



July 8, 2022

Project Close Out Memo

To: The Joyce Foundation, The Klarman Foundation, the Trusted Elections Fund

From: GQR

First, let us thank you for letting us be a part of this project. It ranks as among the more interesting projects we have been involved in this year and certainly as one of the most important.

We believe we have learned a great deal and, as important, that much of that learning is actionable and can play a big role in efforts to reduce political violence.

Key learning includes (but is not limited to):

- ✓ Much of the public polling around this issue likely overstates America's tolerance for political violence.
- ✓ Almost all policy measures to reduce political violence generate huge support in the public. This is not an issue debate.
- ✓ While many concede political violence is a major problem, many do not fully understand the depth and breadth of this problem and fail to list examples of political violence outside of January 6th. The most important public role we can take is educating the public about this issue, particularly at the local level.
- ✓ Much depends on language and how we describe political violence, not only in terms of level of threat, but also whether people justify violence or not.
- ✓ When neutrally defined, Republicans and conservatives are no more likely to justify political violence than liberals and Democrats.
- ✓ This is primarily, but not exclusively, a problem among young people. This holds regardless of party, race, and education. In part, it reflects a generation more directly exposed to violence than older, more mature adults.
- ✓ Tolerance of political violence is highly conditional; certain issues (guns, property rights, etc.) trigger more violence on the right than the left. Moreover, much of the country (accurately) believes there is more of a problem on the right than on the left.
- ✓ In the virtual world, progressive actors overwhelmingly give voice to the problem of political violence and right-wing actors are far more likely to justify or rationalize political violence. This disparity of interest and approach is not fully shared by average people in our survey work.
- ✓ Conflicts between efforts to reduce political violence and the First and Second Amendment are inevitable and can be effectively managed by taking it on directly (e.g., "there is no First Amendment right to violence....")
- ✓ This issue is *probably* best approached as a legal or "law and order" issue rather than a political or "democracy" issue. By definition, political violence is a crime and should be approached as such.
- ✓ There is no evidence in this research that elevating this issue reduces political participation.

All of that said, there are areas that merit additional exploration. We do not see the need to field another project in the short term, but as this issue evolves and we make efforts to push this issue legislatively at state capitols, we might consider another look. This second look may be particularly important leading into the 2024 election cycle likely to involve Donald Trump.

- The findings among young people are among the most dramatic here. Again, regardless of education, race, gender, ideology, or education, younger people are more likely to condone political violence, more likely to consider political violence personally and more likely to know someone who would engage in political violence. Part of the reason is just the life cycle; young people are more likely to engage in violence or any criminal activity and have been for a long time. We also suspect that their relative tolerance for political violence is a symptom of a bigger problem among young people in our country right now. We have certainly seen sufficient evidence—in Uvalde, in Buffalo—that something may be very wrong with some young people in our country. We see this not only in extreme examples like these shootings, but in the long waits necessary to get an appointment for mental health issues and in their general withdrawal from politics since the 2020 election.

We might consider a project aimed entirely at young people and devote more resources to qualitative work than a single focus group.

- Broadly speaking, police and law enforcement represent the most credible messengers on this issue and a “law and order” message finds the most traction. But in communities of color, the police have less credibility and some in our focus groups suggested the police sponsor some of the political violence in their community. We might also consider additional resources aimed at finding a more common ground in these communities, particularly those most impacted by police violence (e.g., Baltimore, Memphis, Minneapolis, etc.).
- We invested in a social media landscape analysis and found that that the online conversation on political violence among progressive actors and influencers is far different than the conversation among conservative influencers. The survey data on social media, however, did not produce particularly interesting results. Part of this is because (almost all) young people are heavy users of social media and age is predictive of our issue. However, particularly given how the Buffalo shooter was activated, we believe can do more to unpack the role of social media in promoting political violence, potentially exploring more extreme channels and platforms.
- As pollsters, we spend a huge amount of time testing specific language in messaging, as we did in this project. But much, if not most, of political communication is visual and few 30-second spots or social media posts fully and faithfully capture the language tested in a survey. If there is a group or collection of groups producing materials—speeches, PSAs, banner ads, social media posts, etc.—it would be worth getting that material in front of a group of people to test their impact.
- We can infer based on some of the data here that we are better off approaching this issue as a legal issue, rather than a political issue. However, that particular aspect needs to be explored further. Would such a frame sap some of the energy around this issue among progressives? How does it play out in communities of color? Does the potential trade off justify itself in making the issue of reducing political violence truly non-partisan?

- Finally, Buffalo and Uvalde generated another round of debate over guns. We are candidly cynical that this debate will have different legislative outcomes than previous horrific events, at least at the federal level. However, the issue of guns and political violence are inevitably connected and we know from the survey work that *some* gun measures (not all) are less popular than other steps to reduce political violence, such as shutting down violent social media posts. We would find value in exploring further how the issue of issues of guns and political violence intersect, potentially investigating areas of opportunity, as well as areas of risk.

We hope this has been helpful. Again, we are grateful to all the funders for your trust in us and for this partnership.