



---

June 29, 2022

## Political Violence Project

Focus Group Report

**To:** Internal Political Violence Team

**From:** GQR

---

Few participants in these focus groups really think about political violence outside of the context of January 6<sup>th</sup>. It is true that when asked specifically about political violence in a survey, most concede this is a major problem. But this issue is not top of mind. After mentioning January 6<sup>th</sup> and, to a lesser degree, some of the violence that surrounded the 2020 police protests, participants struggle to come up with examples of political violence.

As a result, the conversation around this issue is labored and somewhat shallow. Participants cannot make nuanced judgements about how to balance efforts to reduce political violence against protecting First and Second Amendment Freedoms. Until the night of the focus groups, none have them had really thought through the issue. Young people struggle to explain their generation's higher tolerance for political violence outside of the role of social media. There is opportunity here, as advocates have the opportunity to shape rudimentary impressions of political violence. But more than anything, there is also a raw, political imperative to educate the public about this issue.

That is the most important and glaring finding in these focus groups.

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, GQR convened three online focus groups of self-ascribed conservatives, people of color, and gun owners. After seeing the higher tolerance for political violence among young people in the initial round of survey research, we added a focus group among people under age 30 on March 9. Focus group findings are not statistically projectable, but offer an opportunity to talk though issues in depth in a fashion that is impossible to achieve with a large sample, quantitative instrument. This memorandum summarizes these results.

## Division still dominates the mood

As is the case in almost any focus group these days, the mood among these participants is toxic. One reason why political violence is not a front-and-center issue is that it competes with such a large host of other plagues: COVID, inflation, crime, broken and divisive politics, and the Ukraine crisis that was just emerging at the time of these groups. These diverse sets of participants likely disagree on an awful lot, but they broadly agree that our country faces many problems and that our political system seems incapable of effectively addressing those problems. One of the more striking outcomes is that all four groups lament the divisiveness of our political environment right now. We hear many of the same comments in groups among swing voters currently and heard the same in groups two and three years ago.

*“I think it is divisive. That is the word that comes to mind. Democrats and Republicans still have polarization and their self-interest higher than making the country a better place.” – Conservative*

*“I guess Democrats and Republicans fighting each other. Getting real dirty. They attack personally or in a non-significant way.” – Person of Color*

*“Tensions are very high.” – Young Person*

*“Misled. I really believe the news media only highlights things that are really bizarre. I am not sure they really tell us what is going on.” – Gun Owner*

*“Very divided right now, even within my own family.” – Young Person*

One message tested at the conclusion of this discussion speaks directly to this divisiveness. This message finds real traction among these participants.

## Understanding Political Violence

For most participants, understanding of and appreciation for political violence does not run much past January 6<sup>th</sup>. A fair number of conservative and gun owners in these groups also point to the 2020 anti-police demonstrations as an example of political violence. These models provoke fairly limited interest in our issue. January 6<sup>th</sup> is polarizing in partisan terms and most of the perpetrators of that act are being aggressively prosecuted. The George Floyd protests are over for now and, for people of color, the violence attending some of those protests was “understandable.”

Participants do not show any real awareness of violence vested on election workers, school board members, elected officials, state houses, polling stations or even demonstrators.

*“I am trying to think about how many events I remember where there was political violence. January 6th. The other ones I come up are like police and wrongful death kinds of things. I don’t know of other ones unless I lost my mind.” – Gun Owner*

*“After what happened in Minnesota, all the store fronts that were burglarized.” – Conservative*

*“Trump supporters, maybe I don’t know. Carry weapons on TV or on YouTube. I guess they do. maybe at rally or protest. I just am assuming them carry weapons at event.” – Person of Color*

*“Driving on people’s lawns, knocking down signs.” – Young Person*

One important moment occurred in the groups—all three groups—where participants read a clip from a CNN story about less conspicuous example of political violence.

*Lawmakers in at least three states are considering measures to counter the onslaught of threats that state and local election officials have endured in the aftermath of the 2020 election.*

*In Maine, a bill slated for debate in a legislative committee later this week would increase the penalty for threatening an election official with violence. In Vermont, a measure introduced this month aims to make it easier to prosecute culprits. And in Washington, the state Senate has approved a bill that would make harassing election workers a felony, punishable by up to five years in prison.*

*The bills advancing at the state level follow the US Senate's failure to pass sweeping federal voting legislation that, among other things, would have made it a federal crime to reveal personal information about election officials, poll workers or their families with the goal of threatening or intimidating them.*

*Election workers have faced a barrage of harassment and threats following the 2020 election.*

The last line in this story provoked considerable outrage.

*“I am surprised that election workers are being harassed. I was not aware of that issue.” – Person of Color*

*“I worked as both as poll worker and as a reporter and I know how hard those guys work. They work hard and they try to do their best and make sure the election is true... All that will do is disincentivize these guys from doing this work. And this is really, really important.” – Gun Owner*

*“Poll workers should not feel threatened. I don’t think any of us would like feel threatened for doing their jobs.” – Conservative*

This story does two things. First, it contextualizes political violence. It is not just some one-off event like January 6<sup>th</sup>, but something that impacts their elections moving forward. One participant who worked with the local school board experienced this kind of intimidation directly, but it was not until she read this

story that she connected her experience with the broader issue political violence. It also personalizes the issue. Almost everyone in these groups knows an election worker. We see the same people every two years. They are neighbors. Suddenly, political violence is not about “hanging Mike Pence” but about threats to their friends and neighbors. And threats to local democracy.

As we think about efforts to educate the public on the threat of political violence, it is these kinds of stories—local—that likely need to play a lead role.

In the youth group, we explored in more detail the role of social media. When pressed, young people admit social media represents a major platform for political violence. One participant insisted that, “it is the only place you see political violence.” (!) A Tik-Tok video showing a vivid example of this kind of content generates some level of disgust, but young people are also quick to point out that much of what see in social media is not real.<sup>1</sup>

*“Its scary. But it seems fake. I am not sure he is 100 percent legit.” – Young Person*

*“Kinda cringy. I don’t know if he would really do anything.” – Young Person*

## Justifying Political Violence

Most participants quickly condemn political violence, a gut reaction also apparent in all the survey data. However, as is the case in the quantitative research, this reaction is also highly conditional once they discuss the issue further. Some people of color evince some moral understanding of the 2020 anti-police demonstrations (“sometimes that is the only way to get your point across”), even while eschewing engaging in such violence personally. Conservatives and gun owners do not generally “justify” violence until given some specific examples. As we see in survey data, young people in the groups are somewhat more open to the political violence in the “right circumstance.”

*“In cases when it is justified, we don’t see it on the news.” – Person of Color*

*“Is violence OK to push your political agenda? For me that is a no.” – Gun Owner*

*“With the Georgy Floyd thing, like someone from his family. It would be kinda acceptable.” – Young Person*

---

1

[https://www.tiktok.com/@sapper\\_cool\\_breeze/video/6987905397029997829?is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@sapper_cool_breeze/video/6987905397029997829?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1)

*“There are better ways to get your goals accomplished than political violence. I don’t see it as acceptable.” – Conservative*

*“I don’t think political violence ever worked out in the past. Sometimes it is acceptable, but only if it brings positive change.” – Young Person.*

Young people in these groups were asked directly to explain polling data showing that people under 30 more inclined to justify than political violence. For the most part, they have no idea, but those who can respond point to “maturity-levels” and the role of social media.

When participants given a list of examples of conditions that may provoke a violence response (e.g. “there is a coup and the federal government uses force against Americans”), the number of participants from all four groups who justify violence grows. Threats against the constitutionally enshrined freedoms, specifically the First and Second Amendment, as well as government land confiscation generate the most “support” for violence. Even here, however, most participants insist they themselves would not begin to fill bottles with gasoline.

*“I am extremely concerned I will lose my freedom of speech. I am not saying acting, I am saying speaking. In some states it became ridiculous, they had these strict requirements.” – Gun Owner*

*“One of them was about the First Amendment. That is really messed up, but I would not act violently.” – Person of Color*

*“Where is my line of demarcation? It (violence) would be OK when I saw no hope left and my family and I were on our own and we would have to protect ourselves.” – Gun Owner*

*“I don’t want to let them come and take my guns.” – Conservative*

This discussion raises an important point for our issue and how we internalize polling data suggesting up to a third of Americans justify violence. Events that provoke a more violent response or at least the understanding of a violent response are unlikely. There is no organized effort in the federal government to do away with the First Amendment. The attempted coup on January 6<sup>th</sup> did not come close to succeeding. On the other hand, the things that are inciting real violence right now—COVID mandates, election disputes, police shootings—are largely rejected as antecedents for a violent political response. Americans’ support for real world political violence is likely overstated in survey data, particularly public survey data, even when reflecting minority support for violence. Also, the more we focus on these less conspicuous events, such as threatening poll workers, the less tolerance people have for political violence.

## Push-back and Participation

Because relatively few of these participants have thought through this issue, a more nuanced discussion of political violence is difficult. Unlike issues like choice or guns or taxes that have been debated politically in this country for decades, political violence is a fairly new topic.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, asking participants to parse where the need to reduce political violence starts and where the need to protect First and Second Amendment freedoms ends is a particularly labored conversation.

To the degree participants draw a line, it is a fairly legalistic one:

*“The higher priority is protecting people’s right to bear arms. You are going to reduce violence by trying to protect people rights.” – Gun Owner*

*“Once the violence starts, you are breaking the law.” – Conservative*

*“If you are the driver of the bank robbery, you are still guilty, even if you did not rob a bank.” – Conservative*

*“If you take appropriate steps (to reduce political violence). Like protecting poll workers, that is an appropriate step.” – Young Person.*

Importantly, participants embrace most solutions to political violence, even after raising the First and Second Amendments. We saw a similar outcome in the survey with huge majorities supporting steps to reduce violence, even among gun owners and people who otherwise “justify violence.” The debate over the First and Second Amendment may be worth having among elected officials and stakeholders, but in the broad public, this debate is likely unnecessary and unproductive.

There is no evidence in the groups and in the survey that raising the issue of political violence broadly mitigates participation in voting. For some participants here, the challenge of political violence inspires them to participate more as an act of defiance. However, participants do admit the threat of violence could inhibit participation in marches or rallies. As they discuss this, this threat needs to be proximate and specific to a certain event and lead to alternative (e.g., online) ways of getting their point across.

*“It (threat of violence) makes me want to participate even more.” – Person of Color*

*“Maybe if you see an opposition group, you don’t want to protest. I would do a Facebook post.” – Person of Color*

---

<sup>2</sup> There is some irony here; political violence is older than our Republic, but only a handful of participants recognize that history.

*“When you see things on TV, if it gets crazy, you might want to go it. If you want to peacefully protest, you may not want to go out. Not voting, but protesting for sure, you want to think about your safety.” – Person of Color*

## Solutions to political violence

As we saw in the survey, solutions to our issue prove wildly popular in these groups. Even the suggestion of “banning people who call for violence online from owning or possessing a firearm” does not raise hackles of conservative and gun-owning participants. As is the case with gun violence prevention, specific solutions (such as universal background checks) prove more popular than the broader concept of “gun control.” Cracking down on social media, which many source as the main driver of political violence and division in this country, emerges as particularly popular solution in these groups.

Policy	Participant Responses
Require social media companies to remove posts calling for violence or remove groups who call for violence.	<i>A lot of these are trying to calm things down.” – Conservative</i>
Prohibit the carrying of guns in the state house, government buildings or at or near a polling station.	<i>“Social media. That is huge. That is where a lot of misinformation comes from, social media.” – Person of Color</i>
Ban politicians who call for violence from running for office.	<i>“A lot of criminals. The first thing is to find them. and when you do find them, crank up the law.” – Gun Owner</i>
Ban people who call for violence online from owning or possessing a firearm.	
Increase penalties, including jail time, for people making violent threats against elected officials, school board members or election officials.	<i>“If you see someone running for office agreeing with violence, I think it will just lead to more violence.” – Person of Color</i>
Increase law enforcement monitoring of individuals and groups calling for violence.	<i>“I think social media has become a negative. A lot of bad ideas come from social media.” – Conservative</i>  <i>“A lot of good ideas here.” – Young Person</i>

This is an important tactical and message finding and consistent with the first survey. As we seek to introduce the issue of political violence, we need to be as “solution-forward” as possible. If people know what specific steps we are talking about, they will be less inclined to project the worst kind of motivation (“trying to take away our guns” “trying to silence conservatives”) on our efforts.

## First stab at messaging

We also spent some time asking participants what messengers they would listen to when comes to this issue. This conversation failed to produce anything interesting, unless we can secure the services of “a celebrity like Tom Cruise.” The groups responded well to the messaging, however.

### MESSAGES TESTED

(CIVIL RIGHTS) Most of the great changes in this country, particularly in our recent history, have been led by people committed to democracy and non-violence. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that this country can fundamentally change for the better only through democracy, not through violence.

(POLITICAL PROCESS) While not always perfect, one hallmark of American democracy is the peaceful transfer of power and the non-violent process of resolving political disputes through the elections and free speech. The rise of political violence threatens our 250-year American democracy.

(DIVISION) Our country is being torn apart by political division. Republicans attack Democrats, Democrats attack Republicans. We will not always agree with each other but on big things like the need to reduce political violence, we need to unite as Americans.

(UNITY) Most Democrats overwhelmingly oppose political violence; so do most Republicans. Most Republicans believe in democracy and support cherished rights like the freedom of speech. So do most Democrats. Despite our disagreements on many, many issues, Democrats and Republicans share the belief that disagreements should be settled through elections, not through violence.

(PARTICIPATION) Democracy requires participation. Hundreds of locally elected officials have been threatened with violence and some are resigning from office and potential candidates are refusing to run in the first place because they are worried about threats to their family. Political violence is a threat to democracy itself.

(THREATS) The First Amendment does not give you the right to threaten an elected official. We can take some simple steps, such as increasing monitoring of people who explicitly call for violence, removing guns from polling places and increasing penalties for those who commit acts of political violence without infringing our constitutional rights.

(DISCOURSE) There are better ways to get your point across than through violence. We live in a democracy. We can vote, protest, post messages on social media, organize behind candidates who shares our views, unseat elected officials who disagree with us and sue people in court to protect our Constitutional rights. (ONLY ASKED IN GUNOWNER GROUP)

These messages—and others as well—will be tested more systematically in the last survey, but in these groups, the three arguments that find the most traction are the example of the civil rights movement, focusing on political division and addressing the impact violence has on political participation. The civil rights frame found adherents in all four groups and, while one or two objected, most found the MLK reference a strong and stirring example of the power of non-violent political advocacy. As noted at the top of this memo, many of these participants find political divisiveness to be one of the most virulent plagues in our country right now. Little wonder this message finds a receptive audience. And the participation message localizes this issue and focuses participants on things that impact neighbors and people they know.

All that said, at the conclusion of these groups, we asked participants what they would say to a friend of theirs or family member who is considering a violent political act. Participants do not use any of the messages above. Their instinct is two-fold. The first and most obvious is the impact this act will have on their friend's life ("you'll get caught and go to prison"). They also use a skill any parent of a toddler knows all too well: diversion. That is, instead of saying "don't do it," they say "do this instead."

*"I would say to my friends, it is not worth it. Wait until the next election. Go and vote."* – Person of Color

*"Try to hear them out and offer alternatives."* – Conservative

*"I would say, be wise. Know the consequences of what you are engaging. Make it is the right thing to do. There are other options. Try to show love."* – Conservative

We have done a lot of work with gun owners over the years and found one thing particularly true with this group; they are extremely sensitive to other gun owners who put the gun-owning community in a bad light. Gun owners who shoot up highway signs, shoot animals out of season, or who store guns irresponsibly drive mainstream gun owners crazy. We showed this image to the gun owning group:



The response was visceral. Participants made it clear they did not want anything to do with this group. In politics, images and visuals often convey more than words on a page.

*“They are brandishing, they are not transporting. It is very disturbing. They were within the law, but it goes over the line.” – Gun Owner*

*“I have guns like this in my home, it does not bother me in that sense, I know these types of people. They have their rights, and they are trying to show it off. That is their agenda. It does have a very negative outlook on people.” – Gun Owner*

*“Negatively affects people’s perceptions with guns.” – Gun Owner*

*“That looks bad to me.” – Gun owner*

## Conclusions

There is a lot of research yet to do here, but these groups raise a couple of points, some reinforcing findings from the survey and other surveys on this topic, others providing a more textured perspective:

- Public polling on political violence consistently fails to capture how nuanced and conditional this subject is and likely overstates American’s willingness to resort to violence.

- While respondents may concede political violence is a “major problem” on a survey instrument, this is not a top-of-mind issue for most and in-depth public conversations about political violence are difficult.
- For many people, this begins and ends with January 6<sup>th</sup>. Such a narrow perspective limits our ability to make progress.
- Young people are neither insufficiently self-aware or insufficiently conversant with the issue of political violence to understand why their generation is more likely to justify political violence. To the degree they hazard a guess, the point to life-cycle and maturity as well as the outsized role of social media.
- Elevating examples of local political violence, particularly as it impacts poll workers, energizes the public around our issue, including among conservatives and gun owners and makes plain the larger threat to democracy.
- There is limited evidence suggesting elevating the issue of political violence discourages participation in voting; however, the proximate threat of violence could discourage people from participating in other democratic behaviors such as marches and demonstrations. In that case, they will find other outlets.
- Our greatest political strength is that our solutions remain popular among broad swaths of people, including those on the right. To the degree we can keep those solutions prominent in our outreach, we can minimize resistance.
- We believe the next survey will outline some definitive direction in terms of messaging, but the tactic of diversion is worth considering in terms of specific advice we give to people who engage directly with bad actors.