MediaWell

Research Review

Why We Fight for Fractured Truths – How Misinformation Fuels Political Violence in Democracies

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Abstract

In recent election cycles, political violence has afflicted democracies worldwide. From assaults against candidates in France to riotous nationalism in India and to the seditious attacks on the government in the US and Brazil, civilians in democracies are increasingly participating in politics using violence. Notably, many of these instances of violence are predicated on mis- and disinformation, which are used to amplify political mobilization and target out-group ideologies. To explain how mis- and disinformation contribute to political violence in democracies, the following review explores the drivers of civilian political violence, the democratic institutions that constrain or enable the use of disinformation, and the reinforcing relationship between misinformation and polarization that threatens both public safety and democratic stability. I conclude with some potential solutions to disrupt the pathways that amplify the false narratives that transform grievances into political violence.

Introduction

On December 4, 2024, United Healthcare CEO, Brian Thompson was gunned down in New York City. Within hours, the story went viral, with people across the political spectrum vocalizing support for the murder. Before the fugitive shooter was identified or his goals made explicit, individuals posted to praise or express understanding for his assumed "anti-elite" or "anti-corruption" motives, claim that he could not have acted alone, and speculate about "who's next." False information about the shooting combined with real anger over health insurance, spiraling into unchecked calls for further violence. This widespread support illustrates a disturbing trend. Online misinformation can act as both a byproduct *and* an amplifier of violence. It clouds facts, heightens tensions, and drives a kind of emotional, vengeful politics in a way that undermines public safety and the rule of law.

In a broader sense, violent attitudes precede political violence. When disinformation and polarization saturate the information ecosystem, democratic norms – like respecting election results, committing to a peaceful transfer of power, or expressing grievances through established, institutional channels – begin to erode. Certain sparks can then ignite attitudes and result in violence. Throughout today's advanced democracies, misinformation about immigration has resulted in harassment and violence targeting immigrant communities or individuals (Wahlström et al. 2021 on dehumanization and harassment of immigrants in Sweden; Hinz et al. 2023, on arson in Germany; *CNN* 2024, on threats to Haitian immigrants after false claims of pet eating). Fearmongering about religious groups have led to individual harassment, attacks against houses of worship, and domestic terrorism (Amarasingam et al. 2022 on anti-Muslim violence in India; Crothers and O'Brien 2020 on the Christchurch, NZ mosque shooting; Piazza 2022 on domestic terrorism). And in both Brazil and the United States, lies about the validity of elections resulted in violent insurrection (Simões 2023).

The particular "sparks" that ignite violence may be unpredictable, but the preconditions that act as kindling have remarkable similarities. Examining these similarities that drive violent outcomes can illuminate pathways toward preventing violence and enhancing democratic stability.

I identify four key factors and their pathways to foster violent attitudes and behaviors in democracies:

1. Polarized and politicized social identities;
2. Perceived loss of status by a political group;
3. Political figures' use of violent rhetoric; and
4. Widespread distribution of misinformation about politics, particularly on social media.

From domestic terrorists and increasingly-violent clashes between protesters to more organized dissident groups amassing arms and members, the combination of grievances and false narratives has an immense power to produce violence – often with civilians or state officials as casualties. Special attention to these preconditions is a necessary defense mechanism against further violence and anti-democratic behaviors.

Terms and Conditions: Political Violence, Misinformation, and Disinformation

In this review, I use the term "political violence" to mean *actual or intended illegal physical harm done to persons or property, motivated by political gain or political ideology*. (Bosi and

Malthaner 2015). Those fundamental political motivations and intentions that distinguish political violence from other forms of violence.

In practice, some cases – like the assault or assassination of public officials – are clearer-cut than others. More sporadic or disorganized acts of violence may be "arguably" political depending on perpetrator motive, or if the target is viewed as a kind of political symbol. For example, mass shootings are committed by perpetrators with varying political or personal motivations, blurring their definition as political violence, non-political murder, or terrorism. It is important to note that "political violence" does not include "legal violence;" where violence committed by civilians is *always* in violation of the law, the use of violence by a state's police or military force is not. When these laws are vague, discriminately employed, or flouted, then state agents may be acting outside those permissive bounds, which moves into the territory of "political violence."

Political violence has engendered broad scholarly literature, the full breadth of which will not be covered here. However, to explain how the contemporary disinformation environment can be addressed to minimize violence, we need to review what we know about where political violence can emerge. Generally speaking, political violence examines violence by state agents, against state targets, or in pursuit of political power. This includes a wide range of violence, including: the bipolar conflict between organized groups contesting for state power in civil war (Kalyvas 2003; Walter 2022), the organization of violent groups that challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate violence like insurgencies and rebel organizations (Weinstein 2006; Mampilly and Stewart 2021), terrorism (De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2011; Kydd and Walter 2006), or organized crime (Barnes 2017; Lessing 2015).

Political scientists study the conditions that drive individual or group violence (Tilly 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003); how grievances and opportunities affect strategic use of violence (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010); the impact of violent strategies on either the state or violent groups' goals (Chenoweth and Stephan 2008); how individuals are recruited or mobilized to violence (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008); and the interplay between information and the strategic use of violence (Kalyvas 2006, on civil wars; Piazza 2023, on the US).

The state plays a key role in each of these approaches. By holding the power to use violence legitimately (through its police or military force), the capacity and will of the state to levy that power against its citizens frames both the motivations and strategic use of political violence. The strength and stability of the state also affect the likelihood of violence. In unstable political environments where the state is too weak or discriminatory to maintain the rule of law, "violent entrepreneurs" (Volkov 2002) can strategically use violence with

much lower chances of state retribution (de la Sierra 2020 on criminals; Collier and Hoeffler 2004, on rebellion; Phillips 2017, on rural vigilantism; Agbiboa 2018, on urban protection rackets).

In stable democracies, violence most often results from poor legal and informational constraints against extremist factions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). When these factions gain electoral influence, their ideologies are incorporated into the political and media landscape, resulting in a mainstreaming of fearmongering and misinformation (*ibid*). Not only can this feed exclusionary social division between groups (across parties, between ethnic and/or religious identities, or based on policy positions), but it can also create the perception of asymmetrical grievances and emotional volatility between groups. These fractured perceptions, fueled by misinformation and social media, are the critical components of political violence in democracies.

Despite some case-by-case conceptual blurriness, the general rise of political violence in democracies is clear.[1] From disorganized "lone wolf" assailants to coordinated assaults on the halls of government, democracies across the world are grappling with the violent consequences of political polarization and rampant mis- and disinformation.

By "misinformation," I mean the unintentional use of false information; and by "disinformation," I refer to the intentional and often strategic use of false information. Strategic disinformation is used as "offensive counterintelligence" in order to deceive and strategically manipulate an audience (Arce 2024). A wide range of individuals and groups can "benefit" from strategic disinformation, including political, economic, business, or social actors, intending to manipulate a narrative in their favor.

In the context of political violence, widespread misinformation unintentionally fractures the realities and perceptions of truth in our society, whereas disinformation is used to *amplify fractures, promote falsehoods over truths, and manipulate those realities and perceptions*. When disinformation is used and amplified to play "the politics of division," the likelihood of violence spikes (Pierce et al. 2022). Lies and disinformation have long been used to justify and legitimize the division and dehumanization that precede systematic oppression, war (Lewandowsky et al. 2013 on the "War on Terror"), mob violence (Ward and Beyer 2019, on anti-Muslim attacks in India and Sri Lanka; Jeppesen et al. 2022, on the January 6 "Stop the Steal" insurgency in the US), terrorism (Ammar 2023 on disinformation used to recruit to radical Islamic terrorism; Piazza 2022 on domestic terrorism), and genocide (Holvoet 2022, on Nazi propaganda; Richter et al. 2018, on indoctrination in Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, Syria, and Myanmar).

Mis- and disinformation are often a component of political violence, but the link between

fractured truth and violence is very dependent on context. Similar falsehoods can lead to organized violence in one case, but sporadic violence in another. Importantly, this violence is motivated by misinformed political ideas, but can result in both seemingly random or highly organized campaigns of violence.

How Disinformation and Misinformation Escalate Violence in Democracies

Over the past decade, many scholars have attempted to explain the intersection between disinformation and political violence in democratic systems.[2] Studies disagree on the explanatory weight of individual behavior vs. institutional designs, as well as whether mis/disinformation directly causes violence vs. amplifying and transforming tensions into violence. However, most scholars agree on three key factors: (1) political violence in democracies has been increasingly linked to the strategic use of disinformation; (2) political power-holders' use of violent rhetoric increases the use of violence by civilians, and (3) strategic disinformation that manipulates emotions and threat perception can significantly increase the chance of violence.

The relationship between violence and mis/disinformation is complex and often cyclical. Though electoral incentives and rules vary, a common process links disinformation and violence across democratic systems.

Lying is effective at increasing potential electoral or financial gains, especially in polarized climates where emotive responses are common in politics. If unconstrained by law or norms, politicians and media will spread disinformation in pursuit of those gains, resulting in increasingly deep and fractured perceptions of truth between political groups. Atop this pile of conflict kindling, emotional or threat-based rhetoric ignites those reinforced exclusionary attitudes, producing the sparks for violent mobilization by individuals or groups seeking to "help their political team win" using whatever means necessary.

In democracies, norms and institutions exist to attempt to prevent this process from unfolding – for example, major parties' commitments to gatekeep against extremists (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), independent media and journalistic integrity (Michailidou et al. 2022; Graves 2018), and free, fair, and transparent elections occur to promote accountability, representation, and government trust (Manin et al. 1999; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023).

But these safeguards may not be enough in the face of a fractured, distrusted media landscape (Pew 2022). Social media enables all users to create and select information,

which, when combined with freedoms of speech and expression, has led to an explosion of available misinformation. Algorithm-driven content delivery and coordinated disinformation campaigns have transformed digital platforms from "democratic marketplaces for exchanging ideas" into fragmented "information silos" where mis- and disinformation are reinforced and circulated (Sunstein 2009). This information environment demonstrably contributes to political violence. In India,misinformation and Islamophobic hate speech circulated through WhatsApp groups, resulting in targeted assaults and mob violence against Muslims (Banaji et al. 2019; see also Badrinathan et al. 2024 on public support for vigilante violence based on rumors). In Brazil, Bolsonaro's use of "the politics of division" resulted in similar WhatsApp groups spreading misinformation about minorities and the integrity of the 2022 election (Machado et al. 2019; Ozawa et al. 2024), the proliferation of which exacerbated the rise of right-wing politics rejecting democratic civility norms (Layton et al. 2021). The fractured realities that fueled such polarization and violence did not diminish after the election: mobilized by disinformation about election fraud amplified on social media, right-wing Bolsonaro supporters stormed the Supreme Court, National Congress, and Presidential Palace in a violent attempt to challenge the democratic transfer of power to liberal Lula de Silva (Ozawa et al. 2024). Mirroring the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the US in both timing and motivation, the links between lies and violence can have demonstrably severe impacts on both public safety and on the democratic process.

The violent outcomes that result from disinformation in democracies can range from *disorganized individual violence* to *organized group violence*. Some forms of political violence are more common in this context than others:[3]

- *Assaults, threats, and harassment against individuals* – Characterized by violent behavior and language directed at individuals or groups; often driven by politicians' inflammatory rhetoric about groups or political opponents; individuals or small groups may be encouraged (or feel directed by political leaders) to use violence against perceived political opponents to *eliminate or decrease* their power.
    - Examples: Anti-Asian harassment and violence surrounding COVID-19 conspiracies; anti-immigrant rhetoric and violence following politicians' exclusionary nationalism; violence against opposition party candidates or officials; the 2016 murder of UK Labour MP Jo Cox by a far-right sympathizer.
- *Campaigns of harassment, threats, and assaults* – Coordinated violent activity against individuals or groups; driven by power-holder rhetoric and targeting via stochastic terrorism,[4] out-group blame, and often amplified by conspiracy groups.
    - Examples: threats and harassment of election officials in Georgia, Arizona, and Pennsylvania singled out by Trump's election denials; violent counter-protesters; the 2016 "Pizzagate" harassment and shooting in Washington, D.C.

- *Domestic terrorism* – Cases vary based on how [or whether] states' law defines "domestic terrorism," but across contexts, these events: (a) are committed by domestic actors; who (b) use violence and/or threats to *intimidate or influence;* (c) targeting a political audience – often the state or minority groups. These events are often committed by single individuals, radicalized by online disinformation, with access to weapons and misinformed perceptions of government accountability or corruption.
    - Examples: Politically-motivated bombings or mass shootings like at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018 or the 2024 Melbourne Synagogue firebombing; "homegrown" anti-Western or Islamic extremist attacks; several Oath Keepers and Proud Boys members whose planning of the January 6th attack intended to use violence to disrupt government operations.[5]
- *Violent groups – militias and anarchists* – Organized cells of combatants with varying ideologies. When some legal violence and dissent language is permitted, these groups use misinformation and threat manipulation to recruit members, legitimize violence, and identify key "enemies."
    - Examples: White supremacist and/or neo-Nazi groups using the "great replacement" conspiracy[6] to recruit and mobilize; far-right militias amplifying anti-immigrant rhetoric and supporting vigilantism; left-wing or separatist groups' exaggeration of government corruption and repression to justify violence or sabotage.)
- *Violent groups – insurgencies* – Coordinated violent activity against the state in an attempt to overthrow or disrupt the sitting government. Groups with low trust in government may pursue insurgency when there are significant politician-led and social media proliferated disinformation narratives that amplify feelings of "existential threat" of government corruption or oppression, particularly when leaders use rhetoric legitimizing violence.
    - Examples: January 6, 2021 in the US; January 8, 2023 in Brazil.
- *Violent protest or counter-protesters* – formed in the process of democratic contentious politics and free expression, these groups and encounters can become violent under the conditions of: (a) politicians' violent rhetoric normalizing and encouraging dehumanization and violence against political out-groups, and (b) radicalized information environments which increase the organization, armament, and out-group animus of these groups.
    - Examples: 2017 "Unite the Right" rally and fatal violence against counter-protesters in Charlottesville; anti-Black Lives Matter protesters in the US, France, and the UK that had violent clashes with BLM protesters and/or police.

Fundamentally, people use violence to achieve goals they *feel* are important, and that they

think can be best achieved through violence. The use of violence in democracies is considered extreme because it violates both law and social standards of a peaceable society. On an individual level, using political violence has risks, including arrest, imprisonment, and personal harm.

For these risks to be perceived as "worth it," several thresholds must be met: Emotionally, people must be *feeling* sufficient "emotional costs" from negative emotions like fear, anxiety, or anger to be motivated to do high-risk violence to alleviate those emotions. Informationally, people must *think* they are both justified in their emotions, and that there is no feasible nonviolent solution. Both the emotional and informational mechanisms are highly subject to mis- and disinformation, which can manipulate perceptions of truth, risks, and reason.

Catalysts of the Disinformation-to-Violence Pipeline

In some cases, perpetrators explain violence using misinformation, disinformation, and conspiratorial thinking.[7] For example, the gunmen responsible for the 2019 Christchurch mosque attack in New Zealand, the 2018 Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue massacre, the 2019 Walmart shooting in El Paso, and the 2022 Buffalo, NY shooting all cited a perceived loss of status in line with the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory (Wilson and Flanagan 2022). Further, misinformation about election integrity and disinformation by party leaders about those election results were explicitly used to mobilize the 2021 "Stop the Steal" insurgency in the U.S.

Yet not all mis- or disinformation necessarily *causes* political violence on its own. Instead, a few key factors catalyze the power of misinformation to *contribute* to violent outcomes:

1. The emotional and social connection to personal and *political identity* are vulnerable to in-group biases and manipulation, particularly when framed competitively against other political identities;
2. Misinformation specifically about the *loss or potential loss of status*, which can have powerful mobilization effects by activating grievances and exclusionary protectionism;
3. Politicians' use of uncivil and *violent rhetoric* can normalize, legitimize, encourage, or even direct violent behaviors and attitudes, particularly towards out-groups like out-partisans or minorities; and
4. The availability and range of democratic discourse is compromised by fractured information environments in mainstream and social media. Fractured media environments create divergent truths and perspectives, deepening polarization, and

fostering violent attitudes and behaviors.

Fear and Loathing in Party Politics: Identity, Emotion, and Violence

In democracies, division and factionalism between identity-based parties is a key factor to explain political violence (Walter 2022, on precursors to civil war; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023, on precursors to democratic decay; Mason 2018, on precursors to polarized politics). Identity-based parties foster strong emotional ties to political identity, and without collaboration or multi-partyism, bipolar conflict becomes entrenched (Walter 2022; Linz 1990). Here, the emotional ties to political identity often outweigh policy preferences (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), resulting in identity-based conflicts that decimate the cross-group interactions that foster trust and collaboration (Fearon and Latin 1996; Varshney 2003). Physical political sorting and fragmented information ecosystems further inhibit cross-group understanding and exacerbate affective polarization and out-group animus (Mason 2018; Enos 2017; Harel et al. 2020; Cassese 2021).

These frosty inter-group attitudes fuel the polarization that contributes to political violence in two key ways: (1) emotion, and (2) identity-based mobilization.

Emotionally, political scientists have found convincing evidence that negative emotions – specifically fear, anger, disgust, hate, anxiety, loss, uncertainty – are more mobilizing than positive ones, like enthusiasm, hope, joy, or gratitude. That isn't to say positive emotions have no mobilizing power (Brader 2005; Marcus and Mackuen 1993); rather, psychologically, people will do more to prevent negative emotions than pursue positive ones. This connection is particularly relevant for political violence, which results from feelings of desperation, fear, anxiety, anger, and blame (Pearlman 2013; Cederman et al. 2010; Albertson et al. 2015).[8]

Beyond our attitudes, these emotions also affect our political behavior – from voting to violence. In elections, voters' selections can depend more on their emotional reaction to candidates than policy issues (Jenke 2023); participation in risky protest requires an emotional engagement in politics (Pearlman 2013); and resentment about perceived loss of status can fuel aggression and violence toward out-groups (Walter 2022). These emotions often supersede material concerns, making individuals more vulnerable to mis- and disinformation and in-group biases.

While studies show that affective polarization reduces cross-party trust, the emotions behind in-party bias and out-party hostility have also driven increased voter turnout

(Wagner 2021). The impact of affective polarization on attitudes towards policy issues is less clear. For some highly-politicized issues like abortion and vaccination, polarized voters tend to adopt their party's stance (Druckman et al. 2023), though the field has struggled to confirm whether this behavior stems from emotional ties like loyalty (as opposed to information shortcuts) (Broockman et al. 2023; Jenke 2023; Ahn and Mutz 2023). Nevertheless, other studies shows that stronger emotional attachment to party identity *does* lead to both the increased acceptance and sharing of mis- or disinformation (Han et al. 2020 on COVID-19 conspiracies in South Korea; Jenke 2023 on the 2020 U.S. election, the ACA, and immigration; Schaffner and Roche 2016 for both main U.S. parties). Emotion is a key driver of political engagement, even if its influence at the polls is hard to capture.

These emotions do not happen in a vacuum. They can be elicited, shaped, and manipulated by strategic politicians and media (Brader 2005). Negative emotions like fear and anxiety motivate individuals to increasingly rely on trusted in-groups and news sources (Marcus and Mackuen 1993; Albertson et al. 2015), which reinforces strong affective responses and incentivizes media attention on distressing coverage – creating a cycle of anxiety and misinformation among fractured polities (Albertson et al. 2015). In short, when we feel scared, we want answers and solutions from trusted sources. When leaders can develop messaging that feels like answers, our minds are highly responsive to them. Notably, the emotional responses to these messages can be more motivating than the veracity of the messages, creating emotional linkage with falsehoods and decreasing trust in contradictory information sources, even objective fact-checking (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

In these contexts, political identity drives hostility towards out-groups – which fuels violent attitudes and behaviors – as well as loyalty to in-groups, which encourages participation and mobilization (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Phillips 2024). High affective polarization and low-trust cause members of different parties to see each other as "enemies to be defeated" (Berntzen et al. 2023). The latter can be self-reinforcing: distrust between identity groups decreases the likelihood of the kind of interactions that can build trust, cooperation, and a recognition of mutual humanity. Perceived asymmetry with so-called "enemies" can foster feelings of loss of status. If they have more, we necessarily have less. These perceptions result in a sense of desperation – and, in some cases, violence against the out-groups they blame for that loss (Walter 2022).

Group loss can feel deeply personal, because individuals tend to internalize threats to their broader community. Several key psychological mechanisms shape those individual responses and sustain the relationship between misinformation and violence, including emotional triggers, cognitive biases, and motivated reasoning.

Threats of loss trigger intense emotional responses – anger, fear, desperation – which, as

noted above, act as powerful drivers of behavior like violence (Pearlman 2013; Armaly and Enders 2024). In democracies, elections inherently involve the possibility of loss, which can *heighten* threat perceptions and reinforce biases in polarized environments.

Motivated reasoning helps explain this phenomenon. This psychological process leads individuals to accept information that aligns with their existing beliefs and reject contradictory evidence, reinforcing biases and deepening polarization. Emotional responses further entrench these biases. In today's polarized media and social ecosystems, individuals seek validation from trusted sources, particularly ones that provide information that feels true. The availability of misinformation means individuals find and trust sources that confirm their existing beliefs – using motivated reasoning to achieve emotional comfort over democratic deliberation.[9]

Importantly, no "real" loss is required to trigger these processes. The *feeling* of loss, or *potential* loss, is sufficient to trigger an emotional response and reliance on existing information sources. Further, for systematically or historically privileged groups, efforts towards equity can meet that threshold; where things like rights, resources, or opportunities are viewed as zero-sum, these groups experience a more equal distribution of power as a net loss. When leaders use this dynamic to play "fear politics," there is significant potential for individual or collective violence on behalf of one identity against another (Walter 2022).

From Politicians to Posts: Normalizing Vitriol and Violence

> *The result is a fractured sense of reality along identity lines. Between these fractured truths, people can believe contradictory narratives, experience material conditions differently, and hold blame and resentment for others who believe different narratives.*

Disinformation can be a tool of emotional manipulation. Media and political actors understand and leverage this dynamic (Brader 2011; Albertson et al. 2015). The consequences of this use of disinformation are severe, including a decline incross-party trust, eroded familiarity and humanization between groups, and increased normalization of violence as a legitimate political strategy. False and inaccurate narratives (i.e., about rigged elections, immigration, or the use of violence by out-group members) can create a sense of existential threat, especially for those isolated from other information sources. People with

deep or exclusionary ties to political identity then see violence as a rational means to eliminate or defend against those threats. By reshaping perceptions of the severity and likelihood of out-group threat, politicians' rhetoric and behavior can further polarize identities and legitimize anti-democratic behavior toward out-groups.

Political figures that flout democratic norms[10] – using disinformation, manipulation, and incivility as rhetorical tools – significantly impact both polarization and violence by spreading inflammatory language and exclusionary narratives. Levitsky and Way (2018) point to four patterns of politician behavior that enable the rise of violent and extremist politics: (1) rejection of the democratic "rules of the game" like cross-party cooperation and electoral fairness; (2) demonization and dehumanization of opposition candidates (i.e., igniting hate, fear, uncertainty, and directing that to particular party or individual targets); (3) toleration or encouragement of political violence, which normalizes and decreases the perceived costs of violence; and (4) a willingness of politicians to curtail the civil liberties of opposition politicians, media figures, or academics. Together, these behaviors normalize violence, identify targets for group or individual attacks, and encourage personal loyalties over commitments to state stability.

One clear step on the path to violence is an increase in powerful figures' uncivil rhetoric. Incivility, marked by inflammatory language, dehumanization, and exclusionary narratives, exacerbates polarization and undermines norms of peaceful competition. Mutz (2015) demonstrates that politicians' incivility erodes collaborative norms, replacing compromise with adversarial politics.

Not only is incivility increasingly popular (and tolerated), but politicians can strategically garner attention and increase engagement using uncivil rhetoric (Mutz 2015; Ballard et al. 2022) and to amplify emotions that mobilize supporters (Zeitzoff 2023, showing support for "nasty politics" in the US and Ukraine; Piazza 2022, showing political disinformation proliferating on social media increased instances of domestic terrorism).

"Incivility" or "nasty politics" covers a range of rhetoric, notably including both true and untrue content. But using insults, foul language, accusations, conspiracy theories, intimidation, or threats has the universal goal of harming rivals (Zeitzoff 2023). This rhetoric has both a social and political impact – socially, negative emotions and cross-party animus are publicly validated by uncivil politicians, reinforcing polarization. Politically, publicly uncivil politicians often receive increased media coverage and facilitate political identity-based emotional connection with voters (Bentivegna and Rega 2024).[11] Social media has become a significant conduit for political incivility, allowing the posting and sharing of uncivil content,[12] with the potential to activate supporters against targets – for example,

Donald Trump's July 2019 tweets telling four junior congresswomen of color to "go back to where they came from," which resulted in a barrage of retweets, online harassment, and violent threats against the congresswomen, in line with similar reactions to past Trump tweets about other Democratic officials (Brown and Sanderson 2020).

Uncivil and violent rhetoric validates and entrenches political animosities by eroding norms of mutual respect, pushing political opponents further apart, and normalizing dehumanization of political rivals. Supporters may believe their violence will be tolerated (or even supported) by political leaders, emboldening them to engage in acts of violence they perceive as lower cost (Kleinfeld 2023).

This rhetoric also creates a feedback loop, since partisan media often amplifies sensationalist narratives – which further incentivizes politicians' use of violent rhetoric in exchange for coverage. Zero-sum thinking is a common byproduct, where democratic compromise is portrayed as betraying one's party (Mutz 2015; Druckman et al. 2021). It can be difficult for audiences to break out of this cycle. More polarized citizens are more likely to consume partisan media, have stronger emotional ties to their political identity, *and* are more susceptible to mis- and disinformation (Piazza 2023; Berntzen et al. 2023). When media and political leaders spread disinformation (i.e., claims of election fraud), misinformation (i.e., vaccine information), and biased narratives (i.e., selective coverage of events or individuals), they shape the political perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of viewers to be rooted in lies – and center themselves as the only source of "truth."

The result is a fractured sense of reality along identity lines. Between these fractured truths, people can believe contradictory narratives, experience material conditions differently, and hold blame and resentment for others who believe different narratives. These narratives, relayed by a divided media ecosystem, transform political disagreement into entrenched, identity-based conflicts. Emotional responses to these perceived losses often outweigh the importance of factual accuracy. For example, misinformation and conspiracy theories like the "Great Replacement" or "Stop the Steal" reinforce divisive narratives of loss, assign blame for deliberate and undue harm, and mobilize violence (Ahmed 2022).

Even when misinformation content is not as salient, political leadership can exacerbate the likelihood of violence – not only by a rhetorical normalization of violence and polarization, but also by providing targets.

Intentionally or unintentionally, politicians' use of this rhetoric increases the chance of violence (or at least support for it) by "stochastic terrorism" – which is violence incited by vague but targeted rhetoric against political outgroups. This indirect involvement allows

politicians to maintain plausible deniability (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023; Piazza 2022). While *intent* can be difficult to discern, the *impact* is clear. Politicians' use of targeted rhetoric inspires audience members to interpret their words as a call to action, mobilizing violence without directly issuing orders (Amman and Meloy 2021).[13]

When used intentionally, this tactic is particularly effective in highly polarized environments. Audiences are primed by disinformation and fear, and are thus more likely to "defend" against perceived threats identified in violent rhetoric. Social media extends the reach of such rhetoric, turning isolated grievances into broader movements. Perception is key here, particularly in the post-truth climate where powerholders spread falsehoods and violent rhetoric. Trust follows loyalty rather than truth – and when loyalty is pledged to those who encourage violence, violence inevitably follows.

No Truth, No Trust: Disinformation and the Decay of Deliberative Democracy

Because democratic systems are built around public debate, compromise, and trust, they face increasing challenges by the dominance of fragmented information environments and inflammatory rhetoric. Pushed by eroded trust in "mainstream" media and the anxiety of polarization, viewers seek out more partisan or ideologically-congruent information sources – which make their identities feel validated and their grievances understood. Social media not only provides the infrastructure for radicalization, but also creates spaces where social and political figures can deploy violent rhetoric to mobilize these grievances into action.

Social media platforms incentivize divisive content through algorithms designed for engagement, prioritizing sensationalism and outrage over truth (Vosoughi et al. 2018). This "click capitalism" creates a low-truth premium, where provocative misinformation outcompetes balanced discourse, leaving political actors with fewer incentives to participate in good-faith deliberation. Instead, cross-party collaboration is eclipsed by polarization, as social media reshapes political discourse into a battleground of competing truths.

The fragmented nature of social media reinforces this problem, eroding deliberative norms. Algorithmic sorting isolates users within ideologically homogeneous groups, where disinformation and partisan narratives are validated and amplified (Arguedas et al. 2022; Tucker et al. 2018). These "epistemic bubbles" limit exposure to alternative perspectives, socialize users into conspiratorial and "us versus them" mentalities, and allow online radicalization to thrive (Riley 2022).

The anonymity and the scale of social media further encourages uncivil discourse. Where

interpersonal interactions have social norms and pressure of cordiality, social media can (or remove) these expectations, often validating violent protectionist attitudes within those same ideological networks. Online behaviors prime users for offline violence against perceived targets.

Compounding these dynamics is the increasing role of transnational actors in social media spaces. Global democratization of social media, while hailed as a means of spreading democratic ideals, has also opened pathways for foreign disinformation campaigns in order to influence and exploit foreign public sentiments. Actors ranging from state-backed organizations to loosely-organized online communities exploit social media to amplify grievances, inflame divisions, and destabilize democratic systems (Hunter 2023; Pierce et al. 2022). This transnational influence can undermine the transparency of domestic democratic processes, as well as the ability of citizens to engage in collective decision-making based on shared truth.

As polarization deepens and grievances fester, individuals who experience a perceived loss of status or low trust in state institutions may see violence as their only recourse (Walter 2022). In this regard, social media has thus become a multiplier for anti-democratic forces: top-down disinformation campaigns that reject democratic "rules of the game" (Pomerantsev 2019), the demonization and dehumanization of political identities (Harel et al. 2020), violent rhetoric (Mutz 2015), and targeted violence against real or imagined rivals (Piazza 2022; Brown and Sanderson 2020) – undermining the core principles of deliberative democracy by eroding trust, amplifying disinformation, and normalizing hostility.

Reclaiming democratic norms in this age of digital fragmentation requires confronting the structural incentives of social media and addressing the vulnerabilities they exploit.

Conclusion: Disinformation as a Threat to Personal and Democratic Health

Political violence is not the result of a single, straightforward formula – but there *are* factors that make its outcome much more likely.

This review has drawn together the academic literature on political violence to identify some of those factors and the paths they can follow:

- When political and social identity overlap, individuals have strong emotional reactions to political information;
- Perceived loss of status pits politically polarized groups in zero-sum competition against each other;

- Politicians' violent rhetoric can legitimize, encourage, and even direct violence against rivals; and
- Social media provides a platform for widespread mis- and disinformation, violent rhetoric, and incubators that transform grievances into radicalized violence.

Together, these factors activate powerful emotional threat responses, channel those emotions into targeted out-group hostility, and create an atmosphere where violence becomes a "reasonable" political strategy. Different actors can ignite these sparks with violent rhetoric and calls to action.

When those calls are more vague, individuals or small groups may sporadically respond by attacking geographically random out-group targets. This pathway explains the prevalence of domestic terror attacks against symbols of non-white and/or non-Christian identities in Europe and the U.S. (McCabe 2024) and other instances of stochastic terrorism (Amman and Meloy 2021).

Conversely, when leaders use more *specific* violent rhetoric, with details about dates or targets, disinformation can be a powerful influence, mobilizing people to commit directed assaults (Karni et al. 2022, on the assault of Paul Pelosi), plot kidnappings (Warzel 2020, on the Facebook coordination of the Whitmer kidnap plot in Michigan), or organize insurgencies.

Potential Solutions

Because political violence has many potential roots and pathways – each vulnerable to misinformation in its own way – there are many possible intervention points where we can introduce solutions to deflate the processes above. In the following section, I explore a variety of short- and long-term actions from the institutional to the individual level. Though legal reforms often lag behind innovation and development, many options exist for governments, tech companies, educators, and other stakeholders to address the informational precursors to fractured truths and political violence.

Structural Reforms: Evidence from other strong democracies indicate some institutional changes could enforce shared truths and cross party collaboration. Parliamentary systems encourage politician collaboration and civility (Stepan and Skach 1993; Linz 1990); proportional representation systems dilute polarization and competitive political identity (Daxecker 2020); and ranked-choice or nonpartisan primaries can "gatekeep" against extremist politicians (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023). While a longer-term solution, structural reforms do hold promise in their ability to disrupt and constrain the disinformation-to-violence pipeline.

Increasing digital and media literacy: Increasing education about technology platforms, online information, and media biases is a crucial tool to combat the power false narratives can have and how far they spread. (Bateman and Jackson 2024) Primarily, these programs should focus on: (a) seeking multiple information sources and fact checking to discern credible sources; (b) identification and recognition of scams and AI-generated content like photos, videos, deepfakes, or bot comments; (c) increasing awareness of the volume of misinformation in the information environment, emphasizing the availability of unbiased and credible sources, the intentional use of disinformation by bad-faith actors to spread anxiety-inducing falsities (Albertson et al. 2015); and fact-checking and correction of rumors of conspiracies that substantively fuel division, polarization, and violence (Banaji et al. 2019).

Algorithmic transparency and accountability: Implementing more transparent algorithms and monitoring prioritizes both the spread of credible information and the credibility of the platform. Changes to algorithm transparency should: attempt to prevent entrenchment in information silos and echo chambers on social media platforms, include disclosures on content curation and the agenda of the source to enhance and ensure accountability, and when possible, expand political ideological coverage, particularly when algorithms promote asymmetric disinformation. The European Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation emphasizes the importance of algorithmic transparency in combating false information on social media platforms (Kyza et al. 2020; Council of Europe). Further, algorithms can downrank content flagged as harmful or deceitful, decreasing both the reach and impact of that content.

Crackdown on content moderation, particularly on violent rhetoric: Currently, most social media companies abide by state laws regarding threats of violence, where a specific threat and target must be flagged to be considered unlawful or taken down. However, companies can make more stringent regulations to limit threatening or violent language on their sites. This creates a safer user environment and decreases the chance of stochastic terrorism or more specific calls for mass violence. Though many platforms have ideological niches, increased content moderation can expand user bases, decrease government oversight or intervention on policy or liability, and decrease physical harm (Hook and Verdeja 2022). Further, increased content moderation can extend to advertising, particularly regulating political, issue-based, or identity-based advertisements to prevent the dissemination of misleading information for profits. The RAND Corporation recommends regulating social media advertisement as a protection of free speech (Matthews et al. 2023); the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recommends eliminating data collection for targeted advertising to diminish "micro-targeted" disinformation to susceptible individuals (Bateman and Jackson 2024); and the EU's Digital Service Act (2022) enforces compliance on transparency, risk assessment, and content moderation of disinformation and illegal content on large platforms. Despite the proliferation of best practice models and recommendations,

trends from leading social media companies in the United States have been moving away from content moderation.

Expand fact-checking operations: Partnerships with independent fact-checking organizations, coupled with de-monetizing users with multiple instances of spreading misinformation or violent rhetoric can significantly restrict the frequency and power of misinformation narratives to persuade across political divides while also contributing to broader shared truths. Large platforms (YouTube, Meta, X, TikTok) can disable monetization or accounts for users violating community rules regarding violence or mis- and disinformation (i.e., Twitter's suspension of Trump; YouTube's 2021 demonetization of many high-profile channels spreading anti-vaccine information; YouTube and Twitch have disabled "tipping" features of users spreading hate speech and COVID-19 conspiracies). Accounts with multiple violations, particularly with large followings should be flagged for informational audits, and further violations incur increased penalties, including bans.

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