

ELECTIONS & MOMENTS OF NATIONAL STRESS OR UPHEAVAL

Events of national importance can exponentially raise the threat of radicalization. Extremists forever seek to exploit features of democratic societies that garner broad attention, such as elections or protest movements. And so, risks associated with extremism are never isolated and can emerge within any community in numerous ways. Here are a few.

Elections are natural points of conflict, even in healthy societies. However, American politics are particularly prone to polarization, paranoia, and violent rhetoric, while our public discourse is plagued by misinformation and disinformation. Recently, American white supremacy has been reinforced through political efforts to suppress the right to vote. As a response to widespread disinformation about the 2020 presidential election, those efforts are focused around legislation aiming to disenfranchise Black and brown Americans and persons of lower economic status. Seeking to impact voter turnout and election results, violent extremist groups such as the Proud Boys and some in the anti-government militia movement have been supporting far-right candidates, intimidating minority voters and other opposition, and even running for office themselves. Particularly during elections, remaining observant and in conversation with the youth in your life can help you recognize warning signs. This can help you intervene early if a young person begins espousing troubling viewpoints and/or using slang or symbols you do not recognize to express their opinions about an election, a political party, or a specific candidate.

Protest movements can be exploited by extremists through recruitment and propaganda efforts because they challenge established hierarchies of power and privilege in our society. If extremists can paint these movements for change as a threat, they may enlist the support of people who fear losing status. The response of many white Americans to recent protests connected to the broader Movement for Black Lives reflects this dynamic, a feeling of entitlement to elevated status over others that is being threatened by others' calls for justice and equality. This dynamic is known as "aggrieved entitlement," which is a well-established driver of radicalization to extremism. It is often enflamed by mainstream figures in politics and the media, who promote a politics of scapegoating and resentment among predominantly white audiences. Sometimes, these figures directly echo false narratives and inflammatory rhetoric that originate in extremist spaces.

Violent images in the media offer propaganda-makers a powerful emotional tool to radicalize and recruit. Scenes of combative protests, street fighting, and property damage can be taken out of context and reframed to inspire fear, anxiety, and outrage in viewers. Viewers are made to feel like they are under attack, as waves of lawless destruction are overtaking the country. This, in turn, nurtures feelings of grievance that reinforce clear narratives of white supremacy and encourage the adoption of extremist attitudes and viewpoints. In some cases, violent individuals and groups become convinced that now is the time to act.

By the same token, extremist groups or propagandists can rework video clips and photography of violent incidents into images of power and potency that favor their own groups and causes. This, in turn, makes them more appealing to potential recruits and supporters who are seeking out feelings of power, control, belonging, and/or safety; such feelings can be provoked by propaganda images that are saturated with false portrayals of mass disorder, confusion, and predatory violence. Better media literacy programs and resources demonstrating how such images are manipulated in order to provoke our emotions can help us all build resilience to extremist propaganda and recruitment efforts in our communities.

Conspiracy theories paint a false picture of reality. They create powerful but imaginary enemies and threats, which can then justify any action no matter how bigoted, violent, or undemocratic. Conspiracy theories were central to violence surrounding the 2020 election, as well as an excuse for ongoing attempts to restrict voting rights and fair representation in government.

Almost every dramatic or contentious event today now spawns a conspiracy theory. It would be impossible for any one person to keep up with every new, attractive falsehood that emerges. But we can still stop the spread of these dangerous and misleading ideas through ongoing attention and conversation with the young people in our communities. Halting the spread of conspiracy theories requires that we keep lines of communication open and remain connected to youth.

