

## **Statement for the Record**

### **Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol**

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As political scientists and experts on American political behavior, we respectfully submit a summary of our recent research as it is relevant to the violent attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. The findings we discuss here are mainly drawn from Mason and Kalmoe's 2022 book, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> and from a 2021 article published in the *American Political Science Review* by Mason, Wronski, and Kane, titled "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support."<sup>2</sup>

Our findings are presented in four parts. First, we describe the prevalence of violent political attitudes in the American public, demonstrating the prevalence of violent views before and immediately after the attack on the Capitol. Second, we describe the unique appeal of former President Donald Trump to voters who openly described disliking African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, and/or LGBTQ+ Americans - an appeal that we did not observe in the Republican Party generally nor for Republican leaders Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan. Third, we describe the evidence of relationships between racial and gender-based prejudice and violent political attitudes - particularly among some Republicans. Finally, we describe our evidence showing the powerful ability of political leaders to reduce violent attitudes and behaviors in the public through their rhetoric.

*Altogether, our evidence indicates the prevalence of violent views in the public as a risk factor for violent action, clarifies the motivations behind the extremity of President Trump's strongest supporters distinct from Republicans generally, and speaks to the potential power of the president's rhetoric to reduce violent hostility in his followers, had he chosen to do so before the January 6th attack on the Capitol.*

#### **1. General trends in support for political violence and other partisan extremes.**

Between November 2017 and February 2021, Mason and Kalmoe collected over a dozen nationally-representative surveys of Americans to identify the breadth of public support for political violence and related extreme attitudes.

One set of questions were about partisan "moral disengagement," which allows people to participate in violence and other harms while still thinking of themselves as good and moral

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<sup>1</sup> Kalmoe, Nathan, and Lilliana Mason. 2022. *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, & the Consequences for Democracy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> Mason, Lilliana, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane. 2021. "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support." *American Political Science Review* 115 (4): 1508–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000563>.

people.<sup>3</sup> These questions assessed whether partisans believed that those in the other party were “a serious threat to the United States and its people,” whether they were “not just worse for politics—they are downright evil,” and whether they “lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals.” Consistent with psychology research on aggressive behavior, partisan moral disengagement is a major risk factor for adopting violent attitudes. In conflicts through history and around the world, the vilification that enables mass moral disengagement has accompanied mass violence between groups and even genocidal events.<sup>4</sup>

We found similarly high levels of moral disengagement for both Democrats and Republicans until a statistically significant divergence in views beginning in late 2020 - with Republicans expressing more support for these statements than Democrats. The partisan gap for viewing the other party as a threat first opened significantly in mid-2019 with Republicans scoring 8 points higher than Democrats (69 percent of Republicans versus 57 percent of Democrats), rose to around 12 points in late 2020, and then shrank to 9 points in February 2021 (by which point 77 percent of Republicans and 68 percent of Democrats viewed the other party as a threat). A similar gap in seeing opponents as evil appears at the same time. In November of 2020, 39 percent of Democrats and 56 percent of Republicans thought of the other party as evil. By February 2021, over half of Democrats and two-thirds of Republicans believed the other party was evil. Dehumanizing views followed a similar pattern from late 2020 onward, with Republicans 12-points higher than Democrats in their dehumanizing views of their opponents in November 2020 (32 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats), growing to 43 percent of Republicans and 31 percent of Democrats by February 2021.

We also asked specific questions about political threats and partisan violence. These included questions about whether it was acceptable to “send threatening and intimidating messages” to leaders of the other party or harass an ordinary person from the other party “in a way that makes the target feel frightened.” We also asked whether it was ever justified for people in the person’s own party to “use violence in advancing their political goals these days,” and asked if violence would be acceptable if the person’s party lost the next presidential election.

For Republicans, approval of threatening Democratic leaders and citizens surged beyond that of Democrats, peaking at 28 percent and 24 percent, respectively, around the first impeachment of Donald Trump. No significant partisan differences recur until 2021, when Republicans exceeded Democrats at 25 percent approval of threatening leaders and 19 percent approval of threatening Democratic citizens.

By February 2021, Republicans were significantly more likely to favor immediate violence, as their support rose to a record 20 percent and Democratic support fell to 13 percent. (Notably, our respondents had a wide range of actions in mind when endorsing violence, including some who mostly thought of fistfights up through some who imagined conflicts that have widespread killing. All of it is troubling, of course, given the range of harms inflicted in the Capitol attack.)

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<sup>3</sup> Bandura, Albert. 2016. *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves*. Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves. New York, NY, US: Worth Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Bandura, Albert. 1999. “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities.” *Personality & Social Psychology Review (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)* 3 (3): 193. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3).

When we asked partisans to imagine their party losing the next presidential election in the same survey, people in both parties expressed more support for violence, but Republicans were 8 points more likely to endorse violence than Democrats.

To further clarify where we stand on these trends, we asked three new questions to assess violent partisan attitudes in our February 2021 survey: approval of the January U.S. Capitol attack, support for similar attacks on state capitol buildings, and—most explicitly—approving assassination of opposing partisan leaders.

Nineteen percent of Republicans supported the Capitol attack “somewhat” or “strongly” compared to 6 percent of Democrats. After armed takeovers of state capitol buildings in Michigan and Oregon, and armed protests outside government buildings in several other states, 25 percent of Republicans said it was at least “a little bit” justified for their party “to use violence to take over state government buildings to advance their political goals these days,” compared to 13 percent of Democrats who said the same.

Our final question asked whether it was justified for people in the respondent’s party “to kill opposing political leaders to advance their political goals these days.” Twelve percent of Republicans and 11 percent of Democrats said assassinations carried out by their party were at least “a little bit” justified. Generalizing our results to the population of American partisans means many millions endorse assassinating U.S. leaders.

*Overall, these data portray a nation of partisans, particularly but not only Republicans, who are predisposed toward violent political behavior due to their mass vilification and dehumanization of their opponents. Smaller but significant minorities of American partisans support using violence to achieve partisan goals. The vast majority of these people will never take any violent action, but they are primed to respond to leaders who encourage violence and are unlikely to discourage family and friends who are contemplating violent action.*

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## 2. The Unique Appeal of Donald Trump

A peer-reviewed study by Mason, Wronski and Kane (2021) published in the top political science journal found that support for Donald Trump’s presidency was substantially driven by pre-existing attitudes toward marginalized groups in society—namely, African-American, Latinx, Muslim, and Lesbian and Gay Americans. More specifically, using thousands of survey responses from the 2018 “Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group” data set,<sup>5</sup> we found that animosity toward these groups predicted significantly greater support for Donald Trump, even after accounting for a variety of other important factors (for example, respondents’ party identification, race, religion, and age).

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/data>

Furthermore, our study found that such animosity did not significantly predict support for other Republican leaders (such as Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan), nor for the Republican Party as a whole. This suggests that Donald Trump's candidacy was unique in being able to attract citizens who harbored some animosity toward marginalized groups in the United States.

Animosity toward these marginalized groups (measured in 2011, long before Donald Trump's candidacy) predicts substantially greater support for Trump's presidency in 2018 (in a repeated study of the same individuals over time). Notably, these views were not confined to Republicans. While we estimate that nearly half of Republican citizens held (on average) negative attitudes toward African-American, Latinx, Muslim, Lesbian and Gay Americans, over 40% of Independents and one third of Democrats also harbored such feelings of animosity toward members of these same groups. Trump attracted support from intolerant Americans across the political spectrum.

*This is empirical evidence that Trump supporters, unlike regular Republicans, were particularly motivated by intolerance of marginalized groups. In the next section we examine the relationship between violence and intolerance.*

### **3. Racism/Sexism and Political Violence**

Although we see some differences between Democrats and Republicans in the vilification and dehumanization of their partisan opponents, partisans in each party are driven toward these attitudes for very different reasons. In particular, Republicans who score high in racial resentment (a rejection of the idea that Black Americans have struggled because of systemic discrimination) and hostile sexism (expressions of resentment toward women for wanting too much and not appreciating what men do for them) are the most likely to vilify and dehumanize Democrats. At the same time, Republicans who are the least racially-resentful and sexist are also the most tolerant of Democrats. This increased vilification and dehumanization of Democrats among those high in racial and gender-based prejudice allows an opening for violent rhetoric to inspire violent action.

For a separate ongoing book project<sup>6</sup>, Wronski has found a clear link between hostility towards a party and a consideration of that party's groups as "un-American." Considering members of the opposing party as un-American moves beyond disdain. Un-American labels embody beliefs that the other political party and its members are illegitimate and threatening to American society, akin to foreign rivals.

In a 2019 national study, Wronski asked respondents to rate a variety of traditionally marginalized and Democratic Party-linked groups (African-Americans, Hispanics, Atheists, Muslims, Feminists, LGBT, Liberals, and Democrats) on a scale from American to Un-American. She also asked people their views about partisan political violence.

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<sup>6</sup> Wronski, Julie. In Progress. The Un-American Citizen.

As people rate more Democratic Party-linked groups as un-American, approval of Republicans sending threatening and intimidating messages to Democratic Party leaders increases by 33%. Those who rated all of the Democratic-linked groups as un-American had a 52% probability of thinking that it is okay for Republicans to send threatening and intimidating messages to Democratic Party leaders. There is also a connection between viewing Democratic-linked groups as un-American and thinking that the Republican Party is justified in using violence to advance their political goals. As people view more Democratic-aligned groups as un-American, justification for Republican Party violence increases by 31%. Among those who rated all Democratic Party-linked groups as un-American, the probability of justifying Republican Party violence was 50%.

*These results point to a connection between the intolerance of marginalized groups that attracted Trump supporters, vilification of political opponents, and support for political violence.*

#### **4. Elite Rhetoric Matters**

After recognizing the extent of support for violence among partisans, many people have asked us: what can be done about it? We present our most important practical evidence here, with direct tests showing how party leaders can successfully reduce violent partisan attitudes through their messages, especially among the partisans who are most likely to hold violent views.

First, some historical context on how U.S. political leaders powerfully motivate or prevent political violence through messages to their supporters. Low-level political violence was more common in the United States in the mid-1800s, especially during election campaigns and on Election Day itself. Local party leaders on each side generally tolerated and even encouraged fistfights between their supporters, but when violence occasionally spiraled into numerous deaths, those local party leaders tamped down on their followers and the subsequent campaigns remained unusually peaceful.<sup>7</sup>

The Civil War was a much larger case of partisan violence with hundreds of thousands killed. Party leaders played key roles in mobilizing their followers into violence against the United States or in defense of it, but some leaders also succeeded in discouraging their followers from joining the war effort, for better and worse.<sup>8</sup> Civil War party leaders also fomented violence against their partisan opponents *within* the loyal states and plotted against state and national governments.<sup>9</sup>

After the war, white leaders in the South successfully organized racial-partisan violence to suppress Black voters, intimidate and assassinate elected leaders, and even enact coups against

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<sup>7</sup> David Grimsted. 1998. *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2020. *With Ballots & Bullets: Partisanship & Violence in the American Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Jenifer Weber. 2008. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents*. Oxford University Press.

local governments.<sup>10</sup> Those violent tactics ultimately succeeded in reestablishing white supremacy in the South for much of the next century. That history of racial-partisan violence organized and incited by party leaders provides important context for understanding how partisan violence works today.

To test how party leaders shape the public's views about political violence today, Mason and Kalmoe fielded several national surveys that included embedded randomized experiments displaying explicit anti-violence messages from real party leaders.<sup>11</sup> Our September 2019 and October 2020 YouGov surveys tested how Americans responded to anti-violence messages from Donald Trump or Joe Biden.<sup>12</sup> Our June 2021 YouGov survey tested whether other national party leaders have similar influence over public opinion—namely, Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and FOX News personality Sean Hannity.

Our results indicated that anti-violence messages from all four leaders succeeded in reducing support for political violence on several survey questions. Our 2019 study found that reading an anti-violence message from Trump or Biden caused a 3 point reduction in support for violence from a baseline of 10 points among those who didn't see an anti-violence message. Our 2020 study found a 6 point reduction in violent views from a baseline of 18 points, plus a 4 point reduction in support for violence explicitly linked to hypothetically losing the next presidential election. The effects were similar for both leaders, similar for Republican and Democratic respondents, and similar regardless of whether the message came from one's own party leader or the opposing one. The reduction in both studies was largest among people who identified most strongly with their party—the people who generally expressed more support for political violence to begin with.

Our 2021 study found that Sen. McConnell's condemnation of the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack reduced support for violence 2.5 points and Hannity's statement condemning open-carry at Republican protests reduced violent views by 2 points, both from a baseline around 10 points. The impact of

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<sup>10</sup>Eric Foner. 1988. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. Harper & Row.

<sup>11</sup>Survey respondents were randomly assigned to read one short anti-violence quote from Biden, one short anti-violence quote from Trump, or they saw no message. After that, we asked questions about support for political violence. The scientific logic of experiments is powerful for evaluating cause and effect. Because the texts were randomly assigned, we can confidently conclude that any statistically significant differences in violent views between people who read a message or not were caused by the message itself, and not merely correlated with exposure to political messages.

<sup>12</sup>We lightly edited a Trump quote from a 2018 tweet on the anniversary of violence in Charlottesville, VA. "I condemn in the strongest possible terms all acts of violence. That has no place here." Our Biden quote came from a 2019 statement in response to antifa violence in Portland, OR. "Violence directed at anyone because of their political opinions is never acceptable, regardless of what those beliefs might be." The results from these two studies appear in our 2022 book. Nathan P. Kalmoe & Lilliana Mason. 2022. *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

Sen. McConnell's statement is especially noteworthy, given that his statement focused directly on the Capitol attack:

January 6th was a disgrace. American citizens attacked their own government. They used terrorism to try to stop a specific piece of democratic business they did not like. Fellow Americans beat and bloodied our own police. They stormed the Senate floor. They tried to hunt down the Speaker of the House. They built a gallows and chanted about murdering the Vice President. They did this because they had been fed wild falsehoods by the most powerful man on Earth — because he was angry he'd lost an election.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, we conclude that top party leaders can significantly reduce approval of violence among partisans with their explicit anti-violence messages, even with a single message. This is especially effective among partisans who strongly identify with their party. Leaders have a unique opportunity—and sometimes a responsibility—to speak to their most loyal (and usually most extreme) followers to help turn down the partisan fire they might otherwise be stoking.

Our results corroborate House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy's beliefs about President Trump's influence when he begged the president to call off the rioters on a phone call during the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack—something the president initially refused to do.<sup>14</sup> Adding more evidence, once President Trump did put out a statement calling for his supporters to leave the Capitol, some of the rioters at the Capitol were recorded on video telling others there to leave while citing President Trump's statement as the reason to do so.<sup>15</sup> At times when violence threatens democracy, it is essential for leaders and citizens to reinforce vital norms against violence.

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<sup>13</sup><https://www.republicanleader.senate.gov/newsroom/remarks/mcconnell-on-impeachment-disgraceful-derelection-cannot-lead-senate-to-defy-our-own-constitutional-guardrails>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/12/politics/trump-mccarthy-shouting-match-details/index.html>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/video-captures-person-of-interest-before-capitol-breach/65-86c5ac27-3cc8-45d2-8a7e-562ee1f289e0>