



THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: Political Extremism, Radicalization & The 2024 Presidential Election



LINCOLN
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DEMOCRACY INDEX KEY FINDINGS

POWERED BY



A row of white gravestones in a cemetery, with several American flags planted in the grass in the foreground. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

THE AMERICAN REALITY

On January 20, 2025, America's experiment with democracy will either continue as it has for over two hundred forty-eight years, or it will die. Democracy's fate will not be decided by who wins in November 2024. Rather, the outcome will be determined by whether those on the side receiving fewer votes will peacefully accept governance by those who are elected. The outcome of this is unknown for the first time in over a century.

THE LINCOLN DEMOCRACY INDEX

What makes the 2024 elections unique in American history is that we are going into an election cycle knowing there is a real chance a significant portion of the voting population will not accept the results as free and fair. It is highly likely these voters will not accept the governance of the election's winner because they do not believe the outcome. Therefore, to confront this challenge, we must ask ourselves – why is this so?

To solve such a challenge, we must acknowledge the existence of a problem. Then we must strive to understand the problem and take appropriate actions to find a path forward.

The Lincoln Democracy Institute (LDI) set out to tackle this challenge by creating its Democracy Index. LDI realized that there was a dearth of research exploring how political extremism has become normalized -- leading us further down the path of polarization, demonization, and violence. To address this phenomenon, LDI launched our groundbreaking research project focused on quantifying and comprehending the existential crises we are facing in American democracy today.

With our survey partner QuestionPro, LDI conducted over 17,000 interviews with registered voters. The sample statistically matches the American electorate based on gender, race, age, and geography. Each participant was given a 45-minute survey that delved into worldviews and personalities as well as levels of partisanship, extremism, and radicalization -- all to identify the underlying variables of the challenges we face.

While some of the conclusions may be troubling, we hope you find this initial set of insights valuable. Like any unpleasant diagnosis, this research provides the opportunity of a path toward healing.

LINCOLN DEMOCRACY INDEX OBJECTIVES

- 1. QUANTIFY** the levels of partisanship, hyper-partisanship, extremism, and radicalization within the American electorate by better understanding the operative psychological steps towards political extremism and the underlying drivers of radicalization.
- 2. DEFINE** the macro worldviews and micro political values/personalities within the American electorate today to learn what drives politics at its most basic level.
- 3. REFINE** political engagement to meet the moment of our current political reality, taking into consideration what we know of elections and the ongoing battle with zero-sum extremists and radicalized actors intentions on destroying our win-win democratic values.

KEY FINDINGS

As Abraham Lincoln said long ago, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Today, America is experiencing a cycle of escalating extremism. If left unchecked, this cycle will inevitably lead to more of the violent radicalization we witnessed on January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol. That day, our Democracy withstood the attack upon it but next time we may not be as lucky.

The data that follows from the Lincoln Democracy Index provides a greater understanding of how divided our nation’s house has become, the underlying causes of these divisions, and what Americans can do as individuals and as a collective to confront these challenges as we move towards this generation’s moment of truth —the 2024 Presidential election.

A NATION DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND

Although America's political divides are not new, there is a distinct sense since 2016 that something has changed and that our divisions have widened. Understanding these tectonic shifts is where the Lincoln Democracy Index comes into play by shedding unique quantitative light through data on the structural soundness of America's democracy. The data shows that the United States has entered a cycle of political extremism: Normalization, Polarization, Demonization, and Violence. Below is a summary of the key findings supporting this conclusion:

NORMALIZATION:

- Nearly half of American registered voters view those not sharing their politics as “untrustworthy enemies” and have little faith in the freeness or fairness of elections.
- Approximately a quarter of Americans fully meet the four steps of political extremism: psychological distress, acceptance of simplistic answers, overconfidence, and intolerance of political differences.
- Another third of Americans are emerging extremists, exhibiting three of the four steps and displaying distrust or intolerance towards those with differing political views.

POLARIZATION:

- Americans across political divides share a common top fear of “corrupt or incompetent people being elected or appointed to high positions in government.” Unfortunately, the interpretation of who falls under the categories of corrupt or incompetent is based almost entirely on partisan identification.
- Political extremism exists in both parties, with over half of Republicans and Democrats being extremists or emerging extremists. Even among independents, there is a notable extremism problem.

DEMONIZATION:

- What is perceived as right or wrong with America is highly influenced by one's political perspective. For example, supporters of Black Lives Matter and gender-neutral pronouns are viewed as “what is right” by those on the political left, while MAGA supporters and gun owners are seen as “what is wrong.” The reverse is true for those on the political right.
- Extremist individuals on both sides have higher levels of demonization of opposing political groups or ideologies.

THE POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE:

- According to LDI's data, at least one in ten Americans demonstrate all three components of Kruglanski's Significant Quest Theory of Radicalization: need, network and narrative. These Americans are also likely to be considering violence in the future. Currently, three in four voters within this category are on the political right. However, it is essential to recognize how the cycle of extremism can radicalize individuals across political divides, leading to violent conflicts in response to each other's actions. Moreover, this reprisal radicalization can occur rapidly. The data shows that the United States has entered a cycle of political extremism: Normalization, Polarization, Demonization, and Violence. As we go through this cycle more Americans on both sides will begin moving through this cycle towards extremism and acceptance of violence in our politics.

As the 2024 presidential election approaches, America finds itself deeply divided, with escalating levels of extremism and radicalization among the electorate. The crucial question is whether our democracy can withstand these divisions and find a path through 2024 elections.

THE CAUSES OF OUR DIVISIONS

The extremism in America today results from decades of increasing polarization within our politics. The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump marked a significant tipping point, as the optimism of Barack Obama's "Hope and Change" gave way to the normalization of extremist rhetoric, exemplified by the use of phrases such as "Lock Her Up." This trend continued during the Trump Presidency, leading to the radicalization and violence witnessed at the US Capitol on January 6 in 2021. As we approach the next presidential election, it is crucial to identify the factors that, if left unchecked, will further fuel extremism, radicalization, and violence. Based on our data, six causes are contributing to our current divides:

- 1. DIFFERING WORLDVIEWS:** Extremists and emerging extremists on both the right and left share common characteristics, including greater anger and pessimism and lower trust in others. The critical distinction between extremists on the right and left lies in the direction of their anger and distrust, as each side directs these emotions toward those on the opposing side through intolerance, distrust, and demonization.
- 2. DIVERGING FEARS:** The far left and right hold fundamentally divergent fears. As we move along the political spectrum, distress over specific issues becomes more pronounced or diminished. For example, concerns over transgender Americans serving in the military increase significantly when moving from left to right. At the same time, global warming fears decrease dramatically in intensity when moving from right to left.
- 3. RELITIGATING THE SIXTIES:** The Baby Boomers, who have dominated American politics since 1992, comprise a base of extremists on both the far right and far left. They exhibit more pronounced ideological divides compared to other generations. They are more inclined to be intolerant and distrust those not sharing their political views, regardless of whether they are on the right or the left.
- 4. THE COLD WAR GENERATIONS VERSUS POST COLD WAR GENERATIONS:** Generations that experienced the end of the Cold War have different cultural values and relationships with technology compared to those who remember the Cold War. The larger the generational distance from 1989, the greater the divide in these differences.
- 5. CULTURAL VALUES: REFORMIST VERSUS TRADITIONAL:** Most Americans prefer traditional values over reformist ones. Overstepping the perceived status quo into the reformist territory, even within one's political side, often triggers intense resistance. Cultural issues, such as the Dobbs decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* or abolishing the police, are fueled by extremism on both sides. Yet, they can also serve as cognitive dissonance to unite the tolerant and trusting across party lines by breaking them off from the intolerant extremists on their side of our political divides.
- 6. SEPARATED MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS:** Americans exist within three separate media ecosystems - Traditional Media, Fox News Media, and New Right Extremist Media. While extremists and emerging extremists can be found in each, those demonstrating radicalization consume media predominantly from New Right Extremist Media. Therefore, any New Left Extremist Media ecosystem emergence should be watched closely as it would have just as troubling implications for our democracy as that on the right does now. Moreover, as we move through our next presidential election cycle, it is essential to assess whether rhetoric within New Right Extremist Media again aligns with the narratives like election denialism that led to the events on January 6.

As the next test of our America's democracy unfolds, we must watch these groups for growing extremism. Moreover, those relying on the New Right Extremist Media ecosystem must be observed closely to see if they accept narratives with potentially violent consequences again in 2024. In 2020 all the signs of what eventually happened were in plain view. This time, we have quantitative data to back up our hunches. We ignore it at our peril.

CONFRONTING THAT WHICH DIVIDES US

The 2024 Presidential election will be an existential test for the American experiment. It will determine whether we can heal our divisions or continue the current erosion of the foundation of American democracy. To confront this crisis and foster a healthier nation, we propose the following based on our research:

- **RECOGNIZE WHAT IS AT STAKE IN 2024:** Ensuring acceptance of election results is crucial for the survival of any democracy. Ultimately the losing side must consent to be governed by those they did not support, as failing to do so destroys the foundation of democracy. Many Americans doubt the fairness of the 2020 elections, and there is a belief among right-wing extremists and those on the left and right with low trust and intolerance that the other party cannot win a “free and fair” election in 2024. To address election denialism, we must actively marginalize deniers and confront the silence of those who refuse to speak out against such denials. Upholding trust and integrity in our elections is the first step towards safeguarding our democracy.
- **ENGAGE CONSTANTLY WITH THOSE DETERMINING THE OUTCOME:** In the upcoming elections, a small group of voters in Wisconsin, Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Nevada will play a decisive role. These voters, historically leaning towards supporting Republicans, have shown a willingness to cross party lines in recent elections. Engaging them in a sustained and ongoing conversation is vital to ensure they continue prioritizing democracy over partisan interests.
- **CREATE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ENABLERS OF EXTREMISM:** Political extremism follows a progression of psychological distress, acceptance of simplistic answers, overconfidence, and intolerance of political differences. Leaders in a democracy are responsible for confronting and addressing voters on this trajectory. Failure to do so makes them enablers, contributing to the toxic effects harming our democracy. Those who choose to remain silent must be held politically accountable, as they share responsibility for the challenges we face alongside the illiberal actors driving extremism and radicalization.
- **COVER EXTREMISM BY UNDERSTANDING ITS CYCLE:** Intolerance and distrust perpetuate a dangerous cycle of extremism within our democracy: normalization, polarization, demonization, and violence. Journalists covering politics and the coming Presidential campaign must recognize and comprehend this cycle. Individuals displaying emerging extremist tendencies can rapidly descend into full-fledged extremists as the cycle unfolds. Moreover, zero-sum politicians and organizations strategically fuel and exploit extremist behaviors by leveraging media coverage. The media is responsible for acknowledging this reality and incorporating this understanding into their coverage of governing, politics, and the coming elections.
- **INVEST WITH DEFENDING DEMOCRACY AS THE NORTH STAR:** Supporting candidates during elections and safeguarding democracy from extremism are interconnected, yet distinct, endeavors. While supporting candidates buys time to address extremism in elections, defending democracy requires long-term, sustained engagement beyond campaigns and elections to defeat extremism. Therefore, when deciding where to help, it is crucial to prioritize the defense of democracy as the guiding principle. Consider how your support contributes to buying time for democratic forces, obstructing the cycle of extremism, or marginalizing extremists. By aligning to defend democracy, meaningful contributions to safeguarding democratic principles get made.

The challenges of extremism America faces did not arise overnight, and addressing them requires a sustained long-term effort. Through this research, we understand the challenges, their underlying causes, and the strategic steps to start correcting course. Armed with this knowledge, we can begin the vital work of defeating unhealthy extremism. It will require commitment, dialogue, and a collective effort, but we have the potential to overcome these challenges and build a stronger and more resilient nation.

THE LINCOLN DEMOCRACY INDEX

Moving Forward

The LDI Index is an ongoing initiative to identify strategies and tactics to defend American democracy against current threats. This initial chapter provides a glimpse of the comprehensive data we will be releasing in future chapters. Upcoming chapters will explore the following topics:

- **THE BANNON LINE:** In 2020, Steve Bannon, a top advisor to Donald Trump, suggested if the Lincoln Project could sway four percent of Republican voters away from Trump, he would fail to secure a second term. This prediction materialized as five percent of Republicans either abstained from voting for Trump or supported Joe Biden. This trend persisted in the 2022 key governor races. This chapter will analyze these right-of-center voters prioritizing democracy over politics to safeguard our democratic values and outline the necessary steps based on data to ensure their continued commitment in favor of democracy over partisanship.
- **THE CHALLENGE FOR CORPORATE AMERICA:** Extremism poses a threat not only to politics but also to the economy. This chapter explores how companies are becoming targets of extremists and partisan influences. The chapter will also provide insight into how corporate actors can address these challenges.
- **THE SWING STATES:** Focusing on key states that have historically determined presidential elections, this chapter analyzes the unique divisions, extremism, and pivotal voters within these states. Their choices may shape the future of American democracy, and this chapter will provide the pathway to ensure they do.
- **PERSONALITIES AND WORLDVIEWS OF AMERICAN VOTERS:** Using data from the LDI survey, this chapter explores the sixteen personalities and worldviews of the American electorate, highlighting their perspectives on the world and politics based on their foundational values. It then explains how these personalities hold the strategic and tactical keys to defending democracy.
- **IN-DEPTH MEDIA ECOSYSTEMS:** Building on the role of media ecosystems in this current chapter on extremism, this chapter provides research on specific news sources and their impact on our politics. Moreover, it will provide leaders at these organizations with insights they can use to ensure they are part of the solution rather than exacerbating the problem.
- **THE 2024 ELECTIONS AND BEYOND:** The final chapter will review all of the data in the LDI Index, focusing on the prospects for American democracy in the 2024 elections and beyond.

Moving forward, LDI seeks support to expand this research through focus groups, providing a more nuanced understanding of threats from extremists. A detailed program will also monitor changing dynamics within critical groups identified in this and future chapters, ensuring timely actions against rising threats. By gaining insight into potential proactive countermeasures, these efforts aim to prevent a repeat of the turmoil following the 2020 election elections.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The Lincoln Democracy Institute Index is comprised of interviews conducted online with a total of 16,026 self-identified registered voters between February 18 and April 4, 2023. Additionally, 1,723 interviews were conducted after the national sample to gather oversamples of 800 registered voters in the states of Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The samples were carefully selected to ensure statistical representation of the number of registered voters in each state, as well as balanced representation across gender, age, and ethnicity. The survey was carried out by QuestionPro, a leading global consumer research firm specializing in survey fieldwork.

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