



# **Election Risk Assessment**

**October 2024**



# US 2024 ELECTION RISK ASSESSMENT

**Executive Summary:** The risk environment for the duration of the election period will remain *moderate*. This takes into consideration existing structural frameworks of the US electoral system,<sup>1</sup> which create conditions conducive for political violence. There are specific recent trends within US political violence related to domestic violent extremists (DVEs) and within elections' operations that combined will produce an elevated threat level.

## Key points:

- Interference from foreign countries and foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) via influence and disinformation campaigns may stoke civil unrest, incite violence, or compromise election integrity.
- Partisan DVEs may execute specific targeted attacks on government assets and personnel at the behest of domestic or foreign extremist groups, or in response to existential rhetoric from political or social media figures.
- Protests and political rallies remain potential targets for attacks from DVEs and, conversely, serve as sources of threat against government buildings, poll sites, and counter-protesters.
- Protestors are likely to target election-related rallies or events in response to geo-political developments, particularly those related to the conflict in Gaza.

**Foreign Interference:** The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has documented efforts by foreign entities (state and non-state) to interfere in the US election at all levels of government. The main countries of concern are Russia, Iran, and China, each employing differentiated tactics to achieve their unique goals.



These actions include implementing disinformation campaigns that increasingly utilize AI to undercut confidence in election integrity, stoke civil unrest, and sway voters to candidates that support policies that benefit them. Advances in AI allow foreign adversaries to increase the output and authenticity of disinformation while concealing the origin of the content. Vulnerable campaign and election cyber infrastructure remains an attractive target for foreign adversaries. However, there have been no documented cases to date of a cyberattack compromising the integrity of a ballot cast or disrupting the ability of officials to tabulate votes. This possibility remains unlikely, according to US intelligence sources, because it carries a near certainty of US retaliation.

**Foreign Threat Actors:** Middle Eastern based FTOs (most prominently Hamas, Hezbollah, the Islamic State (IS), and Al-Qaeda), in response to the Israel-Hamas War, have increased their calls for action from sympathizers in the US who are disillusioned and have been radicalized. This could manifest as violent action undertaken by anti-Israel actors or could be undertaken by Islamist fundamentalists. FTO capacity for a direct physical attack by a member on an election-related target remains **low**. This is because of the high degree of difficulty involved in getting an asset into the US and carrying out a premediated plan undetected. The DHS cites that encounters with individuals in the Terrorist Screening Data Set, along both US borders, have declined since January 2024, and the US Customs and Border Protection Bureau's September 2024 report noted that apprehensions along the US-Mexico border have reached their lowest point in three years. FTOs are more likely to focus on inciting a HVE (homegrown violent extremist) to take action.



**Domestic Terrorism:** Since 2016, there has been a shift in the nature of political violence in the US. Acts of political violence are no longer carried out by organized groups who espouse their opposition to the federal government, but instead, by radicalized individuals without material ties to a formal group motivated by partisan ideology. The US intelligence community has stated that the greatest terrorist threat today is posed by lone offenders, often radicalized online, with access to soft targets and easily acquired weapons. Domestic extremist groups have become increasingly decentralized, encouraging individuals to act without direct orders from leadership. Therefore, the likelihood of an event akin to the January 6th Insurrection being repeated is **very low** – especially due to reports that the groups responsible have been thoroughly infiltrated and compromised by law enforcement.

The risk of far-right election-related violence is **moderate**, and although the potential of far-left extremist violence is less likely, it should not be dismissed. This can be explained by the weak bond between potential far-left DVEs and the mainstream left, which contrasts the stronger relationship between potential far-right DVEs and the mainstream right. The main accelerant during this election period will be existential political rhetoric from both parties - particularly regarding election integrity and the sanctity of US democracy - which could be interpreted by individuals as a call for violence. Historically, politically motivated attacks have a low level of lethality because of strong security measures surrounding government targets, the tendency to choose specific targets (as opposed to indiscriminately targeting bystanders), and the low skill level of perpetrators.



**Poll Stations and Personnel:** To date, the threat of an ‘insider’ (an individual with authorized access that could be used for harm) sabotaging the electoral system have been domestic, in terms of the actor and motivation. There has been a rise in disruptive tactics targeting election infrastructure including hoax bomb threats, swatting, doxing, and distributed denial of service (DDoS) cyberattacks. Intimidation at polling stations against voters and workers under the guise of ‘observing’ remain probable. According to the Brennan Center, 38% of local election officials experienced threats, harassment, or abuse, and while 90% of local election officials report having taken steps to increase election security since 2020, the specifics vary widely based on locality – leaving gaps to be exploited. The predicted lengthy interim period between Election Day and the declaration of a victor. Coupled with tight margins, will result in a high-tension period. Violently inclined individuals may be galvanized by disinformation and political rhetoric during this period to take violent action targeting polling stations or workers. In swing states, this risk is elevated by various unresolved questions about how to tabulate contested ballots, which could extend counting periods and increase the perception of bias.

**Protests, Demonstrations, and Rallies:** Anti-Israel activists are liable to target the events of both political parties. As US society has become more polarized, counter-protesters have emerged as a source of risk at demonstrations, as they will engage in behavior that intends to provoke a physical reaction. These interactions usually do not escalate past harassment or assault to become fatal. Although minor injuries and arrests often occur at such protests, the most likely outcome is transportation related disruptions. Recent world events, and the tenor of political rhetoric, should be monitored leading up to, during, and after the election to gauge the intensity of the political climate and its potential to incite violent action at protests, or otherwise. Both right-wing and left-wing protests – in light of



precedents at recent pro-Palestinian demonstrations – tend to result in unruly interactions with police/law enforcement and property damage.

There is a **high** likelihood that the losing side in the presidential race, and interest groups aligned with that side, will organize protests in support of their candidate and in opposition to the victor. Washington D.C. is the most likely site for any large-scale protest. However, all urban centers are probable locations for protests and rallies. Isolated smaller protests, or political rallies held within swing states, have a likelihood of encountering counter-protesters. Disinformation from foreign and domestic sources, current world events, and existential political rhetoric are liable to impassion attendees at these events, increasing the risk of escalatory violent action being taken by participants.

**For questions regarding this report or for immediate assistance, please call:**

- Prosegur Global Risk Services: (978) 364-5622
- Alternate Phone: (772) 359-6003

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