

# Global experts are more likely to be worried about electoral violence in the presidential election than their US counterparts.

*Ahead of the US presidential election there is growing concern both at home and abroad about the health of American democracy. In a new study, Ilana Rothkopf, Paul Friesen, Luis Schenoni, Maggie Shum, and Romelia M. Solano asked 150 election experts from around the world about election scenarios. They found that experts outside the US were more concerned than their American counterparts about threats to US democracy such as violence at polling places, or other forms of voter intimidation.*

As it is usual when there is a presidential election, international allies and rivals alike are watching the United States closely. Yet this election has been unique because of a rising concern, both [at home](#) and [abroad](#), [about a](#) decline in American democracy. Indexes assessing the state of democracy globally, such as [Freedom House](#), [Varieties of Democracy](#) (V-Dem), and the [Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index](#) have registered a notable decline of American democracy levels in the past several years. This trend is concerning for the rest of the international community, for it directly affects key foreign policy agendas like the multilateral promotion of democracy and human rights, which have long framed how America approaches diplomacy, [defense](#), and [foreign assistance](#). [The deterioration of American democracy, thus, is arguably linked to a simultaneous decline in](#) parts of [Asia](#), [Europe](#), and [Latin America](#) as well.

Conversely, the troubles of American democracy resemble patterns many of these countries have experienced, which is characterized by high political polarization and institutional erosion from within, led primarily by the actions of a democratically elected incumbent. The image of the US as a lighthouse of democracy is against the ropes. Instead, a study of how democracies have experienced backsliding around the world seems to shed light on what is happening in Washington. Our Comparative Assessment of Electoral Risks ([CAER](#)) project builds upon expert knowledge on democratic elections around the globe to assess the actual impact that developments in the coming weeks might have on American democracy.

Our findings suggest this apprehension about the integrity of American elections, and indeed, American democracy more broadly is well-founded, but observers looking at the US with an international, comparative perspective are particularly concerned. Democratic backsliding – the gradual deterioration of the qualities associated with democratic governance – is [a defining feature](#) of global politics in the last decade. V-Dem's liberal democracy index shows an intensified decline in democracy in the past year: [democracy declined in 26 countries in 2019](#), up from 18 two years ago. Whereas many experts of American politics and elections maintain faith in American institutions, experts for other parts of the world are waving a red flag for American elections. If US sociologist Seymour M. Lipset was right and “those who only know one country, know no country,” then the latter opinions should not be taken lightly.

## Expert Assessments of American Elections

In September 2020, we asked 150 experts of elections around the world about a series of plausible American elections scenarios related to the election, and strategies for mitigating the deleterious effects of these scenarios. Our sample demonstrates a high level of expertise with 47 percent of respondents identifying as tenured university professors, 12 percent untenured university professors, 30 percent Ph.D. students and postdocs, and the remaining 11 percent working outside of academia. 44 percent of respondents study US elections, 24 percent study elections in other countries, and 28 percent study elections in both the US and other contexts. Our survey asked respondents to rank electoral risks of each scenario according to their likelihood of occurring and their impact on the legitimacy of the election, on a scale from 0 to 10. These ratings were combined to create a general assessment of concern about scenarios in the lead up to election day and election day itself.

On average, experts were most concerned about President Trump's attacks on the media, the reduction of polling places, delays or halts in mail-in ballot counting, foreign disinformation campaigns, and the premature announcement of election results, before all ballots have been counted. Strikingly, however, experts of American elections and experts of elections in foreign countries differed with respect to their concern about key election scenarios. For all scenarios where these experts differed from one another in their ratings, it was the global elections experts who registered higher levels of concern.

## Where do Global Experts Diverge?

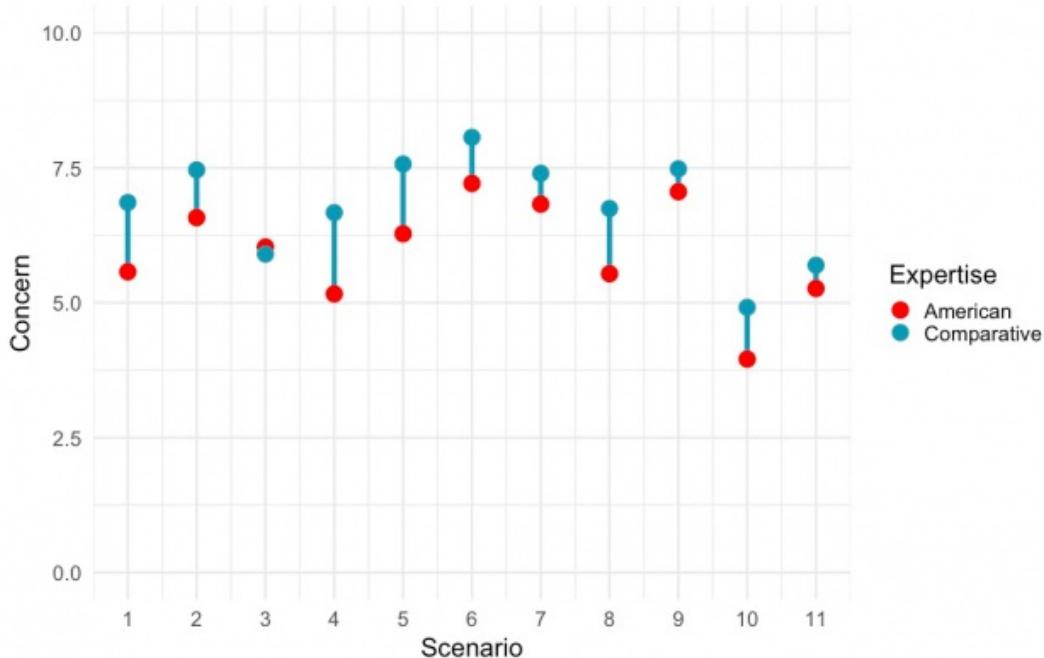
In the Comparative Assessment of Electoral Risks survey, the pre-election phase focused on scenarios that may occur before most citizens have begun to vote. American and global elections experts diverged in their views of three key areas: the impact of polling station reductions and a possible criminal investigation into former Vice President Biden, and the likelihood of a foreign disinformation campaign. This means that although all respondents were concerned about the effects of a foreign disinformation campaign on the election, respondents with expertise in global elections saw disinformation as more likely than their American elections counterparts.



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During the voting process and its immediate aftermath, expert respondents were collectively most concerned with the premature announcement of election results, disputes over mail-in ballots, and voter intimidation. However, there were a few key scenarios where global elections experts were far more concerned than their American elections counterparts: the possibility that martial law is declared either at the federal level or in individual states, the likelihood of electoral violence and extremist group mobilization, and the impact of the misuse of state voter fraud task forces on the legitimacy of the election. For these scenarios, the difference between experts in American and global elections was more than 1, on a scale of 0-10. There is also a moderate difference – between 0.5 and 1 – between experts for scenarios of extremist mobilization, subjective rejection of mail-in ballots, and the use of lawsuits to halt or delay ballot counting. What this means is that compared to their global elections colleagues, American elections experts downplay situations where there may be violence or the use of democratic institutions and powers for non-democratic means. Although such practices are common in some parts of the globe, they are unprecedented in the modern American context. In essence, there are scenarios that global experts are concerned about that American experts simply cannot fathom in the United States.

**Figure 1 – Concern About Scenarios During Voting**



Note: Scenarios: 1. Government officials declare martial law or send federal agents to watch over or close polling stations due to protests and/or the pandemic 2. Citizens mobilized by extremist groups congregate near polling places to intimidate voters. 3. Party-backed poll watchers are deployed to monitor and police polling stations. 4. Violence erupts at numerous polling places involving any combination of actors. 5. Federal or state-level voter fraud task forces claim evidence of mass voter fraud in states with competitive outcomes. 6. The President, in coordination with state leaders, files lawsuits to stop mail-in ballot counting or orders the Department of Justice to seize mail-in ballots before they are counted. 7. A substantial number of mail-in ballots are rejected for legal and/or subjective reasons (forgery, duplicates, etc.). 8. State governments delay the announcement of their election outcome, resulting in their electors not being submitted to Congress on time. 9. The final results are proactively announced by the candidates or partisan-leaning media outlets before mail-in ballots are counted. 10. The candidate likely to win dies or a massive misinformation campaign attempts to convince the public that he is seriously ill or dead. 11. In the name of national security, internet access or other key communications are restricted on a mass scale by the President, especially as opposition groups are seeking to mobilize supporters.

## What Does This Difference Mean?

In the first Presidential debate on September 30, President Trump told the far-right, neo-fascist group the Proud Boys to “stand back, and stand by,” on national television. This comment, and [ensuing discussions](#) in the American media about the possibility of political violence and right-wing extremist mobilization as the election approaches reflects a sobering truth in the CAER findings. Events that many Americans, even experts, did not consider possible in the modern American context, are possible. When American elections and global elections experts diverge in their concerns about the upcoming Presidential election, it is always the global elections experts who see a given scenario as more of a risk. Global experts root their responses in a deep comparative expertise of other countries in the world where events once thought unfathomable have happened. Americans would do well to take a look around the globe at challenged or violent elections and take heed. In essence, if it happened there, it can happen here.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the authors



### **Ilana Rothkopf – University of Notre Dame**

Ilana is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. Her research fields are international relations and comparative politics with interests in international and comparative law, negotiations, non-state actors, international organizations, and post-conflict reconstruction.



### **Paul Friesen – University of Notre Dame**

Paul Friesen is a PhD candidate in political science and a PhD Fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies. Paul's research centers on developing a more in-depth understanding of political behavior, party attachment, and electoral competition across African countries.



### **Luis Schenoni – University of Konstanz**

Luis is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Konstanz. He works on state building, international conflict, and foreign policy, with a focus on Latin America.



### **Maggie Shum – University of Notre Dame**

Maggie Shum is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. She is interested in participatory policies, policy diffusion, political party organizations, contentious politics, and elections.



### **Romelia M. Solano – University of Notre Dame**

Romelia is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. Her research focuses on the role of the state in identity formation, political behavior, and racial-ethnic politics in the United States.