

Talking Points for Clergy on Violence and the November Election

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Author: The Carter Center

RISK

- Violence is on the rise: Mass shootings hit a record high last year.¹
 - FBI data shows all time high of hate crimes in 2018², though the likely number is far higher due to lack of reporting.
 - This summer saw the largest peaceful protest movement in U.S. history,³ 95% of protests involved peaceful protestors, but 5% had violence involving property damage, the police, counter protesters, and/or provocateurs.⁴
 - Militia activity is on the rise on the left and right. There were 187 appearances of paramilitary and other far-right actors at rallies nationwide from late May to early July.⁵
- Violence behaves like a virus⁶, it is contagious. Contain it to reduce the spread and prevent further infection.
- Four major risk factors linked to possible electoral violence: groups engaging in winner-take-all competition to promote their own interests (“elite factionalization”), societal polarization, rise in hate speech and rhetoric, and weakening institutions.⁷
- There is a climate of disinformation designed to further polarize the country.⁸
- Pandemic related recession has put over 40 million people out of work.⁹
- Perceptions of intimidation, suppression, and fraud can haunt an election’s credibility.¹⁰

MESSAGES

Acknowledge concerns

- People are not alone in their fears of election violence. 71% of all Americans are concerned about violence in the wake of the 2020 election.¹¹

Remember history

- No election system is perfect, but America’s elections are some of the best in the world. The United States has successfully held elections throughout our nearly 250 years of history, including pandemics, World Wars, and even the Civil War. We’ve done it before and we’ll do it again, as a country.
- All Americans should cherish our heritage as the first country in the modern world with an elected head of state, and the first country where challengers for the position of head of state, and incumbents in that position, accepted the will of the people as the determining factor in the deciding the leader of the country. Acceptance of the will of the people is perhaps America’s greatest innovation, an invention that has brought peace and prosperity to countries emulating our example around the world.
- Violence is not effective at achieving long term goals. Research suggests that nonviolent campaigns are more successful at achieving social change.¹²

Find common ground

- Strengthen unifying identities. Focus on shared identities among Americans. For example, 86% of Americans cite their role in their family as the most important aspect of their identity, 3 of 4 say their American identity is important to them, and 68% are exhausted by the division in our country and see pitting Americans against each other as a threat to our democracy.¹³
- The vast majority of Americans reject the use of violence.
- Highlight our shared duty to protect our democracy and republic.
- Americans agree that voting is a common obligation.¹⁴

Educate regarding the electoral process and fight disinformation

- While most Americans are probably ready for this election to be over, the truth is that because of the pandemic we will need to wait longer than normal for the outcome. It is likely that we will not know the winner until mid-November or even beyond, unlike presidential elections in the recent past.
- The reason for a longer process should be clear and uncontroversial: the need to ensure the accurate counting of ballots cast this year by voters who choose to use alternatives to voting in person on election day in response to the risks presented by the Coronavirus. These alternatives, specifically voting in person during early voting periods and voting with an absentee ballot delivered by mail or other means, have been used safely in many states for many years. Indeed, in the case of absentee ballots, the American military has safely used this option for more than 140 years.
- This year, it is our duty to wait for every valid ballot to be counted even if it takes a while. Every generation before us has done their duty to keep democracy strong. Now it's on us to do the same.
- The United States has thousands of election officials around the country, and surveys of these officials illustrate their strong dedication to a fair and impartial process.
- More lawsuits are expected and are not in and of themselves cause for alarm. If problems occur, there are laws and processes in place to address election disputes.
- Leaders should refrain from unsubstantiated claims, which may undermine trust and lead to unrest.
- No election is problem free, and we should be prepared for reports of problems in some places. The guiding principle is that the validity of election results can only be called into question if problems reach a level that they potentially impact a greater number of votes than the margin of victory.
- Disinformation, intentionally misleading information, and misinformation, will fill social media. Encourage people to verify before sharing information, and actively seek to correct harmful rumors and conspiracy theories.
- Steer discussion of voter fraud and other politicized issues away from "right" and "wrong." Assure people that there are trusted election officials and established mechanisms to guard against fraud.
- Analysis by a recent governmental commission and the FBI suggests that voter fraud, including with mail in/absentee ballots, is negligible.¹⁵

Promote peace and positivity

- Set positive norms, e.g. “violence is not an acceptable way to resolve any issue.”
- Share and repeat forceful condemnations of violence and reject violent metaphors and headlines, particularly within your own social and political groups.
- Invite or encourage others to talk to people in their communities who will be working at the polls.
- Reinforce how we all want to make this country better, how there are solutions to the concerns about the election, and how this is an opportunity for us to move forward as a community.
- Encourage people to channel their anxiety into civic engagement.
- Feature people getting things right, like local dialogue efforts, fighting disinformation, etc.

ACTIONS

- Take the pledge [“With Malice Towards None”](#) organized by [Braver Angels](#).
- Take the pledge to commit to a free and fair election at [FaithandElections.com](#).
- Consider participating in the [“Mourning in Unity”](#) campaign.
- Consider participating in One America Movement’s [“Open House”](#) events where experts will discuss issues around the election, including violence and division, with faith leaders.
- Write an op-ed in your local papers counseling calm, patience, peace, and justice.
- Share a sermon reinforcing relevant messages with your congregation.
- Share relevant messages on social media.

End Notes

¹ “US Saw Highest Number of Mass Killings on Record in 2019, Database Reveals,” British Broadcasting Corporation, December 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50936575>.

² Meyer, Claire. “Violent Hate Crimes Reach 16-Year High in United States,” American Society for Industrial Security, February 1, 2020, <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/articles/2020/02/violent-hate-crimes-reach-16-year-high-in-united-states/>.

³ Buchanan, Larry, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K Patel. “Black Lives Matter May Be The Largest Protest Movement in U.S. History,” The New York Times, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

⁴ Kishi, Roudabeh and Sam Jones. “Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, September 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>.

⁵ Shortell, David, Christina Carrega, and Josh Campbell. “Vigilante Group Activity on the Rise, Worrying Law Enforcement and Watchdog Groups,” Cable News Network, August 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/30/politics/vigilante-group-activity-kenosha/index.html>.

⁶ “The Big Idea,” Cure Violence, 2020, <https://cvg.org/the-big-idea/>

⁷ Hurlburt, Heather, Nichole Argo Ben Itzhak, Rachel Brown, Laura Livingston, and Samantha Owens. “Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence,” New America, December 10, 2019, <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/policy-papers/building-us-resilience-political-violence/>.

⁸ Howard, Philip N., Bharath Ganesh, and Dimitra Liotsiou. “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018,” Computational Propaganda Research Project, Oxford University, December 17, 2018, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/ira-political-polarization/>.

⁹ Cohen, Patricia. “‘Still Not Catching Up’: Jobless Numbers May Not Tell Full Story,” The New York Times, May 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html>.

¹⁰ Hakim, Danny, Stephanie Saul, Nick Corasaniti, and Michael Wines. “Trump Renews Fears of Voter Intimidation as G.O.P. Poll Watchers Mobilize,” The New York Times, September 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/us/trump-election-poll-watchers.html>.

¹¹ “How Do I Talk About Violence and the Election?,” Democracy for President, <https://democracyforpresident.com/topics/election-violence/>.

¹² Nicholasen, Michelle, “Nonviolent resistance proves potent weapon,” The Harvard Gazette, February 4, 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/02/why-nonviolent-resistance-beats-violent-force-in-effecting-social-political-change/>.

¹³ “How Do I talk to Someone I Don’t Agree With?,” Democracy for President, <https://democracyforpresident.com/topics/communication-2020-election-results/>.

¹⁴ “Advancing Transparency, Building Trust,” The Carter Center, <https://www.cartercenter.org/peace/democracy/us-elections.html>.

¹⁵ Villeneuve Marina, “Report: Trump Commission Did Not Find Widespread Voter Fraud,” AP News, August 3, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/f5f6a73b2af546ee97816bb35e82c18d>. See also: Goldman, Adam and Zolan Kanno-Youngs. “F.B.I. Director Sees No Evidence of National Mail Voting Fraud Effort,” The New York Times, September 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/us/politics/fbi-director-voter-fraud.html>.

