

What is Political Violence?

Compelling Question: What can we do about political violence and the growing acceptance of it?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	60 minutes	Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language
6-7	8-12		



Web Related Connections

Lesson Plans

[Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act](#)

[The Alt Right and White Supremacy](#)

Other Resources

[Discussing Political Violence and Extremism with Young People](#)

[Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)

[Pyramid of Hate](#)

[The Dangers of Disinformation](#)

Key Words

- alienation
- circumspect
- condone
- democracy
- escalation
- extrapolate
- extremist
- foiled
- foreboding
- hate crimes
- intimidate
- justified
- normalize
- prevalence
- replacement theory
- threaten
- widespread

LESSON OVERVIEW

On January 6, 2021, following Donald Trump’s loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, a mob of Trump’s supporters, extremists and others attacked the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Their aim was to keep President Trump in power by preventing a joint session of Congress from officially certifying the November 2020 presidential election. This violent insurrection – an act of political violence – resulted in assault, death, injury, fear and extensive damage to the U.S. Capitol building. Other recent examples of political violence include the 2020 attempted kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer by anti-government extremists and the 2017 shooting of Louisiana Congressman Steve Scalise. The perpetrator in this last situation had a list of six conservative members of Congress who were presumed to be his targets.

Political violence can cause harm, destruction, death, and damage to core tenets of democracy, and can be so threatening and intimidating that people live in a constant or near-constant state of fear, anxiety and terror. We have seen an escalation of political violence over the past several years. Equally concerning is the growing acceptance of political violence. According to nearly every measure of beliefs and actual incidents, political violence is considered more acceptable **than it was five years ago**.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand what political violence is, reflect on public opinion about political violence, and dig deeper into a specific incident of political violence.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand and be able to explain what political violence is.
- Students will examine public opinion about political violence and identify areas of concern.
- Students will cite examples of political violence and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a specific incident of political violence.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [Survey Looks at Acceptance of Political Violence in U.S.](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Political Violence Research Worksheet](#) (one copy for each student)

What is Political Violence?

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *What is political violence?* If students don't know, you can break down the term and ask students: *What is political?* (relating to the government, public affairs of a country, or to the ideas or strategies of a particular party or group in politics) and then ask: *What is violence?* (use of physical force to injure, damage, or destroy). Then put the two together to come up with a preliminary concept or definition.
2. Have students work in pairs and give them ten minutes to come up with a definition of political violence. They can use internet sources and online and print dictionaries. Invite each pair to share their definitions of political violence with the class.
3. You can share that the World Health Organization (WHO) defines political violence as: "the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals." It also states that "political violence is characterized by both physical and psychological acts aimed at injuring populations." (Source: [Political violence, collective functioning and health: A review of the literature](#)) Political violence can include: bombings, shootings, kidnappings, physical sabotage and other types of physical harm to people and property.

Ask students: *Can you think of any recent examples of political violence?*

Share that on January 6, 2021, following Donald Trump's loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, a mob of Trump's supporters, extremists and others attacked the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Their aim was to keep President Trump in power by preventing a joint session of Congress from officially counting the electoral votes, which was required to certify the official election of then President-elect Joe Biden. The mob ransacked the building for hours, attacking police officers, destroying property and sending members of Congress and their staff into hiding. As a result of this violent insurrection, five people died either shortly before, during, or following the event; approximately 150 police officers were attacked; many people including police officers were injured; four officers who responded to the attack died by suicide within seven months of January 6; and the attack caused extensive damage to the U.S. Capitol building.

Ask students: *Based on the definitions we discussed, is January 6 an example of political violence? If so, how?*

Explain that later in the lesson, we will brainstorm and discuss other examples of political violence.

Reading Activity

1. Explain to students that in May/June of 2022, the Violence Prevention Research Program at the University of California at Davis conducted a survey on public opinion about political violence. Explain that before reading more about it, we will guess or estimate how the survey turned out.

You can have students call out their responses, or create a continuum in the classroom with 0% at one end and 100% at the other end and have students place themselves along the continuum based on their responses to the following:

- What percentage of people do you think said: "Political violence is never justified."
Correct answer: 80% of survey respondents said that political violence is never justified. Conversely, 20% of survey respondents said that political violence is sometimes, usually, or always justified.
Ask students: *Do you find these numbers surprising? Why or why not? Please explain.*
- What percentage of people do you think said "they would be at least somewhat willing to resort to violence themselves to threaten or intimidate a person."

Correct answer: About 12% of survey respondents answered that they would be at least "somewhat willing" to resort to violence themselves to threaten or intimidate a person.

Ask students: *Do you find this number surprising? Why or why not? Please explain.*

2. Distribute the article [Survey Looks at Acceptance of Political Violence in U.S.](#) to each student. Provide 10-15 minutes for students to read the article silently or read aloud together, with students taking turns reading.
3. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions.
 - What is your biggest takeaway from the article?
 - Can you tell what the perspective of the article's author is? What is his perspective and how can you tell?

- To what extent are you surprised or not surprised by the results of the survey?
- What do the results of the survey tell us?
- The article states that “attitudes toward violence don’t always translate to action.” Do you agree with that?
- What are the possible consequences of “normalizing” political violence?
- After reading the article, what other thoughts, concerns or insights do you have?

[Note: If students want to learn more about the study, they can use these links to dig deeper into the data: Views of American Democracy and Society and Support for Political Violence: [First Report from a Nationwide Population-Representative Survey](#) (summary) or [Views of American Democracy and Society and Support for Political Violence: First Report from a Nationwide Population-Representative Survey](#) (full report).]



Examples of Political Violence

1. Ask students: *What other examples, either historical or from modern times (i.e., the last few years), can you think of that constitute political violence or threats of political violence? From the reading above, what other examples of political violence are cited in the article?*
[Note: If students don’t have examples, you can ask them to do some online research for homework and come back to class the next day with examples.]
2. As students share examples, record their responses on the board/smart board. They may include some of the following examples:
 - Threats, including death threats, against members of Congress, have increased sharply over the past several years. (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/31/us-political-violence-threats-against-lawmakers>)
 - In 2020, a group of anti-government extremists conspired to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/23/us/verdict-trial-gretchen-whitmer-kidnap.html>)
 - In 2020, 8,263 hate crimes were recorded by the FBI, the highest number recorded since 2001. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hate-crimes-report-2020-fbi-highest/>)
 - Lee Zeldin, New York candidate for Governor, was attacked onstage while giving an election speech. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/21/nyregion/lee-zeldin-attacked-campaign-event.html>)
 - The FBI has investigated more than 1,000 harassing and threatening messages directed at election workers, 100 of them rising to the level of potential prosecution. (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-election-officials-testify-in-senate-hearing-on-protecting-election-workers>)



Writing Activity: Research Project

1. Together, look at the list of political violence examples and have someone read them aloud. Explain to students that they will now work alone or in pairs, select one of the political violence incidents, and undertake research on it. Their selection can be a historical or current day example. As part of their research, they should answer the following questions. They can use the [Political Violence Research Worksheet](#) to record their responses.
 - What happened? What kind of violence took place and what were the political goals/objectives of the perpetrators?
 - What was the incident’s impact on individuals? What was the impact on society?
 - What are your thoughts and ideas about what can be done to prevent something like this from happening in the future?
 - What else did you learn, discover or reflect on that may be useful?
 - What can we learn from this example of political violence?
2. After conducting their research and recording their results, have students demonstrate what they learned in one of the following ways: (1) write an essay or news article about the incident, (2) create a Power Point presentation, or (3) write and deliver a speech about what happened and their thoughts on it. Have students present their project to the class.
3. After students present their work, engage them in a whole class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How do political violence and threats of political violence harm individual people — both those who are targeted and those who are not?

- How does political violence harm society?
- What are ways in which people can express and try to implement their political views that are non-violent?
- How can we prevent or minimize political violence in the U.S.?

(If students don't share ideas for the last question, some you may suggest include: share examples of the impact of political violence by humanizing the victims, report threats to the proper authorities, speak out about the dangers of political violence, and help people understand what misinformation is, which sometimes leads to political violence.)

Closing

Have students share one idea they have about how to prevent political violence.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [As Right-Wing Rhetoric Escalates, So Do Threats and Violence](#) (New York Times, August 13, 2022)
- [Is America entering a new era of political violence?](#) (The Economist, August 22, 2022)
- [One Year Since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol](#) (U.S. Department of Justice)
- [Political violence, collective functioning and health: A review of the literature](#) (National Library of Medicine)
- [Support for political violence among Americans is on the rise. It's a grim warning about America's political future.](#) (Business Insider, March 26, 2021)
- [The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy](#) (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)
- [The Rise of Political Violence in the United States](#) (Journal of Democracy, October 2021)
- [US faces new era of political violence as threats against lawmakers rise](#) (The Guardian, July 31, 2022)
- [Views of American Democracy and Society and Support for Political Violence: First Report from a Nationwide Population-Representative Survey](#) (UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program and the California Firearm Violence Research Center)
- [We need to take political violence seriously](#) (Brookings Institute, August 15, 2022)

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation. W8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Political Violence Research Worksheet

Student Name:

What example of political violence will you research? What happened? What kind of violence took place and what were the political goals/objectives of the perpetrators?

What was this incident's impact on individuals? What was the impact on society?

What are your thoughts and ideas about what can be done to prevent something like this from happening in the future?

What else did you learn, discover or reflect on that may be useful?

What can we learn from this example of political violence?