November 5 • United States

2024 US Presidential Election

Background

The 2024 US elections are scheduled to take place on November 5. The Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, will face Republican nominee, former President Donald Trump, as voters determine who will be the 47th president. On that same day, voters will cast ballots to elect members of Congress.

This election cycle has been characterized by political tension across the US, with polarizing issues including abortion rights and the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. Coupled with suggestions of voter fraud and misinformation, divisions have deepened leading to protests, political violence and two assassination attempts targeting Trump.
This briefing highlights the key actors and risks during the 2024 election.

Analysis

Physical Security Analysis

Protesting

This election cycle has seen many widespread and coordinated protests, prompted by broad issues such as the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, abortion rights and gun laws. Demonstrations and rallies have proved to be extremely disruptive often obstructing infrastructure, targeting businesses and prompting arrests. Earlier this year encampment-style protests took place at over 40 US University

campuses prompting weeks of disruption and clashes between protestors and police. The Democratic National Convention (DNC) and Republican National Convention (RNC) faced significant security challenges this year, including large, organized protests. At the DNC, thousands of demonstrators marched near the event, with some breaching security fences and clashing with police, resulting in arrests. The RNC saw fewer demonstrators than anticipated and fewer arrests.

Self-styled militia groups including the Oath Keepers, Boogaloo Bois and Proud Boys, along with movements like Stop the Steal and Back the Blue continue to operate locally through autonomous chapters across various states. Despite convictions of several of its members following the Jan 6 Capitol attack, the Proud Boys remain particularly active, with reports indicating they have been rebuilding as Trump campaigns. This year, they have made appearances at Trump rallies and organized protests, including a clash with counter-protesters at the Ohio Statehouse. Despite this, data shows that extremist group activity is at some of its lowest levels since 2020. It is understood that this may be in part due to the fallout of Jan 6, but also a notable shift to online threats and campaigns. It should be noted that although extremist activity appears to have generally declined, the landscape is volatile and the outcome of the election or a contested result could trigger a surge in extremist activity including riots or violent protesting. Therefore extremist mobilization around the election date and beyond is **likely** with an uncontested result, but **probable** if it is contested by either candidate.

Beyond the election itself, the sentencing of Trump (currently scheduled for November 26) is likely to spark unrest. In May, Trump was convicted on 34 counts of falsifying business records related to a hush money payment. Supporters rallied outside the Trump Tower in New York City as well as the courthouse where a man died self-immolating. Protestors also gathered in Washington, DC, during Trump's immunity trial at the Supreme Court. Demonstrations in support of Trump or in protest against perceived leniency are **almost certain**, the scale or risk of violence in these protests are dependent on the outcome.

Polling Places And Public Service Buildings

There are expected to be approximately 100,000 polling places across the country. Polling stations and voting centers are often easily-accessible and soft-target buildings like schools, universities, public buildings, churches, senior living facilities, fire stations and community centers temporarily serving as polling centers. For more detail on the specific location of polling stations see here.

Polling places are particularly vulnerable to protests and armed voter intimidation by self-styled militia groups, as seen during the 2020 election, where armed individuals near polling centers surged. Seventeen states and Washington, DC, prohibit firearms at polling sites, while in other states open and concealed carry laws may restrict or permit firearms in certain locations that also serve as polling places. This election, polling places are increasing security to safeguard both workers and the electoral process. Measures include SWAT deployments, bulletproof glass and panic buttons. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has released a physical security checklist for election infrastructure, covering pre-election and Election Day procedures, and is deploying advisors to assess election facility safety nationwide.

This year's swing states are Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Swing states are electorally significant and today, demonstrate very narrow margins, increasing the likelihood of contested results and recounts. All swing states allow open carry firearms, some with or without a permit increasing the risk of violence in a potential election legitimacy scenario. In 2020, these states experienced higher levels of demonstrations and unlawful paramilitary activity, with Arizona and Pennsylvania seeing protests at government buildings following the election results. Many of these states are implementing enhanced security measures, such as Arizona, which is preparing for potential election-related attacks.

Samdesk has also detected a rise in unfounded threats or hoaxes impacting public services and schools. These threats often involve emailed or telephoned bomb threats, shooting threats or suspicious packages. Although usually benign, threats like this cause panic and are highly disruptive to local operations. During a presidential debate, last month, Trump amplified misinformation accusing the Springfield Haitian community of "abducting and eating pets." This misinformation spurred over 30 bomb threats in the city in the weeks following the debate. Ohio is not alone in facing such threats, as similar incidents have surged nationwide.

Violence Towards Politicians And Candidates

This election has seen two failed assassination attempts on Trump. In July, Trump was shot while speaking at a rally in Philadelphia in an attack that killed a member of the audience. In September, Trump was once again the subject of an assassination attempt at his Florida golf course, although the perpetrator was apprehended before he fired his rifle. Both incidents stemmed from lone actors and influenced the unanimous passage of a bill to enhance security for presidential candidates. Trump's campaign is understood to have requested military aircraft and vehicles in the run-up to the election as added protection for the Republican candidate amidst fear of "Iranian-backed plots" to assassinate Trump. Former US officials have suggested that it would be "extraordinary" for the Secret Service to approve such a request.

In addition to rallies or organized events, politicians' residences are also targets, as seen in the 2020 foiled plot to kidnap Michigan's governor and the 2022 attack on former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband after an assailant sought to kidnap her.

Election officials in over 15 states have received suspicious packages, including those in Nebraska, Wyoming and Oklahoma, with some containing unidentified substances. This month, a bomb threat was reported near a rally of Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Walz in Pennsylvania, although police later confirmed it was unfounded. Earlier this year, the DNC also faced bomb threats targeting nearby hotels. Although these threats were unfounded, precautionary measures had to be taken, including evacuations and temporary closures, affecting the hotel's business operations and the public.

Over 320 threat and harassment events had already been reported against local officials by July this year, up 30% on the same period of 2023, with the Justice Department admitting that its options are limited.

Terrorism

Lone actors and self-styled militia groups with extreme ideologies continue to pose a domestic terror threat in the US. Lone actors present threats to election sites and Election Day itself as seen in a recent thwarted plot when the FBI arrested an individual planning an attack in Oklahoma City. Self-styled militia usually target "government itself—including law enforcement personnel, representatives of the courts, and other public officials, along with government buildings."

In recent years, metropolitan demonstrations have seen a rise in domestic terrorist activity. Major cities like New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland and Washington, DC, have become "focal points for domestic terrorism." Threats may include shootings, bombings, kidnappings or vehicle-ramming attacks. Recent domestic terrorist incidents driven by extremist beliefs underscore the severity of these risks, including a racially motivated shooting in Jacksonville, a supermarket in Buffalo and a synagogue shooting in Albany.

Considering the increase in domestic terror acts by lone offenders in recent years, particularly during this election cycle, coupled with the heightened motivation in this election, the threat level of terrorist attacks against local government, campaign sites or polling places is **high**, meaning that it is **likely** to **probable** that an attack of a more localized scale will occur.

Extremist groups or self-styled militia are relatively active online but notably are leaving platforms such as Telegram, likely due to the uncertainty around its future following Pavel Durov's arrest. Larger groups have been observed splintering and migrating onto alternative platforms like Signal, Threema, Session, Zangi, Matrix, XMPP and Bria.

Samdesk's Real-Time analysts have captured a list of active groups displaying violent or extreme rhetoric available on request.

Cybersecurity

The cybersecurity threats and risk factors for the 2024 US election primarily center around potential insider threats, unauthorized access to election systems and foreign interference.

Insider threat comes from election workers and contractors who have access to sensitive data to use it for malice. Polling places rely on election workers with access to ballots, tally sheets and voter registration information. Whether motivated by political bias, financial gain or coercion, insider threats can lead to the deliberate tampering of ballots or manipulation of the counting process. Since manual processes rely on human oversight, there is an increased risk of manipulation that is harder to detect in real-time.

Foreign adversaries may also attempt to disrupt election processes through phishing attacks, hacking attempts targeting election officials and candidates, the spread of disinformation to mislead voters, as well as the potential for ransomware attacks directly on election infrastructure.

The FBI and CISA are implementing several measures to mitigate the risks. Access controls follow the principle of least privilege, ensuring individuals only access necessary systems. Digital access logs and surveillance tools track activity for post-incident investigations. Zero trust security frameworks are being adopted, requiring continuous verification for all access requests and multi-factor authentication is enforced to prevent unauthorized logins. Continuous monitoring tools, like endpoint detection systems, are used to detect anomalous behavior. Throughout the election cycle, regular audits continue to be conducted to ensure compliance with the protocols put in place.

Given the accessibility of ballots and election materials, alongside the mistrust and calls for recounts in the previous election, the risk of insider threat remains **high.**

Disinformation + Influence Operations

Foreign actors are increasing their election influence activities using generative AI technology. In particular, Russia, Iran and China see election periods as moments of vulnerability and an opportunity to take advantage of political divisions in the US.

Last month, the Treasury Department sanctioned 10 Russian citizens and two entities for participating in malign influence efforts targeting the presidential election, including the editor-in-chief of Russian media outlet RT. Simultaneously, the Justice Department seized more than thirty online domains linked to a Russian disinformation campaign referred to as "Doppelganger". A week later, the State Department accused RT of being involved in covert influence campaigns around the world. Following this, Meta and TikTok banned Russian state media accounts for "covert influence operations" ahead of the election.

Russia has seemingly pivoted towards targeting the Harris-Walz campaign. This includes a false video claiming Harris left a 13-year-old girl paralyzed after an alleged hit-and-run in 2011, while other Russian networks are circulating false claims that she is showing signs of Alzheimer's and that her family has secret ties to "Big Pharma". This aligns with Russian interference during both 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections with a clear favorability for Trump and the Republican party.

A photo of Kamala Harris was digitally altered to show her standing beside Sean "Diddy" Combs following his arrest on charges of sex trafficking and racketeering. Trump later shared, then deleted, this image to his Truth Social profile.

Conversely, Iranian operations have targeted both parties but show a preference for Harris. A joint US-intelligence statement claims that Iran sent hacked Trump campaign information to the Biden campaign in June and July. A network of pro-Iranian sites has also been circulating disinformation. Researchers identified at least 19 domains, posing as news or analysis sites, targeting minority and veteran voters among other groups.

China has produced AI-generated material such as inauthentic social media accounts to sow divisions on issues such as drug use, immigration and abortion.

Given the extreme capability and high intent of such adversaries, the threat level of foreign state-sponsored disinformation and influence campaigns is **high**, meaning that it is **probable** to **almost**

What we mean when we say:

Contents

Resources

Key Dates

Trump remarks in Aurora, Colorado

11-OCT-2024

Trump rally in Coachella, California

12-OCT-2024

Vance remarks in Johnstown, Pennsylvania

12-OCT-2024

OUT for Harris-Waltz in Atlanta, Georgia

13-OCT-2024

Trump rally in Prescott Valley, Arizona

13-OCT-2024

White Lives Matter Day of Action, Worldwide

19-OCT-2024

Kamala Parade in Duluth, Georgia

19-OCT-2024

Trump rally in Duluth, Georgia

23-OCT-2024

2024 Annual IMF in Washington, DC

25-OCT-2024

"Aryan Fest" Aryan Freedom Network in Georgia

26-OCT-2024

Annual Anonymous Million Mask March, Worldwide

05-NOV-2024

Election Day

05-NOV-2024

Donald Trump sentencing

26-NOV-2024

Certificates of Ascertainment

11-DEC-2024

Electors vote in their states

17-DEC-2024

Congress counts electoral votes/anniversary of Jan 6 attack

06-JAN-2025

Inauguration Day

20-JAN-2025

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