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NCITE Presents: Elections and the Threat of Violence September 20, 2022

A look at a clear and pressing danger not just to American democracy but to elected officials, election workers, and the electoral environment.

As the United States (U.S.) approaches the midterm elections this November, NCITE held a panel discussion on threats faced by election workers and elected officials, as well as the broader threat of electoral violence. Three researchers from the NCITE consortium – Dr. Pete Simi of Chapman University, Dr. Steven Windisch of Temple University, and Dr. Iris Malone of George Washington University – spoke about the work they are doing through their NCITE projects this year, their thoughts about the risks we face, and what Americans can do to combat these threats. This snapshot summarizes the key takeaways from the discussion that took place virtually and in-person at the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus. A full recording can be found [online](#).

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Pete Simi *Chapman University*

Understanding Threats to Public Officials

Dr. Simi's project helps inform an understanding of trends related to threats targeting public officials – including election officials – primarily by examining the nature of the threat and characteristics of the perpetrator. The project will examine open-source documents to focus on various demographic characteristics of the perpetrator, determine whether ideological motivations were present, and decide how to best categorize these ideologies if they do exist.



What has changed for 2022? Extremism has effectively moved into mainstream, propelled in part by digital culture and the anonymity it offers.

What is the impact? Threats without the execution of an attack still have devastating consequences. A lot of times, “zeros” in intelligence analysis are not actually zeros.

What can we do about it? Promote voter registration and national civic education to help individuals better understand democratic institutions.

“Threats to election officials, and public officials more broadly, should be seen as part of a larger mosaic ... What may appear as disparate forces are actually an interwoven and ongoing effort to essentially dismantle democracy as we know it.”



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Steven Windisch *Temple University*

Understanding the Transition from Political Discourse to Election-Motivated Violent Extremism

Dr. Windisch’s project seeks to examine electoral violence in the U.S. primarily by focusing on victims of these threats. The research team is conducting interviews with election officials to better understand their exposure to threats and potential barriers to reporting them, while surveying existing training materials and safety measures and protocols to develop a cyber hygiene manual. Ultimately, the researchers will develop a continuous threat-level monitor to measure the risk election officials face based on online discussion and communication channels.



What has changed for 2022? Extremist viewpoints seem to be more widespread than previously, with discourse more ingrained in the fabric of the political and social spheres.

What is the impact? The emotional impact of death threats occurs at the individual level, but there are consequences to the election process and the integrity of democracy at a societal and global level.

What can we do about it? We need to view election officials as critical infrastructure, because election officials are necessary to run elections and preserve democracy.

“The loss of the election official, the more human error ... When more human error occurs in the election process, that erodes trust in our electoral system.”

Iris Malone *George Washington University*

How Organizational Dynamics in a Multi-Actor Environment Shape Terrorist Threats and CT Responses

Dr. Malone’s project involves developing an interactive visualization dashboard of electoral security risks that state, local, and tribal stakeholders can access to inform counterterrorism response capabilities. She uses advanced supervised machine learning techniques to view historical risk patterns from 2020, examine trends, and extrapolate outcomes for the 2022 midterm election. The interactive dashboard can be viewed at <https://irismalone.com/policy/electoral-forecasts/>; predicted risk outcomes are mapped by U.S. county.



What has changed for 2022? Threats from 2020 were driven by a unique set of economic, political, and sociocultural factors that have ceased or lessened in pressure in 2022, which lowers the risk for mobilization this election cycle.

What is the impact? There is always a concern for vigilante justice or accidental escalation at electoral demonstrations. It is important to remain informed, but we do not need to be alarmist.

What can we do about it? Continue taking steps to understand the nature of this threat, how it may evolve, and how we can prepare to mitigate this threat in future election cycles.

“Keep calm and carry on. There is a serious and non-zero risk of electoral related threats, but in many cases, conditions have changed sufficiently since 2020 that we do not need to be alarmist.”