Whose America Is It?

“Apocalyptic terms” have taken over the 2020 election, with potentially dangerous implications.

By Thomas B. Edsall
Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C. on politics, demographics and inequality.

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2020 has become the year of the hair-trigger election.

The conservative Federalist website put its point of view in vivid terms on Sept. 11: “The Left Is Setting the Stage for a Coup If Trump Wins.”

John Daniel Davidson, the Federalist’s political editor, warned that

the last three months of rioting and looting by Antifa and Black Lives Matter activists have in some ways been a dress rehearsal for what the left is planning in November.

According to Davidson, left-wing Democrats are primed to adopt a strategy to

contest the results and trigger lengthy litigations and ballot recounts, working in the meantime to come up with enough absentee ballots to put Biden over the edge. In that case, while the lawsuits and recounts are underway, the left plans to do what it’s been doing for months now: take to the streets.

The drumbeat on the other side of the aisle is similar. A headline in the liberal Daily Beast declares: “The Left Secretly Preps for MAGA Violence After Election Day.”

In the article, Sam Stein, the Daily Beast’s political editor, describes a gathering of leaders of liberal organizations preparing “for what they envision as the postelection Day political apocalypse scenario.”

One of the leaders, Rahna Epting, executive director of MoveOn, told Stein: “It is very obvious that Trump is laying the groundwork for claiming victory no matter what,” before adding:

We will fight to protect it from what we truly see as a president who has gone off the rails and taking this country down an authoritarian fascist path.

On July 16, J.J. McNab, a fellow at the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, told the members of the U.S. House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism:
Between gun control issues, civil unrest, the stresses placed on the country by a deadly pandemic, conspiracy theories, anti-press sentiments, and a highly divisive election cycle, the nation is one large event away from violence.

McNab described the anti-government movement as a loose-knit movement of right-wing groups including private paramilitary “militias,” Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, sovereign citizens, tax protesters, and “constitutional sheriffs.”

At the same time, she continued, “sovereign citizen schemes have taken root in some left-wing groups” with the result that “right-wing/left-wing labels may not be as clear as they once were.”

Noting the extent to which the 2020 election has devolved into an exceptionally antagonistic confrontation, Julie Wronski, a political scientist at the University of Mississippi, argues in an email that Trump “acts like a wartime president, defending his base supporters from the ‘liberals’ who want to take America away from them.”

Inevitably, Wronski contends, this wartime psychology and rhetoric raises the stakes of the election. When the stakes are this high, any election missteps at the local level will question whether the winner on election night truly won.

The Transition Integrity Project, a bipartisan organization critical of Trump, mapped out potential scenarios in an Aug. 3 report, “Preventing a Disrupted Presidential Election and Transition.”

Project members, who include John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign, and Michael Steele, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, warned that the “two biggest threats” are “lies about ‘voter fraud’ and escalating violence.”

In the event of a close election, or an election unresolved on Nov. 4, the project advised that the Trump campaign and local Republicans might well take the following steps, including:

- Attempting to halt the counting of mail-in ballots by filing cases in state court or leaning on Republican leaders to stop vote counting or to certify a result early, without waiting for the certified results from the Secretary of State.

And:

- Turning out their well-organized and committed base to take to the streets in Trump’s favor, in part by disseminating disinformation about the danger posed by pro-Biden demonstrators (e.g., by suggesting likely Antifa violence, etc.)

Ariel Malka, a political scientist at Yeshiva University, wrote by email that he is not sure which is the bigger threat, “violent unrest or the prospect of executive actions and legal efforts successfully thwarting a fair electoral process.”
Malka pointed out that many have brought up the possibility of Trump declaring victory on election night before mail-in ballots have been counted and then emphatically claiming that Democrats are trying to steal the election through fraud in the days and weeks that follow.

Trump supporters, Malka continued, are receptive to his false claims about voter fraud and have not wavered in their support of the president in the face of his democracy-degrading actions. Cultural conservatives and citizens with ethnic antipathy are heavily represented among Trump’s strongest supporters, and these are groups that tend to be relatively open to authoritarian actions to achieve their desired political outcomes.

For conservative voters, the election is taking place in a context where the leader they trust is claiming that hated leftist opponents are trying to steal the election,” Malka wrote. For this reason, Malka said he “would not expect Republicans in the general population to serve as a check on even flagrantly undemocratic behavior.”

Robert Malley, president and CEO of the International Crisis Group, wrote me:

While I wouldn’t want to make too much of a comparison between what we are seeing in the U.S. and what, at Crisis Group, we study in conflict-ridden situations, there is no doubt that the similarities are becoming alarming. For that reason, we have just decided, for the first time in our quarter century history, to cover the risks of election-related violence in the U.S.

In June, three staffers at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Seth G. Jones, Catrina
Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, released a report, “The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States.” It makes the case that the dominant role of the far right has grown significantly during the past six years. Right-wing extremists perpetrated two thirds of the attacks and plots in the United States in 2019 and over 90 percent between January 1 and May 8, 2020.

The three authors warn that one of “the most concerning” events “is the 2020 U.S. presidential election, before and after which extremists may resort to violence, depending on the outcome of the election.”

Seth Jones, director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, emailed me to say “there are several factors that make postelection violence likely.” The first, he wrote, is

the assumption by extremist groups from all sides — white supremacists, militias, boogaloo, anarchists, and anti-fascists to name a few — that others are prepared for violence if the election does not go their way.

All of these groups, he pointed out,

have access to firearms, incendiaries, and crude explosives. This situation is a classic “security dilemma.” Each side’s efforts to increase its own security and acquire weapons inadvertently threaten the other side.

Second, according to Jones,

All sides are defining the election in apocalyptic terms: the election will decide the success or failure of the United States. For some far-left extremists, a victory for Trump would expedite the rise of fascism in the United States, however exaggerated that might be. For some far-right extremists, a victory for Biden and Harris (an African-American, which is a lightning rod for white supremacists) would accelerate the rise of Communism, Marxism-Leninism, and outright anarchy in the United States, however exaggerated that might be. Painting the election in these apocalyptic terms significantly increases (actually inflates) the importance of the election in ways that make violence almost inevitable.

The nonprofit, nonpartisan Network Contagion Research Institute, which in the past has focused on right-wing activity, issued a report on Sept. 14, “Network-Enabled Anarchy: How Militant Anarchist-Socialist Networks Use Social Media to Instigate Widespread Violence Against Political Opponents and Law Enforcement,” that warns:
An online structure supporting anarcho-socialist extremism appears to be rapidly growing. The appearance of posts with anti-police outrage and/or memes and coded language increased over 1,000 percent on Twitter and 300 percent on Reddit in recent months during social justice protests. Extreme anarcho-socialist fringe online forums on Reddit use memes calling for the death of police and memes for stockpiling munitions to promote violent revolution. Extreme anarcho-socialist fringe online forums on Reddit underwent growth in membership and participation during the quarantine and recent social justice protests.

The authors stress, however, that

this analysis does not suggest that violence from anarcho-socialist militants has yet become as widespread as ISIS nor does it have the death toll or historical reach that right-leaning extremism has in the U.S.

What is happening here? Four years ago, Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, political scientists at Stanford and Dartmouth, wrote in “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines”:

Our evidence demonstrates that hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained or automatic in voters’ minds, and that affective polarization based on party is just as strong as polarization based on race.

In an email, Iyengar wrote: “I don’t think there is any doubt that Trump will allege widespread fraud in the event he loses.”

Given the degree of polarization, Iyengar continued,

a less than decisive Biden victory, coupled with Republicans’ willingness to accept Trump's claims, may result in widespread protests and unrest.

In a separate email, Westwood voiced similar concerns.

The election has the potential to be incredibly destabilizing. The Republican Party and Trump have spent years conditioning supporters to mistrust elections and to see fraud where it doesn’t exist.

For many of Trump’s loyalists, Westwood wrote, “the only rational explanation for a Trump loss will be manipulation of the election by ‘deep state’ Democrats.”

Westwood does not foresee

a scenario where Trump accepts defeat without claims of fraud. This is a man whose narcissism prompted the creation of a presidential commission to investigate fraud in an election that he won.

To further demonstrate the strength of partisan bias, Iyengar sent me a June 2020 paper, “Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?” that he wrote with Erik Peterson of Texas A&M.

Peterson and Iyengar conducted a survey in which half of the participants were offered incentives if
they answered highly politicized questions correctly (50 cents per right answer) and half were asked the same questions without incentives. They found that

experimental evidence indicated that partisans are genuinely committed to inaccurate beliefs and to congenial sources of information. This is to say the availability of incentives reduced, but by no means eliminated, the partisan divide in information. Approximately two-thirds of the initial partisan divide obtained in the un-incentivized conditions persisted when we offered respondents the opportunity to earn rewards for correct responses.

Polarization, in turn, activates intensified belligerence between partisan adversaries.

In their July 2019 paper, “Party Animals? Extreme Partisan Polarization and Dehumanization,” James L. Marthenerus, Andres G. Martinez, Paul K. Pif and Alexander G. Theodoridis link increasing “affective, identity based, and often negative” political polarization to “a willingness to apply dehumanizing metaphors to out-partisans.”

Dehumanization — or objectification of the enemy — lays the groundwork for extreme hostility and suspicion of the motives of the opposing party, according to the four authors.

In a series of survey experiments, they found “consistent evidence that partisans are willing to dehumanize members of the opposing party in both subtle and blatant ways.”

In addition, their report contends that

this tendency to dehumanize is not unique to members of one political party — both Democrats and Republicans tend to dehumanize each other at roughly similar rates.

The four authors argue that

By depriving political opponents, to even a small extent, of the complex thoughts and scruples we often associate with humanity, we make them easier to stereotype and we may more readily ascribe simpler, more base, and even nefarious, motivations to them.

Large majorities of both parties objectify — dehumanize — the opposition, to a greater or lesser degree. In the first Marthenerus study,

Nearly 77 percent of respondents said out-party members were less evolved than in-party members, and about 65 percent offered at least a 10-point difference.

In a long email, Theodoridis addressed some of the challenges of this year’s election:
Our hyper-polarized context virtually guarantees that both the popular vote and the Electoral College tally will be relatively close. Blowouts like 1964, 1972, and 1984 are unimaginable in the current political environment. So, it is very likely the contest will come down to a relatively small number of votes in a few states. It is quite possible that, once again, the popular vote is not reflected in the malapportioned Electoral College. And, because a significant proportion of votes will be mailed in and there is variation in when states count those, it is very possible we won’t know the outcome of the election on the evening of Nov. 3 or even the morning of Nov. 4. This could very well create an environment where key state vote tallies switch after Election Day, leading to contestation and skepticism. And, Trump and many of his supporters are certainly setting the stage for a challenge to the legitimacy of the vote total.

“This could open the door;” Theodoridis continued, “for some troubling scenarios,” including situations in which neither candidate reaches 270 electoral votes because one or more state slate of electors is contested. Several key swing states have Republican legislatures. In the current polarized climate, where each side sees the other as an existential threat to America, one can’t rule out the possibility that a state legislature might declare their state’s popular vote fraudulent or illegitimate in some way and either assign no electors at all or simply appoint their party’s slate.

Theodoridis concluded:

Even without such confusing procedural machinations by political elites, a close, contested election in our hyper-polarized political climate could very well produce isolated incidents of partisan violence. My research, and work by others, shows that most partisans are willing to metaphorically dehumanize those from the other party, and that this dehumanization predicts greater tolerance for partisan violence. I am hopeful that widespread violence is highly unlikely. Sadly, though, I do not think it is unimaginable.

There is today an astonishingly widespread belief among normally cautious observers of politics that there exists the possibility of severe disruption — including violence — this November.

“I, unfortunately, am not optimistic about a peaceful reaction from either side,” Yphtach Lelkes, a professor of communications and political science at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote by email. “Survey evidence indicates that a sizable chunk (20 percent) of the population believes violence is justified if the other side wins.”

Lelkes pointed out that

if Trump suspects he faces indictment (at the state or federal level) once he leaves office, he will have a strong incentive to remain in office in any way he can. That is an extremely dangerous situation.

This election has, more than in the past, heightened fears on both sides that if the opposition wins, it will do real harm. Robert Harrison Wagner, who specializes in international conflict at the University of Texas, wrote:
The most worrisome aspect of our current situation is not the reciprocal fear of violence by both left and right, but the spreading belief on both sides that the electoral victory of the other side would have unacceptable and irreversible consequences. This can lead not just to potentially violent protests, but to the abandonment of elections as a way of resolving conflicts.

For some analysts, concerns over the 2020 election have been building for years.

Daron Acemoglu, an economist at M.I.T., emailed me:

I have been worried for the last three years that there will be some very bad and chaotic events in November 2020. Trump is bound to claim that the election was stolen from him (I’m presuming he will lose) and some of his very well armed supporters will take action.

Michael Bang Peterson, a political scientist Aarhus University in Denmark and a close observer of American politics, wrote in an email that “there has been an increase in the use of violence for political purposes in recent history in the United States,” adding that the clashes between police forces, left-wing activities and radical right groups surrounding the B.L.M. protests seem to have radicalized the extreme groups and, most likely, have motivated them to make themselves better prepared for violent confrontations.

Petersen described a list of combustible ingredients present in the United States:

The final match that might set this bonfire ablaze is Covid-19. Stress and marginalization is key contextual driver of aggressive responses. If a second wave hits the U.S. hard in November, the lives and jobs lost will create an additional psychological push toward a potentially very dangerous situation.

As Election Day approaches, the incentives are already plentiful to protest an adverse outcome in the courts, in Congress, in state capitols and on the streets. The intensity of such protests will increase in proportion to the closeness of the results. One thing is virtually certain: If the outcome is unresolved by the day after the election, or if Biden wins by a slim margin, Trump will do everything in his power to discredit the process and to ignite the anger and resentment of his most ardent supporters.

As Trump put it in a March 2019 interview with reporters and editors at Breitbart:

You know, the left plays a tougher game, it’s very funny. I actually think that the people on the right are tougher, but they don’t play it tougher. OK? I can tell you I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump — I have the tough people, but they don’t play it tough — until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad.

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