

## UNITED STATES: ONLINE VIEWS OF THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION & POSSIBLE VIOLENCE

### Introduction:

As Americans prepare to go to the polls on Nov. 3, the rhetoric surrounding the election—especially the race for the White House—is intensifying. Nowhere is this trend truer than in online communities on both the right and left of the political spectrum. Babel Street analysts investigated trends, sentiment, and themes on several social media platforms, message boards, and blogs to better understand views across the political landscape, with a particular focus on identifying violent ideations associated with the upcoming election. The results of this analysis of publicly available information indicate there are online groups that are deeply divided yet who see the same problems from opposite vantage points. While the data did not indicate any specific threats to the election, a clear expectation of post-election violence emerged. Such deep divisions plus the anticipation of conflict create a potentially dangerous environment that could be ignited by a relatively small incident. Given the unique voting circumstances caused by the pandemic and the potentially close nature of the race at the top of the ticket, any delay in clear and rapid voting results could further heighten the risk of violence.

### BLUF:



- Both right and left online communities question the integrity of the election process and foresee the losing candidate as unwilling to concede
- PAI indicates that violence is widely anticipated, with each side predicting the other will launch riots or attacks in the wake of the Nov. 3 election
- Dangerous activity is made more likely by organized online communities with fatalistic views of one another and by the presence of violence-seeking groups

### Camps Divided, Thoughts United

Babel Street analysts noted striking similarities in viewpoints from online communities on both ends of the political spectrum despite vastly different policy and social beliefs, particularly from far-right and far-left participants. A key commonality was a distinct “us versus them” theme. Online commentators often portrayed the 2020 election as a fight for survival against the opposite side who is *determined to destroy* “our” way of life (*Figure 1*). Online personas frequently resort to hyperbolic language with those on the right calling Democrats and Biden supporters “commies” and “Marxists” while those on the left routinely refer to Trump voters and conservatives as “fascists” and “racists.” In both cases, the two sides view the other as anathema to American ideals and values. The two sides also both question the integrity of the election and believe their rivals will rig the system to elect their candidate. Such allegations only further polarize the two groups and engender deep ill will. Lack of faith in the election process also likely contributes to a third area of agreement between the two sides on social media: the losing candidate is unlikely to willingly accept defeat. All of these factors likely contribute to the highly negative sentiment across user bases. Babel Street’s sentiment analysis revealed negative or highly negative posts comprising 75% and 85% of all election-related content across political affiliation and online community.

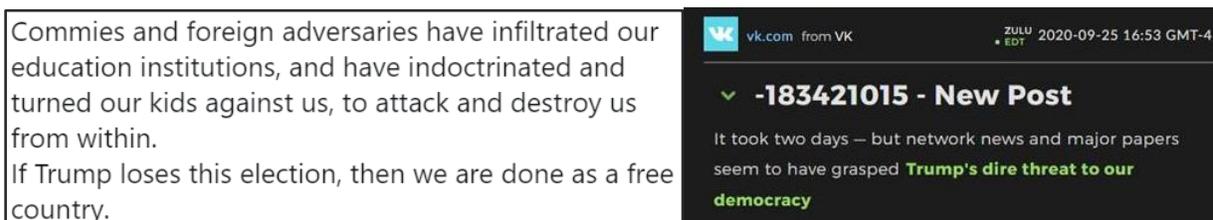


Figure 1 – Examples of Left- and Right-Leaning Social Media Posts

Babel Street’s analysis also revealed that some of these conversations are occurring on the same online platforms. The larger social media platforms have views on the left and right and users with open affiliations to groups such as QAnon, Boogaloo Bois, and Antifa. Telegram also appears to be popular with both the far-right and far-left, and iFunny is flooded with content from both sides. Beyond these platforms, some division emerges. Right-wing supporters appear to be present in greater numbers on platforms such as Gab, Voat, 4chan, and 8kun, possibly for greater anonymity or because more mainstream social platforms have barred certain types of discussions. It should also be noted that racist and anti-Semitic themes were noted on many of these social platforms, but while generally associated with pro-Trump/anti-left content, anti-Semitism and racism were common but not ubiquitous trends within right-leaning online content.

## Expectation of Violence

Another similarity between the right and left online camps was an expectation of violence in the wake of the Nov. 3 vote. Across platforms, numerous instances were noted in which users stated they believed their political opponents would incite violence or launch attacks after the election. This common theme of violence was highlighted by a text analysis of election-related content on social media, blogs, and message boards. Aside from the names of candidates, some of the most repeated words included “riot,” “violent,” and “civil war.” The expectation of violence is widely seen online, but the form of potential violence varies between online audiences. In the event President Trump wins reelection, some anticipate rioting, looting, and property damage similar to this summer’s unrest but on a larger scale. Related to the point above about either candidate’s willingness to accept defeat, some believe the losing side will take up arms to ensure the “real winner” ends up in office. Others believe the election will set off a civil war, either between political ideologies, classes, or races. Indeed, celebrities like Spike Lee and Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs have stated that a Trump victory could ignite a civil war led by Black Lives Matter supporters.

Most of the online conversation simply mentions the inevitability of post-election violence sparked by the other side. Yet another common theme is the need to prepare for the coming violence—whether through stocking up on necessities, buying ammunition, or mentally readying oneself. Babel Street was unable to detect any specific threats or organized efforts to incite violence or carry out vigilante-style counter-violence operations. The data, however, show that a significant number of people not only believe violence will erupt in the wake of the election, but that they are willing to respond if it does (Figure 2).

## A Spark for Dry Tinder

Calls for preparation and possible armed resistance are troubling, but several exacerbating factors increase the danger of post-election violence. The first is ongoing organization efforts on both sides of the political divide. Babel Street analysts saw anecdotal evidence for these organizational efforts in recruitment posts for “Army for Trump” and messages between QAnon followers recruiting to “digital soldiers” to ensure Trump maintains access to communication avenues in the face of media bans on communications. On the opposite side, some unions and left-leaning organizations have been seen rallying members to stand in solidarity following the election to ensure Trump honors a Biden victory. Babel Street also conducted a social media analysis using its artificial intelligence (AI) powered network analysis tool, Babel Synthesis, to better understand how users were connected and common themes among them. In Figure 3, a clear and dense association of Antifa-related accounts from across the United States—generated by Babel Synthesis’ network AI—can be seen where potential post-election violence was a common theme (red circles represent Antifa and far-left association, yellow and green circles are journalists who regularly report on far-left developments). The AI-enabled analysis indicates a network with strong interconnections and a high potential for mobilization. This Babel Synthesis analysis provides quantitative support to our assessment of concentrated support networks among the far-right and far-left. These networks could be influential in the event of post-election turmoil.

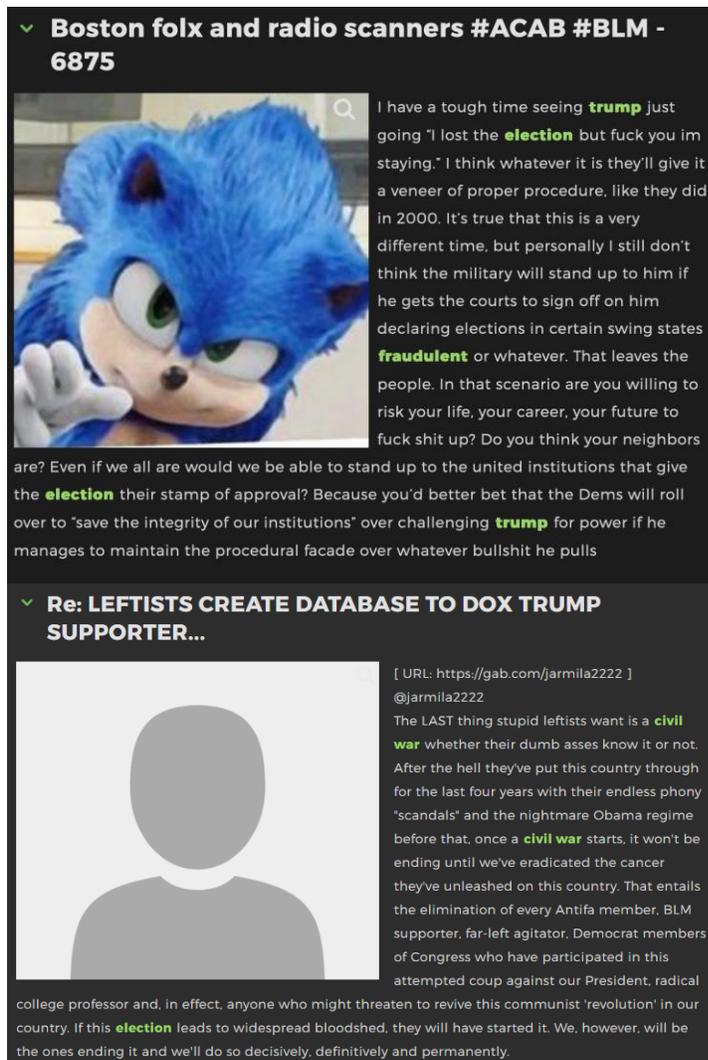


Figure 2 – Examples of Left- and Right-Wing Supporters Calling for Violent Action in Response to Political Opponents

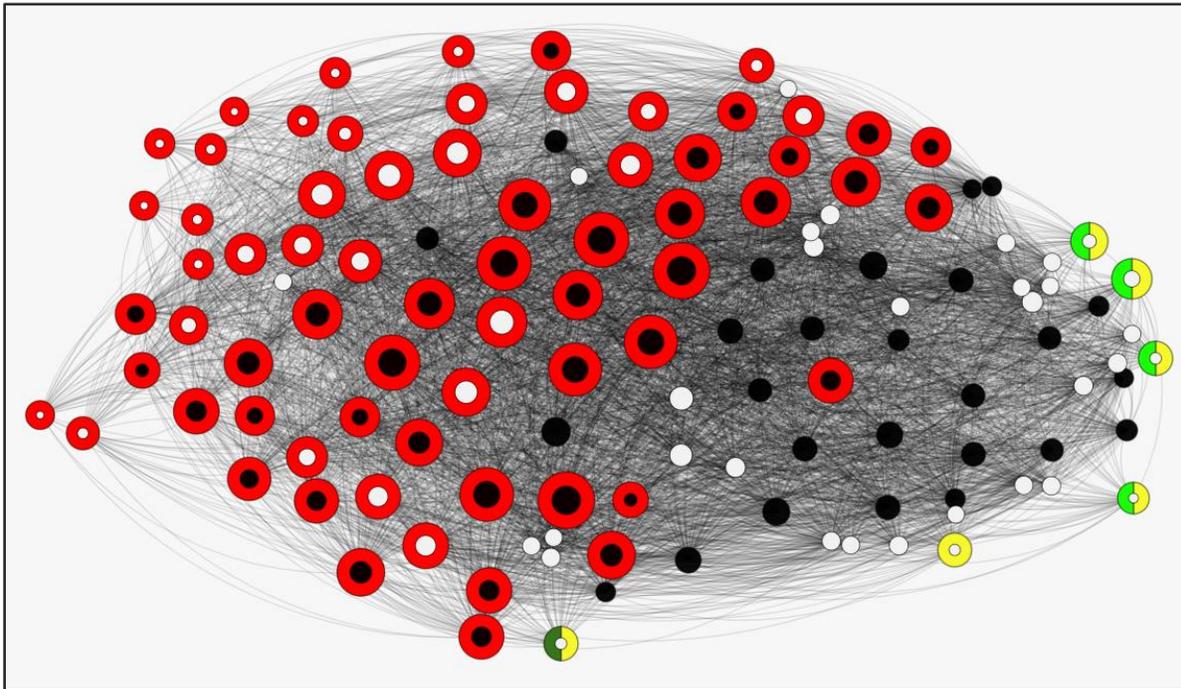


Figure 3 – Link Analysis of Antifa-Related Social Media Accounts

In addition to online organization efforts, another complicating factor in assessing potential post-election violence is the increased prevalence of groups like the Boogaloo Bois, militias, and accelerationist movement adherents. Throughout 2020, these groups have been implicated in many acts of violence throughout the United States, and the online discussions by these groups indicate they plan for more violence in the post-election period. While these groups are often portrayed as Republican-aligned elements, they are actually complex and loosely organized groups with varying philosophies and purposes. One overriding theme among these groups, however, is a distrust of the government and contempt for the current system. Babel Street analysts first uncovered this trend during the unrest following the death of George Floyd, when online personas called for exacerbating tensions and causing more violence by lobbing rocks into protests and inciting altercations. “Hit the rioters, hit the police, hit journalists...it doesn’t matter who gets hurt [as long] you helped make the situation worse,” proclaimed TERRORWAVEREFINED on Telegram in May.

Similar anti-establishment and pro-chaos posts have proliferated in the run up to the election. Many of those online believe the election will be the catalyst for a long-anticipated civil war that will bring down the current government and system so that a better one can be installed. Several Boogaloo Bois online have advocated voting for Biden because they believe his election would quicken the necessary war, and some commenters have justified bloodshed because, “there is no other way, let alone a peaceful way.” Given the already-fraught political environment, the expectation of violence, the extensive online organizations, and the [demonstrated](#) willingness of these groups to use violence to spark more widespread destruction, even a small act of aggression or misstep—from either political camp, the government, or outside agitator—could spark larger and more dangerous acts of violence.

## Conclusion

Online conversations about the upcoming election are plagued by echo-chamber mentalities, half-truths, and paranoia. Both the right and left sides of the political divide ardently believe they are correct and the other side will cause mayhem and chaos, including the inciting of violence in the event of an unfavorable outcome. This situation is made even more worrisome by the calls to arms and willingness to use force exhibited by some in online forums. A lack of faith in U.S. institutions also adds to the problem; a perception of impropriety or bias could inflame the situation regardless of any actual maleficence. The simple fact that online communities (and the real-life people who populate them) believe the system is rigged or the vote might be unfair may be enough to stir people to action, especially if given the right push.

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