



# HARNESSING OUR POWER TO END POLITICAL VIOLENCE

## 2024 GUIDE **FAQS**

### **Q1: What is the purpose of the HOPE-PV guide?**

The HOPE guide is designed to help people across the United States to counter political violence (PV) and uphold democracy. It gives us the tools we need to make sure political violence backfires on those that incite, threaten, and enact it.

Community responses to PV can both support victims and impose costs on those who incite and engage in abuse. This guide is for people who are ready to stand up to those who want to silence our voices, who try to deny us our rights, and who aim to bully their way into political influence through intimidation and violence.

### **Q2: How is this guide organized?**

**Part I** of this guide dives into the harmful impact of political violence, and how ordinary people can join together to stop it.

**Part II** provides five time-tested principles on how to make PV backfire against people who incite, threaten, and enact it. This time-tested framework has helped communities to turn the tide against violence and injustice for generations.

**Part III** goes into the details of how you can make PV backfire in the current US context. It will help you find allies, plan tactics, and develop effective messaging.

**Part IV** is a reference section to improve understanding of certain federal and state laws, and other resources that address PV. Grassroots groups should know when and how to engage with local, state and federal actors. However, governments have limits, which is why we need each other to stop PV. Nonviolent organizing by communities is essential.

The **Appendix** shares important background and analysis about PV in the US right now. Written in simple question and answer format, it addresses questions such as: Who's making threats? (hint: a very small minority); What percentage of the public opposes them? (hint: a very large majority); Which communities are being threatened?; How much are

\* The text in this document is based on: Hardy Merriman, *Harnessing Our Power to End (HOPE) Political Violence*, 22nd Century Initiative and the Horizons Project, 2024. Online. [endpoliticalviolence.org](https://endpoliticalviolence.org).

threats rising?; How high is the risk of physical political violence in the US?; and What actions have government and others taken to counter this threat so far?

### Q3: How is "political violence" defined in the HOPE-PV guide?

A small number of people use PV to limit ordinary people's participation in decisions that affect our lives, and to divide us while they benefit. We define PV as *"force or violence, including threats and intimidation, used with a political motivation to achieve a political goal, assert political power over another group, or disseminate a political message to an outside audience."*<sup>1</sup> PV is a direct assault on US democracy, the Constitution, and the rights and freedoms of people across the nation. It does enormous damage, and it is increasing. While relatively few in the US are directly physically attacked for their political activities, when these incidents happen, fear ripples outward among public officials and communities across the country, including and beyond communities that have historically been targeted with political violence, and significantly undermines democracy.

Equally damaging is the growing number of people who receive threats based on their political views or professional responsibilities. Threats are directed at non-partisan election workers; elected officials of both major parties; professionals in schools, healthcare, and libraries; clergy; journalists; members of the judiciary and juries; members of law enforcement; non-profit organizations; historically marginalized groups; businesses; and ordinary people seeking to uphold democracy and constitutional rights.

Those who engage in PV also aim to spread fear to onlookers. This means that if you reside in the US, you are an intended victim of political violence. Those who incite, threaten, and enact political violence want to intimidate you and change your behavior. They want to control how you use your political voice, influence your personal or professional judgment, and deny you from exercising your constitutional rights. Virtually no one is exempt from being targeted. Confronting political violence is a deeply personal matter—it is about claiming, protecting, and strengthening our personal rights, freedoms, and security, as well as those of our communities.

### Q4: What are the impacts of political violence on democracy?

PV is *one of the greatest attacks on the US Constitution and one of the most corrosive influences on democracy*. It aims to empower a small subsection of the population to seize power against the majority through anti-democratic means. It is used in attempts to overturn elections; reduce voter turnout; push qualified candidates to avoid public service; spread fear about participating in public life; narrow debate, silence voices, and impede the free expression of ideas; intimidate a free press; and undemocratically influence the decision making of public officials.

Existing evidence suggests that political violence:

1. Has caused politicians to **change votes** on significant legislative matters.

---

<sup>1</sup> \* Definition from: Jennifer Dresden and Ben Raderstorf, "Threats of Political Violence Are Injurious to Democracy Too", *The UnPopulist*, January 6, 2024.

2. Imposes significant **psychological distress, physiological harm, and resource costs** on elected officials and civil servants. These may also negatively impact **job performance**.
3. Drives qualified politicians and civil servants **out of public service**.
4. Is likely to result in a **more white and male election candidate pool**.
5. Creates **barriers to public officials connecting with their constituents**.
6. Results in the **criminalization of marginalized groups**

Some major impacts of PV are difficult to quantify. For example, who can determine how many talented and committed people over the last decade in communities across the country have privately chosen to abstain from speaking freely, exercising their rights, or participating in public life out of fear of threats and political violence? How has this enabled the very small minority of Americans who threaten to use political violence to shape public debate, influence who chooses to run (or not to run) for public office, and sway the decisions of public officials, businesses, journalists, and others? How has PV made further threats and violence against different communities more common? There are strong indications that these dynamics have happened.

### Q5: Which groups are most likely to receive threats?

Threats are directed to many groups in US society. People at the local, state, and national level of any gender, race, ethnicity, or political leaning can be threatened with PV. Some groups are more often targeted than others, and knowing who those are helps us prepare and anticipate who may be most likely to need support:

1. Local election workers are highly targeted
2. Members of state legislatures are highly targeted
3. Local elected officials are highly targeted
4. Elected officials from both political parties receive a significant amount of threats
5. Women are significantly more likely than men to be targeted,
6. People of color and LGBTQ+ people are more likely to receive threats
7. When individuals are in the news, they are more likely to receive threats.

### Q6: What is backfire and what are the five principles for making political violence backfire?

Backfire happens when we join together and use nonviolent action to weaken those who incite, threaten, and enact PV. The “5 Rs” of backfire are:

1. **Reveal:** Expose the injustice.
2. **Redeem:** Validate the target.
3. **Reframe:** Interpret the event as an injustice.
4. **Redirect:** Mobilize support and avoid official channels.

## 5. **Resist:** Resist intimidation and bribes.<sup>2</sup>

Below is a brief overview of each principle.



### **Reveal: Countering Cover-Up**

Abusers try to cover up injustice. They claim that the injustice didn't happen, or seek to reduce distribution of news about the injustice.

In order for injustice to backfire, it must be revealed. The methods used to do this will depend on specific circumstances—for example, in some cases, revealing can happen through research and other forms of evidence gathering, working with local media of all kinds, or through detailed interviews with people who have suffered abuse (and whose consent should be secured before sharing this information more widely). Sometimes activists can create conditions that make cover-up of PV more challenging, such as carrying cameras and planning ahead for sustained documentation of public actions, which alerts possible perpetrators in advance that they will be recorded.

### **Redeem: Countering Devaluation**

**Devaluation** is "lowering the status or opinion of a person or object" with the goal of making violence or other abuse toward them seem more acceptable.<sup>3</sup> Perpetrators attempt to devalue the people they abuse through a variety of means, including by sharing (directly or through rumors) damaging information—which may be false—about a person who was abused. They may also label a person as a terrorist, criminal, political extremist, or use other dehumanizing language. In doing so, they often play to prejudices that are present in society, such as racism and sexism. Perpetrators may further try to provoke a targeted person into saying or doing things that can be used against them.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Martin, *Backfire Manual: Tactics Against Injustice* (Sparsnäs: Irene Publishing, 2012), 10-12.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, *Backfire Manual*, 24.

The counter-tactic to this is to humanize (**redeem**) those who have been abused and to reduce the social distance between them and the broader audience. Humanizing people, providing context and details about their lives, elevating their positive values (which they may share with the broader audience) and actions, and having others (especially those in roles that the audience trusts and respects) speak up on their behalf can all help to counter devaluation. Acts of redemption should be planned alongside those who have been dehumanized.

### **Reframe: Countering Reinterpretation by Perpetrators**

Alongside devaluation, abusers will attempt to **reinterpret** an incident to make it seem like their abuse did not do much damage (**minimizing**), was necessary for the greater good (**framing**), or was not their fault at all (**blaming**). Sometimes outright lying about various details is also part of their repertoire.<sup>4</sup>

Countering these efforts requires **reframing**. Documentation about the impact of and damage from the abuse can help neutralize the perpetrators' narratives. Communicating why the abuse violates laws, widely held values, and threatens all of our safety and security is also vital. Communicating who should be held accountable for the abuse and reframing abuse from an individual problem to a systemic problem is also important. Weaving these aspects together into clear narratives that trusted messengers can deliver can further increase impact. It is important to remember that while an injustice may seem obvious to activists, *we should never assume that it is obvious to other audiences*. Therefore, activists must put facts into context by developing narratives that show the moral outrage of an abuse and mobilize a broader constituency to get off the sidelines.

### **Redirect: Not Relying on Official Channels to Deliver Justice**

When efforts to cover up, devalue, and reinterpret fail, perpetrators try to divert action into **official channels** such as an investigation or inquiry. Perpetrators prefer inquiries that are internal and closed-door. However, even public and independent investigations can still result in decreased public mobilization. This is because they tend to work slowly, focus on technical procedures, rely on experts, and give an appearance that justice will be done.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, relying on them can drain grassroots energy. Moreover, once people are demobilized, inquiries may become less aggressive in pursuing the truth.

In the face of such institutional processes, activists have many options, but the key point to remember is that activists must not rely solely on the process to deliver justice. Instead, they must continue to **redirect** public outrage to mobilize public action. The full guide includes examples and ideas for action that can keep the issue alive among members of the public, so that those who oppose injustice continue to build their strength and exert ongoing pressure.

### **Resist: Standing Firm Against Intimidation and Bribery**

---

<sup>4</sup> Martin, *Backfire Manual*, 26-28.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, *Backfire Manual*, 29-31.

A final tactic used by perpetrators to try to inhibit public concern is to threaten those who speak out or organize against injustice. They may also try to bribe, reward, or otherwise co-opt people into remaining silent or demobilizing. This may extend beyond just targeted activists—perpetrators may also try to silence activists' family, friends, and colleagues.

Yet, threats and attempts to reward silence are risky for perpetrators, because activists who resist them can also turn these actions into catalysts for more backfire. As with other backfire tactics, preparation here is key. Anticipating intimidation and rewards, activists can warn their friends, families, and colleagues of such efforts, prepare to document these efforts, and develop strategies to expose the corruption of perpetrators. Publicly acknowledging the fact that you are prepared for threats may actually have a deterrent effect on perpetrators, making them aware ahead of time that such tactics will be used against them in “the court of public opinion,” and possibly also even a court of law.

### **Q7: How can communities maximize backfire?**

While there is no exact formula for applying the 5 Rs and local conditions will determine the strategies and tactics that you use, in general backfire is more likely to happen when we prepare for it. This can include participating in training in 5 Rs; building relationships with others; joining trusted networks that include people from all walks of life; and maintaining a commitment to nonviolence in the face of violent provocations.

### **Q8: How can people stay in touch and get involved?**

First, download the full guide and sign up for updates. Share it with your colleagues and friends, talk about the possibility of PV targeting your organization or community, and use the guide to make a plan. We also have a team of experienced people ready and willing to help you prepare and plan. Let us know you're interested [here](#).