



ELECTIONS

'The country's lost its mind': Polls warning of civil war, violence shows deep partisan chasm over election

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WASHINGTON – Bill Fry, 61, is a supporter of President Donald Trump in rural Ohio who doesn't share much in common politically with Matt Edelman, 29, a Joe Biden backer in Brooklyn, New York.

Except this: They both worry about the legitimacy of the upcoming presidential election and fear an outcome that appears tainted could heighten the nation's already frayed psyche and exacerbate violence in the streets.



A protester and Trump supporter scuffle during a rally for then-presidential candidate Donald Trump on March 12, 2016, at I-X Arena in Cleveland. *Michael Henninger, Associated Press.*



They're not alone. A new poll shows a large swath of Americans harbor deep reservations about the election results weeks before Election Day and are concerned about what actions people might resort to as a consequence.

The YouGov poll of 1,999 registered voters found that nearly half – 47% – disagree with the idea that the election "is likely to be fair and honest." And that slightly more than half – 51% – won't "generally agree on who is the legitimately elected president of the United States." The online poll was conducted Oct.1-2 and has a margin of error of +/-2.56 percentage points.

In addition, a YouGov poll of 1,505 voters found that 56% said they expect to see "an increase in violence as a result of the election." That question had a margin of error of 4.2 percentage points.

For Fry and many other Trump supporters, the concern over the election's legitimacy is tied to the largely unproven claims Trump has raised about potential fraud involving millions of mail-in ballots that already have begun to pour in to election office across the nation.

"We would be foolish to not at least accept that it's a real thing that happens sometimes, and I just worry that it's going to happen in a greater numbers this year," said Fry, a Marine veteran who owns a dental management company in Blanchester, Ohio. "And a lot of my friends think the same things."

For Edelman and other Biden supporters, the worry is that Trump's unrelenting criticism of the mail-in ballots and his refusal to agree to a peaceful transition of power if he loses is

proof that he'll stop at little to reverse what Edelman believes will be an electoral defeat given polls showing Biden with a significant lead nationally.

"Trump is already casting doubt on the legitimacy of vote by mail which tells me that he may try to dispute the result legally or by decree or who knows by what means," said Edelman, an assistant to the learning specialist at a local school who backed Sen. Bernie Sanders in the primary. "He's a liar. He will promote baseless conspiracy theories if he feel it will benefit him politically."

Both Fry and Edelman are members of Braver Angels, an organization that promotes civility and healing between "reds and blues" and regularly holds workshops where participants can air opposing views. The group, formerly known as Better Angels, began in 2017 when half the country was having trouble getting over Trump's victory and the other half resented them for not being able to accept it gracefully.

Braver Angels, which commissioned the YouGov poll, has issued a "Letter from America," a national campaign asking citizens, civic groups and religious organizations to pledge that they will disavow violence from either side and respect those who voted differently.

"If in the near future we face a constitutional crisis in which our institutions cannot produce consensus on who is the legitimately elected president, we resolve to work together across this chasm for solutions grounded in the Constitution and guided by our democratic and non-violent traditions and our sense of shared destiny," the letter says.

The election is less than a month away, and the country has been roiled for months over a series of crises exposing deep partisan rifts: a pandemic that has killed more than 210,000 Americans; an economy that has lost millions of jobs as a result; street protests over police brutality that have included instances of rioting; a contentious fight over a Supreme Court seat that could be asked to decide the election; and the COVID-19 diagnosis of the president, his top aides and some senators.

'Dehumanizing' the other side

Alex Theodoridis, an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, has studied the country's growing partisan divide. The reasonable chance that the election comes down to a few states and that legal challenges could mean a protracted court battle would give voters on both sides more ammunition to doubt the integrity of the election and act out, he said.

"A close, contested election in our hyper-polarized political climate could very well produce isolated incidents of partisan violence," he said. "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."

And each side is apt to blame the other for inciting disorder.

"If Trump wins, I fear chaotic, destructive hate will continue," said Chrissy Koach, 49, a Braver Angels member and Trump supporter from Arlington, Virginia, who works part time for an international development and relief nonprofit organization.

"Trump Derangement Syndrome really exists and some people will not stop," she wrote in an email to USA TODAY. "But that shouldn't frighten me into voting as they want me to vote. Even if President Trump wins by a landslide/legitimately, I believe irrational people will persist and continue to sow hate, fear, etc."

Noor Ain, 23, an architecture student who emigrated from Pakistan as a child, is worried about what will happen in the aftermath of the election. A Biden supporter who initially backed Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren in the Democratic presidential primary, Ain said Trump's victory in 2016 "validated" hate in the U.S. and that his followers could act up even if he wins reelection.

"The country's already pretty divided, and it's only become more and more divided in the past four years," she said. "Considering the state of things this year, there's a lot of different emotions and there are a lot of people who feel very strongly about different sides. Whatever the outcome is, I feel like there will be a rise in violence."

'On the verge' of civil war

Those sentiments might help explain the conclusion of a new survey that finds a majority of U.S. adults believe the country is "on the verge" of a second civil war. Of those, four of 10 said they "strongly agree" with that sentiment expressed most sharply by those identifying themselves as very conservative or very liberal.

The online poll Sept. 23 has a margin of error of 4.42 percentage points in either direction.

"This is the single most frightening poll result I've ever been associated with," said Rich Thau, president of Engagious, one of the three firms, along with the Sports and Leisure Research Group and ROKK Solutions, that sponsored the survey.

Thau said that the partisan tensions have been "bubbling below the surface or just above" for some time and that the divisions are being ruptured further by a pandemic over which both sides disagree on the severity and response and an election in which both sides view each other as hardened combatants.

"So, what's the consequence of that? How bad does this get?" said Thau, who has been holding focus groups with battleground state voters as part of the Swing Voter Project. "You've got people on the far left with guns, people on the far right with guns. And an unwillingness of political elites to condemn this. ... People are girding themselves for something awful to happen."

The poll doesn't define what a civil war would look like. Would it be armed confrontation in some areas or just widespread protests? Would it involve economic boycotts or simply

family members and friends who no longer speak to one another?

'Our country is in a dangerous place'

On Tuesday, Biden was in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the site of the defining Civil War battle in 1863 that ended up saving the Union, to make a point about the need to heal the country's political chasms.

"Today again, we are a house divided," he said.

"As I look across America today, I'm concerned the country is in a dangerous place," the former vice president said. "Our trust in each other is ebbing. Hope seems elusive. Too many American see our public life not as an arena for mediation of our differences, but rather they see it as an occasion for total, unrelenting partisan warfare. Instead of treating each other's party as the opposition, we treat them as the enemy. This must end."

Like many Americans, Carlos Hernandez, 63, of San Francisco has already seen friendships disappear over his support for Trump.

"I have lost individuals who I thought were friends in the aftermath (of the 2016 election). And that's been sad for me," said the social business strategist and former Barack Obama supporter who lives in one of the America's bluest pockets. "Can I rule out fellow citizens from acting out? I'd be foolish to say I can't. It would be sad for us if that were to happen."

Braver Angels and other groups appealing for calm and civility hope their efforts can act as a tourniquet on the country's political wounds. Both Fry, the Republican, and Edelman, the Democrat, lament how bad it has gotten.

For some, the worst division they've ever seen

"I think our democracy has certainly never been weaker in my lifetime," Edelman said.

But neither say the country is irretrievably on course for armed conflict.

"It's scary, but I don't think we're ready to have a civil war like the last civil war," said Fry, who blames the media for treating Trump unfairly and for fanning the flames of partisan discord.

Thau said he has never seen anything like it.

"I was a history major in college and I try to imagine how someone will explain this to other people 50 years from now," he said. "It just seems like the country's lost its mind."