

Nearly one-quarter of Americans believe violent protest against the government can be justified

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A national poll provides a snapshot into public sentiment about the acceptability of violent protest against federal, state and local

government, providing current insights about the state of U.S. democracy and safety of government officials.

The study reveals that nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of Americans believe engagement in violent protest against the government can ever be justified, with 10 percent saying it is justified right now.

"This is a concerning finding," said Northwestern political scientist James Druckman. "While it does not suggest that people are currently arming with the intent to engage in [political violence](#), it does reveal that people perceive the country as being at a place where such behavior is reasonable. This coheres with widespread concerns about democratic backsliding."

Druckman is the Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science and a fellow and associate director of Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research, and one of the project researchers.

The survey, "Americans' views on violence against the government," was conducted as part of the COVID States Project, a consortium of researchers from Northwestern, Northeastern, Harvard and Rutgers universities.

The effect of polarizing views

The poll, conducted between Dec. 22, 2021–Jan. 24, 2022, surveyed 22,961 Americans across all 50 states with race/ethnicity, age and [gender quotas](#) matched state by state. The data was reweighted to match the U.S. population demographics also including education, and residence in urban, suburban or rural areas.

The study found that men and younger Americans, as well as liberals and conservatives who hold polarizing views of the other party, are more

likely than women, older Americans and moderates to believe violent protest against the government is ever "definitely" or "probably" justified.

The study found gender to be a more significant factor than [political affiliation](#) in overall acceptance of violent protest.

Republicans overall are just four points more likely than Democrats to agree that violent protest can ever be justifiable.

When broken down by gender, the poll finds Democratic men are much less likely to say violent protest is ever justifiable than Republican men (23 percent versus 32 percent).

Similarly, Democratic men are significantly less likely than Republican and Independent men to say violent protest against the government is justifiable right now, while Republicans and ideological conservatives are most likely to say violent protest against the government is justifiable right now.

Acceptance over violent protest engagement was greatest at the federal government level. Among those who say engagement in violent protest against the government is acceptable, most (two-thirds) say that the federal government is an appropriate target. Smaller segments find justifiable targets in their own state's government (35 percent), another state's government (20 percent) or local government (21 percent).

Among those who say violent protest is currently justified:

- Republicans are more likely to target the federal government than are Democrats (71 percent versus 62 percent)
- More Democrats say violence against their state's government is justified (43 percent versus 26 percent).

- Independents are more likely than Republicans to say violent protest against their state's government is justified (38 percent versus 26 percent) and are more likely than both groups of partisans to say violence against their local government is warranted.
- Among Republicans, a larger share (37 percent) say violent [protest](#) against their state's [government](#) is justified when that state is controlled by a Democratic governor than those who say it is justified in state's controlled by a governor from their own party (18 percent).

More information: The COVID States Project #80: Americans' views on violence against the government. [DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/753cb](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/753cb).
osf.io/753cb/

Provided by Northwestern University

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