

Is the United States at Risk of Large-Scale Civil Conflict?

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June 2020

The protests that have roiled the United States (US) over the past week, sparked by outrage over the [killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers](#), are rooted in an issue at the heart of the divisions in American society: racism, and in particular racism within the security forces. While the scale of the current unrest may be unprecedented in recent decades, Black Lives Matter demonstrations over police violence have been ongoing for several years now, and the US has seen many other episodes of widespread protest since the civil rights movement. Yet this time, social media and commentary are invoking phrases like insurrection and civil war. Does the US now risk large-scale civil conflict? What makes this moment different from previous waves of protests?

There is a deep literature globally on the causes of large-scale violence and civil conflict. [The main risks stem from the collision of weak, exclusive, or unaccountable institutions with societal stresses of different types](#) (such as legacies of violence and trauma, inequality, unemployment, economic shocks and natural disasters, severe corruption, rapid urbanization, inequality, human rights abuses, and ethnic, religious or regional discrimination or competition). The recent joint [United Nations-World Bank report Pathways for Peace](#) added to these factors strong evidence that the risks rise when political leadership use divisive language or manipulate inequality between racial, ethnic or religious groups. Trigger events for conflict also include assassination of key figures and election periods (primarily post- rather than pre-election).

I have written about this issue for decades, but rarely focusing on high-income countries—because although many high-income countries face similar stresses, their institutions are generally strong enough to manage these stresses peacefully. Spain since 2008 is an example: the country has faced many of the stresses that, in worldwide comparative analysis, are known to increase the risk of violence. Yet Spain's institutions have navigated these stresses so far, although the country only narrowly managed to avoid a further escalation of the violence around the Catalan referendum in 2017.

How many of these factors apply to the US? The US has high inequality—both in general and between racial groups—in assets, income, educational attainment, and healthcare. It has legacies of violence and trauma, particularly in the African-American community, that are wide and deep: just as countries that have had more recent civil wars, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Afghanistan, or the Balkans, carry societal trauma that can reignite violence, the legacy of slavery and segregation continues to affect the United States. The US criminal justice system has long been recognized as inequitable—black Americans are disproportionately convicted of minor offenses, and are [2.5 times as likely to die in police custody](#). These are long term structural and institutional factors. Here are six elements that may make this moment distinct:

1. *The president's communications have been divisive*, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during these protests. Recent comments like “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” are rightly seen as condoning violence, but they are part of a longer trend. President Trump’s order to violently clear Lafayette Park of protestors to stage a photo opportunity holding a bible in front of a local Episcopal church is consistent with a long history of ramping up religious and racial divisions, dating back to his deployment of racial and religious tropes during the 2016 presidential campaign. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the president has made comments that have worsened discrimination against Asian-Americans and immigrants, for example, by calling COVID-19 the “China” or “Wuhan” virus. His communications are almost always aimed at uniting an exclusive group (white, Christian, predominantly male) and dividing them from other Americans. Building a campaign on racism is hardly new in the US—think of Richard Nixon’s [Southern strategy](#)—but this president has done so more explicitly than any of his recent predecessors. It is important not to underestimate this factor in relation to what we know about the spread of civil conflict elsewhere: [the words of political leaders matter](#).
2. *The impact of the pandemic has exposed underlying inequalities* in health, living, and working conditions, and these inequalities often have black, brown (and female) faces: [zipcodes with high minority populations have seen much higher death and infection rates](#). In New York, there [considerable disparities](#) in COVID-19 related deaths among boroughs: the rate of deaths per 1000 people was 0.71 in the Bronx, 0.60 in Queens, 0.48 in Staten Island, 0.46 in Brooklyn, and 0.31 in wealthier Manhattan. This is particularly striking as the Bronx has a lower share of people above the age of 65 years old compared to other boroughs—but its poverty rate, at 27.3 percent, is much higher than the rest of the city.
3. *COVID-19 has caused the worst rise in unemployment since the Great Depression*, and many people are out of work, on furlough, or working at home and more easily able to participate in protests. People may feel they have little to lose—the “opportunity cost” of protest, as economists call it, is very low. Data shows that the black unemployment rate is [16.7%, compared with a white unemployment rate of 14.2%](#). While the entire US economy is reeling from the impact of the pandemic, minority populations feel the economic cost most keenly, while also being the [most likely to hold jobs in essential services](#) that expose them to ongoing risk of infection.
4. *Demonstrator-police dynamics have changed because of COVID-19*. The police response to demonstrations has appeared to be unusually confrontational, even compared to previous waves of protests over police misconduct. The concern that gatherings of large numbers of people could spread the virus may lead authorities and police to take faster action to disperse protests, as well as dissuade some people from participating due to the risk of infection. Members of the police force have also been hard-hit by the pandemic in some areas and may be understaffed and stressed. However, recent protests against lockdowns have not spurred such severe reactions. So it seems likely that it is not simply COVID-19 in general that has affected police response, but also

the sense within the police or those who guide them that these protests in particular merit an iron-fisted response (notwithstanding the police officers who “took a knee” to [express their solidarity with protesters](#)), exacerbated by the incidents of looting and property destruction. The probability of violence in turn affects who attends: the absence of children at many demonstrations has for instance been notable, since in the US it is normal to see families at protests.

5. *Political parties have weakened and polarized, and no longer find it easy to represent all Americans and broker consensus solutions.* [Ezra Klein](#) traces the moment of polarization back to the period after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which was passed with bipartisan support. In its aftermath, he argues, the parties realigned so that the Democratic Party’s base became racially and religiously diverse and urban, and the Republican Party white, Christian, rural, or suburban. Ross Douthat [argues](#) from a different political perspective that “the liberal city lacks the ballast of a substantial middle class, the mediating institutions of old-fashioned machine politics, the cement of shared religious and cultural institutions.” Going a step further, Nancy Frazer makes a compelling [argument that both parties came over the last three decades to focus on a contest over recognition](#)—who belongs, who deserves rights?—while ignoring the redistributive policies that underpinned post-WW2 peace and prosperity. As a result, neither of the main parties find it easy to contain racial and religious manipulation by leadership or harness the potential for positive change that COVID-19, and now this wave of protest, could present.
6. *This is, of course, a presidential election year.* Paul Collier [shows that the period](#) after elections, when combined with other risk factors, is an important trigger for conflict. He argues that, although we often focus on the potential for violence during election campaigns, empirically civil conflict is more likely to break out afterwards, for the reason that beforehand both sides believe they will win. Afterwards, the incentive for the losing side to reject results is greater. This election, even pre-pandemic, was set up to have contestation over the results. COVID-19 and the debate over postal voting has surely made that more likely.

It is not yet clear whether these clashes will peter out, maintain peaceful momentum, or escalate. Nor do we know, in this electoral year, whether American political parties and institutions will succeed in hearing the views of the aggrieved and delivering both effective accountability and a unifying vision. Ensuring that the election results are accepted by all sides as legitimate will also be particularly challenging this year.

The US still has [higher levels of institutional governance than the average for high-income countries](#), and this factor provides some protection. But these governance indicators have been deteriorating over time, and the combination of a public health crisis, systemic generalized inequality and racial disparities, growing socioeconomic hardship, the political manipulation of racial and religious identities and the election trigger is a risky set of stressors. The warning lights for more civil conflict may not yet be red, but they are surely flashing bright orange.