Regional Overview: The United States
1-7 November 2020

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The overall number of demonstrations in the United States increased by 80% last week relative to the week prior. The majority of demonstrations were associated with the 2020 presidential election between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, which was held on 3 November. Competing demonstrations around ballot counting — namely the ‘Count Every Vote’ and ‘Stop the Steal’ rallies — were held across the country, particularly in states like Nevada, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, where the races were highly competitive. Voter intimidation incidents were also reported at polling stations on Election Day, including in North Carolina and New York. Likewise, threats against vote-counting centers were reported after Election Day in Pennsylvania and Michigan. Demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement also slightly increased last week relative to the week prior, while demonstrations related to the coronavirus pandemic continued, though at a slightly decreased number.

Last week, 72% of all demonstrations were election-related, including rallies held for or against the presidential candidates. As tensions between the two sides peaked prior to Election Day, several violent confrontations were reported. On 1 November in Richmond, Virginia, a number of Trump supporters sprayed chemical irritants and fired a gun at a group of counter-protesters during a caravan rally. The incident occurred after a counter-protester reportedly pulled a Trump flag off one of the vehicles (Richmond Times-Dispatch, 2 November). The same day in Pasadena, California, Biden supporters allegedly knocked a pro-Trump hat off a vendor's table during a rally, resulting in a Trump supporter then allegedly grabbing and dragging the person by the hair. About five other Trump supporters began kicking the person (South Pasadenan, 2 November 2020).

Late at night on Election Day, President Trump tweeted allegations of election fraud, though the tweet was soon flagged by Twitter as misinformation (LA Times, 3 November 2020). Nevertheless, demonstrations ensued, with the highest number of events last week recorded on 4 November, the day after Election Day. The presidential election results remained undecided until the weekend, when multiple news agencies announced former Vice President Biden as the projected winner of the election.

During this time, there was intense contention between those demanding that all ballots be counted — ‘Count Every Vote’ — and those demanding that ballot counting be stopped — ‘Stop the Steal’. ‘Count Every Vote’ rallies were held nationwide to support a complete count of all ballots, echoing Biden’s call to
count every remaining vote (New York Times, 4 November 2020). Meanwhile, pro-Trump protesters held ‘Stop the Steal’ rallies, supporting the efforts of President Trump and his allies to contest the results of the election, despite the fact that claims of mass voter fraud have largely been found baseless (New York Times, 10 November 2020).

Counter-protests between the two movements occurred in places with competitive vote counts. For example, on 5 November, counter-protests were reported in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where hundreds of Trump supporters, including members of the ‘Three Percenters militia group, held a ‘Stop the Steal’ rally calling for a recount of ballots, while Biden supporters held a dueling ‘Count Every Vote’ rally (Fox43, 5 November). (For more on right-wing militias and armed groups in the US, including the Three Percenters, see this recent joint report by ACLED and MilitiaWatch).

Yet the division between the two movements has not been completely partisan. While Trump supporters have largely protested to ‘Stop the Steal’ — in other words, to stop the counting of ballots — some of their counterparts elsewhere in the country concurrently protested to ‘Count Event Vote.’ In Arizona and Nevada, for example, delayed counts appeared to diminish Biden’s leads, resulting in Trump supporters advocating for vote counting to continue (CBS News, 6 November 2020). Differences in state laws around ballot processing schedules, especially given the historic number of mail-in ballots in the midst of a pandemic, have at times led to delayed results. Additionally, the trend in mail-in ballots being largely Democratic while in-person day-of voting being largely Republican — in line with the messaging espoused by each respective candidate — resulted in some states appearing ‘red’ (Republican) before turning ‘blue’ (Democratic), and vice-versa — termed red and blue mirages (NBC, 3 November 2020). This initial ambiguity has contributed to the two protest movements.

Meanwhile, multiple voter intimidation cases were reported on Election Day. In Charlotte, North Carolina, an armed man wearing a Trump hat was arrested at a polling site for trespassing and intimidating other voters (New York Times, 3 November). Similarly, in Brooklyn, New York, a man with a Trump flag threatened to put voters in the hospital (Pix11, 3 November). In Baker, Louisiana, a man armed with an assault rifle and carrying a Trump campaign sign stood outside of a polling location claiming to ‘exercise his second amendment right and show support for President Trump,’ while two Black men with similar weapons arrived on the opposite side of the street, only departing after the armed pro-Trump supporter had left (WAFB, 3 November).

Additionally, threats of violence were reported against vote-counting centers in battleground states as the increased number of mail-in ballots caused delays in the final count. Two QAnon supporters were arrested outside a vote-counting center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for carrying handguns without license, after driving there from Virginia. Some reports indicate that they intended to deliver fraudulent ballots to the center (CNN, 7 November 2020). A bomb threat was also called in targeting Philadelphia’s Fashion District, near a vote-counting site (WHYY, 6 November 2020). In Detroit, Michigan, a bomb threat against a vote-counting center was investigated amidst rival pro-Biden and pro-Trump demonstrations (The Detroit News, 6 November 2020). Armed pro-Trump protests also occurred outside vote-counting centers in Arizona, Nevada, and Michigan — all pivotal states as election results began to be finalized (AP News, 7 November 2020). Additionally, vote-counting centers in battleground states received numerous death threats and other obscene calls (The Hill, 8 November 2020; AP News, 6 November 2020).
Last week, 15% of all demonstration events reported in the US were associated with the BLM movement. While the vast majority of demonstrations associated with the movement continue to be peaceful, some violent demonstrations were reported, including in California and Oregon. In Brentwood, California, demonstrators associated with the BLM movement joined with Biden supporters to demonstrate against a private residence that had hung an effigy of Biden (ABC7, 7 November 2020). The demonstrators vandalized the private residence and hurled objects at police. One person was arrested for battery of an officer. In Portland, Oregon, demonstrators associated with the BLM movement hurled flares and paint-filled balloons and broke a window at the home of the Portland Commissioner on 5 November, the day after he voted to maintain funding for the Portland Police Department (OPB, 6 November 2020). In Salem, Oregon, demonstrators associated with the BLM movement clashed with pro-Trump supporters, including members of the Proud Boys, a right-wing street-fighting group, who were holding a ‘Stop the Steal’ rally rejecting the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections. Members of the Proud Boys used mace and chased a press photographer.

In other developments, demonstrations associated with the coronavirus pandemic continued across the country, though at a slightly decreased rate compared to the previous week. Students, parents, and teachers demonstrated against the decisions by different school districts over in-person learning and safety measures. Demonstrations demanding in-person learning were also reported. In addition, workers and business owners demanded government subsidies amid the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. In Hawaii, workers rallied outside the State Capitol in Honolulu against the alleged nonpayment of unemployment benefits and called for the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations to provide more assistance to workers during the pandemic (Patch, 7 November 2020). Meanwhile, in New York on 6 November, Governor Andrew Cuomo increased the presence of National Guard members at airports to enforce the state’s new coronavirus testing rules, requiring anyone traveling to New York to have a negative coronavirus test three days before their arrival (ABC7 New York, 6 November). The decision comes amid a record-breaking rise in new coronavirus cases across the country (Washington Post, 6 November 2020).

Data on political violence and demonstrations in America are made available through the US Crisis Monitor, a special project launched by ACLED and the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University. For more information about the project, click here.

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