Regional Overview: The United States
25-31 October 2020

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Last week in the United States, demonstration events decreased by 27% relative to the week prior. The highest number of demonstrations were related to the general election set for 3 November. Rallies and demonstrations were held across the country supporting the two presidential candidates, current President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden. Demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement continued, but slightly decreased in number. Violent demonstrations were reported in Washington, New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania after Kevin E. Peterson Jr. and Walter Wallace Jr., both Black men, were fatally shot in two separate incidents by police in Hazel Dell, Washington and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, respectively. Demonstrations over issues related to the coronavirus pandemic continued around the country, but also decreased in number. Meanwhile, incidents of voter intimidation and election-related violence were reported in several states, including in Kansas, Texas, and Missouri.

Over 30% of all demonstrations reported last week were election-related. They included rallies and demonstrations held in support of the presidential candidates. Of those rallies and demonstrations, 75% were pro-Trump events. A recent study released by Stanford University estimates that Trump’s campaign rallies between June and September this year may have caused approximately 30,000 coronavirus infections and more than 700 deaths (Politico, 31 October 2020).

While 93% of all election-related demonstrations were peaceful, violence was reported at several events. On 25 October, in New York City, Trump supporters clashed with anti-Trump protesters using pepper spray, resulting in nine arrests (PIX11, 25 October 2020). In Beverly Hills, California, during a 4,000-person 'Freedom Rally' in support of President Trump and against California Governor Gavin Newsom on 31 October, fist fights broke out between Trump supporters and anti-Trump demonstrators (Patch, 31 October 2020; ABC7, 1 November 2020). The pro-Trump event also allegedly featured supporters of the QAnon conspiracy movement.

Similar to the week prior, demonstrations and rallies encouraging voter participation and promoting voting rights, specifically for disenfranchised populations, were also reported last week. In Fort Myers, Florida, people participated in a 'Free the Vote' march on 25 October, organized by the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition. They called for increased voter participation, particularly in the case of those who

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have been incarcerated (Fox4, 26 October 2020). Women, people of color, and the LGBT community also gathered at the State House in Providence, Rhode Island for the ‘Nasty Womxn Vote 2020’ rally on 25 October (Uprise RI, 26 October 2020). At a march to a polling place in Graham, North Carolina, police intervened and pepper sprayed participants, including children and seniors, to disperse them from the roads, arresting eight people. The officers reportedly began pepper spraying the marchers “suddenly and without any warning,” prompting a federal lawsuit accusing police in the state of voter intimidation (NBC, 3 November 2020).

Last week, 20% of all demonstration events reported in the US were associated with the BLM movement. Multiple nights of demonstrations were reported in Vancouver, Washington after three Clark County deputies fatally shot Kevin E. Peterson Jr., a Black man, in Hazel Dell, Washington. The Clark County sheriff stated during a press conference that the officers approached Peterson, who was sitting alone in a car at a parking lot, while they were investigating suspected drug dealing in the same parking lot (ABC News, 1 November 2020). The Southwest Washington Independent Investigative Response Team (SWIIRT), which is investigating the incident, said in a statement that Peterson then fled on foot and was pursued by the officers, and that at some point during the pursuit Peterson produced a handgun (CNN, 31 October 2020). The three Clark County deputies then all fired their weapons, killing Peterson. While the Clark County sheriff stated that Peterson had fired his weapon at the deputies, the SWIIRT statement did not note whether Peterson had fired his weapon (CNN, 31 October 2020). Following the shooting, a vigil and demonstration was held in Vancouver on 30 October. It turned violent after right-wing counter-demonstrators confronted those demonstrating against the police shooting. Dumpster fires were lit, windows were broken, and shots were fired into the air. No one was injured in the incident and it is unclear which group fired the shots. Dueling rallies were also held for a second night in a row. One demonstration was against the police shooting of Peterson and the second was a pro-police, pro-Trump rally organized by a local Republican activist. Verbal confrontations occurred between the groups, though no violence was reported.

Violent demonstrations were also reported in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania after Walter Wallace Jr., a Black man, was fatally shot by police officers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 26 October. Police stated that the incident occurred while two officers were responding to a 911 call about a man with a knife (CNN, 28 October 2020). Eyewitness video shows two police officers firing multiple shots when Wallace walks towards the officers holding a knife. One eyewitness account states that a woman, later identified as Wallace’s mother, had told police that he had mental health issues (CNN, 28 October 2020). Wallace’s family, through their attorney, stated that Wallace was in the midst of a mental health crisis when officers arrived and the initial call made to 911 was for medical intervention (CNN, 28 October 2020; WPVI, 30 October 2020).

Following the shooting, violent demonstrations were reported for two consecutive nights on 26 and 27 October in Philadelphia. Demonstrators reportedly set a police car and dumpsters on fire, threw projectiles at officers, smashed windows at a police station, and assaulted officers. At least 30 police personnel were injured, and over 100 people were arrested (CNN, 28 October 2020). Videos and reports indicate that police used force against civilians caught between the demonstrators and authorities, with officers dragging people out of a car and beating them (NPR, 30 October 2020). In response to the unrest, the governor mobilized the Pennsylvania National Guard to Philadelphia on 27 October. The mayor announced a nighttime curfew on 28 October, which was lifted the following day. On 4 November,
Philadelphia police publicly released body camera footage of the killing of Walter Wallace, Jr., marking the first time in the department’s history that it has released such footage (The Guardian, 4 November 2020).

A quarter of all demonstration events reported in the US last week were over issues related to the coronavirus pandemic. As Trump has falsely accused doctors of misrepresenting the pandemic’s death toll, many students, teachers, nurses, and workers took to the streets to voice opposition to the government’s handling of the crisis (Forbes, 31 October 2020). In North Carolina, Texas, and California, healthcare workers affiliated with National Nurses United held a rally and a candlelight vigil to honor the health workers who have died from the coronavirus. They also called attention to the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for nurses during the pandemic. Demonstrations were additionally held against coronavirus restrictions in several states, including in Idaho, Maine, Florida, and Washington. In Vancouver, Washington, demonstrators, including the founder of right-wing group Patriot Prayer, held a demonstration against the state’s coronavirus measures (for more on right-wing militias and armed groups in the US, including Patriot Prayer, see this recent joint report by ACLED and MilitiaWatch). In Florida, demonstrations were held against a local district school board’s decision to extend mandatory mask mandates. In Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, locals demonstrated against the local city council over a possible mask mandate decision. In Chicago, Illinois, a violent event was reported over the use of masks: two women critically injured a security guard after stabbing him 27 times at a store when he asked them to leave for refusing to wear masks while shopping (CBS News, 28 October 2020).

As states began early voting in the general election, incidents of voter intimidation and election-related violence were reported. In Dickinson, North Dakota, a self-identified member of the Proud Boys, a right-wing street-fighting group, was arrested after he sent an anonymous email to the Dickinson Press threatening to blow up a voting location in the city (Dickinson Press, 29 October 2020). In Boston, Massachusetts, a ballot box was set on fire in Copley Square (Washington Post, 26 October 2020). The suspect has been charged with willful and malicious burning. Suffolk County’s district attorney stated that the person was "emotionally disturbed" and the incident did not appear to be a deliberate plot to undermine voting (Boston Globe, 26 October 2020), though election officials earlier stated that the arson appeared to have been a "deliberate attack" (Star, 26 October 2020). In Oswego, Oregon, two severed deer heads were found in a neighborhood: one near a Biden/Harris campaign sign and the other on a residential lawn with a Black Lives Matter sign. Meanwhile, on 31 October, in Topeka, Kansas, a man shot three people who he thought were stealing Trump campaign signs (WVLT, 1 November 2020). One person was taken to the hospital with potentially life-threatening injuries while the two other victims were later also taken to hospitals for treatment. On 30 October, a group of drivers supporting President Trump surrounded a Biden/Harris campaign bus on a stretch of highway outside Austin, Texas. Pro-Trump supporters, many of whom were armed, surrounded the bus on the interstate and attempted to drive it off the road. One of the drivers hit a Biden campaign staffer’s car. Following the incident, the Biden campaign cancelled an event in Pflugerville, Texas due to safety concerns. Neither Joe Biden nor Kamala Harris were on the bus at the time.

In other developments, businesses and the military took steps to prepare for potential “civil unrest” after the election (Newsweek, 3 November 2020). President Trump’s refusal to guarantee a peaceful transition of power should he lose the election, as well as his repeated threat to challenge an unfavorable result, has aggravated these concerns (Axios, 1 November 2020; CNN, 15 October 2020). Late on election night, the president falsely claimed to win several key states, declared that he won the election, and threatened
lawsuits to block any further vote counting. As of this writing, millions of ballots are still left to be counted (Forbes, 4 November 2020). The National Guard announced several deployments of troops in anticipation of post-election unrest (Newsweek, 3 November 2020). While no large-scale violence was reported on election day, tensions remain high (Bloomberg, 4 November 2020). Coverage of the election and any associated unrest in its immediate aftermath will be included in next week’s data release and Regional Overview.

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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