Issue Brief: Understanding emerging trends in January 6 “Political Prisoners” demonstrations
January 2021 - January 2022

As the first anniversary of the January 6 attacks approaches, national attention has turned to conflicting commemorations of the day itself. A brief period of bipartisan calls for accountability in 2021 ultimately gave way to revisionism, and in some cases outright conspiracy theories, including from some Republican lawmakers looking to maintain favor with former President Trump.

One of the most concerning narratives includes framing arrested rioters as “political prisoners” by either denying documented actions or claiming cases are politically motivated. Few if any uses of the “political prisoner” narrative have been linked to wider calls to improve treatment for all prisoners or other criminal justice reform, suggesting attention on prison conditions is being used primarily to amplify divisive narratives and fear — rather than as an opening to engage on a topic with potential to promote bipartisan cooperation. Though currently limited in total number, the migration of these narratives from online discussion to offline demonstrations and activity merit specific attention.

Most immediately, Look Ahead America has organized at least 21 “Justice for J6” anniversary vigils in 9 states plus DC on January 6. Past trends and behavior suggest these events will be relatively sparsely attended and designed to draw attention to false narratives around the anniversary. Instead, continued presence of elected leaders or party officials at these events on the anniversary of the attack itself could signal a concerning trend in overall willingness to affiliate with more extreme views, potentially indicating risk around greater offline activity in the months to come and further normalizing a dangerous narrative.

Methodology

BDI reviewed two event-based datasets — The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) — that monitor offline demonstration and certain political violence, to capture any publically reported events related to “January 6 Political Prisoners” or “Justice for Ashli Babbitt.” Our team then completed a manual review of all events and other related search terms to add or confirm events of interest. The resulting event set is narrowly focused and does not include events only recording disproven claims of election fraud. As both source datasets rely primarily on news media for initial coding, events may be undercounted if references to “political prisoners” were not reported — for example, if a speaker referred to January 6 “political prisoners” but it was not the advertised or reported topic of the event.

Key Findings

- Documented offline activity seeking to frame January 6 rioters as “political prisoners” have been relatively few, only 45 of at least 12,800 documented demonstration events in the past year.
  - Demonstrations occurred in 18 states plus DC in the past year.
Two demonstrations in New York City and Portland did devolve into violence, while counter protestors affiliated with “political prisoner” claims also attacked a social justice vigil in Sacramento, with no major incidents noted at the other 42 events.

Demonstrations have rarely overlapped with other issues outside of election fraud, but when they do, the overlap is with COVID-19 shut-downs demonstrations.

- Despite relatively few offline events, a disturbingly large number of elected officials and party leaders have used claims of “political prisoners” to advance revisionist narratives about the January 6 attack and stoke fears of future political persecution.
  - At least 4 sitting members of Congress have advanced similar claims. Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene, Matt Gaetz, Louie Gohmert, and Paul Gosar were all involved with events related to similar claims.
  - State elected officials, party leaders, and organizers have also been recorded at similar events, including several in Arizona, Texas (Allen West, local Tea Party Chapters), and West Virginia.
  - State GOP candidates in Arizona, Florida, Texas, Georgia, and Washington have also attended events advancing the same narrative.

- Beyond elected and party officials, offline events have involved a relatively narrow group of organizations, including some overlap with groups with an explicit past history of violence.
  - “Look Ahead America," founded by Matt Braynard, former director of data and strategy for the Trump campaign, organized the (ultimately sparsely attended) September 18 “Justice for J6” rally in DC.
  - Look Ahead has also advertised at least 21 “Justice for J6” anniversary vigils in 9 states plus DC on January 6.
  - In line with overall persistent activity over the past year, Proud Boys have also organized around the “political prisoners” narrative, with just under 40% of all demonstrations (17 of 45) recording Proud Boys affiliates.
  - Other events have at times recorded Oathkeeper, III%er, Texas Militia, and Groyper affiliates -- as well as White Lives Matter groups in attendance.

Contrasting calls for accountability, risk of counter protests, and future trends

Though beyond the scope of this brief, more positive trends and calls for accountability also deserve additional attention in contrast to these negative narratives -- both on the anniversary of the attack and in the coming months. CCC has also recorded at least 208 planned “Vigils for Democracy” in 36 states plus DC on January 6 in support of accountability for January 6 and federal voting rights. At least 32 similar demonstrations occurred, as recorded by ACLED, in the immediate weeks following January 6, 2021 — calling for Trump’s impeachment or for resignations of public officials who attended or supported the attack. Monitoring has not indicated a greater than usual risk of counter-protest or targeting of these events on the anniversary. Though uncertain given the overall political climate, widespread attendance and mobilization in support of accountability for the January 6 attack could instead signal greater attention on voting rights and the January 6 Select Committee as issues of renewed attention in the weeks to come, offering opportunities for more unifying narratives in the long term.