



Epsilon Theory

Apocalypse Always

October 25, 2024



We were in the jungle. There were too many of us. We had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little, we went insane.

Francis Ford Coppola in a speech at the 1979 screening of Apocalypse Now at Cannes

Let us not be naive.

Elections have played host to violent and existential rhetoric since, well, forever.

The second contested American presidential election – the 1800 contest between Adams and Jefferson – was overrun by it. Congressional chaplain William Linn

warned Americans that electing Jefferson would insult Washington's ashes, destroy religion, and loosen all the bonds of society¹. Good Christians were cautioned against "indifference" to the "impending danger" of America's "ruin" that would come at his hands, and reminded that they could not vote for Jefferson without "betraying [the] Lord." The Jeffersonian camp, only a few years removed from Thomas's reminder to Adams's own son-in-law about the bloody manure of patriots and tyrants so necessary to water the tree of liberty, told Americans that the "hideous hermaphroditic character" of the oppressor² Adams would certainly launch a war with France and centralize tyrannical authority in the presidency. After all, he was secretly plotting to marry his children off to foreign princes in order to establish a lasting Adams monarchy in America.

The response of the Adams administration to these affronts was to use the newly printed Alien and Sedition Acts to throw just about anyone who levied such spicy language against the administration in jail. James Callender, the muckraker-for-hire who published the Reynolds Pamphlet you may remember from the musical *Hamilton* ("have you read this shit?"), was fined and jailed for his claims that Adams would be the End of the Republic™. Another supporter heard a gunshot at a parade in Jersey, was overheard remarking that he "hoped it hit Adams in the ass", and got slapped with a citation for that bit of cheek, too. After a couple dozen such cases of what we might today call brazen lawfare (and after a couple journalists got their printing presses roughed up by violent mobs), the citizens of Kentucky and Virginia had had enough. Madison and Jefferson quietly acted as the pen behind the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which asserted the right of states to nullify what they saw as unconstitutional laws like the Alien and Sedition Acts. In yet another salvo of counter-battery fire, one of George Washington's final observations before his death was to assert that Jefferson and Madison threatened to "dissolve the union" through these actions³.

Politicians, ministers, public figures, journalists, statesmen, and garden variety assholes have been threatening the End of the Republic™ since the Beginning of the Republic. We are always beset by tyrants, demagogues, would-be dictators and

¹ Linn, W. (1800). *Serious considerations on the election of a president: Addressed to the citizens of the United States*. New York: John Furman.

² Callender, J. T. (1800). *The prospect before us*. Richmond, VA: Printed for the author and sold by M. Jones, S. Pleasants, and J. Lyon

³ Of note: Washington wasn't wrong. This doctrine played a not-insignificant role in the, shall we say, bumpy unraveling of the question of slavery.

monarchs, buffoons, cretins, devils, demons, infidels, foreign agents, Missourians, and narcissists. Should our opponents triumph, it has always meant the end of democracy, of our identity as a Christian nation, of the American Dream, of our way of life, of freedom and liberty and Chevrolets and Capitalism and love and puppies. Of America.

When Henry Clay handed John Quincy Adams the Presidency over Andrew Jackson in 1824, it was the first of several "corrupt bargains" that we would come to associate with the presidency for the next two centuries. To the Jacksonians and the press in their camp, Adams and the Democratic-Republicans were cheaters, liars, and thieves, inheritors to an illegitimate government that harbored dangerous imperial visions. In 1896, industrialists rent their garments and publicized claims that William Jennings Bryan would create an economic apocalypse. Bryan, in his turn, far more famously accused McKinley of crucifying humanity on a cross of gold. McKinley got himself shot, of course, only it wasn't really a Bryan supporter who did it so much as an anarchist. Not that this stopped anyone from creating the more convenient Narrative.

A decade later, Roosevelt accused Taft of being a traitor to Republican ideals. In return, Taft gave a speech in April 1912 which he claimed that in Teddy the American people were "in danger of a dictator" who would "cling like a leech to the White House and never leave it." Woodrow Wilson used the opportunity to make sure everyone knew that electing him was therefore the only way to save democracy, and Eugene Debs made sure everyone knew that the whole lot of them were just in it for Wall Street. William McKinley, dead for more than a decade, apparently used the opportunity to appear as a ghost to tell John Shrank to shoot Teddy dead. He failed.

A couple decades later, Hoover told us that FDR would destroy the foundations of the American way of life, while FDR told us that he was the only one that could save capitalism from itself. A couple decades after that, LBJ greenlit that 'Daisy Girl' ad to make sure Americans knew that a vote for Goldwater was a vote for global thermonuclear war, a view MLK was happy to co-sign in his assertions that a Goldwater presidency would be "suicidal" not just for America but the world⁴. And all that's *skipping* a certain period between 1861-1865 and just about every period in

⁴ Robert F. Kennedy Jr. [would like you to know at this point](#) that Kamala Harris is also a vote for nuclear war. Whee!

which some trigger-happy arm of the US government decided that it was done tolerating strikes, protests, or demonstrations.

So no, let us not be naive. There is nothing new under the sun. Politicians and the media have been blinding Americans with existential, violent rhetoric and threats since they realized that fear and hatred are pretty powerful forces when it comes to getting people to vote the way you want them to.

Let us also not be naive by pretending that there is no relationship between the purposeful escalation of language and the violent ends it contemplates. The propaganda to which we subject ourselves and our countrymen is infinitely more common and vastly more effective than agitprop from foreign belligerents.

The [origin of these very pages](#) lies in the clear, unmistakable linguistic patterns observable historically in mass media which create the Common Knowledge that the moral threshold for violence has been met. It is a bit harder to know where the threshold between *talking about the necessity of violence* and *actual violence* is for the *public* than it is for a [government hell-bent on engineering support for a military action](#) it knows it will take. OK, it's a lot harder. So no predictions here.

Just a warning.

America is becoming careless with violent and existential language about politics in America. We are doing it a lot. We are accelerating. We are accelerating the most when it comes to the most explicit calls to violent action. Perhaps most concerningly, we are making the language of political violence an endemic feature of our public dialogue rather than a temporary symptom of election cycles.

We are not predicting this; we are observing it. Let's explore together how narratives of political violence have become common knowledge in America.

Sources and Methods

First, in the interest of transparency we will spare a brief word or two here about sources and methods. If you prefer to skip straight to what we found, feel free to scroll to the next section.

As a proxy for the core American presidential election cycle, we examined our news dataset over the period between January 1 and October 15 for each of 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024. We have access to data from 2008, but it is much sparser and materially different in composition (i.e. pre-social media). We also judged that it would add little to our hypothesis relative to beginning in 2012, but we did not test or explore this. The dataset we did select consists of the full text, headline, and metadata associated with more than 10 million articles from 254 US sources⁵. These sources include news publications, opinion journals, high-volume blogs, and other websites which principally cover the United States. The principal vendors for our news dataset are Dow Jones and Lexis Nexis.

We performed a broad semantic search to filter the dataset to a thorough set of articles, blogs, posts, press releases, and other content that relate in some fashion to national elections in the United States. This method is intended to err on the side of including *anything* that might conceivably be related by a reasonable person to elections. This is our filtered dataset.

We then identified 20 linguistic framings we call "archetypes" that reflect both explicit calls to violence and extreme characterizations of candidates and parties that various groups would potentially see as existential in nature. Our team built detailed individual descriptions and example sets of these 20 archetypes, incorporated them into a set of prompts, then integrated those prompts with a set of system prompts and other parameters relating to context and project scope before passing them to the OpenAI GPT 4o-mini model along with the full text of the approximately 1.1 million articles in the filtered dataset described above. We asked 4o-mini to identify regions of text (a parameter we define) with language which

⁵ There is a popular sense that referencing traditional media sources (including blogs, substacks, and the like) without accompanying social media calculations is missing the point, especially over the last 10 years. We understand the point but disagree. Our experience has generally been that scraped social media analysis tends to be unstable, unpredictable, viciously sensitive to assumptions and parameters which ultimately define what's being measured, and biased toward astroturfing and small numbers of viral memes rather than what your typical American voter is exposed to. In our judgment, large-scale published content – and the common knowledge Missionary statements contained within – continue to comprise the tentpoles upon which popular narratives are draped.

matched the prose descriptions and parameters we provided for each of the 20 archetypes, along with a short-form prose summary of the surrounding context of the article. We then passed the “decision” of 4o-mini and the context summary to additional models to be judged against our instructions to filter any additional Type I (i.e. false positive) errors.

Explicit Calls for Violence	Existential Claims (Implicit Calls)		
Civil War is Coming	Candidate is Evil	Candidate is Owned by the Rich	Candidate Will Steal Election
A New Revolution is Needed	Candidate is Demonic	Candidate is Owned by China	Candidate is a Traitor
Armed Americans Must Defend Democracy	Candidate is Beyond Extreme	Candidate is Owned by Russia	Candidate is Anti-Democratic
Imprison Political Opponents	Candidate is Fascist	Candidate is Owned by Globalists	Candidate Winning Would End Democracy
Military Must Intervene in Unrest	Candidate is a Criminal	Candidate is Owned by Deep State	News Media are Traitors

Source: *Epsilon Theory*

The list of archetypes we have identified reflects our team's opinion and judgment. It is by no means objective. You may come to different opinions on the right list. We think it is a good and thorough list⁶. In the analysis to follow, however, we will highlight certain cases where individual archetypes deviate from our more generalized conclusions. You can decide for yourself if you think that changes the conclusion you would draw. We do not distinguish in this analysis *which* party or candidate or media outlet is the target or source of the language in question. We have the data and think that it could be useful for certain purposes. None of which relate to the purpose of this piece. Our aim is to highlight the frequency of the average American's exposure to this kind of language as part of understanding the formation of common knowledge about each archetype, not to validate anyone's narratives about which side is escalating, or which media outlets are the most biased. If you find yourself in utter distress that you cannot discern from the data presented whether there has been a disproportionate rise in media narratives

⁶ One of the main soft spots in the analysis is that list of archetypes *is* probably biased toward narratives of the present. We aren't tracking a "cross of gold" archetype, for example. We did our best to make sure that the universe included similar categories of invective from 2012 that wouldn't necessarily be as relevant today. This point becomes significantly more important if the analysis went much further back, however, as changes in fears and bogeymen would mean that the choice of archetypes being measured would inevitably become the thing being measured.

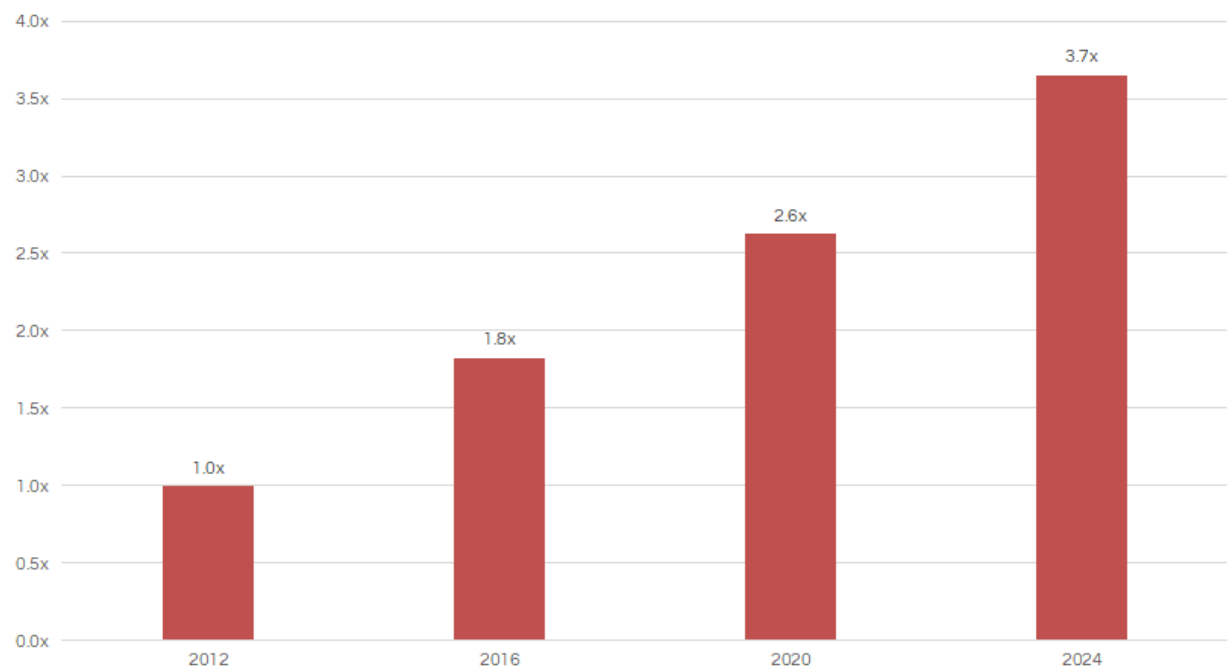
that *your* favored candidate is a tool of the Russian government or the Deep State, we understand. We just don't care (in this case).

Unless otherwise specified, most of the raw calculations presented will be measures of density. In a nutshell, we are looking to identify the share of the text published on any given day which pass our threshold that would align it with one of our archetypes. Because most of us have very little intuition for how much “density” is a lot or a little, in most cases the analysis we present will be relative. That is, we will compare most results to the 2012 period as a baseline. If you see something that says 1.5x, you should take it to mean that the density of language in the archetypes presented is 150% of the level we observed in 2012.

All Extreme Language about Elections has Risen Very Quickly

In qualitative terms, the political world we lived in when Mitt Romney faced off against Barack Obama in 2012 seems almost unrecognizable today. The world inhabited by binders full of women, rooftop animal crates, and then-president Obama laughing at the idea of Russia as a strategic adversary seems like a simpler and gentler one. In quantitative terms, the distinction is even starker. Using the language of the 2012 election cycle as a baseline, the 2024 election cycle is nearly 4 times as dense with language describing candidates in extreme terms, describing the election in existential terms, or explicitly discussing the election in terms of political violence. The density of this language has increased steadily over the course of the last three election cycles

Aggregate Extreme Election Language Density (Indexed to 2012 Election Cycle, All Archetypes)

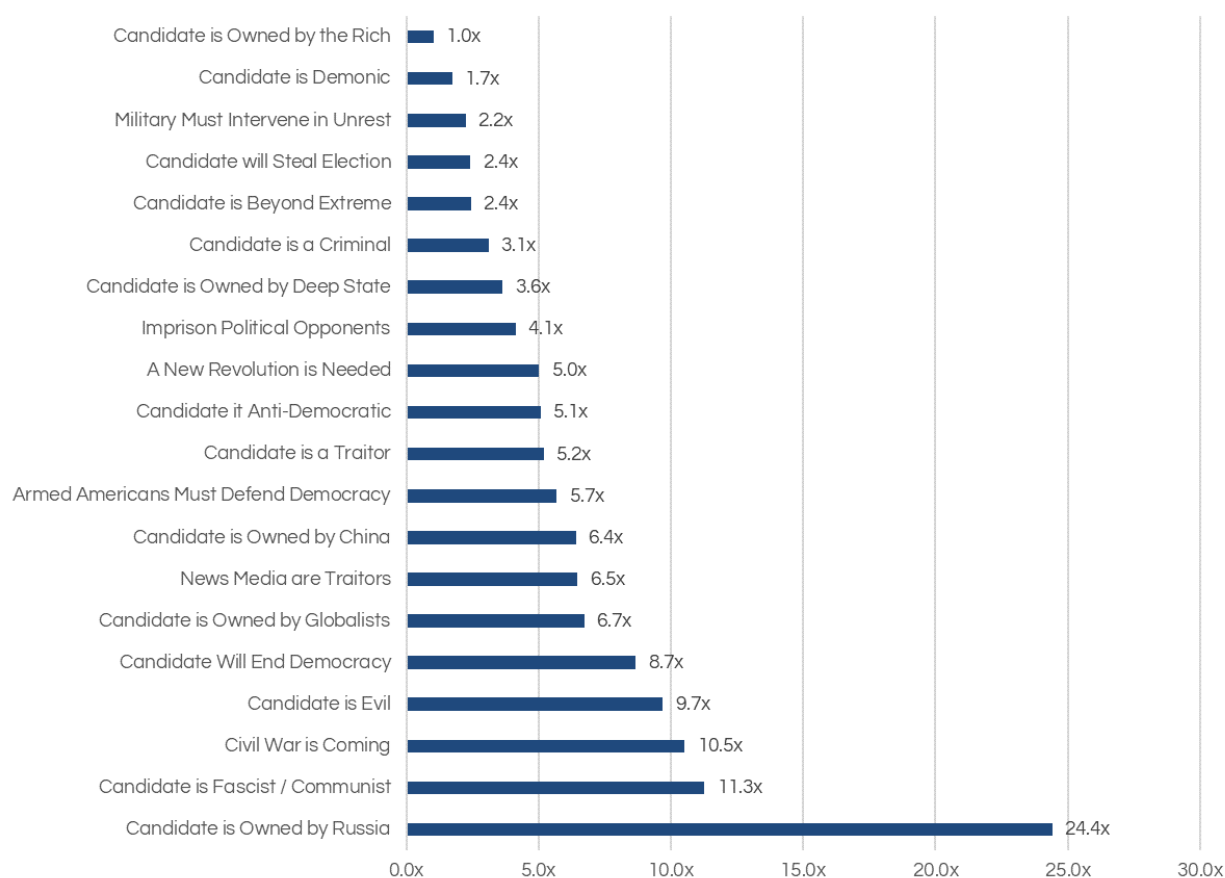


Source: Epsilon Theory

What's more, this rise represents a broad-based increase in frequency and density of this language, not just a narrow spike in a couple kinds of rhetoric. Each of the twenty categories we have identified has increased. In some cases, like the narrative

that a candidate acts in service to Russia, the scale of that increase is probably better thought of as a function of starting from a low base in 2012. If Obama is laughing off the idea of Russia as a strategic adversary to a chorus of chuckles from mass media, implications that a candidate acts in service to them are unlikely to be especially common. In other cases, like assertions relating to the integrity of US democracy, threats of another civil war, or the opposing candidate's "evil" or "traitorous" tendencies, it is probably more appropriate to think of the change as a function of the vast and rapid expansion of a long-standing political narrative that has been with us since Adams and Jefferson were bickering over the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. [We do like to go full circle](#) here in America.

2024 Extreme Election Language Density by Archetype (Indexed to 2012 Election Cycle, All Archetypes)



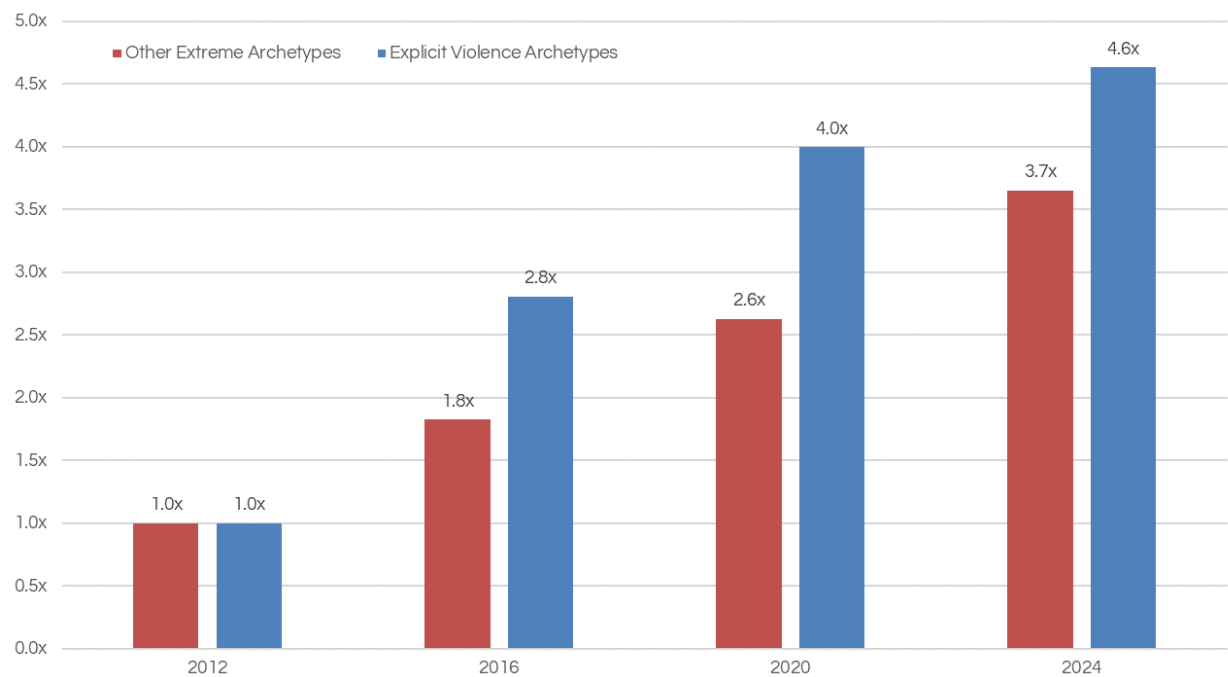
Source: Epsilon Theory

While the density of language in 2024 is higher than 2012 for each archetype, individual archetypes have certainly ebbed and flowed to some extent over the course of the last three election cycles. For example, the pace of “lock her up” rhetoric during the 2016 election cycle was difficult to replicate in 2020, even with the various impeachment proceedings. The 2024 cycle has blown by both. Some archetypes did peak in the 2020 cycle, however. For example, while language describing fears that the other candidate will steal the election remain above our 2012 baseline, they have not been able to replicate the rhetoric of the “Stop the Steal” movement leading up to the 2020 contest. Speaking subjectively, however, I think that many events which would have been framed in terms of a “stolen election” narrative are simply being escalated to even more existential narratives that a candidate is inherently anti-democratic, or that the election of a candidate will *literally be the end of American democracy*.

The Language of Political Violence and Coercion has Risen *Even Faster*

The fastest to rise among the full set of archetypes, however, are not those which simply allude to existential issues that could conceivably be used to escalate or precipitate violent action. The fastest to rise are those which very explicitly suggest violent or coercive action, whether by an armed populace, the military, or police power. Compared with the Romney/Obama cycle, an American consuming a regular diet of the news and blogs served up to them by social media and direct consumption habits in 2024 is reading 4.6 times the amount of language suggesting that it is time for another armed revolution, that a new American civil war is imminent, or that armed Americans may be the only thing between freedom and a future of authoritarian rule under our new Marxist / Fascist overlords.

Aggregate Extreme Election Language Density vs. Explicit Violence (Indexed to 2012 Election Cycle, All Archetypes)



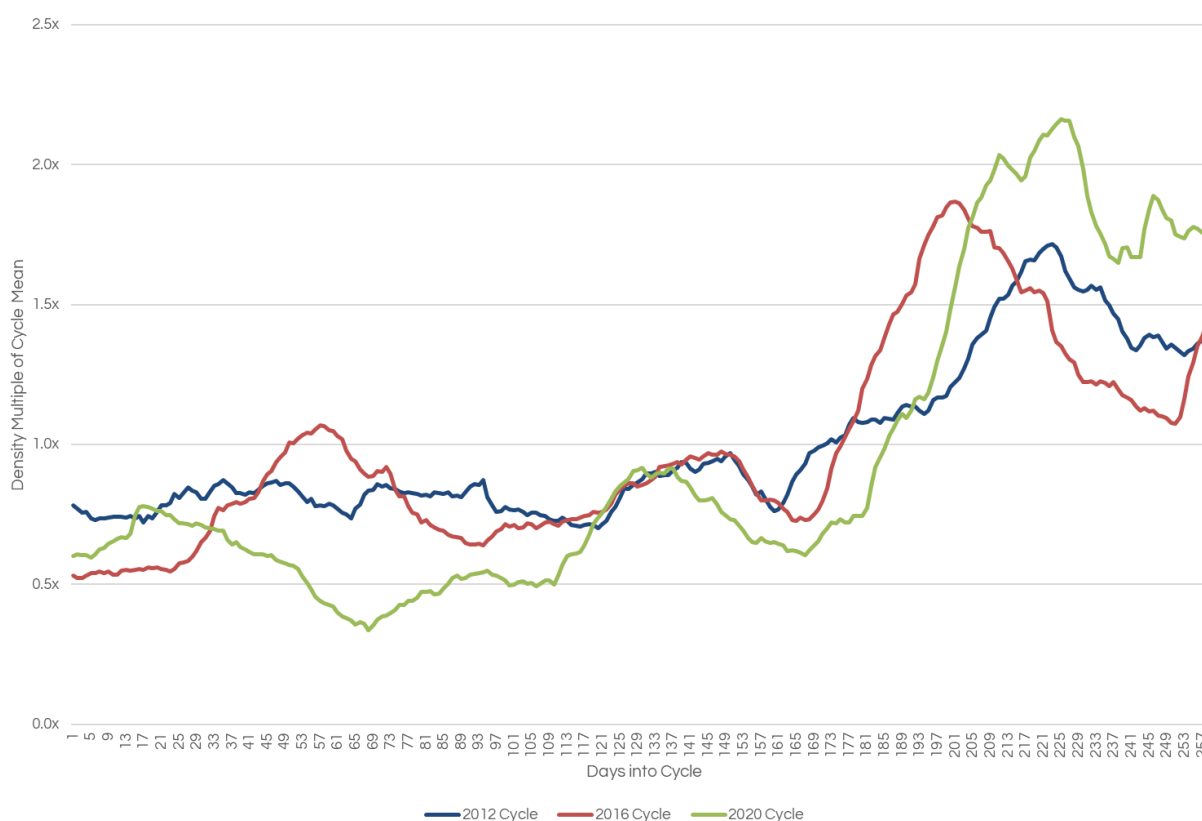
Source: Epsilon Theory

The language of political violence isn't fading post-election like it used to

One of the most significant differences between the prevalence of violent and extreme election rhetoric in 2024 and *all* the other cycles is not its absolute magnitude so much as the energy retained from the prior cycle. Consider the path

that the density of extreme election language took over the last three cycles as presented in the graph below. We show each previous cycle relative to its own full-period mean so that the path of violent rhetoric each takes can be more easily compared without being distorted by the accelerating volume between each cycle. While there are clearly campaign events which produce small spikes in density, the historical pattern is generally consistent: violent and existential rhetoric starts from a low level and accelerates rapidly into the 90-120 day period before the election.

2012/2016/2020 Rolling 30-Day Extreme Election Language Density (Indexed to Each Full Election Cycle, All Archetypes)



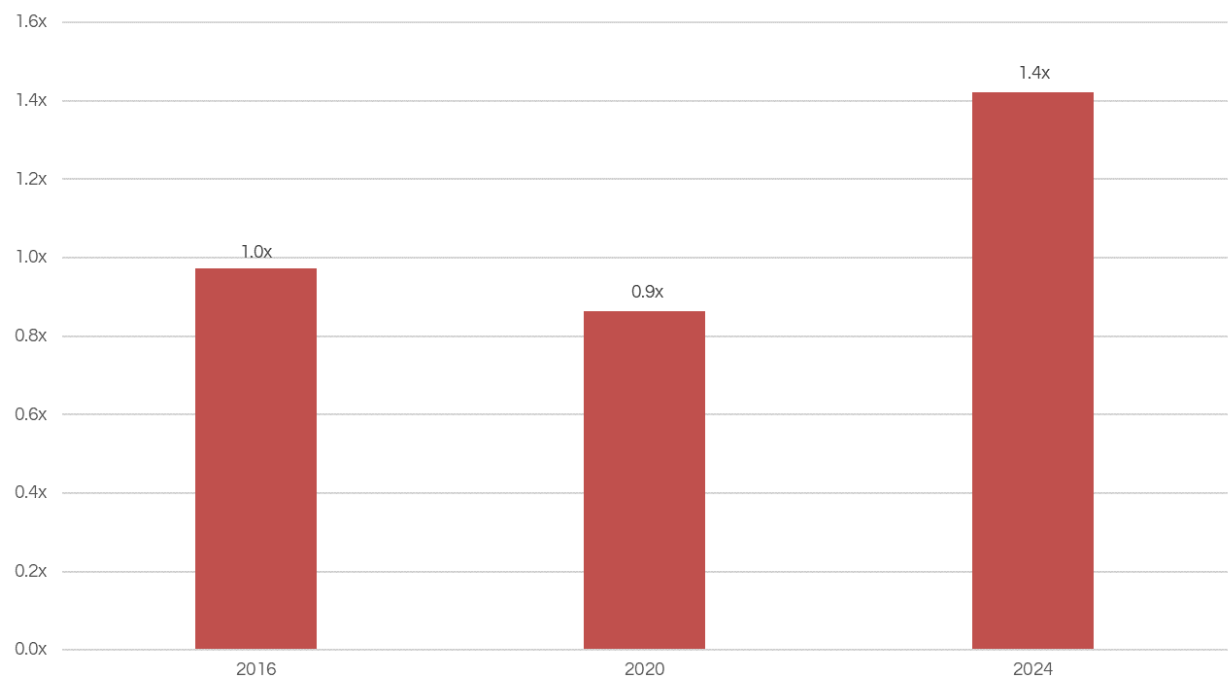
Source: Epsilon Theory

That peak of rhetorical energy is difficult to sustain. After the 2012 and 2016 election cycles concluded, the density of extreme rhetoric faded. By the time the next cycle began, the density of extreme rhetoric had regressed to the *mean* level of the prior cycle, or roughly its mid-cycle level. This is plotted in the chart below – the 2016 cycle started at around 1.0x the mean density of the 2012 cycle, and the 2020 cycle kicked off at around 0.9x the mean density of the 2016 cycle.

That pattern did *not* hold between 2020 and 2024.

Unlike the prior two cycles, we kicked off the 2024 election cycle not at parity with but *40% higher than* the mean density of extreme language of the 2020 cycle. The subsequent pattern is the same – 2024 has begun to spike as we approach the election, too – but the background level of extreme language about elections never really regressed back to where it was. It *retained* much of the energy of the 2020 peak and has built from there. In other words, I think that our results support the findings of a very different sort of analysis published by a group of Penn and Stanford researchers in a paper from just last month – that polarization and animosity since 2020 are showing surprising post-election durability⁷.

January Extreme Election Language Density (Indexed to Full-Period Mean of Previous Election Cycle, All Archetypes)



Source: Epsilon Theory

In some ways, this strikes me as being the most concerning development. We aren't just giving ourselves special license for "hyperbole" and "exaggeration" during election season that we have every intention of ratcheting down once we have

⁷ Fasching, N. et al. (2024). Persistent polarization: The unexpected durability of political animosity around US elections. Science Advances.

staved off the End of the Republic™ once again. We are holding on to that rage, that creeping comfort with talking about violence or conclusions about our neighbors which can only lead to violence.

The language of political violence is an epidemic that has gone endemic.

Resist the Lists

Like any endemic disease, we are getting numb to it. We are *three months* removed from the first nearly successful assassination attempt on Donald Trump, and *one month* removed from a second (thankfully) more amateur attempt. When is the last time you thought about it? When is the last time you talked about it with someone? When is the last time you read about it? Had the smoke even cleared before we went back to claiming that the Other Guy was going to be the end of American democracy? I am afraid that we have so quickly hit numbness to the extremes in language that the only spillover alternatives for anyone truly motivated to be heard above the din are (1) literally making things up and (2) taking action in the real world. I think both are very real risks in the sense that they are already literally happening right just now.

I have made no secret that I think social networks are responsible for exacerbating those risks. No, not in the way that we all know that they do, by making the most negative things go viral and appealing to our worst sensibilities (although yes, that too). I mean that being constantly suffused with powerful symbols, narratives, and patterns which our brains evolved to recognize and incorporate into our thinking has made us more susceptible to this existential way of thinking and speaking and acting ourselves. To paraphrase Coppola, *we are in the jungle. There are too many of us. We have access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little, we have gone insane.*

We are losing our minds.

What this analysis cannot answer is the extent to which what we are seeing is simply the Donald Trump effect and nothing else. Whether you think it is Trump or Trump Derangement Syndrome that should own the responsibility for turning up the temperature, I think we would be fools to say that his presence in our political world has not accompanied these linguistic trends more or less in lockstep. Maybe the 2024 cycle began at a peak not because we are different, but because all the actors were known quantities and all the narratives were already written and ready to unleash upon the world. Maybe when Trump rides into the sunset all of this goes away.

I hope so. But probably not. In the meantime, what do we do? What CAN we do?

Once more, let us not be naive. In the last two weeks before the election, supporters of Harris are not going to stop describing Trump and anyone voting for him as

fascists, Nazis, and *literally Hitler*. It is too in-group reinforcing. It is too effective at producing turnout. Likewise, Elon Musk is not going to stop spamming claims that electing Kamala Harris will ensure "permanent one-party rule" and make this the "last election," and there is nothing any of us can do to keep him, his algorithms, and his legion of glorified satellite speakers from putting this language in front of tens of millions of eyeballs. If every one of us committed to toning down our language, it would do nothing to stop the media onslaught of these common knowledge missionaries.

We can't fight the election spike.

We CAN fight the endemic.

We CAN resist the lists.

It may seem a bit out of the blue, I suppose, but what's the point of telling you something that anyone reading this far who hasn't stormed off in a tribal tizzy already knows? Yes, of course, we can take an extended social media break, touch grass, and try to regain some of our autonomy of mind. Yes, of course, we can and should tell people from our own tribe who insist upon keeping the fire of violent rhetoric alive – whether that's our friends, our families, or those we influence who wanted the same outcome that we did in this election – to knock it off, grow up, and move on. And sure, if you want to boycott a company like iHeartMedia, which will keep happily fanning these flames just to keep their post-bankruptcy, glorified Bob Pittman personal compensation vehicle heads above water, knock your socks off. After all, iHeartMedia employees like Jesse Kelly are out there [publicly calling for the government to find and deport any naturalized citizens and native-born Americans who simply support liberalized immigration policies](#), and iHeartMedia employees like Keith Olbermann are out there [publicly asking the Biden administration to "lock away" Elon Musk in a "military facility" and "seize his facilities."](#)

But you know all that. And maybe those things will help a little. But what keeps an endemic disease of violent rhetoric alive will be the people, institutions, and organizations working now to make **lists**. For every revolution – and make no mistake, whoever wins is going to treat this election like it was a successful revolution – it is lists that keep the revolutionary energy alive. The Bolsheviks had their class enemies and kulak lists, Stalin his enemies of the people, and the NKVD their anti-Soviet elements. The French had their List of Emigrants, the Law of Suspects, and enemies of the revolution. The Chicoms had their Five Black

Categories, the lists of rightists, counter-revolutionaries, and landlords, and struggle committees to enforce them.

These lists are being made today already, crowd-sourced and in the open. Lists of people guilty of wrongthink and wrongvote. Lists of traitors who need to be executed. Lists of journalists who need to be jailed. Lists of “disloyal generals” who need to be court-martialed. Lists of RINOs and DINOs who need to be stripped of office. Lists of neighbors who voted to take away our rights. Lists of citizens who need to be deported or stripped of theirs. Lists of churches, pastors, and public figures who didn’t line up to kiss the ring⁸. Every time someone tries to aggressively conflate “vote for [candidate]” into “a vote for [something horrible]”, that is someone who wants to put you on a list of people now responsible for “[something horrible].”

If you don’t know what to do beyond trying your best to be a decent, full-hearted human in your ordinary life – and that’s the most important thing you can do – do this.

Resist the lists.

⁸ Yes, this is a thing. There is an especially malevolent group called “American Evangelicals” which is not only [assembling a list of pastors and churches guilty of wrongthink and wrongvote](#), but pressuring additional pastors and churches to sign on to publicly out them and denounce their ministries.

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