Rising Threats to Public Officials: A Review of 10 Years of Federal Data

By Pete Simi, Gina Ligon, Seamus Hughes, and Natalie Standridge

A review of federal charges for the past decade highlights that the number of threats to public officials is growing. While 2013-2016 had an average of 38 federal charges per year, that number sharply increased to an average of 62 charges per year between 2017-2022. Across the time series, ideologically motivated threats, on average, accounted for almost half of the cases, and the portion steadily increased year over year. A preliminary review of cases from 2023 and 2024 shows that the number of federal prosecutions is on pace to hit new record highs. The rising threat level may produce significant consequences for the U.S. democratic system of governance.

A California man left a death threat on the voicemail of an Arizona election official. An Indiana man promised to murder any U.S. government official who supports Israel. A Virginia man told a Veterans Affairs employee that he "understood why Timothy McVeigh did what he did." A Washington State man left a voicemail with the U.S. Capitol Police that he wanted to "hunt down Joe Biden."[1] And these were just a few of the examples of the more than 30 individuals federally charged with threatening a public official since the beginning of this year alone.[2]

A substantial number of observers note the growing polarization in the United States.[3] Rising polarization coincides with an increase in observed threats to public officials. This article is based on an ongoing study designed to examine the nature and prevalence of communicated threats to public officials in the United States between 2013 and 2022. A central goal of the present effort is to

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identify key characteristics related to incident, offender, and case outcome variables to better understand the trends in these threats during the past decade, which public sectors are most impacted, and what types of responses might be most appropriate.

According to these data collection efforts, threats against public officials have steadily risen during the last decade. Indeed, in the last six years, the number of individuals who have been arrested at the federal level for making threats has nearly doubled from the previous four years. A close look at the federal data collected shows that this trend is driven, in part, by an increase in ideologically motivated threats that are overwhelmingly of the anti-government and identity-based variety. In short, these actors threaten violence against public officials as part of communicating their grievance regarding political, social, or religious issues.

The article begins by providing some context on the threat landscape. The next section provides a brief methodology to explain how the underlying data for the project was collected and analyzed. The findings section provides a descriptive analysis of the frequency of threats between 2013 and 2022, and reports some key characteristics related to the incidents, perpetrator(s), and case outcomes. The authors conclude by summarizing the findings and discussing implications.

The Multidimensional Threat Landscape

A large existing literature examines methods to assess threats, including operational guidelines and recommendations for managing high-risk situations in different environments such as schools and workplaces.[4] The approach to threat assessment was pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center and various scholars.[5] The threat assessment approach involves investigative strategies designed to guide the collection and analysis of information focused on determining the likelihood a particular threatener will act beyond the threatening communication. One of the most important findings to emerge over the past several decades in threat assessment studies is the distinction between attackers and threateners. As Bryan Vossekuil et al. pointed out back in 1998 in their analysis of completed and attempted assassination, "fewer than a tenth of all 83 attackers and near-attackers communicated a direct threat about their targets either to the target or to a law enforcement agency prior to their attack."[6] In this respect, communicated threats in isolation are a poor predictor about the likelihood a person(s) will attempt to execute their threat.

While threat assessment focuses on determining the likelihood a communicated threat will result in further action on the part of the threatener, this study takes a different approach. The design for this project is not meant to assess the threatener's intent or the likelihood the threat would have been executed had law enforcement not intervened. Instead, this project focuses on the threats themselves as a general type of criminality that warrants

further investigation. Irrespective of whether threats are ever executed, this type of criminality can still have substantial personal and social implications. As such, the current study examines threats targeting a broad range of public officials across multiple public sectors over a 10-year period and includes charges across all 94 U.S. federal judicial districts.

Most previous studies of threat offenders include international as opposed to domestic samples;[7] threats exclusively targeting congressional officials,[8] and judicial officials.[9] Similar to the authors' study, James Silver and Sarah Craun[10] analyzed over 800 federal offenders convicted under a threat-related statute between 2016 and 2021. The offenders in their study, however, included threateners beyond those targeting public officials (e.g., individuals convicted for threatening former romantic partners or employers) and did not focus on describing the nature of the incidents including the grievances and whether any ideological orientation may have motivated the threats.

The Broader Relevance of Threats

Scholars have long acknowledged that violence or the threat of violence is shaped by larger social contexts and can produce challenges to governing systems.[11] In the United States, the domestic threat landscape is dynamic and evolving, marked by targeted violence, which is a vaguely defined umbrella term used to describe various types of violence or threatened violence.[12] Unlike terrorism, targeted violence does not necessarily involve an ideological orientation but does include targets specifically selected such as schools, places of worship, workplaces, and various public locations.[13] Threats directed toward public officials can be considered as a type of potential targeted violence in that the threats may focus on generic targets such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation or more specific representatives of a particular institution such as a congressional official.

Substantial evidence suggests the prevalence of threats to public officials is perceived to be growing and exerting pressure on public officials and systems of governance. For example, according to a 2023 Voting Rights Lab report, election officials are resigning in significant numbers due to harassment and threats, especially in several swing states across the country.[14] In turn, these resignations are straining states' capacity to operate safe and secure elections in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election. Certain states such as Kansas have been especially impacted: A third of that state's election officials have resigned in response to threats and election-related conspiracy theories.[15] Even more troubling, in Arizona, 12 of the state's 15 counties have lost their top election official in the last four years.[16]

Moreover, an April 2023 Brennan Center study found that 75 percent of the public officials surveyed feel threats have increased in recent years, and one-third reported personally experiencing abuse, harassment, or threats related to their role as a public official.[17] Several recent examples provide further evidence about the potential for threats to disrupt democratic processes. In October 2023, several Republican House congressional members who did not support Jim Jordan's bid for the Speaker position received death threats, and in a recent civil trial involving former President Trump, the judge's Principal Law Clerk received on an almost daily basis 20-30 threatening phone calls and 30-50 threatening messages over social media and email.[18] Elected and election officials, however, are not the only type of public servant who are reporting increased threats. Public health officials were especially vulnerable to threats during the COVID-19 crisis[19] but have long been the victim of various threats especially related to reproductive medical care.[20] In 2021, the Department of Justice noted an increase in threats targeting education officials such as school board members, administrators, and faculty and announced that further discussions would occur to explore strategies to address these issues.[21]

Yet, there is a tendency among some observers to focus on threats as a 'nuisance' primarily initiated by individuals 'blowing off steam,' who will likely never act on their threats. The inclination to treat threats as such is reinforced by the fact that only a small percentage of threats manifest into offline violence from a threatener.[22] While it is true most threats will never be executed, the threats themselves—especially in total—represent an important type of action irrespective of the intent or likelihood of attack that can have substantial consequences for the individual targets/victims as well as the system of governance. Understanding the impact of these types of threats is clearer when examining their totality beyond each individual case.

Methodology

To identify cases of threats made against public officials, the researchers used a two-stage process. First, they constructed a case archive that included relevant press releases and other public statements from cases within each of the 94 federal districts. Second, the researchers examined court records using the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system for each case that fit the parameters the authors describe below. These criteria resulted in the identification of over 500 individuals who were charged in federal court in the last 10 years for making threats against public officials.

The inclusion parameters also required that the charges involved communicated a threat such as a phone call or written statement threatening to harm or kill the victim(s) and that the threat was made in the United States between the years 2013-2022.[23] The current study focuses on public officials who represent the following sectors: elected/election, education, health care, and law enforcement/military.[a]

To identify cases, the authors reviewed Department of Justice press releases since 2013 that announced charges of threats to public officials. They supplemented this with an open-source review of news reporting for federal arrests. Using tools such as PACER and commercial court record databases such as Bloomberg Law, the authors reviewed cases related to similar federal charges to others announced by the Justice Department, such as 18 U.S.C. 875 (c) (communicating a threat), and charges brought by prosecutors who tend to specialize in these types of cases. In total, the team

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a   The researchers acknowledge not all possible types of public officials were included; however, they believe this study pertains to one of the largest swaths of public officials as compared to previous studies. Future data collection should consider including an even broader range of public officials such as Internal Revenue Service officials and other types of public servants. The election and elected officials were collapsed for the purpose of clarity in terms of reporting results, although the researchers recognize the fundamental differences between individuals elected to office as compared to individuals employed or who volunteer to help administer elections. The coding system allows the findings to be disaggregated in situations where separate analyses may be helpful. The same reasons guided the decision to collapse the law enforcement and military officials and similarly those categories can also be disaggregated.

reviewed 501 cases, more than 25,000 pages of legal documents, and coded against 55 variables. Whenever possible, the research team augmented the dataset with other findings from organizations such as the National Counterterrorism Center, Princeton's Bridging Divides Initiatives, and statements from public officials such as the Deputy Attorney General and the Director of Intelligence for U.S. Capitol Police.[24]

The team designed a data coding strategy that included the variables constructed across three primary domains: incident, perpetrator(s), and victim(s). Each case was coded to examine the trends and patterns related to threats targeting public officials. A team of researchers reviewed documents using a content analysis methodology.[25] The research design focused on discerning specific characteristics related to each threat identified in open sources. For example, the coding team focused on the location of the threat (both perpetrator and victim(s)); various demographic characteristics related to the perpetrator such as age; gender; political ideology (if any); affiliation with any extremist movement or organization; whether the charges were federal, state, or county level; the specific type of charge; and case outcome.

A total of 55 variables were constructed across these three separate domains, with 21 variables in the event domain, 14 in the perpetrator domain, and 20 in the victim domain. Using historiometry, or the set of empirical techniques used to reliably abstract variables from historical documents, the authors assigned a score for each of the cases in the dataset.[26] Frequencies for each variable item were compared across events, perpetrators, and victims. The analyses also involved qualitative assessments about the nature of the threats in terms of intensity and motive.

Differing from threats of interpersonal violence,[27] ideologically motivated threats are directed at symbolic targets of a particular class of adversary (e.g., the 'deep state,' immigrants) with little to no known relationship between the actor and those threatened. These types of threats can be viewed as efforts by the perpetrators to further political/religious goals meant to disrupt or limit democratic processes.

Given the current study's focus on ideologically motivated threats, it is important to clearly state how the team approached coding this variable. The researchers tried to specifically identify a linkage between the threatener's grievance or reason for expressing the threat and any specific ideology. The researchers recognize that a person may communicate a threat with a clearly articulated grievance (e.g., anger over a parent's medical treatment) that may have little or no connection to a specific ideology. Those cases were coded as "no" ideological motivation.

Aside from examining the grievance, the research team relied on multiple contextual factors to help identify the presence of ideological motivation. First, coding focused on specific types of words used as part of the threat. For example, in cases where the threat specifically included racial/ethnic slurs associated with threatener's grievance, then the coding considered this as potential evidence the threat may be categorized as "racially motivated violent extremism" (RMVE). Second, coding considered the target of the threats as another contextual factor. For example, if the above threat that included racial/ethnic slurs associated with the threatener's grievance also targeted an official whose racial/ethnic identity corresponded with the slurs, then the researchers considered this as another indication in support of categorizing as RMVE. Third, the coding considered whether court documents included information

pertaining to whether the defendant may have been affiliated with any known ideologically oriented movements or groups either online or offline. To be clear, however, if a defendant was described in the court documents as a member of an extremist group, the coders did not consider this by itself as sufficient evidence for determining ideological motivation.

Clearly, determining ideological motivation using any type of data source (e.g., interviews, surveys, archival materials) is difficult and there are many possibilities for introducing both "false positives" and "false negatives." When there was an absence of information in the court documents, the research team relied on a conservative approach defaulting to "no" rather than risk inflating the number of cases coded as being ideologically motivated. For these reasons, the authors' estimate of the percent of threats that were ideologically motivated is likely an undercount.

Findings

Trends in Threats Over Time

To be sure, threats against public officials have a long history in the United States,[28] and thus, the problem is not new. But the data reveals something new emerged during the past decade: a concentration of threats that began to spike in 2017 corresponding with a general increase in polarization following the 2016 presidential election. While 2013-2016 had on average 38 federal charges involving threats to public officials per year, that average sharply increased during the period of 2017-2022, with the average number of federal charges increasing to 62 per year. It seems the clamor of threats to public officials has grown louder since 2017, with gradual, steady increases.
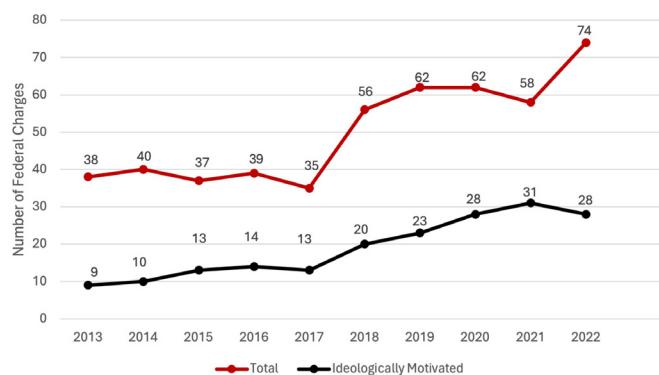

Figure 1: The number of federal charges per year between 2013-2022 for cases that involve threats against public officials Total N=501 (2013-22)[b]

Incident Level

In terms of the type of public officials targeted with threats of violence, law enforcement/military (43 percent of threat targets) and elected/election officials (41 percent of threat targets) were by far the most common. The law enforcement/military category included a range of officials such as local police officers, federal

b   Five hundred and one represents the number of cases as opposed to the number of individual defendants or threats. In terms of the latter, there are far more than 501 threats as some cases involved literally hundreds of threats. In terms of the former, some individuals have been charged on multiple occasions and other cases may include multiple defendants.

agents, individuals working at military institutions in the United States, district attorneys, and all levels of judges. The latter were coded as law enforcement, in part, because of the judicial branch's relationship to enforcing the law and because judicial officials are sometimes elected and sometimes appointed.[c]

Threateners employed a variety of strategies to communicate their messages. The most common, however, was clearly the telephone (31 percent); followed by threats that involved multiple types of communication (18 percent). Finally, 17 percent of the threats relied exclusively on social media. As expected, threats communicated with social media became more common over the period reflecting the growing salience of these platforms within society.

Table 1: Incident characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Method of Communicating Threat	
Telephone	31
Multiple	18
Social media	17
Handwritten/Typed	17
Other or Missing	17
Ideological Motivation	
Not Ideologically Motivated	55
Ideologically Motivated	45
Type of Public Official	
Law Enforcement & Military	42
Election/Elected	42
Education	14
Healthcare	9
Specificity of Threat	
Specific Individual	47
Generic Target	30
Both	23

For the majority of threats, the coding was able to discern a grievance that seemed to animate the communicated threat although the clarity of the grievances varied. The types of grievances also varied with a large portion involving political and social issues (see ideological orientation section below) and others involving interpersonal issues such as anger related to a judicial ruling associated with the threatener's court proceedings. Three-quarters of the cases had at least one grievance identified (76 percent) while in the remaining cases, a grievance could not be discerned. Given the nature of historiometric coding—that is, only making decisions about the presence of a construct when multiple trained raters independently identify it—it is likely that the 24 percent of cases where no grievance was identified may have been an artifact of the use of court documents versus the use of a primary method of

data collection such as direct observation or interviews. As such, the absence of information in some court documents likely means a portion of the cases without identifiable grievances were false negatives.

Ideological Orientations and Overlap with Violent Extremism
A substantial focus of this project has been determining the proportion of threats to public officials that involve an ideological motivation. Of the federal threat cases that fit the study's parameters, nearly half expressed ideological grievances: 45 percent had evidence of an ideological motivation identified in federal court documents describing the event and offender. The proportion of ideologically motivated cases steadily increased during this time from a low of 24 percent in 2013 to a high of 58 percent in 2021. The proportion of ideologically motivated cases remained elevated in 2022 at 38 percent. It is possible that a larger proportion of the cases involved ideological motivation as the authors' efforts to determine motivation were constrained by the information available in the court documents.

Of those offenders who displayed an ideological orientation, the majority were anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE) or racially motivated violent extremists (RMVE) in nature. Of the total count of ideologically motivated threats, 43 percent were motivated by AGAAVE ideology. For example, in 2016, a Huntington, Maryland, resident threatened to kill President Obama and multiple members of Congress including Senators John McCain, Mitch McConnell, Hillary Clinton, and Orrin Hatch because of "government corruption out of control" and what the perpetrator described as "treason against America" by officials who "sold out America."[29]

Moreover, a portion of the threats were motivated by both AGAAVE and RMVE. Related to what other scholars have observed regarding composite violent extremism,[30] 23 percent of the ideologically motivated threats analyzed involved both AGAAVE and RMVE extremism. For example, on April 16, 2019, a Tamarac, Florida, resident communicated a threat by telephone targeting Representatives Eric Swalwell, Cory Booker, and Rashida Tlaib, expressing anti-Black and Islamophobic racism along with anti-government sentiments. The perpetrator also claimed the government was planning a gun confiscation while using racist and xenophobic language to describe certain groups of people.[31] This particular example and the overlap between racially motivated and anti-government sentiments more broadly reflects the long-standing co-mingling of anti-government and white supremacist extremism as illustrated by the founding role white supremacists played in the late 1960s with the emergence of the anti-government Posse Comitatus Movement (which argued that any authority beyond the local sheriff is illegitimate). The Posse Comitatus Movement had spillover effects[32] that influenced both the emergence of the Sovereign Citizen and Militia Movements during the 1990s and more recently.[33] The intertwined ideological and organizational histories of white supremacist and anti-government extremism renders distinctions among types of threats difficult and sometimes misleading.

Finally, racially motivated white supremacists have been designated as the most persistent and lethal ideological extremist threat in the United States, and 19 percent of the ideologically motivated threats to public officials were solely classified as RMVE.[34] While the authors did identify salafi jihadi orientations

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c   The majority of threats directed to election/elected officials involved elected officials while the majority of threats directed to law enforcement/military involved law enforcement.
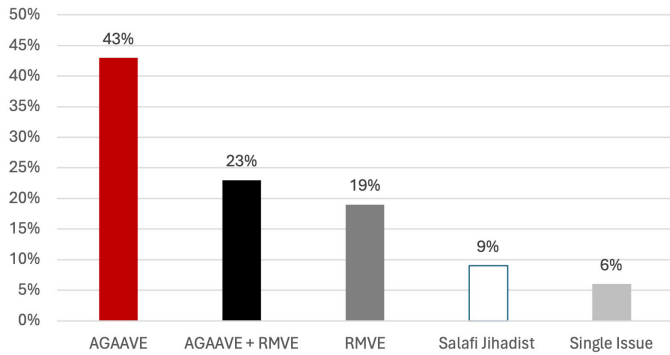
Figure 2: Ideological Motivation pertaining to federal charges for threats against public officials between 2013 and 2022 for cases in which the ideological motivation can be deduced

and issue-specific (e.g., animal rights and environmental-related) grievances in the cases, those were clearly much smaller in number, representing six percent and nine percent of the ideologically motivated threat cases, respectively.

Perpetrator Characteristics
In terms of offender characteristics, several standard types of demographic characteristics were examined such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age. Consistent with other crime types (e.g., interpersonal violence, gang violence), most offenders were male (93 percent). The findings regarding race and ethnicity represented greater variability than gender. Slightly more than half (59 percent) of the offenders were White with Black offenders representing 13 percent of those charged. Asian offenders constituted about two percent of those charged while American Indian represented one percent of those charged. Information for the remaining 25 percent of cases was not available.

Table 2: Perpetrator characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Gender	
Male	93
Female	7
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	54
African American	13
Asian American	2
Other or Missing	31
Criminal History	
Some Evidence	69
No Evidence or Missing	31
History of Mental Health Issues	
Documented Diagnosis	33
Some Indication	10
No Evidence or Missing	57

Perhaps most interesting, the age of offenders was heavily skewed toward the middle-aged (43 percent of the offenders were over the age of 38) while another 33 percent of the offenders were between the ages of 27 and 38. In short, more than three-quarters of the offenders were aged 27 or older. The finding in this area contrasts sharply with the age-crime curve, one of the longest standing criminological findings, that consistently shows the majority of crimes are committed by young males between the ages of 16 and 25.[35] The elevated age among offenders who threaten public officials, however, is consistent with previous research published in 2013 by Jeffrey Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Joshua Freilich[36] who found that violent, lone, politically motivated actors were also older, significantly more likely to be single (including separated or divorced), more likely to have a prior military background, more suicidal, and more likely to target multiple victims as compared to violent extremists with strong network ties.

Criminal history is one of the widely used variables in the study of criminal behavior. A long history of past studies finds it is one of the most predictive characteristics of future offending.[37] The perpetrators in the authors' study were rarely first-time offenders as 69 percent were clearly identified in the court documents as possessing a criminal history (defined as one or more previous arrest and/or conviction). Another four percent may have also possessed a criminal history but the court documents did not provide definitive information in those cases. This finding is consistent with the recent study by James Silver and Sarah Craun who also found that 78.5 percent of their population of threateners charged in the federal system had a criminal history.[38]

To further analyze characteristics related to the offender, the authors turned to mental health history. The study focused on instances where the court documents indicated the defendant had previously been diagnosed with a mental health issue by a medical physician. A portion of individuals in the United Sates who experience mental health issues are never diagnosed by a physician, so this method likely provides an undercount. The findings indicate slightly more than one-third of the defendants had previously been diagnosed with a mental health issue (33 percent) while another 10 percent included "some indications," which involved third-party references to a history of mental health issues such as relatives who reported observing chronic depression.

Outcome Characteristics
The statute 18 USC 875(c), interstate communication of a threat, is one of the most used to prosecute threats to public officials, although the authors have found more than two dozen statutes utilized including cyberstalking and influencing a federal official by threat. The type of charge has ramifications for the sentencing length. Similar to most federal cases,[39] the Justice Department has secured convictions in the vast majority of the threat prosecutions, with nearly 80 percent of federal cases ending with a guilty outcome be it plea or at trial. While this conviction rate may seem impressive from an outsider's perspective, it does represent a significantly lower rate when compared to all federal cases. Indeed, more than twenty percent of threat cases resulted in either a dismissal or an acquittal. The range of sentencing varies greatly from more than 50 individuals receiving no additional prison time to others getting multiple years. The median sentencing length is 24 months.

However, the most interesting aspect of the data may lie in taking a bird's eye review of the findings. The findings underscore a long-held truism related to the federal justice system: namely, the prosecution of an individual case varies substantially depending on which U.S. Attorney's Office has jurisdiction. This broad discretion includes decisions about filing charges and/or pushing the envelope by requesting longer sentences than other districts. For example, nearly half the threat cases in two court districts were dismissed

at the request of the prosecutors after the defendant agreed to a series of pre-conviction diversion programs. Conversely, the U.S. Attorney's Office in three other federal districts secured a 100 percent conviction rate for threats.

The data points to either the importance of an individualized approach to each federal case, or perhaps, a lack of uniform standards and diversion programs nationwide.

Table 3: Outcome characteristics

Descriptive Statistics – (N = 501)

Item	%
Charge Outcome	
Convictions	79
Dismissals, acquittals, etc.	21

Conclusion

Overall, threats to public officials reveal several realities about America today. First, threats may represent a swelling sentiment of Americans' tolerance for violence.[40] Irrespective of any specific offender's intent, threats to public officials in total can instill fear and disrupt democratic systems of governance. As such, these threats coalesce to form a culture that helps normalize their use to express certain ideas and emotions. In a recent interview in *CTC Sentinel*, Ravi Satkalmi, the director of intelligence for the U.S. Capitol Police, noted that "the general acceptance of violent rhetoric and violence as a tool is at a higher level now, and so it's hard to pick out when something becomes a threat." Satkalmi went on to state that "a lot of the stuff you're seeing—particularly violent rhetoric—has almost been normalized in a way that makes it unexceptional."[41]

Second, the findings illustrate the fractured nature of the extremist threat facing civic leaders in the United States. While anti-government and white supremacy racially motivated violent extremism top motivation categories (see figure 2), the types of targets are varied among public servants in law enforcement, military, education, health care, and elections. Modes of threats also come from a variety of sources, such as telephone, social media, email, and even handwritten notes, indicating that there is no one method to deter these threats as they are varied in target and tactic. It stands to reason that as new communication modes come online (e.g., particularly those identified via artificial intelligence tools), so too may new methods for waging threats to intimidate and coerce symbols of government, health care, and democracy.[d]

Several characteristics associated with threats to public servants point to novel terrorism dimensions of the tactic, particularly regarding ideologically motivated threats. The relatively low cost of communicating threats in terms of financial and human resources distinguishes this tactic from types of terrorism that may require extensive resources and specialized skills, such as explosives or other weapons training. At the same time, communicating threats also represents relatively low risk in terms of physical harm to the

perpetrator and likelihood of apprehension as compared to terror tactics that require the perpetrator to sacrifice their own life or risk serious injury. The ease of communicating threats with relative anonymity means the likelihood of apprehension is reduced, and even when convicted on federal charges, threats often produce sentence lengths between 24-36 months with early release common. Threats to public officials also benefit from the ambiguity regarding when a threat becomes criminal, another novel characteristic that distinguishes this tactic from many other terror tactics. The lack of physical acumen required to communicate threats means they are not limited to a "young person's game," a characteristic borne out in the relatively wide age distribution found among the perpetrators in these cases.

Threats do not need to be executed beyond communication for them to be effective agents for instilling fear among victims and, most notably, disrupting democratic processes. Threats to public officials are currently generating substantial damage related to U.S. governance, including discouraging individuals from running for public office.[42]

If threats to public officials are indeed a new class of indicators about some subset of Americans' tolerance for violence, it follows that the examination of the nature of such threats might inform counterterrorism policies and analysis. Both prevention and preparedness require comprehensive understanding to optimize effective use of resources and help inform appropriate policy development. A better understanding of which public sectors face the most consistent and serious communicated threats may be one indicator of the rising tolerance for violence against such sectors, informing recommendations for target hardening and other deterrence-based strategies to enhance personal and organizational security.

Various obstacles hinder formulating an effective response to threatening public officials. For instance, there may be confusion about the line between protected speech and criminal threats. In fact, this line can be quite blurry; certain threats directed to public officials may not constitute violations of existing criminal statutes. For threats that violate one or more criminal statutes, apprehension may be difficult as a wide range of digital technology offers anonymity while older modes of communication, such as mail and telephone, also offer perpetrators easy access to officials in a relatively anonymous fashion.

If the decade of threats examined in this study is any indication, disproportionate threats to election and law enforcement sectors may indicate a growing sentiment of discontent. The current scope of the threat environment makes it difficult to determine which threats will remain—and which portend a greater risk for offline violence. What is clear is that ideologically motivated threats against public officials during the period reviewed consistently increased from one-quarter to 48 percent of all cases. Without a concerted intervention by policymakers, law enforcement, and the public, the damage to governing systems will likely only increase in the foreseeable future. Indeed, a preliminary review of 2023 cases shows at least 75 individuals were arrested for threats to public officials. In the first three months of 2024, more than 30 individuals were subject to federal prosecution for similar acts, on pace to far eclipse the 2023 already 10-year record high.

Those who perpetrate threats to public officials do not need expansive resources, offline connections with like-minded extremists, or formal membership in extremist organizations. In fact, many have none of those features. They can advance their

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d   In the January 2024 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, Gabriel Weimann, Alexander Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz describe the potential malign uses of AI such as ChatGPT to enhance their operations and communications. Once such use could be the concerted and targeted campaign of threats. Gabriel Weimann, Alexander T. Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinin, Gal Rapaport, and David Diaz, "Generating Terror: The Risks of Generative AI Exploitation," *CTC Sentinel* 17:1 (2024).

aims by doxing[e] their victims, targeting their loved ones, and/or

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insinuating that possible violence will be ever-present at some future date. The cacophony of threats observed may be enough to weaken institutions, normalize societal violence, and degrade democracy.[43]   CTC

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