



FROM WORDS TO VIOLENCE: COUNTERING EXTREMIST RHETORIC IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Across democratic societies worldwide, extremist rhetoric has migrated from the political margins into mainstream institutional discourse, threatening the foundations of democratic governance. This phenomenon transcends national boundaries, manifesting in contexts from Hungary's authoritarian populism to Brazil's polarised political landscape, yet recent events in the United States provide a particularly stark illustration of how quickly democratic norms can erode. This policy brief examines how sophisticated rhetorical strategies—combining overt divisive messaging with coded extremist language—operate across multiple communication levels to legitimise violence and undermine democratic institutions. Drawing on recent research in political psychology, comparative analysis of global democratic backsliding, and evidence from successful counter-messaging initiatives, it proposes a comprehensive framework for protecting democratic discourse. Traditional responses such as fact-checking and moral condemnation have proven inadequate against sophisticated extremist communication strategies that exploit emotional and identity-based appeals. Success requires coordinated international action across civil society organisations, educational institutions, technology companies, government agencies, and the business community.

The global crisis of democratic discourse

Democratic societies worldwide face an unprecedented challenge: the systematic infiltration of extremist rhetoric into mainstream political discourse. From Viktor Orbán's Hungary to Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, from Narendra Modi's India to Donald Trump's United States, political leaders have increasingly employed sophisticated rhetorical strategies that combine overt divisive messaging with coded extremist language to advance authoritarian agendas whilst maintaining democratic legitimacy. [1]

This global pattern reveals common techniques that transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. Political figures systematically employ binary framing that presents complex policy disagreements as existential struggles between good and evil. They target democratic institutions themselves—judiciary, media, civil service, academia—as enemies of 'the people'. Most insidiously, they develop parallel communication systems that allow them to signal support for extremist positions through coded language whilst maintaining plausible deniability to mainstream audiences.

Recent events in the United States provide a particularly revealing case study of how quickly these dynamics can escalate. The assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk on 10 September 2025 and the official responses that followed demonstrate how extremist communication strategies operate at the highest levels of government, where institutional authority amplifies divisive messages and legitimises approaches to political conflict that are fundamentally incompatible with democratic governance. [2]

[1] Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. Crown.

[2] Gellman, B. (2022). *The Big Lie: Election Chaos, Political Opportunism, and the State of American Politics After 2020*. Penguin Press.

White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller's response exemplifies the most direct form of this rhetorical strategy. Posted on social media platforms on 11 September 2025, Miller's statement—attacking Democrats and liberals for what he characterized as their ideological responsibility for Kirk's assassination—demonstrates the binary framing and institutional targeting that characterise extremist communication globally:

There is an ideology that has steadily been growing in this country which hates everything that is good, righteous and beautiful and celebrates everything that is warped, twisted and depraved... Its adherents organise constantly to tear down and destroy every mark of grace and beauty while lifting up everything monstrous and foul. It is an ideology that leads, always, inevitably and wilfully, to violence... We see the workings of this ideology in every posting online cheering the evil assassination... Postings from those in positions of institutional authority—educators, healthcare workers, therapists, government employees—revelling in the vile and the sinister with the most chilling glee. [3]

This statement reveals the sophisticated architecture of contemporary extremist communication. Political opponents are systematically dehumanised as entities driven by destructive impulses, language that strips them of moral standing and makes violence against them appear justified. Most troubling is the systematic targeting of democratic institutions themselves—educators, healthcare workers, civil servants—suggesting that core governmental and social structures have been compromised by malevolent forces.

Coded extremism and parallel communication systems

Beyond overt divisive messaging lies an even more insidious challenge: the development of coded communication systems that allow political figures to signal alignment with extremist movements whilst maintaining mainstream credibility. This phenomenon, which scholars term 'dog whistle politics', operates through cultural references and symbolic messaging that appear innocuous to general audiences whilst carrying specific ideological weight within extremist circles.[4]

The appropriation of cultural symbols by extremist movements follows well-established historical patterns visible across multiple contexts. The Nazi regime's systematic use of Germanic and Norse imagery established templates that contemporary movements continue to follow worldwide. In Scandinavia, organisations like 'Soldiers of Odin' explicitly invoke Norse mythology. In Eastern Europe, extremist groups appropriate Slavic symbols. In South Asia, Hindu nationalist movements repurpose religious imagery for political exclusion.[5]

FBI Director Kash Patel's response to Kirk's assassination demonstrates how this coded communication operates within official government channels. Speaking at a press conference, Patel declared: "To my friend Charlie Kirk, rest now, brother. We have the watch, and I'll see you in Valhalla." [6] To casual observers, this appears as a cultural reference expressing respect for the deceased. Yet within far-right circles that have systematically appropriated Norse mythology, references to 'Valhalla' carry specific ideological weight, glorifying death in battle and framing violence in heroic terms.

This creates what extremist movements call 'warrior culture'—a romanticised view of violence that frames political opponents as existential enemies requiring elimination rather than fellow citizens with different policy preferences. When such language enters official government communications, it represents a fundamental breach of democratic norms whilst helping to mainstream previously fringe ideologies.

[3] Miller, S. [@stephenmiller]. (2025, September 11). [Tweet content]. Twitter.

[4] Haney-López, I. (2014). *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. Oxford University Press.

[5] Eco, U. (1995). *Ur-fascism*. The New York Review of Books.

[6] Patel, K. (2025, September 11). Press Conference. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

President Trump's response demonstrates yet another dimension of this sophisticated communication strategy. Official statements calling for unity and non-violence were quickly undermined by subsequent remarks about "radical left lunatics" and declarations that "we have to beat the hell out of radical left lunatics."⁷ This mixture of formal restraint wrapped around inflammatory language creates ambiguity where supporters may hear licence for confrontation whilst leaders maintain plausible deniability.

Digital amplification and global resonance

The consequences of extremist rhetoric extend far beyond domestic political concerns through digital networks that transmit these messages across borders with unprecedented speed and reach. Contemporary examples illustrate this global resonance. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's rhetoric about 'Christian Europe' under siege has been adapted by far-right movements across the continent. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's attacks on electoral integrity provided templates for similar claims in multiple democracies. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist messaging has influenced diaspora communities worldwide. [8]

Digital platforms amplify these effects through algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement over accuracy, creating echo chambers where extremist narratives gain credibility through repetition. The authority of office provides additional amplification, as official statements receive media coverage and social media engagement that grassroots extremist movements cannot achieve independently.

Research from the Reuters Institute demonstrates that misinformation and extremist content spread six times faster than accurate information on social media platforms, whilst coded extremist messaging often evades content moderation systems designed to identify overt hate speech. [9] This creates conditions where democratic discourse becomes impossible because citizens cannot engage in meaningful debate when the terms of discussion are deliberately obscured through coded language and symbolic messaging.

Evidence-based counter-strategies: Lessons from global experience

Traditional responses to extremist rhetoric have proven inadequate across multiple democratic contexts. Fact-checking initiatives, whilst important, fail to address the underlying psychological and social dynamics that make extremist messaging effective. Research in political psychology demonstrates that people's political attitudes are shaped more by emotional and social factors than by rational argument. [10]

Recent empirical research offers more promising approaches. A comprehensive meta-analysis of over 250 interventions designed to reduce political polarisation, conducted by researchers at the University of Rochester, found that the most effective strategies focus on correcting misperceptions about opposing groups and highlighting areas of common ground rather than engaging in direct confrontation with extremist narratives. [11]

[7] Trump, D. J. (2025, September 12). [Rally speech].

[8] Reporters Without Borders. (2024). 2024 World Press Freedom Index. <https://rsf.org/en/index>

[9] Fletcher, R., et al. (2021). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

[10] Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*. Pantheon Books.

[11] Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: What works? A review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 339-367.

International experience reinforces these research findings whilst providing practical models for implementation. In Colombia, peace-building initiatives that brought together former combatants and victims for collaborative community projects proved more effective at reducing political violence than purely rhetorical peace campaigns. In Indonesia, interfaith dialogue programmes that focused on shared local concerns rather than theological differences successfully countered religious extremism. In Kenya, cross-ethnic business partnerships reduced tribal tensions more effectively than top-down reconciliation efforts. [12]

Harvard University research on cognitive dissonance demonstrates that people's attitudes often change to align with their actions, suggesting that encouraging cross-party cooperation on concrete issues can gradually reduce polarisation by shifting attitudes through action rather than argument. [13] When citizens work together across political divides on practical tasks, their attitudes shift towards empathy and compromise in ways that purely rhetorical interventions cannot achieve.

Policy recommendations

Protecting democracy from extremist rhetoric requires coordinated action across multiple sectors. While these recommendations draw from global experience and research, they are designed to be adapted to local political, cultural, and institutional contexts. The following recommendations provide a clear pathway for immediate action and longer-term reform that can be implemented across different democratic systems worldwide.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Counter Extremist Messaging

- Establish rapid-response networks within civil society organizations to counter extremist narratives within 24 hours of emergence.
- Create comprehensive media literacy programs that teach citizens to recognize coded extremist language and appropriated cultural symbols.
- Support local journalism through emergency funding, subscription drives, and public advocacy campaigns.

Strengthen Democratic Culture

- Launch cross-community dialogue initiatives that bring together people from different political backgrounds around shared local concerns.
- Focus on concrete collaborative projects that create opportunities for positive interaction across political divides.
- Promote inclusive patriotism through public art projects and community storytelling that celebrates democratic diversity.

Protect Democratic Institutions

- Strengthen protections for whistleblowers and civil servants who speak out against abuses of power.
- Support and elect pro-democracy candidates at subnational and local levels.
- Provide legal support to civil servants targeted for political reasons

[12] Varshney, A. (2002). *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Yale University Press.

[13] Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

LONGER-TERM REFORMS

Reform Information Systems

- Implement algorithmic reforms that prioritize content promoting constructive dialogue over material generating strong emotional reactions.
- Establish a publicly funded, independently administered media fund for public interest journalism.
- Advocate for greater transparency in how social media algorithms amplify or suppress content.

Embed Democratic Norms

- Establish comprehensive standards for official government communication that prohibit coded extremist language and appropriated cultural symbols.
- Integrate media literacy into school curricula from primary through university levels.
- Create national service programs that bring together young people from different backgrounds.

Strengthen International Cooperation

- Support international cooperation to counter the global spread of extremist rhetoric.
- Share best practices for maintaining democratic discourse across borders.
- Coordinate responses to transnational threats through diplomatic initiatives and academic exchange programs.

Implementation

Success requires sustained commitment across multiple sectors. Civil society organizations, educational institutions, technology companies, government agencies, and the business community must work together. The immediate actions can begin now without waiting for policy changes, while longer-term reforms require coordinated advocacy and political will.

These recommendations should be adapted to fit local political systems, cultural contexts, and institutional frameworks. What works in federal systems may need modification for unitary states, and approaches effective in established democracies may require different implementation strategies in transitional or fragile democratic contexts.

The alternative—continued escalation towards political violence and democratic breakdown—makes this effort essential for democratic survival.



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