

NINA MOINI: In the aftermath of the shootings, we spoke to several experts who called it part of the rise in political violence they've been observing for some time across the country. We now welcome back to the show Jillian Peterson, professor at Hamline University and head of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center. Thanks for being here, Jillian.

**JILLIAN
PETERSON:** Thanks. Happy to be here.

NINA MOINI: Also happy to have Larry Jacobs back with us, political science professor at the University of Minnesota. Thanks for coming back on the show, as well, Larry.

LARRY JACOBS: Always good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: Jillian, I'd love to start with you. Your work involves tracking data on political violence. Can you start with what you're noticing, what I mentioned there in the introduction? How bad is this problem?

**JILLIAN
PETERSON:** Political violence is one of those things that it's difficult to define exactly what we're talking about. So what we track is either assassinations or attempted assassinations of people who hold political office or who are attempting to hold political office-- so a pretty narrow definition. And by using that definition, the past two years have been the worst period since we've started tracking the data.

And it's not like this is happening every day. It's still relatively rare. But we are seeing this uptick. So we do seem to be experiencing a surge of political violence, different than what we've seen in the past few decades.

NINA MOINI: I want to dive a little bit deeper on that. Because it's very interesting, Jillian, because you also think about things like threatening letters that people may receive or different types of acts that some people would think, just speaking to one another, that those acts are, in a way, violent. But it's important to note that you're tracking specifically incidents related to what would be called assassinations or attempted assassinations. But overall, the environment also seems to be worse. Are you following that in any way?

**JILLIAN
PETERSON:** Somewhat. At the Research Center, we really focus on serious attempts of violence, mass shootings, public forms of violence. What we've seen is this uptick in targeted assassinations. At the same time, we're actually seeing things like mass shootings going down. There seems to be a shift where people are trying to similarly get out their message, similarly make headlines, force people to see them and react to what they think. But instead of killing as many people as possible, they're focused on targeting one high-profile person.

NINA MOINI: And the data you're tracking, I see here, dates back to the '50s-- so plenty of difficult points in history during then and since, right?

**JILLIAN
PETERSON:** Exactly. Yes.

NINA MOINI: So Larry, how would you explain why we are seeing more instances of this type of violence against public officials?

LARRY JACOBS: I think there's a routinization of violence. Part of it is the intense partisan polarization, which has shifted from, I disagree with you on a policy issue, to, you're my enemy. You are vermin.

And what this is doing is it's heightening the sense of a threat. It's making what would ordinarily be a discussion of political campaign or policy debate into a defense against evil. And the rival becomes dehumanized. So this is, I think, a very powerful dumbing down but also really just accelerating the environment in which people are now experiencing politics. Social media, of course, is another big factor in all this.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Sometimes you wonder if social media is heightening our senses around this, or we're just having more exposure to it. Although, it seems like, from what you all are saying, the numbers are also backing up the trends that people are seeing. Larry, we had Attorney General Ellison on the show the other day. And he was holding a public meeting that people have to RSVP to figure out the location.

And he said, we're just living in a time where it's really, really hard to engage with people in this type of landscape. I don't think, when I was first reporting in the Twin Cities almost 15 years ago now, that you would have never thought that you wouldn't know where a location was for a public meeting before RSVPing. So I just use that as an example of this environment. And I wonder what you think about that and how that impacts people who may be considering running for office and who ends up running?

LARRY JACOBS: Oh, it's created a real deterrent for staying in office or running. We've seen a number of retirements at the Capitol. I think some of them are tied to fear about violence against oneself or family.

And we've seen, also, at the Capitol some fairly significant bipartisan efforts that I think register this threat as it exists and the attempted or actual assassinations that Jillian's talking about. Security at the Capitol has now been significantly increased. So I think this is just registering, this environment of deep insecurity and fear.

NINA MOINI: This really did hit home for so many people in this tragic situation that happened and many other tragedies happening every day, Jillian. I know you're doing work with the Governor's Safety Council, which was created following this event and the Annunciation Church shooting. Can you share more about the purpose of the Council? And then, who's on it?

JILLIAN PETERSON: The Safety Council was established from executive order from the governor. And it puts, I believe, about 15 different departments together in a room-- so from Department of Public Safety, Children and Family, Education, Health and Human Services, Sheriff's Office, BCA, Chief of Police, NAMI. Actually, the Annunciation Light Alliance is represented.

So it's really all these people coming from all these different perspectives to come together for a half day a month for a year to really get educated, to share perspectives, to embrace the complexity of this. So we've been talking about social media, about mental health, about radicalization, about political violence, school violence. And it's been a really amazing space to have all these people from different perspectives, different political alignments coming together to really say, we actually really need to address this.

NINA MOINI: And Larry, while lawmakers, especially after the tragedies that have unfolded in the state the last year, lawmakers went into this past legislative session saying they really wanted to work on tamping down the difficult rhetoric and just speaking to one another in more respectful ways. And many lawmakers we talked to will say there is bipartisan work happening, and we are friends, and we do talk to each other. But to the point about social media, there's vitriolic messaging everywhere. I wonder if you, from your vantage point, can think of ways that lawmakers and everybody else can actually begin to try to move away from this rage bait?

LARRY JACOBS: What we saw at the Capitol this past session, I think, surprised a lot of us who were following it closely, even though it was basically a split tie between the Democrats and Republicans. The legislature was able to pass some fairly significant legislation, including a bonding bill that was well over \$1 billion. And that reflected, I think, the commitment in both the House and the Senate and with leaders on both sides to try to get work done and also to try to work together, even though there are very serious differences on policy. And that's to be expected.

But how are those differences articulated? How are they pursued? And I think that's the kindling for the acceleration of violent rhetoric and then violence in an environment that the social media world is accelerating.

NINA MOINI: All right, Jillian and Larry, thank you, both, for your time. Appreciate it.

**JILLIAN
PETERSON:** Thank you.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: Jillian Peterson is a professor at Hamline University and the executive director of the Violence Prevention Project Research Center. And Larry Jacobs is the founder and director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota.