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Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest: The Chapman Survey of American Fears

Increasingly Americans Appear to Fear Widespread Civil Unrest

Fear of widespread civil unrest has generally increased since it was first researched in the Chapman University Survey of American Fears (CSAF) in 2015. In the 2018 survey, it ranked only as the 24th fear and then moved up to the 20th spot in the 2019 survey. However, for the first time fear of widespread civil unrest landed in the top 5 fears of Americans. Results from the 2020/21 survey show that a majority of Americans, approximately 56.6%, indicated they were afraid or very afraid of widespread civil unrest¹.

Considering the turbulent year that 2020 was for Americans, the movement of widespread civil unrest from the 20th slot into the top 5 fears within just one year is understandable. In 2020 a large number of protests, with some turning violent, broke out across the country. They were rooted in a wide range of issues like police brutality and racial injustice to anti-lockdown sentiment. The 2020 Presidential Election served as the culmination of these issues and American's discontentment, eventually leading to the storming of the Capitol on January 6th, 2021 - an epitome of civil unrest. The storming of the Capitol received massive media attention and took place while the survey was being conducted, which could have impacted the results. As we can see in Table 1, Americans now fear widespread civil unrest now more than ever before measured in CSAF.

Table 1		
<i>Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest by Year</i>		
	Very Afraid/Afraid	Slightly Afraid/Not Afraid
Wave 7 (2021) Fear Survey	56.6	43.4
Wave 6 (2019) Fear Survey	47.8	52.2

¹ Because the survey was fielded at the start of 2021 (Jan 5th to 15th), we have used 2020/2021 in the title.

Wave 5 (2018) Fear Survey	43.0	57.0
Wave 4 (2017) Fear Survey	39.1	60.9
Wave 3 (2016) Fear Survey	26.6	73.4
Wave 2 (2015) Fear Survey	31.7	68.3

Source: CSAF, Waves 2-7, Chapman University

Political Orientation and Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest

Political orientation seems to have a connection to an individual's fear of widespread civil unrest. Generally, the more liberal an individual is the more likely they are to fear widespread civil unrest. As we can see in Table 2, only 43.2% of those who identify as extremely conservative fear widespread civil unrest, in comparison to 75.8% of those who identify as extremely liberal. There's a difference of over 30% between the two political extremes. This large difference could be related to the fact that the survey was in the field during and after the January 6th raid of the U.S. Capitol.

Table 2		
<i>Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest by Political Orientation</i>		
	Very Afraid/Afraid	Slightly Afraid/Not Afraid
Extremely Conservative	43.2	56.8
Conservative	54.1	45.8
Leaning Conservative	48.2	51.8
Moderate	57.3	42.7
Leaning Liberal	66.4	33.6
Liberal	55.1	44.9
Extremely Liberal	75.8	24.2

N = 1035

Source: CSAF, Wave 7, Chapman University

Media Consumption's Connection to Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest

Media coverage can often play a role in the way people view a certain event or topic, which appears to be the case when examining American's fear of widespread civil unrest. Those who cited that they watched CNN and MSNBC every day were over 20% more fearful of widespread civil unrest than individuals who cited that they watch Fox News every day. Daily consumption of media considered to be more conservative (Fox News) seems to lessen one's fear of widespread civil unrest in comparison to daily consumption of more moderate (CNN) and liberal (MSNBC) media.

Table 3		
<i>Fear of Widespread Civil Unrest by Media Outlet</i>		
	Very Afraid/Afraid	Slightly Afraid/Not Afraid
Watches Fox News Every Day	41.0	59.0
Watches MSNBC Every Day	66.6	33.4
Watches CNN Every Day	67.1	32.9

N = 1036

Source: CSAF, Wave 7, Chapman University