



## The Backlash Next Time:

What State and Local Health Officials Have Taught US about Mitigating and Preventing Attacks on Public Health

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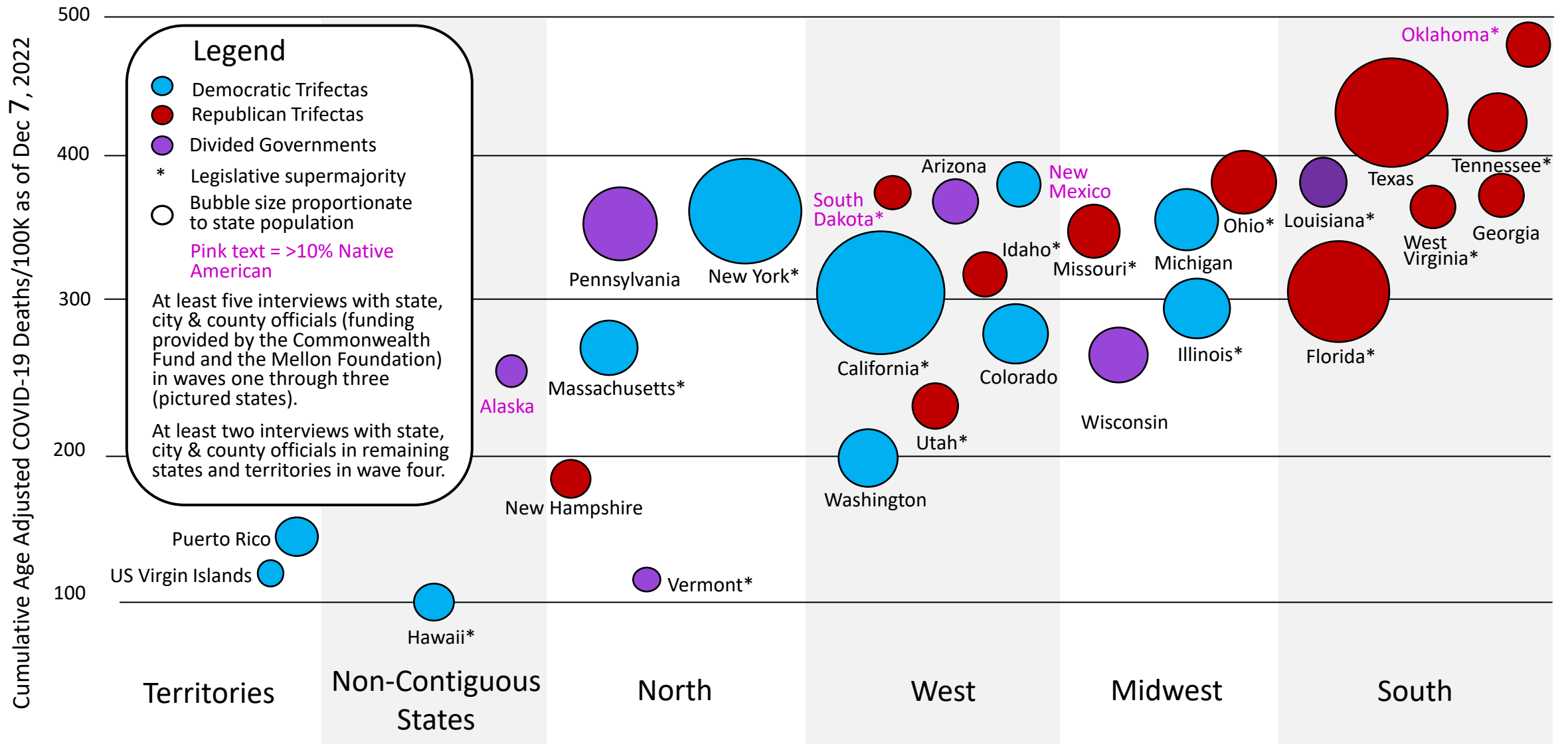


The  
Commonwealth  
Fund



Mellon  
Foundation

# States and Territories Included in Interview Waves One through Three, Organized by Region, Governmental Landscape, COVID-19 Mortality, and Level of Threats to and Harassment of Public Officials



Source for mortality data: <https://www.bioinformaticsco.com/blog/states-ranked-by-age-adjusted-covid-deaths/>

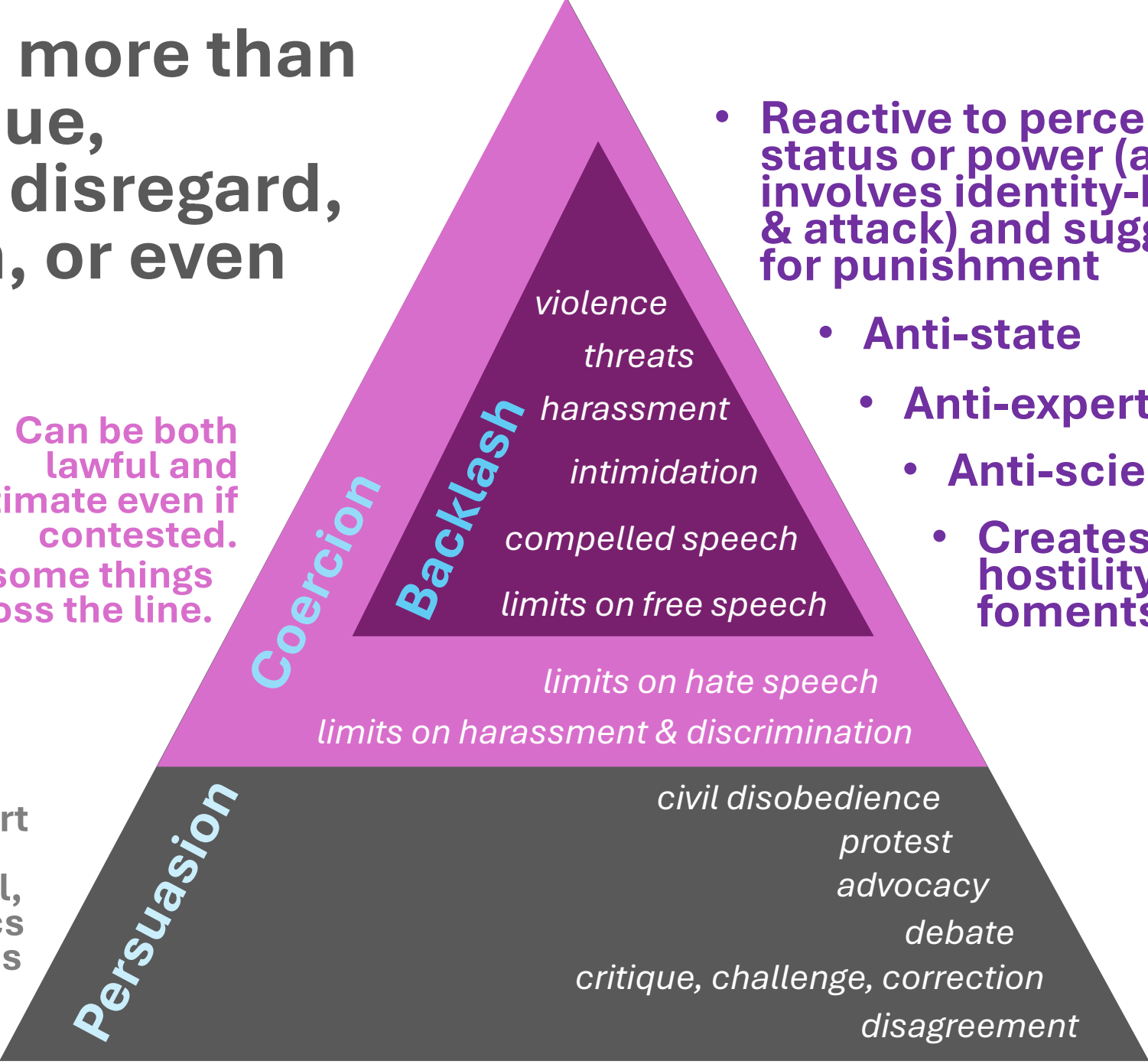
Source for governing landscape data: [https://ballotpedia.org/State\\_government\\_trifactas](https://ballotpedia.org/State_government_trifactas) and [https://ballotpedia.org/Veto\\_overrides\\_in\\_state\\_legislatures](https://ballotpedia.org/Veto_overrides_in_state_legislatures).

Source for threats and harassment data: <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/THD>.

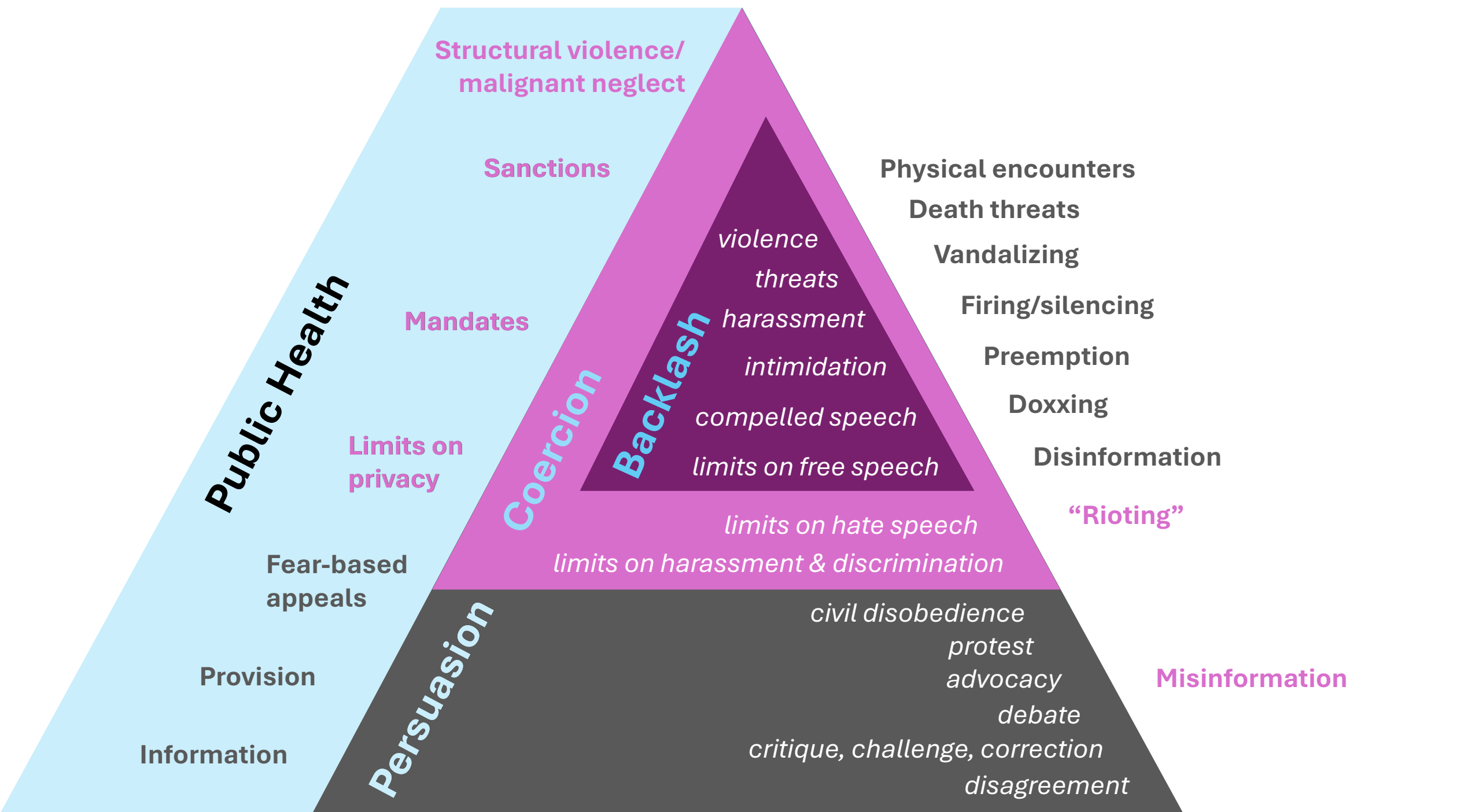
**Backlash is more than sharp critique, resistance, disregard, repudiation, or even coercion.**

Can be both lawful and legitimate even if contested. But some things cross the line.

Can challenge even sacred assumptions and create discomfort without being disrespectful, uncivil, unproductive. Tactics range from innocuous to more provocative.



- **Reactive to perceived loss of status or power (and often involves identity-based targeting & attack) and suggests the need for punishment**
- **Anti-state**
- **Anti-expert**
- **Anti-science**
- **Creates climate of hostility and fear that foments targeting**





THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

# Rising Stress and Burnout in Public Health

Results of a National Survey of the Public Health Workforce

MARCH 2022



## KEY FINDINGS:

More than half of public health employees report at least one symptom of **post-traumatic stress disorder**



Many public health workers, especially executives, report **bullying, threats, and harassment**

Nearly 1 in 3 public health employees say they are **considering leaving their organization within the next year**



Public health employees **are committed to their jobs and their communities**

Two years of COVID response have contributed to increased stress and burnout, as well post-traumatic stress symptoms, according to the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted between September 2021 and January 2022. At the same time, public health workers report that they remain committed to their jobs and communities. The survey by the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials collected the perceptions of nearly 45,000 staff in state and local government public health departments.

Conducted in 2014, 2017, and 2021, PH WINS is the only nationally representative survey of state and local government public health employees. The survey collects information on engagement and satisfaction, intent to leave, training needs, and public health's most pressing issues, as well as demographic information.

This research brief describes key findings from PH WINS 2021 related to satisfaction and engagement, mental health, and intent to leave. Additional data and analyses, including a methodological report, will be released in summer 2022 to provide a more detailed picture of the issues and needs of this vital workforce.

# Extreme Coercion

Dog feces left in a box at front door along with a **DEATH THREAT COMPOSED WITH LETTERS CUT & PASTED FROM A NEWSPAPER.** This health official also had a physical encounter in public.

“[P]eople are spitting in our faces, you know, and shouting us down” at a public meeting.

“You know we're coming to get you. We will not stand for this.”

# Identity-Based

"I walk up [to speak] and the crowd is hissing and jeering at me by this time. [The elected official's] opening question to me was, 'Are you a doctor from the United States? Why should we call you a doctor?' ...That question was designed to throw red meat to the hostile crowd behind me. ... That's when the racial abuse began. 'You effing quack. You effing liar. You tyrant. You ain't even a real doctor. Go the eff back to where you came from.' They began mocking my accent using the Apu voice from *The Simpsons*."

Multiple sexualized (rape and dismemberment) death threats (hanging) and stalking from a known individual convicted of domestic violence. One death threat included an image of a toddler being strangled with the warning:

"I know where your kid goes to school."

You need to be "strung up" and "electrocution would be too good for you."



**Not all coercion, soft or extreme, rises to the level of backlash.**

After face-to-face press conference

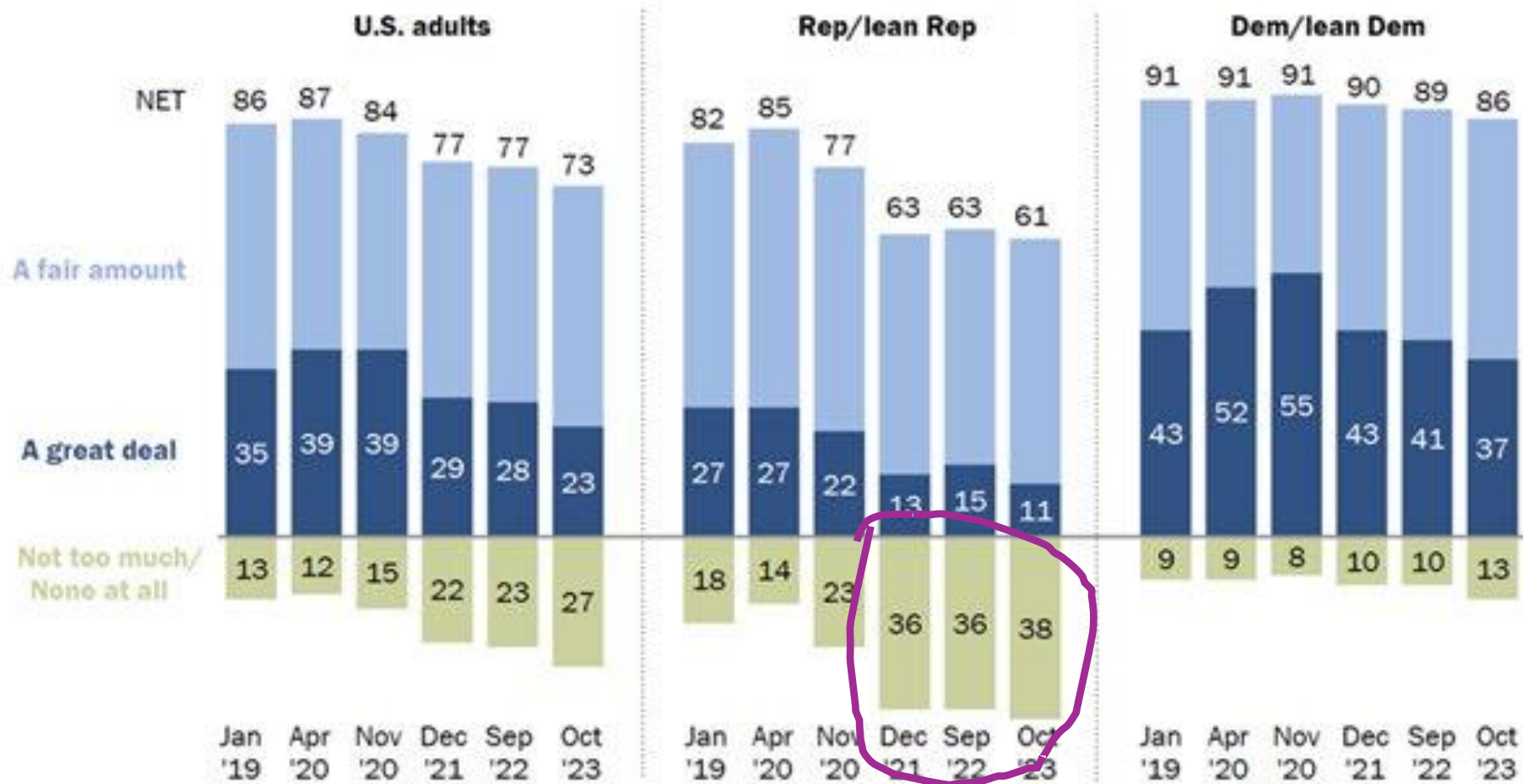
**"some guy followed me back to the the city car and was like spitting at me and telling me that my family needs get Covid and die."**

**"If this goes south, I'm going to hold you accountable,"** accompanied with a threat to lynch or shoot this female health official.

# Broader Social Context

## Declining levels of public trust in scientists

% of U.S. adults who have \_\_\_ of confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 25-Oct 1, 2023.  
 "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Positive Views of Science Continue to Decline"

## SECTION 4

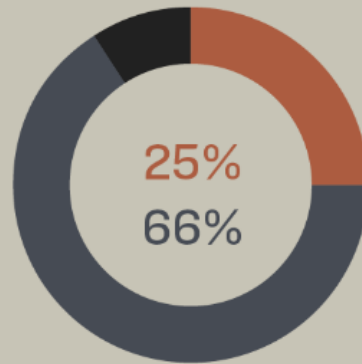
# Partisanship and Violence

Total approval for “threatening a politician who is harming the country or our democracy.”

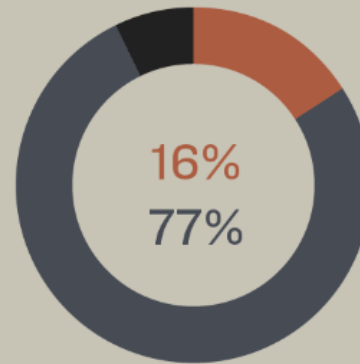
Younger = <50 , Older = 50+

● Approve ● Disapprove ● Don't Know

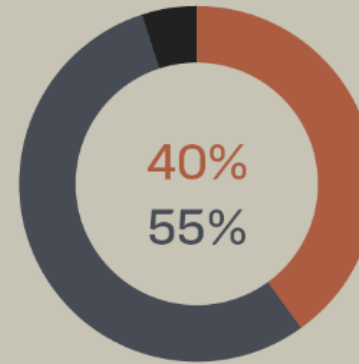
Poll conducted April 18 - 25, 2022



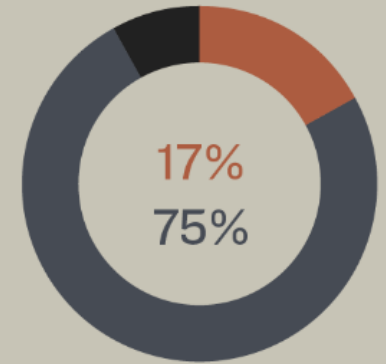
Younger  
Democratic  
Women



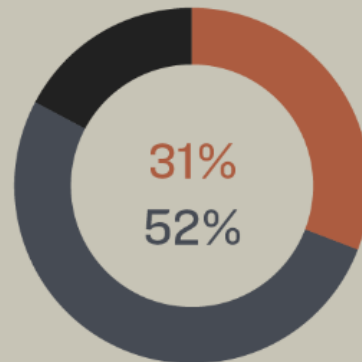
Older  
Democratic  
Women



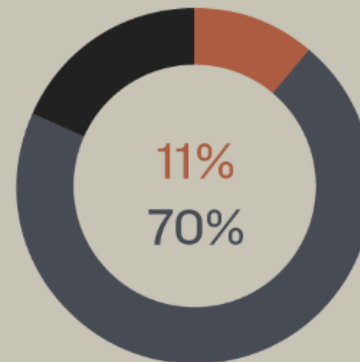
Younger  
Democratic  
Men



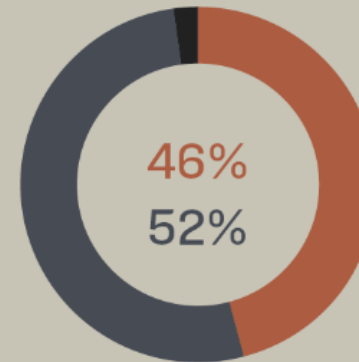
Older  
Democratic  
Men



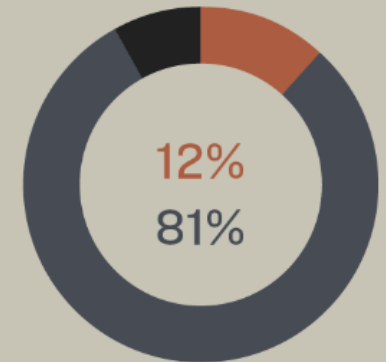
Younger  
Republican  
Women



Older  
Republican  
Women



Younger  
Republican  
Men



Older  
Republican  
Men

## SECTION 4

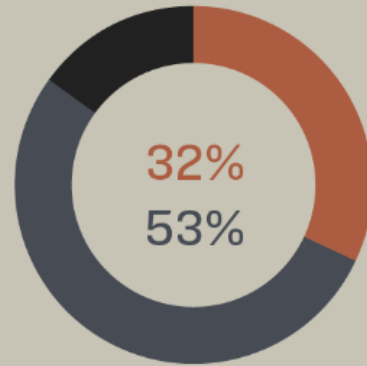
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Total approval for “assassinating a politician who is harming the country or our democracy.”

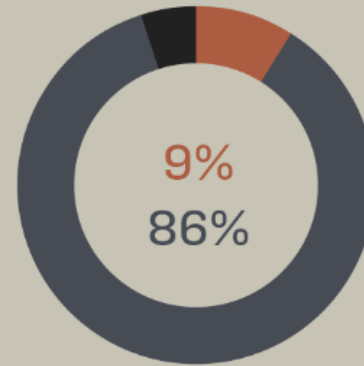
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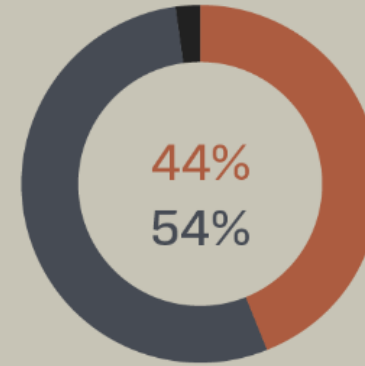
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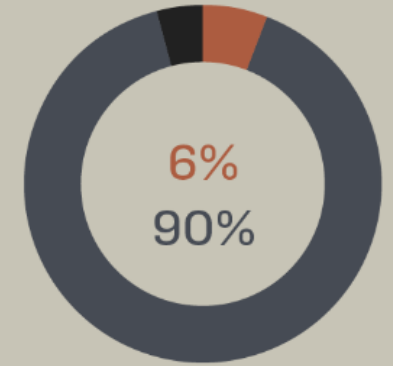
Younger  
Democratic  
Women



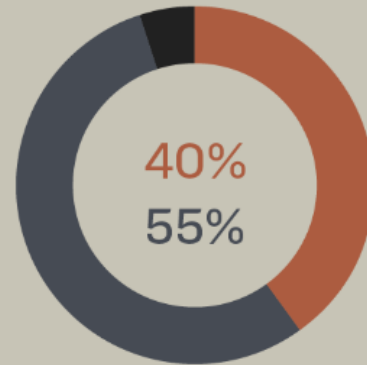
Older  
Democratic  
Women



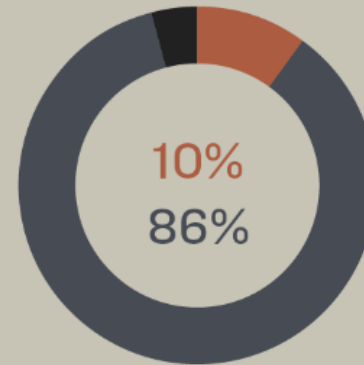
Younger  
Democratic  
Men



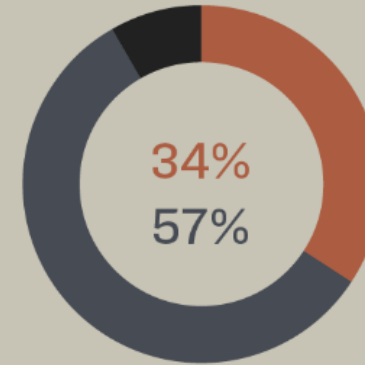
Older  
Democratic  
Men



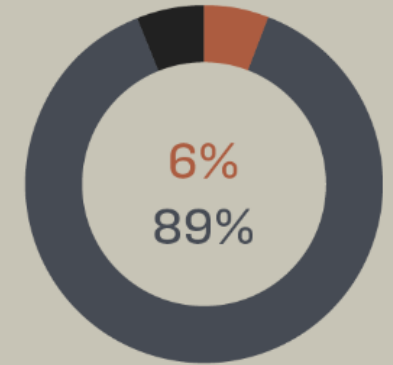
Younger  
Republican  
Women



Older  
Republican  
Women



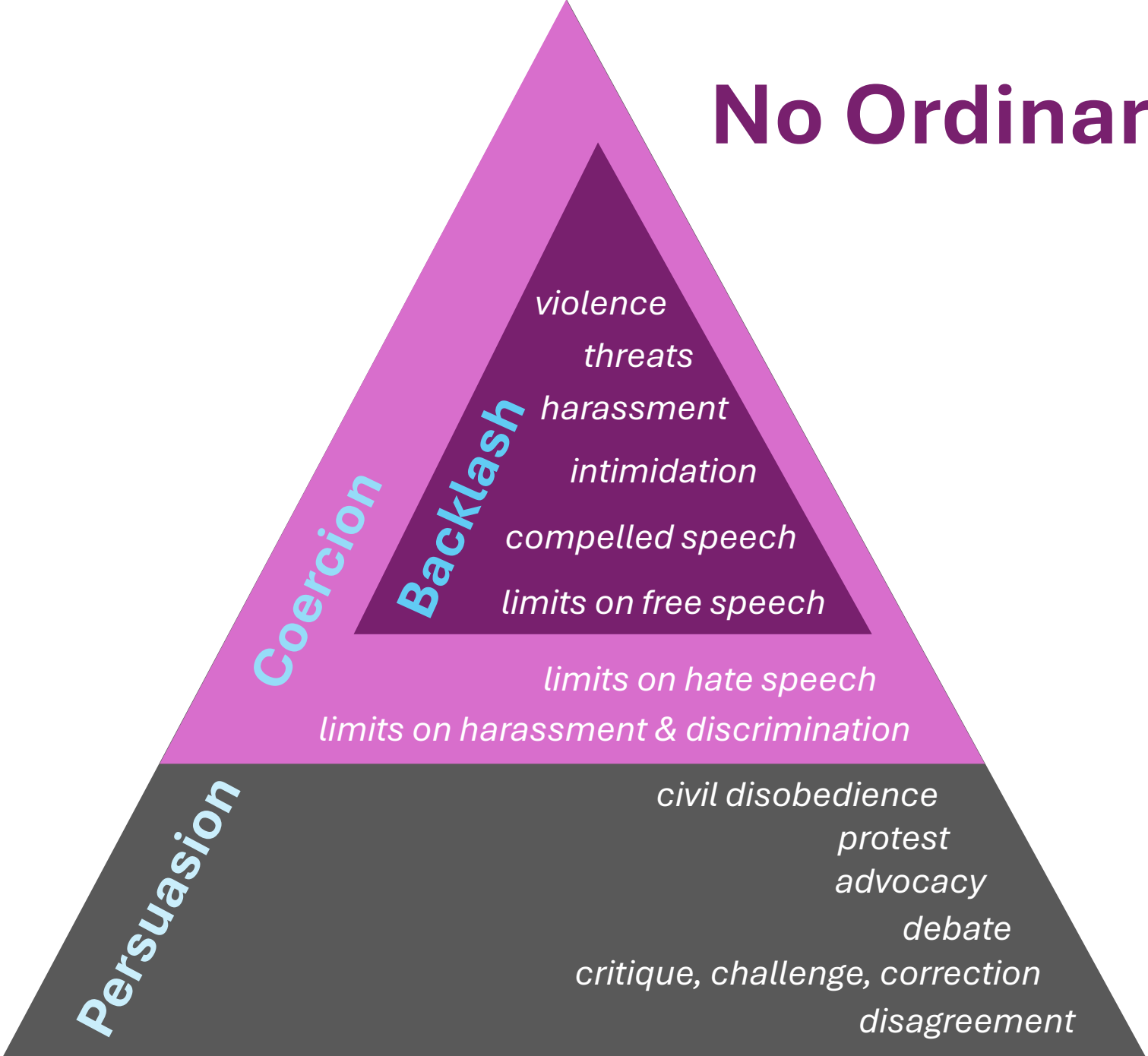
Younger  
Republican  
Men



Older  
Republican  
Men



# No Ordinary Stress



**What do we do in a moment in  
which there is a profound  
commitment to hate?**

**Champion “a broad commitment to pluralism” that delivers “a chance to achieve a higher level of excellence powered by intense engagements across a vast range of viewpoints.”**

~ Danielle Allen, *Washington Post*, 10 Dec. 2023

**Take advantage of this moment in which people across the political spectrum are outraged by threats, harassment, intimidation and violence to ask, in a bipartisan way—or in a way that transcends partisanship--do we want to live like this?**

# Thank you! & Acknowledgments

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