

- United States

Exclusive: Threats to US federal judges double since 2021, driven by politics

By Joseph Tanfani, Peter Eisler and Ned Parker

February 13, 2024 11:55 AM EST Updated 6 hours ago



[1/2] A supporter of U.S. President Donald Trump holds a sign during a “Stop the Steal” protest after the 2020 U.S. presidential election was called by the media for Democratic candidate Joe Biden, in front of the Arizona State Capitol in Phoenix, Arizona, U.S., November 7, 2020. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart [Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab](#)

WASHINGTON, Feb 13 (Reuters) - Serious threats to U.S. federal judges have more than doubled over the past three years, part of a growing wave of politically driven violence, according to U.S. Marshals Service data reviewed by Reuters.

The agency, responsible for the protection of 2,700 federal judges and more than 30,000 federal prosecutors and other court personnel, has seen a sharp rise in threats related to

the country's bitter political divisions, Marshals Director Ronald Davis told Reuters in a recent interview.

Serious threats against federal judges – ones that trigger an investigation by the agency – rose to 457 in fiscal year 2023, which ended on Sept. 30, from 224 in fiscal 2021, according to the previously unreported data. Serious threats against federal prosecutors also more than doubled, from 68 in 2021 to 155 in 2023, the statistics show.

The spike spans a period that began around the time of the 2020 presidential election, when federal courts heard a series of highly politicized cases, including failed lawsuits filed by former President Donald Trump and his backers seeking to overturn his loss. Over the same timeframe, election officials saw a barrage of threats from Trump's supporters, as previously documented by Reuters.

Judges and prosecutors involved in the criminal and civil prosecutions of Trump have reported hundreds of threatening messages linked to those cases, according to court records and public statements by the targeted officials. Court officials also have reported threats from activists enraged by the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn the legal right to abortion.

Davis said the agency has a "growing concern" about a rising tide of threats fueled by partisan divisions and vitriol on social media.

On Wednesday, Davis is scheduled to testify at a U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary subcommittee oversight hearing.

The Marshals Service reviews thousands of potential threats each year against court personnel and launches what it calls "protective investigations" on those it considers the most serious. The agency declined to provide details on the threats.

The Justice Department, when asked to provide the number of people charged or convicted for threatening judges, said they do not track the data.

The 457 serious threats against judges in 2023 marked a dramatic increase from 2019, when the Marshals investigated 179 such threats, according to the data.

In the past, judges mostly faced threats from people who were upset about a judge's decision in their own cases, Davis said. Now, he said, many more are coming from people enraged because of politics.

“The threat environment right now that is causing me concern is when people disagree with the judicial process or the government, and that turns into those verbal attacks,” Davis said in the interview. “And that is the beginning of the process that threatens the judiciary and threatens our democracy.”

During his presidency and in the years since, Trump has shown a willingness to criticize judges who rule against his interests in highly personalized terms, often suggesting their decisions are politically motivated.

A Trump spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, in remarks at the Justice Department on Jan. 5, expressed alarm at “a deeply disturbing spike” in threats against public officials, saying prosecutors have filed charges in cases involving federal judges, presidential candidates, members of Congress, the military and election workers.

The attorney general warned the incidents threatened “the fabric of our democracy.”

The threats come amid the most sustained spate of political violence in the United States since the 1970s, according to a [Reuters investigation](#) last year. That reporting documented at least 232 politically motivated acts of violence since Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Those attacks included everything from riots and brawls at political demonstrations to politically motivated beatings and killings.

Ned Parker reported from New York. Editing by Jason Szep

Our Standards: [The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles](#).