

The Impact of Violence on our Democracy: A Study of State and Local Officeholders

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Brennan Center for Justice
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Background

- Political violence is pervasive and on the rise (ACLED 2022, Brennan Center 2023)
- It is an intersectional problem (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2019, InterParliamentary Union 2019 and 2021, Herrick and Thomas 2021, Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020, Collins 2000)
- Local office is often a stepping stone for women (CAWP, NCSL 2022)
- Women face more barriers to running and building political power (Sanbonmatsu 2002, Dittmar 2015) and violence may impact their political ambition (Herrick et al 2019)



Questions

- To what extent are state and local elected officeholders and candidates, their families, and their staff experiencing insults, harassment, threats, and attacks associated with their public roles?
- Do officeholders from historically marginalized backgrounds face disparate levels of such abuse? How and where does abuse manifest?
- Is the impact of this abuse on officeholders' willingness to run for reelection or higher office, to take certain policy positions, and to interact with the public — key considerations relating to the health of representative government in the United States?

Methods

- Multi-wave Survey of over 1350 local officeholders, in partnership with Bridging Divides Initiative (Princeton)
- Survey of over 350 state legislators, in partnership with Center for Public Interest Polling (Rutgers)
- Interview with 36 state legislators across 21 states
- Analysis weighted on:
 - State: Census division, estimates of state level ideology (Warsaw and Tausanovitch, gender, legislative chamber, year elected, professionalization of legislature)
 - Local: percent of community with college degree, vote share for Republican presidential candidate, size of population

Results

Prevalence

Abuse Reported by Local Officeholders, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

OVER PREVIOUS THREE MONTHS

	MEN	WOMEN	WHITES	PEOPLE OF COLOR	OVERALL
Insults	43%*	59%*	49%	53%	49%
Harassment	32%*	43%*	35%	40%	36%
Threats	16%*	23%*	18%*	25%*	18%
Attacks	1%	1%	1%	3%	1%

* The difference in proportions between demographic groups is statistically significant at the alpha=0.1 level.

Note: Results were weighted by demographic and political characteristics of the local officeholder's jurisdiction to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 1 percentage point to ± 7 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 1,909 responses from 1,744 unique respondents.

Source: Bridging Divides Initiative/CivicPulse/Brennan Center surveys fielded in August 2022, November 2022, May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023.

Abuse Reported by State Legislators, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

DURING CURRENT TERM AND THE PRECEDING CAMPAIGN

	MEN	WOMEN	WHITES	PEOPLE OF COLOR	OVERALL
Insults	84%	89%	88%*	77%*	86%
Harassment	41%	43%	43%	42%	43%
Threats	46%*	35%*	44%	42%	43%
Attacks	5%*	1%*	4%	3%	4%

* The difference in proportions between demographic groups is statistically significant at the alpha=0.1 level.

Note: Results were weighted by census division, chamber, party, gender, year elected, state-level estimates of political ideology, and the level of professionalization of the officeholder's legislature to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 2 percentage points to ± 13 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 354 responses.

Source: Brennan Center/Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling survey fielded in fall 2023.

Prevalence

“Last fall was the last really serious death threat I got,” one state legislator told the Brennan Center. “It was like date, time, location specific. They were going to kill me and then go to the police station and blow themselves up and take as many officers with them as possible.”

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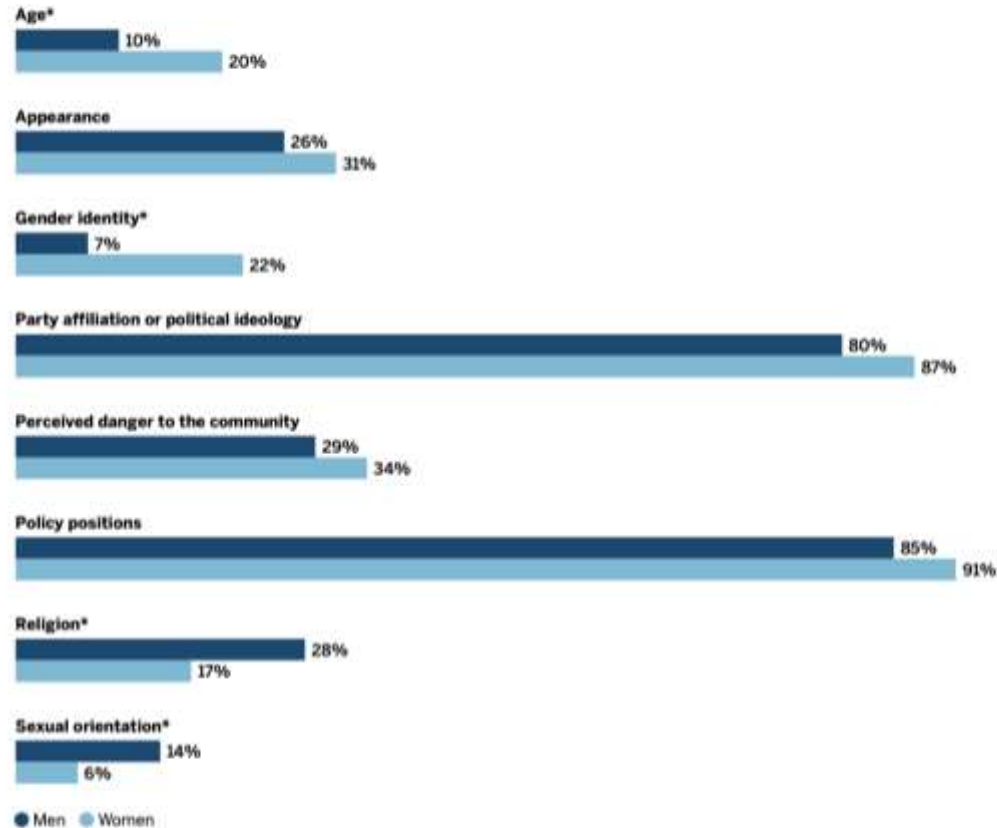
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Source: Brennan Center/Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling survey fielded in fall 2023.

Identity Based Abuse

Subjects of Hostile Comments Reported by State Legislators, by Gender

DURING CURRENT TERM AND THE PRECEDING CAMPAIGN



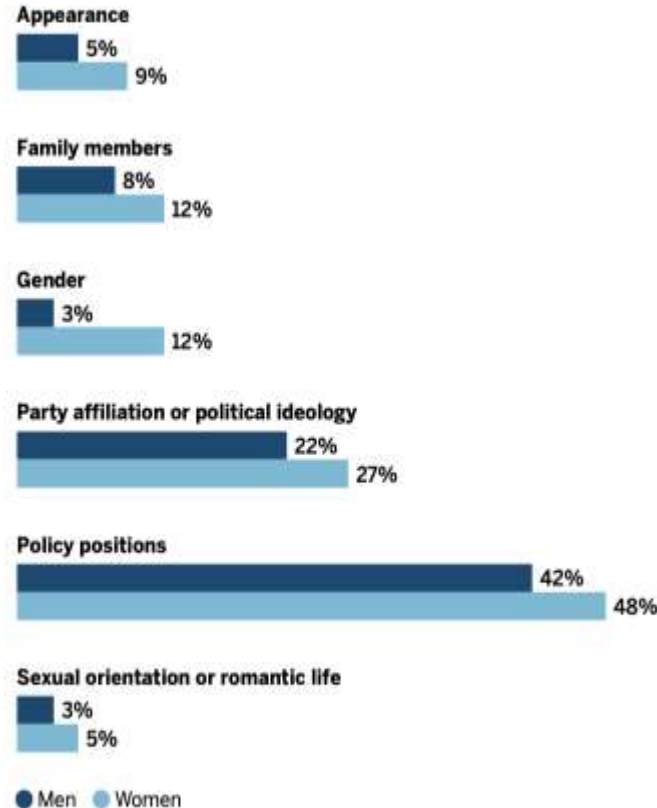
* Actual or perceived

Note: Results were weighted by census division, chamber, party, gender, year elected, state-level estimates of political ideology, and the level of professionalization of the officeholder's legislature to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ±3 percentage points to ±9 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 354 responses. We did not find meaningful differences by gender for other options provided: actual or perceived socioeconomic status; romantic life; spouse, children, or other family members; actual or perceived race or ethnicity; actual or perceived immigration status; and actual or perceived physical ability.

Source: Brennan Center/Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling survey fielded in fall 2023.

Subjects of Hostile Comments Reported by Local Officeholders, by Gender

OVER PREVIOUS THREE MONTHS



Note: Results were weighted by demographic and political characteristics of the local officeholder's jurisdiction to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ±1.5 percentage points to ±4.5 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 1,440 responses from 1,379 unique respondents. We did not find meaningful differences by gender for other options provided: race or ethnicity; religion; age; comments expressing desire to harm you or for harm to come to you; and loyalty to America.

Source: Bridging Divides Initiative/CivicPulse/Brennan Center surveys fielded in May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023.

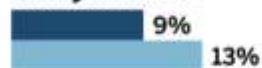
Subjects of Hostile Comments Reported by Local Officeholders, by Race/Ethnicity

OVER PREVIOUS THREE MONTHS

Appearance



Family members



Party affiliation or political ideology



Policy positions



Race or ethnicity



Religion



● Whites ● People of color

Note: Results were weighted by demographic and political characteristics of the local officeholder's jurisdiction to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 1 percentage point to ± 8 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 1,440 responses from 1,379 unique respondents. We did not find meaningful differences by race/ethnicity for other options provided: gender; comments expressing desire to harm you or for harm to come to you; loyalty to America; age; and sexual orientation or romantic life.

Source: Bridging Divides Initiative/CivicPulse/Brennan Center surveys fielded in May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023.

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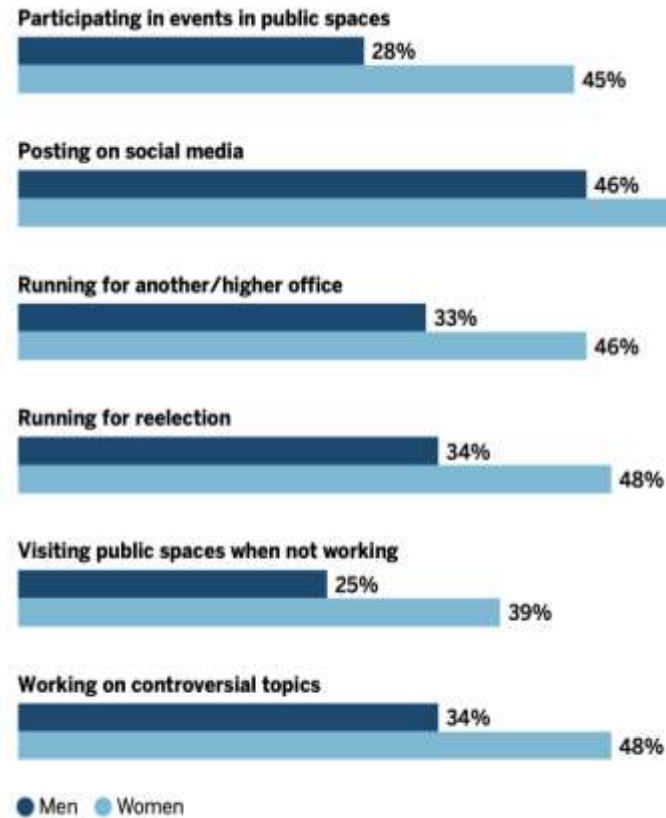
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Source: Bridging Divides Initiative/CivicPulse/Brennan Center surveys fielded in May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023.

“My first session, it was just a lot about race. There was someone who made a lynching joke and a three-fifths comment. ... I think the ones that I remember the most are the ones where I was called the n-word. But I'm sure there's more than that.” – State Legislator

The Threat to Democracy

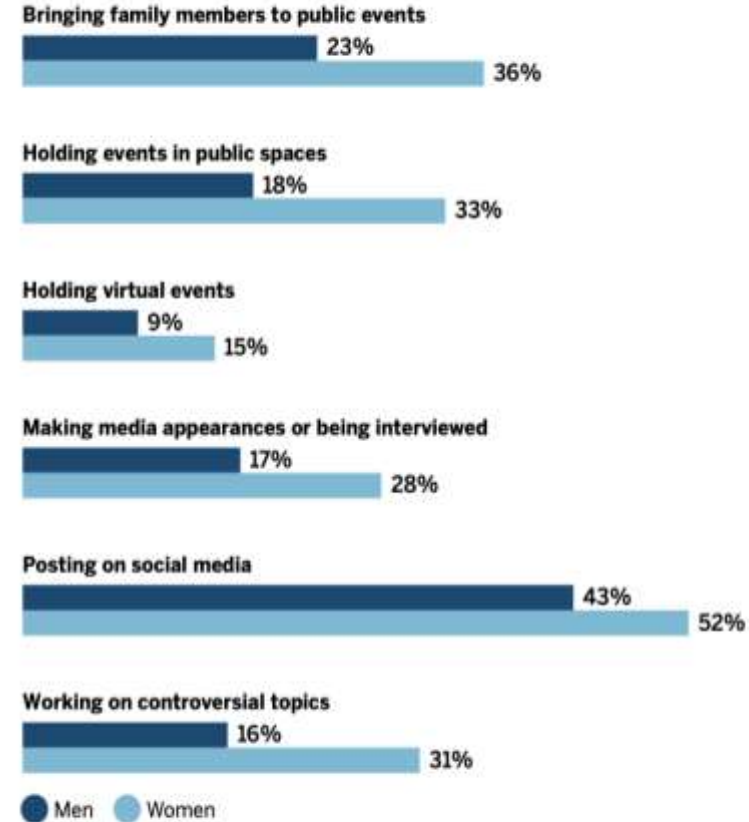
Activities Local Officeholders Report Being Deterred From Due to Abuse, by Gender



Note: Results were weighted by demographic and political characteristics of the local officeholder's jurisdiction to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 3 percentage points to ± 4.5 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 1,440 responses from 1,379 unique respondents.

Source: Bridging Divides Initiative/CivicPulse/Brennan Center surveys fielded in May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023.

Activities State Legislators Report Being Deterred From Due to Abuse, by Gender



Note: Results were weighted by census division, chamber, party, gender, year elected, state-level estimates of political ideology, and the level of professionalization of the officeholder's legislature to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 5 percentage points to ± 9 percentage points depending on the sample proportion. The sample is composed of 354 responses. We did not find meaningful differences by gender for other options provided: working across party lines and moving policy forward.

Source: Brennan Center/Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling survey fielded in fall 2023.

Increasing Violence

TABLE 3

State Legislators' Perceptions of Trends in Abuse Since Taking Office, by Gender and Party

	MEN	WOMEN	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICANS	OVERALL
Frequency					
Increased	35%	43%	32%*	45%*	38%
Stayed about the same	39%	37%	40%	34%	38%
Decreased	17%	14%	20%	13%	16%
Seriousness					
Increased	24%*	37%*	28%	31%	29%
Stayed about the same	54%	49%	50%	51%	51%
Decreased	14%	8%	14%	10%	12%

* The difference in proportions between demographic groups is statistically significant at the alpha=0.1 level.

Note: Results were weighted by census division, chamber, party, gender, year elected, state-level estimates of political ideology, and the level of professionalization of the officeholder's legislature to achieve more nationally representative measures. Margins of error range from approximately ± 4.4 percentage points to ± 9.6 percentage points depending on the sample proportion and subgroup in question. The sample is composed of 354 responses. These questions were posed to respondents who reported experiencing hostility in any previous or current campaign or term in office.

Source: Brennan Center/Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling survey fielded in fall 2023.

Recommendations

- Public leaders should stand up to abuse and speak out against it. Many who we spoke to indicated this was one of the things they found most helpful, especially when the support came from across the aisle.
- States should provide officeholders with mental health services and training in resisting hate-based violence so they have the tools to respond to abuse.
- States should monitor abuse of officeholders — taking care not to impinge on civil liberties — to learn when and how to allocate security resources.
- States should regulate open and concealed carry of guns where officeholders interact with the public.

Recommendations

- States should make officeholders' home addresses and other personal information confidential except when they are needed for public accountability.
- States should permit campaign spending on security, such as home alarm and camera systems or rideshares/cabs for staff going home alone after events. This is permitted in federal campaigns.
- Legislative bodies, officeholders, and social media companies should prioritize the freedom to safely engage in public discourse as they update policies to reduce serious harm online—which they will need to do in response to at least four cases being heard by the SCt this term that touch on the topic

Thank you

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