

METHODOLOGY

Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders

The Threat to Democracy

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This report answers four research 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? And what 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?

To answer these questions, the report employs a mixed methods research design, drawing on three primary data sources: a national survey of 1,744 local officeholders, a national survey of 354 state legislators, and three dozen interviews of state legislators. Together, the data analyzed in this report represents information gathered from a diverse group of more than 2,000 people from all 50 states.

The Brennan Center designed and developed this research in collaboration with an advisory council of scholars, government officials, civic leaders, and others

with lived experience and on-the-ground expertise in state and local elections. The advisory council helped to refine the survey instrument, interpret findings, and strengthen the report's recommendations. The Brennan Center is grateful for these advisers' time and guidance.

The following sections detail data collection and analysis for each of the three data sets: the survey of state legislators, the survey of local officeholders, and the long-form interviews with state legislators. All three data sets were compiled and analyzed with an emphasis on representativeness and accuracy.

Data Collection

Survey of State Legislators — Outreach and Sample

The Brennan Center partnered with the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University on a national online survey of state legislators. The survey asked respondents about their experiences with hostility, including threats, harassment, and attacks, while in office

or running for office. It also asked about respondents' access to resources to address hostility, the impacts of hostility on their political ambitions, and whether hostility dissuaded them from working on certain policy issues, along with standard sociodemographic questions.¹ The survey was in the field between August 14, 2023, and November 3, 2023.

The link to the survey went to all sitting state legislators via official and personal email accounts, staffers' email accounts, postcards to offices, and text messages to publicly available phone numbers. In total, it went to 7,558 legislators across the 50 states.² To boost participation, the Brennan Center and partners conducted outreach at the National Conference of State Legislatures' (NCSL) annual Legislative Summit in August 2023, advertised in the NCSL newsletter, and asked officeholders, via their networks, to send the survey. All survey responses were aggregated and anonymized to protect respondents' confidentiality.

State legislators are a notoriously challenging group to survey. Maestas, Neely, and Richardson (2003) note that surveys of state legislators frequently suffer from low response rates.³ Indeed, many surveys of state legislators have response rates in the single digits or low teens.⁴ After this extensive outreach, 354 state legislators completed responses to the survey, for a response rate of 4.68 percent. Given the nature of the topic, the survey responses may reflect some self-selection bias, with legislators who have experienced hostility being more likely to take such a survey. Weighting procedures were applied to produce more demographically representative results, as detailed below in the data analysis section.

Survey of Local Officeholders — Outreach and Sample

The Brennan Center partnered with Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) and CivicPulse, a nonprofit survey provider, to conduct a quarterly nationwide survey on threats and harassment toward local officeholders since 2022. The survey included questions similar to those in the state legislator survey, assessing experiences and impacts of hostility as well as collecting demographic characteristics. To inform its development of the survey instrument and refine its outreach approach, BDI conducted exploratory interviews with local officeholders.⁵

The report relies primarily on data from three waves of the survey (May 3, 2023, to June 6, 2023; July 21, 2023, to August 16, 2023; and October 6, 2023, to October 24, 2023). To analyze the frequency of hostility that local officeholders experienced, the report also draws on two earlier waves of the survey conducted August 12, 2022, to September 21, 2022, and November 16, 2022, to December 14, 2022.

The sample of local officeholders was derived from a list, compiled by researchers, of elected policymakers

from all "general interest" township, county, and municipal governments (not special districts) serving communities of 1,000 or more.⁶ Officeholders received multiple emails inviting them to participate in the survey, with email addresses validated every three months. The three waves of the survey in 2023 included 1,379 unique respondents. The 2022 waves included 401 unique respondents. The pooled sample for assessing local officeholder reporting of insults, harassment, threats and physical violence was 1,744 unique respondents (including 143 who responded to more than one wave.) The response rates for each wave ranged between 5 percent and 7 percent. These rates are typical for national surveys of local officeholders.⁷

Interviews — Outreach and Sample

The Brennan Center conducted 36 interviews with current and former state legislators from across the country. The interview phase over-sampled legislators from demographic groups that are underrepresented in elected office, anticipating that survey responses from these groups would number too few to draw robust inferences.

The advisory council and networks of the Brennan Center and partner researchers assisted with interview outreach. The final interview sample included a diverse mix of men and women, Democrats and Republicans, and regions (21 states in total). Efforts to over-sample legislators from underrepresented backgrounds succeeded. Participants included 10 people who identified as members of the LGBTQ community and 24 people of color.

Many legislators may harbor reservations about sharing their experiences on this sensitive topic. To mitigate this issue, the Brennan Center's interviewers received training by Julie Cederbaum, associate professor of social work at the University of Southern California, who specializes in scholarly research interviews of trauma survivors, to establish an environment that prioritizes the well-being of interviewees. The interview protocol and procedures for analyzing interview responses are discussed in detail in the data analysis section below.

Data Analysis

Survey of State Legislators

Survey Questions

As detailed in the report, the survey of state legislators asked a series of questions. The full wordings of all questions discussed in the body of the report and the answer options provided to respondents are listed below:

- Have you ever experienced any of the following while serving in or campaigning for your current term in office? Please check all that apply.

- ▶ Insults — instances of demeaning, derogatory, or offensive comments, gestures, or actions that upset, belittle, and/or humiliate
- ▶ Harassment — persistent, uninvited behavior, attention, or actions that cause distress, fear, or discomfort, such as stalking
- ▶ Threats — explicit or implicit expressions communicating an intention to harm, injure, or cause damage to an individual or others associated with them, implying imminent risk to a person’s well-being and safety
- ▶ Physical attacks — slapping, pushing, subjection to projectiles, beating, abduction, assassination attempts, or other acts of physical violence
- ▶ None of the above
- Has the number of insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks you have experienced in recent years increased, decreased, or stayed about the same as when you were first elected to public office? (This question was posed to respondents who reported having experienced insults, harassment, threats, or physical attacks while serving in or campaigning for a current or past term in office.)
 - ▶ Increased
 - ▶ Decreased
 - ▶ The same
- Have the kinds of insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks you have experienced in recent years been more serious in nature, less serious, or have they been about the same as when you were first elected to public office? (This question was posed to respondents who reported having experienced insults, harassment, threats, or physical attacks while serving in or campaigning for a current or past term in office.)
 - ▶ More serious
 - ▶ Less serious
 - ▶ The same
- Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to any of the following topics? (This question was posed to respondents who reported having experienced insults, harassment, threats, or physical attacks while serving in or campaigning for a current or past term in office.)
 - ▶ Your appearance
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived gender identity
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived sexual orientation
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived socioeconomic status
 - ▶ Your romantic life
 - ▶ Your spouse, children, or other family members
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived race or ethnicity
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived religion
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived immigration status
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived physical ability
 - ▶ Your actual or perceived age
 - ▶ Your party affiliation or political ideology
 - ▶ Your policy positions
 - ▶ The perceived danger you pose to the community
- Have any of these insults, instances of harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks ever been sexual in nature? This may include unwelcomed sexual remarks or advances or threats of sexual violence, sexual assault, or sexual violence. (This question was posed to respondents who reported having experienced insults, harassment, threats, or physical attacks while serving in or campaigning for a current or past term in office.)
 - ▶ Yes
 - ▶ No
- Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing — or wanting to do — any of the following?
 - ▶ Working on controversial topics
 - ▶ Holding events in public spaces
 - ▶ Holding virtual events
 - ▶ Bringing family members to public events
 - ▶ Posting on social media
 - ▶ Working across party lines
 - ▶ Moving policy forward
 - ▶ Agreeing to make media appearances or be interviewed
- And what about your colleagues? Do you think insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage has ever prevented any of your colleagues from doing — or wanting to do — any of the following?
 - ▶ (Respondents were given the same options as above.)
- How familiar are you with the formal reporting procedures of your state legislature for incidents such as insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage?
 - ▶ Very familiar
 - ▶ Somewhat familiar
 - ▶ Not very familiar
 - ▶ Not at all familiar

- Please indicate whether or not each of the following has ever happened to you while performing your duties as a state legislator: (For each option, respondents could select “Yes” or “No.”)
 - ▶ You have had personal, identifiable information about your address or other private information published without your consent
 - ▶ Someone has taken uninvited photographs or video of you and/or your property, your staff, or your family without your consent
 - ▶ You have been followed by an individual
 - ▶ You have been intimidated by an individual with a weapon
 - ▶ You have been hit or beaten by an individual
 - ▶ You have been shot at or shot by an individual with a firearm

- Will the future possibility of and/or your past experience with insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage prevent you from doing any of the following in the future? (For each option, respondents could select “Yes,” “No,” or “Unsure.”)
 - ▶ Running for reelection in current position
 - ▶ Running for another/higher office

- Do you think the future possibility of and/or their past experience with insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage could prevent any of your fellow legislators from doing any of the following in the future?
 - ▶ (Respondents were given the same options as above.)

- Please indicate whether or not you have taken each of the following precautions in your daily life to avoid insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks as a result of your elected position. (For each option, respondents could select “Yes” or “No.”)
 - ▶ Changed travel routes
 - ▶ Changed daily routines
 - ▶ Avoided traveling alone
 - ▶ Replaced your phone numbers, email addresses, and/or social media accounts
 - ▶ Sought counseling or therapy
 - ▶ Purchased or subscribed to private online security/identity theft services
 - ▶ Hired personal security guard services

Weighting Procedures

Researchers weighted responses to the survey of state legislators using the following variables: U.S. census division;⁸ estimates of state-level ideology calculated and made available by Christopher Warshaw and Chris Taus-

TABLE 1

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WHILE SERVING OR CAMPAIGNING FOR YOUR CURRENT TERM IN OFFICE? PLEASE CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.	UNWEIGHTED	WEIGHTED
Insults	85%	86%
Harassment	39%	43%
Threats	38%	43%
Physical attacks	2%	4%
Harassment, threats, or attacks	54%	59%
Insults, harassment, threats, or attacks	87%	89%

anovitch, converted into quartiles;⁹ gender;¹⁰ which legislative chamber they served in; party;¹¹ year elected;¹² and level of professionalization of their legislature according to a five-category scheme used by NCSL.¹³ Target population benchmarks were derived from a database of information on state legislators provided by KnowWho.¹⁴

A comparison of weighted and unweighted data revealed that there were relatively small differences. Top-line results changed no more than 7 percentage points when we applied weights, with most results changing less than 3 percentage points. Table 1 shows the difference between weighted and unweighted results for an example question: “Have you ever experienced any of the following while serving or campaigning for your current term in office? Please check all that apply.” The example helps illustrate how weighted and unweighted top lines compared for other questions.¹⁵ Though other potential reasons exist for lack of variation between the two sets of results, this robustness check can be one indicator of relative demographic representativeness of the sample. The use of these weights ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample even more closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target population.

Demographics

The survey asked respondents about demographic characteristics including race, ethnicity, gender, age, partisan affiliation, ideological affiliation, 2022 family income, education status, and religious affiliation. To enable meaningful comparisons across race and ethnicity in a sample that was 77 percent white — as well as for consistency with the race/ethnicity variable that the surveys of local officeholders employed — this analysis considered respondents in two ethno-racial categories: (1) non-Hispanic whites and (2) Hispanics and people of color.¹⁶ The latter was composed of people who selected any category other than “white,” including “Hispanic,” “Latino,” and “Middle Eastern,” even given the option to select multiple

categories. Respondents were also able to select “Prefer to self-describe” to write in an identity not listed. Those who did were sorted into the two broad ethno-racial categories if the identity or identities they wrote in were clearly identifiable as belonging in one or the other.

The analysis below presents the results of weighted logistic regressions for all comparisons referenced in the report. Unless otherwise specified, the response variable is whether the respondent answered “yes” to the question listed.

State Officials Survey Regression Tables

TABLE 2

Have you ever experienced insults while serving or campaigning for your current term in office?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.43 (0.37)	
Race:White		0.81 * (0.41)
N	350	346
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 3

Have you ever experienced harassment while serving or campaigning for your current term in office?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.08 (0.27)	
Race:White		0.04 (0.32)
N	350	346
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 4

Have you ever experienced threats while serving or campaigning for your current term in office?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.47 (0.27)	
Race:White		0.08 (0.33)
N	350	346
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 5

Have you ever experienced attacks while serving or campaigning for your current term in office?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-1.66 (0.89)	
Race:White		0.27 (0.87)
N	350	346
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 6

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your appearance?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.20 (0.30)	
Race:White		0.11 (0.35)
N	314	311
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 7

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived gender identity?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	1.19 ** (0.44)	
Race:White		-0.09 (0.47)
N	314	311
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 8

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived sexual orientation?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.96 *	
	(0.41)	
Race:White		0.88
		(0.51)
N	313	310
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 9

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived socioeconomic status?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.29	
	(0.31)	
Race:White		0.13
		(0.37)
N	314	311
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 10

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your romantic life?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.04	
	(0.46)	
Race:White		-0.34
		(0.50)
N	311	308
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 11

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your spouse, children, or other family members?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.13	
	(0.34)	
Race:White		0.30
		(0.42)
N	312	309
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 12

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived race or ethnicity?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.09	
	(0.33)	
Race:White		-1.90 ***
		(0.37)
N	316	312
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 13

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived religion?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.74 *	
	(0.32)	
Race:White		1.10 **
		(0.39)
N	313	309
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 14

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived immigration status?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.46	
	(0.61)	
Race:White		-2.81 ***
		(0.69)
N	311	308
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 15

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived physical ability?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.41	
	(0.49)	
Race:White		0.09
		(0.60)
N	311	308
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 16

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your actual or perceived age?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.78	
	(0.41)	
Race:White		-0.52
		(0.45)
N	313	310
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 17

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your party affiliation or political ideology?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.36 (0.40)	
Race:White		0.27 (0.44)
N	319	315
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 18

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to your policy positions?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.23 (0.54)	
Race:White		0.56 (0.68)
N	321	317
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 19

Have you experienced insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks relating to the perceived danger you pose to the community?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.15 (0.28)	
Race:White		0.18 (0.33)
N	315	311
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 20

Have any of these insults, instances of harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks ever been sexual in nature?	
	Model 1
Gender:Woman	1.66 *** (0.43)
N	322
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 21

Has the number of insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks you have experienced in recent years increased, decreased, or stayed about the same as when you were first elected to public office? (Response variable is whether they selected 'increased')		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.28 (0.28)	
Party:Republican		0.57 * (0.28)
N	316	316
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 22

Have the kinds of insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks you have experienced in recent years been more serious in nature, less serious, or have they been about the same as when you were first elected to public office? (Response variable is whether they selected 'more serious')		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.61 * (0.30)	
Party:Republican		0.15 (0.29)
N	316	316
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 23

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Working on controversial topics	
	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.88 ** (0.32)
N	341
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 24

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Holding events in public spaces	
	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.83 * (0.33)
N	335
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 25

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Holding virtual events	
	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.66 (0.46)
N	323
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 26

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Bringing family members to public events

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.62 * (0.30)
N	335
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 27

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Posting on social media

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.36 (0.27)
N	334
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 28

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Working across party lines

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.10 (0.42)
N	340
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 29

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Moving policy forward

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.27 (0.43)
N	339
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 30

Have insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage ever prevented you from doing – or wanting to do – any of the following? - Agreeing to make media appearances or be interviewed

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.71 * (0.34)
N	333
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 31

Will the future possibility of and/or your past experience with insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage prevent you from doing any of the following in the future? - Running for reelection in current position

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	-0.64 (0.54)
N	350
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 32

Will the future possibility of and/or your past experience with insults, harassment, threats, attacks, and/or property damage prevent you from doing any of the following in the future? - Running for another/higher office

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.06 (0.42)
N	349
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 33

Please indicate whether or not you have taken each of the following precautions in your daily life to avoid insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks as a result of your elected position - Changed travel routes

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.82 ** (0.30)
N	347
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 34

Please indicate whether or not you have taken each of the following precautions in your daily life to avoid insults, harassment, threats, and/or physical attacks as a result of your elected position - Avoided traveling alone

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	2.29 *** (0.41)
N	347
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

Survey of Local Officeholders

Survey Questions

All questions and answer options the report analyzed appear below. Unlike the state legislators survey, the local officeholders surveys did not provide detailed definitions of insults, harassment, threats, and attacks. The first set of questions below — about experiences of insults, harassment, threats, and attacks within the three months preceding each survey wave — appeared in the survey for all five waves. The rest of the questions appeared in the survey for the May 2023, July 2023, and October 2023 waves.

- In your capacity as a public official, please indicate whether you have experienced any of the following types of incidents in the last three months or so. If you have held your office for less time than that, please answer for the amount of time you have held your position. If appropriate, you may select ‘Yes’ to multiple items for the same experience. In the last three months or so, have you been . . . (For each option, respondents could select “Yes” or “No.”)

- ▶ Insulted verbally, in writing, or online
- ▶ Harassed verbally, in writing, or online
- ▶ Threatened verbally, in writing, or online
- ▶ Attacked physically

- In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about any of the following topics? Select all that apply.

- ▶ Comments about your appearance
- ▶ Comments about your gender
- ▶ Comments about your sexual orientation or romantic life
- ▶ Comments about your race or ethnicity
- ▶ Comments on your religion
- ▶ Comments on your age
- ▶ Comments about your party affiliation or political ideology
- ▶ Comments about your policy positions
- ▶ Comments expressing desire to harm you/for harm to come to you
- ▶ Comments about your loyalty to America
- ▶ Comments about your children, spouse, or other family members
- ▶ None of the above

- To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to do each of the following: (For each option, respondents could select “A lot,” “Somewhat,” “A little,” or “Not at all.”)

- ▶ Run for reelection
- ▶ Run for another/higher office
- ▶ Work on controversial topics
- ▶ Participate in events in public spaces
- ▶ Post on social media
- ▶ Be in public spaces when not working

- We’re interested in understanding the frequency of politically motivated security incidents where the intended target(s) include local elected officials, local government staff, or their family members. Please select from the list below which of these incidents — to the best of your knowledge — have occurred in the last three months.

- ▶ Intentional property damage (e.g., nails under tires, brick in window, arson)
- ▶ Uninvited photographs/video being taken (e.g., people, license plates)
- ▶ Malicious publicizing of personal email/phone/address
- ▶ Threats of property damage or physical attack
- ▶ Intentional blocking of entries or exits
- ▶ Being followed repeatedly
- ▶ Intimidation by individuals with weapons
- ▶ Physical attack (e.g., beating, shooting)
- ▶ Other (Please fill in): _____
- ▶ I am not aware of any security incidents that have occurred.

Weighting Procedures

Researchers weighted results on the basis of three variables, each of which was divided into terciles: the size of the population served by the respondent’s government body, the proportion of community residents who hold a four-year college degree, and the most recent vote share for the Republican candidate for president in the community’s county (to estimate the Republican versus Democratic partisan lean of the county). All three variables are jurisdiction- or county-level statistics rather than characteristics of the individual respondents, due to a lack of available information about the characteristics of each officeholder. The survey provider used a post-stratification raking procedure, a technique to improve the representativeness of data. An algorithm weighted the sample so the proportions of people in a particular group matched the corresponding population-level proportion.¹⁷

The analysis took proportionate measures to avoid over-weighting the experiences of local officeholders who answered multiple waves of surveys. For instance, someone who responded to two waves would not see their responses counted twice, but rather would see each scaled by a factor of one-half. Totals provided for the questions about experiences of insults, harassment, threats,

TABLE 35

IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS, HAVE YOU BEEN . . .	UNWEIGHTED	WEIGHTED
Insulted		
Yes	50%	49%
No	49%	51%
Harassed		
Yes	35%	36%
No	64%	64%
Threatened		
Yes	19%	18%
No	81%	81%
Attacked		
Yes	1%	1%
No	98%	98%
(Listed any of the above)		
Yes	53%	52%
No	46%	48%

and attacks in the preceding three months — questions included in all five survey waves — reflected weighting over the five waves. For questions that appeared in just the three 2023 survey waves, totals reflected weighting of just the three waves.

A comparison of weighted versus unweighted results demonstrated little difference between the two. Table 35 shows results for an example set of questions. The differences between weighted and unweighted proportions were similar for the other questions, with no more than a two percentage point difference after weighting.¹⁸ The relatively small variation between weighted and unweighted results indicates robust results.

Demographics

The survey asked local officeholders to provide demographic information, including ethnicity, race, partisan affiliation, gender, birth year, and religious affiliation. As with the state legislators survey, to enable meaningful comparisons across race and ethnicity in an overwhelmingly white sample (and to protect anonymity given the low numbers of nonwhite respondents), this analysis considered respondents in two ethno-racial categories: (1) non-Hispanic whites and (2) Hispanics and people of color. The latter was composed of people who selected any category other than “white,” including “Hispanic/Latinx” and “Middle Eastern.” Respondents had the option to select multiple identities or to select “Prefer to self-describe” to write in an identity not listed. The survey provider sorted respondents who selected “white” and “Prefer to self-describe,” or solely “Prefer to self-describe,” into the non-Hispanic white category, explaining this decision by providing examples of what these respondents wrote in, including “American,” “Irish and Italian,” and “Caucasion [sic].”

Here, the analysis included output from weighted univariate logistic regressions for each comparison across demographic groups that appear in the report.

- *Experiences of insults, threats, harassment, and attacks.* For this set of questions, the response variable was whether the respondent answered “yes” to the question listed. (tables 36–39)
- *Impacts of hostility on respondents’ behavior.* For this set of questions, the response variable was whether the respondent answered “A lot,” “Somewhat,” or “A little” to the question listed, as opposed to “Not at all.” (tables 40–45)
- *Experiences of targeted abuse.* For this set of questions, the response variable was whether the respondent answered “yes” to the question listed. (tables 46–56)

Local Officials Survey Regression Tables

TABLE 36

	In the last three months or so, have you been insulted verbally, in writing, or online?	
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender: Woman	0.64 *** (0.11)	
Race: People of color		0.18 (0.16)
N	1884	1792
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 37

	In the last three months or so, have you been harassed verbally, in writing, or online?	
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender: Woman	0.45 *** (0.11)	
Race: People of color		0.20 (0.16)
N	1880	1789
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 38

	In the last three months or so, have you been threatened verbally, in writing, or online?	
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender: Woman	0.44 *** (0.13)	
Race: People of color		0.42 * (0.18)
N	1880	1789
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 39

In the last three months or so, have you been attacked physically?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.05 (0.45)	
Race:People of color		0.79 (0.53)
N	1878	1787
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 40

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to run for re-election? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.59 *** (0.12)
N	1412
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 41

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to run for another/higher office? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.57 *** (0.12)
N	1409
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 42

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to work on controversial topics? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.59 *** (0.12)
N	1411
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 43

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to participate in events in public spaces? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.71 *** (0.12)
N	1412
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 44

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to post on social media? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.77 *** (0.12)
N	1403
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 45

To what extent have concerns about insults, harassment, threats, or attacks negatively impacted your willingness to be in public spaces when not working? (At all/not at all)

	Model 1
Gender:Woman	0.67 *** (0.13)
N	1411
R2	

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 46

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your appearance?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.74 ** (0.22)	
Race:People of color		0.58 * (0.29)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 47

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your gender?

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	1.47 *** (0.25)	
Race:People of color		0.42 (0.33)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 48

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your sexual orientation or romantic life?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.38 (0.29)	
Race:People of color		0.41 (0.39)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 51

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your age?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.16 (0.21)	
Race:People of color		-0.34 (0.35)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 54

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments expressing desire to harm you/for harm to come to you?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.22 (0.20)	
Race:People of color		0.08 (0.30)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 49

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your race or ethnicity?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.08 (0.29)	
Race:People of color		1.65 *** (0.29)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 52

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your party affiliation or political ideology?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.24 (0.13)	
Race:People of color		-0.44 * (0.22)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 55

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your loyalty to America?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.26 (0.20)	
Race:People of color		0.02 (0.31)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 50

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your religion?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	-0.38 (0.28)	
Race:People of color		1.24 *** (0.29)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 53

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your policy positions?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.24 * (0.12)	
Race:People of color		-0.29 (0.18)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

TABLE 56

In the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments about your children, spouse, or other family members?		
	Model 1	Model 2
Gender:Woman	0.49 * (0.20)	
Race:People of color		0.46 (0.27)
N	1420	1380
R2		

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

Margins of Error

The tables below provide more detail about margins of error by survey, sample proportion, and subgroup, calculated using Kish’s (1965) design effect and effective sample size.¹⁹

TABLE 57

Survey of Local Officeholders (2022 and 2023 combined)

SAMPLE PROPORTION	OVERALL	MEN	WOMEN	WHITES	PEOPLE OF COLOR
50%	±2.5	±3.1	±4.1	±2.7	±7.2
20%	2.0	2.5	3.3	2.2	5.8
5%	1.1	1.4	1.8	1.2	3.1

TABLE 58

Survey of Local Officeholders (2023)

SAMPLE PROPORTION	OVERALL	MEN	WOMEN	WHITES	PEOPLE OF COLOR
50%	±2.7	±3.5	±4.6	±3.0	±8.1
20%	2.2	2.8	3.7	2.4	6.5
5%	1.2	1.5	2.0	1.3	3.5

TABLE 58

Survey of Local Officeholders (2023)

SAMPLE PROPORTION	OVERALL	MEN	WOMEN	WHITES	PEOPLE OF COLOR
50%	±2.7	±3.5	±4.6	±3.0	±8.1
20%	2.2	2.8	3.7	2.4	6.5
5%	1.2	1.5	2.0	1.3	3.5

Interviews

Questions

Interviews occurred on Zoom. They were semi-structured, featuring open-ended questions and allowing for different sequencing and follow-up questions. Participants were asked the following questions:

- Can you share any specific examples of insults, harassment, threats, or attacks directed at you?
- Have those around you (staff, family) experienced insults, threats, attacks and/or harassment because of your elected position?
- What measures have you taken to increase your sense of safety after experiencing insults, harassment, threats, or attacks?
- What support, formal or informal, have you used after your experience of insults, harassment, threats, or attacks? What was effective or helpful and what wasn't?
- Have you or your colleagues been dissuaded from holding public events or engaging with citizens online because of experiences of violence or fear of future violence?
- How has violence shaped you or your colleagues' work in the legislature?

- Has the experience of violence dissuaded you or your colleagues from running for higher office?
- In your experience, what is the relationship between media and insults, harassment, threats, or attacks? Does getting more media attention expose you or your colleagues to more insults, harassment, threats, or attacks? Does violence/threats/harassment dissuade you or your colleagues from taking on media engagements?
- If you could put in place one reform to protect elected officials against insults, harassment, threats, and/or attacks, what would it be?
- Is there anything else you think we should know about your experience on this topic?
- Discriminatory violence: appearance, gender, sexual orientation, romantic life, family, actual or perceived race/ethnicity, religion, physical ability, age, partisan/political ideology
- People/organizations: family, friends, party leadership, fellow legislators, professional staff, lobbyist/interest groups, police, federal law enforcement, Capitol Police, civil society organizations, social media companies
- Partisan dynamics
- Self-defense measures implemented by the interviewee: any self-defense measure implemented as a result of hostility

Analysis of Interviews

Researchers transcribed and coded all interviews using NVivo. All interviews were coded using the same coding scheme. Coding allowed the team to track and organize content as well as to identify key themes across interviews.

For each transcript, coders identified mentions of the following categories and subcategories:

- Different kinds of violence: physical, psychological, sexual, racial, economic
- Manifestations of violence: insults, threats, harassment, attacks on people or property
- Location/setting of violent incidents: phone, online, traditional media, home, legislature, work-related event outside legislature, places related to family/staff

- Policy topics, issues, and stances: policy issues including gun control, abortion, immigration, zoning, LGBTQIA+ policy, etc.
- Suggestions for reform, resources, trainings, or positive action

The coded interviews enriched interpretation of survey responses by highlighting a number of themes documented in the report. For example, the majority of interviewees mentioned experiencing some form of hostility. Many spoke of discriminatory violence targeting some aspect of their identity. A plurality spoke of armed aggression in some form, with many specifically mentioning guns. A large number of interviewees mentioned social media as a major vector for the proliferation of abuse.

Endnotes

- 1** Since respondents could have held different understandings of terms such as *threat* or *harassment*, the survey included clear definitions of key terms. Definitions and question wording from the survey instrument are discussed in the data analysis section.
- 2** Contacting potential subjects multiple times using multiple modes of communication has been shown to be an effective way to boost response rate. See Samuel H. Fisher III and Rebekah Herrick, "Old Versus New: The Comparative Efficiency of Mail and Internet Surveys of State Legislators," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (June 2013): 147–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440012456540>; and Cherie Maestas, Grant W. Neeley, and Lilliard E. Richardson, "The State of Surveying Legislators: Dilemmas and Suggestions," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (March 2003): 90–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/153244000300300104>.
- 3** Maestas, Neeley, and Richardson, "The State of Surveying Legislators."
- 4** Fisher and Herrick, "Old Versus New"; Anthony J. Nownes and Patricia K. Freeman, "Gender-Based Differences in Information Use and Processing Among State Legislators," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40, no. 4 (June 2019): 473–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2019.1614866>.
- 5** Given the sensitivities surrounding discussion of threats and violence, BDI used a trauma-informed approach to these interviews. For more on this approach, see Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, July 2014, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>.
- 6** The sampling-frame median population was 4,954, the median proportion of residents with a four-year college degree was 21 percent, and the median county-level proportion of votes for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election was 59 percent. For the unweighted samples, those numbers were, respectively: August 2022 – 11,250, 26 percent, 49 percent; November 2022 – 11,820, 30 percent, 48 percent; May 2023 – 7,000, 26 percent, 55 percent; July 2023 – 5,030, 25 percent, 55 percent; October 2023 – 8,760, 28 percent, 45 percent.
- 7** For more on response rates, see CivicPulse, "FAQs," accessed November 15, 2023, <https://www.civicpulse.org/faqs>.
- 8** Census divisions are: New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific.
- 9** Christopher Warshaw and Chris Tausanovitch, "Subnational Ideology and Presidential Vote Estimates (v2022)," Harvard Dataverse, November 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BQKU4M>.
- 10** National Conference of State Legislatures, "Women in State Legislatures for 2023," February 22, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2023>.
- 11** Party was categorized as: Democratic, Republican, and other.
- 12** Year elected was categorized as: before 2012, 2012–2015, 2016–2017, 2018–2019, 2020–2021, and 2022–2023.
- 13** National Conference of State Legislatures, "Full- and Part-Time Legislatures," July 28, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures>.
- 14** KnowWho from Quorum, "State Legislators Data Service," accessed November 15, 2023, <https://kw1.knowwho.com/state-legislators-data-service/>.
- 15** Data from other questions is available upon request.
- 16** It is worth noting that the population of state legislators is itself overwhelmingly white. In 2021, only 26.5 percent of women state legislators were women of color. See Center for American Women and Politics, "Women in Elective Office 2021," accessed September 18, 2023, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-color-elective-office-2021>.
- 17** Matthew DeBell and Jon A. Krosnick, "Computing Weights for American National Election Study Survey Data," American National Election Studies, Technical Report series, no. nes012427, September 1, 2009, <https://electionstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/nes012427.pdf>.
- 18** Data from other questions is available upon request.
- 19** Leslie Kish, "Survey Sampling," *Social Forces* 45, no. 1 (September 1966): 132–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/45.1.132-a>.

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