

The gendered harassment of Parliamentary candidates in the UK

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Abstract:

This article explores the role gender plays in the harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of parliamentary candidates in the UK at election time. Using data from the Representative Audit of Britain surveys (2015-2019) this article takes an intersectional approach to investigate whether trends identified in 2017 suggesting that women candidates reported more incidences of HAI and were more likely to be concerned for their personal safety as a result than men, remain apparent in the subsequent election. Results suggest that HAI is getting worse for candidates in general and the gender gap is widening. About three in every four women experienced some levels of fear while campaigning.

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Key words: Harassment, VAW-P, women, gender, candidates

Background

This paper uses data from the Representative Audit of Britain, a survey of all parliamentary candidates who stood in the 2015-2019 British General Elections, to explore the role gender plays in the experiences of harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) by parliamentary candidates at election time. Previous research has shown that in 2017 women candidates reported more incidences of abuse and were more likely to be concerned for their personal safety as a result than men¹. This paper compares the 2017 and 2019 general elections to identify whether this gender gap in experience of harassment was apparent in the subsequent election and provides a more detailed insight into the gendered nature of harassment and its impact on candidates.

The issue of violence against women in politics has received renewed attention in recent years in the wake of a number of high-profile attacks on women politicians and a wave of women's activism calling for change^{2, 3}. Several small sample studies of women parliamentarians have shown alarmingly high levels of experiences of sexual harassment and violence against women politicians globally^{4, 5}. Extant research suggests that women politicians are subject to a hugely disproportionate share of sexualised abuse online and offline women often experience more threatening and sexualised threats and

¹ Collignon S, Rüdig W. Lessons on the Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom. *Polit Q* 2020.

² Bigio J, Vogelstein R. *Women Under Attack*. Foreign Aff 2020.

³ Krook ML. *Violence against women in politics*. NY: Oxford University Press; 2020.

⁴ IPU. *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*. 2016.

⁵ IPU. *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe*. 2018.

attacks; furthermore, black and minority ethnic women are disproportionately targeted compared with white women⁶.

Historically the study of violence against women in politics has been subsumed within the study of the harassment and intimidation of politicians more broadly. However, in recent years there have been calls for the re-conceptualisation of violence against women in politics to be understood as a distinct phenomenon. Mona Lena Krook argues that political violence against women “aims to exclude women as women from the political sphere via dynamics of structural, cultural, and symbolic violence”⁷. Harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of all candidates is a challenge to democracy, by its very nature it is intended to silence and intimidate in order to limit free and fair participation in the democratic process. Abuse targeted at women candidates is aimed at suppressing women’s full political participation as women. In this paper we assess the extent to which women candidates standing in the 2019 British General Election were targets of abuse.

The 2019 election provides an important case study for measuring gendered political abuse. Several high-profile women MPs retiring from Parliament in 2019 cited gendered harassment and intimidation amongst their reasons for not seeking re-election. These complaints cut across parties but were disproportionately evident among Conservative women MPs. In 2019 19 women MPs stood down, roughly proportionate to the representation of women in the House, but the nine Conservative (and former Conservative MPs who had resigned from the party) women who retired were on average six years younger than retiring Conservative men and had spent eight years less in the House⁸. Heidi Allen, Nikki Morgan, Amber Rudd, and Caroline Spellman all raised the issue of the harassment and intimidation of women politicians and the increasing polarisation and hostility in British politics among their reasons for exiting the Commons. A further indication of the concern shared by many women MPs was the public letter signed by more than 70 women MPs in solidarity with Megan Markle stating that they shared ‘an understanding of the abuse and intimidation which is now so often used as a means of disparaging women in public office from getting on with our very important work’. Analysis of the impact of experience of abuse on women’s campaign strategies has shown that there can be a damaging link whereby women who experience intimidation restrict their campaigning strategies⁹. Thus, there is an urgent need to understand the level, nature and impact of HAI in order to develop and implement measures to tackle it. Here we assess whether there has been any change in the reported levels of abuse experienced by candidates between 2017 and 2019, whether men and women report differing rates and types of abuse and the extent to which women candidates from ethnic minority communities are disproportionately targeted.

Data and Methods

In the wake of the horrific murder of the MP Jo Cox the MP for Batley and Spen in 2016, by a misogynist white supremacist, and widespread reporting of the hostile environment women politicians found themselves negotiating in the polarised post EU referendum politics, we included a new component to the Representative Audit of Britain (RAB) survey. We incorporated a battery of specially designed survey items in 2017, which we then augmented in 2019, intended to measure the level and impact of the abuse of parliamentary candidates and the extent to which it is gendered. We take a victim-

⁶ Collignon S, Rüdig W. Increasing the Cost of Female Representation? Violence towards Women in Politics in the UK. *J Elections, Public Opin Parties*;2021

⁷ Krook ML. *Violence against women in politics*. NY: Oxford University Press; 2020.

⁸ Butler C, Campbell R, vanHeerde-Hudson J. Political Recruitment Under Pressure, Again: MPs and Candidates in the 2019 General Election. In: Bale T, Ford R, Jennings W, Surridge P, editors. *The Br. Gen. Elect. 2019*, Palgrave Macmillan; forthcoming.

⁹ Collignon S, Rüdig W. Increasing the Cost of Female Representation? Violence towards Women in Politics in the UK. *J Elections, Public Opin Parties*;2021.

centered approach and focus on experiences that the candidates themselves label as HAI, avoiding providing a stringent definition that will most likely prompt candidates to leave out experiences of psychological abuse^{10 11}.

The RAB is an original individual-level survey of all candidates who stood in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections. In total our 2017/19 sample is made up of 2,657 candidates, with 1,495 responses from candidates standing in 2017 (53% response rate) and 1,162 responses (36% response rate) from those standing in 2019. The response rate varies between parties and therefore, our statistical analyses are weighted by party.

Findings

1) Despite all efforts, harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of Parliamentary candidates appears to be getting worse

Overall, in 2019, 49% of candidates indicated that they had suffered any form HAI while campaigning. This is a significant ($p \leq 0.05$) increase of 11 percentage points compared with 2017 when 38% of the candidates answered positively to the same question¹². These results are extremely worrying as they suggest that nearly half of all candidates experienced some form of abuse. Yet, since we focus on experiences that candidates label as HAI, we must be a little cautious comparing the absolute levels of HAI between elections. This is because it is possible that greater awareness of the issue has prompted more candidates to recognise the problem. However, there is also a danger that the experience of HAI will be 'normalised' as an inevitable consequence of seeking electoral office. Additionally, varying response rates between the two surveys might limit their comparability.

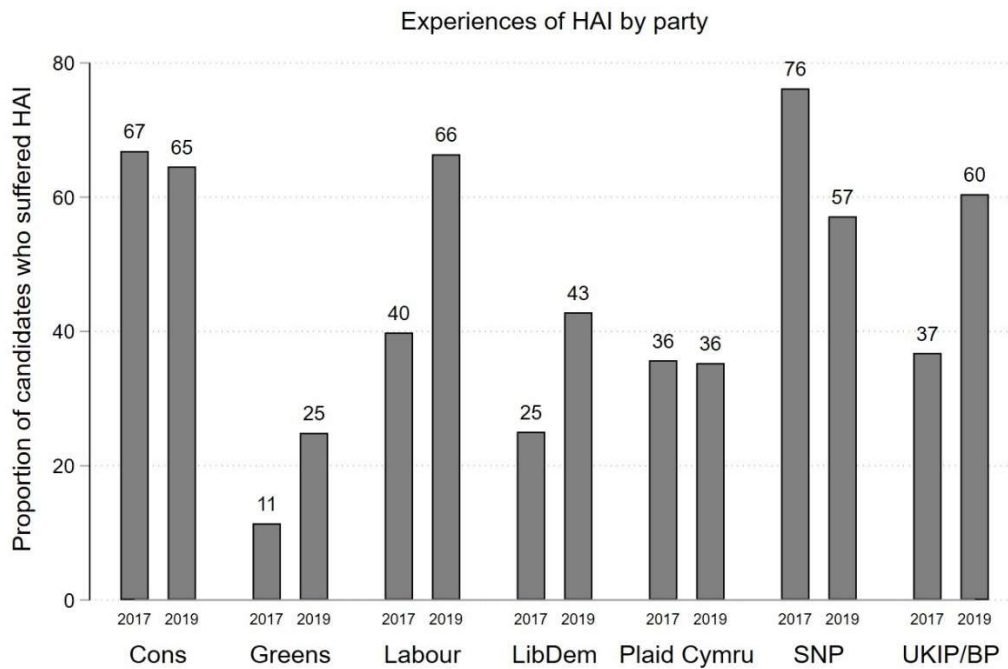
The level of HAI reported in the survey varies significantly by party and the targets of the most abuse shifted between the elections, potentially demonstrating the impact that political context can have on the toxicity of the political environment. Figure 1 shows that in 2017 candidates standing for the Conservative and the SNP parties were the targets of the most abuse, with 67% and 76% of candidates indicating that they have suffered HAI while campaigning. In 2019 the abuse was more focused on the Conservative (65%) and Labour (66%) candidates. The largest change was experienced by candidates from the Labour party with a 26 percentage points increase between 2017 and 2019 in the levels of HAI reported by Labour candidates. These are extremely high levels of HAI with the majority of candidates from the largest parties indicating that they were subject to some kind of abuse during the election campaign.

¹⁰ Collignon S, Rüdiger W. Lessons on the Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom. Polit Q 2020.

¹¹ Collignon S, Rüdiger W. Increasing the Cost of Female Representation? Violence towards Women in Politics in the UK. J Elections, Public Opin Parties; 2021.

¹² Collignon S, Rüdiger W. Lessons on the Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom. Polit Q 2020.

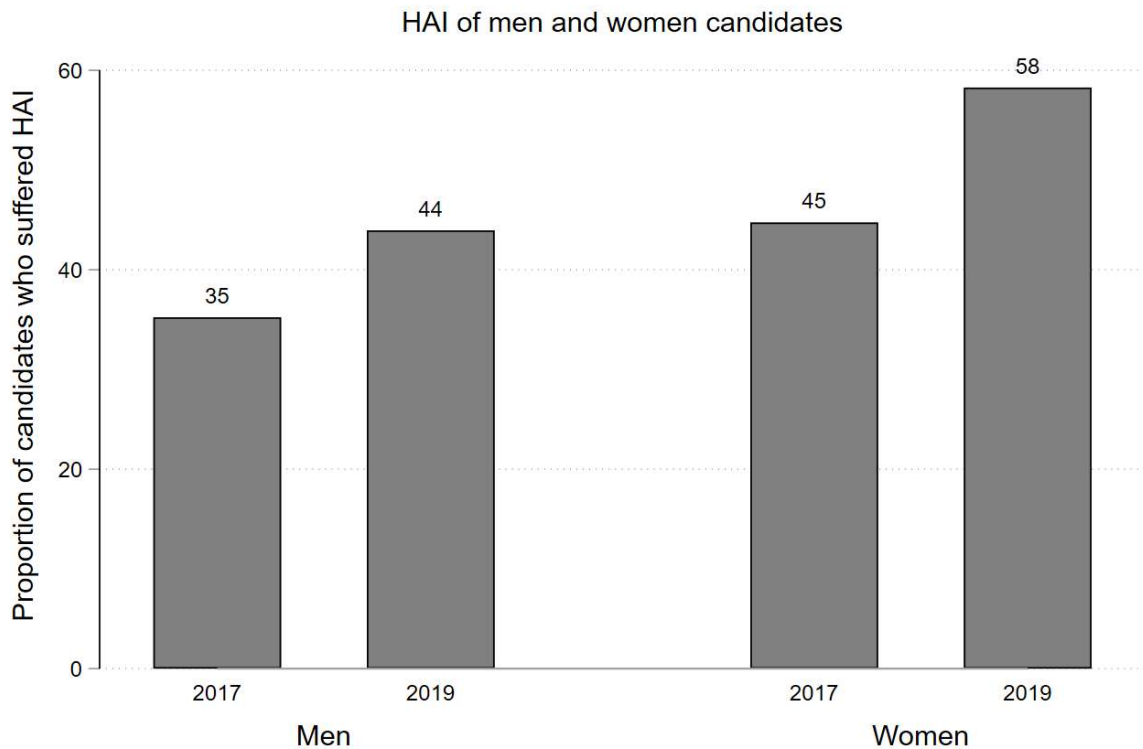
Figure 1 Proportion of candidates by party targeted by HAI



2) ***Women experience higher rates of HAI than men and that gap appears to be widening***

Our analysis does suggest that HAI has a gendered component; as figure 2 shows, in 2017 and 2019 women suffered disproportionate levels of HAI. In 2017, 45% of women respondents to the survey reported experience of some form of HAI whilst campaigning compared with 35% of men. By 2019 a sizeable majority of women reported experiencing HAI (58%), alarmingly suggesting that for women candidates experience of HAI whilst campaigning is becoming the norm. Moreover, the gap between men and women candidates who experienced harassment while campaigning appears to be widening. In 2017 the gap was of 9 percentage points and this increased to 13 percentage points in 2019. Thus, we can say that the rate of HAI by candidates in 2019 was worse than in 2017 and the speed at which the situation is worsening is somewhat faster for women than men.

Figure 2 HAI in 2017 and 2019



3) *BAME and LGBT+ women report the highest rates of HAI*

Our analysis shows that intersectionality plays a role in candidates' experiences of abuse. Our sample includes 200 candidates (7.53%) that identify as being Black, Asian or from an ethnic minority (BAME), giving us sufficient sample size for a four-way comparison between BAME and white, women and men. Our results show increasing levels of HAI among BAME candidates, with 55% of BAME respondents reporting experiencing abuse in 2019 ($p \geq 0.1$) compared with 37% in 2017 ($p \leq 0.05$). The data suggests that BAME women are particularly likely to experience HAI. The combined gender and ethnicity gap in experiences of HAI is enormous with 63% of BAME women candidates ($p \leq 0.05$) reported experiencing abuse compared with 38% of BAME men, 34% of white men and 45% of white women. In other words, white women reported higher levels of abuse than men (BAME and white), but white women were significantly less likely to experience HAI than BAME women.

We also have sufficient sample size for a consideration of the intersection between sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. The sample includes 204 candidates that identify as members of the LGBT+ community (7.68%). Overall, we find evidence ($p \leq 0.1$) that members of the LGBT+ community were somewhat more likely to report experiences of HAI, with 45% of LGBT+ candidates suffering abuse. Furthermore, here is evidence of intersectionality between sexual identity and sex. 58% of LGBT+ women suffered harassment, significantly more than LGBT+ men (39%) and more than heterosexual cis women and men (46 and 34%, respectively).

The sample also includes 183 of candidates (6.89%) who indicated that they have a disability. We do not find evidence that candidates with a disability report higher level of HAI ($p \geq 0.05$). We are cautious

about drawing strong conclusions from this evidence as the category most likely includes disabilities which are not visible or publicly declared.

4) *Online HAI appears to be on the rise, and getting worse for women*

We asked candidates about the nature of the HAI they suffered. Table 1 shows that, with the exception of receiving threatening or abusive phone calls, property damage and people loitering around the candidate, levels of all other forms of HAI were higher in 2019 than in the 2017 survey. Abuse on social media, email and being approached are the three forms of abuse that presented the highest rise in frequency between 2019 and 2017. In 2019, 45% of candidates suffered abuse on social media (29% in 2017), 35% received threatening or abusive emails (23% in 2017) and 25% faced unwanted approaches (14% in 2017).

In 2019 women were significantly more likely to suffer abuse both online and offline than men. Overall, 54% of women and 40% of men reported being the targets of abuse on social media, 42% of women and 31% of men reported being targeted by email and 13% of women and 9% of men reported receiving abusive phone calls. Women were also slightly more likely to report receiving threatening letters (18% of women compared to 15% of men), to be followed (11% of women and 7% of men) and loitered around (8% of women and 5% of men), and to be threatened with physical harm (23% of women and 16% of men), to be approached (32% of women and 22% of men) and to be sexually harassed (5% of women and 1% of men) than men. The largest difference observed relates to abuse on social media (14 percentage points of difference) and by email (11 percentage points difference) and to receive unwanted approaches at home, at work or in public places (10 percentage points difference).

Table 1 Types of harassment, abuse and intimidation

| Type of HAI experienced | | 2017 | | | 2019 | | | Notes |
|-------------------------|---|------|----|-------|------|----|-------|--|
| | | M | W | Total | M | W | Total | |
| Physical abuse | % | 4 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 5 | Year $p \leq 0.1$; sex 2017 and 2019 $p \geq 0.05$ |
| Threatened | % | 12 | 12 | 12 | 16 | 23 | 18 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Approached | % | 13 | 15 | 14 | 22 | 32 | 25 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Followed | % | 6 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 11 | 9 | Year $p \leq 0.1$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Loitered | % | 6 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 6 | Year $p \leq 0.1$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \geq 0.05$ |
| Property damage | % | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 6 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 and 2019 $p \geq 0.05$ |
| Sexually harassed | % | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 2 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 and 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Letters | % | 11 | 11 | 11 | 15 | 18 | 16 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Phone | % | 11 | 11 | 11 | 9 | 13 | 10 | Year $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \geq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
| Emails | % | 20 | 28 | 23 | 31 | 42 | 35 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \leq 0.1$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|--|
| Social media | % | 26 | 34 | 29 | 40 | 54 | 45 | Year $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2017 $p \leq 0.05$; sex 2019 $p \leq 0.05$ |
|--------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|--|

5) More than half of women report campaigning in fear

The serious consequences of the psychological impact of HAI on parliamentary candidates is illustrated by the strength of their emotional reaction. Candidates in general report significantly higher levels of concern, annoyance, and fear as a result of harassment in 2019 than they did in 2017 ($P \leq 0.05$), as illustrated in Table 2. In 2019, 45% of women candidates were very annoyed by harassment (29% of men candidates), 48% of women candidates were very concerned (27% of men) and 34% of women candidates were very fearful (14% of men). Thus, women are over-represented among candidates who reported the most psychological impact of HAI. In all cases, we observe significant differences by sex ($p \leq 0.05$). Together, this indicates that candidates, and in particular women candidates, standing in 2019 had a challenging time whilst campaigning, as about three in every four experienced some levels of fear.

Table 2 Emotional response to HAI

| Feelings | | 2017 | | | 2019 | | |
|--|-----|------------|------------|------|------------|------------|------|
| | | Not at all | Moderately | Very | Not at all | Moderately | Very |
| Annoyed (year $p \leq 0.05$, sex $p \leq 0.05$) | M % | 71 | 10 | 19 | 25 | 46 | 29 |
| | F % | 63 | 8 | 28 | 22 | 33 | 45 |
| Concerned (year $p \leq 0.05$; sex $p \leq 0.05$) | M % | 70 | 15 | 15 | 25 | 48 | 27 |
| | F % | 62 | 14 | 23 | 20 | 32 | 48 |
| Fearful (year $p \leq 0.05$; sex $p \leq 0.05$) | M % | 70 | 15 | 15 | 26 | 60 | 14 |
| | F % | 62 | 14 | 23 | 24 | 43 | 34 |

Discussion

Our analysis shows that reported levels of HAI were significantly higher in the 2019 General Election than they were in 2017. We find a clear link between gender and experiences of harassment. Women reported higher levels of abuse than men and were more emotionally affected as a result. Black and minority ethnic women reported the highest levels of abuse, 64% of BAME women surveyed experienced at least one form of HAI and LGBT+ women also reported higher levels of abuse. The extent of the problem is alarming and the fact that ethnic minority women report such high rates of HAI represents a serious challenge to our democratic processes and institutions.

Our research suggests that online forms of harassment appear to be becoming significantly more common, but reported rates of many forms of offline abuse are also increasing.

The psychological impact on candidates is evident by the large proportion who report feeling fearful at some stage during the campaign and this impact is most pronounced for women.

Our research demonstrates the importance of measuring the scale and impact of HAI on candidates for elected office. Understanding the frequency and psychological effects of abuse of candidates is an important measure of democratic health. In a representative democracy such as ours fair representation requires equal access to political participation and HAI is a deliberate attempt to place barriers in the way of diverse political recruitment. The Committee on Standards in Public Life 2017

review into intimidation in public life cited multiple sources of data, including our own, exposing the high and increasing levels of HAI in contemporary British politics. Several of the review's recommendations have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted. For example, a new offence of electoral offence of intimidation of candidates is expected¹³. Our analysis shows the scale of the problem and its unequal impact. We hope that sharing these findings will be a further stimulus to more action.

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¹³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9192/>