

How Scared Are You?

A Literature Review Contextualizing the Environment of Threats and Harassment of Local Officials in the United States over the Last 10 Years

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INTRODUCTION

Targeted threats, harassment, and the perpetration of physical violence against elected officials are becoming increasingly commonplace around the world. Sadly, the United States and our own backyard of San Diego is no exception. Local leaders - the most foundational representatives of the democratic processes that undergird our system of government - are facing unprecedented levels of uncivil and anti-democratic threats, harassment, and attacks.¹ By nearly all measures, political violence is considered to be more acceptable in the U.S. than it was five years ago.²

Current data indicates that the majority of threatening and harassing behavior directed against local officials is non-physical and occurs through online spaces.³ However, permissive rhetoric can both harm our democracy as well as escalate into physical violence targeting democratically elected leaders. A high-profile example of this is the brutal attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband, Paul Pelosi, in October 2022. David DePape broke into the Pelosis' San Francisco home with the intention of kidnapping the former speaker of the US House. Instead, DePape encountered Paul Pelosi, an 82-year-old man, who he attacked with a hammer. DePape left Pelosi unconscious, with a fractured skull and injuries on his hand and arm. Officials who investigated the attack found that DePape had an extensive history of online engagement with right-wing conspiracy theories and angry rants against women. In his blog, DePape described how Gamergate, an online forum filled with far-right conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric against women, was the catalyst for much of his worldview. Joan Donovan, who recently co-authored a book examining Gamergate's role in the rise of alt-right political movements, stated that DePape's move from an online

¹ Clarence Anthony et al., "On the Frontlines of Today's Cities: Trauma, Challenges and Solutions" (National League of Cities, 2021),

<https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/On-the-Frontlines-of-Todays-Cities-1.pdf>.

² Rachel Kleinfeld, "The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2022,

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/rise-in-political-violence-in-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy-pub-87584>.

³ Anthony et al.

space to an attempted real-world attack on a female public figure is unsurprising.⁴ Incidents like this highlight the danger of violent rhetoric leading to physical violence, as well as demonstrate the need for further analysis of the connection between violent political rhetoric and violent outcomes.

While high-profile incidents such as the Pelosi attack provide crucial context for the broad scope of threats, harassment, and violence directed at public officials, this literature review will focus on the less prominent, but nonetheless critical, issue of threats and harassment directed at local elected officials. In particular, this literature review centers around school board officials, members of city councils, and mayors located within San Diego County as well as across the United States. The literature review will consider the current research on the scope of the threats and harassment faced by local officials, the drivers of threatening and harassing behavior, and its impacts on local officials and the democratic process. In addition, this literature review will provide an overview of current recommendations for reducing the level of threat to local officials and improving the civil discourse. Finally, the literature review will conclude with recommendations for further research around threats and harassment directed at local officials.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

While threats, harassment, and violence directed against high-level officials garner the most media attention, threats and violence directed against local officials are also increasingly widespread and pose a serious threat to democracy. A ground-breaking survey conducted by the National League of Cities (NLC) in 2021 revealed the extent of the problem. The survey found that over 80 percent of 112 local public officials reported having personally faced threats, harassment, and violence.⁵ An even higher percentage - 87 percent - claimed to have “observed an increase in attacks on public officials in recent

⁴ Tim Arango et al., “How the Pelosi Attack Suspect Plunged Into Online Hatred,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/20/us/pelosi-attack-suspect-david-depape.html>.

⁵ Anthony et al.

years.” The survey found that while the majority of threats and harassment were delivered through online spaces (such as social media), threats and harassment were also occurring in person in both public and private spaces. For example, over half of the respondents (64 percent) had been threatened during public meetings and a significant number (35 percent) claimed to have experienced harassment outside of work while going about their daily lives.⁶

The Mayors Innovation Project conducted an extensive survey in 2021 that found similar results.⁷ The survey was provided to all mayors of U.S. cities with populations of over 10,000. The survey questions focused on the frequency with which mayors experienced threats and violence. Violence was delineated into categories of psychological violence (which causes fear or harm to one’s sense of self worth or wellbeing), physical violence, gendered violence (based on one’s gender), sexualized violence (involving sexual depiction), and race–based violence. The results found nearly every mayoral respondent - 94 percent - had faced psychological violence at least once in 2021.⁸ Nearly a quarter of mayors reported being threatened at least once during the year and fifteen percent reported having experienced physical violence within the year.⁹

While threats and harassment of local officials garner less media coverage than threats and harassment of higher-profile leaders, the studies cited above make it clear that significant numbers of local leaders are impacted by threats and harassment. This reality raises several questions that will be addressed in the following sections: Which local officials are most likely to be threatened and harassed? And what form do the threats and harassment typically take?

⁶ Anthony et al.

⁷ Herrick, Rebekah et al., “Intersectional Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence against Mayors in 2021” (Mayors Innovation Project, May 11, 2022), https://mayorsinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/868/2022/05/Herrick-Thomas-et-al.-CAWP-Research-Brief_FINAL.pdf.

⁸ Herrick et al.

⁹ Herrick et al.

WHO IS MOST IMPACTED

The Intersectionality of Minority Identities: Women, People of Color, LGBTQ+ Community

Current research into threats and harassment against local officials indicates that characteristics of gender, race, religion, and sexuality may impact which local officials are most frequently targeted for threats and harassment. In particular, women officials tend to receive more frequent threats, as do people of color and those with other minority identities (such as religion and sexual orientation). Officials with multiple minority identities (such as Black women) often are the most frequent targets of threats and harassment.

The Mayors Innovation Project survey cited above analyzed survey responses around demographic categories and the results firmly support these trends. First, the survey results show that more women mayors reported higher rates of threats and harassment across every category compared to male mayors.¹⁰ Women mayors faced higher rates of psychological violence, gender-based violence, sexualized violence, and threats than did male mayors.¹¹ In terms of frequency, women mayors reported being harassed more frequently on a monthly basis than male mayors.¹² While women mayors in general were targeted more often than men, women of color faced the highest rates of monthly harassment.¹³

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) published a comprehensive report ("The Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset") that tracked publically known incidents of threats and harassment against local officials across the United States between January 1, 2020 and September 23, 2022.¹⁴ The local officials considered in the data are

¹⁰ Herrick et al.

¹¹ Herrick et al.

¹² Herrick et al.

¹³ Herrick et al.

¹⁴ "Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset" (Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, October 20, 2022), <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf246/files/documents/Threats%20and%20Harassment%20Report.pdf>.

categorized into three groups - health officials, election officials, and local government officeholders - going beyond this literature review's focus on local government officeholders (mayors, city council members, and school officials). The incident-based nature of the ADL/BDI dataset provides empirical evidence that complements and reinforces the trends around threats and harassment of local officials that have been identified through survey-based research such as the Mayor's Innovation Project report. Specifically, the ADL/BDI dataset affirms survey research showing that women officials are targeted more frequently than male officials. In fact, the ADL/BDI dataset found that women officials were targeted in 42 percent of the total incidents - which, when adjusted for the proportion of women holding local office, equates to women officials being targeted 3x more frequently than male officials.¹⁵

Local incidents of threats and harassment of public officials within San Diego County appear to support the finding that women officials and those with intersectional minority identities are targeted more frequently than their male, majority counterparts. Research by the Voice of San Diego affirms that "Black, Latina, and Asian women, as well as those who identify as LGBTQ, and other marginalized women often face the worst harassment."¹⁶ One lesbian city councilwoman who served from 2016-2021 in Carlsbad, CA alleged that she was stalked and threatened online by several male constituents, eventually leading her to file a restraining order to protect herself and her spouse. In 2020, the councilwoman explained to Voice of San Diego that, "Women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ folks have been dehumanized and terrorized for years in North County. Now it's happening for all to see and those of us who have dared to step up and strive for more for our communities are taking the brunt of the toxic

¹⁵ "Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset."

¹⁶ Kayla Jimenez, "Women Politicians Across the County Say They've Faced Harassment, Threats," *Voice of San Diego*, November 9, 2020, <http://voiceofsandiego.org/2020/11/09/women-politicians-across-the-county-say-theyve-faced-harassment-threats/>.

backlash because of the idea that abuse and online terrorism are allowed if it's pointed in the direction of politicians."¹⁷ In July 2021, the councilwoman stepped down amid a conservative recall campaign.¹⁸

There are multiple incidents of councilwomen facing threats and harassment here in San Diego County. A second Carlsbad councilwoman filed two police reports against men who threatened, harassed, and stalked her within two years of her 2018 election.¹⁹ A councilwoman in Imperial Beach reported receiving threats throughout her campaign and time in office. In one instance, a man who claimed to be a Vietnam war veteran used a racial slur (the councilwoman is the first Latina woman elected to Imperial Beach city office) and threatened to "take care of" her with his AK-47. The councilwoman explained the threats by saying this: "In the past it's been conservative here, but there's an ideological shift. I only mention it because it seems to be a phenomenon that happens with men who are very vocal about seeing very different faces and different makeup in governing."²⁰

The Imperial Beach councilwoman is not alone in her interpretation of the reasons that women officials face more threats than male officials. Scholars such as Dr. Esperanza Camargo, a professor at San Diego State University, have suggested that women, racial minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community become targets of threats and harassment because they pose a threat to the traditional social order.²¹ This interpretation has also been espoused by other women officials. Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, who faced misogynist slurs and harassment outside her home in response to the city's

¹⁷ Jimenez.

¹⁸ Debbie L. Sklar, "Carlsbad Council's Cori Schumacher Resigns as Conservative Recall Effort Heats Up," Times of San Diego, July 10, 2021, <https://timesofsandiego.com/politics/2021/07/09/carlsbad-councilwoman-cori-schumacher-resigns-before-recall-effort-heats-up/>.

¹⁹ Jimenez.

²⁰ Jimenez.

²¹ Jimenez.

covid restrictions, affirmed the view that women and other minorities in office “represent what progress looks like”, but that the changes may not be welcomed by all.²²

THE MESSAGE AND THE MEANS

Death Threats Online

There are multiple avenues through which local officials are commonly threatened and harassed, including over social media and other online platforms, over text message, and in person (including at public meetings, during daily activities like grocery shopping, or even outside of officials’ homes). The 2021 NLC survey found that 79 percent of surveyed officials had been threatened or harassed on social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), while 60 percent had been threatened or harassed by other means online (such as email or on a public forum).²³ The third most frequent site for threats and harassment was at public meetings (64%), followed by in daily life while off duty (35%), and over the postal mail (34%).²⁴ The least commonly cited location for threats and harassment was in-person while at work (such as at the office or during community visits), with 26% of respondents reported having been threatened or harassed in the work environment.²⁵ Empirical and anecdotal evidence show that messages sent over the internet (often under the guise of anonymity) frequently allude to the targeted official’s death or contain straightforward death threats. For example, messages received by a female candidate for a 2020 CA state Assembly seat read, “You can count on being highly opposed at the ballot box and in the streets by a highly armed well-trained family” and “If you text me again, I will fucking kill

²² Zoe Matthews, “Mayor Wu: Boston Has Become a Target for White Supremacists and Right-Wing Extremists,” *GBH News*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2022/08/18/mayor-wu-boston-has-become-a-target-for-white-supremacists-and-right-wing-extremists>.

²³ Anthony et al.

²⁴ Anthony et al.

²⁵ Anthony et al.

you.”²⁶ This type of message is in line with the finding in the ADL/BDI report that death threats and gun violence threats are more than twice as common as any other form of threat against local officials.²⁷

Threats of Sexual Violence Towards Women Officials

Threats towards women officials often take an explicitly violent sexual tone that serves to reinforce a message that women ought to be under the control and domination of men. In her book, “Violence Against Women in Politics,” Mona Lena Krook argues that violence directed at women in politics is not a new phenomena, but rather the consequence of an increasingly visible yet age-old prejudice that rejects the notion of women in positions of authority.²⁸ Threatening women with sexual violence is an especially forceful way to communicate a view that women are weaker and less powerful than men. As Dr. Camargo from San Diego State University put it, in terms of asserting dominance over a woman, “A woman can be killed, but she can also be raped.”²⁹ It is likely for this reason that the survey conducted by the Mayors Innovation Project framed “sexualized violence” as one distinct category among various types of threats. The survey defined sexualized violence as “violence that sexualizes the mayor by depicting the person in a sexual way.”³⁰ The survey results found that less than one percent of white, male mayors and roughly two percent of male mayors of color experienced sexualized violence (as defined in the survey) on a monthly basis. However, in contrast, 10 percent of white women mayors and 17 percent of women of color mayors reported facing monthly incidents of sexualized violence (as defined by the survey).³¹

²⁶ Jimenez.

²⁷ “Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset.”

²⁸ Mona Lena Krook, *Violence Against Women in Politics: A Global Phenomenon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁹ Jimenez.

³⁰ Herrick et al.

³¹ Herrick et al.

Protesting Officials in Their Personal Lives and Outside Their Homes

Elected officials' homes, families, and personal lives - once considered to be off-limits - have become targets for protestors. As previously indicated, the 2019 NLC survey found that 35% of respondents claimed to have been threatened or harassed in-person outside of working hours.³² The NLC report quoted one local official as having a "feeling of unease and concern because my home address is public."³³ One example of in-person threats and harassment comes from January 2022, when a crowd protesting city regulations around coronavirus precautions gathered outside the home of Boston Mayor Michelle Wu. The crowd played music and blasted bullhorns until the early hours of the morning. According to Wu, the protestors "shouted on megaphones that my kids will grow up without a mom bc (sic) I'll be in prison."³⁴ As disturbing as it is, Wu told reporters that this type of harassment isn't unusual, especially for women mayors. "Just about every woman mayor has had people outside their homes, or pretty disturbing threats leveled at them on a regular basis" she said.³⁵

Lauren McLean, mayor of Boise, ID, understands what it is like to be threatened at home. The first woman to be elected mayor of Boise, McLean took office in January 2020. In a public statement put out in March 2022, McLean shares the fear she experienced around the grave threats that her family faced throughout the coronavirus pandemic.³⁶ While she says that the threats she and her family received went far beyond people standing on the front walk, McLean describes the fear caused by having "angry militia-affiliated crowds" at her family home each Sunday during the summer, and crowds carrying pitchforks and torches the following winter.³⁷ Unfortunately, this type of harassment is not

³² Anthony et al.

³³ Anthony et al. p 24.

³⁴ Colette Phillips, "Staking out Mayor Wu's Home Is Intimidation, Not Protest," *WBUR*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2022/02/07/michelle-wu-protests-outside-house-vaccine-colette-phillips>

³⁵ Matthews.

³⁶ Lauren McLean, "Statement from Mayor McLean," City of Boise, March 3, 2022, <https://www.cityofboise.org/news/mayor/2022/march/statement-from-mayor-mclean/>.

³⁷ McLean.

limited to mayors; even *candidates* for public office have faced protests outside their homes. A Black, female candidate for a seat in the 2020 San Diego County Board of Supervisors elections reported that she often encountered people who opposed her candidacy outside her home in protest - something she had to find a way to explain to her children.³⁸

Threats Against Elected Officials' Children

Even more disturbingly, the children of elected officials are becoming targets of threats and harassment. In her public statement, Mayor McLean describes the devastation of learning that not only had there been thwarted plots against her, but that her children were also being targeted and tracked online.³⁹ In many cases, threats are made to the elected official about potential harm to their children. One high-profile example is Pennsylvania City Commissioner Al Schmidt, who was forced to temporarily vacate his home and maintain police protection after receiving multiple, credible threats to himself and his family. In December 2020, Schmidt's wife received an email that gave their children's ages, the house address, and that read, "Your husband should tell the truth, or your three kids... will be fatally shot."⁴⁰ In other instances, the threatening and harassing messages go directly to the official's children, rather than through the official. One local official told the NLC that, "It has gotten to the point that my kids have been getting harassing text messages on their telephones... There clearly is a line that has been crossed."⁴¹

³⁸ Jimenez.

³⁹ McLean.

⁴⁰ "Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset."

⁴¹ Anthony et al. p. 24

THE DRIVERS OF THREATS AND HARASSMENT

Perception of Cultural Change as an Ideological Threat

One potential driver of the increasing threats and harassment directed at local officials is anger and angst around cultural change. The Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) 12th Annual American Values Survey indicates that Americans who perceive cultural change as an ideological threat may be more likely to justify political violence.⁴² In fact, the survey showed that nearly one in five Americans agreed that because "things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country".⁴³ Of those surveyed, thirty percent of Republicans and eleven percent of Democrats agreed with this statement. Over a quarter of respondents who feel that "things have changed so much that they feel like strangers in their own country" agreed that violence may be justifiable. Religious and nationalist beliefs also correspond with increased justification for violence. Among religious groups, White Evangelical Protestants were the most likely to agree that violence may be justified in order to save the country.⁴⁴ Those who believe that God has granted America a special place in history also had higher rates of agreement that violence may be justified.⁴⁵

Robert Jones, the founder and CEO of PRRI, interpreted the recent American Values Survey results by suggesting that, "The social, political, and economic fabric of America is changing from the old white Christian America pattern—a reality that has created a crisis of identity and a willingness... to question and undermine the legitimacy of American democratic processes... [These factors result] in an unprecedented willingness by a sizable minority to believe it may be justifiable to threaten, harm, or kill their fellow citizens to restore the perceived status quo."⁴⁶

⁴² "Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?," PRRI, <https://www.prii.org/press-release/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

⁴³ "Competing Visions of America."

⁴⁴ "Competing Visions of America"

⁴⁵ "Competing Visions of America."

⁴⁶ "Competing Visions of America."

Polarization Around Covid-19 Restrictions

Political polarization and the vilification of opponents is a significant factor driving threats, harassment, and attacks against local leaders. The two issues that have seen the greatest polarization and incivility across the nation, and particularly among school boards, are covid-19 precautions (such as masking and school closures) and ethnic studies curriculum (considered to be ‘critical race theory’ by opponents).⁴⁷ Across California, parents protesting student masking guidelines during the pandemic regularly shut down school board meetings with incendiary threats, yelling, and other forms of disruptive activity.⁴⁸ The disruption to school boards’ abilities to conduct regular business became so severe that in September 2021, the California School Board Association reached out to the state and federal government for assistance.⁴⁹ In a letter requesting support, the CEO of the Californian School Board Association wrote that he had “watched in horror as school board members have been accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members.”⁵⁰

California is not the only state whose school leaders have faced this issue - A study conducted by The RAND Corporation found that an estimated 75 percent of school district leaders nationwide believed that their ability to educate their students between 2021 and 2022 was hindered by the polarization over Covid-19 precautions.⁵¹ School boards all around the country have had to end meetings and/or rely

⁴⁷ “Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset”

⁴⁸ Kristen Taketa, “‘It’s an Ugliness’: School Officials Fear for Their Safety amid Threats, Disruptions at Meetings,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 3, 2021, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/story/2021-10-03/its-an-ugliness-threats-harassment-over-covid-plague-school-boards-across-california>

⁴⁹ Taketa.

⁵⁰ Vernon Billy to Gavin Newsom, “Letter-to-Gov-on-School-Board-Safety-09.24.21.Pdf,” September 24, 2021, <https://ca-times.brightspotcdn.com/6c/e5/8bdb6775404abc798969f0a6dbb9/letter-to-gov-on-school-board-safety-09.24.21.pdf>.

⁵¹ Melissa Kay Diliberti and Heather L. Schwartz, “District Leaders’ Concerns About Mental Health and Political Polarization in Schools: Selected Findings from the Fourth American School District Panel Survey” (RAND Corporation, February 8, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-8.html.

on law enforcement for protection due to violent protests. In some cases, extreme ideological groups that do not typically share common interests unified around protests against school boards' handling of covid-19 precautions. For example, outside of Portland, Oregon, three organizations that do not typically intersect - the Proud Boys, People's Rights, and Patriot Prayer - spread a joint message for their supporters to protest masking regulations outside of an area school. In response, the school district had to go into lockdown.⁵²

The hostility towards their work has made school board members, who are largely unpaid volunteers, question whether or not serving on the board is worth it. In his resignation letter from a Wisconsin school board, Rick Grothaus wrote that the work had become "toxic and impossible to do."⁵³ In Arizona, school board member Allison Pratt had to step up her home security system due to the level of toxicity projected onto her, and recalls one constituent claiming "It's my constitutional right to be mean to you guys" during a school board meeting.⁵⁴ Pratt, who has been on the school board for six years, said that if she wasn't already a board member, participating on the board would have little appeal. "There is starting to be an inherent distrust for school boards, that there's some notion that we are out to indoctrinate children or to undermine parents or things like that, when we are on the same team" she said.⁵⁵

Polarization Around School Curriculum and Critical Race Theory

The second issue area that drove a high percentage of the overall threats and harassment received by local school board officials is school curriculum categorized by some to be 'critical race theory' or requirements around diversity or ethnic studies education. Critical race theory is an academic

⁵² Kleinfeld.

⁵³ The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile, Some Members Are Calling It Quits," *NPR*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/back-to-school-live-updates/2021/08/30/1032417970/school-board-members-hostile-meetings-mask-mandates-politicized>.

⁵⁴ The Associated Press.

⁵⁵ The Associated Press.

discipline based on the works of legal scholars in the 1970s who asserted that racism was built into the legal and institutional systems of the United States.⁵⁶ It is generally not taught in schools, but many conservatives use ‘critical race theory’ as an umbrella term to describe any curriculum that teaches about racial inequalities in the U.S.⁵⁷

The Coronado Unified School District (CUSD) in San Diego County provides an example of how political polarization around the concept of critical race theory has led to threats and attacks on school board officials. In June 2020, the CUSD Superintendent promised to make the district a leader in promoting racial justice. This was not welcomed by all, and subsequently, the home addresses of some school board members’ who supported this new direction were posted online, along with a photo of one female board member and her two young children. The following year, after an incident in which Coronado High School basketball players threw tortillas at their mostly Latino competitors, the same female school board member (whose personal information had been published) decried the incident as “undeniably racially insensitive.” In response, she found tortillas on her and her husband’s cars in front of their house and received messages over social media that said, “You should be kicked in the face” and “You are a bully and a disgusting human being.”⁵⁸ The intensity of the polarization and emotionality around critical race theory is evidenced by the fanatical rhetoric that surrounds it. During a school board meeting in Brainerd, Minnesota, an attendee referred to critical race theory as “demonic” and threatened to “dump hot coals” on the school board officials’ heads.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Marisa Lati, “What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/>.

⁵⁷ Taketa.

⁵⁸ Taketa.

⁵⁹ “Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset.”

A Culture of Threats and Violence Demonstrated at the Highest Levels of Government

A final factor driving threats against local elected officials is the negative example set by politicians and figureheads at the highest levels of U.S. government and media.⁶⁰ Former President Trump never conceded his loss in the 2020 presidential election, and instead has encouraged his supporters to “fight like hell” and “take back the country,” setting a precedent for and justification of political violence. In fact, a 5-year longitudinal survey found that the 2020 presidential election was a tipping point for support for political violence, particularly among Republicans (although overall support for political violence rose among both political parties).⁶¹

Studies show that perceptions of political illegitimacy and in particular, of election fraud, make people more likely to justify political violence. For example, survey respondents who believed that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent were twice as likely to endorse a military coup and were more likely to justify armed citizen rebellion.⁶² Another survey conducted by the University of Chicago showed that of the 9% of Americans who believed that “force is justified to restore Trump to the Presidency,” ninety percent believed that Biden’s presidency was illegitimate.⁶³ An additional survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institute found that Americans who believe that the presidency was stolen from President Trump are four times more likely than those who don’t believe that there was election fraud “to agree that true American patriots might have to resort to violence to save the country (39% vs. 10%).”⁶⁴

The former president set an example of targeting anyone perceived as a political opponent by publicly naming, harassing, and/or threatening them using ad hominem attacks. When the highest

⁶⁰ Timothy Noah, “‘We’ Don’t Have a Political Violence Problem. Republicans Do.,” *The New Republic*, November 1, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/168391/political-violence-is-republicans-problem>.

⁶¹ Kleinfeld.

⁶² Kleinfeld.

⁶³ Kleinfeld.

⁶⁴ “Competing Visions of America.”

leader in the United States does this, it normalizes the behavior and paves the way for others to do the same at high and low levels. For example, former Philadelphia City Commissioner Al Schmidt testified before the January 6 Committee that accusations from a November 11, 2020 tweet from President Trump resulted in him and his family being subject to an overwhelming volume of death threats. The tweet called Schmidt a “RINO,” (Republican in name only), and added that Schmidt was a “disaster on the massive election fraud and irregularities which took place in Philadelphia.”⁶⁵ The threats, which Schmidt said were general in nature prior to President Trump targeting him, became very specific and echoed some of the President’s language. Some of the messages received by Schmidt’s wife read “ALBERT RINO SCHMIDT WILL BE FATALLY SHOT” and “HEADS ON SPIKES, TREASONOUS SCHMIDTS”.⁶⁶

Even low level government officials with no direct connection to (or personal attacks from) President Trump felt the effects of divisive politics at the highest levels. One example is Daniel Corona, former mayor of West Wendover, Nevada. In 2016, Corona was the youngest and first openly LGBTQ+ mayor to be elected in the State of Nevada. Among other key issues, he was known for taking a strong environmental conservation stance (in a state with a strong mining industry). And yet even with these potentially contentious factors, Corona stated to the National League of Cities that, “As things on the national level started to get more divisive and more painful, *that’s* when I started to receive threats (emphasis added).”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Chris Brennan and Jeremy Roebuck, “Former Philly Elections Official Al Schmidt Says Threats Became ‘Much More Graphic’ after Trump Tweet,” *Https://Www.Inquirer.Com*, <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/pennsylvania/january-6-committee-al-schmidt-voting-philadelphia-20220613.html>.

⁶⁶ “Election Officials Under Attack”, Brennan Center for Justice, June 16, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/election-officials-under-attack>.

⁶⁷ Anthony et al.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THREATS AND HARASSMENT

Harm to Elected Officials' Health and Wellbeing

One consequence of threats and harassment directed at local officials is harm to the officials' emotional and mental wellbeing. Elected officials have expressed feeling constant anxiety and stress, including a loss in ability to concentrate, loss of sleep, and unwanted intrusive thoughts as impacts of being threatened.⁶⁸ Some officials told researchers that they began to take anxiety medication and seek therapy to help deal with the stress of being threatened and harassed.⁶⁹ In at least one case, the extreme and constant stress caused a local school board official to consider suicide.⁷⁰ Shaye Moss, a Georgia election official targeted by former President Trump and subsequently inundated with violent threats, claims that the threats profoundly impacted her. "It's turned my life upside down. I no longer give out my business card... I don't want anyone knowing my name. I don't go to the grocery store at all. I haven't been anywhere at all" Moss testified.⁷¹ Moss's mother, Ruby Freeman - who was also targeted by President Trump's campaign - also testified that "There is nowhere I feel safe. Nowhere."⁷²

Not only do women appear to be the most targeted for threats and harassment, but evidence shows that they may also be the most negatively impacted by being threatened. According to the Mayors Innovation Project survey, there is a difference in officials' level of stress response by gender and race - among mayors, women of color and white women had a greater likelihood than their male counterparts of experiencing intrusive thoughts related to the threats and violence they experienced.⁷³

⁶⁸ Herrick et al.

⁶⁹ Anthony et al.

⁷⁰ The Associated Press.

⁷¹ Deepa Shivaram, "Shaye Moss Staffed an Election Office in Georgia. Then She Was Targeted by Trump," *NPR*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/22/1106459556/shaye-moss-staffed-an-election-office-in-georgia-then-she-was-targeted-by-trump>.

⁷² Amy Gardner, "Election Workers Describe 'Hateful' Threats after Trump's False Claims," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/06/21/ruby-freeman-shaye-moss-jan6-testimony/>.

⁷³ Herrick et al.

Decreased Incentive to Remain In and Run For Political Office

A major consequence of the environment of threats and harassment directed towards officials is that they may be less likely to run for office. The Mayors Innovation Project survey found that 69 percent of mayors knew someone who decided not to run for office as a result of the environment of threats and violence directed at local officials, and 32 percent of those in office had considered leaving.⁷⁴ This has several negative consequences. First, there is a loss of institutional knowledge, as experienced officials decide not to continue serving in public office. Second, there is also a loss of diversity among leaders, meaning less representation for the LGBTQ+ community, women, and racial minorities. Less diversity among leaders is likely to result in fewer challenges to the status quo or representation of priority issues for those in the minority.

Potential for Violent Rhetoric to Escalate to Physical Violence

Violent language (such as threats and harassment) is not only damaging in and of itself, but is also dangerous in that it can lead to violent actions and potentially even death. While some threats of violence may be emotional responses that are not actually indicative of support for actual physical violence, there is evidence that a significant percentage of people espousing violence genuinely support violent acts.⁷⁵ One month after the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, researchers Kalmoe and Mason asked survey respondents who claimed to have a belief that political violence is justifiable about their support for concrete examples of violence. When asked to select among various options of actual violence, only one third chose “none of these options”. The rest of the respondents had varying levels of support for violent acts such as “widespread violence by armed groups that kill lots of people” (7%), “violence by armed individuals that might kill a few people” (17%), “fistfights and beating people up”

⁷⁴ Herrick et al.

⁷⁵ Kleinfeld.

(22%), and property crime (24%).⁷⁶ Research by Bright Line Watch found similar results, in that introducing response safeguards such as providing concrete examples of violence and forcing respondents to pay more attention before responding caused a drop in support for violence, but not a complete denial.⁷⁷

INTERVENTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Holding Perpetrators Accountable

Threats and harassment of local officials necessitates intervention by federal and state governments to demonstrate their commitment to the safety and wellbeing of democratically elected officials. One step that both federal and state governments can take is to hold perpetrators accountable by investigating and prosecuting threats against local officials. For example, the Brennan Center recommends that the Department of Justice create a task force to identify, investigate, and prosecute threats against election officials.⁷⁸ ADL's Backspace Hate campaign also advocates for legislative changes that would hold perpetrators of online hate accountable.⁷⁹

Providing Protection for Elected Officials

Federal and state governments can pass legislation and provide funding that supports the physical and psychological safety of elected officials. The BDI report recommends that states pass stronger laws to prevent doxing (the publishing of private, personally identifiable information on the internet without consent).⁸⁰ One possibility is passing legislation, such as that passed by California in September 2022, that allows public officials to hide their home addresses from public records if they are

⁷⁶ Kleinfeld.

⁷⁷ Kleinfeld.

⁷⁸ "Election Officials Under Attack"

⁷⁹ "Backspace Hate: An ADL Initiative," ADL, <https://www.adl.org/backspace-hate>.

⁸⁰ "Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset."

concerned about their safety.⁸¹ Legislation can also provide explicit acknowledgement of the threats faced by women and other under-represented groups in politics, such as the U.S. House Resolution 801: Recognizing violence against women in politics as a global phenomenon and supporting women's full and meaningful participation in political life.⁸²

When it comes to public officials protecting themselves from online abuse, there are questions around the prohibition on the government of limiting the free speech of private citizens. These questions became more prominent during the Trump administration, in which then President Trump blocked individuals who criticized him on Twitter. The Supreme Court is now set to hear a case that arises out of the Poway Unified School District in San Diego County. Two parents have sued one former and one current Poway Unified school board trustees for blocking them on Facebook and Twitter. The legal question hinges on whether the trustees were acting as government officials on their social media pages, or whether they were acting as private individuals. The case is set to be heard later this year or in early 2024.⁸³

Even if individual public officials are restricted from blocking users on social media, governments can take proactive measures to counter online aggression and intimidation. The Australian government has set an example with its creation of *eSafety*, the first-ever government agency dedicated to protecting people online. *ESafety* uses an international network of organizations, civil society institutions, and the private sector to deter online abusers as well as hold them accountable.⁸⁴ State governments can also

⁸¹ Adam Beam, "California Lawmakers OK Bill to Hide Public Worker Addresses," *AP NEWS*, September 1, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/health-california-public-legislature-1523617244f13792bc5e69d93c038ad6>.

⁸² "Pressley, Tlaib, Colleagues Reintroduce Resolution Calling for Government Action to Mitigate Violence Against Women in Politics During Women's History Month," March 15, 2023, <https://admin-pressley.house.gov/2023/03/15/pressley-tlaib-colleagues-reintroduce-resolution-calling-for-government-action-to-mitigate-violence-against-women-in-politics-during-womens-history-month/>.

⁸³ Greg Moran, "Supreme Court to Hear Poway Case on Whether Public Officials Can Block People on Social Media," *Poway News Chieftain*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/pomerado-news/news/story/2023-04-25/supreme-court-poway-social-media-officials>.

⁸⁴ Ladyane Souza et al., "Viewpoint: Protecting Women Politicians from Online Abuse," *Political Violence at a Glance*, March 9, 2023,

assist in protecting local officials. BDI recommends that the government provide funding to protect the physical safety of local officials. This funding could go towards safety measures such as training programs for local officials and home security systems for their homes.⁸⁵

Cities Must Engage in Preparedness Planning

Cities need to be proactive in addressing threats and violence towards local officials. The National League of Cities research found that three out of five of the local officials surveyed indicated that their office did not have a formal action plan in place to respond to threats against officials.⁸⁶ This leaves public officials and their offices unprepared. The National League of Cities recommends that cities coordinate with local law enforcement to provide education, training, and promote preparedness in case of violent incidents.⁸⁷ The report also suggests utilizing local law enforcement presence at public meetings, as well as making infrastructure changes to enhance physical safety, such as the use of metal detectors and ballistic glass.⁸⁸ However, not all these recommendations are fiscally possible or face other capacity constraints (i.e. rural areas dependent on Sheriff's departments that have limited staff).

Enhancing Data Collection and Sharing

Bridging Divides Initiative makes several recommendations related to enhanced data collection and open communication among multiple stakeholders to address threats to local officials.⁸⁹ BDI recommends improving the accuracy of the data on threats against public officials by developing strong self-reporting mechanisms, casting a wider net for sourcing of incidents, and increasing collaboration (including data sharing) among stakeholders such as law enforcement, civil society groups, and

<https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2023/03/09/viewpoint-protecting-women-politicians-from-online-abuse/>.

⁸⁵ "Election Officials Under Attack"

⁸⁶ Anthony et al.

⁸⁷ Anthony et al.

⁸⁸ Anthony et al.

⁸⁹ "Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset"

government. BDI also recommends expanding data collection in a way that provides feedback on the effectiveness of potential interventions.

Regulating Online Platforms

There are multiple recommendations for improved regulation by internet companies of threats and harassment posted online. The Public Figures, Public Rage report highlights the need for social media platforms to provide greater transparency around their content moderation policies and enforcement mechanisms.⁹⁰ Specifically, the report recommends that social media companies need to provide clear guidelines around what violates their policies and what does not, have a clear appeals process, and maintain ongoing reporting on the type of content that is removed for violating harassment policies. The report also recommends specific training for employee moderators on harassment of public figures. The training should be based in research and include latest guidance around intersectionality and current trends.

Improving the Civil Discourse

The National League of Cities offers several suggestions for cities seeking to improve civil discourse.⁹¹ One suggestion is to provide a formal code of conduct for public meetings, which can be publicly posted and reviewed at the start of each session. Similarly, a code of conduct for online behavior can be agreed to by local officials and publicized. This allows local leaders to set an example for engaging with each other and the public. Cities can also partner with community organizations that promote civil discourse.

⁹⁰ Cécile Guerin and Eisha Maharasingam-Shah, “Public Figures, Public Rage” (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, n.d.), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf>.

⁹¹ Anthony et al.

CONCLUSION

The literature around threats and harassment faced by local officials in the United States makes clear that officials have been facing an increasing number and intensity of threats within the last five years. While no official is immune from attack, women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and those with intersectional identities tend to be at higher risk of being threatened and harassed. Threats online frequently reference death, often with imagery that references firearms. Threats directed at women commonly reference sexual violence. Threats sometimes include family members of the elected officials, and in many instances, protests form outside of elected officials homes. At the city council and school board levels, polarization around covid-19 mandates and critical race theory are significant drivers of threats and harassment. Political polarization at the local level may also be a reflection of polarization and divisiveness demonstrated at the highest levels of government.

As a consequence of the increasingly threatening environment of public service, some local leaders are resigning or choosing not to run for re-election. This is harmful to democracy, as it results in a loss of institutional knowledge and continuity and a loss of diversity among our elected representatives. Various measures have been recommended by civic organizations to decrease the levels of threats and harassment directed at local officials and reinforce democratic norms of civil discourse. Some of these recommendations include holding perpetrators accountable, requiring enhanced transparency and accountability from online platforms, passing legislation designed specifically to protect elected officials, providing additional security for elected officials, and working in community partnerships to promote civil discourse.

There remains a need for additional research around the impacts of threats directed at local elected officials. For instance, what is the statistical relationship between an elected official being threatened or harassed and choosing to leave office? In addition, most of the current research around

threats, harassment, and the decision to leave office has focused on election workers and public health officials.⁹² More needs to be done to understand impacts on a wider range of officials that collectively form our democratically elected local government.

⁹² For reference, see “Election Officials Under Attack” and Julie A. Ward et al., “Pandemic-Related Workplace Violence and Its Impact on Public Health Officials, March 2020–January 2021,” *American Journal of Public Health* 112, no. 5 (May 2022): 736–46, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306649>.

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