

Submission 89  
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Inappropriate Behaviour: Experiences of 2017 Parliamentary Candidates  
Evidence from the Representative Audit of Britain Study (ESRC – ES/M500410/1)

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## 1. Sample and data

This evidence is based on early data, the first 733 responses received out of the 2825 candidates we have contacted; giving a response rate of 25.9%. The total response rate to our 2015 survey was 57% and we have no reason to anticipate a lower response rate at the end of data collection for the 2017 survey. We therefore stress that these early results may change as we increase our sample size.

For comparability to previous studies, our questions are similar to those by David James who conducted a survey of MPs on harassment in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Our sample includes N= 733 candidates (including 2015 MPs who stood again) from the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and Green parties (see Table A1). With respect to gender, 229 respondents identify as female, 502 identify as male, and two identify as non-binary. We have 31 black / minority ethnic candidates in the sample, however due to the small N we are unable to say anything statistically about BME candidates experience of inappropriate behaviours. The data on BME candidates should be interpreted as descriptive only.

## 2. Topline insights

- 32% of candidates who have participated in the survey so far said they experienced some form of inappropriate behaviour during the 2017 general election campaign
- Women candidates were more likely to have experienced inappropriate behaviour
- Abuse of women candidates is not directed at any specific age group; women of all ages receive abuse
- 73% of candidates find abuse annoying, a majority (56%) are concerned, and 32% say they are fearful
- Sending inappropriate emails and abuse on social media are the most common types of inappropriate behaviour; physical attacks, thankfully, are rare
- 32% of candidates report inappropriate behaviour by supporters of opposition parties/candidates
- To increase candidate safety and improve the campaign environment, candidates suggested maintaining the anonymity of candidates' and agents' home addresses and ensuring appropriate and timely responses from police and political parties. They also suggest appropriate training on how to deal with harassment should be provided by parties and police.

## 3. Key findings

In this submission, we use *inappropriate behaviour* or *abuse* as general terms for a range of behaviours (e.g. assault, threats, harassment or unwanted approaches/contact).

### 1. Extent of inappropriate behaviours

To measure the extent of abuse during the campaign, we asked candidates: *During the 2017 General Election campaign, there were several press reports about candidates experiencing harassment and even security threats. Did you personally experience any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to your security in your position as a parliamentary candidate during the election campaign?*

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<sup>2</sup> James, D. V., Sukhwai, S., Farnham, F. R., Evans, J., Barrie, C., Taylor, A., & Wilson, S. P. (2016). Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27(3), 309-330. We are grateful to David James for sharing his questions with us.

Just under one third (32%) of candidates said they had experienced some form of inappropriate behaviour during 2017 campaign. We find significant differences with respect to party and gender. As shown in Table 1, Conservative candidates were more likely to report experiencing inappropriate behaviour than candidates from any other party. Conservative candidates cited more general abuse, in particular, being called ‘Tory scum’.

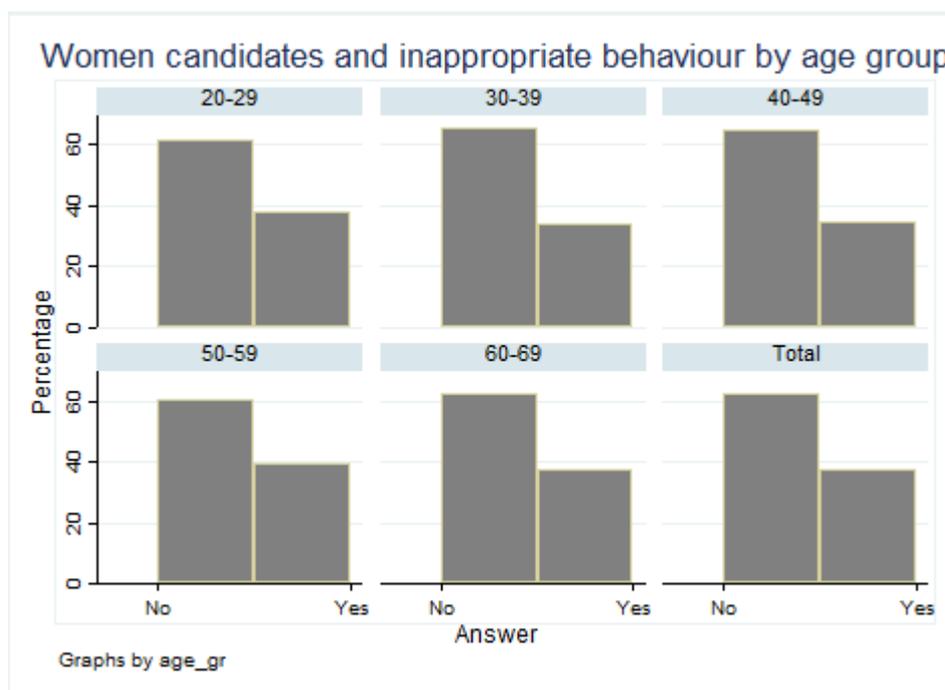
**Table 1. Reports of inappropriate behaviour in the 2017 general election by party**

	% No	% Yes	Total % (N)
Conservative	31 (29)	69 (65)	100 (94)
Labour	64 (110)	36 (61)	100 (171)
Liberal Democrat	76 (152)	24 (49)	100 (201)
SNP	38 (3)	62 (5)	100 (8)
Plaid Cymru	67 (4)	33 (2)	100 (6)
UKIP	59 (46)	41 (32)	100 (78)
Green	90 (145)	10 (16)	100 (161)
<b>Total</b>	<b>68 (491)</b>	<b>32 (233)</b>	<b>100 (724)</b>

(Percentage (N); Pearson  $\chi^2$  109.86;  $p < .001$ )

Women candidates (37%) were more likely to report being subject to inappropriate behaviour than men (30%). As shown in Figure 1, abuse occurs across all age groups and is not statistically more likely to be targeted at younger or older women candidates.

**Figure 1. Percentage of women candidates reporting inappropriate behaviour by age group**



Our sample contains 31 BME candidates, 7 (23%) of whom said they had experienced inappropriate behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Of the 7 BME candidates who reported abusive behaviour, four are women.

We did not ask directly the extent to which people affiliated with the candidate's campaign were also targeted for abuse (see Table 3, item 2 that asks about abuse directed at the candidate or others close to them). However, in open text responses, we can illustrate how abuse extends to people in the candidate's sphere:

Some examples mentioned:

- "I received mildly harassing phone calls at all hours. A family member's car was keyed. I was not terribly distressed, but my husband was, which became a source of contention regarding standing for office"
- "The only incident that enraged me was the person who insulted my family and relatives. Others were vitriolic in their abuse and rabid in their hatred of all things Conservative and, although I accepted this, such behaviour distressed my wife"
- "Intrusive (illegible) is delivered to my home and being followed in a car"
- "A phone line was diverted home. My wife answered and a 14-15 year old girl, possibly encouraged by her father was aggressive and rude"
- "Aggressive behaviour towards my wife and another female campaigner"
- "References to where I live and my children and family mentioned, references to my daily routine"

Some insights from the open-ended questions:

- Candidates indicated that the most worrying abuse / events are those that include references to place of work, children and family
- Families, particularly spouses and partners, feel also threatened
- Harassment can become a source of contention with family regarding standing for office

## 2. Responses to inappropriate behaviour

We asked candidates the extent to which they felt *annoyed*, *concerned* or *fearful* in response to any inappropriate behaviour they encountered. Table 2 shows that 73% of candidates find abuse annoying, a majority (56%) are concerned, and 32% say they are fearful.

**Table 2. Percentage of candidates who felt annoyed, concerned or fearful in response to abuse**

	<b>Annoyed</b>	<b>Concerned</b>	<b>Fearful</b>
Not at all	4	16	39
Only a little	23	28	29
Moderately	31	39	21
Very	42	17	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>3</sup> Of the 7 BME candidates who reported abusive behaviour, four are women. Although our numbers for BME candidates are too small to draw any statistical inferences, we were keen to look at patterns of abuse for BME women candidates, following the Amnesty International report that BME women receive the lion's share of abuse (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/04/female-mps-sent-25000-abusive-twitter-messages-just-six-months/>).

Table 2a shows the percentage of candidates indicating they felt annoyed, concerned or fearful by gender. We find significant gender differences in candidates' responses to abuse.

**Table 2a. Percentage of candidates who felt annoyed, concerned or fearful in response to abuse by gender**

	Annoyed		Concerned		Fearful	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Not at all	5	1	20	7	46	27
Only a little	26	18	30	24	33	22
Moderately	34	26	36	43	14	33
Very	35	55	13	26	7	18
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

### 3. Types of inappropriate behaviour

We asked candidates about different types of inappropriate behaviours they may have experienced – ranging from being physically attacked, followed, inappropriate social media contact and sexual assault. As shown in Table 3, behaviours involving physical abuse/assault is rare. More frequent is abuse through sending inappropriate emails or contact on social media. This table also shows that significant party and gender differences are present. In every instance save sexual harassment we see significant differences among candidates of the different parties. With respect to gender, women candidates were more likely to be sexually harassed and to be sent inappropriate emails. Other recent studies (i.e. Amnesty International) have reported that women, and in particular, BME women receive the lion's share of abuse on social media. Our survey shows that 25% of women candidates report receiving 3 or more instances of abuse on social media compared to 18% of men, however, overall differences were not significant at standard significance levels ( $p = .07$ ).

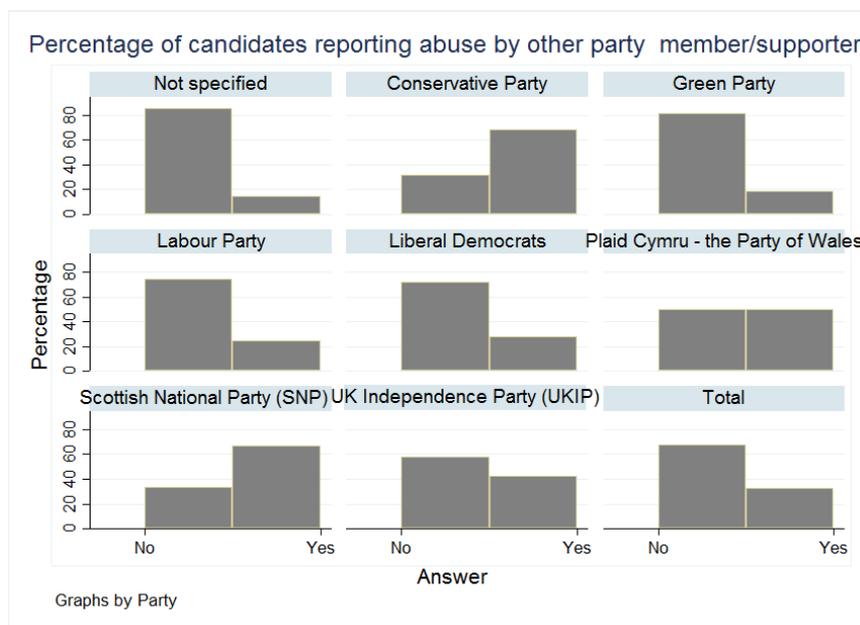
**Table 3. Types of inappropriate behaviour**

	Never	1-2 times	3+ times	Party differences	Gender differences
Physically attacked	98	2	0	Yes	No
Threats to harm you / others	90	8	2	Yes	No
Made unwanted approaches	88	8	3	Yes	No
Followed	96	3	1	Yes	No
Loitered at cand's home/other	96	3	1	Yes	No
Interfered with property	95	4	1	Yes	No
Sent inappropriate email	80	7	13	Yes	Yes
Inappropriate social media contact	76	4	20	Yes	No
Sent inappropriate letters	91	6	3	Yes	No
Made inappropriate phone calls	91	5	4	Yes	No
Sexually harassed	99	0	1	No	Yes
Sexually assaulted	100	0	0	No	No
Other	100	0	0	No	No

### 4. Sources of inappropriate behaviour

To gauge the extent to which inappropriate or abusive behaviour was between supporters of political parties, we asked: *During the 2017 General Election campaign, have you or your campaign experienced any inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/ or candidates?* The data show that 32% of candidates report inappropriate behaviour by supporters of opposition parties/candidates. We do not observe gender differences, but once again, see significant party differences. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses by political party. Some 68% of Conservative candidates said abuse came from opponents, compare to 28% for LibDems and 25% of Labour candidates.

**Figure 2.**



Our question asked about inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties, but in the open text questions, candidates identified several other sources of abuse. We are unable to quantify these, but illustrate the range with the text below. Several candidates noted that the political parties and candidates themselves are responsible for an abusive environment because they use aggressive rhetoric in their campaigns. Other candidates mentioned that social media companies are partially responsible because they should do more to identify members that behave aggressively. Respondents also mention that police should do more to respond to denunciations of harassment because the high levels of impunity have let this type of behaviour flourish. Other candidates identified the press as responsible for fostering harassment due to their aggressive and inadequate coverage of the campaign.

**5. What should be done about harassment/intimidation?**

Finally, in an open-ended question we asked candidates: *What measures, if any, should be taken to increase the security of election candidates?* We identify a range of responses below, in approximate order of the frequency with which they were mentioned.

- Maintain the option of anonymity of candidates' home addresses
- Serious and quick response from police; several candidates indicated that police are unsupportive, e.g. "don't make a fuss about this"
- Security advice from parties, police and other organizations
- Social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook etc.) should be forced to take action against trolls
- A special watchdog to investigate this type of abuse
- Ensure that candidates are accompanied in all moments while campaigning
- Stronger actions against offenders (e.g. including jail and fines)
- Parties should tell their members that this behaviour is unacceptable.

However, a few candidates felt that nothing can be done and this is something that comes with the territory of being a parliamentary candidate.

#### **4. Summary**

Our preliminary evidence shows that intimidation of parliamentary candidates is not limited to a few small cases. Just under one-third of candidates who have responded to our survey thus far report incidences of abuse or intimidation. From our early results, we find that women candidates are more likely to experience abuse, which is common across all age groups. Over half of candidates who experience inappropriate behaviour are concerned by it. Candidates offered a range of actions to address abuse: 1) maintaining the anonymity of candidates' and agents' home addresses and 2) prompt, appropriate responses by police, political parties and social media platforms, we among the most frequently identified.

## Appendix

The Representative Audit of Britain (RAB) is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC - ES/M500410/1). Following the 8 June General Election, the first wave of the survey of parliamentary candidates was fielded 17-29 July 2017 (N = 733). A second wave is currently in field and data collection is expected to finish December 2017.

**Table A1. Number of candidates by political party**

	Number	Per cent
Conservative	95	13
Labour	172	23
Liberal Democrat	201	27
SNP	8	1
Plaid Cymru	6	1
UKIP	80	11
Green	163	22
Not specified	8	1
Total	733	100

(Note: rounding to nearest percentage)

### Question wording

Q3. During the 2017 General Election campaign, there were several press reports about candidates experiencing harassment and even security threats. Did you personally experience any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to your security in your position as a parliamentary candidate during the election campaign?

If yes: Q3a. As a result of these behaviours, did you feel...annoyed, concerned, fearful

Q3b. If you were subjected to any form of inappropriate behaviour during the election campaign, which of the following forms of harassments / security threats did you experience? And how often did you experience such behaviour?

Has any person during the election campaign...

Q3c. If you experienced any inappropriate behaviour during the 2017 General Election campaign, which experience has affected you most?

Q4. What measures, if any, should be taken to increase the security of election candidates?

Q5. During the 2017 General Election campaign, have you or your campaign experienced any inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/candidates?