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Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Review of the 2024 general election inquiry

Background

The administration, process, and conduct of the 2024 General Election present critical areas for improvement to ensure the integrity and safety of future elections. Despite increased awareness and initiatives to address harassment, abuse, and intimidation (HAI) against political candidates, evidence suggests that these issues are intensifying. This submission, prepared by Dr. Sofia Collignon and Dr. Wolfgang Rüdig, provides systematic evidence of the current state of HAI among candidates, highlights the significant challenges faced during the 2024 campaign, and offers recommendations for strengthening future electoral processes in the United Kingdom.

Key Findings

1. **Rising Incidence of HAI:** Preliminary results from the 2025 Representative Audit of Britain Survey indicate that 85% of candidates faced at least one form of violence during their campaign.
2. **Increased Security Concerns:** A significant decline in candidates refusing to publish their home addresses on ballot papers, from one-quarter in 2010 to three-quarters in 2024, underscores growing security concerns.
3. **Public Attitudes:** Polling reveals troubling attitudes among Londoners, with 18% finding it acceptable to follow political figures on the street and 16% supporting the publication of their personal information online without consent.
4. **Need for Enhanced Measures:** Recommendations include improved safety training for candidates, better police response to HAI, stricter social media regulations, and a shift from reactive to preventive approaches.

Insights

In 2024, as part of the Representative Audit of Britain Survey, we collected contact details for 2,801 candidates who stood in the General Election. 335 candidates responded to our survey, resulting in a response rate of 12% (fieldwork is still ongoing).

We asked candidates if they had personally experienced harassment, abuse, or intimidation (HAI). Preliminary results reveal that **32% of respondents openly acknowledged having faced some form of HAI**. We also presented them with a list of possible experiences of HAI that included

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different forms of physical, psychological and online violence and asked them to indicate if they have experienced them at least once. **85% of candidates experienced at least one form of violence during their campaign.** Results align with multiple reports indicating that HAI was a significant issue during the 2024 campaign^{2,3} and suggest that, despite increased awareness, media attention, and initiatives aimed at equipping political actors to address the risks of HAI, the problem is intensifying. In 2019, nearly half (49%) of General Election candidates reported experiencing HAI while campaigning, an 11 percentage point increase compared with the 2017 General Election⁴.

One clear indicator of heightened security concerns among candidates is the sharp decline in those willing to publish their home addresses on the ballot paper. We analysed all the “Statements of Persons Nominated” published by returning officers. The rule allowing candidates this choice was first introduced in the 2010 General Election, when approximately one-quarter of candidates withheld their addresses. By 2024, this figure had risen dramatically, with three-quarters of candidates choosing not to publish their home address. **This trend underscores the growing concern among political candidates regarding personal security.** This issue impacts not only the personal safety of candidates but also broader electoral dynamics, including the perceived gap between politicians and voters.

The issue will likely remain a major challenge for the conduct and administration of elections in the UK. Polling conducted by Savanta on behalf of the Mile End Institute in June 2024 surveyed a representative sample of Londoners and revealed troubling attitudes toward political harassment. **Among respondents, 18% believed it was acceptable to follow political figures on the street, 14% felt it was acceptable to loiter near political figures' offices or homes, and 16% thought it was acceptable to publish political figures' personal information online without their consent.**

These findings suggest that some members of the public condone behaviour that could intimidate or harm political candidates. With nearly one in five Londoners expressing tolerance for such actions, addressing HAI will remain an urgent priority in safeguarding the democratic process in the United Kingdom.

² Collignon, S & Rüdig, W (2024) “Who Runs for Office? Understanding Candidate Diversity, Safety, and Localism in the UK General Election 2024” *The Political Quarterly*.

³ Hannah Al-Othman, *Female Election Candidates Report Increasing Abuse*, London, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/14/abuse-female-election-candidates-getting-worse-uk-targeted>; Eleanor Lawson, *Female MPs Call Harassment an Assault on Democracy*, London, *BBC News*, 5 July 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4ng3j1pnpqo>; Eleni Courea, *Deluge of Abuse Sent on X to Prominent UK Politicians in Election Period*, London, *The Guardian*, 9 September 2024.

⁴ Collignon, S., Campbell, R., & Rüdig, W. (2022). The gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates in the UK. *The Political Quarterly*, 93(1), 32-38; Collignon, S., & Rüdig, W. (2021). Increasing the cost of female representation? The gendered effects of harassment, abuse and intimidation towards Parliamentary candidates in the UK. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(4), 429-449.

Measures in place to prevent and tackle abuse and intimidation of candidates.

There are **improvements that can be done to address the issue of harassment, abuse and intimidation** during campaigns. It is important to point out that some candidates expressed concerns about security measures distancing candidates from voters, suggesting that overly rigid protections could harm democratic engagement. We advocate for a safety approach that pays special attention not to erode the link between citizens and representatives. With the right measures in place, this can be an opportunity to highlight how rewarding political participation can be and to improve the quality of political discussion in the UK.

We argue that **a paradigm-shift from reactive to preventive approaches is imperative**. The severity and persistence of HAI call for comprehensive legislative frameworks that hold perpetrators accountable, do not rely on the good will of social media companies and ease the burden on victims. Transitioning to preventive strategies requires dedicated resources, time, and political commitment. The proposed measures support a triage of actors—candidates, law enforcement, social media companies, and policymakers—working collaboratively to create a safer electoral environment.

We aim to create a comprehensive framework that addresses immediate threats and mitigates future risks by focusing on:

- **Training:** Candidates and party officials should receive **positive safety** training. It is worth highlighting here the set of resources published by the Local Government Association (LGA) to support councillors and councils deal with HAI in public life. The resources are available on their website <https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation> and digital citizenship: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0>
- **Enhancing the Effectiveness of Police Response:** 36% of candidates surveyed reported the abuse to the police and almost half of candidates surveyed indicated that they did not report the abuse to anyone. Many police forces feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle HAI due to the scale of the problem. But there is evidence that training police officers can change their attitudes positively towards victims, leading to better outcomes. As a result, some police forces should establish specialized units to tackle this issue, increased funding, and mandated training for officials.
- Institutions have been slow to adapt to the rapid social changes fuelled by polarisation and the rise of user-generated content online. Law enforcement officials tasked with combating online and offline HAI must possess adequate skills, resources, and sensitivity to apply the law comprehensively and support victims who currently also face the heavy weight of collecting evidence.
- **Social Media and Media Regulation:** To address harassment and ensure a safer electoral environment, candidates surveyed suggest improved policing of hate speech, incitement, and

harassment on social media platforms. They propose requiring social media companies to implement ID verification systems to reduce anonymous abuse and create greater accountability. Additionally, political parties should be held responsible for harassment or incitement carried out by their members, and media outlets must be held accountable for spreading misinformation or inflammatory content that could exacerbate tensions or incite harm.

- Empowering candidates and elected officials through **digital literacy** and awareness programs can equip them to navigate the treacherous online landscape. Creating mechanisms that facilitate quick responses to misinformation and hate speech, coupled with measures to counter anonymity on social media, is crucial. A concerted effort between policymakers, digital platforms, and civil society is necessary to prevent the escalation of online violence and abuse.

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