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Speaker's Conference on the security of candidates, MPs and elections

BACKGROUND

On 14 October 2024, the House of Commons established the Speaker's Conference. The motion directed the Conference to examine the factors influencing threat levels against candidates and MPs, as well as the effectiveness of responses to such threats. Additionally, the Conference has been tasked with making recommendations on the necessary arrangements to ensure free and fair elections and the appropriate protection of candidates in future UK-wide parliamentary elections, along with safeguarding elected representatives thereafter. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Speaker's Conference.

We are a team of academics with extensive research expertise in political violence, electoral integrity, and candidate behaviour. Our research focuses on the experiences of parliamentary candidates in the UK, particularly the challenges they face in terms of harassment, abuse, and intimidation (HAI). Dr **Sofia Collignon** (Queen Mary University of London) has conducted extensive research on electoral intimidation, gender-based violence in politics, and candidate safety. Dr **Wolfgang Rüdig** (University of Strathclyde) specialises in political behaviour, election studies, and party activism. Prof **Susan Banducci** (University of Birmingham) is an expert in media influence, and electoral processes. Our research has been published in leading political science journals and has contributed to national and international discussions on electoral security and democratic resilience.

The evidence presented in this submission draws on the most recent research on the topic and data original from the Representative Audit of Britain (RAB) Survey, which has investigated the spread, type, magnitude, and consequences of harassment, abuse, and intimidation in the 2017, 2019, and 2024 General Elections. For the 2024 General Election, sponsored by Queen Mary University of London, the University of Strathclyde and the European Research Council we collected contact details for 2,801 candidates who stood for election. So far, 335 parliamentary candidates from different parties have responded to our survey, resulting in a response rate of 12%, though fieldwork is still ongoing.

TOPLINE FINDINGS:

1. Harassment and intimidation are widespread: 85% of candidates experienced at least one form of harassment, abuse, or intimidation (HAI). This highlights the normalisation of political violence in the UK and the urgent need for stronger protections.

2. Identity-based abuse is a significant problem: 15% of candidates faced misogynistic abuse, 12% homophobia, 15% racism, 14% Islamophobia, 7% antisemitism, and 15% ableism. Marginalised groups are disproportionately targeted, threatening diversity and deterring underrepresented voices from standing for office.

3. Misinformation fuels hostility and threats: 30% of candidates were targeted with false or misleading information, exacerbating abuse and intimidation. Social media and the press play a direct role in escalating threats, yet current measures to combat misinformation are inadequate.

4. Threats undermine political participation: 27% of candidates considered not standing due to harassment, while 50% avoided certain policy issues for fear of abuse. Threats silence candidates and distort democracy, limiting debate and discouraging public engagement in politics.

5. Institutional support is inadequate and failing candidates: Only 9% of candidates reported incidents to the police, 22% to their party, and 17% did not report at all. A lack of trust in law enforcement and political institutions is preventing effective responses to threats.

6. Stronger protections are urgently needed: Candidates call for tougher legal consequences, stronger policing, social media regulation, and safer campaigning measures. Legal and institutional reforms are essential to safeguard democracy and protect those who stand for election.

EVIDENCE

FACTORS INFLUENCING THREAT LEVELS AGAINST CANDIDATES AND MPS

We asked candidates standing in the 2024 GE if they had personally experienced harassment, abuse, or intimidation (HAI) while campaigning. Preliminary results show that 32% of respondents openly acknowledged facing some form of HAI. We also provided a list of possible HAI experiences, including various forms of physical, psychological, and online violence, and asked candidates to indicate if they had experienced any of them at least once. An overwhelming **85% of candidates reported experiencing at least one form of violence during their campaign**. The disconnect between the proportion of candidates who immediately labelled their experiences as HAI and those who experienced some form of HAI but did not categorise it as such indicates a certain **level of normalisation of violence in British politics**¹. This notion is further supported by a significant proportion of candidates (31%) who agree with the statement that HAI is part of politics in the UK.

Looking at specific forms of violence we find that **58% of candidates suffered of physical violence** (being physically attacked, receiving unwanted approaches, being touched, kissed or hugged against their will and sexual assault); **77% of psychological violence** (being threatened, approached, followed on the street, having people loitering around candidate's offices or home, being belittled or insulted, damage to candidate's property and sexual harassment) **and 83% of online violence** (including receiving inappropriate emails and phone calls, attacks on social media and being the subject of misinformation). Additionally, many **candidates faced targeted vandalism of their campaign materials**. Among respondents, 17% reported that their personal election posters were defaced or damaged, while 21% experienced damage to their party's posters. Additionally, 15% had their election leaflets tampered with or destroyed. These incidents reflect the broader challenges of intimidation and disruption faced by candidates.

Underlying Drivers of HAI

Candidates reported experiencing harassment and intimidation driven by prejudice against specific groups. Among respondents, 15% experienced violence motivated by misogyny, while 12% faced harassment due to homophobia. Similarly, 15% reported abuse linked to ableism, and another 15% experienced racism. Islamophobia was cited as a motivation for threats or violence by 14% of respondents, while 7% faced anti-Semitic abuse. Our findings evidence the **persistent and multifaceted nature of identity-based harassment, abuse and intimidation** faced by parliamentary candidates².

¹ See as well: Collignon, S., & Rüdiger, W. (2020). Harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 422-429.

² See as well: Collignon, S., Campbell, R., & Rüdiger, W. (2022). The gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates in the UK. *The Political Quarterly*, 93(1), 32-38.

Among respondents, 69% reported being targeted by individuals displaying signs of delusion, obsession, incoherence, paranoia, or other behavioural disorders. Additionally, 71% indicated that perpetrators were members of the public who were angry or frustrated. Harassment also came from within the political sphere, with 68% experiencing it from activists and another 68% from supporters of other parties or candidates. The fact that HAI comes from such a broad spectrum of perpetrators emphasises the need for a targeted strategy that includes stronger law enforcement response, improved public awareness campaigns, better support systems for candidates to manage threats, and, importantly, active involvement from political parties. **Parties must take responsibility for ensuring their candidates' safety, providing resources, and addressing any internal harassment or threats from their supporters.**

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RESPONSE TO SUCH THREATS AT THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION

Candidates responded to harassment, abuse, and intimidation (HAI) in different ways. Among respondents, **22% reported incidents to their party, while only 9% went to the police.** Support networks played a key role, with 23% discussing their experiences with family and friends. However, just 2% chose to speak to the media, and 5% reported incidents to election officials. Notably, 17% did not report their experiences to anyone, highlighting potential **barriers to seeking support or a lack of confidence in existing reporting mechanisms.** Our findings suggest a pressing need for clearer reporting pathways and stronger institutional responses to candidate safety.

We asked candidates for **their suggestions to enhance security** and mitigate the harassment, intimidation, and threats they face during election campaigns. We analyse their responses and group them into several key categories:

1. **Protection of personal information:** Candidates have suggested measures to prevent the public disclosure of home addresses to enhance their safety. However, this approach raises certain challenges. Some candidates choose to make their addresses public to demonstrate their connection to the local community. Additionally, in smaller communities where neighbours are familiar with one another, restricting address disclosure may have limited effectiveness. As an alternative, candidates have proposed providing free PO boxes for use in official documentation, offering a safer yet practical solution.
2. **Stronger law enforcement and legal protections:** There is a generalised perception that current legal measures are inadequate and that there is a need for stronger deterrents to prevent abuse. Candidates suggest the implementation of harsher penalties for individuals who harass, intimidate, or threaten candidates, make harassment and intimidation of political candidates a criminal offense and the treatment of deliberate intimidation of candidates as a form of domestic terrorism.
3. **Improved police support and security measures:** Many candidates reported feeling vulnerable, with insufficient police support, particularly in high-risk situations. Suggestions include increase police presence at public meetings and hustings, the establishment of dedicated police liaisons to candidates, provision of personal security and attack alarms.
4. **Regulation of social media and news media:** Candidates consider that online abuse and misinformation are major contributors to the hostile environment faced by candidates. They would like social media platforms to take stronger action against hate speech, misinformation, and incitement, the implementation of user identity verification measures to limit anonymous abuse and the establishment of mechanisms to hold media outlets accountable for biased or inflammatory reporting.

5. **Education and cultural change:** Candidates consider that hostility toward candidates is often rooted in misunderstandings about politics, which are exacerbated by divisive rhetoric. They suggest the promotion of public education on political behaviour and democratic participation and to encourage a culture of actively calling out harassment and abuse. Candidates also recognise that political leaders should set an example by maintaining a respectful tone in public discourse.
6. **Better party accountability:** Ensuring candidates' safety should be a shared responsibility between political parties, rather than solely the candidate's concern. Political parties should take responsibility for any misconduct by their members. This is additional to their responsibility to provide security training and resources to candidates.

Challenges for the police in implementing election security measures

One of the primary challenges is **resource constraints**. Increasing police presence at public events, assigning officers to candidates, and ensuring a swift response to threats would require substantial financial investment. Many police forces already operate with limited budgets and personnel, making it difficult to allocate additional resources to election security without diverting them from other critical areas. Staffing shortages further complicate the feasibility of providing dedicated officers for candidates, particularly during busy election periods.

Logistical challenges in candidate protection could hinder enforcement. Increasing police presence at hustings and campaign events would be resource-intensive and may not be feasible across all regions, particularly in rural areas with limited policing capacity. Similarly, while providing candidates with emergency police contact numbers is a positive step, ensuring a rapid response in every case may be impractical given existing demands on police time.

Another key issue is the **regional disparities** in police resources and the professionalisation of election security measures. In some areas, police forces already collaborate with local councils and political parties to protect candidates, and officers have received specialised training on election security, candidate risks, and the legal nuances of political harassment. However, the level of implementation and professionalism varies significantly across regions. Ensuring that all candidates and MPs, regardless of location, receive the same standard of protection is essential for upholding fairness and security in the electoral process.

Another significant hurdle is **legal and procedural complexities**. Some proposals, such as making harassment of candidates a specific criminal offense or classifying intimidation as domestic terrorism, would require new legislation. Additionally, defining what constitutes harassment in a political context can be challenging, leading to potential legal ambiguities and difficulties in consistent enforcement.

Policing social media presents further complications. Many social media platforms operate outside UK jurisdiction, making it difficult to enforce domestic laws against them. The sheer volume of online abuse and misinformation is overwhelming, and expecting police to monitor and respond to every case is unrealistic. Moreover, many perpetrators hide behind anonymous accounts, making it difficult to identify and prosecute those responsible for spreading harmful content. The alternative is to put more pressure on social media companies to be proactive in removing harmful content. Yet, that **raises the question of whether the UK should rely on foreign companies to regulate freedom of expression and the flow of information in the UK.**

There is also the challenge of **public perception and political sensitivities**. If police forces are seen as intervening too aggressively in election-related incidents, they risk accusations of political bias, which could undermine public trust in both law enforcement and the electoral process. Additionally, stronger enforcement against harassment and misinformation must be carefully balanced with

protecting free speech and political discourse. **Ensuring that legitimate political criticism is not mistakenly categorised as abuse is essential for maintaining democratic integrity.**

SECURING FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

Impact of Threats, Abuse, and Harassment on Candidates and Their Families

In an open-ended question, parliamentary candidates described the experiences that affected them the most. Their responses highlight the significant emotional toll and real-life consequences of harassment, intimidation, and abuse—not just for themselves, but also for their staff and families.

Emotional and Psychological Stress: Many candidates reported experiencing ongoing anxiety due to direct threats and invasive behaviour. One candidate shared, *"I received an extreme death threat to myself and my children, which has now resulted in police action."* Others described feeling watched or monitored in ways that made them uncomfortable. *"A neighbour has been reporting on Facebook when I am in my home, making me feel insecure in my own house."*

Disruption of Daily Life: For some, concerns about personal safety led to significant changes in routine. One candidate described how threats affected even their pets: *"I was afraid people would find out where I lived. I was particularly afraid for my cat—he's now a house cat and not allowed out."*

Impact on Mental Health: Persistent online abuse, particularly from anonymous accounts, contributed to distress. One candidate reflected, *"For me, it was the constant negative comments on social media. They were always from anonymous accounts making horribly homophobic comments."*

Fear for Personal Safety: Many candidates reported that threats extended to their staff, who were forced to deal with abusive messages and phone calls. One candidate noted, *"People phoning my office to leave abusive messages that my staff had to listen to annoyed me."*

Strain on Relationships: Public confrontations also took a toll on candidates' personal lives. One respondent recalled a particularly distressing incident: *"While watching the England football match in a pub, a woman suddenly came up and shouted in my face, in front of my wife and friends, 'What are you going to do about your government committing genocide? Genocidal murderer!!!' She wouldn't stop and was very threatening. It was really upsetting for us all."*

Impact of harassment on decisions about standing, campaigning and serving in public office

The **impact of harassment on political participation is significant**, with many candidates altering their decisions and behaviours in response to threats and intimidation. **Over a quarter (27%) of candidates considered not standing for office** due to concerns about harassment, highlighting the extent to which safety fears can deter political engagement. Additionally, 25% hesitated before taking a particular course of action or making a decision due to either actual harassment or the fear of it. The effects extend beyond personal choices to policy engagement, with **half of the candidates (50%) hesitating to get involved in certain issues** due to concerns about harassment, and 43% ultimately avoiding some topics altogether. These findings underscore **the chilling effect that harassment can have on democratic debate**, limiting the range of issues candidates feel safe addressing and, in turn, restricting the diversity of voices in political discourse³.

³ See: Collignon, S., & Rüdiger, 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.

Impact of Mis-/Disinformation on Candidate Safety & Effectiveness of Current Measures

The prevalence of mis- and disinformation during election periods significantly heightens risks to candidates by fuelling hostility, inciting harassment, and undermining public trust in the democratic process. **30% of candidates reported that misinformation or misleading information about them was distributed during their campaign**, further exacerbating the risks they faced. These falsehoods endangered their personal safety and damaged their reputations and electoral chances. False narratives, whether spread maliciously or unintentionally, can radicalise individuals, leading to increased intimidation, threats, and even physical violence against those standing for office. **Many candidates report that misinformation—particularly about their policies, backgrounds, or motivations—creates a distorted public perception, making them targets for aggression both online and in person.**

Current measures to identify, tackle, and deter such material are largely insufficient. While social media platforms have some content moderation policies, enforcement is inconsistent, and harmful content often remains accessible. Another issue to consider is that once a threat or the abuse has been seen, the damage is already done. Even if the posts are removed, the trauma is significant. Candidates call for stronger regulation of social media, including stricter action against anonymous accounts, bots, and targeted harassment. Additionally, there is **limited accountability** for politicians and media outlets that deliberately spread misleading narratives or incite division.

Beyond online misinformation, traditional media also plays a role in shaping public sentiment. Some respondents argue that **biased reporting and sensationalized narratives** contribute to hostility against candidates. There is a need for greater responsibility from media organizations and clearer consequences for publishing misleading or inflammatory content.

To improve candidate safety, respondents suggest measures such as **stricter legal consequences for those spreading harmful falsehoods, better education for the public on political processes, and stronger police action against those who harass candidates based on misinformation-fuelled beliefs.** Ultimately, tackling mis- and disinformation requires a multi-faceted approach involving platform regulation, legal accountability, and cultural shifts in political discourse.

PROTECTION OF CANDIDATES AND MPS

Protective security measures

Concerns about safety led many candidates to alter their campaign activities. Among respondents, 7% avoided attending rallies, while another 7% refrained from canvassing altogether due to security concerns. A significant proportion, 37%, took precautions by ensuring they never campaigned alone. These findings highlight the extent to which threats, harassment, and intimidation influenced candidates' ability to engage with voters, raising concerns about the broader impact on democratic participation and representation.

We asked candidates what other measures they took to protect themselves. The common issues emerging from these responses include:

1. **Increased security measures** – Candidates took proactive steps such as using bodycams, carrying self-defence items (e.g., a stick, car key, or wooden spoon for safety), setting emergency call shortcuts on their phones, and installing security devices like Ring doorbells.
2. **Avoidance of certain areas** – Many candidates avoided canvassing in specific locations, particularly where they felt at risk due to previous threats or community tensions. Some specifically mentioned avoiding religious or ethnically diverse areas.

3. **Group campaigning** – A strong emphasis on safety in numbers, with candidates often canvassing in pairs or groups, ensuring they were never alone in public, even for personal errands.
4. **Monitoring and reporting threats** – Candidates reported incidents to the police, Home Office, and party officials. Some also took precautions like informing campaign teams or police of their movements.
5. **Social media and personal information management** – Many candidates limited their social media presence, avoided publishing their home addresses on ballot papers, and delegated social media account management to others to reduce exposure to threats.
6. **Police involvement** – Some candidates had direct engagement with police or Home Office security, particularly at public events such as hustings.

Threat reduction

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, parties and policymakers—working collaboratively to create a safer electoral environment.

We suggest creating a comprehensive framework that addresses immediate threats and mitigates future risks by focusing on:

- a) **Training:** Candidates and party officials should receive positive safety training. The Local Government Association (LGA) has published a set of resources to support councillors and councils in dealing with harassment, abuse, and intimidation (HAI) in public life. These resources are available on their website where the LGA has also published a series of successful case studies.
- b) **Enhancing the effectiveness of police response:** Many police forces feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle HAI due to the scale of the problem. However, evidence suggests that training police officers can positively change their attitudes towards victims, leading to better outcomes. Therefore, police forces should establish specialised units to tackle this issue, increase funding, and we suggest mandate training for officials by the College of Policing.
- c) **Adapting to social changes:** 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 burden of collecting evidence. We also consider that parties should play a more relevant role in tackling and preventing HAI from and against their members.
- d) **Social media and media regulation:** Social media companies should be required 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.

- e) **Empowering Candidates and Elected Officials:** Digital literacy and awareness programs can equip candidates and elected officials 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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