Democracy's Blind Spot: Levels and Consequences of Political Violence Against Women of Color in American Politics

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Abstract

Gender and politics research outlines violence as a principal obstacle to equality in political representation, but few studies so far investigate intersectional aspects. Focusing on women of color politicians in the U.S., we study the nature, frequency, and impacts of violence they experience and how these compare to their counterparts. We turn to a survey of ∼600 local politicians and nearly 30 interviews with politicians conducted in summer 2024. We find that while absolute levels of political violence are distressingly high across the board, across the six forms of violence we inquire about, women of color experience the highest rates of violent encounters. Women of color and White women also report significant negative emotional and career impacts as a result of worrying about political violence. Our qualitative interviews supplement these findings and indicate that one reason for this state of affairs is that minority politicians have less access to institutional support, which can mitigate the negative consequences of violence.

Chapter 1: On Political Violence, Representation, and the Case of Women of Color in the U.S.

The rising problem of political violence against politicians

Political violence has become a disturbing reality facing America's politicians. While political violence has always been a feature of American history, leading to the assassinations of four U.S. Presidents, the past five years have seen a distinct and precipitous increase in violent acts targeting officeholders. Arguably, this increase has arisen at a time when opposition to Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and school measures, mobilization against Black Lives Matter protests contesting police brutality and murder of George Floyd, and largescale doubt about the outcome and legitimacy of 2020 presidential election all came to a head. Since then, some of the most disturbing and high-profile instances of political violence to date targeting politicians in executive positions include the attempted kidnapping of Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020, the attempted assassination of former President Trump in 2024, and an arson attack in 2025 on Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro's home hours after he and his loved ones celebrated the Passover Seder.

These have not been isolated incidents, nor have they occurred in a vacuum. Violence in American politics has become pervasive and is regularly targeting politicians who serve in positions beyond executive roles, and across all ranks of government. The United States Capitol Police, for instance, finds that concerning statements and direct threats against U.S. Members of Congress alone more than doubled from 2017 (3,939 incidents) to 2024 (9,474 incidents), with a marked rise in 2020.[1] Lower level legislators are also particularly vulnerable. Not only do they have fewer resources for security measures, the sites for political contestation and national debate have dramatically shifted to lower government arenas, such as state legislatures and municipal councils (Farris and Holman, 2017; Grumbach, 2022). Most recently, as of the time of this writing, the vulnerability of state-level politicians was evidenced by the murders of Minnesota Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband and the attempted murder of Minnesota Senator John Hoffman and his wife in 2025. Local politicians, with even fewer resources on average to expend on security than most state-level politicians, are also increasingly vulnerable to political violence. For instance, local officials were particularly at risk during the 2020 presidential election, as Trump put pressure on election boards to find more votes or disqualify lawfully cast ballots so that the election results would change in his favor. These actions were not without consequence. In Georgia, Gabriel Sterling, a Republican who served as the voting system implementation manager during the 2020 election, has on numerous occasions spoken out about how Trump's false claims about voter fraud incited violence against

[1] http://uscp.gov/media-center/press-releases/uscp-threat-assessment-cases-2024

him and the state's other election workers through intimidation and death threats. What's more, political violence climaxed following the 2020 election with the insurrection on January 6, 2021. Hundreds of protesters stormed the Capitol building at Trump's behest earlier that day to block Congress' certification of the 2020 election results. The insurrectionists vocally sought to kidnap and assassinate various politicians, actively hunting them down as they breached the chamber and inner offices.

Although largescale displays of physical violence against politicians are not everyday occurrences in the United States, threats, harassment, and intimidation—commonly referred to as psychological violence—continue to proliferate. According to recent research, upwards of one-quarter of Americans accept the use of political violence for political purposes to some degree (Armaly and Enders, 2024), and about half find threatening emails to politicians understandable (Håkansson, 2024*a*). The trends in the United States are similar to developments in other comparable countries. Research on violence against politicians in western democracies demonstrates that majorities of mayors, MPs, and candidates experience some form of violence each year (Collignon and Rüdig, 2021; Håkansson, 2021; Herrick et al., 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023), and that politicians who deviate from the dominant political group face particularly vile attacks (Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021; Gorrell, 2020). This state of affairs raises pressing questions about how politicians fare once they hold office, and what this means for how politicians weigh the costs of elected office, particularly if members of some groups are more affected than others.

Existing scholarship in this area highlights *gendered* dimensions to this problem (e.g., Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo, 2020; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2023; Bjarnegård, Håkansson and Zetterberg, 2022; Collignon and Rüdig, 2021; Daniele, Dipoppa and Pulejo, 2023; Håkansson, 2021; Herrick et al., 2022; Krook, 2018; Krook and Sanín, 2020), finding that female politicians are more likely than their male counterparts to experience political violence. A burgeoning research field also investigates racial, ethnic, and intersectional components (e.g., Akhtar, Jenichen and Intezar, 2024; Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*b*). This research consistently finds that political violence is unevenly distributed between dominant and marginalized politicians, but to fully grasp the democratic implications of violence against politicians, far more evidence is needed on to what extent this violence increases the political exclusion of already marginalized groups. Moreover, while an increasing number of studies document patterns in violence targeting candidates and elected politicians, much less is known about the *consequences* of this violence for democracy.

This Element examines how violence affects political equality by focusing on the exposure to different forms of violence and the consequences thereof, for dominant and marginalized political groups. In particular, our analyses center the experiences of women of color politicians in American politics. Based on intersectionality theory (Begum and Sobolewska, 2024; Hancock, 2007), we theorize that perpetrators are more likely to target politicians who deviate from the dominant political class. Furthermore, based on scholarship on political institutions as gendered and racialized (Hawkesworth, 2003; Kantola et al., 2023), we theorize that experiencing violence will be more damaging to politicians who lack informal political capital, such as powerful networks and support from key actors. Empirically, the paper leverages a survey of local politicians conducted in summer 2024 (N=600) and nearly 30 interviews with local and state politicians across the United States. We analyze whether the violence politicians experience follows intersectional patterns, how the personal and professional consequences are distributed, and the repertoires of violence mitigation available to politicians with different identities.

Investigating the democratic implications of violence targeting those serving as the people's representatives in political processes is crucial to fully grasping the costs of political violence. If violence makes representatives compromise their decisions regarding their political service, this affects the entire democratic system. To this end, our study encompasses both patterns in violence and the consequences for representatives, across intersectional groups.

To preview our findings, our results demonstrate that women of color politicians are uniquely disadvantaged in how much political violence they face in the course of their duties as electeds. Compared to the traditionally dominant group in politics - White men - women of color are significantly more likely to experience both physical and psychological violence. Women of color are also more severely impacted by violence. They are more likely to experience fear and anxiety, reduce their public visibility, and consider curtailing their careers as a result of violence in politics. While White women and men of color also are more impacted than White men in some respects, the most pronounced consequences manifest for women of color. Our interviews suggest that it is not only the volume of violence waged on different groups that generates unequal impacts. The deficient support available to women of color from local government actors, staff, and party and council colleagues seems to amplify the burden, relative to more privileged groups of politicians. These findings provide unique insights into the costs placed on women of color for holding political office.

The findings from this research are noteworthy in large part because representation is central to

democracy, and descriptive representation is an important and effective way to represent historically marginalized groups. Fortunately, we have seen an increase in the descriptive representation of different under-represented groups across western democracies (Hughes, 2016; Hughes and Paxton, 2018), though it is equally important that these politicians are able to flourish in political institutions once they assume their roles. For underrepresented groups to be effectively represented, their descriptive representatives must feel safe in their jobs and be able to retain their representative roles. Our findings hence highlight a significant barrier to descriptive representation and democratic equality: not only do the most politically marginalized politicians, such as women of color, experience the most violence, but they also suffer the worst costs both personally and professionally.

The United States as a case

Violence is a distinct feature of American democracy, distinguishing it from other western countries. Though many democracies are facing an increasing threat of political violence, investigating this issue in the United States is of particular importance. The United States is experiencing an alarming rise in political violence (Armaly and Enders, 2024; Herrick and Thomas, 2023; Kalmoe and Mason, 2022; Piazza and Van Doren, 2023). U.S. politicians across the aisle are regularly confronted with political violence targeting themselves and their families. From the arson attack against Governor Josh Shapiro and his family, the plot to kidnap Michigan's governor Gretchen Whitmer, to the brutal assault on Representative Nancy Pelosi's husband Paul Pelosi, being a politician in the United States entails facing genuine risks. Even one of the most protected men in the world, President Trump, was grazed by a bullet during a live-streamed campaign rally on July 13, 2024.

Given this context, we can expect that threats of violence against American politicians are experienced as more credible, intimidating, and consequential than similar events in other places. Furthermore, we anticipate that the socio-political environment in the United States provides ideal conditions for political violence to flourish for several reasons. First, the two-party system in the U.S. has given rise to affective polarization, which, in turn, has made the political environment more contentious (Kingzette et al., 2021). This polarization, in turn, has fostered conditions that make political violence seem acceptable among citizens, and especially among strong partisans, regardless of party (Armaly and Enders, 2024; Håkansson, 2024*a*; Piazza and Van Doren, 2023).

Second, because of highly polarized political issues, many politicians experience acts of violence not only at their offices and during public events, but also at their homes, where protests, arson, harassing mail, physical attacks, intrusions, vandalism, and "swatting" occur with far more regularity (Arango and Secon, 2023; Hakim, Bensinger and Sullivan, 2024; Levine, 2024; Zhuang, 2025). The evolution of and easy access to social media and online communication networks, much of which seemingly allows perpetrators to act with anonymity, has made it easier to coordinate acts of political violence (Wahlström and Törnberg, 2021). As a result, perpetrators are turning to sites such as Twitter/X or Facebook to publish politicians' home addresses and personal information publicly alongside calls to harass and attack them and their families when they are at home (Motyl, 2024; Sholademi and Omowon, 2024). This type of publicly available information is in part what made possible the murders of Minnesota Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband and the shootings of Minnesota Senator John Hoffman and his wife in June 2025.[2]

Third, threats are likely experienced as more intimidating in the U.S. due to the widespread availability and ownership of arms. Compared to other western democracies, the United States is a country with more liberal gun laws, the highest gun ownership per capita in the world, higher rates of gun violence, and increasingly, where more and more U.S. sheriffs claim that they will not enforce gun safety policies from state and federal governments in their counties (Farris and Holman, 2023, 2024; Filindra, 2023; Karp, 2018). As a result, threats directed at politicians in the U.S. more credibly come from a perpetrator who has access to a weapon and who will not be as thwarted by existing regulation.

Political violence in the U.S. is also deeply intertwined with race and state-sanctioned violence. Racial and ethnic minorities have regularly been subject to violence as private citizens and as political elites. They have been frequent victims of political violence by state and federal institutions, most notably through police violence and the criminal justice system. They face disproportionate levels of violence, discrimination, coercion, internment, repression, and surveillance by this "second face" of government (Soss and Weaver, 2017). Many of their peaceful and nonviolent acts of resistance against discrimination and social injustice have been met with violent and often armed resistance by fellow citizens, organized hate groups, and law enforcement. Racial justice activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Representative John Lewis, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Marsha P. Johnson, Tarana Burke, and Anita Hill have faced frequent violence for their political action through death threats, bomb threats, imprisonment, police brutality, beatings, and even assassination. Ms. Hill and Ms. Burke still experience this violence

[2] https://www.semafor.com/article/06/16/2025/congress-minnesota-lee-smith-trauma

today. These historical and ongoing encounters of violence inform marginalized politicians today about the very real dangers they face when ascending to political leadership.

An argument for studying political violence intersectionally

The dangers of political violence matter for American democracy and the descriptive representation of racial and ethnic minorities. Though they make up approximately 42% of the United States' population (Jensen et al., 2021), racial and ethnic minorities constitute approximately 22% of state legislators across all 50 states (NCSL, 2023) and are still severely underrepresented in Congress at 26% (Schaeffer, 2025). Contrastingly, White men are overrepresented among officeholders and hold the majority of all elected offices (approximately 55%), though they only make up approximately 30% of the population (Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2024). To this day, they maintain a strong majority in all branches of government across federal, state, and local political offices.

Similar to racial inequality, gender is also a distinctive feature of American politics. Though women make up more than half of the population, they are severely underrepresented at 33% across all elected offices (Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2024). However, women of color hold particularly salient and marginalized identities that significantly impact their democratic representation and socio-political outcomes. Compared to White men and women, as well as men of color, women of color are disproportionately underrepresented among U.S. officeholders (Shah, Scott and Gonzalez Juenke, 2019; Silva and Skulley, 2019), and this lack of representation has negative impacts on the laws and policies that mitigate the extreme barriers women of color face in their day-to-day lives.

Political violence, we argue, presents many normative challenges to democratic legitimacy, but also has downstream consequences for the descriptive representation of the most marginalized communities. Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which elected officials share politically salient demographic characteristics (like race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, immigration status) with their constituents (Pitkin, 1972). Research finds that minority constituents whose elected representatives also descriptively represent them are more likely to turn out to vote (Barreto, 2007; Hayes et al., 2024; Rocha et al., 2010), to have more positive attitudes toward and higher trust in government (Banducci, Donovan and Karp, 2005; Sanchez and Morin, 2011), and, perhaps most importantly, to see their representatives advocate for the substantive policies they support (Canon, 2020; Minta, 2009; Rouse and Swers, 2013).

Members of historically marginalized groups face extreme disadvantages in winning elected office and remain severely underrepresented in relation to their share of the population (Hajnal, Kogan and Markarian, 2024; Hajnal, 2009). Therefore, factors that drive them to exit office or prematurely curtail their careers ultimately harm their constituencies the most, as research shows that marginalized constituencies benefit tremendously when women of color are elected into office (Brown and Lemi, 2021; Brown, 2014*b*; Reingold and Smith, 2012).

When women of color hold public office, the work that they do yields immense positive externalities for the historically underrepresented communities they represent. As Smooth (2006) writes, "[e]ncouraging women of color to turn out to the polls and even to become candidates may be the best way to ensure the future of progressive politics" (p. 403). When racial and ethnic minorities, and women of color in particular, hold elected offices, there are numerous tangible results that speak to many of the issues that concern the constituents they represent (Baptist et al., 2023) and that improve the day-to-day lives of these groups. This is largely because women of color officeholders represent multiple communities and legislate and govern in ways that are distinctive from their White female and minority male counterparts (Barrett, 2001; Bejarano and Smooth, 2022; Bratton, Haynie and Reingold, 2006; Sanbonmatsu, 2015; Shah, Scott and Gonzalez Juenke, 2019; Smooth, 2006). In addition to being descriptive representatives whose mere presence on the ballot is associated with inspiring young girls of color to participate in politics and consider running for office (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2025), the election of women of color into office sees large substantive policy benefits as well. For example, in *Sisters in the Statehouse*, Brown (2014*b*) finds that Black women are particularly proactive in legislation related to domestic violence, given that many of them have personal experiences with these types of abuse. Reingold and Smith (2012) also find that when women of color govern, they are more effective in bringing about state legislative reform with respect to welfare, much more than other women or men of color. And, as noted by Brown and Lemi (2021), Black women's legislative prowess is exemplified by the Crown Act, which was introduced by Black women politicians and designed to prevent discrimination on the basis of hair type and texture, which disproportionately impacts Black women and men.

Specifically representing the interests of women of color is highly important, due to their vast marginalization in society and the particularly deficient representation of this constituency thus far. Women of color in the U.S. face physical, sexual, and psychological violence in their everyday lives on the basis of race and gender (Crenshaw, 2013), and the intersection of racism and sexism in the United States

contributes to severe discrimination against women of color on many fronts. Some ways in which women of color are underprivileged throughout their lives include disadvantages in early education, which will later affect their economic mobility (Brown, 2014*a*; West-Bey, Mendoza and Bunts, 2018). Additionally, they have worse outcomes in the labor market, and they earn lower wages than White women, which also exacerbates their economic marginalization (Harvey Wingfield, 2020; Richard, 2014). Women of color who seek social services to alleviate these barriers are frequently victims of racialized stereotyping regarding welfare and other social policies, dehumanized as "welfare queens," where White women who use the same social services do not frequently experience the same stereotyping (Foster, 2008; Nadasen, 2007). Women of color have higher rates of maternal mortality than White women, and experience frequent discrimination by health practitioners, which jeopardizes their physical, emotional, and mental health (Petersen, 2019). Furthermore, while women of all races and class backgrounds are frequently subjected to extreme physical and sexual violence, women of color are particularly impacted by this violence as their social and class status prevent them from seeking adequate resources to alleviate the effects of this violence (Crenshaw, 2013).

Related to these social barriers, women of color are underrepresented in high-status jobs that constitute pipelines to political office. Women of color are evaluated at lower rates than white men and women in "white collar" occupations (García-López, 2008; Melaku, 2019), and these evaluations follow women of color when running for political office (Brown and Lemi, 2021; Matos, Greene and Sanbonmatsu, 2021). These barriers all contribute to the severe underrepresentation of women of color across all elected offices, creating a vicious cycle where their needs go unmet by political institutions. Women of color make up approximately 10% of all elected offices, while White women hold double that share (Center for American Women and Politics, 2025; Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2024). For example, only 51 women have served as state governors since the nation's founding, with only three women of color ascending to this position.

Women of color entering political office face additional barriers that circumvent their representation. First, because women of color are situated between at least two subordinate groups that frequently have contrasting political agendas and also ignore the political interests of women of color in particular (Crenshaw, 2013; Gay and Tate, 1998), they must navigate these political interests in ways White men and women and men of color do not have to.

Across the aisle, women of color are frequently met with hostility, silencing, and ostracization by their

colleagues, political party, and PACs when they do seek to prioritize intersectional political agendas. Consider Congresswomen Cori Bush, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tliab, and Ilhan Omar, who have recently faced bipartisan backlash for their stances on Israel and Palestine. Bush was ousted in the 2024 Democratic primary election, with over $9 million spent to unseat her, and though they managed to keep their seats in the 2024 election, Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, and Tliab have been repeatedly silenced and admonished not just by the opposing side, but also by members of their own party. Similarly, women seeking executive office, like Stacey Abrams and Nikki Haley, also have faced both racial and gendered discrimination during their campaigns (Blinder, 2018; Lopez, 2024). These instances, and many more, reveal that discrimination against women of color does not stop once they enter political office. They are stigmatized, scrutinized, and punished by allies and opponents alike when they attempt to represent marginalized voices.

One recent episode in U.S. politics vividly illustrates how party gatekeepers isolate and discipline women of color who challenge the status quo. After members of "The Squad"—a group of progressive women of color, including the women listed above—publicly disagreed with Democratic leadership over an immigration policy, Speaker Nancy Pelosi dismissed their influence, telling the New York Times in an interview, "[t]hey're four people, and that's how many votes they got,"[3] and later chastised the group in a closed-door caucus meeting.[4] Ocasio-Cortez responded by highlighting the alienation she feels from members of her own party as well as her own resilience (Gonzalez and Bauer, 2024), stating in a 2022 GQ interview, "[m]y everyday lived experience here is as a person who is despised... Imagine working a job and your bosses don't like you and folks on your team are suspicious of you."[5]

This experience underscores the unique burdens faced by women of color in office: while they may enter with high political ambition and deep commitments to community-based change (Dowe, 2022, 2020; Scott, 2018), they often encounter institutional cultures that marginalize their voices and pressure them to conform. As such, their underrepresentation is likely not only a function of barriers to entry, but also of hostile environments that make staying (and thriving) in office deeply challenging.

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/us/politics/nancy-pelosi-ocasio-cortez.html
[4] https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/04/15/nancy-pelosi-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-481704
[5] https://www.gq.com/story/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-october-cover-profile

The present research

If women of color are experiencing exclusion, alienation, and discipline from within their own political parties—and from supposed allies—this raises an urgent question: what might they be experiencing in other arenas of political life, where the norms of collegiality and shared goals and purpose are even weaker, if not entirely absent? As numerous scholars have argued and decisively shown, elected officials are not immune to violence and threats. Arguably, for women of color, we contend their intersectional identities render them especially vulnerable to a wide range of political attacks, coming from a range of sources, e.g., constituents, extremist groups, online actors, media figures, and other elites (Akhtar, Jenichen and Intezar, 2024; Krook and Sanín, 2020). Oftentimes, these encounters may serve to challenge and delegitimize their authority, punish their dissent, intimidate them, or discourage their future political actions or engagement. Thus, in this Element we address two open research questions: (1) To what extent do politicians' experiences of political violence vary along intersectional lines?, and (2) To what extent do the negative consequences of political violence vary along intersectional lines?

We rely on intersectionality theory as a basis for the expectation that among politicians in the United States, women of color experience more political violence than other groups. Specifically, we contend that racism and sexism intersect to make women of color hyper-visible to perpetrators, and especially vulnerable to experiences of violence. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 2013) argues, women of color are uniquely impacted by violence on the basis of their intersectional identities, which shape both the forms of violence they face and how they respond to these encounters.

Past research

Studies from various contexts find that violence is a common experience for political candidates and elected representatives. For example, 95 percent of U.S. mayors face some form of violence while in office (Herrick and Thomas, 2024*a*). In Western democracies, most of the violence politicians experience is psychological rather than physical (Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*a*; Herrick et al., 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). Incidents such as online harassment, threats, and other intimidating communication targets between 60 and 95 percent of mayors, MPs, and parliamentary candidates in countries such as the U.S., U.K., New Zealand, Ireland, Denmark, and Sweden (Buckley, Keenan and and, 2024; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021; Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh

and Pathé, 2015; Håkansson, 2021; Herrick and Thomas, 2023; Herrick et al., 2019; James, 2017; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). Whereas the most visible politicians, and those highest in the political hierarchy such as national level parliamentarians, experience the most frequent incidents (Bjørgo et al., 2022; Gorrell, 2020; Håkansson, 2021; Rheault, Rayment and Musulan, 2019), local politicians are distinctly vulnerable. Their geographical proximity to perpetrators increases the risk of encountering them in their everyday lives, and local governments often have less developed security measures and resources to procure security for politicians than do national legislatures (Håkansson, 2023).

Some previous studies find that violence targets politicians with politically marginalized identities more than those from the politically dominant group. In the Swedish context, women experience more violence than men, and those with immigrant backgrounds experience more violence than those without an immigrant background (Håkansson, 2021; Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024). Among U.S. mayors, White men experience fewer threats than all other groups (Herrick and Thomas, 2024*b*). Other studies find that violence targets women and men with equal frequency, but that the violence differs in character depending on the target's identity. Women politicians experience far more personally denigrating harassment and threats than men (Bjarnegård, Håkansson and Zetterberg, 2022; Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*b*; Krook, 2020; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). The few studies on racial or ethnic minority politicians also find that attacks on these groups have a distinctly racist character and often focus on the politician's identity instead of their policy (Akhtar, Jenichen and Intezar, 2024; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*b*; Kuperberg, 2021).

There is far less knowledge about the consequences of violence against political representatives. Experiencing psychological violence has been found to induce significant anxiety, worry, and difficulty concentrating on one's political role (Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh and Pathé, 2015; Herrick and Franklin, 2019; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*a*; James, 2017). Such consequences seem to be particularly exacerbated following threats of sexual violence or other identity-focused attacks (Håkansson, 2024*b*; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*a*; Krook, 2020). Moreover, both being directly targeted and being aware of attacks on their colleagues affects politicians' and prospective candidates' career planning, in particular among marginalized political groups (Håkansson, 2024*b*; Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024; Herrick and Thomas, 2024*a*; Krook and Sanín, 2020; Wagner, 2022). In the U.K., women political candidates seem to be more concerned about their safety than their men counterparts (Collignon and Rüdig, 2024), and are more likely to adapt their campaign styles to threats of violence (Collignon and Rüdig, 2021). In Sweden, women MPs

are more prone to limit their public visibility, decrease their participation in policy debates, and consider leaving politics prematurely than their men counterparts (Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021; Håkansson, 2024*b*). Immigrant-background politicians are similarly affected (Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024). However, a previous study on mayors in the U.S. finds that neither women nor men seem prone to consider exiting politics as a result of violence to any substantial degree (Herrick and Franklin, 2019).

In sum, while some existing research has identified gendered and, to a lesser extent, racial/ethnic impacts of violence against politicians, little is known about how these consequences vary along intersectional identity lines. Against the background of distinct experiences of women of color compared to women from the dominant racial or ethnic group in political and social life, investigating intersectional experiences of political violence and their consequences is imperative.

Our theoretical argument

Our theoretical argument builds on two key frameworks. The first framework, developed by Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2020), emphasizes the importance of studying how political violence can be gendered in its motives, forms, or impact. In order to understand inequalities in political violence, the frequency, form, and impact of violence should be compared to the experiences of the most politically privileged class (i.e. hegemonic men, see Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo, 2020; Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021). In the United States, hegemonic men would refer to White men. If women, compared to hegemonic men, suffer distinct rates of violence, violence of a distinct character, or distinct consequences from political violence, this is evidence of gendered patterns of political violence. We extend this framework to specifically interrogate whether, and in what way(s), political violence follows intersectional patterns and affects women of color disproportionately in frequency, form, and/or impact. The second framework, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 2013), argues that women of color are uniquely impacted by violence on the basis of their intersectional identities, which shape both the forms of violence they face and how they respond to these encounters. Specifically, we contend that racism and sexism intersect to make women of color especially vulnerable to experiences of violence. While all marginalized groups are positioned in relation to the dominant group of White men, women of color must simultaneously navigate both racial and gender-rooted discrimination, making them uniquely vulnerable to political violence.

Following these approaches, we argue that violence targeting politicians can overwhelmingly affect

women of color in several distinct ways. First, they may experience more violence as well as more severe forms of violence compared to more privileged groups of politicians. This expectation builds on existing knowledge of race- and gender-based biases against women of color politicians.

Secondly, they may experience worse consequences of violence. This expectation builds on two underlying mechanisms. First, the personal and professional consequences of political violence may be more severe for women of color since they likely experience a larger volume of violence. Second, against the backdrop of institutionalized racism and sexism in politics, women of color can be expected to have fewer resources to rely on for mitigating the impacts of violence than their more privileged counterparts. We argue that these two dimensions of how violence affects marginalized groups in politics are crucial: understanding the rates and consequences of violence facing women of color compared to their counterparts—and in particular compared to White men—is imperative for fully accounting for the democratic costs of violence in politics.

Disaggregating intersectional identities along the lines of race$*$gender allows us to observe how race, gender, and their intersection are associated with experiences of political violence. While women of color and White female politicians are marginalized by their gender and may encounter political violence based on misogynistic and sexist beliefs about women's involvement in politics (Rottweiler, Clemmow and Gill, 2023), White women do not experience racism like women of color do. Conversely, men of color are subject to racialized forms of violence and state repression, but are not targets of misogyny. Women of color, by contrast, are "doubly bound" by their race and gender (Gay and Tate, 1998), bearing the burdens of both racism and sexism in their daily interactions with the public, institutions, and in their digital and physical environments.

In line with Krook and Sanín (2020), we argue that political violence functions as a mechanism that reinforces inequality in political representation. We disaggregate between women of color, White women, and men of color relative to White men, to observe how race, gender, *and* their intersection influence the type of violent encounters politically marginalized politicians experience while holding political office. Comparing women of color to other groups, we expect to find that they will be more likely to experience political violence and at higher rates than their counterparts, and that the largest difference in violence exposure will be found between White men and women of color. This is due to the fact that women of color occupy a uniquely marginalized position at the intersection of race and gender, making them more visible targets, and more threatening to the dominant norms of political power. As such, we expect women

of color to provoke more hostility and reprisal than do White men.

> H1: Women of color will be more likely than their White male counterparts to report experiencing political violence.

Next, we argue that political violence likely has differential consequences for different groups of officeholders. Political violence may impact marginalized politicians disproportionately, even when similar acts target privileged groups (Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo, 2020). Privileged groups, notably White men, enjoy "systematically conferred advantages" by virtue of membership of a dominant social group (Bailey, 1998). One central advantage conferred on White men is that they are automatically perceived as natural inhabitants of political institutions (Bjarnegård, 2018*b*; Hawkesworth, 2003; Murray, 2014; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Puwar, 2004). Women and people of color, on the other hand, are often seen as "outsiders" in political institutions and routinely have their legitimacy, belonging, and capabilities questioned (Kantola et al., 2023; Puwar, 2004). Coping with violence in such a context requires diverse strategies (Mügge and Özvatan, 2025). Some women of color see toning down their perceived otherness as a viable strategy for political success (Brown and Lemi, 2021). As Håkansson (2024*b*) argues, legitimacy and support among colleagues and leaders of one's political community is another resource which can mitigate the impact of violence. Having other sources of legitimacy to rely on in the face of violence and denigrating comments may enable politicians to shake off their impact more easily (Håkansson, 2024*b*). For instance, privileged politicians may have powerful individuals in their networks who can intervene on their behalf when they face vitriol in public. Feeling supported by actors, such as members of one's party, can also mitigate the burden of receiving threatening and hateful attacks. We hence expect that the consequences of violence in politics will differ across groups of politicians, and that women of color will be the most severely impacted due to their compounded marginalization in politics.

One important area of consequences of violence in politics is emotional burdens. Previous research finds that politicians experience significant negative emotions following experiences of violence (Herrick and Franklin, 2019; James, 2017; Krook, 2020). These emotional burdens, however, can be expected to be disproportionately placed on the most vulnerable members of the political class due to their limited support networks, increased frequency and severity of threats, and greater isolation within political institutions.

As Krook and Sanín argue, violence against women in politics is a "message crime", designed to intimidate and discourage broader marginalized groups beyond the direct victims from political action

(Krook and Sanín, 2020). In this vein, racial minorities exposed to political violence may experience greater emotional distress as a consequence of awareness of the extent of race-based political violence not just against themselves but also against other members of their social group. Women of color politicians, who are acutely aware of their marginalized and vulnerable position in politics and society, may thus experience amplified emotional distress because of political violence, due to the intersectional marginalized identities they hold.

> H2: Compared to White men, women of color politicians will experience more negative emotional impacts as a result of political violence.

Similarly, we expect political violence to have more damaging career impacts on the most marginalized groups of officeholders. Just like the race-gendered hostility of political environments can amplify the negative emotions related to political violence, the same hostility can increase the costs for careers. Feeling unwelcome in the political arena has been associated with a lower likelihood of being willing to run for office (Lajevardi, Mårtensson and Vernby, 2024). For female politicians, these effects are especially pronounced. Women, more so than men, are more likely to consider leaving office when experiencing or worrying about violence (Håkansson, 2024*b*). When considering the racial and gendered hostility that women of color face in political institutions, we expect that experiencing and worrying about political violence in a context where they have already experienced multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, can be more detrimental to the careers of this group's members than an otherwise relatively more privileged White man.

Moreover, as we argue above, women of color are less likely to have access to informal and formal institutional support than their counterparts, and as such we expect them to be particularly vulnerable to negative career impacts as a result of political violence compared to their White male counterparts. Insufficient institutional support may influence marginalized politicians' decisions to alter their actions, such as reducing their visibility in public and online, resisting the move to higher offices, or leaving office altogether. Thus, in their political careers, women of color may adopt similar behaviors they use in their personal lives, such as reducing their visibility in public, avoiding bringing attention to themselves, or withdrawing from the threat entirely. In terms of how they manage their political careers, this can entail reducing activity on social media (Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021), refraining from making public statements (Håkansson, 2024*b*), decreasing their ambition for higher-level office or even decreasing their ambition for remaining in politics at all (Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024; Herrick and Franklin, 2019).

H3: Compared to White male politicians, women of color will report higher levels of negative career impacts as a result of concerns about political violence.

Chapter 2: Concepts, data, and patterns of intersectional violence against politicians

In this chapter, we unpack politicians' experiences of violence in the course of their work, and how these may differ along the lines of race and gender. So far, most of the attention from organizations, scholars, and the media has been focused on female politicians. Although women remain underrepresented at all levels of decision-making (UN Women, 2025), their presence in politics has risen sharply in recent years (Hughes and Paxton, 2018). Yet, as the share of women in politicians has grown in recent years, it has been accompanied by a troubling rise in experiences of assault, intimidation, and abuse targeting female politicians (IPU, 2016; Krook and Sanín, 2020; United Nations, 2022). On the one hand, the rise in the number of women in politics marks a significant step toward equal representation and a more democratic system. But, on the other hand, the increasing violence they face raises serious concerns about our collective ability to foster pluralistic, equal, and tolerant democratic societies (United Nations, 2022). This extant work is a starting point for our research here, as we examine how experiences of political violence may differ intersectionally, e.g., by race *and* gender categories, positing that women of color are particularly vulnerable to violence in comparison to their colleagues.

In this chapter, we first present our conceptualization of political violence, and in doing so, like past scholars, we distinguish between physical and psychological violence. Next, we introduce the data we draw from in this chapter and in the rest of the book. Finally, we evaluate the patterns of political violence against U.S. local politicians along raced-gendered intersectional lines.

Distinguishing between psychological and physical violence

To be sure, once elected into office, politicians' visibility renders them open to attack from a whole host of actors in many different forms and venues. Politicians are constantly juggling responses from their constituents, other members of the public, the media, their own colleagues (both on the same side and across the aisle), and more. Not all responses that politicians receive nor all negative experiences that politicians experience amount to political violence, but some non-negligible share can be categorized as such.

Our study follows previous research (e.g., Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2023; Håkansson, 2021; Höglund, 2009; Krook, 2020; Krook and Sanín, 2020; Krug et al., 2002; United Nations, 2022), and conceptualizes political violence as encompassing various forms of psychological and physical violence. This distinction is important for recognizing that violence against politicians can manifest in different ways. Our distinction between psychological and physical violence does not focus on the consequences of violence, but on the

resources used by perpetrators of violence. Psychological harassment can induce physical, bodily symptoms such as ulcers, and physical violence can induce psychological harm such as anxiety disorders (see also Håkansson (2021)).

Psychological violence refers to non-physical actions that cause harm to the target. These acts can occur in person or online, inside or outside of official settings, and are intended to inflict trauma on individuals' mental and emotional well-being, such as by humiliating or intimidating their targets (Krook and Sanín, 2020). Common forms include threats of violence, harassment, verbal abuse including insults, character defamation, doxxing (e.g., publishing personal information), and malicious impersonation. As Krook and Sanín (2020) note, these can include threats (e.g., death and rape threats), taunts, and efforts to intimidate politicians.

Importantly, for our purposes here, we classify an act as psychological violence based on how it is *experienced* and *perceived* by the target, not necessarily the perpetrator's intent. This classification is in line with past literature in political psychology on minority perceived discrimination, which focuses on the target's perception and not on whether the incident actually occurred or was perceived as intended (see for example Lajevardi et al., 2020; Oskooii, 2016; Verkuyten, 1998). What might be dismissed by some as simply a comment or fair criticism can for some politicians amount to psychological harm, particularly when they are subject to persistent targeting, as well as to multiple forms of targeting. These experiences can shape whether politicians feel safe, supported, and able to participate in public life. As such, how politicians perceive the social meaning behind the violence they experience (i.e. its context, repetition, and symbolic and actual content) can each play important roles in shaping how severely politicians feel their impacts and what their consequences will be.

Physical violence, meanwhile, refers to physical acts that cause or threaten bodily harm, and acts of property destruction. Krook and Sanín (2020) points to examples involving gun violence, kidnapping, abduction, touching, involuntary confinement, jostling, or other forms of unwelcome physical activity. Other examples of physical violence include attacks against politicians' residence, office, or cars, such as arson, spray-painting, or bombing (Daniele, 2019; Håkansson, 2021). Though relatively rare due to how costly it is for perpetrators to wage such attacks, because of their tangible nature, violent physical acts are often the form of violence most widely recognized and least contested (Krook and Sanín, 2020).

Both psychological and physical violence can have far-reaching downstream consequences, including health outcomes such as chronic stress, anxiety, fear, and trauma, and impacts on politicians' continued

political engagement, such as decreasing their capacity to make decisions freely, making them feel unsafe in public spaces to such an extent that may limit future political engagement, and withdrawal from the public eye by, for instance, avoiding providing comments in the media or ceasing to interact with constituents in person or on social media.

Exposure to political violence: Data, concepts, and descriptive statistics

Quantitative survey data

How much political violence do local U.S. politicians experience? Are there differences in the rates of violence that politicians experience by their gender and racial identities?

To evaluate levels and consequences of political violence facing U.S. local politicians, we turn to survey data over other alternatives for multiple reasons. Surveys inherently present challenges related to reliability and consistency due to the different interpretations that respondents may have towards questions and concepts, but as Håkansson and Lajevardi (2024) note, no objective measures exist for politicians' exposure to violence. Many of those studying political violence turn to media reports to document violent incidents. Nonetheless, these reports are rather inconsistent, often favoring certain types of incidents and focusing more on some jurisdictions over others (Bjarnegård, 2018*a*; Von Borzyskowski and Wahman, 2021). Moreover, social scientists studying harassment of politicians have at times turned to social media data as a data source, however this data also has its limitations. First, this data is limited to online abuse, typically on one particular platform such as Twitter/X, and disregards other forms of violent encounters that politicians may face online and offline. Second, while this data approach might standardize measures of online violence, it does not necessarily comprise the entirety of online abuse that politicians experience. This issue is especially amplified when considering that social media platforms delete some direct threats, and that many hostile messages are sent through private messages rather than publicly posted, and are therefore not available or observable by researchers (see also Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021).

It is also important to note that one additional criticism related to survey work on political violence is that any observed difference is related to different groups answering surveys differently. Nonetheless, for sensitive topics such as exposure to violence, self-reported data actually runs the risk of *underestimating* the frequency, or unbalanced reporting across social groups (Traunmüller, Kijewski and Freitag, 2019), particularly among immigrant and ethnic minorities (Davis and Henderson, 2003; Desmond, Papachristos

and Kirk, 2016). Criminology research, for instance, has found that racial and immigrant minorities are less likely than others to report their crime victimization (Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk, 2016; Menjívar and Bejarano, 2004) and in particular victimization to violent crime (Gutierrez and Kirk, 2017). This would suggest that the violence reported by racial minority politicians in our sample risks being under-reported compared to White politicians. As such, presenting results from survey data would suggest that we are more likely to under-estimate than over-estimate differences in violence exposure between White and minority politicians.

In summer 2024, we collaborated with survey firm CivicPulse to survey local U.S. politicians on their experiences with violent encounters.[6] The survey was fielded from July 12, 2024 to August 22, 2024, generating 606 responses comprised of local elected policymakers and school board officials. Respondents were drawn from a wide set of jurisdictions across the country (see Figure A1), though to enhance representativeness, our analyses include vendor-provided weights.[7] However, because we have complete information on 578 respondents, we limit our analyses to include only these respondents. The sample of local elected policymakers consists of top elected officials (e.g., Mayor, County Executive) and governing board members (e.g., Council Member, County Legislator) randomly drawn from all U.S. local governments (i.e., township, municipality, and county governments) with a population over 1,000 residents. Sixty-six respondents are county officials, 250 are municipal politicians, and 69 are representatives from townships. The survey also includes 193 school board officials.

The survey includes questions about experiences of different forms of violence, following conceptualizations elaborated on in previous research (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2023; Håkansson and Lajevardi, 2024; Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016). Specifically, it includes measures of physical violence (e.g., encompassing *bodily attacks* and *property damage*), as well as psychological violence (e.g., including *insults*, *harassment*, *threats*, and *malicious impersonation*). Namely, the survey asked, "[f]or each type of incident, please indicate the most recent time that you experienced it, to the best of your recollection: (1) insulted verbally, in writing, or online, (2) harassed verbally, in writing, or online, (3) threatened verbally, in writing, or online, (4) attacked physically, (5) experienced property damage, and (6) maliciously impersonated." Here, insults, harassment, threats, and malicious impersonation constitute forms of

[6] CivicPulse is a nonprofit nonpartisan organization generating data and insights about a wide range of issues faced by local and state governments in the United States. Their nationally representative survey panels include elected officials, department heads, and civil service staff representing town, city, county, and state governments across America. For more information, see https://www.civicpulse.org/research.

[7] See Appendix for more information on sample representativeness and sampling frame.

psychological violence, while physical attacks and property damage are categorized as physical violence. Response options included (a) within the last 3 months, (b) within the last year, (c) more than a year ago, and (d) never. For comparability to other measures in the extant literature,[8] we ask about experiences of violence during a confined time period. To ensure that we are measuring recent phenomena, and also to account for the fact that some politicians may not have been in session over the past 3 months, we focus on violent encounters experienced over the past year. We created six binary dependent variables measuring whether respondents reported experiencing each of the six forms of violence over the past year.

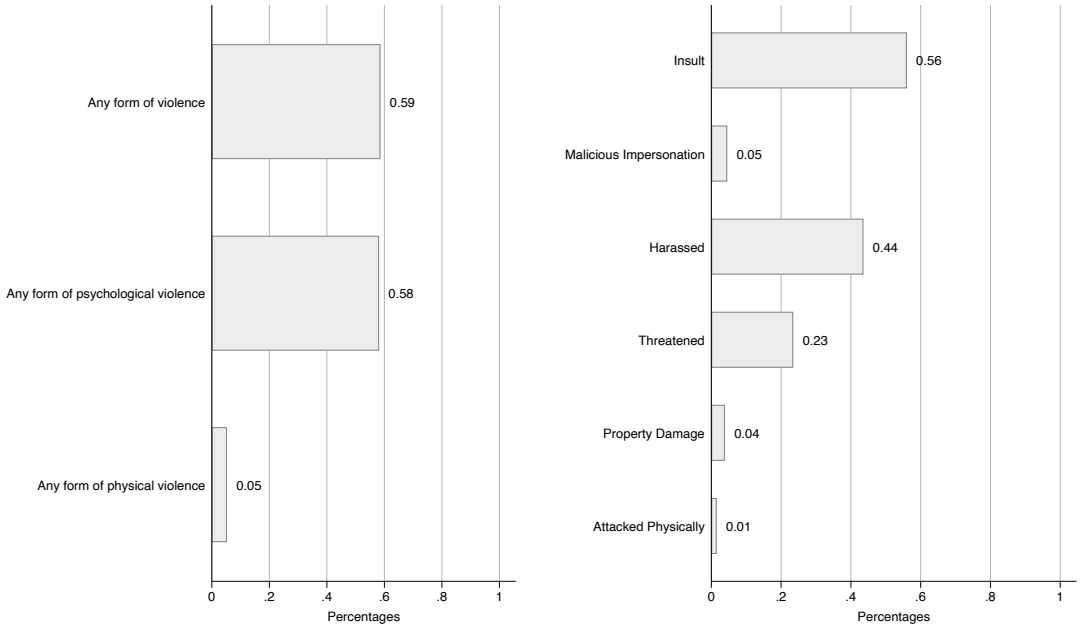
Figure 1 presents weighted percentages of the rates of political violence among respondents in our survey. The figure suggests that violence is a widespread feature of local politics in the U.S. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. local politicians in our sample indicated having experienced at least one form of violent incident type we inquired about. Psychological violence, such as insults, harassment, threats, and malicious impersonation, targets more than half of local elected representatives (58%), mirroring findings by Thomas et al. (2019). When we disaggregate psychological violence into different incident types during the past year, 56% were insulted, 44% harassed, 23% threatened, and 5% maliciously impersonated. Like in previous studies from the U.S. and other Western democracies (e.g., Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Håkansson, 2021; Herrick et al., 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023; Thomas et al., 2019), Figure 1 suggests that physical attacks on politicians are more rare, experienced by only 5% of local politicians in our sample. Four percent of local politicians experienced property damage and 1% experienced bodily violence.

The survey asked two more sets of relevant questions. First, it asked about the perpetrator's gender and identity.Second, the survey inquired about whether respondents had recently been the targets of hostile comments. This question provides an indication of the character of violence. This is important since previous research has highlighted that women and men, and racial majority and minorities, may experience an equal amount of harassment but of markedly different characters (Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson, 2021; Kuperberg, 2021; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). We therefore use this survey question to investigate whether women of color politicians experience violence that is more gendered and/or raced in its content compared to the violence experienced by their counterparts.

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions capturing their demographic and partisan

[8] For example, Bjarnegård, Håkansson and Zetterberg (2022); Buckley, Keenan and and (2024); Collignon and Rüdig (2020); Håkansson and Lajevardi (2024); Herrick and Thomas (2024*b*) and Kosiara-Pedersen (2023) all focus on the past year or the most recent election period.

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics among all local politicians in the survey, weighted



characteristics. These include race, gender, age, and partisanship. In the sample, about 14%, or 82 respondents, identify as non-White. In terms of gender, the majority (329 respondents) identify as male, while over 40% (249 respondents) identify as female. There's a rather even distribution across partisan lines in this sample; 221 identify as Democrats, 129 as Independents, and 228 as Republicans. In terms of age distribution, younger politicians are much less represented, in line with findings at the national (Pew Research Center, 2025) and state levels (NCSL, 2020). For instance, 25 respondents (4% of the sample) are under the age of 40, 239 are between the ages of 40-58 (41% of the sample), while over half, 314 respondents, are over the age of 59. Because we are interested in intersectional categories, our main independent variables examine respondents by their race$*$gender attributes. Overall, the sample includes 46 women of color, 203 White women, 36 men of color, and 293 White men. An over-representation of politicians who are White and male is to be expected due to their over-representation in the full population of politicians in the United States, which we describe in Chapter 1.

The quantitative analyses that follow employ weighted OLS regressions. The omitted baseline race$*$gender category in our regressions is White men, and thus our analyses should be read as comparing the coefficient estimates of women of color, White women, and men of color to those of White men. Moreover, our results present both output from naive estimates, only examining the intersectional

categories as our independent variables, as well as more robust models that also control for age and partisanship.

Qualitative interview data

During the same period as the survey was fielded, we interviewed 27 U.S. local and state politicians about their experiences with political violence.[9] The purpose of our interviews was to supplement our survey data and to understand the qualitative aspects of politicians' lived experiences with violence in politics, with an emphasis on the types of violence they experienced, how they cope with the violence, the consequences violence had on their continued political engagement, and whether they received some kind of support for dealing with violence. Given our focus on women of color and other minoritized politicians, we purposefully oversampled politicians who had relevant experiences. We aimed to include interview respondents of different intersectional identities to better understand qualitative differences in how our groups of interest experience violence and its consequences. Of the politicians we interviewed, 7 were White women, 4 were White men, 9 were women of color, and 7 were men of color. These politicians represented districts across the United States, though those from the West and Midwest were overrepresented in our sample, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Interview Respondent Characteristics

	All		White men		White women		Men of Color		Women of Color	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Party										
Republican	4	15%	1	25%	2	29%	0	0%	1	11%
Democrat	21	78%	2	50%	4	57%	6	86%	8	89%
Independent	2	7%	1	25%	1		1	14%	0	0%
Age										
Under 40	4	15%	0	0%	0	0%	2	29%	2	22%
40-65	19	70%	3	75%	6	86%	3	43%	7	78%
Over 65	4	15%	1	25%	1	14%	2	29%	0	0%
Region										
Northeast	1	4%	0	0%	0	0%	1	14%	0	0%
South	2	7%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	29%
West	9	33%	0	0%	3	43%	1	14%	5	56%
Midwest	15	52%	4	100%	4	57%	5	57%	2	22%
Total N	27	100%	4	100%	7	100%	7	100%	9	100%

Respondents were invited to participate in an interview over email, and interviews were conducted in

[9] See Appendix for more information on interview methods

person, over Zoom, or by phone. Interviews were semi-structured, and lasted between 25 minutes to 1 hour. Throughout the interview, respondents were asked whether they had personal experiences of people attempting to frighten them or being unnecessarily aggressive towards them in their role as a politician. Furthermore, we inquired about how such incidents affected them and made them feel, aiming to capture the psychological or physical harm they might have felt as a result. When appropriate, we asked about why they believed they were subject to harm, who the identity of the perpetrator was, and whether anyone intervened on their behalf. To mirror our surveys, we also inquired about the career consequences of these experiences, such as impacts on staying in office, being silenced in certain debates, reducing their visibility in public and online, and increasing security. Finally, we inquired about how politicians' safety is handled in general in their local councils and in specific instances that they had experienced. We also asked them about any support they received in difficult situations, and whether they had taken any measures to increase their security.

Throughout this study, we draw from these interviews to supplement the quantitative findings with examples. We also coded the interviews to understand the broader context of local politics where politicians experience violence. Qualitative data is particularly suitable for understanding institutional cultures, politicians' perceptions of to what extent they can turn to different actors for support, and whether politicians perceive that the concerns they have for their personal safety are being taken seriously. We discuss our interview methods in more detail in the Appendix.

Results

Intersectional group patterns in violence exposure

We begin by presenting the share of politicians who report experiencing any form of violence, as well as the six forms of violence we inquired about, descriptively. Table 2 presents the rates of violence exposure across race and gender separately, as well as by intersectional race$*$gender identities. It shows that experiencing some form of violence is more common than not among all politicians in our sample, with almost two-thirds of respondents (59%) having experienced some form of violence during the previous year. Moreover, the share of violence exposed politicians is substantially higher among non-White politicians than their White counterparts (a 13 percentage points difference), but the shares of violence exposed politicians among women and men seem more equal (a 5 percentage point difference).

Table 2 further disaggregates these findings by intersectional race∗gender identities, and demonstrates significant gendered and racial patterns in violence exposure. While elected officials faced high levels of violent encounters across the board in absolute terms, women of color reported the highest rates of experiencing any encounter over the past year (70%), followed by men of color and White women and men of color (69% and 59%, respectively). White men reported the lowest rates of experiencing any violent encounter (56%). Columns 5-8 in Table 2 also reveal that the racial patterns in columns 1 and 2 are largely driven by the high rates of violence targeting women of color. Columns that disaggregate the sample by both gender and race reveal that women of color reported the highest rates of each form of violence compared to the other groups.

Table 2: Rates of violence exposure over the past year by subgroup (weighted)

	(1) Among All Respondents	(2) Among Whites	(3) Among Non Whites	(4) Among Women	(5) Among Men	(6) Among Women of Color	(7) Among White Women	(8) Among Men of Color	(9) Among White Men
Any form of violence	58.57%	56.94%	69.25%	60.76%	57.02%	69.73%	58.84%	68.65%	55.70%
Insult	56.01%	54.66%	64.81%	59.73%	53.34%	65.48%	58.51%	63.97%	52.14%
Harassed	43.56%	42.03%	53.55%	46.30%	41.60%	56.71%	44.08%	49.62%	40.69%
Threatened	23.44%	21.66%	35.11%	24.29%	22.83%	37.31%	21.51%	32.38%	21.75%
Attacked Physically	1.50%	1.03%	4.55%	2.61%	0.70%	6.65%	1.74%	1.94%	0.56%
Property Damage	3.84%	3.39%	6.79%	3.48%	4.11%	8.71%	2.36%	4.41%	4.07%
Malicious Impersonation	4.53%	3.83%	9.09%	4.71%	4.41%	11.27%	3.31%	6.38%	4.19%
Aggregate encounters (0-6)	1.32	1.27	1.74	1.41	1.27	1.86	1.31	1.59	1.23
N	578	496	82	249	329	46	203	36	293

Next, we examine whether these differences are statistically significant and if they are impacted by other factors such as politicians' age and which party they belong to. Figure 2 presents estimates from weighted OLS regressions. In Figures 2(a) and 2(b), we first present the results from eight weighted OLS regressions where we regress our dependent variables on two main explanatory variables of interest: race (minority status) and gender (female). We also present results from regressions that controls for age and partisanship.

Beginning with the six disaggregated forms of political violence in Figure 2(a), non-White politicians are significantly more likely than their White counterparts to report experiencing malicious impersonation, harassment, threats, and physical attacks over the past year, both with and without age and party controls. In these models, female politicians are no more likely than their male counterparts to report experiencing any of the six forms of violence over the past year.

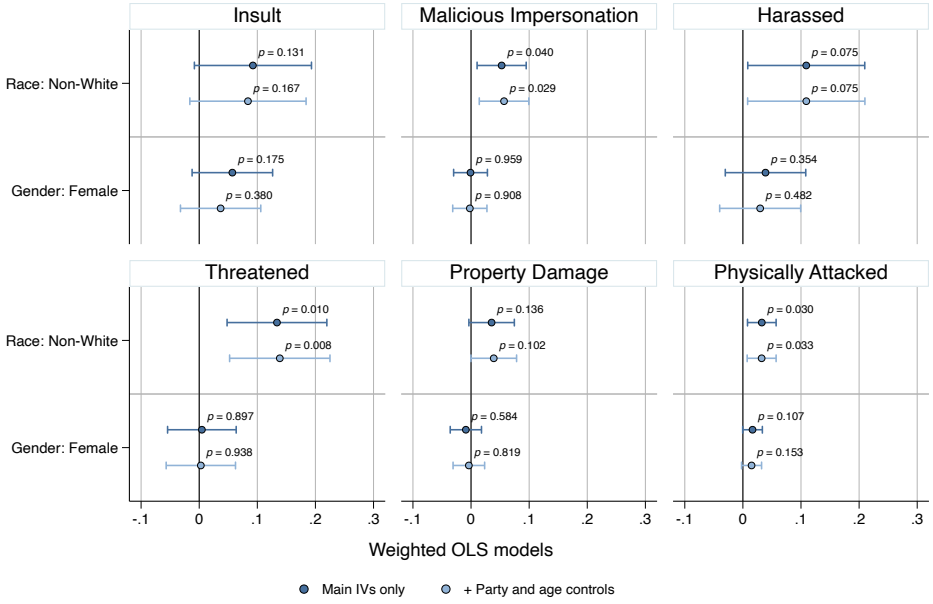
Turning to Figure 2(b), we regress race and gender on two additional outcome variables: (1) a dichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent experienced any form of political violence and (2)

an additive variable ranging from 0-6 measuring how many of the six encounters respondents had experienced. Our findings indicate that female politicians are no more likely than male politicians to experience at least one form of violence. The estimate for women's rates of exposure to several forms of violence, compared to men's, is positive, though not statistically significant. We do find, however, that racial minorities are significantly more likely than White politicians to experience at least one form of violence across both model specifications. And, when evaluating the risk of experiencing several forms of violence, we find that non-White politicians are significantly more likely than their White counterparts to experience multiple forms of violence. This holds both with and without control variables. On average, minoritized politicians experience between 0.456 to 0.460 additional forms of violence compared to White counterparts.

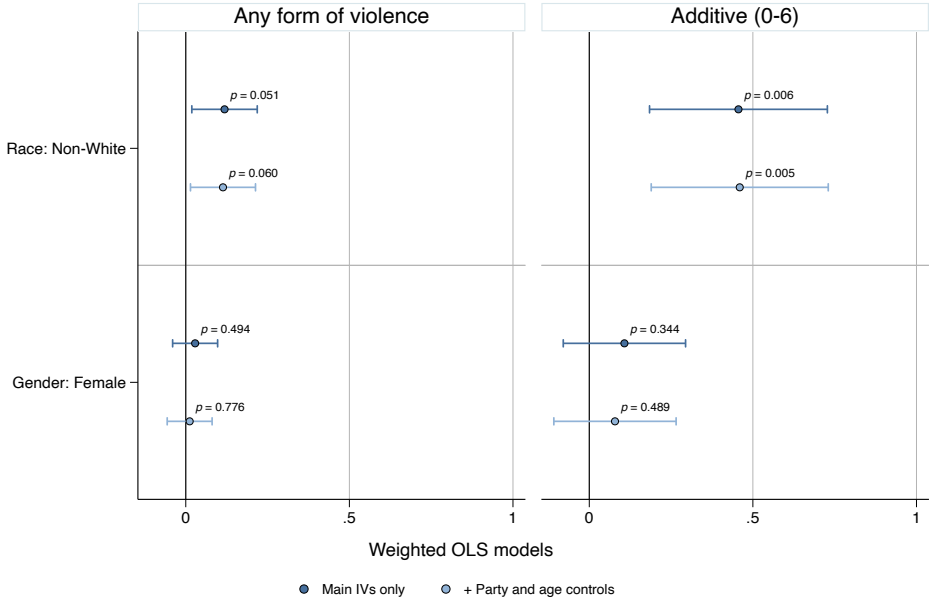
Figure 3 next evaluates the relationship between the intersectional race$*$gender categories and the eight dependent variables of interest. Again, we present naive coefficient estimates, where we control for only our key independent variables (e.g., women of color, White women, and men of color in comparison to the omitted white men category), and more robust models where we include party and age controls as well.

We begin by examining the six forms of violence. Figure 3(a), first, shows no negative estimates, meaning that there is no form of violence that White men tend to experience more frequently than any other group of politicians. This is in line with our theoretical expectation that White men, as the traditionally dominant political class, enjoy the most privileged situation in politics. Secondly, this figure reveals that women of color are significantly more likely than White men to experience malicious impersonation (both specifications), harassment (both specifications), threats (both specifications), physical attacks (both specifications), and property damage (robust specification). Across each of these models, in both the naive and robust specifications, no significant differences emerge between White men and the other two intersectional categories examined, White women or men of color. While some of the coefficient sizes for men of color are substantively large, they do not rise to traditional levels of statistical significance, perhaps due to the small sample size. Moreover, while confidence intervals for women of color and White women, and women of color and men of color, overlap for some of the forms of violence, it is only women of color who experience more violence than White men with a difference that is statistically significant. This indicates that women of color are at a unique risk of experiencing violence as elected officials, and to experience more forms of violence than politicians who align more closely with the traditionally dominant identity in politics.

Figure 2: Association between race and gender and violence exposure, weighted OLS regressions



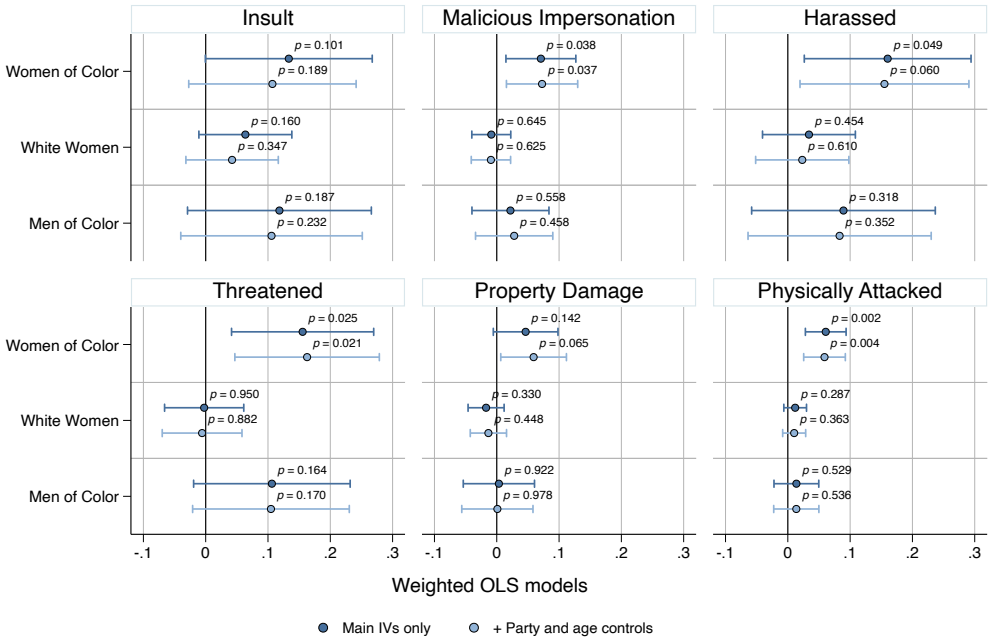
((a)) Race and gender separately



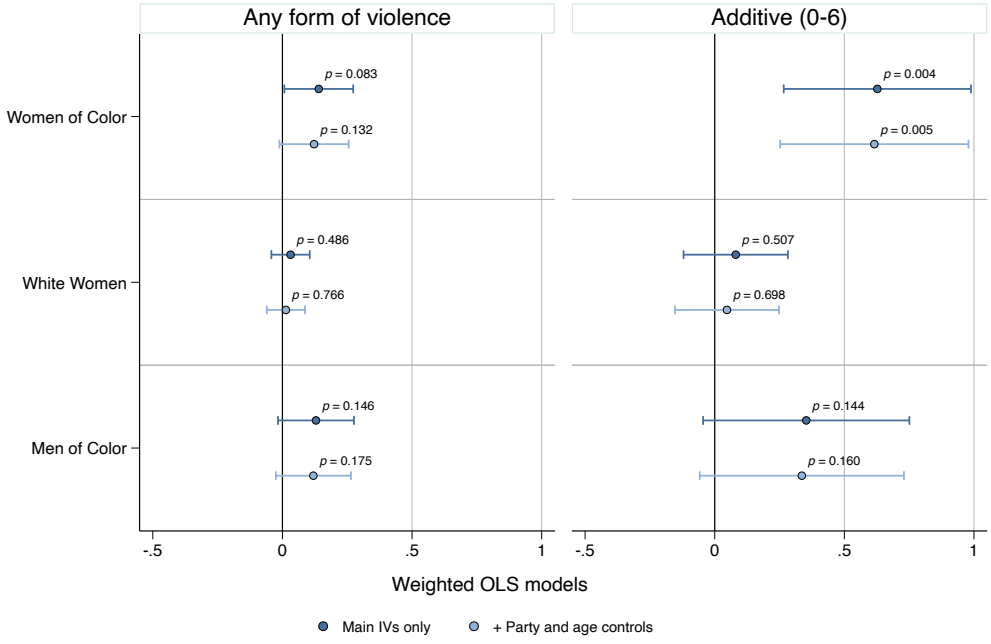
((b)) Race and gender separately

Figure 3(b) tests whether there are statistically significant differences between women of color and White men in experiencing any form of violence and more forms of violence. These results here reveal that women of color are significantly more likely than White men to experience any form of violence (naive

Figure 3: Association between race and gender and violence exposure, weighted OLS regressions



((a)) Intersectional identities



((b)) Intersectional identities

specifications) as well as more forms of violence (both specifications). Again, no statistically significant differences emerge between White men and White women, or between White men and men of color, though once again the substantive size of the men of color coefficient is quite large.

Whereas some previous research has found significant differences in the violence experienced by White women and men, our findings underscore the specific vulnerability of women of color in the American case, confirming H1. For example, Håkansson and Lajevardi 2024 do not find an interaction effect between gender and immigrant-background in the propensity to experience violence among Swedish politicians. Similar to previous research on U.S. mayors (Herrick and Thomas, 2024*b*), we find that the largest discrepancy in violence exposure among local U.S. politicians is that between women of color and White men. This suggests that intersectionality might manifest distinctly in the American case. Here, there are no consistent differences in the violence experienced by White men and White women, or by White men and men of color, but women of color experience markedly more violence than White men.

Our interviews echo findings from the survey, and in particular, highlight how women of color are particularly vulnerable to different forms of violent encounters while they hold public office. Women of color respondents shared examples of threats by physical and electronic mail (WOC6, WOC5); disparaging insults by phone (WOC2), while in public as a private citizen (WOC4, WOC7), and in official public meetings (WOC5, WOC6, WOC3); and regular attacks on social media (WOC1, WOC8, WOC2). Two others across the partisan aisle reported receiving microaggressions about their deservingness and capacity to serve as elected officials from their own colleagues (WOC8, WOC9).

Some examples that highlight the intensity of these experiences include one instance during the pandemic when city council meetings went online. WOC6 shared that at least on two occasions, the "N-word" was used in a city council meeting, targeting her in particular as she was the only Black member of the city council.[10] In one instance, the word was typed in the meeting chat. In another, the word was proclaimed out loud when a meeting attendee unmuted themselves and stated it.

Women of color faced many other forms of psychological violence. In addition to facing hate speech, one politician was also receiving hate mail, stating, "[t]here were also postcards, I was receiving postcards from someone anonymously. That would intentionally put, you know, BLM burners, looters murderers, and ... all lives matter" (WOC6). Another interviewee, WOC5, shared that one participant in a recent city

[10] In the interview, the participant uses the actual racial slur to detail her experience. Given the harm this word can cause towards Black Americans (Sa-kiera Hudson and Banaji, N.d.), we do not include her full quote here. You can read more about this choice in our ethics statement.

council meeting, a local business owner, proclaimed that she belonged on the protest lines, rather than in a position of someone who is able to vote on issues for the entire city. And, finally, WOC1, highlighted how a podcaster with a large social media following falsely connected her to the Mexican cartels, penning long threads about it. Unable to identify her perpetrators but very much affected both reputationally and emotionally by these social media attacks, WOC1 wondered, "[t]his is a podcaster that's given credibility and has like shows and then is not accountable? ... So that's sort of what we're operating against right now like these independent podcasters, who are galvanizing all their followers."

Perpetrator characteristics

Our survey data also includes survey questions about who is responsible for these violent attacks. The Civic Pulse survey asked violence-exposed respondents to identify the identity and gender of the perpetrator behind the most recent attack on them. Overall, respondents reported aggravated citizens as the most common perpetrator (29.91%), followed by someone from a right-wing organization (21.60%), someone from a left-wing organization (15.89%), more liberal elected officials (5.82%), more conservative elected officials (5.09%), business owners (3.15%), and finally members of a criminal network/gang (0.22%). In some cases, there was uncertainty and vagueness about the source of the perpetrator; 12.84% indicated the perpetrator belong to an "other" category and 5.47% were identified as other or unknown. At the same time, 42.17% of the perpetrators were identified as male, 19.63% as female, 29.25% as a combination of the two genders, and 8.94% of the perpetrators' genders were unknown. This is similar to previous research, which has also found men to be overrepresented as perpetrators of violence against politicians (Collignon and Rüdig, 2021; Håkansson, 2021; Schneider, 2023) and hold more tolerant attitudes to harassing and attacking politicians (Armaly and Enders, 2024; Håkansson, 2024*a*).

Turning to racial and gender subgroups in Figures A2(a) and A2(b), some differences are also worthy of note. Politicians of color were more likely to select the other/unknown or don't know options, as well as to identify a female perpetrator and a perpetrator whose gender identity is unknown compared to White politicians. Furthermore, female politicians were more likely than male politicians to identify a member from a right-wing organization, and less likely to identify a member from a left-wing organization, as their perpetrator. These patterns suggest that perpetrators of a more conservative ideology are more likely to target women politicians, and that men are more likely to target those politicians who deviate from the dominant

political class: racial minorities and women.

Next, we consider politicians' intersectional identities.[11] To begin, over 40% of the perpetrators identified by White women, men of color, and White men were male, and ∼30% of the perpetrators identified by women of color were male. Women of color were more likely than all other intersectional groups to indicate that the gender identity of their perpetrator was unknown to them. Moreover, women of color and men of color were also more likely than White women and White men to be targeted by female perpetrators (25% and 26% compared to 16% and 19%, respectively). Compared to White men, women of color were also less likely to identify aggravated citizens and members of a left-wing organization as their perpetrators, and significantly more likely to indicate either "don't know" or "other" when queried about the identity of their attacker. White women, meanwhile, were much more likely than White men to be targeted by a member of a right-wing organization and significantly less likely to be targeted by a member of a left-wing organization. Finally, men of color were more likely than White men to be targeted by a politician more conservative than them.

All of these patterns together show that the composition of perpetrators differs somewhat depending on politicians' identities. The fact that conservative politicians and members of right-wing organizations seem more prone to target women and racial minorities, and members of left-wing organizations seem more likely to target men than women, is unsurprising since women politicians typically represent more progressive views. Moreover, the very presence of women and racial minorities in political domains constitutes a threat to the status quo and provokes those who wish to preserve politics as a space dominated by White men.

Similarly, several interviewees also indicated that a lot of perpetrators are male, and cited problematic group dynamics among men as one driver. One respondent, for example, reflected on a time when she faced extensive online harassment: "I think it's that group mentality of, like 'everyone's shitting on her, so I'm gonna take it to the next level' /.../ Like, just hyper masculinity, the notion of wanting to fit in" (WOC2).

The content of hostile comments

In addition to asking respondents about their experiences with six forms of violence, the survey also asked respondents whether they had recently encountered hostile comments in relation to eleven predefined themes. Specifically, the survey asked, "[i]n the past three months, have you experienced hostile comments

[11] See Figures A2(a) and A2(b).

about any of the following topics?" Response options included: *comments about your appearance*; *comments about your gender*; *comments about your sexual orientation or romantic life*; *comments about your race or ethnicity*; *comments on your religion*; *comments on your age*; *comments about your party affiliation or political ideology*; *comments about your policy positions*; *comments expressing desire to harm you/for harm to come to you*; *comments about your loyalty to America*; *comments about your children, spouse, or other family members*; and *none of the above*.

As can be seen in Figure 4, more than half of politicians received hostile comments corresponding to at least one of these categories over the past three months. This highlights the regularity with which local politicians experience uncivil comments. The most common forms of hostile comments that local politicians received were regarding policy (45%), followed by hostile comments relating to their party (31%). Remarks about other features were far more rare. For example, comments about one's loyalty to America (10%), about one's family (9%), about a desire to harm one (7%), one's appearance (7%), gender (6%), race (5%), and sexuality (5%) were far less widespread. No respondents indicated that they had received hostile comments relating to their age, which is somewhat surprising given that young politicians often experience discrimination in politics (Stockemer and Sundström, 2024). It is possible that the stark underrepresentation of young politicians in U.S. politics makes age a less salient identity marker in this context compared to others. Interestingly, despite the survey being fielded in the aftermath of the Israel-Gaza war and with the onset of mass national protests about the issue, not a single respondent indicated they had received a hostile comment about their religion. While several politicians we interviewed did describe experiencing religious discrimination over the past year, our survey data suggests that this may not be one of the most common types of hostility that local politicians in the U.S. experience.

In raw terms, women of color are especially vulnerable to having received hostile comments recently. In our survey, they report receiving more of these comments than any other intersectional group (70.15%), followed by men of color (61.01%), White women (54.74%), and White men (51.12%). To understand whether one's intersectional identity is significantly associated with a difference in receiving hostile comments, we regress different forms of hostile comments on our intersectional categories in Figure 5. Again, White men are the baseline omitted category and Figure 5 displays regression coefficients from naive models and more robust models where we control for party and age. Figure 5(a) displays weighted OLS regression coefficients from nine models where we regress the nine types of hostile comments for which there is some variation (i.e., excluding religion and age) on the intersectional identity groups.

Figure 4: Hostile comments

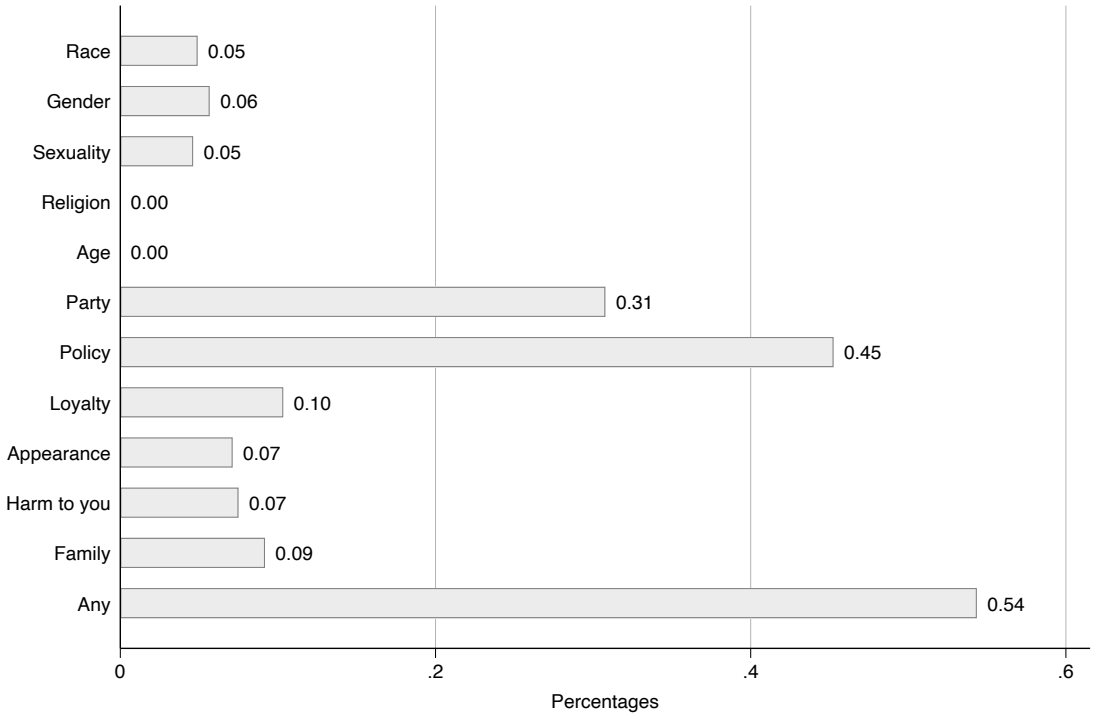
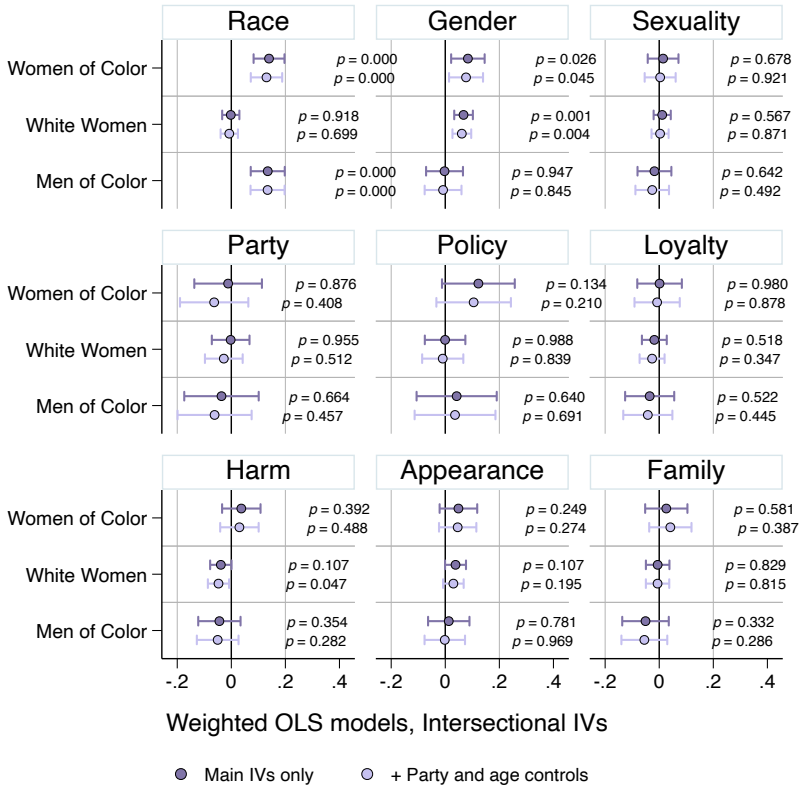


Figure 5(b) examines these relationships with two additional outcome variables: (1) a binary variable indicating whether a respondent has encountered any hostile comment (left-hand panel), and (2) an additive hostile comment variable, which ranges from 0-9 (right-hand panel).

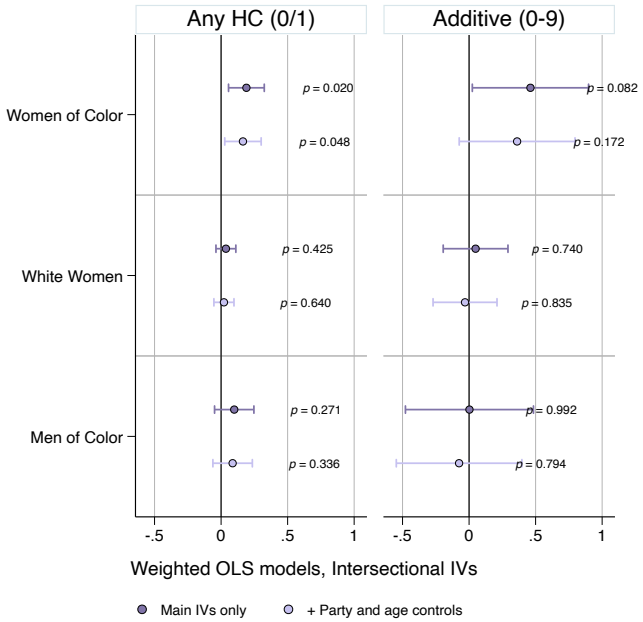
Overall, several takeaways emerge from these analyses. First, women of color are significantly more likely than White men to report experiencing any hostile comment (both specifications, Figure 5(b)). However, no significant differences emerge between the three intersectional categories and White men for experiencing comments about one's appearance, one's sexuality, one's party, one's policy positions, harm to oneself, one's loyalty, and one's family (see Figure 5(a)). Moreover, women of color are significantly more likely (in the naive estimate) to experience more hostile comments than white men, on average. Next, when we turn to hostile comments about race and gender, we find that White women and women of color are each significantly more likely than White men to report receiving hostile comments about one's gender. Relatedly, women of color and men of color are significantly more likely than White men to report receiving hostile comments about one's race. However, it is only women of color, who hold multiple salient and marginalized identities, who are significantly more likely to report experiencing *both* hostile

comments about their race and gender, demonstrating the compounding nature of animus they receive based on multiple aspects of their identity.

Figure 5: Predictors of hostile comments by intersectional identities



((a)) Intersectional identities



((b)) Intersectional identities

Conclusion

This chapter defined and distinguished between psychological and physical violence. It demonstrates that among local U.S. politicians, psychological violence is far more prevalent than physical violence, affecting over 58% of respondents compared to 5%. The findings from this chapter draw on an original survey, which highlights that nearly 7 in 10 women of color reported experiencing at least one form of political violence over the past year, much more than all other race$*$gender groups examined. This violence spans both psychological and physical violence. The statistical analyses confirm that political violence is a widespread and deeply unequal experience, particularly affecting women of color in local U.S. politics. Qualitative interviews supplement the survey findings, and illustrate that women of color face frequent and severe forms of violence, with many reporting being targeted by constituents, colleagues, and online actors. The types of derogatory comments they receive highlight their identities as outsiders in politics, serving to cement politics as an exclusive male, White sphere.