A Comparative Approach to Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

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Abstract

Recent elections around the word have seen increased number of claims of harassment and intimidation of political elites. Candidates of all parties suffer intrusive and aggressive behaviours from members of the public but the threats vary in magnitude and seriousness. While there are very few studies that look into harassment of Parliamentarians, there is no comprehensive study of intimidation of candidates in general. Moreover, studies of electoral intimidation tend to focus on countries that suffer from other forms of violence but less is known about the causes and effects of harassment in the context of peaceful democratic elections. This article presents results of 3 original surveys of parliamentary candidates who stood in the latest legislative elections in the UK, Germany and Chile. Results allow the comparison of experiences of harassment and intimidation of candidates and elected officials in countries that use different electoral and political systems. Are some candidates more likely to be targeted? What are the most common forms of harassment? Is harassment serious and/ or getting worse? What can be done about this issue?

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1 Introduction

Peace should be at the heart of any democratic country. There is no need to fight when citizens are offered political pluralism, civil liberties and assured government accountability. The idea that representatives are elected as delegates of the popular will, and that every citizen has the right to stand for elections and participate in the public life of the country is embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, more often than not, force is used to achieve political goals, either to prevent particular individuals for reaching office, to influence their decisions once in office or to distort the electoral process altogether. This article focuses on acts of harassment and intimidation towards electoral candidates as a form of violence that affects the quality of elections and representation. Studying intimidation and violence during democratic elections is important because it challenges the core values of the democratic system itself, affects the relationship between represented and representative and can have fundamental consequences in descriptive and substantive representation (Norris, 2013).

Electoral violence refers to acts of intimidation or aggression that occur during the pre-election (campaign) period, the election itself or the post-election phase that leads up to the inauguration of the newly elected body (Höglund, 2009). Following this definition, violence directed towards candidates a) occur during campaigns, b) the goal of the act of aggression is to affect an electoral outcome or prevent someone from running in an election, and c) the means by which it is carried out violates the personal integrity of individuals involved in the electoral process (Bjarnegård, 2018). The present article is intended to start a research agenda on harassment and intimidation against elective candidates from a comparative perspective. It focuses on candidates standing in national legislative elections in the United Kingdom, Chile and Germany and reports results from three large national surveys to show the frequency and type of harassment that candidates

suffer in these countries as well as its emotional consequences.

We build on the research of James et al., 2016 to contribute to the existing academic literature in at least, four meaningful ways. Firstly, we compare instances of harassment and intimidation in countries that are otherwise peaceful but that have experienced varying levels of polarisation lately. In the UK, the Brexit debate, in Germany the refugee crisis while in Chile there has been a steady, yet non-explosive, increase in political polarisation over the years (Fábrega, González, & Lindh, 2018). This comparative approach allows us to disentangle instances of harassment from debates that polarise politics in general. Secondly, the comparative approach also allows us to determine if there are similar factors affecting candidates in different countries, in order to establish if the same risk assessment procedures are relevant across borders, a challenge previously identified by James et al., 2016. Thirdly, instead of pursuing the causes and motives of the perpetrator, we focus on understanding the experiences of candidates who are victims of harassment, making them the centre of research. Finally, we go beyond the current focus on MPs and representatives to a focus on candidates in general. This is, instead of looking at the experiences of prominent political figures that are already in a position of power, we focus on the experiences of individuals *seeking power*. The shift of focus has empirical and theoretical consequences. On the one hand, it allows us to identify barriers that increase the cost of participation into politics, facilitating the design of policies that can tackle the problem from the root. On the other hand, it allows us to identify if the drivers of harassment and intimidation to elected figures is different from drivers and motivations of intimidation and harassment to candidates in general.

The remainder of the article presents, first, a brief overview of the most recent instances of harassment and intimidation of political elites in the UK, Germany and Chile. We then present the survey and the methodology used to contact

candidates as well as the response rates. Final sections present the results and conclude.

2 Literature Review

Harassment and intimidation of political figures have been used by protests groups to achieve political goals (Doan, 2009). In this regard, political violence is defined as "acts of disruption, destruction, injury whose purpose, choice of target or victims surrounding circumstances, implementation and effects have political significance" (Nieburg, 1969, p. 13). The definition manifests the link between intimidation and political influence. While it has consequence for policy decision making, it also has personal consequences for the public officer who suffers it.

There are three main bodies of literature that study aggression towards political elites from different angles. The first stream of research focuses on electoral related violence. It has traditionally focused on the study of violence in contexts where institutions are weak and violence of other nature is high (see for example the work of Höglund, 2009; Ponce, 2019; Richani, 2013; Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017; Bah, 2010; Smidt, 2016. One key element of this vast literature is that electoral violence is intertwined with other forms of violence prevailing in the country (Piscopo, 2016). That makes it possible to attribute a rise in electoral related violence to a worsening of the general conditions of political stability (Kleinfeld & Barham, 2018). Less studied, however, is the nature of harassment and intimidation of political figures in established democracies (Herrick et al., 2019).

Lately, the issue of harassment and intimidation of female politicians, become of interest (Piscopo, 2016; Kuperberg, 2018; Krook & Restrepo Sanın, 2019; Krook, 2018). Studies on this stream emphasise the efforts that some governments and international organisation have made to de-normalise violence and harassment of

female politicians. But it mainly focuses on conceptualisation of what violence is and to treat harassment as an issue of harassment in the work place. This is why it finds substantial evidence in the renouncement of cabinet ministers in North America, Western Europe, and beyond as result of women denouncing sexual harassment by senior colleagues (Krook, 2018).

This article is, instead, situated in the context of new trends emerging, mainly from the sociological and psychological literature that point out the importance of focusing on individual experiences of political elites to understand the pervasiveness of intimidation. It has been found that in the UK, Australia, Norway and Canada, parliamentarians are significantly more likely to be object of intimidation and inappropriate behaviour than the rest of the population (Dietz et al., 1991; Adams, Hazelwood, Pitre, Bedard, & Landry, 2009; James et al., 2016; Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh, & Pathé, 2015).

Research indicates that perpetrators of such stalking and aggressive episodes frequently suffer from a mental health disorder, are fixated with the representative, believe they can influence policy or hold personal grievances against their MPs (Pathé, Phillips, Perdacher, & Heffernan, 2014; Adams et al., 2009; James et al., 2016; James et al., 2007; Every-Palmer et al., 2015; Wilson, Dempsey, Farnham, Manze, & Taylor, 2018). Just to put this in proportion, politicians are more likely to being hurt by fixated individuals than by terrorists (Every-Palmer et al., 2015). This suggests that the position of power of MPs makes them visible or responsible to the eyes of perpetrators, driving the fixation. However, if we look at candidates standing in elections, they are seeking a position of power but not yet acquired it, suggesting that in this case, it is more likely that harassment respond to the perpetrator's willingness to stop them participating altogether or reaching that position of power than a willingness to influence decisions over public policy.

The study of harassment of MPs is more advanced than the study of political

candidates. Based on previous research we can say that harassment of members of parliament is frequent. In Canada, it reaches to almost 30% of MPs (Adams et al., 2009). This figure reaches 81, 87 and 84% in the UK, New Zealand and Norway (James et al., 2016). In all cases, researchers have reached the conclusion that intimidating actions are performed by individuals with mental health problems who want to influence policy. However, there is no reason why these individuals will be fixated with candidates, who are not yet in a position of power or to influence policy.

There are emotional consequences of harassment and intimidation of MPs. In the UK, James et al., 2016 found that almost 3 of every 4 MPs who responded their survey experienced fear. His findings suggest that experiences of stalking have a strong effect on feelings of safety. They did not find any significant differences by sex, age, party and number of years in parliament. Adams et al., 2009 found that MPs who suffer abuse become increasingly distrustful of especial interest groups or members of the public with opposing views. A common concern for MPs is the possibility of harassment scaling into something serious. Victims who experienced severe forms of harassment and intimidation suffered mental and emotional stress (Adams et al., 2009; Pathé & Mullen, 1997).

Variations in the proportion of MPs experiencing fear and other emotional reactions to harassment and intimidation indicate that not all political figures react the same to these actions. Some of them, dismiss the incidents as "part of the game". Some others, modify their behaviour to avoid risk and protect themselves or their families. For some others, being victims of harassment may put them off from participating in politics altogether.

The emotional effects of certain forms of harassment can be dismantled if identified and tackled early (Purcell, Pathe, & Mullen, 2004). Many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are the dominant driver of decision making

because decisions serve as a way to avoid negative feelings such as anger or fear (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015). This suggest that harassment will have a stronger impact on the behaviour and political ambitions of candidates who are emotionally affected by it.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) *Candidates standing in new democracies have a higher probability to suffer harassment and intimidation than candidates standing in long established democracies*

Hypothesis 2 (H2) *Women have a higher probability to suffer harassment or intimidation than men*

Hypothesis 3 (H3) *Incumbent candidates have a higher probability to suffer harassment or intimidation than non-incumbents*

3   Data and Methodology

The analysis is based on three individual-level survey data (Great Britain, Chile, and Germany). Data from the UK comes from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey[1]. It was conducted between June 2017 and May 2018. Survey was applied to all candidates of the major parties standing in England, Wales and Scotland (2,825). They received questionnaires by mail, followed by email reminders. 1,498 responses were obtained, corresponding to a 53% overall response rate. Response rate by sex is 57% females and 51% males. 11% of answers come from sitting incumbent MPs and 5% from BMEs.

Data from Germany was collected by Wolfgang Rüdig between April 2018 and July 2019[2]. A total of 2,516 major party candidates were contacted with a printed

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[1]Campbell, Hudson and Rüdig. ESRC – ES/M500410/1
[2]Funded by the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK

questionnaire as well as by e-mail, followed by email reminders. A total of 638 valid responses were obtained, corresponding to a 25.4% overall response rate. Response rate by sex is 21.7% females and 27.1% males. 16.2% of answers come from sitting MPs[3]

The data from Chile comes from the Candidaturas Chile project, the local chapter of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) led by Javier Sajuria. The survey was administered to candidates to the Congress (both the Lower Chamber and the Senate) in the Chilean general elections of 2017. The survey was administered after the election, between December 2017 and June 2018, mostly online. The response rate was 26% (257 responses), with 70 responses coming from elected representatives (45% of the total).

Each survey asks the same questions about harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates. The questions were developed by (James et al., 2016) who kindly shared their questionnaire with us.

In total, we have responses from 2,373 individual candidates from the three countries. Apart from the survey non-response observed above, we also have some levels of item non-response, which explains some of the sample differences in the regression models below. Out of the total sample, 1,615 (68%) respondents were male and 758 (32%) respondents were female. The country with the highest proportion of female respondents (38%) is Chile, where a gender quota is in place, forcing parties to submit at least 40% of candidates from each sex. Within the German sample, we have 73% male respondents and 27% female respondents, whereas in Great Britain the breakdown is 67% male and 33% female.

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[3]We like to thank Heiko Giebler of the Berlin Social Science Centre WZB for his assistance in fielding the survey of 2017 German Federal Election candidates

3.1 Measuring Harassment

Political scientists tend to define violence narrowly as an act of force. Sociologists in contrast, define violence more comprehensively to include actions that are violent but normalised by society (**Burack2005**; Krook & Restrepo Sanın, 2019). Krook and Restrepo Sanın, 2019 indicate that violence can manifest in different ways -semiotic, physical, economic, psychological and sexual-. It is also argued that harassment is traditionally defined in terms that correlate with frequent intimidation towards men and that therefore, many acts of intimidation to women remain unaddressed (Bjarnegård, 2018). Thus, we deliberately avoided providing a definition of harassment or to narrow its scope in the questionnaire. Instead, we asked candidates openly if they personally experienced any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to their security in their position as parliamentary candidates during the campaign. This particular wording allows them to self-define what they consider to be harassment and intimidation before answering the question in a yes/no manner.

3.2 Measuring the emotional response to harassment

Not all candidates react the same to acts of harassment and intimidation. Some of them, dismiss the actions as "part of the game", some others modify their behaviour to avoid risk and protect themselves or their families. For some, being victim of harassment may put them off from participating in politics altogether. Many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are the dominant driver of decision making because decisions serve as a way to avoid negative feelings such as anger or fear (Lerner et al., 2015). This suggest that harassment will have a stronger impact on the behaviour and political ambitions of candidates who are emotionally affected by it. To investigate this issue further, we asked candidates

to indicate in which intensity they felt fearful, concerned or annoyed by actions of harassment and intimidation. They could select four levels in the answer: Not at all, Only a little, Moderately, Very.

4 Findings

Our analysis is, at this stage, mostly exploratory. We have collated the responses from the three countries to study general patterns and local differences in two basic dimensions: experiences of harassment, and emotions deriving from it.

Fortunately, many candidates indicated that they have not been victims of harassment. As it can be observed in Figure 1, the country with the lowest rate is Chile, with an average below 20%. However, this number is much higher in the context of Germany, where almost 45% of the candidates declared being victim of harassment. In the UK, the proportion is roughly above 30%, in line with the cross-country average of 34%[4].

Based on the literature cited above, we explore the relationship between the sex of the candidates and their propensity to declare that they have been the victims of harassment. The differences between male and female candidates are quite small in terms of their average proportions. Whereas 37% of women declare being victim of harassment, that number decreases to 32% in the case of men. Unsurprisingly, the difference between both groups is not statistically significant, according to our error estimations. However, this statistic obscures the differences within countries, where we do observe some relevant differences. Whereas in Chile and Germany we do not observe a difference by sex, we found a significant difference in Great Britain. In that country, 30% of men and 38% of women declared that they were

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[4]In order to provide an approximation of the confidence intervals, we have relied on bootstrapping here and in our other estimates presented below. Other techniques, such as Bayesian approximations, render comparable results.

Harassment to candidates

Proportion of candidates who declared
being victim of harassment in 2017

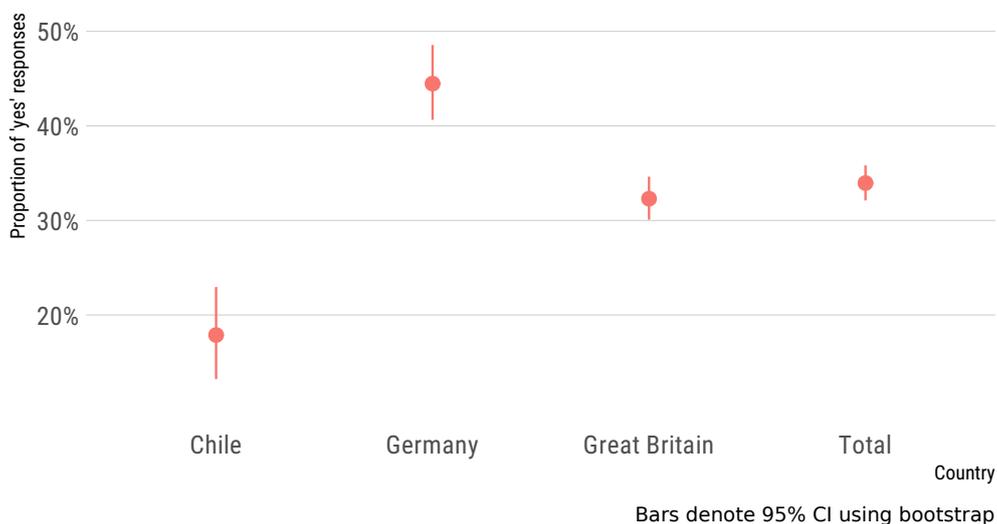Bars denote 95% CI using bootstrap

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents that declare being a victim of harassment during the electoral campaign

on the receiving end of harassment and intimidation, a difference that is significant within a 95% confidence interval.

A second dimension of harassment comes with the actual forms in which it takes place. As explained above, candidates (including those who responded no to the question) were shown different forms of harassment and they had to declare if they had been victim of it and the approximate frequency. We summarise the results of the pooled sample in Figure 3. We can observe that the actual numbers vary significantly across forms of harassment. For example, while a striking 90% declare that they were not victims of physical attacks, almost 60% declare that they received attacks on social media. The other form of harassment that is quite high is receiving inappropriate emails. In general, we observe a pattern where non-

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Harassment to candidates

Proportion of candidates who declared
being victim of harassment in 2017

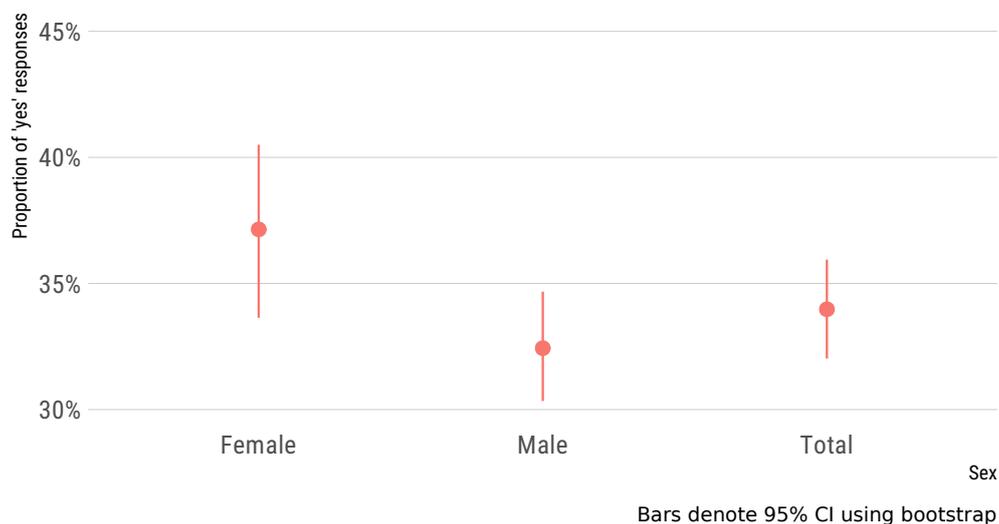Bars denote 95% CI using bootstrap

Figure 2: Victims of harassment by sex

physical forms of harassment are more frequent that those that require someone sharing the same space and time with the candidates.

Finally, a third dimension that we analyse corresponds to the emotions that arise from the experiences of harassment. For that purpose, those who answered "Yes" to the initial question about being victims of harassment were asked follow-up questions about their emotions. In particular, we asked them about three particular emotions: whether they felt annoyed, concerned, or fearful. In all cases, they were able to answer in a 4-point scale, from "Not at all" to "Very". The results are shown in Figure 4 and provide a figure which is quite different from what we observed in Figure 1. We observe that Chilean candidates feel more strongly about their experiences of harassment, with scores that are significantly
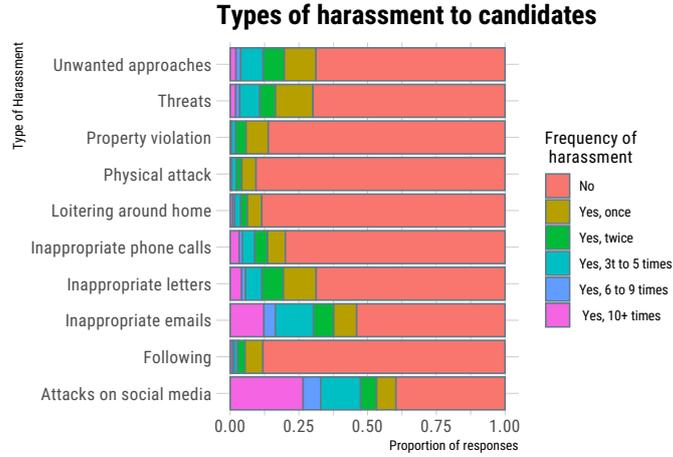
Types of harassment to candidates

Figure 3: Types of harassment

higher than respondents from Great Britain and Germany.

While the results presented above are mostly descriptive, it is important to produce a more complete analysis in which we can control for different demographic and individual-level factors that can be related to the probability of being a victim of harassment, as well as the emotional responses to such experiences. We conducted a series of regression models to analyse these results. For the variables measuring whether the respondents were victims of harassment or not, we rely on a logistic regression. We then model the different emotions using linear models (OLS). We are aware that the number of categories is small (4) and that using a linear model can produce out-of-bands predictions, but for the sake of easiness of interpretation, we rely on a linear approximation[5]. As explanatory variables in our models, we include political aspects (i.e. whether the candidate was successful in 2017, if they were incumbents, or how long they have lived in the constituency they represent), along with demographic variables (i.e. sex and age). We have also

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[5]In comparison to more sophisticated approaches, such as ordered logit or probit, which would produce estimates that are difficult to interpret.
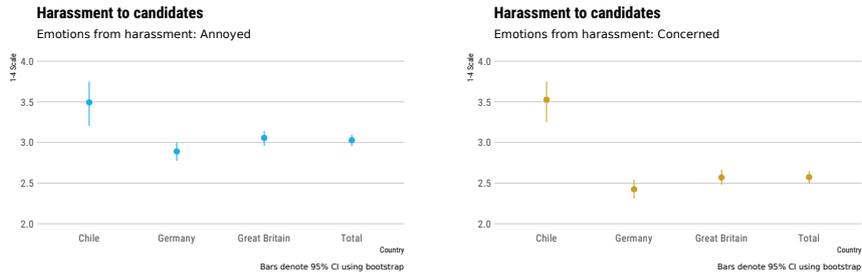
(a) Annoyed

(b) Concerned
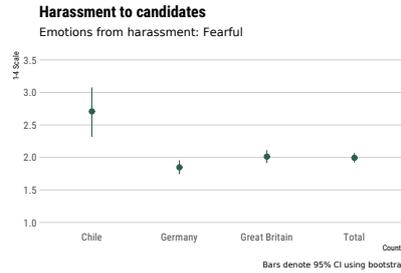
(c) Fearful

Figure 4: Emotions derived from experiences of harassment

added binary variables to account for the country, using Chile as a reference.

It is important to mention that the total number of observations is reduced because question about emotions are only answered by candidates who answered positively to the harassment question. Also, we are working with complete observations.

We show the results from our regression models in Table 1. Model 1 shows that the only significant relationship is between age and declaring being a victim of harassment. In particular, older candidates are less likely to declare being a victim of harassment, which is a result consistent over the years. The reduction in probabilities is also quite substantive from 0.46 for younger candidates, to 0.15 in the case of the older candidates.

In terms of emotions, the results are also consistent with the descriptive infor-

	Victim	Annoyed	Concerned	Fearful
Intercept	−0.68	2.97***	2.61***	1.81***
	(0.36)	(0.27)	(0.29)	(0.29)
Elected	0.06	−0.10	0.19	0.21
	(0.24)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.20)
Incumbent	0.20	0.60**	−0.14	−0.27
	(0.28)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.23)
Age	−0.02***	0.01	0.01**	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Sex	0.18	0.21*	0.19	0.47***
	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Live local	0.01	−0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Germany (ref. Chile)	1.21***	−0.66***	−1.06***	−0.69***
	(0.21)	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Great Britain (ref. Chile)	0.60**	−0.48**	−0.86***	−0.53**
	(0.20)	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.18)
BIC	1501.07			
Log Likelihood	-722.21			
Deviance	1444.41			
Num. obs.	1191	350	345	333
R^2		0.10	0.15	0.11
Adj. R^2		0.09	0.13	0.09
RMSE		0.89	0.92	0.94

$^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 1: Regression models on harassment
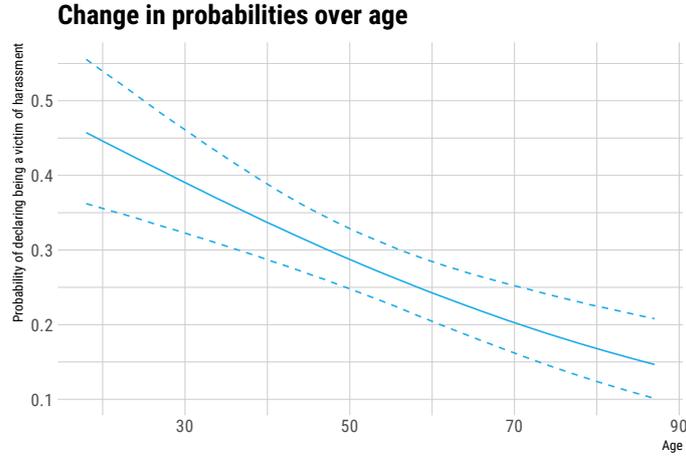
Change in probabilities over age

Figure 5: Predicted change in probabilities from Model 1

mation shown above, Chilean candidates feel more strongly about their experiences of harassment. However, we also see a significant relationship for sex, with women being more likely to feel annoyed and fearful after being a victim of harassment. Older candidates were also more concerned than younger candidates, being this the only significant association for this particular outcome variable.

5   Conclusions and future work

Intimidation and violence of political figures is a problem for the quality of elections and democracy, even in long-established democracies. Yet, this problematic issue has been discussed in very distinct and largely unrelated literature. First, psychology literature focuses on the responsibility of mentally disturbed people and how they pose a threat to prominent people including politicians. This approach has produced a good amount of interesting data and it is a stepping stone to show that political figures do suffer harassment in a larger degree than the average person and that they are also emotionally affected by it. However, its focus on elected

parliamentarians leads to conclusions based on the visibility of the politician, leaving possible drivers of intimidation towards individuals just entering the political arena unexplored. Our results show that being elected or incumbency are insignificant factors to explain harassment in this context, suggesting that the visibility of incumbency or electoral success are limited explanations for harassment.

Second, there is a broad literature on electoral violence which is extensive but focuses mainly in countries of the Global South where violence of other nature is also present. The security threats that violent ethnic groups and the organised crime represent for the general population, suggest that candidates are not just experiencing harassment but are threatened and killed in order to be removed from the election and ensure that a certain party or candidate wins. Our findings align with this body of knowledge. There is clearly a link between general social conflict and electoral conflict. While Chile does not have, at the moment, any explicit social conflict, harassment is low. Meanwhile, we can observe that the polarisation of politics in Germany and the UK may be fostering a rise in violence towards parliamentary candidates as candidates in these countries suffer significantly more harassment.

Then, the third body of literature relates to violence against women in politics, currently an important issue within the gender literature. Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2019 look at harassment and intimidation of female politicians as a general manifestation of structural violence resulting from misogyny. However, our findings indicate that not only female candidates are suffering of intimidating actions. There is no reason to believe that recent increase in harassment can be explained by an increase in misogyny in the UK, Germany and Chile. It seems more likely that in the context of polarisation, harassment has been 'normalised' and that previously hidden misogyny then becomes manifest.

We can establish the value of our approach to study harassment of candidates

and the value of conducting surveys to gather evidence of this phenomenon. In doing so, we respond to a gap previously identified by Bjarnegård, 2018. She makes the point that electoral violence against women is often 'hidden' and encourages researchers to use methods that are not limited a priori to prominent victims of election violence or exclusively to female victims. Our sample includes individuals in all these categories and thus, we can provide valuable insights of what differentiates victims from non-victims, and female victims from male victims.

All in all, by expanding the sample to a larger number of men and women, victims and non-victims on three countries, we do not find evidence of targeting towards women. But we do find evidence that female candidates are more strongly affected by harassment, as they show significantly more annoyance and fear as result. Currently, we do not have evidence to explain why this is the case but we can hypothesise that the effect relates to the type of threat they suffer or the content of the threats they receive. It is also possible that being female interacts with other characteristics (race, age or disability for example) to make certain candidates more vulnerable than others. Due to the low number of candidates with an ethnic minority background who answered the survey, we could not test for intersectionality as driver for harassment, but this is certainly something that a future agenda on the subject needs to address.

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