Tolerating the trolls? Gendered perceptions of online harassment of politicians in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Online harassment of politicians has become a major issue, but one that is particularly problematic for women politicians because of its potentially misogynistic tone. Despite increasing public attention to this issue, scholars cannot say with any authority how online harassment affects the decisions and behaviors of different types of candidates or what it means for candidate emergence. To explore perceptions of online harassment of Canadian politicians, this study draws upon interviews with 101 people from diverse genders, racial/ethnic identities, sexual orientations, and partisan affiliations. Findings indicate online harassment does not depress political ambition in Canada but it is a gendered phenomenon in that women are far more aware of this issue than men. It also shapes the experiences of candidates and officeholders, not least by fostering a hostile working environment that can affect their ability to do, or willingness to stay in, the job. Online harassment thus succeeds in making women feel they are in a hostile political environment even as it fails to deter them from engaging in politics. These findings demonstrate that social media has a gendered impact on democratic participation in Canada in the early 21st century.

I spent a lifetime building up a reputation, being credible, and trying to be quote-unquote a good person, and when you have people who, throughout a campaign right from the beginning, are trying to discredit you, you wonder whether the prize is worth that fight.

—Tash Taylor

Introduction

Tash Taylor had been planning to run for elected office since the age of five, when she first became fascinated with the personalities and processes of politics. But she considered abandoning her childhood dream to become a politician because of the dark side of social media. Taylor was subjected to a well-coordinated campaign of online harassment from the moment rumors surfaced that she would run in a 2015 city council by-election in Canada. Opponents used Twitter, Facebook, and the local newspaper's online comment section to publicly attack the rookie candidate. At first, the trolls were not able to target

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her directly because a busy professional career had kept her off social media. But that changed once she set up her election sites (Victoria Paterson 2015). The online harassment led her to shut down her Twitter account. But the online tormenting did not stop until the election was over and she had lost. Her encounter with online harassment left Taylor re-evaluating whether being a politician was worth the grief.

As Taylor's experience shows, online harassment can be a major problem for individuals seeking elected office. Civil society research has found that women politicians are more likely than men politicians to receive demeaning, insulting, and violent messages on social media (Atalanta 2018; Elle Hunt, Nick Evershed, and Ri Liu 2016). Online harassment is seen as part of the larger, and growing, global issue of violence against women in politics (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016). Yet the phenomenon remains under-explored in the gender and politics, social media, political candidacy, and Canadian politics literatures. Scholars cannot say with any authority how online harassment affects the decisions and behaviors of different types of candidates or what it means for candidate emergence or political longevity. This article addresses these gaps by exploring how perceptions of, and experiences with, online harassment shape the political environment in Canada. Two research questions guide this study: How do candidates and potential candidates view online harassment of politicians in Canada? Are concerns about online harassment leading otherwise qualified individuals to reconsider becoming a candidate?

Semi-structured interviews with 101 Canadians who have run, might run, or refuse to run reveal that online harassment of politicians is a major concern for (prospective) candidates. While it does not deter entry into electoral politics for most Canadians, online harassment is a gendered phenomenon in that women are far more aware of this issue than men. Online harassment also shapes the experiences of candidates and office-holders, not least by fostering a hostile working environment that can affect their ability to do, or willingness to stay, in the job. Results further reveal that online harassment has a silencing effect. It succeeds in making women feel they are in a hostile political environment even as it fails to deter women, as a group, from engaging in and speaking out about politics. These findings demonstrate that social media has a gendered impact on democratic participation in Canada in the early 21st century.

Canada is an ideal case to study because a series of online attacks against prominent women politicians have put the issue on the public agenda. The most notable target is Rachel Notley. In 2015, she led a left-wing party to victory in the province of Alberta, defeating a right-wing party that had governed for more than 40 years. Notley received online death threats following her elevation to provincial premier (Jodie Sinnema 2015). One Facebook user posted that "Someone's gotta man up and kill her, dibs out," while another said "Maybe we need to go back to the old west and just shoot her already" (Mariam Ibrahim 2015). A year later, a Twitter user posted a photo of Notley with her face in the middle of rifle scopes (CTV News 2016). Women politicians across the country have called out these violent trolls (Canadian Press 2017; Elizabeth McMillan 2016). During a speech in the Alberta legislature, cabinet minister Sandra Jensen read out some misogynistic posts she had received: "What a traitorous bitch," "You are both a disgrace to Alberta, lying bitches," "Dead meat," "Fly with the crows and get shot," and "Dumb broad —a good place for her to be is with the rest of the queers" (Don Braid 2016). The line between online and offline harassment of Canadian women politicians is also blurring. Liberal cabinet minister Catherine McKenna is routinely targeted online but the

gendertrolling got physical shortly after the 2019 Canadian federal election when someone spray-painted the word "cunt" on the windows of her campaign office (Shannon Proudfoot 2019).

Qualitative methods are the best way to begin investigating the issue of online harassment of women politicians because perceptions of the phenomenon can affect the political choices individuals make. Semi-structured interviews not only enabled research participants to identify online harassment as a major concern but also different facets of the issue. Insights from this study can inform quantitative research by pointing to questions for large-scale surveys about gender, politics, and social media. This study also advances our understanding of how social media can be used to reinforce the gendered nature of democratic politics in general and in Canada in particular.

Literature review

Women politicians have long been the focus of gendered political discourses. Extensive research has found a distinct gendering in political reporting (Khadija Ejaz 2018; Erika Falk 2008; Mary Anne Taylor and Danee Pye 2019; Angelia Wagner, Linda Trimble, and Shannon Sampert 2019; Diana Zulli 2018). Journalists typically pay greater attention to women's physical appearance and family life but not as much to their policy ideas. In her longitudinal study, Erica Falk discovered that women presidential candidates in the United States were just as likely to see their looks noted in election coverage in 2004 as they were in 1872 (2008, 87). While this gendered scrutiny is dissipating for regular women politicians (Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless 2016), it remains a feature of media representations of women politicians aspiring to or holding executive positions (Falk 2008; Linda Trimble, Daisy Raphael, Shannon Sampert, Angelia Wagner, and Bailey Gerrits 2015; Zulli 2018). Gendered political reporting thus discursively constructs politics as a masculine realm where women do not belong. Charlotte Adcock argues that the absence, marginalization, or devaluation of women's voices in public debates has serious implications for "what counts as true, normal, representative or politically significant," putting the credibility of democracy itself at stake (2010, 151). Yet, despite the threat that under-representation of women in political institutions poses to democratic legitimacy (Marian Sawer, Manon Tremblay, and Linda Trimble 2006), journalists continue to have difficulty treating as credible those candidates who do not conform to the traditional notion of a politician as a white, heterosexual male (Joanna Everitt and Michael Camp 2009).

Many online trolls express a similar attitude. Non-governmental organizations were among the first to investigate the highly misogynistic nature of online attacks against women politicians (Azmina Dhrodia 2017). Examining online harassment in the six months leading up to the 2017 British elections, Amnesty International found the average white woman MP received 0.59 abusive tweets per day, or 92 in total, compared to 0.83 tweets per day, or 132 in all, for an Asian woman MP and 13.12 tweets per day, or 2,781 in total, for a Black woman MP. The later result was strongly influenced by figures for Black MP Diane Abbott, who received about half (45.14%) of all abusive tweets directed at women MPs. Without Abbott, the figure for a Black woman MP was 0.51 tweets per day, or 81 in total (Dhrodia 2017). Racism and sexism were intertwined in the online harassment of Abbott, as the following example shows: "Pathetic useless fat black piece of shit Abbott.

Just a piece of pig shit pond slime who should be fucking hung (if they could find a tree big enough to take the fat bitch's weight)'" (Rowena Mason 2017).

Academic research about online harassment of women politicians, however, is contradictory. One study found that Canadian men politicians received more uncivil tweets than their female counterparts—the only research known to have found such a pattern—but that women who became cabinet ministers or provincial premiers were targeted the most (Ludovic Rheault, Erica Rayment, and Andreea Musulan 2019). A different pattern was found in Britain. Twitter users not only sent more uncivil tweets to women politicians but their messages also contained more gender stereotypes and challenges to the women's right to be elected representatives (Rosalynd Southern and Emily Harmer, forthcoming). A separate analysis on a subset of tweets found trolls reinforced the notion that women do not belong in politics by dismissing their ideas, questioning their intelligence, and demanding they shut up (Rosalynd Southern and Emily Harmer 2019). Academic and non-academic findings together demonstrate that women politicians can be subjected to intense and/or discriminatory online harassment.

Social media attacks against women politicians are part of a larger trend of online harassment of women (Danielle Keats Citron 2014; Emma A. Jane 2014a, 2014b; Jessica Megarry 2014; Karla Mantilla 2015). Women have faced various forms of cyber harassment since the early days of the Internet (Debarati Halder and K. Jaishankar 2011). Gendered online harassment, or gendertrolling, typically involves sexist or misogynistic remarks that target a person based on their gender or sexuality (Gina Masull Chen, Paromita Pain, Victoria Y. Chen, Madlin Mekelburg, Nina Springer, and Franziska Troger 2018). Mantilla (2013, 2015) identifies seven characteristics of gendertrolling: (1) it is sparked by women expressing their opinions online; (2) involves graphic gender-based insults and (3) rape and/or death threats; (4) occurs across online platforms, (5) at a high rate of intensity, and (6) for a long period of time; and (7) can be perpetrated by many attackers working together. Mantilla's concept of gendertrolling provides an important context to understand gendered perceptions of online harassment of politicians.

What makes gendertrolling distinct from generic forms of online harassment is its purpose. While generic trolls often espouse opinions that they do not believe in order to get a reaction, Mantilla argues gendertrolls are deeply committed to a conservative gender ideology and typically believe what they say. They target women in a bid to reassert traditional gender hierarchies that position men as the legitimate actors in the public sphere and relegate women to the private sphere of children and housekeeping (Mantilla 2015; Megarry 2014). Rather than calmly debate the merits of women's arguments, gendertrolls typically spew sexualized insults, creating a hostile online environment for women. For example, women who actively participate in online political debates are routinely objectified and trivialized by male Facebook users (Lenka Vochocová 2018). Gendertrolling thus serves to police and silence women's voices in the mediated public sphere (Martha C. Nussbaum 2010), limiting "the possibility of an effective feminist movement forming in the online public sphere, and perpetuat[ing] the oppression of women as a social class" (Megarry 2014, 52–53). Gendertrolling is a backlash against women's involvement in male-dominated domains such as politics.

Researchers have examined the gendered underpinnings of online harassment. Claire Hardaker and McGlashan Mark (2016) conducted a linguistic analysis of Twitter users' reaction to British journalist Caroline Criado-Perez's campaign to return a woman to

British banknotes. They found that women were often the target of sexually aggressive language and threats, with Twitter users ranging from low-risk behaviour such as insults, ridicule, and sarcasm to high-risk behaviour such as threatening harm or attempting to instill fear (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016, 88–91). African-American comedian Leslie Jones was targeted by trolls and hackers after she co-starred in an all-female reboot of the popular 1980s film *Ghostbusters*. Not only did she receive racist threats and saw her personal website hacked (Abby Ohlheiser 2016) but she was also criticized for not embodying Eurocentric beauty norms (Stephanie Madden, Melissa Janoske, Rowena Briones Winkler, and Amanda Nell Edgar 2018).

While female public figures are popular targets, regular women also face extreme online harassment. Citron (2014) documents the case of a female law student who was targeted on a university discussion board in 2005. Anonymous posters provided regular updates on her activities, made sexually explicit threats, and spread reputation-harming lies that made it difficult for her to find a summer position. Gendertrolling not only carries a psychological cost for its victims but also economic and professional ones. Some victims of cyber harassment have lost their jobs because employers do not want to risk their organization's reputation or other workers' productivity because of the incident (Citron 2014).

Gendertrolling poses a significant risk to women's participation and advancement in politics. Former Australian prime minister Julia Gillard argues it might deter other women from becoming politically engaged:

> Our community would not consider it acceptable to yell violent, sexually-charged abuse at a female politician walking down the street. Why is it okay to let these voices ring so loudly in our online worlds? We don't yet know to what extent online abuse translates into physical violence. But I am certain the connection is real, that women feel and fear it, and that it is preventing women from standing up and serving in public life. (Elle Hunt 2016)

While many current female officeholders have learned to deal with online harassment, gendertrolling might have hidden costs in terms of candidate deterrence and retention. Otherwise politically interested women might opt out of a career in politics to avoid becoming the next target. If they opt in, their careers may be derailed, or denigrated, because of gendertrolling. Some women politicians have even left politics because of harassment (Frances Perraudin 2019). Gillard's claims, however, have not been subjected to empirical analysis and, as such, remain fearful conjecture. It is beyond the scope of this study to statistically establish the extent to which gendertrolling does, or does not, depress the political ambition of different social groups, especially women. Instead, this paper begins to explore the issue by identifying perceptions of online harassment of politicians.

Data and methods

This study stems from a larger research project on political candidacy in Canada. To identify new or overlooked barriers to elected office, 101 Canadians were interviewed between February 2016 and December 2017 about the drawbacks of running. Because online harassment was only identified as a concern after data collection was underway, this study mainly draws upon interviews with the 75 people who raised the issue or were asked: "Did (would) you have any concerns about being attacked through social media?"

To avoid potentially (re)traumatizing recipients, participants were not asked to detail some of the sexist, racist, and/or homophobic online comments they had received. They were left to volunteer examples.

Since the opportunity to become a candidate is expected to vary based on social location, participants of varying genders, races/ethnicities, sexualities, ages, classes, partisan affiliations, and geographical locations were recruited. An equal number of candidates and non-candidates were also sought. Candidates are individuals who ran for federal, provincial, and/or municipal office in Canada. Non-candidates are people identified as strong candidates for elected office but who had not run at the time of the interview (Louise Carbert 2006; Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox 2010).

Potential participants were identified by three methods: electoral, reputational, and positional (David L. Wiltse 2018). The electoral approach was used for candidates. White, racial/ethnic minority, and Indigenous candidates were drawn from election lists for federal, provincial, and municipal office. LGBTQ candidates were selected from a database of out LGBTQ candidates for federal and provincial office in Canada (Joanna Everitt and Michael Camp 2014), as well as through news reports and the social media accounts of ProudPolitics, an organization dedicated to increasing LGBTQ representation in politics. The reputational and positional approaches were used to identify non-candidates. The reputational approach consisted of asking elected officials, former candidates, party officials, and members of candidate recruitment organizations to identify up to three individuals they thought would make good candidates but who had not yet run at the time of the request (Wiltse 2018). This procedure assumed such informants were politically well-connected, knowledgeable about what political parties look for in a candidate, and involved in recruiting candidates (Wiltse 2018). The positional approach focused on recruiting individuals involved with organizations from which candidates typically emerges (Wiltse 2018), such as Pride groups.

Interviews ranged from half an hour to 2½ hours in length, with most taking just over an hour. Eighteen interviews were done face-to-face and the rest by telephone. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder in all cases but one. That individual asked the researcher to take hand-written notes. Each person received a transcript of their interview and could request changes. The gender pronoun preferred by the participant, when shared with the researcher, has been respected.

Of the 101 research participants, 51 were women, 46 were men, and four did not identify as either gender, while 48 were non-white and 50 were LGBTQ. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 68, with an average age of 41. While respondents came from across Canada, the largest number were from the populous provinces of Alberta (27.7%) and Ontario (24.8%). As for candidate status, 51 participants ran for federal, provincial, and/or municipal office while the other 50 were non-candidates. Of the two-thirds (70.3%) who indicated a federal partisan affiliation, 25.7% had been a member of a left-wing political party, 21.8% with a centrist party, and 16.8% with a right-wing party. The rest had not been a federal party member at the time of the interview. Efforts were made to recruit additional right-wing partisans, but they were less likely than other partisans to respond to a request for, or consent to, an interview.

Results

Perceptions of online harassment

To explore perceptions of online harassment of politicians, I asked research participants whether they had, or would have, any concerns about being attacked through social media as a candidate. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics. Their responses reveal strong concerns about the potential for opponents, critics, and others to attack via online platforms during an election. Half (50.7%) admitted to being apprehensive about being targeted by online trolls. Women, non-white individuals, and sexual minorities were most uneasy. Women were almost twice more likely than men to be concerned, a reflection of the high prevalence of cybersexism today. Racial differences were also strong, with non-white individuals more likely to express these concerns than their white counterparts. Heterosexuals were slightly more likely than sexual minorities to admit to fears about social media attacks, but almost twice as many LGBTQ individuals voiced this unease than LGBTQ individuals who did not.

In contrast, one-third (33.3%) of participants reported not having any initial fears about opponents or critics using social media as a soapbox to disparage them during a campaign. (The remaining individuals did not provide a clear indication of their views.) This is not to say they did not expect social media to be used for this purpose, just that they were not afraid of what might happen should this come to pass during a campaign. Candidates, men, and heterosexuals were more comfortable with this type of scrutiny than their respective counterparts. Surprisingly, non-white respondents were much more likely than their white counterparts to indicate they were *not* concerned with social media attacks. One potential explanation is that non-white people might have been socialized as children on how to cope with racism and thus are not easily dissuaded from pursuing their goals by the racist attitudes of others (Danice L. Brown 2008; Danice L. Brown and Tracy L. Tylka 2011). LGBTQ people, in contrast, are an invisible minority and only experience homophobia after publicly disclosing their sexuality. For older generations, this disclosure came during adulthood, but younger generations are coming out during adolescence (Andy Dunlap 2016). LGBTQ people might be aware of homophobia from a young age, but they likely do not need to deal with it until their teens.

Despite strong concerns about social media attacks, most participants were not dissuaded from running because of a belief that attacks have become a normal part of

Table 1. Responses to the interview question "Did/Would you have any concerns about being attacked through social media?" by candidate status and personal characteristics.

Characteristic	Overall		Non-candidates	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Candidate	14 (51.9%)	13 (48.1%)	—	—
Non-candidate	24 (66.7%)	12 (33.3%)	—	—
Women	23 (74.2%)	8 (25.8%)	18 (85.7%)	3 (14.3%)
Men	14 (46.7%)	16 (53.3%)	5 (35.7%)	9 (64.3%)
Non-white	22 (57.9%)	16 (42.1%)	15 (71.4%)	6 (28.6%)
White	16 (64%)	9 (36%)	9 (60%)	6 (40%)
LGBTQ	18 (64.3%)	10 (35.7%)	11 (64.7%)	6 (35.3%)
Heterosexual	20 (57.1%)	15 (42.9%)	13 (68.4%)	6 (31.6%)

The N varies according to category, with Overall = 63 and Non-Candidates = 36. Individuals who did not offer a clear answer are excluded.

the online experience. "I don't think it would discourage me," said a white heterosexual woman who might run one day, "but it would definitely be something I'd have to think about and have to prepare myself for, unfortunately." Most people refused to be scared off by online trolls. A South Asian woman candidate refused to give trolls oxygen by responding to their comments. She would rather address people's concerns face to face: "Get the real story before you start trashing me. If you don't have the decency to do that, then I don't have the time or energy to waste on you."

Five individuals indicated that online vitriol could or has discouraged them from seeking elected office. What is striking is that all are women. They come from a mix of ethnic backgrounds, and all but one is a non-candidate. These women are concerned about the harm that such attacks could cause to their reputations, mental health, and family members. The small sample size means conclusions are tentative, but these findings suggest social media attacks are a gendered *issue* that has the potential to emerge into a gendered *barrier* in the future if efforts to combat online vitriol are not successful. The following sections examine two aspects of online attacks that concerned participants the most: (1) the anonymous nature of social media and (2) the misogynistic content of online attacks.

Dangers of gendertrolling

Anonymity was identified as a key reason why online political discussions have become so toxic. In face-to-face interactions, politicians know who the accuser is because that person is standing in front of them. A traditional assumption of democratic deliberation is that citizens will engage in rational, thoughtful debate about public issues. Individuals who express their views in emotional, crude, or hateful terms risk censure, leading many people to choose their words carefully when their identity is known. The anonymity afforded by social media removes this inhibition. Hiding behind fake usernames, anonymous posters are free to express sexist, racist, or homophobic views with little fear of being held accountable for their comments. "It's easy to attack from behind the screen, you know what I mean?" said an East Asian woman who has run for local office. "There's no name associated with them, there's no identity associated with them, so they can say whatever they want." Anonymity makes it difficult for those who are the target of trolls to do anything to counteract or stop these attacks. And that only emboldens the trolls. Research indicates that the more online posters believe they are anonymous and consequence-free, the more positively they view cyberbullying and the more likely they are to do it (Christopher P. Barlett, Douglas A. Gentile, and Chelsea Chew 2016).

But not every research participant took issue with online anonymity. An Indigenous man, who might one day run for office, defended the practice of anonymous posting. He felt free speech is "slowly being chipped away at all the time." He argued that anonymity enables people like him to express potentially unpopular views and contribute to overall debate without facing a public backlash. In his case, he posts anonymously for fear that people might not do business with him if they do not agree with his political views.

Another concern that participants have about online trolls is their tendency to target women politicians. More than one-quarter (28%) of participants pointed to gendertrolling when discussing online attacks against politicians, especially those against Rachel Notley. This theme proved to be highly gendered: 16 women raised the issue but only four men

did so. A roughly equal number of white and non-white women discussed gendertrolling, demonstrating it is a concern to all women considering a bid for elected office and not just one group of women. Gendertrolls also weighed more heavily on the minds of those who had yet to pursue a career in electoral politics: almost twice as many non-candidates as candidates discussed the issue.

Many of the women's comments regarding social media attacks fit with Mantilla's (2015) concept of gendertrolling. Mantilla argues that women are harassed online because they are women and not because of anything they have said or done. Both candidates and non-candidates talked about the violent, misogynistic rhetoric they have seen or experienced online, with trolls objectifying women through a focus on their body parts and terrorizing women with threats of sexual violence.

> They never say, 'You know, I really disagree with how you voted on that bill.' It's 'You're fat so what do you know?' or 'You're a dyke, what do you know?' or 'You're Indian, what do you know?' It's people sitting in their underwear in the basement somewhere, right, with no life of their own that have the time to sit there and troll you online. (Indigenous lesbian non-candidate)

> The sexist ones will usually come when I've done something more publicly [in the] media. If there's a picture or there's a video [of me], some people seem to think it's okay to cross over from the 'You don't know what you're talking about' to 'You stupid woman' and descending from there. (White female non-candidate)

Participants also recognized the misogyny at the heart of online harassment of feminists and repudiation of feminist sentiments. An East Asian woman believed her feminist views would be attacked if she ever ran for elected office. "There is a lot of antagonism, especially in the Facebook comments about topics like feminism. I could definitely see how I could be attacked personally, and also based on my views about certain things." An Indigenous woman was alarmed that a female friend constantly gets death and rape threats as the head of a feminist organization in the community.

Having already seen or experienced it in their personal and professional lives, non-candidates were well aware that it would continue, and perhaps even worsen, if they were in politics. Joanne Bernard's experiences in provincial office bears this out. The former cabinet minister was surprised at the crude language of some trolls: "I can remember, oh god, it's about maybe two years ago, some guy tweeted that I was a 'retarded cunt' and you know I had a visceral reaction to that because I've never been called these things in my life." Two other participants noted that crude language can evolve into actual physical threats. A federal politician explained that some of his colleagues have been threatened online, prompting a swift response from police. Politicians at other levels of government have also been the focus of threats (Kristin Rushowy 2017).

Non-white and LGBTQ candidates noted that the gendertrolling they experienced was heavily infused with racism, homophobia, and/or Islamophobia. A Muslim woman who ran federally was surprised at the threatening language used by her online harassers, while Bernard, who is a lesbian, was shocked at the level of homophobia directed at her after launching her first campaign. Rana Bokhari, a woman of South Asian descent, did not anticipate being targeted by trolls when she announced her intentions to seek the leadership of a provincial political party. The attacks were especially vicious and did not stop after she became the first non-white woman to lead a provincial party in Canada.

Abandoning her campaign was never an option, despite the deluge of online and offline attacks. "I never once thought, oh, well, why did I do this? I was just in a fight and I recognized I was in a fight and I was just trying to keep my head above water while all this was going on." Bokhari continued to receive sexist and racist messages even after stepping down as party leader in 2016 to start her own law firm.

While the nature of online attacks might vary based on a woman's racial and/or sexual identity, their purpose is the same: to make the Internet, and the public sphere in general, unwelcoming for anyone who is not a white, straight male (Mantilla 2013, 2015). Women respondents did not explicitly attribute online harassment of women to a deep-seated misogyny in society, but that sentiment comes through in their comments on gendertrolling. A former municipal politician believes gendertrolling occurs because women are seen as easier to victimize than men. "But that's from a segment of our society that we just can't seem to get through to them that it's not appropriate, you know what I mean?" said the white woman. "I don't believe society as a whole, but the portion of society that attacks women like that, that's shameful and it's unfortunate and I think there's that element in every society. I don't know when that will quit." As noted above, participants remarked that feminists and feminist views attract intense backlash from online trolls.

Responses to gendertrolling

Women politicians' experiences with gendertrolling acted as a cautionary tale for women thinking about becoming candidates. Several women reported keeping abreast of news reports of social media attacks against women politicians such as Rachel Notley and knew that, if they wanted a career in politics, they would have to prepare themselves for gendertrolls. One Indigenous woman saw the vicious online attacks against prominent women politicians and developed a game plan on how she would react if she experienced similar sexism, as well as racism, during her municipal campaign. Meanwhile, an East Asian woman has worked with a mental health counsellor to deal with past traumas and put her in a stronger mental head space to deal with potential trolls should she go forward with plans to run for municipal office in the future. But not all women are willing to put up with gendertrolls. A South Asian woman said she might become a political staffer or civil servant rather than a politician to avoid online harassment and other negative aspects of public scrutiny.

Current women politicians are viewed as having an important role in combatting gendertrolling and making online political participation less hostile to future generations of women. An East Asian woman spoke out about the online harassment she experienced when she ran for university student office. "There were a few sexist comments and I just kind of stood up for all the women instead of even just myself. This is why we need more women to be out there, to speak up, and to represent people because ... it's very sexist." Her actions followed in the footsteps of provincial women politicians who have drawn public attention to gendertrolling. In 2016, Cheri DiNovo told the Ontario provincial legislature about the misogynistic, homophobic, and violent online comments that she had received (Cheri DiNovo 2016). DiNovo, who did not run for re-election in 2018, told this researcher that she was inspired to share her experiences after seeing Sandra Jansen do the same thing in the Alberta legislature two days earlier:

I thought that was brave and a really excellent thing to do so I did it here too. I talked about how I've been threatened with rape, had death threats, everything's happened really. You name what can be said, it's been said to me on social media. And after I went over some of the things that had been said to me in the House and got picked up by the press a little bit, some of the males came over, cabinet ministers, high-profile folks, and said, 'Wow, I've never had that experience.' No kidding. I think this is a particularly female experience on social media. I think the trolls attacking women in public office on social media are far worse and more virulent than those that attack men and they do it in a particular way and a particularly personal way.

Rather than standing up in the Nova Scotia provincial legislature, Joanna Bernard showed her support by doing media interviews about her experiences with online homophobia, sexism, and fat-shaming (McMillan 2016). Bernard also publicly shamed gendertrolls by retweeting their comments for everyone else to see. European politicians are going further in the battle to combat online harassment of elected officials. The United Kingdom is considering banning online trolls from holding public office (Lizzy Buchan 2018), while the European Union has called on Facebook to take concrete steps to combat online hate speech or face sanctions (Daniel Boffey 2018). Efforts to combat gendertrolling are still in the early stages, but it is clear from research participants and news coverage that women are increasingly refusing to accept online harassment as a *permanent* part of contemporary politics.

Discussion and conclusion

Online harassment of women politicians is a deeply troubling phenomenon that has the potential to become a gendered barrier to political participation, both online and offline. To understand perceptions of social media attacks and the role it might play in politics, this study draws upon a rich qualitative dataset of semi-structured interviews with 101 Canadians of diverse gender, racial/ethnic, sexual, and political backgrounds as well as levels of political experience. Findings indicate that most candidates and potential candidates are concerned about becoming the target of online attacks during a Canadian election campaign, but they vary in the degree to which they perceive such attacks to be a major problem. Members of under-represented groups in Canadian politics—women, non-white individuals, and sexual minorities—expressed the greatest concerns. While online abuse is a problem that all politicians confront, research participants were aware that women politicians face a higher degree of attacks with several noting the sexist, racist, and/or homophobic aspects of online vitriol. This observation was highly gendered as well, with women far more likely than men to highlight the online harassment of politicians. Participants also reported having first-hand experience with online abuse: both candidates and non-candidates talked about the hateful rhetoric they had received or witnessed friends or colleagues receive. Minority women candidates in particular noted that they not only received sexist abuse but also racist or homophobic commentary during their campaigns.

By exploring perceptions of online harassment of Canadian politicians, this study makes a number of theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to our understanding of contemporary online politics and political candidacy. First, it determines that gendertrolling is not dampening women's political ambitions at this point. Online

harassment is not a gendered *barrier* to elected office so much as a gendered *problem* that women must address as part of their overall campaign preparations. And by interviewing a large number of women, non-white people, and LGBTQ individuals, this study can conclude that online harassment of women politicians is a concern to all women, not just to a specific group. That some women indicated gendertrolling might keep them from running (again) in the future, however, indicates it could become a barrier in the future. Political polarization and negativity have already discouraged some individuals from seeking elected office (Lawless and Fox 2015), and online harassment in general and gendertrolling in particular only exacerbate these problems. Scholars must monitor the nature and extent of social media attacks to see if they do, in fact, become a gendered barrier to candidacy in Canada and elsewhere. Future research should measure the extent to which online harassment of politicians occurs, its gendered, racial, and homophobic content, and its impact on people's willingness to run for elected office at different levels of government and in different countries.

Second, this study identifies the ways in which online harassment shapes women's political participation both online and offline. Respondents view social media attacks as a phenomenon that helps create a hostile working environment for Canadian politicians, especially women, non-white individuals, and sexual minorities. Online harassment might not deter large numbers of women from running for elected office in Canada, but its other effects can be just as harmful to their participation in politics. The crude, discriminatory, and sometimes violent nature of social media attacks can humiliate women politicians. Online harassment can have punitive consequences for an individual's political career, reputation, employment choices, and even their mental health. Research should empirically explore the gendered nature of online harassment of politicians during both electoral and non-electoral periods, how it affects the working lives of politicians, and what strategies politicians use to address it.

Third, this study identifies the potential for gendertrolling of women politicians to exert a silencing effect. Women politicians might refrain from espousing feminist views because of the strong possibility of an online backlash from gendertrolls, while other women who want to pursue feminist policy aims might opt out of electoral politics to avoid the online harassment that women politicians experience. Various women's experiences with and observations of social media attacks against women politicians provide support for Mantilla's (2015) assertion that gendertrolls promote a conservative gender ideology that asserts men belong in the public sphere and women in the private sphere. Respondent comments that feminists and feminist views regularly come under attack online is in line with Mantilla's argument that the purpose of gendertrolling is to reject efforts to achieve gender equality and to expel women from the online public sphere. This phenomenon has been observed in some online political discussions in Europe (Vochocová 2018), but additional research is needed in various national contexts and on different social media platforms to map the nature, extent, and consequences of gendertrolling of women who engage in online political debate.

Finally, this study demonstrates the value of conducting qualitative research on emerging political phenomena. Semi-structured interviews enabled research participants to highlight a factor shaping the candidacy and office-holding experience not identified as a problem in the political science literature. Participants also identified aspects of online harassment that could affect the quality of women's participation in electoral politics, both

as candidates and as politicians. The typically close-ended nature of survey questionnaires precludes the possibility of discovering emerging issues in politics. Another benefit of qualitative research is that research participants' real-life experiences and perspectives provide a basis for designing hypotheses and survey questions. One potential hypothesis is that women, LGBTQ, and non-white candidates are more likely than men, heterosexuals, and white candidates to consider online harassment of politicians to be a major problem. Scholars should employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the impact of online harassment on women politicians' working environment and on other women's willingness to enter politics. Future quantitative research on political candidacy should include questions about online harassment of politicians as part of an overall assessment of potential factors limiting women's political ambition.

Even though social media have been a political tool since the 2000s, they remain a moving target. New Internet-based applications are constantly being created, each one with its own set of features, social practices, and potential for politicking. Societal under-standings of and cultural practices around social media are evolving alongside technological innovations, making it difficult for politicians to know how to respond to the increasingly complex ways in which other actors use them to engage in politics. The hazards of social media might make it more difficult to both recruit and retain candidates for elected office in Canada and elsewhere. To ensure social media does not become an obstacle to the political ambitions of under-represented groups, political parties and non-governmental organiza-tions should offer extensive digital training to potential candidates to ensure women politicians and candidates have the tools they need to combat gendertrolling.

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