Increasing the Costs of Representation? Harassment and Intimidation of UK Parliamentary Candidates[1]

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The use of political violence to attain political goals has long been a source of concern. Once thought to be exclusive of countries with high levels of general violence, recent evidence suggests that harassment and intimidation of political elites in the UK are more widespread than previously thought. This article uses evidence from the Representative Audit of Britain survey of candidates standing in the 2017 General Election to show that four in in every ten candidates suffered harassment or intimidation during the campaign, that female candidates are being targeted and that this targeting has emotional consequences. These findings indicate that harassment and intimidation of political elites have important consequences for descriptive and substantive representation, even in long established democracies that are otherwise peaceful.

> Over the past month I have had swastikas carved into posters, social media posts like 'burn the witch', and someone even urinated on my office door. Hardly kinder, gentler politics.
>
> *Sheryll Murray,*
> *MP for South East Cornwall 2017*

Introduction

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 one of equality and fairness. 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 committed towards candidates, particularly women, standing for office in the UK General Election 2017. Using original data, it shows how widespread harassment among candidates is, the most common forms of harassment and their consequences in the emotional state of men and women seeking to occupy a seat in Parliament. 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.

Until now, due to its pervasive nature for regime change and democratic consolidation, the research on electoral violence has placed an especial focus on contexts where institutions are weak and violence of other nature is high (Höglund 2009). One key element of this vast literature is that electoral violence towards candidates and voters is intertwined with other forms of violence prevailing in the country. That makes it

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possible to attribute a rise in electoral related violence to a worsening of the national conditions, either by civil unrest, weak institutions or the raise of violent interest groups (some good reviews of this field of literature can be found in Mares and Young (2016) and Kleinfeld and Barham (2018), just to cite a few). It is then possible that violence of candidates is due to a lack of state capacity to guarantee free and fair elections or because violent groups decide to interfere somehow in the electoral contest (Kleinfeld and Barham 2018). For example, by providing financial resources to help candidates get elected (Acemoglu et al. 2013) or by presenting candidates themselves (Schneider & Schneider 2003). Less studied is, however, the nature of harassment and intimidation of political figures in long established democracies. While it takes different forms of what is observed in conflict countries, its dimensions and consequences are not less dramatic. Take for example, the murdered of MP Jo Cox in 2016 or the shooting of the USA republican member of congress Steve Scalise in 2017.

Lately, the issue of harassment and intimidation of public figures, especially female politicians, started to become an international source of concern (Kuperberg 2018). International organizations have taken the lead to implement actions taken to prevent violence directed to women in politics. In 2011 the United Nations General Assembly first called for zero tolerance for violence against female candidates and elected officials in Resolution 66/130 and in 2016 global and regional organizations began to raise awareness and take action (Krook and Restrepo-Sanin 2019; Krook 2018). These actions resulted in some changes, especially related to awareness and de-normalization of violence and harassment of female politicians. In 2018, the #MeToo movement put the issue in the public agenda and the numerous testimonies of women who have been victims of abuse led to the suspension or resignation of male MPs and cabinet ministers in North America, Western Europe, and beyond (Krook and Restrepo-Sanin 2019, 2019a; Krook 2018).

The study of harassment towards political elites is scarce, emerging and mainly focused on women and minorities. Current research has treated harassment [of women] in politics as an issue of public life, institutions and sexism in the workplace, making important advances, especially regarding its conceptualization (Krook 2018, Hughes et al. 2017, Kuperberg 2018). But despite emerging global attention, there are still some challenges. First, current research focuses on women but without comparing their experiences to those of men (Krook 2017). Second, they refer to anecdotal evidence and testimonials but lack of systematisation to allow comparisons (Kuperberg 2018). Third, the anecdotal evidence they rely on is drawn mainly from the testimonials of prominent female politicians but without comparing them to the experiences of those women and men who have lost the election. These challenges raise a number of questions, how do the experiences of female candidates differ from the experiences of males? Are women particularly targeted during electoral campaigns? What are the emotional consequences of harassment and intimidation in Parliamentary candidates? What can be done about it?

This article looks at the case of the UK. It is 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. This line of research has focused on the cases of harassment and intimidation to Members of Parliament. It has been found that in the UK, Australia, Norway and Canada, parliamentarians suffer more harassment than we have previously thought and that they are

significantly more likely to be object of intimidation and inappropriate behaviour than the rest of the population (Adams et al. 2009; James et al. 2016).

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 et al. 2014; Adams et al. 2009; James et al. 2016; James et al. 2007). Thus, the position of power of MPs makes them visible or responsible to the eyes of perpetrators, driving the fixation. However, this is not a convincing explanation for harassment towards candidates standing in elections as they are seeking a position of power but not yet acquired it. Therefore, 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 different mechanisms that arguably link perpetrator with MPs and candidates manifests the need to understand and study candidates as an especial category of potential victims.

We build on the research of James et al. 2016 to contribute to the existing academic literature in at least, three meaningfully ways. Firstly, instead making inferences regarding the causes and motives of the perpetrator, we focus on understanding the victims, who they are and what experiences they have had. This approach has the advantage of making the victim the centre of the investigation and not a by-product of somebody else's actions. We also 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. On the other hand, it allows us identifying if the drivers of harassment and intimidation to elected figures is different from drivers and motivations of intimidation and harassment to candidates in general.

This is an exploratory article in which we do not try to explain the drivers of harassment but take a step forward in understanding its extension and current form. Our main aim is to show that intimidation of political elites is indeed a problem for the quality of democracy in the UK and to outline avenues for future research to tackle this issue. In order to fulfil our aim, we report results from an original large ESRC-funded survey that explores experiences of harassment among candidates standing in the 2017 General Election in the UK. Results show that a) that harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates is widespread across the UK; b) that female candidates are harassed in greater degree than men, c) that harassment has emotional consequences and d) that these consequences are worse for women. While these results allow us to quantify the magnitude of the problem that the UK faces for its public life and quality of democracy, they leave more questions to be addressed in the future.

Data and Methodology

The analysis is based on an individual-level survey data collected as part of the Representative Audit of Britain Survey between June 2017 and May 2018[3]. The relevant questions for this study relate to the individual

[3] Campbell, Hudson and Rudig. ESRC – ES/M500410/1

experiences of harassment and intimidation we included in the questionnaire[4]. During this period of time, we sent all candidates standing from any of the main parties in England, Wales and Scotland (2,825) questionnaires by mail, followed by email reminders. We obtained 1,498 responses, 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. Response rate is in line with what can be expected for a survey of this type and great for a survey conducted during a snap election.

Table 1: Response rate by party

Party	Response rate	N
Conservatives	27%	168
Green Party	72%	329
Labour	61%	388
Liberal Democrats	65%	411
Plaid Cymru	73%	29
Scottish National Party	37%	22
UKIP	39%	149

Table 1 shows the distribution of responses by party. There is, as expected, variation in response rate by party. We employed different techniques and did our best effort to ensure a good response rate and to encourage candidates from all parties to respond. However, we still found that party membership is a significant variable to explain non-response bias and therefore, we weighted results by party (Gelman 2007; Kott 2007; Kish and Frankel 1974).

Results from the survey, together with the definition of items used for the analysis of the survey, are organised around the research questions that relate to the experiences of harassment and their consequences. The exact wording of questions can be seen in the Appendix.

Findings

How widespread is harassment and intimidation in the UK?

Identifying or defining what is harassment and intimidation present empirical and theoretical difficulties. 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 (Bufacchi 2005; Krook and Restrepo-Sanin 2019). Krook and Restrepo-Sanin 2019 indicate that violence can manifest in different ways - semiotic, physical, economic, psychological and asexual-, and that men are gendered individuals and that as such, their experiences should be compared against that of women. This means that a stringent definition of

[4] We would like to thank James, David V, Seema Sukhwal, Frank R Farnham, Julie Evans, Claire Barrie, Alice Taylor, and Simon P Wilson for sharing their questionnaire with us.

harassment will prompt responses to refer only to widely recognised forms of abuse leaving out other more subtle experiences.

In consequence, 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 and links these actions specifically with political campaigns.

We obtained 1,475 valid responses to the question (98.79%). Of such, 38% of candidates answered positively to the question, suggesting that about four in every ten candidates suffered intimidation during the campaign. A simple cross-tabulation with a Pearson's $\chi 2$ test show that women are being particularly targeted. 45% of female candidates suffered harassment and intimidation, compared with 35% of males ($p<0.05$). These differences can be appreciated in Figure 1. We also observed significant differences by party where Conservatives and SNP candidates are more likely to be harassed than the rest -67% and 76% respectively-.

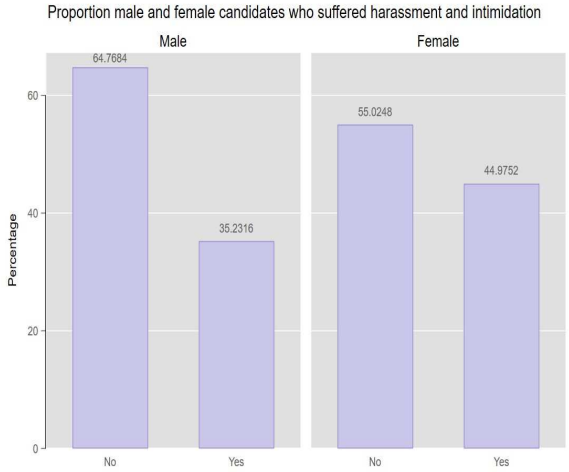

Figure 1 Harassment by sex

We found significant differences by region. Candidates standing in Scotland (46%) and Wales (43%) are more likely to suffer harassment and intimidation than candidates standing in England (37%) ($p<0.05$).

Results from a simple logistic regression (table 1 in the appendix) allow us to determine, on average, the demographic characteristics of candidates that make them especially vulnerable to harassment. The coefficients presented graphically in figure 2, show that even when we control for age, BME status, party and region, female, incumbent and young candidates are significantly more likely to suffer harassment than their counterparts. Marginal probabilities indicate that males have a probability of 32% of experiencing harassment compared with females whose probability is of about 40%, holding everything else constant. Incumbent MPs are 22% more likely to experience intimidation during campaigns than non-incumbent candidates. Younger candidates are more likely to become victims of intimidatory behaviour but the older the candidate the less likely its that they will suffer harassment or intimidation. We would like to mention that BME status is used as

control, however, the number of respondents in the sample from ethnic minorities is too low for us to make inferences on their experiences.

The question analysed before refers to general actions of harassment and intimidation of candidates during the campaign but we also ask candidates specifically if they have suffered some intimidation by supporters of other parties or candidates. A cross tabulation showed that 39% of candidates did suffer harassment from supporters of other parties. The proportion is significantly larger for women (42%) than for men (37%) ($p<0.05$).

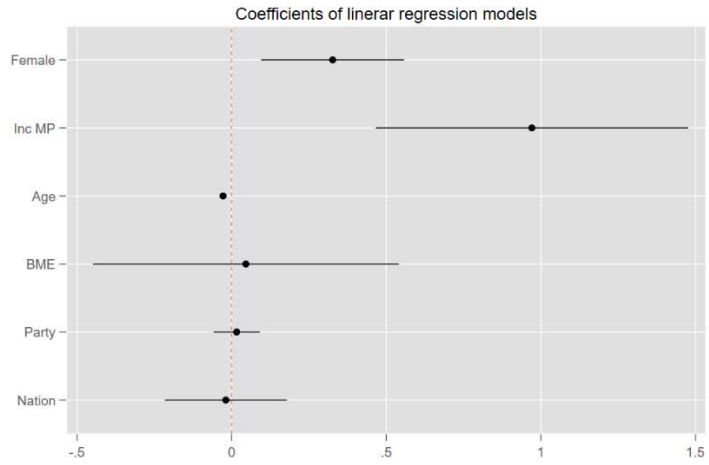

Figure 2 Results of logistic regression explaining harassment

How do the experiences of female candidates differ from the experiences of males?

We recognise that abuse and intimidation take different forms, each with distinctive consequences. To gain a more fine-tune vision of the abuse suffered by candidates, we asked them specifically which type of abuse have they suffered and how often it occurred. Figure 3 shows in descending order the most frequent forms of harassment.

The most frequent is abuse on social media. 29% of the total number of candidates affirm to have suffered improver communications on Twitter, Facebook, etc at least once during the campaign. 25% did so three times or more. We found significant differences by sex with 34% of female candidates being targeted and only 27% of men. The second most frequent form of harassment is intimidation via email. 23% of candidates received inappropriate emails at least once during the campaign. This percentage is significantly higher for women (27%) than men (21%). While physical abuse is, fortunately, rare, women suffer significantly more threats to harm (5% affirm to have suffered three or more during the campaign) and from individuals loitering around their homes or other places their frequent (4% three or more times) than men (3 and 2% in the same categories). The least frequent form of abuse, sexual harassment, also present differences by sex. In general, 2% of the total number of candidates have been victims at least once, but this percentage is entirely formed by women (3% of female candidates) as men did not report any instance of abuse in this category.

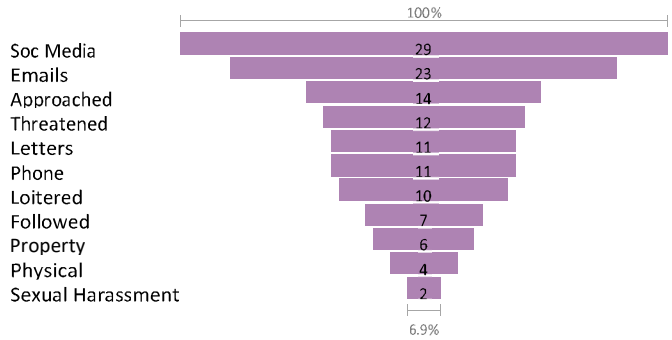

Figure 3 : Frequency of forms of harassment experienced by candidates

What are the emotional consequences of harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates?

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.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that 32% of candidates affirm to feel either moderately of very fearful as a result of their experiences of harassment and intimidation. Women feel significantly more fearful (44%) than men (25%). Our results show that the stronger emotional response is to feel annoyed. 39% of candidates mentioned to feel very annoyed by acts of harassment and intimidation. This emotional response is again, stronger for female (48%) than male (33%) candidates. 54% of candidates feel moderately or very concerned as result of their experiences of harassment and intimidation. We found no evidence of significant differences by sex. Results are illustrated in Figure 4.

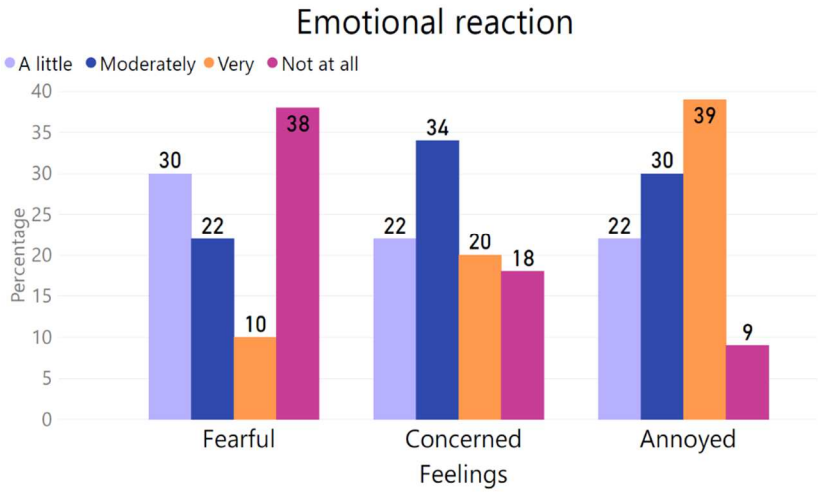

Figure 4 Emotional consequences of harassment

What forms of harassment have the strongest emotional impact?

We linked the type of harassment to the emotional consequences in three linear models. Each model uses as dependent variable one of the emotional reactions to harassment, namely feelings of fear, concern or annoyance. We used principal component analysis (PCA) to identify all the different types of harassment into two latent dimensions (two solutions with an eigenvalue larger than 1). The first factor is mainly composed by threats presented by email, social media, letters and phone. We call this group *remote threats* as they do not imply a personal contact between perpetrator and victim. The second construct is mainly composed by damage to property, loitered, followed, approached and being physically harmed. We called this factor *close threats* as they require a closer or more direct contact between perpetrator and victim.

Figure 5 graphically show coefficients and standard errors from the three models (table 3 in the appendix). The magnitude of the coefficients of remote and close threats cannot be interpreted as these variables are obtained using PCA, but we can observe that remote threats have positive and significant effects in all three cases, motivating anger, concern and fear. Close threats significantly increase fear and have no effect on increasing concern or feelings of annoyance, suggesting that respondents who face a threatening situation where they are close to the perpetrator experience stronger feelings of fear, leaving little room for mid concern or annoyance. But it is important to remember that the most frequent forms of harassment are experienced online or by phone, thus, the number of candidates who actually experienced close forms of harassment is lower than the number of candidates that experienced it remotely. Female candidates feel significantly more annoyed, concerned and fearful than their male counterparts. These results are robust to the addition of control variables of BME status, incumbency, age, party and nation. Table 2 in the appendix present the numerical coefficients and standard errors of the same models.

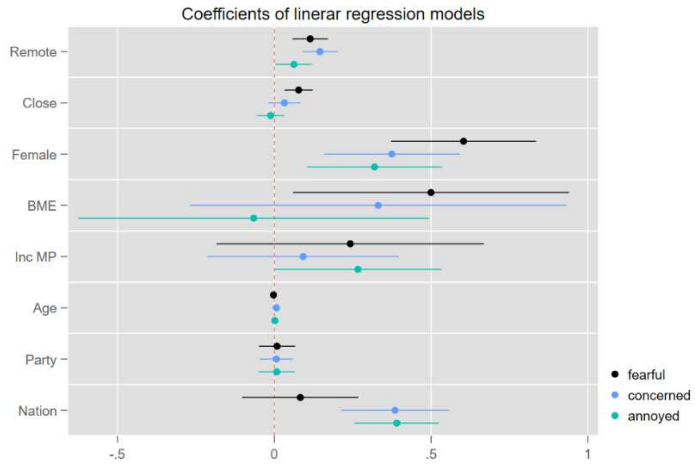

Figure 5 Emotions and type of harassment

Conclusions: Towards a research agenda to study harassment and intimidation of political elites.

Our results suggest that harassment of parliamentary candidates in the UK is frequent as four in every ten candidates experienced some threats, intimidation or abuse during the 2017 General Election campaign. We

found evidence that in general, women and incumbent MPs are more likely to suffer harassment. These findings go in line with current literature that has emphasised their vulnerability to be targeted during campaigns.

We can also 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 (Bjarnegaard 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 we do find evidence that female candidates are more strongly affected by harassment, as they show significantly more annoyance, concern 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.

It is possible to argue that online forms of harassment, by email or social media, should not be taken seriously because they do not represent an immediate threat to the security of candidates. Moreover, it can be argued that since candidates can *choose* to be or not active on social media, they put themselves in risk by expressing their opinions on these platforms. However, nowadays, maintaining an active social media profile is perhaps, the most direct way to communicate with the public. If candidates are to turn off their accounts because of fear of abuse, citizens are losing of vital opportunities to engage with political representatives.

James et al (2016) found that parliamentarians who suffered harassment and experienced strong emotional reactions are more likely to avoid engaging with citizens and other political actors with opposed political views. We believe that candidates who experience harassment and are afraid as result may be reacting the same way. If this is the case, then actions of intimidation are of consequences that go beyond the experiences of individuals and contribute to the polarisation of politics on a larger scale.

Although we cannot say at the moment to whether violent/abusive experiences diminish the willingness to stand for office, the possibility raises serious questions about the quality of future representation. In particular, the willingness of women and BME individuals to stand for office may be affected by targeting of intimidation. Recruitment and motivation have already been identified as a key barrier for descriptive representation (Lawless 2012) and therefore women and BMEs may become under-represented in the future.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Exact formulation of questions:

1. During the 2017 General Election campaign, there were several press reports about candidates experiencing harassment and even security threats. Did you personally experience any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to your security in your position as a parliamentary candidate during the election campaign? Answer: Yes/No
2. During the 2017 General Election campaign, have you or your campaign experienced any inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/candidates? Answer: Yes/No
3. If you were subjected to any form of inappropriate behaviour during the election campaign, which of the following forms of harassments / security threats did you experience? And how often did you experience such behaviour?
4. As a result of these behaviours, did you feel. . . Annoyed, Concerned, Fearful? Answer: Not at all, Only a little, Moderately, Very.
5. What measures, if any, should be taken to increase the security of election candidates? Open text

Table 1 Logistic regression to explain harassment

	(1)
VARIABLES	haras
Female	0.33***
	(0.12)
Inc MP	0.97***
	(0.26)
Age	-0.03***
	(0.00)
BME	0.05
	(0.25)
Party	0.02
	(0.04)
Nation	-0.02
	(0.10)
Constant	0.58**
	(0.26)
Observations	1,122
N	1122
ll	.

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2 Principal component analysis

Component	Variance	Eigenvalue	Proportion	Cumulative
Remote	3.35094	4.35418	0.3046	0.3046
Close	2.39208	1.38885	0.2175	0.5221

Variable	Remote	Close
Physical	-0.0253	0.4539
Threatened	0.2912	0.154
Approach	0.3128	0.1587
Followed	0.0229	0.4698
Loitered	0.0068	0.5027
Property	-0.0224	0.4544
Emails	0.5187	-0.1143
Soc med	0.4987	-0.1045
Letters	0.4117	-0.0288
Phone	0.3529	0.0698
Sexually	0.0617	0.1882

Table 3 Type of harassment and emotional response. Note that the total n is lower because it only includes complete observations of candidates who answered positively to the harassment question.

VARIABLES	(1) fearful	(2) concerned	(3) annoyed
Remote	0.11***	0.15***	0.06**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Close	0.08***	0.03	-0.01
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Female	0.60***	0.37***	0.32***
	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)
BME	0.50**	0.33	-0.07
	(0.22)	(0.30)	(0.28)
Inc MP	0.24	0.09	0.27**
	(0.22)	(0.16)	(0.14)
Age	-0.00	0.01	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Party	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Nation	0.08	0.38***	0.39***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Constant	1.45***	1.28***	2.24***
	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)
Observations	282	282	282
R-squared	0.25	0.21	0.12
N	282	282	282

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1