

NUMBER 7

CMI BRIEF

DECEMBER 2023



Photo: Shutterstock

Candidates' experience of violence in the Norwegian parliamentary election of 2021

AUTHORS

Jana Belschner
UiB

Ragnhild Muriaas
UiB

Vibeke Wang
CMI

Compared to fellow politicians in other countries, women and men who contest elections in Norway do not encounter much political violence. The low occurrence of political violence is reflected in politician's perceptions: More than 90 % of respondents in a survey responded that violence is not a normal part of politics. Still, half of all candidates have experienced political violence, with social media as the main arena.

Key takeaways

- Half of all candidates have experienced political violence.
- Harassment in the form of spreading rumours and derogatory comments is most common.
- Most incidents occur on social media and are carried out by ordinary citizens.
- Young women are most vulnerable to sexual harassment.
- Men underreport their experiences.
- In half of the reported cases, the party did not follow up.
- Women are slightly more vulnerable during the nomination phase than men.

National elections, political culture and women in politics

Aside from some specific incidents, Norway is in many ways a country with little risk associated with engaging in politics. Norwegian election campaigns are relatively peaceful, and there are few personal conflicts related to the final election results. Still, it is increasingly recognized that threats and harassment directed at politicians do occur and constitute a challenge for democracy.

In the elections for the National Assembly (Storting), voters cast their ballots for parties and not individual candidates. The leaders of the parties represented in the Storting are most exposed in media. In the current Storting (2021–2025), ten parties are represented, and the assembly is relatively gender balanced (46% women). Still, thousands of candidates have their names on the lists that the parties submit to the election directorate before the elections. Of those, only a few percentages of candidates have a high likelihood of being elected, while most have list placements that make being elected nearly impossible. Some are also candidates for parties that have never had a representative in the Storting. Nevertheless, by running for office, they participate in party meetings, appear at election forums, post updates on social media, and are interviewed by journalists in local newspapers.

Admittedly, they may lead a relatively low-key existence compared to candidates in many other countries where those running for office have more personal campaigns.

Political Violence

Political violence occurs “when the goal of the violence is to affect political integrity and when the means by which the violence is conducted also violates the personal integrity of individuals involved in politics. Personal integrity can be violated by a range of acts and may be broadly categorised into physical and psychological violence (i.e. intimidation and threats) and can take place in the public or private sphere. Both forms of violence may have sexual connotations” (Bjarnegård 2018:690).

Yet, several news reports have pointed out how high political tension and the fear of hatred and threats deter many, especially women, from running for office. This is interesting because the proportional electoral system with party lists and a good gender balance in the Storting should suggest that threats and violence are not a significant problem for Norwegian politicians regardless of gender. The results of this study partly support this assumption, although harassment and threats do occur, and gender in some cases does matter for one’s experiences.

The Norwegian case-study

This survey was sent out to most candidates who ran for Norwegian political parties in the 2021 Storting election. Out of all 4,152 unique candidates, 3,200 were contacted, and 1,179 candidates participated with at least one response. The slight gender difference in the percentage of male (55.9%) and female (42.7%) respondents reflects that there are slightly more men than women on the lists of Norwegian parties. The relative gender balance suggests that both male and female candidates find the survey topic interesting and important. Candidates on the lists of major parliamentary parties are slightly better represented than those on the lists of parties not represented in the Storting.

The average age of the respondents is 49 years. The majority of survey respondents state that they have held a position within the party they ran for (91.2%), indicating a certain level of experience and career within the parties. However, well over half (55.7%) indicated that they were running for the first time. Only 10% had been elected 1 or more times, which can be explained by the significant disparity between those who run for office and those who are elected in Norway. A total of 74.3% stated that it was unlikely for them to be elected to the Storting.

Survey respondents were asked about their experiences of political violence (hate and threats) during the 2021 election campaign. Those who were elected were also asked

Frequency of political violence by form (%)

Form of political violence	Once	A few times	Several times	Very often	Total
Degrading talk/false rumours	5.4 %	50.4 %	43 %	8.6%	100
Threats	27.5%	49.5%	19 %	1.4 %	100
Physical violence	46.2 %	30.8 %	19.2 %	0 %	100
Destruction of property	47.1%	32.9 %	17.1 %	0 %	100
Intimidation of associates	11.9 %	59 %	25 %	2.9 %	100

to share any experiences they had encountered while serving in office. Most questions were closed-ended and focused on occurrences of 1) degrading talk or false rumours; 2) threats; 3) physical violence; and 4) property destruction. Respondents were also asked whether someone associated with them had experienced any form of intimidation because of their connection with the respondent.

What does political violence look like in Norway?

Respondents were first asked to answer questions about their perception of the level of violence in Norwegian politics. When asked if threats and violence are a normal part of politics in Norway, 7 percent responded “yes, it is a part of politics”; 55.8 percent said “No, but it happens occasionally,” and 35.3 percent answered “No, it is not a normal part of politics.” When we dug a bit deeper and asked more specific questions about different forms of violence, there was clear variation in which forms of violence were seen as more normal than others. Very few believed that physical violence was a normal part of politics in Norway (0.6 percent), while it was more common to think that derogatory comments and false rumors are a part of politics (36.6 percent). We then asked about respondents’ own experiences with various forms of violence. Here, we see that the type and amount of political violence that respondents reported experiencing align well with what the candidates believed was normal in Norwegian politics. Overall, 48.8 percent of respondents have experienced derogatory comments or false rumors, 19.2 percent had been subjected to threats, 2.4 percent had experienced physical violence, 6.4 percent have experienced the destruction of property, and 22.1 percent recall their associates being intimidated. The table above shows how frequently the candidates contesting the 2021 election reported experiencing different types of violence.

For those who experienced derogatory comments and false rumors, this often happened multiple times (only 5.3 percent of those who had experienced this said it happened

only once). However, the situation is somewhat different for physical violence and destruction of property. Among the respondents who have experienced physical violence, nearly half responded that it had occurred only once (46.2 percent). Nevertheless, 17.1 percent of those who have experienced physical violence have encountered it multiple times. It should be noted that the number of respondents for this type of violence is small.

Perpetrators

We also gave the candidates the opportunity to respond to who was behind the incidents they reported. 40.6% experienced an incident committed by an ordinary citizen. In comparison, 25.5% experienced an incident where the perpetrator was from a different political party, and 10.5% experienced an incident where the perpetrator was from the same party. A smaller number of individuals experienced violence where the perpetrator was a public servant (4.0%). 34.4% have experienced incidents on social media, and a smaller number reported occurrences in conventional media (9.7%). Some also experienced incidents in private settings (5.0%).

	% of candidates experienced violence
Citizens	40,6
Social media	34,4
Members or leader in other parties	25,5
Members or leaders of own party	10,5
Media	9,7
Friends, family	5,0
Public servants	4,0
Other	-

Gendered differences

Looking at the amount of violence respondents have experienced, there are few gender differences to be observed. However, there are important distinctions in experiences with various types of violence and how they are handled. For example, more women than men—especially young women—responded affirmatively that the derogatory comments, false rumours, threats, or physical violence they had experienced were of a sexual nature.

Just under 45% of women aged 35 or younger reported that at least one of the unwanted incidents they experienced was of a sexual nature. In comparison, just under 10% of men in the same age group reported the same. The gender balance evens out among those over 35 years old. Here, just over 10% of women reported experiencing unwanted incidents of a sexual nature, while only 3% of men in this age group said the same.

We also find interesting gender differences related to when the unwanted incident occurs. According to our respondents, most unwanted incidents happen during election campaigns, and the numbers are similar for both men and women. However, when we look at the nomination process, the time when parties decide who should be on their candidate lists and in what position, more women (21 percent) than men (17 percent) report experiencing an incident that can be defined as a form of political violence.

Are these unwanted incidents followed up by the parties? Here, we see some gender differences again. A total of 90 percent of respondents confirm that the political party they are a member of has guidelines for handling harassment and unwanted violent behavior. Despite this, we observe that men are more likely than women to underreport the incidents they experience to the party organization. When both men and women do report incidents, they have relatively equal chances of the party acting. Yet, according to the respondents, parties only act in half of the cases.

Political violence and its significance for democracy

In recent years, there has been a growing call for expanding the definition of political violence to not only include physical violence, but also harassment, threats, and property damage. The fear of experiencing these kinds of events can influence who wants to participate in politics and constrain their utterances. Our study shows that about half of the candidates in the last parliamentary election experienced unpleasant incidents during the campaign. We also found that young women, to a much greater extent than others, reported that the incident was of a sexual nature. This may not be surprising, but it is still concerning. In Norway, it

has gradually become more common for women and men to have equally long political careers, at least in national level politics, although women still fall short of men in this respect. If our goal is equal participation in politics irrespective of gender, we should maintain a focus on how political violence can be gendered. Hence, it is important that both new and established parties work towards being inclusive and supportive.

References

- Bardall, G. Bjarnegård, E. and Piscopo, J.M. (2020) How Is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts," *Political Studies* 68, no. 4: 916–935.
- Bjørge, T, Thomassen, G and Strype, J. (2022). Harassment And Threats Towards Politicians: A survey of Norwegian parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and executive committee members of political parties and their youth wings. PHS forskning.
- Collignon, S; Campbell, R.& Rüdiger, W. (2022) 'The Gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates in the UK', *The Political Quarterly*, 93, 32-38.
- Krook, M.L. (2017). Violence Against Women in Politics. *Journal of Democracy* 28(1), 74-88.
- Murias, R & Stavenes, S. (2023). Gender and Political Seniority: Three Measures. *Politics & Gender*, 1-25 (online first)

Project Information

The results are from a survey conducted in Norway as part of The Cost of Doing Politics: Gender Aspects of Political Violence project. The project is hosted by CMI and is funded by the Research Council of Norway. The Cost of Doing Politics project brings together an international research team to undertake a comprehensive, multi-method examination of if and how gender shapes political violence targeting politicians. The project investigates gender differences in the extent and type of political violence experienced by men and women, and the gendered consequences of violence against political actors across three different types of regimes: stable democracies (Norway and Ireland); a new democracy (Ghana); and an authoritarian system (Uganda).



CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute)
Phone: +47 47 93 80 00
Phone from abroad: +47 55 70 55 65
E-mail: cmi@cmi.no
www.cmi.no

P.O. Box 6033,
N-5892 Bergen, Norway
Visiting address:
Jekteviksbakken 31, Bergen

ISSN 0809-6732 (print)
ISSN 0809-6740 (PDF)