Threats and Harassment in Local Government: Initial Benchmarking Report

September 2023
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“Thank you for taking on this topic which is tearing America apart.”
- November 2022 Survey
1. Threats and harassment of local elected officials are at a consistently high baseline: in any given 3-month period, nearly half of all officials have been insulted, a third have been harassed, and nearly one in five threatened.

2. Threats and harassment are even more common for racial and ethnic minorities, and for women: 2 out of 5 women experienced harassment compared to less than a third of men. Similarly, 2 out of 5 minority respondents experienced harassment compared to a third of non-minority officials.

3. Worry about threats, harassment, and attacks is even higher: For example, while actual reports of attacks are relatively rare, they can create an atmosphere of fear, with 14% of local officials reporting being worried about being attacked. Fully 1 in 5 women officials worry about attacks on them or their family.
Experiences of threats and harassment are widespread, with a third of officials surveyed reporting harassment in a three-month period.

"Some people are upset about decisions that we make. I don't consider that an insult or harassment. When they threaten physical violence or property damage, that is a different story.”
- November 2022 Survey

“People feel more emboldened now than they did ten years ago.”
- from 1-on-1 interview, February 2023

Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.
Over the last year, threats and harassment of local officials remain consistently high.

% HAVING EXPERIENCED EVENT IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS

- Insulted
- Harassed
- Threatened
- Attacked

Over the last year, threats and harassment of local officials remain consistently high.

Threats and Harassment in Local Government – September 2023 Benchmarking Report
Over the last year, local officials who are racial or ethnic minorities were disproportionately likely to experience insults, harassment, and threats.

Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.
Over the last year, local officials who are women were also more likely to experience insults, harassment, and threats.

Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.
Over the last year, insults, harassment, and threats were pervasive across communities of all sizes, but especially likely in bigger towns, cities, and counties.

**Likelihood of Experiencing Event in a Three-Month Period**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Pop. &lt;2.4k</th>
<th>Pop. 2.4 - 8.7k</th>
<th>Pop. &gt;8.7k</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insulted</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassed</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.*
Democrats were more likely to report insults and harassment, but all parties reported experiencing threats in equal measure.

Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.
Liberals were more likely to be insulted but harassment and threats were experienced at similar levels across the ideological spectrum.

**Likelihood of experiencing event in a three-month period**

- **Insulted**
  - Liberal: 58%
  - Moderate: 50%
  - Conservative: 43%

- **Harassed**
  - Liberal: 36%
  - Moderate: 34%
  - Conservative: 32%

- **Threatened**
  - Liberal: 17%
  - Moderate: 17%
  - Conservative: 17%

*Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.*
Local elected officials experience pervasive worries about their well-being and safety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>% Worried</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insulted</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassed</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacked</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.*

“I understand why people are hesitant to run for public office.”
- *May 2023 Survey*

“My kids don’t want [me] involved anymore.”
- *1 on 1 interview, conducted Aug-Sept 2023*
One in four minority officials worry about being physically attacked.

% WORRIED ABOUT EVENT FOR THEMSELVES OR FAMILY MEMBERS

- **Insulted**: Minority 48%, Non-minority 40%
- **Harassed**: Minority 49%, Non-minority 38%
- **Threatened**: Minority 37%, Non-minority 28%
- **Attacked**: Minority 25%, Non-minority 12%

Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.
Women officials report higher levels of worry about threats, harassment and attacks, reflecting disproportionate likelihood of incidents reported.

Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.
Likewise, officials in the largest communities worry more than their counterparts in smaller communities.

Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.
Worry for hostile events is high across the political spectrum.

Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.
Worry for hostile events is high across the ideological spectrum.

% WORRIED ABOUT EVENT FOR THEMSELVES OR FAMILY MEMBERS

- **Insulted**: Liberal 51%, Moderate 45%, Conservative 32%
- **Harassed**: Liberal 46%, Moderate 43%, Conservative 32%
- **Threatened**: Liberal 36%, Moderate 33%, Conservative 21%
- **Attacked**: Liberal 17%, Moderate 15%, Conservative 11%

*Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were “All the time”, “Often”, or “Sometimes” worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.*
What’s next?

• CivicPulse will continue to survey local elected officials on a quarterly basis. The research team will conduct additional analysis both of these existing data and future rounds to release further insights in the coming months.

• Ongoing 1-on-1, confidential interviews will form the basis for additional insights, and follow up reports to BDI’s Initial Qualitative Report.

• For additional analysis and access to the underlying data please visit http://civicpulse.org/threats-harassment and bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/understandingThreats

* Taken together, ongoing Threats and Harassment in Local Government Benchmarking Reports will provide a key new empirical foundation to quickly understand and respond to changes in the threat and harassment landscape in the US. *
Appendix – Methodology, Sample Characteristics, and Question Wording
Overview of methodology

- CivicPulse uses a comprehensive list of all elected policy makers associated with townships, municipalities and county governments in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more.

- CivicPulse recruits survey participants through an online random-sample approach.

- Elected policy makers include top elected officials (e.g., mayor, county executive) and governing board members (e.g., council member, county commissioner).
CivicPulse has conducted four national surveys of local elected officials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>Start date</th>
<th>End date</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aug 12, 2022</td>
<td>Sept 21, 2022</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nov 16, 2022</td>
<td>Dec 14, 2022</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>May 3, 2023</td>
<td>June 6, 2023</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>July 21, 2023</td>
<td>Aug 16, 2023</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We recommend the following guidelines for interpretation of the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segmented by survey wave?</th>
<th>Segmented by demographic?</th>
<th>Recommended margin of error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>~2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>~5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>~10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents by party affiliation

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a...

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other party</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, do you think of yourself as:

- Very conservative
- Somewhat conservative
- Moderate, middle of the road
- Somewhat liberal
- Very liberal
- Not sure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very conservative</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat conservative</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate, middle of the road</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat liberal</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very liberal</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents by gender identity

What is your gender?
- Man
- Woman
- Prefer to self-describe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>877</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to self-describe</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents by race/ethnicity

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? Please check all that apply.

- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- Middle Eastern
- Mixed Race
- White
- Prefer to self-describe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Count*</th>
<th>Proportion*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>85.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to self describe</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents could select multiple answers.
In your capacity as a public official, please indicate whether you have experienced any of the following types of incidents in the last three months or so. If you have held your office for less time than that, please answer for the amount of time you have held your position. If appropriate, you may select ‘Yes’ to multiple items for the same experience.

In the last three months or so, have you been...

- Insulted verbally, in writing, or online
- Harassed verbally, in writing, or online
- Threatened verbally, in writing, or online
- Attacked physically

In general, how often do you worry about you or your family being...

**Event types:**
- Insulted verbally, in writing, or online
- Harassed verbally, in writing, or online
- Threatened verbally, in writing, or online
- Attacked verbally, in writing, or online

**Response options:**
- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- All the time
Survey made possible by generous support and partnership of the following organizations, and the many local officials who have already offered their time and insights.

For more on the overall project, see:

http://civicpulse.org/threats-harassment

http://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/understandingThreats