

# Threats and Harassment in Local Government: Initial Benchmarking Report

*September 2023*



# Table of contents

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- Key Findings ([Slide 3](#))
- Local Elected Officials' reported experience with:
  - Hostile Events ([Slide 4](#))
  - Worries about Hostile Events ([Slide 11](#))
- Appendix – Methodology, Questions, and Additional Info ([Slide 18](#))
- Support and Partners (Slide 27)

“Thank you for taking on this topic which is tearing America apart.”  
- *November 2022 Survey*

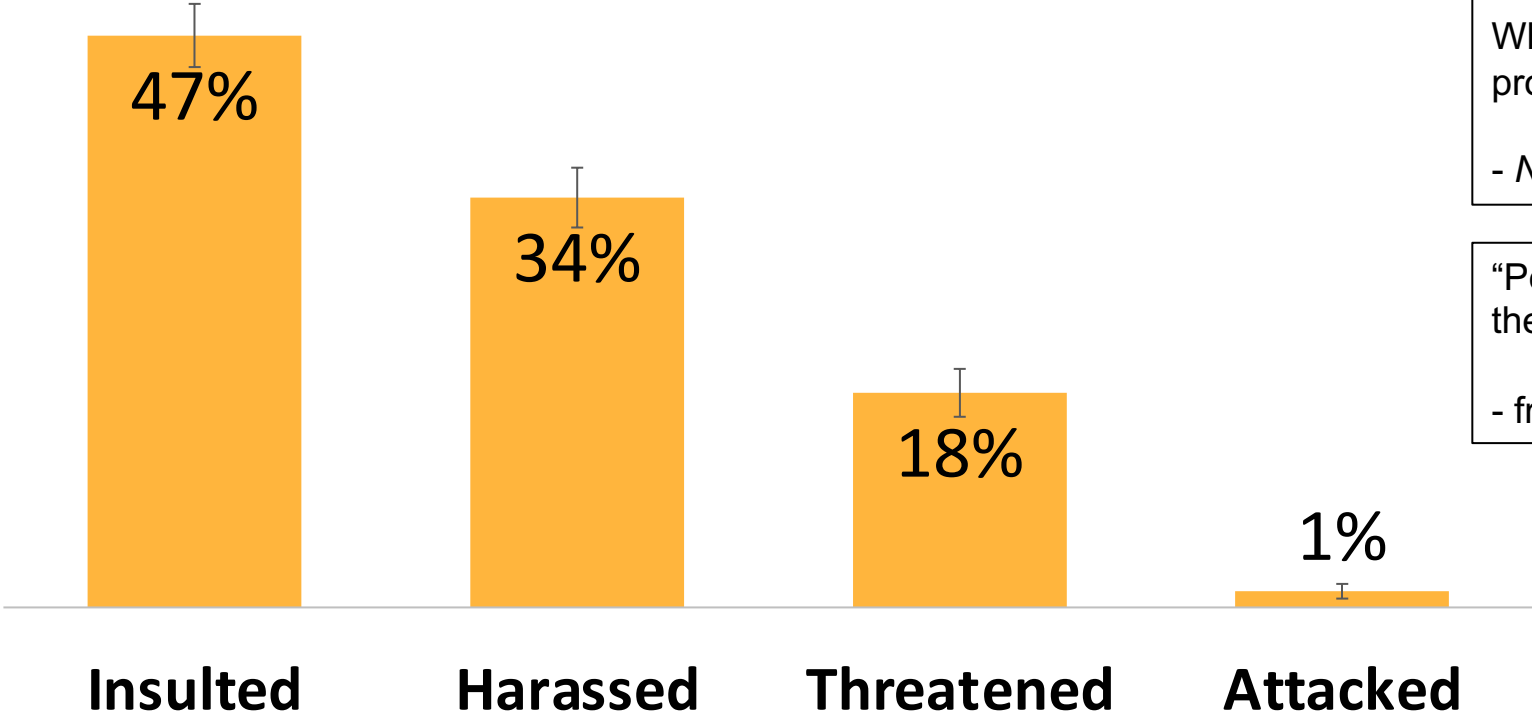
# Key Findings across 4 rounds of surveys:

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- 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.

### LIKELIHOOD OF EXPERIENCING EVENT 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

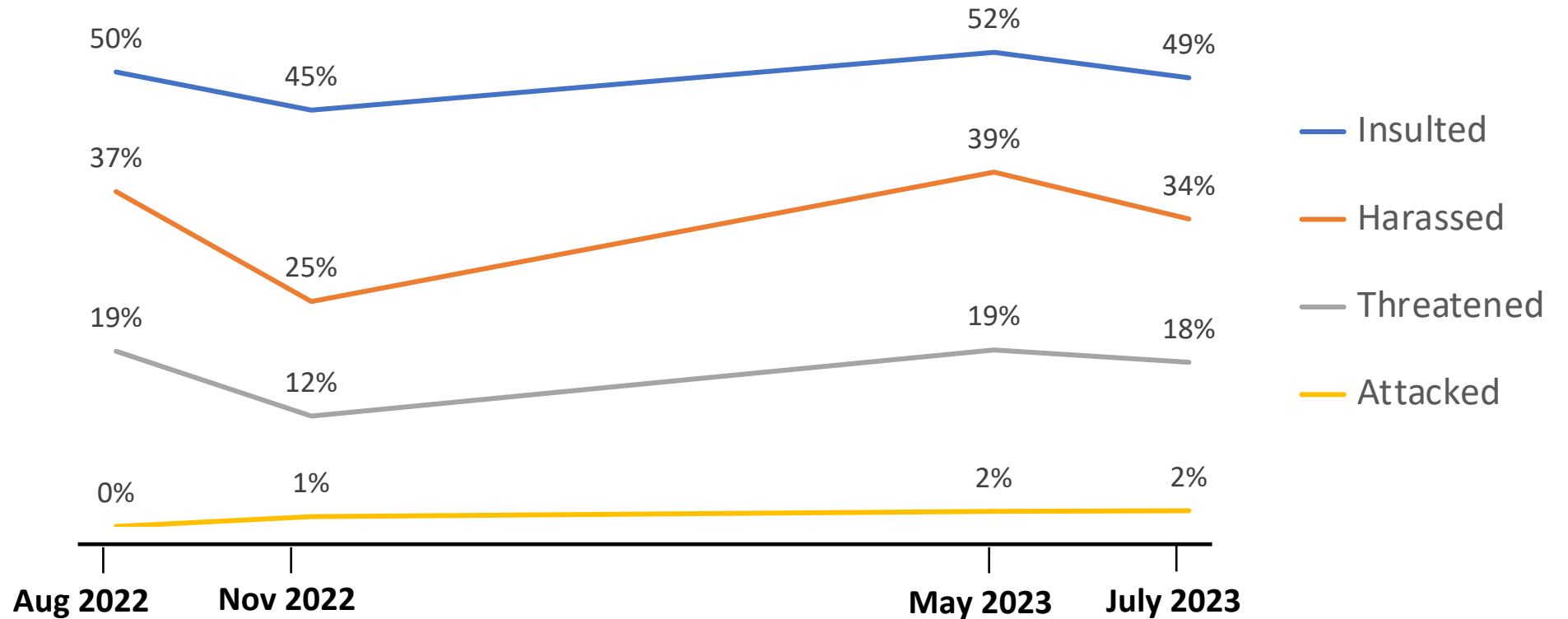
“People feel more emboldened now than they did ten years ago.”

- from 1-on-1 interview, February 2023

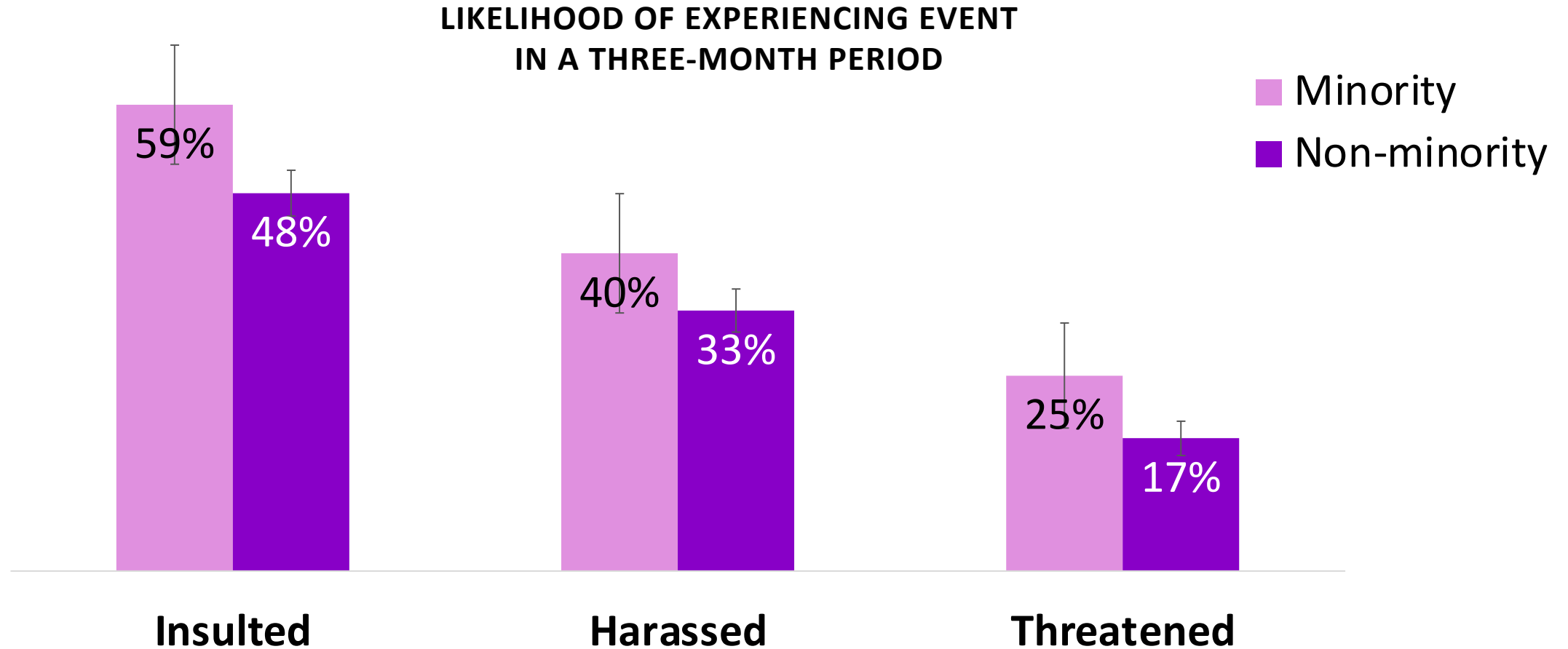
Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.

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

### % HAVING EXPERIENCED EVENT IN THE LAST THREE MONTHS

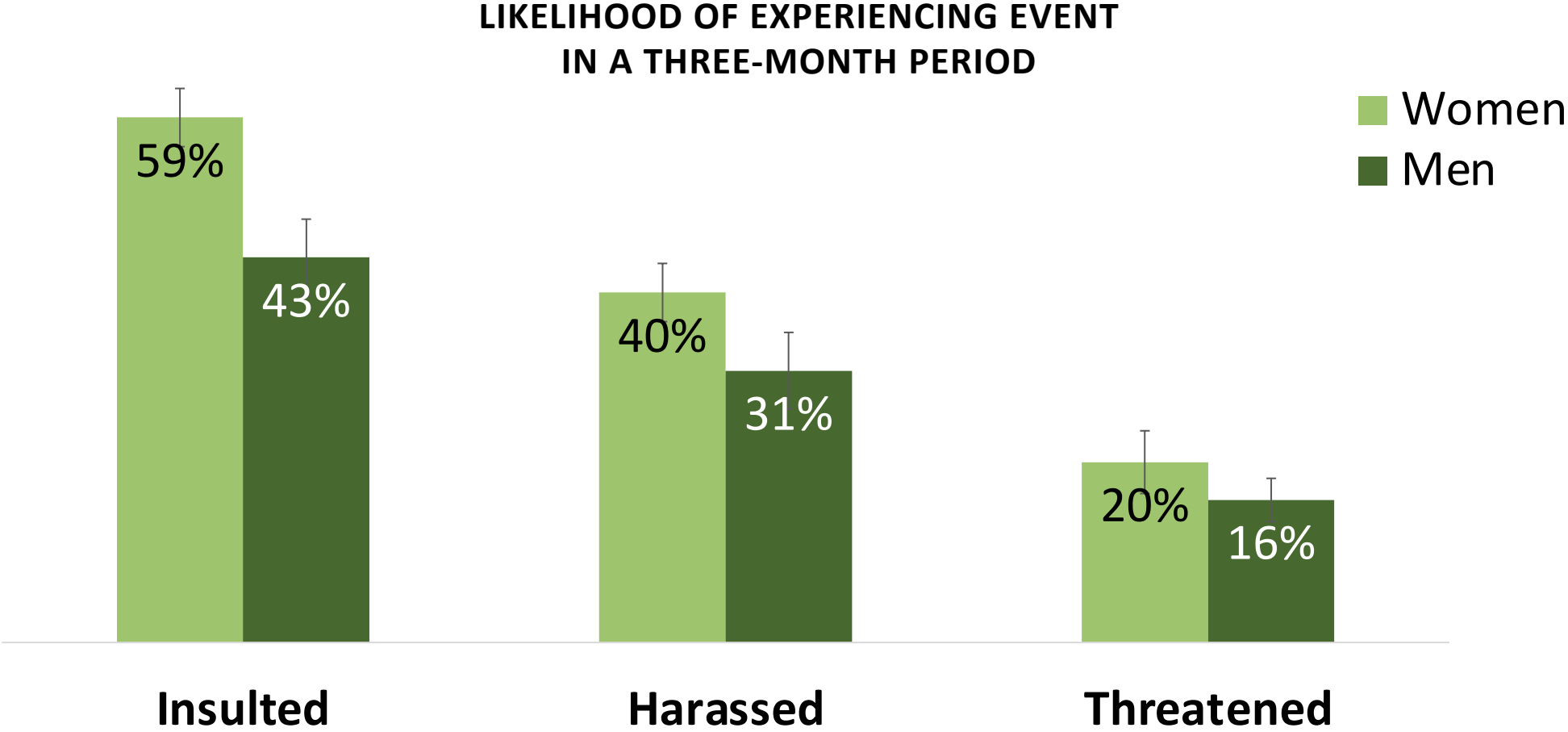


Over the last year, local officials who are racial or ethnic minorities were disproportionately likely to experience insults, harassment, and threats.



*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.

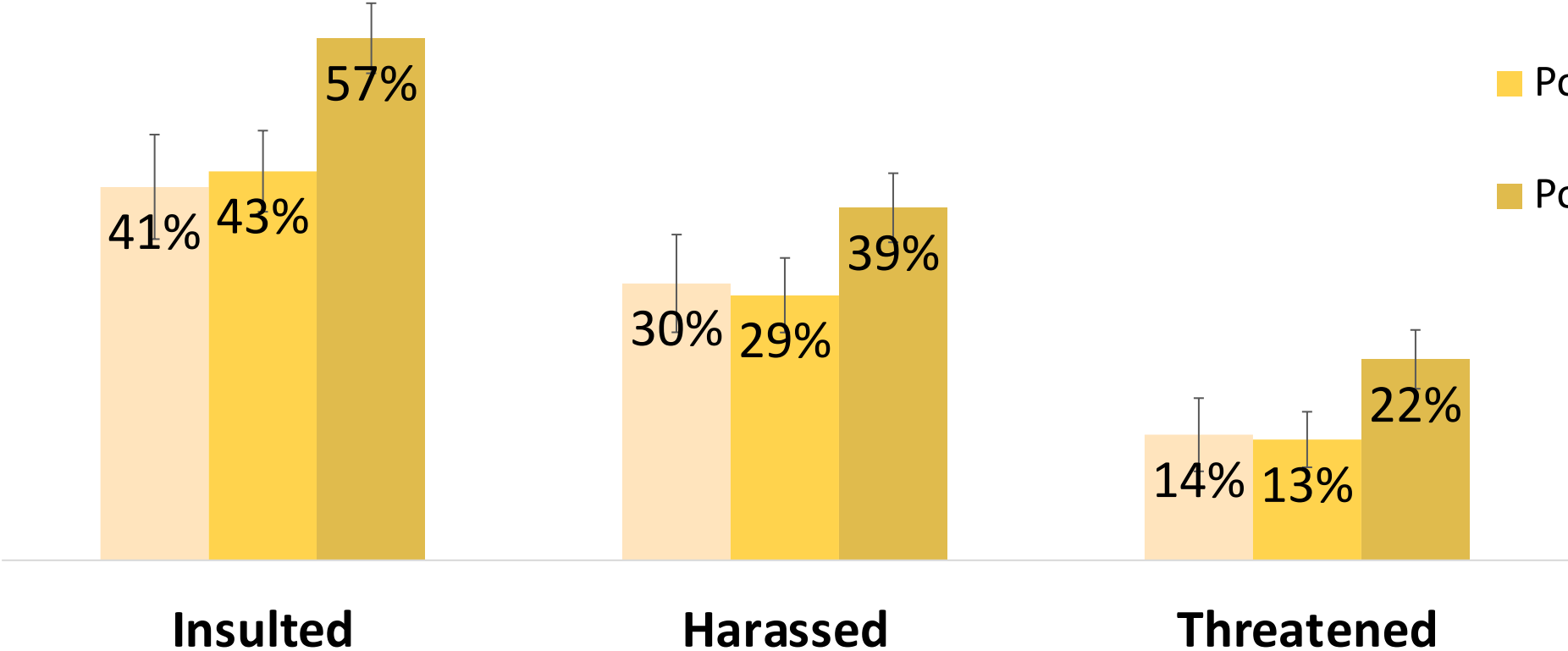


*Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.*

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**

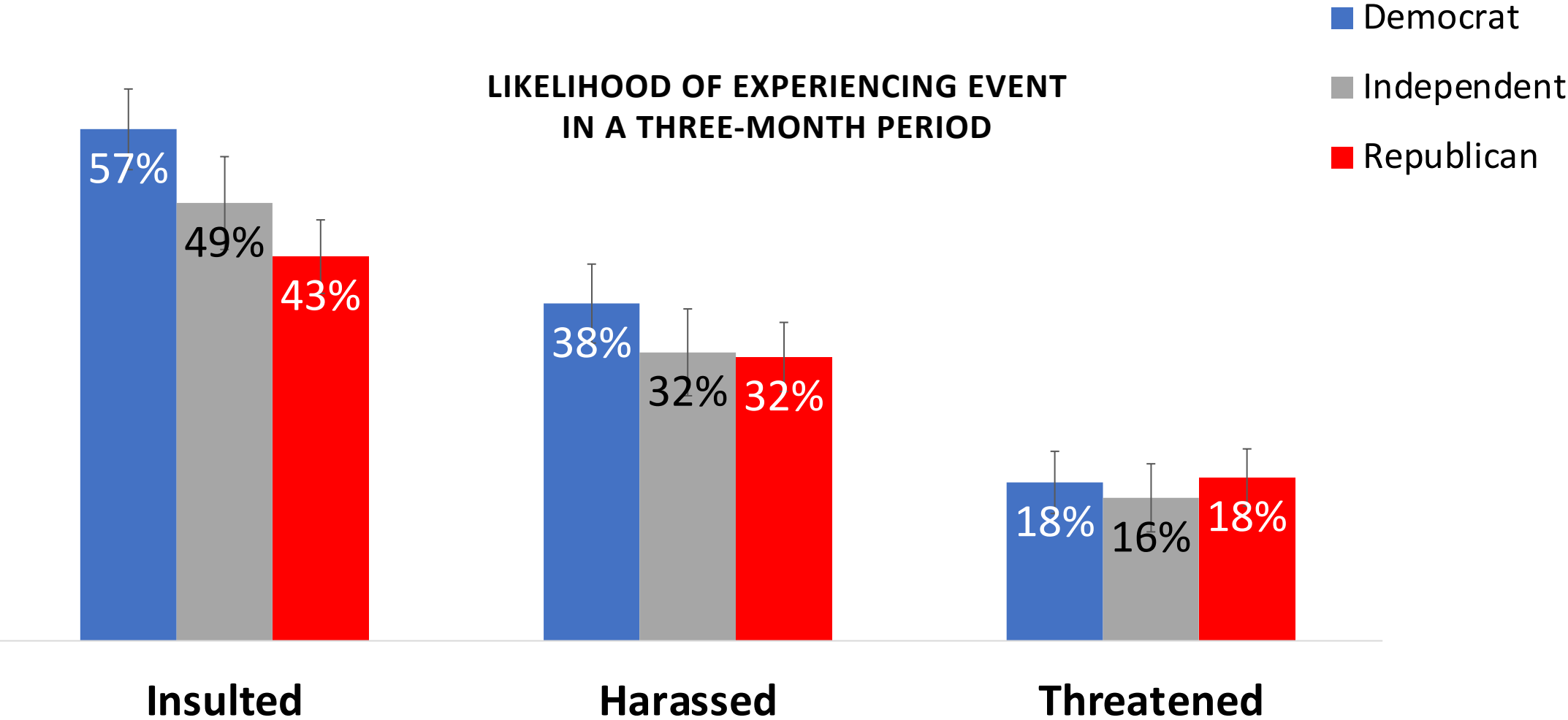
- Pop. <2.4k
- Pop. 2.4 - 8.7k
- Pop. >8.7k



*Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.*

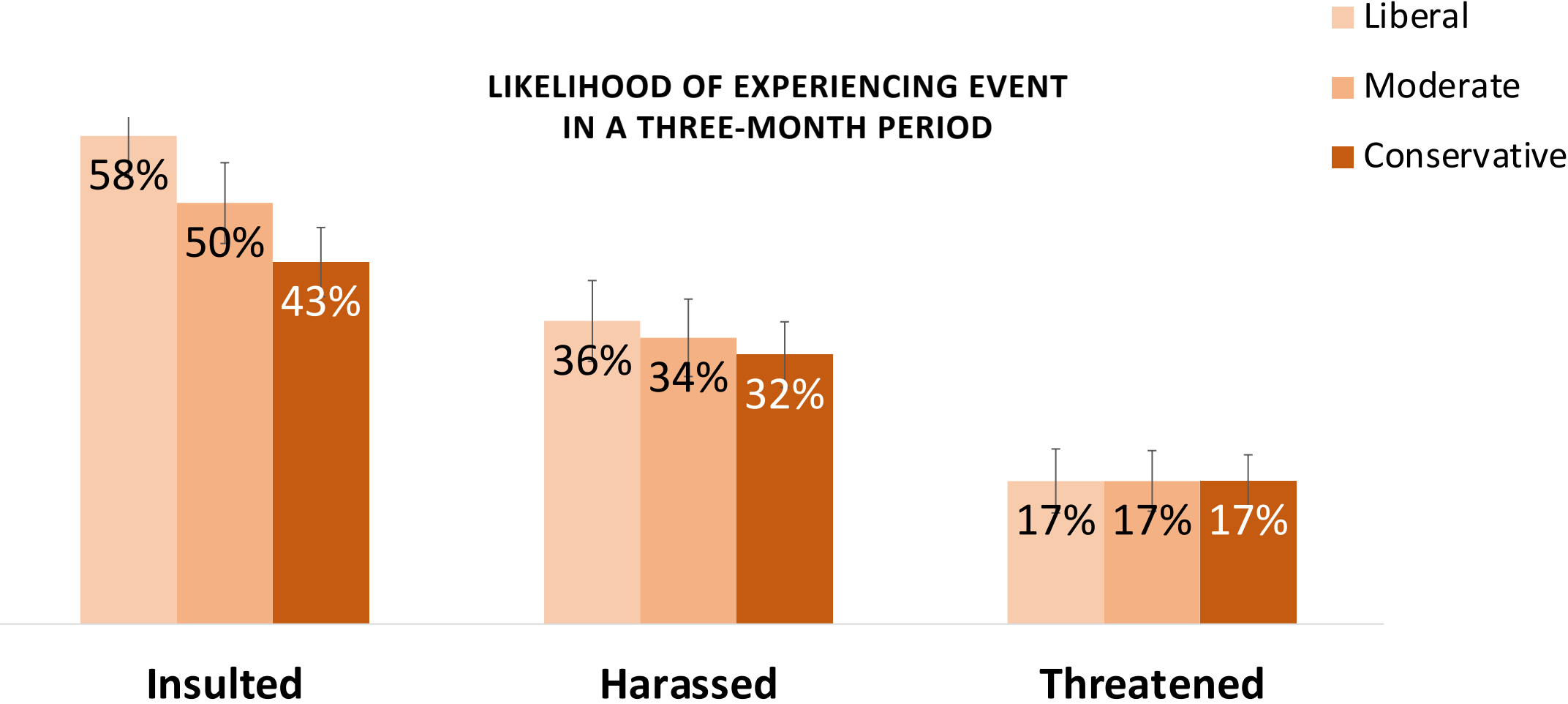


Democrats were more likely to report insults and harassment, but all parties reported experiencing threats in equal measure.



*Note: These estimates are averaged over the four surveys administered in the last twelve months.*

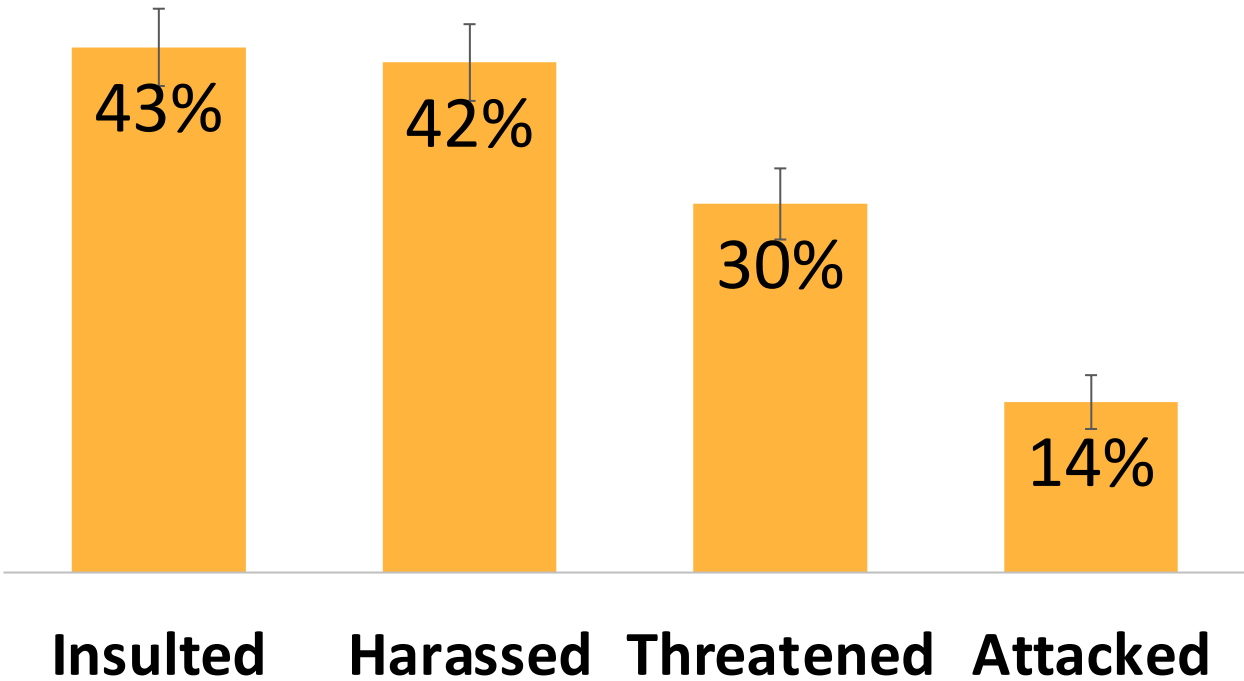
Liberals were more likely to be insulted but harassment and threats were experienced at similar levels across the ideological spectrum.



*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.

## % WORRIED ABOUT EVENT FOR THEMSELVES OR FAMILY MEMBERS



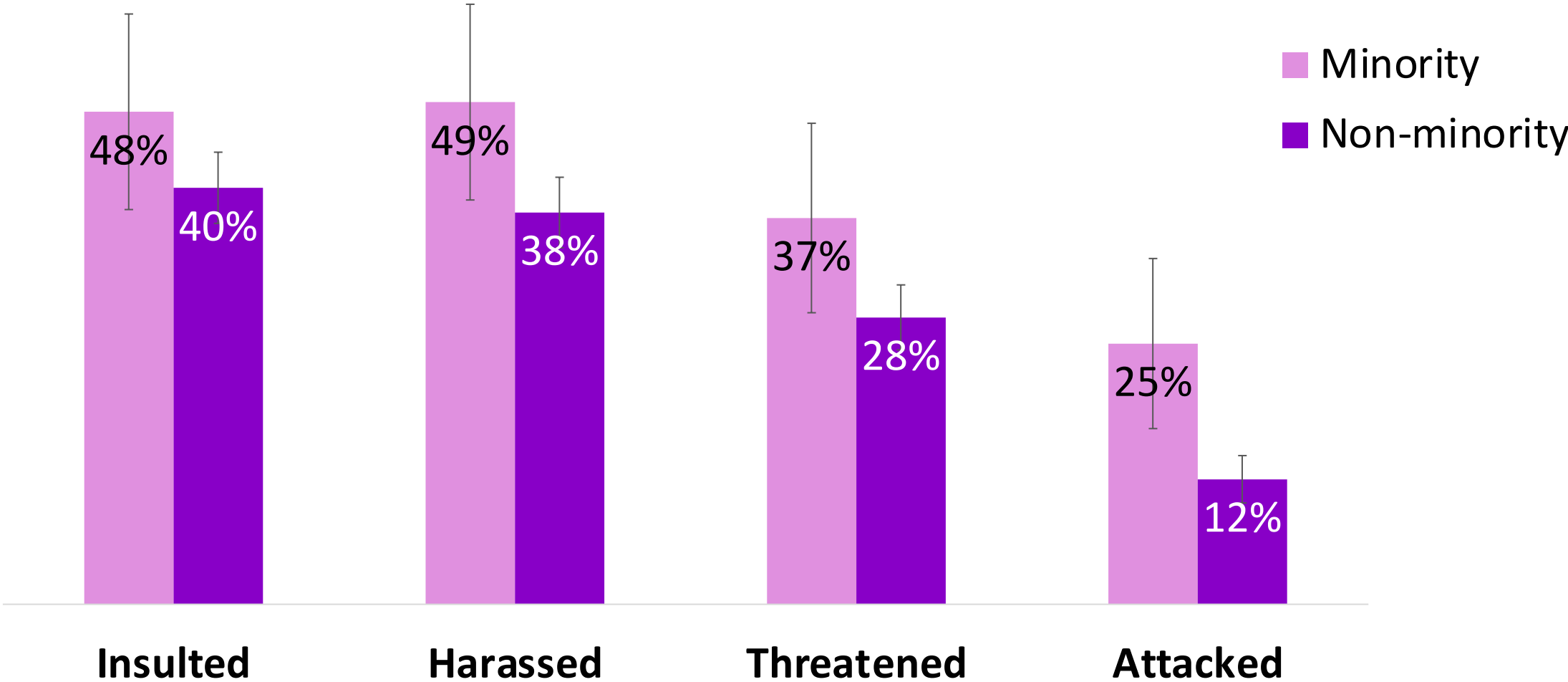
“I understand why people are hesitant to run for public office.”  
- May 2023 Survey

“My kids don’t want [me] involved anymore.”  
- 1 on 1 interview, conducted Aug-Sept 2023

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.

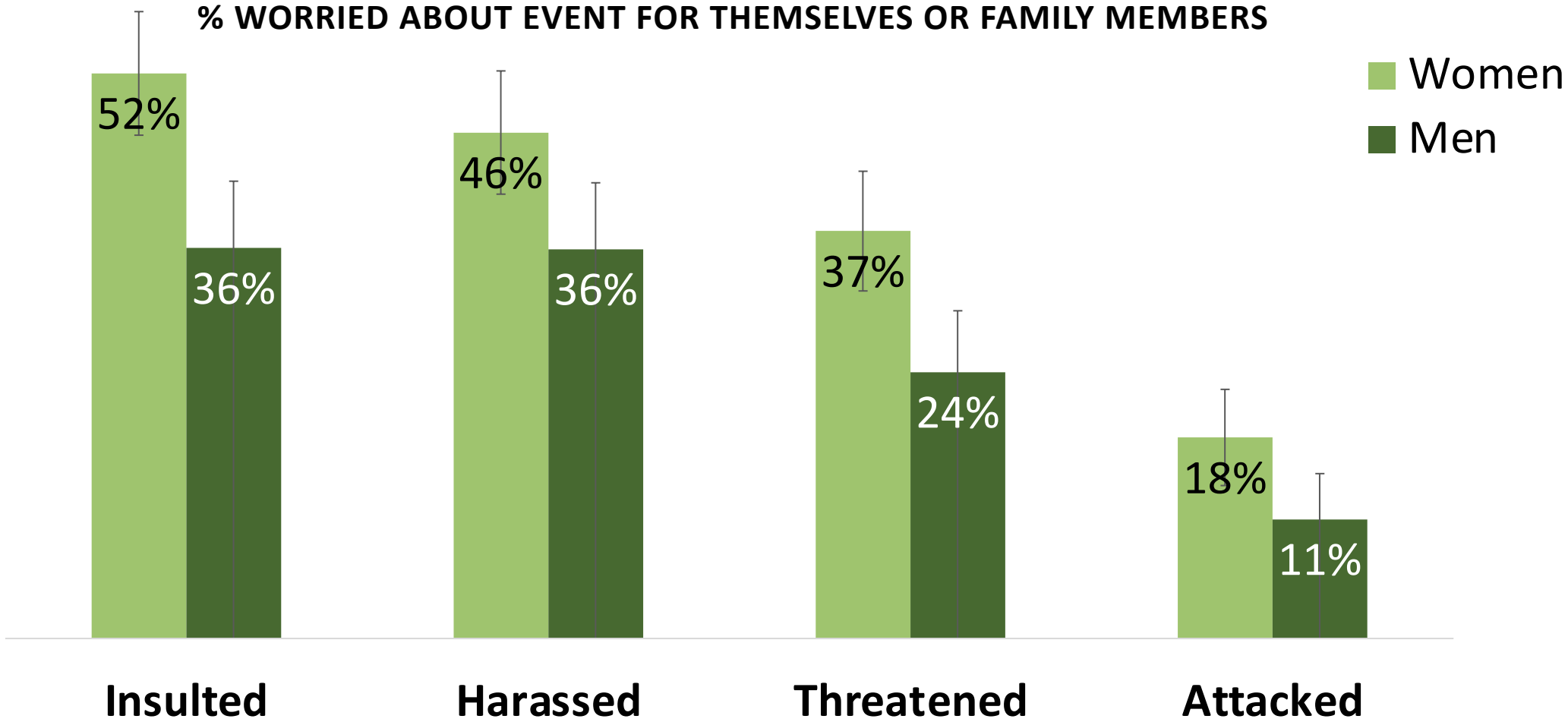
# One in four minority officials worry about being physically attacked.

**% WORRIED ABOUT EVENT FOR THEMSELVES OR FAMILY MEMBERS**



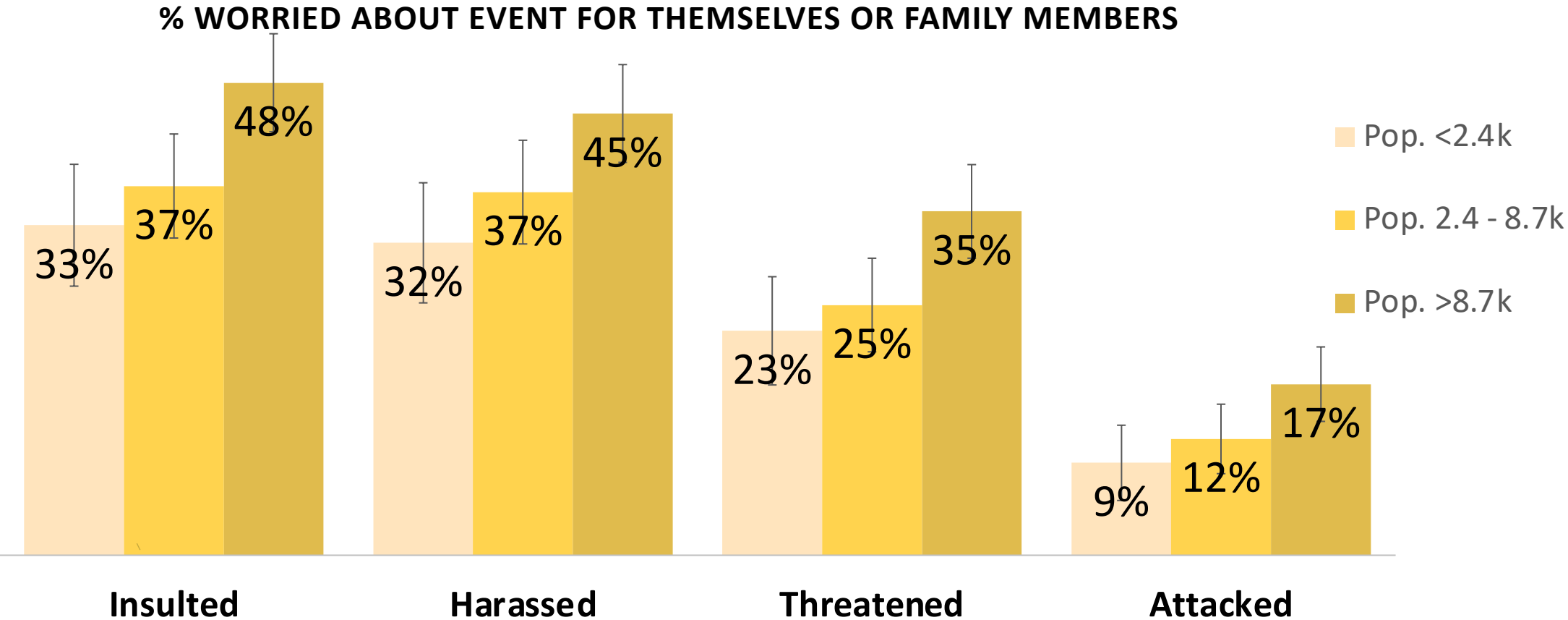
*Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were "All the time", "Often", or "Sometimes" worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.*

# Women officials report higher levels of worry about threats, harassment and attacks, reflecting disproportionate likelihood of incidents reported.



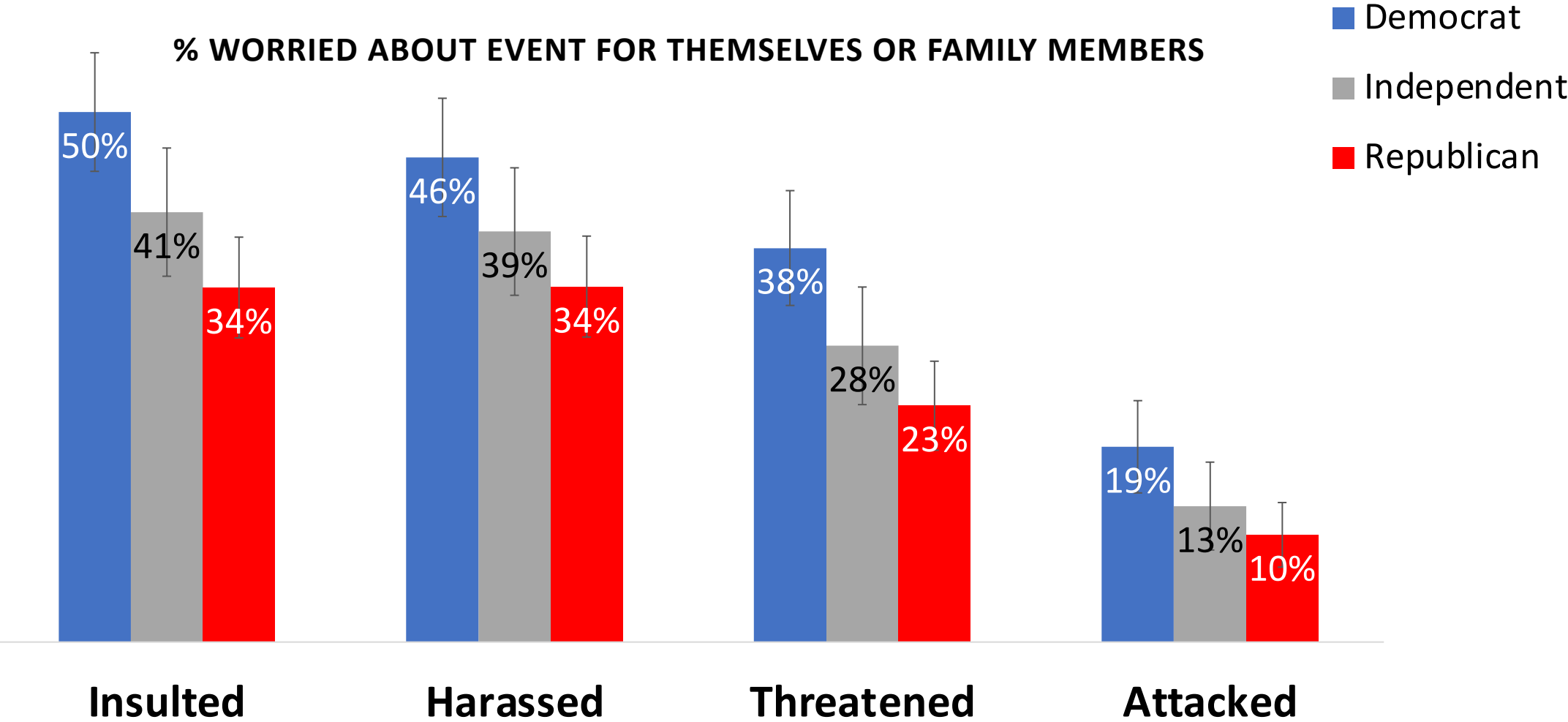
*Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were "All the time", "Often", or "Sometimes" worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.*

Likewise, officials in the largest communities worry more than their counterparts in smaller communities.



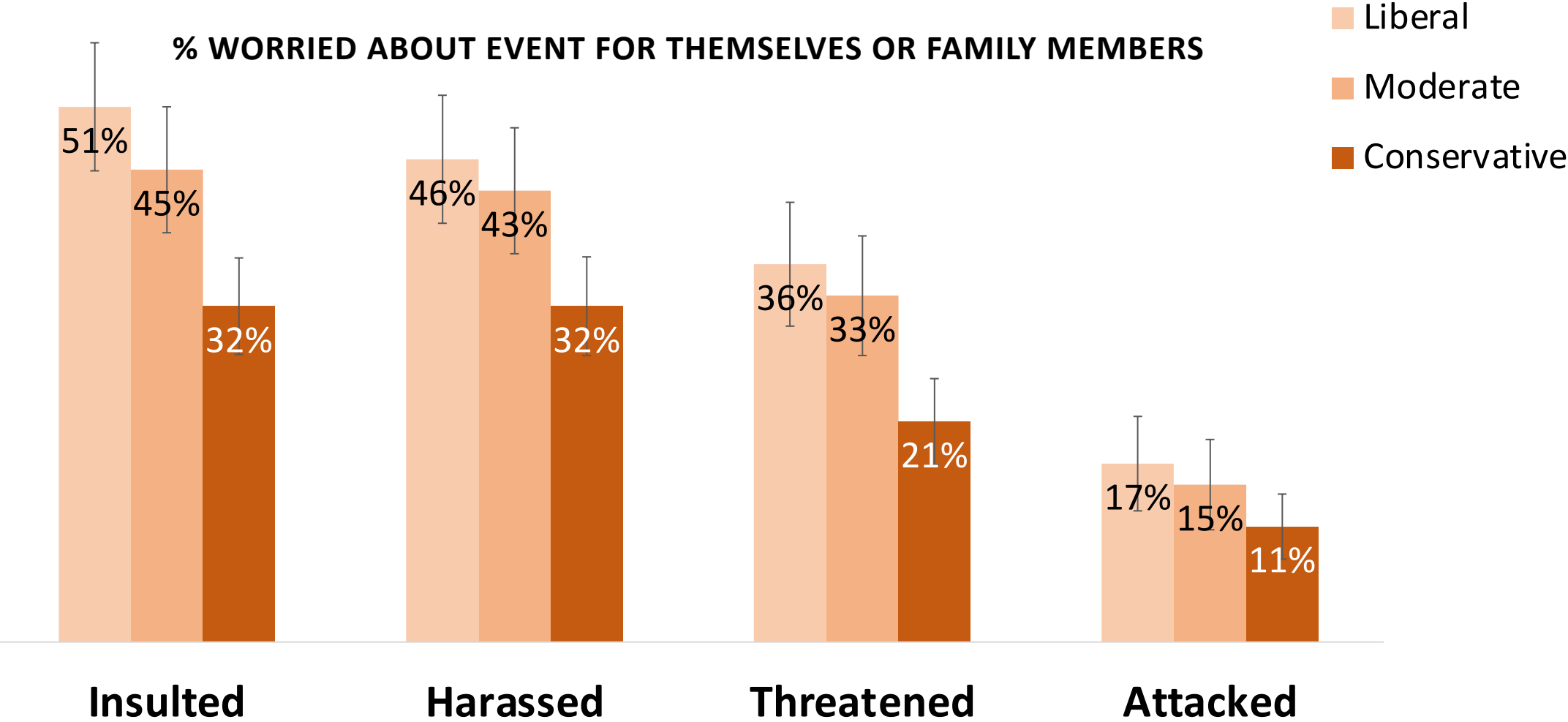
*Note: These estimates are averaged over two surveys administered in the last six months. Shows combined percentage of people that indicated they were "All the time", "Often", or "Sometimes" worried about themselves or family experiencing these events.*

# Worry for hostile events is high across the political spectrum.



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# 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](http://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

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- 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.

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Wave	Start date	End date	n
1	Aug 12, 2022	Sept 21, 2022	207
2	Nov 16, 2022	Dec 14, 2022	262
3	May 3, 2023	June 6, 2023	409
4	July 21, 2023	Aug 16, 2023	532
<b>Total</b>			<b>1410</b>

# We recommend the following guidelines for interpretation of the data.

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Segmented by survey wave?	Segmented by demographic?	Recommended margin of error
No	No	<1%
Yes	No	~2%
No	Yes	~5%
Yes	Yes	~10%

# Respondents by party affiliation

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

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other party

Response Options	Count	Proportion
Democrat	468	34%
Independent	304	22%
Republican	562	40%
Other party	56	4%

# Respondents by political ideology

In general, do you think of yourself as:

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

Response Options	Count	Proportion
Very conservative	220	16%
Somewhat conservative	347	25%
Moderate, middle of the road	413	30%
Somewhat liberal	241	17%
Very liberal	150	11%
Not sure	26	2%

# Respondents by gender identity

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What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Prefer to self-describe

Response Options	Count	Proportion
Man	877	63%
Woman	496	36%
Prefer to self-describe	15	1%



# 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

Response Options	Count*	Proportion*
Asian	15	1.2%
Black	68	5.2%
White	1106	85.1%
Hispanic	61	4.7%
Middle Eastern	3	0.2%
Mixed	18	1.4%
Prefer to self describe	37	2.8%

\*Respondents could select multiple answers.

# Survey Questions

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## Hostile Events

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

## Worry About Hostile Events

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

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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>

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