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Exposure to Online Abuse of Politicians Does Not Scare Citizens Away From Politics

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Abstract

Recent studies suggest that online abuse directed at politicians can have negative effects on their public engagement and continued participation in politics. This article considers the broader consequences of such online abuse by testing whether exposure to online abuse of politicians also decreases the prospective political participation of ordinary citizens. In a preregistered survey experiment with 2,000 participants from Denmark, we find that exposing citizens to cases of online abuse of politicians does not have any statistically significant, or substantively meaningful, negative effects on citizens' prospective political participation. This result holds across multiple measures of political participation and when distinguishing citizens by their gender and level of conflict avoidance. If anything, exploratory analyses indicate that online abuse of politicians may in some cases mobilize citizens who have been bystanders to such abuse.

Keywords: Political participation; political incivility; online abuse; politicians; social media

Introduction

Well-functioning democracies entail political participation by ordinary citizens (Verba and Nie, 1972; Van Deth, 2001; Dahl, 2005). Recently, there has been a growing concern about how the harshness in political discussions, especially on social media, may affect ordinary citizens who witness such discussions. For example, a growing strand of research has investigated whether incivility in political discussion, that is, discussions where the norms of interpersonal interaction are violated (Mutz, 2015), affects citizens' political engagement. So far, the empirical evidence does not consistently support a demobilization hypothesis (Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022).

This article has earned badges for transparent research practices: Open Data and Open Materials. For details see the Data Availability Statement.

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However, incivility is just one expression of political discussions being harsh, and it is arguably a comparatively mild one. While eye-rolling, vulgarities, and other expressions of incivility might be off-putting to some citizens, recent studies have documented the prevalence of much more severe kinds of online political behavior, including threats, racism, or sexism, particularly against politicians on social media platforms (James et al., 2016; Rheault et al., 2019; Gorrell et al., 2020). As recent studies suggest, online abuse of such a caliber can have negative effects on the involved politicians' mental health and well-being and may also dampen their participation in public discussions and desire to continue their political career (James et al., 2016; Theocharis et al., 2016; Tromble, 2018; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020). Similarly, online abuse of politicians could also have negative effects on bystanding citizens' prospective political participation. In this article, we therefore investigate whether online abuse directed at politicians on social media affects the prospective political participation of ordinary citizens who witness the abuse.

Specifically, we test the hypothesis that citizens' prospective political participation decreases when they are exposed to online abuse of politicians. We measure citizens' willingness to participate in politics both by their willingness to engage in online political activities, their willingness to engage in offline political activities, and their willingness to run for political office.[1] As examples of online abuse, our experimental design includes real cases from *Facebook* and *Twitter* (now *X*) of insults, sexism, and violent threats directed at politicians. We also test two hypotheses about the role of gender and conflict avoidance to investigate whether average treatments effects conceal effects among some subgroups: women may be particularly prone to withdrawing from active engagement in politics, as conflict aversion is correlated with gender (Mutz, 2015; Schneider et al., 2016). Such heterogenous effects are important to investigate, as they could exacerbate existing gender inequalities in politics.

Contrary to expectations, our preregistered survey experiment in Denmark shows that exposure to online abuse of politicians does not have any negative effects on citizens' prospective political participation. This holds irrespective of whether we consider overall participation or distinguish between different kinds of political participation. The results are also robust when distinguishing between men and women and between people with low and high levels of conflict avoidance. If anything, our results tentatively suggest that exposure to online abuse of politicians may in some cases increase citizens' prospective political participation.

Online abuse of politicians

Abusive messages have been defined as messages "*directed at a specific person with the intent to cause harm or distress*" (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). While this definition is open to subjective interpretation, surveys show that politicians and citizens alike generally find messages directed at politicians to be abusive when they

[1]Broadly speaking, the term political participation can be defined as "as citizens' activities affecting politics" (Van Deth, 2001). The terms encompass voting and running for office, but the term may also encompass protests, participation in public debates, etc.

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contain rude and personal insults, overt sexist comments and – particularly – threats of violence (Rasmussen, 2022; Pedersen et al., 2024a; Petersen et al., 2024).

Content analyses of social media messages directed at politicians have shown a relatively high prevalence of such types of abuse (Theocharis et al., 2016; Rheault et al., 2019; Farrell et al. 2020; Kosmidis and Theocharis, 2020; Unkel and Kümpel, 2022). Consistent with these findings from content analyses, surveys conducted among politicians also indicate that a large proportion of politicians have been insulted, threatened, or otherwise abused on social media (James et al., 2016; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Herrick and Thomas, 2022; Pedersen et al., 2024a).

While social media companies continually remove abuse and other types of inappropriate content from their platforms (Douek, 2022), much of the abuse directed at politicians remains on social media sites at least for some time, as evidenced by the amount of abuse found in content analyses. Previous studies have found incivility in 10–23% of social media messages and comments to politicians (Rheault et al., 2019; Theocharis et al., 2020; Unkel and Kümpel, 2022) and outright abuse in 2–5% of the comments and messages (Theocharis et al., 2016, 2020; Farrell et al., 2020; Gorrell et al., 2020). Further, a survey among Danish citizens found that 88% of Facebook users and 80% of Twitter users had seen hateful comments directed at someone else on these social media sites, and 57% responded that the hateful comments they had seen were about political beliefs (Jaeger et al., 2022). Thus, while we do not have precise estimates of how often ordinary citizens observe online abuse specifically directed at politicians, it seems reasonable to assume that a substantial number of citizens observe some of the abuse hurled at politicians on social media.

The participatory consequences of online abuse

In surveys, politicians report that online abuse has made them anxious, concerned for their safety and the safety of those around them, and generally affected their personal well-being (James et al., 2016; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2024a). Politicians also report that online abuse can affect how they serve their democratic functions, for example, the extent to which they partake in public debates, including discussions on social media, and the political issues they engage with. For some, at least according to self-reports, it may even affect their willingness to run for office in future elections (Pedersen et al., 2024a).

Importantly, online abuse of politicians could also have broader democratic consequences by affecting the political participation of ordinary citizens. Political participation requires not only resources but also motivation (Brady et al., 1995; Harder and Krosnick, 2008). When citizens observe politicians being abused on social media, their political motivation may suffer for at least two reasons. First, citizens might become worried about participating in politics, fearing that they themselves risk being targeted by abuse. Second, citizens who are bystanders to such abuse might simply be turned off by politics if they get the impression that the domain of politics is generally unpleasant. While this demobilization hypothesis is untested in the literature on abuse of politicians, it has received considerable attention in the related literature on political incivility. Incivility has been defined as "*violation of norms of interpersonal interaction*" (Mutz, 2015) or simply "*impoliteness*" (Masullo et al., 2021). As such, incivility is a broader concept than

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online abuse and includes, for example, name-calling, coarse language, and non-verbal behavior such as eye-rolling (Otto et al., 2020). So far, the results from this literature are inconclusive. While some studies have found a demobilizing effect of incivility (Han and Brazeal, 2015), other studies have found that incivility can make people more emotionally engaged in politics (Borah, 2014).[2] Recently, a meta-analysis of 19 studies concluded that the overall effect of incivility on political participation is small and statistically insignificant (Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg, 2022).

However, there are several reasons as to why the lack of a consistent demobilizing effect in studies of incivility should not be used to infer much about the demobilizing effect of online abuse. First, from a methodological standpoint, one should be careful not to infer confidently from individual studies on incivility, as these have generally relied on experiments with relatively small sample size, limiting the statistical power to detect effects. For example, the 19 studies included in the meta-analysis by Van't Riet and Stekelenburg (2022) had average sample sizes of just 277 participants (in contrast, we include 2,000 participants in our experiment). While the meta-analysis mitigates the problem with small sample sizes, the findings still rest on the aggregation of studies investigating very different types of incivility across distinct contexts.

Second, from a theoretical standpoint, online abuse can be of a character that is far more aggressive and threatening than behavior that is merely uncivil. With few exceptions (Hutchens et al., 2019), the incivility included in experiments is often in the form of nonthreatening use of vulgarities such as *"It makes me want to puke"* (Kluck and Krämer, 2022) and derogatory slurs such as *"assholes"* and *"idiots"* (Otto et al., 2020; Kluck and Krämer 2022). Furthermore, the incivility is often not directed at specific individuals or groups and can also be part of longer messages and comments containing substantive arguments regarding policy positions. In contrast, the online abuse whose effects we investigate is directed at a specific individual and includes statements such as death threats, which go far beyond mere incivility (see Appendix A for specific examples of online abuse used in our experiment). For these reasons, online abuse may have a stronger demobilizing effect than at least some types of incivility. Thus, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Citizens' prospective political participation is decreased when exposed to online abuse of politicians.

Gender and conflict avoidance

The effects of being exposed to online abuse of politicians could potentially be stronger among women than men. Previous studies among politicians and ordinary citizens have clearly shown that women tend to be more averse to abusive messages and ostensibly more affected by such messages (Collignon and Rüdig, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2024a).

[2]It is, however, noteworthy that people generally have an unfavorable view of politicians engaging in incivility against political opponents (Bauer, 2019).

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An explanation for differential effects among men and women can be that they differ substantially in their average level of conflict avoidance. Men are generally socialized in ways that emphasize assertiveness and argumentation. As a consequence, men are less averse to conflicts, on average, while women are more likely to find arguments unpleasant (Wolak, 2022). Notably, men and women differ markedly on aversion to public conflicts, with women being substantially more averse to public, rather than private, conflicts (Mutz and Reeves, 2005, 144). These gender differences are important to examine as women are already underrepresented in politics. If women are demobilized more than men by online abuse of politicians, such abuse may potentially exacerbate the already existing gender inequalities in politics. We, therefore, test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to online abuse of politicians particularly decreases prospective political participation among women.

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to online abuse of politicians particularly decreases prospective political participation among citizens with high levels of conflict avoidance.

Methods and data

Prior to our data collection, all hypotheses were preregistered along with a preanalysis plan at *Open Science Framework.*[3] The experiment was conducted in Denmark using a commercial web panel (*Voxmeter*). The sample size was set to 2,000 participants to maximize statistical power under budgetary constraints. With three condition, the expected group sizes of $n = 667$ yield a statistical power of 95% to find an effect size of just 0.2 standard deviations on the dependent variable (alpha = 0.05), conservatively assuming that covariates have zero explanatory power. Overall attrition rate was just 1.0% (among participants exposed to the experimental stimuli, only 0.6% failed to complete the entire survey, and attrition was not significantly associated with the treatment group, $p = 0.935$). The survey questionnaire is included in Appendix A, and a description of the Danish case is found in Appendix B. The final sample is demographically diverse, with 49.0% women, mean age of 52 years (SD = 17.0), and the sample also shows substantial variation on political attitudes (see Appendix C for additional sample and population characteristics). Furthermore, while our sample is not a probability sample, we note that treatment effects in survey experiments are generally highly consistent across probability and non-probability samples (Coppock et al., 2018).

At the start of the survey, participants were asked standard questions on vote choice, ideological left-right position, and political interest. In addition, conflict avoidance was measured with five agree-disagree items, for example, "*I hate arguments*" (Bjarnøe et al., 2020; Bjarnøe, 2022). Answers to these five items were summarized into an index ranging from zero to 10, with 10 indicating a high level of

[3]See the preregistration here: https://osf.io/uk23b/?view_only=4b723717f8f8425da63738ea83c12356.

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conflict avoidance. The index has a satisfactory level of internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.76).

Experiment

Following the measurements of pretreatment variables, participants were randomly sorted into three groups with equal probability. Participants assigned to group one (control condition) were not shown any social media messages. Participants assigned to group two were shown questioning or mildly critical messages directed at politicians (i.e., messages that were not abusive such as "*Wish that you tried to talk to ordinary people in the real world*"). Participants assigned to group three were shown abusive messages directed at politicians (designed to be either insulting, sexist, or threatening such as "*If you don't shut your mouth we will come and close it for you*"). To heighten the ecological validity of our study, all of the messages used in the treatment material were real messages to politicians on social media (some messages were abbreviated and slightly edited). To ensure that results were not driven by particularities of one specific example of abuse, we used stimulus sampling (Wells and Windschitl, 1999), meaning that the messages shown were randomly sampled from a larger pool of messages. All these messages are listed in the questionnaire in Appendix A. Participants in groups two and three were shown three messages sent to politicians and assessed each on a 0–10 scale, ranging from "0: completely unacceptable" to "10: completely acceptable." This assessment question served two purposes. First, it was included to increase the likelihood of participants reading the treatment text carefully. Second, responses to this question show how participants perceive, respectively, mildly critical and abuse messages. Participants clearly reacted differently to the two types of messages. The mean acceptability rating of the questioning or mildly critical messages was 7.9 on the 0–10 scale (SD = 2.5), while the abusive messages had a mean of just 0.7 (SD = 1.8).[4] This demonstrates that the respondents paid attention to the different types of messages and perceived them as intended.

Participants in all groups were subsequently presented with 12 questions on their own prospective political participation (e.g., likelihood of voting, participation in online or offline discussions, and running for office). Most questions were developed specifically for this survey, although they were inspired by previously used questions on retrospective and prospective political participation (Eckstein et al., 2013; Van Deth, 2014; Elaine and Detenber, 2017; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2017; Ohme et al., 2018). All these outcome questions were combined into a general index for prospective political participation (Cronbachs alpha = 0.86). In addition to this general index for prospective political participation, we also created two sub-indices: prospective political participation on social media (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) and prospective political participation outside social media (Cronbach's alpha = 0.73). Finally, we analyze prospective political candidacy with the single-item measure of people's willingness to run as a candidate in municipal elections. Means, standard deviations, and histograms for all dependent

[4]In the appendix Figure A2, we show the reactions to the individual comments. The mean acceptability ratings for all abusive rating are all very low and far below the ratings for all the mildly critical comments.

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variables are included in Tables A1-A2 and Figure A1 in appendix C. While the measures for political participation on social media and, particularly, willingness to run as a candidate are right-skewed, the measures for overall political participation and political participation outside social media (nonsocial media participation) are approximately normally distributed and show a good amount of variation.

Results

In line with the preregistered analyses plan, the tests of the hypotheses were based on regression models (OLS). Starting with hypothesis 1, we test this hypothesis with a model that includes indicator variables for treatment groups and to increase precision of the estimated treatment effects, three covariates expected to be predictive of political participation (gender, age, and political interest).

As Fig. 1 shows, the results of the preregistered models were not in line with hypothesis 1. Compared to the control group, prospective political participation was not lower on any measure among the participants exposed to the abusive messages. Nor did they differ significantly from participants exposed to mildly critical messages.

In fact, on all measures, participants exposed to social media messages directed at politicians had *higher* levels of prospective political participation, although not statistically significantly so. As these results point in the opposite direction of the hypothesized effects, it is worth noting that the covariates in the models generally act as expected. Women and old participants were significantly less likely to be ready to run as candidates (Dahl and Nyrup, 2021). Likewise, political interest was predictive for all measures of political participation.

To additionally test the robustness of these results, we ran additional, exploratory models, respectively, models without any covariates, and models with additional covariates (left-right position and conflict avoidance). These exploratory results are shown in Figure A3, Appendix D. None of these exploratory models show any demobilizing effects of exposure to online abuse. In models without any covariates, exposure to abusive messages actually had a statistically significant *positive* effect on the overall measures as well as on the measure of non-social media political participation. However, it is important to emphasize that these results are exploratory.

Further, as another exploratory check on the potential negative effects of abusive messages, we repeated the analyses separately for all 12 items measuring prospective political participation (models 13–24 in Appendix D). As shown in Fig. 2, there are no significant demobilizing effects of abusive messages on any of the 12 outcomes. In four cases, exposure to abuse seems to have *mobilizing* effects: participants exposed to abuse are ostensibly more likely to write to a politician ($p = 0.025$), write a social media post regarding a political issue ($p = 0.036$), write a letter to the editor in a newspaper ($p = 0.001$), and to sign a petition ($p = 0.044$). It is important to note that these results are based on exploratory analyses, and they are not adjusted for multiple comparisons. In addition, the effect sizes are relatively modest (in the four cases, Cohen's d was in the range 0.11–0.18). We therefore urge caution when interpreting these apparent effects.

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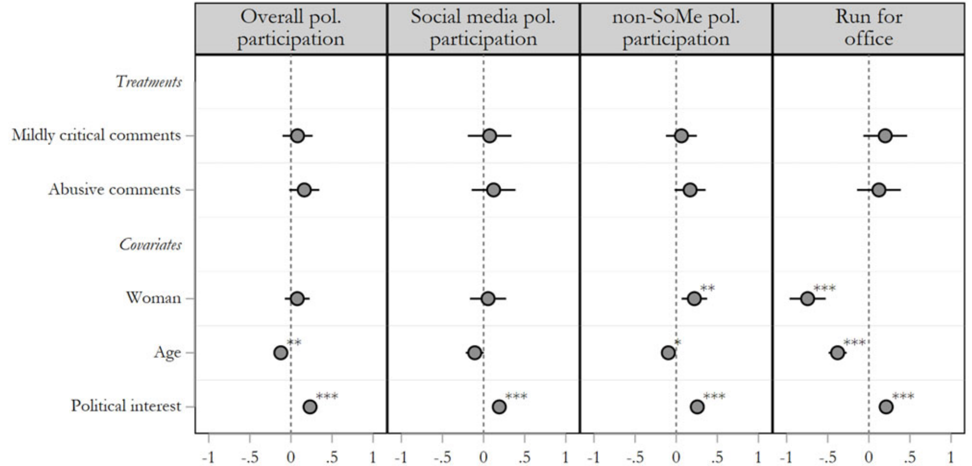

Figure 1. Main effects on political participation (Preregistered).
Note: Estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Based on models 1–4, Appendix D.

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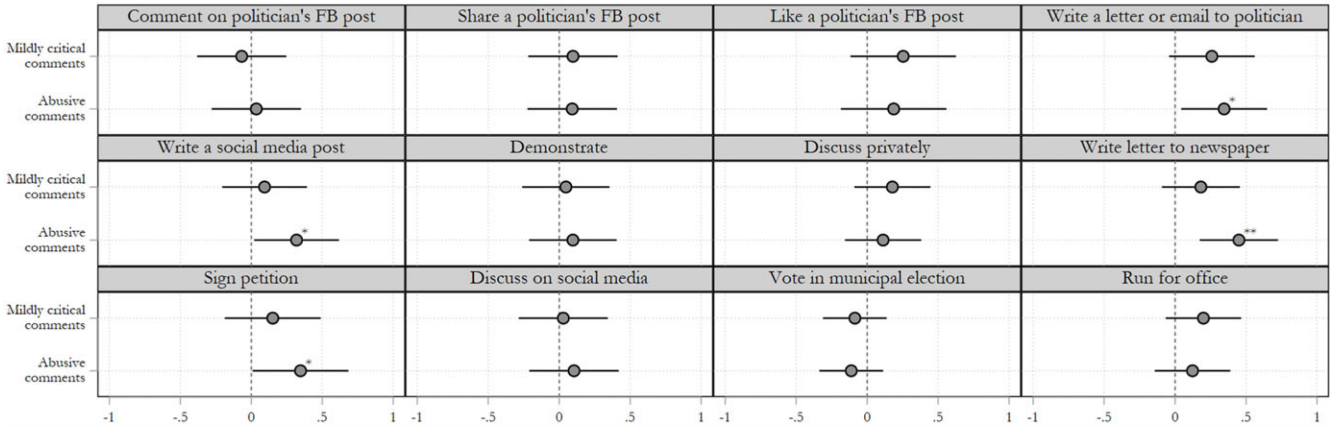

Figure 2. Effects of social media messages across 12 dependent variables (Exploratory).
Note: Estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Based on models 13–24, Appendix D.

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We are on firmer ground when concluding on *demobilizing* effects: in none of the preregistered and exploratory analyses did exposure to online abuse has a statistically significant negative effect. The absence of a statistically significant effect is not proof of no effect, and, in most cases, the confidence intervals of our estimates do not rule out negative effects on the four participation measures. However, exploratory inferiority tests (Lakens et al., 2018) confirm that even small demobilizing effects of just 0.1 standard deviation are highly unlikely ($p<0.01$) on all four preregistered measures. Thus, we can safely conclude that the abusive comments had no substantively meaningful *demobilizing* effects at the overall level.

While there are no general demobilizing effects of exposure to online abuse directed at politicians, effects could potentially be different among some subgroups in the populations. To test hypothesis 2 about heterogeneous effects for men and women, we use models with the same variables as the main test of hypothesis 1, as well as the interaction between our treatment indicators and the gender of the participant (models 25–28 in Appendix D). We find that the interactions between the abuse condition and gender are insignificant for all four outcomes: overall participation ($p = 0.990$), social media participation ($p = 0.631$), participation outside social media ($p = 0.315$) and running for election ($p = 0.326$). These results are thus not supportive of hypothesis 2.

Finally, hypothesis 3 predicted that the effects of online abuse are moderated by participants' level of conflict avoidance. This is tested in models with the same variables as the test of hypothesis 1, as well as interaction terms for the treatment indicators and the continuous measure of conflict avoidance (models 29–32 in Appendix D). It is worth noting that conflict avoidance in itself has a clear and statistically significant correlation with political participation: while participants with very low levels of conflict avoidance (here defined as the 5th percentile) have a mean score of 4.2 (95% CI: 4.1–4.3) on the overall index of political participation, participants with a very high level of conflict avoidance (95th percentile) have a mean score of just 3.2 (95% CI: 3.0–3.3).[5] However, the interactions between the abuse condition and conflict avoidance are statistically insignificant for all four preregistered measures of political participation: overall participation ($p = 0.147$), social media participation ($p = 0.374$), participation outside of social media ($p = 0.180$), and running for election ($p = 0.177$). In sum, there is no support for hypothesis 3.

Conclusion and discussion

Online abuse of politicians does not seem to turn ordinary citizens off politics. Our results suggest that citizens exposed to real-life examples of politicians being abused online are no less likely – or perhaps even more likely – to participate in politics. While we underscore that the mobilizing effects of observing online abuse were only found in exploratory analyses, there may indeed be theoretical reasons to suggest such effects. Exposure to incivility has been found to spur general arousal or anger,

[5]Consistent with previous studies, an exploratory analysis showed that women have a level of conflict avoidance (3.8; 95%-CI[3.7–3.9]), which is significantly higher than the level found among men (3.1; 95%-CI[3.0–3.2]).

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which can potentially mobilize politically (Mutz, 2007; Valentino et al., 2011; Sydnor, 2019). Even though online abuse tends to be much harsher than mere incivility, the same mechanism may be at play here.

It is important to note that our experiment only tested the effects of abuse directed at politicians. Thus, our experiment does not rule out that people may be politically demobilized if the abuse of politicians is accompanied by abuse of other groups, e.g., groups that citizens themselves belong to. Future research could thus investigate how abuse of politicians is interlinked with abuse directed at other targets. Another potential criticism of our experimental design could be that it fails to capture the demobilizing effects of online abuse because respondents had been exposed to online abuse of politicians multiple times before participating in our experiment, thus rendering the experiment's manipulation effectless. While we cannot rule out such pretreatment (Druckman and Leeper, 2012), our findings nevertheless show that (additional) exposure to online abuse of politicians does not scare ordinary citizens away from politics.

This is a normatively important conclusion, as it means that there is little reason to shy away from publicly raising the problem of online abuse of politicians. There is seemingly limited risk that such debates can adversely affect citizens' political participation, and there are still strong reasons to consider online abuse to be a serious problem. First, our results do not invalidate the studies suggesting that online abuse is a serious threat to politicians' well-being and motivation to stay in politics (James et al., 2016; Pedersen et al., 2024a; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020). Second, while one can reasonably argue that there should be room for some incivility in politics (Mutz, 2015; Chen et al., 2019; Sydnor 2019), it is very difficult to argue that outright abuse such as sexist comments and death provides anything of value to the democratic discourse. Thus, online abuse of politicians is still a serious problem for democracies, and a problem which we should not be afraid to talk about.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2024.20

Data availability. Replication materials are available at the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, doi: 10.7910/DVN/SXOYQR (Pedersen et al., 2024b).

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Ethics statement. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at The Danish Center for Social Science Research (2023/9). The authors affirm that the research adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The survey company *Voxmeter* compensates participants with points, which can be used for lotteries, goods, and charitable donations.

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