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Patterns and Consequences of Threats Towards Politicians: Results from Surveys of National and Local Politicians in Norway

by Tore Bjørgo, Anders Ravik Jupskås, Gunnar Thomassen and Jon Strype

Abstract

Norway has experienced vicious acts of anti-government terrorism in the form of a massive car bomb attack on the government district and a shooting massacre on members of the youth wing of the governing Labour Party in 2011. Still, such acts of violence towards politicians are rare and exceptional. However, violent threats and harassment are common and have a significant negative impact on the private and political lives of elected representatives. In this article, we study the extent to which democracy is being slowly undermined through everyday forms of harassment of, and threats against, politicians. The research is based on a unique series of surveys with Norwegian national and local politicians, including the parties' youth wings, exploring the extent to which they have been exposed to various forms of harassment, threats, and violent attacks, and the consequences. The surveys provide comparable data between different categories of politicians as well as longitudinal data on the experiences of members of parliament and cabinet ministers. The findings show that elected politicians are significantly exposed to hateful harassment, verbal threats, particularly through social media. A few politicians have also experienced actual violent attacks. Such exposure has a major impact on both the private and political lives of the politicians, in particular female politicians. As a result, threats of violence and other forms of hateful harassment towards elected politicians represents a considerable challenge to democratic processes and institutions. Given that Norway is a country characterized by a well-functioning liberal democracy, a low level of political polarization, and a generally high level of trust in authorities among the population, such threat to the democracy system is most likely even more severe in other countries.

Keywords: harassment, Norway, right-wing extremism, social media, survey, terrorism, threats, violence

Introduction

On July 22, 2011, Norway experienced the most devastating attacks on government institutions and political party members in Europe since the Second World War. A lone actor terrorist from the extreme right, Anders Behring Breivik, drove a van filled with a ton of explosives up to the main government buildings, housing the prime ministers' office, the ministry of justice and several other ministries in Oslo. The blast killed eight persons, severely injured dozens of other people, and caused enormous material damage. Around two hours later, the same terrorist started a shooting massacre at the summer camp of the youth wing (AUF) of the governing Labour Party on the Utøya island. The attacker killed 69 (mostly) young people, seriously injured 33 others, and caused immense mental traumas to many of the 495 survivors.[1] Although the terrorist was arrested and convicted, he obviously had some sympathisers. In the aftermath of the attack, surviving leaders and members of the youth party were bombarded with messages of hatred and threats, such as "You should have been killed at Utøya", "Pity that Breivik did not aim better", "You are living on borrowed time, wait until next year's AUF camp." In the aftermath, many AUF activists quit politics due to their traumas and this atrocious hate campaign, including several leaders.[2] However, some of the surviving youth politicians carried on their political work and were elected to prominent positions in local and national politics—but continued to receive hateful messages, often with direct or indirect reference to the 22 July attacks. For example, eleven years after he survived the Utøya attack, the district mayor of the Finnmark province, Tarjei Jensen Bech, declared that he would not go for reelection due to the continued stream of hatred, including wishes that he should also have died at Utøya.

Norway's neighboring country Sweden also has a grim history of assassinations of politicians, in particular, the murders of prime minister Olof Palme (1986) and foreign minister Anna Lindh (2003). More recently, in

July 2022, a mentally disturbed man with Nazi views and admiration for Breivik stabbed to death a prominent female psychiatrist during the Almedal's week, an annual political festival. Police investigation revealed that his intended target most likely was Annie Lööf, the leader of the Center Party, but he chose another target as she was protected by bodyguards. Lööf was known as a long-time opponent of any political collaboration with the radical right Sweden Democrats party. Due to her engagement, she had received death threats for several years. The revealed plot against her life contributed to her decision to step down from her position as a party leader. The perpetrator has since then been convicted of terrorism.[3]

Although actual violence against politicians is rare in Norway and Scandinavia, these exceptional violent attacks may add an element of credible risk to the far more frequent incidents of harassment and threats against politicians, contributing to remarkably high levels of fear. As Bruce Hoffman states in his often quoted definition, "terrorism is [...] political in aims and motives; violent—or equally important, threatens violence; designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target [...]"[4] Thus, *threats of violence* may also have terrorizing impacts and real consequences.

This article will explore the patterns of such threats and harassment among different categories of elected Norwegian representatives, and the negative consequences this has for their private and political lives as well as for democratic processes and participation in political elections and willingness to accept public offices. We also explore the extent to which democracy is also being slowly undermined through everyday forms of threats and harassment against politicians. We are also inquire whether the Norwegian data on these patterns and processes may contribute to a better understanding of the broader phenomenon of anti-government extremism.

This article is based on a unique series of surveys [5] among members of the Norwegian parliament as well as cabinet ministers in the years 2013, 2017 and 2021. In addition, members of the executive boards of the parties represented in parliament and the parties' youth wings in 2021, as well as elected members of municipal councils in Norway in 2020 were also surveyed.[6] We refer to the latter as "local politicians" in contrast to the "national politicians". The 2021 survey at the national level was extended to include members of the executive committees of the political parties represented in the national parliament, as well as the executive boards of youth wing parties.[7] Response rates varied from 43% to 60 % for the various categories, and the respondents were fairly representative of the actual population in terms of gender, age and party membership.

Data from these surveys provide interesting opportunities for comparative analysis along several dimensions, both in terms of development over time (using data from 2013, 2017 and 2021 with parliamentarians and cabinet ministers), across different categories of national (youth wings versus older politicians, those elected by the voters versus those elected by the party organization) and across different levels (national versus local politicians). This provides us with insight into the categories of politicians who are most frequently subjected to various types of incidents; how serious, wide-ranging, and frequent such threatening incidents are; the impact of these incidents for the politicians themselves, and changes over time. The surveys are based on the politicians' own experiences of such incidents but also provide insights into the motivation, inducement and issues believed by politicians to underlie the incidents.

The article consists of four sections reflecting the results of original empirical research. First, we map the levels of exposure to unwanted incidents, ranging from milder forms of harassment to more serious threats, and we also explore how these levels have changed over time. We focus particularly on unwanted incidents via social media, as this appears to be one of the most important channels for harassment. Second, we investigate the extent to which certain types of politicians are more likely to experience threats and harassment. Then, we present findings on how the politicians themselves explain the assumed reasons for being subjected to threats and harassment. Finally, we map the consequences of harassment and threats on the private and public life of politicians. In the concluding section, we summarize the main findings and discuss their implications.

Levels of Exposure

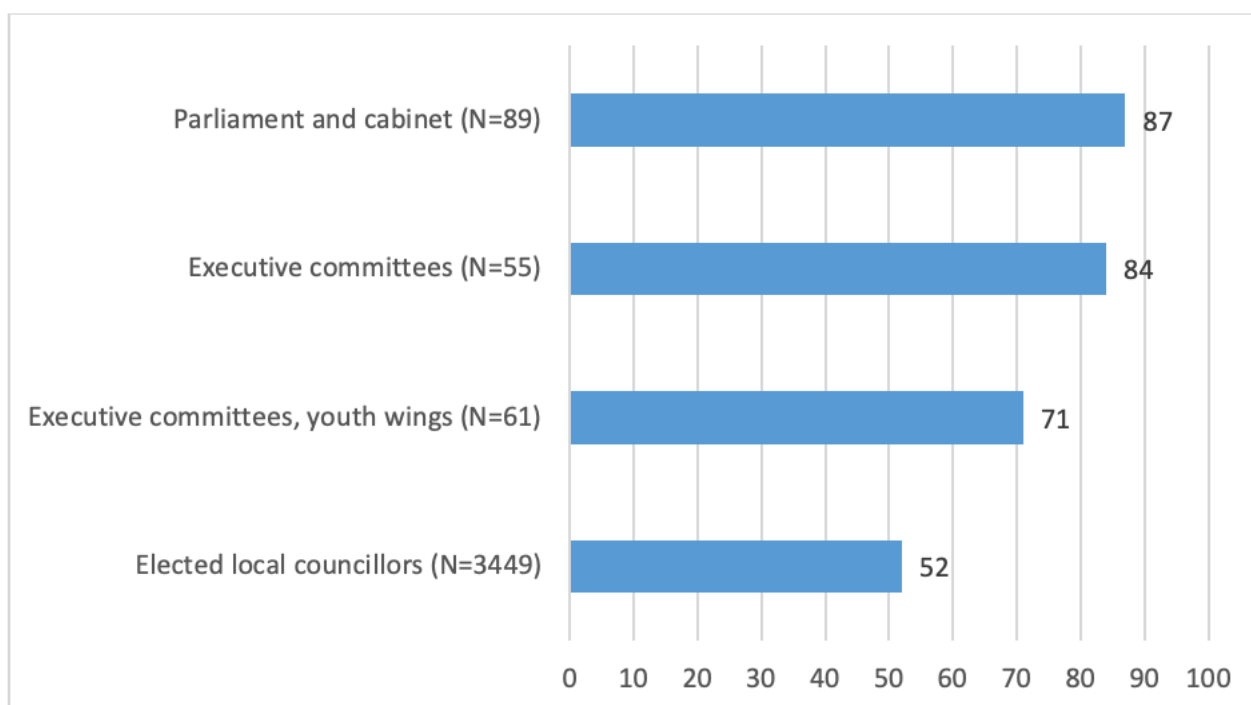
In this section we will analyse the results of the 2021 survey and compare the responses with data from the equivalent surveys conducted in 2013 and 2017 where it is relevant to look at changes over time. Since the number of respondents among cabinet ministers were low (N=9) we have, for statistical purposes, grouped them together with the MPs. In some areas we will also compare our data on national politicians with data from a survey of local politicians.[8]

Frequency and Types of Unwanted Incidents

The respondents were asked whether they had been exposed to incidents which could be presumed to be linked to their political activity during their time as parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, executive committee members or members of local councils. Eleven pre-defined incidents of varying degrees of severity were listed. However, before we look in more detail at the individual incidents and the distribution of respondents across them, it is appropriate to focus on the proportion that report one or more incidents, regardless of type, within the four respondent groups.

Figure 1 shows that a majority within each of the three respondent groups reports one or more unwanted incidents linked to political activity throughout their political career. Parliamentarians and cabinet ministers appear to be most affected. Almost 9 out of 10 (87%) respondents in this group report one or more incident. Within this group, the proportion of those affected is somewhat higher for cabinet ministers compared to parliamentarians (but we need to keep in mind the low number of cabinets ministers in the survey). Members of the political party executive committees are next; here 84% report one or more incidents.

Figure 1: Proportion of Respondents Reporting One or More Incidents of Harassment or Threats

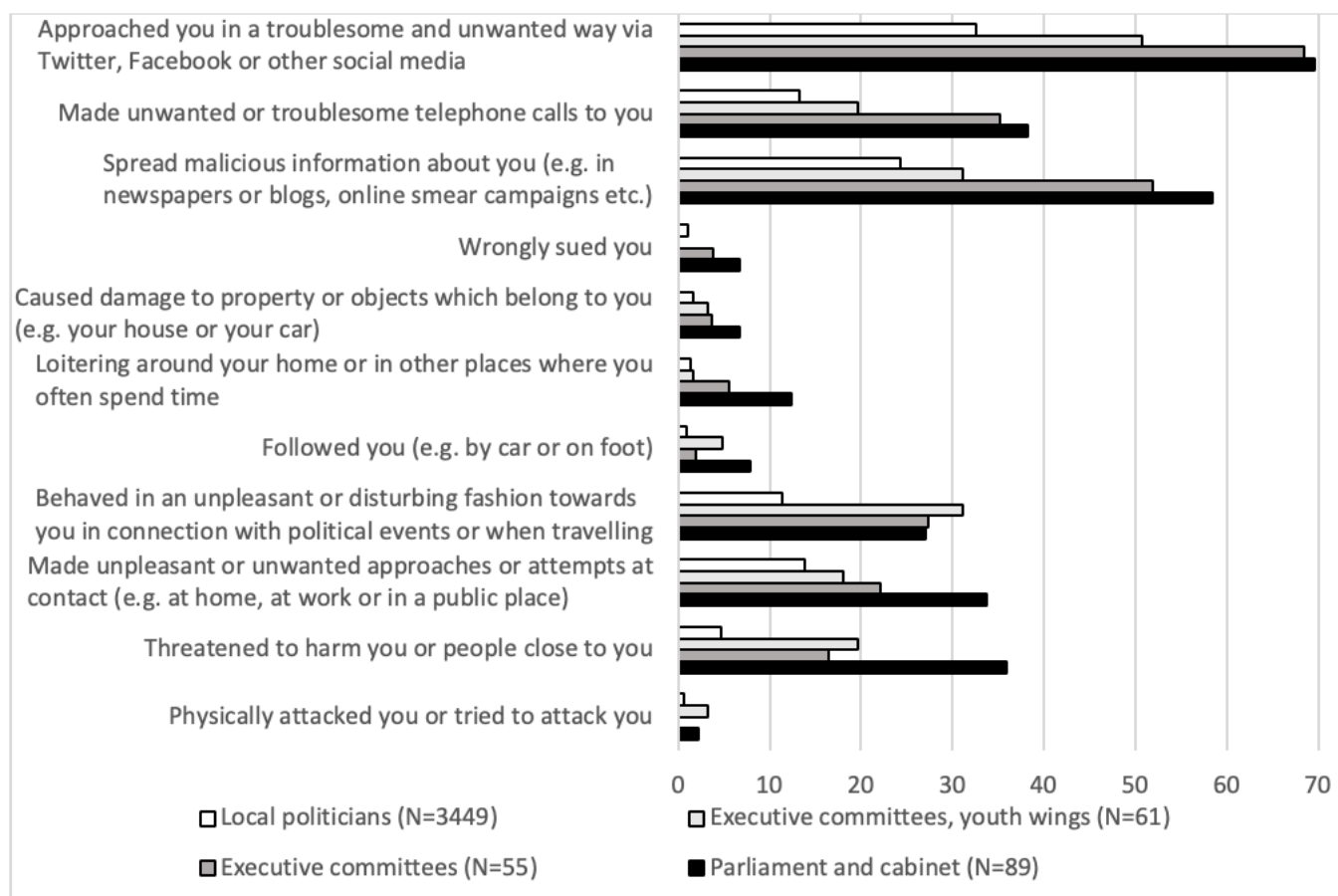


Executive committee members of the parties' youth wings are slightly less exposed, but even here ca. 71% report one or more unwanted incident linked to their political activity. Equivalent data from elected local politicians showed that a somewhat lower proportion (52%) of local politicians had experienced such unwanted incidents, and that politicians in more prominent positions were more exposed.[9] For example, local politicians who are part of a municipal executive body (*formannskapet*) are more likely to experience harassment and threats (61%) compared to members of municipal council (*kommunestyret*) (46%). This shows

that politicians at all levels are affected, but that the more prominent the position they have in the political hierarchy the more exposed they are to threats, hate speech and troublesome incidents. Politicians who take up controversial cases are also more exposed to intimidation. Although executive committee members of the youth parties appear to be somewhat less exposed (71%) than other national level politicians, this should be seen against the background of the relatively short political careers of these youth politicians.

The types of incident respondents have been exposed to varies considerably both within and between the different groups. Figure 2 below shows the proportion of national and local politicians who reported a specific incident within each of the four respondent groups. The category which clearly stands out in this connection is troublesome and unwanted incidents via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. A majority within all three groups at the national level and one third of the politicians active at the local level mentioned that they had experienced such approaches. Quite a few have also experienced communication of “malicious information” and “troublesome telephone calls”: Between 35% and 60% among national politicians (except youth wings) and between 20% and 30% among members of the youth wing executive and local politicians. Fewer have been exposed to the most serious kinds of incidents, but even these form a minority. There is still a considerable number who have reported receiving threats of experienced harm to themselves or someone close to them, particularly among the parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (36%).^[10] There are very few reports of direct physical attacks in the 2021 survey among national politicians and in the 2020 survey among local politicians. However, at the same time it should be emphasised that direct physical attacks must be regarded as very serious incidents.

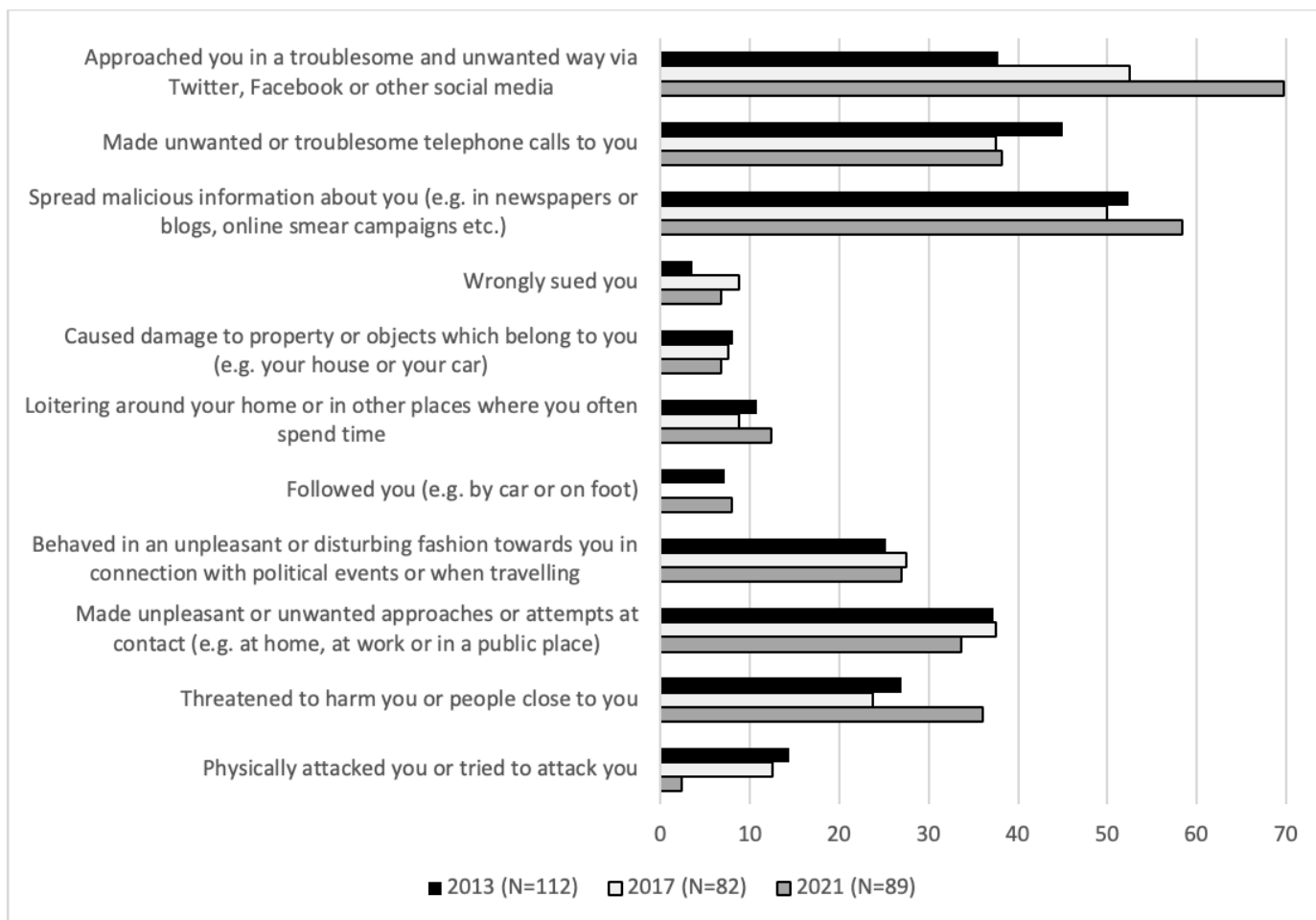
Figure 2: Reported Incidents by National and Local Politicians in Norway 2020-2021



The various incidents are not equally distributed between the different groups. Parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are most exposed in 9 of the 11 incident categories. They are particularly exposed to threats against themselves and against close family members, as well as “troublesome or unwanted approaches or attempts at making contact”.

In addition to making comparisons across different groups and between the local and national levels, the surveys among national politicians allow us to make comparisons over time. As far as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are concerned, available data from previous surveys provide insights into developments over time for this group.[11] Figure 3 shows that the proportion of respondents reporting a specific incident in 2013, 2017 and 2021 respectively. For most types of incidents, including unwanted telephone calls, spread of malicious information, property damage and unpleasant behaviour at events, at home, at work or in a public space, the pattern appears to be stable over time. One important exception, however, is the marked increase over the whole period regarding “troublesome and unwanted incidents through social media”. The proportion of those who reported such incidents has increased from just under 40% in 2013 to over 50% in 2017, and to almost 70% in 2021. This trend probably reflects an increased presence on social media such as Facebook and Twitter both among politicians and the population as a whole.[12] Another important exception is a considerable increase from 24% to 36% between 2017 and 2021 in the proportion of those reporting having been threatened with harm against themselves or someone close to them. On the other hand, there has been a marked decline in the proportion reporting “physical attacks or attempted physical attacks” from 2013 and 2017 to 2021, a decline from 14% to 2% in this period. However, the relatively small numbers mean that we cannot exclude the possibility of random fluctuation. It is also possible that the respondents in 2013 and 2017 were thinking of the 22 July 2011 attacks against the government district and the Labour youth wing summer camp, which then were more fresh in their memories.

Figure 3: Unwanted Incidents Reported by Parliamentarians and Cabinet Members 2013-2021

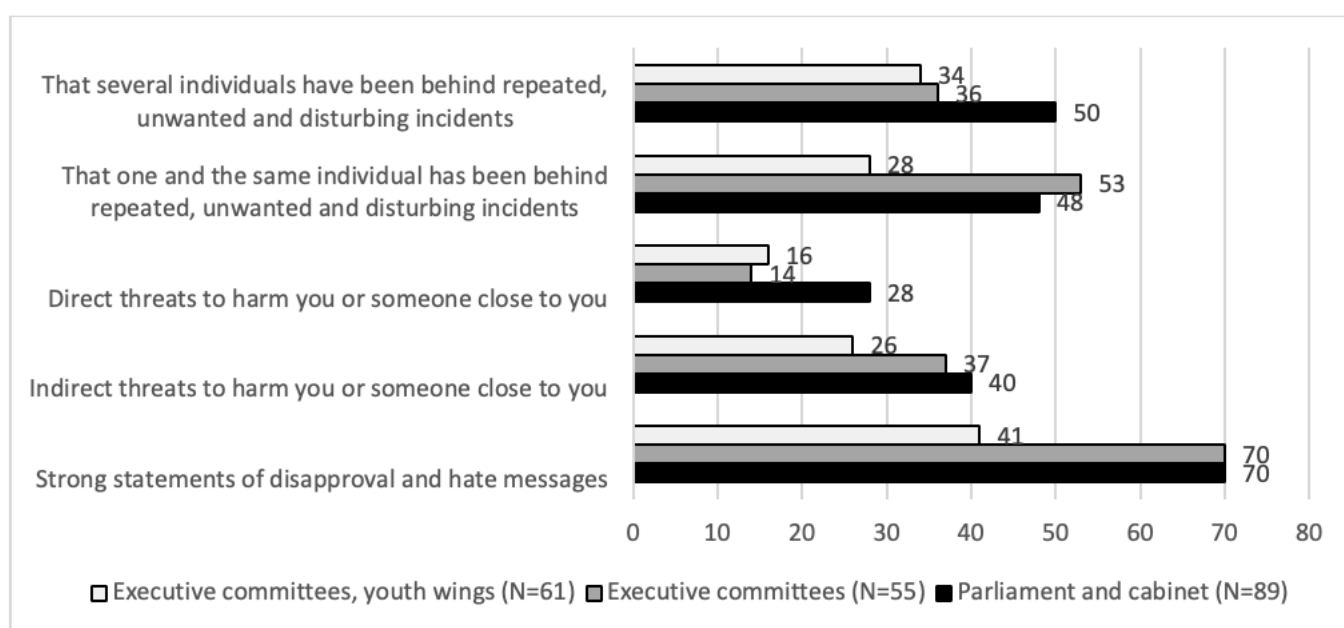


Unwanted Incidents Through Social Media

Figures 2 and 3 above showed that troublesome and unwanted incidents through social media was the dominant category in all four respondent groups and indicates that there was a significant increase in the number of such incidents. Figure 4 below looks more closely at the type of unwanted incidents which the respondents had experienced through social media. Due to lack of comparable data among local politicians, we only look at national politicians.

The unwanted incidents can be split into two categories, *harassment* and *threats*. Not surprisingly, various forms of harassment are more common than threats. The most common sub-category in all three groups is “expressions of extreme disapproval and hateful statements”: 70% of the parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and executive committee members reported such incidences, while just over 40% of the youth wing executive committee members did so.

Figure 4: Incidents Experienced Through Social Media



Indirect and direct threats via social media about harming politicians or those closest to them was reported with lower frequency compared to harassment. Indirect threats were the most common in all three respondent groups, and the most common of all among the parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (40%), followed by executive committee members (ca. 37%) and youth wing executive committee members (26%). Direct threats to politicians were less reported; however this was still experienced by more than one out of four parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (28%), while about one of seven members of executive committees both in the mother parties and their youth wings (14-16%) experienced it.

As far as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are concerned, we have longitudinal data for four of the five categories which dealt with unwanted incidents on social media. Figure 5 below shows developments between 2013 and 2021.

Figure 5: Incidents Experienced on Social Media 2013-2021
(Parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers)

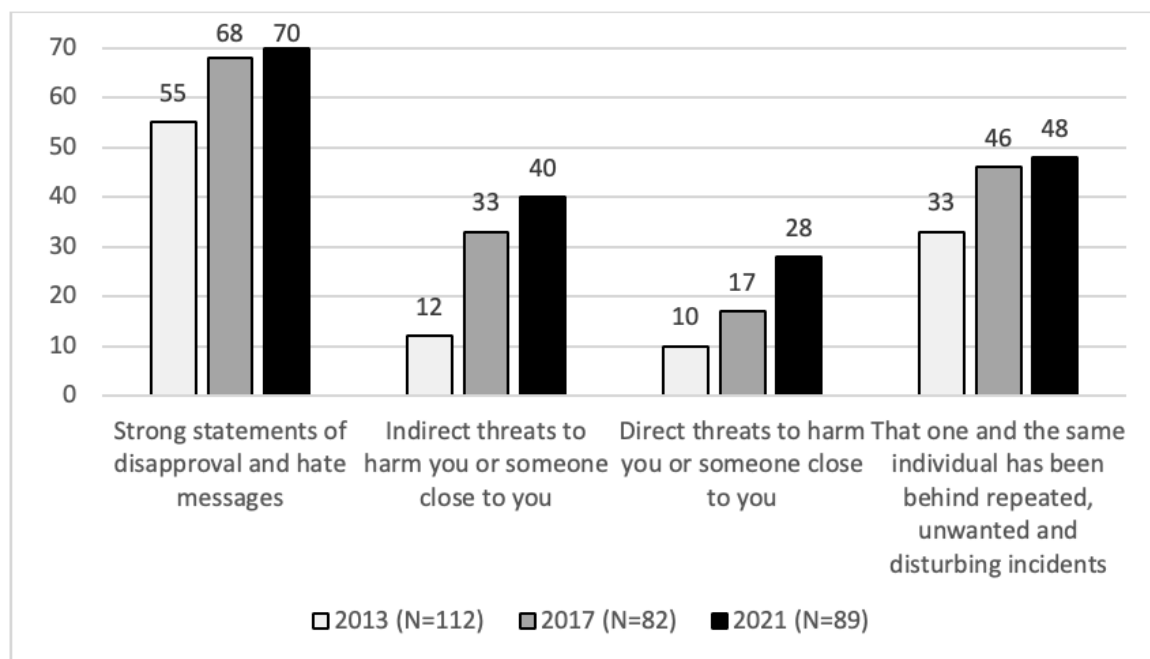


Figure 5 shows an increase during the period in terms of both threats and harassment on social media, but the relative (and actual) increase is greatest when considering threats. This is crucial because it shows that social media platforms not only generated less severe forms of harassment, which are likely to have less severe consequences, but also produced a significant number of very severe forms of verbal attacks, such as indirect and direct threats. The proportion of respondents who reported indirect threats on social media has increased from ca. 12% in 2013 to ca. 40% in 2021, while the proportion reporting direct threats has increased from ca. 10% to ca. 28% during the same period. When we combine these figures with other forms of what we call “serious incidents” (i.e., threats to harm, physical attacks and damage to property or personal belongings), [13] we find that the share of politicians being exposed to such serious incidents had increased from 36 to 46% between 2013 and 2021.

Who is Most Susceptible?

We have looked more closely at exposure to unwanted incidents based on socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, ethnic background, income, and education), political affiliation, experience, and visibility. The patterns are complex and not always in line with expectations (all numbers are reported in Table 6 of the *Appendix*).

It has been generally assumed that female politicians have been particularly susceptible to online harassment. [14] However, this was not supported by our data, at least not when it came to the number of reported incidents generally. In fact, except for the executive committee members of the parties, where men are clearly more susceptible (93% vs. 71%), both the national and local surveys showed no gender differences at all. The absence of a gender effect remains also evident when looking at the most serious incidents. Having said that, the surveys also showed that female politicians, not unexpectedly, were far more often exposed to harassment of a sexual character than their male colleagues (see below).

When looking at age differences, there are similarities but also differences between the national and the local level. At the national level there is a curvilinear relationship in which the susceptibility appears at first to increase with age, only later to fall as respondents get older. At the local level, by contrast, there is a consistent negative relationship in which increasing age leads to less exposure to incidents. When looking at serious incidents, however, the pattern is curvilinear also at the local level with the youngest cohort being

least exposed and the second youngest cohort being most exposed. The reduction in susceptibility above a certain age both at the local and national level is hard to explain, not least because older politicians tend to be more experienced and visible, which should increase the likelihood of having been exposed to unwanted incidents. One possible hypothesis is that one becomes more thick-skinned with age and the threshold for what is reported is raised. Another possible hypothesis could be that older politicians were less active on social media, which has become the most important channel of harassment.

The survey among local politicians also provides information about susceptibility according to ethnic background and social status. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no differences between those with and without parents born in Norway. One could assume that some local politicians with parents born outside of Norway were particularly susceptible to harassment due to their skin-color or ethno-cultural background. However, even when looking at exposure to both serious and less serious incidents for those with parents with a non-Western background, there were no significant differences emerging from our surveys. Regarding social status, the data suggest that those with lower social status (low levels of education or low levels of income) were marginally more likely to experience serious and less serious incidents.

When it comes to party affiliation, politicians belonging to parties at the extreme ends of the ideological/political scales (far-right, far-left, radical environmental) tended to be more exposed, with representatives of the right-wing populist party, the Progress Party, being most likely to report (both serious and less serious) incidents at the national level and serious incidents at the local level.

Not surprisingly, the strongest predictor of being targeted by threats and harassment was the degree of media exposure. At the national level, there is a clear connection between the degree of experienced media exposure and susceptibility to unwanted incidents. In fact, of those who mentioned that they had a high degree of media exposure, all responded that they had been exposed to at least one unwanted incident. A lower degree of media exposure meant a reduction in the proportion of those reporting such incidents. Among those who said that they were exposed in the media to a very small extent, less than half of those respondents (46%) report having experienced any unwanted incidents. There is no comparable data from the local level, but this survey shows that politicians who have positions in local politics that most likely makes them more visible in the media, were significantly more likely to experience both serious (9% vs. 5%) and less serious incidents (57% vs 40%).

Characteristics of Those Persons Who Threaten and Harass

In this section, we will explore possible drivers of threats towards, and harassment of, politicians. We do so by looking at how the *national* politicians perceived the characteristics of the communication, how they assessed the presumed motives and what their presumptions were about what the person(s) expressing threats and harassment would have wanted to achieve. We also present data on how *local* politicians themselves explained why they were being exposed to threats and harassments, as well as what of kind of issues usually lead to unwanted incidents.

Characteristics of the Individuals or the Communication

The national politicians in our survey were asked to think about the most serious incident and say something about what characterized the person or the communication in this incident. Nine pre-defined characteristics were listed whereby the respondents were given the option to select more than one. Table 1 below shows the proportion in each of the groups who marked a given characteristic. For the group parliamentarians/cabinet ministers figures for 2013 and 2017 are also given.

The characteristics are ranked according to the frequency with which they appeared across all three groups. The characteristic which clearly appeared most frequently was “hostile”, i.e., that the perpetrator “expresses anger and bitterness, verbal insults or sarcasm”. A majority of the incidents within all three groups has been characterized as such. A considerable proportion in all three groups further reported that the person or the

communication appeared threatening. Another frequently mentioned characteristic was that the person was “preoccupied with ideas or perceptions which are clearly incorrect”. In terms of issues such as “intoxicated” and “sexual approaches”, these were reported to a lesser extent. However, there was some variation between the groups, even though the picture was more or less the same for all three.

Table 1: Which Characteristics Describe the Communication or the Person Best?

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C (2021)	P&C (2017)	P&C (2013)
Hostile (expresses anger and bitterness, verbal insults or sarcasm)	61	56	64	44	43
Threatening	37	35	43	29	29
Preoccupied by ideas or perceptions which are clearly incorrect	39	51	30	15	16
Confused (illogical and contradictory thoughts which are difficult to understand)	26	28	14	2	17
Compulsive (repeats the same thing over and over)	15	26	18	8	16
Suspicious/has thoughts about being persecuted	9	12	12	6	11
Boasting or bragging	11	21	4	2	5
Intoxicated	4	16	10	0	16
Sexual approaches	13	14	5	4	11
Other	2	7	5	10	24
N	46	43	77	53	78

Note: ECMP = Executive Committee Member, Mother Party; ECYW = Executive Committee Member, Youth Wing; P&C = Parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers.

If we break the data down by gender we also find more or less the same picture, albeit with smaller variations. The greatest difference was found in the proportion reporting “sexual approaches”, where women (ca. 18%) were clearly more susceptible than men (ca. 3%). On the other hand, we note that the proportion of men (ca. 46%) who experienced the incidents as threatening was higher than the proportion of women (ca. 37%) who were reporting the same.

In terms of developments over time in the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group, we see, broadly speaking, the same characteristics appearing most frequently. The ranking of the three top characteristics was almost unchanged from 2013 to 2017, but there was a strong increase of 15-20 percentage points in all the three characteristics in 2021. The other characteristics appeared to fluctuate over time without a clear trend.

Presumed Motives

In line with previous surveys, the respondents were also asked about the motives they think were behind the most serious incident. Table 2 shows the proportion in each of the groups who mentioned a given pre-defined motive. On the far right of Table 2 figure the proportions of parliamentarians/cabinet ministers in 2017 and 2013, respectively.

Table 2: Presumed Motives Behind the Most Serious Incident

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C (2021)	P&C (2017)	P&C (2013)
Interest in a particular policy issue/case	24	26	31	34	21
Conspiracy theory	24	33	26	19	21
Conflict with public services (e.g., children's and welfare services)	28	2	35	No data	No data
Unknown	20	7	19	25	38
Racism or hostility towards strangers	13	26	9	6	9
Right-wing extremism	15	21	7	8	7
Other	9	16	5	17	17
Environment or animal rights activism	7	5	7	8	1
Left-wing extremism	4	2	5	2	4
Religious activism	2	2	7	6	12
Anti-racism	2	5	0	2	1
N	46	43	77	53	78

As in the previous table, the motives are ranked according to how frequently they were registered for all three groups collectively. We see that certain motives appeared to show up fairly frequently in all three groups, among them “interest in a particular policy issue/case” and “conspiracy theory.” Otherwise, there was considerable variation between the groups in what they regarded as motives for the unwanted incidents. “Conflict with public authorities like children’s services, welfare services, etc.” was, for example, the most frequent motive among both executive committee members of all parties and the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group. However, among the youth activists this motive was hardly mentioned at all. On the other hand, motives like “racism or hostility towards strangers” and “right-wing extremism” were mentioned relatively frequently by youth wing executive committee members, but to a somewhat lesser degree among the mother party executive committee members and, to an even lesser degree, among parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. Motives like “environment or animal rights activism,” “left-wing extremism,” “religious activism” and “anti-racism” were registered to a lesser extent, regardless of group.

If we focus on the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group, we see that the picture is relatively stable over time. “Conflict with public authorities” which is the dominant category in the last survey from 2021 was unfortunately not included in 2013 and 2017. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that this category was prominent also in previous years.

The survey among local politicians also included a question about presumed motives, although with slightly different options. The most important reasons by far for being threatened or harassed, according to the local politicians themselves, were single issues (75%). As many as three quarters mentioned this motive (see Table 3). These issues were not necessarily those frequently associated with extreme or radical groups in the public debate (e.g., immigration, asylum-seekers, wind power, child protection), but traditional local issues such as regulation and housing development and the shutting down of public institutions. Merging of municipalities—a major political reform in Norwegian local politics in recent years—was also mentioned as an important issue. What these issues had in common is that they have a large impact on citizen’s daily life and/or identity.

The second most important reason mentioned was “the party they represent”. Not surprisingly, suggesting that their party affiliation was the reason for being harassed was most common among representatives of the far-right, far-left and the radical environmentalists. These were the parties most frequently experiencing

harassment (see above). Local politicians also mentioned the celebrity factor—including the fact that they were well-known persons and received more media coverage—as important factors for being exposed to harassment or threats. Only a few politicians mention socio-demographic characteristics as reasons for being harassed or threatened, although gender was considered an important factor by female politicians (almost all the 10% of respondents mentioning this factor were female). Age was considered an important factor by relatively young politicians (two thirds of those mentioning this issue were below 35 years old).

Table 3: Perceived Motives for Being Exposed to Unwanted Incidents

	Share of local politicians*
Single issues	75
The party you represent	55
That you are a well-known person	28
The way media represents you	15
Gender	10
Age	7
Ethnicity	1
Religion/life stance	2
Sexual orientation	1
Functional impairment	0
Don't know/none of these	5
Other	7
N	1771

*Share of local politicians among those exposed to unwanted incidents who mentioned this motive

Table 4: Issues Perceived to be the Main Drivers of Threats and Harassment

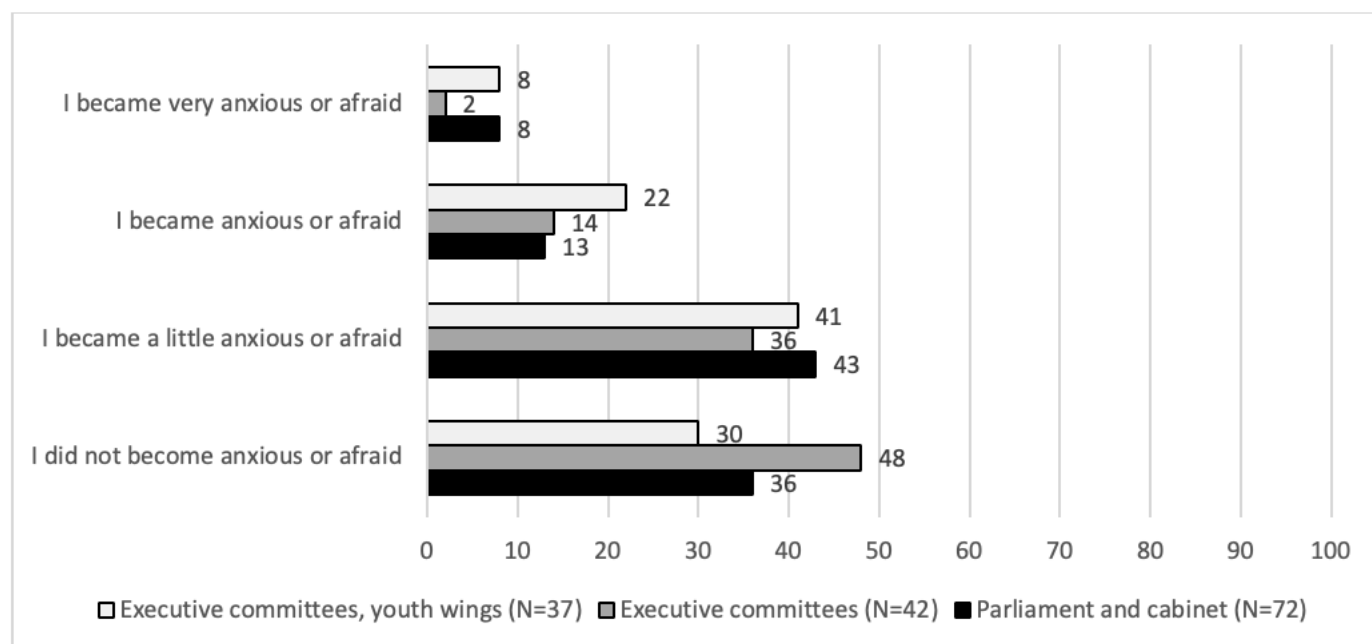
	Share of politicians*
Regulation and housing development	43
Shutting down public institutions	33
Merging municipalities	26
Location of infrastructure	17
Immigration	17
Location of housing/institutions for vulnerable groups	16
Road toll	13
Wind power	12
Child protection	7
Carnivore	7
Reception center for asylum seekers	6
Property tax	1
Alcohol policies	1
Other	24
N	1321

* Share of local politicians mentioning different issues as drivers of threats and harassment

Consequences of Unwanted Incidents

Threats and harassment can have a serious impact both on an individual and societal level, and for those who experience it directly it can be particularly frightening. In this and the previous survey the respondents were asked to think about the most serious incident and how they experienced it. Figure 6 shows the degree to which the respondents in the three groups experienced anxiety or fear in connection with this incident.

Figure 6: Experience of Fear



A clear majority within all three respondent groups state that they experienced, to varying degrees, being anxious or afraid in connection with the incident. It may not be surprising that the highest proportion here are the executive committee members from the youth wings (ca. 70%). The memory of the mass murder of youth politicians at Utøya probably felt particularly significant to them. It is also conceivable that the older and more experienced politicians are a little more thick-skinned when it comes to such threats and harassment. However, parliamentarians and cabinet ministers also reported considerable levels of fear (ca. 64%), and so did members of the mother party executive committee boards where a small majority reported some degree of experienced fear (ca. 52%).

Even if female politicians are not exposed to more frequent harassment and threats than their male colleagues, a greater proportion of women (ca. 68%) experience fear compared to men (ca. 59%). This may partly be explained by the sexual character of a considerable part of the harassment, but also that women are generally not as physically strong as men and therefore feel more vulnerable.

While we cannot compare these figures directly with figures from the local level, the local survey showed similar patterns. A significant minority of local politicians said that harassment and threats made them sad (18%), angry (15%) and/or feeling powerless (16%). A few politicians also felt scared (4%).^[15] For all these reactions, particularly being scared or angry, there is a clear gender effect noticeable, since female politicians were far more likely than their male colleagues to report such feelings (Numbers not shown here).

Threats and harassment have potential consequences both for private lives and political activity. In both this and previous surveys the respondents have been asked to think about all types of unwanted and troublesome approaches, including intimidation and attacks which they have been exposed to, and then were asked to consider a series of pre-defined statements/questions about the consequences.

In Table 5, the respondents were reporting consequences both for their political activity (in grey background) and for their private life (in white). However, there was some variation between the different groups in the prominence of the consequences. Among the parliamentarian/cabinet ministers (P&C) the most frequently reported consequences were those linked to private life. The highest proportion reported that they “became worried about the safety of people close to them” but security concerns impacted other aspects of their private and social life as well. In terms of consequences for political activity, more than one in five respondents “avoided engaging with or speaking out on particular policy issues”, or “hesitated to state a particular opinion” and who felt these experiences “limited their freedom of speech around a policy issue”.

Among the youth wing members (ECYW), unwanted incidents appeared to have consequences for both their political activity and their private life as well. In particular, the youth politicians were the group that was most “worried about being out in public” due to concerns about their personal safety. A large proportion also “hesitated to state a particular opinion” and pointed out other aspects of having limited their freedom of speech around political issues. Almost one out of four “considered giving up politics”.

Among the mother party executive committee members (ECMP) and local politicians (LP), it was particularly consequences linked to political activity that came to the fore. The most frequent consequences mentioned among members of the executive committees was that they “avoided engaging with or making statements about a specific policy issue or field”, followed by “hesitated to state a particular opinion” and “considered quitting politics”. The most frequent consequences mentioned by local politicians were related to limiting their freedom of speech about (35%), or avoided engaging with or speaking out on specific policy issues (32%). Although local politicians were generally less frequently exposed to unwanted incidents than national politicians, the negative consequences were generally stronger for those local politicians who are exposed.

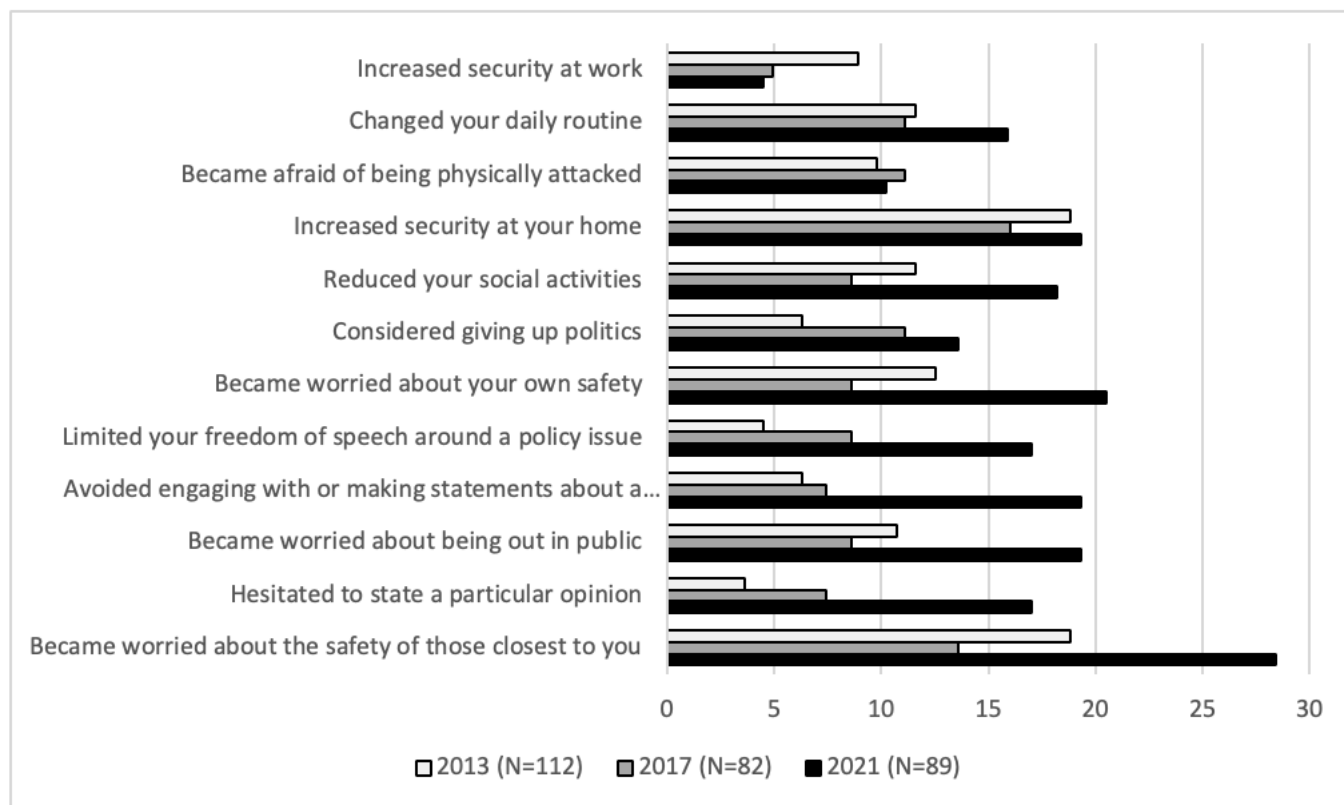
Table 5: Consequences of Unwanted Incidents
Based on Those Who Have Reported Incidents, 2020/21

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C	LP
Hesitated to state a particular opinion	22	30	20	26
Avoided engaging with or making statements about a specific policy issue or field	24	19	22	32
Limited your freedom of speech around a policy issue	17	23	20	35
Considered giving up politics	22	23	16	28
Was influenced to make a different decision	2	2	0	3
Became worried about the safety of those closest to you	17	19	33	9
Became worried about being out in public	15	30	22	11
Became worried about your own safety	9	24	24	4
Reduced your social activities	17	12	21	24
Increased security at your home	13	9	22	4
Became afraid of being physically attacked	11	14	12	4
Changed your daily routine	4	5	18	4
Increased security at work	9	5	5	2
Became worried about being home alone	2	9	4	2
Changed your telephone number	4	0	5	1
Took time off work	4	2	4	2
N=	46	43	77	1782

If we compare the data in this Table 5 with data from 2013 and 2017 (parliamentarians and cabinet ministers), there is a considerable increase in the proportion of those who reported various types of negative consequences (see Figure 7 below). In terms of consequences linked to private life, there appeared to be a certain improvement in several areas during the period 2013-2017, only for it to become considerably worse up to 2021. This is particularly true in relation to “the security of those close to them”, but also when it came to anxiety linked to “personal safety”. In terms of consequences for political activity there has been a

considerable increase in the proportion of those who stated that they either “limit their freedom of speech”, “hesitated to state a particular opinion”, “avoided engaging with a specific policy issue”, and that they were even considering giving up political life. This negative development particularly gained momentum during the last parliamentary term.

Figure 7: Consequences of Unwanted Incidents 2013-2021 (Whole Sample, Parliamentarians, and Cabinet Ministers)



There is reason to believe that there is a close link between the increase in the proportion of parliamentarians and cabinet ministers who experienced serious threats in the period 2013-2021 (see Figure 5) and this negative development in consequences for the private life and political activity of politicians. In the concluding section of this article, we will further discuss how these negative trends represent a threat to democracy.

Discussion of the Main Findings

In this article, we have focused on a neglected topic within the field of research on democratic erosion and anti-government extremism, namely threats and harassment towards individual politicians. Based on a series of unique surveys among politicians in Norway, we were able to map levels of harassment and threats across different levels, types of politicians and over time.

The findings show that harassment and threats are widespread against both national and local politicians, as well as against members of the youth wing executives and mother party executives. Harassment via social media appeared to be the most common form of unwanted incidents. More severe types of incidents, such as direct threats to the politicians themselves or someone close to them, were found to be less common, but still widespread, particularly among national politicians at the top-level.

The timeline of the surveys from 2013 through 2017 to 2021 shows a very negative development in the experience of what we defined as serious incidents (i.e., threats to themselves or their family, physical attacks and damage to property or personal belongings), particularly when it comes to direct or indirect threats to harm politicians or people close to them. This increase mainly concerns direct and indirect threats posted on social media. This is undoubtedly linked to the general increase in the use of social media during the

past decade, but also to the fact that the growth of social media has provided fertile ground for an ever more hateful debating environment.

While the main picture emerging from the surveys is that elected politicians at all levels—from local politics to the youth wings and all the way up to parliament and the cabinet—risk to be confronted by intimidation and harassment. However, the surveys showed that the risk was not equally distributed. The youngest cohorts appeared to experience more harassment and threats than older politicians. For them, the negative impacts were also greater in terms of reduced freedom to express their views with more of them considering to quit politics. This is a significant finding, particularly since the surveys also show that the likelihood of being exposed correlates positively with the length of one's political career, which means that the youngest cohorts should have experienced *less* rather than *more* harassment and threats. Being less experienced, youth politicians are probably also less “thick-skinned” than more established politicians. Another possible explanation is the deep impact made on youth politicians in all parties by the extreme right terrorist massacre at the summer camp of the Labour Party's youth wing (AUF) on the Utøya island on 22 July 2011, killing 69 people. In the aftermath, AUF members, and survivors in particular, were bombarded with cruel expressions of hatred and wishes that they should also have died on the island. This hatred also left a deep impression on members of other youth parties.

Somewhat surprisingly, we found no gender differences regarding levels of exposure, while the content and consequences of harassment and threats were different for male and female politicians (see below). Moreover, the local survey did not indicate any effect linked to ethnic origin of the respondents, although the numbers are too small to make any conclusive assessment. In terms of party affiliation, we found that representatives from parties with a more extreme position on certain ideological dimensions—whether it is immigration policies, environmental issues, or the general left/right dimension—were more likely to be targeted. The right-wing populist party was most exposed, followed by the far left and the greens. Not surprisingly, the surveys also showed that the higher the position in the political hierarchy and the larger the degree of media exposure, the heavier the burden. We also found that politicians with low(er) social status were more susceptible.

In terms of drivers of, and motives behind, harassment and threats, the surveys provide a nuanced picture. On the one hand, it appears that a significant part of the harassment and threats were linked to political and ideological grievances. Most of those who harass or threaten politicians are believed to be interested in specific policy issues and, according to the politicians, they appear to be politically frustrated, expressing anger, bitterness, and hostility. The fact that parties with extreme positions on the ideological dimension were more likely to experience harassment and threats provides additional evidence for this interpretation. At the same time, it seems that harassment and threats in many cases are less linked to politics and more associated with *mental health issues*. The persons behind harassment and threats often appear confused, compulsive and preoccupied by ideas that are clearly incorrect and/or downright imbued by conspiracy theories. Finally, the surveys suggest that harassment and threats may also have been linked to *personal* grievances since the motive of an existing conflict with public services was one, if not the most important, presumed motive behind serious incidents.

Just as serious as the increase in experienced threats, if not more so, were the consequences this was having for the private life and political activity of politicians. The most striking and worrying finding concerns the negative development over time of serious threats experienced by cabinet ministers and parliamentarians, and the impact this has had. In short, over the last decade, both self-censorship and reluctance to stand for re-election due to harassment and threats have become more widespread among top politicians. Moreover, while there was a certain improvement between 2013 and 2017 as far as consequences for the private lives of top politicians were concerned, the consequences have more recently developed in a markedly negative way in areas such as anxiety about security for themselves and for those closest to them, worry about being out in public and reducing social activities.

The survey which has been conducted on threats and hate speech toward local politicians showed that even

when local politicians generally were less frequently exposed to serious threats than national politicians, it appears that the consequences for those who experienced them were regarded as more serious. One reason for this may be that locally elected politicians are to a lesser degree professional, full-time politicians. Therefore, they also had to a lesser degree security arrangements in place around them than was the case for parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. Therefore threats appeared to them more threatening since these originated from the local community.

Our study has several implications for our understanding of current threats to democracy. When politicians report that threats and harassment have negative consequences for both their private life and for their political activity, this can in turn harm democracy and democratic processes in several ways. In a democracy, both the electorate and the people they elect should be able to freely state their opinions, without fear of intimidation and violence. Our findings suggest that this freedom of speech has come under pressure. That may affect the quality of democratic processes and the political debate. We also find that the burden of threats and harassment may influence the representativeness of democratic institutions and impact on the choice to stand for elected positions. The surveys also showed that intimidation and hate speech made women more inclined to withdraw from public life than men. Findings from the local level suggest that the same is the case for young people.[16]

While threats and harassment will probably not lead to difficulties in filling the seats in parliament or in the cabinet, it can influence which type of person is willing to compete for the most important political posts, and those who do not have the stomach for it. If only the most thick-skinned citizens occupy the most important political positions, democracy may miss politicians with important life experiences who ought to have a political voice—individuals who may have experienced abuse, violence and trauma in their lives—experiences which make them less resilient towards intimidation and threats in their role as political actors.

Hate speech, intimidation and threats towards democratically elected politicians and participants in the public discourse will, to all appearances, continue to put pressure on political participation and democratic processes in the coming years, and the main trends point in a negative direction. The challenge will be to find ways to manage such hate speech so that the safety, private life, freedom of speech and political working conditions of democratically elected politicians can be safeguarded without removing the right of citizens to state their opinions—even opinions which may be both slanderous and offensive. Statements which cross the criminal threshold ought to be punished by law, while other measures must be employed to support politicians who are exposed to other forms of intimidation and harassment.

In the broader discussion on the phenomenon on “anti-government extremism”, the findings of this study on threats and harassment towards politicians illustrate how mostly anonymous and uncoordinated expressions of anger and aggression towards politicians at all levels may harm democratic processes and affect the recruitment of citizens to positions of political responsibility. Although we have described some rather serious patterns and consequences of this in the context of Norwegian politics, Norway is probably a “best case”. Given that Norway is a country characterized by a well-functioning liberal democracy, a low level of political polarization, and a generally high level of trust in authorities among the population, this threat to democracy is most likely even more severe in other countries.

Based on rather similar surveys in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Queensland in Australia,[17] it appears that the share of politicians who experienced at least one of 11 different incidents is almost identical in all the different places. Yet, when it comes to the experience of serious incidents, Norwegian politicians reported the lowest susceptibility (based on 2013 data).[18] See also the article by Agata Kałabunowska in this issue.

Future research should aim at developing comparable data to understand cross-national variation of harassment towards and threats against politicians, and explore what conditions and circumstances make this form of anti-government extremism more challenging to democracy.

Another pertinent issue that the current study does not address concerns the connection between online or

offline threats and actual attacks on politicians, and whether expressed threats may indicate a real violent intention. Previous research has shown that the link between threatening hate speech and violent attacks is complex and usually not direct.[19] Systematic studies indicate that only a tiny minority of those who actually attacked politicians had advertised their intentions beforehand, although mentally disturbed perpetrators more frequently did so than those who were mainly politically motivated,[20] although leakage of intentions to friends and family is common even among lone actor terrorists.[21] The link between violent hate speech and threats and actual attacks may often be more indirect: those who carry out such violent attacks might be inspired to action by those who incite to hatred and demonization of specific politicians or parties—phenomenon that is sometimes called “stochastic terrorism”.[22] Thus, a high volume of hate speech and threats against politicians might signal an increased risk for actual attacks.

However, as this study has demonstrated, violent threats and incitement may not even have to lead to actual violence to have a terrorizing impact: politicians at national as well as local levels restrain themselves from engaging in, or speaking out on, certain issues or consider quitting politics altogether due to fear and strain caused by such verbal threats, in turn harming democratic institutions and processes.

About the Authors

Tore Bjørgo is Professor at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Police University College (adjunct), and Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). In the course of a long career, he has carried out research on a wide range of topics, including political violence and terrorism, right-wing extremism, extremist careers, and prevention. He also conducted the two previous rounds of this survey in 2013 and 2017.

Anders Ravik Jupskås is a political scientist, Associate Professor, and Deputy Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo. His research mainly focuses on right-wing extremism, party politics, and populism. As part of a larger project studying general working conditions of local politicians in Norway, he did a survey among local politicians, as well as several interviews, asking questions about exposure to, and consequences of, threats, hate speech and harassment.

Gunnar Thomassen is a political scientist and Associate Professor at the Research Department of the Norwegian Police University College. His work in the field of police research includes ‘police accountability’, ‘police corruption’, ‘police recruitment’, ‘trust and legitimacy of the police’ and ‘arming of the police’. He has contributed to all the phases of this project and has, in particular, been responsible for the analysis and the reporting of the survey findings.

Jon Strype has a background in psychology, psychometrics and statistics and has been an Associate Professor at the Research Department of the Norwegian Police University College for many years. Jon Strype is currently attached to the Institute of Psychology at Oslo New University College. He has contributed to all parts of the project and has been in charge of the design of the web-based questionnaire and the organisation of the data collection.

Appendix**Table 6:** Share of politicians exposed to incidents and serious incidents at the national and local level across gender, socio-demographics, party affiliation, media exposure, experience and positions

	National		Local	
	Incident	Serious	Incident	Serious
Men			51	6
Women			52	5
25-	67		60	3
26-35	96		57	9
36-45	93		52	6
46-55	85		55	6
56+	74		47	5
Income <400 000			57	9
Income 400-799			49	5
Income 800-1199			49	6
Income 1200-1599			54	5
Income 1600-1999			53	7
Income 2000+			53	5
Education low (<i>Grunnskole</i>)			53	9
Education - (vgs)			55	7
Education - (fagskole)			50	5
Education - (1-4 år høyere utdanning)			49	6
Education high (4+ høyere utdanning)			51	5
Born outside Norway or one of the parents born outside			50	4
Both parents born in Norway			51	6
Rødt	80	47	55	8
SV	74	32	52	5
Ap	80	32	51	5
Sp	82	55	44	5
MDG	92	33	56	10
KrF	67	7	48	3
Venstre	67	50	62	6
Høyre	79	38	54	5
FrP	95	62	60	13
Local list			52	3
Others			66	11
One period			36	2
Two periods			53	5
Three periods			60	8
Four or more periods			67	11
Media exposure low	46			
Media exposure rather low	67			
Media exposure neither high nor low	87			
Media exposure rather high	85			
Media exposure high	100			
Position in local politics			57	7
No position in local politics			40	4

Notes

- [1] For a more detailed description and analysis of the 22 July attacks, see the special July 2021 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* on “The Long-Term Impacts of the July 22, 2011 Attacks in Norway—Ten Years After”. URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2021/issue-3/volume-15-issue-3.pdf>
- [2] [De overlevde Utøya. Nå lever de med drapstrusler. \(aftenposten.no\) July 19, 2018.](https://www.aftenposten.no)
- [3] [Han hadde kartlagt kjente svensker i en årrekke. I sommer pekte han ut tre navn på personer han ville drepe. \(aftenposten.no\) Nov. 10, 2022.](https://www.aftenposten.no)
- [4] Bruce Hoffman (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. 2nd ed., New York: Columbia University Press, p. 40.
- [5] The original survey carried out in 2013, 2017 and 2021 was commissioned to the Norwegian Police University College by the Norwegian Police Security Service, responsible for providing protection and security advise to members of parliament and cabinet ministers. A separate survey on the working conditions of local politicians, commissioned by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development to Telemark Research Institute and Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, included many of the same questions on harassment and threats.
- [6] Brandtzæg, B.A., Magnussen, E., Vike, H., Heian, M.T., Kvernenes, M.S., Jupskås, A.R. og Ruud, S.S. (2022). *Lokaldemokrati og lokalpolitikeres arbeidsvilkår: Rekruttering, motivasjon og deltakelse i lokalpolitisk arbeid*. Bø i Telemark: Telemarksforsking. TF-rapport No. 636. URL: <https://www.telemarksforsking.no/publikasjoner/lokaldemokrati-og-lokalpolitikeres-arbeidsvilkar/4078/>
- [7] For a more detailed description of the survey and the methodology, see Tore Bjørgo, Gunnar Thomassen & Jon Strype (2021). *Harassment and threats towards politicians: A survey of Norwegian parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and executive committee members of political parties and their youth wings*. Oslo: PHS Forskning 2021/1. URL: <https://phs.brage.unit.no/phs-xmliui/handle/11250/3021765>
- [8] A.R. Jupskås (2021). Norske lokalpolitikeres erfaringer med trusler, hatytringer og plagsomme henvendelser: Noen resultater fra en spørreundersøkelse i november 2020. C-REX Research report No. 2/2021. URL: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/publications/c-rex-reports/2021/c-rex-research-report-2-2021.pdf>
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] However, this cannot be interpreted as one third of Norwegian top politicians having experienced serious threats, since the response rate was just below 50%. Those who have experienced serious threats may have been more inclined to respond to the survey than those who have fewer experiences of it, although a comparison of surveys at the local level suggest that this is not necessarily the case (Jupskås 2021). Moreover, the less anonymous 2013 survey with members of parliament and cabinet ministers revealed that several of those politicians who did not respond, were publicly known to have been exposed to serious threats and harassment.
- [11] H.F. Bjelland & T. Bjørgo (2014). *Trusler og trusselhendelser mot politikere. En spørreundersøkelse blant norske stortingsrepresentanter og regjeringsmedlemmer*. PHS Forskning 2014:4. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/226703>; T. Bjørgo & E. Silkoset (2017). *Trusler og trusselhendelser mot politikere: En spørreundersøkelse blant stortingsrepresentanter og regjeringsmedlemmer*. PHS Forskning 2017:5. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2477943>
- [12] A.O. Larsson and E. Skogerbø (2018). Out with the old, in with the new? Perceptions of social (and other) media by local and regional Norwegian politicians. *New Media and Society*, vol. 20, issue 1. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661549>.
- [13] The term “serious incidents” includes incidents where (1) someone has physically attacked or tried to attack the respondent; (2) that someone has threatened to harm the respondent or someone close to them; (3) that someone has vandalised the property or belongings of the respondents; or that someone through social media has exposed them to (4) direct threats, or (5) put forward indirect threats to harm the respondent or someone close to them.
- [14] Jfr. Amnesty International (2018). *Kvinnelige politikeres erfaringer med netthets*. (Report dated 3 July 2018). URL: https://amnesty.no/sites/default/files/3688/Kvinnelige%20politikere_RAPPORT.pdf
- [15] The numbers refer to those who responded either “to a large extent” and “to a very large extent”.
- [16] Jupskås (2019), note [8].
- [17] James, D V., Farnham, F. R., Sukhwai, S., Jones K., Carlisle, J., & Henley, S. (2016b). Aggressive/intrusive behaviours, harassment and stalking of members of the United Kingdom parliament: a prevalence study and cross-national comparison. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, Vol. 27:2, pp. 177–197; James, D. V., Sukhwai, S., Farnham, F. R., Evans, J., Barrie, C., Taylor, A., & Wilson, S. P. (2016). Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences, *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27:3, pp. 309-330; DOI: 10.1080/14789949.2015.1124909; Ev-

ery-Palmer, S., Barry-Walsh, J., & Pathé, M. (2015). Harassment, stalking, threats and attacks targeting New Zealand politicians: A mental health issue. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 49(7), pp. 634-641; Pathé, M., Phillips, J., Perdacher, E., & Heffernan, E. (2013). The Harassment of Queensland Members of Parliament: A Mental Health Concern. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 21(4), pp. 577-584.

[18] The situation in the United States is becoming increasingly alarming. In the wake of the attack on the husband of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the US Capitol Police reported that they have investigated 9,625 threats against lawmakers in 2021, an increase from less than 4,000 in 2017. URL: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/11/01/capitol-police-more-resources-attack-paul-pelosi/8240421001/>. For Germany, a pilot study conducted by the Federal Criminal Office, came to alarming results, based on a survey of the experiences of mayors receiving hate mail and threats of violence. Cf. Kirsten Eberspach, Sarah Bitschnau und Uwe Kemmesies. Kommunales Monitoring: Hass, Hetze und Gewalt gegenüber Amtsträgerinnen und Amtsträgers (KoMo). Beobachtungen und Befunde zur Ersterhebung. In: Uwe Kemmesies et al. MOTRA-Monitor 2021 Wiesbaden: BKA, 2022, pp.135-153. URL: https://doi.org/10.53168/isbn.978-3-9818469-4-2_2022_MOTRA . See also the article by Agata Kałabunowska in this issue.

[19] Every-Palmer, S., Barry-Walsh, J., & Pathé, M. (2015). Harassment, stalking, threats and attacks targeting New Zealand politicians: A mental health issue. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 49(7), pp. 634-641; Eke, A. W., Meloy, J. R., Brooks, K., Jean, L., & Hilton, N. Z. (2014). Threats, approach behavior, and violent recidivism among offenders who harass Canadian justice officials. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), pp. 188-202.

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[21] Gill, P., Horgan, J., & Deckert, P. (2014). Bombing Alone: Tracing the motivations and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 59, pp. 425-435; Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., Glaz-Ocik, J., & Guldemann, A. (2014). Warning behaviors and their configurations across various domains of targeted violence. In J. R. Meloy & Hoffman, J. (Eds). *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[22] Amman, M. and Meloy, J.R. (2021). Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol 15, issue 5, pp. 2-13.