

TROLLED ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL:

ONLINE

INCIVILITY

AND ABUSE

IN CANADIAN

POLITICS



Chris Tenove
Heidi Tworek

TROLLED ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

ONLINE INCIVILITY AND ABUSE IN CANADIAN POLITICS

CHRIS TENOVE • HEIDI TWOREK

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CONTENTS

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES	1
RESEARCHERS.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
FACING INCIVILITY IN #ELXN43.....	8
HIGH VOLUMES OF INCIVILITY.....	10
VOLUMES OF INCIVILITY VARY WIDELY.....	11
WOMEN AND RACIALIZED CANDIDATES.....	12
WHO IS TROLLING?	12
HOW CAMPAIGNS RESPOND	14
IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS.....	17
JEOPARDIZING SECURITY AND WELL-BEING.....	17
TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: JENNY KWAN.....	18
UNDERMINING CAMPAIGNING AND ENGAGEMENT	19
CORRODING DEMOCRATIC DEBATE AND EXACERBATING POLARIZATION	21
TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: CAROL CLEMENHAGEN.....	22
AMPLIFYING UNEQUAL REPRESENTATION	24
QUANTITY VS. CONTENT	24
TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: KATHLEEN WYNNE.....	26
SUBTLE AND OVERT MISOGYNY AND RACISM.....	27
TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: ELIZABETH MAY.....	28
A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT ONLINE AND OFFLINE	29
TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: CELINA CAESAR-CHAVANNES.....	31
RECOMMENDATIONS	32
FOR CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGN TEAMS.....	32
FOR POLITICAL PARTIES.....	34
FOR PLATFORMS.....	35
FOR POLICYMAKERS.....	38
CONCLUSION	40

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media are crucial for contemporary election campaigns, and the Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated that trend. While online interactions during campaigns can be positive and productive, candidates also face insults, threats, hate speech, and other forms of incivility.

This report examines incivility on social media in the 2019 federal election campaign and beyond. It draws on an analysis of over one million tweets directed at candidates in the 2019 campaign, and on interviews with candidates, campaign staff, and elected officials. Our major findings include:

- About 40% of tweets at candidates were uncivil, and 16% of all tweets were abusive. Just 7% were positive.
- Party leaders and other high-profile candidates received exponentially higher levels of incivility than most candidates. Candidates' experiences thus varied significantly depending on their prominence before the campaign began.
- Women and racialized candidates were not necessarily subjected to higher rates of incivility online, but the impact of the incivility and abuse they faced was often amplified by their lived experiences of threat, harassment, or marginalization offline.
- Campaign teams often struggled to manage online incivility and abuse. Many felt that they lacked sufficient resources, training, or technical skills. In particular, they were unclear about the effectiveness and political consequences of taking actions like responding to or blocking abusive accounts, a problem made more difficult because they were often unsure who was behind the attacks.

Overall, we argue that pervasive incivility and frequent abuse threaten the security and wellbeing of public figures and their staff, undermine productive engagement between citizens and candidates during campaigns, exacerbate distrust and polarization in our politics, and present further barriers to political participation by people from under-represented groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address online incivility and abuse in Canadian politics requires a multi-pronged approach. Candidates, political parties, social media platforms, and policymakers can all take action.

1. Candidates and campaign teams should:

- Develop and implement proactive plans to manage abuse and incivility;

- Publicly communicate their expectations for people who wish to engage them online;
- Promote healthy discussions and online behaviour—including by their own supporters.

2. Political parties should:

- Provide appropriate training and resources so candidates and campaign teams can safely and effectively manage online abuse;
- Provide support that addresses candidates' diverse experiences and risks;
- Establish guidelines for the online conduct of their candidates and staff.

3. Social media platforms should:

- Reduce deception via fake accounts, bots, and manipulated media;
- Develop clearer and more reliable enforcement of terms of service;
- Design social media platforms to better incentivize productive discussion;
- Improve their transparency about patterns of abuse and their activities to address it.

4. Policymakers should:

- Clarify and improve the laws and police procedures for addressing online threats, defamation, and hate speech;
- Promote greater transparency and more effective content moderation by social media companies;
- Support groups that are combatting online incivility, abuse, and hate;
- Coordinate with other governments and international bodies to address this global problem.

This report does not propose a quick fix for online incivility directed at candidates and elected officials. Instead, it offers an evidence-based assessment of the problem and options to address it. The actions we propose are just part of a broader effort to promote the meaningful and inclusive discussions that are necessary for a robust Canadian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Social media are increasingly essential for election campaigns. Candidates use social media to find, inform, and mobilize potential supporters, and to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Citizens use social media to learn about party leaders and candidates, and to directly engage with them. Many interactions are positive, but officials and candidates also face insults, threats, hate speech, and other forms of abuse. We use the term “incivility” throughout this report (see Box 1), although the phenomenon is more commonly known as trolling.

The 2019 federal election campaign marked a new high in social media usage in Canada. Political parties and third-party advocacy groups spent unprecedented amounts of money on social media, mainly Facebook.¹ Highly targeted ads and promoted content offered unique opportunities for influence and engagement.¹ On Twitter, mentions of the federal election in 2019 increased by 90% compared to the 2015 election.² Posts, hashtags, memes, and videos shaped the electoral dialogue on everything from policy issues to scandals. As we will show, social media platforms were also vehicles for significant amounts of incivility and abuse.

This report investigates incivility and abuse directed at candidates in the 2019 federal election, and assesses the impact of online incivility on Canadian democracy. We pay particular attention to issues of gender and race. We conclude with recommendations for candidates, political parties, social media platforms, and policymakers.

To understand incivility and abuse in the 2019 election campaign, we analyzed over one million tweets directed at candidates, and interviewed 31 candidates and campaign staff who participated in the 2019 election. To better understand issues of gendered and racialized abuse, we conducted interviews with an additional 12 women who have faced extensive online abuse as politicians and political staff at federal, provincial, or municipal levels. Our major findings include:

- About 40% of tweets at candidates were uncivil, and about 16% of all tweets were abusive. Just 7% were positive. Twitter can therefore be seen as a hostile space for political engagement during campaigns, and our interviewees reported similar problems on Facebook.

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1 Andrey, S., Bardeesy, K., Jeffers, S., Savoie, J., van der Linden, C. (2020). [Who Targets Me? Political Advertising on Facebook in the 2019 Election](#). In E. Dubois & T. Owen (Eds.), *Understanding the Digital Ecosystem: Findings from the 2019 Federal Election* (pp. 20-23). Digital Ecosystem Research Challenge.

2 Austin, M. (2019). [Inside the 43rd Canadian General Election on Twitter](#). *Twitter blog*.

- Party leaders and other high-profile candidates received exponentially higher levels of incivility. They also have more staff assistance to help manage it. Candidates’ experiences thus varied significantly depending on their prominence before the campaign began.
- Women and racialized candidates were not necessarily subjected to higher volumes of incivility and abuse online, but interviews revealed how the impact of that incivility was amplified by people’s lived experiences of threat, harassment, or marginalization offline.
- Campaign teams often struggled to manage online incivility and abuse. Many felt that they lacked appropriate resources, training, or technical skills. Moreover, they were often unclear about the effectiveness and political consequences of taking actions like responding to or blocking abusive accounts, a problem made more difficult because they were often unsure who was behind the remarks.

Overall, we argue that pervasive incivility and frequent abuse harm the well-being of public figures and their staff, undermine productive engagement between candidates or elected officials and citizens, exacerbate distrust and polarization in our politics, and present further barriers to political participation by people from under-represented groups.

To help make these issues more tangible, this report includes five “Tales from the Campaign Trail.” These mini-profiles illustrate some of the different ways in which politicians have navigated online incivility and abuse.

Social media will continue to be important for electoral campaigns and democratic engagement. Two federal party leadership contests – the Conservative Party of Canada, and the federal Green party – have already occurred during the “new normal” of Covid-19. In September and October 2020, three provinces (BC, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan) held elections. These contests relied more than ever on digital technologies, given that the Covid-19 pandemic has restricted door-knocking and in-person engagement. In recent months, Canadian politicians also appear to be receiving more threats online.³

Globally, online abuse is recognized as a form of political violence, and one that appears to be particularly damaging to women and members of marginalized groups.⁴ An independent advisory body to the United Kingdom’s government found that MPs experienced “persistent, vile and shocking

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3 Montpetit, J. (2020) [Quebec Extremists Radicalized by COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Could Turn to Violence, Experts Warn](#) *CBC News*, Sep 17.

4 Amnesty International (2018) [#ToxicTwitter: Violence and Abuse Against Women Online](#). London: Amnesty International; Di Meco, Lucina (2019) [#SHEPERSISTED: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World](#). Washington, DC: The Wilson Center; Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) [Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians](#). Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.

abuse,” and concluded that “widespread use of social media platforms is the most significant factor driving the behaviour we are seeing.”⁵ To address online abuse, then, some actions must be Canada-focused and some must promote action beyond Canada in order to improve our online environment.

This report provides evidence to inform an already vigorous public conversation about how to improve our democratic discourse. Change is possible. It will take a change in behaviour from voters, proactive strategies from candidates, leadership from parties, and bold action from parliament and platforms. The analysis in this report provides evidence to continue these important conversations.

What is “incivility”?

By incivility, we mean communication that is designed to shut down, intimidate, or otherwise silence people, often through expressions of disrespect toward individuals and groups. Incivility can range from dismissive insults to racial slurs to threats. Even milder forms of incivility can undermine productive and inclusive conversations, particularly if encountered at high volumes. We use the terms “abuse” or “harassment” to refer to particularly egregious messages. At their most serious these can even rise to the level of criminal acts, such as uttering threats, defamation, or hate propaganda.⁶

At the same time, we recognize that accusations of incivility are sometimes wielded to ignore or silence others. This tactic has frequently been used to exclude the voices of marginalized groups, including Indigenous, immigrant, racialized, and working-class citizens.⁷ Furthermore, incivility is sometimes justifiable, such as when protestors interrupt a public event to bring attention to injustice, or when speakers angrily express their moral outrage at wrongdoing. In short, what counts as “uncivil” is contextual and political. We try to be transparent about how we measure incivility so people can understand and can disagree – civilly we hope! – with our approach.

5 Committee on Standards in Public Life (2017) [Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life](#). United Kingdom Parliament.

6 For a further explanation of incivility and “harmful communication,” see: Tenove, C. and H. Tworek (2020) *Processes, People, and Public Accountability: How to Understand and Address Harmful Communication Online*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression.

7 Bates, K.G. (2019) [When Civility Is Used As A Cudgel Against People Of Color](#). *NPR*, 14 March.

SECTION 1: FACING INCIVILITY IN #ELXN43

The 2019 election has been described as a nasty and bitter affair.⁸ Much of that nastiness played out online, with candidates like Liberal cabinet minister Catherine McKenna and Green party leader Elizabeth May facing threats and constant vitriol.⁹ Media reports suggested this online abuse was widespread. We conducted an extensive study to understand this phenomenon.

To do so, we used two approaches: interviews and social media analysis.

We interviewed 31 people on 2019 campaign teams: 20 candidates and 11 staff-members. These interviewees belonged to four major national parties (Conservative, Green, Liberal, and NDP). More than half of the candidates were women, and about 40% were visible minorities or Indigenous. Thirteen now sit as MPs or cabinet ministers. We asked interviewees about the incivility and abuse they faced online, its impacts on them and their political activities, and how they responded to it online and offline.

We combined those interviews with an analysis of comments or “tweets” directed at candidates on Twitter between mid-August and October 31.¹⁰ Twitter is an important platform for political elites and politically-active citizens, and it is the only platform that allows broad access by researchers to user-generated comments directed at candidates.

Other social media platforms are important and warrant study, but do not allow broad access to all types of user engagement. For example, Facebook hosted the lion’s share of online campaign advertising in the 2019 election, and most interviewees stated that they received negative messages at a similar or higher rate on Facebook than on Twitter. However, Facebook limits the information it will release to researchers; this lack of platform transparency is a problem we discuss in the recommendations section.

Our research team directly examined over 3,300 tweets and manually categorized them as positive, neutral, or uncivil. Uncivil tweets were further broken into the categories of low, medium, or high negativity (see Box 2).

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8 MacSweeney, C. (2019) [Experts Describe Federal Election Campaign as ‘Nasty’, ‘Ugly’, ‘Bitter’](#). *CityNews Winnipeg*, 20 Oct; Proudfoot, S. (2019) [Why Would Anyone Hate Catherine McKenna?](#) *Maclean’s*, Nov 4.

9 Burke, A. (2019) [Relentless Online Abuse Of Female Mps Raises Concern For Safety Of Staff](#). *CBC News*, Nov 5; Tunney, C., and A. Burke (2019) [Fearing Violence, the RCMP Are Closely Watching Hateful Online Election Chatter](#). *CBC News*, Oct 6.

10 Tweets at candidates, or Twitter “mentions,” are posts that include “[candidate handle],” such as @JustinTrudeau. Most often such comments were replies to a message posted by a candidate.

False claims about politicians or unsubstantiated accusations of wrongdoing were also coded as medium or high negativity, depending on their severity. Tweets that were coded as “neutral” if they criticized a politician, party, or policy in a civil manner—without being dismissive or insulting. We developed these categories by drawing on our interviews and the academic literature.

We used this data to train a machine learning model, which is a complex algorithm that can recognize patterns in data. We used this model to evaluate over one million tweets.¹¹ It is important to understand that machine learning models do not have 100% accuracy rates. They may miss nuances that humans would spot, and will interpret some messages differently than we would. (The same is true of the algorithms that major social media companies use to identify harassment and hate speech.) However, based on our verification of the machine learning model and its results, we are confident in its reliability, validity, and ability to detect patterns in the volume and targeting of uncivil tweets during the campaign.

Evaluating Tweets

Low negativity messages are dismissive or somewhat disrespectful toward the candidate, and do not include reasonably-stated policy criticisms.

E.g. “Oh how do I hate thee, @XXX”¹²

Medium negativity messages are offensive, insulting, or advance negative stereotypes of social groups.

E.g. “@XXX So the carbon tax will save the world. Infuckingcredible. You are the stupidest person to walk the planet”

High negativity messages include hateful language at social groups, threats, and unsubstantiated accusations of moral or criminal wrongdoing (i.e. potentially defamatory).

E.g. “@XXX Don’t forget to take your antidepressants pills bitch.”

E.g. “@XXX To those [religious group] who are celebrating ...quit Torcherer our animals assholes... sacrifice yourselves 🙄”

11 A full description of the methods we used will be published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Please write to request more details directly.

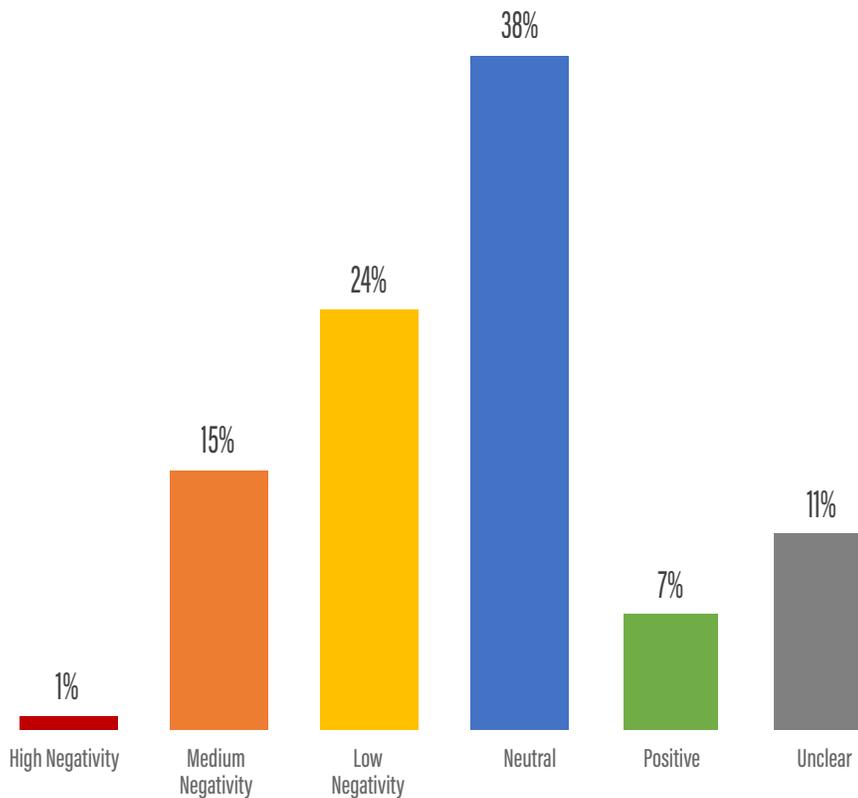
12 These are direct quotations of tweets at candidates in the 2019 election. We don’t wish to give a megaphone to insults, so we replace the name of the targeted candidate with “@XXX”.

HIGH VOLUMES OF INCIVILITY

The results suggest Twitter is often a toxic platform for candidates (see Figure 1). Just under 40% of tweets at candidates are *uncivil* (including low, medium and high negativity messages), and only 7% could be considered *positive*. Another 38% were *neutral* and 11% were *unclear*, meaning they did not contain text we could interpret (they often consisted only of links or symbols).

The majority of uncivil tweets were low negativity (24% of all tweets), a significant proportion were medium negativity (15% of all tweets), and about 1% of all tweets were highly negative. Though this means there were approximately 10,000 highly negative messages among the 1 million tweets directed at candidates, the number is too small to accurately compare across candidates. We therefore combine high and medium negativity tweets into a category we call *abusive*.

FIGURE 1: CATEGORIZING ONE MILLION TWEETS AT CANDIDATES



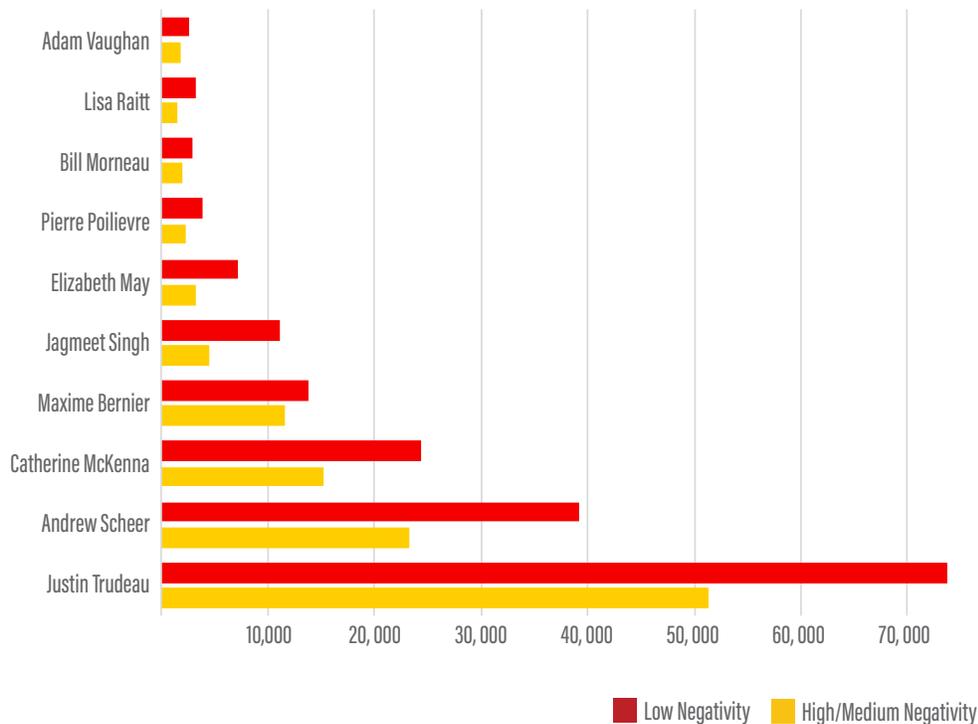
VOLUMES OF INCIVILITY VARY WIDELY

Prominent candidates get vastly more tweets – and more negative tweets. Our data show that the 10 candidates who received the most negative messages were the national party leaders, Liberal cabinet ministers, and a handful of prominent Conservative candidates. (See Figure 2.) These individuals received 75% of the negative tweets in our database—the other 680 candidates received 25%.

To further understand the different experiences of prominent and less prominent candidates, compare our estimates of negative tweets for Justin Trudeau, #1 in this list (125,031 negative tweets), to Adam Vaughan at #10 (4,445 negative tweets), to the #100 candidate (242 negative tweets), to the #500 candidate (11 negative tweets). In other words, the person who tops our list received 28 times more uncivil comments than the person in spot 10; 517 times more than the person in spot 100; and 11,355 times more than the person in spot 500.

Incivility and abuse are cross-partisan issues. As shown in Figure 2, the leaders of five national parties were among the top six most-targeted individuals. Together those five leaders received 60% of all negative comments.

FIGURE 2: CANDIDATES WHO RECEIVED THE MOST UNCIVIL TWEETS



WOMEN AND RACIALIZED CANDIDATES

Our Twitter analysis did not find that women or racialized candidates received significantly higher – or lower – rates of incivility than male or white candidates. We evaluate this by comparing the *proportion* of negative tweets directed at a candidate (negative tweets divided by the total number of tweets they received during the period of analysis). Compared to male candidates, women did not receive higher proportions of tweets that were uncivil (high, medium and low negativity) or abusive (high and medium negativity). Compared to white candidates, candidates belonging to a visible minority group appeared to receive slightly higher rates of abuse, though this difference does not meet a threshold of strong statistical confidence.

However, these are only measurements of the frequency of different levels of negativity. In Section 3, we explain some of the limitations of our analysis. We argue that the *content* and *impact* of incivility may differ for women and racialized candidates.

We recognize that this analysis does not capture all groups potentially subject to abuse. The limitations in our data and the low numbers of candidates from certain groups meant that we could not evaluate whether other groups received higher proportions of uncivil or abusive messages on Twitter in the campaign, including Indigenous, Jewish, or 2SLGBTQ+ candidates. Nor are we able to assess the role of intersectionality: whether people with multiple forms of marginalization are more likely to be targeted, such as racialized 2SLGBTQ+ folks or Indigenous women.¹³ These remain crucial questions for further exploration.

WHO IS TROLLING?

Although our Twitter study does not examine the sources of uncivil or abusive comments, interviews revealed this was a topic of great interest. Candidates and staff frequently speculate about the identities of harassers and sometimes try to investigate them, as this knowledge would affect how they respond these messages.

In a few instances, our interviewees identified competing candidates or their staff as the sources of uncivil comments. While rare, these were particularly concerning, both because attacks from competitors had particularly high stakes in the campaign context and because they set a poor standard for partisan supporters. Given these implications, some interviewees suggested

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13 Some research outside of Canada suggests this may be the case, such as: Amnesty International (2018) [Troll Patrol Findings: Using Crowdsourcing, Data Science & Machine Learning to Measure Violence and Abuse against Women on Twitter](#). London: Amnesty International.

that political parties should address incivility by their candidates and staff. “I absolutely believe that parties, all parties, should not only make sure that their candidates are safe from the abuse, but also hold their candidates to account for posting negative or abusive messages,” said a high-profile MP of colour.

More often, candidates blame a small minority of highly partisan supporters of their key competitors. For instance, Liberals often suggested Conservative supporters were behind most of their abuse, and the NDP and the Green candidates sometimes blamed each other for incivility. In these cases, campaign teams identified partisans by looking at their user profiles, their previous posts or tweets, their followers/friends, or simply by recognizing common phrases from other parties or “borrowed rhetoric,” as one interviewee put it. Even when the specific partisan affiliation couldn’t be identified, there was an impression among interviewees that “their goal was to elect somebody else.”

The geographical origins of incivility differs between platforms. Uncivil or abusive tweets often came from users who seem to live outside of candidates’ regions, though location information for Twitter accounts is often untrustworthy or absent. On Facebook, candidates report that the negativity is more localized, with incivility more likely to touch on local issues and come from prospective voters often commenting on paid and locally prompted ads and posts. A number of interviewees also mentioned receiving abusive content from individuals they know offline, including a former colleague and the mother of an old high school friend. In these cases, there was a sense that Facebook offered a behind-the-screen opportunity to say something to a candidate that would never have been said in an offline venue.

However, campaign teams admitted that they often have “no idea” who is really behind much of the incivility and abuse they face, particularly when using Twitter. Many interviewees believed that some harassers were “bots” (see Box 3). They used this term to describe a range of sources: automated accounts, anonymous users, users who employed fake names and profile descriptions, and paid or unpaid networks of users acting in coordination.

Candidates also contrasted their own visibility with the hidden or deceptive identities of their harassers. As one long-time MP explained, “You don’t actually know if you’re talking to somebody real. So how do you have a conversation? How do you respect a point of view from somebody who doesn’t have a real name?”

Many interviewees felt that users’ anonymity emboldened their incivility, and made it more difficult to assess the risk they pose. As one MP put it: “It’s like adults who go out on Halloween with masks. [They] tend to be assholes

because they get away with stuff, right?” A former MP who received death threats observed that the “faceless avatars” who attacked her were unnerving because “you don’t know when accounts are going to turn violent.”

Bot or Not?

Many interviewees told us that they regularly faced incivility or abuse from “bots.” It is difficult to tell whether that is true.

For starters, people mean different things by the term “bot.” Researchers generally use the term to refer to computer programs designed to mimic human behaviour. A sophisticated example is iPhone’s Siri. However, our interviewees often used the term to refer to accounts that appeared to use fake identities (e.g. “Tony11044272”), or that regularly shared low-quality content.

Even if we focus solely on bots as computer programs, it can be difficult to distinguish them from human-operated social media accounts.¹⁴ Programs that mimic humans are getting more convincing and easier to acquire. At the same time, many humans communicate as if they were programs—posting at high volumes, using bad grammar, etc. Another challenge is that people are more likely to assume that accounts with opposing views are not real individuals.¹⁵ Even programs that are specifically designed to identify algorithmic accounts are unreliable.¹⁶

The ability to distinguish automated or fake accounts from real ones is important. It could help politicians and other users decide how to respond to incivility, and it could help reduce the broader online problem of “pervasive inauthenticity,” in which users are forever guessing whether to treat each other as real people or not.¹⁷

HOW CAMPAIGNS RESPOND

Candidates’ approaches to managing online incivility were shaped by the volumes and types they faced, their personality and approach to social media, and their team’s resources and expertise. As they encountered incivility and abuse during a campaign, candidates and staff continually assessed what harms they could cause.

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14 Want to test your bot-spotting skill? [BOT or NOT](#) is a game by New York-based Foreign Objects that gives you three rounds of interactions with a chatbot or a person, and then asks you to guess which it was.

15 Yan, H.Y., et al (2020) [Asymmetrical Perceptions of Partisan Political Bots](#). *New Media & Society*.

16 Roth, Y, and N. Pickles (2020) [Bot or Not? The Facts about Platform Manipulation on Twitter](#). *Twitter Blog*.

17 McKay, S., and C. Tenove (2020) [Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy](#). *Political Research Quarterly* (Online first).

Campaign teams have a limited range of available responses. They can reply on social media, or use platform tools like blocking users or hiding problematic comments. Offline, they can seek emotional support from their party, friends, and family. When faced with threats, they may reach out to police or parliamentary security staff.

Campaign teams that faced high volumes of incivility were more familiar with platform tools, and more likely to have developed rules for addressing different types of incivility or abuse. Several made public their “standards of engagement,” which explain their expectations to users and communicate when comments will be deleted or accounts blocked. (In this report’s recommendations, we suggest more candidates do so.)

During the campaign, most candidates relied on their staff to help them create and post content online, and manage uncivil messages. For those few candidates who received hundreds or thousands of negative comments, this could require significant labour. Even campaign teams that received only a few negative comments told us that they invested significant time and energy in deciding on appropriate responses, particularly for abusive messages.

Ultimately, the most common response was to ignore uncivil messages. Not only does this take less time, it also avoids the possibility that replying to a comment might amplify the number of people who see it. “You can’t argue with them,” one candidate said about attacks she faced. “Which is really tough, especially if they’re calling out your family or calling out your credentials or anything like that. So, you just ignore everything. Ignore, ignore, or ignore.”

When campaign teams feel they can’t ignore or engage with an uncivil comment, they turn to the tools available on social media, such as “muting” words or accounts (so the campaign team can’t see them, but other users can), blocking accounts from following them on Twitter or accessing their Facebook page, and hiding or deleting comments on Facebook.

As one Liberal candidate explained, “If you’ve got a series of people who are actively trolling and polluting your feed, that’s polluting the feed of anyone who follows you as well, to a certain degree. So, I actually am sympathetic to blocking.” A Conservative incumbent said that he blocks people or accounts whose “whole ambition is just to see me not win,” though he was very reluctant to block or hide uncivil remarks about any particular topic.

Individuals can take these actions to protect themselves, and they may also delete content or block accounts to create safer spaces for dialogue. An Indigenous candidate explained that hateful speech against women and racialized groups could make them feel unsafe or unwilling to participate. “I have a pretty thick skin,” the candidate explained, “but if comments

may affect the safety and wellbeing of others, then I will say something or complain or take them down.”

Interviewees were highly aware of the concern that blocking accounts or deleting their comments could be seen as limiting people’s freedom of expression or the accountability of elected officials. An NDP candidate said, “I think you should be prepared to be exposed to some criticism. And for people to disagree with you, and sometimes very strongly, and even sometimes for those criticisms to be impugning your character.”

Uncertainty about who is behind social media accounts makes these decisions more challenging. Many interviewees felt that bots – or accounts that looked like bots – could be blocked with relatively little concern that this would stifle democratic speech, but they were more willing to respond or at least continue to listen to uncivil remarks from “real” people, and particularly those who may be their constituents.

Campaign teams’ approaches to managing incivility on social media were, our interviewees admitted, not always planned, predictable, or well-thought out. Some campaign teams were unaware of all the platform tools available. For example, some interviewees who told us that they spent a lot of time hiding content on Facebook did not know they could create filters to hide all posts that contain profanities or other terms.

In choosing their responses, campaign teams see several goods at stake, as we argue in the next section: their own wellbeing and security; their campaign activity and messaging; and the quality and inclusiveness of public discussion.

SECTION 2: IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

What are the consequences of incivility and abuse directed at election candidates? Our research identifies three areas of impact: the security and well-being of candidates and campaign teams; campaigning and public engagement; and the quality of democratic debate. The negative consequences are not evenly distributed across all candidates, and in Section 3 we explain how these impacts can be more severe for members of underrepresented groups in Canadian politics.

JEOPARDIZING SECURITY AND WELL-BEING

Candidates, elected officials, and their staff receive messages which directly threaten violence, or which can – due to their volume and intensity – harm people’s health and wellbeing.

Over half (56%) of our interviewees said they had been threatened at some point in their careers as electoral candidates or elected officials, either online, on the phone, or in person. Over one-quarter (26%) had been threatened online in the 2019 election campaign. Our sample of interviewees is not necessarily representative of all candidates. However, other research suggests that offline and online threats in politics are increasing. For instance, the Sûreté du Québec received 300 reports of online threats made against politicians between March and September, 2020, a 450% increase compared to the previous year.¹⁸ And the RCMP’s protective policing division has logged 30% more threats to the prime minister and cabinet ministers in 2020 compared to a similar period in 2019.¹⁹

More systematic research on threats to candidates and elected officials in Canada is needed. However, increasing threats and harm to health and wellbeing have been documented elsewhere. Globally, elected officials are frequently targeted for aggressive behaviours such as physical attacks, stalking and threats.²⁰ A recent survey of parliamentarians in the United Kingdom found that 32% felt “moderately” or “very” fearful as a result of their experiences with threats and harassment, with women MPs reporting

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18 Montpetit, *Quebec Extremists Radicalized by COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories Could Turn to Violence, Experts Warn.*

19 Boutilier, A., and K. Leavitt (2020) *Threats against Justin Trudeau and His Ministers are on the Rise, Rcmp Data Shows.* *The Star*, Aug 12.

20 Krook, M.L., and J.R. Sanín (2020) *The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians.* *Perspectives on Politics* 18(3): 740–55.

• As a long-time politician and racialized woman, Kwan says she has
• experienced incivility of “various shapes and forms over the years.” The
• dynamic of incivility has changed and has shifted from being physical
• hate mail to online harassment. “With social media, it is almost instan-
• taneous,” she says. “People post these things with anonymity, and do it
• without any repercussions, without any accountability.”

• As the NDP’s critic for Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship, and
• Multiculturalism, Kwan frequently encounters racist and discrimina-
• tory remarks. “Misinformation is often the first step,” she observes.
• “Then it can escalate to an attempt to generate negativity – and
• hatred – towards certain groups of people.”

• The news cycle plays an important role in the volume of incivility and
• abuse she receives. “I find that if I’m showing up in the news cycle on a
• particular issue more regularly, then it generates a lot more negativity
• or hate.”

• Kwan recognizes the emotional toll negative messaging inflicts on
• both herself and her staff, as well as the relationship between online
• harassment and offline risks. This has prompted measures such as
• installing a panic button in her constituency office in case they need
• to alert the police. “It’s not just me, it’s all of us, all of my staff,” she
• says. “They get impacted by it too, and I think often people forget about
• that.”

• Kwan believes that the vast majority of people oppose antagonistic
• or discriminatory messages she sometimes receives: “In some ways,
• that pushes me to a place where I will stand even firmer.”

UNDERMINING CAMPAIGNING AND ENGAGEMENT

Managing uncivil comments online takes time, mental bandwidth, and campaign resources that could be used for more productive activities. Incivility and abuse may, therefore, be pushing candidates away from using social media to interact with members of the public.

Many candidates and their staff say that monitoring and addressing uncivil messages takes up significant parts of each day. The campaign manager for a moderately prominent candidate explained that he had to “tap extra people... just to hide the comments” on her social media accounts. He continued:

At the end of each evening, I would be in bed doing a final cleanup. By the time I woke up six hours later, there [could be] a massive onslaught. Before I even put in my contacts, I was addressing negative content... So this was just kind of an ongoing cycle that never let up.

The most prominent candidates faced levels of abuse and incivility that required full-time staff attention, and prevented these individuals from pursuing activities that could actually engage or persuade voters. Several interviewees noted that online abuse caused them to be more cautious about doing public events. For instance, a staff member for a high-profile incumbent said that the team would not announce her candidate's attendance at an event more than 24 hours in advance, in order to provide less time for potential harassers or attackers to plan their actions.

According to a communication staffer for a Liberal cabinet member, "It is a huge drain that could otherwise go towards creating more interesting communications or doing outreach." And a longtime NDP MP said, "When you've got 8 or 10 people who troll you every day, the more time you spend dealing with them, the more they're diverting you from what you should be doing, which above all is door-knocking."

In fact, candidates and staff believe that much of the harassment they face is a strategic attempt to derail their campaign. "Social media abuse is designed to take energy and time away from a campaign and to demoralize," said a former cabinet minister. "It's intentional, that's the goal."

Online incivility not only takes up people's time; it also reduces their desire to use social media to engage with the public. A campaign manager who has worked with federal, provincial, and municipal candidates noted that, rather than engage online and face potential abuse, she advises they "use social media like a billboard—put something up and walk away."

Many candidates explained that online abuse and incivility had made them less willing to use social media platforms to discuss issues. If so, Canadian candidates fit a broader pattern. Research suggests that politicians do tend to limit their engagement with the public online to avoid incivility abuse.²³ Furthermore, politicians who use social media for direct and interactive engagement with the public often receive more incivility and harassment than those who do not.²⁴ These dynamics undermine the potential for social media to be spaces for direct and productive exchanges between politicians and the public.

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23 Tromble, R. (2018) [Thanks for \(Actually\) Responding! How Citizen Demand Shapes Politicians' Interactive Practices on Twitter](#). *New Media & Society* 20(2): 676–97.

24 Theocharis, Y., et al (2016). [A Bad Workman Blames His Tweets: The Consequences of Citizens' Uncivil Twitter Use When Interacting With Party Candidates](#). *Journal of Communication* 66(6): 1007–31.

CORRODING DEMOCRATIC DEBATE AND EXACERBATING POLARIZATION

Online incivility and abuse have consequences beyond the candidates themselves. Risks include increasing social divisions – along partisan and other lines – reducing the quality of online discussion.

The role of social media in exacerbating political polarization is a topic of increasing concern. Compared to the United States and other countries, Canada has been relatively less politically-polarized, but this appears to be changing.²⁵ A report on public attitudes during the 2019 federal election found significant levels of partisan animosity.²⁶ This animosity was not just directed at politicians of other parties but also the supporters of those politicians. “This is troubling,” the report states, “as it suggests polarization does not just influence people’s opinions about the parties, but also how they view other ordinary Canadians.”²⁷

Online incivility reflects this polarization, and may contribute to it. People who encounter partisan incivility online tend to develop more negative attitudes toward the opposing party, and become more close-minded toward views by parties’ supporters.

While most interviewees believed that abuse and incivility came from a small minority of supporters of opposing parties, some struggled not to think more poorly of opposing parties and their supporters more broadly. As a staff member for a prominent MP explained, “I actually had to make an active effort to not just be like ‘this is so typical’ of that party, the stereotypes about it are true.” A first-time federal candidate said that she couldn’t help asking herself why “so many people who make negative comments and nasty, evil comments online are attracted to [an opposing party].”

While some partisans may revel in the combat of online negativity, there is a risk that many will simply tune out and disengage. Some candidates expressed concern that negativity would shut down dialogue online, while others worried it may push people away from politics all together.

Along with polarization, incivility online can damage the possibilities for productive democratic discussions. “There were always so many people whose only purpose was to tear down anything you say... that I don’t think people are trying any more to have substantive policy discussions online,”

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25 Kevins, A., and S.N. Soroka (2018) [Growing Apart? Partisan Sorting in Canada, 1992–2015](#). *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 51(1): 103–33.

26 Digital Democracy Project (2020) [Lessons in Resilience: Canada’s Digital Media Ecosystem and the 2019 Election](#). Ottawa and Montreal: Public Policy Forum and the Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University.

27 Ibid, p. 39.

a first-time NDP candidate said. A Liberal MP came to a similar conclusion, stating that incivility and misinformation on social media has “been extremely negative for political and social discourse.”

A significant body of research argues exposure to online incivility can damage the possibilities for productive democratic discussions.²⁸ Exposure to online incivility may decrease open-mindedness, and reduce citizens’ willingness to seek out new information or critically examine their own views.²⁹ Incivility can also generate negative feedback loops, since people exposed to uncivil behaviour online will often escalate their own uncivil behaviour.³⁰

A growing body of literature suggests that targeted harassment and incivility can have harmful “chilling effects” on participation, which is particularly likely to make women unwilling to express their political views online.³¹ Similarly, a 2016 survey in Canada found that women and racialized individuals were more likely to censor themselves out of fear of online harassment.³²

TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Carol Clemenhagen

Carol Clemenhagen was a first-time candidate in 2019, running as a Conservative in the Ottawa Centre riding. She faced a high-profile opponent in Liberal cabinet minister Catherine McKenna and did not expect to be elected, but believed it was important to offer a test of ideas and a choice to constituents. Clemenhagen, who had previously led the Canadian Hospital Association and been Executive Director of the Medical Research Council of Canada, wasn’t a social media user prior to the campaign, and learned on the job from her young, internet-savvy volunteers. Her campaign team used Twitter and Facebook to discuss issues that came up in the news, but also to share photos and videos from events and door-knocking. “People want to

28 Asker, D., and E. Dinas (2019) [Thinking Fast and Furious: Emotional Intensity and Opinion Polarization in Online Media](#). *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83(3): 487–509.

29 Kim, Y., and Y. Kim (2019) [Incivility on Facebook and Political Polarization: The Mediating Role of Seeking Further Comments and Negative Emotion](#). *Computers in Human Behaviour* 99: 219–27.

30 Gervais, B.T. (2015) [Incivility Online: Affective and Behavioural Reactions to Uncivil Political Posts in a Web-Based Experiment](#). *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12(2): 167–85; Rösner, L., et al. (2016) [Dangerous Minds? Effects of Uncivil Online Comments on Aggressive Cognitions, Emotions, and Behaviour](#). *Computers in Human Behaviour* 58: 461–70.

31 Penney, J., and D. Citron (2019) [When Law Frees Us to Speak](#). *Fordham Law Review* 87(6).

32 Angus Reid Institute (2016) [Trolls and Tribulations: One-in-Four Canadians Say They’re Being Harassed on Social Media](#). Vancouver: Angus Reid Institute.

• see candidates as a human being, as a person with a pleasant person-
• ality...My dog was a star. He had little saddlebags with my campaign
• literature.”

• Clemenhagen doesn't feel that she faced much incivility and abuse,
• with only a few negative messages on Twitter or Facebook every week.
• She also tried to be “a little bit thick-skinned. So if someone wants to
• call me an airhead, who cares?”

• “I'm not hypersensitive, but there are swear words and there are swear
• words, right? The swear words used against women are often very
• sexually focused. So that is an issue because, as a woman, that does
• have more of an impact... I don't know what the equivalent is for male
• candidates. They would call them dishonest or stupid or whatever.”

• Clemenhagen saw her opponent, McKenna, face huge volumes of
• negative and abusive material. During the campaign, Clemenhagen and
• her fellow Ottawa Centre candidates, Emilie Taman (NDP) and Angela
• Keller-Herzog (Green Party), tried to push back against McKenna's
• ill-treatment. “We all put something on our accounts saying that it was
• very inappropriate and should not be happening. I don't know if it had
• any effect or not. But we certainly reacted to it.”

• Reflecting on the experience, Clemenhagen also realized if her posts
• were “a bit punchy, a bit more partisan toward Catherine McKenna,”
• they would get much more attention and engagement. “That kind of
• alarmed me,” she said. “It became really evident how easy it is to crank
• people up.”

SECTION 3: AMPLIFYING UNEQUAL REPRESENTATION

Canada's elected officials are more likely to belong to some social groups rather than others. Fewer than 1 in 3 MPs are women (29%), and racialized and Indigenous peoples have just begun to achieve levels of representation proportional to their populations. Canadians living with a disability and 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians remain significantly under-represented. This under-representation is the result of complex and historically-rooted factors. Online incivility and abuse contribute to the problem.

To address these complicated issues, we expanded our research beyond candidates in the 2019 election and interviewed an additional 12 women, 2SLGBTQ+, and racialized individuals who had faced significant abuse as elected officials. Our research suggests that the unequal impact of online incivility and abuse is not due to higher *frequencies*, but rather the *content* of messages, the *relationship* between incivility online and discrimination offline, and the *poisonous environment* created by gendered and racist attacks—most conspicuously, targeting women and racialized individuals who seek or hold the most senior positions in public life.

As a female mayor put it, “I think there’s a lot of there’s a lot of online criticism of men, too, but the tone is different. It’s not sexualized. It’s not misogynist. It’s just as a woman, as a public figure who’s a woman online. You’re subject to different things.”

Interviewees highlighted the need to discuss these issues in a way that does not exacerbate unequal representation. Many said that this requires being honest about online misogyny and racism, while also highlighting the fact that not all women and racialized politicians face high volumes of abuse, and that many do overcome the challenges it poses.

QUANTITY VS. CONTENT

Do women and racialized politicians receive higher levels of incivility online? The answer varies, depending on how incivility is defined, how it is measured, and which platforms are examined.

Our own study of Twitter messages during the 2019 federal election campaign has not yet detected that women received significantly higher – or lower – proportions of uncivil or abusive comments. Other

Canadian research found women in general received somewhat lower proportions of uncivil tweets, but women in the most senior roles (premiers and cabinet ministers) received a higher proportion of incivility than their male colleagues.³³ Studies of Twitter abuse directed at US politicians³⁴ and at candidates in the UK's 2019 election³⁵ similarly find few significant differences in the frequency of incivility faced by men and women.

In our study, racialized candidates appeared to get somewhat higher frequencies of abuse than white candidates, though the difference is not large or statistically robust. While there is less systematic research on racialized candidates, international studies have found that racialized women face higher levels of online harassment than white women.³⁶ Research in the US has identified extremely high volumes of abuse directed at prominent Muslim politicians.³⁷

Setting aside questions about the volume of abuse, there is good reason to believe the content of tweets directed at women and racialized candidates differs. Studies have found that women politicians receive higher proportions of sexist, sexualized, and identify-focused attacks.³⁸ Politicians in white-majority democracies who are visible ethnic, religious, or racial minorities also experience abuse that focuses on their racial or ethnic identity. For instance, initial findings on the 2020 US election suggest that women and non-white candidates receive more identify-focused attacks.³⁹ We thus make an important distinction between the quantity of online abuse, its content, and its impact on individuals.⁴⁰

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33 Rheault, L., et al. (2019) [Politicians in the Line of Fire: Incivility and the Treatment of Women on Social Media](#). *Research & Politics* 6(1): 1–7.

34 Theocharis, Y., et al. (2020) [The Dynamics of Political Incivility on Twitter](#). *SAGE Open* 10(2).

35 Gorrell, G., et al. (2020) [Which Politicians Receive Abuse? Four Factors Illuminated in the UK General Election 2019](#). *EPJ Data Science* 9(1): 18.

36 Amnesty International (2018) [Troll Patrol Findings: Using Crowdsourcing, Data Science & Machine Learning to Measure Violence and Abuse against Women on Twitter](#). London: Amnesty International.

37 Pintak, L, et al. (2019) [#Islamophobia: Stoking Fear and Prejudice in the 2018 Midterms](#). Brooklyn, NY: Social Science Research Council.

38 Sobieraj, S (2020) [Credible Threat: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy](#). Oxford University Press; Southern, R, and E. Harmer (2019) [Twitter, Incivility and 'Everyday' Gendered Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to UK Members of Parliament](#). *Social Science Computer Review*, Aug 5.

39 Guerin, C., and E. Maharasingam-Shah (2020) [Public Figures, Public Rage. Candidate Abuse on Social Media](#). London: *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.

40 For a similar framework, see Bardall, G., et al. (2019) [How Is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts](#). *Political Studies* (Online first).

TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Kathleen Wynne

From the start of her political career running for the Toronto school board in 1994, Kathleen Wynne has faced hostile voices. As an openly lesbian politician, these have often targeted her sexual orientation. Since her election to the Ontario legislature in 2003, Wynne has seen the volume and reach of harassment increase with the rise of social media.

“Personal attacks or harsh critiques are not new,” Wynne says, but politicians previously received this negativity in person or through the mail, so the public was largely unaware of those comments. “Now everybody knows about it. Everybody sees it. Public humiliation has become part of the equation because of social media.”

For Wynne, one challenge of managing online negativity is finding a balance between protecting her own well-being and staying informed of public discourse. “My staff would try to keep me from looking at Twitter, but I was like a moth to the flame, you know? Eventually I realized that I shouldn’t be reading too many of the comments. It wasn’t good for my mental health and it took too much time ... But I also never wanted to be completely protected from it. I wanted to know what was being talked about.”

As Ontario’s premier from 2013 to 2018, Wynne had a team dedicated to managing her social media. According to her director of communications, Facebook was a more productive platform than other social media for engaging the public, in part because users mostly seemed to use their real names and engaged in more substantial comments. But she found that even people apparently using their real names made abusive remarks.

“On Facebook you have a guy who lives in southwestern Ontario and his profile picture is of him and his daughter on the first day of Grade 1, and he is using hateful, misogynistic, violent language in response to things that the premier is sharing,” she says. “I found that very disturbing.”

Wynne’s team was conflicted about how much public attention to give to the abuse she received. On one hand, screening and hiding hateful language could reduce the overall volume of negativity, a strategy that protected the wellbeing of her team as well as other participants on her Facebook page. On the other hand, hiding abusive content could

- mask the severity of the issue. “There need to be some public accountability for what people say online,” Wynne says.
- Wynne believes it’s important to acknowledge and address online incivility, but not let it prevent people from actively participating in politics. “It’s nasty and it’s crude and it’s mean,” she says. “But at the end of the day, the only way we get things done in a democracy is if we move forward, and we put ourselves out and make ourselves vulnerable. That’s true whether it was in 1900 or whether it’s in 2020.”

SUBTLE AND OVERT MISOGYNY AND RACISM

The women, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals we interviewed told us that they frequently received online messages that targeted their gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, religious, or racial identities. Fourteen of the 18 women (or the staff who support them) whom we interviewed said they had experienced significantly negative online comments that targeted their gender. Many described the incivility they received as often being “misogynist,” “gendered,” or “sexualized.”

Gendered messages sometimes explicitly undermined a candidate’s right and ability to participate in politics. Interviewees mentioned that these kinds of attacks often focus on their bodies or appearance, with messages like “you’re a bimbo” and “those eyelashes aren’t real,” or comments about female genitalia. In other cases, the gendered dimension of incivility was more implicit. For instance, the staff member for a woman candidate in her thirties said the candidate frequently received dismissive comments such as, “You’re a child. You’re young. You’re ridiculous. You’re naïve.”

A number of interviewees believe that this is intentional and, indeed, a major goal of some of the worst online abuse directed at public figures. “It is designed to communicate to the woman politician that she ought not do anything ever, including being in that world in the first place,” said a former provincial cabinet minister.

Racialized candidates told us that comments directed at them sometimes had anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous, and anti-immigrant sentiments. For some high-profile candidates and their teams, it felt constant. “Pretty much any post would have something that, without much effort, you would call racist,” said an Indigenous candidate. “It wasn’t very hard to see it.”

Another Indigenous candidate suggested that sexualized posts about her fit into a context: “We have 5,700 Indigenous women who have gone murdered or missing, and part of the reason is because of hyper-sexualization of Indigenous women.”

For Black women, visible minority women, and Indigenous women, online harassment often did not feel like it was about a single aspect of their identity. One candidate, reflecting on insults targeted at her, said: “Why me? I’m a woman of colour, I am a minority on two fronts... So I sometimes can’t separate those two things...It’s a package.”

For 2SLGBTQ+ candidates, attacks were sometimes motivated by homophobia or transphobia. “Sometimes people were quite opposed to a political issue would degenerate into a verbal assault, and that’s when we would get the standard homophobic stuff,” said a staff member for a gay candidate.

Uncivil comments not only target certain people; they also target certain topics, including issues of gender, race, or religion. White and racialized candidates told us they encountered racist comments when they tweeted or posted about certain issues or communities, such as highlighting religious holidays or ceremonies for new citizens. One staff member told us: “We would put videos [about Muslim or Sikh Holidays] on social media and those would get a huge influx of negative xenophobic and racist comments.”

Some interviewees admitted that they have sometimes self-censored, staying away from topics they felt likely to result in abuse, including feminism, gun regulation, and environmental politics. As provincial MLA one explained, “It censors me. I completely censor my feminism. I don’t poke the bear.”

• **TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL**
• **Elizabeth May**

• Elizabeth May made history in 2011 as the first elected Member of Parliament for the Green Party of Canada, and she led the Green Party in the 2015 and 2019 federal elections.

• May uses Twitter as her primary social media platform. With over 300,000 Twitter followers, she found the platform to be “a valuable communication tool” during the election campaign. May has more concerns about Facebook. While the Green Party runs a page for May, she rarely uses the platform personally or professionally herself.

• May is concerned by what she sees as the largely-unregulated nature of social media platforms: “Why do women in politics face misogyny over which we have no control and no redress? Because these guys have managed to pull the wool over the eyes of governments to claim that they are not publishers.” Platforms, she argues, should be treated in the same way, and have the same responsibilities, as traditional print, radio, and television media.

• As a high-profile politician for nearly two decades, May is very familiar
• with online abuse and harassment, which she describes as a daily
• experience. “Some of it is just repeating lies, some of it’s just directly,
• hideously nasty,” she says, and violent threats are “frequent enough
• that it’s not pleasant.” This abuse is often directly tied to both her
• gender and her calls for action on climate change and other environ-
• mental issues.

• When faced with online abuse, May chooses not to block users. “I’ve
• seen that the trolls really celebrate themselves whenever someone
• blocks them,” she explains. She generally disregards messages from
• abusive accounts that she recognizes, but she recognizes that this
• protection strategy has clear limitations. “You’re vulnerable, of course,
• to the ones you don’t know the first time they write in.”

• May believes that online abuse and harassment not only influences
• what candidates or elected officials say about certain issues, it also
• impacts public opinion and democratic dialogue in a problematic way:
• “It leaves decent people out of the space because it’s so unpleasant to
• be in it.”

A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Incivility and abuse can have a greater impact when they amplify other experiences of violence or systemic discrimination. Those more likely to experience or fear threats, violence, and discrimination are also those under-represented in Canadian politics: Indigenous, women, visible minorities, Black, and 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians. Individuals living at the intersections of these identities are disproportionately affected.

As an Indigenous woman candidate explained, “It’s hard to separate my identity from my online experience. It’s a lived experience that also shows up online.”

Abuse and incivility on social media often do not begin or end online. Candidates and staff reported that they received abusive language, misogyny, homophobia, racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant sentiments by email, mail, telephone, on the doorstep while door-knocking, at campaign events, and at campaign and constituency offices. This was illustrated clearly when Liberal cabinet minister Catherine McKenna, who had received threats and abuse online during the campaign, had her constituency office defaced with a misogynistic slur shortly after the 2019 election. Several other candidates, including Conservative Mariam

Ishak, had campaign signs defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.⁴¹ In BC's 2017 provincial election, NDP candidate Morgane Oger was attacked by transphobic flyers distributed in her riding.⁴²

The interaction and online and offline prejudice or hostility can dampen people's desire to participate in politics. In the lead-up to the 2019 election in the UK, a significant number of MPs – predominantly women – declared that they would not run for again because of the abuse and hostility they had faced in public life.⁴³

Several interviewees told us that their experience of dealing with online abuse as candidates or staff made them less interested in running for office. The communications officer for a female cabinet minister admitted, "If I were ever interested in running, the level of abuse that's been directed at her would be a significant point of concern for me." A racialized, gay candidate observed: "So many people are worried about running because... [of] how many parts of their lives can be spun in a way that becomes super negative, that can be used in a problematic way against us, or weaponized in many ways. And that is scary."

Other interviewees argued that abuse directed at them, or people like them, sharpened their resolve to remain in public life. In her research, Angelia Wagner found that online harassment "succeeds in making women feel they are in a hostile political environment even as it fails to deter them from engaging in politics."⁴⁴

Nevertheless, obstacles to political participation by members of under-represented groups need to be addressed by political parties and policymakers, several interviewees told us. "Any party claiming inclusivity must develop and have these resources on hand," says a former provincial cabinet minister. "Women and marginalized people are at the highest risk. Without an official policy, you're tilting the playing field of politics toward the privileged."

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41 Tunney and Burke, [Fearing Violence, the RCMP Are Closely Watching Hateful Online Election Chatter](#).

42 Dunphy, M. (2019) [Human Rights Tribunal Orders Christian Activist to Pay Morgane Oger \\$55,000](#). *The Georgia Straight*, Mar 28.

43 Oppenheim, M. (2019) [Women MPs Standing down in Election over 'Horrible Abuse', Campaigners Warn](#). *The Independent*, 31 Oct.

44 Wagner, A. (2020) [Tolerating the Trolls? Gendered Perceptions of Online Harassment of Politicians in Canada](#). *Feminist Media Studies* (Online first).

TALES FROM THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Celina Caesar-Chavannes

Celina Caesar-Chavannes was elected in 2015 as the Liberal MP for the Ontario riding of Whitby, and served as a parliamentary secretary in cabinet. In 2019 she left the Liberal caucus to sit as an independent and announced she would not seek re-election.

During the 2015 election, Caesar-Chavannes found social media offered her the opportunity to share unfiltered messages with the public.

“When I did interviews on issues that I was passionate about, I found that sometimes the message that I was trying to get across wasn’t always getting across the way I intended,” she says. “I decided I don’t need traditional media as much... I put messages out on social media and let people follow me there.”

As Caesar-Chavannes’ public exposure rose, so did the harassment she received online. At several points, the severity of threats escalated substantially, requiring the involvement of the local police. The volume and intensity of online harassment changed depending on the issues that she publicly addressed. She faced a particularly virulent backlash, stoked by several high-profile right-wing commentators, when in 2019 she spoke publicly about the forms of discrimination she faced as a Black, woman parliamentarian.⁴⁵

Women and racialized individuals are often put in a bind in such situations, Caesar-Chavannes observes. They are targeted in part because of their gender or race, they are often expected to take the lead on addressing sexism and racism, and they are frequently criticized for playing the victim if they speak out about their own experiences.

Caesar-Chavannes argues that political parties should be ready to assist candidates and elected officials who are targeted, and felt her own party fell short. “I really thought the party would have reached out to be more and said, ‘How can we help you? What can we do?’” she says.

Others did step up, however, including several fellow politicians and a large “squad” of online supporters. “It was important to see that the squad was real, that allies were engaging.”

45 Stone, L. (2019) *Liberal MP Celina Caesar-Chavannes Says She Was Met with ‘Hostility, Anger’ in Private Trudeau Talks*. *Globe and Mail*, Mar 8.

SECTION 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

What can we do to decrease the harms of online incivility in Canadian politics? This is clearly a multi-faceted and deeply-rooted problem. Some actions can be taken in the short term to lessen the hardships faced by candidates, including by candidates themselves. More significant and systemic changes will require that institutions – including political parties, social media companies, policymakers – take action. Ultimately, addressing these issues requires long-term cultural and societal transformations.⁴⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGN TEAMS

When election candidates and other public figures complain about online incivility and abuse, they are often told that they simply need “thicker skin.” This advice is unhelpful for several reasons. First, the threats, hate, and insults that some candidates face are inexcusable and – in some cases – illegal. Second, it should not be on candidates’ shoulders alone to manage or simply endure incivility—political parties, social media platforms, and governments can help address this problem. Third, the idea of a “thicker skin” emphasizes passivity. Candidates can better manage incivility and abuse with informed and proactive strategies.

1. Develop a plan to address abuse and incivility

Many candidates and campaign staff told us that they had not made detailed plans to address online abuse and incivility, but rather developed their approach in an ad hoc and reactive manner. A more proactive approach has three advantages: campaign teams can take full advantage of the tools available to manage social media; they can prepare the organizational roles and social support needed to effectively address problems; and they can do so in ways that align with candidates’ communication styles and values.

Different candidates have different levels of tolerance for online incivility, different lived experiences that change the impact of abuse and threats, and even different understandings of how democracy and speech should be protected online. Candidates and elected officials need to decide on the principles that will shape their own strategies by considering what they are comfortable with, how they understand their responsibility as a public political figure, and what they think is necessary to protect democratic dialogue and free speech.

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46 Feenan, K. and K. Donovan (2019) [Online Culture Shift: Safer Platforms for Women in Politics](#). Ottawa: Public Policy Forum.

To turn their principles into action, campaign teams need to learn how to effectively use all the tools that platforms make available. They also need to decide who on their team will be responsible for implementing their plans, and for sharing the hardships that can come with doing so. Recognizing the cumulative impact on the mental health and well-being of candidates and their team, campaigns should—where possible—delegate responsibilities to multiple people and include clearly defined breaks from using the platform.

2. Communicate expectations for online engagement

Candidates and officials should publicly list their policies or guiding principles to identify and manage incivility and abuse.⁴⁷ Doing so can clarify the expectations for people who wish to engage with them. It can make the enforcement of these expectations more consistent and justifiable. Should a candidate face pushback from a citizen or social media user for blocking them or deleting their message, it is helpful to point to the rule that the user violated.

Planning and publicizing expectations for online behaviour can also help address concerns that public figures may violate people’s free expression. Candidates and especially elected officials do need to recognize that blocking and deleting content may impinge on freedom of expression and on political accountability.⁴⁸ While no case in Canada has addressed this issue to date, American courts have ruled against Donald Trump and other politicians who have blocked critics (though none of these cases addressed situations where people were threatening or hateful toward the politician, other individuals, or social groups).⁴⁹ Reasonable and consistently-enforced rules about unacceptable speech provide public figures with legal and political justifications for the actions they choose.

3. Promote healthier discourse - including from supporters

Candidates can encourage more productive online discussions through their own online posting and through their reactions to incivility and abuse directed at their opponents. For instance, Canada’s Samara Centre for Democracy has published tips for having productive political conversations online.⁵⁰ These include:

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47 Some already do. To take one example, Minister Maryam Monsef’s [Facebook page](#) states its “Guidelines for Respectful Engagement” and MP Michelle Rempel Garner posted a [flowchart on Twitter](#) to explain when she will block people.

48 Duffy, A. (2018) [Mayor Watson Makes Peace in Twitter War, Says He Will Unblock People](#). *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov 2; McIntosh, E. and F. Syed (2019) [Politicians Can Block You on Twitter. But Should They?](#) *National Observer*, Jul 3.

49 DeCell, C. and M. Krishnan (2020) [Public Officials Can’t Block Critics from Official Social Media Accounts](#). *Just Security*, Mar 30.

50 Morden, M. (2019) [The Samara Centre’s Field Guide to Online Political Conversations](#). Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.

- Practice slow politics: Quick responses are more likely to be thoughtless or aggressive;
- Remind people of shared identities and aims;
- Police your own side: Calling out incivility is most effective when it comes from someone on the same political team.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

Parties have an important responsibility to prepare their candidates, support them during elections, and help to set expectations for the behaviour of candidates and supporters. Party leadership is necessary to bring consistent attention to these issues. Some of these activities will be even more effective if there are cross-party or multi-partisan calls to action.

1. Provide appropriate training and resources for candidates and campaign teams

Social media training by parties tends to focus on how to use platforms to win elections. Parties should provide further training to candidates and their campaign teams to help them navigate and manage online incivility. This training should recognize that some candidates will come to politics with social media skills, while others will not. The training should also take into account the differences in campaign resources, including the number of volunteers and dedicated staff who might assist with social media management.

In addition to the generic ‘how-tos’ about platform tools and brand management – which are widely available for individuals and organizations – party training should more directly address the dynamics and challenges of electoral politics. This should include guidance on when to block, delete, mute, or reply, and the online and offline benefits and repercussions of these decisions. Parties may also wish to acquire and make available new technologies to help people address abusive messages safely and effectively.⁵¹

2. Provide support during campaigns that addresses diverse experiences and risks

Parties should be ready to step in and provide support and resources during the campaign period. Candidates and their teams frequently experience forms of abuse that they did not expect or cannot effectively manage, and require political advice and/or technical, legal, psychological, or staffing support.

When providing support or pre-campaign training, parties should be attentive to differences in candidates’ experiences and identities, and to campaign teams’ capacities and resources. For instance, parties should consider that:

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51 For some examples of these products in development, see [Tall Poppy](#), [Block Party](#) or [JSafe](#).

- Certain candidates are more likely to face identity-focused attacks, such as racialized or 2SLGBTQ+ candidates, and especially those who may be targeted on multiple dimensions, such as racialized women;
- Campaigns with fewer resources may need party headquarters to offer staffing assistance, so a targeted candidate and campaign team can take a break from social media abuse;
- Candidates targeted with false information may need help with a media strategy to minimize or counteract the reputational damage.

Parties need to plan in advance so they can provide support quickly. In the thick of campaigning, as one candidate put it, assistance is needed in “hours or days, not weeks.”

3. Establish codes of conduct or principled standards for candidates and party staff

Parties should encourage and support candidates to draft their own policies and practices for responding to incivility and abuse. Different candidates will have different sensitivities and tolerances for uncivil messages, as well as different strategies for managing them. However, parties should promote minimum standards or guiding principles, which candidates could adapt or build upon. Such standards could include:

- A commitment to remove hate speech that is being amplified via the accounts and pages of candidates, elected officials and parties;
- An agreement to refrain from blocking the accounts of citizens on the basis of their political viewpoint;
- An agreement for candidates to provide publicly-accessible expectations for user engagement on Facebook and Twitter, as well as provide guidelines for users and transparent justifications for blocking users or deleting their content.

Parties should also promote standards for the behaviour of their candidates and staff, and commit to hold accountable those who violate these guidelines. Just as parties have codes of conduct for other types of behaviour considered unacceptable, they should also clarify where they draw the lines on social media use.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLATFORMS

Social media companies have become major tools for election campaigns, and there are many proposals to address concerns about their policies regarding advertising, mis- and disinformation, and unequal effects on voter

participation.⁵² Social media companies should also take actions to reduce or mitigate the incivility and abuse faced by candidates and elected officials. For the most part, these are changes that would benefit all users, and not just those involved in politics. Platforms have been regularly updating their policies, particularly in the lead-up to the 2020 US election. But there is much more left to do.

1. Reduce deception via fake accounts, bots, and manipulated media

Many interviewees were frustrated to regularly face incivility and abuse from accounts that seemed not to be authentic individuals. While in some cases anonymity can be a good thing for freedom of speech, platforms can do a better job of labelling bots, anonymous accounts and manipulated media. Even if these aren't banned (and there are reasons they shouldn't be), labelling would make people aware and able to respond.

2. Develop clearer and more reliably enforced terms of service

Terms of service for platforms have developed in an ad hoc fashion. While they have grown considerably over time, they can also change as new infractions arise. For political candidates, it would be helpful to know from platforms when and why they act on particular user reports and not others. It is also unclear how reliably platforms enforce their own terms of service. This is a larger problem, but it often appears as if platforms respond more swiftly to violations that are raised by journalists or prominent figures. This creates equity problems for newer candidates or those who have fewer channels to raise awareness.

3. Design for civility

Platforms could prioritize design changes that encourage more civil discourse. Such changes are an important alternative to having users or platforms delete problematic messages. Options include:

- Requiring people to adhere to rules of civility before joining an online group improves their subsequent behaviour;⁵³

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52 Jaursch, J (2020) [Rules for Fair Digital Campaigning](#). Berlin: Stiftung Neue Verantwortung; Kornbluh, K., et al. (2020) [Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation](#). Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States; Tenove, C. (2020) [Protecting Democracy from Disinformation: Normative Threats and Policy Responses](#). The International Journal of Press/Politics 25(3): 517-537; Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression (2020) [Freedom and Accountability: A Transatlantic Framework for Moderating Speech Online](#). Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, and the Institute for Information Law, University of Amsterdam.

53 Matias, J.N. (2019) [Preventing Harassment and Increasing Group Participation through Social Norms in 2,190 Online Science Discussions](#). *Proc. of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116 (20), 9785–89.

- Introducing forms of “friction” to reduce the rapid spread of potentially uncivil, abusive, or false content.⁵⁴ For instance, Instagram and Twitter are testing a feature that detects problematic language and asks people whether they really want to post it.⁵⁵
- Developing new ways for users to control their social media engagements or exposure to abuse.

4. Improve transparency about patterns of abuse and responses to it

A major hurdle to our study was access to information from platforms. Facebook, for example, should increase data availability to researchers. Even researchers with access to Facebook’s CrowdTangle tool are not able to study comments directed at candidates, and therefore struggle to identify broad patterns in abuse that we have investigated on Twitter. Many other platforms such as TikTok and private messaging services like WeChat are also crucial. While privacy concerns mean that platforms cannot simply release all information, they can make information more accessible to researchers while maintaining appropriate safeguards. Otherwise, platforms will find that many politicians continue to assume the worst.

It would also be much easier to know how to use platforms’ tools if there were clearer evidence about their impact. It has long been unclear when and why platforms take action on user reports, and there is no reliable evidence on the effects of replying to, ignoring, or deleting negative remarks.

5. Treat every country’s election with the same level of importance.

Political candidates in the 2020 US federal election have a label on their Twitter profile that indicates they are candidates for a particular office, and most candidates have blue check marks to indicate “verified” accounts. The same was not true for candidates in Canada’s 2019 federal election. Twitter and other platforms should commit to creating fair and transparent processes for verifying accounts or providing other ways to identify authentic candidates in Canada. Every democracy’s elections deserve serious and equitable treatment.

Relatedly, some of our interviewees had great trouble getting social media companies to address the apparent misuse of platforms to attack them. Social media companies should be prepared to provide swift assistance to candidates in electoral periods, whether those candidates are prominent or newcomers, and whether or not they reside in platforms’ largest markets.

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54 Kornbluh, K., and E.P. Goodman. (2020) [How Social Media Platforms Could Flatten the Curve of Dangerous Misinformation](#). *Slate Magazine*, Aug 21.

55 Statt, N. (2020) [Twitter Tests a Warning Message That Tells Users to Rethink Offensive Replies](#). *The Verge*, May 5.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Canadian policymakers are already working on various aspects of platform regulation, such as addressing hate speech.⁵⁶ While there are broad discussions around approaches to platform governance,⁵⁷ here we suggest policies that can specifically address the particular problem of incivility and abuse directed at politicians and other public figures.

1. Clarify laws and police procedures to address threats and hate speech

Interviewees often did not know when to turn to the police, had mixed experiences with police responses, or were concerned that responses differed widely depending upon who they were or where they resided. Policymakers might consider whether to create national standards for consistent responses from law enforcement around questions of harassment.

Three federal ministers were given a mandate to address online hate speech (Justice; Canadian Heritage; and Diversity, Inclusion and Youth). Finding ways to define and address hate speech remains a crucial dimension of this puzzle, though it is worth remembering that hate speech is only one dimension of this issue. Addressing illegal hate speech is not a panacea.

2. Promote transparency of platforms

One stumbling block for both researchers and candidates themselves is lack of knowledge about platforms. If the platforms respond insufficiently to demands for increased transparency of data and users, this may need to be mandated by the federal government.

At the moment, companies have incentives for ignorance, because it is harder to be accountable for harms they don't measure, and because they face legitimate obstacles to sharing information about user activities.⁵⁸ Policymakers might consider creating a transparency regulator to facilitate tiered levels of access for government agencies, independent researchers, and the public.⁵⁹

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56 Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (2019) [Taking Action to End Online Hate](#). Ottawa: House of Commons, Canada.

57 Among others, see: Owen, T. (2019) [The Case for Platform Governance](#). Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation; Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics (2018) [Democracy Under Threat: Risks and Solutions in the Era of Disinformation and Data Monopoly](#). Ottawa: House of Commons, Canada; Tenove and Tworek, *Processes, People, and Public Accountability: How to Understand and Address Harmful Communication Online*.

58 Tworek, H. (2019) [Social Media Platforms and the Upside of Ignorance](#), in *Big Data, Platform Governance, Internet Governance*. Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation.

59 MacCarthy, M. (2020) [Transparency Requirements for Digital Social Media Platforms: Recommendations for Policy Makers and Industry](#). Amsterdam: Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression.

3. Support groups that are combatting online incivility, abuse and hate

While much policy attention is rightly devoted to the online space, policies should also aim to support people who can help address harmful communication, including:

- Civil society groups and technologists that are developing innovative responses to harmful communication;
- Providers of social and psychological assistance to help affected individuals address the online and offline impacts of harmful communication; and
- Content moderators employed by platform companies, who suffer serious consequences through work that aims to minimize harms to others.⁶⁰

4. Coordinate internationally to create solutions

Multiple reports have documented problems of abuse and harassment around the world. Canadian policymakers can learn from other countries and coordinate with them about how to regulate platforms or create feasible policies. This coordination could be both informal and formal. Policymakers might form international support networks to exchange best practices informally. Canada is already part of several international efforts that could address this problem, including the International Grand Committee on Big Data, Privacy and Democracy and the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace.⁶¹ Policymakers might also discuss this issue through more formal networks like the G7, G20, or the United Nations.

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60 Roberts, S.T. (2019) [Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media](#). New Haven: Yale University Press.

61 The [International Grand Committee](#), an ad hoc group of elected representatives from around the world, met in Ottawa in 2019. Canada is the [co-lead](#) for principle 3 of the Paris Call (Countering Election Interference) with Microsoft and the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

CONCLUSION

Online abuse of political candidates and elected officials is a global problem. Our report provides evidence of its extent and impact in Canadian politics. More research is needed to understand its full scale, scope, and consequences, across different online spaces and social identities. However, we already know enough to suggest how to improve the current situation. Our recommendations focus on actions parties can start now, steps candidates should undertake without waiting for party direction, and issues that platforms and parliaments could pursue to make a real and long-lasting difference. Ultimately, we will have a stronger and more inclusive democracy if aspiring politicians do not need to worry about trolling on the campaign trail.

