

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Risky visibility’: the online harassment of queer politicians

Elise Stephenson, elise.stephenson@anu.edu.au
Australian National University, Australia

Blair Williams, blair.williams@monash.edu
Monash University, Australia

Gosia Mikolajczak, gosia.Mikolajczak@anu.edu.au
Jack Hayes, jack.hayes@anu.edu.au
Australian National University, Australia

Politicians face high levels of public scrutiny and abuse online, with minoritised candidates experiencing qualitatively different treatment. Queer politicians, in particular, face ‘risky visibility’, where their sexuality, combined with other intersecting factors, leads to more personal harassment. Using queer and feminist theory, this article examines online harassment through two case studies focusing on (1) openly out Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer+ (LGBTIQ+) politicians from Australia’s 2022 federal election ($N = 8$) and (2) survey data from politically engaged young gender and sexually minoritised groups ($N = 98$). The analysis reveals that, unlike straight politicians, queer politicians receive more personal harassment (focused on appearance, sexual identity and gender performance) than political harassment (focused on party or policy issues). This harassment negatively impacts the political pipeline, creating a double bind for queer politicians and distracting from genuine political issues, with implications for democracy.

Keywords: online harassment • queer politicians • risky visibility • harassment • queer

Key messages

- Queer and non-queer politicians face roughly similar rates of online harassment.
- However, queer politicians are much more likely to receive more personal, vitriolic harassment than non-queer politicians.
- Queer politicians face a double bind, experiencing more personal hate that impacts them and distracts from genuine political debate.

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Introduction

As public figures, politicians are subject to high levels of public scrutiny and commentary, facing regular privacy and reputational costs from the media (Sutter, 2006). Engagement with traditional media, as well as increasingly social media, is a necessary part of politics yet also a key domain where politicians regularly face scrutiny, backlash and harassment (Krook and Sanin, 2019). One key and growing area of concern is the online harassment faced by leaders, including politicians (Gorrell et al, 2020; see Gordon, 2019; Collignon and Rudig, 2020), particularly those from minoritised backgrounds, for whom such harassment can be used as a tool to silence and discourage their wider participation in politics or leadership (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). While considerable attention has been devoted to the online harassment of women politicians (see, for example, Krook and Sanin, 2019; Wagner, 2022) and a growing body of literature explores the intersectional experiences of culturally and linguistically minoritised (CALM) politicians (see, for example, Leyton Zamora et al, 2022; Carson et al, 2023), the negative treatment of queer politicians online has received little attention, a gap we address through this study.

In this article, we use the term 'minoritised' to signify 'individuals and populations, including numerical majorities, whose collective cultural, economic, political and social power has been eroded through the targeting of identity in active processes that sustain structures of hegemony' (Selvarajah et al, 2020). Both visible identities, such as skin colour or age, and invisible identities that individuals may choose to reveal/hide or are not visible at a glance, like sexual orientation or gender identity, are relevant. We seek to understand the nature, prevalence and severity of the online harassment queer politicians face. Our research question explores whether queer politicians experience online harassment differently than their non-queer counterparts and theorises about what impact this finding might have on the political pipeline. Using data from two case studies conducted in the Australian context, we examined the quantity and nature of harassment received on Twitter by openly queer politicians who ran for office in the 2022 federal election (Study 1). While we found that queer politicians did not receive more harassment online than comparable straight politicians, they did receive qualitatively different harassment – much more personal and vitriolic. Drawing on and expanding Vivien Westwood's (2016) concept of 'risky visibility', we argue that queer politicians face specific visibility risks online, whereby their non-normative gender identity and/or sexuality combine with factors like political affiliation, ethnicity, age, disability and cultural background to contribute to more vitriolic, personal harassment online. This is mediated by online activity/presence, media presence/profile and public visibility.

To investigate the ramifications of these findings on the political pipeline, we conducted a follow-up study (Study 2) with a group of 98 young, politically engaged, gender and sexually minoritised Australian individuals to understand the degree to

which online harassment and perceptions of (the lack of) online safety influenced their intentions to run for office. Our results indicate that the online harassment that queer politicians experience has wider ramifications. We argue that the type of harassment that such politicians receive – more personal (focused on appearance, sexual identity and gender performance) as opposed to political (focused on party or policy issues) – may distract and lower the quality of public policy and the scrutiny of ‘real’ policy issues. Additionally, as indicated by our follow-up study, such online harassment impacts diverse individuals’ motivation to pursue public office. In other words, queer politicians’ differential treatment matters.

Australia is an excellent case to study the online harassment of queer politicians, with the 2022 Australian federal election and 47th Parliament the most diverse ever in Australia’s history (Remeikis, 2022). The fact that there are more openly queer politicians than before means not only that we are able to study them but also that this group is more visible, which may trigger threats to the status quo. Indeed, beyond the psychological and career effects of harassment on individual candidates, such attacks also impact the pipeline of politicians. This harassment even impacts democracy itself by stymying democratic dialogue between and within citizen-representatives and creating ‘toxic’ parliamentary workplaces, impacting nations’ abilities to actually represent their constituents, which is particularly important in representative parliamentary democracies like Australia (Cass and Rubenstein, 1995; Sawer and Maley, 2024). By exploring and comparing the harassment received by queer and heterosexual Australian political candidates, we contribute to theoretical debates around media framing and the harassment of candidates who are non-normative to the political status quo, furthering an understanding of parliamentary workplace safety and its impacts on minoritised groups. We also produce empirically rich data on the social media treatment of queer politicians and how queer othering is used in online spaces.

Literature review

As high-profile public figures, politicians are frequently the subject of vitriolic social media coverage and engagement (Sobieraj et al, 2020). While criticism is an expected part of the professional life of a politician, comments targeting minoritised groups (for instance, women, candidates from multicultural backgrounds, the queer community, religious minorities or any intersecting combination of these demographics) may be particularly harmful given their personal nature. As Ackerly et al (2019) note, ‘hetero-patriarchy, misogyny, and racism are not new’; however, they do have specific implications in the online realm. Even if targeted politicians are able to shrug off vilification, the existence of this abuse and failure to address it (or indeed its toleration by social media providers) has broader implications for the oppression of minorities everywhere. The established set of literature on political violence, harassment and intimidation provides important theories on which this research draws (for example, on incivility, sexualised violence and the impact of harassment in terms of silencing participation [see Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019; Krook and Sanin, 2020; Carson et al, 2023]). With a dearth of research on the impact of online spaces and harassment specific to queer politicians, the following review explores existing scholarship on the experiences of women in politics and of queer people generally, on the distinctly gendered and sexualised nature of this harassment, and on its implications for diverse

representation in politics to provide a background for understanding the context in which queer politicians operate online.

Doing politics online: the necessity and the consequences

Social media platforms have greatly accelerated the capacity for politicians and the public to directly communicate with one another (Parmelee and Bichard, 2011). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of usual electoral and campaign processes has led to digital campaigning becoming much more critical (Virtosu, 2022). This means that the need to engage in politics online has grown significantly – and opting out is often not an option. While social media can facilitate both interpersonal and mass communication, coined by O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) as 'masspersonal communication', it also offers anonymous spaces for online abuse and harassment between politicians and the public (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020; Southern and Harmer, 2021). Social media companies have struggled to introduce regulatory frameworks into their platforms and often rely on self-regulation and limited emerging national frameworks (Smith and Urbas, 2022). Additionally, social media has collapsed the 'dialogue distance' between political representatives and the public. Consequently, the volume of online harassment has steadily increased, accelerated by 'online disinhibition', whereby, due to the anonymous nature of online spaces, individuals participate in abusive activities that they would not otherwise do in person (Every-Palmer et al, 2015; e-Safety Commissioner's 2023).

Given that there is little research on the harassment of queer politicians, this study draws significantly on related research on gender and political harassment. Women politicians or electoral candidates are particularly vulnerable to gendered political violence (Krook, 2020; Krook and Sanin, 2019; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2023; Håkansson, 2024). Women politicians are particularly impacted by the negative consequences of online trolling. In Sweden, Erikson et al (2021) found that experiences of abuse for men and women politicians did not differ substantially in terms of the frequency of online abuse, but women experienced significantly higher rates of comments relating to their gender or sexuality than their male colleagues. Likewise, Gorrell et al (2020) found that, on average, while men experienced more incivility (that is, they received more general and political abuse), women received more sexist abuse. In the UK, Akhtar and Morrison (2019: 324) also found qualitatively different harassment received by men and women: while women reported less online social media abuse than men, they were subject to a greater variety of forms of abuse, 'with the majority being personal in nature'. This included sexual abuse, threats of physical violence to friends or family, or death or rape threats. While men tend to get targeted for their 'integrity and character', attacks against women are 'usually sexual in nature' (Kassam, 2018: 77). Bardall et al (2019) reiterate the gendered experience of political violence by identifying its three gendered dimensions: gendered motives that preserve patriarchal hegemony; gendered forms that speak to the differences in men and women politicians experiencing harassment; and gendered impacts as to how audiences interpret acts of political violence.

To date, research examining the effects of trolling on female politicians has tended to emerge from Canada (Briggs, 2000; Wagner, 2022), the UK (Akhtar and Morrison, 2019; Gorrell et al, 2020) and the US (Herrick et al, 2021). Gorrell et al (2020) found that a 'record' number of women UK politicians in 2019 stated that they would not

be standing for re-election, citing abuse and hostility as a key reason – although it is noted that this was not necessarily or primarily online abuse. Additionally, [Akhtar and Morrison \(2019\)](#) found that while both men and women received trolling, male politicians were more concerned about the reputational damage resulting from the trolling, while women politicians were more concerned about safety. Consequently, women’s targeted negative experiences with online trolling, political campaigns and a lack of safety as such can be a driver for exiting politics ([McGrane, 2022](#); [Carson et al, 2023](#)). This matters because it potentially chokes the political pipeline for women’s representation to other tiers of government and hampers the normative goal of achieving gender parity, further emphasising the capacity for hate speech to ‘marginalise, silence and disempower’ ([Gelber, 2011](#): 84).

[Krook \(2017\)](#) argues that the sexualised nature of violence against women and other minorities is intended to intimidate them into silence. Through lewd comments, smear campaigns, physical assault and exclusion from public spaces, cultural norms and traditions are utilised to both reduce opportunities for political participation and ensure that such spaces remain unsafe for them. Therefore, online abuse is problematic not only in and of itself but also for what it achieves. [Gelber \(2011\)](#) makes the distinction between speech that is simply offensive and ‘hate’ speech; the former may be unpleasant or unprovoked, but the latter serves to, even inadvertently, dehumanise, degrade and incite violence or discrimination against particular groups. The targeted qualities are often visible and unchangeable, such as ethnicity or gender, but may also include identities that people consider important or inextricable to their public identity, such as religion or sexuality. Online abuse, therefore, is not only offensive but also has repercussions beyond the offending of individual politicians. Hate speech upholds systems of power, whether predicated on patriarchy, capital or ethno-hegemony.

Queering politics: beyond gender and political harassment

While online gender and political harassment has been studied to varying degrees, the online experiences of queer people and queer politicians have received limited attention. From the existing literature, queer populations in general often face online abuse based on their gender expression or sexual orientation. A 2021 study found that 70 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual adults in the US reported experiences of online harassment, with 51 per cent of respondents considering the abuse ‘severe’ or sexualised in nature and many attributing their sexual orientation as the primary reason for the abuse ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)). In Australia, the [e-Safety Commissioner \(2023\)](#) found that while 35 per cent of women studied had experienced online abuse, this was significantly higher (at 51 per cent) for those who identified as Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer+ (LGBTIQ+). While the phenomenon of the online ‘public square’ is still relatively new ([Berry and Taylor, 2017](#)), existing scholarship indicates that social media has proven to be a potentially fraught and dangerous space for queer individuals, both intrinsic to and hostile towards queer identity ([Akmeşe and Deniz, 2017](#)).

Even withstanding the public spotlight applied to politicians generally (for example, for political transparency and accountability), queer politicians may be more likely to attract high levels of public scrutiny due to there being ‘something sufficiently novel, interesting, [and] important’ about them to ‘attract close attention and interference

from observers and exchange partners' (Sutton and Galunic, 1996: 205). Indeed, even though the 47th Australian Parliament is the most diverse yet, queer politicians are still a minority of candidates, being 3.5 per cent of all candidates in Australia at federal, state and local levels (29 total) and about 2 per cent of all Congress members in the US (13 total) (Parliament of Australia, 2022; Schaeffer, 2022). The consequence of this minoritisation is the exacerbation of the 'moral regulation of non-traditional lifestyles and identities' already imposed upon sexual minorities in a heterosexist society (Gamez-Guadix and Incera, 2021; Wagner, 2021: 502). Such moral regulation, in turn, increases the likelihood of their being portrayed as 'threats' to the political status quo, whether overtly or subconsciously, by the media, fellow politicians and constituents alike (Taylor and Pye, 2019). This fuels the production of an environment that is increasingly hostile to any attempts to subvert traditional gender and social roles and identities, thus leading to increased sanctions of perceived breachers and harsher policies of containment. While this study is one among few focused specifically on queer politicians, emerging insights highlight that the hostility and harassment received as part of entering public office is often perceived as not 'worth' the stress (Wagner, 2022: 2).

The implications of online abuse

The literature indicates that the impact of targeted online attacks against queer individuals is significant. As online sexualised abuse is often intended to weaponise organisational and social power and maintain oppressive norms and power structures (Gamez-Guadix and Incera, 2021), its normalisation aids in emphasising that minoritised individuals do not belong in political – or online public – spaces (Kassam, 2018: 78). Condemnation of such abuse can be further used to 'other' the individual (Dalton, 2019) and demonstrate that they are either not resilient enough for political life (Ross, 2002: 196) or simply 'playing the gender card' – or perhaps 'queer card' in this case (Sawer, 2013: 115). Further, sexualised abuse can be used to undermine the power of minoritised representatives: by objectifying them and equating their worth to nothing more than their sexual appeal (or disapproval), minoritised individuals are reminded of their status as 'outsiders' and unwelcome encroachers on positions of leadership.

Beyond the psychological effects of harassment on well-being, such attacks also have broader implications for politicians as representatives and democratic figureheads. The disproportionate amount of gendered, racialised and sexualised abuse faced by minoritised representatives can limit their ability to utilise their social media as platforms for engagement (Sobieraj et al, 2020). It can also damage their chances of re-election or political mobility due to the negative effects that such identity-based attacks may have on public perceptions of their personas. On a broader level, online harassment may facilitate a general decline in effective democratic participation (McGrane, 2022). By transforming the online political spaces of representatives from avenues of democratic transparency and engagement into hostile spaces of harassment and abuse, the chances for democratic dialogue between and within citizen-representative relationships are further reduced (Sobieraj et al, 2020).

The high costs of participation for queer representatives therefore hold significant consequences for policy. As minorities themselves, such politicians serve as key advocates for marginalised individuals within their constituencies, sponsoring

pro-queer bills and educating their colleagues on queer issues (Haider-Markel, 2010). They also serve as key signalling figures to their constituents: given their unique position as marginalised individuals with significant policy knowledge themselves, their stances on policy issues and proposed bills are often used to inform the opinions of their audiences. Despite gaps in the literature, there are sufficient accounts detailing the experiences of women and other minoritised candidates to understand that online harassment holds significant implications for democracy. While online harassment has mixed effects in deterring potential candidates from running for office, it fosters a ‘hostile political environment’ that limits their ability and willingness to do their job and remain in office (Wagner, 2022: 1).

Overall, the literature highlights that there are multiple risks for queer politicians associated with the online domain. Women are more likely to experience online harassment that is sexual in nature, queer youth and adults are more likely to experience ‘severe’ and ‘sexualised’ abuse online, and online harassment is a deterrent to minoritised representation in politics, queer included. This presents an opportunity for this study to provide details and nuance regarding the following: the amount and types of online harassment that queer politicians receive; the risks associated with their online engagement; and the ramifications for others following in their footsteps – or for democracy in general.

Theoretical framework: risky visibility

We draw on the concept of ‘risky visibility’ to explore online harassment received by queer and non-queer politicians in Australia. This follows trends identified in the literature and previous research on queer international leaders (Stephenson, 2020), which highlighted the significance of using (in)visibility as a lens to understand queer people’s experiences in high-profile positions of leadership (Stephenson, 2024). Our conceptualisation of risky visibility draws on and extends Westwood’s (2016) analysis of queer aged care, where she used the term to differentiate between invisibility, which can cause feelings of isolation and loneliness, and ‘risky’ visibility, which encompasses prejudice and discrimination when disclosing sexuality or gender identity. Queer politicians’ identity – and queer people’s more generally – can be both visible and invisible. If they are ‘out’ entirely (publicly and in private or to close family or friends), they may be subject to greater overt instances of homophobia or heterosexism. Yet, even if they are not ‘out’, or are only partially ‘out’, homophobia, heterosexism and abuse can still impact them, even if only indirectly because they pervade key environments in which they operate (online, political, workplace and so on). Indeed, in Stephenson’s analysis of queer women in international affairs, she finds that even heterosexual women can be typified as queer and face homophobia, reinforcing the relevance of queerness as a lens for understanding the harassment of leaders. However, for queer politicians, this general context of incivility and heterosexism can also be coupled with the burden of invisibility, isolation and, in some cases, stereotyping regardless of their ‘out’ or not ‘out’ status. In other words, we conceptualise risky visibility as additional risks or challenges associated with queerness – although we recognise that there may be other groups that also face risky visibility, such as those with invisible disabilities or who are neurodivergent, for instance.

While sexuality and gender identity are key lenses through which we look in this article, we have taken an intersectional approach to the study of harassment.

As such, based on the literature and triangulated by our data, we identify the following key identity characteristics relevant to the nature of harassment received: non-normative gender or sexuality, alongside an analysis of ethnicity, age, disability, class or appearance, and non-centrist party affiliation. These identity markers are explored in detail in separate data from this research due to space limitations here (see [Williams et al, forthcoming](#)).

Exacerbating or mediating factors have been adopted from the typology developed by the e-Safety Commissioner in Australia who highlights that online activity/presence, media presence/profile and public visibility can also exacerbate harassment (alongside LGBTIQ+ identity, experience of disability and sexism). As such, exacerbating or mediating factors for harassment that were relevant to our study included: whether or not a candidate was actively using their identity in their campaign or proposed policies ('As a member of this community' and so on); their prominence; intersectionality and the associated layering of harassment (for example, based on one's sexuality and ethnicity or disability); and whether they were affiliated with a minor party. This could broadly be categorised as (1) their degree of visibility and (2) the content of that visibility.

Methodology

The data in this article are based on two studies. Study 1 examines the nature, prevalence and severity of online harassment of queer politicians, while Study 2 explores the consequences of such online harassment on individual candidates (or prospective candidates) and politics.

Study 1: Analysis of online harassment using Twitter in the Australian 2022 federal election

For the first study, we selected two samples of queer and non-queer political candidates to explore differences in online harassment during the 2022 Australian federal elections (approximately six weeks from the announcement of the election until one week post-election). The queer sample consisted of all 'out' (openly queer) candidates with an active Twitter account during the election period (for the purpose of the analysis, we excluded candidates who received fewer than 50 tweets in total across the study period; we also had to limit our analysis to accounts that remained active post-election, when we accessed the data). This resulted in a sample of eight queer candidates. For the purposes of locating a non-queer comparative sample, there were a number of limitations and considerations. The Australian House of Representatives has 151 seats and the Senate has 76 seats. This limited the sample of non-queer candidates.

From the outset, it was anticipated that both queer and non-queer participants would experience, to some extent, harassment on the basis of political affiliation, gender, ethnicity and age. To isolate and differentiate harassment experienced by queer versus non-queer candidates, we attempted to match queer politicians with comparable non-queer participants on the basis of party affiliation, electorate, gender, ethnicity, age and time in politics (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)). In some cases, we had to use our understanding of the political culture and individual politicians to provide a close 'like for like' match. As a representative parliamentary democracy, Australia predominantly operates on a two-party system, with minor parties and independent candidates in

Table 1: Out queer politicians studied

Candidate name	Party	House	State	Sexuality	Gender	Ethnic background	Incumbent?	Win?	Total # of tweets
Penny Wong	ALP	Senate	South Australia (SA)	Lesbian	Cis woman	Malaysian Australian	Yes	Yes	25,576
Julian Hill	ALP	House	Victoria (VIC)	Gay	Cis man	White Australian	Yes	Yes	6,561
Nita Green	ALP	Senate	Queensland (QLD)	Lesbian	Cis woman	White Australian	Yes	Yes	535
Tim Wilson	Liberal	House	VIC	Gay	Cis man	White Australian	Yes	No	40,724
Janet Rice	Greens	Senate	VIC	Bisexual	Cis woman ^a	White Australian	Yes	Yes	1,635
Rachael Jacobs	Greens	House	New South Wales (NSW)	Queer	Cis woman	Indian Australian	No	No	184
Claire Garton	Greens	House	QLD	Trans	Trans woman	White Australian	No	No	303
Stephen Bates	Greens	House	QLD	Gay	Cis man	White Australian	No	Yes	993

Note: ^aJanet Rice was married to the late Dr Penny Wheton, who was a transgender woman.

Table 2: Non-queer politicians studied

Candidate name	Party	House	State	Sexuality	Gender	Ethnic background	Incumbent?	Win?	Total # of tweets
Zoe Daniel	Independent	House	VIC	Straight	Cis woman	White Australian	No	Yes	33,506
Graham Perrett	ALP	House	QLD	Straight	Cis man	White Australian	Yes	Yes	1,255
Lidia Thorpe	Greens (at the time of analysis)	Senate	VIC	Straight	Cis woman	Indigenous	Yes	Yes	985
Anthony Chisolm	ALP	Senate	QLD	Straight	Cis man	White Australian	Yes	Yes	547
Barbara Pocock	Greens	Senate	SA	Straight	Cis woman	White Australian	No	Yes	559
Simon Birmingham	Liberal	Senate	SA	Straight	Cis man	White Australian	Yes	Yes	18,805
Deborah O'Neill	ALP	Senate	NSW	Straight	Cis woman	White Australian	Yes	Yes	90
David Shoebridge	Greens	Senate	NSW	Straight	Cis man	White Australian	No	Yes	5,027

minority governments at times holding the balance of power. This resulted in a final selection across the two major parties, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) (centre-left) and the Liberal Party of Australia (centre-right), and minor parties and independents, such as the Greens (environmentalist-left). In [Table 1](#), we have coded the gender of queer candidates as per how they have referred to themselves publicly. Likewise, politicians have been coded as ‘queer’ based on how they identify publicly.

We collected our corpus from the Twitter microblogging platform using Twitter API v2 Academic research access, which provided us with access to all public tweets. Given our focus on the Australian federal election, we retrieved tweets published between 10 April 2022 and 28 May 2022 – a period from the announcement of the election date, encompassing the election campaign and one week following the election to capture reactions to the election results. To collect tweets mentioning the selected politicians, we retrieved the official Twitter handle (account name) of each politician, which we then used as a filter for data scraping. Thus, our corpus included all public tweets addressed at selected politicians during the election period (including original tweets, replies to a thread in which the politician was marked as a recipient and comments on tweets in which the politician was mentioned). Prior to the main analysis, we pre-processed our corpus by removing all duplicated tweets and retweets and stripping the text of URLs and extra white spaces.

There are limitations to this approach, for instance, not using a handle when writing derisively about a person/organisation is a strategy pursued on Twitter, meaning that we have missed capturing these data, which could potentially alter the results (for instance, on the prevalence of harassment). However, general derisive commentary that does not target the individual (via a handle) is less likely to reach the candidate directly and so therefore perhaps likely to be of less effect. It is also possible that harassing tweets that are not targeted at a handle are eventually retweeted targeting the individual (which was something we saw occur), which means that it is likely that we have captured the most popular/retweeted/vitriolic abuse of this kind.

To detect abusive tweets, we used an extensive list of slurs, offensive words and identity markers compiled based on previous research looking at online abuse ([Farrell et al, 2019](#); [Gorrell et al, 2020](#)), supplemented by a list of words specific to the Australian political context (for example, ‘#uap’ and ‘@australianlabor’) and transphobia (which was not included in previous studies on this topic), created for the purpose of the current study. In our analysis, politically abusive tweets were operationalised as tweets mentioning any of the slurs (for example, ‘moron’ and ‘asshole’) or offensive terms (for example, ‘coward’ and ‘prick’) in combination with one or more of the political identity markers (for example, ‘*liberal*’ and ‘lefty’). Homophobic tweets were operationalised as tweets mentioning either a homophobic term (for example, ‘faggot’) or tweets mentioning a slur or an offensive term in combination with a queer status marker (for example, ‘*gay’ and ‘*queer*’). Similar rules were applied to identify transphobic, sexist and racist tweets. While Twitter’s automated content moderation recognises and flags the use of explicit slurs, users often bypass this by substituting some letters for numerals or symbols (such as an @ in place of the letter ‘a’). These substitutions were taken into consideration while analysing the data. A full list of words used is provided in the Appendix. It should be noted that for the purpose of analysis, we have retained the original grammar, spelling and punctuation of all quoted tweets in the following.

Following data collection, we conducted quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, including both automated and manual discourse analysis. The qualitative analysis first involved a general analysis of the tweets for the accuracy of categorisation through the automated process. Then, a more detailed reading of responses was conducted to understand specific trends to extract more detailed insights about the information found. The process involved manually reading through the tweets addressed to each politician. This methodological choice was particularly important given that [Vilares and Alonso \(2016\)](#) highlight that there are difficulties and controversies regarding computational analyses. As such, we draw on [Torregosa et al \(2022\)](#) and [Wang’s et al \(2021: 8\)](#) methodological approach: ‘the incorporation of qualitative analyses, such as discourse and/or narrative analysis might provide a further understanding of the tweet’s meanings, the act of framing, and of the intentions of the political leaders’. This qualitative approach to analysis was also critical given the small sample of queer and non-queer candidates analysed (16 total).

The data set provided many opportunities for qualitatively rich data analysis, which became our focus after the initial finding that queer politicians did not appear to experience a significantly higher proportion of harassing tweets compared to non-queer politicians (this is consistent with earlier studies on women politicians). Our mixed-methods approach enabled us to understand both the proportion of tweets that were abusive or characterised as harassment and the qualitative nature of that harassment. While defining ‘harassment’ is a difficult task, we have drawn on the [e-Safety Commissioner’s \(2023\)](#) understanding of online harassment as relevant to queer populations. That is to say, while examples of outright cyber-abuse and lateral abuse (abuse between members in a community) were relatively easy to identify, low-level micro-aggressions were harder to identify and relied more extensively on a qualitative ‘reading’ of the tweets in context. For the purposes of this research, we have grouped the overt ‘abuse’ and low-level micro-aggressions under the one banner of harassment; however, we recognise that there are limitations in this approach in terms of understanding the proportion of more severe and overt harassment and more casual and covert harassment.

Why Twitter?

We chose Twitter¹ as a core platform to study because, at the time, it was one of the platforms most prevalently used by politicians and is a social media platform often recognised as one of the most contentious for politicians over a campaign period, providing a window into understanding the front lines of civil-candidate engagement and harassment ([Vromen, 2018](#)). Recent changes to Twitter’s regulatory framework that have undermined its capacity to process the flagging of hate or discriminatory speech positioned it as an ideal platform for the purposes of our analysis. For hate or discriminatory speech aimed specifically at queer people, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) provides Twitter with the lowest score among five social media competitors on its Platform Scorecard, which assesses online safety for queer users ([GLAAD, 2024](#)). In addition, the backsliding of Twitter since this research commenced is evidenced in matters relating specifically to queer people. The new owner of Twitter, Elon Musk, spent 2023 Pride month liking transphobic tweets, while the words ‘cis’ or ‘cisgender’ were banned, being considered slurs on the platform ([Hatmaker, 2023](#)). These changes unfortunately ensure that Twitter

will remain a platform for the future analysis of queer-phobic content, as well as its impacts, so long as such content is allowed to proliferate unregulated.

Study 2: Analysis of survey results of the perceptions of young women and gender minorities of politics as a career

Study 2 was conducted during the Global Institute for Women's Leadership's Youth Summit in Brisbane, Australia, in October 2023. The Summit was attended and facilitated by young gender equality advocates from across Australia, comprising a range of gender and sexuality identities, cultures and ethnicities, experiences of disability, and urban and rural backgrounds. These participants were more likely to be a proactive and politically engaged group than the broader age cohort they represented and are thus not representative of young people or Australians generally but, rather, a purposively sampled group of politically engaged young people. As such, this was a highly relevant group to our study, given the accessibility difficulties in reaching politically engaged young people who also had experiences of intersectional minoritisation that could be helpful to our study.

After gaining appropriate ethics approval from the Australian National University (2022/359), we conducted an online survey using the survey platform Qualtrics, which was available for participants to access via QR codes posted throughout the conference venue. We sought to understand the barriers and opportunities to their political engagement, participation and representation, with online safety, trolling and harassment canvassed as one theme. We also asked about their attitudes towards politics and what political representation means to them.

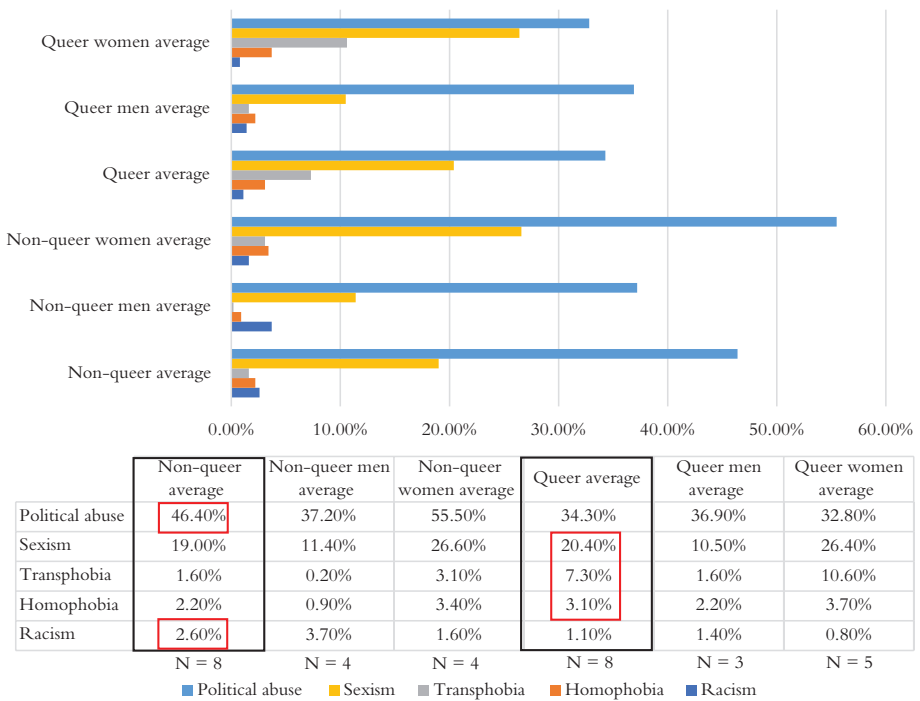
Of the 98 individuals who took part, 60 per cent described their sexual orientation as straight, with the other 36 per cent describing their sexuality as queer in some way (bisexual, queer, lesbian, gay, homosexual or using a different term). A total of 2 per cent preferred not to say, and 2 per cent did not know their sexuality. In terms of gender identity, 92 per cent identified as women, 3 per cent as agender and 2 per cent as non-binary. On top of this, 6 per cent identified as transgender or gender diverse. The mean age was 25 years, 22 per cent further identified as having a disability, and 21 per cent were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. All were politically active in some way, for instance, through either having run for politics before, joining a political party, starting their own petition, campaign or project, or volunteering. While this group was not exclusively a group of politically engaged young queer people, the high proportion of queer people in the sample is relevant to this study, and we have isolated their experiences in particular in the data reported in this article. This additional data set has allowed us to build on Study 1 to understand how online harassment may impact gender and sexually minoritised individuals and shape their intention to be more politically engaged or run for politics.

Findings

Study 1: Online harassment received by queer and non-queer politicians in Australia

Due to small sample sizes, 'differences' in the text refer to qualitative evaluations, not statistical comparisons. Overall, we did not find a significant difference in the proportion of Twitter harassment received by queer and non-queer politicians, with

Figure 1: Comparison of types of abuse by queer and non-queer identity



8.2 per cent of tweets that queer politicians received categorised as harassment, compared to 7.2 per cent for straight politicians. Figure 1 highlights differences in the types of harassment received, with straight politicians receiving more politically abusive tweets surrounding party or policy platforms, while queer politicians are more likely to receive homophobic, transphobic and sexist abuse.

When breaking down the types of harassment received by queer and straight politicians at an aggregated level in Figure 1, specific differences emerge.² Outlined in red are the highest average rates of each specific type of abuse per queer and non-queer politicians. We found that, on average, queer politicians faced 12.1 percentage points less political abuse than their heteronormative counterparts (comprising 34.4 per cent of abusive Tweets, as opposed to 46.4 per cent) but higher rates of sexism, transphobia and homophobia. This does suggest that queer political candidates are more likely to face more harassment based on identity than non-queer politicians.

However, what is clear (and perhaps not surprising given the literature) is that across both queer and non-queer politicians, gender also has a very strong impact on harassment received. For instance, both queer women and non-queer women face more than twice as much sexist harassment as men (both queer and non-queer). They also face more transphobia and homophobia, and non-queer women face almost 20 percentage points more political abuse.

The findings generally suggest that queer politicians received more sexism, transphobia and homophobia, that is, more personal, identity-based harassment. Non-queer politicians, in general, received more political abuse and racist abuse. While these findings are somewhat limited by our sample, as well as the methodological

limitations of our study (difficulties in categorising all types of harassment given myriad examples of more covert or more overt forms of harassment, for instance), it highlights that both women and queer people are more likely to receive abuse targeting their identity or non-normative background than men and, particularly, non-queer men. This suggests that not only do queer politicians face risky visibility but that other identities that might be considered non-normative to the prevailing political culture (for example, women, First Nations people or other cultural and linguistic minoritised groups) also face risky visibility. Our findings also echo those of [Di Meco and Brechenmacher \(2020: para 6\)](#), who found that online attacks targeting male politicians mostly related to their professional duties, whereas those directed at female politicians were ‘more likely to focus on their physical appearance and sexuality and include threats of sexual violence and humiliating or sexualized imagery’. They also open the door for more qualitative analysis of these broad aggregated trends, which we conducted by manually reading through the tweets categorised.

The following tables explore the mediating or exacerbating factors that surfaced throughout our data, the literature and the e-Safety Commissioner’s typology of online harassment. [Tables 3 and 4](#) outline candidates’ prominence, use of identity (for queer participants), intersectionality and party.

Using this framework for understanding the mediating or exacerbating factors, it is revealing to analyse qualitative differences in harassment received. Claire Garton (trans, Greens, high prominence but low tweets) stands out as receiving both the most political abuse and the most sexist abuse of those studied. Drawing on the e-Safety Commissioner’s typology of factors that exacerbate or mediate harassment, while Claire Garton is not a high-profile candidate, as compared to someone like current Foreign Minister Penny Wong (Australia’s highest-ranking openly queer woman of colour), she does have a level of prominence in terms of her queer identity, and she does use it in her profile: ‘a parent, LGBT+ advocate, social campaigner and ICT professional’. Comments she received further highlight transphobia and ableism, as well as judgements and assumptions based on appearances. Indeed, Claire Garton received substantial comments on her physical appearance, amplified by her non-conforming look (for instance, she was the only political candidate with blue hair).

Comments in the following sections are drawn from some of the most indicative tweets for each candidate. Comments for Claire Garton included identity-based comments such as: ‘I wouldn’t vote for you based on looks alone’, ‘is one ugly cross eyed mf [motherf*cker]’ and ‘effen freak show’.

By far the recipient of the most transphobic abuse was Senator Janet Rice (bisexual, Greens, high prominence and relatively low tweets), a vocal and strident champion of transgender rights. She is someone with arguably more prominence than Garton, as an incumbent, and also someone quite vocal in the use of her identity/queer activism as part of her platform. We have grouped criticism of Rice’s defence of trans people into three broad categories: (1) general transphobia (‘Trans is totally fake but pretend all you want. Just stay away from kids you weirdo.’); (2) transphobia as a means of ‘protecting’ children (‘When her husband shattered her life by revealing his fetish and she decided to make a generation of Australian children suffer, rather than face reality.’); and (3) transphobia as a means of ‘protecting’ cisgender women (‘If you want to let males into womens spaces, then it’s you who doesn’t care about women’). Many of the tweets in the latter two categories came with qualifiers and conditions: ‘Their right to exist isn’t being debated, it’s their impingements on women and gay

Table 3: Queer politicians’ intersecting factors impacting harassment

Name	Prominence			Use of (queer) identity in campaigning	Intersectionality considerations	Minor party?
	# of tweets	Incumbent	Prominence and other notes			
Penny Wong	25,576	Yes	High – Was shadow foreign minister in opposition	No	Most senior queer woman and woman of colour in Australian politics	No
Tim Wilson	40,724	Yes	High – high-profile former Australian Human Rights Commissioner	Yes, but not strongly		No
Janet Rice	1,635	Yes	High – co-founder Victorian Greens	Yes, strong campaigning for trans rights		Yes
Claire Garton	303	No	High – targeted for trans identity	Yes, but not strongly	One of very few openly trans people in politics	Yes
Julian Hill	6,561	Yes	Medium	Yes, but not strongly; maiden speech in 2016 referenced him as a ‘Rainbow Labor member’		No
Stephen Bates	993	No	Low	Yes, but not strongly		Yes
Nita Green	535	Yes	Low	Yes, but not strongly; leader of ‘Rainbow Labor’		No
Rachael Jacobs	184	No	Low	Not strongly		Yes

Table 4: Non-queer politicians' intersecting factors impacting harassment

Name	Prominence			Intersectionality considerations	Minor party?
	# of tweets	Incumbent	Prominence and other notes		
Zoe Daniel	33,506	No	High – ousted incumbent Tim Wilson		Yes
Simon Birmingham	18,805	Yes	High – former cabinet minister; leader of the opposition in the Australian Senate		No
Lidia Thorpe	985	Yes	High – high profile disaffection from Greens	One of few First Nations women in federal politics, with one of the highest profiles	Yes
David Shoebridge	5,027	No	Medium		Yes
Graham Perrett	1,255	Yes	Low		No
Barbara Pocock	559	No	Low		Yes
Anthony Chislm	547	Yes	Low		No
Deborah O'Neill	90	Yes	Low		No

men’; and ‘No. Human rights are human rights.... Trans rights are in direct conflict with other humans additional rights.’

Tweet threads – that is, multiple replies to a tweet and responses to those replies – were frequently convoluted and complex, with many reactive replies deviating far from the original tweet. The implication of this approach unfortunately conflates the existence of trans people, or some trans people, with a threat to children and/or women’s spaces. This fallacy of moderation is intended to obfuscate transphobia, the implicit message, by roleplaying a moderate viewpoint: ‘Of course trans people exist! Just keep them out of women’s sport, children’s classrooms, or women’s spaces.’ In this context, a so-called ‘gender ideology’ is often attributed to asking questions about gender, how society is organised by gender and the relationship between gender and power – in sum, any critique of the binary, heteronormative structures that rule much of our social life. It also reflects the anti-trans movement’s co-option of feminist language to obscure their trans-exclusionary motive by appearing reasonable and legitimate: “anti-trans” becomes “pro-women” and “trans-exclusion” becomes the protection of “sex-based rights” (Thurlow, 2024: 967). Transphobia was therefore more complex than typical transphobic slurs and other easily recognisable signifiers of bigotry. It would be difficult to assume whether the people behind these accounts would consider themselves transphobic or simply defenders of cisgender women and children. Regardless of intent, this rhetoric serves to undermine trans rights more broadly, with [Vernon and Galpin \(2024\)](#) connecting burgeoning online anti-trans rhetoric in the UK to a rise in anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes and a series of legislative bills to restrict access to trans-affirming healthcare for British adults and children. This is something that could be further validated in future studies.

As Rice was the recipient of the most transphobia by far among the sampled data of both heterosexual and queer candidates, it was useful to determine how her online activity differed from others in the sample. The clearest point of difference between Senator Rice and her counterparts is the frequency with which she engages in discourse on trans rights, tweets in defence of trans people, replies to transphobic comments and generally presents a larger target for transphobic trolling and abuse. This suggests that queer politicians who actively advocate for queer rights can be seen as more threatening to the status quo. By comparison, transphobia was completely absent in the replies of Rice’s heterosexual ‘matching’ candidate, Senator Barbara Pocock. It was also largely absent from the data of Stephan Bates, another queer Greens candidate. Neither Pocock nor Bates tweeted as frequently or explicitly in defence of trans people as Rice, presenting fewer opportunities for trolls or the ‘gender critical’ to tweet transphobically. This reinforces the use of identity or advocacy for queer people in politics as an exacerbating factor in the harassment received.

Further, the harassment received by Rice and Garton suggests that minoritised candidates in minor political parties (particularly where their party may be perceived as non-centrist, more extreme conservative or progressive) may face additional online harassment than they would receive in one of the major parties. This is reinforced even among the non-queer candidates, where both Lidia Thorpe (First Nations, formerly Greens, now Independent, high prominence but low tweets) and Barbara Pocock (Greens, low prominence and low tweets) faced higher levels of sexism and of racism and political abuse, respectively, than the queer counterparts’ averages. This is consistent with wider research, such as [Fichman and McClelland’s \(2020\)](#) findings that party ideological extremes contribute to elevated online abuse on social media.

What becomes clear from these data is that both Claire Garton and Janet Rice clearly fit our identified compounding factors for risky visibility, being from a non-centrist, minor party, being non-normative (compared to the straight, male Australian political archetype) insofar as Garton is trans and Rice was married to a trans person, and being the target of more identity-based harassment. Both politicians actively invoked their identities insofar as advocating for trans and inclusive policies through their platforms. They also faced the intersection of sexist and homophobic/transphobic abuse. While both could be considered as having high prominence, it was not because of their tweet prevalence/online profiles, which were quite low (with only 1,635 tweets and 303 tweets for Rice and Garton, respectively).

However, they were not the only queer politicians facing compounding visibility risks. Comments based on appearance were also received by Penny Wong, for instance, '@senatorwong you unattractive bully slag'. While Penny Wong is a Labor politician and therefore from a centrist political party, she does face other compounding factors as a lesbian migrant Australian woman of Malaysian Chinese background and one of greater prominence (as foreign minister and with a significantly higher tweet and follower count). Tim Wilson also received considerably vitriolic harassment, though proportionally fewer harassing tweets compared to some of his colleagues, a theme shared by the other queer and non-queer men, highlighting the reinforcing effect of both sexism and heterosexism within politics.

Study 2: Survey results of the perceptions of young women and gender minorities of politics as a career

Based on these findings and the literature earlier canvassed, we were interested in understanding what impact this qualitatively different treatment that queer politicians receive has on politicians (including future politicians) and on the political process. As such, Study 2, which will be explored in more detail in a subsequent publication, contributes key data. Analysis of the responses found that young queer people in our sample were generally less likely to want to run for politics than the non-queer young people in our sample (with 18 per cent responding that their key policy concern/cause would motivate them to run for politics, as opposed to 27 per cent across the general sample). However, this did not mean that they did not want to be politically active at all. Rather, they were more motivated to undertake alternative forms of political participation (volunteering, starting their own campaign or initiative, and so on), with one of the major reasons cited being safety, including online safety. Indeed, major barriers that would stop them from running for politics included feeling that there was a lack of workplace safety (which was reported to include the high emotional toll), a lack of work-life balance, biased and sexist media treatment, and a lack of support for 'people like them' in office. For instance, comments included, 'I decided not to run previously as in the same month all three major political parties had sexualised violence cases in the news that were not handled appropriately', and 'I do not believe Australian politics is safe for women, trans or non-binary people'. Others referenced their fears of the 'sexual and violent threats online' and 'sexualised, violence and racist language', noting that how women and minority participants get harassed online or questioned about their competence 'puts me off completely'. Although not explored in greater detail here due to space limitations, this study reinforces that online harassment does impact diverse individuals' motivation to pursue public office.

Discussion and ramifications

Based on the data analysed, we argue that there are three main types of visibility that candidates face, based on (1) their degree of visibility and (2) the content of visibility. Queer candidates face either invisibility, visibility or risky visibility. Politicians experience invisibility when they are relatively unknown or unfollowed and do not actively use their identity in their campaigning. For example, Nita Green has largely experienced invisibility and less harassment of all kinds overall. Politicians may experience visibility when they are relatively known or followed, and scrutiny and harassment may be more prevalent. However, harassment received largely targets policies or platforms (professional activities, potentially more political). For example, most of the non-queer politicians fell into this definition, whereby non-queer candidates tended to receive much more party, policy or platform-based harassment by comparison to queer candidates (46.4 per cent of tweets, as compared to 34.3 per cent of tweets). The exceptions to this were Barbara Pocock (Greens) and Lidia Thorpe (Greens turned Independent, First Nations, high prominence but low number of tweets), who both received higher sexist harassment and even elevated levels of homophobia and transphobia in the case of Pocock (as compared to the average percentages for their queer counterparts).

Finally, politicians may experience risky visibility regardless of whether they are relatively known or unknown or have amassed a large or relatively low following online. Harassment for these politicians is exacerbated by personal identity or perceived identity (potentially more personal). This was the case for almost all queer candidates, plus some non-queer candidates (Pocock and Thorpe, for instance) who still faced either elevated homophobia, transphobia, racism or sexism. Even queer candidates who were relatively unknown or demonstrated a low follower count, like Rachael Jacobs, faced a kind of risky visibility (for example, high rates of sexist harassment even despite her otherwise low tweet count and low prominence).

We further qualitatively find that queer candidates (and many non-queer women) face more personal harassment rather than political harassment. We define personal harassment as that which is based on identity or perceived identity (or based on party or policy platform but exacerbated by identity or perceived identity). We define political harassment as that which is more based on party or policy platform and that, in our study, was more likely to have been received by non-queer candidates and men.

Thus, based on the literature and our two sets of data, the results of Study 1 show that queer politicians are more likely to experience personal harassment, which is consistent with studies on female politicians. The results of Study 2 show that it has a negative impact on the political pipeline – specifically, young people interested in politics. We speculate on what this means for democracy. While no form of harassment is good or something the authors condone, political harassment may at least be more likely to have a potential furthering impact on policy and politics and, perhaps, less likely to have a personalised negative impact on the individual. We argue that personalised harassment, on the other hand, is less likely to have a furthering impact on policy and politics and more likely to have a negative impact on the individual, as in the case of our second study and young people’s perception of political safety.

It is noted that the terminology of ‘personal’ and ‘political’ does not refer to how the harassment is received (as that is dependent on the individual). Rather, this conceptualisation seeks to theorise the likelihood of a ‘furthering effect’ of harassment

on policy. This is a difficult delineation and one with which the authors are not entirely comfortable. In the context of bettering politics, ideally, no harassment or abuse received should be justified as having a role in the political process. Derision, abuse or harassment in general should not be viewed as having a substantive ability to alter the party or policy platform and should not be looked to as a tool or tactic for policy change. However, our concepts come closest to expressing that while no harassment should be condoned, where politicians receive more political harassment, we argue that this at least has the potential to have a positive impact on the political process and political effectiveness. Where politicians receive more personal harassment, both the politician in question and the party and policy platform suffer. While the queer politicians in our study received a comparable total amount of harassment to their non-queer, straight counterparts, due to the nature of the harassment received, it may be less likely to have a furthering effect on party policy. Indeed, it may even have a negative impact on democratic effectiveness. This puts queer politicians in a double bind, being more targeted by more vitriolic harassment that is less likely to have any positive effect on their policy or platform.

The ramifications of this are illustrated by [Di Meco and Brechenmacher \(2020: para 7\)](#) in the context of women politicians, who argue that the ‘disproportionate and often strategic targeting of women politicians and activists has direct implications for the democratic process’, including discouraging women from running for office, pushing women out of politics entirely or leading them to disengage from political discourse in ways that may harm their political effectiveness. The repercussions are further underscored by [Gelber \(2011\)](#), who connects hate speech to the erosion of democratic ideals, the hindering of free and open public discourse necessary for democratic decision making, and the fostering of a climate of hostility and fear. While more could be done to extend this data set, including repeating the study in subsequent elections and jurisdictions, we believe that these novel findings are relevant, particularly in the context of the literature on the representation of women and minorities in politics and considering the next generation to follow.

Conclusion

We believe that the application of risky visibility as a concept has been useful, extending its relevance from its origination in aged care ([Westwood, 2016](#)) to politics in our study. In this study, sexuality was a primary lens for understanding such risky visibility, but it was also clear that gender remains critically relevant to the harassment received, regardless of whether the political candidates are queer or not. Prominence, the use of one’s (queer) identity or being a proponent of queer/LGBTIQ+ rights, intersectionality, and political affiliation reinforce the need for intersectional studies of politics and provide a way for understanding the varying levels and nature of harassment experienced by politicians, perhaps providing some guidance as to those who may need additional support and the kinds of policy that could help promote a safer work environment for diverse individuals running for office. Interestingly, even those with low tweet and follower counts faced risky visibility, highlighting a beacon effect or compounding effect of being queer in largely sexist and heterosexist spaces.

The ramifications of this study are important: not only does the harassment that minoritised, queer candidates receive distract from genuine political, party or policy scrutiny, but it also has the potential to negatively impact minoritised individuals’

choice to pursue and stay in politics. In addition, it stymies open and constructive political dialogue, erodes a sense of safety when engaging in public discourse and undermines the foundations upon which democracy is built. While it may appear catastrophising to connect tweets to democratic decline, the evidence from both this study and the existing literature maps a clear point of connection. While much advice to young people in the early era of online harassment is simply ‘log off’, given the inextricable merging of online and offline identity in the last decade alone, such a suggestion is not only unrealistic but also places the onus of avoiding harassment on the recipient rather than turning the lens on the harasser.

Notes

¹ A note on timing: this research commenced before Elon Musk initiated an acquisition of Twitter (from 14 April to 27 October 2022) and renamed it to ‘X’ (in July 2023). It is noted that since this acquisition, several substantive changes have occurred, including changes to content moderation. For instance, the words ‘cis’ and ‘cis-gendered’ have been banned as of June 2023, while hate speech, including particularly homophobic, transphobic and racist speech has risen in an ‘unprecedented’ manner (Frenkel and Conger, 2022: para 1). Many of the platform’s outsourced content moderation contractors have been fired since Musk’s acquisition (as reported by Associated Press [2022]) (Ortutaty and O’Brien, 2022). Despite Twitter continuing to haemorrhage users since the takeover, these trends suggest that our research findings are timelier than ever. We refer to Twitter/X as Twitter throughout, as that is what the platform was named at the time of this study.

² Our sample includes queer and non-queer men and women, plus averages, as no other gender minorities were publicly known or identified in our sample during our study.

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Author biographies

Elise Stephenson is Deputy Director of the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership at the Australian National University, Australia. She is a multi-award-winning gender equality researcher with an entrepreneurial background. Elise’s research focuses on gender, sexuality and leadership in policy frontiers, from the space sector to diplomacy, national security, intelligence, climate action, international relations and the Asia-Pacific.

Blair Williams is an award-winning academic and currently a lecturer in Australian politics at Monash University, Australia, following her tenure as a research fellow at the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership at the Australian National University.

Gosia Mikolajczak is a research fellow at the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, Australian National University, Australia. Her research focuses on gender and gender-related policies, the well-being of vulnerable groups, ideology, and social change.

Jack Hayes is a PhD candidate in the Department of International Relations in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, Australia. His research expertise includes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer+ (LGBTIQ+) representation in Australian politics, democratic and electoral health, and good governance in public service.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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