

# THREATS ON THE TRAIL

EXPERIENCES WITH POLITICAL VIOLENCE  
AMONG LGBTQ+ CANDIDATES IN THE USA

LGBTQ+  
VICTORY  
INSTITUTE



Loyola  
Marymount  
University



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Political Violence breakout panel. Pictured left to right:

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*Dina Nina Martinez-Rutherford, Madison, WI City Councilwoman*

*Gabriele Magni, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Loyola Marymount University*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**LGBTQ+ Victory Institute** extends its deepest gratitude to the organizations, community leaders, and individuals whose commitment makes this work possible. This report is a testament not only to our collective investment, but to the strength of our partnerships that are rooted in equity, opportunity, and justice.

We are especially grateful to the organizations, campaign teams, and community partners who work actively to expand LGBTQ+ political representation while also supporting candidates and elected officials navigating increasingly hostile campaign environments. Your leadership on the ground is crucial to ensuring that LGBTQ+ candidates and elected officials can pursue public office with dignity.

We also acknowledge the generosity of LGBTQ+ Victory Institute supporters. Your committed belief in the power of inclusive democracy enables continued investment in research, programs, and protections that advance opportunity for LGBTQ+ leaders to challenge the systemic barriers that persist across our political landscape.

Above all, we honor the LGBTQ+ candidates and elected officials whose experiences form the foundation of this report. Their courage in stepping forward is a testament to resilience and to the enduring importance of visibility and inclusivity in democracy. We are deeply grateful to those who shared their stories.

We are incredibly grateful to Loyola Marymount University for designing, fielding, and leading survey analysis, and to Gabriele Magni, Associate Professor and Chair of Political Science and International Relations, for leading this effort with us. We also extend our gratitude to Change Craft for their time and expertise developing the following report.

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# PREFACE

The experiences documented throughout this report demonstrate that LGBTQ+ political participation in the United States is expanding and that the conditions under which candidates run are becoming increasingly fraught. Across geographies, office levels, and political context, LGBTQ+ candidates are stepping forward to lead. Yet far too often, they do so while navigating harassment, threats, stigma, and violence that extend well beyond ordinary campaign pressures.

Political violence targeting LGBTQ+ candidates is a threat to individual safety, shaping who feels able to run, how candidates are able to campaign, and whether they can remain in public life at all. The toll is deeply personal for many candidates. Often the greatest challenge is not simply the presence of hostility, but the absence of adequate support in the face of it.

This report also reflects the resilience of LGBTQ+ candidates, who described communities rallying, supporters mobilizing, and collective strength emerging even amid backlash. However, we know resilience cannot be the only answer. Safety and wellbeing cannot depend on wealth or extraordinary endurance. Democracy cannot require candidates to absorb violence as a condition of visibility at the expense of their own mental and physical health.

Ensuring the future of inclusive representation demands sustained investment in the systems that protect LGBTQ+ leaders, because protecting candidates is not separate from protecting democracy. **When LGBTQ+ candidates can run for office without fear, their communities gain representation; when they are driven out by violence, that representation is diminished.**

The voices in this report offer both a warning and a call to action: political participation should not come at the cost of safety, dignity, or mental health. The future of LGBTQ+ leadership, and of an inclusive democracy, depends on what we build in response.



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# I. INTRODUCTION

## THE COST OF VISIBILITY IN DEMOCRACY

LGBTQ+ candidates are running for office across the United States in increasing numbers. At the same time, harassment, threats, and violence targeting LGBTQ+ candidates are becoming a defining feature of their campaign experience. This report documents the scope of political violence, the mental and physical toll on candidates, and the implications for democracy.

For many candidates, the act of running is not only a political endeavor, but also a vulnerable public declaration, one that can expose them to hostility that extends far beyond ordinary partisan competition. The toll can be deeply personal and threatens the pipeline of LGBTQ+ leadership in federal, state and local offices.

As one candidate reflected:

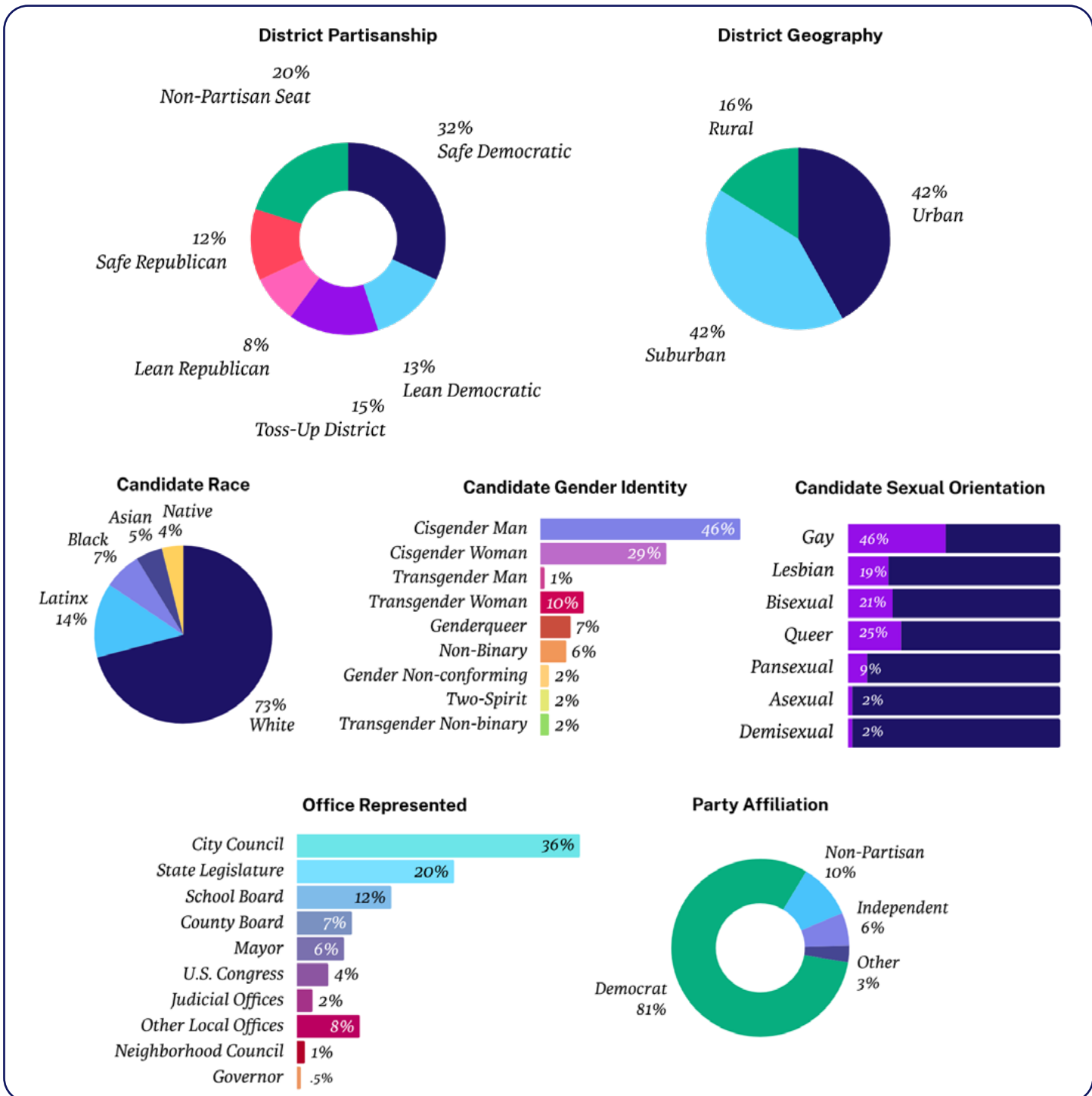
*“Most people are fine and really don’t care. But the bad people are so very loud and it creates a narrative that the political class reads as queer people being weaker candidates so then we get less support and less chances.”*

The findings in this report underscore a critical reality: protecting LGBTQ+ candidates from violence and intimidation is essential to protecting democratic representation itself. Visibility should not come with danger, participation should not require sacrifice of safety, and the future of inclusive democracy depends on sustained investment in the systems of support that allow LGBTQ+ leaders to be elected and serve their respective communities.



# II. METHODS AND SAMPLE OVERVIEW

In the Fall of 2025, Loyola Marymount University and LGBTQ+ Victory Institute surveyed 215 LGBTQ+ candidates who ran for office between 2023 and 2025. Respondents came from 42 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C., reflecting the nationwide reach of the survey. Candidate survey respondents ran for office across all levels of government and the diversity of respondents largely reflected the diversity of LGBTQ+ candidates overall. The graphics that follow provide a snapshot of where these candidates ran, the offices they sought, and the identities and backgrounds they brought to the ballot box.



# III. ANTICIPATING AND EXPERIENCING HARASSMENT

## FEAR BEFORE RUNNING

For many LGBTQ+ candidates, harassment is anticipated from the very beginning, and not only on the campaign trail. Even before formally entering a race, most candidates understand that running openly may increase their exposure to hostility, intimidation, and violence.

**Nearly 9 in 10 candidates worried that running as an out LGBTQ+ person could increase their risk of harassment or attack.** These concerns were especially pronounced among bisexual and queer identifying candidates, as well as non-cisgender candidates and cisgender women, underscoring how vulnerability is shaped by both identity and visibility.

Concerns extended beyond harassment to physical safety. **4 in 5 candidates reported worrying about physical violence, with non-cisgender candidates expressing the highest levels of fear.** Most respondents also believed they faced greater danger than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. More than three-quarters perceived a higher risk of political violence, particularly women and non-cisgender candidates, candidates of color, and those running in suburban or rural districts.

As one candidate reflected:

*“Just being an LGBTQ person in the world is scary right now.*

*We are targeted whether running for office or just existing. It’s scary to be alive right now. “*

Another described pressure to hide their identity altogether:

*“Local Democrats told me not to run openly or speak about my [sexual orientation].*

*This happened several times.”*



## HARASSMENT ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

For many candidates, these fears were quickly realized. **Nearly two-thirds encountered hate or harassment in person during their campaigns, with some experiencing it repeatedly.** Non-cisgender candidates and those running in suburban districts reported particularly high levels of in-person harassment.

Candidates described threats and intimidation while canvassing and engaging with the public:

*“I was out canvassing door to door, and was verbally harassed and threatened for my gender identity and visible-status as a trans elected official.”*

*“The threats were along the line of, ‘if you come near a school, we will physically harm you to protect our children from you, because you are transgender.’”*

*“Last night, I was handing out flyers while I waited for the bus and had an encounter with someone who started to question why I would want all genders to feel accepted in our community. The person tried to harass me about how only two genders existed and instigated an argument I was not going to give them.”*

Harassment was even more pervasive online. **Nearly 8 in 10 candidates encountered hate or intimidation through digital platforms, with more than a quarter experiencing it weekly.**

As one candidate explained:

*“My campaign manager is handling everything so that I don’t have to see the hatred and vitriol online. She doesn’t tell me what is going on online, for my own wellbeing. I do not ask.”*

Others described how online threats constrained their ability to campaign safely:

*“I worry about posting canvassing dates, times and locations, and that makes it difficult to campaign. I NEVER do insta lives while at events or out canvassing anymore. I always post after the fact.”*

***“A VOTER IN MY TOWN MESSAGED ME ASKING WHY I THOUGHT IT WAS APPROPRIATE TO HAVE A HUSBAND AND PONDERED IF I WAS RIGHT IN THE HEAD TO HOLD OFFICE.”***

Together, these findings reinforce that harassment is not an isolated occurrence but a defining feature of the campaign experience for many LGBTQ+ candidates, shaping how they run for office and whether they feel safe pursuing public leadership in the first place.

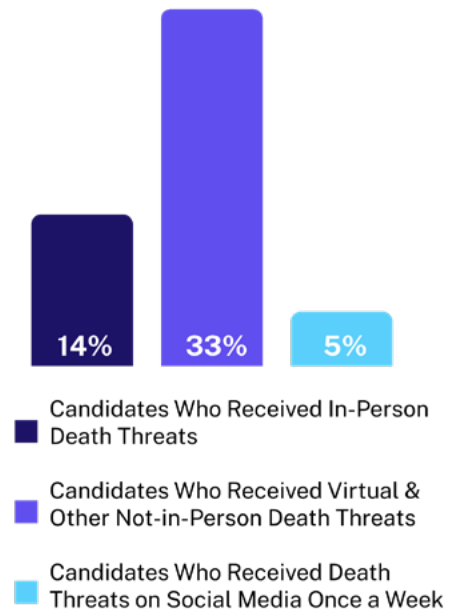
# IV. ESCALATION INTO THREATS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

## DEATH THREATS

Harassment and political violence are not isolated experiences for LGBTQ+ candidates, they are widespread, persistent features of today's campaign environment. Many candidates describe being targeted simply for seeking visibility in public life with intimidation intensifying as their candidacy became more public.

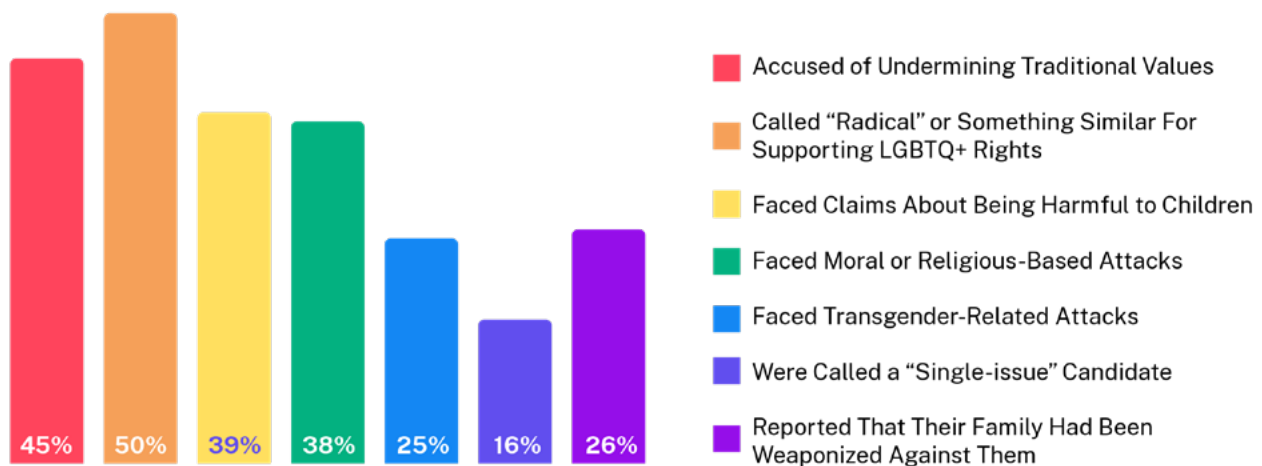
As the graphic on the right illustrates, **death threats represent one of the most extreme and alarming forms of abuse**

reported by respondents. While **1 in 7** candidates experienced death threats in person, the threat landscape is especially intensified online: one in three candidates received death threats through digital platforms, with a small but significant share facing them on a weekly basis. These risks are not evenly distributed. Non-cisgender and queer candidates reported the highest rates of online death threats, and candidates running in suburban, rural, and Republican-leaning districts were more likely to face in-person threats; underscoring how geography, identity, and political environment shape LGBTQ+ candidates' vulnerability.



## OTHER FORMS OF ATTACK

LGBTQ+ candidates reported encountering a wide spectrum of attacks, from verbal harassment and physical threats to doxxing, hate mail, property damage, and homophobic campaign messaging. Online harassment was especially pervasive, affecting more than half of the respondents, and often spilling into the candidates personal lives and families.



The testimonies that follow underscore the reality behind the data:

**harassment is constant, escalating, and uniquely intensified for LGBTQ+ candidates.**

“My house was shot up by a neighbor who is anti-LGBTQ and anti-trans, following my fight for trans rights.”

*“...Name-calling and accusations during public input and through social media persist. I was accused of being a pedophile and other false accusations.”*

“...My harassment is different from the harassment of the straight, cis candidates. I have been followed to my car, had my children brought up by harassers, while screaming they are glad I lost my job (to the federal funding chaos) and hope I am burned alive.”

“I received a DM (direct message) on my City Council Instagram page from a man who stated that he hoped and wished for my young daughter to be r\*\*\*\*d by a transgender man and then added other slurs and demeaning comments. It was reported to the police.”

*“When I first started to run. I’m in a same-sex marriage [and have] a kid. I got threats, people taking pictures of my house, stealing things from my yard. I had to buy security cameras and pay for surveillance.”*

**“I HAD SOMEONE POST ON A LOCAL NEWSPAPER THREAD THAT SOMEONE SHOULD PUT A BULLET THROUGH MY BRAINS.”**

“A local Christian right-wing agitator group harassed me in person and stalked my social media; as a result, I made my account private to avoid continued contact.”

*“I was physically shoved off a porch by a cis[gender] het[crosssexual] couple when door-knocking. I’ve been yelled at and had things thrown at me. I’ve been constantly undermined, talked over, talked shit about, and had my work erased in Dem[ocratic] party spaces.”*

“... lot of the targeting has actually been behind my back, as really vicious gossip and shit-talk. So that instead of open hostility that’s easy to counter, it’s general shunning, avoidance, weird looks, stuff like that.”

# V. IMPACT ON CANDIDATES' HEALTH AND CAMPAIGNS

## MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH TOLL

The impacts of political violence and harassment extend beyond the campaign itself. For LGBTQ+ candidates, repeated exposure to threats, intimidation, and abuse carries a profound personal cost, affecting their sense of safety, as well as their mental and physical wellbeing. Candidates described the strain of campaigning under constant fear and emotional stress while continuing to meet the demands of public service.

Research from our *Pride and Pressure: Exploring Mental Health Among LGBTQ+ Elected Officials* report highlights the toll of running for and serving in public office under these conditions. **Nearly two-thirds of respondents said that the attacks they experienced negatively affected their mental health, and 1 in 10 reported severe impact.** Non-cisgender candidates reported particularly high levels of harm, as did queer candidates, reflecting the heightened burden faced by those most frequently targeted.

Learn more: <https://victoryinstitute.org/resource/pride-and-pressure-exploring-mental-health-among-lgbtq-elected-officials/>

The following testimonies stress that political violence is not only a democratic threat, it is a serious mental health challenge that can shape whether LGBTQ+ leaders are able to run, serve, and remain in public life.

*"It never kept me from campaigning, but it did take a toll on my emotional and physical self. It is hard to be the best candidate you can be when you are dealing with threats and bullying."*

*"...The constant defamation and online hatred and attacks took a toll on my physical wellbeing."*

*"...I also developed hypervigilance that was more harmful for my mental health than any comments."*

**"I'VE HAD TO SEEK COUNSELING AND STILL HAVE PTSD FROM THE EXPERIENCES OVER THE LAST 7 YEARS IN POLITICS."**

*"...Many people don't realize how often we as LGBTQ+ candidates see and read harmful, degrading, threatening, demeaning, harassing, etc. messages and just delete it, block them, and silently move on. However, we cannot unread or unsee what was sent to us and I can personally say that it gets buried but stays in the back of my mind. Holding onto those can deeply impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ candidates and its likely unknown or untouched in terms of research. But we need to make sure that these candidates or elected officials have the space and help to endure these challenging realities."*

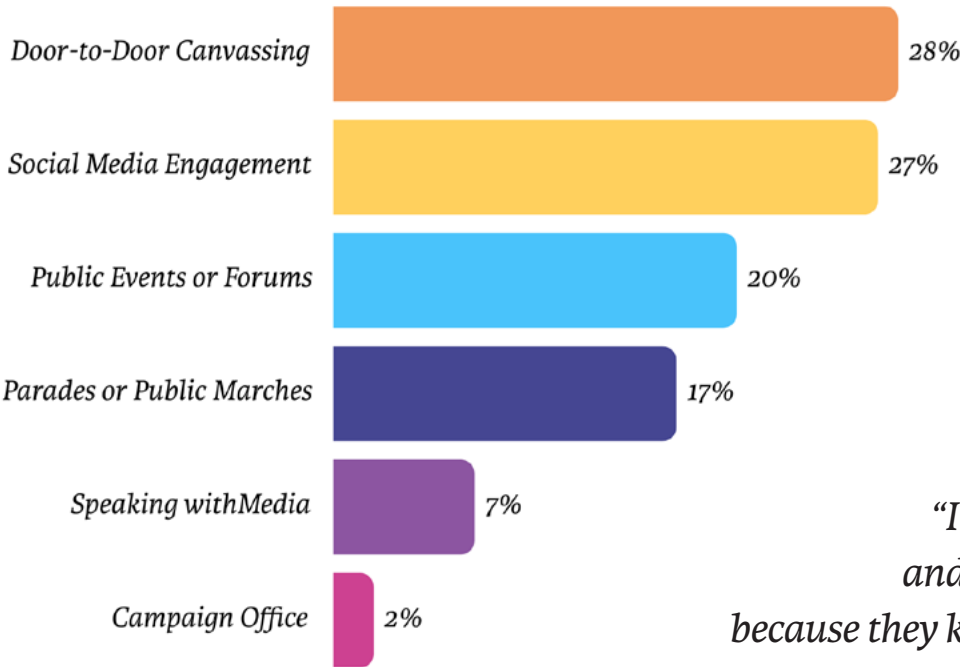
# CAMPAIGN RESTRICTION AND WITHDRAWAL

Harassment and safety threats harm candidates, as they also reshape the political realities of campaigning. For many LGBTQ+ candidates, legitimate concerns about violence directly influence how they engage with voters and where they appear in public.

**More than half of the respondents said that safety concerns affected how or where they campaigned, and nearly 1 in 5 described the impact as significant.** These disruptions were especially pronounced for non-cisgender candidates, who reported the highest level of constraint. LGBTQ+ candidates of color were also more likely to have their campaign activities shaped by safety fear, as were candidates running in safe or Republican leaning districts.

These findings demonstrate that political violence does not remain at the level of rhetoric. These threats carry real, immediate consequences for democratic engagement. When candidates are forced to alter their movements, limit public visibility, or campaign under fear, the fundamental conditions of free and fair political participation are undermined. Over time, these pressures threaten the pipeline of LGBTQ+ leadership by making public service feel unsustainable.

## Campaign Activities Avoided



*“I was fearful to reach out or attend certain events or groups in order to better fundraise.”*

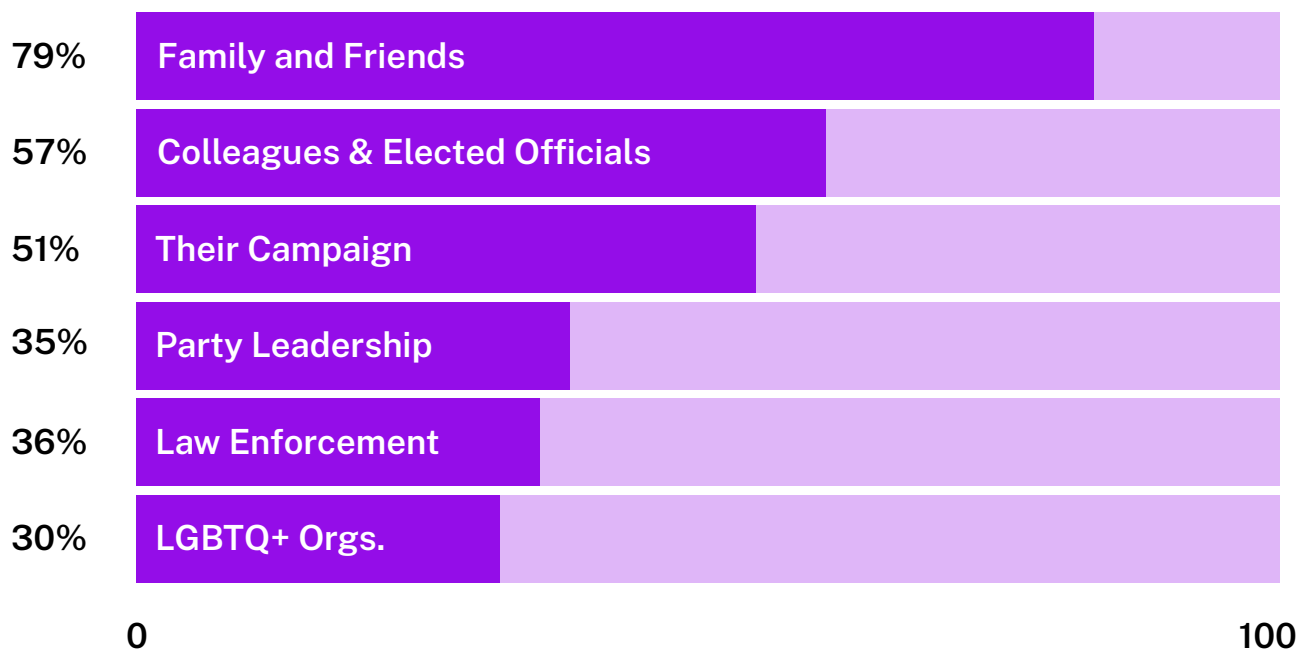
*“I was threatened by someone and stopped going out in public because they know where I live and work.”*

# VI. RESPONSES, SECURITY, AND RESILIENCE

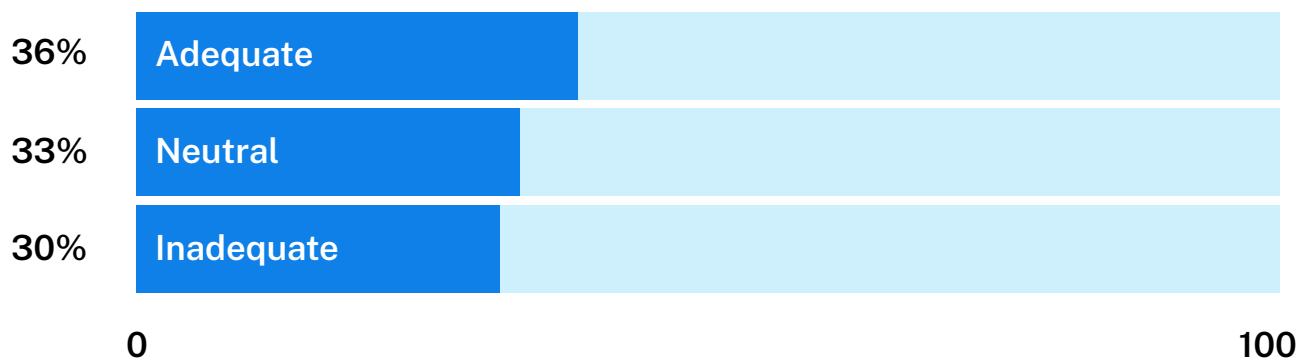
## REPORTING AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Among LGBTQ+ candidates who reported encountering attacks, family and friends, public service partners, and law enforcement were listed among those to whom they reported these incidents, threats and violence.

### Candidates Reported Threats To:



### Candidates Reported Adequacy of Support:



Not all candidates reported the attacks and of those who did, non-cisgender candidates reported higher levels of inadequate support (43%), as did candidates of color (42%).

## SECURITY AND RESOURCES

Only a small share of LGBTQ+ candidates could afford formal security measures in response to harassment and threats. **Fewer than 1 in 10 hired private security or arranged for a law enforcement presence.**

For most, security was discussed but ultimately remained out of reach, reflecting the difficult choices candidates face when navigating risk with limited campaign resources.

Several candidates described weighing the need for protection but deciding against it:

*“We had significant discussions around hiring security but ultimately did not.”*

*“[I have] not yet [hired private security] but this was discussed.”*

Cost emerged as one of the most significant barriers. Even when candidates believed security was necessary, many could not afford it:

***“I WANTED TO [HIRE PRIVATE SECURITY] BUT IT WAS TOO EXPENSIVE.”***

*“[I did not hire private security] during the 2024 campaign, I couldn’t afford it. I did have some safety assessments done in 2022 following death threats and threats of violence.”*

In place of private security, some candidates relied on informal coordination with local law enforcement, particularly around public events:

*“I often let law enforcement know of public events and requested if an officer was in the area to drive by and keep an eye on things.”*

*“I frequently engage with local law enforcement to share any threats and unhinged posts.”*

*“I thought about [hiring security] and discussed it as a possible need after being accosted after the school board meeting. I am friends with the Chief of Police in my town, so he was aware of what was happening.”*

*“I’ve had to increase security in my home with cameras and better locks.”*

*“[I] had to install cameras and pay for surveillance at my home.”*

Taken together, these actions emphasize the reality that **while threats are widespread, meaningful safety protections often remain inaccessible.**

# VI. RESPONSES, SECURITY, AND RESILIENCE

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## BACKLASH DYNAMICS AND RESILIENCE

Responses to political attacks were not uniform. LGBTQ+ candidates' ability to withstand hostility often depends on their resources, networks and community support available to them.

For some candidates, negative targeting paradoxically generated increased attention. **Media coverage and public controversy sometimes expanded name recognition, opened new fundraising channels, and energized supporters.** As one candidate reflected, heightened visibility could translate into tangible campaign benefits, though not without significant emotional cost:

*"I think [the attacks] led to more media coverage, which put us on the radar for more people to take my call and raised our ability to increase donations. But it was a lot to handle and not an easy recommended path for everyone."*

Others described how attacks created opportunities to connect with broader audiences and reframe identity-based smears into messages of pride and inclusion:

*"At least in the social media sphere, [the attacks give] me a chance to talk about my identity, help me connect with what matters to a broader range of people, and then pivot to a broader issue."*

In several cases, opposition fueled increased fundraising and national attention:

*"When the mailer attacked me for being radical cause I'm queer, I turned it around and received national media [attention]. Chasten Buttigieg tweeted about it and I raised thousands of dollars."*

Candidates also noted that attacks could amplify their visibility through both traditional and digital channels:

*"[The attacks increased my] visibility: these people keep sharing my posts in a 'can you believe this lady' way which has saved me a lot of time on canvassing"*

Community response was often a critical factor. Some candidates reported that the more extreme the hostility became, the more supporters rallied to their side:

*“The more extreme my opposition was the more popular I became.”*

***“COMMUNITY RALLIED AROUND ME IN FUNDRAISING AND CANVASSING.”***

*“People were willing to donate and canvas more to try and counter [the attacks].”*

LGBTQ+ communities, in particular, played an essential role in recognizing coded messaging and mobilizing to defend representation:

*“Many supporters and LGBTQ+ community members recognized the coded messaging my opponent used and were motivated to support my campaign, maintain the queer majority on the council, and to signal support to the LGBTQ+ community...”*



# VII. A DEMAND FOR PERFECTION

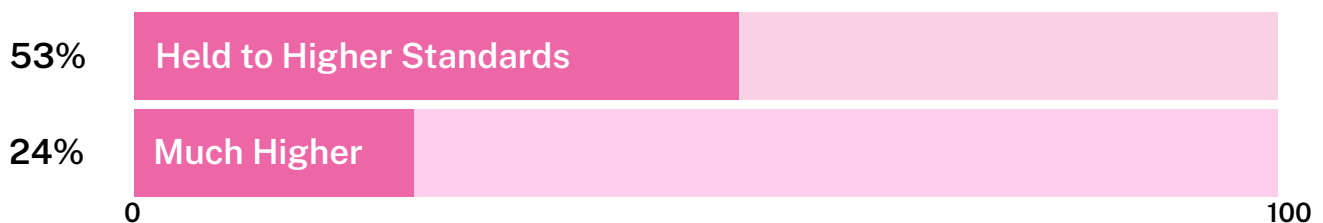
## DOUBLE STANDARDS

Beyond explicit harassment and threats, many LGBTQ+ candidates described facing a quieter but persistent form of pressure: the sense that they were held to different, and higher, standards than their peers. Even when violence was not present, candidates reported feeling that their legitimacy, professionalism, and personal lives were more intensely scrutinized simply because of their LGBTQ+ identities.

As shown below, more than half of the respondents believed they were held to higher standards as candidates. LGBTQ+ candidates also reported that their qualifications were more closely questioned, their families were more heavily examined, and their appearance subjected to heightened scrutiny.

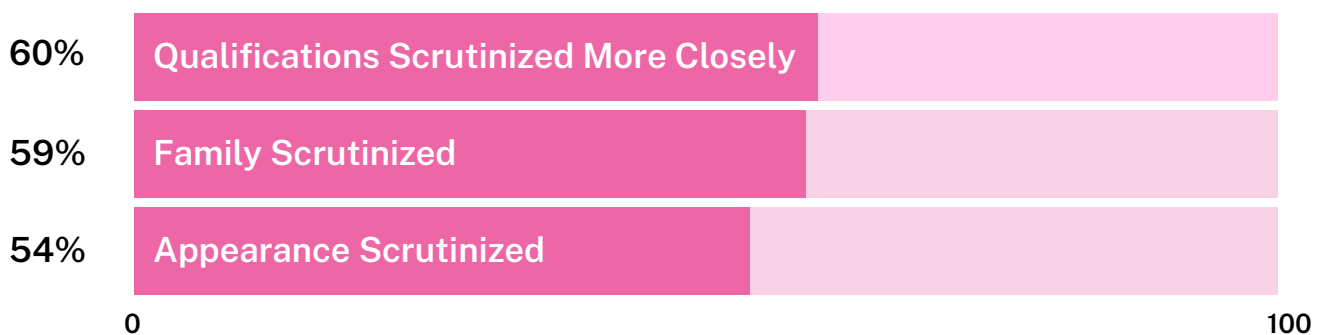
### Perception of Higher Professional Standards

*Percentage of candidates who feel they face a double standard compared to their peers.*



### Key Areas of Increased Candidate Scrutiny

*Percentage of respondents reporting closer inspection in specific categories.*



For some, this double standard was an external reality reinforced by voters, opponents, and political parties and institutions. For others, it became an internalized burden, a constant pressure to be flawless in order to be taken seriously. The following experiences reveal that the barriers LGBTQ+ candidates face are not limited to overt attacks; they also include the constant and exhausting expectation to prove themselves beyond what is required of others.

As one candidate explained:

*“I think that society still hasn’t evolved as much as we think, and as LGBTQ persons and candidates we have to be 200% better in every way, than the other candidates. Especially heteronormative candidates who can campaign on a platform of mediocrity and still get tons of votes because people ‘identify’ with them.”*

Another candidate reflected on the personal weight of that expectation:

*“I suppose I didn’t get the [double-standard] message from anyone in particular. I just felt an outsized pressure to be professional--both because of being LGBTQ and because I was much younger than most [of my peers in office].”*

*“[I held] myself [to higher standards: it is] hard to explain, but I felt as though I had to be perfect and above reproach and held myself to a higher standard.”*

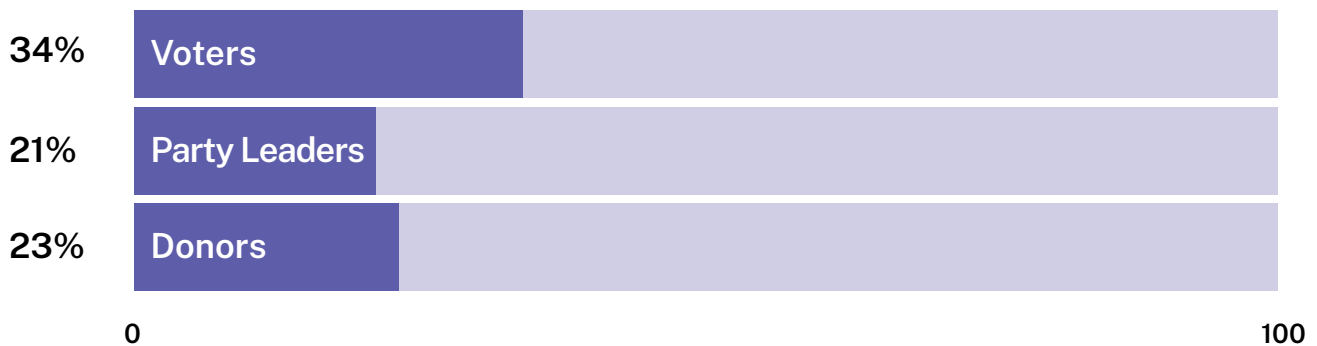
# VIII. QUESTIONING ELECTABILITY

## ELECTABILITY STIGMA

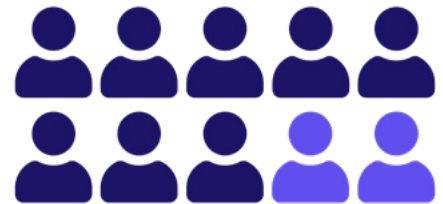
In addition to heightened scrutiny and double standards, many LGBTQ+ candidates reported confronting a persistent electability stigma, the assumption that being openly LGBTQ+ makes a candidate less viable in the eyes of voters, donors, and party leaders. These doubts often emerged not as direct opposition, but as concern framed around what others might deem as acceptable.

As shown below, many candidates faced questions about electability from voters, party gatekeepers, and donors. More broadly, a strong majority believed that voters doubted others would support an LGBTQ+ candidate, reflecting the power of perceived bias even when it is not always openly expressed.

### Candidates Faced Electability Stigma From:



About 7 out of 10 believed voters would doubt others' willingness to support an openly LGBTQ+ candidate, while nearly 8 out of 10 felt that being LGBTQ+ could make some voters less likely to support them.



As one candidate explained:

*"I would like to be clear that in my campaign, the doubts that people had about electability and the harassment received did not have to do with LGBTQ+ status generally. It had to do with the fact that I am transgender.*

*One of my opponents was gay, and they ended up winning the election. People directly expressed to me that they felt other voters could support a gay candidate, but not a transgender candidate."*

Another candidate described how doubts were often voiced through coded concern rather than direct hostility:

*"The biggest were the Boomer Democrats who would start with concern-trolling "do you think the conservative rural [state] is ready for a gay congressman?" and when I'd answer yes, they'd start in [sic] with their whole litany of reasons it can't work, none of which actually came out of Republican mouths at all. Ever."*

Yet, this is also a reflection of a more complex reality. While many candidates felt that being LGBTQ+ made some voters less likely to support them, most also believe it made others more likely to do so. **Nearly all respondents felt that their LGBTQ+ identity strengthened their candidacy, often because it deepened their empathy, resilience, and connection to community.** Electability stigma remains a significant obstacle; nevertheless, LGBTQ+ candidates continue to view their identities not as liabilities, but as sources of strength.

# IX. DEMAND FOR SUPPORT

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE AS A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

The experiences shared by LGBTQ+ candidates are a reflection of a broader reality: political violence is not only a threat to physical safety or democratic participation, it is the cause of a growing mental health crisis. The cumulative weight of harassment, threats, and dehumanizing messages can leave lasting psychological harm, particularly when candidates are forced to endure these attacks in isolation.

As one candidate reflected:

*“...Many people don’t realize how often we as LGBTQ+ candidates see and read harmful... messages... Holding onto those can deeply impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ candidates... But we need to make sure that these candidates or elected officials have the space and help to endure these challenging realities.”*

**Mental health support for candidates is not a peripheral need, it is a form of democratic infrastructure.**

When LGBTQ+ leaders are left without adequate care, protection, or community backing, the consequences extend beyond the individual; ultimately, threatening the long-term pipeline of representation. Addressing political violence requires sustained investment in physical security, informed mental health services, dedicated funding for LGBTQ+ safety and wellbeing, and affordable resources that are not limited by wealth or personal networks.

As one candidate described the weight of this reality:

**“WHEN I SAY IT MAKES ME RECONSIDER RUNNING AGAIN, IT’S ACTUALLY NOT THE HATE I CAN’T DEAL WITH. IT’S THE LACK OF SUPPORT IN THE FACE OF THAT HATE I CAN’T DEAL WITH...”**

# X. CONCLUSION

**Protecting LGBTQ+ political participation will require more than condemning violence after it occurs.** It demands sustained investment in the systems that allow candidates to run and serve safely through comprehensive safety infrastructure, trauma-informed mental health support, and long-term prevention resources that address political violence at its roots. Without these commitments, political violence will continue to narrow who feels able to seek office; weakening representation and limiting the promise of an inclusive democracy.

LGBTQ+ Victory Institute remains proud to stand alongside candidates and partners working toward a more just democracy. The experiences shared throughout this report make clear that the cost of visibility is not shared equally – even within the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ candidates face heightened risks, unequal scrutiny, and uneven access to support. Yet these candidates continue to step forward with courage, empathy, and resilience, often sustained by the collective strength of their communities.

In 2026, informed by the findings in this report, Victory Institute will incorporate more safety training into its programming and expand its Mental Health Initiative for LGBTQ+ elected officials with a new pilot program. It will also include safety and mental health programming at its International LGBTQ+ Leaders Conference and its LGBTQ+ Elected Officials Summit in December 2026. The need far exceeds the programs available, but Victory Institute will continue to find opportunities to support the leaders critical to building an inclusive democracy.



 Levela