"How Scared Are You?"
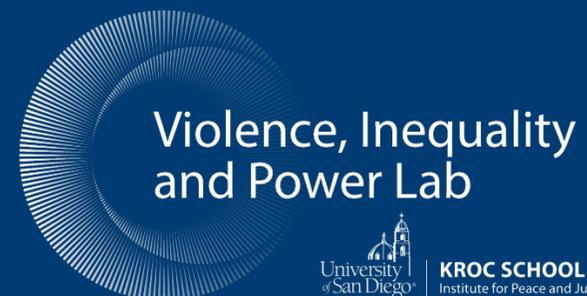
The Impacts of Threats and Harassment on Elected Officials in San Diego County

presented by
Rachel Locke, MA
Carl Luna, PhD

Violence, Inequality and Power Lab

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Background

- Increase in targeted threats and perpetration of physical violence against elected officials
  - A 2021 National League of Cities study found that 81% of public officials surveyed reported having experience harassment, threats and violence
- This project aims to map and measure threats and harassment in San Diego County, opening up dialogue on solutions and improved local governance
  - This study is the first to conduct a deep survey of locally elected officials within one geographic region

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Mixed Methods Approach

1. Literature Review

Contextualized the environment of threats and harassment of local elected officials in the United States over the last 10 years

2. Survey

Sent to 328 elected officials in San Diego County: School Boards, Community College Boards, City Councils, and Board of Supervisors

3. Key Informant Interviews

Interviewed 10% of survey respondents, randomly selected

4. Social Media Review

Analysis of 460,000 tweets from 2016-2022

5. Traditional Media Review

Print & radio articles citing a threat and/or harassment towards locally elected officials between 2017 and 2022

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Mixed Methods Approach

Scope: 42 School Boards, 5 Community College Boards, 18 City Councils, 5 Board of Supervisors

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"HOW SCARED ARE YOU?"

Mapping the
Threat Environment
of San Diego's
Elected Officials

Findings: Survey

"How Scared Are You?"

Mapping the Threat Environment of San Diego's Elected Officials

Targeted threats and the perpetration of physical violence against elected officials have been increasing steadily around the world. Democracy cannot function without individuals serving in elected governance. The presence and growth of threats and harassment undermines community cohesion, further undermining our ability to address our collective challenges.
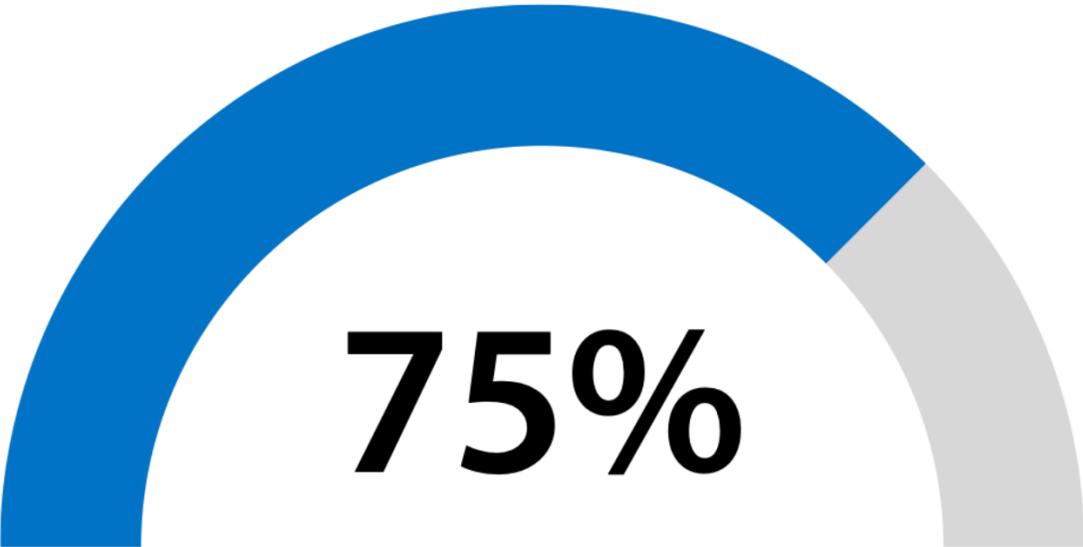
75%
of elected officials report being threatened/harassed

82%
of women

66%
of men

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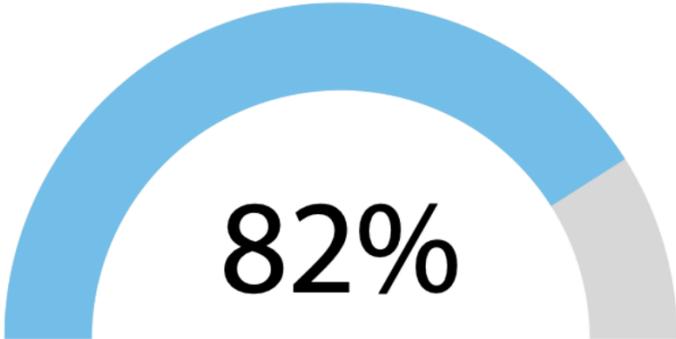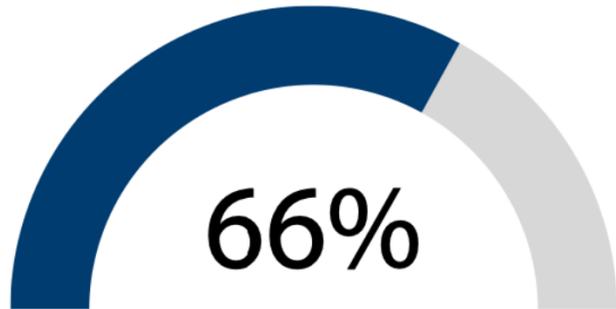
Findings: Survey

A Bipartisan Issue

Conservatives
Moderates
Liberals

0   25   50   75
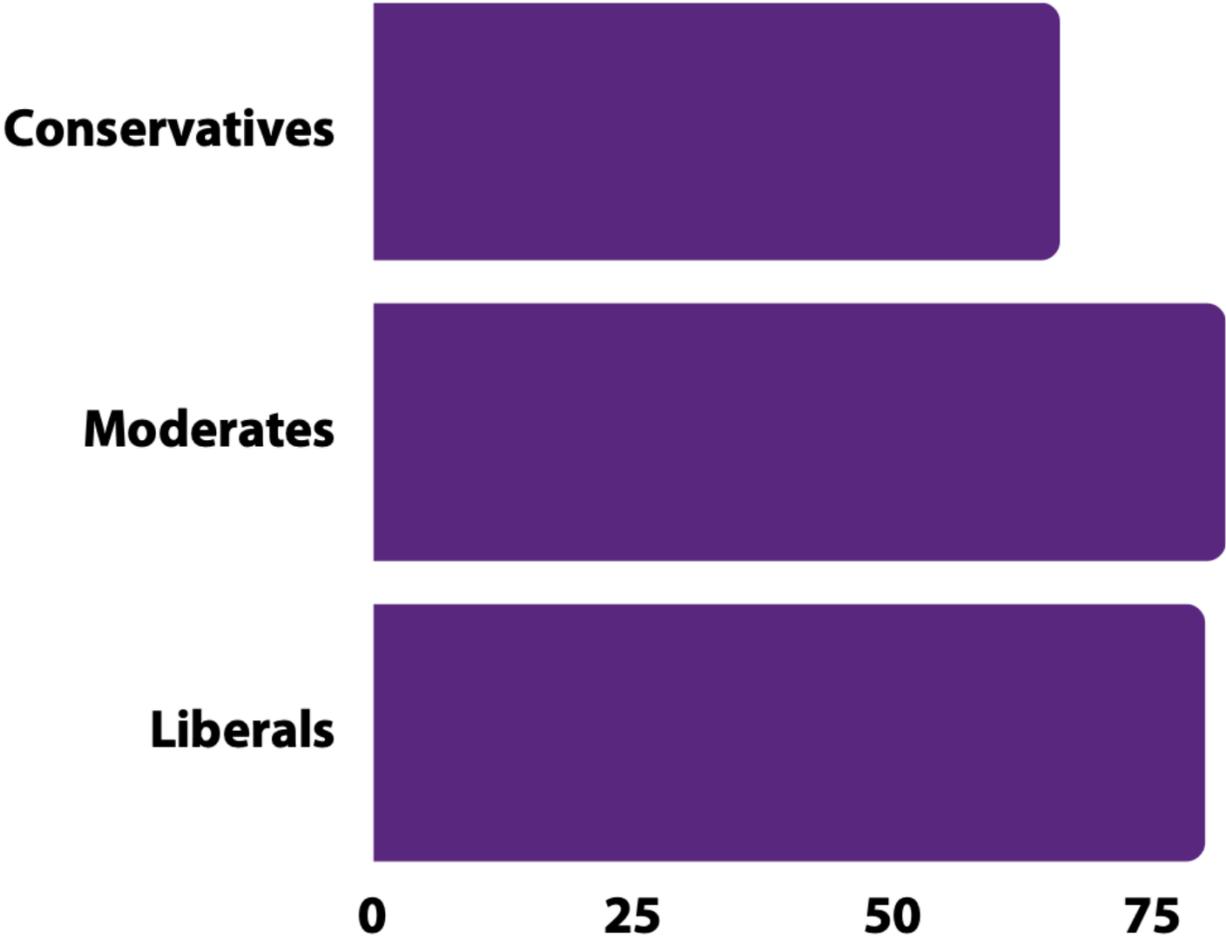
A Problem for Democracy

Of those who reported <u>never being</u> threatened or harassed:

52% believe threats & harassment against elected officials are a central issue

48% reported witnessing threats made against other elected officials

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Findings: Survey

66%

say threats and harassment have INCREASED since they started public service

23%
of respondents say they are LESS likely to speak their minds about policy due to threats and harassment while 14% say they are MORE likely.

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Findings: Survey

Why Are Demographic Differences Important?

If targeted attacks are successful, under-represented individuals are likely to leave public office, undermining efforts towards inclusion.

52%
of those who have received threats have considered leaving public service due to them

32% of men

61% of women

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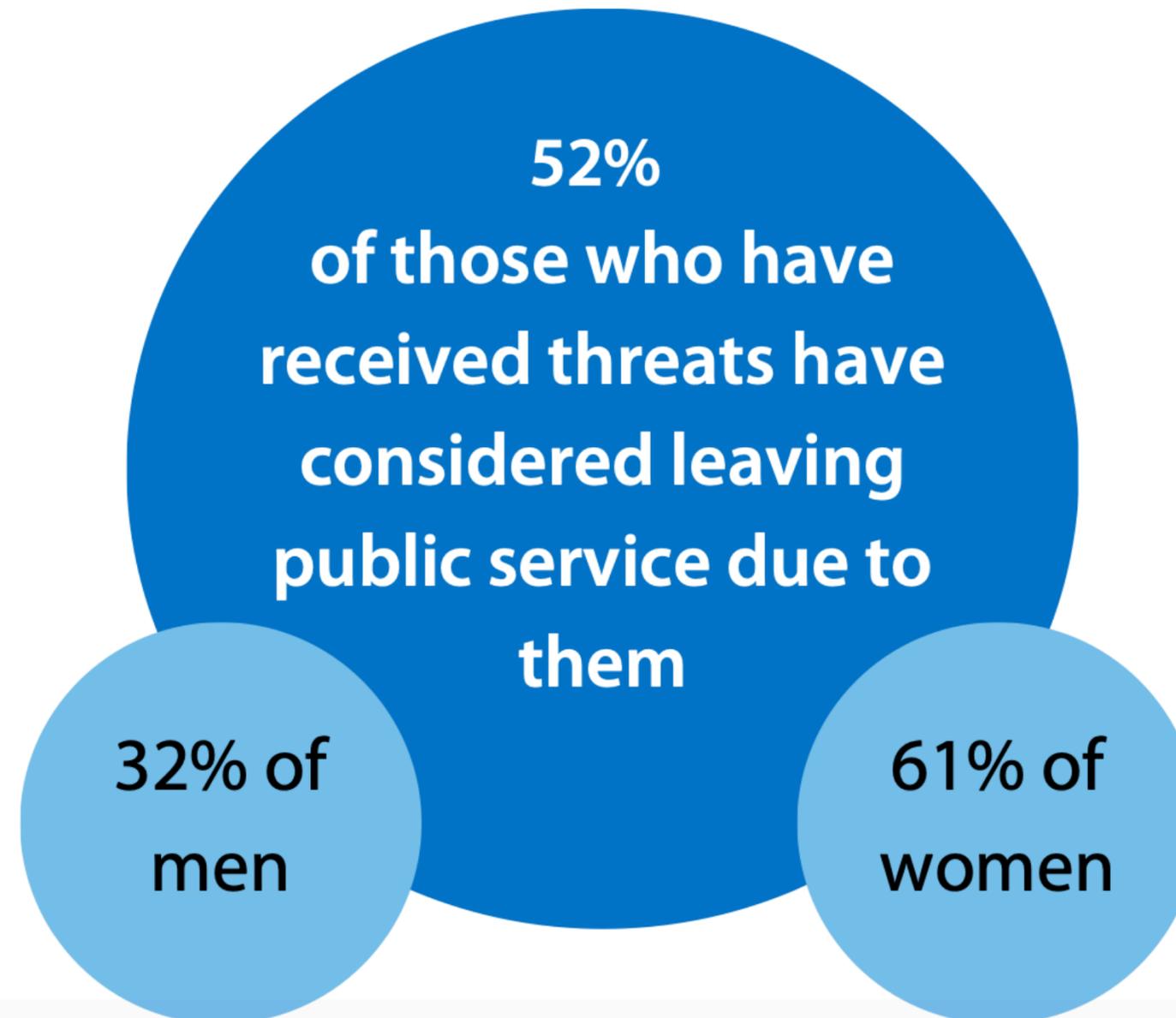
"Things are harder now than it was previously to get people of good will to run for local office."

"When things ramped up the board members didn't really engage in discussion in front of the public, just voted. Limited discourse because that limited the space for hostility."

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Findings: Traditional Media Review

Scope:

Print & Radio Articles citing a **threat** and/or incident of **harassment** between 2017 and 2022.

Main Findings:

- **From 2017 - 2019, between 0-2 reported incidents *per year*; From 2020-2022, between 6-9 reported incidents *per year***
- Majority of those receiving threats/harassment were women (19 Women; 5 Men)
- 20% of incidents involved threats/harassment of family members
- Half of threat-based incidents involved a death threat

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"I don't go to the grocery store during peak hours or when we are deliberating something that's contentious."

"I am more aware of my surroundings. More aware of where I am, people around me, potential threats."

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Findings: Social Media Review (Prominence and Twitter Presen

Scope: Collected list of all office-holders as of Jan 2022 on Twitter. Searched for all replies and mentions of identified twitter handles from Jan 2016 to December 2022. This yielded about half a million tweets (~460,000).

Top Five Receivers

Nathan Fletcher (County Supervisor)

Todd Gloria (SD Mayor)

Terra Lawson-Remer (County Supervisor)

Nora Vargas (County Supervisor)
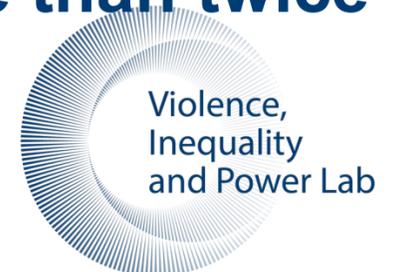
Jen Campbell (SD City Council)

Account for ~80% (Fletcher and Gloria ~ 50%)

100% of SD city policymakers in the sample received aggressive tweets.

12% of policymakers from smaller cities (<100,000) received aggressive tweets.

Activity Matters!

About 80% of aggressive tweets were sent to policymakers who tweet more than twice per day.

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Findings: Interviews

Scope:

Interviewed 10% of randomly selected survey respondents.

Main Findings:

- <u>Flashpoint topics:</u> COVID/masking/vaccines/school closures, Gun Rights, Critical Race Theory/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, LGBTQ+

- <u>Demographic flashpoints:</u> Gender, Race, Intersectionality

- <u>Instigating forces:</u> From individuals to highly organized in County, State, National. Flashpoints occurring nationally are felt at very local level

- <u>Personalization:</u> Rhetoric has gone from disagreement to highly personalized othering

- <u>Spread:</u> Harassment is not only with public, but occurs among peers on Boards as well

- <u>Impacts:</u> Mental health, security reinforced at home, personalized messages, not running again

- <u>Common theme:</u> Gratitude for the chance to speak, connection to normalization

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...mmendation 1: Increased Accountability for
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...mmendation 2: Document and Report All
...nts, Even When They Do Not Rise to the Level of
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mendation 3: Increased Protection for Local

mendation 4: Potential Revisions to the Brown

endation 5: Increased Training for Elected

endation 6: Prepare for Threats and Harassment

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endation 7: Work With Community

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