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THREATS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST ELECTED OFFICIALS AND THEIR STAFF

Constituency Demands and Polarization Drive Threats and Violence: A Legislative Staff Perspective

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Staff Share Insights on Threats and Violence In State Legislatures

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Overview

State legislative staff serve a vital role in helping state legislators advance policy and address constituent concerns. They are the salaried civil servants who form the backbone of America's system of democratic representation. They also have a bird's-eye view into interactions between elected officials and members of the public. This means that staff are often on the front lines of harassment, threats, and violence targeting elected officials. Staff often answer phone calls, open mail and emails, face constituents coming into the office, and organize and attend town hall meetings and other public events, leaving them subject to the frustration and anger that might be directed at the legislator. Since they act as the go-between the elected official and the public, they insulate elected officials from much of the nastiness. Thus, they are often in a better position than legislators to assess the prevalence of harassment and threats.

We surveyed state legislative staff in Fall 2025 to assess their perceptions of political violence, its causes, and support for potential solutions. This report presents key findings showcasing the magnitude of the problem.

Exposure

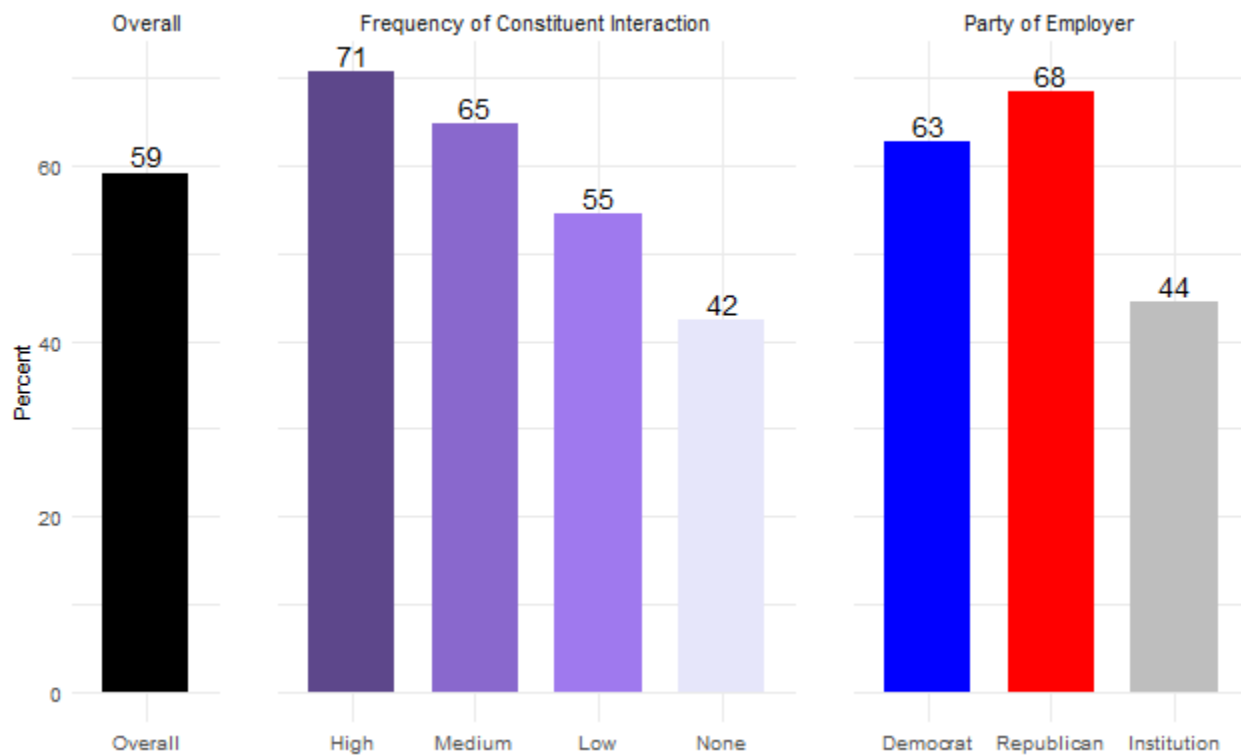
Exposure to threats is distressingly common for the civil servants who staff America's legislatures. During their career, a majority (52 percent) of state legislative staff have experienced threats (verbally, in writing, or online), and an even larger fraction (61 percent) have intercepted communications that implicitly or explicitly threatened their boss. Physical violence is less prevalent, with 3 percent of staff reporting that they have been physically attacked or assaulted and 9 percent reporting that the elected official they worked for at the time had been attacked or assaulted.

Physical violence is not common, but serious threats are: 59 percent have experienced at least one incident that was concerning enough to report it to law enforcement. Figure 1 plots the percentage of staff who have reported at least one incident to law enforcement. Rates are higher among front office staff whose jobs entail more frequent constituency interaction and among those staff members who work in a legislator's office than those who work for the institution.

These patterns suggest that threats and violence are a widespread and bipartisan problem. About two-thirds of staff members who work for a legislator – whether a Democrat or a Republican — reported threats to the police,

compared to 44 percent of back-office, institutional staffers. Institutional staff who report these experiences may be thinking about threats directed at the institution (e.g., bomb threats or armed protests) or about previous positions they held.

Figure 1. Reporting one or more incidents of harassment, threats, or violence to law enforcement



Note: The figure shows the percentage of staff who reported one or more incidents to law enforcement. The “party of the employer” combines a small number of staff who work for independent legislators in the institutional staff category.

While serious incidents are reported to police, staff insulate elected officials from a range of other incidents. Only 20 percent of staff report all insulting communication to the elected official, while 40 percent report implicit threats, and another 40 percent report only explicit threats that require law enforcement intervention. As the front line of constituent interactions in many legislative offices, staff bear much of the psychological burden of harassment, threats, and violence.

Perceived Causes

We find that constituency service expectations are to blame for threats and violence in America’s legislatures more so than partisan politics, according to staff. We asked staff to rank four types of causes. Most staff (63 percent total for both) selected challenges related to constituency service as the most prevalent cause of threats and violence

against legislators. One third of respondents selected “people who do not understand how government works,” and an additional quarter selected people with behavioral health problems as the most frequent cause. By contrast, only 41 percent of staff prioritized partisan causes of violence, with 36 percent attributing it to “people from the opposing party who disagree politically,” and 5 percent to “people from within the same party”. We observe a similar pattern of staff attributing threats and violence to challenges related to constituency services when we consider the top two causes they selected.

The American system of government is complex and multilayered, and characterized by a weak and decentralized social safety net. Citizens expect the government to be responsive and efficient but are often unaware of who is responsible for what function in the American system of government, which leads to misunderstandings, miscommunication, frustration, and (often enough) incivility and threats. Most staff (86 percent) agree that constituents have unrealistic expectations of what staff can do for them.

Citizens in crisis can present a second source of harassment and threats. People in need of help to address homelessness, unemployment, domestic violence, or mental health issues can expose legislative staff members to volatile and threatening situations.

Table 1. Ranking of perceived causes

Category of cause	Ranked cause as 1 st (most frequent) (%)	Ranked cause as 1 st or 2 nd (%)
People from the other party who disagree politically	36	60
People from your own party who disagree politically	5	17
People with behavioral health issues seeking services	26	58
People who don't understand how government works	37	70

Note: The table shows the percentage of staff who ranked each category as first (column 1) or in top-2 (column 2).

The issue of behavioral health carries over even when we ask more fine-grained questions about *how much responsibility* different factors bear for the phenomenon of threats and violence in America's legislatures. The vast majority of staff, across parties, agree that behavioral health problems bear a lot of responsibility for threats and violence against elected officials and their staff (Figure 2). This does not mean that legislative staff members believe that people with mental health problems are violent. It means that, in their capacity as constituency service managers, they often seek to help people in crisis whose situations can provoke volatile behavior.

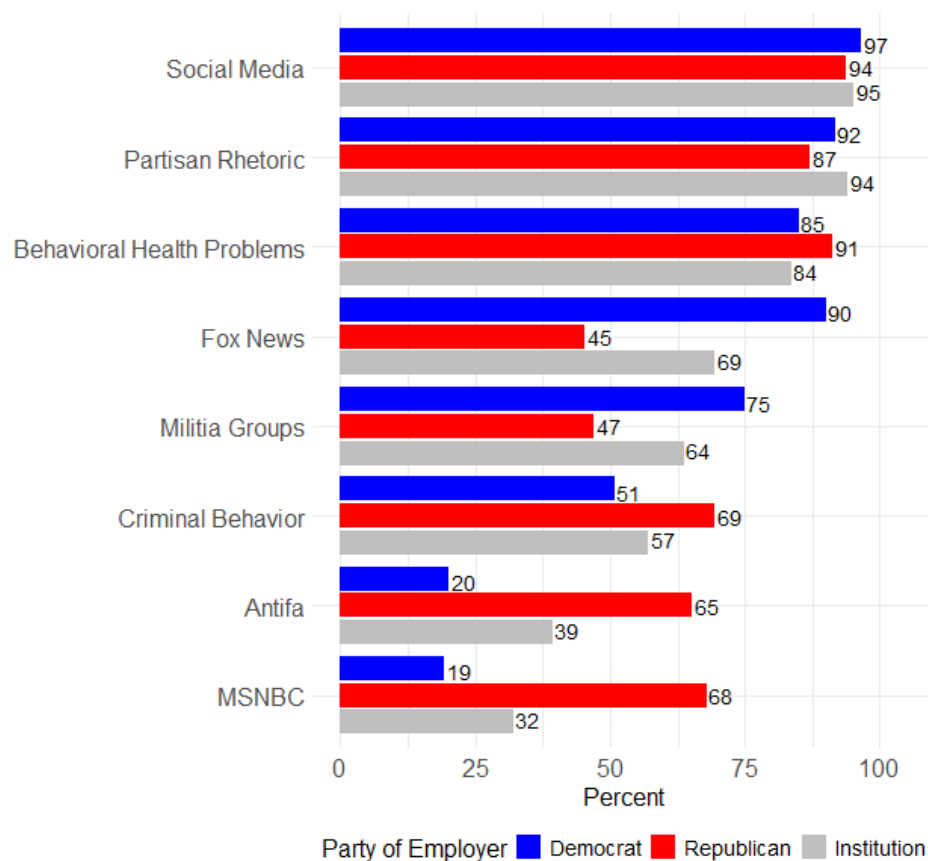
Importantly, staff distinguish between the problem of mental health and criminal behavior: the proportion of staff who attribute a lot of responsibility to criminal behavior is substantially less than those who attribute it to behavioral problems, especially among staff working for Democrats and those working for institutional offices.

Staff attribute the most blame to two key structural issues: social media and violent partisan rhetoric. On those issues, there is strong agreement across parties. Social media has made elected officials easier to reach, removing

communication barriers, which is good for democracy. However, this accessibility has also enabled some citizens to engage in bad behavior, weakening democratic norms and adding further challenges to public service.

The partisan divide emerges when we ask about factors with distinct partisan identities: Democrats and institutional staff are more likely to blame Fox News and militia groups, while Republicans are more likely to blame antifa and MSNBC.

Figure 2. Perceived responsibility for threats and violence



Note: The figure reports the percentage of staff in each party indicating that a given factor has some or a lot of responsibility for threats and violence against elected officials and staff. The “party of employer” combines a small number of staff who work for independent legislators in the institutional staff category.

Government responsiveness appears to be an important factor, even when we drill down into specific policy issues known to have given rise to incivility and hostility among partisan publics in recent years. Government responsiveness was selected by 17 percent of staff as a leading contributor, on par with election integrity concerns, education, and COVID-era public health policy issues that became flashpoints for strong hostility across the states. Other issues map to several areas of political conflict in recent years – immigration, abortion, guns and crime, and, less so, climate change.

Patterns tend to be similar across staff for Democratic and Republican lawmakers, though there are differences between partisan and institutional staff. Staff working for partisan legislators are the most likely to identify immigration policy as a key issue in incidents of threats and violence. Given the timing of the survey, in the Fall of 2025, when federal immigration enforcement officers were conducting raids across the country, this suggests that citizen anger and harassment related to partisan political issues are tied to the national political cycle. Partisan staff are also more likely than institutional staff to identify election integrity as a key issue. Across other issues, the gap between parties and between partisan and institutional staff is smaller.

Table 2. Issues at stake in incidents of threats and violence

Issue Area	Overall (%)	Party of Employer		
		Democrat (%)	Republican (%)	Institution (%)
Immigration	30	34	34	21
Abortion	28	26	27	29
Guns and crime	27	28	28	25
Health (COVID, vaccines, etc.)	20	21	21	19
Education (CRT, book bans, etc.)	18	17	20	18
Election Integrity	18	18	21	14
Lack of government responsiveness	17	20	17	14
Foreign policy	7	9	8	4
Climate change/environment	6	3	12	4

Note: Respondents selected the three issues they thought were most often invoked in incidents of threats and violence. 5% of respondents indicated ‘not sure’ and 11% of respondents selected ‘other’ (volunteering issues such as LGBTQ policy, general grievances about government functioning, among others). The “party of employer” combines a small number of staff who work for independent legislators in the institutional staff category.

Security Solutions Currently Implemented

Some legislatures are full-time (“professional”), with professional staff working year-round. Others are part-time (“citizen”) legislatures with fewer professional staff and more part-time staff. As a result, the needs and demands for security may be different depending on the type of legislature a state has.

A majority (64 percent) of staff members across all legislatures report that their office has enacted at least one security measure to address harassment, threats, and violence. However, there is no uniformity in the types of measures taken. Table 3 reports the percentage of staff who indicated that their office has implemented a range of specific security measures to address violence. About one-third of staff report that their office installed a silent alarm – this measure is popular in professional and citizen legislatures. About one-fourth report “safety training” as

an implemented measure. About one-in-five staff members mentioned measures to protect personal data, active shooter training, and cameras installed at the office.

Although uptake of specific solutions is low, overall satisfaction with workplace security measures is high: 80 percent of staff report being somewhat or very satisfied with the security measures their office or legislature has taken.

Table 3. Security measures implemented to address political violence

Type of security measure	Overall (%)	Legislative Professionalism			
		Mostly Professional (%)	Somewhat Professional (%)	Somewhat Citizen (%)	Mostly Citizen (%)
Boss installed silent alarm at the office	31	35	26	27	30
Boss sought and received safety training for office	28	29	31	21	30
Boss took steps to protect staff's personal data	21	19	26	18	32
Boss arranged active shooter training	20	19	21	17	24
Boss installed cameras at the office	20	20	21	14	24
Boss asked police to drive by office on routine patrol	15	14	14	17	15
Boss arranged de-escalation training for staff	13	17	12	4	6
Boss arranged mental health support for staff	13	13	19	10	5
Boss arranged burnout training for staff	10	12	10	9	1

Note: The table reports the percentage of staff who indicated that their legislature/chamber/office has implemented a given security solution. 15% of staff reported 'other' solutions (and volunteered solutions such as building access controls, on-site security, among others).

Support for Potential Solutions

Despite high satisfaction with what is in place, staff members support the implementation of additional measures. There is widespread and bipartisan support for a range of policies that would help reduce exposure to threats and violence targeting elected officials and staff or help mitigate the impact. Table 4 reports the percentage of staff who

strongly or somewhat support each policy proposal for addressing threats and violence. Staffers express almost universal support for comprehensive threat assessment plans (96 percent) and de-escalation training (94 percent). There is also widespread and bipartisan support for mental health support, funding for district office security, and preventing candidates' personal information from being on the public record. Support is more modest, though still a majority among most groups, for funding security at elected officials' private residences and providing a security detail for elected officials. Staff expressed the lowest level of support for law enforcement monitoring elected officials' social media for threats, perhaps because this raises concerns about freedom of speech. Levels of support tend to be similar across party of employer (shown in Table 4) and frequency of constituent interactions (not shown).

Table 4. Support for policy proposals to address threats and violence

Policy Proposal	Overall (%)	Party of Employer		
		Democrat (%)	Republican (%)	Institution (%)
Provide comprehensive threat assessment plan	96	98	95	95
Provide de-escalation training to officials and staff	94	97	90	95
Provide mental health support services for officials and staff	90	98	84	84
Fund district office security	88	93	85	81
Prevent candidate personal information from being on public record	85	87	84	83
Fund alarms/cameras at official's private residence	69	82	61	59
Provide police security detail to elected official	58	59	57	58
Have law enforcement monitor officials' social media for threats	56	61	49	57

Note: The table shows the percentage of staff who strongly or somewhat support each proposal. The 'party of employer' combines a small number of staff who work for independent legislators in the institutional staff category.

Resilience

Despite the challenges that harassment, threats, and violence pose for legislative staff, America's public servants are resilient. Three-quarters of staff strongly agree that they are very committed to their work in public service.

Nearly a third strongly agree that they have a civic duty to do this job, even if it comes with threats. Staff also report positive interactions with constituents that may provide a contrast to the challenges of harassment, threats, and violence – 94 percent have been thanked at least once by the public for their work, and the average staffer reports that they are ‘sometimes’ thanked for their work. Most staff (71 percent) also feel respected by their boss. When taking stock of both the challenging and rewarding aspects of the job, nearly half (47 percent) of staff report being very satisfied with their job, and 93 percent report being somewhat or very satisfied. Of course, the most dissatisfied and discouraged staff may have left public service.

Conclusions

Staff are a crucial intermediary between the public and elected officials. However, this position often puts staff, especially in constituent-facing roles, at risk of intercepting harassment, threats, and violence from the public. Our research reveals that political violence is a widespread problem, affecting a large fraction of legislative offices. The root causes stem from both partisan animosity – often from the opposing party and more rarely from a legislator’s own party – and non-partisan constituency service pressures. Constituents who are frustrated by a lack of government responsiveness or in need of services may lash out at staff. Many legislative offices have begun to take steps to mitigate the problem of political violence or help staff cope, but more can be done. There is broad and bipartisan support for a range of solutions that would protect legislators and their staff.

Overview of Methods

This report draws on surveys of 740 state legislative staff between August 18, 2025 and November 20, 2025. The surveys were conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois Chicago, University of Massachusetts Lowell, and Northwestern University.

The survey is weighted to population benchmarks on sex, boss’s party, legislative professionalism (Squire Index), census region, and chamber.

Acknowledgments

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