

RAPID RESEARCH REPORT | SEPTEMBER 15, 2026



THREATS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST ELECTED OFFICIALS AND THEIR STAFF

Constituency Demands and Polarization Drive Threats and Violence: Mayors and Top Municipal Officials' Perspective

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Filindra, A., J. Cluverius, and L. Harbridge-Yong. 2026 (September 15). Constituency Demands and Polarization Drive Threats and Violence: Mayors and Top Municipal Officials' Perspective. Institute for Policy Research Rapid Research Report. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-report-political-violence-mayors-report-september-2026.pdf>

Mayors and Top Municipal Officials Share Insights on Threats and Violence in City Politics

By **Alexandra Filindra, John Cluverius, and Laurel Harbridge-Yong**

Overview

Mayors and other top municipal officials play a critical role in serving communities across the country. They address local issues and advocate for their communities. While many aspects of this job are rewarding, public service also comes with challenges, including harassment, threats, and violence targeting elected officials.

In partnership with the U.S. Conference of Mayors, we surveyed mayors and other top municipal executives (e.g., First Selectman, Village President) 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 and how communities are responding. For ease of presentation, we use the term ‘mayor’ to refer to those who hold the title of mayor as well as other job titles that function similarly to mayor.

Exposure

Exposure to threats is distressingly common for mayors and top executives that run America’s cities. During their career, a majority (61 percent) of mayors have experienced threats (verbally, in writing, or online), and a quarter (25 percent) have received threats against their family members. Physical violence, although alarming, is less prevalent, with 4 percent of mayors reporting that they have been physically attacked or assaulted, and 18 percent of mayors reporting vandalism at their office or home.

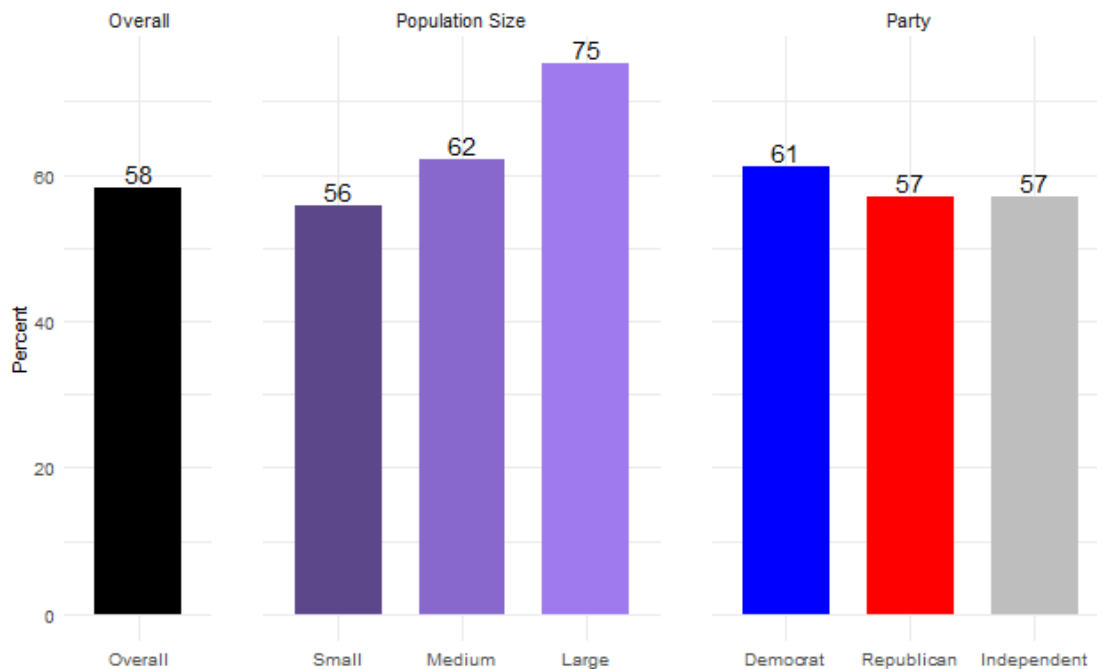
Physical violence is not common, but serious threats are – 58 percent of mayors have experienced at least one incident that was concerning enough to report it to law enforcement. Figure 1 plots the percentage of mayors who have reported at least one incident to law enforcement. Rates are higher among mayors who represent large cities (population over 50,000) than among small (population less than 10,000) and medium-sized cities, pointing to both the widespread nature of the problem and the heightened risks for mayors in large cities that represent more people with more diverse needs.

Acknowledgments

This project was supported by Award No. 15PNIJ-23-GG-01385-DOMR, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

These patterns also suggest that threats and violence are a bipartisan problem. Roughly 60 percent of mayors – whether they self-identify as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents — reported threats to the police.

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



Note: The figure shows the percentage of mayors who reported one or more incidents to law enforcement. Party identification is self-identification and includes mayors who run in partisan and non-partisan races.

Perceived Causes

We find that constituency service expectations are to blame for threats and violence in America’s city halls more so than partisan politics, according to mayors. We asked mayors to rank four types of causes based on their experience. Most mayors (74 percent) selected challenges related to constituency service as the most prevalent cause of threats and violence against elected officials. Fully half of the respondents selected “people seeking constituency services who do not understand how government works,” and an additional quarter selected “people seeking constituency services who suffer from behavioral health issues” as the most frequent cause. By contrast, only a quarter of mayors prioritized partisan causes of violence, with 18 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 mayors 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 mayors (80 percent) agree that constituents have unrealistic expectations of what mayors 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 mayors and their staff 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 don't agree with you politically	18	42
People from your own party who don't agree with you politically	5	19
People seeking constituency services who suffer from behavioral health issues	24	52
People seeking constituency services who do not understand how government works	50	79

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

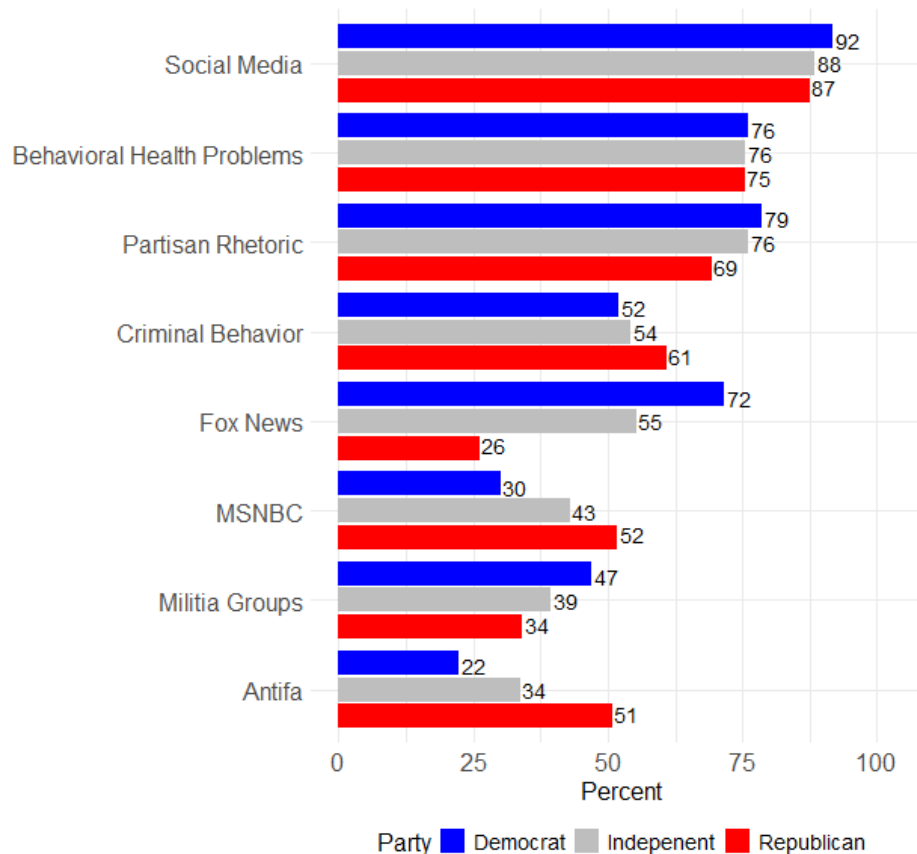
The issue of behavioral health carries over even when we ask more fine-grained questions about *how much responsibility* different factors bear for the broader phenomenon of threats and violence in America's city halls. Three-quarters of mayors, across parties, agree that behavioral health problems bear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

Importantly, mayors distinguish between mental health and criminal behavior: the proportion of mayors who attribute a lot of responsibility to criminal behavior is substantially lower than that of those who attribute it to behavioral problems, especially among Democrats and Independents.

Mayors also attribute blame to two key structural issues: social media and partisan rhetoric. Mayors across the political spectrum are in near-universal agreement that social media is to blame either somewhat or a lot for threats and violence. 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. While super-majorities of mayors from all parties view partisan rhetoric as a contributing factor, Democrats and Independents are more likely to attribute responsibility to partisan rhetoric than Republicans.

Larger partisan divides emerge when we ask about factors with distinct partisan identities: Democrats are more likely to blame Fox News and militia groups, while Republicans are more likely to blame MSNBC and antifa.

Figure 2. Perceived responsibility for threats and violence



Note: The figure reports the percentage of mayors from each party indicating that a given factor has some or a lot of responsibility for threats and violence against elected officials and staff. Party identification is self-identification and includes mayors who run in partisan and non-partisan races.

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. We asked mayors to select the top three issues that contribute to threats and violence against elected officials. A lack of government responsiveness was selected by 63 percent of mayors as a leading contributor, substantially higher than any policy issue identified by respondents.

Substantial fractions of mayors also identified several contentious policy issues as motivators of threats and violence. A third of mayors identified immigration and guns/crime as salient issues behind threats and violence, while roughly a quarter pointed to health policy and election integrity. 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 frustration related to partisan political issues may be tied to the national political cycle and the nationalization of politics.

Patterns tend to be similar across Democratic, Republican, and Independent mayors. The largest partisan difference emerges on guns and crime, where Democratic mayors point to this issue more than Republicans. The differences that we observe across parties can stem both from the issues that resonate with constituents in each party, perhaps because of national partisan rhetoric, as well as differences in the types of cities that elect Democrats and Republicans. Over half of the mayors representing large cities in our data are Democrats (55 percent), compared to 30 percent Republican and 14 percent Independent.

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

Issue Area	Overall (%)	Party		
		Democrat (%)	Republican (%)	Independent (%)
Lack of government responsiveness	63	61	61	70
Immigration	35	33	37	32
Guns and crime	31	41	26	30
Health (COVID, vaccines, etc.)	26	27	26	24
Election Integrity	25	22	28	23
Education (CRT, book bans, etc.)	20	22	20	17
Climate change/environment	10	9	10	11
Abortion	7	9	7	6
Foreign policy	7	10	7	5

Note: Respondents selected the three issues they thought were most often invoked in incidents of threats and violence. 7% of respondents indicated 'not sure' and 23% of respondents selected 'other' (volunteering issues such as LGBTQ policy, general grievances about government functioning, opposition to local economic growth plans, among others). While mayors do not make foreign policy decisions, protests during the Israel/Gaza and Russia/Ukraine conflicts may have involved mayors and city government.

Security Solutions Currently Implemented

Some mayors represent small towns or cities where there are few staff and the mayor handles most of the interactions with constituents. In larger cities, mayors may rely more on staff as intermediaries with the public. The visibility of the mayor as a public persona and as a target of media coverage may also vary across city size. As a result, the needs and demands for security may be different depending on the size of the city.

A majority (63 percent) of mayors 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 mayors who indicated that their office has implemented a range of specific security measures to address threats and violence. The table organizes security measures by those that focus on protection for the mayor and those that focus on training and preparedness. Nearly one-third of mayors report that they have sought to

protect their personal data or have installed a security system at their home. Uptake of both solutions is substantially higher in large cities compared to small cities. About one-fifth report asking police to routinely drive by the mayor's house.

Training and preparation measures also vary by population size. Only 14 percent of mayors representing small cities report having active shooter trainings, compared to 40 percent of mayors from large cities. Similar differences emerge for safety trainings and threat assessment plans.

Although uptake of specific solutions is low, overall satisfaction with workplace security measures is high: 89 percent of mayors report being somewhat or very satisfied with the security measures their office has taken.

Table 3. Security measures implemented to address political violence

Type of security measure	Overall (%)	Population Size		
		Small	Medium	Large
		(<10K)	(10-50K)	(>50K)
		(%)	(%)	(%)
<i>Protection:</i>				
Protect personal data	28	25	32	42
Home security	27	22	38	47
Police patrol by mayor’s house	21	21	23	25
Varied driving routine to/from work	9	7	15	20
Office alarm	10	8	15	21
Unlisted number	7	7	9	14
Police monitor social media for threats	6	4	9	20
<i>Training/Preparedness:</i>				
Active shooter training	17	14	25	40
Safety training	11	8	17	25
Mental health support for mayor/staff	8	7	12	8
De-escalation training for mayor/staff	7	6	11	10
Threat assessment plan	7	4	10	25

Note: The table reports the percentage of mayors who indicated that their office has implemented a given security solution. Less than 5% of mayors selected the following items: taking out a restraining order (4%), requesting that police prioritize calls from the mayor's house (4%), having staff trained in situational awareness drive mayor to event (2%), and holding trainings to reduce burnout among mayor/staff (3%). 12% of mayors reported 'other' solutions (and volunteered solutions such as carrying a

firearm, building access controls, taking precautions such as walking to car with others/not working alone, requesting a police detail at events, among others).

Support for Potential Solutions

Despite high satisfaction with what is in place, mayors 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 or help mitigate the impact. Table 4 reports the percentage of mayors who strongly or somewhat support each policy proposal for addressing threats and violence. Mayors express almost universal support for de-escalation training (93 percent) and comprehensive threat assessment plans (87 percent). There is also widespread and bipartisan support for mental health support and preventing candidates' personal information from being on the public record. Support is more modest, though still a majority among all groups, for funding security at elected officials' private residences and having law enforcement monitor officials' social media for threats. Mayors expressed the lowest level of support for providing a security detail for elected officials. Majority support tends to be similar across parties, though the magnitude of support tends to be lower among Republicans and Independents relative to Democrats.

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

Policy Proposal	Overall (%)	Party		
		Democrat (%)	Republican (%)	Independent (%)
Provide de-escalation training to officials and staff	93	95	91	93
Provide a comprehensive threat assessment plan	87	89	88	86
Provide mental health support services for officials and staff	81	91	75	81
Prevent candidate personal information from being on public record	70	72	72	67
Fund alarms/cameras at official's private residence	58	66	58	50
Have law enforcement monitor officials' social media for threats	57	59	57	54
Provide police security detail to elected official	42	49	41	35

Note: The table shows the percentage of mayors who strongly or somewhat support each proposal.

Resilience

Despite the challenges that harassment, threats, and violence pose for mayors, America's public servants are resilient. Nearly all mayors (90 percent) strongly agree that they are very committed to their work in public service. Over half (52 percent) strongly agree that they have a civic duty to do this job, even if it comes with threats. When taking stock of both the challenging and rewarding aspects of the job, a majority (61 percent) of mayors report being very satisfied with their job, and 97 percent report being somewhat or very satisfied. Of course, the most dissatisfied and discouraged mayors may have left public service.

Conclusions

Mayors and other top municipal officials play a key role in governing and helping address the needs of their community. However, this position often puts mayors 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 mayors. The root causes stem from both partisan animosity – often from the opposing party and more rarely from a mayor'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 mayors and their staff. Many local governments have begun to take steps to mitigate the problem of political violence or help elected officials and their staff cope, but more can be done. There is broad and bipartisan support for a range of solutions that would protect mayors and their staff.

Overview of Methods

This report draws on surveys of 2,110 mayors and other top elected municipal executives distributed between September 2, 2025 and December 10, 2025. Mailed surveys were accepted throughout 2026, with the last survey in the dataset returned July 23, 2026. 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, race, census region, population size, and age.

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