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PRINCETON’S BRIDGING DIVIDES INITIATIVE RELEASES NEW STUDY ON HOW LOCAL OFFICIALS DESCRIBE ONGOING THREATS AND HARASSMENT  
Interviews With 30 Local Elected Leaders Show the Toll On Officials and Gaps in Response  

PRINCETON, NJ — Princeton University’s Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) released a new report featuring the experiences of local elected leaders with threats and harassment. BDI’s report offers preliminary insights and reflections on the experiences of local officials experiencing threats and harassment, in their own words, through conversations with 30 elected officials from across a broad range of locations, demographics, and ideologies.

“This study bears witness to the experiences of local elected officials that are often hushed away and ignored, leaving officials feeling isolated and alone,” says Shannon Hiller, Executive Director of Princeton’s Bridging Divides Initiative. “The data show that officials are under a barrage of harassment and threats. But these initial interviews also tell stories of resilience and readiness to respond to the issue, enabling future leaders to have the support they need in order to serve their communities better.”

Findings

(1) Local officials interviewed experienced a range of threats and harassment, including physical violence, psychological violence, sexualized or gendered abuse, racialized abuse, partisan harassment, and internet harassment and violence.
- Women and people of color bore the brunt of this abuse, mirroring national trends.
- Threats and harassment were not in response to any one issue or isolated to one political party, but respondents broadly described an “emboldened” climate with a “new level of permission to be publicly vile,” especially evident in social media and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(2) Local officials described how threats and harassment impacted them, including community isolation, fear of public spaces, invasion of home privacy, disruption of community meetings, and threats to family, loved ones, and businesses.
• Officials overwhelmingly reported feelings of isolation and loneliness. One elected official reported that she did not “even want to be in public in her community,” driving to a nearby town to run errands.

(3) Interviewees largely described two categories of response - personal changes or legal and law enforcement action - amid the disorienting and unsettling experience of receiving threats and experiencing harassment. Almost all respondents indicated at least some level of behavioral change following threats and/or harassment.

• This includes relatively small measures, such as deleting social media accounts, as well as more drastic steps, such as no longer inviting people over for social gatherings or acquiring a concealed-carry firearms permit.

(4) Local officials identified gaps in support for fellow elected officials experiencing threats and harassment, including building support, training, and understanding response options.

• In particular, women expressed resentment about some national organizations encouraging them to run but not supporting them once in office. As one official put it, “if you’re going to get them elected, why aren’t you supporting them once in office?”

“There is a tremendous cost to public service in the form of threats and harassment that is a persistently growing – and concerning – feature of American democracy,” says Augusta Dell’Omo, Ph.D., Associate Policy Researcher at BDI and lead author of the case studies. “This study offers a glimpse into what elected officials are going through, in their own words, and shows the real need for additional resources and research based on their experiences.”

Methodology and Data
Pulling from a larger sample of survey respondents, the 30 semi-structured interviews centered on five questions about the nature of threats and harassment experienced and what responses officials pursued or wished were in place. Respondents included even splits between men and women (53.3% women and 46.7% men) and relatively even splits across the U.S. by region (33.3% Midwest, 26.7% South, 20% West, and 20% Northeast). 20% of interviewees identified as Republican, with an additional 20% identifying as independent or a third party. The remaining 60% identified as Democrats. Researchers made a specific effort to speak with elected officials of color, who make up 20% of interviewees.

Looking Forward
BDI is partnering with CivicPulse and the Brennan Center for Justice to better understand threats and harassment of local officials, including ongoing quarterly surveys of local officials, continued data collection and analysis of BDI’s Threats and Harassment dataset, and supporting local officials through new tools and working groups.

The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) is a non-partisan research initiative based at Princeton University that tracks and mitigates political violence in the United States. BDI supports efforts to grow and build local
community resilience throughout elections and other periods of heightened risk, laying a foundation for longer-term work to bridge the divides we face as a nation.