Public perceptions of candidate abuse and intimidation

Research carried out on behalf of the Electoral Commission

April 2026



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1. Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

The Electoral Commission appointed Community Research to undertake an in-depth exploration of the potentially sensitive and nuanced subject of abuse and intimidation towards candidates standing for election. The overarching objective of the research was to obtain a better understanding of the public's views on the acceptability of the abuse and intimidation of candidates, both in terms of their thoughts on hypothetical examples, but also more broadly to understand why the public holds those views.

84 participants completed an online written forum, reviewing hypothetical scenarios and sharing their individual, anonymised views. 80 of these went on to take part in an online discussion on Zoom where they explored the topic of abuse and intimidation of candidates in small groups. 10 depth interviews were conducted with those who would struggle to take part in an online methodology.

Participants were recruited to represent a range of demographics, levels of political engagement, political allegiances and locations across all four nations of the UK.

All fieldwork took place between 10 February and 6 March 2026.

1.2 Key findings

Context

Participants' views of UK politics and the tone of political debate were overwhelmingly negative. Many participants perceived debate as increasingly divisive, with social media developments and global tensions feeding into these divisions. Trust in politicians, especially at the national level, was low, and typically linked to perceptions of 'broken promises'. Some participants suggested that trust has declined since Brexit and/or COVID-19. This was attributed to perceptions of misinformation around Brexit and politicians' behaviour during 'lockdown'. However, others just referred to these events as markers of time.

Within this climate, abuse and intimidation of candidates was widely recognised as an issue. However, these behaviours were not seen as unique to candidates; rather, they were viewed as part of a broader societal problem, with some participants sharing their own personal experiences of being subject to or witnessing abusive and intimidating behaviours, typically online.

That said, participants suggested that candidates were likely to be targeted more than other professions or people in the public eye. They thought that, unlike others (e.g. teachers, doctors, celebrities), candidates were perceived as having greater influence over people's lives (and livelihoods) and were regarded as liable if things were not going well. They believed that candidates also held a unique position in

that they stood for a specific party or interest and that it was the viewpoint, and not simply the individual, that was the target of abuse.

Participants did not expect candidates to be subject to severe and/or sustained abusive and intimidating behaviours. However, they believed that a certain level of abuse and intimidation was inevitable given the divisive and angry tone of political debate and that candidates should be able to withstand a certain degree of negative behaviours. Participants further believed that candidates (and politicians outside of election campaigns) have a collective responsibility to ensure that their actions (or inactions) do not further fuel abusive and intimidating behaviours.

Initial reactions to abusive and intimidating behaviours

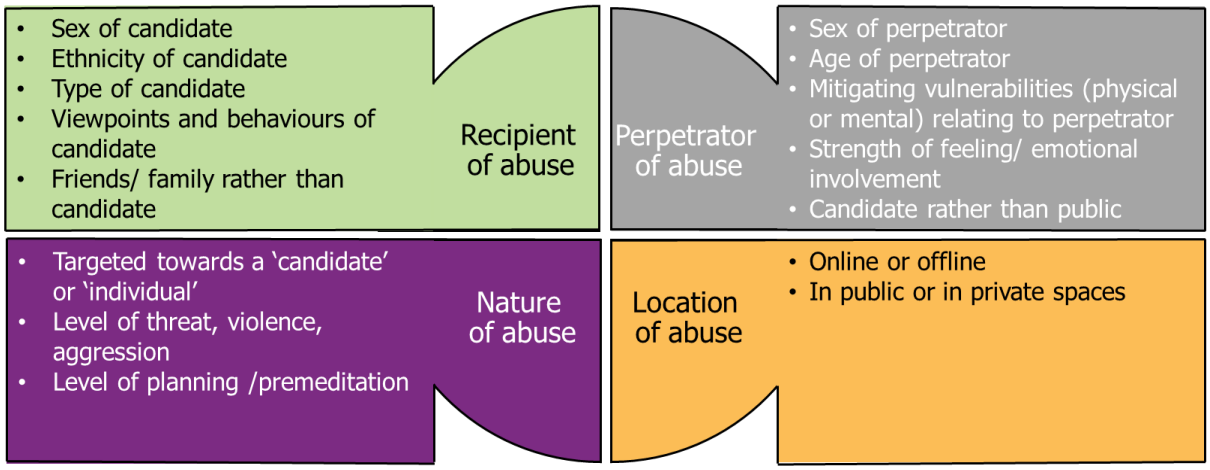
In the research, participants considered a range of scenarios highlighting abusive and intimidating behaviours – egg throwing, defacing campaign posters, grabbing a candidate while out canvassing, shouting at a candidate, and online harassment. Most participants saw all of these as unacceptable to varying degrees. Initial judgements were often shaped by the perceived harm these behaviours cause to individuals. However, perceptions of harm differed, with female participants more likely to emphasise the potential psychological as well as physical harm of behaviours. Few participants referenced wider democratic harms in these early discussions.

Views on acceptability were also influenced by perceptions of shifting social norms: an increase in and greater tolerance towards misogynist and racist comments and, similarly, a perceived increase in and tolerance of abusive and aggressive behaviours online. These perceptions resulted in many participants condemning behaviours towards candidates that were seen to further fuel or normalise this shift.

Factors influencing understandability of abusive and intimidating behaviours

In-depth discussion was often focussed on what might make behaviours more or less understandable. Focussing on understandability, rather than whether behaviours were acceptable or not, brought out more nuance and helped mitigate against the tendency for participants to say what they felt might be more socially acceptable.

Factors that appear to have some influence on whether or not behaviours are understandable related to the recipient, the perpetrator, and the nature and location of abusive and intimidating behaviours and are set out overleaf:



The nature and location of the abuse and intimidation affected how understandable participants felt behaviours were in the following ways:

- Behaviours targeting personal characteristics of the candidate were deemed less understandable than those aimed at the policies, actions or issues candidates are associated with. Abuse relating to protected characteristics was a red line
- Most participants also found violence or threats of violence less understandable than nonviolent behaviours, but a minority questioned whether online threats of violence are always intended as such and, therefore, displayed greater levels of tolerance towards them
- Spontaneous behaviours were seen as more understandable than premeditated ones
- Participants were more likely to understand and accept behaviours taking place in public (e.g. at a meeting/ in the street) than in private spaces, such as outside the candidate's home or on a voter's doorstep
- Online, there was generally more understanding of abusive comments made on a perpetrator's personal social media feed than of those posted on a candidate's feed/ account (though some, mostly younger participants, felt this depends on the size of the perpetrator's online following)

The characteristics of the recipient affected understanding of the behaviours as follows:

- Targeting female candidates was deemed less understandable than targeting male candidates, as participants tended to believe women will be more easily physically intimidated
- There was greater variation in opinions as to whether abuse of a candidate from a minority ethnic group (where abuse does not relate to ethnicity) was more serious. Some felt that a context of rising racism in society makes any abuse of a minority ethnic candidate less understandable than the same abuse directed at a White candidate, but others argued a candidate's ethnicity makes no difference to how they feel about the behaviour

- Type of candidate was relevant – abuse of first-time candidates was considered less understandable given their lack of track record in office; and abuse of local candidates was seen by some as less understandable as they were presumed to make fewer far-reaching decisions and were seen as more vulnerable to intimidation given a lack of security (presumed in place for national candidates) and potentially living locally to perpetrators
- There was more understanding of abusive and intimidating behaviours targeting candidates holding divisive views, those with a track record of not delivering on (or breaking) pre-election promises or those with questions over their personal or professional conduct
- No one found behaviours targeting friends, family and colleagues of candidates understandable

The characteristics of the perpetrator affected understandability:

- Elderly perpetrators were sometimes assumed to be less of a physical threat, with some behaviours (such as grabbing or touching a candidate) seen as understandable due to possible loneliness; and abuse by teenagers was sometimes excused as poor judgement as it was assumed that young people lacked life experience and were not necessarily aware of the consequences of their actions
- Behaviours were more understandable if perpetrators have mental health conditions or are neurodivergent
- There was more understanding for perpetrators whose actions are driven by strong feelings about an issue; who are directly affected by the policies of a candidate; or who are acting aggressively because they feel they haven't been listened to. There was evident empathy for perpetrators who are struggling financially and who have few prospects of social mobility
- There was far less understanding of abuse towards candidates perpetrated by other candidates, as they are expected to set a standard and behave professionally

Addressing the issue

Given the widespread and complex nature of candidate abuse and intimidation, participants felt that tackling abusive and intimidating behaviours requires a multi-organisational approach, with roles and responsibilities for social media firms; government and regulators; individuals; schools and parents; police and prosecutors; and candidates and politicians.

While legal and regulatory solutions were deemed helpful in tackling the issue of candidate abuse and intimidation, people often called for wider actions alongside these to try to change individual and collective behaviours and associated social norms.

Whilst there was some scepticism about the effectiveness of a communications campaign generally, participants saw some potential for a campaign that targets perpetrators at the less extreme end of abusive and intimidating behaviours. The majority preferred an approach that focussed on the consequences for perpetrators (fines; bans; criminal record; prison) or a more emotive approach highlighting the impacts of candidate abuse and intimidation.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background to the research

Abuse and intimidation of those who stand for election is a concern for the Electoral Commission and related organisations. As part of their work on this topic, they undertake regular research with candidates. This work has highlighted the range of abusive and intimidating behaviours experienced by candidates, and the associated impact on candidates and their staff.

In addition to conducting research with candidates themselves, the Commission monitors public attitudes towards elections and democracy in the UK via quantitative research. Following the 2024 UK general election, public concerns about candidate intimidation increased and 35% of respondents identified it as a problem (up from 27% the previous year). However, the data also showed a slight decline in the number of people who say a range of bullying behaviours towards candidates were unacceptable and that there was some variance in attitudes from different demographics.

By contrast, other (external) research suggests the public are more moderate in their attitudes to what is acceptable behaviour towards candidates, leading to a mixed picture.

With all this in mind, the Commission sought a more in-depth exploration of the potentially sensitive and nuanced subject of public perceptions of candidate abuse and intimidation.

2.2 Research aims and objectives

The core aims and objectives of this research were as follows:

- To provide context to participants on the topic and examples (scenarios) of types of behaviour and discuss whether they are acceptable or not
- To explore and understand whether there are any differences in a view of what is un/acceptable depending on:
  - Mode (e.g. online, face to face)
  - Characteristics of the recipient (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity, age etc but also if this differs for candidates versus, for example, other people in the public eye or even members of the public)
  - Characteristics of the participant and/or perpetrator
  - Political position of the recipient (e.g. is it seen as more acceptable if it is someone with an opposing view to the perpetrator)
  - The level at which the recipient is standing (e.g. councillor or parliamentarian)
- To determine a broad consensus of views gathered as to acceptable and unacceptable behaviour

  - Whilst remaining cognisant to the fact that the 'worst offenders' are less likely to come forward to take part in the research and, if they do participate, may not share their views openly
- To potentially highlight any interventions or messaging which could be used to deter unacceptable behaviour
  - Whilst keeping in mind that this is exploratory research as opposed to communications research (which would determine a different research approach)

2.3 Approach

The approach was designed to minimise the impact of social norming. Social norming is where people adjust their opinions, behaviours, or responses to align with what they perceive as the "norm" within a group or society. Essentially, individuals tend to conform to societal or group expectations—whether consciously or unconsciously—because they want to fit in, be accepted, or avoid conflict.

To help address this, the research was run in two phases, both online:

- An initial phase focused on individual responses, where anonymous feedback was sought in an online forum
- A second phase in which participants were placed in small discussion groups to consider understandability of behaviours more broadly

The idea was that collecting views in a non-judgemental space, where pressure to conform was lowered, would allow a more honest view in the first instance.

The discussion groups then brought participants together to debate circumstances that might make abusive and intimidating behaviours more understandable. The focus on understanding behaviours rather than focussing solely on acceptability attempted to reduce social norming by permitting participants to share their views, without having to condone any of the abusive and intimidating behaviours being discussed.

The individual exercise was hosted in the online research platform Recollective[1] and the live online discussions took place over Zoom. To capture the views of those who may be excluded from a fully online approach a further 10 interviews (most of which were via telephone) were carried out.

Social norming operates at both a conscious and unconscious level and while these methodological precautions undoubtedly helped reduce the impact of social norming, its deeply embedded nature means that some degree of influence is likely to persist.

[1] Qualitative Research | Recollective

Online forum

84 participants completed the online forum. Participants were recruited to represent a range of demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group), rural and urban locations across all four nations of the UK, levels of political engagement (high, medium and low) and alignment to a range of political parties (Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Reform UK, Greens, Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, Sinn Fein, Democratic Unionist Party) or no political party alignment. The full sample profile can be found in Appendix 9.1.

The forum involved reviewing a series of scenarios highlighting some abusive and intimidating behaviours, rating them in terms of perceived acceptability and explaining those ratings. Responses were only visible to the research team, and not to other participants. The order in which the scenarios were shown was rotated to mitigate against the order influencing responses.

Scenarios outlined behaviours but deliberately provided little in way of context for the behaviours. They were presented as sex- and gender- neutral – they did not specify whether the candidate or perpetrator was male or female. Moderators were also careful to ensure they used gender-neutral language in talking about the scenarios.

The scenarios used in the online forum are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Scenarios used in the online forum for English participants

Scenario No.	Scenario wording
A	Along with about 50 other people, Candidate A was at a public meeting at the local village hall about the possible closure of a leisure centre in the neighbouring town. On leaving they were stopped by a member of the public. This person started shouting at Candidate A, telling them that they were not fit to be a candidate in the election to the district council.
B	Candidate B was standing to be an MP in UK Parliamentary election (General election) for the first time and was door knocking in their local area. It was late afternoon, and the volunteer supporter that had been with Candidate B all day had to get home. Candidate B wanted to finish making calls on the remaining 3 streets on the target list for the day, before going home, so carried on alone. Candidate B didn't get much of a response from some of the doors they knocked on, however, the person at No.34 was more than happy to chat politics. After about 15 minutes, as Candidate B was trying to leave, that person grabbed them by their arm and tried to stop them.
C	Candidate C had been a town councillor for the last 8 years and after much consideration they decided to stand for re-election. They used their Instagram account to announce that they would be standing again. Soon after posting the news, Candidate C refreshed their feed and saw a number of negative comments had been posted, highlighting their weight.

D	Candidate D was standing for election as a city mayor[2]. As part of their election campaign, they paid to have posters put up in a number of public spaces, including bus stops. Over several weeks it was reported that the majority of posters and either been defaced or written over with references to the candidate's sexuality.
E	Candidate E was standing for election to the city council for the first time and felt it was important to promote themselves as widely as possible, as the opposing candidate was already well known in the city. Candidate E took to social media, taking every opportunity to post, comment, like and share and using popular hashtags to try and reach a wider audience. Candidate E commented on a post by the city's football team, setting out how they would support an increase in grassroots funding for women's football, if elected. After posting this comment, Candidate E received a number of replies that included threats to punch and kick them.
F	Candidate F was standing for election to be the city mayor. They were leaving their house one morning when someone shouted out 'Please give a round of applause for our future mayor'. As they turned round to see who it was, the person threw an egg.

The use of scenarios was to ensure that all participants could make a meaningful contribution, regardless of their level of political engagement, awareness and interest in the issues. In short, the research aimed to bring abusive and intimidating behaviours to life for participants rather than discuss it in the abstract.

Live groups

A week after participating in the online forum, 80 of the 84 participants[3] who completed the online forum went on to take part in online group discussions. The deliberate time lag between the online forum and the live group was an opportunity for participants to further reflect on the scenarios presented to them. The research was designed so that groups were relatively homogenous in terms of age and gender. There were also separate groups comprising minority ethnic groups. This was to ensure that, firstly, minoritised groups could feel better able to raise issues they felt related to issues such as racism and misogyny; and secondly, to facilitate analysis of any difference by demographics.

The composition of these group discussions is shown in Table 2 overleaf:

[2] Amended as appropriate for groups in the devolved nations: MSP for the Scottish Parliament/ Member of the Senedd (MS) for Senedd Cymru/ Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the Northern Ireland Assembly

[3] Note that four participants did not take part in phase two as a result of natural attrition.

Table 2: Live group discussion composition

Online Group No	Age	Gender	Ethnicity*	Location**	Political affiliation
1	16/17	Women	Mixed minority ethnic groups	England	Mix
2	18-29	Men	White	England	Mix
3	18-29	Women	White	England	Mix
4	30-49	Men	White	England	Mix
5	30-49	Women	Mixed minority ethnic groups	England	Mix
6	30-49	Men	White	England	Mix
7	50+	Men	Mixed minority ethnic groups	England	Mix
8	50+	Women	White	England	Mix
9	18-29	Men	Mixed minority ethnic groups	Scotland	Mix
10	30-49	Women	White	Scotland	Mix
11	50+	Men	White	Scotland	Mix
12	16/17	Men	White	Wales	Mix
13	18-29	Women	White	Wales	Mix
14	50+	Women	White	Wales	Mix
15	18-40	Men	White	N. Ireland	Nationalist, with a min. 2 x Sinn Fein
16	30-49	Women	White	N. Ireland	Alliance/other parties with a min. 2 x Alliance
17	50+	Men	White	N. Ireland	Unionist with a min. 2 x DUP

* a range of minority ethnic backgrounds (Asian, Black or Mixed background) were included
** participants were recruited from a range of locations across these nations

The two-hour focus groups followed a semi-structured discussion guide (provided in in Appendix 9.2), which included further exploration of the scenarios shown in the online forum. Moderators used a series of 'what if' statements where necessary to prompt debate and discussion around public acceptability in relation to a wide range of abusive and intimidating behaviours towards candidates. In essence, participants were asked to consider if there were any circumstances in which the behaviour displayed in the scenario would be more or less understandable and how this might impact on overall acceptability.

In-depth interviews

A further 10 x in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who were unable to participate in the online research. This included individuals who had:

- Specific communication needs (visual/hearing impairment; other health issues that mean an in-depth interview was more appropriate than online participation)
- Low literacy and/or neurodivergence (those who would find it difficult to respond in an online forum that required reading and written responses)
- Digital exclusion (low confidence with technology; low income resulting in difficulty accessing wi-fi or devices with internet access)

Where appropriate, individuals were sent a copy of the scenarios to reflect on in advance of their interview.

2.4 Notes on reading the report

As this was a qualitative study, this research cannot – and did not set out to be – nationally representative of the wider population. Instead, it aimed to sample participants purposively in order to highlight a diverse range of views and circumstances. A qualitative approach prioritises bringing meaning and understanding to the existing evidence, shedding light on the underlying factors that drive trends that can be observed in quantitative studies.

As with any research, this study has its limitations. Whilst every effort was made to ensure that a broad cross section of the general public was reached, and included the payment of incentives, there is an inherent risk with all research of this nature that those individuals who actively choose to participate have different views from those of the population as a whole. Whilst we actively recruited individuals with different political views and those with varying levels of interest in politics and current affairs, it is unlikely that those individuals who are actively involved in the abuse and intimidation of candidates would participate.

It should also be noted that the findings in this report are based on the views of participants who have considered the issues in greater depth, for more time, and with more information than members of the public who consider the issues in the course of their day-to-day lives.

Throughout the report, direct quotes have been included to illustrate particular viewpoints and are not intended to represent the views of all participants.

Use of the word candidate is used throughout and should be taken to include those standing in elections at a local or national level.

Finally, during the course of the fieldwork there were a number of news stories covered by UK media that may have influenced views and/or were directly referenced by participants. These are set out below:

The following summarises news headlines during the research period and immediately preceding it:

- Political developments: Lord Mandelson was arrested on suspicion of misconduct following investigations into his links to Jeffrey Epstein, No. 10 Chief of Staff Morgan McSweeney resigned, while Parliament moved to release documents on Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's time as a trade envoy. There were also debates over a potential Westminster return for Andy Burnham
- Issues: Headlines focussed on asylum and immigration, policing, social media ban for under 16-year-olds in Australia, and winter costs, including downward revisions of projected UK economic growth
- International Affairs: UK media covered an escalation of protests and unrest in Iran. At the end of the fieldwork period, Israel and the United States began a series of military strikes against Iran
- Media: The BBC was heavily criticised for not editing out a racial slur for the televised version of the BAFTA ceremony. The slur was made by a person with Tourette's syndrome

3. Views on UK political debate and politicians

Summary: It was important to explore participants' views of political debate and politicians more broadly, in order to understand what might be influencing subsequent views of acceptability and understandability of abusive and intimidating behaviours towards candidates standing for election.

Participants were overwhelmingly negative about UK politics and the tone of political debate. They talked about social media and international tensions fuelling these divisions. Furthermore, participants had low levels of trust in politicians, particularly those standing at a national level and there was frequent mention of 'broken promises'.

3.1 Tone of political debate

Participants were extremely negative about both the state of UK politics and the overall tone of political debate, describing it as angry and divisive. Figure 1 below summarises the most frequently used words when participants were asked to describe the tone of political debate in three words.

Figure 1: Word cloud based on 3 words to describe political debate[4]



[4] Emphasis is placed on the most frequently used words. This was an individual exercise that took place on Recollective and participants were not discussing their views in depth at this point.

The behaviour of political parties and individual politicians

Many believed politicians were exploiting divisions in society by trading 'sound bites' and 'low blows' rather than engaging in meaningful debate on the issues that mattered.

> *…it seems to be people are listening to react rather than listening to hear and appreciate. And they have their agenda written out for how they're going to answer a question. And it just descends into mudslinging sometimes. (Depth 4, 50+, man from White ethnic background, Northern Ireland)*

Some participants spoke specifically of populist parties capitalising on people's fears in relation to the economy and immigration. A number of participants believed that the overall tone of political debate had become more negative since Brexit.

> *I think we're seeing a much bigger kind of tendency going towards populist movements, so left-wing populism, with the Greens and Plaid [Cymru] and right-wing populism, with Reform and things. So I think you could say that society is getting a bit divided. It's a spicy time for politics. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

> *The tone of politics, for me, is quite racist, right-wing leaning, aggressive, quite negative. I don't think it's a good space at the minute. (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

In Northern Ireland, several participants referred to the link between entrenched religious divides and political support further exacerbating the divisive nature of politics.

> *But here, I'd say it's a lot more toxic between all the parties… I guess religion comes into the politics quite a bit, and background and community quite a lot, and then that just generates even more nitpicking and backstabbing. (Group 17, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Behaviours by politicians and/or parties that encouraged anger and division were widely condemned by participants and were sometimes top of mind when participants went on to consider scenarios related to the abuse and intimidation of candidates.

International influences

International tensions (e.g. Israel-Palestine war) and the tone of politics in the USA in particular were seen as feeding into intolerance and division in the UK by helping normalise hateful and divisive speech. Some participants specifically referenced Trump's rhetoric as inciting division and 'bullying' opponents.

Again, even from the news you see, with all [that's] going on in the world, the worsening war and stuff, and it's conflicting again within the communities. (Group 5, 30-49, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

It's like the war at the minute. I watched a video where Trump is in a conference and this was his exact words, "I am going to bomb the shit out of them." Like who even says that? Like people are dying. But no one is going to say nothing because he is saying it. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Influence of social media

Some participants pointed to the fact that social media democratised information and debate, however, at the same time most felt that the anonymity and distance provided by social media enabled rude and abusive behaviour. Participants also spoke of the monetisation of divisive content and algorithms amplifying hate, reinforcing biases and, ultimately, divisions. Some further referenced the lack of moderation on X (formerly known as Twitter) since Elon Musk took over as adding to a downward spiral of incivility.

Well in the good old days of Twitter, people would just be banned for using hateful language or being abusive. I mean obviously the person who bought it has got rid of that department. But it used to be that you would be kicked off. There was certain criteria one had to adhere to and people who broke those rules were gone. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

But I think these days it's with, you know, online, social media, like the algorithm feeds you more of what it sees you engage with. People engage a lot with things that stir them up and get them angry. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Some participants also spoke of the impact of social media on traditional media channels. They believed that traditional media was using ever more divisive headlines as clickbait as they tried to gain the attention of audiences in a crowded space. This was thought to compound the downward spiral or 'race to the bottom'.

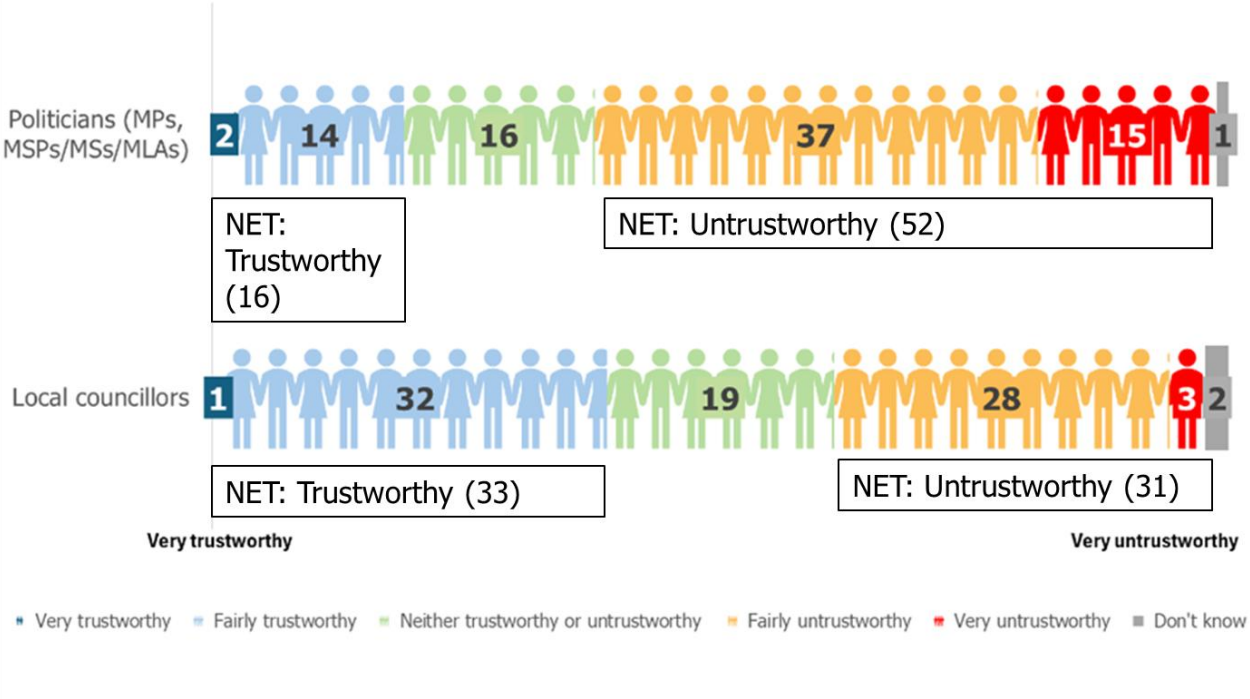
3.2 Trust in politicians and local councillors

Trust in national politicians and, to a lesser extent, local councillors was relatively low across the sample[5].

- 16/85[6] participants saw national politicians as either very trustworthy or trustworthy
- 33/85 participants saw local councillors as either very trustworthy or trustworthy.

See Figure 2 for a full breakdown.

Figure 2: How trustworthy or untrustworthy do you find the following? (Base 85; raw numbers shown)



Candidates breaking promises was a key reason given for reduced levels of trust in politicians and was a theme consistently alluded to throughout the research. Examples given by participants ranged from national candidates not following through on pre-election promises to reduce immigration and local candidates backpedalling on promises to support the building of a new school or a new hospital for an area. Some participants referred to a vicious circle, whereby broken promises by traditional parties resulted in discontent which then allowed populist parties to make subsequent, unrealistic promises.

[5] Similarly low levels of trust were found in the most recent quantitative survey conducted by the Electoral Commission with 14% of the public saying that they trust politicians Public attitudes 2025 | Electoral Commission

[6] Base size is 85 as although 84 participants completed the online forum, 85 participants answered the initial questions i.e. one participant was lost from the forum due to early attrition

> *So I think people are desperate. And desperate people do desperate things. So they kind of latch onto any kind of hope and the whole notion of popularist [sic] parties is offering easy answers to very complicated, difficult questions and situations. And people – so people run for it and then they're disappointed because these promised solutions to huge problems never materialise. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

> *The Labour Government have said all these things to garner votes and then completely turned the manifesto on its head and then the anger began. (Group 11, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)*

Some participants were of the view that voters needed to be more realistic and candidates more honest about what they can deliver. They explained that some factors (e.g. the world economy, war) that impact life in the UK are simply beyond the control of local and national politicians.

A lack of trust was further linked to a disconnect between candidates and the electorate. This was exacerbated by national candidates appearing to trade insults rather than fix problems. Some participants also referred to 'Middle class' candidates not understanding or listening to 'working people'.

> *I think sometimes there can be a big of a disconnect between the public and MPs just in terms of socio and economic class and stuff like that. I think, again, I'm not saying it's fully justified all the time, but I think it definitely sort of lends itself to more people having opinions and strong opinions and strong reactions to MPs in that realm I would say. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *I mean it's like if people are having to use foodbanks in this country and then you see that in the Houses of Parliament they get their food and whatever, alcohol, subsidised when they're putting whatever cost on food and alcohol. (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

For some, memories of politicians' behaviour during COVID-19 and/ or Brexit still burned bright and resulted in diminishing levels of trust in politicians.

4. The issue of candidate abuse and intimidation

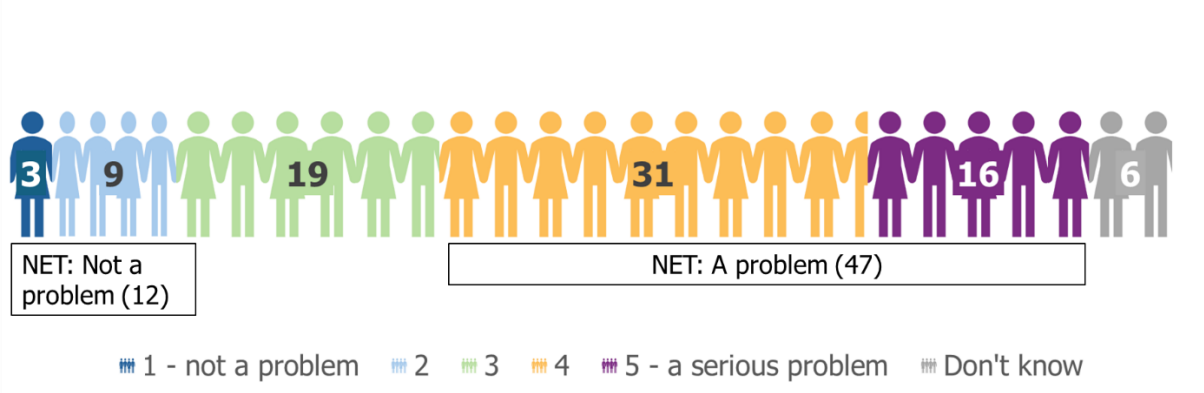
Summary: A high proportion of participants recognised candidate abuse and intimidation as a serious issue and some participants were aware of specific incidents involving candidates. However, abusive and intimidating behaviours were not thought to be confined to candidates; participants viewed such behaviours as a wider societal issue impacting a great number of individuals. Several participants described their own experience of being on the receiving end of abusive and intimidating behaviours, typically online.

Participants did not expect candidates to be subject to severe and/or sustained abusive and intimidating behaviours. However, they believed that a certain level of abuse and intimidation was inevitable given the divisive and angry tone of political debate. They further believed that candidates need a thick skin to withstand these behaviours, but also that, as a collective, politicians have a responsibility not to further encourage abusive and intimidating behaviours by their own actions (or inactions).

4.1 Recognition and awareness

Over half of participants (47/84) who took part in the online forum saw candidate abuse and intimidation as a problem (rating it 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale of seriousness). This was a slightly higher proportion than in the Electoral Commission's 2025 survey of public attitudes (35% of respondents identified candidate intimidation as a problem) See Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: The extent of the problem (Base 84; raw numbers shown)



When explaining the reasons behind the rating they gave, some participants referred to specific examples of abuse and intimidation (and worse), including:

- The murders of MPs Jo Cox and Sir David Amess
- Abuse received by Naomi Long (MLA), Lilian Seenoi-Barr (first black mayor in Northern Ireland) Nigel Farage (MP and leader of Reform UK), Sadiq Khan (Mayor

of London), Diane Abbot (MP), Mhairi Black (former MP) and Jeremy Corbyn (MP and leader of Your Party)

A number of participants had witnessed hate and aggression towards national politicians on their own social media feeds.

> *I've seen a lot of videos that are quite against a lot of the candidates, a lot of people in politics. I see a lot of pretty much hate or aggression towards all members, it doesn't matter which party. Probably because of the anonymous side of the internet: it allows people to just say whatever they want without much care. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

Others recalled reading news headlines and articles referencing issues of candidate abuse and intimidation more widely. A small minority of participants recognised that the issue disproportionately impacted female candidates and candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds.

> *The current London mayor needs round-the-clock protection due to threats and Nigel Farage has liquids thrown over him multiple times, I worry one day that will be acid. (Online forum, Man from a White ethnic background, 18-29, England)*

> *I've heard on the news and from friends that loads of candidates get hassle during elections like nasty messages online or even threats in person. It sounds pretty bad, with some facing some kind abuse, especially women, and it could make them scared to campaign alone. (Online forum, Man from a mixed ethnic background, 18-29, Scotland)*

However, more typically participants simply expected there to be a degree of abuse and intimidation of candidates given the divisive nature of political debate and the behaviours they witnessed on social media more widely.

4.2 A microcosm of what is happening in wider society

Participants were matter of fact about candidate abuse and intimidation being simply a reflection of what is happening in society more broadly and that abusive and intimidating behaviours impact everyone and not just candidates.

Social media was often at the forefront of participants' minds and was seen to be key in promoting and perpetuating abusive and intimidating behaviours. Some participants shared their own experiences of receiving or witnessing abusive comments online, ranging from hateful comments to death threats. Others pointed to the well documented online bullying amongst children and hate speech directed at celebrities. Those who had direct experience of abuse and intimidation appeared to have more empathy for candidates than participants as a whole.

I think it's just the way the conversations have gone now in the country. We can say whatever we want to whoever we want, however we want, and nothing will happen to us. I mean there is a limit to free speech; it's got to be respectful. You know? There is no point shouting at somebody because it's going to achieve nothing. No point beating somebody up; it's going to achieve nothing. It's just a case of being respectful and having dialogue. And that's the one thing we don't have. (Group 7, 50+, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

One time, I got trolled really badly for commenting on… It was a Just Stop Oil post, and I said something on it… People were sending me personal messages, telling me they were going to rape me. Do you know what I mean? So I can't even imagine being somebody in politics. And I'm sure they must get stuff like that and it's just awful. It's not on. (Group 10, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

Facebook and social media in particular is a horrific platform, because anonymous keyboard warriors can trot out all sorts of stuff that they wouldn't say it in the street, they wouldn't say it to your face, they wouldn't say it in a pub or a bar or a restaurant; but in the safe haven of their home or their workplace or whatever they do their posting. (Group 11, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

4.3 Participants expected candidates to tolerate some negativity

Having recognised abuse and intimidation as an issue, participants talked about candidates needing a 'thick skin' to put themselves forward to represent their communities and/or their political party. To some extent they believed that this had always been the case, but most acknowledged that it was even more necessary in the current political climate that was increasingly 'divisive' and 'angry' (see Section 3). Some participants recognised that this would mean that some potentially good candidates might not stand for election in order to avoid being subject to any abusive and intimidating behaviours. Few went on to directly link this to a threat to the democratic process more broadly.

I'm not saying that they should be a target of it, but I am just saying that racism happens to the common people, and these candidates are reflecting the common people. (Group 5, 30-49, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

Social media has created a two-way form of communication, so you will get people who don't agree with your views. You've got to be prepared for backlashes in any shape or form. (Depth 6, 30-49, woman from White ethnic background, Scotland)

Participants further suggested that candidates were likely to be targeted more than people in other professions or people in the public eye. They thought that unlike others (e.g. teachers, doctors, celebrities), candidates were perceived as having greater influence over people's lives (and livelihoods) and were regarded as liable if things were not going well. They believed that candidates also held a unique position in that they stood for a specific party or interest and that it was the viewpoint, and not simply the individual, that was the target of abuse.

> *I think it's probably more emotional than something like a celebrity because the government can make a decision, or a local politician could cut something that affects you or a family member, so it's just very much more emotional than I think those other groups. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *I think it's because there is an expectation to serve the public. Whereas celebrities don't – they are there to entertain. So people are more likely to have some sort of resentment, I think, towards political figures. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

4.4 Influence of behaviours of politicians collectively

Some participants alluded to the fact that individual candidates may receive abuse because of the behaviours of political parties or politicians as a collective. For example as a result of the following:

- Political parties breaking manifesto promises and /or failing to deliver in office
- Politicians' behaviours during COVID-19 'lockdown'

> *I think that local representative is kind of the closest thing they've got to the MP or Prime Minister or whatever they want to say about politics; that's probably their closest channel. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

> *Like if I wanted to approach the Prime Minister or someone very high up, I would have no idea how to do that, whereas I think on a more local level that is probably easier. And then you also have to think there are other emotions spilling out there. (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

In addition to this, some participants spoke of the theatrical, combative nature of debate in the House of Commons and the sight of politicians exchanging insults rather than engaging in serious discussion as setting a poor example that could pave the way for abusive and intimidating behaviours.

> *Yes, there's a certain behaviour learnt that if somebody feels it's okay in Parliament to shout at somebody else without waiting for an answer, then they're going, okay, I can do that… I don't need to follow the procedure. I can*

just shout out in public or I can shout out in a public meeting (Depth 4, 50+, man from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

I mean I do see like some clips on like YouTube and stuff like that of people in Parliament kind of like screaming at each other and kind of almost like not really taking it seriously, almost like putting on a bit of a character... and [it's] almost just seen as kind of basically just like a joke, just a little bit of a circus. (Group 9, 18-29, men from a minority ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

The way they carry on, I think, in the House of Commons, like trading insults and the theatre of it all, I think it's lost its way. (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

5. Initial reactions to a range of abusive and intimidating behaviours

Summary: Most participants believed that behaviours illustrated by a range of scenarios (egg throwing, shouting, grabbing a candidate on the doorstep, referring to a candidate's weight on social media, threatening a candidate on social media, defacing campaign posters) were all unacceptable to varying degrees. They recognised that candidates could be harmed by the behaviours. Individual harm (as opposed to harm caused to society and democracy) was very much top of mind when participants considered acceptability. However, discussions around harm revealed that not everyone saw individual harm in the same way: female participants were somewhat more likely to take account of the emotional as well as physical harm caused by behaviours.

Views on acceptability were also influenced by perceptions of shifting social norms: an increase in and greater tolerance towards misogynist and racist comments and, similarly, a perceived increase in and tolerance of abusive and aggressive behaviours online. These perceptions resulted in many participants condemning behaviours towards candidates that were seen to further fuel or normalise this shift.

5.1 Overall responses to scenarios

Participants were initially presented with a series of scenarios relating to abusive and intimidating behaviours within the online forum (see Section 2.3 for a description of the approach and wording of scenarios) and asked to consider if they were 'never okay', 'sometimes okay' or 'always okay'. To try and mitigate against social norming[7] participants were invited to express their individual views in the first instance, and their views were anonymised.

Figure 4 overleaf highlights that the vast majority of behaviours set out in the scenarios were deemed unacceptable to participants when seen for the first time.

[7] Social norming means that people may respond to a question in a way they believe is socially approved rather than giving their true personal views or behaviours.

Figure 4: Initial reactions to scenarios (Base 84; raw numbers shown)



The scenario that received the most mixed response related to shouting at a candidate as they were leaving a public a meeting. However, it should be noted that for each of the scenarios there was always a handful of participants who indicated that the highlighted behaviour within the scenario was 'sometimes okay'.

5.2 Acceptability spontaneously linked to harm

Individual harm

Discussions revealed that, in the first instance, many participants were quick to consider whether or not the behaviour in the scenario would cause harm to an individual candidate. There were some differences in terms of participants' views of what constituted individual harm. For example, male participants tended to focus on the real and potential physical harm of the behaviours, and female participants were more likely to take account of both physical and mental or emotional harms, particularly in relation to online abuse and intimidation.

> *Because it's one thing someone saying something to you in the street, but when it's printed down there, you can ruminate on it, you keep fixating on it, if it's something that maybe feeds into your own insecurities… if it's upsetting you and you're anxious about it, it's like you keep looking at these comments again and again. (Group 10, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)*

> *I think the mental torment, really, from online, when you see these things and it will replay in your head. So it's sometimes… like for example, just say a*

candidate, it could have a mental effect as well. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

For social media scenarios, some participants considered whether any harm would be caused at all to an individual. They questioned:

- Whether candidates (particularly those running at a national level) would even read their social media streams enough to be harmed
- Why candidates did not just ignore abusive any intimidating comments online so as to avoid being harmed

I'd honestly say it's not going to cause you any actual harm. You may feel offence, but at the end of the day, it's just a comment from some random person. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

If you're going to do content on the internet, whether you're an influencer, you create content, you're a political figure, you kind of have to learn to just accept it and basically ignore it. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Note that behaviours highlighted in a BBC video (highlighting threats of rape, nail bombs and using highly offensive language) shared with participants towards the end of discussions were thought to be significantly more harmful to the recipient than any of the behaviours highlighted in the scenarios. Some participants were shocked at the severity of the threats.

Democratic harm

Only a small number of participants spontaneously took a broader view of harm. As well as individual harm, they spoke of democratic harm in terms of:

- How behaviours could deter people (particularly those from diverse backgrounds and women) from entering politics or debating contentious issues
- And to a lesser degree, how this could ultimately impact communities, if they no longer had representation and felt less heard

Like consequences for us because if they're less engaged then they're less in tune with the issues in their community. And then that just kind of snowballs and spirals because then the community feel that the politicians are perhaps out of touch because they're not engaging... So it's… similar to kind of like a snake eating itself or something like that really I suppose. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Wider societal harm

However, participants did refer to wider societal harm and pointed to misogynistic, homophobic, and racist comments affecting people (not just candidates) in society more widely.

And I just think the impact that that has on the wider community: if people see that and they see these homophobic comments, it just becomes part of the norm and the part of like: 'Oh, it's okay to use some of this language.' (Group 10, 30-39, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

5.3 The impact of changing social norms on acceptability

Need to take a stand

Linked to the above point, participants spoke of how perceived changes to social norms influenced their views of acceptability. They felt that social norms have undergone recent change, with greater division legitimising more extreme views and allowing racism and misogyny to rise.

I think we're hearing more extreme opinions nowadays. What sticks out to me in particular is extreme kind of racist, sexist remarks, against disabled people as well and things. I think [what is considered publicly acceptable] has definitely shifted rightwards and topics that say 10 / 15 years ago would be completely unacceptable are just very casually discussed in mainstream newspapers and on live television. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

Certainly, participants' responses highlighted that some behaviours, whilst not necessarily classed as acceptable, are more likely to be tolerated than others. This was particularly the case in relation to online abuse and intimidation.

When you see it online, when these sort of things happen, you probably don't bat an eye at it because you just expect it at this point. (Group 9, 18-29, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

I would personally say for myself, I've seen it [defacing of posters] so much, it is quite common now, that I don't really care if I see some graffiti that's got maybe the N word on it, or there's a sexual slur or anything; it's pretty normal here, so it doesn't really bother me anymore; but it does still affect quite a few people. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

Some participants commented that, as poor behaviour online was becoming commonplace, it was becoming more evident in offline settings. Several older women further lamented that people no longer called out certain types of in-person behaviours, for example aggressive shouting.

I think social media is not helping, because I think people hide behind the anonymity and feel that they can say whatever they want and I think that's started to filter into everyday life, that almost, I think where we start off by saying that it's free speech, I can say what I want (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Many participants found abusive and intimidating behaviours towards candidates unacceptable because they felt such behaviours further reinforced this negative shift in society.

A minority of participants further pointed to there being less acceptance of 'stunts' such as egg-/ milkshake- throwing as a result of violence against MPs in recent years, in particular the murders of Jo Cox and David Amess.

> *There have been various sort of attacks. And it must be quite frightening. One must be on one's guard, so aggression, aggressive or shouting at you, you don't know the person shouting at you as a candidate, you don't know what they're capable of and you don't know if they are going to really lose it and hurt you or worse. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

Desire to strike a balance

Conversely, a small number of participants (typically from older age groups) commented that they felt it was now less socially acceptable to make offensive sexist or racist comments than was the case in years gone by. A minority, typically White male participants, also believed that people had perhaps become over sensitive to mockery in recent years. This handful of participants typically held less stringent views of acceptability.

> *I think as a society we've all become a bit too precious, to be honest. (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

6. Factors influencing understandability of abusive and intimidating behaviours

Summary: After sharing initial impressions of the hypothetical scenarios with limited context, participants were prompted to consider additional factors influencing behaviours. Framing these discussions around 'understandability' rather than 'acceptability' encouraged more open conversation and participants often ended up using the words interchangeably. These discussions revealed that understandability (or acceptability) is potentially influenced by a number of factors relating to the recipient, the perpetrator, and the nature and location of abusive and intimidating behaviours.

For example, behaviours that target the issues the candidate represents are deemed more understandable than those that target a candidate's personal life. Other factors that made behaviours more or less understandable included the sex of the candidate; the viewpoints and behaviours of the candidate; the age of the perpetrator; the strength of feeling the perpetrator holds towards an issue their behaviour may be targeting; the level of violence and aggression within the behaviour; whether the behaviour is premeditated or not; and whether the behaviour takes place in a private or public space.

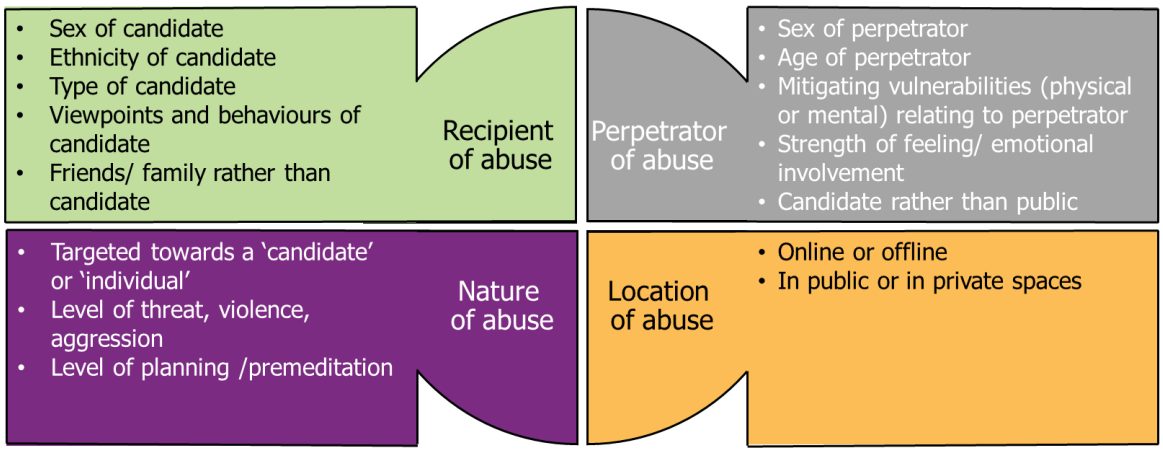
After initial discussion, participants were asked to consider the impact of various factors on some of the behaviours in the scenarios that had not emerged spontaneously. 'Acceptability' was associated with strong social norming, therefore participants were asked to consider these factors in terms of what could make behaviours more or less understandable (rather than more or less acceptable).

Positioning discussions in this way gave participants the opportunity to speak more freely around the issues. Indeed, participants sometimes went on to directly refer to behaviours being more acceptable (rather than more understandable) during these discussions and this is mirrored within the following sections. However, it should be noted that although certain factors are thought to make behaviours more acceptable or more understandable, this still did not mean the behaviour was acceptable in the majority of cases.

Figure 5 overleaf illustrates these contextual factors relating to the recipient, the perpetrator and the nature and location of the abusive and intimidating behaviours. Typically, these factors work in combination to determine the extent to which participants find behaviours understandable.

These factors will be explored in more detail in the following sections. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list.

Figure 5: A qualitative summary of contextual factors



6.1 Factors relating to the nature and location of abusive and intimidating behaviours

There were a number of factors influencing perceptions of abuse and intimidation which related to the nature and location of the behaviours.

Behaviours targeted towards a 'candidate' as opposed to an 'individual'

Participants sought to understand the extent to which abusive and intimidating behaviours were associated to the issues (candidate) or the person (individual). The closer the behaviour was to being purely issues-driven, the more understandable participants found it. In relation to the scenarios, participants put forward the following as examples of when behaviours could become a little more understandable:

- Referring to a candidate's weight in Scenario C was more understandable if the candidate was found abusing expenses (hence perceived as greedy and potentially dining out on public money)

  It isn't [acceptable] but then I think, at the same time, if you are seen at a big luncheon, that like tax payers have paid for, and you know that your constituents are on the bare bones of their backsides, then they're fair game. (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

- Throwing an egg at a candidate (Scenario F) was more understandable if the candidate had supported policies specifically detrimental to poultry farmers.

Participants took a more nuanced view of issue-driven behaviours because they think that people have the right to hold candidates to account and that if candidates do not deliver on their promises or they behave in a way that is inappropriate to their office they deserved to be challenged. While participants believed that the

public should be respectful, they also recognised that this could be challenging if people are not given a forum to express their views or if emotions get the better of them.

> *People are entitled to their opinion about politicians and their councils and, you know, all the way up to the top. I think you are allowed that because they have a level of responsibility. You know, they're there to serve the public and if they don't get something right, they need to be held accountable. People again, we do have free speech, we are entitled to say things even if they are malicious or hurtful. (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *Somebody is entitled to say, 'You're rubbish at your job or whatever.' OK, they might be doing it rudely, but it's not a sort of abusive or racist, discriminatory comment or that type of thing and as I said, I think to some extent, that's sort of par for the course. (Group 10, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)*

In contrast, behaviours that were deemed purely personal and had no connection to a candidate's work life or views were less understandable and, therefore, less acceptable.

One participant from Northern Ireland gave a specific example of a personal attack on a Member of the Legislative Assembly, Naomi Long, that they found unacceptable.

> *One of your examples, I think, was about the politician being singled out for being overweight. And actually, Naomi Long came to mind because she's a larger woman and she's singled out, basically for, in my opinion, no other reason than that, and yes, it oversteps the mark. (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Referencing protected characteristics

As such, referencing the individual's protected characteristics was a red line that very few believed should be crossed. The overwhelming majority of participants saw the defacing of campaign assets with homophobic slurs (as set out in Scenario D) as unacceptable. Some further pointed to the fact that given current shifts in social norms (with misogyny and racism perceived to be on the rise) referencing these characteristics was especially dangerous as it could further normalise and perpetuate such views.

> *But, you know, racism, hate crime, protected characteristics, those things are things that you are not allowed to sort of touch on. (Group 5, 30-49, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *People are always going to do that [deface posters with a sexuality slur], but it's not okay. It's nothing to do with their politics. If it was what they're saying*

> *they're going to do, I would get it, but because you're personally attacking them, I don't think that's acceptable at all. (Depth 10, 16-17, Man from White ethnic background, England)*

However, it should be noted that one or two men from White ethnic backgrounds took a less definitive approach and believed that referencing protected characteristics such as sexuality in 'banter' was sometimes understandable, especially in relation to teen behaviours. Some poor behaviour was excused because young people were felt to be less aware of the consequences of their behaviours as they lacked life experience.

Level of threat, violence or aggression

As the harm caused by the behaviours was top of mind, the level of threat, violence or aggression within the behaviours was scrutinised by participants.

Physical threats, violence or aggression

Participants overwhelmingly believed that behaviours crossed a line if they involved or threatened violence. This included 'egg throwing' (as set out in Scenario F) for many. Participants pointed out that the candidate could have been harmed if they had been hit in the eye or that the perpetrator may have gone on to throw something even more damaging.

Threats of physical violence were also deemed unacceptable by the majority. This included the grabbing of a candidate (set out in Scenario B). Participants were particularly concerned with this scenario if the person grabbing the arm had the physical strength to overpower the candidate; they were less concerned if the perpetrator was elderly and frail (see Section 6.3 for further detail on factors relating to the perpetrator of abusive and intimidating behaviours).

> *I think that the threats of like physical violence takes it to almost another level..., because it's a threat to the person's safety and wellbeing. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

Online threats, violence or aggression

Online threats of physical violence were also unacceptable to the majority. Certainly, the participants took more issue with threats to kick and punch a candidate (Scenario E) than they did with comments referring to a candidate's weight (Scenario C).

> *It's a straight call to violence. It's not going after, you know, someone's weight or something like that. It's a threat of violence. There is nothing else there for me. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

That said, some questioned if online threats of violence were as serious as in-person threats. In particular, some younger men felt that online threats were 'venting' rather than suggestive of action. There were mentions of 'keyboard warriors' in

every group and some participants appeared resigned to their existence. During depth interviews, a couple of individuals talked about how easy it was to angrily fire off an email, or make a post that could be construed as aggressive.

However, others (in particular women and/or those who had been targeted by online abuse themselves) argued that online threats were equally, if not more, serious than verbal threats. They explained that it was not possible to understand the intent associated with online behaviours because the perpetrator could be anonymous. They felt this resulted in psychological harms.

> *It could actually be worse and more intimidating because there's no face, there's no ownership there of who's doing it, so you've no idea who's doing it, no idea how many people are doing it. Then if it gets really abusive and threatening, you're really out on a limb and it's like: 'Well, is this guy serious? Is he going to be outside my house when I get [home]?' (Group 17, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Almost all recognised the potential for online abuse and intimidation to escalate and become more threatening if people 'piled on', amplifying each other and/ or encouraging action.

> *Other people can see stuff like that, and they start getting ideas and start doing it as well... [it gives people the impression that] it's okay. (Depth 7, 30-49, man from White ethnic background, England)*

> *I think another thing to consider as well is, if it's on social media as well, lots of people can quickly gain popularity and influence. So say that one person who's persistently targeting and insulting you gains a following of lots of people and then influences those people and it's just like mob mentality and it makes it worse. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

Shouting

Shouting was typically the most understandable behaviour described within the scenarios, particularly in a public setting (as described in Scenario A). For a relatively large number of participants this extended to the use of profanities. Few associated shouting described in Scenario A with an aggressive act.

> *As long as they didn't become verbally abusive, personally abusive, or violent towards them, then raised voices are raised voices and it doesn't really hurt. It might be a good learning process for a candidate, because it won't be the first person that will shout at them. So I think whether it's palatable or not for the candidate, I think that would be part and parcel of standing up in public and giving your opinions and thoughts on things. (Group 11, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)*

Participants believed that some situations justified raised voices and that sometimes people 'have to shout to be heard'. They pointed to examples of candidates shouting at each other in the House of Commons and protesters shouting in the streets. Many felt that shouting often reflected 'heated debate' and the strength of feeling around an issue that the candidate may stand for or oppose. What is more, some participants (often the more politically engaged) could envisage themselves shouting (and swearing) in certain situations.

However, shouting became less understandable if it was felt to be overly aggressive or threatening. For example, if the perpetrator was deemed to be 'in the face' of the candidate or 'squaring up'.

> *But are they shouting in the person's face and being aggressive and pointing in their face, or is it just simply that they're shouting from across the room? (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Mocking

Although mocking did not appear as a standalone scenario, an element of mockery was incorporated into variations of Scenario F and D at the group discussions.

Mocking of candidates was generally thought to be acceptable as it was not typically viewed as threatening or aggressive. Many participants thought that calling out behaviours and views of candidates in a humorous way was important in terms of freedom of expression and an effective method of bringing their views to public attention for further scrutiny. Participants referred to ridiculing candidates being embedded within British culture and society and they cited putdowns in the House of Commons, political cartoons, satirical shows (e.g. Have I Got News for You, Spitting Image), social media memes and the campaign group Led by Donkeys as examples of this longstanding tradition.

> *I don't think that's like necessarily a harmful thing because I feel like maybe it's because there already is a culture of that in this country. So like you are expected to have the mick taken out of you if you run for public office, and I feel like a lot of candidates may get the mick taken out of them like to their face and it's convention for them to laugh about it or to maybe play it up. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *If you disagree with the person, you have every right to express that. As long as it's not harming the person, there's nothing wrong with mockingly clapping someone. (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Mocking behaviour was also stretched to defacing campaign posters (for example, with horns and a beard). Some participants pointed to amusing graffiti as an established and acceptable form of protest. Two groups specifically mentioned the street artist Banksy as example of legitimate graffiti associated with 'witty' political

protest. Defacing other types of campaign and/or personal property was typically unacceptable. It was seen as more targeted and, therefore, more threatening than defacing a poster.

> *It's not as harmful because it's not attacking them for something like out of their control, and I think drawing like a clown face or devil horns is often quite the norm in British politics, of like the whole ridicule aspect of it. Whilst it is a nuisance to look at and it is a waste of money and it's not pretty to the community, it is less damaging, I think, and can be brushed off more easily. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

> *Well, I do remember one occasion, one of the last elections, I can't remember which one it was, but there was a street near us where there were five or six different campaign posters up for different people and someone had put googly eyes on them all and it was actually very funny. Now, they hadn't picked one person over another, so everyone was getting the same treatment. (Group 16, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

However, mockery was less understandable and thought to cross a line into intimidating and aggressive behaviour if it targeted protected characteristics of an individual candidate or if it was part of a wider, targeted campaign against an individual candidate.

There was also some debate about the impact on how politicians are viewed and its role in terms of reducing levels of respect further.

Level of planning

Participants found spontaneous behaviours far more understandable than premeditated behaviours. This is mostly because spontaneous behaviours are thought to be driven by heightened emotion and, as set out in Section 6.3, participants were more understanding of emotionally driven behaviours.

Furthermore, participants believed that premeditated behaviours could inflict more mental or emotional harm on the recipient as they could be perceived as more targeted and threatening with greater potential to escalate. For example, participants referred to the level of premeditation in throwing an egg at a candidate outside their home (Scenario F). They explained that in this scenario the perpetrator would have had to find out where the candidate lived and purchase the eggs in advance. For some these more premediated behaviours raised concerns about stalking.

> *It's a premeditated assault because they went round to their house, found out where they lived, went round to their house, took an egg with them and threw it. (Group 11, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)*

An effort is made to go and find somebody's home, I think that's when it crosses the line; it's clearly personal and I would be saying that that's not peaceful protest; that's something nastier. There's clearly an intent there to go and target that specific individual, as opposed to them in a particular role, i.e. a councillor whatever. (Group 10, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

You've thought about going to their house, and you've… well, you brought an egg with you, haven't you? So you've planned it out almost… to do this thing… that's quite bad. (Depth 10, 16-17, man from White ethnic background, England)

In private or in public

Participants also made a distinction between behaviours that took place in a public or private setting. This relates to both in-person and online behaviours.

In-person behaviours

Participants believed that candidates were typically less vulnerable in a public space where other people were present. Hence abusive and intimidating behaviours in public, e.g. shouting at a candidate in a meeting or even on the street, were sometimes felt to be more understandable than those taking place outside a candidate's home or on a doorstep where the candidate may be alone.

That said, some participants held contradictory views, as they also believed that candidates should be protected from workplace abuse (classifying attending a public meeting as work).

Behaviours in public spaces became less acceptable if the candidate was isolated and vulnerable.

If it's in the street, because the person may be on their own and if they're shouted at, then they've got nobody around to offer any kind of protection and they're just very, very vulnerable, aren't they, on their own on the street? (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Online behaviours

In relation to online behaviours, the majority believed abusive and intimidating comments were more understandable if they appeared in the perpetrator's personal social media feeds rather than as comments in the candidate's feed. They believed that personal feeds were typically less public and candidates may not even be aware of the behaviour (or they would be less aware of it). Some linked posting in personal feeds to an individual's right to free speech and felt that people had the right to say what they liked in their own social media feeds.

If it's on your private feed and you are saying, you know, this person is this, that's fine. Going directly, going to the person on their feeds and their things

and doing it, that's a completely different kettle of fish. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

However, a number of (mostly younger) participants pointed to the fact that some perpetrators could have a large social media following and comments were therefore not confined to a small group. These could be widely visible and reposted, which in turn could incite more widespread and sustained abuse towards a candidate.

Finally, some older participants warned that all abusive and intimidating social media behaviours, regardless of where they occurred, helped normalise such behaviours and changed the limits of tolerance to online abuse and intimidation.

6.2 Factors relating to the recipient of abusive and intimidating behaviours

Sex of the recipient

More often than not, targeting female candidates was deemed less understandable than targeting male candidates. Both men and women explained that while this might seem an outdated view, they believed that female candidates would feel more physically intimidated by behaviours e.g. being shouted at, having their arm grabbed. This was especially the case if the perpetrator of the behaviour was a man.

But I think in the context of things that have happened historically in politics then maybe a female candidate would be more fearful than perhaps a male would be. I don't think it changes how behaviour should be accepted by society but I think on maybe a personal level it would be easier to intimidate a female than maybe it would be a male. (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Some participants believed that the rise of misogyny and violence towards women within society made any abusive and intimidating behaviours towards women candidates even more unacceptable. The key concern was that these behaviours could further fuel wider societal issues.

Ethnicity of the recipient

Participants were more divided as to whether or not the ethnicity of the candidate made a difference. Some participants found behaviours less understandable if candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds were the target. Even if abuse did not refer to the candidate's protected characteristics outright (which was typically considered a red line – see Section 6.1), participants were concerned that the apparent rise of racism within society at large meant that any form of abuse and intimidation towards a candidate from a minority ethnic background could be 'hijacked' by racist groups and quickly escalate.

> *Unfortunately, now, there seems to be this rhetoric around ethnic minorities, migrants coming into the country, that I think have again ramped that whole thing up, that could make that worse for them. (Group 17, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

However, there were also some to whom ethnicity of the candidate made little difference as they felt abusive and intimidating behaviours were unacceptable, regardless.

Some older, White men raised concerns that – if there was a different standard of acceptability based on ethnicity – people might be less willing to hold candidates to account on political issues for fear of being seen as racist.

> *I know you could be branded sexist, but I would say you'd be more likely to be branded racist. So I guess it shouldn't be any different, but I think the people doing it are putting themselves in a position where they'll get labelled or accused of something that maybe they weren't meaning. So I think those areas come with more risk… but it shouldn't be a difference, though. (Group 17, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)*

Type of candidate

Discussions around the impact of the type of candidate on the understandability of abusive and intimidating behaviours were less conclusive. However, considerations of what might make behaviour more or less understandable included:

- Behaviours targeting first time candidates (as opposed to those standing for re-election) were considered less understandable by participants because they:
  - Did not have a track record to attack
  - May be more sensitive to abusive and intimidating behaviours as they were not used to it
- Behaviours targeting local (rather than national) candidates were often deemed less understandable. Participants generally believed:
  - Local candidates would be more well known in their community and could be living in close proximity to the perpetrator which could make the behaviour feel more threatening
  - Local candidates were sometimes thought to be more 'human' and more committed to the community (and less motivated by money and career aspirations associated with national candidates) and as such were less deserving of intimidating behaviours

> *I think they're less likely to have done seriously detrimental things, because they have less power as well. And also, if you see, you know, there is various issues around here and if you see the county councillor regularly, he turns up at the market on a Wednesday morning, and you just say, "Hey, what's going on with this?" You have a conversation and then you carry on and go and buy*

your sausages. It's very human. It's very kind of – you are able to engage with them. And real, you know? Whereas MPs sat up there in Westminster don't give a damn about down here sort of thing. You know? (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

- National candidates were thought more likely to have security around them and to have received training/advice on how to deal with abuse and intimidation
- It was generally assumed that local candidates may be responsible for less high-profile and far-reaching decisions that affect fewer people (although some highlighted that some of the decisions made could have a significant impact on the local community)

Discussions also revealed that participants assumed that national candidates with established track records would be the main target of abusive and intimidating behaviours.

Candidates' viewpoints and behaviours

Participants were more understanding of behaviours targeting candidates with divisive views; a track record of not delivering on pre-election promises; or questionable conduct in their personal or professional life.

A minority of participants referred to such candidates as 'fair game'. They gave specific (sometimes fictional) examples of such viewpoints and behaviours, including:

- Supporting abolishing free school meals
- Engaging in extreme far right rhetoric
- Supporting the closure of a local leisure centre (as tested when discussing Scenario A)
- Partying during COVID-19
- Expressing homophobic views
- Corruption in office, for example giving backhanders to local developers
- A record of broken promises

While most participants did not typically condone abusive and intimidating behaviours in these circumstances, they found themselves weighing up the harm abusive and intimidating behaviours had on the candidate against the harm the candidate's political viewpoints and behaviours could have on communities/ society.

But you could understand why people may say that about that person if they are controversial and they've like contributed to like harmful narrative. Even though it isn't right I think it could be understood more. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

But it feels like things like corruption and like these politicians making these big decisions and like basically really screwing the population over sometimes for their own benefit it seems probably more than fair that they get an egg chucked at them, for example. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

So I think it's completely acceptable to mock them because they think it's acceptable to mock the lower class too. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Friends and family of the recipient

Participants universally deplored abusive and intimidating behaviours that targeted the friends and family of candidates. Unlike candidates, friends and family had not actively chosen to put themselves forward to represent their community and therefore participants found it unjustifiable.

Even if not a direct target of abusive and intimidating behaviours, participants were concerned that in some situations, family members (particularly children) would have to bear witness to these behaviours and may be negatively impacted. This was one factor that affected participants' responses to abusive behaviours happening outside a candidate's home.

It's the fact that they're intruding on their own personal space and they know where they live, an egg's an egg, but could it escalate to something else. Dog poo through the door, the letterbox, all these things that you hear that people do and spraying over their doors and all that sort of stuff. And then, that's where the fear creeps in and the mental anguish for candidates creeps in as well, that they feel unsafe in their own home. And then that, obviously, filters into their family life, their children's life, extended family, friends, etc. It was more that element of it than the egg throwing, I think, that they were outside their home. (Group 16, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

6.3 Factors relating to the perpetrator of abusive and intimidating behaviours

Participants considered the power dynamics evidenced in behaviours and whether or not the perpetrator intended to cause harm by their behaviours. They raised the following points:

Sex of the perpetrator

The issue of a female candidate being the recipient of abuse from a perpetrator who is a man is covered in Section 6.2. However, a minority of male participants went further than this when discussing how the sex of a perpetrator may impact acceptability. They explained that regardless of the recipient of the abuse,

behaviours conducted by men are typically seen as aggressive and the behaviours of women as more emotional. Therefore, abusive and intimidating behaviours carried out by men would perhaps be deemed as less acceptable than behaviours carried out by women.

Age of the perpetrator

Behaviours sometimes became more understandable on account of the age of the perpetrator. For example, participants found Scenario B (candidate being grabbed when out canvassing) as far more understandable if the perpetrator was elderly. In this case the candidate was believed to be in a less vulnerable position as participants thought the candidate was unlikely to be physically overpowered and the situation was unlikely to escalate. Participants also justified the perpetrator's behaviour by linking old age to loneliness and suggesting that the perpetrator perhaps wanted company.

> *Obviously if it's someone who is getting really aggressive and holding on to you then, you know, hang on, this is a scenario which doesn't look too good. But an 84-year-old woman or whatever, you know, she's not going to suddenly just pull out, you know, rolling pin and hit you over the head really, probably not. There is probably a reason why she wants to just discuss something, because she probably doesn't get that opportunity, you know, face-to-face, or one-to-one. (Group 7, 50+, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

Similarly, defacing a campaign poster (without using homophobic slurs) or throwing an egg was deemed more understandable if the perpetrator was a teenager. Teenage behaviour in these instances was considered mindless rather than targeted and therefore, again, less threatening to a candidate. However, a minority of women warned that teenage behaviour should not be excused in every situation as they felt that a candidate would feel threatened if approached by teenagers in the street.

> *Or if it was kids, I feel like maybe kids a bit of mischief because they like egg houses on Halloween, don't they?... It's maybe less personal for the person doing it and there is less emotion behind it. It's more like, 'I'm just going to be a knob.' (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)*

Mental health issues and neurodiversity

Participants also explained that some behaviours could be more understandable if the perpetrator had mental health issues or was neurodivergent and had not set out to cause harm.

> *There was that thing last night, wasn't there, about the guy who had Tourette's and they had to apologise [BBC BAFTA coverage see Section 2.4], didn't they, for the racist thing that was said. Where is the line drawn on that, I*

guess? It's hard, isn't it? If they've got Tourette's they don't have control of that, do they? (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Somebody with learning difficulties, or serious mental issues such as schizophrenia, dementia etc. would make this more understandable. (Group 9, 18-29, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

Strength of feeling/emotional involvement

Participants showed far more empathy and understanding towards perpetrators who were emotionally connected to an issue. This was particularly in the context of shouting at candidates and online comments but, for a minority, also extended to throwing eggs/milkshakes over candidates.

There were a number of factors that were associated to a higher level of emotional involvement:

Feeling strongly about or being impacted by an issue

Perpetrators feeling strongly about and/ or being impacted by an issue was felt to be a more understandable reason for abusive or intimidating behaviours. For example, most participants found shouting at a candidate as they left a meeting (Scenario A) more understandable if the perpetrator was about to lose their job or would be significantly affected as a result of the leisure centre closure. Participants went on to hypothesise about a range of issues where feelings might run high.

Obviously if emotions are high, and it depends on also what the candidate said. If the candidate said something that the person really doesn't agree with, it could lead to ticking [sic] someone else over. So I think context is very important in the situation and lines can be a bit blurry of what's right and wrong depending on what was said. (Group 9, 18-29, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, Scotland)

Things that are happening now that are actually quite akin to the beginnings of fascism and things like that, and people's rights are being quashed or minimised, so I think it's important, obviously, for the public to take a stand against things like that. The scenarios we've talked about maybe aren't the most conducive sort of ways to do that, but I think it might make it a bit more understandable if the councillor or minister, MP or whatever, is actually suggesting something or trying to push something through that would actually erode people's rights. (Group 16, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

If I'd lost my business [because] of the politicians that had campaigned Brexit, it would be no holds barred and a bit of shouting towards a politician that championed Brexit to line their own pockets or the interests of whoever's pockets they're in, it actually boils my blood. So I think a bit of shouting is the

least that those guys should really have to worry about. (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

Social and economic disadvantage

Participants very often had empathy for perpetrators living in challenging circumstances. While participants believed that people from all socio-economic backgrounds could be frustrated by broken promises and feel emotionally connected to issues, they felt that people who were most disadvantaged in society would feel this frustration and emotion most acutely.

So you've got a lifetime of pissed-off 'ness. So, on the understandability scale, yeah, I can see how that happens pretty easy really. (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

I don't condone any of these things, but maybe the thought process is, 'Well they've done so many things that have made my family's life worse or my life worse,' and that's part of like the dehumanising process of them thinking, 'Well they just don't care about me, they would do this to me so why would I care about them in any way?' I think it's like a whole mindset thing. (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Not being listened to

Participants believed that, regardless of socio demographics, negative emotions would be further heighted if people felt that candidates were not listening to them or if people had not been given the opportunity to have a meaningful say on issues. For example, shouting at a candidate after a meeting (Scenario A) became far more understandable if there had been no opportunity during the meeting for people to air their views.

If you haven't had a forum to be able to, or platform to be able to convey it, I think… they are going to break at some point, aren't they? They are going to snap because they haven't had that platform or forum to be able to approach said subject. (Group 4, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

A lot of people are not being heard and they get frustrated. It's about a balance – if it's shouting at the rooftops, people say, 'Oh you're acting aggressive, I'm not going to put up with this.' But you haven't listened or answered the question, and that's why I'm getting frustrated. (Depth 2, 50+ man from White ethnic background, Wales)

People don't always have a chance to express their views, if we're not too sophisticated, then we'll just do a sledgehammer view, won't we? Like a Facebook post, or defacing a poster, or even a shout across the street. (Depth 5, 50+ man from White ethnic background, England)

Another candidate

Participants believed that abusive and intimidating behaviours towards a candidate were even less understandable if the perpetrator was another candidate (i.e. candidate-on-candidate abuse and intimidation). Participants explained that:

- Candidates need to set an example to the public and control their emotions
- Abusive and intimidating behaviours are unprofessional and further perpetuate negative perceptions of UK politics that could help fuel abusive and intimidating behaviours towards candidates
- Candidates' behaviours reflect badly on those they represent

> *I mean it's not a good look because you've got two councillors or something that are vying for election and you think, 'Oh my God, there are three candidates here, they're all fighting and we've got to choose one of these idiots.' You know? Which is true, isn't it? So they have to have a sense of sort of calm about them and diplomacy. Otherwise you're thinking God, you know, I've got three people to choose from and they're all arguing and, you know, what do you do? …You've got to choose one of them and out of the three they're all thugs! (Group 7, 50+, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)*

7. Addressing the issue

Summary: Given the widespread and complex nature of candidate abuse and intimidation, participants felt tackling these behaviours required a multi-organisational approach, with roles and responsibilities for social media firms; government and regulators; individuals; schools and parents; police and prosecutors; and candidates and politicians. While legal and regulatory solutions were deemed helpful in tackling the issue of candidate abuse and intimidation, people often called for wider actions alongside these to try to change individual and collective behaviours and associated social norms.

There was some scepticism about the efficacy of a communications campaign, but some saw a potential role for a campaign that targets perpetrators at the less extreme end of abusive and intimidating behaviours. The majority preferred an approach that focussed on the consequences for perpetrators (fines; bans; criminal record; prison) or a more emotive approach highlighting the impacts of candidate abuse and intimidation.

7.1 A challenging issue to address

Most participants felt that tackling abusive and intimidating behaviours towards candidates standing for election was difficult and complex, not least because these behaviours were often thought to be reflective of wider, entrenched social views and cultural issues, especially misogyny and racism. As discussed in Section 4.2, addressing the issue was felt to be compounded by the perceived normalisation of abusive and hateful comments online.

> *I don't know; it's a very complex issue, particularly because a lot of this abuse is, as we saw, racially motivated, motivated against women or people of different religions and things. Those are really hard and big topics to tackle, and I think it goes beyond just, 'I disagree with this political opinion, I want to make my voice heard.' It's part of a broader culture that we need to change. And how we go about changing that is a very hard and a very long process and I don't really have any answers. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

Many participants also questioned what consequences and deterrents there are for people who act in this way – they simply don't know what the law is and they don't see it being enforced.

> *If somebody's drink driving and their name goes in the paper, everybody gets to know who lost their license because they were drink driving. For this [abuse and intimidation], do we see the consequences? Do we see the people who*

have been arrested and jailed or whatever for what they've done? (Group 16, 30-49, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

Participants also felt that the scale of the problem means that it is difficult to address – it is too widespread and commonplace to be able to take effective action on individuals.

7.2 Who should tackle the issue?

Given its systemic nature, participants saw roles for a wide range of people and organisations in tackling the issue; from individuals, social media companies, to government, regulators and statutory agencies. While legal and regulatory solutions were deemed helpful in tackling the issue of candidate abuse and intimidation, people often called for wider actions alongside these to try to change individual and collective behaviours and associated social norms.

Social media firms

Early in discussions most participants called for social media platforms to do more to tackle wider abuse and hate. They highlighted how firms are slow to respond to reporting of abuse and to take action. Many participants also raised anonymity as an issue that enables people to 'hide behind screens' and hold multiple accounts, meaning they can make abusive content/ comments with impunity, and do so from multiple angles.

I think social media platforms have a duty of care and that they should also be held responsible if this sort of abuse and hate goes on in comment sections or private DMs [direct messages]. And they do have a duty of making sure that that person who is sending them faces consequences. (Group 1, 16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

There was a sense that the tide is turning against the freedoms social media firms enjoy, with reference to tighter regulations of social media to children in Australia and elsewhere.

When specifically asked to consider how best to address the issue of candidate abuse and intimidation, the types of measures participants suggested to curtail abusive and intimidating behaviours on social media included:

- Greater use of technology to identify people making abusive content and to introduce 'pause before you post' tools, and to prevent anonymous posting (either preventing people from posting anonymously altogether, or ensuring all account holders have their identity verified so perpetrators could be readily identified)

They can use the same sort of technology to do the searching to do a bit of self-policing using AI, really put it to some really good uses. I mean there are

some fantastic uses it could be put to. As you say, holding people to account. Making people accountable for their actions. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

- Consequences for people who post hateful/ abusive content, such as social media bans and – for more serious cases – police action
- Regulation of social media firms – some suggested these measures need to be stipulated through regulation (rather than leaving it to the industry to self-regulate) as there was some scepticism about whether they would act otherwise. This extended to addressing developments such as algorithmic prioritisation of negative and contentious content

People being extreme and horrible does get more attention, so it brings more people to a website, which a lot of these owners of these social media platforms unfortunately, in my view, only really care about money and monetisation, so they probably unfortunately won't do a lot about it because it just ups engagement on their sites which is all they care about (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

However, while many participants were supportive of enforcing laws to ensure social media companies acted more responsibly, a handful of participants (usually younger) actively stood up for the freedoms of social media, and believed that the positives (including anonymity to speak freely) outweighed the negatives.

I would disagree with that just personally [disallowing anonymous posts/accounts], based on the fact that the internet, it's all about anonymous [sic]. You can go and do what you want; you don't have to worry about certain people finding out things or you can have safe groups so you can talk to people. There's a lot of positives and negatives. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

Individuals

Many participants stressed that individuals need to take more responsibility, both as an audience (as complicit consumers of controversial content and soundbites on social media) and as perpetrators, particularly in cases where they mindlessly post abusive and intimidating comments without thinking of the impact.

I don't think it should come down to the social media companies policing people's behaviour… It's a bit like the NHS, you know, telling us how to eat, the sugar tax, I personally don't agree with those things. People have a choice. People make a choice. People should be punished for their choice if they make the wrong choice. We all have a conscience. We all know the difference between right and wrong… why are we saying that social media companies should police that and remove some of the element of responsibility? Because

then where do we draw the line for responsibility? (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

There was some suggestion that members of the public should actively 'call out' poor behaviour and abuse and not stand by.

We have to start taking responsibility for ourselves and for the people we love and for the people we hang out with, and calling people out on behaviours in our day-to-day lives as well. Just like we are asking men to call out other men who indulge in misogynistic talk, we need to call other people out on what they say maybe. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

We do have to self-police. Being a keyboard warrior isn't appropriate with these slanders and slurs and abuse. We have to police others as well ourselves. But stop and think and, you know, because your actions could involve other authorities and land yourself into it. (Depth 4, 50+, man from White ethnic background, Northern Ireland)

I guess we all have a little bit of a part to play – just us accepting being on social media and doing this, we're automatically like, accepting that these things are going to show up on our phones, or we're just, like, using all of these tools, we're using all of these things for free, but there is, like, downsides and stuff that come from that. (Depth 3, 30-49, woman from White ethnic background, England)

Schools and parents

It was common for participants to suggest more should be done in schools to educate young people about citizenship, what is acceptable, and the potential consequences of abuse. Participants also extended this responsibility to parents.

It just does come down to education, that it's not okay to bully people, whether that be online, whether that be in person, physically or emotionally bullying someone, and I think that starts at home and starts in the schools. (Group 14, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

Police and prosecutors

There were strong calls for greater prosecution and punishment of perpetrators, particularly those at the more extreme end of abuse. Participants assumed that the law was not always enforced, and wanted to see that change. They felt that perpetrators should not be able to get away with abuse, and that taking action would make examples of them and act as a deterrent to others.

I think there needs to be like a stricter, I don't know, sort of message out there that if you participate in these type of actions you will be prosecuted. I mean there is nothing out there at the moment saying, you know, if you post

something on social media that, oh by the way you're going to get prosecuted. There is no deterrent. That's the thing. There is no deterrent. (Group 7, 50+, men from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

They should feel the full force of the law, because then people might think about their actions more. (Depth 6, 30-49, woman from White ethnic background, Scotland)

For some, there was also a lack of clarity about what the law was in relation to abusive and intimidating behaviours. While many assumed that stalking, physical violence and hate speech were against the law, they were less certain about behaviours that potentially pushed these boundaries, for example, grabbing a candidate, online abuse that did not reference protected characteristics, and graphically defacing a poster.

I think it's very difficult, isn't it? Depending on what they've done, is there always a consequence? (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Because that could also fall under taking the mick or someone just expressing their view. So I feel like there is like a line between someone being able to talk about what they think and then someone committing an act that is illegal. I think the grey area is like whether it's legal or not. (Group 1,16-17, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

Government (and regulators)

Far fewer participants spontaneously called for government and regulators to take more action (beyond imposing stronger regulations on social media firms), and they only considered a role for the Electoral Commission when prompted. In part this may be because there was not a strong awareness of the Commission (or its role) prior to the research.

Candidates and politicians

Some participants said they expected candidates (particularly at a national level) to address their role in fostering a more measured tone in political debate. Some talked about candidates not making overblown promises which partly contributed to dissatisfaction down the line, but participants also felt that the tone of political debate they saw on the television and in parliament invited a more combative stance from people who want to hold them to account.

I do strongly feel, though, that the politicians have a role to play in this… their behaviour sets the tone and sometimes, I just don't think we're seeing that now, that kind of respectful, open debate… It's just, to me, become like too much of a media circus and I think that has to change at the same time as we

try and change society's behaviour. (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

In a number of groups, participants also suggested there needs to be more opportunity for people to feel they can have a say and influence what politicians do. They felt this could help address the levels of anger and resentment that could be partly driving candidate abuse.

If there wasn't such a disconnect between politics and kind of normal people, maybe we would see a real drop in that kind of behaviour. (Group 3, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

I've tried to talk to MPs and most of the time you just get back nothing or an email. The problem is politicians feel very disconnected from reality, and I can understand that abuse doesn't help with that. But being able to talk to the person who is meant to be representing me is incredibly difficult. (Group 6, 30-49, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

7.3 Developing a communications campaign

Recognise the limitations

Given that participants saw the abuse and intimidation of candidates as part of an entrenched societal issue, there was some doubt over how much impact a communications campaign could have, and which behaviours it might be able to address. Many felt that the types of people who are engaging in abusive behaviour do not care about the harm it might cause (or they intend to create harm and fear). There were also concerns that a campaign might not cut through in a crowded media world.

It might discourage certain people, but then, the real hardcore people that are doing it, I don't think they can be stopped. (Group 15, 18-40, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

I just feel like it's more deep action needs to be taken, because I feel like people who do these sorts of things and say these sorts of things don't get affected by that and won't change their mindset or their behaviour just because of a poster. (Group 12, 16-17, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

Some felt that it would be better to focus efforts and resources on giving politicians and candidates the tools to manage and live with the issue rather than trying to stamp it out.

You're not going to be able to change some random edgy 15-year-old online who is commenting insults, so the only thing you can do is how you respond to

it and how you sort of train people up to be able to deal with it, I think. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Consider the target audience

Keeping in mind these limitations, the general sense was that any communications campaign would be best targeted at people who are at the less extreme end of the scale ('keyboard warriors'; 'trolls'; people acting in haste and without care).

There was also some suggestion that different types of campaigns may work better for different audiences.

The primary focus on participants' suggestions was on social media content, which is where participants thought most of this activity takes place.

Optimal messaging routes

Participants were presented with examples of real messaging campaigns aimed at tackling other social issues (included in Appendix 9.3). The examples showed a range of approaches, from emphasising social norms (shaming re: littering); to consequences for perpetrators (e.g. enforcement action, fines, prison for abuse of staff; racism in football); to consequences for recipients (humanising victims of crime and sexual assault); to 'stop and think' before posting online (changing behaviours)[8].

Focussing on consequences

There was strongest support for messaging that focused on consequences for perpetrators. Beyond bringing attention to potential consequences of abusive and intimidating behaviours, participants believed that messaging of this nature also had potential to:

- Raise awareness of the seriousness of abuse across wider audiences
- Educate people about what constitutes abuse more broadly

Linked to this, there was some support for campaigns which actively try to shock – mention was made of hard-hitting campaigns showing the aftermath of a traffic collision aiming to try to reduce dangerous driving.

However, it was believed that this messaging would need to happen alongside stronger and more routine enforcement action.

If you're going to be arrested for a certain behaviour, you're less likely to do it. If you're going to be fined for something, you're less likely to do it. There has

[8] It should be noted that the intention was to obtain initial responses to high level campaign concepts. If a campaign is initiated, further testing will be required as these types of discussions have significant limitations in that people often cannot accurately predict their own behaviour, and their stated opinions may not reflect how they act in the real world in response to certain messaging.

to be something that stops everyone from making those choices. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)

People don't care about people's feeling. But when it comes to something that will hurt their pocket or... legal action, they are more likely to be intimidated or get scared, or think twice… So I think that's more effective. (Group 5, 30-49, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, England)

Highlighting impacts and/or evoking empathy

Participants also debated the merit of messaging that seeks empathy and aims to humanise the recipients of abuse. A number of participants spontaneously suggested this route. The BBC video shown in the research (where MPs talk about abuse they have experienced and its impacts) influenced some participants. They felt that the shock factor could have an effect on making people stop and think before making comments.

So I felt the harder hitting punch of that little video you played was far more powerful than any of those things [other campaign ideas] that you just displayed. (Group 17, 50+, men from White ethnic backgrounds, Northern Ireland)

However, a considerable number of participants questioned whether this more empathetic approach would work on the types of people engaging in candidate abuse.

The type of people saying this stuff, I don't think their sympathy for the victim is really going to cut through it with them, to be honest, because, given some of the things they are saying, I just can't imagine they are thinking about that person on the other end with any great thought. (Group 2, 18-29, men from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Well, if somebody is guilty of doing that type of targeting and abuse to somebody, would it really bother them if they knew the effect their words were having on somebody? If they're that type of person, would it really bother them? (Group 8, 50+, women from White ethnic backgrounds, England)

Focussing on social norms or calls to 'stop to think'

There was more muted support for messaging that took a 'social norming' approach, for example by trying to link shame and social disapproval with candidate abuse. However, one group did mention an Australian anti-litter campaign[9] which had stood out to them as being particularly effective because of its eye-catching title.

[9] Nature Hates a Tosser | EPA

While a small number of participants spontaneously suggested 'public shaming' of perpetrators, a communications campaign taking this approach had less impact in focus groups, perhaps as it lacked the powerful cut-through of other approaches.

> *If we could try to paint it more as lame, perhaps, because nobody wants to be considered lame and cringe; these are powerful emotions and effects that you have on people and it might be worthwhile exploring. (Group 13, 18-29, women from White ethnic backgrounds, Wales)*

Similarly, only a minority of participants advocated for the 'stop and think' style of messaging shown in focus groups, although a small number of participants spontaneously suggested 'stop and think' mechanisms as an actual automated tool social media firms could introduce.

8. Conclusions

Views of candidate abuse and intimidation need to be seen in the context of the backdrop of public negativity toward UK politics, low trust in candidates and politicians, and increasingly divisive rhetoric both online and offline. While candidate abuse is recognised as serious, it is widely viewed as part of a wider societal problem, going far beyond the political arena. Amongst participants, there is an expectation for candidates to have a 'thick skin' i.e. some abuse and intimidation goes with the territory.

The wider democratic and social harms of candidate abuse and intimidation were only spontaneously raised by a minority of participants, with most participants thinking more narrowly about harm to individual candidates.

Except for shouting at and/or mocking candidates, behaviours highlighted by the hypothetical scenarios are considered unacceptable – but not equally. Online behaviours are more tolerated by some, which hints at changing social norms.

In reality, acceptability is more nuanced and complex and depends on multiple interacting factors, including whether criticism targets policies or personal traits, is violent or aggressive, is premediated or spontaneous or occurs in public or private spaces. The characteristics, views, behaviours and feelings of perpetrators and recipients of abusive and intimidating behaviours further influence views of acceptability. For example, abuse towards a candidate with a record of behaving poorly in office or who has expressed extreme or divisive views is felt to be more understandable. Candidate abuse by a perpetrator who has been adversely affected by specific policies and who has no other route for expression was also felt to be understandable, if not acceptable.

As candidate abuse and intimidation is felt to be part of a wider societal issue, and as abusive and intimidating behaviours are so diverse in nature, it requires multiple agencies working together to address it. Additionally, candidates (and politicians outside of election campaigns) as a collective need to monitor their own behaviours so as not to further perpetuate abusive and intimidating behaviours.

The research suggests a need to raise awareness of the scale of candidate abuse and its consequences – particularly for perpetrators, but also for recipients. However, there is scepticism as to how effective a communications campaign can be, particularly in addressing the more severe end of abuse (where participants want to see more rigorous enforcement by police, prosecutors and social media firms). Further research is needed to explore the real-world impacts of different types of messaging, and any approach should pay attention to the strong social norming that prevents people from admitting any inclination to engage in these behaviours and to strongly condemn those who do.

9. Appendices

9.1 Participant profile

Table 3: Participant profile

Criteria	Variable	Group	Depth
Total		**84**	**10**
Gender	Woman	39	4
	Man	44	6
	Non binary	1	
Age	16-17	10	1
	18-29	22	0
	30-49	28	4
	50+	24	5
Social grade	AB	23	2
	C1/C2	45	4
	D/E	16	4
Ethnicity	Minority ethnic background	18	1
	White British/Irish/Scottish/Welsh	63	9
	White other	3	
Religion	Christian/No religion	80	8
	Jewish/Buddhist/Muslim/Hindu/Sikh	14	2
Political engagement	High	25	5
	Medium	45	4
	Low	15	1
Political affiliation	Conservative	10	
	Labour	11	
	Liberal Democrats	8	1
	Reform	7	1
	Green Party	10	1
	Plaid Cymru	6	1
	Scottish National Party	6	1
	Sinn Fein	3	
	Democratic Unionist Party	2	1
	Ulster Unionist Party	3	
	Alliance Party	3	
	Social Democratic and Labour Party	3	
	Your Party	0	1
	None	12	3

9.2 Agenda for online forum and live discussions

The agenda is shown below. This was amended and a more concise version was used for the in-depth interviews.

Online forum from w/c 9th February

Activity No.	Activity description	Materials/ stimulus
Activity 1 *Introductions* *Responses visible once participant has responded*	• Explain how Recollective works (for the purpose of this research it will be largely used to gain individual responses, although there will be some limited scope for discussion and you will be able to see what others have written after you have submitted your own responses). There will be further opportunity to discuss views later in Zoom groups • Provide an overview of the research objectives (to understand the public's views on the abuse and intimidation of candidates standing for election) • Outline reporting intentions • Explain that some of the examples and scenarios we'll show you during the session may include strong, insulting or offensive language and references to threatening or highly upsetting behaviour. Please only take part in the research if you are comfortable with this. • This is a subject where people may have different views – please respect everyone's views and think about how you express your own opinions. • Obtain and record participant consent for the online forum Ask the participant to introduce themselves briefly.	

Activity 2
Individual starting points
 	
Responses visible once participant has responded
	PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED A SERIES OF QUESTIONS TO ASCERTAIN BASELINE VIEWS ON ISSUES RELATING TO POLITICS AND TRUST
	• In general, how trustworthy or untrustworthy do you think the following types of people in the UK are? (very trustworthy, fairly trustworthy, neither trustworthy or untrustworthy, fairly untrustworthy, very untrustworthy, don't know)
	  • Civil servants
	  • Politicians (MPs, MSPs/MSs/MLAs)
	  • Journalists
	  • Members of the public
	  • Teachers
	  • Police
	  • Local councillors
	• Which of the following do you use for news stories about local and national politics? (Television, newspapers (print or online versions e.g. Guardian app, Mail online), radio, online news feeds e.g. BBC news, podcasts, social media, other internet sources, magazines (print), word of mouth (family / friends / colleagues), none of these	

	• Which of the following social media platforms, if any, do you use? (Facebook, X – formerly Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, other platform, don't use social media for news) • How trustworthy or untrustworthy do you think your news sources are? (very trustworthy, fairly trustworthy, neither trustworthy or untrustworthy, fairly untrustworthy, very untrustworthy, don't know) • Thinking about the news sources listed above, what makes them either trustworthy or untrustworthy?' • How important do you think it is to vote in a) UK Parliament General elections b) Devolved Parliament/Assembly elections [where appropriate] c) Local elections/Mayoral elections (very important, quite important, somewhere in the middle, not very important, not important at all) • Please post an image that sums up how you feel about politics or politicians at the moment • Why have you selected this image?	

Activity 3
Exploring initial views
 	
Responses visible once participant has responded
	PARTICIPANTS WILL BE PROVIDED WITH INFORMATION ABOUT THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ELECTIONS AND CANDIDATES THAT WE ARE CONSIDERING (STIMULUS 1)
	PEOPLE OBVIOUSLY HAVE DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLITICS AND THESE ARE OFTEN WIDELY DEBATED BETWEEN CANDIDATES STANDING FOR ELECTION AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC. FOR EXAMPLE, THESE VIEWS CAN BE DEBATED ON TV BETWEEN CANDIDATES STANDING FOR ELECTION AT A NATIONAL LEVEL OR AT TOWN HALL MEETINGS AT A LOCAL LEVEL. CANDIDATES SOMETIMES KNOCK ON PEOPLE'S DOORS TO DISCUSS ISSUES IN PERSON WITH THE PUBLIC BEFORE AN ELECTION. THERE IS ALSO A LOT OF POLITICAL DEBATE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.
	• If you had to choose 3 words to describe the overall tone of political debate in the UK at the moment, what would they be?
	  • Why do you say that?
	
	This research is focussing on how people behave towards candidates standing for election in the UK
	• What kinds of behaviour do you think are okay when people disagree about politics?
	• What would you see as abusive behaviour towards candidates and not okay?
	• How much of a problem, if at all, do you think abuse and intimidation of candidates who run for election in the UK is at the moment? (1 – not a problem, 5 – a serious problem)
	  • Why do you say that?
		Stimulus 1: PowerPoint animated slides

Activity 4 *Introduction to scenarios and sorting exercise* *Responses visible once participant has responded*	PARTICIPANTS WILL BE GIVEN SOME INFORMATION EXPLAINING THAT WE ARE INTERESTED IN VIEWS ON ACCEPTABILITY OF BEHAVIOURS AND NOT NECESSARILY THE LEGALITIES OF THE BEHAVIOURS THEY ARE ABOUT TO SEE (STIMULUS 2). PARTICIPANTS WILL BE SHOWN ALL SCENARIOS (STIMULUS 3) AND WHERE APPLICABLE THEY WILL BE TAILORED TO THE INDIVIDUAL NATION. THE STARTING POINT WILL BE ROTATED ACROSS THE PARTICIPANTS. PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED TO SORT THE SCENARIOS INTO 'BUCKETS' – THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS NEVER OKAY; THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS SOMETIMES OKAY; THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS ALWAYS OKAY. PLEASE BASE YOUR ANSWER ON THE BEHAVIOUR BEING CONDUCTED TOWARDS THE CANDIDATE STANDING FOR ELECTION.' • Please say why you have chosen to put each scenario in the selected bucket • Is there anything that could make the behaviour more understandable? For example, who the behaviour is directed at? Who the behaviour is done by? • Is there anything that could make the behaviour less understandable?	Stimulus 2: PowerPoint animated slides Stimulus 3: Scenarios
Activity 5 *Wrap up and next steps*	• Any questions that you would like clarified before the live discussions? • Thank for contributions so far	

Live discussion from w/c 23rd February

The following discussion guide is semi-structured, as such these questions are designed more as prompts than to be read out verbatim.

Timings	Content	Stimulus required

Introduction
(5 minutes)
	• Welcome and moderator introductions
	• Aims of the session to be shared with participants:
	  ◦ Discussions will focus on the acceptability of the abuse and intimidation of candidates standing for election
	  ◦ Don't worry, nobody is expected to be an expert and you will be given any information you need.
	• Explain that some of the examples and scenarios used during the session may include strong, insulting or offensive language and references to threatening or highly upsetting behaviour. Check that everyone is comfortable with this and indicate that there will be no pressure to share views/we can have a break if required
	• Explain data protection/recording and confirm consent
	• Introduce observers (if appropriate)	

	• Participant introductions and ice-breaker (name, if working, what they would be doing if not here tonight)	

Initial discussions (10 minutes)	• Explore reflections from their experience of the forum
	  • Was anything surprising?
	  • Did anything make you think differently about your initial views
	  • Anything that you are still thinking about?
	• How would you describe the tone of politics in the UK? Has it changed over time? Why do you say that?
	• What does good / less positive political debate in your country look like in your view?	

Overall response to scenarios (15 minutes)	Explore overall response to scenarios on the forum i.e. what people tended to find more or less acceptable: • Any of the scenarios particularly clearcut? • Any of the scenarios particularly difficult/ challenging? • Anything make these sorts of behaviours more understandable? • Should a candidate be expected to tolerate a certain level of poor behaviour/abuse? Is this part of being involved in politics? • Compare to expectations in relation to poor behaviour/ abuse of 'ordinary' members of the public, people in prominent professions (teachers, lawyers); other people in the public eye i.e. celebrities FACILITATOR TO NOTE THROUGHOUT SESSION WHERE CANDIDATE ON CANDIDATE ABUSE IMPACTS ON HOW PARTICIPANTS VIEW ABUSE BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC. ALSO PROBE WHEN FREEDOM OF SPEECH/RIGHT TO PROTEST IS MENTIONED AS MAKING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR MORE UNDERSTANDABLE.	Stimulus 4: Have summary of forum feedback to hand to further explore

Exploration of specific scenarios (aim for as many as possible; order rotated across groups) (60 minutes)	**For each scenario**
	• Gauge reactions to the basic scenario
	DISCUSS AS A GROUP
	• (Spontaneous) Can you think of any circumstances where behaviour is more / less understandable
	• (Prompted) Explore a series of WHAT IFS relating to each scenario and if/how they change initial reactions
	FACILITATOR TO ENSURE COVERAGE OF THE FOLLOWING IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SCENARIOS:
	• What factors impact perceptions of acceptability – what makes the behaviour more or less acceptable?
	  • Mode (e.g. online, face to face)
	  • Characteristics of the recipient e.g. gender, race, age of the candidate or if the recipient isn't the candidate but family/a friend/staff/volunteer?
	  • Characteristics of the participant and/or perpetrator
	  • Political position of the recipient (e.g. is it seen as more acceptable if it is someone with an opposing view to the perpetrator)
		Stimulus 3: Scenarios Scenario rotation grid

	• The level at which the recipient is standing (e.g. councillor or parliamentarian) • Experience of the candidate (incumbent/someone with a record in office vs a new candidate • Perceived importance of the issue (i.e. some issues as so important that they mean rules/conventions can be broken) • Probe on the following impacts when considering acceptability if they don't emerge spontaneously: • The risks of a slippery slope i.e. if small issues are tolerated, could it lead to more serious issues? • What about the risks of online abuse moving offline (as a result of disinhibition; habitual behaviour) • What about the fact that bullies typically focus on personal characteristics and this can have a significant impact on people on the receiving end • What about cross-over behaviours? i.e. in person abuse which is filmed and then posted online? • The possible impact on democracy / society if abuse/ intimidation is tolerated	
Reflecting on definitions/ spectrum of behaviours (10 minutes)	Thinking about everything that has been said so far: • When do you think political disagreement / criticism crosses the line to abusive or intimidating behaviour?' • Probes: For example, is it ok for people to be rude about a candidate, swear at them, mock them? • Probe: What behaviours do you think are not particularly likeable/agreeable but you wouldn't go as far to describe them as abusive or intimidating? • Are there any behaviours that fall into a 'grey area', where it's not clear whether they are okay or not okay? What makes them difficult to categorise?	
Addressing behaviours and messaging (20 minutes)	• Which groups of candidates do you think are most impacted by this (if not emerging spontaneously)? PARTICIPANTS WILL BE VERBALLY PROVIDED WITH INFORMATION ABOUT THE ISSUES FACED BY CANDIDATES (TYPE AND EXTENT) AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS, SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY (LINK TO BBC VIDEO) Explore reactions • Is anything that you have heard surprising? • Do you feel differently about any of the scenarios now that you have seen that information? Which scenarios and why/why not? • Why do you think people behave in unacceptable ways towards candidates • Generally and to these groups specifically? • What types of people do you think are largely responsible for this sort of behaviour?	Stimulus 5: Video: David Lammy MP: 'I won't let the bullies win' - BBC News Stimulus 6 – Testimonials to feed into debate (only if required)

	• Do you have any suggestions for how this sort of behaviour could be addressed?
	• Who do you think should be doing this work to address these issues? Probe: candidates, political parties, social media platforms, event organisers, the police, local authorities, central government, the public?
	• Would you expect organisations to collaborate to tackle the issue? Why?
	• What do you think would help to discourage people from behaving in this way? Could the authorities like local authorities, central government and the Electoral Commission lead on this??
	  • What sort of messages do you think would work?
	GIVE EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT SORTS OF POSSIBLE CAMPAIGNS
	• Focus on social norms – other people don't behave in this way (littering)
	• Focus on behaviour change - encouraging users online to stop and think before posting (would you say this to a neighbour or colleague?)
	• Focus on the consequences for perpetrator – i.e. fine, court action? (football racism; New TfL campaign)
	• Focus on consequences for the candidate – humanising, emotive
	
	• Which of these do you think will be more/ less successful?
	  • Why do you say that
		Stimulus 7 - Example campaigns

Summing up (5 minutes)	• What is the one thing that should be considered when developing future messaging to try to encourage people not to behave in ways which are abusive or intimidating to candidates standing for election? • Any final thoughts? • Inform about quick follow up task and incentive payment arrangements • Thank and close	

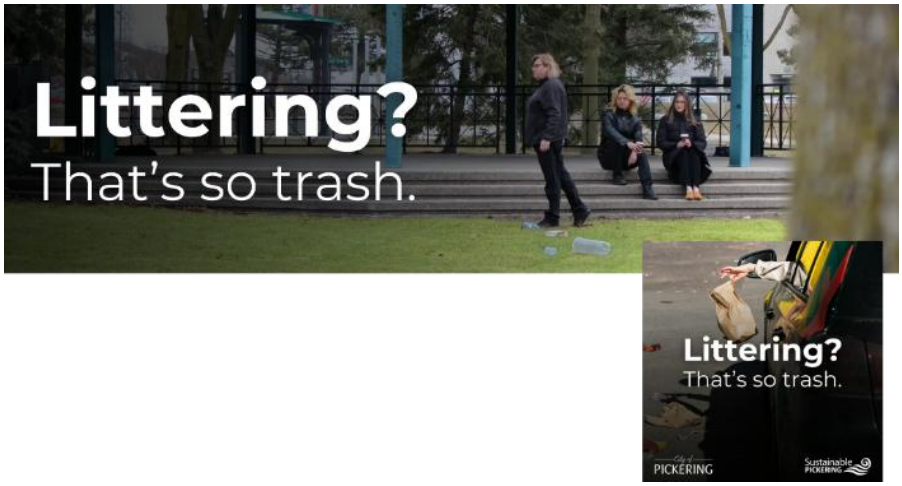
Quick follow up task

Participants will be sent a quick question online to complete after the group to collect their considered thoughts so that we have a 'before' and 'after' comparison of acceptability of the scenarios.

Activity name	Content
Sorting exercise	PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED TO SORT THE SCENARIOS INTO 'BUCKETS' – THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS NEVER OKAY; THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS SOMETIMES OKAY; THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IS ALWAYS OK
Final thoughts	• Do you have any final thoughts/ reflections?
Wrap up	CONFIRM INCENTIVE PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS

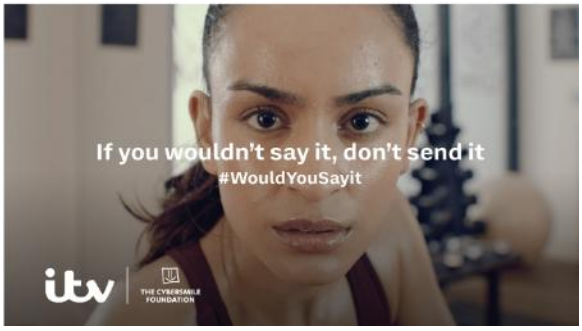
9.3 Communication campaign stimulus materials

Social norm campaign examples



'Stop and think' campaign examples





Consequences campaign examples





Empathy campaign exam



