

# Survey and interviews show political commitment is discouraged by digital violence

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The majority of politically active individuals experience digital violence. The results of a study conducted by the Technical University of Munich

(TUM) in cooperation with the human rights organization HateAid show that around two-thirds of affected women have experienced sexualized online attacks. Around one-third of the respondents who experienced online aggression were also physically attacked. More than half changed their behavior—from self-restrictions on communications to the intention of abandoning their political involvement.

Ahead of the German federal election, several politicians have announced that they will no longer be running for office due to the extent of online threats and defamation they face. This shows that digital violence poses a threat to [political participation](#) and therefore to an important pillar of parliamentary democracy.

In cooperation with the human rights organization HateAid, a team of researchers at the Munich School of Politics and Public Policy at TUM surveyed around 1100 politically active individuals. The majority of the respondents were politicians at the municipal, state, federal and EU levels. Other participants were political activists, researchers, journalists, publicists and party members who do not hold elected office or mandates.

"We deliberately chose a broad spectrum because, along with politicians, other politically active persons help to shape public debate and are therefore part of the formation of political will and opinion," says study author Luise Koch of the Professorship of Global Health at TUM. The non-representative online survey took place between April and October 2024 and was supplemented with 12 qualitative interviews.

## **Hateful comments, threats, discrimination**

[The study](#) (in German) shows that more than half of politically active individuals are affected by digital violence, especially hateful comments, threats and discriminatory statements. 58% of those surveyed report

hostile online attacks, most of which relate to their political positions.

Women (63%) experienced such violence more frequently than men (53%). Around two thirds of affected women reported gender-specific violence such as sexism or misogyny. Almost 25% have been threatened with sexual abuse of a physical nature such as rape threats (men: 3%). Affected men were threatened more frequently with other forms of physical violence such as being beaten up or killed (51%, 43% of women).

Around one third of those affected by digital abuse (32% of both men and women) have also experienced physical violence. Those who were not abused online were also less likely to be physically attacked (women: 14%; men: 10%).

## **Modifying tone and content in social media**

More than one in two of the affected persons modified their communications, with women in particular considering giving up entirely. Women (66 %) as well as men (53 %) reduced their social media presence and modified their tone and content, for example. 49% of women and 30% of men at least occasionally considered turning down a position in which they might be heavily exposed to digital attacks. Far more women have considered giving up their political work entirely (22%, 10% of men).

Many politically active people feel abandoned. 66% of women and 49% of men stated that they feel inadequately prepared for online [violence](#) and its consequences regarding their political activities. Only 45% of the politicians felt that they were well supported in terms of prevention. More than half of those affected expressed a desire for greater solidarity within their communities and in the workplace.

## **'Women are already underrepresented'**

"The results show: although women and men experience similar levels of hate, politically active women are much more frequently affected by sexualized abuse that can be particularly stressful," says study leader Janina Steinert of the Professorship of Global Health at TUM.

"This has drastic effects. Women are more likely to modify their public communications or to consider withdrawing from political life entirely—while they are already underrepresented in parliaments and parties."

The study team and the human rights organization HateAid therefore recommend establishing specialized points of contact within parties that could help members and candidates to report abusive content on platforms and collect evidence to support criminal complaints. Such complaints should then be prosecuted promptly by the authorities. Furthermore, the Digital Services Act (DSA) should be rigorously enforced vis-à-vis social media companies. Flagged content needs to be checked quickly by the platforms and removed if appropriate.

Anna-Lena von Hodenberg, the CEO of HateAid, says, "In the current election campaign we are seeing: The hate and lies that politically active people are exposed to are causing many of them to change the way they engage in politics and how they behave and communicate.

"Above all, it affects their decision on whether they continue to be politically active at all and, if so, how they approach this work. What is happening here is systematic and must give us cause for alarm. When fewer and fewer people have the courage to play an active role in our liberal democracy, it is a loss for all of us. Consequently, it is time for politicians, the justice system, parties and platforms to do everything in their power to provide effective protection to politicians and other

politically [active individuals](#)."

**More information:** Angelina Voggenreiter et al, Angegriffen & alleingelassen. Wie sich digitale Gewalt auf politisches Engagement auswirkt. Ein Lagebild, (2025). DOI: [10.17605/osf.io/j4stx](https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/j4stx)

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