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### Written Evidence to the Public Bill Committee

#### Representation of the People Bill 2024–26

April 2026

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### About the submitter

I am Director of the Mile End Institute and Reader in Comparative Politics at the School of Society and the Environment, Queen Mary University of London. I am a leading expert in political representation, with a particular focus on the impact of harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) on political candidates in established democracies. My research has directly shaped policy and parliamentary debate in this area over the past decade.

My evidence draws on a sustained programme of research including the Representative Audit of Britain (RAB) surveys, which track the experiences of all parliamentary candidates across successive general elections (2015, 2017, 2019, 2024). I have previously submitted evidence to the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2017), the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2025), the Speaker's Conference on the Security of MPs, Candidates and Elections (2024–25), and the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life (Ireland). I regularly advise the Local Government Association on resources and guidelines to support councillors in dealing with HAI in public life.

This submission addresses the provisions in Part 6 of the Bill relating to the intimidation of candidates, campaigners and election staff, and the provision removing the requirement for candidates acting as their own election agents to publish their home addresses. It draws on published research and on preliminary findings from the local and general election candidate surveys.

### Summary

My evidence supports the Bill's direction of travel on candidate safety but argues that the measures proposed are insufficient on their own. The Bill addresses the downstream problem of how offences are prosecuted and sentenced. It does not address the upstream problem: that the threat of HAI deters diverse candidates from standing in the first place, filtering out exactly the people whom a representative democracy most needs to attract. The following summary sets out my core arguments.

- **HAI is worsening and the 2024 election was no exception.** Preliminary results from the 2024 RAB Survey show that 85% of 2024 general election candidates experienced at least one form of violence during their campaign. Despite awareness campaigns and legislative changes since 2019, the problem is intensifying, not diminishing.

- **The gendered and intersectional dimension is severe and must be named explicitly in legislation.** Women, and particularly women from ethnic minority backgrounds and LGBT+ women, experience significantly higher rates of HAI. This is not an incidental feature of the problem: it is the defining characteristic of how HAI operates as a tool of democratic exclusion.
- **The Bill's home address provision is welcome but far too narrow.** Under current law, candidates can already opt to withhold their home address from the ballot paper and nomination documents, and by 2024 three-quarters did so. The Bill closes only a residual gap for candidates who act as their own election agents. The Government should remove the home address requirement entirely for all candidates, replacing it with a mandatory correspondence address such as a PO Box or campaign office.
- **Tougher sentences alone will not change the composition of the candidate pool.** The aggravating factor provision sends a welcome signal, but my research shows that HAI functions primarily as a deterrent before the election, not simply a harm during it. Legislative reform must be complemented by upstream measures that address the conditions under which people decide whether to stand at all.
- **Social media platforms require a clearer statutory duty.** Online HAI has grown faster than any other form of abuse in every election cycle. The Bill does not address the structural conditions that allow it to flourish.

## 1. The scale and trajectory of HAI

Evidence from the Representative Audit of Britain surveys demonstrates a consistent and statistically significant deterioration in the safety environment faced by parliamentary candidates at UK general elections.

In 2017, 38% of all candidates reported experiencing some form of HAI during the campaign. By 2019, that figure had risen to 49%, an increase of 11 percentage points, statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . Preliminary results from the RAB Survey, covering the 2024 general election, paint an even starker picture. When candidates were asked directly whether they had experienced HAI, 32% said yes. However, when presented with a structured list of specific experiences of physical, psychological and online violence, 85% of candidates indicated that they had experienced at least one form during their campaign. This divergence between self-reported and prompted measures is itself important evidence: many candidates do not recognise what they experience as HAI, which reflects a process of normalisation that is deeply corrosive to democratic health.

Analysis of the Statements of Persons Nominated (SOPNs) published by returning officers provides independent corroboration of candidates' growing security concerns. In 2010, when candidates were first given the option not to publish their home address on ballot papers, approximately one-quarter withheld their address. By 2024, three-quarters did so. This is one of the most dramatic and unambiguous trend lines in our data.

Polling conducted by Savanta for the Mile End Institute in June 2024 revealed troubling public attitudes. Among a representative sample of Londoners, 18% considered it acceptable to follow political figures on the street, 14% found it acceptable to loiter near political figures' offices or homes, and 16% thought it acceptable to publish political figures' personal

information online without their consent. These attitudes are not fringe positions: they represent a substantial minority of the public who condone behaviour that constitutes intimidation in law and in practice.

## **2. The gendered and intersectional character of HAI**

My research consistently finds that HAI is not experienced evenly across the candidate pool. It is concentrated amongst those groups who are already underrepresented in Parliament. This pattern reflects HAI's function as a mechanism that enforces the existing social composition of political elites by imposing higher costs on those who deviate from it.

### **Gender**

In 2017, 45% of women candidates reported experiencing HAI, compared with 35% of men. By 2019, 58% of women reported HAI, compared with 45% of men. The gender gap widened from 9 percentage points in 2017 to 13 percentage points in 2019. For women candidates in 2019, experience of HAI whilst campaigning had become the statistical norm rather than the exception. In 2024, women candidates indicated to feel significantly more unsafe during the campaign than men candidates.

The psychological impact on women is commensurately severe. In 2019, 48% of women candidates reported being very concerned because of HAI (compared with 27% of men), 45% reported being very annoyed (29% of men), and 34% reported being very fearful (14% of men). Approximately three in every four women experienced some level of fear whilst campaigning. The Bill's stated rationale acknowledges the disproportionate impact on women, but this acknowledgement has not been translated into specific gendered provisions. I strongly urge the Committee to address this gap.

### **Ethnicity**

The data on ethnicity reveals an intersectional pattern for concern. In 2017, 37% of minority ethnic candidates reported experiencing HAI. By 2019, that had risen to 55%, a statistically significant increase ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). The combined effect of gender and ethnicity is especially stark: 63% of minority ethnic women candidates reported experiencing abuse in 2019, compared with 45% of white women, 38% of ethnic minority men and 34% of white men. Ethnic minority women are by a considerable margin the group most exposed to HAI in the candidate pool.

### **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

LGBT+ candidates also face disproportionate rates of HAI. Overall, 45% of LGBT+ candidates reported experiencing abuse in 2019. The intersection of sexual identity and gender is again significant: 58% of LGBT+ women reported HAI, compared with 39% of LGBT+ men and 46% of heterosexual cis women.

These patterns collectively demonstrate that HAI functions as a barrier to diverse political representation. Legislation that treats intimidation primarily as a sentencing matter, without addressing the structural conditions that concentrate it on already-marginalised groups, will not alter this dynamic. I recommend that the Bill explicitly require courts to treat the protected characteristics of the victim as a factor in the operation of the new aggravating provision.

### 3. The home address requirement

The Bill's home address provision is welcome but far too narrow. To understand why, it is necessary to explain the current legal position in full.

Following a 2008 consultation prompted by security concerns raised in Parliament, candidates in UK general elections were given the option, from the 2010 election onwards, to withhold their home address from the ballot paper and the Statement of Persons Nominated (SOPN), replacing it with the name of their constituency. However, this opt-out contained a structural gap. Every candidate must appoint an election agent — the person legally responsible for managing their campaign finances. Most candidates from larger parties appoint a separate person as their agent. Many smaller party candidates and independents, however, act as their own election agent to avoid cost and administrative complexity. Under existing rules, election agents' addresses must be published in the Notice of Election Agents, and candidates acting as their own agent had no option to withhold that address even if they had successfully withheld it from the ballot paper and SOPN. Those candidates were therefore de-anonymised through the back door of the nominations process.

The Bill closes this specific gap by removing the requirement for candidates who act as their own election agents to publish their home address in the Notice of Election Agents, allowing them instead to provide a correspondence address. This is overdue and I welcome it.

Yet my research with Wolfgang Rüdiger, based on analysis of all SOPNs across five general elections (Collignon and Rüdiger, 2024), documents address withholding accelerated sharply across all parties since the murder of Jo Cox in 2016. Open ended answers confirm that security for themselves and their families is the primary reason candidates withhold their address. This is not an administrative preference; it is a safety response.

This trend also carries electoral consequences that compound existing inequalities. My research demonstrates that the ballot paper address had served as one of the few ways candidates could signal local connection to voters, and research on voting behaviour shows that voters are more likely to support candidates who live close to them. As candidates, and disproportionately women, withdraw this information to protect themselves, they lose a tool for communicating localness that party selectorates and some voters value. Security concerns therefore interact with candidate selection dynamics in ways that place diverse candidates at further disadvantage.

The Bill's reform protects candidates who were already trying to protect themselves but were caught by the election agent loophole. It does nothing for the remaining quarter of candidates who still publish their home address and who may simply be less security-conscious, less well-advised, or standing for the first time. The Government should go further by removing the home address requirement entirely for all candidates across both the ballot paper and all nomination documents, replacing it with a mandatory correspondence address such as a PO Box or campaign office address. This would standardise in law what is already the overwhelming practice, protect those who have not yet taken steps to withhold their address, and remove the security risk from the nominations process entirely. This was a

recommendation of the Speaker's Conference and is directly supported by the trajectory of the data.

#### **4. The upstream deterrence problem**

The Bill's approach to HAI is principally downstream as it strengthens sentencing for offences committed against candidates, campaigners and election staff. This is valuable. However, my research demonstrates that HAI also operates powerfully as a deterrent that operates before the election, shaping who decides to stand in the first place.

In Collignon and Rüdig (2021) we show that HAI increases the effective cost of female representation. Candidates who experience HAI adapt their behaviour: they reduce face-to-face contact with voters, change their online presence, and in many cases decide not to stand again. Women are significantly more likely than men to make these adjustments. The practical effect is that HAI harm individual candidates and shapes the future composition of the candidate pool in favour of those who are either less exposed to abuse or better resourced to deal with it.

Research on MPs' staff adds a further dimension. Data from the Speaker's Conference inquiry found that 72% of staff said their experience of witnessing abuse or intimidation whilst working for an MP made them less likely to stand for election themselves. Women staff were more likely than men to report this deterrent effect (77% versus 58%). The talent pipeline for future candidates is thus also being eroded by the current environment.

The Bill does not address these upstream dynamics. Effective legislative reform requires complementary measures that reduce the baseline level of HAI rather than simply increasing the punishment once it has occurred. The Committee should consider whether provisions on party accountability and support for candidates who are targeted would more directly address the deterrent effect of HAI on candidate diversity.

#### **5. Online HAI and platform accountability**

Online harassment has grown faster than any other form of abuse across every election cycle in our data. Between 2017 and 2019, the share of candidates reporting abuse on social media rose from 29% to 45%, an increase of 16 percentage points. Abuse by email rose from 23% to 35%. The gender differential is large: in 2019, 54% of women and 40% of men reported being targeted by abuse on social media. The 2024 general election saw a further and alarming deterioration, about 60 % of general election candidates stated that they had suffered from online HAI, and 40% stated that during the campaign someone had distributed misleading information about them.

The Bill does not contain provisions that directly address the structural conditions on social media platforms that allow this to flourish. The Electoral Commission has itself stated that further measures may be needed to ensure candidate safety and has called for a clearer overarching statutory duty on social media platforms operating in the UK. The Speaker's Conference made an equivalent recommendation and specifically called on the Government to consider mandating Ofcom to produce an elections code of practice for social media platforms, noting the feasibility of including this requirement in the elections bill it had

committed to bring forward. That recommendation is directly unanswered in the Bill as introduced. This is a significant omission.

A particular and growing concern is the use of generative AI to produce deepfake content targeting political candidates, especially women. The Speaker's Conference heard extremely distressing evidence about the scale of deepfake pornography targeting female MPs and candidates at the 2024 election. This is a gendered harm of the first order as it is designed to humiliate, silence and deter women from political life. The existing legislative framework is inadequate. The Electoral Commission has recommended that section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which criminalises false statements about a candidate's personal character or conduct, should be amended to make explicit that it covers deepfakes. I support that recommendation and urge the Committee to address it through this Bill.

The current regulatory framework depends primarily on the willingness of social media companies to cooperate, which produces significant disparities between platforms in how online HAI is handled. These companies operate on a transnational scale, which raises serious questions about whether the safeguarding of national democratic processes should be entrusted to private entities with no democratic accountability. The legal threshold required to seek protection from online abuse is, in practice, too high for most candidates to meet. Social media companies take too long to remove harmful content, and the law requires victims to document a course of conduct over a sustained period before relief is available. These structural deficiencies are left unaddressed by the Bill as currently drafted.

## Recommendations

### **1. Strengthen the aggravating factor provision to include protected characteristics.**

The new statutory aggravating factor for offences targeting candidates, campaigners and election staff should explicitly require courts to consider the protected characteristics of the victim under the Equality Act 2010 as a further aggravating element. This is consistent with how courts already treat hate crime and would reflect the documented evidence that women, ethnic minority candidates and LGBT+ candidates are disproportionately targeted.

### **2. Remove the home address requirement entirely for all candidates, replacing it with a mandatory correspondence address.**

The Government should go further by removing the home address requirement from the ballot paper and all nomination documents for all candidates, replacing it with a mandatory correspondence address such as a PO Box or campaign office. This was a recommendation of the Speaker's Conference and is directly supported by the evidence that three-quarters of candidates in 2024 chose to withhold their address on safety grounds. The current provision is far too narrow.

### **3. Introduce systematic data collection on HAI as a democratic health indicator.**

The Bill should include a requirement for the Electoral Commission to collect and publish systematic data on the experiences of candidates during election campaigns, including experiences of HAI, in every post-election report. This data is currently collected by academic researchers and organisations in scattered form rather than systematised and organised by public institutions. Embedding it in the official reporting framework would create an

authoritative public record and enable measurement of the effectiveness of protective measures over time.

**4. Place a duty on political parties to report on candidate safety.**

The Bill should require registered political parties to report to the Electoral Commission on the measures they have in place to support candidate safety and to address HAI within their selection processes. Parties are the key gatekeepers to political office and the frontline bodies responsible for supporting candidates during campaigns. At present, there is no accountability mechanism for party-level performance on this issue.

**5. Include in the Bill a provision mandating Ofcom to produce an elections code of practice for social media platforms.**

The Speaker's Conference specifically recommended that the Government consider mandating Ofcom to produce an elections code of practice for social media platforms and assess the feasibility of including this requirement in the elections bill. Elections are identifiable high-risk periods for online abuse. A statutory code of practice would establish consistent minimum standards across platforms for the removal of illegal content targeting candidates, require proactive rather than reactive moderation during campaign periods, and create an enforceable accountability mechanism. Voluntary cooperation has demonstrably failed. The Government should accept the Speaker's Conference recommendation and introduce the necessary provision through this Bill.

**6. Amend section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to explicitly cover deepfakes and designate electoral deepfakes as a priority offence under the Online Safety Act.**

Whilst the Government has legislated against non-consensual sexual deepfakes more broadly, these provisions address general intimate image abuse and do not specifically cover the democratic harm caused when deepfakes are deployed against candidates during elections. The Speaker's Conference Second Report documented extremely distressing evidence about the scale of deepfake pornography targeting female MPs and candidates at the 2024 election. The Bill should amend section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to make explicit that it covers deepfake content, closing the ambiguity identified by the Electoral Commission. The Government should also consider whether section 106 offences should be added to the list of priority offences under the Online Safety Act, requiring platforms to act proactively to prevent candidates being targeted by such content.

## Key references

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