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To cite this article: Rebekah Herrick, Sue Thomas, Lori Franklin, Marcia L. Godwin, Eveline Gnabasik & Jean Reith Schroedel (2019): Physical violence and psychological abuse against female and male mayors in the United States, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2019.1629321](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1629321)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1629321>



Published online: 16 Jun 2019.





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Physical violence and psychological abuse against female and male mayors in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite reports of physical violence and psychological abuse against US officeholders, the subject has not been addressed in research at any level of government. This study reports results from survey research of mayors with three aims: examination of the frequency, types, and correlates of experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse among mayors; exploration of gender differences; and estimates of the effects of violence and abuse on mayors' desire to stay in office. Our findings suggest that US mayors face meaningful levels of physical violence and psychological abuse – and these events are widespread across types of cities. Our data also show that female mayors are more likely than men to experience most types of violence and abuse. And, although having these experiences did not reduce the majority of officeholders' political ambition, those who suffered physical violence were more likely than those who faced psychological abuse to have considered curtailing their political careers. Finally, we consider the implications for these results on the quality and diversity of future representation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 December 2018
Accepted 3 May 2019

KEYWORDS

Mayors; physical violence; psychological abuse; ambition; women and gender

An increasingly rich theoretical and empirical comparative politics literature on violence and abuse toward women in political office has emerged in the last several years. Concomitantly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016, 2018) published two reports that explored these phenomena against female parliamentarians.¹ Yet, despite individual reports of both physical violence and psychological abuse experienced by US officeholders, to date, the subject has not been addressed in American politics at any level of government or for any gender.

This deficiency is important because violence and abuse against those who represent us not only has serious effects on victims – and their families – but may also influence policy-makers' ability and commitment to serve. Such experiences may also deter others from seeking public service careers. Together, these effects may decrease the quality and

diversity, especially gender diversity, of our political leadership. Learning the contours of the problem is overdue.

The present study is intended to jump start research on physical violence and psychological abuse against elective officeholders in the United States. It focuses on US mayors and reports results from survey research from cities at or above the population of 30,000. Our analysis has three aims: examination of the frequency, types, and correlates of experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse among mayors; exploration of gender differences in these experiences; and estimates of the effects of violence and abuse on political ambition to stay in office.

Our findings suggest that US mayors face meaningful levels of physical violence and psychological abuse – and at rates comparable to and above those reported for the general workforce and the public sector workforce. Further, such experiences are widespread across types of cities. The phenomenon is not limited to certain types of places. It is also clear from our data that female mayors are more likely than men to experience most types of physical violence and psychological abuse, including violence/abuse of a sexualized nature. Finally, although having these experiences did not reduce the majority of officeholders' political ambition, those who experienced physical violence were more likely than those who experienced psychological abuse to have considered curtailing their political careers.

The nature of physical violence and psychological abuse

To keep the focus of our study on violence and abuse targeted toward elective officeholders, to ensure the inclusion of violence/abuse of a gendered nature, and to provide comparability across studies of these phenomena, we modeled our survey on the 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study on female parliamentarians introduced above.

Thus, we define experiences of physical violence as: “minor” violence, such as being slapped, pushed, or subject to projectiles; significant violence, such as being shot, assaulted or otherwise injured; and violence against property. Psychological abuse was defined as exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact; seeing oneself or one's family in images of or experienced disrespectful comments in social media, traditional media, or at a public meeting; received threats of death, rape, beating, abduction, or similar act.

Finally, it is important to note that our data pertain to experiences of violence/abuse directed toward elective officeholders by the public. Such experiences that emanate from other elective officials are not included in the present study.

Literature review

The paucity of research about violence and abuse against officeholders in the US results in our reliance on the literatures of general workforce violence/abuse and violence/abuse against local public sector employees. To explore the gendered component of these phenomena, including motives for them, we consult the literature on the differential presence and priorities of female and male politicians in relationship to status quo threats. Finally, the literature on political ambition in the US informs our understanding of the effects that violence and abuse may have on the political ambition of mayors.

Frequency and correlates physical violence and psychological abuse in the US workforce

In the discussion below, we provide insight into the degree of violence/abuse reported in the literature. As we are interested in whether mayors' experiences, overall and by gender, are comparable to other types of workforces, these data are critical.

To start, the most extensive data on violence and abuse on government employees – a category that includes mayors – come from a US Bureau of Justice Statistics longitudinal report. In 2011, the rate of workplace violence against government employees was almost two times as frequent as the rate for private-sector employees.² And, from 2002 to 2011, about 96 percent of workplace violence against government employees was experienced by state, county, and local employees (Harrell 2013).

The most comprehensive national data analysis of workplace violence generally comes from the National Survey of Workplace Health and Safety (Schat, Frone, and Kelloway 2006). This study revealed that 41.4 percent of US workers experienced psychological abuse (defined here as behavior meant to intimidate) at work during a year. Six percent of workers experienced physical violence. Public administrators, the profession that most closely resembles the mayoral focus of our study, encountered the most psychological abuse and physical violence of any category.

Looking across studies, definitive patterns in correlates of violence/abuse are rare. Part of this is due to different operationalizations of concepts and different types of research designs. Still, one of the strongest consistent correlates of this phenomenon appears to be the amount of contact workers have with the public. Workers with more contact are more likely to experience violence/abuse (Baron and Neuman 1996; Piquero et al. 2013; Fischer, Van Reemst, and De Jong 2016).

Among demographic characteristics correlated with experiences of violence/abuse, few consistent conclusions have been reported. One trait has surfaced repeatedly in the literature though: age. Younger workers are more likely to face violence/abuse than their older counterparts (Schat, Frone, and Kelloway 2006; Samnani and Singh 2012; Piquero et al. 2013). Studies of government employees in particular indicate that younger workers are more likely to experience violence/abuse (Schat, Frone, and Kelloway 2006). The other consistent correlate is gender. It is to those findings that we turn now.

Gender and workforce violence and abuse

In the US, a host of studies show that women in the workforce face more of some types of violence and abuse than men, including psychological harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (Berdahl 2007; McDonald 2012; Holland and Cortina 2013, 2016; Kabat-Farr and Cortina 2014; Quick and McFadyen 2017). For example, 41 percent of women report having encountered workplace harassment in their lifetimes (Das 2009). A December 6, 2017 Quinnipiac poll reported that, among adults, 32 percent of respondents were assaulted (17 percent men and 47 percent women), and among those, 37 percent reported that the assault happened at work (Quinnipiac University Poll, 2017).³

To focus more specifically on government employees, a study of local government workers from the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) reports that, in 2014, 60 percent of female managers had been subjected to inappropriate or

disrespectful comments from a commissioner or council members (ICMA 2014a). Nearly one-third reported being excluded from a professional event or organization based on gender (ICMA 2014b).

Only in comparative politics literature is there evidence of violence/abuse experienced by elective officeholders. The 2016 report from the IPU found that, among female parliamentarians from 39 countries, 82 percent experienced psychological abuse, 22 percent had experienced sexual violence, and 26 percent had experienced physical violence. Much of the harassment was perpetrated via social media (see also Dhrodia 2018 on this point). Minority women, young women, and women who belonged to opposition parties were particular targets.

Since that first report, the IPU released another study revealing that sexism, abuse, and violence against female MPs is widespread across Europe – with 85 percent of female MPS suffering from what the study terms psychological abuse (IPU 2018). What neither of these studies did, though, was to compare women's experiences to those of men. And, because the US is not a current member of the IPU, no US officeholders were included in the studies. What both reports did make clear though is that, among the motives for perpetuating violence/abuse, are to: maintain traditional avenues for power, limit women's presence in politics, and control the issues on political agendas.

An explanation for gender differences: disruption of the status quo

Scholars of comparative politics offer frameworks for understanding that violence/abuse faced by political women emanate from perceptions that they disrupt traditional political structures, norms, and practices (IPU 2016, 2018; Krook and Sanin 2016; National Democratic Institute 2016; Krook 2017; Ballington 2018; Biroli 2018; Bjarnegård 2018; Kuperberg 2018). Such violence/abuse may be classified based on the motives, types, patterns, and effects. One motive concerns women's presence in politics: by shattering male preserves, violence/abuse against women is intended to preserve power.⁴ Another motive may be specific to individual women who pursue certain political agendas, especially agendas to further the status of women. Moreover, woman may experience each of these classifications in different ways from men as specific acts may take gendered forms, such as sexualized violence/abuse. Whether or not the violence/abuse is explicitly sexualized, though, female and male officeholders may experience the treatment differently, and the effects of those experiences may affect their political careers in different ways.

In the US, there is considerable evidence that female officeholders have been and still are subject to tactics aimed at marginalizing them and decreasing their effectiveness – that is, tactics motivated by their presence. Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) explain that gender power operates within institutions, and political institutions have been constructed to suit their founders. As such, men are generally advantaged in political processes, policy, and informal norms of behavior; as disrupters of the status quo, women are disadvantaged. Further, when organizations are disrupted, efforts are made to increase conformity – in this case, to restore masculine norms of behavior (Acker 1992). In addition to supplanting men in office, a spur to violence/abuse against female officeholders may be their policy differences from men. Women who hold elective office in the US, including mayors, have distinctive policy priorities (for mayors, see Mezey 1978; Beck 1991; Crow 1997; Boles 2001; Tolleson-Rinehart 2001; Weikart et al. 2008; Holman 2014, 2015).

Effects of violence on political ambition

Following the 2016 IPU study, in this research, we analyze a variable that is among the most relevant to political representation: political ambition. Our concentration is political ambition of the static variety. This area of research rests on the calculations of when or whether the structural, political atmospheric, and personal costs of running for or continuing to hold office exceed the personal, political, or policy benefits (Schlesinger 1966; Rohde 1979; Fowler and McClure 1989; Kazee 1994; Maisel and Stone 1997; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Gaddie 2003).

Being a victim of violence or abuse is a big cost. Thus, mayors who have had these experiences may be less willing to continue their political careers. For example, in 2018, Vermont State Representative Kiah Morris halted her re-election bid because of threats made via social media and in person. The threats were serious enough that the Vermont Attorney General opened an investigation into the incidents (Hirschfeld 2018). This may be particularly troubling for the quality of our future representation and its diversity (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Lawless and Fox 2015; Shames 2017). If, for example, female mayors experience more violence/abuse than men and, if those experiences depress their willingness to stay in office or move up the ladder, women may continue to be under-represented in office. The problem may be compounded if women of color, such as Representative Morris, bow out of elective politics. Finally, this type of treatment may convince those who might serve to avoid the cost altogether.

Although there is scant information about whether experiences of violence/abuse deter US officeholders from continuing in politics, two comparative studies are available. First, an Amnesty International survey of female MPs found that a considerable proportion of the MPs manifested anxiety or panic as well as feelings of powerlessness after such experiences (Dhrodia 2018). Second, the 2016 IPU report indicates that, despite experiences of violence and harassment, and considerable suffering because of it, the majority of female MPs did not report diminished political ambition. Instead, they noted that they accepted a higher cost to serve so that other goals may be achieved. Neither of these reports though included male MPs, so no gender differences in reactions is available.

Expectations and research design

Following the findings and conclusions of the multiples strands of social science literature discussed above, we develop three expectations for the results of our survey of mayors in the United States:

Expectation # 1: Mayors will experience levels of physical violence and psychological abuse at levels consistent with or greater than those reported in workplaces generally.

Expectation # 2: Female mayors will experience more physical violence and psychological abuse overall than male mayors.

Expectation # 3: Among mayors, although violent and abusive experiences are expected to affect a portion of mayors' desire to stay in office, the majority will report a continued willingness to serve.

Data collection: survey of mayors

Our data collection features a survey of mayors in cities of 30,000 and above. We chose mayors as the focus of our study for four reasons: there are sufficient numbers of male and female mayors to analyze results quantitatively⁵; mayors live full-time in their communities, which may make them more visible and accessible than other officials; as executives, mayors may be held more accountable than other city officials for actions of city government; local offices are often at the beginning of professional careers. Thus, if violence/abuse affects ambition, the effects on representation at higher levels of government may be detected early.

The survey is mixed mode with an internet version and a mail version.⁶ Using a modified Tailored Design Method (Dillman 2007), there were five contacts to the mayors: (1) a pre-notice letter by mail; (2) the survey mailing; (3) a mailed reminder/thank you; (4) an emailed replacement survey; and (5) a final email reminder. The survey, which was short to increase the likelihood that mayors would respond, was administered in May and June of 2017. It was sent to all 1360 mayors in cities over 30,000.⁷

The survey content pertaining to violence/abuse was adapted from the 2016 IPU *Issues Brief*, introduced above. For the sake of comparison across studies, we wanted to ensure that the questions we asked were as similar to the IPU survey as possible in the US context. Questions were formatted in three sections. Most questions were answerable by simple check marks or writing in a number. Respondents were also given opportunities to write comments. Section A concentrated on experiences during the most recent campaign and during service as mayor. The approximate number of times mayors experienced specific types of violence/abuse was also requested. Section B of the survey concentrated on the psychological and political costs of experiencing the negative behaviors. Section C collected demographic, political, and structural information. For more detail on the survey questions, see the [Appendix](#).

Dependent variables

We used three key dependent variables designed to measure experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse.⁸

Physical violence: mayors' experiences of: "minor" violence, such as being slapped, pushed, or subject to projectiles; significant violence, such as being shot, assaulted or otherwise injured; and violence against property.

Psychological abuse: mayors' exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact; seeing oneself in images of or experienced disrespectful comments in social media, traditional media or at a public meeting; threats of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act; or having someone in the mayoral family who received threats of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act.

Sexualized abuse/violence: indications that any of the negative experiences reported were sexual in nature.

To tap the effects of violence on mayors' political ambition, we used responses to this question: "Did any of the experience(s) encourage you to think about leaving public office or suspending your campaign?"

Independent variables

The key independent variable is gender. Three additional independent variables are included as proxies to detect whether gender differences in experiences of violence/abuse could be explained by threats to the status quo. The first is whether cities had strong mayors (those with veto and appointment powers). This choice was based on the reasoning that mayors with these powers may be seen as a bigger gender threat than weak mayors. Second, we used Elazar's measure of political culture to ascertain whether female mayors in traditionalistic political cultures were more likely to be perceived as threats than female mayors in other political cultures.⁹ Third, we included whether mayors were elected directly or by the city council – as mayors who are directly-elected may be seen as more powerful than their counterparts (see Alexander 2011).

We also used several control variables related to characteristics of mayors, characteristics of cities, and political variables that may be associated with experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse. Individual mayoral characteristics included: age, years in office, previous political experience, and mayors' ideology compared to their cities.¹⁰ City characteristics included percent of city residents with college degrees, violent crime rates in cities, city size (in thousands; logged), the aforementioned strong mayor systems, and racial make-up of the cities.¹¹ Political variables included popular or council election for mayor, strong/weak mayoral systems, and the aforementioned political culture of states in which the cities are located.¹²

Response rates and representativeness

Of the 1360 subjects, 283 responded, resulting in a response rate of 20.1 percent. Survey responses among politically elite populations in the US have been declining over time and our response rate is similar to other recent local-level surveys (Weikart et al. 2008; Holman 2014; Einstein and Glick 2017).¹³

To gauge the representativeness of our sample, we collected additional background information on all 1360 mayors including their gender, date of entry to office, city size, and the regional location of their cities.¹⁴ The results of analysis showed little difference between our survey respondents and the general population of mayors, with the exception of region and city size.¹⁵ We weighted our data to account for differences in city size.¹⁶

Most central to our analysis, 23.8 percent of respondents were female and 19 percent of non-respondents were female – with a p -value of .12. Details comparing respondents and non-respondents on the other variables may be requested from the authors.

Findings

Bivariate analysis of physical violence and psychological abuse among mayors

As shown in Table 1, over the course of their careers, 83.14 percent of mayors experienced some type of psychological abuse, and 13.13 percent faced some type of physical violence. More specifically, 48.08 percent of mayors experienced exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention or verbal contact; 14.83 percent faced threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction; 11.58 percent experienced violence against property; 2.92 percent faced minor violence, and .97 percent suffered significant physical violence, such as being injured by

Table 1. Level of exposure to psychological abuse and physical violence among US mayors.

Event	Male (%)	Female (%)	All (%)	N/p-Value
Harassment (exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact)	48.09	48.05	48.08	281/.996
Social media (images or disrespectful comments)	70.41	76.04	71.72	281/.38
Traditional media (images or disrespectful comments)	34.06	31.89	33.56	280/.76
Public meeting (images or disrespectful comments)	41.55	47.20	42.87	280/.43
Threats (death, rape, beating, abduction, or similar act)	14.34	16.41	14.83	280/.70
Threats to family member (death, rape, beating, abduction, or similar act)	3.93	1.47	3.36	280/.33
Violence against property	9.41	18.77	11.58	280/.04
"minor" violence (such as having something thrown at you)	2.02	5.88	2.92	280/.10
Significant violence (such as being shot at or experienced assaults that resulted in injury)	.84	1.42	.97	280/.67
Any psychological abuse	80.92	90.33	83.14	281/.07
Any physical violence	10.16	22.73	13.13	281/.01

being shot, or assaulted.¹⁷ The most cited conveyers of violence/abuse were social media: 71.72 percent of mayors reporting such episodes. This finding comports with finding from Dhrodia (2018) and IPU (2016).

Bivariate gender differences

Table 1 also shows that, overall, women experience more violence/abuse than men. In specific, female mayors were more likely than men to experience each type of violence/abuse except general harassment, disrespectful content in traditional media, and threats to family. Approximately, three-quarters of female mayors and two-thirds of male mayors encountered disrespectful content in social media; 47.20 percent of women encountered disrespectful content in public meetings compared to 41.55 percent for men; 16.41 percent of women and 14.34 percent of men faced threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction; and 18.77 percent of women experienced violence against property compared to 9.41 percent of men. Additionally, 5.88 percent of females faced minor physical violence compared to 2.02 percent of men. Summarizing these categories, 22.73 percent of women experienced any physical violence compared to 10.16 percent of men, and 90.33 percent of women experienced any physical violence compared to 80.92 percent of men.

Although not shown in Table 1, the number of mayors subjected to violence/abuse of a sexualized nature was relatively small. Of these, approximately 21 percent of female mayors and 2.54 of male mayors reported sexualized violence or abuse (p -value = .000). And, women's experiences appeared to be of a more disturbing nature. Although, in the open-ended portion of the survey, few described these episodes, one man reported accusations of an affair, and another noted that a sex offender gave him a vile picture. Of the women who commented on these types of experiences, one reported that she had been stalked; one was called a whore; and a third had a blogger make sexual comments about her.

Overall, the results are clear: mayors face a broad range of violence and abuse. They also encounter these episodes at levels above those reported for the general workforce or governmental workforces in the US. Additionally, female mayors report greater levels of violence/abuse than men. Thus far, our findings are consistent with Expectations # 1 and #2.

Multivariate models of physical violence and psychological abuse among mayors

The next stage of analysis features the results of a multivariate model exploring the relationships among individual mayoral characteristics, city characteristics, political factors, and violence/abuse. To analyze the data, we used logistic regression.

Overall, what is striking about our results, shown in Table 2, is that experiences of violence/abuse are widespread. City population, racial composition of cities, political culture, whether mayor perceived her/himself as more conservative than the city, and mayors' previous political experience were not statistically significantly associated with experience of violence/abuse across dependent variables.

For physical violence, among the variables that were statistically significant were: years as mayor – experienced mayors were more likely to experience violence; elected mayors – with elected mayors experiencing less violence than those appointed by city councils; education levels – mayors in cities with lower levels of education faced more violence; and violence levels of cities – mayors in cities with higher violent crime rates were less likely to have suffered physical violence.

With regard to psychological abuse, the variables that were statistically significant included: whether the city had a strong mayoral system – with mayors in the “strong” systems facing more abuse; the age of the mayor – with younger mayors

Table 2. Multivariate analysis of physical violence and psychological abuse against mayors.

	Any psychological abuse		Any physical violence	
	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE
Gender (female)	2.12	.96*	3.29	1.36***
Conservative mayor	1.02	.61	1.08	.71
Liberal mayor	.48	.21*	.75	.45
Strong mayor	2.26	1.09*	.92	.45
Years as mayor	1.01	.03	1.07	.03**
City population	1.84	.74	.98	.30
Elected mayor	1.46	.71	.29	.16**
Age	.95	.02***	.98	.02
Previous political experience	1.14	.48	.53	.23
Moralistic	1.03	.57	.80	.41
Traditionalistic	.64	.35	1.38	.79
Education	1.01	.01	.97	.01**
Percent white	1.00	.01	.99	.01
Violence in city	.93	.19	.63	.15*
Constant	4.20	10.91	2.86	6.64
Chi-square	34.14**	28.91**		
Log likelihood	−115.06	−98.36		
Pseudo R^2	.12	.12		
Sample size	273	273		

Notes: *Physical violence and psychological abuse*: 1 if mayors faced violence or abuse; *Gender*: 1 for female, and 0 for male; *Conservative mayor*: 1 if mayor was more conservative than city; 0 if not; *Liberal mayor*: 1 if mayor was more liberal than city; 0 if not; *Strong mayor*: 1 if the mayor had veto and appointment powers; 0 otherwise; *Years as mayor*: number of years mayor had been in office; *City population*: logged number of residents in the city; *Elected mayor*: 1 if the mayor was elected by a vote of the people; 0 if not; *Age*: age of mayor at time of survey in years, mean substitution used for missing cases; *Previous political experience*: 1 if yes, 0 if no; *Moralistic political culture* was coded 1 if the mayor served in a state that Elazar categorized as moralistic; *Traditionalistic political culture* was coded 1 if the mayor served in a traditionalistic state; 0 otherwise; *Education*: percent of residents in 2016 with college degrees by age 25. From: censusreporter.org; *Percent White*: percent of non-Hispanic whites in 2016. From: censusreporter.org; *Violence in city*: logged number of violent crimes per 1000 residents. From FBI violent crime reports (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/violent-crime>). Means substitution was used for missing cases.

* $p \leq .10$, ** $p \leq .05$, *** $p \leq .01$. Two tailed tests.

being subject to more abuse; and whether the mayor considered her/himself more liberal than the city. The age finding is consistent with the 2016 IPU study, and the 2006 Schat et al. research.

Hence, the correlates differed for experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse – except that of gender – the variable to which we now turn.

Gender differences

Consistent with Expectation #2, female mayors were more likely than male mayors to have encountered physical violence and psychological abuse. The relationship between gender and physical violence was statistically significant – with a p -value of .004 and an odds ratio of 3.29. Further, the relationship between gender and psychological abuse was significant at the .10 level with an odds ratio of 2.12.

The effects of women's presence and priorities – or disruption to the status quo

To analyze further the gender differences in experiences of violence/abuse uncovered by our multivariate model, we delved into three sets of interactions: interactions of strong mayoral systems (veto and appointment powers) and gender; the interactions of political culture and gender; and the interactions of direct mayoral election and gender. The logic was that since strong mayors and directly-elected mayors may be perceived as more powerful than their opposites, females in those situations may be more threatening to the status quo. Similarly, people in cities in traditionalistic political cultures may be more doubtful of female mayors than other political cultures.

Analyzing the interactive relationships results in only a small number of cases in some cells, so we report bivariate findings only. The first notable finding is that all female strong mayors experienced psychological abuse compared to 87.31 percent of female weak mayors. The pattern is different though for physical violence. 11.9 percent of female strong mayors and 26.11 percent of female weak mayors faced physical violence, reversing the expected pattern.^{18, 19}

Comparing directly-elected and council-elected mayors reveals that 91.16 percent of directly-elected female mayors faced psychological abuse compared to 87.57 percent of council-elected female mayors. Yet, 19.42 percent of directly-elected female mayors experienced physical violence compared to 33.69 percent of council-elected female mayors.²⁰ This finding for physical violence is consistent with the multivariate finding pertaining to all mayors.

The findings pertaining to the relationships among gender, political culture, and experiences of violence/abuse reveal that all female mayors in traditionalistic cultures faced psychological abuse compared to 88.58 percent of women in other cultures. For physical violence, 27.08 percent of women in traditionalistic cultures reported these types of encounters compared to 21.95 percent of women in non-traditionalistic cultures.^{21, 22, 23} These patterns are in the direction we expected.

In sum, we found evidence that strong female mayors, directly-elected female mayors, and female mayors in traditionalistic political cultures, were more likely than men to experience psychological abuse. For physical violence, the expected pattern pertains only to women in traditionalistic political cultures. Together, these results suggest that

the women's presence in politics as disrupters of the status quo is complex and nuanced. Much more work is needed to fully understand these dynamics.

Effects of violence and abuse on political ambition

To ascertain the associations between violence/abuse and political ambitions, we used the survey question about mayors' considerations of how such encounters affected desires to leave office.

The results (not shown) indicate that, of the mayors who reported at least one act of violence/abuse, 5.31 percent said these experiences encouraged them to think about leaving office. An additional 10.30 percent said violent/abusive encounters were likely to have caused them to think about leaving. In sum, 15.61 percent of mayors who experienced violence/abuse considered leaving office as a result.

In contrast, 16.64 percent of mayors who had experienced violence/abuse reported that the experiences generally did not result in thoughts of leaving, and 62.82 percent responded that the experiences definitely did not result in such thought.²⁴ That adds to 79.46 percent who were not deterred. Additionally, despite their generally greater exposure to violence/abuse, women's political ambition was not affected more than men's ambition.²⁵ This finding comports with the results of the 2016 IPU study of Member of Parliament from 39 countries. And, the results are consistent with Expectation #3.

Beyond the relationships between violence/abuse and political ambition generally, we examined the relationships between experiences of physical violence and psychological abuse separately. Although the same general patterns pertain, there are meaningful insights into types of encounters that resulted in mayors' considerations of leaving office.

First, those who suffered physical violence were more likely to have thought about leaving office (45.44 percent) than those who faced psychological abuse (16.20 percent).²⁶ Additionally, examination of the relationships between types of psychological abuse and considerations of leaving office suggests that those who experienced any of the categories of abuse were more likely than those who experienced none to have thought about leaving office. There were also differences among types of abuse: those who were threatened were more likely to have considered leaving than those who faced other types of psychological abuse. Among those who were threatened, 13.51 percent of mayors thought about leaving office and 26.97 percent reported that the threats likely led them to consider leaving office (for a total of 40.48 percent). A useful comparison comes from those mayors who were harassed. Six-point nine percent said they considered leaving as a result; 15.68 percent were likely to have considered leaving (for a total of 22.58).²⁷

Thus, overall, Expectation# 3 was supported by the data. Further, there were no meaningful gender differences in the effects of violence/abuse on ambition. Finally, our study provides insights into the experiences that were most likely to be associated with mayors' considerations about their political futures. Having faced physical violence was a larger influence on the thinking of mayors than having faced psychological abuse. And, among those who encountered psychological abuse, having been threatened made mayors more likely to consider leaving office than other sorts of abuse.

Discussion and conclusion

Mayors in the United States face meaningful levels and types of physical violence and psychological abuse – and at rates above those reported for the general workforce. Further, these encounters are widespread phenomena across cities. These encounters are not limited to certain types of places.

It is also clear from our data that female mayors were more likely than men to experience most types of physical violence and psychological abuse, including violence/abuse of a sexualized nature. In fact, gender was the only independent variable in our multivariate model that was associated with both violence and abuse. Our interactive analyses also suggest that having women executives disrupts the political and cultural status quo, although our data are suggestive only of this interpretation. Because of the small number in cases across categories of violence/abuse, strong/weak mayors, political culture, directly-elected mayors and gender, only bivariate analyses are possible with our data. Clearly, additional research is needed to confirm or falsify this preliminary finding.

With respect to the effects of experiences of violence/abuse on political ambition for staying in office, having experienced violence/abuse generally did not reduce most officeholders' commitments to their job, although, those who had experienced physical violence were more likely to have considered curtailing political careers than those who experienced psychological abuse. In other words, calculations of the costs of political careers appear to rise with exposure to physical violence. Should levels increase, there may be effects on future levels of political ambition among existing officeholders.

Although our study cannot speak to whether learning about violent/abusive experiences diminishes the number of people who might consider future runs for office, the possibility raises serious questions about the quality of future representation. It also raises questions about gender diversity in office. Coupled with related research that suggests that female mayors are less likely than male mayors to seek higher office (Einstein et al. 2018), and that women are more affected than men by the high costs of running for and service in elective office (Lawless 2012; Shames 2017), women may become even more under-represented in the future.

Diversity in representation in mayoral office matters: extant research shows that: women mayors are more likely than men to identify women's issues as germane to the business of local government (Mezey 1978; Beck 1991; Crow 1997; Boles 2001; Tolle-son-Rinehart 2001; Weikart et al. 2008; Holman 2014); women mayors are more willing than men to change budget processes, be more inclusive, and seek broader participation (Weikart et al. 2008); and increased comment by the public on city actions is evident in cities with women mayors (Holman 2014).

In addition to presenting our findings, it is important to note limitations of this work that caution us against over-interpreting the data. First, we have just begun the study of violence/abuse directed toward public officeholders. We have surveyed US mayors only and have no information on governors, state legislators, city council members, or members of the US Congress. Second, our survey had a respectable response rate, but not one that would yield definitive conclusions. Third, our sample size was not large enough to uncover differences in experiences of violence/abuse among groups of women rather than between women and men only. This is a particular concern as the IPU *Issues Brief* (2016) reported that minority women were especially likely to encounter

violence. Fourth, even though we specifically told mayors we were interested in their responses *whether or not* they had experienced problems, it is possible that only or mostly mayors who experienced violent actions responded. Conversely, it is possible that individuals who experienced violence did not want to bring up bad memories and, thus, did not respond. Fifth, our results cannot speak to the issue of survival bias. That is, the results pertaining to political ambition may be affected by those who left their mayoral position prior to the survey. And, if some groups within the mayoral population left at a disproportional rate, such as women, that would affect the contours of the analysis. Sixth, we have no longitudinal data, so we cannot say how many, if any, of these findings are new or part of a temporal pattern. In sum, there is a great deal of work that must be done to illuminate this important subject.

Notes

1. The definition of psychological violence in the IPU study was hostile behaviors or acts that caused psychological harm, suffering, or fear; sexual violence was defined as remarks, gestures and images of a sexist or humiliating sexual nature; and physical violence was defined as being slapped, pushed, struck, or targeted by a projectile, threatened or attacked with firearms, knives, or other weapons.
2. This figure excludes law enforcement and security employees.
3. The definition of assault used in the poll is that “someone touched you in an inappropriate, sexual manner without your consent.”
4. See also: research on the Status Incongruity Hypothesis, which examines attitudes and behaviors resulting from reactions against women who disrupt the gendered status quo (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010; Rudman et al. 2012; Brescoll et al. 2018).
5. At the time of this survey, approximately 21 percent of mayors in cities over 30,000 were female (CAWP 2017).
6. A concern with mixed mode surveys is that mode affects responses (Dillman 2007). However, much of the research on this phenomenon has focused on differences between surveys with interviewers and self-administered surveys. With our design, both modes were self-administered. Fisher and Herrick (2013) report that, administered in this way, surveys of politicians produce high quality, reliable, and representative results.
7. The names and email addresses were collected from the US Conference of Mayors website in early 2017. Then, we went to each city’s webpage to find mailing addresses. These efforts resulted in contact information for all the mayors. Our list included individuals with similar roles but different titles than mayor, such as president, and supervisor.
8. We also tried to develop a measure to tap frequency of violence. The survey asked respondents to indicate how often they experienced each type of violence/abuse. However, the responses were not easily comparable. Some gave ranges of numbers, some used a phrase, such as: “often.”
9. The three main political cultures are moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. In the moralistic culture, government is seen as a means to better society and promote the general welfare. In the individualistic culture, government is perceived as a mechanism for addressing issues that matter to individual citizens and for pursuing individual goals. In the traditionalistic culture, government is seen as necessary to maintain the existing social order; the status quo (Elazar 1966). Although Elazar’s typology has been criticized for being too impressionistic, ignoring racial minorities, and being unchangeable (see Hero 2000), we use it here as it is the most well-known and most-used treatment of political culture in the US.
10. These variables come for the survey. The questions were: “Did you hold an elective position in government prior to becoming mayor?”; “When did you first become mayor?”; “How

would you describe your city's politics?"; "Most voters are more conservative than I am."; "Most voters are more liberal than I am."; " In what year were you born?"

11. The data on violent crimes came from FBI reports (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/violent-crime>). The other city-level data came from censusreporter.org.
12. Race of mayors was not used as a variable as the cell sizes were very small for all categories except white: respondents were as follows: 90.2 percent were white; 3.2 percent were black; 2.1 percent were Asian; 0.7 percent were American Indian; and 5 percent were Hispanic.
13. Among the few other surveys of mayors or other municipal officials, there have been some higher response rates, although the data from them were gathered quite a bit earlier than ours or the Einstein and Glick survey (see, for example, Holman et al., 2014 with data from cities with populations of 5000 residents and above and that appear to be from 2007, and Weikart et al. 2008 with data that appear to be from 2001). Although not academic, the 2018 Bloomberg American Cities Initiative Mayors Survey explored the same population as we did and within the same general time period, although our response rate was higher. See: <https://www.bbhub.io/dotorg/sites/2/2018/04/American-Mayors-Survey.pdf>.
14. Since none of the respondents presided over cities of more than 601,000, we redefined our population to mayors of cities with populations of 601,000 and fewer.
15. The average-sized city with a mayor who responded to the survey had a population of 69.76 compared to 82.08 for non-respondents (p -value = .015). The medians were 48.80 and 55.30, respectively. For region, .06 of respondents were from the northeast compared to .16 of non-respondents (p -value = .000); .37 of respondents were from the Midwest compared to .28 of non-respondents (p -value = .002); .25 of respondents were from the south compared to .27 of non-respondents (p -value of .46); and .32 of respondents were from the west compared to .29 of non-respondents (p -value = .39).
16. This was done using proportional weights based on city populations in 1000 s.
17. There were 36 cases in which a mayor experienced both physical violence and psychological abuse; 187 in which a mayor experienced psychological abuse only; and two cases in which a mayor experienced physical violence only. Fifteen mayors experienced violence/abuse that was sexual in nature.
18. Comparing female strong mayors to female weak mayors yielded a p -value of .13 ($n = 67$). Note, however that sample sizes among the two groups vary, so p values are less reliable than in analysis of other relationships.
19. It is also true that in each category, women experienced more violence/abuse than men.
20. The p -value for the difference between female directly-elected mayors who encountered physical violence and female mayors elected by councils was $p = .24$. The comparable statistic for psychological violence was $p = .25$. Note, however that sample sizes among these groups vary so p values are less reliable than analyses of other relationships.
21. Women experienced more than men in each of these categories.
22. For psychological abuse, the p -value for the difference between women in traditionalistic and non-traditionalistic cultures was .25 ($n = 67$). Note, however that sample sizes among these groups vary so p values are less reliable than analyses of other relationships.
23. For physical violence, the p -value for the difference between women in traditionalistic and non-traditionalistic cultures was .75 ($n = 67$). Note, however that sample sizes among these groups vary so p values are less reliable than analyses of other relationships.
24. This does not equal 100 percent because some mayors were undecided (3.8 percent women and 5.5 percent men).
25. The percentages by gender were: 9.4 percent, 9.4 percent, 13.2 percent, and 64.1 percent for females. This adds to 18.8 percent of female mayors who considered leaving compared to 77 percent who did not. For men, the figures are: and 3.7 percent, 11.7, 18.5 percent, and 60.5 percent. This adds to 15.4 percent who did consider leaving and 79 percent who did not. The p -value for gender differences. was .33
26. Each of these relationships was statistically significant.
27. Again, each of these relationships were statistically significant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix. The Survey

Section A of the survey concentrated on experiences of harassment and violence during each mayor's most recent campaign and as mayor as well as the approximate number of times the mayor experienced specific types of harassment/violence. These included:

- Harassment (exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact)
- Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you in social media
- Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you in the traditional media
- Saw images of yourself or experienced disrespectful comments about you at a public meeting
- Received threat(s) of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act
- Someone in your family received threat(s) of death, rape, beating, abduction or similar act
- Experienced violence against your property
- Experienced "minor" violence against yourself, such as having something thrown at you
- Experienced significant violence against yourself, such as being shot at, or experienced assaults that resulted in injury.

Section B concentrated on the psychological and political costs of experiencing any of the array of negative behaviors and provided check boxes for responses.

- Did any of the above experience(s) encourage you to think about leaving public office or suspending your campaign?
- Following any of the above experiences, did you have intrusive memories of the event, nightmares, or did you avoid reminders of the event?
- Following any of the above experiences, did you experience increased levels of irritability, sleep disturbances, problems with concentration, or an exaggerated startle response?
- Were any of the negative experiences mentioned above sexual in nature?

Section C collected demographic, political, and structural information including:

- Year when first became mayor
- Whether the mayors held elective political office prior to being mayor and which office(s)
- Type of mayoral selection (popular vote/nonpartisan; popular vote/partisan; selected by council; other)
- Description of city politics (evenly divided in partisanship; politicians work well together even across parties; voters are more conservative or liberal than the mayors; the city does/does not have a strong mayor)
- What mayor expected to be doing in the next 5 years (same or similar office, higher office, lesser office, work for a party or other political organization, no political office)
- If mayors had to do it all over again, would they still want to serve as mayor (definitely yes, most likely yes, don't know, most likely no, definitely no)
- Party Identification
- Ideology
- Gender
- Year of Birth
- Race/Ethnicity