

Written Contribution Safety in Political Life

Submitted by Stichting Stem op een Vrouw [Vote for a Woman Foundation]

<https://stemopeenvrouw.com/>

Introduction

Stichting Stem op een Vrouw is a Dutch organization working to improve the representation and retention of women in politics. Our work combines research, advocacy, and practical tools to address structural barriers within political institutions.

Based on our research and fieldwork, safety in political life is not only a matter of protecting individuals, but a core condition for democratic participation. Experiences of harassment, intimidation, and violence - particularly online - shape who enters politics, who stays, and who leaves.

Main threats, risks and challenges

Evidence from the Netherlands shows that over half of politicians report having experienced aggression or intimidation. Although experiences are both online and offline, they are increasingly concentrated in digital environments. Women and other underrepresented groups are disproportionately targeted, often with gendered, sexualized, racist or identity-based abuse.

Importantly, exposure to violence discourages political ambition. Research such as our own 'Who Still Wants to Enter Politics?' (2025) shows that exposure to violence against women in politics discourages aspirants. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion. The research was published in the European Journal of Politics and Gender:

<https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/ejpg/aop/article-10.1332-25151088Y2025D000000105/article-10.1332-25151088Y2025D000000105.xml>



What to do: cross-party protocols on online safety

A key lesson from our ongoing work is that violence against politicians cannot be addressed by individual politicians alone. It requires collective, institutional and cross-party approaches. In March 2026, Stichting Stem op een Vrouw launched the cross-party protocol “Safe online visibility in politics”. This protocol was jointly developed and signed by multiple political parties and sector organisations, and is currently being implemented: <https://stemopeenvrouw.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Protocol-Safe-online-visibility-in-politics-1.pdf>

This initiative is particularly relevant as a best practice at European level, because it demonstrates how norms, support structures and responsibilities can be institutionalised across party lines. The protocol establishes a shared standard: online hate has no place in democracy.

Moreover, the protocol provides a comprehensive framework that goes beyond awareness and focuses on practical implementation within political parties: norm-setting, prevention and training, clear internal procedures, support for those affected, and collective responsibility and solidarity.

This approach highlights three key lessons for European policymaking:

1. Safety must be institutionalised, not individualised. Without formal structures, the burden remains on individual politicians to cope with harassment.
2. Cross-party cooperation is essential. Online hate is not a partisan issue. Joint norms increase legitimacy and effectiveness.
3. Focus on impact, not only incidents. Online hate leads to self-censorship, withdrawal from public debate, and decisions not to pursue political careers.



Recommendation: Monitoring

Currently there is no structural monitoring of online hate directed at politicians. Moreover, research on online hate often focuses on the recipient, but not on the sender.

Our proposed points for improvement:

1. Stimulate EU member states to monitor online hate against politicians structurally, and
2. Invest in research on the origins of hate: where does it come from? Who is doing it, and why? What forces lie underneath? And what is the role of big tech platforms like Meta and X in this?

Conclusion

Ensuring safety in political life is essential for democratic resilience. Without targeted action, intimidation and harassment risk narrowing the pool of candidates and reinforcing inequalities. Policies should focus on enabling inclusive political participation across the full political lifecycle¹.

¹ See: Runderkamp 2025: <https://dare.uva.nl/id/271677f6-45c4-4eba-93bf-115de5481b7b>

