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Editor's Preface to the Fall Edition

Here at Elon University, we are extremely grateful to host *The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*. We are proud to present the Fall 2021 issue and congratulate all authors published in this issue for their high achievement.

This publication seeks to highlight the intellectual curiosity that leads to innovative scholarship in all subfields of political science, scholarship that addresses timely questions, is carefully crafted, and utilizes diverse methodologies. We are committed to intellectual integrity, a fair and objective review process, and a high standard of scholarship as we showcase the work of undergraduate scholars, some of whom pursue questions that have been traditionally ignored in scholarship but that drive our discipline forward.

Following the lead of the American Political Science Review (APSR) Editorial Board, we are excited to publish research in the areas of “American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, public law and policy, racial and ethnic politics, the politics of gender and sexuality and qualitative and quantitative research methods.” This publication also values the relationships formed through student-faculty collaboration and aims to build a culture of scholarship that expands beyond the college campus. We hope to encourage and empower students to seek out knowledge and pursue their potential, contributing to scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

This year, we thank our advisors Dr. Baris Kesgin and Dr. Aaron Sparks for their support, without which the issue would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the entirety of the Political Science and Policy Studies Department at Elon University, especially Dr. Laura Roselle; our Faculty Advisory Board; and all the students who shared their exceptional work with us this semester.

We are excited to present the Fall 2021 edition of the *Journal*. Thank you for your continued support and readership of our publication; we hope you enjoy the edition.

Sincerely,

The Editorial Board at Elon University

Submission of Manuscripts

The *Journal* accepts manuscripts from undergraduates of any class and major. Members of Pi Sigma Alpha are especially encouraged to submit their work. We strive to publish papers of the highest quality in all areas of political science.

Generally, selected manuscripts have been well-written works with a fully developed thesis and strong argumentation stemming from original analysis. Authors may be asked to revise their work before being accepted for publication.

Submission deadlines are October 1st for the Fall edition and February 15th for the Spring edition. Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis; therefore early submissions are strongly encouraged.

Students may submit their work through Elon University's submission portal, found here:
<https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/arts-and-sciences/political-science/psa-journal/>

Alternatively, students may email psajournalelon@gmail.com with an attached Word document of the manuscript. In the body of the email, students are asked to include their name and university, the title of the manuscript, and the closest subfield of political science to which their manuscript pertains (American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, or policy studies). Due to the time committed to the manuscript review process, we ask students to submit only one manuscript at a time.

Submitted manuscripts must include a short abstract (approximately 150 words) and citations/references that follow the *APSA Style Manual for Political Science*. Please do not exceed the maximum page length of 35 double-spaced pages, which includes references, tables, figures, and appendices.

The *Journal* is a student-run enterprise with editors and an Editorial Board that are undergraduate students and Pi Sigma Alpha members at Elon University. The Editorial Board relies heavily on the help of our Faculty Advisory Board, which consists of political science faculty from across the nation, including members of the Pi Sigma Alpha Executive Council.

Please direct any questions about submissions or the Journal's upcoming editions to the editors at Elon University: psajournalelon@gmail.com.

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Virtual Realities: Intersectional and Online Violence Against Women in the 117th Congress

Cecilia Ritacco, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Scholars of violence against women in politics (VAWIP) posit that gendered political violence is an underexplored phenomenon that harms representation. Existing literature acknowledges that traits including race, ethnicity, age, and ideology may interact with gender to exacerbate abuse, but I argue that few have adequately incorporated an intersectional lens. I examine the extent to which representatives' gender identities, intersectional identities, and ideological leanings interact to elicit abuse. Employing unique Twitter data and utilizing a VAWIP framework, I hand code approximately 10,000 tweets sent to pairs of similarly situated men and women in the Congressional Progressive Caucus over a week-long period. Though abusive tweets are rare, the data confirm that the experience of online abuse is shaped by gender as well as other identities. This work offers quantitative insight into the magnitude of abusive tweets that representatives receive and qualitative insight into the ways in which identities shape abusive content.

INTRODUCTION

In July of 2020, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez took to the floor of the House of Representatives to address an incident that occurred on the steps of the United States Capitol building wherein Representative Ted Yoho confronted Ocasio-Cortez and called her “disgusting,” “crazy,” “out of (her) mind,” and a “f***ing b****.” In a speech given before colleagues and broadcast widely after the incident, Ocasio-Cortez (2020) said:

This is not new . . . It is cultural. It is a culture of lack of impunity, of accepting of violence and violent language against women, and an entire structure of power that supports that . . . What we are seeing is that incidents like these are happening in a pattern. This is a pattern of an attitude toward women and dehumanization of others.

Ocasio-Cortez was not alone in her condemnation of such treatment. She was joined by a host of other women serving in Congress, including members of the “Squad” of progressive congresswomen as well as Representatives Pramila Jayapal, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Mikie Sherrill, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, all of whom shared similar experiences.¹

One does not need to look far to see that this incident was not isolated but rather reflected broader patterns of treatment toward women in politics. In 2020 alone, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan was targeted by extremists seeking to kidnap her in response to her COVID-19 policies;² District Judge Esther Salas was targeted by an “anti-feminist” lawyer who shot and killed Salas’ son;³ and congressional candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene released a campaign ad that depicted her holding a weapon alongside members of the Squad.⁴

Shortly after the altercation between Ocasio-Cortez and Yoho and in response to Greene’s campaign ad, Representative Rashida Tlaib led the introduction of a resolution that cited data collected by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the National Democratic Institute, and the United Nations and encouraged the government to act in response to such violence, particularly given women’s underrepresentation in politics.⁵ Resolutions are symbolic gestures and do not offer enforceable action items. But, Tlaib’s resolution speaks to the problem that numerous scholars and civil society organizations have identified and devoted increased attention to recently: violence against women in politics (VAWIP).

Politically active women have long faced treatment in public and private spaces that reflects “darker territory” than sexist or gendered comments alone (Krook 2020, 3). Yet, these experiences have largely been normalized. Recognizing that gender has been left to the margins of political violence scholarship, the small but growing collection of VAWIP literature seeks to label what scholars consider to be a “problem with no name” (Krook 2020). Central to the study of VAWIP is the role that gender plays in motivating violence and shaping manifestations of violence. A VAWIP approach expands our understanding of what constitutes “violence” in politics, where violence can occur, and who victims and perpetrators can be.

Centering the role that gender plays in shaping the quality and quantity of violent acts and broadening traditional definitions of violence is critical, particularly given women’s underrepresentation in democracies globally. But in doing so, scholars risk minimizing the ways in which other identities shape both violence and VAWIP. Scholars and civil society

organizations alike have begun to find evidence that identities ranging from race and ethnicity to age and political ideology can also motivate political violence.

Although these findings are vital to the study of VAWIP, an intersectional lens largely appears to be an afterthought in the study of VAWIP rather than something that is central to how scholars conceive of the phenomenon. Yet, in the anecdotes referenced previously, gender rarely appears to be the only factor at play. Indeed, in her speech, Ocasio-Cortez (2020) said:

Not only have I been spoken to disrespectfully, particularly by members of the Republican Party and elected officials in the Republican Party . . . but the President of the United States last year told me to go home to another country, with the implication that I don't even belong in America.

If factors like race and ethnicity as well as political ideology shape VAWIP, one might reexamine the incident between Ocasio-Cortez and Yoho and ask why Ocasio-Cortez received such abuse. Was it because she is a woman? Was it because she is a woman of color? Was it because she is a highly visible progressive politician?

This research addresses the absence of an intersectional lens in VAWIP scholarship by analyzing the extent to which elected representatives' gender identities interact with other salient identities, including race, ethnicity, and ideology, to elicit online abuse. Employing unique Twitter data and utilizing a VAWIP framework, I examine a week's worth of tweets sent to three pairs of similarly situated representatives serving in the Congressional Progressive Caucus and seek to isolate the effect of gender. I hope to offer quantitative insight into the magnitude of abusive tweets as well as qualitative insight into the ways in which tweets reference representatives' diverse identities.

I find that violence, VAWIP, and intersectional abuse are rare when the data are analyzed at both the tweet level and at the congressman level. However, differences within the pairs of similarly positioned representatives confirm that gender does shape the experience of online abuse. Indeed, it appears likely that VAWIP may be standing in for or replacing the violence that targets male politicians. This research also suggests that other characteristics, including race, ethnicity, ideology, and visibility, may shape the ways in which as well as the extent to which the public engages with representatives online.

This paper will first review existing VAWIP literature and in doing so will map the emergence of the phenomenon, the unique features that distinguish VAWIP from other phenomena, and the ways that scholars have empirically identified the concept. It will then explore what existing literature lacks: a strong emphasis on intersectionality. The concluding sections will discuss the research design, findings, and future directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining and Critiquing Political Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as the "intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (2002, 4). This definition privileges physical acts of violence; however, the WHO acknowledges that defining violence as purely physical is inadequate. Though violence may be physical, it can also include actions that inflict psychological harm on groups and individuals.

While the WHO's definition of violence might be applied to political spaces, scholars conceptualize political violence as a distinct phenomenon. Many agree that political violence consists of the "use of force—or threatened use of force—to achieve political ends" (Della Porta and Tarrow 1995; Krook and Sanín 2019). In influencing a political outcome, political violence can be detrimental to the quality of democracy and undermine trust in political processes (Schwarzmantel 2010).

Others focus on different dimensions of political violence. Höglund (2010), for example, considers political violence in the context of elections, finding that definitions of electoral violence must draw special attention to the timing, motive, and intent of any given violent actor. Other scholars focus on the types of figures who are on the receiving end of acts of political violence. James et al. (2016) examine the reality that politicians and their relatives disproportionately attract "inappropriate, intrusive, (and) aggressive attention" (2016, 177) by virtue of the fact that being an elected official renders one a public figure.

Political violence literature shares certain blind spots. By emphasizing the use of force (Della Porta and Tarrow 1995), existing literature suggests that political violence consists primarily of physical incidents. This formulates a hierarchy wherein physical abuse appears to be the only or most consequential form of political violence (Krook 2020). Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2019) suggest that by privileging physical acts of violence, this literature may privilege men's experiences because research indicates that physical acts of violence target men more frequently than women (2019, 918). Studies of political violence may also reflect biases in their data collection methods (Bjarnegård 2018).

Mapping, Labelling, and Defining Violence Against Women in Politics

Victims' identities and the ways in which incidents of abuse may reflect group hate or bias receive less attention in political violence studies. Given women's increasing presence in democracies as well as the proliferation of digital spaces that allow political figures to interact with the public, global campaigns have emerged to address those violent events that target politically active women.

Efforts to recognize gendered human rights violations increased in the 1980s and 1990s, initiating conversations that garnered the attention of a greater number of stakeholders. These campaigns were vital in making space for women in politics to share their experiences with abuse. Efforts that emerged across the Global South, and particularly those in Bolivia, Kenya, and South Asia, shared a commitment to recognizing and condemning forms of gender-based violence that may depress women's political engagement and representation (Krook 2020, 14; Sanín 2018, 21).

The Global North does not have as strong a tradition of addressing gendered political abuse. However, recent developments point to the fact that gendered political abuse is not unique to the Global South. In the Global North, particularly in the wake of the #MeToo movement, women in politics have raised their experiences to problematize power dynamics that have long been normalized. In the United States, nearly 150 women in California joined forces to address rampant sexual harassment toward elected and unelected women in state politics (Krook 2018, 68). Soon after, efforts to bring the #MeToo movement to national politics resulted in #MeTooCongress (Gillibrand 2017), and in 2018, Congress revised its policy on responding to incidents of sexual assault and harassment.⁶

This is not to suggest that abuse directed toward women in American politics was not widespread before #MeToo. Anderson (1999) explores patterns in the language and media coverage surrounding Hillary Rodham Clinton when she served as First Lady. Analyzing the use of the word "bitch," she finds evidence that this language was used such that "[Clinton's] substantive rhetoric was dismissed" and her authority was "[coded] . . . as primarily sexual" (Anderson 1999, 605–8). During her 2016 presidential campaign, Clinton similarly experienced violent verbal attacks in physical and virtual spaces.⁷ Clinton is by no means the only woman in American politics to experience such treatment, but she is a highly visible example.

The consistency with which politically active women have described their experiences with abuse prompted both scholars and civil society organizations to address the issue by labelling it. Between 2006 and 2012, several efforts and campaigns were spearheaded by organizations including the Interparliamentary Union (IPU), International IDEA, iKnow Politics, the United Nations, and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to address VAWIP and its potential to harm the quality of democracies globally (Krook 2019, 85–87).

Scholars have also characterized the origins, implications, and complexities of the concept. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2019) define VAWIP as a:

Distinct phenomenon, whereby the origins, means, and effects of violent acts specifically aim to exclude women from the political sphere, disrupting the political process as a means of reinforcing gendered hierarchies (2019, 742–43).

Krook (2020) expands upon this definition, specifying that "its defining feature, therefore, is not gender differentiation but gender motivation to exclude women *as women* from participating in political life" (2020, 65). Scholars have outlined five distinct categories of VAWIP, including physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and semiotic violence (Krook and Sanín 2019, 740).

According to Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2019), physical violence includes actions that bring about "bodily harm and injury" (2019, 743). Examples of physical VAWIP may include murder or attempted murder, mutilation, beating, arbitrary arrest, and torture (Krook 2020, 128–34). Gender must be central to physical abuse in such a way that it serves as a motivating factor. These incidents may be the most visible and least contested forms of VAWIP.

The second and most common form of VAWIP is psychological violence. A recent report by the IPU (2018) found that 85.2% of women surveyed experienced psychological and gendered forms of violence during their time in office (2018, 1). Psychological VAWIP "inflicts trauma on individuals' mental state or emotional well-being" (Krook and Sanín 2019, 744). Unlike physical violence, psychological violence can consist of threats of abuse rather than attacks themselves.

A third form of VAWIP is sexual violence, which includes "sexual acts and attempts at sexual acts by coercion" as well as "unwelcome sexual comments or advances" (Krook and Sanín 2019, 744). Krook (2020) includes rape, sexual assault, sextortion, rape insults, and sexual harassment in her analysis (2020, 155–61). Though sexual VAWIP may be the most obviously motivated by gender, challenges exist. A report from the United States Government Accountability Office (2020) finds that as few as six percent of victims of sexual assault and harassment working for the government may be reporting such incidents (2020, 1). Hesitancy to report such acts of abuse frequently stems from a fear of retaliation, which speaks to the implications of certain power dynamics within institutions.

Economic violence constitutes the fourth form of VAWIP. This includes "acts seeking to control women's access to, or behavior in, the political realm by systematically restricting access to economic resources which are otherwise available to men" (Krook and Sanín 2016, 141). Economic VAWIP may involve property damage, vandalism, or withholding resources (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 744). Few solutions have been proposed to address such violence because of its relative invisibility.

The fifth category is semiotic VAWIP, which involves the use of symbols, including "degrading images and sexist language" (Krook and Sanín 2019, 744) that demonstrate that gender is a motive. Krook (2020) further describes the intent behind semiotic manifestations of VAWIP, finding that most incidents involve attempts to render women invisible or incompetent by highlighting their "incongruity" with institutional norms (2020, 187). Studying semiotic VAWIP

speaks to the structural nature of the issue, given that such symbols and language are central to many institutions (Krook 2020, 190).

Despite this expansive definition of VAWIP, acts of abuse that fit into the framework remain invisible and underreported. This may be partly due to the fact that victims have internalized that violence is the cost of doing politics (Krook 2020, 5). Low rates of reporting VAWIP may also reflect victims' fears of retaliation by those in power or the fact that victims lack the language to label their experiences (United States Government Accountability Office 2020, 12).

Measuring Violence Against Women in Politics

VAWIP is a concept with numerous complexities, many of which may perpetuate its invisibility. However, proposed legal frameworks and data collection strategies suggest what paths forward may look like in terms of identifying the concept.

Some scholars recommend drawing from hate crimes legal frameworks to determine which acts of violence constitute VAWIP. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016) note that both hate crimes and acts of VAWIP act as “message crimes intended to deny equal access to rights and to create a ripple effect that heightens the sense of vulnerability among other members of the community” (2016, 137). Given these commonalities, Krook (2020) argues that it is critical to employ a “bias events” framework and proposes six criteria to determine whether incidents are VAWIP.

Insight can also be gained from understanding the methodologies that have been employed by other scholars and organizations. Studies of online abuse—including Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah's (2020), Southern and Harmer's (2019), and Rheault's (2019)—often employ web-scraping or machine-learning techniques that allow researchers to collect content sent to representatives in a sample, gauge incivility or abuse, and identify whether identity shapes the quantity or substance of abuse. Other methods of documenting VAWIP include conducting interviews, distributing surveys, and collecting testimonies. For example, the IPU (2016, 2018) interviewed women members of Parliament (MPs) and applied a version of Krook's (2020) definition by asking elected women about their experiences with psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, and economic violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018, 4). Similarly, the NDI (2018) interviewed party leaders to gauge the extent to which parties shape gendered political violence (2018, 45). This is not an exhaustive list of alternative methods by which to identify VAWIP, but it offers insight into practical options that have been effectively employed.

The Case for a Violence Against Women in Politics Approach

A VAWIP framework enables scholars, practitioners, and activists to not only broaden their views of what violence consists of but also to broaden their views of where violence

can occur. For example, several recent studies highlight acts of VAWIP occurring online (Atalanta 2018; Di Meco 2019; Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020; Judson et al. 2020; National Democratic Institute 2019; Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019). Though online interactions may not fit with traditional definitions of violence or political violence, the VAWIP framework emphasizes that other forms of abuse deserve to be addressed as much as physical acts of violence.

A VAWIP framework is also well-suited to expand our understanding of those figures who are considered victims and perpetrators. The word “politics” is intentionally broad, leaving open the possibility that the concept may describe the experiences of women in elective office, women political staffers, women who work in unpaid political positions, women working in political advocacy or activism, and women in other professions related to politics and government, such as political journalism (Krook 2020, 117).

Finally, by invoking the notion of a spectrum of violence, the VAWIP framework highlights the structural roots of gendered abuse in politics (Krook 2020, 119). Indeed, the VAWIP framework recognizes the role that symbols have played in reinforcing misogynist themes, thus demonstrating how and why certain acts of violence have remained invisible. Without a label like VAWIP, public-facing and academic studies alike risk downplaying the pervasiveness of VAWIP and placing the burden on individuals to prove that their experiences with abuse were motivated by their identities and had a cost on their engagement.

Intersectional Critiques of a Violence Against Women in Politics Approach

Intersectional theory is rooted in the recognition that considering salient identities like race and gender separately further decenters those individuals who experience multiple levels of marginalization. Early work utilized a “double jeopardy” analogy to highlight the oppression that Black women experience on the basis of both race and gender (Beale 1970). However, critics argue that in treating levels of oppression as being additive, such an approach obscures the ways in which “multiplicative relationships” exist between levels of oppression as well as the ways in which race and gender may also interact with other salient identities, such as class (King 1988, 47). The term “intersectionality” was formally coined by Crenshaw (1989), who not only considered the experiences of individuals who are multiply marginalized but examined how feminist theory and antidiscrimination law have rendered such individuals invisible (1989, 139). By implying that identities are monolithic and share certain experiences, academic work may further decenter diverse individuals while “maintaining social inequalities” (Collins 2000), hence the importance of incorporating intersectional theory in political science (Junn and Brown 2008).

Kuperberg (2018) offers one of the first and only explicit applications of an intersectional lens to the study of

VAWIP, arguing that although intersectionality has remained “peripheral” to this work, the interaction of identities like race, ethnicity, and gender may heighten political violence (2018, 687). This claim has been corroborated by numerous studies. Dhrodia’s (2017) study of MPs finds disproportionately high levels of abuse targeting women of color. Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah (2020) present similar evidence in their study of 2020 congressional candidates, finding that women of “ethnic minority backgrounds” experience the most online abuse (2020, 3).

Scholars studying VAWIP suggest that this work could benefit from an emphasis on the interaction of other identities as well. Krook (2017) references age as being one identity that may exacerbate the abuse that women in politics experience (2017, 83). This comment has been supported by data collected by the IPU (2016, 2018), which show that women below the age of 40 are the most likely to experience abuse. This trend led the NDI (2018) to develop a methodology that addresses whether such abuse “has a chilling impact on the political engagement of young women” (2018, 19).

Others argue that political ideology exacerbates the abuse targeting women in politics. Some suggest that demonstrating support for feminist causes can heighten the levels of abuse that women in politics receive (Biroli 2018, 683). A report from the UN notes that women who voice “minority, dissenting, or controversial views” are more likely to experience violence (Simonovic 2018, 5). Amnesty International (2018) similarly finds that “women working for left leaning parties . . . received slightly more problematic and abusive mentions.” Likewise, though Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah (2020) do not draw a causal link between ideology and abuse, they find that prominent progressive women politicians receive more abuse (2020, 3).

Kuperberg (2018) writes, “The field of VAWIP is so new, it seems unfair to discuss its ‘gaps’; rather, the study of VAWIP is defined by its uncharted territory” (2018, 685). The study of VAWIP does represent uncharted territory, and the framework serves as a powerful tool, but by failing to account for the ways that gender may be neither the only nor the most significant factor shaping political violence, it suggests that there is a shared experience among women-identifying political figures. Though the study of VAWIP is rooted in a critique of political violence research, it tends to amplify a narrative of cohesion that benefits the most privileged groups in academic and policy spaces.

METHODOLOGY

This study selects a sample of three pairs of similarly situated men and women serving in the Congressional Progressive Caucus in the 117th United States Congress, yielding a total of six members of Congress; employs a web scraping technique to gather tweets sent directly to these representatives over a one-week period; and hand codes a random sample of tweets to

analyze the presence or absence of abuse, as well as the types of abuse directed toward different members of Congress.

To select a sample for analysis and isolate the effect of gender, I draw on research by Herrick et al. (2019). Work by the IPU (2016, 2018), the NDI (2018), Dhrodia (2017), and Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah (2020) motivated my decision to prioritize representatives who hold left-leaning ideologies, belong to historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and lie on the younger end of the age spectrum. I analyze online violence and VAWIP both because Krook and Restrepo Sanín’s (2019) definition of VAWIP accounts for a wide variety of sites and manifestations of abuse, and because practitioners have found significant quantities of identity-driven abuse on platforms like Twitter (Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020; Southern and Harmer 2019). Finally, I modify Southern and Harmer’s (2019) coding scheme to analyze my data.

This study looks for evidence of violence, VAWIP, and intersectional violence and VAWIP in tweets sent to six representatives. To code for the presence or absence of nongendered but violent content, I utilize the WHO’s (2002) definition of violence, and to code for the presence or absence of content that demonstrates VAWIP, I adopt Krook and Restrepo Sanín’s (2019) definition. To operationalize intersectional violence or VAWIP, I adopt VAWIP scholars’ and practitioners’ broad definition of intersectionality, which accounts for numerous potentially salient social identities including race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, as well as political ideology (Biroli 2018; Krook 2017; Kuperberg 2018). If tweets reflected violence or VAWIP, as well as references to salient social identities or progressive political ideologies, they were deemed intersectional violence or intersectional VAWIP.

Consistent with previous studies, this research hypothesizes that the data will support the assertion that congresswomen experience gendered abuse on Twitter.

Hypothesis 1: *Congresswomen will experience online VAWIP in numbers comparable to if not greater than the online violence that their male counterparts experience.*

This research also expects that intersectional references will shape incidents of online VAWIP more so than incidents of online violence.

Hypothesis 2: *Intersectional references will coincide with online VAWIP more often than with nongendered online violence.*

The Sample

The pairs selected for this study include Representatives Andy Kim (D-NJ) and Angie Craig (D-MN); Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) and Yvette Clarke (D-NY); and Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Pramila Jayapal (D-WA). Given scholars’ findings that political ideologies—and particularly left-leaning ideologies—interact with gender and exacerbate the abuse that women

in politics experience (Amnesty International 2018; Biroli 2018), this research analyzes representatives belonging to the Congressional Progressive Caucus.⁸ Because the study of VAWIP has fallen short of properly incorporating an intersectional lens but scholars have found evidence that historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups tend to experience more violence and VAWIP than other groups, representatives who belong to racial and ethnic groups that have historically been underrepresented in the United States were prioritized during the case selection process (Dhrodia 2017; Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020). Finally, the sample consists of representatives who lie on the younger end of the age spectrum because scholars have also found evidence that age may interact with identities like gender, race, and ethnicity to shape and motivate abuse (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016, 2018; National Democratic Institute 2018).

Before settling on this sample, data pertaining to congressmembers' personal and district characteristics were collected for all caucus members, including data about gender identity, race and ethnicity,⁹ age, seniority, leadership positions,¹⁰ district competitiveness,¹¹ and district demographics.¹² Pairs were selected if congressmembers were alike in most of these categories but differed in their gender identities. The decision to isolate the effect of gender while controlling for district and personal qualities was inspired by Herrick et al.'s (2019) methodology.¹³

Kim and Craig are both below the age of 50 and have served in their current positions for two years. They serve in competitive congressional districts that receive R+2 scores from *The Cook Political Report*. They also represent a similar number of predominantly white constituents: Kim represents 735,981 total constituents and Craig represents 717,698. Kim is Asian American, while Craig is white. Craig also sits at a unique identity intersection as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Jeffries and Clarke are both Black representatives who are in their fifties and have represented their districts for eight years.¹⁴ They serve on New York's congressional delegation and represent uncompetitive districts that have earned D+36 and D+34 scores respectively. Jeffries and Clarke represent a similar number of predominantly Black constituents: 776,825 for Jeffries and 720,316 for Clarke. Jeffries holds a leadership role as chair of the House Democratic Caucus, but Clarke holds no comparable position.

Finally, Khanna and Jayapal are both Asian American representatives who are in their mid-forties and mid-fifties respectively and have been serving in Congress for four years. Khanna and Jayapal's districts receive D+25 and D+33 scores, indicating that both are uncompetitive. These districts are comparable in size, with Khanna representing 790,519 constituents and Jayapal representing 817,787. Although Khanna's district primarily consists of Asian constituents, Jayapal's is predominantly white. Neither Khanna nor Jayapal hold a party leadership position, but Jayapal is the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Data Collection

Given the magnitude of online abuse and gendered abuse that other scholars have found, this study examines the treatment of similarly positioned progressive congressmen and congresswomen on social media. Twitter was evaluated because of the availability of its data compared to other social media platforms (Bruns 2019). The TAGS tool for Google Sheets was utilized,¹⁵ which interacted with the Twitter API and automatically collected all tweets sent to the members of Congress in the sample. To complement the Twitter data with a qualitative archive of topical events and noteworthy news items that might offer additional context and explain certain findings, Google Alerts¹⁶ were set up for each of the congressmembers in the sample.¹⁷

TAGS used search terms denoting representatives' personal Twitter handles to generate an archive of Twitter data for each representative in the sample.¹⁸ Though members of Congress typically have two verified Twitter accounts—one for their official duties and one for personal use—this study engaged with verified personal accounts wherever possible because abusive content directed toward government accounts could be monitored or removed.¹⁹

The Twitter API limits retrievable content to tweets from the past six to nine days. As such, one week's worth of tweets was examined. The data collection took place between March 16 and March 26, 2021.²⁰ During this period, the House of Representatives was in session from March 16 until March 19, 2021, and again from March 22 until March 25, 2021. Initially, 75,822 tweets were collected. Because TAGS retrieved all tweets mentioning representatives in the sample, the initial archives included retweets and duplicate tweets. These data were cleaned using RStudio, and retweets and duplicate tweets were discarded. After cleaning the data, 13,737 tweets remained.

Coding Scheme

This methodology was inspired by Southern and Harmer's (2019) design. The authors' ten variables were consolidated to four, which measured the presence or absence of violence, VAWIP, references to representatives' intersectional identities, and references to representatives' progressive political ideologies. To gauge whether tweets demonstrated violence, the WHO's definition of violence (2002, 4) was adopted, and to gauge whether tweets demonstrated VAWIP, Krook and Restrepo Sanín's (2019) definition of VAWIP (2019, 742–45) was adopted. References to intersectional identities could include tweets that mentioned a representative's salient social identities beyond gender, including race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, whereas references to progressive ideologies could include tweets that invoked a representative's affiliation with progressive causes or the Congressional Progressive Caucus. If tweets demonstrated violence or VAWIP and references to intersectional or progressive identities, they were deemed instances of intersectional violence or intersectional VAWIP.

Tweets were assigned values of “0” or “1” for each of the four variables based on the presence or absence of relevant substance. Wherever possible, a random sample of 2,000 tweets was hand coded for each representative.²¹ 2,000 tweets were coded for Khanna, Jayapal, Jeffries, and Kim, and the universe of tweets was coded for Craig and Clarke. This yielded 9,569 tweets, or 69.66% of 13,737 codable tweets.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Violence and VAWIP occur infrequently. This trend is observed at both the tweet level and the congressman level.²² Of the 9,569 tweets coded overall, 0.16% reflect violence. Because VAWIP can only, by definition, impact those identifying as women, the tweet level measurement of VAWIP reflects tweets sent to congresswomen. 0.08% of these 3,569 tweets reflect VAWIP.

Violence and VAWIP also occur infrequently within each similarly situated pair. Congressmen experience more nongendered, violent tweets than congresswomen. Between 0.15% and 0.3% of the tweets sent to congressmen demonstrate violence, but among congresswomen, only Jayapal received violent tweets, constituting 0.15% of 2,000 tweets. However, two of the three congresswomen received tweets that demonstrate VAWIP: 0.05% of Jayapal’s 2,000 tweets and 0.56% of Craig’s 356 tweets demonstrate the phenomenon.

Similarly, intersectional violence and intersectional VAWIP are not frequently observed among the tweets coded for the purpose of this study. Where these phenomena are observed, intersectional VAWIP does not occur any more frequently than intersectional violence. Out of a total of 15 violent tweets, 33.33% demonstrate intersectional violence, and out of a total of three VAWIP tweets, 33.33% demonstrate intersectional VAWIP.

Table 1. Tweet Level Violence and VAWIP

	N	%		N	%
Violence	15	0.16	VAWIP	3	0.08
Other	9,554	99.84	Other	3,566	99.92
Total	9,569	100	Total	3,569	100

Note: VAWIP can only affect women-identifying individuals. 3,569 reflects the tweets coded for women.

Table 2. Member Level Violence and VAWIP

		N	%			N	%
Jayapal	Violence	3	0.15	Khanna	Violence	6	0.3
	VAWIP	1	0.05		VAWIP	--	--
	Other	1,996	99.8		Other	1,994	99.7
	Total	2,000	100		Total	2,000	100
Clarke	Violence	0	0	Jeffries	Violence	3	0.15
	VAWIP	0	0		VAWIP	--	--
	Other	1,213	100		Other	1,997	99.85
	Total	1,213	100		Total	2,000	100
Craig	Violence	0	0	Kim	Violence	3	0.15
	VAWIP	2	0.56		VAWIP	--	--
	Other	354	99.44		Other	1,997	99.85
	Total	356	100		Total	2,000	100

Note: Pairs of similarly positioned members of Congress appear alongside one another.

Qualitative Findings

At the tweet level, certain themes are apparent.²³ Though incidents of online VAWIP are rare, those observed reflect semiotic violence. Rather than explicitly referencing physical abuse, these tweets tend to “dehumanize, degrade, and humiliate” through the use of language and symbols (Krook and Sanín 2019, 192), including those that involve “sexual objectification” (2019, 202–3). The following tweets were sent to Jayapal and Craig:

*“@PramilaJayapal pull your t****n out of your mouth!”*

“@TeamPelosi @JahanaHayesCT @katieporteroc @AngieCraigMN @sharicedavids Women don’t need school, as heels-up Harris proved, it is also possible to sleep your way to the top. So inspirational!”

Among the tweets sent to women that convey violence or VAWIP, several tweets further reference congresswomen’s political ideologies. For example, among the nongendered but violent tweets sent to congresswomen, one refers to a congresswoman’s progressive leanings. Additionally, among the tweets conveying VAWIP, one invokes a representative’s “feminist” ideology (Biroli 2018, 683):

“@PramilaJayapal Performative tweets by false hope sellouts only serves to further enrage the people. The people are on to you, the democratic party and the 2 party system. The people see right through you. The Pitchforks Are Coming. You insist. There will be Socialism or Tyranny.”

“@TeamPelosi @JahanaHayesCT @katieporteroc @AngieCraigMN The sick world of fascist feminist sexism-a clear hate crime against men-democrats constantly lobby pro women, & while women destroy one man after another with sex harassment attacks — this is an evil, insane sexism resulting from spineless, cowardly male leaders @HouseDemocrats”

Tweets of this nature speak to the argument that ideology shapes gendered abuse in politics. The second tweet conveys

what scholars see as the motivating factor behind incidents of VAWIP: a desire to uphold gendered hierarchies (Krook and Sanín 2019).

Finally, several violent tweets sent to both men and women reference identities beyond gender, as is indicated by the measure of intersectionality. For example, Kim authored several tweets detailing his experiences with racism while working for the State Department.²⁴ He received the following response, invoking his race:

“@AndyKimNJ you all are destroying the Great UNITED STATES you should all be jailed and charged with treason”

The act of othering that takes place in this tweet through the use of the phrase “you all” conveys collective violence (World Health Organization 2002), as it sends a message that group members are outsiders (2002, 5).

DISCUSSION

Normatively, observing such low rates of online violence and VAWIP is good, particularly as it concerns the quality of democracy. However, this is not to suggest that online violence and VAWIP do not occur in American politics. The fact that the data show different quantities of violence and VAWIP within similarly situated pairs indicates that gender is shaping progressive politicians’ experiences with online violence. As the data show, progressive congressmen may experience online violence more frequently than progressive congresswomen, but these congresswomen experience online VAWIP. This finding is in line with scholars’ findings and lends support to the first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis expected to observe both intersectional violence and intersectional VAWIP because all representatives in the sample sit at identity-based intersections and are progressives, which aligns with the broad definition of intersectionality adopted. This did occur, as one third of the tweets conveying violence demonstrate intersectional violence, and one third of the tweets conveying VAWIP demonstrate intersectional VAWIP. But, the data show no evidence that intersectional references shape VAWIP to a greater degree than

Table 3. Tweet Level Intersectional Violence and Intersectional VAWIP

	N	%		N	%
I. Violence	5	33.33	I. VAWIP	1	33.33
Other	10	66.67	Other	2	66.67
Total	15	100	Total	3	100

Note: Intersectional violence (I.Violence) is measured as a proportion of tweets that had been previously coded as demonstrating violence. Intersectional VAWIP (I.VAWIP) is measured as a proportion of tweets that had been previously coded as demonstrating VAWIP.

violence. As such, this research does not support the second hypothesis.

Putting the quantitative findings of this study in conversation with studies of a similar nature shines light on factors that may have shaped the results. Southern and Harmer (2019) collect 117,904 tweets sent to 500 MPs. Their study does not adopt a VAWIP framework but looks for differences in levels of incivility targeting men and women. 9.8% of codable tweets are uncivil (Southern and Harmer 2019, 7). Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah (2020) collect 234,269 tweets sent to ten American candidates over a period of 14 days. This study similarly looks for abusive tweets without using a VAWIP framework. Between 3,454 and 76,259 tweets are coded for each candidate. For women, no less than 15% of messages are abusive, but for men, between 5% and 10% are abusive (Guerin and Maharasingam-Shah 2020, 9). Finally, Atalanta (2018) examines how gender shapes online discourse. The sample consists of three pairs of male and female politicians across three continents, and 2.8% of 27,952 tweets indicate gender bias (Atalanta 2018, 5).²⁵ Thus, the low levels of violence and VAWIP observed in this research may be partly explained by the comparatively small universe of codable tweets and the small sample of representatives.

Beyond methodological choices, other traits may also shape online abuse. Though the pairs in the sample were selected because they are similarly situated in terms of their personal and district characteristics, this measure of similarity is imperfect. After analyzing close to 10,000 tweets, anecdotal evidence points to the fact that characteristics like visibility, years in office, or caucus leadership positions may shape violence and VAWIP.

Though few studies examine politicians' visibility as it relates to gendered abuse in politics, those that do find that there may be a link between visibility, gender, and abuse experienced. Some scholars studying online incivility consider social media follower counts to be indicators of visibility (Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019). Adopting such a measure in the context of this study reveals that some pairs are less than perfect. Most notably, whereas Clarke has 87.2 thousand Twitter followers, Jeffries has 399.9 thousand.²⁶

Moreover, representatives' caucus leadership positions may shape abuse. Tweets sent to Jeffries suggest that his position as the chair of the House Democratic Caucus may boost his visibility as well as the ways that the public engages with him. The same is true for Jayapal, who chairs the Progressive Caucus. These leadership roles were mentioned on multiple occasions. For example:

"Chair of @HouseDemocrats Caucus @RepJeffries joined @MetCouncil & Shorefront JCC to thank volunteers, hand out PPE and pack emergency food for upcoming Passover holiday."

"@ThomB01 @ryangrim @PramilaJayapal @SenSchumer It isn't bs. Jayapal is leader of the house

progressive caucus and has more than enough influence to make such demands."

Tweets of this nature suggest that by heightening representatives' visibility, leadership positions may increase the public's recognition of members of Congress as well as the abuse targeting these members.

The length of time a representative has spent in Congress may also shape the public's engagement with them. Craig and Kim were just out of their freshman years when this study was conducted. Neither holds a leadership position, which reflects the fact that they are new to the institution. Given that others in the sample do hold leadership positions and have served for more than two years, it is unsurprising that they might attract different levels or types of attention. Future research should consider these factors.

This project's method of selecting pairs was imperfect because of factors like visibility. However, progressive members of Congress who did not belong to highly visible groups like the "Squad" were examined to better portray the typical online experience of progressive congressmen and congresswomen. Because scholars find that youth is correlated with online and gendered abuse, representatives below the age of 60 were also prioritized during the selection process. This includes representatives like Craig and Kim, who are younger but not as well-established as their colleagues.

Adopting a broad definition of incivility or evaluating gender differences rather than motives would have likely yielded a larger number of abusive cases. Most other studies do not adopt Krook and Restrepo Sanín's (2019) definition, but given that their work has been instrumental to the study of VAWIP, this definition was adopted. It is challenging to understand a Twitter user's motive in 280 or fewer characters, which speaks to the limitations of conducting a study on online abuse. However, understanding when gender serves a motivating factor rather than an incidental factor may say more about episodes that have a chilling effect on political representation.

CONCLUSION

This research answers some questions about VAWIP and raises others, but above all else it speaks to the fact that within an already small field of study, there is a paucity of existing literature that incorporates an intersectional lens. The VAWIP field is new and growing, and it centers the role that gender plays in shaping incidents of violence because the study of political violence has left gender to the margins of research for too long. The case for adopting a VAWIP framework is discussed extensively at the beginning of this paper, and this research confirms what scholars have argued: gender shapes politically active individuals' experiences with abuse. This demonstrates that VAWIP deserves greater attention in academic and practitioner spaces, particularly if such trends have a chilling effect on women's participation.

However, this research does not uncover quite as clear an answer to questions regarding the ways in which gender interacts with other salient identities to shape abuse. Intersectional violence and VAWIP are observed infrequently, but the interaction of numerous factors is qualitatively apparent. The similar number of tweets representing intersectional violence and intersectional VAWIP suggests that identity is a dynamic concept, but without a multitude of intersectional studies with which to put this research in conversation, it is challenging to articulate how identity-based and ideology-based traits affect men and women in politics. Adopting a broad measure of intersectionality may have complicated this effort, but this speaks to the reality that there have been so few studies incorporating an intersectional lens, and those that have often overcompensate by considering all potentially salient identities at once.

There is a strong case to be made for amplifying the study of VAWIP, which receives support from this research. But, there is no universal experience belonging to politicians in different gender groups, and the VAWIP field must not speak on issues of political consequence in falsely universal terms. Though the roles that identities like race and ethnicity as well as political ideology play in shaping incidents of abuse warrant greater attention, to conflate the ways that such identities interact with gender is to continue to sideline identities that have been historically de-centered in academic and policymaking work alike. ■

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APPENDIX

Additional Information Regarding Data Collection and Cleaning

One week's worth of tweets was collected for each representative between March 16 and March 26, 2021. Initially, 75,822 tweets were collected using TAGS. 19,909 were sent to Kim; 1,857 to Craig; 21,090 to Jeffries; 6,951 to Clarke; 14,118 to Khanna; and 11,897 to Jayapal. Using RStudio, a variable was created to search the first five characters of each tweet for the letters "RT," denoting retweets. Retweets and duplicates were discarded. After the data were cleaned, 13,737 tweets remained. 2,254 of these were sent to Kim; 356 to Craig; 2,416 to Jeffries; 1,213 to Clarke; 4,768 to Khanna; and 2,730 to Jayapal. A random sample of 2,000 tweets was coded for Khanna, Jayapal, Jeffries, and Kim, and the universe of tweets was coded for Craig and Clarke. 9,569 tweets were coded, representing 69.66% of 13,737 tweets.

Additional Information Regarding Coding Scheme

Southern and Harmer's (2019) coding scheme was modified so that the authors' ten variables were consolidated to four. The variables included in this study assessed violence [violence], VAWIP [VAWIP], references to representatives' intersecting identities [intersectional], and references to representatives' progressive ideologies [progressive]. Broad measures of intersectional violence [I.Violence] and intersectional VAWIP [I.VAWIP] were constructed, which combined the variables for intersectionality and ideology. If tweets referenced violence or VAWIP as well as intersectional or progressive identities, they were deemed instances of intersectional violence or intersectional VAWIP.

General Coding Rules

The sentiment in tweets had to be directed at the representatives in the sample to be assigned a value of "1." References to caucus memberships or words like "you" and "we" often indicated this. Tweets were not coded based on political issues mentioned unless such tweets made direct reference to representatives in the sample. If tweets referenced race, ethnicity, ideology, or abuse but did not link these themes to the representatives, they were not assigned a value of "1." If tweets referenced representatives' community outreach activities and such activities were linked to the congressman's identity, these tweets were coded as such. Illegible tweets were assigned a value of "0."

Identifying Violence

This study adopted the WHO's (2002) definition of violence as the "intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has

a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (2002, 4). The WHO further defines psychological violence as actions that "compromise the well-being of individuals, families, and communities" (2002, 4). The WHO's typology of violence includes self-directed violence, interpersonal violence, and collective violence (2002, 5). Violent tweets targeting congressmembers were assigned a value of "1."

Identifying VAWIP

Krook and Restrepo Sanín's (2019) definition of VAWIP was adopted for this study. The authors define VAWIP as a phenomenon whose "origins, means, and effects of violent acts specifically aim to exclude women from the political sphere, disrupting the political process as a means of reinforcing gendered hierarchies" (2019, 742–43). The authors break VAWIP into five categories: physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and semiotic violence. Tweets referencing these categories in relation to congresswomen were assigned a value of "1."

Identifying Intersectional Tweets

"Intersectional" tweets referred to a representative's identities beyond gender. Intersectional tweets could affect both congressmen and congresswomen. Tweets had to connect these identities to the representative to be assigned a value of "1." Scholars argue that intersectionality in the study of VAWIP should include race and ethnicity as well as identities like age and religion, so any explicit mention of an identity belonging to a representative beyond gender alone was included. Tweets were coded for the presence or absence of references to political ideology separately.

Identifying Progressive Tweets

"Progressive" tweets referred to a representative's progressive political ideology or caucus membership. This includes tweets that invoked stereotypes or phrases associated with progressive politics. Some of these phrases included: squad, progressive, leftists, radical left, #FraudSquad, fauxgressives. To be assigned a value of "1," the substance of tweets had to be explicitly connected to the representative.

Identifying Intersectional Violence and Intersectional VAWIP

This study drew from existing VAWIP literature and constructed broad measures of intersectional violence [I.Violence] and intersectional VAWIP [I.VAWIP]. If tweets demonstrated violence or VAWIP as well as references to intersectional identities or progressive identities, they were deemed intersectional violence or intersectional VAWIP.

NOTES

- 1 See *The New York Times* (2020): <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/us/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-sexism-congress.html>>.
- 2 See *Business Insider* (2020): <<https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-crowd-chants-lock-her-up-after-whitmer-kidnapping-plot-2020-10>>.
- 3 See *The New York Times* (2020): <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/20/nyregion/esther-salas.html>>.
- 4 See *CNN Politics* (2020): <<https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/politics/marjorie-taylor-green-gun-post-squad/index.html>>.
- 5 Representative Tlaib's House Resolution: <https://tlaib.house.gov/sites/tlaib.house.gov/files/TLAIB_120_xml.pdf>.
- 6 Public Law 115-397 was passed in 2018 to amend the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995, which was the first piece of legislation to extend antidiscrimination laws to employees of the legislative branch.
- 7 Beinart describes the treatment that Clinton experienced during the 2016 presidential election for *The Atlantic*: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/10/fear-of-a-female-president/497564/>>.
- 8 For a full roster of caucus members, see: <<https://progressives.house.gov/caucus-members/>>.
- 9 Race and ethnicity data were collected using the rosters provided by the House of Representatives Press Gallery.
- 10 Data pertaining to leadership positions were gathered using Ballotpedia.
- 11 District competitiveness was gauged using *The Cook Political Report's* Cook Partisan Voter Index.
- 12 District demographics were determined using the data collected by the United States Census Bureau.
- 13 Herrick et al. (2019) similarly analyzed local elected officials but controlled for "individual mayoral characteristics," "city characteristics," and "political variables" (2019, 7).
- 14 Clarke has been serving in the House of Representatives for 14 years since she was first sworn in in 2007. However, she has represented her current district for just 8 years because this district was redrawn in 2013.
- 15 TAGS is a free plugin for Google Sheets that allows researchers to interact with the Twitter API.
- 16 Google Alerts allows users to monitor the internet for certain terms and to receive updates regarding these terms.
- 17 If the coding and data analysis indicated that certain representatives received heightened abuse on a particular day or over numerous days, the Google Alerts archive could be referenced and might reveal that a representative had cast a vote or introduced a policy that could have sparked controversy or hostility.
- 18 For example, the search term for Representative Andy Kim was his verified personal Twitter handle, @AndyKimNJ. This search term allowed TAGS to collect all tweets tagging Kim's verified personal account
- 19 This was not possible for Representatives Hakeem Jeffries and Yvette Clarke because Jeffries' personal account was not verified and Clarke's personal account was designated as her "campaign" profile and was not active.
- 20 Though one week's worth of tweets was collected for each member in the sample, the start dates were staggered during data collection to ensure that the TAGS archives were running correctly.
- 21 There were just 356 and 1,213 codable tweets for Craig and Clarke respectively.
- 22 Consistent with Southern and Harmer (2019), data were analyzed at both the tweet level and the congressman level. Doing so allowed me to examine the extent to which the relevant phenomena were represented as a proportion of all tweets coded as well as the extent to which these phenomena impacted individual members of Congress within similarly situated pairs.
- 23 All tweets included in this section appear unedited.
- 24 The following news article details Kim's Twitter thread and was collected using the Google Alerts archive set up for Kim: <<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/25/980779037/rep-andy-kim-on-state-department-racism-my-own-government-questioned-my-loyalty>>.
- 25 Of these studies, only Southern and Harmer (2019) hand code their data.
- 26 These values represent the number of followers that members of Congress in the sample had on May 9, 2021.