

## For Female Candidates, Harassment and Threats Come Every Day

By Maggie Astor, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/us/politics/women-harassment-elections.html>

The number of women running for office is surging. But for many, harassment and discrimination is a persistent reality. We spoke with six female candidates about how they have persevered.

Four days before the 2016 congressional primary in her Northern California district, Erin Schrode woke up to tens of thousands of messages. They were everywhere: in her email, on her cellphone, on her Facebook and her Twitter and her Instagram.

“All would laugh with glee as they gang raped her and then bashed her bagel eating brains in,” one said.

“It’d be amusing to see her take twenty or so for 8 or 10 hours,” another said, again suggesting gang-rape.

It has been two years since Ms. Schrode, now 27, lost her Democratic primary and moved on. But the abuse — a toxic sludge of online trolling steeped in misogyny and anti-Semitism that also included photoshopped images of her face stretched into a Nazi lampshade and references to “preheating the ovens” — never stopped.

“She needs to stop moving her hands around like a crackhead,” said one tweet this year.

“Another feminazi’s plans foiled!” said another.

The 2018 election cycle has brought [a surge of female candidates](#). A record number of women ran or are running [for the Senate](#), [the House](#) and [governorships](#), according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Many more are running for state legislatures and local offices. And in the process, they are finding that harassment and threats, already common for women, can be amplified in political races — especially if the candidate is a member of a minority group.

Last year, sexist and anti-Semitic abuse helped drive Kim Weaver, an Iowa Democrat, out of her race against Representative Steve King.

Someone crept onto her property overnight and put up a “for sale” sign. The neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer published an article (no longer available) titled, as Ms. Weaver recalled it, “Meet the Whore Who’s Running Against Steve King,” increasing what was already an onslaught of threats. An acquaintance in the German government even called to warn her about a threatening conversation on an extremist message board, and to ask if she had personal security.

“I’m normally a pretty brave person, but when you feel like you’re in a fishbowl and you don’t know who it is that’s throwing rocks at you, it’s disconcerting,” Ms. Weaver, 53, said. “You

don't know if it's somebody sitting in his mother's basement in Florida or if it's a gun-happy white supremacist who hates you who lives a block away.”

When she withdrew from the race, Mr. King suggested she had made up the threats. “I wanted #KimWeaver IN the race — not out,” [he tweeted](#). “Democrats drove her out of the race — not R's. Death threats likely didn't happen but a fabrication.”

No independent organization appears to formally track incidents of harassment, and the Democratic and Republican National Committees did not respond to emails asking whether they did. But several groups that work with candidates said they routinely provided personal safety training.

Emily Ellsworth, 31, a Utah Republican, said that when she was seeking party delegates' support to get on the ballot for the State Senate this year, a male delegate cornered her at multiple candidate meet-and-greets and messaged her around a dozen times on Facebook. Only after she deactivated her account did he stop.

The messages were not sexually explicit, she said, but made her feel that “he really wanted to push a more personal relationship and had a hard time accepting the boundaries I had set.”

Morgan Zegers, 21, a Republican running for State Assembly in upstate New York, said she had been called a “G.O.P. Stepford wife” and often had to delete vulgar comments on her Facebook page. Lauren Underwood, 31, [a Democratic House candidate in Illinois](#), recalled that when she was visiting a supporter, a local Republican stopped by and was affronted when he learned that Ms. Underwood was challenging his friend in Congress.

“He threw his shoulders back and stood at his largest and leaned into me, as if he was going to launch at me for having the audacity to run for office,” Ms. Underwood said, adding that her supporter came to her defense.

Harassment is not new for women in politics, or anywhere else — and men face it too, especially if they are African-American or Jewish. But for women, the harassment is ubiquitous and frequently sexualized, and it has come to the fore this election cycle, partly because so many women are running and partly because more of them are discussing their experiences.

Attendees at WomenWin — a forum in June for Democratic women running in Texas, which included a personal safety session led by the police chief of a local university — said they had found a sense of camaraderie in doing so.

“Being in the room with all of those women that are having those same concerns as me made me feel so much saner,” said Samantha Carrillo Fields, 31, a candidate for the Texas House, referring not only to safety but also to other forms of misogyny on the campaign trail. “O.K., so this is real. What I'm feeling is real. It was really nice having that validation.”

In [a 2017 video by the Women’s Media Center](#), elected officials — including seasoned politicians like Representatives Katherine M. Clark, 55, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, 66, Republican of Florida — described their experiences as part of a campaign called #NameItChangeIt, which encourages women to speak out about harassment. And women are more willing to do so than they were even a few years ago.

When Rebecca Thompson, a Democrat, ran for the Michigan House in 2014, strangers followed her home from events and drove slowly, repeatedly, past her house. At one point, someone broke into her car. By the end of the campaign, she said, she was sleeping at her partner’s house because she was afraid to be in her own.

“I felt unsafe throughout the entire campaign,” Ms. Thompson, 35, said. “It almost seemed like psychological warfare, like they were trying to psych me out. It kept me on edge all the time, because I just didn’t know where I could go, anywhere in the city, without feeling like I was being followed.”

But she was not comfortable speaking out then. “I told myself I had to just suck it up — there’s no crying in baseball; there’s no crying in politics,” she said. “Had those things happened now, I do feel like I would have been empowered to speak up about them.”

Yet even still, some candidates interviewed said initially that they had not been harassed — but then, when given examples like menacing social media messages, said yes, they had experienced those things. Just as many have observed in the #MeToo movement that a certain level of misogyny is so expected as to feel unremarkable, these candidates said they saw the messages as par for the course.

“It becomes so normalized, the types of things that people say,” said Mya Whitaker, 27, a Democrat running for City Council in Oakland, Calif. “Being a black woman and existing, in some cases, is enough to piss people off.”

A different kind of normalization happens at the other end of the spectrum, where the harassment is so vicious and constant that it overwhelms the ability to react.

As an independent video game developer in 2014, Brianna Wu was the subject of abuse [during GamerGate](#), when women involved in gaming were targeted for harassment.

Now a [Democrat running for Congress in Massachusetts](#), Ms. Wu, 41, said death and rape threats came so routinely that she had ceased to feel much in response. Even when people threw objects through her window. Even when they vandalized her husband’s car. Even when they emailed paparazzi-like photos of her in her own home.

“I often look at it and I’m like: ‘I know I should be feeling something right now. I know I should be feeling scared or angry or stressed.’ And it’s at a point where I can’t feel anything anymore,” Ms. Wu said. “It’s almost like fear is a muscle that is so overtaxed, it can just do nothing else in my body.”

Many said it was a point of principle not to be intimidated into silence. Others said their political ideals were simply more important.

“For good reason, there’s never any shortage of telling stories about women being harassed on the campaign trail,” Ms. Wu said. “But I cannot communicate to you strongly enough: Over all, this job is fun. This job is exhausting, but this job is amazing.”

Repeatedly, she and others urged prospective candidates not to be deterred. Ms. Zegers said that was why she deleted sexist Facebook comments.

“A lot of women pay attention to my page,” she said. “It’s important to me that we show a good dialogue about the issues and we don’t scare women away from running.”

And some cast the harassment as a hurdle they simply had to overcome if they wanted to change the systems that fuel it.

The government is still composed mainly of men who have never experienced sexual harassment, while “far too many women experience these things,” Ms. Underwood said.

“I think that’s part of the opportunity in running for progress,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to fix this and stop it from happening in the future.”