Who Tolerates Abuse of MPs?

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"Some days ... you just think: 'Why do I do this? Why do I bother?' ... and people who are thinking about putting themselves forward think, 'Well, do I want to open myself up to this?' It's corrosive to our democracy."

-Anonymous female Labour candidate for MP as reported
in [The Guardian on 14 June 2024](#)

Immediately following the July 2024 General Election, MPs, candidates, and government advisors collectively raised the alarm about the pervasiveness of threats and targeting against British politicians. The problem is not new but evidence strongly suggests that it is becoming more widespread (Collignon et al., 2021; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023), and that is certainly the impression of politicians themselves (Mason, 2024; Dugan, 2024). And the murders of MPs Jo Cox and David Amess, not to mention the attempted assassination of America's Donald Trump at a presidential campaign rally in July this year, made shockingly clear that these threats cannot be treated as idle. In response, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has reconvened the Defending Democracy taskforce to consider how the UK government should address this issue.

This taskforce will need a range of evidence, part of which concerns the general public's view of such threats and intimidation. Such evidence is oddly scarce considering the extent of concern raised by campaign groups and politicians. The problem can be interpreted as a breakdown of a public norm against violence, but is there evidence that that norm has indeed been eroded in mass opinion? On the one hand, even a behaviour as relatively innocuous as milkshake-throwing was widely condemned in a 2019 survey (Ford, 2019). On the other hand, there has been a well-documented polarisation in British politics around the Brexit issue and its deeper ideological roots (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). It is not hard to imagine staunch Leavers or Remainers being rather more sanguine about threats against politicians from the rival tribe. Meanwhile, research has long identified some demographic groups – notably men and younger people – as rather less unanimous in condemnation of violence (Armaly and Enders 2022; Hakansson 2024).

This leaves us with what might be called the 'how many?' and 'who?' questions when it comes to public tolerance of threats and intimidation against politicians. First, how widespread is the public norm against abuse and intimidation of politicians? How many citizens are willing to condone or at least reluctant to condemn violent threats? Second, who is readier to condone such threats? Is this better predicted by ideological polarisation and attitudes or by those demographic categories?

To address these questions, we conducted a survey during the week prior to the 2024 General Election. The survey was fielded online on a demographically representative sample of 2,000 British adults recruited via the Prolific platform. Respondents were asked about their own attitudes and backgrounds and then about a range of hostile behaviours toward politicians.

How widespread is the norm against abuse?

The core question in this survey was worded as follows: "Sometimes politicians say things or support policies that deeply offend some people. We're going to ask about a list of ways in which those people might react. First, when someone becomes very angry at a politician for saying or doing something that they strongly disagree with, is it ever *acceptable* for that person to…?"

Then there followed a parallel question about whether it was *understandable* that someone would react in that way. The distinction is useful given the social pressure respondents might feel to condemn intimidation as unacceptable; it is probably easier to uncover sympathy with the perpetrators via asking whether such behaviour is at least understandable. In addition, both questions were asked on seven-point scales so that respondents could register at least some tolerance of abuse without having to endorse it fully.
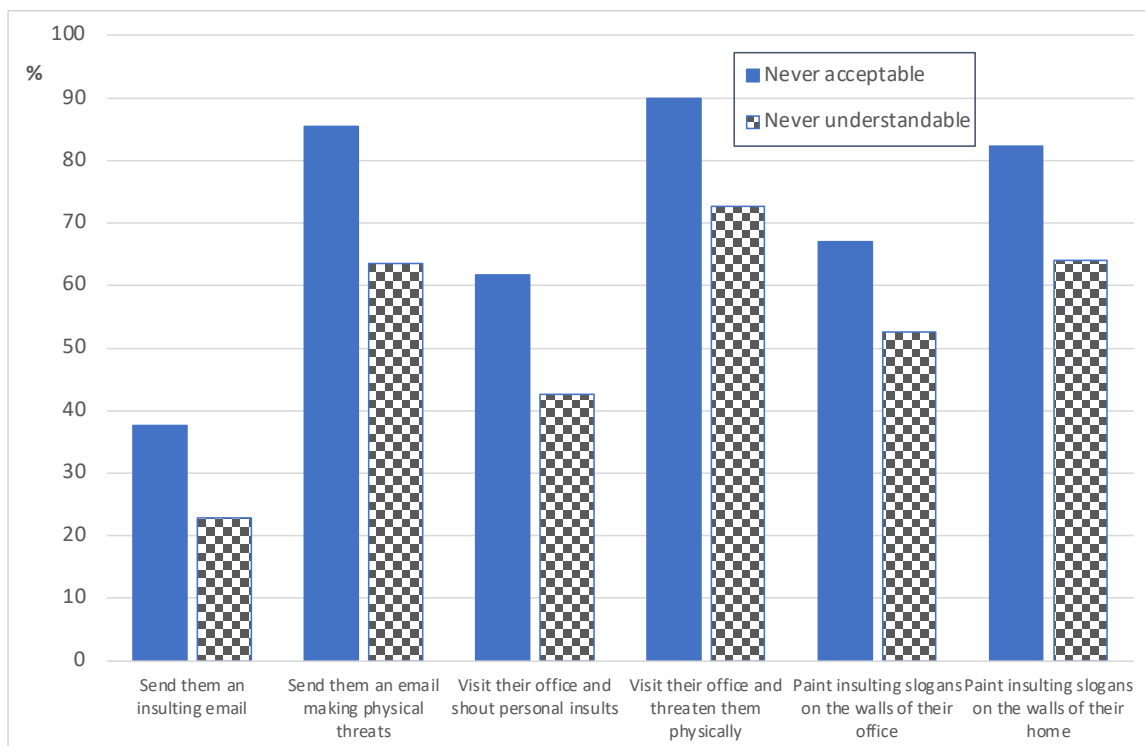

Figure 1 displays the percentages of respondents at the extreme negative point of those scales, i.e., deeming these behaviours "Never acceptable" or "Never understandable". These percentages are large, reflecting a strong skew towards rejection of abuse. Many people regard even personal insults as unacceptable and, when it comes to the more serious cases, there is almost universal condemnation.

As expected, the percentages are lower when we asked about whether each behaviour was understandable. Again, however, large majorities described physical threats or intrusion into the private sphere as "Never understandable". Moreover, even where they chose other options, respondents were almost invariably on the condemning side of both scales. Only tiny (<1%) minorities declared the more serious cases as "Totally understandable".

In what follows, then, it is worth bearing in mind that we are not identifying sections of the population that widely and freely endorse abuse. The "who tolerates?" question concerns which

groups are at least slightly less full-throated in their condemnation of abuse – and, in the case of serious violence or intimidation, these groups will be very small. To simplify the picture (and the graphs) from now on, we focus on three illustrative behaviours: the most innocuous (an insulting e-mail), the most intrusive (insulting graffiti at the politician's home), and the most intimidating (physical threats in person).

Who is readier to tolerate abuse? 1. Demographics

We begin with gender and age, finding at least partial confirmation of the patterns established by previous research. For five of the six behaviours in Figure 1, a larger percentage of women than men deemed it to be 'never acceptable', and all of these differences were statistically significant. Figure 2 begins with the exception, however, which was also statistically significant: more men than women condemned the sending of an insulting e-mail. This interesting anomaly notwithstanding, perhaps the most important point here is the narrowness of the gender differences in the other two cases. While women are generally less tolerant of abusive behaviour than their male counterparts, that conventional gap narrows when it comes to threats of physical violence or vandalism because these are rejected by large majorities of both men and women.
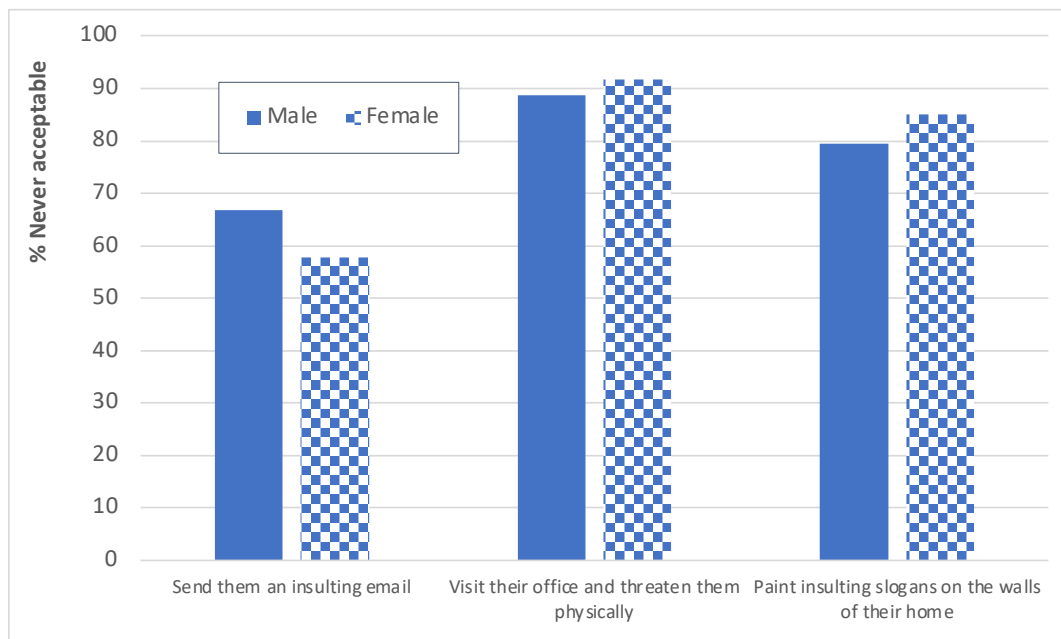

Figure 2. (Un)acceptability of abusive behaviours by gender

Figure 3 reports a parallel analysis by age group. Here the pattern is clear and consistent: older respondents are markedly more likely to condemn all forms of threatening and insulting behaviour as unacceptable. For example, there is a gap of more than 25 percentage points between the youngest (18 to 29-year-olds) and the oldest age groups (over-70s) answering that it is "never acceptable" to paint slogans on a politician's home – although we note again that this is still the clear majority

position even among that youngest cohort. As ever with age gaps like this, the interpretation depends heavily on whether it is a life-cycle effect, with acceptance of violence declining with age as people grow less radical and perhaps more protective of their own offspring, or a generational effect whereby younger people have been socialised at a time of greater hostility towards politics and politicians. The latter would be troubling given that the youngest cohorts will eventually come to dominate the political space and political discourse.
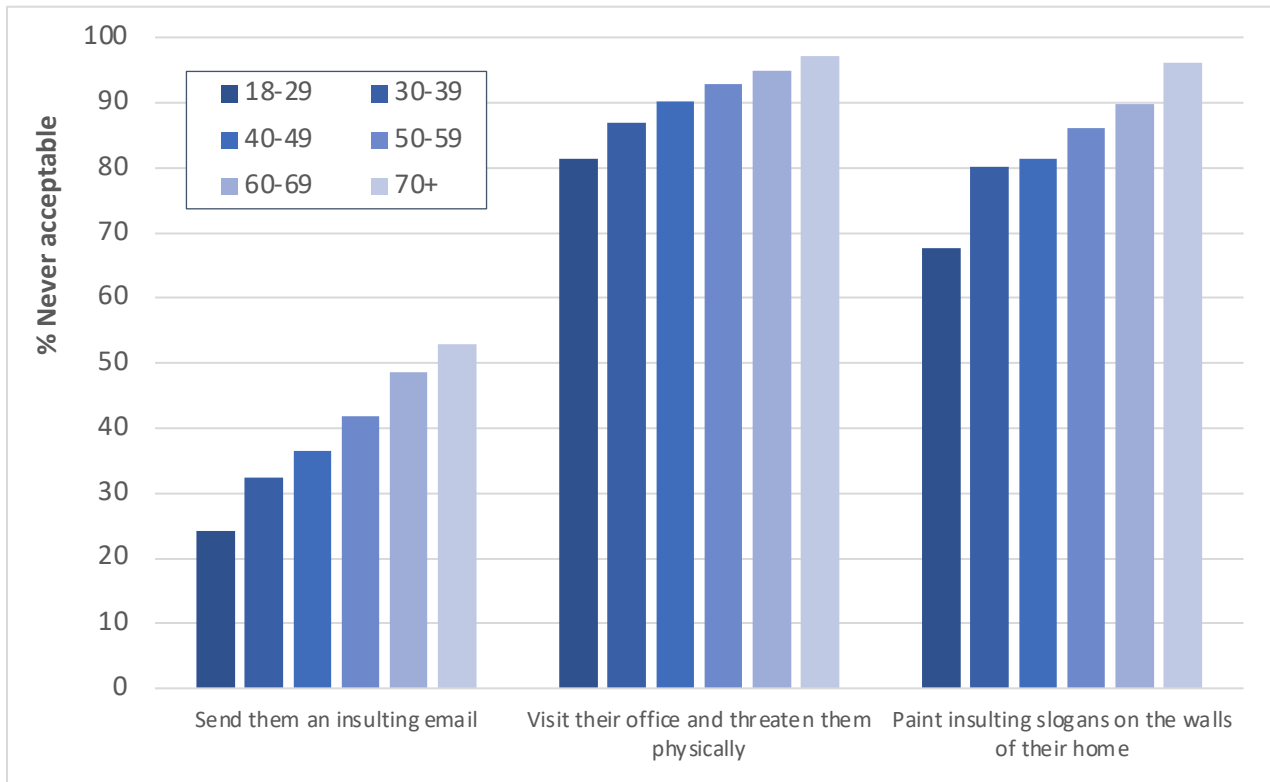

Figure 3. (Un)acceptability of abusive behaviours by age group

Who is readier to tolerate abuse? 2. Ideology

Probably the most common explanation for the rise in political violence is affective polarisation (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Martherus et al., 2021): the tendency for partisan or ideological differences to widen to the point that political disagreement turns to personal hostility or even hatred. This is an obvious place to start in seeking the basis for wider public tolerance of such violence.

Since affective polarisation in Britain has centred on Brexit and the wider divide (especially on immigration) between social liberals and conservatives, we used a specific measure of ideology and thus polarisation. In it, we described two different people – Person A (pro-prison reform, concerned about climate change, voted to Remain in the EU, and supportive of immigration and gay marriage) and Person B (wants tougher prison sentences, thinks climate change is exaggerated, vote to Leave the EU, and is anti-immigration and gay marriage) – and asked respondents to locate themselves on a

seven-point scale from 0 ("More like Person A") to 6 ("More like Person B"). To simplify presentation, we collapse this into three categories: 0-1, i.e. liberal; 2-4, i.e. moderate; 5-6, i.e. conservative.
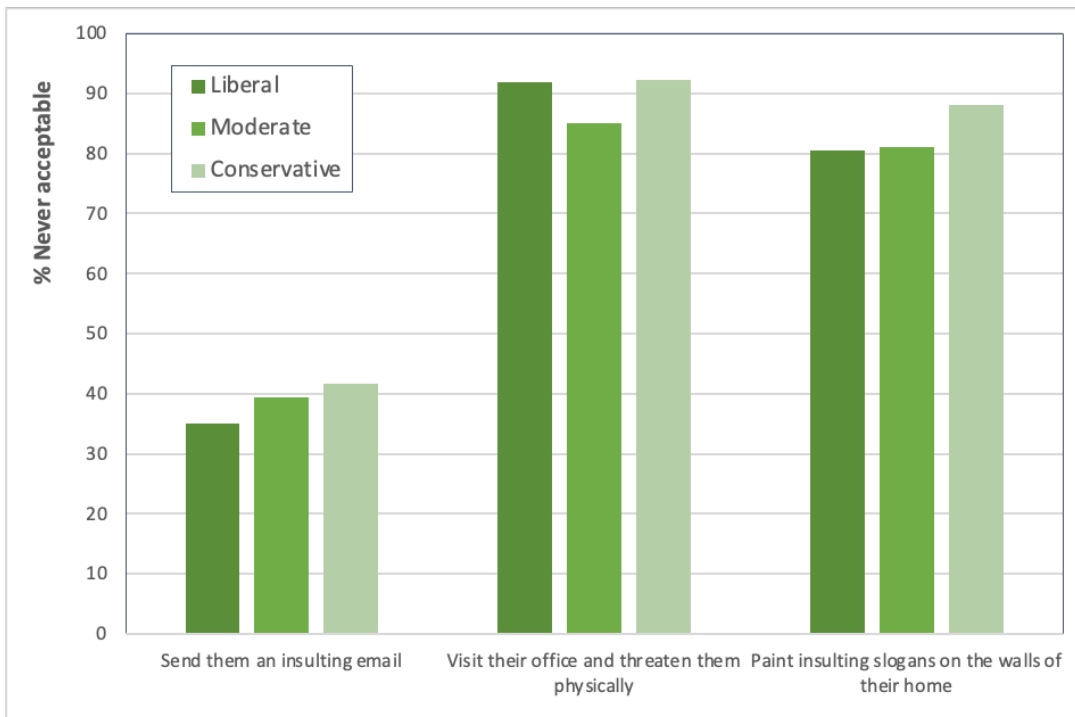

Figure 4. (Un)acceptability of abusive behaviours by political ideology (categorised)

Figure 4 makes immediately clear that tolerance for political intimidation or abuse is not a function of ideological polarisation. There is no consistent evidence that those closer to the ideological poles find these behaviours more acceptable. To the contrary, physical threats were most likely to be tolerated by those in the centre ground. Another potential myth exploded by Figure 4 is any notion – perhaps encouraged by the recent outbreak of far right violence in Britain – that threats and abuse would be countenanced more easily by those on that wing of politics. If anything, the reverse is the case. And, if we extend the analysis to partisanship, the message is the same: there was no sign in our data that those supporting a particular political party were rather more likely to accept or understand this behaviour.

We move instead to two features of political outlook that are less directly about liberal or conservative ideology but more about the rejection of norms – a rejection that might also spill over into our area of interest here. The first is sexism which, while hardly absent from either elite or mass politics, can be seen as against increasingly egalitarian norms. Respondents were asked how much they agreed with a series of statements on gender equality and women's behaviour and we combined responses to form a short scale measuring sexist beliefs in four categories from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest).

Figure 5 shows a reasonably consistent pattern whereby the most sexist respondents are the most tolerant of abuse. Moreover, the correlations are strongest with the statement "Women seek to gain

power by getting control over men", taken from a measure of 'hostile sexism' (Schaffner, 2022) and seemingly capturing some of the kind of anger that also drives acceptance of intimidation against politicians. Unsurprisingly, further analysis confirms that this correlation is stronger for male than for female respondents, placing gender at the heart of at least one explanation for hostility against politicians.
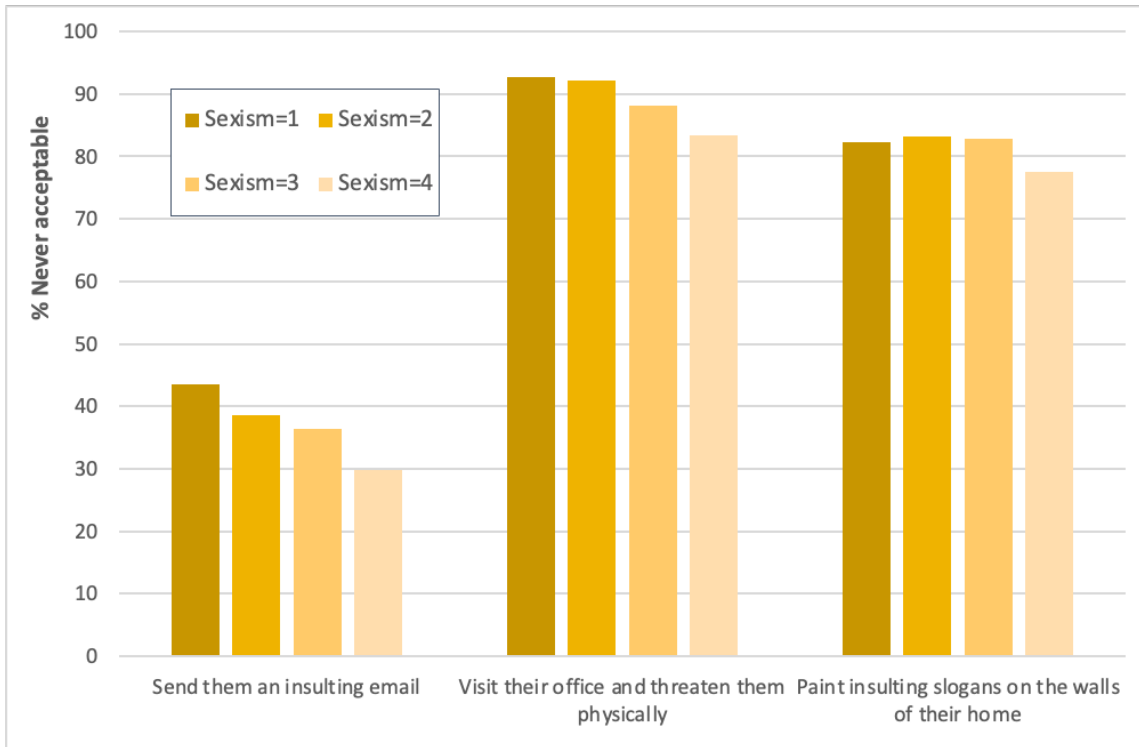

Figure 5. (Un)acceptability of abusive behaviours by sexism scale scores (categorised)

The final analysis here is, in a sense, the most obvious. There has been a rush of research into populist attitudes (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023) and, since these are centrally about the rejection of government by politician, they are also an obvious predictor of support for aggression against those politicians. In the light of that, it might even be surprising that the pattern in Figure 6 is not *that* pronounced: plenty of respondents scoring in the highest category of the standard measure of populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014) were nonetheless adamant that the more serious forms of intimidation were never acceptable. Nevertheless, the pattern is clear and one of the stronger that we have found. Furthermore, since populist attitudes are barely correlated with the other ideological variables examined here, they represent a distinct source of at least relative tolerance for abusive behaviour.
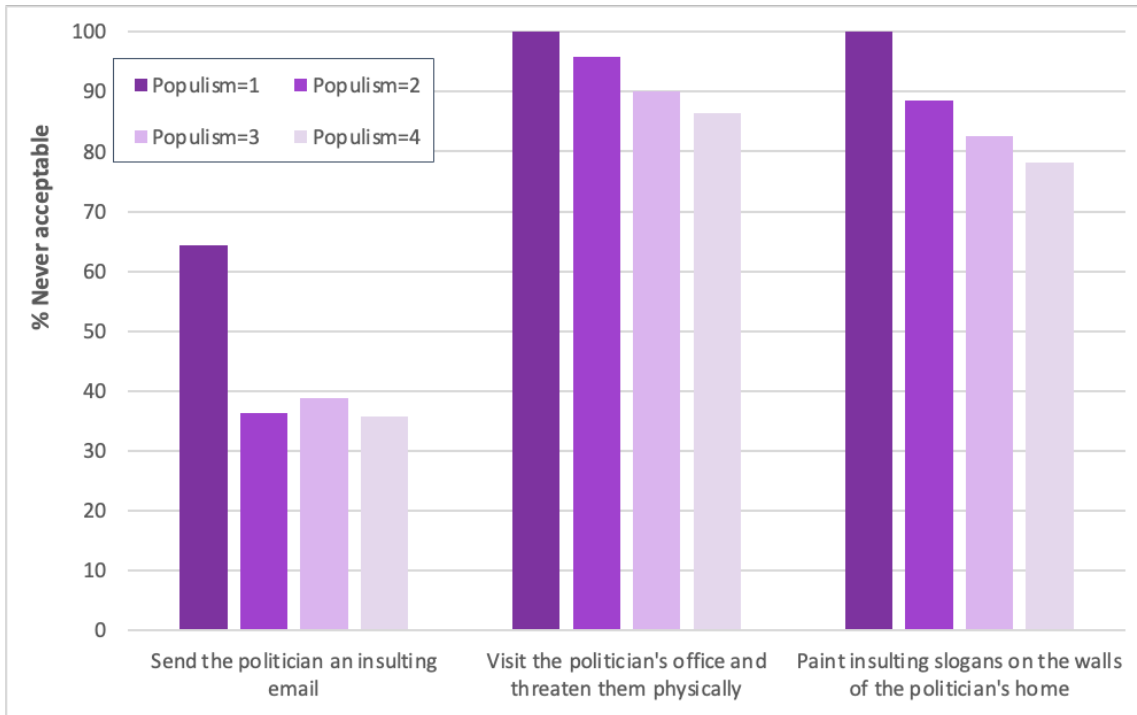
Figure 6. (Un)acceptability of abusive behaviours by populist attitude scale scores (categorised)

Conclusions

The primary conclusion from this research is upbeat. Only small fractions of the British public think that intimidation or aggression against politicians is anything other than completely unacceptable. Sending an insulting e-mail may be acceptable or at least understandable, but there is almost universal strong condemnation of the most threatening forms of abuse. Of course, it takes only a tiny fraction of the public to commit each act of aggression, and none of this is to downplay the severity of those acts themselves. But our research provides a valuable corrective to any suggestion that such acts take place against a backdrop of public indifference, let alone approval.

It also usefully corrects any supposition that ideological polarisation is the key driver here. We found no evidence that the small minority tolerating abuse was made up disproportionately of those at the ideological poles. Our findings complement those of Berntzen et al. (2023), who found that tolerance of political violence in Britain was driven more by various aspects of people's personality than by any particular partisan antagonism. Ultimately, and echoing past research on radicalisation more generally, it is probably psychology rather than politics that drives both violence and support for violence.

An obvious objection to our upbeat conclusion is that respondents felt strong social pressure to reject violence. There is no doubt something in this, even if we took pains in the survey to minimise such pressure. However, in one respect this would reinforce rather than undermine our case. Such pressure would stem from the belief that violence is widely rejected as unacceptable, and it is this norm against violence that some fear has been eroded. Future research should test not only citizens' own

reactions to abuse but their perceptions – and perhaps their *mis*perceptions – of where the rest of the public stands on this issue. The worrisome result would be if individuals continue to disapprove strongly of violence, as we have demonstrated, but have started to feel that this norm is weakening around them.

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