

On the digital
campaign trail:
Election candidates'
online experiences
in the 2024 elections



Coimisiún
na Meán



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Foreword by the Commissioner



Online platforms are no longer simply viewed a useful means of political communication but have become an essential campaign tool and way of reaching and supporting constituents for candidates and elected representatives across all demographics.

This report explores the online experiences of candidates in Ireland's 2024 Local and General Elections. Our research offers a detailed picture of digital campaigning, the benefits it can provide to candidates in reaching their constituents, and the potential harms, including threats, abusive behaviour and impacts on their wellbeing and freedom of expression, as reported by candidates.

It comes in response to Coimisiún na Meán's detailed engagement with NGOs, the Houses of the Oireachtas Safe Participation in Political Life Task Force, An Garda Síochána and peer regulators both in Ireland and across Europe, in advance of the 2024 Local Elections.

A key focus of Coimisiún na Meán is the development of a media landscape which supports democracy and democratic values and underpins civic discourse. Central to this is ensuring that:

- Participants in public life face scrutiny but are not discouraged by the prospect of unlawful threats or abuse and are aware of their rights within our remit and of how to exercise them;
- Freedom of expression is protected, and a wide variety of political views are lawfully expressed.

Since our establishment in 2023, Coimisiún na Meán has worked to achieve these aims through engagement with online platforms, with particular reference to the Digital Services Act (DSA) and DSA Election Guidelines. We have also directly supported candidates in the Local, European, Dáil and Seanad elections through our Contact Centre and the provision of Candidate Information Packs (in partnership with An Garda Síochána), which set out candidates' rights under Ireland's Online Safety Framework and offer guidance on how to report illegal content across different digital platforms.

This study builds upon these efforts and other initiatives we have undertaken to strengthen electoral integrity and support candidates.

Our mixed methods research provides a comprehensive and nuanced representation of candidates' self-reported experiences which details the scale and effects of toxic discourse directed at candidates, and the significance of this behaviour for civic discourse and freedom of expression.

It clearly demonstrates the very real human impact of the harmful, abusive and, at times, threatening, content, which election candidates reported receiving during both the Local and General Election campaigns. While candidates acknowledged the need for legitimate political scrutiny, the offensive, targeted and, in some cases, very localised nature of online abuse, impacts candidates and their loved ones. The findings also point to potential consequences for political participation and the diversity of democratic representation.

We are grateful for the time and effort that many election candidates gave to make this research possible.

The report findings will help Coimisiún na Meán to support safe participation in public life and electoral integrity. They will inform actions over the course of our 2025-27 Strategy Statement, including evaluating platforms' compliance with their obligations under our Online Safety Framework.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-stakeholder approach and collective solutions, and we will engage further with peer regulators, including An Coimisiún Toghcháin, digital and media regulators across Europe and the European Commission, civil society, the Houses of the Oireachtas and An Garda Síochána, to support this.

John Evans
Digital Services Commissioner

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Coimisiún na Meán report examines the online experiences of candidates who participated in the 2024 Local and General Elections in Ireland. Based on comprehensive surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews with candidates for both elections, it investigates the prevalence of social media usage in campaigning, the nature and impact of negative online experiences and their effect on candidates’ wellbeing and participation in political life. With a specific focus on online experiences, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence. Building on recent research in the area of safe participation in political life conducted by the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG),¹ the Houses of the Oireachtas,² as well as by An Coimisiún Toghcháin’s National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS).³

The findings highlight serious concerns regarding the extent of online toxicity and its potential to undermine democratic participation, raising significant questions about the long-term impact on political engagement, representative diversity and the quality of public debate in the democratic system.

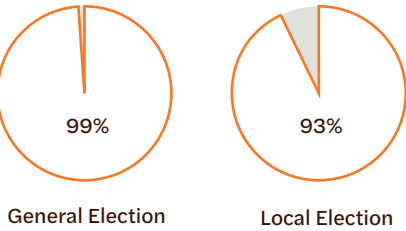
Social media usage in election campaigns

Usage rates of social media in 2024 elections

Election type	Percentage
Local election candidates	93%
General election candidates	99%
Combined – local and general election candidates	95%

Social media has become an indispensable component of modern election campaigns in Ireland, with 95% of surveyed political candidates across both the local and general elections reporting they utilised it during their 2024 campaigns. The adoption rate was higher among general election candidates at 99%, while 93% of local election candidates indicated they had used social media in the 2024 campaign.

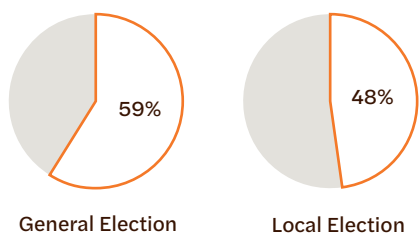
Candidates recognise that traditional canvassing can only reach a limited percentage of voters, making social media essential for expanding their reach, raising their profile and reinforcing key campaign messages. The cost-effectiveness of social media was reported as being particularly valuable for candidates.



1 AILG-CMG Report - Threats, Harassment and Intimidation in Public Office
2 Report of the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life - Report as presented to the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach - May 2024
3 <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/what-we-do/national-election-and-democracy-study/>

Among the major platforms, Facebook was utilised by 92% of the candidates surveyed, followed by Instagram (80%), X/ Twitter (57%), TikTok (45%), LinkedIn (36%) and YouTube (22%). General election candidates indicated higher platform adoption rates than their local election counterparts, reflecting the broader reach required for national campaigns.

Prevalence of negative online experiences



Prevalence of Negative Online Experiences	
Election type	Percentage of candidates experiencing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online▪ Violent or intimidating behaviour online▪ Behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online
Local election	48%
General election	59%

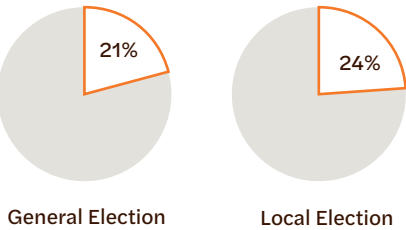
Candidates were asked about specific types of negative online experiences, which are referred to as “relevant online behaviours” throughout this report. These behaviours are:

- offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online;
- violent or intimidating behaviour online; and
- behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online.

The research revealed high rates of experiencing relevant online behaviours among political candidates, with 48% of local election candidates and 59% of general election candidates experiencing offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour; violent or intimidating communications; or impersonation online.

Put another way, nearly three out of every five candidates who contested the general election were subjected to these negative online experiences, while approximately one in every two local election candidates suffered this behaviour.

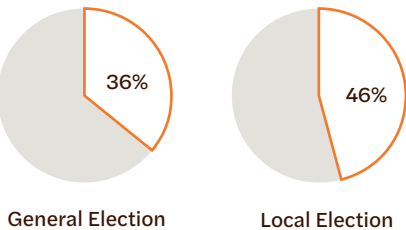
False information intended to damage reputation was the most common form of abuse (46% for local and 36% of general election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours), followed by hurtful or degrading comments (46% for the local elections and 36% for the general election). Gender-based slurs affected 18% of local and 23% of general election candidates who experienced relevant behaviours, while racial slurs impacted 18% of local and 15% of general election candidates.



Threats to Kill or Harm

24% of local election candidates and 21% of general election candidates who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours received online threats to kill or cause serious harm to them during their election campaign

Violent or intimidating behaviour online included persistent communications interfering with peace and privacy (33% local election, 18% general election) and threats to kill or cause serious harm to the candidate (24% local election, 21% general election).



False information intended to damage reputation

46% of local election candidates and 36% of general election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours said they were subjected to online attacks involving false information intended to damage their reputation.

While most candidates interviewed reported suffering online abuse to some extent, the qualitative research identified three groups in particular who had greater levels of online abuse targeted at them: candidates from migrant backgrounds, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Those from migrant backgrounds or who advocated for migrant rights reported having faced particularly vitriolic attacks, while female candidates spoke of having regularly encountered gender-specific abuse including discriminatory language, sexual harassment and derogatory comments about their appearance. LGBTQ+ candidates reported having similarly experienced heightened levels of identity-based hostility.

Targeting based on policy positions

One of the issues this research investigated was whether election candidates who experienced problematic online interactions believed they were targeted due to their positions on specific issues.

Among local election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours, immigration emerged as the most common perceived trigger at 71%, followed by LGBTQ+ issues (31%), women’s issues (24%), housing (23%) and environmental stances (20%). Some candidates also reported targeting based on party affiliation or personal characteristics.

For general election candidates who faced similar experiences, immigration was likewise the leading factor (64%), followed by women’s issues (46%), housing (33%), and LGBTQ+ issues (33%). Environmental positions (23%) and vaccine stances (21%) were also significant triggers.

These findings suggest certain policy areas consistently attract more negative online engagement for candidates across both local and national elections, with immigration being particularly contentious. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with candidates across the political spectrum reporting increased negative engagement when discussing immigration.

Targeting based on specific issues (multiple responses possible)

Topic	Local Election	General Election
Immigration	71%	64%
LGBTQ+ issues	31%	33%
Women’s issues	24%	46%
Housing	23%	33%
Environmental stances	20%	23%

Chilling impact on political discourse

As a consequence of the risk of attracting extensive online abuse, it was widely noted in interviews that political figures often tend to refrain from engaging on particular issues online for fear of attracting a “pile-on”. Several candidates suggested that they tended to avoid discussing a wide range of topics online, including migration, sexual orientation, the environment, taxation and housing, due to the risk of targeted attacks. This fear of coordinated harassment campaigns therefore inhibited meaningful discussion of important but potentially controversial policy matters. Many lamented that debates had been ceded to a highly vocal and aggressive element, with others afraid to offer alternative views for fear of becoming targets of attack.

Impact on candidates’ wellbeing and campaigns

Negative online experiences had significant impacts on candidates’ psychological wellbeing and campaign strategies:

Local election candidates:

- 62% reported feeling anxious or afraid (15% ‘very’ anxious)
- 38% worried about family/loved ones’ safety
- 32% worried about their own safety
- 26% worried about being in public
- 23% suffered mental or physical health impacts
- 20% increased home security
- 17% restricted their movements (such as avoiding particular public places or their workplace)

General election candidates:

- 67% reported feeling anxious or afraid (18% ‘very’ anxious)
- 41% worried about family/loved ones’ safety
- 38% worried about their own safety
- 33% increased home security
- 33% worried about being in public
- 28% said that their family or loved ones worried about the candidate’s safety or their own safety
- 18% increased security at their constituency office or at constituency clinics
- 18% restricted their movements (such as avoiding specific public locations or their workplace)
- 18% suffered from mental or physical health impacts

Female candidates reported significantly higher rates of anxiety in both elections. These experiences directly affected campaigning activities, with 33% of local election candidates feeling less confident about continuing their campaign, 25% stopping personal content sharing, and 21% avoiding specific policy areas in their messaging.

Furthermore, 15% of local and 26% of general election candidates reported being less likely to run for office again due to these experiences, while 2% of local and 5% of general election candidates indicated they would not run again as a result of these experiences.

The qualitative interviews revealed the extent that online harassment had real-world consequences for candidates, in some cases significantly altering how they lived their daily lives and representing a significant disincentive to participating in public life.

Personal life and freedoms were restricted in a number of cases due to online attacks, with several candidates reporting they felt obliged, for example, to install home security systems and alter their regular movements to mitigate the risk of offline attacks.

Threats to family members, whether explicit or implied, represented a major source of anxiety and guilt for several candidates. The psychological burden of protecting loved ones while maintaining a public profile was reported by some candidates as a particular source of acute anxiety. For some participants, these family-related concerns became the determining factor in deciding whether to participate as candidates in future elections, representing a direct threat to democratic participation.

In this context, there was widespread frustration expressed at the perceived lack of responsiveness from social media platforms, with several candidates saying they felt unsupported when reporting threats, abuse or harassment. Additionally, some participants who felt threatened showed reluctance to report online incidents to An Garda Síochána, citing uncertainty about whether specific behaviours constituted criminal offences and doubts about the likelihood of identifying perpetrators.

Barriers to reporting and platform response

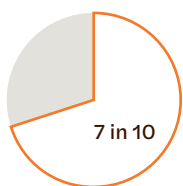
While the level and range of targeted online abuse was reported as being high, only a minority filed reports with the hosting platforms. 42% of those local election candidate respondents who experienced relevant online behaviours indicated that they, or someone on their behalf, had made a report to at least one platform. While only 31% of general election candidates who experienced negative online behaviours said they made at least one report to a platform.

In summary, this means that almost 6 out of 10 local election candidates and 7 out of 10 general election candidates did not report any incidents of relevant online behaviours to a platform.

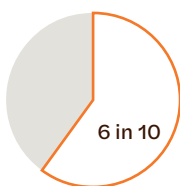
The key reasons given for the reluctance to report included:

- Scepticism that platforms would take meaningful action
- Time constraints during busy campaign periods
- Desensitisation to online hostility
- Desire to maintain a positive mindset

Those who did report content often described convoluted processes with unsatisfactory outcomes, often citing stock responses received, which stated that reported content did not violate terms and conditions, even in cases involving clear threats of harm or incitement to violence.



General Election



Local Election

Low levels of reporting to platforms

General election:

About 7 in 10 candidates who encountered negative online behaviours did not report them to platforms.

Local election:

About 6 in 10 candidates who encountered negative online behaviours did not report them to platforms.

Development of self-protection strategies online

Many candidates reported growing accustomed to online toxicity and consequently employing various defensive strategies to manage negative interactions without engaging directly. A sense of resignation pervaded interviews, with many viewing online hostility as an inevitable aspect of modern political life. There was widespread scepticism about platform intervention and little appetite for engaging with lengthy reporting procedures.

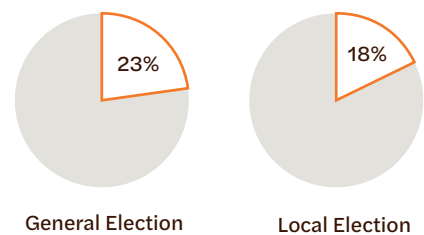
In response, candidates reported adopting a range of self-protective techniques in various situations, including blocking individual accounts, muting specific comments, filtering content, disabling comments and deactivating geolocation features. Those with professional support managing their accounts reported being somewhat shielded by colleagues who screened toxic content. A small number of candidates interviewed took a contrasting approach, deliberately leaving all abuse visible so the public could witness the extent of the abuse targeted against them.

Anonymity and platform accountability

Almost all interviewees raised concerns about anonymous accounts targeting people online without consequence. Many called for stricter registration requirements to enable legal recourse in serious cases, such as threats to harm, incitement to violence, sustained harassment or defamation. While acknowledging legitimate reasons for a degree of anonymity, including the protection of freedom of expression and privacy rights, several candidates said solutions should be found. They suggested measures such as obliging all account holders to register to facilitate some legal recourse in extenuating circumstances. Anonymous accounts were seen as degrading and undermining the online environment, with some actors operating multiple accounts in coordinated attacks. In many cases, interviewees said they suspected anonymous accounts that targeted them were in fact bots - accounts controlled by software rather than operated directly by humans.

Local versus general elections

In comparative terms the interviewees noted that local elections, while generally seen as being less toxic overall than general elections, presented unique risks due to geographical proximity. Harassment and stalking emerged as particularly concerning in local contexts, with abusers often demonstrating detailed knowledge of candidates’ routines, family activities and children’s whereabouts. This created heightened vulnerability among candidates living and working in the same communities as potential harassers.



18% of local election and 23% of general election candidates were subjected to online Gender-based slurs or derogatory terms

In this particular election cycle, the timing of the June 2024 Local Elections was significant and impacted the overall tone of the campaign, as tensions around immigration were particularly high during this period.⁴ Several candidates noted that sensitivity around this issue had somewhat lessened by the November General Election.

Navigating the balance between protection and free expression

Although candidates provided extensive accounts of social media harassment and abuse, they consistently emphasized the need to balance combating online toxicity with safeguarding freedom of expression and privacy rights. Multiple interviewees expressed nuanced views about distinguishing constructive criticism from damaging harassment, clarifying that their goal was not to avoid legitimate political scrutiny but to secure protection from targeted personal attacks, intimidation tactics, and coordinated abuse efforts.

4 Some migrant candidates afraid to canvass or use posters amid fears their children will be targeted; Dozens of incidents of political violence, intimidation and threats detected during Irish election campaign - ISD.

Recommendations

The candidates interviewed suggested several key recommendations to address these challenges:

- Regulatory accountability through stronger enforcement of existing regulations with meaningful penalties for non-compliance, alongside multi-stakeholder forums to develop standardised reporting mechanisms and response protocols.
- Skills support for candidates through comprehensive training programmes covering protective measures during campaigns.
- Public education through awareness campaigns highlighting the impact of online harassment on democratic participation and school-based digital citizenship programmes.
- Role of Coimisiún na Meán in further developing training resources, conducting regional workshops, designating political liaison contacts, and providing updated information on newly created Out-of-Court Dispute Settlement Bodies.⁵
- Engaging in discussions with An Garda Síochána to explore options to mitigate risks and prevent escalatory activity.

The findings reflect the clear view from candidates that there is a need for collective action to ensure that digital platforms enhance rather than undermine democratic processes, protecting the integrity of elections and the wellbeing of those who participate in them. An Coimisiún provides reflections, including actions it can take within its remit and those applicable to other bodies, platforms etc. in Section 7.

⁵ Independent entities designated under Article 21 of the Digital Services Act to resolve disputes between users and platforms regarding content moderation decisions

Section 1:

Background and Methodology

1.1 Research study aims and relevance to the role of An Coimisiún

What is the research about and what is its purpose?

This research examines candidates' experiences of campaigning and engaging on social media platforms during the 2024 Local and General Election campaigns in Ireland. The study was conducted to help Coimisiún na Meán understand candidates' experiences of certain types of online behaviour and their awareness of social media platforms' reporting functions. The purpose is to inform An Coimisiún's work by developing a better understanding of the online engagement experiences of those in public life, building an evidence base to support An Coimisiún in fulfilling its regulatory functions.

Coimisiún na Meán's role

Coimisiún na Meán is Ireland's agency for developing and regulating a thriving, diverse, creative, safe and trusted media landscape. This means having a mix of different voices, opinions and sources of news. This means protecting children and all of us from harmful content.

Our responsibilities are to:

- Oversee the funding of and support the development of the wider media sector in Ireland.
- Oversee the regulation of broadcasting and video-on-demand services.
- Develop and enforce the Irish regulatory regime for online safety.

Ireland's Online Safety Framework makes digital services accountable for how they protect people from potential harm or exposure to illegal content online.

Three different pieces of legislation form the Framework:

- The EU Digital Services Act (DSA)
- The EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation
- The Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022

More detailed information about the Online Safety Framework is available at www.cnam.ie/online-safety.

Dimensions of research study

This research aims to draw a comprehensive picture of political candidates' online experiences in Ireland during the 2024 election cycles and establish key benchmarks for future comparison. The study examines multiple dimensions of candidates' digital engagement, including:

- Platform usage patterns and strategies, identifying which social media platforms candidates utilise most frequently and how they incorporate these tools into their campaign efforts.
- The nature and frequency of negative online experiences, specifically documenting incidents of:
 - Offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online
 - Violent or intimidating communications online
 - Behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online
- Reporting mechanisms and responses, analysing:
 - Whether and how candidates report problematic content
 - How effectively platforms handle these reports
 - What protective and mitigating measures candidates employ
- Impact assessment, evaluating issues such as:
 - The overall effect of online harassment and abuse on political candidates' wellbeing
 - Potential influence on political participation and democratic processes
 - Psychological, professional, and personal consequences for affected individuals
- Recommendations for improvement:
 - Platform policy and enforcement enhancements
 - Legislative or regulatory interventions
 - Support systems and resources for candidates
 - Educational initiatives for both candidates and the public

By examining these elements across both the local and general elections of 2024, this research aims to provide insights into the evolving digital landscape of Irish political campaigns and identify potential interventions to create safer online environments for democratic participation.

1.2 Terminology and definitions used

Term	Meaning
Impersonating behaviour	Pretending to be a specific election candidate online such as by setting up a social media account and engaging online in the candidate's name – this could be for the purposes of making a gain or causing a loss to the candidate or others.
Relevant online behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online▪ Violent or intimidating behaviour online▪ Behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online

In relation to relevant online behaviours, the following categories of behaviours were selected based on anecdotal information about previous experiences of election candidates, and derived from existing offences which such types of behaviour may constitute:

- Offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online
- Violent or intimidating behaviour online
- Behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online

The breakdown of types of offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour were largely based on protected characteristics under equality legislation. The breakdown of types of violent or intimidating behaviours were derived with reference to offences in the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 including threats to kill or cause serious harm, and harassment.

Section 1: Background and Methodology

1.3 Research methodology

A mixed methods research structure was implemented, combining a quantitative survey with in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with a smaller sample of candidates from both elections. This mixed methods approach was adopted to provide both breadth and depth of understanding, allowing the identification of broad patterns through survey data while gaining deeper insights into candidates' experiences and perspectives through qualitative interviews.

Given the small size of the total target population, the entire sample was targeted for recruitment. Extensive email lists were compiled from publicly accessible data of candidates in both the 2024 Local Elections and General Election. All candidates on these lists, both members of political parties and independents (non-party), were subsequently directly notified of the research and invited to complete the survey and participate in an interview. Additionally, all registered political parties in the State were also notified of the research and encouraged to disseminate the information to their candidates in both the 2024 Local and General Elections.

Every effort was made to ensure as large and as representative a sample of research participants as possible. However, there were inevitably some challenges, which are outlined in the discussion of limitations below. In terms of representativeness, An Coimisiún sought to mitigate any risks by contacting all the registered political parties in the State as well as non-governmental organisations, which work to support election candidates, to ask them to disseminate the research invitation to their candidate contact lists. In seeking to recruit interview participants, An Coimisiún followed up with political party head offices to attempt to ensure as representative a sample as possible. In doing so, registered political parties were asked to encourage representativeness in any candidates who would be willing to participate in the research.

Quantitative study

Quantitative survey – local election candidates

There were 226 respondents from among 2,170 local election candidates.⁶ The survey was open from 12 September 2024 to 14 October 2024.

Quantitative survey – general election candidates

66 respondents out of total of 685 general election candidates.⁷ The survey was open from 18 February 2025 and closed on 30 March 2025.

All numbers throughout have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Qualitative study

Participants for this research were chosen as they were candidates in the 2024 Local Elections or General Election or had a close involvement with candidate online experiences during these elections. When candidates for both elections were notified of the online survey, they were also given the option to participate in an interview. Additionally, all registered political parties in the State were contacted and asked to nominate candidates from their parties who would participate in an interview. In doing so, registered political parties were asked to encourage representativeness and particularly a gender-balance in any candidates who would be willing to participate in the research. In total, 44 election candidates were interviewed for this research.⁸

Qualitative – Local Election candidates

The qualitative research with local election candidates comprised interviews with 22 candidates in total. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, following a semi-structured format organised around key themes. The interviews were conducted in October 2024, and the average interview duration was 45 minutes.

Qualitative – General Election candidates

The qualitative research with general election candidates also involved interviews with 22 election candidates. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, following a semi-structured format organised around key themes. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2025, and the average interview duration was 45 minutes.

⁶ <https://datahub.womenforelection.ie/pages/local-elections-map-2024>

⁷ <https://www.rte.ie/news/election-24/2024/1116/1481337-over-680-candidates-to-contest-election-24/>

⁸ In two cases out of the 44 interviews, the interviewees were colleagues of election candidates who had detailed knowledge of the candidates' online experiences and were authorised to speak on their behalf. The other 42 interviewees were candidates in either the 2024 Local Elections or General Election, or both.

Section 1: Background and Methodology

1.4 Ethical Considerations

Consent and data protection

The survey landing page provided participant information and confirmed the voluntary nature of participation. Interview participants received detailed information notes and discussion guides, with consent confirmed before participation. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their consent to participate in the interview at any time before publication of the report of the research findings. Participants were also informed that they could choose to pause or end the interview at any point.⁹

An Coimisiún served as Data Controller for all data collected. Survey data was collected via Microsoft Forms with restricted access, while interview data was recorded via Microsoft Teams and Dictaphone. All data files were password protected with access limited to researchers and analysts. Personal data will be retained only for the research duration and destroyed following publication.

Research integrity

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with data subsequently coded thematically. Participant quotes were included to present findings in participants' own words. The report underwent peer review and was updated based on reviewer feedback. Non-gender-neutral pronouns were used only where contextually relevant.

⁹ For researchers who require a copy of the original surveys, with routing, and/or the qualitative research information sheets, data privacy notice and informed consent forms, please email research@cnam.ie

1.5 Limitations

Sample representativeness

While participants self-selected from the target population through an anonymous survey, standard measures were taken to promote representativeness. Demographic questions were included to identify any potential underrepresentation across gender, political party affiliation status, and geographic location. In terms of recruitment of research participants, every effort was made to obtain contact information for all eligible candidates to ensure broad invitation coverage, though some 2024 Local Election candidates had closed their campaign email accounts. To address this, registered political parties and relevant NGOs were asked to disseminate the research invitation to their candidate networks.

Response rates and potential bias

The final survey samples represented just over 10% of 2024 Local Election candidates and just under 10% of 2024 General Election candidates. Candidates who experienced negative online campaigns may have been more motivated to participate, potentially creating selection bias. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to mitigate limitations associated with sample size, allowing quantitative findings to be considered alongside qualitative insights from in-depth interviews.

Survey anonymity

To ensure complete anonymity, individual survey links were not generated as this would have created digital records linking responses to email addresses. While this meant the survey could theoretically be completed by non-candidates, the risk was considered low given careful dissemination only to candidates directly or through trusted organisations. Initial data review confirmed no unusual patterns or responses indicating inappropriate completion.

Section 1: Background and Methodology

1.6 Acknowledgements

Coimisiún na Meán would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank all of the Local Election 2024 and General Election 2024 candidates who responded to the survey and/or participated in a research interview. An Coimisiún would also like to extend its thanks to the political party head offices and stakeholder organisations (Immigrant Council of Ireland, Women for Election and See Her Elected) who disseminated the survey link and invitation to participate in the research to their candidate contact lists. An Coimisiún is grateful to the Oireachtas Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life, An Coimisiún Toghcháin and the Association of Irish Local Government for their engagement in relation to, and support of, the research. All assistance with recruiting participants and the willingness of candidates to participate were greatly appreciated and were invaluable to the research process.



Section 2:

Demographics and Use of Social Media

2.1 Introduction

This section will discuss the demographics of the election candidates who participated in the research and their use of social media during, or as part of, their election campaign. The first section of both surveys was aimed at gaining an understanding of the demographic backgrounds of candidates to ascertain whether the respondents were representative of different political party types, geographical backgrounds, ages etc. The inclusion of demography questions also allowed for responses to later questions in the survey to be analysed with reference to respondent demographics. This made it possible to assess, for example, whether respondents of a particular gender or age group were more or less likely to experience relevant online behaviours than respondents of another gender or age group. This section will also discuss the findings of the second section of the survey, which was aimed at developing an understanding of the social media use of candidates, including whether they used social media during, or as part of, their election campaign; what social media platforms they used; and how regularly they used social media, if at all.

2.2 Overview of survey respondent and interview participant demographics

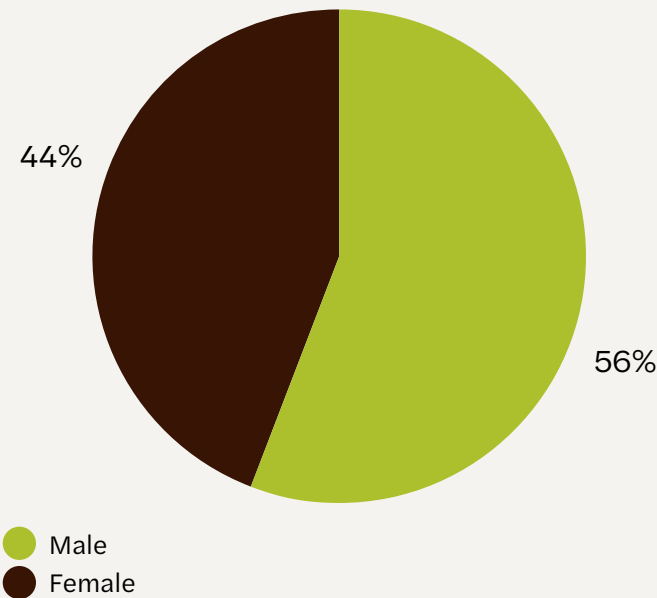
The demography questions covered the following:

- Political party membership/non-membership
- Age group
- Gender
- Ethnic group /background
- Location of the Local Electoral Area/constituency in which the candidate was seeking to be elected
- Whether candidates were running for election as a serving public official or not; and whether those who were running for election had previously run for election to public office or been an elected public official
- Whether respondents had been elected in the 2024 elections
- In the case of the local election survey only, whether respondents intended to run for election in the 2024 General Election

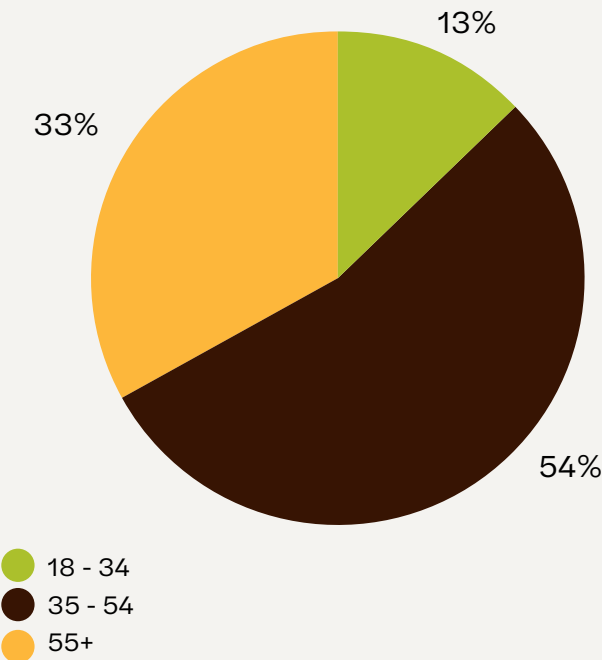
Overview of candidate demographics

Local Election candidates' demographics overview

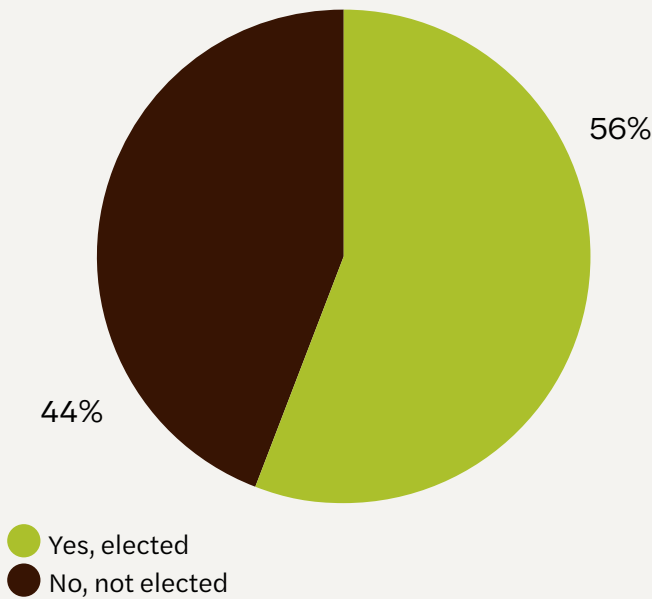
Candidate Gender



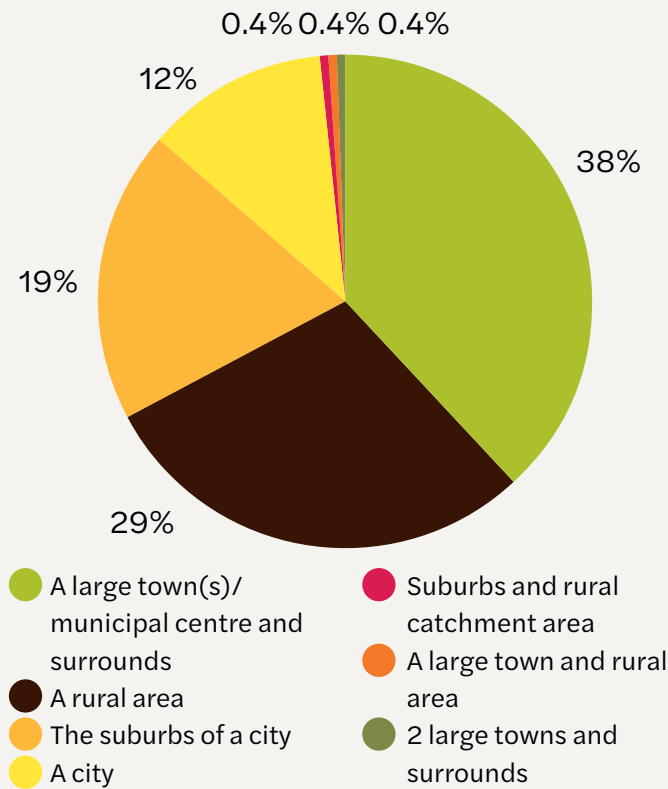
Candidate Age Group



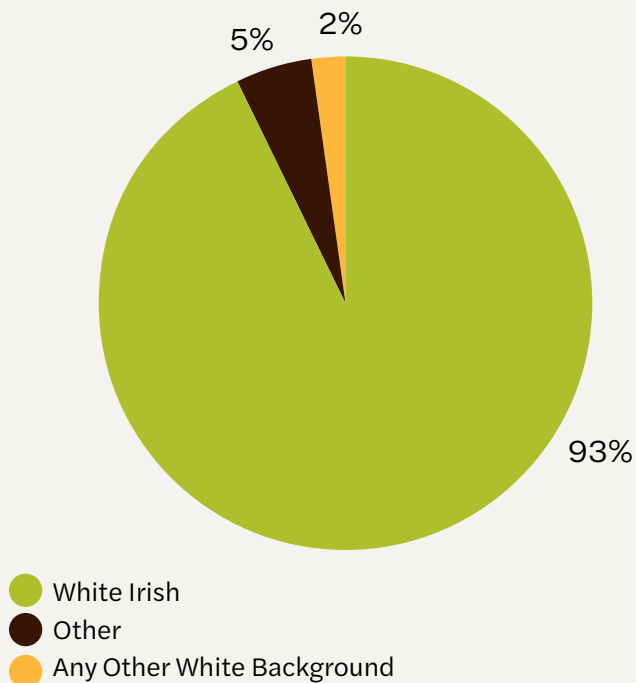
Candidate Electoral Outcome



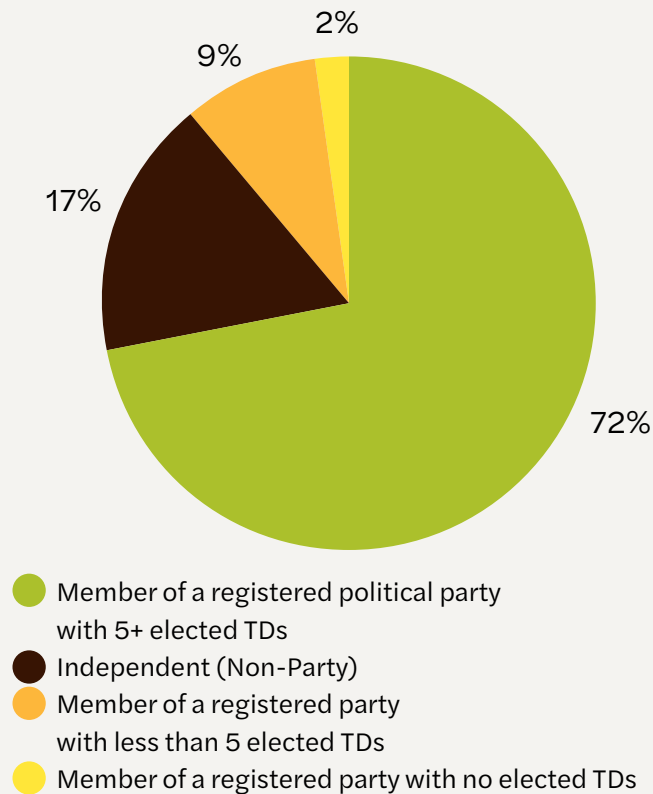
Candidate Electoral Area



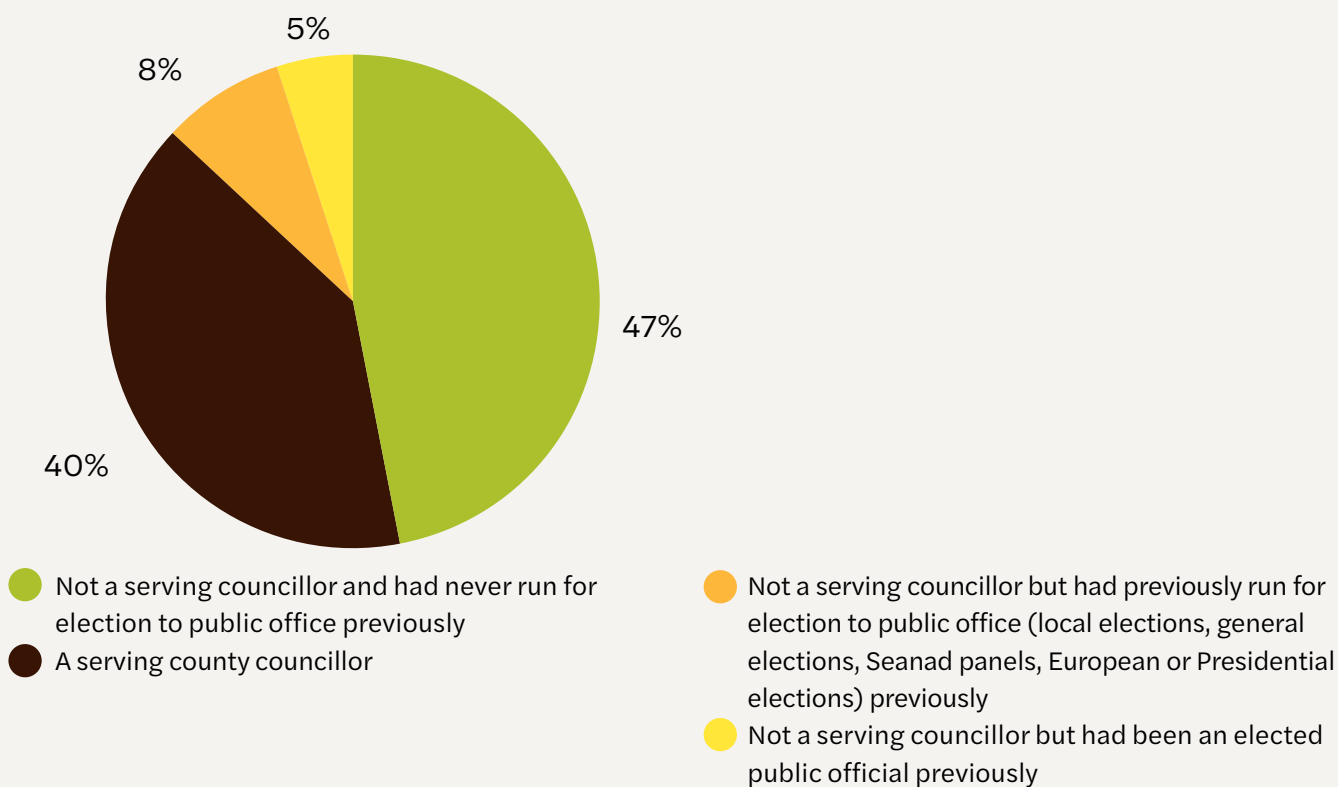
Candidate Ethnicity



Candidate Political Party Membership



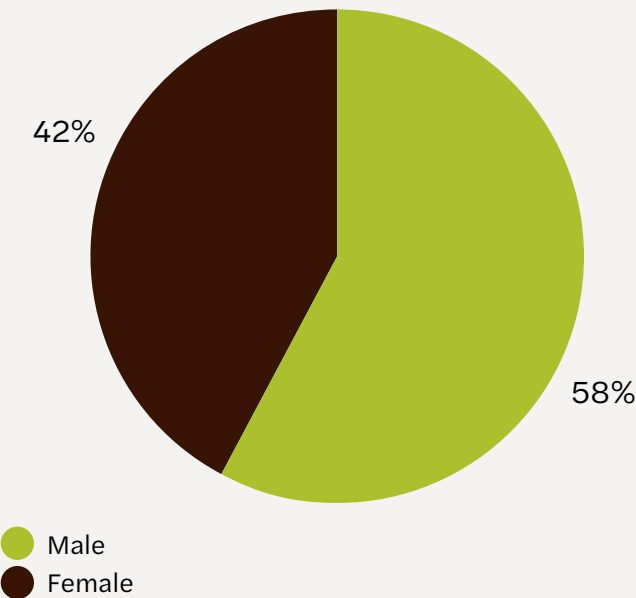
Candidate Status



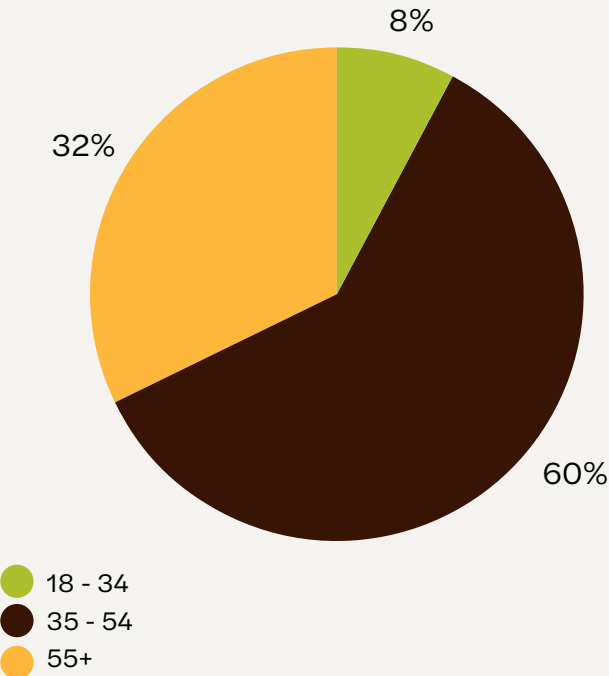
Overview of candidate demographics

General Election candidates' demographics overview

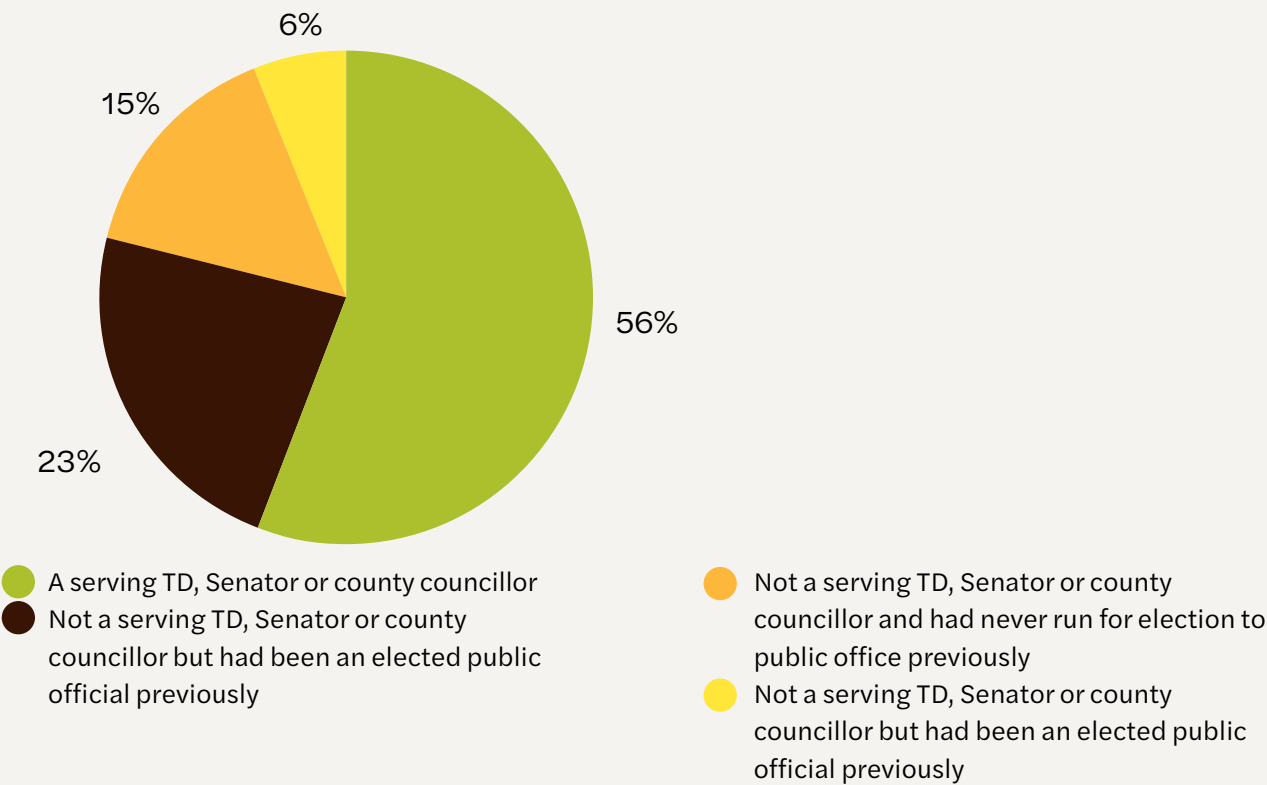
Candidate Gender



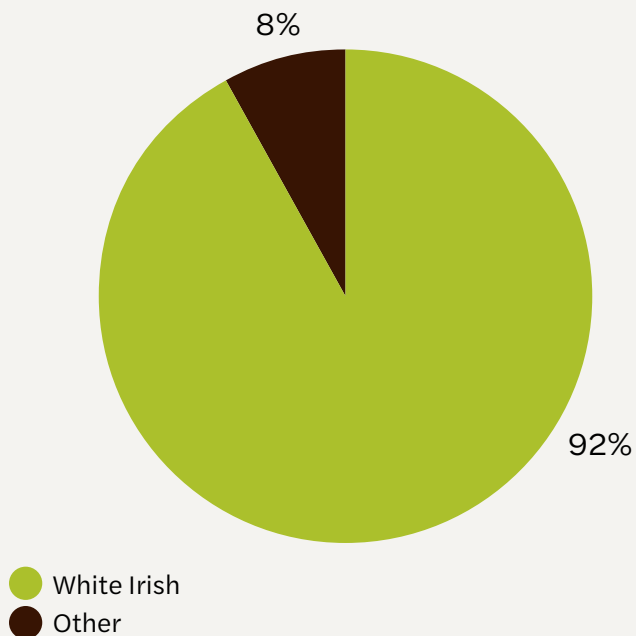
Candidate Age Group



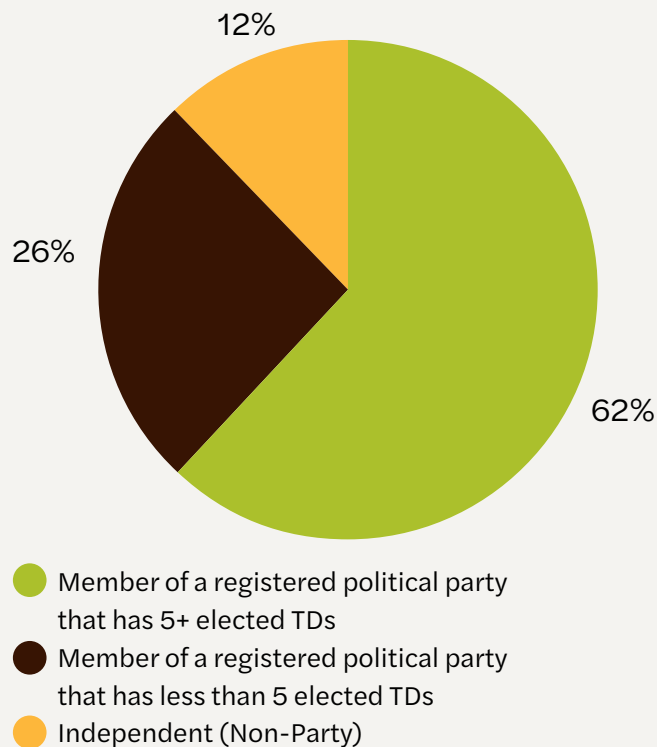
Running for Election to the Dáil



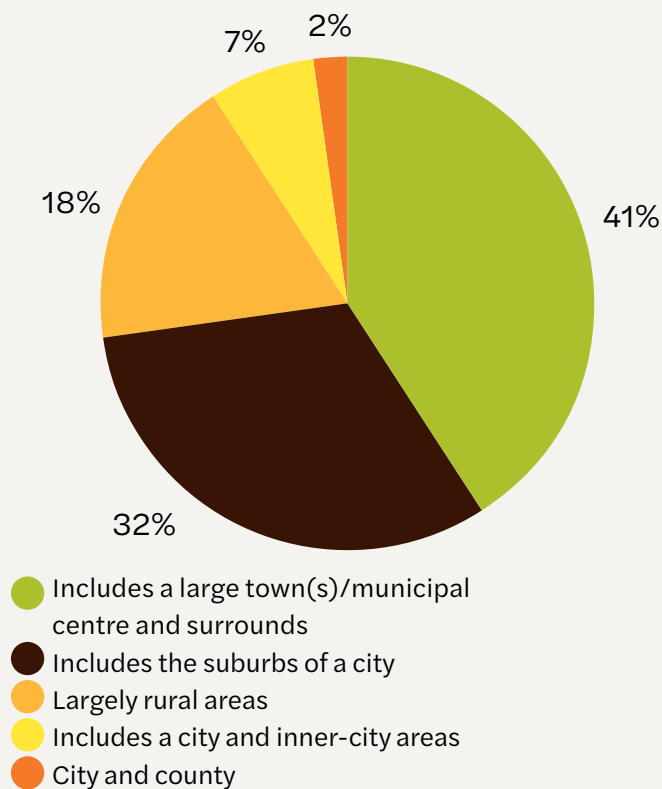
Candidate Ethnicity



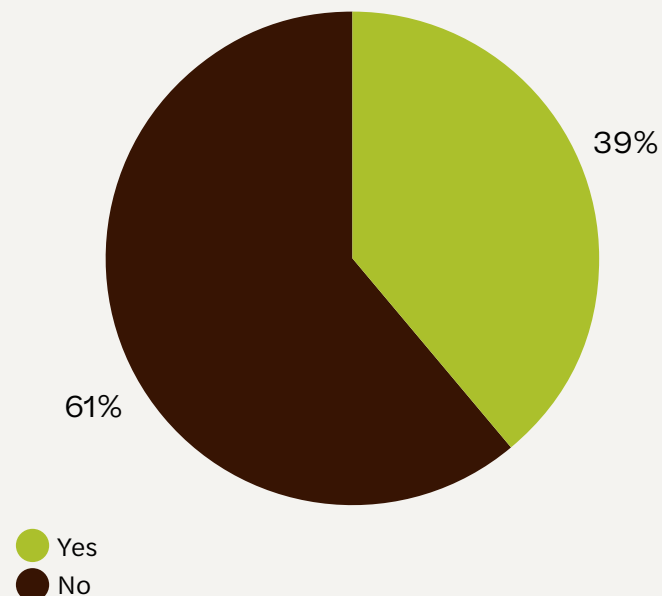
Candidate Political Party Membership



Constituency Type Seeking Election



Elected in 2024 General Election



Overview of candidate demographics

Political party membership/non-membership

Local election candidates

- 72% of the local election candidate survey respondents were a member of a registered political party with 5+ elected TDs.
- 17% were independent (non-party) candidates.
- 9% of respondents were a member of a registered political party with less than 5 elected TDs.
- 2% were a member of a registered political party with no elected TDs.

General election candidates

- 62% of the general election candidate survey respondents were a member of a registered political party with 5+ elected TDs.
- 26% of respondents were a member of a registered political party with less than 5 elected TDs.
- 8% were independent (non-party) candidates.

Age group

Local election candidates

Just over half of the respondents were in the 35-54 age bracket (54%) while 33% were in the 55+ age bracket. 13% of respondents were in the 18-34 age bracket.

General election candidates

61% of the respondents were in the 35-54 age bracket, while 32% were in the 55+ age bracket. 7% of respondents were in the 18-34 age bracket.

Gender

Local election candidates

Just over half of the respondents (56%) were male while 44% were female.¹⁰

General election candidates

58% of the respondents were male while 42% were female. No respondents selected the “Other” option in response to the question on gender.

¹⁰ An Coimisiún recognises that “women” is an inclusive term for those who identify as women. However, in its data collection methodology, An Coimisiún typically uses “male” and “female” as response options for gender questions to align with the gender categories used in the Irish Census, particularly when research aims to survey a nationally representative sample of the population. The usage of research terminology will be kept under review.

Ethnic group/background

In determining the response options to the ethnicity group or background question, regard was had to the response options to the Census question on ethnicity group or background. Given the relatively small target population for the survey (and that research has shown that the majority of candidates are of a white background) it was decided that including all of the response options from the Census question could result in a high risk of identifiability especially when responses to other demographic questions such as age and gender were taken into account. It was therefore decided to restrict the response options to the following:

- White Irish
- Any Other White Background
- Other

Local election candidates

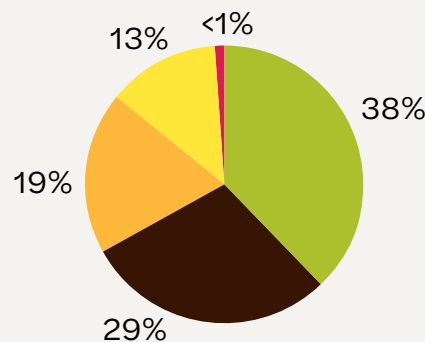
93% of the respondents were “White Irish” while 2% selected “Any Other White Background”. 5% selected “Other”, which encapsulated all ethnic groups or backgrounds other than “White Irish” and “Any Other White Background”.

General election candidates

92% of the respondents were “White Irish”. 8% selected “Other”, which encapsulated all ethnic groups or backgrounds other than White Irish and “Any Other White Background”. No respondents selected “Any Other White Background”.

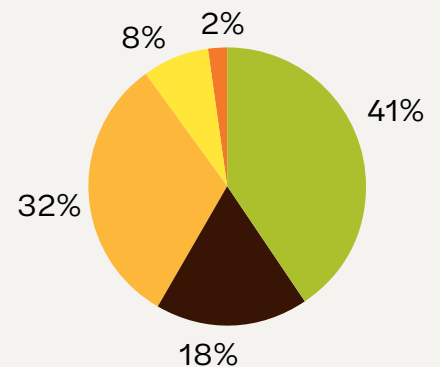
Location of the Local Electoral Area or constituency in which the candidate was seeking to be elected

Local Election Candidates



- Large town(s)/ municipal centre (and surrounding areas)
- Rural area/Largely rural areas
- Suburbs of a city

General Election Candidates



- City/City and inner-city areas
- City and county
- Other*

Overview of candidate demographics

Local election candidates

Candidates were asked to identify the response option that best describes the location of the Local Electoral Area (“LEA”) in which they were seeking to be elected. The purpose of this question was to assess, for example, whether candidates from rural areas were more or less likely to experience relevant online behaviours than candidates from urban areas.

- 38% of respondents indicated that the LEA in which they were running for election was best described as a large town(s)/municipal centre and surrounding areas.
- 29% indicated that the relevant LEA was best described as a rural area.
- 19% indicated that the LEA in which they were running for election was best described as the suburbs of a city.
- 13% indicated that the relevant LEA was best described as a city.
- Less than one percent selected the “Other” option to indicate that the relevant LEA was best identified by an alternate description. In the accompanying free-text response option, the relevant respondents indicated that the LEA in which they were running for election was best described as a combination of a large town and a rural area and a combination of city suburbs and rural areas.

General election candidates

Candidates were asked to identify which category best described the constituency in which they were seeking to be elected to. The purpose of this question was to assess, for example, whether candidates from rural areas were more or less likely to experience relevant online behaviours than candidates from urban areas. Candidates responded as follows in relation to their constituency:

- 41% said it included (a) large town(s)/municipal centre.
- 32% said it included the suburbs of a city.
- 18% answered largely rural areas, while 8% said it included a city and inner-city areas.
- 2% said city and county.

Candidates' previous public official and electoral candidate experience

Local election candidates

Candidates were asked whether they were running for election as a serving councillor or not; and whether those who were not running for election as a serving councillor had previously run for election to public office or been an elected public official previously.

The purpose of this question was to allow analysis to determine whether first-time candidates were more or less likely than incumbent candidates or candidates with previous election or public office experience to experience relevant online behaviours.

- 47% of respondents indicated that they were not a serving councillor and had never run for election to public office previously.
- 40% indicated that they were a serving councillor.
- 8% of respondents were not a serving councillor but had previously run for election to a public office.
- 5% were not a serving councillor but had been an elected public official previously.

General Election candidates

Candidates were asked whether they were running for election as a serving TD, Senator or councillor, or not; if they were not a serving TD, Senator or councillor, if they had run for election for public office previously or not (local elections, general elections, Seanad panel, European or presidential election); or whether those running for election and not serving as a TD, Senator or councillor had been an elected official previously.

The purpose of this question was to allow analysis to determine whether first-time candidates were more or less likely than incumbent candidates or candidates with previous election or public office experience to experience relevant online behaviours.

- 56% indicated they were a serving TD, senator or councillor.
- 23% said they were not a serving TD, Senator or councillor but had previously run for election for public office.
- 15% said they were not a serving TD, Senator or councillor and had not previously run for election for public office.
- 6% said they were not a serving TD, senator or councillor but had previously been elected to public office.

Overview of candidate demographics

Successful candidature in the 2024 local elections

Local election candidates

Candidates were asked whether they had been elected in the 2024 local elections. The purpose of this question was to determine, for example, whether of candidates that had experienced relevant online behaviours, candidates who were not elected were more likely to say that their experience of the relevant online behaviours would affect their decision to run for election again in the future.

Just over half of respondents (56%) indicated that they had been elected in the 2024 local elections.

General election candidates

Candidates were asked whether they had been elected in the 2024 general elections. The purpose of this question was to determine, for example, whether candidates who were not elected were more likely to say that their experience of the relevant online behaviours, if any, would affect their decision to run for election again in the future.

39% of respondents indicated that they had been elected in the 2024 general elections.

Local election candidates' intention to run in the 2024 General Election

The respondents to the survey for local election candidates were asked whether or not they intended to run as a candidate in the 2024 General Election. 64% of respondents indicated that they did not intend to run as a candidate in the 2024 General Election. 19% intended to run in the 2024 General Election while 17% were undecided at the time of completing the survey.

The purpose of this action was to ascertain whether candidates who had experienced relevant online behaviours were more or less likely to say that they intended to run as a candidate in the 2024 General Election than those who had not experienced relevant online behaviours. This will be discussed further below.

Qualitative research – demographic breakdown

Qualitative demographics – Local Election

The qualitative study focusing on local election candidates comprised 22 participants in total. The gender distribution was 15 females and 7 males. Participants represented a mix of political party representatives and independents.

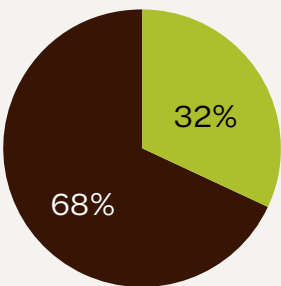
Qualitative demographics – General Election

The qualitative study focusing on general election candidates also comprised 22 participants in total. The gender distribution was 11 females and 11 males. Participants represented a mix of political party representatives and independents.

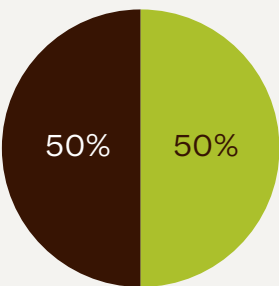
Qualitative research - Demographic breakdown

Gender

Local Elections



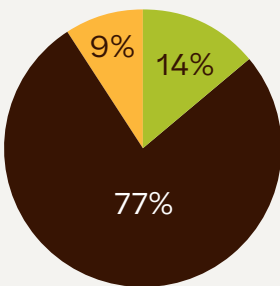
General Elections



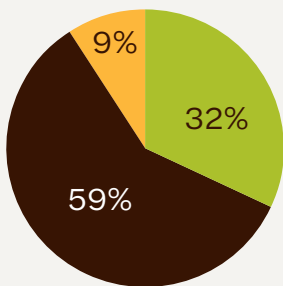
Male
Female

Age Bracket

Local Elections



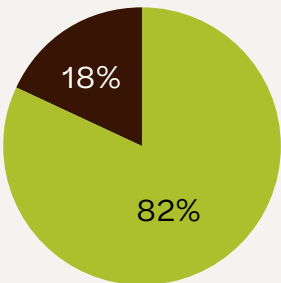
General Elections



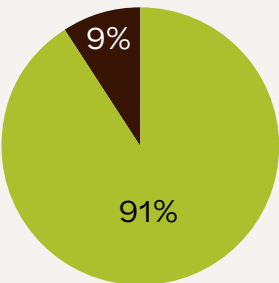
18 - 34
35 - 54
55+

Ethnic group

Local Elections



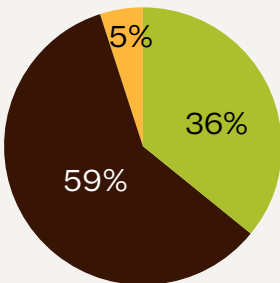
General Elections



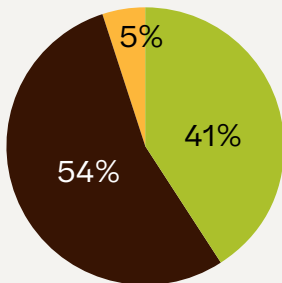
White Irish
Other

Elected

Local Elections



General Elections



Yes
No
Staff member



2.3 Social media usage of candidates with demographic analysis

Social media now serves as an essential tool in contemporary Irish election campaigns, with its use reported by 95% of surveyed candidates across both local and general elections. The adoption was particularly pronounced among general election candidates, reaching nearly universal usage at 99%, while 93% of local election candidates incorporated social media into their 2024 campaign strategies.

The quantitative data highlights how central that social media has become to election campaigns and political engagement across all age groups. This is further evidenced by the strong consensus that emerged in the interviews that social media engagement is now a critical element of any election campaign. Many interviewees acknowledged that traditional canvassing could only reach a limited percentage of the electorate, making social media a critical component of their campaigns to engage additional voters, increase their profile and reinforce key messaging.

Local election candidates

All of the local election candidate survey respondents in the 18-34 age group reported that they, or someone on their behalf, had used social media or video-sharing platforms as part of or during their campaign for the 2024 local elections. This compares with 98% of those in the 35-54 years group and 84% of those in the 55 years plus age group. Male local election candidate respondents were slightly less likely (91%) to have used social media than female local election candidates (96%).

All of the local election candidates interviewed reported that they, or someone on their behalf, had used social media or video-sharing platforms as part of or during their campaign for the 2024 local elections. Predominately local election candidates said they managed the social media accounts themselves, or with the support of a friend or a family member. A small number said they had some professional support. While all of the interviewees used social media, a small number in the 55+ age bracket used it sparingly and were inclined to operate on only one or two platforms. Generally speaking, the younger cohort used social media more frequently and operated across more platforms.

Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

General election candidates

All of the general election candidate survey respondents in the 18-34 age group and the 35-54 years reported that they, or someone on their behalf, had used social media or video-sharing platforms as part of or during their campaign for the 2024 General Election. This compares with 95% of those in the 55 years plus age group.

All of the general election candidates interviewed also reported that they, or someone on their behalf, had used social media or video-sharing platforms as part of or during their campaign for the 2024 Local Elections. Overall, compared to the local election candidates, the general election candidates had more experience and support in the area of campaigning on social media. Many reported having some professional support to manage online engagement and budgets to back up social media ad campaigns, and experience had typically been garnered over a number of campaigns they ran in themselves or in support of another candidate.

General qualitative findings on social media use

Further themes related to candidates' social media usage were apparent from the analysis of the in-depth interviews. These themes included:

- political pages and advertising;
- social media training;
- differences in engaging online during the 2024 Local Elections as compared to the 2024 General Election;
- positive aspects of social media engagement;
- balancing rights (such as to free speech) and regulation;
- crafting and enforcing appropriate legislation; and
- anonymous accounts.

These themes are discussed further below.

Political pages and advertising

Most interviewees had set up verified political representative accounts on platforms, separate from their personal profiles, which allowed them to run political ads. The verification process, aimed at bringing transparency to political advertising, can take some time and was widely reported to be complex, and some candidates expressed frustration with the process. There were calls for a more direct support structure from platforms for political representatives who had difficulties verifying accounts, with an early human response preferred over engaging with chatbots. However, once verified, accounts reportedly operated smoothly for most candidates and there was a general appreciation that the verification process served an important function in establishing authenticity and credibility in the digital political sphere.

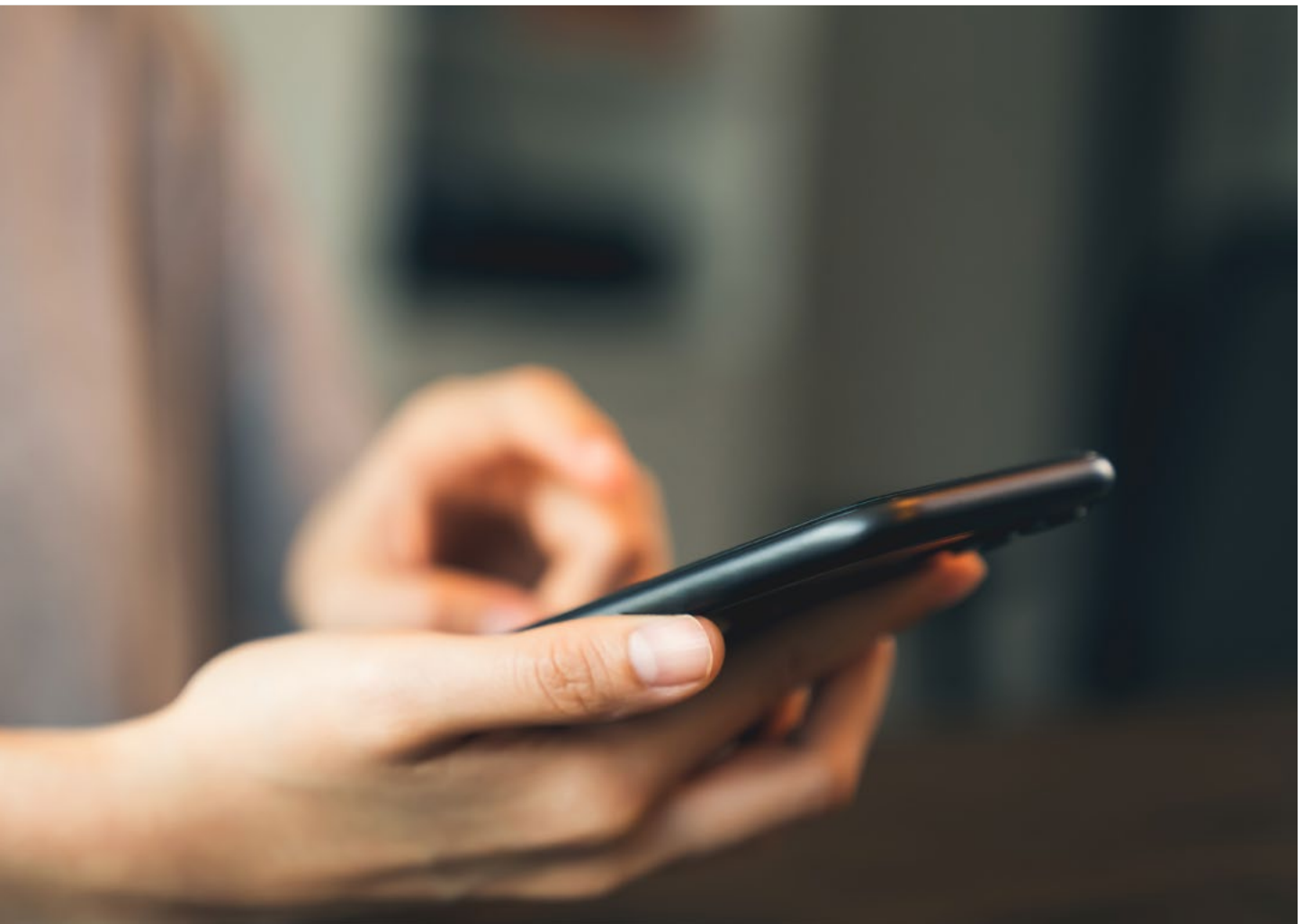
It was widely indicated by interviewees that paid advertisements on social media were now a critical element of local and general election campaigns, significantly boosting the reach of posts and allowing candidates to engage with particular regions or demographics. Reported allocated budgets varied widely, from a campaign spend of a few hundred to tens of thousands of euro, but most candidates who used the process reported it as being a highly cost-effective and efficient way to engage with voters. It was seen as an increasingly critical part of campaigning that supplements more traditional campaigning efforts such as door-to-door canvassing, static canvassing, posterage and leafleting, media engagement, public meetings, etc.

As detailed elsewhere in this report, political candidates interviewed frequently expressed concerns about the adequacy of platform efforts to maintain safe and healthy online spaces. Consequently, concerns were raised about whether this increasing dependence might, as political representatives become increasingly reliant on social media platforms, influence regulatory decisions? These candidates highlighted the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between politicians' personal or campaign interests in using these digital tools effectively and their broader public responsibility to ensure appropriate oversight and regulation that serves the wider public interest.

Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

Training

Social media training was considered vital for many interviewed candidates, both to effectively present themselves and their messaging online, and to better protect themselves from online harms. Most interviewees reported having had access to social media training at some point, particularly members of political parties, which often coordinated information sessions. A high percentage of women also reported they had availed of training offered by groups such as See Her Elected (SHE) and Women for Election. The Association of Irish Local Government also offered training sessions to local candidates which a number of interviewees had availed of. The larger parties have support staff with social media expertise that candidates can access as required. However, some independent candidates expressed concern about insufficient training and support available to them. First-time independent candidates were identified by interviewees as being potentially particularly vulnerable, as they lack both the party infrastructure that might otherwise provide support and practical experience in managing social media for political campaign purposes.



Local versus general elections

When asked to contrast the local and general elections from an online campaigning perspective, interviewees made several observations. Local elections were generally reported as less toxic overall and lower profile than general elections, but they presented unique and concerning risks due to geographical proximity between candidates and constituents.

Harassment and stalking emerged as particularly troubling issues in local elections, with abusers often demonstrating detailed knowledge of candidates' daily routines, family activities, and children's whereabouts. This intimate knowledge created a heightened sense of vulnerability among candidates who lived and worked in the same communities as their potential harassers. Several interviewees recounted disturbing instances where online harassment transitioned into real-world intimidation, with opponents or critics appearing at their homes or workplaces after initially targeting them online.

“Due to persistent online abuse and harassment from one particular individual, I avoided canvassing in the area around their home, for fear I would be attacked. I ultimately lost out on a seat by a very small number of votes, and I often wonder if I had canvassed in that area if it might have made a difference.”

Candidate in 2024 Local Elections

The timing of the 2024 local election cycle was especially relevant, candidates emphasised, as tensions surrounding immigration issues were running particularly high in the period leading up to the 2024 elections on 7 June. This heightened tension around the issue manifested in more aggressive and personalised attacks on candidates who had taken public positions on immigration policy. Some candidates from minority backgrounds reported receiving especially vitriolic, racist abuse.

“Someone took a video of me and my siblings putting up posters. They shouted racist abuse at us, saying things like ‘Get out of my country’ and ‘Ireland for the Irish’, even though I explained I was as Irish as they were. They posted the video online and within days there were hundreds of horrible, hateful comments below it. I did not win a seat, but even months after the election the racist, hateful comments kept being posted.”

Local election candidate

Several interviewees also noted that local elections often involved candidates with less experience and fewer resources to handle online abuse compared to their counterparts in general elections. Without dedicated communications teams or social media managers, local candidates frequently managed their own online presence while simultaneously balancing campaign activities and, in many cases, their regular employment.

Positive Aspects of Social Media Engagement

Many interviewees also noted the positive elements of social media in their campaign efforts. Social media was widely praised as a cost-effective campaign tool, allowing candidates to reach target audiences through modest advertising budgets and boosted content. This accessibility proved particularly valuable for candidates with limited financial resources, enabling them to achieve meaningful engagement without the substantial investment required for traditional media advertising. Constituents frequently mentioned seeing these online posts during doorstep conversations, confirming the effective reach of digital campaigning efforts.

The digital environment offered unique opportunities for direct constituent engagement that traditional campaigning methods could not match. Several candidates highlighted how social media platforms allowed them to quickly respond to local concerns, share their positions on emerging issues and demonstrate their active involvement in community matters.

Political advertising verification requirements, though somewhat cumbersome, were generally accepted as appropriate regulation that was being enforced across platforms. Most candidates recognised the importance of transparency in political messaging and viewed the verification process as a necessary safeguard, while acknowledging the additional administrative burden it placed on their campaigns.

The analytics capabilities of social media platforms were also highlighted as valuable tools for campaign strategy development. Candidates appreciated being able to measure engagement levels, identify which issues resonated most strongly with their audience and refine their messaging accordingly. This data-driven approach allowed for more targeted and effective communication throughout the campaign period.

Several interviewees noted that social media provided crucial visibility for smaller parties and independent candidates who might otherwise struggle to gain attention in traditional media channels dominated by larger political organisations. This democratisation of the campaign landscape was viewed as a positive development for electoral politics more broadly.

Balancing Rights and Regulation

While candidates extensively detailed their experiences with social media toxicity, there was also a strong emphasis placed on the importance of protecting freedom of expression. The complex balance between addressing online harassment and preserving fundamental rights like free speech and privacy was widely noted.

Interviewees frequently articulated positions on the boundary between legitimate criticism and harmful abuse, recognising that robust political debate, even when uncomfortable, remains essential to democratic processes. Several candidates explicitly stated that they did not wish to shield themselves from genuine political critique, but rather sought protection from personalised attacks, threats and orchestrated harassment campaigns.

Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

Crafting and enforcing appropriate legislation

While relevant legislation such as the Digital Services Act and the Online Safety Framework are now fully in place, interviewees raised questions regarding the adequacy of enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures for regulated entities. The widespread feeling among interviewees was that current levels of regulation and/or enforcement were not adequate to address the challenges they faced during their campaigns.

There was particular frustration regarding the apparent lack of consequences for platforms that the interviewees believed failed to meet their obligations under existing regulations. Interviewees suggested that without significant financial penalties or other meaningful sanctions, companies had little incentive to invest in robust content moderation systems or responsive appeals processes.

Several candidates specifically addressed the challenge of crafting legislation that would effectively combat online harassment and abuse issues while remaining compatible with existing human rights frameworks. They added that any regulatory approach must be precisely targeted, proportionate and subject to appropriate oversight mechanisms to prevent misuse.

Anonymous accounts

Almost all interviewees, unprompted, brought up the issue of anonymous accounts and how people could operate multiple anonymous accounts and target individuals or organisations online with, for example, personal abuse, threats, incitement to violence, hatred, misinformation, disinformation and defamatory comment with impunity. In many cases, interviewees suspected they had been targeted by bots, accounts controlled automatically by software rather than direct human input, often operated by anonymous individuals or organisations to amplify harassment or spread coordinated messaging. Many called for an immediate ban on anonymous accounts and said that all account holders should register so there could be some legal recourse in extenuating circumstances. There was broad consensus that the status quo, where anonymous accounts can engage in sustained harassment with minimal consequences, undermines democratic discourse and deters civic participation, particularly amongst groups already underrepresented in politics.

Some candidates simultaneously acknowledged the legitimate reasons why citizens might wish to engage in political discourse without revealing their identities. Concerns about freedom of expression, personal safety and privacy were cited as valid reasons for a degree of anonymity. One potential solution proposed was verified but private registration systems where platforms would hold identifying information that could only be accessed under specific legal circumstances involving serious threats or harassment. This approach, they suggested, might preserve the protective benefits of anonymity for vulnerable users whilst creating accountability for those who abuse the system.

2.4 Rates of usage of individual platforms and frequency of use

Social media platform usage varied considerably among political candidates, with Facebook emerging as the dominant platform at 92% adoption across all candidates, followed by Instagram at 80%, X/Twitter at 57%, TikTok at 45%, LinkedIn at 36% and YouTube at 22%. Additionally, platforms such as Reddit, Mastodon and Bluesky were referenced by an extremely small number of candidates.

Comparing the overall usage between local and general election candidates, there were consistently higher adoption rates among general election candidates across all platforms. Facebook (91% local election candidates vs 95% general election candidates), Instagram (76% local vs 92% general), X/ Twitter (52% local vs 74% general), TikTok (37% local vs 73% general), LinkedIn (32% local vs 48% general), and YouTube (18% local vs 33% general).

Platform	Local Election Usage	General Election Usage	Overall Usage
Facebook	91%	95%	92%
Instagram	76%	92%	80%
X/Twitter	52%	74%	57%
TikTok	37%	73%	45%
LinkedIn	32%	48%	36%
YouTube	18%	33%	22%

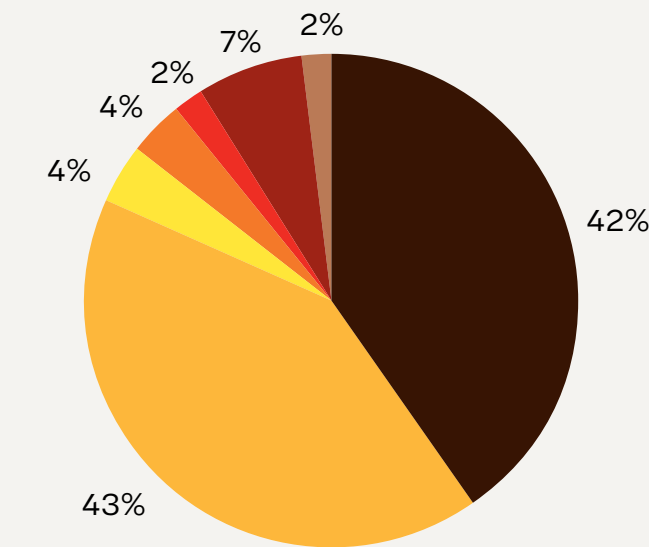
Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

Facebook

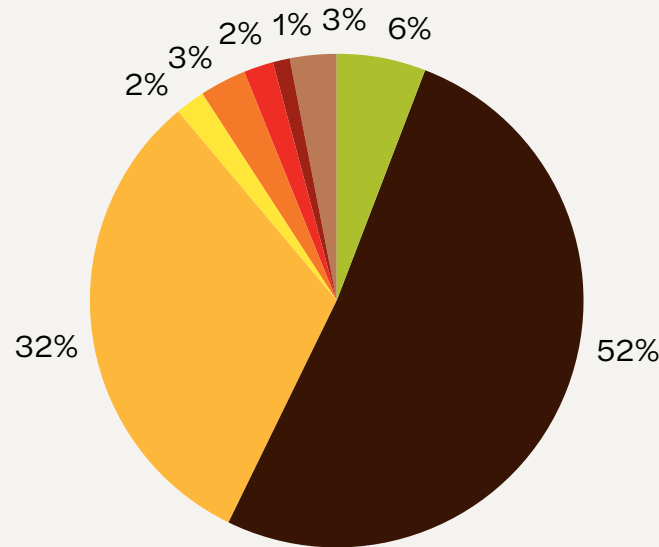
Facebook emerged as the most widely utilised social media platform among political candidates, with 92% of respondents across both local and general elections reporting that they used the platform for campaign purposes. Among candidates surveyed, 91% of local election candidates and 95% of general election candidates reported using Facebook, with frequency of use set out in the table below.

Frequency of Candidates' Facebook Use

Local Election



General Election



- Hourly or more frequently

Daily

Couple of times per week
- Once per week

Couple of times per month

Less often
- Social media not used

Facebook not used

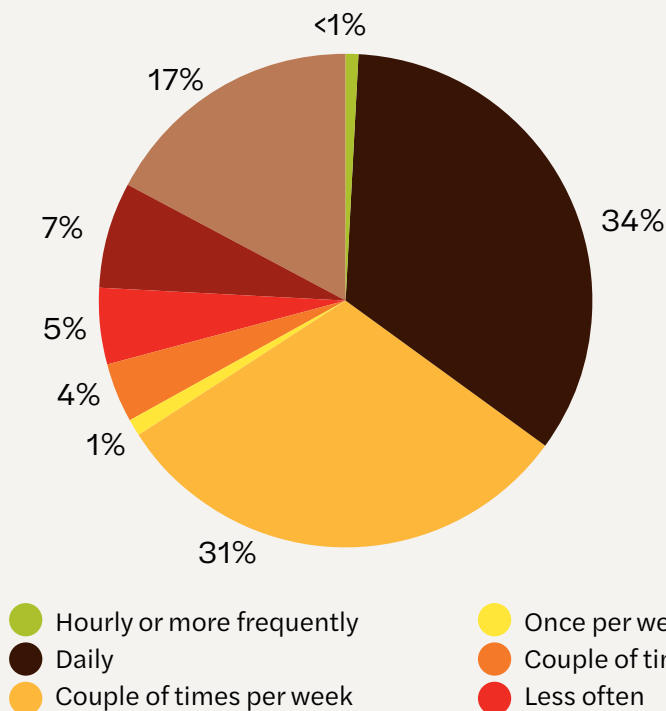
For almost all interviewees, Facebook emerged as the most important platform in the context of election campaigning. Reasons cited included that they can join local pages, and the user demographic tends to be older, which candidates suggested often matched the voter demographic. Many also set up authorised accounts which then allowed them to run political advertisements on Facebook, and Instagram as another Meta-run entity, if they opted to do so.

Instagram

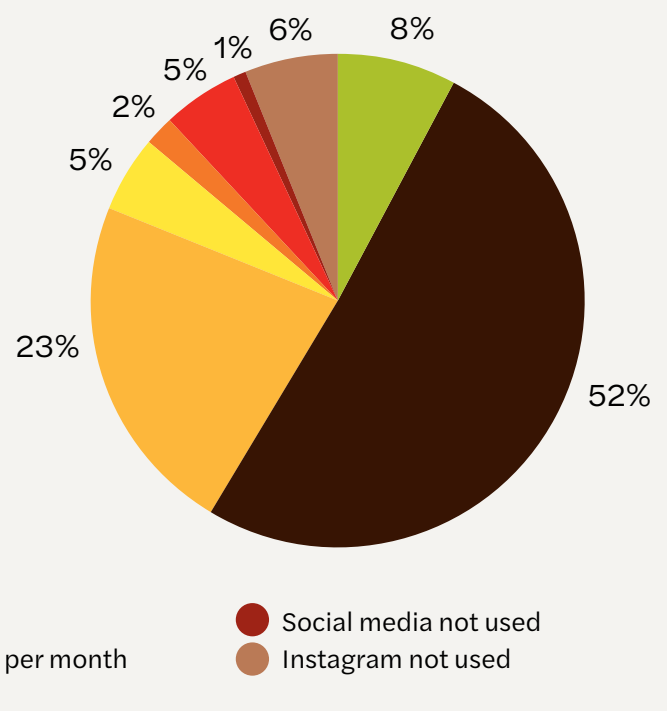
Instagram ranked as the second most popular platform among political candidates, with 80% across both local and general elections candidates combined reporting that they used the platform for campaign purposes. 76% of local election candidates and 92% of general election candidates reported that they used Instagram with frequency of use set out in the table below.

Frequency of Candidates' Instagram Use

Local Election



General Election



In interviews, candidates generally felt that Instagram allowed them to connect with a younger cohort than Facebook, so it was often used as a complementary platform, with a stronger preference for video posts rather than text-based posts.

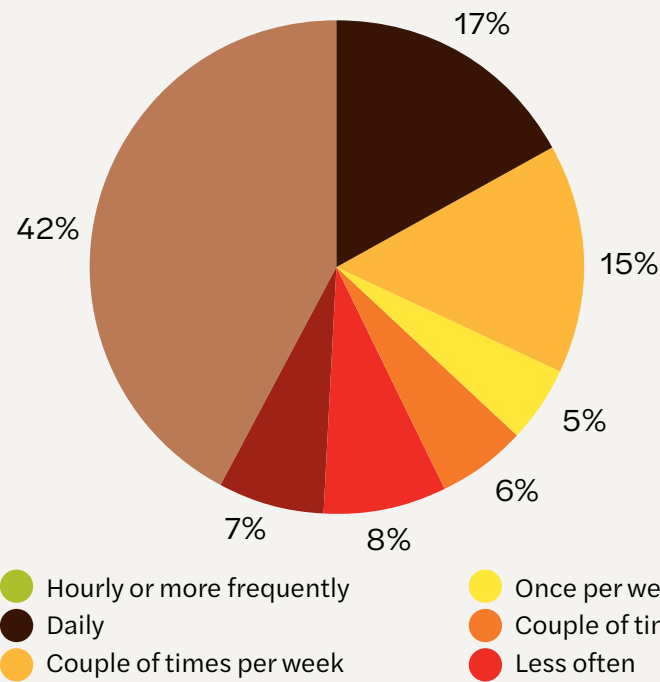
Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

X/Twitter

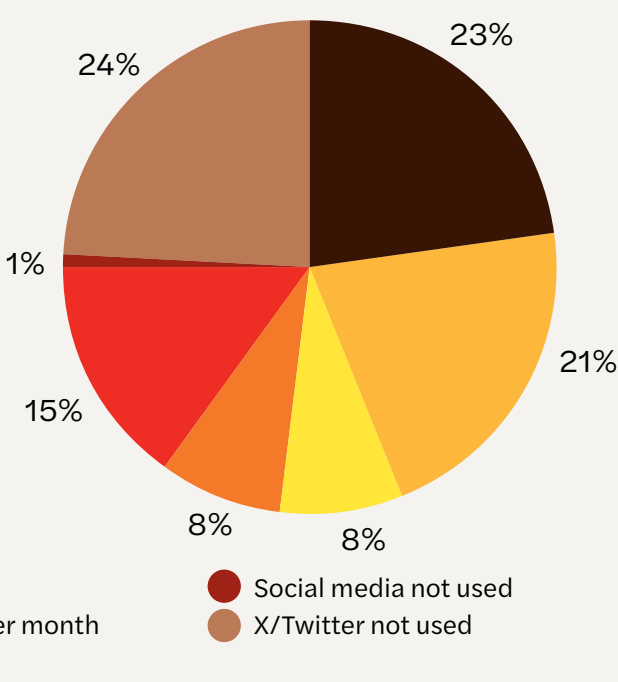
X (formerly Twitter) was utilised by 57% of all candidates surveyed, with 52% of local election candidates and 74% of general election candidates reporting platform usage for their campaign activities.

Frequency of Candidates' X/Twitter Use

Local Election



General Election



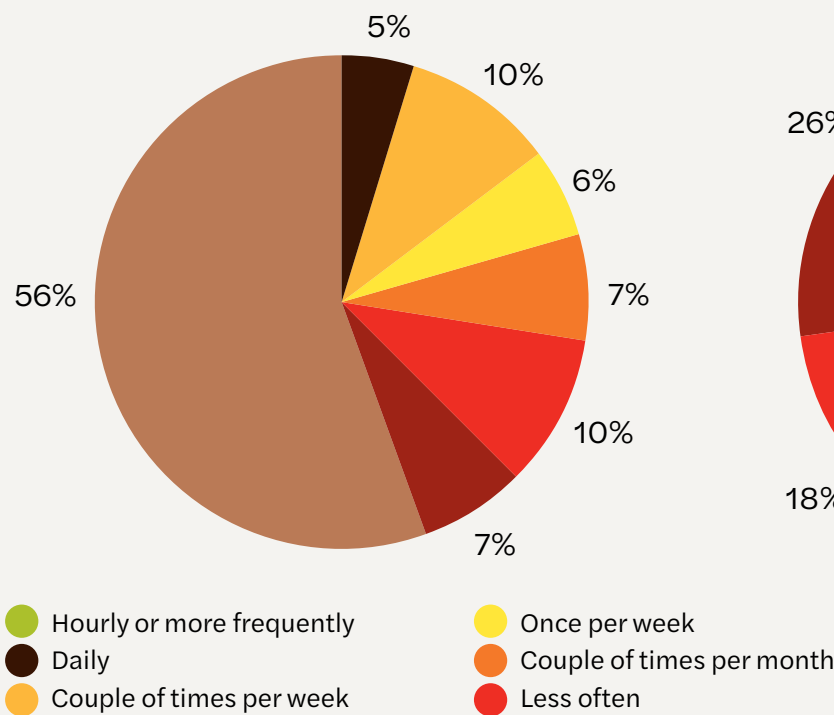
Among interviewees, X was also reported as being widely used. Many interviewees said that they felt the environment on X has become increasingly polarised recently, which had prompted them to reduce their engagement on the platform compared to previous campaigns. Additionally, they noted that interactions on X appeared to involve more international accounts rather than local voters, making it less relevant and effective for targeted political campaigning than other platforms.

TikTok

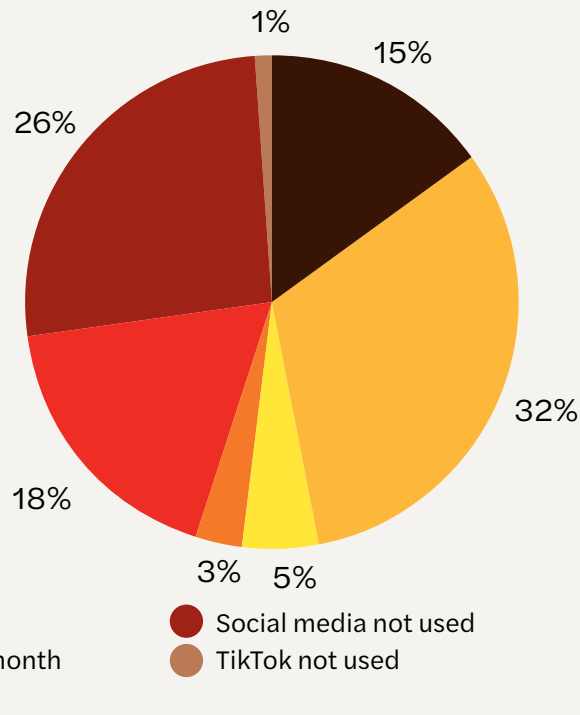
TikTok was employed by 45% of all surveyed candidates, with 37% of local election candidates and 73% of general election candidates reporting platform usage during their campaigns. A number of interviewees also reported having used TikTok.

Frequency of Candidates' TikTok Use

Local Election



General Election



About half the interviewees reported posting videos on TikTok, most of whom were candidates in the 18-34 or 35-54 age groups, and with a particular focus on connecting with the younger voter.

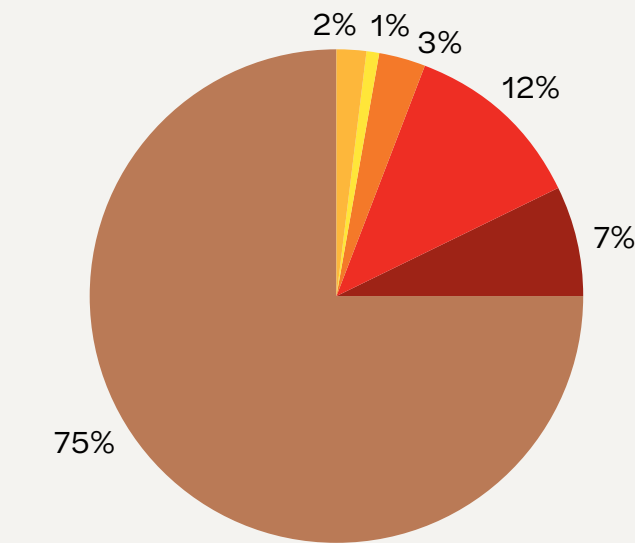
Section 2: Survey - Demographics and Use of Social Media

YouTube

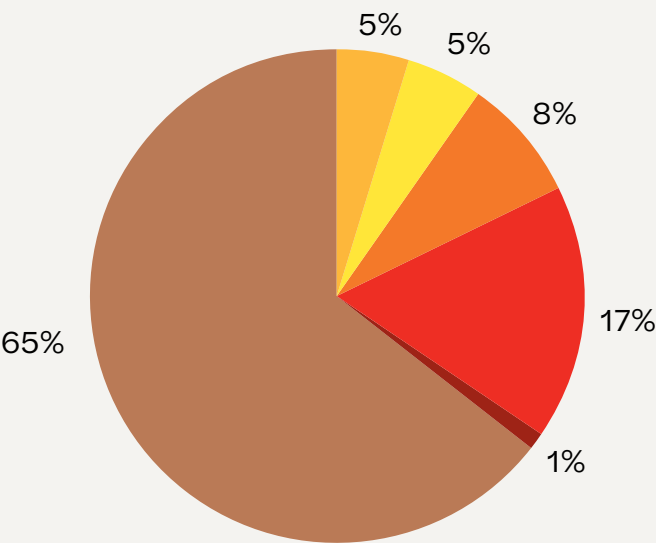
YouTube was utilised by 22% of all surveyed candidates, with 18% of local election candidates and 33% of general election candidates reporting they used the platform during their campaigns.

Frequency of Candidates' YouTube Use

Local Election



General Election



- Hourly or more frequently
- Daily
- Couple of times per week
- Once per week
- Couple of times per month
- Less often
- Social media not used
- YouTube not used

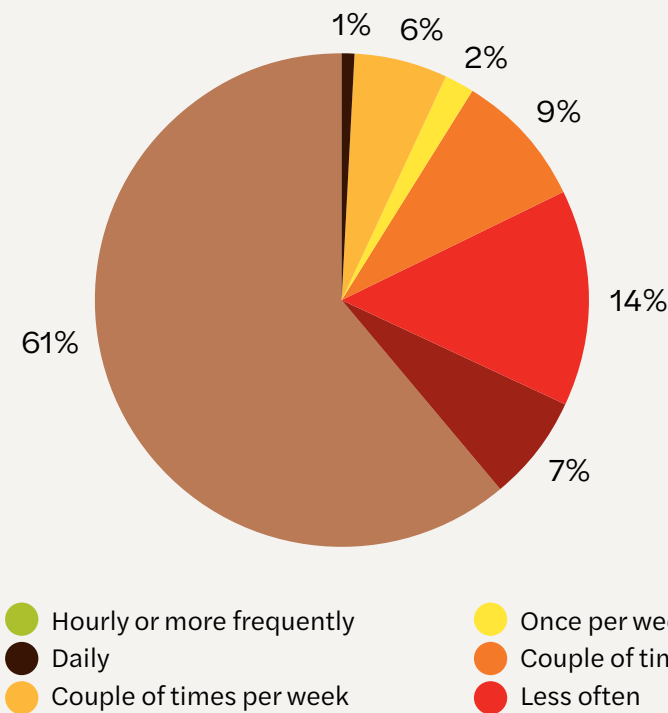
A number of interviewees also reported having used YouTube.

LinkedIn

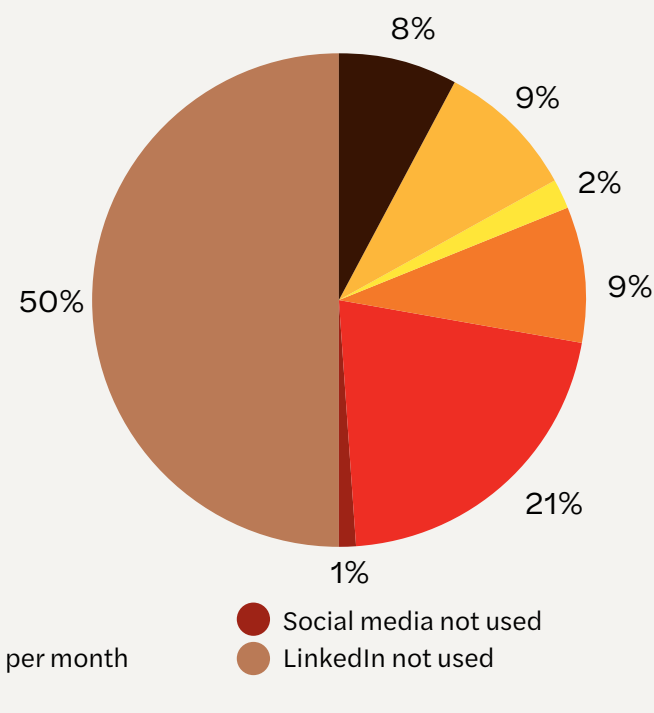
LinkedIn was employed by 36% of all surveyed candidates, with 32% of local election candidates and 48% of general election candidates reporting platform usage during their campaigns.

Frequency of Candidates' LinkedIn Use

Local Election



General Election



Among interviewees, LinkedIn was used by a number of candidates and was referenced by some candidates as a suitable platform to engage with policy and business stakeholders, in particular.

Other platforms such as Reddit, Mastodon and Bluesky were referenced by a small number of candidates in this context.

Section 3:

Candidates' Online Experiences

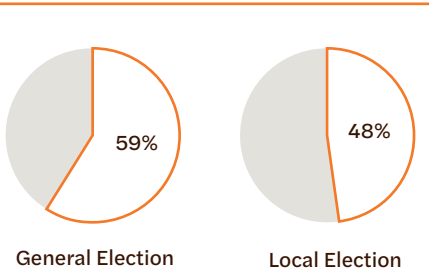
A key aim of this research was to understand whether candidates are experiencing certain types of behaviours online during their election campaigns and, if so, the nature of their experiences and the levels of online behaviour experienced. For the purposes of this research, the relevant online behaviours are:

- (a) offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online;
- (b) violent or intimidating behaviour online;
- (c) behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online.

3.1 Rates experiencing relevant online behaviours

The survey respondents who used social media during, or as part of, their election campaigns were asked whether they had experienced any of the three types of relevant online behaviours, as listed above.

Negative Online Experiences Among Political Candidates Who Used Social Media



Candidate Type	Percentage
Local Election	48%
General Election	59%

48% of local election candidate respondents who used social media said that they had experienced at least one of these behaviours. The figure was higher among general election candidate respondents with 59% reporting such experiences.

Those who had encountered online abuse were then asked specifically about impersonation. Among local election candidates who used social media in their campaign, 10% experienced impersonating behaviour. General election candidates experienced higher rates, with 18% experiencing this kind of behaviour. The higher incidence of impersonating behaviour experienced by general election candidates may be related to their higher public profile, as increased public attention is focused on a smaller number of candidates in a general election compared to local elections.

Experiences across demographics

Gender

Among local election candidate respondents, male and female respondents were equally likely to have experienced relevant online behaviours with 48% of both male and female candidates, who used social media, indicating that they had experienced relevant online behaviours targeted at them during their election campaign. Male local election candidate respondents who used social media were more likely than female local election candidates to have experienced behaviour that involved impersonating them as a candidate online specifically, with 12% of male respondents indicating that they had experienced such behaviour compared to 7% of female respondents.

Among general election candidates, 66% of male candidates reported they experienced relevant online behaviours, compared to 50% of female candidates. However, male respondents were somewhat less likely (28%) than female respondents (36%) to have experienced behaviour that involved impersonating them as a candidate online. Additionally, as discussed in Section 4, the impacts on female candidates’ wellbeing was more severe as a result of relevant online behaviours. In the qualitative interviews, most interviewees, both men and women, reported experiencing problematic online behaviours. However, the abuse directed at women was described as being more hateful and “toxic”. Similar patterns of intensified hostility were reported by candidates with migrant backgrounds and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Local Electoral Area or constituency

Among local election candidate respondents who used social media, the rates of experiencing relevant online behaviours among candidates in each Local Electoral Area (“LEA”) location type are set out in the table below.

Local Election Candidates’ Experiences of Relevant Online Behaviours by LEA Type

A city	71%
Suburbs of a city	54%
Rural area	48%
A large town(s)/municipal centre and surrounds	38%

Among General Election candidate respondents who used social media, the rates of experiencing relevant online behaviours among candidates in each constituency location type are set out in the table below.

General Election Candidates’ Experiences of Relevant Online Behaviours by Constituency Type

Suburbs of a city	71%
Largely rural areas	67%
A city and inner-city areas	60%
(A) large town(s)/municipal centre and surrounds	48%

Age

Local election candidates in the younger age bracket of 18-34 years were least likely to experience relevant online behaviours (7%). This compared to 54% of candidates in the 35-54 years age bracket having experienced relevant online behaviours and 39% of candidates in the 55 years plus age bracket. Among general election candidates, respondents in the 18-34 years age bracket were most likely to have experienced relevant online behaviours (80%), albeit with a small sample size representing this age group. This compared to 63% of those in the 35-54 years age bracket and 48% of those in the 55 years plus age bracket.

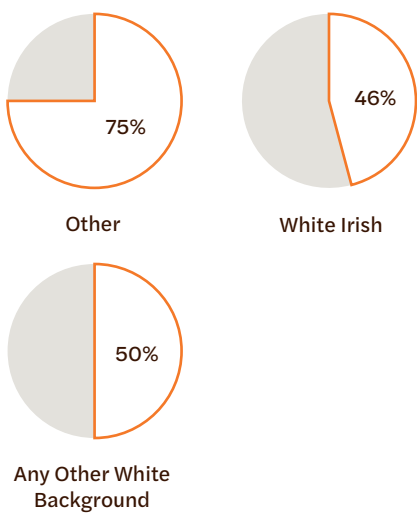
Section 3: Candidates’ Online Experiences

Ethnic group or background

As set out above, the ethnic group or background response options provided were “White Irish”, “Any Other White Background” and “Other”.

Local election candidate respondents who indicated that they were in the “Other” ethnic group or background were most likely to have experienced relevant online behaviours (75%). Those in the “White Irish” ethnic group or background were least likely to have experienced relevant online behaviours (46%) compared to 50% among the “Any Other White Background” ethnic group or background.

Ethnic group or background



Whatever I posted online, I got racist attacks. One time, I reposted a poster my party created supporting a particular environmental scheme. I got a mountain of racist and xenophobic comments about that post, it was an extremely hostile reaction. But yet when my White party colleagues reposted the same poster, they got no abuse and some messages of support. I thought that was a very interesting experiment.

Local Election candidate from a migrant background

As noted above, none of the general election candidate respondents selected “Any Other White Background” in response to the question on ethnic group or background. 62% of those who selected “White Irish” in response to the question on ethnic group or background stated that they had experienced relevant online behaviour during their election campaign. This compared with 20% of those who had selected “Other” as their ethnic group or background, though this was based on a small representative sample.



3.2 Overview of nature of relevant online behaviours and means of targeting

Where respondents had experienced offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour and/or violent or intimidating behaviour online, the survey sought to identify the nature of that behaviour through including questions with multiple response options.

In the local elections, the highest rates of offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour were seen in false information intended to offend or affect the candidate's reputation (46%), hurtful or degrading comments (46%), gender-based slurs or derogatory terms (18%) and use of racial slurs or derogatory terms (18%).

In the general election, the highest rates indicated of offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour were false information intended to offend or affect the candidate's reputation (36%), hurtful or degrading comments (36%), gender-based slurs or derogatory terms (23%), and use of racial slurs or derogatory terms (15%).

Section 3: Candidates' Online Experiences

Offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour (multiple response options)

	Local Elections		General Election	
	% of respondents who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours	% of total number of respondents	% of respondents who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours	% of total number of respondents
False information intended to offend or affect the candidate's reputation	46%	21%	36%	21%
Hurtful or degrading comments (for example, in relation to the candidate's appearance)	46%	21%	36%	21%
Gender-based slurs or derogatory terms	18%	8%	23%	14%
Use of racial slurs or derogatory terms	18%	8%	15%	9%
Sexual orientation-based slurs or derogatory terms	15%	7%	13%	8%
Use of ethnic slurs or derogatory terms	14%	6%	13%	8%
Age-based slurs or derogatory terms	9%	4%	10%	6%
Use of religious slurs or derogatory terms	10%	4%	10%	6%
Use of slurs or derogatory terms related to your place of birth or country of nationality	8%	4%	8%	5%
Disability-based slurs or derogatory terms	2%	1%	3%	2%

Local elections candidates, who had experienced relevant online behaviours, reported that the highest rates of violent or intimidating behaviour online centred around persistent communications, content or images appearing to be from the same person or persons, which seriously interfered with the candidate's peace and privacy or caused alarm, distress or harm to the candidate (33%), threats to kill or cause serious harm to the candidate (24%), and content inciting or encouraging others to kill or cause serious harm to the candidate (22%).

Among the general election candidates, the highest rates of violent or intimidating behaviour online were threats to kill or cause serious harm to the candidate (21%), persistent communications, content or images appearing to be from the same person or persons, which seriously interfered with the candidate's peace and privacy or caused alarm, distress or harm to the candidate (18%), images or other content depicting or insinuating harm or violence, which contained the candidate's name, image or a representation of their likeness (13%), content inciting or encouraging others to kill or cause serious harm to the candidate (8%).

When I posted online that I would be canvassing in a certain area, and so to expect to see me coming to your door, one person responded, that 'you will get the kettle alright, but it'll be boiling over the top of your head'.

General Election candidate

Of particular concern, 21% of general election candidates who had experienced relevant online behaviours reported experiencing threats to kill or cause serious harm to them. In an environment where we have seen a number of instances of offline harms and harassment directed towards candidates both in local elections and those with a higher national profile, this gives cause for concern as to the transfer of online threats into offline harm.¹¹

¹¹ 'Their face was twisted up in anger': Election hopefuls share stories of abuse at the doors; See also ISD Report cited above.

Section 3: Candidates’ Online Experiences

Violent or intimidating behaviour online (multiple response options)

	Local Elections		General Election	
	% of respondents who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours	% of total number of respondents	% of respondents who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours	% of total number of respondents
Persistent communications, content or images appearing to be from the same person or persons, which seriously interfered with your peace and privacy or caused alarm, distress or harm to you	33%	15%	18%	11%
Threats to kill or cause serious harm to you	24%	11%	21%	12%
Content inciting or encouraging others to kill or cause serious harm to you	22%	10%	8%	5%
Images or content depicting or insinuating harm or violence which caused you to believe that it was intended as a threat to you	16%	7%	8%	5%
Images or other content depicting or insinuating harm or violence, which contained your name, image or a representation of your likeness	8%	4%	13%	8%
Threats to kill or cause serious harm to your campaign volunteers/staff	7%	3%	3%	2%
Images or content depicting or insinuating harm or violence which caused you to believe that it was intended as a threat to your family	7%	3%	3%	2%
Threats to kill or cause serious harm to your family	5%	2%	5%	3%

The survey also sought to identify the means through which these behaviours were targeted at election candidates.

How was this online behaviour targeted at you? (multiple response options)

	Local Elections	General Election
Comments on posts, videos or reels posted as part of your campaign	88%	95%
Written posts or threads created specifically for the purpose of the behaviour	39%	36%
Private or direct messages to you on social media or video-sharing platforms	37%	41%
Written comments sent to you or your campaign office by email	12%	18%
Verbal comments made about you in videos or reels created specifically for the purpose of the behaviour	13%	15%
Memes or other graphics created specifically for the purpose of the behaviour	17%	13%
Accounts or posts, including videos and reels, impersonating you or purporting to be you	6%	8%

Qualitative findings

There was a strong consensus among the interviewees that the online world had become increasingly “toxic” and candidates have now come to expect a degree of offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour and/or violent or intimidating behaviour online. Online attacks included threats to life or physical well-being, racist abuse, sexist abuse, intimidation, harassment, spamming/trolling and attacks aimed to humiliate.

“I feel we get more personal attacks online as women. I was constantly abused for what I wore, for my make-up, you name it – endless negative or sarcastic comments on my appearance. And then I got criticised for being out working and campaigning and not being at home looking after my children. It’s a very particular type of online gendered abuse targeted at young women in public life.”

General Election candidate

Section 3: Candidates' Online Experiences

While degrees of intensity varied widely, all candidates said they had some exposure to negative experiences online during their election campaign.

The qualitative research indicated that candidates from a migrant background, and candidates who publicly supported migrant issues, were significantly and disproportionately targeted in social media attacks, frequently subjected to offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour and/or violent or intimidating behaviour online.

“I am used to getting a lot of abuse as a public figure and a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community, but it now goes crazy at times. At one stage in the run-up to the election one person posted, ‘I know where you live and I will burn your house down’.”

General Election candidate

Similarly, the qualitative research indicated a significant association between gender and type of abuse. Women are at higher risk of various forms of online abuse, including discriminatory language, threats, harassment, unwanted sexual advances, appearance-based commentary, and other forms of digital intimidation. Additionally, members of the LGBTQ+ community reported receiving high levels of online abuse.

On women entering politics:

“Absolutely 100% I think that social media being as irresponsible as they are is going to totally diminish the kind of people who go into politics. It’s going to certainly diminish women entering politics.”

General Election candidate

3.3 Targeting of online behaviour based on candidates' stance on particular issues

The research aimed to explore whether election candidates who had experienced instances of relevant online behaviour believed that they were targeted due to their stance on any particular issues. The relevant survey question included multiple responses options and an “Other (please specify)” response option, with respondents being allowed to select multiple responses.

Of those candidate respondents who had experienced relevant online behaviours (48% of those who used social media in the local election and 59% of those who used social media in the general election), the responses can be summarised as follows:

Targeting of online behaviour based on candidates' stance on particular issues (multiple responses possible)

Issue/Stance	Local Election Candidates	General Election Candidates
Immigration	71%	64%
Women's issues (e.g. reproductive rights)	24%	46%
Housing	23%	33%
LGBTQ+ issues	31%	33%
Environment	20%	23%
Vaccines	15%	21%
Homelessness	14%	18%
Traveller or Roma accommodation/services	4%	-

Local election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours who selected the “Other” response option indicated that they believed they had been targeted because of their membership of a particular political party; their stance on transport; their stance on domestic violence issues and education; their stance on gender related issues; their stance on local projects; and that they were targeted for other reasons that were personal in nature. General election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours who selected the “Other” response option indicated that they believed they had been targeted because of their stance on planning or transport or because of their surname, for example.

Qualitative findings

On self-censorship:

“There a few hot button issues that I find are best avoided by politicians online. Even discussing things like plans for wind farms get mountains of abuse, a massive pile-on, I find, never mind more controversial topics like housing or immigration. Best to stay quiet on those topics online.”

General Election candidate

In the interviews, candidates discussed being subjected to online abuse due to their position on particular issues, such as migration, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues. Additionally, a variety of other topics, ranging from property tax to wind farms to housing, could attract ‘a pile-on’, where accounts receive a high volume of abusive commentary. Often this abuse comes from anonymous accounts, and in some cases it was not clear if it was a real person sending the messages or a bot. Several candidates indicated the migration issue was particularly tense in the period leading up to the local elections in June, and the level of sensitivity around it had lessened to a degree by the time of the general election in November.

Self-censorship to avoid ‘pile-ons’

“You would be crazy, I think, to mention anything around the immigration issue in a post. No matter how sensible your comment, you would be singled out and get all kinds of abuse.”

General Election candidate

As a consequence of the risk of attracting extensive online abuse, it was widely noted that political figures often self-censor, refraining from engaging on particular issues online for fear of attracting substantive attacks. Issues that candidates avoided discussing covered a wide range, including migration, sexual orientation, the environment, taxation and housing. Fear of coordinated harassment campaigns prevented meaningful discussion of important but potentially controversial policy matters. Participants observed this resulting self-censorship was having a chilling impact on civic discourse, with social media failing to fulfil its role as a digital town hall where public figures could safely engage on important issues. Many lamented that these debates had been ceded to a highly vocal and aggressive element, with others afraid to offer alternative views for fear of becoming targets of attack.

When witnessing others being attacked, abused or targeted online, there was little hope expressed for the potential to turn bystanders into people who intervene on behalf of those under attack. Many participants noted a reluctance to defend others online for fear of becoming targets themselves.

On self-censorship:

“If you – as I do tend to do anyway – kind of sit on the fence or don’t come out with anything controversial online, you’re okay. I’m happy to forgo the extra likes if it means not getting into the drama online.”

Local election candidate

3.4 Platforms where negative behaviour was experienced

Candidates, who had experienced relevant online behaviours, were asked which social media platforms or video-sharing platforms they had experienced the behaviour on, with multiple response options.

In the local elections, Facebook was the platform with the highest rates of experiencing such behaviours at 33% – it may be worth recalling that Facebook was the platform with the highest rate of usage among local election candidates (91%). X/Twitter was the platform with the next highest rates of experiencing such behaviours (27%). 15% experienced incidents on TikTok. Instagram was mentioned by 9% of affected candidates as a platform on which they had experienced relevant behaviours – this low rate is particularly interesting given that Instagram was the second most used platform among Local Election candidates (76%).

In the general election, 42% of those who had experienced these kinds of behaviours said they experienced incidents on Facebook (95% of General Election candidates who used social media used Facebook), while 41% indicated X/Twitter (74% of General Election candidates used X/Twitter). 29% experienced such behaviours on TikTok (73% used TikTok), with Instagram mentioned by 15% of affected candidates (92% used Instagram).

Platforms where negative behaviour was experienced (% of candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours)

	Local Elections	General Election
Facebook	73%	72%
X/Twitter	61%	67%
TikTok	34%	49%
Instagram	20%	26%
YouTube	1%	3%
Other (Free text: WhatsApp)	3%	N/A
Other (Free text: Reddit)	2%	N/A



Section 4:

Impact of Negative Online Behaviours on Candidates' Campaigning, Wellbeing and Participation

4.1 Impact of online behaviour on candidates' wellbeing

One of the aims of the research study was to determine whether experiences of relevant online behaviours impacted on candidates' well-being. As discussed earlier, relevant online behaviours are:

- (a) offensive, abusive or hateful behaviour online;
- (b) violent or intimidating behaviour online;
- (c) behaviour that involved impersonating a candidate online (including demographic analysis).

Candidates who had experienced relevant online behaviours were asked how they felt as a result of experiencing those behaviours with the following response options:

- not anxious or afraid;
- a little anxious or afraid; and
- very anxious or afraid.

Candidates were asked whether any of the online behaviours caused any of a list of specified impacts on their well-being. Multiple responses were permitted to allow for candidates who had experienced multiple types of effects on their well-being.

1. Quantitative Findings: Impact of Online Behaviour on Candidates' Wellbeing (% of candidates who used social media and experienced relevant online behaviours)

Group	A little anxious or afraid	Very anxious or afraid	A little anxious or afraid or very anxious or afraid
Local Election			
All Candidates	47%	15%	62%
Female	50%	22%	72%
Male	45%	9%	54%
General Election			
All Candidates	49%	18%	67%
Female	71%	14%	85%
Male	36%	20%	56%

These findings reveal that while relevant online behaviours brought about anxiety and fear for a high proportion of candidates who experienced them, it was more pronounced for female candidates, particularly those who participated in the general election with 85% reporting they were either a little anxious or afraid or very anxious or afraid. However more male candidates (20% versus 14%) reported feeling very anxious or afraid in the general election.

Section 4: Impact of Negative Online Behaviours on Candidates’ Campaigning, Wellbeing and Participation

Only 28% of women among the local election respondents and 15% among the general election respondents said that they did not feel anxious or afraid at all, while the corresponding figures for men were 44% and 46%.

Local election candidates

Among the ethnic groups represented, no group reported feeling significantly more or less anxious as a result of experiencing relevant online behaviours, although it should be noted representative samples in this context were small. 47% of “White Irish” respondents indicated that they felt a little anxious or afraid compared to 50% among respondents in the “Any other White background” category and 44% of those in the “Other” category. 15% of “White Irish” and 11% of “Other” respondents reported having felt very anxious or afraid as a result of experiencing the online behaviours. No respondents in the “Any other White background” group reported that they had felt very anxious or afraid.

The other impacts on local election candidates’ well-being are summarised below:

Impacts on local election candidates’ well-being (multiple responses possible)

38% worried about their family or loved ones’ safety	32% worried about their own safety	30% said that their family or loved ones worried about the candidate’s safety or their own safety
26% worried about being out in public	23% suffered from mental or physical health impacts	20% increased security at their home
	17% restricted their movements (such as avoiding particular public places or their workplace)	3% increased security at their workplace

A small number of respondents reported other impacts on their well-being including worrying about their reputation and moving to a different county where they felt that their family would be safe.

General election candidates

The majority of general election candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours felt a little anxious or afraid in response to experiencing relevant behaviours online (49%) while 18% felt very anxious or afraid. 33% reported that they did not feel anxious or afraid at all.

Female general election candidate respondents (71%) were significantly more likely to have felt a little anxious or afraid than male general election candidates (36%). However, a greater proportion of male general election candidate respondents (20%) reported feeling very anxious or afraid than female respondents (14%). Male general election candidate respondents were more likely (44%) than female respondents (14%) to say that did not feel anxious or afraid at all. 50% of respondents who selected “White Irish” in response to the question on ethnic group or background indicated that they felt a little anxious or afraid, 18% said that they felt very anxious or afraid while 32% indicated that they did not feel anxious or afraid.

The other impacts on general election candidates’ well-being are summarised below:

Impacts on general election candidates’ well-being (multiple responses possible)

41% worried about their family or loved ones’ safety	38% worried about their own safety	33% worried about being out in public
33% increased security at their home	28% said that their family or loved ones worried about the candidate’s safety or their own safety	18% suffered from mental or physical health impacts
18% restricted their movements (such as avoiding particular public places or their workplace)	18% increased security at their constituency office or clinic	3% Increased security at their workplace

A small number of respondents reported other impacts on their well-being including making sure that they were not alone while out canvassing or attending public functions.

2. Qualitative Findings: Impact on Candidates' Wellbeing

The wide range and high incidence rate of impacts on candidates' well-being across a multitude of issues reported in the surveys shows just how pressing a matter this is. The main issues reported were candidates worried about their family or loved ones' safety, worried about their own safety, said that their family or loved ones worried about the candidate's safety or their own safety, worried about being out in public, suffered from mental or physical health impacts and increased security at their home.

In the interviews, it emerged that several candidates experienced emotional and psychological distress as a result of being targeted online during the campaign. This distress affected not only themselves but extended to their family members and colleagues. Some candidates reported changing their daily movements after receiving online abuse, fearing they might be targeted on the street.

Several interviewees reported enhancing security measures in their homes and workplaces, including installing CCTV cameras, as a result of online attacks. Many brought up the issue of having to make their home address public when running for election, which made them feel more susceptible to risk. Several suggested that the obligation for candidates to make their full home address public be reviewed and other options be made available. Some spoke of adjusting their travel patterns and habits out of fear of online abuse transferring to an offline attack. One interviewee said they attended council meetings via the back door as they were afraid people who abused them online would be at the main door.

“A lot of people have been intimidated, and really what all this boils down to is intimidation – online and off. It is attempts to intimidate [political candidates], death by a thousand cuts.”

Local election candidate

For candidates who participated in elections, a significant area of regret for some was how their political participation exposed family members and colleagues to harassment, abuse and threats. This was cited as the main cause of remorse and worry among many candidates.

4.2 Impacts of online behaviour on candidates' campaigning

Candidates who had experienced relevant online behaviours were also asked whether the online behaviours had impacted on their campaigning. Candidates were asked to select from a list of specified impacts with multiple responses permitted. The impacts of the online behaviours on local election candidates' campaigning are summarised below:

Impact on Campaigning (multiple responses possible)

	Local Election Candidates	General Election Candidates
Felt less confident in continuing to campaign	33%	18%
Stopped posting content from their personal life/making personal updates	25%	21%
Avoided engaging with specific issues or policy areas in their campaigning	21%	21%
Restricted or decreased overall engagement on civil issues (including engagement after the election)	15%	18%
Restricted their in-person campaigning to certain parts of the Local Electoral Area	12%	8%
Suspended or paused their online campaigning	12%	5%
Felt fearful in continuing to campaign	10%	8%
Suspended or paused their in-person campaigning	8%	5%
Deleted or suspended the social media account being used for campaigning	5%	3%
Experienced none of the listed impacts on campaigning	40%	51%

Impact on campaign

Safety concerns forced some candidates to significantly alter their canvassing strategies, including completely avoiding certain geographic areas they had originally planned to campaign in. Following upsetting incidents online, some candidates felt the need to temporarily suspend their canvassing activities, creating gaps in their campaign outreach and momentum and undermining their ability to run effective campaigns.

Some candidates felt that in light of online attacks they could no longer canvass independently and had to implement new safety protocols, such as only campaigning in groups or specifically requiring male canvassers to be present.

Section 4: Impact of Negative Online Behaviours on Candidates' Campaigning, Wellbeing and Participation

Online abuse escalating to offline attacks

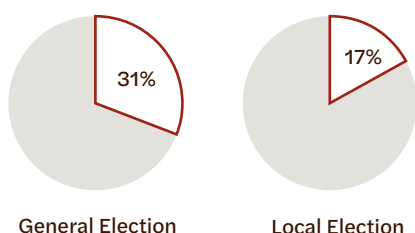
A major concern for candidates was the risk of abuse originating online leading to offline attacks. Several candidates in interviews recounted traumatic experiences where they encountered hostility in person around issues that had begun in online attacks. Some examples include:

- masked protestors gathered outside one candidate's home shouting, engaging in threatening and abusive behaviour, after disinformation had been published about them online;
- another candidate and a canvasser were targeted with racist abuse when canvassing in a housing estate following anti-migrant attacks online. In their haste to get away from the person shouting racist abuse, the canvasser fell and hit their mouth on a pole, losing two front teeth in the process;
- a canvasser who was up a ladder putting up a poster was abused by a person who then shook the ladder, again as a result of the candidate's perceived position on migration;
- a woman candidate was approached in her car and had abuse shouted at her and was blocked from leaving a car park; and
- one candidate who was the subject of extensive online abuse in connection with her support for a local migrant centre observed drones flying over their home and cars circling by in the middle of the night.

Multiple cases such as this were recounted in the interviews, where online abuse was followed up with some kind of offline escalation. Several candidates spoke of actions they had taken as a result of the concerns, including installing CCTV cameras outside their home and workplace, altering their travel arrangements, entering public buildings from a back or side door, removing images or information of family members online, and avoiding certain areas if they thought there was an increased likelihood they would encounter abusive individuals.

4.3 Impacts of online behaviour on candidates' future participation in political life

Candidates were asked to indicate whether they thought that the online behaviours experienced would impact on their decision to run for election to public office in Ireland again in the future.



Impacts of online behaviour on future participation in political life

“I would be less likely to run, or would not run, for election again as a result of online behaviour”

Local election candidates – 17%

General election candidates – 31%

Local election candidates

The likely impacts of the online behaviours on local election candidates' decisions to run for election to public office in Ireland in the future are summarised below:

- 48% said that it would have no impact on their decision
- 35% would still run for election, but would feel worried, nervous or less confident in doing so
- 15% would be less likely to run for election as a result of this online behaviour
- 2% would not run for election as a result of this online behaviour

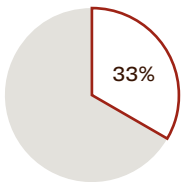
Local election candidate respondents were also asked whether they intended to run for election in the 2024 General Election. Of those who said they intended to run in the 2024 General Election, 60% had experienced relevant online behaviours during their local election campaign; and of those who said that they did not intend to run in the 2024 General Election, 45% had experienced relevant online behaviours.

Section 4: Impact of Negative Online Behaviours on Candidates’ Campaigning, Wellbeing and Participation

General Election candidates

The likely impacts of the online behaviours on general election candidates’ decisions to run for election to public office in Ireland in the future are summarised below:

- 36% would still run for election, but would feel worried, nervous or less confident in doing so
- 33% said that it would have no impact on their decision
- 26% would be less likely to run for election as a result of this online behaviour
- 5% would not run for election as a result of this online behaviour



One in three

Number of candidates who said they would still run in future elections, but would feel worried, nervous or less confident in doing so due to online behaviours they were subjected to.

Deterring participation in political life

Across both local and general election candidates, the prospect of online abuse and its potential offline escalation was identified as a primary deterrent for potential candidates and their families when considering running for public office. This concern was reported in the qualitative interviews to be preventing qualified individuals from entering politics, with participants suggesting that only those with exceptional resilience to harassment would consider standing for election.

A consensus emerged that often only certain types of thick-skinned, highly resilient individuals would be inclined to enter politics. In particular, people who might attract abuse due to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, disability status, or appearance would be more inclined to stay out of politics, participants felt.

“The one thing you would really fear is when the Internet comes to your doorstep.”

General election candidate

Many participants emphasised that highly resilient, thick-skinned personalities represent just one temperament among many, and that individuals with different disposition types should also be encouraged into politics to ensure a broader range of perspectives and approaches in our democratic institutions, and to ensure representative and diverse leadership that reflects the full spectrum of society.

Despite widespread online abuse targeted at candidates and the heightened anxiety and fear as a consequence, most candidates interviewed said they would not rule out running again. Additionally, candidates noted a stark contrast between online hostility and in-person interactions, reporting that doorstep encounters tended to be largely civil, highlighting the disconnect between online and face-to-face behaviour.

“Most of the people who were piling in [criticising a candidate from a migrant background] were saying they were going to ‘take the nation back’. They were saying they were not ready to stand here and watch this ‘plantation’.”

General election candidate

4.4 Recommendations from interviewees

During the course of wide-ranging interviews on the topic of political candidates' online experiences, several suggestions were made by interviewees. Key themes raised are summarised below:

Regulatory accountability

- Ensure platforms are held appropriately to account and that there is adequate regulatory and legislative protection for individuals.
- Interviewees strongly advocated for more robust enforcement of existing regulations, with meaningful penalties for non-compliance.
- Particular emphasis was placed on developing improved reporting mechanisms and response protocols for threats against public figures during election periods.
- Almost all interviewees expressed concern about anonymous accounts targeting people online without consequence. Many suggested the need to engage in public discussions to debate how the harm from these can be mitigated, while considering some form of registration to permit accountability in the most harmful or illegal cases.
- Proposal to establish a multi-stakeholder forum where politicians, regulators, platforms and other stakeholders could collaborate to mitigate harms. This approach would recognise the complexity of the problem and the need for coordinated action across different sectors.

Skills support for candidates

- Help encourage candidates to develop their skills to better present and protect themselves online. Interviewees recognised that effective online engagement requires specific competencies that some candidates may lack. They suggested developing comprehensive training programmes covering protective measures and reporting mechanisms.
- Know your rights information should be clearly communicated, with practical workshops focusing on how to respond to incidents such as orchestrated attacks, false accusations and viral misinformation during time-sensitive campaign periods when rapid response is essential.

Public education and social norms

- Look to make social change over time through public awareness campaigns emphasising that communities should not and will not tolerate abusive behaviour online, just as it would not be accepted in other contexts.
- Engage the general public so people who engage in toxic behaviour are encouraged not to and are educated about the impact of this behaviour on individuals and democracy at large.
- Employ transparent nudging principles to subtly guide users toward more respectful engagement and civil discourse, while fully preserving freedom of expression and individual choice.
- Turn bystanders into upstanders by promoting a culture of active intervention, with school-based digital citizenship programmes teaching responsible engagement from an early age.
- Provide training for community moderators, party volunteers and engaged citizens on effective digital bystander intervention when witnessing online abuse.

Coimisiún na Meán

- Further develop and promote guidance such as the Candidate Information Pack and online resources. Publicise the existence of a quick access portal that candidates can utilise in an emergency and guide them through reporting processes, including information on the newly established Out-of-Court Dispute Settlement Body.
- Establish direct communication with candidates and political representatives increasing visibility of important communications.
- Appoint a political liaison representative so there is a specific person that candidates and political representatives can contact for advice and personalised support.
- Conduct regional, in-person workshops for political candidates to provide practical training on handling online issues and navigating available support systems.

An Garda Síochána

- Given the link between online abuse and offline escalations, some interviewees suggested that An Garda Síochána should explore greater options for early, proportionate responses to deter escalations and clarify when and how candidates and political representatives should bring specific cases to their attention.
- Coordinate public awareness campaigns to highlight which types of online posts are illegal and what the legal repercussions could be.
- Provide workshops or briefing sessions so candidates and political representatives know their rights regarding online harassment and threats.
- Promote contacts to appropriate liaison officers who deal specifically with these issues that candidates and political representatives can contact directly.

Section 5:

Reporting to Platforms - Awareness and Experience of Platforms' Reporting Functions, and Ease of Use

5.1 Reporting to platforms generally and reporting to individual platforms

Reporting to any of the specified platforms

Respondents who had experienced relevant online behaviours were asked whether they, or someone on their behalf, made a report to any online social media platforms about online behaviour directed at them during their election campaign. Reporting levels were low, the survey found.

42% of those local election candidate respondents who experienced relevant online behaviours indicated that they, or someone on their behalf, had made a report to at least one platform. Only 31% of general election candidates who experienced negative online behaviours said they made at least one report to a platform. In summary, this means that 58% of local election candidates and 69% of general election candidates did not report any incidents of relevant online behaviours to a platform.

Reporting to individual specified platforms by candidates who experienced relevant online behaviours on each platform

	% of respondents who reported their experiences to the platform - Local Election	% of respondents who reported their experiences to the platform -General Election
Facebook	32%	25%
Instagram	20%	40%
X/Twitter	32%	19%
TikTok	20%	21%
YouTube	100%	0%
LinkedIn	N/A	N/A

Candidates were asked whether they had made reports to individual specified platforms (Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and LinkedIn). In section 3 above, the findings on the percentages of candidates who had experienced relevant online behaviours on each of those platforms were outlined.

Section 5: Reporting to Platforms - Awareness and Experience of Platforms’ Reporting Functions, and Ease of Use

The above table includes figures on the number of respondents who said that they made a report to each of the individual platforms as a percentage of the number of respondents who said that they had experienced relevant online behaviours on that platform. For example, 32% of those respondents who said that they experienced relevant online behaviours on Facebook said that they, or someone on their behalf, made a report to Facebook.

Respondents were also asked about the outcomes of reports made to platforms and provided with the following response options:

- Content was removed;
- Content was flagged or labelled;
- Response was received stating that the content did not breach the platform’s guidelines;
- Response was received stating that the platform would not review the report;
- No response was received; and
- I don’t know/ I can’t remember.

Candidates were not asked about any specific examples of reported content, and the research was not aimed at determining whether the appropriate outcomes were received. These questions were aimed simply at gaining insights into candidates’ experiences of the reporting process. The responses of the local election and general election candidates, who indicated that they made at least one report to a platform, are set out in the table below.

Reporting Outcomes by Platform

	Facebook		Instagram		X/Twitter		TikTok		YouTube		LinkedIn	
	LE	GE	LE	GE	LE	GE	LE	GE	LE	GE	LE	GE
Content was removed	3	1	0	2	5	0	1	1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Content was flagged or labelled	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Response was received stating that the content did not breach the platform's guidelines	11	4	2	0	12	4	3	2	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Response was received stating that the platform would not review the report	3	1	1	1	5	1	0	1	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
No response was received	9	3	2	2	7	2	2	2	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
I don't know/ I can't remember	2	0	N/A	0	1	0	1	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A

Facebook

Among the local election candidates who reported issues to Facebook, the most frequently cited reporting outcomes were receiving a response stating that the content did not breach the platform's policies (11 candidates) and no response being received (9 candidates). These were also the most commonly cited outcomes among the small sample size of general election candidates who reported issues to Facebook.

Instagram

Among the small sample size of candidates who reported content to Instagram, very small numbers of local election candidates reported receiving responses stating that either the content did not breach the platform's guidelines or that the platform would not review the content. Two general election candidates stated that the reported content was removed by Instagram. A small number of both local and general election candidates said that they did not receive a response from the platform.

Section 5: Reporting to Platforms - Awareness and Experience of Platforms' Reporting Functions, and Ease of Use

X/Twitter

The most common outcomes cited by local election candidates who reported to X/Twitter were receiving a response stating that the content did not breach the platform's guidelines (12 candidates) and that no response was received (7 candidates). Small numbers of local election candidates stated that the content was removed (5 candidates) or that they received a response stating that the platform would not review the report (5 candidates). Among general election candidates who reported to X/Twitter, the most common outcome cited was receiving a response stating that the response did not breach the platform's guidelines.

TikTok

Among local election candidates who reported content to TikTok, a slightly higher number of candidates reported having received a response stating that the content did not breach the platform's guidelines as compared to the numbers who saw content removed or who did not receive a response. There were varied outcomes cited among the small number of general candidates who reported to TikTok including: content being removed; responses received stating that the content did not breach the platform's guidelines; one response that the platform would not review the report; and two candidates reported having received no response.

YouTube and LinkedIn

A very small number of local election candidates, and no general election candidates, reported issues to YouTube, and there were no reports made to LinkedIn among those surveyed.

5.2 Rates of reporting to particular platforms

Election candidate respondents were asked about their rates of reporting of online behaviour to particular platforms. They were asked to indicate which of a list of responses described the reporting of offensive, abusive or hateful/intimidating or violent/impersonating behaviour targeted at them online during the election campaign or in the immediate aftermath of the election.

A summary of the responses of local election candidates is included below:

- 8% said that all instances of the online behaviour were reported to the platform(s)
- 17% only reported the online behaviour that they/their campaign team thought was particularly abusive or hateful
- 4% reported initial instances but the volume became too much to report all instances
- 13% reported initial instances but the nature of the responses or lack of responses by the platform(s) meant they/their campaign team didn't see a point in reporting further instances
- 1% selected "Other" indicating that they did not see a point in reporting due to personal experiences with reporting to platforms.

A summary of the responses of general election candidates is included below:

- 3% said that all instances of the online behaviour were reported to the platform(s)
- 9% only reported the online behaviour that they/their campaign team thought was particularly abusive or hateful
- 6% reported initial instances but the nature of the responses or lack of responses by the platform(s) meant that they/their campaign team didn't see a point in reporting further instances
- 2% selected "Other" indicating that they did not see a point in reporting due to personal experiences with reporting to platforms.

5.3 Reasons for not reporting to platforms

Where candidates had experienced relevant online behaviours but they, or someone on their behalf, had not reported relevant online behaviours to platforms, they were asked to indicate the reasons for this from a list of multiple reasons. Multiple response selections were allowed.

Reasons for Not Reporting Online Behaviours* (as a % of those respondents who had experienced relevant online behaviours with multiple responses possible)

Reason	Local Election Candidates	General Election Candidates
Didn't believe report would be effectively dealt with	59%	72%
Didn't have time to report	32%	36%
Volume of online behaviour too high to report all	16%	10%
Found reporting process difficult/didn't understand requirements	10%	2%
Couldn't find reporting functions on platform(s)	9%	-
Didn't know how to make a report to platform(s)	8%	8%
Didn't know if content was illegal or breached terms	8%	10%
Reported to An Garda Síochána instead	7%	3%
Thought content was acceptable on platform	6%	5%
Reported to Political Party Head Office instead	5%	-
Thought it would harm election chances if reported	4%	3%
Made report to media outlet/journalist instead	3%	3%
Didn't know illegal/harmful content could be reported	2%	3%
Other (Free text response: took alternate action such as: blocking accounts; deleting content; closing an account; calling behaviour out at a public meeting; or didn't take the behaviour too seriously etc.)	9%	15%

*Multiple response selections were allowed

In the survey, a significant number of candidates (59% local/42% general) said they did not report an incident to the platforms because they did not believe the report would be dealt with effectively. Lack of time was cited as the next biggest factor, while others found the volume of offending material to be too high or the reporting process too onerous or complex.

Despite regularly encountering abusive and hateful content they believed warranted removal, candidates indicated in interviews that they rarely reported this content to platforms. This low reporting rate stemmed from multiple factors, including scepticism that platforms would take meaningful action, the time constraints of busy campaign schedules and a general desensitisation to online hostility. This scepticism about whether platforms would take meaningful action is also reflected in the quantitative data above, with 59% of local election candidate respondents and 42% of general election candidate respondents stating that they did not believe that a report would be effectively dealt with. This was by far the most commonly cited reason for not reporting among both cohorts of survey respondents. Many interviewees said they had become accustomed to the high levels of toxicity online and simply entered election cycles with the expectation of facing abuse, viewing the reporting process as an inefficient use of their limited resources.

Some of those who did report content found the process convoluted and time consuming, and often with unsatisfactory outcomes where complaints were met with a stock response that the reported content did not violate platform terms and conditions, even in cases where there were clear threats to harm or incitement to violence. Two examples of such cases are below:

- A candidate from a migrant background reported having received threats to life online against their family members. A complaint was made to the platform involved, but the response indicated it did not violate their Terms and Conditions.
- A candidate with a Muslim name reported often receiving Islamophobic abuse online. One post in this Islamophobic context said “Kill them all”. When the comment was reported to the platform the candidate received a response saying the post did not violate platform Terms and Conditions. While there was a widespread perception that reporting harmful or illegal content to platforms was often futile, a few candidates noted occasions where platforms had responded effectively to their reports.

Section 5: Reporting to Platforms - Awareness and Experience of Platforms' Reporting Functions, and Ease of Use

Another reason that emerged among candidates for not reporting was their focus on staying in a positive mindset. They were aware of the psychological impact that sustained abusive attacks could have on them personally and consequently made a conscious decision to remain optimistic, choosing not to engage in time-consuming reporting processes that could bring them to affect their mental state. They chose to move on as quickly as possible and stay positive.

To minimise the impact of negative online attacks most candidates have developed a set of techniques to protect themselves, such as blocking, muting, filtering, turning off the option to comment on a post, hiding particular comments, turning off geolocators etc.

Methods and mechanisms to support candidates are discussed further in section 7 below, as An Coimisiún recognises that more needs to be done to support candidates in both engaging online and reporting to platforms.



5.4 Other actions taken in response to experiencing offensive/abusive/hateful/impersonating behaviour or intimidation/violent behaviours

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they, or someone on their behalf, had taken any other actions in response to experiencing relevant online behaviours. They were asked to indicate which of the following applied and enabled to select multiple responses.

A summary of the responses of local elections candidates is as follows:

- 33% blocked or otherwise restricted the account(s) from which the online behaviour originated
- 25% deleted any content which the platform allowed them to delete (comments on your posts or private messages received) etc.
- 8% responded to the original poster/account from which the online behaviour or responded to the post/reels/videos
- 7% made a report to An Garda Síochána
- 4% made a report to a media outlet/journalist
- 3% made a report to the headquarters of any political party of which they were a member
- 2% took “Other” actions including hiding comments on a platform to discourage further commentary and disengaging from comments posted
- 1% contacted Coimisiún na Meán

A summary of the responses of general election candidates is set out below:

- 14% blocked or otherwise restricted the account(s) from which the online behaviour originated
- 6% deleted any content which the platform allowed them to delete (comments on your posts or private messages received) etc.
- 5% responded to the original poster/account from which the online behaviour or responded to the post/reels/videos
- 2% made a report to An Garda Síochána

Section 6:

Suspension of Account or Removal of Content and Awareness of Platform Appeal Procedures

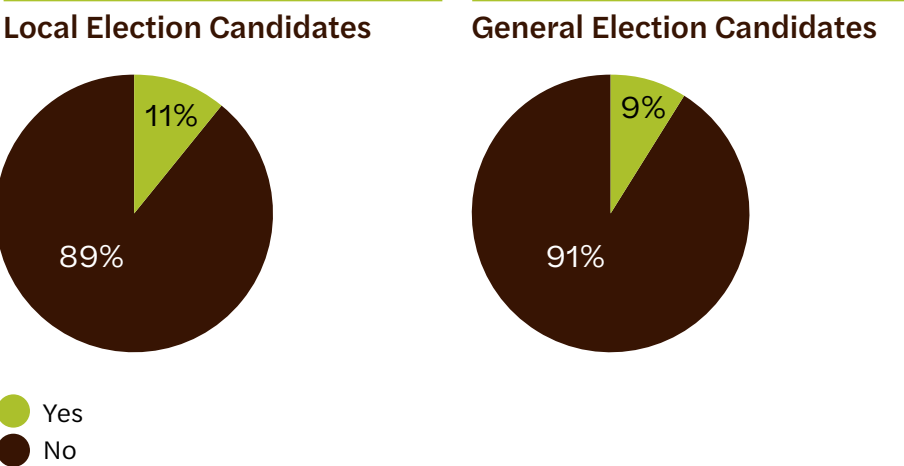
The qualitative findings discussed above indicate the importance of social media in political communication and electoral campaigns. The removal of content or banning of campaign accounts during an election campaign, where there has been no illegal activity or breach of a platform’s terms and conditions, could therefore have a disproportionate impact on electoral integrity. Removal of content or suspension of accounts could also have a negative impact on candidates’ election campaigns and interfere with their rights to freedom of expression. Candidates who participated in the research were therefore asked questions relating to whether they had experienced any suspensions of their own social media accounts or removal of content that they themselves had posted. Research participants who had experienced account suspensions or removal of content were asked about appealing suspensions of accounts or removal of content to the specified social media platforms.

6.1 Rates of experiencing (a) suspension of a personal or personal campaign social media account and/or (b) removal of one or more campaign posts

Respondents, who indicated that they or someone on their behalf used social media as part of their campaign, were asked to indicate whether during their election campaign, they had experienced:

- (a) suspension of a personal or personal campaign social media account; and/or
- (b) removal of one or more of their campaign posts including videos or reels.

Rates of experiencing (a) suspension of a personal or personal campaign social media account and/or (b) removal of one or more campaign posts (% of candidates who used social media)



Section 6: Suspension of Account or Removal of Content and Awareness of Platform Appeal Procedures

6.2 Rates of appealing suspension or removal to the relevant platform(s)

Rates of appeals to platforms generally

Candidates were asked whether they, or someone working or acting on behalf of them, appealed the suspension or removal of any of the relevant platforms from which they had been suspended or on which they had content removed generally.

Of the small number of local election candidates who had experienced an account being suspended or having content removed by a platform, 64% of those appealed the suspension or removal to a platform, while 27% had not, and 9% didn't know or could not remember if they had submitted an appeal. Of the small number of general election candidates who had experienced an account being suspended or having content removed by a platform, 67% of those appealed the suspension or removal to a platform while 17% responded they had not and 17% said they did not know or could not remember if they had submitted an appeal.

6.3 Actions and responses of individual platforms following appeals of suspension or removal

Survey respondents were asked whether they, or someone on their behalf, had appealed the suspension or removal to each of the individual platforms. Respondents who had made an appeal, or had an appeal submitted on their behalf, were asked what happened as a result of the appeal. Candidates reported mixed results: among the small sample size, some appeals were successful with accounts or content reinstated; others received notification that the platform believed the suspension or removal was justified; while in other cases, no response to the appeal was received at all.

In the interviews, candidates requested better communication channels with the platforms and prompt response times to an appeal, particularly in the run-up to an election when timing is critical. In one case, a candidate outlined how their political page was suspended after an anonymous complaint, despite no apparent violations. The candidate informed the platform they believed the complaint was made with the express intent of interfering with their campaign. The appeal process for reinstatement was lengthy, which significantly impacted the campaign's momentum and reach during a critical period.

Section 6: Suspension of Account or Removal of Content and Awareness of Platform Appeal Procedures

6.4 Reasons for not appealing suspension/removal to the relevant platforms

Where the respondent or someone on their behalf did not make an appeal of a suspension or removal to the relevant platform(s), respondents were asked what the reasoning for that was. A list of possible options was provided, and respondents were permitted to select multiple options.

Local election candidates

Of those who had experienced an account suspension or removal of content from a platform, the reasons for local election candidates not appealing an account suspension or removal of content to a platform can be summarised as follows (multiple responses were possible):

- 22% did not believe that an appeal would be effectively dealt with
- 17% found that the appeal functions on the platform(s) were difficult to use
- 11% did not know how to submit an appeal to the platform(s)
- 6% did not know that they could make an appeal
- 6% did not have time

General election candidates

Of those who had experienced an account suspension or removal of content from a platform, the reasons for general election candidates not appealing an account suspension or removal of content to a platform can be summarised as follows (multiple responses were possible):

- 50% did not have time
- 17% could not find the appeal function on the platform(s) or linked in the response emails from the platforms
- 17% reported it to the Electoral Commission
- 17% did not know that they could make an appeal



Section 7: Reflections and Conclusions

Reflections

The findings of this research study present further evidence that action is required to address the scale and impact of online harms facing election candidates in Ireland. The prevalence of harmful online behaviour documented in this research not only threatens individual candidates' wellbeing but can have a significant impact on the health of our democratic system. Protecting candidates from harmful online experiences is essential to ensuring diverse, representative participation in political life and maintaining public confidence in electoral processes.

Based on the evidence gathered through our comprehensive surveys and interviews, Coimisiún na Meán has prepared reflections on how it can further address and mitigate the harms identified in the report, within its regulatory remit, along with identifying actions for other key stakeholders including digital platforms, political parties and state agencies. These measures recognise that addressing online electoral harms requires a multi-faceted approach that balances the protection of candidates with the preservation of legitimate political discourse and freedom of expression.

Our reflections will help inform the implementation of An Coimisiún's 2025 – 2027 Strategy, with particular reference to our Democracy strategic outcome, and are organised into five key areas based on the primary concerns raised by candidates and the tools available to address them. These encompass direct support for candidates facing online harms, examining the links between online and offline harassment, responding effectively to violent and intimidatory behaviour, protecting freedom of expression and supporting electoral integrity. Through these coordinated efforts, we want to work towards a digital media landscape that supports democracy and democratic values, underpins civic discourse and supports everyone to participate in political life without fear of harassment or abuse.

Additional support for candidates facing online harms

This research highlights the scale of harmful content and contact election candidates are subject to. Much of it does not meet the threshold of illegal content, but the volume and nature of the abuse is offensive, upsetting and takes a significant toll on candidates, their families and loved ones, impacts mental health and, for some, their continued participation in political life.

Additional supports are needed to improve awareness of measures that candidates can take to stay safe online and An Coimisiún is committed to working with all relevant stakeholders to empower and inform them.

Ahead of the 2025 Presidential election, An Coimisiún will:

- Provide additional guidance to candidates on platforms' terms and conditions to support them in reporting violations, and;
- Clearly communicate what An Coimisiún cannot do in respect of online harms, including compelling the immediate take-down of online content, or to moderate content;
- Provide additional information materials to other groups critical to upholding democratic values, including journalists.
- We will continue to engage with members of the Oireachtas and Local Authorities on keeping safe online, including at both regional and local levels, and will look to continue our collaboration with An Garda Síochána in this area.

Additionally, responses of candidates in relation to their experience reporting content that they felt violated the platforms' terms and conditions raises questions about the application and enforcement by Very Large Online Platforms of their terms and conditions and the appeal mechanism that platforms need to put in place under the Digital Services Act (DSA).

Coimisiún na Meán, as Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) for Ireland, supervises the platforms and enforces the DSA for those platforms established here.

An Coimisiún has a key role in evaluating and understanding platforms' compliance with their obligations under the DSA. We carry out ongoing supervisory engagement and, if necessary, take appropriate enforcement action to ensure that the objectives of the DSA are achieved. On foot of the issues identified as part of this research, An Coimisiún will explore whether a review on compliance with the DSA, which may include Article 14, is required.

Coimisiún na Meán has played a key role, working in close co-operation with the European Commission, in implementation and coordination of DSA election guidelines. Ahead of the 2025 Presidential election and future electoral events, An Coimisiún will make clear to platforms the urgent need to develop and enforce their rules, including preventing deception through impersonation of candidates, the deployment of deceptive manipulated media and coordination of inauthentic content creation or behaviour.

Examining how online harms translate into offline harm

Recent elections have seen a number of concerning incidents, featuring physical violence towards candidates and canvassers, and candidates in our own research recounted experiences of stalking and harassment, and very serious concerns for their own safety and that of their loved ones.

While Coimisiún na Meán's remit rests in the enforcement of the Online Safety Framework, it is evident that we need to play a role in cross-agency collaboration to 1) better understand the links between online abuse and how it translates into offline harm, and 2) put in place measures to prevent, tackle and mitigate these harms.

As first steps, we will:

- Explore the links between online abuse and in-person harassment and attacks, along with ensuring close collaboration and information-sharing with relevant agencies, including An Garda Síochána (AGS), the Safe Participation in Political Life Task Force, the Houses of Oireachtas and civil society organisations, and;
- Deepen engagement with AGS, Local Authorities and Political Parties, to promote awareness of, and signpost to, appropriate supports regarding serious offline harms including, but not limited to, stalking and harassment.

Section 7: Reflections and Conclusions

Additionally, acknowledging the body of excellent work underway in supporting candidate safety, we further propose that:

- An Coimisiún Toghcháin examine the impact of publication of candidate names on ballot papers and consider whether candidates should have greater choice as to the publication of their address;
- The Houses of the Oireachtas continue to focus on the provision of safety and security supports not only to members, but to their staff and families, in line with the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament and Safe Participation in Public Life reports;
- Local authorities and political parties work to ensure that measures to support the safety of local representatives, councillors and their loved ones are put in place including through the promotion of the Security Allowance Scheme, and provision of security information sessions and psychological supports, as recommended in the Safe Participation in Political Life report, along with proactively engaging with local liaison inspectors in AGS, in this respect.

Responding to violent and intimidatory online behaviour

One of the most worrying findings in this research showed that more than 1 in 5 general election candidates and just under 1 in 4 local elections candidates who experienced abusive, hateful violent or intimidating behaviour, or impersonation, reported receiving threats to kill or cause them serious harm during election campaigns.

An Coimisiún already plays a critical role, not only in informing candidates of their rights in reporting illegal content under the DSA, but importantly through our enforcement powers to ensure that people can easily report illegal content and that platforms take decisions on notices they receive in a timely and objective manner under Article 16 of the DSA. The supervision and enforcement of Article 16 remains a key focus for An Coimisiún and we will continue to review compliance with it.

We will also keep under review platforms' compliance with their obligation under Article 18 of the DSA, to promptly inform the law enforcement or judicial authorities of the Member State concerned of any suspicions of criminal offences involving a threat to the life or safety of persons.

An Coimisiún will, in our role as DSC, work in partnership with An Garda Síochána and the European Board of Digital Services, to identify trends in such notifications, and take relevant steps to evaluate compliance.

Along with this, we will further engage with potential trusted flaggers with relevant expertise, in accordance with Article 22 of the DSA, along with supporting the European Commission in carrying out risk assessments relating to the dissemination of illegal content.

Supporting freedom of expression and mitigating risks to civic discourse

While our research demonstrates the benefits of digital campaigning to many candidates in reaching and engaging with their constituents, it also shows how the removal and restriction of content or suspension of candidates' accounts during an election campaign, particularly where there has been no apparent breach of platforms' terms and conditions, can impact candidates' rights to freedom of expression.

Under the DSA Election Guidelines, platforms should:

- Take measures to show that content moderation decisions do not affect the equality of candidates or disproportionately favour or promote voices representing certain views, and;
- Promptly respond to appeals to account suspensions and content removal during election campaigns and deploy local knowledge and expertise through dedicated teams to support this.

An Coimisiún will continue to monitor the adherence of Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines to these guidelines and use opportunities in advance of the Presidential Election, including through a DSA Roundtable with platforms, other regulatory agencies and civil society to highlight and seek responses to the issues raised in this report.

Section 7: Reflections and Conclusions

It is also clear from this report that the prevalence of “pile-ons”, where a candidate is criticised or targeted by a large number of other users, and coordinated harassment campaigns, when a candidate believes they have been targeted on the basis of commenting on a particular social or policy issue, may also have a chilling effect on civic discourse and freedom of expression.

Low rates of reporting to platforms, however, driven by a fatalism about how effectively reports will be dealt with and a lack of time to report, point to wider challenges in addressing these issues.

As a start, An Coimisiún will:

- Inform other DSCs, the European Board of Digital Services and the European Commission of these issues to support implementation of Articles 34 and 35 by the Commission, with specific reference to systemic risks regarding electoral processes and civic discourse;
- Provide additional signposting to candidates to out-of-court dispute settlement mechanisms to resolve content moderation disputes with online platforms;
- Undertake research with a range of stakeholders to better understand low reporting rates regarding harmful content and account suspensions;
- Develop new, clear, easy-to-understand video materials to support users to make reports to individual platforms.

Supporting election integrity

Since its establishment, An Coimisiún has placed a strong focus on supporting electoral integrity, and critical to this is ensuring the safety of election candidates and participants in the democratic process online. To further expand upon and consolidate this work, An Coimisiún will:

- Develop an Electoral Integrity Strategy, with specific measures to support and empowers participants in political life, promote partnership working, and ensure election preparedness and agility in the face of emerging challenges;
- Support the development and implementation of the European Commission’s forthcoming European Democracy Shield, with a specific focus on the safe participation of candidates in elections;
- Continue to support other DSCs in DSA election preparedness.

Conclusion

Our research further underlines the troubling extent of online toxicity and its potential to undermine democratic participation, and its findings challenge us to confront fundamental questions about how we protect political engagement, maintain representative diversity and preserve the quality of public discourse essential to our democratic system.

Coimisiún na Meán is committed to working with all stakeholders to ensure this research and our reflections translate into meaningful change.

Protecting the integrity of our electoral processes and ensuring democracy remains accessible to all, regardless of their background or the views they hold, requires collective action and sustained commitment. The health of our democracy ultimately depends on our ability to foster an environment where political participation is safe, inclusive and free from harm.

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