



**Hate
Aid**

Technische
Universität
München



Under attack & abandoned

**How digital violence
affects political engagement.
A situation report.**

Synopsis

Democracy thrives on people who participate in it and get involved. **But politicians, campaign teams and other politically engaged people are coming under increasing pressure:** hatred and violence have characterised recent election campaigns. There are threats and physical attacks on the streets. Insults on social networks are the order of the day. Especially there, people are stylised as bogeymen and hatred towards political opponents is stirred up. The new study makes clear that this has consequences for political engagement in Germany. **Digital violence¹ endangers the willingness of politically engaged people to stand up for democracy.**

The study “Under attack & abandoned: How digital violence affects political engagement. A situation report.” carried out by the Technical University of Munich in cooperation with the human rights organisation HateAid **highlights the extent of such hostility and its effects**, without claiming to paint a representative picture. Especially in view of the upcoming federal elections, it is intended to highlight deficits in law enforcement, among other things, and to point out courses of action for parties, law enforcement agencies and platforms, to counteract the growing erosion of democratic structures due to a lack of engagement.

A total of 1,114 politically active people who work at different political levels and in different professional fields (49 % men, 51 % women) were surveyed. The study is not representative.

The most important results:

- **More than half of those involved in politics are affected, but not all in the same way.** Digital violence affects the majority of politically active people. The study shows: overall, 58 % of all respondents reported experiencing hostility on the internet. Most of it was directed against the political position of those affected. Politically active people who have already experienced digital violence also reported attacks in the analogue space more often (71 %) than those who have not (47 %).
- **Politically active women are particularly affected.** The extent to which women (63 %) are affected is higher than among men (53 %).² Almost two-thirds (68 %) of women affected report gender-based violence such as sexism and misogyny. In addition, almost a quarter of them have received threats of sexual violence, such as rape threats. Among male respondents, the figure was 3 %. The picture is different for men: they were more often threatened with other forms of physical violence, such as beatings or murder (51 %; women: 43 %).
- **The violence does not stay on the internet.** A larger proportion of people affected by digital violence reported having also experienced analogue violence: they experienced physical attacks more often (32 % each for men and women) than those who were not affected by digital violence (10 % of men; 14 % of women).
- **More than half of all politically active people affected are changing their way of communicating – women in particular consider quitting.** The hostility has a negative impact on the political work of the respondents (men: 34 %; women: 47 %). Significantly more affected women (66 %) limited their use of social media after experiencing digital violence (men: 53 %). This means that they adapted their tone and content, thought about reducing public appearances or even taking time off from work. In some cases, digital violence led those affected to consider not taking on a position, due to the digital hostility it is exposed to. Of the women surveyed, 49 % thought about stepping back from their position

at least occasionally (men: 30 %), 11 % said they even had this thought all the time (men: 3 %). A complete withdrawal from political work was also much more likely to be an option for women (22 %; men: 10 %).

- **Politicians and political activists feel abandoned.** Many of the respondents would like more support in view of these experiences. Men (49 %) as well as women (66 %) stated that they did not feel sufficiently prepared for digital violence and its consequences with regard to their political engagement. And this despite the fact that 59 % of the men and 53 % of the women affected stated that there were contact persons in their party or at their workplace. The majority of those who have already been attacked would like to see more solidarity within their party, their community or at their workplace.
- **Only a minority takes legal action against digital violence.** Just under a third (30 %) of the politically active people concerned have already filed a criminal complaint with the police about digital violence. Only 8 % have already taken civil action against perpetrators.

The study makes clear that digital violence is changing the way politically engaged people act and communicate – and can ultimately even influence the decision about what kind of political position they make themselves available for. Women, who are still underrepresented in parliaments, are particularly affected. The state and society have failed to create the conditions for politicians and other politically engaged people to feel safe in their work online and in the analogue world. However, it is essential for a healthy democracy that they can stand up for the interests of citizens without fear of hatred and violence. **Instead, politically active people feel insecure and left alone.** And yet the Federal Constitutional Court already made it clear in a decision in 2021: publicly engaged people are entitled to sufficient protection of their personal rights. Only if this is ensured can they be expected to participate in the state and society.

Especially in view of the early federal elections, the findings of this study must be a wake-up call for various actors to act immediately and comprehensively:

1. To the chairpersons of the parties:

Internal party contact point for those affected: there is a need for an institutionalized, inner-party contact point for victims of digital violence. The survey shows very clearly that the present contact persons are not perceived as sufficient. This office must be known to party members and equipped with sufficient resources, e.g. to report content, secure evidence and assist with criminal complaints.

Proactively protect candidates: candidates are usually on their own in the event of hostility. Parties must offer them preventative preparation for hate campaigns and crisis communication basics, as well as provide them with social media screenings and moderation resources during attacks.

2. To law enforcement and the judiciary:

Consistent and prompt prosecution: violence against political figures is not a private problem, but a social one. The expansion of § 188 StGB already aimed to address this and enable the prosecution of insulting offenses in certain cases, even without filing a criminal complaint, if they severely impair public activities. However, the norm does not cover hostility via private message or email, is not applicable to journalists and activists and is also interpreted very restrictively regarding public comments. But consistent prosecution of hate crimes against politically active people is also needed in cases not covered by the norm. Proceedings must not be discontinued and a reference to private prosecution is out of the question (in accordance with No. 86 RiStBV). In addition, proceedings must be concluded in a timely manner. In this respect, it is of vital importance that law enforcement authorities and the judiciary are provided with the necessary resources.

3. To the social media platforms, regulating authorities and the European legislator:

Enforcement of EU digital legislation: under the EU's Digital Services Act, platforms are obliged to minimise risks to public debate and elections, among other things by adapting their algorithms and moderating content. This means

¹ The authors of the present study understand the collective term “digital violence” to refer to a variety of different derogatory, degrading, intimidating or inciting technology-based phenomena against persons or certain groups of people. A detailed definition can be found in chapter 3.1 of the detailed publication on the study.

² Overall, 1.43 % of participants identified as diverse. Due to the comparatively small size of this group and the concomitant limitations in statistical comparability with the other two groups, as well as for the safeguarding of anonymity, these participants were excluded from further statistical analyses.

that politicians, for example, must be particularly protected from organised attacks and disinformation campaigns, especially immediately before and during elections, and that violence must not be amplified algorithmically.

Targeted and consistent action against digital violence also requires the advancement of existing democracy-promoting civil society structures and continuous monitoring of hate dynamics on the internet.

About the study

The study “Under attack & abandoned: How digital violence affects political engagement. A situation report.” was conducted in 2024 by **the human rights organisation HateAid in cooperation with the Technical University of Munich**. The aim of the study is to record the extent and effects of digital vio-

lence against politically active persons, and against politically active women in particular. The findings of the study are to be used to derive necessary changes through which those affected receive more protection and support. A total of 1,114 politically active people took part in the survey. Of these, 543 (49 %) identified as male and 571 (51 %) as female. **The focus of the survey was on politicians who are active at regional, state, federal and EU levels (67 %)**. In addition, activists (19 %), scientists (5 %), journalists and publicists (4 %), influencers (3 %) and other party members (2 %) were surveyed. The spectrum is deliberately broad because, in addition to politicians, other politically engaged people also help shape public debates and are therefore part of the formation of political will and opinion. Among other things, the study examines the influence of digital violence on whether these people aspire to public office in the long term. Conclusions about a connection between party affiliation and being affected by digital violence cannot be made on the basis of the available data. There is a need for further research in this area.

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The German long version of the study can be found [here](#):