

Online Gendered Violence and Visibility in Electoral Autocracies: Evidence from Parliamentary and Local Elections in Türkiye

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Abstract

Online platforms have become indispensable tools for political candidates to gain visibility, particularly for women in electoral autocracies who often lack access to traditional networks, party hierarchies, and media platforms. We argue that online visibility, while a resource for women candidates, disproportionately exposes them to online violence that functions as a mechanism of political control, reinforcing patriarchal exclusion from the political sphere. Our analysis draws on nearly four million tweets directed at 1,834 candidates across the 2023 parliamentary and 2024 local election campaigns in Türkiye, providing a rare opportunity to observe how these dynamics unfold at both the national and subnational levels. We find that while online visibility increases abuse for all candidates, the effect is markedly stronger for women. Moreover, women are disproportionately targeted across diverse types of violence, including ridicule, sexualized insults, physical threats, and religious or ethnic hate speech.

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Introduction

Online platforms have become central arenas for electoral politics, enabling candidates to build visibility, mobilize supporters, and bypass traditional gatekeepers. For women competing for political office in electoral autocracies, where democratic norms and processes are absent or in decline, these platforms are especially significant, as they provide alternatives to party hierarchies and traditional media outlets that often marginalize women's voices. Yet, while social media lowers barriers to entry, it also reproduces entrenched patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, exposing women disproportionately to harassment and abuse (Erikson et al. 2021; Rheault et al. 2019). Thus, the very spaces that create opportunities for women to become visible political leaders may also serve as additional arenas of victimization, paradoxically discouraging their participation.

Despite growing research on online violence against women in politics, existing studies have not systematically studied how the digital visibility of female candidates shapes their exposure to online violence during the election period, especially in less democratic contexts. Scholarship has shown that visibility is a risk factor for abuse, but analyses overwhelmingly center on Western or established democracies such as Sweden, Canada, and the UK (Gorrell et al. 2020; Håkansson 2021; Rheault et al. 2019). Even when election campaigns are examined, visibility is often measured imperfectly through proxies like candidates' list placement (Holm et al. 2024) or rank within political hierarchies, rather than through how visibility is actually constructed and manifested online (Håkansson 2021). This leaves open critical questions: How does visibility affect the risks of online violence for women candidates? How do these processes

operate in declining or less democratic contexts? Do women face sharper penalties than men when they seek to raise their profiles during elections in these contexts?

We argue that for women candidates, online visibility is not a neutral attribute but a direct challenge to entrenched gender expectations. Research in social psychology and feminist theory demonstrates that women in prominent public roles are often perceived as violating norms of modesty, deference, and limited public voice, which provokes hostility (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Bardall 2013; Puwar 2004). In this context, women's visibility carries different political meanings than men's. Whereas male politicians' prominence typically signals credibility and leadership, women's visibility is more likely to trigger backlash in the form of personal, sexualized, and hate-based attacks (Rheault et al. 2019; Håkansson 2021; Erikson et al. 2021). These dynamics are especially pronounced in electoral autocracies, where elections magnify the importance of public visibility for political viability, but weak institutional protections leave women disproportionately vulnerable to online harassment. Such harassment is not incidental incivility but a gendered mechanism of political control: it disciplines women for crossing symbolic boundaries, suppresses their political voices, and reinforces exclusionary norms about who is deemed legitimate in democratic competition.

This study examines the 2023 parliamentary and 2024 local elections in Türkiye to analyze how visibility shapes online harassment in X (previously Twitter). As an electoral autocracy marked by shrinking civic space, patriarchal norms, and structural advantages for incumbents, Türkiye provides a critical case for studying these dynamics. Our dataset includes more than 3.9 million tweets directed at 1,834 candidates across both campaigns. Online political violence is measured through supervised machine learning that classifies tweets as offensive or hateful, drawing on United Nations definitions of hate speech. We capture digital visibility

primarily through follower counts, which signal the reach of a candidate's audience and exposure to both supporters and detractors. We also account for structural sources of visibility, particularly partisan affiliation, as the Green Left Party (YSP, later DEM) promotes gender equality through quotas and co-leadership, making its women candidates especially visible—targeted by conservative and nationalist critics.

We find that while greater visibility in social media increases the likelihood of online abuse for all candidates, its effects are disproportionately severe for women. Across both elections, women experience sharper increases in offensive and hate speech as their follower counts rise, with particularly pronounced effects in the local elections. Disaggregated by type of abuse, women are targeted not only with ridicule, sexualized insults, and demeaning language, but also with identity-based attacks rooted in ethnicity and religion. Moreover, partisan affiliation shapes these dynamics: female candidates from the pro-equality Green Left Party face substantially higher levels of online violence than their male counterparts or women from other parties, suggesting that the party's commitment to gender representation amplifies women's visibility—and with it, their vulnerability to abuse.

This paper aims to make several contributions. First, it advances scholarship on violence against women in politics by demonstrating how digital visibility functions as both a resource and a liability. While visibility enhances women's competitiveness, it simultaneously exposes them to disproportionate abuse that operates as a mechanism of political control. Second, by analyzing nearly four million tweets across two consecutive elections in Türkiye, the study brings rare evidence from an electoral autocracy where patriarchal norms and fragile democratic institutions heighten the costs of women's participation, addressing a gap in the literature still centered on Western democracies. Third, by combining fine-grained measures of online violence

with supervised machine learning of offensive and hate speech, we show how gender, visibility, and partisanship intersect to shape exposure to various types of online harassment. Together, these findings highlight the broader democratic costs of gendered online violence: silencing individual women, deterring others from entering politics, and reinforcing exclusionary norms about who belongs in the political sphere in the context of electoral democracy.

Digital Pathways to Political Participation for Women in Electoral Autocracy

In electoral autocracies, where formal institutions are weakly institutionalized and traditional media often face state control, online platforms provide an alternative sphere for political participation. Digital media lowers the costs of engagement, enabling citizens to access information, mobilize, and voice their preferences even when conventional avenues are constrained (Boulianne 2020; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021). Studies of contentious politics illustrate that social media has created participatory opportunities in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, from the Arab Spring to more recent mobilizations (Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Papacharissi 2015). Although governments attempt to control online spaces, the accessibility and horizontal structure of social media still expand opportunities for political expression (Gunitsky 2015). In this sense, online platforms function as partial substitutes for restricted offline participation in electoral autocracies, making them crucial sites for political activity.

These participatory benefits extend particularly to women, who face layered barriers to political engagement in weak democracies. Patriarchal party structures, limited media representation, and constraints on mobility mean that women are often disregarded in formal political arenas. Online platforms, however, help reduce these disadvantages by providing

relatively low-cost, flexible, and less gate-kept means of communication and visibility (IFES 2018; Cardo 2021). For example, South African female politicians use “metavoicing” and trust-building strategies on social media to enhance their credibility and visibility outside mainstream media (Matsilele and Nkoala 2023). Likewise, women in Nigeria, Ghana, and other electoral contexts leverage online advocacy and generate higher user engagement than men (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2020; Chilwa 2023), illustrating how digital campaigning allows women to bypass male-dominated party infrastructures and connect directly with citizens.

Beyond lowering participation barriers, digital platforms also provide women with symbolic and substantive representation. Online visibility enables women to occupy public space, normalize their presence in political discourse, and build support networks that would be difficult to achieve offline. Research shows that female candidates continue to leverage social media to amplify their voices and connect with audiences (Osei-Appiah et al. 2023) and that digital tools can even narrow gender gaps in political debate by fostering more inclusive forms of participation (Flavia et al. 2025). Such visibility contributes to both descriptive representation—by increasing the salience of women as political actors—and substantive representation—by broadening the issues and perspectives present in the public sphere.

Importantly, the reliance of women on online platforms is particularly pronounced in electoral autocracies, where elections remain focal events despite institutional weaknesses. Scholars of hybrid regimes argue that while electoral autocracies use elections to secure legitimacy, the competitive features of these contests still generate real incentives for parties and candidates to engage voters (Schedler 2002; Diamond 2002). Because electoral competition still matters, parties, candidates, and media outlets have strong incentives to monitor and engage with online discourse, which makes digital visibility politically consequential. For women, therefore,

social media use is not merely symbolic: it provides a means to shape narratives, mobilize supporters, and influence electoral outcomes. Accordingly, electoral autocracies represent a distinct political environment where women's dependence on online platforms is both intensified and politically significant.

Online Violence Against Women in Electoral Campaigns

Yet the same features that make online platforms vital for women's political participation also create new vulnerabilities. Violence and harassment directed at women in politics distort core democratic functions by raising the costs of participation, constraining office-holders' behavior, and ultimately undermining political representation (Phillips 1995; Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). Across multiple contexts, women politicians are targeted more often than comparable men and are subjected to distinct, sexualized, and gender-denigrating attacks that depress ambition, harm mental health, and disrupt campaigning (Collignon and Rüdiger 2020; Håkansson 2021; Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson 2021). Importantly, such violence is not incidental but reflects a deeper resistance to women occupying political roles: it enforces boundaries around who is perceived as legitimate in politics and punishes those who transgress (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Bardall 2013).

Social media platforms now constitute key arenas of political life, lowering barriers to participation and offering political candidates new ways to build recognition. Online visibility, however, functions as a double-edged sword. While a strong online presence can attract voter support, mobilize networks, and build credibility, it also magnifies exposure to criticism, harassment, and threats. Previous research shows that these risks are not evenly distributed:

prominent women are disproportionately targeted with sexualized and gendered abuse aimed at undermining their legitimacy (Erikson et al. 2021; Gorrell et al. 2020; Rheault et al. 2019; Richardson-Self 2021; Southern and Harmer 2021; Ward and McLoughlin 2020). In this sense, social media amplifies both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of women candidates, simultaneously serving as a resource for recognition and a conduit for entrenched patriarchal norms.

These dynamics are particularly acute during election campaigns, when visibility becomes both indispensable and risky. Elections heighten attention, intensify competition, and amplify online mobilization, creating conditions in which candidates must cultivate digital visibility to remain viable. Some initial evidence shows, however, that women are penalized more heavily than men for becoming visible: while men's prominence is associated with credibility, women's visibility disproportionately attracts hostility, ridicule, and sexist abuse (Rheault et al. 2019; Håkansson 2021; Holm, Skhiri, and Zetterberg 2024).

Yet significant gaps in this emerging literature remain. First, few studies have systematically theorized and tested how women's online visibility during election campaigns shapes their exposure to online violence, even though elections are precisely the moments when reliance on digital campaigning is most pronounced (Holm et al. 2024; Gorrell et al. 2020). Second, although visibility is widely acknowledged as a key risk factor, most research operationalizes it with blunt measures such as candidate list placement (Holm et al. 2024) or the rank of the individual's political office (Håkansson 2021), failing to capture how visibility is actually constructed online. Third, the literature has overwhelmingly concentrated on Western democracies (Pacilli and Mannarini 2019; Rheault et al. 2019; Erikson et al. 2023; Southern and Harmer 2021; Gorrell et al. 2020), leaving under-explored how these dynamics unfold in

electoral autocracies where democratic norms and gender equality are not safeguarded. Addressing these gaps, this study investigates how online visibility during elections interacts with gender to shape online abuse in a national context where patriarchal norms and weak democratic institutions heighten the risks and costs of women's political participation.

When Visibility Becomes Risk: Gendered Patterns of Online Violence

To understand why women are disproportionately subjected to online violence during campaigns, it is necessary to take visibility itself as the analytical starting point. Visibility is not a neutral attribute but a deeply gendered one. Feminist and social psychological research has long shown that women who step into prominent public roles are judged against entrenched expectations of modesty, deference, and limited public presence (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Bardall 2013; Puwar 2004). By appearing visibly as political actors, women are not only competing for votes but symbolically challenging patriarchal orders that dictate appropriate roles for women. In this sense, visibility itself is a transgression.

This transgression activates predictable patterns of backlash. Theories of role incongruity and gender backlash suggest that women in positions of authority provoke hostility because their behavior conflicts with stereotypes of femininity, which prescribe warmth and subordination rather than power and leadership (Rudman et al. 2012). Whereas men's visibility in politics typically signifies competence and credibility (Håkansson 2021), women's visibility is more likely to be read as illegitimate or threatening. Online abuse thus operates as a social sanction: a way of policing symbolic boundaries, disciplining women who transgress, and reasserting patriarchal hierarchies (Richardson-Self 2021). From this perspective, online violence should not

be seen as random incivility but as an instrument of control that reinforces exclusionary norms about who belongs in politics.

The double standard in how visibility is interpreted becomes especially consequential in electoral autocracies. Elections are moments when visibility is most essential: candidates must be seen and heard to be electorally viable. Yet women face a paradox. To compete effectively, they must cultivate a strong online presence, but in doing so, they expose themselves to disproportionate abuse. This tension is intensified in electoral autocracies, where elections serve as instruments of regime legitimation but still generate meaningful incentives for candidates to mobilize supporters (Schedler 2002; Diamond 2002). In such contexts, visibility becomes both indispensable and uniquely precarious. Patriarchal institutions remain entrenched, democratic protections are weak, and online harassment is pervasive and weakly regulated.

Social media amplifies this paradox by functioning as both an opportunity structure and a site of risk. On the one hand, it allows women to bypass male-dominated party hierarchies and mainstream media, reaching voters directly and asserting themselves as credible political actors. On the other hand, it facilitates the rapid, large-scale dissemination of misogynistic content that seeks to delegitimize women's participation (Theocharis et al. 2016; Collignon and Rüdiger 2020). Evidence from multiple contexts suggests that visible women are attacked more frequently and more viciously than men, with harassment aimed at silencing them and deterring others from following in their footsteps (Rheault et al. 2019; Southern and Harmer 2021; Bardall 2013).

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate our central argument: as women become more visible during elections, they also become more vulnerable to online violence than their male counterparts. Elections heighten the value of digital presence, yet weak institutions and entrenched patriarchal norms magnify its risks. Women cannot compete without cultivating

visibility, but cultivating visibility exposes them to disproportionate abuse. This paradox lies at the heart of the gendered politics of digital campaigning in weak democracies. Visibility is not merely a resource; it is also a liability, one that disproportionately burdens women and undermines their democratic representation.

Research Design

Case: The 2023 parliamentary and 2024 local elections in Türkiye

The 2023 parliamentary and 2024 local elections in Türkiye provide a uniquely valuable context for examining the gendered dynamics of online political violence. Türkiye has been classified as an electoral autocracy, where competitive elections are maintained but constrained by shrinking civic space, weakened opposition rights, and entrenched patriarchal norms (Ugur-Cinar 2023, Dalay and Toremark 2024). This makes it an illuminating setting to study how visibility interacts with online harassment in a regime that combines electoral contestation with authoritarian practices. The salience of gender is further heightened in Türkiye, where conservative social norms regarding women's roles continue to shape public and political life, magnifying the risks women face when they pursue visibility in electoral politics.

We focus on Türkiye's two most recent national elections. The May 2023 parliamentary elections were among the most consequential in Türkiye's recent history. Marking the centennial of the Republic, they pitted incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) against the Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and a broad opposition coalition. Erdoğan secured re-election in a contested second-round presidential vote, while the AKP-led People's Alliance retained its parliamentary

majority. These elections underscored both the persistence of electoral competition and the structural advantages enjoyed by incumbents in hybrid regimes. For women candidates, the high stakes and national visibility of the campaign created intensified exposure to online scrutiny, making the election a critical case for analyzing gendered patterns of harassment.

Additionally, the March 2024 local elections provide an important complement to the national contest by shifting the level of competition to subnational politics. Local elections in Türkiye are highly salient, particularly in major metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, which serve as platforms for opposition parties to challenge the ruling bloc. In 2024, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) achieved a historic victory, winning control of many municipalities and signaling resilience despite the national-level dominance of the AKP. The simultaneous availability of national and local election data within a short time frame offers a rare opportunity to assess how the risks of gendered online violence vary across different electoral arenas.

The analysis draws on tweets mentioning candidates' official X handles during the campaign periods for each election. To ensure comparability, only candidates with active accounts were included, with parliamentary candidates covered in the parliamentary election and mayoral candidates in the local elections. Handles were used instead of names to standardize data collection and reduce potential selection bias, while also increasing the likelihood that candidates themselves were directly involved in the exchanges. The time frames differed across the two elections: six months prior to the parliamentary election and three months before the local election, reflecting the later announcement of candidacies in many districts ahead of the 2024 local contests. For the local elections, the dataset was restricted to metropolitan

municipalities and central districts of non-metropolitan provinces, where campaigns are most visible and politically consequential.

The dataset includes a total of 3,656,433 tweets from the 2023 Turkish parliamentary election and 321,394 tweets from the 2024 local elections. For the parliamentary election, we collected tweets directed at 954 parliamentary candidates, comprising 553 men and 401 women. These candidates received 3,229,023 tweets mentioning male candidates and 427,410 tweets mentioning female candidates. For the local elections, the dataset covers 880 mayoral candidates, including 423 men and 457 women, with 132,156 tweets directed at male candidates and 189,238 tweets directed at female candidates. This indicates that, while male candidates attracted the majority of online attention in the 2023 parliamentary election, the pattern reversed in the 2024 local elections, where female candidates received substantially more tweets than their male counterparts. One plausible explanation is that local elections in Türkiye often generate intense contestation in metropolitan districts, where female candidates are more visible and symbolically important. In such contexts, women's candidacies may have drawn heightened attention both from supportive constituencies that view them as trailblazers and from opponents who see their participation as a challenge to entrenched gender norms.

Online Offensive and Hate Speech

Offensive and hateful language is one category of online violence against women in politics, alongside cyberstalking, sexual harassment, doxing, intimate image abuse, and disinformation (Krook, 2020). The ontology used in this study to identify offensive and hateful speech is grounded in the working definition of hate speech provided in the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour,

that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor” (United Nations 2020, pp 7-8). This definition highlights two main dimensions that guided the ontology of language classification in this study: the types of offense (attack, discriminatory language, and pejorative language), and the identity factors that are targeted (gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and the like).

Based on these dimensions, the automated detection and classification pipeline of online violence was developed as a two-pronged strategy, which takes up the offensive and hateful language classification tasks separately. The first step involved classifying all documents into *offensive* and *non-offensive* categories. Next, a model classified the offensive content into offense-type categories: threats of physical violence, profanity, demeaning language, and ridicule. A subsequent classifier was applied to all offensive speech content to detect hate speech. Finally, offensive speech content identified as hate speech was further categorized as, gender, religion, and ethnicity-based hate speech.

The definition of offensive and hate speech categories from the annotation manual are as follows:

Offensive speech: Words or phrases that are intended to assault, threaten, insult, ridicule, or belittle a particular group, individual, or institution.

- **Offensive physical harm:** *Language that threatens or incites physical violence or serious harm to an individual or group, including calls for persecution or repression that deprives targets of rights. (E.g. “@candidate away see how that*

goes since you are a tyrant and complicit in this you are a tyrant you deserve no safety or freedom”; “@candidate You need to be removed from this Country!”)

- **Offensive insult-profanity:** *language that insults individuals, groups or through obscenities and/or language considered morally repugnant. (E.g. “@candidate fuck you , you’re a piece of shit. This district hates you fat fuck”; “@candidate Fvck you & your mama”)*
- **Offensive insult-demeaning:** *language that demeans, degrades, or belittles a targeted individual or group’s personality, moral values, or humanity. Discriminatory language falls within this category. (E.g. “@candidate You leftist demon liars are off the rails deranged. Hopefully your drone sheople viewers will wake up.”; “@candidate Come get your kid from the woman you groomed you pedophile.)*
- **Offensive insult-ridicule:** *language that mocks, ridicules, or shames individuals, groups. While such language may appear harmless among familiar settings, in public, it can function as bullying and cause harm. (E.g. “@candidate is a coward.”; “@candidate1 @candidate2 hey morons....)*

Hate speech: *Any offensive language, as defined above, that targets an individual or social group based on their identity, such as their gender, ethnicity, race, or religion.*

- **Hate speech-gender:** *Offensive speech targeting gender identity. Includes sexist or discriminatory language such as gender stereotyping. (E.g. “We should replace @candidate with a man, see how she likes it.; “Maybe with a bag over your face! @candidate”)*

- **Hate speech-religion:** *Offensive speech targeting individuals or groups based on their beliefs. Includes disparaging individuals for their (non-)religiosity, alleged heresy, or membership in a faith or denomination are included. (E.g. “@candidate No fuck you, you Godless piece of shit!”; “@candidate is truly an evil old lady. She has no redeeming qualities and is certainly no Muslim.”)*
- **Hate speech-ethnicity:** *Offensive speech targeting individuals or groups based on their ethnic, cultural, or national identity. (E.g. “Deport @candidate to Syria with her terrorist grandma”; “@Candidate go back crying to the mountains, to your terrorist brethren you traitor”)*

The supervised models were trained and tested on a gold-standard corpus (GSCs) containing 4000 documents sampled from the target social media data, i.e., the tweets posted before the relevant election that contain candidate handles. GSCs are high-quality training datasets that contain documents annotated by at least two humans, in accordance with an annotation scheme that is pre-defined and tested to assure a high level of accuracy and consistency (Hürriyetoglu et. al. 2021). The GSC documents were sampled from the target dataset in a way that normalizes party and gender distributions to minimize selection bias that would reduce the validity of the model predictions, particularly on relatively less represented gender and party clusters. To increase the number of relevant instances to be annotated by our annotators, an additional layer of a recall-optimized hate speech detection model was trained on a dataset, labeled by a large language model prompted to apply our ontology (Topçu et. al 2024). Three graduate students in the social sciences at Koç University annotated the randomly sampled training corpus. Their annotations were supervised and disagreements adjudicated by a domain

expert, who also created and maintained the annotation manual. The GSC was then used to train the hate speech and offensive speech classification models by fine-tuning a pretrained transformer model on the Turkish language (Turkish BERT Model).⁶

While the total number of tweets was much larger during the 2023 parliamentary election, the 2024 local election saw a higher proportion of abusive content. In the parliamentary campaign, 492,329 tweets (15.56%) were coded as offensive and 81,424 (2.28%) as hate speech out of 3,656,433 tweets. By contrast, in the local campaign, 51,386 tweets (19.03%) were classified as offensive and 13,639 (4.43%) as hate speech from a total of 321,394 tweets. Moreover, a greater share of abusive messages was directed at women in the local election than in the parliamentary contest. In 2023, tweets against female candidates included offensive language in about 8% of cases and hate speech in 1.5%, compared to 14% and 2.3% for men. In 2024, abuse increased for both groups, with women facing 16% offensive and 4.2% hate speech, and men experiencing 15% offensive and 4.2% hate.

Online Visibility of Candidates

A central dimension of this study is measuring candidates' visibility in the digital sphere. Following Rheault et al. (2019), we use X follower counts as a direct indicator of visibility. Follower counts capture the size of a candidate's potential audience and shape the likelihood that their posts will be circulated, debated, or attacked. In electoral contexts where Twitter functions as a key site of political communication, follower counts reflect both the reach of a candidate's message and the intensity of public attention directed toward them. This measure is particularly relevant for analyzing online abuse, since greater visibility increases exposure not only to

⁶The F1 macro scores yielded by the offensive speech and hate speech classification models were 0.70 (0.73 precision macro, and 0.69 recall macro), and 0.77 (0.88 precision macro and 0.71 recall macro) respectively. For more details about Turkish BERT Model, see <https://huggingface.co/dbmdz/bert-base-turkish-128k-cased>

supporters but also to critics, trolls, and partisan opponents. Operationalizing visibility in this way embeds the concept within the very platform where harassment occurs, ensuring conceptual and empirical alignment.

The visibility variable, measured by candidates' follower counts on X, is highly skewed in both elections. In the 2023 parliamentary election, follower counts ranged from as few as 3 to over 6.9 million, with a mean of 67,301. This skew reflects a small number of highly visible candidates alongside a majority with modest audiences. On average, male candidates had substantially larger followings (101,181) compared to female candidates (22,360), underscoring gendered disparities in digital reach. A similar pattern emerged in the 2024 local elections, where follower counts ranged from 0 to 1.15 million, with a much lower overall mean of 6,169. Here too, visibility was concentrated among a small minority, and men continued to enjoy larger audiences on average (6,527) than women (4,532). Taken together, these patterns highlight not only the skewed distribution of online visibility but also persistent gender gaps in candidates' ability to command large digital followings.

In addition to follower counts, we also include candidates' following counts—the number of accounts a candidate follows—as a covariate in our regression models. While the following counts are not a direct measure of visibility, they are strongly correlated with candidates' online activity and engagement strategies. Candidates who follow large numbers of accounts are more likely to be active users, engaging in reciprocal interactions that may increase their exposure to diverse audiences. This variable, therefore, serves as a proxy for a candidate's digital embeddedness, helping to distinguish whether online abuse is driven primarily by sheer visibility (follower counts) or by patterns of engagement and network activity. Controlling for the

following counts reduces the risk of omitted variable bias by ensuring that the estimated effect of visibility is not conflated with differences in candidates' own activity levels.

Descriptive patterns reveal an important contrast between candidates' online visibility and their networking behavior. Male candidates consistently enjoy far larger follower counts in both the 2023 parliamentary and 2024 local elections, reflecting their greater digital visibility. In contrast, when looking at the following counts—the number of accounts candidates themselves choose to follow—female candidates are at least as active, and in some cases more so, than their male counterparts. In the parliamentary election, women followed on average 1,083 accounts compared to 1,296 for men, while in the local elections, they averaged 806 compared to 626 for men. These figures suggest that although women attract fewer followers, they actively use digital platforms to build connections and cultivate networks, compensating for structural disadvantages in traditional political arenas.

Control Variables

We control for party labels in our main analysis. In the Turkish context, partisan affiliation itself constitutes an important source of candidate visibility, particularly within a political environment shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms. The Green Left Party (YSP, later reorganized as the DEM Party) is ideologically distinctive as a pro-Kurdish, liberal, and explicitly pro-gender-equality party. Through gender quotas and co-leadership structures, it foregrounds women's political participation in ways that depart sharply from mainstream parties. For female candidates, this partisan identity not only reflects ideological positioning but also signals defiance of traditional gender hierarchies, amplifying their visibility in both supportive and hostile directions. In this sense, YSP/DEM women are simultaneously celebrated by progressive

constituencies and targeted by conservative and nationalist actors seeking to police women who transgress patriarchal boundaries. Partisan affiliation, therefore, represents a form of structural visibility—rooted in ideology and gendered norms—that complements follower counts as an individual measure of digital visibility.

Electoral districts also shape candidates' baseline visibility. Larger and more competitive districts, such as İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir, generate heightened media coverage and online attention compared to smaller or less competitive provinces. Candidates running in these metropolitan constituencies benefit from broader audiences and denser digital ecosystems, which amplify both their potential reach and their exposure to online violence. By contrast, candidates in rural or less populous districts face more limited visibility, regardless of individual effort or platform use. Controlling for electoral district characteristics ensures that observed differences in online visibility and exposure to abuse are not simply artifacts of structural variation in constituency size or political salience.

Temporal closeness to election day represents another crucial factor influencing candidate visibility and online abuse. As campaigns intensify, candidates experience a surge in attention, with social media interactions peaking in the final weeks before voting. Prior research shows that this compressed period magnifies both positive engagement and negative targeting, as heightened competition drives polarized rhetoric and partisan attacks. Controlling for the timing of tweets relative to election day allows us to separate general patterns of online violence from dynamics specifically tied to the electoral calendar. In this way, our analysis accounts for the cyclical rhythms of campaigning that affect candidates' visibility and vulnerability in the digital sphere.

Results

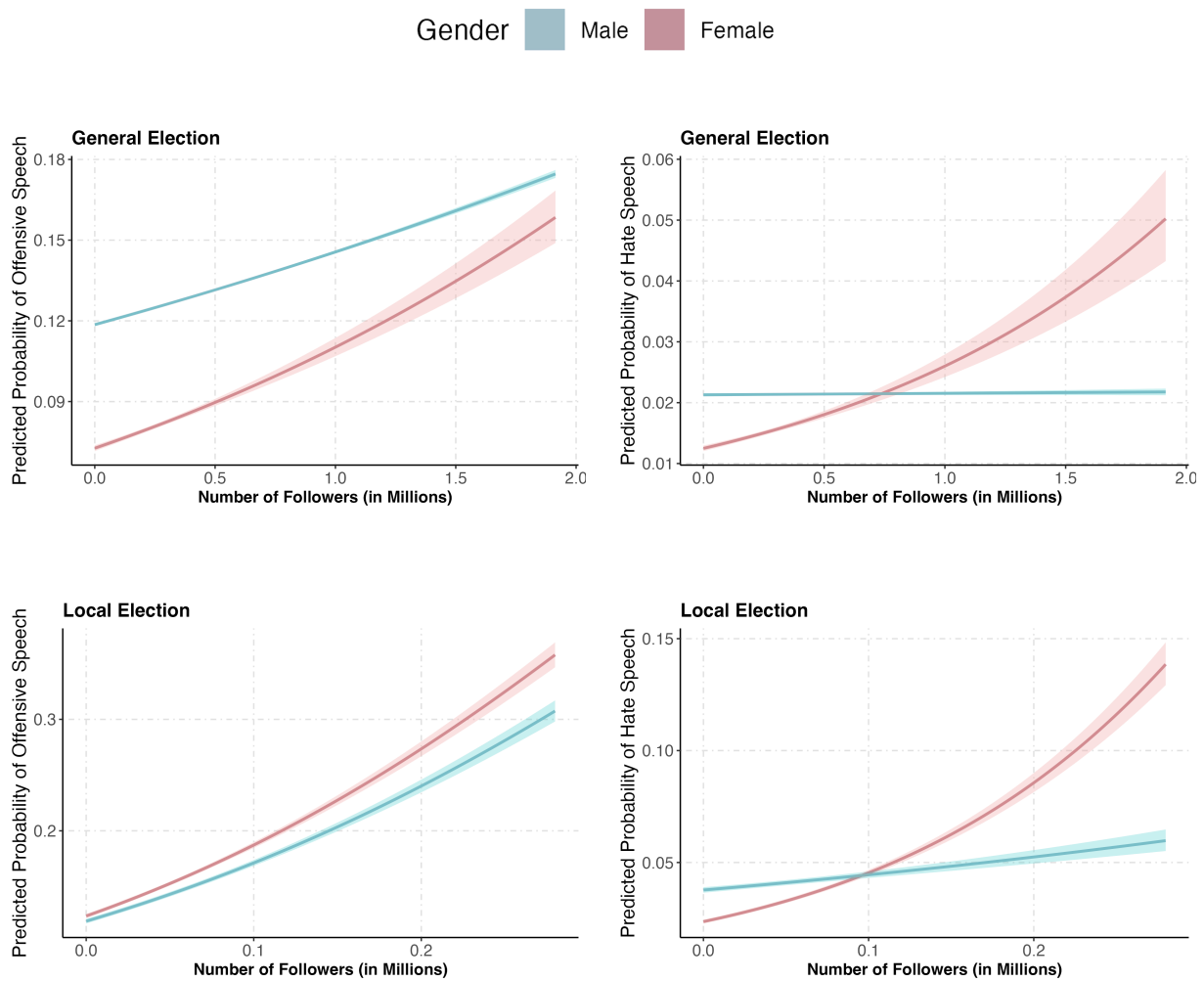
We begin our analysis by examining the baseline effects of gender on candidates' experiences of online violence. Table 1 presents the results from logistic regression models of offensive and hate speech directed at candidates in Turkish elections. Models 1–4 report results from the 2023 parliamentary election, while Models 5–8 present results from the 2024 local Election. Across both sets of models, we examine the effects of candidate gender and online visibility on the likelihood of receiving offensive and hate speech, while controlling for electoral district, partisanship, and other relevant covariates. These statistical models reveal inconsistent overall gender effects across Türkiye's two elections. In the 2023 parliamentary election (Models 1 and 3), female candidates were less likely to be targeted, facing, on average, a 6.87 percentage point lower probability of offensive speech and a 1.49 percentage point lower probability of hate speech compared to men. By contrast, in the 2024 local election (Models 5 and 7), the pattern reversed: women were more likely to experience abuse, with increases of 4.82 percentage points in offensive speech and 1.83 percentage points in hate speech. These divergent findings mirror broader debates in the literature, where some studies report that women face higher levels of harassment and gendered attacks (Håkansson 2021; Erikson et al. 2021; Collignon and Rüdiger 2020), while others find little to no systematic gender differences in exposure (Rheault et al. 2019; Gorrell et al. 2020; Holm et al. 2024).

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models on Offensive and Hate Speech

Election Type:	2023 Parliamentary Election				2024 Local Election			
Violence Type:	<i>Offensive Speech</i>		<i>Hate Speech</i>		<i>Offensive Speech</i>		<i>Hate Speech</i>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Female	-0.65*** (0.01)	-0.80*** (0.01)	-0.73*** (0.02)	-0.81*** (0.02)	0.39*** (0.01)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.46*** (0.03)	0.26*** (0.03)
Follower Count (by 1M)	0.12*** (0.00)	0.12*** (0.00)	0.11*** (0.00)	0.11*** (0.00)	1.36*** (0.04)	0.80*** (0.05)	1.87*** (0.08)	0.89*** (0.10)
Female x Follower Count		0.70*** (0.03)		0.36*** (0.06)		2.09*** (0.11)		3.21*** (0.21)
Following Count (by 1K)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Time to Election	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)
(Intercept)	3.94*** (0.79)	2.76*** (0.79)	-43.31*** (1.88)	-44.13*** (1.89)	101.03*** (4.07)	99.18*** (4.07)	132.94*** (7.26)	129.60*** (7.26)
Party FE	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
District FE	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
AIC	2325976.25	2325264.03	628757.23	628717.80	246293.89	245904.57	96425.54	96175.44
BIC	2326574.39	2325875.17	629355.36	629328.94	246868.23	246489.55	96999.88	96760.42
Log Likelihood	-1162942	-1162585	-314332.61	-314311.90	-123092.94	-122897.29	-48158.77	-48032.72
Deviance	2325884.25	2325170.03	628665.23	628623.80	246185.89	245794.57	96317.54	96065.44
Num. obs.	3278887	3278887	3278887	3278887	307433	307433	307433	307433

Note: Logistic regression models for the local election data were estimated using glm in R. Due to the larger size of the parliamentary election dataset, we employed speedglm in R to obtain the logistic regression result

Figure 1. Candidate Visibility and Gender Differences in Offensive and Hate Speech

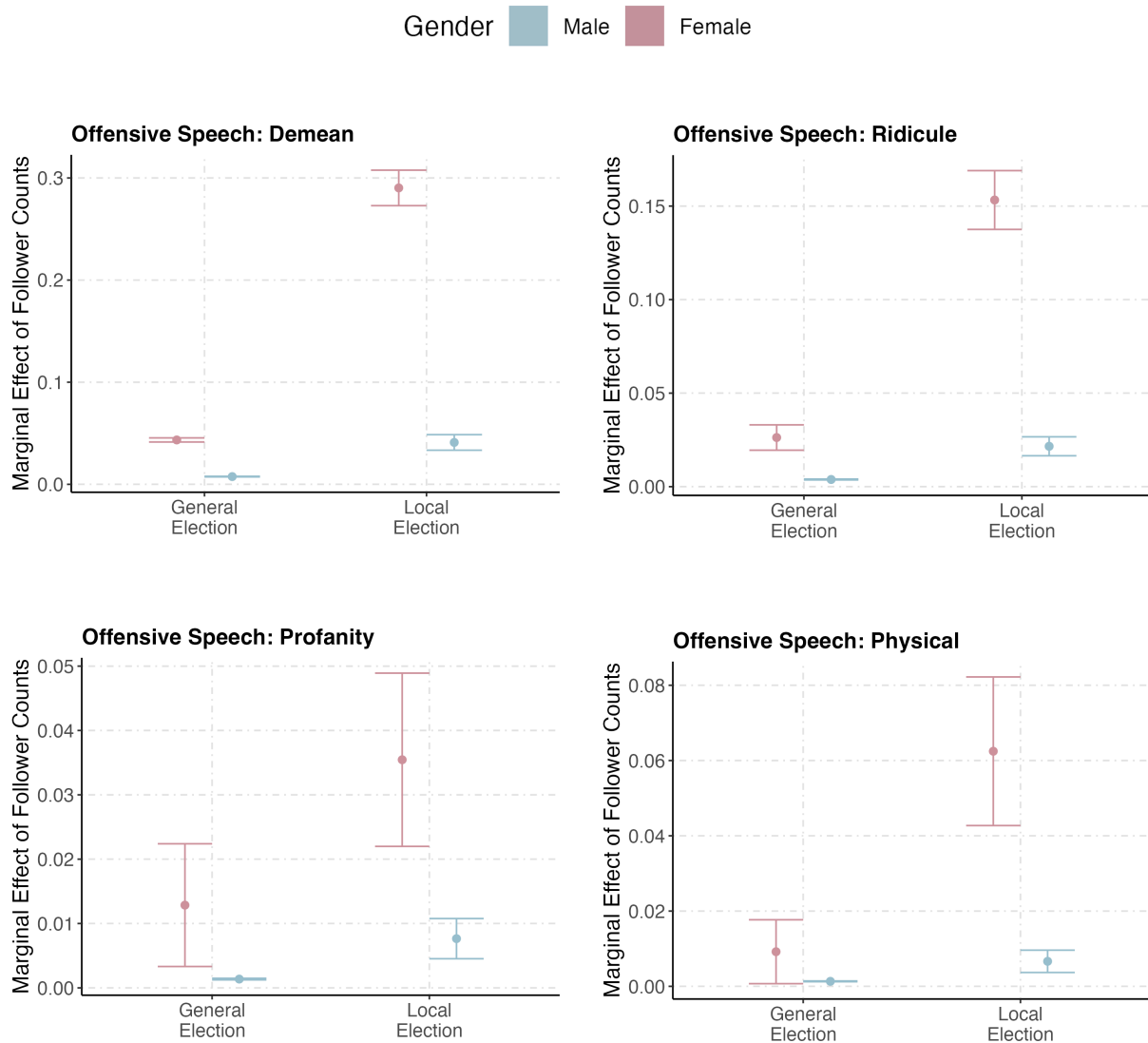


Importantly, our findings show that, in both elections, online visibility affects male and female candidates in markedly different ways. Using multiple logistic regression models with interaction terms, we find that in the parliamentary election (Models 2 and 4), greater online visibility increases to some extent the likelihood of offensive and hate speech toward male candidates, while the effect is substantially stronger for female candidates. On average, a one-million-follower increase raises the likelihood of offensive speech by 1.36 percentage points for men but by 6.45 percentage points for women, and hate speech by 0.25 percentage points for

men compared to 1.07 percentage points for women. Analysis of the 2024 local election (Models 6 and 8) confirms these dynamics. Here, the same increase in followers leads to an 8.43 percentage point rise in offensive speech for men but a 37.65 percentage point rise for women, and a 2.56 percentage point rise in hate speech for men compared to 20.55 percentage points for women. Together, these results underscore that online visibility not only heightens exposure to online violence but does so disproportionately for female candidates across electoral contexts, with the relative likelihood of experiencing online violence being some four to eight times greater for women than men.

Figure 1, derived from these logistic regression models, illustrates how the predicted probabilities of offensive and hate speech rise with candidates' online visibility. In the parliamentary election, men experience a gradual increase in both forms of online violence, while women face a much sharper escalation. Although men are initially more likely to receive offensive and hate speech, the gap narrows as follower counts grow. Notably, once candidates surpass roughly 0.7 million followers, women become more vulnerable to hate speech than men. In the local election, the gendered divergence is also striking: both men and women encounter greater online violence with increased visibility, but the growth rate is substantially steeper for women, especially for hate speech. These patterns highlight how online visibility intensifies gendered risks across electoral contexts, with disproportionately severe effects for women at the local level.

Figure 2. Candidate Visibility and Gender Differences across Offensive Speech Types



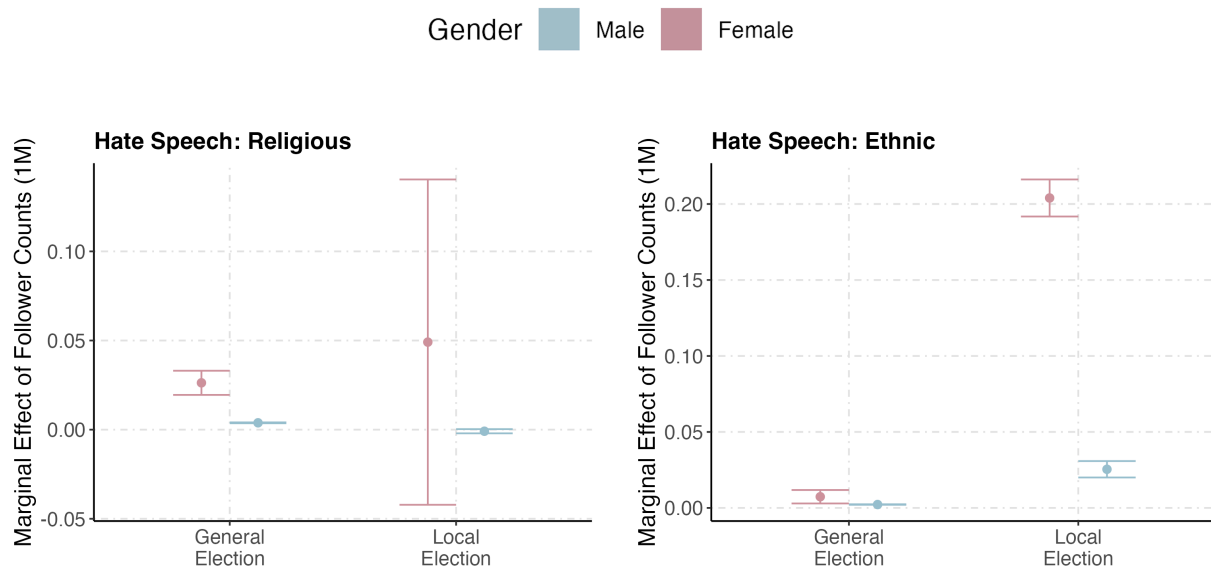
As shown in Figure 2, we find that the gendered effects of online visibility are robust across different forms of offensive speech. Although the estimated marginal effects of a one-million-follower increase are small and often negligible for men, they are far more substantial for women. For instance, in the parliamentary election, profanity barely increases for men (0.1 pp) but rises more meaningfully for women (1.3 pp), while demeaning speech grows sixfold more for women (4.3 pp) than men (0.8 pp). These disparities become even starker in the

local election context. Profanity jumps to 3.5 pp for women compared to only 0.8 pp for men, and demeaning speech soars to 29 pp for women versus 4.1 pp for men. Similarly, exposure to physical threats increases only modestly for men (0.7 pp) but sharply for women (6.2 pp). Ridicule follows the same pattern: in the parliamentary election the effect for women (2.6 pp) is nearly seven times that for men (0.004 pp), and in the local election, women's exposure (15.3 pp) is more than seven times higher than men's (2.2 pp). Taken together, these results demonstrate that online visibility disproportionately magnifies women's exposure to every form of offensive speech, with the effects especially pronounced in local elections where follower growth dramatically escalates ridicule and demeaning content.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 3, we find suggestive evidence that the gendered effects of online visibility extend to identity-based hate speech. These disparities are particularly pronounced in the realm of ethnic and religiously motivated abuse, where visibility fuels targeted attacks against women. For example, in the parliamentary election, a one-million-follower increase corresponds to an estimated 2.6 percentage point rise in religious hate speech directed at women, compared to virtually no effect for men. In the local election, the pattern is similar: although the coefficient for women (4.9 pp) does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, the direction of the effect underscores their heightened exposure relative to men, whose effect is close to zero. Ethnic-based hate speech reveals even sharper gaps. In the parliamentary election, women experience a 0.7 pp increase compared to just 0.2 pp for men, while in the local election, women's exposure rises dramatically by 20.4 pp, far exceeding the 2.5 pp increase observed for men. Taken together, these findings highlight that women's online visibility not only heightens their general vulnerability to abuse but also compounds with other

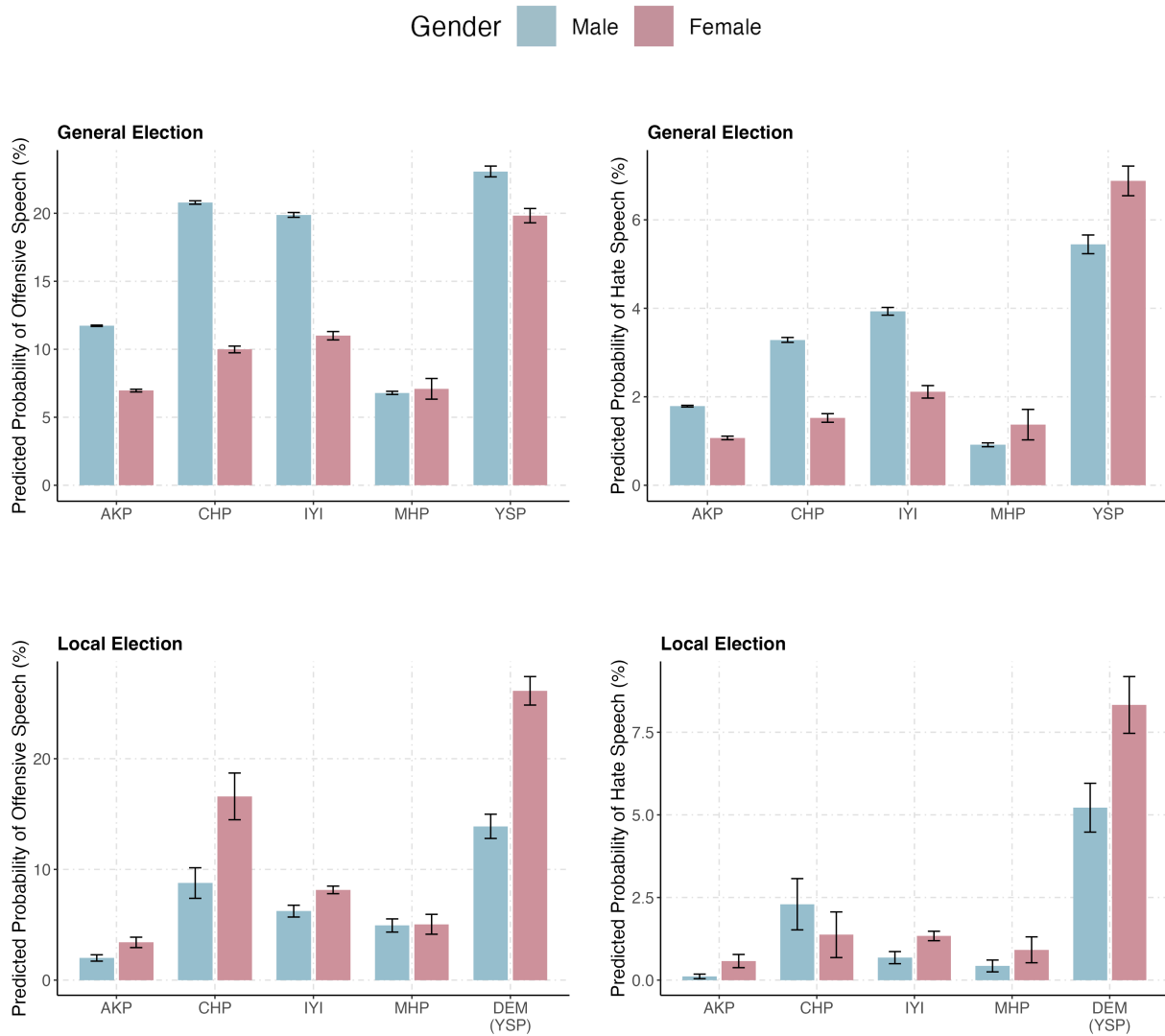
identity markers, making them disproportionately susceptible to intersectional forms of online violence.

Figure 3. Candidate Visibility and Gender Differences across Hate Speech Types



Next, we examine how party affiliation shapes gendered patterns of online violence. As shown in Figure 4, the results reveal that, in the parliamentary election, gender differences in predicted probabilities of online abuse vary across parties, but women candidates from the Green Left Party (YSP) stand out as facing disproportionate hostility. For hate speech, YSP women exhibit the highest predicted probability (6.88 pp), exceeding not only YSP men (5.45 pp) but also women across the CHP (1.52 pp), İYİ (2.11 pp), and MHP (1.37 pp). The pattern is similar in offensive speech, where YSP women (19.83) again rank among the most targeted, trailing only their male co-partisans (23.08 pp) but far surpassing women in CHP (9.99 pp), İYİ (11.00 pp), or MHP (7.09 pp). These results underscore that while men tend to attract more abuse overall in several parties, YSP women are exceptional in receiving consistently higher levels of predicted hate and offensive speech compared to women in all other parties.

Figure 4. Candidate Partisanship and Gender Differences in Online Violence



The local election analysis reinforces this pattern of heightened vulnerability among YSP/DEM women. In terms of offensive speech, DEM women (26.13 pp) are by far the most exposed, facing almost double the rate of DEM men (13.89 pp) and well beyond the levels predicted for women in other parties, such as CHP (8.15 pp), İYİ (5.04 pp), MHP (16.60 pp), and AKP (3.41 pp). Also, female candidates in DEM display a predicted probability of 8.33 pp for hate speech, a figure that not only doubles that of DEM men (5.22 pp) but also eclipses all other

parties' female candidates, such as CHP (1.37 pp), İYİ (1.34 pp), MHP (0.92 pp), and AKP (0.58 pp). Thus, while the incidence of online violence differs across parties, the gap between DEM women and their counterparts—both across gender and across party lines—is consistently stark.

These findings highlight the paradox faced by women in the YSP/DEM: the party most strongly committed to gender equality and female political representation also sees its women candidates disproportionately targeted by online abuse. The YSP's institutional practices, such as co-leadership structures and gender quotas, amplify the visibility of female candidates, which may in turn intensify the hostility they encounter. This suggests that women's political prominence, especially within parties championing egalitarian ideals, does not shield them from violence but may instead render them particularly vulnerable.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online visibility during election campaigns functions as a double-edged sword for political candidates, and especially for women. While greater visibility is essential for building credibility and competitiveness, it simultaneously exposes candidates to heightened risks of harassment and abuse. Our analysis of nearly four million tweets from Türkiye's 2023 general and 2024 local elections shows that the penalties of visibility are not evenly distributed: women are disproportionately targeted with offensive and hate speech as their online profiles grow. This pattern holds across different types of abuse—ranging from ridicule and demeaning comments to ethnic and religious hate speech—highlighting the intersectional nature of online violence against women candidates.

The Turkish case illustrates these dynamics with particular clarity. As an electoral autocracy with entrenched patriarchal norms and fragile gender equality, Türkiye provides a setting where women's digital visibility is both highly necessary and highly perilous. The findings show that online platforms not only reproduce existing hierarchies but actively magnify them: women who cross symbolic boundaries of visibility are disciplined through targeted abuse, and this disciplining effect is most acute in local elections where visibility and proximity to communities intensify public scrutiny. Moreover, partisan affiliation compounds these risks. Female candidates from the pro-equality Green Left Party (YSP/HDP)—a party that foregrounds gender representation through quotas and co-leadership—are singled out for disproportionate levels of online violence, underscoring how gender and party identity intersect to amplify both visibility and vulnerability.

Taken together, these findings contribute to broader debates on violence against women in politics by demonstrating how digital visibility, while enabling women's participation, simultaneously functions as a mechanism of political control. Online violence disciplines women who transgress patriarchal norms of political modesty and signals deterrent costs to others considering political engagement. In contexts like Türkiye, where democratic institutions and gender equality are weakly protected, these dynamics carry profound consequences: they not only silence individual candidates but also constrain the descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation of women more broadly. By situating visibility within the electoral arena, this study underscores the urgent democratic costs of gendered online harassment and highlights the need for stronger protections for women's political participation in both authoritarian and democratic contexts.

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