

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Addressing Violence against Women in Politics: Reflections from an APSA Congressional Fellow

Catherine N. Wineinger 

Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA
Email: wineinc@wwu.edu

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“Where is Nancy?” yelled a man as he broke into House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s home in October 2022 and assaulted her husband with a hammer. The words echoed those chanted by a mob of insurrectionists as they stormed the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021 (Rodriguez and Gerson 2022). While many members of Congress—men and women—have faced moments of political violence, the violence experienced by women leaders is often drenched in misogyny. The disrespectful use of Pelosi’s first name, the entitled invasion of her personal space, and the public display of gendered images and language (including a handwritten note from an insurrectionist on Speaker Pelosi’s desk that read, “Nancy, Bigo was here you b***h”; see Krook 2021) send a message that women are not welcome in positions of political power (Krook 2020b, 2022; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016).

Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is also intersectional in nature (Kuperberg 2018, 2021), and congresswomen of color have been targeted in unique ways—especially as their presence has increased in recent years. Representative Pramila Jayapal, Congressional Progressive Caucus chair and the first South Asian American woman elected to the House of Representatives, shared on Twitter several threatening voicemails she had received. Among the voicemails was a call to “go back to where you f***ing came from. Ain’t none of you’s are f***ing goddamned citizens.”¹ In 2019, President Donald Trump used similar language, telling four congresswomen of color—Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley—to “go back and fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” (Allyn 2019). The insinuation that women of color are not citizens and therefore do not belong in the halls of Congress is steeped in a history of racism and sexism that permeates the institution to this day (Dittmar 2023; Hawkesworth 2003).

I was an American Political Science Association (APSA) Congressional Fellow during the 116th Congress, following the historic 2018 midterm elections in which record numbers of women of color were elected. As a fellow, I had the immense privilege to work in the office of Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian American woman and one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress. I was part of the legislative team, and while I was not responsible for answering phone calls, the open layout of the office made me acutely aware of the types of messages our staff were receiving. Nearly every day, our office was flooded with calls and voicemails like those shared by Congresswoman Jayapal. Beyond these types of messages, Congresswoman Tlaib and her family were also subjected to online harassment, attacks by other elected officials, and credible death threats. The violence was not only gendered in nature, but also explicitly Islamophobic.²

In this essay, I discuss violence against women in politics from the perspective of an APSA Congressional Fellow. While I am a gender politics scholar, my research has not specifically focused on VAWIP. My contribution to this symposium is therefore rooted in my firsthand experiences in the U.S. Congress. First, I describe how I, as a fellow, attempted to bridge congressional policy making and political science research on VAWIP. Our office worked to bring light to the issue through floor speeches and the introduction of a House resolution. I end with some of the continued challenges I see in studying and addressing VAWIP as well as recommendations for how political scientists can continue to engage in this important work.

VAWIP: My View from the 116th Congress

I had been working for Congresswoman Tlaib for only a couple of months when it became clear to me that she and her staff were consistently experiencing what scholars and activists alike have termed “violence against women in politics.” After a discussion with our legislative director, I wrote a memo for Congresswoman Tlaib to see if she would be interested in addressing this issue legislatively. Given the level of vulnerability necessary to take on a such a deeply personal issue, I initially expected some reluctance and pushback. But she showed no such hesitation. If you know her, you know that Rashida Tlaib is rarely afraid to disrupt the status quo—and this was no different. She not only wanted to address VAWIP; she was determined to show that this is a truly global phenomenon and that the United States is no exception.

I worked with leading experts on VAWIP (including contributors to this symposium). Mona Lena Krook, Juliana Restrepo Sanín, and Rebecca Kuperberg had been my colleagues when I was a graduate student at Rutgers University, so I knew their work well. Together with Sandra Pepera and Caroline Hubbard at the National Democratic Institute, they provided invaluable insight and advice. Our office decided that we would write a House floor speech to bring light to the issue, followed by a House resolution.

In recognition of International Women’s Day, Congresswoman Tlaib delivered a special order speech in March 2020. She discussed her own experiences with

death threats and emphasized the global nature of VAWIP, stating, “Women around the world are subjected to physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence for choosing to participate in politics. And when I say around the world, I mean here in the United States, too.”³ This speech would be the first time the words “violence against women in politics” had been spoken into the *Congressional Record*. Directly after the speech, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, who was on the House floor at the time, asked us about VAWIP. As the first Black woman from Massachusetts to be elected to Congress, Pressley is unfortunately no stranger to violent attacks. The fact that this issue had a name—that the experiences of women have been documented, that those experiences were taken seriously, and that people were already working to address the issue—made a tangible policy solution in the United States feel like a real possibility.

Unfortunately, March 2020 was also the month when most of the country, including Congress, went into quarantine. The COVID-19 pandemic put a pause on the work we were doing to address VAWIP. Indeed, every member of Congress shifted their focus almost entirely to providing their constituents with pandemic relief. This was especially important for Tlaib, who represented the third-poorest congressional district in the nation.

Months later, in July 2020, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was accosted on the steps of the Capitol by a Republican colleague, Representative Ted Yoho. In front of reporters, Yoho called Ocasio-Cortez “disgusting” and “a f***ing b***h” (Krook 2020a). Tlaib’s immediate response was to check in on Ocasio-Cortez. These small, often invisible acts of solidarity among congresswomen of color are neither new nor rare, but they are important to note. I came to see during my fellowship year that these types of friendships forged in Congress are not just political relationships; in real ways, they can help individuals challenge institutional norms and power structures meant to marginalize certain members (Childs 2013; Collier and Raney 2018; Hawkesworth 2003). As Ocasio-Cortez later wrote in an Instagram post, “[M]y first instinct was to let it go. It was my second instinct, too. It was only when sisters like Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and friends like Jamie Raskin reminded me how unacceptable this all was that I started to think about what I would have done if this abuse happened to any other person BUT me.”⁴

This incident sparked renewed conversation in our office about VAWIP. Leaders of the Democratic Women’s Caucus issued a statement, emphasizing the gendered nature of this abuse. “Foul and personal attacks meant to intimidate or silence women cannot be tolerated,” they wrote.⁵ In a viral speech, Ocasio-Cortez framed the harassment she faced as a systemic issue experienced by women in professions across the country. Tlaib used her time on the floor that day to bring light once again to the issue of VAWIP, naming it as an unacceptable phenomenon that targets women in nearly all political spaces.

With national attention on this issue, our office drafted a House resolution. House Resolution 1151 was introduced in September 2020 and called on the U.S. government to recognize violence against women in politics as a global phenomenon and to take steps to mitigate it.⁶ In the resolution, we highlighted much of the research that has already been conducted by scholars and advocates, including the fact that VAWIP disproportionately impacts women and nonbinary

folks with multiple marginalized identities, and that it occurs both in person and online. The resolution was cosponsored by Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Jackie Speier. In the 117th Congress, it was reintroduced as House Resolution 801, with newly elected Congresswoman Cori Bush as a cosponsor.⁷

Certainly, there is still much to be done on this issue in the U.S. Congress. The resolution we introduced has not yet been passed, and developing specific federal policies will likely take more time. But the work that Congresswoman Tlaib has done so far, in partnership with scholars and advocates, has brought awareness to VAWIP and has given congresswomen a new way to describe their own experiences. In November 2021, after Representative Paul Gosar posted a violent anime video of him killing Representative Ocasio-Cortez, the House of Representatives censured Gosar. The censuring resolution, introduced by Representative Speier and cosponsored by 123 members, borrowed language from our original resolution. It stated, “Violence against women in politics is a global phenomenon meant to silence women and discourage them from seeking positions of authority and participating in public life, with women of color disproportionately impacted.”⁸ Speaking in favor of the censuring resolution, Congresswoman Nikema Williams further stated, “This routine brand of violence against women in politics is a direct attempt to silence us.”⁹ Speaking out and addressing VAWIP requires, first and foremost, a recognition of how it affects women at levels of politics—including those in the U.S. Congress.

Challenges and Paths Forward for Political Scientists

There remain several challenges to addressing VAWIP through congressional policy making. In what follows, I pinpoint potential policy challenges, framing challenges, and political challenges that I encountered during my time as a fellow. In many ways, these challenges are already being addressed by scholars and practitioners, but I underscore here the role that political scientists can continue to play in these areas.

Policy challenges. It is important to note that many of those who are subjected to VAWIP are also subjected to state violence more generally. Thus, policy solutions to VAWIP should focus on empowering victims without also empowering law enforcement and the carceral state. In addition, it is imperative to recognize that nonbinary individuals and transgender men also face gender-based political violence rooted in misogyny. Explicit emphasis on “women” in the realm of public policy can unintentionally erase those experiences. Political scientists should thus continue to learn about, develop, and amplify creative policy solutions that can bring about significant institutional and societal change in myriad ways. Broadening our understanding of the way gender-based political violence is perpetrated and experienced is an important step in advancing new policy solutions.

Framing challenges. Bringing attention to the violence that women and other marginalized groups face in the political arena may have the very effect that VAWIP itself has: discouraging women from being politically involved. It is

therefore important for politicians and political scientists alike to frame the issue in empowering ways. Congresswoman Tlaib has explicitly framed VAWIP as a way to encourage more women of color to run for office; in Michigan, she started the Rooted in Community Campaign School, which trains candidates of color to run for office. In a fundraising email for the campaign school, she called on progressive women of color to run for office as a way of combating VAWIP and challenging the status quo. Political scientists can help in this effort by using their platforms—in academic spaces, through opinion editorials, on social media, in conversations with policy makers—to frame VAWIP in an empowering way that encourages women’s leadership.

Political challenges. In a highly polarized political landscape, it is difficult to gain bipartisanship support on this issue, particularly as it relates to women in U.S. politics. The violence women face is often committed by members of the opposite party, which means individual cases are often viewed through partisan lenses. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, for instance, has been both a victim and a perpetrator of VAWIP (Stracqualursi 2020). Some women have also argued that their own party’s leadership enables the violence that is directed at them, making systemic change difficult even within their party. In addition to these challenges, it is important to understand the calculations politicians make about the policies they support. Issue saliency and news cycles affect whether and when politicians prioritize certain policies. As political scientists, we should be ready to work with elected officials on their timelines and in ways that account for their political realities.

Notes

1. Rep. Pramila Jayapal (@RepJayapal), “Typically, political figures don’t show their vulnerability...,” Twitter, September 8, 2022, 11:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/RepJayapal/status/1567943349763559426> (accessed July 25, 2023).
2. In 2022, Rashida Tlaib and her son, Adam Tlaib, published a children’s book, titled *Mama in Congress: Rashida Tlaib’s Journey to Washington*. The book does not shy away from showing how Islamophobic attacks against Tlaib has affected her family. Adam writes that he thought it would be safer to hide the fact that they were Muslim, “but mom says it’s important to be our authentic selves.”
3. “User Clip: Rep. Tlaib on Violence Against Women in Politics,” C-SPAN, March 6, 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4859448/user-clip-rep-tlaib-violence-women-politics> (accessed July 25, 2023).
4. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Instagram post, July 26, 2020.
5. Jackie Speier (@RepSpeier), “Policy disagreements are expected ... ,” Twitter, July 22, 2020, 6:40 a.m., <https://twitter.com/RepSpeier/status/1285932659311382528> (accessed July 25, 2023).
6. “H.Res. 1151—Recognizing Violence against Women in Politics as a Global Phenomenon and Supporting Women’s Full and Meaningful Participation in Political Life” 116th Congress (2019–20), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/1151/text> (accessed July 25, 2023).
7. “H.Res. 801—Recognizing Violence against Women in Politics as a Global Phenomenon and Supporting Women’s Full and Meaningful Participation in Political Life,” 117th Congress (2021–22), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/801> (accessed July 25, 2023).
8. “H.Res. 789—Censuring Representative Paul Gosar,” 117th Congress (2021–22), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/789> (accessed July 25, 2023).
9. Nikema Williams, “Hold Members Accountable for Violent Speech,” *Congressional Record* 167 (200), <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-167/issue-200/house-section/article/H6328-4> (accessed July 25, 2023).

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Catherine N. Wineinger is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Western Washington University: wineinc@wwu.edu

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