Blog post entry for: ***Sexual Harassment and Candidate Evaluation: Gender and Partisanship Interact to Affect Voter Responses to Candidates Accused of Harassment***

By Natalie Masuoka (UCLA), Christian Grose (USC), Jane Junn (USC)

During the waning weeks of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, a video with accompanying audio capturing Republican candidate Donald Trump’s first-hand description of acts of sexual harassment and assault against women was widely distributed. Commentators from both sides of the aisle contemplated his electoral demise, anticipating “an apocalyptic election scenario” from “women voters.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In response, the candidate simultaneously apologized for the behavior and challenged the recording’s authenticity. Nevertheless, he won a narrow Electoral College victory while losing the popular vote. Nationally, 42% of women voted for Trump,[[2]](#footnote-2) which was similar to gender-partisan voting trends in past U.S. elections. In stark contrast, there have been other elected officials who suffered clear penalties for engaging in sexual harassment such as former Minnesota Al Franken who resigned in 2017 or former US Representative from Pennsylvania Pat Meehan who resigned in 2018. In the past few years, controversies involving elected officials engaging in sexual harassment have made headline news – the most recent of which involving the resignation of Andrew Cuomo, the former Democratic Governor of New York – yet the consequences for political leaders accused of harassment have dramatically varied.

Watching these recent cases involving elected officials accused of sexual harassment led us to wonder to what extent are voters willing to punish leaders who engage in sexual harassment? More broadly we wondered to what extent does the issue of sexual harassment influence candidate vote choice? Considering the recent cases of elected officials accused of committing harassment, it was clear that there does not exist a uniform reaction to public leaders accused of harassment. We argue that attitudes about harassment vary most importantly by two dimensions: a person’s gender and partisanship. First, we expect gender to be an important factor given that women are more likely to be a victim of sexual harassment than men. Life experience and one’s positionality resulting from a person’s gender assignment inform responses to sexual harassment claims. Second, we expect partisanship to be factor in cases involving candidate vote choice. In the context of political representation and scandal, party group loyalty likely plays a role since voters want to support candidates of their same party. But beyond party loyalty, we also demonstrate that Democrats and Republicans hold distinctly different ideological views on gender roles. Because Republicans value traditional gender roles, accusations of sexual harassment may not be seen as serious violations. In contrast, Democrats’ views supporting gender equity likely led them to strongly oppose those who are accused of committing sexual harassment.

Given these expectations, we hypothesized there to be systematic variation across partisan-gender groups of Democratic women, Democratic men, Republican women and Republican men on the issue. Specifically, we expect that Democratic women and Republican men will take clear opposing views when evaluating candidates accused of harassment while the effect of sexual harassment allegations will be less obvious for Democratic men and Republican women. We test these our hypotheses using three sources of data: two surveys which tested the causal relationship using embedded survey experiments and survey data collected by CCES from 2006 to 2018. The results from both experiments and the associational data provide strong support that, in particular, Democratic women are the group that consistently punishes candidates who have been accused of harassment, even when they represent the shared party. For Democratic women, their positionality as women coupled with their strong ideological position in favor of gender equality lead them to strongly reject leaders accused of harassment. They display low party group loyalty in the context of sexual harassment claims. In contrast, for the three other party-gender groups (Democratic men, Republican women and Republican men), party group loyalty more strongly guides candidate choice.

By focusing on the issue of sexual harassment, our study offers further empirical evidence demonstrating how partisanship is gendered. While existing research shows there to be distinctive gendered dynamics related to party identification, our study expands our understanding on the gendered dimensions of partisanship. Through sexual harassment, we emphasize the role of patriarchy in how it informs voter attitudes. Voter sorting into partisan groups can be seen in the distinct differences between how Democrats and Republicans each think about traditional gender norms. We also show that in the context of a gendered issue like sexual harassment, there are important gender differences *within* party.

1. Bump, Philip. 2016. “Donald Trump is Facing an Apocalyptic Election Scenario, Thanks to Women Voters.” Washington Post 13 October. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Huang, Joh, Samuel Jacoby, Michael Strickland, K.K. Rebecca Lai. 2016. “Election 2016: Exit Polls.” New York Times. November 8. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html

Accessed August 15, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)