

The Contingent Effects of Sexism in Primary Elections

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Abstract

Although the landscape for female candidates in U.S. politics has improved, research continues to find that many voters possess sexist attitudes. We rely on a standard political communication framework to help reconcile sexism in the electorate with increasingly favorable outcomes for women in primary elections. Based on two national survey experiments, we first demonstrate that in the absence of gendered campaign rhetoric, sexism is a weak predictor of support for female candidates on both sides of the political aisle. We then show, however, that when a male candidate attempts to activate sexism among voters by attacking a female opponent, gender attitudes become more salient—but not to the woman’s disadvantage. In a Democratic primary, gendered attacks backfire and lead to a significant boost in support for the female candidate. On the Republican side, a male candidate does not face the same backlash, but the attacks do very little to depress his female opponent’s support. While the persistence of hostile attitudes toward women has slowed the march toward gender equality in society, our experimental results suggest that sexism exerts only contingent effects in primary elections and not systematically to female candidates’ detriment.

Keywords

sexism, primary elections, gender stereotypes, campaign rhetoric

In the last decade, the number of women holding elective office in the United States increased substantially. Between 2011 and 2021, female representation grew by 58% in Congress, 38% among statewide elected officials, and 30% in state legislatures.¹ Nearly one-third of the 44 women ever to occupy the governor’s mansion served during the last decade.² And in 2020, Kamala Harris became the first woman elected vice president. Although Democrats account for much of these gains, the number of Republican women in Congress also increased markedly—by 81% in the last 10 years alone.

This development is notable given the persistence of sexism within the electorate. Surveys continue to find that many voters possess attitudes that suggest hostility toward equal treatment for women. For instance, in a 2020 poll, nearly one-third of U.S. respondents said that “when women demand equality these days, they are actually seeking special favors.” Asked if “women who complain about harassment often cause more problems than they solve,” 47% of Republicans, 26% of independents, and 15% of Democrats agreed.³

Scholars often point to the polarized nature of American electoral politics to explain why the continued existence of sexism is not at odds with the rise in women’s

representation. Because voters’ partisan attachments have grown so strong, they will almost always vote for their party’s nominee; candidate sex (or any other characteristic) exerts only minimal influence on voters’ attitudes (Brooks 2013; Dolan 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). Put simply, even unabashed sexists find it more appealing to cast a ballot for a female co-partisan than to cross party lines.

But partisanship cannot explain why women of both parties now win primary elections in record numbers as well.⁴ After all, gender and sexism should play a stronger role in campaigns in which voters cannot rely on party cues (Hayes 2011; Hayes and Lawless 2016; King and Matland 2003; McDermott 1997). When running against men of the same party, women theoretically should have a hard time winning over sexist voters. And the fact that

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male candidates could exploit sexism in an effort to drive down support for their female opponents would seem to pose another formidable challenge. Yet, in primary elections for both Congress and state legislatures, women are just as able as men to secure party nominations.

In this article, we rely on an experimental approach to help reconcile sexist attitudes in the electorate with increasingly favorable outcomes for women in primary elections. Based on two national survey experiments, we show that sexism plays a nuanced role in contests for party nominations. We first demonstrate that in the absence of gendered campaign rhetoric, sexism is a weak predictor of support for female candidates. We then show, however, that when a male candidate attempts to activate sexism among voters by attacking his female opponent, gender attitudes become more salient—but not to the woman’s disadvantage. In a Democratic primary, where the vast majority of voters possess “non-sexist” attitudes, gendered attacks backfire and lead to a significant boost in support for the female candidate. On the Republican side, where sexism is more prevalent among voters, a male candidate does not face the same backlash. But even among the most sexist GOP primary voters, the attacks do very little to depress his female opponent’s support. Although the persistence of hostile attitudes toward women has slowed the march toward gender equality in society, our experimental results suggest that sexism exerts only contingent effects in primary elections and not systematically to female candidates’ detriment.

How Sexism Could Affect Primary Elections

Previous work on female candidates in primary elections has taken a number of approaches to identify the potential effects of sexism. Some researchers have assessed women’s fundraising and win rates in primaries to determine whether they face disadvantages or bias (e.g., Anastasopoulos 2016; Barnes, Branton, and Cassese 2017; Burrell 2014; Hassell and Visalvanich 2019; Kitchens and Swers 2016; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Palmer and Simon 2008; Pearson and McGhee 2013; Thomsen 2019; 2020). Others have focused on latent gender stereotypes among voters that could influence attitudes toward female candidates (e.g., Bauer 2017; Cassese and Holman 2018; King and Matland 2003; Lawless 2004; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). And still others have explored the ways that sexist attitudes shape how voters search for information about candidates, often to female contenders’ disadvantage (Ditonto 2019; Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk 2014).

For the most part, however, scholars have not applied a standard political communication framework to study

how sexism affects female candidates’ fortunes in primary campaigns. The classical model of persuasion (e.g., Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953) suggests that people’s political opinions—such as vote choice—typically emerge from a combination of their own prior beliefs and the information they are exposed to in public discourse (e.g., McGuire 1968; Zaller 1992). This means that in elections, people’s existing attitudes, or predispositions, do not deterministically dictate their choices. Rather, those attitudes are activated when voters encounter relevant communications in the campaign environment (Bartels 1988; Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Sides and Vavreck 2013). The core insight of this body of research is that “campaign messages. . . work their influence in concert with voters’ prevailing predispositions and sentiments” (Iyengar and Simon 2000, 158). By simultaneously considering both campaign messages and voters’ key predispositions, this framework allows for the derivation of a richer set of expectations regarding the role sexism will play in primary campaigns involving men and women.

First, we expect that sexism will not automatically influence support for female candidates. Instead, it should play its strongest role when campaign rhetoric makes gender-related attitudes salient. We ground this expectation in prior research that suggests voters’ beliefs about gender stereotypes shape their support for female candidates only when campaign activity brings those considerations to mind (Bauer 2015; Hayes 2011). For instance, in Bauer’s (2015) experiment, respondents exposed to news stories containing gendered language were more likely to judge female candidates in stereotypical ways than were subjects who saw coverage without that language. These findings are consistent with studies arguing that in some cases a gendered campaign environment can create a series of strategic challenges for women (Bauer 2017; Cassese and Holman 2018; Dittmar 2015; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014; Windett 2014). In contrast to an earlier line of work positing that candidate sex is a chronically influential feature of voters’ choices (e.g., Sanbonmatsu 2002), the emerging consensus is that the influence of gender attitudes is “highly conditional and [dependent] on the types of information voters receive over the course of a campaign” (Bauer 2015, 705).

Although research that directly measures sexism in primary campaigns is sparse, analyses of the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are consistent with this perspective. Numerous studies of the 2016 election find strong correlations between sexism and vote choice (Bock, Byrd-Craven, and Burkley 2017; Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle 2019; Knuckey 2019; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2020). But that relationship appears due at least in part to the highly gendered nature of the campaign.

Cassese and Holman (2019) find, for instance, that hostile sexism strongly predicted candidate evaluations when experimental subjects were exposed to Trump's "woman card" attack against Clinton. But sexism had no influence on evaluations of Clinton among respondents who did not see the attack. Likewise, Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen (2018) show that sexism's influence depends on a variety of contextual factors. Using data from the American National Election Studies, they find that modern sexism was a stronger vote predictor in 2016 than in the three previous presidential races—perhaps no surprise for an election involving the first female major-party nominee (see also Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). But they also show experimentally that the effect of sexism varies in response to the activation of particular emotions, with fear diminishing sexism's influence compared to anger. The more closely campaign rhetoric connects to gender, the more likely it is that sexism will be an ingredient in voters' evaluations.⁵

Second, the activation of gender attitudes will drive down support for a female candidate among some individuals but increase it among others. For voters who hold sexist attitudes, increasing the salience of those beliefs should make them less inclined to support a woman. But among non-sexists, who tend to be concerned with gender equality, the same sexist attack might generate backlash against a male opponent, boosting relative support for the female candidate. This expectation is consistent with Winter's (2020) findings in both observational and experimental studies; support for female congressional candidates is inversely related to voters' levels of sexism. It also suggests that increasing the salience of gender can in some circumstances help women. For instance, gender attitudes in the 2018 midterms were a stronger predictor of voting than they had been in prior cycles (Schaffner 2021; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2020). But the increased correlation between sexism and vote choice was due to non-sexist voters shifting away from the Republican Party and toward the Democrats (Schaffner 2021). That movement helped elect a record number of women to Congress as part of the midterm's "pink wave."⁶

Finally, our third expectation moves from the individual level to the outcomes of party primaries. We expect sexism to play somewhat different roles in Democratic and Republican contests. After all, whether the activation of gender attitudes is a *net* disadvantage for women depends on the distribution of sexism in the electorate, and that distribution varies by party. Large majorities of Democrats believe that gender discrimination is a major problem and view electing women to office as an important goal (Dolan and Hansen 2018; Hayes and Lawless 2016). And while some Democratic voters possess sexist beliefs, they are outnumbered by non-sexists (e.g., Banda and Cassese 2021). Consequently, if a male Democrat

adopts campaign rhetoric designed to appeal to sexist voters, he is likely to court damaging backlash and boost support for his female opponent. With levels of sexism higher in the GOP (e.g., Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2020), however, a male candidate's strategy of activating gender attitudes may be more effective in driving down support for a woman. This, of course, does not mean that female candidates will win every Democratic primary and lose every Republican one. Instead, it suggests that sexism's role in shaping the fortunes of female candidates will depend on both the specific content of the primary campaign as well as the distribution of sexism in the relevant electorate.

Experimental Design

In order to test our expectations, we conducted two survey experiments that focus on Democratic and Republican primary elections involving a male and female candidate. We study mixed-gender races for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, sexism is likely to exert its strongest influence on voting behavior in races that pit a man against a woman. Practically, when women seek their party's nomination, they are far more likely to face a male opponent than another woman.⁷ We designed the experiments around state legislative primaries, both because they serve as stepping stones to higher office and because they have been the focus of prior work (e.g., Cassese and Holman 2018).

We structured the experiments—the first in September 2016 with a sample of 1120 respondents recruited via Mechanical Turk (Study 1),⁸ and the second in June 2018 with a sample of 2266 Lucid respondents (Study 2)⁹—the same way. Both began with a short survey that collected basic demographic information from the respondents, including their partisan affiliation (see [Supplementary Material](#) for a description of the samples). We then asked a battery of questions similar to the items that scholars use to measure "modern sexism" (Swim et al. 1995) as a way to tap into respondents' gender attitudes.¹⁰ These questions are intended to capture subtle biases against women that underlie opposition to gender equality and correlate with a variety of political opinions (e.g., McThomas and Tesler 2016).¹¹ We asked respondents (1) how much discrimination they believe women face in the United States today; as well as their level of agreement that (2) discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States; (3) society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement; and (4) feminism has had a positive impact on social and political life in the United States.¹² We used these items to create an index, scaling the variable so that higher scores reflect higher levels of sexism.¹³ In an effort to reduce the possibility of priming gender attitudes before

the experimental manipulation, we embedded the measures amid a variety of other survey items and right before a series of distraction questions.¹⁴

Consistent with previous work, our surveys reveal that sexism is more common among GOP voters than among Democrats. Figure 1 displays the distribution of our measure, scaled 0 to 1, in Study 2.¹⁵ Whereas the skew for Democrats in the sample is toward the least sexist side of the scale (left-hand panel), Republicans are more normally distributed (right-hand panel). The larger share of GOP respondents in the middle, as well as toward the more sexist end of the scale, suggests that activating sexism might indeed be more beneficial for male Republican candidates.

Following the initial survey questions, we exposed the subjects to what looked like an excerpt from a typical newspaper article about two state legislative candidates running in their party's primary.¹⁶ In the story, which we wrote, respondents read that Martin Simpson and Deborah Reeves, described as professionals who both previously held local office, were "locked in a tight battle."¹⁷ Republican respondents (including leaners) read articles that described both candidates as Republicans. Democratic respondents (including leaners) read articles that described the candidates as Democrats. Pure independents were randomly assigned to one party's primary.¹⁸

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four main conditions. Those assigned to the control group read

nothing beyond the race recap and basic background information about the candidates. Respondents assigned to the three remaining conditions read the recap and background information, plus a quote in which Simpson expressed doubts that Reeves would do a good job representing the district. Simpson's criticism of Reeves constitutes the key experimental manipulation, and allows us to test the conditions under which sexism influences support for a female candidate.

Across the three treatments, we varied Simpson's criticism in ways that would make it more or less likely to activate respondents' gender attitudes. In what we call the Explicit condition, Simpson directly linked his concerns to Reeves' sex and attacked her on the basis of her qualifications (Study 1) and toughness (Study 2). Perceptions of female candidates' qualifications and toughness have been central to the political science research on stereotypes (e.g., Huddy and Capelos 2002; Lawless 2004; Schneider and Bos 2014), and their mention is likely to tap into respondents' existing predispositions about gender. In Study 1, Simpson said: "She is a woman, and that's the only reason she is doing as well as she is. I think she is not qualified." In Study 2, he said: "As a woman, she is just not tough enough to get the job done." These attacks are modeled on similar rhetoric used, however rarely, by male candidates in recent elections.¹⁹

In the Implicit condition, Simpson once again expressed concern that Reeves would poorly represent the

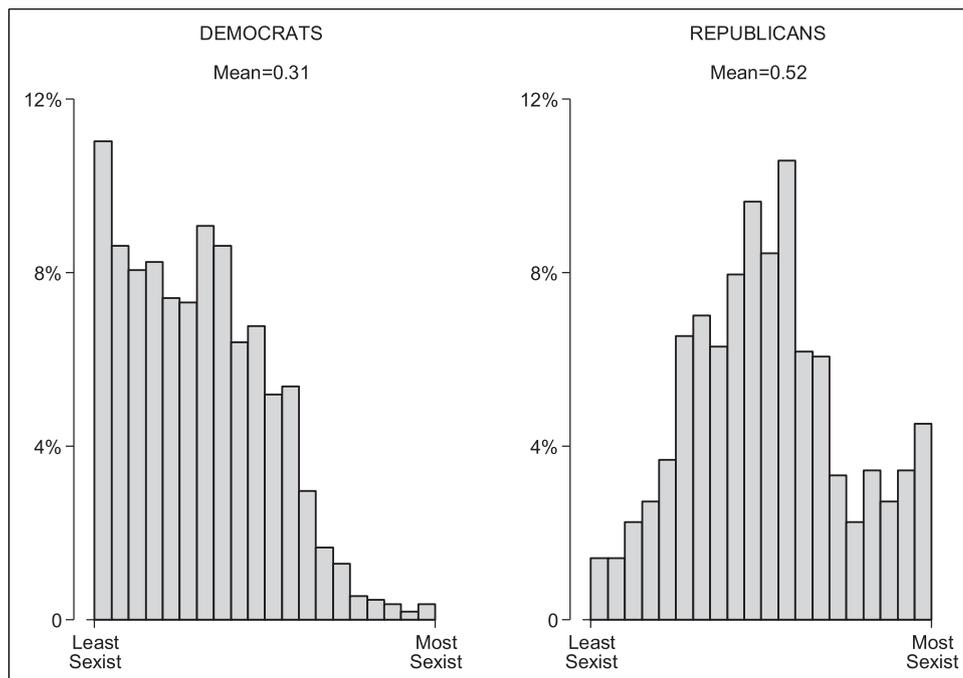


Figure 1. Distribution of Sexism, by Party. Note: Panels illustrate the distribution of sexist attitudes among Democratic and Republican respondents in Study 2. The sexism index (scaled 0–1) is based on a battery of four questions tapping subtle biases against women.

district's interests, either because she was unqualified or not tough enough. But he stopped short of mentioning Reeves' sex, saying only, "I think she is not qualified" (Study 1) or "She is just not tough enough to get the job done" (Study 2). Here, Simpson's remarks are intended to activate gender attitudes by playing on stereotypes, but without making direct reference to the fact that Reeves is a woman. This language, similar to rhetoric sometimes used by candidates in legislative campaigns, allows us to determine whether less overt references to gender are less likely to make sexism salient for voters.²⁰

Finally, respondents in the Non-Gendered condition read that Simpson thought Reeves would not do a good job either because "she is bought by, and will be accountable to, the big money donors paying for her campaign" (Study 1) or because "she just does not share the values of the people of this district" (Study 2).²¹ These criticisms are not connected to gender stereotypes and not intended to invoke gender attitudes. They thus serve as a test of whether the activation of sexism depends on rhetoric being connected to gender, or whether any criticism of a female candidate is enough to increase the influence of sexism on evaluations.²²

After reading the article, we asked respondents to rate the favorability of the candidates, as well as judge them on a series of personal attributes. Our main analytical strategy is to compare movement in net support (comparing Reeves to Simpson), since the key outcome is not just whether favorability toward the female candidate decreases, but whether it decreases more (or less) than it does for the man who attacks her.

We designed the experiment around a news article reporting on one candidate attacking another for three reasons. First, the way voters most often encounter information about candidates in down-ballot elections is to read about them in local media outlets (Graber 2010). Second, although news organizations occasionally inject gender into their coverage without being prompted, research shows that most gendered content—especially outside of presidential campaigns—stems from what the candidates themselves have said or done (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Third, as noted above, we modeled the content of the explicit and implicit gender attacks on the substance and language actual male candidates have used when criticizing their female opponents. Thus, our research design allows us to examine in a realistic way how campaign attacks affect citizens' impressions of the candidates launching them and those on the receiving end.

Results

Before testing our expectations about the circumstances under which individuals react to sexist campaign rhetoric and how voters' assessments play out in Democratic and

Republican primaries, it is important to determine whether respondents exhibit a default preference for male or female candidates. To do so, we focus on subjects in each experiment's control group. In both studies, control group respondents received basic information about Deborah Reeves and Martin Simpson, including their occupations and political experience, as well as the competitive nature of the primary race. Although respondents could discern the gender of the candidates based on their names, none of the information they received was expressly intended to activate gender attitudes.

The control group's candidate ratings on the 0–10 favorability scale suggest no strong anti- or pro-woman bias in the absence of other information. In the Democratic primary, we find a small advantage for Deborah Reeves. In Study 1, she received an average rating of 6.4, compared to Martin Simpson's 6.1 ($p = 0.11$). In Study 2, Reeves held a 0.4-point advantage over Simpson (6.2 average rating compared to 5.8; $p < 0.05$). In the Republican primary, we find no statistical difference in the average ratings for Reeves and Simpson in either study (see [Supplementary Material](#)). These results are similar to other recent work that has found a slight Democratic preference for female candidates, and either no gender difference or a small preference for male candidates among GOP voters (e.g., Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Schwarz and Coppock 2020).²³ The role gender attitudes play in moving support for female candidates away from these baselines is the focus of our remaining analyses.

The Activation of Sexism and Support for Female Candidates

We begin with our first hypothesis—that sexist attitudes must be activated before they are likely to influence

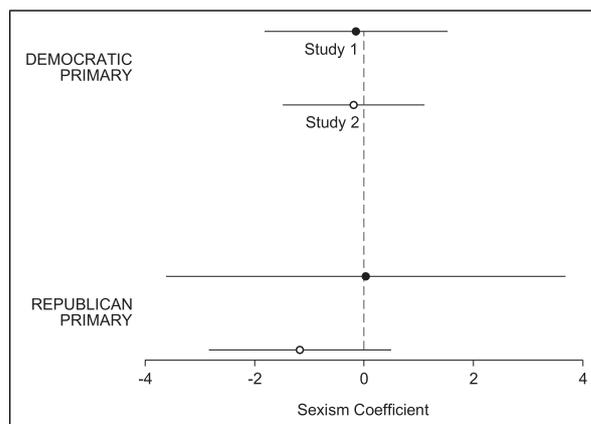


Figure 2. The Effect of Voter Sexism on Net Candidate Favorability, Control Group Only. Note: Estimates represent the effect of sexist attitudes on net favorability (with 95% confidence intervals) for control group respondents. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the complete regression analyses.

support for female candidates. As an initial test, we again consider the control group. In Figure 2, each point represents the coefficient for our sexism measure (with 95% confidence intervals) from a regression predicting net candidate favorability. A positive net favorability rating indicates an advantage for Deborah Reeves over Martin Simpson, and a higher sexism score indicates more sexist

attitudes. With confidence intervals for each point estimate overlapping the zero-line, in no case are control group respondents' sexism scores a significant predictor of net support. In a separate analysis, we find the same thing when we examine each candidate's individual favorability rating (as opposed to net favorability). Sexism never predicts control group respondents' ratings of either

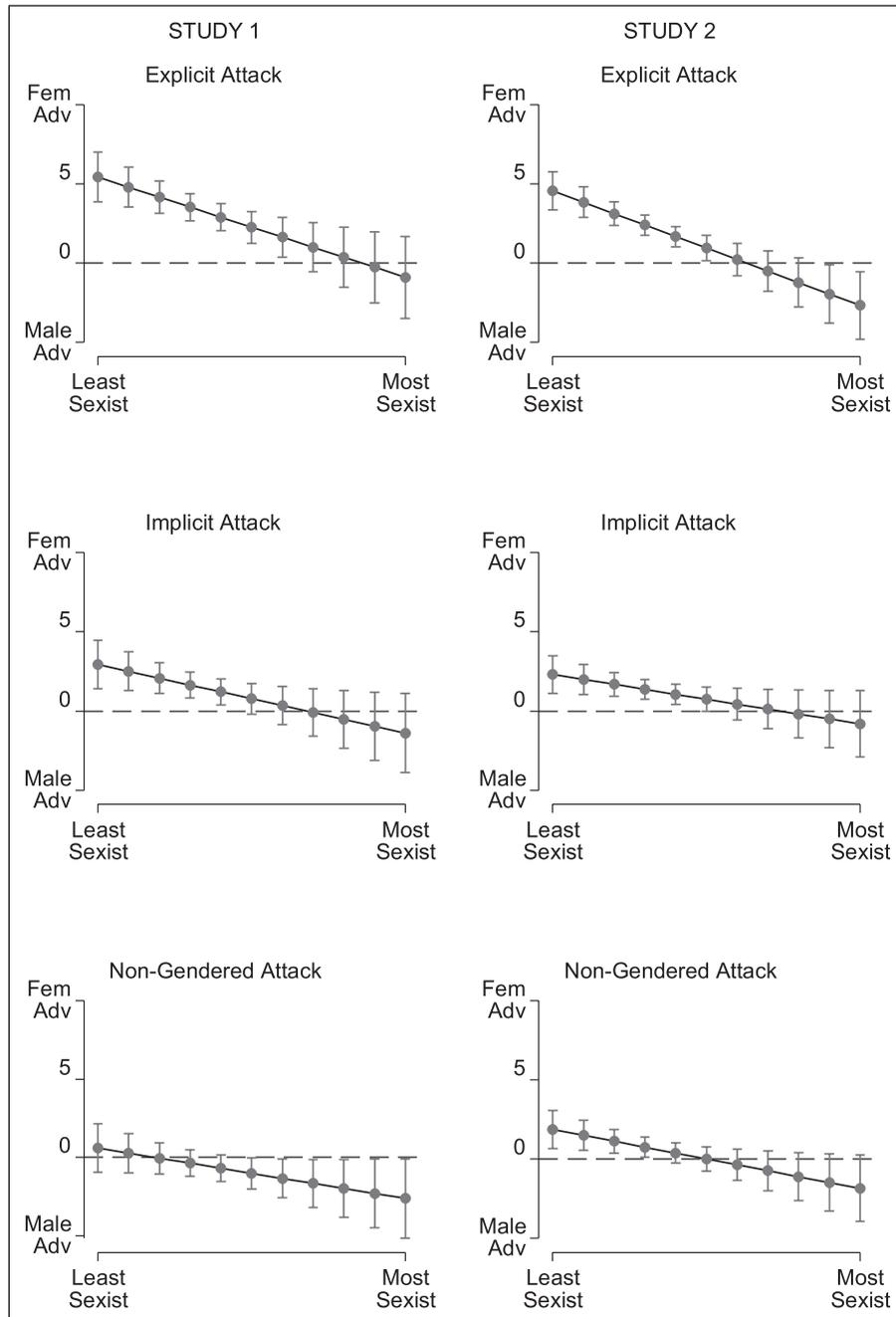


Figure 3. Treatment Effects on Net Candidate Favorability, by Voter Sexism, in a Democratic Primary. *Note:* Estimates represent the difference in net candidate favorability (with 95% confidence intervals) for each treatment group, as compared to the control group, at increasing levels of voter sexism. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the complete regression analyses.

the female or male candidate (see [Supplementary Material](#)). Absent activation, gender attitudes appear to play a limited role in shaping support for female candidates in party primaries.²⁴

But as we expected, in the treatments in which Simpson attacked Reeves on the basis of gender stereotypes the sexism scale is a strong predictor of candidate support—and not always to the female candidate’s disadvantage. Consider first the Democratic primary, displayed in [Figure 3](#). Each panel presents the treatment effects—the difference in net favorability compared to the control—of the main experimental conditions for respondents at various levels of sexism. Positive scores indicate an advantage for the female candidate, while negative scores indicate an advantage for the male candidate. Because both studies produced very similar results, we present them side by side.

The top two panels display the Explicit condition, where Simpson criticized Reeves’ qualifications or toughness by making overt reference to her sex (“As a woman...”). The downward slope of the lines in both studies indicates that the treatment significantly activated respondents’ gender attitudes. Respondents at the low end of the sexism scale in the Democratic primary reacted to Simpson’s overtly sexist attack by moving strongly *toward* Reeves. For example, among people with the lowest levels of sexism, the average net favorability score was five points more advantageous for Reeves than similarly non-sexist respondents in the control. But Reeves’ advantage diminishes as respondent sexism increases, such that Simpson’s attack gives him a small lead among the most sexist respondents (though an insignificant one in Study 1).

As the gendered attack becomes more subtle, its effects weaken.²⁵ Consider the Implicit condition, which sought to activate respondent sexism by tapping into gender stereotypes but did not directly refer to Reeves’ sex. The pattern is similar, but Reeves’ net favorability is only about 2.5 points greater among the most non-sexist respondents as compared to non-sexists in the control group. That advantage is further cut in half among non-sexists exposed to the Non-Gendered condition. Across all conditions, however, Simpson’s attack makes sexism a significantly stronger predictor of candidate support than in the control. In a Democratic primary, even a non-gendered attack on a female candidate may be enough to activate voters’ gender attitudes.

[Figure 4](#) displays the same analysis for the Republican primary. When the female candidate faces an explicitly sexist attack in Study 1, the least sexist GOP voters move strongly toward Reeves, again indicating a backlash against Simpson’s rhetoric. And even among the most sexist Republicans, the attack does not produce an uptick in Simpson’s support, compared to the control.

The interaction between the Explicit treatment and the sexism measure falls short of statistical significance in the Study 2 regression model, but it does produce some movement in Reeves’ favor among respondents low on the sexism scale. Just as with the Democratic result, an explicitly sexist attack does little to erode support for the female candidate.

In contrast to the Democratic primary, however, the Implicit treatment does not significantly increase the influence of sexism on candidate favorability. The attack does not appear to drive down Reeves’ ratings, but it also does not produce the kind of consistent backlash evident in the Explicit condition. In fact, in both studies the role of sexism in the Implicit condition is virtually indistinguishable from its negligible role in the Non-Gendered treatment. Even comparing the activation of sexism in the Explicit condition to the Non-Gendered condition yields ambiguous conclusions. Although the least sexist Republican primary voters move more strongly toward Reeves when exposed to an explicitly sexist attack than when the attack does not invoke gender stereotypes, the overall effect of sexism is technically not larger in the Explicit condition.²⁶ All of this suggests that attacks on a female candidate, regardless of their content, may be less likely to activate gender attitudes among GOP voters than they are among Democrats.²⁷

The Consequences of Activating Sexism in Party Primaries

Given these individual-level patterns, it follows that activating gender attitudes should have different electoral implications in Democratic and Republican primaries. The results in [Figure 5](#) show that it does. Each panel presents the aggregate treatment effects—the change in net favorability compared to the control—for each party’s primary in each study. Once again, higher scores indicate an increased advantage for the female candidate.

Turning first to the Democratic primary (top row), the graphs show that Simpson’s gender attack, whether explicit or implicit, netted a large boost for Reeves. In the Explicit condition, her favorability advantage increased by between two and four points. In the Implicit condition, it was about 1.5 points in both studies. The efforts by a male Democrat to undermine support for a female opponent by invoking gender stereotypes unequivocally backfired. On the Republican side (bottom row), Simpson’s explicit attack also boomeranged and led to an increase in support for Reeves, albeit less than in the Democratic primary. Simpson’s implicit attack resulted in a small advantage for Reeves in Study 2, but no effect in Study 1. The fact that the non-gendered attacks produced either minimal or non-significant movement in both

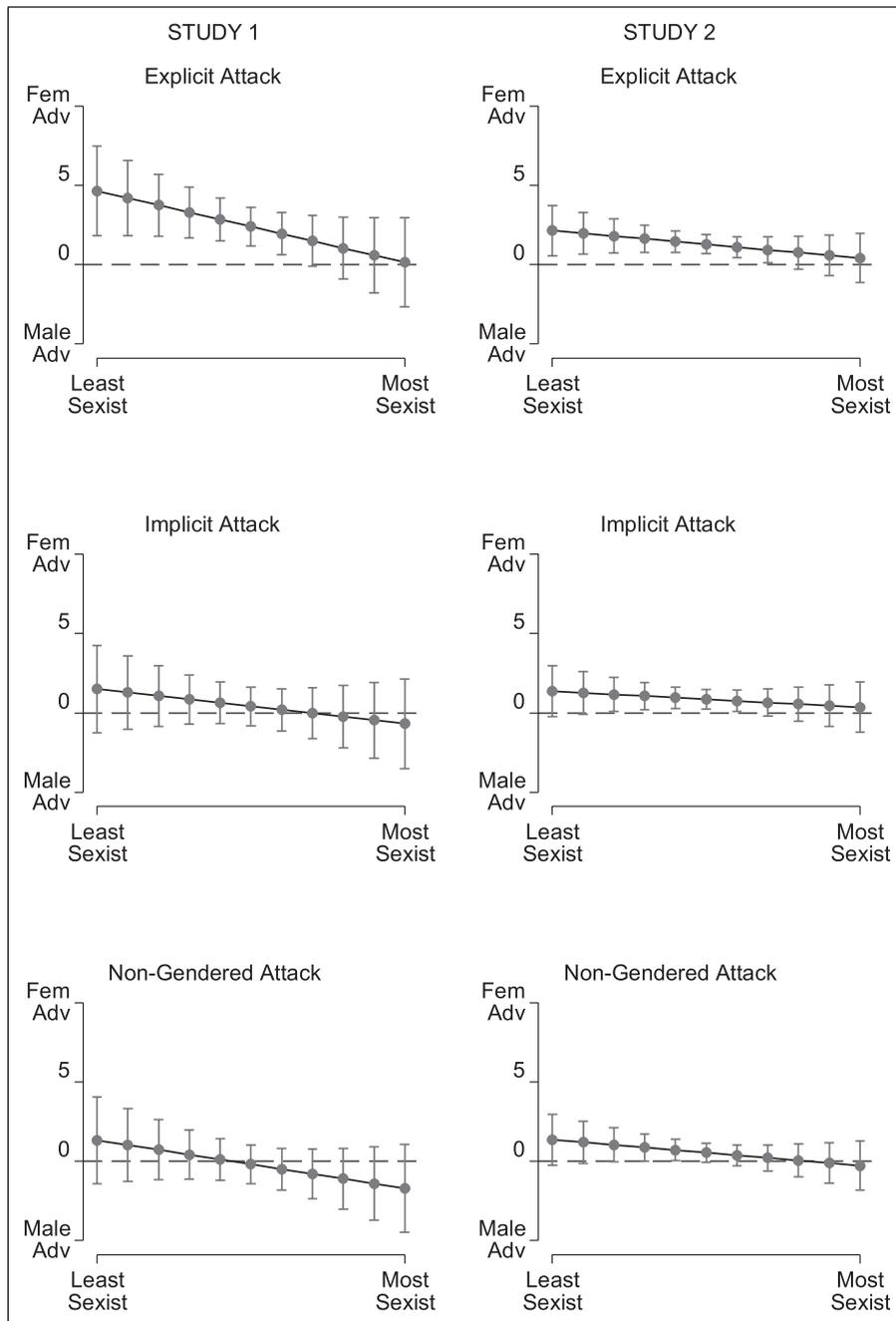


Figure 4. Treatment Effects on Net Candidate Favorability, by Voter Sexism, in a Republican Primary. *Note:* Estimates represent the difference in net candidate favorability (with 95% confidence intervals) for each treatment group, as compared to the control group, at increasing levels of voter sexism. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the complete regression analyses.

primaries suggests that voters were responding most strongly to underlying gender stereotypes invoked by campaign communication, not merely criticism of a female opponent.²⁸

The backlash that produces Reeves' favorability advantage appears to stem from two factors that are similar in both parties' primaries. First, the gendered attacks do

little to diminish respondents' views of Reeves' qualifications or toughness—the focus of Simpson's attack—which we measured by asking respondents how well the term described each candidate.²⁹ In the Democratic primary, the gendered treatments never significantly reduce Reeves' targeted trait ratings. In the Republican primary, Simpson's attacks have their desired effect in the

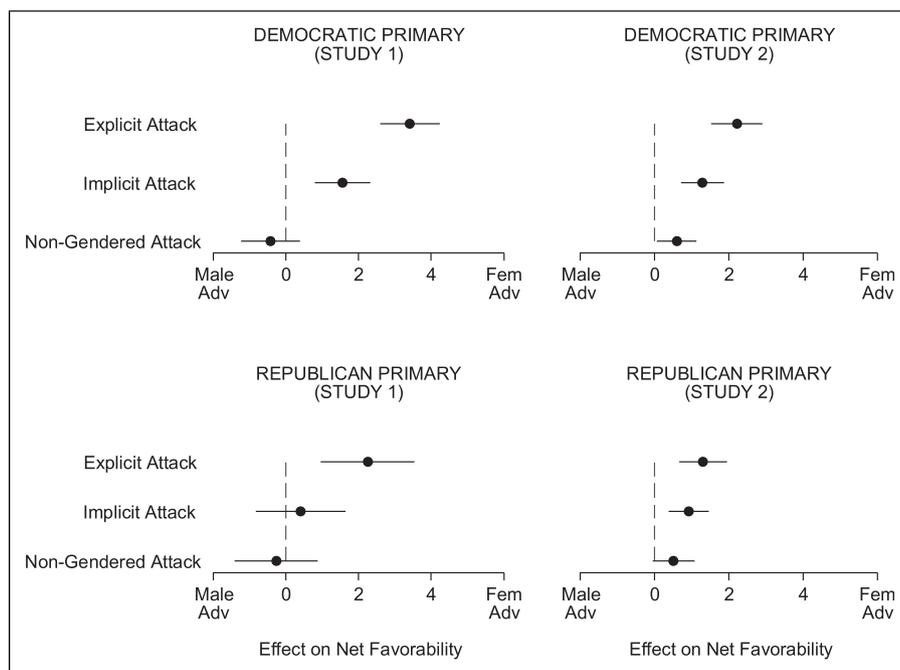


Figure 5. Aggregate Treatment Effects on Net Candidate Favorability. *Note:* Estimates represent differences in mean net favorability from the control (with 95% confidence intervals). Scores above zero indicate an advantage for the female candidate, Deborah Reeves. See [Supplementary Material](#).

Implicit condition—except that his own ratings suffer even more. For instance, in Study 2, Reeves’ toughness rating in the Republican primary fell by 0.57 from the control. At first glance, that suggests that the gendered attack was successful. But Simpson’s own toughness score in that treatment dropped by slightly more (0.65), erasing any potential gain. In no case are voters’ assessments of Simpson’s own qualifications and toughness more positive than their evaluations of Reeves. It is not just Simpson’s positive attributes that take a hit, however. His attacks also lead voters to evaluate him as sexist. In the Explicit and Implicit treatment for both studies in both parties, Simpson’s sexism rating goes up—by as much as four points in the Democratic primary and nearly three points in the Republican contest, changes that are far bigger than on any other attribute we measured.³⁰

Together, these findings explain why the gendered attacks not only do not hurt Reeves but give her an advantage: The explicit attack is ineffective in undermining her qualifications and toughness, and the implicit attack does at least as much harm to Simpson as it does to Reeves. Simpson is also perceived as sexist. That the Non-Gendered condition generally has small effects on Simpson’s sexism ratings lends support to the contention that gendered attacks, as opposed to more generic criticisms, are particularly fraught for male candidates. Voters do not necessarily regard male candidates’ criticism of female candidates as sexist or inappropriate. But they

react unfavorably to criticism that can be interpreted as gendered.

There is one additional way Republican and Democratic voters reacted similarly to the treatments. At a given level of sexism, the influence of gender attitudes was nearly the same in both parties. Both Democratic and Republican voters with scores at the midpoint of the sexism scale (0.5), for instance, moved toward Reeves in the Explicit condition by around one to two points. In the Implicit condition, those voters either did not move or moved toward Reeves by less than one point. Controlling for sexism, Democratic and Republican voters did not behave in dramatically different ways.³¹

Thus, the party differences—Reeves benefited more from Simpson’s attacks in the Democratic primary than in the Republican contest—arise from the *distribution* of sexism in each party’s primary electorate.³² Because there are many more voters in the Democratic Party who fall toward the non-sexist end of the scale (see [Figure 1](#)), the backlash to Simpson’s attack—and the boost for Reeves—was bigger. Even though the most sexist Democrats did move somewhat against the female candidate when she was criticized, there were too few of them to counteract the increase in support she received from the non-sexists.

In the Republican primary, the benefit to Reeves was smaller because there were fewer non-sexists in the electorate. But simultaneously, the attacks did not appeal

sufficiently to the majority of Republicans in the middle of the scale to help Simpson. Although we can only speculate, it may be that gender-based attacks in a GOP primary do not harm female candidates—even when they face a relatively sexist electorate—because Republican voters do not view co-partisans through a lens of sexism. Many GOP voters may assume that Republican candidates—male or female—share their values, including conservative views about gender. Indeed, many prominent female Republican political leaders eschew a feminist agenda,³³ oppose an Equal Rights Amendment,³⁴ vote against bills that combat domestic violence and sexual assault,³⁵ and resist calls for more aggressive efforts to promote gender equality.³⁶ If GOP voters assume that female Republican candidates also have these views, then gender attitudes may in many circumstances pose only a limited obstacle to women seeking the nomination so long as they hold the party line.³⁷

Conclusion

The findings from our experiments help reconcile the puzzle that animated this article: Even as sexism remains a force in American politics and society, women, on both sides of the aisle, continue to win elections in record numbers. Whereas much previous research has relied on partisanship as an explanation, we showed that even in primaries—where party loyalty cannot shield women from voter bias like it can in general elections—sexism may not be as formidable an obstacle as it might seem.

Our findings suggest three conclusions about sexism in primaries. First, in primary campaigns that are not significantly gendered, sexism may play only a limited role in shaping voting behavior. Although the mere presence of a male candidate competing against a woman would seem to make gender immediately salient, our experiments suggest otherwise, a finding that extends previous work (e.g., Bauer 2015; Hayes 2011). Just as other predispositions are weak predictors of candidate support until they are activated, the same is true of sexism. If campaign rhetoric does not tap into gender attitudes, then voters' underlying sexist beliefs may not be detrimental to female candidates' prospects.

Second, male candidates who seek to harness voter sexism to drive down support for a female opponent face significant risks. Sexist voters would seem to be a fertile source of support in mixed-gender races, but appealing to those voters in many cases may doom a male candidate's chances with the rest of the electorate. To be sure, campaign rhetoric that taps into gender stereotypes may modestly increase a male candidate's advantage among voters with the most sexist attitudes. But the backlash among people with liberal or even moderate gender attitudes is more than enough to cancel out those gains. We

found this to be true regardless of whether the male candidate's attack used overt or subtle appeals to gender stereotypes. Thus, the influence of sexism in primary campaigns may be limited because men who run against women strategically decide not to invoke gender in their rhetoric.

Third, the distribution of gender attitudes in the primary electorate is key to understanding when and how sexism will matter. Our experiments showed that a gendered campaign helped a female Democrat, significantly boosting her support among the large number of non-sexist primary voters. On the Republican side, that boost was somewhat smaller because there are more GOP voters with sexist attitudes. This suggests that research would do well to focus less on estimating average effects of sexism (or candidate gender) and emphasize more the ways in which these factors matter or do not matter under different circumstances.

Although sexism did not harm the female candidate in our experiments, the results also suggest conditions under which it could be more detrimental. One concerns the nature of the gendered attack. If the criticism comes from a source other than the male opponent—such as the news media or an outside political group—it is plausible that the backlash will be less severe (see, e.g., Brooks and Murov 2012). In that event, the net result might be more damaging to the female candidate. This scenario, of course, depends on the rare campaign environment in which gender is a central theme (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Still, future studies could consider how the source of gendered campaign criticism might mitigate or exacerbate the influence of sexism.

A second possibility is that political districts with large concentrations of sexist voters could create incentives for male candidates to make gendered appeals that could drive down support for female opponents. With few non-sexist voters and little risk of backlash, a sexist campaign could pay dividends and make it harder for a woman to win. At the same time, our experiments found that even in Republican primaries, sexist appeals boosted a male candidate's support only slightly among the most sexist respondents, suggesting limited gains from such a strategy. And it may be that in most districts, voters ultimately care less about a candidate's sex than whether she espouses values consistent with their own. Indeed, extremist Georgia Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene had no trouble winning her 2020 congressional primary against male opponents in one of the most conservative districts in the country. Liz Cheney (Wyoming) and Carol Miller (West Virginia) similarly represent two of the nation's reddest districts and have handily defeated male primary opponents in each election cycle since their first race.

All told, our findings suggest that sexism in the United States, while a continued impediment to a more equitable

society, does not pose an automatic, systematic obstacle for female candidates in primary contests. Instead, the role played by gender attitudes—and whether they harm or help women—depends on the nature of the campaign and the composition of the electorate. Future research on primaries would be welcome to delineate the complicated interplay of voter sexism, candidate sex, and campaign rhetoric as a growing number of women seek—and win—their party's nominations.

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Data Availability

Data are available at <http://www.dannyhayes.org>.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. "Women in Elective Office, 2021," *Center for American Women and Politics*. Accessed at: <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2021> (27 February 2021).
2. "History of Women Governors," *Center for American Women and Politics*. Accessed at: <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-governors> (27 February 2021).
3. George Washington University Politics Poll, October 2020.
4. Kelly Dittmar, "The 2020 Primaries Are Over. Here's What You Need to Know about the Record Number of Women

Nominees," *Center for American Women and Politics*, 18 September 2020. Accessed at: <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/election-analysis/post-primary-analysis-women-2020> (27 February 2021).

5. A similar dynamic is at play in terms of race. Newman et al. (2020) find, for instance, that voters who are racially prejudiced feel emboldened to express and act upon those prejudices when candidates and other political elites use prejudicial language or racialized rhetoric themselves (see also Banks and Hicks 2019; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). This perspective has challenged the racial priming literature (Mendelberg 2001), which argues that overtly racist campaign rhetoric that violates societal norms diminishes the influence of racial attitudes.
6. Christina Vuleta, "A Pink Wave: The Record Number of Women Heading to Congress Include Fighters, Founders, and First-Timers," *Forbes*, 7 November 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinavuleta/2018/11/07/a-pink-wave-the-record-number-of-women-heading-to-congress-include-fighters-founders-and-first-timers/?sh=1b97ce419873> (7 March 2021).
7. We recognize that women can also launch gender-based attacks against male candidates, and that male and female candidates can issue gender-based criticisms against candidates of the same sex (see Conroy 2015; 1). But we focus on the situation assumed to be the most detrimental to women – when male candidates invoke sexism against female opponents in elections where party cues are absent.
8. This service provides people with small payments (in our case US\$1) for participating in academic surveys or market research. While methodological concerns about online experiments remain, Mechanical Turk samples are more demographically representative than are the convenience samples of undergraduate students typical for political science research (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). Accordingly, MTurk has become a common method by which to conduct experiments in political science (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Huber and Paris 2013). Indeed, although our sample is somewhat more Democratic and liberal, more educated, and younger than the 2016 American National Election Studies sample (see [Supplementary Material](#)), the results of our MTurk study are virtually identical to our findings from our second study, where our Lucid sample matches the ANES very closely. This suggests that any peculiarities of the MTurk sample are not responsible for our findings. For more information on Mechanical Turk, see: <https://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome>.
9. Lucid draws its sample from other survey firms' panel respondents (i.e., SSI, Qualtrics). All respondents are U.S. residents who are at least 18 years old. Demographic and experimental findings on Lucid have been shown to track well with national benchmarks (Coppock and McClellan 2019).

10. It is common for scholars to rely on components on the modern sexism scale (see [Cassese and Barnes 2019](#); [Valentino, Wayne, and Ocenio 2018](#); [Setzler and Yanus 2018](#); [Knuckey 2019](#)), likely because it is how the American National Election Studies measure gender attitudes.
11. The main alternative measure of gender attitudes is the hostile sexism scale, comprised of items that tap into prejudice and resentment toward women. Although [Schaffner \(2021, 17\)](#) finds that hostile sexism items are a more efficient way for survey researchers to measure gender antagonism, he also concludes that “modern sexism items are clearly capturing sexism in a similar way as the hostile sexism scale.” Moving forward, scholars might be well-served to take advantage of the more desirable measurement properties of several of the items included in the hostile sexism scale. But there’s no reason to believe that the results of our analysis would differ fundamentally had we included hostile sexism items in our 2016 and 2018 batteries.
12. We did not replicate the Swim et al. modern sexism measure because the battery includes eight questions, which would make it more likely that our survey respondents would be primed to consider gender attitudes when participating in the experiment. Our four questions tap into the same broad dimensions as the Swim et al. measure – denial of ongoing discrimination against women; antagonism toward women’s demands; resentment about special favors for women – but given the context of the survey experiments, pose less of a priming risk.
13. In Study 1, the mean (on a 0–1 scale) is 0.39 (standard deviation = 0.24), and in Study 2, the mean is 0.41 (standard deviation = 0.22). The scale is reliable. In Study 1, Cronbach’s alpha is 0.77; in Study 2, it is 0.65.
14. We asked about perceptions of discrimination against men, Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Christians, Muslims, atheists, poor people, and immigrants. The battery of questions tapping into equality included items about race and socioeconomic status. We also included distraction questions between these items and exposure to the experimental treatments as a way of minimizing the chance that respondents would evaluate the female candidate more favorably than they would have otherwise. In Study 1, the distraction items asked for additional demographic information (sex, age, race, state). In Study 2, we included a battery of Big 5 questions, which asked respondents to indicate how well several pairs of traits described them. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the pre-exposure surveys.
15. In Study 1, the distribution is virtually identical: Democrats average 0.31 and Republicans average 0.54.
16. In Study 1, respondents were told the race was in Wisconsin; in Study 2, they were told the race was in Delaware. We chose Wisconsin because of its bellwether status, and Delaware because we expected very few respondents to live there. It is likely the case that the results would have been the same regardless of the states we chose. Not only are the findings generally consistent across the two studies, but the results are the same when we drop the 21 respondents from Wisconsin in Study 1 and the five respondents from Delaware in Study 2.
17. The candidates’ names are well-matched on politically relevant criteria. Census data reveal that the overwhelming majority of people with the last names of Simpson and Reeves are white. The same is true for people named Deborah or Martin ([Tzioumis 2018](#)). Moreover, among registered voters named Deborah, 53% are Democrats and 53% have a college degree. Among those named Martin, 57% are Democrats and 54% have a college degree (see <https://www.claritycampaigns.com/names>). In Study 1, we randomized the male and female candidates’ occupations (attorney versus professor) and the previous political offices they held (city council versus county commission). It made no difference.
18. None of our conclusions is different when we restrict the analysis to avowed partisans.
19. Although uncommon, Simpson’s language in both cases reflects the way gender attacks occasionally arise in contemporary political discourse. Beyond numerous instances from Donald Trump, one example is Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s characterization of his 2014 opponent, Kentucky Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes. McConnell referred to her as someone who “didn’t really have any qualifications at all,” adding, “I don’t think arguing ‘vote for me because I’m a woman’ is enough.” In the 2018 Democratic primary for Virginia’s seventh congressional district, Dan Ward told reporters that his opponent (and eventual winner) Abigail Spanberger had major campaign advantages “and gender is really the only reason why.” See Libby Nelson, “Donald Trump Says Women Don’t Like Hillary Clinton. They Dislike Him Even More,” *Vox.com*, 26 April 2016; “McConnell: Grimes Qualifications Not Good Enough for Senate,” *NBC News*, 4 August 2014; and Jessica Contreras and Ben Terris, “This Democrat Thinks His Opponent Has an Advantage because She’s a Woman. Is He Right?” *Washington Post*, 11 June 2018.
20. In 2018, for instance, former Nevada Republican Senator Dean Heller called his (ultimately victorious) female opponent “Weak Jacky Rosen” and claimed in a press release that “Jacky Rosen is Weak on Iran.” See “ICYMI: Weak Jacky Rosen Caught Failing Again,” www.deanheller.com, 14 May 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.deanheller.com/icymi-weak-jacky-rosen-caught-failing/> (14 October 2018); and “Jacky Rosen Is Weak on Iran,” www.deanheller.com, 8 May 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.deanheller.com/jacky-rosen-weak-iran/> (14 October 2018).
21. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the full text of each condition.
22. To add a measure of external validity to the study, each of the three treatments – Explicit, Implicit, and Non-Gendered – was accompanied in the news story by a version of Reeves’

- response (or lack thereof). After all, rarely do candidates allow direct criticism (especially explicitly sexist remarks) to go unchallenged. Some respondents read a story in which Reeves did not respond at all. Others saw an article in which Reeves' campaign issued a statement saying that Simpson's criticism "smacks of sexism" and that voters "deserve a campaign that doesn't involve attacking women's qualifications" (or "toughness"). The remainder read a story in which Reeves did not call Simpson's remarks sexist, but instead counter-attacked by criticizing him for being " beholden to the special interests that are funding his campaign." The female candidate's response did not moderate the effect of the attacks, with all the variation accounted for by the main treatments. Accordingly, we do not focus on the response conditions when presenting the results. See [Supplementary Material](#) for the full text of each response.
23. These patterns also suggest that answering questions about gender discrimination in society didn't lead the respondents in our studies to express disproportionately favorable attitudes about the female candidate. This doesn't preclude the possibility that the treatment effects were influenced by the pre-exposure questions about gender attitudes, but there's little to indicate fundamental contamination.
 24. In pooled models with interactions between party and sexism, sexism's effect on net favorability does not vary by party in either study. The same is true for the effects on the individual candidate favorability ratings.
 25. In Wald tests, the activation of sexism in the Explicit condition in both studies is larger than in the Non-Gendered treatment ($p < 0.05$). In Study 1, the difference between the activation of sexism in the Explicit and Implicit condition falls just short of significant ($p = 0.08$), but in Study 2 it is significant ($p < 0.05$). In neither study is there a statistical difference between sexism's effect in the Implicit and Non-Gendered condition.
 26. Wald tests show that the activation of sexism in the Republican primary in the Explicit condition is not statistically stronger than the activation in the Non-Gendered treatment in either study.
 27. A natural question is whether respondent sex – rather than sexism – is the relevant moderator of reactions to campaign attacks. We find its effect is inconsistent and less influential than sexism, as does other recent work (e.g., [Cassese and Barnes 2019](#)). And in only one case – the Democratic primary in Study 2 – do we find a significant interaction between respondent sex and sexism.
 28. In every case – both studies and both primaries – movement in the Explicit condition is larger than in the Non-Gendered condition ($p < 0.05$). In the Democratic primary, the effect of the Implicit condition in both studies is larger than the Non-Gendered condition ($p < 0.05$). In the Republican primary, the effect of the Implicit condition is larger than the Non-Gendered condition, but does not quite reach statistical significant. In Study 1, the p-value is 0.12 and in Study 2 it is 0.06.
 29. See [Supplementary Material](#).
 30. In the Democratic primary in both studies, the effect of both the Explicit and Implicit treatments on Simpson's sexism rating is larger than the effect in the Non-Gendered condition (all comparisons $p < 0.05$). In the Republican primary in both studies, the Explicit treatment effect is larger than the Non-Gendered effect ($p < 0.05$), but the Implicit and Non-Gendered effects are not different from each other.
 31. In models with interactions among the experimental treatments, voter sexism, and party, we find few differences. In Study 1, the increase in the effect of sexism in each treatment does not differ for Democrats and Republicans. In Study 2, we find that the Explicit treatment activated sexism significantly more strongly for Democrats than Republicans ($p < 0.01$), but there were no party differences in the Implicit or Non-Gendered conditions.
 32. Comparing across party, the effects on net favorability are bigger in the Democratic than the Republican primary in Study 1 in the Explicit ($p = 0.07$) and Implicit ($p = 0.06$) treatments. In Study 2, they are bigger in Democratic primary in the Explicit treatment ($p = 0.02$) but not significantly bigger in the Implicit treatment ($p = 0.20$).
 33. Alanna Vaglanos, "The Historic Number of GOP Women Elected to Congress Has Left Some Feminists Torn," *Huffington Post*, 17 November 2020. Accessed at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/republican-women-congress_n_5fb2fd42c5b6a4664670248c (31 March 2021).
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 35. Bridget Read, "172 Republicans Voted against the Violence Against Women Act Last Night," *The Cut*, 18 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.thecut.com/2021/03/172-republicans-vote-to-oppose-violence-against-women-act.html> (31 March 2021).
 36. Vanessa Williams, "While Democrats Call for Resignations, Conservative Women Stand by Colleagues Accused of Sexual Misconduct," *Washington Post*, 11 December 2017. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/while-democrats-call-for-resignations-conservative-women-stand-by-colleagues-accused-of-sexual-misconduct/2017/12/10/54285bdc-cff6-11e7-81bc-c55a220c8cbe_story.html (31 March 2021).
 37. This does not seem to be the case for Democrats. [Banda and Cassese's \(2021\)](#) analysis of the 2016 election suggests that sexism among Democrats did, in fact, shape their political behavior. More specifically, highly sexist voters were less likely to turn out for Clinton. Sexism also appears to have influenced candidate evaluations in the 2020 Democratic primary (see [Luks and Schaffner 2019](#); [Utych 2021](#)).

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