

**MOBILIZING AND DEMOBILIZING: MODERN SEXISM AND TURNOUT IN THE #MeToo ERA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since the 2016 US presidential campaign and the rise of the #MeToo movement, issues of sexual assault and harassment have risen to prominence. At the same time, these issues have also been understood and evaluated through the lens of partisanship. The US Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh exemplified these dynamics by providing clear partisan and emotion-laden cues to citizens. Given these events' temporal proximity to the midterms, we argue the confirmation hearings not only amplified an ongoing conversation, but also heightened the effect of sexist predispositions on turnout. Using a unique online survey with validated voter turnout in the 2018 midterms, we find that higher levels of modern sexism increased turnout among Republicans while lower levels of modern sexism increased turnout among Democrats. In 2018, sexist predispositions triggered turnout in opposing ways across the aisle.

The 2016 presidential election and the #MeToo movement shifted the national conversation towards issues of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gendered power imbalances in the United States. These issues even reached the highest court in the land. On September 16, 2018, the *Washington Post* reported on Christine Blasey Ford’s allegations of sexual assault by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Amidst rancorous partisan debate and concomitant media coverage, Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, and on October 6, 2018, Kavanaugh was narrowly confirmed by the Senate. The Kavanaugh hearings raised the salience of the already simmering topic of sexual misconduct. A Gallup Poll from late October 2018 asked how important Kavanaugh’s recent confirmation would be for electoral decision-making: 62% of respondents reported the confirmation would be “Extremely important” or “Very important” to their vote (Gallup Organization 2018). The Kavanaugh hearings—and presumably issues related to sexual misconduct—were on the minds of voters as they considered going to the polls that fall.

We investigate the role of these unfolding events in mobilizing turnout in the 2018 midterm elections. The national dialogue surrounding sexism, given the 2016 campaign, the rise of the #MeToo movement, and the temporal proximity of the Kavanaugh hearings, made conditions ripe for sexist predispositions to influence voter turnout. Using a uniquely timed survey appended with validated vote, we provide two contributions. First, we advance the literature by theorizing that the link between sexism and voter turnout will depend critically, and in opposing ways, on partisanship. Second, in testing this theory, we

connect sexist predispositions to political participation: specifically, validated turnout in the 2018 midterms.

The Kavanaugh nomination was marked by rancorous partisan debate surrounding Blasey Ford's allegations of sexual misconduct. The sharp partisan divide among elites provided clear messaging about how rank-and-file partisans should interpret and emotionally react to the allegations. We argue this debate evoked anger among partisans and thus provided a unique case to leverage sexism into turnout.

Rank-and-file Republicans witnessed Republican elites decrying the hearings as a witch hunt, in which an "innocent" man's reputation was being tarnished by a "complaining" woman. Republicans also witnessed angry and emotional testimony from Kavanaugh and "a parade of alpha-male outrage" (Glasser 2018) including Republican Senators Lindsey Graham and John Cornyn. Cornyn even told Kavanaugh, "You're right to be angry" (Ferris and Bresnahan 2018). Kavanaugh's nomination reflected the preferences of the Republican president and the Republican Party; thus, the allegations, hearings, and related media coverage were likely viewed with anger by Republicans scoring high in sexism.

Rank-and-file Democrats were predisposed to oppose any Republican nominee, but the sexual misconduct allegations spotlighted sharper and more emotional fault lines. Democratic elites expressed anger over the treatment of Blasey Ford and Kavanaugh's confirmation. Additionally, after experiencing a full year of #MeToo revelations and two years of Trump's presidency, the Kavanaugh hearings provided yet another example of Republican men mistreating women. Similar to how Trump's 2016 accusation that Hillary Clinton played "the woman's card" activated anger among those low in sexism (Cassese and

Holman 2019), the Kavanaugh hearings and confirmation were likely viewed with anger by Democrats low in sexism.

If the national conversation about sexual misconduct since 2016 instigated anger among Republicans scoring high on sexism and Democrats low on sexism, the 2018 midterms provided an opportunity to act on that emotion. According to appraisal theories of emotions, anger arises from a perception of an unfair state of the world accompanied by a clear attribution of blame (Smith and Ellsworth 1985). This anger appraisal is associated with an action tendency to retaliate or punish whomever is to blame for the unfair condition (Huddy et al. 2007), even when punishment is personally costly (Seip et al. 2014). Furthermore, anger drives political participation (e.g., Valentino et al. 2011). Thus, we hypothesize that in 2018, *more* sexist Republicans were more likely to turn out relative to less sexist Republicans, and *less* sexist Democrats were more likely to turn out relative to more sexist Democrats. That is, sexism's effect on turnout depends upon partisanship: it increases turnout among Republicans and decreases turnout among Democrats.

### **MODERN SEXISM, PARTY, AND TURNOUT**

Our original dataset provides temporal leverage to test these expectations. In April 2018, YouGov collected online survey data from approximately 2,100 respondents.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, this timing preceded the October 2018 Kavanaugh hearings and the November 2018 midterms. Though some politicians faced sexual misconduct allegations between April and November 2018 (North et al 2019), none received the volume of media

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<sup>1</sup> 1,302 respondents were panelists from weeks 9 and week 10 of the 2016 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project. They were weighted to a general population sampling frame. AAPOR Response Rate was 78.45% (RR3). 800 respondents were constituted a fresh cross-section. They were weighted to a general population sampling frame. AAPOR Response Rate was 55.67%. No material differences emerge across the two groups.

or elite attention as Kavanaugh. The weighted sample is intended to be representative of the US general adult population. Respondents answered questions concerning the #MeToo movement and sexist predispositions, and YouGov appended their validated vote data from the 2012-2018 elections.

Three items from the modern sexism scale (Swim et al. 1995) are used to assess levels of sexism. This scale taps a sense of resentment towards women who challenge gender inequality in American society (Swim et al. 1995).<sup>2</sup> The #MeToo movement shone a spotlight on instances of abuses of power and on power dynamics between men and women writ large. The modern sexism scale conceptually resonates with the ongoing political events and #MeToo movement. In addition, the temporal stability of modern sexism (Archer and Kam 2020) makes it particularly advantageous for testing the effect of modern sexism across different elections. An additive index is based upon respondents' strength of agreement/disagreement with the following:<sup>3</sup>

When women demand equality these days, they are actually seeking special favors.  
Women often miss out on good jobs because of discrimination. [reverse coded]  
Women who complain about harassment cause more problems than they solve.

Modern sexism correlates with a range of attitudes such as candidate evaluation and vote choice (e.g., Simas and Bumgardner 2017; McThomas and Tesler 2016; Godbole et al.

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<sup>2</sup> Existing work has also employed hostile and benevolent sexism. Modern sexism is conceptually similar to hostile sexism as both reflect resentment towards women challenging societal male dominance; the two positively correlate (Glick and Fiske 1996). Benevolent sexism reflects positive, though paternalistic and traditionalist, views of women. In the context of #MeToo and the Kavanaugh hearings, hostile sexists would resent women who allege harassment (and challenge male dominance) but benevolent sexists would react negatively to men seen as preying on women's vulnerability (following Barnes et al. 2020). While intriguing, examination of benevolent sexism's effects in the #MeToo era is complicated by Trump himself using benevolent sexism as cover against allegations he himself has faced (e.g., Viebeck 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Modern sexism is coded from low (0) to high (1) on sexism, with  $M=0.36$ ,  $s.d. = 0.27$ ;  $\alpha=0.76$ .

2019). We extend existing work by using validated turnout as our main dependent variable. Studies of sexism's effect on political participation are less prevalent than those studying attitudes, and the few cases we have found (Valentino et al. 2018; Cassese and Holman 2019) rely on experiments using participatory intentions rather than actual, validated participation. We focus on validated turnout, a particularly difficult case given its habitual and costly nature (e.g., Gerber et al. 2003).

We first examine the mean levels of modern sexism among those who turned out and those who stayed home in the 2018 midterms. As Table 1 shows, voters and nonvoters' average levels of modern sexism are statistically indistinguishable. However, within each party, levels of sexism across those who did and did not vote in 2018 *are* statistically different. Democratic voters scored significantly *lower* on modern sexism compared with Democratic nonvoters ( $p < 0.001$ ), and Republican voters scored significantly *higher* on modern sexism compared with Republican nonvoters ( $p < 0.012$ ). These patterns provide initial proof of concept for the hypothesis.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We next estimate a conditional change model with validated 2018 turnout as the dependent variable. The key covariates are modern sexism, party identification, and their interaction; validated turnout in 2014 (the immediately preceding midterms), demographics (gender, race, ethnicity, education, income, and age), and ideological

identification are included as controls.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, all survey items were measured in April 2018, seven months preceding the midterms, which protects our estimates against concerns about reverse causality.

The results in column 1 of Table 2 strongly support our expectations: the coefficient on the interaction term between modern sexism and partisanship is highly significant and sizable, as is the coefficient on modern sexism. For ease of interpretation, Figure 1 depicts the predicted probability of turning out among Republicans and Democrats across levels of modern sexism. Histograms depict the in-sample distributions of modern sexism across parties. Democrats with lower levels of modern sexism were more likely to turn out than Democrats with higher levels of modern sexism, and the former outnumber the latter. Republicans with higher levels of modern sexism were more likely to turn out than Republicans with lower levels of modern sexism, and the former outnumber the latter. In short, the mobilizing tendencies of modern sexism align with the underlying distributions across parties.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Though our instrumentation is limited, we can test for whether modern sexism is merely proxying other considerations by adding an interaction between ideology and

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<sup>4</sup> Partisan identification is measured using a 7-point scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” (0) to “Strong Republican” (1). Previous turnout is a dummy indicating validated vote in the respective election. Ideology is measured on a 5-point scale from “Very liberal” (0) to “Very conservative” (1). *Female*, *Black*, and *Latino* are dummy indicator variables. Education is measured on a 5-point scale from “less than high school” (0) to “post-BA” (1). Income is split into four quartiles; the highest category is the suppressed baseline. Income refused is a dummy for those who refused to report income. Age is captured by dummy variables, with those 18-30 as the baseline.

partisanship. When we do so, the results for modern sexism and its interaction with party identification are substantively and statistically unchanged, assuaging concerns that modern sexism is proxying for a generalized conservative outlook.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE 2018 MIDTERMS IN CONTEXT**

We have focused our attention on the 2018 midterms, as that election clearly provided distinct paths for mapping sexism to turnout across partisans. What about the 2016 general election? Existing work suggests Trump's sexist rhetoric, allegations of his past sexual misconduct, and Clinton's gender activated sexism in 2016 vote choice unlike before (e.g., Schaffner et al. 2018; Cassese and Barnes 2019). We apply the same model to validated vote in 2016, controlling for 2012 turnout (the immediately preceding presidential election) and the same covariates used in predicting 2018 turnout.<sup>6</sup> In column 2 of Table 2, we again see a significant interaction between modern sexism and partisanship, corresponding with the expectation that modern sexism has differential implications for turnout across partisans. However, these results produce a slightly different pattern: while modern sexism significantly mobilizes Republicans in 2016, it has a negative but insignificant effect among (strong) Democrats in 2016.<sup>7</sup> The second panel of Figure 1 illustrates these patterns. The activation of modern sexism in the 2016 campaign

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<sup>5</sup> Full results with predicted probability graphs appear in the online appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Although modern sexism is measured in 2018, test-retest Wiley-corrected correlations are extremely high from 2016 to 2018 (>0.9), and aggregate, average levels of modern sexism are extraordinarily stable across the last two decades (Archer and Kam 2020). The 2016 analyses omit the 25 respondents too young to vote in 2012; estimates for 2018 are unchanged when we re-run the model without this group.

<sup>7</sup> The effect of modern sexism among Strong Democrats is larger in 2018 than 2016 at  $p \sim 0.105$  (one-tailed).

disproportionately advantaged Trump in mobilizing voter turnout, consistent with existing literature (e.g., Cassese and Barnes 2019; Valentino et al. 2018).

Having established that modern sexism was partly “baked into” turnout in 2016, we reconsider the robustness of the results for 2018. These results appear in models [3] and [4] in Table 2, where we substitute 2016 turnout for 2014 turnout [3] and where we include turnout in both elections [4]. Both models reinforce the previous findings: modern sexism and party identification significantly interact, and modern sexism on its own is significant. Taken together, these analyses consistently find that increases in modern sexism mobilize turnout among Republicans and decreases in modern sexism mobilize turnout among Democrats.

The 2014 election provides a placebo test to assess whether this pattern is epiphenomenal. This election was dominated by the economy, health care and foreign policy—not issues related to gender or sexual misconduct. When we model validated turnout in 2014, we find no evidence that modern sexism had any role in affecting turnout across parties. The predicted probabilities for 2014 in Figure 1 showcase these flat lines.

## CONCLUSIONS

Midterm elections have historically been less salient affairs, but 2018 represented an anomaly with the highest midterm turnout rate in over 50 years (Domonoske 2018). Exit polls pointed to longstanding concerns such as health care, immigration and the economy as key ingredients of people’s votes. However, our evidence suggests the #MeToo movement and Kavanaugh hearings, which occurred in close temporal proximity to the midterms, not only amplified an ongoing conversation, but also mobilized political engagement among voters of both parties. Our theory and analyses highlight the critical

importance of considering the conditional nature of sexism’s effect on turnout. Even if sexism does not, in the aggregate, change average levels of turnout, sexism can mobilize and demobilize potential voters in countervailing ways.<sup>8</sup>

Although modern sexism is a stable (Archer and Kam 2020) system-justifying belief (Jost and Kay 2005), its connections to politics will depend upon the degree to which elites frame and potential voters understand elections through this lens (Cassese and Holman 2019). Modern sexism is now baked into the fault lines of the major two-party system. Our theory will likely apply when political debates around sexual misconduct align with the parties’ fault lines and anger is the predominant emotion. These would be cases in which a Republican is accused of sexual misconduct and anger arises on both sides.

Our theory might not apply when these conditions—which are often connected—are not met. For instance, the Democratic rank-and-file might have felt angry about the behavior of Democratic elites accused of sexual misconduct such as John Conyers and Al Franken. However, Democratic Party leaders acted quickly to pressure these men out of office, likely defusing any anger.

In contrast, 2020 Democratic candidate Joe Biden has faced sexual assault allegations from former staffer, Tara Reade. Though Democratic elites have stated that Reade should be heard, many have also stood by Biden in questioning her claims. Thus, instead of anger, Democratic voters low on sexism may feel uncertainty, ambivalence, and

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<sup>8</sup> Further research regarding how race and ethnicity might interplay in this relationship is certainly warranted, given the important complexities at the interface of power, sexism, and race/ethnicity in American society. The women’s movement and feminism have historically represented the concerns of “white, middle-class women” (Simien and Clawson 2004, p. 795). The perspectives of people of color, especially those who are Democrats, demand extended theorizing and analyses that are outside the bounds of the current research note.

perhaps disgust – reactions likely to *de*-mobilize rather than mobilize. While Republican elites might use the Reade accusations to attack Democrats, they would also need to confront the allegations against Trump, who himself stated that Biden should “just go out and fight it” (Navarro et al. 2020). Thus, Republicans scoring high on sexism are unlikely to feel angered by the allegations against Biden; instead they might experience *schadenfreude*, disgust at Democrats’ perceived hypocrisy, or ambivalence given the allegations against Trump - emotions that wouldn’t necessarily mobilize turnout.

The long-term effects of the #MeToo movement and Kavanaugh hearings are difficult to anticipate. The conditions that amplify the conditional effect of sexism on turnout might quickly recede without long-lasting change: many noted the parallels between the Thomas-Hill hearings of 1992 and the Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford hearings three decades later. The sound and fury of the #MeToo movement and Kavanaugh hearings may be eclipsed by the novel coronavirus pandemic, historic economic disrepair, and massive protests against racial inequality and police brutality. On the other hand, the #MeToo movement and Kavanaugh hearings have been credited with bringing sexual misconduct to the forefront of national conversations, ushering in policy change, and altering the gender composition of the House (e.g., Zanona 2018). Thus, these new voices in power may continue to elevate discourse around issues of sexual misconduct and gender inequities, in conjunction with other movements and issues, underscoring the legacy of the electoral implications of these events as well as their political and policy consequences.

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Table 1. Mean Levels of Modern Sexism by Turnout in 2018

|                              | Abstained 2018   | Turned Out 2018  | Differences by turnout, <i>p</i> value |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|--|
| All Respondents<br>(N=2,102) | 0.373<br>(0.011) | 0.362<br>(0.010) | ~0.45                                  |
| Democrats only<br>(N=965)    | 0.266<br>(0.017) | 0.175<br>(0.009) | <0.001                                 |
| Pure Independents<br>(N=373) | 0.400<br>(0.024) | 0.400<br>(0.026) | ~0.99                                  |
| Republicans only<br>(N=764)  | 0.498<br>(0.019) | 0.553<br>(0.011) | <0.012                                 |

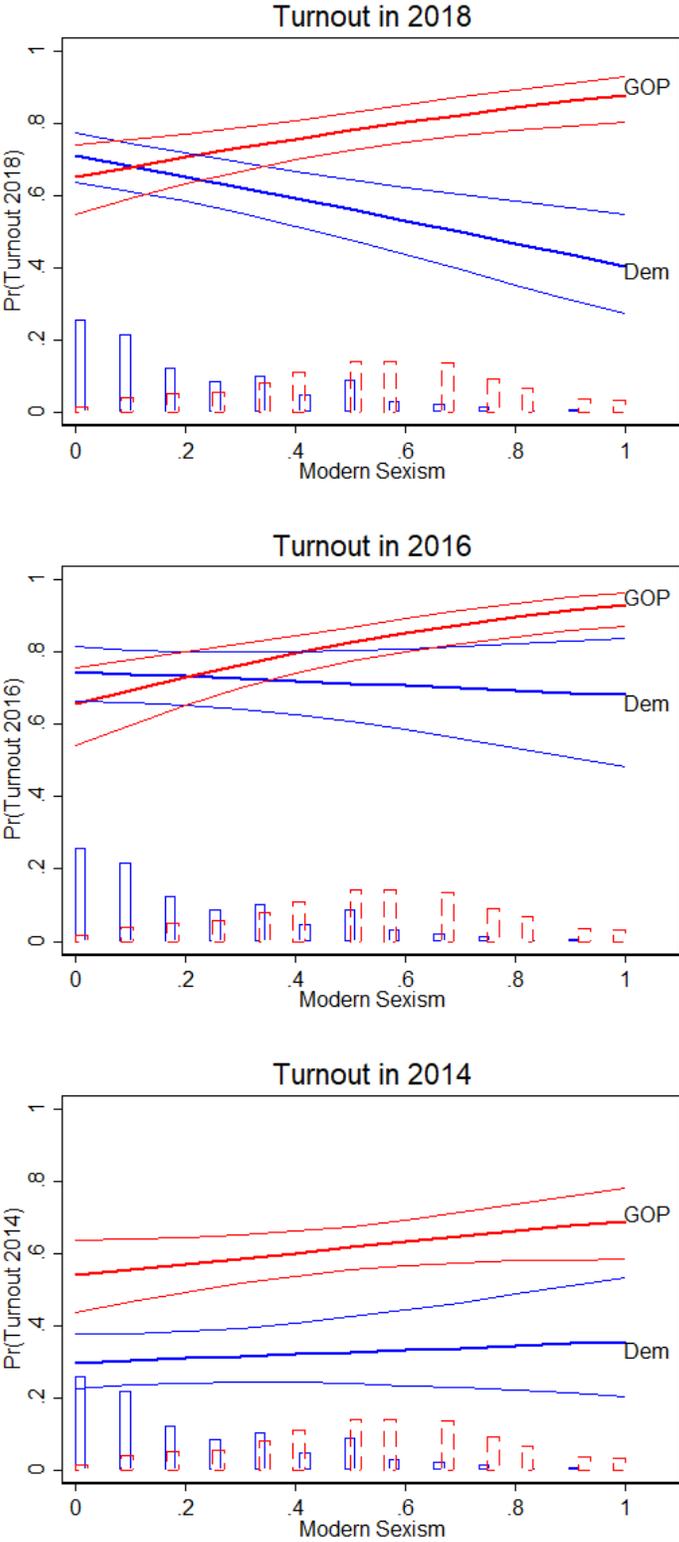
Table entry is the mean with standard error in parentheses. Survey weights applied. Leaners are classified as partisans.

Table 2. Validated Turnout as a Function of Modern Sexism and Party Identification

|                             | <b>Turnout<br/>2018<br/>[1]</b> | <b>Turnout<br/>2016<br/>[2]</b> | <b>Turnout<br/>2018<br/>[3]</b> | <b>Turnout<br/>2018<br/>[4]</b> | <b>Turnout<br/>2014<br/>[5]</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Modern Sexism x<br>Party ID | 1.57*<br>0.49                   | 1.26*<br>0.62                   | 1.16*<br>0.50                   | 1.03†<br>0.53                   | 0.24<br>0.53                    |
| Modern Sexism               | -0.79*<br>0.29                  | -0.19<br>0.39                   | -0.69*<br>0.33                  | -0.58†<br>0.33                  | 0.16<br>0.36                    |
| Party ID                    | -0.54*<br>0.22                  | -0.51†<br>0.30                  | -0.34<br>0.23                   | -0.29<br>0.24                   | 0.05<br>0.29                    |
| Turnout 2014                | 1.86*<br>0.09                   |                                 |                                 | 1.05*<br>0.12                   |                                 |
| Turnout 2012                |                                 | 2.50*<br>0.13                   |                                 |                                 | 2.45*<br>0.12                   |
| Turnout 2016                |                                 |                                 | 2.06*<br>0.10                   | 1.47*<br>0.12                   |                                 |
| N                           | 1946                            | 1921                            | 1963                            | 1946                            | 1921                            |

Table entry is the probit regression coefficient with standard errors below. Survey weights applied. All models also control for ideology, gender, race, ethnicity, education, income, and age. Full results appear in online appendix. † $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

Figure 1. Modern Sexism, Party Identification, and Turnout



Predicted probabilities with 83.5% confidence intervals. Weighted histograms by party  
below.