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How Constituents React to Allegations of Sexual Misconduct in the “Me Too” Era

Samantha Frazier and Connor Kreutz

Introduction

In the wake of the #MeToo movement resulting from the *New York Times*' explosive exposé detailing decades of sexual assault allegations against media mogul Harvey Weinstein, allegations of sexual misconduct have increased in frequency and occupied the national media (Kantor and Tohey 2017). These allegations do not discriminate. From comedians to reporters, judges to presidents, powerful men and women in all walks of life have been forced to reckon with the reality that their past indiscretions could come back to haunt them at any moment.

However, the impact of such allegations is particularly unclear within politics. Some politicians choose to resign in the face of accusations, others are voted out by their constituents, yet some emerge seemingly unscathed. We intend to explore factors that determine how voters respond to allegations of sexual misconduct as we attempt to answer the research question, “How are politicians who are accused of sexual misconduct evaluated by their constituents?”

To answer this question, we undertook a 2x2x3 survey experiment in which we randomly assigned participants to read the profiles of one of twelve hypothetical candidates with differing party affiliations, genders, and the presence or absence of sexual misconduct allegations. We created two groups of candidates—candidates with allegations made against them and candidates with no allegations, effectively a treatment and control group. Within those two groups, both male and female candidates were presented as Republican, Democrat, or with no mention of party affiliation. We then asked survey participants a series of questions regarding their support for the candidate as well as candidate ability and quality. After gathering responses and compiling a dataset pertaining to voter evaluation

of candidates accused of sexual misconduct, we began to understand what effect such allegations have on candidate perception and in what circumstances they make a difference in how voters evaluate candidates.

A Case for Expanded Research on Sexual Misconduct

The #MeToo movement is less than a year old, and nearly every day, new men and women come forward sharing their stories of harassment and abuse. Accordingly, limited research exists within the social sciences exploring how allegations of sexual misconduct affect voters' perception of politicians. Assessment of one such case, Herman Cain's failed 2012 presidential campaign, suggests that general responses to allegations of sexual misconduct are negative but vary between demographic groups (Peterson and Vonnahme 2014). Another study showed that voters are much more forgiving of candidates who deny such allegations altogether, preferring candidates that deny entirely over those that apologize (Sigal et al. 1988). It also seems that the type of scandal makes a difference in voter evaluations. Doherty et al. (2011) found that voters are more forgiving of moral scandals than financial scandals so long as the moral scandal does not involve some sort of abuse of power. However, Carlson et al. (2000) found that both forms of scandals—financial and moral—result in lower appraisals of candidate character in general, indicating that although voters might be more forgiving of one type of scandal over another, candidates' images are still negatively affected by wrongdoing. A different study found that the negative effect of scandal varies over time. Exposure to scandalous information had an immediate negative effect on candidate evaluations, but the strength and magnitude of the effect of scandal diminished over time, particularly amongst those who were already prone to support the candidate in question (Vonnahme 2014).

Partisan considerations may also influence how media covers scandals and how voters evaluate accused politicians. Snyder and Puglisi (2011) found that partisan-leaning news sources tend to cover scandals pertaining to the opposing party more frequently than scandals within their own party. Additionally, voters seem to be willing to make exceptions and excuses for embattled candidates that share their ideological values (i.e., members of their party) but are unwilling to make similar exemptions for candidates of opposing party ideologies (Sigel 1964). This finding is echoed by Fischle (2000) in his study of citizen reactions to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal through the lens of motivated reasoning. The theory of motivated reasoning holds that people are willing to discount or dismiss troubling information that contradicts their previously held beliefs or group identity in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. Fischle found that motivated reasoning played a significant role in evaluations of the Clinton post-Lewinsky scandal, and the influence of things such as the credibility of an allegation on support for Clinton were conditional upon previous support of the president. This suggests that voter partisanship or group identity may play a significant role in the way a voter perceives a candidate who has been accused of sexual misconduct.

Stewart et al. (2013) found that female politicians are evaluated differently than male politicians in the face of scandal. They discovered that male survey respondents were more likely to critically evaluate a female governor than a female respondent would. This gender-based evaluation method has the potential to carry over into evaluations of sexual misconduct allegations, an area relatively devoid of academic research at this time. We feel that this is an area in which our research stands to make a contribution. Are voters more likely to stand by a candidate of their same gender? Are they more likely to stand by a candidate of their same party? Our research examines both questions and makes a case for the latter.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Hypothesis #1: Candidates accused of sexual misconduct will garner less support than candidates not accused of sexual misconduct.

Common sense would suggest that publicized allegations of sexual misconduct against candidates would not make a candidate more popular, and would, in fact, likely have the opposite effect. Assuming voters do not look upon sexual abuse favorably, that they can translate that unfavorable view of misconduct to an unfavorable view of the candidate accused of the misconduct, and that electoral support for a candidate is reduced by unfavorable perceptions of said candidate, we hypothesize that candidates accused of sexual misconduct will receive less support than candidates who have not been accused of sexual misconduct. Important to note is the aggregate nature of this hypothesis—that when measured across all genders and political affiliations, raw support for a candidate is lower when that candidate is accused of misconduct.

Hypothesis #2: Voters are likely to evaluate co-partisans accused of sexual misconduct more favorably than members of the opposite party.

Although allegations of sexual misconduct are likely to negatively impact a voter's perception of any given candidate, we believe the extent to which these allegations impact candidate perception depends on the political affiliation of the voter. Many Trump supporters are willing to ignore the array of sexual misconduct allegations leveled against Donald Trump, just as many Democrats were willing to ignore allegations leveled against Bill Clinton. We predict that shared partisanship will diminish the impact of a credible allegation of sexual misconduct on candidate perception. Although a negative effect is likely to stem from all allegations, we anticipate that the degradation in candidate perception will be smaller when the candidates' party affiliations are included in the candidate descriptions. Additionally, we expect that evaluations of candidates with no party label specified will be similar between Republican and Democrat respondents.

Hypothesis #3: Voters are likely to evaluate candidates of the same gender more favorably than members of the opposite gender.

Furthermore, we believe that shared gender will also influence the effect of the allegation on candidate perception—meaning, women are more likely to support female candidates through scandals, and men are more likely to support male candidates. We also believe the reverse of this to be true—that men will evaluate female candidates accused of sexual misconduct more harshly than they evaluate male candidates, and vice versa. However, given the lack of women in national political positions, substantive examples of female politicians reckoning with allegations of sexual misconduct are few and far between. Additionally, there are far fewer women accused of sexual misconduct than there are men. Still, we believe that women will be more likely to support other women through scandal, whether the candidate is hypothetical or not.

Research Design

In order to explore the effect that allegations of sexual misconduct against a candidate have on voter perception of a candidate, we conducted a survey experiment in October 2018 through Amazon Mechanical Turk to test a sample of likely U.S. voters. As part of the larger Political Science 410, 2018 survey at Brigham Young University, 1,000 subjects were randomly assigned to read the profile of one of twelve different candidates with differing party affiliations, genders, and associated allegations of sexual misconduct. All other aspects of the biographic information are held constant. The following is an example of one of the vignettes that survey takers were asked to respond to:

Example Profile

Mr./Mrs. Johnson is a Democrat/Republican running for United States Senate. He/she is an avid hiker and the former CEO of a successful regional company. Johnson is a dedicated family man/woman, and drives his/her son’s school carpool on a weekly basis. Johnson’s career thus far has been relatively scandal-free, although recently an allegation of sexual misconduct was leveled against him by his former employee. As the election approaches, Mr. Johnson plans to remain focused on the issues and will continue to refine his/her highly praised proposed education initiative in the coming weeks.

Subjects were then asked to rank the candidate on multiple criteria of likability including competence, trustworthiness, and overall support for the candidate. Accompanying questions inquiring about the subject’s gender, education, income, party affiliation, age, and religious affiliation were also posed. Candidate profiles were enhanced biographies of the following:

Table 1.

	Democrat	Republican	Not Specific
Male	Candidate 1 —Senate Candidate —Male —Democrat —Allegation	Candidate 2 —Senate Candidate —Male —Republican —Allegation	Candidate 3 —Senate Candidate —Male —Not specified —Allegation
	Candidate 4 —Senate Candidate —Male —Democrat —No allegation	Candidate 5 —Senate Candidate —Male —Republican —No allegation	Candidate 6 —Senate Candidate —Male —Not specified —No allegation
Female	Candidate 7 —Senate Candidate —Female —Democrat —Allegation	Candidate 8 —Senate Candidate —Female —Republican —Allegation	Candidate 9 —Senate Candidate —Female —Not specified —Allegation
	Candidate 10 —Senate Candidate —Female —Democrat —No allegation	Candidate 11 —Senate Candidate —Female —Republican —No allegation	Candidate 12 —Senate Candidate —Female —Not specified —No allegation

Questions measuring the approval/likeability of a candidate were as follows: Please indicate how strongly you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement

1. This candidate is competent.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat disagree
- f. Disagree
- g. Strongly disagree

2. This candidate is trustworthy.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat disagree
- f. Disagree
- g. Strongly disagree

3. I would support this candidate.

- a. Strongly agree

- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Neither agree nor disagree
- e. Somewhat disagree
- f. Disagree
- g. Strongly disagree

The survey yielded a data set of 1,002 observations of individuals ages eighteen to seventy-two. This data, collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk, includes only adults. These adults were not necessarily likely voters or even people eligible to vote. The data also only captures the opinions of individuals in October 2018.

Analysis and Findings

Balance Tests

Prior to our data analysis, we conducted a series of randomization checks in order to ensure that the differences yielded from our research design come from comparable groups. We were most concerned with ensuring that balance had been achieved between the treatment and control conditions within our various treatments. We found balance in all but one of our twelve treatment groups. Since all analysis in this paper was conducted between groups of treatment groups and not between individual groups, the imbalance in one single groups does not skew our findings.

Table 2.

Balance Tests: Four Aggregate Treatment Groups					
	Republican	Non-Republican	Democrat	Non-Democrat	p-value (diff. of means)
1. Republican Candidate			45.5%	43.4%	0.525
2. Republican Candidate	35.7%	33.4%			0.404
3. Democratic Candidate			42.8%	44.7%	0.553
4. Democratic Candidate	34.9%	33.4%			0.640

Testing Hypotheses

After all data was collected and cleaned, and balance in the data was confirmed, difference of means testing yielded initial insights into the effect that sexual misconduct allegations against a politician have on her or his support. By comparing the means of the competency, trustworthiness, and overall support scores for candidates with sexual misconduct allegations raised against them and those without, we begin to understand what effect said allegations have on the perception of the candidate.

Aggregate Support

Through difference of means testing, we found that potential voters, on average, reported significantly less support for candidates accused of sexual misconduct than

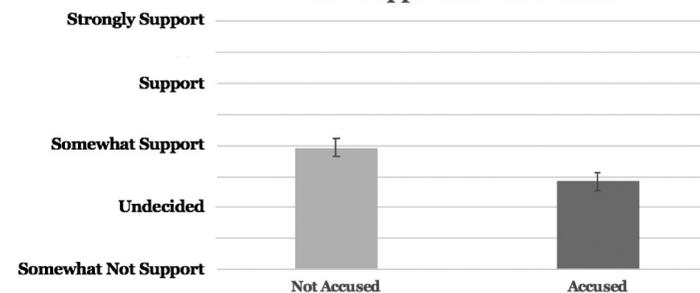
those who had not been. Table 3 shows voters who were asked to rate their support of a generic senate candidate who had not been accused of sexual misconduct reported, on average, a support score of 4.87 (out of 7), whereas the voters asked about the accused reported, on average, a score of 4.42. One would imagine that the average voter does not look kindly upon sexual misconduct; thus, these results are not necessarily surprising. However, while the aggregate level of support across candidates of different genders and political affiliations came out as expected, the breakdown by party proved to be more interesting.

Table 3.

Test	Accused Candidate Mean Support	Non-Accused Mean Support	Difference in Mean	P-value
Aggregate Support	4.43	4.97	0.54	0.0000
Republican Voters' Support for Republicans	5.31	5.53	0.22	0.3497
Democratic Voters' Support for Democrats	4.51	5.58	1.07	0.0000
Female Voters' Support for Female Candidates	4.42	4.84	0.64	0.0680
Male Voters' Support for Male Candidates	4.27	4.94	0.67	0.0000

Note: Significant (p<0.05) differences in support exist between accused and non-accused Democratic candidates adjudicated by Democrats, and male candidates adjudicated by men.

Figure 1.
Mean Support for Candidates



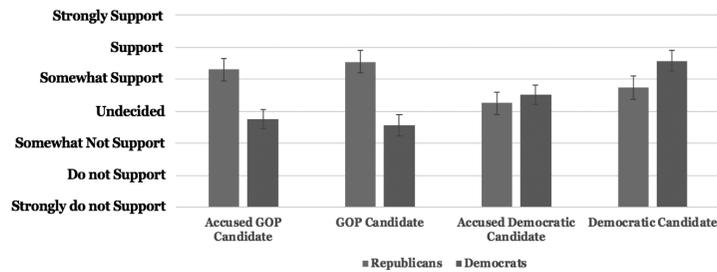
Partisan Support

We conducted additional difference of means tests, this time examining in-group and out-group support by party. Results found in Table 2 indicate that Republicans stick with accused candidates from their party, while Democrats are not afraid to withdraw support. For example, Republicans rated mean support for a non-accused Republican at 5.53 on the 7-point scale, while Republican support for a comparable

accused Republican fell only to 5.31—a statistically insignificant difference of only 0.22 points. Mean Democratic support of accused Democrats fell to 4.51 from 5.58—a statistically significant difference of 1.07 points.

In all cases, voters report greater support for the candidate from their own party, even when the difference is slight. When support for accused political candidates is broken down between Republican and Democratic candidates, we see that Republicans, on average, report much higher support for candidates from their party, but the difference in support between Republican and Democrat respondents is minimal when the candidate is a Democrat.

Figure 2.
Partisan Support for Candidates



Regression Analysis on Partisan Support

While we feel fairly confident about the findings from our hypothesis testing regarding in-group and out-group party support, we thought it prudent to conduct a series of regression analyses in order to control for variables such as age, gender, and education level. By doing so, we measured how each of these individual characteristics weigh into the subject’s ultimate view of the candidate and could be more certain that the differences we observed were truly significant differences after taking these other variables into account.

The first model in Table 4 yields results very similar to our expectations. After controlling for education, income, age, and the gender of the candidate, Column 1 demonstrates that allegations of sexual misconduct result in a significant drop of 1.068 points for Democratic support of Democratic candidates. This means Democrats punish their co-partisans with lower electoral support when said candidates are accused of misconduct. Interestingly, only the treatment variable is significant in this regression, suggesting that perhaps only accusations and the party of the candidate are significant indicators of support.

The same cannot be said of Republicans viewing Republican candidates, as shown in Column 2. We see only a slight (0.0789) drop in support for an accused Republican candidate among Republican respondents, and this drop is not significant. This indicates that Republicans may be more willing to put politics before personal conduct and look the other way when candidates in their party are accused of sexual misconduct of any sort.

Table 4.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Dem Voter	GOP Voter	Dem Voter	GOP Voter	Dem Voter	GOP Voter
	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Dem Cand.	GOP Cand.	Dem Cand.	GOP Cand.	Dem Cand.	GOP Cand.
Dependent Var.	Support	Support	Trustworthy	Trustworthy	Competent	Competent
Accused	-1.068*** (0.199)	-0.0789 (0.235)	-0.947*** (0.197)	-0.0304 (0.217)	-0.362** (0.164)	0.0778 (0.152)
	-0.317	-0.256	-0.180	-0.295	-0.237	-0.248
Male Candidate	(0.200)	(0.233)	(0.198)	(0.216)	(0.165)	(0.151)
Female	-0.0466 (0.203)	-0.636** (0.249)	-0.158 (0.200)	-0.394* (0.231)	-0.145 (0.167)	(0.161) -0.0237
Education	-0.0619 (0.125)	0.212 (0.141)	0.00317 (0.123)	0.0830 (0.131)	0.0295 (0.103)	-0.0237 (0.0915)
Age	0.00499 (0.00848)	-0.0111 (0.0106)	-0.00533 (0.00838)	-0.0102 (0.00983)	-0.00559 (0.00699)	0.0103 (0.00687)
Constant	5.890*** (0.500)	5.247*** (0.633)	5.858*** (0.494)	5.743*** (0.586)	6.192*** (0.413)	6.019*** (0.410)
N =	141	115	141	115	141	115
R-squared	0.194	0.120	0.158	0.069	0.062	0.049

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent Variable: Support for Candidate. Only in the case of the Democratic voter and Democratic candidate does accusation have a significant (p<0.05) negative effect on voters’ support for the candidate. We would also expect a significant decrease in support for the accused GOP candidate adjudicated by a Democratic voter, but the support for the regular candidate is also low. It is likely that support here simply bottoms out.

This difference holds true across all outcome variables included in our survey. Column 3 shows that allegations of sexual misconduct result in a 0.947 drop in appraisals of Democratic candidate trustworthiness among Democratic respondents, the effects of which were statistically significant at the 99 percent level. A statistically significant drop of 0.362 also occurred in evaluations of Democratic candidate competence among Democratic respondents (Column 5), although the drop was far more modest than those seen in support and trustworthiness. However, among Republicans adjudicating Republicans on all measures, there was no statistically significant drop, again indicating that Republicans in today’s political environment are far more willing to look the other way when it is one of their own accused of sexual misconduct, while Democrats are unwilling to ignore such allegations.

Gendered Support

While we suspected that some sort of gender bias was present that would cause voters to evaluate candidates of the same gender more favorably than members of the opposite gender, no such effect seems to exist (see Table 3). Difference of means

tests examining the effects of gender showed there were no significance differences in the support voters offered for accused candidates of the same gender versus candidates of the opposite gender. Regression analysis controlling for party, age, education, and income yielded similarly insignificant results. These findings failed to confirm our hypothesis that voters punish accused candidates of the opposite gender to a greater degree than those of the same gender. At the end of the day, party identification proved far more important than gender in voter evaluations.

Conclusion

One clear limitation of our project is the medium through which we conducted our survey, Amazon Mechanical Turk. The population that chooses to use this web site is typically not representative of the general population as a whole. Survey-takers tend to be more liberal and younger than the population of the United States. There is also concern with the external validity of the results yielded from a survey experiment of this nature. We cannot ensure that these results are replicable in the outside world, nor can we determine the intent and rationale of the respondents taking the survey.

Additionally, although we attempted to create realistic hypothetical candidate profiles to present to survey takers, these are not real candidates, and certain background context on the individuals will be missing. In an actual election, most voters would have more than a simple vignette by which to judge candidates, and traits such as likability, attractiveness, and charisma would likely impact voter evaluations of candidates accused of sexual misconduct. In this case, survey-takers have no real connection to these hypothetical candidates and, therefore, lack the background context that often influences the manner in which voters grapple with allegations of sexual misconduct leveled against beloved politicians in the real world. Additionally, we don't test the role that evidence may play in allegations against candidates. Allegations accompanied by evidence may have more bearing on voters' view of accused candidates and would be important to investigate.

Another notable limitation to the validity of our research is the lack of an opponent candidate for purposes of comparison. An important factor in the support of any political candidate's approval is the favorability of their opponent. Often, individuals vote for a candidate simply because they like that candidate just slightly more than the other. Without an opposing candidate, it is difficult to understand how voters truly feel about a politician. Elections do not take place in a single-candidate vacuum but, unfortunately, this research does.

However, despite these limitations, our experiment offers unique insight into the array of considerations undertaken by voters rendering the topic of sexual misconduct in the political realm so complicated. Given the lack of quantitative research exploring the impact of sexual misconduct and candidate perception, we believe that our research will fill an important gap in the post #MeToo scholarly landscape. While we cannot hope to give a definitive answer on why political actors such as Donald

Trump emerge unscathed from a sea of allegations while others such as Senator Al Franken are forced to resign, we hope we will uncover some of the factors at play as voters evaluate the influx of allegations regarding powerful men and women and how these evaluations impact the political arena as we know it.

Research on public perception of political candidates accused of sexual misconduct is still in its infancy. As more individuals come forward with accusations against public figures, the researchability of voters' response to these types of allegations will improve. At this point, we agree the best method for understanding these phenomena is through survey experiments. Findings from these methods have shown a significant decrease in support for candidates accused of sexual misconduct. Our findings also indicate Republicans do not withdraw support from accused Republican candidates but do withdraw support for accused Democrats, illuminating new areas for research, specifically as to why Republicans are lenient toward co-partisans and Democrats are not. We hope these findings will prompt further research in the aforementioned areas as the public becomes more sensitive to allegations of sexual misconduct, and respond accordingly, regardless of party or gender.

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Not Just Hot Air: How Rhetoric Changes Public Opinion on Windmills

Alena Smith

Introduction

Environmental concerns are nothing new in U.S. politics. More than half of U.S. citizens rank the environment as a top policy issue (Anderson 2017), and support for green energy has been on the rise (Kennedy 2017). One popular source of such energy comes from windmills. Despite the support for eco-friendly energy, windmills produce only 6.2 percent of the U.S.'s electricity today (Electricity Markets and Policy Group 2018). Many suggest that the disparity between green energy support and the low number of windmills in the U.S. is due to Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) opposition (Smith and Klick 2008). While individuals may tout the benefits of green energy, when faced with constructing an industrial-sized windmill within a few miles of their home they may rethink their position. Concerns including increased energy costs, decreased home values, constant noise, and landscape aesthetic, may dissuade individuals from supporting windmill construction in their city. In 2017, residents living in Lincoln County, South Dakota, successfully used these concerns to convince their legislators to block the creation of a proposed wind farm (McFetridge 2018). If a legislators' primary concern is reelection (Mayhew 1974) and legislators predict strong pushback from their constituents, they are unlikely to suggest or support the construction of local windmills.

While local government cannot be expected to change windmill designs to mitigate these concerns, they can emphasize windmill benefits. Using such framings, legislators can shape public opinion to increase community support for windmills. Argument framing has been widely studied and found to be effective, as individuals' perception of an issue can often have a greater impact than the issue itself (Cohen 1995). By studying which pro-windmill arguments are most effective, this study will help local