Article

Let's Talk About Sexism: The Differential Effects of Gender Discrimination on Liberal and Conservative Women's Political Engagement

American Politics Research
2020, Vol. 48(6) 779–791

DOI: 10.1177/1532673X20939503
journals.sagepub.com/home/apr
SAGE

Alexa Bankert[1]

Abstract

As the 2016 election season and the *Me Too* movement have powerfully demonstrated, sexism is a pervasive force not just in American politics but also, more generally, in women's everyday lives. While political scientists have focused on the impact of sexism on voters' evaluations of female candidates and their electoral chances, we know little about the effect of *personally* experienced sexism on American women's political engagement. This manuscript tries to address this gap. Using data from the 2016 ANES Pilot Study as well as a survey experiment, I demonstrate that women who have experienced gender discrimination report higher levels of political participation and a higher chance of voting in the general election. However, among conservative women, personal experience with sexism is not associated with this participatory impetus. These findings have implications for the equal representation of women from both ends of the ideological spectrum.

Keywords

sexism, women, ideology, political engagement

> "Sexual harassment on the job is not a problem for virtuous women."
>
> (Phyllis Schlafly, American conservative activist)

Despite undeniable improvements in women's status and gender equality in the U.S. and beyond, sexism remains a pervasive and widespread problem in American society. A recent survey on women's rights conducted among a nationally representative sample of American women reaffirms this notion: A majority reported experiences with some form of sexism in their lives, ranging from hearing sexist language (70%) to being touched inappropriately without their consent (54%). It is thus not surprising that only about a third (37%) of all respondents believed that it was a good time to be a woman in America.[1]

Sexism and its impact on women's political participation and representation has received much attention in political science, demonstrating that women are less politically interested and informed than men (Burns et al., 2001; Verba et al., 1997) as well as disadvantaged when running for office (Bauer, 2015; Dolan, 1998; Krupnikov et al., 2016; Schneider & Bos, 2014; Schneider et al., 2016). Despite the importance of this prior work, political scientists have paid less attention to the most common way that women learn about and are affected by sexism, namely through personal experiences in their daily lives. The *Me Too* movement has shown that these experiences affect women of all sociodemographic and professional backgrounds, ranging from actresses to restaurant workers.

Although these experiences vary in their forms and severity, they all originate in and reinforce women's subordination (Fitzgerald, 1993)—an experience that is likely to have a spillover effect on women's political behavior especially since politics is still considered a predominantly male domain (Lawless & Fox, 2013). Despite the face validity of this argument, there is little prior research investigating the relationship between discrimination and political engagement among women. In this manuscript, I aim to address this gap by examining the role of personally experienced sexism in shaping women's political engagement.

At the same time, women are not a homogenous group and gender has been shown to be a less influential identity by itself in American politics but more powerful when paired with partisanship and ideology (Barnes & Cassese, 2016; Erzeel & Caluwaerts, 2015; Huddy, 2013; Huddy et al., 2008). This notion is echoed by recent survey data demonstrating that the partisan gap in perceptions of gender inequality and sexual harassment greatly exceeds the gender gap.[2] It is thus plausible that political identities condition how women perceive and respond to personal experiences of sexism.

[1]University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Alexa Bankert, University of Georgia, 180 Baldwin Hall, Athens, GA 30602, USA.
Email: ALEXA.BANKERT@uga.edu

I test this idea by examining the role of ideology in moderating the impact of gender discrimination[3] on women's political participation. Using data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) Pilot Study, I first show that experiences with sexism generally appear to increase women's political participation. This pattern, however, varies substantially based on women's ideology: While gender discrimination tends to increase liberal women's political participation, its effects diminish among conservative women. I corroborate these results with data from a survey experiment that establishes a causal link between discrimination and political engagement among liberal and conservative women. Last, I demonstrate that the *belief* in the existence of sexism does not exert the same effect on women's political participation as the personal *experience* with it.

Overall, the analyses presented in this paper demonstrate that—while there is no doubt that sexism is a persistent problem in American society that hurts all women (and men)—its effects are strongly conditioned by women's ideology. I conclude the paper with discussing the broader implications of this research for gender equality both within and between political parties and drawing scholars' attention to a larger research agenda that examines the relationship between discrimination (of any type) and political engagement.

Sexism and Political Participation

Prior research has focused on female candidates and elected officials as the target of sexism either through gendered media coverage or the use of gender stereotypes among voters (Bauer, 2015; Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Krupnikov et al., 2016; Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Schneider & Bos, 2014). While these works are important for our understanding of the effect of gender discrimination on women's electoral chances, they do not address the impact of *personally experienced* sexism on women's political participation.

Some initial evidence suggests a substantial effect of gender discrimination on women's political attitudes. For example, women who are concerned about gender discrimination are also more likely to support a woman for president (Dolan, 2008; Huddy & Carey, 2009). Similarly, support for gender equality and high levels of perceived gender discrimination boosted approval ratings of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State to a larger extent than for other politicians of the Democratic Party (McThomas & Tesler, 2016). These studies suggest a relationship between the *perception* of gender discrimination and support for female politicians but they do not examine the potentially distinctive effects of perceiving vis-à-vis experiencing gender discrimination on women's political behavior. There is only scant evidence that women who have been discriminated against are also more politically engaged, driven by their desire to advance women's rights (Duncan, 1999).

Research on social movements (e.g., Friedman & McAdam, 1992), however, suggests that experiences with sexism lead to the recognition of common fate among women: ". . . by recognizing both group and personal discrimination, women have recognized that 'what happens to the group, happens to me,' or in other words, they have integrated the personal and social experiences" (p. 1327). From this perspective, an experience with sexism might make the social group (i.e., being a woman) personally more relevant and thus fosters collective political action.

Experiencing sexism might also activate powerful emotions that promote women's political engagement. Indeed, emotions are essential in explaining political involvement because they are intimately tied to action (Damasio, 1994; Izard, 1993). For example, anger drives "action tendencies" that motivate the individual to act in order to change the situation that gave rise to anger in the first place (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006, p. 118). It is thus not surprising that anger in the political arena is associated with higher levels of political interest and protest activity (Groenendyk & Banks, 2013). At the same time, prior work has identified anger as a likely reaction to experiences with sexism (Roosmalen & McDaniel, 1999; Rozin et al., 1999), thereby providing the emotional glue that connects the experience with sexism to political action. Taken together, prior evidence leads to the prediction that the experience with sexism increases women's political engagement (Hypothesis 1).

The Moderating Role of Ideology

Women are not a monolithic group. Instead, there is a substantial amount of heterogeneity in women's political preferences and values, which might also shape women's responses to sexism. Prior work in social psychology has focused in particular on feminist identity as a driving force in boosting women's propensity to challenge sources of sexism (e.g., Dardenne et al., 2007; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Swim & Hyers, 1999). In American politics, feminism and liberal ideology are closely related whereby feminist policy positions such as reproductive rights, equal pay, and paid family leave are inevitably linked to a liberal philosophy. These policy preferences are grounded in the conviction that women are still disadvantaged in various aspects of their lives. From that perspective, experiencing sexism aligns with liberals' perception of persistent gender inequality in American society. Not surprisingly, a majority of Democratic women strongly support the *Me Too* movement.[4] As liberal women experience sexism firsthand, further bolstering their belief in widespread gender discrimination, they are likely to turn to the political domain for solutions. This expectation is aligned with liberals' convictions that it is the government's responsibility to address intergroup inequalities and protect the rights of disadvantaged members of society. From this perspective, liberal women's personal experience with sexism should boost their political engagement.

Conservative women, on the other hand, have actively distanced themselves from the feminist ideology, despite agreement

on many policy issues.[5] A close inspection of the social media campaigns of conservative organizations like "Concerned Women for America" suggests that a large share of conservative women openly reject the feminist identity label[6] citing concerns for traditional family models and individual responsibility, as well as the rejection of victimhood[7] (also see Schreiber, 2008 for a thorough analysis of conservative women organizations). These insights demonstrate that ideology is more than just a summary description of political issue positions. It also serves as a lens through which women interpret and derive legitimacy of their role in society. In fact, Jelen et al. (1994) found that, although women take more left-leaning positions on most policy positions than men, they do not translate these positions into more left-wing ideological identification. Instead, they ground their ideological identity more in religious and cultural values.

Since many conservative women reject the feminist label and its associated battle against sexism, it is possible that conservative women either dismiss or rationalize their own personal experience with sexism. In fact, past research has demonstrated that women who endorse traditional gender stereotypes are also more likely to blame themselves for experiencing sexual harassment (Jensen & Gutek, 1982). Similarly, conservatism has been linked to higher levels of rape myth acceptance—the notion ". . . that men cannot (and should not be expected to) control their sexual impulses, and that women bear responsibility for enticing and inciting male sexual behavior" (Swigger, 2016, p. 263). While men are generally more likely to subscribe to rape myths, Swigger (2016) finds that conservative ideology is a strong predictor of rape myth acceptance among women but not among men. Swigger (2016) provides two possible explanations for these results: First, conservative women might have internalized cues from conservative political elites regarding the scope and severity of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. Second, conservative women's rape myth acceptance might simply be a backlash to what they perceive as feminist causes and beliefs. Both mechanisms point at the possibility that conservative women have a different understanding of what constitutes gender discrimination and who is to blame for it.

These different perceptions might also lead to very different emotional responses. Indeed, prior work on gender discrimination has demonstrated that women's reaction to sexism depend on their interpretations of the situation (Smith & Lazarus, 1993): Experiences with sexism might promote anger among liberal women who are cognizant of structural inequalities between men and women. Conservative women, on the other hand, emphasize individual responsibility and the rejection of victimhood which might lead to more self-critical emotions like shame and anxiety—emotions that have been associated with more passive responses and withdrawal (Huddy et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2019).[8]

Last, and more importantly for political action, even when conservative women acknowledge personal experiences with sexism, they might not see politics as a plausible domain to address gender inequalities and instead turn to other support systems such as religious or civic groups. Thus, conservative women might simply not translate their experiences into a desire for more political engagement.

Given these considerations, I expect that the personal experience with sexism has differential effects on liberal and conservative women's political behavior (Hypothesis 2). In particular, I expect liberal women to show increased levels of political engagement when faced with sexism (Hypothesis 2a) while personally experienced sexism has no significant effect on conservative women's political engagement (Hypothesis 2b). These effects should be moderated by the strength of women's ideology whereby strong liberal identifiers report the strongest response to personally experienced sexism and strong conservative identifiers respond the least to that experience.[9]

Perception versus Experience of Sexism

Most prior work on gender and politics has focused on the perception of discrimination against one's group; here, I focus on personal experiences with discrimination. Duncan (1999), for example, finds that women who have been victims of sexual harassment are politically more engaged, presumably to advance women's rights. It is not clear, however, to what extent the personal experiences with discrimination and the impersonal belief in the existence of discrimination have distinctive effects. These two constructs might be related but do not necessarily go hand in hand. In fact, members of minority groups do not have to individually experience discrimination in order to believe that discrimination against their group exists (Fuegen & Biernat, 2000; Kessler et al., 2000).

DeSipio (2002) and Schildkraut (2005) are two of the few scholars in political science who address this distinction and who both find evidence for differential effects of perceived discrimination and personally experienced discrimination. In the context of Latino immigrants, DeSipio (2002) shows that only personal experience with discrimination increases the likelihood of political engagement while the general perception of discrimination against Latinos failed to exert a comparable effect. In a similar vein, Schildkraut (2005) finds only minimal effects of group-level discrimination on Latinos' likelihood to be registered voters and their turnout compared to the substantial effects of individually experienced discrimination. These findings provide initial evidence for the prediction that the *perception* of discrimination against women might not have the same effect as *experiencing* discrimination on a personal level. While the latter could lead to the former, the two concepts might influence women in different ways. Based on DeSipio's and Schildkraut's findings, I predict that the belief in gender discrimination alone will not exert a significant effect on women's political behavior while the personal experience with sexism will remain a significant predictor of political engagement among women – both with and without taking their ideology into account (Hypothesis 3).

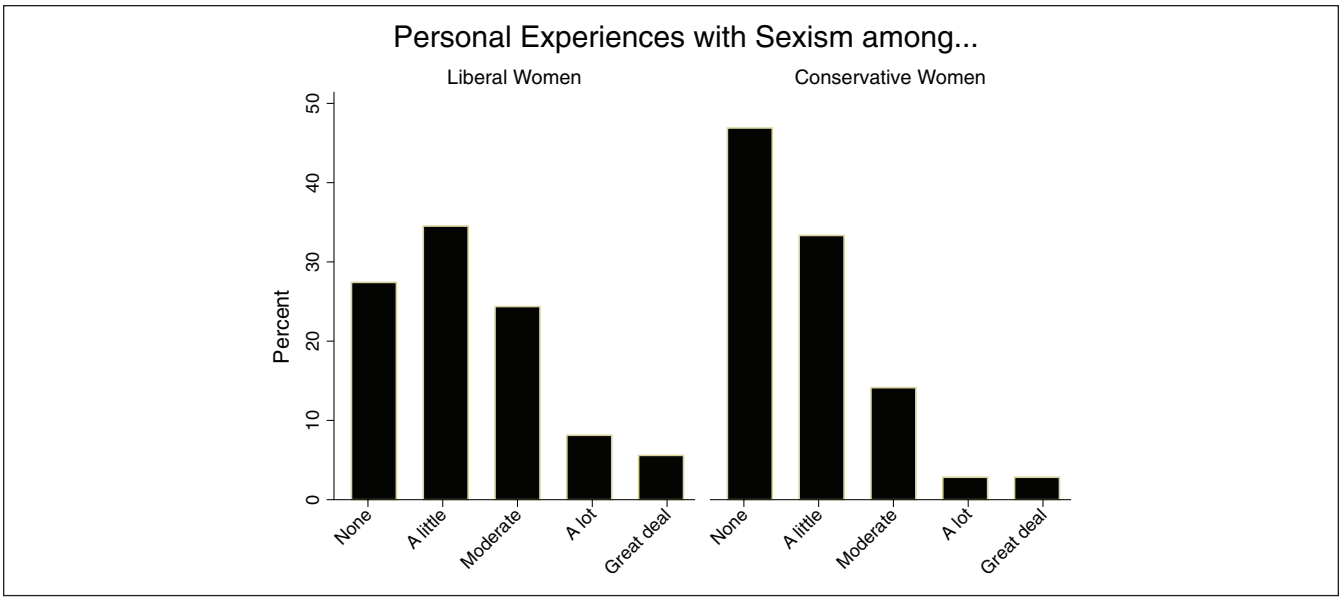

Figure 1. Reported experience with sexism among women by ideology.
Note. Data taken from the 2016 ANES Pilot Study.

Data and Measures

To test my hypotheses, I first rely on the 2016 American National Election Pilot Study, which includes a nationally representative sample of 1,200 respondents who were part of an opt-in internet panel. All respondents are U.S. citizens who were at least 18 years old at the time of data collection in January 2016. In total, 53% of the sample consists of women. The following analyses will be restricted to these 630 women. The median age among female respondents was 51. About 71% of these women were White, 45% were married, and 76% reported a religious affiliation. The women in the sample were relatively educated with 35% having a college degree or a higher formal degree and quite partisan with 80% of women reporting strong or weak partisanship.

Independent Variables

The main independent variables constitute women's self-reported ideology, the level of personally experienced sexism, as well as the perception of discrimination against women in the U.S.

Ideology is assessed using a 5-point measure that ranges from very liberal to very conservative. About 31% of the women in the sample reported identifying as a liberal (11% very liberal and 20% somewhat liberal), 41% as moderates, and 28% as conservative (8% very conservative and 20% somewhat conservative).

Experience with Sexism is measured with one item that asks respondents: "How much have you personally experienced discrimination because of your sex or gender?" Answer choices range from "none" to "a great deal" yielding a 5-point measure. About 36% of female respondents reported never having experienced discrimination due to their gender while about 33% reported a little, 20% a moderate amount, and 11% a lot or a great deal of personal experience with sexism. Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of the variable among women by their ideology showing that liberal women are significantly more likely to report personal experiences with gender discrimination than their conservative counterparts. For example, 47% of conservative women report no experience with sexism compared to 27% of liberal women. Nevertheless, levels of experienced sexism correlate with ideology (from liberal to conservative) at only –0.18.

Perception of Discrimination against women is measured with one item asking respondents to indicate how much discrimination there is against women in the U.S. Answer choices range from "none at all" to "a great deal." In total, 25% of women believed that there was a great deal or a lot of discrimination against women, 68% reported a moderate or a little amount while 7% thought there was no discrimination against women at all. Figure 2 shows that liberal women are significantly more likely to believe that there is "a great deal" or "a lot" of discrimination against women (39%) than their conservative counterparts (13%). Once again, the perception of discrimination against women correlates only moderately with ideology at –0.27.

Dependent Variables

The main dependent variable is political participation among women. I measure political participation in two separate ways: First, women's political engagement in the past 12

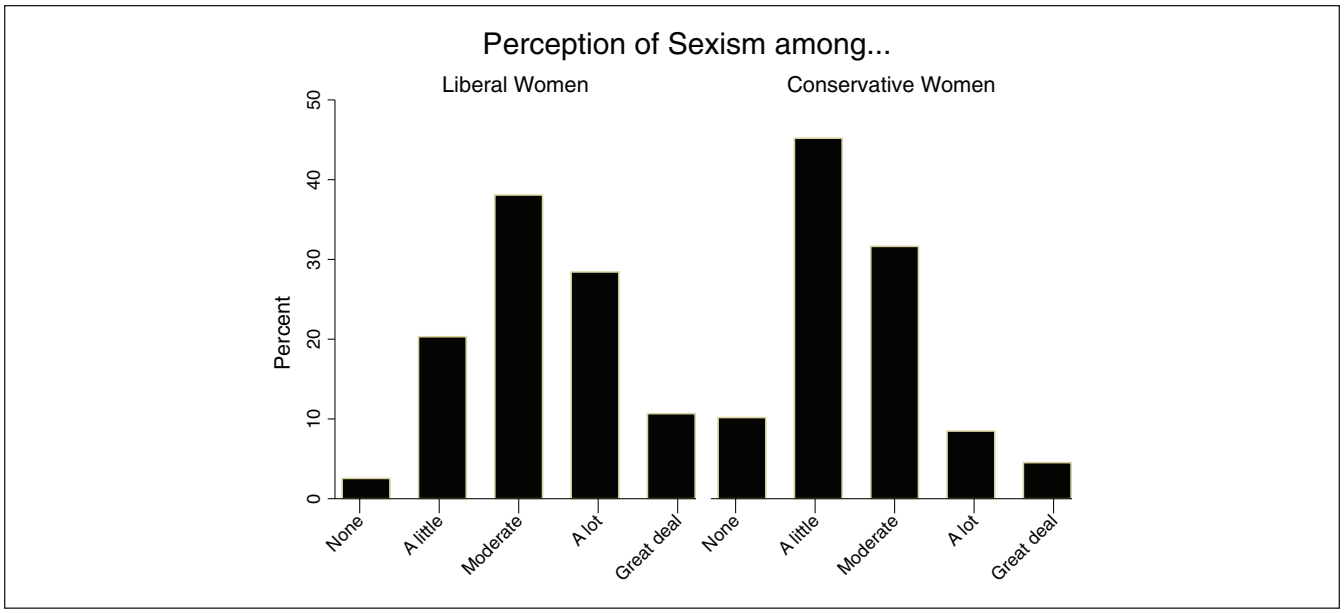

Figure 2. Reported perception of sexism among women by ideology.
Note. Data taken from the 2016 ANES Pilot Study.

months as well as women's self-reported chance of voting in the 2016 general elections.

Political Engagement is measured with two items that gauge participation in campaign-related activities within the last 12 months: The first item asked about wearing a campaign button, or putting a campaign sticker on one's car, and/or placing a sign in one's window or in front of the house. The second item asked about donating money to any candidate running for public office, any political party, or any other group that supported or opposed political candidates. Response options to both items are dichotomous, including "have done this in the past 12 months" and "have not done this in the past 12 months." I combine these two items into a 3-point scale ($\alpha = .62$) that ranges from 0 to 1. Among female respondents, 73% reported not having done any of the two activities in the past 12 months, 19% having done one of the two activities, and 8% having done both of the two activities in the past 12 months. Liberal women reported significantly higher levels of political engagement than conservative women with mean values of 0.25 and 0.17 respectively ($p < .03$).

Chance of Voting was measured with an item that asked respondents to gauge the percent chance that they will vote in the election for President of the United States in 2016. Response options ranged from 0% to 100%. Among all women in the ANES sample, the average percent chance was 85%. Among self-identified liberal women, the chance of voting reached 87% while conservative women reported an average chance of 91%. This is a marginally significant difference between the two groups ($p < .08$). In the following analyses, this dependent variable is scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Control Variables

To isolate the effects of other variables that are known to affect political participation among women, I control for marital status (1 – married and 0 – not married), education (ranging from 0 – no high school degree to 1 – post graduate degree), race (1 – White and 0 – non-White), age (measured in decades), religion (1 – religious and 0 – not religious), income (higher values indicate higher income), and partisan strength which is measured with the standard 3-point scale (i.e., partisan leaners, weak partisans, and strong partisans) and ranges from 0 to 1.

Analysis I: The Role of Sexism

In the first set of analyses, I regress *Political Engagement* and *Chance of Voting* on the main predictor – the level of personally experienced sexism—as well as on a set of control variables. Figure 3 entails the results of these regressions (see Table A1 in Supplemental Appendix). When predicting *Political Engagement* (Model 1), the coefficient for personally experienced sexism is positive, substantial in size, and statistically highly significant. Indeed, only partisan strength yields a similarly significant coefficient.[10] While education is a marginally significant predictor of political engagement in Model 1, other control variables did not reach statistical significance.

To illustrate these effects, I calculate the predicted probabilities of political engagement across levels of personally experienced sexism: Political engagement increases from 0.06 at no personal experience with sexism to 0.18 at high levels of experienced sexism among White, married, and

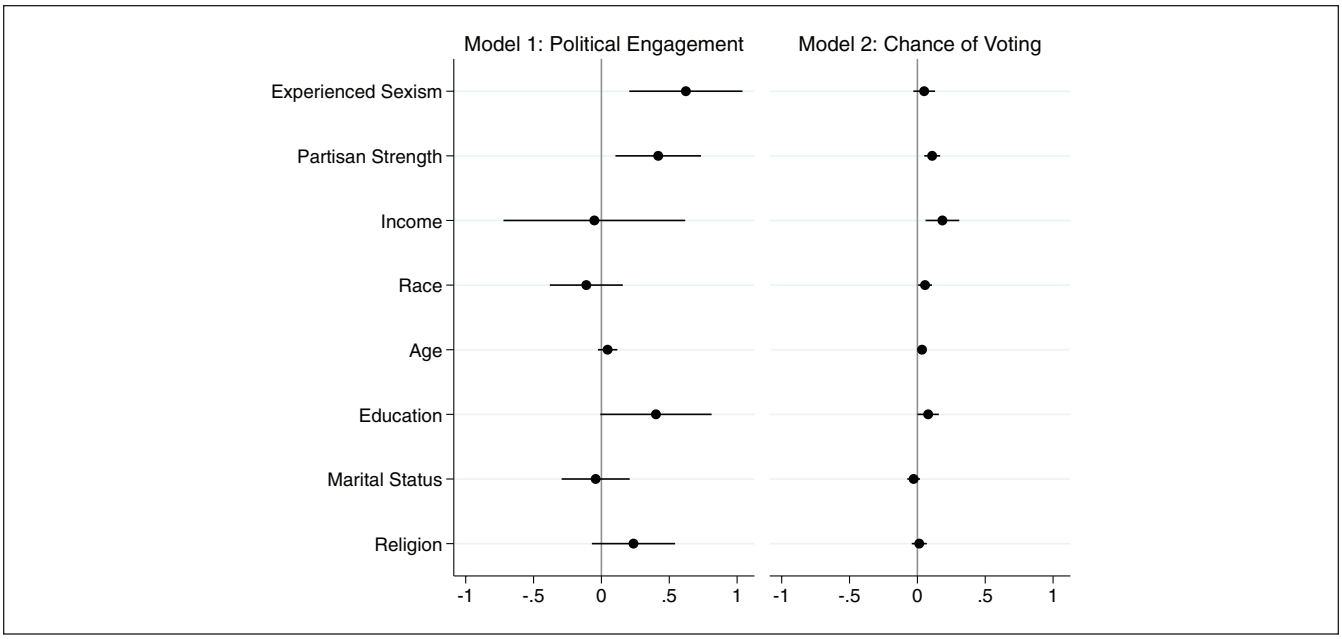

Figure 3. Predicting political engagement and chance of voting with experienced sexism.
Note. "Political Engagement" is a 3-point ordinal variable requiring an ordered probit regression. "Chance of Voting" is a continuous variable and was therefore estimated using an ordinary least squares regression. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 except for age, which is measured in decades.

religious women while holding education, age, income, and partisan strength at their means (see Figure A1 in Supplemental Appendix). Moving on to the *Chance of Voting*, personal experience with sexism does not exert any statistical influence on women's reported voting chance while most other standard predictors of poltitical participation yield significant and positive coefficients. Accordingly, older, wealthier, White, and more educated voters as well as stronger partisans are significantly more likely to turnout to vote. In conjunction, these two analyses provide partial support for the hypothesis that personal experience with sexism increases women's political engagement.

Analysis II: The Role of Ideology

Next, I examine the possibility of heterogenous treatment effects for liberal and conservative women by including an interaction term between self-reported ideology and personal experience with sexism. Figure 4 (see Table A1 in Supplemental Appendix) entails the results for the model predicting *Political Engagement* and *Chance of Voting*: The interaction of ideology and personally experienced sexism is not just significant and negative—as predicted—but also the strongest predictor of political involvement and turnout among women.[11,12]

However, the magnitude and significance of the interaction's coefficient does not provide any information about the meaningful conditional effect of experienced sexism on political engagement (see Brambor et al., 2006). Thus, to illustrate these effects more clearly, I plot the predicted probabilities of political engagement in Figure 5: The predicited probability of political engagement does not change across women's ideology if they report no personal experience with sexism (grey line). However, for women who report experiencing a great deal of sexism (black line), the probability of political engagement drastically decreases across ideology whereby the most liberal women score a predicted probability of 0.38 and the most conservative women score a probabilty of 0.04.

The predicted levels of voting across ideology look similar: As women without any experience with sexism turn from very liberal to very conservative, their predicted levels of turnout increase from 0.83 to 0.94. As women with high levels of personally experienced sexism report more conservative ideological preferences, their predicted levels of turnout drastically decrease from 1.01 to 0.83 (see Figure A2 in Supplemental Appendix). These analyses strongly suggest that the personal experience with sexism has—relative to conservative women—positive effects on liberal women's political engagement, potentially leading to an asymmetry between liberal and conservative women's political involvement.[13–15]

Analysis III: The Difference between Personally Experienced Sexism and Perception of Sexism

Next, I aim to differentiate between the effects of personally experienced sexism and the general belief in the existence of sexism. I utilize *Perceived Sexism* and *Experienced Sexism*[16]

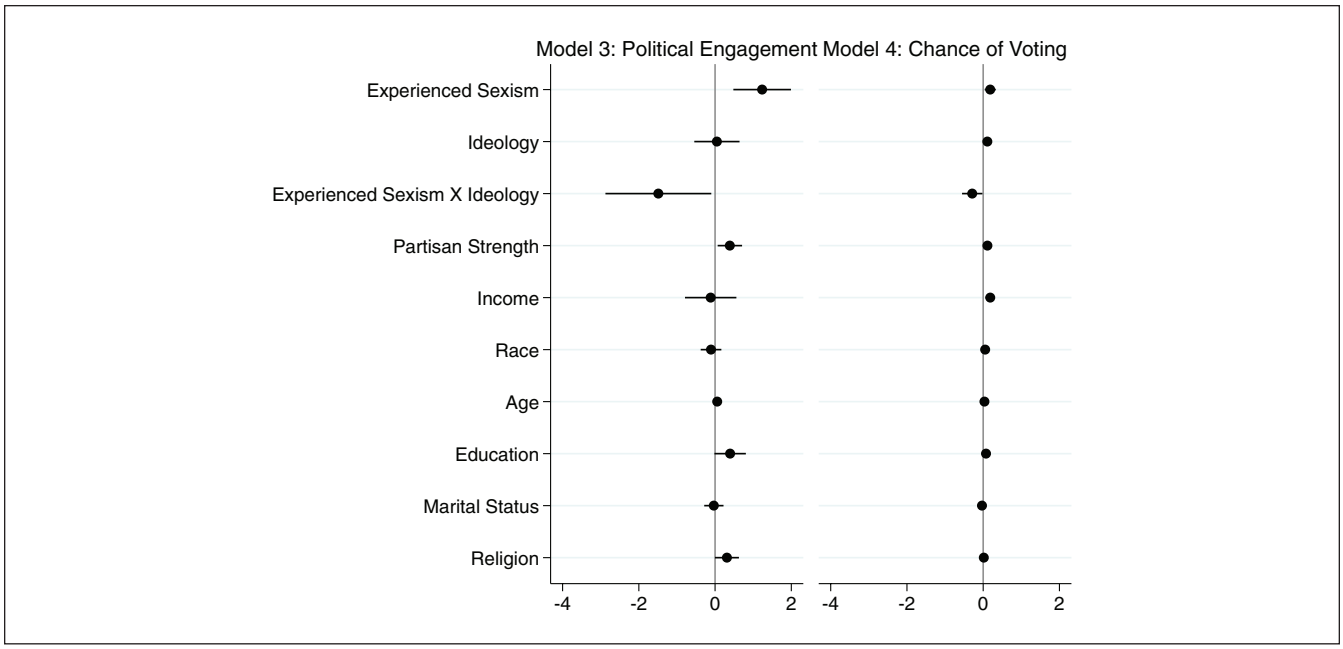

Figure 4. Predicting political engagement and chance of voting with ideology and experienced sexism.
Note. "Political Engagement" is a 3-point ordinal variable requiring an ordered probit regression. "Chance of Voting" is a continuous variable and was therefore estimated using an ordinary least squares regression. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 except for age, which is measured in decades.

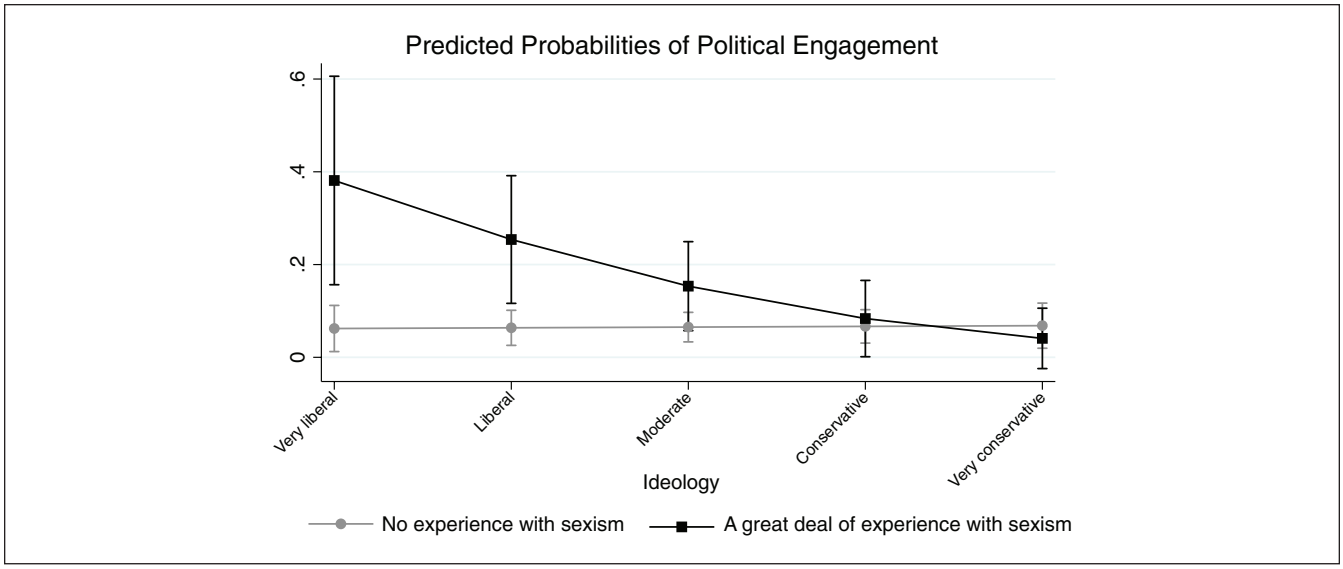

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of political engagement across ideology and experienced sexism based on Model 3.
Note. "Political Engagement" is an ordinal variable that was estimated using an ordered probit regression. Predicted probabilities were estimated for White, married, and religious women while all other variables are held at their means. Probabilities are estimated for a maximum level of political engagement (i.e., respondents who have done both campaign activities).

as main predictors of *Political Engagement* and *Chance of Voting*, in addition to the standard set of controls from earlier models (see Figure 6, Table A7 in Supplemental Appendix).

In the model predicting *Political Engagement*, the coefficient for *Perceived Sexism* is negative and statistically insignificant while the coefficient for *Experienced Sexism* remains a significant, strong, and positive predictor of political engagement among women. This initial finding suggests that perceived and experienced sexism do in fact have different consequences for political behavior among women (Hypothesis 3). However, when predicting the chance of voting in the 2016 presidential election, neither *Perceived Sexism* nor *Experienced Sexism* reach conventional levels of statistical significance while traditional

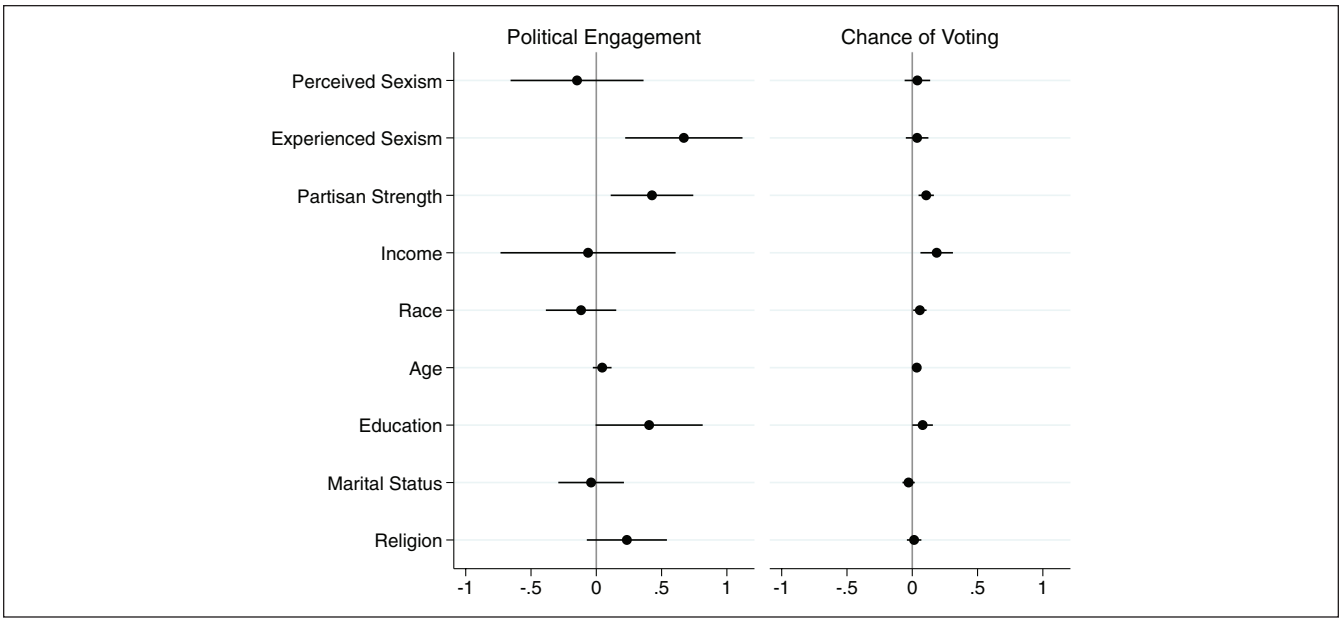

Figure 6. Predicting politcal engagement and chance of voting with *Perceived Sexism*.
Note. "Political Engagement" is a 3-point ordinal variable requiring an ordered probit regression. "Chance of Voting" is a continuous variable and was therefore estimated using an ordinary least squares regression. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 except for age, which is measured in decades.

predictors like partisan strength, income, race, age, and education remain positive determinants of turnout.[17]

Overall, these findings suggest that the belief in gender discrimination on its own might not always be sufficient in raising political engagement among women if it is not bolstered by personal experiences with discrimination (Hypothesis 3).

Causal Evidence

The prior analyses reveal a strong relationship between ideology, personal experiences with sexism, and political engagement. However, these results have somewhat limited power due to the observational nature of the data they originate from. Therefore, I additionally conduct a survey experiment with 200 women on Amazon Mechanical Turk. In this experiment, I manipulate the saliency of women's personal experience with sexism and subsequently measure their interest in various political activities. This setup allows me to test the causal link between the salience of experienced sexism and political engagement among women.

Data and Measures

The data collection took place over a time period of 2 weeks in February 2017 using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid $1 for their participation. Respondents' gender was determined through a screening question before the beginning of the actual survey. Men were disqualified from the survey. A total of 200 respondents began the survey but four of them failed to complete it, yielding an effective sample size of 196 women. The pre-treatment questionnaire entailed the standard 5-point ideology item, which asks women to place themselves on a scale from "very liberal" to "very conservative." In total, 51% of women identified as liberals, 17% as moderates, and 32% as conservatives. While the sample skews towards the liberal side, it sufficiently varies in its ideological composition to test the moderating effect of ideology.

Subsequently, respondents are randomly assigned to either a treatment or control group. In the treatment group, respondents are asked to think about an incident in their personal or professional life in which they felt discriminated against due to their sex or gender. Respondents are prompted to describe this experience and how it made them feel in as much detail as possible. For women who indicate that they have not experienced any sexism, the prompt asks them to imagine this type of scenario and to think about how it would make them feel. This hypothetical scenario is a weaker treatment but it helps to preserve sample size. In the control group, respondents are asked to describe the current weather, which provides a similar writing activity in the flow of the survey but is unlikely to arouse any emotions that might confound subsequent measures. Two research assistants coded the women's descriptions of sexism according to a coding scheme that categorizes women's reported experiences (see Table A8 in Supplemental Appendix for an overview of the coding scheme). Inter-coder reliability was relatively high at 0.81. This coding exercise allows me to examine whether liberal and conservative women report similar or different experiences with sexism and to gauge their understanding of what constitutes sexism.

After the treatment, respondents are asked how writing about discrimination (or the weather) made them feel:

"anxiety/fear," "anger/frustration," "enthusiasm/excitement," or "none/apathetic." This item can shed light on liberal and conservative women's potentially different emotional reactions to the treatment.

Subsequently, respondents indicated their interest in various political activities such as trying to influence the vote of others, attending a political meeting or rally, or working for a party or candidate. I combine these items to create a scale that ranges from 0 which indicates no interest in any of the listed political activities to 1, which indicates interest in all of these activities.[18] This scale serves as the main dependent variable in the following analyses. To facilitate comparison between coefficients, all variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Analysis I: What Constitutes Sexism to Liberal and Conservative Women?

A large share of women's reports (40%) did not entail a concrete description of an actual event but rather how it made them feel. For example, one woman reports: "[it] happens every day. I'm very smart but don't get respected as a woman." Another substantial share of 28% described incidences relating to job performances and competences. For example: "I get discriminated against sometimes because I'm a female gamer and some men take offense to it." Finally, 20% of respondents describe cases of sexism that relate to their hobbies and interests: "When I was in college, I went to the university bookstore to look for books for my classes [. . .] The employee looked me up and down and said, 'Nursing?' I was baffled that being female immediately meant I must be part of the university's nursing program, as if no other majors would take a woman seriously."

These patterns remain when looking at liberal women's responses: 33% describe their feelings only, 33% mention incidents relating to professional competence and performance, and 22% describe expectations of gender-conforming interests and hobbies. For example, one liberal woman reports: "I am a female science major, so I feel looked down on a lot. There are a lot of men in my classes who do not take me seriously, and it is extremely frustrating [. . .]."

Among conservatives, this pattern is quite different whereby 52% do not explicitly describe a case of sexism but instead describe their feelings in response to it. This is because many of these conservative women state that they have never experienced sexism but that it would make them upset and angry. For example: "I would be hurt, but that is pretty much it. I wouldn't make a big deal out of it. If anything, it would make me strive harder to prove whoever is discriminating wrong." These statements align with the notion that conservative women might be more likely see sexism as an isolated incident.

What these essays fail to reveal, however, is how conservative women define sexism: Since so many of them reported no experience with gender discrimination, it is not clear what types of behavior conservative women would label as "sexist." While this survey experiment cannot answer this question, a survey among undergraduate students at a public university in the South[19] reveals that conservative women indeed have a narrower understanding of sexism than their liberal counterparts: Respondents are presented with a list of 16 sexist behaviors of varying severity ranging from catcalling to unwanted touching and pressure for sexual favors (see Table A9 in Supplemental Appendix for full list). Subsequently, respondents are asked to mark every behavior that constitutes "sexual harassment" to them. About 13 out of 16 listed behaviors were considered "sexual harassment" by a majority of liberal women in the sample. The only behaviors that were not checked by a clear majority of liberal women included "looking a person up and down" (checked by 37% of liberal women), "referring to an adult as a girl, hunk, babe, doll, or honey" (34%) and "standing close or brushing up against a person" (48%).

On the other hand, only half of the 16 listed behaviors were considered "sexual harassment" by a majority of conservative respondents. For example, "whistling at someone" (26%) or "catcalling" (46%) were considered "sexual harassment" by less than 50% of conservative women in the sample while liberal women were much more likely to consider these behaviors sexist (51% and 73%, respectively). Even when looking at behaviors that both groups of women overwhelmingly consider "sexual harassment," there are substantial differences. For example, 93% of liberal women considered "unwanted sexual teasing, remarks, jokes, and questions" a form of sexual harassment compared to 80% of conservative women. Similarly, there is a 20% gap in the perception of "sexual comments about a person's clothing, anatomy, or looks." These results suggest that liberal and conservative women have different understandings of what constitutes sexism whereby conservative have a higher threshold for labeling a behavior as "sexual harassment"—a pattern that aligns with the high share of conservative respondents in the survey experiment who report never having experienced gender discrimination.

Analysis II: Emotional Responses to the Treatment

Next, I examine to what extent the treatment provoked an emotional response among respondents and if so, whether these responses differed across liberal and conservative women. In the treatment group, 72% of respondents reported feeling anger or frustration, followed by 16% who reported no emotional response, and 11% who reported anxiety or fear. When broken down by ideology, 77% of liberal women reported feeling anger and frustration in the treatment group compared to 67% of conservative women. Interestingly, 15% of conservative women in the treatment group reported feeling anxiety/fear (versus 6% among liberal women) and 19% reported no emotion at all (versus 13% among liberal

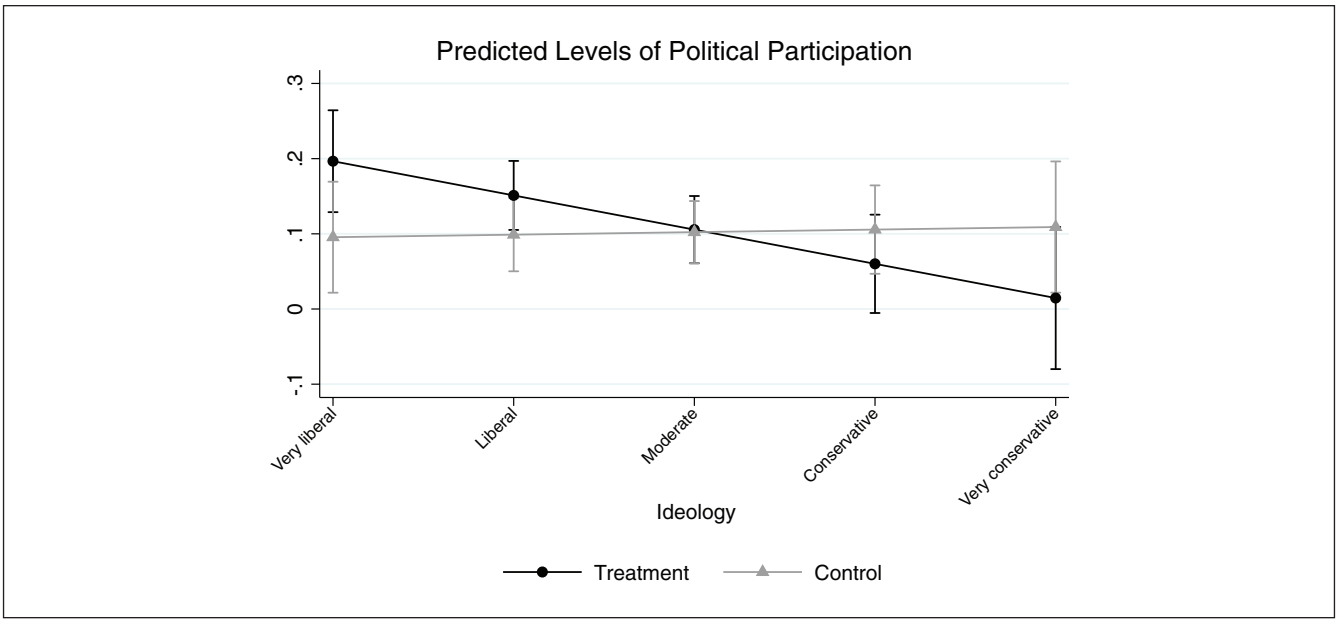

Figure 7. Predicted levels of political participation in treatment and control group.
Note. Predicted levels of political participation are calculated separately for women in the treatment group (black line) and women in the control group (grey line).

women). In the control group, the majority of both liberal and conservative women reported no emotional response to the writing task (76% vs. 68%). Overall, both liberal and conservative women in the treatment group report high levels of anger and frustration when writing about their personal experience with sexism. Thus, liberal and conservative women might not differ substantially in their emotional response to sexism; the main distinction may indeed be grounded in their understanding of what constitutes sexism and the direction they turn to for solutions.

Analysis III: Ideology, Sexism, and Women's Political Engagement

Next, I examine the impact of the treatment on respondents' self-reported interest in various forms of political participation. Mean values of interest in political activities do not differ significantly between women in the treatment and the control group (0.12 vs. 0.10, respectively, $p < .40$). However, liberal women and conservative women in the treatment group differ significantly in their expressed interest in political activities whereby liberal women score a mean value of 0.18 and conservative women a value of 0.07 ($p < .03$). I do not observe any differences in the control group where liberal women score a mean value of 0.09 and conservative women a value of 0.11 ($p < .68$). To examine whether these are linear effects across the ideological spectrum, I regress the dependent variable *Political Participation* on to the interaction of the treatment dummy (0 – control group and 1 – treatment group) and women's self-reported ideology: The interaction is statistically significant ($p < .05$) and negative, indicating that the effect of the treatment decreases as the intensity in conservative ideology among women increases (see Table A10 in Supplemental Appendix). To illustrate these effects, I plot the predicted levels of political participation for women in the treatment and control group across their ideology (see Figure 7).

The effects on women in the treatment group clearly vary based on their ideological self-placement: While the most conservative women score a predictive value of 0.01, the most liberal women score a value of 0.19 on the political participation scale. This is a substantial shift in the levels of political engagement. At the same time, there is no equivalent difference in the control group where the predictive levels remain almost indistinguishable across the ideological spectrum (0.09 for very liberal women vs. 0.10 for very conservative women). These results are exacerbated if the analyses are restricted to women who report on a real event of sexism rather than a hypothetical one (see Table A10 in Supplemental Appendix).

In conjunction with the extensive analyses of the ANES data, these experimental analyses corroborate the finding that experiences with sexism exert differential effects on liberal and conservative women.

Discussion

This paper examined the relationship between sexism, ideology, and women's political engagement providing both observational and experimental evidence for the claim that personally experienced sexism exerts differential effects on liberal and conservative women's political participation.

Using data from the 2016 ANES Pilot Study as well as a survey experiment, I demonstrated that experience with gender discrimination motivates women to become politically more active. This effect, however, is not consistent across their ideological spectrum: Liberal women's political engagement significantly increases when they become the target of gender discrimination while their conservative counterparts appear to remain unaffected by these experiences. Last, I also found evidence that the *belief* in the widespread existence of discrimination against women does not have the same effect on women's political engagement as the *personal experience* with sexism.

Despite the integration of experimental and observational data, there are a few questions that the current manuscript cannot address: First, I remain ambivalent about the type of sexism that is connected to the effects reported in this paper. Prior research has distinguished, among others, between ambivalent sexism, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Future research might explore what type of sexism is most strongly connected to political engagement among women on the liberal and conservative side of the ideological spectrum. Second, I also remain agnostic regarding the specific forms of political engagement that are affected by sexism. For example, it is possible that non-electoral forms of participation such as protesting are more impacted by the experience with sexism than more conventional electoral forms like voting or putting up a political yard sign, especially when none of the two political parties explicitly align with the fight against sexism. Future research might investigate this possibility by examining a more diverse and comprehensive measurement of political engagement.

Last, it is possible that liberal and conservative women simply turn to different solutions to address sexism. While liberal women might turn towards overt forms of political action, conservative women might organize in others forms. For example, the conservative organization "Concerned Women for America" offers prayer networks that are at their core about grassroots involvement in political issues without labeling them as such. Thus, standard measures of political participation might be unable to capture these alternative forms of engagement.

Albeit these open questions, the findings in this paper have important implications for the political representation of women. First, women are subject to sexism regardless of their ideology. However, liberal women seem to have broader criteria for what constitutes sexism than conservative women, leading to an asymmetry in their reports of experienced sexism. Even among conservative women who report experiences with sexism, the perception dominates that these are isolated incidents while liberal women view sexism as a more systemic problem. This might explain why experienced sexism amplifies liberal women's political engagement while we do not see a similar participatory impetus among conservative women.

Second, there is a normative question about the interplay of ideology and discrimination that transcends gender identities. As Schreiber (2008) notes, women have organized for antifeminist and conservative causes for a century, reaffirming the idea that ideological differences impact gender identities, not vice versa. It is therefore not surprising that ideology plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of discrimination, even when it is personally experienced. This effect is likely not limited to gender discrimination but also extends to other forms of discrimination.

Last, there is a general implication about the effect of discrimination—of any sort—on political engagement. Most national election studies do not ask respondents whether they have ever been the target of discrimination, possibly because this question is very sensitive and prone to produce biased responses. Nevertheless, this paper has shown that asking respondents about their mere perception of discrimination is not the same—and does not exert the same effects—as asking them about their personal experience with it. From that vantage point, it appears to be essential to include questions about personally experienced discrimination in future election studies in order to examine the effects of a broad range of discrimination on Americans' political behavior including discrimination based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and nationality.

The personal and political spheres of daily life are closely intertwined. Discrimination in our personal life can have spillover effects on our engagement with the political world. These effects largely depend on our personal beliefs about the world and, in the context of gender discrimination, on our understanding of what defines fair and equal treatment of men and women. Whether and how these beliefs empower or hinder women (and men) from recognizing and defending themselves against discrimination remains an open question that should be of interest to any scholar concerned with political equality and democratic representation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Alexa Bankert https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3672-8015

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. These survey results as well as details regarding the data collection process can be found here: https://www.ctnewsjunkie.com/upload/2017/01/336804316-PerryUndem-Gender-Equality-Report.pdf (last accessed 2/25/2019).

2. See, for example, this Huffington Post poll: https://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/athena/files/2018/08/22/5b7dceaae4b07295150f7fbe.pdf (last accessed 3/12/2019).
3. In the following, I will use the terms "sexism" and "gender discrimination" interchangeably.
4. See, for example, this Vox article: https://www.vox.com/2018/5/7/17272336/sexual-harassment-metoo-me-too-movement-trump-republicans-roy-moore (last accessed 12/2/2019).
5. The 2016 ANES Pilot Study reveals that 67% of conservative women support paid parental leave and 79% are in favor of equal pay regulations.
6. This debate has regained public attention as White House counselor Kellyanne Conway recently claimed to be a post-feminist, asserting that women are already equal to men but better suited for "feminine" and domestic duties.
7. Equally insightful is the "Women Against Feminism" campaign that started on *Tumblr* in 2013. Women posted pictures of themselves holding a sign that listed several reasons for why they do not need feminism.
8. Even if conservative and liberal women experience the same emotional responses, it is possible that the same emotion has a different impact on their political engagement. For example, Phoenix (2019) shows that anger among African-Americans has a weaker mobilizing effect on political participation than among their White counterparts.
9. Critical readers might question why I focus on ideology rather than partisanship in this manuscript given the centrality of party affiliation in American politics. There are two main reasons for this decision. First, a significant share of Republican and Democratic women is comprised of ideological moderates. Second, there is a substantial number of women do not identify with either party but do place themselves somewhere on the ideological spectrum (see Supplemental Appendix for more details).
10. Note that these coefficients do not significantly differ in size ($p < .45$).
11. The coefficient for the interaction is statistically different from the coefficient for partisan strength ($p < .01$) and from the single coefficient for experienced sexism ($p < .01$).
12. As a robustness check, I re-ran this analysis with a different measure of ideology. Rather than coding respondents with no ideological preference ("Don't know") as moderates, I excluded them. While this strategy reduced the sample size, the results of this modified analysis are consistent with the results presented here (see Table A2 in Supplemental Appendix).
13. Results hold when I control for "Perceptions of Sexism" (see Table A3 in Supplemental Appendix).
14. Results hold even when predicting the likelihood of *future* political activity, suggesting the causal precedence of experienced sexism to political engagement (see Table A4 in Supplemental Appendix).
15. Note that I do not observe such effects among male respondents (see Tables A5 and A6 in Supplemental Appendix).
16. The two concepts correlate at 0.37. Women who experience high levels of sexism also report higher levels of discrimination against women in general than do women who report no personal experience with sexism (see Figure A3 in Supplemental Appendix).
17. The results are equally split when perceived sexism is interacted with self-reported ideology (see Table A7 in Supplemental Appendix).
18. I chose these three political activities for two reasons: First, they vary in required amount of time and effort and are thus accessible to a wide range of women from different socio-economic statuses. Second, these are survey items commonly used in other surveys such as the ANES to gauge political participation.
19. The survey was conducted between March and April in 2018. 1,084 students finished the survey and received extra-credit for their participation. About 65% of the sample was comprised of women. About 47% of them were self-identified liberals, 19% moderates, and 34% conservatives.

References

Barnes, T. D., & Cassese, E. C. (2016). American party women. *Political Research Quarterly*, *70*(1), 127–141. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916675738

Bauer, N. M. (2015). Emotional, sensitive, and unfit for office: Stereotype activation and support for female candidates. *Political Psychology*, *36*(6), 691–708.

Burns, N., Schlozman, K. L., & Verba, S. (2001). *The private roots of public action*. Harvard University Press.

Brambor, T., Clark, W. R., & Golder, M. (2006). Understanding interaction models: Improving empirical analyses. *Political Analysis*, *14*(1), 63–82.

Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain*. Putnam.

Dardenne, B., Dumont, M., & Bollier, T. (2007). Insidious dangers of benevolent sexism: Consequences for women's performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *93*(5), 764–779.

DeSipio, L. (2002). *Immigrant Organizing, Civic Outcomes: Civic Engagement, Political Activity, National Attachment, and Identity in Latino Immigrant Communities*. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4pf4c1tz

Dolan, K. (1998). Voting for women in the "year of the woman". *American Journal of Political Science*, *42*(1), 272–293.

Dolan, K. (2008). Women as candidates in American politics. In C. Wolbrecht, K. Beckwith & L. Baldez (Eds.), *Political women and American democracy* (pp. 110–130). Cambridge University Press.

Dolan, K. A. (2014). *When does gender matter? Women candidates and gender stereotypes in American elections*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Duncan, L. E. (1999). Motivation for collective action: Group consciousness as mediator of personality, life experiences, and women's rights activism. *Political Psychology*, *20*(3), 611–635.

Erzeel, S., & Caluwaerts, D. (2015). Is it gender, ideology or resources? Individual-level determinants of preferential voting for male or female candidates. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *25*(3), 265–283.

Fitzgerald, L. F. (1993). Sexual harassment: Violence against women in the workplace. *American Psychologist*, *48*(10), 1070–1076.

Friedman, D., & McAdam, D. (1992). Collective identity and activism: Networks, choices and the life of a social movement. In: A. Morries and C.M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, (pp. 156–173). Yale University Press.

Fuegen, K., & Biernat, M. (2000). Defining discrimination in the personal/group discrimination discrepancy. *Sex Roles*, *43*(5–6), 285–310.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(3), 491–512.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1997). Hostile and benevolent sexism: Measuring ambivalent sexist attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(1), 119–135.

Groenendyk, E. W., & Banks, A. J. (2013). Emotional rescue: How affect helps partisans overcome collective action problems. *Political Psychology*, *35*(3), 359–378.

Huddy, L. (2013). From group identity to political cohesion and commitment. In L. Huddy, D. O. Sears, & J. S. Levy (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 737–773). Oxford University Press.

Huddy, L., & Carey, T. E. (2009). Group politics redux: Race and gender in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries. *Politics & Gender*, *5*(1), 81–96.

Huddy, L., Cassese, E., & Lizotte, M-K. (2008). Gender, public opinion, and political reasoning. In C. Wolbrecht, K. Beckwith, & L. Baldez (Eds.), *Political women and American democracy* (pp. 31–49). Cambridge University Press.

Huddy, L., Feldman, S., Taber, C., & Lahav, G. (2005). Threat, anxiety, and support of antiterrorism policies. *American Journal of Political Science*, *49*(3), 593–608.

Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender stereotypes and the perception of male and female candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, *37*(1), 119–147.

Izard, C. E. (1993). Four systems for emotion activation: Cognitive and noncognitive processes. *Psychological Review*, *100*(1), 68–90.

Jelen, T. G., Thomas, S., & Wilcox, C. (1994). The gender gap in comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, *25*(2), 171–186.

Jensen, I. W., & Gutek, B. A. (1982). Attributions and assignment of responsibility in sexual harassment. *Journal of Social Issues*, *38*(4), 121–136.

Kessler, T., Mummendey, A., & Leisse, U-K. (2000). The personal–group discrepancy: Is there a common information basis for personal and group judgment? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*(1), 95–109.

Krupnikov, Y., Piston, S., & Bauer, N. M. (2016). Saving face: Identifying voter responses to black and female candidates. *Political Psychology*, *37*(2), 253–273.

Lawless, J., & Fox, R. (2013). *Girls just wanna not run the gender gap in young Americans' political ambition*. Women & Politics Institute.

Lerner, J. S., & Tiedens, L. Z. (2006). Portrait of the angry decision maker: How appraisal tendencies shape anger's influence on cognition. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, *19*(2), 115–137.

McThomas, M., & Tesler, M. (2016). The growing influence of gender attitudes on public support for Hillary Clinton, 2008–2012. *Politics & Gender*, *12*(1), 28–49.

Operario, D., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). Ethnic identity moderates perceptions of prejudice: Judgments of personal versus group discrimination and subtle versus blatant bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*(5), 550–561.

Phoenix, D. L. (2019). *The anger gap: How race shapes emotion in politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Roosmalen, E. V., & McDaniel, S. A. (1999). Sexual harassment in academia: A hazard to women's health. *Women & Health*, *28*(2), 33–54.

Rozin, P., Lowery, L., Imada, S., & Haidt, J. (1999). The CAD triad hypothesis: A mapping between three moral emotions (contempt, anger, disgust) and three moral codes (community, autonomy, divinity). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(4), 574–586.

Sanbonmatsu, K. (2002). Gender stereotypes and vote choice. *American Journal of Political Science*, *46*(1), 20–34.

Schildkraut, D. J. (2005). The rise and fall of political engagement among Latinos: The role of identity and perceptions of discrimination. *Political Behavior*, *27*(3), 285–312.

Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2014). Measuring stereotypes of female politicians. *Political Psychology*, *35*(2), 245–266.

Schneider, M. C., Holman, M. R., Diekman, A. B., & McAndrew, T. (2016). Power, conflict, and community: How gendered views of political power influence women's political ambition. *Political Psychology*, *37*(4), 515–531.

Schreiber, R. (2008). *Righting feminism: Conservative women and American politics*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Shepherd, L. (2019). Responding to sexual objectification: The role of emotions in influencing willingness to undertake different types of action. *Sex Roles*, *80*(1–2), 25–40.

Smith, C. A., & Lazarus, R. S. (1993). Appraisal components, core relational themes, and the emotions. *Cognition and Emotion*, *7*(3–4), 233–269.

Swigger, N. (2016). Sexual responsibility and the politics of abortion and contraception. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *13*(3), 263–275.

Swim, J. K., & Hyers, L. L. (1999). Excuse me—What did you just say?! Women's public and private responses to sexist remarks. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *35*(1), 68–88.

Verba, S., Burns, N., & Schlozman, K. L. (1997). Knowing and caring about politics: Gender and political engagement. *The Journal of Politics*, *59*(4), 1051–1072.

Author Biography

Alexa Bankert is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia. She received her PhD in Political Science from Stony Brook University in 2016. Her research examines the impact of social and political identities on political behavior.