



The role of sexism in voting in the 2016 presidential election[☆]



Jarrold Bock^{*}, Jennifer Byrd-Craven, Melissa Burkley

Oklahoma State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential election was one of the most politically charged and volatile elections in recent history. The election also saw its first female candidate, Hillary Clinton, represent a major political party. Prior research is inconclusive on how biases can affect political outcomes, with some research showing that racism has affected presidential elections, while others have shown that sexism does not affect elections. However, agentic women often face discrimination and backlash when seeking positions of power. The current study sought to extend past work by examining the potential role of sexism in the 2016 election. After controlling for participant sex, time of participation, and political party identification, it was found that individual differences in hostile sexism and traditional attitudes toward women significantly predicted voting for Donald Trump. These results suggest that voter attitudes toward women may have played a role in the election outcome.

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1. Introduction

The 2016 presidential election campaign began with women from each major political party, Hillary Clinton and Carly Fiorina, vying for the most powerful position in the United States government. Both Clinton—a former first-lady, U.S. senator, and secretary of state—and Fiorina—former CEO of Hewlett-Packard—were accomplished candidates who had worked their way to powerful positions in government and business, respectively. Despite this, their personhood was frequently reduced to appearances, such as Donald Trump's comments on Fiorina's, "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that?" (Solotaroff, 2015) and Clinton's, "I don't believe she has a presidential look," (Parker, 2016) presidential prospects, and Clinton's "screechy" voice inflections (Khazan, 2016). Talk of Clinton being temperamentally unfit to be president was also commonplace. Bill O'Reilly, former host of Fox News' *O'Reilly Factor*, once asked two woman guests on his show, "There has got to be some downside to having a woman president, right?" in reference to a woman president dealing with difficult countries (Benen, 2014). The present work examined how individual differences in sexism and negative attitudes toward women predicted voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election.

While significant strides have been made over recent decades in women's representation in government, with women making up 20.1% of the current 115th Congress compared to roughly 5% of the

100th Congress (1987–1989; Congressional Research Service, 2016, 2017), women are still underrepresented. Images and stereotypes of a leader are associated with men and masculinity across the lifespan (Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005; Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Traditional gender role stereotypes may explain this image of men as leaders. Men are stereotyped as being assertive and agentic, whereas women are stereotyped as being communal and caregivers (Eagly, 1987). Women often face pushback when these norms are violated, however. Female professionals and feminists—groups that typically reject traditional gender roles—are seen as lacking warmth but competent (Fiske, 2012; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Traditional women, conversely, are much more well received as they are seen as having more warmth but lacking in competence. Thus, women are tasked with choosing between being liked or being viewed as competent. As such, negative attitudes toward powerful, agentic women are commonplace (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). Participants in one study evaluated a male or female job candidate that behaved in an agentic or communal manner (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Results indicated that participants viewed the agentic woman as less socially skilled, likeable, and hireable than an equally agentic man, but agentic women were viewed as competent. Patterns of findings, such as these, represent the "backlash effect" wherein powerful, agentic women face discrimination for failing to act in a communal, gender-normative manner. The devaluing of Clinton and Fiorina's prospects as presidential candidates may have been a result of this phenomenon.

The presidential primary season ended with Trump (Republican nominee) and Clinton (Democratic nominee), representing the first time a woman has earned a major party nomination in a presidential election. The prior non-incumbent presidential election in 2008 was also represented by a historical nomination when Barack Obama

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Oklahoma State University, 116 North Murray, Stillwater, OK 74078-3064, United States.

E-mail address: jarrod.bock@okstate.edu (J. Bock).

became the first African American to be nominated for a major political party. While talk of sexism existed in the 2016 election season, talk of racism was also present in the 2008 presidential election. Across three pre-election time-points, Payne et al. (2010) surveyed Americans for their levels of implicit and explicit prejudice to see if they affected voting behavior. Results indicated that, across all three time-points, greater implicit and explicit anti-Black attitudes were predictive of voting for John McCain.

Evidence of sexism and gender stereotypes influencing voting behavior is less conclusive. Dolan (2014) notes that political party identification is a better predictor of one's evaluation of a candidate compared to gender stereotype endorsement, such that one's evaluation of a political candidate was not affected by the level of stereotype endorsement. Additionally, one study examined how gender biases may have affected another historic election in 1984, in which Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman to be a vice-presidential candidate for one of the two major political parties. Although a few differences emerged, such as how male and female candidates were rated on "masculine" and "feminine" areas, there was no evidence to suggest sexism or gender biases affected voting behavior (Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987). However, while evidence of gender bias affecting voting outcomes is scant or non-existent, female candidates are often viewed as less competent on public issues (Lawless, 2004) and having less leadership capability (Eagly & Carlie, 2007) compared to men. Thus, while political party identification may be a better predictor of voting behavior, gender biases still negatively affect female candidates (Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009). Female incumbents are also more likely to be challenged in elections than men (Palmer & Simon, 2006), which may reflect an underlying preference for more males in government (Dolan & Sanbonmatsu, 2009).

2. Overview

The current study sought to examine the extent that individual differences in sexism and negative attitudes toward women may have affected voting behavior in the 2016 presidential election. Hillary Clinton, having accomplished a great deal in her career, represented an agentic woman who may have experienced *backlash* (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001) in her running for President of the United States—a position previously occupied by only men. In order to examine this possibility, we included measures of sexism, a measure of attitudes toward women, and a measure of attitudes toward the sex roles of men and women. The latter two measures were included to assess attitudes about women's place in modern society and the types of careers men and women should have. Evidence suggests that men tend to score higher on measures of sexism and traditional gender attitudes than women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995) and that more traditional attitudes toward women is related to conservatism (Larsen & Long, 1988), so both participant sex and political party identification were controlled for in examining the predictive ability of sexism. Evidence of sexism and gender biases affecting voting outcomes is minimal, at best, but the rhetoric aimed at Hillary Clinton during the election, such as "Nasty woman" and "Kill-ary", led us to speculate that it may have been a factor in this election. Given this, we hypothesized that higher scores of sexism and negative attitudes toward women would be predictive of voting for Donald Trump.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 239 (170 females, 68 males) undergraduates from a large Southwestern university who completed an online survey for course credit. Participant responses were collected from immediately following the 2016 election through February 14th, 2017. Participants

ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 19.42$, $SD = 2.03$) and predominantly identified as White/Caucasian (73%).

3.2. Materials and procedure

All data was collected using an online survey. Participants responded to a series of questionnaires¹ that measure sexism, attitudes toward women, and gender role attitudes. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information and to indicate, "Who did you vote for in the 2016 Presidential election?" and were given the response options of Hillary Clinton ($n = 53$), Donald Trump ($n = 101$), Gary Johnson ($n = 12$), and other ($n = 71$). Participants were not given a "Did not vote" response option, so the voting outcome "other" includes all other third-party candidates, write-in votes, and those who did not vote.

3.3. Independent measures

3.3.1. Political party identification

In the demographic section of the survey, participants were asked, "Which political party do you identify with?" and were given the response options of Democrat ($n = 61$), Republican ($n = 128$), Libertarian ($n = 11$), Green Party ($n = 3$), and other ($n = 35$).

3.3.2. Ambivalent sexism inventory

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) is a 22-item scale that assesses two forms of modern sexism: Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism. The Benevolent Sexism subscale ($\alpha = 0.79$) assesses the extent that participants endorse females' adhering to traditional norms in a paternalistic manner (e.g., "Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores"). The Hostile Sexism subscale ($\alpha = 0.84$) assesses the extent that participants endorse hostile attitudes toward women and believe that women conspire to ruin men (e.g., "Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist"). Each item is measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Scores for each subscale were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater sexism.

3.3.3. Attitudes Toward Women scale

The Attitudes Toward Women Scale ($\alpha = 0.82$; AWS; Spence & Hahn, 1997; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) is a 15-item scale that assesses attitudes toward women's rights in modern economic conditions. It is comprised of items that tap into traditional attitudes (e.g., "Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers.") and egalitarian attitudes (e.g., "Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men."). Each item is measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) scale. Egalitarian attitude items are reverse scored. Scores for each subscale were averaged, with higher scores indicating more traditional attitudes toward women.

3.3.4. Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role scale

The Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role scale ($\alpha = 0.91$; Larsen & Long, 1988) is a 20-item scale that assesses traditional (e.g., "In groups that have both male and female members, it is more appropriate that leadership positions be held by males.") and egalitarian (e.g., "The belief that women cannot make as good supervisors or executives as men is a myth.") attitudes toward the sex roles of men and women. Each item is measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Items that represent traditional attitudes were reverse coded. An average scale score was then calculated, with higher scores indicating more egalitarian attitudes toward sex roles.

¹ The current results are part of a larger data set intended to develop a new questionnaire. Only the independent variables of interest are reported.

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