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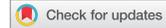
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# Moderating effect of partisanship on personal experience with sexual harassment and gender discrimination on the evaluation of political figures

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination have become more salient in U.S. politics in recent years due, in part, to the #MeToo movement. We conducted two surveys on Californians in the 2018 primary and general election. We find that experiencing either of these types of interactions shaped how Independent voters evaluated political figures but had a smaller effect on Democratic and Republican party identifiers. On average, experiencing gender discrimination has stronger effects on the evaluation of political figures than sexual harassment. Both experiences played out differently for Independent men and Independent women. The boost in female support for Democratic candidates was counterbalanced by a backlash vote from Independent men who reported they experienced gender discrimination, aiding the President and hurting Democratic political figures. This suggests that the pro-Kavanaugh backlash had deeper roots in male resentment towards the perceived preferential treatment of women, especially in work environments.

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## Introduction

In the U.S., Anita Hill's allegations about Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas during his Senate confirmation hearings brought sexual harassment into political focus and energized an electorate around the cause of electing more women to office in 1992 (Rucinski 1993; Paolino 1995). Despite numerous efforts in the intervening years to end sexual harassment of all forms in both the private and public sectors, it persists as a problem in America today and figured prominently in Justice Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings.

Personal experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination are reportedly widespread.<sup>1</sup> One recent survey, for instance, finds that 77%

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<sup>1</sup>According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On its website, EEOC states

of women have experienced verbal sexual harassment, and 51% of women have received unwanted sexual touching.<sup>2</sup> Sexual harassment covers a wide range of problematic social-sexual behaviors, including hostile work environment, derogatory attitudes toward women, dating pressure or physical sexual contact (Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett 2001). Both sexes more frequently experience sexual harassment from men than women (Magley et al. 1999). It has been clearly established that sexual harassment can be “degrading, frightening and sometimes physically violent.” As harassment often occurs over an extended period of time, it can have “profound job-related, psychological, and health-related consequences” (Fitzgerald 1993), and it can also have a significant effect on mental health (Street et al. 2007; Buchanan et al. 2013). While sexual harassment exerts a similar negative effect on both sexes, because it happens more frequently to women than men, the total negative impact on women *as a group* is considerably more pronounced than men (Magley et al. 1999). In addition, minority women are often subject to “double jeopardy” at work as they experience both sexual harassment and ethnic harassment at work (Berdahl and Moore 2006).

Gender stereotypes contribute to gender discrimination and limit the advancement of women in high-level positions in organizations (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Agars 2004), as well as in political offices (Dolan 2010; Bauer 2015; Kahn and Fridkin 1996; Fridkin, Kenney, and Woodall 2009). One survey found that 42% of women say they have experienced gender discrimination at work.<sup>3</sup> Similar to sexual harassment, in addition to material losses, gender discrimination exerts tremendous stress on individuals and affects their physical and mental well-being (Klonoff, Landrine, and Campbell 2000; Landrine et al. 1995).

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that “(u)nwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.” Sexual harassment can happen to both men and women. The victim or harasser may be of the same sex. Many institutions have adopted training programs and rules that prohibit sexual harassment, but, despite universal condemnation, sexual harassment remains pervasive in multiple fields and even in prestigious professions (Coombs and King 2005).

According to the EEOC, gender discrimination “involves treating someone unfavorably because of that person’s sex”. Gender discrimination also violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. In the workplace, “the law forbids discrimination when it comes to any aspect of employment, including hiring, firing, pay, job assignments, promotions, layoff, training, fringe benefits, and any other term or condition of employment.” Gender discrimination can exist in multiple forms. In the workplace, it is commonly manifested through wage differentiation and differential job responsibilities. In 2016, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research reported a 20% wage gap, that is, a full-time employed female worker only makes 80.5 cents for every dollar earned by men. In a survey of the 2018 Fortune 500 list, only 24 companies have female CEOs.

<sup>2</sup>The poll was conducted by a non-profit called “Stop Street Harassment”. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/21/587671849/a-new-survey-finds-eighty-percent-of-women-have-experienced-sexual-harassment>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/14/gender-discrimination-comes-in-many-forms-for-todays-working-women/>

One might have reasonably expected that, given the high level of personal experiences with sexual harassment, this would be an important national issue prior to 2018. However, since 2002, it has never made it onto Gallup's extended list of most important problems facing the nation.<sup>4</sup> Given the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and the general agreement about its detrimental, lasting effects on victims, it was surprising to many that the political reaction to the #MeToo movement and the Kavanaugh hearings in the 2018 election became so bifurcated.

In this paper, we specifically examine how personal experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination translated into political evaluations in 2018. To boost our sample size, we devised and repeated questions regarding personal experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination among men and women during both the California primary and general elections in 2018. Combining the two surveys, 15% of men and 41% of women said they experienced sexual harassment, 14% of men and 33% of women said they experienced gender discrimination. We examined whether personal experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination influenced the voters' evaluations of four key political figures in 2018; i.e. two female Democrats who participated in the Senate confirmation hearings for Justice Kavanaugh (i.e. Senators Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris), President Trump and a centrist male Democratic Governor, Jerry Brown.

We conclude that the impact of personal experiences with sexual harassment and discrimination on both candidate evaluations in 2018 and a preference for more female representation in the future were moderated by the respondent's partisanship and gender. Personal experience effects were primarily significant for Independents and were weaker for party identifiers. They were also stronger for gender discrimination than sexual harassment and played out in different directions by gender, creating an electoral advantage among Independent women for Democrats and an advantage among Independent men for Republicans in 2018.

## Personal experiences and voting theory

Numerous studies have found personal experiences of various sorts can weigh in the formation of opinions, perceptions and policy preferences. For example, recent studies find that personal experiences with local weather can affect attitudes on global warming and preferred mitigation strategies (Egan and Mullin 2012; Li, Johnson, and Zaval 2011; Zaval et al. 2014; Joireman, Truelove, and Duell 2010; Hamilton and Stampone 2013; Howe and Leiserowitz 2013). Experiencing stressful events, such as terrorism,

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<sup>4</sup><https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/Most-Important-Problem.aspx>

migration, and pervasive corruption, can increase psychological stress, which, in turns, affect political attitudes toward aggressors (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Klačnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016). In the 1992 election, women voters who felt that sexual harassment was a serious problem at the workplace were more likely to vote for Democratic Senate candidates (Paolino 1995). Given that sexual misconduct pervades many sectors of society, one might expect individuals who experienced harassment or discrimination to translate their personal experience into political demands and actions.

While it might seem that personal experiences should readily translate into voter attitudes, political scientists have learned that there are, in fact, a number of intervening steps to consider. To begin, there are the specific circumstances of a voter's life that are unique to that voter and have little to do with official policy or politics. This is analogous to findings of experiences with personal finances. As Gerald Kramer (1971) pointed out in his seminal piece on the role that changes in personal finances play in voting decisions, there are many specific reasons that a person could lose a job, experience a decline in income or suffer a loss in assets that have nothing to do with government policy or the actions of a particular candidate. In addition, strong adherence to economic individualism may lead people to be more inclined to accept personal responsibility for their economic conditions, which, in turn, weakens or eliminates any connection between personal well-being and political evaluation (Feldman 1982, 1984). Thus, studies examining the linkage between personal experiences and the evaluation of national economic conditions often find a weak correlation (Funk and Garcia-Monet 1997; Sears and Lau 1983; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). Based on these findings, one can counter-hypothesize that certain aspects of sexual harassment experiences may have to do with the specific people or circumstances that someone had to deal with at a given point in his or her life. Those circumstances might not relate clearly to policy or candidate preferences.

To understand how personal experiences with sexual harassment and gender discrimination affect political evaluation, one must begin with the complex interaction of three factors – gender, partisanship and policy positions, among two sets of actors – voters and political figures.

Previous studies find that men and women do not differ much on traditional women's rights issues, including abortion rights, support for equal rights amendment, and equal pay for equal work. Rather, gender gaps exist over policy issues such as defense spending, nuclear war and power, and social welfare programs (Carpini and Fuchs 1993). Both men and women think that sexual misconduct reflects "widespread problems in the society," instead of purely individual incidents (Oliphant 2017). Such belief can tie personal experiences with politics.

Although few American politicians would openly favor policies that enable or overlook sexual harassment or gender discrimination at this point in history, the two major political parties do disagree on the specific actions that fall into either category or the steps that should be taken to remedy or protect actual or potential victims. Democrats and Republicans have historically diverged on traditional family values, what gender equality means and how to achieve it (Goren 2005; Gunther and Kuan 2007; Miller and Schofield 2003). According to the standard spatial voting model, voters would compare the differences between the strength or nature of the perceived positions the political figures have taken, weighted by the importance that the voter attaches to the topic. Personal experiences with either discrimination or harassment could either shape the voter's idea of what the candidate should say or do on these matters or the importance the voter assigns to these considerations.

The gender of the voter and of the political figures being evaluated also matter. A particular candidate's gender can affect the perceived credibility of certain claims about his or her character (Rosenthal 1995; Gay 2002; Pantoja and Segura 2003). Koch (2000) finds that controlling for a candidate's ideological orientations, gender still exerts a significant impact on citizens' perceptions of that candidate. These gender differences can matter in spite of party cue (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009; Smith, Paul, and Paul 2007; Dolan 2004, 2014). Even in the so-called 1992 "year of the women" election, studies have found that men remained more likely to vote for male than female candidates (Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Dolan 1998). This "gendered voting pattern" was partly due to different policy preferences between male and female voters, and partly due to ideology, such as support for feminism.

Voters often attribute particular leadership qualities and issue skills based on a candidate's gender (Alexander and Andersen 1993). Sanbonmatsu (2002) finds that voters have a "baseline gender preference," with some voters prefer voting for men and others for women. Such underlying predispositions to vote for male or female candidates can be explained by gender stereotypes about candidate beliefs, by issue competency and by voter gender. One study finds that women's voting for female Senate candidates in 1992 was related to issues affecting uniquely women's interests where women might be perceived as more competent than men (Paolino 1995). Female voters perceive women candidates to be more competent in handling "feminine" issues related to abortion and women's health and less competent with "masculine" issues such as military affairs (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Lawless 2004; Leeper 1991; Winter 2010; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989; Koch 1999).

In this light, voters who have experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination may find female politicians more competent in addressing these problems politically. Women who experience harassment or

discrimination may, on average, conclude that female candidates or Democrats generally are better at addressing these issues than Republicans. But, by the same token, men may perceive that there is reverse discrimination or that sexual harassment definitions are too broad, leading men to favor male and Republican candidates.

Another path connecting the personal to the political is the evaluation of a candidate's character. For instance, if a candidate is credibly accused of sexual harassment, discrimination, or even tolerating such behavior, it can either undercut the credibility of the politician's official position and/or alter the public's judgment of the candidate's character. Previous research demonstrates that voters judge political figures on their character (Miller, Shanks, and Shapiro 1996; Glasgow and Alvarez 2000; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). A political figure who steals, lies, commits adultery, or sexually harasses will typically be evaluated less positively than one who does not. When the candidate discriminates or harasses, it raises questions about his or her values and suitability for office.

In short, personal experiences can shape political evaluations through issues positions, character evaluations or both. When there is little or no difference between what the public wants and what opposing candidates profess, policies become valence issues, meaning that a candidate's commitment to a goal and relative competence in pursuing the goal matters more than the policy goal, itself.

Nonetheless, the translation of personal experience into political evaluation can also be moderated by partisanship. Partisanship can shape the causal relationship between gender discrimination and vote choice through "filtering" information selectively (Slothuus and Vreese 2010; Carsey and Layman 2006) or causing people to discount news and information that are dissonant with their political beliefs (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001). As polarization and party sorting have increased over time, partisan screening seems to more strongly shape how citizens perceive candidates, political events and actions (Bartels 2002; Jessee 2010; Goren 2002; Kraft, Lodge, and Taber 2015). By the same reasoning, Independents, who are typically less motivated by policy differences, might rely more heavily on their personal experiences with gender discrimination than Democrats or Republicans. To put it another way, personal experiences with sexual harassment and discrimination may shine brighter when partisan filters are weaker (Badas and Stauffer 2019).

We also need to control for other politically relevant attributes that may affect how people evaluate politicians, such as race and socio-economic-demographics.<sup>5</sup> In particular, race can intertwine with gender (McDermott

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<sup>5</sup>There are several variables that may be relevant to our inquiry but are not in our statistical models, such as social media use. Skewed media use may strengthen partisan perceptual biases (Druckman and

1998). For example, despite the fact that black women are more likely than white women to consider themselves “feminists,” a majority of black women voters expressed disbelief in Anita Hill’s testimony against Clarence Thomas (Mansbridge and Tate 1992). In other words, race constructs the way black women experience gender, and, in turn, gender constructs the way black women experience race (Mansbridge and Tate 1992).

## Data and research design

We conducted two surveys in the 2018 primary and general election in California with a commercial polling firm, YouGov. The primary election survey was conducted between May 12 and May 24 in 2018, prior to the primary election in California on June 5. The survey took about 15 min to finish. We then repeated our questions in the general election survey in October. The general election survey was conducted between October 10 and October 24 in 2018. Combining the two surveys yielded a representative sample of 3,291 adult Californians.<sup>6</sup> The sample was reweighted and matched on gender, age, race and education to mimic the demographic profile of the state.<sup>7</sup>

Respondents were asked to self-identify as “Republican”, “Democrat”, “Independent”, or “Others”. We retained the Republican and Democrat categories, combined the last two categories as “Independent/others”, to divide our respondents into three self-reported partisan groups. In addition to socio-political-demographic characteristics, our combined dataset contains a wide range of questions about whether someone has experienced sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination. If answered in the affirmative, we followed up with questions about where this experience occurred, as well as whether the respondent reported the incident or not (and if not, why not).<sup>8</sup>

To examine whether personal experience translates into politics, we included an evaluation of four key political figures, namely President

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Parkin 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998) and mold the way that personal experiences translate into political evaluations (Mutz 1992, 1994). A voter’s general level of political information may also matter. Examining the extent to which personal unemployment experiences influence presidential approval, Mutz (1992, 1993) finds that well-informed voters are more likely to connect personal experiences with political preferences. Other studies also conclude that greater politicization of personal experiences is more likely to occur among the less informed or those who are less well-off (Weatherford 1983; Brody and Sniderman 1977; Myers et al. 2013). However, both social media use and political sophistication were not measured in our survey due to space limitations.

<sup>6</sup>About 10% of respondents answered both the primary and general election surveys. Since their responses about their experiences with harassment or discrimination could change between elections, we retained these respondents in our sample.

<sup>7</sup>The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2016 American Community Survey 1-year sample with selection within strata by sampling with replacements. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The scores were then post-stratified on 2016 presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age, race and education to create the final survey weight.

<sup>8</sup>Results from these questions are reported in the Online Appendix.

Donald Trump, California Governor Jerry Brown and two female senators, Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris. We picked these four figures for several reasons. First, they are all well-known politicians who occupy top positions in state and federal government. Respondents would recognize the names of these candidates and would have developed stable opinions about these candidates.

In addition, these four candidates represent very different types of politicians. Before and during his presidency, on numerous occasions, Trump has been accused of sexual misconduct and being disrespectful of women. In contrast, Jerry Brown, a lifelong Democrat and politician in California and on the national scene, has not been formally associated with any allegation of sexual misconduct.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in 2018, Governor Brown signed into law four bills designed to toughen the state's enforcement of sexual harassment laws and make it easier for victims to pursue civil claims.<sup>10</sup> Under his leadership, California was the first state in the country to enact a law mandating that public companies based in the state have at least one female board member.<sup>11</sup> Apart from filling a descriptive representation criterion, both Senators Harris and Feinstein have been champions of women's rights and gender equality. Both were prominent figures in the contentious Justice Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. Senator Feinstein's handling of Christine Blasey Ford's allegations, in particular, drew the ire of Republicans. In short, there are variations among the candidates in party, gender and actions with respect to sexual harassment and discrimination.

## Evaluation of current political figures

How did our respondents' personal experiences with sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination impact their evaluations of actual political candidates in the 2018 midterm? As discussed earlier, we examine the evaluations of four prominent political candidates; i.e. President Donald Trump, Governor Jerry Brown, and two female legislators, Senator Kamala Harris and Senator Dianne Feinstein. Evaluation of the candidates was based on a five-point Likert scale approval question that ranges from strongly disapprove to strongly approve – 1 (strongly disapprove); 2 (somewhat disapprove); 3 (neither approve nor disapprove); 4 (somewhat approve); 5

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<sup>9</sup>One of Brown's senior staff was accused of sexual misconduct. Brown's office, however, denied knowledge of his staff's sexual misconduct when Brown appointed him as the assistant deputy secretary for administrative affairs at the California Department of Veterans Affairs. For more, see <https://www.latimes.com/politics/essential/la-pol-ca-essential-politics-updates-senate-staffer-accused-of-sexual-1517615006-htmstory.html>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article218830265.html>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/09/30/california-becomes-first-state-to-require-a-woman-on-corporate-boards/>

(strongly approve). We used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for our analyses.<sup>12</sup>

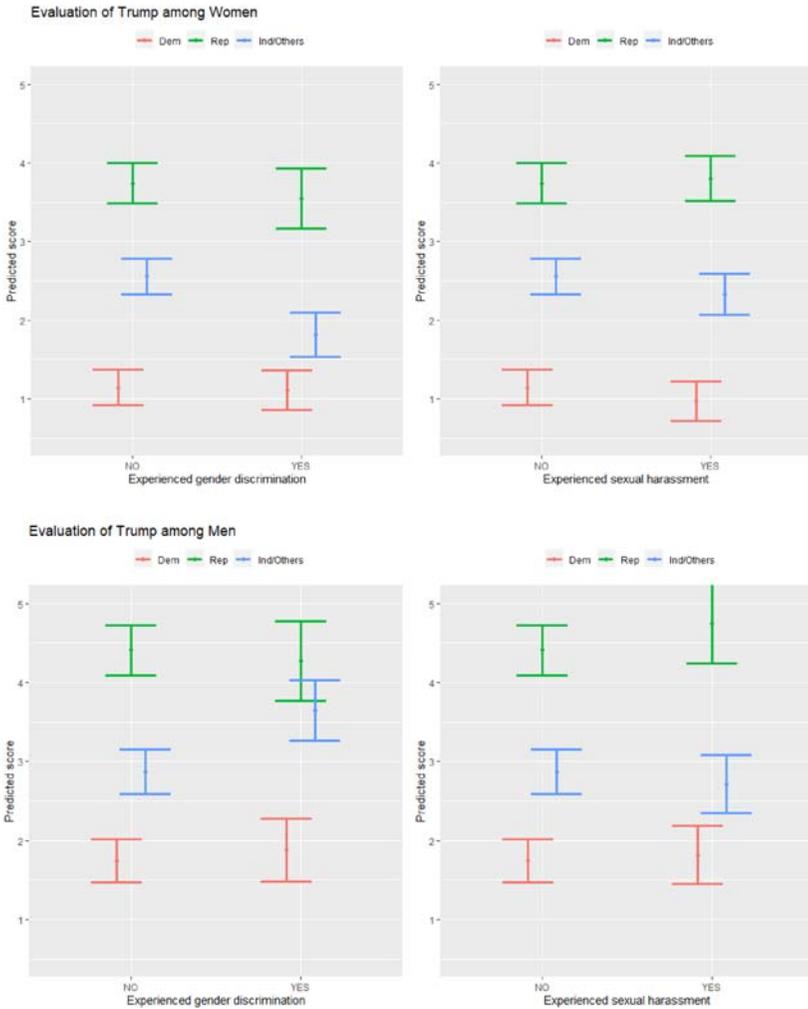
We first ran a model without any interaction terms between personal experiences and partisanship. The results are reported in our Online Appendix Table A7 and A8. In general, we found gender discrimination has a much bigger impact on evaluation than sexual harassment among both men and women. Women who experienced gender discrimination are likely to hold a more negative view of Trump than those who did not experience it. In contrast, women who experienced gender discrimination are more likely to hold a positive view of the other Democratic figures. The pattern reverses for men. Men who experienced gender discrimination are more supportive of Trump and less supportive of the Democratic political figures.

Since there were multiple allegations of President Trump's sexual misconduct during his election campaign and since assuming office, we expected that respondents who experienced sexual harassment and gender discrimination would be more likely to hold a negative view of the President. We hypothesized that the effect of personal experiences on political evaluation would be moderated by partisanship. Given their support for gender equality and stricter sexual harassment enforcement, we hypothesized that the female Democratic candidates might get an extra boost in support, and we thought this would be especially true for Kamala Harris due to her age and alignment with the #MeToo Movement. The variation in candidate characteristics and actions allows us to test whether personal experiences with sexual harassment and discrimination mattered, controlling for voters' partisanship.

To assess the moderating effect of partisanship, we expanded our baseline model and added interaction terms between personal experiences and party identification. We reported the full OLS results in Online Appendix Table A2 (for women) and A3 (for men). For ease of illustration, we presented the predicted scores from OLS for those who experienced sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination by gender and party identification. As [Figures 1–4](#) reveal, partisanship is the major predictor of evaluation regardless of gender. In sum, comparing between the effect of sexual harassment and gender discrimination, the latter has a stronger impact on the evaluation of political figures. Comparing among three partisan groups, Independents react more strongly than Republicans and Democrats. Among those who experienced gender discrimination, Independent women respond most negatively to Trump while Independent men respond more positively. People of both genders who self-identify as Democrats hold the most negative view of President Trump, while people who self-identify as Republicans carry the most positive. Among Democrat women, experiencing sexual

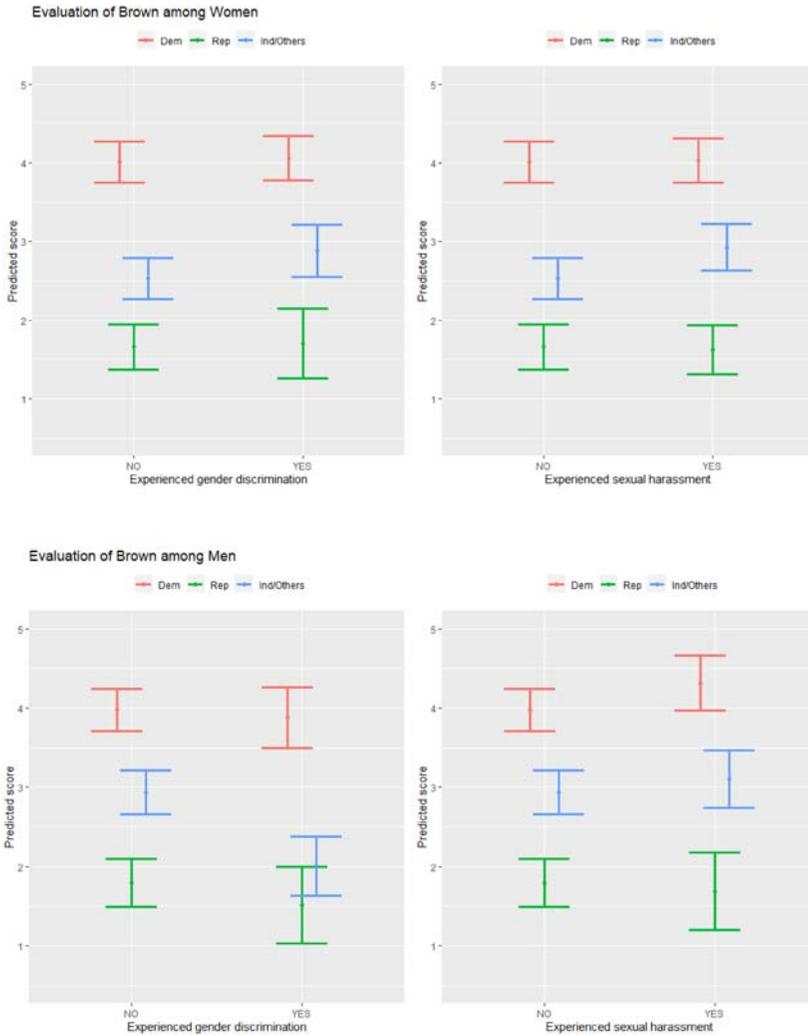
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<sup>12</sup>We also used ordinal logistic regression. Since the results are almost identical to that using OLS regression, we will report the OLS results in this paper as they are easier to interpret.



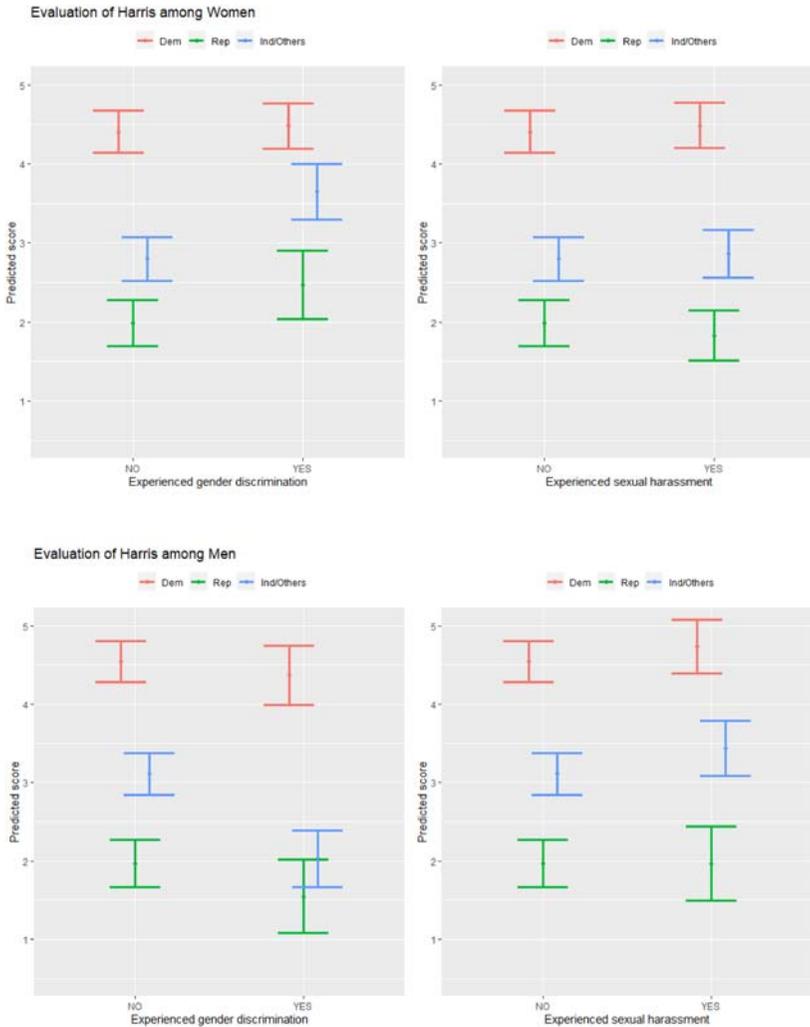
**Figure 1.** Evaluation of Trump among Women and Men. Note: Dependent variable is a 5-point Likert scale evaluation of candidates (1 = strongly disapprove; 5 = strongly approve). Female independent identifiers who experienced gender discrimination are more likely to have a negative evaluation of Trump. Experiencing gender discrimination has a bigger effect among Independent women than sexual harassment. Male Independent identifiers who experienced gender discrimination are more likely to have a positive evaluation of Trump. And Republican men who experienced sexual harassment become more likely to support Trump than Republican men who have not experienced sexual harassment.

harassment made them less likely to support Trump. All the interaction terms between gender discrimination and being Independents are statistically significant. In other words, for both genders, the impacts of gender discrimination are felt more stronger among Independent than Democrats.



**Figure 2.** Evaluation of Brown among Women and Men. Note: Dependent variable is a 5-point Likert scale evaluation of candidates (1 = strongly disapprove; 5 = strongly approve). The effect of harassment or discrimination on evaluation is stronger among Independent women. We observe a drop in predicted scores among Republican and Independent men who experienced gender discrimination.

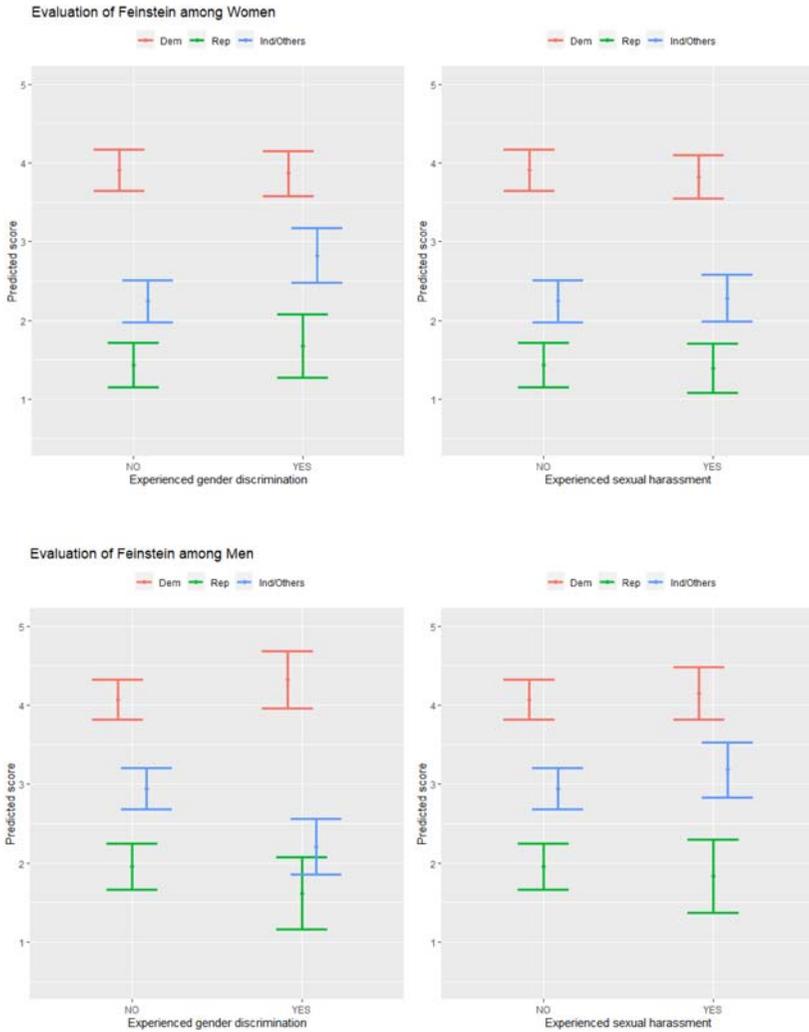
Consider next the three equations that predict the evaluation of the Democratic candidates on the same ballot. Again, partisanship is the strongest predictor of evaluation, regardless of gender. Unlike Donald Trump, Jerry Brown had no previous allegations of sexual misconduct in his record and adopted the standard Democratic positions on gender discrimination. Consequently, the respondent’s personal experience with sexual harassment



**Figure 3.** Evaluation of Harris among Women and Men. Note: Dependent variable is a 5-point Likert scale evaluation of candidates (1 = strongly disapprove; 5 = strongly approve). The effect of harassment or discrimination on evaluation is stronger among Independent women. We observe the biggest drop in predicted scores among Independent men who experienced gender discrimination.

or gender discrimination does not project onto Brown's evaluation. Democratic women are more pro-Brown than Independent women, regardless of their experience with sexual harassment.

The party-personal experience interaction effect is stronger in the case of Senator Feinstein, a female candidate who is also a centrist but one who played a highly visible role in the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. As with Brown, Independent women who experienced gender discrimination were



**Figure 4.** Evaluation of Feinstein among Women and Men. Note: Dependent variable is a 5-point Likert scale evaluation of candidates (1 = strongly disapprove; 5 = strongly approve). We observe the biggest drop in predicted scores among Independent men who experienced gender discrimination and the biggest jump in score among Independent women.

more likely to have a positive evaluation of Feinstein. This suggests an electoral advantage beyond the same party for a female Democratic candidate when the female voter has experienced gender discrimination. This could be due to the benefits of descriptive representation, signaling perhaps more credibility and commitment to these issues than a centrist male Democratic candidate is presumed to have, or it could be related to Feinstein’s

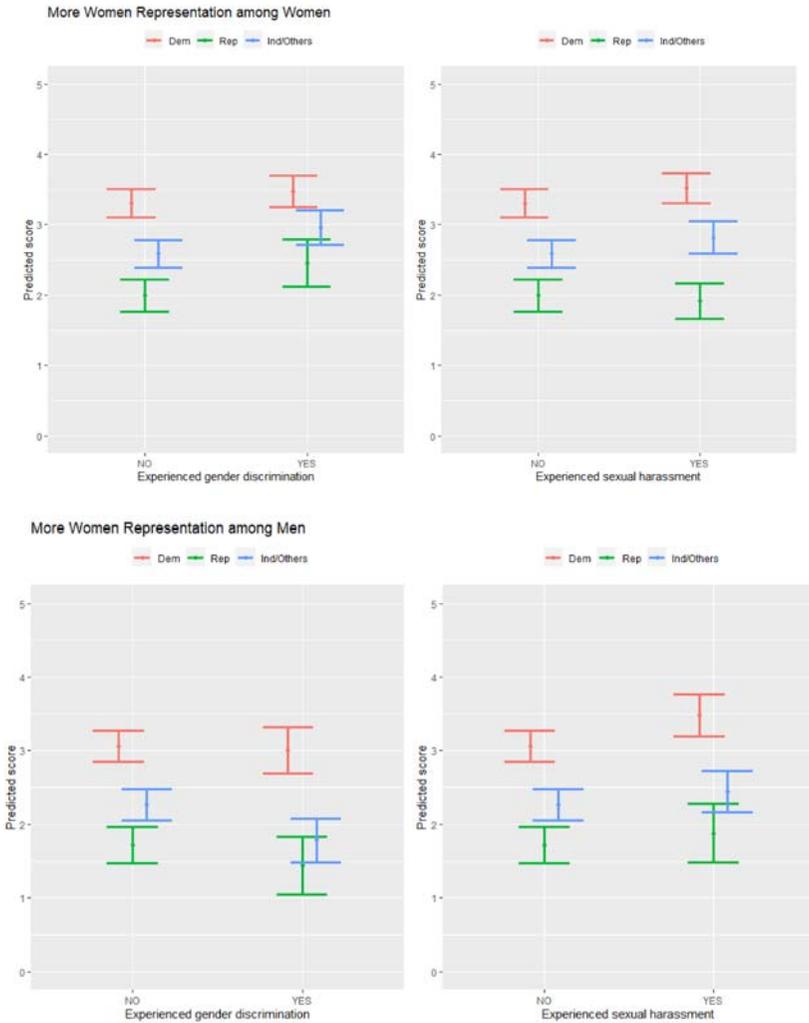
prominence in the Kavanaugh hearings. However, the advantage from female voters is counterbalanced by evidence of male backlash from Independent men who experienced gender discrimination. The same pattern among men appears in the Harris and Brown evaluations. Independent men who experienced gender discrimination were more likely to disapprove of Democratic candidates than Democratic men, regardless of the candidate's gender. Independent men who experienced gender discrimination are less approving of Democratic candidates than Independent men who have not experienced gender discrimination, regardless of the candidate's gender. We contend that this may indicate a rejection by Independent men of the more pro-women policy positions adopted by the Democratic Party.

On average, the personal experience effect seems to be strongest among Independents. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that party filters are weaker for them, and Independents put stronger emphasis on personal qualities than partisans (Weisberg and Rusk 1970; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Female Senator Kamala Harris, who is younger and more progressive than Governor Brown or Senator Feinstein, benefits from women's personal experiences with gender discrimination more than Brown or Feinstein, but, at the same time, she loses more support from men who experienced discrimination. This also seems to be true for Brown, suggesting that gender discrimination is a more partisan issue for men, as compared to sexual harassment.

### **More women representation**

Among the electorate, Dolan and Sanbonmatsu (2009) observe high support among the general public to elect more women in public offices, especially among women. Yet women politicians remain underrepresented in various levels of government offices. The descriptive underrepresentation of women among office holders likely means that some issues that are more salient to women than men receive less political attention. In this section, we examine whether personal experiences of harassment or discrimination may also affect preferences for female candidates in the future.

Our survey asked respondents if they think it is important to have more women elected to public offices. Based on the answer, we created an ordinal variable (1 = not important at all; 4 = very important to me). We used OLS regression for our analyses. The full results are presented in Online Appendix Table A4. As before, we present the predicted scores by gender and party identification in Figure 5. Once again, party identification matters: Democratic identifiers are notably more likely to say that electing more women is very important to them than Republican and Independent identifiers. However, female Democrats are more supportive of having more women in the office when they have experienced either sexual



**Figure 5.** Importance of More Female Representation in Governments Among Women. Note: Dependent variable is a 4-point Likert scale on the importance of raising female representation in governments (1 = not important at all; 4 = very important). The graphs here show the predicted approval score by personal experiences, party identification and gender. As expected, women tend to favor more females elected to public offices. Republican and Independent male respondents, particularly those who experienced gender discrimination, are less likely to want more female representation in governments than Democratic male respondents.

harassment or discrimination whereas male Democrats seem to translate their sexual harassment and discrimination experiences differently with respect to this issue. The negative coefficient for Republican women who have experienced sexual harassment indicates that they are significantly

less likely than Democratic women to prefer more women in office—a reflection perhaps of their acceptance of traditional gendered roles. Independent men who believe they have experienced gender discrimination are significantly less likely to think it is important to have more women in office.

## Discussion and conclusion

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination are distinct in important ways, yet both can be psychologically traumatizing experiences (Schmitt, Branscombe, and Postmes 2003; Pascoe and Richman 2009) that could theoretically translate into political actions. That seems to be true in some cases, but not all. Even though support for preventing sexual harassment and gender discrimination is generally widespread, when it came to evaluating actual candidates, experiences were both moderated by partisan affiliation especially and gender as well. Democratic Party identifiers had such strong prior partisan predispositions that personal experiences with harassment or discrimination did not significantly influence their already highly negative evaluations of Trump nor their support for the Democratic candidates. Similarly, Republican support for Republican candidate was also largely unaffected by either sexual discrimination or harassment (with the exception of increasing male Republican opposition for Feinstein). Rather it seems that personal experience with gender discrimination especially had its strongest effect on Independent voters, but, and in different ways for men and women. For women, it made them more critical of President Trump and more supportive of the Democratic candidates. For Independent men, it had the opposite effect. In short, the gender divide with respect to personal experience was clearer when the partisan affiliations were weaker and it produced different effects for men and women.

When we looked at the impact of personal experiences with sexual harassment and discrimination on a preference for more women in office, we see that the personal experiences added to the preference of Democratic women for more females in office and only sexual harassment mattered for Democratic men. Male and female Republicans were generally less enthusiastic about the idea, including even women who had personally experienced sexual harassment. Independent men who experienced gender discrimination were less inclined than Democrats to think that there was a need for more women in office, compared to those who have not experienced gender discrimination.

In general, from Figures 1–4, we observe that among independents, it seems as though personal experiences with gender discrimination had more effect than personal experiences with sexual harassment in 2018. One explanation might be that aside from President Trump, there was no candidate on the ballot in California who had been publicly accused of sexual

harassment. It is also possible that sexual harassment simply has not yet evolved as clearly into a partisan framing and might never do so in the future. A voter's personal experience with sexual harassment may be due primarily to context specific bad actions by colleagues, employers and others, rather than directly linked to party or candidate policies. By comparison, gender discrimination is more closely tied to traditional party and candidate differences over gender roles, affirmative action and attitudes towards pay equity. Gender discrimination may connect to policy differences more directly than sexual harassment.

Returning to the more general question of personal experience, there are clear parallels with previous findings of personal finances and the economy. Voters' personal experiences can heighten the salience of an issue and mold opinions on policy. But what the parties and candidates say and do is equally critical. If no one publicly defends sexual harassment, then it has become a valence issue, and what matters is not what position the candidate takes but what actions the candidate takes. In other words, the personal becomes political only if it links to actual candidate behavior.

Lastly, there are several limitations to our study. We only examined the California voters who are predominantly pro-Democratic. Since there are no prominent office holders from the Republican Party in the state, we cannot evaluate how personal experience with sexual harassment or gender discrimination would affect a Republican political figure. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other states, or even nationally, to see if the results stand.

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