

Trump, the 2016 Election, and Expressions of Sexism*

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Abstract

The amount of prejudice that people express in social situations, in private conversations, or even on public opinion surveys is not a direct reflection of their views, but rather the result of a process of suppression and justification. Accordingly, the expression of prejudice can be influenced both by a change in one's internal cognitive calculations and also by a change in how one perceives the norms of their social environment. In this paper, I examine how the 2016 election influenced the expression of sexist viewpoints among Republicans. Specifically, I find that partisan motivated reasoning made Republicans more willing to express tolerance for sexist rhetoric when it came from Trump rather than from another source. Additionally, I show that Republicans became more willing to endorse sexist statements after the 2016 election, likely due to the fact that Trump's victory changed their perceptions about the prevalence of sexist attitudes in American society. This increase in expressed sexism has persisted into 2018.

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The 2016 presidential election put explicit expressions of prejudice at center stage. Most notably, Republican nominee Donald Trump made frequent racist and sexist remarks during both the primary and general election campaigns. Many of his sexist remarks were aimed at Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, who embraced her role as the first major party female presidential candidate. For example, when Trump accused Clinton of “playing the woman card” she responded by selling woman cards’ to supporters to raise campaign funds. Rhetoric relating to gender and sexism became even more central during the final month of the campaign when the Access Hollywood tape created even more controversy about Trump’s treatment of women. Indeed, one of Hillary Clinton’s final advertisements during the campaign featured a litany of Trump’s sexist quotations before ending with the argument that these statements made Trump unfit to be president.¹ This led to the expectation, in the minds of many, that the 2016 election would be “a referendum on male entitlement” (Bennetts 2016).

Given the intense focus on sexism during the campaign, it is unsurprising that sexist attitudes played a significant role in the vote decisions of Americans in 2016 (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen, 2018). Even after controlling for a wide range of other factors, sexism was a strong predictor of the presidential vote, with more sexist respondents voting for Trump over Clinton by large margins. But the campaign may also have affected the balance of considerations that people face when it comes to their own tolerance for (and expressions of) prejudice.

In this paper, I draw on social psychological theories about expressions of prejudice in conjunction with theories of motivated reasoning to consider how Trump’s rhetoric and, ultimately, the outcome of the 2016 election may have affected expressions of sexist attitudes among Republicans. Specifically, I argue that Trump’s sexist remarks gave Republicans a justification for expressing sexism in order to achieve partisan directional goals. Additionally,

¹The advertisement, “What he believes,” was released by the Clinton campaign on November 1st, 2016.

these partisan motivations were reinforced by Trump’s victory in the election, which acted as a signal about the acceptability of sexist attitudes. Using a survey experiment and panel survey data, I find evidence that Republicans expressed less discomfort with sexist remarks when they came from Trump (as opposed to an acquaintance) and that they expressed higher levels of hostile sexism after Trump’s surprising victory. There were no such effects among Democrats. Ultimately, then, the 2016 election served to further divide the parties on issues of gender equality (Huddy and Willmann, 2017).

Sexism and the Justification-Suppression Model

Sexism – simply defined as prejudice against women – plays a prevalent role in modern American society. Even in recent surveys, many Americans are willing to agree to statements that suggest a resentment towards women who push for gender equality. For example, in a 2016 survey, nearly one-in-four Americans of both sexes agreed with the statement that “women seek to gain power by getting control over men” while over 30% expressed agreement that “when women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.” These items come from the hostile sexism battery developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) and they coincide with the brand of sexism that Donald Trump appealed to when calling Clinton a “nasty woman” or complaining about her use of the “woman card.” Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta (2018) find the individuals with the highest levels of hostile sexism voted for Trump by 20-30 points more than the least sexist people, even when controlling for racial attitudes, economic indicators, demographics, partisanship, and ideology. Other studies have demonstrated a similar role for sexism in predicting support for Trump, even during the primaries (Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno, 2018).

Important, however, is the distinction between genuine prejudice and the expression of prejudice. According to the justification-suppression model, outlined by Crandall and

Eshleman (2003), an individual's true prejudice is often suppressed or inhibited by both external and internal factors. As Crandall and Eshleman (2003) explain, "People suppress prejudice both to maintain a nonprejudiced appearance and to deny prejudice to themselves and maintain a nonprejudiced self-concept" (p. 420). In other words, people may suppress their prejudice to conform to norms about what kind of language is acceptable in a particular social situation (an external motivation), but they also may do so in order to adhere to their own standards, such as a commitment to egalitarianism (an internal motivation). What this means is that the sexism that a person reveals in conversation or even in responses to survey questions is often not reflective of the true sexist attitudes that they actually hold (Roese and Jamieson, 1993).

While suppression of prejudice is often a default state for many people, justifications offer a release from this suppression. As Ford et al. (2008) put it, "Justifications allow people to express an otherwise suppressed prejudice without feeling self-directed negative affect (e.g. guilt, shame) or fearing negative social sanctions" (p. 160). For example, multiple studies have found that supporting Barack Obama gave whites a sense of holding "moral credentials" which were used as a justification to express prejudice against blacks in other situations (Effron, Cameron, and Monin, 2009; Kaiser et al., 2009). With regard to expressions of sexism, a series of studies found that when people are exposed to sexist humor they become more likely to express prejudice against women (Ford et al., 2008; Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion, 2001). This pattern occurs because the sexist humor shifts the local norms in a way that allows some to feel justified in expressing prejudice towards women that they would otherwise suppress.

Thus, it is clear that a variety of factors can affect the extent to which individuals express, condone, or endorse prejudice. In this paper, I explore (1) the role of partisan motivated reasoning and (2) signals sent by election outcomes in facilitating justifications for the expression of prejudice.

Study 1: Partisan Motivated Reasoning as a Justification for Expressing Sexism

Motivated reasoning occurs when people assess new information with a goal to “arrive at a particular conclusion” (Kunda, 1990). In politics, partisan goals often dominate reasoning (Druckman and Bolsen, 2011; Campbell et al., 1960; Bullock, 2009; Petersen et al., 2013; Taber and Lodge, 2006), often leading people to hold incorrect information about the state of the world because such information reinforces their partisan preferences. Partisan motivations generally lead people to be open to statements and views made by their own co-partisans while they reject arguments made by those from the other party (Zaller, 1992).

It is easy to see how partisan motivated reasoning may serve as a justification for releasing the suppression of prejudice. After all, a person who otherwise might feel negatively about themselves for expressing prejudicial viewpoints may feel significantly better about doing so if it helps them achieve partisan motivated goals. For example, a sexist Republican may generally mask the extent to which they agree with sexist statements in order to maintain a positive self-image. However, if they are asked to assess Donald Trump’s use of sexist language, then their calculation changes. There may still be a desire to maintain a positive self-image by expressing displeasure with such statements, but there is also a countervailing desire to feel warmly towards the party’s presidential nominee. Put another way, expressions of prejudice are easier to justify when they allow one to avoid cognitive dissonance that would come from being critical of something said by a prominent politician in the person’s party.

Experiment

Are individuals willing to reduce the suppression of prejudice in order to achieve partisan motivated goals? To answer this question, I fielded an experiment on a module to the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The experiment appeared on

the pre-election questionnaire and was administered to 1,000 respondents who were interviewed between September 28th and November 6th. The aim of the experiment was to examine whether introducing partisan motivations would influence how people reacted to sexist comments.

The experiment was designed to ask respondents about the types of comments Donald Trump had made about women during his past. In the control condition, respondents were given the following hypothetical scenario:

Imagine that during a conversation, a male acquaintance referred to one woman as “a dog” and then later in the same conversation referred to his wife as a “beautiful piece of ass.”

Respondents were then asked how these comments would make them feel on a five-point scale ranging from “very uncomfortable” to “very comfortable.” In the treatment condition, respondents were told the following:

During the past year, Donald Trump publicly referred to one woman as “a dog” and referred to his wife as a “beautiful piece of ass.”

Respondents were then asked how the statements made them feel and were given the same five-point scale for their responses.

If motivated reasoning provides a justification for people to express more prejudice, then we should find that Republicans in the treatment condition are more comfortable with the statements than those in the control condition. This would occur because Republicans’ partisan motives provide a justification for undermining their motivations to suppress their prejudice. For Democrats, their discomfort with these statements should either not differ across the treatment and control conditions or they may even express more discomfort with the statements in the Trump condition since any partisan motives would reinforce their suppression motives.

To divide respondents into Democratic and Republican groups, I use the seven-point party identification scale from the pre-election survey and I include independents who report that they lean towards a particular party as partisans. The analysis that follows includes 495 Democrats and 311 Republicans.

In addition to analyzing the treatment effects by party, I also extend the analysis to determine whether respondents who are more likely to be suppressing their prejudice in the baseline condition are more likely to respond by releasing that prejudice when partisan motivations are introduced. To do this, I rely on three items from the impression-management (IM) portion of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) (Paulhus, 1991). These items are designed to tap the extent to which an individual is generally motivated to mask attitudes that might violate social norms. The three items are as follows:

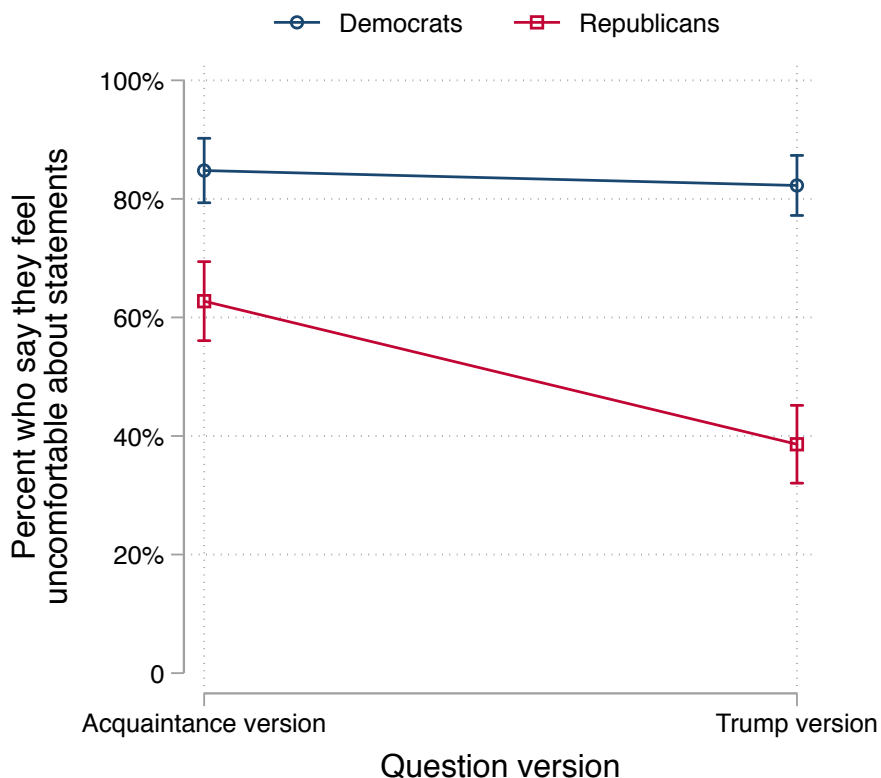
- There have been occasions when I have taken advantage of someone.
- I have said something bad about a friend behind their back.
- I sometimes tell lies if I have to.

Respondents were asked to rate these items on a seven-point scale ranging from “not true” to “completely true.” The reliability coefficient for these three items is .75. I scaled the three items using a Item Response Theory graded response model. The resulting scale is standardized and ranges from -2.2 to 1.7, with higher values indicating that the respondent is more likely to be motivated by goals of preserving a positive social image when they answer questions.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents saying that they felt “somewhat uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” with the statements based on the partisanship of the respondent and the version of the question that they received. The vertical lines represent

Figure 1: Discomfort with sexist statements depending on source, by party id



95% confidence intervals for the estimates. Note that even in the acquaintance version, Republicans were less likely to feel uncomfortable with the remarks compared to Democrats (63% versus 85%). This is not particularly surprising since Republicans generally register higher levels of sexism than Democrats (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2018; Huddy and Willmann, 2017).

However, the key point of interest is the comparison of responses for those in the acquaintance version with those in the version where Trump was tied to the statements. Here we see clear evidence that partisan motivated reasoning led to a release of prejudice among Republicans. In particular, while 63% of Republicans reported that they would be uncomfortable with the statements if they were uttered by an acquaintance, just 39% of Republicans said

Table 1: Distribution of Responses in Acquaintance and Trump Conditions by Party

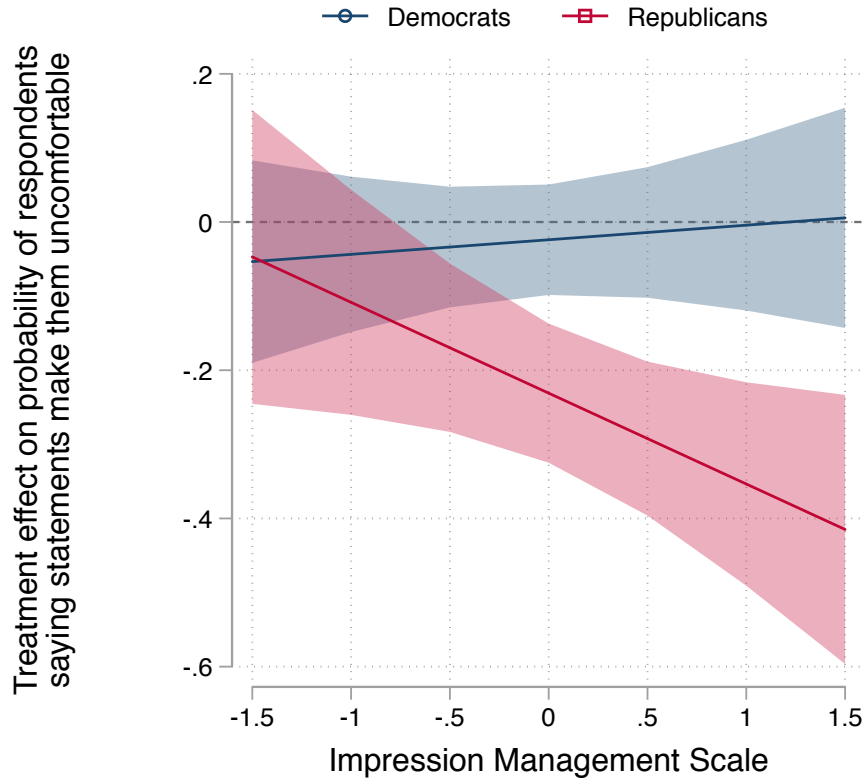
	Democrats		Republicans	
	Acquaintance	Trump	Acquaintance	Trump
Very uncomfortable	63%	69%	38%	20%
Somewhat uncomfortable	22%	14%	25%	19%
Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable	10%	12%	33%	51%
Somewhat comfortable	2%	1%	2%	6%
Very comfortable	3%	4%	2%	4%

that they were uncomfortable with those statements when they were tied to Trump. This amounts to a 24-point drop in discomfort when partisan motivations are introduced ($p < .001$). By comparison, there is virtually no difference in levels of discomfort reported by Democrats in either condition – 85% of Democrats report being uncomfortable with the remarks when they come from an acquaintance while 82% are uncomfortable with them when they come from Trump. This small difference is not statistically significant ($p = .506$).

Table 1 shows more detail about the distribution of responses in the acquaintance and Trump versions. Among Democrats, there is a small shift away from the “somewhat uncomfortable” category and a small (but not statistically significant) increase in the percentage saying that the statements make them “very uncomfortable.” However, responses across the two conditions are not dramatically different for Democratic respondents. However, most interesting is the shift among Republicans. There is a large drop in the percentage of respondents selecting “very uncomfortable” when the statements are attributed to Trump and a large increase in those saying that the statements make them “neither uncomfortable nor comfortable.”

Figure 2 plots the extent to which the treatment effects documented in Figure 1 are conditional on an individual’s impression management score. These conditional effects are produced from a simple regression model where the treatment indicator was interacted with the variable for partisanship and the impression management score. Recall that people with higher impression management scores are generally more motivated to suppress their preju-

Figure 2: Treatment effects of attributing statements to Trump conditional on respondent's score on impression management items



dice.² The results plotted in Figure 2 provide additional evidence that partisan motivations provide justifications for reducing the suppression of prejudice. Specifically, note that for people low in impression management, levels of discomfort in the Trump condition differ little from discomfort in the acquaintance condition. This would be expected since individuals with low levels of impression management are less likely to suppress their prejudice in the first place. Thus, introducing partisan motivations has little effect on whether they report that the statements make them uncomfortable.

²In the acquaintance condition, 70% of Republicans who scored above the mean on the impression management scale said they were uncomfortable with the statements, compared to 54% for Republicans below the mean on the impression management scale.

However, as a Republican's impression management score increases, the treatment effect of being in the Trump condition grows increasingly large and statistically distinguishable from zero. In other words, among people who are more motivated to suppress their prejudice, the Trump condition served as a release, presumably by introducing partisan motivations. Note that there is no such conditional effect among Democrats. This is to be expected since Democrats should be equally motivated to suppress prejudice in both conditions given that the partisan motivations introduced by attributing the quotations to Trump do not run counter to the urge to suppress their sexism.

Study 2: The 2016 Election Outcome as a Justification for Expressing Sexism

The results from study 1 show that partisan motivations can serve as a release for expressions of sexism by introducing cognitive benefits for doing so. In Study 2, I examine whether the outcome of an election in which sexism was a major issue may have also provided a justification for releasing sexist attitudes.

Generally speaking, there are strong norms against the expression of explicit prejudice towards women (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986; Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). These norms serve to increase the suppression of prejudice even among those who hold prejudicial views. However, when people receive signals about the shifting of norms or when norms are ambiguous, there are increased justifications to express prejudice (Blanchard et al., 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, and Vaughn, 1991; Zitek and Hebl, 2007; Paluck, 2009). One salient signal about social norms relates to the perceived prevalence of prejudice among one's peers. After all, people may feel more justified to express prejudiced viewpoints when they believe that many other people like themselves share those viewpoints. Social psychology experiments have found consistent support for this expectation – people tend to express lower levels of

prejudice when they are made to think that others are not prejudiced, and they express more prejudice when they believe the opposite is true (Blanchard et al., 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, and Vaughn, 1991; Zitek and Hebl, 2007).

Based on this existing body of work, it is reasonable to expect that the 2016 presidential election may have served as a signal to many individuals about the prevalence of sexist attitudes among the American public. After all, Trump frequently made high-profile sexist comments during the campaign and was also exposed as making particularly lewd comments about women on the Access Hollywood tape, which was released a month before the election. The Clinton campaign focused considerable attention on Trump’s sexist remarks and deeds in an attempt to dissuade voters from supporting him. In late October, when the first wave of our survey was in the field, Trump was widely expected to lose the election. In fact, a poll conducted by CNN two weeks before the election showed that just 27% of Americans thought he would win.³ In such a climate, sexist Republicans may have felt that their views were not widely shared and thus felt more motivated to suppress those prejudices.

And then Trump won the election, a victory that surprised most Americans and likely shifted peoples’ perceptions about the extent to which the prejudices that Trump verbalized on the campaign trail were widely held. Indeed, there is evidence that the election did play such a role. Crandall, Miller, and White (2018) interviewed a convenience sample of 388 individuals recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform before and after the 2016 election. The researchers found that subjects perceived a higher level of tolerance for prejudicial viewpoints after the election than they had before and that this was largely limited to the groups that Trump had targeted during the campaign. As Crandall, Miller, and White (2018) note, “It was most likely the election itself – the public endorsement of Trump by the American people – that changed perceptions.”

³<https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/25/politics/hillary-clinton-2016-election-poll/index.html>

Panel Data

Did Trump’s election serve as a justification for Republicans to reduce the extent to which they suppressed their sexist views? To answer this question, I analyze data from a nationally representative panel survey of American adults conducted in three waves. The first wave of the survey was conducted October 25th-31st, 2016; the second wave was fielded March 1st-20th, 2017, and the third wave was in the field from July 17th-August 3rd, 2018. In this paper, we limit our analysis to the 731 respondents who answered our survey in each wave. Respondents were recruited and interviewed by the survey firm YouGov.

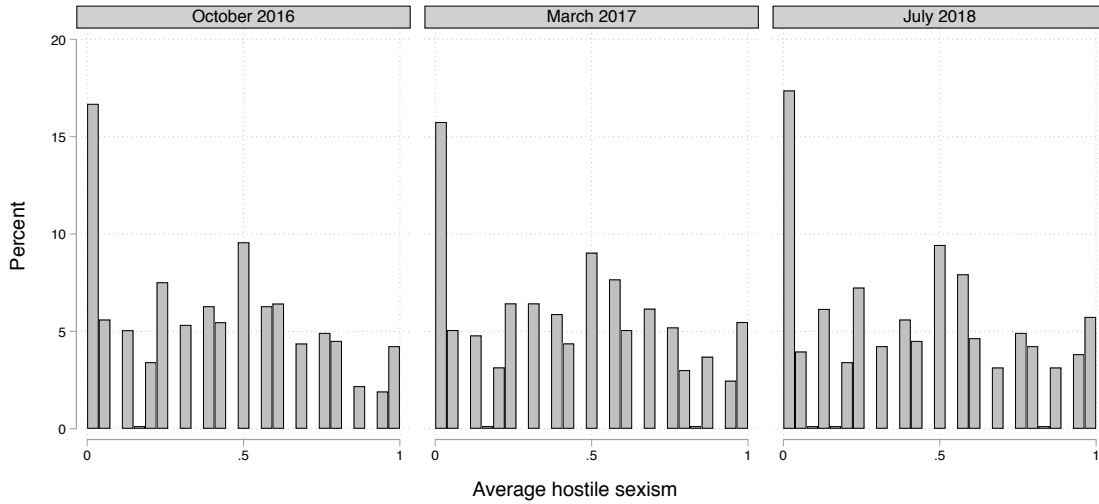
The dependent variable for the analysis is each respondent’s average response to four items from the hostile sexism battery developed by Glick and Fiske (1996). In each wave of the survey, respondents were asked to register their level of agreement with the following statements:

- Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for “equality.”
- Women are too easily offended.
- Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
- When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.

Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from “disagree strongly” (1) to “agree strongly” (5), with strong agreement indicating higher levels of hostile sexism. I averaged the responses for these four items and then re-scaled the average to range from 0 to 1. Figure 3 shows the distribution of hostile sexism scores for panelists in each of the three waves.

As noted above, I expect that the election will increase justifications for expressions of sexism among Republicans, but not among Democrats or Independents. Thus, I examine the change in hostile sexism according to how a respondent identified in the first wave of

Figure 3: Distribution of Hostile Sexism Scores Across Three Waves of Survey



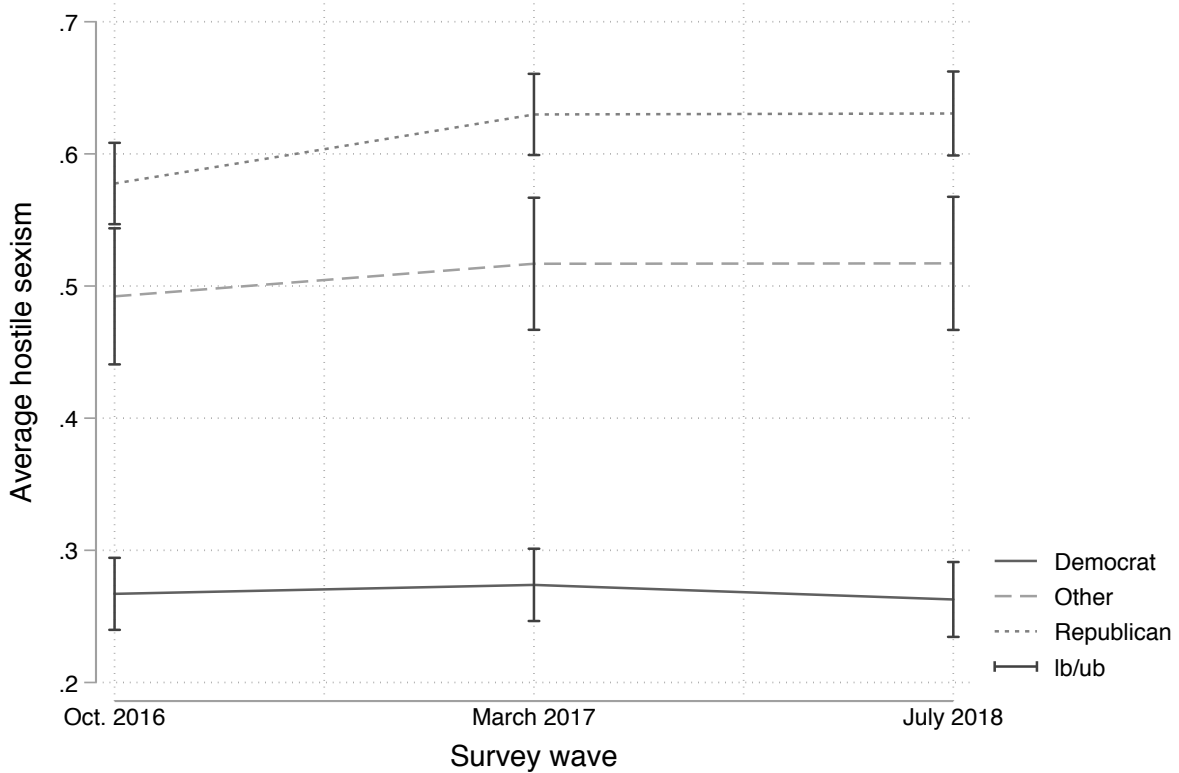
Graphs by Survey wave

the survey. As with the first study, my categorization of respondents includes independent-leaningers as partisans. The sample of individuals responding to all three waves of the survey includes 367 people classified as Democrats in wave 1, 228 classified as Republicans, and 136 who were true independents or affiliated with another party. Note that in all analyses I use only wave 1 party identification to differentiate respondents in order to ensure that any change detected is the result of shifting responses on the sexism scale among the same group of respondents rather than due to the pool of those identifying as Republicans or Democrats changing over time.

Results

Figure 4 shows the average level of sexism for people identifying as Republican, Democrat, or other across the three waves of the panel survey. The vertical bars in the figure represent 95% confidence intervals. Even in wave 1, Republicans expressed significantly higher levels of hostile sexism than Democrats; the average level for Democrats in wave 1 was .27 (on a 0 to 1 scale) while Republicans had an average level of .58. For Democrats, there is no

Figure 4: Hostile Sexism Across 3 Panel Waves, by first wave party id



statistically significant or substantively meaningful change in sexism across the three waves. By wave 3, Democrats registered an average hostile sexism score that is just .005 different from their average in wave 1.

Republicans, on the other hand, do see a statistically significant increase in hostile sexism between waves 1 and 2. Just before the election, the average hostile sexism for Republican respondents was .58. Five months later, the average hostile sexism for Republicans had increased to .63. This difference is statistically significant ($p = .018$) and, substantively, amounts to a five point increase on a 0 to 1 scale. One way to think about the size of this effect is to consider that a .05 increase in the scale would occur if one-in-four Republicans moved one-point towards a more sexist response on each of the four questions (without any Republicans moving in the opposite direction). This increase is particularly noteworthy

given that Republicans already start at a high level of sexism in Wave 1 (thus there is less room for increase in subsequent waves).

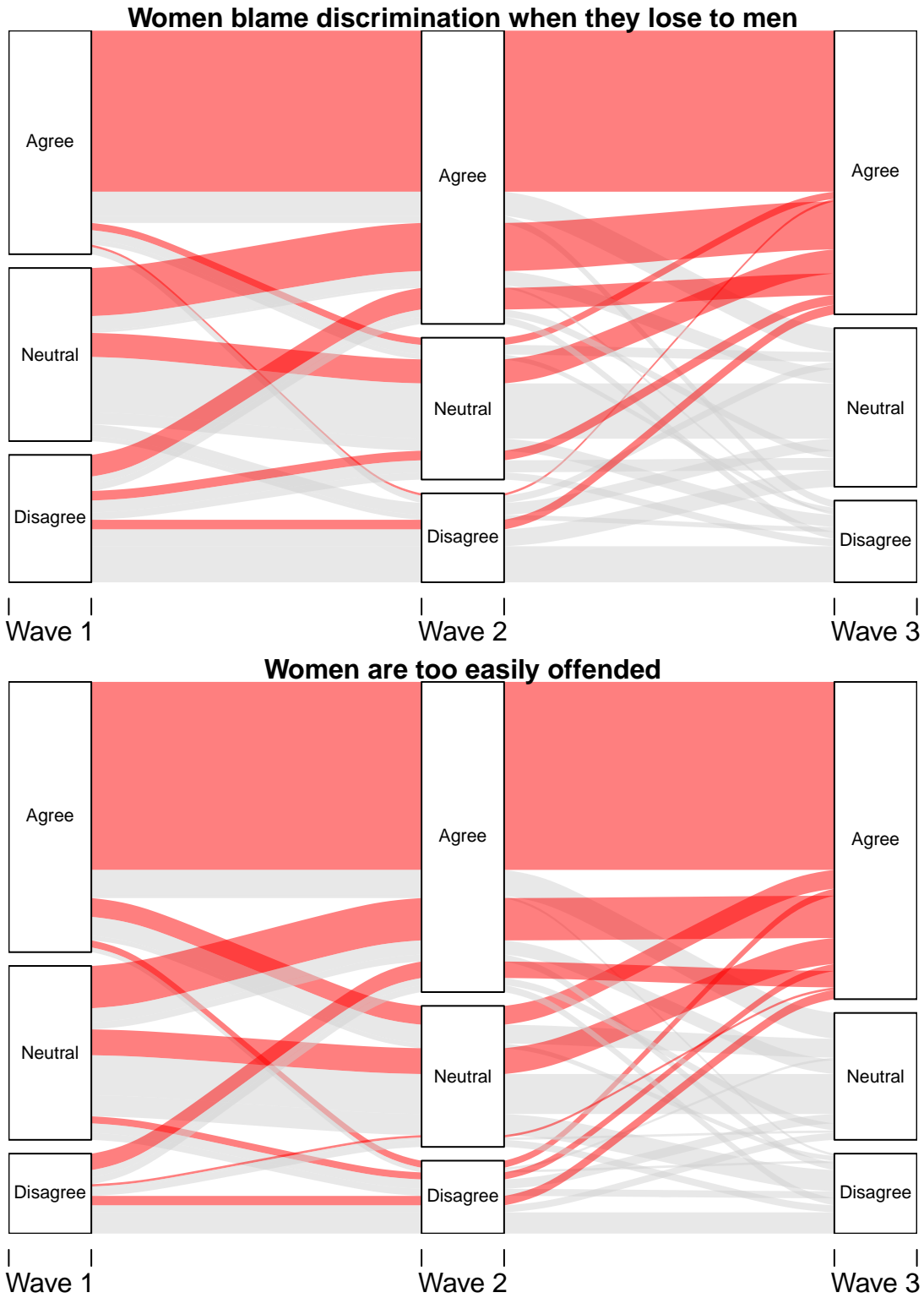
It is also important to note that the increase in expressed sexism is evidenced among both male and female Republicans alike. Notably, the increase in sexism appears to stabilize after wave 2; in wave 3 sexism remained at .63 among Republican respondents.

Recall that the justification-suppression model of prejudice would lead us to expect that Republicans who were suppressing prejudice before the election may have felt justification to reduce that suppression after Trump's victory. This theory can help to inform where we might most expect to observe change in the questions that comprise the hostile sexism battery. For example, an individual who is prejudiced towards women would generally express agreement (or strong agreement) with one of the four statements I use for a reduced hostile sexism battery in this paper. However, in suppressing such a response, that individual might instead select the neutral value on the scale. It is less likely that the act of suppression would move the individual all the way toward expressing disagreement with the statement. Thus, we might expect to find that the increased sexism expressed by Republicans after the election largely came from people who gave neutral responses to the hostile sexism questions before the election.

Figure 5 shows the movement of Republicans between response categories of two hostile sexism questions across the three waves. I selected these two questions as they are the two for which movement was the largest after the election. For ease of presentation, I have collapsed the upper- and lower-two categories of the scale so that responses 4 and 5 are combined into the boxes labeled "agree" and responses 1 and 2 are combined into the "disagree" boxes. The boxes are sized relative to the percentage of Republicans in each group in each wave. The red shaded lines highlight respondents who end up in the "agree" categories in the third wave. Each shaded line is sized relative to the size of the group.

Starting with the top plot, note that the percentage of Republicans agreeing that "when

Figure 5: Change in responses to hostile sexism questions across waves among those identifying as Republicans in Wave 1



women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against” increases from wave 1 to wave 2 while the neutral and disagree boxes shrink. Note also, from the red shaded lines, that of those who move into the agree category after wave 1, the largest share come from those who were in the neutral category in wave 1. A much smaller group of respondents come from the disagree end of the scale. Note, as well, that most respondents who shifted into the agree categories in wave 2 remained in those categories in wave 3.

The bottom plot in Figure 5 shows a very similar pattern. The largest group moving into the agree categories comes from those giving a neutral response in wave 1 and most of that group remained in the agree categories in wave 3 as well. Thus, overall, endorsements of sexist statements increased among Republicans after the 2016 election and have remained high into 2018. This shift appears to have come mostly from Republicans moving from neutral response categories in 2016 to agreement categories in 2017 and 2018.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented evidence that the 2016 election introduced justifications for Republicans to express more sexist viewpoints than they would have otherwise. Two complementary processes appear to be responsible for this dynamic. First, partisan motivated reasoning gave Republicans a justification for reducing the suppression of prejudice against women because doing so helped them to achieve partisan goals by tolerating or even endorsing sexist statements that Trump made. Second, the outcome of the election itself served as a signal to Republicans about the extent to which other Americans found Trump’s sexist remarks acceptable. As a result, Republicans have scored higher on the hostile sexism battery since the election.

Note that the argument here is not that Republicans have actually become more sexist,

but rather that they have become more justified in expressing their underlying sexism. In many ways, this shows the striking effect that Trump's rise to prominence and his successful campaign have had on affecting perceived norms about expressions of prejudice, at least among Republicans. Indeed, in another study, I have shown that Trump's prejudiced rhetoric also affects how people talk about other social groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities. There is also evidence that an opposite process is happening for Democrats. McElwee (2018) reports that white Democrats registered significantly more liberal responses on the racial resentment battery in 2016 than they did in 2011; that is, white Democrats appear to be increasing the suppression of their racial prejudices. Not surprisingly, these changes are happening at the same time that social identities are increasingly overlapping with partisan identities (Mason, 2018).

Of course, the fact that race and gender-based prejudice is becoming increasingly linked with partisanship in the minds of voters is troubling. Norms are most powerful when they are clear and universal (Zitek and Hebl, 2007). Yet, if perceptions about norms regarding expressions of prejudice become increasingly tied to partisanship, then those norms become contingent and ambivalent, and individuals therefore find it easier to express their own prejudices in either word or deed (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Thus, what is needed are actions that serve to undermine this link between partisanship and expressions of prejudice; namely, Republican politicians who are clear and forceful in sanctioning prejudiced rhetoric that comes from Trump or others in their party. Hopefully, such sanctions will serve to promote the notion that there is a global norm against expressions of prejudice, thereby reducing the ability of people to justify the expression of racist and sexist views.

Appendix

Figure A.1: Discomfort with sexist statements depending on source, by party id and gender

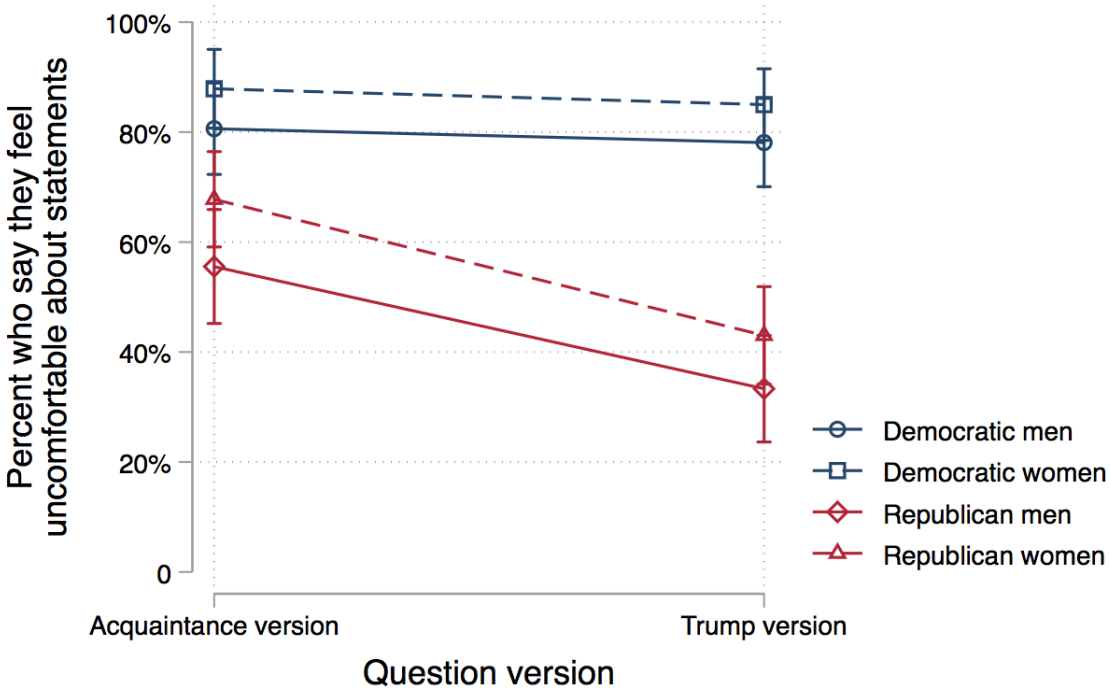
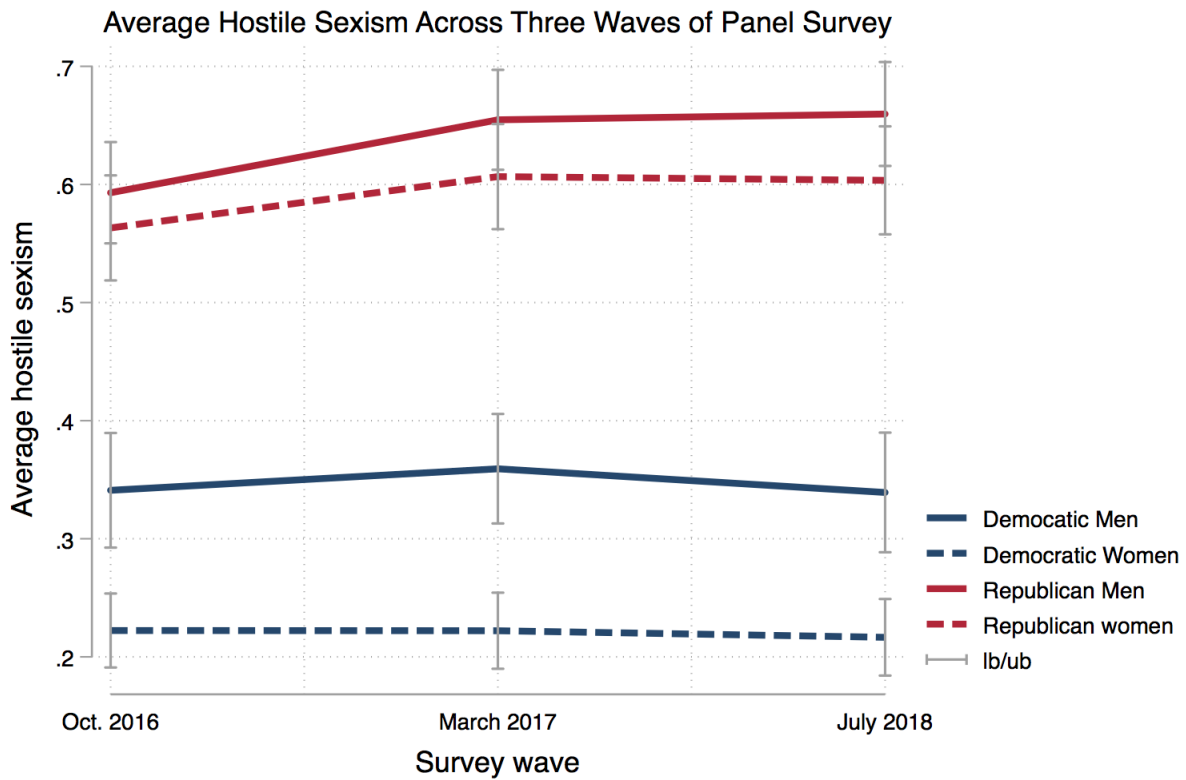


Figure A.2: Hostile Sexism Across 3 Panel Waves, by first wave party id and gender



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