



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



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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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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.

Table 1
Bivariate correlations among all measures ($n = 138$).

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Benevolent sexism	–			
2. Hostile sexism	0.43*	–		
3. Attitudes toward women	0.42*	0.52*	–	
4. Traditional egalitarian sex role	–0.37*	–0.48*	–0.85*	–

* $p < 0.01$.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Because Trump and Clinton accounted for roughly 94% of the total vote, only participants who indicated that they voted for either candidate and identified as a Democrat or Republican were included in the analyses ($n = 138$). Bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the relationship between the variables of interest (Table 1), and independent t -tests were conducted to examine sex differences, voting differences, and political identification differences in the variables of interest (Table 2). In terms of sex differences, results indicated that women had significantly more egalitarian attitudes toward sex roles than men, but no other differences emerged. Results indicated that participants who voted for Trump reported significantly higher levels of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, traditional attitudes toward women, and significantly lower egalitarian sex role attitudes, compared to participants who voted for Clinton. Identical patterns were observed for participants who identified as Republicans, compared to Democrats. Additionally, since participants completed the study at different points surrounding the election and the inauguration, each variable was independently regressed onto the number of days before and after the inauguration. Results indicated that time of participation did not significantly affect any of the variables ($ps > 0.05$).

4.2. Predicting voting outcomes

The reduced sample size still exceeded the recommendations of Peduzzi, Concato, Kemper, Holford, and Feinstein (1996) of having a sample that is ten times the number of predictors in a logistic regression model. A series of logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine the ability of individual differences in each predictor variable to predict the probability of voting for one of the two major candidates in the 2016 Presidential Election, Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump (coded 0 and 1, respectively), after controlling for participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation. In the first series of logistic regression analyses, each predictor variable was examined independently, with participant sex (0 = F, 1 = M), political party identification (0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican),² and time of participation entered in Step 1 and the single predictor variable entered in Step 2. All predictors were standardized prior to analysis.

Table 3 displays the ability of each individual variable to predict voting for either Clinton or Trump, with values in Step 2 showing the predictive ability of each variable after controlling for participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation. When the predictors were entered independently into Step 2 of the model, individual differences in hostile sexism and attitudes toward women significantly predicted voting for Trump above and beyond participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation. This pattern indicates

² Analyses with a more inclusive coding of Political Party, such that participants who self-identified as “Libertarian” and “Green Party” were included, were also conducted. In these analyses, we set “Republican” as the reference group, just as it was the reference group in the dummy coded Democrat v. Republican analyses reported in text. These analyses did not alter the sample size used in the logistic regression analyses, nor did it affect the pattern of our results.

Table 2
Independent samples t -test for sex, voting outcome, and political party identification with descriptive statistics.

Grouping variable	Benevolent sexism		Hostile sexism		Attitudes toward women		Traditional egalitarian sex role	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Sex</i>								
Men ($n = 45$)	3.61	0.76	3.34	0.83	2.04	0.51	3.64	0.71
Women ($n = 93$)	3.58	0.78	3.46	0.88	1.96	0.47	3.98	0.69
t (Cohen's d)	0.23 (0.04)		0.80 (0.14)		0.91 (0.16)		–2.70* (0.49)	
<i>Voting outcome</i>								
Donald Trump ($n = 92$)	3.71	0.66	3.73	0.70	2.18	0.39	3.65	0.67
Hillary Clinton ($n = 46$)	3.37	0.92	2.79	0.83	1.61	0.43	4.31	0.61
t (Cohen's d)	2.23* (0.42)		6.98*** (1.22)		7.88*** (1.39)		–5.61*** (1.03)	
<i>Political party</i>								
Republican ($n = 93$)	3.72	0.65	3.69	0.72	2.17	0.40	3.65	0.67
Democrat ($n = 45$)	3.32	0.92	2.86	0.87	1.62	0.43	4.31	0.61
t (Cohen's d)	2.64** (0.50)		5.88*** (1.04)		7.35*** (1.32)		–5.57*** (1.03)	

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

that greater levels of hostile sexism and more traditional attitudes toward women's role in society were predictive of voting for Trump.

A second logistic regression model where all of the predictor variables were simultaneously entered into Step 2 was also examined to determine the relative contribution of each measure when accounting for other measures. Due to concerns of multicollinearity, the Traditional Egalitarian Sex Role scale was excluded from this model due to its high correlation with the Attitudes Toward Women scale ($r = -0.85$). Participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation were again entered in Step 1 of the model as control variables. As can be seen in Table 4, individual differences in hostile sexism, again, significantly predicted voting for Trump above and beyond the control variables. Additionally, individual difference in attitudes toward women was a marginally significant predictor of voting for Trump above and beyond the control variables. Together, these variables explained an additional 7% of the variance in voting behavior. This pattern provides further support for the roles of hostile sexism and traditional attitudes toward women in voting for Trump.

Lastly, since hostile sexism was a significant predictor in both models after controlling for participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation, we examined its ability to predict voting behavior without the control measures. Results indicated that individual differences in hostile sexism significantly predicted voting for Trump,

Table 3
Regression coefficients and odds ratios predicting voting with all predictor variables entered separately in step 2 ($n = 138$).

Variable	β	SE	Wald χ^2	p	OR (95% CI)	ΔR^2
Step 1						
Sex	0.53	0.79	0.46	0.497	1.71 (0.37, 7.97)	
Political party	5.43	0.77	49.42	<0.001	227.66 (50.13, 1033.99)	
Time	–0.01	0.01	0.84	0.358	0.99 (0.96, 1.02)	0.77
Step 2						
Benevolent sexism	0.02	0.36	0.002	0.96	1.02 (0.50, 2.08)	0.00
Hostile sexism	1.50	0.50	8.95	0.003	4.46 (1.68, 11.88)	0.05
Attitudes toward women	1.36	0.49	7.64	0.006	3.89 (1.49, 10.20)	0.04
Traditional egalitarian sex role	–0.71	0.41	3.05	0.081	0.49 (0.22, 1.09)	0.01

Note. OR indicates likelihood of voting for Donald Trump. R^2 represents Nagelkerke's R^2 .

Table 4
Regression coefficients and odds ratios predicting voting with all predictor variables entered simultaneously into step 2 ($n = 138$).

Variable	β	SE	Wald χ^2	p	OR (95% CI)	ΔR^2
Benevolent sexism	−0.76	0.49	2.36	0.124	0.47 (0.18, 1.23)	
Hostile sexism	1.33	0.58	5.29	0.021	3.79 (1.22, 11.81)	
Attitudes toward women	1.13	0.62	3.34	0.068	3.09 (0.92, 10.34)	0.07

Note. OR indicates likelihood of voting for Donald Trump. R^2 represents Nagelkerke's R^2 .

$\beta = 1.43$, $SE = 0.28$, Wald $\chi^2 = 26.26$, $p < 0.001$, OR = 4.17, 95% CI (2.41, 7.19), Nagelkerke's $R^2 = 0.36$, while also correctly classifying 75.4% of participants' voting behavior. Thus, for every one standard deviation increase in a participant's hostile sexism scores, the odds of voting for Trump were 4.17 times more likely than voting for Clinton.

5. Discussion

The results of the current study suggest that levels of voter's sexism, attitudes toward women, and gender role attitudes played a role in voting behavior. While political party orientation was still by far the strongest predictor of voting behavior, our results demonstrate that greater hostile sexism and having traditional attitudes toward women served as strong predictors of voting for Trump when examined after controlling for participant sex, political party identification, and time of participation. The ability of hostile sexism to predict voting for Trump also went beyond this, in that it predicted voting behavior when examined concurrent with other predictors and in isolation. Consistent with prior research, political party identification was the best predictor of voting behavior. However, a novel effect was observed in that sexism and negative attitudes toward women still played a role in voting behavior even after controlling for political party identification, participant sex, and time of participation (Dolan, 2014; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009). Our results also indicate that, like racism's role in the historic 2008 election (Payne et al., 2010), sexism—particularly hostile sexism—played a role in voting outcomes of the 2016 election.

Hillary Clinton is arguably one of the most accomplished women of modernity, having held some of the highest leadership positions. Because of this, she represented the quintessential *backlash* candidate. Although we did not measure perceptions of likeability and competence, our results complement prior findings that demonstrate women who behave in an agentic manner seeking leadership positions face backlash (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001), such as hostile sexism. Participants with more traditional attitudes toward women (i.e., women should not be agentic or assertive) were more likely to vote for Trump. The pattern of results for benevolent and hostile sexism also seems to corroborate the backlash effect. Benevolent and hostile sexism are complementary devices representing the figurative carrot and stick (Glick & Fiske, 2001). While benevolent sexism primarily rewards women's adherence to traditional gender roles (i.e., carrot), hostile sexism concerns negative attitudes toward women who violate traditional norms (i.e., stick). Thus, the ability of hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism, to predict voting behavior may represent an underlying disdain for an already established, agentic woman.

The time window of data collection for our study is also important. Our survey was launched immediately following the election and lasted until three weeks after Trump's inauguration. Research on attitude-behavior consistency suggests that attitudes are more predictive of behavior when they are measured closer together (see Ajzen, 2012 and Fazio, 1986 for reviews). While this research indicates that causal arguments can only be made when attitudes are measured prior to behavior, the proximal measurement of attitudes following the election in our study may be more reflective of the true attitudes that potentially affected voting behavior compared to measuring these same attitudes at a much later time point. Our results lend support to this assertion wherein time of participation did not affect any of our variables in the

relatively narrow time window of data collection. Moreover, participants may have not had enough time to change their attitudes toward either candidate, either developing more or less pleasant feelings toward Clinton or Trump based on policy proposals or enactments.

Given that we only surveyed college students at one undergraduate university, our study used a non-representative sample and comes with limitations. First, the attitudes and voting behaviors of the participants in the current study may not be reflective of or generalize to the larger voting population. Roughly 22% of our sample indicated voting for Hillary Clinton and 42% for Donald Trump, whereas the general population vote was 48% and 45.9% for Clinton and Trump, respectively. However, Trump won by a two-to-one margin in the state from where the current sample was drawn (New York Times, 2017). Thus, despite our sample having a much stronger favor for Trump compared to the general population, it was representative of the state's voting behavior. In support of the potential generalizability of our results, one study examined the relationship between personality and political opinions among college students and older adults and found that, while the means of each factor differed between the two groups, the relationships and direction of the relationships between personality factors and political opinions were the same (Cooper, McCord, & Socha, 2011). As such, our findings may have some generalizability despite the exclusive use of a college sample. Our reliance on a college sample also lends itself to another interesting interpretation of the findings. College students have yet to achieve status and leadership roles in society, so their attitudes toward agentic individuals may be distinct from that of older, established persons. While older individuals, particularly men, may see an agentic woman as a threat to their masculinity and traditional norms, younger individuals may see an agentic woman as a threat to a potentiality; specifically, a threat to the social order of young men replacing old men in positions of power. In fact, perceived threats of a man's masculinity are positively related to more traditional attitudes toward women, anti-feminist attitudes, and sexism (Burkley, Wong, & Bell, 2016).

It's also important to note that the pattern of mean differences across all variables were identical when comparing differences in voting outcomes and political party identification. More specifically, both Republicans and Trump voters reported greater levels of benevolent and hostile sexism, traditional attitudes toward women, and traditional attitudes toward sex roles. Thus, it's difficult to disentangle these findings as effects of political party identification or voting behavior. In spite of this potential confound, hostile sexism and traditional attitudes toward women still predicted voting for Trump after accounting for the effect of Republican identification. Additionally, when political party identification and participant sex were not controlled for, the individual model of hostile sexism correctly classified a substantial amount of participant voting behavior. Taken together, this provides evidence of the role of hostile sexism and traditional attitudes toward women affecting the election outcome, although the magnitude of this effect is less clear.

Despite these limitations, it is also possible that group-identification factors affected participant responses due to measuring voting behavior post-election. Both basking-in-reflective-glory (BIRG; Cialdini et al., 1976) and cutting-off-reflected-failure (CORF; Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983) have been observed within the political domain. Individuals CORF following a group failure or loss and distance themselves from the group, whereas individuals BIRG following group success or victory. Boen et al. (2002) found that voters BIRGed and CORFed post-

election depending on their group's outcome. Further, in terms of presenting one's group success or failure, Snyder notes that one is more likely to distance themselves from their group following group defeat (i.e., diminish presentation) than one is to increase their group presentation following group success. Relating back to the current study, the lower number of Clinton voters in the current sample could be a reflection of participant's CORFing, wherein they did not want to indicate that they voted for Clinton because of her loss in the election.

In conclusion, the current study demonstrated that, while not the sole contributor, hostile sexism and traditional attitudes toward women significantly predicted voting for Donald Trump after the election. That is not to say that all Trump voters have negative attitudes toward women and have hostile sexist beliefs—as many voters espoused legitimate economic grievances and issues with Hillary Clinton's policy proposals—but that sexism may have played a significant role in the election's outcome.

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