

Bucknell University

Bucknell Digital Commons

Honors Theses

Student Theses

Spring 2021

To Believe or Not to Believe: Voters' Responses to Sexual Assault Allegations in Politics

Emily Brandes
eab049@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brandes, Emily, "To Believe or Not to Believe: Voters' Responses to Sexual Assault Allegations in Politics" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 574.

https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses/574

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

To Believe or Not to Believe: Voters' Responses to Sexual Assault Allegations in Politics

By

Emily Brandes

Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Political Science

April 21, 2021

Approved by:

Adviser: _____(electronically approved)_____
Scott Meinke

Second Evaluator in major:
_____(electronically approved)_____
John Doces

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Chapter One: Introduction.....	4
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	6
Scandal.....	6
Sexual Assault.....	7
Public Opinion.....	10
Partisanship.....	15
Argument	19
Chapter Three: Methods and Results.....	22
Methods.....	22
Survey Questions.....	22
Results.....	26
General Findings.....	26
Partisan: Resign.....	27
Table 1.....	28
Table 2.....	28
Partisan Comparison: Resign.....	30
Table 3.....	31
Table 4.....	32
Partisan: Legal Action.....	33
Table 5.....	34

Table 6.....	34
Partisan Comparison: Take Legal Action.....	35
Table 7.....	36
Table 8.....	37
Gender.....	38
Table 9.....	39
Table 10.....	40
Final Thoughts.....	40
Chapter Four: Case Studies.....	43
Question Formation.....	45
Bill Clinton.....	47
Understanding the Public Response.....	50
Clarence Thomas.....	58
Understanding the Public Response.....	62
Brett Kavanaugh.....	65
Understanding the Public Response.....	66
Donald Trump.....	71
Joe Biden & the 2020 Election.....	73
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	76
References.....	81
Appendix.....	85
Descriptive Statistics.....	90
Acknowledgements.....	94

Abstract

Since the viral 2017 #MeToo movement, public opinion on cases of sexual misconduct has been shaped by the mainstream media coverage of high-profile stories. A shift in public attitude towards these issues has encouraged more victims to come forward and share their stories, many detailing harrowing events perpetrated by successful businessmen and politicians. Credible accusations continue to come forward, and while some end in legal action, many do not, and perpetrators face little to no consequences. I examined how individuals respond to issues of sexual misconduct and assault in politics, and based on the severity of the accusation, how they respond. Through my survey research, I was able to isolate responses to see the influence that party affiliation and gender have on individuals' opinion formation, as well as how the politicians' prior conduct history affects the response. The research reflects an overall partisan difference between Republicans and Democrats in terms of reaction, with Democrats consistently being in favor of harsher consequences, both when Democratic and Republican perpetrators are involved. Additionally, individuals respond more harshly when the accused politician is of the opposite party. This pattern was consistent across the different severity treatments, as well as the conduct history treatments. Generally, when a history of sexual misconduct was present, individuals of both parties reacted more harshly. In summation, there is significant evidence of partisan bias in the public evaluation of sexual misconduct allegations. I also discuss several prominent cases of sexual misconduct by politicians in order to demonstrate how the public has formed opinions in the wake of scandal. This research has both policy and scholarly implications that will be of great value now and into the future as public response to allegations of sexual misconduct continues to evolve.

Introduction

Sex and power. Power in sex. And sex in politics.

In recent years, we have grown accustomed to watching powerful leaders fall from grace as career-ending allegations of sexual assault and misconduct emerge. It is no coincidence that so many people in power seem to have displayed a history of inappropriate sexual behavior because, after all, sexual assault is about power. At its core, sexual assault is a physical exertion of power over an unwilling victim, and unfortunately one that we see far too often.

While there are formal definitions to classify assault in the legal sense, every individual holds their own definition of what constitutes sexual misconduct. This influences how they view and categorize different actions, which results in varied opinions on what may be viewed as harassment or assault.

Since the #MeToo movement gained popularity in 2017, the topic of rape and sexual assault have gained significant new attention. As a society, we have collectively developed our understanding of issues regarding sexual misconduct and violence. However, one thing that was not new to the discussion of sexual assault is its persistent occurrence among politicians. Each election cycle, candidates on both sides of the party lines must respond to accusations of sexual misconduct. Some withdraw their candidacy, others deny any wrongdoing, and some even go on to become President of the United States.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relationship between public opinion and sexual misconduct in politics, while looking specifically at how individuals respond to different types of misconduct, depending on their gender, their political party, the political party of the accused politician, and the prior conduct history of the politician. Using survey research, I

analyzed how individuals responded to different treatment scenarios based on these factors and identified the most prominent influences. Using case studies to make sense of my findings, I explore how these factors are reflected in real life examples of public response to scandal, and also look to understand how the public perception of these issues has evolved over time. Overall, I demonstrate that there is a significant partisan influence on public opinion formation with regards to the topic of sexual misconduct in politics. Likewise, public opinion is greatly influenced by the past conduct of the accused politician, which helps to determine whether or not the allegations result in career-ending consequences.

In what follows, I explore the public opinion of sexual assault in politics by looking at related research, original empirical data, and real-life case studies. The literature review will discuss prior research conducted in the fields of scandal, sexual assault, public opinion, and partisanship, looking closely at overall societal attitudes and responses in these fields. I will present original empirical data from a survey experiment that aims to evaluate the public opinion on sexual assault in politics. The data from the study is broken down and analyzed by gender, partisanship, misconduct severity, and history of behavior. Finally, I will explore real life case studies and discuss how the public opinion and opinion formation process in the aftermath of scandal compares to the empirical data that I gathered through my survey.

This research plays a vital role in understanding how society has evolved in their beliefs about sexual misconduct, and how that looks in an extremely politically polarized environment. With this knowledge, we can better understand the public opinion with regards to sexual misconduct in politics.

Literature Review

Scandal

Scandal and politics are no strangers to each other. Power, when left unchecked, can be a dangerous thing which many aspiring leaders have fallen victim to. Scandal has made a home for itself in the US Congress since George Washington's presidency, and with the growth of the media, it seems to taint more and more politicians every year (Garment 1992).

In order to understand the effects of a sex scandal in the political world, it is foundational to understand how the public responds to scandal in general. The media has played an important role in cultivating the public's understanding and consumption of scandalous information, and often influences the fate of the individual (Zaller 1999). Overall, any type of scandal will likely have a negative effect on the candidate. The public does not like their elected officials engaging in immoral behavior, whether it is illegal or not. Research likens the negative effect of scandal in a bid for reelection to facing a quality political opponent, equating about 5% of the general vote (Bassinger 2013). Between the years 1973-2010, 17% of all congressional scandals are considered to be sex scandals. Bassinger classifies sex scandals as including "extramarital affairs, solicitation of a prostitute, sodomy, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and 'retaining an employee on the payroll for immoral purposes.'" Bassinger analyzed the effects of five different types of scandal classified as financial, corruption, sex, political, and other, and found that the scandals involving corruption and sex have the largest estimated effects on incumbents' bids for reelection.

Sex scandals involving extramarital affairs differ greatly from those concerning sexual assault, as the former is considered a moral shortcoming, and the latter is illegal. That being said, it is not a coincidence that nearly 20% of all congressional scandals in the recent decades are

classified as sex scandals (Bassinger 2013). The relationship between sex and power has many layers. For starters, men are more likely to engage in sexually aggressive behavior than women (Mussweiler; Forster 2000), and men with Dark Triad traits--i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy--are more likely to experience, and act on increased feelings of sexual attraction to subordinates. It is not a coincidence that men in power are also associated with these traits. (Stockdale, Gilmer, & Dinh 2019). Narcissism is a common trait that connects many political leaders, and when grandiose views of self are combined with power, it is much easier for it to foster in ways that are not positive. Individuals who seek power in the political arena often use this medium to compensate for insecurity such as low self-esteem and moral inferiority (Post 2004). This individual uses their power to reaffirm themselves and establish a position of superiority over others. The same concept can be applied to sexual assault, the perpetrator is exerting power over another person to intimidate them and in the words of activist Susan Brownmiller, is “a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller 1975). In both cases, the exertion of power is psychological dominance over others, to establish a firm position in the social hierarchy.

Sexual Assault

As the conversations surrounding sexual assault have taken a more central role in society’s day to day exchanges and news consumption, the study of sexual assault, and the subsequent literature, has become more mainstream. The #MeToo movement, was a social ripple effect of sexual assault survivors coming forward via many mainstream social media platforms to share their stories of assault and harassment. The movement exploded to viral status shortly after Ronan Farrow’s expose on Harvey Weinstein’s sexual crimes was published in the *New York Times*. This article is credited as being the catalyst for the viral movement, as well as the

start of a very public discussion of sexual assault in mainstream media. In the aftermath of the article, many men in prominent positions of power were exposed for indecent behavior and assault, many of which were long-term repeat offenders, as most perpetrators are. As a result of the #MeToo movement's significant traction, many women, with the backing of large publishers, were able to disseminate their stories in the form of articles, and books. In 2018, an article in *The Atlantic* reported that in the 10 months following the Weinstein story, at least 25 named political candidates, from both sides of the aisle, were forced to withdraw their candidacy amidst sexual assault allegations.¹ The article included a list of accused politicians, with additional names of politicians accused of misconduct who remain in office and do not face imminent reelection. The allegations against politicians in this list range from inappropriate workplace behavior, unwanted sexual advancements, and non-consensual violence during sex, to sexual abuse of minors.

In more than one instance, politicians used thousands of taxpayer dollars to pay women discreet settlements. Former Representative Patrick Meehan, and Former Representative Blake Farenthold resigned in the wake of accusations of this nature, and both asserted that they would pay back the money used to do so, which in the case of Farenthold was \$84,000. Farenthold later asserted in a letter to the governor of Texas that he had no intention of paying back the sum, as he did not believe he was wrong to use the money and encouraged Governor Gregg Abbott to rise above “kicking someone while they are down, especially a fellow Republican” (Farenthold 2018). There have been many instances of partisan alliances that have come to play in the aftermath of public allegations. After a vote to expel Steve Lebsack from the Colorado House of Representatives in 2018, the former state representative switched his party affiliation from

¹ Elaine Godfrey, L. (2018, August 17). The 25 Candidates for 2018 Sunk By #MeToo Allegations. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/the-25-candidates-for-2018-sunk-by-metoo-allegations/565457/>

Democrat to Republican because Colorado law dictates that a vacancy must be filled by a member of the same party.² Many politicians look to their same party colleagues for public support and backing in times of scandal. In choosing to make a public statement of support, politicians are influenced by a number of factors including partisanship, severity of the allegation, and also credibility. There is no standard response or approach that politicians take when a colleague of theirs is accused of sexual assault. Each response is specifically subject to the details of the allegation. As long as there are people in power, abuse of power will continue to take place, and sexual assault is just one method of doing so.

The #MeToo movement has impacted the way that the public responds to allegations of sexual assault, as the very public accusations created a cultural shift in the public's understanding of sexual harassment and assault. In its wake, the country has been forced to address inappropriate behavior that has long since been tolerated and to reckon with the consequences of these actions. Sexual assault is, at its core, an exertion of power over someone else. When sexual assault occurs in politics, it creates an intersection of sexual and political power, further complicating the issue.

As part of my exploration of political leaders and perpetrators of sexual assault, I have conducted research to see where the two overlap in shared common traits of those who typically occupy the positions of leader and those who commit crimes of a sexual nature. For someone to want to be in politics, even if they are passionate about change and advocating for their constituents, there must be a part of them that is narcissistic enough to believe that they are

² Staff, C. (2019, July 01). Lebsock Expelled from Colorado House Following Marathon Harassment Debate. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.cpr.org/2018/03/02/lebsock-expelled-from-colorado-house-following-marathon-harassment-debate/>

deserving of that role. As the power of the position increases, we can expect that the strength of these qualities will increase as well (Post 2015; Post 2004).

Public Opinion

Public opinion expert John Zaller has conducted empirical research that speaks both to general public opinion and specific cases of public opinion in the context of sexual scandals. His article, “Monica Lewinsky’s Contributions to Politics,” looks specifically at public opinion on President Bill Clinton in the midst of his sexual scandal involving Monica Lewinsky. Using empirical evidence derived from the media’s attention to the Clinton scandal, Zaller concludes that the largest influence on public opinion was not the president’s transgressions, but rather his politics and their effectiveness. Zaller found that the public moved on from the Clinton scandal relatively fast because of the strong state of the economy, and the overall approval that he had from the country. In the wake of the scandal, Clinton delivered a State of the Union address in which he focused on the strength of the economy, further pulling the focus away from his personal life, and onto his politics.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider how party affiliation affects one’s opinion on political leaders and those leaders’ political beliefs, which they may disagree with. Clinton, although a Democrat, was very moderate, with policies that many today would argue lean conservative (Zaller 1999). In accordance with Zaller’s argument, many people supported Clinton’s policies and were happy with his work, thus making it easier to come back from such a scandal. In the week after the House of Representatives passed two articles of impeachment

against the President, Clinton polled at the highest approval rating of his administration, 73%.³ Had he been less moderate, and dealing with a larger public divide over his policies, it is possible that the public opinion in the aftermath of his personal shortcomings would be very different and the discussion would have remained in the media for far longer than it did. At the time of Clinton's presidency, polarization was on the rise, though not nearly at the extremes it is today. Clinton's moderation worked well for him because of this, and as a result, constituents judged his actions on a more personal level than through a political lens. The notion of the "personal vote" is the idea that candidates have their own individual base of support, above and beyond partisan alignments. A candidate with a strong personal vote is far more likely to endure scandal better than a politician who does not. Why, we must ask, are candidates liked? Yes, policies matter but there's a lot more there and clearly public persona matters. Empirical research has tied the margin of victory in a scandal tainted incumbent's previous election to their likelihood of being elected post scandal (Herrick 2000). The personal vote ties in the importance of public image to a political candidate's foundation, and also sheds light onto the specific characteristics that leaders hold which the public finds attractive.

Similarly, to Zaller, Fischle (2000) looks at the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal with the purpose of understanding the public's response to Clinton. Fischle uses data from before and after the scandal to explain Clinton's continued support and popularity, despite the sex scandal. In order to understand the motivations behind the formation of public opinion in this specific situation, Fishle aims to find the root motivator in the public's support of Clinton. He concludes that ultimately, the public was influenced by their previous impressions of the president, which

³ Newport, F. (2021, April 03). Clinton Receives Record High Job Approval Rating After Impeachment Vote and Iraq Air Strikes. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4111/clinton-receives-record-high-job-approval-rating-after-impeachment-vot.aspx>

combined with the media's lack of coverage on the scandal in comparison to other scandals and new coverage, led to a fast recovery for the Clinton administration (Fischle 2000). This is consistent with other research in public opinion which suggests that individuals are influenced by their overall opinions of individuals which prevents them from judging actions in an unbiased manner.

Other research in the field argues that an individual's perception of politicians in a sex scandal have less to do with the politician and more to do with the individual sexist views of a specific person (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2017). This argument suggests that the actions and policies of the politician have no significant effect on the public opinion. A 2020 research experiment conducted by Costa (2020) and her team explored how society views respond to different types of sexual harassment depending on party affiliation. They found that while partisanship did have an effect on the individual's reaction, there was a limit to this reaction. In addition, the team concluded that Democrats, women, young adults, and regular news consumers, were more inclined to advocate punishment for a politician accused of sexual misconduct than their counterparts (Costa 2020). The literature ultimately suggests that personal sexist beliefs are what most strongly influences an individual's opinion. This is significant because it suggests that there are other factors which weigh more heavily in the opinion formation process when it comes to issues of sexual assault. Because sexual assault intersects with issues of gender and other inequalities that are reflected in our institutions, it is hard to isolate their influences on opinion. The acknowledgement of this truth allows us to better understand the process of opinion formation on sensitive topics, and while we cannot account for every unique opinion, we can work to identify other patterns in the data.

Opinions surrounding sensitive topics such as sexual assault, are often shaped by very personal experiences. However, when you look at sexual assault within a political context, the personal aspect of opinion formation combines with partisan opinion formation, often making things even more complicated. Additionally, it is often expected that gender will play a large role in opinion formation around issues of sexual assault. Statistically sexual violence most often occurs between a male perpetrator and female victim, and 1 in 6 women will be victims of rape or attempted rape in their lifetime.⁴ Given that women are more likely to have experienced rape or sexual assault of some nature, we would expect them to more harshly judge perpetrators of sexual assault.

Men, for the same reasoning, may be more lenient in views of perpetrators perhaps because they themselves fear ending up in a similar position and not being believed. This is a common fear, fueled largely by the lack of accountability from the accused. Just as many guilty people plead not guilty in a court of law, perpetrators very rarely admit any wrongdoing and reduce the assault to a “he said, she said” incident. Allegations of sexual misconduct against politicians are typically dismissed or contested with no regard for fact. Politicians are encouraged to respond this way because a denial of the accusation is seen more favorably in the eyes of the public than an apology (Sigal et al. 1988, Costa et al. 2020).

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, some groups began to label the changing climate as a witch hunt. This incorrect narrative undermined the legitimacy of the allegations coming forward and reduced sexual assault to a “battle of the sexes” type issue (Kunst, Bailey, Prendergast, & Gundersen 2019). The research done on the topic corroborates the expected

⁴ Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>

outcome, which is that men are more dismissive of sexual assault claims than women, and have more negative views about the #MeToo movement as an overall social campaign (Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett 2001; Suarez & Gadalla 2010; Szekeres, Shuman, Saguy 2020). Part of this discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that men and women categorize certain behaviors differently. Women tend to classify a broader range of behavior as sexual harassment, in comparison to men (Rotundo, Nguyen, Sackett 2001). This makes it difficult to assign a broad definition to sexual harassment and assault, and thus puts more of an emphasis on the details and credibility of the allegation. In the eyes of the law, it has been reflected that there is a general understanding that men and women evaluate sexual harassment claims differently. The 1991 *Ellison v. Brady* case established that the standard practice of evaluating cases of sexual harassment being from the perspective of a reasonable person was an inadequate standard to use going forward. In the majority opinion, Judge Beezer on the US Court of the Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, wrote:

We realize that there is a broad range of viewpoints among women as a group, but we believe that many women share common concerns which men do not necessarily share. For example, because women are disproportionately victims of rape and sexual assault, women have a stronger incentive to be concerned with sexual behavior.⁵

It is a commonly accepted notion that because of the probability that women will be victims of sexual harassment and violence, their opinion on the matter is influenced by their

⁵ Kerry Ellison, Plaintiff-appellant, v. Nicholas F. Brady,* Secretary of the Treasury,defendant-appellee, 924 F.2d 872, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/924/872/224242/> (US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit - 924 F.2d 872 (9th Cir. 1991) 1991).

gender. Additionally, in studies addressing this issue, it was found that the relative position of power the perpetrator has over the victim influences how the different genders will respond to the situation (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board; Rotundo 2001).

Partisanship

In the United States, the two-party system has been a constant source of tension in politics, with each side becoming more and more divided each year. The element of partisanship has played a large role in shaping public opinion on many political issues, and sexual assault is no exception. A study done by the Pew Research Center looked specifically at how individuals view sexual harassment in the workplace. The research found that the most influential variable was not gender, but partisanship.⁶ Pew's research on *Sexual Harassment at Work in the Era of #MeToo* serves as a good baseline to see the influence of the political parties when the topic of sexual assault is not directly related to politics and political figures. The survey found that those who identified as Republicans were less concerned with male perpetrators getting away with assault than their Democratic counterparts. This survey looked specifically at situations in which the female worker was the individual being harassed, as is the case in most workplace incidents. The power inequality is heightened by factors of age, political power, office role, and gender all of which make for an environment suited for power abuse, specifically that of a sexual nature.

Similarly, in their 2019 paper "Voters' Partisan Responses to Politicians' Immoral Behavior," Annemarie Walter and David Redlawsk explore the malleability of different moral foundations in voters. To do this they questioned individuals using vignettes that represented

⁶ Graf, N. (2020, August 25). Sexual Harassment at Work in the Era of #MeToo. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/04/04/sexual-harassment-at-work-in-the-era-of-metoo/>

immoral behavior that violated one of their five identified moral foundations of care, fairness, loyalty, authority and sanctity. They found that individuals who identified as Democrats had a stronger negative reaction to immoral behavior than their Republican counterparts regardless of party, and that both parties reacted more negatively when the behavior was done by a politician of the opposite political party (Walter & Redlawsk 2019). This study is in line with other research with the finding that Republicans are more forgiving of immoral behavior by the political leaders than their Democratic partners. This aspect of partisanship is far less explored because of the numerous variables that affect an individual's opinion. It is hard to say whether the modern Republican values are reflective of the party's moral stance, or vice versa.

In his well-known book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, John Zaller explores how individuals cultivate political preferences. At the time of publishing, Zaller points out that there is very little integration between subcategories of public opinion, and what he calls overspecialization in the research around public opinion. When discussing sexual assault in politics, there are so many factors that go into creating an opinion. There are the typical political opinions that are formed, which then must be merged with personal beliefs on a much more sensitive topic. Zaller discusses how available information plays a large role in shaping opinion. Individuals do not have preformed opinions on every matter, so when they must form one, it will be based on the information readily available to them (Zaller 1992). Within this thinking, it is important to consider how the responses of other politicians influence the opinion of the public. Through the concept of elite discourse, it is understood that the actions of politicians can cue certain opinion responses among the general public. If other politicians voice support for a politician accused of misconduct that can influence the public to view the situation more favorably than if they denounced their actions. This puts a lot of power in the hands of politicians

as well, to hold their colleagues accountable. Likewise, there are media channels that are strongly partisan, and the issues, and the way that they discuss said issues are very reflective of that. Media coverage of scandals are often looked to as metrics for a means of explaining public opinion in the aftermath of the event. Both Zaller and Fischle use this technique in their research pertaining to the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal. The issue is that the media often leaves out information and oversimplifies issues to aid in its mass consumption.

In providing examples in his book, John Zaller also touches upon the foundational shift that took place in partisan politics beginning in the mid-1960s. There was a “reshuffling” of party members when the racial liberals moved to the Democratic party, and the racial conservatives moved to the Republican side. The demographics of the parties were greatly altered by this shift, which specifically brought many wealthy, white men to the Republican side. According to Zaller, political information disseminated by the elite is lacking the full truth. In the United States, the elite population is disproportionately wealthy white men.

Zaller’s ideas imply that elite discourse carries especially strong weight in opinion formation around sexual assault. This is in part because allegations of this nature may lack physical evidence, so public support and affirmation of strong personal character appear to carry significant weight. A political leader accused of sexual assault with lots of Congressional support will fare better in the eyes of the public than one who has no support on either side of the aisle. This sort of signaling to the general public can heavily influence the fate of the politician. Typically, political candidates with support from Congress may still be elected or confirmed to their desired position, and likewise, incumbents with strong support will likely not be forced to resign, a common result of sexual misconduct allegations.

Nonetheless, public opinion formation in the wake of scandals is also heavily influenced by voter opinion formed pre-scandal. This gives context to how voters respond to allegations against leaders that they may have supported in elections and how their opinions evolve. Carolyn Funk explores the relationships between voters and specific personality traits possessed by popular political figures and discusses the idea of candidate-centered voting. According to Funk, candidate centered voting is no longer seen as less rational than issue-based voting; however, it is focused on seemingly more superficial elements. Candidate-centered voting can play a vital role in evaluating the strength of the allegiance that a leader's following may have (Funk 1996). Political figures who are well liked and supported by the public will predictably have an easier time rebounding from scandal than unpopular ones, as the Bill Clinton example illustrates. This thinking can be applied to any sort of scandal in general, not just that of a sexual nature. If a leader's politics are largely accepted and liked by the public, they are more forgiving of any transgressions that person may commit (Zaller 1999).

Because partisan politics plays a huge role in determining the response of the public in the face of scandal, more moderate politicians would be expected to fare better in the face of scandal than their less ideologically ambiguous counterparts. It should, however, be noted that because of high polarization, more scandalous politicians often have an unmovable base of support, who are less likely to be influenced by elite discourse or the general media. While these politicians may have a weaker opportunity for personal vote because they are extremely partisan, they often have an extremely loyal subgroup of supporters. Clinton in many ways experienced a bit of both, as a moderate politician with an extremely devoted support base; however, because polarization has increased so much over the past two decades, it would be unlikely to see another politician experience this "Clintonian" effect.

Argument

Many experts have committed their research towards understanding the formation of opinions. When talking about sexual assault, there are many variables that shape opinion formation, some of which are extremely personal. We know from the literature on sexual assault that crimes of this nature not only can produce a behavioral pattern, but also are symbolic of institutional issues in society. My argument centers on the understanding that sexual assault and rape, at their core, are an exertion of power. However, when the perpetrator is a politician, the assault is also an exertion of political power and status. Political sex scandals are especially complicated because they often lead to the uncovering or committal of other transgressions not pertaining to sex, in addition to the already illegal committal of assault. Additionally, studies assessing behavioral traits of politicians and political leaders identified personality characteristics consistent with those that sexual assault researchers have found are common in perpetrators. Synthesizing the literature in both of these disciplines, the connection between narcissism and Dark Triad traits is drawn between politicians, and perpetrators, who have been reported as having elevated levels of these characteristics in particular. Consequently, because sexual assault is an issue of power, rather than sex, one may expect to find more instances of abuse in individuals with close proximity to power.

To understand how the public forms opinions on sexual assault when it occurs in politics, it is essential to consider how individuals separately develop opinions on sexual assault and politics. The research suggests that individuals are in fact able to react to and distinguish a variety of actions classified as sexual harassment, as having different levels of severity. Through this research, it was established that individuals judge incidents of sexual harassment based on that specific incident, rather than viewing each incident as a general crime of sexual harassment.

Using this thinking, and the related nature of sexual harassment crimes to those of sexual assault, I expect that individuals will also judge incidents of assault based on the severity of the particular incident in question. An individual's prior experience dealing with sexual assault may also greatly influence their opinion, especially if they, or someone they know, has been a victim of the crime. For example, women are much more likely to be victims of sexual assault themselves, so it is expected that this influences them to feel more strongly about sexual crimes, and also to be more likely to advocate for holding perpetrators accountable through various methods.

Specific to political opinion, individuals form their opinions with strong partisan allegiance, and are greatly influenced by the media and elite discourse. In reacting to accusations of sexual assault, individuals will be influenced by the accusation, the political party of the candidate, and their own party, as well as what other members in government and the general media have to say on the matter. Additionally, opinion may further be influenced by the prior public perception of the accused individual. Candidates well-liked by the public have a much easier time rebounding from scandal and are more likely to remain in power. An individual will be more likely to favor a candidate when they are of the same political party, have comparable political leanings, and similar morals. From a public perspective, well liked politicians often present themselves as having family values, and a digestible public persona. Even though in the past, the public has been able to "look the other way" on personal shortcomings, such as divorce, familial unrest, and adultery, a candidate without the baggage of a tarnished family life has fewer obstacles to overcome in order to ingratiate themselves into favorable public opinion.

Using the variable of severity, this research explores how far is too far for politicians to go in the public's view. My goal is to understand general public opinion on sexual assault in politics, as well as analyze how the severity of the assault affects aftermath expectations. I

hypothesize that individuals are more sympathetic to the perpetrator when they are of the same political party. Additionally, I hypothesize that Democrats and women believe in stricter punishment for the perpetrator than Republicans and men. I expect that the severity of the punishment will have a positive correlation with the severity of the assault. The severity serves as an important variable in testing the limits of partisanship in public opinion and support. In crimes of this nature, where is the line drawn on tolerance, and how much of this is influenced by the specifics of the assault? I hypothesize that in cases of more severe assault, such as rape, partisanship will not have influence over the individual, or at least not to the extent that I expect it to have on less severe instances of assault.

Methods and Results

Methods

To conduct my research, I collected survey data from a nationally representative sample of participants. The survey was conducted for the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy by the professional polling firm YouGov. YouGov is an opt-in panel survey of over 1.2 million participating U.S residents recruited mainly through advertising campaigns, as well as telephone and mail surveys.⁷ With a total sample size of 1,200, each treatment had between 192 and 208 participants assigned to it. This sample is in line with other survey research conducted in the political science discipline.

I designed a survey experiment that enabled me to look at isolated variables and determine the influence that they had on my participants' opinion formation process. Survey experiment studies have become an especially useful research tool in identifying causal relationships, which is why I chose to create my own set of questions for my research. I was able to carefully control for multiple variables and isolate them one at a time by making small adjustments to my treatments. In doing so, I was able to effectively analyze the effects of partisanship, gender, context, and severity as it relates to participant responses and opinion formation. Each of these variables play an important role in the research I am conducting.

Survey Questions

The survey questions are broken down into three scenarios that detail workplace conduct and misconduct of a sexual nature. Each question details a scenario loosely based on real life accusations of sexual assault against politicians. The questions are broken down by three levels

⁷ *Survey Procedures: Information Related to the Treatment of Human Subjects* [PDF]. (2012, January 30). YouGov.

of offenses, with treatments that alternate both partisan affiliation of the senator and histories of prior sexual assault. Each level is meant to gauge the public opinion depending on the severity of the situation and the party identification. The three levels of severity are i) a sexual relationship with a female staffer, ii) unwanted sexual advances towards a female staffer, and iii) attempted rape.⁸

The participants were presented with three questions having to do with severity and received one of six treatments that indicated what party affiliation the accused senator was, and whether or not they had a prior history of committing the sexual offense they are accused of.

The questions and treatments are as follows:

QUESTION A

Severity Level: Sexual Relationship

- a. A Republican senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- b. A Democratic senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- c. A senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- d. A Republican senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- e. A Democratic senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- f. A senator has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.

⁸ Questions A and B in the survey contain the phrase “young female staffer” while Question C only uses the term “female staffer.” Additionally, both Questions A and B refer to conduct that occurred between a senator and female staffer, while Question C does not explicitly note this. Instead, the senator is accused of rape with no specific details as to who the victim is. All wording is consistent within each scenario, and I believe that these slight variations are not likely to have a large effect on participant response. Most of the analysis is completely unaffected as it is done within each question, rather than a comparison between questions. In question to (walk through thinking)

QUESTION B

Severity Level: Unwanted Sexual Advances

- a. A Republican senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- b. A Democratic senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- c. A senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- d. A Republican Senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- e. A Democratic senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- f. A senator has been accused of making unwanted sexual advances towards a young female staffer. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.

QUESTION C:

Severity Level: Rape

- a. A Republican senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- b. A senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- c. A Democratic senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has a history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- d. A Republican senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- e. A Democratic senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.
- f. A senator has been accused of attempted rape. The Senator has no history of making unwanted sexual advances on his female staffers.

The participants were then prompted to by a list of actions to take, which they were instructed to “check all that apply.”

The response options are as follows:

Resign from his position
Issue an apology
Take a temporary leave of absence from his position while the charges are investigated
Have legal action taken against him
None of the above

The response options were chosen based on the typical outcomes of sexual assault accusations against politicians. They are not ordered based on severity; however, for purposes of this research, a selection of the response “Have legal action taken against him” is interpreted as the participant stating that they believe the nature of the accusation is against the law. This is done with the understanding that in order to pursue legal action, there must be credible evidence that the accused has violated a law. The choice “none of the above” for purposes of this survey is interpreted as no action, as the choices offered cover a wide range of actions that have been previously pursued as the result of sexual assault and follow that precedent.

Additionally, for purposes of this survey experiment, the perpetrator in the misconduct scenarios is a male politician. This choice was made for a number of reasons. Firstly, in cases of sexual misconduct, whether they occur in politics or elsewhere, it is much more likely that the perpetrator is male. While there are absolutely cases in which the perpetrator is female, there are fewer instances of this in politics. Lastly, by keeping the perpetrator as male, and the victim as female, I was able to look at gender with regards to institutional power imbalances and the sexist holdings of society. To do this, it was best that all misconduct scenarios were consistent, and that all variables were controlled for, which explains my ultimate decision to have male politicians as the perpetrator.

Results

To compare results across experimental conditions, I chose to run difference of proportions tests and look at one sided p-values to determine statistical significance. This test was well suited to show the difference between response variables because it allowed me to compare one variable at a time and see a pattern of response.

General Findings

In addition to looking at the aggregate data, I decided to look at how participants responded to the question treatments with a specific focus on partisanship. For each response option, “resign,” “issue an apology,” “take temporary leave of absence,” “take legal action,” and “none of the above,” I ran a difference of proportion test to see how participant responses changed based on whether the accused politician was of their same party or different party.⁹ I hypothesized that participants would be harsher towards accused politicians of the opposite party affiliation. Under this view, it would be expected that respondents would favor the less severe consequence options for politicians of their same party. For purposes of this survey the most severe response options are “resign” and “take legal action.” A response of “issue an apology” or “take a temporary leave of absence” is considered less severe because it does not require the politician to vacate their position or be prosecuted. The “none of the above” option is interpreted as no action because of the previous response options. When looking across all of the participant responses, a majority of the participant responses for the less severe actions do not show statistically significant differences. Instead, the most variation is found within the more severe

⁹ When analyzing my data, I chose to use the Pid3 variable, a three-category self-identification of partisanship, when looking at the partisan identity of the respondents. My choice in doing so was to better reflect the American public, who have varied degrees of partisanship though still identify with a political party.

options, signaling that taking strong action is a more polarizing response. I will continue to explore the more severe options below, looking more closely at partisanship and gender. Results of the difference of proportion test for each response option broken down by political party as well as descriptive statistics on the demographics of the survey sample can be found in the Appendix.

Partisan: Resign

The current research suggests that when individuals are faced with evaluating an accusation against someone of the same political party as them, they are more lenient in their judgement. Additionally, I hypothesized that Republicans in general will be more lenient on accused politicians in general, not only when a Republican official is accused.

In this test, the comparisons that were statistically significant were when a politician was accused of unwanted advances, and when a politician was accused of rape with a prior history both with a prior history of sexual misconduct. In these two scenarios, the difference in response when a Republican was evaluating a Republican perpetrator, as opposed to when a Democrat was evaluating a Democratic perpetrator, cannot be explained by coincidence.

Table 1. Difference of proportion test between treatments with the same partisanship for the “resign” option.

Same Partisan (Resign)							
Severity	Context	Prop Republican	Prop Democrat	Diff Prop (Rep-Dem)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.5909	0.4894	0.1015	44, 94	0.0903	0.4335
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2143	0.2000	0.0143	42, 75	0.0784	0.2865
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.5789	-0.2064	51, 76	0.0883	0.0057
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1200	0.1852	-0.0652	50, 81	0.0630	0.0808
Rape	History	0.3061	0.5769	-0.2708	49, 78	0.0864	0.0008
Rape	No History	0.2250	0.2250	0.0000	40, 80	0.0809	0.2500

Table 2. Difference of proportion test between treatments with different partisanship for the “resign” option.

Different Partisan (Resign)							
Severity	Context	Prop Republican	Prop Democrat	Diff Prop (Rep-Dem)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4091	0.6197	-0.2106	44, 71	0.0939	0.0069
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2174	0.2987	-0.0813	46, 77	0.0801	0.0812
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3947	0.6338	-0.2391	38, 71	0.0978	0.0042
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1600	0.3000	-0.1400	50, 70	0.0754	0.0194
Rape	History	0.6279	0.5000	0.1279	43, 72	0.0944	0.4544
Rape	No History	0.2553	0.2308	0.0245	47, 78	0.0795	0.3110

When comparing how individuals respond to perpetrators of the opposing party, I hypothesized that the individuals would react more harshly. Overall, most of the responses were similar, with the Democrats trending slightly harsher than they had been on their same party

members. Similarly to the same partisan test, the comparisons that were statistically significant were when a politician was accused of unwanted advances, and when a politician was accused of rape, both with a prior history of sexual misconduct. Additionally, there was a statistically significant difference in the response when the treatment detailed a politician accused of unwanted advances with no prior history. In this scenario 16% of Republicans believed that the opposing party perpetrator should resign, in contrast to the 30% of Democrats who believed that an accused Republican senator should resign.

One of the most prominent findings from this test was the difference in how Republicans responded to Democratic senators accused of rape when there was a prior history of sexual misconduct. When Republicans evaluated a Republican senator accused of rape, 30.61% of respondents felt that he should resign if he has previous allegations of misconduct. However, when Republicans were faced with the exact same scenario, the only change being that it was now a Democratic senator, 62.79% of respondents believed that the senator should resign. Not only is this difference significant, but it also trends in the opposite direction of Democrats for this treatment. Democrats, when faced with the same situation, and a same party treatment responded with a 57.69% call for resignation. When given the different partisan treatment, the call for resignation actually lowered to 50%, suggesting that in this scenario, Democrats respond slightly more harshly to accusations against politicians of their same party.

Additionally, I hypothesized that as the severity of the accusations increased, so would the support for harsher repercussions. When responding to the same party and different party perpetrators, Democrats were more likely to select the “resign” response for the unwanted advances treatment than the sexual relationship treatment. The selection proportion stayed nearly the same as the unwanted advances treatment when the severity changed to rape, and only went

down more moderately when Democrats evaluated Republican politicians accused of rape with a history of misconduct. Unexpectedly, when evaluating same party perpetrators, Republicans responded less harshly as the severity increased, with the least number of respondents selecting the resign option for the treatment with the rape accusation. When evaluating a Republican senator, 59.09% of respondents felt that the senator should resign when accused of having a sexual relationship with a female staffer, the wording of this question specifically implying that it may have been a consensual action, as opposed to 30.61% of respondents selecting resignation when the senator was accused of rape. In both of these treatments, the senators had a history of misconduct, and can thus be compared, since the variable of history, which has significant influence, is controlled for. This trend is surprising, even more so because it does not occur when looking at the different partisan treatment.

Partisan Comparison: Resign

In order to understand the full story that the research data shows, I also ran a difference of proportion test on the responses within Republican and Democratic identifying participants. This test directly shows the difference between how participants reacted when primed with accused politicians of their same political party, and the opposing one. While the other partisan difference tests demonstrate the disparity between how Democrats and Republicans respond to cases of assault, this test isolates the partisan variable of the politician in the scenarios and compares it against how groups of Democrats and Republicans respond to same and opposite party accusations.

Table 3. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “resign” option.

Republican (Resign)							
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.5909	0.4091	0.1818	44, 44	0.1048	0.4780
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2143	0.2174	-0.0031	42, 46	0.0878	0.2430
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.3947	-0.0222	51, 38	0.1043	0.2078
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1200	0.1600	-0.0400	50, 50	0.0693	0.1411
Rape	History	0.3061	0.6279	-0.3218	49, 43	0.0988	0.0005
Rape	No History	0.2250	0.2553	-0.0303	40, 47	0.0917	0.1855

When looking at how Republican participants responded to the different treatments, the responses are pretty standard, the big exception being the treatment in which a senator with a history of sexual misconduct is accused of rape. This difference is statistically significant both when comparing it to the equivalent Democratic subgroup, and when comparing it within the Republican subgroup.

Table 4. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “resign” option.

Democrats (Resign)							
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4894	0.6197	-0.1303	92, 71	0.0773	0.0240
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2000	0.2987	-0.0987	75, 77	0.0697	0.0400
Unwanted Advances	History	0.5789	0.6338	-0.0549	76, 71	0.0805	0.1241
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1852	0.3000	-0.1148	81, 70	0.0697	0.0247
Rape	History	0.5769	0.5000	0.0769	78, 72	0.0812	0.4137
Rape	No History	0.2250	0.2308	-0.0058	80, 78	0.0668	0.2327

The Democratic subgroup, in comparison, produced three scenarios where the difference was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. This indicates that for the resignation option, when the scenario detailed a politician accused of having a sexual relationship with a female staffer, whether or not the politician had a history of misconduct, Democratic participants responded measurably more harshly to Republican politicians than they did to Democratic politicians accused of the same misconduct. Likewise, this was true for the treatment scenario in which a senator is accused of making unwanted advances towards a female staffer, though the statistically significant difference occurred when the politician had no history of sexual misconduct.

Partisan: Legal Action

In addition to looking at the breakdown of the resignation response, I also performed proportion tests on the “take legal action” response. The choice of this response reflects that the participant viewed the accusation as a crime. The difference in proportion here trends almost entirely negative, indicating that in all but one scenario, Democrats favored the legal action more than Republicans when considering a same-party politician. This result is consistent with my hypothesis that Democrats respond more harshly to accusations of sexual misconduct and assault. Furthermore, other research suggests that Democrats are more likely to be concerned about perpetrators getting away with assault than their Republican counterparts (Graf 2020).

My findings indicate that across both parties, whether the participant is evaluating a politician of the same or different party, they are less likely to choose the legal action response if the accused politician has no prior history or assault. This finding is reflected not just in this specific test, but across the data both at the aggregate level, and the more specific treatment levels that I have looked at. Participants are more motivated to take accusations against repeat offenders more seriously because the accusation seems more credible, and thus participants are more likely to respond by choosing legal action as a response. When evaluating the same party treatment, the findings indicate that in the scenario where the politician is accused of making unwanted sexual advances, with a history of misconduct, the difference in responses between Democrats and Republicans was statistically significant, showing that the Democrats were more likely to view unwanted sexual advances as a crime.

Table 5. Difference of proportion test between treatments with the same partisanship for the “take legal action” option.

Same Partisan (Take Legal Action)							
Severity	Context	Prop Republican	Prop Democrat	Diff Prop (Rep-Dem)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.3636	0.4255	-0.0619	44, 94	0.0887	0.1226
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1905	0.2000	-0.0095	42, 75	0.0762	0.2253
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.5395	-0.1670	51, 76	0.0886	0.0162
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2400	0.2963	-0.0563	50, 81	0.0789	0.1208
Rape	History	0.4694	0.6154	-0.1460	49, 78	0.0901	0.0267
Rape	No History	0.2500	0.2625	-0.0125	40, 80	0.0843	0.2207

Table 6. Difference of proportion test between treatments with different partisanship for the “take legal action” option.

Different Partisan (Take Legal Action)							
Severity	Context	Prop Republican	Prop Democrat	Diff Prop (Rep-Dem)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4091	0.5775	-0.1684	44, 71	0.0945	0.0198
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2391	0.2597	-0.2060	46, 77	0.0803	0.1998
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3684	0.6056	-0.2372	38, 71	0.0974	0.0046
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2200	0.3857	-0.1657	50, 70	0.0826	0.0136
Rape	History	0.6279	0.6111	0.0168	43, 72	0.0935	0.2856
Rape	No History	0.3617	0.5000	-0.1383	47, 78	0.0901	0.0330

As hypothesized, in both the different partisan and the same partisan treatment, the selection of the response “take legal action” trends upwards as severity increases. This trend is

present in both the treatments where the politicians had a history of misconduct, and those where they did not. The trend here is much clearer, and more consistent than the pattern of response for the option of “resign.” This is not that surprising considering that the response “take legal action” requires the individual to think about whether they believe the accusation to violate a law, while the “resign” option, as well as the additional response options, require the participants to think about consequences in a more relative sense which is a more personal decision-making process.

Partisan Comparison: Take Legal Action

The following difference of proportion tests, displayed in Table 7 and 8, shows the selection of the “take legal action” response within Republican and Democratic subgroups when the accused politician is of their same party, and when they are of the opposition party. Since the purpose of this response option is to evaluate whether the participants viewed the misconduct in question as a crime or not, this test looks at how the response from the same subgroup differs depending on the political party of the accused politician. This test reveals the effect of partisanship on the evaluation of the illegality of sexual misconduct.

Table 7. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take legal action” option.

Republican (Take Legal Action)							
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.3636	0.4091	-0.0455	44, 44	0.1037	0.1653
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1905	0.2391	-0.0486	42, 46	0.0873	0.1450
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.3684	0.0041	51, 38	0.1035	0.2579
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2400	0.2200	0.0200	50, 50	0.0841	0.2970
Rape	History	0.4694	0.6279	-0.1585	49, 43	0.1025	0.0320
Rape	No History	0.2500	0.3617	-0.1117	40, 47	0.0980	0.0655

The data from the Republican subgroup responses revealed that the difference in responses is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level when a politician is accused of rape and has a history of sexual misconduct. When given this treatment scenario, Republican participants were significantly more likely to label the rape accusation as a crime when the accused politician was a Democratic senator than when the accused was a Republican senator.

Table 8. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take legal action” option.

Democrats (Take Legal Action)							
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4255	0.5775	-0.1520	94, 71	0.0777	0.0133
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2000	0.2597	-0.0597	75, 77	0.0680	0.0955
Unwanted Advances	History	0.5395	0.6056	-0.0661	76, 71	0.0814	0.1046
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2963	0.3857	-0.0894	81, 70	0.0772	0.0617
Rape	History	0.6154	0.6111	0.0043	78, 72	0.0796	0.2608
Rape	No History	0.2625	0.5000	-0.2375	80, 78	0.0750	0.0006

Alternatively, within the Democratic subgroup, there were two very significant findings from the response data. In both the scenario in which a politician with a history of sexual misconduct is accused of having a relationship with a female staffer, and the scenario where a politician is accused of rape with no prior history of sexual misconduct, Democrats are more likely to view the action as a crime when the accused politician is a member of the Republican party.

The largest difference in proportion for this test occurred when Democrats were given a scenario in which a senator with no history of prior misconduct is accused of rape. The data shows that they are almost twice as likely to advocate for legal action to be taken when that politician is a member of the Republican party. This is in stark contrast to the complementary scenario in which a senator with a history of prior misconduct is accused of rape. When the subgroup received that treatment scenario, the findings revealed that Democrats reacted seemingly no differently to whether the accused politician was a Democrat or Republican when

there was a history of misconduct. In that same scenario, the Republican response was statistically significant, reflecting that Republican participants reacted significantly more harshly to Democratic politicians with a history of misconduct who are accused of rape. An explanation for this result could be that because a prior history of misconduct represents a pattern of behavior by the individual, when individuals lack this information, they rely more heavily on their biases to form their opinion and signal the appropriate action. This survey response suggests that Democrats are more likely to use their partisan bias to determine appropriate action in this scenario.

Gender

I chose to run a difference of proportion test isolating the gender of the participants to see the effects on participant responses. I originally hypothesized that gender bias would create a clear distinction between the responses of male and female participants, with female participants favoring harsher punishments for the accused. In all but three scenarios, women were more likely to favor consequences than men, but only some of these differences were statistically significant.

Table 9. Difference of proportion test between male and female response to the “resign” option.

Gender (Resign)							
Severity	Context	Prop Male	Prop Female	Diff Prop (Male-Female)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.5000	0.4766	0.0234	96, 107	0.0703	0.3152
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1889	0.2212	-0.0323	90, 104	0.0580	0.1448
Unwanted Advances	History	0.4946	0.5347	-0.0401	93, 101	0.0718	0.1442
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1461	0.1869	-0.0408	89, 107	0.0531	0.1118
Rape	History	0.4318	0.5727	-0.1409	88, 110	0.0708	0.0122
Rape	No History	0.1739	0.1852	-0.0113	92, 108	0.0544	0.2090

The only resignation response in which the difference between male and female responses is statistically significant is the treatment where the politician is accused of rape with a history of sexual misconduct. This treatment scenario has consistently shown distinct differences when isolated for gender and partisanship. This is likely explained by the fact that this scenario has the highest severity level, with the context of prior claims of sexual misconduct which increases the legitimacy of the accusation in the process of opinion formation. I believe that the responses to this specific treatment scenario reflect the expected gender difference because the severity of the misconduct, combined with the legitimacy of the claims, elicits a stronger response from female participants.

Table 10. Difference of proportion test between male and female response to the “take legal action” option.

Gender (Take Legal Action)							
Severity	Context	Prop Male	Prop Female	Diff Prop (Male-Female)	N (R,D)	Standard Error	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4375	0.4393	-0.0018	96, 107	0.0698	0.2449
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1556	0.2596	-0.1040	90, 104	0.0575	0.0192
Unwanted Advances	History	0.4516	0.6436	-0.1920	93, 101	0.0702	0.0018
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2472	0.2150	0.0322	89, 107	0.0606	0.3516
Rape	History	0.5795	0.6273	-0.0478	88, 110	0.0700	0.1235
Rape	No History	0.2935	0.2315	0.0620	92, 108	0.0625	0.4202

For the “take legal action” response option, there were two treatment scenarios in which the responses were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. In the scenario in which a politician with no history of sexual misconduct is accused of having a sexual relationship with a female staffer, and the scenario in which a politician with a history of sexual misconduct is accused of making unwanted advances towards a female staffer, women were far more likely to select the “take legal action” option than their male counterparts. The p values for these scenarios indicate that this difference is related to difference in gender and not due to chance.

Final Thoughts

Through these survey responses, I have identified the prominent influences on public opinion formation on the topics of sexual misconduct in politics. A history of misconduct appears to have a very strong influence in how the participant responded. Across the data, respondents were almost always less likely to advocate for serious consequences such as

resignation or legal action when the accused politician had no history of misconduct, in comparison to one who did. Interestingly, when the accused politician has no history of misconduct, the popular option selected was “take a temporary leave of absence.”

The prominent influences I have identified relate directly to public opinion formation, being that this scenario uses the term “rape” and indicates a history of misconduct. The use of the word rape shows a clear offense, and the action has very publicly been labeled a crime. The history of assault establishes a pattern of behavior, and real-world examples have shown that repeated accusations are more successful in signaling to the public that the accusation is legitimate.

The partisan treatment enabled me to look at how respondents reacted to members of their political party being accused of sexual misconduct, as well as how responses were impacted by the politician having a history of misconduct. In every scenario, the percentage of people who chose an actionable response to a treatment scenario was higher for a politician who had a history of prior sexual misconduct. It is clear from this response that the public does take into consideration previous behavior of accused politicians to an extent that reflects a measurable influence. For voters, the credibility of an accusation, of any severity, seems to depend heavily on prior allegations and the establishment of a history of behavior.

While there are many factors that influence public opinion, I had originally hypothesized that gender would play a significant role in influencing how participants responded to their treatment scenarios, regardless of partisanship, severity, and history. Based on research in related fields, I expected women to judge the accused politicians more harshly than their male counterparts; however, this hypothesis is supported only in some scenarios, with no clear pattern, not reflected as widely in the findings of the survey as expected. The only instance in which the

difference between male and female responses was statistically significant in calling for the resignation of the accused politician was when the accused politician was accused of rape and had a prior history of sexual misconduct. There was, however, a bigger difference between male and female responses when the response was taking legal action. As previously explained, this option reflects the participant's belief that the accusation is a violation of the law. The increased volume of statistically significant responses for this action suggest that women are more likely to perceive certain types of sexual misconduct as a crime as opposed to men.

The question in which the politician is accused of rape is meant to reflect the highest level of severity for an accusation. That being said, I was not surprised to find that there were not many instances in which the responses were statistically significant when comparing partisanship and gender. This is not entirely surprising given that rape is generally understood by the public as being both wrong and against the law. The word itself reflects a clear lack of consent, and additionally has very violent connotations. When discussing sexual assault in the workplace, it must be noted that when there is a very explicit power difference, and someone's job is potentially at risk, it creates an environment where consent cannot be properly given. There are many different scenarios that can be classified as rape, and when actions are labelled as such, in comparison to sexual assault or sexual misconduct, it elicits a stronger response from individuals.

Case Studies

As sexual assault has made its way into the forefront of important conversations, we have learned how to speak more appropriately about such sensitive topics. How we view women's issues and specifically issues of sexual assault has changed and evolved greatly over the past century; however, there are still many related issues that have persisted against reform. As with any issue, the media, and their subsequent coverage of a topic, has remarkable influence over those who consume it. Time and time again, the media's coverage of issues has shaped the general public's views on sensitive topics, often undermining credible accusations of sexual misconduct.

As the media has developed and advanced technology has enabled its widespread growth, individuals are now able to access more information than ever before. In the age of modern media, every allegation is publicized and commented on. With the increasingly polar partisan climate, and the changing culture around sexual assault, accusations are weaponized by the partisan media, who influence their consumers to support whatever narrative they are promoting. Even the mainstream media is guilty of sensationalizing accusations which affects how allegations are framed. This often jeopardizes the integrity and credibility of the accusations, which is an integral part of the public opinion formation process. Unfortunately, accusations of sexual misconduct are not uncommon, and public opinion often has a major influence over whether the accused politician remains in office or is reelected. Additionally, public support of an accusation can also prevent aspiring politicians from even being voted into office.

Sex scandals in Congress are nothing new. In fact, in the United States, sexual scandals have been publicized in Congress and the White House since George Washington's presidency.¹⁰ Sex scandals are classified as any action of sexual misconduct; they most commonly include extramarital affairs, prostitution, as well as sexual assault and rape. In 2020, an allegation of sexual misconduct could easily derail a congressional or presidential bid, but this has not always been the case.

In fact, numerous presidents have been accused of rape and were either still elected or remained in office. Beyond these allegations, there are many other instances of sexual misconduct that, given the context, could justify the label of rape, such as Mimi Alford's affair with President John F. Kennedy, in which Alford, a 19 year old intern, engaged in an 18-month affair with Kennedy where she felt "resistance was out of the question."¹¹ In her own words she describes their first encounter "When we were in the bedroom, he had maneuvered me so swiftly and unexpectedly, and with such authority and strength that short of screaming, I doubt I could've done anything to thwart his intentions."¹² Misconduct allegations of other types, with varying degrees of severity, have plagued these same presidents as well as many others beyond that short list. Allegations in Congress are even more common because of the sheer volume of people, which also means that some of the accusations get overshadowed by accusations against more prominent political figures. It also means that there is significant partisan politics at work,

¹⁰ Begley, S. (2015, December 29). Alexander Hamilton and America's First Political Sex Scandal. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://time.com/4149350/first-political-sex-scandal/>

¹¹ Bennetts, L. (2017, September 18). JFK Intern Mimi Alford's Shocking Affair Tell-All. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.newsweek.com/jfk-intern-mimi-alfords-shocking-affair-tell-all-65693>

¹² Mimi Alford does not consider what happened between her and President Kennedy to be rape, despite that label from others. She maintains that she was a willing participant and though now acknowledges how the power imbalance dictated the relationship.

Alford, M. (2012). Chapter 5. In *Once Upon a Secret: My Affair with President John F. Kennedy and its Aftermath* (pp. 55-56). New York: Random House.

and these more prominent political figures have a large influence over whether an accusation is taken seriously by other members of government, and the American public.

Question Formation

Each of my survey questions was modeled after categories of real-life accusations. The severity spanned three levels i) a sexual relationship with a female staffer, ii) unwanted sexual advances towards a female staffer, and iii) attempted rape, which includes a wide range of accusation types. Question A, in which a senator is accused of having a sexual relationship with a female staffer, is based on President Bill Clinton's relationship with 22-year-old White House intern, Monica Lewinsky during the years 1995-1997. The severity level in which a senator is accused of making unwanted sexual advances on a female staffer is based on very common accusations of sexual harassment and drew on the case of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's and Anita Hill, as well as allegations against Donald Trump and Joe Biden that emerged during and before the 2020 election. Additionally, there were many other cases that I have researched, some of which are extremely recent, in which the misconduct may be classified under this category of severity. Finally, the accusation of attempted rape serves as the highest severity level. This category is reflective of misconduct allegations such as those against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, as well as Donald Trump, and Bill Clinton. In each of the previously mentioned cases, the allegations did not affect the politician's position in office or prevent their confirmation to their position. Clinton was impeached for perjury he committed related to the case; however, he remained in office for the remainder of his term. While this is the case for the aforementioned politicians, and Supreme Court Justices, there are many politicians whose careers do not withstand allegations of any sort of sexual misconduct. In selecting cases to examine for analysis, I chose to focus on situations in which the accused politician was largely

unscathed by the allegations. In doing so, I was able to focus on the factors in the process of public opinion formation that influenced this outcome. Since my survey data showed significant variation in public response, especially in choosing harsh consequences, it was useful to look more closely at the factors that influenced this outcome. It was necessary to explore why certain politicians are able to withstand the scandal that ensues in the aftermath of allegations, and how they are able to do so.

In an effort to better understand the role that public opinion plays in the aftermath of sexual misconduct, I will take a closer look at the specific cases and the factors that contributed to the public response, and subsequent actions taken by the accused politician.

Bill Clinton

In 1998, news of scandal hit the mainstream media when the *Washington Post* published a story, previously reported on the *Drudge Report*, on President Bill Clinton, and 22-year-old White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Between the years 1995 and 1997, President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky engaged in an affair that consisted of a multitude of sexual encounters, phone conversations, and exchanges of gifts. This is but one of the many instances of sexual misconduct that Clinton has been accused of committing, ranging from infidelity in his marriage to Hillary Clinton, to criminal offenses such as sexual assault and rape. While both Lewinsky and Clinton have assumed responsibility for what happened, there is an acknowledgement that what occurred between them was inappropriate on a number of levels.

Clinton's workplace behavior during his time in the White House demands serious scrutiny, especially as we become more knowledgeable about topics related to sexual assault and misconduct. While some may argue that what occurred between Clinton and Lewinsky was consensual, and thus not misconduct beyond infidelity, there were many power dynamics at play, including age, workplace role, and most importantly, that he was not only her superior, but President of the United States. This makes for a very complicated relationship, in which one must remember that the two were not workplace peers. In fact, Lewinsky was moved from her White House role into a different role at the Pentagon because her superiors were suspicious of the amount of time that she was spending around the President. It is clear that this move upset Lewinsky, as she repeatedly asked Clinton to be transferred back to a role in the White House, and even sent him a letter hinting that she would disclose their relationship if the change was not made. She was eventually removed from her position at the Pentagon, and Clinton enlisted the help of his friend Vernon E. Jordan Jr. to find her a new job that suited the "job wish list" that

she presented him with.¹³ The fact that Lewinsky was negatively affected in her career position because of the relationship that she had with Clinton demonstrates the severe workplace power imbalance.

When news of their affair broke, Lewinsky was publicly shamed and ridiculed by the media. She has even recounted that in the days after the news became public, her mother required her to shower with the door open for fear that she would harm herself.¹⁴ In stark contrast, as scandal hit, Clinton found himself preoccupied with whether or not he should come clean. In calculating his response to the scandal, Clinton discussed possible next steps with political consultant Dick Morris.¹⁵ It was reported that “Mr. Morris suggested that he take a poll on the voters' willingness to forgive confessed adultery.”¹⁶ The results of the poll indicated that the American public was “willing to forgive [the President] for adultery, but not for perjury or obstruction of justice.”¹⁷ It was concluded that Clinton would not go public with a confession and instead would continue to deny the allegations, and do whatever necessary to dismiss any accusation of wrongdoing.¹⁸ When it became clear that the American public interpreted Clinton’s denial as “weak,” he made the now infamous public statement,

¹³ The Washington Post Special Report: Clinton Accused. (1998, September 13). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/timeline.htm>

¹⁴ Schwartz, A. (2015, March 21). At TED, Monica Lewinsky Talks Cyberbullying and How She Almost Lost Her Life. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3044038/at-ted-monica-lewinsky-talks-cyberbullying-and-how-she-almost-lost-her-life>

¹⁵ Dick Morris resigned from his role as a political advisor to the Clinton campaign in 1996 after it was publicly revealed that he had an affair with a prostitute. He is credited by many as being responsible for Clinton’s political comeback that ultimately secured him a second term.

Dick Morris Resigns in Wake of Scandal. (1996, August 29). Retrieved April 07, 2021, from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB841337831597958000>

¹⁶ Kenneth Starr, “The Starr Report”, XIV D. #4 “We Just Have to Win,” 1999

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

"I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time. Never. These allegations are false."

The subsequent investigation that occurred into the affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was covered closely by the media, leading to oversaturated coverage of the scandal. Two huge factors in this scandal were both the media's accessibility to information and the partisan nature of the investigation. Both of these factors influenced how the public consumed the information, and also what information they were given. Ken Starr, though a third-party investigator, appeared to have strong partisan motivations in his investigation which the American public perceived as biased against Clinton. His investigation, famously referred to as the Starr Report, was given to the mainstream media, and published in its entirety. All 453 pages of the document, detailing the case against Clinton, including explicit testimony recalling the sexual encounters between him and Lewinsky, could be found on the internet and in special sections of newspapers. It is estimated that over 20 million people downloaded and read the report upon its release in 1998.¹⁹ The report received criticism from many for the inclusion of such explicit information, with critics viewing the report as indicative of an overzealous prosecutor.²⁰ The release of the entire report, unredacted, can be traced back to the House of

¹⁹ Kilgore, E. (2019, April 17). Remembering the Starr Report As We Await the Mueller Report. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from Intelligencer website: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/04/remembering-the-starr-report-as-we-await-the-mueller-report.html>

²⁰ One member of the investigation team who was especially in favor of including sexually explicit details about the President's affair was a young Brett Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh would later be confirmed in 2018 as a Supreme Court Justice, after allegations of sexual misconduct and attempted rape were made in the time leading up to, and during, his confirmation.

Representatives, led by Speaker Newt Gingrich²¹ not heeding warnings of the sensitive material the document contained.

A 1998 Gallup poll showed that the American public still found President Clinton to be more popular than Ken Starr, suggesting further that any efforts of the report to turn the public against Clinton were unsuccessful.²² Furthermore, the Gallup poll also revealed that many Americans did not believe that Clinton should resign from office. It was reported that 60% of Americans approved of Clinton's job as President and felt he should not resign. Alternatively, the public favored a censure by Congress rather than a more formal action. While overall support and approval trended slightly downward, Gallup reported that this was consistent with past public response to similar lines of questioning during a scandal.²³ Additionally, it appeared that the support for Clinton also extended to the entire Democratic party, which managed to pick up additional seats in Congress during the 1998 midterms amidst the scandal.

Understanding the Public Response

The publication of the Starr Report revealed overwhelming evidence undermining Clinton's claims of innocence, yet he maintained majority support from the American people

²¹ After the GOP lost seats in the 1998 midterm, Newt Gingrich stepped down as House speaker. He was partly blamed for the backlash against impeachment. To replace him, Republicans chose Bob Livingston who was forced to step aside before even assuming the role after news of his own affair leaked. During his 2008 bid for president, Gingrich revealed that he had an extramarital affair with a congressional staffer, who would later become his wife, at the time of the impeachment trials.

Mikkelsen, R. (2007, March 09). Clinton Foe Gingrich Admits Impeachment Era Affair. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-gingrich/clinton-foe-gingrich-admits-impeachment-era-affair-idUSN0943442620070309>

Seelye, K. Q. (1998, December 20). Livingston Quits Over Adultery Admission. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/politics/122098impeach-livingston.html>

²² Keith, T. (2018, August 17). Brett Kavanaugh's Role in the Starr Investigation and How it Shaped Him. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/17/639670928/brett-kavanaughs-role-in-the-starr-investigation-and-how-it-shaped-him>

²³ Newport, F. (2021, April 03). Initial Reaction Mixed on Delivery of Starr Report to Congress. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4168/initial-reaction-mixed-delivery-starr-report-congress.aspx>

throughout the scandal. There are many factors that contributed to this, but perhaps the most important are as follows: a “personal vote” for Clinton, approval for the Clinton administration’s policies, the media coverage of the scandal, and society’s understanding of sexual assault and related issues in 1998.

Bill Clinton, despite the many scandals that have plagued his career (most of which were allegations of sexual misconduct), has remained largely favorable in the eyes of the American public. In the weeks after the House of Representatives voted to pass two articles of impeachment, Clinton polled at the highest approval ratings of his presidency. The Starr Report exposed the intimate details of his affair with Lewinsky, which he had previously and publicly asserted was false, yet the public was not entirely shocked that what was detailed in the report was true. After all, his affair with Lewinsky became of interest while he was being investigated for sexual harassment against state employee Paula Jones while he was Governor of Arkansas. The prosecution had probed into his relationship with Lewinsky as a means of establishing a pattern of behavior. At the time, Clinton denied any sexual relationship, despite the fact that this was untrue, and he was under oath. The investigators on the Paula Jones case identified a list of 21 women with whom Clinton was suspected of having had a sexual relationship, though the claims had a varying range of credibility. That being said, Bill Clinton’s sexual misconduct was not a new topic for the American public--allegations and admission of infidelity were part of the 1992 campaign and had already been very public.

In 1998, renowned public opinion expert John Zaller looked closely at the relationship between the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and public opinion. Both journalists and politicians shared information about the scandal with the public, merging media influence with elite discourse. The media’s reporting on the scandal was found to be negative in the immediate

aftermath of the story breaking, but quickly transitioned to more balanced coverage with almost equal minutes of positive and negative reporting on Clinton. Zaller found that the public's opinion on Clinton, as shown through multiple polls, reflected the same trend. In the immediate aftermath, when there was the most negative coverage, approval went down. As coverage balanced, the polls returned to their pre-scandal levels and eventually rose even higher. It should be noted that while Clinton's approval ratings dropped in the wake of the scandal, he was still considered generally popular (Zaller 1998). The media coverage of the scandal, though not overtly partisan, conveyed elite partisan messaging to the public, which only further rallied Clinton supporters to his defense.²⁴ In response to allegations of an affair with Lewinsky, Hillary Clinton went on NBC's *Today Show* and declared the allegations of any affair to be part of a "vast right wing conspiracy."²⁵ This comment contributed to politicization of the scandal, a move that may have strengthened the support for the President from his party.

Zaller argues that while there may be many factors that explain Clinton's ability to rebound so quickly from the scandal, perhaps the most promising argument was his political accomplishments as President. His State of the Union speech, delivered just seven days after news of the scandal broke, not only portrayed him as strong and steady in the midst of crisis, but drew attention back to his significant accomplishments as leader of the free world. The United States found itself in a state of political and economic stability under the Clinton administration, and to many Americans, this seemed to justify overlooking any personal shortcomings of the

²⁴ Media-Driven Public Backlash Spurred Clinton's High Job Approval. (2001, January 22). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.washington.edu/news/2001/01/22/media-driven-public-backlash-spurred-clintons-high-job-approval/>

²⁵ Tumulty, K. (2016, September 03). How Hillary Clinton helped create what she later called the 'vast right-wing conspiracy'. Retrieved April 07, 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hillary-clinton-was-right-about-the-vast-right-wing-conspiracy-heres-why-it-exists/2016/09/02/4a5e0fba-6879-11e6-99bf-f0cf3a6449a6_story.html

president. That, combined with Clinton's moderate political ideology, made him a less polarizing political figure. Additionally, Zaller suggests that many Americans may be “indifferent to presidential character,” which would further support the claim that Clinton’s continued support is a direct result of the success of his policies on improving life for the American people and giving them what they want from a president (Zaller 1998).

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that our 1998 understanding of sexual assault looks very different than it does now, over 20 years later. What happened between Clinton and Lewinsky is very complicated and not clearly understood or explained with a simple label. When comparing Lewinsky’s deeply personal essays for *Vanity Fair*, “Shame and Survival” (2014) and *Monica Lewinsky: Emerging from “The House of Gaslight” in the Age of #MeToo* (2018), there is a clear difference in how she speaks and describes the events. In the latter, Lewinsky begins to acknowledge that what happened between her and Clinton is far more complicated than just an affair, and while some may argue that it does not constitute the label of sexual assault, many others would say that the vast power imbalance would render gaining consent impossible.

In Clinton’s grand jury testimony, he states that “inappropriate intimate contact” took place between himself and Lewinsky but refused to go into more detail about the physical contact.²⁶ In 2014, Lewinsky described the situation, saying “Sure, my boss took advantage of me, but I will always remain firm on this point: it was a consensual relationship. Any ‘abuse’ came in the aftermath, when I was made a scapegoat in order to protect his powerful position.”²⁷

²⁶ The Washington Post Special Report: Clinton Accused. (1998, September 13). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/timeline.htm>

²⁷ Lewinsky, M., & Seliger, P. (2014, May 28). Exclusive: Monica Lewinsky on the Culture of Humiliation. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/society/2014/06/monica-lewinsky-humiliation-culture>

This was in response to Kentucky Senator Rand Paul making the following comments on NBC's *Meet the Press* in January of 2014.

One of the workplace laws and rules that I think are good is that bosses shouldn't prey on young interns in their office. And I think really the media seems to have given President Clinton a pass on this. He took advantage of a girl that was 20 years old and an intern in his office. There is no excuse for that.²⁸

However, after the #MeToo movement, there was a massive shift in the public's understanding of sexual assault and consent, and just four years later, with a new perspective, Lewinsky elaborated on her prior comments.

Just four years ago, in an essay for this magazine, I wrote the following: "Sure, my boss took advantage of me, but I will always remain firm on this point: it was a consensual relationship. Any 'abuse' came in the aftermath, when I was made a scapegoat in order to protect his powerful position." I now see how problematic it was that the two of us even got to a place where there was a question of consent. Instead, the road that led there was littered with inappropriate abuse of authority, station, and privilege.²⁹

²⁸ Kaplan, R. (2014, January 26). Rand Paul Accuses Bill Clinton of "Predatory" Behavior Toward Lewinsky. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rand-paul-accuses-bill-clinton-of-predatory-behavior-toward-monica-lewinsky/>

²⁹ Lewinsky, M. (2018, February 25). Monica Lewinsky: Emerging from "The House of Gaslight" in the Age of #MeToo. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/02/monica-lewinsky-in-the-age-of-metoo>

This knowledge and new perspective are a product of time and a changing culture of sexual assault. In her more recent essay, Lewinsky reflects on how the #MeToo movement and self-reflection had changed her own understanding of what transpired in her relationship with Clinton.

Now, at 44, I'm beginning (*just beginning*) to consider the implications of the power differentials that were so vast between a president and a White House intern. I'm beginning to entertain the notion that in such a circumstance the idea of consent might well be rendered moot. (Although power imbalances—and the ability to abuse them—do exist even when the sex has been consensual.)

It is necessary that we understand how this change and development of perspective, allows us to see what happened between Lewinsky and Clinton in a new light. It is also important to acknowledge that part of the reason Clinton remained so favorable in the eyes of the public was because the American people did not generally have the framework in 1998 for understanding whether what transpired was perhaps not simply a workplace affair, but rather an abuse of power that constituted the label of sexual assault. It is possible that if something similar were to occur today, the focus of an investigation would not be on a crime such as perjury, but rather sexual misconduct. This means that there may be previous claims that deserve a second look. Ronan Farrow, the reporter responsible for breaking the story on Harvey Weinstein,³⁰ said that he believed “the Juanita Broaddrick claim has been overdue for revisiting” citing it as a credible accusation of rape.³¹ The fact of the matter is that Bill Clinton's legacy is still a positive

³⁰ Farrow also received a Pulitzer Prize in 2018 for his reporting on the subject.

³¹ Richardson, V. (2019, November 03). Ronan Farrow: Bill Clinton 'Credibly accused of Rape' by Juanita Broaddrick. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/nov/3/ronan-farrow-bill-clinton-credibly-accused-rape-ju/>

one in the eyes of the American people. He was a well-liked President, whose policies appealed to many Americans. He was seemingly lightheartedly labeled a “womanizer” and any subsequent claims were chalked up to that. In March of 2020, Hulu released a 4-part biographical docuseries on Hillary Clinton, in which Bill Clinton refers to his relationship with Lewinsky as something he did to “manage his anxieties.”³² To refer to a sexual relationship that many have come to see as a form of assault as a way to manage anxieties reveals a strong disconnect between Clinton and his behavior.

My survey data reflects that when a politician with a history of sexual assault, and no identifying party information, any of the following i) engaged in a sexual workplace relationship, ii) made unwanted advances or iii) was accused of attempted rape, roughly 50% of participants responded in each case by saying that the politician in question should resign. When the politician was labelled as Democrat, the responses still stayed relatively consistent. Bill Clinton was a Democratic president, with a history of misconduct, who, depending on your perspective, has engaged in misconduct on all three levels of severity in question, and yet at the time of his scandal with Lewinsky, 60% of Americans felt he should not resign.

It is very problematic that the narrative continues to treat the relationship between Clinton and Lewinsky as an affair. Especially when a new understanding allows us to see the relationship as being a serious assault and abuse of power. There has been a great change in how we view power dynamics as related to consensual sex, and even how we view workplace relationships. In 1998, what occurred between Clinton and Lewinsky was seen as a moral shortcoming in the fact that it was an extramarital affair. There was no real thought as to whether the real issue was that a crime had taken place. To understand this in the context of the survey, I

³² ABC News. (2020, March 06). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bill-clinton-affair-monica-lewinsky-manage-anxieties/story?id=69437334>

believe that the public viewed Clinton's actions as a sexual relationship in the workplace, rather than a serious assault. The difference in participant response between the sexual relationship treatments and the rape treatment, or even the unwanted advances treatment demonstrates how there may have been a very different public response had the media, and other relevant conversations portrayed the events as a more serious event.

Clarence Thomas

In 1991, during the confirmation hearings, Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas was accused of sexually harassing women whom he worked with at the Department of Education and at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Anita Hill chose to come forward with claims of sexual harassment, though later, other women also described inappropriate behavior from Thomas as well. Prior to the confirmation hearing, Hill had been approached by the Judiciary Committee to provide information on Thomas as they had worked together in two prior offices. Hill alleged that Thomas had sexually harassed her while she was working as his aide from 1981-1983. In sharing this with the Committee she insisted that her claims not be shared publicly or with Thomas, nor should her name be included. During this time, support for Thomas was strong and the committee was moving toward a vote. After hearing Hill's allegations, the Judiciary Committee called for an FBI investigation into Hill's claims which lasted three days and ultimately presented the Committee with an inconclusive report.³³ Thomas's confirmation vote was expected to take place; however, Hill's confidential FBI interview in which she alleged sexual harassment, was somehow leaked to the press, which also referenced a witness who corroborated her claims. Hill then agreed to testify, and it was agreed that another round of hearings would take place. Hill alleged that while working under Thomas, he made regular comments to her of a sexual nature that were not appropriate by any standard for the workplace. Furthermore, she stated that these comments ensued after she rejected his request to go on a date. Hill said that she feared for her job, and for her career. She worried that Thomas might dismiss

³³ Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas: The Backstory. (2010, October 20). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anita-hill-vs-clarence-thomas-the-backstory/>

her from her position or prevent her from doing meaningful work because she had rejected his sexual advances.³⁴

"I began to feel severe stress on the job," Hill told the committee. "I began to be concerned that Clarence Thomas might take out his anger with me by degrading me or not giving me important assignments. I also thought that he might find an excuse for dismissing me."³⁵ Hill also shared that on her final day at the EEOC, before moving to a teaching position at Oral Roberts University, over a professional dinner, Thomas commented "If I ever told anyone of his behavior, that it would ruin his career."³⁶

What then ensued is labeled by many reporters, as a "he said, she said" dispute. Hill was firm in her accounts, and it is reported that there were four other women available to testify and corroborate Hill's accusations, although they were never called upon.³⁷ Hill later said that calling two witnesses, Angela Wright and Suki Hardnett, would have helped to establish the credibility of her allegations of Thomas's workplace behavior. Both women were not allowed to testify.³⁸ Thomas vehemently denied any accusation made by Hill, declaring the hearings to be a "high tech lynching"³⁹ as well as a "circus" and "national disgrace."⁴⁰

³⁴ AP Was There: The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Hearings. (2018, September 26). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://apnews.com/article/0e7625b761e7416194562aea38ab9910>

³⁵ Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas: The Backstory. (2010, October 20). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anita-hill-vs-clarence-thomas-the-backstory/>

³⁶ Smolowe, J. (1991, October 21). Sex, Lies and Politics: He said, She said. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,974096-3,00.html>

³⁷ Totenberg, N. (2018, September 23). A Timeline of Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Controversy as Kavanaugh to Face Accuser. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/23/650138049/a-timeline-of-clarence-thomas-anita-hill-controversy-as-kavanaugh-to-face-accuse>

³⁸ Viebeck, E. (2019, August 22). Here's What Happened When Anita Hill Testified Against Clarence Thomas in 1991. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-anita-hill-clarence-thomas-20180927-story.html>

³⁹ Totenberg, N. (2018, September 23). A Timeline of Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Controversy as Kavanaugh to Face Accuser. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/23/650138049/a-timeline-of-clarence-thomas-anita-hill-controversy-as-kavanaugh-to-face-accuse>

⁴⁰ Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas: The Backstory. (2010, October 20). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anita-hill-vs-clarence-thomas-the-backstory/>

Despite the fact that this hearing centered on the Supreme Court, which many prefer to idealize as being removed from partisan politics, what ensued during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing was clearly influenced by partisan politics. When President George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to replace the retiring Justice Thurgood Marshall, it was understood that this would mean a serious realignment of the Supreme Court. Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court Justice, was a civil rights activist, and maintained a liberal ideology. Democrats worried that Thomas, a hardcore conservative, would reverse many of the key legislative decisions that had been made favoring the left. At this time, there was Democratic control of the Senate and after Hill's FBI interview was leaked, the Republicans knew that they did not have enough votes to confirm Thomas, and thus agreed to the additional hearings.⁴¹

Anita Hill was attacked by Republican senators and by Thomas, who said that he believed "Some interest groups came up with this story, and this story was developed specifically to destroy me."⁴² In Thomas's 2007 autobiography, he revisited the events of 1991, and claimed Democrats invoked "the age-old blunt instrument of accusing a black man of sexual misconduct" because they feared he would overturn prior rulings regarding abortion rights.⁴³ Hill was accused by Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, an outspoken defender of Thomas during the hearings, of conspiring with a group of lawyers hoping to prevent Thomas's confirmation.⁴⁴ The nature of these accusations only strengthened the partisan divide; meanwhile President Bush

⁴¹ Totenberg, N. (2018, September 23). A Timeline of Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Controversy as Kavanaugh to Face Accuser. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/23/650138049/a-timeline-of-clarence-thomas-anita-hill-controversy-as-kavanaugh-to-face-accuse>

⁴² Smolowe, J. (1991, October 21). Sex, Lies and Politics: He said, She said. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,974096-3,00.html>

⁴³ Lewis, N. (2007, September 30). In New Book, Justice Thomas Weighs in on Former Accuser. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/washington/30thomas.html>

⁴⁴ Smolowe, J. (1991, October 21). Sex, Lies and Politics: He said, She said. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,974096-3,00.html>

and other Republicans continued to maintain unwavering support for Thomas throughout the hearings.

The hearings served as an intersection of gender and race in politics. After all, Thomas and Hill were both black, Yale-educated law professionals, who had overcome substantial poverty to achieve their success. It is not possible to discuss public opinion without acknowledging the critical role that race plays, both in individual opinion formation, but also in how Hill and Thomas were treated by the media and even their peers. On the issue of gender, Hill had to conduct her testimony in front of an entirely male, all-white Judiciary Committee. Thomas, also answering to the same all-white Senate committee, claimed that Hill was “touchy” and “prone to overreacting,”⁴⁵ both terms that are often used in a sexist manner to describe women. Anita Hill’s experience during the hearings must be considered through the lens of intersectionality, taking into account that she is an African American woman, not just one or the other (Mansbridge 1992). On the subject, Hill has said,

Those members of Congress had never even considered that Black women had our own political voice. They assumed that Black men spoke for us. For an African American woman to have her own political voice and own political position, and to believe that our perspective should be added to the conversation, was just something they hadn't even considered.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hill, A. (2007, October 02). The smear this time. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/02/opinion/02hill.html>

⁴⁶ Massie, V. (2016, April 16). How Racism and Sexism Shaped the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill Hearing. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/16/11408576/anita-hill-clarence-thomas-confirmation>

In 2002, she spoke again about the hearings,

If you think about the way the hearings were structured, the hearings were really about Thomas' race and my gender, it was as if I had no race or that my race wasn't significant in the assessments that people made about the truthfulness of my statements ... [But] how do you think certain people would have reacted if I had come forward and been white, blond-haired and blue-eyed?

Understanding the Public Response

This story cannot be told without acknowledging the deeply rooted institutionalized racism in the United States. Anita Hill was working against stereotypes as not only a woman, or an African American, but an African American woman. The polls reflect this. In the immediate aftermath of the hearings, a *New York Times* poll showed 58% of Americans sided with Thomas, a number significantly higher than the 24% who responded that they believed Hill.⁴⁷ While the polls themselves don't directly point to a race/gender bias, the gap in believability is arguably a result of bias. This is consistent with the overall attitudes in 1991, and likely affected the way that the public perceived Hill. In the end, Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court with the smallest vote margin in over a century, and Anita Hill was essentially driven out of her teaching position at the University of Oklahoma by angry conservative state legislators who accused her of committing perjury.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ ABC News. (2010, October 20). Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/WN/clarence-thomas-anita-hill-decades/story?id=11928941>

⁴⁸ Thomas, J. (1996, November 13). Anita Hill Plans to Leave Teaching Post in Oklahoma. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/13/us/anita-hill-plans-to-leave-teaching-post-in-oklahoma.html>

Once again, we have the opportunity to see how our society has evolved in its views and knowledge on issues pertaining to sexual assault. It was made public that in 2019, Joe Biden, then a presidential hopeful, had reached out to Hill to apologize for the way that he conducted the hearings back in 1991, when he was the chair of the Judiciary Committee. Hill publicly declared that his attempt to make amends was unsatisfactory, and made it clear that she believes the way the hearing was conducted created a “he said, she said” exchange which not only compromised the integrity of the hearings in the eyes of the public, but also ultimately harmed other victims.⁴⁹ In sexual harassment cases, a lack of physical evidence means that corroborating testimony is especially important for establishing credibility, and often times establishing a pattern of behavior. As previously explored, the general public is far more receptive to claims against sexual misconduct when the politician has a history of behavior, as indicated by my survey findings. Even if there is no physical evidence, it is expected that the victim would garner more support from the public if the politician has shown a pattern of behavior in the past, which makes other witness testimony so important in these cases.

Despite the poor precedent set by the hearing, it did have a tangible impact. After watching Anita Hill defend herself to a sea of men, many women felt inspired to get their voices heard. The 1992 election year was declared the “Year of the Woman,” marked by a record number of women securing seats in Congress. At the time of the Thomas hearings, only two women held office in the Senate. Feeling disheartened, more female politicians entered the race for congressional seats, hoping to make change themselves from the inside. Ultimately, in 1992, a record number of women were nominated by major parties to fill seats in Congress, many of

⁴⁹ Stolberg, S., & Hulse, C. (2019, April 25). Joe Biden Expresses Regret to Anita Hill, but She Says 'I'm Sorry' is Not Enough. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/us/politics/joe-biden-anita-hill.html>

them citing Anita Hill as their inspiration. The outcome tripled the number of women in the Senate and totaled 47 women in the House of Representatives.⁵⁰ This influence had lasting effects on Congress, and the Thomas hearings continue to be relevant as conversations revolve around topics of sexual misconduct. In 2018, mainstream media conversations on the topic experienced a resurgence as the American people prepared to watch another Supreme Court nominee prepare to defend himself against allegations of sexual misconduct.

⁵⁰ Strauss, A. (2017, April 02). Key Moments Since 1992, 'The Year of the Woman'. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/04/02/us/02timeline-listy.html>
Women on the Campaign Trail. (n.d.). Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Assembling-Amplifying-Ascending/Women-Decade/>
Gugliotta, G. (1992, November 04). 'Year of the Woman' Becomes Reality as Record Number Win Seats. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/11/04/year-of-the-woman-becomes-reality-as-record-number-win-seats/77598a23-dea3-491a-a8b3-9ccfaf7b61ef/>

Brett Kavanaugh

The accused Supreme Court nominee in question would be none other than Brett Kavanaugh, another distinguished Yale educated lawyer, and former Ken Starr protégé. His case drew many parallels with the Thomas hearings, though the accusation was very different. The allegations against Kavanaugh, like Thomas, surfaced during his confirmation hearings. Christine Blasey Ford alleged in a letter to her member of Congress that in 1982, a 17-year-old Kavanaugh forced her into a bedroom and assaulted her while his friend looked on. The assault happened while both Blasey Ford and Kavanaugh were high school students, and the event took place at a house party in which it is alleged Kavanaugh was drinking. Blasey Ford would remain quiet about the assault, but privately disclosed details of what she classified as an attempted rape to a therapist in 2012.⁵¹ Other sworn testimony corroborated that Blasey Ford confided details of a sexual assault from her high school years to multiple close friends, as well as her husband, in which she provided details that described Kavanaugh and his professional position. Upon hearing that Kavanaugh would most likely be slated to fill a vacant Supreme Court position, Blasey Ford reached out to her member of Congress, whose office connected her with California Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein. Blasey Ford wrote Feinstein a letter in which she confidentially shared her account of the assault. Feinstein did not share the letter publicly but information that she may be in possession of a document that contained an assault accusation against Kavanaugh was leaked to the media. Feinstein confirmed the existence of the document, without revealing Blasey Ford's identity. Blasey Ford then publicly identified herself as the author of the letter in a *Washington Post* article after realizing that her identity had been leaked

⁵¹ Watkins, E. (2018, September 17). Timeline: How the Kavanaugh Accusations Have Unfolded - CNN POLITICS. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/17/politics/kavanaugh-ford-timeline/index.html>

by others who had access to the confidential letter.⁵² Blasey Ford's decision to come forward meant that she was subject to the same public scrutiny that other victims like Anita Hill experienced on the public stage.

The accusation against Kavanaugh, because it dates back to when both were minors, was subject to especially harsh scrutiny. Senator Hatch, who had been an outspoken critic of Anita Hill during the 1991 hearings, commented on the accusations against Kavanaugh, stating "The matter is simply that Christine Blasey Ford, in her recollections, must be 'mixed up,'"⁵³ signaling to his supporters that accusations of this sort are not to be trusted. Once again partisan politics dominated the hearings and divided the American public. Blasey Ford was painted as a hardcore leftist whose accusation was simply a tactical effort to prevent another conservative judge from being confirmed to the Supreme Court. Senator Feinstein was openly criticized by her Republican colleagues for holding onto the letter, a move they saw as intentionally trying to delay Kavanaugh's confirmation.

Understanding the Public Response

Despite the fact that Kavanaugh was ultimately confirmed to the Supreme Court, the attitudes of the general public on the hearings, and Blasey Ford's accusation, marks a significant culture shift, especially when compared to the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas.

⁵² Brown, E. (2018, September 27). California Professor, Writer of Confidential Brett Kavanaugh Letter, Speaks Out About Her Allegation of Sexual Assault. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/california-professor-writer-of-confidential-brett-kavanaugh-letter-speaks-out-about-her-allegation-of-sexual-assault/2018/09/16/46982194-b846-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b_story.html

⁵³ Garber, M. (2018, September 21). The Logical Fallacy of Christine Blasey Ford's 'Choice'. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/09/brett-kavanaugh-christine-blasey-ford/570715/>

Although the two situations are not entirely parallel, comparing them offers great insight into understanding how the public responds to accusations of sexual misconduct.

Poll data found that 43% of Americans opposed Kavanaugh's nomination, and 59% believed that if Blasey Ford's accusation was true, then he should not have been confirmed. At the partisan level, it was found that 54% of Republicans believed that Kavanaugh should be confirmed whether or not the accusations are true.⁵⁴ While these polls were published before testimony was given, they are consistent with the overall trend that Blasey Ford's allegation is credible, although in both polls there was a significant portion of individuals who were unsure of who they believed. Additionally, a deeper look into poll results revealed that there were significant gender disparities in the responses. While the plurality of respondents both men and women were unsure of who was telling the truth prior to testimony, of those who did choose, the support for Kavanaugh was predominantly male, and the support for Blasey Ford predominantly female. Likewise, when they broke down the responses by partisanship, they found that Democratic men were more likely to support Blasey Ford, while Republican women favored Kavanaugh.⁵⁵ While gender alone plays a significant role, the partisan aspect reveals a deeper truth about social identity in politics. Republican women are more likely to side with their partisan identity over gender identity because they often need to "de-gender" themselves as a way of proving their support for conservative issues that are deemed "traditionally masculine" (Wright 2020). This is not surprising, especially since additional research revealed that during the hearings, Democrats focused on framing the issue as "survivors rights" while the Republicans focused on the importance of "due process" (Wright 2020). This reveals that when an accusation

⁵⁴ Montanaro, D. (2018, September 26). New Poll finds Americans Deeply Divided by Gender on Kavanaugh Nomination. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/26/651647131/poll-nearly-6-in-10-to-closely-watch-kavanaugh-ford-hearing-many-undecided-on-tr>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

is made that is unsubstantiated by physical evidence, Democrats are more likely to favor the accuser, while Republicans are more likely to favor the politician. These trends parallel my survey data, which showed that that Democrats are overall more likely to advocate for harsher punishment than their Republican counterparts. Within every scenario treatment, there was a consistent trend of more Democrats selecting the severe response options than Republicans.

A separate poll reported data gathered before and after the testimony portion of the hearings reflected that the American public believed Blasey Ford's accusation to be credible, in comparison to Kavanaugh's denial of wrongdoing. While many respondents were unsure of who to believe prior to the hearings, this number decreased after the testimony portion concluded. After hearing testimony, support for Blasey Ford went up significantly, showing that 45% of respondents believed that she was telling the truth. This is a notable increase from the 32% polled prior. Support for Kavanaugh also trended upward, totaling 33% after the hearings.⁵⁶ A separate poll found that 43% of Americans opposed Kavanaugh's nomination, and 59% believed that if Blasey Ford's accusation was true, then he should not have been confirmed. At the partisan level, it was found that 54% of Republicans believed that Kavanaugh should be confirmed whether or not the accusations are true.⁵⁷

The cultural shift widely credited to the #MeToo movement is seen in the fact that even before the testimony, more individuals opted to side with Blasey Ford over Kavanaugh. Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, described the significance of this change in public opinion, "If it remains 'he said, she said,' the benefit of the doubt is very

⁵⁶ Montanaro, D. (2018, October 03). Poll: More Believe Ford Than Kavanaugh, A Cultural Shift from 1991. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/654054108/poll-more-believe-ford-than-kavanaugh-a-cultural-shift-from-1991>

⁵⁷ Montanaro, D. (2018, September 26). New Poll finds Americans Deeply Divided by Gender on Kavanaugh Nomination. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/26/651647131/poll-nearly-6-in-10-to-closely-watch-kavanaugh-ford-hearing-many-undecided-on-tr>

different from 1991, and it goes to Ford not Kavanaugh. It shows the reaction to the testimony and does show an underlying change in attitude [compared to] 27 years ago."⁵⁸ We now as a collective have started to focus on supporting victims of sexual assault and believing them when they come forward. Even though Kavanaugh was still confirmed, the conversations that took place were extremely different than they were in 1991 when a parallel situation occurred. Blasey Ford has spoken publicly about the difficult decision in coming forward. After all, she wished to remain anonymous and only decided to come forward after it was clear that her identity had somehow been leaked. In the end, in her own words, she felt it her civic responsibility to come forward and report the assault when she learned that he was nominated to the highest court in the country, a role that is a lifetime appointment. Unfortunately, even though there has been much progress in the way the public evaluated allegations, the reality of this story is that Blasey Ford, like Anita Hill, and other high-profile victims of sexual assault and misconduct, were publicly shamed, doxxed, and subjected to extreme scrutiny to establish credibility in a narrative that they never wished to be a part of. They are forced to go to extreme lengths to prove their claims, all under the watch of the American public. Blasey Ford even took a polygraph test, which

⁵⁸ Montanaro, D. (2018, October 03). Poll: More Believe Ford Than Kavanaugh, A Cultural Shift from 1991. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/654054108/poll-more-believe-ford-than-kavanaugh-a-cultural-shift-from-1991>

Kavanaugh refused,⁵⁹ the results of which indicated that she was truthful in answering questions about the alleged assault.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ As calls for Kavanaugh to submit to a polygraph test increased, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo released a public statement in which he declared that President Trump should demand Kavanaugh to do so, and in the event of a refusal, he should withdraw his appointment. Just three years later, in 2021, Cuomo, still Governor of New York, was accused of sexual misconduct by multiple women. Cuomo has since refused to resign, stating the accusations to be unfounded and alluding to unnamed “motivations” that women have when making these types of accusations Jones, K. (2021, March 13). Cuomo's Words on Blasey Ford Come Back to Bite Him After Latest Statement on Accusations. Retrieved April 07, 2021, from <https://www.westernjournal.com/cuomos-words-kavanaugh-accuser-come-back-haunt-latest-statement/>

⁶⁰Tillett, E. (2018, September 26). Christine Blasey Ford's Attorneys Release Polygraph Results on Kavanaugh Allegations. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/christine-blasey-ford-attorneys-release-polygraph-results-on-kavanaugh-allegations/>

Donald Trump

The 2016 election marked the start of a period of four years that can be characterized by extreme partisan polarization, perhaps the strongest that we have seen in recent decades. Donald Trump's road to the presidency was unlike one ever seen before. Also notable about the 2016 election is that it was the first time a woman was slated as a major party nominee, that woman being none other than Hillary Clinton. The campaign period was marked by unconventional behavior and a slew of personal attacks. In a very charged move, Trump invited Juanita Broaddrick, Paula Jones, Kathleen Willey and Kathy Shelton to the 2016 Presidential debate, four women who have publicly accused former President Bill Clinton of sexual misconduct, as a way of intimidating both Clintons. Rudy Giuliani, a Trump supporter and advisor, shared that the original plan was to have the women sit in a VIP box and have them attempt to make contact with Bill Clinton. The organizers of the debate eventually stepped in to ensure that this did not happen.⁶¹

Trump's own presidential bid was marred by many allegations of sexual misconduct. The now infamous 2005 *Access Hollywood* conversation that was leaked in 2016 between Donald Trump, and media personality Billy Bush, showed Trump describing women "You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait...And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything....Grab them by the p---y, you can do anything." *Access Hollywood* confirmed the video was not fake, and Trump later apologized for his comments calling them "locker room talk" and adding "Bill Clinton has

⁶¹ Mitchell, A., & Jamieson, A. (2017, February 07). Trump Planned Debate 'Stunt', Invited Bill Clinton Accusers to Rattle Hillary. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-presidential-debates/trump-planned-debate-stunt-invited-bill-clinton-accusers-rattle-hillary-n663481>

said worse to me on the golf course.”⁶² Billy Bush, then working as an anchor on the *Today Show*, was subsequently fired after the leak, and Trump would go on to win the bid for presidency.

In the aftermath of the leak, a number of women came forward with allegations against Trump, describing behavior reminiscent of his “you can do anything” mindset. While most of the nearly 20 accusations of sexual misconduct surfaced after the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, Trump had been previously accused of misconduct at least twice prior to his presidential campaign and was known for sexist conduct that had also previously resulted in legal action against him by his employees. Anecdotes of objectification and discrimination have been largely corroborated, many of them coming from former employees, as well as contestants in the Miss America pageant contest, which Trump owned, and his reality show, *The Apprentice*.⁶³ Many of the accusations against Trump have been corroborated, though Trump has unequivocally denied any wrongdoing, in some cases going so far as to deny ever meeting the accusers.⁶⁴

⁶² Fahrenthold, D. (2016, October 08). Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation About Women in 2005. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html

⁶³ Stuart, T. (2020, September 17). A Timeline of Donald Trump's Creepiness While He Owned Miss Universe. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/a-timeline-of-donald-trumps-creepiness-while-he-owned-miss-universe-191860/>

Santucci, J., Sargent, J., & Petras, G. (2020, October 21). 19 Women Have Accused Trump of Sexual Misconduct. Here's What Their Stories Have in Common. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2020/10/21/trump-sexual-assault-allegations-share-similar-patterns-19-women/5279155002/>

Barbaro, M., & Twohey, M. (2016, May 14). Crossing the Line: How Donald Trump Behaved with Women in Private. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>

⁶⁴ In multiple cases Trump's claim that he has never met nor seen the accuser has been proven false.

Carroll, E. Jean. (2019, June 21). Donald Trump Assaulted Me, But He's Not Alone on my List of Hideous Men. Retrieved April 07, 2021, from <https://www.thecut.com/2019/06/donald-trump-assault-e-jean-carroll-other-hideous-men.html>

Joe Biden & the 2020 Election

Most recently, the 2020 presidential election was the first to occur in the post #MeToo era. Both Democratic nominee Joe Biden, and incumbent Donald Trump were the recipients of assault allegations, some of which were new during the 2020 presidential campaign. To an extent, the severity and credibility of the accusations played a role in how the public responded, as Trump's accusations were accepted as more severe and credible. Additionally, the multitude of consistent allegations against Trump overall established a much stronger pattern of behavior in comparison to the allegations against Biden. The most prominent allegation against Biden was made by former staff assistant Tara Reade, who alleges that Biden assaulted her in 1993. Friends and family of Reade have said that she confided in them after the incident, and two interns that she supervised recalled her leaving the staff abruptly. Reade has since said that she felt ostracized by her superiors after reporting the incident to them, and alleged that she filed a complaint against Biden after the incident; however, a *New York Times* investigation, and the National Archives could not find any evidence of a report being filed. In his own statement, after denying the allegations, Biden called upon the Senate Secretary to find "any record of the complaint and make it public to the press."⁶⁵ A record of the alleged report was never found. There are also several allegations from women who alleged that Biden's behavior, though not always directly sexual, made them feel uncomfortable. Although Biden has been described as a "tactile politician," the allegations against him reflect that his behavior has gone too far or was not wanted. That being said, none of these other allegations allege that Biden harassed or assaulted the women in question. On the subject, Speaker Nancy Pelosi felt that these allegations

⁶⁵ Feller, M. (2020, May 1). Joe Biden Has Been Accused of Sexual Assault. Here's What We Know So Far. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/joe-biden-has-been-accused-of-sexual-assault-heres-what-we-know-so-far/ar-BB12BVGW>

should not disqualify him from the presidential race. However, she stated, “He has to understand in the world that we’re in now that people’s space is important to them, and what’s important is how they receive it and not necessarily how you intended it.”⁶⁶ This too is consistent with the cultural shift that has taken place. It is possible to make women uncomfortable with your actions whether or not they were intended to, such as a hug that seemed to linger or a kiss on the head. The conversation around Biden was an especially interesting one, as even his supporters, which came from both sides of the aisle, offered no denial of the fact that he was perhaps an “overly touchy” man with both women and men, and instead focused on the framing of such actions. Specifically, in today's culture there is more of a focus on respecting an individual's physical boundaries, even if the contact is benign.⁶⁷

The discussion of both Biden and Trump has been one fueled largely by partisan attitudes. Attacks between the two were deeply personal, though it must be noted that Trump went after Biden’s alleged misconduct as if he himself had not faced accusations as well. There were many factors that played a role in determining a Biden win for the 2020 election, and accusations of sexual misconduct seemed to be just one talking point among many. In this specific race, many Americans felt that they needed to vote along party lines or for the lesser of two evils. While neither choice may be favorable, in the two-party system, voters are often pressed to choose a main party candidate. In the eyes of the public, Biden was the seemingly the more digestible candidate when it came to misconduct because the allegations against him were less severe than Trump’s. Even his most severe allegation was not seen as part of a pattern of behavior, instead, the pattern of behavior was shown through allegations of

⁶⁶ Stolberg, S., & Ember, S. (2019, April 02). Biden's Tactile Politics Threaten His Return in the #MeToo Era. Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/02/us/politics/joe-biden-women-me-too.html>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

unwelcome touching, which was considered less severe than Trump's history of more physical misconduct. Those factors, combined with the fact that almost all of the allegations against Trump surfaced in the 2016 election, in which he was still elected, perhaps lessened the consequences of sexual misconduct allegations to both campaigns. In Trump's case, the public was already familiar with the accusations, and for Biden, they were not as severe as the ones that had already been levied against his opponent. While the 2020 election should not serve as an example in which allegations against opposing candidates "cancelled each other out," it does show what can happen when a politician refuses to step down or resign. In this case the American people were forced to choose between two politicians accused of misconduct, or not voting at all.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The option to vote third party also stands, however, in the history of the United States, there has never been a winning third party candidate in a presidential election,

Conclusion

Overall, the data indicates that both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to advocate for harsher punishments when the accused politician was of the opposite party. However, within this trend Democrats responded more harshly to the different partisan treatment than Republican respondents, meaning that they were much more likely to advocate for more severe consequences when the accused politician was a Republican. That being said, Democratic respondents were more likely to advocate for harsher punishment than Republican respondents, regardless of the accused politician's political party. This trend is consistent overall, regardless of severity level.

Additionally, individuals were more likely to advocate for severe consequences when a politician had a history of misconduct. The presence of a history of misconduct indicates that the accused senator has displayed a pattern of behavior, which seemingly increases the credibility of the accusation. Moreover, female respondents generally responded more harshly than male respondents. The overall trend indicated this but there were significant differences in how men and women responded to "take legal action" responses, with female respondents more likely to see the unwanted advances severity level as a serious workplace violation that warranted legal action.

The attitudes of the American people are changing. Sexual misconduct is no longer swept under the rug, and there has been significant change in how we evaluate consent with regards to power imbalances. While sexual misconduct is nothing new to politics, we have only recently begun to hold politicians accountable for their actions. When forming an opinion on other types of misconduct, such as a financial scandal, there is often more physical evidence that can be used and accessed in the process of evaluating the misconduct. On the contrary, many allegations of

sexual misconduct lack physical evidence and instead rely on the ability to establish credibility, often through corroborating witnesses and proving a pattern of behavior. This is reflected in my survey findings, that participants are more likely to advocate for severe consequences such as resignation or legal action when the accused politician has a history of misconduct. Likewise, because of the subjective nature of sexual misconduct, individuals were overall more likely to advocate for severe punishment when the misconduct was explicitly labelled as being physical. While there are mixed opinions on what constitutes sexual harassment, and even what forms of unwanted touching can be labelled as assault, there is a very clear understanding that rape is illegal. Being that rape was the most severe form of misconduct represented in the scenarios, participants were more likely to choose the “resign” and “take legal action” response, because it is the most explicit example of misconduct.

Among my findings was that while politicians on both side of the aisle are equally likely to commit sexual assault, they differ greatly in their responses to it depending on their party affiliation. Therein lies the problem.

My research revealed that Democratic participants were consistently more likely to advocate for severe consequences when compared to Republican participants, and overall participants from both parties were less likely to advocate for severe consequences when the accused politician did not have a prior history of misconduct. Additionally, individuals typically favored harsher consequences for accused politicians of the opposite party, in comparison to how they responded when the accused politician was from their same party. When comparing the responses across all treatment scenarios, this trend was generally consistent in both Democratic and Republican participant responses. As the country has become increasingly polarized in

recent years, the cultural shift surrounding topics of sexual misconduct has forced some politicians to rethink their stances.

Almost three decades later, we have the hindsight to know that the way Anita Hill was treated during the Thomas hearings was wrong. Two decades later, we can recognize that Monica Lewinsky was a 22-year-old intern, who was taken advantage of by the President of the United States, who had a long-established history of misconduct. And just three years ago, Christine Blasey Ford's accusation against Brett Kavanaugh was not seen as enough of a reason not to confirm him to the highest court in the United States.

Throughout the case studies, we have seen how allegations of sexual misconduct are misconstrued as partisan weapons, a way to derail the career of a candidate you don't want in office. But that is simply not the case. The women that come forward with accusations, are publicly scrutinized, shamed, and ridiculed. In more than one case they found difficulty returning to work after coming forward and faced other serious issues as a result of the treatment they endured. And yet, in every case, the men at the center of these accusations found themselves right where they wanted to be, whether that was the Supreme Court bench or the Oval Office. These accusations become nothing but a small stain in their success story, getting at most the attention of a mere section or chapter in their multi-million-dollar book deals.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Unfortunately, sexual assault is an issue that occurs in all spheres of society. Notably, sexual assault on college campuses remains an extremely prevalent problem. While universities have taken steps to implement educational programs based around consent and sexual assault, the issue remains. Additionally, many universities lack Title IX offices that have the systems in place to deliver actionable responses when a student is accused of misconduct. This is significant because college campuses may likely be the first space in which a perpetrator attempts to engage in misconduct or develops sexually aggressive behaviors. If they are not held accountable for their actions during this time, it sets the precedent that they will not be penalized for their actions, which makes them more likely to keep doing them. These individuals will grow up and most likely continue to engage in inappropriate behaviors, which could have perhaps been prevented if they had been held responsible for their actions during their formative years. Additionally, when sexual misconduct occurs in politics, and the perpetrator is not held accountable, we show that we do not take the behavior seriously. By demonstrating this on the world stage, it is impossible to ignore the implications that complacency has on societal norms. When accusations against leaders are dismissed or ignored we perpetuate the message that individuals who commit sexual misconduct will not be penalized and can be extremely

The reality is politicians are supposed to answer to the people. In February of 2021, multiple women came forward to accuse New York Governor Andrew Cuomo of sexual harassment and making unwanted physical advances. Cuomo became an incredibly popular political figure during the COVID-19 pandemic, whom some had been promoting as a potential Democratic nominee in the 2024 presidential election. Cuomo has since stated that he will not resign, despite calls from politicians on both sides of the aisle. In his first televised appearance to address the allegations, Cuomo declared, “I’m not going to resign. I was not elected by the politicians. I was elected by the people.”⁷⁰ But what if the public doesn’t want someone with a multitude of sexual misconduct allegations to lead them? This is why public opinion is so important. When there is a lack of public support for a politician accused of misconduct, incumbent politicians feel more pressure to act in a way that reflects the desires of their constituents, because they too, want to remain in their position. While the story has previously been Democrats supporting Democrats, and Republicans supporting Republicans, the party lines are starting to blur. The case of Cuomo is our most recent example of this. As we previously watched Republican women try to balance gender and partisan identity during the Kavanaugh hearings, Democrats are now finding themselves in a similar position, forced to choose between party and the survivors rights they had previously advocated for.

At the core of democracy, the opinion of the public is what holds politicians accountable. On the topic of sexual assault there are many factors that influence opinion formation, and one

successful despite committing heinous actions. Additionally, it furthers the narrative that people in power can do whatever they want with no repercussions.

⁷⁰ Cuomo Won't Resign, Says People Know Difference Between 'Bowing to Cancel Culture and the Truth'. (2021, March 12). Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/cuomo-won-t-resign-says-people-know-difference-between-bowing-to-cancel-culture-and-the-truth/ar-BB1ewzGV>

shared identity is not always enough to guarantee support. Even when accusations are credible, it does not necessarily force a resignation or withdrawal of candidate support. We have seen this time and time again. There has been a recent partisan clash between Republicans, who frame their support under the guise of due process and Democrats, who do so with regard to survivors' rights (Wright 2020). This difference in presumption of innocence dictates how they treat the accusation, and the lengths to which they will go to in order to substantiate the claim. However, as Joe Biden said during the Thomas hearings, "This is not a trial, this is not a courtroom. There will be no formal verdict of guilt or innocence," and if this is the case, then why must the standard be so high?⁷¹ After all, the consequences in these scenarios do not involve legal action.

Perhaps one of the most disheartening findings of my research has been that allegations of sexual assault usually do not occur as isolated incidents. Where there is one, keep looking and you will likely uncover many more and a deeply troubling pattern of behavior. When the perpetrators are also in positions of extremely influential power, it only becomes more difficult for victims to come forward, and justice to be served. The American people deserve better from their leaders, and the burden of responsibility has fallen to the masses to keep them accountable. It is time to remind politicians that they are replaceable, and just as we are the ones who give them their power, we are also the ones who will take it away.

⁷¹ AP Was There: The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Hearings. (2018, September 26). Retrieved April 06, 2021, from <https://apnews.com/article/0e7625b761e7416194562aea38ab9910>

References

- Barnes, T. D., Beaulieu, E., & Saxton, G. W. (2018). Sex and Corruption: How Sexism Shapes Voters' Responses to Scandal. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 8(1), 103-121.
doi:10.1080/21565503.2018.1441725
- Basinger, S. J. (2013). Scandals and Congressional Elections in the Post-Watergate Era. *Political Research Quarterly*, 66(2), 385-398. doi:10.1177/1065912912451144
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Fawcett.
- Costa, M., Briggs, T., Chahal, A., Fried, J., Garg, R., Kriz, S., . . . Slayton, J. (2020). How Partisanship and Sexism Influence Voters Reactions to Political #MeToo Scandals. *Research & Politics*, 7(3), 205316802094172. doi:10.1177/2053168020941727
- Farenthold, B. (n.d.). [Letter written May 2, 2018 to Gregg Abbott]. Retrieved from <http://blake.com/AbbottLetter.pdf>
- Fischle, M. (2000). Mass Response to the Lewinsky Scandal: Motivated reasoning or Bayesian updating? *Political Psychology*, 21(1), 135-159. doi:10.1111/0162-895x.00181
- Funk, C. L. (1996). The Impact of Scandal on Candidate Evaluations: An Experimental Test of the Role of Candidate Traits. *Political Behavior*, 18(1), 1-24. doi:10.1007/bf01498658
- Garment, S. (1992). *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Graf, N. (2020, August 25). Sexual Harassment at Work in the Era of #MeToo. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/04/04/sexual-harassment-at-work-in-the-era-of-metoo/>
- Herrick, R. (2000). Who Will Survive? An Exploration of the Factors Contributing to the

- Removal of Unethical House Members. *American Politics Quarterly*, 28(1), 96-109.
doi:10.1177/1532673x00028001006
- Ellison v. Brady. 1991. 924 F.2d 872. <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/924/872/224242/> (US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit - 924 F.2d 872 (9th Cir. 1991) 1991).
- Kunst, J. R., Bailey, A., Prendergast, C., & Gundersen, A. (2019). Sexism, Rape Myths and Feminist Identification Explain Gender Differences in Attitudes Toward the #MeToo Social Media Campaign in Two Countries. doi:10.31234/osf.io/jysw8
- Mansbridge, J., & Tate, K. (1992). Race Trumps Gender: The Thomas Nomination in the Black Community. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 25(3), 488-492.
doi:10.2307/419439
- Mussweiler, T., & Förster, J. (2000). The Sex → Aggression Link: A Perception-Behavior Dissociation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(4), 507-520.
doi:10.1037/0022-3514.79.4.507
- Post, J. M. (2004). *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Post, J. M. (2015). *Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Rotundo, M., Nguyen, D., & Sackett, P. R. (2001). A Meta-Analytic Review of Gender Differences in Perceptions of Sexual Harassment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(5), 914-922. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.86.5.914
- Sigal, J., Hsu, L., Foodim, S., & Betman, J. (1988). Factors Affecting Perceptions of Political

- Candidates Accused of Sexual and Financial Misconduct. *Political Psychology*, 9(2), 273. doi:10.2307/3790956
- Staff, C. (2019, July 01). Lebsock Expelled from Colorado House Following Marathon Harassment Debate. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.cpr.org/2018/03/02/lebsock-expelled-from-colorado-house-following-marathon-harassment-debate/>
- Stockdale, M. S., Gilmer, D. O., & Dinh, T. K. (2019). Dual Effects of Self-Focused and Other-Focused Power on Sexual Harassment Intentions. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 39(1), 17-37. doi:10.1108/edi-09-2018-0160
- Suarez, E., & Gadalla, T. M. (2010). Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(11), 2010-2035. doi:10.1177/0886260509354503
- Szekeres, H., Shuman, E., & Saguy, T. (2020). Views of Sexual Assault Following #MeToo: The Role of Gender and Individual Differences. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 166, 110203. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2020.110203
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.mspb.gov/MSPBSEARCH/viewdocs.aspx?docnumber=253661&version=253948&application=ACROBAT>
- Walter, A. S., & Redlawsk, D. P. (2019). Voters' Partisan Responses to Politicians' Immoral Behavior. *Political Psychology*, 40(5), 1075-1097. doi:10.1111/pops.12582
- Wright, J. M., Clark, J. H., & Evans, H. K. (2021). "They were Laughing": Congressional

Framing of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's Sexual Assault Allegations on Twitter. *Political Research Quarterly*, 106591292098763. doi:10.1177/1065912920987631

Zaller, J. R. (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge (Inglaterra): Cambridge University Press.

Zaller, J. R. (1998). Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 31(2), 182. doi:10.2307/420248

Appendix

Table A. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “resign” option.

Republican (Resign)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.5909	0.4091	0.1818	0.4780
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2143	0.2174	-0.0031	0.2430
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.3947	-0.0222	0.2078
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1200	0.1600	-0.0400	0.1411
Rape	History	0.3061	0.6279	-0.3218	0.0005*
Rape	No History	0.2250	0.2553	-0.0303	0.1855

Table B. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “resign” option.

Democrats (Resign)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4894	0.6197	-0.1303	0.0240*
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2000	0.2987	-0.0987	0.0400*
Unwanted Advances	History	0.5789	0.6338	-0.0549	0.1241
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1852	0.3000	-0.1148	0.0247*
Rape	History	0.5769	0.5000	0.0769	0.4137
Rape	No History	0.2250	0.2308	-0.0058	0.2327

Table C. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “issue an apology” option.

Republican (Issue an Apology)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.2273	0.3182	-0.0909	0.0846
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.0714	0.1087	-0.0373	0.1358
Unwanted Advances	History	0.2941	0.2632	0.0309	0.3129
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.1600	0.1000	0.0600	0.4029
Rape	History	0.2857	0.3023	-0.0166	0.2154
Rape	No History	0.1250	0.1277	-0.0027	0.2425

Table D. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “issue an apology” option.

Democrats (Issue an Apology)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.3936	0.3803	0.0133	0.2845
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2400	0.2857	-0.0457	0.1306
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3816	0.4085	-0.0269	0.1847
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2840	0.2857	-0.0017	0.2454
Rape	History	0.3205	0.3056	0.0149	0.2890
Rape	No History	0.1875	0.1667	0.0208	0.3170

Table E. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take temporary leave of absence” option.

Republican (Take Temporary Leave of Absence)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4545	0.6364	-0.1819	0.0217*
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.4286	0.4348	-0.0062	0.2383
Unwanted Advances	History	0.5294	0.5000	0.0294	0.3041
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.4400	0.5800	-0.1400	0.0404*
Rape	History	0.6735	0.4186	0.2549	0.4965
Rape	No History	0.4250	0.5532	-0.1282	0.0583

Table F. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take temporary leave of absence” option.

Democrats (Take Temporary Leave of Absence)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4894	0.4225	0.0669	0.4017
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.5867	0.6234	-0.0367	0.1609
Unwanted Advances	History	0.4737	0.4366	0.0371	0.3371
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.6296	0.6429	-0.0133	0.2164
Rape	History	0.4744	0.4028	0.0716	0.4057
Rape	No History	0.6250	0.7051	-0.0801	0.0716

Table G. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take legal action” option.

Republican (Take Legal Action)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.3636	0.4091	-0.0455	0.1653
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1905	0.2391	-0.0486	0.1450
Unwanted Advances	History	0.3725	0.3684	0.0041	0.2579
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2400	0.2200	0.0200	0.2970
Rape	History	0.4694	0.6279	-0.1585	0.0320*
Rape	No History	0.2500	0.3617	-0.1117	0.0655

Table H. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “take legal action” option.

Democrats (Take Legal Action)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.4255	0.5775	-0.1520	0.0133
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.2000	0.2597	-0.0597	0.0955
Unwanted Advances	History	0.5395	0.6056	-0.0661	0.1046
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.2963	0.3857	-0.0894	0.0617
Rape	History	0.6154	0.6111	0.0043	0.2608
Rape	No History	0.2625	0.5000	-0.2375	0.0006*

Table I. Difference of proportion test between Republican response to same and different partisan treatment for the “none of the above” option.

Republican (None of the Above)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.0455	0.0455	0	0.2500
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.3571	0.2174	0.1397	0.4634
Unwanted Advances	History	0.0588	0.0526	0.0062	0.2750
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.3400	0.2000	0.1400	0.4713
Rape	History	0.0612	0.0233	0.0379	0.4066
Rape	No History	0.2500	0.1489	0.1011	0.4411

Table J. Difference of proportion test between Democrat response to same and different partisan treatment for the “none of the above” option.

Democrats (None of the Above)					
Severity	Context	Prop Same Partisan	Prop Different Partisan	Diff Prop (Same-Diff)	P Value
Sexual Relationship	History	0.0319	0.0423	-0.0104	0.1810
Sexual Relationship	No History	0.1067	0.1039	0.0028	0.2612
Unwanted Advances	History	0.0000	0.0282	-0.0282	0.0351*
Unwanted Advances	No History	0.0988	0.0857	0.0131	0.3045
Rape	History	0.0385	0.0556	-0.0171	0.1550
Rape	No History	0.1250	0.0385	0.0865	0.4880

Descriptive Statistics

Education

Education	Frequency	%
No HS	66	5.5
High School Graduate	373	31.08
Some College	278	23.17
2- year	122	10.17
4- year	226	18.83
Post-grad	135	11.25
Total	1200	100

Race

Race	Frequency	%
White	845	70.42
Black	138	11.5
Hispanic	128	10.67
Asian	31	2.58
Native American	13	1.08
Two or more races	18	1.5
Other	24	2
Middle Eastern	3	0.25
Total	1200	100

Political Interest

Political Interest	Frequency	%
Most of the time	645	53.75
Some of the time	297	24.75
Only now and then	148	12.33
Hardly at all	71	5.92
Don't know	39	3.25
Total	1200	100

Gender

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	569	47.42
Female	631	52.58
Total	1200	100

Ideology

Ideology	Frequency	%
Very liberal	161	12.42
Liberal	219	18.25
Moderate	347	28.92
Conservative	219	18.25
Very conservative	128	10.67
Not sure	126	10.5
Total	1200	100

Party Identity

Party Identity	Frequency	%
Democrat	443	36.92
Republican	286	23.83
Independent	336	28
Other	60	5
Not Sure	75	6.25
Total	1200	100

Income

Income	Frequency	%
Under 49,999	498	41.5
50,000-99,999	331	27.59
100,000-149,999	144	12
150,000-199,999	56	4.67
200,000+	42	3.5
Prefer not to say	129	10.75
Total	1200	100

Age

	Observations (n)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age	1200	47.19333	18.01165	18	89

Acknowledgements

My biggest debt of gratitude lies with Professor Scott Meinke, without whom these pages would still be blank. It has been the best experience working with you and I am so grateful for the passion and commitment that you have shown this project.

Thank you to Professor Doces for all the thoughtful comments and criticism. I would not have had the pleasure of writing on this very special topic had it not been for your suggestion to pursue something quantitative.

Thank you to Professor Lin, and the rest of the Honors Council, for your time and dedication to this project.

Thank you to the girls of Double Decker, who have supported me every step of the way, as well as all of my friends who have cared enough to listen, share, and ask questions.

Thank you to my Mom, Dad, and Jacob (and George, Finn, and Lexi) for always encouraging me to keep going and reminding me that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to.

A very important thank you goes to the women who have so bravely shared their stories and bared it all in search of justice. I see you. I hear you. I believe you. Thank you.