

**American Party Women Redux:  
Stability in Partisan Gender Gaps**

Tiffany D. Barnes  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Kentucky  
[tiffanydbarnes@uky.edu](mailto:tiffanydbarnes@uky.edu)

Victoria D. Beall  
Graduate Student  
Department of Political Science  
University of Kentucky  
[victoria.dare@uky.edu](mailto:victoria.dare@uky.edu)

Erin C. Cassese  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science & International Relations  
University of Delaware  
[ecassese@udel.edu](mailto:ecassese@udel.edu)

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On average, American women are more likely than men to identify with the Democratic Party and to vote for Democratic presidential candidates. As a result, discussions of the gender gap tend to focus on women's more pronounced tendency toward political liberalism. However, women voters are a politically heterogeneous group – divided by cross-cutting social and demographic factors linked to race, ethnicity, educational attainment, class, region, and religiosity (Andersen 1999; Carroll 1987; Gillion et. al., 2018; Howell and Day 2000; Junn 2017; Kaufmann 2006; Norrander 1999; VanSickle-Ward and Pantoja 2016). Partisanship is also a major source of division among American women. Past research on the intersection of gender and party has revealed that Republican women's policy preferences are much closer to those held by Republican men than to those of Democratic women (e.g., Barnes and Cassese 2017; Deckman 2016). Recognition of this powerful cross pressure necessitates a closer look at gender gaps within the parties, as well as across them, in order to better understand the conditional influence of gender on political thinking and behavior.

Past research suggests that gender gaps fluctuate from election to election. Political campaigns influence the size of the gaps by emphasizing particular policy issues, which can increase their salience or importance to voters, and by working to forge personal connections with specific constituencies (e.g., Hayes 2008; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Kaufmann 2006). In the early 2000s, scholars noted more stability in the partisanship and electoral behavior of men relative to women, suggesting that changes in gender gaps more often than not reflect movement in the political choices of women, or among particular subgroups of women (Box-Steffensmeier, DeBouf and Lin 2004; Kaufmann 2002; 2004; 2006). In this paper, we explore within-party gender differences in policy attitudes using data from the 2012 and 2016 presidential races. We aim to determine whether within-party gender gaps in policy attitudes are relatively stable over

time or whether the size of the gaps varies over the four-year period. If change occurs, does it cut across party lines, or is it confined to a particular subgroup of partisan men or women? A closer look at these two elections affords new insights into the ways that party and gender jointly shape Americans' political thinking.

### **Stability and Change in the Gender Gap**

The modern gender gap refers to the tendency for women to identify with the Democratic Party, support Democratic presidential candidates, and endorse liberal policy positions at higher rates than men (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier, DeBouf and Lin 2004; Norrander and Wilcox 2008). Gender gaps in policy attitudes are relatively modest; for some issue areas, such as abortion policy, there is virtually no gender gap, and for others, like support for government use of force (i.e., defense and criminal justice issues) there are larger gaps ranging from seven to eight percentage points. The gender gap on social welfare issues falls somewhere in between, at about 4 points (for a review, see Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte 2008). Past work suggests that it's important to understand gender gaps in policy preferences, as they underlie gender differences in partisanship, as well as voting behavior (e.g., Chaney, Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Conover and Sapiro 1993; Kaufmann 2002; 2006; Monforti 2017; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).

These average differences between men and women are only part of the story, however. Neither men nor women are political monoliths, and cross-cutting identities as well as demographic factors create significant divisions within gender groups (Brown and Gershon 2016). For example, Barnes and Cassese (2017) evaluated the cross-cutting influence of partisanship on public opinion using the 2012 American National Election Study data. They uncovered small but significant gender gaps among Republicans, with GOP women slightly more supportive of spending on childcare, education, and health care, as well as showing more

support for gun control and gay rights. Fewer differences were evident among men and women in the Democratic Party. Overall, women are more likely to identify with the Democratic party, but the women who do identify as Republican hold positions that are more similar to Republican men than to Democratic women.

In addition to cross-cutting influences, the gender gap is complicated by changes in the political environment. The gender gap is a dynamic phenomenon (Box-Steffensmeier, DeBouf and Lin 2004). For example, in her work comparing gender gaps in 2000 and 2004, Karen Kaufmann (2006) demonstrates that national security concerns and George W. Bush's personal traits uniquely resonated with white female Southern Democrats, shrinking the gender gap in vote choice in 2004 relative to 2000. Beyond this, gender differences in issue positions have been linked to long term changes in the gender composition of the parties (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 2008; Ondercin 2017).

Given what we know about the dynamic nature of the gender gap, there are reasons to expect changes between 2012 and 2016. Gender was salient in both election years, though in different ways. In 2012, inclusion of the birth control mandate in the Affordable Care Act was a point of contention between President Obama and challenger Mitt Romney. In down-ballot races, several GOP candidates made headlines by opposing the rape exemption to state-level abortion laws and by attacking Planned Parenthood. All of this fed the media narrative of a "Republican War on Women" (Deckman and McTague 2015). In 2016, Hillary Clinton's historic candidacy, multiple accusations of sexual misconduct against Donald Trump, and the growing profile of the #MeToo movement focused national attention on issues of gender and power. Beyond this, several researchers have directly compared the influence of beliefs about gender (namely modern and hostile sexism) on candidate evaluations and vote choice in 2012 and 2016. Collectively, this

work finds an effect in 2016, but not 2012, suggesting distinctive gender dynamics across the two elections (e.g., Cassese and Barnes 2019; Schaffner, Macwilliams and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne and Oceno 2018).

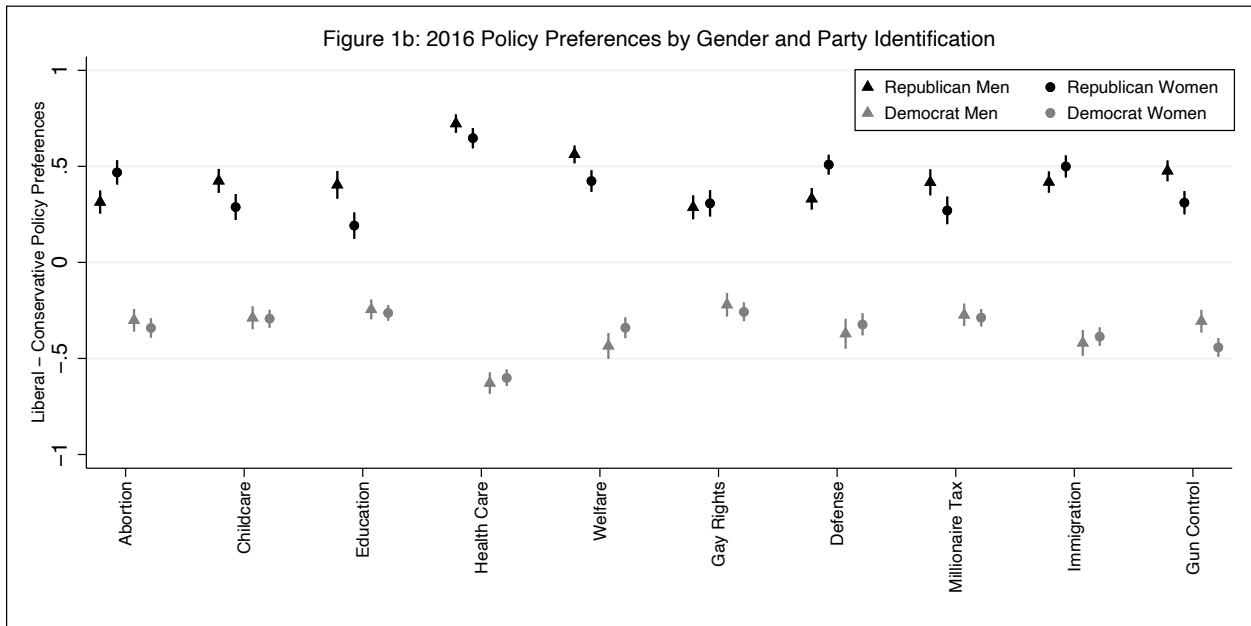
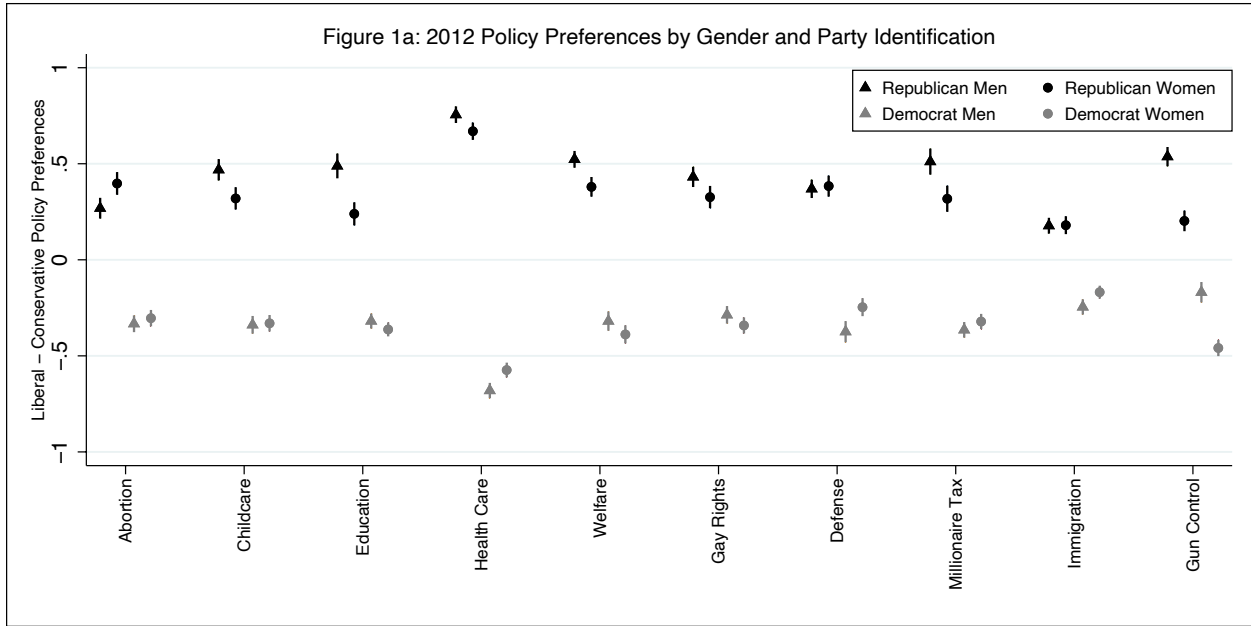
In sum, the literature points to the potential for attitude change, but also notes that change is unpredictable and contingent on a multitude of factors (see also: Howell and Day 2000).

Rather than speculate on specific changes in issue attitudes across the two elections, we take an exploratory approach and compare the within-party gender gaps previously identified in the 2012 ANES (Barnes and Cassese 2017) with those in the 2016 ANES to gain insights into the question of whether gender-based divisions within the parties shift over time.

### **Comparing Within Party Gender Gaps Across Elections**

To investigate whether the within party gaps are stable across elections, we replicate the analysis of within-party gender gaps from Barnes and Cassese (2017) using ANES data from 2012 and 2016. Specifically, we use Adjusted Wald Tests to compare weighted mean issue positions for male and female Republicans and Democrats for ten policy areas (See Appendix Table A1 for question wording). We first graph the standardized (mean of 0; standard deviation of 1) mean policy preferences with 84% confidence intervals in Figures 1a and 1b to visualize group differences in policy preferences by party and gender. To further facilitate this comparison, Figure 2 plots the gender gaps themselves, with positive gaps indicating women are to the left of men. It is clear from Figures 1a and 1b that there are bigger differences between parties than within parties. Figure 2 demonstrates that differences within party are relatively small, nonetheless gender differences are more pronounced among Republicans than among Democrats for both 2012 and 2016. That being said, gender gaps within parties are fairly stable

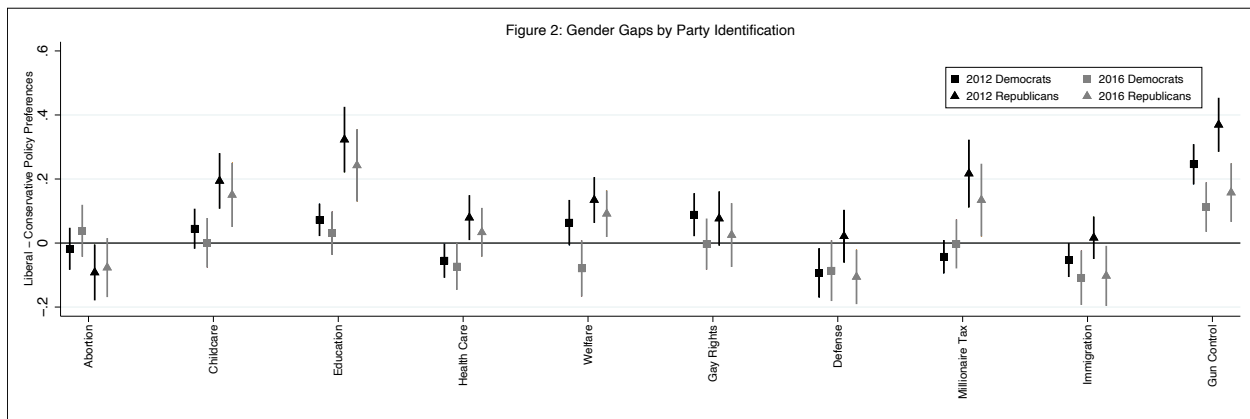
between the two elections. In both 2012 and 2016, Republican women are more moderate than Republican men on child-care, education spending, welfare, millionaire tax, and gun control.



Note: Figures 1a and 1b plot the standardized means with 84% confidence intervals allowing us to assess when the means are statistically different at the 95% level.

Still, a few important differences emerge between the two elections. First, on its face, it appears Republican women are more conservative than Republican men on abortion in 2012. But when we control for socioeconomic and demographic variables—including religion—the 2012 gap reverses with women being more moderate (see Table 1A and 1B). Republican women are likewise more moderate than men on healthcare spending in 2012. In 2016, however, both the abortion and healthcare gaps close. The gender gaps in 2012 may be driven by the fact that these two issues were atypically salient in 2012, due to debate over the birth control mandate in the Affordable Care Act and state-level debates over abortion exemptions (Deckman and McTague 2015).

An interesting difference that emerges in 2016 is that Republican women are more conservative on defense spending and immigration compared to Republican men. However, immigration is not statistically different when we control for basic demographic factors (see Table 1B). The gap is due to women moving even further to the right than men. This is consistent with Kaufmann's (2006) findings about the changing salience of defense issues among women voters over time. Democrats, by contrast, display fewer gender gaps, and the gaps that do exist are more stable over time. Although a few shifts in the gaps are apparent in the mean gender gaps graphed in Figure 2, once we control for basic demographics, the gender gaps are remarkably consistent across the two elections (see Appendix Tables B 3 and B4).



Note: Figure 2 plot the gender gap using standardized means with 95% confidence intervals allowing us to assess when the gaps are statistically different from zero.

### Explaining Within-Party Gender Gaps

Sexism has featured prominently in accounts of the 2016 election, and it was also a factor explored in Barnes and Cassese’s analysis of the 2012 election. Here, we further consider the relationship between policy preferences and sexism. Specifically, we use a standard mediation analysis—i.e., we compare the coefficient on sex in models with and without the mediators estimated in a seemingly unrelated regression/logit (see Appendix B for details)—to evaluate whether sexism explains the observed gaps, or whether the gaps persist even after accounting for sexism. Given the prevalence of gender gaps among Republicans and relative absence among Democrats, we focus our analysis on Republicans below (for analyses of Democrats see Appendix Tables B3 and B4). In addition to sexism, three factors from previous analysis that explain gender gaps among Republicans are included: ideology, attitudes about the scope of government, and egalitarianism (see Table A2 in the Appendix for measurement details). The results are reported in Table 1a and 1b (see Table B1 and B2 in the Appendix for the full results).

All told, there are more similarities than differences between the two elections. All four factors—hostile sexism, ideology, attitudes about the scope of government, and egalitarianism—are important for explaining gender gaps for four of the ten issues in 2012 and 2016: childcare,



education, healthcare, and gun control. The same can be said for the millionaire tax in 2012, but not 2016, where sexism is no longer a salient factor. Likewise, the factors explaining the gender gap in support for gay rights—hostile sexism and ideology—are consistent across the two elections. With respect to defense spending, ideology is the only mediator that shapes citizens policy preferences in either election. Finally, there is no gender gap in support for immigration policy in either election.

Table 1A: 2012 Mediation Models, Republican Respondents

|                | Abortion           |         | Childcare  |          | Education  |          | Healthcare     |         | Welfare    |          | Gay Rights     |          | Defense      |        | Millionaire Tax |          | Immigration   |         | Gun Control |          |
|----------------|--------------------|---------|------------|----------|------------|----------|----------------|---------|------------|----------|----------------|----------|--------------|--------|-----------------|----------|---------------|---------|-------------|----------|
| Gender         | -0.12*             | -0.09   | -0.37**    | -0.19    | -0.52***   | -0.42**  | -0.12*         | 0.00    | -0.41**    | -0.24    | -0.32***       | -0.24*** | -0.09        | -0.06  | -0.24***        | -0.09    | 0.06          | 0.11*   | -0.74***    | -0.56*** |
|                | (0.06)             | (0.06)  | (0.13)     | (0.13)   | (0.13)     | (0.13)   | (0.05)         | (0.04)  | (0.15)     | (0.17)   | (0.06)         | (0.06)   | (0.06)       | (0.06) | (0.07)          | (0.07)   | (0.05)        | (0.05)  | (0.14)      | (0.15)   |
|                | $F = 3.54^\dagger$ |         | $F = 0.02$ |          | $F = 0.76$ |          | $F = 20.56***$ |         | $F = 0.58$ |          | $F = 12.77***$ |          | $F = 3.97^*$ |        | $F = 17.85***$  |          | $F = 10.03**$ |         | $F = 1.45$  |          |
| Ideology       |                    | 0.22*** |            | 0.23*    |            | 0.31**   |                | 0.20*** |            | 0.31**   |                | 0.29***  |              | 0.11*  |                 | 0.25***  |               | 0.07*   |             | 0.35**   |
|                |                    | (0.04)  |            | (0.10)   |            | (0.11)   |                | (0.03)  |            | (0.11)   |                | (0.04)   |              | (0.04) |                 | (0.05)   |               | (0.04)  |             | (0.11)   |
| Scope of Gov't |                    | 0.02    |            | 0.62***  |            | 0.69***  |                | 0.34*** |            | 0.77***  |                | 0.04     |              | 0.02   |                 | 0.41***  |               | 0.01    |             | 0.77***  |
|                |                    | (0.04)  |            | (0.10)   |            | (0.11)   |                | (0.03)  |            | (0.11)   |                | (0.04)   |              | (0.04) |                 | (0.04)   |               | (0.04)  |             | (0.11)   |
| Hostile Sexism |                    | 0.05    |            | 0.24**   |            | 0.20*    |                | 0.09*** |            | -0.03    |                | 0.15***  |              | 0.03   |                 | 0.10*    |               | 0.12*** |             | 0.21*    |
|                |                    | (0.03)  |            | (0.08)   |            | (0.08)   |                | (0.02)  |            | (0.10)   |                | (0.03)   |              | (0.04) |                 | (0.04)   |               | (0.03)  |             | (0.09)   |
| Egalitarian    |                    | -0.05   |            | -0.35*** |            | -0.34*** |                | -0.08** |            | -0.36*** |                | -0.05†   |              | -0.01  |                 | -0.14*** |               | -0.01   |             | -0.22**  |
|                |                    | (0.03)  |            | (0.07)   |            | (0.07)   |                | (0.02)  |            | (0.09)   |                | (0.03)   |              | (0.03) |                 | (0.04)   |               | (0.03)  |             | (0.08)   |
| Constant       | 0.90***            | 0.78*** |            |          |            |          | 0.11           | -0.04   |            |          | 0.17           | 0.02     | -0.04        | -0.12  | 0.23            | 0.03     | 0.14          | 0.09    |             |          |
|                | (0.14)             | (0.14)  |            |          |            |          | (0.12)         | (0.11)  |            |          | (0.14)         | (0.14)   | (0.15)       | (0.16) | (0.18)          | (0.16)   | (0.12)        | (0.12)  |             |          |
| cut1           |                    |         | 0.00       | 0.19     | 1.04**     | 1.43***  |                |         | -2.32***   | -2.28*** |                |          |              |        |                 |          |               |         | -1.11**     | -0.92*   |
|                |                    |         | (0.28)     | (0.29)   | (0.33)     | (0.35)   |                |         | (0.37)     | (0.39)   |                |          |              |        |                 |          |               |         | (0.37)      | (0.37)   |
| cut2           |                    |         | 2.29***    | 2.75***  | 2.85***    | 3.47***  |                |         | 0.12       | 0.38     |                |          |              |        |                 |          |               |         | 2.58***     | 3.17***  |
|                |                    |         | (0.29)     | (0.30)   | (0.34)     | (0.36)   |                |         | (0.36)     | (0.39)   |                |          |              |        |                 |          |               |         | (0.38)      | (0.39)   |
| N              | 5684               | 5666    | 5676       | 5658     | 5682       | 5665     | 5689           | 5671    | 5678       | 5661     | 5687           | 5669     | 5578         | 5566   | 5681            | 5665     | 5689          | 5671    | 5685        | 5667     |
| R <sup>2</sup> | 0.26               | 0.29    | 0.09       | 0.25     | 0.10       | 0.29     | 0.11           | 0.33    | 0.10       | 0.23     | 0.18           | 0.25     | 0.07         | 0.08   | 0.07            | 0.24     | 0.09          | 0.12    | 0.05        | 0.19     |

Table 1B: 2016 Mediation Models, Republican Respondents

|                | Abortion     |         | Childcare  |          | Education  |         | Healthcare    |          | Welfare    |          | Gay Rights     |         | Defense      |         | Millionaire Tax |          | Immigration |         | Gun Control |          |
|----------------|--------------|---------|------------|----------|------------|---------|---------------|----------|------------|----------|----------------|---------|--------------|---------|-----------------|----------|-------------|---------|-------------|----------|
| Gender         | -0.02        | 0.04    | -0.25†     | -0.06    | -0.45***   | -0.30†  | -0.06         | 0.04     | -0.32*     | -0.19    | -0.19**        | -0.06   | 0.14*        | 0.21*** | -0.14†          | 0.01     | 0.04        | 0.08    | -0.53***    | -0.34*   |
|                | (0.06)       | (0.06)  | (0.13)     | (0.14)   | (0.14)     | (0.16)  | (0.05)        | (0.05)   | (0.16)     | (0.18)   | (0.06)         | (0.06)  | (0.05)       | (0.06)  | (0.07)          | (0.07)   | (0.06)      | (0.06)  | (0.14)      | (0.16)   |
|                | $F = 4.62^*$ |         | $F = 0.00$ |          | $F = 0.00$ |         | $F = 10.23**$ |          | $F = 0.00$ |          | $F = 14.63***$ |         | $F = 9.78**$ |         | $F = 13.31***$  |          | $F = 1.15$  |         | $F = 0.15$  |          |
| Ideology       |              | 0.31*** |            | 0.33**   |            | 0.57*** |               | 0.21***  |            | 0.44**   |                | 0.24*** |              | 0.16**  |                 | 0.30***  |             | 0.14*   |             | 0.45**   |
|                |              | (0.06)  |            | (0.12)   |            | (0.14)  |               | (0.04)   |            | (0.14)   |                | (0.06)  |              | (0.05)  |                 | (0.06)   |             | (0.05)  |             | (0.15)   |
| Scope of Gov't |              | 0.08*   |            | 0.57***  |            | 0.50*** |               | 0.29***  |            | 0.61***  |                | 0.03    |              | 0.01    |                 | 0.33***  |             | -0.01   |             | 0.52***  |
|                |              | (0.04)  |            | (0.09)   |            | (0.10)  |               | (0.04)   |            | (0.11)   |                | (0.04)  |              | (0.04)  |                 | (0.05)   |             | (0.05)  |             | (0.11)   |
| Hostile Sexism |              | 0.10**  |            | 0.24**   |            | 0.16†   |               | 0.10***  |            | 0.33**   |                | 0.17*** |              | 0.05    |                 | 0.00     |             | 0.15*** |             | 0.16†    |
|                |              | (0.03)  |            | (0.09)   |            | (0.09)  |               | (0.03)   |            | (0.12)   |                | (0.03)  |              | (0.04)  |                 | (0.04)   |             | (0.04)  |             | (0.09)   |
| Egalitarian    |              | -0.01   |            | -0.27*** |            | -0.25** |               | -0.13*** |            | -0.11    |                | -0.04   |              | -0.02   |                 | -0.16*** |             | -0.10** |             | -0.18*   |
|                |              | (0.03)  |            | (0.08)   |            | (0.08)  |               | (0.02)   |            | (0.10)   |                | (0.03)  |              | (0.03)  |                 | (0.04)   |             | (0.03)  |             | (0.08)   |
| Constant       | 0.42*        | 0.15    |            |          |            |         | 0.58***       | 0.38*    |            |          | -0.05          | -0.50*  | -0.23        | -0.38*  | 0.96***         | 0.72**   | 0.34†       | 0.14    |             |          |
|                | (0.18)       | (0.18)  |            |          |            |         | (0.16)        | (0.15)   |            |          | (0.19)         | (0.20)  | (0.18)       | (0.19)  | (0.22)          | (0.23)   | (0.18)      | (0.20)  |             |          |
| Cut1           |              |         | 0.26       | 0.48     | 0.69       | 1.21*   |               |          | -2.09***   | -2.14*** |                |         |              |         |                 |          |             |         | -2.00***    | -1.79*** |
|                |              |         | (0.42)     | (0.46)   | (0.44)     | (0.49)  |               |          | (0.52)     | (0.62)   |                |         |              |         |                 |          |             |         | (0.43)      | (0.49)   |
| Cut 2          |              |         | 2.30***    | 2.72***  | 2.33***    | 3.01*** |               |          | -0.18      | 0.05     |                |         |              |         |                 |          |             |         | 1.27**      | 1.84***  |
|                |              |         | (0.43)     | (0.48)   | (0.44)     | (0.49)  |               |          | (0.50)     | (0.60)   |                |         |              |         |                 |          |             |         | (0.43)      | (0.49)   |
| N              | 4156         | 3970    | 4150       | 3965     | 4157       | 3970    | 4159          | 3972     | 4155       | 3971     | 4156           | 3970    | 4037         | 3904    | 4157            | 3971     | 4159        | 3972    | 4155        | 3970     |
| R <sup>2</sup> | 0.30         | 0.39    | 0.04       | 0.22     | 0.04       | 0.19    | 0.12          | 0.32     | 0.05       | 0.24     | 0.26           | 0.33    | 0.14         | 0.18    | 0.08            | 0.21     | 0.09        | 0.14    | 0.04        | 0.28     |

Entries are coefficients from seemingly unrelated regression and seemingly unrelated logit models with standard errors in parentheses. Survey weights are applied. Differences in the coefficient sizes for respondent gender are evaluated using Adjusted Wald Tests. Models are restricted to Republican respondents, including leaners. All models contain the following control variables: religiosity, married, education, income, employment, homemaker status, age, kids under 18, black, hispanic, other race, primary voter, political knowledge, and South. Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> for ordered logits are calculated using Wherry's formula. The full results are available in Tables B1 and B2 of Appendix B. †p < 0.10 \*p < 0.05 \*\*p < 0.01 \*\*\*p < 0.001.

Despite similarities across the two elections, some important differences do arise. Notably, the changes we observe provide some evidence that hostile sexism better explains Republicans' policy positions on abortion and welfare spending in 2016. Consider, for instance, that in 2012, women are more supportive of abortion than men, and only ideology explains the gender gap. In 2016, the gender gap for abortion closes, at which point hostile sexism and scope of government are also important for explaining both men's and women's attitudes towards abortion. Regarding welfare spending, a gender gap is present in both 2012 and 2016 with Republican women being more supportive of welfare spending than Republican men. Despite the persistence of the gap between the two elections, different attitudes explain support in each election. In particular, sexism does not explain Republicans' attitudes toward welfare in 2012, but it becomes a relevant factor for explaining their support for welfare in 2016.

## **Conclusions**

Motivated by an interest both in partisanship as a cross-cutting factor shaping gender gaps in opinion and the dynamic nature of these gaps, we have explored group differences in policy attitudes in 2012 and 2016. Our findings support the conclusion that party identity is an important cross-pressure among women (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Deckman 2016). Although average gender gaps are pervasive across all policy areas in both 2012 and 2016, once we account for party identification, few gender gaps persist—particularly among Democrats. This result suggests that the gender gap stems largely from compositional differences in the parties (Howell and Day 2000), the likely result of long-term sorting processes (e.g., Kauffman and Petrocik 1999).

Despite the unique nature of the 2016 presidential campaign, our results suggest it did not immediately open up new divisions within the Republican Party (see also, Cassese 2020). With

the exception of support for defense spending, we do not observe the emergence of any new gender gaps among Republicans in 2016. If anything, Republican women and men become more similar across the two elections—e.g., closing gaps on abortion and healthcare in 2016. And, opinion was stable among Democratic men and women. Digging into the origins of these gender differences we uncover some evidence that hostile sexism is more strongly related to policy attitudes in 2016 than in 2012, particularly with respect to welfare spending and abortion. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that finds sexist beliefs shaped vote choice among white voters in 2016 but not in previous presidential elections (Cassese and Barnes 2019; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and Ocenio 2018).

There are some limitations to our analysis. We cannot gauge whether issue importance changed, while issue positions remained relatively stable (e.g., Kaufmann 2006). And, because we rely on two cross-sections of the electorate, our analysis does not capture movement in and out of the party. It is possible that voters who find themselves out of step with co-partisans defect and come to identify with the other major party or as politically independent. However, our plots suggest that crossing party lines would ostensibly require a major swing in policy attitudes, given that opinions on these issues are quite polarized. If the 2018 midterms and 2020 presidential race are any indication, gender will remain chronically salient in American elections. But based on these results, we should not necessarily expect this to radically reorient men and women's relationship to the parties.

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