



# Sex and corruption: how sexism shapes voters' responses to scandal

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## ABSTRACT

Conventional wisdom suggests that voters rarely punish politicians for involvement in sex scandals. Yet, we argue that some voters are likely to hold politicians accountable for their moral transgressions. We theorize that both hostile and benevolent sexists are more likely than nonsexists to punish women for involvement in a sex scandal – but each for different reasons. We posit that women politicians involved in sex scandals activate traditional gender norms and challenge men's dominant position in the society, thus provoking hostile sexists to punish women more severely than men. Benevolent sexists are likely to punish women who fail to comply with stereotypical expectations of being pure and moral, and the men who fail to safeguard those virtues. To test our theory, we rely on a survey experiment that manipulates politician sex and scandal type. We find strong support for our expectations, indicating that sexism continues to structure evaluations of women politicians and shapes voter reactions to political scandal.

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Sex scandals make for sensational news stories, but research consistently shows they have a limited impact on politicians' public careers (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2014). Nevertheless, most people can think of examples where it appeared as though a politician was harshly punished for their moral transgressions. Donald Trump was able to win the presidency in 2016 despite public acknowledgment of marital infidelity and admissions of sexual assault. At least 16 Republican senators endorsed Trump after he was caught on tape bragging about sexual assault, and polls indicated that Trump's supporters were relatively unfazed by the tape (Lind 2016). Meanwhile, throughout the campaign, Hillary Clinton was vilified for the sexual transgressions of her husband. Donald Trump and his supporters accused Hillary Clinton of "enabling" her husband's affairs when she refused to leave him, and they frequently alleged that Hillary tried to silence Bill's accusers: "Hillary as loyal 'stand-by-your-man-wife' does not marry that well with Hillary as feminist trailblazer" (Bryant 2016). These contrasts present a puzzle, do people punish politicians for involvement in sex scandals, and if so, when are people more likely to hold politicians electorally accountable for their sexual misgivings?

We argue that not all voters will react in the same way to a sex scandal, nor will they react equally to men's or women's involvement in a sex scandal. In particular, we contend

that female politicians involved in sex scandals elicit more negative reactions than their male counterparts. Building on research on ambivalent sexism (Cassese and Holman 2017b; Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Glick and Fiske 1996; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004), we explain that both hostile and benevolent sexists might punish women more for involvement in a sex scandal – but each for different reasons. To begin with, we posit that when women politicians are involved in sex scandals, they simultaneously activate traditional gender norms and challenge men’s dominant position in the society. This combination may provoke hostile sexists, who exhibit *explicit* antipathy toward women, to punish female politicians more severely than men. Ambivalent sexism can also take on a more *benevolent* form, which puts women on a pedestal – as being pure and morally superior – as long as they conform to traditional gender norms (Glick and Fiske 1996).<sup>1</sup> We argue that when women fall short of these moral standards, the ensuing “expectations gap” may lead benevolent sexists to punish women for involvement in a sex scandal. As benevolent sexism emphasizes the need for women to be protected, an additional implication of our theory is that benevolent sexists should also be more likely to punish *men* for sex scandals, for exploiting “vulnerable” women.

To evaluate these expectations, we draw on an experiment embedded in a larger survey conducted in the United States. We tell participants that a member of the U.S. House of Representatives has been involved in a scandal and then we manipulate both the type of scandal and the representative’s gender to evaluate whether the gender of the politician affects perceptions of either type of scandal. Consistent with prior research, we find that on average, people care less about sex scandals than about corruption scandals, but this is not the case for everyone. Specifically, we demonstrate that people who exhibit high levels of hostile sexism are more likely to punish women for involvement in sex scandals than they are to punish men for involvement in the same type of scandal. Furthermore, we find that people who exhibit high levels of benevolent sexism are more likely than those exhibiting low levels of benevolent sexism to punish *both* male and female politicians.

Understanding public reactions to scandals is important because of the impact that scandals have been shown to have on confidence in government institutions (Bowler and Karp 2004). Moreover, these findings have clear implications for female politicians running for office, because they demonstrate that women are confronted with different standards than men in their quest to obtain and maintain political power. Women must be more qualified than men to garner equivalent support at the polls (Fulton 2012), and equally qualified women gain fewer votes than men when competing against quality challengers (Barnes, Branton, and Cassese 2017). Furthermore, once in office, female politicians are frequently held to different – often more demanding – standards (O’Brien 2015). Consistent with this line of research, we find that women face another double standard where scandals are concerned – particularly in the eyes of sexist voters. Whereas benevolent sexists punish both men and women for involvement in sex scandals, voters harboring hostile sexist attitudes punish women politicians – but not men politicians – embroiled in sex scandals.

## **Not all scandals are created equally**

When a political scandal breaks, research shows that the substance of that scandal matters to voters. On average, voters do not view sex scandals as relevant to candidates’

job performance and, thus, are less likely to hold politicians accountable for such transgressions (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 2014). Additionally, Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2014, 360) show, for example, that both old and new tax evasion scandals are more damaging for politicians than *any* type of sex scandal, old or new. However, scandals that involve an abuse of power – whether financial or moral misconduct – negatively affect candidates’ personal and job evaluations, as well as voters’ willingness to support them in future elections (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011).

Contextual as well as candidate- and voter-specific characteristics further shape the public’s response to political scandals. Contextually, the length of time since a scandal occurred shapes the public’s response to the scandal (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2014), as does exposure to different types of media outlets (Peterson and Vonnahme 2014). Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2016) find that politician gender also matters: for either corruption or sex scandals, female politicians are evaluated more negatively than male politicians. With regard to voter-specific characteristics, various factors affect how voters assess candidates (Bauer 2015). For instance, voters are less likely to suspect scandalous behavior, such as corruption, from co-partisans (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014; Beaulieu 2014). Furthermore, research demonstrates that voter- and candidate-specific characteristics interact to affect voters’ evaluations. Funk (1996) finds that politically knowledgeable individuals are more likely to discount a morality scandal when a “competent” candidate is implicated, suggesting that politicians’ perceived traits matter. Our research suggests that candidate gender *in conjunction with voters’ sexist ideologies* inform reactions to different types of political scandals.

### Sexism as a legitimizing ideology

Modern sexism – a “legitimizing ideology” similar to racial resentment (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009) – may lead some voters to punish women more for sex scandals. Legitimizing ideologies are psychological orientations that lead people to justify and perpetuate structural inequalities (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Cassese and Holman 2016; Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015) – in our case, holding women to a different moral standard than men may serve to further gender inequalities in politics. Legitimizing ideologies, such as sexism, are not necessarily one-dimensional, and in fact, can take different forms (Glick and Fiske 1996, 2001; Swim et al. 1995). In particular, Glick and Fiske (1996) propose that modern sexism takes an ambivalent form, meaning that people – both men *and* women – can simultaneously hold hostile and subjectively positive orientations toward women. Whereas hostile sexism is characterized as “antipathy toward women who are viewed as usurping men’s power,” benevolent sexism is described as “a subjectively favorable, chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional roles” (Glick and Fiske 2001, 109).

Hostile sexism is more consistent with conventional conceptions of sexism – i.e., chauvinism and prejudice against women – and, as evidenced by job discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual violence against women, is still relevant in modern society (Glick and Fiske 1996). The *benevolent* form of sexism, however, is also problematic for women’s advancement in society. This form of sexism is characterized as

a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically but that are positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviors typically categorized as pro-social (e.g. helping) or intimacy-seeking (e.g. self-disclosure) (Glick and Fiske 1996, 491).

Although benevolent sexism – much like chivalry – may appear positive at first glance, both benevolent and hostile sexism “serve to justify men’s structural power,” and both types rationalize exploiting women (Glick and Fiske 1996, 492).

This combination of attitudes may initially seem contradictory, as it is puzzling to imagine someone could feel simultaneously hostile and benevolent toward the same group. Yet, Glick and Fiske (2001, 110) explain “dominant groups prefer to act warmly toward subordinates, offering them patronizing affection as a reward for ‘knowing their place’ rather than rebelling. Open antagonism is reserved for subordinates who fail to defer or who question existing social inequalities.” Since both components of ambivalent sexism – hostile and benevolent – serve to justify structural inequalities between men and women (Cassese and Holman 2016), it is important to consider how each ideology might affect voters’ responses to politicians engaged in scandals.

### ***Hostile sexism and evaluations of women involved in scandal***

Hostile sexism produces negative evaluations of women who violate traditional social norms by occupying non-traditional roles in society (e.g., politics). Masser and Abrams (2004) argue that hostile sexism is likely to influence the evaluations of women in careers usually held by men, as they appear to threaten men’s status in society. Business and management research, for example, finds that hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism, is related to negative attitudes toward women in high managerial positions (Eagly and Carlie 2007; Masser and Abrams 2004). Thus, we might expect hostile sexists to respond negatively to any woman in any political scandal.

Nonetheless, as women have made major strides towards equality, the idea of a woman holding a political post is no longer extremely controversial. Instead, attitudes about women violating gender norms may need to be primed or made salient (Hebl et al. 2007). For this reason, Hebl et al. (2007) argue that women are most likely to be subject to hostile reactions when they violate traditional gender norms while simultaneously threatening the status quo. To further elucidate this relationship, they evaluate people’s reactions to pregnant women applying for managerial positions. They demonstrate that people with hostile sexist attitudes more negatively evaluate pregnant women who apply for “masculine” jobs as compared to nonpregnant women (see also, Halpert, Wilson, and Hickman 1993). By contrast, pregnant women who are not seen as challenging the male-dominant status quo (i.e., those not applying for managerial jobs) are subject to more benevolent reactions. In this example, hostile sexists react negatively toward pregnant female job candidates because they prime attitudes about women’s traditional role in society (child-bearing) while threatening men’s superior status in the society. Thus, it is the *combination* of activating traditional gender norms while challenging men’s dominant position in the society that incites a hostile sexist backlash.

These same theoretical insights have implications for how individuals possessing feelings of hostile sexism may respond differently to female politicians involved in a sex scandal as compared to their male counterparts or compared to corruption scandals.

Women politicians involved in a sex scandal will both activate traditional gender norms about women's sexuality, while simultaneously, because of their involvement in politics, threaten men's social status. By contrast, women engaged in corruption scandals may be similarly threatening, but corruption will not activate the same essentialist stereotypes that sex does. Although prior research has identified "honesty" as a stereotypically feminine trait (Dolan 2014, 66), other recent research is moving away from the idea that women politicians are stereotyped as more ethical and honest than men (e.g., Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton 2018). Rather, because women are held to a different standard than men when it comes to sexual behavior (Crawford and Popp 2003; Reiss 1967), promiscuous women are seen as violating gender roles in society. When these views are primed, individuals who prioritize maintaining traditional gender structures are more likely to feel threatened by women violating other gender norms such as occupying masculine roles in the society (e.g., holding political office).

Additionally, women's involvement in a sex scandal should further promote hostile sexism because "men often resent women's perceived ability to use sexual attractiveness to gain power over them" (Glick and Fiske 2001, 112). Although individuals exhibiting high levels of hostile sexism may respond negatively to any woman involved in illicit moral behavior, negative reactions should be exacerbated by female politicians' leadership position and authoritative status in society. Hostile sexism advances the idea that women seek to get ahead in society by gaining power or control over men. As women are not traditionally believed to possess the leadership qualities and general qualifications needed to hold an elected office (Koenig et al. 2011; Schneider and Bos 2014), a woman's involvement in extramarital sexual activities may promote the idea that she used her sexual prowess to climb the political ladder, thus raising questions regarding her qualifications for her current position. Combined, these factors suggest that people with high levels of hostile sexism should respond especially negatively when female politicians are implicated in a sex scandal. Specifically, we test the following hypothesis:

*Hostile Sexism Hypothesis:* People who exhibit higher levels of hostile sexism are more likely to punish women than men for sex scandals.

Testing this relationship will allow us to observe whether hostile sexists punish women more than those who do not hold hostile sexist views. Furthermore, we will be able to observe if hostile sexists punish women more than men for such transgressions, which becomes important as we turn our attention to the consequences of benevolent sexism.

### ***Benevolent sexism and evaluations of women involved in scandal***

Benevolent sexists may also be more likely to penalize female politicians for moral misgivings. Recall that benevolent sexism involves *subjectively* positive but stereotypical attitudes toward women: benevolent sexism is "a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but are subjectively positive in tone (for the perceiver)" (Glick and Fiske 1996, 491). Although the benevolent sexist might feel the need to "protect" women, this "chivalry" stems from the stereotypical notion that women are inferior to men. Women may be seen as more nurturing than men, but this stereotype serves to restrict women to roles such as caregiver or homemaker. More relevant for our purposes, benevolent sexists also harbor beliefs about women's supposed

purity and moral superiority. In Glick and Fiske's (1996) construction of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), they find that notions such as "women have a quality of purity that few men possess" load strongly onto their *benevolent sexism* factor. This finding is consistent with the other literature on gender stereotypes suggesting that women are perceived as more honest and moral than men (Alexander and Anderson 1993; Dolan 2014; Kahn 1996).

When women engage in illicit sexual behavior, they are viewed as violating traditional gender norms and falling short of expectations about purity and moral superiority. Several studies show that individuals – both men and women – with high levels of benevolent sexism are more likely to blame female victims of acquaintance rape. For example, Abrams et al. (2003) use an experiment to show that benevolent sexists are more likely to blame a woman for rape when her attacker was someone she met at a party and brought home, than a woman who was raped by a total stranger. In other words, people were more likely to blame the victim they perceived as "promiscuous" than the victim of "chance." In a similar experiment, Viki and Abrams (2002) find that benevolent sexists assigned more blame for acquaintance rape to a "married mother" than to a single woman. The perception here is that the married mother is guilty of not just promiscuity but also of potential infidelity (Viki and Abrams 2002, 290).

Expectancy violation theory suggests that people are especially likely to punish candidates when they violate group-based expectations (Cassese and Holman 2017a; Prentice and Carranza 2002). For instance, Cassese and Holman (2017a) find that candidates, and especially women candidates, are particularly vulnerable to attacks on issues stereotypically associated with their gender and party. Sex scandals, in contrast to corruption scandals, are going to trigger impressions of promiscuity and infidelity, thus challenging group-based expectations about purity and morality.

Given the "expectation gap" that this will create for benevolent sexists, it is fair to expect that voters who hold such attitudes will punish women more for sex scandals (Hayes 2005). Hayes (2005), for instance, shows how partisan trait stereotypes form a "baseline of expectations in the minds of voters," and falling short of these expectations could shape candidate evaluations and vote choice (911). This expectation gap has been shown to operate not just in Congressional elections (Kimball and Patterson 1997) but also in presidential elections as well (Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999). A logical extension of this argument is that gender stereotypes, especially in an environment of low information voting – such as the House of Representatives scenario we present here – also provide a "baseline of expectations," and that voters (specifically benevolent sexist voters) will punish women who deviate from the moral behavior expected of them.

*Benevolent Sexism Hypothesis a:* People who exhibit higher levels of benevolent sexism are more likely than people with lower levels of benevolent sexism to punish women for sex scandals.

Finally, just as individuals exhibiting higher levels of benevolent sexism may be more likely to hold women to a higher moral standard, and thus be more likely (than non-benevolent sexists) to punish female politicians for sexual transgressions, an additional implication of our argument is that these same individuals may also be more likely to punish men for sex scandals (as compared to those individuals exhibiting low levels of benevolent sexism). In the same way that individuals with benevolent sexist attitudes are likely to hold



women to a higher moral standard, they are also likely to believe women should be cherished and protected (Glick and Fiske 1996). Thus, unlike hostile sexism – which exclusively accounts for negative attitudes towards women – benevolent sexism may take the form of individuals attempting to defend or look after women. Thus, we posit that individuals ascribing to these paternalistic views are more likely to see male politicians involved in sex scandals as exploiting their position of power to take advantage of a “vulnerable” woman or of betraying an “innocent” woman (in the case of infidelity). Under such circumstances, they may be more likely than individuals who have low levels of benevolent sexism to punish male politicians involved in sex scandals.

*Benevolent Sexism Hypothesis b:* People who exhibit higher levels of benevolent sexism are more likely than people with lower levels of benevolent sexism to punish men for sex scandals.

### Testing the sexist ideologies hypotheses: a survey experiment

We first evaluate the conventional wisdom that people are less likely to punish politicians for sex scandals than corruption scandals. We then use our experimental research design as a foundation to test the heterogeneous effect of sexist ideology on evaluations of candidates implicated in scandals (Bauer 2015). The present experiment was embedded in a larger survey that we administered in December 2014 using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. In all, 1106 individuals were surveyed. MTurk survey experiments are increasingly used in social science research (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh 2015; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014), including studies of political scandals (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2014). MTurk samples are shown to be just as representative as traditional samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011), and they have been used to successfully replicate the findings from a number of well-known political science experiments (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).

In the question discussed here, participants are randomly assigned to receive two experimental treatments in the vignette they read, creating a  $2 \times 2$  design.<sup>2</sup> All individuals are told that a U.S. House Representative is up for reelection, and that *his/her* term has been relatively unremarkable, except for one major *corruption/sex* scandal. Participants are instructed to imagine that this hypothetical politician is their representative, and they are asked to indicate how likely they would be to vote for the representative in the next election. Four response options were available: very unlikely (1), unlikely (2), likely (3), and very likely (4). This design allows us to assess the extent to which gender (*his/her*), scandal type (*corruption/sex*), or a particular combination of the two affects how likely individuals are to vote to reelect their hypothetical representative.

We want to understand why *some* people are bothered by *some* scandals committed by particular candidates. Although experiments are not necessarily designed to investigate heterogeneous treatment effects (Gerber and Green 2011; Mullinix et al. 2015), they have advantages over purely observational designs. With this type of research design, we have a chance to leverage causal inference while at the same time taking seriously any theoretically relevant individual-level characteristics.

To assess the possibility of any heterogeneous effects of sexism on participants’ evaluations of candidates involved in corruption and sex scandals, we ask a series of questions

designed to measure benevolent and hostile sexism. Following Glick and Fiske (1996), we present the participants with the following questions:

“Below are a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationship in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a 7-point scale.”

1. Women are too easily offended
2. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess
3. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own wellbeing in order to provide financially for the women in their lives
4. Most women fail to appreciate all that men do for them
5. Women exaggerate their problems
6. In a disaster, women should be rescued before men

Items 1, 4, and 5 are scaled together to form the hostile sexism index, and items 2, 3, and 6 are used to form the benevolent sexism scale. Data from 1106 participants indicated that the internal reliability of the hostile sexism index as measured by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.86, and the internal reliability of the benevolent sexism index as measured by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.73.

### ***Descriptive statistics and sample characteristics***

Both hostile and benevolent sexism are measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (low) to 7 (high). The sample mean for hostile sexism is 3.356, and for benevolent sexism 3.616. Political ideology is measured on a 5-point scale from 1 (very liberal) to 5 (very conservative), with a mean response of 2.693 (slightly left-of-center). We measure religiosity on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (attend religious services more than once a week) to 6 (never attend religious services). Our mean response for religiosity is 2.254. Education is assessed with a 6-point scale, where 0 (no education) and 6 (post-graduate degree). Our sample mean for education is 3.148 indicating that the average response is “some college.” Household income is measured using a 15-point scale, ranging from 1 (less than \$10,000 a year) to 15 (more than \$250,000 a year). The average response is approximately 7, or \$40,000 to \$49,000. Our average participant in the full sample is 54 years old, and about 45% of participants are women. Finally, we use a series of dummies to assess whether each participant works full-time, part-time, is a student, or is not working (e.g., homemaker, unemployed, retired). More than half of all participants work full-time, 17% work part-time, 10% are students, and the remaining 22% are not employed.

We next use a series of two-sample *t*-tests with equal variances to assess balance of covariates across treatment groups. If there are no significant differences between mean responses in each treatment, compared to the full sample, we can more confidently state that our treatments are balanced across sample characteristics. Table A1 in the Appendix shows that with only one exception (i.e., participants in the female corruption scandal treatment group reported slightly lower levels of education than the full sample), there are no significant differences in sample characteristics across treatments. Given this slight difference, we predict assignment to treatment groups using a multinomial logit in the Appendix. Table A2 shows that the sample characteristics do not predict assignment

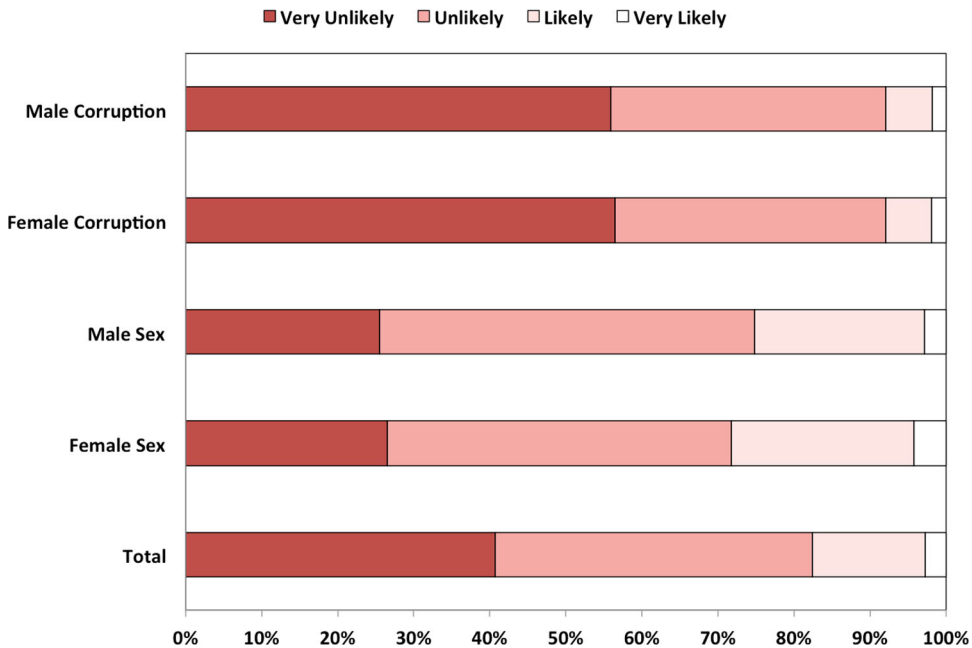


to any treatment groups. Importantly, education does not predict assignment to the female corruption scandal treatment, thus indicating that randomization achieved the desired balance across treatment groups.

### Results: corruption vs. sex scandals

We begin with a comparison of responses across our four treatment groups. Recall that our response variable indicates the likelihood of voting for the representative in the next election. Figure 1 shows that on average, voters report being “very unlikely” to vote for a representative involved in a corruption scandal at nearly two times the rate they are “very unlikely” to vote for a representative involved in a sex scandal.<sup>3</sup> In particular, about 56% of participants in both the male corruption and female corruption treatments indicated they would be “very unlikely” to vote for the representative in the next election. However, only 26% of participants in the male sex scandal treatment and 27% of participants in the female sex scandal treatment indicated a similar level of willingness to punish the representative at the polls. While there is a clear difference in responses to corruption and sex scandals, participants on average did not distinguish between male and female representatives. Moreover, these average treatment results are in line with existing research: voters care much less about sex scandals than corruption.

To investigate the effects of sexist ideologies on voters’ responses, we now turn to an ordered logit model. The dependent variable in our model is the participant’s likelihood of voting for the representative in the next election. Values of the dependent variable range from 1 (“very unlikely”) to 4 (“very likely”). Our key explanatory variables are the type of scandal, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism. Since both of our hypotheses



**Figure 1.** Distribution of responses across treatments.

imply that voters' responses to different types of scandals are conditional, we include interaction terms for sexism, scandal type, and candidate's gender. We also include a number of control variables: participant's gender, education, age, income, employment status, and political ideology. In particular, prior research suggests that ideology affects voters' responses to sex scandals (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011) and that more conservative voters exhibit higher levels of sexism on average (Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, MTurk samples are shown to be more liberal than the population at large (Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015). Table 1 reports the coefficients from each ordered logit model, with each coefficient indicating the effect of a given variable on the probability of voting for the representative in the next Congressional election.

In all three models, each of our treatments is included as a dummy variable. For example, all participants who read about a female representative involved in a sex scandal are coded as 1 for the "Female Sex Scandal" variable, and coded as 0 otherwise. Because including a dummy variable for each of the four treatments introduces perfect multicollinearity into the model, the male corruption scandal variable is excluded and serves as the reference category.

In Model 1, our baseline model, we see that both the male and female sex scandal variables have significant and positive coefficients. Since the male corruption scandal is our reference category, these results show that when a male or a female representative is involved in a sex scandal, there is a higher probability that voters will reelect their representative, compared to when a man is implicated in corruption. These results reinforce our earlier findings that, on average, voters are more likely to punish candidates for corruption than they are for sex scandals. The results in Model 1 also show that when controlling for a number of voter-specific characteristics, male and female representatives fare about the same, on average, when they are involved in a corruption scandal – as indicated by the lack of statistical significance for the coefficient associated with female corruption. Of our control variables, only the participant's gender is statistically significant. Women are, on average, less likely than men to say they will vote for their representative in the next election when they find out the politician has been involved in some type of scandal, and this result holds across model specifications.

To investigate the impact of benevolent and hostile sexism on voters' responses to corruption and sex scandals, we turn to Models 2 and 3, respectively, in Table 1. In these models, we interact our participants' level of benevolent and hostile sexism with each of the treatment dummy variables to first assess if voters holding sexist ideologies are likely to evaluate sex scandals differently than voters who exhibit low levels of sexist attitudes. Model 2 shows the results for the Hostile Sexism Model and Model 3 shows the results for the Benevolent Sexism Model.

The Hostile Sexism model shows a negative and significant coefficient for the interaction between hostile sexism and the female sex scandal treatment indicating that as hostile sexism increases, participants are more likely to respond that they are unwilling to vote for a female representative involved in a sex scandal, as compared to a male politician engaged in corruption. The other interaction terms are not significant, indicating that participants receiving the female corruption and male sex scandal treatments are not more or less likely to report willingness to vote for these politicians as compared to a male politician engaged in corruption. With respect to the Benevolent Sexism Model, the results indicate that as benevolent sexism increases, participants report being less

**Table 1.** Effect of sexism on reaction to political scandal.

	Model 1 Baseline	Model 2 Hostile sexism	Model 3 Benevolent sexism
Female corruption	-.078 (.176)	-.277 (.414)	-.416 (.495)
Male sex scandal	1.299*** (.168)	1.240** (.382)	2.200*** (.472)
Female sex scandal	1.387*** (.170)	2.348*** (.389)	2.532*** (.481)
Hostile sexism		.042 (.077)	-.011 (.044)
Hostile X female corrupt		.055 (.112)	
Hostile X male sex		.022 (.105)	
Hostile X female sex		-.283** (.104)	
Benevolent sexism		-.068 (.049)	.064 (.091)
Benevolent X female corrupt			.093 (.128)
Benevolent X male sex			-.244* (.121)
Benevolent X female sex			-.318* (.125)
Female participant	-.294* (.120)	-.357** (.126)	-.337** (.126)
Liberal-Conservative	-.160** (.061)	-.144* (.066)	-.150* (.066)
Religiosity	-.014 (.043)	-.004 (.044)	-.004 (.044)
Education	.019 (.052)	.005 (.052)	.022 (.052)
Age	-.008 (.005)	-.008 (.005)	-.006 (.005)
Income	-.021 (.018)	-.019 (.018)	-.022 (.018)
Work full-time	-.018 (.165)	.002 (.166)	-.006 (.166)
Work part-time	-.063 (.194)	-.065 (.194)	-.052 (.195)
Student	-.030 (.246)	-.034 (.247)	-.055 (.247)
Cut 1	-.906* (.399)	-.989* (.469)	-.588 (.503)
Cut 2	1.247** (.400)	1.193* (.469)	1.600** (.505)
Cut 3	3.437*** (.435)	3.403*** (.500)	3.805*** (.535)
Observations	1064	1064	1064

Notes: Ordered logit. Male corruption scandal is the baseline category in all models. DV: Likelihood of voting for the representative, "Highly Likely" = 4.

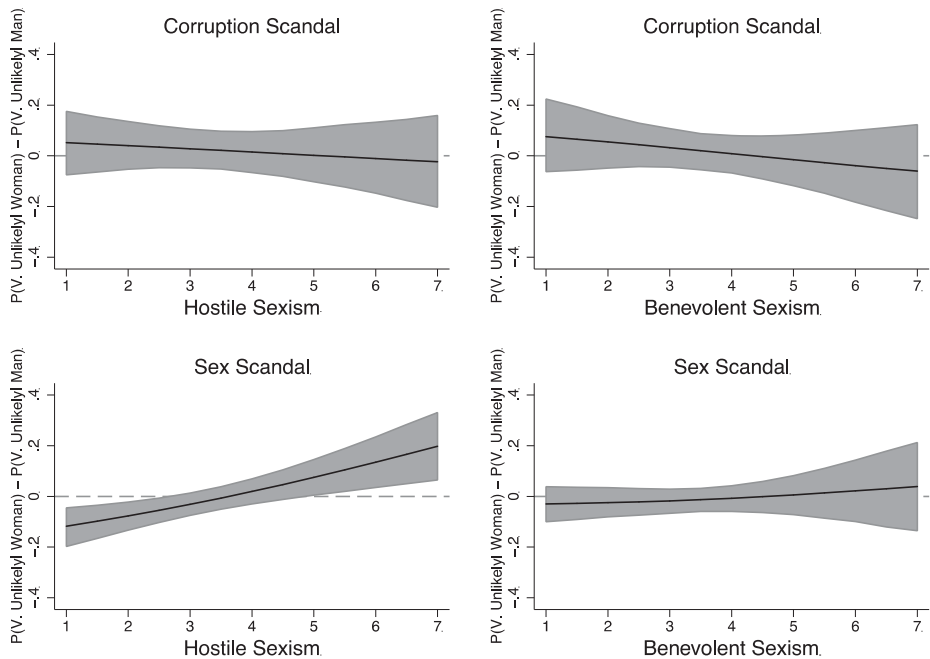
\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (standard errors), two-tailed test.

willing to vote for both male and female representatives engaged in sex scandals as compared to male representatives engaged in corruption, but not more willing to vote for female representatives engaged in corruption. Although the tables of coefficients provide some intuition regarding the results, we can only compare the effect of each of the treatment groups to the baseline – a male representative involved in corruption. Thus, to further analyze our results, and test our hypotheses, we calculate sets of predicted probabilities to compare participants' responses for different variables of interests.

**Candidate sex and voter response to scandal**

First, to investigate our hostile and benevolent sexism hypotheses, we calculate the predicted probabilities of being “very unlikely” to vote for a representative using 1000 sets of simulated coefficients (from Table 1, Models 2 and 3) for each of the four treatment groups while holding all other variables constant at their mean or mode (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). Then we calculate the first difference between the predicted probabilities for the male/female treatment and for the corruption/scandal treatments across the range of hostile and benevolent sexism scales (1 indicates not sexist and 7 represents extremely sexist). We then plot the first differences in Figure 2. Specifically, the values we plot in Figure 2 represent the *change* in the probability that participants will be “very unlikely” to vote for the representative when they receive the female treatment versus the male treatment, for each type of scandal. Values below the  $y = 0$  line indicate that participants are less likely to vote for a male representative, and values above  $y = 0$  indicate that participants will be less likely to vote for a female representative. When the confidence intervals cross zero, it indicates that participants are no more likely to punish male or female candidates for a given scandal.

Turning to the top panel in Figure 2 (corruption scandals), it is clear from the results that participants are equally likely to punish men and women for involvement in corruption regardless of their level of sexism. The difference between participants’ evaluations of male and female candidates is not statistically different at any level of hostile or benevolent



**Figure 2.** Candidate sex and voter response to scandal, across the range of sexism. Note: The y-axis represents the difference in mean predicted values of the DV for male and female treatments. When the confidence bands cross zero, differences are not statistically significant. Predicted values for hostile sexism generated from results in Table 1, Model 2; predicted values for benevolent sexism generated from results in Table 1, Model 3.

sexism. This is evident by the fact that the confidence intervals surrounding the plots cross zero across the entire range of the  $x$ -axis.

Next, turning to the bottom panel (sex scandals), the plot shows that participants who exhibit high levels of hostile sexism are significantly more likely to report that they are “very unlikely” to vote for a woman involved in a sex scandal than for a man. Specifically, the difference between participants’ willingness to punish a woman as compared to a man is positive and significant, demonstrating that as hostile sexism increases, voters are less willing to vote for a woman than a man. Together, these findings are consistent with our theory and provide support for the hostile sexism hypothesis, that a woman challenging the status quo – by being involved in politics and engaging in corruption – alone is not sufficient to elicit hostile reactions. Instead, it is the *combination* of two factors – activating traditional gender norms (by being involved in a sex scandal) while challenging men’s dominant status (i.e., a woman in a powerful position in society) – that incites hostile reactions.

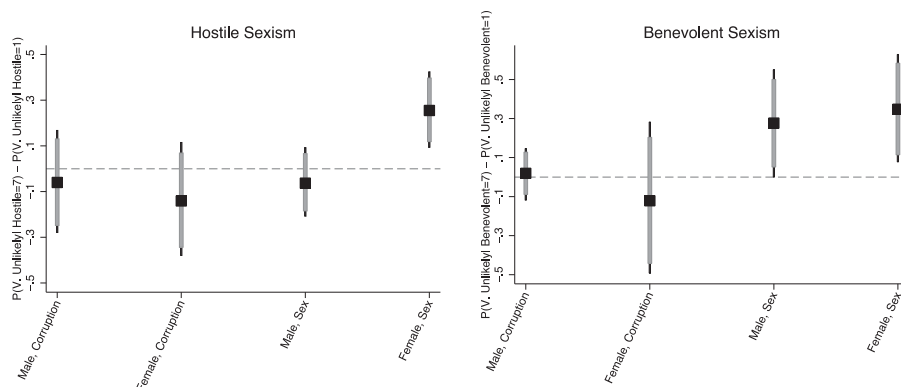
These same results do not hold among participants exhibiting high levels of benevolent sexism. The first difference between the probability of being “very unlikely” to vote for a woman involved in a sex scandal as compared to a man involved in a sex scandal is insignificant across the entire range of benevolent sexism. Participants are thus unlikely to differentiate between the sex of the representative when responding to allegations about the representative’s involvement in a sex scandal, regardless of the participant’s level of benevolent sexism.

### ***Sexism and voter response to scandal***

To evaluate how hostile and benevolent sexism influence participants’ responses to scandals, we calculate the difference in the predicted probability of saying “very unlikely” to vote for a representative between a participant who ranks high (7) on the hostile/benevolent sexism scale compared to a participant who ranks low (1) on the hostile/benevolent sexism scale for each of our four treatments. The differences in predicted probabilities are plotted in [Figure 3](#) surrounded by 90% and 95% confidence intervals. When the confidence intervals cross zero, it indicates that the difference between the two predicted probabilities (i.e., the probability for those exhibiting a 1 compared to those exhibiting a 7) is not statistically different from zero.

The panel on the left (hostile sexism) shows that there is no difference in evaluations of male and female representatives involved in corruption scandals. The 90% confidence intervals cross zero for each of these categories. Similarly, when comparing participants’ responses on the low and high ends of the hostile sexism scale there is no difference in participants’ responses to male representatives involved in sex scandals. But, when we consider participants’ responses to female politicians involved in sex scandals, we observe a significant increase in the probability that a participant says they are “very unlikely” to vote for the representative as we move from individuals on the low end of the hostile sexism scale (1) to those on the high end (7). Consistent with our expectation, voters exhibiting high levels of hostile sexism are less likely to vote for a female representative entrenched in a sex scandal than a male representative.

Next, we posited that voters exhibiting high levels of benevolent sexism will be more likely to punish *both* female and male representatives involved in sex scandals. Consistent with these expectations, we find that individuals exhibiting high levels of benevolent sexism are significantly more likely than those exhibiting low levels of benevolent



**Figure 3.** Sexism and voter response to scandal. Note: First differences between participants exhibiting high levels of sexism (7 out of 7) and those exhibiting low levels of sexism (1 out of 7) by treatment group. The y-axis represents the difference in mean predicted values of the DV for high and low sexism. When the confidence bands cross zero, differences are not statistically significant. Predicted values for hostile sexism are generated from results in Table 1, Model 2. Predicted values for benevolent sexism are generated from results in Table 1, Model 3.

sexism to say they are “very unlikely” to vote for both male and female representatives implicated in sex scandals. They are not, by contrast, any more likely to punish men or women involved in corruption scandals. This comparison makes clear that there is something unique about sex scandals – which can either signal women’s compromised purity or men’s exploitation or betrayal of “innocent” women – that trigger benevolent sexists to punish representatives for their moral transgressions. Taken together, the left panel in Figure 3 shows strong support for both of our Benevolent Sexism Hypotheses, that voters exhibiting high levels of benevolent sexism will be more likely to punish both men and women than those exhibiting low levels of benevolent sexism.

## Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction, we presented readers with two examples of political scandals that shared a number of common characteristics, but had remarkably different outcomes. Both scandals involved politicians engaging in, or associated with, marital infidelity. Yet, the scandal involving a man did not have negative consequences for the individual’s political career, while arguably sex scandals hurt the woman associated, even indirectly, with them. Previous research on political scandals suggests that voters are much less likely to punish a politician for involvement in a sex scandal compared to a corruption scandal. Given these real-world political examples, however, we asked whether sex scandals might be detrimental under certain circumstances. We theorized that sexist ideologies inform the ways that voters respond to sex scandals, and to politicians of different genders. In particular, we suggested that when individuals exhibit sexist ideologies, they should be less forgiving of politicians who engage in sexual misconduct, and that some sexists will be particularly hard on women.

This study contributes several important observations to our understanding of the potential impact of sex scandals and how that impact might be affected by both candidate and voter characteristics. First, it is clear from the results regarding both hostile and benevolent sexism that individuals who hold sexist attitudes are more likely to punish women



candidates for sex scandals than they are to punish either candidate for corruption scandals. Furthermore, our experimental results show that hostile sexists are also more likely to punish women than they are to punish men for sex scandals. These results in particular are consistent with recent research indicating that voters exhibiting high levels of hostile sexism were willing to support Trump even after numerous allegations of sexual assault (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2017), and provide further insights into one of the ways sexism has differential political effects for male and female politicians. Thus, we add to the growing body of literature demonstrating the double standards women face in public service, by highlighting a particular, sexual double standard. Consistent with generally negative views of women's place in public life, hostile sexists accept scandalous sexual behavior from male politicians, but not from women.

Second, the results of our experiment show that even individuals holding benevolent sexist attitudes are more likely to punish women and men for a sex scandal than for corruption scandals. Those who espouse stereotypes of women that appear positive on their face, but include beliefs that women should be cherished and protected, are less likely to tolerate scandals of a sexual nature from any politician, male or female. Thus, not only does our work demonstrate how sexism shapes reactions to political scandals, and the negative consequences for women, it shows that sexist orientations – even when characterized by seemingly benevolent stereotypes – can actually have negative consequences for both men and women.

Understanding how voters respond to political scandals has important implications for trust in the government. Prior research suggests that scandals not only harm individual politicians' reputations but also damage confidence in government institutions more generally (Bowler and Karp 2004). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 2014), we find that people care much less about sex scandals than they do about corruption scandals. Our experimental results, however, show that sexism affects some voters' reactions to sex scandals. Such reactions may, in turn, shape political attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta (2017) find that sexism was a more central factor in the 2016 presidential election outcomes than in previous years, and there is evidence that sexism was associated with lower levels of support for Hillary Clinton in 2008 (McThomas and Tesler 2016).

In trying to understand the impact of something like a political scandal on voter confidence, we must take seriously the ways that individual citizens' own orientation toward the role of women in society affects those evaluations, particularly if we are concerned about women's political representation. Sexism provides a legitimizing ideology that allows gender disparities in politics to persist if men and women are treated differently for similar transgressions. At the same time, this work suggests that sexism, even in its more socially acceptable, benevolent forms, can have negative consequences for all politicians. Thus, this study offers additional insight into how sexism shapes voters' responses to scandal and provides an important example of the ways in which sexism negatively affects women and, in some cases, men as well.

## Notes

1. Importantly, even this more benevolent form of sexism has negative downstream effects for women (e.g., Cassese and Holman 2017b).

2. Treatments were assigned using the Randomizer function in Qualtrics.
3. When comparing the percentage of respondents across treatment groups responding “very unlikely”, a  $\chi^2$  test for average effects is significant at  $p < .001$ .
4. Following Robinson and Jewell (1991), we include control variables in our logistic regression to increase the efficiency of our hypothesis tests, although we acknowledge this choice will reduce the precision of our estimated treatment effects.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Sample characteristics.

	Male corruption	Female corruption	Male sex	Female sex	Full sample
Hostile sexism	3.299	3.360	3.333	3.433	3.356
Benevolent sexism	3.567	3.588	3.676	3.631	3.616
Liberal-Conservative	2.650	2.703	2.690	2.729	2.693
Religiosity	2.281	2.262	2.205	2.269	2.254
Female	.482	.437	.451	.439	.452
Education	3.165	3.011*	3.155	3.250	3.148
Age	54.360	53.289	53.197	54.139	53.750
Income	7.104	6.821	7.130	7.214	7.071
Work full-time	.525	.506	.493	.543	.517
Work part-time	.162	.175	.183	.164	.171
Student	.086	.118	.116	.089	.102

Note: Two-sample *t*-tests with equal variances comparing each group average to the rest of the sample.

\**p* < .05 \*\**p* < .01 \*\*\**p* < .001

**Table A2.** Multinomial logit: predict treatment group.

	(1) Male corruption	(1) Female corruption	(1) Female sex
Hostile sexism	.022 (.063)	.042 (.064)	.066 (.062)
Benevolent sexism	-.075 (.070)	-.100 (.072)	-.082 (.070)
Liberal-Conservative	-.046 (.092)	-.010 (.094)	.004 (.092)
Religiosity	.049 (.063)	.039 (.064)	.031 (.062)
Female participant	.132 (.182)	-.082 (.186)	-.022 (.182)
Education	-.018 (.075)	-.107 (.076)	.048 (.075)
Age	.006 (.008)	.005 (.008)	.006 (.008)
Income	-.003 (.026)	-.017 (.027)	-.003 (.026)
Work full-time	.030 (.236)	.283 (.250)	.076 (.238)
Work part-time	-.260 (.281)	.069 (.290)	-.121 (.280)
Student	-.300 (.360)	.174 (.356)	-.297 (.365)
Constant	-.090 (.585)	.090 (.602)	-.465 (.587)
Observations		1064	
Log Likelihood		-1465.181	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Reference (omitted) category is male sex scandal.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .