

# The New York Times

## Will Women Lead the Democrats to Victory?

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January 18, 2018

Many think the issue of sexual harassment — embodied in the #MeToo movement — will work to the advantage of Democrats in upcoming elections. A mid-December [NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey](#) gave the party a three to one advantage over Republicans on the matter. But it is hardly guaranteed to do so.

Views of sexual harassment and of gender issues generally differ sharply by age, sex and partisan allegiance — all of which create substantial unpredictability. The issue has the potential to accelerate the growing discontent among well-educated white women with the Republican Party. But it could also intensify hostility to the liberal agenda among conservatives, particularly white men, many of whom view women’s complaints of discrimination as “[an attempt to gain advantage](#)” in the workplace.

This complex dynamic is illuminated, for example, in the work of [Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg](#), a psychologist at Tufts, who recently reported a growing divergence on gender issues between male and female voters under the age of 30.

In her paper, “[How Gender Mattered to Millennials in the 2016 Election and Beyond](#),” Kawashima-Ginsberg found that in an election in which allegations of harassment and abuse against Donald Trump were central, support for the Democratic nominee dropped by 15 points from 2008 to 2016 among all young men between the ages of 18 to 29 (from 62 to 47 percent) and by 6 points among all women (from 69 to 63 percent). At the same time, turnout among young white men, many of whom supported Trump, shot up significantly.

“2016 saw the greatest number of votes cast by young white men in the past 12 years — markedly higher than their female counterparts,” Kawashima-Ginsberg wrote.

[Emily Ekins](#), director of polling at the libertarian Cato Institute, also sees pitfalls for Democrats. In an email, she noted that the #MeToo movement and accompanying protests have the potential to make gender issues more important than economics in 2018 and 2020.

That development, Ekins argues,

could have negative ramifications for the Democrats because identity issues are not a unifying force among their base and remain divisive among the general public as well.

Ekins cited a [survey](#) she helped conduct for the nonpartisan Democracy Fund Voter Study Group which found that Democratic men are far less likely than Democratic women

to say gender equality is a “very important” issue — 66 percent of Democratic women, 47 percent of Democratic men, 35 percent of all Americans.

In addition, the survey found that 64 percent of Democratic women strongly disagreed with the statement “When women demand equality these days, they are actually seeking special favors,” compared with 51 percent of Democratic men and 35 percent of all those polled.

In a demonstration of the potential political liability of the issues swirling around identity politics and political correctness, a Cato 2017 [Free Speech and Tolerance Survey](#) found that a bare majority (51 percent) of Democrats believes that calling out sexism is typically justified and not designed to shut off discussion. In sharp contrast, Ekins wrote,

about three-fourths (76 percent) of Republicans and two-thirds (65 percent) of independents believe it’s primarily used as a tool to stifle debate.

Notably, 47 percent of Democrats agreed with Republicans and independents that accusations of sexism are used to silence opponents. The partisan divide over sexual harassment is stark. A December 2017 [Quinnipiac University national poll](#) asked the question:

If a political candidate has been accused of sexual harassment by multiple people, would you still consider voting for them if you agreed with them on the issues, or would you definitely not vote for them?

Among all voters, 66 percent said they would “definitely” not vote for the candidate while 24 percent said they would “consider” voting for the candidate. So far so good. Democrats, however, were 84-10 against the candidate and independents were also opposed, 73-19. A plurality of Republicans, 48 percent, said they would consider the candidate, and 34 percent said they would not. Crucially, among Republican men, 56 percent said they would consider voting for the candidate and 29 percent said they would not.

In an email, [Alex Castellanos](#), a veteran Republican media consultant and Trump loyalist, put forward his view of why Trump and his supporters are immune to the attacks of the #MeToo movement:

Trump displays unalloyed masculine strength. His supporters do not care if he is predatory, insulting, or offensive as long as he is never in doubt, especially if he is kicking the limp Washington establishment around. Trump’s instinct-driven behavior confirms that he is the archetypal alpha-male, the unfiltered reptilian brain, concerned only with sustenance, survival or sex. If anything enters his world, they know he must either eat it, kill it, or mate with it. That’s why they like him. For about half of America, that is terrifying. For the other half, Trump’s strength is the only thing they can count on to protect them from return of the elite bloodsuckers who would devour them.

Castellanos continued, heating up his rhetoric:

Trump’s supporters don’t expect his unrestrained id to ponder the details of briefing papers before he eats the red meat in front of him. As long as Trump displays strength and grabs the

media, the establishment and America's adversaries by the pussy, he's the T Rex many of his supporters want.

Musa al-Gharbi, a fellow in sociology at Columbia, sees the possibility of backlash from voters — such as those Castellanos describes — who are angered or offended by the #MeToo movement. Al-Gharbi emailed me:

If the idea is that Democrats can win over and mobilize people who did not vote for them last cycle by calling Trump a sexist, and Roy Moore a predator — even if many voters agree and are disturbed by Moore and Trump — many of them can also sympathize with Trump in a sense. The same people who are bashing Trump have also disparaged them (Trump supporters) as misogynistic, racist, homophobic, ignorant, etc. — to their minds, unfairly. So they don't put a lot of stock in those messengers, and indeed, hearing Democrats sling these kinds of labels around will probably just stir up resentment against the left.

In an essay in Salon in May 2016 that contended that Trump's path to victory was much easier than conventional wisdom had it, Al-Gharbi argued that Democrats and

progressives have done a great job framing racial inequality, feminism and LGBTQ rights as part of the same basic struggle. However, this association works both ways. Accusations of misogyny, for instance, are often heard in the context of a fundamentally anti-white, anti-Christian culture war — a zero-sum campaign waged against ordinary hard-working Americans by condescending and politically-correct liberal elites.

The issue of sexual harassment is a useful tool to mobilize Democratic voters in liberal states and districts, according to Leonie Huddy, a political scientist at Stonybrook, but, like Al-Gharbi, Huddy thinks that such tactics should be deployed with caution:

Feminism and anti-feminism are essentially baked into the political parties at this point and it is difficult to believe that there are many people left for the parties to capture on the basis of gender-linked issues including sexual harassment.

Huddy warned specifically against Democrats adopting “a singular focus on harassment and gender issues” given the 2016 election outcome:

Gender issues were front and center in Clinton's campaign and that had something of a polarizing effect that likely contributed to weaker support for Clinton among white working class men.

More important, according to Huddy,

Democrats need to figure out how to combine issues linked to gender/feminism, race, and immigration — identity politics — into a more coherent economic framework that reduces the sense that one group wins at another group's expense.

In a recent paper, “Trending Towards Traditionalism? Changes in Youths' Gender Ideology,” two sociologists, David Cotter, of Union College, and Joanna Pepin, of the University of Maryland, found evidence of a retrenchment on key gender issues among the young.

Using polls of high school seniors over the past 40 years — conducted by the Monitoring The Future project at the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center — Cotter and Pepin documented a shift on two key questions: “It is usually better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family” and “the husband should make all the important decisions in the family.” The accompanying chart shows the trend line on both of those questions.

Future” data by David Cotter, Union College, and Joanna Pepin, University of Maryland

I asked Cotter and Pepin about the significance of their findings for the #MeToo movement. Cotter emailed back:

My own work, which has focused on the stalled gender revolution over the past twenty years, would suggest some mix of optimism and pessimism about this. One of the apparent reasons for the stall is the flagging of the women’s movement after the successes of the 1970s and the defeat of the ERA in the 1980s.

On the optimistic side for Democrats, Cotter wrote,

this moment/movement definitely looks like it is taking hold — and it’s had real consequences at least at the level of individual harassers and abusers being called out and facing consequences. Many reports suggest a large number of female candidates for office at all levels.

On the pessimistic side, Cotter argues,

we can already see the beginnings of a backlash against #MeToo. There’s a large reservoir of gender traditionalism and misogyny as shown in the Trending towards Traditionalism paper — and it persists among youths so may be part of our social fabric for some time.

R. Marie Griffith, a professor of religion and politics at Washington University in St. Louis and the author of the recently published book, “Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics,” raised another question in an email:

It seems to me that women themselves are divided on these issues, at least some of the most conservative religious women. How else to explain the white women who voted for Roy Moore, despite everything, and who still support Trump?

Some of the anti-Hillary women may shift to support Kirsten Gillibrand (if she does run), who may seem a much more acceptable sort of female candidate (more feminine, less threatening, perhaps) and has not, to my knowledge, appeared to insult women who stay home and bake cookies,” Griffith wrote, but “some segment of (white, anyway) women will evidently always stand by the macho male candidate, no matter how vile he may be.

Putting those qualifications aside, Griffith argues that “it certainly appears that women’s #MeToo fury is a powerful force with no sign of ebbing,” adding, “but my God, anything could happen between now and then, couldn’t it!? Still, my money’s on them for this year and, if I had to bet that far in advance, probably for 2020 too.”

Cindy Kam, a political scientist at Vanderbilt, argued in an email that sexual harassment is currently “more of a cultural conflict focusing on how people think women (and men) should be treated and should treat each other,” and has not yet emerged as a full-fledged electoral issue.

She notes that

given Trump was elected with the support of about half of white female voters [he won them 52-43], there is clearly a sizable proportion of Americans — both male and female — who are willing to look the other way even in the face of video-taped evidence of crude, sexist language.

Turning toward upcoming elections, Kam makes the case that

for these issues to play a truly transformative role in 2018 and 2020, I think they will need to be more directly tied to institutionalized sexism and associated policy solutions for it rather than tied to singling out specific wrongdoers and removing them from positions of power.

Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster and an expert on the politics of gender, is more optimistic about a positive payoff for Democrats than either Kam or Griffith. In an email, Lake argued that the issue of sexual harassment will motivate young and unmarried women to vote, that it has already helped restore Democratic loyalty among college-educated women and that it will improve prospects for women running for office.

For many women, according to Lake, “there is a continuum from sexual assault to sexual harassment to bad social and dating behavior,” all of which can help motivate female voters.

William Galston, a senior fellow at Brookings, also sees benefits flowing to Democrats from the #MeToo movement. In a Jan. 10 paper titled “Data point to a new wave of female political activism that could shift the course of US politics,” Galston writes:

This may be the first time in American history that an entire cohort of young women reports greater political engagement than their male peers. If so, this could presage a new wave of female activism that shifts the course of our politics in the 2018 mid-term elections and beyond.

In terms of evaluating the political consequences of the #MeToo movement, Charles Franklin, director of the Marquette Law School Poll, emailed me to say that in the December Wall Street Journal/NBC survey, sexual harassment and #MeToo “ranks 6th, behind shootings, natural disasters, Trump, tax bill, and terrorist attacks” in voters’ listing of the most important issue.

“That seems well behind the level of media attention the issue has received,” Franklin notes.

There are at least two possible developments that could substantially increase the attention paid to the issue of sexual harassment.

The first is Kirsten Gillibrand’s potential presidential candidacy. Gillibrand has taken the lead on the matter of sexual misconduct, declaring that “enough is enough” in a Dec. 6 Facebook post:

We should not have to be explaining the gradations between sexual assault, harassment and unwelcome groping. And what message do we send to our sons and daughters when we accept gradations of crossing the line? None of it is ok and none of it should be tolerated.

The second possible development is a Democratic takeover of the House or the Senate (or both) in the 2018 midterms. With majority control of either branch, Democrats would have the power to keep Republicans on the defensive and to set the issue agenda so as to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of gender polarization.

Poll data highlights the volatility of public opinion on matters of sexual behavior. Antithetical conclusions can be drawn depending on the questions asked. For example, a December 2017 Pew Poll found that a solid majority of adults, 66-28, believe sexual misconduct allegations “reflect widespread problems in society” as opposed to “individual misconduct.” Republicans agreed, 61-34. At the same time, in the same month, an Economist-YouGov survey found that a majority of Republicans, 59-41, believe that “false accusations of sexual assault” are a bigger problem than sexual assaults that go unreported and unpunished.

A third poll in December, by PerryUndem, a public policy research firm, asked voters if they were “upset” by Trump’s Access Hollywood remarks. Most people — 61 percent — said they were. However, 65 percent of Republican men said they were not. Lining up on the same side, 54 percent of Republican women said that “many women interpret innocent remarks as sexist.” A far smaller number, 25 percent, of Democratic women agreed.

This contrast appears in question after question. Sixty-four percent of Democratic women say that they feel more unsafe after the election, compared with 14 percent of Republican women.

In other words, what looks like a favorable climate now for Democrats is in fact highly volatile, particularly when the man in the White House likes to set bonfires.