

The Effects of Sexual Misconduct Allegations on Elected Officials: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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Introduction

Following the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016, I became interested in how individuals could be elected to office despite being accused of sexual misconduct. In 2017, The #MeToo movement and the TIMESUP campaign brought the issue of sexual misconduct into the spotlight, and several members of Congress resigned after allegations against them became public. I began to look at cases where an official had been accused of sexual misconduct but refused to resign and chose to run for reelection. Whether or not the official publicly addressed the accusations, the choice to run for reelection was an implicit denial of wrongdoing and refusal to take responsibility for any misconduct. I wanted to know how the public responded to such accusations and why voters would continue to support a candidate even when they had been accused of acts such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, or conducting an affair with a staff member.

Hypotheses

Case Studies:

1. Vote share will decrease between pre-scandal election and post-scandal election
2. Officials accused of more severe forms of sexual misconduct like sexual assault will lose their elections

Survey Experiment:

1. Candidate evaluations will differ depending on treatment condition. Comparing the treatment conditions, evaluations for the affair will be the highest, harassment will be in the middle, and assault will be the lowest.
2. Respondents with higher levels of sexism will report more favorable candidate evaluations regardless of treatment condition

Methodology

Case Studies:

- Compiled list of elected officials accused of sexual misconduct either during their time in office as a member of Congress or during their first campaign who chose to continue their run for office despite the allegations
- Used historical newspaper archives, television broadcasts, online news, official Congressional investigation reports, and election data to investigate details of each case study

Survey Experiment:

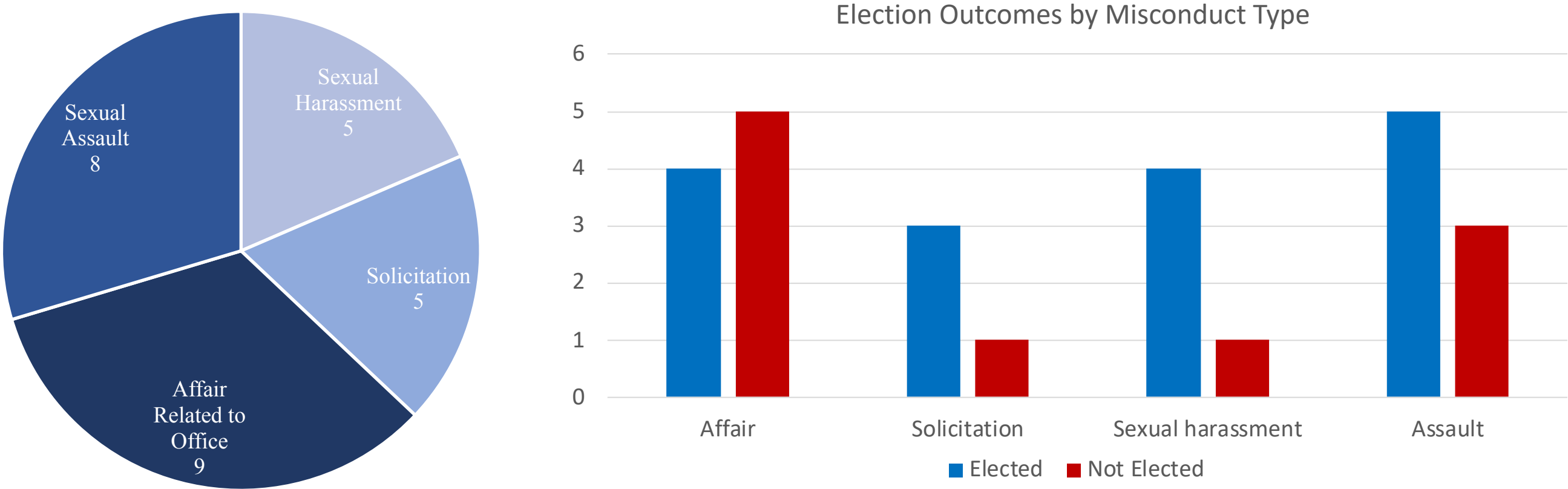
- Survey respondents received one of four articles about a fictional Congressman’s reelection campaign
- Three stories included three different types of sexual misconduct, while one story was a control with no allegation of sexual misconduct

Affair-Sexual Abuse of Power	Sexual Harassment	Sexual Assault
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conducted two year affair with female staffer• Gave her special treatment because of their relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Made “lewd” and “suggestive” comments of a sexual nature• Propositioned her	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Groped and kissed female staffer while in elevator together

- Respondents were asked two candidate evaluation questions and two questions on attitudes towards women

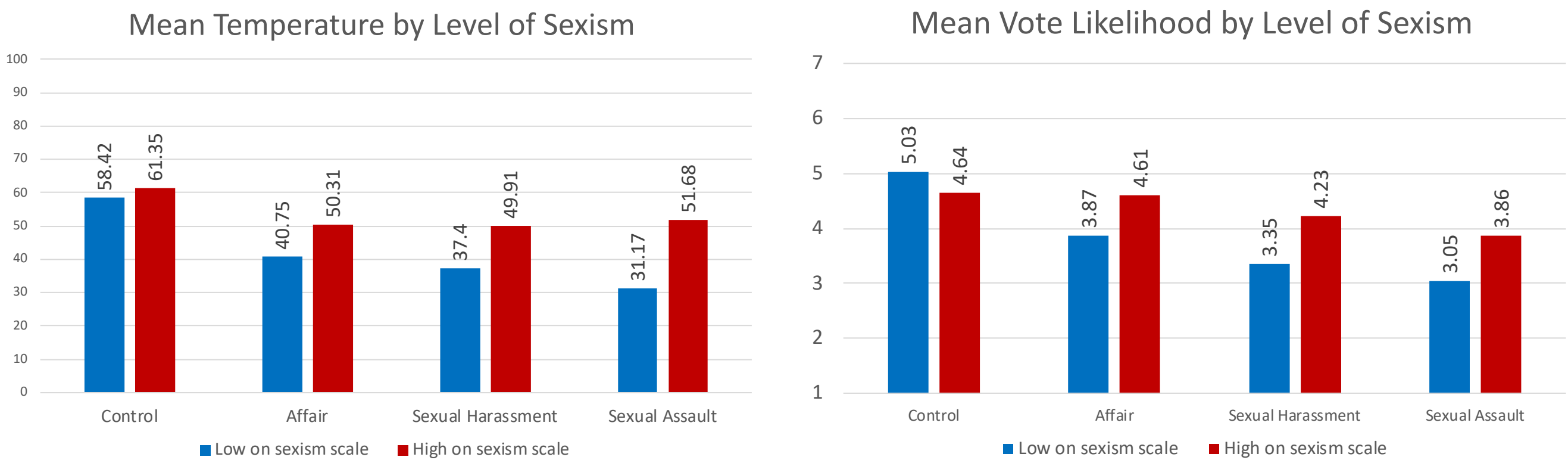
Results: Case Studies

- 27 total cases, all men
- 16 elected or re-elected, 11 defeated
- Organized into 4 categories: sexual assault, sexual harassment, solicitation, and affairs related to duties of office.
- Hypothesis 1 not supported: while some incumbents did see vote share decrease, it was not always enough to cause them to lose reelection. Some officials’ vote share actually increased in the post-scandal election.
- Hypothesis 2 not supported: the affair category was the only one where more officials lost their election than won, no evidence that one type of sexual misconduct leads to loss of election more than others.



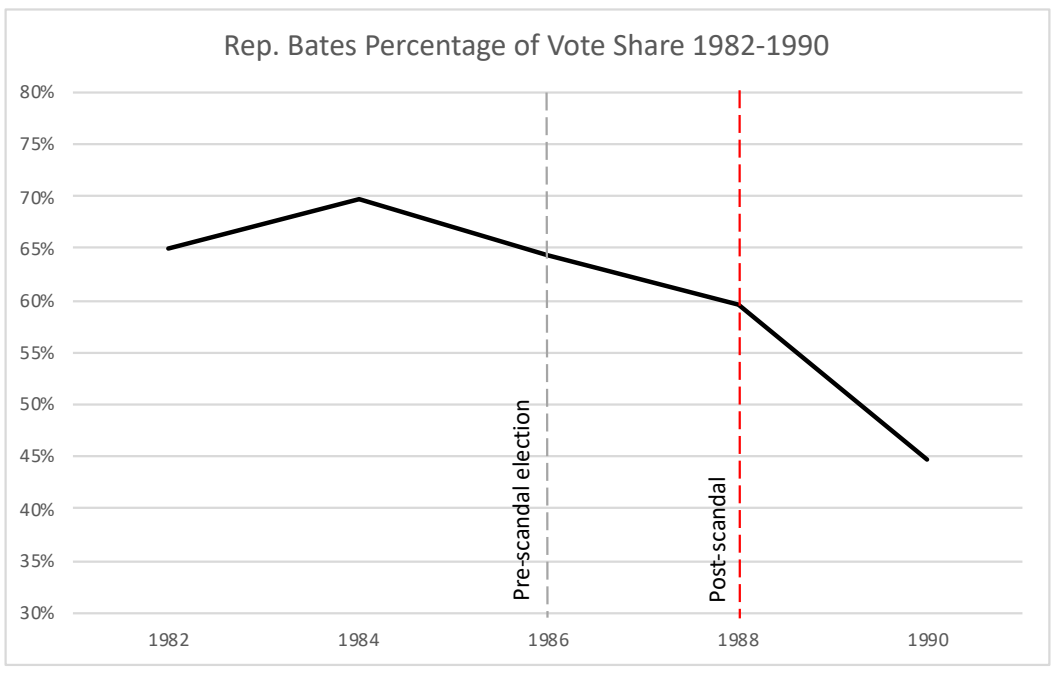
Results: Survey Experiment

- 972 total respondents, about 70% of the sample was female
- Hypothesis 1 supported: all three treatment conditions significantly decreased candidate evaluation (temperature) and vote likelihood compared to the control ($p < 0.01$). The mean temperature in the conditions decreased as severity increased. In the control condition, the mean vote likelihood corresponded most closely with “somewhat likely,” while the vote likelihood in both the affair and sexual harassment conditions corresponded with “not sure.” In the sexual assault condition, the mean likelihood most closely corresponded with “somewhat unlikely.” This reflects my expectations that the more severe condition of sexual assault would have the lowest vote likelihood among the treatment conditions.
- Hypothesis 2 supported: for each treatment condition, the responses among people with high levels of sexism were not very different, each mean was around 50 degrees on the feeling thermometer, while the temperatures differed across conditions for respondents with low levels of sexism. In the affair condition, the average response for people with low levels of sexism was closer to “not sure” while the response for people with high levels of sexism was “somewhat likely.” In the sexual harassment and sexual assault conditions, people with low levels of sexism reported an average vote likelihood closest to “somewhat unlikely” while people with high levels of sexism reported a vote likelihood closest to “not sure.”



Case Study Example

Rep. Jim Bates (D-CA) was accused of sexual harassment in September 1988, just two months before the 1988 election. Around 20 women were interviewed for the initial story and described the hostile workplace and sexual harassment, but only two women made formal complaints to the House Ethics Committee. Bates claimed the charges were unsubstantiated but apologized for “flirting and kidding around.” Bates managed to win reelection in 1988, although he lost about 5 percent in vote share. The House Ethics Committee did investigate the allegations against Bates and released a report in 1989. The Committee determined that Bates had sexually harassed the complainants and created a hostile workplace. They recommended a reproof but no formal punishment. However, the voters, perhaps convinced of Bates’ wrongdoing by the Committee’s report, ousted Bates in the next election.



Conclusions

- Sexual misconduct is not always considered a disqualifying factor for elected officials. In the case studies, more officials accused of sexual misconduct were elected or reelected than defeated. In the survey experiment, respondents may have still supported a candidate accused of sexual misconduct.
- Responses to the treatment conditions significantly differed for respondents with different levels of sexism. High levels of sexism may mitigate the severity of sexual misconduct allegations in assessing a candidate and determining vote likelihood.
- More discussion and debate should occur on how sexual misconduct should be addressed and solved in our society, especially for elected officials tasked with representing the people

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