#ImWithHer: Predictors of Support for Female Candidates

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**Introduction**

Women are underrepresented at all levels of U.S. government, with the greatest gender imbalances at the highest posts. Research with adults indicates that Americans have mixed feelings about women as political leaders (Lawless, 2004). Although women are often viewed as having many of the characteristics associated with good leaders, such as honesty and compassion, many individuals are still reluctant to accept women in positions of leadership (Eagly, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2008).

Additionally, past research suggests that young women are relatively unaware of current gender inequalities (Pahlke, Bigler, & Lamb, 2009) and consider sexism to be a problem of the past.

The present study examines whether support for female presidential candidates in general, and Hillary Clinton specifically, is related to women’s knowledge of gender inequalities and experiences with sexism.

**Measures**

**Enthusiasm for a female president.** Participants were asked how enthusiastic they were about the idea of a woman as president using a 5-point scale that ranged from extremely unenthusiastic to extremely enthusiastic.

**Favorability rating of Hillary Clinton.** Participants were asked to indicate their support for Hillary Clinton specifically using a 5-point scale that ranged from very unfavorable to very favorable.

**Modern sexist beliefs.** Participants completed the 5-item Modern Sexism Scale, which measured beliefs about the continued existence of sexism using a 5-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (α = .85). Higher scores indicate endorsement of more sexist beliefs.

**Past experiences with sexism.** Participants indicated how often they had experienced 7 sexist events in the past (e.g., “How often have you been treated unfairly by teachers or professors because you are a woman?”) using a 6-point response scale ranging from never to very often (α = .77).

**Perceptions of gender inequality.** Participants completed a 7-item measure to assess their knowledge of current educational, wealth, and occupational outcomes among men and women in the United States (α = .70). Participants moved a slider to report their perceptions of the percentage of women and men in various domains.

**Participants**

Women (N = 387) between the ages of 18 and 75 (M = 32.07, SD = 12.7) completed the survey online during the summer of 2016 before the Democratic National Convention. Participants were recruited through a combination of MTurk, Whitman listservs, and personal contacts.

Participants were 81.1% White, 6.7% Black/African American, 8.0% Asian American, 3.1% Multiracial, and 1.8% Hispanic/Latino.

The highest level of education completed was less than high school for 0.5% of the sample, high school or GED for 10.1%, at least some college for 37.2%, Associate’s degree for 9%, Bachelor’s degree for 32.8%, and Advanced degree for 10.3%.

In terms of party affiliation, 57.4% identified as Democrats, 16.8% as Republicans, 1.6% as Green Party members, 2.3% as Libertarians, 19.1% as Independents, and 2.8% as other.

**Results**

There was a significant effect of political ideology and age on both enthusiasm for a female president and favorability ratings of Hillary Clinton. Thus, these two variables were included as covariates in the ANCOVAs.

### Enthusiasm for a Female President

**Modern Sexist Beliefs**

Controlling for political ideology and age, there was a significant main effect of modern sexist beliefs on enthusiasm for a female president, F(3,382) = 16.66, p < .001. Women who did not endorse or slightly endorsed sexist beliefs were significantly more enthusiastic about the possibility of a female president than their peers who held more sexist beliefs.

**Past Experiences with Sexism**

Controlling for political ideology and age, there was a significant main effect of experiences with sexist degradation on enthusiasm for a female president, F(4, 380) = 4.22, p = .002 (see Figure). Interestingly, however, neither personal experiences with sexism in personal relationships, F(4, 380) = 0.56, p = .70, nor experiences with sexism in the workplace, F(4, 380) = 0.27, p = .90, were related to enthusiasm for a female president.

### Favorability Ratings of Hillary Clinton

**Modern Sexist Beliefs**

Controlling for political ideology and age, there was a significant main effect of modern sexist beliefs on favorability ratings of Hillary Clinton, F(3,381) = 2.68, p = .047. Interestingly, individuals who perceived the highest level of gender inequality were more supportive of Hillary Clinton than their peers; instead, women who perceived moderately high levels of inequality were more likely than their peers to view Clinton favorably.

**Past Experiences with Sexist Degradation**

Note. Means with different letters are significantly different (p < .05).

#### Perceptions of Gender Inequality

Controlling for political ideology and age, there was a significant main effect of perceptions of gender inequality on favorability ratings of Hillary Clinton, F(3,381) = 2.68, p = .047. Interestingly, individuals who perceived the highest level of gender inequality were more supportive of Hillary Clinton than their peers; instead, women who perceived moderately high levels of inequality were more likely than their peers to view Clinton favorably.

### Discussion

Even when controlling for political ideology and age, results suggest that women’s experiences with sexism, endorsement of sexist beliefs, and knowledge of gender inequality were related to both support for a female president in general and support for Hillary Clinton specifically.

Although our hypotheses were supported, there were interesting exceptions. For example, sexist experiences in relationships and the workplace were not related to enthusiasm for a female president or support for Hillary Clinton. This may be because experiencing sexism in personal relationships and at work is the norm for many women, and thus it may be that it is the more disruptive forms of sexist degradation that make the need for female leaders salient.

These findings suggest that teaching adolescents about the persistence of gender inequalities in our society may have an impact on their own interest in working to reduce the gender imbalance among our political leadership. Prior research has found that higher awareness of gender inequality motivates women to seek out leadership positions (Eprana et al., 2015), and so teaching female adolescents about gender inequality may inspire them to pursue a career in politics.

Future work should examine whether increasing men’s awareness of gender inequality influences their support for female candidates. If our findings are replicated among a male sample, intervention work could target men to become allies and speak out in support of women in leadership positions. Additionally, future studies should examine the role of intersectionality of gender, political ideology, and age in predicting support for female candidates.