

## THE POLLS—TRENDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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**Abstract** Attitudes about sexual harassment in the United States are multifaceted and have shifted over time. This article examines a quarter century of public opinion trends from several major national surveys. The polls reveal the complexity and dynamism of these views amidst broader societal changes involving gender and views of discrimination. While perceptions of sexual harassment as a problem have dramatically shifted, some questions suggest that public interest ebbs and flows with national political events. This article also documents small gaps between women and men on these views and large gaps between Democrats and Republicans. While recent national attention has increased the survey record on sexual harassment attitudes, inconsistent question wording and temporal gaps between relevant surveys have led to uneven metrics over time.

### Introduction

In 1986, Congress passed the first federal law against sexual harassment, which defines sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, and offensive comments about a person's sex, all of which create a hostile

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environment (EEOC 2020). Although women are more frequent targets of sexual harassment than men (Chira 2018), the laws do not distinguish by sex.

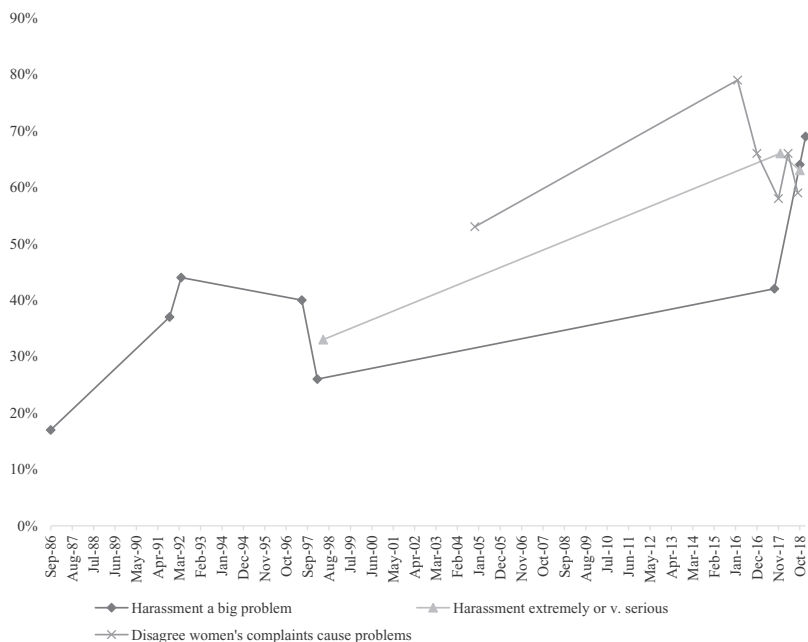
How do Americans think about sexual harassment and how have those views shifted across three decades of legal, political, and social change? Here, we examine the complexity and dynamism in a quarter century of US public attitudes about sexual harassment and its intersections with political life. Those shifting views include perceptions of the problem's importance generally and in the workplace, definitional disagreements, views of the #MeToo movement, and evaluations of how the Republican and Democratic parties handle these issues. Along with a positive change in sexual harassment attitudes in longer time trends, we also find evidence of public backlash in recent years.

Public views of sexual harassment changed as social-political events, scandals, and new laws increased public knowledge and raised the issue's salience, with the public sometimes leading and other times following political and legal progress (Farris and Holman 2015). Anita Hill's 1991 testimony against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas spurred a national conversation about sexual harassment in the workplace (Hutchings 2001), as did accusations against Bill Clinton and Herman Cain (Peterson and Vonnahme 2014). More recently, sexual misconduct gained salience with the #MeToo movement (Lee and Murdie 2020) and sexual assault allegations against Donald Trump (Cassese 2019) and Brett Kavanaugh, illuminating how victims too often remain unprotected. Even today, survey data shows that many Americans focus on the harms to perpetrators and not the harms they inflict on others.

We document small opinion gaps between women and men in these views. In comparison, we find large opinion gaps between Democrats and Republicans. While recent national attention has increased the survey record on sexual harassment attitudes, we document long periods without surveys on the topic; this and inconsistent question wording have yielded uneven metrics over time. We include an extensive set of infrequent questions about sexual harassment in the [Supplementary Material](#). Notably, most questions on the topics do not define harassment or provide examples, and so respondents bring their own understandings to bear in their answers and these definitions may have evolved over time and heterogeneously within groups. We conclude by discussing areas for future research, including ways to improve survey measures of public opinion about sexual harassment.

## Problem Importance

Far more Americans recognize sexual harassment as a problem today than did three decades ago, though rates of harassment remain level (see [figure 1](#)). In



**Figure 1. Perceptions of problem of sexual harassment, 1986–2018.** See the [Supplementary Material, tables 1.1–1.3](#). *Harassment is a big problem:* There has been a lot of discussion lately about sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Do you think this is a big problem, somewhat of a problem, or not a problem at all? Percent reporting “A big problem.” (Variant: 4/1992: “Very serious,” “Somewhat serious,” “Not a problem”; 10/2018: “Serious problem,” “Not a serious problem,” “Not a problem”; 1/2019: “Serious,” “Not serious,” “Not a problem,” “No opinion”); 9/1986: *Time* ( $n = 1,014$ ); 10/1991: *Time* ( $n = 500$ ); 4/1992: *Life* ( $n = 1,222$ ); 6/97: *Time* ( $n = 1,024$ ); 2/98: *Time* ( $n = 1,023$ ); 9/17: *Marist* ( $n = 508$ ); 10/18: *ABC* ( $n = 1,260$ ); 1/19: *Huffington* ( $n = 1,008$ ); 2/19: *Gallup* ( $N = 1,932$ ). *Harassment extremely or very serious:* In your view, is sexual harassment an extremely serious problem in this country today, very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious? Responses reporting extremely or very serious. 5/1998: *Time/CNN* ( $n = 1234$ ); 12/2017: *CNN* ( $n = 1001$ ); 10/2018: *CNN* ( $n = 1009$ ). *Disagree women’s complaints cause problems:* Women who complain about harassment often cause more problems than they solve. Strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. Percent reporting somewhat or strongly disagree. 2004 *ANES* ( $n = 1,066$ ); 2/2016: *Democracy Corp* ( $n = 800$ ); 12/16: *Voter Study Group/YouGov* ( $n = 8,000$ ); 11/2017: *The Economist/YouGov* ( $n = 1,499$ ); 4–5/18: *Voter Study Group/YouGov* ( $n = 5,893$ ); 9/18: *The Economist/YouGov* ( $n = 1,498$ ).

1986, only 17 percent said sexual harassment of women in the workplace was “A big problem.” In October 2018, during Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh’s Senate confirmation hearings, that share reached 64 percent. Responses to other surveys also show a growing recognition of sexual harassment as a problem. In 1998, 2017, and 2018, CNN asked respondents to assess the seriousness of sexual harassment. Here, we see growth in “extremely” or “very” serious responses, chosen by 33 percent of respondents in 1998 versus 66 percent in 2017 and 63 percent in 2018.

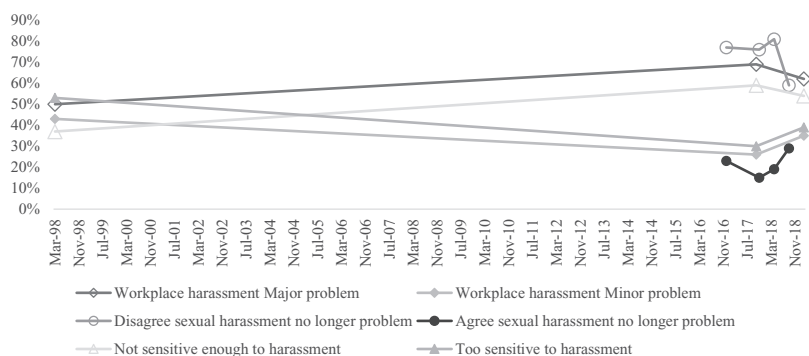
We find more stability in negative views of women who report sexual harassment (see [Supplementary Material](#)). In 2004, 27 percent somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement “Women who complain about harassment often cause more problems than they solve.” Twenty-nine percent expressed that view in 2018.

Next, we examine changing views about sexual harassment in the workplace, where longer-trend data indicates that growing numbers of Americans view workplace harassment as a major problem, think people are not sensitive enough to harassment, and disagree that workplace harassment is no longer a concern (see [figure 2](#)). For all three questions, the #MeToo era is associated with slight declines in views of the seriousness of workplace harassment. The share of respondents who do not see any sexual harassment problem for women in the workplace has *also* risen; while 10 percent of 1986 survey respondents reliably selected “Not a problem at all,” that share doubled in both 2018 surveys (see [Supplementary Material](#)).

## #MeToo Evaluations

The #MeToo movement gained attention in October 2017, when a viral hashtag and related personal abuse stories from thousands of women poured out following allegations of sexual misconduct against filmmaker Harvey Weinstein ([Farrow 2017](#)). The #MeToo hashtag built on the movement Tarana Burke founded in 2006 to provide survivors of sexual violence—particularly Black girls and women—with resources and space for creative efforts against sexual violence ([Burke 2019](#)). The movement succeeded in highlighting sexual misconduct by other entertainment moguls, sports figures, college faculty members, and politicians. In response, several states passed legislation to strengthen workplace protections ([Mahoney, Kearney, and Shaffer 2020](#)).

Several recent surveys include direct evaluations of the #MeToo Movement (see [figure 3](#)). A quarter to a third of the population has positive views of the movement and an equal share has negative views, both stable since the movement gained prominence. Despite wording and format differences, the distributions of #MeToo responses look similar across survey samples, wording, and the (brief) timespan covered here.

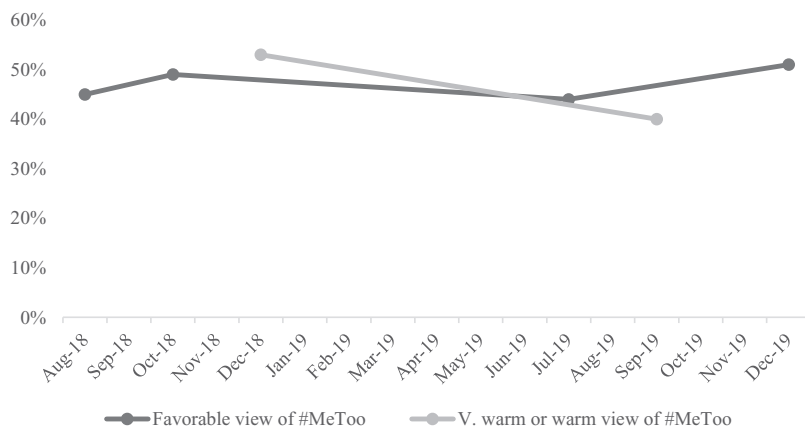


**Figure 2. Views of sexual harassment in the workplace.** See the [Supplementary Material, tables 2.1–2.3](#). *Workplace harassment major/minor problem:* In terms of the number of women who face sexual harassment in the workplace, would you say sexual harassment these days is a major problem or a minor problem? *Gallup* 3/1998 ( $n = 1,010$ ); 10/2017 ( $n = 1,012$ ); 2/2019 ( $n = 1,932$ ). *Sensitive/Not sensitive to workplace harassment:* Do you think that people in the workplace are too sensitive or not sensitive enough to the problem of sexual harassment? *Gallup* 3/1998 ( $n = 1,010$ ); 10/2017 ( $n = 1,012$ ); 2/2019 ( $n = 1,932$ ). *Disagree/agree sexual harassment no longer a problem:* Sexual harassment against women in the workplace is no longer a problem in the United States. Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. Percent reporting somewhat or strongly disagree (disagree) or somewhat or strongly agree (agree). 12/16: *Voter Study Group/YouGov* ( $n = 8,000$ ); 11/2017: *The Economist/YouGov* ( $n = 1,450$ ); 4–5/18: *Voter Study Group/YouGov* ( $n = 5,893$ ); 09/18: *The Economist/YouGov* ( $n = 1,498$ ).

## Differences between Women and Men

We next consider how respondent gender shapes views of sexual harassment. Women and men may differ in these views based on diverging social positions and experiences, particularly women's higher rates of experiencing sexual harassment (EEOC). However, women's and men's views on "gender issues" are often similar, especially in contrast with large partisan differences on the same issues (Lizotte 2015; Barnes and Cassese 2017; Holman, Podrazik, and Mohamed 2020).

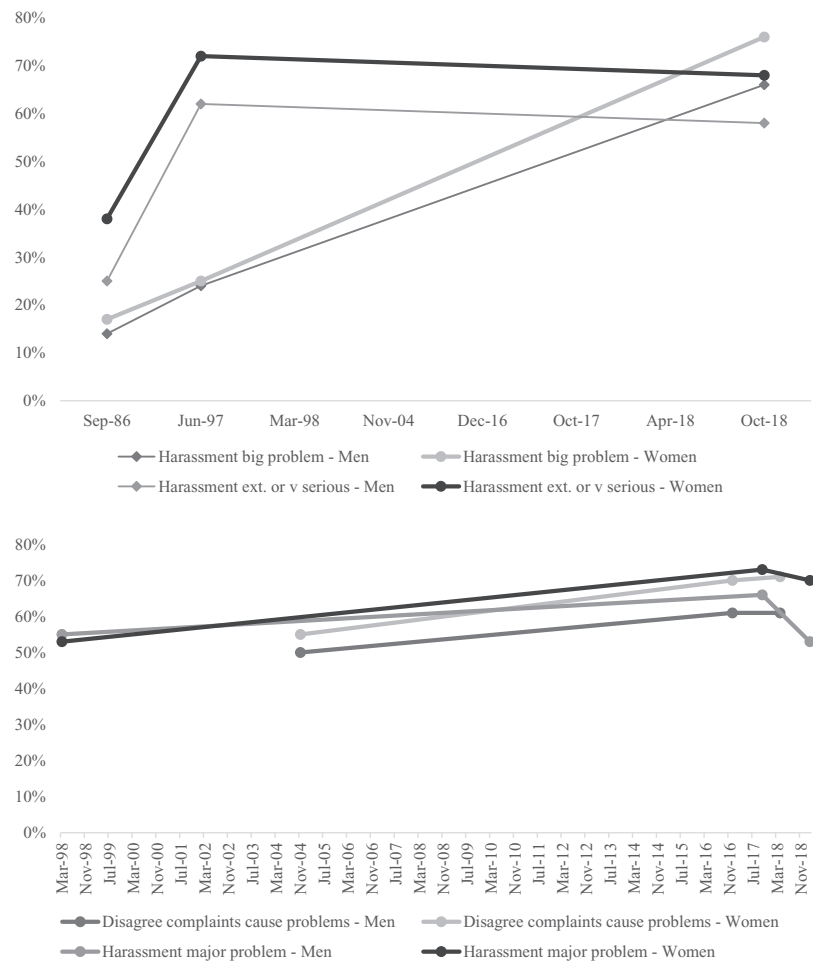
Sexual harassment views follow those patterns: women and men's views differ in small ways, with positive change among both groups over the last thirty years (see [Figure 4](#)). Men and women were equally likely to view harassment as a big problem in earlier surveys (see top pane of [figure 4](#)). Those



**Figure 3. View of #MeToo, 2018–2019.** See the [Supplementary Material, tables 3.1–3.2](#). *Favorable view of #MeToo*: Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the MeToo Movement? Very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable. Percent reporting very or somewhat favorable (Variant: 7/2019: Strongly favorable/strongly unfavorable). 4/1992: “Very serious,” 8/2018: *HuffPost/YouGov* ( $N = 988$ ); 10/2018: *Data for Progress/YouGov* ( $N = 2,954$ ); 7/2019: *AP-NORC* ( $N = 1,000$ ); 12/2019: *CBS/NYT* ( $N = 3,101$ ). *Very warm or warm view of #MeToo*: Now, I’d like you to rate your feelings toward some people, organizations, and ideas, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling; zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that person, organization, or idea. If you have no opinion or never heard of that person, organization, or idea, please say so. . . . The hashtag MeToo movement. Percent reporting a value of over 50. 12/2018: *ANES Pilot/YouGov* ( $N = 2,500$ ); 9/2019: *Democracy Corps* ( $N = 800$ ).

views increase in both groups, but problem importance grew faster among women. By 2018, more than 70 percent of women and 61 percent of men see it as a “big problem.” Similarly, the gap between men and women who see it as an extremely or very serious problem grew from 3 to 10 percentage points over three decades. In 1986, 25 percent of men and 28 percent of women fell into these categories. By 2018, 68 percent of women considered sexual harassment to be an extremely or very serious problem, compared to 58 percent of men.

We find more rapid growth in the gender gap in views of harassment in the workplace (see bottom pane of [figure 4](#)). Men and women support



**Figure 4. Gender and views of sexual harassment (top pane) and workplace harassment (bottom pane).** Top pane: *Harassment is a big problem:* There has been a lot of discussion lately about sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Do you think this is a big problem, somewhat of a problem, or not a problem at all? (A big problem.) *Harassment extremely or very serious:* In your view, is sexual harassment an extremely serious problem in this country today, very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious? (Extremely or very serious.) Bottom pane: *Workplace harassment major problem:* In terms of the number of women who face sexual harassment in the workplace, would you say sexual harassment these days is a major problem or a minor problem? (Major problem.) *Disagree sexual harassment no longer a problem:* Sexual harassment against women in the workplace is no longer a problem in the United States. Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. (Somewhat or strongly disagree.) See figure 1 or Supplementary Material tables 4.1–4.4 for response details.

victims more today than years ago (disagreeing that women's complaints about sexual harassment in the workplace cause more problems than they solve), but with small, growing gaps between them. Men were about equally likely to view harassment as a major problem in 2019 (53 percent) compared to the late 1990s (55 percent). In comparison, the share of women saying the same increased from 53 percent in 1998 to 70 percent in 2019.

## Differences between Democrats and Republicans

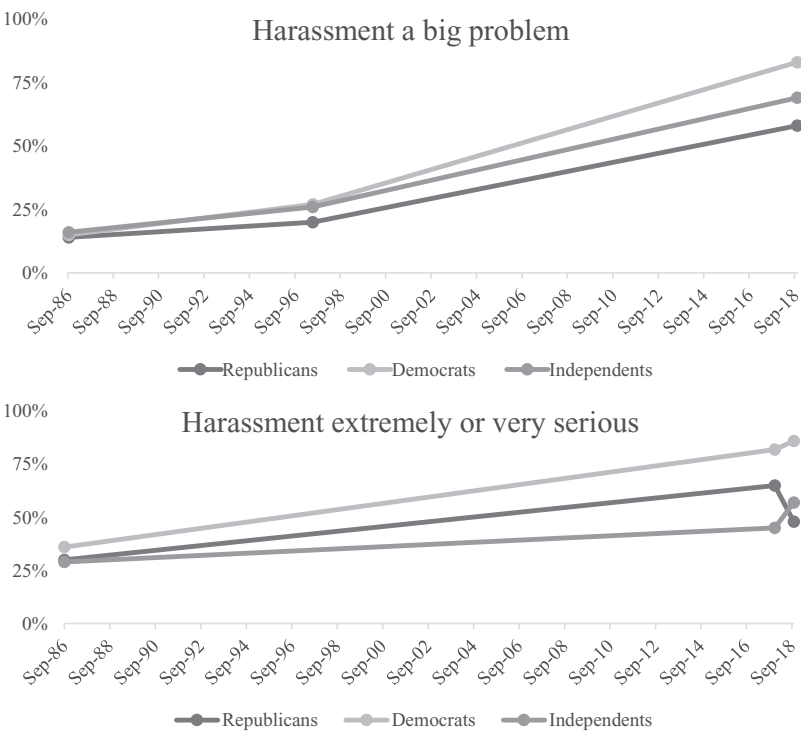
Partisan gaps on #MeToo and sexual harassment in recent years are often larger than gender differences (Hansen and Dolan 2020). We find the same here (see figure 5). The gaps between Democrats and Republicans outpace gaps between men and women on sexual harassment views, particularly in recent surveys. On problem importance for sexual harassment, we observe no difference in 1986, when 15 percent of Democrats and 14 percent of Republicans saw it as “a big problem.” A small 7-point partisan gap opened by 1997. But by 2018, the share of Democrats recognizing “a big problem” had risen to 83 percent, compared to 58 percent of Republicans.

The trends reveal that members of both parties grew more concerned about the issue over time, but the growth among Democrats outstripped the rise among Republicans. We see much the same in surveys with “extremely” as the top category, where 86 percent of Democrats considered it a very or extremely serious problem, compared to 48 percent of Republicans. In the “serious” question, we also observe shifts *away* from recognizing the problem among Republicans from 2017 to 2018: 65 percent chose “very” or “extremely serious” problem in 2017, a share that fell to 48 percent in 2018 immediately following the Kavanaugh hearings. It is possible that Republicans and Democrats have divergent views on what type of behavior constitutes sexual harassment. Unfortunately, only older data is available to measure this—two questions, fielded in 1991 and 1998, that ask respondents to classify a set of activities as harassment or not (see Supplementary Material table 5.3). We see little evidence of partisan definitional differences for sexual harassment in the 1990s.

## Views of #MeToo across Gender and Partisan Groups

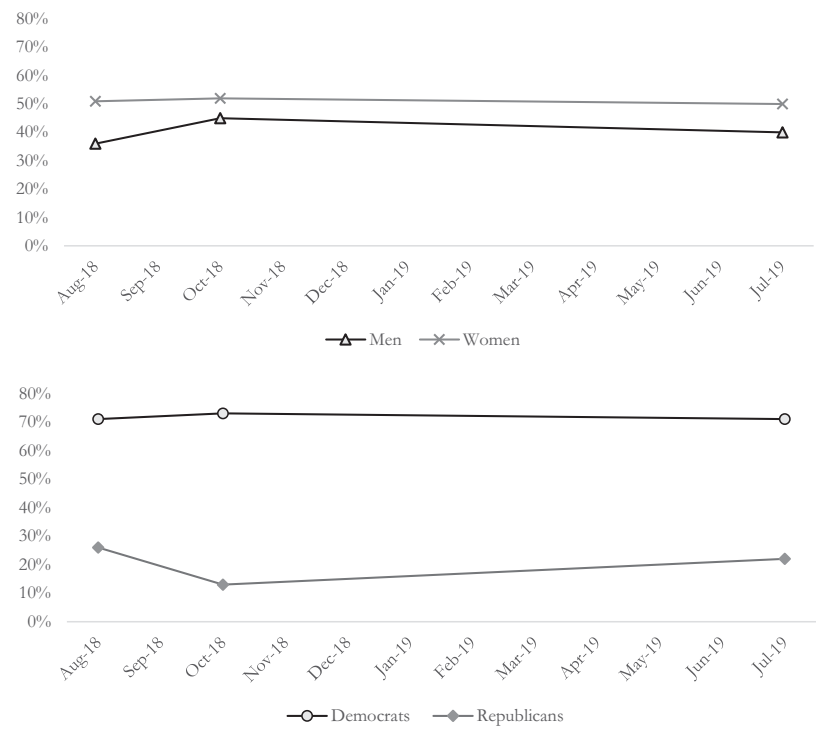
Differences between men and women in #MeToo evaluations resemble those for the other items—small gender gaps (see top pane of figure 6). The #MeToo favorability gap in 2018 is 10 points at the ends of the scale, with 53 percent of women at least somewhat favorable compared to 43 percent for men (see top pane of figure 5). Likewise, women in 2018 gave the #MeToo movement an average feeling thermometer rating of 56 degrees, while men rated the movement at 44 degrees on the 0 to 100 scale (see Supplementary Material).





**Figure 5. Partisan differences in evaluations of problem of sexual harassment, 1986–2018.** Question wording: *Harassment is a big problem*: There has been a lot of discussion lately about sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Do you think this is a big problem, somewhat of a problem, or not a problem at all? (A big problem.) *Harassment extremely or very serious*: In your view, is sexual harassment an extremely serious problem in this country today, very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious? (Extremely or very serious.) For additional information on question wording, see [figure 1](#) and [Supplementary Material tables 5.1–5.2](#).

As with views of sexual harassment overall, #MeToo evaluations are more polarized by party, as presented in the bottom pane of [figure 6](#). On a 4-point scale ranging from “very unfavorable” to “very favorable,” Democrats averaged near “favorable” (3) while Republicans averaged near “unfavorable” (2). The party differences on the 2018 ANES feeling thermometer are ever starker: 77 degrees for #MeToo from Democrats, on average, compared to 19 degrees for Republicans (see [Supplementary Material](#)). Comparing gender differences (in the top pane of [figure 6](#)) to party differences (in the bottom

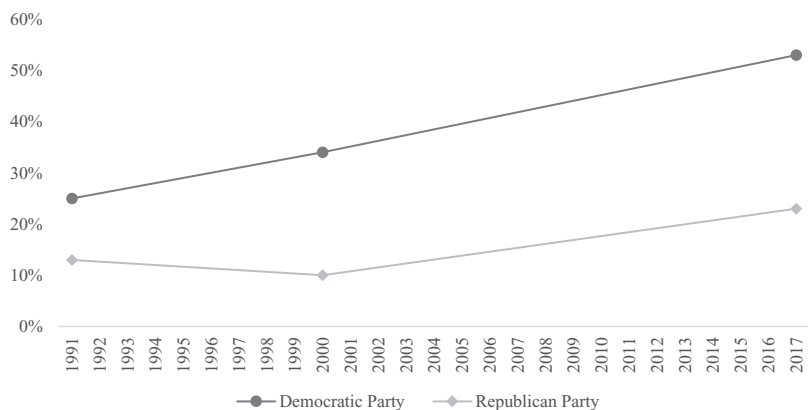


**Figure 6. Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the MeToo Movement?** By gender (top pane) and partisanship (bottom pane), 2018–2019. *Favorable view of #MeToo:* Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the MeToo Movement? Very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable. (Very or somewhat favorable.) For more details, see [figure 2](#) and [Supplementary Material tables 6.1–6.2](#).

pane of [figure 6](#)) confirms [Hansen and Dolan’s \(2020\)](#) work in which often partisanship overrides gender differences in views of #MeToo.

### Political Parties and Harassment

Recurring political scandals involving prominent politicians are one of the most common causes for a rise in sexual harassment’s public salience. Those scandals tend to polarize the issue by political views ([Holman and Kalmoe 2021](#)), and they frequently produce a sudden flurry of surveys with sexual harassment questions. Examining views of party reputations on sexual harassment allows us to see trends in the data, as shown in ([Figure 7](#)). We examine three surveys—fielded in 1991, 2017, and 2018—that ask respondents to



**Figure 7. Views of party ownership of sexual harassment.** Question wording: When it comes to ... dealing with the issue of sexual harassment ... which party do you think would do a better job—the Democratic party, the Republican party, both about the same, or neither? 10/1991: *NBC* ( $N = 750$ ); 12/2017: *NBC* ( $N = 900$ ); 11/2018: *Quinnipiac* ( $N = 1249$ ). See [Supplementary Material](#).

evaluate which party is better at handling the issue of sexual harassment. Moving from 1991 to 2017, the share of respondents choosing the Democratic Party increases, while the share choosing the Republican Party does not. In 2018, over half of respondents selected Democrats and under a quarter selected Republicans, with no “both” or “neither” options for the ambivalent, the indifferent, and the cynical. Other questions that were not fielded repeatedly over time confirm that Americans generally see the Democratic Party as better at handling sexual harassment (see [Supplementary Material](#)).

Questions about harassment by particular party leaders are usually asked during the brief period of news spotlighting the scandal. For example, questions about whether accusations against Clarence Thomas would disqualify him for the Supreme Court were asked repeatedly over a single-week period in October 1991; similarly, questions about accusations against Herman Cain cover a two-week period in October 2011. Unfortunately, these short time periods limit our ability to establish trends with these questions about specific perpetrators. We have assembled a list of all such questions in the [Supplementary Material](#) for the benefit of other researchers.

## Conclusion

The opinion trends presented here provide an opportunity to assess how attitudes about sexual harassment have changed over time. We found several key trends in these views. First, concern about sexual harassment has grown, with

increased recognition of sexual harassment as a major problem. That change in views of problem importance is plausibly due to combinations of short-term news events along with slower cultural changes over time. Second, societal efforts to reduce sexual harassment are prompting a growing backlash, with growing numbers who see no harassment problem at all. Third, we find relatively small gaps between men and women and larger gaps between Republicans and Democrats, and the gaps for both sets are larger in recent years. Socio-political worldview appears to be more influential in this area than social positions set by gender. Finally, the Democratic Party has consistently “owned” this issue over time, with the public increasingly rating the party as better able to handle sexual harassment than Republicans.

Although our purpose here is not to explain changing public views, several related trends could shape these views, including a general shift in Democratic Party’s policies advocating for women’s equality and increased women in the party (Ondercin 2017). It is also possible that accusations of misconduct by specific political leaders—and how the individuals and parties handled those accusations—also shape these views. For example, accusations against Trump and Kavanaugh may have contributed to more people viewing Democrats as better at handling the issue. At the same time, however, several accusations against Bill Clinton in the 1990s did not seem to dim views of the Democratic Party as better at handling the issue at that point.

Despite the many surveys fielded, the trend record remains decidedly anemic, particularly during times when sexual harassment is not made salient by the bad behavior of political leaders or broad social movements. As a result, surveys only tell us about trends in views of sexual harassment during those high-profile moments. If we want to use survey data to inform theories about approval of leaders, accountability around bad behavior, or changing gender norms, the incomplete data and large gaps stymie our ability to construct a complete record. For example, shifting partisan attitudes may reflect the 2016 election and Kavanaugh’s nomination, but they may also indicate broader partisan changes evolving slowly over the last quarter century (Ondercin and Lizotte 2020). In sum, broader, more consistent data would provide better insights into complex gendered attitudes in the United States.

## Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are contained in the [Supplementary Material](#) that accompanies this article.

## Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab034>.

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