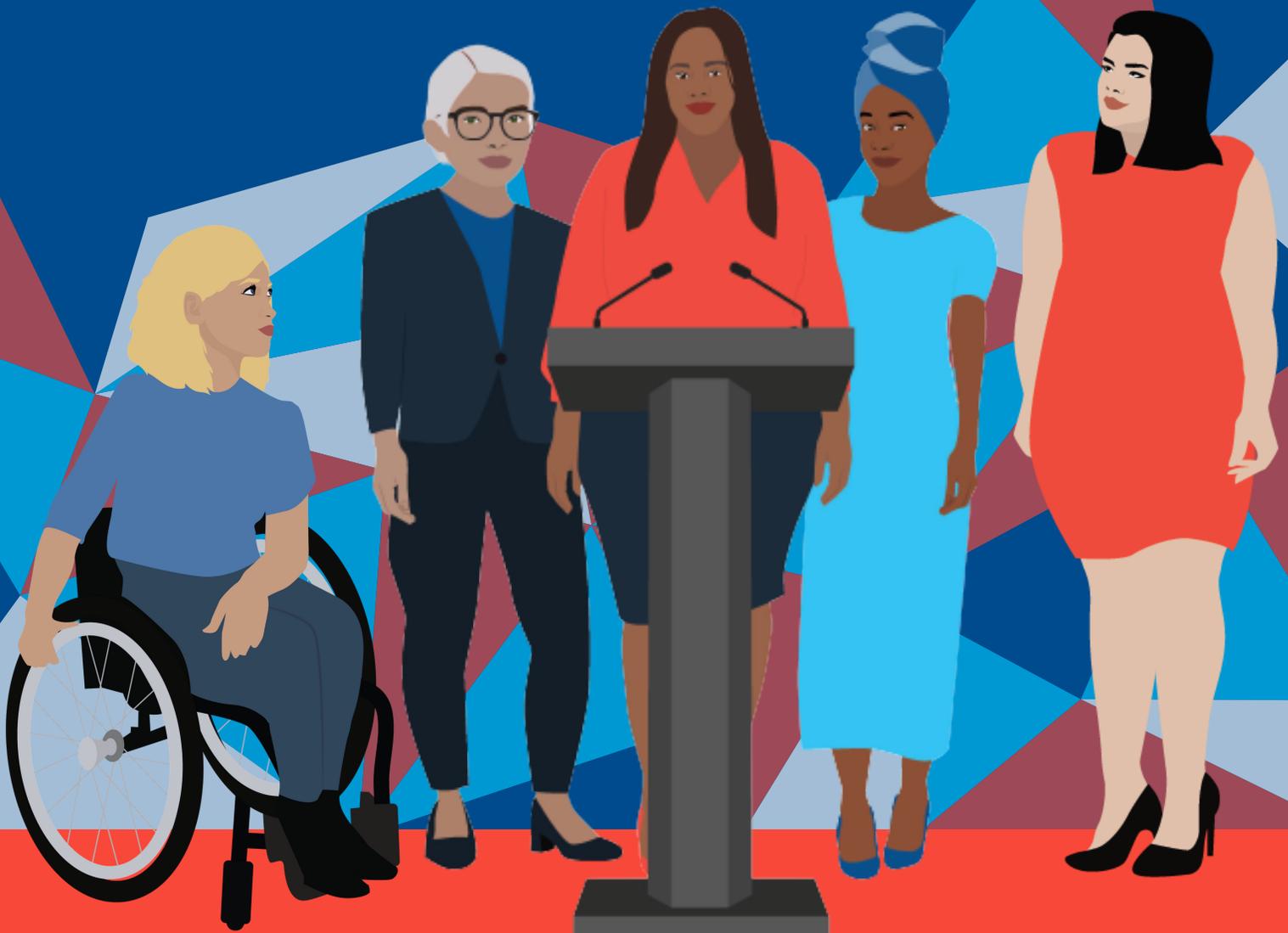


PUTTING SEXISM IN ITS PLACE ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL



Most voters recognize that women face sexism when running for elected office, and believe that candidates who address it confidently, calmly, and professionally demonstrate electability.

In the past several years, the culture and conversation around women running for office has changed dramatically.

A record number of women have run for and been elected to office, the #MeToo movement has revealed the proliferation of sexist treatment of women, and women voters across the country have shown increased political engagement.

With more women on the political stage, it is likely that these candidates will face sexism from any number of sources—opponents, voters, political observers, and social media. Examples of sexism include; double standards for women, such as scrutiny of how a candidate balances her campaign and her family life, and undue criticism of a woman’s appearance, her voice, or her clothing.

In addition to sexist incidents being offensive and possibly harmful to a candidate, media outlets are increasingly attuned to sexism in politics—pointing it out and introducing the potential for those incidents to turn into defining moments in a woman’s campaign.

Our research shows that a majority of voters acknowledge that sexism is a problem for women candidates, and they are broadly supportive of a candidate calling it out. For voters, calling out sexism is an opportunity for a candidate to demonstrate her strength and leadership. In voters’ eyes, responding to a sexist comment or situation is no different from a woman candidate responding to any other tough issues or challenges that could come up during a campaign.



KEY FINDINGS

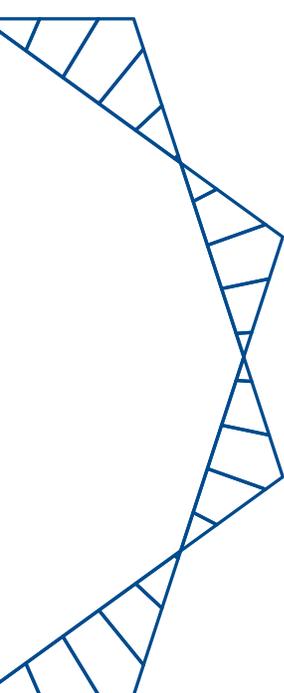
1 Voters view a woman candidate's response to sexism as a demonstration of her leadership and electability, not something that weakens the perception of her electability.

Respondents are concerned about women's electability, but most reject a false dichotomy that a woman must choose to address sexism or be electable. They want a leader who is electable not despite the fact that she addresses sexism, but because she has the leadership skills to address it well.



2 Across parties, voters are supportive of addressing serious incidents of sexism. It's the definition of what is serious that is associated with partisanship.

Our research confirms that voter support for a woman candidate's response relies on her constituency perceiving the incident as a problem. Especially if there is an absence of evidence or outright assault, Republicans, male, and older voters are less likely to perceive incidents as sexist, and are therefore less likely to support a response.



KEY FINDINGS

3

Voters are looking for a candidate to show leadership in her response with a calm, confident, and professional approach.

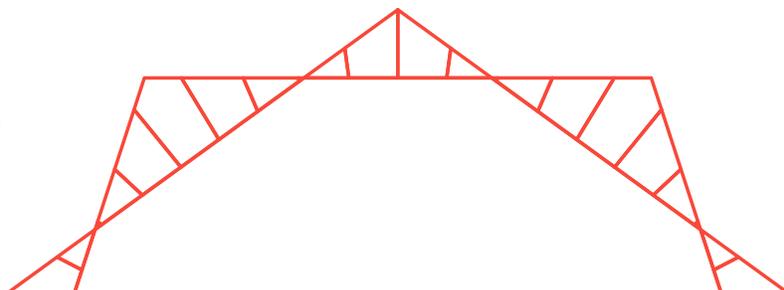
Our research shows that voters across the political spectrum want a leader who is true to her values and can also lead. Focusing on the job at hand, demonstrating strength, and leading with calm and confidence are the top qualities voters look for when a woman candidate responds to sexism.



4

Addressing sexism is supported when it's about standing up for fairness and equality for all women and girls.

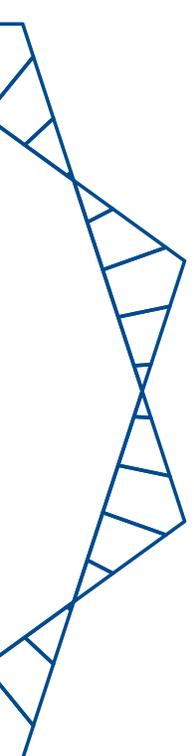
Centering responses on universal equality and fairness resonate most with respondents' personal experiences and their ideals for a fair and just world. Our research demonstrates that voters overwhelmingly want a leader who focuses on what's best for all women and girls, not just on what's best for her campaign.



WHEN DO VOTERS SEE SEXISM AS A PROBLEM FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES?

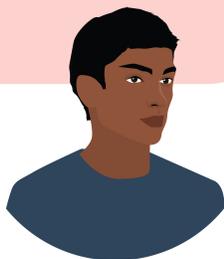
More than 3/4 of voters surveyed are at least somewhat concerned about the sexism that female candidates face. "Concern" rises primarily from perceptions about the treatment of women, the principles of systemic sexism, and electoral outcomes. The driving difference between those who are concerned about the sexism that female candidates face in general and those who are not concerned tends to be voters' personal experiences or identity. Voters who are concerned tend to cite personal experience, while those who do not tend to point to specific facts that they believe demonstrate that sexism is no longer a societal issue.

Respondents in their own words



"I don't believe it is true when I look at who the Speaker of the House is and the number is senators that are female not to mention the large number of female CEOs."

– Man, not concerned



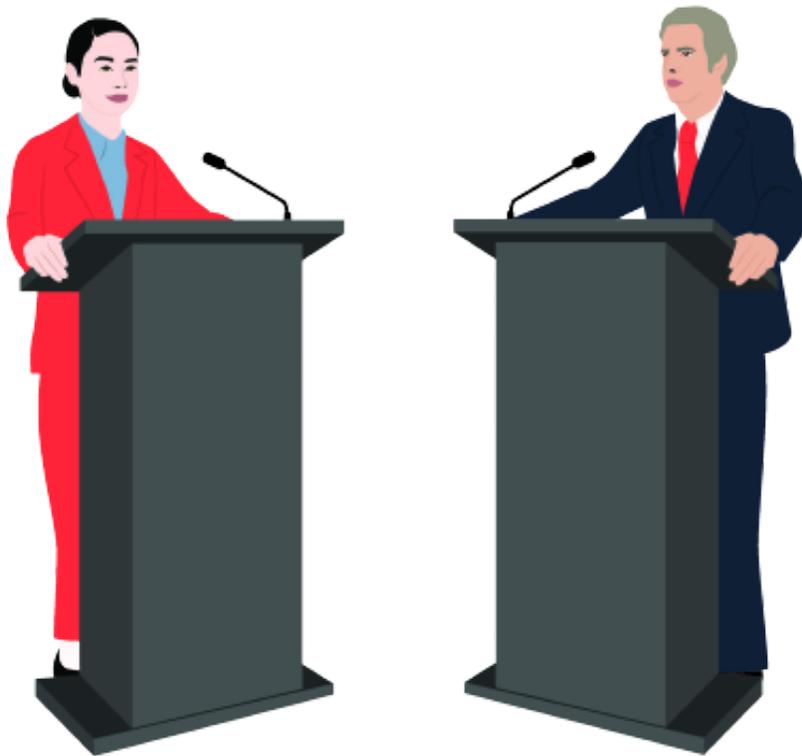
"I'm a 29-year-old male but I grew up in a house full of very strong and very intelligent women so to see what they have to go through and not have equality is upsetting."

– Man, very concerned

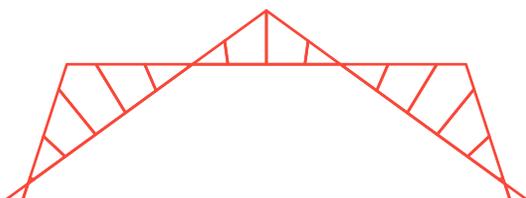


SHOULD A WOMAN CANDIDATE STAY SILENT ON SEXIST INCIDENTS?

There's a longtime misconception that silence is perceived as the strong response to a sexist incident—our research suggests otherwise. Silence can be perceived as a leader failing to address a serious problem and in fact can have negative consequences for a woman candidate. Ignoring or turning a blind eye to serious incidents of sexism can result in blowback since constituents want to see electability, leadership, and backbone.



When posed with hypothetical situations in which women candidates face sexism, 25% of respondents across scenarios say they would lose confidence in the candidate if she ignored the incident, citing her complacency and weakness in failing as a leader to address a serious problem. This is especially true with Democratic and younger voters.



VOTERS CARE ABOUT HOW A WOMAN CANDIDATE RESPONDING TO A SEXIST INCIDENT CAN IMPACT HER ELECTABILITY, BUT SEE A FALSE DICHOTOMY IN THE CANDIDATE HAVING TO CHOOSE ONE OR THE OTHER.

49% strongly or somewhat agree that women in politics need to consider their electability when deciding whether or not to address sexism.

57% say a candidate should prioritize winning the election over addressing sexism.

77% say a candidate should do what aligns best with her values over what's most supported by voters.

76% say a candidate should do what's best for all women and girls over what's best for her campaign.

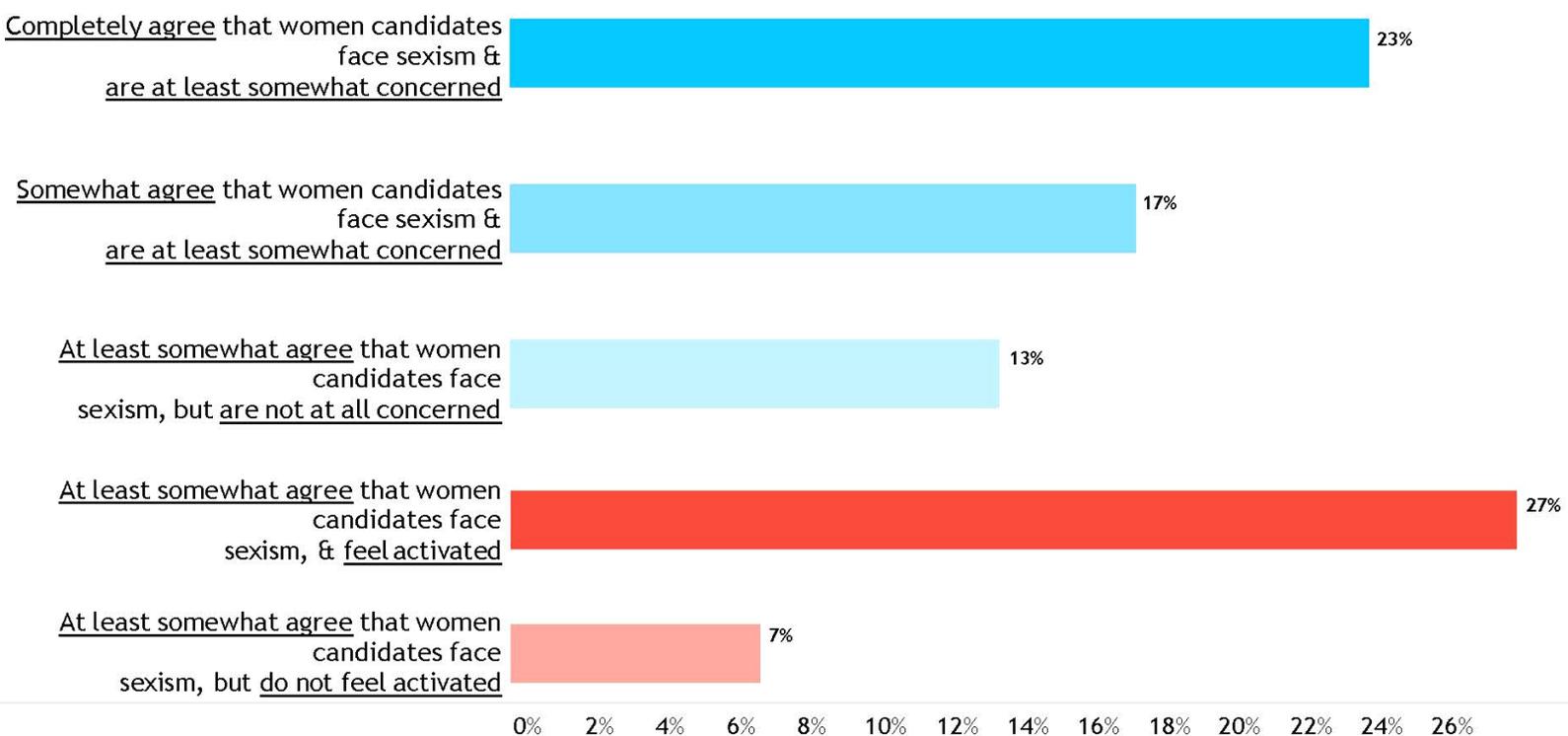
This demonstrates that voters reject the false dichotomy that a woman needs to address sexism or lead. Instead, standing up for herself calmly and confidently after facing sexism can demonstrate her strength, which we know from [previous Barbara Lee Family Foundation research](#) is important to voters. Voters think a woman candidate can show winning leadership qualities by staying calm and strong while addressing a situation.

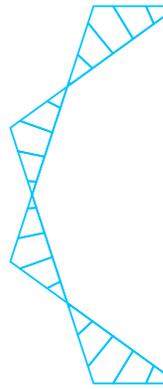
THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Voters' judgements about the way women candidates respond to sexism is viewed through the prism of the voters' own identity and experiences.

Connection to personal identity and experience is the driving differentiator between voters who agree that women running for office face sexism but aren't concerned or emotionally activated, and voters who agree and feel very concerned (+10Pts) and emotionally engaged (+20Pts). This suggests that a candidate using her personal narrative to establish a common "us" with shared concerns and experiences will increase active support for addressing sexist incidents from constituents.

References to personal identity:





TWO MAJOR FACTORS INFLUENCE VOTER SUPPORT FOR A WOMAN CANDIDATE SPEAKING OUT AGAINST SEXISM: PERCEIVED SEVERITY, AND WHAT'S AUTHENTIC TO THE CANDIDATE

1. IS THE SEXIST INCIDENT "SERIOUS"? (AND WHAT DEFINES "SERIOUS"?)

Across parties, voters are supportive of addressing "serious" incidents of sexism. However, the definition of serious is associated with partisanship. If there is an absence of evidence or outright assault, Republicans, older voters, and men are less likely to perceive an incident as "serious" and worthy of a response.

"HER OPPONENT IS SEXUALLY HARASSING HER."

– Female Democrat



"SHE IS BEING PERSONALLY DISRESPECTED, OR IF LAWS ARE IN PLACE THAT PROMOTE SEXIST VIEWS SHE SHOULD STAND UP FOR THE WOMEN SHE REPRESENTS."

– Female, Independent



"IT IS AN OVERT SUGGESTION OF QUID PRO QUO, AND SHE HAS DOCUMENTATION OF SUCH."

– Male, Independent



"IT IS BLATANT AND IF IT FOLLOWS A PATTERN FROM WHOEVER IS GUILTY OF SEXISM."

– Male, Republican



"COMMENTS ARE MADE ABOUT HER QUALIFICATIONS AND APPEARANCE."

– Male, Democrat



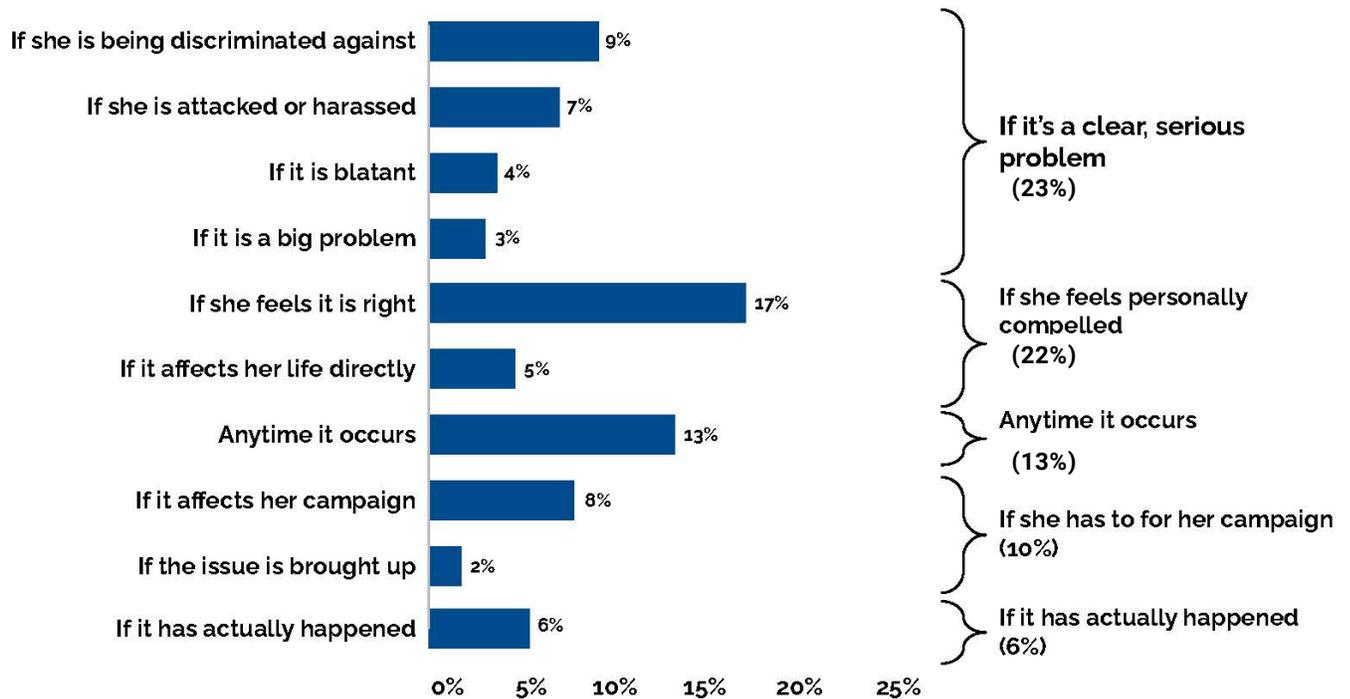
2. DOES THE CANDIDATE GENUINELY FEEL THAT THE SEXISM IS A PROBLEM?

Across voter segments, there is recognition that a woman candidate should act in a way that is genuine and authentic, and that if she truly believes there is a problem, she should address it.

The second most-cited theme in open-ended responses to explain when a woman running for office should address sexism is if she feels personally compelled.

In line with voters' desire that a candidate do what aligns with her values and what's best for women and girls, respondents in our research reference the importance of acting if she feels it is right because the unfairness is hurting her or others.

When asked in open-ended form how women candidates should respond to sexist incidents, the top responses cited were:



Making a connection between a sexist incident and the impact it has on women and girls strengthens voter perception that it's serious. If the incident is clearly serious and if the woman candidate feels authentically called to take action, then the majority of respondents are supportive of her addressing sexism.

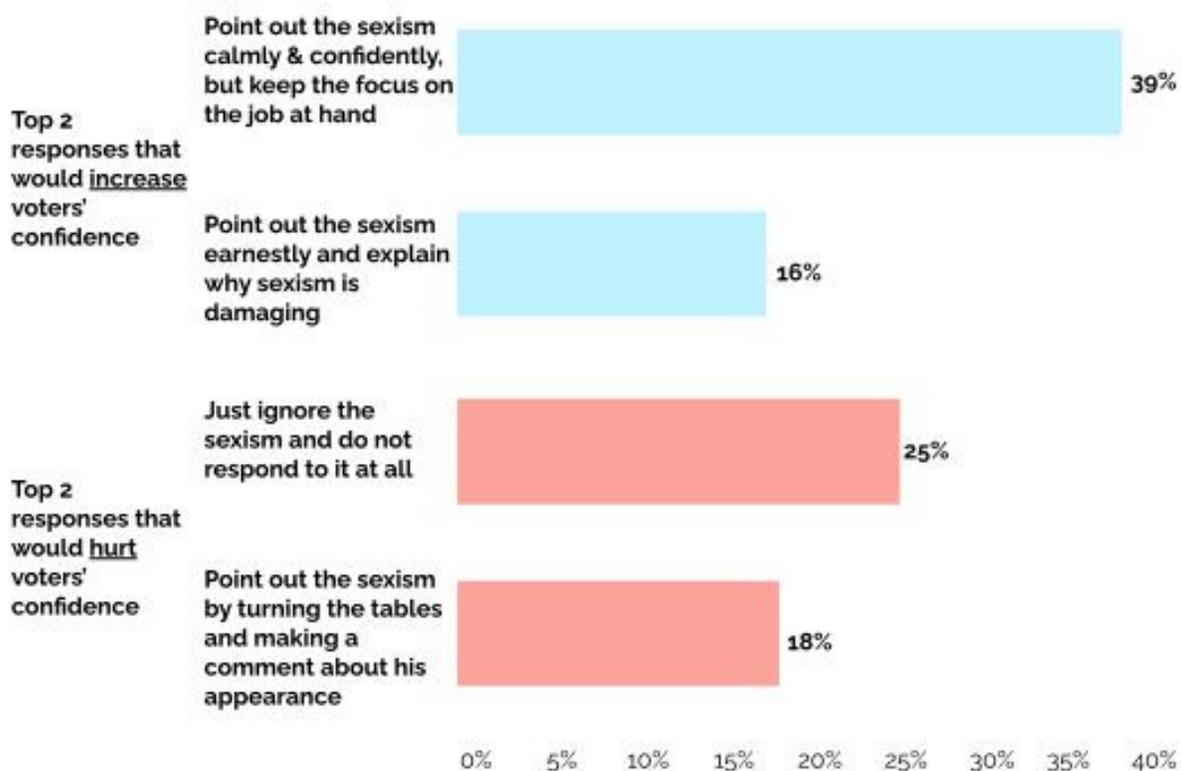
WHAT VOTERS PREFER: A CALM, CONFIDENT RESPONSE FROM THE CANDIDATE OVER ANGER OR RETALIATION

A majority of voters express a clear preference for a response from a woman candidate that demonstrates her strength, composure, and professional focus.

When presented with hypothetical scenarios involving women candidates facing sexism, respondents say a calm, confident response that stays focused on the job at hand would increase their support of the candidate by a significant margin.

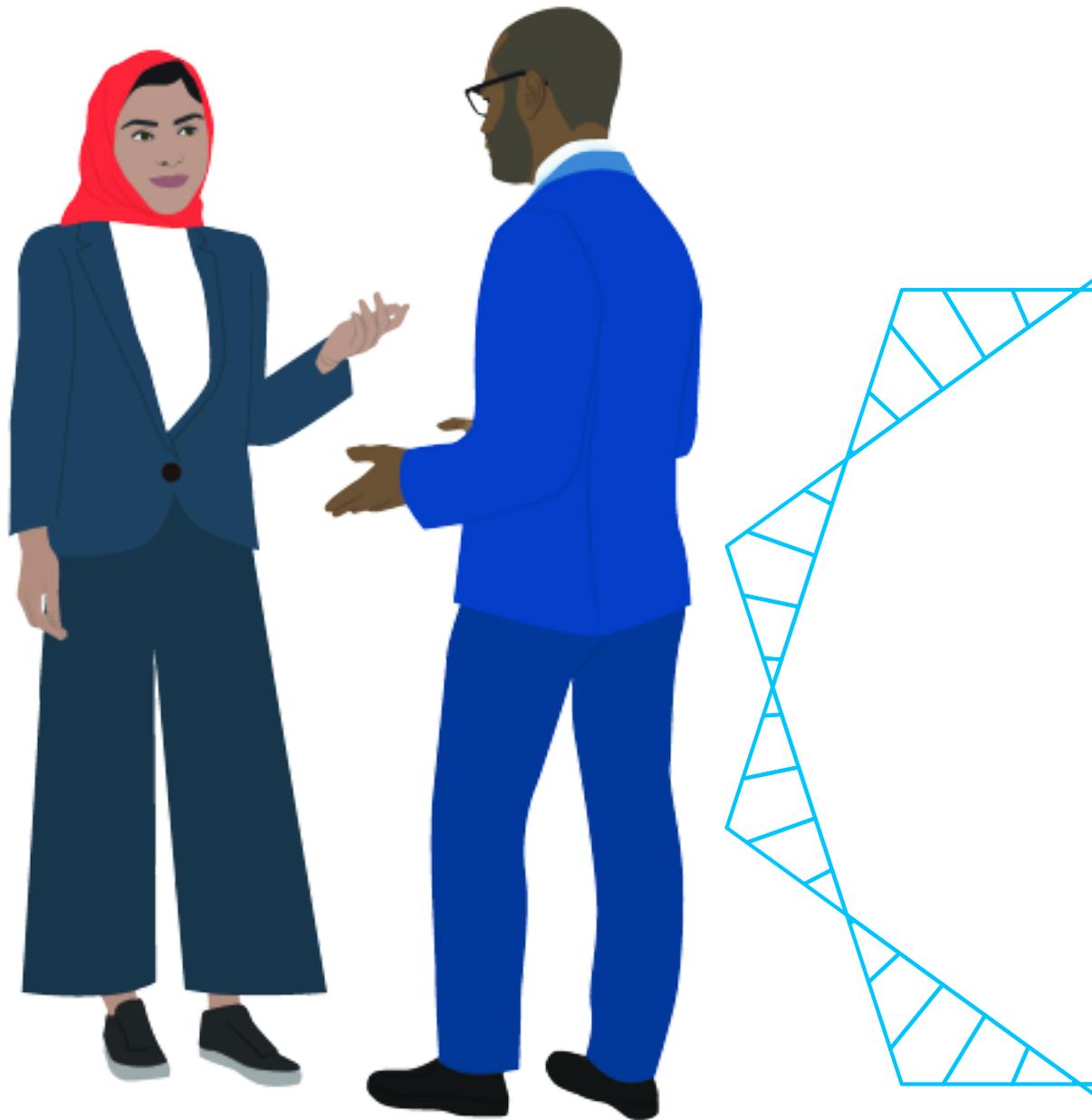
Respondents cite preferring a woman candidate's calm and confident approach because it demonstrates the strong leadership qualities needed in elected officials and because they believe it will be most effective in addressing sexism, which they don't think should be tolerated. For voters, the only thing worse than ignoring overt sexism is reacting by lashing out in anger or retaliation.

Top respondents that increase or hurt voters' confidence in voting for the candidate



When posed with hypothetical scenarios in which women candidates face sexism, ignoring sexism ranks first as the response that would most hurt respondents' confidence in the woman candidate, and retaliating or reacting with anger consistently ranked second. Ignoring overt sexism or responding angrily by retaliating or being emotional most hurts support for women candidates among voters who want to see her address the incident.

Voters recognize that politics requires thick skin and cite wanting a leader who can rise above what they could perceive as childish antics and unproductive attacks. Angry outbursts are seen as poor leadership, and retribution is seen as poor moral character.

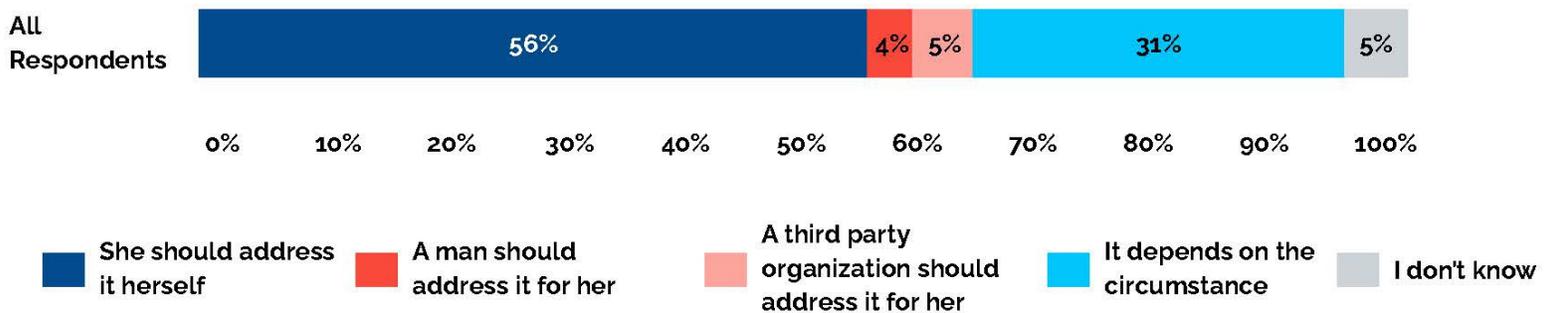


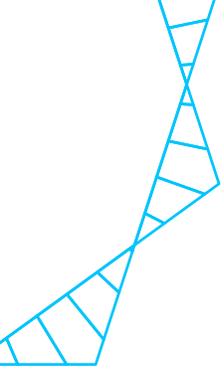
SHOULD OTHERS SPEAK OUT ABOUT A SEXIST INCIDENT ON THE WOMAN CANDIDATE'S BEHALF?

A strong majority of respondents say all women candidates, regardless of age or race, should respond as their own spokesperson and not have someone else speak for them. However, having a third party organization or another individual speak to amplify the candidate's message can serve to reinforce the severity of a sexist incident, particularly for younger women candidates and women of color.

Across political party, respondents want to see the woman candidate show leadership by having the strength and confidence to call out sexism on her own.

In general, should the woman address the sexism herself or should someone else address the sexism?





A WOMAN CANDIDATE'S RACE AND AGE CAN AFFECT THE WAY VOTERS PERCEIVE HER RESPONSE TO SEXISM BUT SHOULD NOT CHANGE THE OVERALL STRATEGY CANDIDATES EMPLOY WHEN ADDRESSING SEXIST INCIDENTS.

We tested eight hypothetical women candidates of various ages and racial identities who faced two hypothetical sexist scenarios. Voters say women candidates of all ages and races, in both scenarios, should call out serious incidents of sexism calmly and confidently if they feel personally compelled to do so.

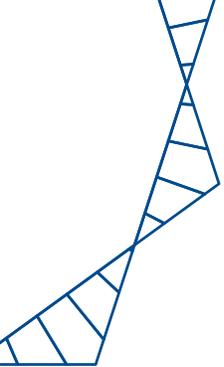
However, voters in our research indicated that a woman of color candidate could face an increased risk of backlash to speaking out, especially if voters perceive her response as angry or retaliatory. Some voters surveyed in this research used coded language to describe how they would judge women of color candidates who are responding to sexism. Voters are more likely to allow a white woman candidate more permission to express anger, hurt, or retaliation in her response.

VOTER REACTIONS TO WOMEN OF COLOR CANDIDATES:



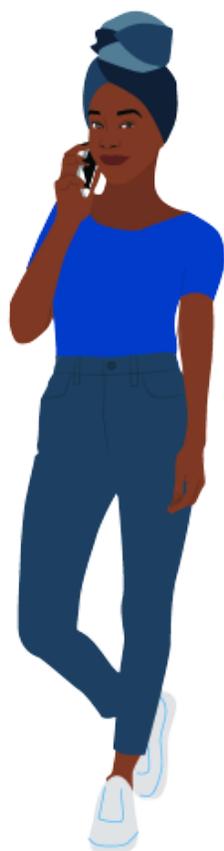
“The woman should always attempt to come across as ‘the better man’ and maintain a higher level of dignity.”

“By doing so [turning the tables] she belittles herself and becomes aggressive.”



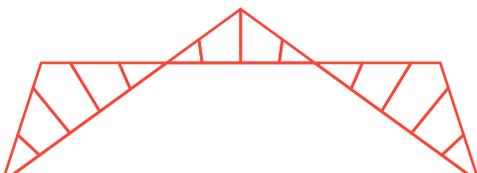
Younger women candidates, regardless of race, face increased scrutiny regarding their maturity, professionalism, and fitness for office. Respondents are more likely to say younger women candidates should avoid acting immature or childish in their responses and demonstrate they are ready to step into the role. This scrutiny is intensified for younger women of color, who voters say face a high potential for backlash if they appear angry or retaliatory, demonstrating that intersectionality plays a tangible role in voters' perception of candidates.

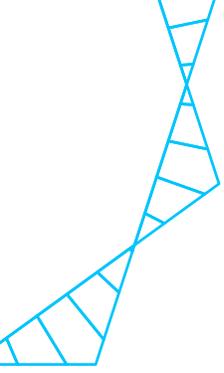
VOTER REACTIONS TO YOUNGER CANDIDATES:



"Politics should be above childish antics."

"In this instance, it's an issue of maturity, not sexism."





Older women face an increased expectation from respondents that they need to **demonstrate maturity**. Voters say she should rise above sexist treatment because she has more experience.

KEY REACTIONS TO OLDER CANDIDATES:



“She is mature enough to ignore the other candidate.”

“Women need to speak out but we are taken more seriously by men if we remain calm and keep the focus on our professionalism and talents.”

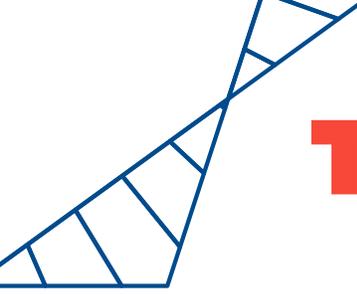
Despite increased scrutiny, speaking out in the face of sexism can still be the right choice for younger women and women of color candidates who feel compelled to do so, and risks can be mitigated through the strategic use of validators and a candidate’s ecosystem, who can amplify her response and validate the severity of the incident.

Regardless of age or racial identity, the top response that increases voters' confidence in a candidate is for her to respond to sexist incidents "calmly and confidently," and the top response that hurts confidence in a candidate is "turning the tables or retaliation." Voters are looking for candidates to show leadership and electability, and this is especially true for younger women and women of color candidates.

CONCLUSION

Voters view how a woman candidate responds to sexism as something that can demonstrate her leadership and electability, rather than something that could jeopardize it. Across political parties, voters believe women candidates of all ages and races should respond to serious incidents of sexism if they feel personally and authentically compelled. Voters say a woman candidate should be her own spokesperson, utilizing a calm and confident response and avoiding any appearance of anger or retaliation. Finally, a woman candidate should use a personal narrative to build a connection with voters, evoking universal values of equality and fairness to demonstrate that she is doing what's best for all women and girls.





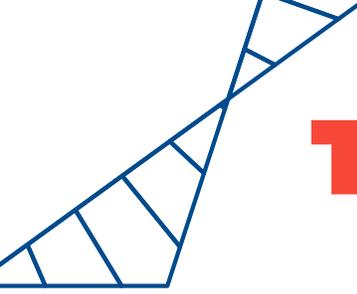
TIPS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES

Speak up about sexism if you genuinely feel you should speak up.

If you connect your response to your personal values, the authenticity will resonate with voters. Have confidence that 72% of survey respondents are concerned about the impact of sexism on female candidates and that they overwhelmingly support candidates who act authentically and in line with their values.

Consider perceptions of severity about the incident.

Voters perceiving a sexist incident as serious is the factor most correlated to supporting you in addressing or calling it out. Severity is somewhat subjective. Older, more conservative men need the most evidence and the clearest sense of wrongdoing to view an incident as sexist and severe. Voters are more likely to think an incident is severe if you are a younger candidate or a woman of color. Voters who are people of color are more likely to rate incidents as severe. If the incident isn't publicly known and widely viewed as serious, consider what evidence exists and who can effectively validate the severity. It's important for you to speak up for yourself. Utilizing third-party validators to amplify and validate the severity of the incident can be an extremely effective strategy to build an ecosystem of support.



TIPS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES

Consider the risk of staying silent.

Women candidates face risk of blowback if they are perceived to be ignoring or turning a blind eye to a sexist incident their constituents view as serious. Your constituents will support you speaking out if you do so in a way that shows your leadership, backbone, and electability. Because voters want leaders who stand up for what is right, standing up to serious unfairness and inequity for all women is expected, and women candidates risk backlash if they ignore a serious problem.

Be calm and confident and stay focused on the job at hand.

Being electable relies on your constituents perceiving you as a strong leader who can stay calm and keep focus on the job at hand. When you respond, do so calmly and confidently, striking a tone of professionalism that demonstrates the severity of the incident and also shows that you can handle any tough scenario.

Avoid angry outbursts or acts of retaliation that undermine your leadership.

Even if constituents view a sexist incident as a problem, they do not support a response that is retaliatory or emotional. Voters want a leader who can handle difficult situations with composure.

TIPS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES

Frame your response as being about equality and fairness.

Respondents want a woman leader who focuses on what's best for all women and girls, not just on what's best for her campaign. Make it about experiences all women have faced. Frame your response in shared experiences of inequality and unfairness that have universal appeal, rather than about you being mistreated.

Use validators strategically.

A majority of respondents want you to respond to sexism directly, rather than relying on others to speak on your behalf. However, many also say validators can step in if they amplify your message (vs. speaking over you). Validators can also help to build support about the severity of the incident that you experienced.



APPENDIX

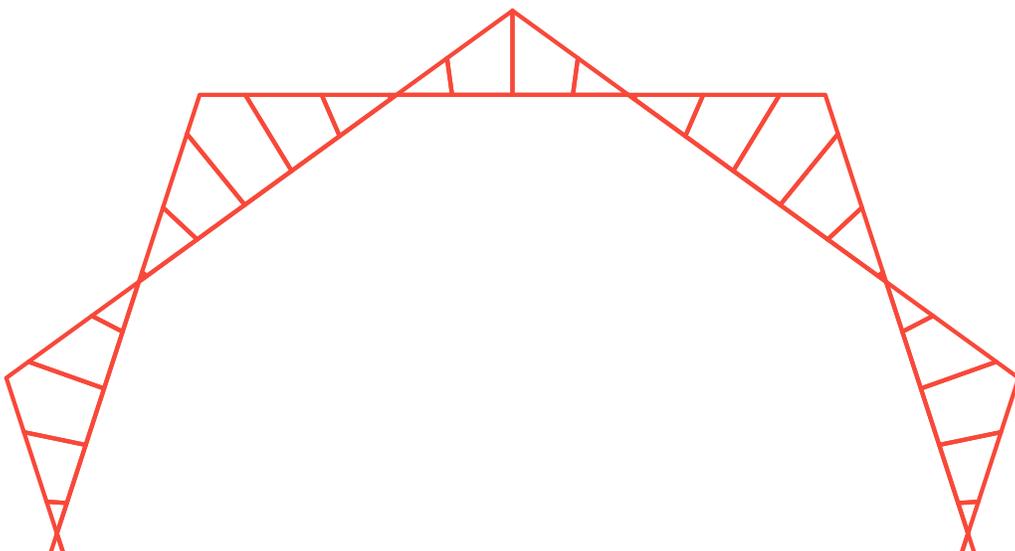
In conducting this research, the Barbara Lee Family Foundation offered two hypothetical scenarios for each candidate profile:

Scenario #1

A campaign posts a photo of a woman candidate wearing a dress at an evening event. Her opponent responds to the tweet by making a rude comment about her appearance and her body.

Scenario #2

While at a public debate, the host, who is a respected media personality, asks the only female candidate on stage a question about balancing work and family. No other candidates receive this question.



APPENDIX

White Candidate

Meet Candidate
Veronica Johnson
Age 50



Veronica should be calm, confident and professional in her response; however, she faces the least risk of backlash if she is angry or retaliatory compared to other candidates.

What type of response do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (41%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (22%)**

Backlash risk if Veronica responds? *Low*

There is a low backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem if she decides to speak out. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, an equal percentage of voters say a calm & confident response or ignoring would increase their confidence in her (25%).

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"It is necessary to be honest when you are hurt, especially when you are in public eye"

"She needs to let it all out and put it on the table"

"Bullies only back down when you give them a taste of their own medicine"

"I feel you should speak truth to power"

APPENDIX

AAPI Candidate

**Meet Candidate
Christine Chang
Age 50**



Voters indicate that Christine faces low risk of backlash if she is calm, confident, and professional in her response. Voters who view the incident as sexist report that she should avoid a retaliatory tone to maintain their support.

What type of response do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (38%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (19%)**

Backlash risk if Christine responds? *Low*

There is a low backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem if she decides to speak out. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, nearly an equal percentage of voters say a calm & confident response or ignoring would increase their confidence in her (22% to 25%).

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"Because as women we have been thrown and pushed around for to long"

"She should be direct. Speaking honestly maintains integrity."

APPENDIX

Latina Candidate

Meet Candidate
Rosalina Gonzalez
Age 50



Voters report that Rosalina risks losing support if she appears angry, hurt, or retaliatory. She also faces a backlash risk among those who don't see the incident as severe.

**What type of response
do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?**

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (39%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (20%)**

Backlash risk if Rosalina responds? *Moderate*

If she decides to speak out, there is a moderate backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, 1.5 times more respondents prefer that she ignore the incident vs. respond calmly & confidently.

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"Taking the high road is a better choice. It makes her more human to the people she is trying to get to vote for her"

"Don't become accusatory, listening will halt"

APPENDIX

Black Candidate

Meet Candidate
Nadine Frederick
Age 50



Voters report the highest risk of backlash for Nadine. Voters say they prefer a response that demonstrates dignity and composure.

What type of response do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (39%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (16%)**

Backlash risk if Nadine responds? *Highest*

If she decides to speak out, there is a relatively high backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, 2 times more respondents prefer that she ignore vs. respond calmly & confidently.

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

It's more appropriate to call the interview out while being classy"

"The woman should always attempt to come across as "the better man" and maintain a higher level of dignity"

"People should not be rude to others"

APPENDIX

Younger White Candidate

**Meet Candidate
Veronica Johnson
Age 28**



Voters prefer that younger Veronica respond in a way that clearly demonstrates her confidence, maturity, and fitness for public office. Calm and professionalism are key.

**What type of response
do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?**

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (39%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (20%)**

Backlash risk if Veronica responds? *Low*

There is a low backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem if she decides to speak out.. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, nearly an equal amount of respondents prefer a calm, confident response as those who want her to ignore it (24% to 25%).

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"To me, job focus would show she is a serious adult."

"Politics should be above childish antics."

"In this instance, it's an issue of maturity, not sexism."

APPENDIX

Older White Candidate

**Meet Candidate
Veronica Johnson
Age 65**



Voters expect Older Veronica to be diplomatic and demonstrate maturity. Voters want to see her ability to rise above, stay focused on the job, and avoid anger.

**What type of response
do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?**

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (37%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (22%)**

Backlash risk if Veronica responds? *Low*

If she decides to speak out, there is a low backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem. Among those who do not view either sexist scenario as a problem, nearly 2 times as many respondents say she should respond calmly & confidently compared to ignoring the issue.

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"Women need to speak out but we are taken more seriously by men if we remain calm and keep the focus on our professionalism and talents."

"She is mature enough to ignore the other candidate."

"It would cause a scene and not address the real issue."

APPENDIX

Younger Black Candidate

**Meet Candidate
Nadine Frederick
Age 28**



Younger Nadine faces the highest risk of backlash as a young woman of color. Voters say they prefer a calm, professional, and strong response, and her supporters can validate the severity of the incident.

**What type of response
do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?**

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (37%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (17%)**

Backlash risk if Nadine responds? *Highest*

If she decides to speak out, there is a relatively high backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem. A higher comparative percentage say she should ignore the incident rather than respond, compared to both older Black candidates and younger white candidates (10-15%).

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"By expressing anger and hurt, it could make her look emotional and weak."

"Showing anger sometimes shows immaturity."

"Responding to bad behavior with the same bad behavior is counterproductive and childish."

APPENDIX

Older Black Candidate

**Meet Candidate
Nadine Frederick
Age 65**



Older Nadine has more room to express her anger/hurt compared to her younger counterpart, but voters still report backlash risk if she appears retaliatory.

**What type of response
do voters say would increase or hurt their confidence?**

Most increase voter confidence: **Calmly & Confidently (37%)**

Most hurt voter confidence: **Turning Tables on him (22%)**

Backlash risk if Nadine responds? *Relatively High*

If she decides to speak out, there is a relatively lower backlash risk among those who do not view the incident as a problem compared to her younger Black counterpart, but a higher backlash risk compared to both her younger white and older white counterparts.

The following quotes represent a cross-section of voters surveyed:

"Responding calmly will annoy the opponent more and she'll look more classy."

"It would be hypocritical to do the same thing to him. She doesn't get a pass."

"Going on the defensive makes her look petty and as someone who worries more about getting revenge than being a successful candidate."

METHODOLOGY

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation commissioned Avalanche Insights to produce actionable insight for women candidates and their supporters about how to address sexism on the campaign trail. These insights are based on three rounds of deep Listening Surveys. An Avalanche Listening Survey combines open-and closed-ended questions to deeply understand how people relate to issues. Surveys are administered on both web and mobile using a variety of third-party partners. Survey respondents are recruited in a popular online marketplace and demographically adjusted to match the registered voter population along with age, gender, education, ethnicity, and census region using iterative proportional fitting.

The first round was fielded to a sample of 5,012 representative of registered voters, nationally, between August 27-28, 2020.

The second round was fielded to a sample of 10,043 representative of registered voters, nationally, between September 30-Oct 1, 2020.

The third round was fielded to a sample of 8,752 representative of registered voters, nationally, between December 4-6, 2020.

Full findings can be found in the appendix.

