

# When the Personal Becomes Political: Sexual Assault and Women's Political Engagement

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## Abstract

Canonical feminist texts describe how some women have found political meaning in their identities as sexual assault survivors. Drawing on interviews, we develop a theory about whether, how, and for whom sexual violence compels women's political participation. For some women, sexual violence shatters victims' core beliefs in ways that facilitate personal growth and resilience. This process is often facilitated by solidaristic ties with other survivors, through which women crystallize their interests around the right to be free from violence and their demands for state responsiveness. We test implications of our theory with an original survey of American women. Women who report having experienced sexual assault or rape report higher levels of political participation than otherwise similar women. This association is stronger among Democratic women and those with higher socioeconomic status, and weaker among Black women. Although reactions vary, participating in politics allows some survivors to turn their pain into purpose.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, political participation, women's movements, gender and politics

**Short title:** When the Personal Becomes Political

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst.

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

Research funding was provided by Vanderbilt University, UC Berkeley, and the APSA Women and Politics Section Small Grants Fund. Human Subjects approval was granted by Vanderbilt University (#211756) and by UC Berkeley (#17656).

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When something is taken from you, what's left behind has a purpose.

– Gretchen Whitmer, Governor of Michigan (2024)

Sexual violence is widespread. In the United States, more than half of women have experienced sexual assault, and one in four women has experienced completed or attempted rape (Center for Disease Control, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Feminist scholars have long described how sexual assault is about power—a tool of subordination meant to keep women in an inferior social position to men (Brownmiller, 1975). The gender hierarchy is further reinforced through institutional or state responses to sexual violence, which tend to be paltry or, when they do exist, may re-traumatize survivors (Richie, 2012; Htun and Weldon, 2010, 2018; Lake and Hartman, 2025). Sexual assault also harms an individual's mental and physical health and often leads to anxiety and depression (Ullman, 2014). All of these occurrences suggest that sexual violence victimization should depress women's political participation.

Yet, many journalistic accounts show how some women, rather than withdrawing from politics, have been mobilized by their victimization experiences. In one high-profile example, in 2013, Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz carried a 50-pound mattress around campus to protest how the university handled her sexual assault case, which became her entry into anti-rape activism (Smith, 2014). Indeed, throughout recent American history, many women have described how their experiences of sexual violence spurred their activism and political participation more broadly, including, at times, running for political office (see, e.g., INCITE!, 2006; Zacharek, Dockterman and Sweetland Edwards, 2017; Whitmer, 2024).

Despite canonical feminist texts and more recent journalistic accounts describing women's political activism as a form of resistance to pervasive sexual violence, empirical research on this connection is scarce. With notable exceptions (see e.g., Schwarz, Baum and Cohen, 2020; Lake and Hartman, 2025; Htun and Jensenius, 2022), most research on sexual violence by political scientists has examined conflict-related sexual violence during war (Cohen, 2018;

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<sup>1</sup>Men, non-binary, and trans individuals also experience sexual violence. In this work, we focus on the experiences of cis women, but we stress that this focus is not meant to minimize the prevalence of sexual violence among other groups.

Wood, 2009) or sexual exploitation in war-torn areas (Karim and Beardsley, 2016), rather than its pervasiveness across societies, including in the Global North.

However, adjacent research hints at the theoretical underpinnings of a possible connection between sexual assault victimization and political participation. Empirical studies suggest that violent or otherwise traumatic experiences can compel increased political engagement among survivors (Bateson, 2012; Marsh, 2023; Blattman, 2009).<sup>2</sup> In work most closely related to our own, research examining conflict-related sexual violence finds that victimization experiences can instigate women’s collective mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia (Berry, 2018), Colombia (Kreft, 2019), and Sri Lanka (González and Traunmüller, 2024). Related work finds that households with survivors of sexual violence engage more in community politics than other households in war-affected areas in Sierra Leone (Koos, 2018) and the DR Congo (Lindsey and Koos, 2025; Koos and Lindsey, 2022).

Taken together, this scholarship supports qualitative accounts from feminist political history: experiences of sexual violence may compel some women to engage in politics in new ways. We draw on interdisciplinary work to theorize how sexual violence may affect survivors’ subsequent political engagement. Throughout our theorizing, we rely on a series of semi-structured interviews that we conducted with sexual assault survivors and with members of community groups that seek to combat sexual violence (e.g., rape crisis centers and violence prevention centers). These accounts often reflect the survivors’ post-traumatic growth; their resilience and agency in the wake of trauma. This growth is facilitated by shared narratives that victims form with other survivors, allowing them first to understand and then articulate their demands for more state responsiveness to sexual violence prevention.

Throughout, we highlight how individual responses are complex and informed by the broader circumstances and the community in which the survivor is embedded. Using an intersectional lens, we also theorize the role of three variables that could moderate the association between sexual assault victimization and political engagement: partisanship,

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<sup>2</sup>Notably, in Bosnia, Hadzic and Tavits (2019) find that war victimization experiences spur political participation among men, but not women.

socioeconomic status (SES), and race/ethnicity. Broadly, we consider how these variables affect the likelihood that our theorized mechanisms—post-traumatic growth and demand and interest crystallization—are present across different groups.

We test the implications of our theory through an original survey of approximately 2,000 American women. Underlining how widespread sexual violence is for American women, when guaranteed anonymity, we find that over sixty percent of respondents in our sample report experiencing an incident that meets the clinical definition of sexual assault or rape. We also find strong support for our theory. Across eight forms of political participation—including protesting, signing a petition, and donating money to a political candidate—survivors of sexual assault report higher levels of participation than otherwise similar women. These results are substantively meaningful (a third of a standard deviation on a composite index). We also measure whether respondents report participating in political activities directly related to women’s rights. When gender-specific political action is the outcome variable, the association we study is strongest. For many survivors, advocating for women’s rights is a pathway to a more active political life.

We find that the connection between an assault experience and higher levels of political engagement appears across party affiliations, but partisanship moderates the size of the association; it is strongest among Democrats. The strength of the association also increases with higher levels of SES. On race and ethnicity, we find statistically significant associations for white women, Asian women, Latina women, and mixed-race women. For Black women, the association is about half the magnitude of that for other groups and falls outside the bounds of statistical significance. We find that victimization experiences are less mobilizing for Black women, Republican women, and women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Our findings underscore that personal experiences mobilize groups of women differently, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities in political participation.

We uncover a relationship that, at first blush, is counterintuitive: rather than withdrawing in the wake of sexual violence, for some survivors, political action is a way to turn their pain into purpose. Research on violence against women typically looks at state responses

(Htun and Weldon, 2018; Htun and Jensenius, 2022; Lake and Hartman, 2025), the drivers of violence (Karim and Beardsley, 2016), and variation in reporting (Green, Wilke and Cooper, 2020; Htun et al., 2022). We know much less about the political consequences of violence against women, particularly in the Global North. In building our theory, we bridge the rich scholarship on victimization experiences, particularly comparative work on conflict-related sexual violence, with the equally rich literature on gender in American political behavior. For the former, we examine how findings emerging from deeply war-torn areas resonate in a much different context. We find remarkable parallels that highlight survivors' agency across settings. For the latter, we recount an underexplored driver of women's political participation—or how and when the personal becomes political.

## A Grounded Theory of Survivor Reactions

We build our theory on research from political science, sociology, and clinical psychology, among other disciplines. We also ground our theory in a series of interviews we conducted over several years. In the first round of interviews, the first co-author (Chojnacki) recruited participants using a snowball sample of women who identified as sexual assault survivors. This effort resulted in sixteen interviews with women across different parts of the United States (all conducted over Zoom). In the second round of interviews, the second co-author (Clayton) connected with community groups engaged in sexual violence prevention in a major urban area. Using snowball recruitment methods, we interviewed directors, staff, volunteers, and caseworkers from these groups, many of whom themselves identified as survivors of sexual violence. Detailed information on participant recruitment, sample characteristics, and the survivor interview protocol can be found in Section A of the Supporting Information (SI).

Extreme care was taken to minimize the risks of participating in the interviews. To prepare, the first author (Chojnacki) took a course on trauma intervention through the Human Development and Counseling Program at the author's university, designed to train therapists who intend to work with trauma survivors. This background informed the structure

and practices carried out during the interviews. All participants were aware that the study focused on how personal experiences of sexual assault influence political behavior, ensuring that no deception occurred. All conversations were recorded and transcribed after the informed consent process and introductions, and then analyzed for key themes. In addition to interviews, our theorizing is informed by reading more than 100 public accounts from sexual assault survivors, typically memoirs or journalistic sources (e.g. INCITE!, 2006; Zacharek, Dockterman and Sweetland Edwards, 2017), which we draw on at times to demonstrate narrative consistency across accounts.

Based on existing theory across disciplines, our interviews, and public testimonies, we develop a theory about whether, how, and for whom the experience of sexual violence compels women's political participation. At its core, our theory bridges work from the victimization literature in political science to work on trauma responses from sexual violence in clinical psychology. We theorize that for some women, the experience of sexual violence shatters their core beliefs in ways that facilitate personal growth and resilience. This process is often facilitated by ties of unity and support that victims form with other survivors, which allows women to crystallize their interests around the right to be free from violence and their demands for state attention to this issue.

## Multiple Reactions in a Traumatized Population

Clinical work on sexual violence emphasizes that there are multiple trajectories within the traumatized population (Ullman, 2014). For some women, a victimization experience results in social withdrawal, while others, over time, derive political meaning from it. This duality in experiences emerged in our interviews with anti-violence practitioners, as one described:

[Survivors] can go down one of two paths: one where they just can't get up, or one where the only reason they get up is to create some justice and space in the world. That's how they make sense out of it. This is the women that I know.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Interviewee 19, interviewed by second co-author, 12/13/24, in-person, Berkeley, CA

Building on the idea that survivors can respond in multiple ways, we first recount how a victimization experience can be demobilizing. Clinical psychology research shows that many women have a hard time processing rape and try to avoid thinking about their experiences to protect their mental state, a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Strauss Swanson and Szymanski, 2020). This can be compounded by feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with sexual assault that are not typically present in victims of other crimes (Weiss, 2010). Women are also not immune to internalizing rape myths (false beliefs about sexual assault) that make it difficult for them to understand that what happened to them was a crime (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut and Johnson, 2018). Distress and anxiety are also common reactions to sexual trauma, which can lead to social avoidance and withdrawal as coping mechanisms, resulting in decreased political participation (Ullman, 2014).

Our review of the clinical literature suggests that variation in survivor responses stems from whether survivors have the tools and capacity to process their trauma. The women whom we interviewed for this study—survivors, activists, and clinicians—all had, at least to some degree, processed their trauma. To conduct this study ethically, we were forthright about our topic; thus, those who responded to our interview requests were able to recount their experiences, an essential step in post-traumatic growth.

Despite this, several women we interviewed did not see politics as an outlet for their processed trauma. Typically, this was because they did not see a connection between their victimization experiences and society's treatment of women. For example, some of the women we interviewed did not blame rape culture for their assaults and instead focused on more personal causes, such as the moral failings of the perpetrator or the ways families choose to raise their sons. Although no woman blamed herself, two interviewees described their experiences as bad things that happened to them rather than as something rooted in systemic oppression. For example, one woman recounted:

I know a lot of people want to mix that [sexual violence] with politics, but I don't. Those things don't interact with my political beliefs... I think in the end, it's everyone's choice, and you have to genuinely want to raise your own kids and

not let a tablet raise them.<sup>4</sup>

Another respondent described feeling very neutral towards politics. Although she told us that she was the only one on her street who did not put up a Trump yard sign in the 2016 election, she noted that she tried to avoid politics altogether. She described how she viewed the solutions to sexual violence as rooted in the family and community. She recounted her involvement in her children's PTA and her church as ways to support young people in her community, connecting this work to her own experience of sexual assault as a teenager.<sup>5</sup> We return to these observations below, but first consider the ways in which a victimization experience can affect survivors differently, as a form of mobilization.

## Post-Traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth is the idea that personal development can result from traumatic experiences or major life crises that deeply challenge an individual's assumptions about the world (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004; Bateson, 2012). Rather than withdrawing from daily life, many survivors of violent trauma show signs of resilience and personal growth (Blattman, 2009). Political scientists have used this concept most often in studies of war victimization. This work finds that those who experienced wartime violence show greater community leadership, civic participation, and, in general, more prosocial behaviors, such as empathy, than comparable individuals who were less affected by war (Gilligan, Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2013; Hartman and Morse, 2020). A growing body of work examines this occurrence within the context of conflict-related sexual violence and finds compelling evidence of this association among wartime sexual violence survivors across a diverse set of cases (Berry, 2018; Lindsey and Koos, 2025; González and Traunmüller, 2024; Koos, 2018; Kreft, 2019).

Outside of political science, there is extensive literature on post-traumatic growth as a reaction to sexual assault (see, e.g., Ullman, 2014; Joseph and Linley, 2008). Post-traumatic

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<sup>4</sup>Interviewee 10, interviewed by first author, 1/25/22, Zoom.

<sup>5</sup>Interviewee 7, interviewed by first author, 2/9/22, Zoom

growth occurs when survivors reconstruct shattered core beliefs and redefine their worldview (Lindstrom et al., 2013). This reaction is common among victims of sexual assault. For example, in a clinical psychology study, Cole and Lynn (2010) found that 74 percent of rape survivors reported post-traumatic growth. Importantly, research in this area emphasizes that post-traumatic growth often occurs alongside mental health struggles, such as PTSD.

Survivors can make meaning of their trauma through working to help other survivors. Many community leaders we interviewed described choosing their careers for exactly these reasons. As one community organizer recounted:

In the pain, in the hurt, in the wound, comes opportunity for growth and for healing. And then, the healing becomes the assignment. My assignment now is to become a witness to transformation and healing . . . Those are the places and spaces that I have been called to based on my own places of wounding.<sup>6</sup>

This desire to create change was a consistent theme in our interviews. Many women described the political action they took in the wake of their assaults. As one woman told us:

After I figured out that [the police] were never going to call me again, I was like, no, I am taking this into my own hands. We need to expose these men, and what they do. . . Some days I post only resources and stories from other survivors and links to women's shelters and information about human trafficking. . .<sup>7</sup>

For many survivors we interviewed, politics became a way to express their resilience and personal growth. In our interviews, women described participating in a wide range of political activities that emerged from increased concern about the rights of women and girls. These actions included voting, discussing politics with friends, protesting, posting on social media, attending town hall meetings, and volunteering at an abortion clinic. For many women, this connection was clear. As one participant stated clearly: "I think [the assault] has only enhanced the way I understand and engage with politics."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Interviewee 19, interviewed by second co-author, 12/13/24, in-person, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>7</sup>Interviewee 3, interviewed by first author, 12/8/21, Zoom.

<sup>8</sup>Interviewee 8, interviewed by first author, 12/5/21, Zoom.

Political science theories that draw on post-traumatic growth as it relates to crime victimization often describe how this process unfolds through the solidaristic ties that survivors form with each other or with the broader community to which the violence is directed. When survivors come together with others who have suffered similar crimes, they can form solidaristic bonds and construct shared causal narratives that give new meaning to what happened to them (Bateson, 2012, 572).

The identity of being a survivor made many of the women we spoke to feel connected to other women. For instance, one woman told us about her victimization experience: “It helped me to identify as one of many. It helped me to say, I’m not the only one.”<sup>9</sup> This is also a common theme in survivors’ public accounts. For example, actor Gabrielle Union describes the origins of her anti-rape activism as follows: “Every time I talk about being raped, someone will come up to me in a bathroom or an amusement park and say, ‘Me too.’ In that instant, I am completely connected” (Gabrielle Union, quoted in Aiello, 2017).

This narrative fits well with feminist accounts from earlier in American history. Scholars have documented how consciousness-raising groups that began in the early 1970s enabled women to build solidarity with other survivors and how these connections were powerful and politically meaningful. For example, in a classic text, Bevacqua (2000, 52) describes that in the 1970s: “many women were led into the anti-rape movement precisely because they had survived rape: political action was one way to transform a traumatic experience into something more empowering.” Several women we interviewed echoed a similar sentiment, describing how their sense of connection with other survivors compelled them to speak out on behalf of this group. One woman recounted:

I make myself very vocal. I think that the people who can, should speak up because I know there are so many women out there who are like me who just don’t have the strength, and that’s okay.<sup>10</sup>

Our theory suggests that bonds of solidarity with survivors facilitate post-traumatic

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<sup>9</sup>Interviewee 1, interviewed by first author, 12/14/21, Zoom.

<sup>10</sup>Interviewee 2, interviewed by first author, 12/9/21, Zoom.

growth and political meaning-making; however, this can occur in multiple, sometimes subtle ways. For example, while solidaristic networks are likely stronger when formed in person, a similar effect might be achieved by joining online communities or engaging with discourses that gain widespread circulation, such as during the #MeToo movement.

## Interest and Demand Crystallization

For some women, post-traumatic growth can also facilitate a new awareness of structural violence. This awareness may crystallize how women see, perhaps for the first time, their structural interest in being free from gender-based violence. For some women, sexual assault can act as a catalytic event in which the survivor sees what happened to her as part of a larger political system that oppresses women. Related to the importance of solidaristic ties, scholarship on this topic often highlights the critical role of women's groups in facilitating interest crystallization (knowing what one wants) and demand crystallization (knowing what to ask for), fostering survivors' collective efficacy and encouraging them to mobilize for political change (Prillaman, 2023; González and Traunmüller, 2024; Kreft, 2019). In the wake of their assaults, many women also described paying more attention to issues related to women's rights, particularly to bodily autonomy. As one woman told us:

I think that my identity now as a survivor has opened up my ears, if you will, to [...] things surrounding sexual assault. About how politicians are ruling things either for or against the female body.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than withdrawing from politics, many interviewees described feeling a greater sense of urgency to change political systems that harmed them and offered them little recourse to justice. Many women described how their experiences made them feel more strongly about issues of reproductive justice. For example, one participant recounted:

I always had that belief system [being pro-choice] before this all happened. But now that it [rape] happened to me, I feel just as strong, if not stronger, about it,

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<sup>11</sup>Interviewee 5, interviewed by first author, 12/17/21, Zoom.

and it makes me want to be an even stronger and louder advocate for women's rights and a woman's right to choose and abortion access.<sup>12</sup>

Interest crystallization may play a more prominent role in the case of sexual violence than in other types of crime victimization. Distinct from crimes such as robbery or assault, sexual violence is an act that reinforces a social hierarchy and thus directly implicates an ascriptive identity (see Marsh, 2023). Sexual violence may thus crystallize women's interests in ways that survivors have not encountered previously in their lives. At the same time, gender may be inseparably bound with other identities for women who are otherwise marginalized by race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, sexuality, gender expression, and many other lived experiences (Richie, 2018). Thus, our theorizing about interest crystallization may be most applicable to women for whom social disadvantage is not compounded by other axes of marginalization, a point we return to below.

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In sum, while not a uniform reaction, we theorize a process whereby survivors of sexual assault may turn to politics. Post-traumatic growth facilitates personal strength and resilience and often occurs alongside shared social and political narratives created in connection with other survivors. For some women, this leads to a new awareness of structural oppression and the crystallization of their interests to be free from violence, compelling them to demand greater responsiveness from the state.

## Variation by Intersecting Identities

Throughout our theory, we have emphasized that while sexual assault is ubiquitous for women across all walks of life, reactions to this experience are complex. We posit that variation may stem from whether a survivor has the resources she needs to process the trauma of an assault experience or, conditional on processing the trauma, whether the outlet she chooses is politics. We theorize that different ascriptive identities may influence whether

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<sup>12</sup>Interviewee 6, interviewed by first author, 12/6/21, Zoom.

survivors have the resources and desire to understand their victimization experience as political, and thus whether it results in increased political mobilization. To do this, we use an intersectional framework to understand how three other identities (out of undoubtedly many others) may moderate the relationship between sexual assault victimization and increased political participation: partisanship, socioeconomic status (SES), and race/ethnicity.

## **Partisanship**

Recent studies have shown that partisans interpret situations surrounding sexual harassment differently (Craig and Cossette, 2022), and we find it plausible that partisanship is also a lens through which survivors view their assault. To begin, Republicans, in general, tend to hold more individualist values than Democrats and view social problems and their solutions as personal rather than structural (Levendusky, 2009). When Republican survivors operate under this belief system—that is, when they attribute what happened to them to personal circumstances (either their own or their perpetrators’)—their political behavior may be less affected. This reasoning, for instance, recalls the response of one of our interviewees cited above, who saw her assault experience as stemming from her perpetrator’s bad upbringing rather than from a culture that oppresses women.

Partisan differences in the attributions of social problems might be particularly pronounced in the case of sexual assault. Narratives about the structural oppression of women (patriarchy) and cultures that normalize sexual violence (rape culture) have a distinct partisan tone (Kam and Archer, 2021). Democrats, both citizens and elites, tend to be more vocal in advocating for feminist policy reforms, while Republicans, including Republican women, often hold explicitly sexist views (Cassese and Barnes, 2019). This can lead to cognitive dissonance for Republican women survivors, causing them to disengage from politics (Bankert, 2020). For instance, Ocen and Morell (2024) find that identifying as a feminist increases political participation among Democratic women but decreases participation among Republican women. These opposing reactions may be compounded by the significant distrust that Democratic and Republican women hold towards each other (Klar, 2018).

This discussion recalls public accounts of survivors from within the far-right community; for example, that of Lauren Southern, a right-wing influencer and self-proclaimed trad wife, who was raped by a prominent figure in that community. The New York Times reports that Southern “lost interest in politics” because of the dissonance caused by her experience:

Her politics made the trauma particularly hard to process. Southern herself says: ‘It wouldn’t be very helpful to ‘the cause’ (or my career, for that matter) for me to become exactly what I criticized, a victim. . . My brain was breaking between two worlds because I couldn’t let go of the ideology.’ (Goldberg, 2025).

Another way that political ideology might matter is through the availability of political leaders who can help survivors turn their experiences into a political identity. Often, social identity is activated by group leaders who give it meaning and encourage group members to take specific political actions (Huddy, 2013). Many visible Democratic women identify as survivors of sexual assault (from pop stars like Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga to political figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Gretchen Whitmer). Social movements that activate identities typically also have partisan tones. The most recent moment in U.S. history when survivor narratives were widely circulated was during the #MeToo Movement, a social movement associated with feminists and the Democratic Party (Kam and Archer, 2021). During this time, thousands of women took to social media and other public outlets to describe how they came to terms with their assault experiences, including by demanding political change (Zacharek, Dockterman and Sweetland Edwards, 2017).

There are fewer women in political leadership within the Republican Party generally, and, albeit with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Megyn Kelly and Lauren Boebert), Republican women have either not been outspoken on the issue or have taken an explicitly anti-feminist stance. For instance, in 2018, Kellyanne Conway (then Senior Counselor for Donald Trump) told CNN host Jake Tapper that she did not believe the assault accusations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh should be disqualifying, saying:

I’m a victim of sexual assault. . . I don’t expect Judge Kavanaugh or Jake Tapper or Jeff Flake or anybody to be held responsible for that. *You have to be respon-*

*sible for your own conduct.* (Kellyanne Conway, quoted in Cohen and Klimas, 2018, emphasis ours.)

Tying this discussion to our theorizing above suggests that Republican women may have less support than other women in processing their assault; there are fewer co-partisan shared survivor narratives, for instance. It further suggests that even if the traumatic event is fully processed, demanding increased state responsiveness to combat violence against women may not be the outlet these women seek. For Republican survivors of sexual violence, post-traumatic growth may mean seeking a more active role in a church, for instance, rather than in a group organized around state responses to sexual violence. For example, this recalls the response of one of our interviewees, who described living in a Republican neighborhood and choosing to work on sexual violence prevention through her church.

We theorized that the association we are studying will be weaker among Republican women, but we also see the possibility of contradictory expectations. By definition, Republican women tend to be more socially conservative than Democratic women (Cassese and Barnes, 2019). This may mean that before a victimization experience, Republican women feel less comfortable participating in the masculinized domain of politics. They may also hold more conservative views on gender roles and be broadly opposed to state interventions (Ocono and Morell, 2024; Klar, 2018). Moreover, our argument that sexual assault can crystallize political interests assumes a preexisting lack of awareness about structural patriarchy, which may be more common among conservative women. For all these reasons, there may be more room for change in Republican women’s attitudes than in Democratic women’s attitudes (see Castle et al., 2020). While our reading of the literature suggests that there are more reasons to suspect that Republican women will be less mobilized by a victimization experience, we note there is ambiguity here.

### **Socioeconomic status**

We theorize that socioeconomic status may also moderate our theorized association. The first dimension of SES we consider is education. Higher education exposes young women to

narratives that connect sexual violence to structural patriarchy and to networks of women where this discourse is circulating. Universities are also important sites of anti-rape activism, often in response to the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses. Through exposure to activist narratives, classroom settings, or mandatory training in the prevention of sexual violence, college-educated women are more likely than other women to be exposed to anti-rape culture and thus to have the tools that facilitate interest and demand crystallization (Htun et al., 2022). Another component of SES is income. Income often grants survivors access to services to process their trauma and facilitate post-traumatic growth (e.g., therapy). Income also allows women the resources and time to participate in more costly forms of politics (e.g., donating, volunteering). Returning to our interviews, some women reflected on the role of resources in their experiences. For instance, one participant noted:

I understand my own privilege a lot more because I am a petite white woman who has access to education, access to health care, and access to all these resources. And after him, I have become acutely aware that I have those resources and that a lot of other women he abused did not.<sup>13</sup>

Together, this work leads us to expect that sexual assault is more likely to increase the political participation of higher-SES women than it is for lower-SES women.

## **Race/ethnicity**

We expect that a woman's race or ethnicity may moderate the extent to which a victimization experience increases political participation. We regret that we do not have the space here to fully present the literature on activism to combat sexual violence against women of color across many different communities—including Latina women, Asian women, Indigenous women, and immigrant women—but we reinforce that sexual violence can affect women of color differently based on cultural interpretations of femininity and masculinity, and the relationship and history of sexual violence to their identities (see INCITE!, 2006; Richie, 2012). Drawing on the considerable body of work by Black feminists, we focus here on how

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<sup>13</sup>Interviewee 3, interviewed by first author, 12/8/21, Zoom.

the experiences of Black women, in particular, may differ from those of other groups and, at times, most distinctly from those of white women.

Sexual violence as a tool of subordination is often amplified for women who live with intersecting marginalized identities (Collins, 1998; Richie, 2012; Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut and Johnson, 2018). That women of color are also more likely to be poor than white women intensifies these disparities (Richie, 2018; Michener and Brower, 2020), particularly in neighborhoods where other types of violence are common (Jones, 2026; Moffett-Bateau, 2024). For example, due to systemic racism within state agencies, Black women are three times less likely than white women to disclose unwanted sexual experiences (Slatton and Richard, 2020). When they do disclose, they often receive little support and can experience re-traumatization by state authorities (INCITE!, 2006; Richie, 2012). Disclosure of an unwanted sexual experience facilitates recovery and post-traumatic growth (Tillman et al., 2010), and per our theorizing, can allow the victimization experience to take on political significance. Thus, many survivors of color may not have access to the services that facilitate recovery.

The processes of interest and demand crystallization may also be less straightforward for women of color. Some survivors we interviewed described an increased awareness of structural subordination in the aftermath of their assaults. This process may be less likely among women of color who also live within structures of systemic racism. Thus, connecting a victimization experience to structural oppression may create a deeper cognitive shift for otherwise advantaged white women, for whom gender is the only axis of marginalization.

Connecting an assault experience to political participation may also be more nuanced for Black women, in particular. Black women often have distinct motivations for participating in politics compared to other groups. For instance, the legacy of the civil rights movement, Black church attendance, and linked fate by race have all been connected to high rates of political participation among Black women (Anoll, 2022; Brown, 2014). These dynamics may also lead to ceiling effects, as many Black women already participate in politics at higher rates than other groups of women (see, e.g., Scott et al., 2021).

In addition, women of color may be distrustful of participating in women's movements and

related political activism that universalize the experiences of white women (Collins, 1998). Black women may also be reluctant to engage in political activities that could strengthen criminal justice systems that have historically falsely accused Black men of rape (Bevacqua, 2000; Kessel, 2022) or in public discourse and policy that implicitly frame Black men as violent (Collins, 2004). More broadly, Black women may be unwilling to participate in political activism that they believe will strengthen carceral systems that disproportionately criminalize Black men and boys (Collins, 2004) and further weaken Black communities in ways that recreate the social systems that lead to the abuse of Black women (Richie, 2012). Because of this, some Black women may see a tension between the struggle for racial justice and anti-rape activism. As one community organizer in this space described to us:

For Black women, there are so many other things that have to come first. Being a woman is part of it, but it's not the [whole] thing. It's like the whole community is resting on our survival... It's not just about the sexual violence ... Racial justice absolutely takes precedence.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, we emphasize the nuances here. Canonical Black feminist texts describe how the personal and political are often blurred for Black women because their lives are already politicized through multiple sites of domination (Collins, 1998). Indeed, Black women's movements have called attention to the problem of violence against women of color for as long as, if not longer than, any other group of American women (Crenshaw, 1991; Combahee River Collective, 1977). However, as current and historical Black feminist leaders have lamented (e.g., #MeToo founder Tarana Burke), anti-gender-based-violence movements are often suppressed within the broader struggle for racial justice (Collins, 1998, 2004; Slatton and Richard, 2020). While this moderator is necessarily nuanced, assessing the literature above as a whole, we posit that sexual assault is less likely to increase the political participation of Black women than it is for other groups of women.

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<sup>14</sup>Interviewee 19, interviewed by second co-author, 12/13/24, in-person, Berkeley, CA

## Testing the Theory with a Survey of American Women

The qualitative work that informed our theory was inductive; it was based on responses from women who experienced sexual assault. It also allowed us to generate observable implications that we can test with a larger sample of the population, including both those who have experienced sexual assault and those who have not. To do this, we surveyed approximately 2,000 American women through the market research firm Bovitz. The survey was conducted in mid-December 2022, using a sample recruited to match US Census benchmarks for race, income, and education.<sup>15</sup> Late 2022 was a time in American politics in the aftermath of organizing around gender and racial justice. It was the beginning of gender backlash to the #MeToo movement and more general “anti-Woke” backlash following the Black Lives Matter protests, culminating in the second election of Donald Trump two years later.

As with the interview protocol, the survey design incorporated best practices when probing sensitive and possibly traumatic topics. First, potential respondents were informed before participating in the survey that they would be asked if they had personally experienced sexual violence, allowing them to opt out at that time. Second, in addition to standard informed consent procedures, respondents were again reminded before the assault experience module that they could skip any question or leave the survey at any time and still receive full compensation. Finally, the last survey question was open-ended, allowing respondents to share their feelings or thoughts after completing the survey. This has become a standard question in surveys on traumatic experiences, as it allows respondents to express emotions that may have arisen while taking the survey. In our survey, many women used this final question to relay circumstances associated with their own experiences of sexual assault or rape.

Sexual assault is defined by RAINN, the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization, as any form of “sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim” (RAINN, 2023). We based our survey questions on respondents’ experiences of assault from the Sexual Experiences Survey, a longstanding survey used by psychologists

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<sup>15</sup>We present sample demographics and compare them with US benchmarks in SI Section C.

to measure the prevalence of sexual violence in the population (see Koss et al., 2007). Respondents were asked whether, in their lifetime, “someone has fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of your body or removed some of your clothes without consent.” Respondents could answer, “yes, this has happened to me” or “no, this has not happened to me.” Respondents were next asked whether they had experienced rape in their lifetime and were given a clinical definition that listed specific violations. Using a clinical definition assuages reporting bias that might emerge from more general statements about whether the respondent identifies as a sexual assault survivor, a point we return to below.

Two-thirds of respondents in the sample (67 percent) reported experiencing sexual assault, and 43 percent reported experiencing rape in their lifetime. We find a somewhat higher prevalence of sexual violence in our survey than is generally estimated in the American population. Again, current estimates are that approximately 50 percent of American women have experienced assault, and 25 percent have experienced rape (Center for Disease Control, 2022; RAINN, 2023). We see two plausible explanations. First, the sample might reflect the true rate of sexual assault experienced by American women. Many researchers believe that the prevalence of sexual assault in the United States is underestimated (Davis et al., 2014). Koss et al. (2007), for instance, find that almost 70 percent of respondents drop off at some point when the standard 38-question Sexual Experiences Survey is administered online, making it difficult to estimate the true prevalence of sexual violence in the population. The shortened design of our survey might mitigate the discomfort that survivors felt when answering an extended battery of questions about their sexual histories.

Second, the higher prevalence of sexual violence reported in our survey may reflect a higher likelihood of survivors opting into our study. Recall that to conduct this study ethically, potential respondents were informed about the purpose of our research before participating, and it is possible that, for reasons consistent with our theorizing, assault survivors felt more compelled to share their experiences and political opinions with researchers than women who have not experienced this type of violence. Thus, our sample may overrepresent survivors. Certain kinds of survivors might also be more likely to participate in our study.

It is possible that survivors who were less comfortable sharing their assault experiences were less likely to take our survey than other women. If these women are also less likely to see their assaults as politically meaningful, our sample might over-represent women for whom our theory is most applicable. This might cause us to overestimate our relationship of interest. We are aware that these factors might affect selection into our sample, and throughout the results section, we discuss empirical patterns in the data that suggest our results are unlikely to stem solely or primarily from sample composition.

Our outcome variable is political participation. We measure this through a shortened battery of questions from the 2020 American National Election Survey (ANES) that asks respondents if they have participated in eight different types of political activities within the past twelve months: attending a protest, march, or rally; displaying a political item; donating to a political candidate; engaging in a political argument; signing a petition; posting politically on social media; contacting their representative; and volunteering for a political campaign. After completing this module on political activities, the respondent immediately saw a second module listing the activities they reported participating in during the past twelve months. For each activity, they were asked whether “any of the actions were due to women’s rights issues.” If the respondent reported that any of the associated activities were related to women’s rights, the question displayed an open-text box for respondents to provide additional information about the nature of the political activity.

## Results

For our main analyses, our dependent variable is a standardized composite index of political participation. To construct the index, we count the number of the eight possible political activities each respondent reports engaging in during the last twelve months. On average, women in our sample report participating in 1.9 activities. We observe a similar number of activities among women respondents in the ANES sample, on which we base our outcome variable module (1.8 activities out of eight, see SI Section H), providing confidence in the

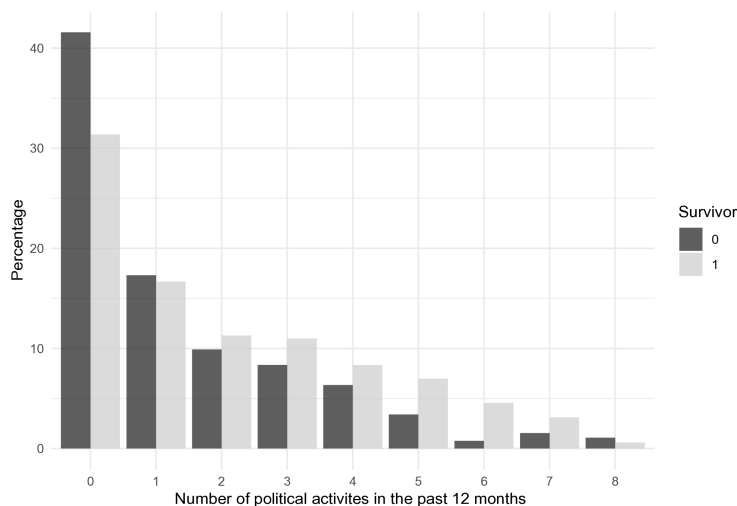


Figure 1: Distribution of political participation by victimization status.

Alt text: The number of political activities victims v. non-victims report participating in over the last twelve months.

representativeness of our sample.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses by victimization status. A plurality of respondents from both groups report doing none of these activities, but differences between the two groups are immediately apparent. Forty-two percent of women who have not experienced sexual assault report engaging in none of the eight activities, whereas only 31 percent of survivors fall into this category. Survivors consistently appear at higher rates in the high-participation categories. For our model specifications, we standardize this count variable to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

We measure assault experiences, our key independent variable, based on whether the respondent answered “yes, this has happened to me” to the question on sexual assault or to the question on rape. Our models also include a standard set of controls: age, education, income, race/ethnicity, and partisanship. We measure partisanship on a seven-point scale, with higher values indicating a stronger association with the Republican Party.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Victimization could affect women’s future education and earnings, leading to concerns about post-treatment bias. Our results are similar for models excluding these covariates

Table 1: OLS linear regression models. Dependent variables are standardized.

|                       | Model 1<br>Participation Index<br>All | Model 2<br>Participation Index<br>Women's Rights | Model 3<br>Participation Index<br>Not Women's Rights |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| (Intercept)           | 0.254*<br>(0.134)                     | 0.566***<br>(0.135)                              | -0.343**<br>(0.140)                                  |
| Assault victimization | 0.339***<br>(0.048)                   | 0.344***<br>(0.049)                              | 0.098*<br>(0.050)                                    |
| Education             | 0.096***<br>(0.019)                   | 0.077***<br>(0.019)                              | 0.060***<br>(0.020)                                  |
| Age                   | -0.018***<br>(0.003)                  | -0.019***<br>(0.003)                             | -0.005<br>(0.003)                                    |
| Income                | 0.029*<br>(0.015)                     | 0.012<br>(0.015)                                 | 0.038**<br>(0.016)                                   |
| Partisanship          | -0.083***<br>(0.011)                  | -0.117***<br>(0.012)                             | 0.026**<br>(0.012)                                   |
| Race/ethnicity FE     | ✓                                     | ✓                                                | ✓                                                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.098                                 | 0.116                                            | 0.020                                                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>   | 0.093                                 | 0.111                                            | 0.015                                                |
| Num. obs.             | 1819                                  | 1826                                             | 1819                                                 |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table 1 shows the results from standard OLS linear models. Model 1 shows that survivors of sexual violence report higher levels of political participation than women who have not experienced this type of violence. This association is statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.001$  level. The standardized coefficient in Model 1 suggests that assault survivors report a third of a standard deviation more political participation than women who have not experienced assault, controlling for demographic characteristics and partisanship. Using the unstandardized measure, this equates to about 0.7 more activities, or 49 percent more among survivors than among otherwise similar women.<sup>17</sup> The coefficient of sexual assault is statistically significant in seven of the eight models that treat each of the eight political activities as distinct outcome variables.<sup>18</sup> We also observe similar results when we examine the experiences of sexual assault and rape separately (see SI Section F). Recall that respondents who

(SI Section F). A DAG visualizes the relationship between variables in SI Section G.

<sup>17</sup>Participating in politics often entails spending more time in public spaces and in community life more generally, which may increase assault exposure. While we cannot rule this out, the treatment effects are so large that reverse causation alone seems unlikely to account for the association. Our qualitative data also suggest against this alternative explanation.

<sup>18</sup>The assault coefficient is just outside the bounds of significance for political protest, likely because this is the rarest form of political participation overall.

reported that they had experienced rape were responding to a clinical definition of unwanted sexual penetration. That our results hold when looking only at this subset of women helps assuage some concerns that less aggravated forms of sexual violence may be more open to interpretation and recall (unwanted touching or groping, for instance).

That our results are large and statistically significant when controlling for partisanship is important; it suggests that our findings cannot be explained by the possibility that Democratic women are both more likely to participate in politics and more likely to report sexual assault when it occurs to them. Another trend in our data that suggests that partisanship is not confounding the relationship that we identify is that we find high levels of sexual violence across the political spectrum. Democratic and Republican women are equally likely to report having experienced an event that meets the definition of sexual assault or rape.<sup>19</sup> This aligns with previous work. While some research finds that Republican women report experiencing sexual violence at lower rates than other women, these differences are often minimal. For instance, the 2018 Pew American Trends Panel poll found that 56 percent of Republican women reported having received unwanted sexual harassment compared to 63 percent of Democratic women (Jose, Fowler and Raj, 2021, 7696). This difference is small, even though the definition of sexual harassment might be more open to partisan interpretation than the clinical definition of sexual assault and rape.

Recall that our survey consisted of two participation modules. The first module presented respondents with a list of eight activities and asked them to indicate whether they had participated in each (yes/no). Then, based on the activities they chose from this list, a new module was populated, and respondents were asked, for each activity type they indicated (donating, volunteering, etc.), whether *any* of those actions were related to women's rights issues. From this, we constructed two separate outcome indices: one measuring political activities, including those related to women's rights, and one measuring participation exclusively in political activities unrelated to women's rights.

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<sup>19</sup>A model that treats party identification as the response variable yields a coefficient on sexual assault that is close to zero and statistically insignificant (see SI Section F).

Model 2 and Model 3 in Table 1 show differences between survivors and otherwise similar women for each measure. For both indices, we see that being a survivor of sexual assault is associated with higher political participation, but this association is largest for political activities that include activities related to women's rights. The coefficient for Model 3 shows that survivors report one-tenth of a standard deviation higher on the political activities index unrelated to women's rights ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). In contrast, Model 2 shows that the coefficient is over three times larger when the index includes political activities related to women's rights ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The R-squared statistic across models also suggests that the inclusion of an assault experience as a covariate explains more variation in participation that includes women's rights causes than in political activities not related to women's rights.

We also thematically coded responses to the open-ended question that asked respondents to describe the types of women's rights activities in which they had participated (see SI Section I). Across all eight types of activities, most women provided specific examples of political actions that they had taken in support of abortion rights in the wake of the *Dobbs v. Jackson* Supreme Court decision that occurred six months before we fielded our survey. For instance, one respondent said she went to a rally for: "Yes on Prop 3, which was to add abortion and reproductive rights to the Michigan constitution." Another respondent in Texas described how she wore: "a button that said Mothers Against Greg Abbot because of the abortion bill here." Several respondents connected abortion access to support for survivors of sexual assault. For example, one respondent noted that she: "Signed several petitions supporting Planned Parenthood and rape victims." Another respondent directly referenced her experience of sexual assault, writing: "I have posted (publicly, not privately) about abortion rights and my own rape..." A sizable group of respondents also reported supporting victims of sexual violence, separate from the issue of abortion access, most significantly in the category of volunteering. For example, one respondent described: "I volunteer on a crisis line and am working to create a Take Back the Night march on my campus. I'm also searching for training to be a victim's advocate." These responses echo what we heard from the women who informed our theory-building: for many women, fighting for bodily autonomy was their

way into a more active political life.

Finally, although assessing mechanisms is beyond the scope of this work, we offer preliminary evidence on the importance of solidarity ties with other survivors for our theorized association. While our survey did not ask survivors whether they had told someone about their victimization experience, we did ask all respondents whether they had a close friend or family member who had experienced sexual assault or rape. Examining responses only among survivors, we find that women who report knowing another survivor demonstrate almost half a standard deviation higher political activity than survivors who do not know another survivor (coef = 0.42 SDs,  $p < 0.001$ , SI Section F.6). In line with our theory, having a confidant with a similar life experience may facilitate political meaning making.<sup>20</sup>

## Intersecting Identities

We theorized that the relationship we are studying should be stronger among Democratic women than among Republican women. To test this, we interact the victimization status variable with a seven-point party identification scale, ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Figure 2 plots the predicted values associated with this interaction. The interaction term is negative and statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.10$  level (See Model 1 in Table SI.2). Across the political spectrum, women who report victimization are more politically engaged than other women. Still, the magnitude of this difference decreases as respondents become more strongly associated with the Republican Party.

Next, we examine the role of socioeconomic status as a moderator. To do this, we interact education and income with our indicator variable for assault (see Models 2 and 3 in Table SI.2). We see positive and significant interaction terms for education ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), indicating that the association between sexual assault victimization and political participation increases among respondents with higher education. The interaction term for income is pos-

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<sup>20</sup>We also note that among non-victims, knowing a friend or family member with a victimization experience is associated with higher levels of political participation (SI Section F.7). We hope future work examines indirect exposure to victimization experiences more fully.

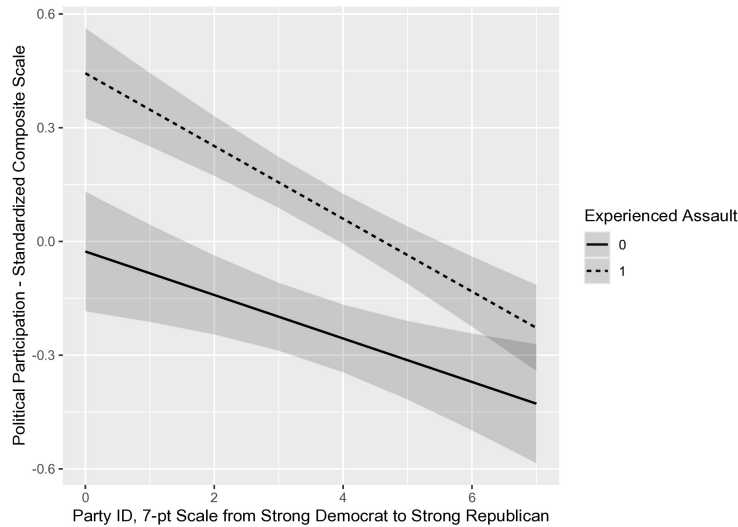


Figure 2: Partisanship moderates the influence of victimization on political participation. Alt text: Predicted values of political participation (y-axis: all activities, standardized score) for victims and non-victims based on party identification.

itive but not statistically significant, separate from the effect of education. To visualize the moderating effect of SES, we create a composite variable combining respondents' education and income. These values are correlated ( $\rho = 0.48$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) and load onto a single factor ( $\alpha = 0.7$ ). Figure 3 plots the predicted values associated with an interaction term of an assault experience and the composite SES measure. The association between victimization and political participation is stronger among higher SES women ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

Finally, we examine the moderating role of race/ethnicity. To do this, we examine the association between a victimization experience and political participation for the five subgroups of women for whom we have a moderate sample size with complete observations across covariates: white women ( $n = 1114$ ), Black women ( $n = 349$ ), Latina women ( $n = 166$ ), Asian women ( $n = 89$ ), and mixed-race or other-raced women ( $n = 230$ ). Figure 4 plots the subgroup coefficients for assault experiences using the model specifications in Table 1. We theorized how the experiences of Black women may differ from those of other groups. Yet, different strands of our theorizing imply different reference groups. For instance, the role of the civil rights movement in fostering Black women's political participation, or the

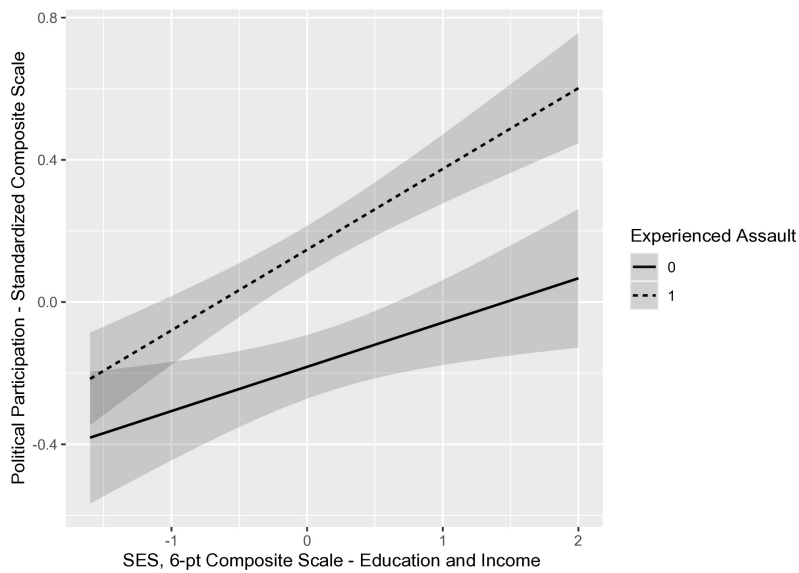


Figure 3: SES moderates the influence of victimization on political participation.  
Alt text: Predicted values of political participation (y-axis: all activities, standardized score) for victims and non-victims based on socio-economic status (education and income).

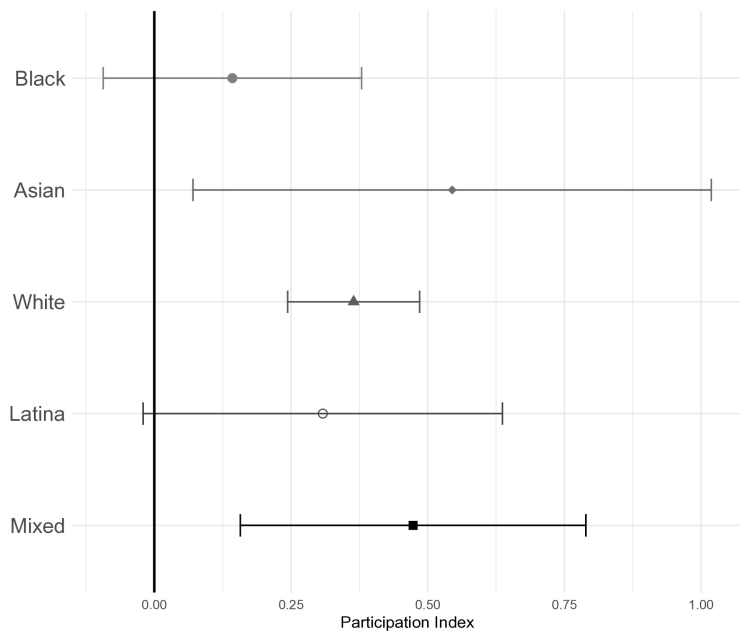


Figure 4: Race/ethnicity moderates the influence of victimization on political participation.  
Alt text: OLS coefficient plot for different groups of women based on self-identified race and ethnicity. The participation index is standardized.

role of anti-Black state violence, may imply a comparison between Black women and all other groups of women (i.e., all non-Black women). At other times, the theories we draw on suggest that differences are more likely between all women of color and white women; for instance, how an assault may lead victims to understand systemic oppression in new ways. We thus present the coefficients for each racial/ethnic group for full transparency.

Figure 4 supports our expectation that the association we are studying is least likely among Black women. The magnitude of the association for Black women is about half that of the other groups and is outside the bounds of statistical significance ( $p = 0.2$ ). We emphasize that this does not mean our theorized relationship does not exist for Black women. The coefficient is positive and approaching statistical significance for a relatively small sample ( $n = 349$ , of whom 224 reported experiencing sexual assault). However, our results by subgroup convincingly suggest that the association is weaker among Black women than among women from other racial/ethnic groups. The difference between Black women and all non-Black women is statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level, and the difference between Black women and white women is also statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.10$ ). However, the association for white women is not statistically different from that of women of color broadly. While we do not have sufficient statistical power to thoroughly assess subgroup differences to test the implications of different parts of the theorizing on this moderating variable, this observation supports a preliminary interpretation that Black women are a distinctive group, even compared to other women of color.

## When the Personal Becomes Political

Canonical feminist texts describe rape as about power; it is a physical manifestation of patriarchy meant to keep women in a subordinate social position (Brownmiller, 1975; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991). The contribution of second-wave feminist movements was to circulate this idea widely among American women, encouraging them to understand their personal experiences as deeply political. Decades later, many women we

interviewed for this study made a similar connection. Rather than turning away from politics, the trauma of sexual violence compelled them to fight for a more just political system for others. Our survey of a diverse sample of American women confirms these narratives.

Our work has important scope conditions. For one, we found several significant moderators of our theory, and there are likely many others we did not have the space to explore here, such as one's age, immigration status, when in one's life an assault occurs, repeated victimization experiences, or the identity of the perpetrator (if they are an intimate partner, for instance, or whether it was a heterosexual act). Another relevant identity is sexual orientation, particularly given that lesbian and bisexual women experience higher rates of sexual violence than heterosexual women (Canan et al., 2021). These identities may matter through the support that survivors receive, especially as anti-violence programs may neglect women who do not fit into archetypal gender stereotypes, including queer, trans, or formerly incarcerated women (Richie, 2012).

Future work could also consider whether there are similar reactions among men, nonbinary, or trans survivors. We suspect that it might be harder for men survivors to construct political meaning from their experiences since there are fewer survivor narratives in wide discursive circulation about how sexual violence harms men. Another open question is how our theory applies in places with highly active anti-rape movements (e.g., in Mexico, see Torres-Beltran (2024)) and in those with less civil society activism on this issue (e.g., Japan). We find it remarkable that our findings from the United States comport with research on conflict-related sexual violence during and after war, highlighting the agency of survivors across diverse settings.

Our findings suggest future work. For one, this research was motivated in part by observing the power of the #MeToo movement in bringing women into politics, some for the first time. The interviews and survey that form the core of this study were conducted between 2021 and 2025, well after the peak of the #MeToo movement. Thus, our findings appear even when these discourses are largely dormant. Yet, our results raise questions about how activating moments, such as the #MeToo movement, the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation

hearings in 2018, the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in 1991, or the handling of the Jeffrey Epstein files by the Trump administration, can *change* how women see what happened to them. Longitudinal studies before and after these defining moments in US history or in-depth qualitative accounts might be best suited to answer these questions (for parallels with LGBT social movements, see Ayoub, 2016).

Future work could also examine how having a partner or loved one with a negative gendered experience, such as sexual assault or a denied abortion, affects men's political behavior. Researchers could also conduct a more in-depth exploration of the role of specific mechanisms. For instance, we did not have space here to thoroughly examine the role of survivor networks in facilitating women's political engagement, even though our intuitions align with a growing body of comparative work suggesting that women's networks are deeply politically mobilizing (Prillaman, 2023; González and Traunmüller, 2024; Kreft, 2019).

Our work also builds on research showing how gendered life experiences affect political engagement. Yet more work is needed here. For instance, future research might seek to explore how the experience of having an abortion, or being denied one, affects one's political behavior. With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, approximately 40 percent of American women of reproductive age lost access to abortion, including women in many states where abortion became completely illegal, even in instances of rape. Before the overturning of *Roe*, estimates were that one in four American women would have an abortion by the end of her reproductive years (Sanger-Katz, Cain Miller and BuiDec, 2021), and we find it plausible that changes in abortion access could affect women's political engagement.

Women's lived experiences inspired this research. Widely available public accounts from women on how sexual assault compelled them to become politically active have existed for at least the last half-century. We have attempted to investigate these claims empirically. In doing so, we highlight how sexual violence is a quotidian experience among women around the world and from all walks of life. We hope that political scientists continue to research the everyday experiences of women and other marginalized groups, and how these experiences can take on political meaning; that is, how and when the personal becomes political.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank Cindy Kam, John Sides, Allison Anoll, Dara Cohen, Cassy Dorff, Angie Torres-Beltran, Soledad Prillaman, Rachel Brulé, Jakana Thomas, and Anna Wilke for their comments and support throughout this research project. We also thank Mallika Kaur, MJ Mariano, Monique LeSarre, and Lorrie Thomas for sharing their insights and connections with us. We are grateful for the feedback we received at the 2022 MPSA Annual Meeting, the 2022 Empirical Study of Gender (EGEN) Meeting at the Harvard Kennedy School, the 2025 EGEN meeting at CIDE in Mexico City, the 2026 ECPG Meeting, the 2026 EPSS Meeting, and from participants in seminars at Washington University in St. Louis and the European University Institute. Most importantly, we thank the women who shared their experiences with us.

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**Supplementary Information for: “When the Personal Becomes Political: Sexual Assault and Women’s Political Engagement”**

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## A Interviews

### A.1 Training

Before conducting the interviews, the lead author took a class from the Human Development and Counseling Program at the author's university. This course was designed to train therapists who intend to work with trauma survivors and informed both the structure of the interview guide and the practices used during the interviews. This class provided instruction on how to structure conversations regarding trauma by starting with a warm-up period, moving into the substantive questions, and then providing a wind-down period to transition individuals back into their day. This wind-down period is unique to situations involving trauma and is not always found in qualitative interviews. Whereas qualitative interviews do typically involve a wind-up period to gain rapport, the extra emphasis the interviewer put on transitioning someone back into their day minimizes psychological risks. Before the interview, respondents also engaged in an informed consent conversation rather than just a statement to ensure they understood their rights and could stop the interview at any time.

### A.2 Recruitment and sample

Once the study passed through the full university IRB process, respondents were recruited through a purposive, online snowball sample using a social media flier asking for survivors of sexual assault to participate in an interview about political values and sexual assault. It is important to note that, while the study used the lead author's social networks, the author had no prior relationship or contact with any of the respondents before the interview. In the end, the flier was shared at least 26 times on Facebook and 24 times on Instagram. Overall, 26 women contacted the lead author to participate in the study, and 16 of those contacts resulted in completed interviews. The recruitment flier was structured as follows:

**Call for participants: Study on how sexual assault affects the political values and views of woman survivors.**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to explore if sexual assault affects the political actions, decisions and values of survivors.

**Participation and Duration:** Participation will consist of a 1-2 hour interview.

**Location:** Interviews with people who do not reside in [lead author's city] will take place over Zoom. Respondents who live in [lead author's city] can choose to conduct the interview face to face in [lead author's city] or over Zoom.

**Compensation and Benefits:** Respondents will be compensated with a \$25 online gift card of their choice to Amazon, Walmart, Target or Starbucks.

**Eligibility:**

- You must be 18+ years of age
- You identify as a woman
- You consider yourself to be a survivor of sexual assault
- You are NOT a student at [author's university]

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Participation is completely confidential, and any identifying information obtained from the interview will be deleted or changed so that you remain anonymous.

Please pass this information on to anyone who might be interested.

For more information or to participate in the study, please contact: [Lead PI name and contact details.]

### A.3 Protocol

The interview protocol started with a detailed description of the project's aims. The interviewer read from the following script:

This is a research study about how experiencing a sexual assault affects the lives of individuals afterwards and specifically how sexual assault affects the way that individuals interact with politics. The interview generally lasts between 1-2 hours. As with most research studies, there are inherent risks to participating in the study. For this specific study, the questions I would like to talk about deal with reflecting on a difficult event and could at times bring up intense emotions, uncomfortable self judgments and distressing memories and could potentially cause discomfort. Your participation in this study is important. However, participation is completely voluntary and should you at any time wish to stop, not answer a specific question, or end the interview, you may do so without prejudice to you and you will still receive any benefits you are entitled to. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential and your information will be protected to the best of my ability. All personally identifying information will be removed. If you would like to voice any comments or concerns about the research process you are welcome to contact me, the Principal Investigator, or the IRB office at [PI's University]. Additionally, if you have any questions about research participants rights you may contact the HRPP office at [PI's University]. [Additional contact details given.] For your participation in this project, I will send you a \$25 gift card to the email address you used to contact me. Do you have any questions at this stage? Do you have any questions at this stage?

The interviewer then described the methods they would use to keep the information confidential. This included the following statement:

I would like to record this conversation if you feel comfortable with me doing so. This will allow me to make sure that I am able to accurately recall and portray your responses in the research project. Only I will have access to this data and I will begin recording after our introductions to each other so that your name or other identifying information will not be included in the transcript unless you provide this over the course of the interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional and confidential audio transcription software Otter.ai and an additional recording will be recorded and stored locally on my computer. If you would prefer me to not use otter and just record on my computer that is also an option that is available to you. No one except for myself will hear the full transcripts of the interview, and any quotes used will be kept completely anonymous. If you would like a full transcript of the interview afterwards to approve, this will be provided to you with the option to redact any information you would like. Do you have any questions about Otter.ai or how your transcript will be handled? Do you have any questions about the research project and your participation in general?

Finally, the interviewer asked for the participants' consent, saying:

Your participation in this study is strictly confidential and your information will be protected to the best of my ability. Because a consent document would be the only physical thing documenting your participation to this research, you do not need to sign a consent document so as to not create this record. However, if you would like to sign a consent document, our team will provide you with one over email and store it securely after your sign it.

The semi-structured interview then proceeded based on the following question guide:

#### Section 1: Warm Up

1. To start, can you tell me about yourself? (Probing: age, edu level, income, general feel for where they live)
2. How do you feel about American Politics? (Probing: political party, political participation )
3. Can you tell me your views on Donald Trump?
4. How about the #MeToo and #Time'sUp movements that took place a few years ago?

#### Section 2: Substantive Questions:

1. Including as little or as much detail as you want, can you tell me about the event that led you to sit down for this interview?
2. What were your initial feelings and reactions after the event?
3. Did you tell anyone about this event?

4. How do you interpret this event in terms of its causes? Has this changed over time?
5. What does this event mean to you now?
6. Do you feel that this event has influenced the way you interact with the world?
7. Do you think it influences how other people interact with the world?
8. Oftentimes, we can dwell on the negatives of these events, and they truly are negative, but I am curious to know if there is anything you are proud of in the way that you have handled the event and moved forward in your life?
9. Is there anything else you think I should know?

### Section 3: Wind down

1. How are you feeling after answering these questions?
2. Are there any questions I asked that made you extremely uncomfortable? How could I adjust this question?
3. Are you ready to go back to your day?

## A.4 Follow-up interviews with community leaders

After the sixteen survivor interviews that formed our theorizing, it became apparent that we also wanted to hear accounts from community leaders who worked on organizing against gender-based violence. To do this, the second author reached out to other academics and former students at their university with significant experience in this area. From this, the author engaged in the standard snowball recruitment method to reach out to directors, staff, volunteers, and caseworkers of community groups working on sexual violence prevention in the major urban area where the author is based. This led to an additional ten interviews. These interviews were less structured than the survivor interviews and followed a freer-flowing format, probing how the community leader had observed survivor responses in their work. The leaders were compensated with a \$50 Amazon gift card for their time.

## A.5 Interviewee demographics

We did not systematically survey our interviewees about their demographics; instead, we took notes during our conversations as these details emerged. Across our interviews with survivors and community leaders, we have a diverse sample. Respondents reported ages ranging from 21 to 50 years old. Most respondents reported middle-class backgrounds, though some also described more working-class backgrounds. Most had completed at least some college. Respondents included women who identified as white, Asian, Black, and as first-generation immigrants. A few respondents told us they identified as queer and/or non-binary. Most respondents identified as politically moderate or liberal. In our theorizing, we also read over 100 public accounts from a diverse sample of women and some men who identified as survivors of sexual violence. These accounts came from media sources (such as *TIME Magazine* or *Vox*) or academic or activist anthologies.

## B Survey Question Wording

We ask two questions about victimization experiences. The wording is as follows:

1. Please indicate if the following has happened to you in your lifetime: Someone has fondled, kissed, OR rubbed up against the private areas of your body (lips, breast/chest, crotch, or butt) OR removed some of your clothes without your consent (but did not attempt sexual penetration).
  - (a) Has happened to me
  - (b) Has not happened to me
  - (c) Don't know
2. Please indicate if the following has happened to you in your lifetime: Someone had oral sex with you or made you have oral sex without your consent OR Someone put their penis, fingers or objects into your vagina without your consent OR someone put their penis, fingers or objects into your butt without your consent.
  - (a) Has happened to me
  - (b) Has not happened to me
  - (c) Don't know

## C Survey Sample Characteristics

Our survey was designed to align with US Census benchmarks for race, income, and education. The table below shows sample averages for the covariates included in our models.

| Variable  | Mean | Min | Max |
|-----------|------|-----|-----|
| Assault   | 0.67 | 0   | 1   |
| Education | 3.47 | 1   | 6   |
| Age       | 34   | 18  | 63  |
| Income    | 3.18 | 1   | 7   |
| Black     | 0.18 | 0   | 1   |
| Asian     | 0.05 | 0   | 1   |
| Latina    | 0.09 | 0   | 1   |
| Mixed     | 0.11 | 0   | 1   |
| Native    | 0.01 | 0   | 1   |
| White     | 0.57 | 0   | 1   |
| Party     | 3.42 | 1   | 7   |

Table SI.1: Descriptive statistics of survey sample

Assault is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports experiencing sexual assault or rape in her lifetime. Education is measured on a six-point scale ranging

from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a seven-point scale, with values ranging from less than \$20,000 to over \$100,000. Party is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. This scale is coded as follows: (1) identify as Democrat – strong Democrat; (2) identify as Democrat – not so strong Democrat; (3) identify as Independent – closer to Democrat; (4) identify as Independent – close to neither party; (5) identify as Independent – closer to Republican; (6) identify as Republican – not so strong Republican; (7) identify as Republican – strong Republican

## C.1 Comparisons to US benchmarks

**Race/Ethnicity:** The survey firm Bowitz recruited a sample of respondents designed to mirror the US population in race/ethnicity. The resulting sample came close to meeting these marks. Our survey sample is 57% white, which exactly mirror US population estimates.<sup>1</sup> Black respondents are slightly overrepresented. They are estimated to constitute 14% of the population but 18% of our sample. Asian respondents are 7% of the US population and 5% of our sample. Native Americans constitute 1% of the American population and 1% of our sample. Hispanic/Latina populations appear to be somewhat underrepresented in our sample. They are 9% of our sample, but 20% of the US population. The remaining percentage of our sample identifies as mixed race or other, and it's possible that some populations that might otherwise be categorized as Hispanic/Latino fall into these groups.

**Education and Income:** For education, our sample of respondents scores 3.5 on a six-point scale, which is between the categories of “some college but no degree” and “an associate’s degree.” This aligns with Pew Research, which shows that about 38% of women in the United States aged 25 or older have a Bachelor’s degree<sup>2</sup>. In our sample, 30% of women aged 25 or older report having a Bachelor’s Degree, suggesting that higher-educated women may be slightly underrepresented. On income, respondents in our sample score, on average, 3.18 out of a seven-point scale, which corresponds to about 60,000 USD in household income per year. This is close to the median earnings of individual women in the United States (55,000 USD), but below the median household income, suggesting that unmarried women and/or lower-income women may be slightly overrepresented in our sample.

**Partisanship:** Respondents in our sample score an average of 3.42 on a seven-point left-right scale, ranging from strongly Democratic to strongly Republican. In total, 41 percent of the sample identify as Democratic (excluding Independents who lean Democratic) and 21% as Republican (excluding Independents who lean Republican), and the remaining sample (38%) as Independent or other. This comports with recent Pew data, which finds that 39% of women identify as Democrats, 28% as Republicans, and 30% as Independents.

**Age:** Our sample is designed to be representative of benchmarks for education, income, and race/ethnicity. However, it skews slightly younger than the national adult population. We purposely oversample women born after 1975. The median age in our sample is 34 (min

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<sup>1</sup>All estimates come from the US Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/>

= 18, max = 63). Feminist rhetoric around sexual assault was not prominent before the feminist movements of the 1970s, and public awareness about consent has grown steadily since, including increased awareness post-2016. Women born in Generation X and younger should have ample preexisting social narratives about the political nature of sexual violence at the time of their assault. Because work on this topic is new, we recruited respondents for whom we expected our theory to have the most traction. We hope future work can examine additional moderators that we do not have space to address here, including how our theory holds for women from older generations.

## D Human Subjects Research

This research employs qualitative interview data from sexual assault survivors and a quantitative survey from a sample of 2,000 American women using the market research and survey firm Bovitz. This appendix details the precautions taken to comply with the APSA Council's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research for the originally collected data.

**General principles:** The procedures used to obtain the quantitative data and qualitative data featured in this study respect the autonomy and well-being of respondents/participants and of other people affected by the research, as detailed in the following sections.

**Power:** Participants in the qualitative interviews were recruited through the lead PI's social media accounts as described above in SI Section A. Participants in the survey were recruited from Bovitz's proprietary opt-in panel of potential respondents. The sample included only women and respondents were recruited to meet US census benchmarks for race, income, and education. Across all data collection efforts, participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. No covert or deceptive research practices were used.

**Consent:** Across all data collection efforts, all respondents/participants were read the approved consent script developed for the study, and gave their informed consent orally prior to participation (for interviewees) or by clicking on a box at the beginning of the survey (for survey respondents). Respondents/participants were made aware that they could opt out at any point without any loss of benefit. All research employed standard techniques and involved minimal risk and harm to participants.

**Deception:** No deception of any sort was used in this study. The researchers accurately described the nature of the research to participants both in the individual consent forms and in the study protocols.

**Harm and Trauma:** The topic of this study, sexual violence, is potentially traumatic for respondents who either have personally experienced it or know someone who has. With this in mind, we took the following steps to minimize harm. First, both interview participants and survey respondents were informed of the study's nature before recruitment, allowing them to opt out if they were not interested. Second, extended informed consent procedures were used throughout to ensure that the participant/respondent knew she could skip any

questions or withdraw from the study at any time without losing compensation. Finally, both the interview guide and the survey included a wind-down period. For interviewees, this involved a series of questions to help them ease back into their day. For survey respondents, this involved an open-ended text box to allow them to express any feelings that arose while taking the survey.

**Confidentiality:** We did not record identifying information (respondent name, date of birth, etc.) in any of our data collection efforts. As we describe in SI Section A above, we took great care to convey to respondents that anything that they told us would be kept completely confidential.

**Impact:** The data procedures used for this study did not compromise the integrity of political processes in any way.

**Laws, Regulations, and Prospective Review:** The procedures used to conduct the survey and interviews for this study fully comply with U.S. law. Ethical review of human subjects was provided by [authors' university].

**Compensation:** Interviewees were compensated with gift cards for their participation (either \$25 for the first round of interviews or \$50 for the second round of interviews) to either Amazon, Walmart, Starbucks, or Target (their choice). Survey respondents were compensated through the payment system set up by Bovitz for its propriety online sample. Participants can choose which surveys to opt into, and payment amounts vary by survey type and respondent experience.

**Shared Responsibility:** The researchers have sought to adhere to the principle of shared responsibility as described in the APSA Council's guidelines.

## E Interactive Models

|                           | Model 1              | Model 2              | Model 3              |
|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                           | Participation Index  | Participation Index  | Participation Index  |
|                           | All Activities       | All Activities       | All Activities       |
| (Intercept)               | 0.174<br>(0.142)     | 0.319**<br>(0.147)   | 0.402***<br>(0.155)  |
| Assault                   | 0.470***<br>(0.092)  | 0.241**<br>(0.105)   | 0.106<br>(0.134)     |
| Education                 | 0.095***<br>(0.019)  | 0.097***<br>(0.019)  | 0.052*<br>(0.030)    |
| Income                    | 0.030**<br>(0.015)   | 0.009<br>(0.024)     | 0.030**<br>(0.015)   |
| Age                       | -0.018***<br>(0.003) | -0.018***<br>(0.003) | -0.018***<br>(0.003) |
| Partisanship              | -0.057***<br>(0.019) | -0.083***<br>(0.011) | -0.082***<br>(0.011) |
| I(Partisanship * Assault) | -0.039*<br>(0.023)   |                      |                      |
| I(Income * Assault)       |                      | 0.030<br>(0.028)     |                      |
| I(Education * Assault)    |                      |                      | 0.065*<br>(0.035)    |
| Race fixed effects        | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>            | 0.099                | 0.099                | 0.100                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>       | 0.094                | 0.093                | 0.094                |
| Num. obs.                 | 1819                 | 1819                 | 1819                 |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.2: OLS linear regression models. The dependent variable is standardized to have a mean of one and a standard deviation of one. Assault is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports experiencing sexual assault or rape in her lifetime. Education is measured on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a seven-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients take white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample). Party is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

## F Additional Analyses

### F.1 Distribution of women’s rights activities

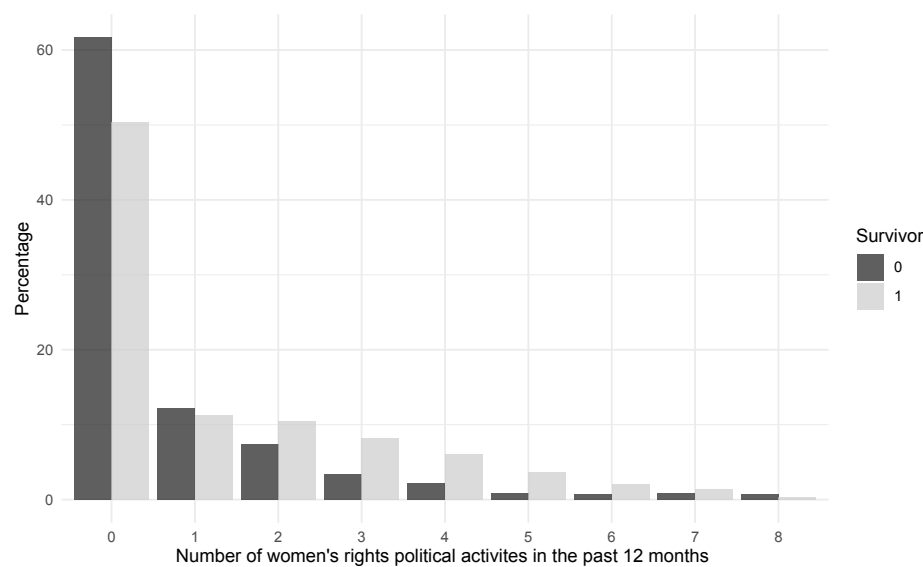


Figure SI.1: Distribution of the number of political activities that respondents report doing related to women’s rights.

### F.2 With separate outcome variables

|                     | Model 1<br>Protest   | Model 2<br>Wear      | Model 3<br>Donate    | Model 4<br>Argue     | Model 5<br>Post      | Model 6<br>Contact   | Model 7<br>Vol.      | Model 8<br>Petition  |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| (Intercept)         | 0.162***<br>(0.037)  | 0.295***<br>(0.056)  | 0.257***<br>(0.054)  | 0.455***<br>(0.059)  | 0.424***<br>(0.061)  | 0.211***<br>(0.046)  | 0.179***<br>(0.057)  | 0.549***<br>(0.063)  |
| Assault             | 0.021<br>(0.014)     | 0.095***<br>(0.021)  | 0.056***<br>(0.020)  | 0.125***<br>(0.022)  | 0.121***<br>(0.023)  | 0.047***<br>(0.017)  | 0.086***<br>(0.021)  | 0.133***<br>(0.024)  |
| Edu                 | 0.114***<br>(0.031)  | 0.062<br>(0.047)     | 0.127***<br>(0.045)  | 0.159***<br>(0.050)  | 0.151***<br>(0.051)  | 0.160***<br>(0.039)  | 0.251***<br>(0.048)  | 0.190***<br>(0.053)  |
| Age                 | -0.004***<br>(0.001) | -0.004***<br>(0.001) | -0.003**<br>(0.001)  | -0.007***<br>(0.001) | -0.005***<br>(0.001) | -0.004***<br>(0.001) | -0.004***<br>(0.001) | -0.006***<br>(0.002) |
| Income              | 0.018<br>(0.026)     | 0.037<br>(0.039)     | 0.078**<br>(0.038)   | 0.060<br>(0.041)     | -0.036<br>(0.043)    | 0.045<br>(0.032)     | 0.126***<br>(0.040)  | -0.003<br>(0.045)    |
| Party               | -0.011***<br>(0.003) | -0.017***<br>(0.005) | -0.022***<br>(0.005) | -0.026***<br>(0.005) | -0.027***<br>(0.005) | -0.021***<br>(0.004) | -0.003<br>(0.005)    | -0.042***<br>(0.006) |
| Race FEs            | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    | ✓                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.034                | 0.029                | 0.035                | 0.062                | 0.046                | 0.043                | 0.050                | 0.073                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | 0.029                | 0.023                | 0.030                | 0.057                | 0.041                | 0.038                | 0.045                | 0.068                |
| Num. obs.           | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 | 1826                 |

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$

Table SI.3: OLS linear regression models. Dependent variables are standardized. Each model takes a dependent variable associated with a specific political action: 1) protesting; 2) wearing a political item; 3) making a political donation; 4) getting into a political argument; 5) posting something political on social media; 6) contacting one's representative; 7) volunteering for a political campaign; 8) signing a petition. Education is on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is on a six-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients treat white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample). Partisanship is on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

### F.3 Rape and assault separately

|                     | Model 1              | Model 2              |
|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| (Intercept)         | 0.452***<br>(0.126)  | 0.349***<br>(0.129)  |
| Rape                | 0.275***<br>(0.046)  |                      |
| Assault (not rape)  |                      | 0.307***<br>(0.048)  |
| Education           | 0.612***<br>(0.109)  | 0.593***<br>(0.109)  |
| Age                 | -0.019***<br>(0.003) | -0.018***<br>(0.003) |
| Income              | 0.179**<br>(0.091)   | 0.155*<br>(0.091)    |
| Partisanship        | -0.084***<br>(0.012) | -0.081***<br>(0.012) |
| Race FEs            | ✓                    | ✓                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.094                | 0.097                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | 0.089                | 0.092                |
| Num. obs.           | 1819                 | 1819                 |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.4: OLS linear regression models. The dependent variable, the composite political participation score, is standardized. Model 1 has the independent variable of whether the respondent indicated that they had experienced rape. Model 2 has the independent variable of whether the respondent indicated that they had experienced sexual assault. Education is on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is on a six-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients use white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample). Partisanship is on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

## F.4 Party ID as a dependent variable

|                       | Model 1              |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| (Intercept)           | 3.201***<br>(0.253)  |
| Assault victimization | −0.014<br>(0.099)    |
| Education             | −1.189***<br>(0.220) |
| Age                   | 0.030***<br>(0.006)  |
| Income                | 0.283<br>(0.185)     |
| Race fixed effects    | ✓                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.080                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>   | 0.075                |
| Num. obs.             | 1826                 |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.5: OLS linear regression models. The dependent variable is party identification, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Education is measured on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a six-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients use white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample).

## F.5 Post-treatment bias

|                       | Model 1<br>Participation Index<br>All | Model 2<br>Participation Index<br>Women’s Rights | Model 3<br>Participation Index<br>Not Women’s Rights |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| (Intercept)           | 0.391***<br>(0.120)                   | 0.454***<br>(0.120)                              | 0.009<br>(0.123)                                     |
| Assault victimization | 0.312***<br>(0.050)                   | 0.320***<br>(0.049)                              | 0.076<br>(0.051)                                     |
| Age                   | −0.018***<br>(0.003)                  | −0.020***<br>(0.003)                             | −0.002<br>(0.003)                                    |
| Race fixed effects    | ✓                                     | ✓                                                | ✓                                                    |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.043                                 | 0.050                                            | 0.004                                                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>   | 0.039                                 | 0.046                                            | −0.000                                               |
| Num. obs.             | 1823                                  | 1823                                             | 1823                                                 |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.6: OLS linear regression models. Dependent variables are standardized to have a mean of one and a standard deviation of one. Assault is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports experiencing sexual assault or rape in her lifetime. Education is on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a seven-point scale. Partisanship is on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Fixed effects by race/ethnicity treat white respondents as the base category.

## F.6 Survivors who know other survivors

|                     | Model 1         | Model 2         | Model 3            |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
|                     | Particip. Index | Particip. Index | Particip. Index    |
|                     | All             | Women's Rights  | Not Women's Rights |
| (Intercept)         | 0.329*          | 0.603***        | -0.352*            |
|                     | (0.181)         | (0.181)         | (0.187)            |
| Know_Survivor       | 0.419***        | 0.465***        | 0.066              |
|                     | (0.076)         | (0.077)         | (0.078)            |
| Education           | 0.131***        | 0.116***        | 0.066***           |
|                     | (0.024)         | (0.024)         | (0.024)            |
| Age                 | -0.023***       | -0.026***       | -0.004             |
|                     | (0.004)         | (0.004)         | (0.004)            |
| Income              | 0.033*          | 0.020           | 0.031              |
|                     | (0.019)         | (0.019)         | (0.019)            |
| Partisanship        | -0.093***       | -0.133***       | 0.032**            |
|                     | (0.014)         | (0.015)         | (0.015)            |
| Race fixed effects  | ✓               | ✓               | ✓                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.122           | 0.149           | 0.020              |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | 0.115           | 0.142           | 0.012              |
| Num. obs.           | 1236            | 1243            | 1236               |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.7: OLS linear regression models. This sample is only of those who report having experienced sexual assault or rape. Dependent variables are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Know Survivor is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports having a close friend or family member who has experienced sexual assault or rape. Education is measured on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a six-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients take white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample). Party is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

## F.7 Family and friends of survivors

In addition to probing the respondents' personal victimization experiences, our survey also included a question that asked respondents: "Do you have a close family member or a friend who has been the victim of sexual assault or rape." We use this question to test whether our theory can be extended to individuals with a loved one who has confided in them about an assault experience.

For this analysis, we use a sub-sample of our survey that excludes survivors. This allows us to test for differences between women who report that a close friend or family member has experienced sexual assault or rape and those who do not report knowing anyone like this. Thirty percent of respondents in the reduced sample report having a close personal contact who is an assault survivor. Table SI.8 reproduces the regression models used in Table 1 of the main paper, but now considers whether the respondent personally knows a survivor as the key independent variable, using the sub-sample of respondents who are not survivors of sexual assault. This variable is statistically significant across all specifications.

These results also suggest that we may have underestimated the associations reported in Table 1, as the reference category of non-survivors includes this group with close personal

|                     | Model 1         | Model 2         | Model 3            |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
|                     | Particip. Index | Particip. Index | Particip. Index    |
|                     | All             | Women's Rights  | Not Women's Rights |
| (Intercept)         | −0.201          | 0.011           | −0.402*            |
|                     | (0.201)         | (0.191)         | (0.226)            |
| Know_Survivor       | 0.338***        | 0.295***        | 0.176**            |
|                     | (0.078)         | (0.076)         | (0.088)            |
| Education           | 0.057*          | 0.032           | 0.057              |
|                     | (0.031)         | (0.030)         | (0.035)            |
| Age                 | −0.008*         | −0.007          | −0.005             |
|                     | (0.005)         | (0.005)         | (0.006)            |
| Income              | 0.033           | 0.009           | 0.049*             |
|                     | (0.024)         | (0.024)         | (0.028)            |
| Partisanship        | −0.051***       | −0.073***       | 0.021              |
|                     | (0.018)         | (0.017)         | (0.020)            |
| Race fixed effects  | ✓               | ✓               | ✓                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.077           | 0.077           | 0.029              |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | 0.061           | 0.061           | 0.012              |
| Num. obs.           | 583             | 583             | 583                |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.8: OLS linear regression models. Dependent variables are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Know Survivor is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports having a close friend or family member who has experienced sexual assault or rape. Education is measured on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a six-point scale. Racial/ethnic coefficients take white respondents as the omitted category (the largest racial group in our sample). Party is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

connections to a survivor. Using the base category of respondents who have not experienced sexual assault and do not know anyone close personally who has, we find that survivors score 0.43 standard deviations higher on the scale of activities related to women's rights, as seen in Model 1 of Table SI.9. Using this same base category, Model 1 of Table SI.8 suggests that personally knowing a survivor of sexual assault is associated with a 0.29 standard deviation increase in women's rights political participation. Thus, the association of a personal assault experience is about 50 percent larger than that of personally knowing a survivor.

|                       | Model 1<br>Particip. Index<br>All | Model 2<br>Particip. Index<br>Women's Rights | Model 3<br>Particip. Index<br>Not Women's Rights |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| (Intercept)           | 0.201<br>(0.147)                  | 0.482***<br>(0.145)                          | -0.399***<br>(0.155)                             |
| Assault Victimization | 0.446***<br>(0.055)               | 0.434***<br>(0.056)                          | 0.159***<br>(0.058)                              |
| Education             | 0.104***<br>(0.020)               | 0.084***<br>(0.020)                          | 0.065***<br>(0.021)                              |
| Age                   | -0.021***<br>(0.003)              | -0.022***<br>(0.003)                         | -0.005<br>(0.004)                                |
| Income                | 0.027*<br>(0.016)                 | 0.010<br>(0.016)                             | 0.035**<br>(0.017)                               |
| Partisanship          | -0.077***<br>(0.012)              | -0.108***<br>(0.012)                         | 0.029**<br>(0.013)                               |
| Race fixed effects    | ✓                                 | ✓                                            | ✓                                                |
| R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.113                             | 0.129                                        | 0.023                                            |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>   | 0.108                             | 0.124                                        | 0.017                                            |
| Num. obs.             | 1632                              | 1639                                         | 1632                                             |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

Table SI.9: OLS linear regression models. This sample excludes respondents who report not having experienced assault but having a close friend or family member who has. Dependent variables are standardized to have a mean of one and a standard deviation of one. Assault is a dichotomous variable, scored as one if the respondent reports experiencing sexual assault or rape in her lifetime. Education is on a six-point scale ranging from less than high school to a post-graduate degree. Income is measured on a seven-point scale. Partisanship is on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Fixed effects by race/ethnicity treat white respondents as the base category.

## F.8 Non-continuous moderators

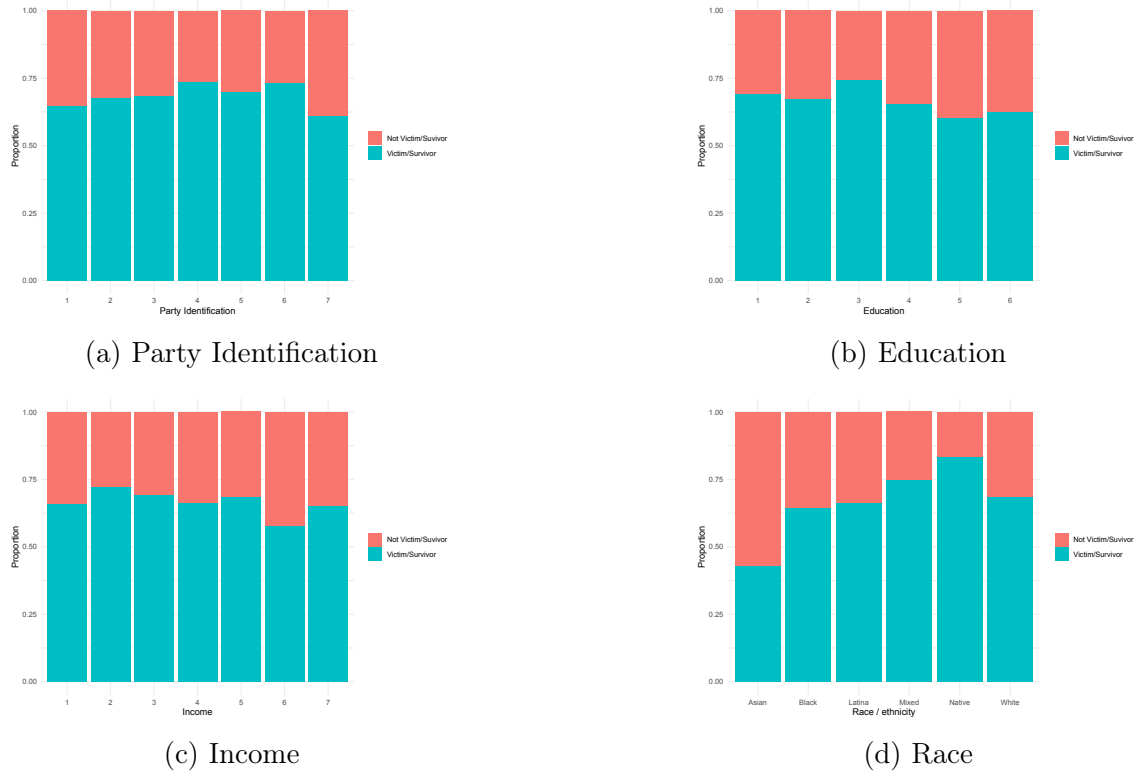


Figure SI.2: Distribution of moderators by assault victimization status. Each panel shows the distribution of the moderator for respondents who report a personal victimization experience, compared with those who do not, showing substantial overlap across groups for party, education, and income).

Figure SI.2 shows the distribution of reporting an assault experience across our moderators of interest. They show that sexual assault is a common experience for women across all groups. They also illustrate substantial overlap across groups for the continuous moderators (party, education, and income), justifying the use of continuous measures.

We also show that our results on interactions appear across multiple specifications of our moderating variables. In Figure SI.3, we plot the marginal effects of both partisanship and socio-economic status, now both measured as factor variables and binned into three categories. The plots generally show trends consistent with those observed in our linear interactions. For partisanship, the downward slope appears to be driven by Republicans. Independents, for their part, are positioned between Democrats and Republicans but lean toward Democrats. This is not inconsistent with our theorizing, which primarily concerns the distinctiveness of Republican women. For SES, we observe monotonically increasing coefficients across the three binnings: low (below -0.5 SDs from the mean), medium (within 0.5 SDs of the mean), and high-SES (above 0.5 SDs from the mean).

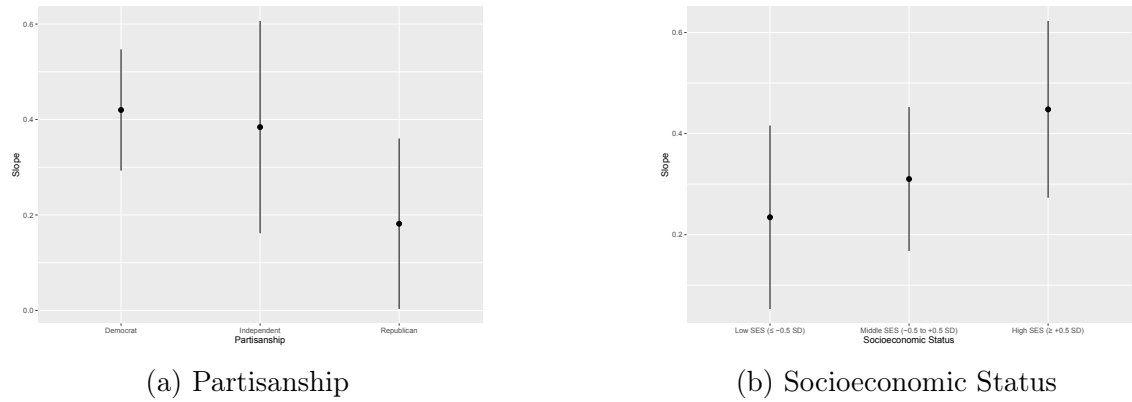


Figure SI.3: Estimated marginal effects of sexual assault victimization by partisanship and socioeconomic status. Models use binned moderators to relax linearity assumptions. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

### G Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG)

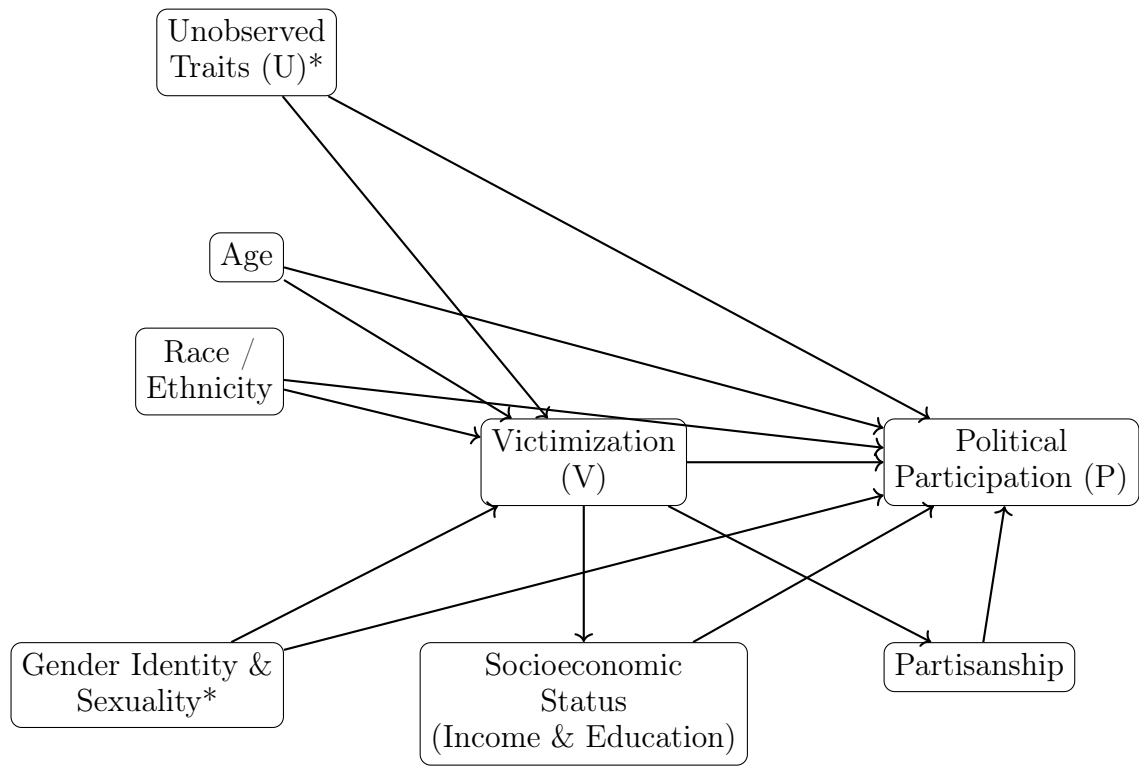


Figure SI.4: Directed acyclic graph (DAG) illustrating the hypothesized causal relationship between victimization experiences and political participation. Socioeconomic status and partisanship are treated as potentially post-treatment. Variables marked with \* are unobserved.

## H Comparison to ANES Participation Rates

Below, we compare the distribution of respondents in our original survey, based on the number of activities they report participating in over the last twelve months, with women respondents from the 2020 ANES. The distribution of responses across the two data sources is quite similar, giving us confidence in the representativeness of our sample.

| # activities | % Respondents (Original Survey) | % Respondents (ANES 2020) |
|--------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 0            | 37.47                           | 33.64                     |
| 1            | 18.21                           | 20.16                     |
| 2            | 11.68                           | 16.56                     |
| 3            | 10.92                           | 11.42                     |
| 4            | 8.28                            | 8.99                      |
| 5            | 6.25                            | 4.92                      |
| 6            | 3.57                            | 2.94                      |
| 7            | 2.80                            | 0.94                      |
| 8            | 0.82                            | 0.43                      |

Table SI.10: Distribution of the number of political activities reported by women respondents in the original survey compared to ANES 2020 benchmarks.

## I Coding of Women’s Rights Activities

### I.1 Substantive categories across activities

Table SI.11: Substantive Categories Referenced When Getting into a Political Argument

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 77%                  |
| General Women’s Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 25%                  |
| Sexism, Misogyny, and Gender Norms                   | 20%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 16%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 13%                  |
| Feminism and Women’s Movements                       | 11%                  |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 7%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 7%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses (N = 186) that referenced each category. Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive responses (e.g., placeholders or entries without discernible issue content) were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.12: Substantive Categories Referenced When Wearing or Displaying a Political Item

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 82%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 35%                  |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 18%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 14%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 13%                  |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 6%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 7%                   |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 9%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 214). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive responses were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.13: Substantive Categories Referenced When Contacting a Political Representative

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 86%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 18%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 14%                  |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 6%                   |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 5%                   |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 4%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 4%                   |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 3%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (n = 152). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive responses were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.14: Substantive Categories Referenced When Donating to a Political Cause or Candidate

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 82%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 29%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 17%                  |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 15%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 13%                  |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 6%                   |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 5%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 4%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 143). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive or ambiguous responses (e.g., generic references to “support” or “charity” without issue content) were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.15: Substantive Categories Referenced When Signing a Political Petition

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 84%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 32%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 18%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 11%                  |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 8%                   |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 9%                   |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 7%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 6%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 241). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive or ambiguous responses (e.g., placeholders or references without identifiable issue content) were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.16: Substantive Categories Referenced When Posting on Social Media

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 83%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 36%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 21%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 18%                  |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 16%                  |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 11%                  |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 9%                   |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 6%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 228). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive or ambiguous responses (e.g., placeholders or references without identifiable issue content) were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.17: Substantive Categories Referenced When Participating in a Political Protest

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 84%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 35%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 17%                  |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 16%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 8%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 5%                   |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 5%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 63). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive or ambiguous responses were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

Table SI.18: Substantive Categories Referenced When Volunteering

| Category                                             | Percent of Responses |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Reproductive Rights and Abortion (incl. Roe v. Wade) | 46%                  |
| Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy        | 32%                  |
| General Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy           | 29%                  |
| Health-Related Women's Causes (non-abortion)         | 23%                  |
| Political Representation and Electoral Politics      | 18%                  |
| Feminism and Women's Movements                       | 14%                  |
| Economic Inequality and Pay Equity                   | 9%                   |
| LGBTQ+ and Trans-Related Gender Rights               | 4%                   |

*Notes:* Percentages reflect the share of *substantive* responses that referenced each category (N = 112). Responses could be assigned to multiple categories. Percentages, therefore, do not sum to 100. Non-substantive or ambiguous responses were excluded from the denominator. Categories were inductively coded from open-ended survey responses.

## I.2 Example activities

Table SI.19: Representative Responses Coded as Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy

| Activity           | Representative Verbatim Responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political Argument | “Fighting against the idea that sexual assault is the woman’s fault for her clothing choices.”<br>“SA Victim Advocacy and Abortion Rights.”                                                                                                                     |
| Political Item     | “It was for victims of domestic violence and rape.”<br>“Wore a button in support of sexual assault awareness month and the Me Too movement.”                                                                                                                    |
| Contacting a Rep   | “I’ve emailed my Congress and Senators over abortion, sexual assault and lesser pay.”                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Donating           | “For rape victims.”<br>“The charity was a locality situated on the protection and sheltering of domestic violence against women.”                                                                                                                               |
| Petition           | “Signed several petitions supporting Planned Parenthood and rape victims.”<br>“To draw more attention to a sexual assault incidence that was being ignored by the University.”<br>“The petition was for harsher punishments towards rapists and sex offenders.” |
| Posting            | “I have posted (publicly, not privately) about abortion rights and my own rape as well as about trans women’s murders.”<br>“Provide assistance to women who have been assaulted.”                                                                               |
| Protest            | “Listened to women who claimed they were raped by a member of a fraternity on our campus.”<br>“Slut walk.”                                                                                                                                                      |
| Volunteering       | “I volunteer on a crisis line and am working to create a Take Back the Night march on my campus. I’m also searching for training to be a victim’s advocate.”<br>“Volunteered at a woman’s shelter.”                                                             |

*Notes:* Responses shown are illustrative examples drawn from open-ended survey answers coded as *Sexual Violence, Consent, and Victim Advocacy*. Responses could receive multiple codes and are presented verbatim, with minor typographical normalization for readability.