

MINNESOTA NICE? LEADERSHIP, SEXISM, AND ATTACKS ON THE LAUNCH OF SENATOR AMY KLOBUCHAR'S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT *In the days before the launch of her 2020 presidential campaign, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar was the subject of media scrutiny documenting how her consistent mistreatment of staff had spurred record levels of turnover in her office. Supportive staff, though, argued that claims that Klobuchar was a horrible boss were sexist, and that powerful men get away with approaches to leadership that powerful women cannot. Existing research shows that women running for and holding office are held to different standards than men are. To what extent do these differences apply here, and does the public buy the idea that sexism creates a mitigating circumstance that should cause us to look differently at Klobuchar's behavior? Findings of an original survey experiment reveal the damage such a scandal can do, cast doubt on whether a man would be given leeway in the same situation, and demonstrate the somewhat restorative effects of claiming that gender bias explains political perceptions.*

KEYWORDS

NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING, GENDER POLITICS, CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, SURVEY EXPERIMENT

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INTRODUCTION

On a snowy Sunday afternoon in early February 2019, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar announced that she would be a candidate for the presidency of the United States of America. The senator, then in the midst of her third term in the upper chamber of Congress, hoped to bring a Midwestern working-class background, a reputation as a fighter on behalf of mainstream Democratic Party ideals, and a resume replete with examples of getting things done to the race to determine who would go on to face incumbent president Donald Trump the following year. In her speech from Boom Island in Minneapolis, Klobuchar declared that she was running for “every parent who wants a better world for their kids ... every student who wants a good education ... every senior who wants affordable prescription drugs ... every worker, farmer, dreamer, builder, for every American.” She proclaimed to those in attendance and those watching via television or livestream “I will look you in the eye. I will tell you what I think. I will focus on getting things done. That’s what I’ve done my whole life. And no matter what, I’ll lead from the heart” (Klobuchar, 2019).

However, a few days before her announcement, a different sort of storm threatened Klobuchar’s launch, calling into question not only the claims that she was an advocate for every worker but also the heart that underlay her approach to leadership. Senator Klobuchar was, in the eyes of numerous staffers who served under her in the past, a horrible boss (Hensley-Clancy, 2019; Redden & Terkel, 2019a; Redden & Terkel, 2019b). According to mostly anonymous reports from previous employees, the senator was verbally abusive, petty, and vindictive in her approach to running her D.C. office. The atmosphere was so problematic that it led to a level of staff turnover higher than that of any of her Senate peers for over a decade. Another set of former staffers made an interesting set of counterclaims amidst the chaos: sexism was to blame for this being a story in the first place. They argued that Klobuchar may have had high standards in terms of what she expected from those who worked for her, but she was being held to a different standard as a manager of staff because she was a woman, and a man with such a leadership style would be excused for having similar expectations and using similar tactics.

What sort of impact did this scandal likely have on Klobuchar’s reputation as she began her run for the highest office in the land? Do counterclaims that a man in the same situation would be treated differently (i.e., more favorably) hold water? Finally, how might cueing the concept of sexism amidst such a scandal help repair a potentially damaged image? Previous research suggests that while a scandal of Klobuchar’s own doing was likely to have impacted her standing, it is within the realm of possibility that the overall impact may have been exacerbated by her gender and that public discussion of said sexism might prove weaponizable in the attempt at reputation management moving forward.

I begin to answer these questions through an original survey experiment in which respondents encountered a politician facing a problem exactly like Klobuchar did. Results reveal the extent of the damage incurred by Klobuchar as a result of public learning

about her staff management woes. They also exhibit the reality that with this particular transgression, a politician's gender offers no quarter: men who are horrible bosses are judged just as harshly as women. In spite of that similarity, the findings do also illustrate how claiming sexism exists (even when it might not or we cannot confirm it does) could prove to be a path back from the brink. Klobuchar almost certainly benefited in some ways from this counternarrative being inserted into the broader debate about how she comported herself as a boss, benefits that could have ameliorated the scandal's impact on how the public thought she should be judged as a candidate for the highest office in the land.

"I CRIED, LIKE, ALL THE TIME": MANAGEMENT, MISMANAGEMENT, CONSEQUENCES, AND PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRATIONS

Stories about Senator Klobuchar's management of staff had percolated a bit across political media in the year before her presidential run began. One piece in early 2018 chronicled a "Worst Bosses" report from LegiStorm in which between 2001 and 2016 Klobuchar was deemed to have the highest staff turnover (36% annually) in the Senate (McCaskill, 2018). Another article later that year previewing the strengths and weaknesses of a potential presidential campaign also referred to such turnover, stating that the senator's "reputation is not all sweetness and light; she is said to be brutal to work for" (Stolberg, 2018).

The whisper campaign became a deafening topic of debate in the days before Klobuchar's Minneapolis announcement event. An article in *HuffPost* (Redden & Terkel, 2019a) and another from *BuzzFeed News* (Hensley-Clancy, 2019) broke the story wide open, chronicling in painstaking fashion a wide variety of anonymous complaints about the senator's managerial behavior and the resulting tense and demoralizing atmosphere within her team over time. Klobuchar regularly yelled at staff and threw things in anger, including a binder that accidentally hit an aide. She frequently sent emails to staff in the middle of the night that berated the quality of their work. These emails would often point out grammatical errors, deride the use of disliked words and phrases, and go on to describe the performance of the targeted employee as "the worst" (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). Other members of Klobuchar's staff would be CC'ed on these put-downs, "giving the emails the effect of a public flogging" (Redden & Terkel, 2019a). Klobuchar was prone to outbursts over mishaps such as staff failing to pack the right coat, using staples, or forgetting to charge her iPad (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). The senator also had staff running errands for her, like picking up dry cleaning, washing dishes, or making appointments (Redden & Terkel, 2019a). In sum, repeated bad behavior created a "workplace controlled by fear, anger, and shame", where one former staffer admitted, "I cried. I cried, like, all the time" (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). It also diminished the office's effectiveness, according to the senator's accusers (Redden & Terkel, 2019a). A follow-up story from *HuffPost* also noted that Klobuchar had been chastised for her mismanagement years earlier by Senate Majority Leader (and fellow Democrat) Harry Reid and that the president of a local

Minnesota chapter of the AFSCME union asked a larger affiliate not to endorse Klobuchar in the mid-2000s during her first run for federal office because of “shameful treatment of her employees” (Redden & Terkel, 2019b). As a result of the overall growing narrative, Klobuchar’s presidential campaign was purportedly hobbled because potential managers refused to sign on to the job (Redden & Terkel, 2019a).

Insiders within Democratic politics realized the damage this set of stories could do to Klobuchar’s public profile and nascent relationship with primary voters nationwide from the beginning. Jerry Crawford, a party operative in Iowa (an early state in the nominee selection process) depicted the scandal as “a very unfortunate way to start a presidential campaign” and said that “having to take time away from stumping on why you would be the best candidate and playing defense on what happened in her past” was a potential roadblock. An anonymous Democratic consultant signaled that the accusations hurt the senator’s likelihood of “getting support from important people, like donors and elected officials”, key to building a winning coalition. Democratic Party strategist Doug Thornell claimed the story cut to the heart of the issue of character, stating that it “potentially undermines one of her core strengths – that she can bring people together and that she’s got a good temperament, ‘Minnesota nice’ thing” (Schneider, 2019). Later reporting put an even finer point on this question of niceness, telling the tale of a time when a staffer forgot to provide the senator with a fork to eat her salad; she went on to use a comb instead and then made the staffer clean the comb (Flegenheimer & Ember, 2019).

Perhaps sensing potential peril, Klobuchar, her staff, and some former staffers attempted to push back against this narrative from its earliest whispers. Even before her run began, the senator stated that she had “high expectations” of those who worked for her (Stolberg, 2018). She used similar language immediately after the scandal broke, telling reporters, “Yes, I can be tough, and yes, I can push people. I have high expectations for myself, I have high expectations for the people that work for me, but I have high expectations for this country” (McGann, 2019). In a subsequent CNN candidate forum, Klobuchar was somewhat apologetic, stating, “Am I a tough boss sometimes? Yes. Have I pushed people too hard? Yes” (Flegenheimer & Ember, 2019).

GENDER, LEADERSHIP, POLITICS, AND POWER: WHY SEXISM MIGHT HAVE MADE THIS A SCANDAL

At the same time, some within and beyond Senator Klobuchar’s purview began raising the question of whether the fact that the senator was a woman was a variable within the scandal worth exploring further. Amidst a handful of quotes from former staffers who reported positive experiences working for the senator, one asked to comment on the first HuffPost story wondered “whether former co-workers who thought she was abusive were falling for sexist stereotypes about female leaders with high standards” (Redden & Terkel, 2019a). Asal Sayas, Klobuchar’s former head of scheduling, went even further, stating “women shouldn’t be expected to nurture their employees or colleagues more than men, and they should be no less entitled to challenge them” (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). A

different former staffer suggested that Klobuchar's gender explained why the story spread as quickly as it did (Hensley-Clancy, 2019). Another previous legislative aide claimed "I've heard people say she's tough to work for, and I sometimes cringe when I hear it because I rarely hear that said about male bosses in Congress despite the fact that half of Congress is tough to work for" (Redden & Terkel, 2019b). Interestingly, according to the aforementioned 2018 LegiStorm report, 7 of the 10 "worst bosses" in the Senate were women, despite a massive gender divide in said chamber that favored men (McGann, 2019).

Other defenders alluded to prominent men in office (e.g., Bill Clinton) with a reputation for managing staff in just as tough a fashion as Klobuchar who took little to no heat for doing so (Flegenheimer & Ember, 2019; Palmieri, 2019). In a February 2019 piece in Vox, Laura McGann went further, arguing that some men have turned such negatives into positives, making them "not a devil wearing Prada" but "a devil to admire." Jennifer Palmieri, communications director for President Barack Obama and the 2016 presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, felt similarly, noting how powerful men in politics wear toughness as "a badge of honor, not a mark of shame." Palmieri's experience working for Clinton and other women in prominent roles in politics led her to believe that it was harder to work for a woman because "women are held to different and often higher standards than their male counterparts – by their colleagues, by the media, by the public." This, according to Palmieri, created distinct challenges for those staffing any woman in power, including Klobuchar (Palmieri, 2019).

These charges of sexism in the case of Klobuchar's scandal do potentially ring true, as an expansive body of research on gender and politics makes clear the ways in which women considering running for, campaigning for, and serving in office are treated differently than men. Women are less likely to enter politics than men are. They think less about running, and after considering it they are less likely to then actually enter the fray (Lawless, 2015). To some extent this can be explained by women receiving less attention from traditional political gatekeepers (Fox & Lawless, 2010), but there is also evidence that gender roles may keep women from realizing any ambition they might have in this particular public realm (Lawless, 2015).

When women do run, they need to be perceived as having more skills than men do in order to win (Bauer, 2020). They must focus on appearing competent much more often than male candidates (Ditonto, 2017). They are often painted as being more liberal or more feminist simply based on gender; they may also be deemed better on issues of compassion like education and health care but struggle to build credibility on economic or security policy (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). When women candidates can prove themselves on issues seen as masculine, they have the potential to maximize support (Dolan, 2010). If women candidates step out of line with traditional gender stereotypes, they may be punished (Boussalis et al., 2021). On Election Day itself, there is a slight bias on the part of men to want to vote for men; this bias increases a bit with more prominent offices like the presidency (Ono & Burden, 2019). Dynamics like these may have been most evident in the 2016 presidential election, where sexism helped explain favorability toward and voting for Donald Trump (Bracic et al., 2019).

Once in office, women politicians may benefit from some perceptions but be hamstrung by others. They are deemed well-educated, assertive, and well-spoken. However, they become more likely to be assessed as bossy, indecisive, or overly emotional. They also often score lower than their male counterparts on traits like competence or leadership (Schneider & Bos, 2014). If they choose to be ambitious, that ambition might be used against them; women seeking to climb the ladder and accrue more power are perceived negatively (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

Such differences in treatment by politician gender apply specifically to the context of scandal as well. In some scandals, especially those driven by internal factors rather than external ones, women politicians are punished more severely in terms of public reactions than men are (Cucchi & Cavazza, 2020). This punishment may in some cases happen when the scandal entails violating gender norms (Courtmanche & Connor Green, 2020). Women involved in scandal pay a media penalty as well as an electoral one should they be on the ballot (Prémont & Millette, 2023; Waylen & Southern, 2019). However, arguing mitigating circumstances for why a scandal took place can be an effective strategy for women politicians to defend themselves and overcome the penalty of scandal (Cucchi et al., 2021).

We know women in politics are treated differently than men are. We know that, in many cases, this differential treatment penalizes women as they run for, win, and hold office. We know that such separate standards hold women in politics back as they strive to succeed, but also in some situations keep them down when they fall short and face scandal. However, mitigating circumstances might matter in shaping public evaluations of women accused of wrongdoing. To what extent do these dynamics hold true in how Amy Klobuchar was perceived following the revelations of how she treated her staff?

While leadership of one's staff may not be an archetypal subject for attack, the fact that the scandal leaked when it did (right before the presidential campaign launch) and from whom it did (anonymous former staffers) almost certainly allowed for the exacting of revenge and the undermining of the senator's public standing in a way all too familiar to politicians, pundits, and scholars who follow the dark art of character assassination (Icks et al., 2019). The specifics of the stories themselves clearly threatened years' worth of efforts on the part of Klobuchar to build a reputation for having the right temperament to hold high office, making her look like a contradiction when it comes to leadership, good in public and horrible in private (Schneider, 2019). Given that a vast body of research has shown how candidate traits provide a useful heuristic by which voters can make decisions, such a hit to one's profile could prove detrimental (Hardy, 2017). However, the argument that powerful women are treated differently than powerful men being proffered by supporters of the senator also seems like a piece of evidence some within the public could consider before rendering a verdict on Klobuchar's past, present, and future.

SURVEY EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

To explore opinion dynamics within and around the Klobuchar staff management scandal, I conducted a survey experiment.¹ A total of 481 Americans consented to take part in late June 2024. Participants were recruited via Lucid Theorem, a survey research platform connecting academic researchers with representative public samples.²

After answering a handful of introductory questions on topics unrelated to the research presented here, respondents were told that they were about to encounter a narrative about an elected official under scrutiny.³ They were instructed to read this narrative carefully. After spending at least a minute with the narrative, they were able to proceed to a set of questions in which they would assess the elected official and the job they were doing.

The narrative presented a simulated news story based on (and borrowing specific details from) coverage of concerns regarding Senator Klobuchar's management of staff publicized prominently before and after the February 2019 launch of her presidential campaign.⁴ The simulated story is about a state senator planning a run for governor, mirroring Klobuchar's attempt to climb the ladder from a prominent legislative position to the most powerful executive position in that same geographic area. The state senator, much like Klobuchar, is dogged by reports that she mistreats staff in a variety of ways. Participants were randomly selected to read 1 of 3 different versions of this story.

Narrative 1, the baseline narrative, starts with the headline "Wilson's Mistreatment of Staff Scared Off Candidates To Manage Her Gubernatorial Bid." From there, it reports the following details. Three people have withdrawn from consideration to manage State Senator Penny Wilson's probable gubernatorial campaign, partly because Wilson has a history of mistreating staff. Anonymous former staffers claim Wilson is "habitually demeaning" and "prone to bouts of cruelty." These factors make it difficult to work for Wilson for very long. Wilson sends emails in the middle of the night to staffers criticizing their work, sometimes CCing unrelated staffers at the same time to turn said criticism into something akin to a public flogging. Wilson has a temper that is unpredictable and set off by a wide variety of mistakes (e.g., grammar errors, using specific words the state senator dislikes, packing the wrong coat, forgetting to charge an iPad, using staples); this temper also regularly makes staffers cry. Wilson's behavior makes it difficult for staffers to help her do her job and distracts from governing, creating an environment where an equal amount of time is also spent on anger management. Finally, Wilson's office had the highest level of staff turnover between 2011 and 2023 (with just over a third of staffers departing every year). The article does concede early on as well that Wilson's public persona is that of a smart, funny, personable lawmaker who is known for the questions she asks in high-profile hearings.

¹ This experiment (#17328) was approved by The University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board.

² Lucid Theorem, owned and operated by Cint, provides survey samples that approximate a nationally representative population with respect to age, gender, education, race and ethnicity, income, region, and party identification.

³ Complete narrative language can be found in Appendix A.

⁴ This includes Hensley-Clancy (2019) and Redden and Terkel (2019a, 2019b).

Narrative 2, which I will refer to as the gender swap narrative, contained the exact same story as the baseline narrative previously described except for one potentially impactful change: every mention of the state senator being a woman was changed to being a man. This starts with Wilson's first name of Penny being changed to Paul. It also includes every instance of she, her, or herself being changed to he, him, or himself. Finally, the remaining third of respondents encountered Narrative 3, the sexism defense narrative. In this version of the story, all the details from the baseline narrative about State Senator Penny Wilson remain, but readers are given additional pieces of information about the scandal: the fact that several former staffers suggested Wilson was being held to a different standard due to sexism. This narrative offers an anonymous quote from one such staffer that states "I've heard people say she's tough to work for and I sometimes cringe when I hear it because I rarely hear that said about male bosses in the legislature. When a woman steps out of her expected role of 'caretaker,' she's attacked. Women shouldn't be expected to nurture their employees or colleagues more than men, and they should be no less entitled to challenge them."

The post-narrative questionnaire asked participants to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the scandal involving Senator Wilson's management of staff.⁵ These statements included whether Wilson has high expectations of staff, whether Wilson's expectations of staff are too high, if Wilson's treatment of staff does not matter, and whether the staff who complained about Wilson are overreacting. Respondents were asked whether Wilson is emotional, if Wilson is horrible at being a boss, and whether Wilson is horrible at being a state senator. They assessed whether Wilson is being held to a different standard due to sexism, and if Wilson is the victim of character assassination. Finally, they were asked whether this story should affect voters' decision-making should Wilson run for governor.

The survey experience closed with a traditional battery of questions on demographics, politics, and information gathering.⁶ This section revealed that 70 percent of the sample was White, non-Hispanic and that there was nearly a 50-50 split when it came to gender.⁷ 87% considered themselves to be heterosexual. When it came to education, only 35% had at least a bachelor's degree. 40% made less than US\$40,000 per year, while another 16% made US\$100,000 or more per year. 20% of those surveyed were below the age of 30, while 38% were 55 or older. When it came to political beliefs and affiliations, 42% saw themselves as identifying with or leaning toward the Democratic Party, while 36% identified with or leaned toward Republicans. 30% self-described as extremely liberal, liberal, or slightly liberal, while 32% deemed themselves slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. 29% were daily news readers/watchers/listeners, while another 25% did so less than once a month or never.

⁵ These statements can be found in Appendix B.

⁶ Specific wording for the demographic, political, and information-gathering questions and their response categories is available from the author upon request.

⁷ Given this study's focus on gender, sexism, and stereotypes, it is worth noting that there are no significant differences across treatment groups in terms of participant gender.

RESULTS

Before considering whether gender stereotypes and claims of sexism shape how members of the public react to a scandal akin to the one Senator Klobuchar found herself enmeshed in, we must explore the ways in which this scandal does or does not impact baseline assessments of the accused. In what ways was Senator Klobuchar's reputation likely damaged by her treatment of staff? Column 1 in Table 1, which reports assessments of the State Senator in the baseline treatment (the aforementioned Narrative 1), reveals the extent of the damage.

Table 1. Assessments of Scandal Impact by Candidate Gender

Statement	Penny (Baseline)	Paul (Gender Swap)
High Expectations	3.83	3.77
Expectations Too High	4.12	4.02
Treatment Doesn't Matter	1.75	1.74
Staff Are Overreacting	2.21	2.14
Emotional	3.94	3.93
Horrible Boss	4.12	4.17
Horrible State Senator	3.56	3.76
Character Assassination	2.34	2.32
Different Standard (Sexism)	2.54	2.65
Should Affect Voters	3.76	3.87

Note: N = 319. * indicates $p < .05$. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

As reactions to the baseline narrative reveal, members of the public were likely to see such treatment of staff as a real problem. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was *strongly disagree* and 5 was *strongly agree*, participants agreed that the State Senator in the treatment had high expectations ($M = 3.83$) and were even more likely to claim those expectations were too high (4.12). They did not agree that treatment of the staff does not matter (1.75) or that the State Senator's staff was overreacting (2.21). The narrative led them to believe that the State Senator was emotional (3.94) and a horrible boss (4.12), but a slightly lower mean resulted from the question of whether Wilson was a horrible state senator (3.56). They did not agree that Wilson was a victim of character assassination (2.34) and did not think she was being held to a different standard due to sexism (2.54), a concept not cued in the baseline narrative. Finally, respondents in this group did seem likely to agree that this information should affect voters' decision-making should Wilson run for governor (3.76).

What of the claims made by some that Senator Klobuchar was being treated differently on this issue of staff management because she was a woman, that men in similar positions are able to get away with "leadership" of this sort? My first endeavor to test this claim comes from a straightforward comparison of reactions to Narratives 1 (the baseline) and 2 (the gender swap, where State Senator Penny Wilson becomes State Senator Paul Wilson).

This comparison can be seen across Columns 1 and 2 in Table 1. The clear takeaway from comparing reactions to Narrative 1 and Narrative 2 is that respondents asked to consider a male politician facing this particular staff management scandal did not treat him any differently than those asked to consider a woman politician. T-tests reveal there are no significant differences in the means across the two state senators on all 10 statements.

What if we force the issue, though? What if we tell respondents there might be some amount of sexism in how the politician is being treated? What if we mention stereotypes in how men and women in power should or shouldn't handle managing their staffs? Does this lead participants to assess the scandalized politician any differently than others who aren't privy to such claims? Table 2 helps answer these questions, presenting a comparison in attitudes delivered by those who read the baseline story (Narrative 1) and those who read the version that mentions sexism and gendered expectations of leadership (Narrative 3).

Table 2. Assessments of Scandal Impact by Presence of a Sexism Defense

Statement	Penny (Baseline)	Penny (Sexism Defense)
High Expectations	3.82	4.08*
Expectations Too High	4.12	3.93
Treatment Doesn't Matter	1.75	1.88
Staff Are Overreacting	2.21	2.35
Emotional	3.93	3.74
Horrible Boss	4.12	3.80*
Horrible State Senator	3.56	3.37
Character Assassination	2.34	2.56
Different Standard (Sexism)	2.54	3.06*
Should Affect Voters	3.76	3.50*

Note: N = 319. * indicates $p < .05$. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Here, we see that considering claims of sexism and stereotypes do seem to make respondents act differently toward a politician facing a scandal like Senator Klobuchar did around the time she launched her presidential campaign. On 4 of the 10 statements, those who read Narrative 3, which included the arguments that sexism was creating different standards and that women who defy stereotypes of how women should manage staff are attacked, reacted significantly differently than those who read the baseline story in Narrative 1. Respondents who encountered the sexism defense were more likely to agree that State Senator Penny Wilson had high expectations of staff (4.08) than those in the baseline group (3.82, $p = .048$). Those who encountered the sexism defense were less likely to agree Wilson was a horrible boss (3.80) than those in the baseline group (4.12, $p = .005$). Participants who encountered the sexism defense were less likely to believe that the story should affect voters' decision-making should Wilson run for governor (3.50) than those in the baseline group (3.76, $p = .039$). Finally, it appears that the sexism defense made those who read it more likely to agree that sexism was leading Wilson to be held to a different standard (3.06) than those in the baseline group (2.54, $p = .000$). In short, making

the public consider the possibility sexism played a role in the scandal seemed to help the politician's image a bit on a handful of fronts.

It should be noted, though, that just because respondents who read the sexism defense reacted significantly differently than those who didn't in some cases, this does not mean that their perspectives on State Senator Penny Wilson were demonstrably more positive. The mean scores reveal that they were still more likely to perceive Wilson as a horrible boss than not, just less so than those who weren't prompted to think about sexism and stereotypes. They were still more likely than not to think the story should affect voter decision-making, but not as much as those in the baseline. It is also worth noting that the sexism defense was apparently not overwhelming in its ability to convince those who read it that sexism existed; the mean response in that group on the question of whether Wilson was being held to a different standard due to sexism was only 3.06 on the scale from 1-5, which is almost right in the middle. It appears the sexism defense was convincing enough to some in ways that benefit Wilson's broader public persona and political ambitions.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What broad conclusions might we draw from the results of this survey experiment as they pertain to Amy Klobuchar's plight? First, this was a scandal that almost certainly hurt the senator, and across a number of metrics. A similar politician embroiled in a similar situation was deemed a horrible boss who was emotional and whose expectations were too high. Those surveyed thought the treatment of staff mattered, and didn't think the staff were overreacting; moreover, they didn't see the telling of the story as an attempt at character assassination. Finally, the story of staff mismanagement was deemed to be one that should affect voters as they consider the politician's attempt to win higher office. All of this in total suggests that anyone who heard about Klobuchar's misdeeds likely judged her harshly for them and quite possibly held them against her as she ran for the White House. However, the findings also reveal that a man in a similar situation would have paid a pretty similar penalty, undercutting claims by staffers friendly to Klobuchar that any powerful man with such a leadership style would automatically escape scrutiny like the senator was facing. This appears to be a type of scandal that damages anyone who is this tough on those who work for them.

How then do we think about the revelations in Table 2, which revealed that cueing sexism for some respondents led to them thinking about the scandal significantly differently in some ways than those who weren't given this defense? It appears that the presence of this pushback in articles and opinion pieces on Klobuchar's scandal likely helped her a bit. A politician facing the same blow to her reputation as Klobuchar was seen a less horrible boss by those prompted to consider whether there was differential treatment at play based solely on gender. While still thinking the story should affect voters, those asked to consider sexism didn't think it should affect voters quite as much. The senator's campaign may have benefited from journalists who, in seeking out staffers

with positive things to say about their time in Klobuchar's office, also included those staffers' analysis of why the story was a story in the first place. One question we might have is whether this provides evidence for a new play in the scandalized politician's image repair playbook: claim an accusation is sexist and see if that helps. It could reduce an attack's offensiveness (Benoit, 2025). This would be a play with limited applicability but potential situational power.

Given such findings, it is natural to consider how they extend existing literature on related topics, generalize to contexts beyond America and beyond politics, and offer directions for future research. The scandal described here, how it was revealed, and its impacts on the broader presidential campaign fit quite neatly into the pantheon of examples that constitute the phenomenon known as character assassination (Icks et al., 2019). More specifically, Klobuchar's case adds to what we know about how leadership, attacks, and reputation management intersect with the issue of gender. Powerful women have had their character called into question across both geography and time, from the days of Ancient Rome and the French Revolution through the recent American presidential campaign of Kamala Harris (Burrows, 2019; Icks, 2019; Keohane et al., 2025). Senator Amy Klobuchar was another such modern powerful woman under fire. In her situation though, gender's impact appears multifaceted, with data buttressing the general effectiveness of the sexism defense yet rebutting the specific claim within that defense that a man would have fared better than she did (perhaps contrary to what previous work on the penalties women in politics pay would lead us to expect).

The scandal examined here took place in the United States, but given the influence accrued by growing numbers of women running for and holding office in nations across the globe (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025), we should expect these findings to matter in cross-national contexts. In fact, given that nearly half of G-20 nations perform better than the United States in terms of women holding seats in national legislatures (Ferrell, 2024), how women wield power, manage staff, and potentially face attacks in doing so might be even more relevant beyond American borders. The slow yet steady growth over recent decades in the number of women worldwide in corporate leadership positions (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024) also entails that the results found here might have purchase in the boardroom as well.

Given the ever-unfolding breadth of types of scandal amidst the ever-changing face of political power, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to continue to study the question of whether men and women accused of bad behavior are treated differently. Subsequent survey experiments could manipulate the scandal type to see which ones affect both genders equally and which have one-sided effects. Another manipulation worth exploring includes whether who makes the accusations (or who attempts to assassinate the character) matters; in terms of the research presented here, was this leadership management scandal particularly impactful because the charges came from former staffers instead of political opponents? It might also be interesting to move the setting of a staff scandal like Klobuchar's outside the realm of politics and into other spaces where women increasingly make their mark in terms of leadership, like the world of business.

Continued testing of sexism as an explanation for why something is a scandal in the first place could also prove interesting. Given that this defense seemed to soften the blow of accusations against the Senator across a handful of metrics, would a similar defense work in other situations where women in power find themselves ensnared in a scandal and needing image repair? In any survey research effort exploring scandal in general or the intersection of scandal and gender more specifically, open-ended questions or in-depth focus groups might help us better understand the “why?” that underlies the impacts on character and the effectiveness of subsequent reputation management strategies.

Within a few weeks of the stories of Senator Klobuchar’s staff scandal breaking, for the most part original reporting on the topic died down. The media’s interest turned to thinkpieces about the relationship between feminism and the scandal (Flanagan, 2019; Zhang, 2019) or whether tough bosses actually get better results (Carey, 2019). After mea culpas and plans to “do better” (Vasquez, 2019), the senator even attempted to joke her way past her wrongdoings, delivering quips about yelling at staff and eating salads with combs at March 2019’s Gridiron dinner (Edevane, 2019). Klobuchar and several other senators turned presidential candidates even co-sponsored legislation aimed at making it easier for employees to report workplace harassment (Ollstein, 2019). Google Trends data reveal, however, that at key moments throughout the Democratic primary season in mid to late 2019 and early 2020 (i.e., weeks in which debates were held, weeks in which voters went to the polls), interest in the scandal flared up a bit once again, suggesting that Senator Klobuchar could never quite put the scandal behind her as she tried to make the case to the American people that she should be the one to take on and take down President Donald Trump (Google Trends, n.d.). She never finished higher than 3rd in any of the first four nominating contests and suspended her campaign in early March of 2020, just under 13 months after kicking it off on that snowy afternoon in Minneapolis. A campaign postmortem written by her home state’s *MinnPost* described Klobuchar as “a candidate who wasn’t used to being under the microscope” unable to fully deal with a scandal “she did not expect” (Schneider, 2020). While said scandal may not have been fatal and while claims of sexism may have alleviated its impact for some, the potential for lasting damage was evident from the day the story first broke. Senator Klobuchar may have tried to appeal to voters concerned about “the noise, the nonsense and the extremes of our politics” (Schneider, 2020), but as a result of her staff mismanagement scandal, she herself exacerbated all three.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Experimental Narratives

Narrative 1: Baseline

Wilson's Mistreatment of Staff Scared Off Candidates To Manage Her Gubernatorial Bid

By Marc Bauer

The Tribune

May 29, 2024

At least three people have withdrawn from consideration to lead State Senator Penny Wilson's probable 2026 gubernatorial campaign – and did so in part because of the politician's history of mistreating her staff, The Tribune has learned.

Wilson, who plans to make an announcement about a potential gubernatorial bid by year's end, has spent the past several months positioning herself to run for governor. She's beloved in her district as a smart, funny and personable lawmaker and has gained statewide attention for her lines of questioning at high-profile hearings.

But some former Wilson staffers, all of whom spoke to The Tribune on condition of anonymity, describe Wilson as habitually demeaning and prone to bursts of cruelty that make it difficult to work in her office for long.

It is common for staff to wake up to multiple emails from Wilson, often sent between 1 and 4 AM, characterizing one's work as "the worst" briefing or press release she'd seen in her decades of public service, according to two former aides and emails seen by The Tribune.

Although some staffers grew accustomed to her constant put-downs, others found it demoralizing. Adding to the humiliation, Wilson often cc'd large groups of staffers who weren't working on the topic at hand, giving the emails the effect of a public flogging. Anything could set her temper off, they said, and it was often unpredictable. Among the things that staffers said had prompted outbursts from Wilson: minor grammar mistakes, the use of the word "community" in press releases, forgetting to pack the proper coat in her suitcase, failing to charge her iPad, and using staples. That anger regularly left employees in tears.

"I cried. I cried, like, all the time," said one former staffer.

Some former aides say that Wilson's behavior as a leader didn't just affect her employees but her own ability to do her job, making it difficult to prep her for interviews or distracting her in the moments before a hearing. This behavior also limited their ability to conduct State Senate work, creating a chaotic environment where staff were forced to devote as much time to managing their boss's unpredictable anger as they did to governing.

According to data from 2011 to 2023, Wilson had the highest employee turnover rate in the State Senate, with an average of 36% of staffers departing each year.

Narrative 2: Gender Switch

Each "Penny" in Narrative 1 becomes a "Paul." Each "she" becomes a "he." Each "her" becomes a "his." Each "herself" becomes a "himself." All other text is held constant.

Narrative 3: Sexism (INSERT TEXT BELOW INTO NARRATIVE 1 ABOVE FINAL SENTENCE)

However, several former staffers suggested Wilson was being held to a different standard due to sexism.

"I've heard people say she's tough to work for and I sometimes cringe when I hear it because I rarely hear that said about male bosses in the legislature. When a woman steps out of her expected role of "caretaker," she's attacked. Women shouldn't be expected to nurture their employees or colleagues more than men, and they should be no less entitled to challenge them."

Appendix B: Scandal Assessment Questions

Based on the narrative you just read, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding State Senator Wilson? (1. Strongly disagree, 2. Somewhat disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5. Strongly agree)

Wilson has high expectations of staff.

Wilson's expectations of staff are too high.

Wilson's treatment of staff does not matter.

The staff who complained about Wilson are overreacting.

Wilson is emotional.

Wilson is horrible at being a boss.

Wilson is horrible at being a state senator.

Wilson is the victim of character assassination.

Wilson is being held to a different standard due to sexism.

This story should affect voters' decision-making should Wilson run for governor.

MINESOTSKA PRISTOJNOST? VODSTVO, SEKSIZAM I NAPADI PRILIKOM POKRETANJA PREDSEDNIČKE KAMPANJE SENATORICE AMY KLOBUCHAR

Tyler Johnson

SAŽETAK *Senatorica iz Minnesote, Amy Klobuchar, u danima koji su prethodili pokretanju njezine predsjedničke kampanje 2020. godine, našla se pod povećalom medija zbog izvještaja o tome da je njezino kontinuirano loše postupanje prema zaposlenicima dovelo do rekordno visoke fluktuacije osoblja u njezinu uredu. Međutim, zaposlenici koji su joj pružali potporu tvrdili su da su navodi prema kojima je Klobuchar bila užasna šefica seksistički te da se moćnim muškarcima toleriraju stilovi upravljanja koji se moćnim ženama ne dopuštaju. Postojeća istraživanja pokazuju da se žene koje se kandidiraju za političke dužnosti ili ih obnašaju procjenjuju prema drukčijim standardima nego muškarci. U kojoj se mjeri te razlike očituju u ovom slučaju i prihvaća li javnost tvrdnju da seksizam predstavlja olakotnu okolnost zbog koje bi ponašanje Amy Klobuchar trebalo promatrati drukčije? Rezultati izvornoga anketnog eksperimenta pokazuju koliko štetu takav skandal može prouzročiti, dovode u pitanje pretpostavku da bi muškarcu u istoj situaciji bilo iskazano više razumijevanja te te upućuje na djelomično ublažavanje tvrdnje da rodna pristranost oblikuje političke percepcije.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

NEGATIVNA KAMPANJA, ROD I POLITIKA, UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE, ANKETNI EKSPERIMENT

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