



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When Councillors Sexually Harass: Legislative Sanctions and Gender-Based Violence in Canada's Municipalities

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(Received 25 July 2023; revised 25 April 2024; accepted 11 July 2024)

## Abstract

Previous research has examined whether voters will punish candidates who engage in sexual harassment in national-level elections, revealing partisanship as a strong predictor of electoral punishment. Using original survey data, we evaluate whether the public supports a broader range of sanctions (e.g. apologies, training, and removal from office) that legislatures can impose upon politicians who perpetrate sexual harassment in Canada's municipalities, a non-partisan context. In the absence of partisan-based motivated reasoning, we find that women are more likely than men to support the removal from office of a councillor who engages in sexual harassment. Respondents who do not believe that sexism is a problem and are skeptical about claims of gender-based violence are also less likely to support punishment in these cases. These findings have relevance for democratic institutions, revealing that sanctions imposed on politicians who perpetrate sexual harassment can help maintain political accountability and restore public trust.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment; municipal politics; gender-based violence; democratic accountability; political trust

Although not a new problem, reports of gender-based violence in legislatures have proliferated worldwide, including in local councils. In the last few years, allegations of sexual harassment and sexist treatment have been made against local councillors—mostly men—in Australia, Brasil, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In Canada, several male councillors have engaged in sexually inappropriate and harassing behavior

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against city administrators, political staff, fellow councillors, and citizens, with some of them continuing to serve in office. In this paper we investigate what the Canadian public believes should happen when a municipal councillor engages in sexual harassment.<sup>1</sup>

Research on political misconduct and sexual harassment (SH) has focused on the American electorate, with partisanship emerging as a strong predictor of public opinion on this issue (Cossette and Craig 2020; Stark and Collignon 2022; Savani and Collignon 2023). Sexism has additionally been found to influence U.S. voters' willingness to cast their ballot for candidates who are embroiled in "sex" scandals (Barnes, Beaulieu and Saxton 2020). This study builds on this research by considering the legislative, rather than electoral, consequences of SH in a non-partisan, municipal context for the first time. Our results have applicability to other local governments where formal parties are absent, including in Australia, New Zealand, the western United States, and most of Canada. We ask three questions: (1) What are the drivers of support for the punishment of councillors who engage in SH? (2) Does public support for punishment vary based on the stage of a claim (allegation vs. finding)? (3) Do women and men differ in their support for a punishment based on the severity of the sanction being proposed? We evaluate these questions by administering an original survey to municipal voters in Ontario, Canada, a province in which parties are formally absent from municipal politics.<sup>2</sup>

Our research agenda aims to make several contributions to gender and politics literature. Previous work has examined whether voters will punish candidates who engage in sexual misconduct at the ballot box. Here we investigate whether the public supports a wider array of sanctions that councils can impose upon a councillor when they engage in SH outside of election times. Punishments include remedial sanctions such as informing the public, requesting an apology, or mandatory training, and a more serious penalty, which is a deduction of pay. These sanctions are currently provided for under the law.<sup>3</sup> However, we expand this list to include two harsher sanctions: removal from office and a ban from public office. The latter two options track with current policy debates after several high-profile cases of councillors engaged in SH and faced few consequences for their actions.<sup>4</sup> To our knowledge, this is the broadest range of sanctions for SH in politics tested using public opinion survey data to date.

All in all, we find that the public is supportive of sanctioning councillors who engage in SH, with support the strongest for the most lenient (apologizing) versus harshest (banning from office) penalties. We further observe important gender-based differences, with women more likely than men to back the punishment of a councillor at the time a SH allegation is made. At the same time, the differences we observe between women and men in our data are nuanced. While women are more likely than men to support punishment after an allegation, this gap disappears after an investigation has taken place, with women and men equally likely to support sanctions. Sexism and skepticism about gender-based violence additionally influence opinions about holding a politician who engages in SH accountable. Our study thus documents how societal attitudes and myths about gender-based violence influence voters' legislative accountability expectations. Despite these nuances, our results show that many people—women and

men—believe that councillors who sexually harass should face consequences for their actions and that legislatures must play a role in disciplining their members proportionate to the unethical behavior in question.

This study also contributes to violence against women in politics literature, with a focus on the perpetrator side of gendered political violence. Prior research has identified some of the democratic consequences of gendered violence in public life, including its impacts on policy effectiveness and gender representation (Krook 2018; Restrepo Sanín 2020; Håkansson 2023a). Here we focus on the democratic costs when councillors who commit SH are not held accountable for their actions. Politicians who commit SH with impunity serve to diminish political accountability and public trust.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing this reality, in 2017 France passed a “trust in political life” law stipulating that anyone who committed a crime or misdemeanor, including SH, would be ineligible to hold or run for parliamentary office for a maximum of ten years (Krook 2020, 170).<sup>6</sup> When legislatures impose proportionate sanctions against politicians who commit SH, they are sending a powerful message to women and the broader public that gender-based violence is antithetical to the democratic process and will not be tolerated.

### **Sexual Harassment in Local Politics: A Global Problem that Needs Explicit Attention**

SH is a global problem that exists at all levels of government, including at the local level. Following the murder of local councilwoman Juana Quispe, in 2012 Bolivia became the first country in the world to criminalize political violence and harassment against women (Restrepo Sanín 2018; 2020). Research from the U.S. and Sweden reveals how women mayors face more violence compared to their male counterparts, especially those who are highly visible in the media (Herrick and Franklin 2019; Håkansson 2021). Sexual violence has also been shown to impede women’s descriptive and substantive representation in Danish municipalities (Kosiara-Pedersen 2023). Despite its local-level prevalence, however, most scholarly attention on the topic has tended to focus on the national level (see Krook 2018; 2020; Restrepo Sanín 2020; Erikson and Verge 2022). In Canada, previous studies have examined the House of Commons’ approach in addressing SH (Collier and Raney 2018; Raney and Collier 2022). This research demonstrates how various features of Canada’s Westminster parliamentary system (e.g., party discipline and parliamentary privilege) are woven into legislative anti-harassment rules in ways that reduce the potential for democratic accountability.<sup>7</sup>

Even if the House of Commons’ approach to SH were deserving of emulation, Canada’s municipal context is sufficiently different that it would be difficult to transport federal/national measures into local governments. In addition to their lack of parties, Ontario’s local governments differ from the federal level in substantial ways that may have implications for dealing with gender-based violence politics. In Canada, municipalities are not formally recognized in the *Constitution Act of 1867* and fall under provincial jurisdiction, meaning that it is the province’s responsibility to formally adopt such rules and apply them in all

444 municipalities. In Canada and indeed around the world, as a matter of sheer numbers there are many more (mainly white male) politicians elected to city halls relative to other office levels, providing for more opportunities for local councillors to perpetrate violence compared to national-level politicians.<sup>8</sup> Citizens may be more likely to personally interact with local officials whose responsibility is to attend to immediate, day-to-day issues that arise in their local community. Relative to other levels of government, municipal employees often have more direct contact and work more closely with local elected officials due to the smaller nature of their governments (Wade and Fiorentino 2023). Differences between local and national media ecosystems are also relevant, as local media actors worldwide have fewer resources to expose political corruption and unethical conduct, which includes gender-based violence. This study therefore puts a necessary spotlight on SH and legislative accountability in local politics for the first time.

### ***Public Opinion on Sexual Harassment in Politics***

To develop our research expectations, we first consider the growing body of scholarship on political misconduct and SH. In these studies, partisanship and party loyalty have emerged as key predictors of voters' willingness to punish candidates who engage in this behavior (Cossette and Craig 2020; Hansen and Dolan 2020; Craig and Cossette 2022; Stark and Collignon 2022). Cossette and Craig (2020)'s U.S. study finds that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to report feeling sad and angry that SH occurs in politics and to say that victims who claim to have been sexually harassed should be taken at their word. Looking at partisanship and gender, Masuoka, Grose and Junn (2021) find that Democratic women are the most likely, and Republican men the least likely, to electorally punish a congressional candidate accused of SH. What remains unknown, however, are the factors that condition peoples' attitudes about SH in politics in contexts where political parties do not operate, which is the case in many municipal contexts around the world.

### ***Women's and Men's Attitudes About Sexual Harassment***

In the absence of party leadership cues, we suspect that women will be especially attuned to this problem and see a compelling need to sanction councillors who engage in this behavior compared to men. Prior research demonstrates, for example, that women are motivated by campaign dynamics when gender-salient issues are at stake (Hansen and Dolan 2020; Cassese and Barnes 2018). Although men experience SH, women are more likely to be sexually harassed, which we argue makes it a highly gender-salient issue (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). Compared to men, women are also more likely to describe a wider range of behaviors as SH and are generally less tolerant of such behavior (Fitzgerald and Shullman, 1993).

Research on sexual misconduct in politics offers mixed support for the expectation that women and men will differ in their views on appropriate sanctions for sexually harassing politicians. In their experimental survey, Stark

and Collignon (2022) do not find that American women are more willing to change their vote intentions after learning of a SH scandal. In contrast, Barnes, Beaulieu and Saxton (2020) find that women are generally more likely than men to electorally punish a candidate who has been involved in any type of scandal. Compared to men, women are also more likely to support penalties for corrupt politicians (Stensöta Wängerud and Agerberg, 2015). In Canadian federal politics, Raney and McGregor (2023) find that women's and men's accountability expectations are especially likely to diverge at the time an allegation is made. They report that Canadian women are more likely than men to support the public disclosure of an allegation of SH and to support an MPs' suspension from office pending an independent investigation. In the absence of strong partisan cues, we therefore suspect that women will be more supportive of sanctioning a politician who perpetrates SH compared to men particularly at the time an allegation is made.

### **Sexism & Attitudes About Sexual Harassment**

At the same time, a respondent's self-identified gender may not be the only, or perhaps even the best, predictor of attitudes about SH in politics. Together, gender role perceptions and sexism have been found to influence policy attitudes that are salient to women's lives (Hansen and Dolan 2020, 533; Cassese and Barnes 2018). Gender role stereotypes have been linked to perceptions of SH specifically, such that women who hold traditional gender role beliefs appear more apt than others to hold other women (and themselves) responsible when they are sexually harassed (Cesario 2020). Conversely, men can hold gender-egalitarian views and view SH as a serious problem. Barnes, Beaulieu and Saxton (2020) find that people with hostile sexist attitudes (i.e., antipathy towards women who are viewed as taking away men's power) are less likely than other voters to support a woman politician who is involved in a sex scandal compared to a male candidate. Those who hold benevolent sexist attitudes (i.e. a chivalrous belief in the need to protect women) were less likely than others to vote for either a woman or a man involved in a scandal. Costa et al's (2020) experimental research demonstrates that hostile sexist beliefs predict electoral support for a candidate embroiled in a SH scandal. They find that sexism, rather than partisanship, is a key determinant in voter assessments of candidates who engage in SH.

Using survey data, Archer and Kam (2021) observe that sexist ideology correlates with views about the #MeToo movement, with those who hold "modern" sexist views comparatively more likely to minimize the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct and to believe that #MeToo has gone too far. Looking at violence directed at women politicians by citizens, Håkansson (2023b) assesses how subtle forms of sexism – by way of voters' higher propensity to direct their grievances towards women politicians compared to their male counterparts—fuel gender-motivated political violence. Finally, using a survey experiment, Longdon and Banducci (2023) find that voters with less hostile sexist attitudes were less likely to support a candidate accused of sexual misconduct. Bringing this research together, we suspect that in addition to differences between

women and men, sexist attitudes will shape voters' opinions about legislative accountability and SH.

### **Beliefs About Gender-Based Violence**

We are further interested in whether respondents' opinions about gender-based violence specifically shape their accountability expectations of politicians who engages in SH. Social psychology research points to the prevalence of gender-based stereotypes and biases about violence, which refer to the "acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression" ('AMMSA') (Milesi et al. 2019). AMMSA is defined as "descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about sexual aggression (i.e., about its scope, causes, context, and consequences) that serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexually aggressive behavior that men commit against women" (Gerger et al. 2007, 425). This research draws our attention to the ways that sexual violence myths reinforce victim-blaming mentalities, while at the same time exonerating a perpetrator from wrong-doing. Myths include how men's sexual violence is natural and normal, that women exaggerate or falsely claim to be assaulted or harassed, feel flattered and secretly enjoy being sexually harassed, and that SH has a minimal impact on those who are targeted (Fitzgerald and Shullman; 1993; Milesi et al. 2019). Although correlated with other attitudinal variables like modern sexism, right-wing ideology, and social dominance, beliefs about gender-based violence arguably constitute a unique form of moral reasoning that might influence perceptions of perpetrator accountability. By casting doubt on the "believability" of women's claims of violence, adherence to such myths helps to cognitively deflect blame away from perpetrators, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for accountability altogether.

Attitudes about gender-based violence could also play out differently for women and men, reinforcing any observed gender-based differences in our study. Lonsway, Cortina and Magley (2008: 612) find that men are more likely than women to accept gender-based violence myths, while women are reluctant to report their experiences of sexual violence to the authorities for multiple reasons, including the knowledge that they may not be believed (Gilmore 2023). The #MeToo movement helped expose the gendered and raced nature of this "credibility discount gap" where historically, women and girls (especially Black women and girls) targeted by sexual violence have not been believed, while (white) men perpetrators have evaded accountability (Burke 2021; Gilmore 2023, 45). We suspect that respondents' beliefs about gender-based violence will have an important and unique effect on their support for sanctioning politicians who engage in this behavior, and that such opinions might vary for women and men.

### **Data and Results**

To recap, our research questions ask: (1) What are the drivers of support for the punishment of councillors who engage in SH? (2) Does public support for punishment vary based on the stage of a claim (allegation vs. finding)? (3) Do women and men differ in their support for a punishment based on the severity of

the sanction being proposed? We answer these questions using data from an original panel survey dataset, collected at the time of the 2022 Ontario Municipal elections.<sup>9</sup> Data were collected in two waves, with the first wave of the survey fielded prior to election day (September 28 to October 20), and the second afterwards (October 25 to November 7). The survey was administered by Léger Research using participants from an existing online panel, with recruitment quotas for age, gender, and education. Surveys were completed online, via the Qualtrics interface.<sup>10</sup> All respondents were eligible to vote in the 2022 municipal elections (meaning that they were Canadian citizens, residents of Ontario, and 18 or older). A total of 4,038 respondents completed the first wave and 2,982 completed the second, for a return to sample rate of 73.4%.

Our outcome variables are based on responses to a set of two question batteries, asking about the appropriateness of a series of punishments following an accusation of SH, and a finding of SH. Respondents were presented with the “accusations” battery first, and then the “finding” battery. The battery is below, listing the punishments. Response options in each case were: “Yes, I would support this”, “No, I would not support this”, and “Don’t know/Prefer not to say”.<sup>11</sup> Appendix I contains information on all other survey questions employed in the analysis below.<sup>12</sup>

If your municipal councillor was [accused of sexual harassment/found through an investigation to have sexually harassed someone], which of the following actions would you support?

- The public should be made aware that a complaint has been made against the councillor, while maintaining the privacy of the complainant
- The councillor should be required to take anti-harassment training
- The councillor should be required to issue a public apology
- The councillor should have their pay deducted, in an amount proportionate to the severity of the offence
- The councillor should be removed from office
- The councillor should be removed from office and banned from running for office again

The above punishments were selected because they include different levels of severity which will allow us to assess whether a respondent might support “weaker” punishments, should they not support the harshest ones available (i.e., removal from office). They are also consistent with on-going policy debates in Ontario.<sup>13</sup> Our analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we describe the extent to which respondents support various types of punishments for councillors following (a) accusations and (b) findings of SH.<sup>14</sup> Our survey design is unique in this regard in that we ask respondents their opinions about punishments at two stages of a SH complaint, at the time of both an allegation and after a finding. At each stage – allegation and finding – we create an additive index that tracks the number of punishments each respondent supports in each condition. These serve as our key dependent variables for our later analyses.



We begin by describing levels of support for six types of councillor punishments, following accusations and findings of SH. Table 1 shows the support rates for each punishment, in each scenario. Note that the severity of punishments increases as one reads down the table.<sup>15</sup>

Several clear patterns emerge from Table 1. The first is that, somewhat unsurprisingly, support for punishing offenders of SH is relatively high. Most respondents support each of the six types of punishment, following both accusations and findings of SH. In total, 29.4% of respondents support all six punishments following an allegation, while 44.8% support all punishments after a finding. In contrast, 16.1% support none of the punishments in the case of an allegation, and just 9.9% fit this description after a finding. On average, there appears to be low tolerance for councillors who engage in sexually harassing behavior among voters in our sample. The fact that half of respondents favor permanent removal from office, even without a formal investigation, speaks to just how little support there is for SH in local politics. The second finding of note is that, as the severity of penalties increases, public support decreases. This pattern holds true at both the “allegation” and “finding” phases of a SH claim. Support for making the public aware of harassment (the gentlest form of punishment in the table) is considerably higher than it is for the harshest punishment (removing a councillor from office and banning them from running again).

Table 1 also reveals that voters are more supportive of punishment following a SH finding, rather than after an allegation is made. This pattern holds for all six punishments, as well as at the aggregate. The average numbers of punishments that respondents agree to following an allegation and finding are 3.44 (SD = 2.25) and 4.35 (SD = 2.01), respectively (this gap is significant at  $P < 0.001$ ). Though voters are broadly supportive of punishment at the time an allegation is made, their support clearly increases after a finding of SH.

As noted above, however, there is reason to suspect that women and men have different views on these punishments. Such a difference is, in fact, borne out by our data. Women support an average of 3.76 punishments following an allegation, while the average for men is lower at 3.08. After a SH finding, women support 4.51 punishments, while men support 4.18 (both gaps are significant at

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of support for punishments

	Accusation	Finding
Public should be made aware	65.4%	78.0%
Councillor should take training	64.6%	76.4%
Councillor should apologize	58.2%	73.6%
Councillor should have pay deducted	50.1%	64.6%
Councillor should be removed from office	55.1%	74.2%
Councillor should be removed and banned	50.1%	69.2%

N = 2,964



the 99% level). We note also that the gender “gap” is smaller (less than half) at the finding phase, compared to after an allegation is made. At the simple bivariate level, therefore, there is a clear difference between women and men in their support for punishing councillors who are accused of, or found to have, engaged in SH. This observed gendered difference depends upon whether a formal investigative process has substantiated a SH claim. We turn now to our multivariate analysis, to determine whether this gap (and/or others) remains when multiple relevant sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics are considered simultaneously.

### **Who Supports Punishment?**

Next, we consider in more detail the correlates of support for punishment. To do so, we create two indices that indicate support for punishment in the two conditions – allegation and finding. These measures reflect the number of punishments that respondents would support (of six) in each condition. These variables range from zero to six, with high values indicating support for a higher number of punishments in the “findings” condition. As explanatory variables, we also include several sociodemographic and attitudinal factors: gender, age, education, income, relationship status, employment status, place of birth, race, and religion.<sup>16</sup> As an additional control, we also include a measure of political ideology.

To measure attitudes about sexism, we create an index of two agree/disagree questions that ask respondents their opinions of whether sexism is a problem in the workplace and whether #MeToo has been positive for society, with the general expectation that those who score high/low on this measure will be comparatively supportive of/resistant to punishment (as adapted from Cossette and Craig 2020, 85–86). The next variable is our attitudinal measure of gender-based violence, which includes whether a respondent believes that: (1) women often mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or actions by men as sexism and (2) there are too many people who are claiming SH or assault. Prior studies have used these questions separately to test for generalized sexism in U.S. politics (Cossette and Craig 2020, 82–84). Here, we use them to create a unique composite index related to gendered myths that women are prone to exaggerate and make false claims of their experiences of sexual violence, and we label this variable “skepticism.”<sup>17</sup> We then test the potential of this “skepticism” index to predict voters’ support for sanctioning a politician who engages in SH.<sup>18</sup> Finally, we use an indicator of whether respondents have personally experienced unwanted sexual attention or harassment, under the assumption that these experiences might make respondents supportive of punishment for perpetrators of SH.

We run OLS models to identify the correlates of support for punishment in both the “allegation” and “finding” conditions. This approach allows us to assess whether the same factors are associated with attitudes towards punishment following an allegation and after a finding. Raney and McGregor (2023) employ a similar test, but ours is an improvement in that we ask about the same punishments at both the allegation and finding stages; whereas in their work, they

consider different punishments at each stage of a claim. We also consider six types of punishment at each stage, while they consider only two.

What are the correlates of attitudes towards punishment? Figure 1 shows coefficient plots for two OLS models, where the “allegation” and “finding” indices serve as the outcome variables. Recall that these variables range from 0 (indicating support for none of the punishments) to 6 (support for all punishments). The socio-demographic variables are all dummies, as is the “personal experience” variable.<sup>19</sup> Ideology, as well as the “sexism is a problem” and “skepticism” variables are interval level. All explanatory variables are coded to range from 0 (minimum) to 1 (maximum). The figure shows point estimates and whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals. Black results are significant at the 95% confidence level, while grey results are not. Full model results are found in Appendix III.

Figure 1 shows the factors that explain respondents’ attitudes towards punishment. In the “allegation” model, several sociodemographic factors are significant, with women, individuals without a university education, those who are married/common law, immigrants, and Catholics comparatively supportive of punishment. Our two main attitudinal variables of interest are also statistically significant. On average, respondents who believe that sexism is a problem are very supportive of punishment – this is, by far, the largest effect in the figure. Confirming our research expectation, individuals who are highly skeptical of gender-based violence claims are less supportive of punishment. The “women” variable deserves some particular attention here, given the gender-based nature

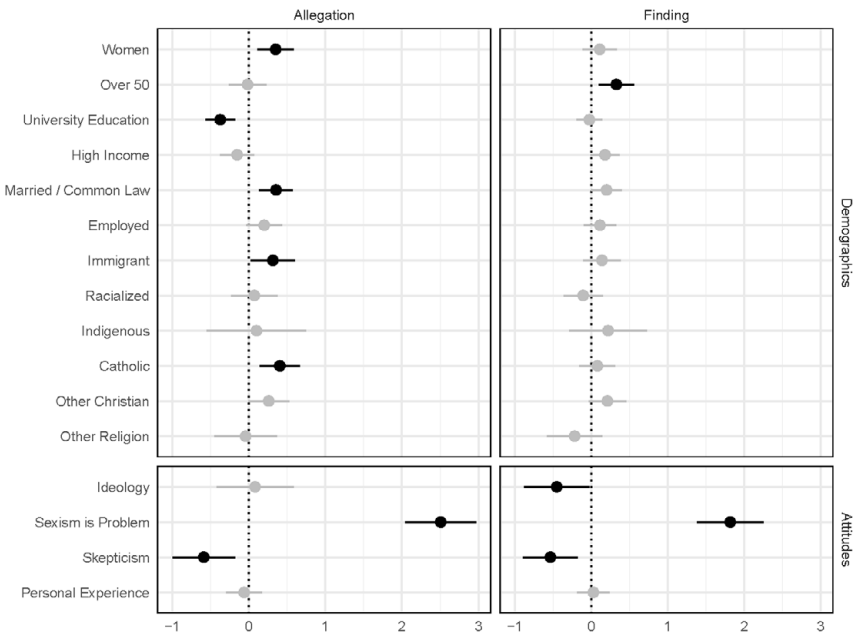


Figure 1. Correlates of support for punishment: Allegation and Finding.

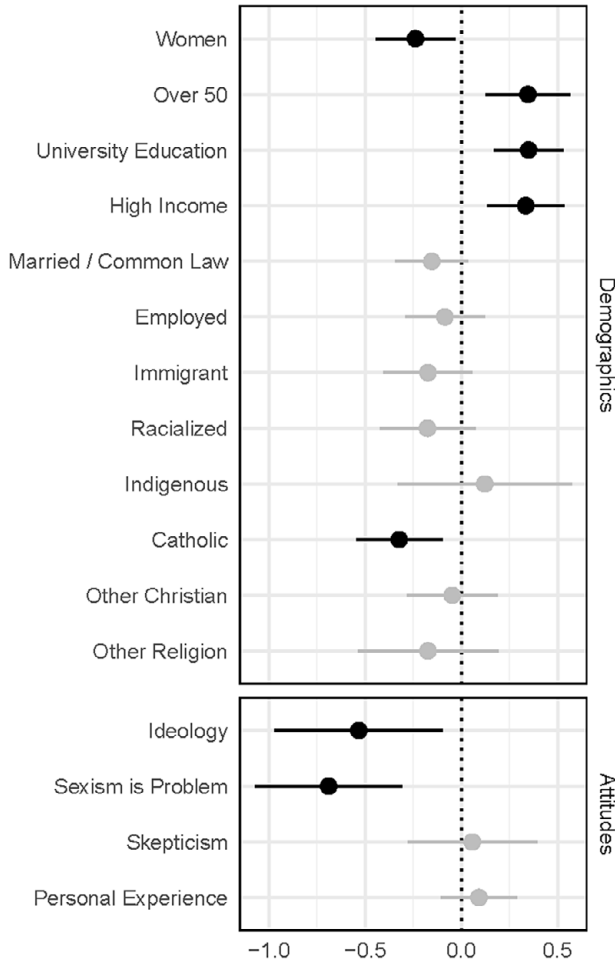
of SH. Although it is related to many of the other factors in the model (including all the “attitudinal” variables), it nevertheless retains an independent effect upon attitudes towards punishment at the allegation phase.<sup>20</sup> Women and men may have different views on whether sexism is a problem or on gender-based violence but even after controlling for such factors, self-identified gender still matters.

The results of the “finding” model are slightly different than the “allegation” results, with fewer of the sociodemographic characteristics reaching statistical significance. Notably, we observe that the gender gap has disappeared, while age is the only statistically significant sociodemographic factor (with older individuals being more supportive of punishment). Right-wing voters appear less supportive of punishment compared to left-wing voters – a gap that did not appear in the “allegation” model. The “personal experience” variable is insignificant in both models. Finally, both the “sexism” and “skepticism” variables remain significant, and in the same direction as the previous model.

A particularly noteworthy feature of Figure 1 is the differences between the two models – some variables are significant at the allegation stage, but not after a finding (and vice-versa). To determine if these differences are statistically significant, we run a third model, where the outcome variable is the *difference between* the number of punishments respondents support after a finding and after an allegation. Values for this new variable range from –6 to 6, with a high value indicating support for more punishments in the “finding” condition. Figure 2 shows the results of another OLS model with this new variable as the dependent variable, using the same explanatory factors as in Figure 1. Statistically significant results here indicate that the explanatory variables are differently related to attitudes towards punishment in the two points in time. As above, the figure shows point estimates and 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2 shows that a number of factors are differently related to support for punishment at the finding and allegation stages. This setup is important as it shows how support for punishment changes across the two stages. The negative result for “women” confirms what we observed in the two separate models in Figure 1: the gap between women and men that we find in the allegations model is, in fact, different from the null result for that variable observed in the “finding” model. Some other sociodemographic indicators are also significant, with a gap between older and younger respondents, university educated and less than university educated respondents, high-income and less than high-income voters, and Catholics and Atheists. The model in Figure 2 tells us that the effect of these factors on support for punishment of a councillor depends on whether an allegation of SH has been substantiated through a formal investigation.

Turning to the attitudinal variables, both the significant and insignificant results are of interest. The “sexism is a problem” variable is significant in all models in Figures 1 and 2. The negative result in Figure 2, however, suggests that this factor matters less for attitudes towards punishment in the “finding” condition. Interestingly, we also find that the “skepticism” variable is significant in both models in Figure 1, but is insignificant here, meaning that this factor matters the same for views on punishment in both conditions. This result suggests that skepticism about gender-based violence is at play no matter the



**Figure 2.** Correlates of support for punishment: Finding minus Allegation.

stage of a SH claim, or put another way: a skeptic is always a skeptic. We also find that ideology is significant (and negative), which accords with the finding from Figure 1 that left- and right-wingers differ from one another at the “findings” stage only.<sup>21</sup>

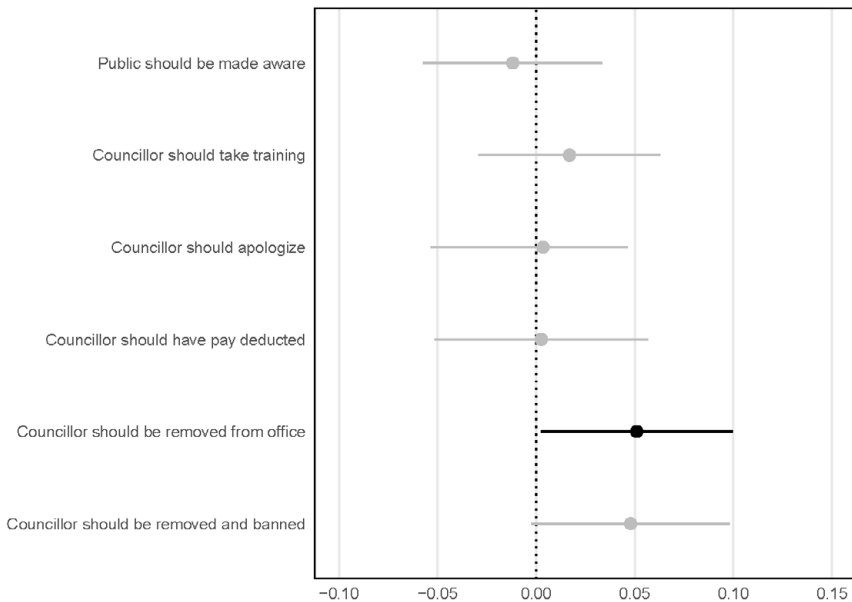
All in all, the results in Figure 2 indicate that the question of whether an allegation of SH is substantiated by an investigation matters to respondents, and that it matters quite a lot. Support for punishing a councillor not only increases after a finding of SH (as we see in Table 1), the correlates of support also change at this stage of a claim. Of note is again the difference between women and men respondents: while the importance of other factors changes following an SH finding, the diminishment of a gendered attitudinal gap is noteworthy.<sup>22</sup>

### Does the Type of Punishment Matter?

Despite the observations in Figures 1 and 2 that show no substantive differences between women and men at the findings stage, we are further interested in whether women and men might support different types of punishment depending on their severity. The outcome variables in Figure 1 and 2 are based on indices, which are counts of support for up to six punishments. In this final stage of our analysis, we consider the correlates of support for each of the six individual punishments following a finding of SH.

To test whether the self-identified gender of a respondent matters for specific sanctions, we run a series of six different logistic regression models. The explanatory variables considered are the same as those included above, but the outcome variables are now binary indicators of whether respondents would support (or not) each punishment following a finding of SH (where the punishment index suggests that there is no difference between women and men). We present the results for this final step of our analysis in Figure 3, which shows the findings for the gender variable for each of the six models – one for each punishment (listed on the left side of the figure). The coefficient plots show the marginal effect of gender in each “punishment,” with 95% confidence intervals, along the x-axis. Punishments range from gentlest (at the top of the figure) to harshest (at the bottom).

In Figure 3, an estimate above 0 indicates that women are more likely than men to support a particular form of punishment. Again, black estimates are statistically significant at  $P = 0.05$ . Recall that in Figure 1, a respondent’s self-identified gender appeared to exert no independent effect on attitudes towards punishment at the



**Figure 3.** Support for punishment following a sexual harassment finding.

aggregate-level following an SH finding. In [Figure 3](#), we disaggregate support for punishment at the findings stage, where important differences between women and men emerge based on the severity of the punishment. For the gentler or more moderate sanctions – making the public aware of the misconduct, forcing the councillor to take training or give an apology, and deducting their pay – women and men are no different from one another. However, for the two most severe punishments that involve removing the councillor from office, a gender gap in opinions reappears. As demonstrated in [Figure 3](#), women are more likely than men to believe a councillor found to have committed SH should be removed from office (at the 95% confidence level) and to support banning them from running for office again ( $P = 0.06$ ). To be clear, both women and men are highly supportive of removing councillors from office at this point – as we saw in [Table 1](#). Women are, however, roughly five percentage points more likely than men to believe that a councillor should be removed from office after a finding of SH. In short, the presence of a gender gap in attitudes towards the punishment of councillors found to have committed misconduct depends upon the type of punishment being imposed.

## Discussion

Taken together, our results show that members of the public are supportive of a range of punishments for local councillors who sexually harass someone, at both the “allegation” and “finding” phase of a claim. Support for punishment further increases following a finding of SH. Though not surprising, both findings are encouraging as they suggest that such behavior is widely considered unacceptable. Aside from confirming this much, this study set out to answer three research questions about public opinion towards legislative sanctions and SH: (1) What are the drivers of support for the punishment of councillors who engage in SH? (2) Does public support for punishment vary based on the stage of a claim (allegation vs. finding)? (3) Do women and men differ in their support for a punishment based on the severity of the sanction being proposed? We now have clear answers to all three questions.

In the absence of formal party organizations and cues, we identify several new determinants of support for punishing councillors who engage in SH. A key predictor is whether a respondent identifies as a woman or a man. Our results indicate that women are more supportive than men of punishing councillors accused of SH, but that this gap disappears once a councillor has been found through an investigation to have engaged in this behavior. Somewhat surprisingly, we do not find evidence that a respondent’s personal experiences of SH motivate their attitudes toward punishment. This result may be partially because this variable is antecedent to a person’s attitudes towards sexism and skepticism about gender-based violence (bivariate analyses reveal that experience is positively associated with attitudes towards punishment, but this result disappears in the multivariate model). It could also be an artifact of respondents’ unwillingness to self-report their experiences of SH, which is consistent with the under-estimation of sexual violence in survey research generally (Brunton-Smith, Flatley and Tarling 2020).

The importance of other factors, both sociodemographic (such as being Catholic or an immigrant) and attitudinal (ideology, sexism and skepticism), in conditioning punishment attitudes also hinges on whether the misconduct has been substantiated. An exception to this finding is that those with less education are more likely to want to see a politician punished at the time an allegation is made. One possible interpretation of this result is that well-educated respondents attach greater importance to fact-finding processes and may be less likely to “rush to judgement” in the absence of a formal investigation. Taken as a whole, however, our results demonstrate that a robust investigative process matters greatly in shaping public opinion about SH in local politics.

Analyses of the different types of sanctions, however, reveal that an opinion gap between women and men does exist. Though women and men agree on the imposition of gentler forms of punishment, women are more likely than men to expect a municipal councillor to face the harshest penalty after a SH finding – removal from office. This finding is a novel contribution to gender-based violence in politics research and warrants some reflection. One possible interpretation of this result is that women in our study may be more inclined than men to support a sanction that would require a “proven” sexual harasser be removed from the workplace. By comparison, all the other punishments in our survey, such as mandatory training or pay reduction, would allow a perpetrator to remain in the municipal workplace. Although sexual violence is highly under-reported, criminal justice research shows that a motivating factor for women who do report their experiences of sexual violence is a feeling of obligation to protect other potential victims from similar abuse (Johnson 2017; 59). Future research on the (dis)incentives for women to formally report their experiences of violence in politics might probe this possibility further.

In addition to differences between women and men, we also find that gender-related attitudes about sexism and skepticism about violence matter. Individuals who do not believe sexism is a problem today and are skeptical about claims of sexual violence are less likely to want to sanction councillors who perpetrate SH, at either stage of a claim (allegation or finding). Conversely, those with gender-egalitarian views (high “sexism is a problem”/low “skepticism”) are more likely than others to support punishing councillors. Our study thus confirms that in a non-partisan local government context, gender is an important factor in public opinion on sanctions for councillors who commit SH. More specifically, this study confirms that a respondent’s self-identified gender and gender attitudes both matter to issues of legislative accountability and SH in municipal governments. This finding substantiates our suspicion that national-level studies on SH in highly partisan electoral arenas do not necessarily apply in local contexts, especially where party ideology and partisan cues are not at play. Given the vast number of local assemblies and the prevalence of violence and harassment inside of them worldwide, more research on gendered political violence in local government contexts is needed.

This study is intended as an initial foray into voter attitudes about the legislative, as opposed to electoral, consequences of SH in politics. Future research should investigate how other gendered myths about violence influence voters’ punishment expectations for councillors who engage in SH, and for other



types of gender-based violence (e.g., sexist treatment or online sexual violence). The social identities of victims/perpetrators are also likely relevant; experimental research that varies the gender, race, and sexual orientation of different parties would be worthwhile. Future studies should assess how other factors outside of partisanship and party loyalty, such as personal or political values that are not related to gender, including political attention, knowledge, and trust as well as media consumption, all shape citizens' accountability expectations. Finally, the gendered and racist abuse that councillors and staff experience from members of the public in city halls around the world is an important and pressing issue deserving of greater attention.

## Conclusion

In this study we set out to better understand the determinants of support for sanctioning councillors who engage in SH. We focus on a new level of government (local) in a non-partisan context for the first time and suggest that others replicate this study in a partisan arena to determine whether our findings travel to a setting where many electors are heavily influenced by their partisan predispositions. In a local government context, we find that women are more supportive than men of punishments following an allegation (rather than a finding). Women are also more likely than men to support the removal of a councillor from office who is found to engage in SH (though we find no evidence of a gender gap when it comes to gentler punishments). In this non-partisan local politics sample, women appear to have a lower bar than men when it comes to addressing these allegations and in the severity of punishment expected to deal with perpetrators. While attitudes about sexual violence in the workplace may be shifting in the #MeToo era, accountability in municipal politics still looks a little different for women and men when it comes to dealing with SH.

These results have importance for local democracy. Overall, we find strong support for the sanctioning of councillors who are found through an independent investigation to have committed SH. As lawmakers grapple with how to address this issue, they should take note that many citizens expect them to hold their colleagues who engage in this behavior accountable. Passing this responsibility onto voters in periodic elections may not be sufficient. At the same time, allowing councillors who commit SH to act with impunity would also likely not be well received by the public and could diminish its trust in local governments. Robust ethics rules that proportionately punish councillors who commit gender-based violence should be part of broader efforts to enhance accountability and public trust in political institutions globally. Legislatures and politicians have important roles to play in ensuring political workplaces are violence and harassment free.

We also find that underlying attitudes about sexism and gender-based violence are drivers of citizens' accountability expectations on this issue. In addition to independent investigations and robust sanctioning systems, policy interventions that tackle societal-level gendered biases and myths that are intended to prevent violence are further needed. Initiatives might include awareness-raising

and educational campaigns, as well as increased funding and resources for anti-violence groups and gender-based violence research in all spaces (e.g., family, intimate partner, online, and the workplace). Both preventative and punitive measures are required to address gender-based violence in the political realm.

## Notes

1. Sexual harassment is a manifestation of sex discrimination and a violation of human rights. Under Convention No. 190, the International Labour Organization does not define sexual harassment, but notes that it can include quid pro quo behavior, hostile work environments, unwanted sexual comments, pictures objectifying women, physical contact and sexual assault (International Labour Organization 2019).
2. All candidates in the province's 444 municipalities seek office as independents and provincial regulations are in place to prevent the creation and maintenance of parties. Informal partisanship is also generally absent, as candidates largely refrain from indicating partisan affiliations (even if they have them from previous time at other levels of government) (McGregor et al., *forthcoming*).
3. Currently, Ontario's *Municipal Act 2001* provides for sanctions that can be imposed upon councillors, who can only be removed from office in a small number of circumstances, including when they overspend during campaigns, breach conflict of interest policies, or are found through the judicial system to have broken the law. Otherwise, the harshest penalties that can be imposed on a councillor are a reprimand or suspension of pay for ninety days.
4. This included an Ottawa city councillor who sexually harassed multiple women staffers and members of the public and faced a temporary deduction of his pay, the harshest penalty that could be imposed upon him. In Ontario, SH complaints are to be filed with a municipal Integrity Commissioner. There is no central repository of the number of investigations/sanctions imposed on councillors. Anecdotal evidence and media reports reveal that some councillors have been asked to apologize, take training, and have had their pay deducted. No councillor has been suspended or banned from office for SH. As is the case in many other male-dominated workplaces, SH is most likely underreported in Ontario's municipalities.
5. It is possible that some members of the public may react differently depending on the status of the target (ie. councillor, staffer or member of the public). At the same time, public trust in elected officials who commit SH may arguably be shaken irrespective of the status of the target, as such behavior is generally deemed unacceptable in most workplaces today especially since the #MeToo movement. We thank one of our reviewers for drawing this point to our attention.
6. Ineligibility is not automatic, although a judge must justify why it would not apply in a particular case. See: <https://jean-jaures.org/publication/sept-propositions-pour-lutter-contre-le-harcelement-sexuel-au-parlement/> or Krook 2020, 170.
7. For example, while an MP could theoretically be suspended or expelled for committing SH against another MP, due to informal partisan norms it is highly unlikely that either disciplinary action would be taken.
8. In Ontario, Canada 2,860 local representatives were elected in the 2022 municipal elections, compared to 124 provincial and 338 federal representatives.
9. For context, in the 2022 Ontario Municipal elections there were 6,325 candidates for council. 32% of candidates were women. 31% of elected councillors were women.
10. Quality checks were conducted using an attention question (selecting the correct colour). After collection, the data were cleaned by removing straightliners and respondents who either completed the survey too quickly or too slowly.
11. We present two batteries, but an alternative approach would have been to conduct a survey, whereby the accusation/finding distinction was varied. We decided to opt for the former approach as it allows for within-respondent comparisons. Nevertheless, we see value in work that reconsiders our research questions using an experimental approach, either providing respondents with just one battery of questions, or varying the order of battery presentation.

12. Appendix II contains descriptive statistics for explanatory variables. Descriptives on the “attitudes towards punishment” questions are found in Table 1.
13. A private member’s bill introduced in 2022 would have restricted the ability of a councillor found to have violated a municipalities’ violence and harassment policy to stand for election in the next election cycle. In May 2023, the provincial government voted the legislation down, leaving the existing (and highly insufficient) ethics rules in place. Another private member’s bill seeking to address this issue was introduced in June 2024.
14. We ask respondents to consider SH committed by *their* councillor rather than presenting a fixed (or manipulated) councillor description. As a result, we aren’t able to control for the councillor profile respondents are thinking about when answering follow-up questions about allegations and punishment. While this is a potential limitation of our analyses, the random distribution of the demographic profiles of councillors likely smooths out idiosyncratic effects across the whole sample. Future work could address this limitation using vignettes.
15. All results are weighted for age, gender, and education. We employ a subset of the sample in later analyses as cases are dropped when data are missing. The results in Table 1 would change very little, and all observed trends would hold, if only this subset was shown in the Table.
16. These variables are commonly employed in analyses of political outcomes such as vote choice and turnout, and we expect that they may also be relevant here.
17. We’ve opted to label this variable as “skepticism” but acknowledge that such underlying sentiments could also include outright denial of the credibility of these claims.
18. Cronbach’s alpha scores for the two indices are 0.73 for “skepticism” and 0.63 for “sexism is a problem.”
19. The reference categories for the race and religion variables are White and atheist, respectively.
20. The Pearson R values for these correlations are: -0.13 (ideology), 0.30 (sexism is a problem), -0.24 (skepticism), and 0.43 (personal experience).
21. Considering previous work that found an interaction of partisanship and gender (Masuoka, Grose and Junn 2021), we ran alternative versions of the models in Figures 1 and 2 whereby partisanship was interacted with gender. The results of all interactions were null.
22. As a robustness check, we ran two different versions of the analysis in Figures 1 and 2, using two different indices of five punishments – dropping the “weakest” and “strongest” punishments respectively. The substantive conclusions in the main analysis (including those that pertain to gender) are unchanged with these additional analyses.

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## Appendix I. Survey Question Wording

### Sociodemographic characteristics

#### Gender

*Are you...?*

- A man, a woman, non-binary, another gender  
[ Coded as 1 for woman, 0 for man ]

#### Age

*In what year were you born?*

- Years listed  
[Coded as 1 for over 50, 0 for less than 51]

#### Education

*What is the highest level of education that you have completed?*

- No schooling, some elementary school, completed elementary school, some secondary/high school, completed secondary/high school, some technical, community college, CEGEP, completed technical, community college, CEGEP, some university, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, professional degree or doctorate  
[ Coded as 1 for Bachelor's degree or higher, otherwise 0 ]

#### Income

*What was your total household income, before taxes, for the year 2021? Be sure to include income from all sources, to the nearest thousand dollars.*

- Open ended box provided  
[Coded as 1 for over the median, 0 for below]

## Relationship status

*Are you presently married, living with a partner, divorced, separated, widowed, or have you never been married?*

- Married, Living with a partner, divorced, separated, widowed, never married  
[Coded as 1 if married or living with partner, otherwise 0]

## Employment

*What is your employment status? Are you currently...*

- Working for pay full-time, Working for pay part-time, Self employed, Retired, Unemployed/looking for work, Student, Caring for a family, Unable to work due to disability, Student and working for pay, Caring for family and working for pay, Retired and working for pay  
[Coded as 1 if working for pay full or part time, or self employed, otherwise 0]

## Immigrant

*Were you born in Canada?*

- Yes, no

## Race

*Do you consider yourself... (Please select all that apply)*

- White, Indigenous, South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, Other (please specify)  
[Three categories for White, Racialized, and Indigenous]

## Religion

*Please tell me what is your religion, if you have one?*

- None, don't have one/atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Christian orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Lutheran, Mormon, Pentecostal/Fundamentalist/Born Again/Evangelical, Presbyterian, Protestant, United Church of Canada, Christian Reformed, Salvation Army, Mennonite, Other (please specify)  
[4 categories are Atheist/Agnostic, Catholic, other Christian, and Other]

Attitudes

## Ideology

*In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?*

- 0 (left), 1, ... 9, 10 (right), don't know/prefer not to say

## "Sexism is a problem" index

*Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements?*

*Sexism, both in the workplace and in everyday interactions between men and women, is a big problem in our society*

- Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, don't know  
*In general, the #MeToo movement has been positive for society by drawing attention to problems of sexual harassment or assault".*
- Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, don't know

## Skepticism index

*Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements?*

*Women often mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or actions by men as sexism*

- Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, don't know  
*There are too many people who are claiming sexual harassment or assault*
- Strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, don't know

## Personal experience

*Now thinking about your own experiences, have you ever personally received unwanted sexual advances, or been subject to verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature? This can be in any circumstance, whether or not it was work related.*

- Yes, No, Don't know/prefer not to say

## Appendix II. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Woman	0.50	0.50	2,423
Over 50	0.50	0.50	
Universty education	0.30	0.46	
High income	0.45	0.50	
Married/common law	0.59	0.49	
Employed	0.53	0.50	
Immigrant	0.17	0.38	
Racialized	0.20	0.40	
Indigenous	0.03	0.17	
Catholic	0.24	0.42	
Other Christian	0.27	0.45	
Other religion	0.09	0.28	
Ideology	0.50	0.22	
Sexism is problem	0.63	0.26	
Skepticism	0.48	0.29	
Personal experience	0.38	0.49	

## Appendix III. Full Model Results

**Table III-I.** Full model results for Figures 1 and 2

	Figure 1	Figure 2	
	Support for punishment following accusation	Support for punishment following finding	
		Difference in support for finding - accusation	
Woman	0.35 (0.12)**	0.11 (0.11)	-0.24 (0.11)*
Over 50	-0.17 (0.12)	0.33 (0.12)**	0.25 (0.11)**
University educated	-0.37 (0.10)**	-0.03 (0.09)	0.25 (0.09)**

(Continued)



Table III-1. *Continued*

	Figure 1		Figure 2
	Support for punishment following accusation	Support for punishment following finding	Difference in support for finding - accusation
High income	-0.15 (0.11)	0.18 (0.10)	0.33 (0.10)**
Married/ common law	0.36 (0.11)**	0.20 (0.10)	-0.15 (0.10)
Employed	0.20 (0.12)	0.11 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.10)
Born outside Canada	0.31 (0.15)*	0.14 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.12)
Racialized	0.07 (0.15)	-0.11 (0.13)	-0.17 (0.13)
Indigenous	0.10 (0.33)	0.22 (0.26)	0.12 (0.23)
Catholic	0.40 (0.13)***	0.08 (0.12)	-0.32 (0.11)**
Other Christian	0.26 (0.14)	0.21 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.12)
Other religion	-0.04 (0.21)	-0.22 (0.19)	-0.17 (0.19)
Ideology	0.08 (0.26)	-0.45 (0.22)*	-0.53 (0.22)*
Sexism is a problem	2.51 (0.23)**	1.82 (0.22)**	-0.69 (0.19)**
Skepticism	-0.59 (0.21)**	-0.53 (0.18)**	0.06 (0.17)
Personal experience	-0.06 (0.12)	0.03 (0.11)	0.09 (0.10)
Constant	1.69 (0.30)**	3.39 (0.28)**	1.59 (0.25)**
R-square	0.136	0.114	0.048
N	2,423	2,423	2,423

Entries report OLS regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses)

\*:  $P < 0.05$

\*\* :  $P < 0.01$ .

**Cite this article:** Raney, Tracey, R. Michael McGregor, and Cameron D. Anderson. 2024. "When Councillors Sexually Harass: Legislative Sanctions and Gender-Based Violence in Canada's Municipalities." *Politics & Gender* 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000394>

**Table III-2.** Full model results for Figure 3

	Public should be made aware	Councillor should take training	Councillor should apologize	Councillor should have pay deducted	Councillor should be removed from office	Councillor should be removed and banned
Woman	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)*	0.05 (0.03)†
Over 50	0.10 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)*	0.10 (0.03)**	0.00 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)*	0.00 (0.03)
University educated	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)*
High income	0.05 (0.02)*	0.08 (0.02)**	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)*	0.01 (0.02)
Married/common law	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)*	0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)
Employed	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Born outside Canada	0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Racialized	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Indigenous	0.11 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)	0.02 (0.08)	0.02 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)
Catholic	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Other Christian	0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Other religion	-0.06 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Ideology	-0.10 (0.05)*	-0.16 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)
Sexism is a problem	0.22 (0.04)**	0.27 (0.04)**	0.31 (0.05)**	0.24 (0.05)**	0.31 (0.04)**	0.33 (0.05)**

(Continued)

**Table III-2.** *Continued*

	Public should be made aware	Councillor should take training	Councillor should apologize	Councillor should have pay deducted	Councillor should be removed from office	Councillor should be removed and banned
Skepticism	-0.10 (0.04)*	-0.12 (0.04)**	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.04)**	-0.09 (0.04)*
Personal experience	0.02 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)*	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.25)	-0.02 (0.03)
Pseudo R-square	0.073	0.101	0.062	0.029	0.082	0.059
N	2,423	2,423	2,423	2,423	2,423	2,423

Entries report logit marginal effects and standard errors (in parentheses)

†: P = 0.06

\*: P < 0.05

\*\* : P < 0.01