

Partisanship and the Resurgence of Women's Protest in the United States

Michael T. Heaney

Assistant Professor of Organizational Studies and Political Science
University of Michigan
mheaney@umich.edu

February 1, 2017

Abstract: The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States helped to catalyze the resurgence of women's protest. This study considers the likely strengths of this movement, and the challenges it faces, by examining the partisanship of protesters. Using survey data from the Women's March on Washington in 2017 and the protests outside the Republican National Convention in 2016, this article argues that the Women's March appeared to be roughly twice as Democratic-leaning as other recent left-oriented protests in the last year. The article points out that partisanship is a resource that the women's movement may be able to exploit to help sustain activism throughout the Trump presidency. However, partisanship also creates challenges for activism. A more partisan movement may be more likely to collapse after the next election than a more issue-oriented movement. Moreover, a partisan movement may have a harder time building coalitions that would be essential to success in achieving policy change than a more issue-oriented movement.

Keywords: Donald Trump, presidency, 2016 election, women's movement, social movements, activism, protest, political parties, and partisanship.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by grants from the Institute for Research on Women and Gender (IRWG), the Organizational Studies Program (OS), and the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) at the University of Michigan. The author is especially grateful to Anna Kirkland for the tremendous support and encouragement that she provided in helping to launch this project on short notice. Special thanks are owed to Bob and Kate Bateman, Jack Santucci, Mark Chupp, Sharon Shumaker, Patrick Coy, Christina Beaty, Lisa Leitz, and Melissa Van. Surveys at the Republican National Convention were conducted by Benjamin Smith, Charmaine Pope, Ian Cameron, James Satrape, John Hess, Kareemah Hairston, Lea Baron, Michelle Eatman, Monica Kaiser, Patti Longville, Savannah Justus, Sharon Renner, Tim Lilley, Mary Poropat, Megan Murray, Cheng Ren, Winnie Wang, Zoe Van Dyke, and Michael Heaney. Surveys at the Women's March on Washington were conducted by Andrea Mayer, Michael Mrozinski, Barbara dos Santos, Kaitlyn Block, Erica Rodarte, Diana Davila, Jack Fazzino, Jack Hasler, Katherine Ruehrdanz, and Rebecca Strauss. Data entry was performed by Laboni Bayen, Ilina Krishen, William Sollish, Jack Sexauer, Katarina Nehr Korn, Aliza Sitrin, Steven Vaniwarden, Ji Soo Kang, Matthew Harmon, Amogh Daduvai, and Chen Liang.

The clash of perspectives on gender was one of many elements that made the 2016 presidential election extraordinary. Longtime liberal-feminist Hillary Clinton became the first woman to be nominated for president by a major political party in the United States. Her chief opponent, Donald Trump, had a long record of making problematic statements about women and was dogged by multiple allegations of sexual assault. The candidates' clashing perspectives on gender became one of the most widely discussed issues in the election. When Donald Trump was ultimately elected president, many women viewed this outcome as an affront to them (Edelstein 2017).

The day after Trump's inauguration, hundreds of thousands of activists – the overwhelming majority of whom were women – took part in the Women's March on Washington (Wallace and Parlapiano 2017). Speakers at the march included feminist icon Gloria Steinem, prominent activists such as Angela Davis, and entertainers such as Madonna and America Ferrera. The speakers and the marchers voiced a wide range of political messages on gendered and non-gendered topics, as is illustrated by the photo in Figure 1. The march was one of the largest gatherings of women in American history. Sister marches were held in cities and towns across the United States and around the world.

While the women's movement in the United States has been active in recent years – working inside government agencies, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and social institutions (Banaszak 2010) – the Women's March signaled a resurgence of protest by women *as women* (Goss and Heaney 2010). Indeed, women's efforts to mobilize using a broad, gendered frame have been abeyant for many years (Goss 2013; Taylor 1989).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The ultimate political significance of the Women's March will likely depend less, however, on the raw count of the number of people who marched and more on the extent to which it does or does not motivate women to organize on a gendered basis to oppose to the policies of the Trump Administration and enact their own agendas. As sociologist Dana Fisher (2017) explains, “[h]istory

teaches us that successful movements require that demonstrations be but one tactic in a much larger repertoire of contention that leads to social change” (see also Tarrow 2011). This article examines the political forces that will likely shape this new wave of activism. It asks the question, what, if anything, could political science do to inform these contemporary politics?

This article argues that the partisanship of activists is a critical element that shapes the dynamics of protest. First, it considers why partisan identity is especially relevant to political mobilization in the United States. Second, it outlines a research design built on surveys at grassroots political events. Third, it compares the results of surveys conducted at protests outside the 2016 Republican National Convention and the Women’s March on Washington in 2017. Fourth, it concludes by analyzing what the overwhelmingly Democratic-partisan nature of the Women’s March means for the prospects for organizing women *as women* in the coming years.

Partisan Identity and Mobilization

Political parties play an enormous role in acting as agents of political socialization in the United States (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Parties help citizens to learn about politics by inundating them with political advertising, structuring the issue positions of candidates, and supplying the resources that are necessary for elections to take place. Although citizens may learn about politics from other sources – such as social movement organizations – no other organizations can compete with parties in the extent to which they dominate conversations about politics.

While it is commonly recognized that partisan identity is a critical factor in how citizens vote in elections (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960), partisan identity also molds the way that people think about other political phenomena. In my recent book, *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11* (Heaney and Rojas 2015), Fabio Rojas and I argue that the distribution of partisan identities within a movement is a critical variable that matters to the

strategies, tactics, and protest cycle followed by a movement. People who identify with a political party are most likely to participate in a social movement when they believe that movement advances the party's agenda, but are likely to withdraw their involvement once the movement and the party no longer align. Thus, a movement with a high percentage of partisan activists may experience an amplified mobilization cycle when parties come in and out of power, while a less partisan movement may follow a more attenuated cycle of mobilization.

In light of these tendencies, it is important to examine how women's protests are connected to the party system. Did the Women's March draw women from across the political spectrum? Or, did it rely on a more limited segment of activists? Especially during a period of high partisan polarization, the answer to this question helps to anticipate the power of the movement and how it is likely to factor into political debates.

Survey Design

As Fabio Rojas and I demonstrate in *Party in the Street*, it is possible to obtain a quasi-random sample of people participating in a demonstration by adapting exit-poll methodology. To do so, we create an "anchor sampling" approach. We hire teams of surveyors, who begin their work by dispersing to the major regions of the crowd. Each surveyor is instructed to look out into the crowd and select a person to be used as an anchor for counting. The anchor is not surveyed. The surveyor then counts five persons from the anchor and invites the fifth person to take a survey. The surveyor continues counting five to the right until three surveys are accepted. Nonresponses are recorded. After three surveys are completed, a new anchor is selected and the counting process resumes.

I applied this methodology to conduct surveys at the Women's March on Washington in 2017. The survey included questions on political attitudes, partisan identification, histories of political

participation, and demographic characteristics. My team collected 187 surveys of participants in the march, 81 percent of whom were women. The response rate was 78 percent.

In order to assess the nature of the crowd at the Women’s March, it is helpful to have a comparison group. Marchers have above average levels of political participation. Thus, it would be misleading to compare them to a sample of the general population. Instead, it makes sense to compare them to those mobilized at a similar, recent political event. I chose to compare them to protesters at the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. Using data from this event is advantageous because it took place at a reasonably similar point in time. The most relevant differences are location (Cleveland rather than Washington, DC), that it took place before the 2016 election (and thus was not responsive to the actual election of President Trump), and that it was not oriented primarily around a gendered master frame. Comparing the marchers in Cleveland to those in DC therefore yields a comparison of left-leaning activists who opposed Donald Trump prior to his election, but did not focus on gender, to a group of left-leaning activists who opposed Donald Trump after his election, but who were focused on gender. This comparison is not perfect, but it does facilitate understanding how the Women’s March compared to other left-leaning mobilizations.

My team collected 578 surveys of participants over the week of protests at the Republican convention, 48 percent of whom were women. The response rate was 49 percent. Although both women and men demonstrated at both events, here I analyze only the surveys of women attending the events. I do so to make the samples more directly comparable.

Results

As is indicated in Figure 2a and Figure 2b, women at the Women’s March had much stronger loyalties to the Democratic Party than was the case for women protesting at the Republican convention. Only 25 percent of female protesters at the Republican convention identified as strong Democrats.

Independents made up 18 percent of the group, while people with other identifications made up 19 percent of the sample. In contrast, 51 percent of women at the Women’s March described themselves as strong Democrats. Only 4 percent chose the independent option and 10 percent elected the other option. The difference between these distributions is statistically significant ($\chi^2_7 = 66.87, p \leq 0.001$).

INSERT FIGURE 2A AND FIGURE 2B HERE

The two groups differed considerably with respect to whom they supported for president, as is revealed in Figure 3a and Figure 3b. At the Republican convention, 45 percent of women indicated an intention to vote for Hillary Clinton. But, at the Women’s March, 90 percent of women reported that they had voted for Hillary Clinton. This difference is statistically significant ($t = 9.53, p \leq 0.001$).

INSERT FIGURE 3A AND FIGURE 3B HERE

To ascertain the multiple, interacting factors that distinguish the women who protested at the Republican convention from those who marched in Washington after the Inauguration, I estimate a Probit regression. The dependent variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent was observed at the Women’s March and 0 if she was observed at the Republican convention. Missing values of independent variables are imputed using complete case imputation.

The results, reported in Table 1, show significant differences in the type of people that attended the two marches. Participants in the Women’s March identified significantly more closely with the Democratic Party than did protesters at the Republican convention. Women’s marchers were also significantly more likely to be white, have higher levels of education, and higher levels of income than was the case for protesters at the Republican convention. Attitudes about discrimination toward women in the workplace, membership in political organizations, previous participation in protests, and age do not appear to separate participants in the two events from one another in a significant way.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Overall, the Women's March attracted roughly double the level of participation by Democratically-identified activists than was the case among left-leaning activists at the Republican convention. The tendency toward Democratic identification at the Women's March remains statistically significant in a multivariate analysis that considers alternative explanations for mobilization. Nearly all (90 percent) of the Women's marchers reported having voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general presidential election.

Prospects for Women's Protest

The Democratic leaning of the Women's March is suggestive of both strengths and weaknesses for resurgent women's protest. A major advantage of this leaning is that these women are likely to be highly motivated to mobilize as long as the Republican, Donald Trump, remains President of the United States. Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that women will remain mobilized on a gendered basis for at least a number of years. There are some vulnerabilities that result from this situation, however. First, when Trump eventually leaves office – especially if he is replaced by a Democratic president – women's protest will likely resume its abeyant state. Yet, it seems probable that problems linked to gender inequality will remain. Thus, as was the case for the antiwar movement after 9/11, the women's movement would demobilize at exactly the time that it was most likely to have a positive policy influence.

Second, the high percentage of Democratic activists in the movement likely will strongly discourage participation from Republican, conservative, independent, and third-party-leaning activists. The absence of non-Democratic women from women's activism is potentially a serious deficit for the movement. Given that Republicans control the Congress and the White House at the present time, the movement is lacking in brokers who could potentially build alliances on issues of wide interest to women. The issue of abortion is a major factor that keeps many of the non-Democratic women out of

women's activism. For example, 34 percent of women at the Women's March reported past participation in pro-choice rallies, but only 5 percent admitted joining into pro-life rallies. Still, abortion is not the only factor creating division. There are many supporters of Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein who care about women's issues, but are turned off by the partisan leaning of women's protest.

It may seem somewhat inconceivable to separate abortion and the Democratic Party from women's activism, perhaps because these elements have been connected to the women's movement since at the least the 1980s. But doing so seems plausible upon some reflection. It is easy to imagine that there are many women who are pro-life, but would prefer not to experience sexual harassment. Likewise, there are Republican and libertarian women who believe that they deserve equal pay for equal work. By narrowing itself largely to pro-choice women, women's activism misses opportunities to seize power and make policy changes in areas where there is broader consensus among women.

Leaders of the women's movement would be well advised to pursue strategies that would broaden their ranks beyond those of liberal, Democratic women. Doing so would help to stabilize the movement in the face of varied electoral outcomes. It would also enhance the chances for alliances in Congress, state capitals, and other policymaking venues that advance much-needed policy reforms. One way to pursue this goal would be to rely more heavily on ideologically diverse coalitions than on large mobilizations. Given that President Trump is an alienating political figure for many people, diverse coalitions might have better prospects during the 2017-2020 period than they have had in recent years. At the same time, such a strategy would require movement leaders to adopt discursive practices that are outside their traditional comfort zones (such as avoiding mentions of reproductive rights in their speeches). In conclusion, success for women's activism around a broad, gender-based frame is far from certain, but it seems more likely now than it has during the past two decades of partisan polarization.

References

- Banaszak, Lee Ann. 2010. *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Edelstein, Jean Hannah. 2017. "Trump's casual misogyny is an affront to all women." *The Guardian* (January 21). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/22/donald-trump-misogyny-affront-womens-march-unite-against-him>, accessed January 30, 2017.
- Fisher, Dana R. 2017. "The women's march was only the beginning." *Contexts* (January 26). Available online: <https://contexts.org/blog/the-womens-march-was-only-the-beginning/>, accessed January 30, 2017.
- Goss, Kristin A. 2013. *The Paradox of Gender Equality*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Goss, Kristin A., and Michael T. Heaney. 2010. "Organizing Women as Women." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(1): 27-52.
- Green, Donald, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Heaney, Michael T., and Fabio Rojas. 2015. *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarrow, Sidney G. 2011. *Power in Movement*, 3rd Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Verta. 1989. "Social movement continuity." *American Sociological Review* 54(5): 761-775.
- Wallace, Tim, and Alicia Parlapiano. 2017. "Crowd Scientists Say Women's March in Washington Had 3 Times as Many People as Trump's Inauguration." *New York Times* (January 22). Available

online: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/22/us/politics/womens-march-trump-crowd-estimates.html?_r=0, accessed January 30, 2017.

Figure 1. Activists Head to the Women's March on Washington, January 21, 2017



Photo by Michael T. Heaney.

Figure 2a.
Partisan Identification at Republican Convention Protests, 2016

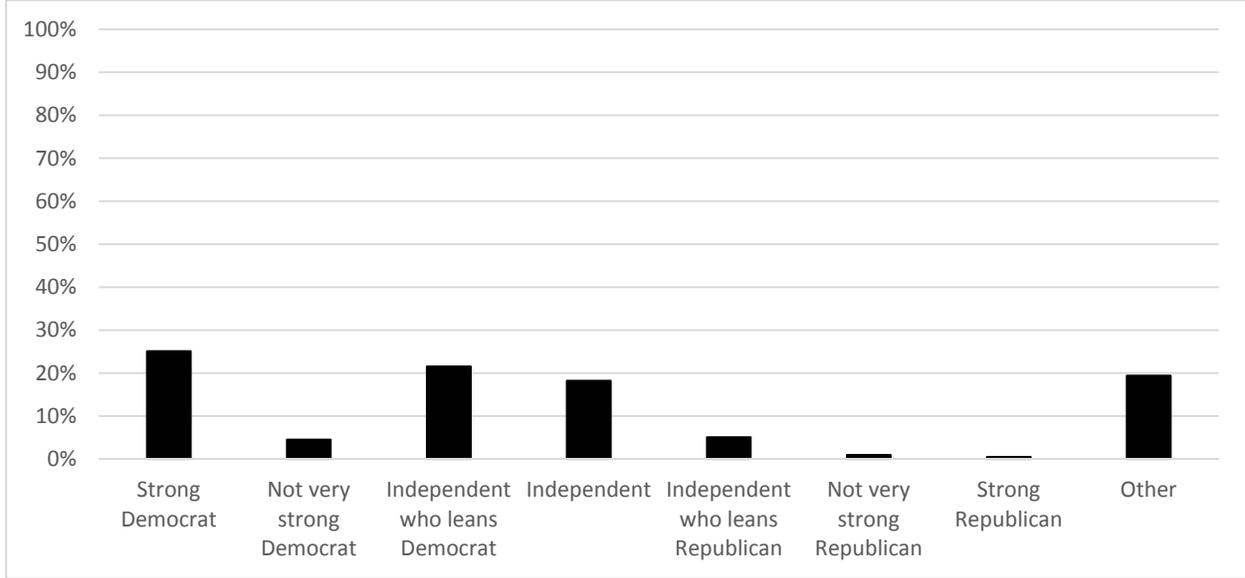


Figure 2b.
Partisan Identification at the Women's March, 2017

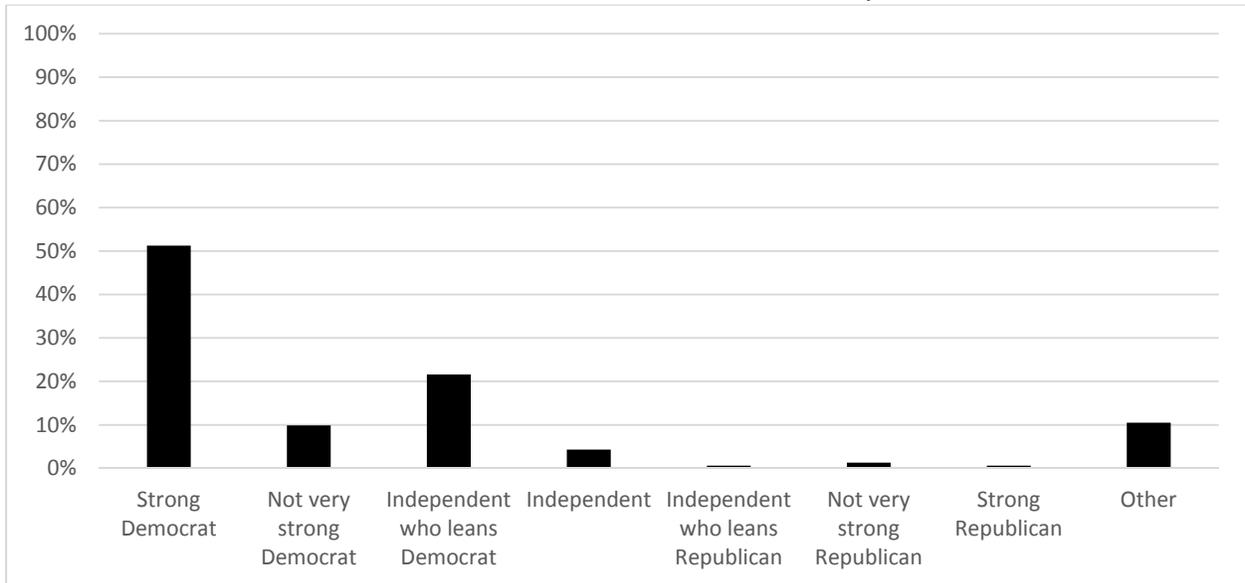


Figure 3a.
Voting Intentions at Republican Convention Protests, 2016

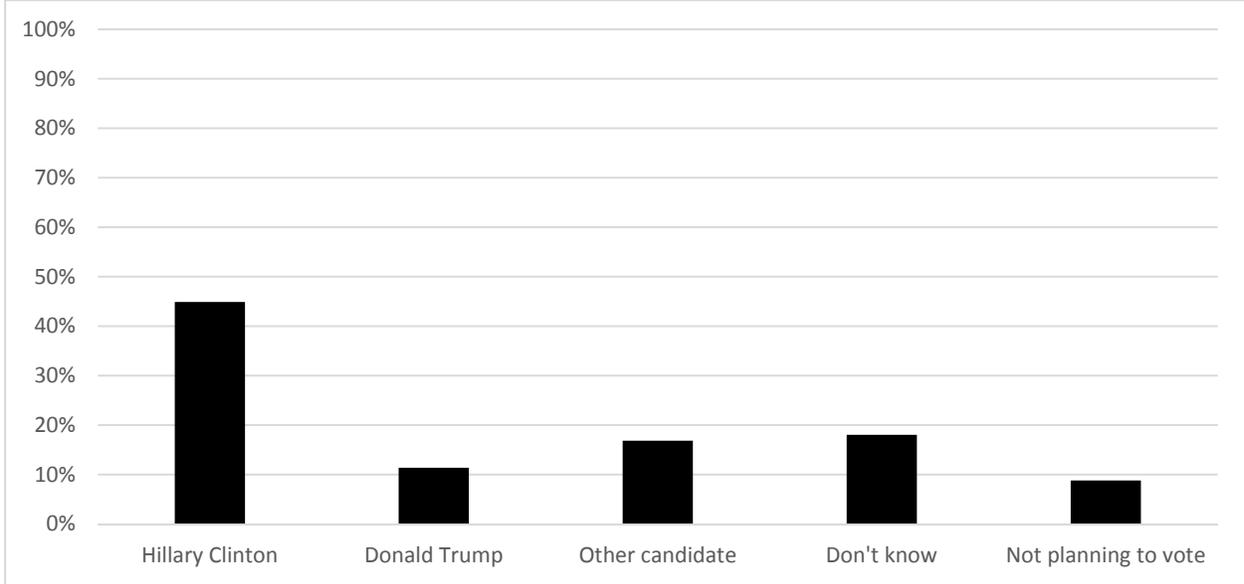


Figure 3b.
Reported Votes by Women's Marchers, 2017

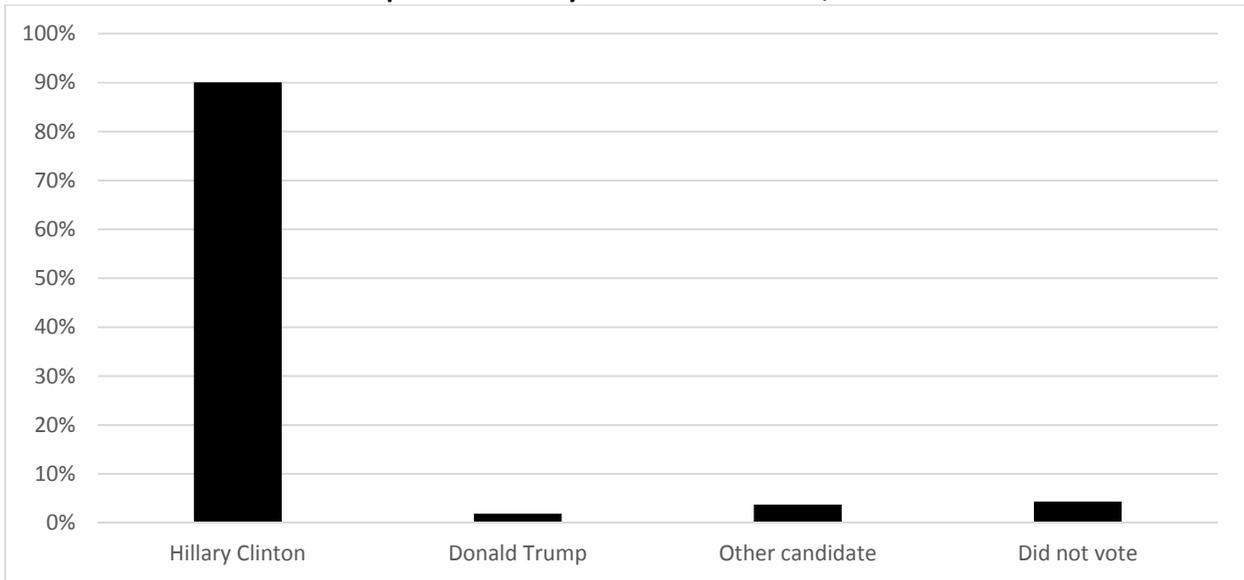


Table 1.
Factors Distinguishing Women's Participation in Women's March and Republican Convention Protests

	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Percent Imputed
<i>Party Identification</i> (1=Strong Republican, 7=Strong Democrat)	0.207*** (0.061)	5.664 (1.579)	27.32%
<i>Women are Discriminated against in Workplace</i> (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)	0.202 (0.113)	4.398 (0.887)	11.37%
<i>Member of Political Organization=1</i>	-0.246 (0.165)	0.438 (0.497)	11.90%
<i>Attended Past Rally = 1</i>	0.239 (0.193)	0.740 (0.439)	14.90%
<i>Respondent is White / Caucasian = 1</i>	0.486** (0.181)	0.740 (0.439)	18.82%
<i>Respondent's Age in Years</i>	0.005 (0.005)	42.519 (16.076)	20.78%
<i>Level of Education</i> (1=less than high school, 6=graduate degree)	0.171** (0.062)	4.588 (1.347)	18.69%
<i>Income in Thousands of Dollars</i>	0.003** (0.001)	75.009 (80.589)	23.01%
<i>Constant</i>	-3.732*** (0.609)		
Dependent Variable: <i>Participated in Women's March = 1</i>		0.366 (0.483)	
N	= 344		
Log likelihood	= -194.19478		
LR χ^2_8	= 63.59***		

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.050$.