

Sample Research Report

**NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT
THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT CHARGES AGAINST CLARENCE THOMAS:
THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY
CONTROLLING FOR LEVEL OF EDUCATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

National-sample, public-opinion polls show the U.S. public to be sharply divided by Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas. No national consensus has yet emerged on which of the two is telling the truth.¹ It seems reasonable to predict that North Carolinians are similarly divided with no public consensus on this issue. Political ideology often shapes perceptions of political events. Hence, it is plausible to suggest that a North Carolinian's political ideology will influence his or her belief in the truth of Clarence Thomas's denial of the charges brought by Anita Hill. Specifically, it is logical to predict that conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe that Hill's charges are false. Level of education also influences many political opinions and behaviors. Specifically, college-educated individuals are more likely to hold ideologically sophisticated beliefs. Hence, it is plausible to predict that the relationship between a person's political ideology and his/her assessment of Thomas' innocence will be stronger if that person has a college degree. This paper will report the results of testing these three hypotheses by analyzing data from a 1991 survey of adult North Carolinians.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Univariate hypothesis. Numerous national-sample, public-opinion polls were conducted by or for the news media during the Thomas-Hill controversy and reported similar results. In one of these, a survey of 758 adults compiled by the Gallup Poll, each respondent was asked, "Clarence Thomas has been charged with sexual harassment by Anita Hill, and he has denied the charges. Who do you believe is telling the truth?" Opinions were greatly divided: about 45 percent believed Clarence Thomas was telling the truth, while 20 percent believed Anita Hill's accusations, and nearly 30 percent believed neither, both, or didn't know who was telling the truth (Gallup data as cited in Harbrecht, 1991: 34). It seems plausible to assume that North Carolinians are similarly divided with no clear consensus on who is telling the truth. Although a plurality of North Carolinians are more likely to believe Clarence Thomas' denials than Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment, a large proportion of North Carolinians are still undecided about which person to believe; hence,

H₁: There is no statewide consensus among the North Carolina public on whether Thomas or Hill is telling the truth..

Bivariate hypothesis. There is a quite-large body of research that demonstrates an association between political ideological self-identification and a person's attitude toward political issues. Robert Erikson, Norman Luttbeg, and Kent Tedin provide a review of this literature (1991, 84)². This bivariate relationship exists when self-identified liberals hold a liberal attitude and self-identified conservatives hold a conservative attitude toward specific issues. Because Clarence Thomas has a reputation for being conservative and because liberals have rallied around Anita Hill's cause, a person's self-identified political ideology should help predict who he or she believes to be telling the truth.

H₂: North Carolina's conservatives are more likely than North Carolina liberals to believe Thomas' denial of Hill's charges of sexual harassment.

Multivariate hypothesis. The impact of controlling for level of education when measuring the relationship between political ideology and issue preferences has not been extensively researched. However, there are two studies that address this problem. The more famous of the two studies was authored by Philip Converse. In his 1964 essay, Converse reported that,

¹Public-opinion analysts generally define *consensus* as a substantial level of agreement among the public, i.e., 60 percent or more holding the same view or position.

²A list of the policy issues examining ideological preferences and opinions are in Table 4.3 (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 84).

... the degree of association between liberal-conservative attitudes and various issue positions was about twice as large, on the average, among respondents with a college education as among those who did not go beyond grade school. (Converse, 1964)

Converse believed that the low level of ideological thinking that he found within the mass public was due to their receiving low levels of political information. He attributed this low level of information to the mass public's lack of college education.

George Bishop reported a later study examining the effect of education on a person's ideological consistency (1976, 337-48). The relationship found by Bishop supports Converse's earlier theory and findings.³ Bishop found that the level of education achieved had a considerable effect on the sociopolitical opinions of the American people. Bishop described "a clear relationship that better-educated groups respond in a more consistently ideological fashion" (Bishop 1976, 334).

H₃: Controlling for respondents' level of education will affect the bivariate relationship. The people with the strongest relationship between ideology and attitude toward Thomas will be the college educated. The people with the weakest relationship will not have a college education.

METHODS

Data Selection

The data for this research were taken from the Fall 1991 *Carolina Poll*. The telephone survey was conducted by the University of North Carolina School of Journalism. A random-digit-dialing method was used to give all residential phones in North Carolina an equal chance of being called. The data were weighted by household size to restore equal representation to members of large households. The questions were asked of adults over age eighteen living at the residence. The poll was conducted between October 20-24, 1991; 610 respondents were interviewed. The sampling error margin is plus or minus 3.5 percent for the total sample, larger for comparisons between groups. The confidence level is 95 percent. In addition to sampling error, any survey contains unknown levels of error from other sources, such as question wording, question order, respondent misunderstandings, refusal rates, and other practical difficulties of measuring public opinion.

Data Definition

The respondents were asked "*Do you think the charges of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas were true or false?*" Some respondents volunteered the answer that both Thomas and Hill were not telling the truth. The responses coded *don't know* or *no answer* were dropped from this paper's analysis as missing cases because this study is only interested in people who expressed an opinion on the Thomas-Hill controversy.

The respondents were also asked, "*In general, when it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or what?*" All the people who answered *no preference*, *don't know*, or *no answer* were placed into the missing-cases category.

The respondents were also asked, "*What is the highest degree you earned?*" The possible choices were *high school*, *associate or junior college*, *bachelor's degree*, *graduate degree*, or *no answer*. This variable was recoded into two categories, *college* and *non-college*. Respondents with some college education but lacking a baccalaureate

³Although Bishop's findings supported Converse's theory, another study did not. Nie and Andersen examined increased ideological consistency among the U.S. public in the 1960s and concluded that this resulted from the increased salience of politics to the mass public more than an increase in college-educated adults (Nie and Andersen 1974, 571-575).

degree were put in the non-college group. Respondents who answered that they *didn't know* or had *no opinion* were placed into the missing-cases category.

Data Analysis

The univariate hypothesis (H₁) was tested by running a simple frequency distribution on the dependent variable -- *belief that the sexual harassment charges were true, false, or both*. The bivariate hypothesis (H₂) was tested by crosstabulating the dependent variable with the independent variable -- *self-reported political ideology*. Chi square and gamma summary statistics were computed to see if the relationship was statistically significant and to measure how strong a relationship existed. Finally, the multivariate hypothesis (H₃) was tested by rerunning the bivariate crosstabulation while controlling for *level of education*. Chi square and gamma statistics were again computed for each of the resulting partial tables.

FINDINGS

Test of the Univariate Hypothesis

The data in Table 1 support the univariate hypothesis (H₁) that, *although the people of North Carolina were more likely to believe Clarence Thomas than Anita Hill, there is no statewide consensus on this issue*. While more than one-third of those having an opinion agreed with Anita Hill that the charges were true, just under one-half believed that Hill's charges were false. Sixteen percent of those with an opinion volunteered that the charges against Thomas were both true and false. We can safely assume that these findings are statistically significant because the percentage-difference between each of these three sub-groups is larger than the random-sample error margin (± 4.4 percent) for this number of valid responses (n = 491). Thus, as in Gallup's national sample, there is no consensus among North Carolinians on the validity of Hill's charges. It is also important to take notice of the 114 missing cases. Almost one out of five persons questioned had no opinion or chose not to answer this question. This is an unusually large proportion of respondents and illustrates the difficulty in judging the truth in this matter.

**TABLE 1:
ATTITUDE TOWARD ANITA HILL'S SEXUAL HARASSMENT CHARGES
AGAINST CLARENCE THOMAS**

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cum Percent
True	1.00	181	30.0	36.9	36.9
Both [volunteered]	2.00	78	12.8	15.8	52.7
False	3.00	232	38.4	47.3	100.0
Don't know/no answer	4.00	114	18.8	Missing	
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	Total	604	100.0	100.0	
Valid cases	491	Missing cases	114		

Test of the Bivariate Hypothesis

The data in Table 2 support the bivariate hypothesis (H₂) that *political ideology helps predict who the respondent believes, Thomas or Hill -- self-reported conservatives are more likely than liberals to believe Hill's charges are false*. The data show that a majority of conservatives believed Hill's charges are false while a plurality of liberals believed that they are true. Conservatives in North Carolina were 16 percent more likely than liberals to believe the charges are false. Liberals were 18 percent more likely than conservatives to believe the charges are

true. The moderates were more evenly split -- four out of ten thought the charges are true and four out of ten thought the charges are false. However, the gamma of 0.23 shows that only a moderate relationship exists between self-reported political ideology and attitude toward the sexual harassment charges.⁴ This modest strength of association reflects the finding that approximately four out of ten liberals disbelieved Hill and almost three of ten conservatives distrusted Thomas.

We can assume these bivariate findings are statistically significant because all of these subgroup differences are larger than the random-sampling error margin (± 4.8 percent) for this size subsample ($n = 423$). The statistical significance of these bivariate findings are further demonstrated by the chi square probability of sampling error, which is 0.00. The relationship shown would occur 0 out of 100 times by chance.

**TABLE 2:
ATTITUDE TOWARD HARASSMENT CHARGES AGAINST CLARENCE THOMAS
BY RESPONDENT'S SELF-REPORTED POLITICAL IDEOLOGY**

		Self-Reported Political Ideology			Row Total
		liberal	moderate	conservative	
Attitude toward Charges	Col Pct	1.00	2.00	3.00	
		46.3	41.0	28.0	157
1.00	true	46.3	41.0	28.0	37.1
2.00	both	10.9	18.3	13.7	64
3.00	false	42.9	40.7	58.4	203
	Column Total	88	175	161	423
		20.7	41.3	38.1	100.0
	Chi-Square				.00498
	Gamma				.22693

Test of Multivariate Hypothesis

The data in Table 3 *neither support nor contradict* the multivariate hypothesis (H_3) that *controlling for education will affect the bivariate relationship -- the college-educated respondents have the stronger relationship between political ideology and attitudes toward the charges*. Although, as predicted, the gamma for the college-educated group (0.30) is larger than the gamma for those lacking a college degree (0.18), the chi-square probability statistic is below the 0.05 confidence level only for the non-college sample and not for the college-educated sample. Almost nine times out of 100, random sampling error could have produced a relationship as large as that shown in the group with a college degree. Hence, these sample findings cannot be confidently extrapolated to the larger, North Carolina population. Thus, these data neither support nor contradict the Converse and Bishop argument that the college experience increases the impact of political ideology in shaping people's attitudes about political controversies. Alternately, a selection effect may be at work such that people who have the opportunity to go to college are more active political ideologists for reasons other than the college experience, reasons perhaps related to class, race, or other factors correlated with college attendance.

⁴Many public opinion analysts agree that a gamma between 0 and ± 0.15 indicates a weak relationship; a gamma between ± 0.15 and ± 0.30 indicates a moderate relationship; a gamma above ± 0.30 indicates a strong relationship.

**TABLE 3:
ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT CHARGES
AGAINST CLARENCE THOMAS
BY SELF-REPORTED POLITICAL IDEOLOGY
CONTROLLING FOR RESPONDENT'S SELF-REPORTED LEVEL OF EDUCATION**

NO BACCALAUREATE COLLEGE DEGREE

		Self-Reported Ideology			Row Total
		liberal	moderate	conserv- ative	
Attitude about Charges	Col Pct	1.00	2.00	3.00	
true	1.00	39.8	42.1	28.1	99 36.4
both	2.00	10.6	19.3	10.8	39 14.3
false	3.00	49.6	38.6	61.1	134 49.3
Column Total		57 20.8	114 41.9	102 37.3	272 100.0
		Chi-Square	.01725		
		Gamma	.18879		

AT LEAST A BACCALAUREATE COLLEGE DEGREE

		Self-Reported Ideology			Row Total
		liberal	moderate	conserv- ative	
Attitude About Charges	Col Pct	1.00	2.00	3.00	
true	1.00	56.7	37.8	25.9	55 36.9
both	2.00	11.7	16.8	19.0	25 16.6
false	3.00	31.7	45.4	55.2	69 46.4
Column Total		30 20.3	60 40.3	58 39.3	148 100.0
		Chi-Square	.08758		
		Gamma	.29934		

IMPLICATIONS

Substantive

From the univariate findings reported, it can be concluded that by voting to confirm Clarence Thomas as a Supreme Court Justice, North Carolina's two Republican U.S. Senators acted in accordance with what a plurality of the North Carolina citizens wanted. Hence, probably neither Helms nor Faircloth were significantly harmed in North Carolina by supporting Thomas. However, this assumes that the Thomas controversy was equally salient to both partisans on both sides of the issue. However, if Thomas opponents are more intense in their beliefs, then their

single-issue voting could hurt Helms or Faircloth in future elections just as it hurt Senator Gus Savage of Illinois in his recent failure to win reelection.

The bivariate findings support the notion that in North Carolina, as in the national public, political perceptions on controversial issues can be shaped by ideological predispositions. However, while statistically significant, the relationship between ideology and attitude in this study was only weak to moderate in strength. Clearly, other factors were at work shaping political attitudes in this controversy. Presumably, the Hill-Thomas dispute is not the only controversy in which the North Carolina public's political perceptions cannot be greatly manipulated or solely explained using ideological cues.

The multivariate findings neither support nor contradict the hypothesis that controlling for education does effect the relationship between political ideology and attitude. Although the sample findings were consistent with the hypothesis that college-educated respondents would exhibit a stronger bivariate relationship between their self-reported political ideology and their beliefs about the Thomas-Hill affair, these sample findings had too high an error margin to allow us to confidently project them onto the statewide population. Nonetheless, we should consider that Bishop also argued that because younger cohorts do have a greater education level, over time, the aggregate increase in education level might lead to greater consistency in ideological attitudes at the individual level. Such an increase in future generations' ideological consistency could then make it safer to predict attitudes along ideological lines (Bishop, 1976 345).

Methodological

These findings could be methodologically flawed in several respects. First, a larger sample size might have shown stronger bivariate and multivariate relationships. Second, there were a large number of missing cases for the dependent variable, thereby further increasing the chance of sampling error. And finally, non-sampling errors in the question wording or question ordering of the *Carolina Poll* could have distorted the data collected. For example, in further research it might be beneficial to use an objective, issue-based measure of ideology, instead of the subjective measure used in this study. Other, obviously important, variables in the Thomas-Hill controversy that could be used as control variables are race, gender, and party identification.

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