

“You Reached Out to Me for Help”: Female Attorneys, Anti-Feminist Causes, and Their Effects on Symbolic Representation

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Abstract

Research shows that having a woman represent anti-feminist policy can legitimize the policy and institution even among women. But does this effect extend to federal courts ruling against women's interests? When a woman argues for an anti-feminist outcome, are the courts perceived as more legitimate than when a man makes the same argument? Using a survey experiment where 1,395 participants read about a workplace sexual harassment case argued by a male or female attorney, we find that courts are different from legislatures and that the legitimization process is more complicated there as a result. Specifically, we find that female attorneys can legitimate anti-feminist rulings in one specific instance: when a female attorney represents an employer and wins, and only for female participants who are much less likely to perceive that process to be procedurally legitimate in the first place. Our results demonstrate that attorney gender has little impact on feelings of court legitimacy and, when it does, only women can legitimize anti-feminist rulings.