Trumping Norms: Lab evidence on aggressive communication before and after the 2016 US presidential election

By Jennie Huang and Corinne Low[*]

This paper uses a simple lab experiment designed to test for gender differences in negotiation to show that the 2016 election of Donald Trump had a profound impact on individual behavior in the lab. Huang and Low (2017) use a "Battle of the Sexes" ("BoS") game with unstructured communication to show that men are less likely to use tough, but effective, negotiation tactics when paired with female partners, and more likely to offer the higher payoff to female partners. We repeat this experiment after the election, and find two important differences: 1) Individuals are less cooperative in general, more likely to use adversarial strategies, and less likely to reach an agreement, and 2) This is particularly driven by men acting more aggressively toward women.

Although we do not see the same individuals in the lab before and after the election, we perform several robustness checks that suggest this change was driven by differences in individual behavior, rather than selection. Our results are consistent with literature showing that broader political or world events can impact behavior such as generosity (Tilcsik and Marquis, 2013; Rao et al., 2011), fairness and reciprocity (Cassar, Grosjean and Whitt, 2011; Castillo and Carter, 2011), cooperation (Douty, 1972; Whitt and Wilson, 2007; Randa et al., 2009; Grossman and Baldassarri, 2012), group bias (Randa et al., 2009; Lawless, 2004), and health insurance uptake (Ericson and Kessler, 2016).

Many popular press articles pointed to upticks in racially motivated violence and sexism following Trump's election.[1] Our re-

sults are consistent with these reports, and suggest that, at least in the lab, Trump's election may have disrupted community norms around civility and chivalry.

I. Experimental Design

Our experiment involves Wharton Behavioral Lab participants, mostly University of Pennsylvania students, playing a Battle of the Sexes game against a randomly selected partner, either with or without chat communication.[2] Below is the payoff matrix of the game (the context participants are given is dividing $20 with their partner):

		Player 2	
		A	B
Player 1	A	$15, $5	$0, $0
	B	$0, $0	$5, $15

This game has two pure strategy equilibria, AA and BB, and a mixed strategy equilibrium where each player plays their preferred choice 75% of the time. We randomized whether we revealed the gender of the subject's partner at the session level, using an information sheet about the partner that either did or did not contain gender. Subjects naturally play against partners of different genders, as the pool was evenly divided between genders, and matching was random. Subjects played 4 rounds of the game without chat, a standard BoS lab experiment, and then 4 rounds of the game with unstructured chat communication prior to decision-making, matching with a new partner for each round.[3]

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[*] Business Economics and Public Policy, Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania. Huang: huangzh@wharton.upenn.edu, Low: corlow@wharton.upenn.edu.

[1] See "The postelection hate spike: How long will it

last?" Samantha Schmidt and Jasper Scherer, Washington Post, November 14, 2016, and "Trump's Election Raises Fears Of Increased Violence Against Women," Melissa Jeltsen, The Huffington Post, November 16, 2016.

[2] The experiment was conducted using z-Tree (Fischbacher, 2007).

[3] For detailed protocol, see Huang and Low (2017).

Our data contains 232 subjects from 24 lab sessions from October 3-5 and October 24-26, 2016, before the election, and 154 subjects from 12 lab sessions from November 14-16, 2016, less than a week after the United States Presidential election and Donald Trump's victory (sign ups for these sessions took place from November 4th to November 16th, spanning election day).

In total we have over 3,000 game-level observations, and 772 chat conversations. Following Huang and Low (2017), we used 310 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers to classify de-identified chat data based on the definitions we provided.[4] All of the qualitative coding took place post-election.

One note in interpreting our results is that in addition to the national event of Donald Trump's election, there was also a particular disturbance on Penn's campus that week. On the Friday following the election, it was reported that many black freshmen had been added to a racist social media group with shockingly racist words and images.[5] There were several events organized both that Friday and the following week to show support for the targeted students. Thus, we cannot rule out that our results are partly driven by these specific on campus events, in addition to the broader national context.

II.   Results

We first establish that, post-election, there is an increase in aggressive behavior and a decrease in cooperative behavior across all treatments. We then show that the effect is even stronger for men playing against women when the partner's gender is known. Finally, we show that these results are robust to sample matching and controlling for potential selection bias.

A.   Decreased cooperation

In a BoS game with no communication, "hawkish" or aggressive play is choosing

[4]On average, 5 different MTurk workers classified each negotiation conversation.

[5]See "Black UPenn Freshmen Added to Racist Social Media Account with Daily Lynching Calendar," Susan Svrluga, Washington Post, November 11, 2016.

one's preferred option, here, the \$15 end of the split. In Figure 1, we compare the probability of participants choosing \$15 for themselves and the resulting profits pre- and post-election, pooling the gender reveal and no reveal sessions. As shown in Huang and Low (2017), with no chat communication, participants tend to play close to the mixed strategy equilibrium of 75% preferred, while with chat communication, given the opportunity to coordinate, there is a movement toward more even play.
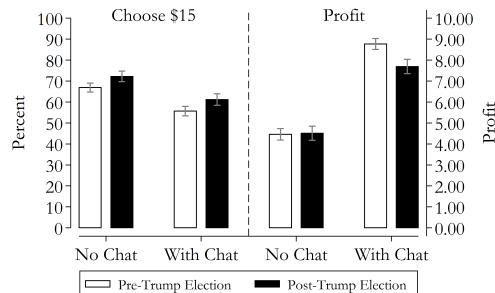

Figure 1. Increase in Playing Preferred and Decrease in Profit Post-Election

Note: Vertical lines represent the 95 percent confidence interval.

However, in both cases, we see a post-election jump of about 5 percentage points in the rate of choosing \$15. This is statistically significant at the 10 to 1% level.[6]

This increase in hawkish behavior might have led to more mismatching and thus a loss in payoffs. There does not seem to be a significant change in payoffs without chat, as rates of coordination, and thus the cost of choosing preferred more frequently, are not as high. However, when communication is available, the missed opportunity for coordination creates a higher toll: we see that individuals in the post-election sample earned, on average, \$1.08 less per round than those in the pre-election sample. This loss in payoff is large relative to the total average payoff with communication of \$8.34, and suggests that the post-election sample was more prone to unprofitable mis-coordination.

When chat communication is available, participants have the chance to "negotiate"

[6]All significance levels from a regression with session-level clustering, available in the online appendix.
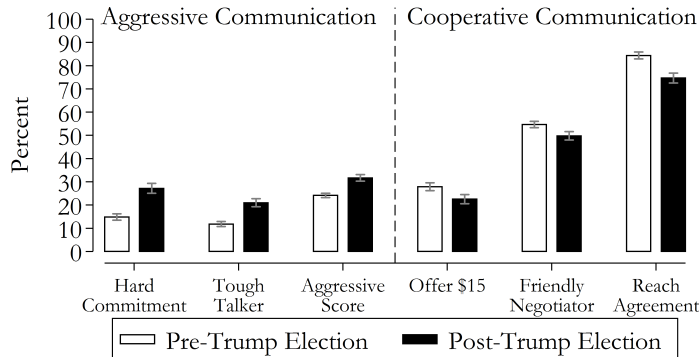
FIGURE 2. INCREASE IN AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR AND DECREASE IN COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION
Note: Vertical lines represent the 95 percent confidence interval.

for their preferred outcome. Thus, hawkish or aggressive play can also be demonstrated by their choice of communication tactics. One common, and often effective, communication tactic used in this game is "Hard Commitment." The participant announces at the outset of the chat that they are choosing $15, and thus their partner has a choice between $0 and $5. (This tactic essentially aims to turn two-way communication into one-way communication, where the responder has a dominant strategy to go along with the "committed" path.)

We assigned mTurk workers to code for this negotiation strategy (blind to gender and treatment), along with two other markers of aggressive communication: being a "Tough Talker, " meaning using a tough or hard-line negotiating strategy, and the overall aggressiveness of the communication style displayed.[7]

We also had mTurk workers code for more cooperative communication elements. "Offer $15" is when participants offered that their partner could have the higher payoff, thus reaching an agreement. Being a "Friendly Negotiator" means trying to build up-front rapport and acting friendly toward the other player. Finally, reaching an agreement is coded by MTurk workers by the apparent outcome of the chat.

Figure 2 shows that there is a stark in-

crease in aggressive behavior such as using a Hard Commitment negotiation strategy or being a Tough Talker. In contrast, we find a decrease in cooperative behaviors such as Offering $15 to their partner. The increase in the use of the "Hard Commitment" strategy is most striking: usage almost doubles post-election. All of the differences in aggressive and cooperative communication before and after the election are statistically significant, all at the 10 to 1% level except for Friendly Negotiator. The decrease in apparent agreement in the chat communication post-election helps explain the precipitous drop in payoffs, since mismatching results in $0 for both.

B. Decreased "chivalry" by male subjects toward female subjects

We next examine the gendered effects of this post-election behavior change. Turning our attention to sessions where gender was revealed, we compare the behavior of male study participants when playing against (known) male versus female partners. Among male subjects (in the gender revealed condition), the increase in aggressive behavior and decrease in cooperative behavior is driven principally by behavior changes toward female partners. Figure 3 shows that the difference in aggressive behavior of men playing male partners is small and not significant. On the other hand, men playing female partners are being more aggressive after the election compared to before, all significant at the 5% level. For

[7]Communication strategies were coded as 0 or 1, with the average score being used. Aggressiveness was rated on a scale from 1-7, and rescaled here to be a percentage out of 7. These categories are the same ones used in Huang and Low (2017).
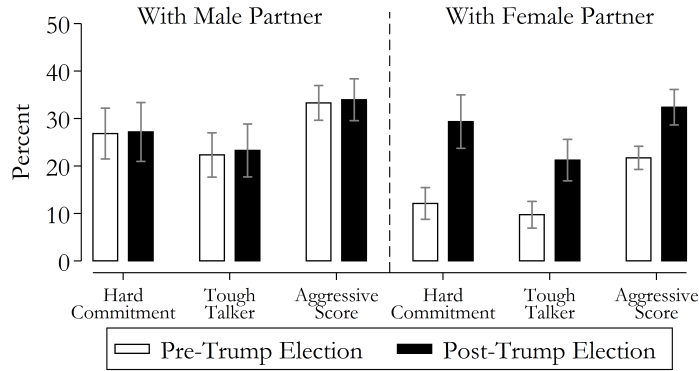
FIGURE 3. AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION (MEN ONLY WHEN GENDER IS REVEALED)

Note: Vertical lines represent the 95 percent confidence interval.

example, we see that men were 17.2 percentage points more likely to use a Hard Commitment strategy against women in the post-election, equivalent to a 140% increase in using this strategy post-election.[8]

Prior to the election, as noted in Huang and Low (2017), men were less likely to use such tough strategies against female than against male partners, displaying what could be classified as "chivalry" toward female partners. Post-election, this deferences is replaced with increased aggression. The general increase in aggression, and decrease in effective coordination, coupled with the specific increase of aggression towards women, suggests that the Trump election may have fractured community norms of civility and chivalry.

C. *Robustness to sample selection*

Because participants were not randomly assigned to the pre- or post-election sessions of our experiment, it is possible that some of our results are driven by differences in the sample composition between the two periods. Reassuringly, participants see very limited information about studies run in the Wharton Behavioral Lab when choosing to sign up—in this case, they saw the generic name, "Choice Study," and that the study offered bonus payment. They had no information that the study involved gender or negotiation.

[8]Results for cooperative communication are directionally consistent, and shown in the online appendix.

TABLE 1: USE OF HARD COMMITMENT STRATEGY, WITH DEMOGRAPHIC CONTROLS AND MATCHING

	Full Sample Hard Commitment		M with F Partners Hard Commitment	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post-Election	0.13***	0.15***	0.18**	0.17*
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Constant	0.16	0.40	0.02	-0.44
	(0.122)	(0.28)	(0.23)	(0.53)
PS Match		YES		YES
Observations	1388	964	221	155
R-Squared	0.07	0.08	0.15	0.16

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Regressions in the full sample control for age, non-white, liberal, citizen status, employment, gender, partner gender, gender reveal, and session controls such as day of the week, time, and game period. Regressions in men with female partners (when gender is revealed) subsample control for all except gender, partner gender, and gender reveal. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

While we cannot rule out selection on unobservable characteristics, we can look at how selection on observables may be driving our results. For example, we see fewer non-white participants after the election, which could be driven by either random variation, or by non-white students being more distressed by Trump's election and events on campus, and therefore less likely to participate in activities.

In Table 1, we control for these demographics as well as use propensity score matching to show that our results are ro-

bust to sample selection.[9] In addition, our results are also robust to restricting to a "white only" or "liberal only" sample. Our effects appear somewhat stronger for individuals who identify as more conservative, but this result is not significant.

III. Conclusion

This paper uses the 2016 US National Presidential election to show how social contexts and events can disrupt norms. Post-election, we find increases in aggressive behavior, and find that this leads to a decrease in payoffs when participants play a communication game, thus destroying value. Furthermore, we find particular increases in aggressiveness by men playing against (known) female partners. Future work should examine whether these behavior changes can be replicated when participants are randomly, or at least quasi-randomly, assigned to pre- and post lab sessions, and furthermore, whether such changes are temporary or permanent.

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[9]The online appendix shows these same robustness checks for playing preferred choice and profit, as well as additional aggressive and cooperative communication.

TRUMPING NORMS: LAB EVIDENCE ON AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION BEFORE AND
AFTER THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
BY JENNIE HUANG AND CORINNE LOW
ONLINE APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL RESULTS

Table A1 shows that individuals were more likely to play their preferred choice, $15 for themselves, following the election, both with and without chat communication. Profit is not significantly reduced in the no chat condition, but is reduced by more than a dollar in the chat condition. Results with individual-level clustering are similar, with slightly smaller standard errors.

TABLE A1—PLAYING PREFERRED AND PROFIT WITH NO CHAT AND WITH CHAT

	Dependent variable:			
	No Chat		With Chat	
	Play Preferred	Profit	Play Preferred	Profit
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post-Election	0.053*	0.052	0.055***	-1.077***
	(0.030)	(0.545)	(0.016)	(0.308)
Constant	0.669***	4.461***	0.557***	8.772***
	(0.018)	(0.274)	(0.010)	(0.205)
Observations	1544	1544	1544	1544
R-Squared	0.00318	0.0000179	0.00297	0.00802

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

Table A2 shows that individuals were more likely to use aggressive communication such as "Hard Commitment" and being a "Tough talker." They are also more likely to be rated as aggressive. Additionally, individuals were less likely to offer the higher payoff to their partner, and less likely to reach an agreement. The result for being a "Friendly Negotiator" is directionally consistent, but not significant.

TABLE A2—AGGRESSIVE AND COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION

| | Dependent variable: | | | | | |
| | Hard Commitment | Tough Talker | Aggressive Score | Offer $15 | Friendly Negotiator | Reach Agreement |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post-Election	0.123***	0.092***	0.075**	-0.053*	-0.048	-0.097**
	(0.040)	(0.032)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.043)
Constant	0.149***	0.118***	0.242***	0.279***	0.547***	0.844***
	(0.023)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.035)
Observations	1544	1544	1544	1544	1544	1544
R-Squared	0.0315	0.0265	0.0266	0.00509	0.00578	0.0179

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.
Source: Experimental data from 36 sessions run at the Wharton Behavioral Lab in October and November 2016.

Figure A1 shows visually the changes in cooperative communication for men playing against female partners versus male partners when gender is revealed. For cooperative communication, the changes are less striking than for aggressive communication, both because the size of the post-election change is smaller, and because there also appears to be a change when playing against male partners, unlike in aggressive communication. However, for all three cooperative behaviors, we see a decrease when playing against women post-election.
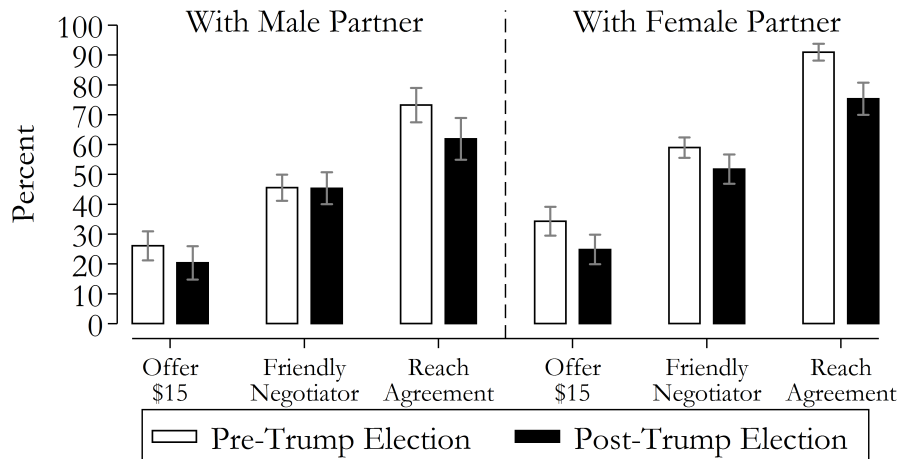

FIGURE A1. COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION (MEN ONLY)

Note: Vertical lines represent the 95 percent confidence interval.

Table A3 Panel A shows that the difference in aggressive and cooperative behavior of men playing male partners is small and not significant for almost all behaviors. On the other hand, Table A3 Panel B shows that men playing female partners are being significantly more aggressive and less cooperative after the election compared to before. For example, we see that men were 17.2 percentage points more likely to use a Hard Commitment strategy against women in the post-election, this is equivalent to a 140 percent increase in using this strategy post-election.

We now turn to reporting additional results that control for sample selection. We run regressions that control for demographics characteristics of age, being non-white, being liberal, being a US citizen, being a native English speaker, employment status, as well as gender, the partner's gender, whether gender was revealed, and other session controls. In addition to this, we perform regressions that match on these characteristics in addition to controlling for them. In each table, the odd columns contains estimates from regressions with controls, while the even columns contain estimates from matching with controls.

Table A4 repeats the analysis in Table A1 with controls for sample selection and sample matching. The increase in playing preferred in both conditions and the decrease in profit in the chat condition remains significant.

Table A5 provides regression results for other communication behaviors besides "Hard Commitment", comparing rates of being a "Tough Talker," overall aggressiveness score, rates of offering $15 and rates of reaching an agreement before and after the Trump election. Our results remain significant with both methods of controlling for sample selection.

Table A6 repeats this analysis for male subjects with female partners (when gender is revealed). In this case, everything except for "Tough Talker" remains significant when controlling for sample selection through either methodology.

TABLE A3—AGGRESSIVE AND COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION (MEN ONLY)

	Panel A: Male with Male Partners					
	Hard Commitment	Tough Talker	Aggressive Score	Offer $15	Friendly Negotiator	Reach Agreement
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post-Election	0.003	0.009	0.007	-0.057	-0.002	-0.113
	(0.091)	(0.079)	(0.082)	(0.065)	(0.077)	(0.129)
Constant	0.269***	0.224***	0.333***	0.261***	0.456***	0.733***
	(0.057)	(0.058)	(0.049)	(0.040)	(0.045)	(0.098)
Observations	174	174	174	174	174	174
R-Squared	0.0000189	0.000184	0.000145	0.00632	0.00000963	0.0169

	Panel B: Male with Female Partners					
	Hard Commitment	Tough Talker	Aggressive Score	Offer $15	Friendly Negotiator	Reach Agreement
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post-Election	0.172***	0.115**	0.107***	-0.095**	-0.072*	-0.156***
	(0.050)	(0.045)	(0.035)	(0.040)	(0.035)	(0.048)
Constant	0.121***	0.098***	0.217***	0.343***	0.590***	0.910***
	(0.033)	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.029)	(0.030)
Observations	242	242	242	242	242	242
R-Squared	0.0599	0.0421	0.0485	0.0143	0.0126	0.0592

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

Table A7 demonstrates that the increase in "Hard Commitment" post-election is also robust to simply restricting the sample to only white or only liberal, to eliminate possible changes from sample variation in these characteristics post election.

Table A8 demonstrates that our results on the increase in aggressive and decrease in cooperative communication appear to be slightly stronger for lab participants who identify as conservative, although this effect is not significant.

TABLE A4—PLAYING PREFERRED AND PROFIT WITH CHAT AND WITH NO CHAT

	Dependent variable:							
	No Chat				With Chat			
	Play Preferred		Profit		Play Preferred		Profit	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Post-Election	0.058*	0.073**	-0.061	-0.071	0.053**	0.082***	-1.257***	-1.121***
	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.449)	(0.492)	(0.021)	(0.028)	(0.333)	(0.324)
Constant	0.826***	0.308	6.481***	8.279***	0.835***	0.782**	11.222***	12.226***
	(0.147)	(0.271)	(2.051)	(2.872)	(0.150)	(0.348)	(1.058)	(2.303)
PS Match		YES		YES		YES		YES
Observations	1388	962	1388	962	1388	964	1388	964
R-Squared	0.0428	0.0508	0.0298	0.0451	0.0157	0.0193	0.0232	0.0264

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Regressions in the full sample control for age, non-white, liberal, citizen status, employment, gender, partner gender, gender reveal, and session controls such as day of the week, time, and game period. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

TABLE A5—OTHER AGGRESSIVE AND COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION

	Dependent variable:							
	Tough Talker		Aggressive Score		Offer $15		Reach Agreement	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Post-Election	0.096***	0.102***	0.079***	0.096***	-0.053*	-0.067**	-0.113**	-0.067**
	(0.029)	(0.034)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.043)	(0.031)
Constant	0.065	0.235	0.214***	0.391**	0.265**	0.697***	0.983***	0.697***
	(0.098)	(0.193)	(0.069)	(0.159)	(0.124)	(0.216)	(0.102)	(0.216)
PS Match		YES		YES		YES		YES
Observations	1388	964	1388	964	1388	964	1388	964
R-Squared	0.0622	0.0686	0.0632	0.0767	0.0291	0.0295	0.0630	0.0295

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Regressions in the full sample control for age, non-white, liberal, citizen status, employment, gender, partner gender, gender reveal, and session controls such as day of the week, time, and game period. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

TABLE A6—OTHER AGGRESSIVE AND COOPERATIVE COMMUNICATION (MEN WITH FEMALE PARTNERS WHEN GENDER IS REVEALED ONLY)

	Dependent variable:							
	Tough Talker		Aggressive Score		Offer $15		Reach Agreement	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Post-Election	0.120*	0.104	0.120**	0.100*	-0.085**	-0.065*	-0.176***	-0.159***
	(0.067)	(0.078)	(0.045)	(0.053)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.054)	(0.049)
Constant	-0.130	-0.687**	0.088	-0.459	0.478***	1.633**	1.108***	2.221***
	(0.160)	(0.315)	(0.128)	(0.340)	(0.159)	(0.698)	(0.125)	(0.516)
PS Match		YES		YES		YES		YES
Observations	221	155	221	155	221	155	221	155
R-Squared	0.111	0.112	0.132	0.128	0.108	0.110	0.150	0.197

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Regressions in men with female partners (when gender is revealed) subsample control for age, non-white, liberal, citizen status, employment, and session controls such as day of the week, time, and game period. all except gender, partner gender, and gender reveal. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

Table A7—Using a Hard Commitment Strategy (White/Liberal Only)

	Full Sample				Men with Female Partners			
	White Only		Liberal Only		White Only		Liberal Only	
	Hard Commitment		Hard Commitment		Hard Commitment		Hard Commitment	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Post-Election	0.161***	0.168***	0.113**	0.117***	0.293***	0.295***	0.194**	0.187*
	(0.058)	(0.050)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.090)	(0.081)	(0.084)	(0.103)
Constant	0.156***	0.513*	0.138***	0.145	0.066	0.326	0.101***	0.027
	(0.035)	(0.288)	(0.022)	(0.116)	(0.038)	(0.387)	(0.029)	(0.219)
Controls		YES		YES		YES		YES
Observations	568	568	1292	1160	89	89	194	178
R-Squared	0.0475	0.135	0.0284	0.0598	0.165	0.464	0.0806	0.128

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Controls for regressions in the full sample include age, non-white, liberal, citizen status, employment, gender, partner gender, gender reveal, and session controls such as day of the week, time, and game period. Controls for regressions in men with female partners (when gender is revealed) subsample include for all controls except gender, partner gender, and gender reveal. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

Table A8—Aggressive and Cooperative Communication, Interaction with "Conservative"

| | | | Dependent variable: | | | |
| | Hard Commitment | Tough Talker | Aggressive Score | Offer $15 | Friendly Negotiator | Reach Agreement |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post-Election	0.113**	0.078**	0.066**	-0.042	-0.039	-0.079*
	(0.042)	(0.031)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.042)
Conservative × Post	0.014	0.047	0.029	-0.047	-0.017	-0.076
	(0.103)	(0.082)	(0.062)	(0.066)	(0.075)	(0.055)
Conservative	0.085	0.047	0.033	-0.008	-0.070	-0.017
	(0.064)	(0.048)	(0.039)	(0.059)	(0.045)	(0.041)
Constant	0.138***	0.112***	0.238***	0.280***	0.556***	0.846***
	(0.022)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.034)
Observations	1544	1544	1544	1544	1544	1544
R-Squared	0.0413	0.0362	0.0331	0.00666	0.0144	0.0227

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the session level. Significance: *** 1 percent; ** 5 percent; * 10 percent.

Experimental Protocol

Protocol available in Huang, Jennie, and Corinne Low. 2017. "Men Don't Ask (Women): Benevolent Sexism in a Negotiation Experiment." Working Paper.