

# Accusing and Believing in Equilibrium: Evidence from #MeToo

**Anya Marchenko**

Brown

**Bobak Pakzad-Hurson**

Brown

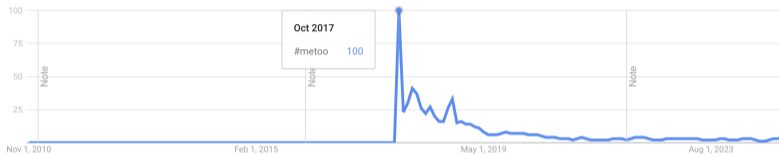
MPSA

April 23, 2026

# Adjudication under uncertainty

- Adjudicators in many legal settings face a tradeoff:
  - Type I error: believe an unfounded claim.
  - Type II error: fail to believe a founded claim.
- Social movements can affect this tradeoff by 1) decreasing wrongdoing, 2) increasing reporting of wrongdoing, 3) changing adjudicators' beliefs
- As a result, social movements can uncover legitimate harm — or generate excessive / unfounded accusations.

# #MeToo movement



- #MeToo movement shifted public attitudes toward sexual harassment.
- Public opinion was divided (NPR 2018):
  - 69% said #MeToo led to more accountability for offenders,
  - 43% said #MeToo risked too many accusations / harm to non-offenders.

# Research questions

1. How did #MeToo change how often sexual harassment complainants were “believed” in high-stakes settings?

# Research questions

1. How did #MeToo change how often sexual harassment complainants were “believed” in high-stakes settings?
2. How much is adjudicator leniency (adjudicator effect) versus case composition (selection effect)?

# Research questions

1. How did #MeToo change how often sexual harassment complainants were “believed” in high-stakes settings?
2. How much is adjudicator leniency (**adjudicator effect**) versus case composition (**selection effect**)?

*We proxy for “strength” with case **foundedness**: reported accurately and rises to legal threshold.*

# Setting and Data

- **Setting:** State anti-discrimination agencies
- Complainants file discrimination charges against employers, agency investigates with interviews, document review, site visits
- **Data:** We FOIA all states to collect every discrimination allegation filed, their outcome, dates filed/resolved, complainant gender
- **Main sample:** ~192k employment discrimination complaints across 10 states—most detailed public record of SH filing and outcomes in the US
- **Main outcome:** whether the agency finds probable cause discrimination occurred (“winning”).

## Reduced-form design: estimating combined effect

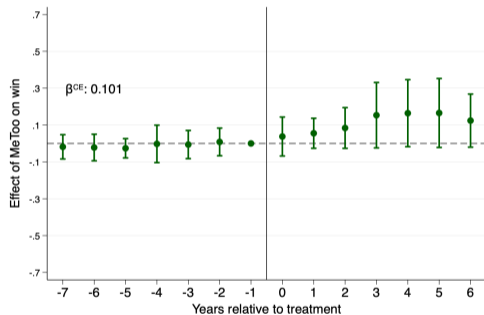
Use difference-in-differences to compare sexual harassment complaints to other discrimination complaints within a state, before vs. after #MeToo:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta^{CE} (SH_i \times Post_t) + \alpha_{gs} + \mu_{ts} + \varepsilon_{ist}$$

- $\alpha_{gs}$  are complaint-type by state fixed effects.
- $\mu_{ts}$  are resolution-month by state fixed effects.
- To identify  $\beta^{CE}$  as causal effect of #MeToo, make parallel trends assumption:  
 $\mathbb{E}[\Delta Y(0) \mid SH = 1] = \mathbb{E}[\Delta Y(0) \mid SH = 0]$

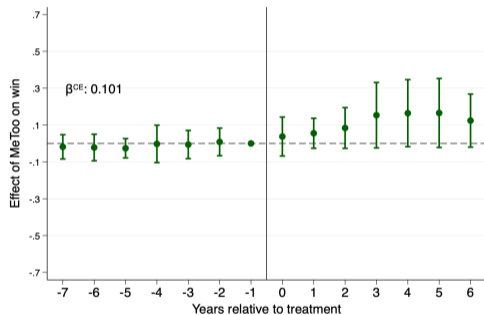
# Results: Combined win probability

#MeToo increased the probability of sexual harassment complainants winning

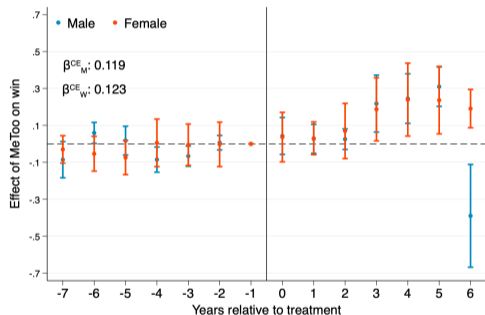


# Results: Combined win probability

#MeToo increased the probability of sexual harassment complainants winning

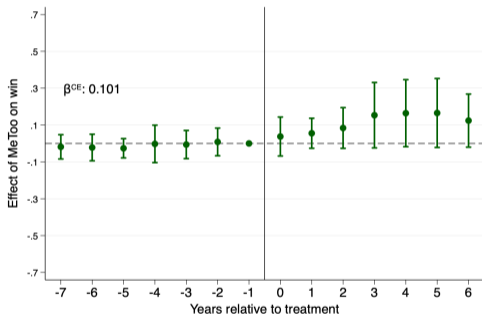


...but this increase is not statistically different for men versus women

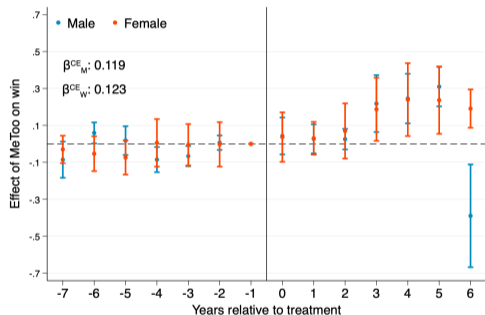


# Results: Combined win probability

#MeToo increased the probability of sexual harassment complainants winning



...but this increase is not statistically different for men versus women



**Given surprising lack of gender difference, rest of paper attempts to unpack the mechanisms driving these results for men vs. women.**

# Why the combined effect is not enough

A higher post-#MeToo win rate can come from two conceptually distinct sources:

# Why the combined effect is not enough

A higher post-#MeToo win rate can come from two conceptually distinct sources:

## **Adjudicator Treatment Effect**

Adjudicators may be more willing to believe a given sexual harassment accusation after #MeToo

## **Selection Effect**

Complaints induced by #MeToo may be more likely to be founded than earlier complaints

# Why the combined effect is not enough

A higher post-#MeToo win rate can come from two conceptually distinct sources:

## Adjudicator Treatment Effect

Adjudicators may be more willing to believe a given sexual harassment accusation after #MeToo

## Selection Effect

Complaints induced by #MeToo may be more likely to be founded than earlier complaints

**Problem:** We observe neither foundedness at the case level nor the evidentiary threshold.

**Solution:** We develop a model and empirical decomposition to identify each channel.

# Identifying the two effects

*We skip the formal exposition of the model and present the takeaways:*

- #MeToo encouraged more people to report harassment.
- Some of these new people are “similar” to those reporting before (i.e., unselected). Call them **always reporters (ARs)**. Their effect identifies the **adjudicator effect**.
- Remainder of new reporters are **induced reporters (IRs)** (may be stronger or weaker than reporters from before). The effect on this group identifies the **selection effect**.

## Identifying the two effects

*We skip the formal exposition of the model and present the takeaways:*

- #MeToo encouraged more people to report harassment.
- Some of these new people are “similar” to those reporting before (i.e., unselected). Call them **always reporters (ARs)**. Their effect identifies the **adjudicator effect**.
- Remainder of new reporters are **induced reporters (IRs)** (may be stronger or weaker than reporters from before). The effect on this group identifies the **selection effect**.

By the LIE, write the combined effect of #MeToo as a weighted average of the effects for these two groups:

$$ATT^{CE} = \omega ATT^{AR} + (1 - \omega) ATT^{IR}$$

## Decomposition Step 0: $ATT^{CE}$

$$ATT^{CE} = \omega ATT^{AR} + (1 - \omega) ATT^{IR}$$

$ATT^{CE}$  is already identified by  $\beta^{CE}$  from our main regression (under parallel trends).

## Decomposition Step 2: $ATT^{AR}$

$$ATT^{CE} = \omega ATT^{AR} + (1 - \omega) ATT^{IR}$$

Use cases filed before but resolved after #MeToo to identify  $ATT^{AR}$ .

## Decomposition Step 3: $ATT^{IR}$

$$ATT^{CE} = \omega ATT^{AR} + (1 - \omega) ATT^{IR}$$

Solve for  $ATT^{IR}$  as unique solution to equation.

## Estimating $ATT^{AR}$ directly

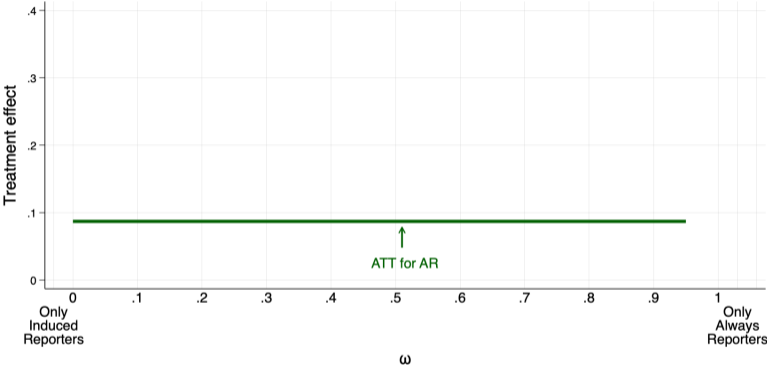
$$Y_{ist} = \beta^O(SH_i \times Post_t) + \alpha_{gs} + \mu_{ts} + \varepsilon_{ist}$$

- Run same regression but on *overlap* cases (filed before but resolved after #MeToo), which are mechanically free of selection
- Under a parallel trends assumption,  $\beta^O = ATT^{AR}$

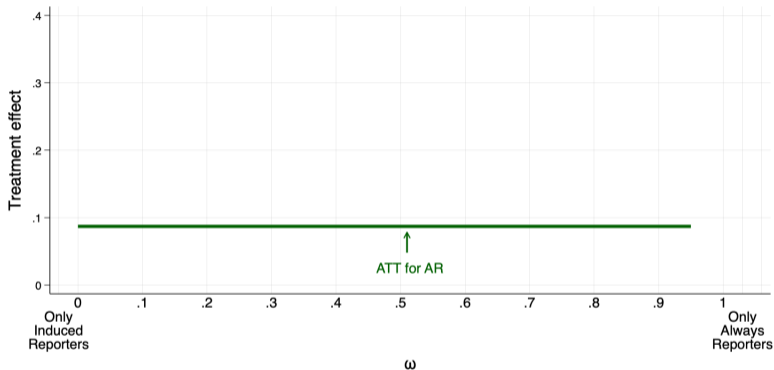
### Broader contribution

The same logic can be applied to other delayed-resolution settings: permits, public housing applications, grants, insurance claims, and more.

# Finding 1a: Adjudicators overall became more lenient after #MeToo



## Finding 1a: Adjudicators overall became more lenient after #MeToo



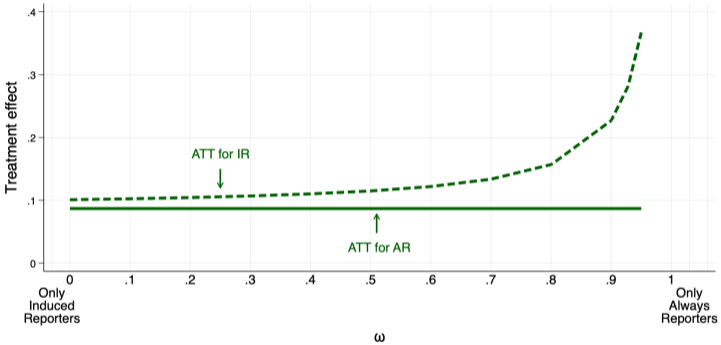
Since  $ATT^{AR} > 0$ , conclude that **adjudicator effect** is positive. Intuition: #MeToo benefited complainants by inducing adjudicators to lower their evidentiary threshold.

## Finding 1b: #MeToo benefited men twice as much as women

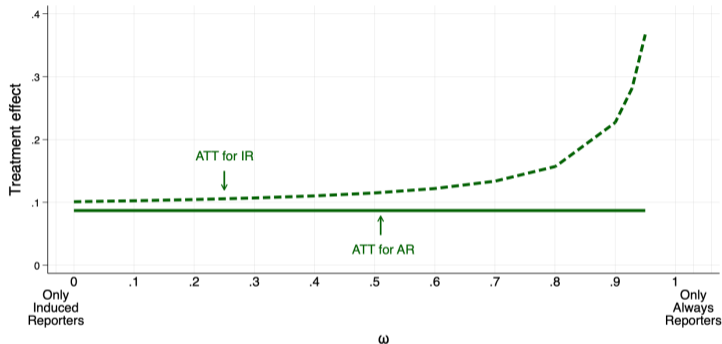
Adjudicators reacted more strongly to men complainants: Adjudicators became almost twice as lenient towards men relative to women (15.3pp > 8.6pp)

	All complaints	Complaints with gender	
SH × Post	0.087*** (0.013)	0.102*** (0.011)	0.153*** (0.014)
SH × Post × Female			-0.067** (0.027)
{Unit, Time} × State FE	✓	✓	✓
{Unit, Time} × State × Female FE			✓
N	39,321	30,741	30,733
$R^2$	0.128	0.073	0.081
Control mean	0.152	0.226	0.229

# Finding 2: Effect on IRs is positive

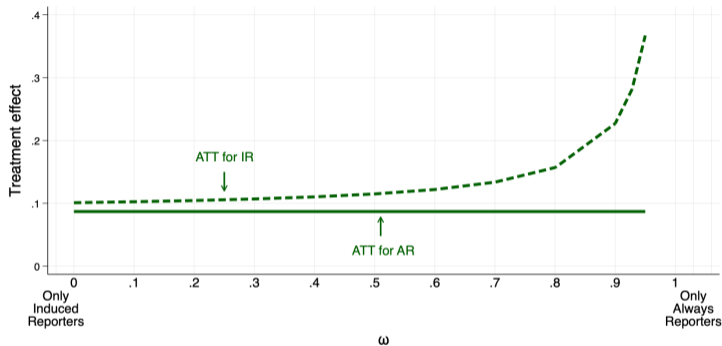


## Finding 2: Effect on IRs is positive



Since  $ATT^{IR} > ATT^{AR}$ , conclude that **selection effect** is positive: complaints induced by #MeToo were *positively* selected for foundedness.

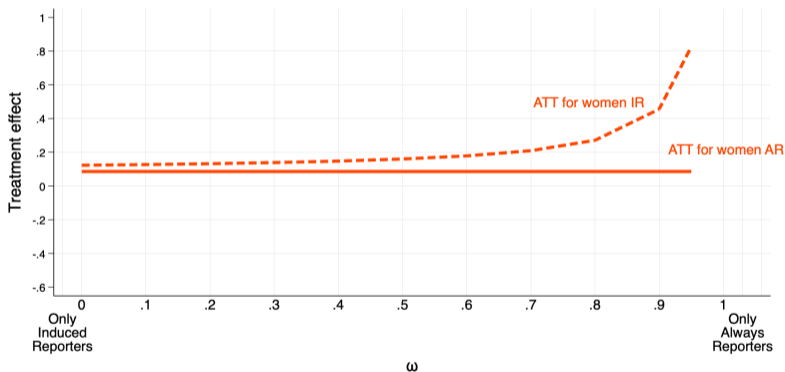
## Finding 2: Effect on IRs is positive



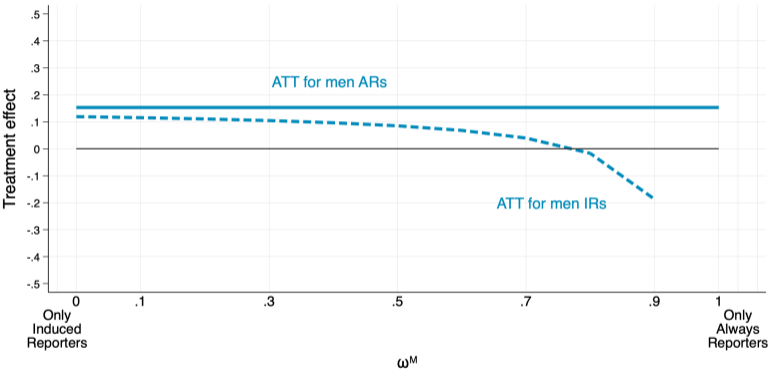
**Broad claim that #MeToo mostly generated bogus cases is not supported by the aggregate evidence.**

## Finding 2: New women reporters are positively selected

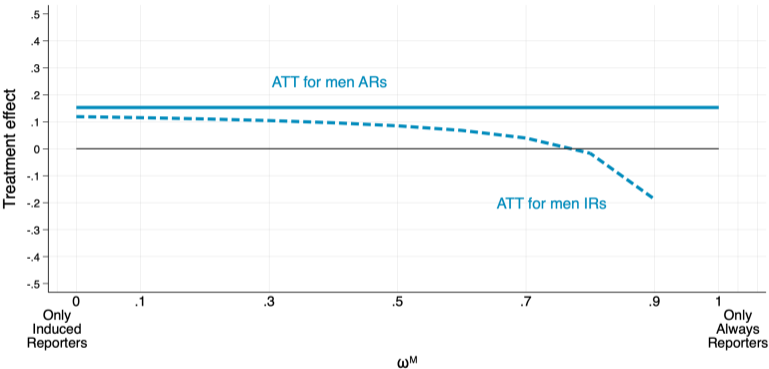
Women follow the aggregate pattern, with new female reporters being positively selected:



# Finding 3: But men induced reporters are negatively selected



# Finding 3: But men induced reporters are negatively selected



# Takeaways

- #MeToo benefited sexual harassment complainants by making them more likely to win their case.
- The criticism that #MeToo encouraged bogus reporting is not supported for women – #MeToo led women to bring stronger complaints on average, but not men.

## Takeaway

Social movements can change both who reports and how adjudicators weigh evidence. Reduced-form outcomes alone can be misleading unless treatment and selection are disentangled. We provide a framework for doing so.

# Thank you!

Questions and comments welcome:

marchenko@brown.edu

bph@brown.edu