

The Backlash Equation

Rising Women's Employment + Male Resentment = Authoritarian Gains

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Introduction

Despite the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which mandated equal wages for equal work, the gender wage gap persists in 2025 as women earn approximately 83 cents for every dollar earned by men¹. Fifty years ago, American women got legal access to financial freedom in 1974 when the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (which prohibited credit discrimination based on sex or marital status, allowing women to open bank accounts, build credit, and secure loans independently) passed². It wasn't until 1994's Violence Against Women Act that marital rape became illegal and not until 2010 no fault divorce became legal nationally. American women are two generations into having access to a semblance of freedom, and what is the measurable progress?

Women now earn 58% of bachelor's degrees and 61% of master's degrees, a dramatic reversal from the 2:1 male-dominated college enrollment of the 1950s³. Women's participation in the paid labor market rose from 43% in 1970 to 57.4% in 2025, with prime-age women (25–54) driving 60% of post-pandemic job recovery⁴. Among unmarried adults, women without children have as much wealth

¹ Rebecca Falconer, "Gender Wage Gap Narrows but Persists at Higher Earnings Levels," Axios, September 11, 2024, <https://wwwaxios.com/2024/09/11/gender-wage-gap-rate-earnings>.

² U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, "Equal Credit Opportunity Act," accessed May 2, 2005, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/equal-credit-opportunity-act-3>.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, "Equal Credit Opportunity Act," accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/equal-credit-opportunity-act-3>.<https://www.dazedsdigital.com/life-culture/article/62302/1/are-young-men-really-doomed-adolescence-stephen-graham-gender?amp=1>

⁴ New York State Department of Labor, 2025 Update: The Gender Wage Gap (Albany: NYS DOL, 2025), accessed May 2, 2025, <https://nysdolreports.com/gwg/2023-gwgreport/2025-update-the-gender-wage-gap/>.

as single men⁵ and more likely to own their own homes⁶. Teenage pregnancy rates are at record lows⁷, women are waiting longer to have children⁸, and the number of women in opposite-sex marriages who earn as much as or more than their husband (aka being “the breadwinner”) has roughly tripled over the past fifty years⁹. Women have higher rates of voter registration and vote more than their male counterparts¹⁰. —

And in 2024, the United States popularly elected a civilly-convicted rapist¹¹ with thirty-four felony convictions to become President of the United States¹². Since then, “language glorifying violence against women or celebrating the possibility of their rights being stripped away has spiked since the election”. The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap 2024 Report concludes that “based on current data, it will take 134 years to reach full [global gender] parity”¹³.

⁵ Pew Research Center, "Among Unmarried Adults, Women Without Children Have as Much Wealth as Single Men," November 5, 2024,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/04/among-unmarried-adults-women-without-children-have-as-much-wealth-as-single-men/>.

⁶ National Association of Realtors, "Single Women Are More Likely to Own Homes Than Single Men: Why?," The Hill,
<https://www.nar.realtor/newsroom/in-the-news/single-women-are-more-likely-to-own-homes-than-single-men-why-the-hill>.

⁷ Pew Research Center, "Why Is the Teen Birth Rate Falling?," August 2, 2019,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/02/why-is-the-teen-birth-rate-falling/>.

⁸ Abigail Abrams, "Women Keep Having Kids Later and Later," TIME, May 12, 2014,
<https://time.com/6965267/women-having-kids-later/>.

⁹ Pew Research Center, "For Women's History Month, a Look at Gender Gains – and Gaps – in the U.S.," February 27, 2024,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/27/for-womens-history-month-a-look-at-gender-gains-and-gaps-in-the-us/>.

¹⁰ Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout," accessed May 3, 2025,
<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout>.

¹¹ Rachel Weiner and Perry Stein, "Judge Denies Trump's Request for New Trial in E. Jean Carroll Case," The Washington Post, July 19, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/07/19/trump-carroll-judge-rape/>.

¹² Michael R. Sisak, "Jury Ends First Day of Deliberations in Trump Trial Without Verdict," Associated Press, May 29, 2024,
<https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-deliberations-jury-testimony-verdict-85558c6d08efb434d05b694364470aa0>.

¹³ Global Gender Gap Report: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (Cologny: WEF, 2024)
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>

It is the continued feminist (someone who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes) project to work towards achieving this liberation. To do so, it is important to understand the phenomenon that occurs when women are making large strides towards equality and independence and there is reactionary conservative backlash that causes misogynists to support authoritarian leaders and parties in response.

This paper will examine whether rising women's labor force participation in the U.S. has provoked reactionary conservative backlash and whether this backlash translates into greater electoral success for far-right authoritarian candidates. My hypothesis is that increases in women's labor force participation rates trigger reactionary conservative backlash, and that this backlash increases electoral support for far-right authoritarian parties and politicians. There will be correlation between rising numbers of women working in the paid labor market in a society and an increase in men looking to authoritarian leaders such as Donald Trump and J.D. Vance, and political parties, such as the Republican Party, to restore patriarchal gender roles. Many see the rise of gender equality as a threat to their worldview and personal identity and so look to a Strong Man to protect their way of life.

This research is significant as it addresses an important gap in the literature on the societal and political consequences of gender equality. Much has been written about the economic and social benefits of women's workforce participation but less attention has been paid to the relationship between the rise in women's participation in the workforce and the conservative backlash to it that far-right authoritarians utilize to their advantage to win power. By examining the link between these two phenomena, this study contributes to our understanding on how rising gender parity shapes and affects politics.

Literature Review

The literature on gender backlash and far-right political movements provides an important foundation for this study. *'Sexism and the Far-Right Vote: The Individual Dynamics of Gender Backlash'*, for example, uses panel data from Spain as a case study for an empirical analysis of the relationship between modern sexism (defined as the denial of discrimination against women, antagonism toward feminist demands, and resentment against anti-discrimination policies) and support for far-right political parties. It argues that sexism plays a critical role in the electoral rise of far-right parties as both a preexisting attitude and as a dynamic factor that can change in response to societal progress and feminism mobilization¹⁴.

Anduoza and Rico argue that feminist mobilization provokes increases in sexist attitudes among certain individuals that then turn to far-right authoritarians to protect these traditional gender roles, a phenomenon called backlash theory. Essentially, progress (or perceived progress) towards gender equality can provoke reactionary backlash. When there are increases in sexism during periods of feminist mobilization, this is backlash attitudinal change. When there are increases in sexism during periods of far-right visibility, this is normalization attitudinal change. This study finds that normalization change did not have the same impacts as backlash change, suggesting that the initial reaction to feminist progress is more consequential politically than later shifts in attitudes. They also note that while overtime levels of sexism broadly decreased in their data, certain groups became more

¹⁴ Backlash theory (Spain):

Eva Anduiza and Guillem Rico, "Sexism and the Far-Right Vote: The Individual Dynamics of Gender Backlash," *American Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 2 (2022): 478–493, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12759>.

sexist in response to feminist activism which created a set of voters who were more likely to support far-right parties like the Spanish far-right Vox¹⁵.

This study provides a clear theoretical framework that is grounded in backlash theory and provides clear distinctions between backlash attitudinal change and normalization attitudinal change. As the researchers used panel data over a period of four years, they were able to observe changes in sexist attitudes and voting behavior over time. It's limited generalizability (the paper is focused exclusively on Spain) and lack of detailed measure of exposure to feminist activism are two of the biggest weakness of this study, but it still provides important data that goes towards my hypothesis that rising gender equality provokes a reactionary response that leads to increased support for authoritarian far-right parties¹⁶.

In a similar vein, '*A Gender Backlash: Does Exposure to Female Labor Market Participation Fuel Gender Conservatism?*' uses twenty years of panel data from Switzerland and a robust methodology to examine the relationship between women's increasing participation in the labor force and the rise of gender conservatism and far-right support. It finds that increasing gender equality in the workplace negatively affects men's economic prospects. As historically men have been dominant in the paid labor market, as women enter the workforce at greater numbers, men experience declines in employment, income, and their personal share of the household income. This lack of financial domination and control leads more men to adopt more conservative gender attitudes in their personal lives, which the researchers call

¹⁵ Backlash theory (Spain):

Eva Anduiza and Guillem Rico, "Sexism and the Far-Right Vote: The Individual Dynamics of Gender Backlash," *American Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 2 (2022): 478–493, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12759>.

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egocentric gender attitudes. Men who have been exposed to more gender-equitable workplaces are less likely to support gender equality in their personal relationships and more likely to feel personally penalized compared to women¹⁷.

Interestingly, this same study finds that while labor market equity influences men's personal gender attitude, it does not affect their broader societal view, or their socioeconomic gender attitudes. This suggests that economic grievances alone are not enough to translate into political behavior unless activated by political or other external factors. It also notes that negative effects of rising levels of female participation in the paid labor market are most pronounced amongst unemployed, partnered, and less-educated men who are most likely to feel economically threatened. This study's twenty years of longitudinal data and distinctions between egocentric and sociocentric gender attitudes provides important perspective on the topic in question, but the limited generalizability, a narrow focus on economic grievances, and the lack of direct measurement of feminist mobilization or activism leave gaps in the literature to be explored further¹⁸.

Martina Lackner discusses the "The Psychological Impact of Gender Equality on Men", including how how the increasing strides in gender equality can create feeling of displacement, a "defense mechanism in which a person redirects an emotional reaction from the rightful recipient onto another person or object"¹⁹. Research from the University of Bath finds that men's life satisfaction declines as

¹⁷ Economic grievances (Switzerland): Paul Rettl et al., A Gender Backlash: Does Exposure to Female Labor Market Participation Fuel Gender Conservatism? (Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 25-022, 2024)

¹⁸ Economic grievances (Switzerland): Paul Rettl et al., A Gender Backlash: Does Exposure to Female Labor Market Participation Fuel Gender Conservatism? (Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 25-022, 2024)

¹⁹ "Displacement," Psychology Today, accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/displacement>.

their female partners earnings²⁰ exceed their own, with increased stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms when the traditional income hierarchy is reversed in a relationship. Research from the University of London corroborates these findings, and find that men derive a psychological boost from out-earning their female partners and perceive it a threat to their masculinity when women earn more than them. These feelings encourage the displacement effect, and men who lack confidence may “subtly or overtly attempt to undermine their partner’s achievements in an effort to reassert dominance”.

As noted above, the most threatened by gender equality in the workplace are the less-educated, unemployed, and partnered men. As noted in *‘Why aren’t we talking about the real reason male college enrollment is dropping?’* men now make up only 40% of the college students, a significant drop from the 2:1 ratio they maintained in the 1950s. Of the 1.5 million students lost in recent years, 71% of them are men. While there have been many proposed explanations (such as that men don’t believe that a degree for their desired job, negative experiences in K-12, costs, women outperforming men academically, higher rates of drug use and incarceration among men, and higher rates of men joining the military or entering trades instead of college over women, Davis argues that the real reason for the decline is male flight. Coined from the term white flight, a term to describe how white people move out of neighborhoods when more people of color move in, male flight is a similar phenomena when men leave a profession, hobby, group, or industry when large numbers of women enter. “When the number of women hits 60% the men who are there make a swift exit and other men stop joining”, she writes.

²⁰

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/healthy-power-in-modern-times/202410/the-psychological-impact-of-gender-equality-on-men>

"School is now feminine. College is feminine. And rule #1 if you want to safely navigate this world as a man? Avoid the feminine"²¹.

The research done by Blue Rose Statistics of 2024 electoral data (a combination of precinct-level data across the country, combined with our models of Democratic candidate support and their own extensive survey data) shows that regardless of race and gender, young voters are increasingly aligning with the Republican Party. However, if you zoom in on the gap between men and women, the difference in Democratic support between young men and women has doubled from the historical gap of about 10% in voters from ages 40-70, it has increased to nearly 20% among voters under 25. They make sure to point out that this is not a unique phenomena to the United States, that this widening gender gap between conservative and progressive parties is an international trend per recent research²².

Theory and Hypotheses

The primary hypothesis in question is whether as women's workforce participation increases, it creates reactionary conservative backlash that then fuels the electoral success of far-right authoritarians. Here, reactionary conservative backlash, measured through increased sexist attitudes and support for patriarchal hierarchies, is the mechanism that links the relationship between the labor force participation rate to the electoral success of far-right candidates.

The theoretical framework that this study is based off of is backlash theory, which proposes that progress towards gender equality can provoke reactionary responses from those who perceive gender

²¹ Male flight in education: Celeste M. Davis, "Why Aren't We Talking About the Real Reason Male College Enrollment Is Dropping?", Matriarchal Blessing (Substack), October 6, 2024, <https://celestemdavis.substack.com/p/why-boys-dont-go-to-college>.

²² Youth gender gap in voting: New York Times Opinion, "Democrats Need to Face Why Trump Won | The Ezra Klein Show" [Video], YouTube, March 18, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx0J7dIL7c>.

equality as a threat to traditional power structures. While true gender equality is a multi-faceted state of being, not an easily measurable metric, the rise of women's workforce participation - and therefore the rise of the number of women with access to their own money - challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures. The theory goes that this conservative backlash leads some men to adopt more conservative attitudes and support leaders with authoritarian tendencies who promise to restore traditional heteronormative hierarchies.

Reactionary backlash typically manifests in two ways: attitudinal backlash, which leads to increases in sexism; and behavioral backlash, which leads to shifts in voting behavior towards far-right candidates. This study focuses on the role of behavioral (voting) backlash, but is conscious of attitudinal data that is important supplementary data to consider and be aware of.

Beyond this primary hypothesis, there are possible alternatives that the data might prove to be true instead. The first is that cultural factors such as religiosity or nationalism are the primary drivers of far-right support, independent of women's workplace participation. The second alternative states that it is economic grievances, not cultural or gender grievances, that prove to be the drivers.

If reactionary conservative backlash drives far-right support, the relationship between women's labor participation rate and Republican votes should persist even after controlling for economic issues, such as male unemployment or education levels, and religious conservatism (for while religious conservatism typically goes hand in hand with patriarchal gender roles, no one is immune to misogyny).

Data and Methodology

To understand how changes in labor participation rates by gender have affected broader politics and culture, I have retrieved three data sets of the Labor Force Participation Rate in the United States from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, one a total participation rate, the remainder broken down by sex. Each spans from 1948 through February 2025 Using data from the 'Current Population Survey (Household Survey)', which defines the Labor Participation Rate as "the number of people in the labor force as a percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population [...] the participation rate is the percentage of the population that is either working or actively looking for work" and "to obtain estimates of women worker employment, the ratio of weighted women employees to the weighted all employees in the sample is assumed to equal the same ratio in the universe. The current month's women worker ratio, thus, is estimated and then multiplied by the all-employee estimate". As of February 2025, the total labor force participation rate in the United States is 62.5%, 57.4% for women and 67.5% for men.

This research question has an important intervening variable between labor force participation rates and support for conservative politicians and parties; reactionary conservative backlash. To measure this backlash, I will have to account for both attitudinal and behavioral backlash. To account for attitudinal backlash, I will use polling data to examine how sexist attitudes, opinions on gender roles, and opposition to gender-equity policies (such as anti-abortion laws or Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies) have changed over time. For behavioral backlash, I can examine the gender gaps in the vote share of Republicans over time from exit polls.

To measure the gendered differences in electoral support for far-right political parties over time in the United States, I am examining the Republican vote share among men. The Republican Party, in

particular under the influence of Donald Trump and the broader MAGA movement, has increasingly aligned itself with the so-called manosphere and traditional gender roles that promote a vision of American society in which women's autonomy is restricted in favor of patriarchal power structures. The GOP's platform often reinforces rigid gender norms, advocates for policies that limit reproductive rights, dismantle workplace protectionism, and undermine gender equality initiatives. Under Trump, this agenda became even more overt, with rhetoric and policies that openly targeted women's rights, from judged hostile to reproductive free to dismissing sexual assault allegations and dismantling protections for survivors.

During the 2024 campaign, Trump and the GOP intensified their assault on women's rights, inflammatory rhetoric and regressive policies to rally their base. From overturning Roe v Wade to weakening the Violence Against Women Act, slashing healthcare access, and obstructing gender equality measures. Trump's campaign amplified these efforts by pushing for abortion bans, opposing paid family leave, and promoting policies that widen the gender pay gap. The GOP's 2024 strategy relied heavily on appealing to conservative voters who embrace traditional gender hierarchies, while dismissing women's rights as part of a "radical leftist agenda" (Indivisible, n.d.). By embedding misogyny into policy and rhetoric, the Republican Party under Trump has cemented its role as the political arm of the manosphere, seeking to roll back decades of progress for women's equality.

As for my dependent variable, support for far-right authoritarians, The Center for American Women and Politics has compiled voting behavior data from 1980 to 2024 from national exit polls archived at Cornell University's Roper Center, including surveys by Edison Research, Voter News Service, CBS/New York Times, and AP VoteCast. These polls track the gender gap in support for

Democratic versus Republican candidates in every US election since 1980. Since 1996, a majority of women have voted Democratic, while men have increasingly favored Republicans. And in recent years, the gender gap has widened amongst voters under 25 to a near 20-point divergence. While exit polls underrepresented non-voters who may hold distinct gender attitudes, they are also rigorously designed and cross-validated results, as the data comes from multiple trusted firms.

Due to the global pandemic and the legalization of abortion bans after the Dobbs decision, there is a strong possibility there might be reductions in women's labor force participation rates. If conservative backlash impacts the relationship between female labor force participation rates and the electoral success of far-right conservatives, there will be a stronger correlation between labor participation and far-right support in subgroups more prone to backlash (such as less-educated or unemployed men). In addition, we should see that there is a sequence to events, it is only after labor participation rates rise that we begin to see backlash attitudes in polling and policies.

Controls

To control for economic grievances, such as male unemployment rate or income levels, I have data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For education levels, there is data from the U.S. Census on the percentage of men with college degrees over time. For religiosity, data from the General Social Survey. We can also add demographic information, such as racial composition of vote share or rural or urban divide.

This study would use time-series cross sectional analysis, which examines data that has repeated observations (voting behavior by gender) on a series of fixed units (elections) over multiple

time periods (election cycles between 1980 and 2024), to correlate annual labor force participation rate data with election outcomes.

Internal threats to this study's validity may include the possibility of reverse causality - that far-right policies (e.g. restricting abortion access) may reduce women's workforce participation rather than vice versa. There may also be omitted variables that drive unobserved support for either or both variables. External validity threats include the possibility that these findings may not generalize to other countries with stronger labor protections, or with different cultural relationships to patriarchal gender norms.

An important bottleneck in this study is that without a natural experiment, any causal claims will remain tentative and cannot be taken as anything more than that. Besides that, this design tests backlash theory and acknowledges its limitations, which strengthens the study's contribution to political and gender research.

Expected Findings

Given the theoretical framework of backlash theory and prior empirical evidence, this study anticipates that the primary hypothesis will be confirmed. There will be a positive correlation between increases in women's labor force participation and electoral support for far-right candidates (in this case, the Republican Party), particularly among men. Supporting the evidence in Spain (Anduiza & Rico, 2022) and Switzerland (Rettl et al., 2024), the U.S. data should show that

If backlash theory holds, the data will show that labor participation increases predict that there are rising sexist attitudes (opposition to workplace equality, for example) and policy backlash (such as

anti-abortion laws occurring in states with faster female workforce growth). If the theory holds, then these factors will correlate with higher Republican vote share among men over time.

When I examine variations among subgroups, I expect that the strongest backlash will be among economically vulnerable men, e.i. unemployed, less-educated, and partnered men. White men will exhibit stronger backlash effects than men of color, aligning with exit poll data that shows majority-white male support for Republicans . I also anticipate that while cultural factors such as religiosity and nationalism will independently predict far-right support, it will not fully mediate the relationship that women's labor force participation rate plays in the conversation.

If these are the results as I expect, the results would extend backlash theory to the United States, illustrating how economic gender parity triggers political reactions. It would also demonstrate that electoral behavior mirrors the workplace and educational trend of male flight and highlight risks that (conscious or unconscious) misogyny plays in the labor market.

Conclusion

The evidence supports my hypothesis that rising women's labor force participation triggers reactionary backlash, fueling authoritarian electoral gains. As demonstrated, men experiencing economic displacement and cultural dislocation (e.g., declining male college enrollment) are disproportionately drawn to far-right leaders who promise to restore patriarchal hierarchies. This aligns with global patterns, from Spain's Vox party to Trump's 2024 coalition, where sexist attitudes and economic anxiety converge to undermine democratic norms.

Ultimately, the "backlash equation" reveals a critical tension in modern democracies: progress toward gender equality destabilizes traditional power structures, provoking authoritarian counter-movements. Policymakers must recognize this dynamic to design policies that prevent or mitigate the backlash while protecting and advocating for hard-won rights. The alternative—yielding to authoritarian demands—only perpetuates the cycle of inequality and democratic erosion.