

Article

The Growing Gender Divide: Changing Perceptions of Gender Equality among the Youth in the United States

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Abstract

This study examines why support for gender equality is declining among young Americans. We show that the youth in the United States are becoming increasingly more traditional in their views of gender equality and contend that this is due to a shift that is being led by democratic dissatisfaction and growing economic anxiety. Moreover, we further argue that this conservative shift is creating a divide between young women and young men, where anger and ideology are changing their support for women. Empirical analyses of the World Values Survey and the American National Election Survey show that these predictors have significantly influenced gendered attitudes among the youth. The results suggest that these differences may not only undermine the potential influence young Americans can make as primary decision-makers in the adult electorate, but can also significantly influence the progress of gender equality in the United States in the years to come.

Keywords

Gender Equality, Public Opinion, Youth, United States, Ideological Divide

Introduction

Despite various limitations around the world in the progress towards gender equality, the United States continues to function as the vanguard in the push for gender equal measures. Indeed, gender movements in the United States have experienced both progress and setbacks throughout

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the years (Scarborough et al., 2019)¹, yet significant efforts to close this gap have slowly but consistently been made through what has been described as a “gender revolution” (Cotter et al., 2011; England, 2010; Goldscheider et al., 2015). This includes increasing female employment (Cohen, 2004), particularly in professional and managerial jobs that were previously only available for men (Cotter et al., 2011), improving the gender wage gap between women and men (Blau & Kahn, 2017; England et al., 2020), increasing education opportunities for women within fields of studies have been traditionally dominated by men (England & Li, 2006), and increasing female leadership both in business (Lyness & Grotto, 2018) and politics (Ferreira & Gyourko, 2014). As a result of these measures, more female students are enrolled in higher education and women represent around half of the total labor and occupy almost half of management spots, even in top management and political positions (Blau et al., 2006; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Scarborough & Risman, 2017; Thomas & Wilcox, 2014).

In the same vein, Americans have increasingly shown more gender equal attitudes overall (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Donnelly et al., 2016; Meagher & Shu, 2019; Twenge, 1997). This is especially pertinent in the case of employment (Panayotova & Brayfield, 1997), politics, family roles, and motherhood (Meagher & Shu, 2019). According to six waves of the World Values Survey (*Figure 1*), conducted from 1990 to 2022, when asked whether “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women,” more American respondents disagreed with the statement throughout the consecutive waves, with 23.9 percent supporting the statement in the 1990-1994 wave to only 5.2 percent supporting the statement in the most recent 2017-2022 wave (Haerpfner et al., 2022).

Of course, there are significant variations based on one’s own gender (Baber & Tucker, 2006; Buchanan & Selmon, 2008; Donnelly et al., 2016), race (Kane, 2000), regional background and rural/urban living (Rice & Coates, 1995; Twenge, 1997), parenthood and family roles (Donnelly et al., 2016), education levels (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Bryant, 2003), and religiosity and religious affiliations (Siordia, 2016). In particular, in the United States, the intersectionality

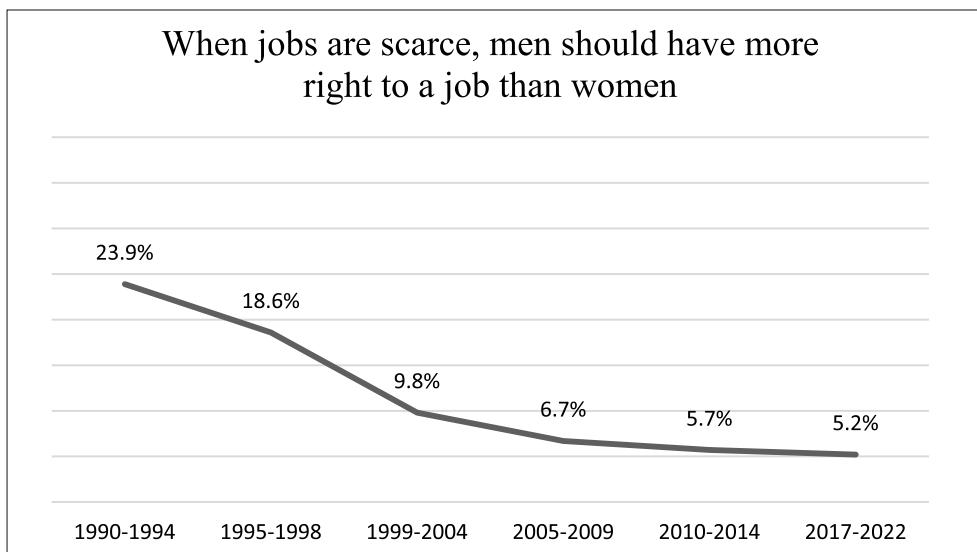


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who agreed to the statement, “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women” (World Value Survey data)

between gender and race is crucial in understanding as systemic racism and gender and race are often intertwined when examining gender attitudes in the United States (Carter et al., 2009; Dugger, 1988; Hunter & Sellers, 1998; Kane, 1992; McDonald & Deckman, 2021).

Yet, one particular demographic has been overlooked in the gender literature: the youth. Young American voters (i.e. population below the age of 30) have been often considered marginal players in politics with significantly different political orientations than their older counterparts (Keeter et al., 2002), little interest in political participation (Quintelier, 2007), and little interest in politics overall (Carpini & Keeter, 1991). Nonetheless, recent findings suggest that they are far from idle in the political sphere. In fact, they are becoming highly engaged in politics and their political voices are growing at a significant pace (Oates et al., 2006). In this light, it is crucial to examine the opinions and changing sentiment of young voters in understanding the future trajectory of the country's political climate.

Existing studies remain limited in their scrutinization of the growing gender divide and gendered attitudes among the youth. To fill this gap in the literature, this study focuses specifically on young Americans' support for gender equality and gender attitude. It poses the following questions: Do young Americans, who have had lifelong exposure to democratic ideas and values, fully support gender equality? Are there significant differences among young women and young men in support for women as a marginalized group, and if so, why?

This study makes two broad arguments. First, we suggest that, overall, declining support for democracy and increasing economic anxiety influence young Americans' decreasing support for gender equality. This is contrary to conventional belief that the youth often function as the strongest proponents of liberal and progressive values including that of gender equality (Bryant, 2003; Weber, 2013). Second, we argue that growing anger and conservative ideologies are starting to push the young male population towards more traditional gender attitudes (i.e., a lower level of support for women's rights) relative to young women. In testing these claims, we use multiple regression analyses to examine data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the American National Election Survey (ANES). We find that there is a statistically meaningful association between increasing democratic dissatisfaction, increasing economic anxiety, and declining support for gender equality. Moreover, our analysis further suggests that increasing anger and conservative ideological preferences are leading to a growing gender divide in the hearts and minds of young Americans.

While extant literature contends that the preferences of older generations and more traditional groups are the biggest, and most persistent, challenge for gender equality (Dorius & Firebaugh, 2010; Jennings, 2006; Scarborough et al., 2021), this study suggests that recent pushback against gender equality instead comes from the youth and that a growing gender gap among young women and men is also becoming exacerbated. These ideological differences may not only undermine the potential influence young Americans can make as primary political decision-makers but can also significantly curb the progress towards gender equality in the years to come.

The outline of the study is as follows. We first discuss why there is stagnating support for gender equality among young Americans and introduce the main predictors of democratic dissatisfaction and economic anxiety on declining support for gender equality among young Americans as well as the main predictors of anger and ideology that are increasing the gender divide among young women and young men. Then we explain our research design, including our measurements of support, and discuss the data sets used in this study. After, we provide the results of our analyses. Last, we conclude with a summary of our results, limitations and contributions, and the implications this may have on the future progress of gender equality in the United States.

Stagnating Support for Gender Equality among Young Americans

Today's young Americans are at the forefront of American politics. Often described as Generation Z or Gen Z (i.e., individuals born between 1995 and 2010), this young group is highly engaged in the civic and political realms (Sloam, 2011) and actively participating in both conventional, i.e. voting, and non-conventional, e.g. political protests, forms of political activity (Fisher, 2012; Kahne et al., 2015; Owen, 2006). Young Americans are interested in various political issues and, in particular, gender. Many existing studies on youth politics suggest that voters from younger generations often more demonstrate gender egalitarian orientations. They are also more likely to support social norms and policies leading to gender equality than members of older generations who tend to be more traditional (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Bryant, 2003; Medenica, 2018; Rouse & Ross, 2018). On the other hand, some recent studies find that young Americans' attitudes towards gender equality show more mixed results and nuances (McDonald & Deckman, 2021).

The World Values Survey data also shows this stagnating support among the youth. In answering the same survey question as posed above (i.e., "Men should have more rights to a job than women when jobs are scarce."), a larger proportion of young respondents in recent waves agreed with the statement (*Figure 2*). While only 4.5 percent of young respondents agreed in the 2005-2009 wave, this proportion increased 1.4 percent in the following wave (2010-2014) to 5.9 percent and then 6.7 percent in the most recent wave (2017-2022).

This trend in youth is in contrast with that of the overall population, which showed a steady decrease among those who agreed with the same statement. Between the 1995-1998 wave and the 1999-2004 wave, there was a sharp decline from 18.6 percent to 9.8 percent. The following waves also saw a consistent decrease with the more recent wave (2017-2022) showing 5.2 percent agreeing with the statement. While Americans in general increasingly disagree to this statement over time, the gap between younger and older generations seems to be widening. Younger

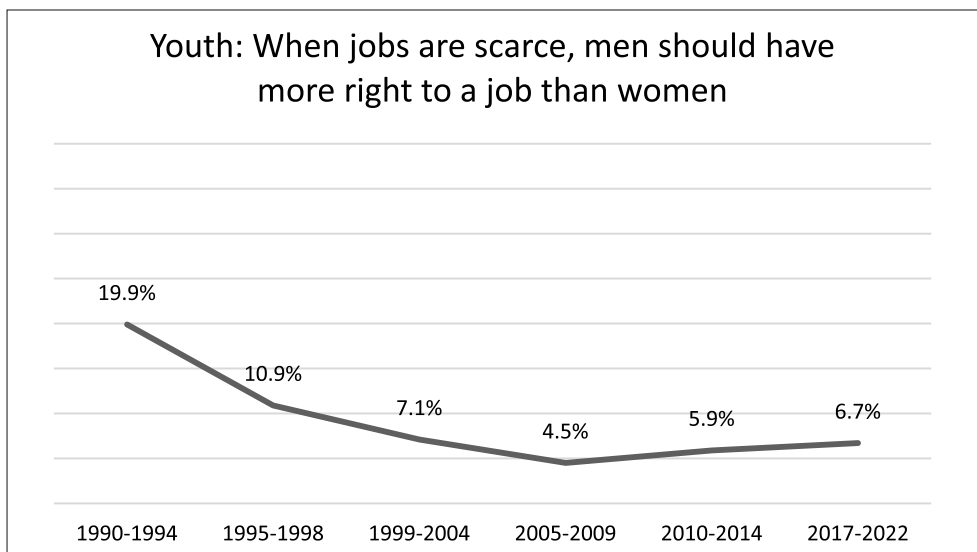


Figure 2. Proportion of young respondents (18-29 years old) who agreed to the statement, "When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women" (World Value Survey data)

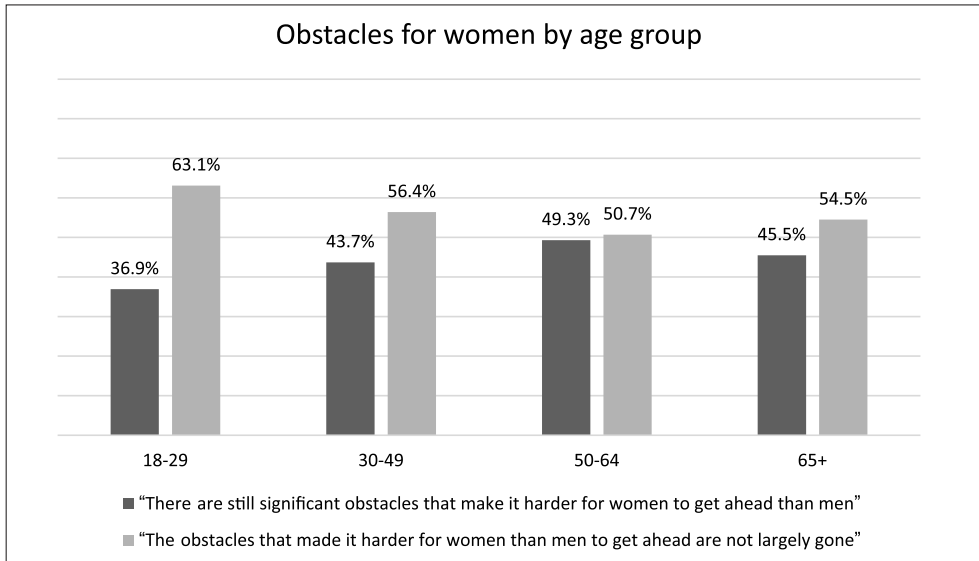


Figure 3. View on obstacles for women by age group (Pew Research Center data)

generation’s support for gender equality is declining not just overall but also relative to older age groups at similar stages of life.

Survey data from Pew Research Center shows a similar trend (*Figure 3*). In this survey, participants were asked about their views on social barriers for women. 63.1 percent of young Americans with the ages of 18 to 29 agreed that “the obstacles that once made it harder for women than men to get ahead are now largely gone.” 36.9 percent of the same age group indicated that “there are significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead than men.” Among the four different age groups ranging from ages of 18 to 65 or older, the youngest group showed the largest gap of 26.2 percent between the proportion of respondents who believed that there were no more obstacles for women versus those who believed there still were such barriers. The age group of 50 to 64 were the least likely to say that obstacles for women were largely gone and the most likely to say that they still exist. Comparing the response of different age groups, the youth seem to believe that gender disparities are largely gone and show the largest difference in these attitudes. This result is especially concerning since the younger generations are often viewed as the core age group to play a critical role in the push for greater gender equal practices (Inglehart & Norris, 2003, 2005).

While there are various factors that can explain such trend, we focus on economic and political factors that influenced the changes in overall attitudinal orientations among the youth. More specifically, we contend that there is a conservative shift among the youth due to two major predictors of declining support for gender equality: declining support for democracy and increasing economic anxiety. Furthermore, we argue that there is a growing divide within the younger generation, where young women support more gender equality, and young men show growing hostility towards gender equality. The major predictors of this ideological gap stems from young men experiencing growing anger towards women as an outgroup and ideological shift towards conservatism.

Predictors of Declining Support for Gender Equality among Young Americans: Democratic Decline and Economic Anxiety

First, young people who were once highly enthusiastic about democratic values are, relative to their older counterparts, becoming increasingly less supportive of democracy (Essomba et al., 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2019). This is in part because young Americans are losing trust in the government (Dalton, 2007) and becoming increasingly disappointed with the failures of democracy and political leaders elected through democratic processes. Instead, there is a growing appeal of populism among young Americans (Foa & Mounk, 2019; Kazin, 2016). In many ways, former president Donald Trump became an unlikely populist and his supporters adopted similar views or “tapped into a deep vein of distress and resentment” (Kazin, 2016, p. 17).

This anti-democratic sentiment is a concerning trend as it may undermine the stability of democratic institutions and further decrease people’s preference for democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2019) when, in fact, the sole way for democracy to succeed is when it is viewed as “the only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Indeed, this growing “democratic apathy” among young Americans has been characterized through both low voter turnout and low political interest as well as distrust and skepticism regarding democratic institutions and their values (Foa & Mounk, 2019). This encourages a conservative shift in their views of gender since “democracy is an ally” for gender equality and “a necessary condition for its success” (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018). Therefore, this decline in support for democracy and democratic values is likely to be correlated with the aforementioned decline of support for gender equality as well. As such, democratic dissatisfaction among the youth has led to a conservative shift in attitudes which has led to declining support for gender equality.

H1. Democratic dissatisfaction decreases support for gender equality among young Americans.

Second, these attitudinal changes are also being influenced by increasing economic anxiety among young Americans due to high level of youth unemployment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of July 2023, only 55 percent of young people are employed. Though unemployment has been a long-term problem in the United States, young Americans face worsening employment prospects in recent times relative to previous decades (Steinberg, 2013). This is in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had significant ramifications on young Americans by disrupting employment sectors and heightening unemployment (Collins et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2023). The economic anxiety caused by the pandemic further exacerbated the preexisting inequalities and led to more conservative and traditional views of gender (Landivar et al., 2020). The pandemic-induced recession and economic downturn threatened the entire country, but young Americans in particular struggled even more by having to face “one of the worst job markets” in recent times (Maye et al., 2020). They not only continue to struggle to gain economic ground (Ross, 2023), but also experience increasing amounts of frustration in attempts to achieve a higher standard of living (Picchi, 2022; Williams, 2022). Moreover, as studies on other regions have shown (e.g. Boring & Moroni, 2023; Danzer et al., 2021), the pandemic fueled traditional gender attitudes due to increasing economic constraints. In this way, increasing economic anxiety among young Americans has led to a conservative shift in attitudes which has resulted in declining support for gender equality.

H2. Economic anxiety decreases support for gender equality among young Americans.

Differing Support for Women among Young Women and Young Men: Anger and Ideology

As mentioned, young Americans are struggling more with economic anxiety than previous generations, which in part has to do with the lack of good job opportunities. This lack of resources in the society in turn has led to a divide between women and men who are newly in need of jobs and resources to start their adulthood. Through this zero-sum framework, young women and young men are now put in a situation where they must compete against each other for job opportunities and resources. This perception of the lack of resources thus increases anger among the youngest cohort and increasingly divides up the cohort of young women and young men. According to group threat theory, an ingroup often assumes that the others, an outgroup, will take away their limited resources and pose a significant obstacle to their success (Riek et al., 2006; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Applying this framework to our context, young men who have traditionally been the dominant work force in many cases may view themselves to be the ingroup due to traditional gender roles. Consequently, they associate the perceived lack of resources with the outgroup, young women, resulting in an us-versus-them competition. Young men who feel pressured to fulfill their traditional gender role experience anger due to the discrepancy between their ideal and the reality, and this can be seen through growing resentment towards public institutions that increase gender equal measures. The increasing push for gender equality in general are thus viewed as another barrier for this group of young men to overcome, resulting in a decreasing support towards the outgroup, young women.

Similarly, young women may view this backlash from young men as another challenge in addition to overcoming long-existing traditional barriers for better opportunities. This is particularly the case during periods of social crisis and economic decline, where explicit misogyny increases and long-running inequalities reemerge. As a result, young women become increasingly frustrated and angry with public institutions that seem to continue to reinforce the glass ceiling. Thus, they push for more pro-women values and policies. In this way, increasing anger among both young men and young women leads to a more divided view of their support for women as a traditionally marginalized group. Because both young women and young men feel as though they are being attacked by the other group, the former begins to harbor more negative attitudes towards women while the latter harbors even more positive attitudes towards women. Thus, increasing anger among young women fuels their support for women while increasing anger among men decreases their support for women.

H3. Anger increases support for women among young women relative to young men.

Lastly, we focus on the fact that the youth today have been socialized at a time when American society at large is the most polarized in recent times (McDonald & Deckman, 2021). Due to this polarization, even people with similar political ideologies can have significant differences in their attitudes towards gender equality and support for women. In this case, even within the conservative population, women and men may have differing values in the context of gender. Indeed, extant literature suggests that individuals with more conservative-leaning ideology are less likely to show support for women's rights in general because they stress the importance of traditional values (Anderson, 2014; Jennings, 2006; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021). This was particularly exacerbated during the Trump administration since former president Donald Trump ran on what many saw as an openly misogynistic platform (Harp, 2019; Silva, 2019). During his campaign and presidential term, debates on women's rights were heightened, particularly in relation to gender roles and behavioral expectations (Harp, 2019), and hostile sexism and

resentment became increasingly visible particularly among young male Trump voters (Glick, 2019; Setzler & Yanus, 2018). As a result, conservative young men may be less likely to show support for women and women's rights.

For young women, on the other hand, the lasting impacts of the Trump administration has had significant influence on how they develop salient political identities (McDonald & Deckman, 2021). Liberal young women experienced similar developmental processes as conservative ones in this context. Misogyny became more aligned with conservative ideologies during the Trump era, which led conservative young women to become increasingly liberal in their views of gender. This is in juxtaposition to young male conservatives becoming more supportive of traditional gender norms. Similarly, recent social movements that empower women such as the #MeToo movement may have supported conservative young women, but have had repercussions towards young men. In this way, conservative young men may have felt rejected and reverse-marginalized by the modern liberal movement and felt a sense of unbelonging. Moreover, for conservative young men, policies and societal push for gender equality seem to ignore the challenges that they face in a similarly patriarchal society, such as the pressure to be the partner with higher salary. As a result, conservative young men are less likely to show support for women and women's rights compared to conservative young women.

H4. Conservative ideologies decrease support for women among young men relative to young women.

Research Design

We analyze two datasets to examine our four main hypotheses. Specifically, we use the seventh wave (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey (WVS) to test *Hypotheses 1* and *2*, and we incorporate the 2020 American National Election Survey (ANES) Times Series Data to examine *Hypotheses 3* and *4*. These datasets are arguably the most comprehensive and consistently distributed datasets with sets of items in each survey that fit well with our variables. The WVS includes survey items related to dissatisfaction on democracy and *democratic values*, *economic anxiety*, and measures of support for *gender equality*.² The ANES includes survey items related to *anger*, *political ideology*, and items that specifically measure support for *women's rights*.³ In addition, to fully measure respondents' support for, or lack thereof, gender, it is necessary to examine attitudes holistically. As such, we incorporate an index for our broad measure of gender equality from the WVS and an individual survey item for support for women from the ANES.

For the first two hypotheses, we measure *dissatisfaction on democracy and democratic values* and *economic anxiety* through two survey items from the WVS. Specifically, for *democratic dissatisfaction*, we use a survey item that asks: "I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?" Here, "having a democratic political system" is listed with response options from very good to very bad.

In measuring respondents' level of *economic anxiety*, we use a survey item that asks about "Worries: Losing my job or not finding a job" with response options from no worries to very worried. Both are reverse-coded, indicating that a scale was created where "very good" was coded as 1 and "very bad" was coded 0, with other responses in between. For a broad measure of support for *gender equality*, we develop an index that takes into account four separate dimensions of support for gender equality. This includes questions related to women's political leadership,

Table 1. Index used for support for gender equality

Gender Equality Index	
0	No Support for Gender Equality
1	Little Support for Gender Equality
2	Some Support for Gender Equality
3	High Support for Gender Equality
4	Full Support for Gender Equality

education, business leadership, and jobs. The questions ask the degree to which respondents support the following statements:

- “Men make better political leaders than women do.”
- “University is more important for a boy than for a girl.”
- “Men make better business executives than women do.”
- “Jobs scarce: Men should have more right to a job than women.”

We used these four items and reverse-coded the frequency of a respondent agreeing to these statements. That is, if a respondent indicated support for all four statements, then their responses were coded 0. If a respondent indicated no support for any of the statements, then their responses were coded as 4. In this way, all of the questions are for both the index and independent variables are coded on a 0 to 1 scale.

For *Hypotheses 3* and *4*, to measure *anger* and *political ideology*, we incorporate survey items from the 2020 ANES Times Series Data. To measure *anger*, we incorporated a survey item that asks: “how angry the respondent feels about how things are going in the country,” where response choices range from extremely angry to none at all. To examine their *political ideology*, we used a seven-point liberal-conservative scale placement, where 0 indicates extremely liberal and 1 indicates extremely conservative, and the others being located in between. Moreover, to examine support for women, we took into account a survey item that asks about whether or not women experience discrimination in the United States, with response choices from “a great deal” to “none at all.”

In addition to these independent and dependent variables, we categorized young respondents separately from the overall dataset, i.e. those between the ages of 18 to 29. We also included control variables include *race*, *marital status and/or children*, *level of education*, *employment status*, *political party affiliation*, *class*, and *income*, and all the variables are coded on a 0 to 1 scale.⁴

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Among young respondents in the WVS, the majority generally showed support for the gender equality index. That is, only 3 percent showed no support (0) while 3.6 percent showed little support (1), 8.2 percent showed some support (2), 7.0 showed high support (3) and around 78 percent showed full support (4) in the index.⁵ While support for gender equality in general seems high, it was still lower levels of support for each dimension compared to the overall respondents.

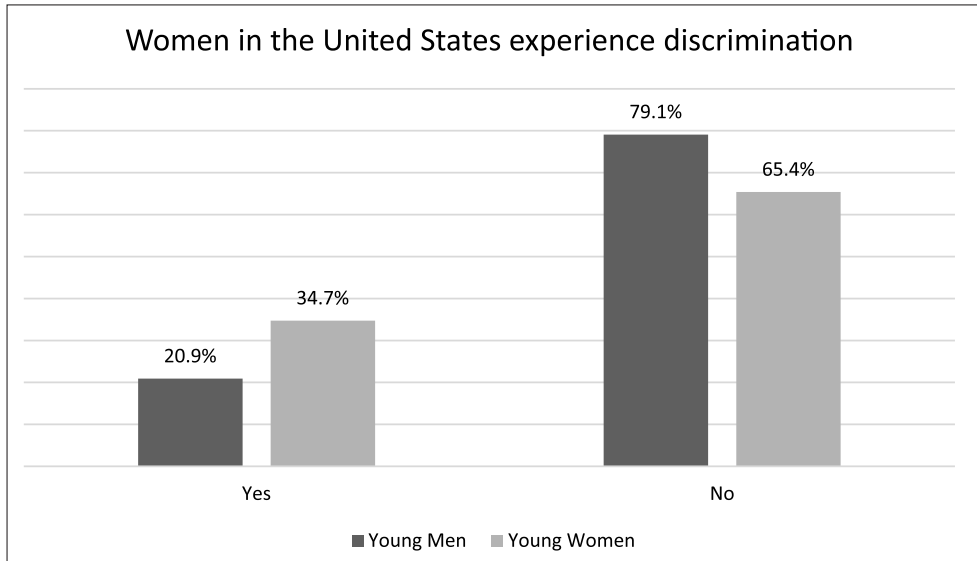


Figure 4. Proportion of young respondents (18-29 years old) who agreed/disagree with the statement that “Women in the United States experience a considerable amount of discrimination” (ANES)

However, descriptive statistics regarding democratic dissatisfaction showed that only 33.2 percent of young respondents believed that “having a democratic political system” would be “very good” while the descriptives for economic anxiety showed that 15.5 percent of young respondents were “very much worried” about “losing their job or not finding a job.”

Among young female and male respondents in the ANES, when examining support for women, only 125 out of 597 young male respondents (20.9 percent) in the ANES believed that women in the United States experience a considerable amount of discrimination while nearly 80 percent stated that women did not experience discrimination. Among young women, 246 out of 710 (34.7 percent) showed support while 65.4 did not.⁶

Regression Analyses

Table 2 shows the first regression results, where *Model 1* represents the effects of democratic dissatisfaction on support for the gender equal index and *Model 2* presents the effects of economic anxiety on support for the gender equal index. In *Model 1*, we found that the level of democratic dissatisfaction predicted lower support for gender equality among young Americans by about 11.6 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). Moreover, respondents’ gender (Female) and race (White) were positively correlated with support for the index while those with higher income levels were less likely to show support.

Additionally, *Model 2* suggests that young Americans who are experiencing economic anxiety were 6.8 percentage points less likely to support the gender equal index ($p < 0.05$). Similar to *Model 1*, respondents’ gender (Female) and race (White) again predicted positive support while higher levels of education and increasing income in young Americans predicted less support for the index. Still, both democratic dissatisfaction (*Hypothesis 1*) and economic anxiety (*Hypothesis 2*) were strongly and negatively correlated with young Americans’ overall support for the gender index, i.e., gender equality.

Table 2. Regression results for Hypotheses 1 and 2

DV = Support for Gender Equality	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Democratic Dissatisfaction</i>	-0.116** (0.039)	-0.068* (0.031)
<i>Gender</i>	0.081*** (0.021)	0.083*** (0.021)
<i>Race</i>	0.044* (0.021)	0.040+ (0.021)
<i>Education</i>	0.049 (0.034)	0.067* (0.034)
<i>Employment</i>	0.024 (0.025)	0.024 (0.025)
<i>PartyID</i>	-0.028 (0.028)	-0.024 (0.028)
<i>Income Level</i>	-0.131* (0.062)	-0.013* (0.062)
<i>Marital Status</i>	-0.034 (0.023)	-0.035 (0.023)
<i>Class</i>	-0.048 (0.054)	-0.065 (0.054)
<i>Religion</i>	0.004 (0.025)	0.012 (0.025)
<i>Constant</i>	0.896*** (0.042)	0.886*** (0.042)
N	580	590
R ²	0.075	0.068

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 shows the last results of our analyses, where *Model 3* represents the effects of anger on support for women's rights and *Model 4* presents the effects of political ideology, i.e. conservative ideology, on support for women's rights among young women and young men. *Model 3* suggests that, among young male respondents, those who expressed anger towards the society were only 16.3 percent more likely to answer that they supported women's rights ($p < 0.01$). However, young female respondents who are angry at the society were 27.8 percentage point more likely ($p < 0.000$) to indicate that they support women's rights predicted support for women, which is almost twice more than that of young men in the same category. For control variables, race (White), political party affiliation (Republican), and marital status (Married) showed less support among young female respondents whereas only race (White) and political party affiliation (Republican) showed less support among young male respondents. This indicates that marriage has a significantly negative effect on support for women more so than married young male respondents as well as young single female respondents.

Additionally, *Model 4* suggests that having conservative ideologies predicted less support for women's rights among young male respondents with around 44.1 percentage points ($p < 0.000$) while young women's conservative ideologies predicted less support for women's rights at

Table 3. Regression results for Hypotheses 3 and 4

DV = Support for Women	Model 3		Model 4	
	Young Women	Young Men	Young Women	Young Men
<i>Anger</i>	0.278*** (0.058)	0.163** (0.058)		
<i>Ideology</i>			-0.425*** (0.082)	-0.441*** (0.082)
<i>Race</i>	-0.065+ (0.036)	-0.077* (0.035)	-0.016 (0.041)	-0.074* (0.038)
<i>Education</i>	-0.010 (0.067)	0.001 (0.064)	0.024 (0.076)	-0.038 (0.068)
<i>Employment</i>	-0.018 (0.035)	0.017 (0.033)	-0.024 (0.039)	0.028 (0.035)
<i>Party ID</i>	-0.284*** (0.065)	-0.270*** (0.061)	-0.195** (0.073)	-0.139* (0.069)
<i>Marital Status</i>	-0.168*** (0.040)	-0.040 (0.037)	-0.172*** (0.043)	0.014 (0.040)
<i>Children</i>	-0.003 (0.017)	-0.005 (0.038)	0.007 (0.023)	0.005 (0.019)
<i>Religion</i>	-0.019 (0.038)	-0.005 (0.038)	-0.036 (0.043)	0.022 (0.042)
<i>Constant</i>	0.395*** (0.071)	0.292*** (0.068)	0.677*** (0.066)	0.545*** (0.061)
N	692	586	556	502
R ²	0.134	0.080	0.144	0.118

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

around 42.5 percentage points ($p < 0.000$). While the difference between young women and men were subtle, conservative young male respondents were slightly less likely to support women's rights relative to conservative young female respondents. For control variables, among young female respondents, political party affiliation (Republican) and marital status (Married) again predicted less support for women while, for young male respondents, race (White) and political party affiliation (Republican) predicted less support. Similar to *Model 3*, this indicates that marriage has a significantly negative effect on support for women more so than married young male respondents as well as young single female respondents. However, differently from *Model 3*, race (White) had a statistically significant effect only on young male respondents while it did not for young female respondents. That is, White young male respondents were less likely to support women by 7.4 percentage points ($p < 0.05$). This further reinforces the idea that race and gender are heavily intertwined in salient political and social issues in the United States.

Overall, *Table 3* had several interesting results. First, both education and employment did not have significant effects on support for women among young respondents, though young Americans often pursue higher levels of education than their older counterparts, which further influences their liberal orientations. Additionally, marital status seemed to have a significantly negative effect on young female respondents, i.e. married young female respondents were much

less likely to support women, whereas it had no statistically significant effect on young male respondents. When it comes to the major predictors, nevertheless, both *Hypotheses 3* and *4* were supported.

Conclusion

According to Dalton (2005), the younger generation is reshaping American politics. Indeed, young Americans (i.e. Generation Z or Gen Z) make up an estimated number of 70 million members. Yet “as a generation that came of age during uncertain times, Gen Zers have a political perspective that is unique from prior cohorts” (McDonald & Deckman, 2021). While studies show that young Americans are interested in political issues (Oates et al., 2006), their means of expression and participation are different. That is, they seem less likely to actively participate in traditional ways, such as signing petitions, working for politicians and parties, attending town hall meetings, and writing letters to their representatives (see Dalton, 2008; Easterlin & Crimmins, 1991; Putnam, 2001; Skocpol, 1996). This makes it important for us to understand young Americans’ political interests and participation through a different lens.

Additionally, their attitudes towards gender equality are also unique. Though they have been expected to change politics as they replace older generations in the American electorate, the “stalled gender revolution” (Cotter et al., 2011; England, 2010; Goldscheider et al., 2015) seems to be more prominent among younger generations than the older ones (Cotter et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2013; Spar, 2013). Moreover, young Americans’ attitude towards gender equality seem to be heavily polarized even within the group, where young women are much more favorable to gender equality and women’s rights such as electing female political leaders relative to young men (Parker et al., 2019). This growing ideological divide between young women and young men, despite living in the same locations and having similar experiences, “no longer see eye-to-eye,” and it only took six years for this gap to open up (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). This rapid widening of the gender gap among younger Americans indicates that polarization of their political attitudes does not actually stem from issues related to gender. Instead, the relationship is reverse – political polarization is having an effect on young Americans’ attitudes towards gender equality.

This can have significant implications for other countries worldwide as well. Because the United States is often viewed to be at the forefront of gender equal movements, there may be a type of ripple effect where similar trends will be seen in other consolidated democracies. Indeed, gender inequality has been examined in various parts of the world, including Europe (Verloo, 2018; Rubery, 2015; Pascall and Lewis, 2004), East Asia (Pascall and Sung, 2007; Steel and Kabashima, 2008), and parts of Latin America (Biroli, 2020), yet the role of the youth and their recent attitudinal changes, or lack thereof, have not been holistically observed. Increasing democratic dissatisfaction as well as increasing economic anxiety among the youth in other democracies may already be changing sentiment towards gender in other regions. Moreover, the trend of increasing polarization may further signal that there are growing gender divisions among the youth in other countries. As a result, the case of the United States functions as an example of how similar sentiment may be seen in other consolidated democracies, which may have a slowdown in gender progress worldwide since democracies in general often provide women with “more rights and more channels to make their voices heard than are present in autocracies” (Welzel and Inglehart, 2005).

Limitations & Ways to Move Forward

This study shows that democratic dissatisfaction and growing economic anxiety among the youth are heavily influencing overall declining support for gender equality in the United States. Moreover, even among young Americans, young men with growing anger towards the society and more conservative ideologies seem to be influencing this declining support for women's rights. Despite the importance of this topic, our study has some limitations that should be addressed.

First, we used two different forms of cross-sectional data which captured attitudes during a particular time period. While this was relevant for our research, future studies should provide a longitudinal analysis that is grounded in our findings. An additional way to move forward would be to provide more of a combined analysis between gender and race among the youth. While it is not a part of our study's scope of consideration, race and ethnicity are crucial components of American politics. We only controlled for race in our study and focused on gender, but we also fully acknowledge the importance of race in fully understanding any type of social divide in the United States. In this light, combining racial components to our discussion on gender divide would not only help us provide a more comprehensive analysis, but also enhance the validity of our results from this paper.

Second, because we used observational data collected by a third party, there might be measurement issues. For example, we used a survey item for anger that was focused on anger towards the country, but there were limitations in understanding details regarding that emotion. Moreover, because we focused on young respondents, our sample sizes became much smaller than the original datasets. As such, future studies should incorporate larger samples that mostly consist of younger respondents.

Finally, in this study we only focused on the United States context, but providing a comparison with other postindustrial democracies that have shown significant progress in gender equality could reveal whether this is a unique pattern in the United States or a larger trend that can be seen worldwide. We expect future researchers conducting similar research to provide more of an in-depth analysis regarding this.

Contribution of the Study

Despite these limitations, we believe that our study has significant theoretical and practical implications. It contributes to the existing scholarship in three ways. First, this study provides an understanding of declining support for gender equality, and specifically women's rights, in the United States, a country that has often been considered to be at the forefront of social movements for gender equality. While existing literature on the gender gap in the context of the United States often focuses on female representation in politics, the workplace, and even within the family, there remain limited studies in attitudes towards, and perceptions of, women's rights in general. Thus, to provide a holistic approach to measuring these attitudes, this study incorporates both a multidimensional index of support for gender equality and a separate measure for support for women's rights.

Second, recent studies dominantly examine predictors towards different groups, such as immigrants and minorities, due to increasing hostility that many have faced during the pandemic and during the Trump era (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021; Fording & Schram, 2020; Goodfellow, 2020; Ho, 2021). As such, this study contributes to recent literature on political conflicts and divide by examining also how orientations towards women during the same time frame have changed. Third, this study focuses on youth politics through a two-level analysis by examining young Americans as a group and by examining differences among young women and young men.

While scholars have often viewed the youth generally as the most progressive generation, this framework shows that the youth are declining in their liberal attitudes and existing scholarship remains limited in observing these effects towards gender attitudes among the youth in the United States. As such, this study provides a unique contribution to the existing literature on understanding these attitudes as well as the future trajectory of American politics. Moreover, it provides a lens to seeing how the landscape of how the political world will be reshaped in the years to come.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Notes

1. Indeed, gender inequality continues to struggle with significant challenges despite efforts for progress. For example, according to two Pew studies conducted in 2023 and 2024 in the United States, when it comes to employment and pay, women make up 47 percent of the labor force while they earn only about 82 cents for every dollar a man earns. In leadership positions, female legislators have less than one third of the US Congress seats (28 percent) while only 11 percent of CEOs in the Fortune 500 companies are women (Schaffer, 2024). When it comes to working parents, moreover, 67 percent of working mothers reported that feeling pressure related to household responsibilities, which was almost double the proportion of working fathers (35 percent) who answered that they felt the same pressure (Aragão, 2023). However, in this study we attempt to focus on progress related to gender equality since we examine support for, or lack thereof, gender equality.
2. The World Values Survey consists of 2,596 respondents in the United States, with 632 young respondents that are included in this study.
3. The ANES data includes a total of 1,307 young respondents, with 597 male respondents and 710 female respondents.
4. Here, higher political party affiliations indicate more conservative values, higher gender values indicate female, and higher race values indicate White.
5. When dividing this up by dimension, among young respondents, 83.7 percent rejected the idea that “men make better political leaders than women do” while 89.4 percent rejected the statement “university is more important for a boy than for a girl,” 86.1 percent dismissed the statement “men make better business executives than women do,” and 94.5 rejected the notion that when “jobs [are] scarce: men should have more right to a job than women.”
6. When asked similar questions, among young male respondents, 27.8 percent believed that “women interpret innocent remarks as sexist,” 19 percent stated that “women seek to gain power by getting control

over men,” 10.2 percent believe that “women complaining about discrimination causes more problems,” and 11.6 percent agree that “women demanding equality seek special favors.” Among young female respondents, the results for the same items were 23.5 percent, 10.1 percent, 8.0 percent, and 10.4 percent, respectively. Though it is a smaller margin, young female respondents were less likely to support these statements that seemed to show discrimination towards women.

7. We included both political party affiliation (party ID) and ideology separately because, while it can be assumed that the two are closely aligned, recent studies have shown that the two are surprisingly not well correlated. As a result, we included Party ID as a control for Model 4.

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