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The Political Economy of the Marriage Market:
Demographic Policies, Social Norms, and Women's Empowerment in South Korea

by

Soosun You

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Leonardo R. Arriola, Co-chair
Professor Cecilia Hyunjung Mo, Co-chair
Professor Thad Dunning
Professor Stephanie Zonszein

Summer 2024

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Leonardo R. Arriola, Co-chair

Professor Cecilia Hyunjung Mo, Co-chair

In this dissertation, I examine the politics of demography, marriage, and gender. I argue that demographic policies and social norms surrounding the family interact to cause backlash against women's empowerment, focusing on the case of South Korea. Each essay focuses on a cause of the backlash: demographic policies, norms, and gender-based comparisons in educational achievements. In the first essay, I trace the history of demographic politics in South Korea and show how policies implemented in the 20th century to modernize the country subsequently led to a sex imbalance in cohorts currently at what is considered prime marital age. By creating a marriage market squeeze, where there are more men than women seeking partners in the heterosexual marriage market, these demographic policies had the unintended consequence of prompting men in these cohorts to exhibit gender backlash. In the second essay, I argue that diverging preferences toward marriage along gender lines, which stem from different social norms and economic constraints that women and men face, are further exacerbating the marriage market squeeze. This causes young men to feel a status threat and react by calling for a reversal of women's empowerment outside the patriarchal bargain. Backlash is a political tool by which men seek to secure an advantageous position in the marriage market. The third essay explores the role of gendered competition in educational achievements. I find that the underperformance of men relative to women causes men to support a conservative political party they see as better representing men's interests. Overall, the three essays demonstrate how resistance against women's empowerment comes from changes surrounding family formation and how economic grievances can make some men more susceptible to backlash rhetoric that promises to improve their lot at the expense of women.

To Seung-hee and Jong-sung You,
my parents

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Dissertation

Over the past several decades, women worldwide have achieved substantial progress in various aspects of social life. But in recent years, the surge of right-wing populism has been accompanied by an increasing resistance against the further advancement of women's rights, hindering societies from achieving gender parity. Some individuals deliberately oppose women's advancement, verbally and physically, fearing it would come at their own expense. At times, their calls to roll back women's rights are enacted institutionally through legal means or policies. For example, abortion rights in the United States have been significantly curtailed after a 2022 Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Roe v Wade*. Since, many states have imposed a stringent set of regulations on abortion, making access difficult. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have restricted women's access to education, paid employment, political participation, basic health care, and services for domestic violence survivors.¹ The Chinese government is using censorship to ban feminism, such as by banning feminist terms out of the fear that it might "incite conflict."² In South Korea, women are being harassed and physically attacked for having short hair³. Its politicians have taken to using anti-feminist rhetoric to win votes, such as vowing to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family; they have removed the term "women" from policies, programs, and even from names of departments within the government.⁴

The key motivation driving this dissertation is an attempt to understand the causes of the backlash against women's empowerment and their political ramifications. Previous studies in political science that have tackled this task have focused primarily on women's increased representation in the public sphere: in politics and in the professional workforce. Yet, I argue that one needs to look at the shifts occurring closer to home—i.e., the family. In making this argument, I focus on the case of South Korea, where the backlash against women has

¹For a more detailed description of how the Taliban have been violating women's rights, see [here](#).

²Example can be found [in this article](#).

³In a recent incident, a man attacked a shop clerk for having short hair because he associated short hair with feminism, as reported [here](#)

⁴Removing the term "women" is one manifestation of backlash against women in South Korea, as reported [in a widely-distributed local daily newspaper](#). This phenomenon was also observed during my fieldwork.

been intense in recent years. Based on extensive fieldwork in South Korea, during which I conducted interviews, surveys, and archival research, I advance an argument that helps us better understand *when* individuals become more resistant to change in women's status and *who* are more likely to be susceptible to engaging in backlash. I argue that the backlash against women's empowerment is a product of changing norms and preferences surrounding marriage, as well as demographic shifts that have altered the composition of the marriage market.

In the first empirical chapter (Chapter 2), I address the question of *when* we are likely to observe backlash against women's empowerment. I trace the backlash in South Korea to demographic policies (or, more precisely, population control policies) implemented in the 20th century. Enforced with vigor, pressures to reduce the population inadvertently led to a sex imbalance among cohorts currently at what is considered prime marriage age in South Korea. These demographic policies, carried out under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, were intended to help modernize the country and stimulate economic growth. Faced with state-led pressures to have fewer children and familial expectations to have sons, many individuals sought ways to ensure having sons while adhering to state guidelines. Technological openings—specifically the domestic production of ultrasonic technology that enabled sex screening of fetuses—therefore became a widely-used solution. As a result, cohorts born during this period face a severe sex-imbalance, in which there were more male than females born during this period.

The sex imbalance at birth translated into a *marriage market squeeze*, where there is an excess of men over women seeking partners in the heterosexual marriage market. I argue that cohorts of men who face a more constricted marriage market are more likely to exhibit backlash against women's empowerment. To secure a better position in the marriage market, they revert to traditional gender norms that limit women's economic, social, and political opportunities outside the patriarchal bargain. In summary, demographic policies implemented to modernize South Korea led to an unintended consequence of prompting gender backlash.

In support of my argument, I provide qualitative case study of South Korea, tracing through the history of demographic policies during the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. I then use a quasi-natural experiment that leverages the sudden domestic availability of ultrasonic diagnostic equipment in South Korea. This caused a sharp increase in the sex-ratio of cohorts born after the technology became widely available. Leveraging this technological policy shock, I find that the cohorts of men who were affected by the shock are more likely to exhibit backlash against women's empowerment.

The second essay addresses the question of *who* are most susceptible to exhibiting backlash against women's empowerment, focusing on the conditions that make marriage market squeeze more threatening. To do so, I shed light on a more recent trend in the marriage market: the diverging preferences toward marriage men and women have in South Korea. Through interviews, I document how preferences toward marriage are extremely divided along gender lines. I find that while women perceive a high cost to getting married, men perceive a higher cost of remaining unmarried. Such diverging preferences between men

and women, in turn, have exacerbated the marriage market squeeze (that existed due to demographic trends that I examined in Chapter 2). In a society marked by patriarchal and patrilineal norms, I argue that the marriage market squeeze causes men to feel status threats and thereby react by resisting women's empowerment. Backlash becomes a political tool through which men attempt to main their advantageous position in the marriage market.

A survey experiment is used to test this link and further suggest potential mechanisms underlying the relationship between the marriage market squeeze and gender backlash. I find that those who are particularly vulnerable to the marriage market squeeze are unmarried men in their prime age for marriage. Notably, this group coincides with the cohorts affected by the marriage market squeeze that was created in response to the demographic shift. Drawing on insights from interviews, I argue that unmarried men in their prime marital age, and particularly those who are the first-born sons or socioeconomically less well-off, are more likely to be susceptible to engaging in backlash. My analysis supports my argument, showing that the marriage market squeeze leads to attitudinal backlash, where men express resistance to women having equal job opportunities and increased autonomy from the family. Furthermore, they are likely to demand policies to curtail women's power and rights, such as the abolition of the gender ministry and the abolition of gender quotas in the workplace and in politics.

In the third essay, coauthored with Nicholas Kuipers, I examine a different factor that is closely related to shifts in the economy. While the first two essays focused on factors more germane to men in their marital age, here I probe whether and to what extent the education system in Korea—more specifically comparisons based on standardized exams—activates group threat and how this translates to political outcomes. Ubiquitous in Korean society and frequently used to allocate scarce resources (including jobs and marriage), I find that competitive exams are an important source causing men to seek redress in the form of support for conservative parties that they see as better representing men's needs. While standardized exams can generate support for conservative parties, they do not shift fundamental views on gender.

These findings bolster my central thesis that the fundamental source of opposition to women's empowerment may stem from a cultural shift regarding the family. Economic grievances can, however, make some men more susceptible to backlash rhetoric that promises to improve their situation through targeted policy interventions at the expense of women's rights.

Chapter 2

The Unintended Consequences of Demographic Policies for Women's Empowerment

Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the long-run consequences of a major demographic shift on women's empowerment. I argue that demographic policies have played a central role in fueling a backlash against women's empowerment by generating a 'marriage market squeeze'—a phenomenon in which there are excess men seeking partners in the heterosexual marriage market. Using qualitative and quantitative evidence from South Korea, where gender has emerged as a prominent political cleavage in recent years, I demonstrate how demographic policies and technological shifts interacted with social norms (i.e., preference for sons) to create a constrained marriage market for cohorts of men who are now in their prime age for marriage. The inability to find marital partners leads some men to become more resistant to women's empowerment. As a causal evidence for this argument, I leverage a technological policy shock that caused variation in individuals' exposure to the marriage market squeeze and find that the cohorts of men affected by this shock became more opposed to women's empowerment. This study thus not only speaks to the complexities of the marriage market's influence on gender politics, but also underscores the broader implications of demographic shifts on societal attitudes and political discourse.

2.1 Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, efforts to reduce the population proliferated across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Population policies were implemented to encourage, and to differing degrees, coerce people to have fewer children (Cho, 2021a; Connelly, 2010; DiMoia,

2008; Lee, 2023). China’s one-child-per-family policy is one of the most extreme cases in which the state had control over a woman’s right to (not) bear and give birth to a child. South Korea, Japan, India, Taiwan, and Pakistan adopted similar policies, with varying levels of enforcement and in different time periods, to achieve the goals of the state, such as economic growth (DiMoia, 2008; Connelly, 2010; Mattingly, 2020; Park and Woo, 2020) and state building (Greenhalgh, 2008; Homei, 2022; Lee, 2023; Shin and Choi, 2020b).

As an unintended side effect of these population policies, many countries saw an increase in the sex ratio at birth (the number of male live births per 100 female births). State-led demographic pressures to have fewer children, combined with a preference for sons, led to female infanticide, abandonment of newborn girls, as well as sex-selective abortion (Gu and Roy, 1995; Hesketh and Xing, 2006; Junhong, 2001). These issues appeared because in countries where anti-natalist policies were most actively pursued, patrilineal norms tended to be deeply rooted, contributing to the “missing girls problem” (Sen, 2017). Critical to note, the cohorts born during this period face an uneven dating and marriage market—i.e., *a marriage market squeeze*—when they come of age.

I argue that the marriage market squeeze is key to understanding the backlash against women’s empowerment. Men who face a more constrained marriage market are more likely to exhibit backlash against women’s empowerment. Specifically, men are more likely to reject greater empowerment for women because it undermines their ability to secure marital partners. In order to secure a better position in the marriage market, they seek to revert to traditional gender norms that limit women’s economic, social, and political opportunities outside the patriarchal bargain.

Based on qualitative and quantitative evidence from South Korea, I examine the link between demographic policies, sex imbalance, and women’s empowerment. South Korea is an important case because of the central role that population policy (In’gugjŏngch’aek) played in its development and state-building projects (Bae, 2012; Cho, 2021a; DiMoia, 2008, 2013). State and civic organizations worked closely together to suppress the fertility rate: the average number of children born to women in “childbearing years” sharply declined from nearly 6 in 1960 to around 1.6 by 1986 (KIHSA and Affairs, 1990). Today, South Korea has the world’s lowest fertility rate of 0.72 Statistics (2023). Additionally, it was the first country to report extremely high sex ratio at birth (Hesketh and Xing, 2006). Using the South Korea case, I seek to illuminate how policies and politics surrounding reproduction have immense consequences on women’s empowerment.

South Korea also offers analytical advantages. First, it has a high-quality health care and information registration system. Thus, gender mortality (which could drastically change the sex ratio after birth) and under-reporting of births have not contributed to the reported sex ratios in South Korea (Hesketh and Xing, 2006), an issue that raises doubts about the validity of using sex ratio data in other places, such as China (Yi et al., 1993). Second, it underwent changes in regulations and availability of sex-selective technology, providing exogenous variation in levels of sex ratio for different cohorts. I leverage a “policy shock” that caused an as-if random variation in the extent to which individuals were born in years with an imbalanced sex-ratio: the mass expansion of the ultrasonic diagnostic technology in

South Korea.

I trace the changes in technological policies and development to examine how they affected the marriage market for different cohorts of individuals. First, I show that following the government’s decision to allow and invest in the domestic production of ultrasonic diagnostic equipment in the mid-1980s, there was a dramatic increase in sex-selective abortion. The year 1985 was particularly critical in increasing the availability and spread of ultrasonic technologies. This resulted in men born in or after 1985 facing, on average, a more constricted marriage market in their prime marital years compared to those born just before 1985. Using a regression discontinuity approach, I find that cohorts born after 1985, and therefore face a more constricted marriage market, are 0.455 standard deviation (S.D.) more likely to exhibit backlash against women’s empowerment, calling for a reversion to traditional gender norms that would limit women’s opportunities outside the patriarchal bargain.

The aim of this chapter is two-fold. First, it highlights the central role that demographic policies played in South Korea’s development. The population policy (In’gujŏngch’aek) played a central role in South Korea’s development, yet have largely been disregarded in the developmental state literature. Many authoritarian regimes, including China, India, and Iran, have sought to control its population through the use of demographic policies and programs (Cho, 2021a; DiMoia, 2008, 2013; Mattingly, 2020). In South Korea, they were an integral part of Park Chung-hee regime’s Five-Year Economic Development Plan, which is often credited for laying the foundation for the country’s economic growth (Kim and Vogel, 2011; You, 2017).

My study demonstrates how demographic policies produced an unintended consequence in the long-run: resistance against women’s empowerment. In an effort to embrace and promote “modernity,” authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan encouraged certain behaviors and adopted modern science and technologies. However, efforts to modernize clashed with existing norms, producing unintended consequences that continue to affect citizens to this day. Thus, it sheds light on the legacy of demographic policies and the project of development in the long run.

The outline of the remainder of this chapter is as follows. After defining the key terms, I present a theoretical framework in Section 2.2 to explain the link between demographic shifts, sex ratio, and backlash against women’s empowerment. Section 2.3 provides a qualitative application of my theory by tracing through population policies and programs that were implemented in South Korea in the late 20th century (1960s–1990s). In Section 2.3, I provide my strategy for assessing the causal relationship between the marriage market squeeze and backlash against women’s empowerment. Section 2.6 presents my findings from the quantitative analysis. The last section (Section 2.7) concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for policies and future research.

2.2 Theoretical Overview

Defining Key Terms

Before presenting my theoretical framework, I begin by defining key terms to be used throughout this chapter. Concepts like gender, women, men, and women's empowerment have long been contested. Reviewing the debates is outside the scope of this chapter. However, given that there is no consensus on these terms, discussing how I use them is important, as my argument and findings are contingent on their meanings.

First, the concept of sex and gender. Following [Goffman \(1977\)](#), I define sex as a social arrangement that is facilitated by various institutional practices. Thus, I use the term sex to refer to a sociological category distinct from biological sciences. Sex is important because one's assigned sex is subject to different treatment and societal expectations. In considering the different institutions that reify sex and gender, marriage is of paramount importance in many modern societies. Marriage is central to the social arrangement in many modern societies. Within the arrangements, women are given the lesser rank and power, "restricting her use of public space, excluding her from warfare and hunting, and often from religious and political office" ([Goffman, 1977](#), p.36).

Gender as a concept emerged by feminist scholars as a way of transcending essentialist notions of sex. Yet, even the concept of gender has been critiqued for overlooking the varied experiences of a gender group, and for normalizing the binary category. It is therefore helpful to view gender as seriality, or a series of social collective, as emphasized by [Young \(2017\)](#). Rather than viewing women and men as a group within which members share a common goal or identity, the term seriality allows one to recognize the diverse experiences of women and intersectionality, while making it possible to conceptualize oppression as a "systematic, structured, institutional process." A series, according to Young, is a "social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others."¹

While some critiques of the use of the term gender is valid, in that it contains dangers of normalizing ([Butler, 2002](#)), it is still important to understand the category of women and recognize the reality of groups outside of liberal individualism as to not leave "individuals to wrestle with their boots" ([Young, 2017](#), p.17). As Butler later notes, the concept of gender has been "historically wrought and politically mobilised" ([Reddy and Butler, 2004](#)). Based on these discussions, I primarily use the concept of gender rather than sex, except when discussing sex ratios, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, which are practices that derive from societal and cultural understandings of sex.

Now that I have established the ways in which sex and gender will be used in this chapter, my next task here is to define women's empowerment and the backlash against it. Here, I follow [Kabeer \(1999\)](#), who defines women's empowerment as 'the process by which women acquire enabling resources [...], which in turn, may enhance women's agency,

¹The term seriality is taken from [Sartre \(1991\)](#), who distinguishes it from group that assumes common attributes and goals.

or ability to define their own life-choices.” In short, to have power means the ability to make choices.² She identifies three dimensions of women’s empowerment as resources, agency, and achievements. The three dimensions are interconnected, and together demonstrates empowerment as a process of change.

Finally, it’s critical to discuss my usage of the term backlash against women’s empowerment. Contrasting it to the term of empowerment, we can first begin to conceive of backlash as the process of disempowerment, which, according to (Kabeer, 1999, p.436), is the process of being denied the choice to define one’s own life-choices. What follows from this is that attempts to reduce and hamper women’s access to resources, agency, and achievements may all constitute *backlash*.³ This notion is aptly reflected in Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease (2021), whom I follow in defining backlash as “any form of resistance toward progressive social change,” where resistance (against women’s empowerment) is a “subset of the many practices and processes, which sustain gender inequality, defined by opposition, challenge or push back against efforts to build gender equality.”

A benefit of using Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease (2021)’s definition of backlash is that it encapsulates both attitudinal and institutional resistance against women’s empowerment. In considering the practices and processes that sustain gender inequality (i.e., backlash), I include any attempts to reinforce the beliefs around sexual division of labor or practices that confine women’s role to the household. Here, I am building upon scholars who emphasize gender attitudes in understanding women’s empowerment. Yount et al. (2016), for instance, include in their measures “the expression of equitable gender beliefs and attitudes.” Others emphasize women’s attitudes about gender and violence against women, their freedom of movement and their domestic, sexual, and reproductive decision-making. But backlash need not be beliefs, either; it may refer to the use of coercive power, such as the threat of sanction or use of force, that seeks to reinstate one’s power (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008, p.632). Demanding institutional changes that can undermine women’s status, regardless of one’s belief, therefore also constitutes backlash.

Growth, Demography, and Women’s Empowerment

Demographic trends have long been of interest for scholars and practitioners of economic growth and modernization. One of the most influential models, put forth by Malthus (1986), posited that population growth is incompatible with income growth. When the population is small, he argued, the standard of living will be high. On the other hand, a society with a large population will have a low standard of living (Galor and Weil, 2000). The Malthusian model was key in the developing policies that were pursued throughout East and South

²It is important to note, however, that there is no consensus around the concept and measurement of women’s empowerment. In fact, some feminist scholars argue that it cannot be clearly defined or measured Batliwala (1994), especially due to the contextual specificity that can change what empowerment means (Agarwala and Lynch, 2006).

³I use backlash against women’s empowerment, gender backlash, and resistance against women’s empowerment interchangeably in this chapter.

Asia, Africa, and the Americas in the 20th century, particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s (Connelly, 2010).

Many countries during this period, including South Korea, Japan, India, Taiwan, and Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, fully embraced the Malthusian model (Connelly, 2010; Lee, 2017; Lie, 1998; Greenhalgh, 2005). They tried to engineer modernization through its population policy. While there surely existed other enabling factors,⁴ much of the domestic rationale was economic. Reducing fertility was as an important method to achieve growth and modernization as were some of the other frequently discussed factors in the literature, such as industrialization policies and export-led growth regime.

In China, rapid growth of its population was perceived as a major hindrance to the “four modernizations” after Mao’s death in 1976 (Greenhalgh, 2005, p.258). Deng Xiaoping was especially keen on population control. Between 1975 and 1978, he spoke out on the link between population growth and poverty at least four times (Greenhalgh, 2005, p.260). China’s population policies during this period evolved from encouraging families to have two children, and later strongly encouraging one. Similarly, South Korea government actively endeavored to curb its population in the hopes of promoting development and ideas of modernity (Kim, 1993; Lie, 1998). Though the Malthusian model has been challenged (Easterlin, 1967; Lie, 1998), it is undeniable that states implemented population policies with the intention of modernizing countries throughout the 20th century across the Global South, and particularly, Asia.

However, population policies that were pursued as a means of promoting *modernity* were coercive in practice, often involving forced sterilization, abortion, as well as economic and social sanctions for those who refused to follow recommended state guidelines (Cho, 2021b; Kim, 1993; Roberts, 2014).⁵

Patriarchal norms clashed with these demographic pressures in many societies that adopted population control policies. This was especially true for societies where patrilineal norms were upheld, such as societies that have been described as the “belt of classic patriarchy,” spanning from North Africa and the Middle East to South and East Asia (Caldwell, 1978; Kandiyoti, 1988). In these societies, families, and women in particular, confronted a dilemma: though failing to adhere to state guidelines can be costly, it did not outweigh the costs of not giving birth to a son. As a result of this dilemma, many families would decide to abort or neglect the female fetus, causing an imbalanced sex ratio, where there is an excess of males over females (Das Gupta and Mari Bhat, 1997; Hesketh and Xing, 2006; Park and

⁴International factors played an important role. The eugenics movement, for instance, sought to reduce the population of the Global South as a way of “preserving quality” of populations. Taking place soon after the Cold War, population control became an “overriding priority” (Connelly, 2010, p.161). Many international organizations advised developing countries to adopt population control programs as a tool in economic development (Kim, 1993); it was also enforced on minority groups within capitalist countries, including Black women in the United States Roberts (2014).

⁵Thus, while one aspect of the policies may be argued to be liberating for women (by expanding access to contraception), scholars emphasize the need to distinguish population policies from birth control policies (Kim, 1993).

[Cho, 1995](#)) at birth.

Crucially, another consequence of this is that the sex imbalance is likely to continue over the span of a lifetime, assuming a stable mortality rate by gender. Generally, mortality rates are higher for men than for women, especially in old age. However, these rates are likely to remain stable until marital years absent major conflicts. In such case, cohorts born during the population control era are likely to face an uneven marriage market in which there will be excess men over women seeking partners for marriage. In fact, demographers are taking note of such a trend: In Korea, the cohorts who are now of marital age are those who have been most affected by the aforementioned demographic policies. China and India confront a similar challenge that is likely to exacerbate in the future, as the number of prospective grooms is expected to exceed that of prospective brides by more than 50 percent for the next three decades ([Guilmoto, 2012](#)).

Thus far, I have argued that the interaction of population control policies and social norms surrounding marriage and childbearing has resulted in a gender imbalance in the marriage market in some societies. The next section delineates my theoretical argument for why the marriage market squeeze may cause some men to resist women's empowerment.

The Marriage Market Squeeze and Gender Backlash

Why does the marriage market squeeze matter for women's empowerment? I argue that marriage market squeeze, in which there is an excess of men over women seeking partners for marriage, may cause men to reject greater empowerment for women because it undermines their ability to secure marital partners. Faced with a constrained marriage market, some men may react by attempting to limit women's options outside the patriarchal bargain simply to gain a better position in the marriage market. This may manifest by increasing men's tendency to subscribe to traditional gender norms that reify the patriarchal bargain, as well as calls for reversal of institutions that they perceive as advancing women's status in society.

This argument builds on previous studies that have speculated on how the imbalanced sex ratio may affect gender relations and women's empowerment. For example, ([Guttentag and Secord, 1983](#), p.20) argue in societies with high sex ratios, where there are more men than women, young adult women would be highly valued. Yet, further reading of the argument reveals that such valuation of women occurs within the confines of the traditional gender norms and family setting. They state "women would achieve their satisfaction through traditional roles. Male and female roles would be complementary, involving a division of labor with men and women having distinctly different tasks. A woman's role would be in the family, that of homemaker and mother" ([Guttentag and Secord, 1983](#), p.19). They also note that women would enjoy a subjective sense of power and control over their lives, if "they choose among men for a marriage partner. This sense of relative power and control would not be expressed by women in striving for sexual or economic independence, but would instead be reflected within traditional institutions of the society, particularly the family."

In a society where the marriage market is constricted for men, scholars have also warned that men may react with violence and also hinted at the possibility of security implications

arising (Hudson and Andrea, 2004). Greenhalgh (2013) critique this approach, arguing that it is critical to understand the realities that these men often face such as poverty and social exclusion. But precisely because of the social costs of not marrying in a context where realities bind men's duty and status to marriage, men may respond with backlash to women's empowerment if they perceive it as inhibiting their ability to find marital partners—such as calling for institutional measures to reduce women's autonomy or power in society. (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p.165) also emphasizes the role of structural power. In societies where men have more structural power—which is the case in most societies—men are able to leverage their power to enforce women's role in the family. Structural power can allow individuals to influence and shape not just economic, political, and legal systems, but social customs and practices that control people's lives. Thus, even women were to have dyadic power, it may be overwhelmed by structural controls (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p.29).

The marriage market squeeze can also produce a psychological response on the part of men; if men perceive their reduced ability to find marital partners as a threat to their status, which I argue to be the case, they are likely to exhibit backlash against women's empowerment. Marriage often signifies wealth and one's capacity to support his own family. It is commonly seen as an essential milestone for attaining full adult status (Tilche and Simpson, 2018). Additionally, for men, marriage is an necessary process in fulfilling the duty of continuing the family lineage in a patrilineal society (Park and Woo, 2020). In addition to a loss of prestige, a related “cost” that may emerge from the marriage market squeeze is damage incurred to one's social identity. Studies show that exclusionary attitudes can stem from threats against one's social identity and a desire to maintain a positive image of oneself (Tajfel, 1982; Shayo, 2009). The marriage market squeeze can be threatening to one's identity by increasing the challenges of attaining the status of a breadwinner, father, and husband.

Previous studies show that threat emerges as a response to changes in social and economic circumstances (Rudman and Fairchild, 2004), especially when perceive that the changes cause a loss in prestige or status (Gusfield, 1986). The possibility of failure may be sufficient to threaten one's self-esteem, which can activate stereotypes and lead to a backlash (Fein and Spencer, 1997). Such backlash may manifest in the dominant group's attempt to maintain the status quo on existing social and political structures, enforce conformity to group norms, and display negative attitudes towards outgroups (Mutz, 2018). Such a theoretical expectation is also consistent with what the social identity threat literature would predict: That threats to one's social identity can result in exclusionary attitudes towards outgroups as a means of preserving a positive self-image (Tajfel, 1982; Shayo, 2009). Consequently, not getting married can damage the reputation of both the man and his family. This societal and familial pressure may lead men to perceive a constricted marriage market as a threat to their status, prompting resistance to the advancement of women's empowerment.

Another genre of explanations on backlash centers on more material concerns, especially drawing on power threat and social dominance theories, holding that backlash against minority groups arises as a result of competition over scarce resources (Bobo, 1983; Hardin, 1997). The intuition behind this set of explanations derives principally from the literature on

race and ethnic politics, where competition over scarce resources such as jobs and property has drawn scholars' attention as a driver of backlash. Recent work suggests similar dynamics may prevail in the context of gender politics, as well. Focusing on India, for instance, [Brulé \(2020\)](#) show how men oppose gender quotas in politics only when they were associated with perceived material economic costs, most notably women's increased ability to inherit land. [Kim and Kweon \(2022\)](#) similarly find that economic threat is a key motivator for opposition against gender quotas among young men in South Korea.

Faced with such threats, confining women's role to a household can reap economic benefits: that of "relieving persons who are males from half of the competition they would otherwise face" ([Goffman, 1977](#), p.325). Backlash can therefore be used a tool by which men attempt to preserve the distribution of goods as to keep their advantageous position in society. This study is the first to empirically assess the effects of the marriage market squeeze on backlash against women's empowerment by theoretically highlighting as well as analytically leveraging state-induced shifts in the demographics of a country.

2.3 A Push for Modernization: Demographic Politics in South Korea

South Korea, along with Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong (together, they are called the "Four Asian Tigers"), achieved rapid economic growth between 1960 and 2000. Today, it has the twelfth largest economy in the world. Various efforts have taken place to explain its rapid development. Economic Explanations include macro-economic policies, ranging from export-oriented trade to exchange rates regimes, industrial policies ([Amsden, 1989](#); [Wade, 1990](#)) and land reforms ([Lie, 1998](#); [You, 2017](#)). Political explanations highlight the role of a strong state ([Cheng, 1990](#); [Haggard, 1990](#); [Johnson, 1982](#)) and development of a meritocratic bureaucracy ([Kim and Vogel, 2011](#); [Cheng, Haggard and Kang, 2020](#); [Evans, 1995](#); [Evans and Rauch, 1999](#)).

One aspect that has been overlooked concerns its demographic policies. In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea initially adopted policies to encourage population growth. Rhee Syngman's administration (1948–1960) found it necessary to increase the population size of South Korea so that it could have an electoral advantage after reunification with North Korea ([Shin and Choi, 2020b](#)). Yet, history took a sharp turn after Park Chung-hee's coup d'état in 1961.⁶ Soon after Park ascended into power, the military regime took measures to reduce its population. Demographic policies, and in particular Family Planning (FP, or *Kajok kyehoeok*), became an integral part of the Park regime's five-year economic plans that many credit for having laid the foundation for Korea's rapid economic development.

⁶This is not to say that there were no efforts to encourage family planning practices before Park's ascendance. During the Rhee era, there were private interest groups that sought to encourage birth control practices ([DiMoia, 2013](#), p.109). Yet, these actions became mobilized at the national level during the Park administration.

The incorporation of demographic policies into the national economic agenda was aimed at increasing the political legitimacy and thereby consolidate the power of the Park Chung-hee regime (1961–1979) (Shin and Choi, 2020*b,a*). Others highlight international factors—Connelly (2010), for example, argues that various and at times conflicting interests that were prevalent in the West, including the eugenics movement, feminist agenda, and the Cold War, merged to produce this effort. Indeed, throughout the FP program, much of the funding came from the Population Council (Rockefeller) and SIDA (Sweden International Development Authority). Without the enthusiasm of the Park regime, however, FP would not have infiltrated Korea as deeply and widely as it had (Cho, 2021*b*; Poston Jr, Wu and Gon, 2003). Curbing population growth was crucial, as it freed up revenues (i.e., “demographic dividends”) that could be used for investing in other sectors (DiMoia, 2008). In such way, South Korea took a pivot from building national strength (*Kungnyŏkchŭngga*) toward economic development (*Kyŏngjebalchŏn*) (Shin and Choi, 2020*a*, p.99) as part of its nation building agenda.

The Korean government had established concrete targets for reducing population growth, seeking to reduce its population growth from 2.9% in 1962—when family planning policy was first undertaken as a national policy—to 2.5% to 1966, and then to 2.0% by 1971. The Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK or *Taehan Kajok Kyehoek Hyoŏphoe*) was crucial in helping the state achieve this goal. Working closely with the PPFK, the government actively embraced and promoted family planning, including subsidized vasectomy, intrauterine device insertion procedures on their family planning buses (Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs 2016: 78, 80) as well as abortion, in pursuit of economic development (DiMoia, 2008; Park and Woo, 2020).

The enthusiasm with which these policies were promoted is evident in Figure 2.1, which shows a “Population Clock Tower” (in’gushigyet’ap in Korean) that was installed across different cities in Korea to serve as a warning that the population is growing at a rapid pace, and thereby encourage individuals to have fewer children. To meet national targets, the government and the Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK) employed various strategies, from promoting natural contraceptive methods to expanding abortion services. The scope of legal abortion was also expanded following a revision of the Mother and Child Health Law (Shin and Choi, 2020*a*). Reports indicate that the proportion of women who underwent abortion surgery increased from 6% in 1964 to 48% by 1979 (Kihasa, 1990). Today, the total fertility rate (TFR) in South Korea is 0.72, the world’s lowest record (Statistics Korea, 2023). Demographers have referred to this shift as “one of the most rapid and remarkable fertility reductions in the historical demographic record” (Poston Jr, Wu and Gon, 2003).⁷

⁷Family planning is not the only reason for causing this demographic shift. There are other causes, such as urbanization, expansion of educational and paid work opportunities for women (Raymo et al., 2015; Zhao, Xu and Yuan, 2017). But government intervention is one of the central explanations for understanding the demographic trend in Korea (Poston Jr, Wu and Gon, 2003).



Figure 2.1: Population Tower, Seoul, 1984.

The image is from the cover of the Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK)'s 1984 Annual Report. The Population Clock Tower was installed for the first time in 1983 in South Gyeongsang Province, and was installed throughout major cities in Korea, to "serve as a wake-up call about the population problem for the entire population." At the very top of the tower is a sign that reads "the current population in Korea." Just beneath it, the tower keeps track of the population in flickering yellow lights. Below it is another reminder: "Today's Family Planning." Photo taken by the author at the PPFK Archives.

2.4 Demographic Shifts, Norms, and the Marriage Market Squeeze

Despite the central role of demographic policies in shaping the trajectory of economic and social development, there is a large gap in knowledge regarding their long-run consequences. They were particularly significant in shaping the family life and in connecting the family to the state. Essentially, it brought the “state and its emerging public health network directly into the domestic sphere; more specifically, the family and married life” (DiMoia, 2013, p.112).

One immediate side-effect of the anti-natal policies, as I have argued above, concerns the increase in the sex ratio at birth (Hesketh and Xing, 2006; Park and Cho, 1995; Junhong, 2001). The imbalanced sex ratio stems from a strong tradition of preference for sons over daughters that led to female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, under-reporting of female births, and adoption of unwanted female babies.

Even in the initial stage during which FP reforms took place, many policy and medical elites openly spoke of their concerns about the prevailing norms at the time that placed a strong preference for having sons over daughters (or *Namasŏnhosasang* in Korean) (Jung, Choi et al., 2021). They sought to alleviate such preference through government and media campaigns, as well as magazines that were distributed to women by the Mothers’ club, an organization that was mobilized to disseminate information and encourage contraceptive practices. An example of a poster by the PPFK that sought to disseminate this message is shown in Figure 2.2. Yet, their primary concern over the son preference was that it may become a major obstacle for the success of reducing population growth. The 1985 FP Annual Report is quite revealing. In the report, there is a message that reads “For there to be a son, there must also exist a wife. Are we to leave all potential problems to our children? Have you thought about what their futures will look like?” Then almost immediately, it emphasizes the state campaign: “Even having two kids is too much. Let’s have one and raise them well. Now is the time for you to make a firm decision.”

The promotion of medical technology was also consistent with the government’s goal of promoting modernity and building an effective state bureaucracy (DiMoia, 2013). Because of the enduring preference and pressure to have sons, families were reluctant to give up on childbearing without the guarantee of having a son (Cho, 2021a). Individuals thus sought out ways to ensure having sons while adhering to the state guidelines.

Medical technology was therefore an important factor in the South Korean context (Kim, 1997; Yi et al., 1993). It was in this context that ultrasonography was introduced.⁸ The first ultrasound screening room being installed in a Korean hospital in 1974. The government, while it initially precluded its expansion to prevent the inflow of foreign cash, began investing in its own ultrasonography in the 1980s (Cho, 2021b). Knowledge around ultrasonography

⁸Before then, amniocentesis was also used as a way of screening the sex of a fetus. This method was not as popular because of it required a more invasive procedure and carried higher risks. It was also banned in 1980, not long after it was introduced.



Figure 2.2: “Let’s Have Two Children and Raise Them Well.”

A poster issued by the Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK) encouraging families to have two children as a way of promoting economic growth. On the bottom, the poster reads “Let’s have two children and raise them well, regardless of their sex.” On the top of the arrow, the poster reads “1981. The road to achieving a national income of USD 1,000,” suggesting that having two children could help achieve this national goal. Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea, Seoul: PPFK, 1974.

began to be shared in the early 1980s, yet was limited to a few university hospitals; it was from the mid-1980s that the technology became widely adopted, and knowledge commonly shared (Cho, 2021b, p.54).

According to various sources, 1985 was a landmark year in which ultrasonography for prenatal sex screening became widely accessible to individual families (Lee and Smith, 2018). The government promulgated its “the first plan for the domestic production of medical technology” in 1983, and began subsidizing companies like Samsung, Medison, and Kumsung to produce its own ultrasound technologies. In 1980, there were only nine devices across the country. By 1986, there were 762 and by 1990, there were 2,020 devices (Cho, 2021b, p.38). With the expansion of ultrasound in the mid-1980s, prenatal sex determination became available, exacerbating the issue of sex-selective abortion.

A natural corollary to the problem for the cohorts born during this period is that they are also likely to face a more constricted marriage market. The aforementioned message in the FP Annual Report provides direct evidence that FP authorities were aware of and concerned about the marriage market squeeze. However, their concern was driven by a desire to protect men’s futures, such as their prospects of marrying when they come of age. This concern did not prevent them from promoting the ideal of having smaller families. These policies, combined with existing gender and family norms, created a marriage market squeeze for the cohorts born during this time.

While this article acknowledges the societal constraints that men face from not being able to marry, it focuses on the consequences that such a state-induced marriage market squeeze has had on women in the form of backlash. The qualitative evidence from South Korea provides evidence of the first part of my argument: that the interaction of government policies and social norms surrounding marriage and childbearing has resulted in a gender imbalance in the marriage market among cohorts of men in recent years. The next section provides evidence of how the demographically-induced marriage market squeeze is an important causal factor for understanding the backlash against women’s empowerment we are observing today in South Korea.

2.5 Causal Evidence

Research Design: A Regression Discontinuity Design

To examine whether the marriage market squeeze affects backlash against women’s empowerment, I leverage an as-if random event that caused variation in the extent to which individuals face a marriage market squeeze: the introduction of the ultrasonic diagnostic technology in South Korea. In 1985, ultrasonic diagnostic equipment was domestically produced and became widely available and affordable for fetal sex screening (Lee and Smith, 2018).

I treat this as an exogenous shock that affected some cohorts’ marital squeeze, but not others. Specifically, parents of those born in or after 1985 had greater access to ultrasonic

diagnostic technology, while parents of those born before 1985 did not. Thus, those who were born shortly after the change are likely to face a more constricted marriage market compared to those born just before. These individuals are therefore expected to exhibit greater backlash against women’s empowerment. A finding that those born in or after 1985 indeed hold more conservative views on gender roles and are less likely to support institutions for empowering women compared to those born before will strongly support my theory, especially as this goes against the general intuition that younger cohorts are likely to hold more socially progressive values.

I use the regression discontinuity approach, leveraging the ultrasonic diagnostic technology that led to increases in sex-selective abortion. The year of birth of an individual is the running variable, and those who are born on or after 1985, the cutoff point, are given the ultrasonic diagnostic technology, which functions as a proxy for marriage market squeeze (i.e., the treatment). I assume that those who were born just before and after the 1985 cutoff are comparable to each other. The RD design here is useful because individuals do not have any control over which year they are born, and thus their “assignment” into treatment (born just after the cutoff point) and control (born just before the cutoff point) can be considered as-random. The key idea underlying the RD design is that because people do not have control over their running variable (it is impossible for those being born to consciously select into a treated year, hence creating an ideal setting for a natural experiment), their characteristics (both observable and unobservable) should not change abruptly at the cutoff, leading to comparable control and treatment groups.

Data and Variables

For my outcome variables, I use the Korean General Social Survey (hereafter KGSS) data, the largest social survey conducted in South Korea. I merge this data with administrative data containing the sex ratio for each cohort. I use questions from the KGSS, including extent to which one agrees with the following statements: (1) “It is okay to first layoff women in times of economic downturns,” (2) “the primary responsibility of a woman is to take care of the household, while that of a man is to be the household breadwinner,” (3) “a woman needs to have children to be fulfilled,” (4) “women who are married are happier than women who are not married,” and lastly, (5) negative evaluation of the Ministry of Gender and Family in protecting human rights. I create an index that is the mean of these five variables, which I label gender backlash. The index is standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation among men, a group that I focus on in this chapter.

Estimation

I apply a continuity-based sharp regression discontinuity design, using the local polynomial approach, to approximate the regression functions just near the cutoff. I use a linear polynomial approximation, which is substantially more robust and less sensitive to boundary

and overfitting problems (Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2019). I weight observations by applying a triangular kernel function to the distance between each observation’s year of birth and the cutoff (i.e., born in 1985). These kernel-based estimators require selection of a bandwidth, whereby observations outside the bandwidth receive zero weight. The selected bandwidth was chosen to minimize an approximation to the coverage error (CER) of the confidence interval. By design, CER-optimal bandwidth choice leads to valid confidence intervals (Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2019). Results using different bandwidths are also reported. I estimate the following linear equation:

$$\hat{B}_i = \alpha + \tau_{SRD}US_i + \beta_1(YOB_i - c) + \beta_2US_i * (YOB_i - c) + \epsilon \quad (2.1)$$

Where G_i denotes gender attitudes of observation i (i.e., individual), the running variable is the DOY_i , year of birth for observation i , centered around 1985, the cutoff point, c . US_i is the treatment, i.e., exposure to ultrasound screening, for observation i , which equals 1 if one is born in or after 1985 and 0 otherwise. ϵ_i is the error term for observation i . The coefficient of interest (the RD point estimate) is τ .⁹

Assumption Checks

The regression discontinuity design rests on a critical assumption that there was a policy shock that created a gender imbalance for cohorts born in or after 1985. Examining the sex ratio at birth, I find that sex ratio at birth increases to over 110 for cohorts born between 1985–1986. Compared to cohorts born just before, whose sex ratio at birth is 106.6, this is a significant increase. As shown in Table 2.1, which shows the trend between 1977 and 2003, I find that the sex ratio at birth increases in 1985, when ultrasound began being domestically produced. Furthermore, sex ratio at birth declines after doctors were effectively punished for sex screening in 1995 from 112.3 in 1995 to 106.6 in 1997.

Thus, individuals born between 1985 and 1995 are likely to face a more constrained marriage market squeeze compared to those who are born before 1985 and after 1995. Also note that these individuals are between the ages of 29 and 39 today, which is considered to be a prime age for marriage in South Korea. Young men of this age are also considered to be the main champions of backlash against women’s empowerment in South Korea today. The data for the outcome variable I draw on comes from surveys taken between 2008 and 2018 in South Korea, during which these individuals were just about to or just had come of age. It is also when backlash was less apparent in South Korea. Thus, this design provides me with an ideal opportunity to identify the effect of the marriage market squeeze on the likelihood of engaging in backlash just before backlash erupted.

One may question whether the sex ratio at birth can be used as a proxy for the marriage market squeeze—the degree of gender imbalance during marital years. A sharp regression

⁹As pre-determined covariates, I use education dummies for father and mother of the respondent, the only variable that I can confidently assume as having likely been decided before one’s entry into the marriage market. Note that results are robust to excluding all covariates.

Table 2.1: Sex Ratio at Birth by Cohort

	Cohort	Sex Ratio at Birth
	1977	107.8
	1979	105.9
	1981	106.9
	1983	106.6
ultrasound available	1985	110.6
	1987	111.0
	1989	114.1
	1991	113.0
	1993	115.3
ultrasound banned	1995	112.3
	1997	106.6
	1999	109.8
	2001	109.5
	2003	108.4

Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

discontinuity supports this assumption. The gender imbalance within one’s cohort continues in the years in which the survey was conducted, as shown in Figure 2.3. When accounting for the difference between the age at which women and men tend to get married, by calculating the distribution of men and women’s ages at first marriage, I find that the effect still holds. That is, the sex ratio that adjusts for the age differential at marriage still jumps at the 1985 cut-off, as demonstrated in Figure 2.4.

2.6 Findings from the Quasi-Natural Experiment

How do individuals born just after the domestic production of the ultrasound screening technology compare with those born just before? I present the results from the sharp regression discontinuity design in Table 2.2. The results show the difference between the two groups (i.e., the “treated” and “control” groups) for the backlash index, with higher values indicating greater levels of backlash against women’s empowerment.¹⁰

I find that men who were born just after 1985 when the ultrasound technology became widely available (and hence are likely to face a more constricted marriage market) are about 0.455 S.D. units more likely to exhibit backlash against women’s empowerment compared to those who were born just before 1985, using the CER-optimal bandwidth (see column 1 in Table 2.2). The estimates are similar regardless of the choice of bandwidth (see columns 3 and 4 for estimates based on using MSE-optimal bandwidths; see columns 5 and 6 for estimates

¹⁰The index is standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation among all men in the sample.

Figure 2.3: Marriage Market Squeeze on Sex Ratio at Time of Survey

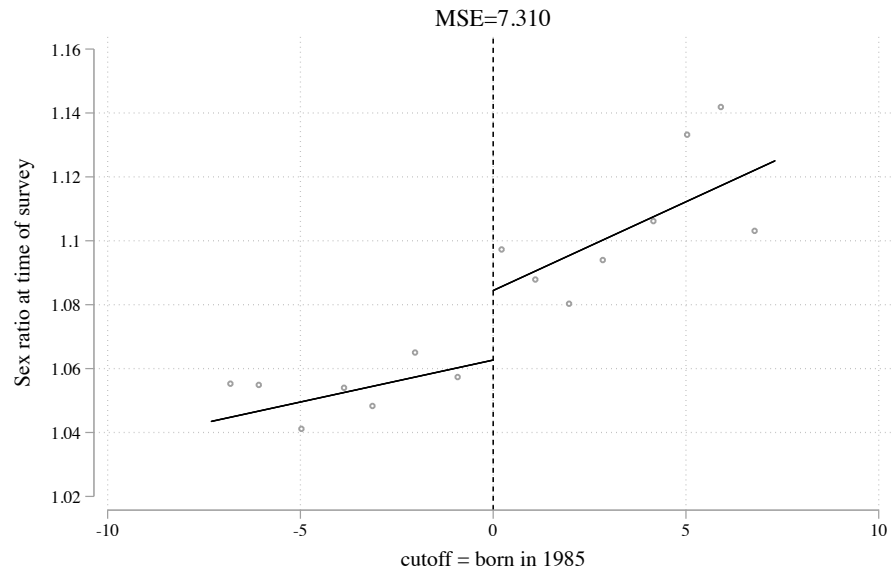
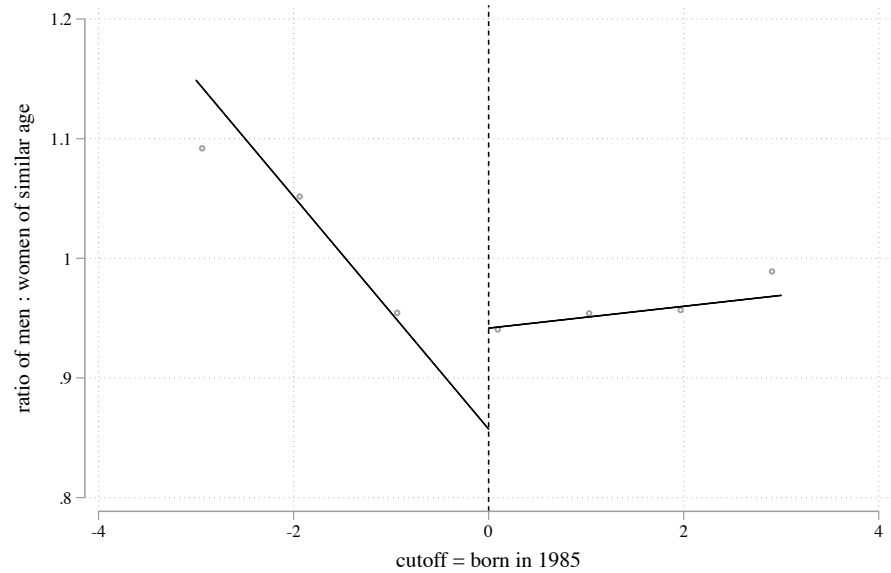


Figure 2.4: Marriage Market Squeeze on Distribution of Women and Men of Marital Age



based on using a bandwidth of 7), and regardless of using pre-determined covariates (even columns (2), (4), and (6) in Table 2.2 display estimates after controlling for pre-determined

Table 2.2: Sharp Regression Discontinuity Design Results

DV: Backlash	Bandwidth=CER		Bandwidth=MSE		Bandwidth=7	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Point estimate (S.D.)	0.455**	0.542**	0.452**	0.513***	0.386**	0.434**
P-value	0.0424	0.0156	0.019	0.00722	0.0243	0.00555
95% Conf Interval (left)	0.0179	0.115	0.0924	0.172	0.0768	0.215
95% Conf Interval (right)	1.018	1.103	1.034	1.097	1.104	1.249
Bandwidth	3.569	3.734	5.304	5.527	7	7
Order polyn.	1	1	1	1	1	1
Obs. (left)	158	144	274	253	325	296
Obs. (right)	152	138	234	212	256	232
Covariates	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES

Notes: All estimates are from using a triangular kernel function. Columns (1) and (2) use the CER-optimal bandwidth; columns (3) and (4) use the MER-optimal bandwidth; columns (5) and (6) use an arbitrary bandwidth of 7. Pre-determined covariates are included in (2), (4), and (6), and not included in (1), (3), and (5). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

covariates, while odd columns (1), (3), and (5) show RDD estimates that do not control for pre-determined covariates). All results are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

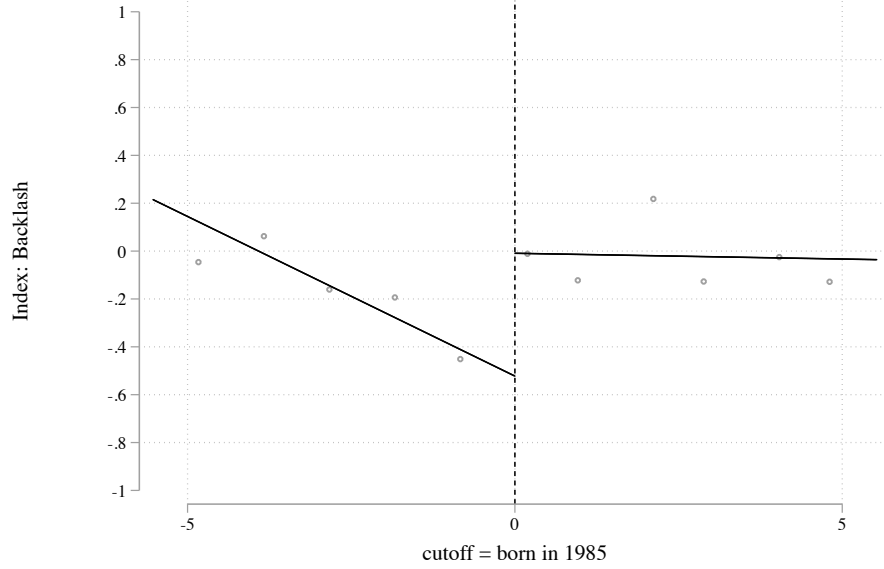
Figure 2.5 visually illustrates the effect. The RD plot displays the overall backlash index against the running variable (i.e., year of birth centered at 1985). The plot shows an uptick of 0.455 S.D. ($p < 0.05$; based on model (1) Table 2.2) in backlash attitudes, suggesting that the marriage market squeeze causes a substantial change in men’s gender attitudes.

To provide additional evidence about the validity of the design, I conducted several additional falsification tests. These include density tests to show that there is no sorting around the cut-off, covariate tests to show null RD effects on predetermined variables, and sensitivity tests to using different bandwidths and orders of polynomials. I also perform a placebo test, demonstrating that other outcomes are not affected by the marriage market squeeze. Results are shown in Appendix A.1.

Robustness and Extensions

Next, I use the local randomization framework as a robustness check, which is useful when the treatment assignment is not deterministic of treatment receipt. In this framework, score values are assumed to be as-if randomly assigned in a small window around the cutoff, so that placement above or below the cutoff and hence treatment assignment can be interpreted to be as-if experimental (Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2023). In the small window near the cutoff (i.e. born in 1985), I assume that individuals are randomly assigned to have

Figure 2.5: Effects of Policy-induced Marriage Market Squeeze on Gender Backlash



been exposed to prevalent ultrasound technology that leads to a more constricted marriage market.

The local randomization regression discontinuity equation I employ is expressed as follows:

$$G_i = \beta_0 + \tau US_i + \beta_1 DOY_i + \beta_2 (DOY_i - c) US_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2.2)$$

$$US_i = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } |DOY_i - c| \leq h \text{ and } R_i = 1 \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (2.3)$$

$$R_i \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\pi_i) \quad (2.4)$$

Where G_i denotes gender attitudes of observation i , DOY_i is the running variable, year of birth for observation i , US_i is the treatment, i.e., exposure to ultrasound screening, for observation i , and c is the cutoff point centered around 1985. R_i is a randomization variable, and I assume a Bernoulli distribution, where π_i is the probability of being assigned to treatment in the randomization process. β_0 , τ , β_1 , β_2 are the regression coefficients, and ϵ_i is the error term for observation i .

I use a data-driven window selection based on the same set of predetermined covariates.¹¹ As I find that no measure is significantly different at a 5% significance level, I fail to reject

¹¹I analyzed all symmetric windows around the cutoff between $[-1, 1]$ and $[-10, 10]$ with increments of 1 year. In each window, I performed randomization-based tests of the sharp null hypothesis of no treatment effect for each of the predetermined covariate.

the null that there is no meaningful differences in pretreatment measures at the cutoff within the window (see Table 2.3).¹²

Table 2.3: Local Randomization Analysis for Covariates

	(1) Control mean	(2) Treatment mean	(3) Diff-in -means	(4) Fisherian p-value	(5) Large-sample p-value	(6) Observations
Education (some college)	0.850	0.865	0.037	0.279	0.610	392
Have religion	0.429	0.524	0.126	0.019	0.237	392
Urban	0.864	0.909	0.048	0.119	0.453	392
Regional political ideology	3.011	3.017	-0.001	0.957	0.977	392
Political ideology	2.843	2.911	0.132	0.157	0.513	380
Protestant	0.171	0.250	0.049	0.244	0.586	392
Catholic	0.086	0.111	0.054	0.075	0.422	392
Buddhist	0.171	0.163	0.023	0.543	0.773	392

Notes: This table tests whether the pre-treatment variables are statistically significantly different at the cutoff. As shown in both fisherian and large-sample p-values, I fail to reject the null that the cohorts born before and after 1985 are similar in the following characteristics: a dummy variable for having at least a college degree, a dummy for having a religion, living in an urban area, political ideology at the individual and regional levels, and indicator variables for being a protestant, catholic, or buddhist.

I present estimates and tests based on the randomization-based framework in Table 2.4. I find that those born in years in which the ultrasound was made readily available (i.e., treated units) are 0.415 S.D. more likely to engage in gender backlash compared to those born before the policy shock (i.e., the control units). The magnitude of the effect is comparable to that found from the sharp regression discontinuity, and is statistically significantly different from 0 ($p_{fisherian} < 0.01$). I find similar results for the conservatism index and the economic index: the treated units (men born in or after 1985) are 0.14 S.D. more likely to exhibit conservative gender attitudes ($p_{fisherian} < 0.005$) and 0.207 S.D. more likely to demonstrate conservative economic attitudes ($p_{fisherian} < 0.001$) compared to the control units.

Evidence from the RD analysis suggests that, consistent with my hypothesis, men who face a marriage market squeeze are more likely to engage in backlash against women's empowerment. A demographic change that alters the sex ratio can have lasting impact for the impacted cohorts.

¹²These tests are based on 10,000 simulations of the randomization distribution of assuming a fixed-margins assignment mechanism. For each window, I chose the minimum p-value across the covariates (Cattaneo, Frandsen and Titiunik, 2015; Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2023). Using $\alpha = 0.15$, my chosen window is [-5,5], which is the smallest window I considered and is the window where the minimum p-value exceeds 15% in that window and all the windows contained in it.

Table 2.4: Localized Randomized Based Regression Discontinuity Design Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Index: Backlash	Index: Conservatism	Index: Economic
Point estimate	0.415	0.14	0.207
Fisherian p-value	0.024	0.005	0.000
Bandwidth/Window	[-1,1]	[-1,1]	[-1,1]
Sample size treated	69	54	54
Sample size control	45	40	40

2.7 Discussion and Implications

In recent years, many countries have witnessed a rise in backlash against women’s empowerment. I examine the role of marriage market dynamics in understanding the rise of anti-feminist backlash in South Korea, a country that has achieved remarkable economic growth, but in which progress for women has been notoriously slow. Specifically, I assess the effects of a pronounced demographic shift—the marriage market squeeze, a phenomenon referring to an excess of men over women seeking partners in the heterosexual marriage market.

Leveraging changes in the availability of ultrasonic technology, this chapter demonstrates how the marriage market squeeze can have a long-lasting impact on women’s empowerment. Demographic policies exacerbated resistance against women’s empowerment by putting men in a bind—while they still feel the imperative to get married in a traditionally patriarchal society, they find it increasingly difficult to fulfill such an expectation. Using a regression discontinuity design that leverages a sharp change in the availability of ultrasound technology, I showed that men who were born in or after 1985 (and thus were exposed to a more constricted marriage market when they came of age) were more likely to exhibit backlash against women’s empowerment relative to those born before who were exposed to a relatively less constricted marriage market.

The case of South Korea presents an opportunity to examine what happens when the basic premise that serves as a foundation for the patriarchal bargain is challenged. By illuminating the dynamics surrounding the marriage market, this chapter contributes to our knowledge about how broad demographic shifts can affect attitudes toward women’s empowerment. This study also speaks to the tension between existing norms and ideas of modernity. It sheds light on the legacy of demographic policies and the project of development in the long run. Efforts to modernize clashed with existing norms, producing unintended consequences that continue to affect citizens to this day. The case of South Korea serves as a cautionary tale for policymakers who are aiming to affect demographics by intervening in women’s reproductive decisions. Not only can it have unintended consequences (e.g., sex selective abortion and imbalanced sex ratio of cohorts), it can have a lasting impact (e.g., backlash against women’s empowerment).

Examining the phenomenon of the marriage market squeeze has broad implications for understanding the backlash against women’s empowerment in countries around the world.

For example, in India, the diminishing role of agriculture has led many men to become “unmarriageable” (Tilche and Simpson, 2018), and this has also in part caused an increase in farmer suicides (Kumar, 2017). Similar problems have been documented in China, where these excess men are called “bare sticks” (Greenhalgh, 2013; Poston and Glover, 2005). According to Guilmoto (2012), the number of prospective grooms in China and India is expected to exceed that of prospective brides by more than 50 percent for the next three decades. There are some indications of backlash resulting from this demographic change.¹³ My results have implications for societies that are currently confronting challenges to gender equality, particularly in countries that have been most affected by the missing girls problem.

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¹³For example, see this [article](#) by the New York Times.

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Chapter 3

The Main Squeeze: A Constricting Marriage Market Backlash Against Women's Empowerment

Abstract

Countries around the world are witnessing a rise in backlash against women's empowerment. I examine this phenomenon by showing how the 'marriage market squeeze'—a phenomenon in which there are excess men seeking partners in the heterosexual marriage market—contributes to gender backlash. Focusing on South Korea, where gender has emerged as a prominent political cleavage, I explain how the inability to find a marital partner leads some men to become more resistant to women's empowerment. I draw on insights from interviews to explain why women's empowerment is perceived as a particularly acute threat for men whose position in the family hierarchy (e.g., being the first-born son) binds them closer to patriarchal order as well as those from with lower perceived socioeconomic status. I argue that backlash becomes a political solution for resolving the status threat for some men who perceive women's empowerment as inhibiting them from achieving their social obligations and status. In other words, backlash becomes a tool through which men may attempt to maintain their advantageous position in the marriage market. To provide evidence for this argument, I employ a survey experiment to show that priming the marriage market squeeze heightens young men's opposition to institutional mechanisms aimed at expanding women's rights, such as legislative gender quotas, and further causes them to exhibit more conservative attitudes toward women's roles in marriage. This study highlights the complexities of the marriage market's influence on gender politics, as well as implications for understanding the rise of right-wing populism and democratic backsliding.

3.1 Introduction

Women around the world have made significant gains in almost all realms of social life over several decades, ranging from educational attainment and labor force participation to political representation (Paxton, Hughes and Barnes, 2020). Yet, in recent years, the rise of right-wing populism has been accompanied by growing opposition to further expansion of women’s rights (Anduiza and Rico, 2022; Graff, Kapur and Walters, 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015), forestalling societies from making further gains in gender equality.¹ What are the *conditions* that make the backlash against women’s empowerment more likely, and among *whom* is it likely to be intense?

I argue that the *marriage market squeeze*, a phenomenon referring to an excess of men over women seeking partners for marriage, is a major factor that has given rise to gender backlash, defined as any form of resistance toward change that sustains gender inequality.² Through this argument, I extend our understanding of gender backlash in three main ways. First, while existing scholarship commonly attributes backlash to the *rise* in the influence and visibility of women in the public sphere (Clayton, 2015; Kim and Kweon, 2022; Morgan and Buice, 2013; Sanbonmatsu, 2008), I suggest that women’s *declining* presence can be equally important. Specifically, I maintain that the relative scarcity of women in the marriage market, by forcing a rearrangement and renegotiation of gender relations, may induce men to seek a rollback of women’s empowerment. It is not merely the presence of women that produces backlash; rather, we must focus on sources that threaten to upset the existing set of rules governing gender relations. In this vein, I examine the outcome of the (perceived) erosion of a key institution in our society: marriage. Simply put, when men are unable to marry, they are more likely to resist women’s empowerment and may even call for a reversal of institutions that have been adopted to advance women’s status in society.

Second, I assess the conditions that make backlash more likely. In questioning whether increased visibility of women causes backlash (Breyer, 2023; de Abreu Maia, Chiu and Desposato, 2023), scholars have noted that the timing and severity of opposition to women’s empowerment can differ based on contextual and structural factors, such as those created by institutions and policies (Brulé, 2020a,b; Sanbonmatsu, 2008). To address these dynamics, I specifically examine the factors that make the marriage market squeeze more threatening for men, including how individuals perceive their economic status and their position in the family hierarchy (e.g., being the first-born son) that bind them closer to existing patriarchal

¹Gender plays a significant role in political disputes and, in particular, right-wing populist discourse in various parts of the world today, including Asia (Graff, Kapur and Walters, 2019; Brulé, 2020a; Krishnan et al., 2010), Europe (De Lange and Mügge, 2015; Kantola and Lombardo, 2019, 2021), Latin America (Graff, Kapur and Walters, 2019), and in North America (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019).

²This definition draws upon Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease (2021), who define backlash as “any form of resistance toward progressive social change,” where resistance (against women’s empowerment) is a “subset of the many practices and processes, which sustain gender inequality, defined by opposition, challenge or push back against efforts to build gender equality.” Note that I use backlash against women’s empowerment, gender backlash, and resistance against women’s empowerment interchangeably in this chapter.

order. By doing so, I identify the economic and social constraints that lead men to respond more intensely to the marriage market squeeze.

In particular, by tracing the sources of the marriage market squeeze, I argue that the phenomenon is especially pertinent for countries marked with a long history of patrilineal lineage norms and which are now undergoing economic changes that are forcing a renegotiation of gender relations in the family and society more generally. Two features of these societies are highlighted. First, while economic opportunities for women have expanded in many of these societies, the terms of marriage typically remain unfavorable to women. The legacies of patriarchal norms and traditions collide with modernizing economic expectations, creating a fundamental tension in the marriage market: these norms not only increase the costs for women who choose to marry, but they also simultaneously impose higher costs on men who remain unmarried (Greenhalgh, 2013; Tilche and Simpson, 2018).

Lastly, in examining the relationship between the marriage market squeeze and gender backlash, I also consider the role of economic inequality. A large literature has examined the effects of (perceived) economic inequality, and the accompanying feelings of relative deprivation, on political attitudes and behavior (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020). Recent studies show that perception of relative deprivation could also shape support for women’s empowerment (Kosec et al., 2021, 2023). Yet, equally relevant is how economic inequality interacts with existing institutions (such as the institution of marriage) to affect political attitudes and behavior. For instance, individuals with high economic standing are less likely to be affected by the marriage market squeeze because they will be more likely to be “selected” in the marriage market due to their resource endowments (Greenhalgh, 2013; Tilche and Simpson, 2018). Alternatively, failure to marry may remind individuals of their lower socioeconomic standing in society—i.e., it may serve as a symbol of prestige or lack thereof. Thus, the salience of inequality in the marriage market may exacerbate the effect of the marriage market squeeze on gender backlash among men who perceive themselves to be relatively worse off.

I test my argument in South Korea, where hostilities against women have dramatically increased, with gender becoming one of the most salient cleavages in electoral politics (Kim and Lee, 2022). The growing opposition to women’s empowerment has been harnessed by politicians, including the ruling conservative People Power Party, to mobilize young men in recent elections. What is puzzling about the antifeminist backlash in South Korea is that it is driven by younger cohorts men (Kim and Kweon, 2022), a group that typically holds more progressive values compared to older generations of men in advanced democracies (Inglehart et al., 2003). Concurrently, Korea is grappling with a demographic challenge marked by a diminishing birth rate (which, as of 2022, was 0.78, the lowest record in the world) and an asymmetric demand for marriage between genders (Kim, 2023). These challenges, while globally evident, are exceptionally acute in Korea, making it an crucial case to study. The case of South Korea offers lessons for other countries such as India and China that are confronting similar problems of declining populations, skewed gender ratios, and rising economic inequality.

To empirically assess the effects of the marriage market squeeze on backlash against

women’s empowerment, I conducted a novel survey experiment among South Korean citizens in their 20s and 30s. The design of the survey experiment was informed by fieldwork and in-depth interviews in a way that is culturally sensitive and contextually relevant. I find that the marriage market squeeze leads to backlash against women’s empowerment. I examine the effects on two sets of measures: 1) attitudinal backlash against defying traditional gender roles and 2) institutional backlash, which I use to denote opposition against policies that aim to empower women. My findings show that the marriage market squeeze increases men’s opposition against institutional arrangements intended to increase gender equality, such as legislative gender quota and gender ministry. I also find that the marriage market squeeze causes attitudinal backlash among men—they are more likely to adhere to traditional gender norms which stipulate that women’s role should be tied to the household and the family. The marriage market inequality treatment, which was intended to subtly prime individuals to think that those who are well off (not as well off) have a higher (lower) chance of successfully finding a partner for marriage, caused attitudinal backlash but not institutional backlash. The effects of the marriage market squeeze are more pronounced among men who are unmarried and in their prime age for marriage.

I probe potential mechanisms by examining whom among these men respond strongly to challenges in the marriage market. Consistent with my hypothesis, I find that the effects are particularly large among men who are the first-born son (or *jangnam* in Korean) in their family, a position that imbues them with a greater sense of filial duty and an obligation to continue the ancestral line. I also examine whether the effects differ for those with relatively lower perceived socioeconomic status. Yet, I find that they are no more likely to respond with backlash when primed with either the marriage market squeeze or the marriage market inequality treatments. This suggests that the marriage market backlash may be driven primarily by cultural rather than economic set of motives.

The outline of this chapter is as follows. Section 3.2 delineates my argument for why the marriage market squeeze can lead to backlash, drawing insights from literature in political science, anthropology, sociology, demography, and social psychology. The theoretical argument was also informed by extensive fieldwork in South Korea. Section 3.3 provides additional contextual details on South Korea. Section 3.4 describes the research design. In Section 3.5, I report my findings from the experiment. I conclude with discussions of the findings from my research as well as their implications.

3.2 The Marriage Market Squeeze and Gender Backlash

In many societies, marriage is a key institution through which the patriarchal bargain has been maintained. Societies in the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia—regions identified by Caldwell (1978) as the “patriarchal belt”—were especially more likely to adopt corporate male-headed systems with a rigid set of rules surrounding the patriarchal bargain, based on a

“trade-off between women’s autonomy and men’s responsibility for their wives” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.277). This classic patriarchy shares common family and kinship features, including a patriarchal authority structure, patrilineal descent and inheritance, patrilocal residence patterns, as well as a strong culture of son preference (Kabeer, Huq and Mahmud, 2017). While the patriarchal bargain is based on such rules and scripts that “both genders accommodate and acquiesce”, they “may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.286).

In this chapter, I argue that challenges to the rules of the patriarchal bargain surrounding marriage can cause intense backlash against women’s empowerment. Specifically, a marriage market squeeze, in which there is an excess of men over women seeking partners for marriage, may be perceived as an acute threat to men, who may respond with backlash as a way of reinstating their power, i.e., an advantageous position in the marriage market and society at large. Backlash becomes a political solution for resolving the status threat for some men who perceive women’s empowerment as inhibiting them from achieving their social obligations and status. In other words, backlash becomes a tool through which men may attempt to maintain their advantageous position in the marriage market.

This argument builds on prior works that suggest that when societal rules governing gender relations are contested, backlash is a likely outcome. For example, Berry, Bouka and Kamuru (2021) find that backlash can be intense when women’s inclusion in formal and visible institutions is prioritized because this can be perceived as a challenge to the patriarchal bargain, which relegates private matters to women and public matters to men. Brulé (2020b) also finds that backlash, in the form of violence against women by family and community members, ensued as a result of gender quotas increasing the ability of women to inherit land in India, a practice that would contradict patriarchal norms (i.e., patrilineal lineage norms). Others argue that the rise in the share of women in the professional workforce or in industries that are typically deemed masculine can lead to backlash (Clark, Khoban and Zucker, 2022; Morgan and Buice, 2013; Kim and Kweon, 2022) either due to status concerns or material concerns.

However, it departs from existing studies on gender backlash, which have primarily focused on the effects of an increased proportion of women in the professional workforce and politics. I extend this argument to show that it is not just the increased presence of women leads to backlash. Rather, the status threat can stem from a lack of women in the marriage market: the relative scarcity of women in the marriage market, by forcing a rearrangement and renegotiation of gender relations, induces men to seek a rollback of women’s empowerment. It is not merely the presence of women that produces backlash; rather, we must focus on sources that threaten to upset the existing set of rules governing gender relations. In this vein, I examine the outcome of the (perceived) erosion of a core institution governing gender relations in many societies: marriage.

The marriage market squeeze may be perceived as threatening for men for three reasons. Traditionally, men have enjoyed relatively higher bargaining power in the marriage market (Kabeer, Huq and Mahmud, 2017). If we treat marriage as a market, the relative scarcity of women drives up their value in the market while the relative abundance of men drives

their value down. In other words, the marriage market squeeze almost automatically reduces men's bargaining power in the marriage market. This may cause men to react with backlash if they perceive that women's empowerment is inhibiting their chances of marriage. Backlash may be perceived as a way of "reigning" women back into the family, and thereby regaining men's advantageous position in the marriage market.

Second, threat may emerge as a response to changes in behaviors of members of the minority group, particularly if those behaviors deviate from existing norms. Women opting out of marriage (and in some cases dating) may be perceived as incongruent with existing expectations and stereotypes about how women should be (such as the expectation that they should be selfless and family-oriented) (Rudman and Glick, 2001). Expectancy violation increases justification for backlash, increasing the probability of backlash (Rudman and Fairchild, 2004).

Relatedly, if an inability to find a marital partner lowers one's self-esteem (Fein and Spencer, 1997; Spencer et al., 1998), it can activate stereotypes and subsequently lead to backlash (Rudman and Fairchild, 2004). Members of the dominant group may exhibit backlash by upholding the status quo (i.e., existing social and political arrangements), defending one's in-group, reinforcing conformity of group norms, and showing negative attitudes toward outgroups (Mutz, 2018). This response aligns with the social identity threat literature, which suggests that threats to one's social identity can provoke exclusionary attitudes as a means of preserving a positive self-concept (Tajfel, 1982; Shayo, 2009).

Following this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that the marriage market squeeze will lead men to exhibit backlash.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) *The marriage market squeeze (excess of men over women in the marriage market) will cause men to exhibit backlash against women's empowerment.*

In considering who among men is most likely to be threatened by the marriage market squeeze, I expect those who have not yet married and are at what society considers a prime age for marriage to be most susceptible. If one has married, they have already achieved societal expectations and may not see the marriage market squeeze as a threat—they have won the hard battle. If they are too young, they are less likely to perceive challenges to marrying as pertinent to their identity. Thus, I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2 (H2) *The effect of the marriage market squeeze (excess of men over women in the marriage market) on backlash against women's empowerment will be larger among men in their prime marital years who are not yet married.*

Mechanisms

Social costs of the marriage market squeeze In some societies, marriage and fatherhood is a status symbol (Greenhalgh, 2013; Park and Woo, 2020). In this setting, a failure to marry can have a devastating impact on one's reputation. For men in particular, status may come from being able to provide for the household (i.e., being the household breadwinner)

as well as fulfilling a duty to the family (e.g., continuing the ancestral line). Marriage may also be regarded as a necessary procedure for achieving full adulthood (Tilche and Simpson, 2018), or a marker of prestige and achievement (Cherlin, 2004). A failure to secure a partner for a conjugal relationship can therefore incur reputational costs for men and their family. In such context, the marriage market squeeze may be particularly threatening to one's status as a man that can lead him to resist the advancement of women's empowerment. Backlash becomes a political solution for resolving the status threat for some men who perceive women's empowerment as inhibiting them from achieving their social obligations and status.

The reputational costs of not marrying vary depending on the norms of lineage as well as the position one occupies within the family hierarchy. In many patrilineal societies, these costs are likely higher for men who are expected to continue the ancestral line. Indeed, family-centered values continue to permeate Korean society (Chang, 2022). My interviews indicate that many young Koreans still believe that men have an obligation to continue the family line and thereby honor their ancestors. For instance, one woman in her 30s, whose older brother had recently married, told me in an interview³: "There was no option but for my brother to marry, as he needed to bring a bride who would take over the family rituals." She herself was reluctant to get married and, although she faced some pressure, she noted that it was less severe compared to what her brother had faced.

Thus, in thinking about whom among the unmarried men may respond most strongly to the marital market dynamics, first-born sons are particularly susceptible. I expect the effect of the marriage market squeeze to be larger among men who are first-born sons, who typically carry the heaviest weight in continuing the ancestral line.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) *Among the unmarried men in their prime marital age for marriage, the effect of the marriage market squeeze (excess of men over women in the marriage market) on backlash against women's empowerment will be larger among first-born sons.*

Economic costs of the marriage market squeeze Economic inequality is another significant dimension in the marriage market. Research shows that financial issues are important in marital decisions (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan, 2005; Smock, Manning and Porter, 2005), and that lower income and educational status can be damaging to the marital prospects of men in particular (Becker, 1991; Raymo and Park, 2020). While some argue that importance of economic prospects of men has been declining while economic prospects of women has increased (Sweeney, 2002), many studies still point to the relative importance of economic prospects of men, especially (Fukuda, Raymo and Yoda, 2020; Raymo and Shibata, 2017; Raymo and Park, 2020). This is particularly relevant for societies where the practice of hypergamy, the practice of seeking higher (lower) status grooms (brides), is prevalent, as men's socioeconomic status is likely determinant of their marriage prospects (Kabeer, Huq and Mahmud, 2017).

³Interview conducted online on 3/5/2023.

Globalization and rising economic inequality may have exacerbated this issue, by increasing involuntary job loss and difficulty of establishing economic independence (Farber et al., 2005). Young men, compared to mid-career men, are susceptible to these losses (Buchholz et al., 2009; Farber et al., 2005), making it difficult to reach the “economic bar” for marriage (Fukuda, Raymo and Yoda, 2020; Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan, 2005). Thus, economic inequality can increase the burden of the marriage market squeeze for men of lower socioeconomic class. That there has been an increase in income inequality in nearly every single country (Alvaredo, 2018) further necessitates an examination of this dimension in the context of the marriage market and gender relations.

How might economic inequality in the marriage market affect attitudes toward women’s empowerment? I hypothesize that it is likely to exacerbate the backlash among men for two reasons. This argument is based on prior works that point to the psychological underpinnings between the relationship between economic inequality and outgroup hostility. A large body of works show that economic inequality matters in shaping attitudes toward immigrants and racial minorities. Allport (1954) notes that feelings of economic insecurity can lead individuals to form prejudice against out-groups. In the United States, studies find that economic insecurity can heighten negative attitudes toward racial out-groups (Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000; Krosch and Amodio, 2014). Dancygier and Donnelly (2013) and Dancygier et al. (2022) argue that economic inequality heightens opposition against immigrants in Europe. In a similar vein, some studies attribute the rise of xenophobic parties to increases in economic inequality (Rodrik, 2018) and general sense of insecurity (Inglehart, Moaddel and Tessler, 2006; Inglehart and Norris, 2017).

These studies indicate the theoretical possibility that perceptions of economic inequality can also shift attitudes regarding women’s empowerment. An emerging body of works have begun empirically examining the impact of economic inequality on support for women’s empowerment, and find a negative relationship. For example, (Kosec et al., 2023) find that feelings of relative deprivation reduces support for some aspects of women’s empowerment among both men and women. Examining how the inequality in the marriage market is affecting gender relations is therefore an important extension of existing research.

The inequality in the marriage market could also exacerbate the threat that men perceive from their lower prospect in the marriage market if marriage comes with material benefits, such as inheritance and better job opportunities. If married men are provided with better job opportunities, and if inheritance is tied to marriage and continuing the ancestral line, the inability to marry poses a material threat. This issue is especially salient in the context that I conduct my study. South Korea has undergone rapid economic growth in the past decades, causing a dramatic shift in individuals’ expectations. Yet, growing inequality and insecurity have made it increasingly difficult to achieve those expectations. Indeed, my interviews in South Korea illustrate the growing sense among men that marriage is for individuals who are economically affluent.

I hypothesize that the salience of inequality in the marriage market will exacerbate the effect of the marriage market squeeze on gender backlash among men.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) *The inequality in the marriage market will exacerbate the effect of the marriage market squeeze on backlash against women’s empowerment.*

Yet, the marriage market squeeze does not affect everyone equally. Individuals with high economic standing are less affected by the marriage market squeeze as they will be more likely to be “selected” in the marriage market due to their favorable resource endowments (Greenhalgh, 2013; Tilche and Simpson, 2018). My interviews with citizens in South Korea reveal a pervasive sense among men that marriage is only for individuals who are economically affluent. Several of the men I interviewed indicated that those who are socioeconomically well-off are more likely to succeed in the marriage market compared to those who are socioeconomically worse off. Thus, economic inequality can cause the burden of the marriage market squeeze to disproportionately fall on those who are at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. I hypothesize that the salience of economic inequality may exacerbate the effect of the marriage market squeeze on backlash against women’s empowerment among men who perceive their socioeconomic status to be lower.

Moreover, those who perceive that they have a low socioeconomic status are more likely to be affected by the inequality in the marriage market. Recent studies finds that it is the perception of status, rather than objective status, that impacts behavior (Cruces, Perez-Truglia and Tetaz, 2013; Hauser and Norton, 2017; Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). What follows from this is that the effects of the marriage market squeeze and inequality in the marriage market will be more intensely felt among those who *perceive* that their status is low.

Hypothesis 5 (H5) *The effect of the marriage market inequality will be larger among unmarried men with low perceived socioeconomic status.*

3.3 Qualitative Evidence from South Korea

Women’s Status and Gender Backlash

In September, 2021, Lee, Jun-seok, a 36 year-old politician, became the youngest leader of the People Power Party, the main conservative party in South Korea. His campaign centered on doing away with “feminist” policies in the country, which Lee states was the reason for the overwhelming support he received from young male voters in the country (Kim, 2021). Since then, gender has become one of the most salient cleavages in Korean politics. With support from Lee, Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People Power Party, won the 2022 presidential election. Under Yoon’s government, the number of women in ministerial positions dropped sharply from 27.8% in 2021 to 15.8% in 2023. Based on my interviews with politicians, activists and scholars, other programs and investments intended to protect and advance the status of women have been cut back.⁴ Many individual women I have spoken

⁴Author’s interviews on 2/7/2023, 2/27/2023, 3/03/2023, 3/20/2023, 4/12/2023, 4/26/2023.

to have expressed fear and distrust toward men as well as the conservative party that have “taken their side.”⁵

Many critics attribute Yoon’s victory to his anti-feminist campaigns that catered to young Korean men, a group that the media has shown to hold anti-feminist views in recent years.⁶ For several years prior to the election in which Yoon ran, misogynistic discourses have been disseminated online, especially in male-dominated online communities such as “Ilbe”, but have not been confined to such places (Kim, 2018). Many, especially young men, not only believe that women are not discriminated against, they believe that they are the marginalized group. According to a 2019 survey of 1,000 adults in South Korea, 68.7 percent of men in their twenties responded that discrimination against men is very or somewhat serious. This is far above the percentage (30.6) of those who indicated that discrimination against women is serious (Cheon, 2019).⁷ Yoon won about 59 percent of the male votes in their 20s, while his contender won 58 percent of the female votes in their 20s.

What’s puzzling is that women are still heavily discriminated against in South Korean society. Women constitute just 18.6 percent of seats in parliament, far lower than the global average of 26.5 percent and the average in Asia, 21.2 percent (IPU, 2022). And although South Korea elected its first woman president, Park Geun-hye, in 2012, her popularity stemmed in large part due to the legacy of her deceased father and former authoritarian ruler, Park Chung-hee (Han and Chun, 2014; Hong, Park and Yang, 2022). Women also fare worse economically. Women are paid 67.7 percent of men. According to the Korea Statistics, over 1.5 million women left the workforce in 2020 due to marriage and childcare. Women account for a mere 15.6 percent of senior roles. Accordingly, South Korea ranks low on the dimension of economic participation and opportunity (123 out of 156 countries) (WEF, 2021). The National Assembly has yet to pass laws to reflect the Court’s ruling on decriminalizing abortion. Confucian customs, deeply rooted in South Korea’s culture and political development, continues to influence gender roles and relationships in South Korea today (Raymo et al., 2015; Yang and Rosenblatt, 2008).

Diverging Gendered Preferences Toward Marriage

Critical facets for understanding gender relations relate to changes in the family and economic structure (Chang, 2022; Park and Woo, 2020). One of the most pronounced shifts that have taken place in South Korea concern marriage and birth. An increasing number of South Koreans are choosing to live alone. Between 2000 and 2022, the proportion of one-person households has increased from 19,674 (or 15.5% of households) to 21,774 (or 34.5% of all households). A large share of these households are led by single young men. Of the men

⁵Author’s interviews, conducted on 2/8/2023, 2/9/2023, 3/06/2023.

⁶Author’s interviews also confirm that man political elites view anti-feminist rhetoric and policies to have been a key factor to Yoon’s success.

⁷This sentiment was shared among many (but not all) of the young men I interviewed, including college students (1/03/2023), a columnist and aspiring politician (3/2/2023) and a senior aide of a member of the National Assembly (03/21/2023).

in their 20s and 30s, 19.5% and 22%, respectively, live alone. These numbers are surprising because not long ago, marriage was considered less of a choice but as a necessity in South Korean society (Greenhalgh and Li, 1995). In the last few decades, practices surrounding marriage have changed considerably. Delays in marriage and birth, as well as non-marriages and childlessness have become pronounced in Korea. For instance, the average age of a woman's first marriage was 23.3 in 1970. By 2022, it reached 31.26. The proportion of those who have never married at 50 increased from 0.4% to 5.8% in Korea between 1980 and 2010 (Raymo et al., 2015). Accordingly, the average number of children born to women in "childbearing years" sharply declined from nearly 6.5 in the 1950s to 0.72 in 2023, the lowest record in the world. There are a few reasons for this.

Particularly striking are the differences in how men and women perceive norms and expectations around marriage. Prevailing policy and social conditions in South Korea magnify the gendered costs associated with marriage: while increasing the relative costs for women who choose to marry, they impose higher costs on men who remain unmarried. Under such circumstances, women are opting out of the marriage market at a higher rate compared to men. The social and economic cost of a divorce can affect one's decision to enter a marital relationship. Women are likely to delay marriage and childbirth in economies such as South Korea where tenure plays a crucial role in setting wages (Iversen, Rosenbluth and Rosenbluth, 2010). In South Korea, only 2.5 percent of children were born outside of marriage in 2020 due to the stigma attached to having children outside of marriage (Myong, Park and Yi, 2021). Some scholars note that the rapid improvements of women's education along with existing norms of educational hypergamy in Korea make it more difficult for highly educated women and less-educated men to get married (Park and Smits, 2005; Raymo and Iwasawa, 2005). Despite improvements in women's educational and income opportunities, gender-based division of labor in the household remain entrenched (Myong, Park and Yi, 2021; Raymo and Park, 2020), making the traditional marriage model less appealing for women.

My interviews also revealed a gendered pattern, with far fewer women expressing a desire to get married and have children compared to men. There were three main reasons. The first reason was a fear of losing independence. The second reason, which was more common, was the fear among women that their career would come to a halt were they to choose to get married, or worse, have children. When I asked if they would be willing to get married without having children, many noted the difficulty of remaining childless in a marriage. One woman from Jeolla Province, who was in her 30s, noted "Once I get married, the pressure to have children would start to kick in from both sides of the parents. And I was raised to be respect my elders—knowing this about myself, I would not be able to resist that pressure for long." Simply not getting married at all seemed like an easier option for her, she added. The concern was shared among female-identifying college students. One student in her 20s told me: "I have one friend who recently got married, and all of my friends—including myself—became very upset. I just warned her that she should not give up on her career and become a *gyung-dan-nyeo*. If she does, she would never be able to get a divorce even if she wanted to." *Gyung-dan-nyeo*, a common term used in Korea, refers to a woman whose career comes to

an abrupt end (*dan* means “cut off”). A *gyung-dan-nyeo* consequently becomes tied to her husband and his family, making divorce a less feasible option. The last reason concerned the way they were brought up: witnessing patriarchy in their own household. One woman in her late 20s, born in Gyeongsang province, told me that she moved to a city nearby Seoul a few years ago to escape from her hometown: “I grew up with my father and my grandmother. My grandmother would always make me cook and do the housework ever since I was in elementary school. I hated it.” Witnessing patriarchal relationships within their own homes, many women felt that they did not want to end up in the same situation as their mothers. And some noted that even their mothers told them to live differently.

The same sentiment was not shared among men. While some men have given up on the marriage, more men than women expressed a desire to get married, and some disapproved of individuals who did not share their values: “I still think it’s important to have a family and raise your own children. I am saddened by those who think that it will be easier to live by themselves,” a man in his 30s noted in an interview in Daegu.

Similar patterns were found in a 2023 survey I conducted, where there were far more women who expressed doubts about marriage and having children. About 57.2% of women in their 20s and 30s opposed the statement that “one should marry regardless of the situation,” while only about 37% of men in the equivalent age group did. And while 26.6% of these women felt that marriage is an outdated institution, only 19% of men expressed such feelings. Recent statistics confirm this gap is not merely feelings, but translates to actual behavior in the marriage market: unmarried men outweigh women in great numbers. Of those who are currently at the age of 40, 46.5% of men remain unmarried while 29.1% of women are unmarried. The gap remains for those in their 50s, with 16.4% of men remaining unmarried compared to 7.2% of their women counterparts (KIHSA, 2024). This resulting asymmetry, I contend, is vital for understanding the backlash against women’s empowerment we are witnessing in South Korea today.

Another relevant feature worth investigation relates to responses to the rise in economic inequality, and the accompanying feelings of relative deprivation. Much like other countries across the world, South Korea experienced a rise in income inequality (Kim and Kim, 2015). Economic competition has also intensified, and achieving social mobility through education has become increasingly difficult with educational expenditures also widening across classes in recent years. The rise of economic inequality is relevant in the context of the marriage market because individuals with high economic standing may be less affected by the marriage market squeeze, as they will be more likely to be “selected” in the marriage market. Indeed, recent reports find that men who are in the top decile of income earners are about 12 times more likely to be married compared to those in the bottom decile.⁸

My interviews confirm that material concerns regarding marriage were visibly higher among men than women. Most of the women I spoke to concurred that it is men who need to achieve more material assets in order to marry. One woman in her 30s talked about the expectations that her brother faced as he was preparing for marriage: “There is still

⁸For example, see [this article](#).

the expectation that men should be financially better off, and be the breadwinner of the household.” Even so, remaining a bachelor is not an appealing option for men. She recalled that her brother faced a great deal of pressure from his parents to get married and bring a bride who can continue their family rituals. “Not getting married was not an option for him,” she said. She noted that she herself decided to give up on marriage, though she had not yet confessed this to her parents.

For some men, marriage was an ideal that was unattainable due to their economic status. Throughout my interviews, I observed a growing sense among men that marriage is for individuals who are economically affluent. One interviewee, a man in his 30s residing in Seoul, aptly described these feelings. He said “For my own survival, I had to let go of the option of marriage. Otherwise, I would have had to work harder and compete harder to get a job at a bigger company. I think those who do get married are those who have thought things out from the first place. ... Basically, I think it’s the people who are smart and wise who are able to get married.”⁹ Some remained hopeful despite acknowledging the difficulties of succeeding in marriage. One college student in his early 20s said: “I am young now, and therefore these things matter less, but later in my thirties or so, I am afraid that I won’t have what it takes—such as a stable job and enough savings—to get married.”¹⁰

It was also evident that many young men held conservative gender attitudes. While many men acknowledged the disadvantages women face in having a successful career (such as getting a promotion), and almost all agreed that women do have a heavier burden when it comes to raising a family, most men I spoke to firmly noted that institutions and programs to empower women were no longer needed in South Korea. For instance, many men opposed gender quotas even after admitting that women were under-represented in politics and corporate executive positions. Many expressed outright hostility against the gender ministry, outraged that a ministry should exist to advance one gender over another.

It is difficult to say whether and to what extent the marriage market dynamics were shaping gender attitudes among the respondents I spoke to. Yet, some conversations did shed light on the possibility. For instance, when asked why they thought that women were less willing to marry compared to men, one man in his 20s responded with noticeable hostility toward women: “Now that I think of it, it’s actually my sister’s husband who did most of the household work whenever I visited them. I don’t think men should sacrifice that much just to get married.” experimental design enables me to examine whether this relationship is causal, which I turn to in the next section.

3.4 Research Design

I leverage a survey experiment of 2,000 young men in South Korea. The survey was administered by Qualtrics, an online survey panel vendor. Male citizens between the ages of 18-40 were eligible to take the survey.

⁹Interview, 4/19/2023.

¹⁰Interview, 7/12/2023.

Experimental Manipulation

To examine the causal effect of the marriage market squeeze on gender attitudes, I leverage a 2X2 survey experiment in which I manipulate the perceived sense of female scarcity (relative to men) in the marriage market and the salience of competition between men in the marriage market. I use a placebo control in order to ensure that the effects are not being driven by the salience of gender. This yields four treatment conditions: placebo control, marriage market squeeze (MMS) treatment, marriage market competition treatment (Competition), and both treatments (MMS & Competition).

Marriage market squeeze treatment: Due to the rapid decline in fertility in South Korea, there has been a surge of news reports on potential reasons for the fertility decline. A common rhetoric is that young women, compared to men, are much more reluctant to marry, have children, or to sacrifice their own well-being for that of their family (Kim, 2023). My treatment is designed to reflect the kind of information that individuals observe in the real world. Specifically, I utilize an actual news article to manipulate the perceived level of the marriage market squeeze. Respondents are told that “According to a recent survey of 579 people, women were much less willing to get married compared to men. Men in their 20s and 30s, compared to their female counterparts, were about three times more likely to state that they think that they should get married.”¹¹ Note that given the salience of these types of news, the estimate of the treatment effect will likely be a conservative one.

Marriage market inequality treatment: The marriage market inequality treatment is designed to prime the perception that there is economic inequality in the current marriage market—i.e., that the average individual will have a much harder time compared to the affluent, as shown in Figure 3.1. Here, respondents are asked to evaluate two profiles of candidates for marriage. Intentionally, I assigned one candidate to have a higher socioeconomic status than the other. Respondents are asked which candidate they think will be more likely to succeed in getting married.

In this treatment, respondents are provided profiles of two male candidates for marriage, where one candidate (Park, on the left) has a lower socioeconomic status than the other (Choi, on the right). Park is a 35-year-old male candidate, an employee at a medium-sized company, living in *jeonse*, a graduate of a college outside of Seoul, and residing in Seoul. Choi is a 30-year-old male candidate, an employee at a large conglomerate, property owner, a graduate of one of the most prestigious colleges in Seoul, and residing in Seoul. Respondents are asked which candidate they think will have an easier time getting married. Nearly all respondents are expected to choose Choi (on the right).

This treatment is inspired by my observation of the kinds of information that marriage and dating platforms advertise in South Korea. On subways, in the news, and on TV, it is common to see advertisements by matchmaking websites that emphasize economic assets as a critical component in becoming a successful candidate for marriage. Rating one’s own and others’ chances of getting married is also not uncommon. For instance, Duo, one of the

¹¹For an illustration of what the treatment looked like in Korean, see Figure B.1 in the Appendix.

Figure 3.1: The Marriage Market Competition Treatment

다음 두 남성 중 어떤 사람이 **결혼에 성공할 가능성**이 더 높다고 생각하시나요?

	박성준	최영재
성별	남성	남성
나이	35세	30세
직장	중소기업	대기업
자산	전세	자가 보유
학력	경기대학교 졸업	연세대학교 졸업
거주지역	서울	서울

☐ 박성준

☐ 최영재

*

Note: In this treatment, respondents are provided profiles of two male candidates for marriage, where one candidate (Park, on the left) has a lower socioeconomic status than the other (Choi, on the right). Park is a 35-year-old male candidate, an employee at a medium-sized company, living in jeonse, a graduate of a college outside of Seoul, and residing in Seoul. Choi is a 30-year-old male candidate, an employee at a large conglomerate, a property owner, a graduate of one of the most prestigious colleges in Seoul, and residing in Seoul. Respondents are asked which candidate they think will be more likely to succeed in getting married.

most popular and long-running matchmaking companies in Korea, asks potential clients to take a quiz that will rate their marriageability.

Placebo Control: Respondents assigned to the placebo condition are shown a message that highlights the difference between men and women in their attitudes toward placebo. Specifically, they are given a message that reads: “According to a recent survey of 579 people, women were much less likely to state that recycling is necessary compared to men. Men in their 20s and 30s, compared to their female counterparts, were about three times more likely to state that recycling is necessary.” I use a placebo control to mitigate concerns that providing any messages related to gender differences could increase hostility against women, given the heightened tension between men and women in Korean society today. The message is worded to mirror the language used in the main treatment (MMS) as closely as possible.

Measures

For my outcome measures, I develop a battery of questions that will allow me to gauge the level of resistance against women’s empowerment (i.e., backlash against women’s empowerment). I use two sets of measures. The first set of outcomes are directly related to gender backlash, and focus on opposition against (support for) policies intended to raise (hamper) women’s status in society. The operationalization of backlash against women’s empowerment is inspired by [Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease \(2021\)](#), who define backlash as “any form of resistance toward progressive social change,” where resistance (against women’s empowerment) is a “subset of the many practices and processes, which sustain gender inequality, defined by opposition, challenge or push back against efforts to build gender equality.”

There are a few benefits to using this definition. First, this definition allows me to include both attitudinal as well as institutional resistance to women’s empowerment. This is more expansive than ([Mansbridge and Shames, 2008](#), p.632), who restrict it to the use of coercive power, such as the threat of sanction or use of force, in response to lost power. Such restrictive understanding of backlash would prevent a consideration of attitudes that do not involve immediate sanction or force. Attitudes are essential components to achieving gender equality. [Yount et al. \(2016\)](#), for instance, argue that “the expression of equitable gender beliefs and attitudes” is an important measure of gender equality. In the psychology literature, the term is also closely related to attitudes. Rudman, for example, defines it as “the negative evaluation of agentic women for violating prescriptions of feminine niceness” ([Rudman, 1998](#); [Rudman and Glick, 2001](#)). In considering what constitute backlash, resistance against women’s autonomy from the household are particularly relevant. Yet, [Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease \(2021\)](#)’s definition is also more expansive than some studies that only focus on the attitudinal aspects of backlash ([Anduiza and Rico, 2022](#)). It enables me to consider backlash that involve 1) attitudes toward breaking free from traditional gender roles that relegate private matters to women and public matters to men (which I refer to as “attitudinal backlash” and 2) opposition against institutional measures to enhance women’s status in society (which I refer to as “institutional backlash”).

I operationalize attitudinal backlash using three items that measure resistance against behaviors that deviate from traditional gender norms that relegate private matters to women and public matters to men. Specifically, I use the following: 1) [prioritization of men in the public sphere] “It is okay to first layoff women in times of economic downturns,” 2) [women’s care-taking roles] “women’s responsibility is to take care of the household and members of her family” and 3) [women as mothers] “women need to have children in order to be fulfilled.” Response options for all of these questions include Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, and are coded such that higher values always indicate greater backlash attitudes. To operationalize institutional backlash, I draw from [Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease \(2021\)](#)’s typology. They describe different types of backlash, including denial of the problem (e.g., claiming reverse discrimination), disavowal of responsibility, inaction (e.g., refusal to implement policy changes), appeasement (efforts to pacify those advocating for change and attempting to limit change), co-option (simulating change while undermining it), repression (reversal of a change initiative), and violence (use of violence, harassment and abuse). I developed survey questions that capture the concepts and simultaneously take into consideration the context in which I conduct my study. Specifically, I ask the extent to which one agrees with the following statements: 4) [Disavowal of responsibility] “Men should take some responsibility for addressing the discrimination that women faced in the past” (reverse coded), 5) [Co-optation] “The government should revamp the function of the Ministry of Gender and Family such that it serves family matters that are not directly tied to women in particular,” 6) [Inaction] Corporate gender quotas should be expanded (reverse coded), 7) [Repression] “The government should completely abolish the Ministry of Gender and Family,” 8) [Repression] legislative gender quotas should be abolished, and 9) [Violence] “The government should enforce stricter penalties on perpetrators of sexual assault” (reverse coded).

The principal component factor analysis of the nine components yields two indices, and confirms that I have two distinct sets of factors with eigenvalues higher than 1.¹² I refer to the two indices as “attitudinal backlash,” which captures resistance against women’s autonomy from the household (items 1-3) and “institutional backlash index,” comprising of opposition against institutional measures to empower women (items 4-9). I use these two factor indices as my primary outcome measures. For details on the factor loadings, see Table B.1 in the Appendix.

Summary statistics

Table 3.1 summarizes the nine outcome components for all men in the sample, and then separately for men in their twenties and men in their thirties.

Overall, it is evident that men are quite opposed to institutional measures that seek to empower women, but are less likely to subscribe to traditional gender norms at baseline,

¹²I used a promax oblique rotation to allow the factors to be correlated with each other and formed factor scores that are linear composites based on the rotation results ([Hamilton, 2012](#); [DeVellis and Thorpe, 2021](#)).

when they are not exposed to any experimental manipulation. Comparing men in their twenties and thirties, I find that they are similar with respect to most measures. There are some differences, however, with men in their thirties reporting greater resistance against women’s empowerment relative to men in their twenties. Men in their thirties are more likely to believe that corporate gender quotas should not be expanded ($p < 0.10$) and that it is important to protect those suspected of committing sexual violence crimes ($p < 0.01$). They are also more likely to agree that a woman needs to have children in order to have a fulfilling life compared to their younger counterparts ($p < 0.05$). Younger men are more likely to exhibit a greater level of backlash on just one component: that it is okay to lay off women first in times of economic hardship ($p < 0.05$). This may be due to the greater economic precarity they face in the labor market.

Table 3.1: Summary statistics for outcome components at baseline

	Men		Men in 20s		Men in 30s		T-test
<i>Outcome Measures</i>	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P-Value
	(μ_{Men})		(μ_{20s})		(μ_{30s})		($ \mu_{20s} - \mu_{30s} $)
Past discrimination	4.833	1.626	4.810	1.725	4.850	1.547	0.805
Revamp gender ministry	4.906	1.804	4.877	1.801	4.930	1.811	0.772
Limit corporate quota	4.803	1.653	4.631	1.699	4.938	1.606	0.063
Abolish legislative quota	5.012	1.680	5.017	1.766	5.009	1.613	0.962
Abolish gender ministry	5.286	1.677	5.223	1.797	5.335	1.578	0.507
Sexual violence	4.778	1.906	4.472	1.943	5.018	1.846	0.004
Lay off women	2.970	1.676	3.201	1.756	2.789	1.591	0.014
Wife care of family	3.515	1.484	3.592	1.494	3.454	1.476	0.351
Woman needs children	3.564	1.557	3.385	1.544	3.705	1.556	0.040
Observations	407		179		228		407

* Note: Raw measures for the six components range from 1 to 7. All measures are coded such that higher values indicate greater backlash against women’s empowerment.

The main moderators in my study include marital status and age group, an indicator for being the first-born son (*jangnam*), and perception of socioeconomic status as per Hypothesis 2 (which states that men who are not married and in their prime marital years are more likely to engage in backlash in response to the marriage market squeeze), Hypothesis 3 (which states that men who are first born sons will be more likely to engage in backlash in response to the marriage market squeeze), and Hypothesis 4 (which states that the effects of the marriage market inequality would be larger among those with lower perceived socioeconomic status). For marital status, I use a dummy variable which indicates whether one is married or not. For prime marital age, I create a dummy variable which indicates whether one is in their 30s, as that is a typical age in which one gets married in South Korea.¹³

¹³The average age of marriage for men was 34 as of 2022. (Korea Statistics, 2022). Of all of the men who wed in 2022, 60.2% were in their 30s.

For first-born sons, I create a dummy variable which indicates whether one is the eldest male sibling or an only child, as they would be typically responsible for continuing the ancestral line in South Korea. For perceived socioeconomic status, I create a binary indicator variable for relative deprivation based on the question, “How much does your household earn in income compared to the typical household in Korea?” [Response options: much more, slightly more, about the same, slightly less, much less]. Those who chose slightly or much less are coded as being relatively deprived.

Demographic Characteristics

Table 3.2 summarizes demographic characteristics for the sample. Of the 1692 respondents who completed the survey, about 59% of the respondents are in their 30s, 32% married, and 68% have at least a university degree. Additionally, 86% of respondents have served in the military, 84% have at least one sibling, and 59% of them are an only child or the eldest of their siblings. Most of them (88%) spend some time on social media, 72% make at least the median income of 34.5 million Korean Won (which is approximately 25,000 USD). These characteristics are balanced across the four conditions (placebo control and three treatment arms) in the experiment (see Table B.2 in the Appendix). I report experimental results without controls for transparency, given that individual traits across the four conditions were balanced.

Manipulation Check Measure

The main marriage market squeeze treatment is followed by a manipulation check question, which asks individuals to identify which of the two sentences correctly summarizes the article: 1) Men in their 20s and 30s are about three times *more* likely to state that they should get married compared to women in their 20s and 30s and 2) Men in their 20s and 30s are about three times *less* likely to state that they should get married compared to women in their 20s and 30s. Only those who choose the first statement is regarded as having passed the manipulation check question. Of the 1,067 respondents across the three treatment arms, just 218 (or 16.9%) failed the manipulation check question and are removed from the main analysis.

Estimation

To capture the effect of the marriage market squeeze, the marriage market competition, and both treatments on gender backlash, I estimate the following equation using the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$B_i = \alpha + \beta MMS_i + \gamma MINEQ_i + \delta BOTH_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (3.1)$$

where i indexes individuals, MMS_i is an indicator for respondent i receiving the marriage market squeeze treatment, and $MINEQ_i$ is an indicator for respondent i receiving the marriage market competition treatment, and $BOTH$ is an indicator for respondent i receiving

Table 3.2: Individual-level characteristics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age: Thirties	1692	0.589	0.492	0	1
Married	1692	0.322	0.467	0	1
Educ: elementary	1692	0.003	0.054	0	1
Educ: middle school	1692	0.003	0.054	0	1
Educ: high school	1692	0.182	0.386	0	1
Educ: professional schools	1692	0.131	0.337	0	1
Educ: university	1692	0.603	0.489	0	1
Educ: masters	1692	0.066	0.248	0	1
Educ: phd	1692	0.013	0.113	0	1
Military veteran	1692	0.861	0.346	0	1
Subjective income	1691	3.065	0.930	1	5
Income: less than 25 Million KRW	1692	0.131	0.337	0	1
Income: 25-35 Million KRW	1692	0.152	0.359	0	1
Income: 35-50 Million KRW	1692	0.170	0.376	0	1
Income: 50-60 Million KRW	1692	0.163	0.370	0	1
Income: 60-70 Million KRW	1692	0.164	0.370	0	1
Income: over 70 Million KRW	1692	0.220	0.415	0	1
Social media: none	1692	0.115	0.319	0	1
Social media: less than 1 hour	1692	0.311	0.463	0	1
Social media: 1-2 hours	1692	0.296	0.457	0	1
Social media: 2-3 hours	1692	0.135	0.342	0	1
Social media: more than 3 hours	1692	0.142	0.350	0	1
Dummy: Have siblings	1692	0.838	0.369	0	1
Dummy: First-born son (<i>jangnam</i>)	1692	0.585	0.493	0	1
Pre-treatment values: marriage	1691	4.211	0.840	1	7
Pre-treatment values: children	1692	4.189	1.060	1	7

both the marriage market squeeze and competition treatments, and ϵ_{ijk} is the error term. The outcome, B_i , represents individual-level gender backlash attitudes. As I have two factors that capture 1) attitudinal backlash and 2) institutional backlash, I estimate the equation separately for each factor. When testing for heterogeneous treatment effects, I conduct a subgroup analysis. I report whether the group differences are statistically significant by interacting the moderator of interest with each treatment indicator.

3.5 Main Findings

I begin by examining the effects of the marriage market squeeze and the marriage market competition among all men in their twenties and thirties. I then subset my analysis to those who are in their prime marital years and those who are unmarried, for whom I hypothesized that the effects would be larger. Figure 3.2 presents my main findings. Considering all men,

I find that the marriage market squeeze does lead to an increase in institutional resistance against women's empowerment. Compared to those assigned to the placebo control, those who receive the marriage market squeeze treatment are about 0.17 S.D. units more likely to oppose policies aimed at empowering women, and this effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).¹⁴ While marginally statistically significant, I also find that the marriage market squeeze causes men to exhibit attitudinal backlash—they become more opposed to women deviating from traditional gender norms ($p < 0.10$). Overall, men—when faced with a constrained marriage market—become more likely to exhibit both attitudinal and institutional backlash.

Looking at the effects of the marriage market inequality prime, I find that men are 0.144 S.D. units more likely to exhibit attitudinal backlash compared to those who received the placebo control. The effects are again statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The salience of inequality in the marriage market causes men to adhere to traditional gender roles and seek to curb women's autonomy from the household. Notably, the marriage market inequality treatment does not cause changes in levels of institutional resistance against women's empowerment. This suggests that when men believe that other men are interfering with their chances of succeeding in the marriage market, they are not likely to call for institutions that would reduce women's empowerment.

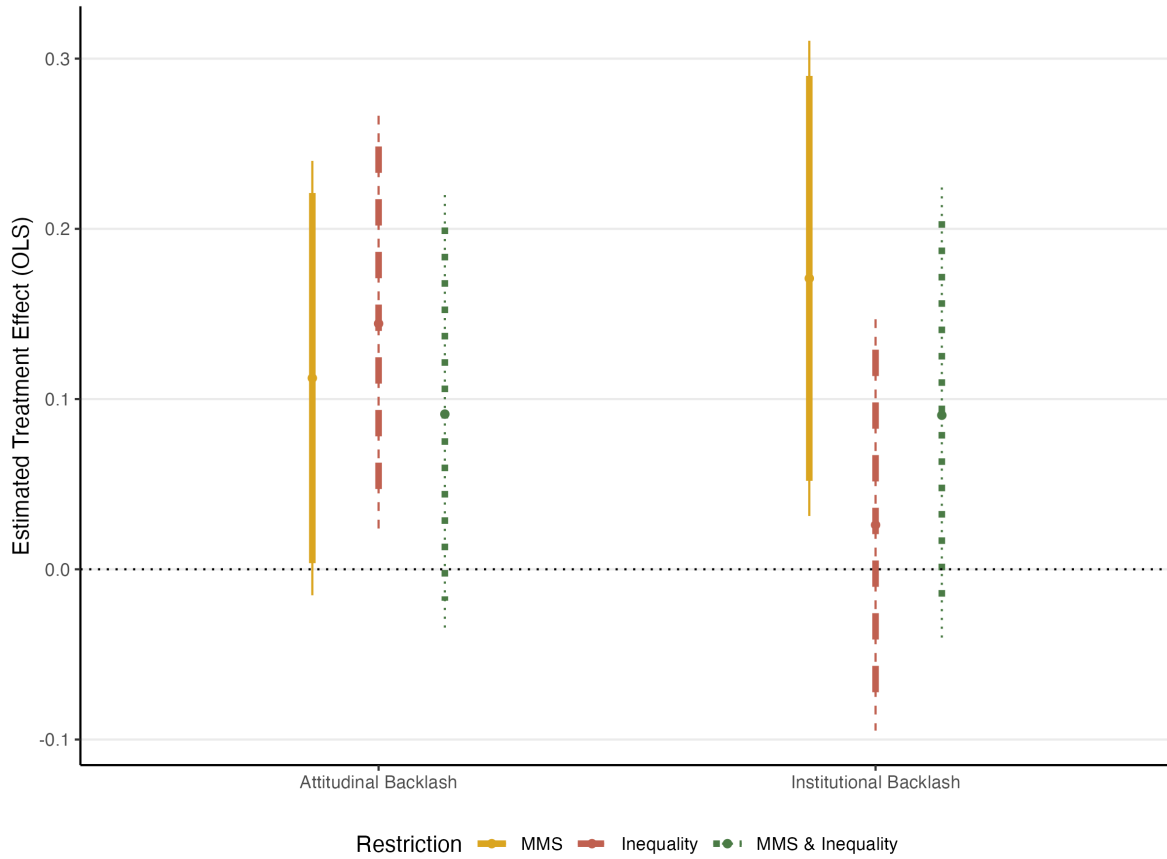
Next, to evaluate Hypothesis 2, I assess the effects separately for men who are unmarried and in their 30s, a prime age group for marriage, and men who are married or in their 20s. It is reasonable to suspect that the former faces a more imminent threat from the challenges extant in the marriage market in Korean society. If one has married, they have already achieved societal expectations and thus are not likely to be as threatened by the marriage squeeze. If they are too young, they may perceive the squeeze as a less relevant (or a more remote) concern.

Consistent with my hypothesis, I find that unmarried men in their 30s are about 0.32 S.D. units more likely to exhibit attitudinal backlash ($p < 0.01$) and 0.28 S.D. units more likely to exhibit institutional backlash ($p < 0.05$) in response to the marriage market squeeze treatment (see the upper panel of Figure 3.3). In response to the marriage market inequality prime, these men are also likely to show more conservative gender attitudes; compared to those assigned to the placebo condition, these men on average show 0.25 S.D. higher attitudinal backlash attitudes ($p < 0.05$). Yet, similar to the pattern observed with the full sample, I find that the inequality treatment does not change men's attitudes toward institutional backlash in a meaningful way.

As the bottom panel of Figure 3.3 shows, the effects among men who are either married or in their 20s pale in comparison, with none being statistically significant. Unmarried men in their 30s are driving the effects observed above. The differences appear most evidently for those who received the marriage market squeeze treatment, and to a lesser degree for the marriage market inequality treatment. A formal test of the differences show that unmarried

¹⁴All of the effect sizes presented in this section are calculated by dividing the coefficient by the S.D. of the sample considered in each respective regression model.

Figure 3.2: Treatment effects among all men in their 20s and 30s

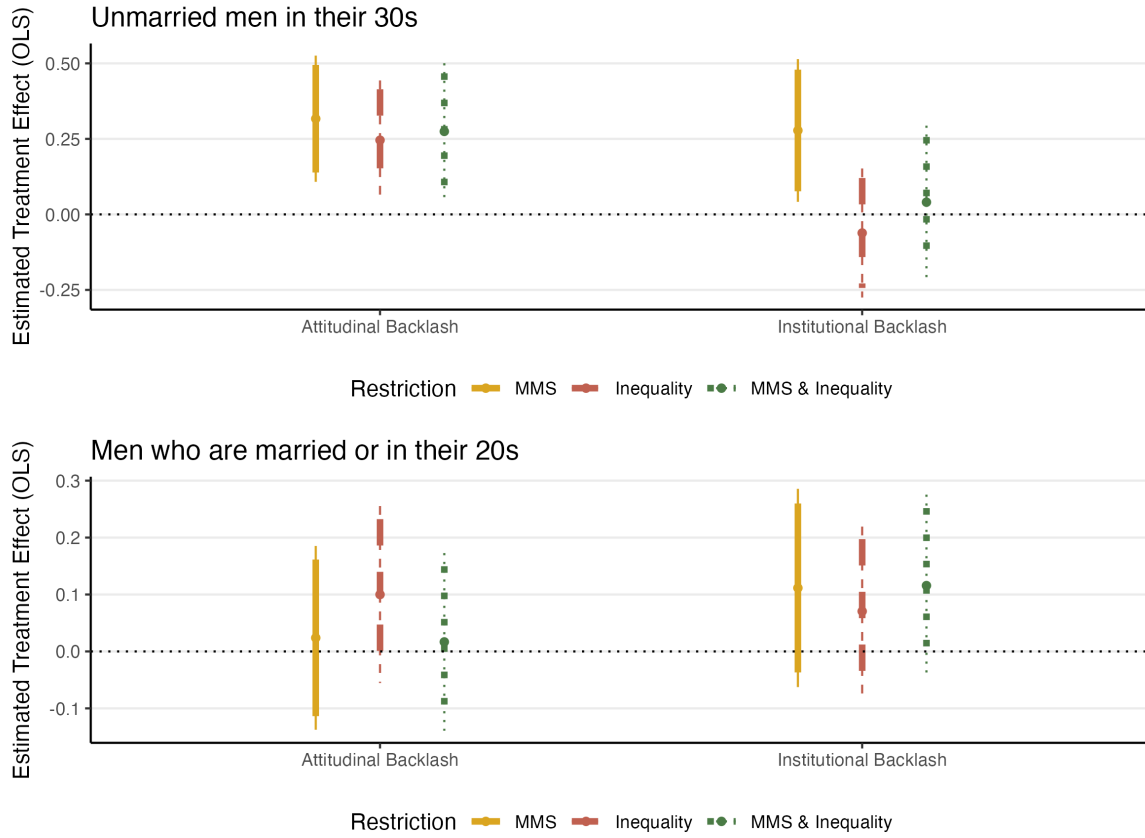


men in their 30s are about 0.17 S.D. units more likely to engage in institutional backlash, although the difference fails to reach the conventional statistical significance (see Table B.3 in the Appendix). As only 33% of the men in the sample meet this criteria, the imbalanced sample sizes reduces precision with which I am able to test this.

The effects are substantially different when it comes to men's likelihood of engaging in attitudinal backlash, however. The effects of the marriage market squeeze on attitudinal backlash among unmarried men in their thirties are 0.29 SD units larger than men who are either married or in their twenties ($p < 0.05$), as shown in Table B.3 in the Appendix. These men are also 0.26 S.D. units more likely to exhibit attitudinal backlash in response to the marriage market inequality treatment, although this difference is marginally statistically significant ($p < 0.10$).

It is worth noting that the effects are directionally consistent even among men who are in their 20s or are married—in all cases, the treatments do seem to be increasing men's tendency to engage in backlash. This suggests a possibility that even for men who are not immediately threatened by the marriage market squeeze and competition, the mere possibility of being

Figure 3.3: Treatment effects by marital status and age



affected may still make them prone to changes in the marital market dynamics, albeit to a less degree.

Potential Mechanisms

Next, I focus on the subset of men who are prone to backlash, and try to probe the mechanisms by examining the effects among the first-born sons (*jangnam*) and among the relatively deprived. As I have established above that the effects are being driven by unmarried men in their 30s, I focus on this set of individuals in the remainder of my analyses.

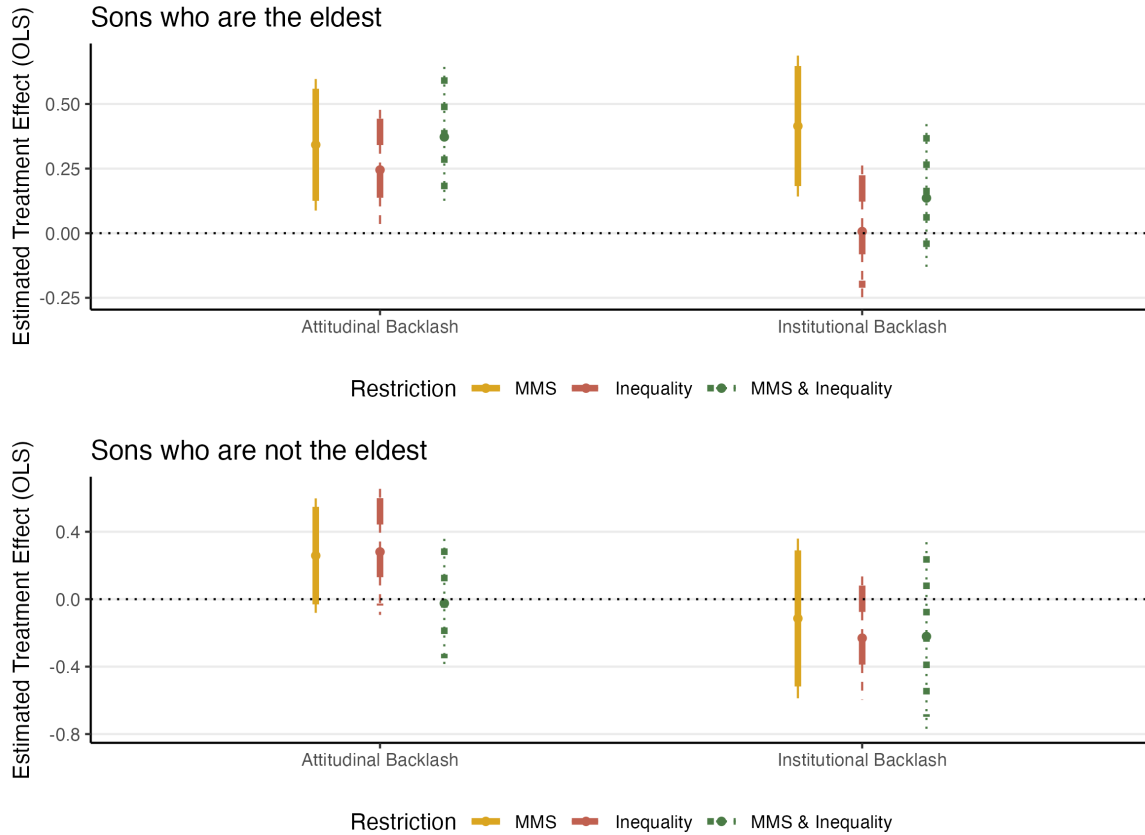
Effects by filial duty: To evaluate my hypothesis that the effects of the marriage market squeeze on gender backlash is larger among men who have the responsibility of continuing the ancestral line, I examine the effects separately for those who are first-born sons (*jangnam*) and men who are not. Figure 3.4 illustrates the treatment effects separately for the two groups of men. In both cases, I subset my analysis to never married men in their 30s.

First, examining men who are not the first-born sons, I find that the marriage market squeeze and the marriage market inequality treatments do not lead to significant changes in their backlash against women’s empowerment (see the bottom panel of Figure 3.4; the coefficient plot shows that the treatment effects are not statistically distinguishable from zero). However, upon assessing the effects among men who are the eldest of their siblings, I detect large and statistically significant shifts. I find that among the *jangnam* (i.e., the eldest son), the marriage market squeeze causes about 0.34 S.D. increase in attitudinal backlash ($p < 0.01$) and a 0.42 S.D. increase in institutional backlash ($p < 0.01$). The differences in effects on attitudinal backlash between the first-born sons and other men are not statistically significant (see Table B.4 in the Appendix). Yet, strikingly, the effects on institutional backlash are about 0.529 S.D. units larger among the *jangnam* compared to those who do not carry the same pressure of continuing the ancestral line. Overall, these results suggest that the marriage market squeeze treatment has the most consequential effect among the eldest sons in causing an institutional opposition against women’s empowerment.

The marriage market inequality treatment causes an increase in gender conservatism by 0.25 S.D. units ($p < 0.05$) among the eldest sons who are not yet married and in their 30s. Yet, it does not lead to changes in one’s likelihood of engaging in institutional backlash. Receiving both treatments cause about a 0.37 S.D. increase in attitudinal backlash ($p < 0.01$). Upon receipt of both treatments, however, the difference in effect size is statistically marginally larger *jangnam* (i.e., first-born sons) ($\beta = 0.397$ S.D. units; $p < 0.10$).

Effects by relative deprivation: Lastly, I examine whether the treatment effects differ among those who feel relatively deprived compared to those who do not. Considering those who felt relatively deprived, I find that the marriage market squeeze treatment causes about a 0.32 S.D. unit increase in attitudinal backlash, which is marginally statistically significant ($p < 0.10$). They are also more likely to engage in institutional backlash; relatively deprived men are about 0.32 SD units more likely to oppose gender-equality policies upon receipt of the marriage market squeeze treatment. This effect is, again, marginally statistically significant ($p < 0.10$). Among this group, the marriage market inequality prime leads to an increase in attitudinal backlash. The effect size is comparable to the marriage market squeeze treatment. Specifically, when the inequality among men in the marriage market is made salient, men are about 0.29 S.D. more likely to exhibit conservative gender norms with respect to women’s role in the household and family ($p < 0.10$). Yet, this is not likely to spill over to institutional backlash.

Examining the effects among those who do not feel relatively deprived, the effects are quite similar. I find that the marriage market squeeze treatment causes about a 0.33 S.D. unit increase in attitudinal backlash ($p < 0.05$), and 0.25 S.D. unit increase in institutional backlash, although the latter is not statistically significant. The marriage market inequality prime causes 0.21 S.D. unit increase in attitudinal backlash, which is marginally statistically significant. Results are displayed on the bottom panel of Figure 3.5). Note, however, that the differences between the two subsamples of men are not statistically significant (see Table B.5). Thus, this only provides merely suggestive evidence that relative deprivation matters in shaping how men respond to the marital market constraints. Cultural constraints, such

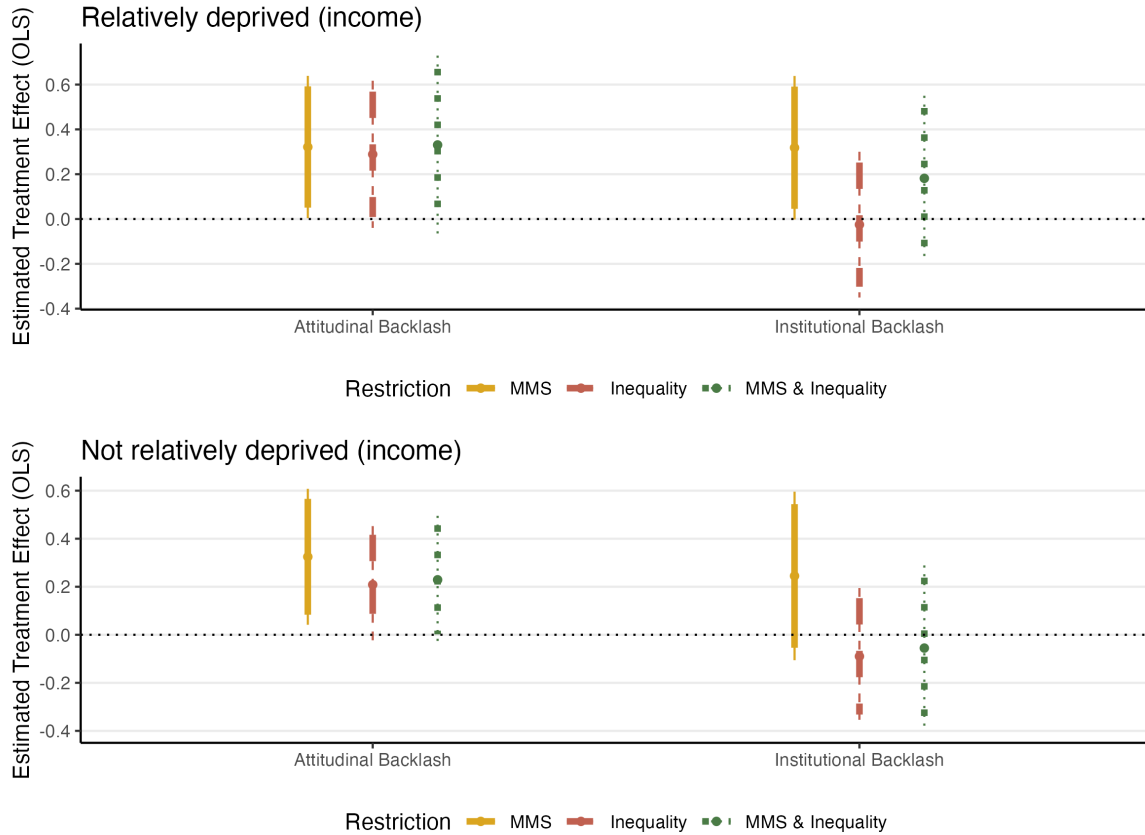
Figure 3.4: The *Jangnam* effect

as being the eldest son, may be a more important constraint that shapes how one responds to the marital market dynamics.

3.6 Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout history, marriage has been an important form of patriarchal contract. The terms of the contract are disadvantageous for women in many societies, but as women's labor market options have expanded, this social contract has become less binding for women. Yet, in societies still marked by patriarchal and patrilineal norms, changing gender norms within marriage has proved more challenging. One option for women then, is to not marry at all. As women increasingly opt out of the marriage market, another problem emerges: too many bachelors. And while this has increased the alarm among many societies, including India, China, and South Korea, its consequences are less well known. This chapter focuses on the consequences of the marriage market squeeze on women's empowerment.

Figure 3.5: Relative deprivation effect



The central argument I make is that the gender imbalance in the marriage market can negatively impact women's empowerment. I argue that when men are unable to marry, they may resist women's empowerment and may even call for a reversal of policies that have been implemented to increase women's status in society. I test this argument in South Korea, a country that is witnessing a backlash against women's empowerment. I leverage a survey experiment that manipulates the salience of the marriage market squeeze, where there is far more prospective grooms than brides, and the salience of the marriage market inequality among men.

Priming men of the marriage market squeeze increases their opposition against institutional measures that aim to advance the status of women in society, such as legislative gender quotas and the ministry of gender and family. The threat of not securing a spouse causes men to also exhibit more conservative gender norms with respect to women's role in the household. These effects are driven by unmarried men who are in their prime age for marriage, consistent with my theoretical prediction.

Additionally, I find that while priming the differences in socioeconomic status among

men in the marriage market does generally cause an uptick in attitudinal backlash, these do not spill over to institutional backlash. That is, when men view the challenges to be coming from other men, they are not more likely to oppose policies that seek to uplift women's status in society. Even so, they do subscribe to traditional gender norms, such as that a woman needs children in order to be fulfilled and that it is a woman's responsibility to take care of the household and the family. In such case, men may be more open to increasing the status of women as long as it does not interfere with a woman's role within the family.

Further investigation of how unmarried men in their prime marital age responds to the threats of the marriage market, I find that the effects are substantially larger among first-born sons, who are typically expected to continue the ancestral line in Korean society. As these men face higher constraints imposed by patrilineal norms, this finding bolsters my argument that one's inability to secure a spouse is an important source of status threat among men, leading them to demand institutional reversals in women's empowerment. Interestingly, being relatively deprived does not make a marked difference in how these men respond to the marital market dynamics, suggesting that the backlash may be more cultural than economic when it comes to the marriage market.

Studying the marriage market squeeze and its impact on backlash against women's empowerment provides important insights on when and why we are likely to observe backlash and how it may vary across various countries. I argue that women's relative scarcity in the marriage market is an important factor in prompting backlash against women's empowerment among men. Women may choose to opt out of the marriage market for various reasons. They may decide against marriage for economic reasons and for political reasons, including as a way of protesting institutions that put women at a disadvantage. Such shifts are occurring in various countries around the world. Yet, even as an increasing number of women may exercise their right to not marry, it is concerning that they do so at the risk of facing backlash.

This chapter also speaks to studies on right-wing populism and democratic backsliding. Right-wing populists often attempt to shore up their support through the use of narratives that decry women's empowerment (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Indeed, a long tradition of studies identify women as a potential group that can be leveraged by populist political leaders (Banaszak and Plutzer, 1993). An emerging literature further highlights the role of gender and sexism in fueling the rise of right-wing populism and conservatism in the U.S. (Bock, Byrd-Craven and Burkley, 2017; Hanley, 2021; Schaffner, Macwilliams and Nteta, 2018; Valentino, Wayne and Ocen, 2018), Europe (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021; de Geus, Ralph-Morrow and Shorrocks, 2021; Anduiza and Rico, 2022; Off, 2022), and Asia (Kim and Kweon, 2022). While one of the core features of democracy concerns the protection of rights (Ding and Slater, 2021), the scholarship on democratic backsliding has primarily focused on electoral outcomes without paying attention to the cultural and economic developments that politicians often manipulate to the detriment of specific groups like women. Examining the causes that trigger reversals in women's rights is therefore an essential step in advancing our knowledge of democratic backsliding.

3.7 Bibliography

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Chapter 4

Examining Resentment: How Standardized Testing Motivates a Gendered Conservative Backlash

Abstract

Women often do better than men academically. Looking at South Korea, we conduct an experiment to study whether this tendency drives a conservative backlash among young men. Compared to respondents who were not told their scores, revealing to men that they underperformed women on a standardized test led to an increase in conservative identification and support for the conservative political party. However, these same underperforming men are no more likely agree that they faced discrimination or harbor sexist attitudes. Our results challenge canonical models of group threat, grievance, and political action: knowledge of comparative underperformance may lead to a recognition on the part of young men that gendered inequalities on standardized tests do not reflect unfair treatment but may nonetheless activate group threat and push men to seek redress in the form of support for conservative political movements.¹

4.1 Introduction

Across the world, women have made significant progress in the realm of education. The gap has nearly closed or reversed across all OECD countries over the last decade. And in many countries, girls do better than boys.² In fact, boys are more likely to under achieve

¹This study was co-authored with Nicholas Kuipers.

²51% of women age 25-34 have a tertiary degree, compared to 39% of men in the same age bracket. See: “Educational Attainment by Gender,” OECD, 2019 ([here](#)).

(i.e., fail to attain a basic level of proficiency) in reading, mathematics and science.³ Despite the case being, women continue to face sexist headwinds once they reach the labor market. These puzzling gendered patterns in academic performance merit investigation, with scholars proposing a range of explanations—including variation in the timing of prefrontal cortex maturation, a dearth of male role models extolling the virtues of education, or simply that young men perceive lower returns to education and forgo serious study from the outset (Brizendine, 2007; Reeves, 2022).

The stakes of this gender gap in academic performance are high. For instance, consider how, given the value of a college degree, underperformance on the standardized tests that throttle access to these institutions might motivate frustration on the part of young men who perceive their economic prospects to have dimmed when they fail to secure admission. We take up this line of inquiry in this study, investigating the consequences of the gender gap in academic performance on political attitudes. Group-based comparisons are ubiquitous in various countries across the world, and are often made on the basis of gender. Media may amplify this by celebrating the success of women regardless of how commonplace they are relative to men.⁴ Thus, we focus on the gendered differential on standardized tests and argue that knowledge of these outcomes can stoke a conservative backlash, as young men seek out and support chauvinist politicians who both deploy rhetoric and offer policies that give voice to their frustrations. In other words, when individual underperformance on standardized tests is understood chiefly through the prism of one's gender identity, it may cultivate a sense of group threat that politicians face incentives to harness for electoral gain by speaking to these grievances in their platform.

To evaluate this hypothesis, we study the political and attitudinal impacts of individuals' performance on standardized testing in South Korea, where a system of examinations is deeply embedded in society, governing selection into university, the civil service, and positions at private sector corporations. Importantly for the purposes of this study, women often do better than men on these examinations. The gender gap in academic performance may be a source of considerable frustration on the part of young men, whose economic and marital prospects may be hampered by weak educational achievements (Park and Kim, 2011). It is also a salient in Korean society, where gender differences in educational achievements are often advertised on newspapers, often become a subject for parents and their decisions regarding where to send their boys to school. In recent years, a large anti-feminist movement has emerged in South Korea with young men participating in protests calling for the end of affirmative action for women in government hiring and university admissions. These demands have found voice in chauvinist political movements, especially among a group of young firebrands at the conservative People Power Party (PPP), which has won the votes

³There are important exceptions and caveats: boys continue to overperform girls on certain domains, like math. There are also important regional variation and caveats: boys do better than girls on the *Gaokao* in China and on the SAT in the United States (Cai et al., 2019).

⁴In fact, the rarer these cases are, the media may further advertise these successes precisely because they are rare. For a detailed discussion around the “man bites dog” effect and its political ramifications, see Brundage, Little and You (Forthcoming).

of over 75% of young men in the previous two elections by pushing “anti-feminist” policies such as the promise to disband the Ministry of Gender Equality.

To study whether standardized test performance is motivating group threat, gendered resentment, and stoking a conservative backlash, we recruited 4,000 South Korean young men (18–40 y.o.) across two studies to take a standardized test that draws on a sample of questions from a widely-used corporate examination. Study 1 was conducted in July 2023 and Study 2 was conducted in December 2023. In both studies, participants in our main estimation sample observed their score. Our experiment manipulated whether we revealed the average score of the opposite gender.⁵ A placebo group completed the exam and observed their own score, but were not made aware of the performance of anyone else or any other group. The design of the study allows us to compare individuals who under-performed the opposite gender, varying only whether they were made aware of their relative performance, thus capturing the effect of the group threat engendered in standardized testing.

Across two studies, the results of our analyses are mixed but point in the direction of two key findings. First, we find evidence that men who under-perform women, *and are made aware of it*, are more likely to indicate a vote preference for the main conservative party, benchmarked against similarly performing men who were not made aware of their relative performance. Results from Study 1 suggest that this is driven by an uptick in the likelihood to self-identify as conservative, although we fail to replicate this finding in Study 2. Our second finding stands in contrast to our pre-registered expectations: the increased support for the conservative party induced by the treatment is not driven by an uptick in gendered grievances or resentment. Specifically, we measure respondents’ agreement with a host of statements gauging beliefs that men are discriminated against and treated unfairly in Korean society. Instead, we find that, if anything, under-performing men who were made aware of their relative position are in fact *less likely* to believe they face discrimination.

How should readers interpret these seemingly inconsistent results? Our preferred explanation challenges canonical models linking group threat, resentment, and redress. According to social identity theories, backlash that benefits conservative politicians stems from vote choices rooted in the deep-seated resentment among majority groups who are in turn motivated by a sense of group threat from minoritized groups. The results presented in this chapter suggest that group threat need not generate resentment, but that it may nonetheless spur a backlash at the ballot box as majority groups seek redress from conservative politicians. We develop an interpretation that emphasizes a simple process of cognitive updating. At least in the context of the gender gap in academic performance in South Korea, under-performing men may come to recognize that women’s superior performance does not stem from any form of unfair treatment about which they ought feel resentful: young women simply do better. Yet, facing this gap, especially given the role that examination outcomes play in governing access to economic opportunities in South Korea, men may still choose

⁵In Study 1, we piloted other experimental interventions that proved inconsequential and were dropped in Study 2, such as asking an additional subgroup of respondents to reflect in an open-ended question on why there existed a gap in the performance across men and women on standardized examinations.

to support chauvinist politicians who promise to boost their lot through targeted policy interventions.

Additional modules included in Study 2 probed this mechanism, finding support in the form of three interrelated auxiliary results. First, men who were told they under-performed women on the standardized test, reported a greater likelihood to cite “military issues” as a key concern—a topic that the PPP routinely captures in its messaging and reflects widespread male concern that the policy of mandatory conscription for men but not women creates unfair labor market conditions. Relatedly, asking respondents whether the liberal or conservative party offers better policies on a suite of issues, we find that men who were told they under-performed women were more likely to state that the conservative party had a stronger platform for the economy and military issues. Finally, third, probing respondents’ warmth to different prominent Korean politicians, we find that men who were told they under-performed women offer much colder assessments of politicians who advocate gender equality and warmer assessments of politicians known for championing chauvinistic agenda.

Our results speak to a broader conversation around anti-feminist backlash and its linkages to conservative political movements. Existing research has especially focused on the role of sexism in fueling the rise of right-wing populism in the United States and Europe (Anduiza and Rico, 2022; Bock, Byrd-Craven and Burkley, 2017; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021; Off, Charron and Alexander, 2022; Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta, 2018). This chapter makes two principal contributions to this literature. First, given the increasing conversation on the “boy crisis,” as shown in (Reeves, 2022), it is increasingly important to understand how relative performance—or perception of one’s own performance relative to others—affects political outcomes among men. South Korea is an ideal setting for examining this relationship because of the import that exams carry—enabling us to devise a subtle but impactful treatment for studying the impact of exams and how their results are publicized. Doing so brings our second contribution into focus, which is to reflect on the institutional determinants the shape the behavior of the young men giving rise to the chauvinist backlash observed across the world.

4.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Group Threat, Resentment, and Backlash

The rise in support for right-wing parties around the world has received widespread scholarly attention in recent years. The causes of this trend are myriad, with scholars tracing the foundations to factors including sluggish economic performance (Berman, 2021, 73-75), trends in local immigration (Dancygier, 2010), and the arrival of social media (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). We focus our attention here on the role of gender politics and especially how a backlash against women’s growing economic empowerment in traditionally patriarchal settings may be partly driving the electoral fortunes of conservative parties at the ballot box. A growing body of research supports this claim. Anduiza and Rico (2022), for example, argue

that sexism—activated by feminist mobilization—fueled a conservative backlash in Spain. Other studies explore how sexism affected voting behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, showing that Donald Trump’s misogynist rhetoric found a susceptible audience among a large tranche of the electorate who were motivated by gendered grievances (Bock, Byrd-Craven and Burkley, 2017; Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta, 2018; Valentino, Wayne and Ocenio, 2018).

Despite the growing interest in the role of gender in driving a global conservative backlash, the precise mechanisms undergirding the relationship remain unclear. One class of explanations draws on status discontent theory and the relative deprivation literature, focusing on the psychological impacts stemming from a perceived loss in prestige on the part of men (Gusfield, 1986). The rise in women’s share of the professional workforce, for instance, can serve as a powerful source of motivation for a backlash against women’s empowerment because it undermines prevailing gender stereotypes from which men have historically benefited (Morgan and Buice, 2013). A more recent research finds that the decline in male-dominated industries have led to a conservative backlash (Clark, Khoban and Zucker, 2022). This will be especially true if coveted job opportunities are viewed as zero-sum such that men perceive their prospects to be in direct competition with women’s. By the same token, the increased presence of minority groups in politics can also induce resentment. Berry, Bouka and Kamuru (2021), for example, argue that conservative backlash intensifies when women’s inclusion in formal and visible political institutions is prioritized. In these accounts, exclusionary attitudes play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between status threat and conservative backlash, with perceived threats against men’s social identity and their desire to maintain a positive image of themselves nudging the uptake of gendered grievances (Tajfel, 1982; Shayo, 2009).

A second genre of explanations centers on more material concerns, especially drawing on power threat and social dominance theories, holding that backlash against minority groups arises as a result of competition over scarce resources (Bobo, 1983; Hardin, 1997). The intuition behind this set of explanations derives principally from the literature on race and ethnic politics, where competition over scarce resources such as jobs and property has drawn scholars’ attention as a driver of backlash. According to this camp, material threats arise when the presence of minority groups increase in politics (Hardin, 1997; Jacobs and Wood, 1999; Grossman and Zonszein, 2021), when economic conditions worsen for the dominant group (Dancygier and Donnelly, 2013), or both (Dancygier, 2010). Recent work suggests similar dynamics may prevail in the context of gender politics, as well. Focusing on India, for instance, Brulé (2020) show how men oppose gender quotas in politics only when they were associated with perceived material economic costs, most notably women’s increased ability to inherit land. Kim and Kweon (2022) similarly find that economic threat is a key motivator for opposition against gender quotas among young men in South Korea. The key insight is that voter backlash is a tool by which dominant groups are able to either alter or maintain the distribution of goods as to keep their advantageous position in society.

Studies in both camps tend to assume that hostile feelings or outgroup animus necessarily accompanies a sense of group threat—whether activated over status or economic concerns.

A third possibility we consider is that animus or resentment need not be present for a sense of group threat to motivate a conservative backlash. For example, [Blumer \(1958\)](#) maintains that members of the dominant group may hold different feelings toward members of an outgroup, but are united by the sense of positional superiority.⁶ Similarly, [Allport \(1954\)](#) notes that ingroup favoritism can occur without overtly negative responses to outgroups.

This third possibility is in line with recent empirical research on the attitudinal shifts of voters in the United States before and after Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and his successful election. Trump’s use of inflammatory racialized rhetoric has been widely reported upon, and is thought to have cued a surge in outgroup animus. However, recent work has complicated this view, suggesting that levels of racial animus—even among Trump voters—did not increase during or after his campaign, and may have even declined. Using a panel survey of voters, [Hopkins and Washington \(2020\)](#), for instance, show that measures of racial animus actually declined during the Trump presidency, even among those who voted for him. [O’Brian \(Forthcoming\)](#) focuses on a panel survey of Trump voters between 2011 and 2016, finding that feeling thermometer measures towards Black, Hispanic, and Muslim Americans actually slightly increased during this period.⁷

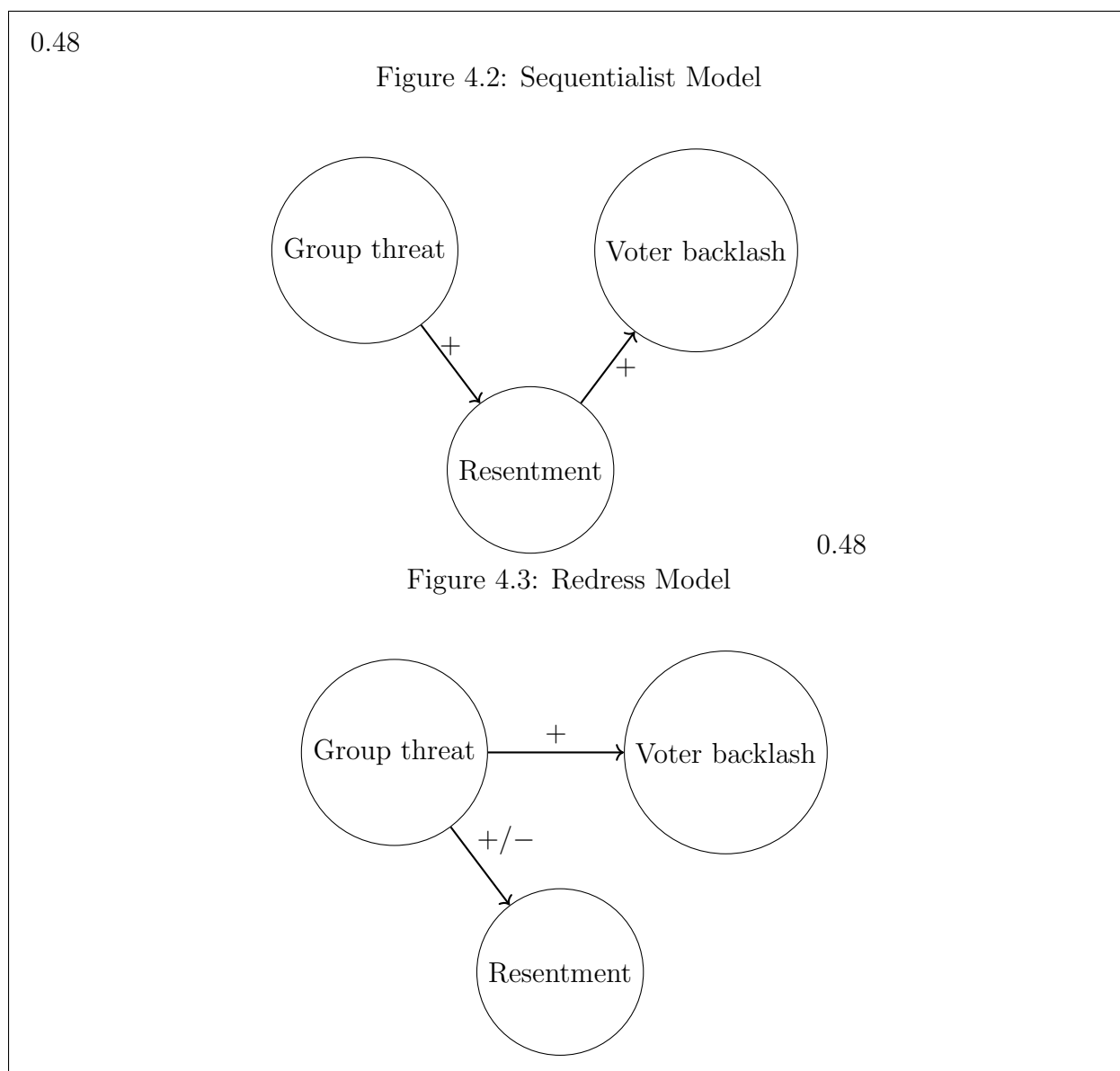
We build on these findings here to develop an intuition concerning the role of gendered group threat in motivating a conservative backlash. As with the work of [Hopkins and Washington \(2020\)](#) and [O’Brian \(Forthcoming\)](#), our interest is in how group threat might directly motivate a conservative backlash, without any effects on resentment as a mediating variable—a possibility that would challenge prevailing works that champion the conditioning role of grievance in explaining voting behavior. In other words, conceived in chiefly material terms, a sense of group threat may prompt members of majority groups to simply support conservative parties who promise to deliver policies that will shore up any possible economic losses. The nature of this relationship need not necessarily be driven by a deep-rooted sense of grievance, resentment, or hatred towards out-groups or minority groups.

We typify two models of backlash in Figure 4.1. One productive way to structure our discussion on the distinction between the “sequentialist” and “redress” models is to refer to the large literature in economics on the sources of discrimination. One class of explanations centers of “taste-based” discrimination, in which an individual is prejudiced purely on the basis of another individuals’ ascriptive traits *qua* traits. Another explanation focuses on “statistical discrimination,” in which an individual is prejudiced towards another individual because of his or her traits, but only because those traits correlate with other, unobserved traits. The “sequentialist” model implies “taste-based” resentment or grievance, as individuals develop an animosity towards groups, which is the driving source of the observed conservative backlash. The “redress” model, meanwhile, is akin to “statistical” discrimination insofar as it captures how, when faced with a perceived group threat, individuals may seek circumstances that benefit their position without harboring deep-seated chauvinist

⁶Specifically, he notes: “the sense of group position is a general kind of orientation. It is a general feeling without being reducible to specific feelings like hatred, hostility, or antipathy” ([Blumer, 1958](#), 5).

⁷See, especially, Figures 7.7 and 11.6.

Figure 4.1: Two Models of Conservative Backlash



sentiments.

How Standardized Tests Cue Group Threat

In studying the relationship between group threat, resentment, and conservative backlash we turn to the role of standardized examinations—an institution that is widely used to

distribute scarce resources across the world and one that we believe is particularly relevant for evoking gender-based comparisons. Gender-based comparisons under standardized testing raises a suite of concerns that animate the literature on group threat and political psychology. For one, standardized examinations motivate both egocentric and sociotropic concerns, as test-takers form self-centered evaluations of their performance as well as views about broader group-based interests, both of which may drive exclusionary political attitudes. Drawing inspiration from the literature on race and ethnic politics, scholars have uncovered evidence that individuals are more likely to oppose outgroups only if they believe that they will personally bear the cost (Malhotra, Margalit and Mo, 2013). Others have emphasized collective interest in shaping their attitudes (Dancygier and Donnelly, 2013). In other words, the group- and individual-level comparisons inherent in the outcomes of standardized tests offers a uniquely well-suited context for parsing the role of group threat in motivating conservative backlash.

Importantly for our study, examinations are ubiquitous.⁸ Their ubiquity derives from the widespread belief that standardized examinations—across their range of applications—are a “fair” means of assessment, such that test-takers will accept the outcome as an honest reflection of their individual performance. But standardized tests have come under fire in recent years, however, as critics allege that entrenched inequalities in educational attainment make certain groups less likely to be competitive on examinations. We hypothesize that underperformance on these examinations will prompt frustration that calls forth political action as a means of redress, especially when failure on standardized tests is understood through the prism of one’s identity. This possibility would be consistent with Kuipers (2022) findings that failure on civil service examinations motivates ethnic out-group resentment and an uptick in the perception that the test was rigged. To the extent that underperformance stokes a sense of group threat, politicians may face incentives to harness these grievances in their platform for electoral gain.

Assessment of the link between group threat and vote choice also speaks to the processes through which people engage in blame attribution. Underperforming in an exam does not necessarily indicate a structural disadvantage in the labor market. Indeed, across OECD countries, men are still more likely to be employed and earn higher wages, even in countries where women have begun outperforming men. In other words, better performance of girls in education does not necessarily translate over to the labor market. An erroneous belief that academic performance is the sole determinant of one’s career prospect can have political consequences. Thus, this study also speaks to the necessity of the types of information that gets circulated, and how misperceptions can form political beliefs (Brundage, Little and You,

⁸There are compelling reasons motivating the widespread uptake of standardized tests across a wide range of use-cases. Many countries use standardized tests to select civil servants, for instance, reasoning that bureaucrats selected under such procedures will be more competent than those selected under alternative mechanisms such as patronage or nepotism. Educational institutions widely use examinations to serve backward- and forward-looking purposes, anticipating that these assessments will *both* measure *and* motivate student learning. The United States even uses a standardized test during its naturalization process, screening aspiring citizens on their knowledge of American government and history.

[Forthcoming](#)).

Increasingly, standardized examination outcomes are sorting along gendered lines—above and beyond the differences observed across racial and ethnic divides. Especially in educational settings around the world, girls tend to better than boys on standardized tests. Our framework expects that these differences are liable to stoke a sense of group threat. But the group threat engendered in standardized test outcomes poses a series of questions. Upon learning of their comparative underperformance, do men increase their political engagement as a means to reassert their dominance in the hierarchy ([Zonszein and Grossman, 2022](#); [Grossman and Zonszein, 2021](#))? In other words, do men respond to women’s superior performance and their relative underperformance by resorting to political means that can reassert their power? We test this possibility by examining whether underperformance in standardized testing leads men to increase their support for a party that is campaigning on anti-gender policies in South Korea.

4.3 Background: Sexism and Gender Politics in South Korea

In recent years, gender has become one of the most salient issues in South Korean politics. In 2021, Lee Jun-seok was elected leader of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) on a campaign that centered on doing away with “feminist” policies in the country. Several months later, Yoon Seok-youl of the conservative Kukmin’s Party, won the 2022 presidential election with the endorsement of the PPP. His campaign also centered on a platform that denied the existence of gender discrimination and called for both the abolition of government hiring quotas for women and the dismantling of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. These arguments were particularly popular among legions of young men who believe themselves to be unfairly marginalized by government policies. One recent survey, for instance, found that 68.7 percent of South Korean men in their 20s believed that discrimination against men is either a somewhat or very serious problem ([Cheon, 2019](#)).

These trends are particularly puzzling given that South Korea remains far from achieving gender parity. As recently as 2021, South Korea ranked 102nd of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index (GGI), which measures gender-based disparities in education, health, welfare, the labor market and political empowerment. With a gender gap of 23% in its labor force participation, moreover, South Korea ranked 123rd in empowering women’s economic participation. Gender quotas in legislative offices were introduced in the early 1990s to boost women’s representation in politics. But political parties have been resistant to implementing these reforms and have not fully complied with the quota mandate for SMDs, meaning that, today, women make up only 19 percent of the parliament, a significantly smaller proportion compared to the global average of 22 percent.

What characterizes the recent uptick in backlash against women’s empowerment is that it is led by young men ([Kim and Kweon, 2022](#); [You, 2023](#)). To understand why young men

are driving gender backlash in South Korea, a few considerations are worth noting. First, young men are disproportionately impacted by increasing economic inequality. Indeed, [Kim and Kweon \(2022\)](#) finds that backlash against women’s empowerment is most pronounced among young men, who are also the most economically insecure. Second, this group is active on media and other online platforms, including male-dominated online communities that disseminate antifeminist views and misinformation ([Kim, 2022](#)).

Moreover, group-based comparisons are ubiquitous in South Korea. For example, young individuals often find themselves being the subject of comparisons by their parents.⁹ Media may amplify this by celebrating the success of individuals or by making explicit comparisons between different groups in their level of achievements. Often the subject of comparisons is a scarce yet highly desired resources, such as an admission to a prestigious university or a job, which may have far-reaching consequences. For instance, performance in the Korean College Scholastic Ability Test affects almost all aspects of one’s life outcomes, including a career, wage, and marriage prospects. Conversely, underperforming on the exam has been linked to suicide—[Wang \(2016\)](#), for instance, finds that students who under-perform on the Korean College Scholastic Ability Test vis-a-vis their expectations are 17% more likely to think about suicide than those who meet expectations. It’s also worth noting that while women still fare worse on nearly all outcomes compared to men, education gap has nearly closed—in fact, recent news reports have shown that the matriculation rate for college entrance was about 4.8 percentage points higher for women compared to men¹⁰. Korean women have recently begun to excel in major public service exams, making education and exam-based comparisons increasingly salient.

Our study examines the effect of one such resource: scores on standardized exams. Specifically, we examine the effects of underperformance on an English aptitude test that is widely used to allocate scarce resources. The English language has a significant meaning in Korea, as it is considered a symbol of privilege. The stakes of standardized exams are unusually high. For instance, many large corporations (such as the *chaebols*)—where most young Koreans aspire to work at—require individuals to score well in English aptitude tests and often have their own standardized corporate exams. For such reason, rules around standardized exams are frequently a source of political contention. Yet, their consequences on political outcomes are rarely studied.

4.4 Research Design

The overarching goal of this study is to estimate the effect of knowledge of gendered underperformance on standardized tests on measures of (1) conservative backlash and (2) gendered resentment. In theory, given the ubiquity of standardized examinations in South Korea, there ought to be many opportunities for studying this phenomenon “in the wild.” This

⁹https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/area_general/476453.html; <http://m.koreatimes.com/article/20101121/628821>

¹⁰<https://www.mk.co.kr/news/society/view/2021/07/706543/>

natural experimental approach faces at least two hurdles, however. First, few, if any, institutions that carry out standardized examinations would be interested in collaborating on a research project of this nature, given the motivating expectation that their test plays a role in motivating generally socially undesirable outcomes. Second, these settings do not allow researchers to manipulate what information is being shared to test-takers: recall that we are specifically interested in understanding what happens when young men are told they underperformed against women.

Given these challenges, we adopt an experimental approach. We embed identical behavioral experiments within two waves of a large-scale online survey we fielded. In our pilot, Study 1, we obtained a sample of 4,000 respondents from the online survey panel vendor Qualtrics, which maintains a large sample of respondents in South Korea. Study 1 contained both female and male respondents; otherwise, respondents were filtered on age, such that we only survey respondents between the ages of 18-40. Respondents were directed to a landing page to affirm their consent before beginning the questionnaire. After a series of questions measuring demographics and various standard psychological measures, respondents reached the experimental manipulation, described below. Afterwards, respondents were asked a series of questions gauging the outcomes of interest. Study 1 was designed to pilot five different experimental manipulations. Study 2 homed in on two of the experimental manipulations piloted in Study 1, focusing on a sample of 2,000 male South Korean respondents, also between the ages of 18-40, and also provided by Qualtrics. To probe mechanisms, we included additional post-treatment modules.

Before continuing, it is worth briefly digressing to discuss the research ethics around our study. Readers may be concerned about the potential for harm to the research participants given that we are subjecting them to an examination and manipulating whether they are told they did worse than their peers—a potentially upsetting experience. We offer three points in response. First, standardized examinations are genuinely ubiquitous in South Korea: in the course of applying for a private sector job, for instance, it is expected to take a test. This means that the intervention is not far removed from the day-to-day experience of life among South Korean young adults. Second, knowledge of gendered performance on these standardized tests is widely reported and commented upon, making the “information reveal” which constitutes our intervention not especially distinct from the what many young adults in South Korea regularly experience, although our experiment is likely to cue the salience of these differences. Third, we debriefed respondents at the end of the study, informing them of our intention with the research.

Experimental Manipulation

In our pilot, Study 1, respondents were randomly assigned to one of five treatment conditions.¹¹ In Study 2, we home in on two of those treatment conditions: (1) a benchmark

¹¹Specifically, we included (1) pure control, (2) placebo, (3) comparison to overall average, (4) comparison to opposite gender average, and (5) comparison to opposite gender average and prompt for reflection.

placebo group and (2) a condition in which respondents observe the average score of women in comparison to their own performance. We construct one further variable based on respondents’ scores on the examination to capture under-performance. Specifically, we use the gendered breakdown of average scores provided by on the TOEIC testing service’s website. Using these “benchmarks” we create variables capturing whether a given respondent under- or over-performed the opposite gender’s average score. As discussed below, to capture our estimand of interest, we focus on those who under-performed the reported average score for women (66.4% of respondents in the main estimation sample). Importantly, as well, after encountering the experimental manipulation, respondents answered a manipulation check question that asked respondents to recall their score on the examination. Our main results are subset to those who answered this question correctly.

To ensure exchangeability of treatment groups, we conduct a series of balance tests in which we compare the distribution of demographic traits of respondents, which we present in SA Section C.3. We benchmark against the placebo group (T2). Across 36 tests, results show only two statistically significant “imbalances” across demographic features—in this case the distribution of middle-income respondents—although the difference is slight in substantive terms.

Outcomes

We measure three genres of attitudes following the experimental manipulation. First, we probe respondents on a nine-item index capturing the extent to which the respondent believes men are treated unfairly in Korean society. We specifically segment these questions into three categories capturing (1) general male discrimination, (2) unfair marriage market, and (3) unfair expectation. These questions were measured on a five-point likert scale and collapsed to averages for the purposes of estimation, per our pre-analysis plan. The full text of the questions can be found in Appendix Section C.1. Second, we probed respondents’ inclination towards sexism, using the modern sexism scale, which we also measured on a seven-point likert scale and collapsed to averages (Swim et al., 1995). Third, we measure prospective indicators of political preference, capturing respondents’ inclination to support different parties in the upcoming election as well as their self-reported political identification.

Estimation

To capture the effect of revealing under-performance, benchmarked against the average of the opposite gender, our main estimation strategy relies on a split sample approach, as the theoretical treatment of interest is *under-performance*, rather than its relative effects vis-à-vis *over-performance*—an alternative estimand that would invoke an interaction model. In other words, our experimental manipulation involves *revealing* one’s relative performance, conditional on actual under-performance.¹² Our stated theoretical interest is in how men

¹²We pre-specified the average scores, which we took from a distribution of an actual TOEIC exam that was recently conducted. Note that we specified the exam for which we based off the average scores in our

respond to the knowledge of their relative performance. The equation below captures the effect of revealing under-performance (denoted by the subscript $-$) for men (denoted by the subscript m).

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_{(m,+/-)} \text{Reveal}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (4.1)$$

Here, Y_i is a vector capturing the relevant outcome of interest for respondent i . Reveal_i is a treatment assignment vector that takes one of two values corresponding to different treatments, with the baseline condition being the placebo treatment (“0”). If respondent i is assigned to the condition in which they are revealed their under-performance, this vector takes a “1.” Finally, $\beta_{(m,+/-)}$ is the parameter in which we are interested, and is the effect of revealing either under- or over-performance on the outcomes of interest for men. In the appendix and in exploratory analyses, We estimate analogous sets of equations for both women and *over*-performers, as well.¹³

4.5 Main Findings

Political Conservatism

To start, what is the effect of revealing to men that they under-performed? Recall that our benchmark “placebo” condition is one in which respondents completed the exam but were not told of others’ relative performance. In the treatment condition, we revealed the average score of the opposite gender. The design of our study enables us to narrowly capture the effect of revealing the score, holding constant individuals’ performance on the examination, as we observe the scores of applicants in the placebo condition, meaning we “control” for individuals’ underlying preparedness for the examination—a variable that is likely correlated with a host of underlying unobservable features that would otherwise confound inference.

We present the results in Table 4.1, which is subset to respondents who under-performed. We focus on three outcomes: (1) a five-point likert scale of partisanship, ranging from “very conservative” to “very liberal;” and (3) a binary variable capturing whether a respondent would vote for the conservative People Power Party in a legislative contest if the election were held today; and (3) a binary variable capturing respondents’ belief that the far-right PPP best represents the interest of men. We plot the the estimated treatment effects from Study 1 and 2, first, as well as including the pooled coefficient. Note that we did not field item (3) in Study 1. The coefficients plotted are the average treatment effects of revealing respondents’ comparative performance on the standardized test on the above-described outcomes.

Next, we look at two outcomes capturing respondents’ intention to vote for the conservative People Power Party. Looking at the pooled estimate, we see a 5.2 percentage point increase in intention to vote for the conservative People Power Party among men who were

pre-analysis plan.

¹³We also discuss deviations from our pre-registered analysis plan in Appendix C.2.

Table 4.1: Effect of Revealing Under-Performance on Political Conservatism, Among Men

	Partisanship: Conservative (1-5)		Vote Choice: PPP (1/0)		Represents Men: PPP (1/0)	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Wave 1	0.359**	0.166	0.110	0.072	NA	NA
Wave 2	0.062	0.052	0.039	0.026	0.06**	0.03
Pooled	0.058**	0.048	0.052**	0.024	0.06**	0.03

Note: This table presents the average treatment effect of revealing under-performance on measures of political conservatism for respondents who are men. All point estimates benchmarked against the placebo condition. All standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

informed that they had underperformed women and were asked to reflect on why ($p = 0.028$). Strikingly, compared to those in the placebo condition, underperforming men who were told about the performance of women were no less likely to have voted in the past presidential election, nor were they more likely to have voted for the People Power Party in the previous legislative election, suggesting the manipulation alone is driving the shift in political preferences and interest.

What explains the increased political conservatism among men who under-performed against women—and were told? For one, it may reflect a updating in the beliefs of young men who, upon observing an academic disadvantage, believe that progressive values are misaligned with their material interests. As parties have divided along gender ideology in recent elections, young men may be coming to see the conservative People Power Party as better representing their prospects for career and economic advancement—perhaps doubly so in the face of evidence that they are poorly positioned to outperform women in the tournament for increasingly scarce and thus coveted jobs. We probe this possibility in Study 2, asking respondents to reflect on whether the conservative PPP or the liberal DPK better represents the interests of men in South Korea. In the last column of Table 4.1, we show that men who were told they under-performed women on the examination report a 6.0 percentage point increase in the likelihood of stating that the conservative PPP better represents men than the more liberal DPK.

One possibility worth emphasizing is that the effects on hypothetical vote choice may even be depressed: over the months between the two studies (July 2023 and December 2023), the conservative and PPP-aligned Yoon Suk Yeol administration has been criticized for failing to meet its campaign promise of abolishing the Ministry for Gender Equality and Family in South Korea. Yet, male voters are still likely to view the PPP as the party that will deliver policies favorable to men. Given these countervailing forces, especially when considering knowledge of women’s performance on standard examinations is already salient in Korean society, that these estimate are likely running up against ceiling effects and are thus understatements of their true scale.

Sexism and Perceptions of Male Discrimination

What explains these findings, especially the uptick in political conservatism among underperforming men? In advance of Study 1, our pre-registered expectation was that under-performance would indeed generate a conservative backlash that would operate through an increase in attitudinal measures of gendered resentment: as men learn they perform worse than women, they become frustrated at their relative position and are thus nudged to support chauvinist politicians and their parties to protect their worldview.

To probe this possibility we first look at the impact of our manipulation on a battery of questions gauging perceptions of male discrimination in Korean society. Many of these statements have been circulated on social media and in the popular press as challenges that uniquely and unfairly affect men, such as the requirement that they serve for two years in the military—a condition that critics allege holds men back in their academic and career development. Our measures capture three distinct categories.¹⁴ First, we measure perceptions of general male discrimination, which captures the view that men are unfairly discriminated against in, say, hiring decisions. The second measure captures perceptions of inequality in the marriage market, where men may perceive a disadvantage in attracting partners owing to societal expectations that they serve as the primary breadwinner, for instance. The third component of the index captures perceptions of unfair societal expectations of men; here we include the measure regarding the expectation that men serve in the military, for example. Our main measure is an aggregated average of the nine items.

Table 4.2: Effect of Revealing Under-Performance on Perceptions of Male Discrimination and Sexism Among Men

	Male Discrimination Perceptions Index		Modern Sexism Index	
	β	SE	β	SE
Wave 1	-0.196	0.120	-0.136	0.096
Wave 2	0.044	0.042	0.033	0.037
Pooled	0.040	0.038	0.025	0.033

Note: This table presents the average treatment effect of revealing under-performance on measures of perceptions of male discrimination and modern sexism index for respondents who are men. All point estimates benchmarked against the placebo condition. All standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

We present the results in the left hand panel of Table 4.2. Looking at men who underperformed on the examination and were told of their relative position vis-a-vis the performance of their gendered outgroup were, if anything, *less likely* to indicate support for the measures capturing perceptions of male discrimination. Specifically, focusing on the results

¹⁴For instance, see [here](#).

from Study 1, compared to under-performing men who were not told of their relative position, men who under-performed and were then told of women’s average score saw a 5.4% drop in an index capturing perceptions of male discrimination ($p = 0.103$), although the results are not statistically significant. Decomposing the index components, these effects appear to be driven by a decline in the perception of general male discrimination as well as a drop in the perception that men are discriminated against in marriage markets. The results pooled across both Study 1 and 2 reveal that—despite leading to an uptick in support for conservative parties—it appears not to be driven by a corresponding increase in perceptions that men are discriminated against in Korean society ($p = 0.29$).

To further confirm the idea that revealing one’s gendered under-performance on an examination does not stoke gendered animus, we also look at the impact of our intervention on measures drawn from the modern sexism scale (Swim et al., 1995). These measures capture respondents’ latent sexism towards women, and have recently been taken up by political scientists to measure backlash attitudes toward women (Anduiza and Rico, 2022; Kim and Kweon, 2022). If knowledge of gendered under-performance on standardized testing is motivating men to support conservative political parties without also activating a sense of gendered animus, there ought to be little movement on these measures. To be sure, some of these measures capture perceptions of the extent of discrimination faced by women. But the items in general circle around capturing respondents’ views of women—rather than our original battery of questions measuring attitudes about men’s experiences—and can thus be understood as a clearer signal of respondents’ grievances towards women.

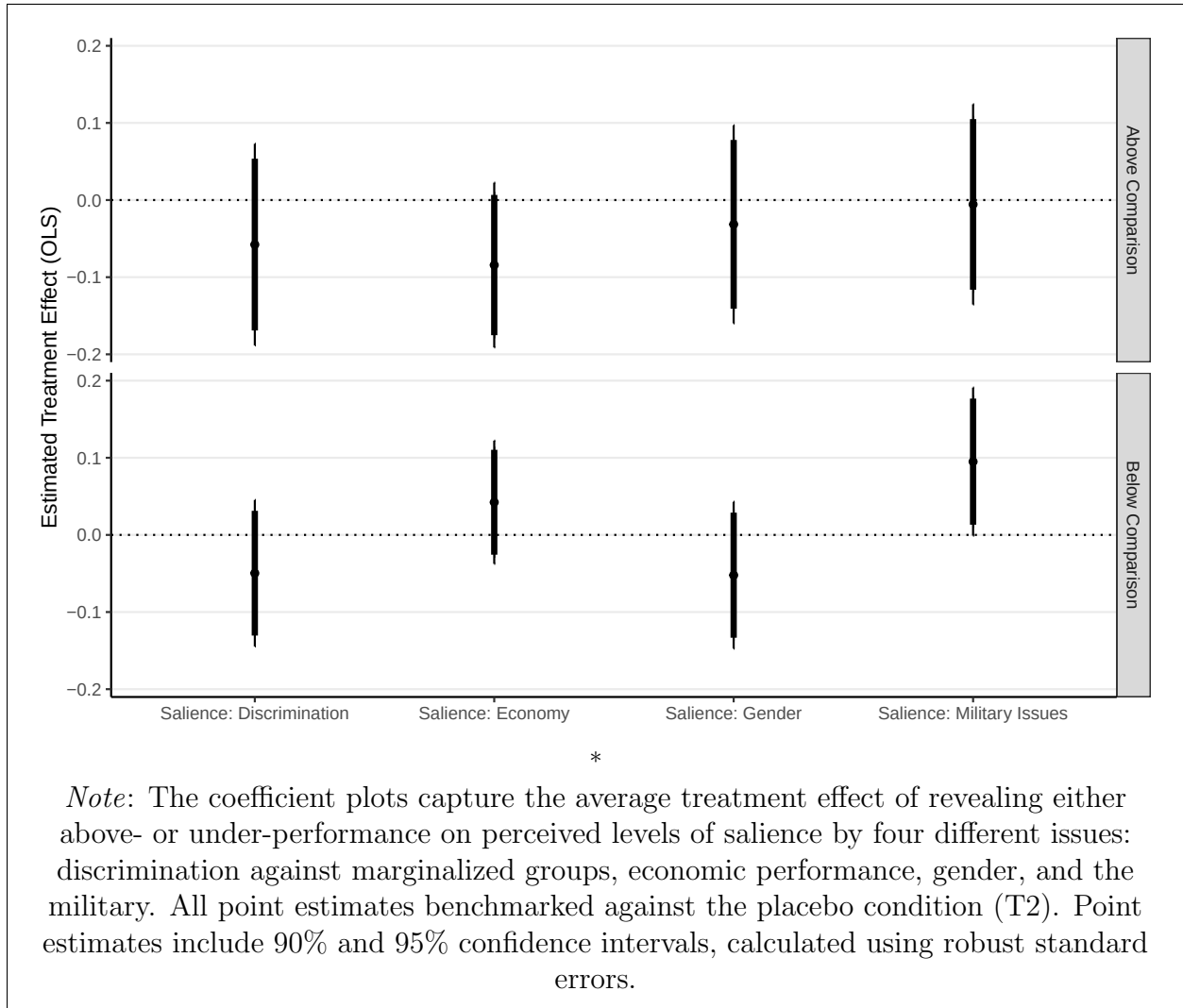
We present the results in the right hand panel of Table 4.2. Again, the coefficients capture the effect of the main experimental manipulation in Study 1 and 2, benchmarked against the placebo condition in which respondents’ scores were revealed but were not given information against which they could compare their scores. We show the estimated effects for indexed components of the modern sexism inventory. As before, we are chiefly interested in the effect of a respondent learning they under-performed the referent group (i.e., the outgroup average). Here, again, there are no statistically significant effects on measures capturing men’s sexism after learning they under-performed women.

Mechanisms

If sexism fails to explain the increased conservatism among men who learned they under-performed, what does? To answer this question, we included additional questions in our second study to probe the relationship between relative performance on standardized exams and heightened political conservatism. Specifically, we asked respondents to evaluate the severity of various issues facing South Korea, assess the effectiveness of political parties in addressing these issues, and share their perspectives on prominent South Korean politicians.

Figure 4.4 illustrates the effect of revealing either above- or under-performance on perceived levels of salience of four issue areas: discrimination against marginalized groups (discrimination), unemployment and economic growth (economy), gender equality and women’s

Figure 4.4: Effect of Under/Over-Performance on Perceived Issue Salience, Among Men



rights (gender), military (military).¹⁵ Of these issues, we only observe shifts in in perceptions around the military (see bottom panel of Figure 4.4). Specifically, men who were informed of their under-performance became 0.095 units more likely to state that the issues regarding the military are serious compared to men who were not informed ($p < 0.10$). In contrast, we do not observe any statistically or substantively meaningful shift among those who over-performed relative to the average woman (see top panel of Figure 4.4).

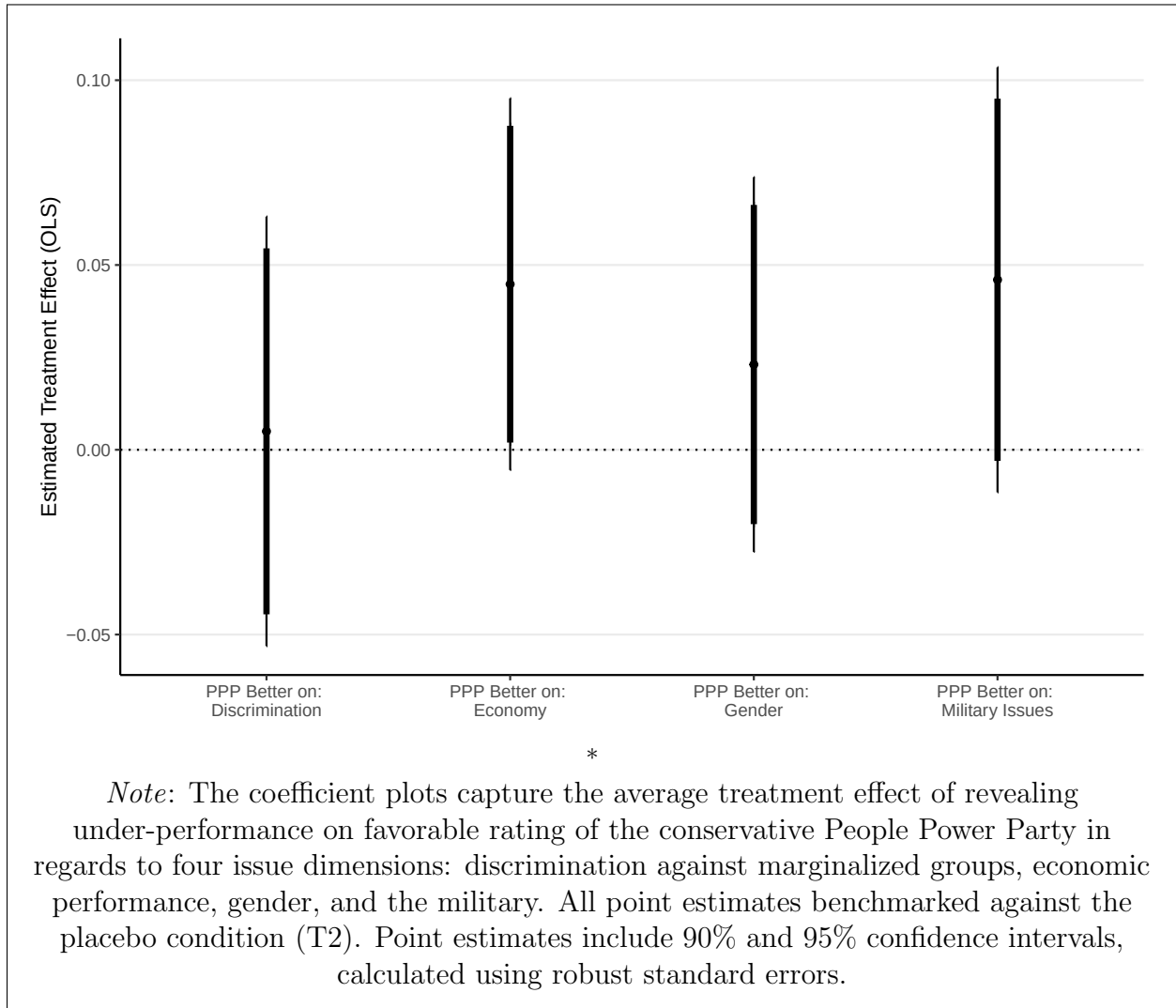
¹⁵We also asked respondents to rate their perceived salience on other issues including education, poverty/inequality, religion, and climate. We focus on the four issue areas that we deemed most relevant.

Another issue dimension where we observe an uptick—though modest—in perceived salience revolves around economic concerns, namely unemployment and economic growth. Though the effect size is small, and not statistically distinguishable from zero, results suggest that examination failure increases the salience of military issues, presumably around the economic impact of mandatory service. We observe an opposite pattern among those who over-performed—learning that one scored higher than the average woman caused individuals to perceive economic issues less seriously (again, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that the effect is different from zero).

Lending additional support to this interpretation, the same set of men provide a more favorable evaluation of the conservative People Power Party in its ability to handle issues concerning the economy (see Figure 4.5). Upon learning of their under-performance in a standardized exam, male respondents are more likely to state that the PPP, compared to the Democratic Party, is better equipped to handle economic issues by 4.48 percentage points ($p < 0.10$). We do not find the same pattern when it comes to issues surrounding discrimination and gender, suggesting that material concerns are driving the results. In other words, young men, upon learning of their under-performance in exams, are more likely to support the conservative party and identify as a conservative because they perceive doing so would be in their interest. This is also consistent with our earlier finding which showed that the same set of young men are more likely to believe that the PPP better represents the interests of men compared any other political party in South Korea ($p < 0.05$).

Lastly, we find that under-performance in standardized exams can directly impact individuals' evaluation of political candidates. Figure 4.6 illustrates these results. To measure respondents' support for politicians, we employ a feeling thermometer, a widely used scale that is used to rate one's affective polarization toward a person or subject. Specifically, we ask respondents to rate how cold or warm they feel toward six politicians who vary along dimensions of gender and political ideology. We find that information about one's under-performance leads to a general decline in support for (as measured by warmth toward) politicians who are either women or liberal and an increase in feelings of warmth for politicians who are men or conservative. The most striking difference is the difference in the effects of information about under-performance on feelings toward Lee Jae-myung, the current leader of the liberal DPK, and Lee Jun-seok, previous leader of the conservative PPP and a major proponent of men's rights. Individuals feelings toward Lee Jae-myung, on a scale of 0-100, became 3.60 points cooler ($p < 0.10$), while their feelings toward Lee Jun-seok became 3.08 points warmer ($p < 0.10$). These results also suggest that voters are more inclined to follow leaders than parties, at least when it comes to gender issues in South Korea—while men become more supportive of Lee Jun-seok, we do not find evidence that they become more favorable of either Lee Hye-hoon, a prominent female politician in the PPP or Yoon Suk Yeol, the current president from whom Lee has drifted apart from since the presidential election. Indeed, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that under-performing young men are no more likely to become favorable toward politicians who are conservative or men, simply for their ascriptive traits (see the bottom panel under “Collapsed Items” in Figure 4.6). What we observe is a limited shift in political support for male and conserva-

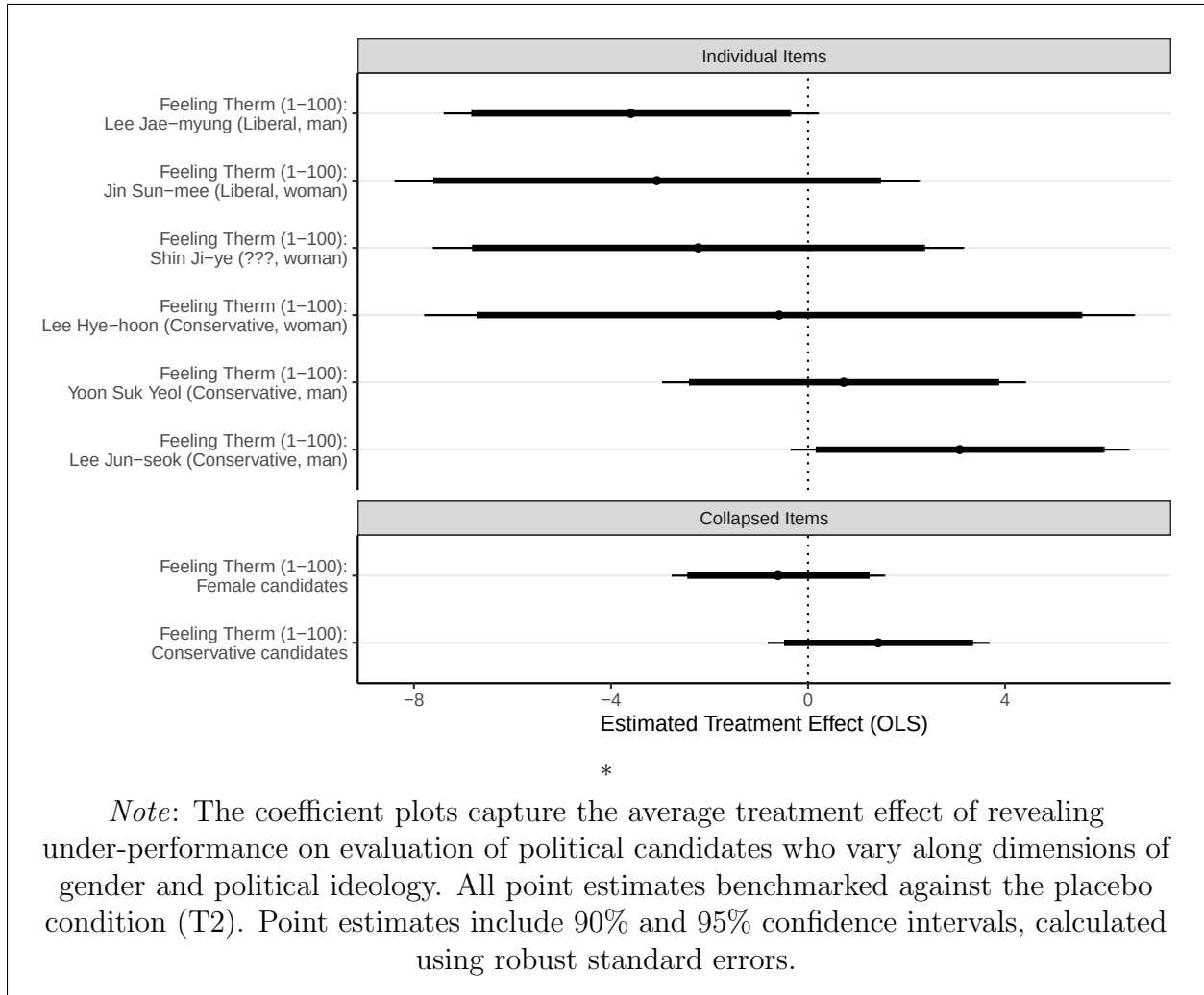
Figure 4.5: Effect of Over/Under-Performance on Evaluation of Political Parties, Among Men



tive politicians, driven by increased (decreased) support politicians known to espouse men's (women's) interests.¹⁶

¹⁶This finding is consistent with some recent research on gender in South Korea. A conjoint experiment involving hypothetical political candidates by (Lee and Sambanis, 2022), for instance, shows that men are less likely to choose politicians who espouse gender equality regardless of the candidate's gender.

Figure 4.6: Effect of Under-Performance on Evaluation of Politicians, Among Men



4.6 Robustness and Extensions

Our results suggest that gendered underperformance on standardized examinations is a powerful signal of group threat for young men. We document how knowledge of underperforming women on a standardized test motivates a conservative backlash. But, importantly, we detect no evidence that this backlash is driven by an uptick in measures of grievance or resentment. Instead, if anything, our results suggest that underperforming men are updating their updating their views on the prevalence of male discrimination—in a downward direction. Our preferred interpretation is that the group threat stimulated by gender differences in standardized examination performance stokes a conservative backlash without occasioning the

animus and resentment typically thought to accompany such swings. Instead, conservative politicians may be winning young men’s votes simply on the recognition that their economic prospects are threatened and conservative parties promise to boost their job prospects.

In this section, we present additional analyses extending these findings and probing their robustness. To start, skeptics may wonder if our results are indeed driven by the experience of underperformance, rather than a broader priming effect derived from the experience of taking any standardized test. To examine this possibility, recall that in our first study, the experimental manipulation included a group assigned a “pure control,” in which respondents did not take a standardized test. In SA Figure C.1 we estimate the effect of being assigned to any of the four treatment groups that took the standardized test, benchmarked against a pure control group that did not take an exam, looking at the primary and secondary outcomes. We find no effect for men, suggesting there is no priming effect of taking an examination independent of its outcome. However, treatments involving a standardized examination increased women’s perception that men face discrimination, suggesting that the simple experience of taking a standardized examination primes women to broader conversations ongoing in South Korea around gender and economic opportunities.

One productive avenue for further inquiry concerns understanding the subgroups for which the experience of under-performance is most meaningful. It might be the case, for instance, that young men who harbor a sense of thwarted ambition may be especially susceptible to appeals from conservative politicians that prey on a latent sense of economic scarcity or resentment. Relatedly, recall that military service is compulsory for young men, but not women, in South Korea. This has led to a widespread sense of frustration on the part of young men who believe women are given a longer runway to develop their economic prospects. Yet, some young men are able to fulfill this requirement through supplementary service or obtain outright exemptions, offering an opportunity to probe whether under-performance heightens the conservative politicians’ appeal according to one’s status as a veteran.¹⁷ In sum, we investigate a series of heterogeneous treatment effects—leveraging respondents’ (1) employment status, (2) whether or not respondents believe themselves to have fallen short of their educational goals, and (3) experience in the military.

First, we examine the differences in effects of revealing under-performance by employment status (see Figure C.4). Unemployed men are 22.9 percentage points more likely to perceive military issues as being serious ($p = 0.053$) and 13.7 percentage points more likely to state that the PPP is better equipped to manage issues concerning the economy ($p = 0.018$). Such effects are not detected among men who are employed nor among those who performed above the average woman. As a whole, these patterns provide additional evidence that economic concerns are shaping men’s policy preferences as well as political views.

We find a similar pattern when it comes to subjective educational status, as shown in Figure C.5. Specifically, we examine the treatment effects separately for men whose educa-

¹⁷Reasons for military exemptions are varied. Exemptions are given to men with a disability or chronic disease, professional athletes and artists with notable accomplishments. Expert researchers in science or technology and physicians are also able to fulfill the military requirement through a supplemental service in their field of knowledge.

tional aspiration has been met and for men whose educational aspiration has not been met, calculated by taking the difference between the level of university one aspired to attend and that one actually attended. For those whose aspirations exceeded their objective educational achievement, we find that under-performance heightens the salience of military issues, and increases intended vote choice for the conservative PPP.

Lastly, when we examine the heterogeneous treatment effects by respondents' experience in the military, a striking pattern emerges for those who have been exempt from the military (see Figure C.6). We find that revealing over-performance for men who have been exempt from military service leads them to view the PPP less favorably; these men are *less* likely to state that the PPP performs better on issues concerning discrimination, economy, gender and—although marginally statistically significant—military issues. Additionally, exempt men are less likely to identify as politically conservative and less likely to believe that the PPP best represents men's interests. Yet, the attitudes of exempt men who find out that they under-performed vis-a-vis women remain largely unchanged.

In contrast, military veterans tend to view the PPP more favorably regarding their ability to manage economic issues. They are also more inclined to identify as politically conservative and believe that the PPP is the most capable of representing men's interests. And while fail to detect attitudinal shift among over-performing veterans, we do among under-performing veterans do. A key takeaway from this analysis is that individuals' responses to their relative performance depend on their own circumstances. Military veterans, possibly perceiving themselves at a disadvantage in the job market compared to women, react to information about their under-performance with increased political conservatism. In contrast, information revealing their over-performance does not prompt attitudinal shifts. Conversely, men exempt from military service, who may not sense such a disadvantage, are less likely to adopt a conservative stance even upon learning about their under-performance relative to the average woman. This suggests that the absence of a clear entity to blame may be sufficient in preventing a conservative backlash.

4.7 Conclusion

In this study, we show that standardized test performing can be a powerful tool for motivating gendered group threat, and a source of a conservative backlash among young men in South Korea. Using two survey experiments, we find that when men are told that they underperformed women on a frequently-used standardized exam in Korean society, they are more likely to exhibit conservative gender ideology. They are also more likely to profess a preference for a conservative party, which they perceive as better equipped at addressing their grievances.

Underperforming in an exam invokes economic anxieties. Interestingly, the types of anxieties that are summoned are closely tied to the identity and shared experiences of young men. Specifically, in the Korean context, we find that underperforming men are much more likely to point to "military issues" as a key concern. Conservative parties and right-wing

politicians frequently utilize rhetoric that highlights men’s mandatory conscription as a reason for providing them with economic advantages and giving women a disadvantage in the labor market. As such, learning of one’s underperformance increases support for parties or candidates who they see as likely to address their identity-specific grievances. Indeed, men who are told of their underperformance, they are more likely to rate PPP as better equipped to handle economic and military issues and more likely to represent men’s interests.

In contrast to canonical models of group threat, we find that group threat need not be accompanied by animus toward an outgroup. Upon learning of their under-performance, men do not perceive this as unfair or become more resentful of women, as one might suspect. However, they are still likely to seek political means to express their grievances and seek redress. Our results suggest that faced with increasingly challenging labor market conditions exacerbated by exam competition, men may choose to support chauvinist politicians who promise to improve their situation through targeted policy interventions. Voting becomes a tool through which they attempt to maintain their advantageous position in society.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion to the Dissertation

Proponents of the modernization theory predicted that industrialization and economic growth will cause societies to adopt more socially progressive values ([Lipset, 1963](#)), including support for gender equality ([Marx, 1973](#)). Many studies have since challenged this model, arguing that cultural values are persistent and independent of economic changes ([Jayachandran, 2021](#)). They argue that cultural heritage, such as religion and Confucianism, leaves an indelible mark that cannot be undone by economic growth ([Huntington, 1993](#); [Weber, 2003](#)). Others have contended that while the relationship may not be linear, the general trend tends to hold. [Inglehart and Baker \(2000\)](#), for example, maintain that while cultural heritage does matter, economic growth is positively associated with a more secular-rational worldview once it is “controlled for.”

This dissertation challenges all three views. Rather than viewing gender attitudes as an outcome of economic growth *or* cultural heritage, I argue that it should be studied as a process of constant negotiation and interaction between the two. A complete assessment should take the complexities of this relationship into account. The case of South Korea is illustrative of such dynamics. First, it shows that economic growth does not always bring about more progressive social values. Although some progress has been made with respect to women’s rights over the past few decades, it remains one of the most gender unequal countries in the world despite being one of the richest.

By tracing its history, I demonstrate that the strategies states implemented in their developmental pursuits, along with existing societal norms, played significant roles in shaping the trajectory of women’s empowerment in South Korea. Chapter 2 shows that demographic policies, implemented as part of the nation’s economic development agenda, had the unintended consequence of harming women on the short term—through the abortion of female fetuses, infanticide, and neglect of baby girls—and in the long term, by creating conditions prone to backlash against women’s empowerment years later. Patrilineal norms were critical in shaping this path. It is worth highlighting that many countries where such demographic policies were actively promoted were also those where patrilineal norms were deeply rooted. There is irony in that governments—often authoritarian-led—endeavored to promote “modern” ideas of family and sexuality even as they effectively coerced individuals to have fewer

children. Thus, this chapter highlights how economic growth and social norms are not to be analyzed as independent causes, but as constraints through which individuals navigate. These forces interact to produce changes in the labor market and demographic composition of citizens that can shape the values that people come to hold (or resist) and, furthermore, the types of policies they demand. Only by drawing out the tension between the modern and traditional norms, and how they clash with economic pressures, can we begin understanding how they influence women's empowerment.

Chapter 3 illustrates that even the most deeply entrenched cultural heritages do not produce uniform effects on individuals. I focus on the friction between liberalizing attitudes among women who choose to opt out of marriage and traditional norms that constrain both women's and men's choices before and within marriage. My interviews with young men and women revealed significant differences in how the two genders view marriage. These diverging preferences reflect how individuals navigate constraints posed by societal/familial norms and economic conditions.

Bound by conservative norms concerning marriage and increasing economic expectations, women find it impossible to fulfill the duties that come with marriage. They also perceive fewer benefits to marriage as their economic opportunities have expanded, providing them with an alternative: opting out of the marriage market by not marrying at all. Conversely, these constraints shape men's behavior differently. Compared to women, men do not find marriage to be a costly endeavor. Not marrying, on the other hand, defies expectations that men must become breadwinners and, especially among first-born sons, continue the ancestral line. These diverging preferences have exacerbated the marriage market squeeze, intensifying the backlash against women's empowerment.

In the final empirical chapter (Chapter 4), I show how economic pressures can prompt a conservative backlash. Underperformance in a hyper-competitive economic environment can activate group threat, leading individuals—particularly young men—to support conservative parties that they perceive as more favorable to their in-group. As underperformance in the education system can have a decisive impact on men's economic and marital prospects, some men become more susceptible to targeted policy interventions that favor men at the expense of women's empowerment. While underperformance in an exam is not a sufficient cause of gender conservatism, it can contribute to gender backlash as political parties and entrepreneurs appeal to their grievances, promising to uplift them at the expense of women's empowerment.

This dissertation is the product of extensive fieldwork and is thus influenced by specific aspects of South Korea. However, its lessons have implications that extend far beyond South Korea. First, its findings may apply to countries that have prioritized economic growth, particularly those that have sought to promote growth through demographic policies and programs, such as China, India, and Iran. Countries that have the "missing women" problem may especially fall prey to backlash against women's empowerment.

Second, even in societies that do not have a demographic excess of men, many are still characterized by deeply-rooted patriarchal norms. In these contexts, women may choose to opt out of marriage when faced with disadvantageous terms. Indeed, the 4B move-

ment—a feminist movement that rejects marriage, dating, having sex, or having children with men—that began in South Korea is spreading to other countries, including the United States. Thus, the marriage market squeeze may play a growing role in understanding the backlash against women’s empowerment observed in various countries around the world. That women face backlash for exercising their right not to marry or have children, or for rejecting disadvantageous terms of marriage, is a problem political scientists and policymakers should pay heed to. Efforts to change norms and constraints regarding marriage for both men and women must therefore be pursued to address this concern.

This dissertation is also relevant to political scientists studying right-wing populism and democratic backsliding. The world has been observing growing accounts of right-wing populists using chauvinistic narratives to win political support, threatening the health of democracy globally. In South Korea, for example, recent elections have been devoid of policy debates or discussions of democratic values and ideals.

Examining the causes that trigger reversals in women’s rights is therefore an essential step in advancing our knowledge of democratic backsliding. While safeguarding rights is a fundamental characteristic of democracy, much of the research on democratic backsliding has predominantly focused on electoral outcomes. This has often neglected the cultural and economic changes that politicians manipulate to harm specific groups, particularly women. Thus, understanding the factors that lead to setbacks in women’s rights is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of democratic backsliding.

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Appendix A

Supplemental Materials for *The Unintended Consequences of Demographic Policies for Women's Empowerment*

A.1 Robustness checks

To test the robustness of the results from my observational data analysis, I conduct the following falsification tests. First, I examine whether results are consistent to using different polynomials in the sharp regression discontinuity design. Using polynomial degrees of 1, 2, and 3, I find largely consistent results. Results are shown in Table [A.1](#).

A.2 Robustness checks 2

Second, I conduct covariate tests to examine whether there is null regression discontinuity effects on predetermined variables that may affect both the treatment receipt (marriage market squeeze) and gender backlash attitudes. As Table [A.2](#) shows, I fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is a difference between pre-1985 and post-1985 cohorts on the following characteristics: having some college education (college enrollment rate is 73.8% in South Korea, and thus it is not likely that one would enroll in a college to be relieved of the marriage market squeeze), having a religion (dummy variable), being a Protestant, Catholic, or Buddhist, and being born in an urban area. Furthermore, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups with respect to their political ideology as well as the political ideology of the region that they were born in.

Third, I use a density test to examine whether the number of observations below and above the cutoff are not statistically significantly different from 0. This test provides additional evidence that individuals are not able to manipulate the receipt of the treatment

Table A.1: Sharp regression discontinuity design results using different polynomials

DV: Backlash Index	Bandwidth=CER			Bandwidth=MSE		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Point estimate	0.542**	0.659*	0.712	0.513***	0.727***	0.826**
P-value	0.0156	0.0755	0.26	0.00722	0.012	0.0355
95% Conf Interval (left)	0.115	-0.0723	-0.539	0.172	0.18	0.0593
95% Conf Interval (right)	1.103	1.48	1.999	1.097	1.461	1.684
Bandwidth	3.734	4.282	5.536	5.527	6.703	8.56
Order polyn.	1	2	3	1	2	3
Obs. (left)	144	203	253	253	296	391
Obs. (right)	138	183	212	212	232	276
Covariates	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; Covariates are included in all models. * p<0.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

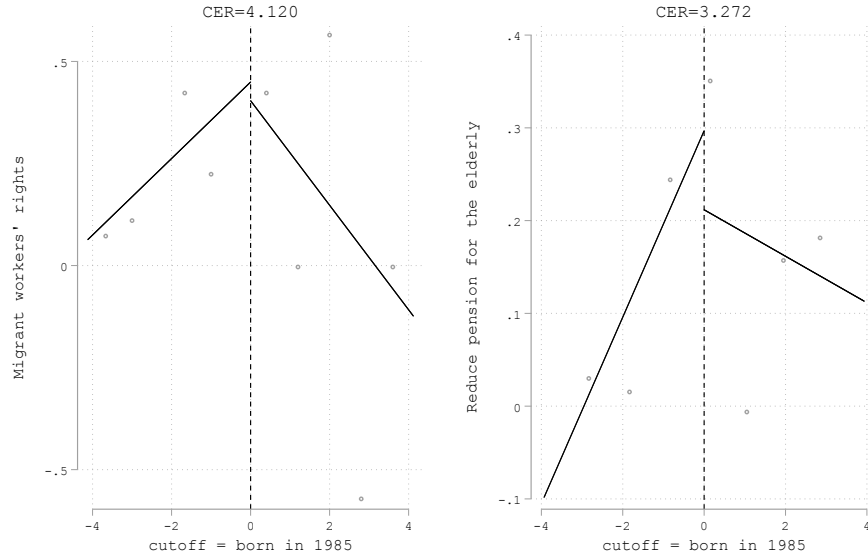
(which is already unlikely given one cannot manipulate the year in which he or she is born). Following ?, I perform a simple Bernoulli test within the neighborhood around the cutoff, setting a probability of “success” equal to 1/2. The p-value from the test is 0.654; thus I cannot reject the null that the the number of treated observations in the chosen neighborhood is compatible with what would have been observed if units had been assigned to the treatment group with a 50% probability. In other words, there is no sorting around the cutoff.

Table A.2: Sharp regression discontinuity design for covariates

	some college	religion	urban	region pid	pid	protestant	catholic	buddhist
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Point estimate	0.007	0.0604	0.048	0.00822	-0.0571	0.0419	0.0242	-0.0128
P-value	0.941	0.278	0.151	0.624	0.701	0.404	0.374	0.844
95% CI (left)	-0.108	-0.0615	-0.0229	-0.0264	-0.28	-0.0574	-0.0413	-0.11
95% CI (right)	0.0998	0.214	0.149	0.044	0.188	0.143	0.11	0.0903
Bandwidth	5.612	6.066	5.975	6.704	7.428	7.414	6.699	6.635
Order polyn.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Obs. (left)	823	986	823	986	1134	1161	986	986
Obs. (right)	714	810	714	810	860	881	810	810

Fourth, I conduct the RD analysis using different outcome variables: attitudes toward migrants and pension for the elderly. As Figure A.1 illustrates, I find that the imbalance in the sex-ratio induced by the technological policy shock does not produce effects that are statistically significantly.

Figure A.1: Effects of policy-induced marriage market squeeze on gender backlash



Lastly, I test if the RD estimates are null around an arbitrary cut-off. If the effects are driven by treatment (being born on or after 1985), then I should not observe the same type of jump at the cut-off when I use a different cut-off. Indeed, the results are null using arbitrary cut-offs of 1981, 1983, 1987, and 1989, as shown in Table A.3.

Table A.3: Continuity-based regression discontinuity design results

DV: Backlash	Bandwidth=CER				Bandwidth=MSE			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Point estimate	-0.0397	0.0676	0.181	0.0496	-0.149	0.148	0.254	-0.129
P-value	0.951	0.926	0.605	0.941	0.647	0.775	0.332	0.541
95% C.I. (left)	-0.573	-0.646	-0.601	-0.679	-0.593	-0.506	-0.333	-0.792
95% C.I. (right)	0.538	0.71	1.033	0.732	0.368	0.679	0.986	0.416
Bandwidth	3.921	3.994	2.759	3.925	5.827	5.935	4.1	5.833
Order polyn.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Obs. (left)	173	114	103	121	280	227	205	197
Obs. (right)	170	165	177	134	253	217	253	183
Covariates	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Cut-off	1981	1983	1987	1989	1981	1983	1987	1989

Appendix B

Supplemental Materials for *The Main Squeeze: A Constricting Marriage Market Backlash Against Women's Empowerment*

B.1 Treatment

Figure B.1: The Marriage Market Squeeze Treatment

최근 조사에 따르면 미혼 응답자 579명 중 결혼 의향이 여자가 남자에 비해 매우 낮은 것으로 나타났습니다. 또한 20-30대중 결혼을 해야한다고 응답한 비율은 남자가 여자보다 약 세배가 높았습니다.

귀하께서는 이러한 남녀간 미스매치가 얼마나 심각한 문제라고 생각하시나요?

- ☐ 전혀 심각하지 않다
- ☐ 별로 심각하지 않다
- ☐ 조금 심각하다
- ☐ 상당히 심각하다
- ☐ 매우 심각하다

Note: In this treatment, respondents are told that “According to a recent survey of 579 people, women were much less willing to get married compared to men. Men in their 20s and 30s, compared to their female counterparts, were about three times more likely to state that they think that they should get married.” They are then asked to answer the following question: “How serious of a problem is this mismatch between men and women?” Response options: [(1) Not at all serious - (5) Extremely serious]. This treatment was inspired by the following article: [link](#)

B.2 Descriptive Statistics & Balance Test

Outcomes and Question Text

Table B.1: Factor analysis loadings

Item	Index: Institutional backlash	Index: Attitudinal backlash
Past discrimination	0.43	-0.35
Revamp gender ministry	0.36	0.06
Limit corporate gender quota	0.54	-0.32
Abolish legislative gender quota	0.79	0.25
Abolish gender ministry	0.72	0.17
Protect sexual violence offenders	0.37	-0.32
Lay off women	-0.01	0.65
Woman should take care of family	0.20	0.72
Woman needs children	0.15	0.65

**Note:* The table presents factor loadings from a factor analysis of the nine items used to measure backlash.

Balance Tests

Table B.2: Balance test

	Placebo	Marriage market squeeze	Marriage market inequality	Both	P-value
Age: 30s	0.560	0.634	0.585	0.578	0.163
Married	0.310	0.345	0.293	0.341	0.297
Educ: elementary	0.002	0.000	0.005	0.005	0.548
Educ: middle school	0.005	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.874
Educ: high school	0.189	0.173	0.194	0.172	0.772
Educ: professional schools	0.123	0.132	0.122	0.146	0.718
Educ: university	0.612	0.596	0.605	0.599	0.968
Educ: masters	0.057	0.090	0.061	0.055	0.136
Educ: phd	0.012	0.007	0.011	0.021	0.307
Military veteran	0.853	0.905	0.840	0.847	0.023
Subjective Income	3.108	3.050	3.059	3.045	0.755
Income: less than 25	0.157	0.099	0.133	0.134	0.100
Income: 25-35	0.125	0.156	0.144	0.181	0.151
Income: 35-50	0.189	0.168	0.183	0.141	0.249
Income: 50-60	0.147	0.151	0.172	0.181	0.490
Income: 60-70	0.143	0.184	0.160	0.167	0.435
Income: over 70	0.238	0.241	0.208	0.196	0.293
Social media: none	0.130	0.106	0.108	0.115	0.699
Social media: less than 1 hour	0.337	0.291	0.327	0.291	0.339
Social media: 1-2 hours	0.275	0.288	0.296	0.325	0.457
Social media: 2-3 hours	0.145	0.137	0.111	0.150	0.327
Social media: over 3 hours	0.113	0.177	0.158	0.119	0.020
Dummy: have siblings	0.833	0.837	0.833	0.850	0.901
Dummy: First-born son	0.597	0.582	0.603	0.556	0.518
Pre-treated Values: marriage	4.130	4.280	4.208	4.224	0.078
Pre-treated Values: children	4.181	4.233	4.156	4.186	0.759
Proportion	0.241	0.250	0.262	0.248	

*Note: Income is in 100 KRW. The p-value noted in the last column is the p-value from a t-test of the differences of the means of each of the listed variables across each treatment arm.

B.3 Additional Analyses

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Table B.3: Heterogeneous treatment effects on backlash, by marital status

	(1)	(2)
	Attitudinal backlash	Institutional backlash
MMS	0.028 (0.081)	0.117 (0.088)
Inequality	0.111 (0.078)	0.065 (0.075)
MMS & Inequality	0.018 (0.079)	0.111 (0.081)
MMS $\times$ Unmarried and 30s	0.289** (0.134)	0.161 (0.149)
Inequality $\times$ Unmarried and 30s	0.135 (0.127)	-0.127 (0.132)
MMS & Inequality $\times$ Unmarried and 30s	0.257* (0.140)	-0.070 (0.152)
Unmarried and 30s	-0.243*** (0.092)	0.072 (0.093)
Constant	-0.059 (0.054)	-0.028 (0.052)
Observations	1468	1468

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table B.4: Heterogeneous treatment effects on backlash among unmarried men in their thirties, by jangnam

	(1)	(2)
	Attitudinal backlash	Institutional backlash
MMS	0.258 (0.172)	-0.114 (0.239)
Inequality	0.281 (0.190)	-0.231 (0.185)
MMS & Inequality	-0.025 (0.193)	-0.221 (0.281)
MMS $\times$ Jangnam	0.084 (0.215)	0.529* (0.277)
Inequality $\times$ Jangnam	-0.036 (0.224)	0.238 (0.227)
MMS & Inequality $\times$ Jangnam	0.397* (0.237)	0.357 (0.317)
Jangnam	-0.194 (0.157)	-0.361** (0.155)
Constant	-0.161 (0.128)	0.309** (0.123)
Observations	448	448

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table B.5: Heterogeneous treatment effects on backlash among unmarried men in their thirties, by relative deprivation

	(1)	(2)
	Attitudinal backlash	Institutional backlash
MMS	0.325** (0.144)	0.245 (0.179)
Inequality	0.209* (0.125)	-0.090 (0.145)
MMS & Inequality	0.229* (0.136)	-0.055 (0.176)
MMS $\times$ Relatively deprived	-0.003 (0.217)	0.073 (0.242)
Inequality $\times$ Relatively deprived	0.080 (0.209)	0.065 (0.221)
MMS & Inequality $\times$ Relatively deprived	0.102 (0.244)	0.237 (0.257)
Relatively deprived	-0.125 (0.156)	-0.059 (0.157)
Constant	-0.248*** (0.090)	0.070 (0.103)
Observations	448	448

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Appendix C

Supplemental Materials for *Examining Resentment: How Standardized Testing Motivates a Gendered Conservative Backlash*

C.1 Outcomes and Question Text

Table C.1: Survey Questions, Outcomes, and Families

	Question	Scale	Family
	“To what extent do you agree with the following...”		
Q1	...If there were two equally qualified candidates for a job, a woman and a man, the woman is always more likely to get the job	1-5, Likert	Male Discr.
Q2	...Men are often held back from achieving their goals because of discrimination based on their gender	1-5, Likert	Male Discr.
Q3	...It’s unfair that men are treated more harshly by the law than women, even when they perpetrate identical crimes	1-5, Likert	Male Discr.
Q4	...When searching for a partner, it’s unfair that women have such an easy time compared to men	1-5, Likert	Marriage
Q5	...Society places unfair expectations on men before they can get married, such as expecting them to be rich	1-5, Likert	Marriage
Q6	...The marriage culture in Korea favors women over men	1-5, Likert	Marriage
Q7	...Overall, society expects much more of men than it does of women, but this is never recognized	1-5, Likert	Expectation
Q8	...Even if it’s painful, men should never discuss their emotions or show that their struggling	1-5, Likert	Expectation
Q9	...Expecting men to serve in the military for two years is an unfair handicap on their professional development, compared to women	1-5, Likert	Expectation
Q10	If the legislative election were held today, which party would you vote for?	Forced choice	Pol.
Q11	To what extent do you consider yourself politically liberal or conservative?	1-5, Likert	Pol.

C.2 Pre-analysis Plan

We pre-registered hypotheses and an analysis plan on the EGAP OSF registry. As we conducted both a pilot and a follow-up study, we registered an initial and a secondary analysis plan.¹ Our benchmark specification and interpretation follows our secondary analysis plan

¹See [here](#) for round 1 and [here](#) for round 2.

as it reflects our attempt to confirm hypotheses developed as a result of our attempt to interpret the results obtained from the pilot. This point merits comment. Our overarching expectation in advance of the pilot study was that revealing to men that they had underperformed women would lead to an *increase* rather than a *decrease* in perceptions of male discrimination, which would in turn could be construed as the causal mechanism through which it would also lead to an uptick in support for conservatism. In the event, we found the reverse, and pre-registered a secondary pre-analysis plan that sought to replicate and extend this finding.

The pre-registered estimation strategy from the pilot is also different than the one we adopt in the main text of the paper and in the secondary registration, realizing that our proposed model would have not captured the estimands of interest. Specifically, we had initially registered an interaction model that interacted the treatment indicator with an indicator capturing whether or not the respondent over- or under-performed, further interacted with gender. There is a certain appeal to this model, but we are ultimately interested in the effect of revealing a score comparison among under-performers who are also men on political attitudes. After further reflection, we believe this calls for a more straightforward split-sample approach.

C.3 Descriptive Statistics & Balance Test

Table C.2: Descriptive Statistics and Balance Tests

	Group Means					P-Values on Group Means			
	$\bar{X}_A$	$\bar{X}_B$	$\bar{X}_C$	$\bar{X}_D$	$\bar{X}_E$	p_{A-B}	p_{C-B}	p_{D-B}	p_{E-B}
Gender: Woman	0.522	0.499	0.494	0.506	0.498	0.361	0.827	0.785	0.960
Age	31.651	31.375	32.197	31.430	31.421	0.386	0.466	0.853	0.874
Married	0.342	0.341	0.349	0.363	0.363	0.961	0.710	0.346	0.350
Education: HS	0.188	0.164	0.159	0.156	0.163	0.192	0.801	0.674	0.982
Education: Junior College	0.192	0.213	0.207	0.176	0.190	0.296	0.759	0.056	0.239
Education: College+	0.618	0.623	0.633	0.667	0.647	0.842	0.681	0.062	0.317
Income: Low	0.316	0.293	0.299	0.305	0.275	0.322	0.799	0.617	0.417
Income: Middle	0.338	0.365	0.316	0.314	0.348	0.251	0.035	0.031	0.485
Income: High	0.345	0.342	0.385	0.380	0.374	0.889	0.066	0.111	0.174

C.4 Tabular Presentation of Results

Table C.3: Effect of Under/Over-Performance on Political Conservatism, Among Men

		Conservative (1/0)		Conservative (1-5)		Vote Choice: PPP	
		β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Above Comparison	Treat C	0.081	0.120	0.069	0.249	-0.010	0.122
Above Comparison	Treat D	0.097	0.120	-0.032	0.255	0.048	0.122
Above Comparison	Treat E	0.070	0.120	-0.076	0.252	0.045	0.122
Below Comparison	Treat C	0.076	0.064	0.345	0.167	0.083	0.071
Below Comparison	Treat D	0.085	0.065	0.359	0.166	0.110	0.072
Below Comparison	Treat E	0.181	0.067	0.519	0.168	0.145	0.073

Table C.4: Effect of Under/Over-Performance on Political Conservatism, Among Women

		Conservative (1/0)		Conservative (1-5)		Vote Choice: PPP	
		β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Above Comparison	Treat C	-0.284	0.141	-0.314	0.242	-0.092	0.117
Above Comparison	Treat D	-0.352	0.156	-0.534	0.265	-0.218	0.146
Above Comparison	Treat E	-0.265	0.157	-0.372	0.264	-0.143	0.147
Below Comparison	Treat C	0.009	0.067	0.095	0.178	-0.107	0.077
Below Comparison	Treat D	-0.021	0.062	-0.019	0.169	-0.096	0.070
Below Comparison	Treat E	0.017	0.063	0.156	0.169	-0.061	0.071

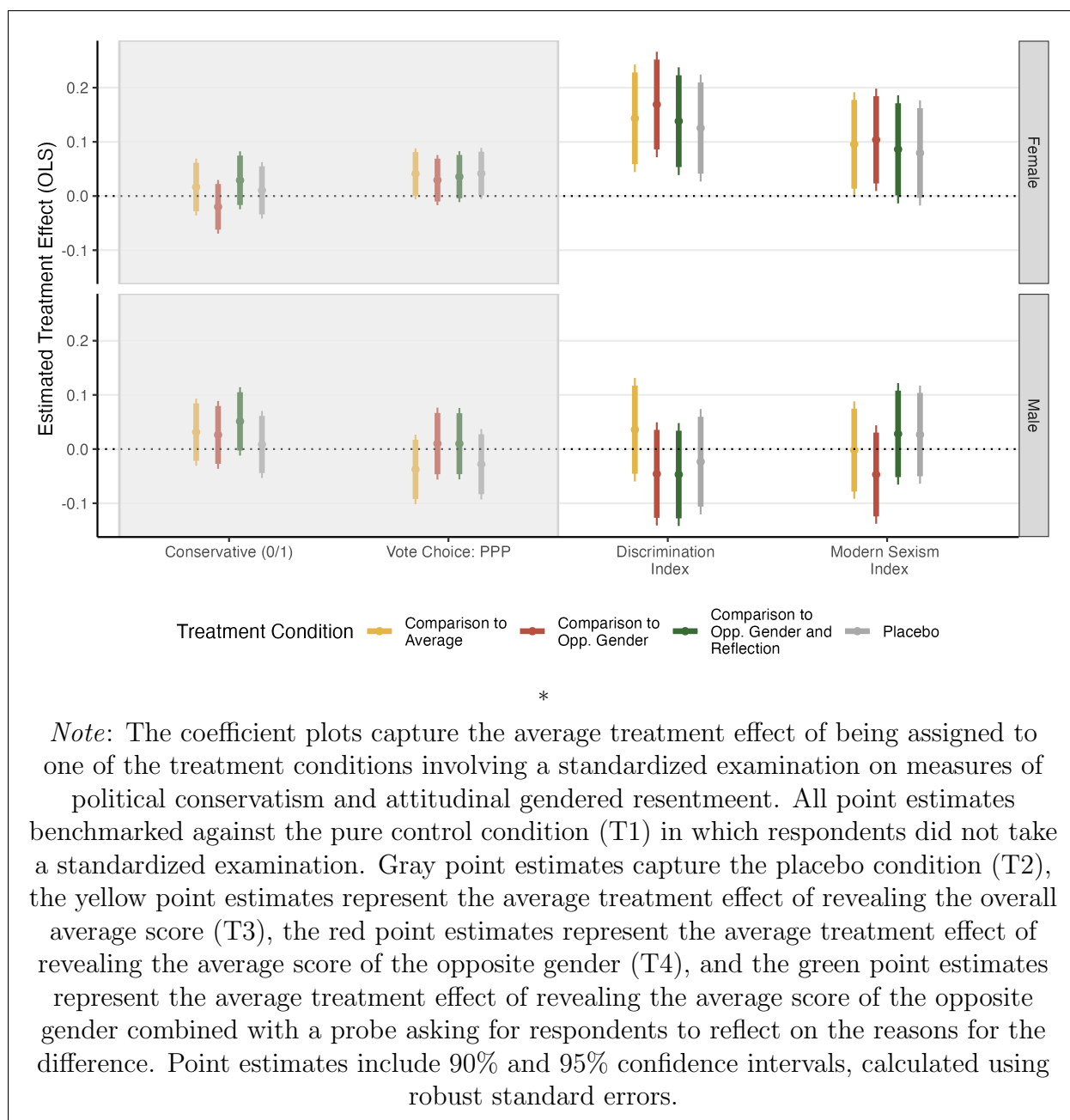
Table C.5: Effect of Under/Over-Performance on Perceptions of Male Discrimination, Among Men

		Average		General		Marriage		Expectations	
		β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Above Comparison	Treat C	0.040	0.156	0.036	0.152	0.152	0.169	-0.068	0.211
Above Comparison	Treat D	-0.104	0.155	-0.198	0.151	0.079	0.168	-0.193	0.211
Above Comparison	Treat E	-0.123	0.159	-0.100	0.155	-0.043	0.170	-0.225	0.215
Below Comparison	Treat C	-0.208	0.119	-0.158	0.137	-0.182	0.129	-0.233	0.144
Below Comparison	Treat D	-0.196	0.120	-0.099	0.138	-0.265	0.132	-0.193	0.147
Below Comparison	Treat E	-0.247	0.119	-0.273	0.139	-0.204	0.130	-0.229	0.147

C.5 Additional Analyses

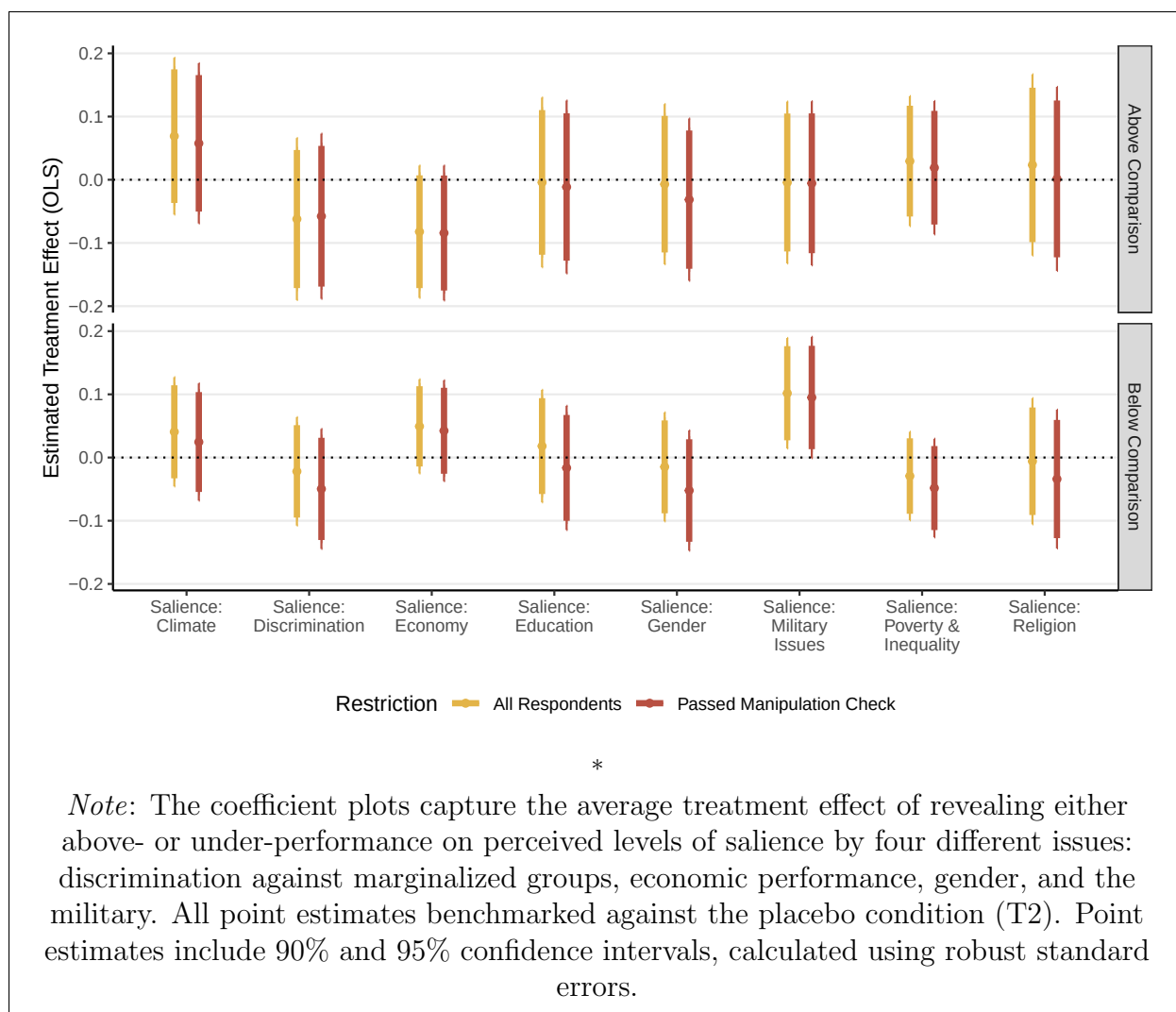
Examination Priming Effects

Figure C.1: Effect of Treatment Conditions on Primary and Secondary Outcomes



Other Outcome Measures

Figure C.2: Effect of Under/Over-Performance on Perceived Issue Salience, Among Men



Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Figure C.3: Effect of Over/Under-Performance on Evaluation of Political Parties, Among Men

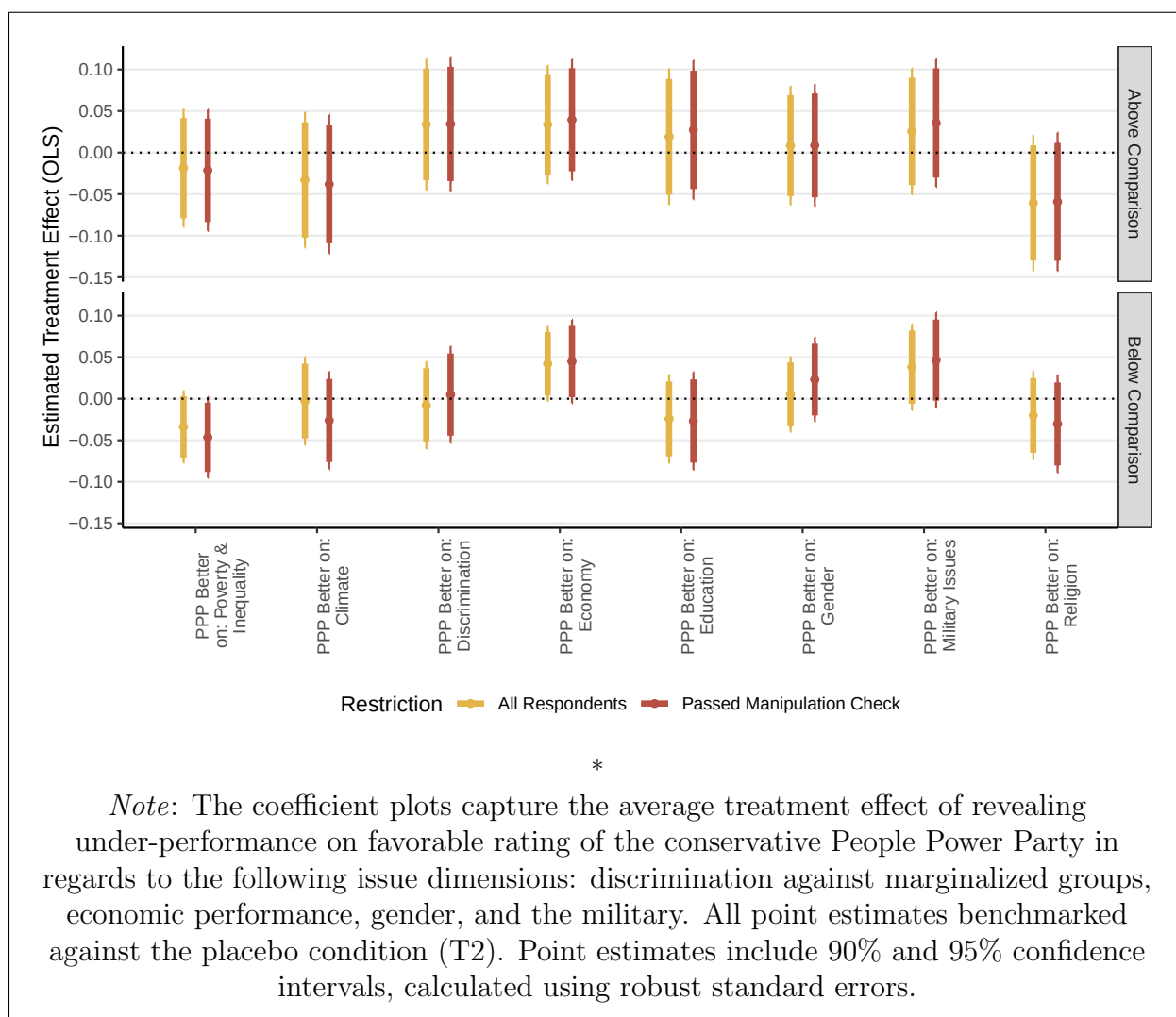
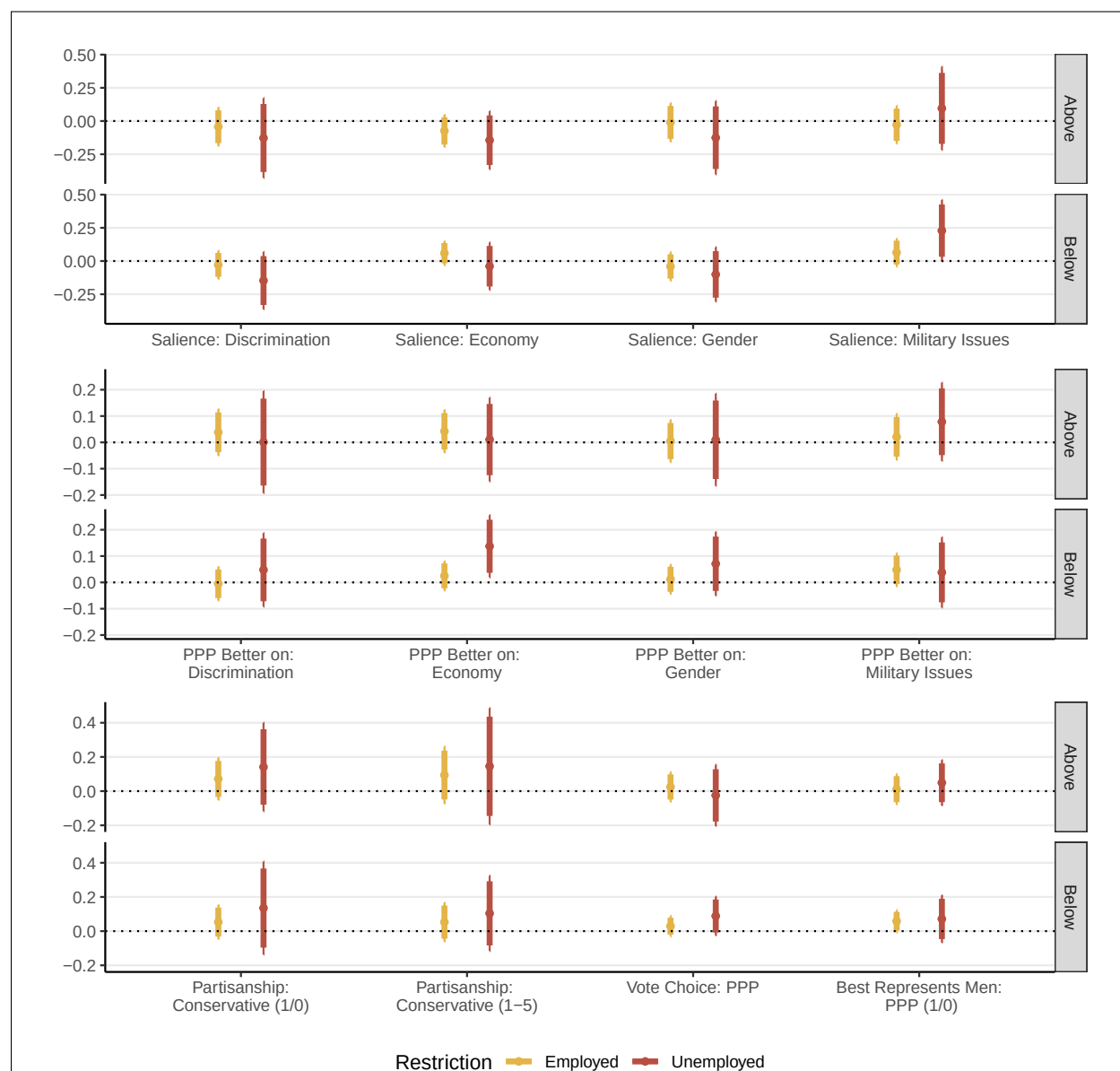


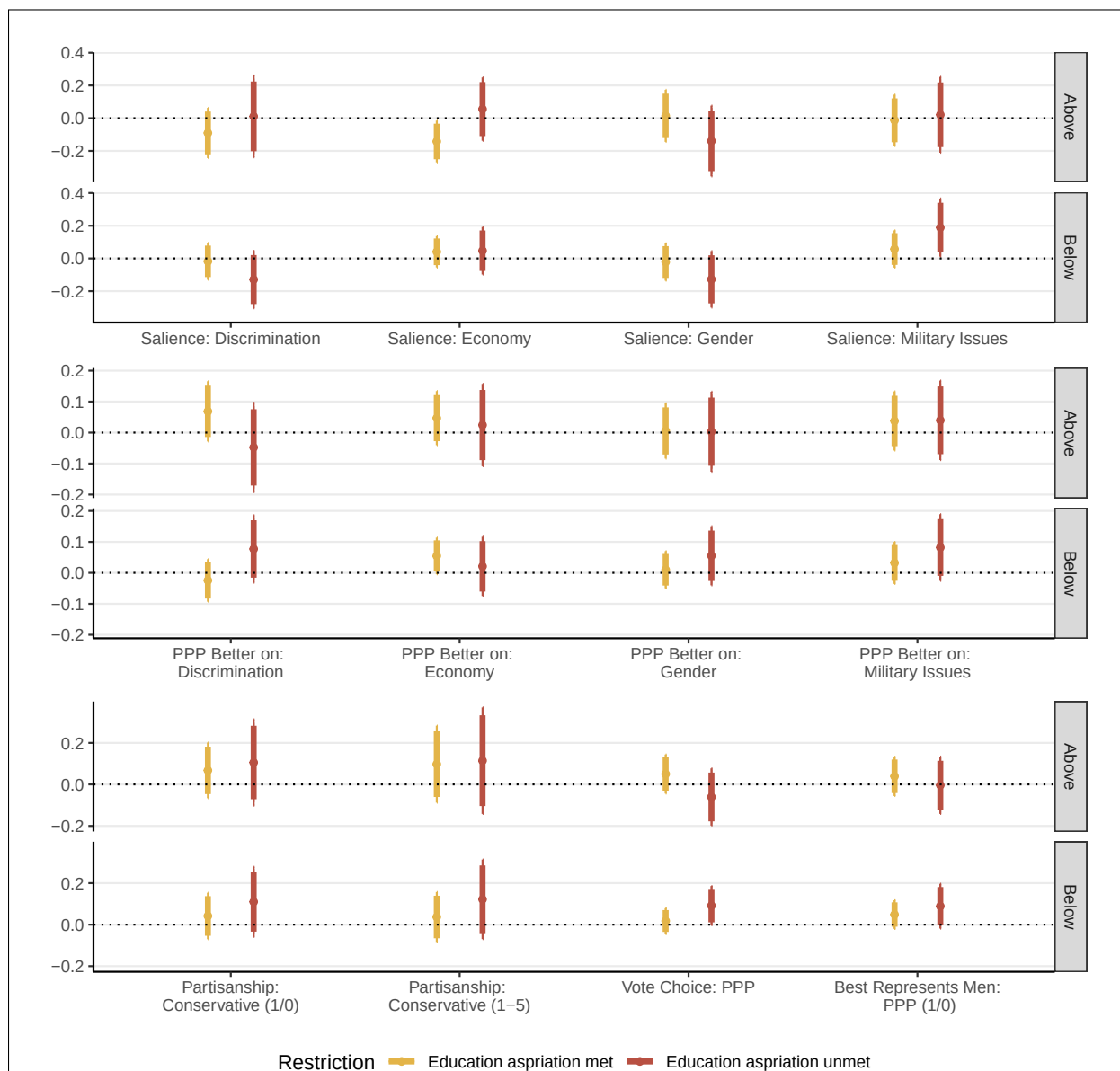
Figure C.4: Average Treatment Effects of Under/Over-Performance on Perceived Issue Saliency by Employment Status, Among Men



*

Note: The coefficient plots capture the heterogeneous treatment effect of revealing either above- or under-performance on perceived levels of saliency by respondent's employment status along four different issues: discrimination against marginalized groups, economic performance, gender, and the military. All point estimates benchmarked against the placebo condition (T2). Point estimates include 90% and 95% confidence intervals, calculated using robust standard errors.

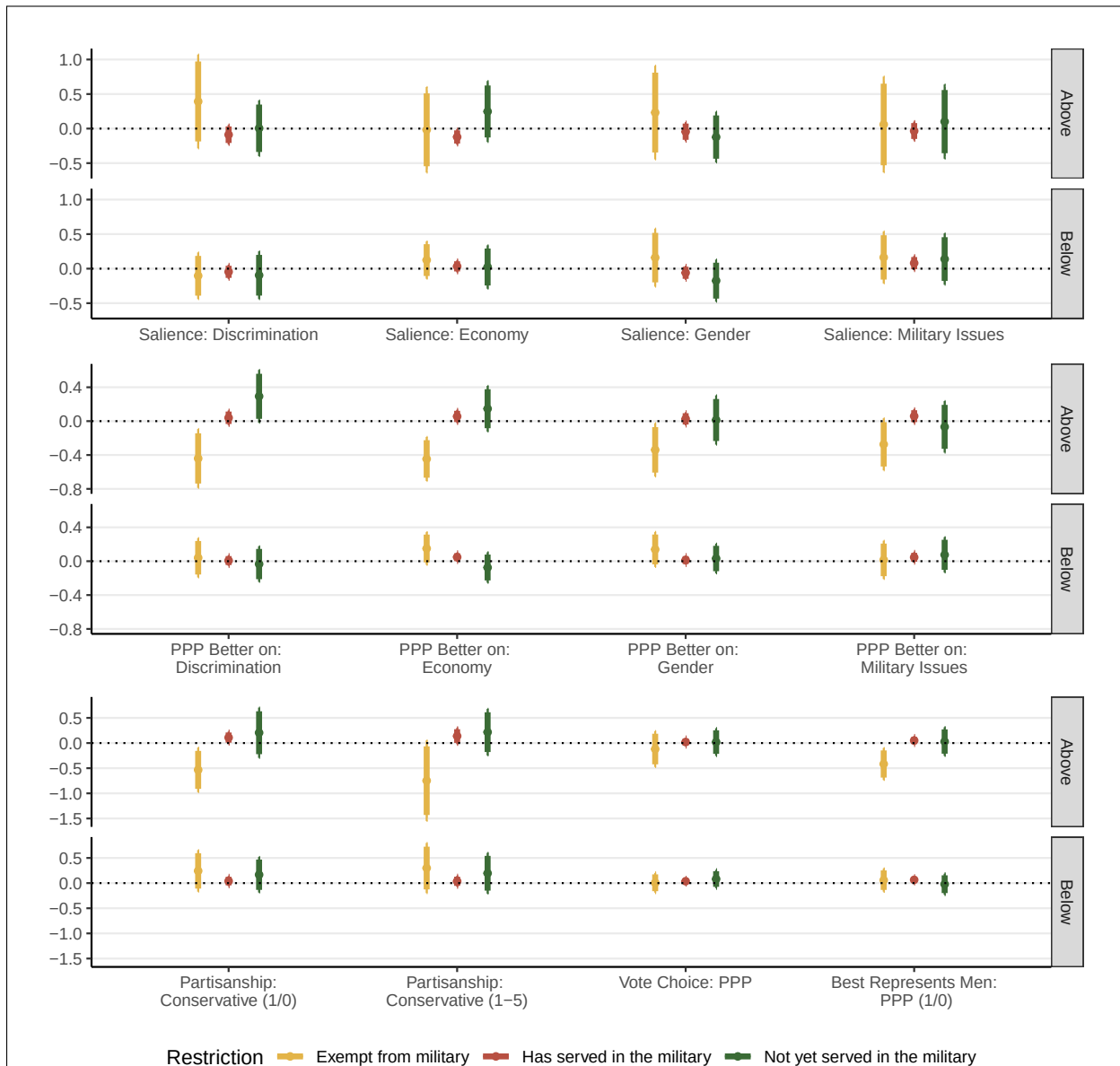
Figure C.5: Average Treatment Effects of Under/Over-Performance on Perceived Issue Saliency by Subjective Educational Status, Among Men



*

Note: The coefficient plots capture the heterogeneous treatment effect of revealing either above- or under-performance on perceived levels of saliency by respondent's subjective educational status along four different issues: discrimination against marginalized groups, economic performance, gender, and the military. All point estimates benchmarked against the placebo condition (T2). Point estimates include 90% and 95% confidence intervals, calculated using robust standard errors.

Figure C.6: Average Treatment Effects of Under/Over-Performance on Perceived Issue Saliency by Military Experience, Among Men



*

Note: The coefficient plots capture the heterogeneous treatment effect of revealing either above- or under-performance on perceived levels of saliency by respondent's experience with the military along four different issues: discrimination against marginalized groups, economic performance, gender, and the military. All point estimates benchmarked against the placebo condition (T2). Point estimates include 90% and 95% confidence intervals, calculated using robust standard errors.