

Female Employment and the Gender Voting Gap

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Abstract

Rising labor market participation among women has been suggested as an explanation for the changing ‘gender voting gap’: whereas, in the mid-twentieth century, women voted for more right-wing parties than men in the aggregate, in recent decades, it appears that women have come to vote for as, if not more, left-wing parties as men. This paper engages with this hypothesis by using individual-level panel data from Britain to examine the effects of labor market participation on the preferences of men and women. We find that women are no less favorable towards right-wing parties, on average, when they are employed than at other times. However, we do find that participation in the labor market *gradually* reduces support for the UK Conservative party among women. Further investigation suggests that this effect may be particularly marked among women with children, and may also be confined to women whose formative political years were during Thatcher’s ascendancy. Our results further suggest that this tendency may be driven by the effect of employment on these women’s preferences over gender roles.

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1 Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, political scientists routinely noted that women were more likely to choose centre-right parties at the ballot box than men. In the United Kingdom, in the first election following the Second World War, the Labour party won a landslide victory against the Conservatives. The votes of women did more to hinder than help this outcome: whereas the Labour lead among women was 2%, it was 16% among men (Norris 1996, 335). Similar patterns were apparent throughout Western Europe and in the United States. In this period, Conservative and Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe drew heavily on the support of women, as did the Republican party in the United States. However, by the 1980s, this ‘traditional’ gender gap seemed to be fading, and what would eventually be termed the ‘modern’ gender gap was emerging in its place. The pace and depth of this transformation has varied considerably between countries. Regardless—putting paid to established wisdom—researchers have come to conclude that, across a wide swathe of post-industrial democracies, women may now even prefer left and centre-left parties at a higher rate than men.

Figure 1 plots the evolution of the average gender voting gap between 1973 and 2002 in nine European countries. During this time, the average gender voting gap in these countries shrank from -7.1% to -1.2% ; in Denmark—where the gender voting gap was -4.7% in 1973—we routinely find more women than men indicating support for left parties by the 1990s. One of the most prominent explanations for the changing gender gap in recent decades has been the increase in female labor force participation (also plotted in Figure 1). For instance, Manza and Brooks (1998) explain the changing gender voting gap in U.S. presidential elections as resulting from rising female participation in the labor force. More recently, Giger (2009) argued for female entry into the labor force as the most important factor underlying the emergence of the ‘modern’ gender gap in recent decades.

The proposed mechanisms are manifold. Lipset (1981) suggested that women might be introduced to new political ideas and debates in the workplace; others have suggested that paid employment and economic independence may lead women to question traditional gender roles, increasing their support for parties able to expand their opportunities outside the home (Gerson 1987; Togeby 1994). Another line of argument has focused on the distinct economic interests of working women relative to men. Relative to men, women are more frequently employed in less senior positions and face higher risk of unemployment. Consequently, the modern gender gap may reflect women voting with their new-found social class rather than that of their partners’. Moreover, women are dispro-

Figure 1: Trends in Female Employment and Voting in Western Europe, 1973–2002



Note: The top-left figure plots the population-weighted average gender voting gap for nine European countries between 1973 and 2002: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The bottom-left figure plots the gender voting gap for the United Kingdom in particular. For each country, the gender voting gap is defined as the difference in the percentage of women and men supporting Socialist and Communist parties, constructed using respondent level information from the annual Eurobarometer survey series. A negative value for the gender voting gap in a country suggests that men supported left-wing parties in greater numbers than women in that country. The top-right figure presents the population-weighted average female labor force participation rate in these countries between 1983 and 2002, and the bottom-right figure plots the female labor force participation rate in the United Kingdom for the same period. Labor force and population statistics were obtained from the OECD statistics database.

portionately employed in the public sector, and so have a vested interest in maintaining and expanding the welfare state (Erie and Rein 1988; Knutsen 2001). Further, women in the workforce rely heavily on the very social services that left-wing parties tend to support – services such as public provision of daycare and paid maternity leave (Deitch 1988).

All of these mechanisms imply that women should become more supportive of left-wing policies and parties as they spend more time in the labor force, in line with research finding a strong positive association between female labor force participation and support for the left. However, such studies predominantly rely on cross-sectional analyses of individual or country-level data. As a consequence, these studies cannot discriminate between the direct effect of employment on the political preferences and behavior of women, and the indirect effect of the many social changes that occurred around the same time – such as second-wave feminism, or increasing access to higher education for women. Such developments may have increased the propensity of women to enter the labor force *and also*, independently, shifted their political sympathies towards the left. Alternatively, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006) present evidence from an individual-level analysis that married housewives are considerably more conservative in their policy preferences and voting behavior than married women in work – in line with the argument that labor force participation may affect women’s perception of their interests, and therefore, their voting behavior. However, without panel data, we cannot deal satisfactorily with the possibility that certain latent individual-specific characteristics may lead some women to support left-wing parties *and* choose to work, and others to stay home following marriage or childbirth. That is, these studies cannot distinguish between whether working makes women more left-wing, or whether, more simply, women who are more left-wing in early adulthood are also more likely to stay in work after marriage or childbirth.

To address these concerns, we analyze individual-level panel data from the British Household Panel Survey between 1991 and 2008.¹ This allows us to track the effect of employment on the political preferences and attitudes of individuals over a period of eighteen years, while controlling for latent personality traits and political predispositions using individual fixed effects. Moreover, by focusing on variation in political preferences over the life cycle, and by controlling for year-specific effects, we are able to dismiss the possibility that our findings reflect the coincidence between trends in female labor force

¹Few studies have taken advantage of individual-level panel data to compare changes in the political preferences and behavior of men and women. Exceptions include Edlund, Haider and Pande (2005), Kern (2010) and Finseraas, Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2012), who use panel data to analyse the effect of marital status on the political preferences and behavior of women.

participation and other societal changes.

The British case presents a particularly hard test case for this analysis. Relative to the United States, for instance, researchers focusing on Britain have identified little or no aggregate-level gender gap in vote choice since the 1970s. This is borne out by Figure 1, which does not suggest a strong time trend in the aggregate gender voting gap in Britain.² Nevertheless, researchers have identified a clear change in the gender gap over time across different birth cohorts in Britain (Norris 1996, 1999; Campbell 2012; Campbell and Childs 2015; Shorrocks 2016). For instance, Shorrocks (2016) uses data from the British Election Study to demonstrate that British women born in the 1940s now favor the Conservatives over Labour by approximately 5 percentage points relative to men, whereas women born in the 1980s favor Labour over the Conservatives by around 2 percentage points. If changes in the gender gap in the Western world can, to any extent, be directly attributed to trends in women’s participation in the labor market—and not to other contemporaneous social changes—then we should find some evidence that time spent in the labor market altered the political preferences of British women.

Our initial results suggest that women who choose to work are systematically less likely to support the British Conservative party than those who do not, but that the same is not necessarily true of men. Accounting for these differences in individuals’ latent political preferences considerably shrinks our estimates of the effect of employment on women’s voting preferences, and reveals that labor market participation has a *gradual* rather than instantaneous effect on the political preferences of women. For example, all else equal, there is no statistically significant difference in the political preferences of a woman who does not work outside the home and one who has spent one to three years in paid employment; however, the same woman is 2.8 percentage points less likely to support the Conservative party after ten years in work than her non-working counterpart. Further investigation reveals that the ‘employment effect’ is no stronger for women employed by the public sector than those in the private sector. However, we find evidence that the gradual effect of employment on vote choice may be more marked for women with children, and may also be confined to women whose formative political years were during the ‘Thatcherite ascendancy’.

Further, we find little evidence that long-term employment shifts women’s attitudes on economic issues such as redistribution or state intervention in the economy, but we *do* identify a sizable effect of employment on women’s attitudes to gender roles at home and

²Regression analysis does not reveal a statistically significant relationship between year and the gender voting gap in Britain—in either direction—between 1973 and 2002.

in the workplace. Again, it appears that this shift is especially marked for women from particular political generations – in this case, those women whose formative political years were between 1965 and 1996, a period that spans the rise of second-wave feminism and the entrenchment of Thatcherism in the British political mainstream. This suggests that the cohort a woman is born in may not only affect her voting behavior on average, but also may affect how her voting behavior changes in response to life events. We speculate that changing attitudes to gender roles as a result of prolonged paid employment may only have influenced vote choice for those women who came politically of age during successive Conservative administrations that were socially conservative, and also committed to paring back the welfare state (Gamble 1988). By contrast, the Conservative party in the preceding era was still, for the most part, wedded to the post-war ‘Butskellite’ consensus and also more socially liberal.³

Cumulatively, our results suggest that changing female labor force participation rates may have contributed towards the displacement of the ‘traditional’ gender voting gap, but also that some fraction of the observed association between female employment patterns and left party support is better attributed to the self-selection of women with more left-wing views as young adults into work as adults. Moreover, that the ‘employment effect’ is particularly marked for women with children who came of age during Thatcher’s ascendancy, and given evidence that it may be mediated by such women’s changing preferences with respect to gender roles, we suggest that the effect we observe may result from the greater salience of particular issues to working women with children – issues such as the social provision of childcare and flexible working policies, typically ‘owned’ by left-wing parties in Europe.

2 Data and Methodology

We estimate the effect of employment on vote choice using individual-year level data from the British Household Panel Survey. For this survey, respondents were re-interviewed annually between 1991 and 2008, allowing us to track the political preferences of individuals over a period of eighteen years. We consider all individuals of working age (aged 18–65) who were ever interviewed as part of the study, resulting in a full sample of 22,704 individuals.

To measure the strength of an individual’s left-party support, we code a binary vari-

³Under the leadership of Edward Heath, the Conservative party briefly toyed with a strongly free-market platform between 1969 and 1972, before returning to a more statist position.

able that takes the value 1 if a respondent indicated support for the Conservative party in a given period, and 0 otherwise. Of the major parties in the British party system, the Conservative party is the only right-wing party of significance in this period.⁴ Each year, respondents were also asked about their employment status, as well as regarding other demographic characteristics, such as age, household income, religious observance and marital status. To identify the relationship of interest, we estimate the following regression equation using a linear probability model:

$$Y_{it} = X_{it}\beta_1 + \mathbf{Z}_{it}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

Here, Y_{it} measures respondent i 's support for the Conservative party in year t , X_{it} measures respondent i 's employment status in year t , and \mathbf{Z}_{it} is a vector of control variables. In all models, we include dummies for individual i 's marital status, retirement status, full-time student status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income as controls – all time-varying characteristics that we might expect to influence an individual's employment status and also their vote choice. α_i and γ_t denote individual and year fixed effects, respectively. The identifying assumption in our analysis is that, after controlling for observable characteristics, latent personality traits and any period effects, variation in an individual's employment status over the life cycle is random. For all specifications, we present robust standard errors clustered by individual, to allow for dependence between observations for the same individual over time. Due to the large number of parameters to be estimated and the resulting computational demands, a linear probability model is preferred to a conditional logit or a multinomial logit model.

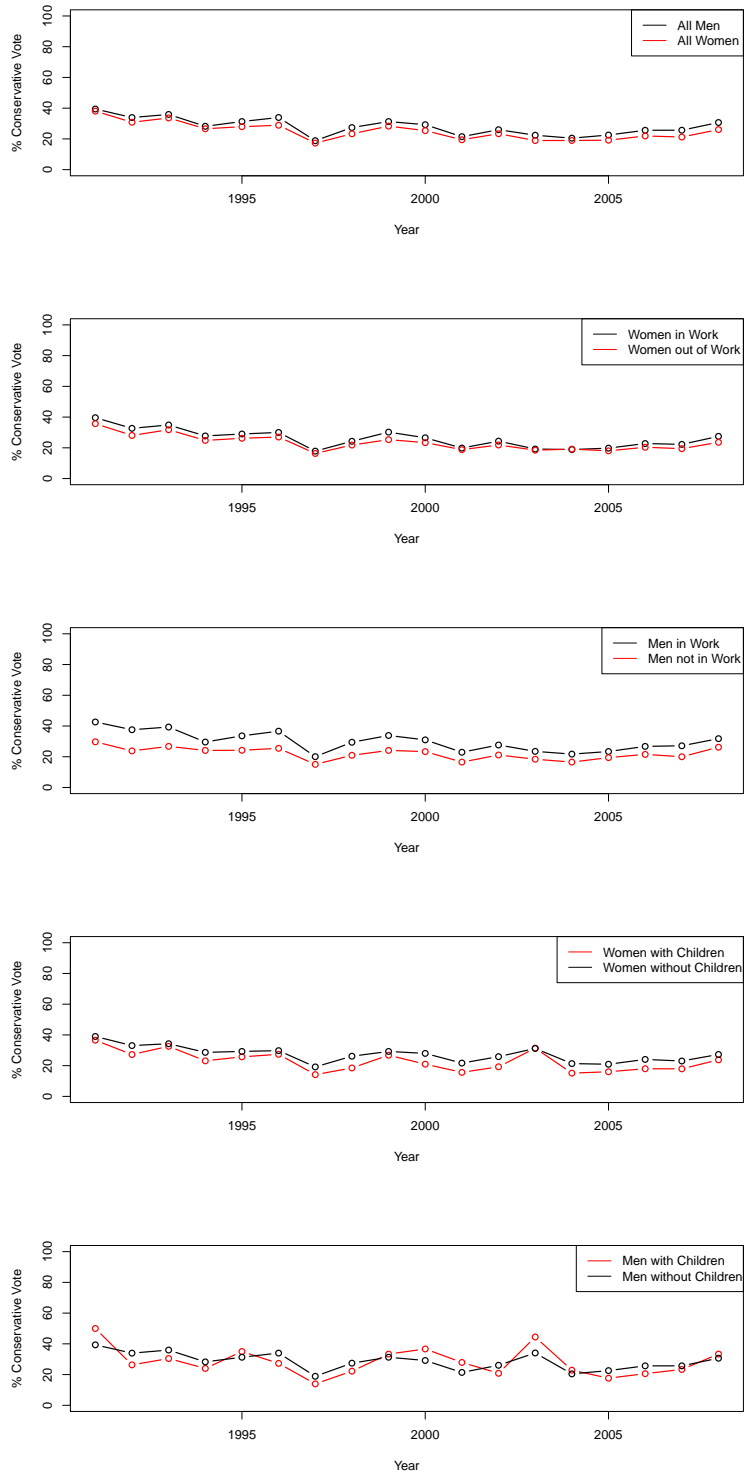
3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Figure 2 reports trends in Conservative party support between 1991 and 2008 for various subgroups in our sample. The topmost figure plots the trend in aggregate support for

⁴The question asked of respondents was open-ended. Other common responses included the Labour party, the Liberal Democratic Party, the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, and the Green party – all of which are located by respondents and by experts to the left of the Conservative party. Although the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is considered to be a right-wing party by many political analysts and commentators, its electoral presence was minimal before 2010. The ultra-nationalist British National Party (BNP) also failed to make much headway in national elections in this period. Nevertheless, our results are statistically and substantively identical when we pool UKIP, BNP and Conservative party support (available on request).

Figure 2: Trends in Conservative Party Support, 1991–2008



the Conservative party among men and women. We see that throughout this period, men were marginally more supportive of the Conservative party, in the aggregate, than women. The gender voting gap in our sample ranges between 5 and 1.4 percentage points, – with 3.05% more men, on average, preferring the Conservative party over alternatives in a given year, relative to women ($p < 0.01$). When we distinguish between men and women in and not in work, we find that, like their male counterparts and contrary to expectations, non-working women are, if anything, slightly *less* likely to support the Conservative party than women in paid employment.⁵ Meanwhile, when we distinguish between men and women with and without children, we do observe a significant tendency for women without children to support the Conservative party at higher rates than women with children (a difference of 4.54%, $p < 0.01$). We find no such difference between men with and without children. These patterns indicate that insofar as we observe a difference between the political preferences of working and non-working women in an examination of individual-level panel data, the family status of these women may play an important role in mediating the relationship between employment and vote choice. In the following section, we explore this suggestion more rigorously with the aid of regression analysis.

3.2 Main Results

Table 1 reports results from several specifications analyzing the effect of employment on the political preferences of men and women. Model 1 presents results from the baseline specification, which regresses respondents’ voting behavior on the total number of years the respondent has been employed since the start of the panel, estimating a separate coefficient for men and for women. As discussed in Section 2, the baseline specification includes individual fixed effects, which account for the possibility that some women may have more left-wing views in early adulthood *and* also be more likely to choose to work following marriage or childbirth. Our coefficient estimates that, on average, every additional year of employment has no statistically significant effect on individuals’ support for the Conservative party – whether men or women.⁶ Model 2 allows for the possibility that employment may either have an instantaneous *or* a gradual effect on voting behavior.

⁵A one-sample t-test comparing the means of these two groups finds that working women are 2.62% more likely to support the Conservatives than women not in work ($p < 0.01$). This is a smaller difference than between working and non-working men (7.85%, $p < 0.01$), and of course, may be an artifact of differences in age, education or household income between working and non-working individuals.

⁶The number of years an individual has been employed is calculated as the total number of years she has been employed in the panel to date. That is, for each individual, the counter does *not* return to zero following a period of unemployment.

We still find that, once individual-specific characteristics are accounted for, there is no evidence of a statistically significant difference, on average, between men and women in and not in work.

Table 1: Employment and Vote Choice by Gender

	Vote Intention: Conservative		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Employed (M)		-0.001 (0.005)	0.010* (0.006)
Employed (F)		-0.004 (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.006)
Years Employed (M)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.019*** (0.001)
Years Employed (F)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓
Indiv. FEs	✓	✓	
Controls	✓	✓	✓
# Respondents	22,704	22,704	22,704
N	132,639	132,628	132,628
R ²	0.800	0.800	0.302
Adjusted R ²	0.759	0.759	0.302

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Cell entries present OLS coefficient estimates from linear probability models of voters' support for the UK Conservative party between 1991 and 2008. All models include controls for each individual's marital status (single, married or divorced/widowed), full-time student status, retirement status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income. Robust standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses.

However, the extent to which some women may 'select' into work on the basis of other preferences is demonstrated by Model 3, which omits individual fixed effects from the analysis. We now find that women are 1.5 percentage points less likely to support the Conservatives *upon finding work*, an effect which diminishes significantly over time. These

results are consistent with the hypothesis that women who choose to work are, on average, more left-wing than those who do not, and therefore, estimates without individual fixed effects are biased. This suggests that some of the estimated effects of employment on women’s political views in the literature are instead due to the fact that women with some left-wing views by early adulthood may be more likely to stay in work later in life.

Of course, if years employed does have a gradual effect on the political preferences of either men or women, this may not be apparent from Models 1 or 2, which only estimate the effect of every additional year employed on voting behavior *on average*. If, for instance, the relationship between years employed and vote choice is non-linear—as may be the case if transitory periods of employment have little effect on preferences, but prolonged periods do—then this restriction may lead us to needlessly dismiss the ‘employment effect’. Model 1 in Table 2 relaxes this constraint by decomposing the number of years an individual has been employed into four lag dummies. These dummies indicate whether an individual has been in employment for one to three years, three to six years, six to ten years, and more than ten years. Coefficient estimates for this specification are reported in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2. We still find no evidence that employment gradually shifts the voting behavior of men. We also find no statistically significant difference, at conventional levels, between the political preferences of women who have been in work for less than six years and non-working women; however, our estimates suggest that a woman who has been in work for more than ten years is 2.8 percentage points less likely to vote for the Conservative party than if she had not been in work during that time.

Models 2 and 3 in Table 2 restrict the sample to women, and shifts the focus of the analysis to evaluating possible explanations for this gradual ‘employment effect’. Model 2 examines the suggestion that the effect of labor market participation on women’s political preferences may result from their disproportionate employment in public sector – and so, a vested and growing interest, shared with left-wing parties, in maintaining and expanding the welfare state (Erie and Rein 1988; Knutsen 2001).⁷ If this were the case, we would expect to see a gradual effect of employment on the voting intentions of women employed in the public sector, but not the private sector, or in other sectors. We find no such differences, rather, we find substantively similar, and always gradual, effects of employment on the voting intentions of women employed in all three sectors. This

⁷We code women who are employed by the civil service, central government, local government, the NHS, in education or a nationalized industry as public sector employees. Women employed by a private firm or company are coded as private sector employees, and those employed by non-profit organizations, other organizations or the armed forces are coded as ‘other’.

Table 2: LPM Analysis of Employment and Vote Choice

	Vote Intention: Conservative						
	(1) Men	(1) Women	(2) Public	(2) Private	(2) Other	(3) With Children	(3) No Children
Years Employed: 1–3	–0.005 (0.011)	–0.012 (0.009)	–0.001 (0.024)	–0.013 (0.011)	0.008 (0.010)	–0.013 (0.010)	–0.007 (0.010)
Years Employed: 3–6	–0.008 (0.012)	–0.018* (0.010)	–0.006 (0.019)	–0.012 (0.011)	–0.007 (0.009)	–0.014 (0.011)	–0.016 (0.011)
Years Employed: 6–10	–0.016 (0.013)	–0.029*** (0.011)	–0.038** (0.019)	–0.028*** (0.011)	–0.015* (0.009)	–0.036*** (0.013)	–0.019 (0.013)
Years Employed: >10	–0.019 (0.015)	–0.028** (0.013)	–0.015 (0.032)	–0.031** (0.014)	–0.024** (0.012)	–0.033* (0.018)	–0.020 (0.016)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Indiv. FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Respondents	22,704	22,704	8,370	8,370	8,370	11,739	11,739
N	132,639	132,639	41,620	41,620	41,620	67,429	67,429
R ²	0.800	0.800	0.805	0.805	0.805	0.793	0.793
Adjusted R ²	0.759	0.759	0.756	0.756	0.756	0.749	0.749

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Cell entries present OLS coefficient estimates from linear probability models of voter support for the UK Conservative party between 1991 and 2008. Column numbers indicate the model being estimated, and Models 2 and 3 restrict consideration to women alone. All models include controls for each individual’s marital status (single, married or divorced/widowed), full-time student status, retirement status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income. Robust standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses.

suggests that any effect of labor market participation on women’s voting behavior is not driven by their disproportionate employment in particular sectors.

Next, Model 3 evaluates the argument—most recently put forward by Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006)—that working women with children may be especially motivated to vote for left-wing parties and policies which improve their ability to balance work and family. On the other hand, non-working women with children do not share this motivation, and may prefer to vote for right-wing parties like the Conservatives, which are more likely to implement policies that maximize their working partner’s take-home pay. Our coefficient estimates are consistent with this argument, as we find that prolonged employment gradually shifts working women with children to the left relative to their non-working counterparts.⁸ Specifically, we find that a woman with a child who has been employed for 6 to 10 years is 3.6% less likely to vote Conservative than if she had not been employed during that time. By contrast, we find no evidence of an employment effect on the voting intentions of a woman without children. Further, a Z-test rejects the hypothesis that the coefficients on years employed for women with and without children are the same ($p = 0.03$), for women who have been employed for 6 to 10 years in our sample.

3.3 Generational Variation in the Employment Effect

In this section, we study the implications of individuals’ membership of different ‘political generations’, coded using birth cohort membership, for how individuals respond to labor market participation. We hypothesize that just as, in Britain, the gender voting gap may be between birth cohorts rather than visible in the aggregate, the mechanisms by which societal change influences voting behavior may also be both gendered and generational. In developing this argument, we lean on political generations theory. Theories of generational political socialization suggest that individuals’ values, attitudes and political preferences are influenced by political events and experiences in early young adulthood, and remain fairly stable thereafter (Mannheim 1968; Grasso 2016; Grasso et al. 2017). Extending this line of argument, we investigate the possibility that generational political socialization may not only influence individuals’ political preferences and values on average, but also condition how they respond to environmental and political stimuli in later years.

In particular, if it is the case that working women with children become less supportive

⁸We code a woman as having a child if she reports being the responsible adult for at least one child under 16.

of right-wing parties over time because of their particular disagreement with such parties' policies on issues relating to work and childcare, then we may expect such women to become especially antagonistic towards right-wing parties which take more conservative positions on related issues. In the British case, this would imply that working women with children should have become especially hostile to the 'Thatcherite' Conservative party. Under Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative party embraced a twin doctrine of market liberalization and social conservatism (Gamble 1988). With respect to family policy, the Conservative governments under Thatcher and Major were more notable for what they did not do rather than what they did; at a time when other countries were developing parental leave policy and extending state nursery provision, the British state did little to assist working parents with combining paid and unpaid responsibilities (Pascall 1997). Such lack of action may not have been well received by working women with children. Additionally, the significant cuts to public health and education services initiated by the Thatcher government might have been more unpopular among principal carers of young children—overwhelmingly female—since children are a major recipient of these services.

The nature of our data does not allow us to investigate the reception of Thatcherism on working women with children during its ascendancy, or its impact on support for the Conservative party within this group at the time. However, extending the theory of government political socialisation (Butler and Stokes 1974; Tilley 2002; Smets and Neundorf 2012), we suggest that an individual may persistently associate a party with the specific issue positions which were salient for that party during that individual's formative political years. As a consequence, an individual belonging to the birth cohort that voted in its first election during the Thatcherite ascendancy may be more likely to associate the Conservative party with deregulation and 'slimming the state' than a similar individual from the preceding birth cohort.

We follow Grasso et al. (2017) in distinguishing between four political generations in Britain: the early consensus generation (b. 1925–1944), 'Wilson/Callaghan's children' (b. 1945–1958), 'Thatcher's children' (b. 1959–1976) and 'Blair's babies' (b. 1977–1990).⁹ Thus, 'Thatcher's children' are those individuals who came of age in the extended period of Conservative rule between 1979 and 1996. Although this section of our analysis studies the conditioning effect of birth cohort membership on the relationship between an individual's employment status and vote choice, our coefficient estimates are insulated from the age-period-cohort identification problem, as both age and period effects on vote

⁹We omit the 'pre-consensus generation'—including those born 1910 and 1924—as the oldest person in our sample was born in 1926.

choice are captured within our fixed effects.¹⁰ Moreover, our analysis does not seek to identify the overall effect of age on an individual’s propensity to support the Conservatives in a given period, or the overall effect of cohort on an individual’s propensity to do so over her life cycle.

Table 3 reports results from successive analyses of Conservative party support after restricting the sample to women from each of these four generations. The results of these analyses are also presented graphically in Figure 3. Consistent with our hypotheses, we only observe an effect of employment on vote intention for working women with children belonging to the ‘Thatcher’s children’ generation: those women that came of age during the prolonged period of government under a ‘Thatcherite’ Conservative party. We do not identify a statistically significant effect of employment for Conservative party support for working women without children, although our estimates do not allow us to reject the hypothesis that the employment effect is the same in both subgroups. One possible explanation is that the Conservative party’s economic policies under Thatcher also negatively affected working women *without* children, as cuts to public health and education services lowered relative pay and employment security in professions that disproportionately employed women.

3.4 Generational Variation in Political Attitudes

If it is the case that prolonged employment drew working women with children away from the Conservative party *because* they associated the party with less family-friendly policies, then we should observe an effect of years employed on their attitudes to traditional gender roles in the household. However, we should not necessarily observe an effect of employment on other political attitudes, as we would expect leftward shifts in e.g. attitudes to inequality as a result of time employed to occur equally among working women with and without children. We investigate these suggestions further in this section. The results of our analyses are reported in Tables 4 and 5.

To construct the dependent variable in each of these analyses, we average each woman’s responses to a series of questions on economic issues and on traditional gender roles to measure their average preferred position on each type of issue. In the British Household Panel Survey, respondents were asked if they agreed, disagreed, strongly agreed, or strongly disagreed with a range of positions. We recoded individuals’ responses to

¹⁰The age-period-cohort ‘identification problem’ results from the observation that the three effects depend linearly on each other, requiring additional restrictions in order to distinguish between these effects (Neundorf and Niemi 2014).

Table 3: LPM Analysis of Employment Effect on Women by Political Generation

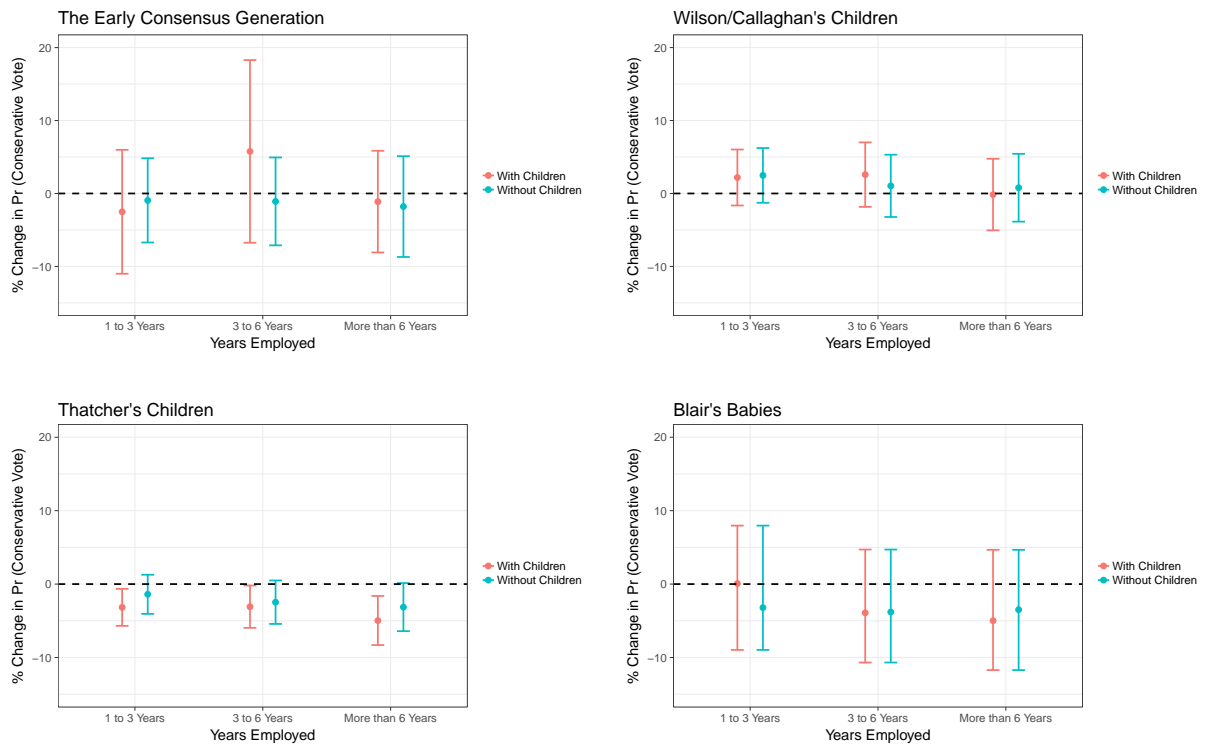
	Vote Intention: Conservative			
	(1) Consensus Generation	(2) Wilson's Children	(3) Thatcher's Children	(4) Blair's Babies
With Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	–0.025 (0.043)	0.022 (0.020)	–0.032** (0.013)	0.001 (0.040)
Years Employed: 3–6	0.058 (0.064)	0.026 (0.023)	–0.031** (0.015)	–0.039 (0.044)
Years Employed: >6	–0.011 (0.036)	–0.002 (0.025)	–0.050*** (0.017)	–0.050 (0.049)
No Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	–0.009 (0.029)	0.025 (0.019)	–0.014 (0.014)	–0.032 (0.029)
Years Employed: 3–6	–0.011 (0.031)	0.010 (0.022)	–0.025 (0.015)	–0.038 (0.035)
Years Employed: >6	–0.018 (0.035)	0.008 (0.024)	–0.031* (0.017)	–0.035 (0.042)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Indiv. FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Respondents	2,173	2,909	4,684	2,164
N	11,726	21,229	27,962	6,512
R ²	0.844	0.800	0.755	0.790
Adjusted R ²	0.808	0.768	0.705	0.684

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

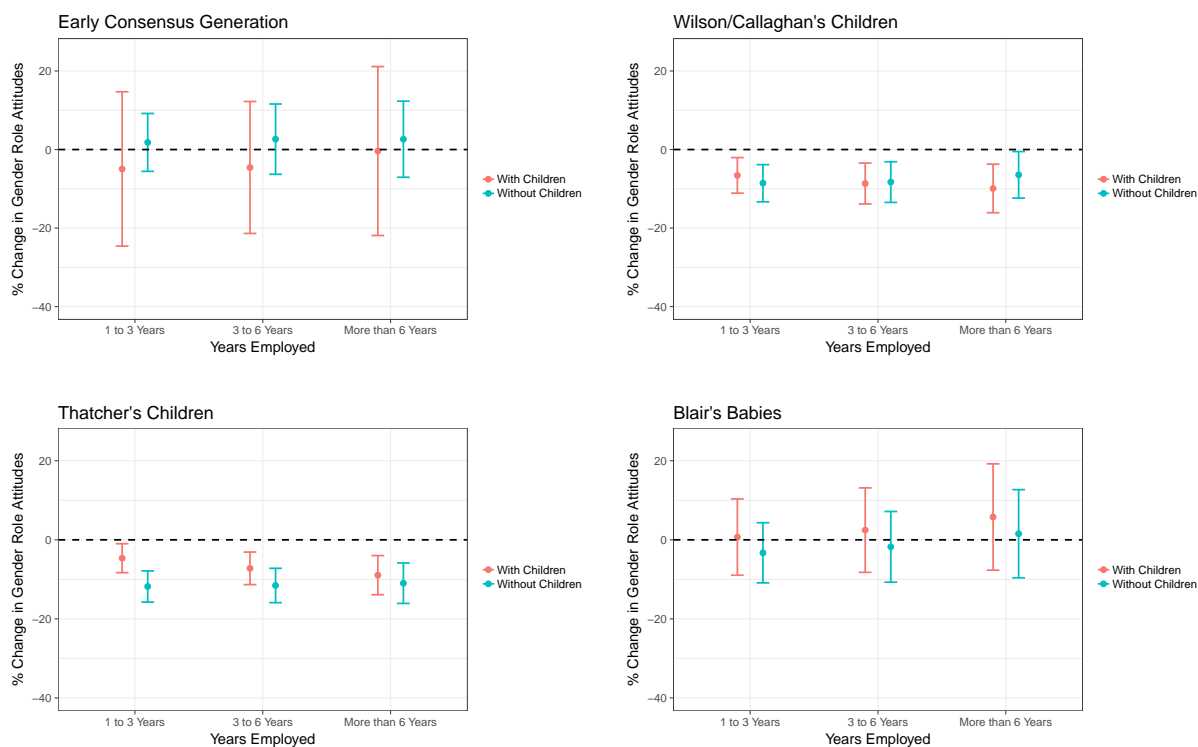
Note: Cell entries present OLS coefficient estimates from linear probability models of female support for the UK Conservative party between 1991 and 2008. All models include controls for each individual's marital status (single, married or divorced/widowed), full-time student status, retirement status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income. Robust standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses.

Figure 3: The Employment Effect by Political Generation



construct a binary variable where 1 indicates agreement with a more right-wing position on the issue, and 0 disagreement. This is preferred to constructing an ordinal variable that uses information from the full scale, as we did not wish to confound individuals' preferences and their intensity of feeling on each issue. The list of economic and gender issues we incorporate into our analyses are listed in Appendix A.

Figure 4: Trends in Gender Role Attitudes by Political Generation



As the results reported in Table 4 indicate, we find no significant effect of years employed on the economic preferences of women from *any* of these four generations. However, as reported in Table 5, we do find a substantial effect of employment on women's preferences regarding traditional gender roles – and on working women both with *and* without children. This effect is not constrained to those women belonging to the generation that came of age during the Thatcher and Major governments, but is also evident among those who entered early adulthood during the 1960s and 1970s (termed 'Wilson/Callaghan's Children', following Grasso et al. (2017)). This was contemporaneous with the rise and subsequently, the mainstreaming of 'second-wave feminism' – a movement that advocated legislative reform to promote and enhance women's lives at home and in the work place (e.g. equal pay and equal opportunity legislation, paid maternity

Table 4: LPM Analysis of Womens' Economic Preferences by Political Generation

	Mean Preferred Position on Economic Issues			
	(1) Consensus Generation	(2) Wilson's Children	(3) Thatcher's Children	(4) Blair's Babies
With Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	−0.096 (0.094)	−0.043 (0.031)	0.003 (0.025)	0.031 (0.143)
Years Employed: 3–6	−0.115 (0.109)	−0.027 (0.036)	−0.014 (0.027)	−0.055 (0.160)
Years Employed: >6	−0.098 (0.103)	−0.028 (0.043)	0.002 (0.032)	0.087 (0.194)
No Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	−0.058 (0.045)	−0.054 (0.034)	−0.005 (0.026)	0.013 (0.126)
Years Employed: 3–6	−0.069 (0.055)	−0.058 (0.037)	0.013 (0.029)	0.055 (0.131)
Years Employed: >6	−0.072 (0.065)	−0.049 (0.040)	0.0005 (0.034)	0.068 (0.171)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Indiv. FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Respondents	1,973	2,725	4,431	1,989
N	5,523	9,498	13,171	2,713
R ²	0.791	0.741	0.725	0.845
Adjusted R ²	0.673	0.635	0.585	0.400

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Cell entries present LPM coefficient estimates from linear probability models of women's preferences on a range of economic issues. Individuals' responses were recoded such that a positive coefficient indicates greater agreement with right-wing positions on economic issues, on average. For a list of the issues considered, see Appendix A. All models include controls for each individual's marital status, full-time student status, retirement status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income. Robust standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses.

Table 5: OLS Analysis of Women’s Gender Role Attitudes by Political Generation

	Mean Preferred Position on Gender Roles			
	(1) Consensus Generation	(2) Wilson’s Children	(3) Thatcher’s Children	(4) Blair’s Babies
With Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	−0.049 (0.100)	−0.066*** (0.023)	−0.046** (0.019)	0.007 (0.049)
Years Employed: 3–6	−0.046 (0.086)	−0.086*** (0.027)	−0.072*** (0.021)	0.025 (0.054)
Years Employed: >6	−0.004 (0.110)	−0.099*** (0.032)	−0.089*** (0.025)	0.058 (0.069)
No Children				
Years Employed: 1–3	0.018 (0.038)	−0.086*** (0.024)	−0.118*** (0.020)	−0.033 (0.039)
Years Employed: 3–6	0.026 (0.046)	−0.083*** (0.026)	−0.115*** (0.022)	−0.018 (0.046)
Years Employed: >6	0.026 (0.049)	−0.064** (0.030)	−0.110*** (0.026)	0.015 (0.057)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Indiv. FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Respondents	2,197	3,002	4,916	2,625
N	7,481	14,218	20,628	6,035
R ²	0.757	0.722	0.699	0.754
Adjusted R ²	0.655	0.647	0.605	0.562

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Cell entries present OLS coefficient estimates from linear probability models of women’s responses to a range of questions on traditional gender roles. Individuals’ responses were recoded such that a positive coefficient indicates greater agreement with right-wing positions on those issues, on average. For a list of the issues considered, see Appendix A. All models include controls for each individual’s marital status, full-time student status, retirement status, and also include polynomials in age and (logged) household income. Robust standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses.

leave, etc.), and also sought to reform conventional assumptions regarding traditional gender roles. These findings raise the intriguing possibility that the experience of employment may only shift the attitudes to traditional gender roles of women who enter and remain in work in an era when attitudes to traditional gender roles are in flux—in contrast with the experiences of those who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s. However, we do not find strong evidence of such an effect among ‘Blair’s babies’—those who came of age under New Labour. Indeed, although our estimated standard errors for Model 4 in Table 5, most of the point estimates are positive. These results suggest that the experience of employment may have had little effect on the attitudes of women who came of age in an era when traditional gender roles were already widely regarded with skepticism.

Further, note that although we observe an effect of employment on the attitudes to traditional gender roles of women who came of age between 1964 and 1996, but only observe an effect of these changes on Conservative party support for working women with children from the generation that came of age under Thatcher and Major. This is consistent with the adapted ‘government political socialisation’ hypothesis we introduces above, where we suggest that individuals who voted in their first election under Thatcher or Major were especially likely to associate the Conservative party with economically and socially conservative policies. We speculate that although a larger swathe of working women may have come to question the merits of traditional gender roles following time spent in the workforce, only those who saw the Conservative party as reinforcing traditional gender roles, *and* those for whom family issues were particularly salient, were persuaded to change their vote intentions as a response. Of course, further analysis is essential before we can draw any stronger inferences regarding generational differences in ‘employment socialisation’ from these trends.

4 Conclusion

While in the mid-twentieth century, it appeared that women were more likely to vote for right-wing parties than their male counterparts, trends in many advanced industrial democracies now suggest that relative to their male counterparts, women may vote in equal proportions for—if not in greater proportions for—left-wing parties. In this paper, we use individual-level panel data from Britain over an eighteen-year period to evaluate the explanatory power of one contemporaneous development—growing female participation in the labor market—for these changes. We observe that previous studies examining the effect of female labor force participation on the changing gender voting gap have

predominantly relied on cross-sectional analyses of individual or country-level data. This means that previous studies have not adequately accounted for the role of stable individual traits—including, for instance, political socialisation in early adulthood—which may have increased support among some women for left-wing parties, and also encouraged them to stay in work following marriage or childbirth. Once we account for these latent individual-specific characteristics using individual fixed effects, we are able to focus our investigation on how an individual’s vote intention changes over their life cycle in response to changes in employment status.

Our results confirm our initial hypothesis that women who chose to work were systematically less likely to support the British Conservative party than those who did not, but that the same is not necessarily true of men. Once we account for these differences in individuals’ latent political preferences using fixed effects, we find that labor market participation only has a gradual and slight effect on the political preferences of women, but not necessarily those of men. Further investigation suggests that this gradual effect of employment on vote choice does not vary between women employed in different sectors, but may be more marked for women with children, and may also be confined to those women whose formative political years were under the Thatcher and Major Conservative majority governments. We also find suggestive evidence that these changes may be driven by the effect of employment on these women’s preferences with respect to traditional gender roles. Although we identify an effect of employment on attitudes to traditional gender roles among women who came of age between 1964 and 1996, we only observe an effect of employment on Conservative party support for working women with children who came of age during the protracted period of Conservative party dominance between 1979 and 1996.

We combine generational theories and theories of government political socialisation to introduce an adapted theory of generational ‘employment socialisation’, which we argue may explain these results. In particular, we suggest that women who came of age following the advent and mainstreaming of ‘second-wave feminism’—at a time when attitudes to traditional gender roles were in flux—were more likely to question those traditional roles after spending some years in paid employment. However, we speculate that only those women for whom family issues were particularly salient—that is, working women with children—*and* who may have perceived the Conservative party as particularly backing traditional gender roles in the household— were likely to change their vote intention as a result. Future versions of this paper will further evaluate this theory using data from a wider range of contexts.

Appendices

A Coding Decisions

The following table lists the questions used to construct each individual's average preferred position on economic issues, used as the dependent variable in analyses reported in Table 4. We recoded each individual's responses to each question to construct a binary dependent variable such that 1 indicates agreement with a more right-wing position on the issue, and 0 disagreement.

Economic Issues:

1. Ordinary people get their fair share of the nation's wealth.
2. There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.
3. Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems.
4. Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership.
5. It is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one.
6. Strong trade unions are needed to protect the working conditions and wages of employees.

The next table lists the questions used to construct each individual's average preferred position on traditional gender roles, used as the dependent variable in analyses reported in Table 5. Again, we recoded each individual's responses to construct a binary dependent variable such that 1 indicates agreement with a more right-wing position on the issue, and 0 disagreement.

Questions on Traditional Gender Roles:

1. A pre school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.
2. All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full time job.
3. A woman and her family would all be happier if she goes out to work.

4. Both the husband and wife should contribute to the household income.
5. Having a full time job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person.
6. A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family.
7. Children need a father to be as closely involved in their upbringing as the mother.

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