

Demand for Gender Equality under Conservatism: Experimental Evidence from Elite Platform Shifts

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Abstract :

Societies have dramatically changed their stance on many sociocultural issues over the last century. When these changes occur, it is often unclear whether citizens are leading them or responding to new cues from political elites. We leverage two independently implemented experiments in two provinces in Turkey during elections to estimate the causal effect of elite platform shifts toward more liberal positions on voter preferences and partisan realignment. Neighborhoods were assigned to receive (i) information on gender-equality reform proposals, (ii) information on non-gender policy proposals, or (iii) no information. Administrative voting records show that gender-equality proposals increased opposition support by 0.9 percentage points (1.7 percent) in İzmir and 4.6 percentage points (11 percent) in Kars, but unlike the non-gender proposals, they did not benefit the delivering party. Instead, they shifted support toward a smaller, pro-minority opposition party with the strongest record on gender equality, suggesting voters respond to issue salience rather than party persuasion. Strikingly, post-election survey data in İzmir show the opposite pattern: the gender campaign reduced self-reported opposition support by 11 percentage points (18.4 percent), and voters reported more regressive gender attitudes. This divergence appears to be driven by strategic misreporting rather than by sample selection. Our findings demonstrate latent demand for progressive gender policies even in conservative, polarized contexts, while highlighting that stated preferences on sensitive sociocultural topics may not only understate true effects but also show effects of opposite sign to revealed preferences.