

Backlash Boys? Understanding The Gender Gap in Radical-Right Support Among Young People

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Statements and declarations

Ethical considerations

The data analysed in this paper are publicly available and were previously subject to ethical review and approved for public release.

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Abstract

While older voters are often seen as the primary base of right-wing populism, recent elections suggest growing support among young people, particularly young men. Yet the reasons why remain unclear. Using panel data from the British Election Study, we examine the youth gender gap in support for Britain's leading radical right party, Reform UK, and explore differences in opinion that may account for this divide. We find that young men have become significantly more likely than young women to support Reform, particularly during the 2024 election campaign. Although young men and women differ across a range of political attitudes, it is primarily views related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that account for this youthful gender divide in support. These findings suggest that a specific form of cultural backlash, involving opposition to policies revolving around group identity, may be driving a new cohort of support for the radical right.

Keywords: radical-right parties; populism; diversity; inclusion; backlash; youth; Britain

Words: 4,831

Introduction

As the populist radical right wave continues to wash over Western democracies, one of its more unexpected vanguards has been young men. While scholars such as Norris and Inglehart (2019) describe the rise of right-wing populism as a conservative backlash driven primarily by older citizens, recent elections suggest that young men are increasingly warming to these parties and leaders (Abou-Chadi 2024). Given that radical right parties are now a primary vector of democratic backsliding (Manucci 2024) and electoral choices in the impressionable years of early adulthood tend to have a lasting influence (Dinas 2014), this pattern is concerning. Yet the reasons behind this young male shift to the radical right remain unclear.

Although a large literature explores the motivations behind radical right support (e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017; Ivarsflaten 2008), few studies have examined why young men, in particular, are increasingly drawn to these parties. An exception is Off, Alexander, and Charron (2025), who – using pooled survey data from EU states – find that the gender gap in sexist attitudes is larger among young people than in other age groups. Yet it remains unclear whether this attitudinal gap actually accounts for the corresponding gap in radical right support between young men and women. Moreover, there are a number of other potential explanations that remain unexamined, especially the idea that young men may be reacting against recent efforts to promote equity and inclusion for women, ethnic minorities, and LGBT communities. These initiatives – variously labelled “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI), “equality, diversity, and inclusion” (EDI), “identity politics,” or simply “woke” – have become lightning rods in contemporary politics (Bernstein 2005; Marx 2025), raising the possibility that resistance to these policies is helping fuel young men’s support for the populist right.

In this study, we examine the gender gap in radical-right support among young people in Britain, using panel data from the British Election Study that enables us to track electoral preferences over time and includes detailed longitudinal measures of a variety of political attitudes, including hostile sexism, economic perceptions, immigration views, and support for DEI initia-

tives.

We find that young men have become significantly more likely than young women to support Reform UK, Britain's leading radical right party, particularly during the 2024 election campaign. While young men and women differ on several opinion dimensions, it is attitudes toward DEI initiatives that primarily drive increased young male (versus young female) Reform support. Across a range of models, controlling for these attitudes reduces the gender gap in Reform support to near zero, suggesting that opposition to DEI plays a central role in explaining young male support for the radical right in Britain.

Existing research

Younger voters in Western democracies have consistently shown an inclination towards a more progressive politics. They have generally expressed more socially liberal views on issues such as immigration, gender equality, and LGBT rights (Coenders and Scheepers 1998; Banaszak and Plutzer 1993; O'Grady 2023; Pew Research Center 2015) and have also been more likely to support progressive parties, such as Greens (Lichtin, van der Brug, and Rekker 2023) and less likely to support parties of the right and centre right (Pew Research Center 2024; Whiteley 2023; cf. Dassonneville and McAllister 2025).

At the same time, a growing body of work has highlighted that these age-related trends mask significant gender divides within younger cohorts. Recent studies show that young men are particularly likely to oppose gender equality policies and to perceive them as threatening, whether in the form of legislative gender quotas (Kim and Kweon 2022), gender-neutral language (Marx 2025), or broader equality measures in the labour market (Alexander, Charron, and Off 2025; Off, Charron, and Alexander 2022; Campbell and Cowper-Coles 2025). Cross-national evidence further suggests a widening gender gap in ideological self-placement, with young women continuing to locate themselves on the left, while young men are increasingly drifting rightwards (Campbell and Cowper-Coles 2025; Nennstiel and Hudde 2025).

Recent evidence suggests furthermore that this gendered divergence among young peo-

ple has started manifesting in election results. Radical right support has increased sharply among young men in Europe (Abou-Chadi 2024; Cokelaere 2024) – albeit still at a lower level than among older men. A parallel trend has been noted in the United States, where young men have shown increasing support for Donald Trump (e.g., Brown 2024). While men have historically been more likely to support radical right parties (Immerzeel, Coffé, and van der Lippe 2015), this new pattern of *young* male support challenge the widely held interpretation of right-wing populism as a “cultural backlash” driven mainly by older voters alienated by cultural liberalism (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

To date, the only study to focus specifically on the reasons for the emerging age–gender divide in radical right support is Off, Alexander, and Charron (2025), who find that young men and young women in EU countries show large gaps both in radical right support and in modern sexism, i.e., hostility toward feminism and gender equality movements. This suggests that sexism may play a role in the higher support for radical right parties among young men. Indeed, a broader literature shows that sexist attitudes do play a significant role in support for populist right-wing candidates and parties across all ages (Anduiza and Rico 2024; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2020).

However, the wider research on radical right support highlights additional factors that might motivate young male radical right support. Economic grievances are often cited, both at the macro level, in terms of long-run processes such as de-industrialisation and welfare state retrenchment (Betz 1994; Iversen 2001), and at the individual level, in terms of insecurity and perceived status loss, particularly among working-class men (Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017). These themes of precarity and marginalisation also increasingly feature in journalistic accounts of young men turning to the radical right (Henley and Sauer 2023; Miller 2024). Immigration attitudes are another central explanation, with opposition rooted in concerns about national identity, xenophobia and ethnocentrism, as well as perceived competition over jobs, housing, and public services (Ivarsflaten 2008; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2009; Rydgren 2008; Dancygier 2010; Cavaillé and Ferwerda 2023).

More recently, scholars and commentators have argued that a newer set of motivations

have come into play, especially among younger men: resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. These policies – also referred to as equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) or more broadly as “identity politics” (Bernstein 2005) – seek to redress the historical exclusion of women, ethnic minorities, and LGBT communities through affirmative action, cultural recognition, and institutional reform. Backlash to such efforts has become increasingly visible in popular culture, from online subcultures like the “manosphere” (Botto and Gottzén 2024) to male-dominated podcasts (Nicolaou 2025). In the UK, anti-DEI messaging has been embraced by political actors ranging from the Conservatives’ “war on woke” (Bale 2022, p. 75) to Reform UK, which attacked “woke ideology” in public institutions in its 2024 manifesto (Reform UK N.d.). Our hypothesis is that this resistance to DEI represents an important pathway to radical right support among young men, and one that potentially distinguishes them from female and older male supporters of such parties.

It is important to note that opposition to DEI may have at least three distinct sources, following Kinder and Sander’s (1997) classic account of racial attitudes in the United States: an individual’s (1) interests, (2) their attitudes toward the social groups in question, and (3) their political principles. For some young men, opposition to DEI no doubt reflects material interests, such as perceived competition with women in education, employment, or cultural status – indeed, several studies find evidence that such competition increases sexism among young men (Alexander, Charron, and Off 2025; Off, Charron, and Alexander 2022). For other young men, hostility to DEI may be rooted in prejudice toward the groups most associated with these policies: women, ethnic minorities, and LGBT communities. But opposition may be grounded in political principles, such as a classical liberal concern with the erosion of individual rights and a scepticism toward group-based claims – concerns that have also been advanced by political theorists (e.g., Barry 2001; Fukuyama 2018).

As such, anti-DEI sentiment may overlap with established drivers of radical right support, such as xenophobia or sexism, while also drawing upon distinct ideological commitments. Recognising these multiple foundations potentially helps explain both the breadth of anti-DEI backlash

among young men and its resonance within radical right discourse.

Data and research design

We focus on Britain from 2019 to 2024, with Reform UK – and its predecessor, the Brexit Party – as the radical right parties of interest.¹ Despite the constraints of the single-member plurality electoral system, the radical right has attracted notable support in British politics: 14% of the electorate voted for Reform in 2024, and the party was leading the opinion polls with around 30% support in the summer of 2025.

Our data come from the British Election Study (BES) Internet Panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2024), which provides large, representative samples of the British public (around 30,000 respondents per wave) and a broad set of political attitude items, measured repeatedly across time. We analyze waves 16–28, spanning June 2019 – when the BES first measured support for the Brexit Party – through to the pre-election survey in June-July 2024. Our main outcome is vote intention for Reform or the Brexit Party. We examine 12 attitudinal variables (see supplementary materials), including authoritarianism, economic values, immigration attitudes, hostile sexism, racial resentment, opposition to DEI initiatives, and personal financial evaluations.

We begin with descriptive analyses of Reform support and political attitudes by age, gender, and wave, followed by regression models predicting Reform support. Interactions between age and gender isolate the young male effect, while adjustments for attitudinal and demographic variables allow us to explore which factors help explain for this gap.

Trends in young male support for Reform UK

Figure 1 shows trends in support for the Brexit Party and Reform UK from 2019 to 2024, broken down by age and gender. Support peaked in mid-2019, driven largely by older voters – especially

¹Reform UK is classified by The PopuList as both “populist” and “far right” (Rooduijn et al. 2023).

older men – but the gender gap was nearly as large among the youngest group. After Boris Johnson became prime minister and the Brexit withdrawal agreement was finalised, support collapsed and remained low through the COVID period, during which the party rebranded as Reform UK. From late 2022, support rose sharply again, particularly among men.

[Figure 1 about here]

To clarify the temporal dynamics of this shift, Figure 2 isolates Reform support among 18–29-year-olds across the 13 survey waves studied between 2019 and 2024. While the party always receives more support from young men than young women, the gap grew larger in 2023 and 2024. By the July 2024 pre-election survey, 11.7% of young men intended to back Reform UK, which was more than double the share of young women (4.4%). The gender gap for 18-29-year-olds (7.3 percentage points) was the largest observed among any age cohort.

[Figure 2 about here]

Attitudinal trends by age and gender

To investigate the attitudinal foundations of rising support for the populist right among young men, we examine political attitudes across age and gender groups using data from the June 2024 wave of the British Election Study. Figure 3 presents levels of support or opposition on a range of attitudes and opinions commonly linked to radical right party support, including authoritarian values, opposition to immigration, and hostile sexism. Several distinct patterns emerge. Across most issue domains, men express more culturally conservative views than women. There is also a clear age trajectory, with older respondents being more conservative than younger ones. Among younger respondents (18–29), we find mixed effects: men are more conservative than women on attitudes toward gender, immigration, ethnicity, and DEI initiatives, but no such gender gaps appear in broader political values or views of democratic institutions.

[Figure 3 about here]

Consistent with recent work (Off, Alexander, and Charron 2025), young British men show significantly higher levels of hostile sexism than young women. However, this gender gap in sexism is larger in the 30-39 and 40-49 age cohorts, meaning young men are not uniquely sexist. In fact, they are, by a considerable margin, the least sexist male cohort in the BES sample.

A significant male-female gap also exists in immigration attitudes, with men more sceptical of immigration and more likely to rate it as their most important political issue. Men also express more racial resentment than women,² and greater opposition to DEI policies and equity efforts. For all these attitudes, the gender gap widens in younger cohorts.

On other issues, gender differences among young people are inconsistent with the higher support for the radical right that we see among men in this age group. Young British men do not differ from young women in their preference for a strong, undemocratic leader, nor do they hold more authoritarian attitudes. Indeed, young Britons overwhelmingly reject either form of authoritarianism. While democratic dissatisfaction and mistrust typically predict far-right support, young men are no more disaffected than young women and, in fact, express greater trust in MPs. Young men additionally report substantially better personal financial situations, contradicting narratives of young male economic disadvantage.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the gender gap in young people's attitudes cannot be attributed to dissatisfaction with the political system or economic conditions, nor does it reflect a generalised ideological conservatism among young men. Instead, the attitudinal divides that parallel the male-female voting intention gap all relate to groups, identities, and policies focused on group identities. This pattern is consistent with some leading explanations of radical right support, such as hostility to immigration and sexism, but it is consistent with our claim that opposition to DEI constitutes a distinct driver.

Next, we focus on the youngest age group and examine trends in their political attitudes over time (Figure 4). These longitudinal data confirm that young men are consistently more op-

²This is measured as perceptions of discrimination against minorities subtracted from perceptions of discrimination against whites; see supplementary materials.

posed than young women to equity efforts and DEI initiatives, more likely to perceive discrimination against whites (and less likely to perceive discrimination against minorities), and more sexist. These gender gaps moreover widened over time, paralleling the growing gap in Reform support (also shown in Figure 4 for comparison). The longitudinal results also show that the widening gender gap among young people is driven at least as much by increasingly progressive views among young women as by growing conservatism among young men, particularly on our measures of hostile sexism and opposition to DEI.

[Figure 4 about here]

Explaining the gender gap in youth far-right support

To identify which political attitudes are associated with the gender gap in support for Reform UK among young voters, we estimate a series of logit models using data from the July 2024 pre-election survey. We begin with a baseline model that includes the major demographic variables and then add each of seven attitudinal variables in turn. We use these models to produce a series of predicted probabilities of supporting Reform. We show two contrasts: young men vs young women (upper plots in Figure 5) and young men vs older men (aged 30 or more; lower plots in Figure 5).³

[Figure 5 about here]

By comparing each specification to the baseline, we assess whether adding a given attitudinal variable attenuates the “young male effect”, i.e., whether it mediates the association between age, gender, and Reform support. In the upper panels of Figure 5, only two attitudes significantly

³Predicted effects are based on the “observed values” approach (e.g., Hanmer and Kalkan 2013). The underlying models include the full sample of respondents with the young male effect isolated using an age category by gender interaction. See the supplementary materials for the full regression results.

reduce the young male–female gap: opposition to diversity/equity initiatives (DEI) and opposition to equity policies. In contrast, most other attitudes leave the gap unchanged, and authoritarianism actually widens it. Notably, hostile sexism does not appear to account for the gap between young men and young women.

The lower panels use the same modelling framework but switch the contrast to age groups within gender rather than gender groups within age. The baseline effect shows that, net of demographics, young men are significantly less likely than older men to support Reform. Three sets of attitudes reduce this age gap: opposition to DEI/equity policies, immigration disapproval, and authoritarian values. Controlling for DEI opposition or immigration disapproval fully eliminates the age gap in Reform support among men, whereas including authoritarianism can even flip the sign, implying (conditional on other covariates) higher support among young men.

Across the two sets of comparisons, both DEI-related measures consistently explain a meaningful share of Reform support, i.e., they explain gender gaps in Reform support among the young and age gaps among men. When considering the latter gap, immigration disapproval and authoritarianism clearly also matter. By contrast, hostile sexism does not explain either gap in these within-group comparisons. The common finding across both sets of contrasts is the importance of attitudes to DEI, suggesting that these views are an underappreciated mechanism behind support for Reform UK – and potentially for radical right parties more broadly.

Conclusion

Consistent with recent findings across Western democracies, we observe a clear gender gap in radical-right support among young people in Britain. While men have long been more likely than women to back Reform UK (and previously the Brexit Party), this difference is especially marked among 18–29-year-olds and widened further during the 2024 election campaign. Our analysis suggests that common motivations for radical right support, such as authoritarianism, economic insecurity, or democratic dissatisfaction do not explain this divide. The key differences lie in attitudes to groups, identities, and policies focused on group identity: young men express stronger

opposition to immigration and DEI initiatives than young women, are more likely to perceive discrimination against white people, and hold more sexist views. These divides have grown over time. Finally, our regression models of Reform support during the 2024 pre-election period show that opposition to DEI accounts for much of the gender gap in far-right support among young people.

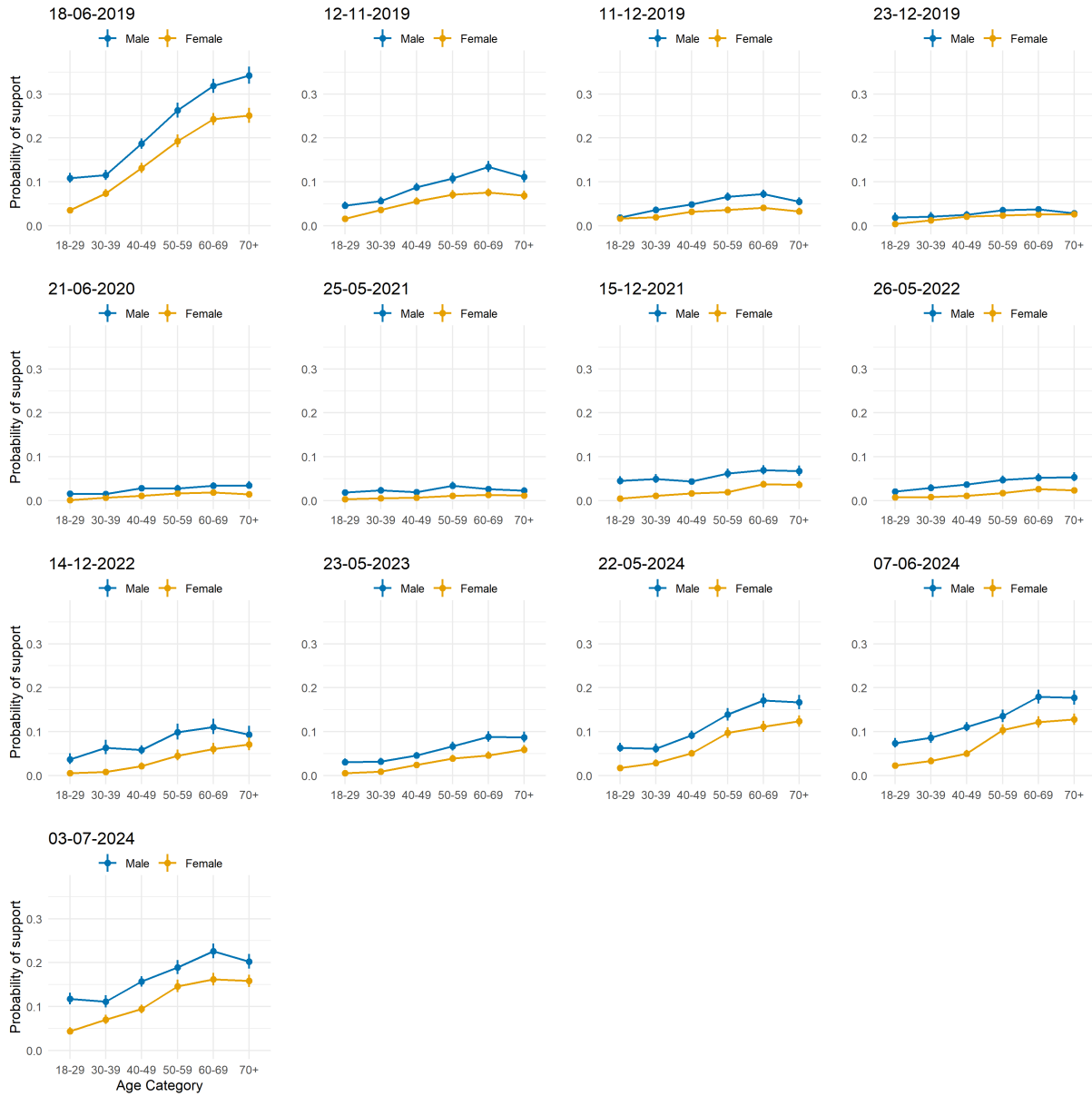
DEI initiatives aim to redress discrimination and under-representation by promoting the inclusion of disadvantaged groups based on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Yet these efforts have attracted criticism for privileging group identities over individual rights, potentially provoking resentment among majority groups (e.g., Barry 2001; Fukuyama 2018). Our findings suggest that, in Britain, such resentment may be contributing to increased support for the radical right among young men. Indeed, while the Brexit Party's 2019 manifesto made no mention of "woke ideology," by 2024, the rebranded Reform UK portrayed it as having "captured" Britain's public institutions. On one hand, this can be viewed as a routine form of democratic contestation, in which opposition parties tap into dissatisfaction with government policy. On the other, given the radical right's record of challenging democratic norms and targeting minorities, such backlash raises legitimate concern.

The prominence of anti-DEI sentiment among young male Reform supporters is notable not only because it departs from traditional ideological explanations of radical right support, but also because such views are arguably more socially acceptable. Unlike overtly racist or sexist rhetoric, anti-"woke" or pro-free speech arguments can serve as a bridge between the radical right and mainstream conservatives, liberals, or libertarians. In turn, this suggests an expanding and more ideologically diverse support base for radical rights parties such as Reform UK, which could enhance their electoral prospects.

Finally, we should not overstate the exceptionalism of young men. While their support for Reform UK has grown sharply, it has also increased among young women – albeit from a lower starting point and at a slower pace. Moreover, the attitudinal shifts we observe could be described as growing progressivism among young women as much as rising conservatism among young men. It is also important to stress again that young men are not the group most supportive of the radical

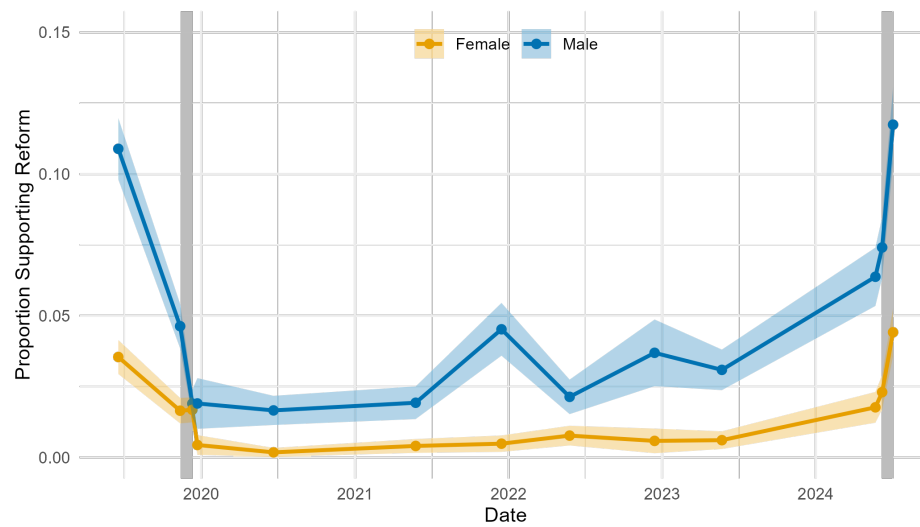
right in absolute terms; rather, their recent upturn in support is striking because it departs from earlier generational trends.

Figure 1. Reform Support by Age and Gender and Survey Wave (2019–2024)



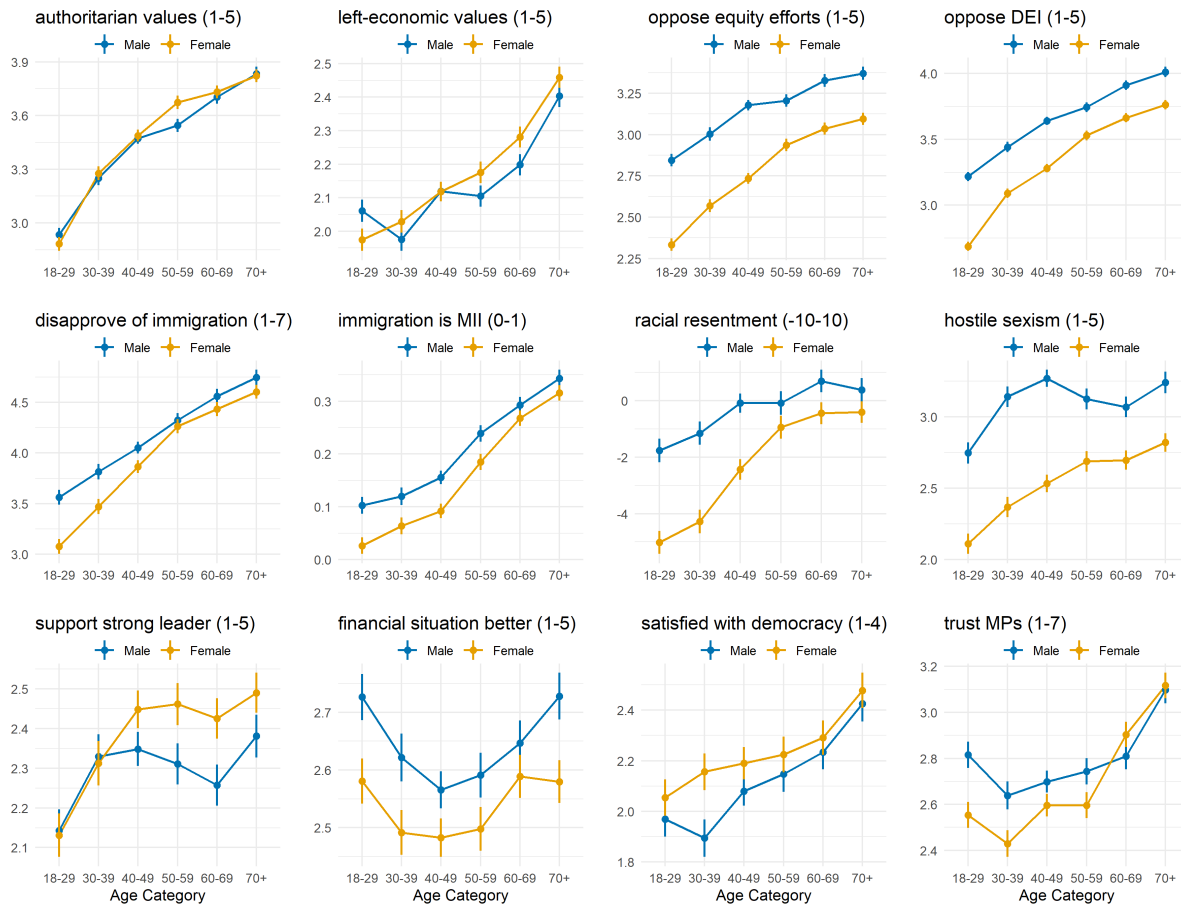
This figure presents the proportion of the sample supporting Reform UK across 13 survey waves from June 2019 (wave 16) to July 2024 (wave 28), disaggregated by six age categories and gender. Estimates are weighted but unadjusted for covariates. The December 2019 and July 2024 waves are pre-election polls. Each panel represents a different survey wave, with the date indicating the last day of fieldwork for that wave.

Figure 2. Trends in Reform Support Among 18-29 Year-Olds (2019–2024)



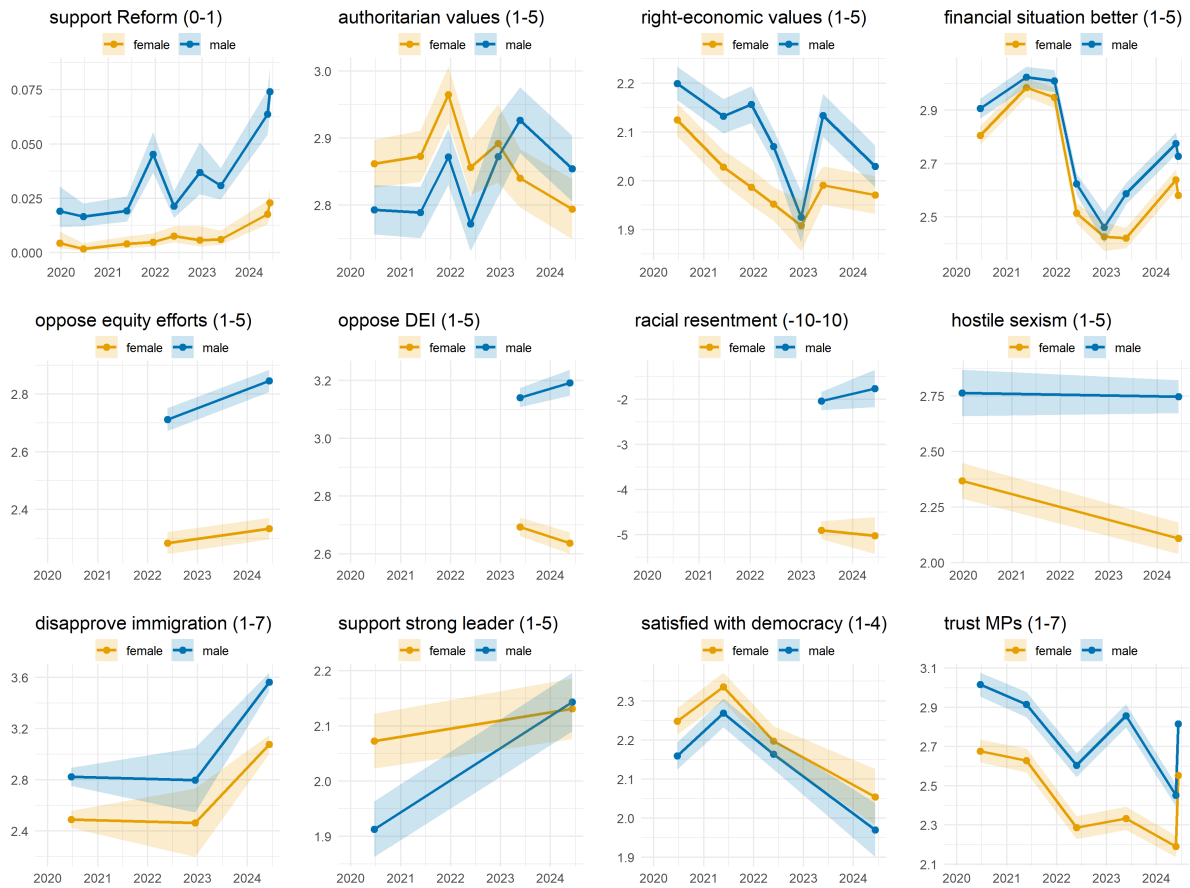
This figure shows the proportion of 18–29-year-olds supporting Reform UK across 13 survey waves from June 2019 (wave 16) to July 2024 (wave 28). Shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are weighted but unadjusted for covariates. The 2019 and 2024 election campaign periods are indicated using gray bars.

Figure 3. Political Attitudes by Age and Gender (2024)



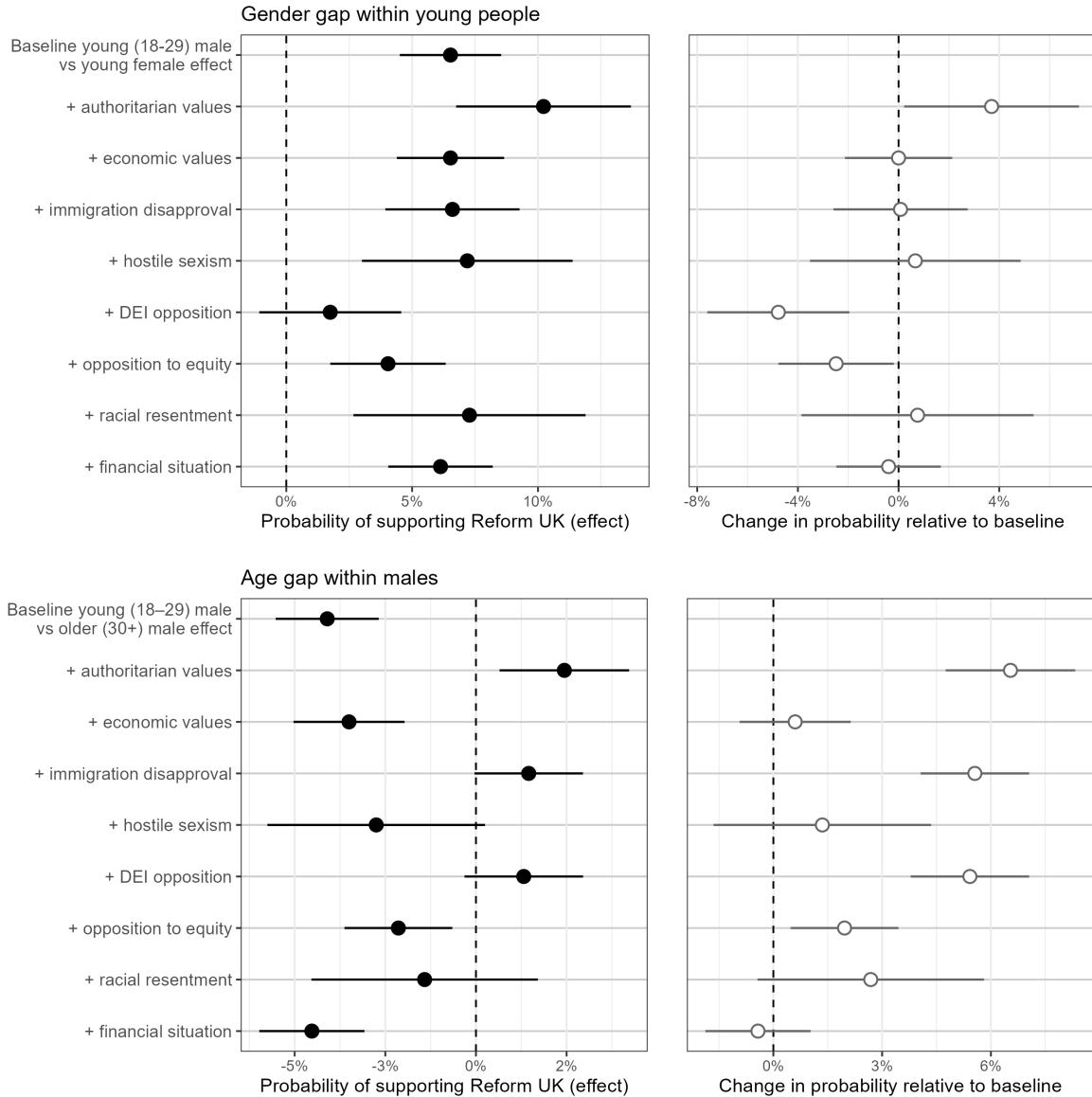
This figure shows levels of political attitudes by age group and gender as measured in the 27th wave of the BES, fielded in June 2024. Estimates are weighted but unadjusted for covariates.

Figure 4. Trends in Political Attitudes Among 18-29 Year-Olds (2019–2024)



This figure shows levels of political attitudes for 18–29-year-olds across nine survey waves from December 2019 (wave 19) to June 2024 (wave 27); data are shown whenever the corresponding variables were included on the BES. Shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are weighted but unadjusted for covariates.

Figure 5. Which Attitudes Explain the Age and Gender Gap in Reform Support?



The plots on the left show the predicted probabilities of supporting Reform for respondents who are young and male vs young and female (upper plot) or older and male (lower plot), after adjusting for all other demographics and for the single covariate shown in rows. The plots on the right show the differences between the baseline predicted probability (top row in each plot) and the predicted probability for young men estimated from the model indicated in rows. Horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The observed value predicted effects approach is used (e.g., Hanmer and Kalkan 2013). Underlying models are logit regressions applied to the entire sample, with age by gender interaction terms.

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