Survey shows a widening ideological gap in recent years. Why?

Introduction

In recent years, election polling and surveys across several Western democracies showed a growing ideological divergence between young men and women. Social scientists and psychology academics are keen to unravel this fascinating phenomenon due to its prevalence worldwide. Researchers describe this as a widening "gender ideological gap," particularly among newly eligible voters born in the late 1990's and after, often referred to as 'Gen Z' (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). Reports from Pew Research Center, The Gallup, the British Election Study, and analyses sponsored by Financial Times universally indicated that young women hold more progressive views on issues such as feminism, abortion, LGBTQ rights, and social equality, while young men are more likely to identify with conservative standings on the other end of the political spectrum (Milosav et al., 2025).

Before moving to interrogate the causes of such gender-based ideological gap widening, it is necessary to first clarify a few foundational concepts. Firstly, this essay approaches the idea of gender as a socially and psychologically constructed identity and is to be distinguished from the biological sexes, which have to do with physical characteristics. Although academics have started to include non-binary gender identities in recent surveys, most academic research data is still based on a male-female dichotomy, with which this essay will follow (Grasso & Shorrocks, 2025). Secondly, this essay characterizes "ideology" as more than strictly political and refers to an integrated system of political beliefs, social values, and moral priorities (Federico et al., n.d.). The male and female voters' preferences on issues like feminism, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and diversity initiatives will be a part of the discourse (Langsæther & Knutsen, 2024). Lastly, this essay considers it necessary to address both theories that help explain the causes of ideological gaps, and newly proposed

theories and evidence aiming to embed the widening gap into psychological research discourses.

This essay argues that the widening gender-ideological gap between younger generations is driven by three factors: gender-based social identity, changing social expectations, and a new, volatile information environment. Attitudes toward politics are not independent of one's living experiences and social backgrounds and should be seen as manifesting from a person's inherent need for social acceptance and a sense of purpose in life.

To psychology academics, what makes the phenomenon interesting is that gender itself has evolved to become one of the more salient foundations for modern political identity and social comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The past three decades saw shifting gender roles and expectations, technology-induced educational and economic transformations, jump-started online social media and its increasingly complicated relationship with adolescent self-esteem, all came together and carved out a new, unfamiliar politics that contemporary psychology studies have yet to fully understand. Therefore, it is worth pointing out that both the prompt itself and this essay's undertaking are signals of a new, emerging "zeitgeist", and the young generation of voters across the world is forming a sense of self and understanding the accelerated social changes from a different psychological angle.

This essay has three key arguments. It will first examine the evidence of the widening gender ideological gap, then it will explore the Social Identity Theory, as well as the changing gender expectations, and the role of the digital communication society. Finally, it will evaluate the implications of such a trend for future social relations.

Is There Really a Widening Gender-Based Ideological Gap?

There can be no doubt that large-scale surveys around the world, particularly in Western democracies, showed an increase in ideological gaps between men and women in recent years

(Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). Besides the aforementioned polling and survey data, analysis of Generation Z attitudes has similarly found that young women increasingly identify with progressive social movements, whereas young men have a significantly less shift and, in some cases, even moved toward conservatism (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025) (Milosav et al., 2025).

Before moving to explore the causes of such a widening, however, it is worth pointing out a few caveats. Firstly, much of the research and data are from Western democracies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, where intense election cycles have created an entire industry of polling and surveys. It can't and shouldn't be overgeneralized to include countries and cultures such as Asia, Africa, or the Middle East. How various cultural backgrounds affect young people's political inclinations is yet another frontier area that awaits more scholarly input. Another problem is that many surveys are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, meaning that these surveys were designed to measure attitudes at that moment (Jost et al., 2022). Lastly, the size of the gap is highly issue-based. Gender-based polarizations are shown to be far bigger on issues like feminism and LGBTQ rights.

To sum up, research evidence does show a widening ideological gap based on gender, particularly on social and cultural issues. However, it is just as important to keep in mind that the phenomenon is neither universally applicable across both democratic and non-democratic regimes, nor equally prevalent across all political discourses.

Social Identity Theory as an Established Framework

With data proving the widening gender-based ideology gap, this essay will now turn to explore foundational academic frameworks that explain the gap overall. The most relevant psychological explanation is the Social Identity Theory, first developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The Social Identity Theory states that individuals derive

part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. As people identify more strongly with the group, they become increasingly motivated to maintain their standings, with some even actively seeking ways to promote themselves within the group. The theory proposed a three-step structure that humans as socially bound individuals take to establish a sense of belonging: categorization, identification, and comparison. Individuals first categorize themselves and others into groups, then choose to identify with particular groups, before they finally start comparing themselves against other groups and exhibiting a preference for perceived out-groups.

Young voters now have various opportunities to embed themselves into issues like gender equality, feminism, and abortion. Individuals who have categorized and identified themselves as a member of these highly gender-based groupings are more likely to follow the community's political subscription. Consequently, the observed ideological gaps between males and females are no longer a reflection of these voters' policy preferences, but a lens through which they form and strengthen their personal identities.

Recent psychological research based on the Social Identity Theory offered a solid theoretical foundation for such an explanation (Otteni, 2025). A strong social group identification increases in-group favoritism and leads to aversion toward out-groups. Once the bias against the out-group takes shape, a gender-based ideology gap emerges and widens as voters become emotionally attached to their group identity, a process termed "affective polarization" by Shanto Iyengar and his peers in 2018 (Iyengar et al., 2018).

The Social Identity Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how gender-based identities and groupings influence the ideological gap, though other factors such as individual experiences, family and educational backgrounds, and cultural context may decidedly shape one's ideological leaning.

Social Expectations and Social Reality

Besides social identities embedded in different issue-based groupings, the tension between social expectations and the contemporary social reality is another cause for ideology polarization (Eagly et al., 2004).

Until the early Industrial Revolution, women in a household were unfairly expected to take on caregiving and domestic chores and were economically dependent on their male partners. Men, in contrast, were expected to demonstrate authority and achieve economic success. Such a societal norm was forever changed as productivity spiked. The past half-century saw numerous women attending higher education, becoming a part of the workforce, and making strides in gaining economic independence. In fact, a 2017 research data showed that women are outperforming men academically and are more likely to obtain graduate degrees (Pepin & Cotter, 2017).

There have been several social scientific theories attempting to explain this tension between the long-established gender expectations and the new gender reality. For example, relative deprivation suggested that human beings respond not only to objective outcomes pertaining to themselves, but also perceived disadvantages: while women are keen to push for progressive social reforms over perceived gender inequality, men are shown to be developing anxieties over status loss and future uncertainty. In a psychological context, Jennifer L. Petriglieri characterized this feeling of deprivation as an “identity threat” in her highly cited 2011 research (Petriglieri, 2011). Petriglieri posited that when important aspects of an individual’s identity are challenged, their psychological discomfort increases, and they will respond by advocating for their beliefs, seeking supportive communities, and adopting stronger, more extreme ideological positions.

The identity under threat as a framework complements nicely with the social identity theory because the former focuses on providing a socially oriented cause for the widening ideology gap between males and females. The great social changes that took place in past three decades of globalization have led to intense cognitive dissonances among many, who'd often embrace polarized communities in exchange for psychological security.

Neo-Communal Environment

The last theoretical pillar of this essay is a social context variable unique to the new generation of young males and females: the rise of digital communication. From social media to alternative sources of information, the emerging online landscape has transformed how young people receive and process information and develop ideological leanings.

Group Polarization Theory, proposed by Serge Moscovici, argued that when individuals interact primarily with like-minded people, their world views become synchronized and more extreme over time (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). The online environment, from social media and discussion forums to User-Generated Content (UGC) websites and algorithm-driven timeline feeds, greatly helps facilitate this process (Van Bavel et al., 2021).

From a psychological studies' standpoint, online discussions are especially prone to confirmation bias and selective exposure, encouraging individuals to filter information that support their convictions and curating an echo chamber. These two nuanced mechanisms, unbeknownst to the more naïve young people, strengthen and increase users' ideological radicalization. (Van Bavel et al., 2021)

In conclusion, it may be a bit far-fetched to claim the internet alone caused the widening gap, but when put together with the social identity theory and the identity threat framework, the underregulated online space can be viewed as a powerful catalyst that amplifies existing identities and grievances.

Are Young Men and Women Really Becoming Enemies?

With three distinct psychology theories providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the causes of gender-based ideological gaps, the last part will now address the impacts to come. Ideological differences between males and females never necessarily lead to hostility, and therefore, this essay will explore whether a widening ideological gap means disagreement or signals a coming social breakdown.

A 2025 research piece suggested that gender politics increasingly contains elements of affective polarization. Online discussions often promote negative stereotypes about both genders, and social media is a hotbed for the toxic narrative that frames gender relations as a zero-sum conflict (Otteni, 2025). As a result, the young generation of male and female voters increasingly views the world in an absolute light, and ideological gaps widen. To help prevent things from deteriorating further, stricter regulatory policies are needed, and legislators should take action to effectively limit adolescents' access to forums online and offline that promote gender-based radicalization (Otteni, 2025).

Conclusion

Widening ideological differences between men and women are now an emerging discourse for psychology and social science research. This essay proposes using three different psychological frameworks to provide a comprehensive explanation of the causes. The social identity theory explained how individuals establish a sense of belonging by embedding themselves in a group. The identity threat theory traces back to the social changes that had begun over three decades ago, provoking strong anxieties among the new generation of voters and radicalized their politics. Lastly, the rise of social media and a strange, algorithm-driven digital landscape ran in parallel with Gen Z votes, prompting group polarization. While the

widening gender-based ideology gap alone is unlikely to cause social turmoil, more frontier research is needed to better understand and predict if the gap will grow further.

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