

Democratic Backsliding, Resilience, and Gendered Political Authority in South Korea

Abstract

Democratic backsliding and resilience shape citizens' evaluations of the political leaders involved. We argue that they can also influence citizens' broader beliefs about political leadership. We examine support for *male political authority*—the belief that men are especially suited to political leadership and that effective leaders possess masculine-coded traits—across South Korea's 2024–25 democratic crisis and recovery. We posit that periods of acute democratic strain may weaken attachment to male political authority. As institutions recover, however, familiar expectations about who should lead and how reassert themselves. We test this claim with an original four-wave panel survey conducted after martial law and the National Assembly's impeachment vote and continuing through the Constitutional Court ruling, presidential campaign, and post-election transition. Respondents initially expressed weaker attachment to male political authority, but this openness receded as ordinary politics resumed. Resilience can thus stabilize institutions while leaving the gendered foundations of political authority intact.

Democratic backsliding is a central concern of contemporary politics. Ideally, in response institutions constrain executive overreach, leaders are removed from office, and power changes hands through elections (Boese et al., 2023; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Merkel, 2026). South Korea's 2024–2025 crisis offers a striking example of this kind of democratic resilience. After President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, the country moved through impeachment, a snap election, and a peaceful transfer of power. Voters punished the ruling party at the polls. By conventional measures, South Korea is a democratic success story.

Yet this democratic success may be incomplete. Even when institutions recover, political authority can remain organized around familiar inequalities. The 2025 South Korean presidential election, for example, featured no woman candidate for the first time in 18 years. Although President Lee Jae Myung increased women's representation in cabinet, he fell short of his 30% target. Democratic resilience may thus restore institutional order without transforming who is seen as entitled to political power. This possibility shifts attention from whether backsliding leaders are held accountable to whether democratic crisis and recovery also influence broader understandings of political leadership.

Do citizens revise their beliefs about political leadership as democracies move from backsliding to resilience? We examine this question through the lens of male political authority — the belief that men are especially suited to positions of political power and that effective leadership requires traits traditionally associated with masculinity. This form of authority is deeply embedded in democratic politics. Men dominate political office, and citizens often associate effective leadership with traits such as strength, assertiveness, and decisiveness (Bauer, 2018; Holman, 2023; Kim and Kang, 2022). Indeed, President Yoon's declaration of martial law reflected an especially stark version of this leadership model, one grounded in unilateral, coercive authority and justified through the language of national security.

Democratic backsliding may be associated with weaker attachment to male political authority. Moments of democratic crisis can expose the costs of masculine models of leadership, while women's political inclusion can symbolize democratic quality and legitimacy (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2022; Bush and Zetterberg, 2021; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, 2024; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo, 2026; Kao et al., 2024). Democratic resilience, however, may reverse

this opening. As institutions recover and political life returns to normal, established leadership norms may reassert themselves.

We expect support for male political authority to be lower while democratic institutions remain under strain and to increase as democratic resilience takes hold. To evaluate this claim, we fielded a four-wave panel survey in 2025, following the same respondents through the aftermath of South Korea's martial law declaration. The four waves were fielded before the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling, one week after the ruling, just before the presidential election, and about six weeks after the new government took office. This design allows us to observe within-person attitudinal change as the country moved from crisis toward recovery. We assess male political authority through respondents' support for strongman leadership, leadership trait preferences, perceptions of women's leadership capacity, and support for increasing women's political representation. We also examine whether these patterns extend to evaluations of candidates for ministerial office.

The panel reveals a shift in attitudes as South Korea moved from backsliding to resilience. Before the Constitutional Court upheld impeachment, respondents express weaker attachment to male political authority. They are less supportive of strongman leadership, place less weight on masculine-coded traits, are more likely to view women as capable leaders, and report greater support for increasing women's representation. As democratic resilience takes hold, however, these patterns reverse, with the largest changes concentrated among respondents with weaker baseline commitments to gender egalitarianism.

Our work shows that even successful episodes of democratic resilience may leave the gendered terms of political authority largely intact. Our findings contribute to the study of democratic backsliding and resilience by shifting attention from citizens' evaluations of particular leaders and parties to their broader beliefs about political leadership. We also focus on democratic resilience itself, examining how public opinion evolves not only when democracy comes under threat, but also as institutions recover. This move also brings gender more centrally into debates about backsliding and resilience (Çavdar and Yaşar, 2026; Noh, 2026). For gender and politics scholars, the results further speak to research on gendered leadership stereotypes (Bauer and Santia, 2022; Banducci, Everitt, and Gidengil, 2025; Taylor-Robinson and Geva,

2023) and emerging work on gender and crisis (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och, 2023; Hargrave et al., 2026; Kroeber and Dingler, 2023). We show that preferences for male political authority are malleable within individuals over short periods of time. Crises may sometimes create openings for women’s leadership, but those openings can close as stability returns. Finally, by examining South Korea, we draw further attention to a case central to recent debates about resistance to women’s political power (Kim and Kweon, 2022; Kweon, Kang, and You, 2025; Lee, 2025; Mo and You, 2025; Woo, Kim, and Osborn, 2026; You, 2024).

Citizens’ Responses to Democratic Backsliding and Resilience

A growing body of scholarship examines both democratic backsliding and the conditions under which democracies prove resilient in the face of such threats. Democratic backsliding involves the “state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (Bermeo, 2016, 5) or, more broadly, a “deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime” (Waldner and Lust, 2018, 95). South Korea’s martial law crisis was an executive coup, or “self-coup” (*autogolpe*), in which a freely elected chief executive sought to suspend constitutional constraints and concentrate power in a single stroke (Bermeo, 2016). At the same time, this crisis also highlights democratic resilience, “the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character” (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021, 872). The self-coup was quickly contained. Following the National Assembly’s vote against the martial-law declaration, Yoon rescinded the decree, and democratic procedures were reaffirmed through his impeachment and removal, followed by a competitive election and peaceful transfer of power.

Democratic resilience is not only an institutional outcome; it is also a public process that citizens observe and interpret as crises unfold and are resolved. The literature on citizens’ responses to democratic backsliding asks how people react when leaders seek to undermine democratic rules, especially whether, and under what conditions, they sanction politicians who engage in anti-democratic behavior (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Carey et al., 2022; Yeung, 2025; Jacob, 2025). A consistent finding is that accountability is often tempered by competing considerations, including partisanship (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Mazepus and Toshkov,

2022), perceptions of candidates' competence (Frederiksen, 2022), economic evaluations (Ferrer et al., 2025; Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022), and alignment with ideological commitments or policy goals (Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin, 2022; Lewandowsky and Jankowski, 2023; Christensen and Saikkonen, 2025). Citizens often persuade themselves that they can secure both their preferred policies and democracy, even when leaders behave anti-democratically (Krishnarajan, 2023).

Much of this literature evaluates citizens' responses to democratic backsliding using either hypothetical scenarios — survey experiments that ask respondents to weigh democratic principles against partisanship, competence, or policy goals — or observational surveys of democratic attitudes in routine political periods. A smaller set of studies leverages real-world episodes of democratic backsliding to examine how citizens respond when democratic norms are contested in practice (van Noort, 2023; Svolik, 2023). These event-based studies assess whether anti-democratic behavior carries real-world consequences for vote choice (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2023) and party identification (Frye, 2024; van Noort, 2023).

This work has substantially advanced our understanding of when citizens punish — or tolerate — anti-democratic behavior, but two important questions remain underexplored. First, most studies center on the moment of democratic threat or its immediate aftermath. We instead shift attention to the period of democratic resilience that follows, when the threat is contained, democratic procedures are reasserted, and politics begins to stabilize. Second, existing studies focus primarily on electoral accountability, examining whether citizens punish particular leaders or parties for anti-democratic behavior. We instead ask how citizens' broader beliefs about political leadership evolve as democratic backsliding gives way to democratic resilience, including the traits they prioritize in leaders, the kinds of authority they value, and their evaluations of women as political leaders.

Gendered Leadership Preferences

Episodes of democratic backsliding and resilience may affect not only citizens' evaluations of the leaders involved, but also their broader expectations about political leadership. Leadership preferences influence who citizens elevate to office, what traits they reward, and which

behaviors they tolerate from those in power (Bergeron et al., 2025; Laustsen, 2017). Voters' assessments of traits such as strength, decisiveness, compassion, and integrity influence candidate evaluations and vote choice (Laustsen, 2017; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). These preferences are also context dependent. Under threat and uncertainty, for example, citizens may become more receptive to dominant, forceful, or rule-breaking leaders who appear better able to secure the group's future (Gadarian, 2010; Gillath and Hart, 2010; Hasty and Maner, 2025; Kakkar and Sivanathan, 2017).

The traits and leadership styles citizens value are also deeply gendered. Although attitudes towards women's leadership have become more egalitarian in many countries over time, citizens still often view men as better suited for political leadership (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes, 2025). These judgments reflect not only attitudes toward women as leaders, but also beliefs about gender and leadership traits. Men are more readily associated with strength, assertiveness, decisiveness, and risk-taking, whereas women are more often linked to compromise, consensus-building, honesty, and risk aversion (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Barnes and Beaulieu, 2024; Bauer, 2018; Holman, 2023; Huddy and Capelos, 2002; Kim and Kang, 2022). These stereotypes shape both what citizens view as effective leadership — decisiveness rather than compromise, for example — and which leaders they see as able to embody these traits.

Because the traits most commonly associated with effective political leadership are coded as masculine, gendered leadership preferences have often advantaged men, particularly in contexts that prize toughness, unilateral decision-making, and security. Role congruity theory, for example, posits that prejudice arises when the agentic traits associated with leadership — such as assertiveness and dominance — are seen as incongruent with the communal traits stereotypically associated with women (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Consistent with this logic, men are more strongly preferred as political leaders following terrorist attacks (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister, 2022) and in settings marked by sustained rivalry (Jang, 2026; Schroeder, 2017; Kim and Kang, 2022).

Yet men and masculine-coded leadership traits are not advantaged in all contexts. A growing body of experimental research documents voter bias in favor of women candidates (Clayton

et al., 2020; Lust and Benstead, 2024; Schwarz and Coppock, 2022). Some political environments are especially likely to increase support for women leaders and more feminized models of leadership. Women are often viewed as less corrupt than men and are sometimes preferred as candidates when corruption is salient (Barnes and Beaulieu, 2024). Health and financial crises may create similar dynamics by elevating the value of care, caution, restraint, and risk management, thereby increasing the appeal of women leaders and feminine leadership styles (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och, 2023; Hargrave et al., 2026; Vranic and Just, 2025).

The political context may also affect whether women are seen as capable of embodying masculine-coded leadership traits. A meta-analysis of 63 studies finds a modest but persistent tendency to ascribe masculine traits and competencies to men and feminine traits and competencies to women (Banducci, Everitt, and Gidengil, 2025). Yet these stereotypes are not always politically consequential. U.S.-based research shows that gender stereotypes shape evaluations of women candidates only when they are activated (Bauer, 2015). Related research likewise suggests that women face larger penalties for agentic behavior in masculine-coded issue domains, such as national security, than in feminine-coded domains, such as care for vulnerable populations (Schneider, Bos, and DiFilippo, 2022). Women's perceived ability to embody masculine-coded leadership traits therefore depends on whether the political context activates stereotypes that associate those traits with men.

Taken together, these studies suggest that gendered leadership preferences are contingent and context dependent. Citizens vary not only in their support for women's representation, but also in whether they prefer masculine or feminine models of leadership and whether they see men or women as able to embody these leadership traits. Support for male political authority is therefore not fixed; it shifts with the problems citizens believe politics must solve and the forms of authority they see as suited to those problems. These dynamics are especially important during democratic backsliding and resilience, when citizens are forced to confront questions about the kinds of leadership traits they value and who is best suited to provide them.

Backsliding, Resilience, and Male Political Authority

Democratic backsliding and resilience are especially likely to influence beliefs about political leadership. We argue that these moments may lead citizens to evaluate not only current political leaders, but also what political authority should look like, which leadership qualities are most valued, and who is understood as suited to exercise political power. We focus in particular on *male political authority*, which privileges men as leaders and masculinity as a model of political leadership. We assess male political authority through support for strongman leadership and preferences for masculine-coded leadership traits, as well as beliefs about women's ability to embody those traits and support for women's political representation. Together, these outcomes capture attachment to masculine models of political authority and the perceived place of women within political life.

Democratic backsliding is, fundamentally, a crisis over the exercise of political authority. In other types of crises, citizens often confront an external threat and may reward leaders who appear tough, dominant, and willing to act decisively (Gillath and Hart, 2010; Itzkovitch-Malka, 2024). In episodes of democratic backsliding, however, the threat comes from political authority exercised without institutional constraint (Druckman, 2024; Park, 2025). In this context, the masculine-coded exercise of authority is not simply an ineffective response to democratic threat; it is part of the threat itself. Under these conditions, traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and unilateral action may appear less like markers of effective leadership and more like signals of domination, coercion, and disregard for institutional limits. Leadership styles associated with communication, collaboration, and institutional restraint may therefore become more attractive when democratic preservation and repair are especially salient.

At the same time, these shifts may not endure. In cases where democratic backsliding is followed by resilience, democratic turmoil may become less central to citizens' evaluations, economic concerns may become more salient, and trust in political institutions may begin to recover. Under these conditions, citizens may rely less on cues tied to democratic repair and more on familiar judgments about what effective leadership looks like in ordinary politics. As attention shifts toward more routine governance problems, leadership qualities associated with

decisiveness, assertiveness, and executive control may again become more attractive. Democratic resilience may therefore restore more familiar preferences for masculine-coded models of political leadership.

Male political authority depends not only on valuing masculine-coded leadership traits, but also on believing that men are better able than women to display them. Voters tend to ascribe masculine traits and competencies to men (Banducci, Everitt, and Gidengil, 2025), but during acute democratic backsliding, that belief may weaken. In South Korea, Yoon's declaration of martial law made this dynamic especially visible: a male president abused executive power to override democratic limits, while women exercised decisive and authoritative leadership in the pro-democracy mobilization that followed (Mesmer, 2024). Together, these developments may have challenged the assumption that men are especially capable of decisive and assertive leadership. As democratic resilience takes hold, however, familiar associations between men, masculinity, and political authority may return, making citizens less likely to see women as capable of providing those qualities.

Male political authority is reinforced not only by the leadership qualities citizens value, but also by beliefs about whether women should hold political power. Support for women's political representation may therefore also change as democracies move from backsliding to resilience. Citizens view governments as more democratic when women are better represented in elected office (Karp and Banducci, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005), and across democracies women's presence can confer legitimacy on legislative decisions and decision-making processes (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo, 2026; Kao et al., 2024). Consistent with this logic, voters and parties sometimes turn to women candidates when distrust in existing political institutions is high (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo, 2021), and the presence of women politicians can make even anti-democratic parties appear more legitimate to voters (Elad-Strenger, Ben-Shitrit, and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2024). Indeed, this association is so strong that it extends beyond democratic settings. Autocrats also deploy women's rights and representation to improve their democratic image at home and abroad (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2022; Bush and Zetterberg, 2021; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, 2024). In moments of acute democratic strain, women's inclusion may therefore take on heightened symbolic value as a marker of democratic repair

and distance from a discredited status quo. As democratic legitimacy becomes less immediately contested, however, women's political inclusion may lose some of this symbolic appeal, and support for women's political representation may decline.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that democratic backsliding and resilience should shape attachment to male political authority. When democratic threat is especially salient, citizens should be less attached to leadership models centered on masculine-coded authority and more open to women's political inclusion. As democratic recovery takes hold, however, those openings should narrow. Over the backsliding-to-resilience sequence, we expect citizens to become more supportive of strongman leadership and masculine-coded leadership traits, less likely to believe that women can embody valued leadership qualities, and less supportive of women's political representation. That is, **citizens' attachment to male political authority should strengthen over the transition from backsliding to democratic resilience.**

Democratic Backsliding and Resilience in South Korea

South Korea is an especially valuable case for examining how democratic backsliding and resilience shape gendered leadership preferences. After decades of Japanese colonial rule and successive military regimes, South Korea seemed locked in a cycle of repression. The 1980s, however, marked a turning point. Students and workers organized mass protests, forcing the regime to respond to demands for democracy. In 1987, sustained public pressure forced the government to introduce democratic reforms. South Koreans today view their democracy as a hard-won achievement and a symbol of collective resilience and civic determination (Lee, 2011). Against this backdrop, threats to democratic institutions take on particular significance.

On December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, reviving unsettling memories of South Korea's authoritarian past (Choi and Baptista, 2024). Citing escalating threats from alleged anti-state actors and growing internal security challenges, Yoon justified the move as necessary to protect the nation. Yet the declaration occurred amid deep political polarization, collapsing approval ratings, and intensifying opposition protests accusing his administration of eroding democratic norms (Han, 2025). Allegations of corruption involving the president's wife, together with ongoing economic instability, further fueled public anger,

leaving Yoon politically vulnerable even before the martial law declaration (Choe, 2024).

The declaration immediately mobilized citizens across Seoul, with large protests forming outside the National Assembly to demand an end to martial law. In response, legislators swiftly passed a resolution calling for the order's repeal, forcing Yoon to rescind it just five and a half hours after its announcement. Yet the political crisis deepened. Demonstrations continued nationwide for weeks, culminating in the National Assembly's vote to impeach the president on December 14. Under the Constitution, impeachment required two steps: a legislative vote followed by review by the Constitutional Court. Substantial uncertainty persisted as Yoon remained in office pending the Court's decision, with the right-wing People Power Party (PPP) continuing to back him (Park, 2025).

In April 2025, the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment, formally removing Yoon from office and ending four months of political turmoil. A snap presidential election was held sixty days later to restore political leadership, resulting in the victory of Lee Jae Myung from the opposition center-left Democratic Party (DP). Yet even after the new administration assumed office, criminal proceedings against Yoon continued, alongside ongoing investigations into the declaration of martial law. Questions over who participated in its planning and execution — and the extent of legal and political accountability for those involved — remained unresolved well beyond the inauguration of the new government. Court sentences for the former Prime Minister, Justice Minister, and Minister of Government Legislation, for example, were not handed down until January 2026 (Kurniawan, 2026; Yonhap, 2026).

These dynamics unfolded within a broader political landscape shaped by entrenched male dominance. South Korea has the largest gender pay gap among OECD member states and has ranked last in *The Economist's Glass Ceiling Index* for twelve consecutive years (Chae, 2025; Shin, 2024). Women's political representation mirrors these economic inequalities. As of April 2026, women hold just 20.8% of seats in the legislature, ranking 117th out of 181 countries and well below the OECD average of 34%. The impeachment of the country's first woman president, Park Geun-hye, appears to have further deepened skepticism toward women's leadership (Woo, Kim, and Osborn, 2026). Institutional reforms aimed at strengthening women's representation, such as gender quotas, have also faced substantial resistance, particularly from

younger men who have expressed backlash against feminist movements (Jung and Moon, 2024; Mo and You, 2025; Kim and Kweon, 2022).

President Yoon's declaration of martial law brought this gendered political context into sharp relief. The declaration exemplified a highly masculine model of authority: unilateral, confrontational, and justified through the language of national security (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2026; Kang and Jo, 2025; Park, 2025). This style of leadership was not unique to the crisis. Even before the martial law declaration, Yoon had become closely associated with anti-feminist politics. His assertion that "structural gender discrimination does not exist anymore" (Lee, 2025, p. 591), together with his campaign pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, was widely understood as reaffirming masculinity in the political sphere (Mo and You, 2025). The backsliding-to-resilience sequence allows us to examine whether citizens' reactions to this model of authority changed as democratic crisis gave way to recovery.

Empirical Strategy and the Backsliding-to-Resilience Sequence

We expect support for male political authority to increase as South Korea moved from the unresolved aftermath of martial law toward democratic resilience. To test our expectations, we conducted a longitudinal survey (re)contacting 1,000 respondents at four critical junctures. First, during the uncertain period after martial law was repealed and the National Assembly voted to impeach Yoon, but before the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling; then immediately after the Court's ruling; during the presidential campaign; and finally after the election. These moments capture externally driven changes in the political environment, allowing us to observe within-person shifts in attitudes across the backsliding-to-resilience sequence. Because all four waves were fielded after the onset of democratic crisis, our design does not identify change relative to a pre-crisis baseline. Instead, it assesses whether attitudes shifted systematically as the immediate democratic crisis receded and democratic stability was gradually restored. This sequence offers unusual leverage for studying how democratic backsliding and resilience shift citizens' preferences over who should govern and what leadership qualities they value.

The first wave was fielded approximately one and a half months after the declaration of martial law, during a period of acute uncertainty, when trust in political institutions remained

under strain and public opinion was divided over how the Constitutional Court would rule. The second and third waves were timed to capture attitudinal change in the immediate wake of the impeachment decision and in the final stage of the presidential campaign. We minimized the gap between each political event and survey fieldwork. The second wave was conducted one week after the Court upheld the impeachment, and the third was fielded one week before the presidential election. The fourth wave was designed to capture attitudes after the transition to the new administration, but before evaluations of its performance could substantially shape perceptions of the crisis itself. We therefore fielded the final wave one and a half months into the new administration. Table 1 reports the dates of the key political events and the corresponding survey waves.

Table 1: Timeline of key political events and survey waves

Date	Event
December 3	Declaration of martial law
December 14	National Assembly vote for impeachment
January 24–February 5	Wave 1: Acute-crisis survey
April 4	Constitutional Court upholds impeachment
April 11–17	Wave 2: Post-impeachment survey
May 23–28	Wave 3: Pre-election survey
June 3	Snap election
June 4	New government inaugurated
July 18–22	Wave 4: Post-election survey

The survey was administered in collaboration with Macromill Embrain, a licensed local survey firm. Respondents for the first wave were recruited from Macromill Embrain’s online panel, with quotas set on age, gender, and region to ensure a sample representative of the national population. To offset expected panel attrition, we recruited 4,650 respondents in Wave 1, 2,790 in Wave 2, 1,674 in Wave 3, and 1,000 in Wave 4. Of the 4,650 respondents recruited in Wave 1, 1,000 completed all four waves.

To assess attrition bias, we estimated a logistic regression predicting retention through Wave 4 using respondents’ baseline characteristics. As shown in Table A.1, older respondents, men, and respondents with higher levels of education were somewhat more likely to remain in the panel, but income, perceived social status, and party identification with either the right-wing

incumbent party (PPP) or the center-left opposition party (DP) were not significantly associated with retention. Importantly, we find no evidence that retention was associated with support for President Yoon, trust in the presidency, or baseline support for women’s representation. This suggests that attrition was not strongly structured by respondents’ political or gender attitudes, which reduces concern that observed changes reflect selective panel retention. Among respondents in the final panel, the average age was 50 and 42% were women. Approximately 80% had completed a college degree or higher, 19% had completed high school, and fewer than 1% had less than a high school education. Average monthly household income was approximately ₩4.35 million, or about \$3,600 (see Table A.2 for a detailed summary statistics).¹

Our empirical analyses leverage the repeated observations to assess within-person change across the four waves. This design allows us to compare each respondent’s attitudes at different stages of the backsliding-to-resilience sequence. We model within-person change using repeated-measures ANOVA for each outcome, followed by post-hoc paired t-tests to assess pairwise differences between waves.

Results: Attitudinal Change Across the Backsliding-to-Resilience Sequence

We begin by establishing that the survey waves track a meaningful shift from acute democratic crisis toward political recovery. Against this backdrop, we examine whether citizens’ gendered political preferences changed across the backsliding-to-resilience sequence. We focus on four outcomes: support for strongman leadership, relative preferences for masculine rather than feminine leadership traits, beliefs about whether women can provide valued leadership qualities, and support for women’s political representation. We also examine whether related patterns appear in evaluations of candidates for ministerial office. Finally, after presenting these

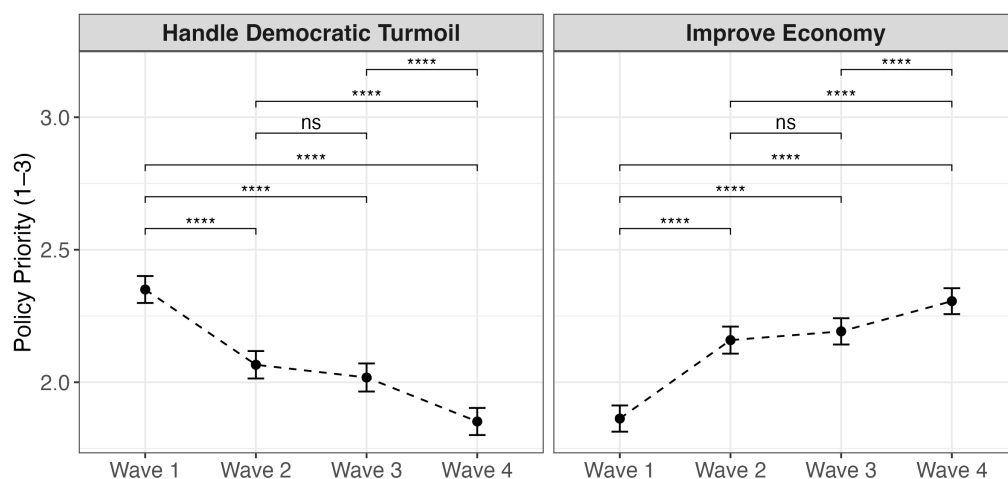
¹The national gender ratio is approximately 50:50 and the national average age is 46.1, compared to 42% women and an average age of 50 in our sample. The share of college-educated respondents (80%) is higher than the national rate of 56% among adults aged 25–64, which is common in online panel surveys. Average monthly household income in our sample (₩4.35 million) is modestly below the national average of approximately ₩5.42 million.

main results, we turn to a set of supplementary analyses that clarify the scope and interpretation of these attitudinal shifts.

Political Priorities and Institutional Trust Across Backsliding and Resilience

As our argument hinges on attitudes shifting as democratic backsliding gives way to resilience, we first need to establish that respondents did indeed perceive the crisis as receding across the four survey waves. We therefore assess whether respondents' policy priorities moved away from democratic turmoil and toward more routine governance concerns, and whether trust in major political institutions increased over time.

Figure 1: Shift in Political Priorities

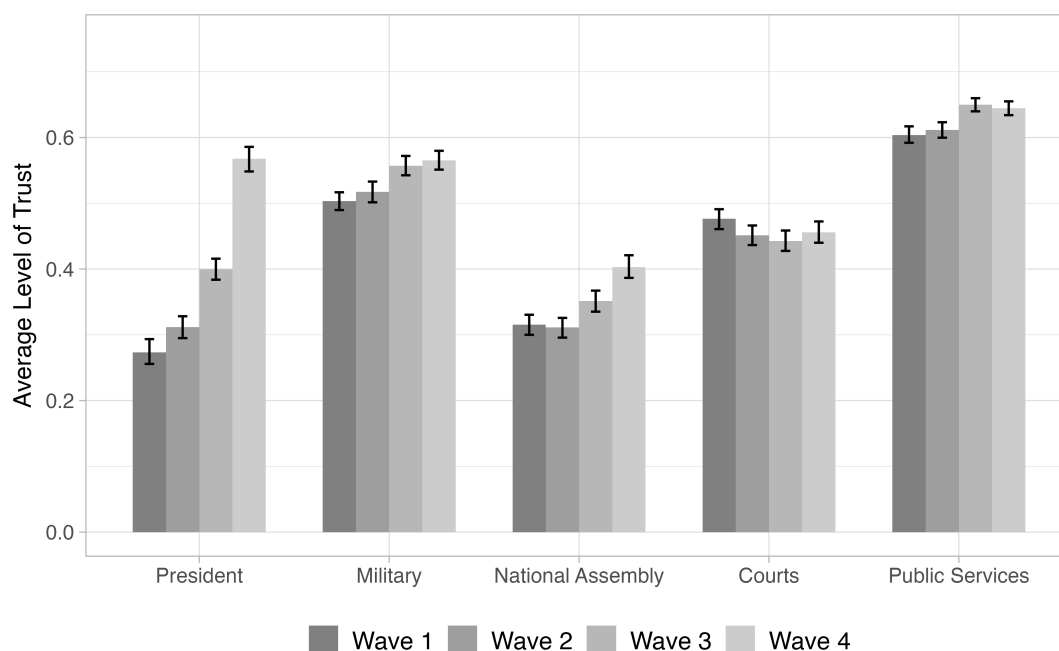


Note: This figure shows the average priority assigned to handling democratic turmoil and improving the economy across four survey waves. Priorities are rescaled to range from 1 (lowest) to 3 (highest), and error bars indicate bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. Horizontal lines above the points represent results from post-hoc paired t-tests comparing each wave to the others following repeated-measures ANOVA.

To assess issue prioritization, respondents ranked the importance of handling democratic turmoil, restoring institutional trust, and improving the economy. We recoded responses to range from 1 (lowest priority) to 3 (highest priority). Figure 1 shows substantial change in citizens' policy priorities over time (Handle democratic turmoil: $F(2.98, 2977) = 96.9, p < 0.001$; Improve economy: $F(2.96, 2957) = 97.7, p < 0.001$). Across the four survey waves, respondents placed steadily less priority on handling democratic turmoil, with all pairwise differences statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) except between Waves 2 and 3. Over the same period, respondents placed increasing priority on the economy, especially after Yoon's removal. Together, these shifts suggest that concerns about the democratic crisis receded over time as citi-

zens increasingly turned their attention to routine governance issues.

Figure 2: Shift in Institutional Trust



Note: This figure shows the average level of trust in the Courts, Military, National Assembly, President, and Public Services across waves 1 through 4. Trust levels are standardized to range from 0 to 1, and error bars indicate bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals.

Turning to institutional trust, Figure 2 shows a pattern consistent with democratic resilience. Trust in the presidency was lowest in the first wave, consistent with the executive’s central role in the declaration of martial law, but rebounded sharply in subsequent waves. Trust in the military and National Assembly also increased over time, though less dramatically. By contrast, trust in public services remained consistently high and changed little across waves, as expected for an institution more removed from the crisis. This stability helps underscore that the shifts observed for more politically implicated institutions reflect meaningful changes in public confidence rather than generalized response instability. Although trust in the courts did not follow the same recovery pattern, the broader trajectory across institutions is consistent with the view that the most acute phase of the democratic crisis had receded by the later waves of the survey.² Appendix B reports the full results of the repeated-measures ANOVA.

²A programming error in Waves 1 and 2 omitted the intermediate negative category, “Somewhat distrust,” from the 6-point trust scale. Respondents therefore saw five options, producing an imbalanced scale with three positive and two negative responses. This may have inflated re-

Taken together, the evidence on issue priorities and institutional trust suggests that the four survey waves capture meaningful movement from backsliding toward resilience. As democratic turmoil became less central and confidence in major institutions generally improved, the political environment became less defined by acute democratic strain. These shifts provide the context in which gendered preferences over leadership and representation may also change.

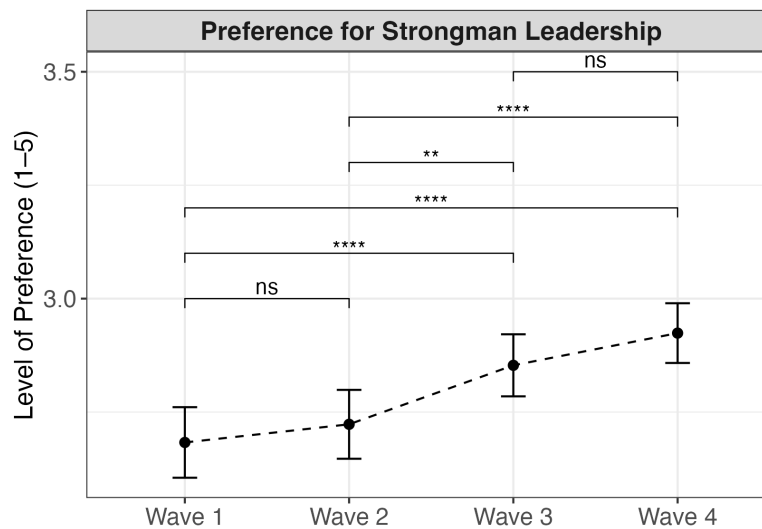
Strongman Leadership Gains Support as Backsliding Recedes

We now turn to whether these broader political shifts were accompanied by changes in citizens' gendered understandings of political authority. We begin with support for strongman leadership, which captures willingness to endorse leaders who bend the rules to get things done. This measure is especially salient in South Korea because the crisis itself began with an attempted exercise of unilateral executive authority. Whether citizens became more or less willing to endorse rule-bending leadership therefore speaks directly to how they responded to the central abuse of power at the heart of the crisis. It is also a central component of male political authority, as strongman leadership elevates decisiveness, dominance, and rule-bending as desirable qualities of political rule. Even the term “strongman” is revealing. It denotes a style of political leadership traditionally associated with, and deployed by, men. We expect support for strongman leadership to be lowest in the first wave, fielded in the immediate aftermath of the attempted coup, and to increase across subsequent waves as democratic resilience restores more familiar expectations about political leadership.

We measure support for strongman leadership using responses to the question: To what extent do you believe having a strong leader in government, even if they bend the rules to get things done, is good for our country?” Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “very bad” to (5) “very good.” As shown in Figure 3, support for strongman leadership was initially low, but it rose sharply in Wave 3. This increase was partially obscured by preventing respondents from selecting a moderate distrust option. The full scale was restored in Wave 3. Because trust in Waves 1 and 2 may be overstated, the Wave 3 increase likely understates the true magnitude of recovery. The error therefore biases against our expectations, making the observed rise a conservative estimate. Notably, average trust remained low in Waves 1 and 2 and rose sharply in Wave 3 even after the missing negative category was restored.

leadership increased significantly across the four survey waves ($F(2.86, 2858.91) = 17.58, p < 0.001$). Average support increased from 2.68 in Wave 1 to 2.92 in Wave 4, a change of 0.24 points on the 1–5 scale, or approximately 0.19 standard deviations. The largest increase occurred between Waves 2 and 3, when presidential candidates entered the campaign and electoral competition intensified ($p < 0.001$). By contrast, neither Yoon’s removal from office (Wave 1 to Wave 2) nor the formation of a new administration (Wave 3 to Wave 4) produced a statistically significant change relative to the immediately preceding wave. Support for rule-bending leadership therefore rose most clearly not during the immediate institutional response to martial law, but once citizens turned to evaluating prospective leaders in an electoral setting. Rather than producing a lasting backlash against unconstrained executive authority, the crisis was followed by increasing support for strongman leadership as electoral competition intensified.

Figure 3: Shift in Preferences for Strongman Leadership



Note: This figure shows the average levels of preferences for strongman leadership across four survey waves. The measure ranges from 1 to 5, and error bars indicate bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. Horizontal lines above the points represent results from post-hoc paired t-tests comparing each wave to the others, following repeated-measures ANOVA.

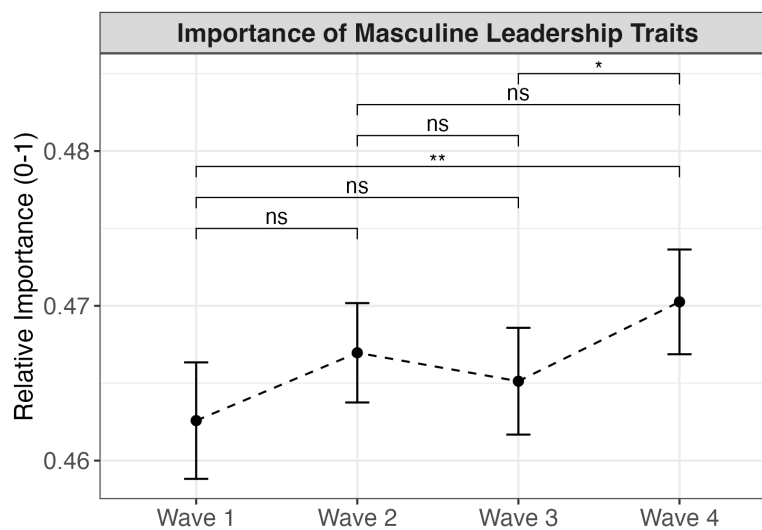
Masculine Leadership Traits Gain Support as Backsliding Recedes

Male political authority encompasses not only support for rule-bending executive power, but also preferences for masculine-coded leadership traits. We next examine whether the patterns observed for strongman leadership extend to the traits citizens value in political leaders. Across the four survey waves, respondents rated the importance of several leadership qualities on a

five-point scale. Following scholarship on gendered leadership stereotypes (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Huddy and Capelos, 2002), we treat assertiveness and decisiveness as masculine-coded traits, and communication and collaboration as feminine-coded traits. If citizens became more receptive to masculine-coded authority as backsliding receded, over time they should place greater relative weight on assertiveness and decisiveness than on communication and collaboration.

We construct a measure of Relative Preference for Masculine Leadership Traits, calculated as the combined scores for assertiveness and decisiveness divided by the total scores assigned to all four traits. This measure captures the relative weighting of masculine- and feminine-coded leadership styles rather than respondents' general tendency to rate all leadership qualities highly. Figure 4 shows that the relative importance assigned to masculine leadership traits increased significantly over time ($F(2.8, 2793.09) = 6.70, p < 0.001$), with the largest increase after the new administration took office (Wave 4).³

Figure 4: Shift in Preference for Masculine Leadership Traits



Note: This figure presents the average relative weight placed on masculine leadership traits among all leadership traits, both masculine and feminine, across the four survey waves. Relative importance ranges from 0 to 1, and the error bars show bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal lines above the points display the results of post-hoc paired t-tests comparing each wave with the others after the repeated-measures ANOVA.

³Two additional measures capture relative preference for masculine leadership traits through trade-off and single-choice questions. Because these items were introduced in Wave 2, we present these analyses in Appendix D; the trends are consistent with the main results.

As backsliding receded, respondents placed greater relative weight on assertiveness and decisiveness than on communication and collaboration. Citizens not only became more receptive to rule-bending authority, but also to the masculine-coded traits associated with it. The shift is especially notable because respondents consistently viewed President Yoon's leadership as masculine-coded. When asked in Wave 2 which traits best described Yoon's leadership, 46.45% selected assertiveness and 15.7% selected decisiveness, together accounting for 62.1% of responses.⁴ Yet respondents' relative preference for these traits increased over time, even though they associated them with Yoon himself. The crisis may therefore have undermined confidence in Yoon personally without diminishing the broader appeal of masculine-coded authority.

Women Become Less Associated with Assertive and Decisive Leadership as Backsliding Recedes

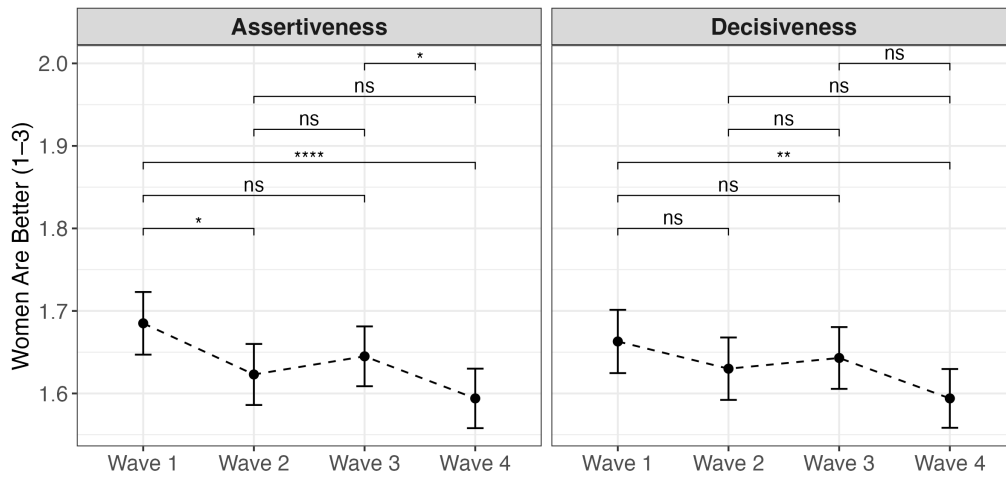
As backsliding receded, citizens placed greater value on assertiveness and decisiveness. We now examine whether women were also increasingly seen as less able to provide those traits. This question is central to male political authority because masculine-coded traits matter politically only if citizens also believe men are better able to embody them.

Across all four waves, respondents indicated whether men or women politicians were better at demonstrating each leadership trait considered above, or whether there was no gender difference. Responses were coded on a 1-3 scale, with higher values indicating a stronger belief that women politicians better demonstrate the trait. Figure 5 shows that beliefs about women's ability to provide decisive and assertive leadership both declined across waves (Assertiveness: $F(2.97, 2971) = 7.31, p < 0.001$; Decisiveness: $F(2.93, 2924) = 3.87, p = 0.01$).

Beliefs about women's decisiveness declined steadily over time. Although adjacent waves do not differ significantly from one another, the cumulative decline from Wave 1 to Wave 4 is statistically significant. Beliefs about women's assertiveness, in contrast, declined in two steps: after the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling (Wave 2) and after the new administration took office (Wave 4). At both points, respondents' assessments shifted significantly against

⁴Responses in Waves 3 and 4 do not differ significantly from those in Wave 2. This item was not included in Wave 1.

Figure 5: Beliefs on Women’s Assertive and Decisive Leadership



Note: This figure presents the average beliefs about women’s assertive and decisive leadership across the four survey waves. The measure ranges from 1 to 3, and the error bars indicate bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal lines above the points show the results of post-hoc paired t tests comparing each wave with the others following the repeated-measures ANOVA.

women, producing markedly weaker beliefs in women’s assertiveness by the final wave. Taken together, these results suggest that as respondents placed greater value on masculine-coded leadership traits, they also became less likely to see women as able to provide them. Over time, the traits that became more politically desirable were increasingly viewed as less characteristic of women politicians.

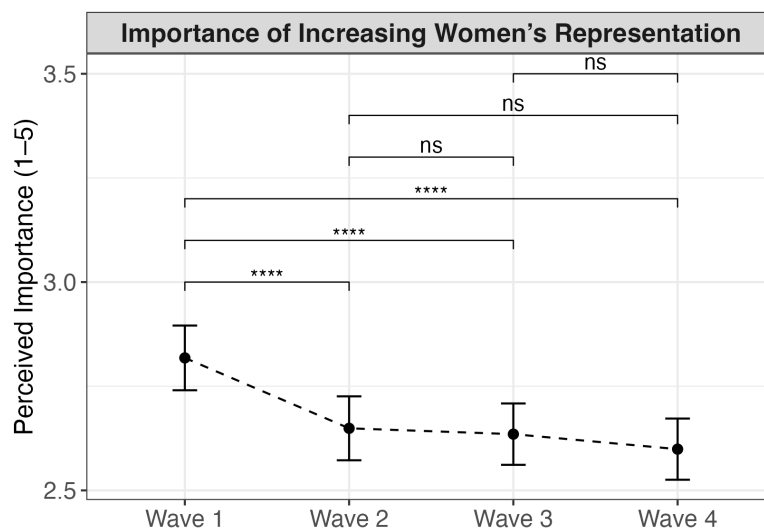
Support for Women’s Representation Declines as Backsliding Recedes

The preceding analyses show that, as backsliding receded, respondents placed greater weight on masculine-coded leadership traits and became less likely to associate women with those traits. We now ask whether this pattern extends to support for women’s presence in political office. Unlike the previous outcomes, this measure shifts from beliefs about leadership to preferences over who should hold political power. It therefore captures openness to disrupting a political order that remains dominated by men. If the backsliding-to-resilience sequence made male political authority more appealing over time, respondents should also become less supportive of increasing women’s representation.

We measure support for women’s political representation using a survey item that asks how important it is to increase the number of women in political decision-making positions, given

that women currently hold about 19.2% of National Assembly seats. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “not at all important” to (5) “extremely important.” As shown in Figure 6, support for women’s political representation declined significantly over time ($F(2.9, 2894.76) = 19.24, p < 0.001$). The largest decline occurred between Wave 1, fielded after the declaration of martial law, and Wave 2, fielded after the Constitutional Court’s impeachment decision ($p < 0.001$). Support then continued to fall across the later waves, suggesting that the initial post-impeachment decline was part of a broader downward trajectory. These results suggest that support for women’s political inclusion was higher under acute democratic strain, but narrowed as resilience took hold.

Figure 6: Beliefs on Importance of Increasing Women’s Representation



Note: This figure presents the average beliefs about the importance of increasing women’s representation across the four survey waves. The measure ranges from 1 to 5, and the error bars indicate bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal lines above the points show the results of post-hoc paired t tests comparing each wave with the others following the repeated-measures ANOVA.

Male Political Authority and Access to Ministerial Power

The preceding results show that, as backsliding receded, respondents became more supportive of masculine-coded political authority and less supportive of women’s political representation. We next examine whether citizens apply gendered standards when evaluating individual men and women as potential holders of ministerial power. To do so, we conducted pre-registered conjoint experiments in Waves 2–4 in which respondents evaluated ministerial candidates. In Waves 2 and 3, respondents compared hypothetical candidates; in Wave 4, fielded during cabi-

net formation, they evaluated actual nominees against hypothetical alternatives.⁵ These analyses complement the panel results by moving from broad attitudes toward women’s representation to judgments about women’s capacity to wield concrete executive authority.

We focus on three ministries: Defense, Interior Safety, and Health. These portfolios differ in how directly they implicate male political authority. Defense centers on security, command, and coercive state power, domains in which men are traditionally viewed as especially credible political actors. Health, by contrast, is associated with care and social provision, domains more often coded as feminine and less central to male political authority. Interior Safety falls between these domains, combining responsibility for public protection with a more domestic orientation toward safety and emergency management.

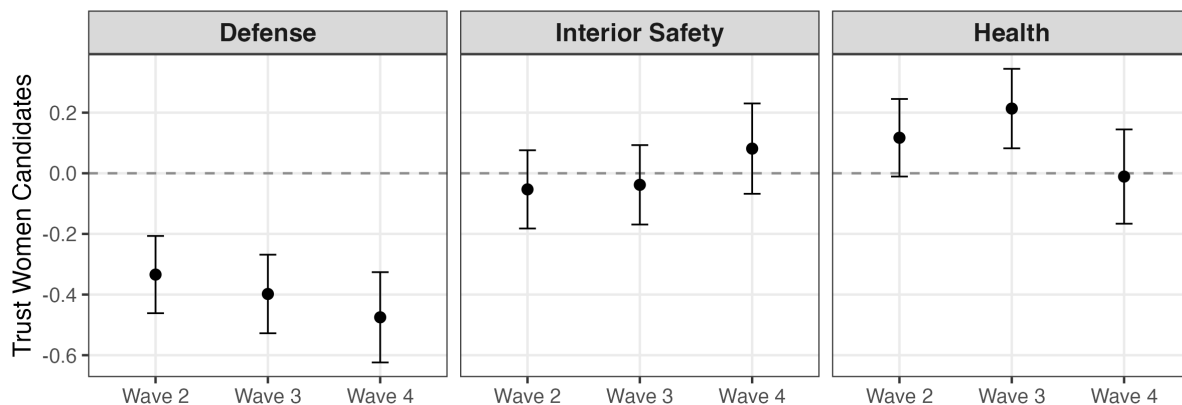
In each task, respondents evaluated one woman and one man candidate whose professional experience, political experience, and leadership style were randomized (see Appendix E.2 for details). Respondents then indicated which candidate they found more trustworthy. We focus on trustworthiness because ministerial office requires citizens to believe that particular individuals can exercise state power responsibly. That judgment becomes especially consequential in moments of democratic strain, when the misuse of political authority is precisely what is at stake. We estimate separate conditional logit models for each portfolio, where the outcome is whether a candidate profile was selected as the more trustworthy option.

Figure 7 presents the estimated effect of candidate gender on trustworthiness evaluations across portfolios. The clearest pattern appears in Defense, the portfolio most closely tied to male political authority. Across all three waves, women candidates were significantly less likely than otherwise comparable men to be viewed as trustworthy. Although the Wave 2-to-Wave 3 interaction does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (see Table E.3), the penalty grows in the expected direction as the crisis recedes. Wave 4 is especially revealing because respondents evaluated the actual Defense nominee alongside hypothetical alternatives during cabinet formation. Respondents thus assessed men’s and women’s trustworthiness against a real man selected for executive power. In this setting, women faced the largest trust penalty observed across the three waves. This penalty, moreover, does not simply

⁵The pre-analysis plan is attached to this submission as a separate document.

reflect deference to the named nominee, who was himself viewed as significantly less trustworthy than the hypothetical male alternatives (see Table E.5). Yet even when respondents were willing to look beyond the government’s candidate, they remained reluctant to trust women as alternatives for the Defense post.

Figure 7: Candidate Trustworthiness Evaluations by Ministerial Portfolio



Note: The figure reports conditional logit estimates for the effect of a woman candidate on being selected as the more trustworthy candidate. Points show log-odds coefficients and vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Values below zero indicate that women candidates were less likely than otherwise comparable men to be selected as more trustworthy; values above zero indicate that women candidates were more likely to be selected. Full results are reported in Tables E.4 and E.5.

The Health results underscore the asymmetry of gendered political authority. Women were not penalized in this more feminized domain, and by Wave 3 they were significantly more likely than otherwise comparable men to be viewed as trustworthy. This suggests that women can sometimes be advantaged in feminine-coded portfolios. This advantage, however, disappeared once respondents moved from evaluating hypothetical candidates to comparing alternatives against an actual woman nominee. In Wave 4, the gender of the hypothetical Health minister no longer significantly shaped trustworthiness evaluations. If feminized domains imposed barriers to men’s authority comparable to those women face in masculinized domains, male alternatives should have been penalized. They were not. Instead, men and women alternatives were viewed similarly. Finally, Interior Safety falls between Defense and Health, both conceptually and empirically, and candidate gender does not significantly affect trustworthiness evaluations for this portfolio in any wave (see Figure 7).⁶

⁶We also estimate the Wave 4 models using our six-point relative trust scale as the outcome in OLS regressions. Table E.6 shows the results are robust to this alternative specification.

Taken together, these results show that male political authority operates not simply through a generalized preference for men in politics, but through gendered boundaries around the kinds of power women are trusted to exercise. Women face the strongest and most persistent penalties in Defense, the portfolio most closely associated with security, command, and coercive state power. Although women may be viewed favorably in feminized portfolios such as Health, those advantages are weaker and less durable than the penalties they face in masculine-coded domains. The conjoint results therefore suggest that democratic resilience may reinforce not only who is trusted to govern, but also the gendered distribution of executive authority itself.

Interpreting Attitudinal Shifts

As backsliding receded, support for strongman leadership and masculine-coded authority increased, while support for women's political inclusion declined. In supplementary analyses, we now turn to further examining the scope and meaning of these shifts. We use a pre-crisis survey to contextualize post-crisis levels of support for women's representation, assessing whether women and men moved similarly over time, and identifying which respondents were most likely to withdraw support for women's political representation. Together, these analyses suggest that the decline in support for women's political inclusion is best understood as the narrowing of a crisis-era opening rather than a wholesale collapse, and that this narrowing occurred broadly across women and men while falling most heavily among respondents with weaker gender-egalitarian commitments.

Did Attitudes Return to a Pre-Backsliding Status Quo?

Support for women's political representation and more feminized understandings of leadership was highest during the period of acute democratic strain and then receded over time. The backsliding-to-resilience pattern is clear within the panel, but because all four survey waves were fielded after the declaration of martial law, we cannot determine how these attitudes compare to a pre-backsliding baseline. The over-time increase in support for male political authority could reflect a return to pre-crisis attitudes. Alternatively, attitudes may have remained more egalitarian than they were before the declaration of martial law, even as the opening created by democratic backsliding narrowed over time.

We can partially assess whether attitudes in the later waves reflected a return to pre-backsliding levels using a 2021 survey from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK). That survey asked respondents whether women’s roughly 19% share of National Assembly seats was “very few,” “few,” “about right,” “many,” or “too many.” In that survey, 50.14% described women’s representation as too low (very few or few). Although the comparison is necessarily approximate, support in our panel is notably higher: 78.4% of respondents in Wave 1 and 75.1% in Wave 4 expressed at least some support for increasing women’s representation. The same pattern holds under a stricter threshold: 64.6% of respondents in Wave 1 and 57.9% in Wave 4 said that increasing women’s political representation was “moderately,” “quite a bit,” or “extremely important,” again above the NHRCK benchmark. This comparison suggests that support for women’s political representation was elevated after the declaration of martial law and then receded over time, making the observed decline more consistent with the narrowing of a temporary opening than with a wholesale shift toward more exclusionary attitudes. Appendix [F.1](#) presents the full comparison and coding decisions.

Did Women and Men Shift in Similar Ways?

Prior research gives reason to expect both divergence and overlap in how women and men respond to democratic backsliding and resilience. On the one hand, women are often more supportive of women’s political inclusion (Alexander, 2012) and less likely than men to stereotype women politicians (Bauer, 2015). On the other hand, both women and men often view women politicians as more trustworthy and gender-balanced institutions as more democratically legitimate (Clayton, O’Brien, and Piscopo, 2026). We therefore examine whether respondent gender conditions change across waves in support for male political authority.

Appendix [C](#) reports the full set of gender-disaggregated results. Women and men differ in their levels of gendered leadership preferences, but not in how those preferences change across waves. Women report lower support for masculine leadership traits, stronger beliefs that women can provide assertive and decisive leadership, and higher support for women’s political representation across all waves. Support for strongman leadership is the exception, with women and men reporting similar levels. Despite these differences in levels, women and men follow broadly parallel trajectories. Across all four outcomes, there are no statistically significant

gender differences in either the direction or magnitude of change. As democratic resilience took hold, women and men alike became more supportive of masculine-coded leadership and less supportive of increasing women's political representation. These shifts thus appear to reflect a broader societal response to democratic backsliding and resilience rather than changes concentrated among men alone.

Who Drives These Shifts?

Given that women and men shifted in broadly similar ways, respondent gender alone cannot explain the reassertion of male political authority as democratic resilience took hold. We therefore turn to an exploratory analysis of which respondents were most likely to withdraw support for women's political representation over time. While our broader framework encompasses multiple dimensions of male political authority, support for women's representation most directly captures whether citizens are willing to disrupt men's dominance over political power. This outcome thus provides the clearest indicator of whether citizens are willing to challenge male political authority in practice.

We construct a binary outcome coded 1 if respondents' support for women's political representation declined between Wave 1 and Wave 4, and 0 if their support remained stable or increased.⁷ Respondents who expressed no support in Wave 1 are excluded, as they cannot subsequently withdraw support. We then estimate a logit model predicting this outcome using two sets of covariates: Wave 1 gender-egalitarian beliefs and sociodemographic characteristics.

Our primary interest is in the first set of measures, which includes bias against women in politics, sexism, perceived gender inequality, beliefs about the difficulty of women's belonging in politics, and perceptions that women active in party politics are held back by men. Respon-

⁷As a robustness check, we report an OLS model using a continuous change score in support for women's political representation between Wave 1 and Wave 4 (Δ). As shown in Table F.2, the substantive conclusions remain unchanged, though Democratic Party identification, sexism, and education are estimated with greater precision. Because a positive coefficient can reflect either greater decline among those whose support fell or smaller gains among those whose support increased, the continuous measure is less straightforward to interpret. The binary measure avoids this ambiguity by distinguishing support withdrawal from stable or increasing support.

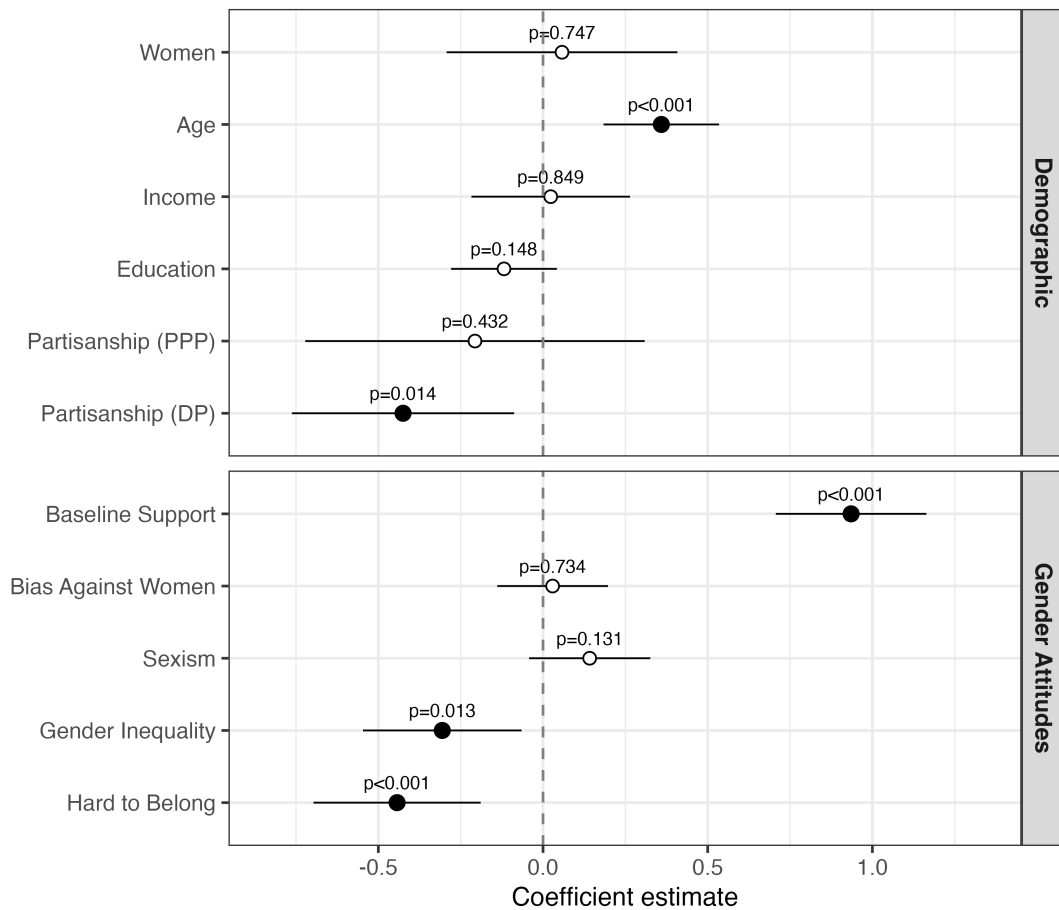
dents with less egalitarian views in Wave 1 may be more likely to treat crisis-period openness to women's representation as contingent, withdrawing that support as democratic resilience takes hold. We also include gender, age, education, income, and partisanship to assess whether these patterns are concentrated among particular social groups. Finally, we control for Wave 1 support for women's representation. Respondents who begin at higher levels of support have more room to move downward and are therefore, by construction, more likely to be coded as having declined. Controlling for Wave 1 support accounts for this mechanical relationship and allows us to interpret the other covariates as predictors of withdrawal net of initial support. All continuous variables are standardized, and full question wordings are provided in Appendix G.

As shown in Figure 8, Wave 1 gender-egalitarian beliefs strongly predict whether support endures. Respondents who perceive structural inequality facing women in society (log-odds = -0.306, $p = 0.013$) and who view political institutions as making it difficult for women to fully belong (log-odds = -0.443, $p < 0.001$) are significantly less likely to withdraw support. Substantively, respondents one standard deviation below the mean on perceived gender inequality have a 48% predicted probability of withdrawing support, compared with 33% among those one standard deviation above the mean. The pattern is even larger for beliefs about women's belonging in politics: moving from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean is associated with a decline in the predicted probability of withdrawal from 52% to 31%. Support for women's political representation is therefore most durable among respondents with more gender-egalitarian views.

By contrast, sociodemographic characteristics are weaker predictors of withdrawing support for women's representation. Although older respondents are more likely to reduce their support (log-odds = 0.359, $p < 0.001$) and Democratic Party supporters are less likely to do so (log-odds = -0.425, $p = 0.014$), other characteristics, including education and income, are not meaningfully associated with support withdrawal. Notably, women are no less likely than men to withdraw support once baseline gender attitudes are taken into account. This suggests that the observed shifts are not strongly structured by standard sociodemographic divides, but instead occur broadly across the population. Finally, baseline support for women's political representation in the initial wave is positively associated with subsequent withdrawal (log-odds

= 0.935, $p < 0.001$). Because respondents who begin at higher levels of support have more room to decline, part of this association is mechanical, though it may also reflect substantive withdrawal among respondents whose support was especially high during the acute phase of the crisis.⁸

Figure 8: Predictors of Shift in Support for Women’s Political Representation



Note: The figure displays logit coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. Each point represents the estimated association between a predictor and a binary indicator of whether support for women’s political representation declined between the initial and final waves. All continuous predictors are standardized. Filled points indicate statistical significance at $p < 0.05$ and the dashed vertical line indicates zero. Full regression results are reported in Table F.1.

Taken together, these exploratory results suggest that the decline in support for women’s political representation over the backsliding-to-resilience sequence was not uniform across re-

⁸In Appendix F.3, we examine Wave 1 support for women’s representation. Similar to the predictors of support withdrawal, the findings show that support for women’s representation is driven primarily by gender egalitarian beliefs and perceptions of women’s leadership competence, rather than by sociodemographic characteristics.

spondents. Support proved more durable among those with stronger gender-egalitarian commitments and eroded more readily among those with weaker commitments. The decline therefore reflects not simply a uniform downward shift, but a narrowing of the coalition willing to challenge male political authority by endorsing women's political inclusion. As the extraordinary conditions of democratic backsliding receded, support became increasingly concentrated among respondents whose prior views already favored gender equality in politics.

Discussion and Conclusion

Democratic resilience can reaffirm democratic institutions without broadening access to political power. In South Korea, resilience coincided with a reassertion of male political authority. In the aftermath of martial law, respondents were less supportive of strongman leadership, placed less relative value on masculine-coded leadership traits, were more likely to view women as assertive and decisive leaders, and expressed greater support for women's political representation. As backsliding receded, however, each of these patterns reversed, marking a return to male political authority. These shifts occurred among both women and men, but were especially pronounced among respondents with weaker baseline commitments to gender egalitarianism. Together, our findings suggest that democratic resilience restored confidence in democratic institutions while also reasserting more masculine understandings of political authority.

These findings contribute to research on democratic backsliding and resilience by shifting attention from whether democracy recovers to whether recovery alters citizens' beliefs about who should lead and how. Existing scholarship often evaluates democratic resilience in terms of whether institutions survive executive challenge, constitutional order is restored, and citizens retain confidence in democratic governance (Boese et al., 2023; Little and Meng, 2024; Riedl et al., 2025). South Korea performed well on these dimensions. Institutions constrained executive overreach, removed the president from office, preserved electoral competition, and enabled a peaceful transfer of power. Yet our findings show that success on these conventional indicators can coexist with the reassertion of male political authority. Just as democracies no longer appear to hold a clear advantage with respect to women's political representation (Donno and Kreft, 2019), democratic resilience does not necessarily dismantle male political authority.

Our work underscores the importance of integrating gender more centrally into research on democratic backsliding and resilience. At the individual level, support for gender equality is associated with stronger anti-authoritarian commitments (Alexander and Off, 2025). A growing literature also shows that gender is often at the forefront of democratic erosion (Çavdar and Yaşar, 2026; Noh, 2026), and that backsliding frequently coincides with attacks on women's rights and broader forms of gender equality (Hoque, Azim, and Parvin, 2026; Sosa, 2021). Our work extends this research by showing that democratic crisis and recovery may themselves reshape citizens' gendered understandings of political authority. More generally, these moments may matter not only for who holds political office, but also for citizens' preferences about how power should be exercised and what kinds of leaders should exercise it.

We also contribute to research on gender and political leadership. Much of this literature emphasizes the durability of stereotypes associating men with strength, decisiveness, and authority (Banducci, Everitt, and Gidengil, 2025; Eagly and Karau, 2002). Our findings instead suggest that gendered leadership preferences may be more contingent. Democratic backsliding may temporarily weaken attachment to male political authority by exposing the dangers of concentrated executive power. Yet these openings may narrow as institutional stability returns and leadership competition re-centers familiar expectations about strength, decisiveness, and authority. Crises may therefore create opportunities for women's inclusion without durably transforming the gendered foundations of authority. For those seeking to expand women's political power, the findings point to the importance of converting moments of disruption into durable institutional change, such as (stronger) gender quotas, before politics settles back into familiar patterns.

Building on this work, future research should examine whether similar shifts in gendered understandings of political authority emerge in other episodes of democratic backsliding and resilience. South Korea provides a theoretically useful first case for examining these dynamics because democratic breakdown remains historically salient, anti-gender conflict has become highly visible in contemporary politics, and Yoon's declaration of martial law represented a stark portrayal of masculinized executive power. These features may have intensified the relationship between democratic crisis and attitudes toward political leadership. Yet the dynamics

we identify are unlikely to be unique to South Korea. Democratic crises elsewhere may also lead citizens to reconsider the kinds of leaders and leadership styles they value, especially when backsliding is associated with strongman rule, coercion, or masculinized political appeals. Future research should examine whether similar patterns emerge under other forms of democratic erosion, including slower-moving processes involving electoral manipulation, attacks on courts and the media, or partisan polarization. Comparative work could also identify the conditions under which democratic resilience produces more durable shifts in attitudes toward gender and political authority, rather than temporary openings that narrow as stability returns.

These questions point to a larger tension at the heart of democratic resilience. Democracies often experience recurring cycles of erosion and recovery, a pattern described as a “democratic rollercoaster,” in which progressive leadership gives way to democratic backsliding under right-wing authoritarian rule, followed again by democratic restoration (Fleckenstein and Lee, 2026). Our findings suggest that these cycles may be reinforced when democratic resilience restores familiar political norms. Democratic backsliding may temporarily loosen attachment to male political authority and increase openness to women’s leadership, but those shifts can recede as institutions recover and politics returns to familiar terrain. Even successful episodes of democratic resilience may restore democratic institutions while leaving the gendered terms of political authority largely intact. Breaking this cycle requires democracies not only to recover from crisis, but also to create more inclusive understandings of who can lead.

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