Letter

Fathers' Leave Reduces Sexist Attitudes

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*R*esearch shows that sexist attitudes are deeply ingrained, with adverse consequences in the socioeconomic and political sphere. We argue that parental leave for fathers—a policy reform that disrupts traditional gender roles and promotes less stereotypical ones—has the power to decrease attitudinal gender bias. Contrasting the attitudes of new parents who were (and were not) directly affected by a real-world policy reform that tripled the amount of fathers' leave, we provide causal evidence that the reform increased gender-egalitarian views in the socioeconomic and political domains among mothers and fathers, and raised support for pro-female policies that potentially displace men among mothers. In contrast, informational, indirect exposure to the reform among the general public produced no attitudinal change. These results show that *direct* exposure to progressive social policy can weaken sexist attitudes, providing governments with a practical and effective tool to reduce harmful biases.

INTRODUCTION

Equality-enhancing reforms that grant parental leave to fathers are becoming increasingly common in developed societies (Castro-García and Pazos-Moran 2016). A wide-ranging literature examines the behavioral outcomes of such reforms, including childbearing choices, leave uptake by fathers, division of childcare, household work, women's sick leave, labor market participation, and earnings (e.g., Cools, Fiva, and Kirkebøen 2015; Rege and Solli 2013; Schober 2014). However, whether fathers' leave also promotes gender equal attitudes remains strikingly understudied.[1]

Attitudes matter because attitudinal gender bias perpetuates socioeconomic inequality (Inglehart and Norris 2003). It also features amongst the causes of sexual harassment (Fiske and Glick 1995), and intimate partner violence against women (Herrero et al. 2017). In politics, asymmetrical attitudes affect women's representation and the evaluations of female candidates (e.g., Clayton et al. 2020; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Mo 2015; Profeta and Woodhouse 2022). Such prejudiced attitudes are deeply ingrained and resistant to change (Paluck and Green 2009), making it crucial—for theory and policy—to uncover interventions that can reduce attitudinal sexism.

Prior work traces patriarchal attitudes to traditional gender roles (Beaman et al. 2012; Koenig and Eagly 2014), which magnify the perceived differences in the essential traits and abilities of women and men. If, as has traditionally been the case, women predominate in domestic, caretaker, and service roles, and men in powerful, public, and leadership roles, then, consistent with those role differences, women are viewed as more communal (i.e., oriented toward others, caring, and nurturing), whereas men are regarded as more agentic (i.e., taking charge and being in control) (Bauer 2015). This imbalance feeds gender-biased attitudes in socioeconomic and political life (e.g., Bos et al. 2022; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993).

We argue that direct exposure to social policy interventions, such as fathers' leave, which offer individuals the opportunity to benefit only if they make more equal, nontraditional gender role choices, has the power to weaken ingrained sexist attitudes. This distinguishes fathers' leave from other social policies that are compatible with traditional gender roles, such as parental leave that can be shared between parents as they see fit, which is in practice disproportionately taken by women. By offering a benefit that can be accessed only through the choice of a nontraditional caring role by

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[1] A study of the 1993 Norwegian "daddy quota" (Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011) was not able to fully identify the attitudinal effect (Rege and Solli 2013).

men, fathers' leave directly challenges mothers and fathers to conceive of their social roles in less stereotypical ways. Casting men and women in roles that contradict stereotypically gendered expectations provides alternative social role associations for each group, and promotes less unequal perceptions of the essential attributes of women and men. This disrupts the imbalanced traditional gender perceptions and makes them less mentally accessible, which reduces gender bias in expressed attitudes and opinions (Finnegan, Oakhill, and Garnham 2015).

Establishing whether social policy, such as fathers' leave, has the power to undermine patriarchal attitudes is challenging: while gender-equal attitudes are more prevalent in countries with equality-promoting parental leave policies (Sjöberg 2004), determining whether this relationship is causal has proven elusive. Families in which fathers take parental leave differ from those in which they do not in many ways, including education levels and preexisting attitudes toward gender equality. This nonrandom selection, alongside the potential for reverse causation and confounding, implies that typical observational studies cannot isolate the causal effect of fathers' leave (Rege and Solli 2013).

Our preregistered study overcomes these challenges. We focus on a reform in Estonia that extended fathers' leave threefold for children born on or after July 1, 2020, thereby offering nontraditional caring choices to new parents. Our study leverages this policy discontinuity in which reform eligibility is as good as randomly assigned for parents with children born around the birthdate cutoff. We study the effect of direct exposure to this reform with a real-time, original survey of the hard-to-reach population of new and expecting parents, whose life choices, including time use and earnings, were directly affected by the reform. We interviewed parents on a rolling basis and kept our survey in the field for a full year, from January to December 2020. This enables us to apply an approach similar to a regression discontinuity design that leverages the reform eligibility criterion and allows us to compare those who were eligible for the extra leave to those who were not (Study 1). The study carefully distinguishes between support for gender equality and positive action, and examines the heterogeneous responses of mothers and fathers. In a supplemental, survey experimental study (Study 2), we examine how the weaker form of indirect, informational exposure to the new policy affected attitudes toward gender equality among the general public (in contrast to direct exposure among the target population of new parents).

STUDY 1: NEW AND EXPECTING PARENTS

The Estonian parental leave reform is exceptional in that it did not include changes to any other entitlements besides the fathers' leave extension, allowing us to isolate its effect (see Dataverse Appendix [DA] 5 for details of the reform and Estonian leave policy). In addition to this design strength, Estonia is also a case

with features that generalize: prior to the reform, attitudinal support for gender equality in Estonia was close to the European Union average,[2] and its generous maternity versus scant paternity leave reflected the reality in most developed democracies where parental leave policies still overwhelmingly treat women as the main carers of young children.[3] Like many OECD democracies, Estonia additionally offered shared parental leave. However, as in other countries, this leave is disproportionately taken by women.

We pair this policy discontinuity with an original survey of new and expecting parents to measure their attitudinal support for gender equality. Our study was fielded with the help of the Estonian survey firm Kantar Emor, preregistered (see DA4 for the pre-analysis plan) and approved by the Institutional Review Board. The control group ($N = 614$)—new and expecting parents whose children were (due to be) born up to 6 months *before* the reform—were interviewed from January to June 2020. The treatment group ($N = 748$)—parents whose children were (due to be) born up to 6 months *after* the reform—were interviewed from July to December 2020.

Our final sample consists of 1,362 new parents, which amounts to interviewing at least one parent of about 10% of all children born in Estonia in 2020, and has a good gender balance (750 new mothers and 612 new fathers). Achieving this remarkable sample required considerable effort and resources given that our target population was very specialized, hard to reach, and challenging to recruit. The survey firm recruited subjects from their own subject pool and from the general population by advertising the study in outlets targeted to new and expecting parents, using the snowball method, and offering incentives. We discuss the recruitment process in Section SM1 of the Supplementary Material and present information on the demographic characteristics of respondents in Section SM2 of the Supplementary Material.

The research design enables us to evaluate the overall attitudinal effects of the policy among new parents based on *eligibility* and irrespective of uptake by comparing the attitudes of parents in the treatment group (i.e., eligible to benefit from the reform) to those in the control group (i.e., not eligible to benefit). This is important because uptake confounds the effect of the policy with the effect of selecting into the extended fathers' leave, which would cause us to overestimate the overall attitudinal effects of the policy.

Our approach is similar to a regression discontinuity design with a discrete running variable—birth month—and cutoff in July, which relies on the assumption that parents did not plan pregnancies strategically to benefit from the new policy. Since the policy change was initially adopted in December 2017, with final implementation announced in June 2019, strategic pregnancy

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[2] Special Eurobarometer 465: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2154.

[3] OECD Family Database: https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm.

planning was in principle possible and would be evidenced by depressed birth rates before the July 1, 2020 cutoff date, and inflated birth rates thereafter. Analyzing monthly birth rates in 2020, we are unable to detect such a pattern (Figure SM2.1 in Section SM2 of the Supplementary Material). The difference in the number of births between June (1,211) and July (1,287) is not sizable or statistically significant and the monthly birth rates are similar in the first and second half of the year. Additional comparisons to birth records from 2010 to 2020 also reveal no evidence of strategic pregnancy planning (see Section SM2 of the Supplementary Material for more details).

Balance tests (see Section SM2 of the Supplementary Material) show some imbalances in sociodemographic and other background characteristics across treated and control parents in our sample. Our estimation strategy accounts for these imbalances in two ways. First, our main model specification includes all our sociodemographic covariates as control variables. This approach eliminates any potentially concerning linear relationships between treatment assignment and the covariates (Gerber and Green 2012). Second, we employ a Lasso-based post-double-selection method to account for more complex, nonlinear ways in which our covariates might affect treatment assignment (Belloni, Chernozhukov, and Hansen 2014). Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material additionally reports models without any covariate adjustment.

We start by testing new parents' awareness of the reform, which is a precondition for any effects that the reform may have on attitudes toward gender equality. Three questions served as our manipulation checks (sequenced before the gender equality items). These asked respondents how many days of paid fathers' leave (i) they thought a father was currently entitled to take (*Entitlement*), (ii) they thought an average new father would take (*Average use*), and (iii) how much paid parental leave they were planning on taking with their new baby (*Uptake*).

Table 1 presents the mean responses of new parents in the control and treatment groups with *t*-tests and confirms that the reform had the expected effect on beliefs and anticipated behaviors (see Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material for additional robustness checks): Post-reform respondents correctly identified that men were entitled to more fathers' leave, expected an average new father to take significantly more paid

fathers' leave, and post-reform fathers (but not mothers) were planning on taking significantly longer paid leave (11.5 days more) than their peers pre-reform, suggesting high awareness of the reform.

Our outcome questions measure gender bias in subjects' descriptive and prescriptive attitudes toward women and their role in society and politics. The full list of items measuring different aspects of this concept, which is latent in nature, is available in DA1. Existing literature offers no single, universally accepted set of measures of gender equal attitudes and studies use different items depending on their context and focus. We rely on measures that have been shown to capture gender bias in the World Values Study and on prior work conducted in Estonia (Pérez and Tavits 2019; 2022), and that yield meaningful variation in our research context (see Section SM1 of the Supplementary Material). Our measures assess attitudinal gender bias in (a) the social and economic sphere (two items, e.g., agreement/disagreement that "a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works"), (b) the political sphere (three items, e.g., agreement/disagreement that "men make better political leaders than women do"), and (c) support for pro-female positive action policies to increase the representation of women in political leadership roles (two items, e.g., agreement/ disagreement with requiring "political parties to reserve some space on their lists of candidates for women, even if they have to exclude some men"). To minimize measurement error, we combine responses to individual survey items in each of these three categories into scales using the first component of a principal component analysis. Note that the first two outcomes measure attitudes toward gender parity and make no connection between women's and men's prospects in society. In contrast, the last outcome captures support for pro-female interventions that potentially displace men—a subtle but potentially relevant difference.

We run OLS models with *Fathers' Leave Reform* as the treatment indicator (coded "1" for the parents whose child was born on or after July 1, 2020, "0" otherwise). Choosing a bandwidth of monthly data pre- and post-reform to include in the analysis poses a tradeoff between bias and sample size. Including fewer months strengthens the identification assumption and minimizes bias; including more months maximizes sample size with the associated advantages. We balance these concerns by using 3 months of data pre- and post-

TABLE 1. Manipulation Checks

	Pre-reform (control)	Post-reform (treatment)	Difference	N
Entitlement	13.26	29.48	**16.22 (p = 0.00)**	1,359
Average use	9.67	18.50	**8.82 (p = 0.00)**	1,357
Uptake (fathers)	15.56	27.03	**11.47 (p = 0.00)**	610
Uptake (mothers)	334.89	341.00	6.11 (p = 0.75)	712

Note: Entries for Pre-reform and Post-reform are mean values. The third column reports the differences in means and the corresponding *p*-values according to *t*-tests and the last column reports the number of observations. Bolded values indicate differences that are statistically significant at p < 0.01.

FIGURE 1. Effect of Fathers' Leave Reform on Gender-Equal Attitudes, Study 1
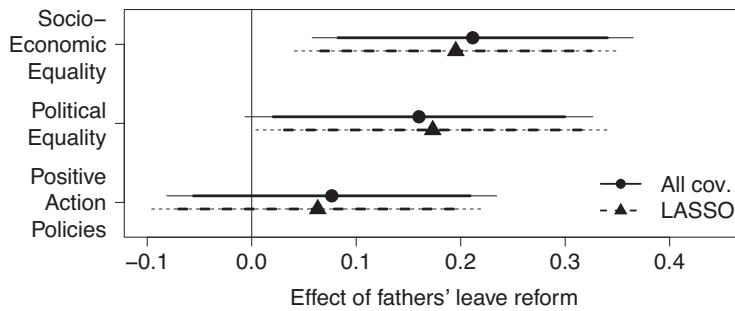
Note: Plot depicts point estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (fathers' leave reform) on the three outcome scales measuring attitudes toward gender equality (described on the *y*-axis). Full results can be found in Table SM3.5 in Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material.

reform in our main analysis (see Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material for analyses using all other possible bandwidths).

Figure 1 presents the results of our analysis examining whether the fathers' leave reform affects attitudinal gender bias and support for positive action among new parents. Starting with the *Socio-Economic Equality Scale* at the top, we see that the reform significantly increases attitudinal support for gender equality in the social and economic spheres ($p = 0.01$ for both specifications). Our scales have a standard deviation of 1, meaning that estimates of 0.21 and 0.20 are sizeable —approximately 20% of a standard deviation. To put this treatment effect in context, the reform affects gender-equal attitudes as much as respondents' gender. This treatment effect is notable but not unrealistic for a real-world social policy intervention with significant implications for life choices, earnings, and time use. Other work demonstrates similarly large effects of an educational intervention that engaged adolescents in discussions about gender equality (Dhar, Jain, and Jayachandran 2022).

The second set of estimates in Figure 1 indicates that this effect also applies to preferences about women in politics. Our *Political Equality Scale* shows positive treatment effects that are similar in magnitude to the *Socio-Economic Equality Scale*: 16% and 17% of a standard deviation ($p = 0.06$ and $p = 0.04$, respectively). Substantively, new parents who were eligible to benefit from the reform were significantly more supportive of women's engagement in the traditionally male-dominated domain of politics.

The estimates at the bottom of Figure 1 focus on our *Positive Action Policies Scale* and indicate that the reform had no equivalent positive effect on support for policies to increase women's representation in political leadership positions at the expense of men. Although the estimates are positive, the effect sizes are smaller than for the items discussed above—only about 7% of a standard deviation—and do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This null finding adds important nuance to the understanding of attitudinal support for gender equality.

Jointly, these results suggest that direct exposure to the reform that disrupted traditional gender roles encouraged more gender-equal attitudes, but not support for action to promote women at the expense of men, a subtle but consequential difference. In Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material, we present additional analyses that further substantiate our argument and results, including a placebo test in which we employ two hypothetical policy reform dates (April 1, 2020 and October 1, 2020) instead of the true date (July 1, 2020). As expected, we find null effects across both placebo tests. Note that the first placebo test also addresses—and helps to refute—any concerns about the potential impact of any COVID-19-related restrictions to hospital access for new fathers in the spring of 2020.

SUBGROUP HETEROGENEITY: MOTHERS VERSUS FATHERS

Next, we examine whether mothers and fathers responded differently to the reform. By giving fathers the choice to expand their caring role, the reform challenged both parents to conceive of their own and their partner's care-giving role in a less traditional fashion. Nonetheless, mothers' and fathers' responses to the reform may diverge for several reasons: their perceptions of the scope, acceptability, and suitable remedies for gender inequality may differ. The reform also affected fathers' choices directly and mothers only via those of their partners.

Figure 2 presents the results of the analysis split by sex and reveals interesting similarities, but also some differences. Across mothers and fathers the reform increases attitudinal support for gender equality on the *Socio-Economic Equality Scale* (0.26 and 0.24 for mothers vs. 0.18 and 0.16 for fathers), and on the *Political Equality Scale* (0.16 and 0.14 for mothers vs. 0.17 and 0.18 for fathers). On neither scale are the differences between mothers and fathers statistically significant (see Table SM3.6 in Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material for interaction models). Note

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FIGURE 2.   Effect of Fathers' Leave Reform on Gender-Equal Attitudes for Mothers and Fathers, Study 1
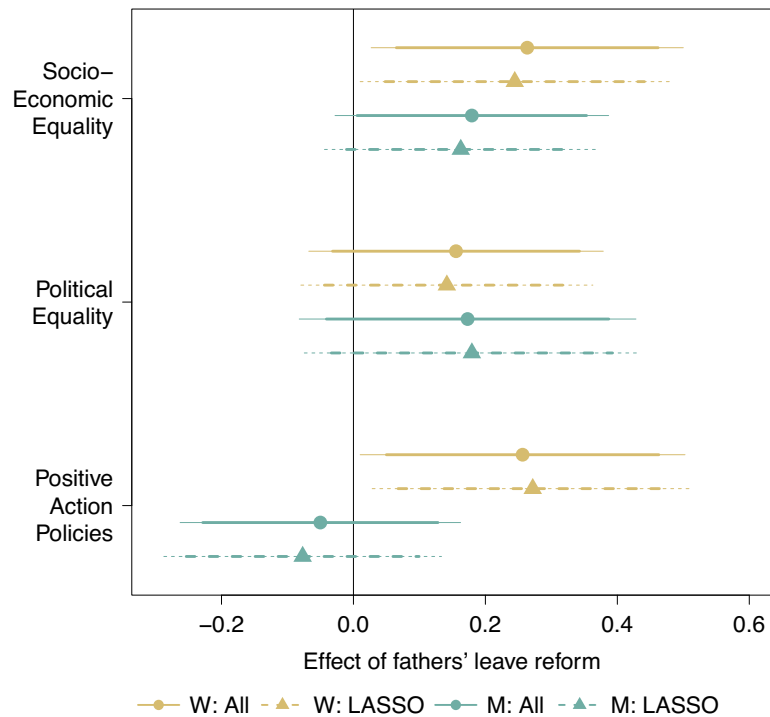
Note: Plot depicts point estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (fathers' leave reform) on the three outcome scales measuring attitudes toward gender equality (described on the *y*-axis) among mothers (in gold) and fathers (in green). Full results can be found in Tables DA2.1 and DA2.2 in the Dataverse Appendix.

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that the point estimates are close to those in our main analysis, but less precisely estimated, which is not surprising given that splitting our sample by sex halves the sample size and reduces statistical power.

However, striking differences arise on the *Positive Action Policies Scale.* Among mothers, the reform's effect on support for such policies is positive, very large (26% and 27% of a standard deviation), and statistically significant. Among fathers we find no such increase in support for positive action. In fact, the effects are *negative* but small (–0.05 and–0.08) and fail to reach statistical significance. The interaction models in Table SM3.6 in Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material confirm that these differences between the sexes are statistically significant. In sum, while both groups respond to the change in social roles promoted by the fathers' leave reform by expressing more gender equal attitudes, support for positive action to bring it about rises only among women. This finding calls for further research into better understanding the differences between women and men in their attitudinal support for various dimensions of gender equality. Disrupting traditional gender roles may not be sufficient to increase men's support for positive action. This could be because of differences in the perceived cost: after all, positive action implies the promotion of women *at the expense of men.*

We perform additional sub-group analyses by comparing (i) expecting parents to parents after they had

their baby (Table SM3.13 in Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material), and (ii) first-time parents to experienced parents, who already had at least one prior child (Table SM3.14 in Section SM3 of the Supplementary Material). These additional analyses do not reveal significant sub-group heterogeneity in responses to the treatment.

STUDY 2: GENERAL PUBLIC

In a separate Study 2, we examine the effect of indirect (as opposed to direct) exposure to the reform. While Study 1 shows that the reform affects the attitudes of new parents, who could benefit personally by choosing less traditional social roles, it may also affect attitudes among the general public through informational, indirect exposure. Study 2, conducted before the reform, employs a survey experiment on a representative sample of the general public. Respondents in the control group were told about the preexisting leave policy, whereas the treatment group received information about the reform's extension of fathers' leave (full treatment wording available in Section SM4 of the Supplementary Material, outcome measures replicate those in Study 1). Like Study 1, Study 2 was preregistered (see DA4) and approved by the IRB.

The theoretical expectations about the effect on the general public are less clear. On the one hand,

FIGURE 3. Effect of Information about the Reform on Gender-Equal Attitudes, Study 2
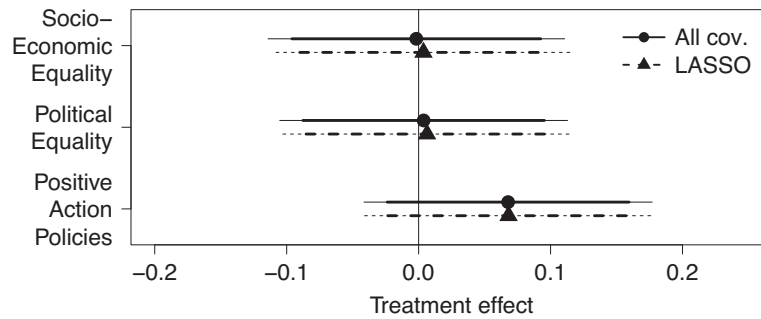
Note: Plot depicts point estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effects (information about the reform) on the three outcome scales measuring attitudes toward gender equality (described on the *y*-axis). Full results can be found in Table SM4.4 in Section SM4 of the Supplementary Material.

information about the reform might signal a social norm change regarding gender roles, prompting the general public to update their gender attitudes accordingly (Tankard and Paluck 2017). On the other hand, indirect and informational exposure may be less effective (compared to new parents' direct exposure to nontraditional gender role choices) in changing attitudinal gender biases, which tend to be resilient.

Figure 3 presents the main results of Study 2. It shows that the treatment, which passively exposed individuals to information about the extension of paternity leave, and altered respondents' perceptions of fathers' leave entitlement (see manipulation check in Table SM4.3 in Section SM4 of the Supplementary Material), had no effect on gender-equality attitudes. A full description of the study and additional analyses are available in Section SM4 of the Supplementary Material. Taken together, our two studies, which contrast direct with indirect, informational exposure to the same policy change, demonstrate that informational exposure is clearly a less effective means for increasing attitudinal support for gender equality. A policy intervention can produce attitudinal change among the target population whose life choices it alters, but may not have the same effect among the general public, who are only passively and informationally exposed to the reform. This is an interesting result that invites further research. For instance, future work might investigate whether repeated and sustained informational exposure to nontraditional gender roles can change attitudes, which our finding does not rule out.

CONCLUSION

Our results provide the first causal evidence that direct exposure to fathers' leave, a social policy intervention that weakens traditional gender roles, reduces sexist attitudes in the socioeconomic and political domains. Offering parents the choice of extended fathers' leave led to a sizeable increase in gender-equitable attitudes, which suggests that social policy has the power to reduce ingrained attitudinal biases. This constitutes a

significant advance not only in the parental leave literature, but also in work on prejudice reduction, where compelling, causally identified studies that demonstrate what works in reducing stereotypical attitudes are rare (Paluck and Green 2009).

These findings are particularly timely as governments around the world continue to reform their parental leave policies. Our results merit the attention of policy makers because they suggest that expanding the parental leave entitlements of the millions of fathers, who still confront much more limited caring choices than mothers, offers a mechanism to reduce damaging sexist attitudes. The implications of our findings also extend beyond fathers' leave. The intervention that we study amounts to a disruption of traditional gender roles. Its sizeable effect implies that other policy interventions that broaden gender roles may also move attitudes in a more gender-equitable direction.

In addition, our findings suggest that support for gender equality is not the same as support for positive action to bring it about—at least in our study, positive action divides respondents by sex. Moreover, the nature of the exposure is consequential. We show that direct exposure among new parents to the reform that promoted more equal gender roles generates progressive attitudinal change, whereas passive, informational exposure among the general population does not. This does not rule out that repeated informational exposure to nontraditional gender roles could change attitudes, but it indicates that direct exposure to broadened gender-role choices is a more effective mechanism.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000369.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the

American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/4DUB7X.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflict of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by Washington University in St. Louis and certificate numbers are provided in the Supplementary Material. The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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