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The GOP's biggest 2026 risk may be hiding in plain sight

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Analysis by  Ronald Brownstein



A woman votes at a polling place in the Bronx borough of New York in June 2020. Carlo ...

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Celinda Lake, a longtime Democratic pollster, has a simple formula for her party's success: Democrats triumph in elections when they win among women by more than Republicans win among men.

Democrats passed that test in the 2018 midterm and 2020 presidential elections, and flunked it during the 2022 midterm and 2024 presidential elections, exit polls show. This year, polls offer Democrats encouragement that they could again come out on the right side of Lake's equation in November.

Trump's approval rating among men has run close to even in many recent national polls. But those same surveys now routinely show him confronting cavernous deficits

among women, with 60% or more of them typically saying they disapprove of his performance in office.



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Indeed, for all the understandable focus on Trump's erosion among the untraditional groups of voters that moved toward him in 2024 — young men, Latinos, working-class non-White voters — the GOP's greatest threat in 2026 may be hiding in plain sight: towering discontent among female voters about what Trump has, and has not, done in his second term.

Nearing eight months before Election Day, Trump's standing with women more closely resembles his enfeebled position in 2018 and 2020 — when he was in the White House — than his more modest deficit in 2024, when he was out of office, and to some extent out of mind.

Lake said that while Democrats still face substantial work to address women's unresolved doubts about them, it will be tougher for Trump and the GOP to regain the ground lost since 2024 among female voters than to reverse Trump's decline among men.

“I think it's much easier for him to recover men and he probably will recover men, in part because men have more doubts about Democrats” than women do, Lake said. “(But) it is going to be hard for him to cut his losses with women, because they have moved so far, so fast, and so solidly.”

Women have soured on Trump over a range of issues

Democrats rarely win most men in competitive races for any major office, just as Republicans rarely win most women. As a result, the gender gap has been a constant in elections since the 1980s — but the question of which side benefits from it varies. Most elections are decided by which party does a better job of maximizing its advantage with its stronger gender, while minimizing its deficit with its weaker.

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In the 2020 presidential race, Democrats held the gender advantage among voters. Joe Biden amassed a national lead among women (15 points) almost twice as large as his deficit among men (8 points), according to the exit polls conducted for a consortium of news organizations including CNN. That allowed Biden to comfortably win the popular vote. The former president likewise won women by at least as much as he lost men in five of the seven swing states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona and Nevada), capturing them all. (Biden lost men by more than he won women in North Carolina and Georgia, but narrowly captured the latter anyway because women constituted such a large majority of the voters.)



Supporters stand near their cars as they listen to Joe Biden speak during a drive-in campaign rally in Atlanta, Georgia, in October 2020. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

In 2024, the equation flipped. Trump won the national popular vote after beating Vice President Kamala Harris among men by 12 percentage points and losing women to her by just 8, according to the exit polls. Harris still won most women in six of the seven key swing states (albeit generally by smaller margins than Biden did), but she lost men by more and saw each of those states go to Trump. (In Arizona, which Trump also carried, Harris lost both men and women.) The gender gap still existed in 2024, but it functioned in a way that boosted Trump.

Many of the women who voted for Trump in 2024 did so despite harboring clear doubts about him. In the exit poll, a strong majority of women said they considered his views too extreme — but about 1 in 9 of them who felt that way voted for him anyway. More than 1 in 4 women who said they believed abortion should be legal in all or most cases also voted for him; strikingly that was even higher than the

percentage of women supporting abortion rights (about 1 in 5) who supported him in 2020, before his Supreme Court appointees helped to overturn the constitutional right to the procedure.

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Jackie Payne, the executive director of Galvanize Action, a liberal group that studies moderate, working- and middle-class White women, **told me during** the 2024 election that in her polling and focus group research, women who thought Trump would improve their economic situation actively resisted any information that might complicate their decision to support him. “They were choosing to believe a vision of him that was aligned with what they wanted to get out of him — a strong economy — and they were absolutely discounting anything that felt extreme as disinformation or hyperbole, even if he said he would do it,” she said then.

Now, Payne said, many of those women feel disappointed by Trump on both counts. “They feel he is not delivering for them on the economy and actually making things feel more insecure and unsafe in the rest of their lives,” she said.

Both ends of that equation are evident in polls. Women consistently express much more negative views than men about the economy and inflation: **In the latest CNN/SSRS poll**, 76% of women, compared with 62% of men, described the economy as poor. **In a January poll by KFF**, a nonpartisan health care think tank, women were slightly more likely than men to say they worried about affording their mortgage and

health care, and much more likely to say they worried about affording food, groceries and utilities. **In a New York Times/Siena University poll** around the same time a 54%-45% majority of male voters said they could afford the life they want; an even larger 56%-42% majority of female voters said they could not. In that same survey, far more female voters (53%) than male voters (36%) said it was now unaffordable to raise a family.

Women are also more likely than men to say Trump's policies are compounding, rather than alleviating, their financial squeeze. **In a recent Fox News poll**, about three times as many female voters said they have been hurt than helped by Trump's economic policies; male voters divided more closely. Likewise, **in a January Marquette University Law School survey**, almost two-thirds of women (compared with just over half of men) said Trump's policies had increased rather than reduced inflation. Women are consistently much more hostile in polls to Trump's tariffs than men.

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This gender divide extends to other core Trump policies. Women are more likely than men to say Trump's aggressive assertion of presidential powers **constitute a unique threat to our system of government**; more likely to disapprove **of the big Medicaid cuts in last year's "One Big Beautiful Bill"** and the GOP Congress' decision to let the **enhanced subsidies under the Affordable Care Act expire**; much more likely to say Trump's mass deportation program **has been too harsh** and **made America less safe**,

not more; and more likely to say **Trump has “gone too far” in using federal forces against protesters**. In all these ways, Payne says, women feel Trump is unleashing an unsettling level of “chaos,” both at home and abroad. Trump and Republicans “offered themselves as protection” from disorder in 2024, she says, “but instead they are becoming the threat.”



Federal agents point weapons amid tear gas fired at protesters in Minneapolis, on January 24, 2026, after US Border Patrol agents shot and killed Alex Pretti. *(Stephen Maturen/Getty Images)*

Lake notes that even men somewhat uneasy with those policies will often cite what they see as offsetting benefits, such as reducing government spending, removing undocumented immigrants or potentially creating domestic manufacturing jobs with tariffs. Women, she says, are less conflicted: “They disagree overwhelmingly with the policies, and they don’t see any upside to the policies.”

Relative advantage is the key

Big demographic and geographic groups in the electorate almost never move in isolation. Presidents tend to rise with almost all groups when their support swells and to fall with almost all when it recedes.

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Compared with polls in the early weeks of his second term, Trump's job approval has ebbed with both women and men. All recent surveys show Trump's support declining among men, though they differ on how much. A few (including polls from CNN/SSRS, AP/NORC and the Pew Research Center) have found his approval among men collapsing down to about 40%; most show men divided almost evenly about his performance with slightly more disapproving than approving.

There's more consistency in recent polling about women's views on Trump's second-term performance. Virtually every major nonpartisan poll in 2026 has found that at least 60% of women disapprove of his job performance, with at least half a dozen surveys putting that disapproval number as high as 63-65%.

That opens Republicans to the risk that even more female voters will disapprove of Trump's performance on Election Day than the 59% recorded in the 2018 exit poll. That's an ominous prospect for the party, because even though that level of discontent with Trump helped Democrats record their best performance among women voters in any recent House election: The exit polls showed women that year preferred

Democratic House candidates over Republicans by 19 percentage points, the biggest margin either side has recorded with *either* gender in any 21st century midterm.

The Democrats' 2018 sweep offered more proof of Lake's equation: Republicans still narrowly won men in the national House popular vote that year, but were routed because Democrats won women by much more, the exit polls found. The formula explained the 2022 and 2014 House elections, too: Republicans those years won men by much more than Democrats won women and gained seats each time.

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Almost all Senate races since 2018 for which exit polls have been conducted also follow this pattern: Democrats have always prevailed when they win women by more than they lose men and only rarely succeeded when they lose men by more than they win women. (Michigan's Elissa Slotkin in 2024 and Georgia's Raphael Warnock in 2022 are among the very few exceptions whose deficit with men exceeded their lead with women, but who won anyway because women made up well over half of voters.)

Early polls measuring voter preferences for the House this fall consistently show Democrats on the right side of Lake's test. The latest measures of the "generic ballot" test have usually shown Republicans running about **even**, or just **slightly ahead** of Democrats among male voters. Several of those same polls find Democrats leading among female voters by **about 10 points**, though some have shown the party's advantage among them **widening to** about 15 points.



President Donald Trump boards Air Force One at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, on February 19, 2026. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

The absolute Democratic advantage among women will be critical in November, but the composition of it will be too. Both college-educated White women and Black women appear poised to repudiate Trump in big numbers. Democrats also look on track to **recover with Latina women**, who moved toward Trump in 2024.

But White women without a college degree have been the female voting bloc most resistant to the party, and recovering ground with them, as I've written, will be key to Democrats **maximizing their gains in the House** and **developing a real chance to recapture the Senate**. Nicole McCleskey, a longtime Republican pollster, sees more opportunity for the GOP to improve with those women before Election Day than with the other big blocs of female voters.

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Though those working-class White women are frustrated, their economic squeeze has not eased more quickly, she said, they remain deeply alienated from the Democratic alternative. “Nothing is scarier to them than what they think a President (Kamala) Harris would have meant to the country,” McCleskey said. “Right now (their choice) is Trump-focused, so it’s Republicans versus an idealized Democrat, which never exists. Once a Democrat becomes known, there are greater opportunities for us, because generally their policies and their positions on issues are not what these women are looking for.”

Both Lake and Payne agree that persuadable female voters who sided with Trump in 2024 still harbor many questions about Democrats. But Payne maintained that their disappointment in Trump, particularly on the economy, is high enough that a meaningful number appear “willing to take a risk on the Democrats again.”

How many of those ambivalent women Democrats can pull into their camp matters — but so does the number of men disenchanted with Trump that Republicans can reel back by reminding them of their ideological disagreements with Democrats.

Too often, discussion of the gender gap focuses only on the Democratic edge with women. But as Lake’s simple maxim underscores, what matters is the *relative* advantage each party amasses with each gender. In 2024, that balance returned Trump to the White House. In 2026, it could return Democrats to control of one or even both congressional chambers.

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