

# The Atlantic

SEXES

## America Is Still a Patriarchy

Male dominance may be weakening, but it's not gone.

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*Male dominance may be weakening, but it's not gone.*



Carolyn Kaster/AP Images

In this election, women were the majority of voters, and the majority of them [voted for Obama](#). The weaker sex clearly was men, contributing less than half the vote, the majority of whom preferred the loser. This is not new. [As with Obama](#), men and whites also [failed to unseat Bill Clinton](#) in his reelection after voting for him the first time.

This story tests my ability to think systematically about power and

inequality. How is it possible to understand an unprecedented transformation in women's relative status while also acknowledging men's continued dominance? Must we just list data points, always just including an "on the other hand" caveat to our real narrative?

I have been [described](#) as part of a "feminist academic establishment" that insists on taking the glass-half-empty view—as someone who likes to engage in "[data wars](#)" over the details of gender inequality. But what I actually try to do is keep the change in perspective.

In our academic research on gender inequality, my colleagues and I study variation and change. That means figuring out why [women's employment increased](#) so rapidly, why some labor markets have [smaller gender gaps](#), why some workplaces are [less segregated](#), why couples in some countries [share housework more](#), why women in some ethnic groups have [higher employment rates](#), and so on.

The patterns of variation and change help us understand how gender inequality works. Systemic inequality doesn't just happen. People (in the aggregate) get up in the morning and do it every day. To understand how it works, we need to see how it varies (for example, some people resist equality and some people dedicate their lives to it). Someone who studies inequality but doesn't care about change and variation is not a social scientist.

## Patriarchy

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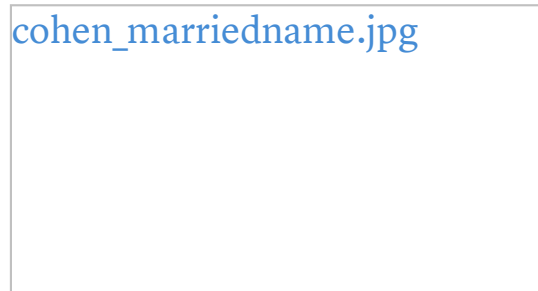
"It's easy to find references to patriarchs, patriarchy or patriarchal attitudes in reporting on other countries," [writes Nancy Folbre](#):


Yet these terms seem largely absent from discussions of current economic and political debates in the United States. Perhaps they are no longer applicable. Or perhaps we mistakenly assume their irrelevance.

In fact—my interpretation of the facts—the United States, like every society in the world, remains a patriarchy: they are ruled by men. That is not just because [every country](#) (except Rwanda) has a majority-male national parliament, and it is despite the [handful of countries](#) with women heads of state. It is a systemic characteristic that combines dynamics at the level of the family, the economy, the culture and the political arena.

Top [political](#) and [economic](#) leaders are the low-hanging fruit of patriarchy statistics. But they probably are in the end the most important—the telling pattern is that the higher you look, the maler it gets. If a society really had a stable, female-dominated power structure for an extended period of time even I would eventually question whether it was really still a patriarchy.

In my own area of research things are messier, because families and workplaces differ so much and power is usually jointly held. But I'm confident in describing American families as mostly patriarchal.





Maybe the most basic indicator is the apparently quaint custom of wives assuming their husbands' names. This hasn't generated much feminist controversy lately. But to an anthropologist from another planet, this patrilineality would be a major signal that American families are male-dominated.

Among U.S.-born married women, only 6 percent had a surname that [differed from their husband's](#) in 2004 (it was not until the 1970s that married women could even function legally using their "maiden" names). Among the youngest women the rate is higher, so there is a clear pattern of change—but no end to the tradition in sight.

Of course, the proportion of [people getting married](#) has fallen, and the number of children born to non-married parents has risen. Single parenthood—and the fact that this usually means single motherhood—reflects both women's growing independence and the [burdens of care](#) that fall on them (another piece of the patriarchal puzzle). This is one of many very important changes. But they don't add up to a non-patriarchal society.

### **Differences that matter**

The social critic [Barbara Ehrenreich](#)—in a [1976 essay](#) she might or might not like to be reminded of—urged feminists to acknowledge distinctions that matter rather than tar everything with the simplistic brush of "patriarchy." Using China as an example, she wrote:

There is a difference between a society in which sexism is expressed in the form of female infanticide and a society in which sexism takes the form of unequal representation on the Central Committee. And the difference is worth dying for.

China presents an extreme case, with an extremely harsh patriarchy that was fundamentally transformed—into a different sort of patriarchy. By the late 1970s [female infanticide](#) (as well as [footbinding](#)) had indeed been all but eradicated, which represented a tremendous improvement for women, saving millions of lives. Since the advent of the one-child policy in the 1980s, however, female infanticide has given way to [sex-selective abortion](#) (and female representation on the ruling committees has dropped), representing an important transformation. Calling China a "patriarchy" is true, but by itself doesn't much help explain the pattern of and prospects for change.

Like Ehrenreich, I think we need to look at the variations to understand the systemic features of our society. Men losing out to women in national elections is an important one. Given the choice between two male-dominated parties with platforms that don't differ fundamentally on the biggest economic issues despite wide differences in social policy, women voters (along with blacks, Latinos and the poor) bested men and got their way. I wouldn't minimize that (more than I just did), or ignore the scale and direction of change. The American patriarchy has weakened.

I expect some readers will go right to their favorite statistics or personal experiences in order to challenge my description of our society as patriarchal. In that tit-for-tat, men leading the vast majority of the most powerful institutions, and that American families usually follow the male

line, become just another couple of data points. But they shouldn't be, because some facts are more important than others.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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