

Evidence suggests that America's resource wealth undermines women's economic and political power

*The problem of the 'resource curse' for countries with access to a greater abundance of natural resources is well known – but does this curse also extend to the undermining of women's economic and political power? In new research examining US states, **Joel W. Simmons** finds that states which produce more resource wealth have lower levels of labor force participation, lower voter turnout rates, and lower political representation among women. He argues that these trends are caused by higher wage flows to male dominated sectors during resource booms, which in turn leads to more women exiting the workforce, and therefore having less political power.*



Decades of social science research have concluded that natural resources like oil and natural gas have some troubling economic and political properties. There is broad agreement that where oil and gas are found in abundance, so too are slower and more volatile economic growth, nondemocratic rule, weak political institutions, and corruption. Recently, Michael Ross, a political scientist at UCLA and the leading expert on the so-called "natural resource curse," has added a new item to this catalogue of social ills. He [argues](#) that resource wealth reduces female labor force participation and undermines women's political influence in society. Indeed, he maintains that it is oil wealth, rather than the tenets of Islam, that explains why women in Arab countries participate in the labor force in fewer numbers and have less political clout than women elsewhere in the world. Critics dismiss the notion of a "gendered resource curse," however. Instead, they assert that if we want to understand the economic and political power that women wield in a society, we need to focus our attention on the prevailing attitudes in the community toward gender equality and the appropriate social roles for women – not on whether there is oil and natural gas in the ground.

While theories of resource curses typically focus their attention on developing countries, the debate about the gendered effects of resource wealth is particularly relevant for contemporary US politics. Due to innovations in hydraulic fracturing, the discovery of oil in the Bakken formation, and a highly efficient coal industry in Wyoming, the United States finds itself in the midst of an unprecedented boom in natural resource production. If Ross is right, this state of affairs is unworthy of the unqualified approbation it often receives. Instead, if he is correct, America's resource boom might harm women's economic and political influence. But, if Ross' critics are right, then we need not worry that America's increased resource production will have much of an effect on women's economic and political clout.

So, which is it? In new research, I provide evidence that a gendered resource curse exists in the US. Let's start with the economic consequences. Using data between the years 1997 and 2012, I find that the states that produce more resource wealth per capita have lower levels of female labor force participation than their resource scarce counterparts do. And the effect is fairly large to boot. Suppose that we held constant other factors that affect the female labor force participation rate – say, the state's GDP, the partisanship of its state legislature (Democrats tend to facilitate higher employment, which, in turn, might influence the labor force participation rate), the size of its female population, and whether the state is located in the South. When we do so, increasing the level of resource wealth from the sample's 5th percentile (equal to resource production in Rhode Island) to the 95th percentile (equal to the production in Louisiana) causes female labor force participation to fall by about 3 percent.



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What about the political consequences of resource wealth? The results are equally dispiriting. To measure political influence, I gathered data on the voter turnout rate among eligible women. And like the female labor force analysis, I find that turnout is lower in resource rich countries. If the old quip “if you don’t vote, you don’t count” is right, then it is also true that women in resource rich states have less influence over the political process than their counterparts in resource scarce states. To capture another dimension of political power, I measured the share of seats women hold in each state’s legislative assembly. As before, I find that this share is decreasing as resource wealth increases.

Why does resource wealth have these negative social consequences? I argue that there are two likely reasons. First, resource wealth reduces female labor force participation by increasing household income. During resource booms, wages in the male dominated resource sector increase dramatically. So, too, do the wages in the equally male-dominated sectors that complement resource production, say, trucking, refining, and construction. While these increased wages do not necessarily affect women directly, they can affect women indirectly by increasing their husbands’ income. In other words, resource wealth increases household income. In turn, increased household income allows women to exit the labor force to engage in any number of other activities that matter to them, while the household still has enough money to consume that which it has reason to value.

The political consequences follow directly from women’s labor force decisions. Existing political science research concludes that one of the most important determinants of the amount of political power women wield in a society is the extent of their participation in the workforce. Working outside of the home endows women with skills, assets, and access to important networks, that, in turn, increase women’s interest in and knowledge about politics, their political participation, and even the likelihood of being recruited to run for political office. Accordingly, when resource wealth reduces female labor force participation, it also – albeit indirectly – reduces women’s political influence.

Thus, I argue that resource wealth suppresses women’s economic and political power. The evidence supports the argument. Obviously, these results are troubling for what they imply about women’s economic and political clout in the resource rich states of the country. The results are all the more dispiriting because the US ought to be a hard case to find evidence of a gendered resource curse. We might expect the country’s status as a developed economy with strong political and labor market institutions would inoculate it from the social ills that accompany resource wealth elsewhere in the world. The results presented here challenge that assumption and show that even among the richest countries in the world, resource curses can manifest themselves.

It is possible, of course, that future economic or political conditions will be different than the ones studied in my paper. Yet, policymakers would do well to consider implementing safeguards that preclude the gendered social ills stemming from resource abundance from becoming manifest in the resource rich areas of the country.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘[Resource Wealth and Women’s Economic and Political Power in the U.S. States](#)’, in *Comparative Political Studies*.*

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