The Impact of Married Women's Property Laws on Labor Outcomes and Marital Status

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Abstract

The **Married Women's Property Acts** are laws enacted by the individual U.S. States during the second half of the nineteenth century that **granted economic rights to married women**.

I use **spatial variation** to identify **the effects of this legislation on <u>female labor participation</u> and <u>marital status</u>.**

Early results show that **more economic rights increased the work incentives of all women.** This effect is more substantial on unmarried women than on married ones. Additionally, **marriage rates decreased**.
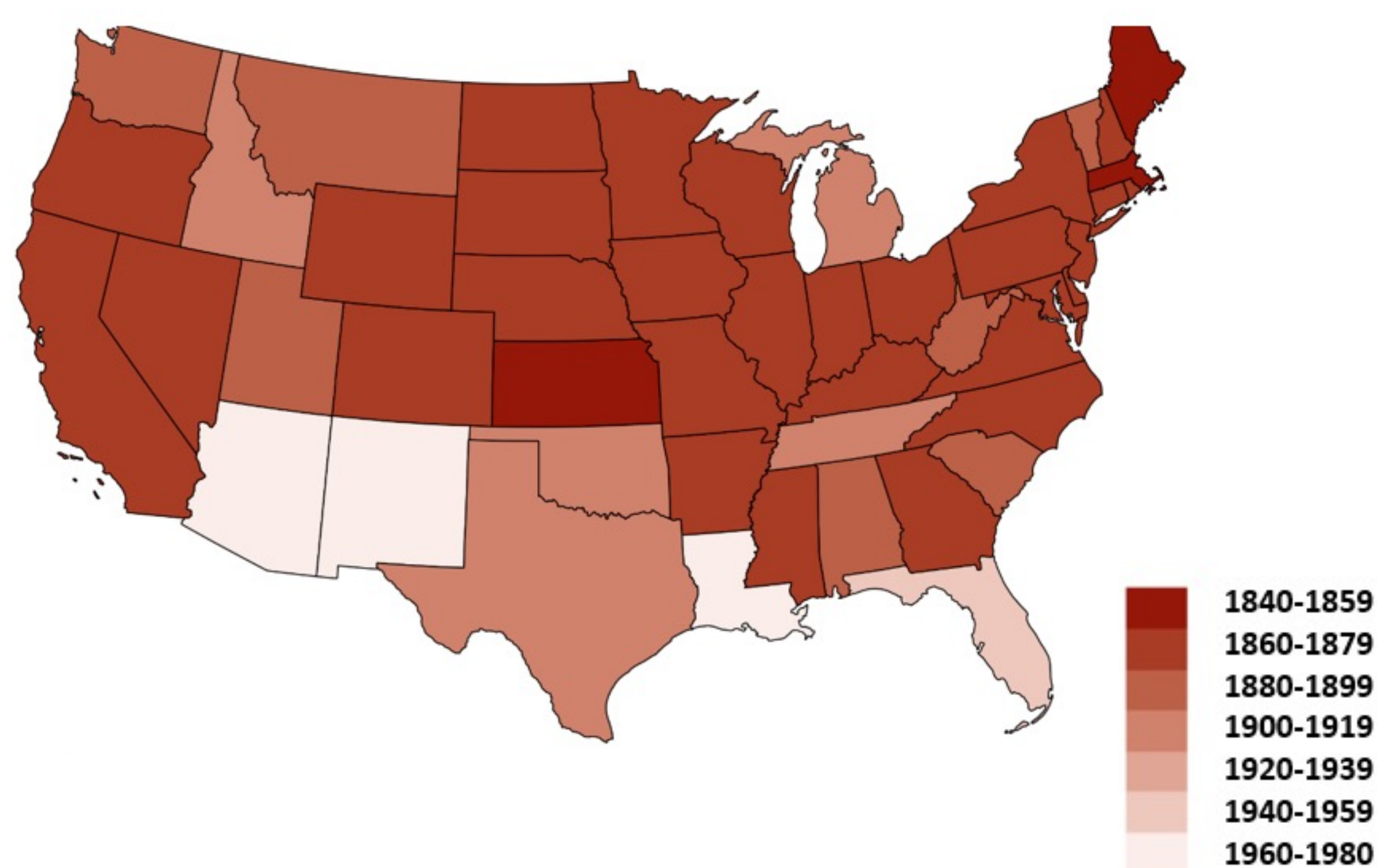
Background

In the 19th century, **husband and wife were considered one person under the United States law**, which translated to the legal nonexistence of married women.

Once women were married, they lost the right to own and control properties, enter into commercial contracts, earn wages, etc. In contrast, single women had the same property rights as men.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, **married women's legal status was modified by each state**.

State laws were enacted by the different states beginning with Massachusetts in 1846. The last state to implement a property law was Louisiana in 1980. Figure 1 shows the time variation in the enactment of each state law.

Figure 1. **Timing of the Married Women's Property Acts by state**

1840-1859
1860-1879
1880-1899
1900-1919
1920-1939
1940-1959
1960-1980

Data

- I use the complete **U.S. census samples** from 1850 to 1920.
- I restrict the sample to **women from 18 to 31 years old**.
- Variables of interest: labor force status, school attendance, literacy, and marital status.
- Censuses are every ten years; however, enactment dates can be between decennial years.
  - For instance, Colorado enacted the law in 1868, **I round up to the next decennial** and consider the enactment in 1870.

Empirical Strategy

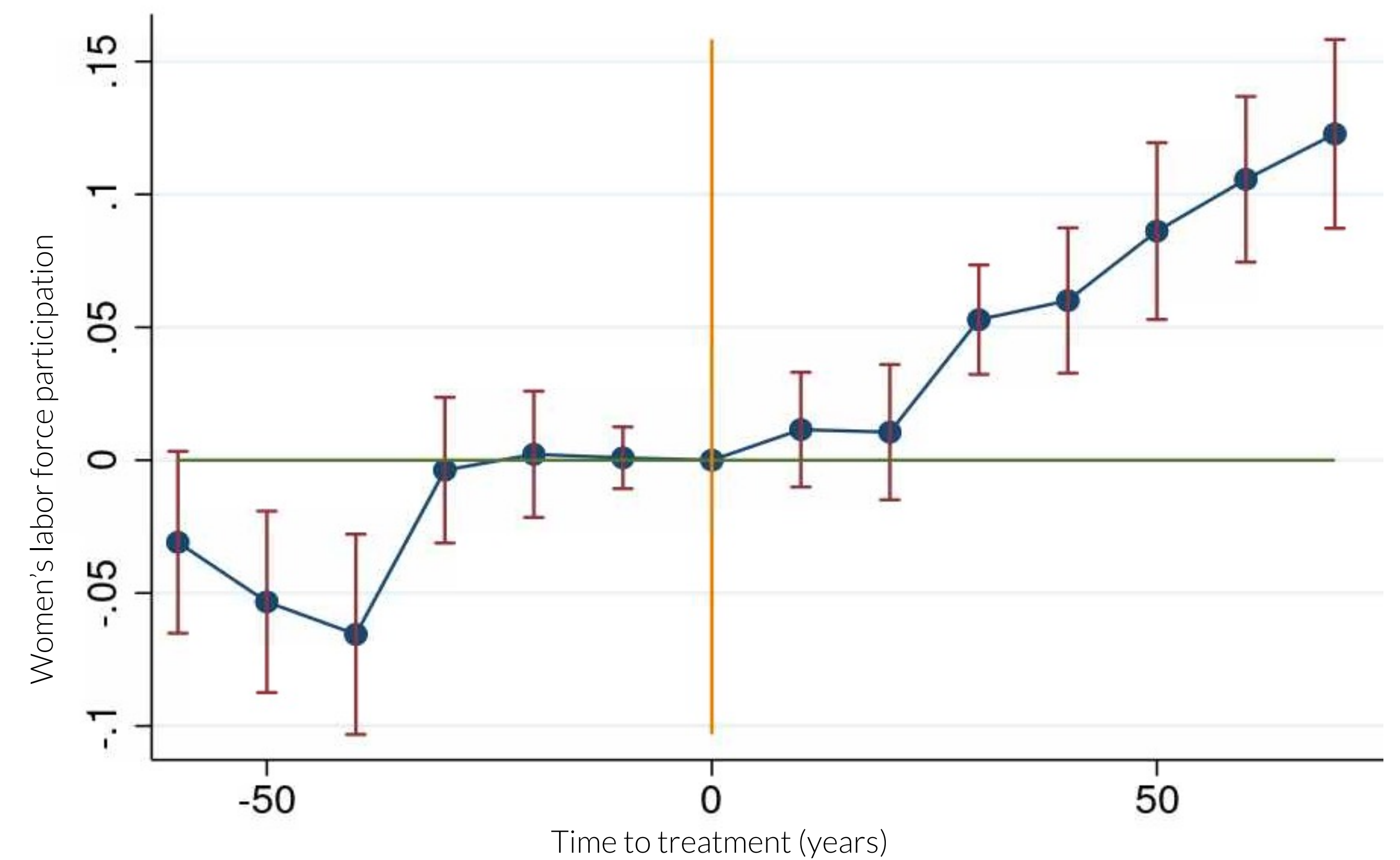I use a difference-in-differences **event study**:

$$Y_{g,t} = \beta_0 + \sum_{k=T_0}^{k=-2} \beta_k * Treated_{g,k} + \sum_{k=0}^{k=T_1} \beta_k * Treated_{g,k} + \alpha_g + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{g,t}$$

Additionally, I use a **stacked difference-in-differences** specification as follows:

$$Y_{g,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \, Treated + X'_{g,t}\delta + \sum_{j=1}^{j=5} \beta_j D^j + \alpha_g + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{g,t}$$

where $Treated$ is a binary variable indicating the treated group after the treatment period, D^j are relative event-time indicators, α_g and α_t refer to state and time fixed effects, and $X'_{g,t}$ is a set of control variables.

Figure 2. **Women's Labor Force Participation** (Event Study)

Results

The event study and the stacked difference-in-difference estimates show similar results, I find **a positive and significant estimate of the property laws on the female labor force participation**:

- Better economic rights increased the work incentives of all women.
- However, labor participation marginally increased for married women.
- In contrast, labor effects are more substantial on unmarried women.

Additionally, **marriage rates decreased**, suggesting that women may have delayed their marriages to work more.

Future Research

- Identify and compare the effects of the legislation on **contiguous county pairs in bordering states** that gave rights at different times.
- Develop of **a theoretical model**, which shows the women's choices when deciding whether to work or not, and whether to get married.
- Analysis of the **effect of laws on married men (employment).**
- Incorporate some critiques about **underreporting of women's labor participation observations** during the 19th century.

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