



The rise of the childless cat ladies

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Following the presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris on 10 September 2024, pop megastar Taylor Swift announced on her Instagram page that she would be voting for Harris come the election on 5 November. She posted a photo of herself holding her cat Benjamin Button (who had previously shared the cover of *Time* with her when she was named its Person of the Year). She added a multi-paragraph caption explaining her decision, signing it, ‘Taylor Swift—Childless Cat Lady’.

In so doing, Swift implicitly called out comments made by Trump’s running mate J. D. Vance back in 2021, when he lamented that the future of the US was in the hands of Democratic politicians with no kids (and thus no personal stake in the country’s future). Vance mentioned Harris and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in particular and used the expression ‘childless cat ladies’. Many women took to social media to rightfully make the case that their societal value is not derived from their decision whether to have kids.

But far from singling out just another subgroup in the culture war, ‘Childless Cat Ladies’ is now a widespread, observable social phenomenon—although it is neither gendered nor strictly feline. ‘Childless Pet Parents’ might be a more accurate description, albeit far less catchy. Whatever its name, at its core are pet owners, often young, who have replaced the children their grandparents were having at their age with cats and dogs—and crucially, doting on them in the same manner.

I know this because, as the owner/parent of two female cocker spaniels, I frequently refer to them in conversation with my partner as ‘the girls’. One sees something of the

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general trend in the man who takes his dog along whenever he leaves home for more than a couple hours (I plead guilty) or the woman who creates a social media profile for her cat and writes all the captions as if Kitty were typing them herself (I pride myself on not being guilty of this one). The latter is definitely more humanising than the other, but they share the same underlying intent.

The numbers speak for themselves: Americans spent \$136.8 billion on their pets in 2022, a 51% increase on 2018 (Inspire Veterinary Partners, Inc. 2024). In part this is due to pet owners wanting only the very best for their ‘fur babies’ (a term added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015). But it is also because modern capitalism has caught on and been all too keen to provide pet-related products and services that might once have made more sense had they been geared towards one’s children. Out with the video baby monitor; in with the self-cleaning, wi-fi connected litter box that delivers updates about your cat’s bowel movements directly to your phone. (I’m not joking; look it up.) For many people in the workforce, getting good optical and dental coverage for your kids through your employer’s health insurance plan is no longer a major objective; today over half of pet-owning Americans rank the availability of pet insurance as one of the top benefits that would influence their decision to take a new job (MetLife 2021).

This phenomenon is not limited to the West. It is well known that for decades China enforced a one-child policy, before making a sharp U-turn in recent years and now permitting couples to have up to three children. But for 2024 it is projected that the number of urban pets will surpass the number of toddlers (Lewis et al. 2024). And by 2030 the nation will have twice as many pets as it will children under the age of four.

Regardless of where we look, the underlying causes will be familiar to most: stagnating wages, significant student debt and low rates of home ownership among young people. All these factors have combined to create a climate of economic uncertainty which hardly fosters the desire to start a family, a costly endeavour. In addition, a pervasive sense of impending doom linked to climate change has unfortunately overtaken the worldview of many young people, so that potential parents think either that the world will not be around long enough for their kids to enjoy it or that Earth’s limited resources are becoming so scarce that we should avoid consuming them further by, as it were, adding more consumers.

Ultimately, today’s Childless Pet Parents are young adults navigating a world that has little in common with the one their parents were born into. In many ways having pets is motivated by the same basic human drive to provide care in return for love that has underpinned human relations for millennia, but adapted somewhat to fit modern circumstances. Barring any major shifts, one can only conclude that fur babies and their parents won’t be just a fad. For many it’s the new normal.

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Theo Larue grew up in Paris, holding dual French and American citizenship. He is a graduate of Royal Holloway, University of London, from which he holds a BA in History and International Relations, and an M.Sc. in Political Science. His political research interests revolve around domestic French and American politics, EU economic policy and all aspects of international relations. In addition to his native English and French, Theo speaks Spanish.