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Counting Women's Ballots

On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state in the union to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. After a more than seventy-year battle, women throughout the United States secured the right to vote. The national enfranchisement of women represented the largest expansion of the electorate in American history, nearly doubling the size of the voting age population.[1] Millions of citizens who had never cast a ballot became eligible to do so.

This dramatic expansion of the electorate generated a great deal of activity and uncertainty. Newspapers offered advice to new female voters. "You Can't Drag Your Husband Into The Booth When You Vote on Tuesday!" explained the *Bridgeport Post* (Bridgeport, CT), helpfully adding that "There Are No Mirrors Inside … Hubby Cannot Legally Offer You a New Hat to Vote for His Candidate."[2] Political parties and women's organizations designed "play elections" and practice voting booths to teach women how to fulfill their new civic obligations.[3] Cities

[1] We say "nearly" because eleven states allowed women to vote in the 1916 presidential election. On the other hand, restrictive interpretations of registration rules (ratification occurred after registration deadlines in a number of states) denied women access to the ballot in Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina in 1920, delaying women's participation in presidential elections in those states until 1924 (Gosnell 1930). Together with black men, many black women continued to experience systematic exclusion from the franchise until the second half of the twentieth century.

[2] "You Can't Drag Your Husband Into The Booth When You Vote Tuesday!" *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, October 31, 1920. See also: "What the Woman Citizen Should Know" (repeated column). *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 24, 1920, p. 2; "To Women: Register!" *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1920, p. 1.

[3] "Play Election Devised to Teach Women How to Vote." *Boston Globe*, August 10, 1920, p. 2; "Women Taught How to Run an Election." *Boston Globe*, August 13, 1920,

and states extended registration times; added days for women to register; and shifted women's names from earlier, limited vote lists, all in an effort to accommodate new female voters.[4]

Expectations were high that women would play a key role in the election. "Women Take the Ballot Seriously" declared one headline just days after ratification.[5] "Registration of Women Is Heavy" advised the *St. Paul Dispatch* as the election approached.[6] "Women Filled Lines at Every Voting Booth" proclaimed a *Boston Globe* front-page headline on election day.[7] Suffrage leaders predicted a "marked change because of women's entrance into the electorate."[8]

Both political parties actively sought the support of new female voters (Bagby 1962; Barnard 1928a, b; Jensen 1981; Lemons 1973).[9] Yet, all of these new voters were apparently a source of considerable anxiety for political organizers: "Women's Vote Baffles Politicians' Efforts to Forecast Election" warned one newspaper headline.[10] The *Boston Globe* reported that "anxious politicians of both parties are sitting up nights worrying about [women's votes]" in an above-the-fold, front-page article entitled "How Will the Women Vote?"[11]

Almost 100 years later, that question – How did newly enfranchised women vote? – remains to be answered satisfactorily. The decades-long struggle for women's suffrage involved conflicting claims about whether and how women might cast their ballots if permitted to do so. Although the experience of female voters in early enfranchising states had provided some clues, the national enfranchisement of women brought about by the Nineteenth Amendment provided the opportunity to evaluate the electoral behavior of women conclusively. Yet, our knowledge of how

p. 2; "Women Learn How to Vote at Fair." *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 6, 1920, p. 5; "Registration Week Begins Tomorrow." *The New York Times*, October 3, 1920, p. 4.

4 For example: "Mayor Extends Time for Registration." *Boston Globe*, August 19, 1920; "Wednesday Only Day for Women to Get Votes." *Chicago Tribune*, August 20, 1920, p. 3; "Women Now Registered Stay on Lists." *Bridgeport Post*, September 22, 1920, p. 1.

5 "Women Take the Ballot Seriously." *Boston Globe*, September 8, 1920, p. 1.

6 "Registration of Women Is Heavy." *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 23, 1920, p. 1.

7 "Women Filled Lines at Every Voting Booth." *Boston Globe*, November 2, 1920, p. 1.

8 "Women Transforming Polls, Says Mrs. Catt After Vote for Cox." *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 3, 1920, p. 3.

9 For example, "Democrats Lay Plans to Snare Women's Votes." *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1920, p. 7.

10 "Women's Vote Baffles Politicians' Efforts to Forecast Election." *Bridgeport Post*, October 29, 1920, p. 1.

11 "How Will the Women Vote?" *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1920, p. 1.

women first voted and with what consequence remains contradictory and incomplete.

Two somewhat conflicting sets of conclusions characterize current understandings of the behavior and impact of the first female voters. One perspective emphasizes the failure of women to employ their new right distinctively and of women's suffrage to effectuate any meaningful political change. In this assessment, women took up their right to vote in only very limited numbers, and those who did cast ballots voted just as men did. As a result, the impact of female voters on American politics was virtually nonexistent. As early as 1924, writers were asking, "Is Woman-Suffrage a Failure?" (Russell 1924; see also Blair 1925; Rice and Willey 1924; Tarbell 1924), and that characterization was soon accepted as scholarly wisdom (Alpern and Baum 1985).

Other scholars, however, have claimed that in some elections and in some places, women exercised their new right in ways distinctive from those of long-enfranchised men. Women have been implicated as major contributors to the Republican landslide of 1920, and many have concluded that women's suffrage initially benefited Republican candidates (e.g., Brown 1991; Lane 1959; Smith 1980; Willey and Rice 1924). An association of women with the Progressive movement led many to expect women to be particular supporters of Progressive causes and candidates, such as third-party presidential candidate Robert La Follette in 1924 (e.g., Allen 1930; Flexner 1959; Ogburn and Goltra 1919; Russell 1924; Tarbell 1924). Others describe women – mobilized by issues of religion and prohibition – as playing a particularly important role in the presidential election of 1928 (Andersen 1996; Burner 1986; Burnham 1980; Matthews 1992; Sundquist 1983). Still others have proposed and uncovered data consistent with the claim that men and women followed distinct paths to New Deal realignment in the 1930s (Andersen 1979; Gamm 1986).

Yet, the evidentiary basis for *any* conclusions about women's electoral behavior and impact after suffrage turns out to be surprisingly thin. The reason is that we actually possess very limited useful data on how women voted after suffrage. With rare exceptions, official records report only the total number of votes cast overall and for each candidate. Whether women cast ballots, for which candidates, and with what consequences cannot be determined directly from the vote record alone. Reliable public opinion polls – the modern solution to this problem – were virtually nonexistent during this period. Early researchers attempted to draw conclusions from the available aggregate election and census records,

but since Robinson (1950) social scientists have understood the dangers of what is known as the ecological fallacy (see Chapter 4) and generally shied away from such analysis. Meticulous empirical work has told us something about how women voted in a few places at a few times (e.g., Andersen 1994; Gamm 1986; Goldstein 1984), but this time- and effort-intensive research is limited both geographically and temporally. As a consequence, more than ninety years after women won the right to vote, and despite a conventional wisdom that can sound quite confident in its conclusions, we actually know far less than we should, or than we believe we do, about the behavior and impact of female voters in the period after suffrage.

This book seeks to fill this lacuna and in doing so, to deepen and improve our understanding of an important period in American electoral history and political development. The enfranchisement of women, the largest expansion of the electorate in American history, transformed the relationship between women and the state (Andersen 1996). The extension of suffrage rights to women is a key example of the sort of "durable shift in governing authority" (Orren and Skowronek 2004, 123) that shapes the path of American political development by disrupting and transforming relationships of influence and power. Yet, our current knowledge of how women employed the vote once won remains quite limited, almost 100 years after the fact.

Combining unique historic election data and recent methodological innovations, we are able to estimate the turnout and vote choice of new female voters in the five presidential elections following suffrage (1920–1936) for a larger and more diverse set of places – a sample of ten American states – than has previously been possible. This is a major accomplishment. Previous studies were limited to a small number of places over one or a small number of elections. Estimating how particular groups behave based on the available aggregate data on population characteristics and overall election returns has long been considered an insurmountable methodological challenge, particularly for a group as evenly distributed across locales as women are. Our ability to generate reliable estimates of women's turnout and vote choice during this era is a central contribution of this research.

These estimates permit us to observe and evaluate the behavior and impact of new female voters. In doing so, we consider the accuracy of the traditional and often conflicting narratives of the behavior and impact of new female voters found in contemporary and scholarly

sources. Moreover, we place those long-standing accounts within the context of more general expectations about the turnout and vote choice of women as newly enfranchised citizens derived from elections and voting research. The result is a thorough and extensive theoretical and empirical accounting of the incorporation of women into the American electorate.

While highlighting the contributions we are able to make, we also acknowledge important limitations. Women, like men, are not an undifferentiated bloc in any sense, including politically. A number of characteristics, such as class, ethnicity, immigrant status, and race, surely shaped women's political experiences and incorporation into the electorate. Our methodological approach permits us to offer insights into the electoral behavior of women in general during this period, but it does not allow us to reach any conclusions about the electoral behavior of women in different social groups.

We recognize that different groups of women very likely had different opportunities and propensities to take advantage of their newly granted right to vote. To use one particularly important example, we have every reason to expect that the myriad formal and informal institutions that kept black men from the polls in the 1920s and 1930s certainly barred most black women from participating as well, despite their concerted attempts to do so. Black women faced particularly strong barriers in the South, where the vast majority of African Americans resided in the 1920s and 1930s (Lebsock 1993; Terborg-Penn 1998). Our data cannot tell us the race of those women who did turn out to vote, but everything we do know about the period leads us to expect there were few African American women in their ranks. Thus, while our data and estimates can only speak of the electoral behavior of male and female voters in general, we are cognizant of the fact that any description of women as an undifferentiated whole masks important variation among and between them. We seek to be attentive to these dynamics when discussing turnout and vote choice in our various states.

In this introduction we first review current understandings of the impact of women's suffrage on American politics. We then turn to a discussion of expectations for the mobilization – both overall and by particular political parties – of newly enfranchised women. Next, we argue for a broader and more nuanced standard for evaluating the contribution of women to elections after suffrage. Finally we preview our findings and map out our plan for the rest of the book.

The Supposed Impact of Women's Suffrage

This book inquires into the behavior and impact of female voters after suffrage. For many, these are settled, and easy to answer, questions. Women were initially (and for quite some time) reluctant to turn out to vote. When they did vote, women cast ballots that were largely indistinguishable from those of long-enfranchised men. These claims emerged almost immediately after women won the right to vote (see Alpern and Baum 1985; Andersen 1996; Baker 1984). Contemporary writers debated whether, in what ways, and to what extent women in politics were a "failure" (Blair 1925; Russell 1924; Tarbell 1924), while in a widely cited study, scholars described women's "ineffective use of the vote" (Rice and Willey 1924). By the 1930s, the standard textbook on American politics, Ogg and Ray's *Introduction to American Government*, could report that the experience of female voters had clearly revealed that "women voters are strikingly like men voters" (1932, 112). These early, largely impressionistic accounts became the basis of the conventional wisdom as "[m]any conclusions drawn in the 1920s were incorporated into standard histories of the impact of the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment" (Alpern and Baum 1985, 45).

Indeed, many contemporaries and later scholars concluded not only that the enfranchisement of women had no discernible impact on elections, but that women's suffrage had no impact on politics at all. That is, the belief that women's suffrage was a "failure" described not only elections, but also effects on public policy, politics more generally, and the cause of greater equality for women (see Andersen 1996; Baker 1984). Despite women's extensive activism in the Progressive movement, women's suffrage failed to generate more reform-oriented and female-friendly public policy. Despite women's supposed natural purity and morality, women's suffrage failed to transform the corrupt world of politics. Despite the great promise of the vote as the sine qua non of democratic politics, women's suffrage failed to dramatically empower women or fundamentally challenge their unequal position in American society.

The "women's suffrage as failure" conventional wisdom has been challenged on a number of fronts. Cott (1990) argues cogently that looking for dramatic political change in the wake of women's enfranchisement ignores the extent and ways in which women were politically active both before and after the "great divide" of 1920. Goss (2013) shows how the conventional narrative of women's organizational collapse after suffrage misses the ways in which women's organizational activism diversified in

the 1920s and the degree to which women's advocacy continued apace. As women were already active and influential within movements and as advocates for policy change before enfranchisement (see Clemens 1997; Wilkerson-Freeman 2003), we should not expect to see dramatic change when the – one could argue, relatively less powerful – act of casting ballots was added to women's available repertoire of political action (see Pateman 1980). Cott (1990, 153) also challenges electoral impact as the standard by which women's political influence should be judged: "Concentrating on suffrage and the electoral arena means viewing women's politics through the conventional lens where male behavior sets the norm." Many writers, both at the time and since, have emphasized that most politically active women of the period explicitly rejected any expectation of a female voting bloc, arguing instead that women, as diverse and independent human beings, rather than a gendered class, would be similarly diverse in their political choices (e.g., Alpern and Baum 1985; Cott 1990; McConnaughy 2013; Roosevelt 1940).

Others argue that the failure claim ignores important achievements. At the national level, scholars have credited women's suffrage with providing the impetus for a number of important bills in the early 1920s, most notably the Shepard–Towner and Cable Acts pertaining to maternity and infant care and women's citizenship, respectively (Andersen 1996; Ogg and Ray 1932). These successes and the general dearth of other new policies responsive to women must be viewed, Andersen (1996) argues, within the broader context of the 1920s, a decade of conservative retrenchment and Progressive movement weakness. At the state and local levels, legislators initially responded to women's enfranchisement with various reform policies, many aimed at women and children, and women's suffrage often translated into political influence and activism in complex and important ways (e.g., Schuyler 2006; Scott 1972; Wilkerson-Freeman 2003).

Moreover, whatever the direct impact on elections, policy, and politics, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment transformed women's contested relationship to the political sphere, as well as the "boundaries between male and female" (Andersen 1996, 15). As we discuss in detail in Chapter 2, by granting women access to the ballot, the Nineteenth Amendment clearly recognized women as political actors in their own, independent right, challenging long-held norms about the appropriate place of women and the nature of politics itself (DuBois 1978). Women's suffrage was thus a key step in a long, not always straightforward process of expanding political equality for women.

We certainly endorse the unambiguous evidence that women acted politically and affected political outcomes long before, and after, the extension of suffrage rights. We also agree that suffrage represented a fundamental transformation of women's relationship to and place within American politics. What remains less well understood is how and with what consequences women exercised their new rights – that is, how women actually voted. Whatever indirect impact enfranchisement might have had, at its core, suffrage transformed women into *voters* – or at least *eligible* voters – and thus our knowledge of the impact of women's suffrage remains far from complete.

Women won the right to vote at a time of great transition in American politics. The 1920 election, the first after the end of World War I, was heralded as a "return to normalcy" and the decade of the 1920s is often viewed as a relatively tranquil and prosperous interlude between two world wars and before the Great Depression. Yet this apparent lull masks a great deal of change and disruption. Electoral participation, historically high and widespread in the late nineteenth century, fell dramatically in the early twentieth century (cf. Burnham 1965; Converse 1972; Rusk 1974). A third-party presidential candidate garnered 17 percent of the vote in 1924, signaling a growing dissatisfaction with the options offered by the two major parties (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). Throughout the decade, new lines of cleavage and an evolving population were transforming the political parties. By 1928 – just the third presidential election after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment – the process of what would become known as New Deal realignment was underway, dramatically disrupting previous electoral patterns and ultimately resulting in a dominant Democratic majority after decades of Republican ascendancy.

What did women's suffrage contribute to these developments? Did women – as new and inexperienced voters – contribute to electoral instability and change? Did particular issues and parties mobilize women and attract their votes? Were women – undermobilized and with presumably weaker partisan ties – at the forefront of New Deal realignment? Or, as many have claimed, did women's votes have little or no impact at all? In other words: Did women's votes count?

Our challenge to the suffrage-as-failure narrative is thus found not (only) in the electoral data we analyze, but also in the questions we ask. A misguided focus on suffrage success or failure can obscure many interesting and relevant questions about the experience of female voters in the first elections after suffrage. The behavior and impact of newly enfranchised women is, we argue, best understood in terms of

mobilization: the decision to turn out (mobilization into the active electorate) and the decision to cast a ballot for a particular party's candidate (mobilization by and into particular parties). Both choices defined women as political actors – turnout made women voters, and vote choice made women active partisans. Both decisions were shaped by women themselves – their interests, characteristics, and experiences. Both choices also were shaped by the political context in which women entered the eligible electorate – the ways in which communities facilitated and/or discouraged women's political engagement and preferences. Both choices are intertwined: People turn out to vote largely to (or because they have been encouraged to) cast ballots for particular parties and candidates: "Deciding whether to vote is a choice made not in the abstract, but in the context of particular candidate choices, party images, and issue agendas" (Andersen 1996, 74). Jointly, both kinds of mobilization determine impact. The effect of any group of voters is a function of the mobilization of that group, overall and for particular parties, relative to the mobilization of other groups. Thus, our expectations for the electoral behavior and impact of women after suffrage are shaped by the characteristics of newly enfranchised women themselves and the varying political contexts in which women first had the opportunity to exercise their new suffrage rights.

In the next two sections, we discuss expectations for the mobilization of female voters overall (turnout) and for particular parties (vote choice), respectively. We then return to the question of the impact of women's suffrage, arguing that examining turnout and vote choice together allows us to provide more nuanced evaluations of the contributions of women in the first elections in which they were eligible to participate.

The Turnout of New Female Voters

One direct impact of women's suffrage has been universally acknowledged: Overall turnout declined as a result of adding women to the eligible electorate. What remains unsettled is how much of the decline in turnout in the early twentieth century can be attributed to women. According to many observers and scholars, women's failure to embrace their new right played a major role. As a population without electoral experience and burdened by strong norms discouraging participation, it is not surprising that women are implicated in many of the major treatments of declining turnout at the turn of the last century (e.g., Converse 1972; Rusk 1974). According to Converse (1972, 276),

"while definitive research on the precise effects of female suffrage remains to be done," women's suffrage unambiguously played a (or even the) major role.

There is in fact no question that women initially turned out at lower rates than did men, which, given the size of the eligible female electorate, certainly dampened turnout rates (Andersen 1996; Burnham 1980; Dugan and Taggart 1995). Yet, others have challenged the assumption that all or most of the 1920s decline in turnout can be attributed to new female voters, noting the many factors that discouraged participation more broadly during the period, including widespread one-partyism and the introduction of increasingly restrictive registration rules (e.g., Cott 1990; Kleppner 1982b). Burnham (1965) points out that much of the early twentieth-century decline in turnout occurred before 1920, suggesting that other factors were driving the long-term trend. Similarly, Kleppner (1982b) argues that turnout patterns are not consistent with a hypothesis that women's suffrage was the dominant cause in the 1920s, but rather point to the impact of factors such as declining party competition. Andersen (1990) notes that the "System of 1896" produced a large number of citizens with weaker-than-usual partisan attachments, also contributing to decreased turnout. Finally, a focus on women's low turnout per se ignores the more complicated effects of women's suffrage in tandem with other long-term shifts in American political culture. The introduction of the Australian (secret) ballot, combined with the shift in polling locations from saloons and barber shops to schools and churches, transformed election day from a raucous, social, and largely masculine spectacle to a placid, bureaucratic proceeding (see Edwards 1997). It is perhaps not surprising that these changes were associated with decreased turnout (see Andersen 1990; Baker 1984).

Although it is clear that women's turnout initially (and indeed for decades) lagged that of men, basic features of women's mobilization – the level of turnout; the difference in turnout between men and women; and in particular, the variation in the turnout level and gender gap over time and across space – remain largely unknown. Lamenting that women's turnout initially and for some time lagged behind men's, as a general rule, has often obscured the considerable variation in women's turnout across time and space after suffrage. Understanding the causes and consequences of this variation can provide important insight into the nature and potential of women's engagement with electoral politics in this era. What might we expect of women's mobilization into the active electorate in the presidential elections following enfranchisement?