

## CHAPTER 1

### Women at the Polls

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution

**T**HE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT TO THE US CONSTITUTION WAS RATIFIED IN August 1920, setting off a flurry of speculation about how newly enfranchised women would vote in the upcoming presidential election. Although women in fifteen states already enjoyed the right to vote by 1920, politicians and observers nonetheless expressed uncertainty about what to expect. “Women’s Vote Baffles Politicians’ Efforts to Forecast Election” claimed one newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Another reported that “anxious politicians of both parties are sitting up nights worrying about [women’s votes].”<sup>2</sup> Appeals to new women voters emphasized issues specific to women, such as equal pay and maternity care, and issues related to women’s roles as mothers, such as child labor and education.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the election, many claimed that women had handed the election to Republican Warren G. Harding, for reasons ranging from his good looks to the Republican party’s support of women’s suffrage.<sup>4</sup> Others attributed the Republican advantage to specific groups of women; the women many considered most likely to turn out to vote in 1920 – suffrage activists – tended to be native-born white women, who like native-born white men, were expected to vote Republican.<sup>5</sup>

Almost a century later, the presidential election of 2016 – with Tweets, Russian meddling, and the first-ever woman major party nominee – differed dramatically from the presidential election of 1920. And yet, there are striking similarities between the two when it comes to women voters. Interest in the

## A CENTURY OF VOTES FOR WOMEN

potential impact of women was again pervasive: “The Trump-Clinton Gender Gap Could be the Largest in More Than 60 Years,” predicted NPR.<sup>6</sup> “Women May Decide the Election,” claimed *The Atlantic*.<sup>7</sup> Parties and candidates continued to target women voters, defined as women, and especially as mothers: Hillary Clinton highlighted her famous declaration that “women’s rights are human rights” in an “appeal to female voters,” explained NPR.<sup>8</sup> Donald Trump was “Targeting ‘Security Moms,’” according to *Time* magazine.<sup>9</sup> As in 1920, post-election analysis focused on the distinct contributions of different groups of women to the Republican victory: “Clinton Couldn’t Win Over White Women,” emphasized popular election website, FiveThirtyEight. “Why Hillary Clinton lost the white women’s vote,” echoed the *Christian Science Monitor*.<sup>10</sup>

The presidential elections of 1920 and 2016 both featured widespread speculation about the impact of women voters. In both elections, appeals to and analysis of women voters often were grounded in assumptions and stereotypes about women’s interests *as women*, and particularly as mothers. In both elections, the Republican candidate won. Yet, the actual political behavior of women in these two elections was quite different. In 1920, our best estimates are that about one-third of eligible women turned out to vote. In 2016, 63% of women cast ballots in the presidential election. Women were much *less* likely to turn out than were men in 1920 (a nearly 35 point gap, on average), but women were slightly *more* likely to turn out to vote than were men in 2016 (4 point gap). Women’s partisan preferences also shifted. Republicans had a slight advantage, at most, among women in 1920, but by 2016, it was Democrats who maintained a consistent advantage among women. Both women (63%) and men (60%) overwhelmingly supported Harding in 1920. Exit polls conducted in 2016 indicated that only 41% of women voted for Trump compared to 52% of men.<sup>11</sup>

*A Century of Votes for Women* describes and explains how women voted in presidential elections from the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment until the present day. Our brief discussion of women voters in the first (1920) and last (2016) elections covered here highlights four key arguments of this book. First, the actual voting behavior of women – both the extent to which they turn out to vote and the parties and candidates they tend to support – has varied considerably over time. We trace the evolution of women’s turnout and vote choice across the past century briefly below and in detail in the chapters that

## WOMEN AT THE POLLS

follow. Second, popular discourse about “the woman voter” varies but also is characterized by remarkably consistent themes and assumptions over these ten decades, despite extraordinary changes in women’s lives. Third, women (like men) are not a monolithic group and other identities and experiences are often as or more important than gender for women’s voting behavior. Fourth, history matters. Women’s (and men’s) electoral behavior must be understood within the unique political, social, and economic context in which it takes place.

### Women Voters Over Time

Women’s voting behavior has evolved since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The story of voter *turnout* is largely one of women becoming increasingly similar to men. In terms of *vote choice*, however, women have become more distinct. The first women voters lagged considerably behind men in their tendency to enter polling places, although the extent to which women and men turned out (and the size of the turnout gender gap) varied from state to state depending on the political context.<sup>12</sup> By 1964, women’s increasingly high turnout combined with women’s greater numbers in the eligible electorate translated into more women than men casting ballots for president. Since 1980 women have been more likely than men to turn out in presidential elections.<sup>13</sup>

The historical trajectory of women’s vote choice – which parties and candidates women tend to support at the polls – is a more complicated story. In the main, the ebbs and flows of women’s vote choice have reflected the broader electoral trends of the nation as a whole: Republicans were the majority party, consistently winning presidential elections, in the period immediately after extension of the suffrage. Women, like men, voted overwhelmingly Republican. In a dramatic shift, Democrats wrested majority status from the GOP during the New Deal period of the 1930s, and would maintain that status for at least the next 50 years. Women, like men, contributed to the emerging and persistent Democratic majority. As that majority status eroded across the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, both men and women shifted toward the Republican party. These shared shifts are significant. Despite women’s historic exclusion from the electorate, differences in gender socialization, and women’s distinct position in the social and economic structure, women and men generally cast ballots for the same parties and candidates.

## A CENTURY OF VOTES FOR WOMEN

Yet, in some places and in some times, women's vote choice diverged from that of men. Women voters were slightly more likely than men to cast Republican ballots in some elections prior to 1964. Women voters have become consistently more likely than men to support Democratic candidates, and men to support Republicans, since at least 1980.<sup>14</sup> This does *not* mean that a majority of women cast Democratic ballots in every election since 1980; Republicans won majorities of women's votes in 1984 and 1988. But the percentage of men casting Republican ballots is larger than the percentage of women doing so in every presidential election from 1980 on, even when Republicans captured a majority of the votes of both women and men. In some recent elections – 2000, 2004, 2012, and 2016 – a majority of women favor the Democratic candidate, while a majority of men favor the Republican.<sup>15</sup>

### Framing Women Voters

Women voters have been the subject of considerable interest and speculation across these ten decades. Observers and campaigns have often assumed women's gender per se is the key to understanding women's political behavior and interests. Women's presumed natural disinterest in the rough-and-tumble world of politics explains their relatively low turnout in early presidential elections, for example.<sup>16</sup> Women's interest in issues specific to women – suffrage, equal pay, abortion – have been invoked to explain their choice of party and candidates.<sup>17</sup> Fundamental personality and values differences, such as women's greater compassion, are assumed to explain women's support for social welfare programs and the parties associated with them.<sup>18</sup> The interests of women voters have been repeatedly understood in terms of their roles as wives and mothers: Women oppose war (ranging from Korea to Iraq) because they fear their husbands and sons being sent off to fight. Women are concerned with inflation and high prices because they manage the household finances. Women prioritize education and health care because of their maternal concern for the well-being of children. These beliefs about the interests and behavior of women as voters has shaped women's political influence, the creation of public policy, and the ways in which candidates and parties appealed to female voters. We seek to

## WOMEN AT THE POLLS

not only describe how women voted, but how women voters were understood by contemporaries and scholars.

### **Women are Not a Voting Bloc**

American women are diverse. Not all women turn out to vote or vote the same way. Gender is not the most salient political identity shaping electoral behavior for most women (or men). Factors such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, employment, education, and marital status all shape women's (and men's) electoral behavior in important ways. Women's experiences also are shaped by their location; where women exercise their electoral rights is often as important as the fact that they are women. Among the most important aspects of women's diversity is race. The Nineteenth Amendment prohibited the denial of voting rights on the basis of sex. It left in place, however, legal and extra-legal practices which denied voting rights on other bases, most notably on the basis of race in the American South.<sup>19</sup> As a result, most women of color continued to be excluded from the suffrage until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and face unique challenges today.<sup>20</sup>

Diversity means that it is impossible to speak of "the woman's vote." There is no one stereotypical woman, but rather as many "kinds" of women voters as there are kinds of men voters. Multiple factors determine women's decision to turn out to vote and who to vote for, many of which trump the impact of being a woman. Women also vary in their political views, generally and specifically related to women's rights. Women have both opposed and supported suffrage, equal pay, abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and family leave policies. Women are capable of holding and expressing sexist beliefs – both benevolent and hostile – with consequences for their electoral behavior.<sup>21</sup> We describe women's rates of turnout and party vote share in a general sense, but our further analysis emphasizes the considerable variability of electoral behavior across different groups of women.

### **The Importance of Historical Context**

Finally, voters do not cast ballots in a vacuum. Rather, the decision to turn out to vote and for whom to cast a ballot is made within a specific moment,

## A CENTURY OF VOTES FOR WOMEN

characterized by events, issues, conditions, and candidates that shape and frame decisions in particular ways. For that reason, we have organized our discussion of women voters historically, which allows us to highlight the specific issues and candidates, as well as the social, economic, and political developments, that shaped electoral choices for women and men, and how those actions were understood, in each election and era.

Major political developments ranging from the New Deal and the Cold War to the civil rights movement and 9/11 have transformed American politics for citizens in general and often for women in particular. Technological and economic developments, such as the expansion of mass-produced clothing and food and the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, have had social and political impacts broadly, as well as specifically for women. Significant changes in the conditions of women's lives – the increasing participation of women in the paid workforce, the expansion of occupations open to women, changes in marital practice and stability, and shifting patterns of pregnancy and child-rearing – have always had political consequences.<sup>22</sup>

The chapters that follow provide ample support for these arguments and observations, and we return to them again in the conclusion. In this introductory chapter, we prepare readers for our discussion of women voters across the past century in three ways: First, we identify and discuss some of the key issues involved in thinking about and examining women as voters in American politics across 100 years. Next, we briefly review the many monumental developments in the lived experience of women's lives across this ten-decade period. Finally, we describe, in the most general sense, the turnout and vote choice of women voters from 1920 through 2016, highlighting general trends that are explored in greater detail throughout the book. We conclude the chapter with a preview of the chapters which follow.

## THE STUDY OF WOMEN VOTERS

This is a book about women voters. Specifically, it is a book about the turnout and vote choice of American women in presidential elections from the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 through the election of 2016. We seek to understand how women used the vote – and how political observers and scholars explained women's use of the vote – across the past 100 years.

## WOMEN AT THE POLLS

In this section, we review a number of the key issues that arise when we examine women as voters.

### Women Voters and the Gender Gap

To understand women voters as women, we must be attentive to the voting behavior of the rest of the voting age population – that is, to men. In other words, if we want to understand how, if at all, women as a group employ their right to vote in a distinctive manner, we need to compare their turnout and vote choice to that of men. The difference between the political behavior of women and men is known in both popular and scholarly parlance as the gender gap. The term “gender gap” was coined by feminist activists seeking to gain political leverage from the fact that women were less likely than men to cast ballots for Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980. Activists argued that the gender gap was a reaction to Reagan’s anti-feminist positions; by revealing the electoral costs of those actions, they hoped to create political pressure in favor of women’s rights.<sup>23</sup> The size, consequences, and reasons for the gender gap remain politically contested; Republicans, for example, have an incentive to highlight the problems Democrats seem to have in attracting men’s votes, while Democrats frame their advantage among women as a seal of approval for their policy positions. Despite its political origins, the term gender gap is now in widespread use to describe any and all differences between women and men ranging from economics and health to movie dialogue and celebrity chefs.<sup>24</sup>

The divergent voting preferences of women and men remain the original definition and prevailing use of the term gender gap. For the sake of clarity, we use the term “turnout gender gap” when speaking of differences between the percentage of eligible women turning out to vote versus the percentage of men doing so. Differences between the percentage of women voting for a candidate or party (usually the winning one) and the percentage of men who do so are described as the “gender gap” or the “partisan gender gap.” Measurement of the gender gap is contested, but our measure is the standard approach used by activists, the press, and scholars since the gender gap was “named” after the 1980 election.<sup>25</sup>

We are cognizant that the gender gap can obscure as much as it reveals, particularly when considering change over time. A change in the size of the partisan gender gap, for example, can result from dramatic shifts in men’s

## A CENTURY OF VOTES FOR WOMEN

preferences while women remain steadfast for one party, shifts among women but not men, or shifts in the party preferences of both women and men. Each has different implications for our understanding of the political behavior of women and of the impact of gender on electoral politics.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, our practice is to present women's and men's turnout and vote choice separately, rather than the gender gap alone, in most cases.

### The Male Standard

While useful, comparisons of women's and men's voting behavior can be problematic.<sup>27</sup> In voting, as in other areas, the behavior of men is often presented as the standard; that is, male turnout and vote choice are understood as *normal* and any divergence from the male standard by women is viewed as a puzzle to be solved. Women's turnout is considered high or low relative to male turnout. Women's support for particular parties is only presented as notable when it diverges from the partisan preferences of men.

The focus on comparison with men can lead to distorted and inaccurate understandings of women's political behavior. In recent decades, popular and scholarly discussions of the gender gap gave the impression that women were strong supporters of the Democratic party. Women of all racial and ethnic groups have been more supportive of Democrats than similar men since at least 1980, but in the case of white women that does not always, or even usually, mean that women supported Democrats more than they supported Republicans. Indeed, a majority of white women supported the Republican candidate in every presidential election since 1950, save two. Black women, on the other hand, have consistently given a majority of their votes to Democratic candidates to an even greater extent than have black men during this period. A focus on the gender gap combined with a failure to recognize diversity among women gives the mistaken impression that all women vote Democratic.<sup>28</sup>

The male standard hampers our understanding of women as voters in other ways as well. When political activists identified the partisan gender gap in favor of Democrats in 1980, popular discourse focused on women as the cause of any divergence in party preference between women and men. Men's choice of candidates was presumed to be the norm; women's a deviation. Not surprisingly, then, explanations for the gender gap (discussed in Chapter 3) have tended to focus on women per se – women's growing autonomy from men,

#### WOMEN AT THE POLLS

women's reaction to the parties' changing positions on women's rights issues, the impact of women's increased education and employment, and so on. Yet, in reality, the emergence of the current gender gap was as much or more due to the behavior of men as it was women: Men shifted to the GOP after the 1960s, while women remained Democrats or shifted toward the Republican party to a lesser extent than men (see Chapter 7).<sup>29</sup>

The male standard also is problematic when men's political behavior is treated as not just normal, but as normatively ideal. For example, one of the key findings of early voting research was that women were less likely to express a sense that they personally can influence the political world; that is, they were less likely to express political efficacy. This shortcoming was viewed as key to understanding why women lagged behind men in voter turnout but also as a failure of women as citizens.<sup>30</sup> Yet, later scholars noted that framing women as deficient for not expressing more personal efficacy assumes that men's tendency to view themselves as effective political agents was a reasonable and even laudable belief. But is it? Political scientists Sandra Baxter and Marjorie Lansing explain:

Instead of interpreting the difference as an inadequacy in women, we suggest that given the very limited number of issues that citizens can affect, the lower sense of political efficacy expressed by women may be a perceptive assessment of the political process. Men, on the other hand, express irrationally high rates of efficacy.<sup>31</sup>

We compare women's and men's voting behavior throughout this book, as one way of determining when gender is, and is not, meaningful for electoral behavior. We avoid claiming that one group's behavior is the standard against which the other's behavior should be judged or offering conclusions that how one group measures up normatively against the other.

While our focus is on the specific, political act of voting, we also are aware that the male standard can shape even our understanding of what is political. When we judge women by whether they vote, donate to political campaigns, know national political figures, or run for office, we are holding women to a standard of political activity that is defined by things men have traditionally done. When we turn to other behaviors, such as working with community organizations, volunteering on civic and political campaigns, and knowing everyday economic information (like prices) – all of which

## A CENTURY OF VOTES FOR WOMEN

are absolutely political – a very different picture of women’s engagement emerges.<sup>32</sup> In this book, our concern is with traditional electoral participation, but we remain cognizant of the diverse other ways in which women engage in political activity.

### One Hundred Years?

We begin our examination of women voters with the presidential election of 1920, held just weeks after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. For the study of women voters, the election of 1920 is both “too late and too early.”<sup>33</sup> The election of 1920 is too late because women had been voting in American elections for decades prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Indeed, a few propertied women cast ballots in several New England states in the late eighteenth century. As states expanded voting rights for men without property in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they closed those state-level loopholes for women.<sup>34</sup> As a result of the determined work of suffragists in state campaigns in the second half of the nineteenth century, women in fifteen states had secured the right to vote in most elections prior to 1920 (see Chapter 2).<sup>35</sup> The national woman suffrage amendment was the culmination of a long-term process of expanding, and sometimes constricting, voting rights for women in the United States.

At the same time, the election of 1920 is much too early to declare universal female suffrage accomplished. There were short-term delays for women; four Southern states refused to let women vote in 1920 due to their failure to meet registration deadlines that occurred months before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. (Other states with similar deadlines adjusted their rules to accommodate new women voters.)<sup>36</sup> Women in those states were unable to vote in a presidential election until 1924.

In the longer term, Jim Crow practices in the South meant most black women continued to be disenfranchised on the basis of their race for decades following the presidential election of 1920.<sup>37</sup> The continuing disenfranchisement of black women after suffrage occurs in a broader context in which suffragists, especially in the final decades of the struggle, often adopted racist and ethnocentric arguments in favor of giving women the right to vote, claiming that native-born white women would counter the votes of black and