

# Turning Rights into Ballots: The Uneven Integration of Women into Electoral Politics after Suffrage

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“The ratification of said [Nineteenth] amendment placed additional burden upon this department....The time outside registration in wards was extended by direction of the Mayor...3 evenings before the presidential election, and 2 additional registrars were added to each ward registration place. Ten additional registrars were employed in the central office... [for] many days and evenings for this registration.”

— *Annual Report of the Boston Election Department for the Year 1921*

After a more than seven-decade battle, American women secured the right to vote in August 1920. The struggle for women to have a voice in elections was not over, however. The Nineteenth Amendment states that “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.” The amendment gives Congress the power to enforce the law by appropriate legislation. It does not, however, empower or charge any government office or actor with ensuring that women can and do cast ballots. This article argues that this reality, often taken for granted, has serious implications for both the incorporation of women into the electorate and the representation of their political interests.

Women are no different from other voters (i.e., men): the right to vote belongs to the individual, and the onus is on the individual to exercise—or not—that right. In the absence of (much) state action, interested individuals and organizations devote significant time and resources to the registration and mobilization of individuals in the electorate. For men, organizations that do this work were already experienced and pervasive in 1920—parties, unions, and other organized actors had long channeled men into polling places. For women, winning the vote gave way to a long-term effort to overcome social norms that discouraged participation; lack of experience with voting itself; the absence of organizations with experience mobilizing women; and a federal structure that not only did not facilitate but also often discouraged voting. Given these barriers, we should not be surprised that fewer than half of women voted in the presidential elections immediately following ratification (figure 1).

The full incorporation of women into the active electorate took more than 50 years and required the joint efforts of a wide range of state and non-state actors, including women’s, civil

rights, and good-government groups. These efforts diverted resources from other advocacy and education work that these groups might pursue, further limiting the impact of enfranchisement on the broader goals of political and social equality.

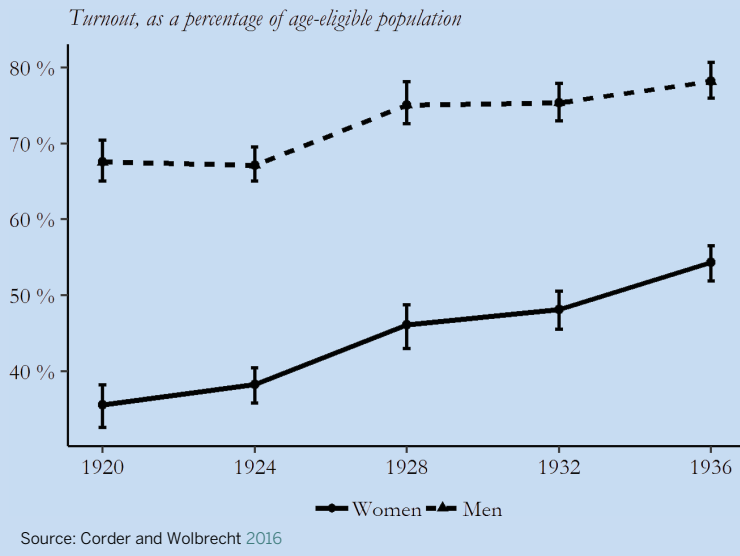
## WOMEN’S TURNOUT DEPENDED ON STATE ACTION AND WAS CONTINGENT ON STATE RULES

The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment required considerable action on the part of state and local governments. Most chose to accommodate new women voters, although they may have complained about the “additional burden” (e.g., the head of the Boston Election Department quoted previously). In Bridgeport, Connecticut, for example, the “veteran registrar of voters” claimed that women’s suffrage required “a great deal of extra work but can be done nevertheless.” In anticipation, Bridgeport ordered 14 new voting machines—enough to handle a doubling of the electorate—although the registrar doubted “it will go that high.”<sup>1</sup> After ratification, the State of Connecticut called a special legislative session to “provide the state with sufficient legal basis for receiving women as voters,” including increasing the number of registrars. Connecticut and other states also automatically rolled over women registered for school elections (permitted by a number of states before 1920) to general-election lists.<sup>2</sup> In another example of accommodation, the Quincy (Massachusetts) City Council voted in special session to hold primaries in the smaller precincts, rather than wards, to accommodate the expected influx of women voters in 1920.<sup>3</sup>

Not all states chose to be so accommodating of new women voters. In the most extreme examples—Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina—women were prohibited from voting in the 1920 presidential election because ratification in August took place after deadlines to register or pay poll taxes. This was a choice; other states with similar provisions found a way to legislate accommodations that permitted women to vote in 1920 (Gosnell 1930).

More generally, many state election laws featured a range of restrictions and requirements at the time of women’s enfranchisement and permitted considerable bureaucratic discretion in the enforcement of those laws. Black women in the South were particular targets. In Richmond, Virginia, for

**Figure 1**  
**Women's Turnout in Presidential Elections Lags Men's by a Considerable Margin after Suffrage**  
**(Estimates, 1920–1936)**



example, black and white women seeking to register to vote in advance of the 1920 presidential election overwhelmed registration offices. The city responded by appointing three additional deputies for white women; however, multiple requests to make similar accommodations for black women were ignored. The result was a long line of black women outside registration offices, due to both the small number of registrars and the more frequent challenges to these voters. Even this

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outcome was used for racist purposes. Local newspapers published photographs of the lines of black women with headlines such as “Negro [sic] Women Continue to Outnumber White in Attempt to Qualify,” which were meant to encourage white women to register in response to the supposed threat (Lebsock 1993). These practices were not limited to the South. Connecticut and Massachusetts, for example, required literacy tests, poll taxes (Massachusetts), and a long residency requirement (Connecticut) (Blakey 1928).

As a result, whether women voted after suffrage appears to be more a function of where they lived and their state and local electoral institutions than of their gender alone. National averages obscure that women’s turnout varied considerably across states in 1920 (figure 2). States with more voting restrictions (e.g., Virginia, Massachusetts, and Connecticut) had considerably lower turnout overall but especially among women—a dynamic well understood by political observers at the time (Wilkerson-Freeman 2002).

In states where political competition was high (e.g., Missouri and Kentucky), parties and other organizations had the incentive (and presumably the resources) to engage in more extensive voter mobilization. For this and other reasons (e.g., salience, excitement, and stakes), turnout was higher in those states and, again, particularly among women. On the whole, the first women to vote were more hampered by barriers and more mobilized by competition than men. As a result, women living in some states were far more likely to convert their right to a ballot than women in other states. Indeed, the turnout gap between women in Virginia and in Kentucky was larger than any female–male turnout gap observed in 1920.

**PARTIES AND ADVOCACY GROUPS (SOMETIMES) STEP INTO THE GAP**

Given states’ lack of responsibility to get voters to the polls, the onus for voter mobilization falls to individuals as well as to political parties and civic, labor, religious, and other organizations who seek to mobilize them. Not surprisingly, suffrage advocates were eager to meet

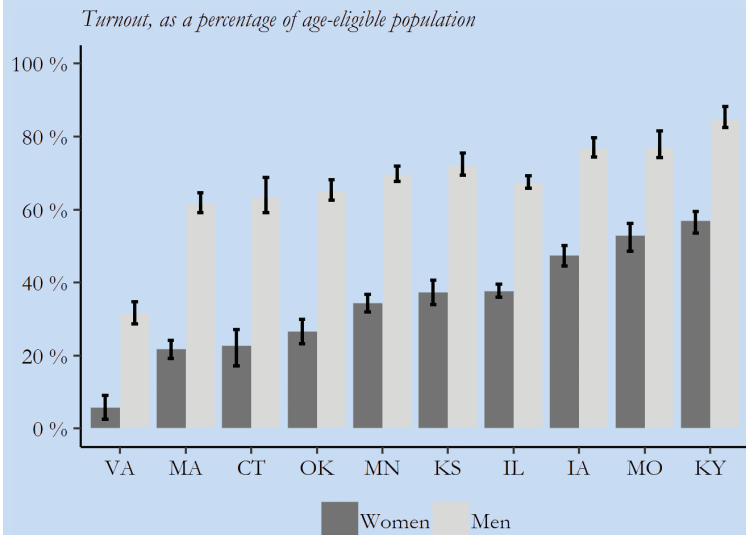
this need. Suffragists in Bridgeport reached out to the mayor the day that the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Their offer of assistance “was gladly accepted” and space in City Hall was offered to them.<sup>4</sup> Most notable was the transformation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the leading national suffrage organization. At its national convention more than a year before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, the NAWSA voted to dissolve its

organization when the fight was won and to create a new organization, the League of Women Voters (LWV), to continue their work on behalf of a political voice for women (Young 1989). LWV chapters engaged in a range of Get Out the Vote (GOTV) activities, including citizenship schools, regular radio broadcasts, and practical demonstrations of election machinery at fairs and other locations in the years following suffrage (Andersen 1996).<sup>5</sup>

Both major parties created national women’s committees to mobilize women voters. For the most part, however, actual GOTV work was the province of state and local party organizations (Freeman 2000; Harvey 1998). Women’s clubs established by both candidates and parties held teas, presented speakers, and made the case for the appeal of a candidate on issues that they believed mattered most to female voters. While a state-led mobilization effort ostensibly would have been required to mobilize *all* women, party-led efforts focused on those women believed most likely to support the party.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2

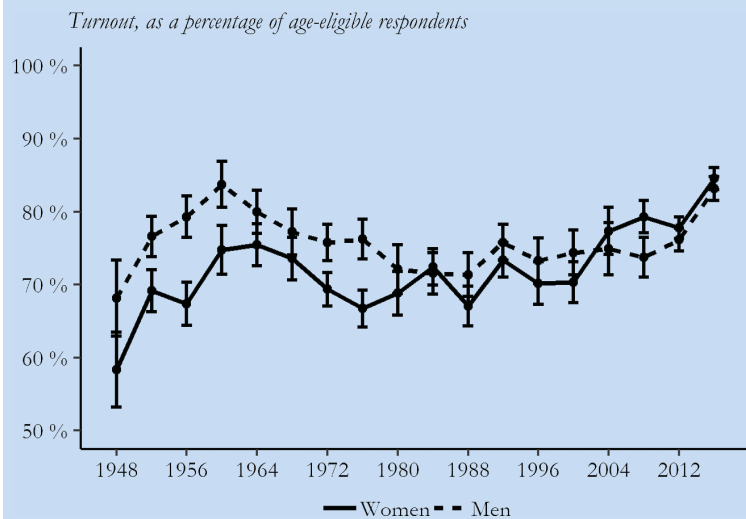
### Women's Turnout Highest in States with Few Ballot Access Restrictions and Competitive Elections (Estimates, 1920)



Source: Corder and Wolbrecht 2016

Figure 3

### Today, Women Are as or More Likely to Vote Than Men



Source: American National Election Studies, 1948–2016

#### WOMEN'S TURNOUT INCREASES AND RACIAL DISPARITIES NARROW

Lamenting women's failure, as women, to embrace their role as voters proved to be a powerful storyline. In the 1920s, headlines asked, "Is Women's Suffrage a Failure?"<sup>7</sup> The story persisted. Forty years later, a 1960 *Los Angeles Times* article concluded that "Today women of voting age outnumber men.

Yet, offsetting this to some extent has been the fact that women have generally stayed in the kitchen in unhealthy numbers on Election Day."<sup>8</sup> The claim that women "have stayed in the kitchen" neglects that fact that by 1960, surveys indicated that women's self-reported turnout was an impressive 75% compared to about 80% for men (Wolbrecht and Corder 2020).

Current Population Survey data show that women became slightly more likely to vote than men beginning in 1980, a gap that has persisted for 40 years. Data from the American National Election Studies, available since 1948, reveal the long-term change (figure 3). Women's turnout gains came almost entirely from the replacement of older cohorts (who remained less likely to vote throughout their life) with younger, better-educated cohorts who were more likely to vote (Cascio and Shenhav 2020).

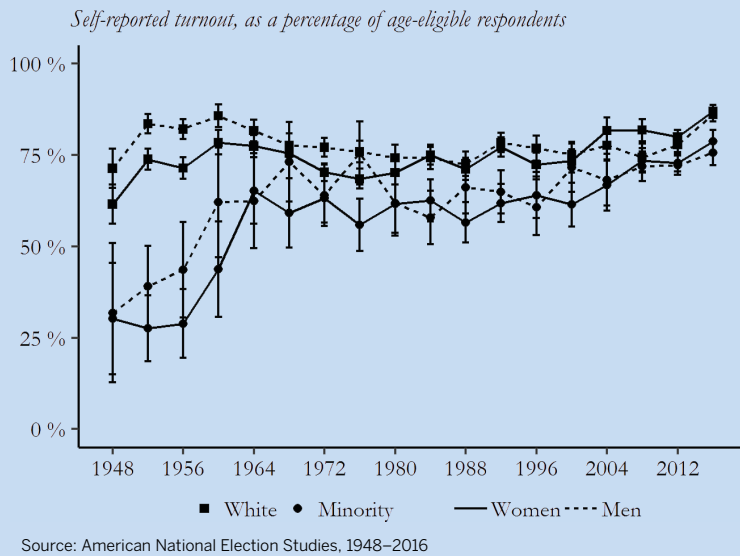
The incremental narrowing of the gap in participation obscures major changes in the racial composition of the electorate and the uniquely daunting challenge of mobilizing voters in the South. The presence of state (and other) barriers to voting created particular burdens for black women. Restrictions on voting in the South were designed explicitly to block black voters from the polls. Whereas parties and citizen organizations often take on the work of mobilizing voters, in the South, the dominant Democratic Party viewed its interests as best served by engaging in extensive and violent black voter demobilization. When other groups sought to mobilize black women (and men), Democrats and other Southerners made the costs of doing so extraordinarily high. In 1920, the leading African American newspaper of the twentieth century, *The Chicago Defender*, reported that those seeking to mobilize black women as voters had faced murder, kidnap, and threatened lynching; signed threats of arson against homes and businesses; and 500 warrants in one town alone against black women charged with "registering illegally."<sup>9</sup>

Although the turnout of black women remained low until the 1960s, recognizing the massive obstacles to their electoral participation only makes the early successes of some black women all the more impressive. In Rich-

mond, for example, almost 13% of black women managed to register in 1920, despite the considerable barriers described previously; the comparable figure for white women was about 27% (Lebsock 1993).

Civil rights activism and particularly the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) considerably narrowed the gap between white and black electoral participation in the 1960s

**Figure 4**  
**Minority Turnout Lags White Considerably Before 1964, but Racial Differences in Turnout Are Very Small by 2016**



(figure 4). In contrast to the typically “hands-off” approach to voting by states, the VRA was meaningful because it put the onus on state governments to meet certain standards for electoral participation, with mechanisms for evaluation and enforcement. Yet, even in the VRA, provisions largely focused on *stopping* state action that created barriers to voting rather

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than requiring states to take *affirmative* steps to facilitate voter registration or turnout. In *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the US Supreme Court struck down key VRA provisions that encouraged state oversight. Despite remaining less likely to possess a number of the individual resources

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associated with turnout, today black women—on average—cast ballots at rates exceeding all other racial–gender groups, with the exception of white women (Wolbrecht and Corder 2020). Importantly, a sense of a communal “linked fate” helps explain

black women’s high turnout, above and beyond the standard individual-level resources and characteristics understood to drive turnout (Brown 2014; Smooth 2018).

#### THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN INDIVIDUAL RIGHT TO VOTE

That voter mobilization in the United States is largely left to non-state actors meant that gender differences in organizational capacity had consequences for the representation of women’s interests after suffrage. The newly created LWV had virtually no experience with GOTV, and their energies were divided by the work of studying, recommending, and advocating on behalf of policy proposals. In comparison, political parties, labor unions, and other male-dominated organizations already had extensive experience with voter mobilization. This reality, Harvey (1998) argued, hampered the capacity of women to act politically as a group. Although organizations representing men’s interests (professionally and otherwise) already mobilized them to vote, organizations representing women lacked the same experience and expertise; therefore, the task of mobilizing

women fell mostly to political parties. Whereas men were mobilized by parties *and* by organizations representing their interests, the comparative disadvantage of women’s non-party interests in voter mobilization likely hampered the political impact of women—in general and as specific groups—who were not mobilized into elections on those bases.

That the onus of voter mobilization falls largely to non-state organizations has other consequences for representation. Political, labor, and civic organizations and activists could devote more of their energies to understanding and advocating for the interests of their constituencies if they did not have

to expend so much time and effort challenging state policies that discourage turnout and to mobilizing their members in elections. Moreover, when non-state organizations bear the burden of voter mobilization, they do so selectively,

reproducing biases in resources and power (Piven and Cloward 1989). The diversion of time and energy into mobilization also has implications for who runs for office—efforts to break down barriers to women voting divert resources that could support women candidates.

Newly enfranchised and marginalized groups face a long-term struggle to convert voting rights into political equality in the absence of an affirmative right to vote (Guinier 2009) and given the presence of additional burdens on potential voters: the poor were confronted with the poll tax, African Americans in the South were met with state-sanctioned violence, and women had to overcome inexperience and traditional gender norms. Without the state (and often despite resistance from the state), newly enfranchised groups must do the work—individually and collectively—of mobilizing resources to translate the “right” to vote into an actual ballot. ■

#### NOTES

1. “City Ready to Register ‘Suff’ Vote,” *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, p. 1, July 20, 1920.
2. “Assembly to Confine Itself to Suffrage at its Session Tomorrow,” *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, p. 1, September 13, 1920. See also “Governor Will Take Steps to Amend Statute,” *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, p. 1, August 22, 1920; “Women Now Registered to Stay on Lists,” *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, p. 1, September 20, 1920.
3. “To Vote by Precincts in Quincy Primary: Added Facilities Needed for the Women,” *Boston Globe*, p. 2, August 31, 1920.
4. “Women Will Aid Registrar,” *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, p. 1, August 27, 1920. See also “W.C.T.U. Plans Campaign to Get Voters to Polls,” *The Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, September 11, 1924.
5. For example: “450,000 Votes, Aim of Women,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, p. 1, July 14, 1920; “Women Learn How to Vote at Fair,” *St. Paul (MN) Dispatch*, p. 5, September 6, 1920; “Plan to Give Voting Lessons to Women,” *The Washington Post*, p. 11, April 4, 1923; “Women Voters Will Have a Novel Booth at State Fair,” *Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, September 2, 1924; “Sixth Annual Convention of Voters Called; Get-Out-Vote Campaign Stressed by Women,” *Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, September 21, 1924.
6. For example: “Women Taught How to Run an Election: Republicans of Fair Sex Open Headquarters,” *Boston Globe*, p. 2, August 13, 1920; “Service to Party Keynote of Talk by Mrs. Fosseen,” *Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, September 18, 1924; “Coolidge Club Plans to Hold Precinct Teas; Women Voters to Hear Speakers at a Series of Meetings,” *Duluth (MN) News Tribune*, September 25, 1924; “Meriden Women Hear Mrs. Merritt; Hartford Speaker Praises National and State Tickets,” *Hartford (CT) Daily Courant*, September 24, 1924.
7. For example: Charles Edward Russell, “Is Woman-Suffrage a Failure?,” *The Century Magazine* 35 (1924): 724–30.
8. Mary Lou Loper, “Femme Bloc Could Run U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, p. A1, June 27, 1960.
9. For example: “Urged Women to Vote; Almost Killed,” *Chicago Defender*, p. 1, October 23, 1920; “Drive Women from Polls in South: Southerners Threaten to Use Gun and Rope on Race Leaders,” *Chicago Defender*, p. 1, October 30, 1920.

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