



Gender and Voting Behavior: Are Women Voters Changing Electoral Outcomes?

K Hinoca Assumi

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the complex relationship between gender and voting behavior, paying attention to whether or not women voters are making meaningful differences in electoral outcomes in democratic politics. Based on the literature in political science, electoral data, and cross-national studies, it posits that the gender gap in voting (both in terms of turnout and candidate preference) has widened considerably since the 1980s and women are a key and structurally distinct political force. The paper outlines histories of suffrage to the present day of women's participation in elections, examines policy-preference gaps between men and women, and questions the simplistic "women's vote" narratives by considering other salient factors like race, education, age, and socioeconomic status. Several pieces of evidence from the USA, India, South Asia and Europe are incorporated globally. The paper also discusses new theories, such as intersectionality and feminist mobilization theory, that can account for the political action of women as a diverse but powerful force. The conclusion concludes that, although women do not vote as a monolithic block, the overall gender vote choice gap of 4-18 percentage points across electoral cycles is a force that affects not only the outcomes of elections, but also the priorities of policies and the very structure of representative democracy.

Keywords: Gender gap, voting behavior, women voters, electoral outcomes, political participation, intersectionality, feminist mobilization, suffrage, policy preferences

INTRODUCTION

The research on electoral behaviour has long debated whether or not there are identifiable social groups that make a systematic and independent impact on vote choices, such as race, class, religion and gender. Since the twentieth century when women started to be granted mass suffrage, gender, as a central organizational axis of society, has taken a more and more prominent place in this debate. The question in this paper "Are Women Voters Changing Electoral Outcomes?" is not a rhetorical one. It calls for a thorough empirical and theoretical discussion about the political dimension of a voter's gender, and about whether it ceases to be a meaningful variable when other cross-cutting identities are added to the mix [1].

More than 100 years of democratic involvement has led to no doubt about the path of the evidence: Women vote and they vote differently from men. Since 1984, American women have voted in slightly greater numbers than men in every presidential election [2]. The gender disparity in registered voters in the U.S. in 2024 was 8.7 million, where there are about 10 million more women than men registered to vote in recent years [3]. According to the 2016 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDLO) study on voting trends in 58 countries, women in 21 of these countries have higher mass turnout than men. They are not fringe occurrences. They are features of the structure of modern democratic politics that have a direct bearing on who wins, who governs and what policies are most important.

But it is far more complicated than the number of participants in aggregates indicates. Political behaviour of women is not amenable to analysis in isolation from race, education, age, income and ideology. African American women vote in bloc-like patterns regardless of their education level, but the college-educated white women are quite different from their peers who did not complete college in terms of whether they vote Democratic or Republican [1]. The 2024 elections in the United States revealed generational and gendered

differences between young women and older women and between young men and older women [4]. The structural barriers for women's political participation in Pakistan, India and other countries in the Global South include patriarchy, voter registration, and a lack of autonomy at the household level, which makes it difficult to make simple country comparisons [5][6].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Gender Gap as a Political Phenomenon

The term “gender gap” in the context of political science is just a measurement of the percentage difference between the voting of women and men for a particular party or a specific candidate [7]. Though different from, but related to, voter turnout. The modern research on the gender gap in vote choice dates back to the 1980 U.S. presidential election, when exit polls for the first time revealed a systematic difference between men and women in their vote choices [7]. Since then, the explanations of this divergence, their causes and their mechanisms, have grown more rigorous and the consequences of the phenomena have been debated by political scientists.

The first explanations of gender differences in voting were in terms of socialization, civic culture, and women's presumed apolitical nature, all of which have come under intense criticism in recent years [8]. Women's underrepresentation in political life, traditionally, was attributed to their structural disadvantage in terms of education, income and occupational status, and not any lack of political interest [9]. In many advanced democracies, by the 1990s, the gender turnout gap had been turned into a gender turnout advantage, with women voting at higher rates than men, as their socioeconomic status had become more similar to men's.

The more intractable theoretical conundrum is not about participation rates but about vote choice. Whereas women, in all countries and at election time, vote for left-of-center parties more often than men, why is this the case? There are a number of rival theories.

Social Welfare and Redistributive Preferences

A leading theoretical explanation relates to policy preferences. Women, especially in Western post-industrial societies, prefer all the aspects of generous welfare states, universal healthcare and redistributive economic policies [10]. Multiple electoral cycles demonstrate using mediational analyses that social welfare attitudes account for roughly 60.95% of the gender gap in U.S. vote choice [10]. Support for defense spending accounts for 22.36% of the gap, support for environmental regulations accounts for 20.93%, and support for anti-discrimination laws accounts for 25.47% [10].

Additional experimental studies conducted in redistribution laboratory settings support these findings. Women vote for more egalitarian redistribution than men, and this finding holds across all model specifications ($p < 0.002$), with women voting in favor of redistributive policies between 0.164 and 0.236 higher than their male counterparts, according to experimental data [11]. Importantly, this gap is durable over time and in less economically risk-averse environments, suggesting that it reflects deep-seated differences in preferences rather than situational responses [11].

Feminist Identity and Mobilization Theory

The other theoretical framework centers on feminist identity as a motivator of political participation. Previous research on either online political participation generally, or feminist specific online political participation, has found that being a feminist is the strongest positive predictor of both types of online political participation [12]. Theoretically, it is important because the negative evidence points to an activation of women's political engagement through identity and not merely representation in abstract policy preferences.

Developing cross-cutting identity theory, scholars have also argued that the interaction between feminist identity and partisan identification determines whether campaign participation is reinforced or curtailed [13]. When feminist and partisan identities become more closely aligned (as they increasingly are among Democratic



women), the result is increased political participation. A politically demobilizing effect is felt when these identities clash, as is likely the case for Republican women with feminist leanings.

Intersectionality Theory

About the Framework A third, derived from Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational concept of intersectionality, holds that women's political behavior cannot be examined along a single-axis lens of gender. Gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability and immigration status to create unique political identities and patterns of political behavior [14]. It is also partly an electoral issue: the assumption that women think and vote as a block overstates the alignment and choices of political preferences by women of color, working-class women, and rural-based women who may behave very differently at the polls than college-educated white women [14].

A stark example of these dynamics came during the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. In research with white women, racial resentment had a micromorphic effect on voting for Donald Trump and hostile sexism did not [14]. This implies that for many white women voters, race collectively mattered more than gender.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study is qualitative and comparative with the supporting technique being secondary quantitative electoral data. The research is explanatory and analytical and explores the impact of gender on voting behaviour and the extent to which women voters have an impact on electoral outcomes, particularly in democratic societies.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary political science perspective that draws on electoral studies, gender studies, social studies and democratic theory. The methodology combines:

- Historical analysis of women's political participation,
- Comparative electoral analysis across countries,
- Thematic analysis of policy preference patterns,
- Intersectional interpretation of voter behavior.

The research generally uses a descriptive analytical approach with the aim of explaining patterns rather than forming experimental causalities.

Nature and Sources of Data

The study relies entirely on secondary data sources. Data were collected from:

Academic Sources

- Peer-reviewed journal articles,
- Books on political behavior and gender studies,
- Conference papers,
- Electoral behavior literature.

Institutional and Electoral Sources

- Pew Research Center,
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP),
- Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF),

- International IDEA,
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,
- Election Commission reports,
- National Election Studies,
- Government statistical databases.

This study aims to explore electoral trends and discrimination against gender in voting. For these purposes, the recently conducted election data of the United States, Indian general elections, South Asian electoral system and Western European democracies have been used. Data includes voter turnout, partisan preference, gender gap data, registration data, public opinion surveys, and policy-preference data.

The collection of data was done through:

1. Documentary Analysis – scholarly publications or electoral reports;
2. Content Analysis – analysis of the policy debates, voting and gendered political narratives;
3. Comparative Data Compilation – compilation of national electoral data on participation of women in elections and voting.

The literature examining the issues up to 2025 and in the late 20th century was systematically analysed to detect commonalities and trends in theory development.

Second-Order Elections and Political Interest

A further explanation and one that is especially relevant in a European context relates to first-versus second-order elections. Studies have shown that the already small gender gap in voter turnout, almost been eradicated for national elections, but still exists in second-order elections such as the European Parliament elections [9]. The explanation given is not for socioeconomic but psychological reasons: women are less psychologically engaged in politics than men (on average) and second-order elections are more abstract, limited-knowledge contests that do not engage bottom-up voters who lack other intrinsic political motivation to mobilize them [9]. This constant interest gap is pinpointed to cultural stereotypes and gendered socialization as major direct causes for study [9].

Historical Evolution: From Suffrage to Electoral Power

The Suffrage Movement and Its Electoral Consequences

The eligibility of women for voting is one of the most impactful changes in democratic institutions. New Zealand women gained the vote in 1893, closely followed by their counterparts in Australia (1902), Finland (1906) and Norway [1]4 (1913); thus,[2]. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in the United States in 1920. The US did not grant women this right formally until 20 more nations had done so first [2]. Discriminatory restrictions were either implemented or adjusted in some nations; in Iceland, women over age 40 received the vote first (the minimum age dropped to 25 after five years) [2].

Regression analyses on electoral data have established quantitatively that the enfranchisement of women resulted in a substantial and persistent rise in both turnout and engagement, altering the dynamics of electoral politics at their core [16]. For example, in the case of suffrage for U.S. women, we see that states granting this right saw very fast increases in local public health spending and milestone-radical efforts with measurable impacts on infant mortality [17]. These downstream effects tell us that women voting matters for government (and by extension, population health).

One recent advanced historical study leveraging sex-disaggregated vote counts on women and men in Chile before and after female suffrage has uncovered one more layer of complexity: that with women's suffrage, men's

voting behavior also changed—implying both strategic adaptation by male voters as well as household-level negotiations into the newly enfranchised [18].

The Twentieth Century: From Subordination to Parity

Women who did vote were strongly biased towards conservative parties in many Western democracies for most of the early twentieth century, more so than men – a tendency associated with religiosity and traditionalism that constrains family behaviour and lower participation in wage-labour [19]. This “traditional gender gap,” in which women voted more for the right, began to reverse in the 1960s and 1970s as second-wave feminism, rising female educational attainment, and workforce integration began to change women’s political orientations [19].

By the 1980s, the "modern gender gap" had solidified: women started voting for left-of-center parties and candidates at significantly higher rates than men [7]. This more recent gap manifested itself most strongly in the 1980 presidential election, when Ronald Reagan's stronger appeal with men was a factor leading to his victory [7], although it existed well before that time (even back as far as Watergate). Since this election, a gender gap of between 4 and 12 percentage points has been present in every U.S. presidential election, with women consistently preferring the Democratic candidate by larger margins than men [7].

The Twenty-First Century: Acceleration and Complexity

The early part of the 21st century has seen yet another development, however. Over time, educational attainment has become a more important driver of political preferences, especially among white women: highly educated white women are about 25 points more likely than non-college-educated white women to prefer Democratic candidates [1]. In 2014, with men receiving bachelor's degrees at roughly 29% and women earning them at a rate of 37%, the implications for white women's progressive but widening gender gap were significant [1].

African American women should be one of the most politically consequential of all sub-groups among women voters. African American women across the nation were responsible for delivering Roy Moore's death blow when they voted overwhelmingly against him in the 2017 Alabama Senate race, while white working-class women helped propel Donald Trump to victory [1]. These divergences reinforce the theoretical insight that women voters do not think and act as a monolithic bloc but a collection of various subcategories whose collective behavior affects electoral results in complicated ways.

The Gender Gap in Vote Choice and Party Preference

Magnitude and Persistence

The gender gap in presidential vote choice is one of the most consistent, replicable facts in modern electoral politics. As far back as 1980, a 4-12 percentage point gender gap has been documented in every U.S. presidential election, with women significantly more often than men preferring the Democratic candidate [7]. In 2024, that gap hit 18 points by some measures: exit polls showed that Donald Trump won male voters by 12 percentage points, and Kamala Harris won female voters by 6 percentage points [20].

Yet this gap was not uniform across demographic groups. Among college-educated women of color in 2020, Trump’s support fell by 1 point from 2020; among college-educated men of color, it surged by 11 points, yielding a 16-point gender gap by this subgroup alone [21]. The gender gap among voters 30 to 39 was 12 points but only 4 points among voters over 50 [4]. Trump won women aged 50 to 64 by 51% in 2024, compared to 44% in 2020, thus narrowing the gender gap in that group from 15 points to 10 points [4].

Party Identification and Long-Term Realignment

While the more visible gender gap in vote choice in specific elections is not only more volatile but includes occasional reversals, the gender gap in party identification is a more permanent, structural facet of electoral

politics. Men are less likely than women to lean Democrat in every age group, education level, and income class in the US [10]. This partisan gender gap is largely explained by a systematic preference for expanding social welfare policy, whereby women more reliably endorse government action to promote healthcare, alleviate poverty and support social services respectively [10].

The gender gap in voting can be explained by how parties behave, and there is research that shows how parties also respond and adapt to gender-driven patterns [22]. Specifically, parties that take policy positions more closely aligned with women's preferences are more likely to gain seats from the gender gap, while parties that move in the other direction risk falling into the gender gap, losing seats among women voters. In competitive democracies, this dynamic creates structural incentives for at least one major party to take up women's policy issues [22].

The 2024 Elections: A Case Study in Gender Politics

One of the most fruitful case studies on the complexity of the gender gap is the 2024 U.S. presidential election. But despite predictions of a historical turnout of women against Trump, with some speculating that the backlash against Dobbs would drive women out to oppose him, exit poll data found that somewhere between 45% of women and 55% of men voted for Trump [23]. Nothing more, given that 42 per cent of women and 53 per cent of men had voted for Trump in 2020 [23].

Yet this overall picture masks considerable diversity. Compared to young men, young women offered markedly less support for Trump, a gap larger among those 18 to 29 years old [4]. Reproductive rights scored as a key issue: two-thirds (65%) of women voters believed that the 2024 election had a “greatly” to “extremely” impact on abortion access, a bump from 54% in June 2024 (with climbs largely known as driven by young women [24]). Democratic women, in particular, trusted Harris over Trump by very high margins on access to abortion (90% vs. 4%), access to birth control (92% vs. 4%), and access to IVF (88% vs. 5%) in the KFF survey [25].

Policy Preferences and the Substantive Content of the Gender Gap

Social Welfare and Healthcare

Women and men voters differ on the issues in ways that are substantial. In fact, the literature consistently shows overflow effects whereby women are more supportive than men of government provision of healthcare, aid to the poor, food stamps and welfare and a government guaranteed minimal standard of living [10]. These gender gaps exist even among voters who are demographically comparable across various races, education, age cohorts, and income level categories, implying that the preference gap cannot be attributed to compositional differences between male and female voters [10]

Mediational analyses indicate that attitudes towards social welfare account for about 60.95% of the U.S. vote choice gender gap, making social policy the single largest substantive driver of partisan gender gaps in the U.S. [10]. This leads to direct implications for electoral strategy: parties that want to gain or maintain women's votes have motives in favour of setting themselves on the expansive side of social welfare debates.

The connection between women's political participation and health outcomes is wider than electoral engagement. In a large aggregation of 65 cross-sectional studies, there were significant negative relationships between female voting rates and female mortality: A higher political participation among women in the country, the lower the national female mortality rates ($r = -0.51$); for each unit displacement for political participation, 7.3 fewer deaths per 100,000 women in the country [26]. This evidence suggests that the availability of women to the electorate has positive policies relevant to health outcomes.

Environmental Policy and Climate Change

Support for environmental regulation and climate policy interventions is stronger amongst female voters, which is than amongst male ones. Environmental protection policies mediate about 20.93% of the U.S. gender gap in vote choice, that is, how much more likely women are than men to support the Democrats [10]. The

environmental gender gap is especially striking among younger and college-educated women, who consistently rate climate change as a higher electoral priority compared to their male counterparts.

Reproductive Rights as an Electoral Mobilizer

Contrary to some older findings, reproductive rights have turned out to be a compelling mobilizing issue for women voters, especially in response to the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*) overturning 1973's momentous schema of settlement of legal abortion (*Roe v. Wade*). In a survey conducted of voters before the 2024 election, the share of women voters who said abortion was the most important issue to them also increased between earlier in the electoral cycle (13%, up from 10%, among women, almost all the increase driven by young women), along with inflation and climate change [25]. Even so, the connection between reproductive rights salience and electoral outcomes is mediated by party identification: Republican women consistently viewed the stakes on abortion as low, with a majority saying the presidential election would have either "a minor impact" or "no impact" on abortion access [25].

Defense and Foreign Policy

Compared with men, women voters have consistently been less supportive of military spending and interventionist foreign policies. The ideological effects of defense spending account for a little less than a quarter (approximately 22.36%) of the gender gap in U.S. vote choice [10]. Similar findings emerge from research in other international contexts, which show that women in advanced democracies are more supportive of diplomacy and less supportive of military buildups. Such preference gaps matter for election results when defense and foreign policy are priorities.

Intersectionality and the Heterogeneity of Women Voters

Race, Gender, and Voting Behavior

This is because race and gender lead to unique patterns of voting that neither variable can measure on its own. African American women are consistently one of the most solidly Democratic demographics in the United States a trend that does not hold across education or income level as well as region [1]. Hispanic women and Asian American women show much more heterogeneous partisan patterns with broad within-group variation driven by national origin, generational status, and local political environment.

Research using intersectionality as an analytic framework has shown marked differences between women voters in the 2020 presidential election in the extent to which they considered gender and racial inequality as factors in whom to support, consistent with their intersectional positionality of gender and race [14]. Racial resentment, rather than hostile sexism, was a significant predictor of Trump support for white women, suggesting that the identity issues relevant to this demographic were more political than gender-based [14].

Education and the Emerging Educational Gender Gap

Educational attainment is one of the most potent and widely studied predictors of partisan vote choice in the modern era, but its effects also overlap with gender in complex ways. Over the last decade, college-educated white women have moved decisively toward the Democratic Party, while white women without college degrees have moved equally decisively toward the Republican Party [1]. Such educational re-sorting among the female electorate indicates that the aggregate gender gap is progressively a more ideologically polarized internal component.

The generational aspect of the educational gender gap. Daughters are now going to college at much higher rates than sons, which implies that the gender gap educationally and electorally will only grow.

Age and Generational Dynamics

The interaction of gender and age creates significant differences in voting behaviour. The gender gap was largest among younger voters and smallest among those ages 50 and older in the 2024 U.S. election [4]. Young women expressed significantly less support for Trump than their male peers, a difference that analysts found to be partly driven by cross-gender differences in the importance of attitudes toward reproductive rights, economic opportunity, and social equality [20].

Generational replacement effects the gradual replacement of older cohorts by younger cohorts, will mean that the electoral weight of the youngest generation of women voters will rise substantially in the decades to come. If this trend continues, this replacement dynamic could entrench and perhaps increase the gender gap in U.S. elections.

Class and Economic Vulnerability

The over- representation of women in low- quality employment or informal jobs and in the care sector influences the policies you support and, by extension, the way you vote. Women are more likely than men to be poor in old age, to lack employer-provided health insurance, and to rely on social services to provide child and elder care. It is these material conditions that underpin the cross-area differences in preference for social welfare policies [11].

The experimental evidence supports the claim that gender gaps in relative performance beliefs (in particular, beliefs about one's own economic prospects relative to others) are the main underlying mechanism driving the gender voting gap on redistributive issues [11]. As women move toward parity in economic status, these beliefs may change and reduce the gap between women and men in terms of policy preferences. But in the current term, systemic economic inequality still perpetuates the disparity between male and female voters.

International Comparative Evidence

The United Kingdom and Western Europe

Over more recent decades, gender differences in voting in the United Kingdom and in Western Europe have tended to move on a broadly similar path to that in the United States, whereby the traditional right-leaning gender gap is reversed in favour of a modern left-leaning gender gap, and complexity is added along the way with the effect of education, age and other cultural variables [22]. Existing research on the gender voting gap in Western Europe has shown that parties' policy positions and candidate selection interact with the gender gap in ways that provide parties with incentives in competitive electoral environments to programmatically converge toward women's preferences [22].

Gender quotas requiring minimums of female candidates on electoral lists have been found to shrink gender differences in voter turnout. Analysis of Norwegian electoral data showed that a gender quota increased female candidates by 6.5 percentage points and closed the gap between the representation of men and women by 0.5 percentage points, as a result of increases in female turnout, not reduced backlash by men [27].

India: A Case Study in Emerging Electoral Power

India is one of the most important examples of women's increasingly important role as voters beyond the established West. Voting by women increased in past Indian elections, and women outnumbered male voters in several districts [28]. Uttar Pradesh saw women's voting turnout (57.24% of women voting compared with 56.65% of men) surpass men's in the 2024 Indian general elections and this played a role in electoral results that claimed many political scalps and even stunned political analysts with incumbent ministerial defeats in bastions of the BJP was followed up with defeat for ministers from a ruling party widely expected to have done well [28].

Scholars attribute India's increasing female voter turnout to a boost in female welfare schemes, better mobility, increased political awareness and identity politics [29]. Nonetheless, important limitations remain: in both the 2009 and 2014 National Election Studies, about 55% of women reported deciding whom to vote for without

consulting anyone, compared to 70% of men [30], demonstrating that gender differences in household-level constraints on voting autonomy remain [30].

Pakistan and South Asia: Structural Barriers

On the other hand, Pakistan is an outlier, where structural barriers remain in place preventing women from registering and voting. Women comprising 42.6% of all voters turned out in the 2024 elections in Pakistan, as opposed to 47% in total with about 3.5 million absentee women on Pakistan's voter rolls [31]. Although the Election Commission of Pakistan took joint action to decrease the gender gap on voter rolls from 12.4 million (2018) to 9.9 million (2024), serious obstacles remain [5].

For example, in South Asia, the FPTP first-past-the-post electoral systems that are more common in many of the countries put women candidates behind even worse; they can often not be elected at all. Out of these, Nepal is an outlier where a parallel electoral system links the two aspects with a positive association to greater representation of women [31]. All South Asian countries except Bhutan have some sort of legislated gender quotas; however, the presence of quotas and/or the number of women voters is neither a sufficient nor a necessary precondition for substantive representation of women [31].

The Global South: Intersecting Barriers

Far from being a simple matter, women in the Global South need to negotiate multifactorial and deeply entrenched barriers to political participation that are hallmarked by preconceived patriarchal principles, historical injustice, and the intersectionality of gender with class, caste, race, and ability [6]. Much of the normative framework advocating for women's political representation in contested spaces, however, remains limited even in the face of international initiatives [6].

Based on different varieties of evidence, as recently summarized in a paper on women's role as “the new electoral kingmakers” in India and similar elections, there is evidence of a positive relationship between female turnout and incumbents keeping welfare programs and social benefits stable, when women vote more, even in worlds where household voting autonomy is often still considerably constrained [32].

Electoral Outcomes and Democratic Representation

Does the Gender Gap Change Electoral Outcomes?

The first important question, whether women voters are reshaping electoral outcomes, can be answered in the affirmative, but with significant caveats. Competitively close democratic elections have outcomes that differ due to the large gender gap in voter registration, turnout, and vote choice. With approximately 10 million more women than men registered to vote in the United States [3], a consistent preference for one party or candidate means a structural advantage for that party and candidate such that this advantage cannot be overcome without substantially increasing male turnout or changing women's party preferences.

The most evident instance of the gender gap affecting elections is where women's votes were decisive. Data show that African American women were the difference maker in Doug Jones's narrow win over Roy Moore in the 2017 Alabama Senate race [1]. In 2024, electoral results in Indian constituencies where more women than men turned out diverged from national trends in ways analysts trace to the unusual tastes of mobilized women voters [28].

Consequences for Policy and Representation

The latter matters in concrete elections, but the gender gap in the voting behaviour is also important for democratic representation and policymaking. Studies with data on female political representation consistently show that increased female representation reduces geographical inequalities in infant mortality, inequalities in self-reported health, and disability-adjusted life-years lost in women and men [17]. Health outcomes for all men and women alike improve with increased representation of women in politics [17].

The case of evidence-based policy during the COVID-19 pandemic governance further highlights the repercussions of women's electoral power. Women parliamentarians were much more likely to question school closures during the pandemic: while approximately one-third of parliament, women parliamentarians asked 65% of all school closure-related questions, and much of this remains unexplained by party affiliation, age or parental status [33].

Female Candidates and the Gender Gap

The interaction between candidate gender and the gender gap in voting behavior is complicated by the fact that its effects vary at the ontological level and that actors of different levels may also use different methods. In Regression Discontinuity designs that exploited close U.S. House of Representatives elections between 2006 and 2018, female candidates suffered a penalty in terms of vote share relative to male candidates when they ran in gender-competitive races, especially in general elections [34]. But increasing the number of women on the ballot has also been shown to mobilize women to vote and not lessen men's participation, a potential descriptive representation effect. Women are more likely to vote when they see women running [27].

The Gender Gap in Polarization

Introduction The gender gap in political preferences is one of the most studied yet puzzling phenomena within the field of electoral behavior (Gidengil et al 2005). The rise of gender as a political cleavage has been recognised for quite some time (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2004). The feminism-partisanship nexus has been a potent mobilizer of Democratic women in the US as gender and women's issues have become more Democratic-owned throughout the years [13]. Feminist identity in combination with Democratic partisan identity produces a positive spiral of engagement, and feminist identity in combination with Republican partisan identity produces ambivalence or disengagement [13].

The danger of democratic polarization is a self-reinforcing gender gap: a political party becomes identified with women's concerns, the other party identified with masculine identity, and men and women are sorted into opposing partisan camps, not only on grounds of the positions they take on policies, but on grounds of identity. This trend is confirmed by data from the 2024 U.S. election, where the gender gap among young voters had grown to unprecedented levels [4].

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Synthesis

The evidence examined in this paper is consistent with a multi-causal explanation of gender and voting behavior. The phenomenon of the modern man-woman situation cannot be represented through a single variable that would explain it. The partisan gender gap can be explained quite thoroughly, due primarily to the policy dimensions of social welfare, health care, and redistribution 10. Differences in political participation not accounted for by socioeconomic status alone can be explained by feminist identity and mobilization dynamics 12. Intersectionality theory offers the analytical tools required to explain the high levels of heterogeneity observed within the category of "women voters" and eliminate the methodological flaws that come with treating women as a unified political group 14.

Historical institutionalism the study of how political behavior is shaped by institutional arrangements that change over time, adds a crucial element to this picture since the extension of the franchise to women triggered path-dependent transformations of democratic politics that went much further than the immediate effects on the size of the electorate [16]. The slow march of women's political empowerment crosses over a century, from the suffrage movements of the first decades of the twentieth century through electoral mobilizations in the 2020s and reflects a far-reaching entrenchment of women as full players in the project of democratic self-governance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These knowledge gaps stem from several major limitations. Cross-national comparative studies are complicated by disaggregate electoral data: most countries lack so-called gender-differentiated vote counts [18]. Surveys of voting behaviour based on survey measures are biased in that women may be less likely to vote for an extreme right due to social desirability bias, which leads to a lower estimate of the gender gap between voters than may be the reality. The causal mechanisms that connect women's policy preferences to their voting behavior are still inadequately specified: we have little understanding of the relative importance of material interests, socialized values, and identity-based mobilization.

There is a need for much more bounding of experimental methods, including the laboratory voting experiments reviewed here [11], with field electoral data [12, 13]. Longitudinal panel studies tracking cohorts of women voters across electoral cycles would shed light on the evolution of political preferences over the life cycle. Research on the interaction between electoral institutions (whether proportional representation or first-past-the-post, and whether the presence or absence of gender quotas) and the electoral impact of the gender gap has been an important frontier of research [27].

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that women voters are not simply the tipping-point for electoral outcomes in particular instances but rather a structural determinant of democratic politics that does more than affect which parties govern, which candidates win, and which policies are implemented. The gap between sexes in voting is large, persistent, and substantively rooted in real differences in political preferences and political identities between men and women in terms of enactment, registration, vote decision, and party identification.

The paper has simultaneously insisted upon conceptually disciplined treatment of women's political heterogeneity. African American women who vote loyally for the Democratic Party; college-educated white suburban women who swung toward the Democrats in the Trump years; non-college-educated white rural women who swung toward the Republicans; young women brought to the polls by concerns about reproductive rights; older women for whom economic security is the primary concern; and gazillions of women in the Global South struggling against an array of patriarchal limitations on political agency [28] constitute the category of the "women voters" [25]. It is intellectually unproductive and empirically incorrect to refer to this as a single "women's vote."

What the heterogeneous subgroups have in common is not a common political preference, but a structural position within different democratic systems where gender mediates access to political resources, influences exposure to policy risks, and interacts with identity to yield politically consequential behavioral differences. As women continue to achieve higher levels of educational attainment, enter the labor force in greater numbers, and mobilize around issues ranging from reproductive rights to climate change, the gender gap in electoral politics will likely persist through the next few decades-and possibly widen.

The larger question, after all, is not whether women voters are changing the course of elections. They are. For political scientists, democratic theorists, and citizens alike, the deeper question is what kind of democracy, if the gender gap is permanently structural, and whether democratic institutions will configure representation to account for and fully weight a constituency of female voters?

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