Counting Women’s Ballots: Female Voters after Suffrage in the U.S.

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On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state in the union to ratify the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. After a more than 70 year battle, women throughout the U.S. 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.

Just four presidential elections later, the U.S. would experience one of the most dramatic electoral transformations in its history. Republicans had been ascendant since the end of the Civil War, but the crisis of the Great Depression—and the parties’ divergent responses to it—transformed partisan alignments in the U.S. and ushered in an era of Democratic dominance for much of the 20th century. The “New Deal realignment” of the 1930s established a new Democratic coalition which would persist for decades.

The causes and consequences New Deal realignment have received considerable attention. Scholars have had far less to say about the contribution of women to this process. Yet we have reason to expect women may have played a key role in the enormous voter mobilization during this period. A large number of still electorally inactive women were among those most available for mobilization into the Democratic party in the 1930s. At the same time, women who had voted in the 1920s were—as a result of their relatively fewer opportunities to have reinforced their partisanship by casting ballots—among those most available for conversion from one partisan allegiance to the other. This paper asks: Did women and men realign via the same or different processes? What was the contribution of women to New Deal realignment?

Previous scholars has been hindered in the conclusions they could reach regarding the electoral behavior of the first female voters because we 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 directly determined from official records alone. Reliable public opinion polls—the modern solution to this problem—are virtually non-existent 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 below) and generally shied away from such analysis.

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) systematically denied women access to the ballot in Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina in 1920, delaying their participation in presidential elections 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 20th century. For that reason, we assume that our conclusions about the voting behavior of female voters largely describe white female voters.
This paper reports on results from a project which seeks to overcome these data and methodological challenges and in doing so, deepen and improve our understanding of an important period in American electoral history and American political development. 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 women’s national enfranchisement (1920-1936) for a larger and more diverse set of places—ten American states—than has previously been possible. In this paper, we employ the estimates for the presidential elections of 1932 and 1936 to examine the contributions of women to the process of New Deal realignment.

**Expectations for Women and New Deal Realignment**

The electoral realignment that occurred between 1928 and 1936 has been the subject of a remarkable volume of scholarly work. A question of particular interest is the extent to which the shift from Republican to Democratic dominance was characterized by the mobilization of previously inactive citizens or the conversion of those already active. The conversion story posits that widespread dissatisfaction with the Republican response to the economic crisis persuaded previous Republican voters to support the Democratic nominee, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), in 1932, and then reinforce that preference by voting for FDR in subsequent elections, resulting in a long-term shift from Republican to Democratic loyalty (Brown 1988). Those particularly hard hit by the Depression—e.g., farmers and urban industrial workers—were believed the most likely candidates for conversion (Gourevitch 1984; Sundquist 1973).

Others, however, have emphasized the considerable evidence of individual-level stability of partisan attachment, a finding dating from the influential early vote studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960, 1966; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) and a persistent, if contested, thesis today (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). If partisanship is an "unmoved mover" (Johnston 2006), then Democratic gains likely came less from party-switching by Republicans, and more from the mobilization of new or previously inactive citizens, such as the massive numbers of new immigrants entering the U.S. in the preceding decades, responding to the appeal of the Democratic party (see Salisbury and MacKuen 1981).

Amidst debates over theory and method, scholars have found support for both mobilization (Andersen 1979; Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell 1985; Prindle 1979; Wanat 1979) and conversion (Burnham 1970; Erikson and Tedin 1981; Hawley and Sagarazu 2012; Ladd and Hadley 1975; Sundquist 1983) as the mechanisms for New Deal realignment. Different elections, groups, and places may have been characterized by different kinds of processes (e.g., Andersen 2014, Brown 1988, Gamm 1989; Nardulli 1995).

We have reason to expect that women were both more likely to convert from previous Republican support and more likely to be mobilized into the emerging Democratic majority during the New Deal elections. Since women had been less likely than men to turn out to vote in the elections of the 1920s, more women than men were available for
mobilization—that is, there were more women who were not already members of the active electorate. Indeed, in terms of sheer numbers, there were likely more women available for mobilization than any other demographic group. At the same time, women who had voted during the 1920s may have been more likely to convert since their relatively short experience at the polls provided less opportunity to reinforce partisan preferences. In other words, women boasted lower levels of “political immunization” (McPhee and Ferguson 1962), the resistance to disturbance accumulated from repetition and reiteration.

Yet, many of the most prominent realignment and partisanship scholars have been silent on the potential contributions of female voters. In his influential book, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics, Burnham (1970) notes the likely differential mobilization of native and immigrant women prior to 1928 but does not imply them in the realignment that followed. Likewise, in Sundquist’s (1983) important statement on party realignment, Dynamics of the Party System, the chapter on New Deal realignment does not mention women. Kleppner (1982, 89) identifies “immigrant-stock voters, the young, those toward the bottom of the economic ladder, the unemployed, relievers, and citizens who had chosen to abstain in the 1920s” as those responsible for increased turnout during the New Deal period; while many women fell into the last category, he does not discuss women specifically with regards to the New Deal. Similarly, Gosnell (1942, 23), describing the six-fold increase in Democratic voters between 1928 and 1936 in Pennsylvania, concludes that the Democrats attracted “a huge army of new voters—the young voters and those who had formerly been non-voters through indifference.” Again, we might expect many women to fall into that second camp, but they go unmentioned. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of establishing the conventional wisdom, in their classic book, The American Voter, Campbell and his colleagues (1960, 153) implicate “the youth, the economically underprivileged, and the minority groups,” but not women, as sources of the new Democratic majority.

A few scholars have at least allowed for the possibility of a role for female voters in the New Deal elections. Drawing explicitly on McPhee and Ferguson’s (1962) concept of political immunization, Andersen (1979) identifies the enfranchisement of women as a central contributor to the large number of non-immunized voters in the 1920s who were subsequently available for Democratic conversion and mobilization during the New Deal period. In other work, Burnham (1974, 1015) points to the heavy mobilization of women, especially “ethnic women,” during the “1928-1936 realignment sequence.” Using data from Boston wards, Gamm (1989) finds that women were mobilized as Democrats later than men; increases in Democratic support before 1934 were a result of support from men, but after that time, women’s gains surpassed those of men.

The general inattention to women as a factor in New Deal realignment can be attributed to at least two factors. First, the conventional wisdom that female voters had failed to materialize as a unique voting bloc or to differ much from men in their political preferences had been largely accepted as conventional wisdom by the time Key (1955) had called attention to critical elections and the New Deal period in particular had become the
subject of widespread scholarly interest. As a result, few scholars likely viewed women as potential contributors to the process of electoral change in the 1930s.

Second, the dearth of attention to women in the previous literature on New Deal realignment highlights the methodological challenges to studying gender differences in electoral behavior prior to the advent of survey research. Much of the literature on New Deal realignment is characterized by meticulous data work in which scholars carefully identified counties and other geopolitical divisions with demographic populations that allowed reasonable (in most cases) inferences about the turnout and vote choice of particular groups (Andersen 1979; Gamm 1989; Key 1955; Kleppner’s 1982; Nardulli 1995). Racial, ethnic, and immigrant residential segregation makes isolating such groups geographically far more tenable than identifying female voters separate from male. This empirical challenge does not justify the failure to so much as speculate as to the possible distinctive contribution of women to New Deal realignment, however. Rather, this lacunae in the scholarly literature (with few, important exceptions) points to a more general failure to recognize women as having a potentially unique electoral impact during this period.

**Research Design**

The methodological challenge for this research is described by Ogburn and Goltra (1919, 413): “women’s ballots are not distinguished from those of men but are deposited in the same ballot box.” In virtually all cases, ballots are not distinguished by the sex of the voter who cast them, and thus official records cannot tell us how women and men voted. Public opinion and exit polls, the modern solution to this problem, are unavailable or unreliable during this era.

Some early scholars correlated available information about the gender composition of the population and aggregate election returns to make inferences about the electoral behavior of women and men (e.g., Ogburn and Goltra 1919; Rice and Willey 1924). This process of inferring individual-level relationships (such as between sex and turnout) from aggregate-level data (such as the proportion of the population that is female and the proportion of the population that turns out to vote) is known as ecological inference. However, Robinson (1950) explains how these correlations are characterized by what he terms the ecological fallacy. A positive relationship between, for example, the proportion of the population that is African-American and the proportion that turns out to vote, does not necessarily mean that African-Americans are more likely to turnout than other citizens. Indeed, such a positive correlation was often found in counties in the American South in the first half of the 20th century; rather than indicating high African-American turnout, that correlation was driven by the propensity of whites to turn out at higher rates where the African-American population was larger (Key 1949).

Ecological inference to determine gender differences in behavior is particularly challenging. Even in small geographic units, we do not observe extremely high concentrations of women or men. This distinguishes our application from those that focus on other politically-relevant divisions, such as race, class, or immigration, where residential segregation results in high concentrations of various groups in particular geographic areas
(often, of course, not by choice), permitting the direct (or near direct) observation of behavior for that group in some especially informative geographic units. That is, observations with extremely lopsided concentrations of, e.g., white citizens, produce very narrow bounds of the possible electoral behavior of whites. If 90% of the population in a geographic unit is white, the logically possible turnout and vote choice rates of white citizens in that unit must be very similar to overall turnout and vote choice in that unit. Given a relatively limited range for the variation in percentage female and given the typical concentration of that percentage around 50 percent, the logically possible combinations of male and female turnout range across a very wide interval.

Recent research, however, has pioneered new, more reliable approaches to ecological inference (see especially King 1997). We employ an approach described in Wakefield (2005) which builds on a large body of related work in biostatistics and epidemiology (see Richardson and Monfort 2000) to develop a computationally manageable Bayesian strategy for 2 x 2 tables. We extend Wakefield’s approach in two ways. First, we apply Wakefield’s approach—developed for 2 x 2 tables—to the more complex 2 x 4 problem, estimating Democratic vote, Republican vote, other party vote, and abstention (four possible outcomes) for men and women (two population groups). Second, we introduce the uncontroversial assumption that male turnout will exceed female turnout in each geographic unit during this period. As we show below, this approach permits us to generate reliable estimates of female and male turnout and vote choice in these elections. (Our method and estimation strategy are described in greater detail in Corder and Wolbrecht N.d.).

We then employ this methodology to estimate the turnout and vote choice of women and men in a sample of American states. Data constraints limited us to a sample, rather than the full population. We constructed our sample of states with two objectives: (1) to obtain as many observations as possible in each state (preferably in excess of 100), and (2) to produce as much cross-state variation in politically-relevant variables as possible. Depending on the data available, we observe population characteristics and electoral outcomes for various sub-state geographic units, including counties, wards of major cities, and Minor Civil Divisions (MCDs), the term the U.S. Census uses to describe the political sub-units of counties (usually townships and villages). County-level data were made available by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR 1992, 1992; see Corder and Wolbrecht N.d. for further information on the data). Election returns and census (population) data for multiple observations in each state and election produces sufficient variation to permit successful estimation. Variation across states in politically-relevant factors permits us to examine a number of hypotheses regarding contextual effects. Our resulting sample of ten states is described in Table 1.
Table 1
Sample states and characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Date of Presidential Women's Suffrage</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Electoral College Vote Share (1920)</th>
<th>Party Competition</th>
<th>Restrictions on Voting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Border</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Competitive Democratic</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>One-party Republican</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Competitive Republican</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Border</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>One-party Democratic</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Solid South</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>One-party Democratic</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Our ten state sample permits us to observe the behavior and impact of female voters over a far broader and more diverse range of time and place than previous research. However, we do not claim that the sample is representative of the broader U.S. electorate. Our sample was constrained, sometimes systematically, by the lack of election and census returns for a sufficient number of sub-state observations in many states; such data are unavailable through the west in this period, for example. As a result, our sample does not fully reflect each region of the country and both differs from and is similar to the population as a whole on a number of dimensions. (For a comparison of our sample and the broader American electorate, see Corder and Wolbrecht N.d.).

We employ MCMC simulation to produce estimates of female and male turnout for each of our sample states in the five presidential elections between 1920 and 1936 (see Corder and Wolbrecht N.d.). While our estimates satisfy a number of diagnostic tests, the best indicator of the accuracy of the estimator, in our view, is the recovery of the known (true) Illinois outcomes in 1916 and 1920. The state of Illinois enfranchised women for a subset of offices in 1913, and thus women received different ballots than did men in the presidential elections of 1916 and 1920 (see Goldstein 1984). This was not unusual in states that enfranchised women prior to the 19th Amendment; what was unusual is that Illinois also reported the outcomes—numbers of votes cast and vote choice—separately for men and women. The Illinois data thus provide us a unique and valuable opportunity to validate our estimates.

Figure 1 reports the actual and estimated quantities for Illinois in 1916 and 1920. The table reveals both the promise of the approach and a few hazards. Despite the significant challenges of ecological inference, particularly for sex differences, estimates of turnout and partisan vote share are remarkably close to the observed returns. Indeed, the
error or uncertainty associated with the estimate is comparable to the margin of error in the sort of large public opinion survey that forms the basis for most contemporary election research (+/-3% for 1920 Republican vote share, for instance). With the exception of turnout, each of the observed quantities is in the 90% Bayesian credible interval—the range of uncertainty associated with the estimated parameters. In both elections, estimates of overall turnout are very close to the observed, but biased slightly downward for female turnout and slightly upward for male turnout. This small bias, while problematic, does not prevent us from reaching highly accurate conclusions about changes in turnout and vote choice across the two Illinois elections.

Figure 1

Observed and estimated vote choice and turnout, Illinois, 1916 and 1920

Women and New Deal Realignment

We now turn to what our estimates of turnout and vote choice can tell us about the role of women in the transformative presidential elections of 1932 and 1936. Mobilization

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2 The 90% Bayesian credible interval is the range of estimated values in 90% of the simulations. The Bayesian approach permits us to be fairly specific about the confidence we have in particular conclusions that we reach. In the text we claim to be confident of a finding of difference (e.g., female Republican vote share exceeded male Republican vote share) if 90 percent or more of the simulations support the conclusion. We may note a difference in which a smaller proportion of simulations support the conclusions but we acknowledge less confidence in such results. The choice of a threshold of this type in the Bayesian context is notoriously difficult (see Rafterty 1996), so we disclose specific probabilities associated with important claims.
of the electorate in 1932 and 1936 is exceptional, particularly given the long-term trends toward declining electoral participation at the turn of the century (see Burnham 1965). Across our sample as a whole, men’s turnout averages 75% in 1932 and 78% in 1936. Women’s turnout averages 48% in 1932 (a 27 point turnout gender gap) and by 1936, more than half of the women in our sample states (54%) turn out to vote, a 24 point turnout gender gap. The state-level estimates, reported in Figure 2, highlight this remarkable mobilization. In our ten sample states, more than 70% of the male voting age population turns out to vote in every state save one (Virginia) in 1932 and 1936. Female turnout is also high: above 50% in half of the states in our sample in 1932 and in 6 of 10 states in 1936. Indeed, we estimate female turnout to exceed 60% in four Midwestern states in 1936, a level of mobilization on par with high turnout elections in the U.S. today.

Figure 2
Turnout of women and men, 1932 and 1936

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3 Because region and party context are central to our analyses elsewhere, we organize states in the figures by those characteristics: We start with our one-party Democratic Southern state (Virginia) on the far left, then report on our two Border states, with the one-party Democratic state (Oklahoma) followed by the competitive (Democratic-leaning) state (Kentucky). We then move on to our Midwestern states, starting with the one competitive (Republican-leaning) state (Missouri) and then the four one-party Republican states (Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois). Finally, to the far right we present our two one-party Republican states in the Northeast (Connecticut and Massachusetts). Both region and our party context measure are indicated, along with state label, on the x-axis.
Figure 3 shows that, across our sample as a whole, Democrats were hugely successful in 1932 and 1936—particularly in light of Republican dominance in the 1920s. In the elections leading up to 1932, we observed a persistent Republican advantage among women in one-party Republican states in the Midwest. This difference is largely responsible for the small Republican advantage among women in our sample as a whole in the first three presidential elections, 1920 through 1928. The electoral disruptions of 1932 and 1936 erode this advantage—and perhaps even reverse it slightly—with the end result that women’s and men’s support for Democratic nominee settles at about the same level by 1936. Specifically, Democratic support in both 1932 and 1936 averages 57% among men compared to 60% among women in our ten sample states.
Figure 3
Democratic vote share of women and men, 1932 and 1936

1932

1936
The figures so far have given us a general sense of the turnout and vote choice of women and men in these elections. What is significant about these elections is the dramatic shift from a considerable Republican advantage among the electorate in elections prior to the 1930s to a Democratic advantage beginning in 1932. How did that come about, and what role did women play? We can best answer that question with our estimates by examining the number of ballots gained and lost between elections. As we have discussed, the contributions of mobilization and conversion to New Deal realignment have been of keen interest to scholars. The processes appear to vary across these two elections—with little turnout change and large Democratic swings (conversion) in 1932, and significant new mobilization and little change in partisan distribution (mobilization) in 1936—so we discuss the overall and partisan mobilization patterns in the 1932 and 1936 elections in sequence.

The Election of 1932

Figure 4 summarizes the total number of female and male voters added to the electorate in 1932, providing an indication of the size of the mobilization of men and women. With the exception of Virginia, the size of the active electorate expanded in every state, although sometimes only very slightly, over 1928. Given the extraordinary level of new voter mobilization in 1928, both maintenance and especially expansion of the size of the active electorate should be considered an impressive feat. In a handful of states in the Midwest (i.e., Missouri, Kansas, and Illinois), we estimate that nearly twice as many new female voters are added to the rolls as male voters in 1932, although only in Illinois are more than 90% of the simulations consistent with the conclusion that female mobilization outpaced male mobilization in 1932. In the other states, the number of new voters is either similar or there are just slightly more new female voters; we can only conclude with confidence that these states added similar numbers of new male and female voters. Massachusetts and Connecticut, both of which experienced a dramatic expansion of the electorate in 1928, stand out as states with almost no new voters in 1932; here again, the simulations suggest this conclusion holds for both male and female voters. Thus, with the exception of Illinois, we estimate that roughly equal numbers of new men and women entered the electorate in 1932.
Democrats overcame a considerable Republican advantage to become the majority party in 1932. Figure 5 displays the change in the number of votes cast for the Democratic presidential nominee between 1928 and 1932. Outside of the Northeast, the number of Democratic votes gained is extraordinary in every sample state. In nearly all of the states, men account for a larger number of new Democratic voters than do women but in most cases, the differences are small. Illinois is the exception: Nearly 80% of the simulations indicate that women accounted for more new Democratic voters than did men in Illinois in 1932 despite the fact that, as in every state, women’s turnout lagged that of men. There are two others states in which gender differences do appear, both in the Southern/Border region: In Oklahoma and Virginia more than 90% of the simulations are consistent with the conclusion that Democrats gained more new male than female voters. These findings are consistent with evidence that New Deal realignment unfolded in uniquely local ways, and that the experience and contributions of women were as much a function of their local context as the fact of their gender.
Not surprisingly, the decline in Republican ballots in each state—summarized in Figure 6—tells the same story. The decline in the level of support for the Republican candidate was roughly similar among men and women in most sample states. In Oklahoma and Virginia (where Democrats gained more men than women), Republican losses among men were much larger than losses among women, a conclusion supported by more than 90% of the simulations. More than 70% of the simulations support the same conclusion in Kansas and Minnesota. We thus are beginning to see some evidence consistent with differing patterns of mobilization (women) and conversion (men) as explanations for partisan change among men and women in 1932.
Were women and men mobilized as or converted to Democrats in the same way in most states or by distinct paths? Our estimates do not permit us to say with certainty how new voters cast their ballots, or whether voters lost by Republicans in 1932 stayed home or cast their ballot for Democrats. We can, however, make reasonable inferences (with appropriate caution) from the patterns observed. Overall, our general conclusion is clear: With the exception of the Northeastern states and Illinois, turnout gains are modest or non-existent in 1932 while the share of votes won by Democrats increases dramatically, suggesting a significant portion of those new Democratic votes likely came from voters who cast their ballots for the Republican candidate in 1928; in other words, we conclude, as others have, that conversion was likely the dominant mechanism overall in 1932 (cf., Brown 1988; Hawley and Sagarzazu 2012).

The minimum number of converts required to generate the observed level of Democratic votes\(^4\) in each state in 1932 is summarized in Figure 7. The number reported in the figure is the number of new male or female Democratic voters minus the number of new male or female voters. The difference between these numbers is the minimum number of converts (previous Republican voters) who must have switched partisan vote choice to account for observed support for the Democratic candidate in 1932. Since the number of additional votes for Democrats is so large relative to the number of new voters in every

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\(^4\)The figure summarizes defections from the Republican Party in 1932, which could result in increasing support for the Democratic candidate or a third party candidate. Third party support is fairly low in the sample states in 1932, about 2.5%, so the overwhelming number of Republican converts supported the Democratic candidate.
state, it is extremely likely that there were many converts from the Republican to the Democratic party. (This is an estimate based on the assumption that virtually all new voters were Democratic supporters. If some new voters supported the Republicans, the number of required converts would be higher. If some established voters shifted from the Democrats to or third parties to the Republican party, the number of required converts from 1928 Republicans would be higher. On the other hand, if many Republican voters from 1928 stayed home and these voters were replaced with new Democratic voters, then the conversion numbers would be lower). While differences in many states are small, in most states there were more male converts (1928 Republican voters who cast Democratic or third-party ballots in 1932) than there were female.

**Figure 7**

Minimum* number of Republican converts, 1928 to 1932

*Assumes no new voters are captured by the Republicans

Overall, given the estimated number of new female and male voters in 1932 in our sample (411,000 new women and 290,000 new men), and accepting the crude assumption that no new voters are Republicans, we estimate that, across our ten sample states, about 656,000 women who voted Republican in 1928 voted for FDR in 1932, and approximately 828,000 men who had voted Republican in 1928 cast Democratic ballots four years later. As a result, conversion accounts for about 62% of the 1.06 million votes gained by Democrats among women in 1932 in the sample states, and perhaps 75% of the 1.11 million votes gained by Democrats among men.
Thus, conversion generally appears to account for more, and mobilization relatively less, of the new Democratic votes cast by men than by women. This is not particularly surprising; the larger number of men already voting in 1928 implies that more men were available for conversion and, less so, mobilization. What might be surprising is that the relatively larger number of male converts occurs in spite of the fact that women are more likely to defect. That is, women who voted Republican in 1928 were more likely to cast Democratic ballots (defect) in 1932 than were men who voted Republican in 1928. The minimum number of converts (from above) as a percentage of the available 1928 Republican electorate gives a sense of the rate of defection. For example, in Minnesota, we estimate 89,000 of the 213,000 women who cast Republican ballots in 1928 did not do so in 1932, for a defection rate of 41% among women. In contrast, we estimate 108,000 of the 347,000 men who cast Republican ballots in 1928 did not do so in 1932, producing a male defection rate of 31%. Consistent with the estimates from Minnesota, women’s rate of defection exceeds men’s in every state. In some states, like Oklahoma and Illinois, the gender differences in defection rates are quite small. In other states, like Minnesota and Kentucky, the defection rate for women was clearly higher. Since each of the numbers in the calculation is estimated with uncertainty, the confidence intervals for these quantities are wide. Summing across all of the sample states, about 80% of the simulations are consistent with the conclusion that female defection rates exceeded male defection rates in our sample states. In one state, Minnesota, over 85% of the simulations are consistent with the conclusion that the percentage of Republican defectors was higher among women than men. There are no states where even more than 50% of the simulations are consistent with a higher minimum defection rate among men.
Thus, while in 1932 mobilization was responsible for a bigger portion of new Democratic ballots cast by women, than it was for new Democratic ballots cast by men, the percentage of women who changed their vote choice from 1928 to 1932 (defection) was likely larger than the similar percentage among men. Once again, this finding highlights how our conclusions are shaped by the data and measures we examine, and particularly the interaction of turnout and vote choice. While more of the Democratic gains among men were attributable to conversion than mobilization, many fewer women voted in 1928. As a result, even with fewer converts in 1932 overall, the likelihood that a 1928 voter changed her vote from Republican to Democratic in 1932 was likely marginally higher among women than men. Substantively, we note that the greater likelihood that women would defect in 1932 is consistent with claims that women’s lesser electoral experience would mean weaker partisan ties (e.g., Converse 1969, 1976).

The Election of 1936

In 1936, the mobilization of new voters is clearly more extensive than in 1932 and in most states there are more women added to the electorate than men. Overall, across our ten sample states, 868,000 more women participate in 1936 than in 1932, and 570,000 more men. Figure 9 shows that this pattern generally holds at the state level; in nearly all of our sample states, there are more new female voters than male. We can be confident of
these differences in Illinois, where more than 90% of the simulations support the conclusion that female mobilization was larger, and somewhat confident in Connecticut and Kansas (where more than 80% of the simulations show more new female voters than male. (In another three states—Iowa, Missouri, and Oklahoma—75% or more of the simulations are also consistent with this conclusion). Thus, in most states, the expectation that the larger numbers of inactive women available for mobilization would mean women were responsible for more new ballots than men during the New Deal period is confirmed in a number of states in 1936, when new mobilization was considerable.

**Figure 9**

*Change in number of votes cast by women and men, 1932 to 1936*

With the exception of Kentucky, Democrats tended to gain voters in 1936 (see Figure 10). More of the new Democratic votes come from women than men in eight of our ten states, although again, differences are small in a number of cases. Since the uncertainty associated with these estimates are large, we can only be confident about these differences in Connecticut; over 90% of the simulations indicate that Democrats picked up more votes from women than from men. The large mobilization of voters in 1936 generated gains for the Republican party as well (see Figure 11). The differences between men and women are small, however, so our overall conclusion is that in 1936, in places where Republicans gained male votes, they gained a similar number of female votes.5

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5 Massachusetts stands out as an exception, but the simulation failed to converge for Massachusetts, 1936, so we have less confidence in that estimates associated with that election.
Figure 10
Change in number of Democratic votes cast by women and men, 1932 to 1936

Figure 11
Change in number of Republican votes cast by women and men, 1932 to 1936
We have a harder time inferring the mechanisms for the allocation of partisan votes gained in 1936, compared to 1932, since the number of new entrants to the electorate was quite large (over 1.4 million), but the gains for Democrats were smaller (900,000), and Republicans experienced gains as well. As a result, a variety of possible mechanisms could be at work between 1932 and 1936: Mobilization of Republicans, mobilization of Democrats, conversion from Democratic to Republican, and/or conversion from Republican to Democrat. It is not possible for us to say with much confidence which mechanisms, and to what extent, explain electoral change in 1936, or if different mechanisms characterize men and women. Although they remain possible, the estimates, in the aggregate, reveal no striking gender differences in these dynamics, except for the evidence of greater turnout gains among women compared to men.

**The Contribution of Women to New Deal Realignment**

Overall, we find men and women contributed in roughly equal numbers, but in different ways, to New Deal realignment. In both 1932 and 1936 we find evidence that the number of new female voters entering the system exceeded the number of new male voters: In our sample, 120,000 more women than men entered the electorate in 1932 (almost exclusively attributable to Illinois) and 300,000 more women than men entered the electorate in 1936. As previous scholars have expected (e.g., Andersen 1979), women’s under-mobilization relative to men translated into more new female than male voters during the New Deal realignment period. At the same time, we find that women in the electorate prior to the 1930s were somewhat more likely to defect from their pre-New Deal partisanship (i.e., women who voted Republican in 1928 were more likely to vote Democratic in 1932 than were men who voted Republican in 1928), consistent with the expectation that partisanship would be less stable among female voters who had been in the active electorate for a shorter period (e.g., Andersen 1979, Converse 1969, 1976). However, because there were fewer women in the active electorate overall, mobilization accounted for more new Democratic votes among women than it did among men.

Despite the fact that more new women than new men were mobilized in these elections, the number of new Democratic votes overall that can be attributed to women is not substantially different than the number of new Democratic votes that can be attributed to men: In our ten sample states, we estimate that just over one million female Democratic votes were added (1.07 million) in 1932 and a little more than one million additional male Democratic votes (1.11 million), plus about 550,000 additional female Democratic votes and about 320,000 additional male Democratic votes in 1936. While more new female than male voters entered the active electorate in 1932 and 1936, more new male Democratic votes were generated by conversion (men were less likely to defect, but their defections came from a larger base of established voters and thus generated more Democratic ballots). Thus, the combined effects of mobilization and conversion allowed the Democrats to draw nearly equal numbers of new voters from the ranks of the male and female electorate in 1932 and 1936: 1.4 million additional votes from men and 1.6 million additional votes from women.
Conclusions

Conventional narratives of New Deal realignment overlook the impact of new female voters on the fortunes of the Democrats. Both mechanisms of realignment—mobilization and conversion—appear to have characterized women’s contribution to New Deal realignment: Due to lower turnout, many women were available for mobilization, and those who had voted previously (mostly for Republicans) lacked the reinforcement of partisanship offered by long-term political participation. And indeed, many women either converted from Republican support (particularly in 1932) or were newly-mobilized by Democrats (especially in 1936).

Interestingly, although the shift in support to the Democrats—measured as the change in Democratic vote share—was smaller among men (in 1932), the male electorate was larger so the net result is that Democratic gains came in roughly equal numbers from men and women—about 1.6 million additional women and 1.4 million additional men across both elections. In our ten sample states over 4.5 million men and 3.3 million women supported the Democratic candidate Roosevelt in 1936. Given that Democratic candidate Smith received 3 million votes from men and only 1.7 million votes from women in the same states in 1928, the joint impact of mobilization and conversion on the female electorate across the 1932-1936 period is clearly very large. By 1936, Democrats had attracted an impressive 95% more female voters (from 1.7 million in 1928 to 3.3 million in 1936) compared to about 50% more male voters (from 3.0 million to 4.5 million).

Accounts of New Deal realignment that ignore the gradual and persistent increase in women’s turnout miss an important element of mobilization that accounts for a huge number of new voters in the 1930s. In some states, women were clearly well incorporated into electoral politics by the end of the realignment era—the rate of turnout for women in several sample states was nearly 65% by 1936. This level of mobilization would be considered remarkable in our current era.

Women shaped the size, pattern, and outcome of New Deal realignment. The massive change in the electoral fortunes of the Democratic party in the 1930s was due, in roughly equal measure, to the ballots of men and women. Only 16 years after the extension of suffrage to women and after early accounts dismissed women’s suffrage as a disappointment or failure, women were a large and increasingly important source of electoral support for the emerging Democratic majority.
References


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