



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Look Back At 20 Years of Research on Gender and Voting in *Politics & Gender*

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## Abstract

This essay highlights the impact of *Politics & Gender* on the discipline's understanding of how gender shapes the preferences, behavior, and motivations of voters. It provides descriptive information about the prevalence of research on gender and voting in the journal, along with the proportion of articles dedicated to women voters across different regions globally. The bulk of the essay focuses on the substance of this research — drawing out major themes and identifying significant contributions within each theme — and it concludes by offering a future research agenda on gender and voting.

**Keywords:** gender gap; women voters; political participation; public opinion; gender bias; information processing; intersectionality; descriptive representation

## Introduction

Women's quest for formal political representation sparked many questions about the influence enfranchisement would exert on electoral politics. Foundational research on women as political actors has sought to explain women's political loyalties, their rates of electoral behavior, and their candidate and policy preferences. Often this work has been situated as a comparison between men and women — identifying various “gender gaps” and investigating the factors that might underlie them. This line of inquiry has tested theories of gender difference ranging from economic resources (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2009; Carroll 1998; Detraz and Peksen 2018; Rosenbluth, Salmond, and

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Thies 2006), to psychological resources (e.g., Preece 2016; Wolak 2020), to specific beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Filler and Jennings 2015; Hansen, Clemens, and Dolan 2022). This work warns against simplistic or reductive accounts of gender difference and instead points to gender dynamics in public opinion and political behavior that are complex and contingent on aspects of the political and campaign contexts in which they are situated.

Increasingly, scholarship in this area has argued against the tendency to conceptualize women voters as a political monolith and instead sought to better understand sources of heterogeneity among women. In some cases, this has meant a focus on the ways that gender intersects with other politically-relevant social identities that might divide women, such as race and ethnicity (Bejarano, Manzano, and Montoya 2011), sexual orientation (Albaugh and Baisley 2023), and religiosity (Banaszak 2006), as well as other social markers, such as marital status and parenthood (Elder and Greene 2006; Stalsburg 2010). Recognition of heterogeneity among women has also manifested in important debates over “women’s issues” aimed at avoiding reductive conceptualizations of women’s preferences and priorities as political actors (Beckwith 2011; Reingold and Swers 2011). It has also pushed past a binary conceptualization of gender identification to a more expansive view of masculinity and femininity (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant 2017; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2020) and contributed to a recognition of the ways that beliefs about gender, sometimes more so than gender identification in and of itself, can shape political thinking and voting behavior (e.g., Deckman and Cassese 2021). *Politics & Gender* has provided a critical forum for this research over the past 20 years.

## Twenty Years of Research on Women Voters

To gain a sense of how the journal moved forward the field’s understanding of gender and voting, we reviewed all research articles and critical perspectives published between 2005 (Volume 1, Issue 1) and 2024 (Volume 20, Issue 2) for insights into this topic. We excluded editors’ introductions and introductions to critical perspectives, the latter of which varied significantly in length and format, but generally did not advance an original line of inquiry. As we reviewed every article in the journal over this period, we used conservative inclusion criteria for our article selection, focusing on articles that analyzed electoral behavior or public opinion in the electorate as a whole, with voters as the primary unit of analysis. We focused on mass political behavior specifically aimed at electoral institutions and the attitudes that underpin that behavior. We opted to exclude articles on protest and social movements without explicit mentions of voting or elections. These forms of activism certainly have electoral consequences, but we only included articles in our review if they included an explicit electoral component.

In total, we considered 755 articles and perspectives pieces and identified 139 that offered insights into gender and voting (about 18%). This topic was much more likely to show up in research articles (90%) compared to critical

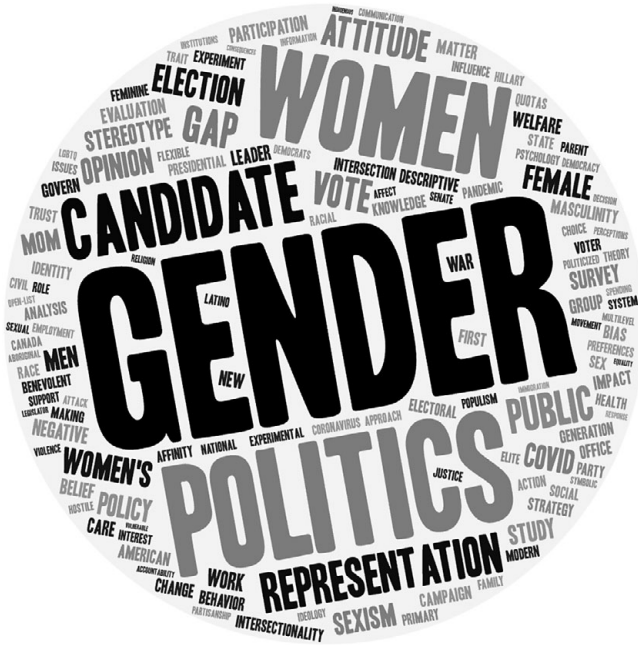
perspectives (10%). Published work in this area disproportionately featured the American political context, with about 63% of articles and critical perspectives on this topic focused exclusively on the United States. To provide a broader sense of geographic representation, we classified locations of study based on the eight regions defined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals project. We included a category for “multiple regions” when an article utilized data from two or more of these regions. About 84% of the selected articles examine voters from Europe and North America. Only 20 articles focus on other regions (five span multiple regions, three analyze women voters in Eastern and Southeastern Asia, and the remainder were spread across Northern Africa and West Africa, Latin American and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, Oceania, and sub-Saharan Africa).

This work is largely empirical and relies heavily on survey data. There is some methodological pluralism evident in this set of articles — which include observational, experimental work, and focus groups, along with analytic essays. Some of this work has grappled with methodological challenges associated with the study of gender, such as how to reconcile discrepant findings from experimental work on elections involving hypothetical candidates with observational work involving real candidates (Dolan and Lynch 2016; Lefkofridi, Giger, and Holli 2019), how to best measure gender bias or sexism (Setzler 2019), and how to integrate individual and aggregate-level analyses of gendered political action (Burns 2007; Junn 2009). The reliance on survey data for much of this work highlights the important role government-subsidized, publicly available datasets play in supporting timely scholarship on gender and elections (e.g., the Cooperative Election Study, World Values Survey, General Social Survey, and especially the American National Election Studies).

The citation counts for scholarship in this area are particularly telling in terms of impact on the field. Collectively, this work has been cited 6,692 times as of September 30, 2024,<sup>1</sup> with an average citation count of about 48 for each article or critical perspective. Though citation counts are an imperfect metric of impact for many reasons, including the significant lag time for newly published articles to be read and cited, these figures suggest this work represents an important core of scholarship on gender and political behavior, and one that has contributed to the rising impact factor and prominence of *Politics & Gender*.

## Major Themes in Research on Women Voters

Major themes from 20 years of research on women voters are evident in the keyword cloud depicted in Figure 1. Please note that articles published in *Politics & Gender* were not keyword indexed prior to 2019, and keywords for these earlier articles were derived from their titles. Keywords are weighted by frequency. Unsurprisingly, candidates and vote choice are a recurrent theme, with an emphasis on the gender gap. Issues of representation and women voters were a common focus, with 23 mentions in the set of articles, and public opinion and the attitudinal underpinnings of electoral behavior had about 34 mentions, spanning terms like “opinion,” “policy,” “beliefs,” and “preferences.”



**Figure 1.** Keywords from articles on women voters.

Another cluster of articles centered around gender biases, denoted by terms like sexism (13 mentions), stereotypes (12 mentions), and bias (8 mentions). There was also a concentration of articles aimed at understanding the COVID-19 pandemic, consisting mostly of short papers solicited by the editorial team of Christina Wolbrecht and Susan Franceschet.<sup>2</sup> Below, we outline major contributions in four areas: (1) descriptive representation and elections, (2) sources of heterogeneity among women voters, (3) gender differences in political information processing, and (4) gender bias in elections. Though these themes reflect the broad strokes of research contributions on women voters, there are standalone articles that have made an important impact on the field in other areas. Regrettably, we cannot detail every article here.

### Descriptive Representation and Elections

An important area of inquiry regarding women voters in this journal pertains to descriptive representation. Women have historically lagged behind men in elective office, and research on women voters has sought to investigate demand for gender-based descriptive representation. Some of this work has searched for evidence of a gender affinity effect — a tendency for women to support women candidates at higher rates than men by virtue of their shared gender identity, and the expectations about the quality of representation they will receive stemming from this shared identification. Research suggests that demand for

descriptive representation is not universal, but instead conditioned on a number of different factors.

In the United States, partisanship constrains gender affinity, such that women voters will rarely cross party lines to vote for a woman (Dolan 1997; 2004). In other contexts, institutional factors moderate gender affinity (Golder et al. 2017; Marien, Schouteden, and Wauters 2017). For instance, elements of Canadian electoral systems discourage candidate-based voting, which dampens gender affinity in vote choice (Goodyear-Grant and Croskill 2011). In their study of women's representation in Japan, Kage, Rosenbluth, and Tanaka (2019) argue that the dearth of women leaders is not a function of gender bias in the electorate but attributed instead to an electoral system that demands intense, round-the-clock legislative work and constituent service, which suppresses the supply of women available for this work. The salience of gender issues in a given election can play a role as well (Campbell and Heath 2017).

In addition, scholars have considered the impact of being descriptively represented on women voters. Working from the point of view that representation does not merely influence policy and other government outputs, scholars demonstrate this representation shapes women's attitudes toward politics and the political system in several ways, including: their level of trust (Kreutzer 2023; McDermott and Jones 2022), political efficacy (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007), increased confidence in women's leadership abilities (Alexander 2012), and reduced perceptions of corruption in the political system (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014). Some of this research suggests that descriptive representation bolsters women's attentiveness to politics, and women voters show greater awareness of the legislative activity of their descriptive representatives compared to those who do not share a gender identity (Jones 2014). Beyond this, descriptive representation is associated with a subjective sense of having one's preferences represented (Montoya et al. 2022), and evidence from 27 European countries suggests women legislators share policy preferences with women citizens, demonstrating substantive representation indeed follows descriptive (McEvoy 2016). Collectively, this work has offered important insights into factors influencing the pursuit of descriptive representation among women voters, as well as the broad consequences of women's political incorporation on women in the electorate.

### Sources of Heterogeneity among Women Voters

Two decades of gender and politics research have established that the political implications of gender are often dependent on and even secondary to other social identities. This work largely takes an intersectional perspective, maintaining that gender consciousness and feelings of linked fate between women do not operate in isolation but instead function as part of a constellation of other politicized identities, including, but not limited to, race and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship, disability, and parenthood. For instance, in the early years of the journal, Wendy Smooth (2006) demonstrated the importance of an intersectional look at voting behavior, particularly for African American

women in the wake of the Voting Rights Act. The through line of this research is evident in a recent article about Black women's critical role as the keepers of American democracy (Slaughter, Crowder, and Greer 2024).

Work in this vein has also offered critical insights into the intersection of gender, race, and class in subnational American elections (Bedolla and Scolla 2006), explored how national origins and subnational cultures may also influence gendered political behavior (Bejarano, Manzano, and Montoya 2011), and how beliefs about race and gender intersect to shape policy preferences (Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015). Religious identity is often tied to race and ethnicity, and this intersection with gender can have important implications for vote choice and policy preferences. For example, Muslim identity in Indonesia is related to opposition to gender quotas and women candidates (White et al. 2024).

Though *Politics & Gender* has published a large number of studies of women voters in countries around the world, the majority of the published identity articles are centered in the United States, with particular emphasis on African American and Latina women. There are important studies on the voting behavior of other ethnic groups in North America, including Native Americans (Herrick 2018) and Indigenous peoples in Canada (Harell and Panagos 2013). But gaps in the literature remain, both in terms of other key racial and ethnic groups in the United States (e.g., Asian women voters), and in terms of racial and ethnic heterogeneity among women voters in comparative political contexts, particularly outside of North America.

Some of the scholarship in this area dovetails with the focus on descriptive representation outlined in the previous section. This work highlights the need to consider descriptive representation from an intersectional vantage point, in that voters often seek representation on multiple axes of representation simultaneously (Montoya et al. 2022). The impact of such representation is not always straightforward, however. For instance, Albaugh and Baisley's (2023) investigation of the impact of a lesbian premier (a provincial-level executive) in Ontario, Canada, found her leadership had mixed effects on vote choice depending on the gender and LGBTQ+ identity of voters.

Voters also see factors like parenthood as important representational criteria, as childless women candidates are often penalized, and mothers of young children are evaluated differently than male candidates with young children (Stalsburg 2010). Motherhood itself can shape citizen preferences, where in the case of the US, mothers may take up more conservative viewpoints (Greenlee 2010; see also Carroll 2006 and Elder and Greene 2006), and lower rates of participation as well. Using data across 25 European countries, Shore (2020) demonstrates the importance of parental leave, cash assistance, and childcare access policies for boosting participation for single mothers. This work highlights the need to take an expansive perspective on the social factors shaping women's lives in order to gain a granular understanding of women as political actors.

### **Gender Differences in Political Information Processing**

An additional area of research emphasis worth mentioning involves evidence of gender differences in the processing and retention of political information.

Though this topic is more difficult to detect from the word cloud, it addresses a common underlying question about the electoral implications of knowledge acquisition, which provides the basis for issue attitudes, candidate evaluations, and ultimately, vote choice. Early work on the gender gap in political knowledge came at the issue from a deficit perspective and focused on the implications of women's lower average political knowledge for their civic competence.

Yet, research published in this journal came to qualify this perspective in important ways. Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas (2008) uncovered a confidence gap at the root of the knowledge gap. This confidence gap stemmed from gender differences in concrete socioeconomic resources rather than a lack of interest or engagement in politics. Similarly, Lizotte and Sidman (2009) identified risk aversion, uncertainty, and women's tendency to select "don't know" on survey questions as factors significantly inflating the gender gap in political knowledge. Evidence accumulated to suggest measurement choices related to political knowledge are not gender neutral (Hannagan, Littvay, and Popa 2014), and contributed to normatively problematic conclusions about gender and civic capacity in previously unforeseen ways (for a comprehensive review, see Ferrin, Fraile and García-Alabcete 2018).

Research in this area also points to a gender difference in reactions to negativity in political communication and campaigns generally, suggesting the tone of campaigns may exacerbate these differences in how men and women encounter and absorb political information. Women are typically less receptive to campaign negativity compared to men (Philips 2021), and there is some evidence that men are both more receptive to and more mobilized by negativity compared to women (Brooks 2010). Women voters are not completely turned off by negativity. Under some circumstances, women actually attend more to negative news coverage than men (Soroka et al. 2016), and there is some evidence that women are more receptive, compared to men, to fact checking targeted at correcting inaccuracies presented in negative ads (Fridkin et al. 2016). Given trends toward heightened polarization and campaign negativity in the United States and globally, this is likely a fruitful area for continued research.

### **Gender Bias in Candidate Evaluations**

Research in *Politics & Gender* has systematically explored the ways that gender bias might manifest in elections, with an emphasis on expressly prejudicial beliefs about gender as well as gender stereotypes. The primary goal of much of this scholarship has been to understand how these factors impact the electoral fortunes of men and women candidates, and whether they operate in ways that undermine women's political incorporation. Beyond this, researchers seek to advise candidates on their strategic self-presentation, exploring questions about how to balance societal expectations about gender and power. Notably, much of this research shows that gender stereotypes and sexist beliefs operate in a similar fashion for men and women voters. To the extent that women voters endorse sexist attitudes, they think and act in ways similar to men who share

these same beliefs. Thus, voters' beliefs about gender, rather than their own gender identification, prove to be electorally consequential.

Gender stereotypes can potentially disadvantage women candidates, to the extent that political leadership is culturally tied to masculine rather than feminine stereotypes. This expectation has led to debate over whether women candidates are better off "running as a man" and stressing their stereotypically masculine *bona fides*. Yet, this strategy runs the risk of violating cultural expectations about femininity, so that a woman candidate is viewed as competent but not warm. Some gender scholars have referred to this struggle to find a precise balance of both masculine and feminine traits as "the double bind" (see, for example, Wang, Merolla, and Manganiello 2023). Yet, gender stereotypes are not always disadvantageous. Work published in this journal reports that positive evaluations of women senators often stem from their gender stereotypic strengths (Fridkin and Kenney 2009; Lucciola 2023). Beyond this, Bauer's (2020) research argues that understanding gender stereotypes requires distinguishing between trait and issue-based stereotypes, as it is the former and not the latter that can sometimes disadvantage women candidates.

Research in this journal highlights that the electoral implications of stereotyping are hard to pin down — not stable over time and highly dependent on candidate characteristics (e.g., Doan and Haider-Markel 2010) as well as contest-level factors (Glaurdić and Lesschaeve 2023; Ondercin and Bernstein 2007). Partisanship is a particularly important confound in that gender stereotypes are conditioned and even constrained by party stereotypes in significant ways (Bernhard 2022; Cormack and Karl 2022). The Republican Party is associated with stereotypically masculine traits and issues, and the Democratic Party with stereotypically feminine traits and issues. Candidates then face pressure to conform to these aspects of party culture, regardless of their gender identification (Winter 2010). And as polarization increases, so does this pressure, such that gender stereotypes are increasingly secondary to party stereotypes (Hayes 2011).

Much of the early work in this journal on electoral gender bias was motivated by Hillary Clinton's first presidential bid in 2008. This research debated whether Clinton's electoral fortunes were constrained by competing expectations regarding communal and agentic traits (Carroll 2009) and how gender consciousness conditioned vote choice in the primary (Lawless 2009), along with the relative impact of racism and sexism among voters choosing between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama (Hancock 2009; Huddy and Carey 2009; Junn 2009; McThomas and Tessler 2016). Later work illustrated that sexism operates in elections even when a woman is not on the ticket. For instance, Simas and Bumgardner (2017) demonstrated that the GOP "War on Women" narrative in the 2012 presidential campaign heightened the salience of gender-relevant political issues and sharpened the effect of modern sexism on vote choice. Further scholarship has clarified this point, uncovering evidence that the hostile variant of sexism depresses support for women candidates, but the benevolent variant is tied not to a candidate's gender identification, but rather to their gendered leadership style, reflecting a preference for candidates with a more masculine self-presentation (Winter 2023).



Of course, gender bias does not just impact women candidates, but also the experiences of women officeholders. Hostile attitudes toward women explain why women leaders are singled out for threats of violence and harassment more so than similarly-situated men (Håkansson 2024). Sexism also shapes perceptions of leaders' responsiveness to their constituents (Costa 2021), with broader implications influencing factors ranging from attitudes toward key political issues (Cizmar and Kalkan 2023; Smilan-Goldstein 2024), to compliance with government-issued public health mandates (Chen and Farhart 2020; Kalaf-Hughes and Leiter 2020), to support for right-wing parties (Christley 2022). Taken together, this research suggests that sexism exerts an ongoing influence on electoral politics and the political culture more broadly.

### Future Directions for Research on Women Voters in *Politics & Gender*

Past research in this journal situates us to understand the outcomes of future elections and provides a strong foundation for additional research on women voters. Recently, Vice President Kamala Harris, only the second woman in the history of the United States to be a major party nominee in the general election, lost her presidential bid to Donald Trump. Naturally, comparisons can be made with Hillary Clinton's previous campaigns, but prior work on gender and elections in the journal also helps us explore questions related to campaign finance (Tolley, Besco, and Sevi 2022), intersectional representation (Montoya et al. 2022), and even the potential for a "gender backlash" (Sanbonmatsu 2008). It also orients us toward understanding gender gaps on key issues voters are citing as critical to their vote choice, such as immigration (Corral 2024), abortion (Cizmar and Kalkan 2023), and to a lesser degree, violence associated with terrorism (Haider-Markel and Vieux 2008). And because the election is closely tied up in bigger questions about democratic backsliding and public support for democratic norms in the United States, it presents new opportunities for exploring gender differences in perceptions of democratic governance (for related work in Europe, see Hansen and Goenaga 2021).

Given the dearth of research on women voters outside of Europe and North America in past issues of *Politics & Gender*, the editors may wish to encourage submissions of critical perspectives on women voters in other regions of the world. Another option might be to invite submissions organized around critical elections globally to complement past perspectives focused on voter behavior in American elections (e.g., the recent presidential election in Mexico). Other gaps we have identified include research into the intersection between gender, religious identity, and religious beliefs, with a focus on downstream electoral consequences (but see Friesen and Djupe 2017 for a look at the development of civic skills in Christian congregations). Masculinity is often overlooked as well. Past research suggests that men's ambivalence toward advances in gender equity impacts their political behavior (Jennings 2006), and this finding seems important for understanding, among other things, conservative trends in ideological identification among young men and the impact it has on their votes (Deckman 2024).

Our review also highlighted that although sexual orientation is a politically-relevant identity, there is less research on the role of LGBTQ+ politics in elections (but see Bell and Borelli 2024). This is no doubt due to limited data availability and lack of sub-sample sizes sufficient to draw meaningful inferences. With the increased frequency of LGBTQ+ identification in younger generations and the destigmatization of these identities for older generations, barriers to LGBTQ+ voting behavior research are lowering. For instance, a recent survey in Canada found that the voting behavior and party affiliation of nonbinary individuals differs compared to men and women, even when analyzing a subset of only LGBTQ+ identifying respondents (Albaugh et al. 2024). This work highlights the importance of scholarship encompassing a broad understanding of gender inclusive of queer, transgender, nonbinary, feminine, masculine, and other gendered conceptions of self (Murib 2024). Such work will encourage more nuanced development of the social and psychological underpinnings of gender difference.

The presence of gender and politics research has dramatically risen in the top journals in our field and the general social sciences, but for much of political science, “gender” is simply a control variable. The richness of the scholarship reviewed here highlights the utility of a dedicated subfield journal. As this brief review demonstrates, the study of women voters within political science crosses many major subfields, with scholarship on women voters primarily situated in country specific subfields (e.g., American, Canadian, etc.), but also explored comparatively. Theoretical and methodological approaches vary widely and often incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives. We expect this trend to only increase with time as political scientists continue to draw upon work from sociology, psychology, economics, and communication science. The majority of the articles in our corpus for this review leverage secondary data from sources such as the American National Election Studies, the Canadian Election Study, European Social Survey, and other established national datasets collected both online and over the phone. But increasingly authors are collecting novel data, which incorporate experimental designs and new measures to better understand the relationship between gender and electoral behavior. Still others rely upon different methodological perspectives offering contributions grounded in critical theory, discourse analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and case studies.

Advances in access to behavioral data, such as online voting records and campaign donations, will sharpen our explanations and predictions if we no longer have to rely only upon self-report. Technological advances in big data processing and artificial intelligence models also may change the scope of our questions, such as content analysis of large bodies of text from legislative speeches (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2017). Access to under-studied populations continues to increase as scholars from North America and Europe collaborate with counterparts in other regions of the world (Dieng, Haastруп and Kang 2024; Medie and Kang 2018). Applied research and partnerships with political parties, NGOs, government agencies, and others have opened the door to raising the impact of our scholarship while simultaneously providing field work opportunities. In sum, we enter the next decade of *Politics & Gender* scholarship well-

grounded in theoretical and empirical research from the past 20 years, with promising new directions to advance the field's understanding of the political implications of gender in elections.

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**Competing interest.** The authors have no competing interests to report.

## Notes

1. Based on Google Scholar citation counts.
2. This collection of articles, "Gender, Politics, and the Global Pandemic," is available [here](#).

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