



Readers' Room

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Christina Wolbrecht and J. Kevin Corder, *A Century of Votes for Women: American Elections since Suffrage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, £19.00). Pp. 308. ISBN 978 1 3169 4133 1.

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment transformed women's admission to American politics. Although access to the political electorate may have drastically improved for women since their enfranchisement, political representation, particularly in the highest offices, certainly has not. Seeking to grapple with these limitations but also in an endeavour to mark the centennial of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, Christina Wolbrecht and J. Kevin Corder, political scientists and authors of *A Century of Votes for Women: American Elections since Suffrage*, seek to examine the trajectory of how and why women turned out to vote and for whom during the last hundred years.

A Century of Votes for Women begins by establishing the notion that women are not a single, cohesive voting group. Rather, a multitude of factors other than gender need to be considered in order to explain women's turnout and voter choice in the ten decades since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The opening chapter acts as an introduction, defining key terminology and giving historical context. The subsequent chapters explore the battle for enfranchisement before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and how women voted immediately after suffrage. Within this opening section, Wolbrecht and Corder effectively outline a clear framework by focussing on three overarching themes within women's voting: "Legal order, gender order and electoral behaviour" (15). These three aspects form the methodology for the following chapters in order for Wolbrecht and Corder to examine how and why women voted in the hundred years since the Nineteenth Amendment.

Beginning with the 1920 presidential election that was held just a few months after the ratification of the amendment and concluding with the 2016 presidential election, Wolbrecht and Corder have chosen to focus on five successive chronological periods that span the century since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. All of these studies follow a similar structure: an overview of electoral history, a study of how women's lives have altered and the response of politicians and the media, an examination of the challenges and opportunities when observing women voters, and an overview of how many women voted in the presidential elections of the period and for whom.

Concentrating on three key areas – women's lives, turnout and voter choice – Wolbrecht and Corder examine the first women voters and how their entrance into the electorate was shaped by two world wars, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the New Deal. Wolbrecht and Corder conclude that while this decade saw large-scale social and political changes for many women, they were likely to cast fewer ballots than men and those who did embrace their newfound

enfranchisement were very likely to emulate how their husbands voted. Moving forward chronologically to examine women's voting patterns during the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, the findings suggest that although women's voting behaviour continued to be influenced by their husbands, these decades also witnessed vast social changes for women that greatly affected not only their likelihood to vote but also whom they would vote for. The emergence of survey data and public-opinion polls during this period transformed the study of voting choice, allowing a greater understanding of women's voting behaviour. Wolbrecht and Corder determine that, by the early 1960s, "almost 75%" of women voted and "the turnout gender gap shrank considerably" (122–23).

Wolbrecht and Corder further explore how social reform movements, such as the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism, altered the electoral behaviour of American women during the years from 1964 to 1976. This decade was defined by major political and social transformations that altered the everyday lives of many American women not seen since 1920. Wolbrecht and Corder's expansive analysis demonstrates the effects of these transformations and how, during these turbulent years, the gender turnout gap "narrowed to nothing" (158). Wolbrecht and Corder also note that "by 1964 more than half of voters in the presidential elections were women" (158).

The changing social context during the 1980s and 1990s meant that women had more independence (both economically and politically), resulting in this era being distinct from those before. Wolbrecht and Corder note that, for the first time in national history, women became more likely to vote than men. Finally, attention is paid to women's voting patterns from the turn of the new millennium to the 2016 presidential election. Spanning major social and political events, 9/11, the Obama presidency and the election of Trump, Wolbrecht and Corder observe the similarities and differences between the 2016 and the 1920 presidential elections and the extent of women's participation. Using the 2016 election as a social and political marker for progress, Wolbrecht and Corder conclude that although the 2016 campaign was extraordinary, due to the nominations of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, the outcome of the election was "mostly ordinary" (232). One of the leading contributions of this volume is the way in which empirical findings have been embedded in the historical context of women's rights. However, contemporary factors such as gun rights and gun control are neglected almost entirely in the study. This omission is arguably to the detriment of claims surrounding how social attitudes affect gender differences in voting choice.

The authors' findings demonstrate how the tale of a hundred years of women's suffrage can be summarized as initially large gender differences in turnout and small differences in preference immediately following the amendment, to small differences in turnout and large differences in preference a hundred years later. Their research presents a compelling argument, that a century of female political involvement cannot be reduced to a single notion of "the women's vote." Offering instead a counternarrative that dismisses claims that women's turnout and voting choice remain largely dictated by their lack of interest in politics or their tendency to follow the preference of their husbands, Wolbrecht and Corder demonstrate how women's voting is "characterized by events, issues, conditions, and candidates" (6). The value of the authors' contribution not only to gender studies but also to political analysis lies in their ability to analyse vast data of women voters over the last century and commendably demonstrate how an understanding of women's enfranchisement has altered in relation to changing social and political factors. Wolbrecht and Corder ultimately conclude that women

have never represented, and likely never will represent, a monolithic voting bloc. There is still more that needs to be done in order to truly understand the factors that influence female voting.

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Ira Nadel, *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, £22.99). Pp. 568. ISBN 978 0 1998 4610 8.

When Blake Bailey's authorized biography of Philip Roth was published by Norton in 2021, it was hailed by Cynthia Ozick in the *New York Times* as "a narrative masterwork."¹ But in the weeks that followed, disturbing stories about Bailey began to emerge online, including accusations of sexual assault. He was quickly dropped by his agent, and then his publisher, Norton, announced that *Philip Roth: The Biography* would be taken out of print, with unsold copies pulped. You can still get hold of it, though; the biography was picked up by Skyhorse Publishing, whose other titles include Woody Allen's memoir and Michael Cohen's account of his time as Trump's bagman. According to reports, Skyhorse will next year publish Bailey's side of the story in a memoir entitled *Repellent: Philip Roth, #MeToo, and Me*.

The Bailey scandal could've been lifted straight out of a Roth novel, where biographers are always nefarious characters. Media commentators linked the accusations against Bailey to the familiar charge that Roth's novels are misogynistic, tarring author and subject with the same brush and muddling fact and fiction – a confusion Roth himself liked to court in his writing. The coverage also recalled the reaction to *Leaving a Doll's House*, Claire Bloom's 1996 memoir, which divulged details of her tumultuous marriage to Roth and portrayed him as manipulative and vengeful (as well as unfaithful and litigious). Roth worried that the fallout would ruin his reputation; he blamed Bloom for the fact that he never got the Nobel. After his retirement from writing fiction in 2012, Roth spent much of his time collaborating with Bailey, putting together a 295-page document entitled "Notes for My Biographer" – a detailed rebuttal of Bloom's charges, and of just about every other slight he felt himself to have suffered during his long, complicated life.

Ira Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* appeared just as Bailey's book was heading to the pulpers. Nadel's subtitle suggests that his biography will give details not captured in the official account; it also seems to "indicate an awareness," as one reviewer noted, of his book's "also-ran status."² But now that the authorized narrative has been discredited, the counterlife has taken on a life of its own. With Roth scholars still a little uneasy about citing Bailey, Nadel's might well become the standard biography.

In his final chapter, Nadel describes Roth's working relationship with Bailey, noting how the author sent his biographer hundreds of documents accompanied by "meticulously typed memos" outlining "how they were to be used, and what to think about the material." Roth, Nadel claims, "was directing and even writing his biography ...

¹ Cynthia Ozick, "His Life as a Man," *New York Times*, 11 April 2021, "Sunday Book Review," 1.

² James Wolcott, "Sisyphus at the Selectric," *London Review of Books*, 20 May 2021.