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MORE THAN DOUBLE:

African American Women and the Rise of a "Women's Vote"

Liette Gidlow

On a late October day in 1920, forty-seven-year-old homemaker Matilda Wheelock and three other African American women visited the Board of Elections in Phoebus, Virginia, to register to vote. Each filled out an application, signed it, and answered a question about the definition of "a republic." All four women registered without incident.

Wheelock's experience was not typical for southern African American women in the first elections after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. The document that testifies to her success—a remarkable field report by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) investigator Addie Hunton—also details the obstructionism that many Black women encountered at registrars' offices across the South. Wheelock and her neighbors succeeded in registering, but Wheelock's own daughter did not. That same day, the registrar "quizzed" twenty-three-year-old Lucile Wheelock, a college graduate, for nearly an hour before announcing that she "did not pass."¹

The Wheelocks and their neighbors were part of a fresh surge to the polls of southern African Americans that began in the fall of 1920 and continued for years afterward. As newly enfranchised southern Black women tested their new rights, many southern Black men also seized the moment to try to regain the voting rights they, their fathers, or their grandfathers had lost. Even though many aspiring voters failed in their efforts, some succeeded, and their successes, together with the persistent demand for voting rights by those who failed, altered the course of US politics for decades to come.

These developments among African Americans were not the result that most white woman suffragists sought from the Nineteenth Amendment. After ratification, these suffragists worked to harness the power of women's ballots to try to solve pressing problems like economic insecurity and continuing legal inequality. As the 1920s wore on, white female voters failed to develop into a cohesive voting bloc or "woman's vote." Despite enfranchisement, suffragists' goals seemed as unattainable as ever, leaving many contemporaries then, and scholars since, to conclude that the Nineteenth Amendment "doubled" the electorate but did little to change election results or policy outcomes. Women's apparently low turnout at the polls, although difficult to measure precisely, made a mockery of suffragists' claims that women wanted to vote. Nor did many women win election to

office. By the end of the decade, progressive causes largely faltered. Woman suffrage recognized women as equal citizens in this signal civic right—that remained important in itself—but, frankly, not much changed.²

This interpretation of women's suffrage, however, does not fully account for the activities of aspiring African American women voters in the Jim Crow South at the time or more broadly across the United States in the decades since. Many contemporaries assumed that southern Black women had no interest in voting; certainly, white supremacists had long made the same claim about southern Black men. That assumption may have been the natural corollary to Booker T. Washington's well-publicized claim that African American men had no desire for "political equality," but it was far from the truth. In the fall of 1920, southern African Americans—newly enfranchised women together with male family members and neighbors, many of them veterans of the First World War with proud records of service to country who were now exempt from poll taxes—surged to the polls to claim, or reclaim, their right to vote. Their fresh demands for the ballot, triggered by the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, changed the course of US politics for the next hundred years.

In the months after ratification, African American women succeeded in registering or voting in communities in at least nine southern or border states, sometimes by the hundreds or thousands and often accompanied by men who were also determined to participate. In Charles County, Maryland, south of Washington, DC, some 160 Black women and nearly 90 Black men registered themselves as Republicans during the September registration period. In Savannah, Georgia, a local newspaper reported that "an astonishingly large number of negro women—more than 1,000"—registered to vote in Chatham County. In Richmond, Virginia, approximately one-tenth of the city's population of African American women succeeded in registering. In North Carolina, about one thousand Black women, scattered across the state, added themselves to the voter registration rolls. Black women and men collaborated, as men with voting experience coached women to prepare them to handle pushback at registrars' offices and polling places. In Lake City, Florida, an African American man who was a Republican organizer conducted meetings at "churches, lodges, and night schools" to "instruct Negro women how to vote." Colored Women's Voter Leagues sprouted in Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia to help Black women navigate white obstructionism and qualify for the ballot. Activists and news organizations in Shreveport, Louisiana; Birmingham, Alabama; and Houston, Texas also reported major, collective efforts to organize Black women voters. Despite the widespread dodges, deceptions, intimidation, and, at times, violence, some southern African Americans could pass the literacy tests and pay the poll taxes. Indeed, some *did*.³

The successes of new Black voters, even if they were outnumbered by those who failed, pried open a fresh crack in the edifice of white supremacy in the South. After all, the South's "Negro problem" at the polls was supposed to have already been solved. It had taken some forty years of fraud, intimidation, and bloody violence, but by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, white supremacists had largely succeeded in driving Black men from the polls. Beginning in Mississippi in 1890, southern states adopted new constitutions with disfranchising provisions that white supremacists believed would make these exclusions permanent and lock Black men out of the electorate for good.⁴ Now, with the newly ratified Nineteenth Amendment imposing woman suffrage upon states that did not ratify it, the "problem" had returned. This time, not only were African American men demanding the ballot; now, Black women were demanding it, too.

If the Nineteenth Amendment "doubled" the electorate, it also doubled the number of southern African Americans whom white supremacists needed to disfranchise, and disfranchisement on that scale required new tools. Before long, aspiring Black voters in the South learned that, like the Fifteenth Amendment before it, the Nineteenth Amendment would not guarantee their access to the ballot box and they would need to take the fight to new fronts.⁵ But the Nineteenth Amendment was a critical part of the continuum of struggle for southern Black voting rights dating back at least to Reconstruction and looking ahead to the 1965 Voting Rights Act and beyond. That struggle helped shape election law, partisan politics, and reform movements on the right and left.

So, what difference did the Nineteenth Amendment make? The successes and failures of aspiring southern African American voters—women but also men—in the 1920s resonated through the decades to come and helped change the American political landscape in four ways.

1. The Nineteenth Amendment Helped Resurrect the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

Scholars have attributed the spread of the "second" Ku Klux Klan—with its midwestern power base and anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic bent—to a range of factors, including nativism, religious fundamentalism, anti-modernism, anti-radicalism, rural economic distress, concern for traditional gender roles, and the business savvy of its corporate leaders.⁶ But in at least one southern locale, the resurrected Klan closely resembled the Klan of old. In 1920, Jacksonville was the largest city in Florida, and in October of that year, African American women there registered en masse, outnumbering new white women registrants by a narrow margin. Shortly after the close of the registration period and just three days before the election, one thousand

members of a “revived” Klan paraded the streets of the city “in disguise.” Their attempt to intimidate failed because more than four thousand Black voters showed up to vote on Election Day anyway, where, according to subsequent investigations by Republican officials and the NAACP, voting officials turned them away. A report in the *New York Herald* suggested that the second Klan’s intimidation of Black voters may have extended well beyond Jacksonville. “Open threats of violence, such as a Ku-Klux visit, with its beatings and crop burnings, or naked banishments at midnight, have so often been made good the colored brother is convinced of the certainty of such retribution and lets politics alone.” But despite campaigns of intimidation, some “colored brothers” and sisters persisted. White supremacists’ “problem” of the Negro voter did not go away.⁷

2. The Nineteenth Amendment Helped Expand and Entrench the White Primary.

The expanded potential of southern Black voters tested the tools that white supremacists had relied upon to keep African Americans out of the electorate. White supremacists’ situation was more fragile than one might have supposed for a region that had so widely disfranchised Black men, for “Negro Domination” did not require a Black Republican majority but only enough Black votes to decide an election between white Democratic factions. Disfranchisers depended upon poll taxes, literacy tests, and white primaries to keep Black voters out, but all three tactics fell short when confronted with the new challenge posed by the Nineteenth Amendment.

The poll tax was flawed because significant numbers of African Americans could pay it. Poll taxes had the added drawback of disenfranchising not just poor Blacks but poor whites as well. Literacy tests also fell short because they were decentralized and discretionary. These were not standardized tests processed in a consistent manner by a central body; rather, local officials administered them, and passing depended on their discretion. In a face-to-face encounter with every applicant (and repeated encounters with persistent applicants), registrars were tasked with deciding who had to take the test, which questions to ask, and whether the applicant’s answers were correct (or correct enough) to pass. All this became more difficult when registrars were taken by surprise, overwhelmed by numbers, or knew the people they were supposed to turn down, as records documenting their apparent improvisations, inconsistencies, and hesitations reveal. When African American women in Americus, Georgia, approached the county office, the registrar was reduced to “hid[ing] the book or himself.” In Phoebus, the Black community became convinced that after a few women successfully registered, an order to deny African American applicants “seems to have

been passed down before other colored applicants arrived." In fact, when Matilda Wheelock returned to ask why her daughter had been turned down, the registrar apologized, telling her that "he was sorry, but that he was obeying orders." A letter writer from Montgomery, Alabama, recounted how the registrar himself testified to his good character. When the registrar asked him, "Can you get two white men to vouch for you?" He replied, "Yes. You can. You have known me since I was a boy." The registrar hesitated, then fumbled a reply: "You are all right—but I can't do it." Literacy tests required election officials in every jurisdiction to hold the line consistently. Now, with ratification, there were twice as many potential Black voters to suppress. A writer in the *Pelham Journal* (Georgia) summed up the situation this way: "Evidently we will have to have another disfranchisement law put on the books."⁸

The solution turned out to be an improved version of a tool that had already emerged in southern elections: the white primary. Democratic officials had utilized white primaries in a piecemeal fashion in southern elections since the post-Reconstruction period. Some states used them irregularly, deploying them in selected counties or in elections for some levels of government but not others. North Carolina, for example, did not enact a statewide white primary until 1915. After ratification, however, Democratic officials worked to transform a patchwork of white primaries into a more robust, uniform system. Texas led the way in 1923, becoming the first state to centralize the task of barring Black voters from local Democratic Party organizations by assigning it directly to the state government. A more solid white primary system addressed the challenge posed by the Nineteenth Amendment by taking the business of disfranchisement out of registrars' hands. Easier to implement than literacy tests and devastatingly efficient, the white primary evolved after ratification into what the political scientist Ralph J. Bunche in 1941 called "the most effective device for the exclusion of Negroes from the polls in the South."⁹

3. The Nineteenth Amendment Forced the Republican Party to Affirm Its Identity as a White Party, Laying the Groundwork for the Post-Voting Rights Act Movement of Southern White Voters into the Party.

Nineteenth-century Democrats built their brand by promoting themselves as the party of white supremacy, but by the early twentieth century, the Republican Party was not far behind. In 1877, Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes made good on a promise to withdraw federal troops from southern states in exchange for winning the White House. This signaled a retreat by the "Party of Lincoln" from its commitments to civil rights that

unfolded in elections and in the courts over the next two decades. After the ground-shaking realignment of the 1890s, the Republican Party no longer needed southern voters, whether white or Black, to win the presidency and congressional majorities. Republican landslides between 1900 and 1908 made it easy for the party to leave behind the Black men whose votes had been a vital part of Reconstruction-era biracial “Black and Tan” coalitions. After the realignment of the 1890s, Republicans won federal offices by endorsing “lily whitism” instead.

The feeble southern Republican Party might have welcomed an influx of new supporters as an opportunity for growth, but it did not. After ratification, even as the national party apparatus appointed African American women like Hallie Q. Brown and Jeannette Carter to leadership roles, southern Republicans explicitly disavowed support from African Americans who were aspiring voters. This was the case, for example, in North Carolina, where the Republican gubernatorial candidate John Parker carefully threaded the needle to explain that while he had enthusiastically supported the Nineteenth Amendment (and hoped that support might now earn him white women’s votes), he was not stooping so low as to court Black voters. As he proclaimed from the stump in 1920, “the negro as a class does not desire to enter politics. The Republican Party of North Carolina does not desire him to do so.” Despite their need for more votes, southern Republicans rebuffed Black supporters in order to reassure newly enfranchised white women that, in the historian Glenda Gilmore’s words, they “were not joining a ‘Negro’ party.”¹⁰

Nearly fifty years later, when southern whites heard again that the Republican Party wanted their votes, the message sounded familiar. Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson signed sweeping civil rights bills into law in 1964 and 1965, and disaffected southern white Democrats went searching for a party in which their racial values could again find a comfortable home. In the dog whistles of Republican Richard Nixon’s 1968 campaign for “law and order,” these voters could hear echoes of the Republican Party’s “lily-white” past. After ratification, when aspiring Black voters used the Nineteenth Amendment to press their claims to the ballot, the Republican Party chose “lily-whitism” instead, helping lay the groundwork for the mass movement of white southerners into the Republican column in the decades to come.

4. The Nineteenth Amendment Helped Shape the Racial Politics of the Feminist Movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The failure of white former suffragists in the 1920s to advocate for the voting rights of African American women in the South cast a shadow long

enough to dim the prospects for full collaboration across the color line during the feminist upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s. Faced with disfranchisement in the early elections after ratification, southern Black women reached out to white former suffragists for support but to no avail. In early 1921, sixty delegates who represented Black clubwomen from fourteen states, Addie Hunton among them, petitioned the National Woman's Party (NWP) to press Congress to investigate the disfranchisement of Black women in the recent presidential election. In a tense meeting with Alice Paul, the petitioners laid out their case. Given the NWP's leadership in fighting for the amendment, they argued, "We can not then believe that you will permit this amendment to be so distorted in its interpretation that it shall lose its power and effectiveness. . . . No women are free until all are free." But the NWP's response surely made believers of them because Paul dismissed their concerns as "race issues" unrelated to a women's rights agenda and denied their request to address the full organization. As great a feminist leader as she was—innovative, dogged, bold, and brave—Paul could not grasp intersectionality. After the meeting, she complained to her supporters, "Why do these people harass us?"¹¹

The League of Women Voters did not do much better. Although the League, the successor organization to National American Woman Suffrage Association, conducted massive publicity and educational campaigns in the 1920s to boost voter turnout, it barely acknowledged that the low turnout in the South was rooted in racial discrimination. Instead, it tiptoed around the "race question," framing its signature "Get-Out-the-Vote" campaigns in the South as campaigns to get out the "qualified" vote, a condition that gave white supremacists all the cover they needed to camouflage continued racial discrimination as the preservation of democracy. Nor did the League outside the South make much effort to court Black women members, and most Black women who did join the League served in segregated chapters. "By the end of the decade," the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham concludes, "the League of Women Voters had lost, largely by its own choice, the potential for being an important mobilizing force among black women."¹²

In the complicated, intertwined histories of the movements for freedom for African Americans of all sexes and rights for women of all races, the Nineteenth Amendment thus serves as a bridge between the first Reconstruction and the second. Some fifty years before ratification, the woman suffrage movement had split over the question of Black men's voting rights. Nearly fifty years after ratification, Black and white feminists failed to form the unified, deeply collaborative, cross-racial women's rights movement that many activists sought. At the midpoint, in the 1920s, white women broadly failed to stand up for Black women's voting rights or for those of Black men. And at the center of it all stood African American women who

struggled across generations to secure voting rights for their community and for themselves and who sometimes reached out, with little success, to white women's groups to join them in that fight. Little wonder that many Black feminists in the 1960s demurred when white women's groups asked them to join their "universal sisterhood." Little wonder that women's rights activists of different races instead forged what the sociologist Benita Roth calls "separate roads to feminism."¹³

White women's votes in the aftermath of ratification may not have done much to alter the course of American politics, but southern African Americans' efforts to take their place at the polls in 1920 and in the years to come certainly did. In the short term, the Nineteenth Amendment made the work of white supremacy much more difficult, triggering a new round of Klan violence in the style of the old and stimulating efforts to retool the techniques of disfranchisement. Over the next half century, the racial dynamics forged in the aftermath of ratification resonated as the Republican Party reconstituted its white base in the South and as women's rights activists, Black and white, struggled to make common cause in the feminist upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s.

Over a longer time frame, the effects were more dramatic still. Before the end of the century, a women's voting bloc did indeed emerge, one with high voter turnout, a sharp preference for one party, and consistent performance across election cycles. That voting bloc emerged not among white women but among African American women. After many African Americans moved north and west in the Great Migration; after most Black voters moved into the Democratic column; and after the Voting Rights Act became law, African American women registered and voted, en masse, sometimes despite ongoing resistance.

Their votes have made a difference. Sometimes their votes have made *the* difference. In every presidential election since 1976, African American women have shown the sharpest partisan preference of any demographic group. In the closely fought 2000 presidential election, Black women voters constituted the margin of victory for candidate Al Gore in eight states. In 2008 and 2012, African American women posted the highest voter turnout of any demographic group, helping to secure the election and reelection of Barack Obama. In 2017, Black women voters supplied more than the margin of victory for the Democratic underdog Doug Jones in the hotly contested Alabama Senate race. And, in 2018, a study by the NAACP and two research partners concluded that "Black voters," and in particular Black women voters, "propelled the Blue Wave" that captured the US House of Representatives.¹⁴

It took the better part of a century, but the Nineteenth Amendment *did* produce a “women’s vote”—a Black women’s vote. And as Black suffragists hoped and white supremacists feared when the Nineteenth Amendment took effect, that vote has made a difference indeed.

NOTES

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¹[Addie W. Hunton], “Phoebus,” [25 October 1920], Group I, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (hereafter NAACP Records), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²For examples of this line of argument, see Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women’s Movement, 1920–1940* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and Anna L. Harvey, *Votes without Leverage: Women in American Electoral Politics, 1920–1970* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Of course, the claim that the Nineteenth Amendment doubled the electorate is not quite right because women in fifteen states had won full suffrage rights through state action before ratification.

³*Baltimore Morning Sun*, September 30, 1920, Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File (hereafter TNCF) (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1976); NAACP, “Disfranchisement of Colored Americans in the Presidential Election of 1920,” [December 1920], p. 14, 18, Group I, NAACP Records; Andrew Buni, *The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1902–1965* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 79; Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 218–224; NAACP, “Disfranchisement,” 12; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment,” in Scharf and Jensen, *Decades of Discontent*, 261–278, 265; NAACP, “Disfranchisement,” 17; “Declaration of Incorporation of Ex-Soldiers Co-operative Association, Inc.,” 11 December 1925, RG 60, US Department of Justice Central Files, Archives II, National Archives, College Park, Maryland; Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women’s Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 147–148; and Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 33, 50.

⁴Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁵Liette Gidlow, "The Sequel: The Fifteenth Amendment, the Nineteenth Amendment, and Southern Black Women's Struggle to Vote," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17, no. 3 (2018): 433–449.

⁶Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

⁷*Metropolis* (Jacksonville, FL), September 30, 1920, TNCF; and *New York Herald*, October 24, 1920, quoted in NAACP, "Disfranchisement," 15.

⁸S. S. Humbert to NAACP, November 9, 1920, Group I, NAACP Records; [Hunton], "Phoebus"; NAACP, "Disfranchisement," 17; and *Pelham Journal* (Georgia), October 29, 1920, quoted in NAACP, "Disfranchisement," 21.

⁹Oliver Douglas Weeks, "The White Primary," *Mississippi Law Journal* 35, no. 2 (1935): 135–153, 136–138; and Ralph J. Bunche, "The Negro in the Political Life of the United States," *Journal of Negro Education* 10, no. 3 (1941): 567–584, 573.

¹⁰Glenda E. Gilmore, "False Friends and Avowed Enemies: Southern African Americans and Party Allegiances in the 1920s," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Daily, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 219–238, 222.

¹¹Freda Kirchwey, "Alice Paul Pulls the Strings," *The Nation*, March 2, 1921, <https://www.thenation.com/article/alice-paul-pulls-strings/>.

¹²Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s–1920s* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 78–89; and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920s," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837–1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 150.

¹³Winifred Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4; and Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁴Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich, "Significance of Black Women's Vote Ignored," *Women's eNews*, November 15, 2000, <https://womensenews.org/2000/11/significance-black-womens-vote-ignored/>; Kelly Dittmar and Glynda Carr, "Black Women Voters: By the Numbers," [2016], Higher Heights, accessed April 26, 2019, http://www.higherheightsforamerica.org/black_women_voters_by_the_numbers; Andre M. Perry, "Black Women Are Looking Forward to the 2020 Elections," Brookings Institution, January 10, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-women-are-looking-forward-to-the-2020-elections/>; and Stephanie Akin, "Black Voters Propelled Blue Wave," *Roll Call*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/the-blue-wave-was-propelled-by-black-voters-survey-finds>.