


ARTICLE

## Introduction: Gender and Partisan Polarization in the Modern Political World

Regina L. Wagner 

University of Alabama  
Email: [rlwagner1@ua.edu](mailto:rlwagner1@ua.edu)

In the years since the 2016 presidential election, questions of partisan identity and partisan polarization have burst into broader public discourse, and they have invariably been intertwined with curiosity about gender and gendered behavior, especially as it relates to partisanship and voting. What is women's role in creating and sustaining the current political moment, or is politics as we experience it today shaped entirely by and for men? Political science as a discipline has of course tackled these questions for a much longer time, even though for some scholars, the current political moment has bestowed greater urgency on these long-running discussions and puzzles. However, even within political science, these two phenomena and their related questions have not always been examined in tandem.

Scholars of gender and scholars of partisan polarization have produced a considerable wealth of scholarship and have accumulated significant knowledge of the past several decades. However, for much of that time, each group has had little to say to and about the other, meaning that the interaction between gender and partisan polarization received little to no attention until much more recently, when scholars of both started to become much more interested in the interaction between questions of gender and questions of polarization. The result has been fruitful and illuminating, demonstrating again how much political science as a discipline can benefit from connecting different aspects of the broader political environment more explicitly. In the pages that follow, new research in this crucial and exciting tradition will shed further light on questions of importance to scholars of gender, partisan polarization, and those of us who are curious about the connection between both.

Broadly speaking, three separate but related questions drive and connect much of this growing research on gender and partisan polarization in the United States: the interaction of gender and partisanship and its direct effect on legislator behavior, the relationship between partisan polarization and policies primarily targeted at or affecting women, and women's electoral behavior in a more and more polarized world. Women, as both voters and legislators, must

determine how their gender and partisan identities fit together, how they reflect on their policy priorities, and what they mean for their behavior, both in the legislative arena as well as in the voting booth. The authors in this special issue address each of these questions in turn, each one contributing important insight to our understanding of the complex interaction between partisanship, gender, and polarization in current US politics.

Research on the connection between partisanship and legislator gender has grown more abundant and insightful in the last decade, with researchers moving away from studying “women legislators” and toward studying “Democratic women legislators” and “Republican women legislators.” Examples of this include Deckman’s work on Tea Party women<sup>1</sup> showing how women are not generally across the board more liberal, even if that trend still holds on average, and Wineinger’s work on Republican women’s representation in Congress,<sup>2</sup> where she examines the role women have on the Republican Party in the legislative setting and how Republican women present themselves as women as well as Republicans. In my own work,<sup>3</sup> I have found that contextual factors interact with partisanship and gender to shape the representational activities of male and female legislators, creating distinct representative patterns for each subgroup.

In “Gender and Party Polarization in the US Congress: Invisibility and Hypervisibility,” Rosalynn Cooperman of Mary Washington University explores this interaction between gender and partisanship further, exploring the gendered nature of partisan polarization, and finding that Democratic women and Republican men, in particular, being most distinct from each other, benefit from emphasizing partisan differences. Cooperman asks whether and how women legislators are in fact different from the men of their own parties and connects these questions of gender and partisanship back to the increasing polarization that we have been observing in the US House of Representatives.

When the Supreme Court of the United States overturned *Roe v Wade* in June of 2022, it quickly became clear that in a post-*Roe* world, partisanship and party control of political institutions, in both the nation and individual states, would be critical for shaping reproductive policy and access (or lack thereof) to abortion services. In large part, developments have followed the expected patterns, with Republican lawmakers often eagerly moving to restrict abortion access and many Democratic states taking steps to enshrine abortion rights in both laws as well as constitutions. However, there have been some notable wrinkles, especially when it comes to voters in conservative states supporting efforts and measures to protect or even expand abortion access, running counter to elected officials in their own party. Some attention has also been played to the role of Republican women, such as red state governors, in the post-*Roe* policy-making world.

In “The Indirect Approach: Restricting Abortion Access through US Federal Legislation After Dobbs,” Crystal Brown of Worcester Polytechnic Institute looks at five bills that have been introduced in the US Congress post-*Roe* in an effort to illuminate common threads among these legislative efforts when it comes to intent, language, and portrayal of women. She then uses these patterns to discuss implications that arise from these bills for future legislative efforts in the United

States with respect to reproductive rights and abortion access, connecting policy making to partisan polarization, and the narratives that shape liberal and conservative notions of gender.

Finally, Hillary Clinton's run for the presidency in 2016 marks an important event, not only for American politics broadly but also for questions of gender and politics as well as party polarization. Clinton overwhelmingly won women voters, 54%–41%, an increase over 2012, when Barack Obama won women voters 55%–44%.<sup>4</sup> The split for white women alone looks very different, with Trump winning this group 53%–42%,<sup>5</sup> suggesting that much of the gender gap (but not all of it) is explained by partisanship. It stands to reason, however, that factors beyond partisanship shape women's vote choices, especially in an election when one of their own could ascend to the presidency for the first time.

In "Hillary Clinton, Female Voters, and Tall Poppies in the 2016 Election," David Bridge of Baylor University explores what could have motivated women voters to not vote for Clinton, who had the chance to become the nation's first female president. Using the "tall poppies" theory from psychology and communications research, he examines whether self-described homemakers, controlling for party affiliation and ideology, were more likely to cast their votes for Trump, or maybe against Clinton, and he finds support for a split between women in the workforce and homemakers.

Together, these three articles provide important insights into the intricate relationship between gender and partisan polarization, but they also, and maybe even more importantly, lay the groundwork for future research expanding on their insights and further driving our knowledge in this important field. As we stand today, questions of partisan and gender identity, policy making as it relates to women and is shaped by partisanship and polarization, and questions of voting behavior stand to become more important in the future. Recent election results have revealed sharp and growing partisan divisions, hardened polarized fronts, and deep gender gaps. The research presented here establishes a path to understanding each of these better, laying the groundwork for making us better researchers and more informed participants in civic society at the same time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Melissa M. Deckman, *Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Leaders, and the Changing Face of the American Right* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine N. Wineinger, *Gendering the GOP. Intraparty Politics and Republican Women's Representation in Congress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Regina L. Wagner, "Invisible Forces: How Contextual Receptiveness to Women Shapes Women's Representation in the U.S. Congress." *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy* 40, no. 4 (2019): 445–72.

<sup>4</sup> Center for the American Woman and Politics, Fact Sheet: The Gender Gap: Voting Choices in Presidential Elections, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> CNN Exit Polls 2016.