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THE PARADOX OF
GENDER EQUALITY

*How American Women's Groups
Gained and Lost Their Public Voice*

New Edition, with a New Preface

Kristin A. Goss

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Preface to the 2020 Edition

Women's organizations have played a central role in shaping American public policy. *The Paradox of Gender Equality* examines how this role evolved from the late 19th century to the dawn of the 21st. This preface picks up where the book left off by reflecting on women's collective activism in an age of democratic distress.

The book chronicles the issues that most concerned women's organizations, how they framed their authority to influence policy on these issues, and how these agendas and frameworks changed over time. The story relies on many sources of information, but the most important is an original dataset of women's groups' appearances before Congress—more than 10,000 of them—spanning roughly 1880 through 2000. These data reveal fascinating, often counterintuitive patterns in the extent, breadth, and framing of women's issue engagement.

With 20 years' hindsight, it is now clear that by 2000, women's collective mobilization was on the verge of reinvention and revival. The final chapter of the first edition, written in 2011, caught glimpses of the female phoenix. New "hybrid" organizations were creatively combining and updating time-worn frameworks to appeal to a new generation of women. While the book hinted at this development, the main story ended on a more somber note. Even as women had gained political and economic clout, their organizations were fading fast. In terms of capacity and policy reach, American women's groups were far less vibrant in 2000 than they had been in 1950—and, by some measures, less vibrant than in the 1910s.

And yet, as the book documents, the history of women's organizing involves beating odds and countering assumptions. For example:

- Suffrage supposedly had little effect on women's political engagement. But in the first few decades after the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment, women's organizations flourished, greatly expanding their policy interests and increasing their prominence on Capitol Hill.
- Midcentury, middle-class white women are caricatured as shallow homemakers happy to leave the public's business to the men. But actually white women were deeply involved with the nation's most pressing policy issues. "Betty Crocker" had another role as a citizen lobbyist, and midcentury was her moment.
- The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s drew criticism for marginalizing women of color, lesbians, and others who did not fit a certain mold. And yet organizations representing intersectionally disadvantaged women exercised their voice before Congress with a vigor and frequency that might surprise contemporary audiences.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the book is that for most of the 20th century, women's organizational energy was widely dispersed. The (nearly all male) Congress extended invitations to women's groups to provide expertise in policy domains as wide ranging as international relations, environmental protection, crime and justice, democratic governance, poverty, housing, civil rights, and education. For much of the 20th century, virtually every issue was a women's issue.

The book covers the four decades before ratification of the 19th Amendment, which barred voting discrimination on the basis of sex, and the eight decades afterward, during which women's economic status and political standing grew. Like many works that aspire to understand the present by unearthing the past, this study was undertaken and published at a time of change, both for women and for the American pressure group system.

In his seminal work on social capital, political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) notes that as problems begin to overwhelm society's capacity to address them, we often see a boom in civic institution building. Such was the case in the Progressive Era, for example, when many of the most influential mass membership organizations were founded. In the Progressive Era and the decades that followed, white women and women of color fueled a wide array of business and professional women's clubs, sororities, ethnic and religious organizations, unions and other job-related associations, as well as civic powerhouses such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Negro Women, and the League of Women Voters. The women who filled these organizations' boards and

volunteer ranks were important civic entrepreneurs, community organizers, and policy activists. And yet by the latter decades of the 20th century, as sociologist Theda Skocpol (2003) has documented, American civic life was undergoing a transformation from "membership to management," wherein professionally staffed, Washington-based, narrowly focused interest groups took over the policy work once dominated by large federated organizations of everyday citizens, including women. This transformation reflected many underlying changes, including a massive expansion in the federal government's policy reach and the growing complexity of the problems that policymakers sought to address.

Now, as the 21st century enters its third decade, the United States faces a most daunting challenge: assaults on the norms and institutions of democracy itself. History tells us that these assaults will meet a vigorous response from women working through civil society organizations. After more than a century of developing and deploying gendered frameworks for public action, women are well prepared to lead a movement for democratic renewal. And indeed, the 2016 U.S. presidential election is proving to be a watershed moment in a female-led civic renaissance.

The book outlined three big ideas (or frameworks) that have motivated American women's collective action over the past century. These frameworks emphasize women as mothers, women as equal claimants to legal and social rights, and women as good citizens. The prominence of each framework has varied across issues, organizations, and eras. But each framework has stood the test of time both on its own and in combination with the others. As I discussed in the concluding chapter, women's organizations of the late 20th and 21st century creatively sampled from each to produce hybrid frameworks that resonate with contemporary women.¹ This work continues.

Three prominent and very different women's organizations—the League of Women Voters, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and the constellation of groups under the banner of the "Resistance"—illustrate the intertwining of continuity and change in American women's activism. They offer a glimpse of what has changed after the book left off.

The League of Women Voters: Old Group, Newly Urgent Challenges

The (National) League of Women Voters was established in 1920 as the successor to the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. With

a founding mission to train newly enfranchised women in good citizenship, the League spent decades developing units in states and localities across the country. The national League and its state and local affiliates appeared nearly 1,000 times before Congress through the close of the 20th century—more than any other women’s organization. The League testified authoritatively on legislation spanning more than 100 policy domains. The League’s prominence as a policy actor was related both to the breadth of its interests and to the care that it took to study the issues and assemble, from the ground up, consensual positions on the great questions of the day.

Like other mass membership federations, the League placed heavy time and leadership demands on its members. For this reason and others, the League struggled to stay relevant as educated women entered the labor force in droves and professional interest groups moved into policy domains that the League had once dominated. Membership in the League peaked around the 1970s and dropped in half by 2000. (See chapter 4.) With constraints on its resources, the League maintained its identity as a multi-issue organization but prioritized a core mission: the promotion and protection of democracy. The “Democracy Agenda,” instituted in 2004, emphasized traditional concerns such as voting rights and access, while also focusing on campaign finance, lobbying reform, and opposition to partisan gerrymandering.

The League’s democracy agenda and federated structure, together with its century-long commitment to nonpartisanship, positioned it well to capture and channel grassroots anger over the 2016 election and the broader infirmities that it exposed. From 2016 to 2019, League membership grew by a third nationwide.

I had a bird’s eye view of the renaissance. I had joined my local League in Virginia in 2004 to help me better understand the inner workings of an organization that was turning out to be a key player in my study. Immediately upon joining, I was drafted onto the board as the newsletter editor. I stayed on the board for the next 12 years, including the final 3 as president. My fellow members were remarkable, and our little League filled an important niche in the community—putting together voter guides, holding public forums, and registering voters. But we struggled to recruit new members, especially young people and people of color. The organization felt like an older white women’s organization, and it was.

Sometime around 2014, the situation began to feel different, and membership started to edge up. Some of our younger members were trying new and creative approaches, which were paying off in spades. But the political context was important, too. Anecdotally, it seemed that people were weary

of the intense partisanship in Washington during the Obama years and were looking for a nonpartisan, problem-solving organization as a place to make a contribution.

After the 2016 election, this bubbling discontent boiled over. Our local League’s membership tripled between 2015 and 2019. With the surge in members looking for ways to make a difference—and *now*—committees, study groups, and activist cadres emerged to give force to longstanding priorities such as gerrymandering reform, affordable housing, and voter registration. The League offered a locally accessible organization, with a trusted brand, strong leadership, and a policy agenda ideally suited to citizens anguished over the state of American democracy. People were ready to advocate for democracy, and the League had decades of experience doing so.

The case of the League illustrates a continuity in the long history of American women’s activism: the appropriation of a “good citizen” framework to legitimize women’s civic place. As I discuss in chapter 5, the framework rejects the idea that women are different from men while at the same time implicitly portraying women as civically superior—less political and more interested in the public good. This nimble framework resonated in the 20th century, and it continues to resonate in today’s period of democratic discord.

Moms Demand Action: New Group, Age-Old Challenges

Women’s groups historically have been at the forefront of movements for social reform. Gun regulation has all the hallmarks of a traditional women’s issue. Indeed, in the 1930s, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs went to Capitol Hill to urge passage of landmark federal firearms legislation. At the turn of the 21st century, the Million Mom March, created by a suburban mother and publicist, arose in response to mass shootings of children in safe spaces. The chapter-based organization infused maternal tropes with subtle snark to advocate for policy change in statehouses and the U.S. Congress. The book identified the Million Mom March as a new hybrid organization whose creative combining of traditional identity frameworks might herald a revival of women’s collective action.

In 2012, after 20 first graders and 6 educators were killed at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, another suburban mother with a public relations background created a second maternally rooted organization—Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. Like its predecessor,

this organization had a “badass mom” sensibility. But Moms Demand Action had more movement-building resources—including lots of philanthropic money and social media tools—to facilitate connection and coordination among gun control sympathizers. Other factors provided additional momentum, including an escalation in mass public shootings and a renewed willingness of Democratic politicians to prioritize gun control. Like generations of women’s groups that came before, Moms Demand Action has deployed maternalist, feminist, and “good citizen” frameworks to advance its agenda. Specifically, the group has chosen to emphasize how American gun laws threaten children, women in abusive relationships, and the fabric of social life.

As of this writing, Moms Demand Action has chapters in all 50 states and claims tens of thousands (perhaps hundreds of thousands) of active volunteers. In the 2018 midterm elections, more than 40 members and survivors ran for public office. These candidates included the Moms group’s national spokeswoman, Lucy McBath, who beat the odds to win a seat in Congress from Georgia.

The case of Moms Demand Action, like the Million Mom March before it, illustrates the enduring power of maternal frameworks of collective action. The “Goundhog Day”-like reinvention of moms-for-gun-control groups reinforces one of the book’s core conclusions: Women are interested in engaging, as women, on issues beyond women’s rights. But this possibility presents a triple challenge to issue entrepreneurs: to see the demand, to tweak traditional frameworks so that they speak to contemporary sensibilities, and to hitch gendered frameworks to the issue at hand. Issue entrepreneurs need to make sense of women’s urgency and organize it.

The Resistance: New Groups, New Challenges

The 45th president of the United States was inaugurated on January 20, 2017. The next morning, several million women took to the streets. Wearing hand-knitted pink “pussyhat” caps—a nod to a vulgarity uttered by the new president some years before—women and their male allies staged what is believed to be the largest political demonstration in American history. Somewhere between 3 and 5 million marchers clogged Washington and scores of cities and towns across the country (and even the world).² While the women’s marches did not congeal into a new powerhouse interest group, they did presage a renaissance in women’s collective action.

The 2017 Women’s March was billed as a march for women’s rights.

The new president had been caught on tape bragging of sexual conquest, and he was expected to appoint Supreme Court justices who would undermine reproductive rights. Not surprisingly, as work by sociologist Dana Fisher has found, concern for women’s rights indeed was the top motivation for attending (cited by 61 percent of protesters surveyed).³

But the women’s march was much more than a women’s rights demonstration. Fisher’s research shows that roughly one-quarter to one-third of the protesters were motivated at least in part by the environment, racial justice, LGBTQ rights, objections to the president, equality, or social welfare (including gun violence).⁴ Protesters held signs decrying Russian influence in the election, championing science, and defending democratic values.

After the women’s march, organizations quickly formed to combat the new president and his agenda. A state-level campaign organizer in Virginia, which was gearing up for off-year elections in the months after the inauguration, strained to manage the influx of energetic volunteers associated with what she termed “pop-up groups.”⁵ She also struggled to understand this new civic universe. Who were these new groups, and who were their leaders? What capacity did they have? What were their priorities, and how could they be of help? How were all these groups related to each other, if at all?

Two scholars, historian Lara Putnam and political scientist Theda Skocpol, decided to find out. Working independently in non-urban areas across four swing states, they found a surge in civic activism—and it was led by women. These Resistance activists typically were college-educated, middle-aged and retired, rooted in suburbia, and connected to professional networks in nonprofits, teaching, government service, and other public-facing professions. The scholars concluded that the public protests were “just a small piece of a far more consequential rebuilding of the face-to-face structures of political life.”⁶

These findings echo those from big public protests in 2017 and 2018. Regardless of the focus—women’s issues, science, climate change, racial justice, gun violence—women constituted the majority of participants (roughly 70 percent on average).⁷ Most were highly educated and middle aged.⁸ Notably, protesters (male and female) typically didn’t hear about the demonstration through a formal organization.⁹ Nor did formal organizations play “a strong role in turning out participants to march in the streets or getting them to march again and again.”¹⁰

The case of Resistance organizations illustrates several themes in the book. One theme is that public policy is not only a goal of civic mobiliza-

tion, but also a driver of it. Threats to hard-won policy victories, as well as to broadly accepted norms and values, spurred women's collective engagement. Policy indeed has feedback effects that shape organizational agendas. (See chapter 7.)

The Resistance case also calls our attention to the enduring value of old-style, in-person participation—a mode of engagement that makes uncomfortable demands on activists' time, patience, feelings, and assumptions. Such participation has always been facilitated by technology (mimeograph machines, telephone trees, email, social media). But technology has never been a substitute for showing up.

Finally, the Resistance pop-up groups illustrate the historical pattern and promise of civic reinvention. Left-leaning Resistance groups, like the right-leaning Tea Party organizations that emerged a few years before—show that civil society remains a fertile field for deep engagement. But organizational structures are changing. In her study of the Resistance, Fisher found that the movement is less formal and hierarchical than the civic universe of old. Instead, the Resistance follows a “distributed organizing” model that relies on “fluid membership” (as opposed to formal membership secured by dues or organizational service), “loosely affiliated networks” (as opposed to formally accountable federated structures), and “geographically diffuse activism” (as opposed to brick and mortar organizations that mobilize in the community where they are located).¹¹

The informal, digitally networked mode of organizing is substantively important, but it also makes shifts in civic engagement more challenging to study. *The Paradox of Gender Equality* was able to capture women's policy engagement over time by examining a consistent mode of formal engagement—testimony at congressional hearings. These appearances were duly catalogued in big books and then digitized into a searchable online platform. Hearing testimony wasn't a perfect measure of women's organizations' agendas, but it was a pretty good one.

The heyday of congressional hearings has long passed. If a scholar wanted to study shifts in the policy engagement of women's organizations—or any category of organization—from this date forward, what data would the researcher use? The data would have to be reliable, valid, and subject to consistent collection over time. An obvious possibility is social media output, which captures organizational priorities and can be systematically “scraped” and analyzed. But anyone can create a Twitter feed; it's not clear how a researcher would identify the universe of organizational feeds that matter or account for inconsistency in posting practices. I pose the data question not because it's unanswerable; scholars deal with data

challenges all the time. But accurately measuring informal, networked organizing may bedevil studies that try to understand big shifts over long periods of time.

Let me return to where I started. Throughout history, women's collective engagement has risen when it was expected to fall and fallen when it might have been expected to rise. History is complicated and counter-intuitive. But one lesson seems clear: Big problems often lead to a civic renaissance. Even as women remain underrepresented in positions of formal power, they continue to dominate civil society where this renaissance must begin. And so it has.

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NOTES

1. See also Goss and Heaney 2010.
2. Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, “This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 2017 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/?utm_term=.78a9ef9fbd8a).
3. Dana R. Fisher, *American Resistance: From the Women's March to the Blue Wave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 51.
4. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 51.
5. Gideon Lewis-Kraus, “How the ‘Resistance’ Helped Democrats Dominate Virginia,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 13, 2017.
6. Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, “Middle America Reboots Democracy,” *Democracy*, February 20, 2018.
7. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 45.
8. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 43.
9. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 94.
10. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 63.
11. Fisher, *American Resistance*, 78–86.