

# Direct Democracy and Women's Political Engagement



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**Abstract:** *What are the conditions that promote gender equality in political participation? In this article, I propose that the presence of direct democracy expands gender equality in political participation by signaling the system's openness to women's voice, confirming their political competency, and highlighting their stake in political decisions. To test this argument, I leverage a quasi-experiment in Sweden in the aftermath of the introduction of universal suffrage, where the type of municipal political institutions was determined by a population threshold. My findings lend strong support to the effect of direct democracy on the political inclusion of women. I find that the gender gap in electoral participation was smaller in municipalities using direct democracy than in similarly sized municipalities that only had representative institutions.*

**Replication Materials:** The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/AGIMGY>.

Across the world, women's engagement in politics tends to lag behind that of men. Although the gender gap in turnout has disappeared in many countries (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Quaranta and Dotti Sani 2018; Smets and Van Ham 2013), research demonstrates that women still participate less frequently in other forms of political activities, such as making campaign contributions, joining a political organization, or persuading others to vote (Burrell 2004; Deposato and Norrander 2009; Fraile and Gomez 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Women's lower propensity to engage in politics raises normative concerns, and it has important policy consequences. Given that men and women tend to hold divergent political preferences (Alvarez and McCaffery 2003; Gottlieb, Grossman, and Robinson 2016), lower levels of political participation among women can produce policies that are systematically biased against women's preferences, which in turn can reinforce gender inequalities in social and economic domains.

While scholars have examined the effect of cultural (Inglehart and Norris 2000) and economic factors (Morgan-Collins and Teele 2017) on women's political participation, there has been less discussion on how

the political environment affects gendered patterns of political behavior. Recently, the historical political economy literature has drawn attention to the role of institutional context by investigating how proportional representation (Skorge 2018a) and heightened party competition (Corder and Wolbrecht 2016) have increased women's turnout relative to men's in the early twentieth century.

This article illuminates an alternative institutional mechanism that narrows the gender gap in participation: direct democracy. In broader terms, direct democracy refers to political processes that allow ordinary citizens to directly decide on laws rather than select representatives to make decisions on their behalf (Matsusaka 2005). The most widespread forms of direct democracy include citizen initiatives, in which citizens vote on fellow citizens' policy proposals, and referendums, in which citizens vote on a law already approved by the legislature. Direct democracy also covers town meetings, in which citizens gather on a regular basis for making public decisions. In several advanced democracies, most famously in the United States and Switzerland, direct democratic procedures have become an integral part of the policy-making process across different levels of government.

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In this article, I propose that the presence of direct democracy signals the openness of the system to women's political activism and confirms that women are equally competent to make important contributions to political decision making. It also enables women to more closely observe how their political actions translate into changes in their lives, thereby increasing their sense of having political influence. These effects will in turn increase women's political participation at a higher rate than men's.

Although recent work suggests that women and men now turn out at a similar rate (Quaranta and Dotti Sani 2018), women's turnout was substantially lower than that of men when they first gained voting rights (Duverger 1955; Tingsten 1937). I investigate how the presence of direct democracy affected the gendered patterns of electoral participation in the earlier years of women's enfranchisement. Specifically, I test the effect of direct democracy on the gender gap in turnout through leveraging a natural experiment in Sweden in the early twentieth century. Between 1919 and 1953, a population threshold determined whether direct democratic institutions governed Swedish localities or whether elected representatives governed it through a local council. This plausibly exogenous variation in local political institutions coincided with the introduction of universal suffrage in the country, providing a rare opportunity to identify the effect of local direct democratic institutions on women's political inclusion, while controlling for their past behavioral patterns. Results from regression discontinuity (RD) analyses confirm that the presence of direct democracy has strong effects on the political inclusion of women. Extending this baseline analysis and using rich information from minutes of municipal meetings, I examine whether women's involvement in direct democratic meetings is associated with their participation in subsequent parliamentary elections.

This article makes three important contributions. First, it extends the literature on political institutions and women's political inclusion. Most studies on this topic have focused on how electoral institutions, especially those expected to increase women's representation, bring women closer to politics. Notably, many scholars have examined how the adoption of gender quotas in elections affects women's presence in elected positions (Krook 2009; Schwindt-Bayer 2009; Tripp and Kang 2008), access to political leadership (O'Brien and Rickne 2016), and political engagement (Barnes and Burchard 2013; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010). My findings complement this research by showing that institutions that are not explicitly designed to promote representation of women, such as direct democratic procedures, have unintended positive effects on women's political inclusion. They also

suggest that providing participatory opportunities at the mass level has important impacts on women's political orientations. This insight highlights the need to explore the role of broader institutional contexts in shaping women's political behavior.

Second, this article advances our understanding of developments of women's political engagement by analyzing historical data from the early decades of women's electoral participation. It builds on an emerging interest in the research on women and politics in utilizing historical data to test previously untestable arguments about women's political behavior. Specifically, these studies have addressed how women's economic status (Morgan-Collins and Teele 2017), levels of electoral competition (Corder and Wolbrecht 2016), or electoral rules (Skorge 2018a) shaped women's voting behavior in the early twentieth century.

My article makes a distinct contribution to this literature by examining how the availability of direct policy influence affected newly enfranchised women's participation in elections. Furthermore, both my theory and findings suggest that women's participation in direct democratic procedures has durable implications for their subsequent political behavior. This finding is consistent with the scholarly evidence on the relationship between women's earlier involvement in political activities and their political activism in the future (Carpenter and Moore 2014; Skorge 2018b).

Finally, this article provides a new theoretical perspective on the relationship between direct democracy and marginalized groups. Some empirical studies have shown that direct democratic procedures tend to produce outcomes that are systematically biased against the interests of socially marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities (Gamble 1997; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2015; Hajnal 2009). My study indicates that opportunities and experience under direct democracy may create some positive behavioral implications for marginalized groups. It further suggests that direct democracy helps citizens, who have been politically excluded and socially marginalized develop a sense of political efficacy, leading them to become more engaged in politics. This attitudinal change, in turn, may provide them with greater political influence in the long run.

## Previous Literature on the Gender Gap in Political Engagement

Why does women's political engagement tend to lag behind men's? Many attribute this to individual women's

limited access to political resources. Scholars have argued that differences in resources that enable political engagement, such as education and income, create political inequality across groups (Conway 1991; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Verba and Nie 1972). With fewer financial, organizational, and civic resources, women on average face higher barriers to acquiring and processing political information than men (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Moreover, as women tend to have more housework and caregiving responsibilities than men (Ferguson 2013), devoting extra time to political activities becomes particularly costly for women.

Other studies suggest that differences in psychological dispositions, such as political efficacy or trust in government, may explain disproportionate rates of political participation between men and women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In particular, scholars have argued that women tend to have lower levels of political efficacy vis-à-vis men, and this is mainly due to historical marginalization of women in the political arena. In many societies, politics has been considered men's domain, and women remain as unwelcome actors in the political arena (Jaros 1973, 44; Welch 1977). Within this context, women themselves tend to internalize traditional gender stereotypes and, thus, consider themselves unsuitable to participate in political activities at rates comparable to men's (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

More importantly, women's structural underrepresentation in political bodies has created psychological barriers to female citizens' engagement in politics. The exclusion of women from political power sends a strong signal to female citizens that they are subject to political hierarchy and incompetent to influence political decision making (Atkeson 2003; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Hansen 1997). Moreover, the low presence of female representatives is likely to produce policies that are less responsive to women's interests (Bratton 2005; Jones 1997; Swers 2005; Vega and Firestone 1995), leading women to become skeptical about the system's openness to their voice, as well as their ability to achieve desired policy outcomes.

While women's political engagement globally lags behind that of men, the size of the participation gender gap varies substantially across geographic units and over time. Previous studies have suggested several explanations of this variation. First, scholars believed that contextual stimuli, such as the closeness of the electoral competition, have a stronger impact on women than men. They reasoned that women, especially in the early stage of suffrage, lacked the experience and socialization for voting. As a result, they would be more responsive to electoral incen-

tives shaped by contextual factors than voters who were more experienced and thus more inclined to vote (Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw 2008; Kleppner 1982). A study by Corder and Wolbrecht (2016) supports this reasoning by showing that turnout of newly enfranchised women in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s was higher when the election was competitive, and the difference in turnout between competitive and non-competitive states was much higher among women than men. Studies have also found that previous mobilizational activities, such as the suffrage movement (Carpenter and Moore 2014) or petition canvassing (Skorge 2018b), increase women's political participation.

Another explanation considers the descriptive representation of women. Scholars have argued that the increase in women's presence in political offices can attenuate psychological barriers to women's political engagement, thereby narrowing the preexisting gender gap in participation (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Barnes and Burchard 2013; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Swers 2002; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). Extending this argument, studies have explored how political institutions that promote women's descriptive representation affect women's political participation. Notably, a growing body of work finds that the introduction of electoral gender quotas signals the system's inclusiveness to women's perspectives, legitimizes women's presence in the political process, and consequently motivates women to engage in politics at a greater rate (Bauer 2012; Bhavnani 2009; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010). More recently, Skorge (2018a) finds that proportional representation (PR) systems have positive impacts on women's electoral participation using the exogenous change in electoral institutions in early twentieth-century Norway.

In summary, previous studies showed that the political and institutional environment surrounding women could explain the size of the participation gender gap. These studies, however, did not consider how political decision rules might affect gendered patterns of political participation.

## **Direct Democracy and Women's Political Engagement**

The subsections below will address the mechanisms I propose that can explain why direct democracy promotes gender equality in political participation. These mechanisms include signaling, informational, and spillover effects.

## Signaling Effects of Direct Democracy

Scholars have long argued that where political institutions encompass broad views and interests in policymaking processes, citizens are more likely to engage in the political process, because they signal the openness of the political system to citizens, thus altering their belief about their influence (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Karp and Banducci 2008; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Wells and Kriekhaus 2006). Building on this literature, I argue that the presence of direct democracy has signaling effects that can improve women's belief about their political influence. Direct democracy provides opportunities to make meaningful input in policymaking processes to underrepresented groups, who otherwise would have few channels of political power. The availability of such alternative channels of policy influence conveys a message to citizens that their voice is heard, independent of how elected officials serve their interests. These signaling effects lead women to believe that the political system values their opinions, despite their exclusion and marginalization under representative institutions.

In nearly all democracies around the world, women have been severely underrepresented in political offices. As a consequence, policymaking processes do not adequately address women's needs and interests (Carroll 1984; Thomas 1994), and they tend to sideline legislation that promotes women's socioeconomic status (Burrell 1995; Jones 1997; Swers 2002). This pattern leads women to believe that politics is not for them and that getting involved is unlikely to achieve their desired policy outcomes (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). The presence of direct democratic institutions transmits a message that women can have important policy influence in spite of underrepresentation. It is likely to have less impact on men because their interests have been better addressed than women's.

Another signaling effect consists of validation. Direct democracy offers an implicit confirmation that ordinary citizens are politically competent and trustworthy (Smith 2002). This effect is also likely to be accentuated for women because women have been politically marginalized and, thus, are on average less confident about their political competency than men. Direct democracy functionally puts women's opinions on equal footing with men's.

## Informational Effects of Direct Democracy

Direct democracy improves the supply of political information available to citizens. First, it can provide greater access to political information. Direct democratic pro-

cesses usually involve intense campaigns and media coverage of politics, and they stimulate informal conversations about politics among citizens, providing political information to citizens at a lower cost (Benz and Stutzer 2004; Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000; Smith and Tolbert 2004).

Second, direct democracy increases citizens' information about why and how their political participation matters. Representative democratic institutions often create policy through multiple and complex stages, which make it extremely challenging for ordinary citizens to track down how policy decisions are made (Powell 2004). In contrast to this, most direct democratic decisions become final policy outcomes with fewer bargaining processes than those made through legislative processes (Matusaka 2005). Thus, direct democracy makes policymaking processes more transparent and relatively easier to track. Ultimately, direct democracy can help individuals better observe how their input in decision making translates into final policy outcomes.

Furthermore, direct democracy communicates the importance of politics and public decisions more closely, by highlighting their tangible impacts. People engage in politics at higher rates when they believe they have immediate interests at stake in political decisions (Campbell 2002; Soss 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 392). For example, previous studies suggest that experience with traumatic events, such as natural disasters or crime victimization, increases rates of political participation, as people begin to realize the importance of politics in their lives (Bateson 2012; Blattman 2009). Similarly, while women tend to show lower levels of political knowledge than men, previous studies have also argued that women are better informed than men about policy issues that are more relevant to their daily lives (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Dolan 2011). For instance, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 146) find that women are equally knowledgeable as men in local politics, because they perceive local issues as more closely related to their lives than national issues.

Campaigns under representative institutions tend to center on a candidate or party's broad principles or general ideological stances, which ordinary citizens might find too abstract and remote from their daily experiences. By contrast, direct democratic procedures focus on specific policies that often directly address citizens' everyday needs (Benz and Stutzer 2004; Smith 2002), such as employment, infrastructure, social insurance, education, or family policy. By allowing citizens to directly decide on these issues, which have immediate and tangible consequences, direct democratic procedures can effectively highlight that their participation in politics can make important differences in their own lives.



Both signaling and informational mechanisms suggest that the presence of direct democracy motivates women to more actively participate in politics. These logics lead to the following hypothesis:

*H1 (Presence Hypothesis):* The presence of direct democracy will narrow the gender gap in political participation.

### Spillover Effects of Direct Democracy

Direct democracy may encourage women's political engagement by its mere presence as discussed above, but equally important, women's actual participation in direct democratic procedures may have durable impacts on their political engagement. Importantly, direct democratic experiences can empower women with skills and resources that enable political activism. Research suggests that social and political interactions provide political awareness and skills that promote later political activism. For example, there is evidence that black veterans were more likely to engage in the civil rights movement than other Southerners because their military experience offered them both motivation and organizational resources for political activism (Parker 2009). Thus, past experience of political engagement spills over into future engagement.

The spillover effects of political engagement are likely to be particularly evident among women, who typically have fewer opportunities to participate in politics than men. A study supports this claim by showing that experience with antislavery petition canvassing led many American women to become active in later women's rights campaigns (Carpenter and Moore 2014). More recently, Arab women's unprecedented participation in both online and offline political activism during the Arab Spring uprisings has led to substantial growths of feminist organizations in this region (Khamis 2011).

In a similar vein, women's participation in direct democracy may help them develop political awareness and civic skills. Under direct democracy, women can gain some hands-on experiences of policymaking, such as public deliberation of policies, evaluating different policy proposals, and resolving disagreements, which would otherwise be unavailable to them. As women gain these experiences in political processes, they become familiarized with their roles in the political arena and enhance beliefs about their political influence. They can also acquire some essential skills for political activism, such as the ability to process political information, articulate their policy preferences, and persuade others with opposing views, which, in turn, can motivate them to seek political participation in other forms.

Together, women's direct democratic experiences may enhance their political consciousness and skills, thereby facilitating their deeper engagement in politics. It implies that women's participation in direct democratic institutions may spill over into participation in other political processes, which generates the following empirically observable implication:

*H2 (Spillover Hypothesis):* After participating in direct democratic institutions, women will participate in other political activities at greater rates.

## Research Design

I test my hypotheses on data from Swedish municipalities during the period 1921–44. In most observational data, it is extremely challenging to isolate the effect of a single political institution from the effects of unobserved confounders. Consequently, research estimating the effect of political institutions based on cross-sectional data is often subject to endogeneity bias, which can undermine the reliability of the estimate. I overcome this methodological challenge by exploiting the unique institutional setting in Swedish municipalities.

This case was first introduced in an influential work by Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom (2014), in which the authors use a regression discontinuity (RD) design to show that public spending is lower in municipalities with direct democracy than those with representative democratic systems. I follow the same regression discontinuity approach based on a population threshold to test how the presence of direct democracy affected the gender gap in political participation in Sweden during this period. In this section, I describe the historical context of Sweden, focusing on the women's political movement during this period and the institutional background of municipal reform in 1918.

### Women in Swedish Politics

In Sweden, it was not until 1921 that universal women's suffrage was introduced. In principle, the voting right in Sweden before 1921 was based on the ownership of property, and Swedish women with the taxpaying ability were allowed to participate in clergy and mayor elections in towns and cities beginning in 1862 (Sjögren 2006; Wängnerud 2012). However, only a few wealthy unmarried women could participate in practice, as most women were financially dependent on their husbands or fathers (Sjögren 2006, 73).

In 1884, the Swedish parliament debated the question of granting voting rights to women in national elections for the first time, and the establishment of the Fredrika Bremer Society, the first women's rights organization in the country, followed (Wängnerud 2012, 245). In 1903, the National Association for Woman Suffrage was founded, which served as a driving force in the women's movement for universal suffrage (Sainsbury 2001, 125). A long battle between the Liberals and the Social Democrats on one side and Conservatives on the other over universal suffrage for both men and women led to incremental removal of property restrictions for male voters from 1911 to 1921, followed by the extension of equal and universal suffrage to women in parliamentary elections (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Tilton 1974).

Women's political mobilization in Sweden featured several distinct patterns. First, the class division between the working class and the bourgeoisie was less evident than in other Scandinavian countries. In Sweden, the long-held denial of married women's political rights provided "a common rallying point" for both lower- and upper-class women (Sainsbury 2001, 116). Moreover, the gradual extension of suffrage together with the delayed electoral reform in Sweden strengthened the alliance between the Liberals and Social Democrats, enabling cross-class cooperation in the women's movement (Sainsbury 2001).

Political mobilization in Sweden in the early twentieth century was also marked by its high levels of rural participation (Alestalo and Kuhnle 1986; Castles 1973). The Swedish peasantry had substantial political influence even in the old estate system. Also, Sweden's industrialization was scattered across smaller rural areas, unlike other European countries where industrial enterprises were concentrated in cities, thereby limiting political influence of the urban bourgeoisie (Tilton 1974). Previous scholarship expects turnout of newly enfranchised women to be lower in rural areas than in cities (Rokkan and Valen 1962; Tingsten 1937), as women in rural areas are likely to be less endowed with political resources. According to Rokkan (1970, 123), this urban (center)–rural (periphery) cleavage will be even stronger in smaller countries, as they are more politically, economically, and culturally dependent on the outside structure, and therefore, resources are more likely to be concentrated on cities. Such urban–rural division, however, was not particularly salient in Sweden's mobilization process.

### Municipal Reform in 1918

The Swedish case allows me to causally identify the effect of direct democracy on the gender gap in political

participation using the RD design, because the type of local political institutions in each of Sweden's municipalities during the earlier decades of the twentieth century depended on its population size.

A direct democratic institution called *Kommunalstämma* was the highest decision-making body in all municipalities in Sweden from 1863 to 1918. Under this system, each municipality held three mandatory resident meetings every year, where anyone who paid taxes had a right to attend and vote. At these meetings, residents decided on all local matters, except those related to school and the church. Although each municipality had the right to transfer its decision-making authority to the municipal council, this was very unusual before 1918.

The Liberals and the Social Democrats gained a majority in the 1917 Riksdag election, when the economic crisis in this country caused the public's discontent with the Conservative government. A new Liberal–Social Democratic government implemented a series of institutional reforms. At the national level, the new Liberal–Social Democratic coalition government implemented a program for democratization of voting rights by extending the voting rights for Riksdag elections to women and releasing the financial restrictions on the voting right (Särilvik 2002). At the same time, the coalition government gathered proposals for a municipal reform from experts and implemented a reform that mandated a transition from a direct democratic decision-making process to a representative council system. This decision was based on the belief that "a representative council will produce better policy decisions, because representatives are more knowledgeable, more responsible, and more engaged in societal issues than ordinary men on the street" (Wallin 2007, 55).

After the initial implementation, only 18 out of more than 2,400 municipalities voluntarily transitioned to a representative system, and government confronted opposition from many municipalities that valued the old decision-making process. In particular, small localities did not favor the reform. Hence, the central government mandated that localities with a population greater than 1,500 must create a municipal council and transfer all decision-making power to the council, whereas those with a population below that threshold were free to choose between the status quo direct democracy and representative democracy in the form of the municipal council.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Information in this section is based on the Swedish Code of Statutes (Svensk författningssamling, SFS) 1918:573, 1930:252, and 1953:753, and Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom (2014). The resulting institutional variation across municipalities continued until 1954, when representative democracy replaced *Kommunalstämma* in all municipalities as the highest decision-making body.

Since the reform led larger municipalities to curtail the preexisting direct democratic institution, this setting may seem suitable to questions about the effect of the transition to representative democracy. However, I believe that the Swedish case is also relevant to test my theoretical argument for two reasons. First, my theory focuses on the effect of the presence of direct democracy on women's political participation, rather than its directional effect (i.e., the expansion or reduction of direct democracy). Second, I compare observations with and without direct democracy, not those before and after the reform. The estimated effect in my analysis is thus, equivalent to the effect of having direct democracy relative to not having direct democracy.

The RD design will not be applicable to this case if politicians had strategic reasons for implementing the reform, especially if those reasons included depressing the influence of women in larger municipalities. However, no historical or scholarly evidence suggests strategic motivations behind this reform. Moreover, the fact that the reform was implemented by the Liberals and Social Democrats, who had long pursued the extension of political rights to women, makes it less likely that it was intended to curtail women's influence.

Many researchers have used population-based RD design to identify the effects of public policies or political institutions (Casas-Arce and Saiz 2015; Eggers 2015; Pettersson-Lidbom 2012). The underlying assumption of this design is that municipalities with a population size just below and above the cutoff only differ in the presence of direct democracy, whereas other factors determining levels of political participation remain highly similar. The supporting information provides a set of balance tests showing that the municipalities of each side of the population threshold were comparable in political, economic, and demographic characteristics. This finding implies that the policy reform was plausibly exogenous to other determinants of women's political engagement.

## Analysis I: Direct Democracy's Effect on Women's Political Participation

### Data and Measures

In order to evaluate whether and how the presence of direct democracy has affected the gender gap in political participation across different localities, it is necessary to have data on political participation by gender in these localities. These data, however, rarely exist because men's and women's political participation are not counted separately in many areas. Sweden from 1921 to

1944 is an exception. The Swedish National Data Service provides municipal-level data on the size of the male and female voting population, and the number of votes men and women cast in parliamentary elections.<sup>2</sup> The data on population size, types of political decision rules, and demographic characteristics of municipalities come from Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom (2014).<sup>3</sup>

Using this data set, I compare women's and men's turnout in parliamentary elections during the time of investigation. It is noteworthy that regardless of the type of municipal government, all residents above the age of 23 in each municipality were able to vote in parliamentary elections during the time of the investigation. This fact allows me to identify the effect of municipal-level direct democracy by comparing the participation of residents in parliamentary elections between municipalities with direct democracy and those without direct democracy. The *Women's Turnout* variable indicates the number of women voting divided by the number of eligible female voters, whereas *Men's Turnout* is the number of men who voted divided by the number of eligible male voters.

The second measure of the gender gap in political participation is *% Votes Women Cast*. This measure is operationalized by dividing the number of votes women cast by the total number of votes. This measure captures gender inequality in the voting population. The closer the value is to 50%, the more egalitarian the voting population is.

To validate the use of an RD design, I need to show that the density of the running variable (i.e., population in  $t - 1$ ) is continuous around the threshold (i.e., 1,500). A considerable difference in the number of observations just below and above the threshold would indicate municipal governments might have manipulated the population number (Eggers et al. 2018). Figure 1 displays a histogram of the running variable around the cutoff, and it does not show a clear sign of such a sorting effect. Following McCrary (2008), I formally test for a significant discontinuity at the cutoff. The test fails to reject the null ( $p = .302$ ). Also, manipulation of the population size was unlikely, since the population registers were carefully recorded and administered by the Swedish state church, not by the local governments.

<sup>2</sup>The 1921 election was the first time women over the age of 23 were allowed to vote in the Riksdag election. The gender-disaggregated municipality-level turnout measures for elections after 1944 are not available.

<sup>3</sup>The authors note that the primary data were collected from both published and unpublished material from Statistics Sweden (Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom 2014, 970). I thank the authors for sharing their data set.

FIGURE 1 Histogram of Running Variable (Population<sub>t-1</sub>)

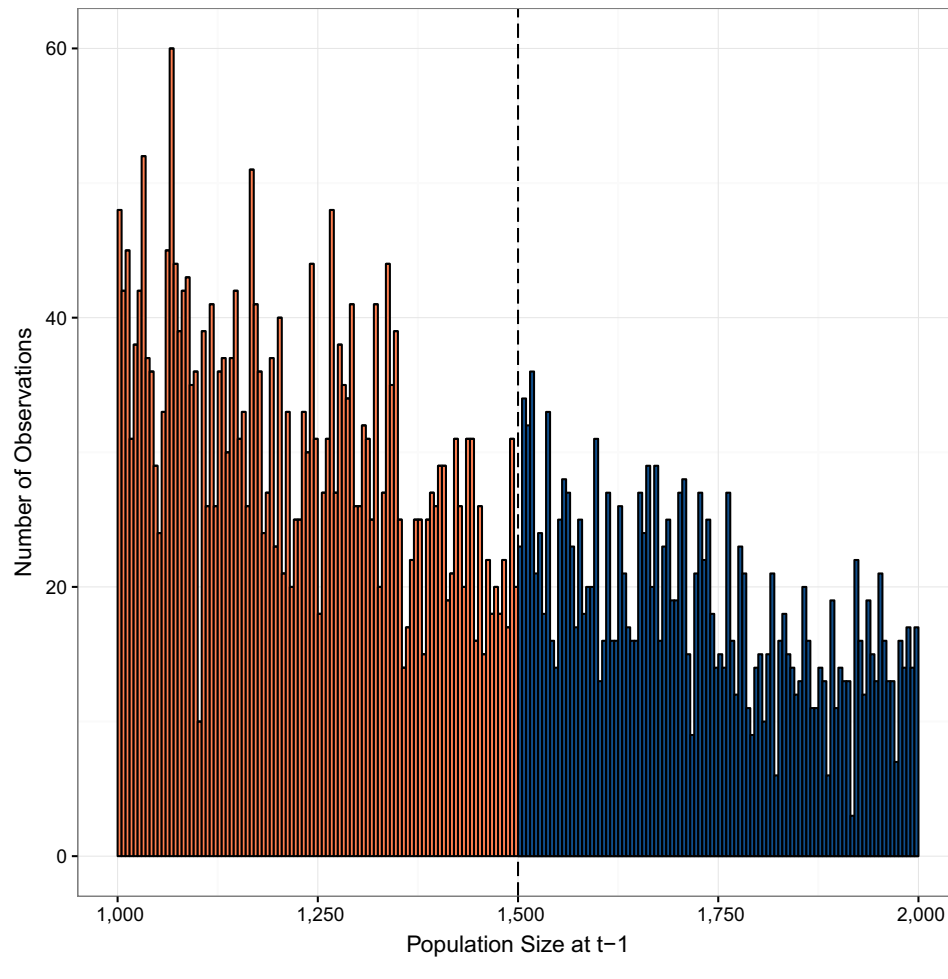


Figure 2 plots the raw data of observations around the population threshold. Since the assignment rule was binding only on one side of the cutoff, we cannot derive the precise causal effect of direct democracy just by looking at the raw data. However, an examination of the raw data gives us some sense about the relationships between the running variable and the outcome variables of interest. In each plot, a dot represents a data point ( $Y_{it}$ ). Blue solid lines represent predicted values of a local linear smoother that is estimated on each side of the cutoff, and the dashed lines show their 95% confidence intervals.

From these plots, we can see that municipalities with a population below the threshold that mostly had direct democratic institutions exhibit higher levels of *Women's Turnout* and *% Votes Women Cast* than those with a population size over the threshold and thus switched to rep-

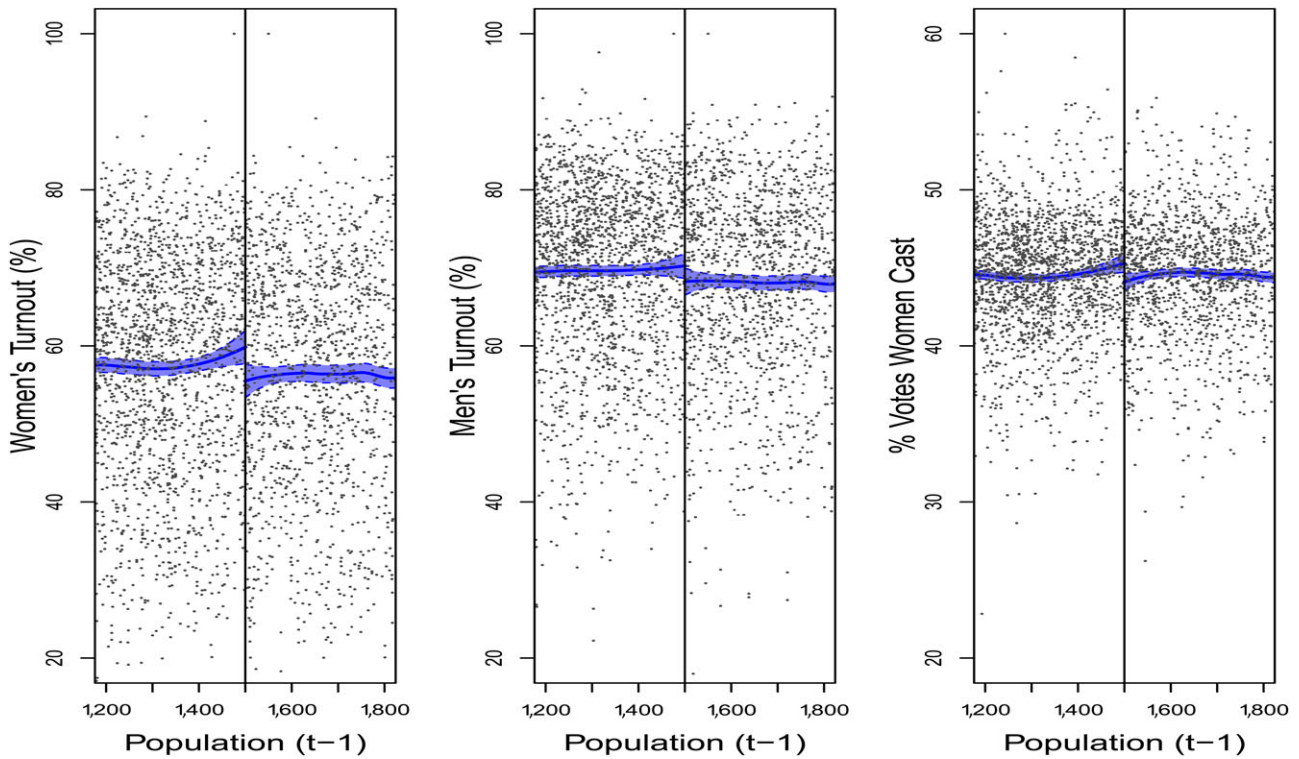
resentative democracy. In the following section, I report the results of statistical analysis using a regression discontinuity design.

## Results

Table 1 shows that 13.6% of observations (municipality, election year level) that were below the population threshold voluntarily had representative democracy. To account for the presence of noncompliers, I employ a fuzzy RD design. The convention in the literature is to estimate the treatment effect under a fuzzy RD setting as a version of complier average treatment effect (CATE; e.g., Hahn, Todd, and Van der Klaauw 2001). Following this, I estimate two-stage linear regressions using the assignment rule as an instrumental variable.



FIGURE 2 Raw Data Plots around the Population Threshold



I also include control variables to account for possible confounding factors. These variables are the support for leftist parties, the level of political competition, and the number of female voters. Evidence suggests that leftist parties in Sweden were more in favor of women's enfranchisement than conservative parties (Sulkunen, Nevala-Nurmi, and Markkola 2008; Tomasson 1969). Relatedly, a recent study claims that leftist women were relatively highly mobilized in the early twentieth century (Morgan-Collins and Teele 2017). It is, therefore, possible that support for leftist parties is negatively associated with the size of the gender gap in electoral participation. Other studies find that heightened political competition narrowed the gender gap in turnout during this period (Corder and

Wolbrecht 2016; Skorge 2018a).<sup>4</sup> Finally, to account for potential changes in the gender composition in a given municipality, I include the number of female eligible voters.

Column 1 in Table 2 reports the results from the RD analysis. Regarding the choice of bandwidth within which to perform the analysis, I use a method suggested by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014), which is to search for a bandwidth that minimizes the mean squared error (MSE) of the local linear estimator.

The results confirm the positive effect of *Direct Democracy* on women's political participation. In the first column in Table 2, I report the estimates of the effect of *Direct Democracy* on *Women's Turnout*. The result indicates that having direct democracy at the local level boosts women's turnout in national-level elections. When using the optimal bandwidth, the estimated effect of *Direct Democracy* is 3.95 percentage points, and this appears to be a sizable effect in comparison to previous findings with the same outcome measure. For example, a study

TABLE 1 Number of Observations by Institution Type

	Direct Democracy	Representative Democracy
Population <sub>t-1</sub> ≤ 1,500	9,234	1,459
Population <sub>t-1</sub> > 1,500	0	5,891
Total	9,234	7,350

<sup>4</sup>The number of competing parties is operationalized as the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP). The measure is based on the formula by Laakso and Taagepera (1979;  $ENEP = \frac{1}{\sum v_i^2}$ , where  $v_i$  is the vote share received by party  $i$ ).

**TABLE 2 The RD Effects of Direct Democracy**

	(1) Women's Turnout (%)	(2) Men's Turnout (%)	(3) % Votes Women Cast
<b>Bandwidth</b>			
[1, 500 ± . . .]	291	388	278
Direct Democracy	3.946 (0.950)	3.517 (0.643)	1.854 (0.314)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓
Number of Municipalities	549	679	533
Number of Observations	2,792	3,705	2,679

Note: Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

finds that the victory of the female candidate increases women's turnout in the subsequent election by five percentage points (Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras, and Iyer 2013). The estimate is also comparable to the effect of having a minority candidate on the ballot on turnout among that minority group (2–3 percentage points; Washington 2006).

In Figure 3a, I plot the estimated effect of *Direct Democracy* across different bandwidths with 95% confidence intervals. It shows that within the bandwidths in the 110–600 range, the estimated effect is positive and statistically distinguishable from zero. The results were also robust to the use of standard errors that are clustered at the municipality level.

As a comparison, I also report the estimated effect of *Direct Democracy* on *Men's Turnout* in the second column in Table 2. It appears that direct democracy has positive effects on men's turnout in parliamentary elections as well. The estimated effects of *Direct Democracy* on *Women's Turnout* range from 3.19 to 9.17 percentage points across different bandwidths. Its effect size for *Men's Turnout* is between 1.64 and 6.08 percentage points, as seen in Figure 3b.

The third column in Table 2 more clearly demonstrates that *Direct Democracy* narrows the gender gap in electoral participation. It shows that the share of votes women cast is 1.85 percentage points greater in municipalities with direct democracy than that of similarly sized municipalities without direct democracy. Figure 3c illustrates the effect of *Direct Democracy* on *% Votes Women Cast* in the bandwidths within a range of 50 to 600. We

see that *Direct Democracy* has a positive effect on women's participation not just within the optimal bandwidth, but across different bandwidths. The effect size ranges from 1.27 to 3.83 percentage points.

Together, the results reveal that municipalities that had direct democracy experienced a greater female turnout, compared to those where representative democracy had replaced direct democracy. They further show that direct democracy increases women's presence in the voting population, thereby promoting gender equality in electoral participation.

## Analysis II: Women's Experience with Direct Democracy and Subsequent Political Participation

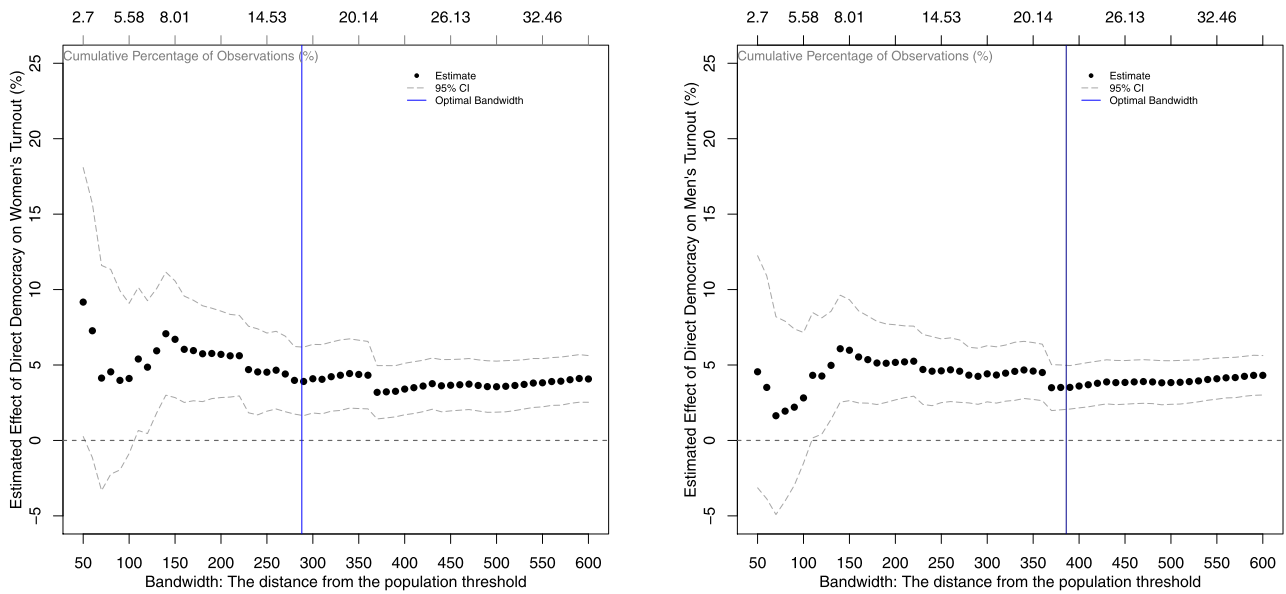
Next, I turn to examine how women's participation in direct democratic procedures affects their later political activism. I expect that by joining direct democratic processes, women gain political awareness and skills, and this leads them to participate in political activities at a greater rate (Hypothesis 2). To test this spillover process, I conduct an additional set of analyses using women's participation rate in local-level direct democratic meetings as an explanatory variable. Here, the goal is to test whether women's participation in direct democratic meetings at Time  $t$  explains women's participation in a parliamentary election at Time  $t+1$ .

The measure of *Women's Participation in Direct Democracy* is operationalized as the share of female attendees in all direct democratic meetings that were held in a given municipality in a given year. The data come from the minutes of municipal meetings from 1921 to 1944. The Swedish Local History Database provides digitized texts of minutes of all municipal-level meetings, including direct democratic meetings (*Kommunalstämma*), council meetings, and administrative committee meetings in six counties during this period. These counties are Halland, Jönköping, Kalmar, Kronoberg, Älvsborg, and Skaraborg.

From these minutes, I extracted lists of attendees in each meeting and then identified female participants based on their first names. Next, I calculated the yearly proportion of female attendees by dividing the number of female participants by the total number of participants in meetings held in that year.<sup>5</sup> In this analysis, I only examine observations that had direct democracy for

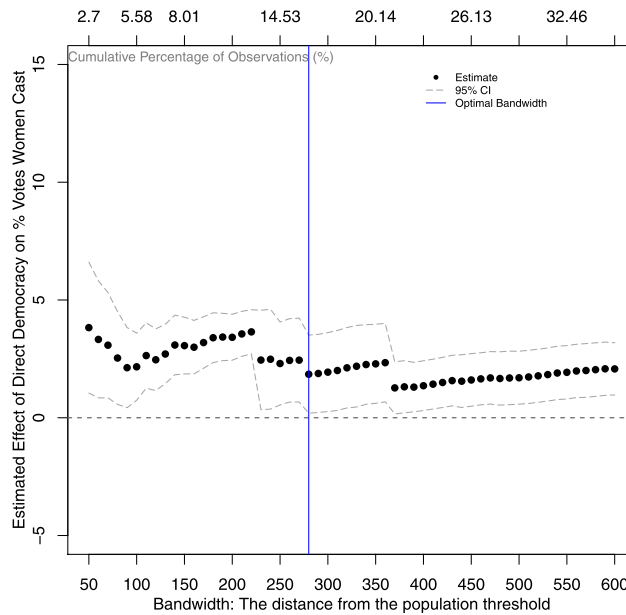
<sup>5</sup>As this measure is operationalized as the share of female participants, the value of this measure is largely determined by overall participation. Thus, it is possible that a municipality with low overall participation had a higher value of this measure, because of a higher proportion of female attendees.

**FIGURE 3 The Estimated Effects of Direct Democracy across Bandwidths**



**(a)** The Effect of Direct Democracy on Women's Turnout

**(b)** The Effect of Direct Democracy on Men's Turnout

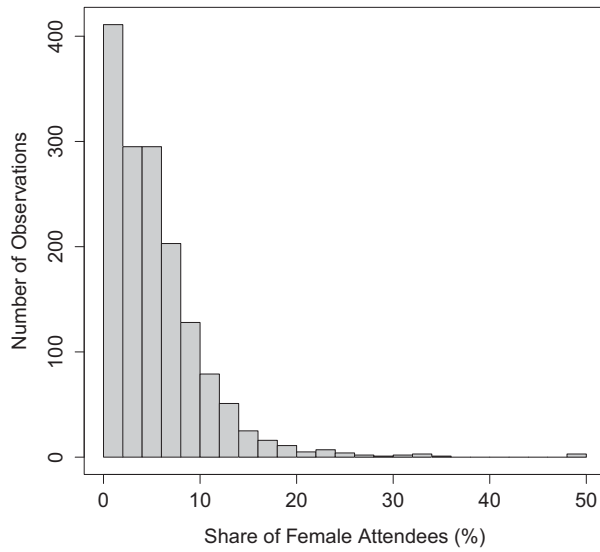


**(c)** The Effect of Direct Democracy on % Votes Women Cast

two reasons. First, the measure of women's participation in direct democratic meetings in municipalities with representative democracy is not available, simply because these municipalities did not hold direct democratic meetings. More importantly, it is because the goal of this analysis is to test the dynamics of direct democracy. My theoretical argument suggests that policymaking experiences that women gain through direct democratic

procedures help them develop political skills and consciousness. In order to test this mechanism, I examine how the extent to which women participated in direct democratic meetings is associated with their subsequent participation in parliamentary elections.

It is also important to note that the minutes do not provide the full list of attendees in a given meeting. The minutes primarily consist of summaries of agendas

**FIGURE 4** Distribution of Women's Participation in Direct Democracy (%)**(a)** Histogram of Women's Participation in Direct Democracy (%)**(b)** Trend in Women's Participation in Direct Democracy % (Each dot is the mean of the share of female attendees in each year.)

covered during each meeting and the final decisions made by the attendees. Thus, the names of attendees appear when (1) they were selected to a certain position (e.g., board members, committee chair/deputies/members); (2) they made important remarks regarding the agenda discussed, such as providing significant factual information or presenting a strong opinion on the issue; or (3) they were directly involved in an item on the agenda. Given that female attendees were less likely to fall under these three cases than male attendees, the actual share of female attendees was expected to be greater than the value of the measure based on the minutes. It implies that the spillover effect using this measure is likely to be underestimated.

Figure 4 shows us some patterns regarding the *Women's Participation in Direct Democracy* measure. The data are heavily positively skewed, suggesting that women's presence in direct democratic procedures was extremely low in many municipalities. At the same time, the extent to which women participated in direct democracy varied considerably across time and municipalities.

Table 3 reports the results from the OLS models analyzing how this variation in women's participation in direct democracy is associated with women's participation in parliamentary elections in subsequent years. The models include years in direct democracy, the total number of municipal meetings held in that year, the number of female voters (logged), and the left party's

vote share as controls. Fixed effects for years and county are included to control for time-specific trends and unobservable geographical features at the county level.

As seen in the first row, *Women's Participation in Direct Democracy* in the year before the election year does not have significant effects on women's participation in elections. As a comparison, I report the result using *Men's Turnout* as the outcome variable. Column 3 shows that

**TABLE 3** The Effect of Women's Participation in Direct Democracy on Women's Subsequent Electoral Participation

	(1) Women's Turnout <sub>t</sub> (%)	(2) Men's Turnout <sub>t</sub> (%)	(3) % Votes Women Cast <sub>t</sub>
Women's Participation in DD <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.250 (0.162)	-0.328 (0.121)	-0.059 (0.057)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
County Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	214	214	214
R <sup>2</sup>	0.535	0.558	0.249
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.507	0.532	0.208

Note: Table entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

*Women's Participation in Direct Democracy* in the year before the election year is negatively associated with *Men's Turnout*. This finding suggests that a lower share of male attendees in municipal meetings has a short-term negative effect on men's electoral participation.

Although the results from Analysis I show us strong and robust effects of direct democracy on women's participation, Analysis II does not confirm the spillover effects of direct democracy. This finding suggests that even when (1) few women actually participated in direct democratic institutions and (2) women's participation in direct democracy did not lead to their subsequent participation in representative institutions, the presence of direct democracy itself stimulated women's activism through its signaling and informational mechanisms.

## Conclusion

Equal political participation of different social groups is vital in democracies, yet rarely achieved. In particular, there have been persistent gender disparities in political participation across the globe, posing a significant challenge to democratic representation. In this article, I theorize that participatory opportunities at the mass level can ameliorate this problem. Specifically, I propose that the presence of direct democracy expands gender equality in political participation by signaling the system's openness to women's voice, confirming their political competency, highlighting their stake in political decisions, and empowering them with political skills and resources.

Using municipal-level data on newly enfranchised women in Sweden, I find evidence that direct democracy indeed has narrowed the gender gap in political participation. My findings demonstrate that women's turnout in parliamentary elections was higher in municipalities using direct democracy than in similarly sized municipalities that only had representative institutions. Moreover, women's share in the voting population was higher where direct democracy was present, indicating that direct democracy has promoted gender equality in electoral participation.

This research makes significant contributions to two distinct literatures. First, it broadens our understanding of gendered patterns of political behavior. My findings complement the existing literature on women's political engagement by showing that the availability of participatory opportunities for citizens can have equally important impacts on women's political participation as electing more women to political offices.

Second, this research extends the literature on behavioral impacts of direct democracy. Beyond its overall

impact on individuals' political knowledge and interest, I show that direct democracy has a meaningful impact on political equality and political integration of marginalized groups.

More generally, my findings carry implications for our understanding of political equality, democratic representation, and institutional designs. This article is the first to empirically assess the relationship between direct democratic institutions and political engagement of marginalized groups. I find that the presence of direct democracy stimulates the participation of politically marginalized groups. The findings have significant real-world implications, especially in the context of developing countries where direct democratic reforms are designed to incorporate voices of politically inactive groups—such as women—in policymaking.

This research also opens up a new avenue for inquiry on women's political behavior in the era when they first won voting rights. Specifically, we can learn much more about the impacts of institutional context on political equality by further investigating how political decision rules affected the mobilization of women during these years. Scholars have argued that partisan mobilization is central to women's political inclusion in the early twentieth century, and they examined the conditions that promoted mobilization of women during this period. Teele (2018), for example, argues that heightened political competition and previous suffrage movement in U.S. western states incentivized politicians to mobilize women voters, thereby promoting women's suffrage reform in those states. Similarly, Corder and Wolbrecht (2016) suggest that the level of political competition affected parties' strategy to mobilize new female voters after women's suffrage in the United States. Skorge (2018a) contends that proportional representation provided politicians with electoral incentives to mobilize new female voters in Norway. While I demonstrate in the supporting information that the level of political competition and prior mobilization activities of women do not drive my findings, it is still possible that the presence of direct democracy affected patterns of women's mobilization in Sweden during this period.

Future research can extend this study in many ways. First, although this study only addresses the effect of direct democracy on electoral participation, my theoretical argument can be tested on a broader range of political participation. For example, it would be interesting to examine the influence of direct democracy on women's participation in more active forms of political activities, such as running for political office. Second, though I have focused on direct democracy in the form of town meetings, the most common forms of direct democracy today



are ballot initiatives and referendums, where citizens vote on specific policy matters. On the one hand, these institutions should have the same effect on women's participation because they share the essential elements of direct democracy, which I theorize as main factors generating the causal effect. On the other hand, we may not be able to detect the same effect, given that these institutions take place less frequently and address a smaller subset of political matters than town meetings. Taken together, this is an open empirical question that I hope to explore in future work.

Finally, an important direction for future studies will be to consider what conditions reinforce or undermine the effects of direct democracy on women. I have argued and shown that the use of direct democracy leads women to become more confident about their political influence, thereby stimulating their political activism. However, certain procedural, social, or cultural contexts may modify the anticipated effects of direct democracy on women. For example, the type of decision rules in direct democratic processes (e.g., unanimous vs. majority rule) may condition the extent to which women express their voice and influence the final policy decisions (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Also, the prevalence of social norms against women's political participation may undermine the effect of direct democracy on women. For example, in a society that has particularly strong norms against women's participation in the public sphere, the use of direct democracy may lead men to build a new barrier to women's participation as a form of backlash (Gottlieb 2016). Future research might examine what circumstances lead direct democracy to fail to boost women's political engagement and to identify the preconditions for promoting political equality through direct democracy.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

- 1. Balance Tests on Predetermined Covariates**
- 2. Robustness Check: Placebo Test**
- 3. Descriptive Statistics**
- 4. Discussion of an Alternative Mechanism**
- 5. Comparison of 6-County Sample and Population**