

Introduction

In 1913 Ella Elm rejected the life of limited and unsteady employment that was available to black women in Arkansas by relocating to Illinois, where she had heard “there was lots of work.”¹ Work, or wage labor, had been a necessary component of Elm’s life in Arkansas after she “went to school some.”² Elm did not describe the nature of her employment in Arkansas to the interviewer who visited her home in downstate Illinois in the late 1930s. She would have been in the minority of black women in the state if she did not eke out a marginal income through agricultural and domestic labor. By the time Elm departed for Illinois in 1913, African American laborers were suffering from severe under- and unemployment in Arkansas’s cotton- and corn-dominated economy.³ Ella Elm’s life in Arkansas was marred not only by tough economic times but also by political turmoil. As a child and then young woman, Elm watched Arkansas’s white Democratic-controlled legislature disfranchise black men between 1891 and 1909.⁴ These efforts reduced the black male vote in Arkansas from 71 percent in 1890 to 24 percent in 1892 and eliminated the presence of black men in public office throughout the state.⁵ Along with limited employment opportunities, such disfranchisement schemes pushed many southern women like Elm northward.

Once in Illinois, Ella Elm set out to make a better life for herself than had been possible in Arkansas. Unlike the majority of migrant women, Elm did not have to rely long on her own wage labor. Shortly after her 1913 arrival in Illinois, Ella met and married fellow Arkansas native, “Texas” Elm. Ella and Texas were able to survive on his income, an aspiration of many black families who depended upon the wage labor of every member. Although raised in Arkansas, Texas had traveled across the South finding short-term jobs “to get by with” and, in fact, earned his nickname because of the considerable time he spent in the state of Texas seeking these odd jobs. He relocated to Illinois in 1912 because, as Texas told the interviewer, he “heard there was better opportunities for colored folks” up North. He quickly found

employment with the Missouri Pacific Railroad on the “extra gang” and eventually channeled this physically demanding job into a degree of financial security for himself and Ella. By the late 1930s, the Missouri Pacific Railroad employed Texas as a foreman at one of its downstate railroad stations. One of the perks of the job was a small four-room house on a two-acre plot of land. Ella and Texas fixed up this house with great care. Ella created a flower garden in one corner of the property, and the couple devoted the rest of the land to raising vegetables and hogs. The two acres “ain’t a whole lot,” Texas acknowledged, but it supplemented the couple’s diet with “fresh vegetables in the summer” and “meat for the winter.”⁶

Even as Ella embarked upon her new life in Illinois, she did not turn away from the family and community that she had left behind in Arkansas. As surely as she carried her belongings on the long train ride to Illinois, Ella Elm also carried with her a commitment to use her newfound freedoms in Illinois to aid family and friends who remained in Arkansas. One of these freedoms was the right to vote. In 1913 women in Illinois acquired the right to vote in most municipal and federal elections, including presidential elections. A scarcity of archival records makes it difficult to discern whether Elm’s politics were limited to voting, or if she was also active in the Jackson County Colored Republican Club. During the 1920s, the women of this club, mostly residents of Murphysboro and nearby Carbondale, canvassed voters on behalf of selected Republican candidates.⁷

Elm’s father had certainly prepared her for participation in such canvassing work. As Elm told the government interviewer, “I can’t remember much that happened in my childhood but one thing does stand out.” Elm recalled, “When I was a little girl my daddy used to say to me. Ella you is a little girl now but when you grow up to twenty-one and can vote don’t never vote a democrat ticket.” Optimistic that one day his daughter would join the ranks of voters, Ella’s father attempted to educate his daughter about the dangers of the Democratic Party and the virtues of voting the Republican ticket. Following her relocation to Illinois, Elm used her vote on behalf of her father and the thousands of disfranchised African Americans in Arkansas. Referring to her father’s appeal not to vote for Democrats, Elm informed the interviewer, “And so to this very day I never have.”⁸

This book is a history of African American women like Ella Elm who entered electoral politics to help their new northern communities and the ones they left behind in the South. It examines this history during what is often described as the “nadir” of black life in America. These were the incredibly oppressive decades between the demise of Reconstruction in 1877

and the beginnings of a major voting realignment in 1932. African American women who lived beyond the reach of southern white supremacists, this book argues, participated in the American party system during these years in a hard fought effort to put an end to the nadir. They served as “proxy” voters and canvassers for African Americans who remained under the tyranny of southern white supremacy. For the most part, this meant voting the Republican ticket. They sought to create an activist federal government that would use its power to protect African Americans’ basic citizenship rights.

Twenty-first-century Americans often view party politics with cynicism. Since World War II, half or less than half of eligible voters cast their ballots in presidential elections. This figure drops further during “off-year” elections.⁹ From a twenty-first-century perspective, it might be hard to comprehend the effort and hopes that earlier generations invested in the arena of electoral politics. Americans of diverse backgrounds have fought in the courts, on the streets, in the battlefields, and through the constitutional amendment process for the right to cast their ballot and participate in party politics. Since the rise of the two-party system in the United States during the 1820s, the mobilization on behalf of candidates from competing political parties has served as the principal vehicle by which American citizens have attempted to influence government. Historically, however, a privileged few have chosen representatives for the majority. This book explores how African American women mobilized to enter and reshape one of the most exclusive power institutions in America, the party system, so that it would protect the rights of all citizens rather than a privileged few.

African American women’s turn to electoral politics to defeat white supremacy began during the crucible of Reconstruction before they even had the right to vote. In many ways, this book is an epilogue to or continuation of a story that began in the South during the 1860s and 1870s with a generation of women who attempted to influence electoral contests so that results would enhance black freedom. Subsequent generations of African American women kept this battle for basic citizenship rights within the party system alive by carrying it from the South to the North and from the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

Reconstruction, that is the years between 1865 and 1877 when rebel states regained admission to the Union, was a period of great promise for black Americans. With the end of the Civil War in 1865, southern roads were filled with newly emancipated people searching for children, husbands, siblings, and parents who had been sold away during slavery. Men, women, and children of all ages packed into schoolhouses seeking the education that the

slave regime had denied them. Black men held offices in southern state governments that had been newly reconstructed in order to rejoin the Union. Congress demonstrated a commitment to black Americans never witnessed before on the part of the federal government when it enacted the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution between 1865 and 1870. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished American slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment defined American citizenship and who had the authority to confer it in such a way that newly freed slaves became American citizens. For the first time, the Constitution defined this fundamental concept as deriving from the federal government, not the states. Additionally, the Fourteenth Amendment established the concept of equal protection before the law, and it made unconstitutional any state laws that “abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States.” In other words, southern states could no longer deny black residents the entitlements and protections that came with being an American citizen. For white American men, one of these key entitlements was the right to vote. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 recognized black male suffrage in the former Confederate states. The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 made black male suffrage part of the Constitution. Congress backed up these three Reconstruction Amendments with enforcement legislation and civil rights acts.

Although not entitled to vote themselves, African American women were heavily involved in politics during Reconstruction.¹⁰ At the same moment that white suffragists were just beginning to establish national suffrage organizations, black women were attending Republican rallies and conventions. In Virginia, for example, both women and men poured into Richmond’s First African Baptist Church in late August 1867 for a Republican state convention hours before the meeting was to begin. When white delegates arrived and discovered no available seats for themselves, they moved the meeting outdoors, much to the delight of the thousands of additional African Americans who had not been able to find space in the church. Similar scenes of women and men packing Republican meetings, large and small, took place across the South (see figure 1). At community rallies, women voted on issues and expressed their opinions, sometimes shouting them from the crowd. They made their politics known in other ways. In 1868, for instance, white employers in Mississippi were alarmed when cooks and maids showed up to work wearing campaign buttons with images of Republican presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant. In Georgia and Virginia, women established political organizations that helped their neighbors

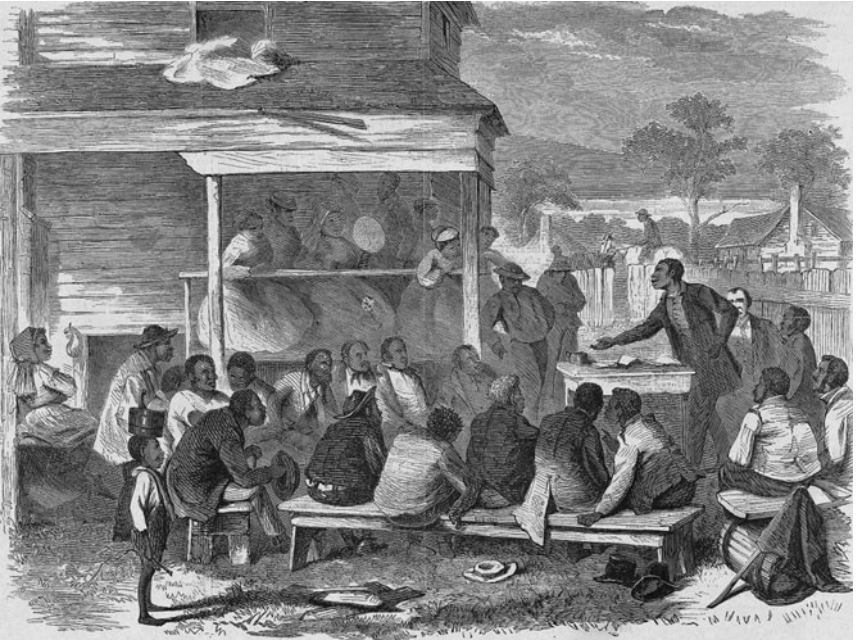


FIGURE 1. Women appear on the balcony and the far left bench in this 1868 Harper's Weekly rendition of a political gathering entitled "Electioneering at the South." The text that accompanies this drawing reads: "It shows the newly-enfranchised citizens of the United States engaged in the discussion of political questions upon which they are to vote." Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1868, 468. Provided courtesy HarpWeek, LLC.

prepare to go to the polls and that financed Republican speakers. African American women also helped to register voters and marched with men to the polls. In fact, black women were so engaged in politics that white employers widely complained about their lack of domestic servants on convention and election days.¹¹

At the polls, women did not stand by passively. One educated Savannah, Georgia, woman described her efforts to prevent white Democratic misconduct at the polls during the first election in which black men could vote in the state. Initially, as she told a *New York Times* reporter, she had merely intended to assist a few men: "I went out with four colored men from the country to help them vote. I suppose I was interested in the first place to see that my people had a chance to vote. Then these men could not read or write, and so I went with them." The widespread fraud that she encountered at the polls, however, led her to broaden her efforts. As she described, "The white people were giving the colored voters Democratic tickets, and the negro men did

not know any better.” There at the polls she remained after concluding that “I could be of use,” helping illiterate men identify and reject the Democratic tickets that white poll workers were fraudulently giving them.¹²

Analyzing disfranchised women’s Republican activism during Reconstruction, historian Elsa Barkley Brown argues that freed people in the South did not approach politics through the lens of nineteenth-century liberal ideology that characterized society as an aggregate of autonomous individuals each acting in his or her own self-interest. Rather, an “ethos of mutuality” and interreliance that enabled so many families and communities to survive the poverty African Americans confronted in the South following emancipation was also reflected within party politics. Freed people, Brown explains, viewed the ballot as owned by the community rather than individuals. Women’s participation at these various political events was an expression of this view that men were voting on behalf of the entire community and not just for themselves.¹³

This expectation that men’s votes would benefit the entire community helps to explain why women celebrated men’s voting rights, even though they were denied the ballot. One white woman wrote derisively about the celebratory atmosphere that unfolded near her Virginia home on election day: “Negroes went to precincts overnight and camped out. Morning revealed reinforcements arriving. All sexes and ages came afoot, in carts, in wagons, as to a fair or circus. Old women set up tables and spread out ginger-cakes and set forth buckets of lemonade.” To her surprise, “The all-day picnic ended only with closing of polls, and not always then, darkeys hanging around and carrying scrapping and jollification into the night.”¹⁴ The gathering of men, women, and children at the polls that this white woman tried to dismiss as typifying a carnival more than a civic duty was a demonstration of the hope that black communities invested in men’s voting rights for creating a new political and racial order in the South.

Women also joined men at rallies and the polls to guard against violence.¹⁵ When Ella Elm’s father taught her about the dangers of the Democratic Party, he would have no doubt recalled the party’s terror campaigns to reclaim power during Reconstruction. The 1868 elections in Arkansas were so violent that the state’s Republican governor declared martial law in ten counties and called up a militia to restore order. Across the South, white paramilitary groups attempted to prevent Republican victories by murdering both black and white Republican leaders. Elm’s father would have remembered the assassination of white Republican James Hinds in 1868, one of Arkansas’s sitting representatives in the U.S. Congress. If her father had

attempted to cast a ballot, he may have encountered white marauders, including the Ku Klux Klan, who attacked black voters and shut down polling sites. In one horrible incident in Georgia, white Democrats shot at a black election parade, even chasing down and murdering terrified participants who fled for their lives. By accompanying men to the polls, women and children avoided the prospect of being confronted by white militias while the majority of men were absent from the home. Armed with a range of weapons from boards with protruding nails to hatchets, women also stood guard while men cast their ballots or Republican rallies were under way.¹⁶

Women may have expected men to vote on their behalf, but reality did not always match expectation. It is clear that not all men adhered to the notion that the ballot was collectively owned. Democratic violence and intimidation sometimes intervened. So too did economic desperation. White employers threatened to fire men who voted the Republican ticket and, in some instances, promised jobs for those who sided with the Democrats.¹⁷ Moreover, not all men favored women having so much say in the political process. Because slavery had muted patriarchy within southern black communities, some African American men associated their freedom with the ability to establish a patriarchal system, a privilege that in the South had been the preserve of white men. During election season, establishing male authority sometimes translated into the exclusion of women from Republican rallies in various locations.¹⁸

In these circumstances, African American women who did not possess any formal political power relied on persuasion and threats to influence men's voting. Women chastised men who strayed from the Republican fold. Fiancées broke off engagements and wives refused to share beds with men who turned away from the Republican Party. Church congregations ostracized Democratic members. Women monitored men's voting at the polls, promising, as one woman told her husband, that "if he voted the Democratic ticket she 'would kill him dead in his sleep.'"¹⁹ If women could not vote themselves, they could at least pressure men to represent them. By most accounts, this approach was often effective. As one black Democratic man described, "many more [men] desire to vote the Democratic ticket and on account of these women and the threats, they voted Republican."²⁰ In the end, however, black women of the Reconstruction South were dependent upon men's decisions at the polls.

Reconstruction had started with great hope that the federal government would recognize and protect former slaves as full American citizens. By 1877, however, after the Republicans lost the House in 1874 and nearly the

presidency in 1876, the federal government had abandoned black Americans in the South. W. E. B. Du Bois poignantly characterized both the promise and incredible disappointment of Reconstruction when he wrote in his 1935 study of the era that “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”²¹ In one state after another, former rebel leaders regained control of southern legislatures. In Arkansas, for example, Elm’s father watched as white Democrats once again dominated the state legislature in 1874. A series of Supreme Court decisions gutted the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and “gave a green light to acts of terror where local officials either could not or would not enforce the law.”²² In 1877 the final remaining federal troops in the South withdrew as part of deal brokered between white Republicans and Democrats to resolve the contested presidential election of 1876.

The white South was free to trample over the rights guaranteed in the Reconstruction Amendments. Through a combination of state-sponsored violence and legislation, white southern Democrats were well on their way to nullifying the Reconstruction Amendments by the 1890s. The chain gang labor and sharecropping systems that had emerged throughout the South after the Civil War looked disturbingly like slavery at times. In 1883 the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that prohibited discrimination in public accommodations.²³ Between 1890 and 1910, all of the ex-Confederate states and Oklahoma legislated the disfranchisement of black male voters.²⁴ The Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that “separate but equal” accommodations were constitutional enabled legalized segregation to spread throughout the South. Widespread violence facilitated the “legalization” of disfranchisement and segregation. The federal government, of course, was complicit in this nullification process through decisions like *Plessy* and by refusing to enforce the amendments.

While the federal government abandoned American citizens of African descent in the South, aunts, mothers, sisters, and daughters residing outside the South did not. The pages that follow document how African American women in one state, Illinois, repeatedly entered electoral politics between the 1890s and 1930s in order to complete the unfinished goals of Reconstruction. They mobilized to elect representatives who would push for the enforcement of the Reconstruction Amendments in the South. In so doing, African American women kept alive a very distinct strain of Republican Party ideology that favored using federal power to protect black citizenship rights. This particular vein of Republican Party ideology had fallen out of favor with most white supporters by the close of the nineteenth century.

Beginning in the 1890s, black women in Illinois attempted to keep alive this strain of Republican Party ideology with one important difference from the generation of women who had preceded them: they participated in the party system as a new class of voters. Their ability to shape the party system was not dependent on men's willingness to extend an ethos of mutuality to politics. Persuasion and threats were no longer their only tools for ensuring Republican votes. Precisely during the years when black men in the South were being disfranchised, American women's access to the ballot box was gradually expanding. American women's enfranchisement did not occur in a single moment with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Women in Illinois were among the millions of American women who acquired the right to vote selectively in various cities and states during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women in Illinois acquired voting rights in three stages: suffrage for school officials in 1891, expanded suffrage for many municipal and federal offices in 1913, and the full franchise in 1920. The ability of states to enfranchise residents, even to vote for federal offices as was the case in Illinois in 1913, without federal authority was one of the peculiar qualities of the suffrage process and a sign of the continuing ambiguities of the demarcation between state and federal enfranchisement roles in the years after Reconstruction.

Black women in Illinois entered the electoral system not only as voters in the years after 1891 but also as canvassers and even candidates—primarily Republican voters, canvassers, and candidates. Because the Republican Party was the party of Abraham Lincoln and the Reconstruction Amendments, most blacks who retained the franchise favored the Republican Party. During the depths of the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs helped to bring the majority of black voters into the Democratic fold for the first time in 1936, but before this major voting realignment, African American women in Illinois formed a plethora of Republican women's clubs devoted to canvassing on behalf of chosen Republican candidates.

Illinois is a very rich site for examining the history of black women's electoral activism. This is because African Americans acquired significant political influence in Illinois, and especially Chicago, during the first part of the twentieth century. The arrival of tens of thousands of southern blacks like Ella Elm was a key factor in the growth of black political power in the state. Illinois's black population expanded by more than 475 percent between 1890 and 1930, from 57,028 to 328,972. Elm eventually made her home in downstate Illinois, but the vast majority of southern migrants who arrived at one of Chicago's railroad depots remained in the city. This fact

was reflected in U.S. Census figures: the number of African Americans who made their home in Chicago skyrocketed by more than 1,500 percent between 1890 and 1930, from 14,271 to 233,903.²⁵ Black leaders in Chicago bartered this potential voting bloc for jobs, social services, and elected offices. Between 1915 and 1928, black voters in Chicago put more black men into office than in any other American city. The list of black elected officials included multiple city councilmen, a state senator, several state representatives, a municipal court judge, and a U.S. congressman. This congressman, Oscar DePriest—who in 1915 was also Chicago’s first black city councilman—became in 1928 the first black American to serve in Congress since 1901. The first black Democrat to be elected to Congress also came from Chicago. This was Arthur Mitchell, who defeated DePriest in 1934. African American women in Chicago were heavily involved in these elections as voters and canvassers. They were also a driving force behind the campaigns of white candidates whom they identified as friendly toward black voters and, even more important, interested in promoting black freedom.²⁶

Although organized around Illinois, and especially Chicago, this book is a history about national and southern politics as well. The narrative moves from the Midwest, to the South, to the national level because the women discussed here operated in, and linked, these multiple political arenas. By virtue of their location, Republican women in Illinois were at the crossroads of a great deal of national Republican traffic that passed through Chicago. Between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the 1936 voting realignment, nine of the fifteen Republican National Conventions took place in Chicago; and the Republican National Committee’s main headquarters or its Western Division Headquarters was frequently located there.²⁷ Black Republican women in Illinois were not alone in their political organizing. Similar Republican clubs emerged in cities and states across the country during this period. By the mid-1920s, women in Illinois were part of a national network of black Republican women who worked together in both local and national campaigns in order to place desirable candidates in office. Politically active black women in Illinois also traveled the crossroads that connected southern and midwestern communities. Like Elm, many were originally southerners who had resettled in Illinois only a few years and sometimes months before throwing themselves into the fray of campaign work with longtime Illinois residents.

Glenda Gilmore argues that black men’s disfranchisement in North Carolina at the turn of the century ironically created new public roles for black women. Black women in North Carolina became “diplomats to the white

community” who negotiated for government services for black residents. Black women’s ability to negotiate services from a government that excluded black men was possible precisely because women lacked voting rights. Unlike black men, women in North Carolina had never voted and this fact “camouflaged” the political content of their activities.²⁸ Once in Illinois, no longer needing to camouflage their politics, they joined the thousands of newly enfranchised African American women in the state who marched to the polls to cast their own ballots.

Migrant women, however, were more than just numbers. Their decision to cast ballots and engage in Republican canvassing work in Illinois needs to be understood within the larger continuum of their lives. While seeking to escape the oppressive regime of southern white supremacy, migrant women did not begin their lives “anew” upon relocating to Illinois, nor did they sever personal ties to the South. Rather, they carried with them a host of memories and experiences—political and otherwise—that shaped their future lives in the Midwest. Many newly arrived migrants had weathered disfranchisement battles against southern white Democrats. Others, like Ella Elm, learned about Democratic misconduct from relatives. Migrant women’s infusion of southern political knowledge into the Midwest took place over several decades. The term “Great Migration” is most closely associated with the heaviest years of migration during World War I and the 1920s. Black migration out of the South, however, was a continuous process that stretched across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The pages that follow show that each new wave of migration reinvigorated the southern orientation of black Republican women’s culture in the Midwest with fresh stories of southern Democratic abuses.

Together migrant and Illinois-born women created a hybrid political culture in Illinois that blended local political issues with a concern about black rights in the South. Both groups were acutely aware that they had access to the ballot box, whereas the majority of southern blacks did not. Each electoral battle in which they engaged had its own unique set of issues. Yet, a common goal emerged across the years and idiosyncrasies of diverse electoral contests. They repeatedly looked for moments in electoral races, even small local contests, to focus attention on the ongoing struggles against disfranchisement, segregation, and forced labor in the South—and to help elect officials who would do the same. For example, during the 1890s, black women in Chicago used a local school election that had nothing to do with federal power to generate a public discussion about the power and authority of the Reconstruction Amendments.²⁹

It was never this simple, however. African American women faced a whole host of interlocking obstacles as they attempted to push forward the struggle for civil rights using the party system. One of the most challenging obstacles they faced was a lack of good choices. When African American women finally began to cast their own ballots, neither of the two main parties offered very much on the national level. The Democratic Party remained the party of southern white supremacy, and the Republican Party was in deep retreat from its antislavery origins. Increasingly, even white Republican candidates who talked about using federal power to protect black rights also sought southern white votes in order to break up the Democratic “solid south.” At the local level in Illinois, however, black women voters and canvassers had more options. There, African American women found white and eventually black Republican candidates who, in return for black support, were willing to use their elected office to promote legislation beneficial to black communities. In 1928, for example, African American women across Illinois canvassed hard to help white Republican Ruth Hanna McCormick win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Once in office, Congressman McCormick attempted to reduce southern representation in the House from states that disfranchised black voters.

One of the factors that distinguished African American women’s electoral activism from men’s during the nadir was black women reformers’ belief that they had embarked on a new era in which women would help deliver the race from the injustices that it faced. African American women were so insistent that famed abolitionist and suffragist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper declared the late nineteenth century was the “woman’s era.” As historian Deborah Gray White explains, this “woman’s era” philosophy was grounded in the “sad loss of confidence in the ability of most black men to deal effectively with the race problem.”³⁰ Women reformers asserted that, as wives and mothers, women were better situated than men to instill in future generations the values of self-help and respectability that they believed to be so essential to race progress. Indeed, Michele Mitchell has demonstrated that many reformers, both women and men, held that properly educated mothers and homemakers were the key to the very survival of the race. Healthful and respectable homes would produce vigorous offspring who would lead morally upright lives.³¹

In addition to propagating a physically and morally robust race, personal displays of thrift and modesty, reformers believed, would go a long way toward undermining devastating racial stereotypes of African Americans as immoral and undeserving of citizenship. The expectation that the victims

and not the perpetrators of racism should regulate their behavior was a problematic strategy for battling racism. Middle-class African Americans' reliance on such "racial uplift" and "racial destiny" ideology was indicative of the limited avenues available for challenging white supremacy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and also contributed to the construction of intraracial class divisions. Indeed, middle-class status, or what Mitchell characterizes as "aspiring class" status, was defined less by income and more by the determination to live a certain type of respectable life that entailed hard work and modest behavior. Black women reformers asserted that because they were unlike the mass of black Americans, they should not be lumped together with uneducated blacks in the white mind; yet, at the same time, they had an obligation to prevent the working poor from engaging in behavior that would injure the reputation of the entire race. Mostly middle-class black women established a plethora of self-help institutions that both provided social services that ensured healthful homes and instilled racial uplift values in the working poor. These included kindergartens, homes for the elderly and for wayward girls, health clinics, and classes that taught a range of homemaking and mothering skills.³² African American women's social service was part of a more general turn inward among black communities that had been largely abandoned by elected representatives.³³

This book unpacks the electoral manifestations of "woman's era" philosophy, what might be characterized as the "outward" electoral face of this drive among African American women to help guide the race out of the profound problems that it faced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To be sure, women's efforts to save the race through social service was political, not only by the very definition of the project but also because women reformers regularly worked with government agencies to ensure healthful living conditions and the availability of public services for their communities.³⁴ Many of the very same women who established these self-help organizations, however, also carried on their work to save the race within the party system. Indeed, the notion that women had a responsibility to lead the race took on a life of its own within party politics.

From the 1870s through the 1920s, many black women reformers held that it was women's responsibility to keep men loyal to the Republican Party. From this vantage, party loyalty, and specifically Republican Party loyalty, was a virtue that would eventually reap rewards. Women's supposed moral superiority over men, women reformers asserted, enabled women to deflect vote-buying schemes. As women increasingly joined the ranks of voters,

adherents of this view rhetorically lumped women of low social standing together with men when describing that group of African Americans most likely to succumb to Democratic malfeasance. In other words, class increasingly cut across gender in Republican women's partisan constructions of race disloyalty. Moreover, within local Republican circles, it was not always clear what example women should be setting for the masses. Republican women leaders, for example, disagreed about whether the race would benefit most by working with white-controlled political machines or by supporting black candidates over white ones.

This belief that women must guide the race toward Republican loyalty was not the only argument circulating about women's unique responsibilities within party politics. A minority of women tapped into this very same ideology of female moral superiority to make a very different claim: that if it was women's responsibility to lead the race, then they must lead the race *out* of the Republican Party. This explicitly gendered argument for abandoning the Republican Party helped to fuel what would eventually transform into a major voting realignment by the mid-1930s. To be sure, this assertion was not the primary factor motivating the mass of poor African Americans to switch to the Democratic Party. Among some middle-class black women reformers who had devoted their adult lives to trying to pull the race out of the nadir, however, the notion that women reformers had an obligation to guide the race into the Democratic Party carried weight.

African American women grounded their approach to party politics in their vast experience negotiating, bridging, and transforming contradiction, what contemporary theorists would describe as a womanist perspective to social change.³⁵ In addition to Republican duplicity, African American women regularly encountered blatant sexism and racism from groups who should have been their closest political allies, African American men and white Republicans (both women and men). Rather than throw up their hands in despair, politically active black women simultaneously criticized and supported these sometimes less than ideal partners. Far from illogical or contradictory, this strategy enabled them to work toward the multiple levels of social change that they demanded. They needed to build such alliances in order to gain a voice in powerful party circles. Even as they cultivated powerful allies, however, they also protested indifference, bigotry, and hypocrisy. African American women regularly criticized black men for what they perceived as failures of leadership while also expressing solidarity with them in a shared battle against white supremacy. The same could be said

for black women's dealings with white women reformers: they denounced white women's racism while also expressing solidarity with them in the struggle to undermine sexism. And so it was in their approach to the Republican Party.

Black Republican women rebuked their party for its profound failings, but they also focused on the exceptions to Republican indifference when canvassing for candidates. These exceptions changed over the years and with different candidates. They included legislative efforts for black education, against mob violence, and for a reduction in U.S. representatives from southern states that disfranchised voters. African American women also supported positions that at first glance seemed to have nothing to do with the struggle for black citizenship rights. One of these seemingly unrelated issues was the enactment and then repeal of a federal amendment prohibiting the production and consumption of liquor. The Republican Party's support of prohibition gave women reformers a reason to work with the party as they increasingly struggled with Republican indifference toward the end of the 1920s. Ironically, however, African American women's stance in favor of prohibition also undercut their authority to represent the race during an era when many enjoyed the pleasures of commercialized leisure districts, from blues and jazz clubs to dance and gambling halls.

In their canvassing efforts, African American women relied on a range of institutions. These included churches, fraternal organizations, women's reform groups, and Republican and Democratic clubs. This study traces some of the key institutional changes that undergirded women's political activism between the 1890s and 1930s. The overall trajectory of these changes was from less organizational support to more: in 1891 when women in Illinois acquired their first voting rights, African American women in the state had few organizations at their disposal for campaign work, whereas by the 1930s they had a range from which to choose. This growth in organizational support, however, involved a complicated set of struggles for authority and resources that were refracted through gender and class hierarchies. Because historically they were among the only black institutions independent from white authority, black churches served as important sites for party politics. Churches were also patriarchal institutions in which key leadership positions were reserved for men. African American women regularly turned to the churches to conduct campaign work, but they also created their own set of clubs that theoretically enabled them to express their political views beyond the reach of clerical authority. In practice, however, the clubs did not

always achieve this intended goal, and this book documents tensions between women and male clergy that only increased as women's independent political organizing expanded in the twentieth century. The pages that follow also document how black women reformers missed several important opportunities to reach women voters who, because of a combination of poverty and regional differences, remained outside the fold of either middle-class women's clubs or mainline churches.

Chapters 1 through 3 explore African American women's Republican and eventually Democratic activism following each expansion of women's voting rights in Illinois: 1891, 1913, and 1920. These chapters identify the different ways that African American women in Illinois and across the nation used electoral contests to shine a light on the need for a stronger federal government, especially in relation to the South. Each new wave of migrant women who arrived in Illinois, these chapters show, reinvigorated this southern orientation of local women's politics. Chapters 1 through 3 also consider the diverse ways that African American women applied "woman's era" philosophy to party politics. This philosophy was articulated mostly with the Republican Party in mind. Chapter 3, however, also documents how some African American women, angered by the Republican Party's failure to push through federal antilynching legislation, argued by the mid-1920s that if women were going to lead the race, then they needed to lead it into the Democratic Party. This analysis of the gendered components of the voting realignment extends into chapter 4's discussion of prohibition politics and the 1928 presidential election. Chapter 4 continues to trace this gendered argument for switching to the Democratic Party. It also explores how the decline of women's racial uplift ideology intertwined with the decline of the Republican Party among black voters in ways that undercut the influence of Republican women's networks that were, after years of organizing, at the height of their organizing potential. Chapter 5 examines black women's use of these Republican networks to advance individual and group agendas in congressional elections in Illinois between 1927 and 1930. Despite or because of their embattled position, black Republican women remained fiercely loyal to the Republican Party not only to achieve long-sought policy goals but also to obtain paid campaign positions that would help them weather what was turning into the worst economic depression in American history. The book concludes with a brief discussion of women's turn to the Democratic Party with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. Threaded across these chapters is an examination of the shifting institu-

tional support—from churches, to women’s clubs, to party organizations, to fraternal organizations—that black women relied upon, fought for access to, created, and sometimes overlooked in their campaign work.

ELLA ELM WAS NOT the only daughter who learned about the politics of Democratic white supremacy from her father. Several hundred miles to the east in North Carolina, another young girl by the name of Jennie Lawrence learned about the history of the Democratic Party during Reconstruction from her father, Abner Bernard Lawrence. Abner Lawrence had witnessed the establishment of the Republican Party in North Carolina in 1867 and its decline over the next eight years. In 1876 Lawrence was a seminary student at the Biddle Memorial Institute in Charlotte.³⁶ In addition to preparing for a life as a Presbyterian minister, Lawrence was engaged in a last-ditch fight to retain Republican influence in North Carolina.

On July 4, 1876, Abner Bernard Lawrence addressed a crowd of between 5,000 and 8,000 African Americans who had gathered in the grove near Biddle Memorial Institute to celebrate the nation’s centennial. Some had traveled from as far as Statesville and Wilmington to participate in the festivities. Lawrence was one among several prominent black and white North Carolinians who, in between singing, prayer, and eating, delivered speeches to the crowd throughout the day. Several of the speakers, including Lawrence, had participated in the Republican Convention of Mecklenburg County ten days earlier where a heated dispute over patronage had nearly caused a breakdown in the convention and had divided black Republicans among themselves. Having survived the convention with the county’s Republican Party battered but still intact, black Republicans sidestepped their disagreements and instead emphasized unity. As the *Charlotte Observer* reported, leading black Republican John Schenck told the crowd that “at present they had best disregard personal preferences and stand together for the Republican party.” Days earlier Schenck had squared off with Lawrence over patronage practices and the nomination of candidates. Schenck, Lawrence, and others would have another chance to hammer out their disagreements over nominees in Raleigh the following week. They would travel there as delegates to the North Carolina Republican State Convention.³⁷ For the time being, they presented a unified front against a shared enemy, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Zebulon Vance. Vance, whose campaign rhetoric included a description of the Republican Party as “begotten by a scalawag out of a mulatto and born in an outhouse,” had served as the

governor of North Carolina during the Civil War.³⁸ Vance's victory would mean that the exact same man who had led North Carolina during the secession crisis would once again govern the state.

It was with good reason that Schenck emphasized unity among black Republicans in the upcoming election, even though he personally railed against the party's treatment of black members. The pages of the *Charlotte Observer* gleefully noted the presence of a black Tilden and Vance Club in the city.³⁹ Deeply frustrated with Republican Party scandals and general unwillingness to either support black candidates or reward black supporters with patronage, some black men turned toward the Democratic Party. Others succumbed to economic pressures and intimidation.⁴⁰ White employers coerced black workers to support Democratic candidates, in some instances accompanying them to the polls to make sure they voted the Democratic ticket. Black men of the Tilden and Vance Club were given badges that, as the *Charlotte Observer* reported, were "to serve as passports to the favor of those who wish to hir[e] labor."⁴¹

Black women in Charlotte openly challenged black men who for whatever reason considered voting a Democratic ticket. After a late October women's meeting, a local paper reported, "a bright colored damsel of probably 20 summers, was heard to say 'we'll make them forget Vance yet, d—n their black souls.'" ⁴² Days after the gathering, the *Charlotte Observer* made an unveiled threat against women who denounced black Democrats: "The colored women should not be so embittered against the whites, nor should they work so hard against the interests of those persons who give them their patronage and employment." Knowing full well that many black women in the city earned wages as washwomen—picking up dirty laundry from white households, scrubbing the linens clean on washboards at home, and then carrying them back to the white section of Charlotte freshly ironed and folded—the *Observer* predicted ominously: "If a steam la[u]ndry was erected, as is talked of, it would throw hundreds of colored women out of the means of making a support. Colored people think! who are your friends."⁴³ Defiantly, black women "held meetings and appointed committees on elections to look after the men and induce them to return to Radicalism."⁴⁴ On election day, they jeered at black Democrats and, by one account, lay "in ambush and stone[d] them as they return[ed] home."⁴⁵

Despite black Republican efforts, Zebulon Vance won the election by about 13,000 votes. Democrats were also in control of the state legislature. North Carolina was officially "redeemed" from Republican influence asserted during Reconstruction.⁴⁶ Abner Lawrence must have been deeply

disappointed about Vance's victory. Still, he continued to forge a life for himself as a minister, husband, and father. In early 1878, Abner married teacher Annie Henderson. Together they had seven children, three surviving.⁴⁷ Their eldest surviving daughter, Jennie, would carry her parents' passion for party politics northward. Jennie Lawrence emerged as a leading Republican organizer in Chicago's predominantly black wards between the 1910s and 1930s. During Reconstruction, disfranchised women expected men to use their vote on behalf of the entire community. Not all of them did, of course, but the expectation or pressure that men should act as proxy voters for women was there. By the time that Jennie Lawrence was ensconced in Republican politics in Chicago, African Americans' ability to cast a ballot was increasingly determined more by region and less by gender. The disfranchised, both men and women, resided in the South; the enfranchised, including women, lived outside that region. In Chicago, Jennie Lawrence would take on the role of proxy voter that her father had once performed.