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RACIAL, ECONOMIC, AND GENDER INEQUITY IN THE STATES

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Describe at least one demographic pattern in the United States that highlights the importance of racial, economic, or gender equity.
- 1.2 Describe the difference between equity and equality.
- 1.3 Discuss how structural contexts relate to equity.
- 1.4 Explain the meaning of the phrase “politics has an ‘upper class bias.’”

States are increasingly the gravitational center of American political life. Intense and deepening partisan polarization have made gridlock more prevalent in federal governance and imbued state politics with heightened national significance, making states the battleground for (often bitter) clashes over everything from healthcare to gun rights to education (Hopkins, 2018; Grumbach, 2022). In the United States, state politics matter for everyone. Yet, political decisions made at the state level have especially profound implications for people who occupy marginalized positions within American social and economic hierarchies. Such people are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, signaling the fundamental challenges facing states, and revealing the shortcomings of state political institutions. The fate of marginalized people and communities within state politics is a critical marker of the effectiveness of state governance and the strength of democracy. This basic logic—that we ought to look to those who are disadvantaged by and within systems to evaluate how those systems operate—is a broadly held notion that has been articulated by luminaries and leaders throughout U.S. history. Consider just a few:

“If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. *One goes to the unprotected...*”

—James Baldwin, 1972

“The test of a civilization is the way that it *cares for its helpless members.*”

—Pearl S. Buck, 1954

“In this nation, I see tens of millions of its citizens...who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life. I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day...I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished...*The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.*”

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1937

The insight threaded through these statements extends to the states. To understand state political processes more incisively, we must turn to those who are most precariously positioned, taking a view of politics that centers those at the margins (Michener, SoRelle, and Thurston, 2022). By attending to denizens¹ who face severe disadvantages, we learn what state politics portend for those who are most vulnerable in the face of governance outcomes, most reliant on policy, and most acutely affected when state institutions fail to foster contexts that enable everyone to thrive. This is the rationale for focusing on racial, economic, and gender inequity in the states.

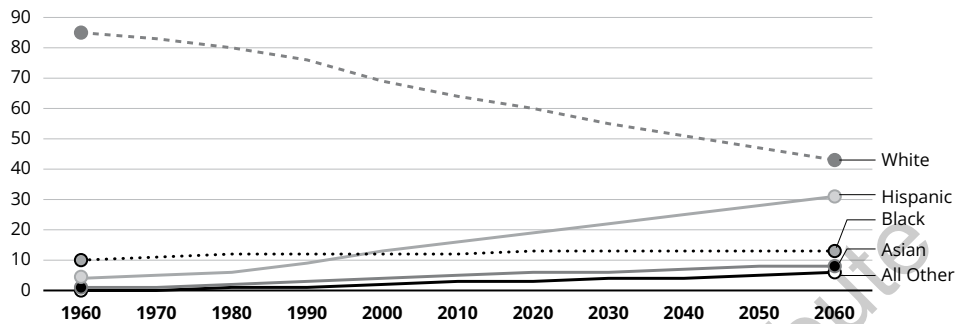
RACIAL, ECONOMIC, AND GENDER DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE UNITED STATES

As a starting point for exploring state politics through the lens described above, this chapter begins by underlining key demographic patterns. Whether in terms of population composition, electoral configurations, or longstanding dynamics of inequity, there are essential facts on the ground that highlight the centrality of racial, gender, and economic status in the United States. A vital point that will be reinforced throughout this chapter is that race, gender, and class do not matter in state politics for biological, genetic, or even cultural reasons. Instead, it is the material realities determined by state political processes that render these categories socially and economically meaningful and contribute to their role as critical determinants of lived experiences and well-being.

State Racial Demographics

Over the last 60 years, U.S. population growth has been primarily driven by increasing numbers of people who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, Black, and Asian (as shown in Figure 1.1). While the changing makeup of the U.S. populace does not inexorably or straightforwardly alter politics, such shifts have a wide range of political upshots (Collingwood, DeMora, and Long, 2022; Craig and Richeson, 2014; Craig, Rucker, and Richeson, 2018; Turner, 2015; Wong, 2018). Whether by altering the needs and preferences of denizens, the incentives and priorities of legislatures, the tenor and emphases of political discourse, or the balance of economies and electorates—demographic transformation has significant implications for political processes and institutions.

Even more germane is that the nationwide demographic shifts displayed in Figure 1.1 are happening unevenly across states. Figure 1.2 shows state-level changes in racial/ethnic diversity

FIGURE 1.1 ■ U.S. Racial and Ethnic Population Composition

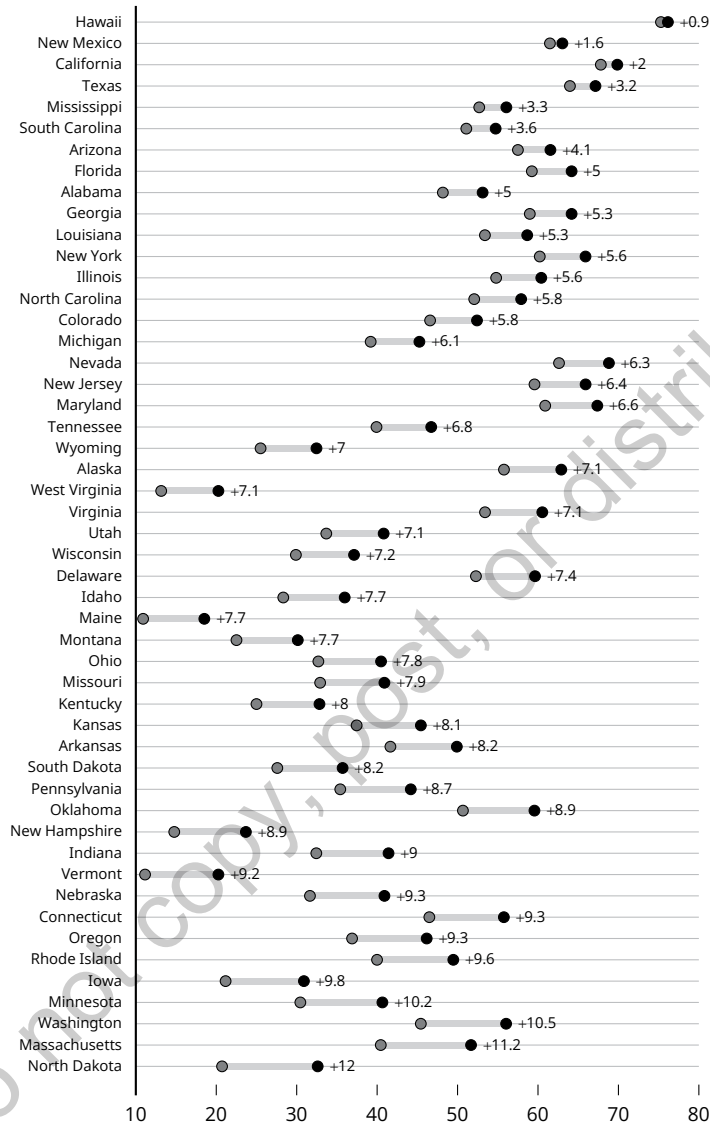
Source: PEW Research Center, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/04/10/next-america/>

between 2010 and 2020. State diversity scores are measured by the Census Bureau and tell us “how likely two people chosen at random will be from different race and ethnicity groups” (Census, 2023). As shown, Hawaii, California, Nevada, and Maryland rank among the most diverse states, while Maine, West Virginia, and Vermont are the least diverse. While these general rankings are not too surprising, the changes in diversity levels over time within states are both striking and instructive. Some of the most diverse states (Hawaii, California) are quite static in their racial demographics, with little change occurring between 2010 and 2020. On the other hand, North Dakota, a relatively less diverse state, experienced the sharpest increase in diversity during this decade. More generally, there are 18 states that experienced substantial shifts (eight or more percentage points) in diversity during this period. These states are heterogeneous in terms of region, political context, economic conditions, and more. For this reason, the political economy of population dynamics positions racial equity as pivotal consideration for state politics going forward.

State Gender Demographics

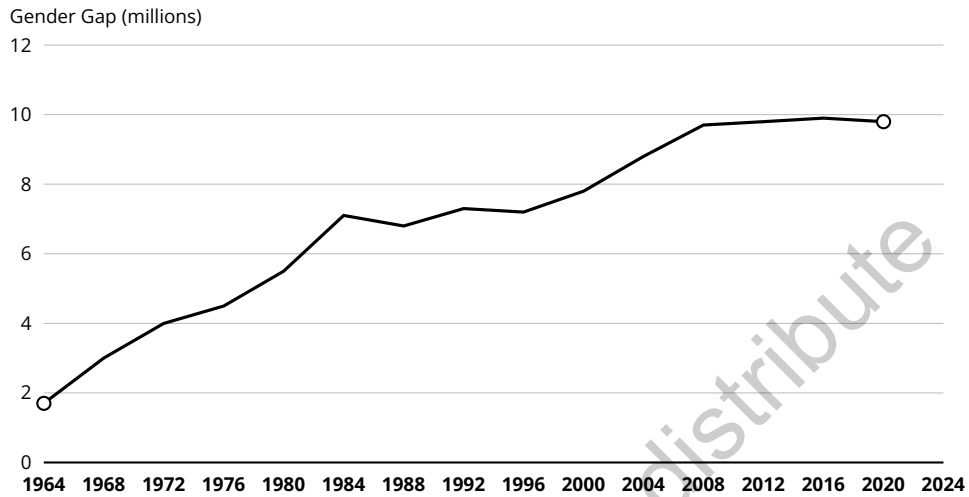
Gender is also a crucial locus of demographic change. Overall, the population of women and men hovers around parity (with slightly more women than men in the United States). However, the electorate is increasingly skewed towards women. As shown in Figure 1.3, the gender gap between women and men who voted in a presidential election has been on the rise. In 1964, 1.7 million more women reported voting. By 2020, that number had risen to 9.8 million.

This gender gap is poised to keep growing, and unevenly so across states. In 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the now seminal *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. As a result of the *Dobbs* decision, states gained increased legal leverage for limiting and prohibiting abortion. In the immediate aftermath of this ruling, women registered to vote in large numbers in states where access to abortion could be threatened (Paris and Cohn, 2022). For example, in the week after the court’s June 2022 judgment, more than 70 percent of newly registered voters in Kansas were women (Paris and Cohn, 2022). This pattern continued until the Kansas primary in December 2022, when a robust turnout of Democrats helped beat back a referendum that would have severely imperiled abortion rights in Kansas. Kansas was

FIGURE 1.2 ■ State Changes in Racial/Ethnic Diversity

Source: US Census. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-the-united-states-2010-and-2020-census.html>

hardly the only state where such patterns unfolded. Voter registration surged among women in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Idaho, and Oklahoma, among other places. No matter where one falls on the side of the issue of abortion, the politics surrounding it have implications for how denizens make political decisions, especially (though not exclusively) those who identify as women. This is one of numerous examples of how issues related to gender equity inflect state politics and are likely to always do so.

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Gender Gap in Number of Eligible Adults Who Reported Voting

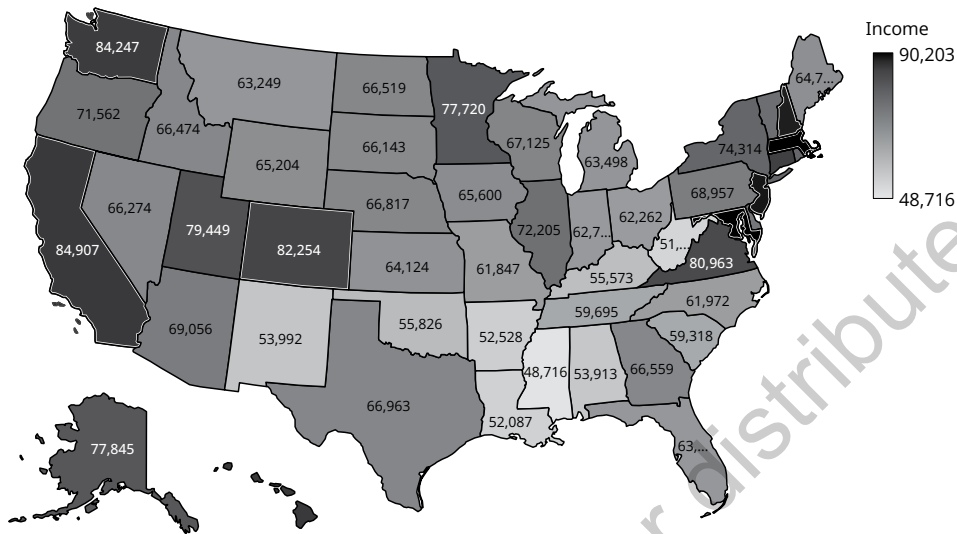
Source: Center for Women and American Politics, 2023. <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout#GGN>

State Economic Patterns

Economic dynamics are also enduringly important for the landscape of state politics. A longstanding scholarly literature posits socioeconomic status and related resources as key determinants of political participation and representation (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman, 1995; Verba and Nie, 1987; Scholzman, Verba, and Brady, 2012; Michener, 2017). While there are many mechanisms that account for the relationships between markers of social class (income, education, etc.) and political outcomes, there is little doubt about the broad importance of such factors. Even further, access to economic resources varies widely across states. As shown in Figure 1.4, the 2021 median household income across the country ranged from a low of \$48,716 in Mississippi to a high of \$90,203 in Maryland. Such differences are not solely (or even primarily) the product of differences between individuals living in these states. State politics shapes policies that structure the labor market, access to affordable housing and healthcare, and many other factors that bear upon the economic well-being of state residents. This striking heterogeneity across states highlights economic status as a central fulcrum around which state politics orients.

WHAT IS EQUITY?

The demographic trajectories described above underscore the importance of racial dynamics, economic status, and gender politics in the American states. Still, there are reasons for centering equity across these dimensions that go beyond demographic trends. To be sure, equity has become a salient and controversial lightning rod in state politics. For example, between 2021 and early 2024, state legislatures proposed or passed more than two dozen bills designed to restrict or control funding, programs, or practices related to diversity, equity, and

FIGURE 1.4 ■ Median Household Income by State

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021 (1-Year Estimate). [https://data.census.gov/nap/010XX00US\\$0400000_040XX00US\\$0600000/ACSDT1Y2021/B19013?q=b19013&y=2021&layer=VT_2021_040_00_PP_D1&loc=43.3751,-113.1138,z2.6270](https://data.census.gov/nap/010XX00US$0400000_040XX00US$0600000/ACSDT1Y2021/B19013?q=b19013&y=2021&layer=VT_2021_040_00_PP_D1&loc=43.3751,-113.1138,z2.6270)

inclusion (DEI) in colleges and universities (Contreras, 2024). States as wide ranging as Florida, Mississippi, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah have adopted these laws. Such legislation is not the focus of this chapter, but it bears mentioning because it is an important part of the post-2020 political environment. A skeptical reader of this textbook might observe the pushback against equity that has animated state politics and wonder why the first chapter of *Politics in the American States* should be centered around an ostensibly controversial subject. To address this skepticism, it is crucial to look beyond headlines, soundbites, and political polemics. The most straightforward step in this direction is to clarify what equity means. **Equity** is the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, benefits, and even burdens. While **equality** is about everyone having the same thing, equity is about people having what is understood to be fair given their capacities, circumstances, and structural contexts (Stone, 2012). As an example, let's consider equity in access to healthcare. We might observe that a high-income, suburban neighborhood and a nearby low-income, urban neighborhood have the same number of local hospitals serving their respective populations. But this sameness does not mean there is equity between the communities in question. If the low-income, urban neighborhood is more densely populated, has higher incidences of chronic illness, and has more residents with acute need for medical care (e.g., young children, elderly people), then despite that community having access to an *equal* number of hospitals as its suburban counterpart, it does not have *equitable* access. Equity involves the alignment of resources and opportunity with need and context.

Heated political debates over subjects like “DEI” and “Critical Race Theory” can involve many different things (e.g., backlash against heightened attention to racism in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, zero sum assumptions about racial group threat or competition).

But rhetoric around these issues often distorts the core concerns that underlie an emphasis on equity. At base, equity is about fairness. In this way, it is a principle that resonates with many Americans and matters for every resident of every state.

In the pages to follow, equity is not deployed as a political buzzword. It is not meant to indicate that some groups are inherently bad and others good, that some are perpetually perpetrators and others invariably victims, or that some are characteristically oppressors and others inescapably oppressed. While state politics does at times involve bad actors, perpetrators, and oppressors—an oversimplistic application of these categories risks reifying them, and painting with a brush so broad that we fail to capture the processes underlying racial, economic, and gender inequities. State political institutions sometimes perpetuate inequity without any obvious bad actors, even in the face of otherwise good intentions. And while the processes that generate and maintain inequities disproportionately and systemically advantage some groups over others, a wide array of people and practices propel those processes. This means that crass bifurcations of good and bad are unhelpful for making sense of how and why inequities emerge in states. As readers delve into this chapter, they should set aside whatever baggage or preconceptions they have brought with them about equity and recall FDR's exhortation to "test" our progress as a polity by considering the realities of "those who have too little." Most fundamentally, this is why it's important to center racial, economic, and gender inequities in our understanding of state politics.

STATES AS STRUCTURAL CONTEXTS

States serve both as contexts for generating and reproducing inequities, and venues for addressing and reducing them. This chapter focuses on both functions. Beginning with an overarching assessment of the landscapes of state inequity, this chapter then offers comprehensive detail about how state politics and policy sometimes deepen inequities and sometimes redress them.

The next sections of this chapter follow FDR in orienting around the "millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day." Those facing such problems are not a random selection of residents in each state. Instead, some groups of denizens—especially women (in all racial categories) and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people—are systematically more likely to face such circumstances. This is not due to the failings or inadequacies of people within such social groups. Instead, it is because of **structural contexts**—the institutions, policies, and practices that shape economic and social opportunities, benefits, and burdens. State politics and policy are core determinants of structural context, and state differences in material outcomes across racial, economic, or gender categories are an indicator of the primacy of structural factors. Race and gender do not come to affect key life outcomes for biologically or genetically determined reasons.² Instead, these ascriptive categories translate into social and economic hierarchies through political processes. So, when we see heterogenous racial, economic, and gender-based stratification across states, it suggests that state political contexts (e.g., the opportunities that states create or foreclose, the resources they distribute or withhold, etc.) are key drivers of such inequity.

An abundance of social science research substantiates the central role of state politics and policy in producing the conditions that enable racial, economic, and gender inequities, both historically and contemporarily. States have played a vital part in entrenching American racial hierarchies for hundreds of years, enacting draconian practices related to the enslavement of African peoples, repressive regimes of state sanctioned racial violence, oppressive Jim Crow laws, racially biased administration of social policy, and much more (King and Smith, 2005; Lieberman and Lapinski, 2001; Katznelson, 2005; Mickey, 2015; Williams, 2010). States have similarly engendered economic inequity, leading the way in welfare state retrenchment, the stigmatization of poverty, and the disproportionate channeling of resources towards the wealthy (Franko and Witko, 2018; Michener, 2018; Tani, 2016). Finally, states have perpetuated gender-based disparities by too slowly, grudgingly, and inadequately providing policy benefits to women on an equitable basis, while variably and unreliably providing access to key supports like protections from domestic violence (Mettler, 1998; Sidorsky and Schiller, 2023).

The sections to follow highlight patterns that stress wide heterogeneity in racial, economic, and gender inequities across the American states. People fare dramatically different based upon what state they live in. Moreover, state differences in economic well-being are racialized and gendered—meaning that they vary based on racial and gender positioning of state residents. Ultimately, this suggests that economic, racial, and gender equity are closely interconnected with politics and policy in the American states.

Poverty, Race, and Economic Precarity

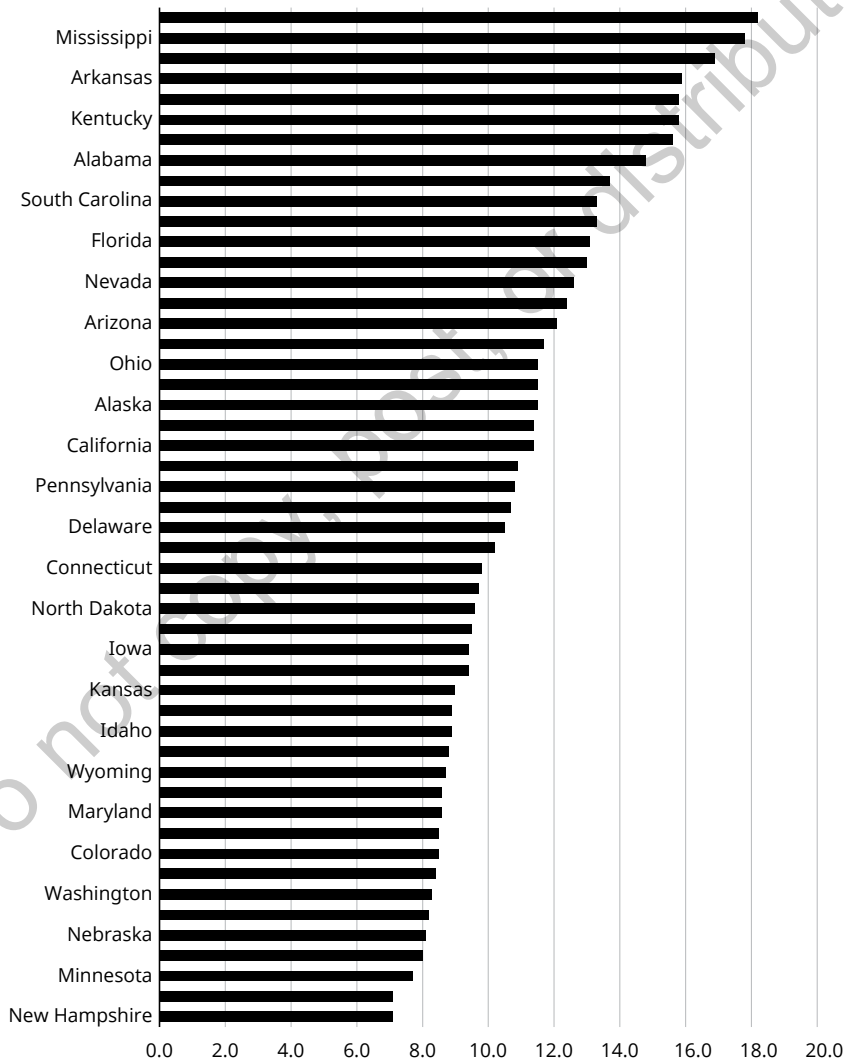
Poverty is one of the most salient markers of economic and social well-being. Living in poverty can diminish physical health, jeopardize mental health, and catalyze a host of negative life outcomes, especially for children (Brady and Burton, 2016; Le Menestrel and Duncan, 2019). Poverty is a barrier to accessing housing, food, education, safety, and so much more. Poverty also weakens democracy by undermining the political voice and power of low-income people and communities (Royce, 2022). Life crises associated with economic precarity (e.g., eviction, foreclosure, job loss, discontinued health insurance, etc.) make it less likely that people will participate in politics (Ojeda, Michener, and Haselswerdt, 2024).

For all these reasons, poverty is something that state governments generally seek to reduce. However, states take very different approaches to doing so. As a result, they create vastly differing structural contexts with marked heterogeneity in state poverty rates. Figure 1.4 displays the three-year average (2020-2023) of the official poverty rate across states. The official poverty measure (OPM) counts pre-tax cash income against a threshold that is set at three times the cost of minimum food diet in 1963, with adjustments for family size (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2020). Crucially, the OPM does not account for cost-of-living, taxes, or transfers (which encompass public assistance benefits like cash or food assistance), so it is an imperfect measure that only partially reflects economic hardship. Nonetheless, the OPM is a widely used metric that serves as a basis for many resource

allocation decisions. So, notwithstanding with well-noted flaws, it is a critical marker of economic well-being.³

Figure 1.5 shows sizable variation in state poverty rates, with states like New Hampshire, Utah, and Minnesota registering rates well below the 11 percent national average, and states like Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico exhibiting rates far above that average. Many of the highest poverty states are in the South and Southwest, and many of these states contain significant Black and Latinx populations. This reflects distinct

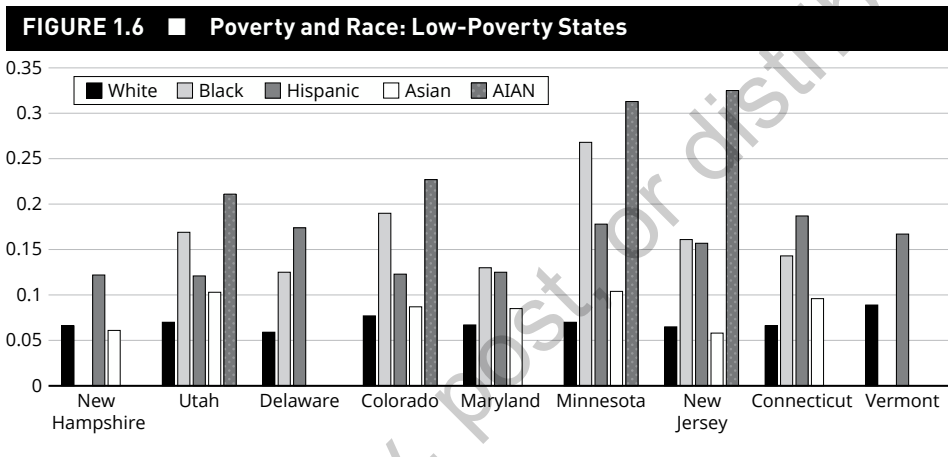
FIGURE 1.5 ■ State Poverty Rates (2020-2023)



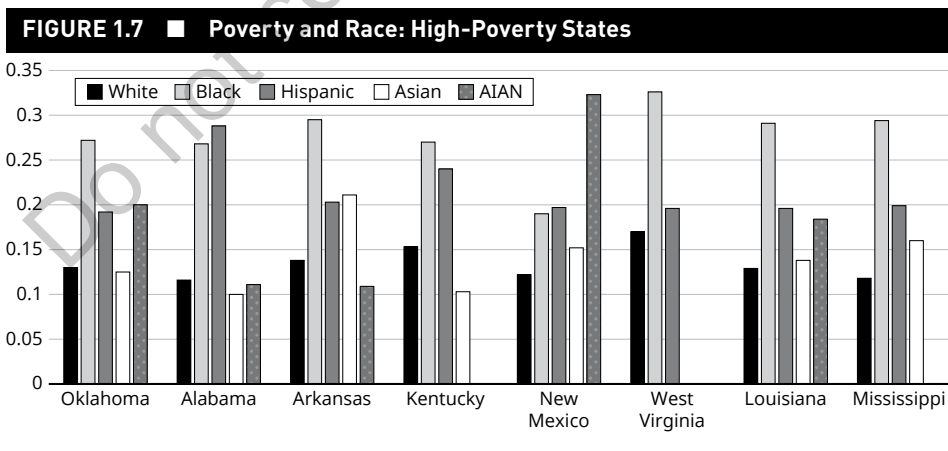
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023, Current Population Survey, 2021-2023 Annual Social and Economic Supplements. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.html>

racial disproportionalities in poverty rates. Importantly, however, even those imbalances vary across states, indicating that structural contexts, not inherent group differences, best explain racial disparities in poverty.

Figures 1.6 and 1.7 offer a closer look at racial disparities in poverty. Focusing on 2022, Figure 1.6 displays racial poverty gaps in low-poverty states (with average poverty rates below 10 percent), while Figure 1.7 shows racial poverty gaps in high-poverty states (with average poverty rates above 15 percent). Even in low-poverty states, rates of poverty are high for Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) populations. Consider Utah, for example. Though Utah had one of the lowest overall poverty rates in the country in 2022 (~8 percent),



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation State Health Facts, 2022. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation State Health Facts, 2022. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

this was mostly driven by low poverty levels among white state residents (-7 percent). The Black poverty rate in Utah that year was nearly 17 percent, while the AIAN poverty rate soared to 21 percent.

Such patterns held even in more racially diverse low-poverty states. New Jersey, for example, kept its overall poverty rate just below 10 percent in 2022, but the Black and Latinx poverty rates hovered around 16 percent and the AIAN poverty rate was approaching a whopping 33 percent.

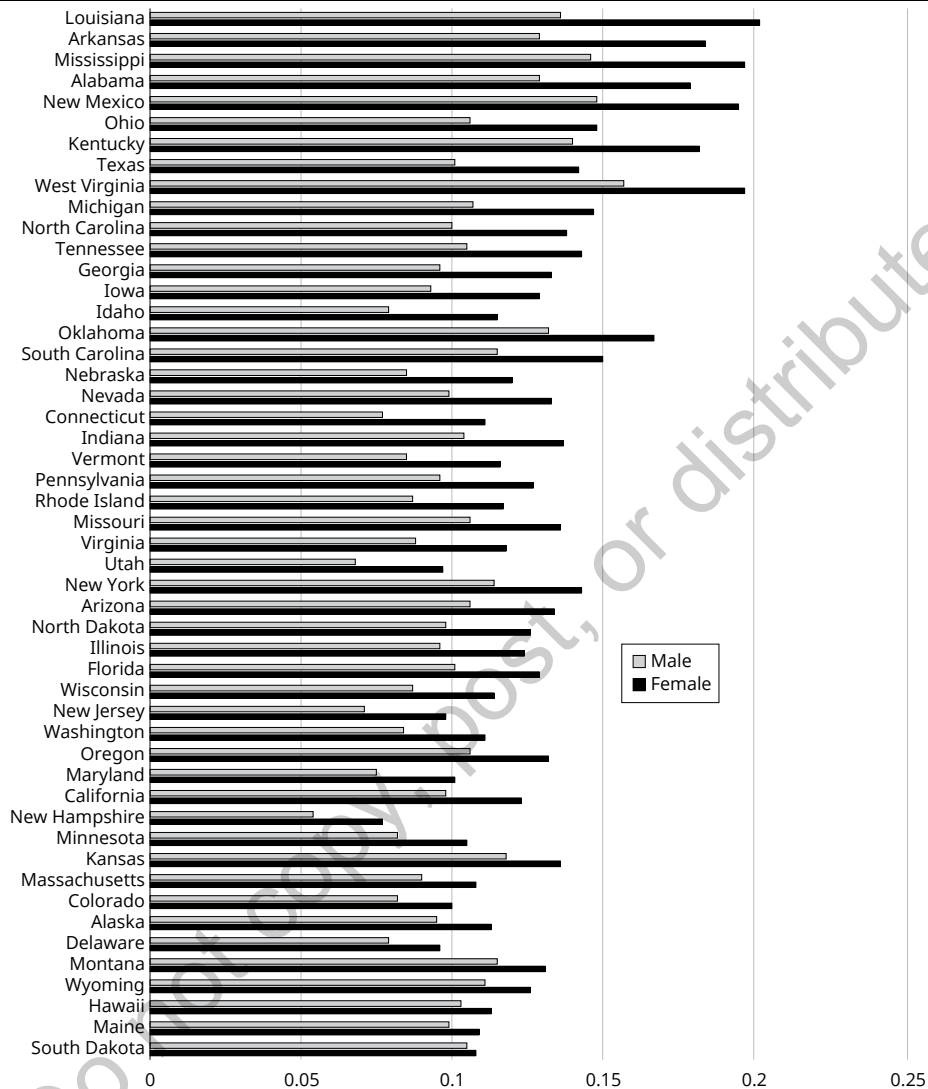
Importantly, just as a rising tide does not lift all boats in low-poverty states, increased levels of economic deprivation are not borne equally in high-poverty states. Indeed, high-poverty states had similarly (if not more) striking racial poverty gaps. Consider Mississippi, for example, with a relatively high overall poverty rate in 2022 (-19 percent) but a comparatively low white poverty rate (-12 percent) and much higher poverty rates among Black (-29 percent) and Latinx (-20 percent) residents. Both the overall poverty trajectories and racial poverty disparities are generated by state structural contexts. The policies and practices that states implement over time shape the well-being of all state residents, even while creating divergent fortunes for people who are differentially positioned vis-à-vis racial and class hierarchies.

Poverty and Gender

Just as state structural contexts lead to heterogeneous state racial disparities, they also map to gender inequities. Figure 1.8 displays state variation in poverty rates for men and women in 2022. *In every state, women are more likely than men to live in poverty.* But in some states, the gap is especially striking. Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama are among the places where the highest proportions of women are living in poverty. In these states, the poverty gaps between men and women are the largest (in the range of five to six percentage points). On the other end of the spectrum, South Dakota, Maine, and Hawaii are among the places where the fewest proportion of women live in poverty. In those states, the gaps edge close to parity between men and women.

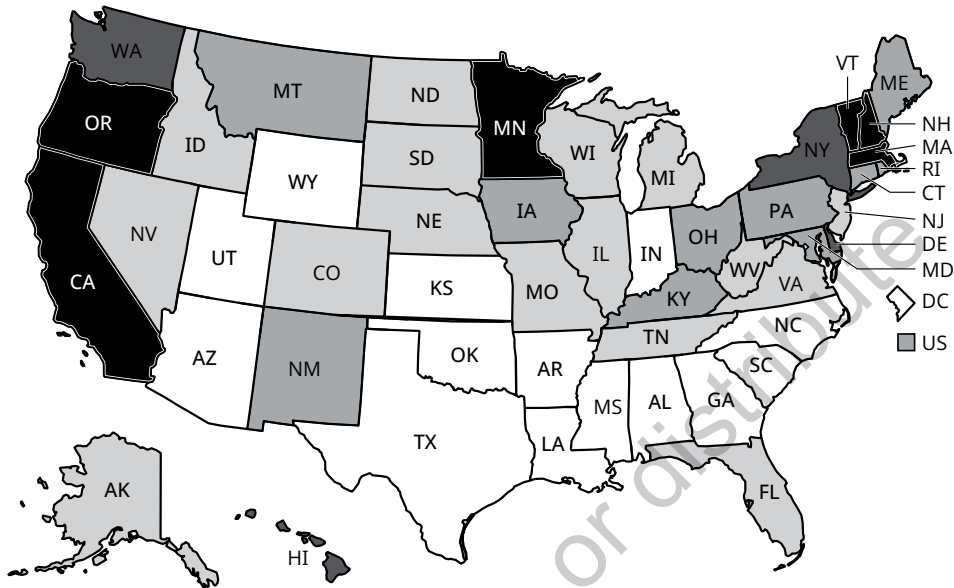
There is nothing biologically or genetically distinct about women in high-poverty states that causes them to be more vulnerable to economic precarity than women in low-poverty states. Instead, the structural contexts of states contribute to such outcomes. To illustrate this, Figures 1.9–1.11 map three state policies that are particularly relevant to low-income women. **Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF)** is a federal assistance program that allows states substantial discretion over the provision of cash and other kinds of assistance to families living in poverty. Community development expenditures reflect state investments in crucial resources like housing. State based **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** programs provide working families with financial resources through the tax filing process.

Many of the states with the most constrained access to these policy resources are also those with the highest poverty rates in general, for people of color and among women. Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Alabama, for example, have very low proportions of families receiving TANF assistance (Figure 1.9), relatively meager expenditures on housing and community development (Figure 1.10), and no state level EITC programs (Figure 1.11). At the same time,

FIGURE 1.8 ■ State Poverty Rates by Sex

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation State Health Facts, 2022. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/adult-poverty-rate-by-sex/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22coll%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

the states with the relatively low poverty rates, particularly for women (Massachusetts, Maine, Delaware, Hawaii) have more rather than fewer of such resources available. This mapping does not align perfectly (for example, South Dakota has very low poverty rates among women but does not appear to have generous social policies). Nonetheless, the broad patterns illustrated suggest the importance of state structural contexts for understanding the inequities that emerge in state populations.

FIGURE 1.9 ■ State TANF to Poverty Ratio

TANF-to-poverty ratio: # of families receiving TANF benefits for every 100 poor families with children (2019–2020)

□ 0–10 □ 11–20 □ 21–30 □ 31–40 ■ Greater than 40

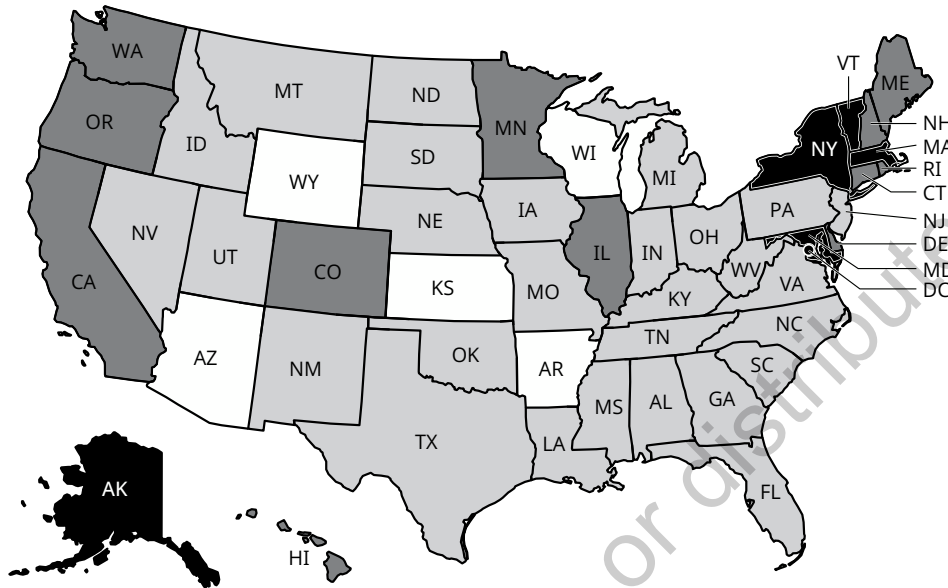
Source: Center of Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), 2023. Despite Recent Increases, TANF Benefits Still Leave Families Well Below Federal Poverty Line, <https://www.cbpp.org/despite-recent-increases-tanf-benefits-still-leave-families-well-below-federal-poverty-line-3>

RACIAL, GENDER, AND ECONOMIC INEQUITY IN STATE POLITICS

The policies that account for state structural contexts unfold within state political environments that shape the nature and substance of those policies. Indeed, policies are a product of politics and vice versa (Michener, 2019). So, when we observe variable policies across states with striking implications for equity (as noted in the section above), we must consider the politics that account for the emergence and persistence of such patterns. There are too many relevant factors to cover exhaustively in a single chapter—and many of additional considerations will emerge throughout this book in the chapters to follow. Here, I offer an entry point by focusing on three salient and instructive state political dynamics: attitudes towards women, voting among low-income Americans, and patterns of descriptive representation. I emphasize these aspects of state politics because they span a range of distinct registers (attitudinal, behavioral, and institutional, respectively) that speak to vital dimensions of state politics.

Attitudes Towards Women

The relationship between public opinion and public policy is by no means straightforward. To understand this relationship, scholars focus on both **policy responsiveness**—where

FIGURE 1.10 ■ State and Local Housing/Community Development Expenditures

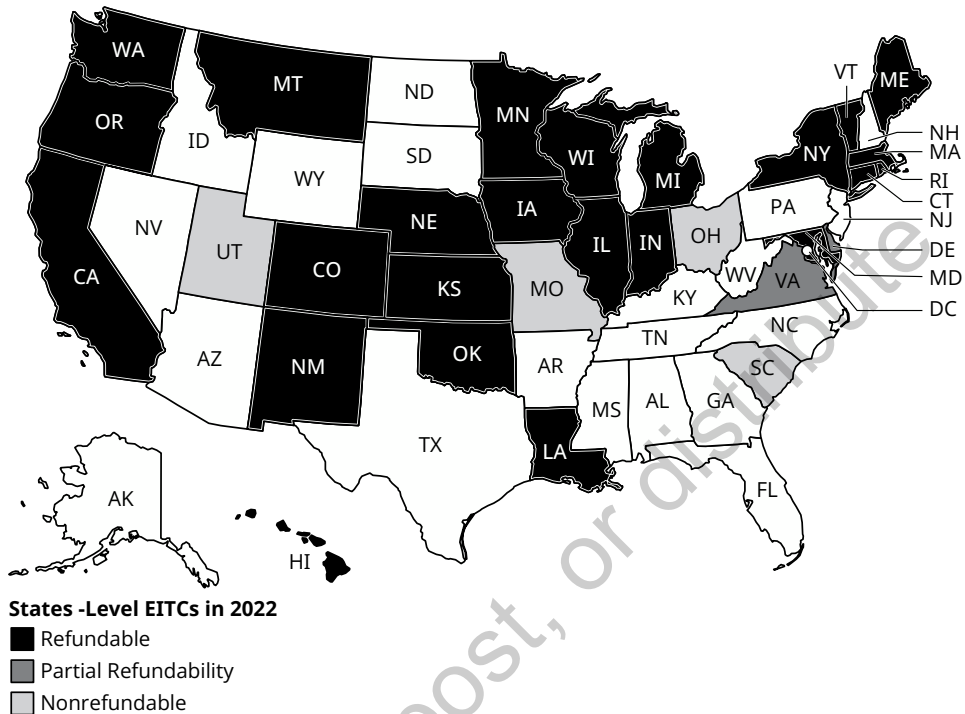
State and Local Housing and Community Development Expenditures Per capita direct general expenditures

■ >\$300 ■ \$200–\$300 ■ \$100–\$200 □ <\$100

Source: Urban Institute, 2021. <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/housing-and-community-development-expenditures#:~:text=differ%20across%20states%3F-,How%20much%20do%20state%20and%20local%20governments%20spend%20on%20housing,of%20total%20direct%20general%20expenditures.>

public preferences are predictive of subsequent policy changes—and **policy congruence**—where policies that are favored by a majority of the public are subsequently enacted. The literature investigating these phenomena offers a complex body of evidence about the ways that “the public” is represented in policy processes (Canes-Wrones, 2015; Lupu and Warner, 2022; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Enns and Wlezien, 2011). Existing research suggests that both policy responsiveness and congruence are conditional, varying across policy domains, geographic contexts, institutional venues, partisan contexts, social groups, and more (Canes-Wrones, 2015; Erikson, 2015; Lupu and Warner, 2022). Overall, the effect of public opinion on public policy is dynamic and contingent—it can neither be assumed nor taken for granted. Nevertheless, because public attitudes do sometimes prove to be a factor in shaping public policy, they are an important marker of state politics (you can learn much more about this in Chapter 5). With this in mind and given the emphasis in this chapter on gender inequity, it’s worth noting and examining significant state variation in attitudes towards women.

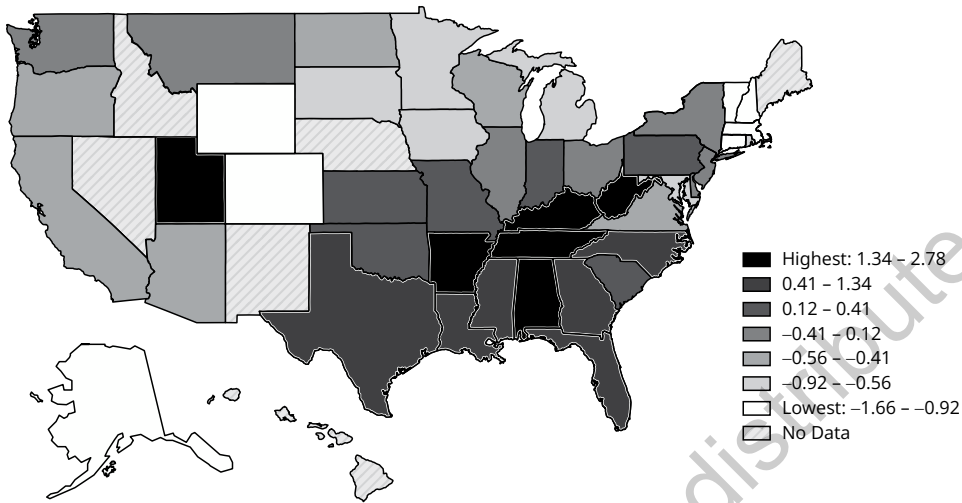
To gauge attitudes towards women in the American states, scholars have drawn on nationally representative survey and census data to develop a geographic measure of sexism

FIGURE 1.11 ■ State Earned Income Tax Credit Policy

Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2023. <https://itep.org/boosting-incomes-improving-equity-state-earned-income-tax-credits-in-2023/>

(Charles, Guryan, and Pan, 2022). This measure was based on questions probing survey respondents' beliefs about women's capacities, roles, and social status, including inquiries about whether women should take care of running the home and let men run the country, whether men are better suited emotionally for politics, and whether working mothers can have secure relationships with their children. Researchers then created measures of average sexism by taking the mean of individual responses within each state (Charles, Guryan, and Pan, 2022).

Figure 1.12 shows the geographic distribution of sexist beliefs. There is significant variation. States like Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Colorado display relatively low levels of sexism, while states like Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, and Utah display very high levels. Beyond these overarching patterns, it is notable that many of the states where the highest proportion of women live in poverty (Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Texas) are also the places where sexist beliefs are most predominant. Similarly, the places where the lowest proportion of women live in poverty (South Dakota, Alaska, Colorado, Wyoming, Massachusetts) are also places where levels of sexism are lower. While

FIGURE 1.12 ■ Sexism in the American States

Source: Charles, Kerwin Kofi, Jonathan Guryan and Jessica Pan. "The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms vs. Discrimination." *Journal of Human Resources* vol. 59 no. 3 © 2022 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

these stylized links are not unequivocal evidence of causal relationships, they are suggestive of the role public opinion might play within state political contexts. Moreover, the researchers that map sexism across the United States find that such contexts have significant consequences for both socioeconomic and health outcomes. Evidence indicates that white women born in more sexist states have larger gaps in wages and employment relative to their male counterparts (Charles, Guryan, and Pan, 2022).⁴ Research also indicates that Black and Latina women are substantially more likely to face barriers to healthcare when they reside in states with high levels of sexism, even when adjusting for a wide range of potentially confounding factors (Rapp, Volpe, and Neukrug, 2021).

Voting Among Low-Income Americans

In addition to attitudinal patterns related to gender equity, electoral dynamics are also a crucial aspect of state politics. To explore this, let's again focus on economic equity. Existing scholarly literature suggests that the substance and quality of political representation varies markedly by income (Erikson, 2015; Franko, Kelly, and Witko, 2016; Gilens, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012; Witko et al., 2021; Wright and Rigby, 2020). Such research has identified an **upper-class bias** (with variation across partisan contexts) that advantages economically well-off Americans, affording them greater political voice, influence, and agenda-setting power. Relatively low voter turnout among economically marginalized Americans is an imperative element of this broader set of processes. Ample research demonstrates that

low-income Americans are less likely to vote and that their low levels of participation have consequences for material outcomes, such as economic inequality and social policy generosity (Avery, 2015; Hill and Leighley, 1992; Leighley and Nagler, 2013; Solt, 2010). Overall, patterns of voting among low-income Americans are a vital marker of democratic inclusion, with concrete implications.

To put these research findings into context, consider voting patterns in a recent U.S. election. Table 1.1 shows the share of low-income state residents who were eligible to vote but did not cast a ballot in the 2016 election (e.g., eligible non-voting low-income Americans), as a proportion of the total electorate.

TABLE 1.1 ■ 2016 US Presidential Elections, Non-Voter Turnout, Listed by State

State	Non-voter turnout (percentage)
Alabama	18%
Alaska	12%
Arizona	17%
Arkansas	23%
California	14%
Colorado	8%
Connecticut	8%
Delaware	9%
Florida	11%
Georgia	15%
Hawaii	15%
Idaho	17%
Illinois	11%
Indiana	15%
Iowa	13%
Kansas	15%
Kentucky	20%
Louisiana	18%
Maine	13%

(Continued)

**TABLE 1.1 ■ 2016 US Presidential Elections, Non-Voter Turnout, Listed by State
(Continued)**

State	Non-voter turnout (percentage)
Maryland	8%
Massachusetts	9%
Michigan	13%
Minnesota	8%
Mississippi	20%
Missouri	15%
Montana	16%
Nebraska	13%
Nevada	12%
New Hampshire	7%
New Jersey	8%
New Mexico	20%
New York	13%
North Carolina	13%
North Dakota	12%
Ohio	14%
Oklahoma	20%
Oregon	12%
Pennsylvania	12%
Rhode Island	13%
South Carolina	16%
South Dakota	16%
Tennessee	20%
Texas	18%
Utah	14%
Vermont	11%
Virginia	10%
Washington	11%

State	Non-voter turnout (percentage)
West Virginia	22%
Wisconsin	11%
Wyoming	13%

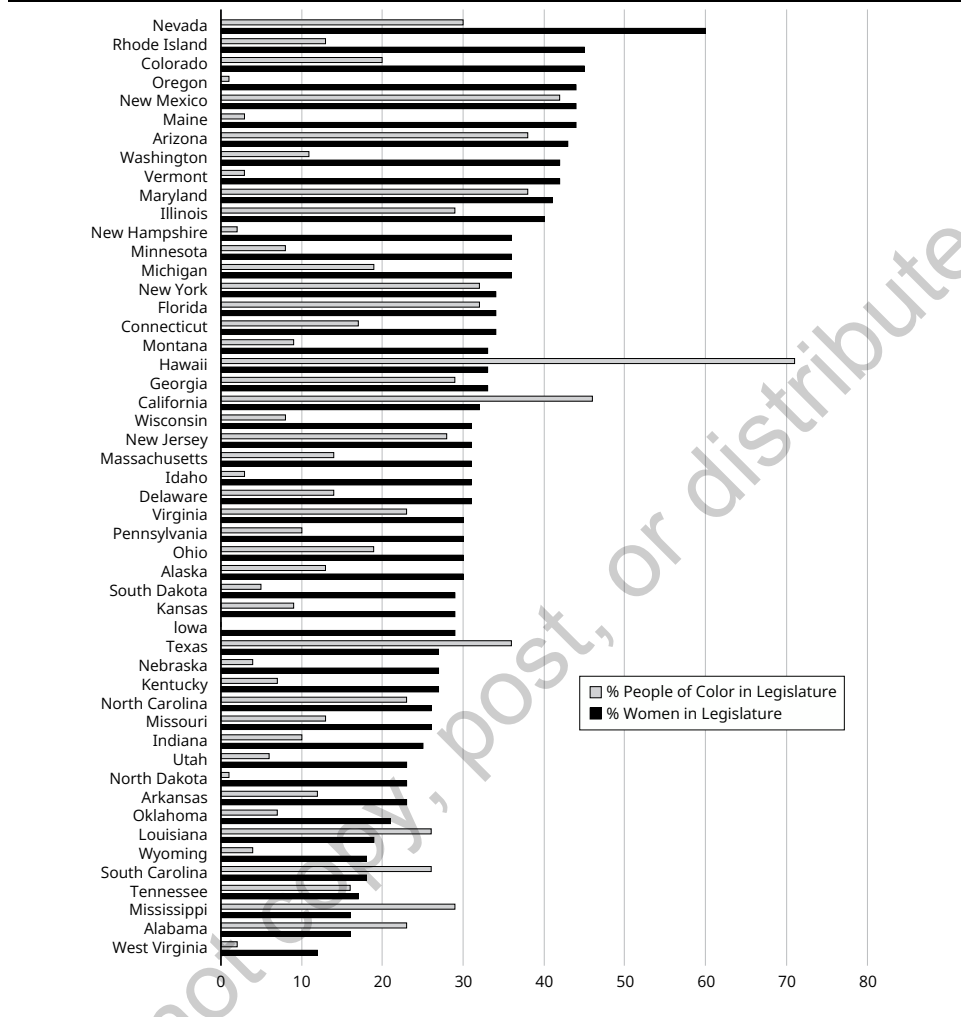
Notably, the largest concentrations of low-income people who did not vote in the 2016 election were found in states with very high rates of poverty, including Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Comparatively lower shares of non-voting, low-income Americans reside in states with low poverty rates, like New Hampshire, Minnesota, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Colorado. This is not dispositive evidence that low voting rates among low-income denizens is responsible for high-poverty rates, but it does sketch critical contours of state politics and policy, with striking implications for economic equity.

Patterns of Descriptive Representation

In addition to the attitudinal and electoral factors emphasized above, political institutions are also essential pillars of state politics. Indeed, legislative, executive, and other state institutions (including courts, parties, interest groups, and more) are covered deeply and extensively in the chapters to follow. In this section, I'll focus on descriptive representation in state legislatures to underline a broader point about the equity implications of institutional processes. A well-developed corpus of scholarship evinces the relationships between the racial and gender composition of legislatures and public policy outcomes. Increased descriptive representation correlates with substantive policy gains in terms of spending priorities, issue salience, policy benefits, and more (Gamble, 2007; Grose, 2011; Haynie, 2001; Mansbridge, 1999; Minta, 2012; Owens, 2005; Preuhs, 2005, 2006, 2007; Wallace, 2014). **Descriptive representation** refers to correspondence between the ascriptive social categories that legislators identify with and the similar categories that their constituents identify with. For example, when women represent women in legislatures, or when Black-elected officials represent Black districts. Theories of representation posit both the symbolic and substantive value of having political representatives who share experiences related to these social characteristics. Altogether, descriptive representation is another important input into the larger set of factors that shape the structural contexts of states.

Figure 1.13 charts the gender and racial composition of state legislatures. There is wide variation in the racial diversity of state legislative institutions, with states like Hawaii, California, New Mexico, Maryland, Arizona, Texas, and New York boasting the largest proportions of people of color in state legislatures, and states like Nevada, Rhode Island, Oregon, Colorado, and New Mexico having the most substantial shares of women elected to state legislatures. These patterns do not align simplistically with outcomes like poverty but instead evince a more complex set of relationships between race, gender, and representation in state politics.

FIGURE 1.13 ■ Race, Gender, and State Legislative Composition



Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020. <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-state-legislatures-2021> Center for American Women and Politics, 2021. <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/state-legislator-demographics>

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on racial, gender, and economic equity in state politics. Equity is a fundamental concept that orients us towards the well-being of state residents from all backgrounds and walks of life. It is both a necessary and difficult time to center equity in discussions of American politics. On the one hand, many government agencies and entities have made equity a pillar of their work in recent years. For example, in 2021 President

Joe Biden issued an executive order (EO) on his very first day in office that was focused on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government” (Executive Order 13985). Among other things, this federal EO noted that “Equal opportunity is the bedrock of American democracy, and our diversity is one of our country’s greatest strengths” and laid out “a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all” by “embedding fairness in decision-making processes, executive departments and agencies.”²⁵ Such action was not limited to the federal government. Governors in states like California (EO: N-16-22), Minnesota (EO: 23-12), and Washington (EO 22-02) also issued executive orders in attempts to ensure equity in state governmental processes.

Notwithstanding these political efforts to advance equity, widespread backlash to the very concept of equity emerged in American politics in the wake of massive protests following the 2020 killing of George Floyd (Mutua, 2022). States have been the primary terrain of such anti-DEI battles, with numerous states mounting efforts to expunge even the mention of racial and other kinds of inequality from educational and other state institutions. Amid all this, the impetus and ideas underlying a focus on equity are too easily missed. Equity is not about reductively or over simplistically pegging victims and oppressors, it is about taking steps to ensure that everyone has fair access to the resources, opportunities, and benefits that are distributed through economic and political processes. This chapter has laid out crucial demographic, economic, and political facts on the ground in the American states that underscore the critical importance of racial, gender, and economic equity. As states grapple with the struggles of the most marginalized denizens, they cannot ignore the disproportionate presence of women, people of color, and low-income Americans among those who are most in need. Confronting such dynamics means understanding how the structural contexts of states shape social, economic, and political well-being.

The groundwork laid in this chapter is just a beginning. As you progress through the rest of *Politics in the American States*, you will find consistent and comprehensive reference to the various dimensions of equity that have emerged here, as well as additional dimensions that have not. There is a standalone chapter focused on race and ethnicity in state politics (Chapter 17). The chapter on policing and incarceration (Chapter 10) as well as the chapter on housing and economic development (Chapter 16) orient prominently around racial inequality. Similarly, there is a standalone chapter on economic inequality (Chapter 18), while the chapters on health and welfare (Chapter 12) and fiscal policy (Chapter 11), also tackle important dimensions of the same subject. Even chapters that seem less directly concerned with equity, like those on public opinion (Chapter 5) and legislatures (Chapter 7), are attentive to dynamics of equity. As you delve into the many facets of state politics covered in this book, you will learn much that sheds light on the critical “test of our progress” laid out by FDR not only concerning “whether we provide enough for those who have too little” but more fundamentally considering what role states play in the process, and how state actors and institutions help to determine where the United States stands in relation to President Roosevelt’s profoundly apt challenge.

KEY TERMS

Descriptive Representation
Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
Equality
Equity
Policy Congruence

Policy Responsiveness
Structural Contexts
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
(TANF)
Upper-class Bias

SUGGESTED READINGS

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