Part I
Gender, Citizenship, and Republicanism
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Introduction to Part I

Among the most salient modernizing forces of nineteenth-century France were the contested concept of citizenship and the issue of precisely who had rights to civil freedoms and protections, social justice, and political power. This book begins with two chapters that advance the discussion of the meaning of citizenship in France’s long struggle with the republican experiment, and particularly its relationship with female emancipation. At its inception in 1792, French republicanism did indeed imply equality and liberty for all human beings. With the granting of universal manhood suffrage, France became the most democratic country in the world. Political distinctions were no longer based on wealth or on lineage through birth. Women, whose civil and social rights largely depended on their marital status, were categorically excluded from political rights on the basis of biological sex. Many historians contend that the equality ushered in by the revolution made sex a more important marker of distinction and difference as other sources of distinction (such as noble birth) became legally and politically untenable. As followers of Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers, many revolutionaries justified the exclusion of women on their conception of ‘natural law.’ Anaxagoras Chaumette, for example, pointed to nature when he argued that women were meant to confine themselves to domestic chores because they, not men, had been given breasts. And indeed, motherhood assumed a distinct importance in the new democratic context: women now had the civic responsibility of nurturing and raising the good citizens required of a successful republic. Although few demanded the vote for women in the Revolution of 1789, more did so in the Revolution of 1848 and during the Second Republic (1848–1852), the Paris Commune of 1871, and in the feminist movement of the fin de siècle.

In the first chapter of this section, Charles Sowerwine provides a very compelling overview of this history as well as the historiography addressing the issue of women’s political exclusion. He argues that legislators systematically denied women the vote because French republicanism was ‘gendered male’ – and continued to be until 1944. But was it French republicanism itself, or anti-feminist men who denied women the vote?

Karen Offen’s chapter argues the latter position. She points out that even though the Third Republic failed to grant women the vote, many republican men supported women’s suffrage. Moreover, even without the vote, women exercised considerable power both in the home and in civic life. Indeed, beginning with the First French Republic, republican rhetoric and the legal and civil changes it wrought opened new ways for women to appropriate power even without the vote – and it was this power and influence that in fact fueled the anti-feminism excluding women from the body politic.

These chapters not only provide two very different perspectives about gender and citizenship, but together they raise a number of important
questions: what were the ideological tenets of French republicanism over the course of the first four republics, and were they consistent in the manner in which they excluded women? Did women need the vote to exercise influence – and indeed did the influence that they already exercised make the vote less central to French feminism? What can the interplay between republican ideology, feminism, and gender relations tell us about the experience of modernity in France? Finally, what can the French experience suggest about countries with strong patriarchal traditions that are trying to establish modern democratic republics?