

HISTORY PRACTICE

Using Cartoons to Teach the Suffrage Campaign in European History

Should Women Vote?

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On 13 July 1910, the English humor magazine *Punch* published a cartoon depicting a woman pushing a rock labeled “Women’s Suffrage” up a steep hillside labeled “Parliament (Figure 1).” A caption under the picture exclaims “Excelsior!” It is followed by this statement: Suffragist: “It’s no good talking to me about Sisyphus; he was only a man!” The well-dressed woman pushes the rock in a pose suggesting strength, while she gazes directly at the viewer with a determined look on her face. The landscape behind her fades into distant mountains and clouds, leaving no means to judge whether she is approaching the summit.¹

A brilliant device for teaching about women’s suffrage, this cartoon provides numerous access points for engaging students in discussion and analysis. The cartoon visually illustrates the central issue: could suffrage advocates persuade Parliament to alter voting statutes? This conflict is illustrated by the determination of the suffragists (symbolized by the woman pushing the boulder up the hill) and the resistance created by Parliament (that is, the force required to push this boulder against gravity up a seemingly unconquerable slope). At the same time, the caption, with its ironic statement (“he was only a man”), validates the larger claim of the suffrage movement that women were not just proving their rights as citizens, but also demonstrating their superior moral and ethical standards. The references embedded in the cartoon thus provoke a more in-depth analysis of multiple meanings. Contemporary students are likely to have some familiarity with the myth of Sisyphus, who was punished for his cleverness by spending eternity in Tartarus pushing a rock up a mountain only to have it fall to the bottom, forcing him to begin all over again. Yet the invocation of this myth in a different historical and political context raises the question of whether women’s struggle for equal rights was a Sisyphean sentence of endless frustration or whether, as the caption suggests, a woman might achieve what a mythical man could not.

The title “Excelsior!” represents an even more subtle teaching challenge. Standard dictionary definitions, i.e. “wood shavings used for pack-

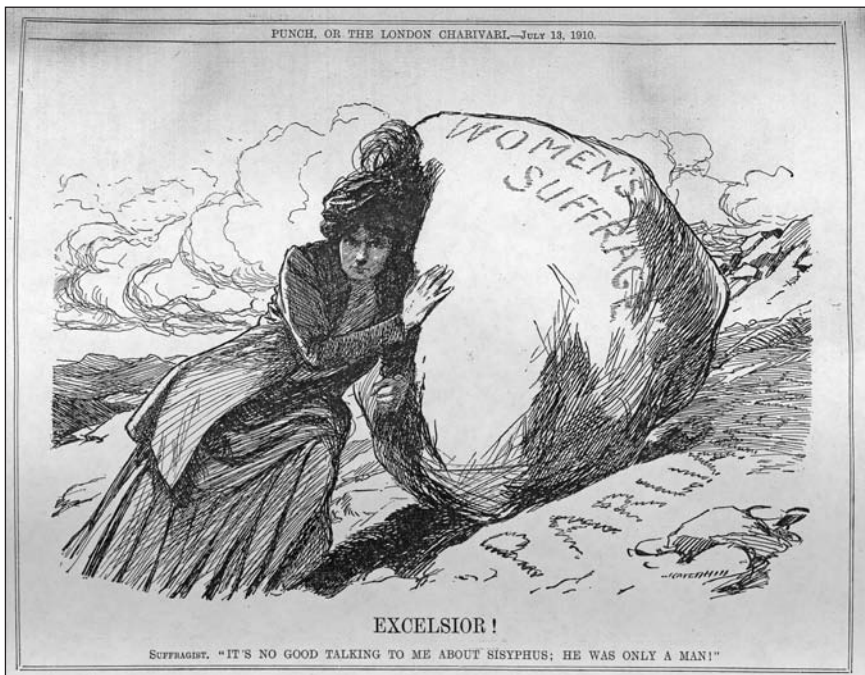


Figure 1. "Excelsior!" *Punch*, 13 July 1910.

ing," make no sense in this context; it is only by referencing a dictionary with an extensive etymology that the "right" meaning can be found: in Latin, "still higher." This additional knowledge clarifies the cartoon's perspective, exhorting women to push still higher to achieve their desired goal. Exposing students to these multiple layers of meaning, from the most obvious images through symbolic references to more obscure textual elements, demonstrates how reading primary sources can yield complex understandings of significant historical processes. Recognizing that these amalgams of text and image are not self-explanatory or simply illustrative requires that students employ the methodologically advanced reading skills acquired through the study of primary sources in a history course.

This cartoon offers a useful place to begin this discussion of teaching about the women's suffrage in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The suffrage campaign achieved considerable visibility throughout Europe during this period as women mobilized to pressure their governments to expand the rights denied by sex to one-half of the adult population. At the same time, as this cartoon suggests, resistance to suffrage became a significant political force as both governments and organized groups sought to preserve restrictions on women's rights. To

understand this subject, students need to know about historical context, the contributions of important leaders, the differences between countries, and the chronology of campaigns. Just as important, however, students need the analytical skills to identify point of view, to explain processes of change, and to connect historical examples to contemporary situations. This pedagogical approach teaches students that, in the words of historian Sandra Stanley Holton, the history of women's suffrage, "like all history, is contested ground, and remains always a provisional and partial form of knowledge."²

To pursue the objective of developing critical thinking skills, this article compares the "expert" analysis of historians with students' interpretations of a range of cartoons. This approach follows the research of educational psychologist Samuel Wineburg, who makes a persuasive argument for seeing history teaching as "a site of inquiry in its own right, a place to explore the complex cognitive processes we use to discern pattern and significance in the past."³ By contrasting the ways that we—as professional historians—interpret these cartoons with the ways that students—who come to these materials with differing levels of knowledge, skills, and perspectives—interpret the same cartoons in a course setting, this article provides insights into the opportunities of teaching suffrage using political cartoons. Our goal is thus to provide a model of how instructors can create opportunities for students to develop the reading and thinking skills essential for visual literacy.

The content for this discussion, including all the primary source documents, is available in the "Should Women Vote? The Politics of Suffrage in Europe" module of the *Digital History Reader*, an online resource developed for secondary and higher education classrooms (www.dhr.history.vt.edu). The approach and materials discussed in this article are appropriate for many courses and levels. For a European survey course, these materials address a set of core issues significant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including developing notions of citizenship, the expansion of political rights, and the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion. Yet these materials could be used just as effectively in introductory women's studies courses that explore varieties of women's activism in transnational contexts as well as more advanced disciplinary courses on gender in history, political science, or sociology. The materials and teaching strategies described in this article demonstrate that the political cartoon is an accessible medium that invites students to engage in thoughtful consideration of complex issues within a defined historical context as well as across boundaries of time and space. The suffrage cartoon is thus not just an illustration for the "real" political history, but rather, in the words of art historian Lisa Tickner, "an integral part of the fabric of social conflict with its own contradictions and ironies and its own power to shape thought,

focus debate, and stimulate action.”⁴ Asking “should women vote?” thus incorporates a variety of perspectives that provoke new thinking about complex issues.⁵

This article focuses on eight cartoons originally published in the British commentary periodical *Punch*, the pro-suffrage publication *The Suffragette*, and the main voice of the opposition *The Anti-Suffragist*. For this analysis, we draw upon our experience teaching these materials in European history courses, including an introductory survey, a seminar on women’s history, and an honors colloquium, at Virginia Tech, a public university in the United States.⁶ Approaching women’s suffrage as both an outcome and a significant challenge to the ideological, cultural, political, and religious processes of modern European history helps students to understand why the right to vote became so important to activist women and democratic reformers, while also so threatening to those invested in the existing distribution of political, cultural, and economic power.⁷ This historical background helps to explain the uneven results of the suffrage campaigns, while also illustrating the unique contribution of militant suffragettes in England, whose activism became the most visible challenge to the political establishment.⁸ By demanding the right to vote in every public venue, from the pages of periodicals through the meeting halls, legislative assemblies, and even playing fields of powerful men, these activists—and the equally fierce resistance they provoked—transformed European politics in dramatic and far-reaching ways.⁹ By exposing students to a range of materials and interpretations, the cartoons and the pedagogy described in this article avoid the linear narrative of suffrage that appears in many textbooks, thus creating a classroom opportunity to explore current historiographical debates on the meanings of militancy, the influence of diverse historical actors, and the legacies of the suffrage campaign.¹⁰

Political cartoons compel students to historicize and contextualize what they “see.” Reading the words of suffrage proponents and opponents is an essential part of learning, but in many ways visual evidence demands and promotes a different kind of learning. Seeing images of strong and forceful women, as in the “Excelsior” cartoon and other cartoons described below, or images of humiliation, scorn, and derision in the cartoons published by opponents of suffrage, enables students to understand symbolic meanings in a particular historical context. Examining cartoons in a dialogic pedagogy, which includes discussion, writing, and debates, also guides students to examine their own views of feminism in historical and contemporary contexts. While cartoons representing the views of proponents and opponents of suffrage offer stark images of these opposing positions, teaching more “neutral” cartoons, as discussed below, pushes students to eschew simplistic binaries by considering the tension between advocacy and commentary. Cartoons require that students make connections between words

and images that are not always explicit within a specific historical context. Teaching cartoons requires a cognitive leap beyond "simple" reading or viewing, thus promoting the kinds of critical thinking expected in the history or women's studies classroom.¹¹ By exploring these issues through the analysis of complex primary sources, this approach creates opportunities for students to acquire new understandings of European history as well as new insights into the ways that gender shapes political roles and public performances.

"Excelsior!"

As discussed above, the image of a woman pushing a "suffrage boulder" up the "Parliament slope" invokes a variety of symbols that comment on both the efforts of supporters and the resistance of opponents.¹² Students who wrote about this cartoon tended to focus on the sense of struggle embodied in the figure of the woman. They referred to the "long, seemingly unending road," "the uphill battle," and the "somewhat tedious, exhausting, and seemingly endless effort to convince parliament of the importance and validity of Women's Suffrage" as symbolized by "the massive size of the boulder that the British woman is trying to push over the line of parliament." Other students concluded that winning the vote was a difficult process, a hardship, a challenge, and a struggle; the woman was said to be showing strength, resolve, and determination. One student wrote that the suffragist "does not look like a person that is going to back down from her fight," while another described "Excelsior!" as showing "how much gaining the right to vote meant to women, and how they are willing to keep fighting for it as long as it takes for them to get the vote."¹³ These interpretations illustrate how a single cartoon can suggest different elements and sides of a particular historical process, thus encouraging a more complex understanding of the historical question: should women vote.¹⁴

Yet not all students saw this cartoon as a positive representation of suffragists and their cause. One student saw the woman's "very angry look" as a symbol of suffrage's limited prospects: "The woman pushing the boulder up the mountain signifies how women believed it was nearly impossible to achieve suffrage at this point in the century because of all the negativity associated with women's suffrage. I believe this reflects the anger women had towards the people who did not support women's suffrage because they thought women did not have the same political views as men." Even the caption about Sisyphus being "only a man" is interpreted in a more negative light: "This was referencing the disbelief that women had towards men because of the disrespect women were given in that time period." The complexity of the cartoon thus provoked a range of responses that creatively explored the potential meanings of the different visual elements.

As students engaged with these multiple layers, they increasingly recognized the bold claims women made in their determination to change society. One student wrote that the cartoon “shows that some women thought they were not only equal to men but superior.” Another student focused on the imagery of struggle: “Just as Sisyphus pushed the boulder up for it only to be rolled back down shows exactly what women went through battling against men. It seemed like men would give just a little or lean more towards equality only to change their minds.” For some students, the more they looked at the cartoon (and the more they wrote), the deeper the meanings they found, as in this multifaceted analysis: “The woman is firstly displaying her dislike for this man condemned to eternal struggle—or at least not sympathizing with him, for she in fact is going through the same, or worse, conditions.” Referring to the “stamina and integrity of the suffragist movement,” this same student declared: “If anyone were stronger in this situation, it would be the woman, and not the man. It may have seemed that women would be condemned to this eternal struggle, but they did not wish to come out as Sisyphus did (who, in theory, is still pushing his own boulder up a hill!).”¹⁵ Through interpretations of this image, students understood that while men controlled Parliament and therefore could decide whether women would succeed, the affirmation that the suffragist, a woman, would succeed where Sisyphus, a man, had failed suggests the possibility of successful completion of an impossible task.¹⁶ The process of reading the multiple levels of the cartoon and drawing interpretations about complex relationships creates possibilities for students to understand how gender relations shaped and were being shaped by the struggle for women’s right to vote.

“Justice / Equality / Votes for Women”

While the figure of the suffragist dominates the “Excelsior!” cartoon, another pro-suffrage cartoon places more emphasis on the promised outcomes of women’s right to vote.¹⁷ The central figure in this image is a woman wearing a suit of armor, a sword on her belt, and holding a torch. The sword is labeled “Votes for Women,” with the year 1913 stenciled on the handle; the torch bears the word “Justice.” The woman stands on a rounded surface, meant to suggest the earth, while beams of sunlight radiate behind her, evoking the rising sun. The word “Equality” is framed by the sun. To the left, in a darkened section behind the woman, a list of words appears, barely legible: “Ignorance, Unequal Laws, White Slave Traffic, Intemperance, Prejudice, Sweating, Fear, Tyranny, Monopoly.” This cartoon offers a specific point of view: votes for women, expected in the coming year, would bring justice and equality, symbolized by the rising sun. The forces of darkness would then disappear with the dawn of an enlightened age.¹⁸

Implicit in this cartoon, therefore, is the promise that suffrage would bring moral improvements, not just to women, but throughout society.

The intended message of this cartoon proved readily comprehensible for students. When they took a pre-quiz before reading the suffrage module, 94 percent correctly identified this cartoon as pro-suffrage. In written responses, students easily recognized that the contrast of light and dark meant that society would be improved by the dawn of women's suffrage. One student wrote: "The background is dark because that's how much equality women had. Their world was very 'dark' and limited in comparison to men's." Another student commented on symbols associated with suffrage: "the woman in the middle represents the women's desire and courage to fight for justice until they have it." This cartoon also provoked more self-reflective interpretations: "I think that this is one of the most simple cartoons, but it's one of the most powerful. Sometimes saying less is better." Amplifying this point, another student wrote: "I really liked this image as it expressed positive thoughts on women's suffrage without being violent or too in your face, it is simple and allows you to just sit back and think." While recognizing the main symbolism, this student's comment opens up some space for discussing perceptions of tactics deployed by activist women in historical and contemporary contexts.

As this example suggests, the cartoon prompted responses shaped as much by present-day perceptions and concerns as by attitudes and issues from the 1910s. A student who correctly identified the promise that "women would bring justice and equality to politics if they were able to vote" then added a more personal view unrelated to the cartoon's content or context: "I believe that women are more open minded and want equality more than men." While the latter may have been a sentiment shared by the creator of the cartoon, this student is extrapolating from the historical evidence to support a universal or essentialized claim about gender identities. This response also demonstrates how teaching with these materials can facilitate a dialogic pedagogy, as students can be asked to identify specific visual or textual elements that support their interpretations.¹⁹ By engaging students in a critical dialogue, historians can encourage students to ground their interpretations in primary source evidence. By contrasting contemporary views with historical perspectives, instructors can also guide students to reflect on ways in which seemingly universal categories (women as more open-minded, activist woman as too militant, etc.) are actually historically contingent.

"Unmasked"

Teaching with cartoons also makes it possible to illustrate the persistent opposition to the expansion of women's political rights in the early twentieth century. As in the two cartoons described above, the central figure in "Un-



Figure 2. “Unmasked!” *Anti-Suffrage Review*, September 1912.

masked” is a woman, but in this case she wears a headband marked “Feminist” (Figure 2).²⁰ In her right hand, she holds a pair of scissors, poised to cut a ribbon marked “loyalty–harmony.” The ribbon is held jointly in the hands of a male and a female figure, both kneeling with peaceful facial expressions. A fourth figure, a helmeted woman, holds a trident and a mask. The single word caption suggests that the “feminist” has just been “unmasked.”

Reading this cartoon alongside pro-suffrage cartoons is a useful strategy for indicating how opponents responded to the growing demands for the vote. Whereas the pro-suffrage cartoons portray a determined woman and the promise of equality and justice, this cartoon “unmasks” the “feminist” agenda as the destruction of “loyalty” and “harmony” between men and women. The female figure doing the “unmasking” would have been easily recognized in the early twentieth century as Britannia, the symbol of Great Britain. Whereas pro-suffrage cartoons promise that women’s equality would enlighten society, this cartoon warns that suffrage threatened familial relations at the center of society. By examining this cartoon, students learn how the opponents of suffrage deployed key symbols and rhetoric to support their arguments against extending voting rights to women.

In an analysis of this cartoon, a student correctly recognized the intended message that “England, Britannia, is witnessing the breakdown of the ideals and values of her country” as “feminists are cutting the bond between men and women—a bond of loyalty and harmony.” Other students stated that this cartoon affirmed that “women’s suffrage [is] a bad thing for Britain,” that the feminist movement threatens “a disruption of social life and family life,” that voting would mean that “men and women can no longer live in harmony and no longer have a loyalty to one another,” that “feminists are tarnishing the image of women,” and that these efforts would “destroy the marital and social structure between men and women.” For another student, however, this “amazing” cartoon was more about tactics than goals: “I think it is trying to say that the militants and the feminists are going about it the wrong way and that peaceful demonstrations and protests are the way to go.”

The range of interpretations partially reflects the complexity of the cartoon, with its multiple figures, but may also represent students’ uncertainty in dealing with such explicitly antifeminist discourse. This cartoon is thus well-suited to teaching students to differentiate between goals and tactics, and to look for evidence to support interpretations of perspectives. Teaching with this cartoon also confirms the significance of “the epistemology of the text,” which Wineburg defines as guiding students to “seek out features designed to shape their perceptions or make them view events in a particular way.”²¹ Given current discussions about feminism, especially among college students, this cartoon is particularly suggestive for exploring historical and contemporary representations and perceptions of gender in politics.²²

“Votes for Working Women” and “No Room for Me”

Maternal and familial imagery were central to the discourse of suffrage, as both proponents and opponents invoked symbols of motherhood to support their position on women’s right to vote.²³ Both cartoons discussed in this section invoke women’s roles as mothers, yet their strikingly different perspectives present students with the analytical challenge of recognizing how similar symbols were deployed for contradictory purposes. In an obviously pro-suffrage cartoon, “Votes for Working Women,” a woman stands with her arms outstretched, a shawl draped across her shoulders, while four children (apparently two boys and two girls) pick flowers under the shelter of her arms (Figure 3).²⁴ The only text is a quote from the Bible: “Her children shall rise up and call her blessed” (Proverbs 31:28). This depiction of the woman differs from those in most suffrage cartoons: she wears simple clothes and her rolled-up sleeves suggest a working posture. The children

also wear comfortable clothes and assume relaxed and playful poses. This cartoon conveys the message that suffrage was not just an elitist demand by unmarried and childless women, but also would benefit mothers and women of the working classes.²⁵ Giving these women the right to vote, the cartoon affirms, would make them better mothers, while their children would be blessed with maternal care. The biblical quote connects a political demand with a familiar cultural reference, thus providing further reassurance that female suffrage, however radical it might seem, was consistent with social norms and moral values in this historical context.

By contrast, "No Room for Me" draws a diametrically opposite connection between suffrage, womanliness, and maternity (Figure 4).²⁶ In this cartoon, a young girl stands in the doorway of a cluttered office, holding one hand to her mouth. The caption expresses her perception of the situation behind the door: "No room for me!" Stacks of paper with the heading "Votes for Women" are piled in one corner; books lie on the floor, with such titles as *Laws: How to Make and Break Them*, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, and *Forcible Feeding*; a broken whip-handle and hammers hang on the wall and rest upon the desk; and a pile of broken bricks leans against another wall. At the center of the cartoon, a poster tacked to the back wall reads simply: "Votes for Women." In the bottom right corner, positioned as though it had fallen off the desk, a piece of paper with the words, "Mother and Child," has been ripped in half. This cartoon warns that militant suffragettes had "no room" for their children because they were obsessed with their own militant tactics and extreme demands. Suffrage, in this imagery, leads to maternal neglect.

In their written assignments, students recognized how both cartoons used maternal imagery to express political views: suffragists hoped that votes for women would strengthen their familial relationships, while opponents warned that women's suffrage threatened the family. In an analysis of "Votes for Working Women," one student accurately identified markers of familial and class identity ("poor looking clothes" and "surrounded by many kids"), and then differentiated between the idealized message and the actual effects of social distinctions: "I believe that the working class women are probably not going to get much out of the suffrage movement but this was done as propaganda just to get them" to support suffrage. Similar analysis led to another student's conclusion that "No Room for Me" reflected the anti-suffrage perspective that suffragettes were "abandoning their roles as mothers."

Yet both cartoons also caused problems for many students. A close analysis of these readings illustrates the challenges of teaching students to think historically and critically about gender roles in families and politics.²⁷ One student argued that "No Room for Me" demonstrated that women were incapable of doing men's work, as symbolized by the fact that the



Figure 3. "Votes for Working Women!" *The Suffragette*, 7 January 1913.

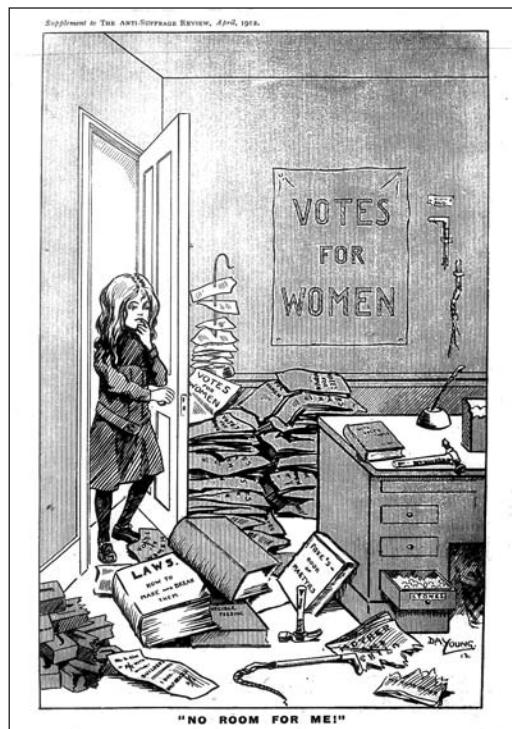


Figure 4. "No Room for Me," *Anti-Suffrage Review*, April 1912.

girl had no place in the suffrage “room,” and thus women did not deserve the vote. Rather than recognizing criticism of suffragists for neglecting maternal duties, this student assigned a completely different meaning to the cartoon. This reading is an important reminder that when analyzing visual images, a particular reading of one set of symbols can produce an interpretation inconsistent with both the intended meaning and the likely responses within a historical context. In a classroom setting, it is important to work backwards through students’ interpretations to understand how they support their readings with significant elements from the cartoons.

In the case of “Votes for Working Women,” students tended to overlook maternal imagery and focus primarily on class dimensions. One student wrote that this cartoon signified that working-class women followed the same path to the vote as working-class men, demanded the same rights as middle- and upper-class women, and believed that “voting should be a right given to all women not those with wealth,” all of which were summed up in the statement that the cartoon “shows that working class women want equality too.” While each of these points is partially true, the student did not distinguish between the views that suffragettes projected onto working-class women (through such images as this cartoon) and the actual views of working-class women, which encompassed a full range of complex opinions about rights, voting, and equality. As in the example cited above, this partial reading confirms the effectiveness of the cartoon, for this student accepted as fact the political agenda of the cartoon, that is, that working-class women joined with middle- and upper-class women in supporting suffrage as a step towards political rights and equality. By focusing exclusively on class dimensions, however, this student neglected the meanings associated with the image of the mother and her children.

In some cases, historically confused or inaccurate readings were compounded by ahistorical extrapolations. One student’s evaluation of the “No Room for Me” cartoon correctly identified its anti-suffrage perspective, yet missed the broader point of the maternalist critique of women’s suffrage, by describing the girl’s expression of “sheer confusion” as she entered a room filled with political and legal books, as if “she wouldn’t know where to start if given the right to make decisions.” This same student then offered a sympathetic, if still confused, response to the cartoon’s underlying message: “While I have very traditional beliefs even for today, I still believe in all women’s freedom to vote and express themselves.” Recognizing the plurality of interpretations can thus serve the distinct teaching purpose of identifying and understanding historically grounded values and assumptions about women’s maternal and familial roles. Given that the connections between family roles and political power have acquired even more complex manifestations in the twenty-first century, educating students to identify,

understand, and critically engage these multiple meanings is a necessary and valuable teaching objective.²⁸

“The Suspect,” “Do you want women to have votes?” and “Another Militant”

While cartoons representing either pro- or anti-suffrage positions illustrate the polarization of responses to this campaign, other cartoons can best be categorized as interstitial commentaries. While these cartoons are less immediately accessible to students looking for evidence of dichotomous views, their very ambiguity forces students to engage repeatedly with the sources' multiple meanings. In “The Suspect,” an elderly woman with scarf, feathered hat, spectacles, and hands resting in a muff walks in front of four immense police officers, each of whom looks down from an exaggerated height (Figure 5).²⁹ The juxtaposition of size is striking, as the woman is less than one-half the width and perhaps two-thirds the height of each officer. Other than the caption, the cartoon lacks text, leaving it up to the reader to situate it in the context of the militant suffrage campaign, where even “respectable” women engaged in acts of vandalism and violence. Yet the cartoon seems not to take a position on either the militant tactics or the broader question of suffrage, as in the examples described above. This cartoon instead uses familiar images to comment on how this struggle transformed social interactions and perceptions. While “the suspect” appears vulnerable to the police, her facial expression suggests a determined effort to ignore the imposing forces of order, whereas the officers' own expressions suggest some combination of anxiety, distaste, vigilance, and fear. By inverting the usual power dynamic between the police and “the suspect,” this cartoon symbolizes the suffrage campaign's challenge to gender roles.³⁰

In a second cartoon in this category, two girls sit in a bedroom, with a Victrola on the table next to them and a doll in the unmade bed.³¹ The Elder Sister asks: “Do you want women to have votes?” Her Younger Sister replies: “No.” The Elder Sister asks: “Why?” The final line is given to the Younger Sister: “Because I like to hear about the suffragettes.” In this case, the grand promises and the grave threats articulated by pro- and anti-suffrage sides are undermined by the suggestion that the campaign itself has become an object of amusement and diversion. While this cartoon seems to mock the suffragettes' demands for equal rights, it can also be read as more sympathetic to their cause, for their tactics have succeeded in engaging these girls in a dialogue about political rights as well as providing new stories of women's adventures. While resisting easy categorization, this cartoon illustrates the visibility of a campaign that had captured public attention across class, generational, and status boundaries.



Figure 5. "The Suspect," *Punch*, 12 February 1913.

In the last of these cartoons, "Another Militant," a well-dressed woman stands in a park, with an array of men, women, and children strolling in the background (Figure 6).³² Two children, also well-dressed, stand next to her: a girl grasping a hoop and a boy holding his hand to his face. The dialogue and caption, working together, indicate the actions and sentiments of the protagonists. Mother: "So you tried to take her hoop away and she boxed your ears? Well, it served you quite right!" Bobby: "Oh, Mummy, Mummy, you see I didn't know she was a Suffragette!" This cartoon pokes fun at the gender reversals associated with the suffrage campaign. The girl's assertiveness and the boy's humiliation are explained by the claim that this girl "was a suffragette." While many opponents of suffrage seized on images of "unfeminine" militancy to discredit the movement, "Another Militant" can also be read as a more positive commentary on the changing attitudes and behaviors of girls and women. When the mother says, "it served you quite right!" she provides a kind of affirmation for her daughter's stance. Terms like "suffragette" thus had multiple potential meanings in this context, and this cartoon plays with these conflicting perceptions to provoke humor as well as social commentary.



Figure 6. "Another Militant," *Punch*, 19 March 1913.

For students, the ambivalence of these cartoons presents distinct challenges, but also stimulates particularly suggestive interpretations of women's identities and the gendering of power. The best evidence of the complexity of these interpretations comes from a multiple-choice test administered in a European survey course. When asked about "The Suspect," 15 percent saw it as pro-suffrage, twice as many (30 percent) saw it as anti-suffrage, and about one-half (55 percent) identified it (correctly) as a commentary on the suffrage campaign itself. The span of responses to "Another Militant" was even broader, as 18 percent read the cartoon as pro-suffrage and 26 percent read it as anti-suffrage. While such varied results (certainly less than a passing grade!) might ordinarily alarm an instructor, this range of responses becomes a "teachable moment" for exploring the complex relationship between meaning, symbols, and content.

Students' written comments illustrate this diversity of views. Some interpreted "The Suspect" by empathizing with the police's strong reaction to women activists; a few took the pro-suffrage position in seeing the cartoon as a condemnation of police abuses; and still others interpreted the cartoon in terms of the mounting conflict between the two sides. One student described "the completely ridiculous ignorance and fear" shared

by men afraid of women seeking and acquiring power. "So afraid of losing power," this student wrote, "the men hunted down female 'criminals' in order to preserve their power." Another student began with a broad statement that suffragettes were "generally depicted as masculine, unattractive, violent, and brutish in political cartoons," but then claimed that this cartoon showed that militant tactics "had made every woman a potential suspect in the smashing of windows or disturbances of the peace." Identifying this element of uncertainty even more directly, another student described how representations of suffragettes as "old, middle and upper class ladies" illustrated "the trouble the government had with deciphering who was a radical supporter of women's suffrage and who was a moderate supporter." Praising "The Suspect" for doing "a magnificent job of skillfully balancing criticism and humor," one student drew an implicit connection with other highly visible images of suffragette women confronting state power, in the statement that the policemen "aren't exactly villains who are using brute force to break the will" of a political prisoner on a hunger strike.

The cartoon "Do you want women to have votes?" was described by one student as the "political cartoon I liked the best," because it provoked "a few different thoughts/ideas": first, that the younger sister must admire the suffragettes, including "a mother or aunt or someone who is participating in the movement for women's suffrage"; second, that the cartoon actually represented the anti-suffrage position because the militant tactics were provoking childish amusement and idle discussion, but "not worth doing anything about in government"; and last, that this cartoon resembled lyrics from the musical *Mary Poppins*, where the mother sings about how her children will adore her activism and accomplishments.³³ Another student said that this "most surprising" cartoon was "an obvious cheap shot from those who oppose women's suffrage," because it represented militancy as "a cry for attention rather than equality," and thus depicted the "next generation of women" as being "simply amused by the headlines," rather than caring about suffrage.³⁴ Yet these same images provoked very different responses from another student: "I would guess that these girls would eventually become suffragettes because they seem to understand the importance and excitement" of fighting for women's suffrage, "even at such a young age."³⁵

Perhaps the most interesting responses were declarations that "Another Militant" symbolized how women put men "in their place," how boys learned that girls "can fight back," and how women were "becoming fed up with taking it easy and being nice, and that it was necessary to become more aggressive in their tactics for suffrage."³⁶ In a similar manner, one student identified elements of a broader political contest: the hoop symbolizes liberty, which boys/men are trying to take away from girls/women, and thus the mother tells her son that he deserves the punishment inflicted by

the girl. The implications of this cartoon are then summarized: "just because a female stands up for herself does not mean she MUST be a suffragette." Echoing this sentiment, another student's conclusion extended beyond the historical context into a presentist statement of identity politics: "I like the image and its message, because I believe women should be able to stick up for themselves. I also like the fact that another female agrees with one that defends herself because a male tries to take what is hers, just like men should not take away women's right to vote." These comments transform the cartoon into an inspiration for, as well as a confirmation of, students' own views of gender relations as they are (or should be). While historical awareness requires the student to acknowledge how gender relations were perceived differently a century ago in a specific national context, the fact that a cartoon can also provoke engagement with the underlying question of gender roles and power relations provides an excellent vantage point for pursuing further inquiries in the classroom. By exposing students to contrasting representations of bodies, by illustrating emotional and intimate experiences, and by suggesting the contested identities of "suffragists/suffragettes," these three cartoons can provide students with opportunities to ask questions about militancy that connect the suffrage campaign to broader women's history themes.³⁷

Implications of Teaching Suffrage Cartoons

Exploring the guiding question, "should women vote?" through analysis of cartoons strengthens content acquisition by providing historically specific images of key topics: the ideas, principles, and objectives of supporters and opponents of suffrage; the legislative and police institutions that upheld the law; and the multidimensional struggle for public support. While representing a spectrum of perspectives, these cartoons also teach students to acquire empathetic understandings by situating themselves in the positions of participants.³⁸ Cartoons encourage students to see history as a process of meaningful change, rather than an arbitrary or disconnected sequence of dates and people.³⁹ Exploring a guiding question through analysis of cartoons thus pursues multiple objectives that share the underlying goal of improving specific skills of historical understanding.

By taking cartoons seriously as historical sources, students develop skills of historical analysis applicable to other kinds of documentary materials. While asking students to write a paragraph or devote fifteen minutes of class time to a cartoon may seem like "too much time" on "just one source," this approach is consistent with Wineburg's claim that such focus is essential for effective teaching at all levels: "the very act of comprehension demands that [students] stop to *talk* with their texts."⁴⁰ Cartoons also promote understanding of the connections between historical understand-

ing and contemporary engagement. According to historian Elisabeth Israels Perry, suffrage cartoons “can serve as a positive learning tool, especially for today’s generation of young people, whose historical memory of women is not only impoverished but for whom the ideals and goals of the feminist cause have little meaning.” These cartoons illustrate how women’s political struggles were central to the transformations of modern European political history, yet the cartoons also serve another contemporary objective identified by Perry: “they can provide tactical models for women activists still searching for means to attract a broader spectrum of adherents to the pursuit of feminist goals.”⁴¹

Asking students to examine, reflect upon, and write about cartoons thus becomes a form of feminist pedagogy. Students are encouraged to take seriously the suffragettes’ demands for equality as citizens and for the rights of full political participation, and they have the opportunity to interrogate their own contemporary notions about feminism in a new light.⁴² Teaching suffrage cartoons thus makes it possible, in the words of historian Antoinette Burton, to be “mindful of how the historical narratives of feminism are being constructed, contested, and recast even as we write, even as we read.”⁴³ By adding the verbs “even as we teach, even as we digitize history,” these materials demonstrate the continuing possibilities of using the suffrage movement to explore the meanings and implications of feminist history.

NOTES

¹*Punch*, 13 July 1910, 21. This image, along with the other cartoons discussed in this article, can be found in the module, “Should Women Vote?” available from the *Digital History Reader*, <http://www.dhr.history.vt.edu>. The eighteen modules in the *Digital History Reader* each include a “Context” section providing historical background, an “Evidence” section with primary sources, and other sections providing guidance and resources for teachers and students. Funding for the *Digital History Reader* was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Virginia Tech Department of History; neither of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed in this article. For more information about this project, see E. Thomas Ewing and Robert P. Stephens, “The Digital History Reader: Teaching Resources for United States and European History,” *Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (2007): 16–19.

²Sandra Stanley Holton, “The Making of Suffrage History,” in *Votes for Women*, ed. June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton (London: Routledge, 2005), 28.

³Samuel S. Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991): 518.

⁴Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), ix.

⁵For the significance of cartoons in the U.S. suffrage campaign, see Elisabeth Israels Perry, "Introduction: Image, Rhetoric, and the Historical Memory of Women," in *Cartooning for Suffrage*, by Alice Sheppard (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 5–6. For teaching with political cartoons, see Michael P. McCarthy, "Political Cartoons in the History Classroom," *History Teacher* 11, no. 1 (1977): 29–38; and Michael O'Malley, "Analyzing Political Cartoons," *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/cartoon.htm>, July 2002.

⁶This article is based on examination of approximately one hundred online short essays submitted in the survey course, longer papers assigned to the Honors colloquium, and classroom discussions in all three classes, which included analysis of specific cartoons as well as dialogue about political activism, cartoons as persuasive images, and gender identities. All quoted material from students retains original spelling and grammar.

⁷The historical background in the "Context" section of the module draws primarily upon Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866–1928* (London: Longman, 1988). For an extensive bibliography, see June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton, "Introduction: The campaigns for votes for women," in Purvis and Holton, *Votes for Women* (see note 2), 1–12. For the "symbolic significance of the vote," see Sandra Stanley Holton, "The Suffragist and the 'Average Woman,'" *Women's History Review* 1, no. 1 (1992): 12–13.

⁸During these years, "suffragette" referred to militant activists while "suffragists" referred to more moderate leaders and their followers. This article follows this distinction in meanings, except as the terms were used in quoted materials. For the historiographical debate on militancy, see Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908–1909," *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 340–71; Mayhall, "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit': British feminism and historical imagination," *Women's History Review* 4, no. 3 (1995): 319–44; June Purvis, "A 'Pair of . . . Infernal Queens'? A Reassessment of the Dominant Representations of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, First Wave Feminists in Edwardian Britain," *Women's History Review* 5, no. 2 (1996): 259–80; Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 26–81; and Sandra Stanley Holton, "Manliness and militancy: The Political protest of male suffragists and the gendering of the 'suffragette' identity," in *The Men's Share? Masculinities, Male Support, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920*, ed. Angela V. John and Claire Eustance (London: Routledge, 1997), 110–34.

⁹For the suffrage campaign's long-term significance, see Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Domesticating Emmeline: Representing the Suffragette, 1930–1993," *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 2 (1999): 1–24.

¹⁰See the critique of the single suffrage narrative and a univocal definition of militancy in Mayhall, "Creating," 320–21; and Mayhall, "Defining," 349, 369–71.

¹¹For the argument that "visuals lend themselves to many readings," see W[alt] Werner, "Reading Visual Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 2 (2002): 422.

¹²For images of strong women in suffrage campaigns, see Holton, "Suffragist," 9–20; and Perry, "Introduction," 9–10.

¹³The imagery of a woman struggling against Parliamentary resistance was not only metaphorical. Just a year earlier, two women had locked themselves to a grille in the observers' balcony of Parliament as a means of protesting against men's refusal to pass a suffrage bill. The imagery of the woman in the cartoon can thus be used to teach students about women's actions as well. Mayhall, "Defining," 357–59.

¹⁴These interpretations are consistent with historian Nancy Hewitt's pedagogical goal of teaching students "to think of history, and of women's history, as stories of struggle in which people had and made choices even though these were constrained by various factors": Susan K. Freeman et al., "Perspectives on Teaching Women's History: Views from the Classroom, the Library, and the Internet," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 161.

¹⁵By having students write out responses, this assignment actually illustrates how students explore different symbols, make connections to historical and contemporary issues, and acquire an increasingly complex understanding of the significance of suffrage. For historical analysis as "a dialectical process" involving questions and textual materials, see Sam Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert / Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Texts," *Cognitive Science* 22, no. 3 (1998): 337.

¹⁶In writing about this cartoon, most students drew upon the familiar understanding of a Sisyphean task as a difficult endeavor that will never be completed, rather than referencing the myth itself, in which Sisyphus was punished by the gods for his cleverness.

¹⁷*The Suffragette*, 7 December 1912, n.p.

¹⁸The reference to "white slave traffic" provides a teaching opportunity not only to deconstruct this concept, but also to address issues of race, colonialism, and empire in the English suffrage campaign.

¹⁹Teaching suffrage cartoons thus responds directly to the desire of historians to overcome "the presentist cast of most women's studies majors," "see the relevance of history," "learn to historicize contemporary issues," and "understand the diversity of women's historical experiences and how history is not disconnected from the contemporary": Susan K. Freeman et al., "Perspectives on Teaching," 145, 149, 155–56, 162.

²⁰*The Anti-Suffrage Review*, September 1912, 215.

²¹Wineburg, "On the Reading," 509–13.

²²For distinctions between the history of feminism, feminism in history, and feminist history, see Antoinette Burton, "'History' is Now: Feminist Theory and the Production of Historical Feminisms," *Women's History Review* 1, no. 1 (1992): 25–38. See also the review of feminist analysis of suffragette leaders in Purvis, "Pair of Queens," 268–72.

²³For images of womanliness and the politics of militancy, see Mayhall, "Defining," 362–63. See also discussion of personal and political spheres in Holton, "Suffragist," 9–24.

²⁴*The Suffragette*, 7 January 1913. See discussion of this cartoon in Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp, *The Transfiguring Sword: The Just War of the Women's Social and Political Union* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 108.

²⁵For suffragettes' appeals to working women, see Tickner, *Spectacle*, 174–82; and Purvis, "A Pair of Queens," 267–70.

²⁶*Anti-Suffrage Review*, April 1912, n.p.

²⁷For students' "failed" readings of historical texts, see Wineburg, "On the Reading," 500–3.

²⁸In 2007, a discussion of suffrage was followed by analysis of cartoons depicting U.S. women politicians, including Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, thus encouraging students to apply the same analytical skills to understand how power is gendered in contemporary culture.

²⁹*Punch*, 12 February 1913, 124.

³⁰See discussion of status, privilege, and power in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 247–52.

³¹*Punch*, 1 December 1909, 385.

³²*Punch*, 19 March 1913, 222.

³³For suffragettes in *Mary Poppins*, see Mayhall, "Domesticating Emmeline."

³⁴This cartoon nicely illustrates the argument of historian Mayhall that militancy was "a dialogic practice," emerging from interactions between organizations and individuals, including those outside the movement, like these two girls, whose responses to militant tactics became part of the historical process of making meaning. Mayhall, "Defining," 343, 370–71.

³⁵For expressions of hilarity, exhilaration, and personal freedom within the militant suffrage community, see Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 45–46.

³⁶It is beyond the scope of this article, but the anonymous forum of the online writing assignment may allow some students to express views that they would not have felt comfortable articulating in either a classroom discussion or a formal writing assignment. For discussion of how different formats encourage engagement in women's history classes, see Freeman et al., "Perspectives on Teaching," 157–59.

³⁷For these directions in gender history, see Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). For an earlier, influential study of "male space and women's bodies" in the suffrage campaign, see Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 247–80.

³⁸David Stockley, "Empathetic Reconstruction in History and History Teaching," *History and Theory* 22, no. 4 (1983): 50–65.

³⁹An inquiry-based model of pedagogy thus asks students "to explore the complex cognitive processes we use to discern pattern and significance in the past": Wineburg, "On the Reading," 518.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 503.

⁴¹Perry, "Introduction," 13.

⁴²Of course, students may derive an entirely different lesson from these materials, as in this written response: "I didn't find any of the images to be particularly interesting. I felt that they all were too overly zealous for women's rights. My feeling is that in order to get what you want you should do it diplomatically and not by way of force." Judging by written comments and classroom discussion, this dismissive response appears to be a minority position, but it needs to be recognized and addressed. One effective strategy is to explain how a similarly "masculinist" perspective sustained opposition to women's suffrage a century ago, which in turns provides an opportunity to describe the rational, calculated, and effective tactics adopted by suffragists. See Holton, "Making," 26; and Mayhall, "Defining," 364–65.

⁴³Burton, "History," 26.
