

*SYMPOSIUM: THE 19TH AMENDMENT AT 100: FROM THE
VOTE TO GENDER EQUALITY*

WOMAN SUFFRAGE: THE AFTERSTORY

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Winning the Nineteenth Amendment was, as leading suffragists recognized, only the very beginning of the battle for women's political rights. Indeed, it took as long after 1920 for American women to make their presence felt in American politics as it had to win suffrage rights in the first place.

Before the second national election after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, "experts" were already declaring woman suffrage a failure. They disparaged the many women who weren't voting—or as one observer declared, the amendment had merely doubled "the number of docile ballot-droppers."¹ The 1920s were a period of declining political enthusiasm among all voters, but women were receiving the blame for the declining voter numbers.

Importantly, at the time there was no scientific way to assess the level of women's voter participation other than anecdotal evidence, but modern political scientists have been able to produce better information.² Nationwide, approximately two-thirds of women eligible to vote were doing so, but participation rates varied dramatically, by race and by region. In the Midwest, where contests between the two parties were

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1. Charles Edward Russell, *Is Woman Suffrage a Failure?*, *THE CENTURY*, 724–30 (1924).
2. KEVIN CORDER & CHRISTINA WOLBRECHT, *COUNTING WOMEN'S BALLOTS: FEMALE VOTERS FROM SUFFRAGE THROUGH THE NEW DEAL* (2016).

vigorous, women voted in higher numbers. In the South, mechanisms for suppressing voter participation among African-American men long in place, now were directed at women. Voting rates for women, black but also white, were very low. In Virginia, approximately 6% of women who might have voted did. In North Carolina, epicenter of the suppression of black men's votes at the turn of the century, white supremacists circulated false information that African-American women activists were engaged in a secret plot, not just to get black women to the polling places but to depress white women's votes. Even so, the determination of black women to vote in southern states made newspaper headlines.³

However, other ways to assess women's political activism in the immediate post-suffrage years are available to historians. Suffrage veterans pursued several national legislative priorities. Maud Wood Park, who had been the leading congressional lobbyist for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, assembled the Women's Joint Congressional Coalition (WJCC). Its greatest success was the 1924 Married Women's Citizenship Act (usually called the Cable Act, named for its Congressional sponsor). When women's enfranchisement was beginning to appear on the political horizon, laws were passed to deprive American women married to non-American men of their independent American nationality. The Cable Act sought to remedy this marriage penalty and restore independent citizenship to these American women (including very notable figures such as Harriot Stanton Blatch). The Cable Act was part of an international women's rights movement in the aftermath of the First World War to ensure that married women had independent nationality rights. In deference to the period's intense anti-Asian prejudices, the original Cable Act excluded American women married to Asian men from its benefits; in 1931, a second Cable Act remedied that.⁴

Other legislative goals focused on mother and child issues. Also in 1922, former suffragist and labor reformer Florence Kelley began a campaign to secure the Welfare and Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy Act. Also known after its congressional sponsors as the Sheppard-Towner Act, the law designated federal moneys to remedy the nation's shockingly high infant and child mortality rates. The funding was extremely low—

3. *Colored Women's Rights Association Gives Advice to Negro Voters*, LINCOLN COUNTY NEWS, Sept. 30, 1920, at 6, [https://www.newspapers.com/clip/5552634/the_lincoln_county_news/\[https://perma.cc/G98H-V3N8\]](https://www.newspapers.com/clip/5552634/the_lincoln_county_news/[https://perma.cc/G98H-V3N8]).

4. NANCY COTT, *PUBLIC VOWS: A HISTORY OF MARRIAGE AND THE NATION* (2002).

only a million-and-a-half dollars for each of seven years, and it was directed through the states so as to placate states' right sentiments.⁵

Even so, the law met with considerable opposition. Motherhood had once been the untouchable third rail of gender politics but that was no longer the case. The Daughters of the American Revolution designated the legislation as "an entering wedge of communism," and the American Medical Association condemned it as the first step toward socialized medicine.⁶ Anti-feminist Missouri Senator James Reed declared Sheppard-Towner "a Bill to authorize a board of spinsters to teach the mothers of the United States how to rear babies."⁷ By 1929, the law was not renewed.

Florence Kelley's other major initiative was a constitutional amendment to ban child (under age 16) labor. Because the Supreme Court had previously ruled anti-child labor laws a violation of the Commerce Clause of the Constitution,⁸ an amendment was necessary. The anti-child labor amendment got through Congress, but only six states ratified, and so it was not adopted. A ban on labor for workers sixteen and under, as well as federal funding for maternal and infant health care, was finally secured in the 1930s under the New Deal.

In the immediate post-suffrage years, the National Woman's Party also pressed for an addition to the Constitution, known as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The ERA fared even worse than the anti-child labor amendment and could not get through Congress. The wording of this first version of the ERA read "men and women shall have equal rights." This was different, more affirmative and expansive than the version of the amendment which was revived in the 1970s (which also was not ratified) and assumed that men and women already had "equality of rights under the law" which could not "be denied or abridged."⁹

African-American women had their own political priorities in the 1920s: federal anti-lynching legislation and a federal investigation into voter suppression in the South. They pressed the National Woman's Party to support the latter, and although they were supported by several notable white suffrage veterans, Alice Paul, who controlled NWP priorities, rejected their petition, regarding it as addressing a race and not a sex matter. Mary Church Terrell, leading black suffragist and one of the few

5. J. STANLEY LEMONS, *THE WOMAN CITIZEN: SOCIAL FEMINISM IN THE 1920S* (1973).

6. JACQUELINE VAN VORIS, *CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT: A PUBLIC LIFE 193* (1987)

7. LEMONS, *supra* note 5, at 160.

8. *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, 247 U.S. 251, 271–74, 277 (1918).

9. EQUALRIGHTSAMENDMENT.ORG, <https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/faq> [https://perma.cc/PC2W-MPXZ].

who had any personal connection with Paul, was disgusted at “the most painful lack of tact I had ever seen.”¹⁰ The other metric of post-suffrage female political effort, women’s election to office, showed even fewer gains in the 1920s. Through much of the pre-enfranchisement period, suffragists had foresworn interest in office-holding, lest their desire for the vote be seen as ambitious, power-hungry and self-seeking. Once suffrage was won, however, women showed themselves eager to serve as legislators. By 1922, the League of Women Voters found more than 250 women seeking office.¹¹ Most were aiming for their state legislatures, but women ran for the House of Representatives in Indiana, Iowa, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, New Mexico, and West Virginia, and for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Most ran as third-party candidates, with no chance of winning, but a few ran as major party candidates, especially as Republicans. These found the doors to office-holding firmly locked. Missouri suffragist Emily Newell Blair, who had held a relatively high position in Democratic party circles, concluded by decade’s end that “[n]ow at the end of ten years of suffrage, I find politics still a male monopoly.”¹²

The most ambitious effort to secure a national political office was made by Ruth Hanna McCormick. McCormick had unmatched political credentials, both as a suffragist and as a Republican. She had served as chair of the National American Woman Suffrage Association’s Congressional Committee, and she was the daughter and wife of major Republican Party figures. She was the widow of former Illinois congressman Medill McCormick, but did not merely intend to take over her husband’s seat. (As Alice Roosevelt Longworth put it, such women “used their husbands’ coffins as springboards.”)¹³ McCormick had her own considerable political plans. Her 1928 campaign for Congress was well organized, energetic and successful. Notably, she relied on several African-American women, led by Mary Church Terrell, to organize support in Illinois’ significant black Republican constituency. At that point, only a handful of women had made it to Congress, none of them former suffragists or figures with any significant political clout. *Time Magazine* put her on its cover.

10. DOROTHY STERLING, *BLACK FOREMOTHERS: THREE LIVES* 147 (1988).

11. *Women Entries in Election Races*, *WOMAN CITIZEN*, November 4, 1922, 12.

12. *Emily Newell Blair Tells Why I Am Discouraged about Women in Politics*, *WOMAN’S J.*, Jan. 1931.

13. KRISTIE MILLER, *RUTH HANNA MCCORMICK: A LIFE IN POLITICS, 1880–1944*, at 159 (1944).

Almost immediately upon taking her seat in the House, McCormick began a second campaign, for the U.S. Senate. At that point, only one woman, eighty-seven-year old Georgia suffragist Rebecca Felton, had served in the U.S. Senate, and she had done so for exactly one day. U.S. Senator (and notorious white supremacist) Tom Watson had died in office, and the governor had appointed Felton as a way to hold the seat until a special election, which he expected (but failed) to win.

Ruth McCormick found that making it into the U.S. Senate was much harder than into the House of Representatives. Illinois Republicans, set against “extending petticoat rule,” would not support her; and Hiram Johnson, Progressive Republican Senator from California, said that her election would be a “punch in the eye of the Senate.”¹⁴ She was able to fight back against the opposition to win the Republican primary but was done in by the Democratic wave unleashed in the aftermath of the Stock Market Crash. The U.S. Senate remained all male.

Most analyses of the historic 1932 political realignment which finally effected the transfer of national reform energies from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party have focused on class and race factors, but not on the role played by women voters, despite the massive doubling of the electorate just twelve years before. Many women were still not integrated into the political system, especially wives and daughters of immigrant, working-class men attached to the Democratic Party. By 1936, the number of women voting for the Democratic Party had doubled. “Women were a large and increasingly important source of electoral support for the emerging Democratic majority,” according to a recent study.¹⁵

However, what has long been apparent is the importance of a cadre of women behind New Deal labor reform and social welfare policy. Surrounding First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, these experienced women political figures, several of them veterans of the suffrage movement, contributed significantly to the Social Security Act and other social welfare measures. Child welfare funding, which had been terminated in 1929 by the defunding of the Sheppard-Towner Act, was reinstated, and the bane of child labor was successfully targeted by federal legislation, which a chastened Supreme Court let stand. Among the influential New Deal women was Mary McCleod Bethune, an African-American educator from Florida who had earlier made her mark defending black women voters in her home town of Daytona.

14. *Id.* at 223, 232.

15. CORDER & WOLBRECHT, *supra* note 2, at 250.

Backed by these women and by his wife, President Roosevelt finally accomplished what his Republican predecessor Herbert Hoover had promised and failed to do: appoint a woman cabinet minister. Frances Perkins, who had cut her teeth in suffragist and labor reform circles in New York City in connection with the 1911 Triangle Fire, became Secretary of Labor, a position previously controlled by the male-dominated labor movement.

Finally, a Democratic woman accomplished what Ruth McCormick had failed to do: be elected to the U.S. Senate. Hattie Wyatt Caraway of Arkansas had no connection to the suffrage movement but did cosponsor the ERA in 1944 when her party finally put it on its platform. She was a loyal New Dealer and held her seat for two terms, until she was replaced by J. William Fulbright.

After the Second World War, the difference in voting rates between men and women, now traceable by scientific exit polling, narrowed, but women no longer concentrated their voting power on common legislative goals or female office holders. In 1948, the hundredth anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention, Susan B. Anthony II, named after her great aunt, wrote an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the nation's most popular magazine, criticizing women's political disorganization. "Women have a vote, . . . but they don't use it to benefit themselves . . ." she wrote. "American women, after grasping the weapon of political action, the ballot, let it rust in their hands."¹⁶

Susan B. Anthony II had helped to found the left-wing Congress of American Women (CAW), which was carrying forward the feminist tradition, energized by knowledge of the history of suffrage triumphs. CAW became a target of a congressional anti-Communist crusade, emanating from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Anthony II was excoriated for "shamelessly capitalizing on the name of her great aunt," and another member, Nora Stanton Barney, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's granddaughter, was also targeted.

Six months later, Margaret Chase Smith, who had previously followed her ailing husband into the House of Representatives, became the second woman elected to the U.S. Senate. The Maine Republican made headlines in 1950 by becoming the first senator to criticize her fellow Republican and rabid anti-communist Joseph McCarthy: "Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all too frequently those who, by their own words and

16. Susan B. Anthony II, *We Women Throw Our Votes Away*, SATURDAY EVENING POST, July 17, 1948, at 4.

acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism.”¹⁷ McCarthy denigrated Smith and six fellow senators as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and financed an unsuccessful primary campaign against her. Nonetheless, in 1964, Smith also became the first woman whose name was placed in nomination for president by a major party.

The nomination that year went to Barry Goldwater. Smith’s moderate Republicanism was giving way to a new radical conservatism, and her position as the party’s most prominent woman would soon go to Goldwater champion, Phyllis Schlafly. In 1964, the party, which had endorsed the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment since 1940, removed it from its platform. In 1972, the ERA was nonetheless passed by Congress. A modest response to the rising spirit of a new feminism, it looked likely to be ratified until Schlafly, at the head of the newly-established Eagle Forum, effectively organized to kill it.

The battle over the ERA was one manifestation of a highly fraught conflict between a passionate new feminism and an equally determined defense of traditional gender roles. Unlike previous years, the fiftieth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment was celebrated by massive marches in New York City and elsewhere, calling for the decriminalization of abortion and passage and ratification of the ERA, as well as for an end to the Vietnam War and to institutionalized racism. These new feminist energies also had their political manifestations: the 1981 appointment of a woman—finally—to the Supreme Court, the 1974 announcement of an electoral “gender gap” of women’s votes in favor of the Democratic Party and liberal causes, and slowly, very slowly, growing numbers of Congresswomen. As of this writing the highest glass ceiling resists being shattered; but who can know how long it will hold?

These gains and the tremendous backlash that they generated have coincided with, and given heightened meaning to, the hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, making it clear that, like all great struggles for human freedom, the meaning of the movement for woman suffrage continues to unfold.

17. *Margaret Chase Smith Denounces McCarthy*, DIGITAL HIST., http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1315 [<https://perma.cc/6E8D-V3DN>].