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# Woodrow Wilson's conversion experience :: the President, the woman suffrage movement, and the extent of executive influence

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**WOODROW WILSON'S CONVERSION EXPERIENCE:  
THE PRESIDENT, THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT, AND THE  
EXTENT OF EXECUTIVE INFLUENCE**

A Thesis Presented

by

BETH A. BEHN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2004

Department of History

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THE PRESIDENT, THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT, AND THE EXTENT  
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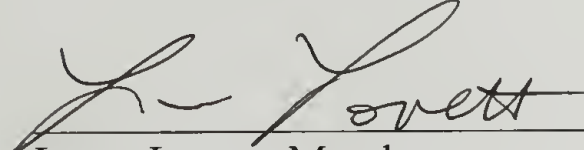
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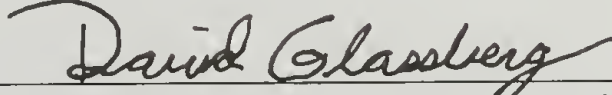
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As Woodrow Wilson traveled the presidential campaign trail in 1911, he confided to one of his staff members that he was “definitely and irreconcilably opposed to woman suffrage; woman’s place was in the home, and the type of woman who took an active part in the suffrage agitation was totally abhorrent to him.”<sup>1</sup> Just six years later, though, halfway through his second term, he pleaded with the United States Senate to pass the federal woman suffrage amendment. In the midst of a world war and with significant mid-term elections looming just days away, Wilson took the unprecedented step of personally injecting his voice into the Senate debate over woman suffrage. The future direction of the nation rests on granting women the right to vote, he argued, because “we shall need their moral sense to preserve what is right and fine and worthy in our system of life as well as to discover just what it is that ought to be purified and reformed. Without their counselings we shall only be half wise.”<sup>2</sup>

What had transpired during the first six years of his presidency to bring about such a dramatic change in Wilson’s position? How had the federal suffrage amendment been elevated to an issue of such importance that the President felt compelled to personally intervene with Congress on its behalf? The purpose of this thesis is to answer that question using the framework of executive influence. Envisioning executive influence as

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Parker Stockbridge, "How Woodrow Wilson Won His Nomination," *Current History* 20 (1924): 567.

<sup>2</sup> Congress, Senate, President Woodrow Wilson’s message to the U.S. Senate urging passage of the suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution. 65<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (30 September 1918), vol. 56, pt. 1, 10900-10901.



a two-way exchange, I seek to understand the array of forces that pressured Wilson and the extent to which he was able to exert authority over Congress and voters.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was signed into law on August 26, 1920. In the month that followed, Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), composed letters to the chairmen of both the Republican and Democratic National Committees summarizing the performance of each party in the long struggle for woman suffrage. In her letter to the Democratic chairman, she wrote, “There is one important Democratic factor which should be included in the record and that is the fearless and able sponsorship of the amendment by the leader of your party, the President of the United States.”<sup>3</sup> Catt was convinced that President Woodrow Wilson’s support for a federal suffrage amendment had been a crucial element in its eventual passage.

Wilson’s relationship to the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment has received much consideration from suffrage historians. Women who personally participated in the campaign authored the earliest suffrage histories, published in the decades immediately following passage of the federal amendment. The manner in which these accounts described Wilson’s role in securing the amendment depended on whether the authors had worked with NAWSA or with the smaller and more militant National Woman’s Party (NWP). Both groups agreed that Wilson became an advocate and that his support helped secure the necessary votes in Congress and, later, in the state ratification campaigns. They disagreed sharply, however, on the cause of his conversion. Those affiliated with NAWSA insisted that Wilson was

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<sup>3</sup> *The History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. Ida Husted Harper, 6 vols., vol. 5 (New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969), 648. Hereafter referred to as *HWS*.

won over to the cause by their organization's tireless campaigning along nonpartisan lines and women's war service. In contrast, women affiliated with the NWP argued that, as a result of their campaign to "hold the party in power responsible" and the militant tactics they employed, Wilson recognized the urgency for passing the suffrage amendment under a Democratic administration. Furthermore, NWP activists adamantly believed that NAWSA abandoned the cause of suffrage during World War I and focused all of their efforts on war service, thus leaving the NWP to shoulder the brunt of the suffrage work. Although these accounts make clear that the participants were aware of the manner in which woman suffrage had become entangled with other political objectives like prohibition, progressive labor protection laws, and Southern voting qualifications designed to disenfranchise potential black voters, they rarely connect Wilson's actions to those other issues.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson scholars have paid relatively little attention to the way the suffrage campaign weighed in among the other issues of Wilson's Administration. Sadly, one could browse through hundreds of monographs on Wilson's foreign and domestic policy and not realize

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<sup>4</sup> Early suffrage histories written by NAWSA members include *HWS*, which was originally published in 1922 and Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923). The first full history of the NWP, published in 1921, was Inez Hayes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party*. It was republished in 1977 as *The Story of Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party* (Fairfax, Virginia: Denlinger's Publishers, Ltd., 1977). Another first-hand NWP account was Doris Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 1920). The first three of these accounts discuss the manner in which the "liquor interests" campaigned against suffragists in state suffrage campaigns and during the ratification process. Additionally, they acknowledge the powerful race issue as it deterred Southern Democrats from supporting the federal suffrage amendment. Stevens' account is more focused on the experience of the pickets and Wilson's reaction to them. None of these accounts, however, directly link Wilson's level of support for suffrage with pressure he received from those opposed to suffrage because of its relationship to other progressive issues.



that one-half of the nation's population gained the right to vote during his administration. His primary biographer, Arthur S. Link, mentions Wilson's interaction with suffragists only a few times in his five-volume history of Wilson's two terms. His most extensive discussion concerns Wilson's decision to vote in favor of the state suffrage referendum in New Jersey in 1915 – a pronouncement that Link contends was intimately tied to the president's simultaneous choice to announce his plans to remarry just a little more than a year after the death of his first wife. While Wilson's affirmative vote in New Jersey was certainly significant, Link's over-simplified explanation of the decision fails to connect this action to the President's broader experience with the suffrage movement.<sup>5</sup> Wilson's later advocacy of the federal suffrage amendment is almost entirely absent from Link's account. Biographies focused on Wilson's personal life do not devote much more time to the suffrage issue than those centered on his foreign policy. Much scholarly work has been done on Wilson's relationship to progressive legislation, but suffrage is almost entirely excluded from those investigations.<sup>6</sup> This thesis is an attempt to at least partially fill the suffrage movement void in the existing Wilson scholarship while also contributing a broader picture of Wilson's political conversion to the body of suffrage history.

In the first "objective" suffrage history written by a nonparticipant, Eleanor Flexner acknowledges the importance of Wilson's role in the suffrage campaign. In *Century of*

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> More personal biographies such as August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991) and Phyllis Lee Levin, *Edith and Woodrow: The Wilson White House* (New York: Scribner, 2001) mention Wilson's wives' distaste for women's political participation and, later, the actions of the NWP. However, neither author devotes more than a few sentences to Wilson's reaction to suffrage pressure. His interaction with Congress on the issue is completely absent from these accounts.



*Struggle*, originally published in 1959, she carefully assesses the influence both the NWP and NAWSA had on the President. Flexner concludes that the real contribution of the NWP was to bring the federal amendment back to a central position in the suffrage movement through the work they did between 1913 and 1916. Beginning in January, 1917, they began to use militant tactics that included picketing in front of the White House, lighting bonfires in which Wilson's speeches about democracy were burned, and conducting hunger strikes after they had been arrested. Flexner asserts that the militant phase of NWP activity probably did not help the cause and certainly did not endear suffragists to Wilson. She concludes that NAWSA, under the strict control of Catt and her moderate, nonpartisan approach, found the most effective path to win over the president and eventually gain the vote.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, Flexner notes that winning the support of the President was not the only challenge suffragists faced. Even with his support, the suffrage amendment was defeated twice in the Senate (first in October 1918 and again in February 1919) before finally passing by the slim margin of two votes in June 1919. Flexner lists the multitude of other issues facing elected representatives including Southern fears that woman suffrage threatened white supremacy and pressure from the liquor and textile industries who feared that woman voters would support reformist legislation such as prohibition and protective child labor laws.<sup>8</sup> In pointing out the influence of these outside factors on

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<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, Enlarged ed. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 262-268.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-297.

Congressmen, Flexner neglected to explain the impact they had on Wilson's decision to withhold or exert executive influence.

Suffrage histories written in the wake of *Century of Struggle* followed the trend Flexner established. Most historians agree that Wilson was converted to the cause by late-1917 and thereafter played a significant role in securing the amendment. The bulk of the scholarly disagreement centers on the competing influence of NAWSA and the NWP on Wilson's conversion, paying relatively little attention to Wilson's personal connection to other salient issues such as Southern race fears and powerful business interests.<sup>9</sup>

One notable exception to this trend is David Morgan's *Suffragists and Democrats: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in America*. Morgan carefully examines Wilson's choices about when, where, and with whom he tried to exert his influence in favor of the federal suffrage amendment. In a more thorough manner than many others, Morgan places Wilson's actions in the context of sectional rivalries, economic realities, and party

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<sup>9</sup> Accounts that spend the balance of their discussion of Wilson on how he was affected by either NAWSA or the NWP include Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910-1928* (New York: New York University Press, 1986) and Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism between the Wars* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981). Both of these works argue that, more so than any maneuvers by NAWSA, the anti-Democratic campaigns led by the NWP during both the 1914 and 1916 elections effectively convinced the President that his party would suffer drastic consequences unless he began to advocate for the federal amendment. William O'Neill, in *Everyone was Brave: A History of Feminism in America* (New York: The New York Times Book Co., 1971) argues that it was NAWSA's more gentle persuasive approach that converted Wilson. He criticizes the NWP for their policy of "holding the party in power responsible" and damaging the cause through their militant actions. O'Neill contends that the NWP was an embarrassment to both NAWSA and Wilson by continuing to focus their attacks on him after he had already come out in support of suffrage. Like Flexner, though, O'Neill does not examine the effect of the myriad of connected political issues on Wilson's willingness to wade into the suffrage fray.

politics.<sup>10</sup> Published in 1972, Morgan's account does not enjoy the benefit of more recent scholarship on the goals of the suffrage leaders or on Wilson's state of mind during his second term in office. Additionally, he discounts the importance of NAWSA's active participation in war service on Wilson's decision to serve as an advocate for the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

This thesis builds on Morgan's foundation by incorporating both the suffrage and Wilson scholarship of the last three decades. I argue that suffrage became an issue of tremendous political value during Wilson's second term. Not out of a sense of justice or any type of feminist conversion, but out of knowledge of political reality, Wilson came to support the federal amendment. The degree to which he came to personally regard women as deserving members of the franchise is difficult to discern. Comparing his deep distaste for women in politics during his academic years and his early political career with the tremendous level of support he gave to the suffrage movement during the final push for passage of the federal amendment, it certainly appears as if his experiences with women in the public sphere at least partially mitigated his personal opposition to their participation in politics.

Regardless of the degree of his private conversion, though, his public support of the principle of suffrage was key in several state referenda, thereby increasing the number of Congressmen from suffrage states and improving the chances of successfully passing the federal amendment. He also succeeded in securing the votes of several legislators through personal appeals. There were limits, though, to Wilson's ability to influence

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<sup>10</sup> David Morgan, *Suffragists and Democrats: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in America* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1972). See especially Chapter 11: Liquor, Cotton, and Suffrage, p. 155-178.



events in Congress. Included in this thesis is a thorough examination of his inability to secure the needed two votes in the Senate during the October 1918 and February 1919 Senate debates.

Alongside the exploration of the ability of the President to persuade Congress, I assess the impact of the various factions that pushed and pulled at Wilson over the suffrage issue. I develop the argument that the NAWSA strategy was infinitely more successful at gaining the President's support than that of the NWP. In taking a more critical stand than previous historians regarding the NWP, I explain why the policy of "holding the party in power" was ineffective in both the 1914 and 1916 elections. A close examination of Wilson's correspondence reveals that his most-trusted advisors told him not to worry about women in the West becoming single-issue voters and abandoning the Democrats. The election results indicate that Wilson's advisors were right.

Furthermore, the militant tactics employed by the NWP beginning in 1917 hurt the cause of suffrage much more than they furthered it. By appearing to be disloyal during wartime, the militant pickets damaged the image of the suffrage movement just as the President was beginning to become more supportive of the cause. The argument made by the NWP leaders was that the tremendous publicity they were generating would force the President to act. However, the overwhelming majority of the correspondence from *NWP members* all over the country back to the NWP headquarters indicates that publicity, if it existed at all, was mostly negative in local papers. A tiny minority of Americans protested about the violation of the pickets' civil rights. A vast majority, many of whom were ardent suffrage supporters, believed that attacking a president who was trying to conduct a war was reprehensible.

The NAWSA strategy, on the other hand, made the President an ally to the cause. Their decision to remain nonpartisan and to support the war strengthened Wilson's hand as he prevailed upon members of Congress and the general public to reward women's war service and aid his goal of "making the world safe for democracy" by granting full democratic rights in the United States. NAWSA's disavowal of the NWP and active campaign to distinguish themselves from their more militant and partisan sisters succeeded in bringing the President and his cabinet more closely in line with the NAWSA leadership. Politically, their decision to distance themselves from the NWP paid big dividends with the President, members of Congress, and the general public.

Finally, this thesis investigates the manner in which the federal suffrage amendment created enemies among Southern Democrats, the liquor industry, and the textile industry. These enemies, just like NAWSA and the NWP, had an impact on the President. While publicly willing to support the suffrage amendment, Wilson was privately only willing to push *certain* members of Congress. He was least willing to push those whose support he had relied on in the past and whom he knew faced constituents panicked about threats to white supremacy and campaign contributors fearful of woman suffrage crippling their ability to employ child labor in cotton textile mills. To see suffrage as one of many competing priorities on Wilson's agenda is to see it in a new light. Using Wilson's experience with the suffrage campaign to examine the two-way street of executive influence is to shed light on the darker corners of both the past and our present.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Using Wilson's experience with the issue of woman suffrage to examine executive influence raises two additional questions that I intend to explore in a later, expanded study. First, once Wilson was converted to the suffrage cause, how did his advocacy of the federal amendment to Congress compare to his advocacy of other issues he championed? Was he more or less willing to engage in "executive interference" for

In order to contextualize the final phase of the suffrage campaign during Wilson's second term, I spend the next chapter reviewing key events leading up to the 1916 presidential election. This review includes an examination of the evolution of Wilson's stance on women in politics from a position of pure political opposition and personal disgust to supporting the right of each state to choose for themselves whether or not women would have the right to vote. Additionally, this chapter sketches the late-19<sup>th</sup> century roots of the woman suffrage campaign to include the 1893 NAWSA decision to focus on state referenda rather than a federal amendment. Included in this section is a discussion of the racism of white suffragists and the manner in which they, more often than not, sacrificed the principle of universal suffrage for the expedient attainment of white woman suffrage. Recounting the gradual growth in the number of suffrage states, the quagmire of the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment, and the split between NAWSA and the NWP, Chapter Two concludes with a summary of the suffrage situation as the nation moved into the 1916 election year.

Wilson's conversion from a states' rights supporter to an advocate of the federal amendment occurred between the Democratic National Convention in June 1916 and his address to Congress in December 1917. The significant events that took place in between serve as the basis of the analysis in Chapters Three and Four. From January 1918 until final passage in the Senate in June 1919, Wilson actively campaigned for the federal

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prohibition, child labor laws, and/or the League of Nations? Secondly, what was the basis of Wilson's understanding of the rules that governed his interaction with Congress? Is he following a historical precedent or is he abiding by self-imposed restrictions? How do Wilson's actions compare with those of other Chief Executives? Did the relationship between the President and the Senate change as a result of the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment that provided for the direct election of Senators? This thesis does not seek to answer these questions, but it does provide the initial framework for a study that will address them.



amendment. Chapter Five examines his specific actions and the reaction of those he tried to influence. Additionally, this chapter incorporates the influence that anti-suffrage interests had on both the President and Congress. The ratification process lasted from June 1919 to August 1920. It became, in many ways, a race between the two political parties to see which one could claim they had helped the cause the most, thereby winning the votes of women in the 1920 Presidential and Congressional elections. Although Wilson was actively involved in trying to speed ratification, his was but one voice among many as suffragists battled local interests and prejudices in each individual state. In that this study is principally concerned with Wilson's ability to influence the Congress, the ratification process is only briefly examined.

The concluding chapter reiterates the arguments made here – that Wilson did have a significant role to play in the successful passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, but that more powerful currents like sectionalism, race, and economic interests sometimes limited the extent of his influence. Additionally, the strategy employed by NAWSA was the most effective in winning the loyalty of the President and, thereby, facilitating victory in the suffrage campaign.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRELUDE TO WILSON'S SECOND TERM

#### Wilson's Evolutionary Suffrage Stance

Near the end of a long session of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Woman Suffrage in December 1915, Carrie Chapman Catt testified to the committee, "I have discovered that when a man believes in woman suffrage it is a national question and when he does not believe in it he says it is a question for the states."<sup>12</sup> At the time of Catt's testimony, President Woodrow Wilson represented the non-believers. He supported woman suffrage only as an issue to be decided by the voters of each state. On the same day that Catt testified to the House Committee, President Wilson gave an interview to the *New York Times* in which he restated his position on the issue. Pointing to the fact that he voted in favor of the state amendment in his home state in New Jersey in October of that year, Wilson said that he believed suffrage was an issue to be decided by the voters of each state. He conceded, however, that he would take the idea of a federal amendment into consideration.<sup>13</sup> This concession was a huge step forward for a man who had been adamantly opposed to women's political involvement only a few years before.

As early as 1885, Wilson wrote to his soon-to-be wife, Ellen Axson, that he did not approve of any of the notions floating around society that women should be liberated from the bonds of family to lead independent lives or become involved in the public

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<sup>12</sup> *HWS*, 469.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, 16 Dec 1917.

sphere. Wilson believed that family was the bedrock of society and that increased rights for women would alter the precious balance within families. Ellen totally supported his ideas about women's place in the home and in society.<sup>14</sup> Later that same year, Wilson began his first teaching assignment at Bryn Mawr College, a recently founded women's college in Pennsylvania. The college president, M. Carey Thomas, was an ardent supporter of women's rights and increased educational opportunities for women. Ellen was troubled that Wilson had to answer to a woman, and Wilson confided to a friend that Thomas represented to him that which he most detested – “advanced women.”<sup>15</sup>

Wilson's years at Bryn Mawr were difficult for him and for those with whom he worked precisely because of his view that higher education was wasted on the minds of young women. As the head of the History Department, Wilson taught courses on Ancient Greece and Rome as well as on European History and American politics. He also gave informal talks on current affairs and constitutional development. He was extremely

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<sup>14</sup> Levin, 26. and Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters*, 8 vols., vol. 8 (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1939), 240-241. Hereafter referred to as *Life and Letters*. See also Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947), 2. Wilson's second wife, Edith Bolling Galt, also held very traditional views of women's inferior intellectual and political status. Within Wilson's familial circle, the only woman who held a more progressive view was his eldest daughter, Margaret. Margaret served as the chair of NAWSA's Honorary Committee during preparations for the 1915 National Convention and was given a seat of honor on the platform at the convention's final session. Additionally, she was a guest of honor at the February 1917 NAWSA Conference at which the organization took an affirmative stand on the President's war position. See *HWS*, Vol. 5, 440, 459, and 724. There is no evidence that Margaret's participation in the suffrage movement caused a rift between her and her father. On the contrary, Wilson remained close to all three of his daughters throughout their lives. See Heckscher and the memoirs of Wilson's youngest daughter, Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1937).

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed account of Wilson's experience at Bryn Mawr and conflicts with M. Carey Thomas, see Heckscher, 80-94 and Levin, 140.



popular among the undergraduate students who attended his lectures, but the feelings were not mutual.<sup>16</sup> Wilson confided his feelings about the students to his diary, writing “Lecturing to young women of the present generation on the history and principles of politics is about as appropriate and profitable as would be lecturing to stone masons on the evolution of fashion in dress.”<sup>17</sup>

Wilson was assigned a graduate fellow for each of his three years on the Bryn Mawr faculty. Writing to a Wilson biographer in 1926, one of his graduate students recalled that Wilson was ill-suited for teaching women because he assumed that their minds were somehow different than men’s. She thought it was unfortunate for both Wilson and his students that he never made an effort to find out whether his assumptions were true.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, Wilson abruptly left Bryn Mawr in 1888 after a contract dispute with the college. He accepted a position at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, confiding to a friend, “I have long been hungry for a class of men.”<sup>19</sup>

His views on the inappropriateness of women’s interest in politics changed little over the next two decades. According to Frank Stockbridge, the director of publicity for Wilson’s 1912 presidential campaign, the future president was horrified by the idea of

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent summary of Wilson’s years at Bryn Mawr, see Henry Wilkinson Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 143-161.

<sup>17</sup> Woodrow Wilson, Diary Entry (October 20, 1887), Woodrow Wilson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter referred to as *PWW*)

<sup>18</sup> Bragdon, 152. The graduate student who provided this account was Lucy Maynard Salmon who, after leaving Bryn Mawr, taught history at Vassar College for nearly forty years.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

women voters. The suffrage question was repeatedly posed to Wilson as he traveled the campaign trail in the western states in 1911. As Stockbridge reported in a 1924 reminiscence, Wilson “was definitely and irreconcilably opposed to woman suffrage; woman’s place was in the home, and the type of woman who took an active part in the suffrage agitation was totally abhorrent to him.”<sup>20</sup> Stockbridge went on to explain that Wilson decided to adopt a states’ rights stance during the campaign in order to effectively “dodge the issue.”

Wilson’s victory in 1912 was dominant in terms of the electoral vote. He won 435 electoral votes as compared with 88 votes for the Bull Moose Progressive candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, and eight votes for the incumbent Republican William Taft. The ascension of a Democratic president was accompanied by the election of a Democratic House and Senate. The popular vote, however, revealed that Wilson did not have the mandate that the electoral vote indicated. Wilson received just over six million votes while Roosevelt garnered more than four million, Taft secured nearly three and half million, and the Socialist candidate, Eugene V. Debs, captured another 900,000. All together, the other candidates received three million more popular votes than Wilson. The president-elect recognized that the Democrats were not the dominant party in the nation and that they were only guaranteed a two-year hold on the House of Representatives. His first term, then, had to be focused on those issues he considered key provisions of his “New Freedom” campaign platform – tariff and currency reform.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Parker Stockbridge, "How Woodrow Wilson Won His Nomination," *Current History* 20 (1924): 567.

<sup>21</sup> Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House*, 524-525.

## Background of Woman Suffrage Movement

Catt's speech to the House Suffrage Committee in December 1915 was one of her first actions as the newly elected president of NAWSA. She succeeded Dr. Anna Howard Shaw who had been the president since 1905. The previous two decades had been extremely difficult for the suffrage movement. Under the guidance of Susan B. Anthony during the early 1890s, NAWSA had focused its efforts on securing a constitutional amendment that would grant suffrage at the national level. In 1893, however, the organization decided instead to seek amendments of state constitutions. In effect, the movement for a federal amendment was abandoned.<sup>22</sup>

One of the chief reasons for this shift in focus was the issue of race in Southern states. Between 1890 and 1910, all twelve southern states succeeded in disfranchising black male voters who had been granted suffrage through the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution at the end of the Civil War. They completed this task through an elaborate set of literacy and property qualifications and use of a poll tax. When those tools also resulted in the exclusion of many poor, white voters, Southern politicians created flimsy loopholes about "good character" and "understanding" that allowed whites to vote, but still excluded blacks. White supremacy was guaranteed in the South so long as the states were allowed to establish electoral qualifications and conduct elections.<sup>23</sup>

A federal woman suffrage amendment threatened this system because it granted Congress power to enforce the provisions of the amendment. To white Southerners, the

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<sup>22</sup> Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 212-213.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, 74-75.



enforcement clause of the amendment evoked negative memories of Reconstruction when federal troops were stationed in the South in order to enforce the voting rights of black men. The fact that black women could just as handily be disfranchised as black men did little to assuage their fears. The specter of federal intervention into voting practices in the South made discussion of a federal amendment impossible for Southern politicians.<sup>24</sup> Using “states’ rights” as a thinly veiled disguise for preserving white supremacy, they eschewed any association with suffrage sympathies. The only hope, or so it seemed to NAWSA at the dawn of the twentieth century, was to work for state referenda.

It is important to take a moment here to review the records of both NAWSA and the NWP on the issue of black voting rights. Sadly, the record is less than complimentary for either organization. As numerous historians have pointed out, time and time again white suffragists from both national organizations abandoned their black counterparts if a coalition of the two groups threatened the chances for white women gaining the right to vote.<sup>25</sup> Often, suffrage leaders found themselves in the awkward position of promising

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76., and Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>25</sup> For general descriptions of the relationships between white and black women in the suffrage movement see Flexner and Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965). For a more focused examination, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). or Green. An illuminating theoretical examination of race and feminism can be found in Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Newman points to the manner in which imperialism, white women’s participation in reform movements, and the combination of misogyny and racism simultaneously brought women of different races together and drove them apart. For a case study written from the perspective of African-American women, see Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the*

Southern white men that enfranchising women would not threaten white political supremacy because black women could be barred from the polls in the same manner that black men had been disfranchised.

On the extreme were women like Kate Gordon of Louisiana who was as much of a white supremacist as any of her male counterparts. Gordon, an ardent states' rights suffragist, broke with NAWSA when Catt began to focus the organization on the federal amendment. During the ratification campaign, she went so far as to join forces with the anti-suffragists and work to prevent ratification in Louisiana and Mississippi.<sup>26</sup>

Fortunately, few southern suffragists followed Gordon into the ranks of the "anti's." Still, even those that remained within NAWSA and the NWP took an accommodationist position on the issue of black voting rights in the South. The growing emphasis on expediency in the final stages of the suffrage movement had many casualties. Foremost among them were disfranchised black voters – male and female alike.

With NAWSA's new focus on state campaigns, women had been granted full suffrage in four western states by 1896. However, between 1896 and 1910, no new suffrage states were won and only six state referenda were held. Between 1910 and

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*Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth R. Johnson, "Kate Gordon and the Woman-Suffrage Movement in the South," *The Journal of Southern History* 38, no. 3 (1972): 392. Suzanne Lebsock, in a case study of Virginia suffragists, argues that Gordon is atypical of white southern suffragists. She points out that white women who became involved in the suffrage movement did not do so out of a desire to preserve white supremacy. While most of them failed to disavow white supremacy and work for universal suffrage, they also did not embrace it. Lebsock convincingly argues that the aggressive racism of the anti-suffragists "constrained the options available to all the other players." See Suzanne Lebsock, "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 64-66.



1913, six more states granted women full suffrage, but the cumulative electoral votes of all nine suffrage states only totaled 74 out of a possible 531. As a result of this slow rate of progress a rift had developed within NAWSA over the appropriate strategy to secure woman suffrage. In 1912, two young women, recently returned from working with the militant suffragists in England, asked Dr. Shaw to appoint them to NAWSA's Congressional Committee. Alice Paul and Lucy Burns hoped to revive the defunct committee whose purpose it was to press for a federal amendment. Rather than fighting the suffrage battle state-by-state, Paul and Burns hoped to win one sweeping victory at the national level.

Alice Paul was born into a Quaker family in Moorestown, New Jersey in 1885. She graduated from Swarthmore College in 1905, received an MA at the University of Pennsylvania two years later, and a Ph.D. from the same in 1912. Between her MA and Ph.D. work in America, Paul spent more than two years in England as a graduate student in sociology and economics at the University of London. During her time in England, she became involved with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) of London and also met Lucy Burns, another American studying abroad.<sup>27</sup>

Burns, the fourth of eight children born into an Irish-Catholic family in Brooklyn, was a 1902 graduate of Vassar College. She briefly worked as a high school teacher before beginning graduate work at Yale. In 1906, she moved to Germany to intensively study foreign languages at the University of Berlin and, later, at the University of Bonn. After three years in Germany, Burns transferred to Oxford University in England for

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<sup>27</sup> Inez Hayes Irwin, *The Story of Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party* (Fairfax, Virginia: Denlinger's Publishers, Ltd., 1977), 7-9.



additional graduate work and became involved in the English militant suffrage movement.<sup>28</sup>

Both women participated in British suffrage activity, were arrested for their actions, and served time in British jails. They became familiar with militant tactics such as showing up to protest and heckle members of Parliament at different speaking engagements, organizing suffrage parades, and participating in hunger strikes while in jail. They also became familiar with the political strategy employed by the WSPU of “holding the party in power responsible” for passing suffrage legislation.<sup>29</sup>

Under the British parliamentary system, one party could be held responsible and ousted from power for failure to pass specific legislation. Although the American system of government differed, Paul and Burns were convinced that since the Democrats held the presidency and a majority in Congress, that party should push through a federal suffrage amendment. If they failed to do so, they should have to face the consequences of being campaigned against by the suffragists in states where women had secured the right to vote.

Paul was appointed chair of NAWSA’s Congressional Committee when she was just 27 years old. She brought her experience from England, youthful energy, tremendous organizational skills, and persuasive powers to the task of securing a federal amendment. She also brought the immense talents, experience, and energy of Lucy Burns who was appointed as her vice-chair.<sup>30</sup> These two women immediately infused the campaign with

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<sup>28</sup> Stevens, 356.

<sup>29</sup> Irwin, 7-9.

a sense of purpose and direction never seen before. Their first major accomplishment was planning, organizing, and executing a suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. on the day before Wilson's inauguration in March 1913.

Nearly 8,000 women from all over the country participated in the parade that moved from the Capitol, up Pennsylvania Avenue, and ended at the Hall of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Towards the end of the parade route, rowdy members of the crowd began to press forward and some physically attacked the marchers. Marchers had their suffrage banners ripped from their hands. Several were knocked to the ground and trampled by the crowd. The police failed to intervene in a timely manner and a detachment of soldiers from nearby Fort Meyers had to be dispatched to settle the disturbance. Two days after the parade, the Senate passed two resolutions demanding an investigation into the police department's failure to safeguard the marchers.<sup>31</sup> Paul's suffrage parade, coupled with the intense lobbying of members of Congress that she initiated, abruptly awakened members of Congress to NAWSA's desire for a federal amendment.

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<sup>30</sup> During Paul's tenure with NAWSA's Congressional Committee, the Congressional Union, and the NWP, Burns served as her second-in-command. The manner in which they divided up leadership responsibilities is an area in need of further research, but both the secondary scholarship and the existing NWP records suggests that Paul was the political visionary and Burns served as a workhorse ensuring Paul's visions were carried out. This is not to say that Burns lacked vision or that Paul spent all her time making plans without becoming involved in their execution. There seems to have been an enormous amount of overlap in their duties. Burns often answered mail addressed to Paul if the latter was incommunicado for one reason or another. For the most thorough description of their working relationship, see Irwin, 14-18.

<sup>31</sup> Irwin, 30. See also *New York Times*, October 5, 1913, "Parade Protest Arouses Senate."

Shortly after her appointment as chair of the Congressional Committee, Paul formed a parallel organization called the Congressional Union (CU) to support the activities of the Committee. Accepted only as an auxiliary to NAWSA but under the direction of a NAWSA officer (Paul), the CU took actions that seemingly violated fundamental tenets of the National's policy. These actions led to sharp dissension within NAWSA and eventually to a split among the organization's members. As Catt explained in an article written three years after the split, "A break with the National occurred because [Paul and the CU] refused to accede to certain established rules of the Association."<sup>32</sup> She went on to list the infractions which included using NAWSA funds for CU activities, conducting work in individual states without coordinating with NAWSA state officers, and campaigning against Democratic candidates in western states. The conflict came to a head at the 1913 NAWSA convention where the charges were debated at length. Following the convention, NAWSA's executive council demanded that Paul eliminate any conflicts of interest by resigning her position as head of the Congressional Union. When she refused, they requested her resignation as chair of the Congressional Committee, which she provided.

Historians and historical actors alike disagree over some of the underlying causes of the rift. Alice Paul biographer Christine Lunardini argues that the NAWSA leadership generally accepted Paul's melding of Congressional Committee and Congressional Union funds.<sup>33</sup> Catt, on the other hand, lists the funding issue as one of the central points of

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<sup>32</sup> Article by Carrie Chapman Catt, "The Winning Policy" (1916) *National American Woman Suffrage Association Records*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Box 82, Reel 59. (Hereafter referred to as *NAWSA Records*)



contention. Paul denied most of the charges Catt levied in her 1916 “The Winning Policy” article. In an extensive set of correspondence through intermediaries, Catt and Paul argued over minute details such as what type of stationary the CU used to raise funds and whether or not CU officials cooperated or worked independently with NAWSA officials in various states during 1913.<sup>34</sup> This correspondence suggests that financial and administrative concerns may have been a cover for deeper philosophical and generational issues. While Catt’s 1916 article makes it clear that Paul’s “holding the party in power responsible” seemed politically unsound, an interesting letter from Harriet Stanton Blatch suggests the generational issue.

Blatch was the daughter of the famous nineteenth century women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and, in 1913, head of the New York state-based Women’s Political Union. Also a veteran of the British suffrage campaign, she had assisted Paul and Burns with their preparation for the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. and generally supported their enthusiastic work for the federal amendment. After the tumultuous 1913 NAWSA convention, Blatch wrote to Burns, “I was distressed, but not amazed, to read the news in regard to the action of the National Association, in reference to Miss Paul’s chairmanship . . . I say I was not surprised because again and again I have seen vigorous young women come forward, only to be rapped on the head by the so-called leaders of our movement.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the rift between NAWSA and the CU was at

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<sup>33</sup> Lunardini, 36.

<sup>34</sup> See Dora Lewis to Alice Paul (July 14, 1916) and Paul to Lewis (July 25, 1916) National Woman’s Party Papers, Microfilm Edition, Reel 1. (Hereafter referred to as *NWPP*)

<sup>35</sup> Blatch to Burns (December 22, 1913), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

least in part a turf war between suffrage veterans and younger women with less patience for the long haul of state campaigns.

In the first few months of 1914, representatives of the Congressional Union met with NAWSA leaders in an attempt to keep the groups from developing into rival organizations, but disagreements over strategy prevented any such rapprochement. The Congressional Union, in flagrant violation of NAWSA's non-partisan policy, campaigned against the Democratic candidates in the western states during the midterm elections of 1914 and announced their plans to campaign against Wilson and the national Democratic slate in the elections of 1916. After one final failed attempt at reconciliation in December 1915, the two organizations severed all ties.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Quagmire of the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment**

Paul's replacement as head of NAWSA's Congressional Committee, Ruth Hanna McCormick, further muddled the already cloudy suffrage picture by bringing about the introduction of an additional suffrage-related amendment to the Constitution in March 1914. An experienced suffragist from Illinois, McCormick discerned that gaining suffrage by the state initiative method was much more palatable to the majority of Congressmen than a federal amendment. Working with Senator William Shafroth of Colorado and Representative A. Mitchell Palmer of Pennsylvania, McCormick and her

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<sup>36</sup> Lunardini, 49. See also Becker, 4., and Jacqueline Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life* (New York: The Feminist Press and the City University of New York, 1987), 119-120.

committee tried to meet the tastes of the majority of Congressmen by developing a new suffrage constitutional amendment.<sup>37</sup>

The Shafroth-Palmer Amendment required that if eight percent of voters in any state signed an initiative petition requesting a referendum on woman suffrage, the state then *must* submit the question of suffrage to the voters. This new variation offered relief from two major problems facing suffragists. First, it held the potential to force a vote in states that had so far managed to defeat campaigns for state referenda. Secondly, it could gain the support of Senators who opposed suffrage on the principle of states' rights because it contained no provisions for federal enforcement and the voters of each individual state would still make the decision on suffrage.<sup>38</sup>

Opponents of the new amendment believed the measure was difficult to understand and only prolonged an already difficult process. Even if the bill passed both houses of Congress and was ratified by three-fourths of the states, a battle to win state referenda would still have to be fought in each non-suffrage state. Shaw was flooded with angry letters from NAWSA members all over the country after the new amendment was introduced. She responded with a blanket letter to all NAWSA members that indicated just how directionless NAWSA was in the final years of her presidency. She wrote, "The National Association is not abandoning the old Constitutional amendment. It worked for it all this winter until it was voted down by a majority, which showed there was no hope

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<sup>37</sup> Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 246-247.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Hanna McCormick made the case for the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment at the 1914 NAWSA Convention. See *HWS*, Vol. 5, 412-418.



whatever of passing it . . . While we are pushing the new amendment we are also pushing the old amendment, and it is hoped that the new one will help the old one and it was introduced for that purpose.”<sup>39</sup> She went on to blame the Congressional Union for any confusion over the matter, claiming that the CU was trying to gain support for their organization by giving “the impression that we have forsaken the old amendment, which is absolutely false.”<sup>40</sup>

For the remainder of that year and well into the next, NAWSA simultaneously supported the traditional federal amendment and the Shafroth-Palmer amendment. It was not until the December 1915 NAWSA convention that the latter was officially disavowed, although little work had been done on its behalf for the last half of that year. The confusion within the National’s ranks only fueled the fire of the CU as they headed west to campaign against Democrats in the 1914 mid-term elections. As Burns explained to Blatch, “It seems to me foolish to propose that we should undertake the tremendous labor of getting the Constitution of the United States amended and, at the end of that work, have gained nothing except the right to submit the question to the electors, which, by a little intelligent and concentrated labor, we can do already. The procedure combines all the difficulties of state and national work in one.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The CU and the 1914 Mid-Term Elections**

The CU campaigned against all Democrats, suffrage supporters or not, in Western states during 1914. They urged enfranchised women to withdraw their support from the

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<sup>39</sup> Shaw to Ellen Douglas Hoge (April 11, 1914), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Burns to Blatch (March 12, 1914), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

Democratic Party until it complied with their demands to enfranchise all women through support of a federal amendment. Key to their campaign was the belief that women would behave as single-issue voters. As the election results showed, however, this was a faulty assumption. Democrats maintained control of both the House and the Senate, although their majorities were significantly reduced. Despite CU claims to the contrary, this reduction was not related to suffrage agitation. Most election analysts agreed that the chief cause of Democratic setbacks was the decline of the Progressive Party and the return of many former members to the Republican Party. Setbacks notwithstanding, White House spokesmen released statements claiming victory for the Democratic Party because they had increased their strength in the Midwest and Pacific Coast in a year during which they had enacted unpopular tariff reform.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the most significant contribution made by the CU agitation may have been to contribute to the defeat of several key state suffrage campaigns in 1914.

Seven states voted on woman suffrage in 1914, but only the Montana and Nevada campaigns were successful. At the same time and in the same places that NAWSA State Associations urged voters from all parties to support the suffrage referendum, CU members actively worked against all Democrats and labeled that party an enemy to suffrage. NAWSA members openly blamed the CU for their defeat in North Dakota and Nebraska.<sup>43</sup> The president of the Ohio State Woman Suffrage Association, who generally supported the work of the CU, wrote to Paul three times during the first week of October

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 468. See also *New York Times*, November 5, 1914, "White House Blames Tariff for Loss in House; Says Result is Really an 'Off-Year' Victory."

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, 95.

to indicate the amount of damage being done in her state by CU activity in the West. She provided Paul with direct quotes from the Mayor and Postmaster of Cleveland who had withdrawn their support for suffrage in Ohio because of the CU and warned, "I honestly and truly think that your campaign against the Democratic party in the enfranchised states is hurting the Ohio campaign."<sup>44</sup> Ohio was one of the five state referenda to fail during 1914.

An impartial observer of the woman suffrage movement from 1914-1915 would find the situation greatly confusing. Two different groups that seemed to be working in exact opposite directions represented the movement. The larger of the two groups, NAWSA, was simultaneously supporting the traditional federal suffrage amendment and the cumbersome Shafroth-Palmer bill, while still trying to win victories in a number of state referenda campaigns. Meanwhile, the CU was urging the abandonment of state campaigns, pouring all their energies into the traditional federal amendment, and campaigning against all western Democrats (even those who supported suffrage) in order to "hold the party in power responsible" for pushing the amendment through Congress. During the congressional hearings on suffrage in December 1915, representatives of both organizations insisted on providing separate testimony to the committees. Political leaders from both parties could, and did, play the groups off one another and used the confusion of the movement as an excuse to not take a definitive stand on the issue. This was clearly the case with the President.

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<sup>44</sup> Harriet Taylor Upton to Paul (October 5, 1914), *NWPP*, Reel 1. See also Upton's letters of October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>.



As previously mentioned, Wilson's two major goals during his first term were reducing tariffs and reforming the banking system. The legislative sessions of 1913 were devoted to these causes and, using all the tools of persuasion available to his office, Wilson was able to pull together the support of Western and Southern Democrats to pass both measures.<sup>45</sup> Woman suffrage was an issue that he had mainly been able to avoid during 1913 by claiming that his administration was too busy with New Freedom legislation to give the matter serious consideration. Through the aggressive efforts of NAWSA's Congressional Committee under Paul's leadership, the amendment had been reported out of the committee in the Senate in 1913 for the first time since 1896. It was reported with a favorable majority again in 1914 and was headed to a vote in the full Senate when the Democrats caucused in February. The Senate Democrats published their position that suffrage was an issue to be decided by individual states – a position that Wilson supported.<sup>46</sup> When the vote came in the Senate on March 19, the amendment was defeated by a count of 35 in favor and 34 opposed (11 votes short of the required two-thirds).

Wilson could safely hide behind the party position on a federal amendment for most of 1914, but events of the following year made it clear that his position would have to be slightly amended if he hoped to win the support of Progressives in the 1916 election. As the next chapter details, the fall and winter of 1915 were critical months for both Wilson and the suffrage movement. The President found himself in need of Progressive support heading into the 1916 election and the suffrage movement, still divided over the

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<sup>45</sup> Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom*, 186-197.

<sup>46</sup> Morgan, 79-80.

NAWSA/CU rift and the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment, faced referenda campaigns in four key states – New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Between October and December, the movement experienced a roller-coaster effect. Suffragists lost all four of the state campaigns, but won more votes than many people expected in several of the states. Furthermore, they secured crucial support when Wilson voted in favor of the amendment as a private citizen of the state of New Jersey. Most importantly, NAWSA's path took a decisive turn when it met in convention in December 1915, dropped the Shafroth-Palmer Amendment, and elected Carrie Chapman Catt as the new president.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE 1916 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

#### Wilson's Progressive Bow: The New Jersey Suffrage Amendment

Heading into the election year of 1916, Wilson recognized the need to make a bow toward progressive voters whom he had offended during the previous two years. His opposition to rural credits, refusal to grant the American Federation of Labor immunity from the Sherman Act, approval of racial segregation in federal service, and refusal to support the Palmer Child Labor bill had alienated Progressives of every stripe and from every section of the country.<sup>47</sup> This chapter argues that Wilson's need to win back some of those voters played a major role in his decision to vote in favor of the suffrage referendum in his home state of New Jersey.

The vote in New Jersey became a battleground for pro and anti-suffragists as each side hoped to use the President's decision to their advantage in the public relations war. The White House was flooded with letters from both sides of the debate imploring him to support the cause in their favor. A letter from Caroline Cruvey just a few weeks before the vote typifies the more than 100 letters Wilson received from anti-suffragists in New Jersey alone, not to mention the correspondence from interested parties throughout the country. Cruvey wrote:

As one of the majority, (as I believe), of women opposed to Female Suffrage, I beg you will not cast your vote with its great influence, on the affirmative side of "votes

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<sup>47</sup>Morgan, 80. Rural credits were part of a progressive proposal to ease the burden on small farmers by providing low-interest credit through financial institutions thus enabling farmers to break out of the lock-in mechanisms of the existing private credit system.



for women". I can see no adequate gain coming from the admission of women into the political arena compensating for the added expense which will follow, and for the loss of interest in home and family life which will surely result . . . There are no "rights" to be advanced by our votes, for the laws are in our favor as regards our persons and property. The emotional nature of our sex sadly unfits us for participation in politics and its hot-bed of passions. Won't you, by your vote, leave us a little longer in the quiet of our homes where most of us love to be, with time to rear our children well, and care for our husbands and grown sons with undivided interest?<sup>48</sup>

Despite this compelling appeal and hundreds like it, Wilson announced his decision to vote in favor of the amendment on October 6, 1915.

In a statement issued to the press, he explained the rationale behind his decision demonstrating the tentative nature of his support for women's voting rights. He insisted that he was voting as a private citizen of New Jersey and not as the leader of the Democratic Party. Furthermore, he reiterated his stance on the issue of a federal amendment saying, "I believe that [suffrage] should be settled by the States and not by the National Government and that in no circumstances should it be made a party question, and my view has grown stronger at every turn of the agitation."<sup>49</sup>

The motivation behind Wilson's affirmative vote in New Jersey has been an issue of great debate among historians. Link contends that events in Wilson's personal life contributed to his decision. When Wilson's first wife died in August 1914, he was nearly overcome with grief. Seven months later, however, he met Edith Bolling Galt who was to become his second wife. Link asserts that women voters in the Western states were upset about Wilson's quick courtship with Galt so soon after his wife's death and that

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<sup>48</sup> Caroline A. Cruvey to Woodrow Wilson (October 5, 1915), *PWW*, Box 89, Reel 208.

<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, October 7, 1915.

Wilson's affirmative vote in New Jersey was an attempt to pacify those indignant women voters who would play a significant role in the 1916 election.<sup>50</sup>

Link's analysis of the significance of Wilson's impending marriage on his decision to vote for suffrage in New Jersey is overstated. The memoirs of Wilson's Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, reveal that many senior Democratic leaders were indeed worried about offending women voters in the West if the President married Galt before the 1916 election. Daniels was asked by a number of Democrats to approach the President and warn him of the political liabilities of a hasty remarriage. His negative response to the request is worth quoting in full:

Having been called [to the post of Secretary of the Navy] by President Wilson I did not feel inclined to exchange it for the difficult and, perhaps, dangerous high and exalted position of Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary to the Court of Cupid on a mission in which neither my heart nor my head was enlisted and in the performance of which my official head might suffer decapitation . . . Wilson was not warned. They were married before Christmas and two things followed: (1) Wilson was reelected, proving that political prognosticators are not always right; and (2) they lived happily together and Mrs. Wilson's charm and sound wisdom made her greatly beloved and admired.<sup>51</sup>

While many may take issue with Daniels' characterization of Galt as charming and wise, his account of this episode erodes support for Link's theory that Wilson's advisors were willing to broach the topic of the political ramifications of remarriage with their boss. Daniels' contention that women voters were not put off by the president's remarriage is well supported by both the election results (Wilson swept the West in 1916) and Galt's memoirs of the same time period.

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<sup>50</sup> Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916*, 1-14.

<sup>51</sup> Josephus Daniels, *The Wilson Era: Years of Peace, 1910-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 452-454.

Galt recalled tremendous support from people all over the country after Wilson announced their marriage plans. The couple immediately began to receive congratulatory telegrams from friends and strangers. They received a standing ovation when they were announced to the crowd at a Red Sox-Phillies game the day after their engagement announcement and another ovation the following month when they attended the annual Army-Navy football game. Galt further recalled, "Among the gifts which came at the time our engagement was announced was a large nugget of gold from the people of California with the request that part of it be used for our wedding ring. It was such a charming letter that we decided to accept the gift and the suggestion."<sup>52</sup> Women in California had been granted full suffrage in 1911. The combination of the accounts of Daniels and Galt about the reaction of Americans to Wilson's hasty courtship and remarriage indicate that the President's decision to vote for suffrage in New Jersey was not likely connected to fear of offending women voters in the Western states.

Christine Lunardini and Thomas J. Knock argue that Wilson had to vote for the New Jersey amendment in order to not appear hypocritical. Regardless of his personal feelings, he had supported suffrage as a state issue in his 1912 campaign. To abstain from voting in New Jersey would appear hypocritical and to vote no would have offended progressive elements within the Democratic Party. This argument has merit, but their further explanation that Wilson had "simply been overwhelmed by growing suffrage demands" is unconvincing given the chaos within the suffrage movement, the clear repudiation of the Federal Amendment by the Senate in 1914 and the House in 1915, and

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<sup>52</sup> Edith Bolling Wilson, *My Memoir* (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1938), 81-83.



the fact that New Jersey voters opposed the state referendum by a margin of nearly three to two.<sup>53</sup>

Voting in favor of the New Jersey referendum was the most politically savvy move for Wilson. It was a move that would please suffragists in the East and women voters in the West, as well as progressive elements of the electorate from across the country that had been alienated by some of Wilson's actions in 1914 and 1915. Supporting suffrage in New Jersey would not alienate Southern Democrats because it in no way committed Wilson to support the dreaded federal amendment. In fact, as his statement to the press reveals, he went out of his way to make it clear that his vote in New Jersey only reaffirmed his support of a states' rights approach to politics.

The New Jersey referendum was defeated by a margin of 51,200 out of a total of 317,600 votes cast – a margin of almost 3 to 2.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, Catt was elated upon hearing the announcement that the President would vote in favor of suffrage. From her post as the Chair of the Empire State Suffrage Campaign in New York, Catt immediately sent a telegram to the White House on the day of his announcement saying, "On behalf of a million women in New York State who have declared they want the ballot, please accept my gratitude for your announcement that you will vote for the woman suffrage amendment in New Jersey."<sup>55</sup> Catt hoped that the President's actions in New Jersey

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<sup>53</sup> Christine A. Lunardini and Thomas J. Knock, "Woodrow Wilson and Woman Suffrage: A New Look," *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (1980-1981): 660-661.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, October 21, 1915, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Catt to Wilson (October 7, 1915), *PWW*, Box 89, Reel 208.

would positively influence voters in New York – a hope that was not fulfilled in the 1915 suffrage campaign in the Empire State.

Wilson's vote did not push suffrage to victory in Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, either. Still, it was symbolically important for the movement. NAWSA never failed from that day forward to point out that the President supported suffrage, at least in principle, because of his affirmative vote in New Jersey. The results in Pennsylvania were somewhat encouraging to suffragists. With the exception of Philadelphia, suffrage had won a majority in all the large industrial areas. The margin of defeat was only seven percent, with 80% of the opposition votes coming from Philadelphia. Both New Jersey and Pennsylvania had state constitutions that mandated a five-year waiting period for resubmission of defeated amendments, so near-term hopes were diminished despite the close election returns.<sup>56</sup>

Massachusetts, home of the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, only gained 35.5 percent of the total vote in favor of the amendment. New York, though, showed the most promise for a future near-term victory. Despite losing by nearly 200,000 votes, voters in many industrial areas had begun to support suffrage, and the state's suffrage leaders were confident that they could win the next time around. New York required a two-year wait between amendment votes, but suffrage leaders announced the start of their 1917 campaign on the night of their 1915 defeat.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 263.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

## Turning Point for NAWSA: Catt's Ascension to President

Catt's election as President of NAWSA in December 1915 was actually the second time that she had been elected to that post. It marked another milestone in her life, which had largely been devoted to increasing women's rights since her initial engagement with the suffrage movement in Iowa in 1885. Born in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1859, Catt moved with her family to Charles City, Iowa in 1866. She was one of seven women to enter Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University) in 1877. Following her graduation in 1880, she taught high school in Mason City for three years before being promoted to the position of Superintendent of Schools in 1883.<sup>58</sup>

Following her marriage to Leo Chapman in 1885, Catt resigned her position as school superintendent and served as her husband's co-editor of the Mason City newspaper. Leo Chapman died from typhoid fever in 1886 just a few months after the couple had moved from Iowa to San Francisco. At the age of 27, Catt was widowed, unemployed, and living alone in a new city. She took up free-lance journalism for a few years before returning to Iowa in 1887 and beginning work as a public lecturer. Shortly after her return to her home state, she rejoined the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association, becoming a paid lecturer in 1889.

In a move that surprised many of her suffrage comrades, Carrie married George Catt in 1890. The couple had first met at Iowa State during their undergraduate years and became reacquainted during Carrie's time in San Francisco. George Catt was an engineer

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<sup>58</sup> Biographical information about Catt's early years in Iowa and her initial involvement in the suffrage movement is detailed in Robert Booth Fowler, *Carrie Catt: Feminist Politician* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 3-4., as well as Van Voris, 7-13. See also Mary G. Peck, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Biography* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1944).



who spent a great deal of his time at work sites in Washington state and California. To the immense pleasure of the Iowa suffragists, Carrie's marriage did not end her work for their movement. She and her new husband made an agreement that he would work and earn money to support them and that she would continue with her reform work, even if that meant they would have to spend a great deal of time apart from one another.<sup>59</sup>

In the same year that she remarried, Catt first entered into the limelight of NAWSA by giving a speech at the National Convention. She impressed the leaders of the National, including Susan B. Anthony, who later hand-picked her to lead the successful 1893 state suffrage campaign in Colorado, serve as Chair of the Organization Committee from 1895-1899, and to succeed her as NAWSA's president in 1900. Catt served four one-year terms. Her tenure was marked positively by the formation of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), but negatively by repeated failure to secure any victories in state suffrage campaigns. Frustrated by the lack of progress, increasingly interested in her work with the IWSA, and concerned about George Catt's failing health, Carrie Catt resigned the NAWSA presidency in 1904.<sup>60</sup>

Following George's death in 1905, Catt immersed herself in work with IWSA. Her longtime lieutenant from their early NAWSA days, Mary (Mollie) Garret Hay, came to live with her and join in international suffrage work. For the remainder of Hay's life, she and Catt lived and worked together.<sup>61</sup> From 1905-1913, the bulk of Catt's energy was

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<sup>59</sup> For Catt's account of this agreement, see Van Voris, 20., and Fowler, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Van Voris, 55-59.

<sup>61</sup> Hay died 19 years before Catt, however, when Catt died in 1947 she left instructions that she was to be buried next to her long-time partner. Shortly after Hay's

devoted to work with IWSA. Following a major suffrage victory in Illinois in 1913, however, she agreed to serve as chair of the Empire State Campaign Committee in New York. As explained above, NAWSA leaders hoped to capitalize on the momentum of the Illinois win by gaining victories in several Eastern states in 1915. For the next two years, Catt worked tirelessly on the New York state suffrage campaign. Although unsuccessful in winning the referendum, Catt's popularity and prestige within NAWSA soared as a result of her leadership of the campaign. It was in the wake of the New York defeat that she reluctantly agreed to serve again as NAWSA's president.<sup>62</sup>

Catt faced a daunting task as she accepted the reigns of NAWSA in December 1915. She knew that the organization needed a clear focus and direction that included educating the public and key politicians alike about the differences between the National and the CU. While still at her post as chair of the New York suffrage campaign she was sensitive to the need for distance from the CU. She wrote to Jane Addams in January 1915 expressing her desire to steer clear of any organization that involved the CU because she did not want her name or NAWSA linked with that group. Addams had requested that she attend a conference in Washington, D.C. with several other women's groups to discuss the formation of a peace organization. Initially, Catt agreed to attend – only later discovering that the CU was hosting the conference. She immediately wrote to Addams, reneging on her agreement to attend the conference.

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death, Catt had a monument erected over their burial plot in New Rochelle, New York. The monument reads, "Here lie two, united in friendship for thirty-eight years through constant service to a great cause." See Van Voris, 219.

<sup>62</sup> Fowler, 28.

She explained in the letter that she held no personal animosity toward the CU, but its leaders continued to pursue an anti-Democratic campaign when the suffrage amendment was pending in eleven states and depended for success on Democratic votes. Catt told Addams, “As Chairman of the New York Campaign Committee, I must not allow myself to be placed where I seem to sanction that policy.”<sup>63</sup> Even as a state level representative of NAWSA, Catt recognized the potential damage her association with the CU could have for the National. She carried that level of recognition with her into the NAWSA front office.

The historical record indicates that her fears about public confusion were well founded. Not even the President, a fairly astute and informed political player, was able to match suffrage leaders’ names with the organizations they represented. In July 1916, Catt and Mrs. Frank M. Roessing, chair of NAWSA’s Congressional Committee, requested to meet with Wilson. The President’s personal secretary, Joseph Tumulty, communicated the request to him via a memorandum. In a hand-written note at the bottom of the memo, Wilson asked, “Are these ladies of the ‘Congressional Union’ variety?”<sup>64</sup> Tumulty replied with a note explaining the difference between the two groups, pointing out that Roessing and Catt represented the more “conservative” organization that did not approve of the radical heckling methods of the CU. He also

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<sup>63</sup> Catt to Addams (January 4, 1915), Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 4, Reel 3. (Hereafter referred to as *CLOC*). Addams eventually persuaded Catt to attend the conference by promising that her presence would not compromise her position within the suffrage movement. See William L. O’Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America* (New York: The New York Times Book Company, 1971), 174-175.

<sup>64</sup> Tumulty to Wilson (July 27, 1916), PWW, Box 89, Reel 209.



informed the President that Catt was scheduled to address the Democratic State Convention in West Virginia the following week, which helped to distinguish her from the anti-Democratic practices of the rival organization.<sup>65</sup>

After reading Tumulty's explanation, Wilson, satisfied that he was not meeting with the enemy, wrote on the memorandum, "Okay Tuesday at 2 pm – office."<sup>66</sup> It is significant to note Wilson's confusion in mid-1916. Clearly he was aware of the CU's agitation against his party and was reluctant to grant leaders of that organization an audience. If his ability to distinguish between the two groups were not changed, he might have continued to associate the federal amendment only with the CU. Over the next several months, Catt initiated a public relations campaign that left no doubt in the President's mind that NAWSA, too, supported the federal amendment but would pursue it in such a manner that did not threaten him or the Democratic Party.

### **CU Activity in 1916**

In the first few months of 1916, the CU solidified its strategy for making suffrage an issue in the fall election. In February, Blatch expressed optimism to Paul that the threat of women voters abandoning the Democrats in the West was forcing the Democratic leadership to be more responsive to the issue. She explained that she had written to the heads of both political parties in all the Western states requesting a hearing with them on behalf of the CU. To Paul she confided, "I think it is interesting that the Democratic Committees are replying so much more readily. Evidently, the Congressional Union has

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<sup>65</sup> Tumulty to Wilson (undated), PWW, Box 89, Reel 209.

<sup>66</sup> Tumulty to Wilson (July 27, 1916), PWW, Box 89, Reel 209.

filled them with some fear.”<sup>67</sup> Fueled by this sort of optimism, Paul called a meeting of the CU National Advisory Council in early April to focus efforts in the West and make the threat of women voters even more credible.

In a memo written at the meeting’s conclusion, the chair of the Advisory Council summarized the proceedings. She explained that the council had decided to form a National Woman’s Party (NWP) whose basis it would be to place suffrage above allegiance to any other political party. Enfranchised women of the West would be urged to join the NWP and use their voting power to press for immediate passage of the federal amendment. The council also decided to hold a formal founding convention for the new party in Chicago in June 1916 to coincide with both the Republican and Progressive Party National Conventions.<sup>68</sup> Paul sent letters to CU leaders in each of the Western states reiterating the new strategy and urging them to attend the convention in Chicago. She used the letters to amplify her strategy, reasoning, “We hope that if the political leaders see the women voters are forming an independent party they will regard the suffrage question as a more serious one than they have considered it in the past.”<sup>69</sup>

Blatch gave the keynote speech at the Chicago convention. She demanded that the enfranchised women of the nation take a stand against the Democrats unless they passed the federal amendment:

I know that we have never had a greater instance of the control over legislation by the Party in power than at the present time. I know that the Party in power today, the dominant Party - my Party – controls the White House, controls the Senate, and

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<sup>67</sup> Blatch to Paul (February 23, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>68</sup> Memo by Elizabeth Selden Rogers (April 9, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Cuthbert (April 14, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

controls the House of Representatives; and you know what that means. They control every committee in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. They determine legislation. Now you and I are voters in the Suffrage states, controlling ninety-one of the electoral votes, controlling one-fourth of the United States Senate and one-sixth of the House of Representatives. Are we going to sleep? Are we going to sentimentalize? Are we going to run after this Party or that Party? Or are we going to stand for the biggest principle that any group of enfranchised people have ever been called upon to stand for?<sup>70</sup>

Blatch went on to claim that the Woman's Party would deliver 500,000 votes against the Democratic Party in the 1916 election unless it pledged its support to the federal amendment.

In the days that followed, the Progressives and Republicans held their national conventions. Suffrage was an issue of debate for both parties. In the end, the rapidly shrinking and increasingly politically insignificant Progressive Party endorsed the federal amendment in their platform while the Republicans took a more moderate stance, urging the extension of suffrage but recognizing the right of each state to settle the question for itself. In his acceptance of the Republican Presidential nomination in August, Charles Evan Hughes went a step further offering his personal endorsement of the federal suffrage amendment. Nevertheless, in early June it appeared that the Progressives favored a federal amendment while Republicans only supported a states' rights version of suffrage. The attention of all suffragists then turned to the Democratic National Convention in St. Louis, which was held the following week.

When the Democrats adopted a plank similar to the Republicans, endorsing suffrage only as an issue to be decided by the states, the NWP earnestly began campaigning against all Democrats in the western states. An overwhelming amount of evidence points

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<sup>70</sup> Harriot Stanton Blatch and Alma Lutz, *Challenging Years: The Memoirs of Harriot Stanton Blatch* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), 262.



to the conclusion that this was a strategy based on faulty assumptions, which did nothing to further the cause of suffrage. The major assumptions that failed the Woman's Party were that women would behave as single-issue voters willing to place suffrage for women in other parts of the country above any other concerns, that they would view Wilson as anti-suffrage because he was the head of the Democratic party and a federal amendment had not been passed during his first term, and that a majority of people would understand their strategy of campaigning against all Democrats even if they supported suffrage. In reality, women voters were concerned with a wide range of issues in the 1916 election. Wilson's affirmative vote in New Jersey and willingness at the St. Louis Convention to support the suffrage plank, limited though it was, convinced many voters that he was actually an advocate for the cause. A tiny minority abandoned their traditional party allegiance to join the Woman's Party, while a vast majority, suffragists and anti-suffragists alike, were convinced that the campaign against all Democrats damaged the suffrage movement.

One of the best illustrations of women's refusal to behave as single-issue voters comes from a set of correspondence between Alva Belmont and a number of Western women voters. Belmont served as the Chairman of the NWP's Campaign Fund Committee during the 1916 election year. In September, she sent a letter to 20,000 women voters asking them to donate money in an attempt to raise \$500,000 for the upcoming campaign. Her letter explained that the NWP needed additional funds because, "Mr. Wilson and his party have steadfastly opposed the woman suffrage amendment in Congress. The Woman's Party is campaigning, therefore, in the states where women

vote, against Mr. Wilson and the Democratic Congressional candidates.”<sup>71</sup> She received hundreds of responses, overwhelming negative. A snapshot of those responses illustrates the posture of women in the West.

A woman in Kansas responded that knowing that the Republican candidate supported a federal suffrage amendment was not enough to cause her to vote for him. She wrote, “The women of Kansas have the suffrage and it is valuable to them only as it is used to gain for themselves or humanity the things most desired. We are anxious to know [Hughes’] attitude on a number of questions; vis: Child Labor law, Universal compulsory military service, taxes on income, inheritances and munitions.”<sup>72</sup> She went on to express scepticism that Hughes’ interest in suffrage extended beyond his near-term desire to be elected. She questioned Belmont, “Has all this enthusiasm for woman suffrage been awakened merely to get votes – women’s votes – to help make himself President . . . His election would in no way advance the suffrage cause and on the other hand defeat much very necessary legislation.”<sup>73</sup>

A woman who described herself as an “earnest advocate of women’s suffrage” sent a similar response to Belmont. She was even more specific about Wilson’s appeal over Hughes. In refusing to donate any funds to the NWP, she explained that Wilson “had done so much for our country. A man who has stood by the wage earning people. I think the woman’s suffrage party in campaigning against Mr. Wilson is all wrong. And you

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<sup>71</sup> Belmont to Fellow-Member (September 13, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>72</sup> Mrs. J.E. Drennan to Belmont (September 27, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

will find in the end that you have gained nothing.”<sup>74</sup> She further added her belief that Wilson’s support of the states’ rights stance of the Democratic Party did not mean that he personally did not support a federal amendment. This letter indicates two important points. First, that the writer believed Wilson’s support of wage-earning people was more significant than his party’s failure to secure a federal suffrage amendment – further proof that the belief in suffrage as an issue women would weigh more heavily than all others was false. Secondly, that Wilson had successfully used his party’s adherence to states’ rights as a protective barrier for his personal views. Despite the fact that he had never wavered from the party’s position that suffrage was an issue to be decided by the states, many women were hopeful that because he was in favor of the principle of suffrage, he was not personally opposed to a federal amendment.

A respondent from Oregon blasted Belmont and the NWP for their strategy, echoing the belief that Hughes only supported the federal amendment in order to gain votes and that he knew the bill would first have to gain the support of two-thirds of Congress before he would ever have to deal with it. She pointed out that the suffrage amendment had lingered in Congress for twenty years under Republican administrations and that the amendment had come further under Wilson than any of his Republican predecessors. In a sharp rebuke of the entire NWP strategy, she wrote,

In this state the majority of the women are standing for Wilson and the suffrage cause has long many of its best workers because of the foolishness of the congressional union [sic] and the woman’s party in trying to throw the Oregon women’s vote to Hughes. You are definitely injuring the cause of suffrage among Oregon women. We will never again work together as we did before the split which you and your followers have forced upon us. You are causing the same split in other states and therefore you have given suffrage the greatest setback that it could be

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<sup>74</sup> Nannie T. Daniel to Belmont (September 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.



given. It will take at least ten years of hard work by the saner women to overcome the blow you have given suffrage in trying to force your candidate for president upon us.”<sup>75</sup>

This woman clearly represented the views of those who not only continued to support Wilson but also were distraught over the damage being caused by the NWP's misplaced assault on the Democratic Party.

In an almost identical letter, Mrs. W.F. LeSueur from Arizona contradicted all three of the assumptions on which the NWP's strategy was based. She wrote, “President Wilson can and will get suffrage for women quicker, than would his opponent. In my opinion he has accomplished more in the last three and half years than has the Republicans in twenty years [sic]. I do not think that Mr. Hughes would be equal to the big questions now confronting, and that will confront our nation.”<sup>76</sup> LeSueur's letter demonstrates that the “big questions” facing the United States weighed more heavily on the minds of many voters than did suffrage. Additionally, her response indicates the belief held by many that Wilson was actually an advocate for suffrage and to campaign against him and the other Democrats would only hurt the movement.

The replies to Belmont's request for financial aid are not the only sources of evidence that an overwhelming majority of women rejected the NWP's strategy, although the actual words of western women are perhaps the strongest testimony. Subsequent correspondence suggests that Belmont's September 1916 plea for donations to the cause went largely unanswered. Less than four months after her call for funds, she was forced

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<sup>75</sup> Respondent from Multnomah, Oregon to Belmont (September 30, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>76</sup> LeSueur to Belmont (September 25, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

to send another letter to previous contributors asking for financial assistance. She wrote, “Our treasury is empty and our work is seriously crippled for lack of funds.”<sup>77</sup> The women she had solicited in September apparently spoke with both their pens *and* their checkbooks. The NWP’s membership numbers are even more compelling. In early 1917, the number of women from suffrage states that had joined the Woman’s Party was only 14,277 – a far cry from the 500,000 voters that Blatch had promised in June 1916.<sup>78</sup>

Part of the problem for the NWP resided with the fact that Paul’s strategy, though defensible if given proper scrutiny and full hearing, seemed counterintuitive to most voters who quickly dismissed it without a full hearing. Paul’s explanation of the strategy to one of the leaders of the Woman’s Party in Colorado, illustrates this point. She wrote, “Our interest, of course, is in securing the passage of the amendment and not in securing the election of Hughes, but it is vital to the success of the amendment, I think, that we secure the defeat of Wilson and the election of Hughes.”<sup>79</sup> Paul had a hard time convincing people that she was not interested in electing Hughes – only defeating Wilson; with only a subtle difference in purpose, the propositions were one and the same.

Additionally, Paul’s method of measuring the success of the movement differed from that of most people who believed supporters should be won over rather than coerced. She went on in the same letter to the supporter in Colorado to justify her methods:

It seems to us that we gain more publicity by our campaign of opposition than we could by one of support. In Colorado two years ago . . . we succeeded in making

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<sup>77</sup> Belmont to Anderson (January 26, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>78</sup> Report of the National Woman’s Party Membership Committee (March 3, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>79</sup> Paul to Cuthbert (August 23, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

such an impression upon the campaign and obtaining so much publicity for our fight against [U.S. Senator] Thomas that even now, two years later, he is still making speeches in the United States Senate denouncing our campaign against him. Had [NWP members] simply gone in as speakers supporting Mr. Thomas' opponent, they could not possibly, I believe, have created the furor in the state in which they did by their policy of attacking Thomas and pointing out the reasons for not having him returned to Washington.<sup>80</sup>

The problem with Paul's assessment is that Thomas was a pro-suffrage Senator who had worked to secure suffrage for women in Colorado and voted in favor of the federal amendment repeatedly in the U.S. Senate. Paul considered the NWP's campaign against Thomas a success, despite the fact that they had been working against a long-time suffrage supporter and that he was re-elected despite their efforts to defeat him. This type of "success" was not attractive to the vast majority of voters.

If anything, the NWP's 1916 campaign strategy only made the suffrage battle more difficult. After Wilson was re-elected and the Democrats maintained control of the House and Senate, the Republicans owed the NWP nothing since the women's vote had not carried them to victory. Furthermore, many Democratic suffrage supporters backed away from the cause because they were made to feel as if it conflicted with their party loyalty. Most importantly, much-needed Democratic support in Congress had been alienated by the NWP's campaigns in the West. NWP member Maud Younger reported in January 1917 that Representative Hayden of Arizona, a long-time suffrage supporter in the House, had rejected her request to delay a vote on premature vote on suffrage that would surely end in defeat for the amendment. Hayden had told her that if the NWP was in favor of delaying the vote, than he was in favor of rushing it, even if it meant defeat for the amendment. He explained that he was in favor of anything the NWP opposed

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



because they had fought against him in his last campaign.<sup>81</sup> If this was the type of response the NWP generated from Congressmen who supported suffrage, they stood little chance of winning the votes of those who opposed the amendment.

### NAWSA Activity in 1916

NAWSA activities in 1916 reflected the beliefs of its leader, Catt, just as much as the CU's activities reflected the leadership of Alice Paul. The two major tenets of Catt's strategy in 1916 were remaining steadfast to the policy of nonpartisanship and distinguishing NAWSA from the CU. In the first years of her presidency, Catt found herself not only defending the policy of non-partisanship to the public, but also fending off partisan overtures from close friends and members of her own organization. So what was it about NAWSA's traditional policy that drove Catt to defend it with such vehemence? She answered that question in numerous articles, letters, and interviews by claiming that holding the party in power responsible simply would not work to secure suffrage for all women. It was not a personal issue for the always-pragmatic Catt. Rather, she simply did not believe it was an approach that could succeed. With constitutional rules requiring a vote of two-thirds of the national legislature in order to send an amendment to the states for ratification, the amendment necessarily required bipartisan support. State ratification, as well, required bipartisan support. Therefore, suffragists could not afford to draw the hostility of either party.

Despite what seemed blatantly obvious to Catt as the correct path for NAWSA, women whom she respected and worked with occasionally challenged the traditional

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<sup>81</sup> Interview by Maud Younger (January 13, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

policy. In July 1916, Catt received a letter from the President of Bryn Mawr College, M. Cary Thomas. Thomas, an active suffragist and a long-time national leader of the battle for greater educational opportunities for women, wrote only a few weeks after both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions had adopted a suffrage plank for their party platforms, but during which neither endorsed the federal amendment. Thomas suggested that Catt meet with the Republican presidential candidate, Charles Evan Hughes, and urge him to publicly support the federal amendment and promise to try and get Congress to pass it if he were elected. NAWSA should offer their pledge of support to Hughes in the upcoming election unless the Democrats passed a federal amendment in the final session of the 1916 Congress.

Thomas went on to suggest that Catt then meet with President Wilson and explain her plan to support Hughes in the upcoming election unless the Democrats pushed the federal amendment through in the next two months. She felt that the fear of losing the election in the fall would force Wilson to rally his party and push the amendment through Congress. Even if it did not, all the nation's suffragists (CU, NAWSA, Progressives) would be united in their support of Hughes and the Republican ticket, and, following their election to office, "the federal amendment will at last be passed especially as the Republican congressmen who have been campaigned for by women will feel a sense of obligation to them such as they have never yet felt."<sup>82</sup> Thomas' letter had genuine appeal.

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas to Catt (July 4, 1916), *CLOC*, Box 29, Reel 19. Interestingly, this letter contradicts the account of Thomas' relationship to the suffrage movement offered in Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). Horowitz asserts that Thomas' interest and participation ended after the death of her companion, Mary Garrett, in April 1915. According to Horowitz, Thomas' last suffrage activity was her attendance of the December 1915 NAWSA

She predicted a reunification of suffrage forces under one banner supporting Hughes and success for the federal amendment. Catt, however, was not swayed.

Even after Hughes was convinced by the CU to come out in support of national suffrage in his July 15, 1916 nomination acceptance speech, Catt refused to give him NAWSA's endorsement. She continued to speak of suffrage as inevitable because of its bipartisan appeal. In an article written after Hughes' announcement in July but before the November elections, she reiterated her non-partisan approach, assuring voters that no national party opposed suffrage. "The two dominant parties in their suffrage planks recommended that the question should be settled by the States, but neither declared against the Federal method. Mr. Charles E. Hughes, the Republican candidate, has openly declared for the Federal Amendment. Mr. Wilson, at this time, does not yet endorse it, but many democrats in Congress have not only spoken and voted for it, but are earnest advocates of it."<sup>83</sup> Wilson's later actions in his second term indicated that by refusing to endorse Hughes over Wilson, Catt endeared herself and NAWSA to the President.

Thomas was not the only one urging Catt to reconsider her non-partisan path. At the NAWSA Atlantic City Convention in September 1916, one of the delegates made a motion that NAWSA support only those candidates who had spoken out in favor of the federal amendment – namely Hughes. The motion attracted many of the women who were frustrated with the slow rate of progress and saw a partisan approach leading to quicker victory. Catt spoke in opposition to the proposal and was supported by her

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National Convention (p. 435). This letter from July 1916 suggests that Thomas remained interested and at least marginally engaged with the suffrage movement beyond that point.

<sup>83</sup> Catt, "Women and the Presidency," *CLOC*, Box 13, Reel 9.



predecessor, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw. After two hours of debate, the motion was defeated, and the delegates passed a subsequent resolution to initiate a vigorous publicity campaign to make clear the association had indeed decided to maintain their non-partisan policy.<sup>84</sup>

Despite challenges from within and outside the organization, Catt navigated NAWSA through the tempting waters of partisan politics. President Wilson's reaction to her dedication to this principle can be measured by his increasing responsiveness to her requests for support. After his successful re-election in the fall of 1916 by a close margin of 276 electoral votes against 255 for Hughes, Catt was able to repeatedly call on the President for support in state campaigns as well as the federal amendment campaign – a dynamic to be explored in-depth in the following chapter.

Catt's other main 1916 goal – distinguishing NAWSA from the CU – was a focal point of the emergency NAWSA National Convention she called in Atlantic City, New Jersey in September 1916. At the convention, she revealed her "Winning Plan" for securing the federal amendment. In her Presidential address, she informed the audience that the suffrage movement was in a state of crisis. Arguing the futility of securing suffrage for all women of the country by the state method and the necessity of the federal amendment, she exhorted NAWSA to continue to campaign for state suffrage in states likely to accept an amendment, but not waste efforts in states with an obstinate electorate or constitutional constructions that made securing amendments almost impossible. In all

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<sup>84</sup> *HWS*, Vol. 5, 489-490.

cases, the organization would work to influence legislators to vote in favor of the federal amendment. Repeatedly, she stressed organizational efficiency and unity of effort.<sup>85</sup>

The beauty of Catt's Winning Plan is two-fold. First, it recognized the necessity of winning more state referenda in order to eventually secure a federal amendment. Catt was well aware that Congressmen were more apt to vote for a federal amendment if they came from suffrage states. To abandon the campaign in states with large Congressional delegations such as New York would not only erase the years of work that had been poured into those campaigns, but also spell defeat for the federal amendment. Additionally, keeping state suffrage organizations alive would provide the framework necessary for the eventual ratification campaign that would have to be fought once the federal amendment passed Congress.

Shortly after issuing her call to NAWSA members to attend the Atlantic City convention, Catt invited the President to address the assemblage at their closing session. The President replied in a personal letter to Catt that he would accept the invitation barring any schedule conflicts, adding a sentence at the end of the letter, "I sincerely wish to come."<sup>86</sup> The evidence suggests that Catt saw Wilson's presence in Atlantic City as a way to accomplish two goals. First, she hoped his appearance before the convention could be used in the public relations campaign. Even if he did not come out in support of the federal amendment, his mere presence at the national convention of an organization with that end as its stated goal could be interpreted to show his decreasing resistance to

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<sup>85</sup> Carrie Chapman Catt, "The Crisis," Speech to 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of NAWSA (September, 1916), *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 59.

<sup>86</sup> Wilson to Catt (August 10, 1916), *PWW*, Reel 146.

such a measure. Secondly, she hoped his exposure to a theater full of dedicated, orderly suffragists would help facilitate his complete conversion to the ranks of the believers – in other words, an advocate for the federal amendment.

As expected, the President did not speak explicitly in favor of the federal amendment during his address. Neither did he, though, insist that suffrage be attained through the state method. In a marked departure from his past statements, he professed his support for the principle of suffrage without clearly stating his preference for the issue to be settled by the states. Wilson said, “We feel the tide [of the suffrage movement]; we rejoice in the strength of it, and we shall not quarrel in the long run as to the method of it.”<sup>87</sup> Wilson’s shift in position was not an unconscious action or a slip of the tongue. Later correspondence indicates that he intended his remarks at Atlantic City to represent his openness to a federal amendment heading into the 1916 election. Responding to a request in October from the Writers Equal Suffrage League for a statement of his position, Wilson directed his secretary to provide the league with a copy of his Atlantic City speech.<sup>88</sup>

Reminiscing several years later, Catt expressed her belief that it was that night in Atlantic City when Wilson “yielded to the momentum of the movement which was rapidly reaching its climax in his administration. [The convention was] the very hour when conversion to the principle became with him conversion to an obligation to join the

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<sup>87</sup> “Speech of President Woodrow Wilson at the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association” (September 8, 1916), *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 59.

<sup>88</sup> Anna Johnson to Wilson (October 24, 1916), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986. (Hereafter referred to as *LWWP*)



campaign.”<sup>89</sup> When Wilson looked out over the audience in Atlantic City, he saw exactly what Catt wanted him to see – orderly women that cheered him before and after his speech and who contrasted sharply with the image he held of CU agitators. This positive image, she believed, catalyzed Wilson’s conversion to the NAWSA cause of a federal suffrage amendment.

Just two months later, Catt decided to increase the intensity of the public relations campaign aimed at distinguishing between NAWSA and the CU. NAWSA press secretary Rose Young wrote to her in November 1916 requesting that she write some articles to be used in conjunction with personality stories, cartoons, and news items in order to “get the National American so dominantly featured in relation to the federal amendment that there won’t be any room on the map for the C.U. to get a grip on popular imagination again.”<sup>90</sup> Catt, concurring with Young’s proposal, composed a letter that Young released to the press. Young indicated on the press release that Catt had written the letter in answer to three questions: 1) Why the Congressional Union came into existence 2) Why it advanced a policy contrary to that of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and 3) What the differences are between the two groups.

Catt effectively used the letter to answer those questions. She explained how the mixing of the Congressional Committee responsibilities with the Congressional Union and the violations of NAWSA principles had led to Paul’s decision to part ways with the National. Furthermore, she provided a detailed explanation of the CU policies of holding the party in power responsible and abandoning any state suffrage campaigns in favor of

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<sup>89</sup> Catt and Shuler, 260.

<sup>90</sup> Rose Young to Catt (November 14, 1915), *CLOC*, Box 36, Reel 24.

focusing on the federal amendment. In contrast, she explained, "The National looks to both parties for support of the Federal Amendment and to intensive organization and vigorous activity within the states, to secure the ratification of the Federal Amendment; and the National would also secure the vote by suffrage referenda whenever possible."<sup>91</sup> Stressing NAWSA's non-partisan approach, focus on the federal amendment, and continued work at the state level, Catt clearly explained the differences between the two organizations. She concluded the letter with her personal assessment of the ineffectiveness of the CU policy of holding the party in power responsible.

By the end of 1916, NAWSA had succeeded in getting both major parties to include suffrage planks in their national platforms. Like their counterparts in the NWP, they would have much preferred a plank endorsing the federal amendment, but in that they were committed to work at both the state and national level, they chose to see the states' rights planks as a positive step. Through an aggressive publicity campaign, NAWSA leaders had educated a large number of Americans about the difference between NAWSA and the CU. More importantly, they had educated the President. Wilson was convinced enough of NAWSA's goodwill to speak at its national convention. He did not endorse a federal amendment, but he certainly was vague enough for most listeners (and readers who saw the reports of his speech in newspapers across the country) to interpret his words to mean that he did not oppose the amendment. His mere presence at the convention was a public relations plume in NAWSA's hat that they used repeatedly during the final three years of the campaign.

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<sup>91</sup> Catt, "The Winning Policy," p. 3. *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 59.

## Wilson's Reaction to Suffrage Pressure in 1916

One of the most important things to note when examining Wilson's approach to the 1916 election is that the issue of suffrage was, at best, a minor concern. The issues that dominated the campaign were America's involvement in the war in Europe and where the two major political parties would fall on a broad range of progressive issues. Wilson's campaign strategy evolved tremendously during the course of 1916, but by the time the election arrived in November, his platform can be summarized best as peace, prosperity, and progressivism.

On the international stage, Wilson charted a bold course for the country. Recognizing that most Americans were opposed to U.S. military intervention in the war and deeply divided over the causes of the fighting in Europe, he developed a plan for a mediated peace. First outlined in a speech on May 27, Wilson set forth his vision to end U.S. isolation by taking the lead in a negotiated peace agreement among the warring nations of Europe and then committing the nation to participation in a postwar association of nations that would maintain peace in the future. His plan offended isolationists but pleased a majority of Americans who enthusiastically supported the campaign slogan: "He kept us out of war."<sup>92</sup>

Domestically, Wilson needed to regain ground with Progressives he had offended during the legislative sessions of 1914-15. To do so, he gave his personal support to pending child labor and federal worker's compensation legislation during the summer session of 1916. These bills faced tremendous opposition from Southern Democrats for

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<sup>92</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 17-25.



two reasons. First, many of the Southern senators received key support from the textile and manufacturing industries that viewed both pieces of legislation as threats to their autonomy and ability to turn profit. Secondly, the legislation increased the regulatory power of the federal government – always a move that states’ rights supporters found threatening.<sup>93</sup>

Members of Wilson’s cabinet insisted that passing this legislation was key for Wilson’s re-election, specifically mentioning the fact that he would win over women voters who resoundingly supported both bills. Wilson was able to convince the reluctant members of his own party that Democrats would lose control of both the White House and Congress unless the two bills were passed. When he had finally won over key senators from the Southern states, the bills were passed in August 1916.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, Congress passed a Democrat-sponsored revenue bill in September that included the nation’s first progressive income tax – a measure that held wide appeal to farmers, workers, and members of the lower middle classes.<sup>95</sup> By passing the child labor, federal workmen’s compensation, and progressive income tax bills, the Democrats strengthened themselves against Republican attacks and won over critical Progressive voters in the last few months before the election.

Needless to say, conservative Republicans and the business interests that supported them abhorred both Wilson’s willingness to end U.S. isolation by engaging in world politics and the rash of progressive legislation he supported in 1916. Wilson bred

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 56-58.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 64.

enemies among many Catholics, as well. A majority of Catholics were of German and Irish descent, and they tended to believe, despite his arguments to the contrary, that Wilson was pro-British.<sup>96</sup> Those who strongly opposed Wilson were primarily clustered in the Eastern part of the country, while the South was solidly Democrat. The West and mid-West, then, would be the determining factor in the 1916 election.

Wilson gambled that the themes of progressivism and peace would win Western voters. His gamble paid off. In one of the closest elections in U.S. history, Wilson defeated Hughes by a margin of 274 to 255 electoral votes. With the exception of Oregon, Wilson won the electoral votes of every state in the West. The headline in the *New York Times* read, "Votes of Women and Bull Moose Elected Wilson; Western Progressives Turned to Him Almost En Masse, but Not Those of the East; Peace a Powerful Issue."<sup>97</sup> The article specifically derided the efforts of the NWP. Under the banner, "Woman's Party Failed Utterly," it read,

The Woman's Party terrorized the two conventions and frightened them with the prospect of 'four million votes,' which it held over them as a club. Mr. Hughes was led to believe that it had the votes and made his celebrated declaration for the Anthony Federal amendment. The Woman's Party tried to make its threats good and marshal the Western women for Hughes, but the dispatches received by *The Times* showed that it failed utterly. It did have an influence, but the wrong kind. These dispatches are unanimous in recording the antagonism excited by the activities of the Woman's Party, and also by the special train of Hughes women which went campaigning from New York into the West. From many states come reports that both these things added greatly to Wilson's vote; from no State comes a report that it subtracted from that vote. The women, where they broke away from party lines or where they voted contrary to their men folks, voted for Wilson. They did so generally on the argument that 'He kept us out of war.' In some States, such as

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>97</sup> *New York Times*, November 12, 1916.

Washington, the influential argument with them was not this one, but the legislative record which appealed to them as progressives.<sup>98</sup>

Correspondence between Wilson and his closest advisors in the months before the election indicate that they should not have been at all surprised by women's behavior at the polls in November. With a much firmer grasp of the relative importance of suffrage as an election issue than that held by the NWP, they had counted on such behavior all along.

Wilson was instrumental in the development of the Democratic platform that was eventually adopted at the St. Louis convention in June. The suffrage plank endorsing the principle of suffrage but only recommending that the individual states extend the franchise to women had his full support. Although his speech in Atlantic City just two months later expressed openness to any method of obtaining suffrage, his sense of political reality made only this plank possible. During the debate over that particular plank, the anti-suffrage Governor Ferguson of Texas made a last-minute attempt to have it removed completely. His motion gained the support of a number of Southerners, which propelled Catt to telegraph the President and ask him to clarify his position. He promptly replied that the plank received his approval and that he wished to recommend to the states that they extend suffrage to women upon the same terms as to men.<sup>99</sup>

The only suffrage plank that had a chance of being adopted in the Democratic platform was the one that Wilson endorsed. As Ferguson's efforts revealed, even that

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> For Catt's telegram to Wilson, see Catt to Wilson (June 16, 1916), *PWW*, Box 89, Reel 209. For Wilson's reply, see Wilson to Catt (June 19, 1916), *NAWSA Records*, Box 9, Reel 7.



was unsatisfactory to a vocal minority present at the convention. After the newspapers ran reports of Catt's call to Wilson for clarification of his position, a woman in California wrote the president, "Who is Carrie Chapman Catt that she can call the President of the United States to order. Don't fear those four million woman votes in the Suffrage states. They will vote the democratic ticket."<sup>100</sup> The message to not worry about Western women abandoning the Democrats over the issue of suffrage was one that Wilson heard repeatedly over the next four and a half months.

In early August, Daniels relayed a message to Wilson from Representative Keating from Colorado. Reacting to Hughes' declaration in support of the federal amendment just a few days earlier, Keating opined that Wilson should not change his states' rights position. Voters would recognize that he was only changing his position to try and win votes, and, in fact, a shift at this juncture would only have the opposite effect. Despite the fact that Keating was an advocate for the federal amendment and desired Wilson's support, he recommended that the President adhere to the party platform in order to win the election.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, Vice-President Thomas Marshall urged the President to not worry about the suffrage issue in the wake of Hughes' announcement. Wilson wrote back to Marshall, thanking him for the advice and adding, "I don't mean to worry about the woman suffrage question. I have too much confidence in the good sense and public spirit of the women of the country to believe that they will act as unjustly as some of their

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<sup>100</sup> Annie Dock to Wilson, (June 19, 1916), *PWW*, Box 89, Reel 209.

<sup>101</sup> Daniels to Wilson (August 2, 1916), *LWWP*.

number are predicting.”<sup>102</sup> Wilson’s most trusted advisor, Colonel Edward House, wrote, “I am glad you declined to come out for the Susan B. Anthony amendment. It would not surprise me if Hughes’ action would cost him the election if nothing else did. In the long run your position is better for the suffrage cause.”<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, all of this advice came from members of Wilson’s advisory circle who were self-professed suffragists. They recognized, though, that suffrage would not be the deciding issue of the election and that a Democratic victory was more important for accomplishing a wide range of Wilsonian initiatives.

Wilson articulated his position on suffrage during a speech to the Jane Jefferson Club of Colorado on August 7. He proclaimed his faith that women voters would study the broad questions facing America and select the candidate that could best handle *all* of those questions. Additionally, he criticized Hughes for supporting a federal amendment when the Republican Party had been unwilling to go that far at their Chicago convention. He was adamant that he would not disregard the official declaration of his party, but would do everything within his power to press for suffrage in state referenda. Finally, in a sign of things to come, he complimented the sacrifices and war service of women in Europe as proof that women contribute service to their nations just as men do and therefore deserve equal citizenship.<sup>104</sup>

Political insiders from the West continued to reassure Wilson that his suffrage position would not harm him throughout the late summer and early fall of 1916. One of

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<sup>102</sup> Wilson to Marshall (August 3, 1916), *LWWP*.

<sup>103</sup> House to Wilson (August 6, 1916), *LWWP*.

<sup>104</sup> Wilson to the Jane Jefferson Club of Colorado (June 7, 1916), *LWWP*.

Wilson's advisors passed along a letter in late August from Mary Field, "a highly intelligent woman who knows more about California than anyone I know." Field refuted the Woman's Party claim that they would be able to sway the woman's vote in the West. She was confident that women would not vote on a sex basis. Rather, most people in the West were grateful that Wilson had kept the nation out of war. She continued, "I feel that Wilson's policy has done for women far more than the endorsement of the franchise amendment. Far reaching and less obvious are the results of his federal reserve banking system, his rural credits, his tariff regulations, his industrial relations commission – all of which have direct, though subtle [*sic*], effect on the lives of women, especially the workers."<sup>105</sup> Field's letter, much like the majority of responses to Belmont's request for financial support of NWP activities, indicates that women were much more complex political creatures than the NWP made them out to be.

Wilson even received reassurances from NAWSA leaders that he need not worry about the Woman's Party activity in the West. Anna Howard Shaw, now retired but still an honorary member of the NAWSA executive council, told Wilson's campaign manager that the only thing the NWP would accomplish during the campaign would be harm to the suffrage cause. She stressed that NAWSA was the largest suffrage group and the one to whom the President should pay attention.<sup>106</sup> Less than two weeks later, Wilson found himself being wildly applauded by the assembled members of NAWSA at the Atlantic City Convention. His closest advisors, political activists from the West, and the nation's largest group of suffragists all expressed their support for his stance on suffrage. With

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<sup>105</sup> Field to Howe (August 21, 1916), *LWWP*.

<sup>106</sup> Hapgood to Wilson (August 28, 1916) *LWWP*.



good reason, he ignored the NWP and ran a successful campaign based on his accomplishments in the arenas of foreign policy and progressivism.

As 1916 drew to a close, Wilson found himself still in control of the White House and his party still in control of Congress. He had been narrowly elected, mostly on the basis of his ability to keep the nation out of war. Events on the world stage, though, would force him to radically alter America's position on the war in 1917. The crisis in Wilson's Administration would force Catt to also make a radical change in NAWSA's policy by convincing the organization to simultaneously work in support of the war and suffrage. Paul, too, would drastically alter the strategy of the NWP in 1917. Rather than taking a stand on the war in Europe, Paul initiated a war at the White House gates.

## CHAPTER 4

### 1917: THE YEAR OF DECISIONS

#### The White House Pickets

Beginning on January 10, 1917, the NWP sent daily delegations of “silent pickets” to stand outside the White House gates holding banners which read “Mr. President, What Will You Do For Woman Suffrage?” and “How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?” For nearly six months, the police and the President effectively ignored the activists. As the United States entered the war and patriotic fever swept across the nation, though, many began to view the picketers as disloyal.

In June, when the NWP banners began to accuse Wilson of hypocrisy by fighting a war for democracy abroad but denying true democracy at home several picketers were arrested and imprisoned on charges of obstructing sidewalk traffic. During their imprisonment, they staged hunger strikes in protest against the illegality of their arrests and the bad conditions in the prison. The authorities responded by conducting brutal forced feedings. The picketing, arrests, hunger strikes, and forced feedings that went on from June through November provided the NWP with intense press coverage. Although much of it was critical of their actions, NWP leaders believed it helped the cause by keeping the suffrage issue on the front pages of the nation’s newspapers.<sup>107</sup>

Much historiographical debate has centered on the role of the pickets in Wilson’s eventual decision to advocate for the federal amendment. Flexner argues that NWP-generated histories in the years immediately following ratification of the nineteenth

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<sup>107</sup> Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 267-278.

amendment greatly exaggerated the impact of the pickets. She concedes that suffrage received increased publicity as a result of the NWP activity, but believes that more of the general public and members of Congress were alienated rather than won over to the cause. Wilson, she argues, was much more influenced by other events in 1917, particularly his close association with NAWSA and the increasing role women played in the public after the U.S. entered the war.<sup>108</sup> Morgan mostly agrees with Flexner, although he allows that an indirect contribution of the NWP was to galvanize NAWSA to greater action.<sup>109</sup>

In their close analysis of Wilson's relationship to suffrage in a 1981 article, Lunardini and Knock wade tentatively into the debate by arguing that the NWP's action pushed Wilson towards NAWSA, but they take no further stand than that. Responding to that argument, Sara Hunter Graham maintains that Wilson came out in support of the federal amendment in December 1917 as a direct result of the NWP picketing campaigns. The pickets, she claims, succeeded in pointing out the inconsistency of his war aims about spreading democracy and his administration's indifference to democracy at home. Graham contends that the pickets posed such a threat to Wilson that he entered into a conspiracy with NAWSA, major newspaper editors, and the director of his Committee of Public Information in order to suppress coverage of NWP activities.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 279-280.

<sup>109</sup> Morgan, 186.

<sup>110</sup> Sara Hunter Graham, "Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and the Woman Suffrage Movement," *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (Winter 1983-1984): 665-66. Graham provides an abbreviated version of this same argument in Sara Hunter Graham, *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 106-110.



Perhaps inspired by Graham's rebuttal, Lunardini more boldly argues in a later work that the NWP campaign did succeed in making the point to the President that there would be consequences to pay if he did not accede to their demands. Those consequences included losses for Democrats in future elections and loss of positive public opinion as a result of his administration's harsh treatment of the pickets.<sup>111</sup>

A thorough examination of the relevant correspondence and newspaper coverage for the most intense period of picketing (January-November 1917) reveals that the pickets were little more than an annoyance to the President. Most of the publicity so coveted by Paul and her followers was negative, and little publicity appeared outside of New York and Washington, D.C. Rather than being pushed to take more decisive action on the federal amendment, Wilson found his ability to work for the suffrage cause hampered by the activities of the NWP. The President regretted the presence of the pickets, not because of the bad publicity it brought to his administration but because of the bad publicity it brought to the greater suffrage campaign.<sup>112</sup> From the beginning, but increasingly so after the war began, Wilson, NAWSA leaders, most of the general public,

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<sup>111</sup> See Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights* and Linda G. Ford, *Iron-Jawed Angels: The Suffrage Militancy of the National Woman's Party, 1912-1920* (New York: University Press of America, 1991).

<sup>112</sup> Examples of "bad publicity" include the following: The *New York Times* reported on January 19, 1917 that Representative Emerson, a Republican Congressman from Ohio, made a statement in Congress that he supported suffrage by both the state method and the federal amendment, but that he opposed the tactics of the pickets. Representative Emerson stressed to his colleagues that the pickets did not represent most suffragists. See *New York Times*, January 19, 1917. The NYT carried a letter to the editor the following day, again from a suffrage supporter, who called the policy of picketing the president "idiotic." See *New York Times*, January 20, 1917.

and even a significant number of NWP loyalists thought the picketing campaign was ineffective and, in fact, harmful to the cause.

So, what exactly was the picketing strategy, why did it appear, and how did Wilson respond to it as it evolved over the course of the year? The NWP Executive Council released a statement to the press on January 9, 1917 that they had met with the President and that he had declined to support the federal amendment, citing his allegiance to the Democratic Party's platform. At an "indignation meeting" held that afternoon, the Council had resolved to initiate a new campaign against the President. Their press release explained that they intended to post women pickets at the White House grounds in order to make it impossible for the President to enter or leave the White House without encountering a picket pleading for the cause of suffrage.<sup>113</sup>

Wilson's initial reaction was to view the pickets as a sort of amusing distraction. He would tip his hat to them as he came and went from the White House. On the first extremely cold day that the pickets stood at their post, he instructed his chief usher to invite the women into the lower corridor of the White House in order to escape the wind. When they declined, he ordered the usher to deliver hot bricks to the gate for the women to use for some warmth.<sup>114</sup> He joked with members of his Cabinet that he actually liked the pickets because they brought him prominence.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *New York Times*, January 10, 1917.

<sup>114</sup> Diary entry of Thomas W. Brahany, White House Chief of Staff (March 4, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>115</sup> E. David Cronon, ed. *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 154.

An article in the *New York Times* reveals that Wilson was not the only one amused by the pickets. The Gridiron Club of Washington held a dinner for the President and several members of his Cabinet in February. A group of actors performed a series of comedy acts in which they parodied recent political events. The article reported that the actors introduced a character named "Hazel Jones" as one of the silent suffrage sentinels at the White House. "Hazel" was then made the target of several gibes in a minstrel skit, demonstrating that most members of the audience viewed the pickets as a group of crazy women. The newspaper related one specific joke, "Do you know Hazel had an awful accident? . . . One of those big fat squirrels in the White House grounds bit off her ear. The President said it wasn't the squirrel's fault, and the President was right . . . Suppose you were a hungry squirrel with an appetite for nuts, and for eight hours in the rain and snow and sleet somebody stood in front of your house."<sup>116</sup> The pickets were mocked again when actors portraying Ellis Island officials quizzed an immigrant about his knowledge of America. When they asked the immigrant what President Woodrow Wilson spent most of his time doing, the man responded, "Dodging women with yellow flags [the color of NWP banners]."<sup>117</sup>

The President was forced to give the pickets more careful consideration beginning in late June. On June 20, a group of delegates from the new Russian Republic that had just enfranchised its women arrived at the White House to meet with Wilson. They were greeted by an NWP banner that read, "President Wilson and Envoy Root are deceiving Russia. They say 'We are a democracy. Help us win the war so that democracies may

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<sup>116</sup> *New York Times*, February 18, 1917, "Bluejackets Visit Gridiron Dinner."

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



survive.' We women of America tell you that America is not a democracy. Twenty million women are denied the right to vote."<sup>118</sup> The banner went on to say that Wilson was the chief opponent of suffrage in America. It urged the Russian delegation to tell Wilson he must enfranchise women before claiming Russia as an ally. The inflammatory banner drew a crowd of opponents who ripped the banner to shreds. A similar scene occurred on the following day when NWP members arrived at their posts with an identical banner. On that day, the crowd not only tore apart the banner, but some also physically attacked the pickets and had to be restrained by the police.<sup>119</sup>

The incident surrounding the "Russian banner" received considerable press coverage. Over the next two weeks, a pattern developed in which the pickets would arrive at their posts, be attacked by unruly crowds, and then be arrested. Initially, the police claimed that the arrests were for their own protection, although later the pickets were charged with obstructing sidewalk traffic. Wilson did not make any public statements during this time, but privately he confided his disappointment in the type of publicity being drawn to suffrage. He wrote to his daughter on the day of the second crowd attack, "I dare say you heard of the fracas raised by the representatives of the Woman's Party here at the gates of the White House. They certainly seem bent upon making their cause as obnoxious as possible."<sup>120</sup>

On July 14, sixteen women were arrested on the charges of causing unlawful assembly before the White House. In court three days later, the women received fines,

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<sup>118</sup> Irwin, 215.

<sup>119</sup> *New York Times*, June 22, 1917.

<sup>120</sup> Wilson to Mrs. Francis B. Sayre (June 22, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol 7.

but refused to pay, so were sentenced to varying periods of confinement at Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. According to the Commissioner of the District of Columbia, Louis Brownlow, the President was not told beforehand that the arrests were going to be made, and he was indignant when he found out afterwards. He immediately pardoned the women and ordered Brownlow to his office. Brownlow recalled that Wilson clearly disapproved of the arrests because it only indulged the women in their desire to be considered martyrs. The President ordered Brownlow to refrain from further arrests without his approval.<sup>121</sup>

When fighting between the pickets and the crowds continued over the next few days, Brownlow reported to the President that he needed to make more arrests. Wilson agreed that Brownlow should take minimum measures necessary to maintain peace on the streets. Brownlow recalled, “Thereafter we pursued a policy of attempting to keep the peace, not arresting the pickets until they, or at least some of them, had taken positive action.”<sup>122</sup> Brownlow’s memory of the events, written more than 40 years later, was undoubtedly affected by his desire to appear concerned for the safety of the pickets rather than guilty of committing serious breaches of their first amendment rights.

I will not make the argument that Wilson was unconcerned with publicity, but I will dispute Graham’s contention that he engaged in a conspiracy to suppress the facts involved in the picketing arrests and imprisonment. Wilson’s secretary, Tumulty, informed him on the day after he had pardoned the sixteen pickets that several editors of

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<sup>121</sup> Diary Entry (July 14, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 7. See also Louis Brownlow, *A Passion for Anonymity: The Autobiography of Louis Brownlow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 77-79.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

prominent newspapers had inquired how the White House would like them to cover the events. T.W. Noyes, editor of the *Washington Evening Star*, told Tumulty that he favored having a bare statement of fact, but no publicity in any paper. Arthur Brisbane, editor of the *Washington Times* suggested that the Administration avoid the appearance of any "conspiracy of silence." Wilson instructed Tumulty, "My own opinion is that a compromise course ought to be adopted . . . My own suggestion would be that nothing that [the pickets] do should be featured with headlines or put on the front page but that a bare colorless chronicle of what they do should be all that was printed. That constitutes part of the news, but it need not be made interesting reading."<sup>123</sup>

Graham contends, "At NAWSA's instigation, President Wilson and the wartime censorship agency abridged the freedom of the press" in order to suppress news about NWP activities.<sup>124</sup> She finds evidence for this conspiracy in Wilson's instructions to Tumulty (as noted above) and in a report from NAWSA lobbyists that the CPI Director, George Creel, arranged appointments for them with major news services. The purpose of the appointments was for the NAWSA lobbyists to emphasize their desire for newspaper coverage to make a clear distinction between NAWSA and the NWP and to emphasize the former's abhorrence of the picketing. Creel's office also issued an official bulletin to all newspapers, post offices, government officials, and public agencies on July 3, 1917, in which similar points were made.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Wilson to Tumulty (July 20, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol 7.

<sup>124</sup> Graham, *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy*, 109.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*



The President clearly preferred that the pickets not receive the type of publicity that they were seeking, but Graham's own review of prominent newspapers reveals that the next major set of arrests in August received front page coverage.<sup>126</sup> If Wilson attempted to suppress news coverage, and there really is no evidence beyond the correspondence outlined above that he did any such thing, the attempt failed. Furthermore, his alleged suppression was clearly not much of a priority since there is no evidence that Wilson or Creel took punitive action against any of the major newspapers that continued to give front-page coverage to the pickets.

When viewed in comparison to the administration's suppression campaign against anarchists, I.W.W.'s, and Socialists, the plan to ask newspapers to provide "colorless" coverage of the pickets appears relatively benign.<sup>127</sup> For example, the postmaster general denied second-class mailing privileges to leftist publications such as the *Milwaukee Leader*, the *Appeal to Reason*, and the *Masses*, resulting in the virtual shut-down of those publications. Additionally, Socialist leader Eugene Debs was sentenced to ten years in prison for speaking out against American participation in the war.<sup>128</sup> Given that most of

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<sup>126</sup> Graham reviewed coverage of the arrests and riots of 14-18 August 1917 and found front page stories in the *Evening Star* (Washington), *Washington Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *New York World*, *New York Tribune*, *New York Herald*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. See Graham, "Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and the Woman Suffrage Movement," : 672.

<sup>127</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Wilson Administration's campaign against political extremists, see H.C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917-1918* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957).

<sup>128</sup> Thomas J. Knock, "Wilson's Battle for the League: Progressive Internationalists Confront the Forces of Reaction," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 69.

the articles about arrests were critical of the NWP, anyway, Wilson had even less motivation to try and limit the exposure. There is no doubt that NAWSA leaders worked closely with the administration, including the CPI, to distance themselves and the cause of suffrage from the militants. However, the fact that NAWSA and Wilson were in agreement on the damage to the cause being inflicted by the NWP does not equate to a conspiracy to “abridge the freedom of the press.”

The argument that Wilson resorted to arrests to try and silence the pickets who were arousing public opinion against him is even less convincing when one sees the number of letters that Wilson received criticizing him for being overly lenient with the pickets. A woman in Missouri wrote to him in late July demanding that he put a stop to the “un-American” picketing of the White House. In August, a man who had witnessed the fighting between pickets and crowd members and the subsequent arrests, defended the actions of the crowd, saying, “An indignant public should be allowed to deal with such banners according to the dictates of their patriotism without police interference.”<sup>129</sup> The actions of the crowd, of course, also led Wilson to believe that the opinion of the pickets was a tiny minority. He did receive advice and petitions from those who supported the pickets, some of whom were prominent citizens, but there is no evidence that any of these appeals caused Wilson to alter his suffrage stance.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> See Dee Richardson to Wilson (July 24, 1917) and Henry Noble Hall to Wilson (August 15, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>130</sup> For letters supporting the pickets, see Charles August Lindbergh to Wilson (August 27, 1917), *LWWP*. See also the report of J.A.H. Hopkins, National Progressive Committeeman, on his visit with Wilson regarding the pickets in *New York Times*, August 13, 1917, “Quote’s Wilson’s Views; Hopkins Tell of Interview Regarding Suffrage Pickets.” See also the resignation letter of the Collector of the Port of New



When he received letters from people concerned about the conditions in which the jailed suffragists were kept at the Occoquan Workhouse, he directed his staff to immediately investigate the charges and take any such action as needed to ensure there was no basis for future charges.<sup>131</sup> In late November, the 31 suffragists currently in jail appeared before a District Judge who ruled that they had been illegally committed to Occoquan Workhouse and were entitled to liberation on bail pending an appeal. After their release, they did not picket again until the summer of 1918.<sup>132</sup>

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York, Dudley Field Malone printed in *New York Times*, September 8, 1917 and Wilson to Malone (September 12, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol 7.

<sup>131</sup> See Wilson to Tumulty (October 23, 1917) and (November 16, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol 7. See also William Gwynn Gardiner to Wilson (November 9, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>132</sup> In her article, Graham repeats the story told in Irwin, *The Story of the National Woman's Party*, 261., that a reporter from the *New York Post*, David Lawrence, was sent by Wilson to meet with Paul in prison. Lawrence allegedly offered a deal to Paul: Wilson would guarantee that the suffrage amendment would pass by the end of 1919 if she would agree to end the picketing. Graham says that Paul's answer is unknown, but speculates that she agreed based on the following evidence: The pickets' sentences were overturned the following week and they were released from jail. The NWP then refrained from any further picketing and Wilson advocated passage of the federal amendment to the House in January 1918. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that indicates Irwin's version of events is simply incorrect. The story published by David Lawrence in *The Evening Post* makes no mention of the alleged deal. See *The Evening Post*, November 27, 1917, "For and Against Suffrage Pickets." Lawrence denied at the time that he was an emissary from the White House. According to Flexner, he refuted Irwin's story again in a letter to Flexner prior to her first publication of *Century of Struggle*. See Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 377, footnote 19. Additionally, the *New York Times* reported on November 9 – a week before Lawrence's visit to Paul – that the NWP planned to stop picketing the White House. During an NWP meeting on November 8 in New York, volunteers were invited to participate in the final picket of the White House on that following Saturday. According to the article, "Miss Doris Stevens said after the meeting that this would undoubtedly be the last time that the White House would be picketed." *New York Times*, November 9, 1917, "Talk of Dropping Capital Pickets." Finally, Wilson's decision to support the federal amendment was made weeks before Lawrence's visit to the District Jail. See Catt's report of her meeting with Wilson in *New York Times*, November 10, 1917.



To the greatest extent possible, Wilson ignored the pickets during 1917. When the publicity surrounding their arrests made it impossible for him to ignore them, he did his utmost to minimize the publicity they received. Undoubtedly, this was partially an attempt to keep bad light from falling on his Administration. More importantly, though, he sincerely believed the pickets were causing harm to the suffrage cause. His growing interest in the federal amendment was not a result of the coercive actions of the NWP, but rather the result of its increasing political value as more and more state suffrage campaigns were won, the U.S. engaged in a war to spread democracy, and Democrats began to prepare for the 1918 mid-term elections.

NAWSA, unlike the President, could not ignore the pickets. From the start, NAWSA leaders denounced the silent sentinels of the NWP – continuing the campaign Catt had started in 1916 to distinguish NAWSA from the CU. Shaw wrote to a close friend of Wilson's in March 1917 expressing her deep regret at the actions of the Woman's Party and reiterating her continued support for Wilson. After condemning the pickets, she added, "I fully agree with you that Mr. Wilson intended just what he said at our National Convention at Atlantic City and what is more he has lived up to his promise. He has done more for suffrage during the month of February than all of the Presidents who have even been in the White House."<sup>133</sup> Shaw's friend passed along the letter to Wilson, emphasizing her belief that the majority of suffragists opposed the pickets.

In response to the wave of publicity after the July arrests, Catt issued an "Open Letter to the Public" in which she stressed the complete separation of NAWSA from the NWP. Pointing out that the NWP was a minority organization, she claimed that the

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<sup>133</sup> Shaw to Warren (March 13, 1917), *LWWP*.

National represented 98% of the organized suffragists in the United States and was officially on record as absolutely opposed to the picketing tactics. She urged the press and public alike to disregard the tactics of the NWP and to grant women suffrage in spite of the distasteful actions of a small minority.<sup>134</sup> She insisted that readers understand her organization was the true voice of the suffrage movement in America. In describing the organization, she boasted, "With its membership of two millions [*sic*] of women representative of all the states, it is the essential agent to be reckoned with; that its work has always been constructive, law-abiding and non-partisan."<sup>135</sup> Catt spoke of the NWP as a dramatic foil for the National, urging the public to make a clear distinction between the two groups.

Catt also made sure the President understood that she did not support the pickets. Prior to his decision to pardon the pickets after the July arrests, she had scheduled a conference with the President to discuss the negative impact the pickets might have on upcoming legislative action. After he granted the pardon, the NAWSA Executive Secretary wrote to Wilson's chief of staff that Catt thought the meeting would be unnecessary and that it could wait "to a later date when the war measure and the Congress will bear less heavily upon him . . . His serene and tactful handling of the recent 'picket crisis' cleared the air for a time, at least, and makes the conference unnecessary, we hope until the close of this Congress."<sup>136</sup> While emphasizing that her organization

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<sup>134</sup> Catt, "An Open Letter to the Public" (July 13, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 60.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Gardener to Brahany (July 26, 1917), *LWWP*.

disapproved of the pickets, Catt made sure to recognize the other issues facing the President. This diplomatic and considerate approach was effective in winning the support of the President and his staff.

As the crucial New York state suffrage campaign neared its climax in the fall of 1917, the NAWSA affiliate in New York passed a resolution protesting against men who said they planned to vote against the amendment because of the picketing in Washington, D.C. They denounced the tactics of the NWP and asked the men of New York not to punish them for the acts of a few who were misled into militancy.<sup>137</sup> After New Yorkers passed the suffrage amendment in November, Catt and other members of the NAWSA Executive Council requested a meeting with Wilson to thank him for his assistance in New York and solicit his support for the federal amendment. In the memo requesting the meeting, Gardener informed the President that the NWP was planning a large demonstration against him on November 10 and that it would help squelch NWP publicity if Wilson met with NAWSA members prior to that.<sup>138</sup>

Wilson not only met with the group, but also came closer than ever to fully and publicly endorsing the federal amendment. Catt told the *New York Times* after the meeting that the President had agreed to try and push the federal amendment through the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress (opening in January 1918). She explained that the President had promised to do everything within his power to help the cause.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *New York Times*, October 2, 1917.

<sup>138</sup> Memorandum for the President from the White House Staff (November 6, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* See also *New York Times*, November 10, 1917.



After Catt's meeting with Wilson, his director of the Committee for Public Information, George Creel, sent him a memo stating that the NWP wanted to have an audience with him in order to urge the federal amendment. Creel recommended that Wilson decline to meet with them, saying, "May I advise against such an audience and if you agree with me will you suggest form of refusal. Mrs. Catt and Dr. Shaw speak for equal suffrage in the nation and the Congressional Union is without standing and deserves no recognition."<sup>140</sup> Creel's letter indicates that Catt's campaign to distinguish NAWSA as the "organization to be reckoned with" fully succeeded.

NWP leaders, though, also believed they had led a victorious campaign in 1917. Paul spent a period of time in a sanatorium in Baltimore during the summer of 1917 recuperating from exhaustion. Burns filled in as the acting chair of the NWP. Expressing her confidence in the NWP strategy to a supporter in Rhode Island in late July, she declared, "We have been passing through a very trying time, but I believe great good has been accomplished . . . We expect to go on picketing during the coming week. There is great indignation that so many arrests have been made which now apparently can be proved false."<sup>141</sup> Despite the public outcry against the pickets, Burns was convinced that a significant number of people were more indignant of their arrests. This was a belief shared by most NWP leaders. Writing to her comrades who were in jail, NWP member Beulah Amidon encouraged:

The big world is watching---and learning---and admiring, and pretty soon the job you're helping at will be done. Can you imagine how it will be when that amendment actually passes? Sometimes, when I am too tired to think, I just take a

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<sup>140</sup> Creel to Wilson (November 9, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>141</sup> Burns to Mrs. Richard Wainwright (July 23, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

long breath and try to dream of a whole nation politically free---and then there is nothing too hard to do to make the dream come true. We had wonderful stories in the NY, Washington, Phila., and Boston papers this morning, and every batch of clippings that comes in is bigger and friendlier.<sup>142</sup>

Amidon's words were surely encouraging to her comrades in jail. Undoubtedly, she believed what she was telling them. But her perception that people were "admiring" the pickets and that the press coverage was friendly was simply wishful thinking.

Upon her return to the NWP ranks in late September, Paul, too, voiced her belief that the picket strategy was effective. In an argument foreshadowing Graham's article more than sixty years later, Paul wrote, "The vigor with which the administration is seeking to crush the picketing indicates, it seems to me, the effectiveness of this form of agitation."<sup>143</sup> Again, Paul's method of measuring success seems skewed. As with her campaign against the pro-suffrage Senator Thomas of Colorado in 1914, she was convinced that garnering the hatred of those whose assistance she sought was good for the cause. The responsiveness of the White House and Congress to NAWSA, who employed the exact opposite approach, demonstrates just how wrong Paul's philosophy was.

Enough of the leaders, though. What did the rank and file of the Woman's Party (small though they were) across the country think of their organization's new direction in 1917? Some were supportive when the picketing first started and before the war began. A woman in Philadelphia wrote in February, "Don't let people persuade you to withdraw the 'pickets' from the White House. They are something far more than a spectacle. If

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<sup>142</sup> Amidon to Picket-Prisoners (August 23, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>143</sup> Paul to Miss Mary B. Dixon (September 26, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

war should be declared and our country should need our energies . . . it will be time enough then to call in the pickets.”<sup>144</sup> Two sisters in New York who pledged \$500 to the NWP in July because they were so inspired by the brave pickets expressed a similar sentiment. When they actually sent their check in August, they qualified their support, “We do not feel that the banners which display protest such as Kaiser Wilson are at all worthy of the cause and we fear may discredit it even among those most sympathetic. We hope that our contribution will not be used for this part of the work but rather for the educational propaganda.”<sup>145</sup>

Perhaps the oddest letter of support came from Mary E. McCumber, the head of the North Dakota NAWSA affiliate. McCumber, apparently a closet militant, wrote to Paul to tell her how much she admired her willingness to “fight right on the firing line.” She added that there were “thousands of women scattered over the country who are watching your achievements with pride and gratitude.”<sup>146</sup> We can probably assume with relative confidence that Paul derived more than a little satisfaction in receiving a letter of support written on NAWSA stationary.

The bulk of the mail from NWP members, though, was strongly opposed to the picketing campaign.<sup>147</sup> Many of those who had not been opposed in January and

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<sup>144</sup> Mary V. to Paul (February 8, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>145</sup> Irene and Alice Lewishon to NWP (July 20, 1917) and Irene Lewishon to Paul (August 18, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>146</sup> McCumber to Paul (June 25, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>147</sup> This statement is based on the existing letters in the NWP papers. Letters of opposition to the picket strategy outnumber letters of support by a margin of nearly three to one. The question remains as to whether those who supported the strategy were as



February, became so when the U.S. entered the war in March. Many were driven completely away from the NWP by its actions with regard to the Russian delegation in June. Two letters in January came from members canceling their pledges because they thought the picketing was both unwise and ridiculous.<sup>148</sup> The tenor of the letters Paul received grew much more grave after the incident with the Russian delegation.

In a very analytical note that struck right at the heart of Paul's belief that there was no such thing as bad publicity, a woman in New Jersey reflected:

Because I believe in the federal amendment and because I believe the war should not stop the fight for suffrage, I belong to the Woman's Party; and because I have had confidence in the women in Washington I have said many times to myself that they know best and the rest of us must stand behind them. But today's paper shakes my confidence, so untrue and misleading does that [Russian] banner seem to be. Publicity is certainly gained, but as a great cost.<sup>149</sup>

This letter conveys the torn feelings of many NWP members who wanted to continue to work for the federal amendment but were uncomfortable with the militant course Paul charted for their organization.

When Paul sent out a mass mailing requesting funds in late June, many of the recipients took the opportunity in their replies to voice their displeasure with the

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motivated to write to the NWP leadership and voice their opinions as those who opposed the strategy. The majority of all correspondence from rank and file members of the NWP back to the headquarters deals with donations. Respondents are usually answering a call to send in money that they had previously pledged or that members of the NWP Executive Council had solicited them for. Given that as the basis of the correspondence, it seems that supporters and opponents of the picketing strategy would have the same motivation to write to the NWP headquarters. If the motivation to write is, indeed, equal, than the raw ratio of 3:1 accurately portrays strong opposition to the picketing strategy within the NWP.

<sup>148</sup> Mary P. Smith to CU (January 11, 1917) and Perle Shale Kingsbury to Maud Younger (January 25, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>149</sup> Mary Everett to Paul (June 21, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

picketing (and to decline to send any money). The Chair of NAWSA's Massachusetts state association wrote that she was convinced that the work of the NWP was delaying rather than helping the federal amendment. In her state, she reported, the tactics of picketing and heckling the President repelled both men and women.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, a woman in Illinois who confessed that she subscribed to the NWP newspaper, *The Suffragist*, refused to send money saying, "I do not believe that Mr. Wilson is our greatest enemy, though I have been impatient at his attitude, nor do I think that we gain by holding a party as a party responsible."<sup>151</sup>

From the far side of the country came a major blow to the NWP leadership in early July. Elizabeth Kent, a member of the NWP Executive Committee, and an extremely active campaigner in California, tendered her resignation on July 9. She telegraphed Paul, "Have greatest respect for your judgment but feel that present methods are not my methods and therefore I cannot honestly remain on board."<sup>152</sup> Kent had been supportive of the initial picketing strategy, but the Russian banner had been too much for her to handle. Many less prominent members of the organization echoed her sentiments.<sup>153</sup>

During the fall of 1917, a number of letters from women not located in the urban-industrial center of New York or the political hub in Washington, D.C. warned that the NWP was losing the publicity war in most other parts of the country. An NWP member in Mississippi reported, "I do 'my bit' in your defense whenever I can get in a word.

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<sup>150</sup> Grace Johnson to Paul (July 2, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>151</sup> Colby to Paul (July 8, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>152</sup> Kent to Paul (July 9, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>153</sup> See Celia Raymond to Burns (August 16, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

Through much garbled and prejudiced news reports the sentiment, and emphatically among suffrage enthusiasts, is violently against you.”<sup>154</sup> A Tennessee woman complained that the papers in her area refused to print the NWP publicity bulletins and instead published articles critical of the pickets. The Woman’s Party, she lamented, was losing almost all of its members in Tennessee. From Georgia came a report that the *Atlanta Constitution* refused to publish anything about the pickets as an interview or as an article of news.<sup>155</sup>

Publicity was stymied in other ways, too. A representative of the Bar Association, upon receiving circulars and tickets concerning a mass meeting by the NWP to describe their prison experiences, wrote back to the NWP Headquarters that he had received the materials too late to announce it at the meeting of the Bar Association, but would not have announced it even if he had received them earlier. He explained, “I am thoroughly in favor of Woman’s Suffrage but have no toleration whatever for the conduct of the Pickets which has disgraced this city for some months past.”<sup>156</sup>

Beulah Amidon’s inspiring letter to her comrades in jail failed to take these types of sentiments into account. The women who braved freezing cold weather in the winter and steaming temperatures in the summer, angry crowds and indifferent police, dirty prison cells and forced feedings, exhibited tremendous courage and dedication to their cause. The violations of their civil liberties is a black mark on the history of the United States,

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<sup>154</sup> Mary Houston to Paul (September 1, 1917), NWPP, Reel 2.

<sup>155</sup> Memo to Paul from the Tennessee Branch of the CU (September 3, 1917) and Memo to Gertrude Fendel (December 9, 1917), NWPP, Reel 2.

<sup>156</sup> Easby-Smith to Emory (December 5, 1917), NWPP, Reel 2.



and especially on all those who supported the cause of suffrage but stood by as the pickets were arrested for exercising their right to free speech. Neither their bravery nor the injustices they suffered, though, changes the fact that their actions were harmful to the greater suffrage cause. Specifically aimed at the President, their actions only made the positive work he did for the suffrage cause in 1917 even more difficult at a time when his difficulties were legion.

### **1917's Main Event: War**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the primary reason for Wilson's re-election was the support he received from people who believed he had kept the nation out of the war in Europe. His bold plan for a mediated peace had appealed to Americans deeply divided over the cause of the war and fearful of ending America's neutrality. In the month after his narrow election victory, he constructed a plan for a peace conference. As a first step toward the realization of that vision, he sent a memo to both the Allies and the Central Powers asking for a clear statement of their war aims. Their responses in early January demonstrated just how difficult a mediated peace would be, for their visions of a just post-war settlement were vastly different. Nonetheless, Wilson felt comfortable in giving his "peace without victory" speech to Congress on January 22, 1917.

Unbeknownst to him at that time, the German leadership had already decided to resume their unrestricted submarine warfare in an attempt to speed the end of the war. This action was a direct violation of the Sussex Pledge the Germans had given Wilson in May 1916. In that accord, the German government had agreed to refrain from attacking merchant vessels and liners without warning. The German ambassador informed the

President of the submarine warfare plan on January 31, and Wilson – true to the promise he had made at the time of the Sussex Pledge – broke off diplomatic relations with Germany on February 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Wilson's cabinet urged him to request an armed shipping bill from Congress so that U.S. merchant ships could defend themselves against attack. Wilson was reluctant to do so until he learned of the German plan to bring Mexico into a war against the U.S. After the famous "Zimmerman Telegram" containing the German message to the Mexican leadership came to light for Wilson on February 24, he asked the Congress to arm merchantmen on the following day. Illustrating the limits to executive influence, the bill passed the House but failed in the Senate where staunch neutralists debated it so long that the Congress expired on March 4 without a vote.

On March 12, a German submarine sank an unarmed American merchant ship – the first time Germany violated the Sussex Pledge in deed, rather than word. That same day saw the start of the Russian Revolution, widely welcomed in America which had been troubled by the presence of the authoritarian Tsarist regime's presence among the Allied Powers. Wilson recognized the new Russian government on March 22.

The President called an emergency session of the new Congress in early April. He gave his war message to a joint session and uttered the famous phrase, "The world must be safe for democracy." Angered by the Zimmerman Telegram and the sinking of U.S. merchant ships, the Senate adopted a statement of war against Germany on April 4 by a vote of 82-6 and the House adopted it two days later by a vote of 373-50. Congress also adopted a joint resolution to restrict their debate during that session of Congress to "war measures" - issues that directly affected America's ability to prosecute the war.

American troops began arriving in Paris in June. Much of Wilson's time over the summer was spent negotiating the terms of American Army units' participation in the war with the Allies. Wilson and his commander, General John J. Pershing, felt strongly that American troops should fight as a united unit and not be used as individual fillers for gaps in the Allied armies. Wilson and Pershing's views prevailed, but the negotiations with the allies were tense and time-consuming.

The second Russian Revolution in November ended Russia's involvement in the war and made its eventual outcome very unpredictable. In January 1918, Wilson delivered his famous "Fourteen Points" speech to Congress. The exuberance with which it was initially received was quickly overshadowed when the Germans initiated a major offensive in the spring of 1918 that was marginally successful. They were on the move again in the Marne offensive of July only to be badly defeated, mostly by the fresh U.S. troops. The Allies began a counterattack in July that succeeded in pushing Germany back toward her borders over the course of the next few months. The Central Powers began to crumble in October and, finally, the Germans capitulated and signed the armistice on November 11, 1918.<sup>157</sup>

It was against this backdrop of world-changing events that Catt developed and executed the "Winning Plan" she had outlined in Atlantic City. Recognizing that Congress would be distracted by the war, she made state campaigns the main arena for NAWSA activity in 1917. As Morgan argues, Catt was content to fight a holding action in Congress while increasing the eventual number of supportive Congressmen by creating

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<sup>157</sup> This outline of U.S. participation in World War I is taken from David A. Shannon, *Twentieth Century America: The United States since the 1890s*, Second ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1969), 159-172.



more suffrage states. She also recognized that participation in the war effort could be used to demonstrate the full capacity of women and further justify their demands for equal suffrage.<sup>158</sup>

For the majority of her public life, Catt worked simultaneously towards broadening women's rights and achieving world peace. Before the First World War, she was active in the Woman's Peace Party. After the war and the passage of the federal suffrage amendment, she founded the Committee on the Cause and Cure of War, an organization to which she devoted herself until the end of her life in 1947. Her decision, then, to support American involvement in World War I may at first seem contradictory. Certainly many of her comrades from the peace movement believed it was and harshly criticized her decision.<sup>159</sup>

What those comrades-turned-critics failed to grasp was Catt's political pragmatism. She articulated time and again in letters, articles, and speeches her conscientious objection to war of any sort, but also her realization that American

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<sup>158</sup> Morgan, 118.

<sup>159</sup> Catt's successful campaign to convince NAWSA to support the war was extremely controversial and led to the defection of several prominent members. NAWSA's National Publicity Director, Elinor Byrns, resigned in the middle of a speaking tour when she heard that the National's officers had voted to support the war. She continued to work for suffrage by joining the NWP which had voted to take no stand on the war. See Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 61. Similarly, NAWSA's state leader in Wisconsin, Meta Berger, defected to the NWP over the issue of war support. See Shelia Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (New York: Viking, 1997), 99. After the United States entered the war, the Woman's Peace Party split into three factions: one that decided to support the war and devote themselves to war service, one, led by Crystal Eastman, which resolved to continue agitating for an early peace, and one, led by Jane Addams, which sought to promote a durable peace settlement while working for civilian relief at home during the war. See O'Neill, 183-184..

intervention in the war in Europe was inevitable after February 1917. Given that inevitability, Catt calculated that NAWSA stood a much greater chance of achieving its objectives if they threw themselves solidly into home front war service while simultaneously working to secure the federal suffrage amendment. Not only would NAWSA's war service aid in the public relations campaign to convince voters that women as citizens fulfilled their obligations just like men and deserved the vote, but it would also deflect the potential criticism of anti-suffragists who would surely criticize NAWSA as "unpatriotic" for working towards suffrage while the war was being fought overseas.<sup>160</sup> When war became inevitable, Catt the pragmatist felt that her decision to support the war was also inevitable.

The historical record contains several clues to Catt's decision early on to place suffrage higher on her priority list than her involvement with the peace movement. For example, when Jane Addams was working to call nationwide mass peace demonstrations in December 1914, Catt offered her services only so far as her participation did not reflect poorly on the suffrage campaign. She amplified, "I think it most advisable that the suffragists should not be the prime mover in this step. When I say that I will undertake [organizing the demonstration] in New York, I do not mean that I will head the movement, but that I will get the right people to do it and will give my assistance to it."<sup>161</sup> Always conscious of the public's perception of suffragists, Catt maintained her distance from potentially damaging relationships with other movements. She continued to be

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<sup>160</sup> Van Voris, 137-138.

<sup>161</sup> Catt to Addams (December 4, 1914), *CLOC*, Box 4, Reel 3.

casually involved in the Woman's Peace Party until February 1917 when the organization officially rebuked her for NAWSA's statement of support for the war.<sup>162</sup>

February was indeed the crucial month in terms of decisions about the war. On February 3, 1917, Secretary of State Robert Lansing informed Congress that the United States had broken off diplomatic relations with Germany. On that same day, one of Catt's closest co-workers at NAWSA, Clara Hyde, wrote to Mary Peck about Catt's latest activities. She informed Peck, "The second item you should know about is that C.C.C. dines with President and Mrs. Wilson on Monday night as the guest of Secy. Of War Daniels and his wife!! The old goat is warming up. I'd give a king's ransom to watch Carrie turn her lamps on him."<sup>163</sup> Wilson's appointment book confirms that he and his wife dined with Daniels (who was actually Secretary of the Navy) and Catt on February 5, 1917.<sup>164</sup>

No record exists of what was discussed during their dinner. The events of the preceding and following days suggest, however, that the impending war was most likely a topic of conversation along with whether or not NAWSA intended to support the President should he officially decide to send troops to Europe. Wilson had held a meeting just four days earlier with the executive officers of the Woman's Peace League who undoubtedly voiced their continued disapproval of increasing U.S. militancy.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Van Voris, 138. See also *New York Times*, March 7, 1917, "Peace Party Ousts Mrs. Carrie Catt."

<sup>163</sup> Hyde to Peck (February 3, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 24, Reel 16.

<sup>164</sup> Appointment Books (February 5, 1917), *PWW*, Box 3, Reel 3.

<sup>165</sup> Appointment Books (February 1, 1917), *PWW*, Box 3, Reel 3.



It seems more than likely that the President would have inquired if Catt and NAWSA held the same views as the Woman's Peace League. Whether or not he asked that question remains a mystery, but the following day Catt issued a call to the Executive Council of NAWSA to meet later that month and adopt their official position on the war. It would seem that Catt felt the question of NAWSA's position had been asked – if not explicitly by the President then at least by the circumstances of the day.

In her call to the Executive Council, Catt began by stating, "Our nation is on the brink of war." She went on to explain that the decision the organization needed to make was whether "suffragists [should] do the 'war work' which they will undoubtedly want to do with other groups newly formed, thus running the risk of disintegrating our organizations or shall we use our headquarters and our machinery for really helpful constructive aid to our nation. The answer to these questions must be given now."<sup>166</sup> Even before war had been declared, Catt seemed to see the political benefits of making NAWSA's stand transparent to the public and key politicians alike.

At the meetings of the Executive Council on February 23-25, the members passed a resolution by a vote of 63-13 pledging their support and service in the event of war. Although invited, Wilson was unable to attend the final session in which the resolution was presented to Secretary of War Newton Baker. He did send a letter to the NAWSA headquarters stating, "The Secretary of War has transmitted to me the resolution presented to him . . . under the auspices of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. I want to express my very great and sincere admiration of the action

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<sup>166</sup> Catt to Executive Council (February 6, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 60.

taken.”<sup>167</sup> Wilson expressed his appreciation and admiration in more concrete terms over the next two years, as he became not only a supporter but also an advocate for the federal suffrage amendment. In her urgent call for NAWSA to define its position on the war, Catt rigorously answered any question the President might have had about looking for support to its two million members. In return, he seems to have answered Catt’s question about his support for national woman’s suffrage.

The NWP, too, realized that it must take some position on the war. Paul sent a letter out to all her state chairmen on February 8th in which she called for a national convention in March to consider the organization’s war policy. In the letter, she stressed that the organization was dedicated only to the enfranchisement of women and that, until changed by an action of the convention, that would continue to be the NWP policy.<sup>168</sup> The March convention voted to sustain the current policy of focusing only on suffrage and remaining neutral on the issue of the war. What Paul did not anticipate, or ever realize, was that a majority of Americans saw “taking no stand on the war” as a very active stand. They viewed the NWP as unpatriotic and harmful to the nation. This, much more so than opposition to suffrage, was the source of the anger that propelled crowds to attack the White House pickets.

Paul maintained her belief that NAWSA had forgone suffrage work to participate in war service throughout the remainder of her life. In an interview given just a few years before she died in 1977, Paul related the same thing to her interviewer that she expressed

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<sup>167</sup> Wilson to NAWSA (February 28, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 32, Reel 21.

<sup>168</sup> Paul to State Chairmen (February 8, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

conclusion

to members of the NWP in 1917: it was up to the NWP to singularly focus on suffrage because the National was “working only for war.”<sup>169</sup>

Paul’s charge that NAWSA abandoned suffrage work is totally unfounded. An April 1917 article in the *New York Times*, running under the headline, “Suffragists’ Machine Perfected in All States under Mrs. Catt’s Rule,” gave testimony to NAWSA’s two-pronged strategy. The article referenced NAWSA’s recent commitment to war service, but went on to describe the organization’s vast political lobbying, publicity activity, and state campaigning. Specifically, it pointed out that the National’s news service sent press releases to 6,000 newspapers throughout the country and that members in all the states collected stories of local work and fed them back to the National which then redistributed them to Washington and New York papers.<sup>170</sup>

Catt was quick to capitalize on the political capital earned by suffragists’ war service. An excerpt from one of the NAWSA press releases to the *New York Times* demonstrates the manner in which she wedded the issues of suffrage and war service:

In the United States, suffrage associations have illustrated this alertness of women. Suffragists were already stimulating the production and conservation of food before any definite governmental action was worked out. And through their suffrage associations they were passing on the word to other women. What Connecticut found out was told in Alabama. Nebraska’s thrift aroused emulation in New York. Women in Plattsburgh, New York, and San Antonio, Texas, were of one mind about being “camp mothers” to soldiers . . . There has been no sectionalism, there can be none among women, alike disfranchised, and alike, seeking for the ballot for the common end of protecting that which is dearest to their hearts. No other group of people came so readily into line for national service, for no other group seeking enfranchisement has ever sifted through every class and station of life. Ready-to-

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<sup>169</sup> Alice Paul, *Alice Paul*, Regional Oral History Office, (University of California, Berkeley: November 1972 and May 1973). Available from the Online Archive of California; <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt6f59n89c>.

<sup>170</sup> *New York Times*, April 29, 1917.



serve suffragists have put the handles of the tools of their colossal organization into the government's hands.<sup>171</sup>

This article underscores several important points that Catt thought were critical in the public relations campaign. It mentions the nationwide spread of NAWSA's efforts, the unity of their effort that transcended sectional boundaries, and their willingness to heed the nation's call for aid while still fighting for equal suffrage.

Wilson did not fail to hold up his end of the bargain, either. Although he did not advocate for the federal amendment until the year was nearly complete (neither did NAWSA push him to do so), he made significant contributions to the cause, as will be shown, through his support of state referenda and the creation of a separate suffrage committee in the House of Representatives. Partially as a result of the President's aid, eight more suffrage states were added in 1917. With the support of Representatives from these states the federal amendment was able to win its first victory in the House on January 10, 1918. Wilson's actions in 1917 contributed no small amount to that victory.

### **Wilson and NAWSA Work for State Victories**

Catt repeatedly called on the President for support in state suffrage battles in early 1917. In January, she wrote to the President's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, alerting him that Oklahoma's legislature was about to vote in favor of a suffrage bill. She requested that Wilson write her a letter that included a statement that he hoped the voters in the state would approve the amendment.<sup>172</sup> On the same day, she sent another letter to

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<sup>171</sup> Catt, "Ready for Citizenship" (August 24, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 82, Reel 59.

Tumulty explaining that a somewhat different bill was pending in North Dakota. Implying that she and the President were in accord on the issue, she requested, “A letter of congratulations from the President and an expression of approval of this form of legislation, together with an expression of his continued interest in the suffrage movement and hope for its ultimate establishment would be of great assistance to the cause in general and serve the purpose of which we spoke.”<sup>173</sup>

Wilson responded quickly, conforming to Catt’s specific wording requests in both cases. In his letter of congratulations regarding the successful North Dakota vote, he wrote, “As you know, I have a very real interest in the extension of the suffrage to women and I feel that every step in this direction should be applauded.”<sup>174</sup> Catt’s use of the phrase “of which we spoke” and Wilson’s phrasing “as you know” indicates a level of high agreement and cooperation between the two.

Wilson also lent his support to campaigns in Maryland and Maine, but in the most important state campaign, New York, Wilson was particularly active. Like Catt, he weaved the issues of democracy, war service, and suffrage into his statements and letters. To a letter from the head of the New York Woman Suffrage Party, Vira Whitehouse, asking for a declaration of his support, he responded, “I hope that the voters of the State of New York will rally to the support of woman suffrage by a handsome majority. It would be a splendid vindication of the principle of the cause in which we all believe.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Catt to Tumulty (January 17, 1917), *PWW*, Box 89, Reel 209.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Wilson to Catt (January 25, 1917), *CLOC*, Reel 7.

When Whitehouse wrote back to thank Wilson for his supportive words, she informed him that New York suffragists were suffering, “from the very general disapproval of the course of the pickets, over whom, of course, we have no control and whose methods we deeply deplore. Your message should help as much as anything to show the voters of New York State the fair attitude to take.”<sup>176</sup>

Taking into account the obstacle of the pickets, Wilson wrote to Catt in October again expressing his support for the campaign in New York. He included a statement, “May I not say that I hope that no voter will be influenced in his decision with regard to this great matter by anything the so-called pickets may have done . . . Their action represents, I am sure, so small a fraction of the women . . . that it would be most unfair and argue a narrow view to allow their actions to prejudice the cause itself.”<sup>177</sup> Catt was quick to give the President’s letter a wide circulation in the New York newspapers.

Just a few weeks before the vote in New York, Wilson met with Whitehouse and a delegation of 110 members of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party. His statement to them represents the climax of his connecting the war, women’s service to the country, and the right to full citizenship. So sweeping were his words that some even saw it as his first public endorsement of the federal amendment.<sup>178</sup> His statement, printed in the *New York Times* on October 26, read, in part, “I am free to say that I think the question of

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<sup>175</sup> Wilson to Vira Boarman Whitehouse (August 27, 1917), *LWWP*. For Wilson’s letters to Maryland and Maine, see Wilson to Tumulty (April 24, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 7 and Wilson to Deborah Knox Livingston (September 4, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>176</sup> Whitehouse to Wilson (August, 28, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>177</sup> Wilson to Catt (October 13, 1917), *CLOC*, Box 9, Reel 7.

<sup>178</sup> See Blatch and Lutz.



woman suffrage is one of those questions which lie at the foundation [of the struggle for democracy].” He added, “I believe that, just because we are quickened by the questions of this war, we ought to be quickened to give this question of woman suffrage our immediate consideration . . . I think the whole country has appreciated the way in which the women have risen to this great occasion [of the war].”<sup>179</sup> The suffrage amendment passed in New York two weeks later by a margin of 94,000 votes. The New York victory alone dramatically increased the number of representatives in Congress from suffrage states.

Wilson was also instrumental in breaking up a major administrative obstacle for the suffragists. For years, suffragists had been forced to plead their case for a federal amendment with the House Judiciary Committee because the House leadership had refused to establish a separate committee on woman suffrage. The Senate had established a separate committee in 1913 and both suffrage organizations were convinced that their interests had been treated more fairly and with greater attention in the Senate than in the House. In May, NAWSA executive secretary Helen Gardener wrote to Wilson and asked him to intervene on NAWSA’s behalf with Representative Pou who, as chairman of the Rules Committee, held the necessary influence to create a separate suffrage committee. Pointing out that this was the only request NAWSA had made during the “war session” of Congress, she implored the President to come to her aid. Gardener, too, made use of women’s war service by adding, “With this added bit of legislative machinery working in

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<sup>179</sup> Wilson’s Statement to New York State Woman Suffrage Party delegation (October 25, 1917), *LWWP*.

our interests, as occasion permits, we can all the more freely and happily give of our services in other directions to our country.”<sup>180</sup>

In a very polite and carefully worded letter, Wilson complied with Gardener’s request and endorsed the idea of a separate committee to Pou. The Congressman responded that he would heed the President’s advice and hold a vote on the matter with the Rules Committee. The committee ruled favorably on the resolution on June 6.<sup>181</sup> Still, the creation of a new committee had to be approved by vote of the full House. Gardener again called on the President to use his influence. She asked that he try to persuade Representative Heflin or Glass, both Democrats, to vote in favor of the measure.<sup>182</sup> Wilson again complied and was successful.

He wrote to Heflin, urging him to support the new committee. The representative from Alabama wrote back that he personally favored a states’ rights approach to suffrage, but, “after reading your letter several times and thinking over the situation, I have concluded to follow your suggestion and not oppose the creation of a committee in the House on Woman Suffrage.”<sup>183</sup> The House finally voted and approved the new committee by a close vote on September 24. Wilson’s contributing role in this matter was of no small significance. With a separate committee in place, the federal amendment moved more smoothly through the committee process in late 1917 resulting into its

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<sup>180</sup> Gardener to Wilson (May 10, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>181</sup> Wilson to Pou (May 14, 1917), *Life and Letters*. For Pou’s response, see Pou to Wilson (May 17, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>182</sup> Gardener to Wilson (June 10, 1917), *LWWP*.

<sup>183</sup> Heflin to Wilson (June 28, 1917), *LWWP*.

favorable report and eventual successful vote in the House in January 1918. By convincing Pou to push the creation of the committee and convincing Heflin to cast an affirmative vote, the President played a major role in one of the crucial battles of the larger federal amendment war.

In his struggle to ensure the autonomy of U.S. troops in Europe and his ongoing struggles with Congress over other pieces of war legislation during the summer of 1917, Wilson was unwilling to support suffrage as a war measure. When members of the NWP, accompanied by representatives of the Progressive, Labor, and Socialist movements, urged him in May to press the federal amendment at the existing session of Congress he refused.<sup>184</sup>

Catt declined to join the May deputation to the President and, in fact, declined to ask him to push the federal amendment at all during the “war congress.” In July, though, Gardener wrote to Wilson advancing NAWSA’s wish that he would use his opening speech to the new Congress in December to support the federal amendment as a war measure.<sup>185</sup> Again, the president complied with NAWSA’s wishes. His speech to Congress on December 3<sup>rd</sup> urged the passage of the federal amendment during the upcoming session.<sup>186</sup>

### **SUMMARY OF 1917**

The President’s primary focus during 1917 was U.S. entry into the war. Suffrage histories sometimes miscalculate the relative importance of their subject. Wilson’s

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<sup>184</sup> Diary Entry (May 14, 1917), *Life and Letters*, Vol 7.

<sup>185</sup> Gardener to Wilson (July 19, 1917), *NAWSA Records*, Box 32, Reel 21.

<sup>186</sup> New York Post, December 4, 1917.



attitude toward suffrage during 1917 must be placed into context with the larger issues he faced – issues that had the potential to affect the entire world. To the extent that he did involve himself with suffragists, he did so in concert with Catt’s vision for securing the federal amendment and in spite of the hostile actions of the NWP. Wilson and Catt’s vision for the proper suffrage strategy changed over the course of 1917 as events unfolded, but their vision evolved together, through constant and careful correspondence. The evidence suggests that there were three decisions NAWSA made in 1917 that contributed to the eventual success of the federal amendment. First, they led the charge in denouncing the militancy of the NWP. By doing so, they were able to distinguish themselves from the White House pickets that the majority of Americans (and, more importantly, members of Congress whose votes would eventually be needed) abhorred.

Secondly, they recognized the need to win more suffrage states before they could have a chance at success at the federal level. Knowing that the President and Congress would not, in all likelihood, give the federal amendment serious consideration during the “war congress” they chose to focus their efforts on state campaigns. As a result, they won victories across the nation and dramatically increased the number of Congressmen responsible to equal suffrage constituents.

Finally, they chose to actively support the war, simultaneously strengthening their own hand and the hand of the President when it came time to stake their claim as equal citizens. To be sure, Catt and other NAWSA leaders recognized that suffrage was a right they deserved apart from their war service – most had been working for suffrage for multiple decades. Still, the reality of the situation dictated that they use all expedient arguments to support their claim. Right or wrong, the fact of women’s tremendous

contributions to the successful prosecution of the war was a major contributing factor in the nation's willingness to support the federal amendment.

What was the result of these three critical decisions? By the end of 1917, eight more suffrage states had been added to the national total. The President's support in the state campaigns had been critical to their success. Likewise, his influence had helped to secure a separate committee on woman suffrage in the House of Representatives. This removed a major legislative hurdle for suffragists as they attempted to bring the federal amendment to a vote. Finally, by December, they had succeeded in persuading the President to lend his voice to the growing chorus that demanded equal suffrage for all American women through passage of a constitutional amendment.

## CHAPTER 5

### WILSON AS AN ADVOCATE: 1918-1919

From the time of his December 1917 speech to Congress, the President never backed away from supporting the federal amendment. His newfound enthusiasm was consistent with his behavior throughout the suffrage campaign – it was based on the political value of the issue. Through the addition of eight more suffrage states, the war being fought in the name of democracy, and women’s massive participation in the home front war effort, suffrage had gathered momentum as a powerful political issue by January 1918.

Wilson’s close advisors communicated a very different message to their leader heading into the 1918 mid-term elections than they had in the election years of 1914 and 1916. They expressed concern about suffrage as a political liability if the suffrage amendment were not passed under a Democratic Congress. As this chapter will show, Wilson did everything in his power to avoid that liability.

Understanding Wilson’s motivation during this time period is a complex endeavor. His foremost goal, as he told that nation and the world in his January 1918 “Fourteen Points” speech, was to attain a peaceful, liberal world order. Wilson’s vision included self-determined capitalist nations governed by international law and safe from both traditional forms of imperialism and revolutionary socialism. He believed that America had a mission to extend her national values to the rest of the world – a mission that could only be fulfilled within the stable boundaries of his postwar vision for world order.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), vii, 5.



The significance of the 1918 mid-term elections was enormous for Wilson. If the Democrats lost control of Congress, he knew that he would face tremendous opposition to American participation in the League of Nations – a key component of the postwar order.<sup>188</sup> Wilson's strong desire to win votes for Democrats in order to pursue his larger strategy for the war and the peace that would follow must be seen as the driving force behind all of his decisions leading up to November.

It is precisely because this particular desire was so strong in Wilson that it is difficult to determine the degree to which his personal feelings about women as political beings changed, if at all. As this chapter will reveal, he worked tirelessly to secure the federal amendment under a Democratic Congress. Was this purely an attempt to strengthen his party in order to pursue his foreign policy or was there a personal conversion involved?

Wilson's exposure to women in the public sphere had certainly increased during his six years in the White House. Not only in the form of suffragists, but also as members of the Woman's Peace Party, the Women's Trade Union League, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the President has dealt with women fully engaged in matters of political import. As the nation moved into war, he found himself appointing women to the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense and approving the enlistment of thousands of women in the American Expeditionary Force that deployed to Europe.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Knock, 69.

<sup>189</sup> Susan Zeiger, *In Uncle Sam's Service: Women Workers with the American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 137-138.

It seems more than plausible to suggest that increased familiarity with women operating in the public sphere bred in Wilson a newfound respect for women's capabilities. Perhaps, he finally tested some of those assumptions about women's mental limitations that his Bryn Mawr graduate student complained of and found them in serious need of revision. In the absence of any personal writings from Wilson that indicate he underwent a private conversion that matched his public enthusiasm for suffrage, we are left only with the proposition that such a conversion *may* have occurred. Setting aside the possibility of a private conversion, though, there can be no doubt about his advocacy for woman suffrage in the public sphere - advocacy that would see both victory and defeat during the course of his final two years in office.

### **Victory in the House: January 1918**

Months before the first suffrage victory in Congress, Wilson had begun preparing for the battle that he knew would have to be fought. Throughout the summer and fall of 1917, he corresponded back and forth with members of his cabinet and suffrage advocates trying to determine where the House and Senate stood if the measure were to come up for a vote.<sup>190</sup> His major concern during the months leading up to the start of the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress was that the measure would be put to a vote before the necessary affirmative votes were secured. Pro-suffrage Congressmen and Senators succeeded in blocking any premature votes in December, and by the first week of the new year, it was fairly evident that the first vote would come in the House on January 10.

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<sup>190</sup> See Wilson to Burleson (July 19, 1917), J.A. H. Hopkins to Wilson (July 18, 1917), Gardener to Wilson (July 19, 1917), Maud Wood Park to Wilson (November 30, 1917), and Tumulty to Wilson (December 12, 1917), *LWWP*.

Two days before the vote, the women's representative of the Democratic National Committee, Elizabeth Merrill Bass, who had been in close communication with Wilson for several months, wrote to encourage Wilson to amplify his December message of support for the amendment. She made the political implications clear, urging, "Do not let us give [the Republicans] the advantage of our silence to carry with them into the congressional campaigns next year when asking for the votes of the enfranchised women."<sup>191</sup> In a theme that she would repeat for the next year, Bass stressed to the President the political importance of a suffrage victory under a Democratic Congress.

Wilson heeded her advice. He made himself available to a group of Democratic members of the Suffrage Committee the following day and voiced his support for the federal amendment. After the meeting, the Representatives handed a statement to members of the press that read, "The Committee found that the President had not felt at liberty to volunteer his advice to members of Congress in this important matter, but when we sought his advice he very frankly and earnestly advised us to vote for the amendment as an act of right and justice to the women of the country and the world."<sup>192</sup> The *New York Times* ran their story about the meeting under the headline "Wilson Backs Amendment for Woman Suffrage."

The House of Representatives voted on the measure the following day. As the table below indicates and as Catt and NAWSA had always maintained, bipartisan support was a key element in the victory:

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<sup>191</sup> Bass to Wilson (January 8, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>192</sup> Press Statement (January 9, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 7.



	Yes	No
Republicans	165	33
Democrats	104	102
Miscellaneous	5	1
Total	274	136

The final vote was less than a fraction over the necessary two-thirds.<sup>193</sup> With high hopes for a quick victory, suffragists turned their attention to the Senate. Despite Herculean efforts by the President, their hopes for a Senate victory were not to be realized for more than a year.

### **First Vote in the Senate**

From January to October 1918, the Senate vacillated on whether or not to vote on the suffrage amendment. Predictions about the outcome were so close that calling for a vote was extremely risky for both sides. When it looked as if it might pass, anti-suffrage Senators would filibuster to block a vote. When it appeared that it would fail, they would rush to try and get the measure voted on. Wilson campaigned zealously throughout the eight-month period between victory in the House and the first vote in the Senate. The main point he used to try and persuade reluctant Senators to vote for the amendment was that the Democrats might lose control of Congress if the suffrage amendment did not pass before the November 1918 mid-term elections. Wilson repeatedly wrote to Senators that he needed Democrats to maintain control of Congress in order to successfully prosecute the war and ensure a lasting peace in the post-war settlement.

Despite his full desire for the amendment to pass, Wilson was constrained in his advocacy by several factors. First, he recognized that the line between executive interest

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<sup>193</sup> *HWS*, 636-637.

and executive interference was both highly sensitive and extremely thin. His correspondence with Senators during the spring and summer of 1918 demonstrates that he struggled mightily with how far and how hard he could push without crossing that line and creating a negative backlash against the amendment. Secondly, he fully realized the pressure that Southern Democrats were under to protect white supremacy by opposing the amendment. Knowing that they may face dire consequences in future elections, Wilson attempted to provide cover for Southerners who would be willing to support suffrage.

Finally, Wilson was aware that dedication to continued white supremacy was only part of the issue for some Southern senators. Despite the intense efforts of NAWSA and NWP leaders to not allow the suffrage movement to become entangled with other progressive issues, the overlap in membership between suffrage groups and other progressive interests such as the prohibition and child-labor movements made the entanglement impossible to avoid. Leaders of the liquor and cotton textile industries feared that women voters would provide massive support to progressive legislation that would curtail their ability to turn a profit.

For Senators who came from states in which those interests had the most power, support for suffrage was political suicide. Though they often publicly emphasized their racist opposition to suffrage over economic interests, Wilson was not ignorant of the additional reasons beyond race for their opposition to a federal amendment. Nor did he choose to push those particular senators with as much vigor. As the record shows, he focused his efforts on those Democrats who did not have to answer to powerful industry lobbyists.

In March, Tumulty received word from the Senate that the suffrage amendment would be brought to a vote within the next few days. He wrote a memo to Wilson voicing his fears that the amendment would not pass and that its failure would be laid at the feet of the Democratic Party. Indicating the continued importance of NAWSA's close relationship with the Administration, Tumulty informed the President that Catt had called and expressed hope that the two Senators from Florida might vote in the affirmative if Wilson asked them to do so. Wilson responded that he "would weaken my influence in a score of directions if I were to depart from the rule I have set myself and send for Senators, but I am eager to advise them to vote for the amendment if they will themselves give me an opportunity to do so."<sup>194</sup> Anxious to not violate senatorial courtesy, he encouraged Tumulty to devise a way for the Senators to come to the White House without being "called."

In a letter that sheds fascinating insight into the lengths to which a president will go to not cross the line between interest and interference, Tumulty wrote back to Wilson with an elaborate plan to get Senator Fletcher from Florida to come see the President without having it appear that Wilson had ordered him to the White House. Tumulty met with the pro-suffrage Senator Hollis and together they devised a plan that Tumulty then passed along to Wilson:

You [should] send for Senators Fletcher and Ransdell, both of whom are members of the Committee on Commerce, which Committee has recently been investigating the Shipping Board and Hog Island. Senator Hollis understands that you have not talked over shipping matters with Fletcher and Ransdell for some time and that they will be able to give you some valuable information that may speed up the shipping programme. They are both great friends of the Administration and are anxious to serve. You might very properly send for them at once to discuss the speeding up of

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<sup>194</sup> See Tumulty to Wilson and Wilson to Tumulty (March 12, 1918), *LWWP*.



the shipping programme. If you do this, Senator Ransdell will call your attention to the situation in connection with suffrage and will give you a most excellent chance to discuss it with Senator Fletcher. Senator Trammell [from Florida] has stated that if Senator Fletcher votes for suffrage, he will also. This will enable us to put the matter over this week.<sup>195</sup>

Tumulty's letter is instructive for a number of reasons. First, it shows that senatorial courtesy was not just an excuse that the President used to avoid openly pressuring Senators to vote in a particular way – a charge repeatedly leveled by the NWP. If Tumulty and Wilson, in their private correspondence, were willing to go to these lengths to respect the need for Senators to at least appear independent, then the fear of crossing that invisible line was surely real and not just a convenient excuse for inaction. Secondly, it indicates the tremendous amount of coordination that was required among Wilson, his staff, NAWSA leaders, and pro-suffrage Senators to try and secure the federal amendment. Winning suffrage in the Senate was no small task.

The vote in March was blocked by opponents who feared that the resolution might pass. The next time a vote appeared on the horizon was early May. Following a request from Catt and similar urging from Bass, Wilson wrote to seven Senators urging them to support the amendment. The letters show his struggle to secure their support without alienating them through pushing too hard. To Senator Wolcott of Delaware he typed, "I am writing this letter on my own typewriter (notwithstanding a lame hand) in order that it may be entirely confidential and may not in the least embarrass you if you should find

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<sup>195</sup> Tumulty to Wilson (March 14, 1918), *LWWP*. There is nothing in Wilson's papers to indicate that this meeting ever actually took place, however, a rumor circulated in the press that Wilson had swung over two unnamed Southern Democrats and that the amendment would pass if brought to a vote. Opponents blocked the vote based on those rumors. If the rumor was based on Senators Fletcher and Trammell, it appears to have been unfounded. Both Senators voted "nay" each time the measure came up in the Senate (October, 1918 and February and June 1919).

that you cannot yield to this very earnest request.”<sup>196</sup> He went on to make a convincing connection between passing the suffrage amendment and winning Democratic victories in the mid-term elections. His letter concluded, “The next Congress must be controlled by genuine dependable friends; and we may lose it, - I fear we shall lose it, - if we do not satisfy the opinion of the country in this matter [of suffrage] now.”<sup>197</sup>

The rest of the letters Wilson sent carried a similar message. The replies he received indicate the many fronts on which he had to fight the suffrage war. Senator Beckham of Kentucky said that he opposed the federal amendment because it violated the principle of states’ rights and because he was personally opposed to women having the right to vote. Senator Tillman of South Carolina replied by saying that the women of his state did not really want the vote and that he would not be a party to forcing it on them. A similar reason was offered up by Senator Pomerene of Ohio who pointed out that he had personally voted for a state amendment when serving in the Ohio legislature, but that the amendment had been defeated in his state. Like Tillman, Pomerene argued that he would be contradicting the will of his constituents if he supported the federal amendment. From Florida came replies from Senator Fletcher that he did not believe suffrage was an issue that would hurt the Democrats in the upcoming election and from Senator Trammell who claimed only that he had already pledged to his constituents to oppose the amendment.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Wilson to Wolcott (May 9, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> See Beckham to Wilson (May 9, 1918), Tillman to Wilson (May 10, 1918), Pomerene to Wilson (May 11, 1918), Trammell to Wilson (May 16, 1918), and Fletcher to Wilson (May 11, 1918), *LWWP*.

In addition to these objections, Wilson heard from Senator Overman of North Carolina who made it very clear why he could not vote for suffrage. In addition to offering up the same reason as Tillman and Pomerene, Overman wrote, “I am sure it will be exceedingly unwise at this time, from a political standpoint, for a North Carolina Senator to favor the passage of this measure, as our people believe it might result in a very dangerous inroad into our social condition, if adopted, and would give us a great deal of trouble in the future.”<sup>199</sup> Overman’s reference to the threat of black voters was clear. What he did not say, but what was surely a part of his thought process, was the way the powerful cotton textile industries would be alienated by his support of suffrage – the passage of which they saw as directly connected to increased federal regulation of cheap child labor.<sup>200</sup>

Wilson, exasperated over the situation, sent an uncharacteristically curt letter to Bass in late May. Bass had written the President expressing her belief that there were at least six senators who could be influenced to change their votes if the President would make an appeal to them. As always, she mentioned the difficulty of winning the mid-term elections if suffrage did not pass. Wilson wrote back, “It was supposed as you say in your letter . . . that there were ‘half a dozen possibilities’ in the Senate from whom we might draw sufficient support to put the federal amendment through, but as a matter of fact I have done my best to draw from that half-dozen and have utterly failed.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Overman to Wilson (May 21, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>200</sup> For Overman’s connection to the American Cotton Manufacturer’s Association, see Morgan, 173.



Unable to secure the necessary votes in May, suffragists were able to get their advocates in the Senate to delay the vote again. With this additional time to garner support, they began to push Wilson to support the amendment as a war measure. They hoped that the pressure of a war measure would either cause at least two Senators to change their votes in order to not appear unpatriotic or that Southerners could argue to their constituents that threats to national security were more important than threats to white supremacy.

While Bass continued to communicate her fears about the mid-term elections, Wilson also began to hear the same fear from other corners. U.S. Representative Jouett Shouse of Kansas wrote to convey his concern that a defeat for suffrage in the Senate would do serious harm to the re-election bids of Democrats in the suffrage states. Shouse called for Wilson to make another public statement of his support for the amendment and his encouragement of Democratic Senators to vote in its favor. On the same day, Catt also wrote to the President urging him to make a public statement that granting equal suffrage in the United States was critical to the successful prosecution of the war under the stated aim of making the world safe for democracy.<sup>202</sup>

Wilson chose to make his public statement through a publicity mechanism provided by Catt. The French Union for Woman Suffrage had written to him in February asking for an expression of his opinion on woman suffrage. He drafted a response that he submitted to Catt for her review on June 7. Catt wrote back indicating her general approval of the letter but asking that he add one crucial sentence: "As America's answer

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<sup>201</sup> See Bass to Wilson (May 21, 1918), *LWWP* and Wilson to Bass (May 22, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>202</sup> Shouse to Wilson (June 8, 1918) and Catt to Wilson (June 8, 1918), *LWWP*.

to this question, it is my earnest hope that the Senate of the United States will pass the suffrage amendment to our federal constitution before the end of this session.” Wilson rewrote his response with the new sentence inserted exactly as Catt had written it, and the letter was reproduced in all the major newspapers in mid-June.<sup>203</sup>

Hoping to capitalize on the publicity from the letter to the French women, pro-suffrage Democrats tried to call for a vote in late June. Wilson again wrote letters to secure the necessary votes. He did not publicly call the amendment a “war measure;” however, his private correspondence to reluctant senators stressed the link between the war and granting equal suffrage. To Senator Shields of Tennessee, Wilson stated, “I feel that much of the morale of this country and of the world, and not a little of the faith which the rest of the world will repose in our sincere adherence to democratic principles, will depend upon the action which the Senate takes in this now critically important matter.”<sup>204</sup>

Despite Wilson’s willingness to privately argue for the amendment as a war measure, he had little success with Southern Democrats. In his reply, Senator Shields not only rejected Wilson’s contention that the adoption of the suffrage resolution would in any way contribute to the successful prosecution of the war, but also reiterated that racial fears were controlling him and the majority of his colleagues from Southern states.<sup>205</sup> Seemingly undaunted, Wilson wrote back to Shields, “I do earnestly believe that our

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<sup>203</sup> See Catt to Wilson (June 11, 1918) and Wilson to Catt (June 7, 1918), *NAWSA Records*. For the publicity generated, see Bass to Wilson (June 19, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>204</sup> Wilson to Shields (June 20, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>205</sup> Shields to Wilson (June 25, 1918), *LWWP*.

action upon this amendment will have an important and immediate influence upon the whole atmosphere and more of the nations engaged in the war.”<sup>206</sup> His efforts were in vain. Shields voted “nay” in October and again in February and June 1919.

With the vote scheduled for June 27, Wilson made himself available to a group of Senate Democrats who came to ask his opinion on the measure. Like the meeting with House Democrats before the January vote, this meeting was engineered solely for the publicity it would again give to the President’s message of support. The Senators that attended were all pro-suffrage already, but they were able to report to the press afterwards that Wilson had been very enthusiastic about the measure passing under a Democratic Congress.<sup>207</sup> The effect of this public pronouncement did not have the intended effect of convincing any reluctant Democrats to change their votes.

What did have an effect was Wilson’s request to Senator James of Kentucky to give up his agreement to be paired with an anti-suffrage senator for the upcoming vote. With James’ agreement, the pro-suffrage forces believed they had enough votes to pass the resolution. Thanks to Wilson’s intervention with James, a victory in the Senate appeared imminent. Once again, though, opponents of the measure refused to let it come to a vote for fear that they would not be able to secure its defeat.<sup>208</sup>

The Senate then adjourned until the beginning of September. In late August, Wilson was able to ensure additional support for the amendment by urging the appointment of a pro-suffrage senator to replace Senator James who had died earlier in the summer.

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<sup>206</sup> Wilson to Shields (June 26, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>207</sup> Appointment books (June 24, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>208</sup> Wilson to James (June 24, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.



Wilson maintained a close correspondence with Governor Stanley of Kentucky who had the responsibility of appointing James' successor. In his initial letter to Stanley, the only issue that he mentioned in connection with the appointment was that of suffrage. He wrote, "It would be of great advantage to the party and to the country if his successor entertained views favorable to the pending constitutional amendment."<sup>209</sup> Stanley responded that he had appointed George B. Martin to succeed James. He indicated that Martin was not personally in favor of suffrage, but he was reasonably certain that the new appointee would defer to the President and support the amendment.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, Martin helped to break the "solid South" by voting "yea" in October.

When the Senate reconvened in September, the vote on the amendment was scheduled for October 1. In concert, Catt and Wilson made a final push to secure the necessary votes from Southern Democrats. On September 18, Catt wrote to Wilson, "Every Senator knows that the vote of the Amendment depends upon Mr. Benet [of South Carolina] and he, if voting 'aye' on the first roll call, would virtually make the announcement that it will pass."<sup>211</sup> She went on to implore the President to seek Benet's vote that she was certain would swing over several other Southern Democrats.

Wilson did his best. He wrote to Benet on the same day that he received Catt's letter. Additionally, he coordinated a meeting with Benet and the governor of South

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<sup>209</sup> Wilson to Stanley (August 30, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>210</sup> Stanley to Wilson (September 7, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>211</sup> Catt to Wilson (September 18, 1918), *NAWSA Records*. Senator Christie Benet of South Carolina was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Senator Benjamin Tillman. Benet only served from July 6 to November 5, 1918 when an elected successor, William P. Pollock, took office.

Carolina in the Oval Office on September 23. Benet was strongly opposed, but Wilson did not give up. He wrote to him again three days later urging the amendment as a war measure: "On this ground I appeal to you to hold up the President's hands at the time of all times when his responsibility to his own country and his obligations to the cause of world-democracy weigh most heavily upon him."<sup>212</sup> Again, Wilson's efforts went unrewarded as Benet voted "nay" just four days later. During his final correspondence with Benet, Wilson also made one last appeal via telegram to five other Southern Democrats, all of whom refused to change their positions.<sup>213</sup>

The senate recessed over the weekend of September 28-29 with the vote scheduled for Tuesday, October 1. Knowing that they were two votes short of the two-thirds majority required for passage, Catt dashed off a desperation letter to Wilson on Sunday morning. She informed him that the only way she could see to secure two more votes was for the President to publicly endorse suffrage as a war measure. Catt asked the President to write a letter stating his support of suffrage as a war measure so that the letter could then be printed in the newspapers prior to the Senate vote. She hoped, although did not guarantee, that this step by Wilson would swing two senators around in support of the resolution.<sup>214</sup>

It was a busy Sunday for Wilson. In addition to receiving Catt's letter, Treasury Secretary McAdoo personally called on the President to urge him to appear before the

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<sup>212</sup> See Wilson to Benet (September 18, 1918), Appointment Books (September 23, 1918), and Wilson to Benet (September 26, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Catt to Wilson (September 29, 1918), *NAWSA Records*, Box 32, Reel 21.

Senate on Monday and make a final appeal for the suffrage amendment. Two pro-suffrage Senators came to see him in the afternoon voicing their support for McAdoo's suggestion.<sup>215</sup> Despite his fear that such an act might cross the fragile line into the realm of executive interference, Wilson decided that it was the only hope for securing the needed votes. He apparently believed that some Southern Democrats would feel safer explaining an affirmative vote to their constituents if they could say that they had been following the wishes of the President.

Wilson's speech to the Senate was a public pronouncement of his support for suffrage as a war measure. He said that the amendment's adoption was "clearly necessary to the successful prosecution of the war and the successful realization of the object for which the war is being fought."<sup>216</sup> In addition, it served as a testimony to the way women's war service had strengthened the President's hand. He made repeated references to the injustice of withholding the full rights of citizenship from those who had sacrificed so much in their country's time of need. Finally, he used the speech as a forum in which he could again distance himself and the mainstream suffrage movement from the NWP. He went out of his way to say that his decision to support suffrage was in no way a result of the "voices of foolish and intemperate agitators [that] do not reach me at all."<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Appointment books (September 29, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>216</sup> President Woodrow Wilson's Message to the U.S. Senate (September 30, 1918), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*



The speech did not have the intended effect. In his memoirs, McAdoo regretted having the President appear before the Senate. He recalled that the appeal was deeply resented by those who opposed the amendment and even offended some pro-suffrage senators who felt that Wilson had indeed crossed over too many lines of senatorial tradition and respect.<sup>218</sup> Whether senators were offended or not, the vote status did not change. As predicted, when the votes were cast on the following day, the resolution was two votes short of a two-thirds majority:

	Yes	No
Republicans	32	12
Democrats	30	22
Total	62	34

The breakdown of the vote showed that the overwhelming reason for the resolution's failure was the opposition of Southern Democrats – 19/22 opposed Democrats were from the South. The three additional Democrats that voted “nay” were staunch anti-prohibitionists.<sup>219</sup> The need to maintain white supremacy and the power of the cotton textile industry in the South combined with the power of the liquor industry in certain northern states was too strong a coalition for even the President to overcome.

Wilson was well aware of the political liability the failure had created for Democrats from suffrage states facing re-election the following month. He was also aware that his

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<sup>218</sup> William Gibbs McAdoo, *Crowded Years: The Reminiscences of William G. McAdoo* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), 498.

<sup>219</sup> Morgan, 126. Anti-Prohibitionists were Senator Reed of Missouri, Senator Hitchcock of New Hampshire, and Senator Pomerene of Ohio. For details of their activity as “wets,” see *Ibid.*, 165. It is interesting to note that there is no record of Wilson directly trying to influence two of these three Senators, suggesting that he was sympathetic to their need to not alienate the political support they received from the liquor industry.

plans for the post-war settlement depended greatly on maintaining a Democratic majority in Congress. In an angry letter to Senator Williams of Mississippi in the days immediately following the vote, he wrote, "I must frankly say that I was very much grieved that the Senate did not respond to my appeal about woman suffrage the other day, because I knew what I was talking about when I spoke of the effect it would have upon our moral influence on the other side of the water and the effect is going to be very serious."<sup>220</sup> As the mid-term elections would show, the effect was serious, indeed.

### **The 1918 Mid-Term Elections**

Voters went to the polls on November 5 and, for the first time in decades, restored a Republican majority in both the House and the Senate. In the House, Democrats lost 23 seats. Republicans gained a 49-47 advantage in the Senate by garnering six seats and only losing one. Suffrage was an issue in some of the Congressional campaigns, but other powerful currents also caused a backlash against the Democratic Party. Chief among them were Wilson's post-war peace plans that violated the isolationist sentiments of many Western voters. Democrats also wrestled with the strong perception among mid-Western wheat farmers that the Wilson administration showed favoritism to the South by fixing wheat prices to their detriment but allowing cotton prices to go unregulated to the tremendous profit of Southern cotton growers.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Wilson to Williams (October 5, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol. 8.

<sup>221</sup>Seward W. Livermore, "The Sectional Issue in the 1918 Congressional Elections," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 35, no. 1 (1948): 38. Livermore points out that 21/23 of the lost House seats came from the West and mid-West, as did 4/6 of the lost Senate seats. See p. 58.

The October Senate defeat of the suffrage bill caused both NAWSA and the NWP to alter their traditional election year strategies for the 1918 mid-term elections. NAWSA launched campaigns against anti-suffrage Senators in New Hampshire, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Delaware. Catt made it clear that this was not a break for their policy of remaining non-partisan – they campaigned against Democrats and Republicans alike – but that it was a deeper plunge into the political fray than the National had previously taken.<sup>222</sup> A more radical policy shift was that taken by the NWP. While continuing their campaign to “hold the party in power responsible” by urging Western women to vote against Democrats, they also decided to work for the election of a Democrat in New Hampshire who was pro-suffrage and running against the incumbent anti-suffrage Republican.<sup>223</sup>

Through their combined – though not coordinated – efforts, the two suffrage organizations contributed to the defeat of the Republican Senator Weeks in Massachusetts by the pro-suffrage Democrat David Walsh. When J. Heisler Ball, the Republican senatorial candidate in Delaware, announced his support for the federal amendment just two weeks before the election, suffragists successfully threw their entire energies into defeating the incumbent Democrat, Senator Saulsbury.<sup>224</sup> The required two additional votes in the Senate were now guaranteed for the 66<sup>th</sup> Congress.

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<sup>222</sup> *HWS*, 641.

<sup>223</sup> For the campaign to galvanize enfranchised women to vote against Democrats, see Statement of Alice Paul (October 24, 1918), *NWPP*, Reel 2. For plans to support a Democrat in New Hampshire, see NWP Treasurer to Miss Evelyn Ryce (October 19, 1918), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

<sup>224</sup> Morgan, 132-133. and Harper, ed., 641.



The question remained whether the Democrats would be able to make one more effort to pass the resolution during the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress and at least claim partial credit for the victory. The November election also saw state suffrage victories in Michigan, South Dakota, and Oklahoma, which increased the number of presidential electors for which women could vote to 339, as compared with only 92 in 1916. The women's vote in the 1920 presidential election would be significant and both parties now began to jockey for that vote. Democrats had hurt themselves with their failure to pass the amendment in October. They would inflict further damage to their long-term interests by failing again in February.

### **Last Chance for Democrats: February 1919**

Wilson was incensed with the refusal of Senate Democrats to heed his call for passage of the suffrage amendment. The tenor of his correspondence suggests that his anger was not so much about prolonging the injustice of unequal suffrage, but about the political damage done to the party. The most pressing thing in the President's mind was his plan for U.S. involvement in a league of nations after the war. Without a Democrat-controlled Congress, his ability to execute that plan would be greatly hindered. Without the support of women voters, winning back the presidency in 1920 would be almost impossible.

Even before the mid-term elections, he began to work the Senate again in the hope that the amendment would pass during a later session of the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress. Less than two weeks after the failed October vote, he wrote to the Governor of South Carolina in an attempt to discern the suffrage stance of the newly elected Senator, William P. Pollock,

that would replace Senator Benet, stating, “I was so deeply disappointed in the action of Senator Benet about the suffrage amendment . . . It is a matter of the utmost consequence that the amendment should be adopted by the Senate, and any representations that I can legitimately make to Senator-select Pollock, I should like very much to convey.”<sup>225</sup>

An early November memo written by Tumulty for the President outlining the major issues for the next year further demonstrates the importance of the suffrage issue to Wilson’s administration. Under the heading “things to be attended to at once,” Tumulty listed suffrage as the number one issue. He explained, “The policy of the Democratic Party should be to put [the federal amendment] over now and thus obtain the credit for it. If we wait, the Republicans will surely put it over in March and we will have the name of defeating it.”<sup>226</sup> Now that suffrage could serve as a wedge issue between parties, the stakes over who could claim credit for its passage were considerably raised.

Members of the Wilson Administration were not the only ones to recognize this shift in political value. Internal NAWSA correspondence indicates that suffrage leaders were well aware of how each party would try to reap the most benefit for what was, after the November election, an inevitable victory. When the armistice was signed on November 11, Wilson announced his plans to travel to Paris for the peace conference. Catt’s right hand in the NAWSA leadership circle, Mary Hay, wrote to another NAWSA leader that she could not believe either party would permit the President to go over to Europe and meet the representatives of the other countries, knowing that they had enfranchised their women and the United States Senate has refused to do it. She confided, “It is an insult to

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<sup>225</sup> Wilson to Manning (October 10, 1918), *Life and Letters*, Vol 8.

<sup>226</sup> Memorandum by Tumulty (November 9, 1918), *LWWP*.



the President and I should think the Democratic Senators would see that and put the thing through before he sails. If they do not, they will miss their opportunity.”<sup>227</sup>

Suffrage leaders encouraged the President to press the amendment on the Senate before he left for Paris – a request with which Wilson willingly complied. In his State of the Union message, given just days before he sailed for Europe, Wilson said:

And what shall we say of the women, - of their instant intelligence, quickening every task that they touched; their capacity for organization and cooperation, which gave their action discipline and enhanced the effectiveness of everything they attempted. Their contribution to the great result is beyond appraisal. They have added a new luster to the annals of American womanhood. The least tribute we can pay them is to make them the equals of men in political rights as they have proved themselves their equals in every field of practical work they have entered, whether for themselves or for their country. These great days of completed achievement would be sadly marred were we to omit that act of justice.<sup>228</sup>

Women’s war service figured prominently in Wilson’s public appeal, but the importance of suffrage to party politics was the resounding theme of his private appeals.

The Governor of South Carolina had assured Wilson that Senator-select Pollock would vote in favor of the federal amendment. Consequently, he needed to secure only one more vote for the measure to pass in the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress. Before leaving for Europe, he focused his efforts on Senator Williams of Mississippi and Senator Gay of Louisiana, neither of whom agreed to change their positions.<sup>229</sup> He remained in constant contact

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<sup>227</sup> Hay to Maud Wood Park (November 21, 1918), *Mary Garrett Hay Papers*, Reel 1.

<sup>228</sup> State of the Union Message (December 2, 1918), *LWWP*. For NAWSA’s request for mention of suffrage in the speech, see Gardener to Wilson (November 27, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>229</sup> See Wilson to Williams (November 29, 1918) and Wilson to Robert Ewing (December 2, 1918), *LWWP*.



with Tumulty about the suffrage situation while in Paris, inquiring, “Is there anything else that I can do that might help to bring about the passage of the suffrage amendment?”<sup>230</sup>

A confidential letter from Williams to Wilson in mid-January made it clear that his position was immovable. In addition to the fear of decreased white supremacy in the South, Williams communicated his ongoing displeasure with the NWP. The NWP had continued to use militant tactics to pressure Wilson and the Democratic Party to pass the amendment. Unconvinced that the President was doing all that he could, they had begun burning his words in elaborate demonstrations in Lafayette Park across from the White House. A potential candidate to cast the one additional vote in favor of suffrage, Senator Williams responded to the President’s request for assistance by saying that he would never vote for suffrage “as long as they keep up their infantile and asinine bonfire performances in Lafayette Park.”<sup>231</sup> To the bitter end, the tactics of the NWP did more harm than good for the suffrage movement.

When the amendment finally came to a vote on the Senate floor on February 10, it was more a formality than anything else. All interested parties were aware that the resolution was still one vote short of the necessary two-thirds. The only changed vote from October was that of Senator Pollock who provided the keynote speech. His address to the Senate was an eloquent tribute to women’s war service and to the President’s leadership of the nation during the war. He explained that he felt it was his duty as a Democrat to heed the President’s call and support the suffrage amendment. Additionally,

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<sup>230</sup> Wilson to Tumulty (January 10, 1918), *LWWP*.

<sup>231</sup> Williams to Wilson (January 15, 1919), *John Sharp William Papers*, quoted in Morgan, 136. For details of NWP activities in January and February 1919, see Lewis to Mrs. George H. Day (January 20, 1918), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

he appealed to his fellow southerners by claiming that white supremacy in the South would not be threatened by extending suffrage to women. Pollock explained, “The black man could not control the white man, and the Negro man and the Negro woman combined can not any the more control the white man and the white woman combined.”<sup>232</sup>

Despite Pollock’s appeal, the outcome was as expected. The amendment failed to pass by a vote of 63-33, one vote short of the required two-thirds majority. With nearly three weeks to go before the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress officially adjourned, pro-suffrage Democrats scrambled to try and get one more vote. When rumors emerged that they had the votes, Republicans filibustered to block a vote before Congress adjourned on March 4. Fully aware of the manner in which party politics were driving the train, Catt later explained:

Friendly Democrats [contended] that the Northern opposed Senators were merely postponing action in order to throw to the Republicans whatever political credit might accrue from the passage of the Amendment in the Sixty-sixth Congress, and Republican Senators accusing the Democrats of attempting to cover their years of opposition to federal suffrage action, by the appearance of support at the eleventh hour. Both accusations contained much truth, and the sorry fact was that the Sixty-fifth Congress adjourned with the Amendment not yet submitted.<sup>233</sup>

Barring unforeseen deaths of pro-suffrage Senators, the amendment was guaranteed to pass in the Republican-controlled 66<sup>th</sup> Congress. Its failure during the 65<sup>th</sup> Congress was a defeat for Wilson personally and for the Democrats as a party.

### **Final Victory in Congress: June 1919**

Both parties wanted an early vote on the suffrage amendment during the 66<sup>th</sup> Congress. Wilson and his staff took several actions to try and give credit to the

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<sup>232</sup> *Congressional Record*, 65<sup>th</sup> Congress (February 10, 1919), p. 3055.

<sup>233</sup> Catt and Shuler, 337.

Democratic Party for the eventual suffrage victory. First among these was the President's call for special session of Congress to meet May 19, 1919. Within two days of the convening of the session, the resolution to send the federal suffrage amendment to the states for ratification passed in the House by a vote of 304-89.<sup>234</sup> As usual, the Senate was not as swift.

Wilson was back in Europe by the time the 66<sup>th</sup> Congress convened. In another attempt to claim Democratic credit for the victory, Tumulty wrote to the President that suffrage organizations were beginning to publicly declare that victory in the Senate was not assured, despite what had seemed a guarantee after the November 1918 elections. Tumulty urged Wilson to secure the vote of Senator William Harris of Georgia, a Democrat who had been elected largely as a result of Wilson's support during his campaign. Harris was vacationing in Europe at the time, and Tumulty was convinced that, if the President could get his vote and have him make a public statement to that effect, the newspapers would report that it was the Democrats, rather than the Republicans, that had secured the passage of the resolution.<sup>235</sup>

Wilson met with Harris on May 8, and the newly elected Senator informed him that he would vote for the federal amendment. Both the *New York Times* and *New York Post* carried stories about Harris' pledge in the days following this meeting in Europe and both quoted Democratic sources who claimed Harris' vote was the one that would put the amendment through in the special session of Congress.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *HWS*, 644.

<sup>235</sup> Tumulty to Wilson (April 30, 1919) and (May 2, 1919), *LWWP*.



As the final vote would show, Republicans would not allow full credit to go to their opponents. There were four more votes in favor of suffrage on June 4 than there had been on October 1, 1918. Two votes were from Democrats and two were from Republicans. The debate over which party should get credit did not end in June 1919. Just a few days before the Senate vote, when the actual date had been shifted for the third time, an exasperated Mary Hay summed up the feelings of many suffragists who were fed up with being the pawns in a game of partisan politics. Hay wrote to a comrade, “All men are liars – Republican and Democrat – at least they get that way when they go to the Senate.”<sup>237</sup>

When the roll was finally called in the Senate on June 4, 1919, the results were as follows:

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Republicans	40	9
Democrats	<u>26</u>	<u>21</u>
Total	66	30

Senator Pollock’s “aye” vote from February had been cancelled by his successor, Senator Dial, who voted “nay.” The four changes from October were Walsh of Massachusetts and Ball of Delaware – both newly elected with the support of suffragists during the 1918 mid-term elections. These two were joined by Senator Harris who had been persuaded

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<sup>236</sup> For Wilson’s meeting with Harris see Diary Entry of Dr. Grayson (May 8, 1919), *LWWP*. For information about Harris’ statement and its coverage in the press, see Tumulty to Wilson (May 9, 1919) and Wilson to Tumulty (May 13, 1919), *LWWP*.

<sup>237</sup> Hay to Park (June 1919), *Mary Garret Hay Series*, Reel 1.

by Wilson and Senator Hale, a Republican from Maine who changed his vote because his state had passed into the ranks of the “suffrage states” since the October vote.<sup>238</sup>

Victory in Congress, sweet though it was, only meant that suffragists could now turn their attention to the ratification campaign that needed to be fought in the states. The Wilson Administration, of course, did its best to put a positive spin on the victory for the Democratic Party, but those who studied the results of the Senate vote could see that it was mostly in spite of the Democrats that the resolution passed. Wilson’s ability to influence members of his own party had its limits. When their political survival depended more on their constituents who feared any threat to white supremacy or their contributors who feared the economic damage women voters might inflict than it did on the support of the President, they placed personal interests above the President’s request for support. As a result, the Democratic Party suffered the backlash of pro-suffrage voters in both the 1918 mid-term elections and the 1920 presidential election.

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<sup>238</sup> HWS, 646-648 and Morgan, 140.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

An idealist beginning a journey through the records of the woman suffrage movement might hope to encounter heroic figures along the way. Knowing that women were finally granted the right to vote under Woodrow Wilson's administration, one might jump to the conclusion that the President recognized the contradiction inherent in a nation founded on natural rights theory withholding equal citizenship from half the population. He then must have taken decisive and courageous action to correct that wrong. Surely, Wilson must be one of the heroes. The leaders of the suffrage movement must be heroes, too. Women who rallied members of both sexes to their cause and, against incredible odds, succeeded in extending equal voting rights to all women must have acted on the purest of principles. Women who themselves were less than noble could not have driven such a noble crusade.

With those types of expectations, the idealist should cancel any plans to actually begin the journey. This thesis reveals that neither the elected leaders of the country nor the leaders of the suffrage movement are immune from criticism for their actions. Wilson, more often than not, acted out of cold political reality rather than out of a sense of justice. Catt, seeking all expedient means to further her cause, was more than willing to ignore the civil rights' violations committed by the government against the NWP. Paul wrongly pursued a policy of militant harassment of the President even while he was exerting his utmost executive influence to secure the federal amendment. Both the President and the two suffrage organizations were willing to sacrifice the rights of black citizens in order to gain suffrage for white women. Fortunately, historical analysis is not



necessarily concerned with identifying heroes and villains. It is, however, concerned with understanding how and why change occurs. To that end, this thesis contains important insight into why Congress finally passed the federal suffrage amendment and what role the President played in that process.

Few scholars disagree with one of this study's fundamental points: Wilson was converted to supporting the cause of the federal suffrage amendment early in his second term. Where the disagreement begins is around the questions of what brought about that conversion and what its eventual effects were on the suffrage amendment's outcome. Using the analytical framework of executive influence, I have attempted to answer both of those questions.

Prior to the 1918 mid-term elections, suffrage was not an issue with enough power to swing a significant number of voters in one direction or the other. With only minor concessions to the suffrage movement, Wilson was able to win re-election in 1916. His support for the states' rights plank in the Democratic platform, his vote for the New Jersey suffrage referendum, and his proclamation of openness to a federal amendment at the Atlantic City NAWSA Convention were enough to convince most pro-suffrage Democratic voters that he was an ally. Those same actions were moderate enough to not alienate anti-suffrage elements within the Democratic Party, especially Southerners fearful of the federal amendment as a threat to white supremacy.

In a direct rebuke to the NWP campaign strategy in 1916, enfranchised women in the West demonstrated that they were not single-issue voters. Evaluating Wilson and Hughes across the spectrum of their policies and beliefs, the majority of women voted in

line with their traditional party affiliations. Those who broke ranks tended to support Wilson because of his efforts to keep the United States out of the war in Europe.

What changed between the November 1916 election and the start of the 1918 mid-term election campaign season that made suffrage a more powerful political wedge? First, and perhaps most importantly, the United States became directly involved in war. NAWSA leaders, following Catt's guidance, made a critical decision to commit their organization to war service alongside suffrage work. Their contributions to national defense through home front service strengthened the arguments they had been making for decades that equal sacrifice deserved equal citizenship. This is not to say that they explicitly altered the basis of their demand for suffrage. They continued to ask for suffrage on the basis of natural rights, but they were not above using patriotism as an additional reason.

Helen Gardener articulated this dual reasoning to Wilson in a letter sent a few months before the first vote in the Senate. She explained:

We do not ask, and do not want [suffrage] given as a 'reward' for war work and war sacrifice. Those are our loyal duty and pleasure to give even under the humiliation of disfranchisement, but how much more whole-heartedly, cheerfully, joyfully we can and will make those duties our first thought and pleasure when we can feel that we are a part of the government which we gladly sacrifice so much to protect and to make safe! I doubt if even you can grasp how deep that feeling is in women.<sup>239</sup>

Whether women wanted suffrage as a reward or not, that is certainly part of the reason why male elected officials decided to grant it to them. Wilson increasingly emphasized women's contribution to the war when he urged members of Congress to support the federal amendment. Likewise, the Congressional debates on the amendment are filled

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<sup>239</sup> Gardener to Wilson (June 17, 1918), *NAWSA Records*, Box 32, Reel 21.

with pro-suffrage Congressmen heaping accolades on the sacrifices of women engaged in war service.

The other significant change during 1917 was the increase in the number of suffrage states. Eight more states had granted women the right to vote, and it was clear to both parties that, unlike in 1914 and 1916, enfranchised women would make a difference in the 1918 mid-term elections. The increase in the number of suffrage states was in no small way connected to Wilson's support. In close coordination with NAWSA - the only suffrage organization still working on state campaigns - Wilson encouraged state legislatures across the country to pass suffrage referenda. Shedding his hesitance to become involved in internal state affairs, he wrote letters, gave statements to the press, and encouraged individual legislators and governors to extend the franchise to women.

Members of the NWP, and the modern scholars that agree with them, would argue that the other significant change in 1917 was the militant picketing campaign and subsequent publicity surrounding the pickets' arrest and imprisonment. The actions of the NWP, they insist, made it impossible for Wilson to continue to talk about fighting a war for democracy abroad while denying democracy at home. The civil disobedience of the pickets was so embarrassing to the Wilson Administration that the President realized the only way he could remove the NWP thorn from his side was by supporting the federal amendment.

This thesis has refuted that position. Wilson was troubled by the pickets mostly because of the embarrassment that they caused to the suffrage movement as a whole. His correspondence with members of Congress, NAWSA leaders, and the press all indicate that he hoped the general public's distaste for the pickets would not create irreparable



harm to the suffrage cause, which he increasingly supported. Moreover, press coverage of the pickets, especially outside of New York and Washington, D.C., was primarily negative. Only a tiny minority of Americans pressured Wilson to stop the arrests, imprisonments, and forced feedings of NWP members. Despite the pickets' willingness to suffer injustice at the hands of the government, there was no great public outcry at their mistreatment. Wilson's conversion over the course of 1917 came in spite of the actions of the militants.

Once Wilson for the first time asked Congress to pass the federal amendment in December 1917, he never wavered from that position of support. Illustrating the limits of executive influence, though, the amendment failed to pass in the Senate two times before finally succeeding under a Republican-controlled Congress in June 1919. This study has established three factors that constrained the President's ability to influence Congress.

First, he had to wrestle with the thin line between executive interest and executive interference. Senatorial courtesy required him to tread carefully on the sensitivities of those he sought to influence. In addition, the solid base of the Democratic Party was located in the South where woman suffrage seemingly posed a threat to white supremacy. Wilson recognized that Southern Democrats were under immense pressure from their constituents to protect white supremacy at all costs. The reality of the situation was that woman suffrage posed little threat to the Southern political system. In fact, had black women been as disfranchised as easily as black men had been, the power of white voters would have doubled when women were given the vote. Nonetheless, fear outweighed fact. Anti-suffragists convinced voters that woman suffrage would destroy white political hegemony. Public perception mattered more to Southern Senators than the political

reality and, despite his best efforts, Wilson was largely unable to overcome their fears of losing future elections by supporting the federal amendment.<sup>240</sup>

Finally, Wilson recognized that suffrage had become entangled with a host of other progressive issues including prohibition and child labor laws. Several Democratic Senators depended on support from the liquor and textile industries for their political survival. Those industries, sometimes publicly and sometimes working from the shadows, continually fed the anti-suffrage movement. Mostly Southerners, these Senators faced a demand to defend white political hegemony as well as pressure from the liquor and textile industries to adamantly oppose a federal amendment. Owing more to the white constituents that elected them and the interest groups that financed their campaigns, those Senators were immune to pressure from the President. As a result, Wilson's efforts to swing their votes in favor of the suffrage amendment were in vain.

In the end, party politics and simple electoral math made suffrage an issue worthy of Wilson's attention and devotion. Under Catt's leadership, NAWSA played the bipartisan political game more effectively than the NWP. Without alienating the Republican support that would be required to win in Congress and, later, in the state ratification campaigns, Catt endeared NAWSA to the President and gained his support in critical battles for state referenda, the creation of a separate House Suffrage Committee, and, finally, the federal amendment itself. NAWSA wisely decided to continue pursuing state referenda. Additionally, they distanced themselves from the actions of the NWP and

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<sup>240</sup> Wilson, himself, was no champion of black civil or political rights. A southerner by birth and by ideology, he held similar views of the need for white supremacy in the South as did the members of his party in Congress. Still, his work on behalf of the federal suffrage amendment indicates that he felt confident that white supremacy was not threatened by granting women the right to vote.

simultaneously engaged in war service and suffrage work. As a result, NAWSA leaders put the suffrage movement in a position to secure the federal amendment before the end of Wilson's second term.

A political analysis of the suffrage movement leads to a version of the story that lacks much inspiration. Watching Wilson come to support the cause only when it becomes politically significant to do so is less than stirring. Even without actively seeking heroic figures, though, one cannot help but come across them when studying a movement that was, at its most grassroots level, about political liberty and democratic principles.

I continue to find myself inspired by letters like the one from a young suffragist campaigning alone in Montana who wrote back to the NWP headquarters, "Often I ride all night from one town to the next. It is very uphill work here in Montana. Every place I go seems harder. Sometimes I wonder if it is worth all the money and effort, but Miss Burns said it was one of the most important states so I suppose it is worth while."<sup>241</sup> Likewise, one cannot help but be moved by the report from another suffragist that she was sure Senator Hayden had told her he would vote "yea" on the amendment, but that she could not remember any of the specifics of their conversation because he was just one of 14 members of Congress she had interviewed on that particular *morning*.<sup>242</sup>

Even if it was the result of political compromises and pressures and capitulation to racism in many cases, that magical day that Beulah Amidon imagined when writing to her comrades in jail in 1917 did come to pass. Her words, meant to inspire those unjustly

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<sup>241</sup> Clara Louise Rowe to Mrs. Jay Webster (May 31, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.

<sup>242</sup> Report of Maud Younger (January 17, 1916), *NWPP*, Reel 1.



imprisoned for petitioning the government for a redress of legitimate grievances, travel through the years to remind us of the true basis of the battle: "Can you imagine how it will be when that amendment actually passes? Sometimes, when I am too tired to think, I just take a long breath and try to dream of a whole nation politically free --- and then there is nothing too hard to do to make the dream come true."<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Amidon to Picket-Prisoners (August, 23, 1917), *NWPP*, Reel 2.

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