

APR 28 1986

WOMEN AS A POLITICAL FORCE . . .

DID THE VOTE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Dorene Roberts Sarnoski

Capstone Spring 1986

"Once the right to vote had been won, the movement lost momentum. Success often leads to apathy. . . ." (K.T. Poole, Women, Public Opinion and Politics, 1985).

"... Suffrage did not alter the way in which American women have most effectively exerted political power." (C.R. Berkin, Women of American History, 1979).

"There is no significant difference between men's and women's votes." "Wives follow their husbands." "Women are traditionalists." (D.V. Edwards, The American Political Experience, 1984).

"Women's official admission into the political arena seemed to retard rather than enhance the social power of women." "The female reformers were no longer a force to be reckoned with." "Election studies revealed that women did not vote in a bloc, in great numbers or in opposition to their husbands." (M.P. Ryan, Womanhood in America, 1983).

"Years ago I predicted that these suffragettes would turn out to be idiots. They are now hard at work proving it. (H.L. Mencken, In Defense of Women, 1922).

"The newly enfranchised women turned out to be sleeping partners in the political sense." (M. Kinnear, Daughters of Time).

Kinnear refers to the period after 1920 as a time of "women's political abdication". Yet, at the same time she also says "... during the 20's feminists were able to influence government legislation on different matters." This appears to be a clear contradiction. It is to this contradiction that I direct your attention and this research. Many have simply overlooked the facts and remained loyal to the contradiction.

Whether from traditional history books or women's studies texts, the pronouncement on women and the vote seems to be the same. The preceding quotes are the conventional assumption of women as a political force. After the vote, we are told, women went back home and nothing changed. With no driving issue, women became apathetical. This is not only a wrong historical fact, but a dangerous one for women. If accepted, it can be used as a weapon against women. ie: Women aren't really political. Women did not exercise rights anyway. Suffragists were a small, unimportant group. Most women don't care about the public sphere. The same thing will happen with ERA, so why bother.

I suggest that we will prove the historians verdict

false by an examination of women's activities both before and after the 19th Amendment. This examination will focus three areas in which women were an active force: labor, social reform and moral reform.

The most violent opposition against women voting came from three areas: 1) Liquor interests, who were afraid of the women's moral reform activities; 2) Factory owners in the industrial states, who feared women's fight for better labor laws; and 3) Southern states, who thought voting was just too unladylike. Their fears were alleviated after the vote when women voted with husbands, fathers; when only 25% of women voted; and when most of the female voters were white and not immigrant. However, had they looked further down the road, their fears would have been founded. Their worst fears were realized after the 1920's, when women did indeed become political beings.

It is necessary to look beyond the polling place itself. Why look beyond? Because voting practices as an isolated measuring stick do not tell us the real story.

Accepting the statistics of the time, we have to ask why would women vote the same as husbands, or even not vote at all. Is apathy the answer? There are other answers to consider. The "sports theory" (Edwards) suggests that men see elections as a contest, a sporting event. Their particular social indoctrination has taught them how to behave in such an event. It is of major importance who wins the contest. Women did not have this same social indoctrination. Secondly, Poole's statistics suggest that other newly enfranchised groups behave exactly the same as the women did. When the vote was given to those under 21, the young voted as their father's had. They did not vote as a cohesive bloc. This fact has often been ignored. (Poole p.41) Finally, D. Antolini points out that the election is seen as the end, the victory, by men. Yet women see political action as the means to the end. (Flammang p.23)

It is the direction for political action that is gender-distinctive, not necessarily the election. In issues that directly and immediately effect women: reproduction rights, child-care, family policy, employment discrimination -- how often is there a clear difference in the candidates?

Looking beyond, we see that voting is not the only way to participate. In studying political participation, Poole(p.124) found the following statistics:

	Men	Women
Influencing others votes	.40	.38
Attending meetings	.08	.09
Campaign work	.03	.04
Wearing political buttons	.07	.08
Belonging to political club	.04	.05
Contributions to campaign	.11	.11

This research shows that women do not fall behind men in the area of political participation. Poole also points out that since he began gathering statistics in 1950 the fluctuation in the above areas has been the same for both sexes.

Politics is defined by Edwards as the "actions of individuals who run for office, work campaigns, vote, lobby, make policy, or execute policy." This is done most actively and most effectively by individuals organized into groups. Since women were organized well before the vote, are we to believe that they fell apart because of the 19th Amendment? Does it make sense that such organization meant nothing, fell apart, or withdrew into apathy?

No. They not only remained organized, but further organized, and changed the direction of their impact. After 1920, women (and rest of society) saw themselves as whole political, 'citizens'. The vote did make a difference -- it

was not seen at the polls because the difference was psychological. Women changed their tactics, their mode-of-operation. The vote gave them access and that access has made all the difference for the rest of us in what has been achieved since 1920.

To demonstrate, we turn to Women as a Political Force before 1920 and after.

MORAL REFORM

BEFORE THE VOTE

Women moved into moral reform in full force with the anti-slavery movement. The first Female Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Boston in 1832. It was a chapter of the American AntiSlave Society - modeled after their male predecessors. (Ryan p.127)

How did these women go about their reform? They entreated the men in their lives to abolish slavery on moral grounds. They used a "domestic strategy". It was rare when someone like the Grimke sisters spoke out in public, as if they had a right to do so. The closest these abolitionists came to direct political action was the petitions they sent to legislatures. But even this was a "proper feminine

tactic" because they did not have to leave their homes to do it. By the 1850's, "female signatures on petitions were in a clear minority".(Ryan p.132) Never, did the abolitionists' speeches end up with a call for women's suffrage.

In 1840, the World Anti-Slavery Convention met. The women delegates were refused admission because of their sex. They were willing to compromise and sit in the balcony with a curtain drawn, so as not to distract the men.(Edwards p. 466) Here was a group of women fighting for freedom of the slaves as a god-given right, yet not even demanding their own freedom as citizens.

The reform movement that enrolled the most women in America prior to the vote was the American Female Moral Reform Association. This organization, founded in 1843, had 400 chapters at its height. Ryan points out that before this, most female associations "followed on the heels of male crusades". The Moral Reform Association was the "notorious exception" where women took the lead and set the course of reform.(Ryan p.129-31)

You would expect the above fact to make a difference; make women see themselves as political beings; make them take political action. They were thought of as a "force to

be reckoned with at city hall".(Ryan p.125) However, their "force" was secondary - through the men in their lives. Women still acted within their superior moral roles. They never called for change because they had a right to do so, but rather because it was proper for a good christian society. Women were granted permission to judge what was 'good' as opposed to what was 'just'.

Through these moral reform activities, women learned how to organize, form networks, and raise money. But always they worked within the private, not political, sphere. They directed their efforts toward education and persuasion of individuals. They entreated their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. Their attack on prostitution involved educating men about "proper ethical behavior" and entreating the prostitutes to change on religious grounds. They entered the public sphere by converting husbands and sons and sending them as "emissaries".(Ryan p.130)

Again, the reformers did not link up with the suffragists. Their ultimate goal may have been political, but their means was not. They continued to identify within the traditional sphere of private, not public. Ryan feels women "organized associations, held meetings, published reports, etc. but stopped short of political power." The female moral reformers seemed almost to anticipate a "march

of women into the male sanctums" of political power, but did not advance there themselves.

AFTER THE VOTE

Compare the above to the anti-lynching campaign of women after the passage of the 19th Amendment. Certainly this could have been perceived of and fought on moral grounds. But it wasn't. Why?

The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was founded in 1930 by Jessie Daniel Ames. She urged women to "no longer remain silent in face of a crime done in their name".(Berkin p.360) This organization had a highly institutionalized structure, with a central council and councils in each state. The structure and constituency of the ASWPL were "predicated on the tradition of voluntarism and belief in the potential power of enfranchised women".(Berkin p.366)

There were 43,000 signatures on the anti-lynching pledge -- all women. Importantly, these women were the same members of the old moral reform movement. They were the women from women's clubs, missionary societies, and church groups. Their average age was 48. (Berkin p.368) They

were, therefore, the same women who had seen the suffrage amendment through.

Most important is the fact that these women did not fight on moral grounds. They certainly brought morality into it. "This crime brings contempt upon America, discredits our civilization, and discounts christian religion".(Berkin p.373) However, this time, from the very beginning, their literature stressed the political. They said lynching discredits the legal processes and undermines respect for the officers of law. Throughout, the ASWPL probed the implications of the courts' treatment of blacks. Women had not used these arguments in the past.

The ASWPL linked their campaign directly with issues in national politics. They called attention to the plight of the tenant farmer. They applauded the New Deal for contributing to the fight against lynching. They used political arguments and they were successful. In 1932 there were 28 lynchings; in 1933 they declined; in 1940 there were none. (Berkin p.381)

It is also interesting to compare the moral reform movement in the U.S. to that in England. Historians called the English more radical than the American reformers. More radical to some means political recognition to me. The

women in England recognized themselves as political beings, as citizens, before American women did.

When the English women wanted the Contagious Disease Act repealed they used direct political tactics. Their leader was a woman named Josephine Butler. (Kinnear p.134) The fact that she called for political action coupled with the fact that she was also active in the suffrage movement is no coincidence. These reformers argued that women were "robbed of their civil rights" because only they were being regulated and not the male customers. They did not argue about the morality of prostitution. (Kinnear p.134)

Butler addressed political gatherings, canvassed, and openly called for defeat of candidates who support the Act. Kinnear points out that, "Butler's success was singular because it involved direct political action."

LABOR

BEFORE THE VOTE

Since women comprised a majority of the labor force in some industries (laundry workers, collar makers) you would expect them to expand their sphere and make labor

demands as political beings. But again, before the vote, they did not.

Labor activity in the 19th century was usually sporadic, short-lived, and unsuccessful. There were "outbursts of militance" in the late 1800's among laundry workers, collar makers, typographers and cigarmakers. However, these isolated acts of resistance never resulted in the formation of "enduring labor organizations".(Ryan p.195) Men did not recognize women as full human beings equal with themselves. In unions where women were allowed (Knights of Labor), women made up on 3% of membership.(Ryan)

Ryan suggests that the "collective consciousness" of women workers was deflected by a sense of temporary employment, ethnic differences, irregular wage scales and the fact that they were spread through all different small shops. I suggest that women did not have a collective consciousness when it came to fair treatment for themselves. They only recognized themselves as mothers, wives, helpers, keepers of morality. When these women did make attempts at organization, they organized as small groups of workers, not as a larger political group of women workers. These pockets of women workers throughout the nation believed that women should have the vote, but said "the ballot was not working women's protection."(Berkin p.219)

Berkin says the "womens role in the labor force was incompatible with conditions necessary for permanent trade union organization". What conditions does she point to?

1)They did not regard themselves as permanent members of the work force. 2)They were too shy and retiring to participate in organizations that required speaking and assuming leadership. Do these reasons make sense? Would you be willing to work for \$1 instead of \$4 just because it's only temporary? Are we to believe that in the entire labor force all the women were shy and retiring?

Rather, these women were not given recognition as whole people and that's what kept them from organizing politically. Men were political, full-fledged citizens. They could demand constitutional rights, while women had to ask.

An exception to women's labor organizations pre-1920, was the Collar Laundry Union of Troy, N.Y. This organization had 400 members and lasted six years. However, their leader, Kate Mullaney, saw herself as a political being. She urged the women to organize themselves independently of the men. These launderers saw themselves as different than the traditional women of the times because laundering was considered less ladylike than the other women's occupations.(Berkin p.208)

The Workingwomens Association of N.Y. was founded in 1968.(Berkin) Their purpose was to help women workers. They raised money to ease the financial woes of some of the women, not to help them strike or move politically. When the above-mentioned launderers tried to strike, their smallest contribution came from this Association.(Berkin p.214) Again, women confining themselves to helping others, not demanding fair treatment.

Legislation which did take place was to protect women. There is much argument over whether this was a good or bad thing. While men were able to improve their status through union organization, women had to rely on protective legislation from long hours, low wages, and poor working conditions.

Taylor points out that the exclusion of women from the mines in 1842 paved the way for their subjection to state control. By 1844, they were in the same class with children and young persons.

In a 1907 landmark case (Muller v Oregon) sex was established as a valid classification for protective legislation. The famous Brandeis Brief used biological data to show women as weaker than men. This limited the contractural powers of women. The decision was epoch-making

because it emphasized health of women rather than "legal aspects of the case."(Taylor) The legality of the American Constitutions did not count for women in 1908.

AFTER TO VOTE

After the passage of the 19th Amendment, the Women's Trade Union League devoted less and less time to bringing middle-class culture to working girls and became "deeply embroiled in union activities and strikes".(Ryan p.203)

The Women's Bureau began investigations and publications of situations they wanted corrected. This Bureau was given the status of a department in the national government. They recommended standards of employemnt directly to political leaders of the country.

The National Women's Party lobbied against protective legislation. They had previously steadfastly fought for political recognition of women as political beings. They called for labor legislation irrespective of sex. They used political arguments for: the right to contract, control of property, equal earnings, and opportunities in government. In their arguments, they cited Constitutional law and freedom of contract as rights of newly enfranchised women.(Taylor)

The National Industrial Recovery Act included women and raised their wages in 1933.(Taylor)

The Wage and Hour Act of 1938 included women "engaged in commerce or in the production of goods for commerce."(Taylor) This Act set standard wages that employers were forced by law to pay.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 included women in the minimum hours and minimum wage standards in industry. Dunlop's research shows that records kept since 1939 show compliance with this Act was highest where the Department of Labor inspections were most frequent -- the South, among non-whites, and among females. Therefore, women definitely benefitted.

The Social Security Act of 1935 included women as beneficiaries and entitled them to coverage. More importantly, it included women workers under unemployment compensation insurance.

Most might argue that all of this legislation happened not because of women, but in spite of them. They would point to demographic changes (more women in work force), and the Depression as the catalysts. However, in 1935 there were only 1% more women in the work force than in

1910.(Dunlop) Therefore, an increase in their numbers cannot explain the beneficial legislation. The big increase in women in the work force did not come until after 1950. Also, based on historical precedent, would it not seem more plausible that women would be further oppressed during the Depression to allow more benefits for men?

The above legislation attests to the fact that women were recognized as political beings after the vote. The vote left male society no choice. These labor laws did not come about because of the kindness of male legislatures. Women now saw themselves as voters, as citizens, as law makers, as equals with the American man in the political sense. The vote provided access and incentive. The women did not walk away, but changed their line of attack. They now worked full-fledge within the system, not from the outside. They demanded equal rights for their labor. They wanted legislation on the books. Suffrage gave women formal, written power; as weak as it may have been, it now had to be recognized because Americans do homage to the written law.

SOCIAL REFORM

BEFORE THE VOTE

In this final area of reform, women were often referred to as the "breadgivers".(Ryan p.167) Women began to organized in their existing female circles, especially church groups. They took up a larger and larger share of responsibility for the care of the poor. By the mid 19th century, the local asylum often stood out as one of the cities most impressive buildings. It sometimes housed hundreds of children at a five-figure budget.(Ryan p.151)

Operating through various settlement houses, welfare agencies, and womens clubs "women became the backbone and inspiration of the Progressive Movement".(Ryan p.169) By 1910, 400 settlement houses had been established to help the poor. All of these were staffed by women. Women were expanding their caretaking abilities - becoming the housekeepers of the world. But their reforms were still only "quasi-legitimate."(Ryan p.202)

The day-to-day charity work belonged almost exclusively to women. This included: visiting work, establishing soup kitchens, hospitals, and lying-in asylums. They raised their own money. No one in government had to concern

themselves with what to do with the street people. Women saw this work far removed from the dirty world of politics.

Two of the most famous reformers, Florence Nightingale and Octavia Hill, would not support women as a political force. Nightingale spent her life training nurses and working for the improvement of public health. Hill re-furnished run-down houses to make homes for the poor. She housed over 2,000 people.(Kinnear p.145) Yet, both refused to support women's suffrage. Hill said, "the very thing which makes me feel how fatal it would be for women to be drawn into the political arena precludes my joining what must be a political campaign."(Kinnear p.146) Before the vote, women clearly saw their social reform work as non-political.

AFTER THE VOTE

Luckily, all the reformers did not withdraw from the political front. Some knew that the vote was needed to go any further. Some knew it would make a difference for women and their social movement to have political recognition. Among them was Jane Adams. She knew that the political system was responsible for urban design, housing, clean water, sanitation, education. She recognized that women were doing all the work, but could go no further without

access to that system. The only direct way to work for sanitary municipal housekeeping was through elected officials. The vote was seen as a practical instrument of reform. Women were sticking to the notion of "breadgiver", but wanted the new status of citizen to continue their work. To these women, 1920 meant a direct link to the legislature.

Mary Livermore was active in the social reform movement as the leader of the Sanitary Commission. She explains her shock when a builder would not accept her check for hospital construction: "Here was a revelation. Women enlisted the whole northwest in a great money-making philanthropic enterprise. But by law our names were not worth the paper they were written on."(Ryan p,214) After 1920, her checks were accepted.

After 1920, the social housekeepers were "aligned in an impressive formation" with the traditional male structures of public and political power. Women headed three state wage boards, five industrial commissions, and eleven children's bureaus.(Ryan p.205)

The Maternity Act of 1921 was called a "uniquely progressive piece of legislation enacted in an era not noted for the liberality of government programs."(Ducat/Chase p.68) Women created this early forerunner to the now-famous

grant-in-aid programs. The national government offered to match state expenditures to encourage them to provide social services.

Direct political action was used to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Protection for the health of mothers and infants was taken out of womens' moral/helping spectrum and put directly in the spectrum of the law. The Act provided a very small amount considering the high infant mortality rate among the poor. However, women had forced the political system to recognize the slum conditions of working-class women. These new voters had forced a new political issue.

Heated opposition to this Act came from the same groups who had opposed suffrage. Some called it a move toward communism. The American Medical Associations feared socialized medicine would result. The D.A.R. did not like the suffragists bring the strong arm of the Federal government into states.

About 45 states participated when the Act was under the auspices of the Federal government. Once Federal funds ran out, however, only 16 states kept up the funding. This is in spite of the fact that records showed the death rate was reduced. This withdrawal of state support shows why women wanted reform to be official, political doctrine. They knew

society would not see "breadgiving" as their duty. This is why after the vote they changed tactics to get everything written in the golden law book.

Before 1920, women's political rights were viewed as topics for conversations, but not action. This does not mean all has worked out perfectly for women. What it does mean is that the women did not go away.

In conclusion I urge you to look beyond the voting patterns or the statistics of women in public office. This is still a bleak picture: never more than 2 women Senators; 4% of House members are women; no women governors; only 8.7% of mayors are women. This does not tell the whole story because for that we must look at organizational and policy fronts. We cannot overlook such things as rape crisis centers, health collectives, welfare rights organizations, League of Women Voters, National Organization of Women. All of these are political, all came after 1920, all show a change in perception. Mandel is confident that these "changes in the public agenda" have come about and will continue to come, "because of women's political participation". Since being raised to the citizen status, women have produced "impressive policy achievements and expanded what's considered political".(Flammang p.10) Women

have been held back by societal roles, not because they won or had no driving issue.

Americans have a long history of adoration for and adherence to the written law. In 1923, after the vote, women claimed "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the U.S. or by any state on account of sex." Today we call it the ERA; it was first introduced in 1923. (Ruth) These women perceived themselves as citizens and demanded full recognition from the country. They recognized the American tradition of Constitutional doctrine as their rightful tradition also. This demand would not have come before the 19th Amendment. Women as a political force -- indeed, the vote did make a difference.

SOURCES USED

- Berkin, Carol R. and Norton, Mary B., *Women of America, A History*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979.
- Ducat, Craig R. and Chase, Harold W., *Constitutional Interpretation*, St. Paul, West Publishing Company, 1978.
- Dunlop, John T. and Galenson, Walter, *Labor in the Twentieth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1978.
- Edwards, David V., *The American Political Experience*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1982.
- Flammang, Janet A., *Political Women*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1984.
- Kinnear, Mary, *Daughters Of Time*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1982.
- Mandel, Ruth B., *In the Running, The New Woman Candidate*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1981.
- Poole, Keith T. and Zeigler, L. Harmon, *Women, Public Opinion, and Politics*, New York, Longman, 1985.
- Ruth, Sheila, *Issues in Feminism*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.
- Ryan, Mary P., *Womanhood In America*, New York, Franklin Watts, 1983.
- Taylor, Albion, G., *Labor Problems and Labor Law*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1944.