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Bigger than a Ballot Box

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Bigger than a Ballot Box

Sara Hunter Graham. *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996. 256 pp. ISBN 0-300-06346-6 (cl).

Anne Meis Knupfer. *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African-American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 222 pp. ISBN 0-8147-4671-3 (cl); 0-8147-4691-8 (pb).

Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed. *Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Woman Suffrage in Utah, 1870-1896*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997. 332 pp. ISBN 0-87421-222-7 (cl); ISBN 0-87421-223-5 (pb).

Suzanne M. Marilley. *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. 294 pp. ISBN 0-674-95465-3 (cl).

Joanne L. Goodwin

The relationship between the histories of woman suffrage and U.S. politics suffered from a reluctance on the part of both fields to include the other until recently. Political historians refrained from in-depth discussions of the eighty-year movement to gain the vote for women until the new political history expanded the definition of political actors and activities. Women's historians (with a few notable exceptions) discussed the suffrage movement as a type of voluntarist reform activity, rather than contextualizing it within political institutions and systems. Ellen Carol DuBois's study of suffrage through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments departed significantly from earlier research by placing suffrage squarely within nineteenth-century politics. A few years later, Paula Baker's article on the "domestication of politics" provided an interpretative framework that located women and men as actors within respective gendered political cultures.¹ The four books reviewed here illustrate the value of this expanded definition of politics. Each work goes beyond narrative description to explore the ways in which organized women engaged in the political life of their communities. Three specifically focus on suffrage, while the fourth places the vote within a broader context of African-American social politics. All four books provide new perspectives that enable scholars to address questions central to the histories of both politics and women. For instance, how the achievement of women's right to vote reshaped U.S. politics; or what correlation might exist be-

tween the expansion of citizenship rights and a decline in voter participation. Studies of voting rights campaigns can explore far more than patterns of voting behavior because they reveal the cultural and political dimensions of American life.

Suzanne M. Marilley revises several standards of suffrage historiography in a study that could reignite debates on the topic. Scholars have looked at half of the suffrage picture with their studies of women's voting patterns, involvement in party auxiliaries, and initiatives for social policy. In addition to these proactive means, Marilley argues, we need to examine the movement's strategies to overcome resistance to the woman's vote. She contends that the liberal ideal of individual rights appeared in three arguments over the eighty years of the suffrage campaign: freedom through equality, the right to a life free from fear of violence, and the freedom to develop one's individual talents through equal opportunities. Early works on suffrage set up "false dichotomies" by defining and separating arguments for justice and expediency. However, these two arguments were not unique to the suffrage movement and little separates the two in the world of practical politics. Marilley agrees that a change took place when the positive right grounded in liberal individualism became compromised and changed during the political process as liberal suffragists used "illiberal" means to achieve their goals.²

The first rights argument appeared within the abolitionist movement and the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. Both groups used natural rights arguments as the basis for universal suffrage claims. Such writers as Maria Stewart, Lucretia Mott, and Sarah Grimke and Angelina Grimke drew from scripture as well as the Declaration of Independence to strengthen their cause. The emphasis on natural rights as a justification for universal suffrage lost out in the dynamics of Reconstruction politics as debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments divided the coalition between suffragists and abolitionists. From that point on, political expediency replaced the logic of natural rights and the moral premises upon which they were based.

Marilley's second rights example evolved from her interpretation of the lull in suffrage politics during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. She shifts the focus away from both the National and American Woman Suffrage Associations (NWSA and AWSA) toward the largest women's organization of the period, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU, she argues, transformed women from hesitant observers of political life to active promoters of suffrage. Under Frances Willard's leadership, this organization gave traditionalist women an arena in which to discuss issues important to them—their physical, economic, and spiritual security—and in so doing found a new rationale for the vote.

Members based their need for voting rights on their fear of domestic and economic violence to themselves and their families. This “feminism of fear” changed members’ views of suffrage from that of radical politics to a method to secure family stability (102). Marilley’s interpretation moves the center of the mass suffrage movement from suffrage organizations to moderate, if not conservative, WCTU members, who broadened the appeal of woman suffrage and made it acceptable to the majority of Americans.

The decision of NAWSA leadership to include WCTU within the movement, to be tolerant of differences in Susan B. Anthony’s words, also reflected the intolerance and exclusivity adopted at the time. By mainstreaming the suffrage movement and gaining numbers important for the passage of the federal amendment, white women suffragists engaged in racist and nativist arguments. The issues of security, antiviolence, and family protection that appealed to WCTU members would have resonated with working-class immigrant and African-American women as well; yet, white suffragists used racial privilege to campaign for sex-based rights.

The third form of the rights argument—personal development—corresponded with the revival of the suffrage campaigns by the 1910s. Turning away from nativist claims, many suffragists worked on building alliances. However, the strategy of the national leadership in the final campaign rejected grass roots appeals to male voters and focused on elected officials in state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. “Guarantees of liberal freedom matter more to political elites than to citizens at large,” and proved successful in work with state and federal legislators (15). This decision, one among many that illustrates a retreat from inclusive politics on the part of woman suffragists, reflected the realities of political compromise necessary to achieve political goals as well as a new way to understand the events of the post-suffrage years.

The top-down strategy to win the vote passed over local-level precinct captains and ward bosses. The suffrage victory did not take place at the local level, according to Marilley, and women and men did not form a coalition with mutual benefits. The traditional party work of voter education took place at women’s clubs or ethnic associations, not with ward organizations. Although party politicians rushed to bring in new party members, nothing indicated that the parties would incorporate women into their structures of institutional power. Suffrage groups’ non-partisan philosophy compounded the problem of women’s political integration. Organized women accepted an individual’s right to make her own political choices, as the diverse political identities of NAWSA membership exemplified. Some historians have argued that this contributed to a lack of cohesive vision after 1920, but Marilley believes it “justified women’s

multiple agendas and affirmed multifaceted political aims without imposing one model of citizenship or policy platform on women" (222).

Marilley sympathizes with the challenges early-twentieth-century suffragists faced. These issues reassert themselves in the late twentieth century as historians of women balance their interpretations of suffrage between the compromises the political system demanded and the goals of inclusive politics. In her conclusion, she calls for an analysis that critically assesses antidemocratic aspects of suffrage politics without dismissing the significant political victory achieved by ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Sara Hunter Graham places woman suffrage within U.S. political history and insists that it symbolizes an important milestone of what she calls the "new democracy." She explores how and why supporters of woman suffrage succeeded in passing a constitutional democratic reform in an era of hostility toward rights campaigns. Whereas earlier studies of suffrage emphasized various constituencies within the national movement—radicals of the National Women's Party, traditionalists of the WCTU, or moderates of NAWSA leadership—Graham deconstructs the strategies of the national leadership to make her case. Suffrage campaigns provide an early example of interest group politics and demonstrate how the development of interest groups has shifted the way Americans participate in politics.

During the 1890s, fragmentation and ineffective strategies characterized the political operations of the national movement. The antisuffrage movement, however, made advances in shaping public opinion. Forced to respond to the challenge, NAWSA developed innovations that revitalized the movement and made a permanent impact on American politics. The revived suffrage movement drew upon such methods and structures around them as the indirect influence of benevolent work, the direct action of labor unions, and the organizational structure of urban machines. New uses for publicity, reworked rhetoric about democratic traditions, and precinct-level organization provide the keys to understanding how woman suffrage succeeded when it did, and explain why suffragists used tactics and arguments that were clearly undemocratic.

Opponents represented suffrage as an event that would turn social relations upside down and suffragists as "he-she/s" or marginal women who had forgotten their "true" role. Suffrage leaders counteracted these negative images with illustrations of female progress and self-fulfillment. The "new image" of NAWSA contributed to what Graham calls the "suffrage renaissance." Membership increased, funding expanded, and public opinion turned to favor the vote for women, which together created the foundation for practical politics (148).

NAWSA leadership employed an insider/outsider strategy at both federal and state levels. The insider assumed a non-combative role to build relations with power brokers and gain access to information, and included professional lobbyists who moved legislation through state houses and the U.S. Congress. The outsider built a mass constituency and developed an "army of advocates" who could descend upon local politicians with positions on specific reforms. A well-oiled publicity office created the perception of a mass movement during the ratification process. In addition to new images and revamped strategies, the movement also organized itself down to the block level. Suffragists mixed the methods of indirect influence learned from voluntarist activities with the direct action tactics trade unionists employed. Such pressure group practices led to poor choices, deceptive practices, and appeals to race and wealth at the cost of African-American and working-class support.

The reader will quickly notice that Graham's study includes suffrage scholarship only up to the mid-1980s. Less than one-half dozen sources published later are cited in either the endnotes or selected bibliography. The state of political history at this time suffered from the dearth of research on woman suffrage. Marginalized as insignificant and ignored by political scientists, only a handful of historical studies existed to explain "the largest democratic reform in American history" (xii). The problems Graham identifies from the literature, particularly the lack of attention to gender, suggest that she was not familiar with the changes in U.S. political history that developed over the last decade. The new political history gives greater attention to the interactions between social groups and political systems. The definition of politics has expanded to examine the ways in which groups of actors shaped politics, despite the fact that they had no access to traditional domains of electoral politics. Although not stated directly, the illness that Graham suffered while she completed the book might explain the absence of newer political literature; the book was published posthumously in 1996.

Graham's most significant contribution to the questions about the success of suffrage and the post-suffrage decline rests with her connection between the rise of interest group politics and the decline in voter participation. People felt less need to vote, she argues, not because more people could vote, but because interest groups could influence political outcomes. As the authority of lobbyists and special interests increased, political parties shifted their responsibilities. Political parties did not reflect the diversity of political actors or actions. Nor did they incorporate women or African-American voters into the machinery of politics. Political education and voter socialization became projects of pressure groups. The result of these changes was a new system of political participation that

included formal and informal structures. Graham concludes that our understanding of U.S. politics will reflect more accurately those who were involved in the dynamics of a political system when historians of politics expand their analyses. Then woman suffrage will receive the recognition it deserves as the milestone it was in the development of American politics.

State studies of any national reform offer scholars the opportunity to compare findings across state, region, and nation. This type of comparative analysis shapes new interpretations and allows us to evaluate the comprehensive statements made about regional settings by scholars who have used only national sources. For the United States, a country that grants states considerable latitude in determining the governance of its citizens, comparative studies are essential to our understanding of politics. As regional analyses have demonstrated over the past few years, conclusions drawn from northeastern and upper-midwestern campaigns do not explain southern and western suffrage campaigns.

Carol Cornwall Madsen's edited collection on suffrage in Utah moves in the direction of understanding regional differences with a diverse group of contemporary and historical essays written during the last two decades. It would be easy to view Utah as an anomaly among states because of the Mormon majority. In fact, Mormonism played an important role in the trajectory of suffrage for Utah as a territory and state, but the book avoids the problem of marginality and explores the issues raised in Utah within the context of national politics. For example, the passage of woman suffrage in territorial Utah belongs within the context of Reconstruction Era politics and the pressure of congressional Republicans to build a democratic republic. This context, however, should not confuse Utah territory's early suffrage victory with a movement to expand equality and democratic principles.

In 1870, Utah passed woman suffrage. National debates over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments occupied legislators' attention as did the specific crisis in Utah over polygamy. Between 1862 and 1887, Congress passed punitive measures against the territory and rejected proposals for statehood because of the Mormon Church's stand on polygamy. These measures included the revocation of women's vote in 1887. After several attempts and the church's issuance of an antipolygamy statement, Utah won statehood in 1896 and became the third state to grant voting rights to women.

The explanations for Utah's early pro-woman suffrage position are debated within this collection, but three explanations rise to prominence. First is the argument that the territorial legislature passed woman suffrage to secure Mormons' position in the context of increased federal in-

tervention after the Civil War. The assumption underlying this argument is that new migrants to the area would reduce the majority position of Mormons in the state, thus woman suffrage would secure the majority for the theocracy in the near term. The second explanation argues against this premise stating that internal rather than external pressures led to support for the reform. Mormons never needed to worry about losing their majority status within the territorial population. Suffrage passed in Utah because a splinter group of Mormons who promoted egalitarian relations had created dissent sufficient to raise concerns about internal cohesion. The legislature sought to dispel political dissent by passing the legislation. The third argument places the engine for change in outsiders' cultural constructions of Mormon womanhood. This interpretation claims that women in Utah territory received the right to vote because territorial legislators hoped to show the rest of the nation that Mormons did not disparage or devalue the women in its community.

A second link between Utah's passage of suffrage and the national movement is the alliance between the feminists of the National Woman Suffrage Association and Utah's pro-suffrage activists. Correspondence between Susan B. Anthony and Utah suffragists reveal that despite the NWSA's antipolygamy stance, the organization accepted Mormon support for the campaign, which exemplifies the lengths to which national suffrage leadership would go to further political alliances and gain the vote for women.

Suffrage is one of many issues addressed by the African-American community activists in Anne Meis Knupfer's essential volume. The book's extensive coverage of women's club activities in Chicago made me question how so many could have written so much on Chicago women reformers without including those in Knupfer's story. The book is the first scholarly compendium of club women's work and voluntary social services pieced together from reels and reels of newspaper coverage, club notes, and underutilized manuscript collections. The community life women led provides a more balanced view of the infrastructure of African-American communities on Chicago's south and west sides. Future research on Chicago reform undoubtedly will rely heavily on this resource.

Knupfer's book covers the ideas that motivated turn-of-the-century African-American club women as well as chapter-length coverage of the types of reform they sponsored. She casts a broad net to include clubs that focused on suffrage, literature, and social life, as well as those that tried to address the needs of African-American dependent children, working girls, and the elderly. Knupfer recognizes, as did her subjects, that the world of politics and the world of reform were inextricably linked. Antilynching campaigns, school desegregation, and political campaigns to elect "race

men" as representatives for the second and third wards of Chicago's "Black Belt" are discussed as all part of one agenda—"to uplift the race."

Ideas about race progress and racial differences are imprinted on club women's objectives. They shared the dedication to "maternalist politics" that existed in a variety of women's organizations of the period, but it always had a different twist. African-American club women would not separate the protection of children, working girls, families, and the elderly from the circumstances of social, economic, and physical violence that African Americans faced during the era of de facto segregation. When they discussed protection of the family and development of the child, they shared the ideals of the national women's club movement; that women dedicate themselves to the health and welfare of the family. Yet their motivation went beyond the saccharine idealization found in such groups as the National Congress of Mothers. Women, already protecting family, home, and children, carried the additional duty to keep the race *alive*. Unlike European Americans' reference to the "survival of the race" and their perception of race suicide, the dangers to African Americans were clear and present; in Chicago's southside communities approximately fifty-eight bombings of homes and businesses took place between 1919 and 1921.

Women took the lead in the creation of private agencies and public social services to help meet the needs of community members. Through their clubs they raised funds, staffed centers, and managed homes for dependent children, working girls, and the elderly. They also experienced the frustrations associated with too few resources for too great a need. In addition to internal community motivation to shape and control services, external forces added pressure to develop a community response. Admission to private and sometimes public facilities was restricted racially.

Racial experience also shaped a distinctly different political agenda within the woman suffrage movement. Knupfer expands upon the frequently told story of Ida B. Wells and the Alpha Suffrage Club to describe the network of religious, social, and political ties binding social work to political reform in Chicago. Women often used maternalist arguments to justify their activities in the political process, but the gender concerns of African-American women could not be separated from their concerns for "the race." Before they held the vote, and certainly afterwards, they canvassed the wards of the city to elect an African American to the city council. The white, native-born political activists in the Women's City Club despised their candidate of choice, Oscar de Priest, as a machine politician, a concern many club women of Chicago's southside found irrelevant.

Those familiar with the literature on organized women and the poli-

tics of social provision will find a different emphasis in Knupfer's work. Cross-class unity overrides such familiar analytical themes as social control, middle-class insensitivity to cultural and class differences, and the cost-benefit of government intervention. Class differences and education separated club women from those who received their services, but Knupfer contends the goal of "race uplift" overcame these differences. I am willing to suspend my initial response to what appears as a romanticization of these forerunners of activism, but an explanation of how these women managed to overcome cultural biases at the time is warranted. A critical analysis of the term "racial uplift" could be contextualized within the race and gender constructions for the period. Similarly, the role of religion within reform work appears without critical assessment of the ways in which religion offers its own forms of indoctrination. Finally, the ideas of gender and welfare scholars may not apply to the study undertaken here, but it would be useful to have a discussion of how and why that is the case.

One example of the kind of insight that could come from a comparison is the role of the state in social provision. For instance, it is acknowledged widely that reform women played a major role in the transition from private to public provision. What views emerged from African-American club women about state-funded public provision? The expansion of social work education and the increasing difficulty of fundraising would suggest some interest in public funding. Yet, African Americans' desire to play a role in these agencies and their consistent lack of inclusion in plans for state and county social programs reveals large tensions between black and white social service agencies. The multifaceted dimensions of racial thinking on these and other issues involved with community work deserve further exploration.

The four works reviewed here illustrate the benefits of expanding definitions of politics. To study only elections and office holders as evidence for political history and change over time appears limited by comparison. I know that many political historians have not embraced warmly the more expansive definition of politics and that an audience exists for electoral analyses; however, the wider spectrum of political activities offers a clearer idea of political participation and the distribution of power in U.S. politics.

NOTES

¹ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); and Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women

and the American Political Society, 1780–1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620–47.

² William O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971); and Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).
