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Author(s): Lynn Dumenil

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The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s

The politics of the 1920s are often portrayed in fairly drab terms. Sandwiched between the more compelling eras of Progressivism and the New Deal, the decade seems comparatively uneventful as Americans turned their backs on reform while conservative big business reigned over a “politics of normalcy.” However, many scholars have challenged this stereotypical view of the eclipse of reform, and none more resoundingly than historians of American women. Conventional textbook treatment usually includes a brief mention of the passage of the women’s suffrage amendment in 1920 and perhaps a discussion of the “new woman” embodied in one of the most pervasive icons of the decade, the flapper. A more in-depth analysis, however, that includes changes in the family and sexual mores, women’s participation in the work force, and the political activism of these newly enfranchised citizens, offers a vehicle for broadening our understanding of the social, economic, and political developments of the era. This essay on women and politics focuses on African American and white women’s efforts to expand their political influence once enfranchised. Their activism illustrates women’s role in developing political pressure groups in the early twentieth century and demonstrates both the continuation of reform—and its limits—in the so-called “jazz age” (1).

It should not be surprising that women activists would play an important role in the effort to keep the Progressive Era reform spirit alive in the 1920s. In the suffrage campaign’s last stages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women’s demand for the vote had been intertwined with the ferment for social justice. The practical uses of the vote attracted both upper and middle-class white and black reformers as well as working-class women to the campaign.

Although a broad group of women supported the suffrage campaigns, they were far from united. With few exceptions, black women were excluded from the white-dominated suffrage groups. Racism, as well as a fear that black participation in the movement would confirm southern perceptions that expanding the suffrage to women would disrupt well-established black disenfranchisement in that region, led white suffragists to rebuff black women’s overtures at cooperation. White women themselves were divided, especially after Alice Paul

formed the Congressional Union in 1914. This group, the members of which tended to be young and radical, launched a campaign for a national suffrage amendment and broke with the more conservative National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA), directed by Carrie Chapman Catt, which had focused on a state by state approach to enfranchisement. Congressional Union members picketed the White House during World War I to protest that while the country fought a war for democracy abroad it denied women their democratic rights at home. Distressed by such militant tactics, NAWSA leaders continued their more moderate campaigns in which they emphasized women’s wartime service to the country. This uneasy alliance of a wide variety of women, using different tactics, finally overcame determined opposition, and in 1920 the federal amend-

ment passed, extending the vote to women throughout the nation.

White women leaders entered the new decade with optimism about their newly enlarged public responsibilities. As they sought to expand their political influence, they debated among themselves as to how, and whether, they should act within the Democratic and Republican parties. Because suffragists had claimed that women were unsullied by the corruption of political parties, many now had grave reservations



Three suffragists casting votes in New York City, 1917. The accompanying caption read, “Calm about it. At Fifty-sixth and Lexington Avenue, the women voters showed no ignorance or trepidation, but cast their ballots in a businesslike way that bespoke study of suffrage.” (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-75334.)



To encourage voter registration, members of the Cincinnati League of Women Voters prominently display the results of their efforts on a downtown billboard, 1926. (Image courtesy Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-14420.)

about working within the established party system. Indeed, the League of Women Voters (1920), the successor organization of NAWSA, was established as a nonpartisan group that urged women's active citizenship rather than the support of a particular political party or specific candidates. Some former suffragists followed Alice Paul's lead into the National Woman's Party (NWP), which became a single issue organization that after 1923 focused exclusively on an equal rights amendment to build on the success of constitutional enfranchisement. Others attempted to exert influence within the Republican and Democratic parties. While many progressive women reformers had long been connected to the reformist wing of the Republican Party, some now began to support the Democrats, attracted by the urban liberalism that was emerging in the party in New York state.

In 1920, both Democrats and Republicans recognized women's issues in their platforms, presumably taking women at their word that they would use their combined votes as a powerful political tool. They opened up places within the organizational structure of their parties for female members, although the positions granted were marginal in terms of power or influence. Women became officeholders as well; only a handful were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (a high of

seven in 1928), and none to the Senate, but hundreds served at the state level in legislatures and executive positions earmarked as women's jobs, such as secretary of education and secretary of state. Women were more successful in local government, in part because many of these positions were nonpartisan and thus seemingly more in keeping with ideas that women should operate "above politics." Despite these inroads, female officeholders generally operated within the context of prevailing assumptions that women should keep to women's issues, or "municipal housekeeping," the same assumption that limited their ability to wield much power within their political parties. As the *New York Times*' magazine, *Current History*, summed it up, "Where there is dignity of office but little else, or where there is routine work, little glory, and low pay, men prove willing to admit women to an equal share in the spoils of office" (2).

Although one focus of white activist women's energies centered specifically on breaking down the barriers to their participation in partisan politics, equally important was the determination to use their new political clout to continue the reforms of the Progressive era. Scholars term the approach of these women "maternalism," a fluid concept that usually refers to the idea that women's nurturing roles in

the home could be brought into the public arena to implement social reforms, especially those concerning poor women and children. In the 1920s, white women continued what had begun in the Progressive era: a women's "dominion of reform," of interlocking groups of women who lobbied successfully for mothers' pensions for impoverished dependent women, education and industrial reform, wage and hour laws for working women, a wide range of child health programs on the state level, as well as a broad extension of women's legal rights (3).

The lobbying efforts of these women underline the importance of women activists in pioneering twentieth-century interest group politics (4). Progressive era women activists had worked mostly at the state level, but this changed in the 1920s. An astute recognition of the growing importance of national associations' lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C. led fourteen women's organizations to form the Women Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC), with the goal of promoting federal legislation backed by the member organizations. National leaders mobilized women's groups throughout the country as they passionately advocated for the Child Labor Amendment—after the Supreme Court invalidated a second national child labor law in 1921. Although that effort ultimately failed, the women's lobby saw an early success in the federal Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which gave matching federal funds to states to provide health care and other services for mothers and children.

Women's groups also lobbied on behalf of disarmament and the peace movement. A number of organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, the Women's Trade Union League, and the General Federation of Women's clubs, coordinated a drive to put pressure on President Warren Harding to support disarmament. Their lobbying was a decisive factor in the convening of the Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armament in 1922, although women were disappointed that more was not accomplished. Later in the decade, it was again women's groups, especially the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, that led the way in securing U.S. support for the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact of 1928 that countered isolationist sentiments to renounce war "as an instrument of national policy" (5).

Yet, as was the case with their entry into partisan politics, women activists had limited success in lobbying. Although many states had

passed laws extending women's legal rights and implementing social reforms, by the end of the decade, progress had slowed. Women were particularly discouraged by the failure of the effort to get a child labor amendment through Congress. Indeed, most national legislation supported by women lobbyists was unsuccessful. Congress successively cut the Sheppard-Towner Act's appropriations and finally ended the program in 1929. By the end of the decade, many women activists were frustrated because, while both political parties seemed eager to woo the woman's vote by making rhetorical appeals to women's role as homemaker, they paid significantly less attention to the specific reforms demanded by the "women's lobby" (6).

Moreover, the women's rights movement itself was in shambles, with white women divided among themselves as to tactics and goals. Ironically, the problems hindering a sustained feminist movement to some extent grew out of the success of the suffrage battle. Before national suffrage was achieved, a great many women—equally excluded from this basic right of citizenship—could come under the same umbrella of "votes for women." Once the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, the lines that divided women—class, race, age, ideology—became more significant. By gaining the individual right they had so vigorously sought, they laid the groundwork for the fracturing of female communities. As one activist ruefully put it in 1923, "The American woman's movement, and her interest in great moral and social questions, is splintered into a hundred fragments under as many warring leaders" (7).

This fragmentation was particularly evident in the ferocious debate over the NWP's proposed Equal Rights Amendment, which stated that, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." Under the leadership of Alice Paul, the NWP focused so exclusively on the ERA as a means of achieving the political and economic equality that the newly coined term *feminism* soon came to refer exclusively to their specific agenda. Women interested in broader social reform, especially the sex-specific labor laws that they had worked so hard to achieve for working women in the states, were alarmed at this "blanket amendment," which they feared would undermine labor protection for women.

Another serious issue that hampered women's efforts in behalf of reform was the white racism and indifference that limited black and white women activists' ability to work together. African American women hoped that suffrage would allow them to address issues such as Jim Crow, lynching, male disenfranchisement, the sexual abuse of black women, and economic discrimination, goals that underlined their view that the elevation of black women was inseparable from racial progress. Even before the suffrage amendment passed, African American women's organizations had embarked on voter registration campaigns in states that had given women the vote. After the amendment was ratified, black women redoubled their efforts, focusing especially on the South, where the majority of blacks still lived. White southerners, however, resisted black female registration through official channels that had been used since the late nineteenth century to deny suffrage to black men—tax qualifications, educational tests, grandfather clauses, and harassment.

Black women, through the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), assisted by the NAACP, fought back. They assembled evidence in behalf of the Tinkham bill, designed



Colored Women Voter Leagues were formed in several southern states to help both women and men qualify as voters, ca.1919-1920. (Image courtesy of Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).



Nina Oter-Warren (left) of Santa Fe campaigned for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1922 after making sure New Mexico ratified the suffrage amendment. The widely respected Latina Republican won over 49,000 votes. (Image courtesy the New Mexico State Archives, Bergere Collection, #21252).

to reduce congressional representation of states that restricted women's suffrage. When this tactic failed, black women approached white women's organizations to elicit some support for enforcing the Nineteenth Amendment. But neither the League of Women Voters, nor the NWP was willing to support the antidisfranchisement efforts of black women voters in the South.

Black women had one advantage over white women: they were all concentrated in a single party, the Republican. But even here, in the Republican party, which could have used their votes, they met with frustration. In the states outside the South, they organized "Republican Clubs" to support the candidates of the party of Lincoln and Radical Reconstruction. And in 1924 they created the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLRCW), with the slogan, "We are in politics to stay and we shall be a stay in politics" (8). Initially the GOP was attentive to black women leaders, inviting them to their first national conference of women leaders, where the NLRCW president, Nannie Burroughs, spoke. The white feminist Ruth Hanna McCormick drew on black women's support in her futile effort to move from the House of Representatives to the Senate in 1928. But while the Republicans offered symbolic nods to black voters' issues, by 1929, African Americans were beginning to feel disillusionment with Hoover's and the Republicans' lack of concern for the problems facing black Americans in the context of the depression. Black men

and women still gave their votes to the Republicans in 1932, but by 1934 a shift toward the Democrats was clear. The networks that African American women had created in the 1920s became a mainstay of black political organizing in the 1930s. Now, however, that organizing was increasingly in support of the Democrats, as blacks became a part of the urban liberal coalition that was reshaping the Democratic Party.

While the difficulties all women reformers faced arose in part from women's disunity, the underlying problem was the decade's overall conservative political climate. Observers in the 1920s, citing declining voter participation during the decade (roughly half of those eligible voted), assumed that women's nonvoting accounted for the decline. With only sparse data of voting by sex available, many historians have echoed this assumption. More recent studies, however, maintain that women's participation in elections varied significantly by location and by election. Women in states that had only recently enfranchised them seemed less likely to vote than those living in states such as California where they had longer experience with the electoral process. What is most interesting is that men's voting decreased in this period as well, following a long-standing trend of declining engagement in partisan politics. Jane Addams ruefully commented in 1924 that the question should not be "Is Woman Suffrage Failing?", but rather, "is suffrage failing?" (9). Both men and women were not voting in large numbers, which points to a political climate of disaffected or disinterested citizenry, and it is this broader context of American politics, not women's failures as voters, that offers the most compelling explanation for the difficulties women reformers faced (10).

A related problem was a political climate hostile to reform that made it impossible to sustain the prewar enthusiasm for progressive measures. On the national scene, the Republicans, now largely divested of their progressive elements, dominated the White House and Congress, and, reflecting in part the parties' ties to corporate business interests, resisted efforts to expand federal regulatory powers or raise taxes to pay for social welfare legislation. The Prohibition amendment ratified in 1919 further increased many Americans' wariness of intrusive social reforms. Prohibition met with vigorous opposition. Many Americans resented and circumvented the law and others worried that the ineffectual effort to control alcohol consumption had fostered contempt for law. That women reformers were so closely associated with the controversial amendment surely fueled hostility to the social reforms women activists promoted in the 1920s. Finally, the widening prosperity of the period may well have influenced many Americans to turn toward new consumer and leisure pleasures and away from political engagement and concern for the nation's poor.

Perhaps most damaging to reform and especially women's part in it was the "Red Scare" of 1919 to 1921. Prompted initially by American fear of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the revolutionary ambitions of the fledgling Communist Party in the United States to topple this nation's government, Americans succumbed to a hysteria in which wild-eyed Bolsheviks seemed to be lurking around every corner. The Red Scare quickly expanded to target a wide range of people and associations deemed "un-American," and led to the deportation of "suspicious" immigrants, the suppression of the labor movement, and massive violations of civil liberties. It also helped to fuel the growth of the second Ku Klux Klan, an organization opposed to immigrants, Catholics, Jews and blacks, that achieved significant popularity and influence in the early 1920s. Finally, the Red Scare contributed to the passage of restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s and in addition became a weapon for opponents of reform legislation, who could now argue that efforts to increase government's role in regulating the economy or protecting workers and the poor would lead American down the same path as Russia.

Red Scare hysteria particularly focused on a number of women's groups, including those in the Women's Joint Congressional Committee and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which they claimed were spreading Bolshevism in the United States. Jane Addams, in particular, came in for forceful criticism. Attempts by opponents to discredit women reformers with claims that they were Bolsheviks points to a further dilemma facing women activists. Preeminent among the opponents of reform were right-wing women's organizations. The Women Sentinels of the Republic was a small but vocal group that opposed social reform as the forerunner of Bolshevism. The Daughters of the American Revolution, initially interested in women's social reform efforts, had by mid-decade also taken up the antiradical hysteria. Women in an auxiliary of the all-male Ku Klux Klan supported some reforms like Prohibition, but like other right-wing women's groups promoted what was called "one-hundred percent Americanism," and were suspicious of the liberal goals of the white women's lobby and hostile to black women's demands for equal citizenship.

With these counterpressures, then, it is not surprising that the reform agenda of women's groups stalled in the nation's capitol and it is impressive that women activists accomplished as much as they did on the local and state level. In the process, they helped keep the reform spirit alive, if not well. Black women created and sustained organizational efforts that would give them more political influence in the 1930s, and white women developed lobbying skills that would serve as a crucial bridge to the social welfare reforms of the 1930s introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. □

Endnotes

1. For further discussion of the "New Woman" in the 1920s and bibliographic resources, see Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 98-144, 321-25.
2. Dorothy M. Brown, *Setting a Course: American Women in the 1920s* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 69.
3. On the maternalist reforms and organized women, see Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
4. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 97.
5. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Changing Differences: Women and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy, 1917-1994* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 32-34.
6. Anna L. Harvey, *Votes without Leverage: Women in American Electoral Politics, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 104-135.
7. Brown, *Setting a Course*, 50.
8. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920s," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, ed. Ann D. Gordon and Betty Collier-Thomas (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 144.
9. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 102.
10. Kristi Andersen, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 104-108, 318-19.

Lynn Dumenil is Robert Glass Cleland Professor of American History at Occidental College. She is the author of *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*; *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880-1930* and coauthor of *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents*. She is currently working on a study of American women during World War I.



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