

THE RIGHT TO VOTE



*The Contested History of
Democracy in the United States*

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Women's Suffrage

To get the word “male” in effect out of the Constitution cost the women of the country fifty-two years of pauseless campaign. . . . During that time they were forced to conduct 56 campaigns of referenda to male voters; 480 campaigns to get legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters; 47 campaigns to get state constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to get state party conventions to include woman suffrage planks; 30 campaigns to get presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms, and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses.

—CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT
AND NETTIE R. SHULER,
Woman Suffrage and Politics (1926)

MR. HALFHILL: Now, gentlemen, this question of franchise is not, as has been sometimes debated and urged, an inalienable right; it is a conferred right, and it must be conferred under our theory of government and under our organization of society.

MR. FACKLER: If suffrage is a conferred right and not a natural one, who conferred that right on us?

—OHIO CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1912

THE HISTORY OF VOTING RIGHTS FOR WOMEN carved its own path through the political landscape. As half the population, women constituted the largest group of adults excluded from the franchise at the nation's birth and for much of the nineteenth century. Their efforts to gain the right to vote persisted for more than seventy years, eventually giving rise to the nation's

largest mass movement for suffrage, as well as a singular countermovement of citizens opposed to their own enfranchisement. Women enjoyed (or at least possessed) different, more intimate relationships with the men who could enfranchise them than did other excluded groups, such as African Americans, aliens, or the propertyless. Moreover, the debates sparked by the prospect of enfranchising women had unusual features—with fairly conventional propositions about political rights and capacities contending with deeply felt and publicly voiced fears that female participation in electoral politics would undermine family life and sully women themselves.

Yet distinctive as this history may have been, it always ran alongside and frequently intersected with other currents in the chronicle of suffrage. The broad antebellum impulse toward democratization helped to fuel the movement for women's rights; decades later, the reaction against universal suffrage retarded its progress. Black suffrage and women's suffrage were closely linked issues everywhere in the 1860s and in the South well into the twentieth century; similarly, the voting rights of immigrants and the poor pressed repeatedly against the claims of women in the North and West. To some degree, this interlacing was inherent and structural. Women, after all, were not a socially segregated group; they were black and white, rich and poor, foreign-born and native. But the links between the evolution of suffrage for women and for men also were shaped by more contingent events: by the rhythms of social change, the dynamics of partisan politics, and the accidents of historical timing.

From Seneca Falls to the Fifteenth Amendment

The movement to enfranchise women in the United States had its legendary beginnings at a convention held in July 1848, in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York. The convention was the brainchild of two women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Mott, from Philadelphia, was already a well-known public figure, a Quaker minister and ardent abolitionist, revered for her compassionate manner and eloquence as a speaker. Stanton, a generation younger and the daughter of a judge, was married to Henry B. Stanton, a prominent abolitionist who recently had settled in Seneca Falls, not far from Rochester. The two women renewed an earlier acquaintance while Mott was visiting a friend in the nearby town of Waterloo. Their conversations led to a publicly announced call for a "convention" to "discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of woman."¹

The convention, held in a local church and featuring Mott as a speaker, attracted nearly three hundred people, including many men. Most of those who attended were from Seneca Falls, Waterloo, or Rochester; roughly a quarter were Quakers. After two days of discussion, one hundred of the participants approved and signed a set of resolutions calling for equal rights for women, including “their sacred right to the elective franchise.” The convention’s Declaration of Sentiments, drafted by Stanton and modeled on the Declaration of Independence, declared “that all men and women are created equal” and protested the denial to women of “this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation” and “oppressed on all sides.” Laws made only by men, the declaration detailed, relegated women to an inferior place in the social, civil, and economic order.²

That women throughout the nation lacked the right to vote in 1848 reflected beliefs and values long embedded in the politics and culture of the United States and western Europe. Although women were regarded as intelligent adults, they were viewed as having capacities different from those of men, capacities appropriate to private life and the domestic sphere rather than the public world of politics. More decisively perhaps, women—who were envisaged and treated in law as members of families rather than as autonomous individuals—were excluded from the polity for the same reason that the poor and propertyless were disfranchised in the late eighteenth century: they purportedly lacked the “independence” necessary for participation in electoral politics. Economically dependent on men, as well as legally subservient to them, women, in Blackstonian fashion, could be controlled by men and thus could not be responsible political actors. Concomitantly, women were not believed to need the franchise because, in a gendered version of “virtual representation,” their interests were defended by the men in their families, presumably husbands and fathers.³

To be sure, not everyone accepted such views, even in the late eighteenth century. Abigail Adams’s well-known admonition that her husband “remember the ladies” was only one expression of the belief that the rights of women ought to be enlarged, and some of her contemporaries, unlike Adams, even believed that women could play a public role in political life. Moreover, the experience of New Jersey, where women participated in elections for more than a decade, suggests that the enfranchisement of women was neither unthinkable nor catastrophically disruptive of the political order. Even William Griffith, one of the state’s vocal opponents of female suffrage, stressed that the

primary “mischief” caused by women voting was that it gave “the towns and populous villages . . . an unfair advantage over the country” because women could get to the polls more easily in the towns.⁴

Nonetheless, women remained outside the polity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and efforts to promote their inclusion were rare. The idea of enfranchising women was raised briefly at a few constitutional conventions in the antebellum era; Kentucky in 1838 went so far as to permit propertied widows and unmarried women to vote in school elections. But the issue was not widely debated during this period, and most references to women, in constitutional discussions of suffrage, were designed to demonstrate that voting was a privilege, not a right: since everyone agreed that women should not vote, it clearly could *not* be a right. As Abigail Adams’s husband had noted, any claim that voting was a right logically led to the enfranchisement of even women and children.⁵

The timing of the Seneca Falls convention—and the emergence of women’s suffrage as a public issue—was far from accidental. The decades preceding Seneca Falls had witnessed the expansion of an urban and quasiurban middle class in much of the North, a growing concentration of city and townspeople, some of them professionals, who valued and embraced an expansion of civil, economic, and political rights. At the same time, the number of women in the paid labor force increased sharply, leading many women to be exposed as individuals—not simply as family members—to the vicissitudes of the market and the consequences of state policies. These shifts in the social structure fostered diverse efforts to rethink and promote the rights of women in the family, churches, and society at large. In addition, the antislavery movement proved to be a breeding ground—and training ground—for advocates of women’s rights: actively abolitionist women were frustrated by being treated as second-class members of the movement, while some male abolitionists were led, by the logic of their own convictions, to embrace gender as well as racial equality.⁶

Of equal importance were the spillover effects of the era’s broader democratizing currents. The termination of property and taxpaying restrictions on voting, as well as debates about the enfranchisement of aliens and African Americans, threw open the logical and rhetorical doors to the further expansion of suffrage. If the propertyless (who also had been viewed as dependent) could vote, if noncitizens could vote, if voting were indeed a natural right, then why should women continue to be excluded? The Pandora’s box had, in fact, been opened, and it proved difficult to slam shut: ar-

guments that had been mobilized to enfranchise men could readily be applied to women as well. To at least some women, the refusal of political leaders to acknowledge these parallels underscored the need for a suffrage movement—and the need for conventions (not just meetings) that would reestablish fundamental principles of governance much as state constitutional conventions were doing. It was likely not coincidental that the Seneca Falls gathering occurred in the wake of a New York State Constitutional Convention that had ridiculed, and given short shrift to, the idea of enfranchising women.⁷

In fact, the meeting at Seneca Falls was only one of numerous conventions called to promote women's rights in the late 1840s and early 1850s; its special place in historical memory, as Nancy Isenberg has pointed out, stems partially from Stanton's subsequent role as the preeminent leader and chronicler of the movement. In the spring of 1850, a similar convention was held in Salem, Ohio; with men sitting quietly in the balcony, women drew up and debated resolutions to be forwarded to the forthcoming state constitutional convention. Several months later, the first national Woman's Rights meeting was convened in Worcester, Massachusetts, initiating a series of annual events to mobilize support for full citizenship for women and their equal treatment under the law.⁸

Although suffrage had been one demand among many in 1848, it soon became foremost on the agenda of a growing feminist movement that held meetings, sponsored lectures, and petitioned legislatures throughout the 1850s. "The Right of Suffrage," resolved the second national convention in 1851, "is . . . the corner-stone of this enterprise, since we do not seek to protect woman, but rather to place her in a position to protect herself." This demand, as historian Ellen DuBois has pointed out, was a radical one: it implied that the interests of women could not be adequately protected as long as men held a monopoly on political power, that women had to be empowered rather than protected. Nonetheless, the argument for suffrage generally was couched in traditional republican language: voting was a right that ought to belong to all adults, including women; all of the governed had the right to choose their governors. Familiar as the rhetoric may have been, the movement was slow to garner support: although significant measures were passed to improve the legal and economic status of women, no states granted them the franchise in the 1850s. At the beginning of the Civil War, suffrage advocates, most of whom were strongly invested in the antislavery cause, temporarily scaled back their efforts to give the war, and black rights, priority.⁹

As the war ended and Reconstruction began, leaders of the suffrage movement, including Stanton and her indefatigable collaborator, Susan B. Anthony, were optimistic about its prospects. (Anthony, also a Quaker and a former teacher from western Massachusetts and upstate New York, had begun working with Stanton in 1851.) The public embrace of democracy was as broad as it ever had been; the war and the plight of the freedmen had energized the language of universal rights; and the Republican Party, home of the staunchest advocates of civil and political rights, was firmly in power. What the suffragists anticipated was a rising tide of prodemocratic sentiment that would lift women, as well as African Americans, into the polity. We intend, declared Stanton, "to avail ourselves of the strong arm and the blue uniform of the black soldier to walk in by his side." Suffragists also felt that their claim to the franchise had been strengthened by the energetic support women had lent to the war effort: such activities presumably had neutralized the oft-repeated argument that women should not vote because they did not bear arms. As one supporter noted,

True, the women did not go to the battle-field, with muskets and bayonets in their hands, and fight to put down the rebellion; but they did render services at home during the war equally as valuable as fighting, and highly auxiliary to the success of the Union Army. . . . They did their full share in saving the Republic.¹⁰

Yet the suffragists were doomed—or at least slated—to be disappointed. Within a few months of the war's end, Republican leaders and male abolitionists began to signal their lack of enthusiasm for coupling women's rights to black rights. "One question at a time," intoned Wendell Phillips. "This hour belongs to the negro." The Fourteenth Amendment, drafted in late 1865 and ratified in 1866, disheartened suffragists and made clear that the Republican Party could not be counted on to promote suffrage for women. While offering strong, if indirect, federal support to black enfranchisement, the amendment undercut the claims of women by adding the word *male* to its pathbreaking guarantee of political rights. Although well aware of the strategic concerns that prompted such language, Stanton, in a prescient warning, declared that "if that word 'male' be inserted, it will take us a century at least to get it out."¹¹

Offended by the text of the Fourteenth Amendment and feeling betrayed by their former abolitionist allies, suffragists launched an energetic cam-

paign to fuse the causes of women and blacks in the name of equal rights. Stanton, in a speech delivered in 1867, flatly rejected not only the “principle” that suffrage was a “gift of society” (which she claimed would “take us back to monarchies and despotisms”) but the notion that “women and negroes” ought to be enfranchised “as women and negroes, and not as citizens of a republic.” Similarly, Henry Ward Beecher, a staunch supporter of women’s rights, urged “not that women have the right of suffrage—not that Chinamen or Irishmen have the right of suffrage—and that native born Yankees have the right of suffrage—but that suffrage is the inherent right of mankind.” Stanton, Beecher, and their allies campaigned vigorously to achieve universal suffrage through both state constitutional reforms and the federal government.¹²

Meanwhile, the number of Republicans committed to enfranchising the freedmen was growing rapidly; but many of these men, whatever their personal convictions, feared that this goal would be jeopardized by simultaneously pursuing the controversial cause of women’s suffrage. Republican leaders, even Radicals, sought to separate the issues, to enfranchise blacks first and women later. The result of this divergence of strategy and principle was a growing, often hostile schism between the two movements: some abolitionists and African Americans actively opposed the drive for woman suffrage, while many feminists denigrated the abilities and qualifications of African Americans. Stanton herself objected to having “the colored man enfranchised before the women . . . I would not trust him with all my rights; degraded, oppressed himself, he would be more despotic with the governing power than even our Saxon rulers are.” At a New York Constitutional Convention, one delegate opposed a law allowing “the black men of the South, fresh from the chains of slavery, to go to the ballot-box and vote on all the great questions involving the interests of this nation, while you deny the same right to educated, patriotic women.” This schism led Stanton and some of her allies into a brief flirtation with the Democratic Party, which had a more prosuffrage track record than the Republicans on issues other than race; it was played out with particular clarity—and destructive force—in Kansas, where separate referenda were placed before the electorate by the legislature in 1867. While many Republicans campaigned not only for black suffrage but against enfranchising women, some advocates of female suffrage, including Anthony, allied themselves with overtly racist Democrats who opposed black enfranchisement. The upshot was the popular defeat of both African-American and woman suffrage.¹³

During this same period, Stanton, Anthony, and other suffragists also sought to build an alliance with the fledgling postwar labor reform movement, centered around the National Labor Union (NLU). The equal rights vision of many suffrage advocates meshed well with the broad, class-based politics of the NLU, a multifaceted organization founded in 1866 that appeared to have picked up the mantle of reform discarded by the Republicans. But the alliance proved to be short-lived, if not stillborn. Middle-class suffragists such as Stanton, believing as they did in the reconciliation of capital and labor, never fully grasped the sense of class antagonism that informed the NLU's politics and program. At the same time, the trade unions of the NLU, seeking to protect the jobs of their own members, remained antagonistic to the entry of women into their trades. By the early 1870s, a series of small but grating conflicts had undermined the possibility of substantial collaboration.¹⁴

With the passage and ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 and 1870, the causes of black (male) and women's suffrage were decisively severed. Discrimination against African-American men was constitutionally prohibited, bringing the national drive for suffrage expansion to a close and leaving the status of women at best unchanged; indeed, arguably, women were worse off, because the Fifteenth Amendment appeared to implicitly condone political discrimination based on sex. After twenty years, the drive for women's suffrage had failed, and the political crisis of Reconstruction had, in the form of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, erected new constitutional obstacles to enfranchisement.

The defeat of this initial mobilization stemmed from constraints of ideology and partisan politics. Although support for female suffrage had grown rapidly and many thousands of men and women had publicly endorsed the cause in petitions and meetings, there was still substantial resistance to the proposition that women could be participants in the public sphere. Despite the movement's pointed arguments and visibility, little had occurred to shatter the traditional consensus that had kept women out of the polity in the first place. The surge in democratic sentiments, so palpable at midcentury and so fervently embraced by some Republicans during Reconstruction, had its limits: the nation's political leaders, almost certainly reflecting the views of a majority of their constituents, declined to promote women's suffrage, just as they had backed away from more inclusive versions of the Fifteenth Amendment. There may well have been, as one delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1869–70 de-

clared, “a wonderful revolution taking place in the minds of all the people of the country with reference to the right of suffrage.” But that revolution was beginning to stall, even as the delegate was speaking. “Equal rights” was a powerful slogan, but a minority view. As important, the political contingencies that drove Republicans to endorse black suffrage were lacking in the case of women. Women did not seem (to men) to be endangered by their inability to vote, and nowhere did the enfranchisement of women seem likely to vest Republicans or Democrats with any discernible partisan advantage.¹⁵

Citizenship and Taxes

In the wake of their political defeats in Congress and within the Republican Party, some suffragists turned briefly to a legal strategy for gaining the right to vote. The strategy was suggested by the first section of the Fourteenth Amendment, which declared that “all persons” born or naturalized in the United States were citizens of the nation and the state in which they resided. Women, as “persons,” were unquestionably citizens, and the franchise, suffragists maintained, was an intrinsic feature of citizenship: the Constitution, therefore, already guaranteed women the right to vote in federal elections. As was frequently pointed out, various dictionaries, including Webster’s, actually defined an American citizen as someone entitled to vote and hold office. Susan B. Anthony gave this equation a broadly political, if ambivalently egalitarian, rationale:

If we once establish the false principle, that United States citizenship does not carry with it the right to vote in every State in this Union, there is no end to the petty freaks and cunning devices that will be resorted to, to exclude one and another class of citizens from the right of suffrage . . . it will not always be the rich and educated who may combine to cut off the poor and ignorant; but we may live to see the poor, hard-working, uncultivated day laborers, foreign and native born, learning the power of the ballot and their vast majority of numbers, combine and amend State constitutions so as to disfranchise the Vanderbilts and the A. T. Stewarts, the Conklings and Fentons . . . Establish this precedent, admit the right of the States to deny suffrage, and there is no power to foresee the confusion, discord, and disruption that may await us. There is, and can be, but one safe principle of government—equal rights to all.¹⁶

This view was activated into legal combat when women in several locales (including Anthony) went to the polls and either voted or, if refused the ballot, filed suit to exercise a right that they claimed they already possessed. The most consequential of these legal actions (because it went to the Supreme Court) proved to be a suit brought by Virginia Minor and her lawyer husband, Francis, in 1872 against a St. Louis registrar who had prevented her from registering to vote. The Minors maintained that the Missouri Constitution and its voter registration law, which restricted the ballot to men, violated the U.S. Constitution in at least two ways: they infringed on Virginia Minor's right of free speech, which was protected by the First Amendment, and they contravened the Fourteenth Amendment's command that states not abridge the "privileges or immunities" of citizens of the United States. Voting, the Minors claimed, was one of those privileges. Although the argument was a coherent one, the justices of the Supreme Court unanimously disagreed. Upholding a lower court decision, they ruled in 1875 that suffrage was not coextensive with citizenship and thus that states possessed the authority to decide which citizens could and could not vote. Bringing an end to debates that had surfaced periodically for decades, the Court formally ratified the severance of national citizenship from suffrage that the late-eighteenth-century authors of the Constitution had devised as a solution to their own political problems. In so doing, and in reiterating the principle that suffrage was a state rather than a federal matter, the Court was bolting the gates on the simplest and shortest road to female suffrage.¹⁷

The rulings in the women's suffrage cases did not take place in a legal or political vacuum: lurking in the background was the apprehension that the franchise was already too broad. This apprehension fostered resistance to claims that voting was a national right and colored legal arguments assigning the federal government only a narrow role in shaping the franchise. In rebuffing the claims of women in Washington, D.C., for example, a federal judge in 1871 observed that the breadth of the franchise in the cities was producing "political profligacy and violence verging upon anarchy." Categorically rejecting the proposition that there existed a natural or constitutional right to the franchise, the judge noted that "the fact that the practical working of the assumed right would be destructive of civilization is decisive that the right does not exist." In taking this approach, the judges in *Minor v. Happersett* and similar cases were self-consciously laying the legal groundwork for decisions that would limit the ability of the federal govern-

ment to prevent racial discrimination in the South as well as discrimination against workers and immigrants in the North.¹⁸

Suffragists took another legal tack as well: they promoted tax rebellions among female property owners in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In scattered locales throughout the country, women refused to pay their taxes as long as they were prevented from voting, insisting that it was unconstitutional to impose the obligations of citizenship on them while they were deprived of political rights. “No taxation without representation” remained a resonant slogan, which activists buttressed with research demonstrating that women in fact paid a sizable portion of the taxes in many municipalities. The depth of feeling about this incongruence between the tax and voter rolls was made clear in the small town of Glastonbury, Connecticut, where two elderly sisters, Abby Hadassah Smith and Julia Evelina Smith, announced in 1869 that they would refuse to pay taxes on their farm until the town permitted them to vote. As historian Linda Kerber has recounted, the Smith sisters—educated, single women with abolitionist backgrounds and some involvement in the suffrage movement—dug in their heels for years, forcing the tax assessor to go to their home and seize their cows to pay off their overdue taxes. Although a series of court battles that dragged on for a decade resulted in a technical victory for the women, they were never enfranchised, and the Connecticut courts—like their counterparts elsewhere—gave little credence to the claim that taxpaying and voting had to go hand in hand.¹⁹

Although it would take another half century for women to acquire the right to vote, the optimism that suffrage advocates felt in the 1860s was realistically grounded in their own ideological vision and political experience. Supporters of women’s suffrage sincerely and deeply believed not only in the rightness of their cause but in the power of their simple egalitarian arguments: women were capable adult citizens and as such ought to be able to choose the lawmakers and laws that governed them. These suffragists, moreover, lived in an era when a righteous cause—the abolition of slavery—had triumphed over ferocious, entrenched opposition. They had witnessed not only the end of slavery but also an extraordinary transformation of popular views and laws regarding black suffrage: within a decade, an idea supported only by those on the fringes of politics had acquired the backing of the Republican Party and then been embedded in the Constitution. Suffragists thus had good reason to believe that profound ideological and political changes could not only happen, but happen quickly, particularly in the overheated climate of sectional

conflict and war; and if one accepted the premise that voting was a right, natural or otherwise, it was not a long leap from black to women's suffrage.²⁰

What Stanton and Anthony and their allies could not have foreseen, however, was that the mid-nineteenth-century wave of prodemocratic sentiment already had crested. It would not continue to swell, sweeping away all obstacles to an expanded suffrage. An antidemocratic undertow had already begun during the Know-Nothing agitation, and by the late 1860s it was growing stronger. Black suffrage triumphed—albeit temporarily—not because the polity had become convinced of the virtues of equal rights or universal suffrage but due to the unique political exigencies of Reconstruction and the political goals of the Republican Party. Since these singular conditions did not create comparable pressures to enfranchise women, the drive for suffrage fell short, leaving the issue stranded on shore just as the tides of democracy began to recede.

Regrouping

We do not concur with those who predict that the question of Suffrage for women will speedily demand public action or engross public attention . . .

New York Times, 8 MARCH 1869

The question of woman suffrage is, in my opinion, one of the most important of the political problems of this century.

—MR. EWING, OHIO
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1874

Our political system is based upon the doctrine that the right of self-government is inherent in the people. . . . Women are a portion of the people, and possess all the inherent rights which belong to humanity. They, therefore, have the right to participate in the government.

—MR. SEARS, OHIO
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1874

I deny, Mr. Chairman, that there is one scintilla of truth in the assertion that woman is oppressed. Men shield and protect and de-

fend her as a being better than themselves. . . . The male, at least in all species which form unions of any degree of permanence. . . defends and protects the female and her young ones. Thus, if a herd of elephants is menaced, the most powerful tuskers take their station on the side where danger appears. . . . If bisons are attacked by wolves, the bulls form a circle. . . . A gorilla will encounter any danger in defense of his mate.

—MR. CAPLES, CALIFORNIA
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1879

The defeats of the late 1860s left the movement for women's suffrage divided but unbowed. Ironically, perhaps, the political debates of Reconstruction had served to magnify the importance of the right to vote: while pressing the cause of black suffrage, Republican Charles Sumner, for example, had declared that the ballot was "the great guarantee and the only sufficient guarantee" of human rights. Advocates of women's rights increasingly agreed with Sumner, and they remained determined that women soon would acquire this "Columbiad of our political life." For the next two decades, against the backdrop of a changing political climate and an increasingly industrial society, these advocates pursued their goal through diverse means in Washington and in the states.²¹

Once it became clear that women would not be enfranchised on the arm of the black soldier, several different strategies emerged. The first, embraced by the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), founded by Stanton and Anthony in 1869, was to pressure the federal government into enfranchising women throughout the nation; this was to be done through a national organization controlled and shaped by women themselves. The second strategy was to convince state legislatures and constitutional conventions to amend state constitutions to include women in the electorate; this approach was favored by the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), which was founded a few months after the NWSA and headed by Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, both veterans of the abolitionist and antebellum suffragist movements. Stone, raised in a wealthy family in western Massachusetts, was an early graduate of Oberlin College and a popular public speaker; Blackwell, from Ohio, was a dedicated reformer with a lifelong penchant for failed entrepreneurial schemes. The third strategy, more local and decentralized, yet overlapping with that of

AWSA, was to wring “partial” or “limited” suffrage (on issues such as schooling, prohibition, and municipal taxes) from state authorities.²²

NWSA’s approach in key respects was an extension of Radical Reconstruction: despite their break with former abolitionist allies, their distress at the Fifteenth Amendment, and their sometimes disparaging comments about black suffrage, Stanton and Anthony retained a commitment to equal rights and, for a time at least, a desire to build bridges to labor. Government “based on caste and class privilege cannot stand,” declared Stanton in 1869, and she was convinced that political rights were the solvent that would dissolve these social boundaries. Accordingly, NWSA’s strategy was to pressure the federal government to offer women the same constitutional protections given to freedmen in the Fifteenth Amendment. This view was embodied in a draft constitutional amendment introduced in Congress by Radical Republican George Julian in 1869: it declared that “the right of suffrage in the United States shall be based on citizenship” and that “all citizens . . . shall enjoy this right equally without any distinction or discrimination whatever founded on sex.” In the increasingly conservative and pro-states rights political climate of the 1870s, however, this initial version of the Sixteenth Amendment—which tacitly would have nationalized suffrage in ways akin to the Wilson amendment—made little headway.²³

Anthony consequently drafted a new and narrower version in the late 1870s that was first presented to the Senate by Aaron A. Sargent of California in 1878. Modeled on the Fifteenth Amendment, it stated simply that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” Although NWSA also lobbied for the expansion of women’s economic and social rights, securing the passage of this amendment was the focal point of its activities, and the organization’s political allies introduced the measure into Congress every year. In 1882, both houses of Congress appointed select committees on women’s suffrage, each of which recommended passage of an amendment. Four years later, thanks in part to the energetic support of Republican Henry Blair of New Hampshire, the amendment was finally brought to a vote on the Senate floor, where, to the great disappointment of suffragists seated in the galleries, it was decisively defeated in January 1887 by a margin of thirty-four to sixteen (with twenty-six abstentions), a far cry from the two-thirds positive vote required for passage. In an echo of the regional politics that remained so salient even after the end of Reconstruction, no southern senator voted in favor of the amendment, while

twenty-two voted against it. For another half dozen years, Congress continued to grapple with the issue, but after 1893, no congressional committee reported it favorably until late in the Progressive era.²⁴

The state-by-state strategy of the AWSA bore little fruit as well. Although the issue was debated in numerous constitutional conventions, and referenda were held in eleven states (eight of them west of the Mississippi) between 1870 and 1910, concrete gains were few. The territory of Wyoming enfranchised women in 1869, a policy affirmed at statehood in 1889; Utah did the same in 1870 and 1896 (interrupted by a brief period when the federal government stripped Utah's women of the suffrage as a curious step in its effort to rid the territory of polygamy); and Idaho and Colorado granted suffrage to women in the mid-1890s. Everywhere else, referenda failed, or the writers of new constitutions chose not to present the proposition to voters for ratification. (See table A.20).²⁵

There were, however, a significant number of locales—states, counties, and municipalities—where partial suffrage was adopted, permitting women to vote in municipal elections, on liquor licensing matters, or for local school boards and on issues affecting education. This unique, even anomalous development—enabling women to vote in certain elections but not in others—was made possible by the complex architecture of voting laws. In most states, the suffrage requirements for “nonconstitutional” elections did not have to be identical to those for offices named in state constitutions; they also could be altered by legislation rather than the cumbersome and difficult process of constitutional amendment (see chapter 5).

The most common form of partial enfranchisement involved schools: legislatures, recognizing women's responsibility for childrearing, as well as their education experience, responded to pressure from the suffrage movement by permitting women to vote on matters affecting schooling. Nearly all state legislatures considered adopting laws of this type, and by 1890, more than twenty states had done so. (See table A.17.) Although activists generally viewed school suffrage as a stepping-stone, an entering wedge for broader electoral participation, legislators tended to view the matter differently: as a gesture to placate prosuffrage forces and an assertion that school matters were distinct from “politics.”²⁶

Placating suffragists, as well as temperance reformers, also was the primary motivation behind laws permitting women to vote on liquor licenses and other matters related to the sale of alcoholic beverages. In many states, such laws were demanded by the large, rapidly growing Woman's Christian

Temperance Union (WCTU), which argued that women had a special interest in voting on such matters because of the impact of alcohol on the family and the links between drunkenness and domestic violence. Similarly, in the 1880s and 1890s, women in a few states were granted the right to vote in municipal elections, or if they were taxpayers, to vote on tax and bond issues. Although sanctioned by the notion that municipal governance was a form of "housekeeping," such laws also were a response to the suffrage movement's ongoing agitation in behalf of the inseparability of taxation and representation. Indeed, there was a conservative twist to this expansion of the franchise, since it appealed to those who believed that voting should be restricted to property owners and taxpayers.²⁷ (See table A.18.²⁸)

The limited roster of successes, however, does not do justice to the strength of the movement in the 1870s and 1880s. Local prosuffrage organizations proliferated, referenda were held in numerous states, and after vigorous campaigns, hundreds of thousands of men voted in favor of women's suffrage, a development that would have been unthinkable forty years earlier. Moreover, even in states where the issue was not submitted to a popular vote, suffrage organizations were active, state legislators were obligated to vote on suffrage bills year after year, and support for enfranchisement often cut across party lines. In Massachusetts, for example, both parties were divided on the issue, and Democrat Ben Butler twice ran for governor on prosuffrage planks. At the Illinois Constitutional Convention of 1869–70, delegates voted forty to twenty-one to submit the question to the voters, only to reverse that vote by a narrow margin a month later. A few years later, in Pennsylvania, the issue was the subject of a lively debate at the constitutional convention, and in the 1880s the Indiana House of Representatives voted several times to endorse women's suffrage, only to see its actions blocked by Senate filibusters encouraged by fears that female voters would restrict the sale of intoxicating liquors. In California, the constitutional convention of 1878–79 devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to the question; after prolonged and passionate debate, suffrage was restricted to men by a margin of only ten votes.²⁹

One reason for the growing support was the power of prosuffrage arguments. Impressively diverse, these arguments were voiced not only by suffrage activists but also by political figures, usually but not always Republican, who found themselves in legislatures or constitutional conventions where they had to think through and vote on the issue. The most common argument remained the natural or universal rights view put for-

ward at Seneca Falls and throughout the 1850s. “Woman’s right to the ballot seems so clear that it is like some of the mathematical axioms which it is difficult to more clearly define than by stating them,” declared an Ohioan in 1874.

Each individual on entering a state of society surrenders a portion of natural rights, and in return therefore receives, among others, the political right of the elective franchise. A woman is an individual, and when she enters into a state of society and thereby surrenders a portion of her natural rights, she receives in return therefore the right of the elective franchise, equally with man. . . . If the syllogism be correct the right inevitably follows, and where logic leads I cheerfully follow.

“Whatever rights are given to one citizen ought to be given . . . to every other citizen,” echoed Eli T. Blackmer, superintendent of the San Diego public schools, at the California Constitutional Convention of 1878. Although voting was not a “natural right,” conceded Democrat John Campbell, the youngest member of Pennsylvania’s constitutional convention of 1872–73, it was a “political right” that ought not be denied to women. Evoking the traditional language of American republicanism, all Americans were believed to be entitled to self-government—and all Americans included women. An Ohio delegate insisted that “woman . . . have a voice in the enactment of laws to which she is subject. . . . There should be, with us, no subject class. In a genuine, democratic republican government, the governed are also the governors.” The governor of Kansas, in 1871, insisted that in a “true republic—a ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people,’” there should be no “favored class of ‘white male citizen.’”³⁰

Emerging alongside these traditional views was another, more essentialist strand of argument: that women possessed particular qualities or virtues that would improve the character of politics and governance. Such views began to be uttered by Stanton and other suffragists in the late 1860s, and they were embraced by many male politicians who seemed more comfortable stressing women’s unique virtues rather than their similarity to men. The presence of women, it was argued, would elevate the tone of politics and put an end to “scoundrelism and ruffianism at the polls,” particularly in urban areas. Enfranchising women would “tend to impart integrity and honesty to politics, and to control the tricks of those who make politics their trade.” In addition, female voters would be less corruptible and more likely to promote policies

favoring social justice, peace, and sobriety: “when our mothers, wives, and sisters vote with us, we will have purer legislation, and better execution of the laws, fewer tipling shops, gambling halls, and brothels.” According to this line of argument, which became preeminent by the end of the 1870s, women ought to be enfranchised not because they were identical to men but precisely because they were different—and the qualities that made them different would be a boon to American political life.³¹

For some men, at least, this essentialist vision—the notion that women had special qualities and virtues—was both Christian and Jeffersonian, emotional as well as political. In Texas in 1875, for example, a delegate to the constitutional convention introduced the following resolution:

That women, being by the ordinances of nature, the mother of all living human beings . . . and that, as mother, wife, sister and daughter, she has the first care of our lives, is our nurse in childhood, our mentor in youth, our companion, helper and consoler in manhood, our comforting, ministering and sustaining angel in death, even at the birth, trial, death and resurrection of Jesus . . . and that, in this land of republican faith and representative, democratic government, by every recognition of modern, enlightened Christian civilization, she is morally and mentally man's equal; that the same “inalienable rights” that Jefferson has made household words . . . are as much woman's as man's; . . . and inasmuch as woman is of the people, and must be governed by the laws made by the people, and is often a taxpayer, there is no reason, political, human or divine . . . why she should not have the same rights at the ballot-box that man has.³²

This essentialist argument could have a conservative thrust as well: the virtues of women could be counted on to preserve the traditional social order, to protect property, order, and stability, particularly against the vices of the urban working class.³³

Other arguments were also mobilized. Prosuffrage convention delegates maintained (probably inaccurately) that the public desired woman suffrage and thus that the conventions should respond to the will of the people. Some of their allies invoked the principle of “no taxation without representation,” while others claimed that enfranchisement would provide economic benefits and workplace protection to the growing number of female wage earners. More intellectually minded advocates offered broad historical portraits, pointing to the progressive enlargement of the franchise as a sign of

the steady and beneficent erosion of oppression and “aristocracy.” John M. Broomall, a former congressman and Republican delegate to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1872–73, concluded a lengthy speech by announcing that

This thing is coming. It is only a question of time. The progress is onward. For thirty years I have been an advocate of universal self-government, and during that time I have marked the progress of it steadily onward. At first, nobody was a man, in the sense of the “governed,” unless he was a white man; and indeed some white men were hardly counted. . . . That word “white” . . . was washed out with blood.

He continued:

Four hundred years ago women, according to the popular notion of that day, had no souls. . . . Still later than that, the women were beasts of burden. . . . Still the world moves, and in our time they have been granted equal civil rights with men. The next step is coming, and there are those living who will see it. . . . That step is equality of all human beings both before the law and in the making of the law. Thus it is that the world moves, and the man who is not prepared to keep pace with its motion had better get out of the way.³⁴

Still others, both politicians and female suffragists, put forward a more conservative—and ominous—rationale: that it was wrong for the polity to enfranchise ignorant blacks and foreigners while barring educated, nativeborn white women. One delegate to Ohio’s constitutional convention in 1873 lamented the decision “to confer this great privilege upon the ignorant alien—the Chinaman, the Japanese, the Ashantees, and to everything that wears human hair from any part of God’s earth, because they are ‘male,’ and yet withhold it from the American woman who may desire it, for the only reason that she is a female.” Similarly, a Californian in 1879 asked whether there was

any right, or justice, or decency, in a law which gives the elective franchise to the most ignorant, debased, and brutal man in the land, whether born here or abroad, and denies it to Mrs. Stanton, a cultivated and intellectual woman, descended from revolutionary forefathers, and able to go before a committee of the United States Senate and make an argument on constitutional law that would have done credit to any gentleman on this floor or in this nation?

At times in the 1870s and 1880s, this rationale went a giant step beyond fairness and acquired a more overtly politicized, racist edge: female suffrage would benefit society because white native-born women outnumbered—and would out-vote—blacks, the Chinese, aliens, or transients. The political dominance of “Americans,” therefore, would be insured by the enfranchisement of women.³⁵

Faced with this powerful array of arguments, opponents of women's suffrage in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s responded with expressions of an altogether different conception of gender roles, with convictions heavily laden with moralism, religion, and fears of social and familial turmoil. In sharp and revealing contrast to other debates about the franchise, opponents of expansion rarely argued that women lacked the intelligence to participate in politics or that their enfranchisement would damage the political order. Instead they insisted that women themselves would be degraded by participating in politics, that their nature made them unsuitable for the rough-and-tumble world of politics. “I believe that women occupy in many respects a higher position than men,” observed a Californian in 1879, “and I, for one, do not wish to drag them down from that exalted sphere.” Some maintained that the prospect of being dragged down “into the very filth and mire of degradation and human infamy” would mean that only the “worst” women actually would vote, while others (including antisuffrage women) claimed that most women in fact did not want to be enfranchised. Opponents of women's suffrage also invoked repeatedly the notion that voting ought to be linked to military service—which led to the following memorable exchange between two delegates to the California convention of 1879:

MR. CAPLES: What is political sovereignty? It is the fruits of the sword. It has always been the fruits of the sword. . . . Where would be that power that you represent at the ballot box today but for that sword that has maintained it from the time of the Revolution down to the present day. . . . The right to vote, the power of sovereignty, does rest right squarely upon the basis of the ability of men to wield the sword.

MR. MCFARLAND: I would like to ask the gentleman if he holds that the right to vote depends upon skill in wielding the sword? If that be so, I know a little actress who can run the gentleman through the ribs in two minutes.

Opponents further insisted that voting was not a natural right and that women did not need to vote because their civil rights already were amply protected. “If there be any one thing settled in the long discussion of this subject

it is that suffrage is not a natural right, but is simply a means of government," declared New York delegate (and later senator and secretary of war) Elihu Root in 1894. "The question is therefore a question of expediency."³⁶

But the core of the opposition was more emotional: a deeply felt anxiety that enfranchising women would deform natural gender roles and destroy family life. "What is this demand that is being made?" asked the irrepensible Mr. Caples in California in 1879.

This fungus growth upon the body of modern civilization is no such modest thing as the mere privilege of voting, by any means. . . . The demand is for the abolition of all distinctions between men and women, proceeding upon the hypothesis that men and women are all the same. . . . Gentlemen ought to know what is the great and inevitable tendency of this modern heresy, this lunacy, which of all lunacies is the mischievous and most destructive. It attacks the integrity of the family; it attacks the eternal degrees of God Almighty; it denies and repudiates the obligations of motherhood.

Statements such as Caples's—remarkable as they sound to twentieth-century ears—were not uncommon during this period. A few years earlier, a Pennsylvania politician, W. H. Smith, declared that he opposed the "pernicious heresy" of women's suffrage because "my mother was a woman, and further, because my wife is a woman." If women could vote, "the family . . . would be utterly destroyed." An Ohioan viewed "this attempt to obliterate the line of demarcation . . . between the sexes" as "one phase of the infidelity of our time." That infidelity often was overtly sexualized: admitting women into the public arena would encourage promiscuity, undermine the purity of women, and expose them to the irresistible predations of men. In addition, the sexual charms and seductiveness of women would distort the ways in which men voted: "the young lady would control everything with the young gallants," insisted an Ohio politician. Those who resisted reform further claimed that the enfranchisement of women would create dissension within families, that inescapably there would be arguments between husband and wife that would fracture the family, "the most ancient and uninterrupted social community"; it would produce "horrible strife and derangement of domestic relations." "The whole country—every household," noted the much-agitated Mr. Smith, "would or might be the scene of everlasting quarrels."³⁷

Advocates of suffrage devoted considerable energy to rebutting such views. They spurned the notion that "self-government" was "degrading" as

“sentimental twaddle” and denied flatly that “only low class women would vote.” They countered the idea that “woman” was “outside her sphere when she casts her ballot” by pointing out both that higher education once had been considered outside the sphere of women, and that women themselves ought to determine the boundaries of their sphere. That enfranchising women would destroy the family was dismissed as baseless, as was the charge that voting would somehow erode the special virtues of females. In response to the claim that the franchise ought to be yoked to military service, a California politician asked, “is fighting all there is to be done in this country? . . . Look at the greatest heroes of the wars of the world, and tell me who of them all did as much as Miss Florence Nightingale?” A Pennsylvanian with similar views asked whether clergymen, who did not fight, also should be excluded from the polls. By the mid-1870s, proponents frequently invoked the precedent of Wyoming, where women voted and nothing calamitous had occurred.³⁸

Although advocates of suffrage surely got the better of the argument, their rhetorical sallies did not vanquish the opposition. Far from it. Logical arguments could carry the movement only so far, and resistance was firmly lodged in several different quarters. Most fundamentally, perhaps, many women themselves were either opposed, or relatively indifferent, to their own enfranchisement. In the United States, as elsewhere, the demand for suffrage was most resonant among middle-class women, women from families engaged in the professions, trade or commerce, and educated women who lived in cities and developing towns. These were the women whose experiences and desires clashed most directly with traditional norms and who were most likely to seek the independence, autonomy, and equality that enfranchisement represented. Yet such women, although more numerous with each passing year, were far from a majority in 1880. Farm women, living in greater isolation and in more traditional social structures, were less responsive to calls for suffrage as well as more difficult to mobilize into collective action (they were, however, increasingly active in women’s clubs, which sometimes led them into more politicized activities). Similarly, urban working-class women, many from immigrant families, did not rush to join a movement that addressed their pressing economic needs only obliquely and sometimes seemed inhospitable to the foreign-born. Upper-class women, meanwhile, often became the leaders of formally organized antisuffrage campaigns and organizations: defending what Susan Marshall (among others) has called their “gendered class position,” these women, who already had access to power and could wield in-

fluence through their wealth, had little need for the ballot and little interest in democratization.³⁹

The political pressure that suffragists could exert thus was limited by their numbers, too limited to overcome the entrenched ideological and psychological resistance of many male voters and politicians. The campaigns for suffrage, moreover, generated organized opposition from some interest groups. The identification of suffrage with temperance and prohibition, for example, sparked an antisuffrage reaction among brewers and liquor retailers. This reaction was shared by some immigrants who felt culturally assaulted by the attack on alcohol, not to mention (although it rarely is mentioned) the rather large number of individuals who simply liked to drink or wanted the freedom to have a drink. Machine politicians also were dubious about women's suffrage—in part for cultural reasons and in part because they always sought to keep the electorate as manageable as possible. Equally skeptical, and sometimes downright hostile, were conservative members of the economic elite who took seriously the proposition that women would promote egalitarian social reforms. Reinforcing these diverse sources of antagonism was the generally declining faith in democracy. "At the bottom of this opposition is a subtle distrust of American institutions, an idea of 'restricted suffrage' which is creeping into our republic through so-called aristocratic channels," observed Harriette R. Shattuck in 1884. To some degree (and to a degree that later would grow) the resistance to enfranchising women was a resistance to enfranchising any new voters at all.⁴⁰

These broad social and political patterns help to explain the particularly slow progress of women's suffrage in the South. There were, of course, active suffragists in the region, both white and black; there also were male politicians, usually Republican, who embraced the cause in constitutional conventions and state legislatures. Still, the movement was slow to gather steam: suffrage organizations were far smaller and less visible than in the North, no referenda were held, and even school-district suffrage remained a rarity. This lag had two critical sources. The first was the South's predominantly rural, agricultural social structure. The social strata most receptive to woman suffrage—urban, professional, educated, middle-class—emerged belatedly and slowly in the South. Most women continued to live in an entirely agricultural world, while elite women from plantation and textile-manufacturing families often joined a vocal antisuffragist countermovement. The second reason that the movement lagged was race. Although suffrage advocates argued that their enfranchisement would solidify white supremacy—because white

women outnumbered black men and women—this claim made little headway with white male Southerners: to them, women's suffrage meant opening the door to a large new constituency of black voters, something to be avoided at all costs. As Senator Joseph E. Brown of Georgia put it in 1887, little could "be said in favor of adding to the voting population all the females of that race." In addition, the movement for a national suffrage amendment was repellent to southern Democrats, who perceived such an amendment as yet another federal threat to states' rights.⁴¹

If the South was particularly resistant to enfranchising women, the West was unusually receptive. All of the states that fully enfranchised women in the nineteenth century were west of the Mississippi, as were most states that held referenda on the issue. This regional pattern has elicited from historians an array of plausible, if not altogether convincing, explanations: the egalitarian influences of frontier life, the desire to encourage settlement, a western revival of a Puritan urge to purify politics, the opportunities presented by the convening of constitutional conventions at statehood, the egalitarian thrust of western Populism, and a heightened valuing of women resulting from unusually large male-to-female population ratios. Recent studies, however, have suggested that these broad western phenomena may have been less significant than the unusual political circumstances that prevailed in the handful of states (Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Utah) where suffrage was achieved. In Colorado, for example, the temporary strength of the People's Party appears to have been crucial to the 1893 success of women's suffrage. In Utah, the enfranchisement of women was certainly—if not simply—linked to the complex politics of gender spawned by the efforts of a Mormon territory, with a tradition of polygamy, to gain national acceptance and statehood.⁴²

Indeed, the history of the right to vote in general suggests that the search for any single-factor explanation of regional differences is misguided: groups of non-voters, as a rule, gained the franchise only when there was a convergence of several different factors—from a list of possibilities that included grassroots pressure, ideological resonance, wartime mobilization, economic incentives, class interest, and partisan advantage. Some of these (e.g., grassroots mobilization and ideological appeal) were present in numerous states, both east and west of the Mississippi—which is why debates over enfranchising women often were sharply contested and closely fought. What seems to have tipped the balance in a handful of western states (as well, perhaps, as in western states that dominated the first twentieth-century wave of suffrage victories) was a combination of several additional

ingredients. One was a more fluid pattern of party competition, due in part to the strength of the insurgent Farmers' Alliance and shortly later, the People's Party. Another was that western states tended to be dominated by land-owning farm families yet included a highly visible number of workingclass transients who labored in mining, railroading, and agriculture. Since the latter group consisted overwhelmingly of single males, the enfranchisement of women offered discernible political benefits to the settler population at the expense of workers in extractive industries (and the companies that sometimes were believed to control their votes).⁴³

Finally, most western states between 1850 and the 1890s did not experience the massive growth of an industrial working class that triggered such an antidemocratic reaction in the East and Midwest. The region's swing against democracy was more mild and emotionally focused on the largely male Chinese population. Although the West did share in the nation's ideological retreat from universal suffrage, the relative shallowness of that retreat may have left open a larger political space in which the political rights of women could be considered and embraced.

Doldrums and Democracy

I think it was Wendell Phillips who said something like this, "if women are like men, then they certainly possess the same brain and that should entitle them to the ballot; if they are not like men, then they certainly need the ballot, for no man can understand what they want." And we ask you upon those lines to give the ballot to women.

—CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT TO THE
DELAWARE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1897

I provide a home for my wife, and I expect her to do her share in maintaining it, and I think that is reasonable enough. If we give women the vote our wives will soon be absorbed in caucuses instead of in housekeeping. They will be drafted on juries too. When I come home at night I expect my wife to be there, and not in a political caucus or locked up in a jury room with eight or ten men.

—ASSEMBLYMAN SHEA OF
ESSEX, NEW YORK, 1910

In October 1893, the *New York Times* declared in an editorial that “the cause of woman suffrage does not seem to have made the least progress in this part of the country in the last quarter of a century, if indeed it has not lost ground.” Although the *Times* was hardly an unbiased observer—it would editorialize against woman suffrage well into the twentieth century—its observation was difficult to dispute. Only a tiny portion of the nation’s women was fully enfranchised, interest was flagging in many states, and as the *Times* observed, most of the women who were entitled to vote in school board elections did not show up at the polls. The optimistic days when woman suffrage seemed to be a goal within easy reach were over.⁴⁴

Suffrage activists responded to their lack of success—and to the economic and political circumstances that had changed around them—by unifying the two competing suffrage organizations into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890. Although Stanton and Anthony were the first two presidents of the merged association, power was gradually handed off to a younger generation of leaders, including Anna Howard Shaw, who had risen from a childhood of frontier poverty to gain a medical degree, and Carrie Chapman Catt, a former teacher and journalist from Iowa. Catt, who proved to have exceptional administrative talents, spent years transforming NAWSA from a loosely run association into an efficient organization that carefully tracked its membership and finances, established permanent headquarters in each state, sponsored courses in political science and economics, and coordinated national, state, and local campaigns. By the end of the 1890s, NAWSA had created branches in every state, founded hundreds of local clubs, generated large quantities of literature, and was pressuring politicians everywhere. NAWSA also began to target and raise funds from wealthy, upper-class women, some of whom for the first time were lending their support to the movement.⁴⁵

These organizational changes were accompanied by shifts in ideology—or at least by shifts in the emphases placed on various arguments. Mirroring the broader middle- and upper-class disenchantment with democracy, suffragists placed less weight on equal rights arguments, which implied that everyone, male and female, should possess the right to vote. They stressed instead the more palatable essentialist theme that feminine qualities would be a welcome addition to the polity: that theme, in addition to conforming with traditional notions of gender roles, had the advantage of avoiding the implication that blacks and immigrant workers also should be enfranchised. This essentialist emphasis was reinforced by the increasingly common claim

that women had distinct economic and social interests that could only be protected by possession of the right to vote.⁴⁶

As important, white middle-class suffragists placed new weight on the argument that the enfranchisement of women would compensate for and counter-balance the votes of the ignorant and undesirable. This conservative notion, with its unmistakable class and racial edge, had been voiced since the late 1860s, but only in the late 1880s and 1890s did it become commonplace.⁴⁷ Catt herself decried the enfranchisement of some Native Americans and spoke disparagingly of immigrants, particularly those from eastern and southern Europe.

Today there has arisen in America a class of men not intelligent, not patriotic, not moral, nor yet not pedigreed. In causes and conventions, it is they who nominate officials, at the polls through corrupt means, it is they who elect them and by bribery, it is they who secure the passage of many a legislative measure.

The best means of limiting the influence of such voters and of perpetuating “the American Republic” was to enfranchise native-born American women. “The census of 1890 proves that women hold the solution in their hands. . . . Expediency demands it as the policy which alone can lift our nation from disgrace.” Olympia Brown, a Universalist minister from Wisconsin, gave more precise numbers in 1889.

There are in the United States three times as many American-born women as the whole foreign population, men and women together, so that the votes of women will eventually be the only means of overcoming this foreign influence and maintaining our free institutions. There is no possible safety for our free school, our free church or our republican government, unless women are given the suffrage and that right speedily.⁴⁸

In the South, of course, the American Republic was thought to be threatened not by immigrants but by blacks, and some suffragists offered to meet that threat through what Henry Blackwell, as early as 1867, called “the statistical argument.” (Blackwell’s reiteration of this argument, entitled “A Solution to the Southern Question,” was published by NAWSA in 1890.) As Mississippi native Belle Kearney put it at the NAWSA convention of 1903, “Anglo-Saxon women” were “the medium through which to retain the su-

premy of the white race over the African." Kearney maintained that the "enfranchisement of women would insure immediate and durable white supremacy, honestly attained." To be sure, the relationship between women's suffrage and black enfranchisement in the South was byzantine. Many white suffragists declined to play the race card, and even some who did were motivated less by a commitment to white supremacy than by the search for a potent line of attack. In addition, the ranks of southern suffragists included a growing number of African-American women. The most strident antagonists of black rights, moreover, belonged to the anti-women's suffrage camp: one of the principal arguments against female enfranchisement from 1890 to 1920 was that it would open an additional door to black voting and possibly to federal intervention in election laws. Nonetheless, the currency of the statistical argument, particularly coupled with NAWSA's own tolerance of segregation, highlighted the distance that the movement had traveled from the equal rights impulses of the 1860s. At the 1903 NAWSA meeting, held in New Orleans, the executive board formally affirmed its recognition of "states' rights," effectively permitting southern chapters to bar blacks from membership.⁴⁹

In both the North and South, the notion that women were the antidote to undesirable voters led many suffragists, including Stanton, to join the conservative chorus calling for literacy tests as a means of shaping the electorate. In a well-known article entitled "Educated Suffrage," Stanton in 1895 proposed doing away with the "ignorant foreign vote" by instituting a test for "intelligent reading and writing." Speaking to a Senate committee in 1898, she declared that "the popular objection to woman suffrage is that it would 'double the ignorant vote.' The patent answer to this is 'abolish the ignorant vote'" (which Stanton, in any case, believed was "solid against woman's emancipation"). At the 1902 convention of NAWSA, she insisted that immigrants "not become a part of our ruling power until they can read and write the English language intelligently and understand the principles of republican government." Although Stanton's longstanding radicalism kept her xenophobia in check (she opposed immigration restriction and pressed hard for free, compulsory education), she and many other suffragists effectively abandoned the principle of universal suffrage in favor of increasingly popular class-based limitations on electoral participation. They were not unopposed in this stance: Stanton's own daughter, Harriot Stanton Blatch, publicly dissented from her mother's view in the 1890s. But advocacy of restrictions on the right to vote had entered the mainstream of feminist thought.⁵⁰

The sources of this ideological shift were several. White, native-born, middle-class women, like their male counterparts, had less faith in democracy and universal suffrage than they had possessed thirty years earlier. Women, as well as men, reacted to the political turmoil in the South, to massive immigration, and to the growth of urban political machines by concluding that the franchise should be restricted—even while arguing that the portals to politics should be opened to them. In addition, as historian Steven Buechler has pointed out, changes in the nation's social structure altered the class location and attitudes of many suffrage advocates: with the growth of a national elite and a foreign-born working class, the midcentury view of a relatively porous boundary separating workers from members of the middle class was becoming untenable. Given such a shift, suffragists who embraced middle-class values found themselves sliding from the “class blind” ideology of equal rights to the more class-conscious embrace of “educated suffrage.” This conservative tilt was accentuated by the entry into the suffrage movement of upper-class women who self-consciously sought to defend the existing social order through politics. Finally, many suffragists—whatever their deepest convictions—may have resorted to these restrictionist and even racist claims in order to counter their opponents' arguments and win adherents in an increasingly conservative political climate. As was often true in public debates, each side's utterances were partial reflections of the arguments of their adversaries.⁵¹

If feminists believed that their conservative posture would speed the passage of new suffrage laws, they were sorely mistaken. Despite the more sophisticated organizing techniques developed by Catt and her colleagues, the 1890s and 1900s witnessed few concrete gains, and the period from 1896 to 1910 came to be known among suffragists as “the doldrums.” During this period, only six referenda on suffrage were held, three of them in Oregon: all six were soundly defeated. Although the issue was raised repeatedly in state legislatures and constitutional conventions, there were no new additions to the suffrage column. New York rebuffed its suffragists in 1894, as did California in 1896, and Washington in 1898. In 1895, Massachusetts even underwent the demoralizing spectacle of a mock (or nonbinding) referendum on municipal suffrage that was overwhelmingly defeated and for which only 23,000 women (out of a possible 600,000) turned out to vote. To be sure, some progress was made in achieving partial suffrage for women: school suffrage laws were passed in several states; Michigan, Kansas, and New York permitted property-owning women to cast ballots on financial issues; and

the city of Annapolis rewrote its charter to permit female taxpayers to vote. (See tables A.17 and A.18.) Yet even on this limited front, setbacks were common: most legislative proposals for school and municipal suffrage were defeated; California's governor vetoed as unconstitutional an 1899 bill that would have granted municipal and school board suffrage; legislatures debated but uniformly rejected bills to permit women to vote in presidential elections; and the courts in several states, including Michigan and New Jersey, ruled that partial suffrage bills violated state constitutions.⁵²

The paucity of victories had multiple sources. As was true before 1890, the social base of the women's movement remained limited, despite the addition of some upper-class recruits. Well into the twentieth century, for example, the nation's women's clubs declined to endorse the cause of suffrage. Similarly, traditional gender ideology remained strong, reinforced by religious world views that were resistant to social change. In Delaware in 1897, for example, delegate Edward G. Bradford insisted that enfranchisement would "strike a blow at the harmony . . . of the home" and at "the Christian civilization of the nineteenth century." His colleague, Wilson T. Cavender, expressed his belief that women possessed a "maternal duty imposed by the law of nature" and "by that duty God has placed an obstacle in the way of their becoming a part and parcel of a Government." In addition, liquor interests as well as businessmen opposed to social reform once again mounted effective campaigns against enfranchisement, particularly after they were alerted by the victories of the mid-1890s that women's suffrage could win.⁵³

Undergirding and perhaps outweighing all of these factors, however, was the conservative reluctance to expand the franchise at all, the distrust of democracy that reached its emotional peak precisely during the "doldrums." "Tory anti-suffragism," as historian Sara Graham aptly dubbed such sentiments (to distinguish them from traditional antisuffrage views, grounded in notions of feminine ideals and separate spheres), was gaining strength with each passing year. In 1897, Carrie Chapman Catt, addressing Delaware's constitutional convention, noted that "there is growing in this country a great skepticism concerning man suffrage. If that were not true, our own cause of woman suffrage would grow more rapidly than it is growing." The following year, Mary Jo Adams, an early historian of suffrage, wrote that

the day has passed when the incapacity of women for political duties was maintained; and the opposition today seems not so much against *women* as against any more voters at all. Suffrage is not an "inalienable right" of the cit-

izen, of the tax-payer or of anybody else. It exists for the good of the State and whatever is for its best interests is right. . . . The advocates of the measure claim that government would be better if women had a participation in it. The opponents say that woman suffrage would merely add to the number of votes, already unmanageably large, without vitally affecting results.

Adams's observation was astute. In the South, the statistical argument was simply no match for the frenzied political circus that was disfranchising blacks and poor whites in one state after another. Meanwhile, in the North, the parallel push for suffrage for educated women collided head-on with the powerful middle- and upper-class desire to shrink the electorate. As Abraham Kellogg put it at the New York Constitutional Convention of 1894, "before we double twice over the voting population . . . with its untold possibilities of corruption," the state ought to "bend its efforts towards purifying the Augean stables which we now have to contend with rather than to incur the possibility of new evils which we know not of." By 1901, the aging Susan B. Anthony, a witness to a half century of struggle, concluded that one of the three "great obstacles to the speedy enfranchisement of women" was "the inertia in the growth of democracy which has come as a reaction following the aggressive movements that with possibly ill-advised haste enfranchised the foreigner, the negro, and the Indian."⁵⁴

Whatever its statistical validity, the anti-black, anti-immigrant, and anti-working class argument in favor of women's suffrage was inescapably weakened by its own internal contradictions. Voicing the argument at all meant jeopardizing or forgoing the political support of large groups of actual and potential voters; it also implicitly sanctioned the antifeminist view that voting was not a right and that the franchise could legitimately be restricted by the state. An antidemocratic argument in favor of enlarging the franchise could neither overwhelm nor outflank the simpler and more consistent conservative view that the polity should be as narrowly circumscribed as possible.

A Mass Movement

Even as the doldrums dragged on, organizational and ideological shifts were under way that would soon change the movement's direction and fortunes; the first decade of the twentieth century proved to be less a period of failure than of fruitful stock taking and coalition building. Under the

leadership of Catt and Blatch, among others, NAWSA continued to systematize its organization, while adopting tactics pioneered by British suffragists and the political left. Equally important was the formation of new, more militant organizations, such as the Equality League (1907) and later the Congressional Union (1913) and the Woman's Party (1916), led by Alice Paul, a highly educated Quaker social worker. Paul, who had traveled to England to study as a young woman, served an apprenticeship in militance with British suffragists, including participation in a hunger strike that had terminated only when she was fed by force.

Both in and out of NAWSA, the movement became more tightly run, better funded, and more militant in the decade beginning in 1905: suffrage organizations implanted themselves in towns, cities, wards, and precincts throughout the country; they imaginatively generated attention-getting demonstrations of strength; and they pressured political leaders in Washington and the states. In New York, the Woman Suffrage Party adopted Tammany Hall's techniques of precinct-level organizing; in California, the Equal Suffrage Association canvassed door to door and distributed millions of pamphlets. A steady increase in the number of educated urban women helped to swell the ranks of suffragists.⁵⁵

At the same time, the movement became socially and ideologically more diverse, attracting both elite and working-class supporters to complement its middle-class base. The addition of the latter was encouraged by increasingly audible progressive voices, by the movement's growing interest in social reform and receptivity to working-class women. The turning point for NAWSA came at its 1906 convention, at which child labor reformer Florence Kelley sharply attacked the movement's class and ethnic prejudices. "I have rarely heard a ringing suffrage speech which did not refer to the 'ignorant and degraded' men, or the 'ignorant immigrants' as our masters. This is habitually spoken with more or less bitterness. But this is what the workingmen are used to hear applied to themselves by their enemies in times of strike." Urging her fellow suffragists to abandon such language, Kelley called for a renewed commitment to social reform, particularly compulsory education and child labor laws. Her views were seconded at the convention by settlement house pioneer Jane Addams, who grounded a call for enfranchisement in the observation that the governance of modern cities was largely a matter of "housekeeping" that required the particular talents and experiences of women. Notably, Addams also seized the occasion to debunk the notion that women should be excluded from voting because they did

not bear arms: although that notion may have had “a certain logic” in medieval cities that were constantly at war, it was irrelevant in a world where the welfare of the city was threatened not by military attack but by social, industrial, and medical problems.⁵⁶

Not all suffragists embraced the progressive views of Kelley and Addams, but many did, and the tactical failure of the tilt toward xenophobia and elitism was apparent to all. As a result, the movement shifted direction once again, became more inclusive (at least of whites), and more openly identified with social reform. After 1906, calls for educated suffrage became less frequent, and in 1909, NAWSA formally reversed its support of education qualifications for voting. Linked to the growing concern with social reform, moreover, was a new stress on the economic roles and needs of women. “It is with woman as a worker that the suffrage has to do,” observed Harriot Stanton Blatch, one of the key architects of this ideological turn. Although Blatch wrote extensively about the economic importance of household labor, it was the size and nature of the paid female labor force that buttressed the claim that working women had a particularly compelling need to be enfranchised. By 1900, roughly one fifth of the labor force was female, and many of these women held poorly paid, semiskilled jobs; in 1905, there were 50,000 women in New York’s garment industry alone. As activists tried to impress on politicians and on the middle-class public, women were not a transient presence in industry, and they therefore needed to wield political power in order to protect themselves. “No one needs all the powers of the fullest citizenship more urgently than the wage-earning woman,” Florence Kelley had declared in 1898.⁵⁷

This new emphasis on working women had both ideological and pragmatic attractions for suffragists. Female workers were, in the words of historian Nancy Cott, admirable “exemplars of independent womanhood”; they also were vulnerable and exploited victims of industrial capitalism whose plight readily tapped the broad impulses of Progressive-era social reform. Moreover, to stress the needs of working women was to treat them tacitly as an interest group, an ideological reconfiguration that (as Cott has pointed out) fused essentialist and egalitarian claims. Finally, some suffragists, such as Blatch, Kelley, Adams, Anna Howard Shaw, and New York settlement house founder Lillian Wald, believed that suffrage would never be achieved until it had gained the electoral support of working-class men—which meant emphasizing class as well as gender issues. The defeat of a 1912 suffrage referendum in Ohio was widely attributed to the lack of labor support.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, working women themselves, as well as their activist leaders, displayed new interest in acquiring the right to vote. This arose in part because of their difficulty unionizing and winning workplace conflicts: although the number of organized women workers was on the rise, progress was slow, and many women were losing faith in the leadership of male trade unionists. More important, female wage earners, in and out of the labor movement, were increasingly convinced that state intervention could ameliorate their working conditions and that such intervention would be forthcoming only if they were enfranchised. Despite their early skepticism about the significance of suffrage, many women workers and their supporters—most notably those who belonged to the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a cross-class organization founded in 1902 to promote the unionization of women—came to believe that enfranchisement was the key to the passage of legislation that would improve the wages, hours, health, and workplace safety of women. "Behind suffrage," organizer Leonora O'Reilly declared, "is the demand for equal pay for equal work." Some WTUL activists went a step further, concluding that women's lack of political power was the critical source of their economic exploitation. "The disfranchised worker is always the lowest paid," insisted a WTUL resolution presented to the New York State Federation of Labor in 1914. "Working women must use the ballot in order to abolish the burning and crushing of our bodies for the profit of a very few," lamented a garment worker after a fire at the Triangle shirtwaist factory killed more than one hundred women. Similarly, black women—a disproportionate number of whom held working-class jobs—became increasingly engaged in the struggle for suffrage.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, the engagement of working-class women was accompanied by the strengthening of trade union and socialist support. The American Federation of Labor had endorsed women's suffrage as early as 1892, but its support was tepid until the WTUL and other suffrage organizations began to appeal to working-class interests. By 1915, even the politically cautious AFL president, Samuel Gompers, formally asked all trade unionists to offer active support to the suffrage movement. "There are two tremendous movements for freedom at the present time," Gompers wrote in an official AFL bulletin, "the labor movement and the woman suffrage movement. . . . Men must join the women in the effort to solve their common problem, or else they will find women used against them as competitors." Similarly, Socialists had long endorsed suffrage in principle and their leader, Eugene V. Debs, had been an unflinching supporter, but it was only

in the 'teens that Socialists began to campaign vigorously for the ballot. Although support from labor and Socialists drew fire (albeit a rather self-satisfied fire) from antisuffragists, those movements helped to invigorate the suffrage drive while also serving as a training ground for organizers.⁶⁰

Thanks in part to this convergence of working-class interest in suffrage with the suffragists' interest in the working class, the campaign for women's suffrage became a mass movement for the first time in its history after 1910. Not coincidentally, the movement also began to win some new victories. Washington permitted women to vote in 1910, followed by California in 1911, and Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon the following year; Illinois, in 1913, decided to allow women to vote in presidential elections and for all state and local offices not provided for in its constitution; and the next year, Montana and Nevada adopted full suffrage. In 1912, Congress expressly authorized the territory of Alaska to enfranchise women if its legislature so chose. (See tables A.19 and A.20.)

A large and geographically variable roster of factors contributed to these successes: among them were imaginative organizing techniques, persuasive and charismatic leadership (notably, Jeannette Rankin in Montana), the strength of the Progressive Party and the progressive wing of the Republican Party, increasing support among Democrats, the appeal of social reform endeavors linked to women's suffrage, and the persistence of prohibitionist sentiment (coupled with the persistent prohibitionist campaigns of some suffragists). Yet even in the western states, far from the densely populated immigrant cities of the East and Midwest, the shift in working-class sentiment played a key role. In Washington, suffrage was supported by the state federation of labor, and a straw poll revealed that union members overwhelmingly favored the referendum. In California, where the margin of victory was slight, a sharp rise in the prosuffrage working-class vote proved to be critical. Although women's suffrage was defeated in the San Francisco area (and received its greatest support in rural counties), an energetic working-class suffrage organization, the Wage Earners' Suffrage League, helped to substantially increase the prosuffrage vote in working-class districts: from 25 percent in the unsuccessful referendum of 1896 to more than 40 percent in 1911. The working class, in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, was more favorably disposed to suffrage than were either the middle classes or the urban elite.⁶¹

Such victories reinvigorated the movement, as did other tangible signs of progress. In 1910, President William H. Taft agreed to address the annual

convention of NAWSA, endorsing the cause in remarkably opaque and ambivalent prose.

In the first place popular representative government we approve and support because on the whole every class, that is, every set of individuals who are similarly situated in the community, who are intelligent enough to know what their own interests are, are better qualified to determine how those interests shall be cared for and preserved than any other class, however altruistic that class may be; but I call your attention to two qualifications in that statement. One is that the class should be intelligent enough to know its own interests. The theory that Hottentots or any other uneducated, altogether unintelligent class is fitted for self-government at once or to take part in government is a theory that 'I wholly dissent from—but this qualification is not applicable here. The other qualification to which I call your attention is that the class should as a whole care enough to look after its interests, to take part as a whole in the exercise of political power if it is conferred. Now if it does not care enough for this, then it seems to me that the danger is, if the power is conferred, that it may be exercised by that part of the class least desirable as political constituents and be neglected by many of those who are intelligent and patriotic and would be most desirable as members of the electorate.

Taft's reference to Hottentots infuriated many suffragists, but what mattered politically was that he spoke at all. That same year, a petition favoring a federal amendment, signed by more than 400,000 women, was presented to Congress. In 1912, the Progressive Party endorsed women's right to vote, and in March 1913, Woodrow Wilson's inauguration was partially eclipsed by a suffrage parade of 5,000 women in Washington. The following year, a Senate committee reported favorably on a federal amendment, and for the first time in decades a draft amendment was brought to the floor of Congress for a vote. Throughout these years, the issue garnered far more attention in the press than it ever had before, while suffragists ratcheted up the pressure to change both state and federal laws.⁶²

Nonetheless, opposition remained strong, particularly in the eastern half of the country. Although the movement was sturdy enough to compel numerous states to hold referenda on women's suffrage, defeats were far more common than victories. In 1912, referenda had negative outcomes in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan (where the result was repeated in 1913); in 1914, the men of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri, and Ohio (again)

voted similarly; the following year, suffrage proposals were defeated by large margins in the industrial states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. In nearly all of these states, political machines (generally Democratic but Republican in Pennsylvania), liquor interests, elite opponents of democratization, and immigrant groups (particularly Germans, but some of the Irish as well) contributed to the defeats. So too did the durability of traditional beliefs that could not be reconciled with the enfranchisement of women.⁶³

The strength and persistence of such beliefs ought not be underestimated, however tempting it may be to regard them as mere window dressing for more material, political, or ethnic interests. At the 1912 Ohio Constitutional Convention, for example, the standard array of prosuffrage arguments (including numerous invocations of the needs of female workers and the positive stance of the labor movement) repeatedly was countered by a profoundly different social vision, grounded in religion, culture, and individual life experiences. One delegate, after extensively quoting the Bible, including the phrase from Corinthians that “the head of every woman is the man,” insisted that enfranchisement would “blot out three of the most sacred words known in the world’s vocabulary of six thousand years, namely, mother, home, and heaven.” Another spoke reverentially of his mother, a widow “who took in long rolls of wool to spin for her neighbors” and who never voted. Several lamented that voting was a “burden” that they ought not place on the “shoulders” of women and that only “unwomanly” women would vote; another characterized the agitation for suffrage as “a sex war.” One eloquent opponent announced with a telling sense of social and generational resentment,

I stand here as the apostle of the old man—mere man—tyrannical man. The old fellow who brings home the rent—who eats out of a kettle at noon, and fills it with kindling to carry home in the evening. The old fellow who pays for the food and heat and light, who puts up the insurance premiums, and occasionally wrestles with a chattel mortgage . . . the old fellow who has hewn the wood and drawn the water, who has tunnelled our mountains, who has bridged our rivers, who has built our railroads . . . and who now stands in the presence of it all wearing plain clothes, holding up horny hands, weary in body and mind, quietly receiving the assurance that he is indeed a tyrant.

It was testimony to the growth of prosuffrage sentiment that the Ohio convention voted to hold a referendum on the issue: numerous delegates an-

nounced that they personally opposed suffrage but did not want to bear the responsibility of preventing its passage. But the traditional gender ideology that they voiced was sufficiently widespread that the referendum failed in 1912 and again in 1914.⁶⁴

Although no referenda were held in the South during this period, the suffrage movement there also gained strength. A new surge of organizing began in 1910, rooted in an urban and quasi-urban middle class that had grown rapidly in preceding decades: that middle class spawned southern New Women who were educated, had held professional or white-collar service jobs, and were married to (or the children of) professionals and small businessmen. This new generation of white southern suffragists—women such as Gertrude Weil from the railroad juncture town of Goldsboro, North Carolina, or Margaret Caldwell of Nashville, the daughter of a doctor and wife of a car dealer—was motivated by concerns very similar to those of their northern counterparts, and they joined hands with NAWSA and other national organizations, reviving or building chapters throughout the South. By 1913, every southern state had a suffrage organization allied with NAWSA; within a few years, Virginia's organization had 13,000 members and Alabama possessed eighty-one local suffrage clubs. These women were joined (although usually not in the same organizations) by numerous African-American women who believed with good reason that they, more than anyone perhaps, had a compelling need to be enfranchised. Notably, some southern suffragists, like their northern colleagues, made concerted efforts to reach out to the South's emerging labor movement and to link the cause of suffrage to the exploitation of working people. "We have no right," declared Virginia's Lucy Randolph Mason, "to stand idly by and profit by the underpaid and overdriven labor of people bound with the chains of economic bondage."⁶⁵

Despite such efforts, the soil for democratic expansion remained less fertile in the South. Not only was the middle class relatively small and the rural world large and difficult to reach, but antisuffrage forces were strong and well organized. In addition to the liquor interests and political machines, such as those in New Orleans and parts of Texas, suffragists had to contend with active and well-financed antisuffrage organizations, led by upper-class women and men tied both to the world of plantation agriculture and to the new industrial South of textiles and railroads. This elite opposition was grounded in southern variants of traditional gender ideology and in a fierce class-based antagonism to the types of social reform (including labor reform) that many suffragists advocated.⁶⁶

The opposition also had a great deal to do with race. By the latter years of the Progressive era, African Americans had been successfully disfranchised throughout the South, and most whites were intent on keeping it that way. Politicians were loath to tinker at all with electoral laws, and they feared that black women might prove to be more difficult to keep from the polls than black men—because black women were believed to be more literate than men and more aggressive about asserting their rights, and also because women would be unseemly targets of repressive violence. “We are not afraid to maul a black man over the head if he dares to vote, but we can’t treat women, even black women, that way,” fretted a senator from Mississippi. Although some white suffragists continued to advance the statistical argument that woman suffrage would insure white supremacy, that rhetorical claim made no more headway after 1910 than it had in the 1890s.⁶⁷

Faced with this opposition, in a one-party political system that left little room for dissent, suffragists found it difficult to make much progress. In 1912, after a perfunctory debate, the Virginia legislature voted eighty-eight to twelve against a state amendment; the state senate declined to vote on the issue at all. In Louisiana, both branches of the legislature rejected a bill that would have permitted white women to vote in Democratic primaries, and the electorate then rebuffed a proposal for school suffrage. Although Arkansas’s legislature did approve a suffrage referendum (that was not submitted to the people because of a technicality), as did the lower house in Alabama, most state governments declined to promote referenda on the issue and some reacted derisively to suffrage proposals. In 1916, for example, the state senate of Georgia set a hearing on women’s suffrage for the day after the legislature adjourned.⁶⁸

Compounding the difficulties faced by southern suffragists was another issue, the growing support nationally for a federal amendment. If women’s suffrage itself was unpopular in much of the South, a federal constitutional amendment was anathema. Not implausibly, many Southerners were convinced that a federal amendment would open the doors to Washington’s intervention in elections, to enforcement—so glaringly absent—of the Fifteenth Amendment and any subsequent amendment that might appear to guarantee the voting rights of black women. In addition to strengthening anti-suffragism, this issue split the southern suffrage movement itself, often along lines coinciding with suffragists’ attitudes toward racial equality. While some suffragists welcomed the prospect of a federal strategy (either on principle or because it was more likely to succeed than state efforts),

others—most vocally, Kate Gordon of Louisiana—denounced the possibility. Gordon, a champion of women's suffrage as a bulwark against black political power, resigned her leadership position in NAWSA to protest the organization's renewed efforts to promote a federal amendment. In 1913, she founded the Southern States Woman Suffrage Conference to focus on passage of state laws and convincing the national Democratic Party to endorse suffrage on a state-by-state basis. Gordon's new organization—which she thought should replace NAWSA's in the South—proved to be shortlived, but by 1915 it was evident that the two currents in the southern movement coexisted very uneasily with one another.⁶⁹

The Nineteenth Amendment

To fail to ask for the suffrage amendment at this time would be treason to the fundamental cause for which we, as a nation, have entered the war. President Wilson has declared that "we are at war because of that which is dearest to our hearts—democracy; that those who submit to authority shall have a voice in the Government." If this is the basic reason for entering the war, then for those of us who have striven for this amendment and for our freedom and for democracy to yield today, to withdraw from the battle, would be to desert the men in the trenches and leave them to fight alone across the sea not only for democracy for the world but also for our own country.

—ANNA HOWARD SHAW, HEARING BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WOMAN SUFFRAGE, 1918

In 1914 and 1915, the suffrage movement stood at a crossroads. Although women were fully enfranchised in some states and had partial suffrage in many, the movement for political equality still faced an uphill, obstacle-laden struggle. Victories had been won, but defeats were more numerous, and none of the heavily populated states of the Northeast and Midwest had granted women the right to vote. The social base of the movement was broader than ever, but key segments of the electorate remained antagonistic, most politicians were waffling, and the opposition was better organized.

Not surprisingly, the mixed record of wins and losses—coming after fifty years of effort—spawned a vigorous strategic debate. Some NAWSA ac-

tivists favored a continuation of efforts to alter state constitutions: this strategy had yielded victories, and it had the virtue of deflecting the opposition of states' rights advocates, particularly (but not exclusively) in the South. Proponents of a state strategy also were mindful that Congress had defeated a proposed federal amendment in 1914 and early 1915. On the other hand, state campaigns required a massive investment of resources, and they seemed almost unwinnable both in the South and in other states (such as Minnesota and New Mexico) whose constitutions could be amended only through elaborate, multilayered electoral procedures. Passage of a federal amendment, in contrast, would demand only congressional approval (by a two-thirds vote) followed by votes in the legislatures of three quarters of the states. It was for these tactical reasons—in addition to the principle that all of the nation's female citizens should be enfranchised—that Alice Paul and her friend Lucy Burns (also a veteran of the militant wing of the British movement) split off from NAWSA to create the Congressional Union, which would focus single-mindedly on a federal amendment.⁷⁰

In 1915, with the reelection of Carrie Chapman Catt as its president, NAWSA too began to tilt decisively toward a federal strategy. The text of the Nineteenth Amendment, still modeled on the Fifteenth, was simple and straightforward:

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State on account of sex.

Section 2. Congress shall have power, by appropriate legislation, to enforce the provisions of this article.

Catt devised a “Winning Plan” of building support in the thirty-six states most likely to ratify an amendment; under her leadership, NAWSA also managed to increase its membership from 100,000 to 2 million by 1917. Meanwhile, the Congressional Union intensified its efforts, and as a cadre organization, smaller and more focused than the sprawling heterogeneous NAWSA, became increasingly militant in its tactics. Although not by design, the combination of the Congressional Union's militance and NAWSA's more moderate yet insistent lobbying was emerging as a potent strategic force, a political pincers' movement that kept the public spotlight and political pressure on both parties.⁷¹

In 1916, the Congressional Union and NAWSA catapulted the issue of women's suffrage, for the first time, into the mainstream of national party pol-

itics. The partisan lineup on the issue was—as it long had been—complex and fluid. Support for women's suffrage was most common among reform-minded Republicans, but the party itself was not united, either nationally or in most states. Vehement opposition came both from Tory Republicans, who wished to turn the clock back on democratization, and from those who resisted social reform, such as New York's Senator James Wadsworth. Another stalwart Republican opponent was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the author of the 1890 "force" bill to guarantee black voting rights in the South. The Democratic Party was also divided: its southern wing and urban machines generally had opposed women's suffrage, and the party's embrace of states' rights mitigated against a federal amendment. Yet there were many prosuffrage Democratic politicians, including Champ Clark of Missouri, who became the powerful Speaker of the House in the 'teens.⁷²

Breaking with the suffrage movement's tradition of nonpartisanship, the Congressional Union—and its organizational offspring, the Woman's Party and the National Woman's Party—attempted in 1914 and again in 1916 to mobilize women who were already enfranchised to vote against Democratic candidates. Despite that threat, President Woodrow Wilson declined to endorse women's suffrage, evasively reiterating his view that suffrage was a state issue; the national Democratic Party was similarly unresponsive. (The Republican platform of 1916, in contrast, endorsed the cause, albeit in watered-down language.) When the votes were counted, the suffragists' strategy appeared to have failed: Wilson was reelected, the Democrats won most states where women had voted, and there was no evidence that Democratic congressional candidates had suffered because of their party's stance on the voting rights of women.⁷³

Nonetheless, the 1916 elections set in motion two distinctive partisan dynamics that had surfaced periodically in suffrage struggles since the 1840s. The first resulted from the partial enfranchisement of women: some women already could vote in all elections, and many could vote in some elections. As Alice Paul and her allies realized, such circumstances gave women leverage to reward or punish politicians because of their (or their party's) stance on the Nineteenth Amendment. That this leverage was not particularly effective in 1916 did not mean that it would remain inconsequential: Democrats in states such as California, where women did vote, still had good reason to press the national party to endorse women's suffrage. The second dynamic was that of the "endgame," the dynamic of possible or impending victory: once it seemed likely or even possible that

women's suffrage eventually would be achieved, either nationally or in an individual state, the potential political cost of a vote against enfranchisement rose dramatically. Such a vote all too easily could earn the enmity of a large group of future constituents. The invariable upshot of such circumstances (and a clear sign that a suffrage contest had entered its endgame) was pressure on political leaders to jump on the bandwagon, or at the very least, to get out of the road.

The operation of these dynamics accelerated in 1917. Beginning in January, the National Woman's Party began the unladylike activity of picketing the White House day after day, carrying signs contrasting Wilson's broadly stated democratic utterances with his position on women's suffrage. As the picket lines grew larger and occasionally more vociferous, the Washington police began arresting the women, which led to trials, jail terms, and hunger strikes for prominent social figures as well as dedicated recent college graduates. The courts eventually dismissed all charges against the picketers, but small-scale acts of disruption and civil disobedience continued in various locales. NAWSA, meanwhile, intensified its less flamboyant efforts on all fronts, raising money, holding public demonstrations, and lobbying state and national political leaders. Indeed, by 1917, the National Woman's Party's dramatic militance was serving to make NAWSA appear increasingly moderate and acceptable to mainstream politicians. State legislators in six midwestern and northeastern states (Michigan, Ohio, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Nebraska, and Indiana) responded to these efforts by adopting the precedent set in Illinois: without constitutional amendments, they altered their laws to permit women to vote in presidential elections. (See table A.19.)⁷⁴

In November 1917, the male voters of New York made an even more striking decision, approving a state constitutional amendment that enfranchised women in all elections. This stunning victory, reversing the outcome of a referendum held only two years earlier, was made possible by a remarkable shift in the working-class and immigrant neighborhoods of New York City. Districts that had opposed suffrage in 1915 voted in favor in 1917, by margins large enough to tilt the balance in the state tally. The efforts of the WTUL and others to build a cross-class coalition finally had paid off. The Democratic machine politicians of New York had proven to be receptive to those efforts and shrewd enough to read the political winds: dropping their longstanding opposition, they remained officially neutral in the referendum, and in the end, actively worked for its passage. After the

victory, one suffrage leader declared that “we owe a great debt to Tammany Hall,” and many credited Democratic politicians, especially Tammany boss Charlie Murphy, for the victory.⁷⁵

The shift of Tammany to the prosuffrage column was both an emblem of and stimulant to a seismic shift in the politics of suffrage: between 1915 and 1920, machine politicians dramatically reversed course and began to favor the enfranchisement of women. Sensing correctly that suffrage was likely to triumph, that it would not necessarily damage their interests, and that their own constituents supported it, Democratic machine leaders in New York, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and other cities joined hands with NAWSA and the National Woman's Party to promote suffrage reform; the Republican organization made a similar about-face in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Simultaneously, if more spottily, organized labor—rapidly growing in the wartime economic boom—strengthened its ties to the suffrage movement. In Connecticut, for example, a strong alliance emerged between the National Woman's Party and the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which counted among its members thousands of munitions workers in Bridgeport. In 1919, one activist wrote to Alice Paul that Sam Lavit, the head of the Bridgeport IAM local, had “done more for the National Woman's Party in Connecticut than any other man.” In most states, thus, the two primary organizational expressions of working-class power—political machines and the labor movement—climbed on the suffrage bandwagon. At the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1917–1918, the primary argument made in behalf of suffrage expansion was that it would benefit the “working girls and women” who were exploited in the factories and shops of the Bay State.⁷⁶

1917, of course, also was the year that the United States entered World War I. The war, and preparations for it, briefly retarded and then accelerated the progress of suffrage reform. When President Wilson and Congress declared war, NAWSA, in deference to the war effort, decided to suspend its congressional lobbying, although it continued grassroots efforts to build support for a federal amendment. Militant and pacifist (often Quaker) suffragists, however, ignored NAWSA's directives, organizing picket lines and hunger strikes, while excoriating the president for fighting for democracy abroad while undercutting it at home. These militant suffragists were often denounced as unpatriotic (or worse) by an increasingly strident antisuffrage movement that linked the right to vote with feminism, radicalism, socialism, and “German Kulture.”⁷⁷

But the most critical impact of the war was the opportunity it gave suffragists to contribute to the mobilization and in so doing, to vanquish the age-old argument that women should not vote because they did not bear arms. NAWSA converted its local chapters into volunteer groups that provided Americanization classes, distributed food, and cooperated with the Red Cross. Missouri's suffragists, thousands of whom, carrying yellow parasols, had lined the streets at the Democratic convention in St. Louis in 1916, feverishly sold bonds and thrift stamps, knitted clothes, and gave gifts to soldiers and sailors. In New York, the Woman Suffrage Party sold more than a million dollars' worth of bonds between the declaration of war and the fall referendum of 1917, the first direct electoral test of the impact of war on the suffrage movement. The leadership of NAWSA also offered its political support—always especially valued during wartime—to the Wilson administration; both Catt and Anna Howard Shaw served on the Women's Committee of the Council on National Defense.⁷⁸

The suffragists' adroit handling of the war crisis, coupled with continuing (if often behind the scenes) political pressure on Congress and the president, was rewarded in January 1918. The president, in an extraordinary address, announced his support of a federal suffrage amendment "as a war measure." The next day, the House of Representatives, reversing its stance of only three years earlier, voted in favor of the Nineteenth Amendment: the victory was won by one vote, with the Democrats splitting almost evenly while more than 80 percent of Republicans voted favorably. Importantly, most of the congressmen who changed their position in those few years came from states that recently had adopted some form of women's suffrage.⁷⁹

The Senate, where antisuffrage southern Democrats constituted a proportionally larger bloc, took an additional year and a half to endorse the amendment. Addressing the Senate in September 1918, Wilson again pressed the links between war and enfranchisement. Women's suffrage, he declared, was "essential to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which are engaged. . . . We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of sacrifice and suffering and toll and not to a partnership of privilege and of right? This war could not have been fought . . . if it had not been for the services of women." Notably, Wilson was extending rather than rejecting the traditional notion that suffrage ought to be tied to military service: as was appropriate, perhaps, in the nation's first modern war (which demanded a new level of mass mobilization), the president claimed that women should

be enfranchised because of their contributions to the war rather than despite their failure to bear arms.⁸⁰

Suffragists too stressed their wartime role, even threatening to diminish their support if suffrage were not forthcoming. They also campaigned hard in the 1918 elections, helping to generate new Republican majorities in Congress. After months of relentless political pressure and careful targeting of Republican and Democratic holdouts, the Senate—by a large Republican majority and a small Democratic one—finally came on board in the summer of 1919. The combination of broad, multiclass support, war, and the endgame dynamics of party competition had put the amendment over the top.⁸¹ Notably, congressional support for the Nineteenth Amendment was centered among politicians of both parties who had displayed some commitment to issues of social justice and civil rights; its last-ditch opponents were almost entirely Southerners and old-stock, probusiness Republicans such as Henry Cabot Lodge.⁸²

The fight was not quite over. NAWSA's leaders recognized that ratification depended on winning virtually every state outside of the South and the border states; they also believed it essential to move quickly, before the aura of wartime faded. Meanwhile, antisuffragists geared up for battle, denouncing the Nineteenth Amendment as a violation of states' rights and a giant step toward socialism and free love. Fortunately for the suffragists, however, the political tides were running in their favor, and NAWSA's finely honed organization was well prepared for the task of navigating the Nineteenth Amendment through state legislatures. The amendment was approved with remarkable speed in much of the Northeast and Midwest; the western states, where women already were enfranchised, did not lag far behind. Texas, Oklahoma, and Connecticut proved to be battlegrounds, but successes in the first two lessened the sting of defeat in the southern New England state.⁸³

To no one's surprise, the South remained recalcitrant. In the hope of wooing southern votes, some politicians, such as Jeannette Rankin, as well as activists such as Catt and Paul, tried to reassure Southerners that the amendment did not threaten white supremacy (it meant "the removal of the sex restriction, nothing more, nothing less"); and NAWSA opportunistically distanced itself from black suffragists. But despite their rather unprincipled efforts, the South remained opposed, with the full-throated cry of states' rights giving tortured voice to the region's deep anxieties about race. Nowhere were those anxieties more vividly manifested than in Louisiana and Missis-

sippi, where Kate Gordon and her followers actively and successfully worked to defeat the amendment; in the end, it was approved only by the four border states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, and Arkansas. Nonetheless, women everywhere, including Kate Gordon, were enfranchised. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee, by a margin of one vote, became the thirty-sixth state to vote positively on the amendment; a week later, after ratification had been formally certified, the Nineteenth Amendment was law.⁸⁴

Aftermath

It is a well-known irony in American history that politics did not change very dramatically after women were enfranchised. The electorate nearly doubled in size between 1910 and 1920, but voting patterns and partisan alignments were little affected. The largest movement for voting rights in the nation's history did not spark the revolution that some had feared but instead coincided with the return to "normalcy" in American politics. Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge were the first presidents elected with a sizable number of women's votes, and conservative Republicans dominated political life throughout the 1920s. Women, moreover, did not rush out to vote in huge numbers: electoral turnout was even lower among women than among men. Political life in the 1920s was not nearly as vibrant or energetic as it had been in the 1890s or the latter years of the Progressive era; despite the identification of women with social reform, reforms were few during the first decade that women could vote.⁸⁵

To be sure, the entry of women into the electorate, as scholars recently have pointed out, did have many subtle and longer-range consequences for political life. New issues, particularly those affecting women and children, were injected into the political arena, even if concrete reforms were slow to materialize. The social welfare programs of the 1930s were colored by the concerns of the female electorate and often promoted by women who had cut their political and organizational teeth in the suffrage movement. To cite the most obvious example, Franklin Roosevelt's appointment of Frances Perkins as secretary of labor (and as the first woman to hold a cabinet position) would not have happened without the Nineteenth Amendment. Women, and the experiences of the suffrage movement, also had an impact on the practice of politics—including interest group formation and techniques of voter education—and on the evolution of political cultures within each of the major parties.⁸⁶

Nonetheless, the aftermath of victory was low-key, if not anticlimactic, a fact not unrelated to the movement's success in the first place. The victories of the suffrage drive were built in part on the ever-widening perception among men that the enfranchisement of women would not significantly transform politics or policy. This perception gained currency thanks to the federal structure of voting laws and the piecemeal way in which women first were enfranchised. As was pointed out again and again in twentieth-century debates, nothing particularly unusual had happened to politics or voting patterns in states that had enfranchised women in the 1880s and 1890s, such as Colorado and Wyoming: by the time that the federal amendment was approved, women already were voting in many state and local elections, as well as in numerous foreign countries, without jarring or revolutionary consequences. The states that enfranchised women early did not even enact prohibition laws! The machine politicians who eventually tilted in favor of suffrage learned from these experiences, concluding correctly that their organizations would not be threatened by the votes of women. Similarly, the suffragists' prediction that the enfranchisement of women would not jeopardize white supremacy in the South proved to be on the mark: although some (but not many) black women were able to register to vote, the Democratic Party remained firmly in power, segregation and black disfranchisement persisted, and the federal government steered clear of voting rights issues for another four decades.⁸⁷

Sex, thus, did not prove to be a significant line of cleavage in the American electorate: some gender gaps in voting did occur in the early years (as well as more recently), but they were not large, and few issues sharply divided men and women. Moreover, despite the coalitions formed during the suffrage struggle, women as a group did not develop lasting alliances with other disadvantaged citizens, such as blacks and immigrants, nor did the foray of the suffrage movement into partisan politics lead to durable party loyalties. Women certainly were empowered by enfranchisement, and their lives consequently (if gradually) may have changed in a host of different ways, but they tended to vote for the same parties and candidates that their husbands, fathers, and brothers supported. Class, race, ethnicity, and religion remained the more salient predictors of a person's voting behavior. The domestic and familial conflict over politics so vividly feared by antisuffragists never materialized. Nor did possession of the vote automatically give women full and equal citizenship in matters such as jury duty or office holding.⁸⁸

The very absence of dramatic change after 1920 inescapably leaves one wondering what the adamant resistance was all about. Why, given the rather placid outcome, did so many men oppose women's suffrage for so long? Why did it take women seventy years after Seneca Falls to become enfranchised? The historical record points to three overarching factors. The first, simply, was fear of the unknown: no one knew—especially in the nineteenth century—exactly what would happen if women voted, which permitted many different types of anxieties—political, social, and psychological—to be projected onto the specter of woman suffrage. The enfranchisement of women was something new and untested that could reach into the public and private lives of all men.

The second sustained source of resistance was the persistence of deeply ingrained standards of femininity and masculinity that appeared to be threatened by the prospect of women voting. Grounded in culture, social patterns, and the division of labor, these standards led men (and some women as well) to believe that suffrage would genuinely be a pernicious heresy, a violation of divine law, a threat to the family, or a source of promiscuity and debasement. The right to vote was an expression of masculine power, exercised in the male sphere of public life; for women to claim such power was to rob men of a piece of their identities, alter their social roles, and threaten their legal dominance over women. In the end, of course, suffrage did not generate any profound transformation in gender roles or even a powerful feminist movement. But people believed that it would, and they acted on their beliefs.

The third overarching factor was the coincidence of historical timing that brought the issue of women's suffrage to the fore just as faith in broadly distributed political rights was beginning to diminish. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the celebratory democratic rhetoric of the 1830s and 1840s had receded into almost-dim memory. To many, voting once again had become a privilege rather than a right, and the size of the electorate a matter of expediency rather than principle. To grant that women had a *right* to vote could only undercut the rationale for laws designed to restrict a male electorate that already seemed too large and unmanageable. This conservative impulse, widely present in the middle and upper classes, substantially narrowed the path down which the women's suffrage movement was obliged to travel and in so doing, significantly retarded its progress.⁸⁹

Overcoming this resistance required an immense movement, shrewdly led by experienced political operatives, energized by the participation of

millions. It also took more than that. Success did not come to the suffrage movement until images and norms of gender roles began to shift under the gradual but sturdy pressure of changes in the social structure, until local experiences and evolving beliefs could relax some of the apprehensions about the potential consequences of enfranchisement. Electoral majorities in favor of suffrage were mustered only when divisions between and within the major political parties could be exploited by a single-issue movement; and victory was ushered in at the end by war. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Civil War vision of entering the polity alongside the blue-uniformed black soldier was never realized. Yet the final and decisive victories of the movement that she founded were achieved while millions of men were in uniform and millions of women were mobilized to abet their military efforts.⁹⁰