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978-1-107-01366-7 - The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment

Corrine M. McConnaughy

Excerpt

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Introduction

On States and Suffrage

“I don’t know the exact number of States we shall have to have, but I do know that there will come a day when that number will automatically and resistlessly act on the Congress of the United States to compel the submission of a federal suffrage amendment.”

– Susan B. Anthony

As their Women’s Rights Convention assembled in Seneca Falls, New York, in the summer of 1848, organizers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott dissented on the prudence of one agenda item. Stanton had revised their Declaration of Sentiments – a document regarding women’s rights modeled after the Declaration of Independence – to include a resolution in favor of women’s voting rights. Mott balked. She worried the woman suffrage proposal was too far before its time; such extremity could threaten the viability of their broader women’s rights agenda. Having her ideas about woman’s place labeled as “too radical” even among fellow women’s rights activists was hardly an uncommon experience for Stanton. She would, in fact, later become alienated from the organized woman suffrage movement over taking another radical position: her indictment of organized religion as an oppressor of women, the core of which she set down in a treatise entitled *The Woman’s Bible*. This time, however, Stanton found an ally in convention delegate and eminent abolitionist Frederick Douglass. With Douglass introducing the suffrage appeal to the convention, Stanton managed to retain its inclusion. The Declaration, with Stanton’s call for women to actively pursue the right to vote, was ultimately signed by a third of the convention attendees. Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men had put their names to the document that scholars have labeled the beginning of the struggle for women’s enfranchisement in the United States.¹

¹ The chapter’s opening quotation of Susan B. Anthony appears in Catt, Carrie Chapman and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*

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The end of the woman suffrage struggle came, of course, with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, which barred discrimination based on sex in voter qualifications. That the struggle to realize the goal of woman suffrage spanned more than seventy years seems, perhaps, to validate Mott's worry that the idea of women's voting rights was still too radical for her time. Indeed, a proposal for a constitutional amendment did not appear in Congress until 1878, would not be voted upon until 1887, and seemed to stand no chance of passing until the second decade of the twentieth century. Yet, beneath the surface of the long wait for a federal woman suffrage amendment was a much more dynamic story of the politics of women's voting rights in the states. Woman suffrage measures were considered and adopted by states through legislative enactment, constitutional conventions, and popularly initiated referendums; the earliest of these extensions came in 1837, the latest during the push for ratification of the federal amendment in 1920. Some of these state-level measures provided for purely local electoral rights, enabling women to vote on local tax issues, school matters, or for municipal officers. Other measures provided women with limited suffrage rights in statewide elections, such as allowing them to vote only in presidential elections. And some states endowed women with truly full voting rights – as early as 1890.

Leaders of the national woman suffrage movement certainly noticed the story of the states, at least to the extent that they engaged the question of whether state-level adoption of woman suffrage would enhance the viability of their goal of a federal amendment. Although notable suffrage activists disagreed on the answer to that question, the state strategy – aiming to win the woman suffrage battle at the federal level by first accumulating a sufficient number of state-level victories such that Congress, the President, and the national party organizations would find support of a national amendment the only politically expedient option – ultimately became the dominant approach of the major national organization, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). When the U.S. Constitution was finally amended, more than half of the states already had adopted measures giving women voting rights in at least some statewide elections, and fully three-fourths of the states had instituted some form of voting rights for women. In turn, the argument that gains at the state level were key to effecting change at the federal level infused suffrage activists' accounts of their final victory. Carrie Chapman Catt, who lobbied Congress in her role as president of NAWSA, referred to the adoption of the state level suffrage measures as no less than “the most persuasive of

(New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1926), 227. For a general outline of the history of the national movement, including the Stanton and Mott exchange, see Flexner, Eleanor, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1959). See also suffragists' own accounts in Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joselyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, ed. *History of Woman Suffrage* (Salem, 1985 (reprint)).

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all arguments for extending full suffrage to women” at her disposal.² I will ultimately agree with Catt’s conclusion, but demonstrate that progress at the state level mattered for political reasons well beyond any sense of accountability to women in the electorate.

Changes in women’s voting rights in the states may have been essential to the achievement of a national commitment to sex equity in electoral qualifications, but the state and local politics of woman suffrage were also something more than mere stepping-stones to a federal amendment, even if nationally prominent suffrage activists viewed and treated them as if they were not. The states were filled with women who desired voting rights for their own sets of reasons, and who had their own ideas about how to attain those rights. Each state, moreover, presented a different political and social environment to be negotiated. These realities often led to clashes between “local” and “national” suffragists over state-level activism. There were disagreements about whose support should be sought, what type of suffrage legislation should be proposed, and when it was the right time for a public campaign. And the national suffrage organizations were quite regularly in the wrong. As women in Colorado, for example, mounted a campaign for a woman suffrage amendment to their state constitution in the summer of 1893, they found themselves defending their choice to act to the NAWSA leadership. Wrote one Colorado suffragist to Chapman Catt, then the NAWSA organizer appointed to her state: “You say you have talked with ‘no one who feels the slightest hope of success in Colorado,’ are you sure you have talked with anyone who understands the situation here?”³ Colorado women were enfranchised in November of that year.

It is also true that the pursuit of women’s voting rights was at times carried out in the states (and territories) without any intervention or assistance from the national organizations. Indeed, state lawmakers were considering the idea of woman suffrage before there was any national organization of which to speak. In states that were moving, in the score of years before the Fifteenth Amendment materialized, to dispose of clauses in their constitutions that defined voters in terms of race, removal of the sex barrier was not an uncommon digression in the debate. Michigan state legislators first contemplated female suffrage in this way in 1849 – just one year after Stanton met resistance to her women’s voting rights proposal at a women’s rights convention.⁴ And yet a national organization dedicated to the goal of woman suffrage would not emerge until 1869.

² Catt and Shuler, *Woman Suffrage*, 340. I am attributing a passage of the text to Catt, which seems justified by Catt’s role in the lobbying practices of the NAWSA, and Shuler’s absence therefrom.

³ Letter from Ellis Stansbury (Meredith) to Carrie Chapman Catt, June 30, 1893 (Ellis Meredith Collection, Colorado Historical Society).

⁴ *Documents Accompanying the Journal of the Senate of the State of Michigan at the Annual Session of 1849* (Lansing: Munger & Pattison), 32–69.

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Fixating on the story of the Nineteenth Amendment, then, or even taking a broader view by chronicling the woman suffrage issue from the vantage point of those in the national suffrage organizations, eschews important pieces of the history of woman suffrage in the United States. That prominent suffrage activists were convinced state-level developments were key to winning the federal amendment is certainly one reason to seek an explanation of state action – and inaction – on women’s voting rights. That the states varied so widely, across time and geography, in their treatment of the issue is another. Simply put, it begs the question of why. Why did woman suffrage become a political reality in some states and not others? Why were women enfranchised at particular moments in their states’ histories?

To offer an explanation of the states’ treatment of the issue of women’s voting rights will involve addressing the fundamental question about democratic development at the heart of the woman suffrage story: why would politicians *ever* decide to expand the electorate to which they are accountable? The aim of this book is to develop a general framework for understanding why politicians act to widen the democratic circle, and to use that framework to explain the politics of woman suffrage. Building this account of electoral expansion entails drawing on insights about the decision-making process of the legislators who control the supply of new voting rights, including how and when political parties structure the environments in which legislators make their decisions.⁵ Centering the focus on partisan politics does not imply that suffrage activism is unimportant in the process of electoral expansion. Indeed, I argue that activism powerfully shapes the incentives of the supply-side actors in the enfranchisement equation. Yet previous accounts of voting rights extension that have focused almost exclusively on the demand-side actors have had difficulty explaining *how* activism influenced policy outcomes. By accounting for partisan politicians’ motivations to expand the electorate, I gain new leverage on that question.

Why Woman Suffrage – What We Know So Far

Explanations for the extension of voting rights to women were first offered by suffrage activists themselves. NAWSA, the largest and longest-standing national suffrage organization, which emerged in 1890 as the reunification of the feuding National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association, published its own six-volume account of the movement – from start to finish and across state and federal levels. This *History of Woman Suffrage* allowed leaders from each state to write their own reports of state action; what was done by suffrage organizers, what legislation was introduced and

⁵ In the category “legislators” I am including delegates to constitutional conventions, as well as members of regular state and territorial legislatures. Delegates do not have reelection goals per se, but are usually interested in legislative or other political careers after the convention. I deal with consequences of exceptions to this rule in later chapters.

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how it was treated, and the characterization of “public opinion” in the state were all chronicled. NAWSA also kept copious records, for at least part of its existence, which were later deposited for public study. The Congressional Union/National Woman’s Party (CU), which splintered off from NAWSA in 1914, also left behind a lengthy paper trail. And in both 1926 and 1940, NAWSA leaders authored book-length treatments on how woman suffrage was won.⁶

Despite the abundance of evidence left behind by suffragists, scholars were slow to come to the task of documenting and explaining the American experience with woman suffrage politics. Eleanor Flexner’s *Century of Struggle*, considered the groundbreaking history of the American movement for women’s rights by many contemporary scholars, did not appear until 1959. Flexner, and the scholarly literature on woman suffrage that followed, while cognizant of suffragists’ lack of objectivity in documenting their efforts, nevertheless unapologetically concentrated on telling the woman’s rights story from women’s perspectives. Women as political actors had been missing from historical scholarship, and the line of research that emerged endeavored to redress that omission. As a result, what we know so far about woman suffrage is mostly about the suffragists themselves: the arguments they invoked, the ways they organized, and how they presented their cause. The cost for this tendency in research on woman suffrage, however, has been a relative paucity of work meant to address directly the question of outcomes.

To the extent that there are accounts about what determined woman suffrage successes or failures, they are developed from the vantage point of the movement. Indeed, most existing explanations of women’s voting rights outcomes are found inside narratives meant to address other questions about the development of the suffrage movement. The consequence is a list of possible influences on the decisions made on the question of woman suffrage, but not clear answers to questions about how, when, and why each translated into the political behavior that produced voting rights policy outcomes.

Some scholars have identified changing ideologies as the primary mover of suffrage laws. In essence, the argument is that women were granted voting rights when and where the idea of their enfranchisement was no longer a radical one. Changing ideas about gender roles and the capacity of women, in particular, are often highlighted as the most important ideological shifts for facilitating woman suffrage success. The pattern of suffrage successes is thus fitted with two distinct societal developments that enabled women to establish legitimate claims to participation in electoral politics. First, early success in

⁶ The Library of Congress (Washington, DC) and The Schlesinger Library (Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts) each house extensive collections of papers from the national suffrage associations. Books by NAWSA leaders: Catt, Carrie Chapman and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (New York, C. Scribner’s Sons, 1926); The National American Woman Suffrage Association, *Victory: How Women Won It* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company).

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the American West is attributed to the changes in gender roles demanded by the frontier experience. Second, changes in women's levels of education and increases in their participation in both the workplace and the public sphere – what some have termed the “rise of the new woman” – are used to explain the increased success of demands for women's voting rights in the later years of the movement.⁷

Others have looked to variations in the organizational capacity of the suffrage movement to explain the pattern of its successes and failures. In these narratives, leveraging positive outcomes for the movement depends most on the development of sufficient resources or appropriate tactics. Developments of this sort deemed influential are generally those that map onto moments of increasing suffrage success. Inside this category are scholars who argue that success came when suffragists dropped principled arguments for extending voting rights to women – that is, appeals to issues of republican ideals and legal justice – and instead turned to arguments defined by political expediency. The key to success, then, was to find an argument for suffrage rights that fit into ongoing political debates, promising that enfranchised women might contribute to the victory of one side over another. Development of more sophisticated lobbying strategies over the course of the movement, particularly in the later years, has also been forwarded as an explanation for suffragists' patterns of success. A number of scholars explicitly credit the execution of Carrie Chapman Catt's “winning plan” strategy, which funneled NAWSA resources to a combination of key state campaigns and Congressional lobbying activities, as the determining factor in the increased generation of successes for the movement in the final decade before the federal amendment was ratified. With equal conviction, however, others have pointed to the explanatory power of the introduction of more militant tactics, such as confrontational White House pickets, employed by the CU in the same time period.⁸

⁷ Baker, Paula, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920.” *The American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 620–47; Beeton, Beverly, *Women Vote in the West: The Woman Suffrage Movement, 1869–1896* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986); Grimes, Alan P., *The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Mead, Rebecca J., *How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage in the United States, 1868–1914* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); McCammon, Holly J., Karen E. Campbell, Ellen M. Granberg, and Christine Mowery, “How Movements Win: Gendered Opportunity Structures and U.S. Women's Suffrage Movements, 1866 to 1919.” *American Sociological Review* 66 (Feb., 2001): 49–70.

⁸ On the idea of the importance of politically expedient arguments for suffrage, see Marilley, Suzanne M., *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). For arguments about the influence of tactics, see Buechler, Steven, *The Transformation of the Woman Suffrage Movement: The Case of Illinois, 1850–1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Ford, Linda, “Alice Paul and the Triumph of Militancy” in *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, 277–94 (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995).

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Yet another set of accounts of woman suffrage outcomes is focused on factors that might explain delay or failure, implying that voting rights gains were achieved by somehow disabling opponents. Indeed, suffragists themselves were inclined to single out malicious opponents, such as liquor industry interests, “ignorant” immigrant men, and well-heeled women organized as anti-suffragists, as the key impediments to the adoption of women’s voting rights. A fear of pro-prohibition voting by women was said to have driven the liquor lobby to campaign actively, and perhaps deviously, against woman suffrage. Vehement protection of traditional gender roles was the supposed motivation of immigrant men and the organized anti-suffragists. In this same vein, Southern resistance, tied to interests in keeping the “Negro question” closed by avoiding all discussions of voting rights, also has been implicated in the political stalling of woman suffrage.⁹

Finally, some scholars have looked to the political conditions under which women became eligible voters to explain suffrage success. Researchers have noticed that woman suffrage was often welcome on the platforms of minor political parties, including those of the Populists, Socialists, and Progressives. That woman suffrage was adopted in a number of states at moments when these third parties were actually having some electoral success is seen as evidence of their influence on the issue. In addition, scholars studying the Western suffrage successes have ascribed importance to the “unsettled” nature of partisan politics there, seeing in it a tendency toward political experimentation from which woman suffrage benefited. These are ultimately explanations about political opportunities – cracks in the system of politics as usual that might make space for the admission of new voters.¹⁰

Yet even as stories of partisan politics and political opportunities enter accounts of woman suffrage, lawmakers remain on the periphery, and their

⁹ Green, Elna C., *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 100–32; Gilmore, Glenda Elizabeth, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), esp. 203–24; Kraditor, Aileen S. “Tactical Problems of the Woman-Suffrage Movement in the South” in *History of Women in the United States: Historical Articles on Women’s Lives and Activities*, v. 19, ed. Nancy F. Cott (Munich: KG Saur, 1992), 272–90; Marshall, Susan E., *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Banaszak, Lee Ann, *Why Movements Succeed or Fail: Opportunity, Culture, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); McCammon, Holly J. and Karen Campbell, “Winning the Vote in the West: The Political Successes of the Women’s Suffrage Movements, 1866–1919.” *Gender and Society* 15 (2001): 55–82. For an exceptional work that considers legislators’ incentives, see McDonagh, Eileen, “Constituency Influence on House Roll-Call Votes in the Progressive Era, 1913–1915.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 18 (1993): 185–210.

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incentives for making decisions on women's enfranchisement largely unexamined. Historian Aileen Kraditor observed in the preface of the 1981 edition of her book on the national movement that the effect of suffragist activity on Congressmen's votes was conspicuously missing from her own work, and that, "If someone tabulated the votes of all those Members of Congress who voted both when the amendment lost and later when it passed, and then searched the papers of those who changed their votes, we might know why they did so."¹¹ Systematic examinations of legislators' votes need not take on the form that Kraditor suggested – indeed, there are many other ways to get leverage on the reasons for legislative outcomes – but it is true that we won't understand why woman suffrage became law where it did and when it did without rigorous investigations of lawmakers' decisions on the issue.

Putting partisan politics and legislative decision making at the center of the woman suffrage story does not imply dismissal of the importance of the organized movement. Rather, it is the only approach that enables us to determine when and how suffrage activism – or any other factor – influenced state decisions on women's voting rights. As I show in later chapters, building legislative and partisan politics into the narrative of woman suffrage helps resolve empirical and theoretical difficulties in existing accounts of women's voting rights. For instance, while it is not incredible that opposition played a role in shaping political action on women's voting rights, the question remains of why the opposition would have been victorious initially and yet eventually overcome. Similarly, if ideological shifts pegged to changes in women's place drove suffrage outcomes, how can we explain why some frontier states held out longer than others, and why so many states in the Northeast, the region where the "new woman" was most common, never adopted woman suffrage? It is also unclear just how third parties could have delivered woman suffrage if they never controlled even a single state legislature. What is missing from all these accounts of woman suffrage, still concentrated on telling the woman's rights story from women's perspectives, is the mechanism by which each influence changed the minds of some lawmakers – and not others.

Suffrage through a Partisan Politics Lens: The Argument in Brief

Understanding what motivates politicians to work toward changing the makeup of the electorates to which they are accountable involves attending to their location in legislative institutions and partisan electoral environments. Legislators must be central to an account of electoral expansion because of their institutional power to grant or rescind voting rights. Changing voter qualifications, in fact, involves significant legislative work and institutional capacity: changes must be ushered past multiple legislative hurdles, usually

¹¹ Kraditor, Aileen S., *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), vii.

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involving supermajority floor vote requirements, often in two successive sessions of the legislature. In many states, changes to voter qualifications made by the legislature must also be ratified by the existing electorate through a referendum. Such a long and complex path from proposal to policy implies that legislation for new voting rights is particularly vulnerable to defeat by neglect, delay, or procedural technicality. Ensuring success for the idea of new voting rights thus depends critically on whether the policy becomes not only an acceptable idea to a sufficient number of lawmakers, but an important one as well – one that legislators will expend their time and resources to advance.

Parties enter the account of voting rights extension not only as the political institutions centrally concerned with organizing and controlling electoral outcomes – and thus, with obvious interest in the definition of the electorate – but also as organizers of legislative bodies. Partisan interest in the extension of voting rights may thus provide the issue importance essential to ensuring its success inside legislative institutions. Given their central concern with electoral outcomes, a political party convinced that there is an electoral benefit for them in the enfranchisement of the new group would prefer to change electoral qualifications, and the more they need those new votes to win control of the government, the more important such a change should be. Conversely, if a political party sees more cost than gain in the enfranchisement of new voters, it should work to stymie the proposed change.

In defining the potential for success of a proposal for suffrage extension, then, the first question to answer is what the addition of new voters will mean for party politicians. How do they expect the group that might be enfranchised will behave as voters? From where do they draw those expectations? I argue that political identities – shaped by the influences of political comprehensions of race, class, and gender – are key to shaping partisans' expectations of likely voter behavior. It is possible that partisans might understand a disenfranchised group as likely to be supportive of a particular political party; common understandings of the political homogeneity of groups defined by their social location may credibly signal probable partisan benefit. In this case, the party expecting to reap the electoral rewards of enfranchising these new voters should be the only party interested in extending suffrage rights to the group. This simple partisan story of suffrage extension is what I term *strategic enfranchisement*. Importance of the suffrage issue, in this case, derives from a combination of a party's level of need for more support in the electorate and the would-be voters' (perceived) political tendencies. In other words, this is a story of parties seeking new sources of electoral support, finding in a disfranchised group the promise of a new voting bloc, and hence pushing suffrage changes through the legislative (and perhaps referendum) process.

It is also possible, however, that the future voting behavior of a disenfranchised group may be quite difficult to predict. Or the expectation may be that the group would be unlikely to exhibit any singular partisan pattern. That is, a proposed change in voter qualifications may not neatly map onto a politically

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cohesive group. What then? The change in the qualifications of voters must derive its political meaning and importance from some factor other than the promise of a new partisan voting bloc. In this case – when new voters are enfranchised not for the sake of the votes they themselves offer – new voting rights must somehow be distinguished as a real constituent demand, one for which unresponsiveness on the part of elected politicians and political parties would likely translate into real electoral consequences. Suffrage extension in an accommodation of the interests of existing voters in these new voting rights is what I term *programmatic enfranchisement*. The programmatic enfranchisement account takes on a level of complexity in how politicians come to perceive the importance of action on the suffrage issue; there are several political conditions that help suggest such importance, which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Essential to programmatic enfranchisement, however, is a credible pro-suffrage coalition to which elected politicians are already accountable.

Key Insights and Predictions for the Case of Woman Suffrage

My main argument about outcomes for the woman suffrage movement is that the *successful* path to enfranchisement for women was programmatic. This argument rests on the understanding that although gendered arguments for woman suffrage were common, real *political* essentialism of the category “women” was not. That is, politicians saw as much political diversity in “women” as they saw in “men,” thus making women poor candidates for strategic enfranchisement. This argument does not imply that attempts at a strategic enfranchisement strategy never emerged. Rather, it asserts that the fundamental incentive structure of the strategic enfranchisement model was not realized; that where and when voting rights for women were actually delivered, it was through the coalitional politics of the programmatic enfranchisement model. To argue that woman suffrage was delivered through programmatic enfranchisement adds far clearer definitions of the relevant political opportunities, political barriers, movement resources, and activism strategies than previous accounts of the movement have managed to offer. In so doing, it also clarifies and even changes our understanding of how several of the oft-cited influences on the woman suffrage cause shaped the movement’s potential, most notably race, third parties, political machines, and suffrage opponents like the liquor industry.

In arguing that women were not likely candidates for strategic enfranchisement, I am not arguing that expectations of women voting to support a particular cause or party were absent from the politics of woman suffrage. The groups that ultimately partnered with the suffrage cause likely wanted women sympathetic to their cause to add to the organization’s electoral leverage once they became voters. It is easy to conflate the idea, however, that suffrage supporters expected that *certain groups* of women would be electorally supportive of their cause – such as those women that were locally active in the organized suffrage