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Lorrai Schuyler. *Weight of Their Votes.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 336 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5776-2.

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A Spark or a Fire?

In the summer of 2006, I sat at the Seventh Southern Conference on Women's History held by the Southern Association for Women Historians listening to Lorraine Gates Schuyler deliver a paper that was part of her upcoming book, *The Weight of Their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s.* As I looked around the room, I saw familiar faces–Anne Firor Scott, Marjorie Spruill, Elna Green, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, just to name a few. During the question-and-answer session, Scott spoke from the audience (and I paraphrase): "So you are saying that you have been able to prove with your research that the Nineteenth Amendment really did have an effect in the South?" Schuyler replied, "Yes." Scott answered, "I knew it."[1] This moment of dialogue summed up one of the central debates among historians of twentieth-century women: Did women gaining the vote, especially in the South, make an immediate difference? Or did the "doldrums" set in until sometime during the 1960s? Even the academics in that room at the SAWH conference would surely be split over these questions.

In her book, *The Weight of Their Votes*, Schuyler enters the debate and "poses a direct challenge to the standard interpretation of the meaning of the Nineteenth Amendment [and] argues that southern women, who were so adept at wringing power from powerless situations before 1920, were no less adept at using the ballot to achieve their political goals after 1920" (p. 6). The "standard interpretation of the meaning of the Nineteenth Amendment," that it did not have an impact for decades, has two likely origins. First, it is possible that the roots of this interpretation lie in the years following the amendment's ratification, when former woman suffragists were surprised that women across the United States did not rise up and vote in a block to force "women's issues" onto the legislative agenda and usher female candidates into office. Second, the debate can be traced historiographically to the women's historians writing in the midst of the seemingly more radical second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s and comparing actions of the past with their political surroundings. In addition, previous historians have focused on national change and the numbers of women in office at the expense of the local and state levels, where women worked with the vote and succeeded. A core theme of Schuyler's book is examining women's local activity and seeking corresponding political changes.

The Weight of Their Votes is organized thematically, which at first glance seems counterintuitive. Yet, Schuyler argues that the changes brought about by the Nineteenth Amendment are best viewed not chronologically but in the different effects women voters' presence had on the political process. To see that, each area of the process needs to be identified and explored thematically for pre- and post-Nineteenth Amendment differences.

Attempting to discuss the South overall during the 1920s, Schuyler studied all of the former Confederate states except Florida and added Kentucky (pp. 240-241). The book pulls a large amount of research together by using multiple primary source archives from almost every state surveyed and relying on an extensive range of secondary sources to fill in when necessary. Therefore, the reader gets a good taste of local examples spread across much of the South, and thus receives good regional understanding of women's activities from the view Schuyler prizes the most–up close.

Schuyler kicks off her case in the first two chapters with newer ways to define political activity–the changing of spatial social norms through alterations in gendered activity. Before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, polling places were usually male spaces in which activities associated with men accompanied the casting of ballots. Yet, once women began to enter these places to vote, either their presence changed the tone or they started taking exception to the environment and

calling for change. For example, in Tennessee when women arrived to vote, "there was certainly a contrast in the election scenes. Loud talking and the threats of betting are absent and everything was orderly as a Sunday school assemblage" (p. 20). Moreover, African American women were sometimes able to use this period of changing voting definitions to "exercise their rights as citizens" (p. 24). Numbers of black women registered to vote increased state by state partially because the violent means used against African American men to decrease their political voice became more complicated across gender lines. As Schuyler pointed out, white women were less likely than white men to use violence to uphold disfranchising polling practices, and often, the same held for white men in the presence of white women.

Even so, not all southern men accepted women voting–white or black. Disfranchising activities by male-run election machines often continued their successful management of local politics through ballot marking, pre-filled ballots, and intricate registration requirements. Therefore, as chapters of the National American Woman Suffrage Association began to turn into League of Women Voters (LWV) organizations, some of their first activities were to educate women on registration and their rights as voters. Schuyler argues that these campaigns to educate would-be voters and undermine questionable voting restrictions increased political participation in the region by more than one million new voters and "attacked the very structure of disfranchisement itself" (p. 47).

In the second section of her argument, made up of her third and fourth chapters, Schuyler explains the negotiations entered into by new women voters and existing male political leaders. In chapter 3, "Making Their Bow to the Ladies: Southern Party Leaders and the Fight for New Women Voters," it is apparent that most of the "bowing" happened in 1920 and 1921, which was only a small section of the decade. Furthermore, the author admits that "Democrats opened their party institutions to women in an attempt to secure women's partisan loyalty, but they were not eager to share real political authority with these new women voters" (p. 89). How much of politicians' attention was lip service and how much was actual change because of the Nineteenth Amendment is not entirely clear and may leave readers wanting more in this section.

The theme of women voters having to work to keep politicians' interest is continued into the next chapter when Schuyler discusses how many southern women tried to portray themselves as free-agent voters who were "Not Beholden to Any Party." Schuyler argues that southern white and black women turned their backs on traditionally unquestioned Democratic or Republican Party alliances, and instead publicly left their options open for the politicians who would listen and react to women's demands. She offers good evidence for this action being supported and repeatedly upheld by LWV chapters and members across the South. Additionally, the author shows evidence of "rare coalitions" of black and white women working together against political machines run by Democrats and thus injuring the party's reliance on arguments of white supremacy for support (p. 130).

On the other hand, sometimes the conclusions seem a bit overzealous when it comes to claiming that women's actions threatened solid Democratic Party control (p. 133) or that white women not automatically supporting the Democratic Party made it acceptable not to do so (p. 134). It was more likely that within the groups of politically active white women who chose to maintain the public image of nonpartisanship such actions became socially acceptable in order to keep the attention of politicians. Overall, much of the white South continued to vote Democratic for decades. Therefore, the public image of free-agent and socially acceptable did not translate into big changes in which party controlled who held office.

Throughout the book Schuyler continually does a good job discussing the roles of both black and white women in working to change the political scene in the South during the 1920s. Furthermore, she does not abandon discussing political differences based on race, cross-race similarities in voting-age women, and the occasional instances in which white and black women worked together for joint political causes. Such local examples of cross-racial cooperation demonstrate that even within a highly racist society not all white southerners accepted racist or segregationist practices.

The efforts and successes of southern women in getting legislators' attention and influencing them in turn to pass legislation is the theme for chapters 5 and 6. Schuyler argues that, interestingly, white women voters were able to lobby successfully for legislation even in states like Georgia that had refused to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Yet even more often, as she admits, legislators turned down women voters' demands for increased political inclusion and legislation that conservative male southern officeholders believed to be overly expensive. This section is the heart of the book in that it really weighs the successes and defeats that the LWV and other southern women's groups had during the 1920s in local and state politics.

The last chapter of the book concentrates on politics in the South at the end of the 1920s. Power struggles between women voters and politicians continued. According to Schuyler, women were still struggling to get legislation passed with its needed funding. LWV members were still pushing nonpartisanship but found that white women were "[voting] the Democratic ticket out of habit" (p. 195). And politicians were getting tired of "bowing" to women's groups. Yet, as the party discussion regarding the 1928 presidential election showed, political leaders learned by the end of the decade that women voters had a voice, were not afraid to use it, and tracked perceived gender voting patterns out of habit. Schuyler argues that this is strong evidence that while many southern male politicians were still not excited about having to court white women voters, they knew they had to and still did so a decade after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Thus, the author maintains, after ten years with the vote women were still influencing southern politics.

Schuyler's effort to use local and state arguments to tell the regional story leads to occasional misinterpretations. For example, when Schuyler discusses Christia Adair leading black women to vote in the Texas state primary, she uses this as an example to show how the Nineteenth Amendment changed the "southern political landscape" (p. 26). Yet, the rest of the story–that Adair and the other African American women were turned away by the sheriff–is not there. Because of race they were refused the vote. In another example, Schuyler writes that women joined forces in Texas during their "first" gubernatorial primary election to defeat former anti-suffragist Joseph Weldon Bailey in 1920 (p. 105). Not true: women had had the primary vote in Texas since 1918 and had exercised that right during the gubernatorial primary that had reelected governor William Hobby.

Regardless, *The Weight of Their Votes* strongly shows through detailed examples that after passage of the Nineteenth Amendment varying groups of women in the South used their power as voters to be politically active and successful. Overall, the book is enlightening and engaging. The author draws on a large number of archival resources to provide local examples of her regional arguments, and the list of secondary sources used in the book's preparation is impressive. It is a good place to start for sources in related topics. This book not only speaks to historians of women and the South but to social- and political-science scholars looking to broaden their interpretations of voter impact. Furthermore, it is a good read for seasoned academics, students, and the historically curious public.

Note

[1]. To see Scott's view on this in writing, see Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 349.

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