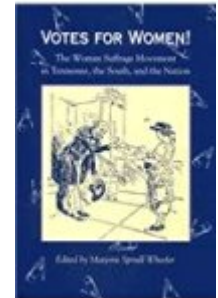


**Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, ed..** *Votes for Women! The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South and the Nation.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. xxiv + 358 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87049-836-7.



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In 1920, Tennessee made woman suffrage part of the U.S. Constitution by becoming the thirty-sixth state to ratify the nineteenth amendment. The seventieth anniversary of the Tennessee legislature's action became the occasion for a symposium in Nashville on the history of the woman suffrage movement. The conference in turn gave birth to an anthology, *Votes for Women! The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South and the Nation*. In addition to the papers from the symposium, editor Marjorie Spruill Wheeler has included in this volume a rich selection of documents illustrating both the suffragists' strategies and the nature of the opposition from the "antis."

The chapters in this collection include contributions by Ann D. Gordon on the strategy of pursuing woman suffrage by federal amendment, by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler on the nature of the Southern movement, by A. Elizabeth Taylor on the passage of the nineteenth amendment in Tennessee, by Adele Logan Alexander on African-American women in the suffrage movement, by Anastasia Sims on "the radical vision" of the antisuffrag-

ists, and by Jean Bethke Elshtain on the origins and fate of the so-called "gender gap." More than half of the book is devoted to source material from the suffrage and antisuffrage movements, including thirteen documents that range from speeches to correspondence to memoirs, along with dozens of broadsides and cartoons.

*Votes for Women!* is a welcome addition to the recent resurgence of interest in the history of the woman suffrage movement. Ironically, as interest in the broader field of women's history escalated starting in the 1960s and 1970s, the study of the woman suffrage movement declined. Monumental and pioneering works in the field, such as Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*[1] and Aileen Kraditor's *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*[2] left a rich legacy for later historians; however, as in other fields, the focus on the "new social history" tended to eclipse political subjects in the history of women, including the struggle for the franchise.[3] The last decade, however, has seen a revival of interest in woman suffrage, although there continues to be a dearth

of scholarship on suffrage in the Southern states. [4]

The present volume thus promises to fill an important gap in the literature by contributing to the study of the continuities and discontinuities between the Southern suffrage movement and suffrage activism in the rest of the country. In that respect, the breadth of the work, as indicated in the subtitle, is significant. The book attempts to place the Southern movement within the context of the national movement, thus shedding light on the distinctive nature of suffrage activism south of the Mason-Dixon line, and showing, as the Tennessee example so dramatically proves, the importance of the Southern suffragists. The tactics, strategies, and ideology of the national movement were shaped in part by the need to court Southern voters. The ambitious nature of this book, despite the potential pitfalls that its breadth creates, gives it an appeal well beyond the reach of a narrower state study.

The question of the extension of the vote to Southern women, of course, intersected in complex ways with the distinctive racial and class structures of the Southern states. Part of the puzzle for all of the authors in this anthology, then, is to dissect the ways in which gender, race, class and region interacted within the Southern suffrage movement. Most obviously, any call to enfranchise women threatened to disrupt the system of disfranchisement that was the foundation of Southern politics. The essays and documents in this volume all touch, to one degree or another, on the extent to which the Southern woman suffrage movement was shaped by racial concerns. More particularly, the contributors to *Votes for Women!* use the Southern example to reinterpret the transformations within the woman suffrage movement. The study of Southern suffragism, with all its racism, class bias, and distrust of national power, naturally magnifies the historian's skepticism about suffragists' motives that dates back at least to Aileen Kraditor's argument that

woman suffragists gradually abandoned arguments about justice for those based on the moral superiority of women. Although they do not directly address Kraditor's arguments, each of these essays implicitly asks the same questions: did the woman suffrage movement shift away from an earlier democratic idealism, and if so, what role did the South play in that transformation?

Six essays form the first part of this volume. As promised in the subtitle, they vary in their scope, some treating the national suffrage movement, others dealing with the Southern states as a group, and some focusing on the case of Tennessee. The opening chapter, Ann D. Gordon's "Woman Suffrage (Not Universal Suffrage) by Federal Amendment," makes the intriguing argument that the suffragists' decision to abandon the state-by-state strategy in favor of amending the federal constitution was the culmination of a retreat from democratic ideals of universal suffrage. Gordon argues that the switch away from the state strategy starting in 1914 was purely strategic. Thus, it did not represent a return to an ideology of federal guarantees of universal suffrage for citizens that she argues characterized the earlier movement to amend the constitution in the 1860s through the 1880s. This renunciation of the ideal of universal suffrage, Gordon argues, made the federal route less threatening to Southern elites, who had reason to fear federal regulation of suffrage in any form. Gordon is certainly right that many suffragists had pulled back from any commitment to universal suffrage by the second decade of the twentieth century; however, it is important to note that, in doing so, they were very much in step with many of their contemporaries. To explain the anti-democratic ideology of many woman suffragists, one needs to look further than the shifting strategies on how to win woman suffrage. And, as other chapters in the collection illustrate, many southerners still resisted the federal strategy strenuously in the 'teens. Still, Gordon's subtly argued chapter does an important service in focusing attention on the federal strategy, and

in stressing the limitations of the movement: by the time of its passage, the woman suffrage movement had become largely a movement for white woman suffrage.

Marjorie Spruill Wheeler's "The Woman Suffrage Movement in the Inhospitable South" argues that the South opposed woman suffrage for cultural, political, and economic reasons. Thus, the supporters of votes for women in the South were presented with a particular set of challenges rooted in "the South's paternalistic, hierarchical social structure ..., the drive to restore and maintain white political supremacy; and the regional reverence for state sovereignty ..." (p. 26). Wheeler emphasizes that gender relations and racial hierarchies were intimately bound together in a distinctive Southern traditionalism that created great obstacles for suffragists, and she concludes that the reason that woman suffrage was so threatening in Southern states is that it challenged "[white] male protection of [white] women's rights" (p. 46). As another contributor to this collection, Anastatia Sims, points out, the need for white men to protect white women was one of the stated rationales of the disfranchisement of African-American men, and hence of the entire structure of early twentieth-century Southern politics.

Wheeler's analysis rests on a subtle and finely crafted analysis of Southern regional culture. But her emphasis on the intersection between regionalism and the distinctive Southern construction of gender does not blind her to other forces, including race and class. In fact, of all the authors represented in this anthology, Wheeler is most cognizant of the class dimensions of the movement she describes, stressing the elite nature of the suffrage leadership and the importance of the leadership of socially prominent women in establishing the respectability of the suffrage movement.

The one essay in the first part of this anthology that deals specifically with Tennessee is informative but less stimulating than the rest. The chapter by the pioneering suffrage historian A.

Elizabeth Taylor, to whom the volume is dedicated, stands out from the others as old-fashioned and thin in interpretation. Still, it is useful in offering a straightforward, detailed narrative of the political and institutional history of the Tennessee suffrage movement.

Adele Logan Alexander's essay, "Adella Hunt Logan, the Tuskegee Women's Club, and African Americans in the Suffrage Movement," examines an important and neglected aspect of Southern suffrage history: the involvement of African-American women in the fight for woman suffrage. Alexander traces the suffrage activism of black women congregated at the Tuskegee Institute, and shows that these elite women mobilized in support of woman suffrage despite the cool or even hostile reactions of white suffragists. The chapter raises interesting questions that the author does not fully develop: for example, did the elite leaders of the African-American suffrage community adopt the class-tinged ideals that white woman suffragists espoused? The material in this essay suggests that they did not, thus further undermining the argument that has labeled Southern suffragists (and sometimes woman suffragists in general) as uniformly racist and elitist. In fact, as the example of the Tuskegee Women's Club demonstrates, the very existence of the Southern suffrage movement, as limited and racist as it was, presented an opportunity to those who would make broader democratic claims on the political system.

Anastatia Sims' chapter on the antisuffragists is thought-provoking, although problematic in some aspects of its interpretation. Self-consciously revisionist, she claims that the opponents of woman suffrage were actually more radical in their visions of what woman suffrage would achieve than were the suffragists themselves. She also offers important insight into the Southern antisuffrage perception of the threat that suffrage posed to the Southern political order: "... if white women could vote, if they became politically autonomous, they might

no longer need the protection of white men, and the justification for black disfranchisement would evaporate" (p. 110). Sims may overstate her case, however, in labelling the antis as "radicals" in their estimation of the effects of women voting; some of them assuredly did claim that women would vote no differently than their husbands, fathers, and brothers. In fact, Sims errs on the side of taking the rhetoric of her subject too literally—it seems likely that at least some of the antis deliberately exaggerated the threat that suffrage posed in order to discredit their opponents. Their confidence that labelling the suffragists as radicals would hurt their reputation illuminates another important point about Southern suffrage politics, however: that suffragists sought to dissociate their cause from any hint of radicalism in this conservative political culture, a fact that their opponents understood thoroughly.

Most of the above five essays are compatible with the idea that the story of the woman suffrage movement is the story of a retreat from its founding ideals—whether the ideology moved from "justice" to "expediency," as Kradtitor would have it, from egalitarianism to elitism, or from racial inclusion to exclusion. The case of Southern white suffragism provides a particularly poignant example of how far distanced from its roots in abolitionism and Reconstruction twentieth-century suffrage activism had become. Even the counter-example of the Tuskegee group becomes the exception that proves the rule, as Alexander shows these black women to be clearly on the fringes of the suffrage community. Political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain's chapter, "Woman Suffrage and the Gender Gap," reworks the above dualities along slightly different lines, examining the enduring question of whether women are inherently different from men or fundamentally their equals. In examining this critical split in the suffrage movement, Elshtain shows that suffragists have never been consistent on this question. Since the days of Mary Wollstonecraft, feminists have been ambivalent and often inconsistent on the

"difference question," proclaiming women's absolute equality with men at one moment and their essential difference at the next. Declaring women's inherent equality with men, suffragists claimed suffrage on the basis of justice; simultaneously, they asserted their essential uniqueness and demanded the franchise in order to use feminine values to transform politics. The story is less one of declension than of persistent duality.

Elshtain also does a valuable service in tracing this tension beyond the suffrage victory in 1920 down to the present day, examining the sources and causes of the differences in men's and women's voting patterns in the United States. She concludes that the gender gap has tended to rest not on so-called women's issues, such as abortion or the ERA, but on issues of war, force and aggression. She calls for acknowledging and encouraging the introduction of nurturing female values into politics, but without "essentializing male and female identities" (p. 140). Whether one agrees that this is possible or desirable, her basic point—that "womanist" ideology has been a double-edged sword for feminists (p. 141)—is powerful and persuasive.

The six essays in this volume raise important and interesting issues. But they do have their limitations. They stress the ideological history of the Southern suffrage movement at the expense of its social history. And, with the partial exceptions of the contributions from Marjorie Spruill Wheeler and Anastatia Sims, the issue of class is notably absent from these essays. While they investigate the intersection of race, gender and region with care, as a group these analyses offer little consideration of how class shaped the distinctively Southern aspects of the woman suffrage movement. Hints of the impact of class on Southern suffragism can be seen in Wheeler's discussion of the opposition of textile interests to woman suffrage and in her keen observations on the importance of the suffragists' socially elevated position; Sims also makes reference to the idea that economic

development and woman suffrage were seen to be at odds because of the heavy use of woman and child labor in Southern cotton mills. These observations suggest the possibility that we cannot really understand what the suffrage fight was about in the South if we just consider cultural attitudes toward gender and race. Sims' observation that antisuffragist women feared that their influence might diminish with enfranchisement, Gordon's understanding of the shifting ideology of the suffrage movement, and Alexander's analysis of elite black women's activism could all benefit from a closer attention to the class distinctions that divided Southern women. A fuller investigation of the class aspects of the suffrage fight, interlaced with the already fine discussions of gender, race and region, would make this a more satisfying volume.

Another problem is one that is perhaps inherent in collections growing out of symposia and conferences. The thread that connects "Tennessee, the South and the nation," as promised in the subtitle, is sometimes thin. Thus the rationale for treating some topics while neglecting others is elusive. This is particularly noticeable in the weakness of the articles' treatment of the Tennessee example. Indeed, if we were to rely exclusively on the articles presented here, it would not be clear why Tennessee belongs in the subtitle at all. Fortunately, editor Wheeler has more than compensated for this lacuna in the second two sections of the book, which present documents, cartoons and broadsides.

Wheeler has done an exemplary job in providing a broad cross-section of documents to represent the various points of view on the suffrage question, from within Tennessee and beyond, both favoring suffrage and opposing it, with excellent and informative introductions and captions. Particularly enjoyable are the selections of cartoons representing "Colonel Tennessee" and women demanding (or opposing) suffrage. The documents also focus the reader's attention on a fasci-

nating cast of Tennessee characters who are treated only lightly in the essays. For example, a selection written by African-American leader Mary Church Terrell, a native of Tennessee, freely uses arguments invoking justice and citizenship to support women's claim for suffrage. Anne Dallas Dudley is heard making a distinctively Southern claim for suffrage, cajoling her audience with "honey-tongued charm." And Sue Shelton White, a Tennessean who became one of the country's most famous suffrage militants, demonstrates how one Tennessee woman threw off the shackles of conservatism and Southern tradition. These documents whetted this reviewer's appetite for a fuller treatment about what was unique in the struggle for woman suffrage in the thirty-sixth state, coming as it did at the end of the long struggle.

If the essays in this book do not exploit all opportunities to put the history of the Tennessee suffrage movement into a regional and national context, the documents provided here offer ample documentary evidence for readers to make connections of their own. The need to connect Southern history to national history is acute. *Votes for Women!* takes an important step in the right direction.

#### Notes:

[1]. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[2]. Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

[3]. For good descriptions of the failure of the "new" women's history to pay attention to politics, see Nancy F. Cott, "Women and the Ballot," *Reviews in American History* 15 (June 1987), 290-296; and Ellen Carol DuBois, "Working Women, Class Relations, and Suffrage Militance: Harriot Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage Movement, 1894-1909," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987), 34-58.

[4]. Important works on post-Reconstruction woman suffrage written since the mid-1980s include the work of Ellen Carol DuBois on Harriot Stanton Blatch (see previous note); Steven Buechler, *The Transformation of the Woman Suffrage Movement: The Case of Illinois, 1850-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); and Sara Hunter Graham, *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Marjorie Spruill Wheeler's *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) is an exception to the neglect of the Southern suffrage movement, as is the voluminous work of A. Elizabeth Taylor, written over a career that spanned fifty years from the 1940s to the 1990s.

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