

Votes for Women

The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited



Edited by

JEAN H. BAKER

VOTES FOR WOMEN

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To

Abby Scott Baker (1871–1944), distinguished secretary of the
National Woman's Party, and to her great-great-granddaughters
Abby Elizabeth Bauman and Devin Robinson Munroe

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Catherine Clinton had the original idea for this book. Over one of the many lunches we have enjoyed through the years, she persuaded me that a book of essays incorporating new scholarship on the American suffrage movement would prove useful for students and their professors. And so, three years later, *Votes For Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited* has moved from conversational abstraction to material reality. It becomes the third volume in Clinton's series Viewpoints on American Culture, and is intended to provide a practical, handy guide to an important subject. Throughout, Catherine Clinton has herself been the best of guides, casting an experienced eye perceptively and knowledgeably over all the essays that are included. I believe that *Votes for Women* adds to Clinton's many contributions to her larger endeavor of increasing and thickening our understanding of women's history, even as we place it within the widening boundaries of the studied American past. This volume was also immensely improved by Susan Ferber, our diligent and intelligent editor at Oxford University Press, who corrected mistakes of interpretation, fact, and writing.

I am also appreciative of the dedicated efforts of the thirteen contributors who took seriously the mandate to make their essays, in the cliché of our times, "accessible" to different audiences. Their approach to suffrage has been fresh and innovative. They have also made the story of American suffrage dramatic and relevant, as they have moved beyond the traditional retelling of this story to place women's struggle to get the vote where it belongs—in the larger narrative of American democracy and government. From my perspective working on this book has been a collegial, cooperative effort, and I am honored to have worked with all of them.

I am also grateful to several research assistants at Goucher College, especially Paige Young and Candice Hill, who were supported by the Clapp Fund, and Jamie Winter, for support in getting the final manuscript to-

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September 2001
Baltimore, Maryland

J.H.B.

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VOTES FOR WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Jean H. Baker

In the years before the Civil War, American women began a campaign for the vote that lasted nearly seventy-five years. Their battle finally ended in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment prohibiting the denial of the right to vote "on account of sex" was adopted. Initially, suffrage was one of several reforms intended to end the significant legal, political, religious, and cultural discriminations against nineteenth-century women. In the 1840s and 1850s, activists targeted injustices ranging from child custody laws that favored fathers to prohibitions against women speaking in public, the denial of equal education, and the existence of a double sex standard. In language and vocabulary familiar to a generation whose parents had lived during the American Revolution and who remembered the Declaration of Independence, women at the 1848 Seneca Falls convention resolved, among other injustices, that "all laws which . . . place her in a position inferior to that of man are contrary to the great precept of nature and therefore of no force or authority."

A necessary transaction in any democracy between the people and those to whom they delegate authority, suffrage emerged in the 1860s as both a powerful symbol of equality with men as well as an instrument of reform. Voting became the essential political utility by which women could achieve other improvements in their status. If women could vote, went the argument of this first generation of suffragists, they would end barriers at the state level that prevented married women from controlling their wages and attending state universities. If women could vote, given their acknowledged position as moral guardians of their homes, they would

reform the corrupt practices of American politics. If women could vote, they would end unequal pay.

Following the founding in 1869 of the National Woman Suffrage Association and its rival the American Woman Suffrage Association, suffragists fought for the next fifty-one years against an opposition that at first trivialized their efforts and then circumvented their intentions through legal and constitutional maneuvers, refusing to include black or white women in the constitutional settlement of Reconstruction. Finally, in the second decade of the twentieth century, those opposing votes for women, who now included a group of contrarian women, had become a minority. Women had won their great struggle in the court of public opinion. Passed by two-thirds of Congress in 1918, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified by three-quarters of the states in the summer of 1920, with Tennessee the thirty-sixth state legislature to adopt the amendment. A campaign—remarkable for its endurance, its development of independent female-led organizations, its leaders, and its tactics, as well as the intransigence of its opposition—delivered the vote to one-half the population and thereby reshaped the United States into a more egalitarian and democratic nation.

Given the utter logic and justice of their cause, suffragists always believed that success was imminent, and so they numbered their amendment to prohibit discrimination in voting on the basis of sex the Sixteenth Amendment. But votes for women came so slowly that they followed changes legalizing an income tax, authorizing popular voting for United States senators, and establishing prohibition. Given the federal nature of the United States government and the tangled jurisdictions over voting between state and national authority, the latter so strikingly evident in the presidential election of 2000, suffragists faced endless campaigns to persuade state legislatures to take the word “male” out of their constitutions. Usually, the procedures for any such change entailed a statewide referendum. In a system that consigned to states authority over deciding who could vote, there was always some battle somewhere that demanded attention. If success did not come in 1890 in South Dakota and Wyoming, then victory would come in New York and Kansas in 1894—or failing that, in 1896 in California or wherever a constitutional convention was held or a state legislature, through its judiciary committee, might bring a resolution for a referendum to the floor of the legislature.

As Carrie Catt, the tenacious president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), catalogued these efforts: “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 fifty-six 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 . . . and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses."¹ And this list does not include efforts to gain an endorsement of woman suffrage in state and presidential conventions held by political parties during the period. There were some successes along the way, notably in the western states of Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado, where women's voting was constitutionally authorized by 1890.

The stamina of these optimists represented one of the movement's strengths, as did the longevity of its remarkably energetic first generation of leaders. Lucy Stone died in 1893 at seventy-five years of age; Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1902 at eighty-seven, and Susan B. Anthony in 1906 at eighty-six. Having joined the suffrage movement as young women, their combined years of service to suffrage added up to nearly 150 years. As the essays in this volume make clear, these women and their followers were sustained not only by the commonsense rectitude of their goal and their growing organizational sophistication but also by their increasing contacts with an international woman's movement that began in the 1830s and brought women from Great Britain, France, and Germany together in a common cause. In 1883, when the crusade in the United States was at a low point, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized an international council in London. Thereafter, the council provided a structure for women throughout the world to meet and discuss common issues. Emma Goldman once compared these pioneers of human progress whose life's work crossed national boundaries to seagulls, "they behold new coasts, new spheres of daring thought. . . . They send joyous greetings to the distant lands."²

In the United States as in other nations, suffragists sent their joyous greetings not only across space but also through time to a new generation of women. They had nurtured their cause in the early days through a network of friends whom Susan B. Anthony called "the sisters of suffrage." By the end of the century, blood relatives of the pioneers—Anthony's nieces, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter Harriot Stanton Blatch, and Lucy Stone's daughter Alice Stone Blackwell—along with a new group of professional and working women had joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman's Party. Based at first on informal personal associations, in time suffrage women created powerful national institutions, different from most reform organizations

because they were female-organized, led and staffed, by women intent on achieving political equality for their sex.

To be sure, there were many disheartening moments, especially during Reconstruction when black males were made citizens in 1868 and enfranchised in 1870 and women—black and white—were not included in what seemed at the time a natural, easily obtained expansion of democracy. As a result of differing positions on the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black males the right to vote, the suffrage movement divided into two wings—the American Woman Suffrage Association led by Lucy Stone in Boston, who accepted the idea that it was a time to entitle black males during the so-called Negro's hour, and the National Woman Suffrage Association centered in New York and Washington and dominated until the twentieth century by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who rejected the Fifteenth Amendment because it did not include women. In the 1870s using one of several strategies, Stanton and Anthony took the position that the Fourteenth Amendment's citizenship clause ("all persons born or naturalized are citizens of the United States") embodied the right to the franchise. Any reasonable interpretation of citizenship meant that women already had a right that was inherent and did not have to be bestowed by state or federal government. But when Susan B. Anthony and other members of the National Woman Suffrage Association registered and voted in the presidential election of 1872, their votes were thrown out. And in Rochester, Anthony was arrested and convicted of a federal felony.

By the 1880s, women appreciated just how threatening their enfranchisement was to what Stanton labeled "the ruling aristocracy of sex," as they increasingly argued for the importance of the vote for women as a collective group rather than as a natural right for individuals. Yet the conviction that women were represented in the political process by husbands, fathers, and brothers and therefore did not need the vote withered painfully slowly. An indication of the significance of the vote, this delay occurred because suffrage represented a systemic challenge qualitatively dissimilar from more benign reforms such as opening up higher education to women or improving kindergartens. For most men, political equality with women cut into their households, endangering domestic arrangements crafted in the understanding that while women might exercise limited degrees of domestic feminism within their homes, men were the acknowledged sovereigns in the public domain. The associated notion that women were ill-suited to participate in public life because of their domesticity has never entirely disappeared. But as Ellen DuBois has shown, the eventual enfranchisement of women has made everything

political, or, in the slogan of modern feminists, the personal is irrefutably the political.

By the 1890s, the suffrage organizations merged and began the process of bringing the proposed Sixteenth Amendment before congressional committees. In the early years of the new century, women focused on a federal strategy, which required pressuring the United States Congress and organizing a Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association with the sole function of lobbying members of the Senate and House. By 1915, Alice Paul and a group of militant women had formed the National Woman's Party, which employed confrontational tactics in order to embarrass a vulnerable government during World War I and thereby obtain the vote.

Notable among the weaknesses of the suffrage movement was the fact that, until the twentieth century, women had no core of supporters inside the halls of government. Both propertyless males in the early decades of the nineteenth century and slaves in the 1860s had advocates for their rights. But women were the ultimate outsiders in their struggle for political reform. Accordingly, the story of suffrage is often told as the tale of its exceptional leaders, a great heroes approach—in part because of the longevity and authority of these women, their connections to each other, and the lack of research on the movement's supporters, in part because of the paucity of insiders who made their case, as for example, Senator Charles Sumner did for black males. Even the twentieth-century strategy employed by Alice Paul's activist National Woman's Party, with its array of confrontational tactics borrowed from Great Britain, is no exception. It is Alice Paul (and to a lesser extent her lieutenant Lucy Burns) whom we remember, for she was, in the words of one of her loyal followers, "the Party."

Thus, the essays that follow are threaded together with the collaborations of such women as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her daughter Harriot, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Carrie Catt, and Alice Paul. Yet today's social history concentrates instead on what William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. once called "the great army of silent workers, unknown to fame, and without whom the generals were powerless."³ Instead of defensive justification of an unfashionable historical approach, students of the suffrage movement should reconsider the importance of hierarchy as a model for suffrage followers in an age, unlike our own, in which even women's speaking in public was challenged by men. Still, for all their appreciation of the ways to use and retain power, these leaders understood that the movement did not depend on them and was comprised of what Anthony called a "galaxy" of women, who must help them in the battle for public opinion.