

Analyzing the history of Women's Politics in the Shadow of the Millennium

Sarah Mercer Judson

Volume 43, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt43re01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Judson, S. M. (1999). Review of [Analyzing the history of Women's Politics in the Shadow of the Millennium]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 43, 195–202.

REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTE CRITIQUES

Analyzing the history of Women's Politics in the Shadow of the Millennium

Sarah Mercer Judson

Kristi Anderson, *After Suffrage: Women and Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996).

Suzanne Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996).

Susan Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood, Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1997).

AS WE APPROACH the 21st century how should scholars evaluate women's politics in the United States over the last two centuries? Should women's politics be seen as a tireless progression toward women's suffrage, culminating in 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment? Is the study of women's politics defined by the participation of white, middle-class women? Have we succeeded in uncovering how race and class shaped women's political struggles? Did all activist women take the same positions? And finally, how should we understand the boundaries of women's politics? This review looks at three recent books that address women's political participation in the context of the United States women's suffrage movement. These three books: Suzanne Marilley, *Woman's Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*, Kristi Anderson, *After Suffrage: Women*

Sarah Mercer Judson, "Analyzing the History of Women's Politics in the Shadow of the Millennium," *Labour/Le Travail* 43 (Spring 1999), 195-202.

and Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal, and Susan Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood, Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage*, explore how white women acted politically before and immediately following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Taken together, these works offer new insights into the history of gender and politics in the United States.

Recent scholarship in US women's political history is expanding our knowledge of the history of women's political empowerment by challenging the traditional narrative of women's pursuit of a political voice. Scholars are now interrogating the conventional periodization of the women's suffrage movement. They are reconsidering which dates mark significant turning points in women's political history. Should we consider 1837 as the beginning of the women's movement when the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women convened, as opposed to 1848, the year of the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention? Is 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the victory year for women's campaign for the vote? Or is 1965, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act guaranteeing universal suffrage, a more significant milestone in women's political history?

Another related question is whether the definition of politics should be limited to voting and other types of formal political participation. Do people act politically when they cannot vote or attend political meetings? Women's history has contributed a great deal to our expanding understanding of what politics is and has been in the United States. Scholars have shown how with the rise of the white middle-class in the US, both physical and cultural space was divided along the lines of gender, with middle-class women occupying the private sphere of home and family, and men located in the public sphere of commerce and politics. Victorians associated gender identities with designated spheres, and thus, calculated degrees of manhood or womanhood based on one's proximity to the private or public sphere. Hence, working-class and African American women, whose lives took them outside the conventional gendered spheres were often not considered "true women."

By the turn of the century, many white middle-class women rebelled against the idea of women's separate sphere. They constructed different strategies to justify and ease their entrance into the public sphere. Many women participated in reform efforts and joined the women's club movement, often justifying their involvement in political issues on the basis of their special interests as women, mothers, and potential mothers. This "maternalism" lent credibility to women as they lobbied government officials, waged campaigns, and fought fierce battles over diverse issues such as prohibition, anti-lynching, child labour, pure milk, women's work conditions, and the age of consent.

Historians today consider women's movements of the pre-suffrage era to be intensely political. Despite women's lack of voting power and exclusion from parties (with a few exceptions), women acted politically to transform their commu-

nities. They attempted to control or at least influence the distribution of resources and they promoted new kinds of government that would respond to the welfare of citizens.

This new political life for women was deeply divided by race, and the women's suffrage movement needs to be seen in this context. As women organized voluntary associations and reform movements, relations between black and white women reformers were strained at best.

African American women were also excluded from local and national women's suffrage organizations. In 1896, after repeated efforts to join the General Federation of Women's Clubs, African American women created their own mass women's movement by forming the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. This history of exclusion has led historians to interrogate the different ways that African American and white women fought for citizenship rights during this period.

African American women activists could not separate their interest from the interests of their people. For many African American women, fighting for rights could not be gender exclusive, especially in a political climate in which Jim Crow laws excluded black men from political participation, in which the United States embarked on a foreign policy of imperialism that was justified to the public in terms of white racial superiority, and as the numbers of lynching rose. Hence, suffrage for African American women was part of a larger struggle for equal rights and citizenship for all. White women, on the other hand, professed to be fighting for women's rights exclusively. Whether or not they were fighting to share in the political rule of white supremacy is a question that historians are still debating. It is no accident that as white women entered the public sphere during the late 19th century, public life in the United States was increasingly divided by race.

Suzanne Marilley's *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism* seeks to explain how and why the women's rights movement transformed from a radical movement for equal rights to a narrowly defined and exclusive movement for white women's right to vote. Marilley uses methodologies from different disciplines, most notably political science, to challenge conventional interpretations of the reasoning behind some of the successes and failures of the women's suffrage movement. For example, when considering the 1893 Colorado campaign for women's suffrage, Marilley disagrees with earlier works that stress the nativism and racism of this campaign for women's suffrage. She argues that it was not appeals to nativism that encouraged white men to side with women's suffrage, but that suffragists were able to "create a context that prepared and enabled white men to see the political exclusion of women as unjust." (155) Drawing on John Kingdon's theory of "policy streams," Marilley demonstrates how once the public got used to the issue of suffrage, negative attitudes toward women voting could change.

Marilley's book also sets up an interesting periodization for the women's suffrage movement. Where most historians see a marked difference between the antebellum women's rights movement and the women's suffrage movement following the Civil War, Marilley divides *this women's movement* into three distinct phases: the "feminism of equal rights" (1820s-1870s), the "feminism of fear" (1870s-1900), and the "feminism of personal development" (1900-1920). It is within the context of these three feminisms that Marilley explores the contradictory nature of liberal feminism. She argues that because of their lack of power, liberal feminists often had to draw on "illiberal" rhetorics of racism in order to advance the cause of women's suffrage. Marilley charts the political and social developments that transformed the ideology of the suffrage movement, from the equal rights discourse of the antebellum era to suffragists' appeals to racism and to nativism in the late 19th century. Marilley concludes in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the rise of a new phase in the women's suffrage movement — a sort of multi-cultural feminism based on a diverse coalition of women reformers.

Marilley offers the reader a challenging analysis of the women's suffrage movement. She argues that the racist ideologies employed by national leaders to keep African American women out of the suffrage movement were really just necessary political strategies. As evidence of this, she points to the early 1900s, when the national women's suffrage leadership abandoned racism and nativism and re-emphasized discourses of egalitarianism to win the vote. In other words, suffrage leaders who had fought to keep the suffrage movement racially exclusive decided that exclusion was not the right strategy, learned from their mistakes, and tried to open the suffrage movement up to a variety of "subcultures." The reader will have to decide for his or herself whether or not they agree with interpretations such as, "from the start of the women's rights movement, both justice and expediency mattered and sometimes leaders made difficult trade-offs between them, but none of these elements was ever fully sacrificed for any of the others. Some leaders such as Catt may have been less than 'good persons' at times, but successful political reform often requires exactly that." (220) Marilley excuses Catt's manipulation of white supremacist ideology to win support for suffrage and some readers may not feel comfortable with that. However, Marilley is headed in the right direction by trying to understand why race mattered more in some contexts of the suffrage movement than in others. However, by rendering racism a political strategy, Marilley misses an opportunity to explore how deeply embedded beliefs about racial inequality were in the women's rights movement.

In her study of the liberal origins of women's suffrage, Marilley herself employs the colour-blindness of liberalism, the idea that race should not make a difference. Part of the problem with Marilley's interpretation of the history of the women's suffrage movement in the United States is that she sees it as made up of women who all had the same interests. Her treatment of African American suffra-

gists provides some insight into this narrow definition. For many African American suffragists, rights for women were never separate from rights for all African Americans. A number of historians demonstrate how African American women activists perceived voting rights for women as a benefit to the "race." In the 1830s, Maria Stewart, an African American abolitionist and women's rights activist spoke of women's special role in African American as well as women's liberation. Stewart's insistence that the political action of black women was central to both projects resonates even today: "possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted, sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason you cannot attain them." Stewart urged black women to understand the complex relationship between sex and race discrimination in 19th-century America. By missing this connection, Marilley under-emphasizes important differences in the ways that African American and white women experienced and thought about women's suffrage.

Susan Marshall's book addresses women's suffrage, but from a vastly different perspective. In *Splintered Sisterhood*, Marshall analyzes women's involvement in the late 19th and early 20th-century anti-suffrage movement. Her goal is to answer a number of important questions about the political engagement of women who vehemently objected to women's suffrage. She asks: How do we reconcile women protesting against women's rights? What was the relationship of the anti-suffrage movements to other Progressive Era reform movements? How did gender and class interests shape suffrage opposition? Probably one of the most compelling problems Marshall solves is the apparent contradiction between anti-suffrage women waging a highly visible political campaign against suffrage and their belief that suffrage endangered social order because it brought women into the public sphere. (14-15)

To answer her questions, Marshall uses the records of the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women. She argues that these records counter the conventional stereotypes of anti-suffrage women as isolated, "butterflies of fashion." Marshall portrays anti-suffrage women as politically savvy members of the burgeoning women's club movement and participants in their community life. It is ironic that anti-suffragists and suffragists were both heavily influenced by the same women's club movement, yet they drew vastly different conclusions and their platforms were diametrically opposed. While some women came to support suffrage after their clubs exposed them to community and intellectual issues, for other women, the club work had an opposite affect. The clubs gave anti-suffrage women an avenue for practicing indirect influence on prominent husbands and male policy makers.

Through her statistical analysis, Marshall finds some significant social differences between national leaders in the suffrage anti-suffrage movement. Suffrage leaders tended to be from rural areas while most of the leaders in the anti-suffrage movement were New York elites. Suffragists embodied the characteristics of the "New Woman," the late 19th and early 20th-century female college graduate who

found employment and fulfillment in Progressive reforms. Anti-suffragists drew on more personal contacts. They “actively maintained the relatively closed social networks of wealth and privilege that constituted the source of their power.” (56) Female anti-suffrage supporters promoted as an ideal a class-based gender identity that restricted elite women to the ladylike position of the “power behind the throne.” (109) In contrast to suffrage leaders, anti-suffragists occupied less visible positions. Their immediate social world was family, home, and local community.

One of Marshall's contributions to the study of women's politics is her chart of anti-suffrage arguments by time period and by sex. She lists three themes — suffrage comparisons, gender issues, and political issues — under which are listed topics of published arguments. For example, between 1867 and 1899, the most popular topics used by anti-suffrage women to argue against suffrage were gender issues like family welfare, female character, domestic roles, and separate spheres. This changed in the years between 1913 and 1921 when women were more likely to argue against suffrage on the basis of political issues, like female influence, women as unqualified voters, and threats to national strength and elite power. Over time, female anti-suffragists became more militant and more engaged with public issues as support for women's suffrage grew.

Marshall draws on mobilization theory to explain the seemingly contradictory behaviour of anti-suffragists by arguing that these women were acting out their gendered class position. She argues that “gendered class position suggests motives for female mobilization against the extension of the franchise to others of their gender.” (226) Anti-suffrage women followed the tradition of “true womanhood,” basing their identities in the home as mothers. Yet at the same time, anti-suffragists could exploit their kin and social networks among the elite to prevent women's suffrage from gaining serious consideration. It appears that anti-suffragists manipulated men to their advantage with their indirect influence. Marshall reveals the intricacies of male/female relations by pointing out how “male emissaries bound by kinship and class interest enabled female opponents of suffrage to maintain an image of self-sacrificing womanhood that obfuscated the true extent of their suffrage activities.” (226) Ironically, anti-suffragists became trapped by their practice of this elite gendered class identity since they were “restricted from openly engaging in electoral politics in support of their allies.” (227) In the end, they failed to prevent women's enfranchisement. In 1920, the Susan B. Anthony Amendment was ratified, giving women the right to vote.

But did the vote make a difference? After women fought so hard for (and against) the vote, did female enfranchisement change anything for women? Did the women's vote transform the United States? Since 1920, debate has raged over whether or not voting made a difference in women's lives and in US society. Did women march into political office *en masse*? Did women vote in huge numbers and differently from their husbands? Did US politics change? Kristi Anderson offers a

fresh perspective on these questions in *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal*.

Anderson argues that we are not looking in the right places if we just focus on the numbers of women voting and the amount of legislation passed. She asks a broader question: how did conceptions of women's citizenship change with the vote? To answer this, Anderson analyzes how the boundaries of public life shifted as women entered politics as voters, party activists, and office holders. Historically, women's citizenship was perceived as indirect, "exercised primarily through a woman's care of husband and children, and disinterested, rather than interested." (139) In the 1920s, as women entered the public world of politics, US society understood their political engagement as fundamentally different from men. The popular view of women in politics was that they were not politically ambitious, were concerned mostly with "women's issues," and held primary allegiance to their families. However, Anderson reveals that some women political activists and candidates pushed at these boundaries, seeing themselves as not essentially different from men.

Anderson shows that even with this gender boundary in politics, US society did grow to accept women in politics. That acceptance did lead to a renegotiation of political boundaries. Changes in how people "did" politics demonstrates that women's political participation had a fundamental impact. Anderson shows how observers at the time perceived these changes in politics. For example, one commentator complained that, "since the women's been mixing in, politics ain't the same." (143) The gender boundary in politics meant that partisan politics was associated with male public spaces and public rituals such as saloons, parades, campaign clubs, and mass rallies. (143) With women's inclusion, politics took on a more genteel and refined air. Politics now took place in "gender neutral" public spaces like churches, schools, and firehouses. Anderson points out that women's suffrage helped transform the prevailing view of elections as a "somewhat questionable, probably corrupt activity." Now, elections were seen as "a wholesome community event in which all good citizens could participate." (144)

Scholars who are interested in using gender as a category of analysis will appreciate Anderson's contribution to the study of citizenship and politics. Anderson is correct in arguing that women's suffrage hastened the erosion of the division between public and private and the transformation of politics from a male activity to a gender-neutral activity. This change in American society may not have granted women equal rights, but it did transform the playing field. Politics changed with women's suffrage, even though it continued to be difficult for women to hold powerful political positions. This conflict has lasted into the present day as women politicians in the United States still have trouble gaining and holding powerful political offices.

Anderson is successful at using gender to analyse US politics in the 1920s. I wonder if the story would be even richer if she had factored race into her equation.

Anderson duly recognizes studies by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn that study African American women's partisan activities after the Nineteenth Amendment. Works by these and other scholars suggest that African American women's political participation was very influential in northern urban centers and impacted established political machines. Including African American women's experiences after the Nineteenth Amendment might also bring new insight to how in the 20th century, citizenship became increasingly defined as white. Before women's suffrage, citizenship was gendered, with full citizenship rights granted to men. With voting restrictions fully in place by 1920 in the South, full citizenship was increasingly a racial prerogative.

These three texts enrich our understanding of how the struggle for women's voting rights was a piece of the larger history of women's political activism and engagement with the public sphere. Each in her own way, the authors advance the field by introducing new ways of understanding women's politics in the United States. Marilley challenges how we understand the evolution of suffrage politics, Marshall demonstrates the importance of class identity and elite status to the anti-suffrage movement, and Anderson shows how women's citizenship was redefined after suffrage. Yet, these works also remind us that scholars must pay attention to the different ways that women gave meaning to political change and political activism in the late 19th and early 20th-century United States. While Marshall focuses on the connections between class and gender identity, Marilley and Anderson look only at gender in their examination of women's politics.

Scholars researching women's politics must reach beyond the experiences of white middle-class women and examine how women from all backgrounds negotiated for power. It is clear that women activists have not always shared the same interests across class, race, and ethnic lines. Likewise, we should not assume that women always choose each other as allies because of their gender. Perhaps the scope will be widened if scholars move away from the conventional periodization of the women's movement. Women's suffrage was part of a larger movement by women to advance political, social, and economic reforms in a society where women, especially women of color and working-class women, had little if any political impact. The legacy of this movement exists today, albeit in different forms, as women in the United States continue to fight race and sex discrimination in employment, attacks on welfare and abortion rights, and the rise of the religious right. As we face the millennium, it is imperative that scholars revise the narrative of women's political history to create a more inclusive history. Now is the time for us to make connections between yesterday's struggle against women's oppression and today's activism that resists assaults on women's hard won rights.