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American Women's History: A Very Short Introduction

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U.S. historians have closely studied women's suffrage. In the 1960s and '70s, practitioners of the new women's history wrote extensively about women's enfranchisement and citizenship, as well as the nineteenth-century reform movements that inspired support for—but also opposition to—them. These aspects of political history remained a core priority for women's historians in the 1980s and even the 1990s. The publication of numerous authoritative biographies, organizational studies, and documentary collections enriched our knowledge these subjects.

As you think back over this field, what are your impressions? What are its distinguishing characteristics? What works, methodologies, or interventions do you find most crucial? Has your reading of this scholarship changed in recent years? If so, how? What surprises you now?

When I began my graduate work in 1972, it was pretty much possible to read all the existing scholarship on women's history. And not just U.S. women's history. So beginning at the beginning, my introduction to women's suffrage began with Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*, Gerda Lerner's *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina*, and the less well remembered *The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage* by Alan Grimes. In fact, as an undergraduate in Herbert Aptheker's class on African American history, I wrote a paper on the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 as the impetus for the Seneca Falls Convention, relying heavily on Lerner's work to guide me to the sources. And then in 1978 came Barbara Berg's *The Remembered Gate: The Origins of American Feminism* and the now-classic *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869*, by Ellen Carol DuBois.

When I think about this early literature and the subsequent development of the scholarship on suffrage, citizenship, and the women's movement over time, three themes come to mind. All apply in some ways more generally to the ways the field of women's history has developed over time.

The first is the increasing attention to the importance of race, ethnicity, and class to the history of suffrage. The fact that our earliest histories came from the pens of scholars—Flexner and Lerner—embedded in the progressive left distinguishes suffrage history from many other topics in women's history, where some early work can be criticized for making arguments about women in general based on the experience of white middle-class women. Both Flexner and Lerner attended to issues of race and class, but the racial complexities of the suffrage movement that grew out of the abolitionist struggle did not take center stage, as they would in later literature. DuBois, also coming out of a left feminist context, detailed the failure of a joint struggle for black suffrage and woman suffrage during Reconstruction, the inability of suffragists to forge an alliance with organized labor, and the racism and class bias that underlay and were exacerbated by these failures. Yet in the end the point of the book is that these developments led to the emergence, as the title proclaims, of an independent women's movement, a positive development in the long run. Since 1978 we have, of course, learned much more about the race and class politics of the suffrage movement and, from works such as Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's *African American Women in the Struggle for the Right to Vote, 1850-1920*, of the role that Black women, with a foot in both race and gender politics, played in achieving suffrage.

A second theme that characterizes the direction of scholarship over the decades is the continuity of the struggle for women's rights in the aftermath of suffrage victory in 1920. For a time, 1920 seemed to mark the end of organized efforts to win women full citizenship until the emergence, seemingly unconnected to the suffrage movement, of the women's movement in the 1960s. Then a flood of studies addressed what was going on in the intervening decades. What happened to the women's movement? Did it die out after suffrage was won? Scholarship on the 1920s and beyond—Susan Becker in 1981 on feminism between the wars, Nancy Cott on *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Dorothy Sue Cobble's *The Other Women's Movement* on labor activism, Cynthia Harrison on the politics of women's issues in the post-World War II period, my work with Verta Taylor on the women's rights movement in the 1950s, to name just a few—argued persuasively that it did not, and that it took a variety of forms. We came to think of “waves” of the women's movement, the first suffrage wave giving way to the second wave in the 1960s, with third and fourth waves to follow, only to back off from that metaphor in order to emphasize greater continuity than the rise and fall of waves seems to suggest.

Which brings me to a third theme, which is placing the U.S. suffrage movement and subsequent activism in the context of transnational movements. In my *Worlds of Women* I argued that a history of what I called an international women's movement, which picked up steam in the 1920s and 1930s, showed that rather than “waves” of activism we should think of “choppy seas.” Increasingly, as in other fields of U.S. history, women's historians are paying attention to a larger global context. Bonnie Anderson's *Joyous Greetings* on “the first international women's movement” makes it impossible to think about the Seneca Falls convention as a purely American event. To give just a couple of other examples of the way that scholars have brought a transnational lens to the history of suffrage and the fight for equality more generally, Alison Sneider, in *Suffragists in an Imperial Age: U.S. Expansion and the Woman Question*, connects women's suffrage to U.S. imperialism, and, most recently, Katherine Marino's *Feminism for the Americas* details the ways that Latin American feminists in the 1920s and 1920s took the lead in fighting for economic and social, as well as legal, equality on the global stage.

Since Flexner's *Century of Struggle* hit the bookstores, we have learned so much more about organizations and individuals and ideas and activism in the suffrage movement and beyond. These are certainly not the only ways our scholarship has evolved.

Liette Gidlow's comments about the breaking down of a dominant narrative of suffrage as a self-contained and American story of efforts by middle-class and elite white women that began in 1848 and ended in 1920, along with Judy Wu's focus on the history of both systematic exclusion and imperialist incorporation of Asian and other women of color as central to the history of political rights, raises for me the question of whether we have anything to celebrate about the suffrage victory. As early as 1967, Alan Grimes argued that suffrage was a weapon wielded by nativists and other supporters of conservative Protestant values in hopes of limiting immigration and, in Utah and Wyoming, maintaining control in the hands of the Mormons and the "civilized" settler population, respectively. Given the complicated history of suffrage that has increasingly emerged, are there positive developments we can point to with regard to women's enfranchisement? What did women's votes bring to politics?

I would like to respond to a number of themes developing in this conversation. First, I agree with Ellen DuBois that in the 1960s and 1970s and even a bit beyond, women's historians were not much interested in suffrage and, more generally, political history. In addition to what Ellen has said about a lack of faith in the political system, I think we were confident that we knew the suffrage story, the version Liette has laid out as the old dominant narrative. Further, we were influenced by the criticism of the "malestream" of history as a story of what happened in the public sphere. Since women's history was not just about adding women to that narrative, we turned to the places where women were—definitely not much in politics—as the main story. As women's history flourished, we wrote about family and birth control and sexuality and romantic friendship and domestic work. The 1980 symposium in *Feminist Studies*, "Politics and Women's Culture in Women's History," with contributions from Ellen DuBois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, took up the question of the relationship between culture and politics, reflecting the complexity of 19th century women's culture and its relationship to feminism. The rethinking of the suffrage narrative came later, as all the important works others have mentioned (and authored) make clear.

Second, I appreciate Liette Gidlow's careful construction of the making of a women's voting bloc—a Black women's voting bloc. The questions in the immediate aftermath of the 19th Amendment were whether women would vote, whether they would with the men in their lives (therefore, presumably, doubling the vote of their race/ethnicity/religion/class), or whether they would vote based on a set of presumed "female values." Certainly suffragists across at least the transatlantic world regularly wielded the argument that women's votes would make a more peaceful and just world, since as mothers or potential mothers they would work to keep their sons out of war and would bring maternal values to the public sphere.

Answering the question of how women voted is not easy. For the years before mass opinion polls, there is no way to tell the gender of votes. Recent research by political scientists Kevin Corder and Christina Wolbrecht used a sophisticated technique to analyze the votes of women in the 1924 election, the first after passage of the suffrage amendment, finding that the expectation that women would support the Progressive party did not pan out. Then as now, women as citizens and political actors tend to be more similar to than different from men of their race, ethnicity, class, religion, or region.¹ Which is why Liette's point about Black women's votes—and the attention focused on the fact that 53 percent of white women voted for Donald Trump in the last election—is so important.

And this brings me to Katherine Marino's thoughtful response to my question about whether there is anything to celebrate about women's suffrage. I would argue that the right to vote is important no matter what women did or did not do with it. And of course women have done a lot with it. Despite the fact that both the suffrage movement and the larger political context in which suffrage came to pass have a regressive side, the potential access to political power mattered. It is impossible to imagine the history of women's activism on a wide range of issues following the same path without the tool of the vote. Did suffrage transform women's lives? Did it transform society? No. But it did play a role in the history of both structural changes and the efforts of organized women in making the society we live in now. As Katherine points out, diverse and radical women such as Sojourner Truth, Clara Zetkin, Ida B. Wells, and Jovita Idar thought the

vote was important. They didn't wait for elections to bring about the change they sought. But they fought to be able to wield the vote as a tool when it was needed.

And that is part of what the history of women's suffrage has meant for U.S. and other national histories. Among other things, the history of women's suffrage helps us to understand the place of formal politics, of particular civil rights, in the history of activism and social change.

Question 4:

Our conversation thus far has mostly concerned the consequences or legacies of the Nineteenth Amendment. Before concluding this Interchange, let's turn back, to turn-of-the-century suffrage movements and campaigns for constitutional reform. In 1913, the suffragist writer Winnifred Harper Cooley observed, "All feminists are suffragists, but all suffragists are not feminists." Cooley's famous statement reminds us that the fight for suffrage necessitated the forging of alliances among a broad range of social reformers, many of whom held conflicting beliefs about women's rights. Working together produced strain and required compromise.

Just how "feminist" were state and federal suffrage campaigns? How did feminists and non-feminists agree or differ in their understandings of women's subordination? How much common ground did they find and what strategies or solutions did they adopt?

One important distinction we need to keep in mind is between those who advocated suffrage because they thought it was an important right that women (however limited that term was in terms of which women) deserved, and those who supported women's right to vote because of what they thought women would do with it. That is not the same as the distinction between feminists and suffragists, but it is relevant. In terms of the early literature, this gets back to Alan Grimes, who focused on why *men* supported women's suffrage, concluding that they did it not only in the interests of conservative causes but as a means of increasing the vote of their own social category (Mormons in Utah, men with families as opposed to miners and other single men in other places in the West). As Lisa Tetrault has reminded us, lots of women were voting in states before 1920, and many of them, too, supported women's suffrage as a means to an end. Some of those ends can be considered broadly feminist, but many were not. We have long known of the link between women's suffrage and Prohibition and the opposition of the liquor industry to women's suffrage. Supporters of women's suffrage proposed a whole variety of things women would do with the vote: end war, clean up politics, pass Progressive legislation, maintain white supremacy, to name just a few. As we know, feminist suffragists at both the state and federal levels were willing to make alliances that should have violated their feminist principles. But that was not the first, and certainly was not the last, case of feminists and non or anti-feminists collaborating on a specific goal.

ⁱ J. Kevin Corder and Christina Wolbrecht, “Disappointed Hopes? Female Voters and the 1924 Progressive Surge,” in *100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment: An Appraisal of Women’s Political Activism*, edited by Holly J. McCammon and Lee Ann Banaszak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19-45.

In this Interchange, we have looked back over the field of women’s suffrage. Before we close, let’s look ahead. What gaps or holes remain to be filled in the history and historiographies of women’s suffrage? What do we have left to learn? What discoveries, if they are possible to foresee, might fresh questions and new research yield? What will or should be the future of historians’ work on women’s suffrage?

This question takes us back to a lot of the ground we have already covered: the race and class dynamics of the suffrage movement, the consequences of the 19th Amendment, and the place of the U.S. suffrage movement in a transnational frame. I think we still have a lot to learn about all of those topics, despite all the important literature cited in this interchange that has emerged in the last decades. I want to focus here on the aftermath of the passage of the suffrage amendment in terms of both voting behavior and movement continuity.

I think there is still more to learn about how many and which women voted, how they voted, and why they voted the way they did, although I understand the difficulties of researching these questions. What might a systematic history of women’s voting behavior tell us? It is hard not to think of the contemporary question—why did 53 percent of white women vote for Donald Trump?—when thinking of women and voting. Did anti-suffrage women vote? Were those who thought women would vote the same way as their husbands, if they had them, right? Were there issues, such as peace, that affected how women voted? Was there any impact of the expectation that women would vote a certain way in the immediate post-19th Amendment years?

I also think we need to know much more about the impact of the final years of the suffrage movement on subsequent rounds of mobilization of all kinds of women’s movements. We know that, among transnationally organized women, the winning of the vote in some places divided the movement into suffrage “haves” and “have-nots,” with consequences for a hierarchy of countries and debate about what were the most important issues for organizations to target. Should the movement move on to what the International Woman’s Suffrage Association called “Equal Citizenship?” Should the next issue be peace, or marriage and citizenship, or something else? The winning of suffrage for some women in some places had an impact on goals and strategies in the transnational organizations. What did it mean nationally?

We know about the transformation of suffrage organizations into the League of Women Voters and the National Woman' Party, but how did the 19th Amendment affect the organized Black women Martha Jones discusses, women in the labor movement, women in the peace movement, women in right-wing movements, and so many others? This is not so much a question about the impact of the winning of the vote for some women, but, rather, a question of social movement realignment. When the focus of a movement is achieved, things shift, sometimes in unpredictable ways. There may still be surprises in store for us in the ways that the 19th Amendment affected diverse women's organizing in the 1920s and beyond, despite existing work on post-1920 women's activism.

Addition: Attention to place, to rural women: Sara Egge's *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870-1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).