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Women, Politics, and American Society



Nancy E. McGlen • Karen O'Connor

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WOMEN, POLITICS, AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

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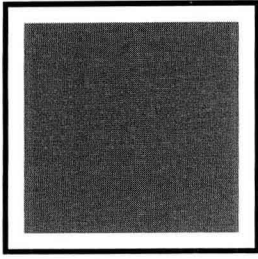
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Preface

We have worked together for more than twenty years and have lived through many of the changes chronicled in this book. We also have experienced these changes through the eyes of our students, who seem to get younger every year. It is they we must first thank for keeping our interests in women and politics alive. While the study of women, politics, and American society can indeed be frustrating, the enthusiasm and interest of our students have kept the subject matter from becoming too depressing, even during the 1980s, a time that some argue saw gains in women's rights begin to disappear.

In this text we try to share our enthusiasm for the study of women and politics. It is our experience that many people are woefully unaware of the battles that many heroic women and women's organizations have fought since the 1800s to garner basic, fundamental rights. This book addresses women and politics in American society by combining historical and topical approaches with a focus on political rights, education and employment, and familial and reproductive rights.

We hope we offer our readers a more comprehensive understanding of where women are today in America, the battles they have fought, and what changes still need to be made before full equality can be reached. We hope that this book produces as many questions as it answers and motivates readers to pursue subjects of particular interest in greater detail.

We would like to thank our colleagues in the Women's Caucus for Political Science and the Organized Women and Politics Section for always being there to support research of this nature: Judy Baer, Meredith Reid Sarkees, Denise Baer, and Sue Carroll. Thanks also go to the following reviewers: Anne N. Costain, University of Colorado; Lauren Holland, University of Utah; Emily Stoper, California State University; Laura R. Woliver, University of South Carolina; and Sarah Slavin, Buffalo State College.

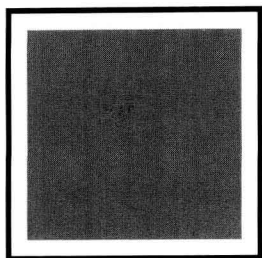
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Many women's organizations and research institutes—including the Center for American Women and Politics, the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan, the National Women's Political Caucus, the National Organization for Women, Concerned Women for America, EMILY's List, the Ms. Foundation, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, RENEW, and the Reproductive Freedom Project of the American Civil Liberties Union—provided us with valuable information. We would also like to acknowledge the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the Louis Harris Association, and the Roper Organization for survey data and summaries used throughout the book.

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*Nancy E. McGlen
Karen O'Connor*



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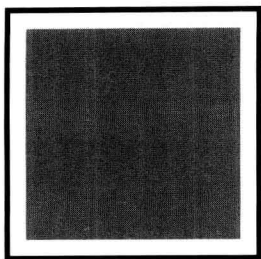
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Introduction: Women's Movements in America

Women's efforts to gain political, economic, and social equality in America are as old as the United States itself. As early as March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, who was in attendance at the Continental Congress:

In the new Code of Laws . . . I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies [*sic*] we are determined to foment a Rebellion [*sic*], and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.¹

The rebellion predicted by Abigail Adams, however, did not begin for more than half a century.

In 1848, a woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, a small town in central New York. Present at that meeting were many women who soon were to become leaders of what we call the first woman's movement, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Today these women are most remembered for their efforts to secure female suffrage; in 1848, however, their goals were much broader in scope.

At the Seneca Falls Convention, a Declaration of Sentiments modeled after the U.S. Declaration of Independence was drawn up by attendees.² Later, at the same meeting, a series of resolutions calling for the abolition of legal, economic, and social discrimination against women was passed. Twelve days later a larger meeting was held in Rochester, New York. At that meeting, which was presided over by a woman (a controversial move at the time), an even more revolutionary set of resolutions was drafted. Both documents reflected these women's dissatisfaction with contemporary moral codes, divorce and criminal laws, and the limited opportunities for women

to obtain an education, participate in the church, and enter careers in medicine, law, and politics. While the agenda of rights for women set forth at these conventions has been expanded over the years, women today continue to work toward many of the goals first publicly enunciated at Seneca Falls.

Since 1848, however, the pursuit of women's rights has been intermittent. There have been periods of high activity, when pressure for reforms has been keen. Most often these phases have been followed by years of little visible or public organized effort. In the pages to follow, we focus on three high points of activity when definable women's rights movements existed: (1) the early woman's movement (1848–1875), (2) the suffrage movement (1890–1925), and (3) the women's rights movement (1966–present). We examine these three periods of women's rights activity by detailing the rise and development of each movement, its philosophy, and its accomplishments in three issue areas: (1) politics; (2) education and employment; and (3) personal rights, including those within the family and those dealing with reproductive freedom.

Where appropriate, we trace the development and activities of organizations or social movements that arose to oppose these women's movements' efforts for expanded rights. We also examine the nature of the movements themselves and why they developed when they did. Thus, we pay particular attention to factors that social movement theorists consider important to the rise or development of social movements: (1) an organizational base and organizational support that includes government support and the presence of preexisting groups upon which to build, (2) the availability of leaders or organizers (who often have experience in other groups), (3) the existence of communications networks to facilitate expansion of a movement, and (4) the role of crises (or what we term *critical mobilizing events*) to foster or even to reinvigorate a movement. Also key to our discussion is an examination of the kinds of rights sought by women in the various women's rights movements. It is our contention that those movements that sought rights that could be termed by some as *public goods*,* which by definition are available to all and therefore often threatening to many, are less likely to succeed. Movements seeking public goods, which often are viewed by some as public bads, are more likely to encounter strong opposition than movements whose goals are more limited.

To facilitate our analysis of the development of women's rights—and the role that organized women's groups have played in the achievement of those rights—this book is divided into three parts: Part I—Political Rights and Realities, Part II—Employment and Educational Rights and Realities, and Part III—Familial and Reproductive Rights and Realities. The first chapter of each section describes the political efforts undertaken to obtain various

*Political scientists generally define *public goods* as “necessarily shared goods” or ones that once provided to a single member of any group cannot be denied or withheld from others in the group whether or not they contributed to its attainment. An example of a public good would be the proposed equal rights amendment, which was defeated in 1982. Had it been ratified, equal rights would have been guaranteed to *all* women, whether or not they personally favored the amendment.

rights. Because these endeavors were strongly influenced by the particular characteristics of each women's rights movement, as well as by a number of other political and social factors, we attempt to show how these several factors interacted to affect the successes of each movement. The second chapter of each section then focuses on the social changes still needed to obtain the conditions necessary for the full exercise of rights. The transformation of public opinion, especially that of women, toward women's participation in each area is of special interest. This is followed by a discussion of how hard-fought-for rights have been translated into realities and what legal and social barriers remain to the achievement of full equality for women.

While we have divided "rights" into three general areas, they often overlap. Efforts to achieve success in one area have often affected progress in others. Changes in social institutions that allow for the fuller exercise of political rights, for example, have often influenced participation in the economic or social spheres. This has been particularly true of women's role within the family. Changes in marital age, number of children, and other aspects of family life have important ramifications on political and economic participation.

Perhaps most importantly we cannot ignore the fact that only women give birth, which has permeated their efforts to seek expanded rights. Assumptions about women's child-rearing capabilities as well as their "motherhood" duties are a common theme that has linked debates concerning political, employment, and educational rights.

Women in the United States clearly have made major legal, political, and social advances since 1848 and especially in the past thirty years. Yet much remains to be accomplished. The so-called Nannygate debacle that occurred early in the first Clinton administration, when charges were made that only female and not male nominees for Cabinet positions were asked about their child-care or other household arrangements, is but one example of the problems that continue to plague women in their effort to reach the full equality first demanded at Seneca Falls. A 1993 United Nations report estimated that it would take nearly one thousand years for women to gain the same political and economic clout as men.³ We hope that as you read the pages to follow you will gain a fuller appreciation of the activities of those who have gone before you, learn what changes still need to occur, and be inspired to carry on the mission.

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

The Early Woman's Movement (1848–1875)

During much of the early nineteenth century, a prime topic of discussion and of women's writings was women's proper role in society. Nevertheless, no organized activity for women's rights occurred. In the 1840s, as an outgrowth

of religious revivalism, however, both men and women were encouraged to work for those less fortunate than themselves. The temperance and abolition movements, both developed by followers of revivalism, attracted large numbers of supporters. Women were initially assigned minor roles in these efforts, and the battle over their right to take action in "political causes" was often heated. Nevertheless, women eventually took an active and vocal role, especially within the more liberal branch of the antislavery movement headed by William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*, a leading abolitionist newspaper, theorized that the rights of blacks and women to vote and otherwise participate in government followed from the position that all men and women were created equal. Thus, both groups possessed the same inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This view fostered the formation of numerous local and national female antislavery societies in the mid-1800s. These organizations brought women together for the first time and gave them the opportunity to develop leadership and political skills.

One of the first women to speak out publicly was Maria W. Stewart, a writer for Garrison's *Liberator*, who gave a series of four public addresses in Boston. At a time when public speaking for women was a rarity—except at Quaker meetings—Stewart's speeches were even more notable because she was African American.⁴ Actions of women including Stewart and the Grimké sisters of South Carolina, Sarah and Angelina, who first gained their fame as abolitionists, earned for other women the right to speak out on political issues. The social code that made it unladylike for women to speak in public was "bent" to accommodate the perceived need for action against a horrible evil—slavery.

Participation in the antislavery movement helped to spark women's recognition that they, as a *class*, were subjected to discrimination. More specifically, in 1840, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton accompanied their husbands to a meeting of the World Anti-Slavery Society in London, England. After their long and arduous trip, the women were denied the right to participate in the meeting. A lengthy and vehement debate by the assembled delegates ensued. In the end, Mott and Stanton were told to take seats in the balcony because, as *women*, they could not participate in the meeting. This stinging rejection led them to realize that their position in society was not much better than that of the slaves they were working to set free. Mott and Stanton immediately resolved to call a convention of women to petition for their rights. Both women had families to raise, so it was not until eight years later that they convened a meeting in Stanton's hometown of Seneca Falls, New York, believing that the time was opportune to press for additional rights.

Friendships among other women active in the abolitionist cause produced a set of linkages, which with the aid of abolitionist newspapers and annual conventions served as a communications network of sorts for the fledgling woman's movement until after the Civil War. No independent national women's rights organizations, however, were formed until the late

1860s. In 1869, after a disagreement over endorsement of the Fifteenth Amendment occurred, two rival organizations, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), were founded. From that time through the mid-1870s, women's groups lobbied for a variety of reforms advocated at Seneca Falls. Generally, they focused on woman suffrage, but their efforts were to no avail, as no state added women to its list of eligible voters during that period. Women's work for expanded rights, including suffrage, was grounded in their belief that "the gender hierarchy of male dominance and female submission was not natural but arbitrary."⁵ Their anger at the unfairness of this system often came through loud and clear. Not surprisingly then, as women continued to press for women's rights during the next few decades, they met with little success. Their views were simply seen by many as too radical.

The Suffrage Movement (1890–1925)

In 1890, after years of limited activity, NWSA and AWSA were merged to create the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Susan B. Anthony, a longtime close friend of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, at its helm. Anthony, in fact, had founded NWSA along with Stanton.⁶

We date the beginning of the suffrage movement as 1890, but other social trends also helped to foster the second push for equality. Both the temperance and progressive movements were instrumental to the development of the suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), whose primary focus was the abolition of liquor, was founded in 1874 and promoted woman suffrage as early as 1879. Its phenomenal growth to more than 200,000 members by the early 1900s helped a large number of women to perceive the need for suffrage.⁷ In the North and West, the Progressive Era gave birth to the settlement house movement, the National Consumers' League (NCL), and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Both organizations were made up largely of white, middle-class women who sought to improve the working conditions of less fortunate children and women. Eventually, many women active in these organizations came to see the ballot as a prerequisite for their success. They claimed the vote would allow women to reform society, a task that they, as women, were particularly well suited to do.

This ideology clearly buttressed these women's limited demand for the vote. Most supporters of suffrage were avowedly content with their roles as mothers and wives. In fact, their position and the logic used to support it were the ideology of the earlier movement in reverse. While Stanton, the intellectual leader of the woman's movement, had claimed that motherhood and marriage were only *incidental roles* for women with respect to any claim for rights, leaders of the suffrage movement viewed motherhood and marriage as an *important basis* for the right to vote.

The existence of strong women's organizations, especially the WCTU,

helped to spread this idea to women who had been untouched or unconvinced by women's rights advocates of the earlier era. In particular, the WCTU was especially effective in the South, where it was able to cloak the "radical" vote idea under the rubric of temperance. Thus, the WCTU was responsible for organizing women in a region that had previously seen few women's organizations.

The temperance and progressive movements also provided training for suffrage leaders. For example, two later presidents of NAWSA came to the suffrage movement via their activities in the temperance movement. Indeed, an interlocking directorate of sorts developed between the various reform groups and the NAWSA, as depicted in Table I-1.

Social Movement Connections

The period from 1820 to 1850 saw the development of several religious, moral, and social reform movements including the temperance movement, the abolition movement, and the woman's rights movement. These movements were largely centered in the Northeast. Central New York State was an area of particularly intense activity.

Historian Alice Rossi has argued that this proliferation of social causes can be traced to the economic instability of the period and the region, as the United States began to shift from an agricultural land-based economy to an industrial society.^a These economic changes seriously challenged traditional values. Entrepreneurial skills and money—not land or family heritage—now determined status in the new economy. To compensate for their inability or unwillingness to join the new capitalist culture, many middle-class women and men were drawn to social causes that emphasized betterment of the community. The personal ties forged among the women who participated in these efforts formed the basis for their combined attempt to reform the role of women in society. As Table I-1 indicates, these various reform movements were supported by leading women's rights advocates of the nineteenth century.

^aAlice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

The progressive and temperance movements alone, however, probably would have been insufficient to produce an effective women's movement were it not for the development of a large organizational base of women that came from the tremendous growth of women's clubs in the 1880s and 1890s. White middle-class women, freed from many domestic tasks by the development of many labor-saving devices, devoted some of their extra time to participation in self-improvement groups such as reading societies or book clubs, as they are called in some communities today.⁸ An important club movement also began among well-educated and affluent African American women,

TABLE I-1 Social Movement Connections

Women's Rights/ Suffrage Advocate (Year of birth)	Religious Revivalism	Temper- ance	Moral Reform	Aboli- tion	Peace	Settlement House/ National Consumers' League
Sarah Grimké (1792)	X	X	X	X	X	
Lucretia Mott (1793)	X	X	X	X	X	
Angelina Grimké (1805)	X	X	X	X	X	
Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815)		X		X	X	
Lucy Stone (1818)		X		X		
Susan B. Anthony (1820)		X	X			
Anna Howard Shaw (1847)		X				
Alice Stone Blackwell (1857)		X		X	X	X
Florence Kelley (1859)					X	X
Carrie Chapman Catt (1859)					X	
Jane Addams (1860)				X	X	X

Note: All women listed, except for Lucretia Mott and the Grimké sisters, were officers of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

Source: Adapted from Alice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

who often joined these clubs for companionship and self-improvement. But, unlike most white women, African American women also saw these groups as a way of alleviating racial injustice and underscoring their own religiosity and character.

When women in these clubs became involved in social causes, they quickly realized their own inferior political position. Thus, in 1914, the immense General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) decided to support the suffrage movement, which added the organizational strength necessary for a successful social movement. Other organizations of professional, university, and even working women also began to support woman suffrage and became affiliated with NAWSA. The result was a powerful movement that was able to mount what Carrie Chapman Catt called a Winning Plan to coordinate the efforts of thousands of women to lobby for the vote.

By 1920, this alliance was able to secure passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. The fragile coalition that made up the suffrage movement soon disintegrated, however, when its diverse constituent groups could no longer agree on a new postsuffrage agenda.⁹

The Women's Rights Movement (1966–Present)

After the demise of the suffrage movement, there was little organized protest activity by women for women until the 1960s. What we call the women's