

Anna L. Harvey

The Political Consequences of Suffrage Exclusion

Organizations, Institutions, and the Electoral
Mobilization of Women

By the close of the first decade following ratification of constitutional female suffrage in the United States, it had become commonplace to read of female political leaders bemoaning the inefficacy of women's lobbying organizations, which despite their lobbying efforts did not engage in any electoral activity such as the mobilization of female voters (see, for example, *NYT* 10 March 1928: 3; *NYT* 31 March 1931: 22). That this should have been the case raises an interesting question: Why not? That is, given the likeli-

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hood that women's votes would have increased the efficacy of these lobbying efforts, why weren't the leaders of women's lobbying organizations, in particular those of the former suffrage machine, the National League of Women Voters (NLWV), pursuing those votes?

Students of these organizations have offered two answers to this question. The first relies on ideology as an explanation for the actions of former suffrage elites in the postsuffrage years: Those elites were constrained either by an ideological tradition of nonpartisanship or by an ideology of gender "sameness," both of which would have precluded the mobilization of women as a group in partisan electoral contests (Muncy 1991: 127; Cott 1987: 112; Alpern and Baum 1985: 63). The second answer to this puzzle infers from the absence of such mobilization the conclusion that former suffrage elites did not believe that women in fact constituted a distinctive electoral group (Black 1989: 249–50; Cott 1987: 112).

As this article will document, both of these answers are empirically problematic. The argument that former suffrage elites were ideologically constrained by a history of nonpartisanship from seeking women's electoral mobilization is simply not supported by the evidence. In fact, the nonpartisan "tradition" inherited by the NLWV and its state affiliates from their parent, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), had never proscribed the support of or opposition to candidates in partisan electoral contests; the NAWSA itself had campaigned against antisuffrage candidates before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Moreover, the electoral mobilization of women in support of or against candidates for office in order to further a legislative program for women was in fact a central goal of the newly created NLWV and its state affiliates. It is true that by the mid-1920s, the NLWV had ceased to seek women's electoral mobilization. Yet the fact that it began its career as an organization with the stated intention of mobilizing women's votes in support of or against candidates for office, and only later moved away from that policy, mitigates against the notion of an inherited ideological tradition somehow constraining NLWV elites.

Similarly, the argument that former suffrage elites were constrained by an ideology of gender "sameness" from seeking women's electoral mobilization is largely unsupported. The suffrage movement itself had successfully mobilized women to collective action by appeal to gender solidarity.

Moreover, the postsuffrage NLWV and its state affiliates were unmistakably created to develop and pursue a legislative agenda that protected women's interests as a group. Only later did NLWV leaders abandon that organizational mission.

If ideology is not supported as an explanatory variable, neither is the argument that political elites simply did not consider women to be a distinct electoral group. First, both major parties, in most states and nationally, assiduously pursued strategies designed to attract women as a distinct electoral group immediately upon their enfranchisement.¹ Former suffrage leaders would have been at least as aware of the potential for women's electoral mobilization believed to exist by party elites. Those former suffrage leaders had, after all, successfully perfected the technique of making appeals to gender solidarity during the suffrage movement itself. Second, as mentioned previously, former suffrage leaders in fact appeared to have had every intention of mobilizing women's votes in electoral contests if such mobilization were required to secure their legislative goals; indeed, they attempted such mobilization in 1920. But while the major parties continued to mobilize women in electoral contests throughout the 1920s, with apparently increasing success, the NLWV had backed away from its policy of electoral mobilization by the mid-1920s.

In addition to their empirical shortcomings, both answers to our puzzle pose theoretical problems. Ideology is a rather unpersuasive explanatory variable in the context of political competition that is well defined by the rules of an electoral game. Actors in this game (candidates, voters, interest-group leaders) are easily identifiable and have goals that are clearly specified for them by the game rules. That is, candidates may have many goals other than election or reelection (e.g., better policy), but they must be elected or reelected before they can pursue the greater good as they see it. Similarly, interest-group leaders may have goals other than the pursuit of policy benefits for their group, but if they miss opportunities to pursue such policies effectively, they can be sure that others will rise to challenge their leadership by taking advantage of those opportunities. NLWV leaders who refused to pursue the electoral mobilization of women, in the face of the apparent viability of such mobilization, over time should have been replaced by others who could more successfully secure benefits for the group by threatening

electoral retaliation on uncooperative legislators. The prevalence of competition in an electoral democracy does not seem to leave much room for the persistent influence of such nonstrategic factors as ideology.

However, there are dangers to applying a “simple” competitive model to electoral politics, as illustrated by the second answer to our question. That common inference—that because no women’s organizations pursued the mobilization of women as an electoral group, women must not have constituted such a group—assumes a model of perfect electoral competition in which if an electoral group exists, group leaders have every opportunity to leverage the group’s votes into policy concessions. But just as many (if not most) economic markets do not reflect the conditions of perfect competition, so, too, may political “markets” be only imperfectly competitive. The trick lies in discerning the particular mechanisms at work which may lead to less than optimal results.

In this article I present an alternative explanation for the failure of women’s organizations to seek the electoral mobilization of women after the mid-1920s, one that can account both for the attempts of the major party organizations and the NLWV to seek such mobilization and for the decision of the NLWV to repudiate its electoral policy while the party organizations continued theirs. This explanation is based on a “rational-actor” account of electoral mobilization and therefore assumes that the decisions of both NLWV and party elites were strategic ones, taken to maximize benefits and minimize costs within the constraints imposed by the rules of the electoral system. As such, the explanation is grounded in a growing body of logically consistent theoretical propositions that would seem to be especially appropriate to the explanation of political outcomes.²

But the explanation also takes into account the way in which the outcome of interest here depended on not only the strategic interaction of elites and voters in the postsuffrage years but also the earlier investments made by suffrage elites in an organizational form appropriate to a prior (presuffrage) institutional context, but inadequate to the postsuffrage task of electoral mobilization in support of a legislative agenda. The explanation thus also explores mechanisms of imperfect competition in the electoral market of the 1920s. As I shall argue, those earlier organizational investments led to a situation in which the NLWV could not effectively compete with the party organizations in women’s electoral mobilization after the passage of

female suffrage. Recognizing their competitive disadvantage, the leaders of the NLWV abandoned their earlier commitment to seek that mobilization.

This article is divided into the following sections. The first two sections present the two components of the theoretical argument—namely, an account of how organizations can facilitate a group’s electoral mobilization by appealing to group identity, and an account of how institutions can affect an organization’s capacity to execute that mobilization. The third section applies this theoretical framework to the case of woman suffrage in New York State, the only state in which the NLWV and its state affiliate directly competed with the major parties’ state organizations for women’s electoral loyalties after female enfranchisement. The progression of events that unfolded in New York State—from the state suffrage campaign through the postsuffrage competition between the NLWV and the parties—thus provides us with the only useful evidence to test the hypotheses proposed here to explain the later decisions made by NLWV elites.

Group Identification, Organizations and Mobilization: A Rational-Actor Account of Electoral Participation

Rational-actor accounts of electoral participation have recently begun to explore the idea of mobilization as a solution to the collective-action problem in voting (see Aldrich 1993, 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; and Uhlener 1989a). Briefly stated, the collective-action problem derives from the weakening of individual incentives to action in the context of large-group action to attain some collectively desired goal. I may value the state of the world represented by a candidate for office much more than I value the opportunity costs of voting, but the more I believe that others who also value those policy positions will vote for the candidate, the fewer incentives I have to turn out to vote. Given even small opportunity costs of voting, the negligible policy benefits that flow from my vote in the context of collective voting will fail to outweigh the costs of voting, and I will stay home on election day. Of course, all rational actors in a large electorate should reason similarly, and theoretically no one should vote.

The most plausible solution to the collective-action problem in voting is that voters receive selective or private benefits from voting—benefits that

accrue from performing the act itself. Mobilization accounts of voter turnout hypothesize that voters may receive selective “solidary” incentives to vote through their desire to win acceptance by some valued other or others (on solidary incentives see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Uhlaner 1989b; and Wilson 1973). For example, a common empirical feature of elections is the phenomenon of coordinated spousal voting, or husbands and wives who are either joint voters or joint nonvoters (Straits 1990). Although a rational individual will discount his policy preferences as an incentive to vote because of the collective-action problem, the desire to please his spouse by accompanying her to the polls may be a strong enough incentive to outweigh the opportunity costs of voting.³ Where the relevant valued other is not an individual but a group whose acceptance of the voter is important to the latter—such as an ethnic, racial, or religious group—then the possibility exists for mass mobilization on the basis of solidary incentives. To the extent that I have internalized the value of acceptance by some group, as in cases where a norm of group identification exists, I am more likely to vote in a given election if I believe that others in that group strongly value voting in that election.⁴ Unsurprisingly, another common empirical feature of elections is the relationship between group identification and voter turnout (see Verba and Nie 1972: 159; Shingles 1981; Miller et al. 1981; Uhlaner 1989a; Miller et al. 1991: 1144).

However, there are two hurdles to the consumption of solidary benefits by large reference groups through the act of voting: some initial core of group members must receive nonsolidary benefits to publicly endorse some candidate, and the existence of this core must be publicized throughout the group so that others can use the opportunity of voting for that candidate to realize the benefit of solidarity with the group. With respect to the first point, there are no solidary benefits to be consumed through voting if there is no group with which one can act in solidarity. Nonsolidary benefits (for example material benefits) must thus be used to induce some group members to act in a way that creates the opportunity for other group members to act in solidarity with them. Similarly, the existence of this core of group members which has been induced to endorse a particular candidate will not serve to provoke other group members to act similarly unless the latter know of the former’s existence. Mass voting by reference groups is thus still a dim prospect in the absence of any solution to these start-up and coordination problems.

Those problems may be solved, however, by interest-group entrepre-

neers who wish to capitalize on the group's potential for electoral mobilization. Such entrepreneurs can invest in organizations that address the start-up problem by providing prominent group members with material benefits in the form of positions within the organization, for example, in return for publicly announcing support of a candidate or party. The same organizations can then be used to distribute publicity within the group about this initial core of partisan group members, thereby solving the coordination problem.⁵

Organizations for group-based mass electoral mobilization can thus be an attractive investment for group entrepreneurs, who will realize a payoff on their investment if in fact they are successful in coordinating the group's mobilization and then use that mobilization as leverage in negotiations over policy concessions with candidates. Moreover, the investment of time and material resources required to create such organizations will be smaller than the alternative strategies of mass mobilization—for example, the provision of material benefits to all potential voters in a comparably large group. The more members of my group that I believe support voting for some candidate, the stronger are my incentives to vote for that candidate also, and such mobilization on the basis of a norm of group identification will essentially take off on its own momentum after some initial core of group members has been induced to create the impetus for the bandwagon.⁶

As with bandwagon dynamics in economic markets, such a momentum implies the conditions for imperfect competition. While such a bandwagon dynamic will benefit the first entrepreneur who initiates the group's mobilization, as she will be able to offer increasingly larger solidary incentives to group members as she attracts more supporters, later competitors for the group's electoral loyalties will not be so fortunate. A latecomer to the group's "market" in electoral mobilization will have to demonstrate to group members that a comparably large fraction of the group supports his favored candidate as supports the original entrepreneur's candidate, a task which will require a larger (and thus more expensive) initial core of supporters than was needed by the first entrepreneur. The longer the first entrepreneur has been engaged in mobilization work, the harder it will be for a later competitor to match the first entrepreneur's following of group members. Given this (anti)competitive dynamic, group entrepreneurs will compete to *initiate* group mobilization as they perceive a developing norm of group identification that could facilitate mobilization.⁷

From the standpoint of democratic theory, however, even such a dynamic of imperfect competition will usually have the desired outcome of securing the representation of that group's interests in the policy process. Where a norm of group identification is in the process of developing, it is likely that the first political entrepreneurs to recognize and to capitalize on that norm through electoral mobilization will be members of the coalescing group. Benefit-seeking group entrepreneurs should thus be able to capitalize on the bandwagon dynamic of mobilization on the basis of solidary incentives well before nongroup entrepreneurs (such as purely office-seeking party elites) perceive an electoral opportunity in the group's existence, thereby significantly raising the costs of later mobilization for nongroup entrepreneurs. And group entrepreneurs can then pursue policy benefits for the group which enhance their standing as group leaders.⁸

Organizations and Institutional Context: A Rational-Actor Account of Organizational Learning and Adaptation

A rational-actor account of electoral mobilization thus hypothesizes that group entrepreneurs will respond to the "profit" opportunities created by the existence of the collective-action problem in voting. But successful entrepreneurs will need to respond not only to the opportunities posed by the problems of strategic interaction in a decentralized electoral market, but also to the constraints posed by the institutional context of that market. As with economic markets, political markets are structured by institutional rules that satisfy participants' need to reduce uncertainty and cut information costs by establishing regularized patterns of interaction. For example, electoral laws create a stable framework within which parties and interest groups can compete for the support of voters. As with economic organizations like firms, political organizations learn over time how best to maximize votes at the minimum cost within this framework. Organizations learn in part by seeking out easily available public information—such as dates and times for elections, the location and characteristics of election districts, and the provisions of campaign finance laws—and in part by what economist Douglass C. North has called "learning by doing":

Learning by doing in organizations, as the term implies, means that an organization acquires coordination skills and develops routines that work as a consequence of repeated interaction. The kinds of knowledge, skills, and learning that the members of an organization acquire will reflect the payoff—the incentives—imbedded in the institutional constraints. (1990: 74)

Learning by doing results in the acquisition by organizations of “tacit knowledge” specific to a particular institutional context (*ibid.*, 77). For political organizations, that tacit knowledge might consist in learned wisdom concerning the optimal internal governance procedures to mesh nonpolicy appeals to voters with policy lobbying of legislators, the relative merits of direct mail versus membership organizations, or the best marketing strategies to attract a given electoral group.

One consequence of these learning and coordination effects discussed by North is the phenomenon of increasing returns to institutions: The longer an organization pursues profit opportunities under a given set of institutional constraints, the more profit that organization will realize for a given level of effort. Conversely, an exogenous change in a market’s institutional context will result in a costly period of adaptation for affected organizations, as they seek out new forms of tacit knowledge appropriate to their new institutional context.

Organizations, Electoral Mobilization, and Institutional Context: The Case of Woman Suffrage

An illustration of the role of organizations in facilitating collective action, and of the relevance of institutions to those organizations, is provided by the case of woman suffrage in the United States, with particular reference to New York State. First, the institutional context of disfranchisement created incentives for the leaders of women’s political organizations to forego the pursuit of policy benefits for women as a group before suffrage had been won, as only suffrage itself could plausibly lead to success in such a pursuit. Second, the same context that led women’s leaders to focus on the woman suffrage movement to the exclusion of policy benefits for women alerted

party elites, through the suffrage movement, to an existing norm of gender identification well before women could vote. Third, once suffrage had been won, the transition to the new environment of electoral politics entailed a period of adaptation for the former suffrage organization before its leaders could begin to seek policy benefits for women as a group. Fourth, that same period of adaptation for the NAWSA created a window of opportunity for party organizations to initiate the mobilization of women as an electoral group by appeals to women's gender identification. Fifth, as evidenced in the 1920 U.S. senatorial election in New York State, that lead time gave the party organizations enough of a competitive advantage in appealing to women as a group to prohibit the success of similar appeals by the much later entrants to the market in women's electoral mobilization, the NLWV and its New York affiliate. Finally, as a result of its competitive disadvantage in appealing to women's electoral loyalties, the NLWV left the market in women's electoral mobilization to the political parties.

The Effects of Female Disfranchisement: The NAWSA and Its State Affiliates

The institutional fact of women's disfranchisement in the nineteenth-century United States created strong incentives for those interested in policy reform benefiting women to focus first on securing woman suffrage. The early history of the suffrage movement reveals that from its organizational inception in 1869 with the formation of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), suffrage leaders saw the vote as primarily a means to advance women's specific interests as a group in economic and sexual equality. The ultimate goals of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the NWSA's founders and the first two presidents of the later NAWSA (formed by merger of the NWSA in 1890 with another national suffrage organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association [AWSA]) were public policies such as marriage, divorce, and wages and hours reform. Stanton and Anthony had indeed been involved in policy reform efforts before they became leaders of the woman suffrage movement, and it was their repeated failures to effect reforms benefiting women that led them to focus on suffrage as the proximate goal of the incipient women's rights movement in the United States (see Stanton et al. 1881a: 15, 460–61, 488–92, 499, 513–17, 747–

49). As the two wrote of the efforts of nonvoting female reformers to change laws by petitioning vote-minded legislators, “they forgot that women were a disfranchised class, and that legislators give no heed to the claims of such for protection” (ibid., 490). Even when women’s petitions seemed to succeed in effecting policy reform, as with measures enacted in New York State in 1860 giving women equal guardianship rights, such reforms were anything but secure, as was revealed by the repeal of these measures in 1862 and 1871: “Had woman held the ballot—that weapon of protection—in her hand to punish legislators, by withholding her vote from those thus derelict to duty, no repeal of the law of 1860 could have possibly taken place” (ibid., 749).

The NWSA was formed to implement Stanton and Anthony’s belief in the primacy of the ballot, as articulated in their newsletter shortly after that organization’s founding: “While we would yield to none in the earnestness of our advocacy of these [policy] claims, we make a broader demand for the enfranchisement of women, as the only way in which all her just rights can be permanently secured” (*Revolution*, 6 December 1869, in DuBois 1981: 100). The constitution of the NWSA stated clearly that its only aim was the pursuit of woman suffrage (Stanton et al. 1881b: 401). The leaders of the AWSA, formed only a few months later to pursue suffrage on primarily a state-by-state basis, proclaimed similar sentiments: The focus of the organization would be to secure the ballot for women, “everything else being held for the time in abeyance. . . . Suffrage is not the only object, but it is the first, to be attained. . . . We must take one thing at a time” (ibid., 802–3).

Both organizations, before and after their merger into the NAWSA, allowed individuals to make resolutions from the floor of their annual conventions endorsing specific policy reform measures (see, for example, ibid., 420, 542, 818–19), and NAWSA leaders even appointed specific committees to monitor the progress of reform in areas such as women in industry, child welfare, women’s civil rights, and peace. But no legislative work toward securing these goals was ever performed by the NAWSA or its state affiliates, with one exception: State affiliates that were “not strong enough to attempt a [suffrage] campaign” were allowed to work for the removal of legal discrimination against women and other policy reforms in their states (Harper 1922: 10, 163). Every other resource of the suffrage organization and its state affiliates was to be directed only toward the attainment of suffrage, as reaffirmed by NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt in 1904: “To help

working women was the motive that determined me to devote my life to obtaining woman suffrage. How hard it is that women must spend so many years just to get the means with which to effect reforms! But we who believe that behind them all is the ballot are chained to the work for that until it is gained" (*ibid.*, 98).

The ultimate goal of those who initiated the woman suffrage movement, then, was the pursuit of women's distinctive policy concerns through the medium of electoral politics. Under normal circumstances—where women could vote—the steps for achieving that goal would have been clear: Stanton and Anthony would have created an organization to enable them to coordinate women's voting by appeal to solidary incentives, while giving them the authority to develop a legislative agenda and then to pursue specific policy reforms through lobbying and targeted electoral intervention.

Without suffrage, however, there was simply no point in developing within the NWSA, the AWSA, the NAWSA, or these organizations' state affiliates any organizational procedures that would have constituted an apparatus for developing policy priorities and linking those priorities to electoral targets. Because women did not possess suffrage, they could not pursue policy reforms to further their interests as a group with any efficacy. The vote was a proximate goal that required attainment before the ultimate goal of policy reform could be attempted. Suffrage leaders, therefore, did not need to and did not seek to resolve the organizational questions of developing a legislative agenda that could be supported by women's elites and their followers. As noted earlier, the only mechanisms within the NAWSA that bore any relationship to public policy reform were a few committees which simply monitored progress in these areas. Instead, the NAWSA existed solely to coordinate suffrage mobilization campaigns in the states and the U.S. Congress, and the national organization consisted exclusively of a handful of national officers and a committee on which sat a representative of each state affiliate.

As an organization that existed solely to coordinate the timing and partial funding of state mobilization campaigns, the NAWSA was an entirely appropriate adaptation to the presuffrage context faced by women's leaders. As those leaders learned in the years prior to 1869, any efforts expended on policy reform in the absence of woman suffrage were largely wasted, and they streamlined their organizations to eliminate such costly and unrewarding efforts. But while this skeletal organizational form was an effective

adaptation to the institutional context of female disfranchisement, it would prove inadequate to the demands of the postsuffrage years.

The Effects of Female Disfranchisement: The Political Parties

In theory, we would typically expect members of a coalescing group to be the first to initiate a group's electoral mobilization on the basis of group solidarity. Membership in a developing group gives group members privileged access to valuable information about the group's receptiveness to mobilization appeals. And certainly in the case of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was group members who first recognized and capitalized on the group's developing norm of group identification.⁹ The suffrage movement itself is the best example of the increasing success of appeals to that norm. But because this demonstrated success in appealing to a norm of gender identification occurred *before* the attainment of woman suffrage itself, it likely served to remove any advantage held by women's leaders in the possession of information concerning women's potential for electoral mobilization.

In the New York suffrage campaign, for example, state party elites could not have missed the growing reliance on and success of suffragists' appeals to a norm of gender identification. One of the first actions of the New York City Woman Suffrage Party (NYC WSP), a NAWSA affiliate, was to appeal to women's sense of solidarity with other women: "This is the day of organization, and it is the time when women must stand by women. Working together, actuated by a common desire, united as to policy, 'failure is impossible'" (*TWV* September 1910: 8). The following year, the Suffrage Party's newspaper urged its readers to attend the national suffrage convention en masse in order to signal the potential for collective action by women: "We call upon you to show a united front significant of the growing solidarity of women" (*TWV* October 1911: 18).

Tactically, these appeals to gender solidarity were developed through a series of assemblies of women at all levels of the suffrage organization. For the election district organizations, these meetings took the form of social gatherings, as described in this report from the 25th Assembly District in Manhattan: "A series of afternoon parlor meetings is being held to develop

interest in the various election districts. In preparation for each, the election district is thoroughly canvassed, and printed invitations distributed from house to house. . . . At these informal gatherings tea is served, literature distributed, and a social time enjoyed" (*TWV* May 1911: 6). Such meetings provided female attendees with the benefit of solidarity through joining with their female friends and neighbors in the suffrage campaign.

Assembly district leaders could then call on their election district captains to muster their women to larger mass meetings, as could borough and city leaders. These monthly mass meetings at all levels of the party's organization further served to publicize the collective and united action of women to nonparty members: "Our cycle of meetings carrying out our own organization plans and perfecting our basis of activity, supply recruiting [efforts with] centers of activity and inspiration. Solidarity, concerted action and better crystallized programmes of procedure grow out of these district, borough and city conventions" (*TWV* October 1912: 7). The culmination of these displays of gender solidarity were the massive suffrage parades, which were the most public tactic of demonstrating collective female action. A final parade just before the 1917 referendum, in fact, was billed as a "woman's parade" rather than merely a suffrage parade, and all women in the state were invited to march, regardless of their opinion on suffrage. During the parade, all of the 1,006,503 names of the enrolled women in the New York State Woman Suffrage Party (NYS WSP) were marched down Fifth Avenue, and "pledge" blanks were distributed to the women watching this spectacle of women, enabling them to register support for their sisters while their feelings of solidarity were at their strongest (*TWV* September 1917: 29).

The point of mobilizing women by appeal to solidarity, in spite of the circumstance of female disfranchisement, was to draw on women's individual relationships with voting men in order to use solidary benefits as a way of persuading male voters to support suffrage.¹⁰ Men could be mobilized indirectly to support suffrage, in other words, through the individualized efforts of women drawn to the suffrage campaign by direct appeals to gender solidarity. Thus NYS WSP leaders exhorted their followers to proselytize among voters:

"Do you never see any man during the seven days of the week? Do you never have a word with your butcher, your grocer, your plumber? Is it impossible for you to hand them suffrage leaflets? Can you not ask them

to vote for the amendment?" I maintain that if every suffragist spoke of suffrage to every man with whom she came in contact within the next three months, the campaign would be ours. . . . The next time I saw this woman she had signed up her furnace man and her grocer, and was giving literature to the wash woman for her husband. . . . Never lose a chance to speak of suffrage to every man whom you meet. . . . The circle of voters that could be reached by the women who are suffragists is big enough to win as a majority. (*TWV* August 1915: 17)

Women were even instructed to answer the telephone with "Votes for Women" rather than "Hello" in order to maximize their ability to convert male acquaintances.

During the successful 1917 New York State referendum campaign, the suffrage strategy was twofold. First, resources were to be devoted "to the women of the State, to a thorough canvass and propaganda that shall be so far reaching that no woman shall be able to say she has never heard of suffrage" (*TWV* January 1916: 11). Second, male voters were to be contacted by female suffragists: "Then to the half million voters who have already placed themselves on record [in the 1915 referendum] as believing in equal rights we intend to add as many more by education and argument" (*ibid.*). The women recruited in the first stage of the campaign by appeal to gender solidarity would each be responsible for converting one male voter known to them already:

In the last campaign we won the endorsement of enough groups and parties to have enfranchised us. Now we must reach the individual voter. He can be reached only by personal effort, at his work and in his home. He should find that the "Suffragettes" are not strange women, but they are the women of his own household. The first task then of the great new campaign is to increase our organization among the women themselves, until behind the door of every house in the State and City there is a suffragist. Our canvassers should not only go from house to house, but they should *be* in every house. The new campaign must grow more and more intensive. . . . All the officers of the Woman Suffrage Party, State and City branches, agree now on the outlined policy: to increase the force of women workers in order to carry on a most intensive work among the voters. (*TWV* May 1916: 11)

With the success of the 1917 referendum, suffrage elites appeared to have demonstrated the success of their two-pronged strategy. A norm of gender identification that could facilitate women's mobilization evidently existed, and suffrage elites had recognized and capitalized on the existence of that norm. Under normal circumstances—where women could vote—these elites would have been drawing on that norm to mobilize women in electoral contests and would thus have been in a position to deter potential competitors for women's electoral loyalties.

Instead, the exclusion of women from the vote implied that their mass mobilization in order to *get* the vote would bring the existence of their norm of group identification to the attention of party elites well before their eventual attainment of suffrage. As a result, party elites were acutely aware of the potential for women's eventual electoral mobilization several years before female enfranchisement. As will be documented later in this article, those elites were not hesitant to act on that information.

The Transition to Female Enfranchisement: The NAWSA and the NYS WSP

The organizational form adopted by the NAWSA and its state affiliates like the NYS WSP to address their presuffrage environment was ill suited to the tasks they faced on women's enfranchisement. Specifically, while NAWSA and WSP leaders envisioned the role of these organizations in their changed environment as including seeking legislation of interest to voting women by endorsing or opposing candidates, they did not possess the authority to make the crucial decisions about which pieces of legislation to support and which candidates to endorse or oppose. Altering the suffrage organizations' existing structures and procedures to provide leaders with this authority was not an impossible task, merely one that required time to "learn by doing": time for elites to assemble information, present ideas, argue, marshal their supporters within the organization, organize the membership to vote on proposals, and so forth. In fact, it would take almost three years before the new incarnations of the NAWSA and its affiliate, the NYS WSP—namely, the NLWV and its affiliate, the NYS LWV—were ready to begin a remobilization of women by appeals to gender identity in an electoral campaign.

The first step taken by WSP leaders in New York State was to announce

immediately after the 1917 referendum victory their intentions to remain in existence and to campaign against candidates who had opposed suffrage (thereby aiding the ongoing fight for constitutional suffrage), candidates who opposed “humanitarian legislation,” and candidates who opposed legislation designed to benefit women and children (*TWC* 1 December 1917: 1). Contrary to the conventional historiographical wisdom, this was not a decision that broke tradition with an ideology of “nonpartisanship”:

The Woman Suffrage Party has, since its beginning, opposed individuals in all political parties who are against woman suffrage. It will be remembered that the Woman Suffrage Party of New York City did pioneer work in campaigning against anti-suffragists for office. This policy will be continued and will undoubtedly be more effective with thousands of voters behind it. (*TWW* January 1916: 8)

However, the decision-making processes that would permit the development of a specific legislative program and the targeting of candidates to support or oppose based on their legislative records were simply nonexistent. Moreover, the resolution of these organizational questions depended on the actions taken by the NAWSA, which only a few weeks after the 1917 NYS WSP convention had discussed the organization of former suffrage auxiliaries in enfranchised states into a “National League of Women Voters” (Young 1989: 22). As a result, the New York State auxiliary essentially went into a holding pattern, refraining from any explicitly electoral activity until the organizational issues raised by mobilizing female voters in support of a legislative agenda were settled by the National Association (*TWC* 12 January 1918: 128).

Instead, the former state suffrage association limited itself to such innocuous tasks as general voter and civic education for women. These activities did not involve the mobilization of women by appeal to gender identification to support some desired legislative end, as had the suffrage drive and as would later electoral campaigns. And when during the 1918 elections new female voters reportedly looked to the NYC WSP for guidance in their voting decisions, the party sent them away empty-handed: “Hundreds of women flocked to our various headquarters seeking information. . . . Some of them were disappointed because we did not advise them how to vote” (*TWC* 14 September 1918: 306).

Despite its inactivity in the 1918 elections, the state suffrage party re-

affirmed its intention to participate in electoral campaigns at its convention in December of 1918, voting to “oppose candidates for public office, irrespective of their political affiliations, when the records and policies of such candidates are at variance with the objects set forth in the Party’s constitution” (*TWC* 21 December 1918: 616). But the party was still waiting for the National Association to propose what those objects would be and how they would form criteria by which candidates would be supported or opposed. This the National Association did not do until March 1919, at which time the annual NAWSA convention approved a constitution and a program of action for the newly created National League of Women Voters.

As first proposed by Carrie Chapman Catt in December 1917, the NLWV was to have as its primary goal the electoral mobilization of women in suffrage states in order to further the drive for a constitutional suffrage amendment: “In view of the further fact that woman’s task of securing the suffrage is not finished and will not be until she gets nation-wide suffrage, she would be too stupid to vote at all if she did not use her vote to delete such opposition to suffrage wherever it may be found” (*TWC* 1 December 1917: 1). The NLWV would also seek to educate women voters, as well as press for legislation of interest to women. Prior to Catt’s proposal, the NAWSA’s policy had been to allow state suffrage auxiliaries to disband once state suffrage referenda had been passed and the auxiliaries’ goal had been achieved.

There had not been enough time between New York’s suffrage victory in November 1917 and the NAWSA’s convention in December 1917 to organize the proposed NLWV, so further progress toward its creation had to await NAWSA’s next annual conference, the association’s skeletal national organization being, as earlier discussed, merely a handful of officers and state leaders who were not authorized to create the new league. The next step toward the NLWV was not taken until December 1918, when an official call was issued to representatives from former suffrage organizations in the fifteen full suffrage states to attend a NAWSA convention in March 1919 for the purpose of creating an organization of voting women within the National Association.

As a constituent part of the NAWSA, the new organization would carry forward three ideological elements of the parent organization. First, the new organization would devote itself to furthering women’s legislative prefer-

ences. The call to organize the NLWV stated that in addition to organization for suffrage ratification, the purpose of the new organization would be “to discuss and adopt a national charter of Women’s Civil Rights; to discuss and adopt a charter of Children’s Rights; to discuss and adopt a program . . . of improving election methods, campaign usages, so-called Americanization work, and other lines of political action” (*TWC* 14 December 1918: 584). Suffrage leaders specifically noted that this mission of legislative reform was not ideologically hostile to the traditions of the suffrage movement, whose leaders had in the early years of the movement supported a broad program of legislative goals (*TWC* 15 March 1919: 858).

Second, it was clear from the NLWV’s inception that the tactics to be used to achieve these legislative goals would not exclude working for or against candidates who supported or opposed issues of concern to the league. Again, this was well within the traditions of political action established by suffrage organizations. In 1872 the NWSA had campaigned for the Republican Party because of its historic reference to women in its platform (Stanton et al. 1881b: 516); in 1890 and 1897 NAWSA conventions discussed the virtues of remaining sufficiently nonpartisan to worry both parties at the polls (*ibid.*: 173, 280); in 1909 the Illinois state NAWSA affiliate reported to the annual convention on its work in electoral campaigns to elect pro-suffrage candidates (Harper 1922: 262); in 1912, 1914, and 1915 NAWSA annual conventions reaffirmed the position that not a candidate’s party but rather his position on suffrage should determine female voters’ support of that candidate (*ibid.*: 342, 426, 454); and in 1918 the National Association itself engaged in several campaigns to defeat antisuffragists, under the following authorization passed at the 1917 annual convention:

Resolved, that if the 65th Congress fails to submit the Federal Amendment before the next congressional election, the Association shall select and enter into such a number of senatorial and congressional campaigns as will effect a change in both houses of Congress sufficient to insure the passage of the Federal Amendment. (*TWC* 22 December 1917: 1)

The 1919 convention reaffirmed the National Association’s willingness to participate in electoral campaigns by ratifying the following definition of “nonpartisanship”:

Resolved, That the National Association shall not affiliate with any political party nor endorse the platform of any party nor support or oppose any political candidate *unless such action shall be recommended by the Board of Directors in order to achieve the ends and purposes of this organization as set forth in the constitution*. Nothing in this resolution shall be construed to limit the liberty of action of any member or officer of this association to join or serve the party of her choice in any capacity whatsoever as an individual. . . . The National Board shall be empowered to enter any state to carry on work without the authority of that state if necessary. (NLWV *Papers* II 25 March 1919: Reel 1, Frame 3)

The nascent League of Women Voters, as a component of the NAWSA, was bound by this interpretation of nonpartisanship.

Finally, the founders of the NLWV signaled their intention to continue the NAWSA's tactic of mobilizing women on the basis of their identification as women, rather than on some other basis:

This is nothing less than a national union of women citizens comprehensive of the interests of the women voters of the country, as well as of the non-voters. . . . Does this mean to form a new party exclusively of women? If a party is, as the dictionary says, "a body of persons united for some purpose," it does. The proposed coalition also seems to be a party in so far as it aims to be a "part or portion" of the government. (TWC 15 March 1919: 857)

While the *goals* and the proposed *tactics* of the new organization appeared ideologically consistent with the history of the mother organization, the machinery to implement these goals and tactics in the new context of electoral politics was innovative. Indeed, the March 1919 convention saw the creation of an entirely new organizational structure to develop a legislative agenda and to link that agenda with electoral action.

Carrie Catt had posed the question of fundamental organizational change to the 1919 convention, asking the assembled delegates:

Shall we merely unite for the one purpose of hastening the final day of the century-long struggle for the enfranchisement of women, or shall we frankly change our policy, recognizing that in this period more great issues are pressing for attention than at any other period of the world,

and therefore unitedly use our votes and our utmost influence to “keep God’s truth marching on”? (NLWV *Papers* II 25 March 1919: Reel 1, Frame 20)

Catt had also acknowledged that such a mission, even if not inconsistent with the organization’s ideology, would still require major alterations in the organization’s structure:

It must be remembered that no League of Women Voters can be possible on the lines suggested unless the NAWSA is willing to amend its time-honored policy in response to what seems a new time and new conditions. It must be further remembered that to make these amendments involves the most fundamental changes in our internal policy ever proposed. It will doubtless arouse sharp differences of opinion, and action should be taken only after careful and sincere reflection. (ibid.)

In the end, control of the NLWV’s legislative program was given primarily to seven newly created national standing committees, each responsible for studying a particular legislative area thought to be of interest to female voters.¹¹ These committees would be composed of the chairs of the corresponding legislative committees at the state level. The standing committees were to draw up legislative recommendations, which would then be voted upon and amended if necessary by the full NLWV in convention, and then approved by the NLWV council, composed of the league state chairs.

Based on this national legislative program, each state would receive its marching orders, or would be “assigned the legislation necessary to bring its state’s code of laws up to the standard” (*TWC* 3 May 1919: 1044–45). Local leagues would not possess legislative committees but instead would be given carefully defined topics to discuss and publicize, the goal being to arouse and educate women around unifying legislative initiatives: “As rapidly as possible, information will be furnished concerning these subjects and the results of investigation. Clubs of every variety, forums, churches, social centers, settlements and every group with a ‘ready-made audience’ should be urged to make place upon their programs during the coming year for a presentation of the needs of study and action under each of the departments” (ibid.).

State and local leagues were, however, given the autonomy to decide whether to support or oppose state and local candidates for election based on

those candidates' records on the NLWV's legislative agenda. Similarly, the national league's board of directors, along with the national league in annual convention, would make those decisions for national offices (*TWC* 29 March 1919: 940).

This organizational overhaul in 1919 demonstrates the kinds of changes the NAWSA and its state affiliates had to make before they could seek to mobilize women in support of a legislative agenda. And although several basic issues were resolved at the 1919 convention, many more organizational questions remained. At the first meeting of the NLWV's governing council in June 1919 (when league membership was still limited to 26 states), questions of electoral strategy and organizational structure were still being argued (Young 1989: 35–36). With respect to the new organization's electoral policy, NAWSA's previous involvement in electoral politics had been limited to senatorial campaigns selected for their potential to alter the balance of power in the Senate. With the federal suffrage amendment now through Congress, should the National League still focus on senatorial and/or congressional campaigns? Should it endorse a presidential candidate? Would its endorsement decisions be binding on state and local leagues? What would be the criteria by which state and local leagues would decide to endorse or oppose candidates? For the time being, these questions were left unresolved.

In April 1919 the NYS WSP was NAWSA's first state affiliate to become a state League of Women Voters (*TWC* 26 April 1919: 1025). By December 1919 state league elites had decided that at least one candidate for office met their rudimentary criteria for opposition, and the state league in convention voted to declare itself “‘as opposed to [U.S.] Senator [James] Wadsworth's nomination or election' and committed to do 'everything in our power to defeat him'” (*TWC* 6 December 1919: 1). The Republican senator in question had steadfastly opposed woman suffrage and “humanitarian” legislation in general, and he had been a thorn in the side of both the state and the national suffrage associations. The state league announced its intention to campaign against Wadsworth the following month, issuing a pamphlet to league workers for distribution, which set forth its case against the senator's renomination by the Republican party (*TWC* 17 January 1920: 727).

In February 1920, the newly created full National League of Women Voters voted to join the New York State League in its campaign to defeat Wadsworth (*TWC* 21 February 1920: 895). This action was taken despite the

fact that the new 1920 NLWV constitution proclaimed that the NLWV “as an organization . . . shall be allied with and support no party,” clearly indicating that endorsing or opposing candidates was not interpreted to violate that policy (NLWV *Papers* II February 1920: Reel 1, Frame 142).¹²

The New York State and National Leagues began to distribute anti-Wadsworth material in New York the summer before the fall Republican State Convention, seeking to prevent his renomination (*NYT* 24 July 1920: 12). Defeated there, the leagues’ attempt to mobilize women against Wadsworth began in earnest in October 1920, under the slogan “Wadsworth’s place is in the home.” League letters asked former suffrage workers to participate in a strategy of gender mobilization that was reminiscent of the suffrage campaign:

1) Vote against him yourself; 2) See that his record is known and understood in your family, your neighborhood, your town; 3) Get nine women to form with you a committee of ten. Get each of the ten to form other committees of ten each and so on as far as you can stretch it, and ask every woman to get ten men and women outside the working committees to vote against him. (*TWC* 2 October 1920: 475)

The National League’s newspaper added its voice to the campaign by asking for campaign contributions from outside the state, telling its readership that “the non-partisan campaign against Senator Wadsworth is of especial interest to women because he has been their particular enemy. He is bound to block whatever women want” (*TWC* 9 October 1920: 504).

By the fall of 1920, then, the former suffrage organization in New York State had begun a new campaign to mobilize women by appeal to their norm of gender solidarity, this time as voters in electoral politics. But in the fall of 1920, the NYS LWV was almost three years behind the state Republican Party in implementing plans to mobilize women in electoral campaigns on the basis of that norm.

The Transition to Female Enfranchisement: The NYS Republican Party

As discussed earlier, during the course of the New York State suffrage campaign, elites in the two major state political parties could not have failed

to notice the growing coordination of women by appeal to their identification with other women. The frequent mass meetings and parades staged by suffrage party leaders to demonstrate to women their developing solidarity would have demonstrated this fact also to male party elites. And upon the heels of the 1917 referendum, the major political parties lost no time in seeking women's electoral mobilization themselves. Elites in both state parties immediately began planning intensive mobilization campaigns aimed at enlisting women in the parties en masse. These mass enrollment drives of women would later facilitate the acceptance by prospective female voters of *partisan* female leaders as the authoritative source of cues for group-based electoral behavior, rather than *independent* female leaders.¹³ For the sake of brevity, I will report here only the New York State Republican Party's mobilization efforts among women.

In theory, successful mobilization of a group on the basis of group identification requires, first, a core of prominent group members somehow induced to support a given cause or join a given organization, and, second, effective distribution of propaganda among the group to create a bandwagon dynamic of group support for or membership in the cause or organization. The Republican Party followed precisely this strategy in New York, described by a top female Republican official as the following:

We seek to draw into the active service of the Republican party those women who have earned and justified their leadership in the long accustomed services of women. Women who have thus won their way know and are known to women throughout their states and throughout the country, just as our party leaders are known. Through these women we shall reach others, and so bring to the women in the cities and in the villages, in the counties and at the crossroads, our purposes. (*TWC* 15 February 1919: 784)¹⁴

Only a few days after the November 1917 election, New York's Republican governor tapped the president of the New York City Federation of Women's Clubs, Mrs. John Francis Yawger, to serve as the "Associate Chairman" of a "Women's Republican State Committee," which would be formed in every county and every election district in the state, "under the guidance of George A. Glynn, Chairman of the Republican State Committee" (*NYT* 15 November 1917: 6). (In 1920, following guidelines formulated by

the Republican National Committee, a “Republican Women’s State Executive Committee” composed of sixteen women was created by the men’s state committee to direct the women’s state organization [*NYT* 19 May 1920: 15].)

As part of this “associate” organization of the state party, county chairmen were to see to the creation of duplicate organizations of women in their jurisdictions. For example, the New York County Republican Committee created a “Women’s Republican County Executive Committee” of thirty-six women, the same number as the men’s Republican County Executive Committee. The thirty-six women would be appointed by the male county chairman, and would serve as the “associate leaders” in the assembly districts from which they were appointed, “the associate leader to be a woman with her own staff of lieutenants and election district workers of her own sex” (*NYT* 21 December 1917: 11).

These “associate” assembly district leaders then arranged for the selection of women in each election district to serve as “captains” of a team of canvassers that would contact women door-to-door prior to enrollment days. The chair of the Women’s Republican County Executive Committee in New York City, Helen Varick Boswell, described the progress of the women’s organization in April 1918:

“From the talk I have had with the women associated with men as leaders of the different Assembly District organizations, I find that despite the short time we have been at the work, the districts are from 50 to 90 per cent organized. Complete organization, in our terminology, contemplates not only the election of a leader, but the selection of a Captain for every election district . . . [and] at least five helpers [for every election district Captain] to aid in the house to house canvass that we expect to make prior to enrollment.” Miss Boswell told her leaders that the task confronting them between now and May 25, when the newly enfranchised women will have their opportunity to enroll with the party of their choice for participation in the Fall primaries, would be to persuade as many as possible in their districts to enroll under the Republican emblem. (*NYT* 18 April 1918: 12)

When time came for the house-to-house canvass for the May registration, the female election district captains were armed with pamphlets “setting forth the excellences of the Republican Party and urging women to be

sure to enroll under the eagle,” and sent out by Boswell on their mission of persuasion (*NYT* 10 May 1918: 5). These appeals were clearly based on references to women’s norm of gender identification, calling women’s attention to their wartime role and asking for their loyalty to the party which “has carried the flag as it has kept step with the music of the Union which it made”:

The test of all time of the womanhood of the world is upon us. It is the women who are carrying the supreme burden of this war and noble and magnificent beyond expression is their conduct. . . . I am convinced that the women of America can be depended upon and that they believe in those things for which the Republican Party stands. (*NYT* 16 May 1918: 24)

As the *Woman Citizen* noted at the time, “Republicans and Democrats alike are becoming urgent in their efforts to get New York women to make their party alignments and to come early and avoid the rush, on enrollment days. No sort of stimulating device seems likely to be spared by the individual politician in his ambition to convince woman that she can save her country only by enrolling with his party” (*TWC* 4 May 1918: 447). Reporting on the Republicans’ canvass, the *Woman Citizen* noted that

the woman’s division of the New York County Republican Committee has inaugurated a drive for a record breaking enrollment of the Republican women in that county. May 25 is the day appointed by the board of elections for the enrollment of women in the primaries. It is expected that women Republican district leaders and helpers to the number of 4,000 will work on this enrollment campaign. The plan calls for a house to house canvass, thus establishing a personal acquaintance with the new voters. The county organization of women leaders is practically completed and the canvass under their direction will start at once. In some districts the work is already well under way, and seventy five per cent of the women have been personally interviewed by the Republican women captains. (*TWC* 11 May 1918: 467)

The party’s efforts appeared to generate substantial returns; in the May 1918 registration alone, 375,093 women enrolled as Republicans in New York State, approximately 60% of the total major party registration (*TWC* 27 July 1918: 165).¹⁵ In the general registration for the 1918 fall elections, the state

party was able to substantially increase its female enrollments, to approximately 720,000 women.¹⁶ Apparently women were again proving to be susceptible to mobilization efforts on the basis of appeals to their norm of gender identification. Indeed, Helen Varick Boswell reflected later on the amazement of most political observers in New York at the “rapidity” with which women were persuaded to enroll in the Republican Party (*NYT* 26 August 1921: 3).

The year 1919 saw another enrollment drive by the Republicans, particularly in New York City where the party’s women’s division focused on mobilizing female immigrants:

The Republican party of New York City has begun an aggressive campaign to Americanize the foreign-born women who will be entitled to vote when their husbands have become citizens of this country. . . . The Republican club houses are being used as social centre houses in many districts, and the use of these clubs by the foreign-born women will be encouraged during the coming months. (*TWC* 22 March 1919: 908)

For the fall registration days, the Republicans once again initiated a canvass directed at women:

Doubling the enrollment of Republican women of the state of New York this fall is the task Mrs. [Mary] Livermore has set out to accomplish as chairman of the Women’s Executive Committee of the Republican State Committee. . . . A series of sectional conferences was initiated to bring out the best Republican thought in the state on the question of getting out a strong woman enrollment and vote. . . . Then came a “barn-storming” tour through central and western New York. (*TWC* 20 September 1919: 404)

By December 1919, the Republicans had women’s organizations in “virtually every county in the State” (*NYT* 4 December 1919: 18).

Upon women’s entrance into the New York electorate in 1917, then, state Republican elites clearly believed women shared a norm of group identification strong enough to facilitate their electoral mobilization by appeal to that norm. Suffrage elites no longer had an informational advantage over party elites in their knowledge of the existence and the strength of that norm of gender identification.

Moreover, the parties were not hampered by an organizational structure inappropriate to electoral mobilization in support of or opposition to candidates: This was, after all, the task that parties were originally designed to solve. Republican elites were thus able to implement their plans for the electoral mobilization of women much more quickly than were suffrage elites, having only to appoint women at the various levels of the party organizations to its new women's division. These appointments were largely made by the spring of 1918, only a few months after the state's passage of the suffrage referendum. The party organization thus had a significant head start over the NYS WSP in initiating women's electoral mobilization.

The Competition for Women's Electoral Loyalties: The 1920 Wadsworth Campaign

As discussed, by the close of 1918 the Republicans had enrolled approximately 720,000 women in New York State by appealing to a norm of gender identification. The registration drives of 1919 would presumably have only increased those figures, although no data are available for that year.

To prepare for the fall 1920 campaign, the Republican state women's organization first used the occasion of the special spring primaries (held in presidential election years to elect delegates to the party conventions and the personnel of the party committees) to launch a mobilization drive among women:

We have in every way possible tried to make the Republican women of the State conversant with the meaning of primaries and the necessity of voting at them. For the past few weeks we have been emphasizing in our weekly bulletins just how to go about this matter. These bulletins reach 2,800 organization leaders. Through them the contents are disseminated among the members. We have a woman Vice Chairman of the county organization in every county except five. Every county except one has the women organized in some form of political association. It is through these organizations that we reach the woman in her home. House to house canvasses are made, instructions mailed and the press utilized to draw the attention of the women to the duty that is expected of them. (Mary Livermore, Chairman, Republican State Women's Executive Committee, in *NYT* 4 April 1920: 2)

The next step in the 1920 campaign was to mobilize women in support of the party's nominees for office, including former antisuffragist Senator Wadsworth. There does not appear to have been widespread support for the reelection of the senator among Republican female workers (many of whom had been active in the suffrage movement), but there does appear to have been a clear sense among many of these workers that their positions in the party depended on their support of the party ticket. At the Republican State Convention in September, an effort by a female delegate and member of the League of Women Voters to have the female delegates collectively declare their opposition to the renomination of Wadsworth failed, reportedly out of concern for the reaction of male party elites (*NYT* 20 September 1920: 6). Instead, the party's female leaders drew up plans to combat the LWV's efforts to unseat the senator.

To that end, the Republican Party's female workers sent out an appeal to the female voters of the state asking them to lay aside suffrage considerations and vote for Wadsworth's reelection. Specifically, the party's female leaders sought to create the impression that all women who supported the party's presidential nominee, Warren G. Harding, were swinging over to the support of Wadsworth on the grounds that a Republican president required a Republican Senate to enact progressive legislation (*TWC* 2 October 1920: 474). Since Harding had recently announced his support for several prominent pieces of legislation designed to benefit women and children, the argument would have had a certain appeal to potential female voters.

The NYS LWV understandably did not buy this argument, noting caustically that

with speech, editorial, letter and literature; with desperate appeal along every avenue known to campaigning, the Republican workers are pleading, entreating, begging, beguiling all Republicans and persons of Republican sympathy, to vote for Wadsworth in order that Harding may have a Republican Senator from New York. . . . Will women surrender before this most specious of fallacies as men have done over and over again? (*TWC* 9 October 1920: 504)

However, what LWV leaders could not argue with was the Republican Party's head start in enrolling women under its banner and its influence with those potential female voters who now recognized Republican Party female

leaders as the source of authoritative cues concerning the coordination of women's collective action. Because the Republican Party had begun to mobilize women several years before the NYS LWV, the party had evidently been able to initiate a bandwagon in female support which had gone uncontested by the LWV. Once this bandwagon had been established, the LWV leaders must have found it quite difficult to attract women to their anti-Wadsworth campaign by arguing that theirs was a "women's" campaign. All a potential female voter would have had to do was compare the number of women on record as supporting the Republican Party versus the number of women on record as supporting the LWV. While the Republican Party could boast an enrollment of at least 720,000 women in the spring of 1920, the NYS LWV could have claimed no more than 25,000 women as members.¹⁷

Since the Republican Party and the NYS LWV were direct competitors for the mass of women who could be mobilized by an appeal to gender identity, this put the LWV at a distinct disadvantage in terms of the utility it could offer to prospective female voters. Any woman who valued her identity as a politically active woman, and who was the target of both organizations' appeals on the basis of that identity, would rationally seek to maximize the benefit she received from voting by voting with the largest group of politically active women in her election district. To do otherwise would place her action at odds with the mass of women with whom she identified, and whose opinion of her actions was a valued good. To do otherwise, in short, would have been irrational. The LWV was simply outmobilized by the Republican Party, and Wadsworth soundly won reelection.

The NLWV Reconsiders Its Electoral Policy, November 1920

The participation of the NLWV in the New York anti-Wadsworth campaign had particular significance for the future of women's electoral politics because it was the first and the last electoral campaign in which the National League would participate. The NLWV had not successfully affected the election's outcome, despite the fact that Wadsworth ran behind the Harding ticket, and NLWV elites could only have expected any advantages won by the parties resulting from their head starts in initiating women's electoral mobilization to increase, not decrease, in the coming years.

At an NLWV board meeting held in New York immediately after the 1920 election, the following motion was made and carried:

Moved by Mrs. Marie Edwards that we recommend that as far as possible we do our League work along the constructive lines of our general program and unless an emergency arises our advice is, *that for the present we keep out of local political struggles or endorsements of candidates. Carried.* (NLWV *Papers* I November 1920: Reel 1, Frame 94 [emphasis added])

The NLWV had provisionally repealed its long-held electoral policy of positive or negative endorsements of candidates. It was not a final repeal; the NLWV governing board would reconsider an electoral strategy in 1922 and hold a general discussion on candidate endorsements at the 1922 NLWV convention. In 1923, however, the NLWV's board of directors would reaffirm its 1920 decision (Harvey 1995).

If NLWV leaders had had any expectation of electoral benefits from their candidate endorsement policy, as was apparently the calculation of league elites prior to the Wadsworth campaign, then those elites conceivably would not have repealed that policy. But as league elites evidently realized after the Wadsworth campaign, in a direct competition with either party for women's electoral loyalties, the league as a latecomer to that competition would not be able to successfully appeal to a norm of gender identification. Repealing the endorsement policy was thus the best course of action open to the league, and that repeal effectively ended the league's short career as a mobilization organization.

But while the league had repealed its candidate endorsement policy, a repeal that would be apparent to most political elites by the mid-1920s, the major party organizations, in New York State and nationally, continued to seek the mobilization of a "woman vote" throughout the 1920s. Moreover, party elites came to believe that these efforts were increasingly successful (Harvey 1995). That party elites continued to treat women as a distinct electoral group, and that they continued to see payoffs from that strategy, constitutes further evidence that the league's repeal was a decision forced on it by its competitive disadvantage in women's mobilization.

Conclusion

Neither ideology nor a “simple” strategic model of electoral politics can provide an adequate explanation for the cessation of electoral activity by the NLWV by the mid-1920s. If anything, it was the NLWV’s decisions in 1920 and 1923 to *repeal* its candidate endorsement policy that represented a break with an ideological tradition, rather than the announcement of that policy itself. Moreover, NLWV leaders at the time of that first repeal, on the heels of a vitriolic election campaign in which league leaders had sought to appeal to women *as* women, did not adhere to an ideology of gender “sameness.”

Similarly, a simple strategic model of electoral politics, which assumes that the existence of a mobilizable electoral group implies interest group leaders seeking to mobilize the group, is likewise unhelpful in this case. NLWV leaders in late 1920 had no reason to believe that women could not be mobilized by appeal to a norm of group identification, as that was precisely how the major parties mobilized women. Still, those same league leaders repealed their mobilization policy.

What appears to explain these events most completely is a modification of a simple strategic model of electoral politics to take into account the lingering effects of institutions on political organizations, even after a radical institutional change. As argued here, these incentive consequences of institutions set women’s presuffrage organizations on a particular developmental path, a path that later proved difficult and time-consuming to alter after the attainment of woman suffrage. By contrast, the major party organizations faced no such difficulties in adapting to the entrance of women into the electorate, as their organizations had been finely honed over the years to respond efficiently to changes in the composition of the electoral market. Given the rare opportunity to initiate a group’s electoral mobilization, party elites jumped at the chance to reap the benefits of being able to offer increasing solidary benefits to potential female voters as time passed and more women were attracted by the parties’ appeals. By the time the NLWV was ready to compete with the parties, too much time had passed, and the NLWV apparently could not overcome what had become the political consequences of suffrage exclusion.

Notes

Anna L. Harvey is assistant professor of politics at New York University. Her research interests include rational choice theory as applied to problems of political inequality, with a particular focus on women in electoral politics. She thanks the members of the Research Colloquium in the Department of Politics at New York University for their helpful comments on this article.

- 1 Cott notes this fact in passing and characterizes it as “curious,” given her own assessment that a “woman vote” was an “interpretive fiction” (1990: 172).
- 2 For a discussion of the basic elements of a rational-actor explanation see Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1978.
- 3 For both the 1980 and the 1984 presidential elections, Straits (1990) found that husbands of voting wives were approximately 25 times more likely to vote than husbands of nonvoting wives, nearly the identical relationship found by Glaser (1959) for the 1956 presidential election.
- 4 An internalized norm of identification with a reference group does not imply the inapplicability of rational choice theory. For an account of the generation and maintenance of such norms from a rational choice perspective see Hardin 1995.
- 5 For a similar discussion see Aldrich 1995 on the formation of the first political party organizations in the United States as a solution to the coordination problems of mass electoral mobilization.
- 6 In formal terms, the utility which a voter receives is additive in equal increments as more group members join in a group-sponsored action or are believed to support that action. The voter’s utility from voting in a particular way is thus a simple linear function of the number of other group members believed to endorse voting in that way. For similar reasoning see Palfrey and Rosenthal 1988 and Sugden 1984.
- 7 This point is general to any situation in which consumers of a good receive utility that is cumulative as more of the good is provided, as in the form of a telephone network which is more attractive to subscribers as more individuals subscribe. In the language of economics, such additive utility is an externality that constrains competition between providers of telephone networks. The first to set up such a network will benefit from these increasing incentives to subscribe, while later and thus smaller competitors will suffer a disadvantage in the magnitude of the benefits they will be able to offer potential subscribers (Artle and Averous 1973; Rohlfs 1974).
- 8 The distinction between benefit-seeking group leaders and purely office-seeking electoral elites is an important one and is emphasized in Schlesinger 1975 and Aldrich 1995. Their differing motivations to pursue policy benefits lend significance to the outcome of any competition they may engage in to mobilize an electoral group. I explore this issue in Harvey 1995.
- 9 Evidence of the development of such a norm is given by the appeals made to it by suffrage and later party leaders. For more direct evidence on the existence of women’s networks in New York State, see Rosenthal et al. (1985).

- 10 See note 3.
- 11 These committees were given the following legislative responsibilities: Women in Industry, Child Welfare, Citizenship, Elections, Social Morality, Unification of Laws [in the various states, regarding women's civil rights], and Food Supply and Demand (NLWV *Papers* II: Reel 1, Frame 18).
- 12 At a meeting following the 1920 convention, the NLWV board of directors voted to distinguish the Wadsworth campaign from that of a league officer presenting herself as a party's candidate for election. The latter case was thought to identify the league too closely with a given party, and the board recommended to state leagues that they seek to avoid this situation. Even this scenario, however, was said not expressly to violate the league's constitution (NLWV *Papers* I: Reel 1, Frame 76).
- 13 See note 8.
- 14 The Democratic Party also pursued women's electoral mobilization, but in this article I focus exclusively on the Republican Party because of the party's direct competition with the league for women's electoral loyalties in the 1920 Wadsworth campaign.
- 15 Some 247,676 women also enrolled as Democrats, bringing the total female major party partisan enrollment to 679,618.
- 16 In the fall of 1918 women accounted for approximately 41% of the total registration in New York City (*NYT* 14 October 1918: 24). Extrapolating that percentage to the statewide total registration, we obtain the figure of 1,195,959 (*NYT* 27 October 1918: 7). The figure in the text was arrived at by assuming that women registered as Republicans in roughly the same proportion as they did in the special May registration days.
- 17 The Pennsylvania LWV was the largest postsuffrage NAWSA affiliate, and it claimed 25,000 members (Young 1989: 51). In 1923, the NYS LWV reported a membership of 19,065 (NLWV *Papers* II: Reel 4, Frame 453).

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