

The Rise of the Independent Woman Suffrage Movement – a Non-Romantic Study of Coalition Politics

A lecture based on the paper entitled, “The Power & Fragility of Social Movement Coalitions: The Woman Suffrage Movement to 1870,” produced for *The Centenary of the 19th Amendment: New Reflections on the History & Future of Gender, Representation, and Citizenship Rights*, Boston University, September 25, 2020.

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This is a full-length lecture based the paper I have written for the BU conference on the 19th Amendment Centennial. Please do not circulate this. It is for purposes of this conference only

My title is *The Rise of the Independent Woman Suffrage Movement – a Non-Romantic Study of Coalition Politics*. The first part of that title should be clear enough: I will be talking about my research on the first stage of the development of the Woman Suffrage Movement. By *independent* Woman Suffrage Movement I mean a movement that is not a part of another movement, one in which a core concern was extending the right to vote to women. Social movements are usually interlinked with other social movements, and the independent woman suffrage movement certainly was, but an *independent* movement means that it is not subsumed under or run by or organized by another movement. The period I will cover begins in the 1830 and 1840s, when most of our activists were preoccupied with the antislavery movement. We will then focus on the period from the Civil War to 1870, which the part of the story I am telling ends.

Perhaps the more curious part of my title is sure the subtitle – “A Non-Romantic Study of Coalition Politics.” “Romantic” as in, for example, the romantic movement (not as in being in love) refers to an emphasis the individual; his or her feelings, passions, and actions. In this sense a romantic story emphasizes individual geniuses or heroes (or villains), their struggles and challenges.

This year of the Centennial of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, encourages us to tell stories framed in this way, emphasizing individual heroes and villains. We are, after all, memorializing and celebrating. I see two common stories of this sort of the 19th Amendment. The traditional, celebratory version focuses largely on the amazing valor and persistence of the women who struggled for the vote over a 70 or so era. All too often this story focuses on only a very few of those who devoted themselves to the movement – notably Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. They were surely among the most important, and they worked very hard to make the suffrage story revolve around them. But (a) they are only two of hundreds of people, and scores of leaders and (b) they were actually dead quite long before the 19th Amendment passed.

The other romantic story is the inverse, but increasingly common. This story consigns most of the white- and white-dominated suffrage organizations and events to a story of almost pure racism. Some of my students even told me that the suffrage movement required that people choose between supporting abolition or woman suffrage, which absolutely wrong. This story, however, also emphasizes heroes and geniuses, balancing the traditional story by focusing on the African American heroes of the struggle for the vote.

A focus on the heroes is surely important. And we need to know about the villains. And it’s about time that people beyond a few historians pay attention to the diversity of women who struggled for their political and other rights. And it’s essential to understand the all of the great emancipatory

movements in a clear-eyed way, understanding the ways they were all limited by race, class, and gender, and by race, class, and gender prejudices and exclusion. But as a social scientist, and a political scientist, I think there are yet other important ways to understand the woman suffrage movement – or any social movement for that matter. Tonight, I will explore that story as an application of theory and research on social movements.

First, I will review some key features of the massive research literature on social movements, that are most important for understanding the history of the movements we will focus on. Second, I will provide some context for understand the politics of the era and movements we are focusing on. Finally, I will briefly track the history of the development of the independent woman suffrage movement from the 1830s up to 1870, when my story ends. I will emphasize translating the traditional stories we are used to hearing into a framework of social movement theory.

Before I do that, let me be clear about the nature of the Constitutional Amendment ratified 100 years ago.

The 19th Amendment did not, as some people say, “give women the right to vote.” What it said is that if a woman would be qualified to vote according to the law but for her sex, the vote could not be denied to her. So, for example, women who were disqualified by the condition of race or age or anything else would not have the right to vote because of the 19th Amendment. The 19th Amendment was not designed to disbar anyone from voting.

So the 19th Amendment was like the 15th Amendment in certain respects. The 15th Amendment said, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It did nothing for people excluded on the basis of sex, or age regardless of race. There is a difference between the politics of designing the 15th and the 19th Amendment though: The framers of the 15th Amendment purposely chose to leave women out, designing the Amendment to help only African American men.

In many parts of the country the 19th Amendment didn’t have any impact for another reason: Many states had already barred denying or abridging the right to vote on account of sex. In some of those states African Americans were not barred from voting so in those cases the 19th Amendment didn’t change anything for black or white women because they could already vote.

So let’s turn to the study of social movements.

Social movement scholars differ in exactly how they define social movements, but nearly all share one core idea: a single organization does not constitute a social movement. Social movements consist of networks or coalitions of different organizations, groups, and individuals with overlapping but different interests, priorities, and sometimes strategic or tactical preferences. These networks and the way the partners in them interact change over time.

The crucial thing about social movements that follows from this is that they can usefully be analyzed through the lens of coalitions and coalition dynamics. To ignore the fact that social movements are coalitions is bound to weaken our analysis of them.

Here's my crucial starting point: The fact that social movements are coalitions means that they almost always contain significant internal differences and even conflict, and that they are very fragile.

Let's think for a moment about what social movements look like when we focus on their coalitional nature. I want to emphasize the relationships among coalition partners:

- The coalition partners may coalesce around a broad or specific goal, but at the same time differ in support for particular issues that may be especially important for some partners: Say, voting, education, temperance, equality in religious roles.
- They may agree on issues but disagree on how they would prioritize the importance of the different issues – this is crucial when resources are tight. Where are you going to put your resources?
- They may differ in preferred strategies and tactics -- this is most often the source of differences between so-called “radical” more moderate wings of social movements.
- Coalition partners often differ in their social group memberships & identities. The more successful a movement is in become large and diverse, the more they build in potential conflict.
- It's important to think about the interaction of stressors on a social movement and this coalitional character. Social and political psychologists have shown repeatedly that stress activates the background prejudices and stereotypes that people hold. So when social movements face particular challenges and opposition, especially those that strain their internal resources, this can accentuate difference, hostilities, and conflict within the social movement

Now I'll turn to some important aspects of the context of the historical period we are investigating. This context is especially important for less familiar with society and politics in mid-19th century America.

First, Federalism: The usual emphasis on the 19th Amendment sometimes diverts our attention from the fact that most of the crucial 19th century work on changes in enfranchisement laws focused on the state, not federal level. This is true of the woman suffrage movement. But note: Even the *federal* amendment process is largely a state-by-state process. This is important in these ways:

- We have to recognize that the politics of the fights for and against suffrage were largely shaped by state political and social cultures and processes, not national ones.
- Because enfranchisement was largely a matter for state law to decide, the history of enfranchisement is *much* more complicated and varying across time and across the states than most people realize. There is no simple story of successive expansion of the right to vote. This is crucial as a backdrop for the story of woman suffrage.
- As I've already pointed out, by the time the 19th Amendment was ratified women across much of the US, including black women in non-Jim Crow states, could vote.

My first contextual point was about the importance of federalism. My second is the importance of understanding the nature of women's rights -- or the lack of them -- throughout the period of the woman suffrage movement.

We often hear people without historical background in the period seem to dismiss the concerns of what are often called privileged middle class white women. But in order to understand the perspectives of the full range of women involved in women's rights and eventually woman suffrage,

and how all of this relates to the history of democracy in the U.S. we must recognize this: Even among the most privileged “free” women, women lacked almost all fundamental personal and citizenship rights, and had virtually no protection against sexual and gender violence from husbands, family members, or others. None. Up through the 1840s free married women, regardless of status, could not own property other than the clothes on their backs, make contracts, seek employment without their husband’s permission, keep their wages, have control over their own children. None. There was no such thing as rape in marriage – by marrying, a woman had given her consent. Husbands were generally not prosecuted for brutality against their wives. In other words, all the special privileges that “privileged” women had were *entirely* contingent on their particular husband’s say-so. Enslaved women, of course, had no rights whatsoever. But do not overestimate the rights of free women beyond what their husbands or fathers personally allowed them.

My third contextual point relates to the ambiguity of the language people used historically to describe enfranchisement, especially with respect to race and gender. It is very difficult to peel apart what people meant when they talked about rights. Person, woman, man, black, white, human, universal – all of these words were used in a variety of ways that were deeply ambiguous. When people said “universal” suffrage they variously meant all men or all white men; only occasionally did it incorporate any women of any race and not, generally (except among woman suffragists) until much later. When people talked about no longer limiting the vote to white people, they generally meant to include only African American men, not women.

My fourth and final contextual point concerns the impact of social movements. The political scientist Corinne McConaughy, in her book, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment*, did a fantastic job of comparing the fights for suffrage in states across the country to see what made the difference between success and failure. She found that the difference had little to do with the shape of the suffrage movements themselves or their arguments or internal dynamics. Success or failure had everything to do with the people in power who got to decide what the law was – the opportunities and challenges facing the state legislators, and whether they thought there was anything to be gained by expanding the right to vote. If there was nothing to be gained or if there was something to be lost, they did not expand the vote. It is no wonder the struggle to expand the right to vote rarely worked.

So now let’s move directly to the story of the creation of an independent woman suffrage movement given the context we’ve looked at.

The story begins in the 1830s and 1840s when women became very important foot soldiers in the antislavery movement (but largely excluded from leadership). It moves on to them becoming antislavery activists who also, because of their activism, became increasingly aware of and demanding about the rights of women because of the barriers they faced as antislavery activists. Many of these antislavery activists and activists in the post-emancipation antislavery movement were inspired to begin to demand their rights as citizens, including the franchise. And finally, when their demands for support were widely rejected, there was an explosion in the coalition that made the movement splinter and created the independent woman suffrage movement. All this occurred before the end of 1870, when my story ends.

To the beginning then. Beginning in the 1830s, women – black and white—were involved in the abolition movement in many ways, but one of the activist roles that involved hundreds of them was circulating petitions calling on legislators to end slavery. Don’t underestimate how radical it was for

women at that time to go door to door asking for people's signatures on these petitions or, for that matter, how radical it was for anyone to be associated with the antislavery movement. Women's activism in Anti-Slavery fed directly into their changed consciousness about their position and rights as women. It fed the creation of their gender consciousness and their likelihood of advocating for expanded roles. This was true of both black women and white women. Anti-slavery activist women began to hold annual women's rights conventions in the 1850s, but they did not focus seriously on the vote until later, especially not until after emancipation when the struggle for the 15th Amendment began – the Amendment intended to give African American men the right to vote.

Not all male leaders of anti-slavery movement even welcomed women to be foot soldiers in the fight for abolition, and fewer welcomed them to take leadership positions, including public speaking. And even fewer welcomed women to talk about the limitations placed they faced because of their gender, or to advocate for women's rights in the context of the antislavery fight. This was true in both race-integrated antislavery organizations and some organizations of black men, and it affected both black and white women. African American women were, of course, in an especially fraught situation, caught between the sexism of male-dominated antislavery organizations and the racism of white-dominated women's rights organizations. At the former they heard that anti-slavery meetings and conventions were not women's rights meetings. At the latter they heard that "women's meetings are not place for questions of 'color.'"

Bear in mind that most of the most prominent women's rights early woman suffrage advocates worked on behalf of both antislavery and women's rights, but they consistently placed primary emphasis on antislavery until after emancipation. This was true of all of the most famous ones. There is no question that they put the pursuit of women's rights on the back burner during the Civil War when they dedicated their work to abolition and support of the United States efforts against the Confederacy.

The anti-slavery or abolition movement was, like all social movements, a coalition of different organizations, groups, and individuals. There was a dominant organization – the American Anti-Slavery Association – but there were many others as well, including organizations that African American men created for themselves. Many of these organizations had overlapping memberships.

The antislavery movement suffered a series of different ruptures in its coalition. One of the first, in 1840, was partly over the place of women in the movement. This was a conflict largely among men. The antislavery coalition was rocked again in 1865 over what the mission should be after the end of slavery – how broad should the emancipatory agenda be? This was partly a conflict among the male leaders over whether the "antislavery movement" had *any* place once slavery was ended, or did it have a larger emancipatory mission. And *then* there was the question of whether the larger emancipatory mission should include the woman question. The third major crisis was in 1869-70, when woman suffrage advocates brought to a head the question of advocacy of woman suffrage, and they were roundly rejected by most of the other partners in the old coalition, which is why many organized their own separate organizations and coalitions. Each of these ruptures created much bitterness and antagonism – more with each successive one.

When I mention the antislavery coalition it is important to be aware of one of the crucial partners in that coalition, both because it provided a critical connection to government, and because it played a determinative role in the creation of an independent woman suffrage movement. The Republican

party, founded in 1854, was the party of the abolition movement, and it was the party of the women's rights advocates until it became clear that the Republican party was not only not going to support woman suffrage, it was going to be antagonistic toward the idea.

So as we have already seen, the women activists we can trace forward to the rise of an independent woman suffrage movement mostly began their activism as part of the abolition movement. They were also active in other causes, such as temperance. Some women had focused on other issues such as women's property rights and education.

Here's a catch. Some historians, notably Laura Free, in her book *Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era*, shows that this period, in which we see the increase of gender consciousness among women activists that ultimately primed their demand for the vote, was actually one of increasing gender inequality, a time in which various social and political activities became increasingly gender-defined. Most important for our story, citizenship itself became a more masculine concept. This masculinization of citizenship occurred for a variety of reasons, but it played an important role in both race- and gender-focused discussions of rights and citizenship.

White men increasingly defined citizenship, in short, as *manly*, as something that required the ability and willingness to take up arms for your country. Well, this notion actually provided some leverage for newly emancipated African American men to make a case for their right to vote. If citizenship was a *manly* thing, black men shared that with white men. If, as white men increasingly argued, to earn the vote you had to have taken up arms in defense of your country, black men shared that with white men. They made this case forcefully emancipation restored their lost humanity and manliness and should lead to strengthened citizenship. To include gender equality in citizenship along with race equality among men would shatter that conceptual leverage.

This is all despite the fact that most of the white and African American male antislavery activists were in favor of expanded women's rights to some degree, and some of the black and white male leaders of the were in principle in favor of women voting eventually. Eventually was good enough for them.

Nevertheless, if we search for an explicitly sexist case made at the time to resist the idea of women voting, we find relatively little. And that, as some historians have pointed out, is because the idea of women voting was so absurd, so far-fetched, and so radical that it mostly wasn't even deserving of discussion. We certainly see rivers of virulent, clearly-spoken anti-woman statements and images in the late 19th century up to the ratification of the 19th Amendment. An explicit anti-suffrage movement and anti-suffragist organizations arose in that late 19th century period, but in the era we are discussing the woman suffragists were regarded as so far out that they just weren't worth thinking about seriously.

But understand – extending the franchise to black men was no easy task in the mid-1860s. The vast majority of white people, and not just in the South, were likely opposed to that. Referenda and other efforts to extend the vote to black men failed repeatedly. So why did the 15th Amendment succeed? Certainly not because of a widespread principled view of justice among the white men who held political power. Rather, there were strategic interests at work. The Republican party was beginning to weaken and face losses, and party leaders were fairly certain that if black men were given the vote, they would use it to shore up Republican strength.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution ending slavery in the United States was ratified December 6, 1865. The politics surrounding the 14th Amendment were fraught. The final text was the result of multiple compromises, and the outcome pleased no one. Frederick Douglass and many of the anti-slavery coalition leaders were furious because the 14th Amendment did not extend the vote to African American men. The women's rights members of the anti-slavery coalition were furious because it did not extend the right to vote to anyone, and for the first time, it inserted gendered language into the Constitution, showing women's political inferiority.

The mid- to late-1860s was a pretty ugly time for the former anti-slavery coalition. The state-by-state campaigns to extend the franchise were brutal. The emancipatory coalition that was the antislavery movement was so fractured over many issues soon after emancipation that it was as good as gone. Most of the women's rights -- now woman suffrage -- activists still believed in a large coalition of emancipatory projects for both African Americans and women. They thought that Reconstruction would be the second American Revolution that might fulfill the promises the first didn't.

But soon enough they realized that their former coalition partners were not interested and most importantly, the Republican party was not interested. Wendell Phillips, remaining major leader of the American Anti-Slavery Association worked with others to strip the women's rights leaders of the little funding they had, and terminated their access to newspapers that had given them voice. The woman suffrage effort thus lost its most important resources to wage its struggle. The male leaders again explicitly asked the women to delay working on their own behalf, to put aside their claims to the right to vote in order to support the right of African American men to vote. Make no mistake -- this was not a choice between supporting the right of women (generically understood) versus the right of African Americans (gender neutrally understood). The practical choice was between African American men only or holding out for expanding the right to vote regardless of race or gender.

So *many* of the advocates of women's right worked to form organizations to advocate for woman suffrage -- some of them simply added these organizations to their repertoire, some (notably Stanton and Anthony) fully broke with the larger movement. Most of these leading advocates did not differ at the time over whether African Americans should have the right to vote, but they did differ over whether they would support the 15th Amendment as it was proposed, which would only extend the vote to African American men.

The role of Susan B. Anthony and especially Elizabeth Cady Stanton in exacerbating the conflict, and especially launching a campaign that was sometimes drenched in racist rhetoric is well known. But their first move that angered many of their former coalition partners (other than being self-aggrandizing and acting like they *were* the women's right movement) was to commit the heresy of saying that their backing of a political party was now not absolute -- it would now be contingent on support for woman suffrage. That is, they withdrew their unconditional support for the Republican party. When they accepted overtures from Democrats, and one person of especially unsavory character and politics, they were not just abandoning the Republican party -- which was bad enough in their former colleagues' minds -- but they were now with the party of slavery and explicit racism. There were only bad choices at that point in terms of party support, but by turning to the Democrats at all this group of woman suffragists offended the vast majority of their former antislavery colleagues, women and men, black and white, in favor of moving quickly or slowly on woman suffrage.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's increasingly racist rhetoric disgusts us today. Luckily, she did not represent the entire early woman suffrage movement, and not even everyone in her organization. There is more to say about how she deployed race and class in her arguments – like most things historical, it was never all that simple and straightforward. But her anger led her to reveal some deeply troubling views that alienated many of her colleagues, black and white.

In thinking about these emancipatory movements – the antislavery movement, its post-emancipation continuation, the women's rights movement, the early woman suffrage movement, we cannot ignore how profoundly sexist, racist, and ethnocentric the culture and structures of America were at that time – not to mention later times. If it doesn't bother us much to hear that male leaders in the emancipatory movement tell women (black and white) repeatedly to put their rights behind those of men, it can only be because we share some view that citizenship, rights, and voting aren't quite as important for women as for men.

It probably doesn't sound as bad to us to hear Fredrick Douglass castigating “drunken Irishmen and ignorant Dutchmen, ... the tools of the negro-hating Democracy of this city, many of who, would sell their votes for a glass of whiskey” as it does to hear Elizabeth Cady Stanton spouting her racist diatribes. And that is likely because we understand the much deeper, much more lethal, and much more long-lasting impact of racism of white people against African Americans in our society than the class- and ethnocentric diatribes and discrimination that were all too common in this society. The curse of racism afflicted the woman suffrage movement later in the 19th century and clear up to the ratification of the 19th Amendment. The various emancipatory organizations and coalitions of the remainder of the 19th century and the next reflected the best and the worst aspects of the culture in which they lived and operated – the will toward greater justice and equality, but also the racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, anti-Catholicism, anti-semitism and more.

So the old antislavery and emancipatory coalition shattered into different pieces, and an independent woman suffrage movement was born. The women thought they were promised their turn would come next but of course, it didn't. The backers of the 15th Amendment did not turn around to support the hoped-for 16th.

But any idea that that there were clean breaks, that there was any simple division between being in favor of further emancipation of African Americans and being in favor of rights for women, or that there were clearly definable differences between those who held racist and ethnocentric stereotypes and those who didn't is just romantic story making. The break between the American and National American Suffrage Associations was not as simple and clean as many stories would have it. There were both white and African American women who were members of both organizations. The woman suffrage movement that grew over the next half century covered the country, reflected the variety of cultures and social structures of the states. Some component organizations were diverse in their membership, some were not. Some were more homogeneous for exclusionary reasons – as when white women excluded Black women from their organizations. Some were homogenous because they were organized among particular groups of women focusing on the relationship of the vote to their particular communities and issues – women in black communities, in Hispanic communities, or women in labor unions, or farmers, or women in particular immigrant neighborhoods, or white women who lived in places where, before the Great Migration, there were very few women who were not white. A coalition is a loose network of organizations, groups, and individuals who work for a common goal, sometimes together, sometimes in parallel and separately, sometimes even in conflict with each other.

And meanwhile I sometimes think of those people who held the power that whole time – the mostly white men who had their rights, who occupied most positions of political power chuckling to see the struggles among the disenfranchised fighting among themselves because coalitions among the weak are so very hard to build and sustain.