

Forget Susan B. Anthony

By **Corrine McConnaughey** March 31, 2014

Chances are, if you know something about the American struggle for women’s voting rights, it involves Susan B. Anthony. After all, she has been enshrined as the symbol of woman suffrage. The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which forbids the use of sex as a qualification of voters, was popularly called the “Anthony Amendment” in her honor. And, as President Jimmy Carter wrote, her likeness was chosen for the dollar coin first issued in 1979 to “symbolize for all American women the achievement of their unalienable right to vote.”

Why, then, am I asking you to forget Susan B. Anthony? Certainly not because she was unimportant to the suffrage movement — an impressive political marathon that lasted more than 70 years. Rather, as I argue in my recent book, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment,” fixation on a figure like Anthony eschews the most important political lessons of the movement. Anthony — who had died more than a decade before passage of the Anthony Amendment — was actually quite disconnected from much of the politics that delivered the movement’s policy successes. Those politics were politics of coalition-building and partisan maneuvering, neither of which were great strengths of Anthony’s. And understanding the politics of the movement’s policy successes helps us to understand the politics of voting rights generally speaking — to understand that women’s history is relevant to both political history and contemporary politics.

To begin to appreciate how much can be learned from the political history of the woman suffrage movement, consider that women’s voting rights emerged long before the 1920 adoption of the Anthony Amendment. The map below shows the spread of women’s voting rights across the states — the political units with primary control over voting rights in the U.S. It shows that some women had fully equal voting rights long before 1920. It also shows that women’s voting rights spread in waves — that policy progress came in fits and starts. Digging into the meaning of these patterns, I find that women’s voting rights came at moments and in places where partisan politics were particularly contentious *and* the suffrage movement had become allied with other constituencies that partisan politicians needed to maintain or recruit to achieve electoral victory.

In other words, women’s voting rights were not a direct response to movement activism. They were political concessions to the already enfranchised allies of the movement, delivered under partisan duress.

In the book, the evidence I offer to substantiate this claim comes from detailed case studies of five states as well as statistical analysis of data on all 48 (relevant) states over the duration of the movement, and statistical analysis of legislative treatment of the Anthony Amendment in the U.S. Congress. The case studies are particularly illuminating because they enable detailed mappings of the movement’s activities, including the establishment (or not) of coalitional partnerships and tests of the effectiveness of those activities on state legislatures’ actions and decisions on the issue.

Consider the case of Michigan. Though voting rights for women had first been considered by the state in 1849, the issue had no traction in state politics until 1911 — the moment when the state’s powerful farmers’ organization, the Grange, chose to endorse the issue. The Grange, pushed in part by interest in voting rights from women inside the organization, staged a more concerted lobbying campaign in the legislature the next year. The result: It converted state legislators from farming districts — the home of its constituent base.

These patterns can be seen in the figure below, which displays the presence of farms, derived from U.S. Census counts, in Michigan House of Representatives districts. When House members voted on a woman suffrage issue in 1909 — before the Grange endorsement — the relative presence of farming in members’ districts did not significantly divide supporters from non-supporters. Nor did the measure garner much support — only a third of House members voted in favor. When the House considered the issue again in 1911 and 1912 (a second vote after the issue failed the first), farming interests were a significant predictor of support. Indeed, the only members able to hold out on women’s voting rights were those that faced little to no presence of farming interests in their districts.

Despite the influence the Grange had on Michigan legislators, women’s voting rights failed to actually pass in 1912. Why? Because despite the leverage exerted on individual members, the state’s dominant Republican Party organization resisted. Without party organization support, the necessary public approval through referendum failed. The party was not moved until it found itself facing an electoral challenge in the state from the new Progressive Party. In the combined presence of organized constituent pressure and electoral vulnerability, the party helped to deliver new voting rights for women in the state in 1918.

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This finding — that women’s voting rights came when and where the suffrage movement was able to build and leverage partnerships that wielded electoral and partisan strength — is one that helps contribute to our general understanding of voting rights politics. Consider the lessons for contemporary voting rights politics it imparts.

On the one hand, my findings about the woman suffrage movement clarify that concerted organization by the group seeking voting rights was decidedly insufficient to challenge partisan interests in the definition of the electorate. If we consider current voting rights politics around minority communities that feel their voting rights are being whittled away or threatened — whether through the undermining of the Voting Rights Act, the passage of voter identification laws, or state felony disenfranchisement provisions — the lesson is that mobilization within these communities is unlikely to be effective on its own. The necessary partisan incentive to push back in a way that actually delivers policy change is likely to come only when politicians perceive committed alliances between these communities and other organized political forces that will exert leverage on their behalf.

On the other hand, my findings also make clear that the sometimes seemingly insurmountable hurdle of changing broad and deeply held convictions about the “worthiness” of groups for electoral inclusion isn’t necessarily a hurdle at all. Voting rights for women were delivered despite broadly held and heralded convictions that women were less capable than men — in politics as well as many other arenas. Broadly changing hearts and minds about women’s worth wasn’t necessary. Changing the

incentives of the political system could be accomplished without that. The lessons for today's voting rights struggles, which are so often entangled in issues of race, class and ethnicity, is that the battle is not over those sentiments. The tactical moves required are not eliminating biases, but forging effective partnerships. And while the latter may prove quite difficult, the former seems much further off in the realm of possibilities.

Finally, there is the lesson of political context and timing. Political parties weren't supportive of women's voting rights outside of competitive political environments, even with strong interest group support. Moving political parties to make themselves accountable to more voters involves them seeing risk in the current political environment. That means voting rights are unlikely to expand in states where one party enjoys comfortable dominance. But it also means that moments when partisan politics become more contentious are exactly the moments that new voting rights concessions should be sought.

So forget Susan B. Anthony as the symbol of the struggle for women's voting rights. Fixation on her has hidden far too much about what the woman suffrage struggle can teach us about how voting rights are won. Feel free, however, to remember her as just one part of an important, complex, and engaging political struggle.

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