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Suffragists, Antis, and the New Woman: Press Coverage in California and New York, 1900-1920

Jacqueline N. Stotlar

In grade schools across the country, women's suffrage is a cornerstone of American Social Studies. What most children are taught is that in 1919, Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, legally giving women in every state the right to vote.¹ Along with this history lesson, students are most certainly introduced to the suffragists. They are taught that the likes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Jeanette Rankin were among the vocal female suffragists who helped clear the path for universal suffrage. Lesson plans even represent the anti-suffragists. The National Archives features a lesson plan on its website that showcases a multitude of documents on women's suffrage, including a 1917 Petition to Congress submitted by the Anti-Suffrage Party of New York.² What is less well represented in American classrooms are the details of the hard fought, state-by-state battles for women's suffrage that began in the mid-1800s and extended into the twentieth century. Beginning with the Western states,

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suffragists and antis across the country became mired in political campaigns and struggled to redefine the political role of women in the process.

As a grade school subject, the New Woman, a rising identity of young women during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, tends to be relegated to high school classrooms, if discussed at all. While failing to teach about the importance of the New Woman is disappointing in and of itself, it is especially problematic when attempting to explore the state-by-state suffrage movements, particularly when studying New York and California. What is missing from the current historical narrative, among American historians as well as grade school teachers, is an exploration of the link between the New Woman, the state-by-state suffrage movements, and the role of the press. Indeed, between 1900 and 1920, the coverage devoted to the New Woman in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* tends to be remarkably similar to the press coverage of the suffrage movements in the same papers. A comparative analysis of over 200 *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* articles and advertisements reveals a clear divide between New York and California attitudes toward the New Woman. In general, the *Los Angeles Times* (*LAT*) featured encouraging articles with a positive outlook towards the New Woman, while the *New York Times* (*NYT*) published a far greater number of disparaging and negative articles. Furthermore, the rhetoric used to discuss the New Woman mirrors each paper's language used to discuss the state's suffrage movements, that is, the *LAT* was highly encouraging of state suffragists, while the *NYT* was high discouraging. This in turn reflects the larger accepting or obstinate state environments of the suffrage and anti-suffrage

movements in New York and California. Overall, this rhetorical trend indicates that press coverage of the New Woman in the *LAT* and *NYT* played a role in reflecting and influencing the reception of the state suffrage movements in California and New York.

Many scholars have devoted their work toward exploring one or two aspects of this topic. Jane Jerome Camhi, Anne M. Benjamin, Susan Goodier and Sven Beckert have all written detailed scholarship on the state-by-state and national anti-suffrage movements. Rebecca J. Mead, Anne Firor Scott, Andrew MacKay Scott, Sara Graham and Gayle Gullett have conversely written on the state-by-state and national suffrage movements. Other scholars have written extensively on the New Woman. During the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, gender and social historians sought to reclaim the history of the New Woman and bring her political importance to light. Scholars such as Susan M. Crucea and Gail Collins document the changing notions of womanhood that led to the advent of the New Woman and the eventual shift into feminism. Lynn Dumenil tries to measure the political impact of the New Woman in both her political heyday of the 1910s and '20s and throughout the twentieth century. Others have explored the fact that the New Woman was not a phenomenon exclusive to the United States. The anthology *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* features articles on the New Woman and her incarnations in such diverse locations as France, Japan, India, and South Africa. There is also available scholarship on the history of the *LAT* and *NYT*. Robert Liecester Wagner and Susan E. Tifft have written

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excellent histories of both the owners and the development of the world famous papers.

Yet despite the range of topics explored by scholars of the suffrage and anti-suffrage movements, the New Woman, and the *NYT* and *LAT*, none of them explore the link between the press support for the New Woman and the successful or difficult environment created for the suffragists in their state campaigns. This essay will aim to correct this oversight and explore the relationship, beginning with a discussion of the New Woman, the suffrage movement and the representation of both in the *LAT*. From there, it will explore the New Woman, her reception in the *NYT* and the link to the state's anti-suffrage movement. Finally, it will explore the circumstances under which each state gained the right to vote and observe the imbricated relationship between each paper's press coverage and the state attitudes toward these groups of women.

The American version of the New Woman developed as a social identity in the rapidly changing time of the late nineteenth century, which was connected to larger changes in material circumstance. In particular, the late nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century saw a rise in opportunities for female education and employment for working, middle, and upper class women. The rise of industrialization increased the availability of jobs for working and middle class women outside of the traditional sphere of domesticity, including jobs as factory workers, shopkeepers, department store workers, secretaries, even doctors,

laypeople and lawyers.³ By 1900, women made up ten percent of the non-agricultural work force, an increase of nearly four percent since 1870.⁴ Furthermore, the opportunities for women's education were increasing. According to Catherine Lavender, "from 1890 to 1920, women comprised 55% all high school students and 60% of all high school graduates," and "by 1900, all but three state universities admitted women on same terms as men."⁵ The increase in availability of education meant more women, particularly middle and upper class women, had the opportunity to pursue advanced degrees and become specialty professionals such as lawyers and doctors. The increase in availability of new jobs and education, combined with the rise of women's participation in political campaigns during the mid nineteenth century, as seen in the abolitionist movement and state-by-state temperance campaigns, led to the creation of the identity of "New Woman."

New Women of the late nineteenth century in the U.S. heeded the then radical ideology that "womanhood ought to exist outside the home."⁶ This ideology

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lent itself well to the cause of female suffrage. While female suffrage campaigners had existed in the U.S. since the middle of the nineteenth century, their popularity and tactics dramatically changed near the end of the century. During this time, suffragists began campaigning for women's rights in terms of citizenship. This was an important shift in strategy for suffragists because, as Judith Shklar describes, "there is no notion more central in politics than citizenship."⁷ Shklar notes that American citizenship rests primarily on the point that citizenship is "the equality of political rights," such as the right to vote, the right to pay taxes, and the right to run for public office.⁸ In order to argue for citizenship, the suffragists desired to prove that women were just as capable and just as worthy of upholding the role of citizen as men.

As such, the link between the New Woman and the suffragist played an immensely important role in the passage and acceptance of state-by-state universal suffrage. This was especially true of the fight for universal suffrage in California. After a ballot referendum for universal suffrage failed in the 1896 election, California suffragists cultivated the identity of women as citizens by reaching out to local clubwomen and pushing the identity through propaganda.⁹ Women's Clubs, which saw a dramatic increase in popularity and number at the turn of the twentieth century, embodied the New Woman's redefinition of the tradi-

⁷ Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1991), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-28.

⁹ Gayle Gullett, "Constructing the Woman Citizen and Struggling for the Vote in California, 1896-1911," *Pacific Historical Review* 69 no. 4 (2000): 573-593.

tional spheres of influence.¹⁰ Victorian attitudes prescribed that women were more moral, sensitive creatures than men, and as such were only fit to life in the domestic sphere, while men were suited to tackle life in the public sphere.¹¹ Yet the New Women argued that their natural moral superiority over men not only suited them to public life as activists, but also demanded that they participate in social reform. To achieve cohesive action within the public sphere, New Women coalesced to form Women's Clubs.

Suffragists saw women's clubs as a valuable platform for their agenda. With the suffragists help, the activist clubwomen were directed towards the good government movement, "an urban forerunner of Progressivism that promised to end corruption in city government."¹² But this agenda may not have been highly publicized had it not been for the *LAT*. The *LAT* had a profound influence on shaping the popularity of the New Woman, and as a corollary, the identity of women as citizens. In general, the *LAT* showed its support by publishing a great number of articles positively detailing the beneficial aspects of the New Woman. Articles covered a wide range of topics, such as Women's Clubs, women in the workforce, and women as community leaders. In addition, the newspaper published a variety of other forms of material, ranging from letters to the editor to prose narratives, but by far the most common articles printed about the New Woman detailed the activities of Women's Clubs.

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In 1903, the *LAT* reported that the Ebell Club hosted Dr. Yamai Kin, a female Chinese physician, to give four lectures on “Things Oriental.” The reporter praises Kin, noting that she is not only an expert in the medical field, but is also “well grounded in the principles of art, ... is endowed with fine literary instinct,” and “is enough of a politician to take a leading part in the councils of the Chinese reform party.”¹³ The reporter goes on to assert “Dr. Kin is undoubtedly a ‘new woman.’”¹⁴ This article summarizes the link between the New Woman, the press, and Clubwomen’s role in supporting the identity of women as citizens. The reporter makes full mention of Kin’s intellect, professional life, and her civic role, all in a positive way. By linking Kin to the identity of the New Woman, the *LAT* supports the notion of women citizens in the process, thus supporting the suffragists’ platform.

Beyond reports from the Women’s Clubs, the *LAT* published a range of articles and advertisements supporting the New Woman. Some of the articles applaud New Women for their participation in highly non-traditional jobs, such as the article “Arizona Sportswoman Shoes Horses,” describes the work of Mollie Thompson White as “a ‘lady blacksmith,’ believed to be the only ‘new woman’ who has this far encroached upon an occupation considered solely and surely masculine.”¹⁵ Ads tended to target the New Woman with products aimed to aid her lifestyle. Products such as Peruna and Lydia E. Pinkham’s

¹³ “Women’s Clubs: The Ebell,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Jan. 1903, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Arizona Sportswoman Shoes Horses,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Nov. 1904, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

Vegetable Compound, both serums that supposedly cured a variety of ailments, featured New Women in their advertisements. The ads for both Peruna and Pinkham's Vegetable Compound regularly use "testimonials" from women who were worn out from their busy lives as employees, wives, mothers, and clubwomen. Women should take Peruna or Pinkham's Vegetable Compound to regain their vitality and get back to doing their great community work.¹⁶ Overall, these articles and advertisements created a generally positive outlook toward the New Woman, and by proxy, clubwomen and suffragists in California. This in turn made the push against the anti-suffrage movement easier, as more Californians were willing to accept the notion that women could be capable citizens.

While the New Women, and by proxy, clubwomen and suffragists in California, enjoyed relatively positive press coverage in the *LAT*, which in turn made the push against the anti-suffrage movement easier, the New Women in New York experienced much more entrenched resistance to suffrage rights. Unlike the anti-suffrage movement in California, which failed to garner much support in the popular press, the anti-suffragists of New York understood and capitalized upon the power of the media. By using inflammatory rhetoric, they tapped into the state's growing anxiety about the place of women and the state of womanhood. Lisa Cochran Higgins explores the anti-suffragists' use of language in her essay, "Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writing." Higgins notes that one of the most

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common themes in anti-suffrage pieces was a fear of female adultery, the fear that suffrage would “trigger the ‘carnal appetite of women,’” and “lead to the ‘moral vertigo’ of America.”¹⁷ Behind this anti-suffrage fear of adultery lay the belief that to participate in democratic politics was to abandon woman’s “natural role as the central pillar of domestic life.”¹⁸ Anti-suffragists believed that the definition of womanhood lay within the confines of the domestic sphere. Thus seeking entrance into the public sphere was to “undermine the nation’s most important institution, the family,” and upset the very definition of womanhood in the process.¹⁹

The belief that women moving outside the domestic sphere would lead to the downfall of American society was not limited to condemnations of women’s suffrage. The rhetoric used by anti-suffragists in New York, both in speeches and in newspaper articles, mirrors the language used to critique the New Woman as well. Attacks on the New Woman published in the *NYT* framed their critiques in highly negative terms, often focusing on the decay of marriage in American society as proof of the toxicity of changing societal norms. These articles promote the idea that the essence of true womanhood is domesticity and to stray outside of its confines was to betray nature. In an article published on 22 September 1907, Anna Rogers blames the advancement of the New Woman for the destruction of

¹⁷ Lisa Cochran Higgins, “Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writing,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 21 no. 2 (2004): 2

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

American marriages. Rogers attributes America's increasing rate of failed marriages to the modern woman's inability to understand her role as a wife. She contends that, "marriage is woman's work in the world, not man's," and that men are rightfully "the world's workers, breadwinners, home builders, fighters, supporters of civic duties... and the world's idealists."²⁰ Rogers notes that the unjustified expansion of women into the public sphere has left the modern woman "unprepared, undisciplined, uncounseled, impatient of less a thing than godhood itself," and when challenged by marriage, "she often refuses to adjust the yoke to her inexperienced shoulders, and more often throws it off, glorifying in the assertion of her 'persistent self.'"²¹ Throughout the article, Rogers asserts that in her failure to understand her place, the New Woman is slowly destroying America.

Perhaps the most virulent article published during the period was a critique of both New Women and suffragists written in 1911 by Emily McLean. In the article, entitled "Fewer Marriages Among Women of the Future," McLean opines that this "new tendency of womankind," when combined with suffrage, will have "grave effects on matrimony." McLean goes on to indicate that a fall in marriage rates will ultimately lead to a decreased rate in childbirth among middle to upper class women, as "women cannot have perfect freedom and perfect babies at the same time."

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McLean, therefore, contends that the New Woman and the granting of suffrage to women would be “race suicide,” “the ultimate destruction of humanity,” and “the desolation of the home and Nation.” Finishing off her egregious charges, McLean describes suffrage as “a cup with bitter dregs,” and describes the New Woman’s motives as nothing less than “pure selfishness.”²²

Just as the glowing support of the *LAT* for the New Woman created a positive and encouraging public and political space for suffragists in California, the frequent and pernicious negative views of the New Woman and suffragists published in the *NYT* encouraged a dismissive and dissenting space for public women in which New York’s anti-suffragists thrived. Both papers published rhetorically concurrent articles approximately 75% of the time. That is, between 1900 and 1920, for every negative article published about the New Woman in the *LAT*, three positive articles were published. The same statistic holds true for the *NYT*, but in reverse, with negative articles outweighing the positive. As a result, California’s suffrage movement flourished where New York’s foundered, and ultimately, this continued to alter the representation of women, even after women in each state were granted the right to vote.

California was the sixth state to grant women the right to vote. On 10 October 1911, the California voters approved Proposition 4 as part of a special referendum. Surprisingly, the amendment passed by

²² Edward Marshall, “Fewer Marriages Among Women of the Future,” *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1911, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

a small margin of only 3,587 votes.²³ According to Mead, this smaller margin of victory than expected was due to the persistent negative attitudes towards women that existed in northern cities like San Francisco and Oakland. It took the support of the rural farm voters as well as a few key larger cities, like Los Angeles (which passed the bill as expected), for women to win the vote.²⁴

New York women, on the other hand, had to wait until 1917 to secure the right to vote. Like California, universal suffrage in New York was presented as an amendment to the New York state constitution that would be voted on during a special referendum. By 7 November 1917, it was official: the two million women of New York had been granted the right to vote by a statewide majority of 92,000 votes.²⁵ Anne Benjamin credits the large margin of victory to suffragists' increasingly patriotic tactics during the 1917 campaign. When the U.S. entered the Great War, suffragists did all they could to link universal suffrage to patriotic duty, thus propagandizing the suffragists as good Americans.²⁶

While the circumstances under which each state granted women the right to vote were certainly linked to the ways in which women were portrayed in the press coverage of their state, it must be stressed that

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the media did not cause the passage of universal suffrage in either California or New York. Instead, the press coverage of the New Woman, suffragists, and antis in both the *LAT* and the *NYT* helped shape and reflect public perception of these feminine social groups. The public and vocal existence of these groups and the resulting press coverage in the *NYT* and *LAT* created a mutually productive environment where both sides served to reinforce the popular public discourse. In California, this produced an environment where the New Woman and the suffragists were given greater credence and credibility, while in New York, this engendered a decisively negative environment in which the New Woman was often scorned while the anti was highlighted as the reasonable thinker.

Although margins of victory in each state may suggest greater support for suffrage in New York, the specific timing of the passage of suffrage was more significant. California women were granted universal suffrage ahead of New York women by a full six years, and they beat the national legislation by eight. But perhaps more important than either the year or the margin of victory are the attitudes that remained after the elections. An article in the *LAT* published on 6 December 1911 reports the results of the recent mayoral election in Los Angeles, and heartily praises the female voters for their role. The reporter triumphantly declares, “the power of the new women voters was most effective,” and praises the women for voting so wisely.²⁷ The reporter continues the praise, noting,

²⁷ “A Sweeping Victory for Good Government,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Dec. 1911, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

“in every way their influence at the polls was in the interest of true American government.”²⁸ Finally, in what was perhaps a jab at San Francisco’s vote against universal suffrage in the recent referendum, the reporter instructs, “San Francisco will please take notice.”²⁹ Even with the slim margin of victory for women voters in California, the *LAT* continued to positively represent the New Woman and the suffragists’ cause.

Given the large margin of victory for universal suffrage in the New York, one may think the *NYT* would be inclined to shift coverage to be more supportive of the New Woman and the suffragists. But this was not the case. Even after the passage of universal suffrage in New York, the anti-suffrage movement was still alive and well and gathering significant coverage in the *NYT*. In a letter to the editor published on 19 February 1918, Helen Harman-Brown writes that the anti-suffragists will “have the satisfaction of saying ‘I told you so,’” when the next election comes around. She decries the fact that in the next election, the state will be “dominated” by “the 400,000 foreign women voters unable even to understand or use the English language.”³⁰ In order to curtail such a foreign take over, Harman-Brown urges “that it is not too late for the Anti-Suffrage Party to demand a resubmission of this question to the people (men and women) of this State.” She goes on to claim, “The results of such a

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resubmission few will doubt and all should accept as final.”³¹

Even after women in each state were granted the right to vote a few years before their national peers, articles in the *LAT* and *NYT* continued use the old tropes of the New Woman, suffragists, and antis that had developed in their states during the 1900s and early 1910s. Indeed, they continued to promote the ideas that the newspapers themselves had helped create. The results of the 1911 and 1917 referendums in California and New York show that press coverage in the *LAT* and *NYT* were not solely responsible for the outcomes of the elections. If this had been the case, Californians would have passed universal suffrage resoundingly, while New Yorkers would have just barely passed the amendment, or perhaps not at all. However, the timing of the referendums was most likely affected by the electoral mood in each state, and this mood was in part defined by the attitudes represented in the *LAT* and *NYT*. Furthermore, the post-electoral press coverage suggests that the attitudes in each state were still affected by the newspapers' view on women in society. In New York, Benjamin notes that anti-suffrage leagues continued to rally against universal suffrage after it was passed at a federal level. Mirroring the attitude of Harman-Brown in the *NYT*, in May 1919 the Women Voters' Anti-Suffrage Party urged its constituents to not quit “but rather to reopen hostilities with renewed vigor.”³² Meanwhile, in California, the successful suffragists extended their

³¹ Ibid.

³² Records of the NAWSA, Box 40, June 1919, Library of Congress, quoted in Benjamin, *Women Against Equality*, 272.

campaigns and “took their innovative ideas to other state campaigns, the Congressional Union, the National Women’s Party, and the final battle for the federal woman suffrage amendment.”³³

From 1900-1920, the press coverage in the *LAT* and *NYT* concerning the New Woman, suffragists and anti-suffragists played a role in the perception of women and what women could and should do during the turbulent times of the early twentieth century. More importantly, the language used in each paper to support or attack the New Woman was the same language used to support or attack the suffragists. This in turn helped create environments in which either suffragist or anti-suffragists thrived. In California, the positive coverage of the New Woman and the suffragist allowed suffragists to sustain a popular movement that lasted well beyond the granting of universal suffrage in 1911. Conversely, in New York, the negative coverage of the New Woman and the suffragist allowed the anti-suffrage movement to gain significant traction. Not only did New York’s intense anti-suffrage movement most likely delay the vote for universal suffrage until 1917, but it also allowed for the continuation of the anti movement, even after universal suffrage was considered a federal right. By examining the newspapers’ coverage of the New Woman, the suffragists, and the antis in light of the universal suffrage movements within each state, one can clearly observe a link between the press coverage and the environment in which the movements struggled or thrived. And for historians seeking to understand the development of the suffrage and anti-suf-

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frage movements in New York and California, such a link is undoubtedly newsworthy.

Jacqueline Stotlar is a senior History and Women's & Gender Studies double major with a minor in English. This essay is an abbreviated version of her senior thesis, which was awarded the Mehl Prize, an annual award given to the best senior thesis in the History Department. Jacqueline enjoys playing the double bass and trap and skeet shooting in her spare time. In the fall, she plans on pursuing a Master's in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University.