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Responsible Citizens: Comparing Woman Suffrage in Arizona and South Dakota

By Sara Egge

On January 19, 1915, when Frances Willard Munds, the junior senator from Yavapai County, called the Arizona State Senate into session, she declared, “We are here for business.”¹ The occasion was momentous. Munds was “reportedly the first woman in the world to preside over an elected body,” and the words she uttered were telling.² She had become a state senator after successfully leading the 1912 campaign to enact a woman suffrage amendment in Arizona. Like many former western suffragists, Munds saw office-holding as she did the right to vote. Women’s political participation was essential for economic development and community uplift, not just for gender equality. While she espoused the ideals of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) about

¹ Heidi J. Osselaer, *Winning Their Place: Arizona Women in Politics, 1883–1950* (Tucson, 2009), 80.

² *Ibid.*

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social housekeeping that insisted women sought political engagement to purify politics and support families, those ideals did not capture the political identity Munds had cultivated for decades. She understood the complexities of partisan politics in Arizona, engineering significant electoral support from the Labor Party and Progressive Party during the 1912 campaign. She and her husband had built a successful livestock business, gaining key insights into the nature of western economic development. She had cultivated an unexpected but powerful coalition of Mormons, progressive reformers, and labor unions to support the cause, defying leaders of NAWSA who had advised against engaging with Mormons or in partisan politics. For women like Munds, politics was a business that required deals, not just gentle persuasion.³

Munds crafted a political identity that resonated with many other western and midwestern suffragists. This identity relied on explicit notions of race, ethnicity, and religion as it developed out of nineteenth-century white settlement. Like Munds, the most prominent suffragists were Anglo and Protestant. While in some cases they built alliances that transcended these boundaries, these suffragists also often excluded those they deemed unfit. Across these regions, suffragists routinely barred racial and ethnic minorities, religiously distinct groups, Indigenous tribes, and other marginalized peoples working for the cause. In addition, they built activism for woman suffrage out of the economic, political, and social networks to which they belonged. When amendment campaigns erupted in the West or Midwest, victory or failure was often a product of the degree to which these women could navigate the contentious issues—temperance, labor organizing, immigration, or third-party politics—that defined state politics. Finally, suffragists in these states often ignored attempts by NAWSA to standardize rhetoric, strategies, and organizational structures. In particular, these western and midwestern activists cultivated identities steeped in civic engagement and community development, making the case for the ballot less because it was their right and more because it was their responsibility.

In South Dakota, a borderland state situated in both the Midwest and West, campaigning for woman suffrage was strikingly similar to efforts in Arizona. After 1911, leaders in the state association, the South Dakota Universal Franchise League (SDUFL),

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

learned how to harness partisan politics to gain electoral support for the cause. Nineteenth-century campaigns had ended in defeat in part because of a fraught relationship with prohibition. A series of third-party movements roiled state legislators, which made them less eager to engage with controversial issues. The debate also played out among voters. In 1889, voters passed a prohibition measure only to reject it eight years later.⁴ This political hot potato hurt woman suffrage in South Dakota because the same women who served as executives in the state's Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) also led the South Dakota Equal Suffrage Association (SDESA), the first state suffrage organization. Unlike the leaders of the SDESA, executives in the SDUFL did not have explicit ties to temperance activism. It allowed them to engage more effectively with partisan politics because they could advocate for woman suffrage as a single issue. After the 1916 election, Peter Norbeck, a Progressive Republican, became governor, and the SDUFL, led by President Mamie Pyle, found him supportive of their WCTU-free efforts to enfranchise women in South Dakota.⁵

Woman suffrage flourished in South Dakota not only because of leadership changes at the state level but also because of a refined message of civic responsibility. As early as the 1914 campaign, suffragists claimed the ballot not necessarily as a right but as a responsibility of citizenship. Arizona's political culture was similar to that of South Dakota in that people had venerated political participation, especially among white, Protestant women, for decades. Like their counterparts in Arizona, these women were on the forefront of white settlement, building libraries, churches, schools, and other public institutions while serving their communities in the absence of official municipal authorities. But, as South Dakota suffragist Edith Fitch put it, even though they had fulfilled their civic responsibility, they were merely "half citizens," denied the ability to contribute fully to their communities.⁶ She boldly proclaimed that not

⁴ Herbert Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Pierre, S. Dak., 2004), 232–38; Sara Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (Iowa City, 2018), 45–47.

⁵ Patricia Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota: The Final Decade, 1911–1920," *South Dakota History* 13 (1983): 208; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 258–69.

⁶ "Universal Franchise," *Dakota Herald* (Yankton, S. Dak.), September 25, 1914; "Yankton Universal Franchise League," *Press and Dakotan* (Yankton, S. Dak.), October 2, 1914; "Yankton Universal Franchise League," *Press and Dakotan*, October 31, 1914; "Universal Franchise," *Dakota Herald*, September 29, 1914; "Yankton Universal Franchise League," *Press and Dakotan*, October 2, 1914; "Yankton Universal Franchise League," *Press and Dakotan*, October 9, 1914.

only “the welfare of any community depends upon the amount of civic responsibility which its members assume” but also that “the fullest participation of its citizens in the government is the best safeguard for liberty.”⁷ Just like Munds in Arizona, suffragists like Fitch in South Dakota deviated from NAWSA’s social housekeeping rhetoric, adopting a message about civic engagement and political participation that resonated better within their respective states.

While suffragists in both Arizona and South Dakota shared many similarities, the path to victory in South Dakota was not through a coalition as it was in Arizona. South Dakota, like many states in the Midwest, had welcomed thousands of immigrants since the close of the Civil War. Many of those immigrants were Germans, and they settled in rural areas, away from towns dominated by Anglos. The pattern allowed these immigrants to hold fast to their customs, fostering an ethnic enclave culture that withstood Anglo attempts at assimilation. In addition, immigrants in South Dakota could vote before completing the naturalization process, a practice called alien suffrage.⁸ Their votes, alongside those of their native-born children, often counted against woman suffrage. They largely opposed the cause because they found the executive overlap between the WCTU and SDESA incredibly troublesome, especially since alcohol consumption was a hallmark of their ethnic identities. While immigrant opposition was noteworthy, it was not the reason why defeat marked six of the seven state amendment campaigns from 1890 to 1918. A majority of all voters, foreign and native-born, voted against these measures. NAWSA principally blamed immigrants, and as a result they explicitly infused nativism into their rhetoric.

Anti-German sentiment reached a crescendo in South Dakota as the United States joined World War I in the spring of 1917. The state legislature had already approved the seventh woman suffrage bill in January, and by March, the body met to pass emergency war legislation. Nativist paranoia led Progressive Republican Governor

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Frederick C. Luebke, “Introduction,” in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln, Neb., 1980), xi–xxxiii; Jamin B. Raskin, “Legal Aliens, Local Citizens: The Historical, Constitutional and Theoretical Meanings of Alien Suffrage,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 141 (April 1993): 1391–470; Rex C. Myers, “An Immigrant Heritage: South Dakota’s Foreign-Born in the Era of Assimilation,” *South Dakota History* 19 (Summer 1989): 137–39; Frederick Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (Oct. 1977): 412.

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Peter Norbeck to amend the measure to not only enfranchise women but also to disenfranchise any non-naturalized voters. He added a clause that effectively ended alien suffrage, a move that electrified suffragists in South Dakota who were ready to adopt NAWSA's nativist stance. Norbeck had created what the press dubbed the Citizenship Amendment, a bill that made woman suffrage a war measure and nativism, not gender equality, the logic behind it.⁹ By 1918, while suffragists were pouring themselves into war work through the American Red Cross and Council of National Defense, they also disseminated nativist propaganda. Headlines asked "Are you 100% American?" and called the Citizenship Amendment a "Patriotic Act."¹⁰ Voting for it was not about enfranchising women but about defeating the alien enemy. On November 8, 1918, three days before the war ended, 64 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of the Citizenship Amendment. World War I had bolstered patriotism and enflamed nativism, a potent combination that won women the right to vote.¹¹

Comparing woman suffrage in Arizona and South Dakota reveals many unanswered questions and compelling avenues for further research. First, uncovering histories of woman suffrage at the local and state levels complicates notions about how women fought for the ballot. Western and midwestern suffragists built complex coalitions, developed distinct rhetoric about civic engagement and political participation, and jumped headfirst into the partisan fray. NAWSA officials not only downplayed these strategies at the time but they also wrote the details out of the official record later.¹² Second,

⁹ "Suffrage Amendment Again," *Dakota Herald*, January 18, 1917; "Suffrage Up Again," *Volin* (S. Dak.) *Advance*, February 1, 1917; "Dakota Suffs Are Hopeful," *Dakota Herald*, May 16, 1918; Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 634–35.

¹⁰ "Woman Suffrage a War Measure," *Press and Dakotan*, September 30, 1918; "Amendment E Patriotic Act," *Press and Dakotan*, September 30, 1918; "President Wilson to Mrs. Potter," *Volin Advance*, May 2, 1918; "The Soldiers on Suffrage," *Press and Dakotan*, September 30, 1918; "Are You 100% American?" *Volin Advance*, September 26, 1918; "How South Dakota Voted on Suffrage Amendment in 1916," *Press and Dakotan*, September 30, 1918; Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 633–36.

¹¹ Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 635–37; "Politics Are Adjourned since the Election," *Lesterville* (S. Dak.) *Ledger*, November 8, 1918; "Mission Hill Department," *Press and Dakotan*, November 7, 1918.

¹² See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1: 1848–1861 (New York, 1881); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2: 1861–1876 (New York, 1886); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 3: 1876–1885 (New York, 1886); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Ida Hustad Harper, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 4:

scholars must pursue intersectional analyses that examine how racial, ethnic, and religious identities shaped the extent to which people could engage with the cause. In Arizona, Anglo suffragists actively shunned Mexican Americans but included Mormons. In South Dakota, Anglo activists openly criticized German immigrants. What were the ramifications of these exclusionary politics? Moreover, how did Mexican Americans in Arizona and German immigrants in South Dakota respond to them? How did others in the West and Midwest, including Indigenous, African and African American, Asian and Asian American, and other marginalized peoples, react? How did suffragists' exclusionary practices affect the disenfranchisement of these marginalized groups and shape ideas about citizenship and its assumed constitutional rights?

The cases of Arizona and South Dakota offer a final challenge to the predominant narrative structure of scholarship about women's rights. Animating research questions often explore the reasons why women won a certain right, presuming an ending—legislative, judicial, or electoral victory—that seeks evidence of success and downplays the realities of failure. Attaining the right to vote or hold office or sit on juries or preside over an elected body did not mark a conclusion in the same way that failure did not cause activism to cease. Careful periodization, coupled with renewed attention to the diversity of women who worked for political inclusion in a variety of ways and over lifetimes, builds better historical contexts in which to tell these complicated stories.

1883–1900 (Indianapolis, 1902); Ida Hustad Harper, *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 5: 1900–1920 (New York, 1922); Ida Hustad Harper, *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 6: 1900–1920 (New York, 1922).