2009

In Pursuit of the Sixth Star: An Analysis of Literature and Tactics from the 1911 California Woman Suffrage Campaign

Sarah Trevino Promnitz
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making

Part of the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol2/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arthur E. Nelson University Archives at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
In Pursuit of the Sixth Star: An Analysis of Literature and Tactics from the 1911 California Woman Suffrage Campaign

BY SARAH TREVINO PROMNITZ

After an initial defeat to win the vote in 1896, suffragists in California reorganized their efforts and in 1911 campaigned for a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the franchise. In order to combat fierce opposition and to increase public awareness of the proposed amendment, California suffrage advocates developed new forms of campaign literature and tactics. An analysis of 1911 suffrage campaign literature uncovers that the campaign was based upon the core arguments of innate womanly virtue and the need to create an inter-class coalition of women dedicated to the suffrage cause. The campaign to gain the franchise was considered a radical movement at the time, and an attempt to alter fundamentally the traditional gender ideologies of the era. To combat this assumption, California suffrage advocates adopted a tactical campaign that was highly visible and aggressive. In doing so, women were able to present a united front to the California public and enlighten the electorate to the notion of females being active participants in the political realm. In suffrage literature, arguments often conformed to traditional philosophies about gender and the separate-spheres mentality. Thus, California suffragists attempted to make the contentious idea of woman suffrage palatable to the public and to elicit greater support for the cause. The 1911 California woman suffrage campaign had a profound effect on the way gender and political equality were perceived within the state, and suffrage advocate’s successful victory was a crucial advancement for the legitimization of women as active citizens within the state and for the future movement toward greater gender equality.
The 1911 California campaign to adopt a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing women’s suffrage was a crucial chapter in the arduous nationwide struggle for women’s enfranchisement and proved to be a watershed moment for women’s equality in California politics. Emerging from the suffrage battle was a new woman, one that was endowed with forever altered perceptions of her roles and responsibilities as a female in California society. Furthermore, this perceptional shift extended to the California public as a whole, providing the opportunity for the communal legitimization of women as an active and significant political constituency and laying the foundation for future advancements and gender ideological shifts that would come to characterize the latter portion of the 20th Century.

The journey to become the sixth state in the nation to legalize woman suffrage was not a smooth transition from disenfranchisement, but rather a gradual process steeped with controversy. It called into question the public’s basic assumptions about the notions of gender and the nature of political fairness. As a previously proposed amendment, women’s suffrage had already failed fifteen years before the advent of the 1911 campaign, and California suffragists quickly assessed the failings of the previous 1896 franchise attempt and made crucial adaptations to the campaign. Modifications were instituted; innovative new tactics were introduced, and as many hindrances as possible were eliminated in order to form a winning political strategy. The contentious nature of woman suffrage ensured that ingenuity would need to be a hallmark of the campaign, allowing California suffragist’s to create a movement that adhered to inter-class unity and modern tactical campaigning. The methods pioneered by California were soon adopted by other states in their own quests for woman suffrage, creating a wave of woman suffrage successes that culminated in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

To accomplish their goals, California woman suffragists implemented new, more sophisticated campaigning methods that emphasized efficiency, inter-class unity, and traditional gender ideologies. Clearly the suffragists had learned from past failings. Aggressive and highly public campaign tactics were launched with
the intent of depicting the woman suffrage crusade as an inescapable social reform movement; one that would mark the beginning of ethical legislative practices and improve general California society. Also introduced was pervasive and systematized campaign literature that advanced the notion of woman suffrage as not being a means of dismantling traditional gender role doctrines, but rather as a reform that would work to enhance and expand the intrinsic virtue of women. California suffragists also made distinct advancements in the formation of class-wide unification, creating a broad coalition of women from all social backgrounds that proved to be instrumental to the campaign’s eventual success.

The events of the 1911 suffrage campaign did not materialize out of a sudden yearning of California women to dominate political life. Rather, it developed out of and in conjunction with the larger national campaign to attain universal woman suffrage. The fundamental ideas of women’s political equality had been central to the discourse in the American political landscape since the Republic’s inception. In fact, Abigail Adams frequently extolled on the subject to her husband, warning that “if particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”¹

The jesting nature of the statement clearly shows that Adams realized the futility of her aims, but the underlying sentiment is a clear understanding of a growing concern for women’s rights advocacy in the fledging American democracy. To the forerunners of the equal rights movement, there dawned a realization that a nation built upon the ideals of equality and personal freedom would someday have to reckon with the fundamental inequalities embedded within the country’s new governmental system.

The pioneering concerns for equality and justice that Adams and others extolled carried over into the antebellum period. Amid the growing abhorrence to the injustices of slavery, the national women’s movement witnessed its organizational birth.

Women, discouraged by the lack of political influence they wielded in the growing abolition crusade, began a formalized women’s rights movement in the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in the northwestern United States. This inaugural women’s rights conference was concerned with the social, moral, legal, educational, and economic status of women. However, the right to vote was not seen nor was it regarded as the initial focus of woman’s reform. As time passed, however, these early women’s leaders began to see suffrage as the only way in which to ensure that their rights could legally be protected. Women consequently campaigned vigorously to have the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, born out of the ashes of the Civil War battlefields, broadened to include women. Their failure served only to stiffen their resolve to push for a constitutional amendment specifically targeting the right to vote in relation to gender.

Despite initial setbacks, the woman suffrage crusade continued to gain both in momentum and in followers. Various plans of action to secure the ballot, be it through an all-encompassing constitutional amendment or through a state-by-state suffrage passage, were proposed and fought over. A compromise was eventually reached where the ultimate goal would be the attainment of a nation-wide woman suffrage amendment that would be built upon the strength and support of individual state woman suffrage triumphs. This plan focused on states that seemed sympathetic to the suffrage crusade, and California’s location in the suffrage-friendly West made it an ideal candidate to launch the renewed statewide enfranchisement campaign. Additional features made California a prime potential candidate for suffrage, such as its large urban and immigrant population, which would provide the movement with its first victory outside the rural Western regions. To secure California as the sixth suffrage state would also mean a tremendous boost in momentum for the national campaign, with a win serving as a rallying point and potential harbinger for future individual state successes.

In 1896 an initial campaign to pass woman suffrage in California was launched, but ended in a rather resounding defeat

---

for the cause. Woman suffragists concluded that several factors had coalesced to defeat them in their initial effort to gain the vote: the liquor interests and its political allies who propagated the notion that woman suffrage would mean the passage of prohibition; the very wealthy and the very poor who opposed suffrage in the San Francisco Bay area; and the enduring prejudices of the California voting public over the assumption that the vote would fundamentally alter traditional gender roles. The fifteen years leading up to the 1911 campaign were spent trying to counter these notions and to extend the suffrage movement’s base of appeal across class lines, a tactic that was conspicuously lacking in the 1896 campaign.

As California entered the 20th Century, women were becoming increasingly vexed by the lack of real influence they wielded when it came to initiating statewide reform. Women recognized that they had their own special interests and issues that were separate from men, yet there was a grave shortage of advocacy groups willing to lobby for legislation that addressed their concerns. The few laws and regulations that were passed concerning women’s issues and the domestic sphere were considered inadequate and very limited in scope. Suffragists argued that the only solution would be for Californian women to be allotted a larger influence in public society, something that only the right to vote could provide. Women’s suffrage was thus promoted to the public as the only way to guarantee that the needs and concerns of the women of the state would be properly addressed.

While the battle for the ballot intensified, California suffragists privately concluded that success could only be achieved if their movement took on a more visible role in the state’s public political consciousness. Leaving domestic rhetoric to the literature campaign, California suffragists concurrently engaged in a battle to get as much exposure for the suffrage cause as possible. To accomplish their goals, California suffragists adopted every

---

legitimate form of tactical campaigning they could devise, taking their arguments to the public at large and utilizing such methods as door-to-door campaigning, precinct organization, street speaking and car campaigning, press work, plays and pageants, outdoor meetings and rallies, and participation in suffrage parades.

These new campaigning techniques were revolutionary for the California suffrage campaign and vital to its success. California suffragists refined older techniques and brought in a level of campaign militancy that would have been impossible to institute only a few years before. While suffragists had previously engaged in tactics designed to convince the public of the right to be equal participants in the public arena, they were never greatly persuasive. This was mainly due to the fact that earlier public tactics were educational in nature, attempting to influence the male electorate but rarely going into anything that could be classified as assertive in nature. Instead, these early suffragists attempted to cultivate support amongst those they felt they could easily convince. Seeking mass public support for woman suffrage was deemed too militant in the early day of the movement, and to engage in street-speaking campaigns and outdoor campaigns would have been unthinkable.

Highly visible tactics, such as those used in California, were successful in bringing the public’s attention to the cause of suffrage. Large numbers of women within the state were now seen as active agents and political demonstrators, publicly voicing their right to be equally included in California’s political atmosphere. In doing so, it also became increasingly difficult for the suffrage opposition to continue to characterize women as passive onlookers in regard to political and social change. Public campaigns for the right to vote had an enormous impact on the public’s perceptions of suffragists as it highlighted their determination to break through the long-held tradition of California women as being content in their domesticity. For the first time, the electorate could witness the growing dissatisfaction women had with the gender norms of

---

5 Ibid., 791.
the day on a large and unified scale, putting the issue of suffrage in
the context of a statewide gender reform movement rather than a
small-scale attempt to alter the gender ideologies of the era.

These conspicuous campaign tactics generated reams of
publicity for the suffrage movement as the public was highly
intrigued by these demonstrations that challenged the notions of
female respectability that had previously eschewed women’s
vigorously participation in public life.6 Women actively engaging in
such “masculine” demonstrations were widely reported by the
press, but moreover, it helped to reshape suffragist’s perceptions
about their own political validity. As they participated and
campaigned for men to grant them all the privileges of citizenship,
they themselves were already actively participating in activities
that defined the citizen. The tactical and publicity campaigns of
the women suffragists made California women a highly visible
component of society, which warmed the state electorate to the
idea of women as eager and enthusiastic political participants.
California women had identified a goal for themselves and united
around it to secure its passage, attaining an unprecedented degree
of visibility for their cause in the process.

The saliency of the campaign also showed the fierce
commitment that California woman suffrage advocates had for the
cause, aiding in the perception of a dedicated, statewide suffrage
movement. In publicly protesting, California women firmly placed
themselves in the public realm, distancing themselves from the old
traditions of best being suited to tend home and hearth. As
historian Ellen Carol DuBois noted, suffrage leaders expected that
by “overstepping the boundary of respectability would etch
suffrage beliefs on women’s souls, beyond retraction or
modification.”7 By engaging in visible protest, women were

---

6 Sherry J. Katz, “A Politics of Coalition: Socialist Women and the California
Suffrage Movement, 1900-1911,” in One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the
Woman Suffrage Movement, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, (NewSage Press,
1995), 255.

7 Ellen Carol DuBois, “Working Women, Class Relations, and Suffrage
Militance: Harriot Stanton Blatch and the New York Woman Suffrage
Movement, 1894-1909,” in One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman
directly challenging the separate-spheres mentality, a long held gender role ideology that divided the sexes into public (male) and domestic (female) spheres of dominance. By participating in a movement that was so highly public, California suffragists were able to ceremoniously sever the bonds of domesticity that for so long held them, allowing them to fully immerse themselves into the fight for woman suffrage.

The increased assertiveness of the campaign also served to legitimate the concept of women’s enfranchisement. As suffragists took their arguments to the streets and directly to the public at large, they began to see themselves, and were consequently seen as, legitimate participants in political reform. With every new campaign victory came an increase in suffragist’s awareness within themselves, as they realized that by acting and protesting as citizens, they were being seen as plausible candidates for future political equality. This shift in perception meant that California women, regardless of the outcome of the 1911 election, were determined to make their presence felt within the realm of California politics. The mass movement for women’s enfranchisement solidified suffragist’s determination to win not only state’s suffrage, but to aggressively take on the issue of nationwide suffrage as well.

The California suffrage movement as a whole provided a sense of unity to the women of the state, bringing women from various socio-economic strata, religious ideologies, and political backgrounds together and united in the fight for a common cause. Historian Sherry J. Katz takes special note of this trend in her analysis of the importance of Socialist women to the campaign, stating, “the demand for suffrage constituted a ‘capricious umbrella’ under which a large diversity of women, organizations, and beliefs could temporarily stand.”

This overtly public campaign for the ballot visually unified suffragists in the public’s perception of the cause. Mothers and factory girls, the wealthy and the poor, all publicly campaigned together in solidarity for the cause and were successful in giving the issue of woman suffrage a sense of urgency and importance that rhetorical argumentation alone could never hope to achieve.

---

Also of paramount importance to the 1911 California suffrage movement was the literature campaign. Realizing the potential value of a pervasive suffrage literature operation, suffrage leaders retooled their literature and adapted it as an instrument of mass marketing, a means of extending the issue of suffrage beyond the realm of the provincial and making it an issue of statewide importance. Literature disseminated during the 1911 California suffrage campaign was unique in that it was systematic, repetitive, and ubiquitous. California suffrage leaders looked to the infant advertising agencies as their inspiration for the diffusion of their core literature, and marketed the issue of women’s suffrage like a salable commodity. Relying heavily on catchy slogans, simplified messages, and iterative arguments, California suffrage literature was successful in portraying votes for women as applicable and acceptable to the average citizen. Moreover, suffrage workers were able to adopt the principles of contemporary consumerism and apply it to their campaign, effectively recasting the image of woman suffrage as modern, attainable, and nearly impossible to ignore.

In order to sell the issue of women’s suffrage as a viable commodity, it needed to be dispersed as one, and California suffragists wasted no time in bombarding the male electorate with signs, buttons, flyers, posters, and pamphlets, advancing the cause of woman suffrage. California suffragists even took their campaign to the air, tossing woman suffrage leaflets from a balloon floating two thousand feet above Los Angeles’ Fourth of July festivities.9 The ubiquitous nature of suffrage literature dispersal allowed suffragists to saturate the state with their aims, overwhelming critics of their cause by the sheer volume of campaign material that they spread out to the public. Furthermore, the diffusion of campaign literature to the masses was one of the first indications that the 1911 suffrage campaign would not be a quick and quiet affair by the suffragists; instead, it would be an all-encompassing

---

assault on California. Campaign literature was quickly recognized to be a cheap and efficient means to ensure that the most critical messages of the woman suffragists could effectively be distributed to the public.

California suffragists adamantly refused to allow the woman suffrage issue to be pushed into the shadows of a busy election year, and they relentlessly barraged the voting public with their strongest arguments and most influential supporters. In recalling the enthusiastic and confident nature of the California campaign, suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt recalled, “So omnipresent was the insistent suffrage propaganda that the twenty-two other constitutional amendments were thrust into the background and thousands read and talked of woman suffrage only, day after day.”

Thus, California suffragists ensured that suffrage would not be an issue in the 1911 election, but would rather be the issue, one that had the capacity to be a turning point in California politics.

The 1911 California suffrage campaign also saw the introduction of systematized literature campaigning that allowed for the greater dispersal of information, something that the previous individual methods conspicuously lacked. With a new standardized and efficient campaign literature strategy, California suffrage advocates could reach out to the broad diversity of the state’s population. These new methods guaranteed that the suffrage message would transcend regional, social, and class lines. New literature campaigning meant the issue of woman suffrage would appeal to voters in both the northern and southern portions of the state, which constituted two very different political and social backdrops. New campaign techniques would also help convince both the wealthy and working-class members of the state to join the fight for woman suffrage as well as transcend organizational and cultural ties, giving California women a common cause to unite around.

While the tactical campaign was successful in being the visible justification for women’s political equality, the literature

---

campaign in California was successful in influencing the public on a more personal level and aimed to bring in a wider audience in support for the cause. The literature campaign also specifically targeted, on a deeper analytical level, many of the attacks the opposition was purporting to the public and could make claims and assertions specifically designed for use in certain regions and segments of California’s population. Campaign literature also served as an important way to counteract the aggressive public tactics that were being employed by the suffragists, becoming a way to appeal to members of the California electorate on a more traditional level than large-scale community tactics would be able.

The vast majority of California suffrage campaign literature was built upon two distinct concepts designed to neutralize the issue of suffrage. This first overarching argument was built upon the assumption of the innate morality of women. Women, being perceived as the moral guardians of society, would benefit the California public by bringing their virtuous and ethical attributes into the political arena. In what became a defining feature of the campaign, suffragists utilized a blend of innovation and traditionalism in gender rhetoric that served to neutralize the concept of woman suffrage, making it more palatable to a skeptical California public. For example, a suffrage pamphlet entitled “Why California Women Should Vote” declared that “women are so generally chaste, that even fraud, force, money, pretended love, and the allurements of an idle, elegant life cannot tempt from virtue’s path enough women to supply the demand.”11 These characterizations presented to the California voting public an incorruptible segment of the population, one that would be endowed with the capacity to make ethical voting decisions and would have the greatest chance of cleaning up political corruption.

11 “Why California Women Should Vote” California suffrage pamphlet, distributed by the California Equal Suffrage Association, San Francisco. Ida Rust Macpherson Collection By and About Women, Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 32. Hereafter referred to as IRMC.
The intention of the second main concept of California suffrage literature was to solicit and maintain an inter-class alliance of support. This second concept focused on arguments and rhetoric intended to unite women of all classes under the banner of suffrage, shifting the suffrage movement from an upper and middle class crusade to an all-encompassing one. With campaign literature targeting women of all social classes, the women’s suffrage movement could break away from many of the more elitist constraints that bound the movement, while at the same time utilizing the vital contributions of wealth and political prestige that the upper classes could add to the cause. In addition to seeking out expanded class-wide support, suffrage literature also made a conscientious effort to appeal to the needs and concerns of other constituencies, namely mothers and both the men and women of the rural and urban sectors of the state.

This California campaign literature spoke directly to the wage-earning women and summed up the need for working women to be able to vote. One example of this is a pamphlet entitled “Why Wage-Earning Women Should Vote,” which declared that more than seven million women in the United States daily left their homes to go out in the world and fought beside men for their living. They worked under greater disadvantages and temptations than men, they worked for longer hours and lower wages, they bore the greater burdens of their industrial system, yet they did not have the protection which men had of the ballot.12

As it now appeared that the number of women seeking wages would invariably continue to rise, it became of utmost importance to protect them from the strains of work. They asserted women were naturally more delicate and, without proper protection, would wind up with the “stunted growth and impaired vitality of the English working people” that were forced to suffer due to the “direct results of lack of legislation in their behalf when the introduction of machinery made possible the great exploitation of labor.”13

12 “Why Wage-Earning Women Should Vote,” California woman suffrage pamphlet, printed by the California Equal Suffrage Association. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, box 1, folder 74.
13 Ibid., box 1, folder 74.
Campaign literature made it plain that one of the principle purposes of suffrage was to alleviate the problems that had begun to arise with the onset of increased industrialization and mechanization. It was argued that before the advent of mass industrialism, women had more satisfactory domestic living conditions. Popular campaign arguments asserted that these women never had occasion to venture out of the comforts of the home since they could produce virtually any commodity that was needed themselves. Food, clothes, soap, candles, and other items of home necessity were all made by home women with their own home-grown products and their own labor. Domiciliary concerns were thus their primary concern, and they consequently had no reason to enter the public sphere. They left the public realm to the men who, being the dominant sex in the public arena, consequently made laws in order to protect their own male interests. As mechanization and industrialization began to mass-produce items more cheaply and in greater quantities than the lone housewife was able, the center of women’s work was transferred to the factory—forcing women to abandon their sphere of influence and enter the previously male-dominated public dimension. Campaign literature thus focused on the perceived need to protect women from the harsh realities of public life that now surrounded them on a daily basis.

The specific constituencies mentioned in literature thus blended both a call for unity and for the extension of feminine virtue. For instance, in specifically targeting the needs of mothers, California suffrage literature ennobled the responsibility as an example of moral perfection. As one suffrage excerpt pointed out, “…in any case involving a moral issue, in any case involving the welfare of the child or the home—the foundation corners of the nation—she is above all else the Woman, the Mother. If, therefore, for no other reason than this, we need the woman’s ballot.” The


15 “Why Wage-Earning Women Should Vote,” IRMC, box 1, folder 74.

16 Ibid.

37
In Pursuit of the Sixth Star

adequacy with which a woman could perform her expected obligations as a wife and mother depended largely on the degree of available support from the political area, as laws and legislation that regulated home life were becoming of increasing importance to the new, urbanized society that was beginning to characterize the lives of many individuals. The franchise thus began to be promoted as a means for mothers to gain lasting and important legislative influence for the rights and protections of the home she governed.

The basis of the arguments advocating the need of home women to have the vote rested upon the assumption that it was the mother who was responsible for the cleanliness of the home, the wholesomeness of the food provided to the family, and the health and educational upbringing of the children within the home. While the mother was supposed to provide for all these things, she had no recourse when the markets were flooded with unsanitary, impure food, when her family had to try to survive in substandard housing, or when dangerous diseases and immoral influences were an ever present threat to her family’s well-being. The vote was thereby proposed as the ultimate solution for the ills that plagued the home, making the concept of suffrage appealing to California mothers and reformers alike.

In recognizing the link to the reformist mindset, suffrage leaders were quickly able to connect California women’s suffrage with Progressive reform. This crucial link enabled suffragists to characterize the franchise as a vital tool that could be used for the extension and implementation of greater Progressive reforms throughout the state. In doing so, suffrage literature was able to highlight long-held assumptions about the altruistic nature of California women, portraying them as community servants who, with the vote, would be able to extend their philanthropic goals to a statewide level. Throughout the country, women had a long history of being active in community and social reforms, working behind the scenes to make societal improvements in areas that

17 “Women in the Home” California suffrage pamphlet distributed by the Political Equality League. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, box 1, folder 85.
could easily be linked to the domestic sphere. The issue of enfranchisement was thus reconstructed to fit the parameters of a sort of community service project, a designation that appealed to the traditionally ingrained notions that women were best suited for the establishment of communal societal reform.

Not content to make the issue of woman suffrage a purely regional one, California suffragists intended to use the immense level of support suffrage had in rural areas to combat some of the fierce opposition the amendment faced in urban ones. What rural inhabitants lacked in urbane sophistication they more than made up for in egalitarian ideals, with men and women routinely working as partners in the home and community in order to ensure their economic well-being. It was in the rural areas of the state that the Western ideas of individuality and equitable domestic partnerships were most pronounced, and therefore these areas could always be counted on as strong supporters of the suffrage amendment.

California suffrage literature was thus produced and distributed to these areas that intended to make rural inhabitants fully mobilized and active participants in the woman suffrage cause. Therefore, suffrage literature emphasized the perceived social benefits of living in rural areas, urging inhabitants to spread their ideal ways of living to their less fortunate counterparts in the city. The vote, it was argued, would help combat the vices of urban areas that were slowly starting to permeate into the fabric of rural life. For instance, one pamphlet entitled “To the Farmers and Fruit Growers of California” was expressly designed to appeal to country inhabitants and specifically warned of the dangers that prohibition of women’s votes entailed. Noting that California rural women and their families were perceived as living in a purer community than their counterparts in the cities (for they had cleaner air, more wholesome food, and lower levels of vice than larger urban centers), the pamphlet stressed that the vote must be granted to women or else the city vote would outpace the voice of rural inhabitants and lead to corrupted city legislation forever.
tainting the pureness of rural life. The stress here was that rural people must not become complacent about their idyllic lives in the country, and that woman suffrage would help to ensure the protection of their way of life.

California suffrage literature also noted that the ballot would be a vital aid in ensuring that women from all classes and backgrounds could attain a higher sense of civic and social responsibility. The inclusion of these arguments aimed to counteract much of the criticism leveled at the suffrage movement by their opponents as to the character and background of the women that might soon be able to vote. However, literature aimed at enveloping women of various classes into the cause had the negative consequence of sparking the ire of the anti-suffragists, highlighting the controversial nature that subject of class had within the spectrum of political equality. Emphasizing the concerns of a large portion of California’s population, one anti-suffrage campaign bluntly asked, “Are we prepared to throw into political life all the women, good and bad, intelligent and unintelligent, of the whole United States, including the swarms which belong in Europe but have been adopted here?” Social status, despite its controversy, was too valuable a political asset to be given up on so easily. The precarious situation of woman suffrage forced the movement to make political connections that they never before would have considered, and the class-wide inclusiveness that the campaign adopted proved to be a successful feature of the campaign.

Suffragists contended that good citizenship and a high degree of public responsibility could never be achieved without enfranchisement, and to allow half of the United States population to live ignorant of the ideals and duties of a good citizen was to counter the fundamental benefits that came with an independent upbringing. As one suffrage pamphlet noted, what California

18 Millicent Shinn, “To the Farmers and Fruit Growers of California,” California suffrage pamphlet, distributed by the College Equal Suffrage League, IRMC, Denison Library Scripps College, box 1, folder 112.
women needed most was the “openness, the publicity, and the responsibility of action” that suffrage could bring. Californian suffragists were quick to point out in their literature the folly of expecting a woman to remain ignorant of civic responsibility yet simultaneously be accountable for instilling those same attributes onto future generations. Californian suffrage literature emphasized this disparity by stating, “Women who are slave mothers bring forth slave children. An enfranchised motherhood will bring forth a race which has never been equaled for nobility, heroism, and true greatness.” It was therefore argued that if nothing else, woman suffrage would help foster future generations that could be taught from experience the responsibilities and duties of a proper citizen.

While suffrage literature in many ways promoted the traditional social doctrine of the separate-spheres philosophy—an act that seems contradictory to the goal of suffrage and citizenship—it was actually a method of making the issue of woman suffrage more acceptable to the average California voter. Conducting an inoffensive campaign was the only way to retain voter’s sympathy to the cause of suffrage, and to purport anything that could be perceived as overtly radical would have been disastrous to the movement. If the suffragists had any hope of their movement being victorious, it was crucial for them to convince the electorate that enfranchisement would neither alter the rigid gender role notions of their era nor reduce the tremendous influence women wielded in their dominion of the home.

Womanly virtue and femininity were highly prized gender characterizations that were vital to the success of both the suffragists and anti-suffragists alike. For the anti-suffragists, it was their most prized argument, and they quickly latched on to the matter, redefining it to fit their own agendas and using it to justify their own reasoning behind opposing woman suffrage. The anti-

---


suffrage campaign publicly decried women entering the public sphere, as to do so would forever shatter the separate-sphere philosophy. Anti-suffrage women perceived access to the ballot as the ultimate threat to their femininity, an arrow directly through the heart of true womanhood. Former suffragist Helen Lewis placed the argument in context when she declared, “the very womanhood of America is threatened...by participation in campaign activities and the intimate and unconventional contact that would serve to erase the tradition of women’s dependency—the fundamental factor in all the world’s history that has served most to nourish the love and respect of man for woman.”\textsuperscript{22} To anti-suffrage leaders, woman suffragists were asking for a fundamental and inalterable shift in the very nature of gender roles. The right to vote was not merely an invitation for women to exert greater political influence on state politics; with the vote came the expectation that women would shoulder the responsibility of political legislation on the public stage. In the anti-suffragist’s view, granting women the vote was seen as a flagrant public refusal of a woman’s supreme role in the domestic sphere and an open rejection of the qualifying attribute of womanhood and femininity.

Not only was suffrage a threat to assumptions about gender ideologies, it also posed a danger to the few women who did in fact wield a measure of political influence and power. To grant universal woman suffrage was to strip upper and middle class women of the delicate partnership in political authority that they had carved out for themselves. They created a special niche in the political sphere where women gained influence from their connections to influential men. These few women were the influential backbone of the anti-suffrage movement, and had carefully cultivated not only a place of power for themselves but also a special image, one where they were perceived as the exemplars of moral propriety.

While the expectation that women were needed to bring about societal reform had, to some extent, always been present for American women, never before had the suffragists been expected

\textsuperscript{22} “Woman Suffrage a Menace to the Nation,” issued by the Nebraska Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. IRMC Denison Library, Scripps College. box 1, folder 119.
to put their successes and failures for all to witness on the public stage. Bound by the dogma of the separate spheres of philosophy, anti-suffragist women had taken the role of marshaling political reform from behind the scenes. Centering their operation backstage worked for them because these women, by virtue of their vast wealth, high social rank, and direct access to powerful male political leaders, wielded tremendous legislative influence. From this vantage point, anti-suffrage women could still adhere to their socially acceptable roles as mistresses of the home, yet would still be able to halt, hinder, and flat out crush woman suffrage reforms.

Suffrage literature therefore had to communicate to voters that women’s enfranchisement was not a radicalized assault on traditional gender norms, but rather an issue that was a politically and economically necessary for the entire state and applicable to Californians of all classes and backgrounds. The California suffrage literature campaign was a highly successful balancing act, appealing to both traditional gender ideology but at the same time promoting the greater public responsibility for the women of state. In doing so, suffragists presented to the male electorate a movement with all the potential to bring lasting reform and improvement, and yet maintain a semblance of traditional gender roles and responsibilities. The combination of vigorous campaigning, uniting suffrage support across a broad spectrum of social, regional, and class differences, and maintaining a campaign rhetoric that balanced traditionalism, finally proved to be enough to convince the male electorate, who finally granted suffrage to the women of California in 1911.

Utilizing innovative new campaign literature and tactics, California suffragists had finally achieved their goal, and the resulting consequences of suffrage proved to bring drastic change to women on both the state and national level. The passage of women’s suffrage in California, with its great wealth and influence, assured that the issue of woman suffrage would not have its success confined merely to the rural and sparsely populated

---

Western regions. With the state’s large urban and immigrant population, the California victory proved that women’s suffrage could be successful in the more populous Eastern regions whose own demographics mirrored those of California. Women’s suffrage in California was also successful in obtaining some of the Progressive reforms that suffragists promised the vote would provide, such as an extension of the eight-hour work day, raising the age of consent from sixteen to eighteen, minimum wage laws, and provisions for equal guardianship of children.24

The California suffrage victory also was able to alter the perceptions that women had about themselves. The achievement of women’s suffrage in California proved to be a crucial transition period for the women of the state, as women were able to make their first great detachments from the traditional notions about female propriety and respectability. The campaign was successful in forever altering previous notions about the respectability of women in public life, allowing women in California to be seen as legitimate political players within state. While they still appealed to the perceived ideal duties and obligations of women, suffragists still managed to successfully engage in new tactics and actions that brought them firmly into the public sphere, where their endeavors earned them a marked degree of political respectability throughout the state.

Suffragist’s new tactics laid the foundation for the radical shift in the views about women that would come about in the following decades, and prepared women to take on the challenges of extended equality. The California campaign for suffrage was a liberating one, one that helped relax the strict doctrines of separate-spheres and allowed women to accept the concept that they should be allowed all the responsibilities and duties befitting a citizen of the nation. Most important of all, Californian women now saw themselves as being able to elicit great change within their state and throughout the nation. Californian women had at last won their hard fought battle for political equality, creating a lasting change in the perception of their entire gender. The events and struggles of the 1911 woman suffrage campaign was most successful in

allowing women to begin to perceive themselves, and be perceived by the public, as full citizens of the state of California.
Bibliography


Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. “Direct or Indirect Power of Women.” California woman suffrage pamphlet distributed by the California Equal Suffrage Association. IRMC Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 110.

Howard, Clifford. “Man Needs Woman’s Ballot,” California suffrage extract. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 92a.


Shinn, Millicent. “To the Farmers and Fruit Growers of California.” California suffrage pamphlet, distributed by the College Equal Suffrage League. IRMC, Denison Library Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 112.

_____. Why California Women Should Vote.” California suffrage pamphlet, distributed by the California Equal Suffrage Association, San Francisco. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 32.

_____. “Why California Women Should Vote.” California woman suffrage pamphlet, distributed by the California Equal Suffrage Association, San Francisco. IRMC Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 72.

_____. “Why Wage-Earning Women Should Vote.” California woman suffrage pamphlet, printed by the California Equal
Suffrage Association. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 74.

_____. “Women in the Home.” California suffrage pamphlet distributed by the Political Equality League. IRMC, Denison Library, Scripps College, Box 1, Folder 85.

_____. “Woman Suffrage a Menace to the Nation,” issued by the Nebraska Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. IRMC Denison Library, Scripps College. Box 1, Folder 119.


Sarah Trevino Promnitz is a senior at California State University, San Bernardino with a B.A in History with an emphasis in Public and Oral History and a minor in Art History. She will graduate in spring 2009 with honors. She was awarded both the Robert A. Claytor and J.C. Robinson Memorial Scholarships for History in 2008 and is currently a member of the McNair Scholars Program, as well as being a member of Phi Alpha Theta, Phi Kappa Phi, and Golden Key honor societies. She will pursue her Ph.D. in fall 2009 at the University of California, Los Angeles as a recipient of the Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship. She hopes expand upon her research into women’s history, especially the California women’s suffrage movement.