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THE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT AND ITS OUTCOME FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Rosalyn Terborg-Penn

African American women were not promised inclusion in the Nineteenth Amendment. The ratification was achieved at a time when segregation and racial discrimination characterized American institutions. Although Black women had been woman suffrage advocates since the movement began in the post-Civil War years, their inclusion in the Nineteenth Amendment was not a given. This was a struggle that took considerable effort, primarily among African American women who set out to educate Black people about strategies for change. Nonetheless, like Black men a generation earlier, the majority of African American women—those living in the South—were disenfranchised, or lost the right to vote, soon after the amendment was ratified in 1920. Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, did Black women and men living in the South regain their lost right to vote.¹

Most Americans are surprised to learn that Black men and women were part of the nineteenth-century woman suffrage movement, which began officially at a small women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. During the over seventy years that followed, hundreds of African American women mobilized to gain the right to vote, especially during the years 1900 to 1920. Some organized in women's clubs formed in churches and in neighborhoods to aid Black communities. However, most joined national African American organizations like the National Baptist Woman's Convention and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), often through state federations. Still others were members of Black secret societies like sororities of Black college women or Black women's auxiliaries of Masonic orders. Each developed appropriate strategies for gaining the ballot or, in states where women could vote, for electing candidates of their choice. In associations, Black women focused on voter-education classes and other vehicles for helping inform their communities and preparing women to vote effectively.² Some Black clubwomen lived in the few states where woman suffrage had been legislated before 1920. Their goals included working to support an all-inclusive woman suffrage amendment that would give all women the right to vote in any type of election. For example, in the summer of 1906, the Colorado State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs met in Denver, where members discussed the role of Black

women voters. Women were encouraged to be educated voters and to seek candidates who supported justice for Black people. Elizabeth Piper Ensley, who was second vice president of the federation, delivered the address "Woman and the Ballot."³

Once Illinois women won local suffrage in 1914, Chicago's African American clubwomen immediately went to work. During 1914 and 1915, members of the Alpha Suffrage Club led by Ida B. Wells-Barnett published a newsletter, *The Alpha Suffrage Record*, which sought to educate the community about candidates and local issues that would appear on the ballot.⁴ Some Black women enthusiastically joined the club, founded in 1913, when Wells-Barnett explained how they could use their votes for the advantage of themselves and their race. As a result of her efforts, over sixty members of the club traveled to Washington, DC, to march in the 1913 suffrage parade in front of the White House. Some Black men in Chicago, however, were suspicious of the club's efforts. According to Wells-Barnett, they jeered at the women as they canvassed African American neighborhoods to recruit Black voters and told them that they ought to be at home taking care of babies. Other men accused the women of trying to take men's places in politics. However, African American women suffragists in Chicago were able to disarm these men. The women responded to male fears by telling them that they were registering to vote in order to put Black men into elective offices, which was their goal.⁵

Because most Black women in the nation did not live in places where women had earned the right to vote, throughout most of the first twenty years of the twentieth century, African American women's clubs sought strategies for gaining enfranchisement rather than mobilizing their communities to vote. The reason for this reality was that the woman suffrage movement came late to most states with large Black female populations, and many white women did not welcome them. Voting appeared to be elusive for clubwomen in the South. Even in other regions, Black clubwomen wondered if they would even be included in a woman suffrage amendment. Faith appeared to be the basis for their struggle. In New York State, however, where African American men had voted since the late nineteenth century, Black women's clubs mobilized for suffrage along with white women's groups early in the twentieth century, mainly because New York had long been a site for the woman suffrage struggle. Mrs. R. Jerome Jeffrey, a Black club leader from Rochester, had been a cohort of Susan B. Anthony. As president of the New York Federation of Colored Women, Jeffrey was part of both the NACW and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She was visibly supportive of the movement, speaking at various state conventions during the first decade of the twentieth century.⁶

Black woman suffragists had mobilized in New York City boroughs in the 1890s, and the Black woman suffrage network in New York City broadened as white suffragists in the city realized the importance of the movement's success if African American men who voted supported the movement. As early as 1910, white women suffragists from several organizations worked with African American clubwomen, inviting them to form separate colored chapters of various suffrage associations. The socialite Alva Belmont, a southern-born white New Yorker married to the wealthy banker Oliver Belmont, was one of the first to bring Black women into the New York City world of elite white suffragists. Approaching members of the Negro Women's Business League, Belmont raised the proposition of funding a suffrage meeting room for African American suffragists under the auspices of her organization, the Political Equality Association. When Belmont approached Mrs. I. L. Moorman, president of the Negro Women's Business League, Moorman did not agree to join because she had heard about the anti-Black woman suffrage efforts of white women in the South who attempted to keep African American women out of the woman suffrage amendment. But Belmont assured Moorman that African American women in New York would not be left out of the amendment. With this assurance, Moorman threw her support behind Belmont and the Political Equality Association.⁷

Over two hundred African American women met with Belmont and other white women in mid-town Manhattan at the Mount Olivet Baptist Church. Moorman presided over the affair, where women of the Baptist Woman's Convention were in attendance. Belmont promised to provide them a suffrage headquarters if more than one hundred of them joined her suffrage association. At the close of the meeting, the *New York Times* reported that about half of the Black women indicated interest in joining. This appeared to be a significant meeting, the point wherein interracial cooperation for woman suffrage in this New York City voting district began.⁸ Within six months of that meeting, over one hundred African American women joined the "colored" branch of the Political Equality Association. Belmont was true to her promise and opened a permanent headquarters in Harlem. Moorman was placed in charge of the room. Her goal was to provide voter education for Black women. Belmont promised to provide the Black women larger accommodations as their membership increased. What African American women did not know, however, was that Belmont later secretly donated \$10,000 to the Southern Woman Suffrage Conference, an organization that opposed a federal woman suffrage amendment because it would enfranchise southern Black women. This regional association was working to keep Black women from voting the same way that Black men had been disenfranchised, a tactic Moorman had feared at the outset of her

interaction with Belmont. Such anti-Black woman suffrage efforts were a precursor of things to come. There were pros and cons about developing segregated organizations for Black women versus integrating them into chapters with white women. Separate chapters for Black women allowed for their continued autonomy, while racially integrated ones, as in the New York City case, promoted white hegemony and patronizing relationships in which white women perceived Black women as lesser representatives of their gender and in constant need of aid.

By 1915, the *New York Times* reported that the woman suffrage party opened a suffrage headquarters for Black women, this time located in a house in mid-town Manhattan on West Sixty-Third Street. New York suffragists worked diligently for the woman suffrage legislation that year, and W. E. B. DuBois, the editor of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) journal, *The Crisis*, encouraged African American men to support the pending referendum to strike the word *male* from the state constitution. DuBois was serving as a member of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Centennial Committee at the time and was the most notable Black man of the era to support the woman suffrage movement.⁹

For organized Black New York women, there were several organizational choices for cooperative strategy building in the movement: the white woman suffrage associations and the men and women of the NAACP. African American women from New York State used both options. For example, in 1915 New York State members of the Household of Ruth (the sister affiliate of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, a Black Masonic convention) met with the men of their organization at the statewide convention in Poughkeepsie, New York. The group was founded in 1897, and each year both the men's and women's groups met at the same time. In discussing suffrage resolutions, the members argued, "The women of our race are largely wage earners in industry and their labor needs the protection of the ballot."¹⁰ The women endorsed the woman suffrage referendum and authorized their District Grand Most Noble Governor, Lena M. Johnson, to send their resolution to the Woman Suffrage Party of New York. One of the goals of the party was to eliminate all legal barriers against women, including inequities in pay and employment. In this New York State case, African American women elected to form a loose coalition with a political organization of primarily white women in order to assure working-class Black women were included in the state lobby for woman suffrage. The New York State referendum did not pass until 1917, the year Du Bois had encouraged the Black men of the state to support the bill. African American men's votes were key in this tight contest to remove the word *male* from the state constitution.¹¹

In other states outside of the South, more and more legislatures considered woman suffrage bills in some way or another, and African Americans urged their representatives to adopt woman suffrage legislation. Such was the case in Ohio. In 1919, Black Republican women in the state reorganized and renamed their association when the Republican legislature defeated the equal rights bill. These clubwomen elected Rosa Moorman president of the Colored Women's Independent Political League. Before the vote on the equal rights bill, Moorman took a petition in support of it to the Ohio House of Delegates, asking the Republicans to support the bill, which would have provided for woman suffrage, but they would not. As a result, women who formerly supported the Republican Party decided to organize as independents.¹²

In 1920, Rhode Island Black woman suffragists campaigned vigorously for the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and for the Warren G. Harding presidential ticket. The women were known for canvassing neighborhoods in efforts to get Black people out to vote for the Republican ticket. When Harding was successfully elected, he sent Bertha Higgins a letter of thanks for Black clubwomen's support during the elections. This personal citation revealed the political influence of African American women outside of the South and inside of the Republican Party.¹³

In contrast to the North, Black people in the South had to be very careful about publicly supporting the Republican Party. In any event, most Black men could not vote in the southern states. Exceptions occurred in border states like Kentucky and Maryland. In some small deep South communities like Tuskegee, Alabama, and perhaps even Hampton, Virginia—where professional African American men were insulated in college towns—Black men had maintained the privilege to vote granted by the Fifteenth Amendment.¹⁴

Woman suffrage in Alabama, however, was not readily accepted by white women or white men. Whites, consequently, truly frowned upon African American women who openly supported the cause. As a result, a hostile environment awaited the women of the Tuskegee Woman's Club as they initiated their woman suffrage efforts at the turn of the century.

The Tuskegee Woman's Club was the center for educational, social, and political work among the elite African American women who were connected to Tuskegee Institute. The club had been founded by Booker T. Washington's wife, Margaret Murray Washington, who became its president in 1895. Shortly thereafter, she became the founder and president of the Southern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Adella Hunt Logan was one of the charter members of the Tuskegee Woman's Club and perhaps its most dynamic woman suffrage activist, as she encouraged students and women faculty particularly to learn about and participate in the movement. Documented woman suffrage activities developed by the club at the

institute began in 1900. For example, Logan organized a political parade for her civics class around the time of the kickoff of Republican President McKinley's reelection campaign. A decade later, the Tuskegee clubwomen held formal "suffrage nights" and convened suffrage lectures, which Logan often presented. In 1912, when the National Medical Association met at Tuskegee, Ruth Logan organized the opening ceremonies. Adella Logan's eldest daughter Ruth taught physical education at Tuskegee and later became a New York City physician.¹⁵

The suffrage activities of the club appear to have been primarily educational, for the idea of women voting in Alabama seemed merely a mirage. After graduation, however, many Tuskegee students returned to their homes in the Northeast and Midwest or obtained employment outside of the South, where in another time and location Black women could dare to dream of actually voting. What is most significant about the Tuskegee clubwomen is their impact on the woman suffrage movement outside of their home communities. Adella Logan's words in particular graced the pages of *The Crisis* and the *Colored American Magazine*, where she reached a national African American audience.¹⁶

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, many more African American women's suffrage and voters clubs emerged, not only in states where women won the right to vote before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment but also in states where women voting was still just a hope. Voter education became a major goal of African American woman suffragists, who sought to make Black people effective voters. For example, in Texas, where women gained the right to vote in primary elections in 1918, there were suffrage associations in four different urban centers and a statewide organization, which were all formed at the Texas State Republican Convention of 1918. All of these organizations provided voter-education classes.¹⁷ In the upper South, there were political and suffrage clubs in the District of Columbia and Baltimore. In addition, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, two sororities founded at Howard University in the District of Columbia, participated in woman suffrage activities, inviting speakers like Montana Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin to campus.¹⁸

Mobilization for the right to vote appeared to have a snowball effect among Black clubwomen during the early twentieth century as more and more women's organizations joined the movement. Several reasons account for this phenomenon. As the Black women's club movement developed nationwide, there was a greater exchange of ideas about common problems like discrimination against African American women because of race and gender at the polls and the disenfranchisement of Black men in the South. As other groups seeking redress of grievances through political means aligned with Black women, a critical mass of sentiments for enfranchising Black women developed. Leading women in the protest against discrimina-

tion at the polls included Adella Hunt Logan and Mary Church Terrell of Washington, DC, who was the first president of the NACW.¹⁹

This increase in support promoted a sense of empowerment. For the most part, club leadership directed the strategy, and the leaders considered themselves to be the elite because they were educated and middle class, although some of the clubs represented significant numbers of working-class and poor women. Nonetheless, as the drive to ensure the enfranchisement of all American women reached its apex, it appears that Black women closed ranks—putting aside internal differences—and focused on winning the prize.

As the over-seventy-year struggle for woman suffrage ended with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, African American suffragists realized their dilemma, as forces throughout the nation organized to deprive them of their hard-won right to vote. It had taken twenty years for southern states to rewrite their constitutions to disfranchise Black men after the Fifteenth Amendment ratification in 1870, but Black women in the South lost their right to vote in less than ten years.²⁰

By 1929 and the Great Depression, African American women living in most southern states were prevented from voting. Border states like Maryland and Kentucky had not disfranchised Black men, so African American women in those states did not lose their votes. However, the overwhelming majority of African American women lived in the lower South, where literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and intimidation kept them from voting.²¹

Because of racism, Black woman suffragists' experiences and goals were different from those of white suffragists. Racism stimulated multiple consciousness and survival strategies among African American women—past and present. Racism aside, many white women suffragists sought the vote only to empower themselves. African American women, however, were universal suffragists in the sense that their voices called for the vote for all citizens, not just themselves.

A renewed drive for regaining the vote among African Americans did not take off again, however, until the 1960s civil rights movement, when college students in particular, especially the members of the interracial Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), mounted a campaign for voter registration in the South that peaked in 1964.²² College students from all over the nation went to southern Black campuses to help the Black students who were protesting against segregated public accommodations and, more importantly, the disfranchisement of Black women and men. Fannie Lou Hamer, a Black Mississippi sharecropper, joined the struggle and became symbolic of the poor African American women who were willing to lose their homes and possibly their lives for the right to vote. Hamer survived imprisonment, where the white police officers forced Black male prisoners to beat her severely or be beaten themselves.²³

This was a momentous period in US history, when civil rights workers, primarily northern college students, converged upon the South to educate Black students who were denied public education, as white leaders closed public schools and educated their students in private academies. Three male activists—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—were murdered in Mississippi as a result of their efforts to help Black people, which were a threat to the white status quo.²⁴

Unlike the woman suffrage movement, the civil rights movement was covered by national television. As a result, Americans were witnesses to the movement, as they saw white police officers and their dogs attack the young and old—most of whom were female—as the protesters demonstrated nonviolently for the right to vote. Consequently, Americans witnessed the persecution and violence on television and turned the tide of indifference. By 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Bill, which made it a federal crime to prevent a person from registering or voting. The bill was written as a temporary measure to expire periodically. The bill has been renewed several times because African Americans have demonstrated how tenuous their right to vote is.

The struggle continues as we celebrate each major anniversary of the woman suffrage amendment and the freedom fighting of African American women who pledged themselves to struggle for the right to vote. With the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that diminished the protection of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Nineteenth Amendment has been weakened for women of color nationwide. Consequently, Black men and women are in danger of being disenfranchised once again.

NOTES

A note from the editor Liette Gidlow: I would like to thank Jeanna Penn for her permission to publish this essay.

The *Journal* would like to note as well that Professor Gidlow has copyedited this essay.

¹See Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

²*Ibid.*, 1–3.

³Third Annual Convention of the Colorado State Convention of Colored Women's Clubs, program, 13–14 June 1906, Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee, Alabama.

⁴*Alpha Suffrage Record*, March 1914, 1, Ida B. Wells Papers, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

⁵Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 346.

⁶Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle*, 99–100.

⁷"Negro Women Join the Suffrage Fight," *New York Times*, February 7, 1910, 4.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*The Crisis*, August 1915, 179.

¹⁰Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle*, 52, 77, 102.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 10–11.

¹²*The Crisis*, July 1919, 17; and Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle*, 10.

¹³Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle*, 104.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵Adella Hunt Logan, "Tuskegee Institute," 103; Adele Logan Alexander, "Adella Hunt Logan, The Tuskegee Woman's Club Women, and African Americans in the Suffrage Movement," in *Votes for Women! The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South, and the Nation*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 71–104.

¹⁶Logan, "Tuskegee Institute," 60–61, 92.

¹⁷Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle*, 146–148.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹Adella Hunt Logan Papers, Tuskegee University Archives; and Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, DC: National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc., 1968).

²⁰Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment," in *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920–1940*, ed. Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

²¹Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830–1920," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978).

²²Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), chap. 10.

²³*Ibid.*, chap. 11.

²⁴*Ibid.*
