

# INTRODUCTION

## Suffrage and Its Limits

The New York Story

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This volume is the result of a two-day conference sponsored by the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz in collaboration with the New York State League of Women Voters, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, and the New York State Women's Suffrage Commission. The conference organizers sought to commemorate the centennial of woman suffrage in New York State through a scholarly investigation of the past, present, and future of women's social and political participation and representation in state politics. The 2017 centennial of woman suffrage at the state level offered a unique opportunity to examine this watershed moment in the women's movement and New York State history. Through a series of invited panels, presenters and the audience engaged in an interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue about the legacy and limits of suffrage, and its promise of legal political equality, for women in New York. By bringing together scholars from different regions of the state and across the country with a wide variety of research specialties, the conference initiated a dialogue between researchers, students, and the public that links an

understanding of past accomplishments to a clearer understanding of present problems and an agenda for future progress.

When the conference organizing committee first met, we were convinced of the timeliness of the topic—and assumed it would allow us to make connections to the election of the first woman president. That former New York senator Hillary Clinton did not achieve that milestone suggests the questions asked and investigated here are still relevant. At the time of the national centennial of woman suffrage, and in the current political climate, perhaps they are even more urgent.

In her memoir *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*, suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt wrote of the movement:

Hundreds of women gave the accumulated possibilities of an entire lifetime, thousands gave years of their lives, hundreds of thousands gave constant interest, and such aid as they could. It was a continuous, seemingly endless, chain of activity. Young suffragists who helped forge the last links of that chain were not born when it began, old suffragists who forged the first links were dead when it ended. . . . To them all its success became a monumental thing. (107–8)

The success, struggle, and victory about which Catt wrote was indeed a monumental thing and well worth celebrating. Yet as we planned for the conference and, subsequently, this volume, we aspired to move beyond “celebrating” to commemorating and complicating this history while connecting narratives of the past, present, and future of New York State.

For us, commemorating meant taking seriously women’s mobilization and political participation as a topic worthy of scholarly investigation and debate. While we might have simply celebrated that women were “given” the right to vote in New York in 1917, we instead chose to commemorate the evidence that the vote was not “given” to women, but fought for, over decades, by hundreds of thousands of women, and many men, before it was finally won.

When we say that we wish to complicate, we argue for histories that move beyond Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Although Stanton and Anthony are an important part

of the New York narrative we seek to understand, their story is not the only or even the central story of the New York (or national) centennial. The 1917 and 1920 centennials mark the anniversaries of what had become very different movements with different leaders, whose successful strategizing and organizing we seek to better understand in this volume.

We also endeavored to complicate our celebration by acknowledging some uncomfortable truths about many suffrage leaders and followers, including their nativism, classism, and racism. While acknowledging and confronting these truths does not negate their achievements, it allows us to interpret the past with greater clarity and honesty. When we do so, we can better connect the struggle for suffrage to later efforts to mobilize in defense of women's and civil rights and of struggles for racial justice. We can better understand some of the limits of such movements in our contemporary polarized political reality.

By making a conscious, collective effort to connect these mostly white, middle-class suffragists to the labor and efforts of African American, immigrant, working-class women who strove for the same goal, we complicate a "celebration" by acknowledging that the vote did not provide the panacea for women that many of the movement leaders thought it would. By recognizing that some women still struggle daily against sexism, racism, classism, settler colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and patriarchy, and therefore are denied effective voice in the political process, we query the notion that the struggle is over and complete victory achieved. Our book is organized in the manner of the conference, with nine chapters in total, three dedicated to the past, three to the present, and three to the future of women's social and political equality in New York and beyond. While all of the authors are established scholars in their respective fields, their presentations, from which the chapters are derived, were aimed at the non-expert audience, such as college undergraduates in a New York State history survey or a women and politics course, community members interested in suffrage and its limits, members of New York State and local historical societies, and educators in the region who wish to develop materials to teach the suffrage movement and will have every incentive to place New York in the context of this national conversation.

In part 1, "Investigating the Past," several historians reexamine the path to suffrage and its aftermath in New York State. In the

first chapter, historians Susan Goodier and Karen Pastorello provide an in-depth investigation into the initial struggle for suffrage, from Seneca Falls through the early twentieth century. This chapter offers the necessary context for understanding Susan Ingalls Lewis's second chapter, which reviews current suffrage scholarship and asks why the movement succeeded in 1917 (having failed in 1915), focusing on the leadership strategies of Carrie Chapman Catt and Mary Garrett Hay. Finally, in the third installment on the past, Julie A. Gallagher, Joanna L. Grossman, and Meg Devlin O'Sullivan explore what happened in New York State and nationally after women won the vote, with particular attention to the experience of African American women in New York City, as voters, reformers, activists, and elected officials.

The next three chapters, "Interrogating the Present," focus on the current status of women and politics in New York State. In chapter 4, Kira Sanbonmatsu analyzes current levels and trends in women's representation in state politics, with an eye to comparing New York to other states. In chapter 5, kt Tobin provides newly collected data on women in local political offices in New York both to demonstrate that even at this oft-cited "entry" level, women lag behind men in executive-level positions and to identify continued obstacles in the gendered nature of some local political offices. Chapter 6 tackles the results of a survey designed to measure New Yorkers' attitudes about women and politics, funded by the Albany-based *Times Union* Women@Work initiative. Here Kathleen Dowley and Eve Walter confirm that although New York State remains a largely liberal "blue" state that votes for Democrats in the majority, gender gaps in public policy priorities persist.

Finally, in part 3, "Imagining the Future," a series of feminist writers reflect on the gains and limits of the suffrage movements for women going forward and the ongoing struggle for social, legal, and political equality in New York. In chapter 7, Amy Baehr lays out a robust defense of liberal feminism while identifying its central weakness in its failure to make "fairness" with regard to sharing in society's burdens (i.e., care work) as central as the demand for legal "rights" to its benefits (the vote, work, property). Jasmine Syedullah and Gabrielle Baron-Hill, in response to the charge to consider the "limits of liberal feminism and suffrage" for women, argue in chapter 8 that the limits of suffrage for gender equality is the unfinished work of abolition. In the final chapter, we present the conference keynote

address of Barbara Smith, black feminist activist, author, and former two-term Albany council representative. Here Smith invites us to imagine a future informed by the lessons of organizing from the past.