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Woodrow Wilson and Woman Suffrage: A New Look

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“Barring the chilled, scandalized feeling that always overcomes me when I see and hear women speak in public,” young Woodrow Wilson once wrote in 1884, describing a Woman’s Congress meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Women in Baltimore, “I derived a good deal of whimsical delight . . . from the proceedings.” The future president’s amusement, however, could not overcome his antipathy for feminine orators. Commenting on one speaker, “a severely dressed person from Boston, an old maid from the straitest sect of old maid,” Wilson observed that she was “a living example—and lively commentary—of what might be done by giving men’s places and duties to women.”¹ Surely the man who dismissed the participation of women in public affairs would have recoiled at the suggestion that one day he would write about the woman suffrage amendment: “I deem it one of the greatest honors of my life that this great event, so stoutly fought for, for so many years, should have occurred during the period of my administration.”²

His own testimony demonstrates Wilson’s political evolution concerning women. But it does not measure his contribution to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, a contribution which has not been accorded careful attention by historians of either the Progressive era or the woman suffrage movement.³ Few presidents have been persuaded to exercise the full power of their

¹ Wilson to Ellen Louise Axson, 31 October 1884, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 35 vols., eds. Arthur S. Link et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966-), 3:389 (hereinafter cited as *PWW*).

² *New York Times*, 27 August 1920.

³ Scholarly works usually present Wilson as a negative influence or a reluctant reformer. Eleanor

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office on behalf of a controversial amendment to the Constitution. Historically, most federal amendments have been carved out in Congress and in the states with little more than perfunctory attention from the presidents who held office at the time. Women who sought a suffrage amendment in the late nineteenth century, then, did not regard the president as a requisite ally. The transformation of the modern presidency, however, which had its genesis in Theodore Roosevelt's concept of the office as a "bully pulpit," gradually led suffragists to rethink their position. By 1915, awareness of the ways in which the presidency could be used convinced all suffragists that it was necessary to win the support of Woodrow Wilson. An examination of Wilson's role illustrates the crucial nature of active presidential lobbying and brings to light a significant aspect, hitherto unexplored, of the political dynamics involved in the passage of the amendment in both houses of Congress, as well as ratification by the states.

WILSON AND THE NEW SUFFRAGISTS

That Wilson held Victorian views of women and their proper place in society is not surprising. Born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1856, and reared in Augusta, Georgia, he brought with him to adulthood the culture and mores of the South. Inheriting the region's general contempt for career women, he frequently expressed his disapproval of "unsexed, masculinized females."⁴ His vision of femininity reflected contemporary attitudes of northerners and southerners alike, including many women. His wife, for one, sustained him in every way. A native of Rome, Georgia, Ellen Louise Axson Wilson shared his concept of what the ideal woman should be—a homemaker, helpmate, and genial hostess. She agreed with "Woodrow" that if a woman "cannot preserve her individuality in the family . . . she simply has no individuality worth preserving."⁵ When Bryn Mawr, M. Carey Thomas's newly endowed women's college, offered Wilson his first

Flexner's *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1973) is the best narrative of its kind. However, Flexner fails to make use of many manuscript collections of political figures connected with the Wilson administration, including Wilson's papers. Thus she views Wilson's role as limited essentially to wooing a few Southern Democrats in the final days of the movement. David Morgan's *Suffragists and Democrats* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1972) concentrates on suffrage politics as it related to southern congressional objections to enfranchising black women, but it fails to acknowledge Wilson's accomplishments as a suffrage advocate. Anne F. Scott and Andrew M. Scott's *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Lippincott, 1975) includes six pages of documents on "The Education of Woodrow Wilson," but does not convey the level of his exertions or effectiveness. Other notable but equally incomplete studies include: Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); William L. O'Neill, *The Woman Movement* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969); and idem., *Everyone Was Brave* (Chicago, Ill.: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

⁴ Frank Parker Stockbridge, "How Woodrow Wilson Won His Nomination," *Current History* 20 (July 1924): 566-67.

⁵ Wilson to Ellen Axson, 1 March 1885, *PWW*, 4:316-17. For a brief biographical sketch, see Arthur S. Link, "Ellen Louise Axson Wilson," in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, eds. Edward

teaching position in 1884, his bride-to-be expressed concern that he would “find it very unpleasant to serve, as it were, under a *woman*.” It furthermore struck her as “absurd” and “unnatural” that he should stoop to teaching girls.⁶ Nevertheless, while at Bryn Mawr Wilson launched a distinguished career as teacher and historian; by the time he had become president of Princeton University in 1902, his scholarship had established him as one of the country’s leading educators. During these years Ellen had borne three daughters, all of whom doted on their father and complemented their mother’s outlook. It was a close-knit, happy family. But feminine independence, much less the idea of woman suffrage, was not promoted by the household environment—the emotional and social base from which Wilson stepped into public life.⁷

Progressive reform and the New Freedom became the cornerstones of Wilson’s New Jersey governorship and first presidential administration. The progress and freedom of which he and other presumably forward-looking men spoke, however, did not embrace genuine national political democracy. Wilson certainly no longer believed, as he had at the age of twenty, that universal suffrage lay “at the foundation of every evil in this country,” but when he ran for president in 1912 he had not yet conceded that women deserved the right to vote.⁸ And because the split in the Republican party between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft insured his election, Wilson could safely evade the issue whenever it came up. Choosing to hide behind the Democratic platform, which made no reference to suffrage, he stated that candidates for national office should remain noncommittal. Cornered by reporters in California where it was a state referendum item, in May 1911, he had said only: “Suffrage is not a national issue, so far. It is a local issue for each State to settle for itself.”⁹ He would maintain that position for several years.

Roosevelt’s Progressive party platform, on the other hand, boasted a suffrage plank. Although Roosevelt, too, proved to be equivocal on the issue, no less a luminary than Jane Addams had seconded his nomination. With good reason the editors of many suffrage journals urged their readers to rally behind the “Red Bandana.”¹⁰ His defeat did not dampen their mood. As the campaign had emphasized the need for reform in general, the election of a progressive

T. James and Janet W. James (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 3: 626–28.

⁶ Axson to Wilson, 28 November 1884, *PWW*, 3: 494–95. On the subject of the Wilson-Thomas relationship, always cordial, see Wilson to Axson, 6 December 1884, *PWW*, 3:517–18; and in *PWW*, Thomas to Wilson, 15 August 1885, 5:13–14; Wilson to Thomas, 29 August 1885, 5:15; Thomas to Wilson, 17 May 1887, 5: 505–6, and 1 August 1888, 5: 758.

⁷ Two of his daughters, Eleanor Randolph Wilson McAdoo and Margaret Wilson, later would become active suffragists.

⁸ Diary entry, 19 June 1876, *PWW*, 3: 143; Wilson to Witter Bynner, 20 June 1911, *PWW*, 23: 160.

⁹ Stockbridge, “How Wilson Won His Nomination,” pp. 566–67.

¹⁰ See, for example, *The Woman Voter* 3 (October 1912) and *The Western Woman Voter* 2, nos. 8, 9, 10, and 11 (August–November 1912).

president of any kind could not have failed to inspire hope in suffrage circles that an end to the century-long struggle was in sight.

During the two decades before Wilson's election, the suffrage movement had met with limited success. Sustained mainly by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), founded in 1890, suffragists had worked tirelessly in hundreds of campaigns, state by state.¹¹ Four Rocky Mountain states granted their women voting rights in the 1890s; after a fourteen-year dry spell, five additional trans-Mississippi states did likewise between 1910 and 1912.¹² Because the hard-fought state campaigns yielded such comparatively small gains, a new determination to seek a *federal* amendment characterized the ambition of many younger suffragists.¹³ The foremost leader among this new breed was the redoubtable Alice Paul. After working with the radical English suffragettes, Emmeline, Cristobel, and Sylvia Pankhurst, Paul had returned to America in 1910. Her arrival in Washington in 1912 signaled a renaissance for federal suffragism. With some reservations, NAWSA agreed to sponsor the work of Paul's newly formed Congressional Committee, and the young Quaker quickly set about organizing a massive suffrage parade.¹⁴

On 3 March 1913, five thousand white-robed suffragists marched up Pennsylvania Avenue, flanked by a half-million spectators. The onlookers, most of whom were in Washington to attend Wilson's inauguration, quickly forgot that he was about to arrive at Union Station. Before long, a large, hostile element of the crowd began throwing stones and cursing the demonstrators. Many policemen refused to restrain the rioters; one officer reportedly grabbed Genevieve Francis Stone, the wife of Illinois Representative Claudius U. Stone, shouting: "If my wife were where you are, I'd break her head!" The disturbance required a detachment of marines to restore order. The whole affair resulted in a congressional investigation and the subsequent dismissal of the chief of police.¹⁵ Although many marchers suffered injuries, the attendant public sympathy served as balm for their wounds. Because of the favorable publicity, the movement gained more momentum than had been seen in a generation. Soon afterward, in March, April, and June 1913, suffrage delegations were arguing their case before the reticent Wilson. In July, the Suffrage Caravan, which originated in

¹¹ The woman suffrage movement had split in 1869 due to disagreement over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Lucy Stone and Henry Ward Beecher founded the American Woman Suffrage Association, while Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. The two groups merged twenty-one years later.

¹² Between 1867 and 1917, suffragists mounted some 854 various suffrage campaigns directed at state legislatures. See Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, pp. 5–6. The states granting suffrage were Wyoming (1890), Colorado (1893), Utah (1895), Idaho (1896), Washington (1910), California (1911), and Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon (1912).

¹³ Enthusiasm for the federal amendment had flagged earlier, after the death of Susan B. Anthony in 1906.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 5 vols. (New York: Foster and Wells, 1881–1922), 5: 377–78 (hereinafter cited as *HWS*).

¹⁵ See the *New York Times*, 4 March 1913.

San Francisco and worked its way east, delivered to Congress a petition with over 200,000 signatures gathered from all parts of the country. And a new, national publication, *The Suffragist*, began circulation in November.¹⁶

Despite the Congressional Committee's achievements, NAWSA, skeptical of seeking a federal amendment, continued to concentrate on state referenda. Nevertheless, it sanctioned the more sensational tactics employed by Paul throughout 1913. But when her Congressional Committee forged plans to campaign against the Democrats in 1914, relations with NAWSA grew more strained. Paul's insistence on holding the "party in power" responsible for congressional diffidence conflicted with NAWSA's contention that suffrage needed all the friends that it could muster, regardless of party. At length, Paul's committee struck out on its own as a new organization—the Congressional Union—in February 1914.

The NAWSA hierarchy subsequently decided to make its own overtures toward Wilson. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, NAWSA's president, had met with him on 8 December 1913. "I am not a free man," he responded to Shaw's request that he use his influence with Congress on behalf of suffrage. "I am not at liberty until I speak for somebody else besides myself, to urge legislation upon the Congress."¹⁷ His statement was disingenuous. Wilson had built a reputation as an executive capable of writing into law progressive legislation in which he believed. Within the first year of his presidency, he had already achieved two major goals of his New Freedom—the Underwood Tariff Act and the Federal Reserve Act—through persistent leadership, including congressional conferences at the Capitol to insure their passage.¹⁸ In these matters, it was not "private views" that he urged; it was the voice of the people as he interpreted it. On the controversial issue of woman suffrage, he refused to pass judgment. The president did offer one consolation: He said that the formation of a House Woman Suffrage Committee would be a good idea. Dr. Shaw left the White House pleased with this small gain.¹⁹

NAWSA's work during 1914 centered on referenda in the important states of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The Congressional Union, meanwhile, undertook its western campaign against Democrats in the off-year elections and canvassed in nine suffrage states where a total of forty-three Democrats were running. Of the twenty-three who were defeated, the Union claimed credit in at least six races.²⁰ More importantly, by the spring of 1915, the Congressional Union's efforts, complemented by NAWSA's conven-

¹⁶ Wilson Appointment Books, 17 March and 12 April 1912, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (hereinafter cited as WP, DLC); Inez Hayes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), p. 41; Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, pp. 264–65.

¹⁷ *HWS*, 5: 376.

¹⁸ See Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 147–57, 197, and 239–40 on Wilson's leadership qualities.

¹⁹ *HWS*, 5: 376.

²⁰ Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party*, p. 92.

tional lobbying, had moved the federal amendment onto the floor of both houses of Congress for the first time.²¹

TOWARD A FEDERAL AMENDMENT

Wilson remained unimpressed throughout 1914 and 1915 as delegations from both the Congressional Union and NAWSA continued to secure audiences with him.²² Not until 19 October 1915 did he find himself compelled to do more than nod and speak evasively on the subject. On that date he voted in favor of woman suffrage in the special New Jersey state election.

Events in Wilson's personal life in part motivated the gesture. On 6 August 1914 Ellen had died. Her death plunged him into profound grief and despair.²³ He did not fully recover until he met Edith Bolling Galt, his "gift from Heaven," in March 1915. Their courtship soon agitated his cabinet: remarriage so soon after Ellen's death and before the election of 1916 might alienate women voters in vital western states.²⁴ (The Congressional Union, as a catalyst for organizing women voters, was a force to be reckoned with.) The nation looked upon the romance with warm approval, generally, but in some quarters the couple became the object of malicious gossip. In the West the impending remarriage spurred a number of indignation meetings. Undaunted, and with little prior notice, the president and Mrs. Galt formally announced their engagement on 6 October 1915. That day Wilson also told reporters: "I intend to vote for woman suffrage in New Jersey. I believe the time has come to extend the privilege and responsibility to the women of the State, but I shall vote . . . only upon my private conviction. I believe that it should be settled by the State and not by the National Government and that in no circumstance should it be made a party question."²⁵

Arthur S. Link has speculated that Wilson's decision may have been based in part on a desire to overcome the indignation of women voters.²⁶ Wilson also had simply been overwhelmed by growing suffrage demands, as he himself had candidly suggested on October 12 to the Daughters of the American Revolution: "I know of no body of persons comparable to a body of ladies for creating an atmosphere of opinion. I have myself in part yielded to the influence of that atmosphere, for it took me a long time to observe how I was going to vote in New Jersey."²⁷ Though both of these explanations are instructive, Wilson had

²¹ The Senate defeated the measure on 19 March 1914, 35 in favor to 34 opposed, while the House defeated it on 12 January 1915, 174 to 204.

²² He met with suffrage delegations in February, June, and September 1914, and January, June, and August 1915, reiterating the states' rights doctrine each time (Wilson Appointment Books, WP, DLC).

²³ For details, see Link, *The New Freedom*, pp. 459–65.

²⁴ On Wilson's remarriage, see Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 1–14.

²⁵ *New York Times*, 7 October 1915.

²⁶ Link, *Confusion and Crises*, p. 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13; *New York Times*, 12 October 1915.

painted himself into a corner. In every previous utterance to suffragists he had consistently reiterated the states' rights doctrine. Now the New Jersey election put him to the test. Despite considerations of placating the bluenoses or responding to an atmosphere of opinion, Wilson in fact had no other choice. Not to have voted at all in New Jersey would have made him appear hypocritical; to have voted against suffrage would have made him appear reactionary.

At any rate, Wilson's concession, important though it was, had no discernible effect. The referendum lost by over 46,000 votes.²⁸ Moreover, the voters in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania also rejected woman suffrage. Although NAWSA lost these battles by respectable margins, the effort, time, and money required had become too costly. In a somewhat demoralized state, the members of NAWSA gathered in Washington for their annual convention in December to elect a successor to the aging Shaw. The unanimous choice was Carrie Chapman Catt, the head of the New York Suffrage Association. Within a year, the dynamic new president formulated the multifaceted "Winning Plan." It called for enfranchised states to petition Congress on behalf of a federal amendment; selective referendum campaigns; and state-by-state agitation in the South. And, auspiciously, the plan made Woodrow Wilson the focus of both suffrage factions. Paul, with the threat of electoral reprisal, intended to force him to support the amendment. Catt, with personal diplomacy, sought to educate him and enlist his support.

As the suffragists' demands increased during 1916, Wilson could make further concessions, however haltingly, in response to Catt's gentle persuasion, without giving the appearance of succumbing to Paul's pressure tactics. The Congressional Union's efforts in the elections of 1914 had impressed many politicians; in April 1916, the union reorganized itself as the National Woman's party, with the avowed purpose of acting as the balance of power in the twelve suffrage states, which controlled ninety-one electoral votes. Thus, when Catt requested that the Democrats write a suffrage plank into their national platform, Wilson readily complied.²⁹ He kept his pledge, although the plank was based on states' rights, and in July the Republicans followed suit. In a surprise move, however, the Republican presidential nominee, Charles Evans Hughes, ventured beyond his party's platform on August 1 with a strongly worded endorsement of the federal amendment.³⁰ The National Woman's party applauded Hughes's extraordinary step, and M. Carey Thomas tried to persuade NAWSA to back the candidate, also.³¹ Instead, Catt urged Wilson to follow Hughes's lead. He declined, stating: "If I should change my personal attitude now I

²⁸ *New York Times*, 20 October 1915.

²⁹ *New York Times*, 15 December 1915; see also, Janice B. Roessing (vice-president of NAWSA) to Wilson, 14 April 1916, WP, DLC.

³⁰ *New York Times*, 2 August 1916.

³¹ Thomas to Catt, 4 August 1916, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

should seem to the country like nothing better than an angler for votes." He did agree, however, to speak at NAWSA's convention on September 8.³²

A tumultuous ovation broke out in the theater in Atlantic City when the president, accompanied by Mrs. Wilson, stepped onto the stage and sat next to Catt and Shaw. His speech, by his own choice the last on the evening's agenda, was cautious but encouraging, as he averred: "I have not come to fight anybody, *but with somebody*. We feel the tide; we rejoice in the strength of it; and we shall not quarrel in the long run as to the method of it."³³ For the first time, as many people noted, he made no reference to states' rights. After he finished, Shaw, with a touch of the dramatic, exclaimed: "We have waited *so long*, Mr. President! We have dared to hope that our release might come in your administration and that yours would be the voice to pronounce the words to bring our freedom."³⁴

Wilson's abandonment of his states' rights position can be attributed in part to his desire to counteract the Hughes declaration and the potentially harmful consequences of the National Woman's party's anti-Wilson campaign in the West. Yet, Catt may have been right in interpreting his altered position as evidence of his personal conversion and commitment to suffrage.³⁵ Because of the combined efforts of all suffragists, suffrage advocacy had gradually acquired legitimacy within the administration. During the state referenda of 1915, for example, not only Wilson, but also his private secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, and Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison had voted for suffrage; at the same time, Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, Wilson's son-in-law, and Secretary of Commerce William C. Redfield voted for it in New York; in Pennsylvania, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson had done likewise.³⁶ Moreover, while the second Mrs. Wilson let be known that she did not favor woman suffrage, the president's daughter, Margaret, had become an ardent suffragist and had participated in several National Woman's party activities. On one occasion, she had asked Colonel Edward M. House, her father's closest adviser and a suffrage advocate, to use his influence to convert Wilson to the federal amendment.³⁷ While it is impossible to measure the depth of his conviction by the time of the Atlantic City convention, these cumulative influences within Wilson's official family cannot be dismissed.

Yet another process was at work. Wilson's reelection depended on his ability not only to win a mandate for his policies of neutrality, but also on his success in garnering the votes of former Bull Moose Progressives, independents, and

³² Wilson to Mrs. E. P. Davis, 5 August 1916, WP, DLC.

³³ For the complete text, see Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 6 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1925), 4: 297-300.

³⁴ Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics* (New York: Scribners, 1926), p. 260.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *New York Times*, 6 October 1915.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20 October, 22 November, and 8 December 1915; the diary of E. M. House, 15 December 1915, E. M. House Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.

agrarians who had grown disenchanted with his failure to work actively for further domestic reforms after 1914. Beginning in 1916, he championed a number of social justice measures which, for a variety of reasons, he had previously resisted. These included the Adamson eight-hour-day law, the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act, the Rural Credits Act, and a federal workman's compensation act. Extending the franchise as an act of social justice may be viewed as part of this larger program, although it would be a distortion to suggest that it was solely a matter of political expediency.

Regardless of motivation, Wilson made only one further public reference to states' rights—to a Woman's party delegation in January 1917. But to NAWSA he never again invoked his old excuse. During his second administration he would respond with alacrity to almost every request they made of him.

The race between Wilson and Hughes was one of the closest in American political history. Suffragists notwithstanding, the war in Europe, not women's rights, weighed most heavily on the minds of Americans as they went to the polls on November 7. With the popular campaign slogan, "He kept us out of war!" Wilson emerged triumphant, though just barely, winning 277 electoral votes to Hughes's 254. Of the twelve suffrage states, Wilson won all but Illinois and Oregon, despite the Woman's party campaign. Ironically, his narrow victory was attributed to the women's vote because of the peace issue. The *New York Times*, for instance, asserted that women in California, with thirteen electoral votes, went disproportionately for Wilson. William Allen White wrote that if women had not supported Wilson, "Kansas would have gone for Hughes." And observers in Arizona, Idaho, Utah, and Washington credited women with swinging their combined eighteen electoral votes to the Democratic column. The Democratic party was indebted to women. Without them, as the *New Republic* editorialized, "Mr. Wilson would not have been continued in the White House."³⁸

RESISTANCE AND COOPERATION

When the United States declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, Wilson emphasized America's responsibility to make the world "safe for democracy." The nation's entrance into the war and Wilson's famous phrase played into the hands of the suffragists and forwarded their cause immeasurably. The role that women played in the war effort—tending farms, working in factories, transporting freight, and performing numerous other jobs usually reserved for men—proved to be a salient part of the education of both Wilson and Congress regarding women's rights. Throughout the war, the president appealed to and praised the women of the nation for their help and patriotism. In acknowledg-

³⁸ *New York Times*, 10 and 12 November 1916; *Literary Digest*, 18 November 1916, pp. 1312–16; *New Republic*, 25 November 1916, pp. 86–87; see also, Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 161n; and Catt and Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics*, pp. 264–65.

ing their spectacular cooperation, he consistently stressed the term “women” as well as “men” in his wartime messages, in a conscious attempt to give them full credit.³⁹

The war effort elicited varying responses from suffragists. The Woman’s party refused to subordinate its activities. Angered by what they believed to be intransigence on Wilson’s part, the party commenced daily picketing of the White House on 10 January 1917. The picketers at first enjoyed the silent nods of White House guards who looked upon their lonely vigil in a spirit of camaraderie. Even Wilson, on one occasion, invited the women to escape the bitter cold by joining him for tea. (They declined.) Although many people admired the picketers, others were alienated by them. When the militant suffragists unveiled “Kaiser Wilson” banners quoting the president’s pronouncements on democracy—to emphasize the absence of democracy at home—they were attacked by passers-by, and arrested and imprisoned. The often hysterical atmosphere of “100 per cent Americanism” did not suffer any acts hinting of “treason.” Severe treatment, however, did not blunt their determination; new recruits quickly came forward and kept the issue in the public eye.⁴⁰

NAWSA, on the other hand, viewed the war as an opportunity to show that women, by their patriotism, deserved full enfranchisement. Shaw and Catt accepted appointments as administrators of the Women’s Committee of the Council of National Defense on 24 April 1917.⁴¹ At the same time, Catt’s lieutenant, Helen Hamilton Gardener, began assiduously cultivating friendships on Capitol Hill and in the White House. Gardener’s powers of persuasion and tact made her an invaluable liaison, and her admirers soon included Wilson himself. Writing to the president on 10 May 1917, Gardener asked him to assure Representative Edward W. Pou (D–N.C.), chairman of the House Rules Committee and an opponent of the cause, that he, Wilson, favored the creation of a House Committee on Woman Suffrage. Wilson wrote to Pou on May 14 that he heartily approved “in this matter of very considerable consequence.” Congressional resistance proved to be so formidable, though, that Gardener again appealed for help. A word from the president to Representatives Carter Glass (D–Va.) and J. Thomas Heflin (D–Ala.), in particular, she believed, would help stem the opposition. Wilson interceded on June 13, and Heflin yielded: “After reading your letter several times, and thinking over the situation, I have concluded to follow your suggestion.”⁴²

The House debated the issue for four months. During this time, the idea of making suffrage a war emergency measure emerged as a critical factor in the

³⁹ See, for example, Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers*, 5: 263.

⁴⁰ For a day-by-day account of the pickets, see Irwin, *The Story of the Woman’s Party*, pp. 193–291.

⁴¹ Newton D. Baker to Catt, 24 April 1917, Newton D. Baker Papers, DLC.

⁴² Gardener to Wilson, 10 May 1917; Wilson to Gardener, 14 May 1917; Wilson to Pou, 14 May 1917; Gardener to Wilson, 10 June 1917; Wilson to Heflin, 13 June, and Heflin to Wilson, 30 June 1917, all in WP, DLC.

pursuit of the amendment. By previous arrangement, Congress had agreed to forego any matter not considered by the administration as a war measure. Woman suffrage was not on the list. Gardener had told Wilson, who was responsible for drawing up the list, that NAWSA “refrained from forcing the issue” because of his overwhelming task of war administration.⁴³ The picketers, however, provoked an incident that compelled Wilson to think about including suffrage. On July 14, police arrested several picketers, including Alison Turnbull Hopkins, the wife of J.A.H. Hopkins, the chairman of the New Jersey Progressive party. Both recently had been White House dinner guests. Meeting with Mr. Hopkins on July 18, Wilson asked for advice. Hopkins said that the solution “lay in the immediate passage of the Susan B. Anthony amendment.” They then discussed the practicability of treating suffrage as a war emergency measure.⁴⁴ Two months later, on September 24, the House Woman Suffrage Committee was established; waving Wilson’s letter of May 14 overhead, Chairman Pou announced that the House would take up suffrage as soon as “all current emergency war measures have been disposed of.”⁴⁵ Thus, Wilson’s response to the pickets had greatly enhanced the prospects of the amendment.

Yet the Woman’s party seemed to draw Wilson and NAWSA into closer cooperation throughout the summer.⁴⁶ With the approach of the New York referendum in November, Catt directed Gardener to obtain Wilson’s aid in repairing the damage which she believed the picketers generally had done to the cause.⁴⁷ Eager for the state to set an example, Wilson twice conveyed strong endorsements to the people of New York shortly before the election. He enjoined them not to use the pickets as an excuse to reject suffrage and praised “the spirit and capacity and vision of the women of the United States.”⁴⁸ The amendment passed. To celebrate the victory, Wilson arranged a reception in December for Catt and Shaw, hosted by his daughter, Eleanor Wilson McAdoo.⁴⁹ Thus, by year’s end, Catt’s “Winning Plan” had yielded a bountiful harvest.

In the eighteen months between January 1918 and June 1919, the House and Senate voted on the federal amendment on five occasions. The roll calls in each instance were extremely close; a single congressman or senator could determine the outcome. For this reason Wilson’s role took on greater importance. During this period, he made scores of personal and written appeals to members of Congress and also petitioned the Senate three times on the matter. His lobbying efforts were necessary, if only to bring some of his own party members into line.

⁴³ Gardener to Wilson, 19 July 1917, WP, DLC.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, 19 and 20 July and 9 September 1917.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1917.

⁴⁶ Wilson Appointment Books, 19 July, 8 and 20 August 1917, WP, DLC.

⁴⁷ Catt to Gardener, 11 October 1917, and especially Catt to Alice Paul, 24 May 1917, copies in the Ray Stannard Baker Papers, DLC.

⁴⁸ Wilson to Catt, 13 October 1917, WP, DLC; NAWSA Press Release, copy in Ray Stannard Baker Papers, DLC; Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers*, 5: 109.

⁴⁹ *HWS*, 5: 515.

Many Southern Democrats, such as John Sharp Williams (D-Miss.), refused to support suffrage because they did not want to enfranchise black women.⁵⁰

Two days before the House vote on the amendment, Representative Jouett Shouse (D-Kan.), a member of the Democratic National Committee fearful that Republicans would seize upon the issue, implored Wilson to curb the opposition of recalcitrant Southern Democrats “for the sake of the party.”⁵¹ The next day, January 9, Wilson invited Representatives John E. Raker (D-Cal.) and Edward T. Taylor (D-Colo.) and a committee of ten of their colleagues to the White House. Nine of the congressmen had been present for the previous House vote in January 1915, and six of the nine had voted against the woman suffrage measure.⁵² Several of them had not yet decided how they would vote, and they entered the Oval Office looking for advice. In a surprise move, Wilson publicly acknowledged that he could “frankly and earnestly” advise them to vote for the federal amendment “as an act of right and justice.”⁵³ Suddenly, the suffrage amendment, which only days before had been viewed as having dim prospects for adoption, became a certainty in Washington circles. Some observers estimated as high as a fifteen-vote margin of safety.⁵⁴ When the votes were counted the following day, January 10, the amendment had passed, 274 to 136—exactly the necessary two-thirds majority. Significantly, all twelve of the Democratic congressmen who had talked to Wilson voted in favor of passage.⁵⁵ Several publications, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, editorialized that the victory was due to Wilson’s last-minute endorsement. At any rate, suffrage had reached a major turning point.⁵⁶

The bill then went on to the Senate where it faced stiffer opposition. In May, the Women’s Division of the Democratic National Committee submitted a list of six Democratic holdouts they believed the president might be able to persuade. He reported that he had spoken to each of them to no avail, but would try again.⁵⁷ To Senator Josiah O. Wolcott (D-Del.) he wrote: “I am writing this letter on my own typewriter (notwithstanding a lame hand). . . . I am deeply

⁵⁰ Williams made many attempts to divorce black women from voting rights. He suggested the amendment read: “The right of white citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex” (U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 2d sess., 19 March 1914, p. 5104).

⁵¹ Shouse to Wilson, 8 January 1918, WP, DLC.

⁵² See U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 3rd sess., 7–23 January 1915, pp. 1483–1485; Wilson Appointment Books, 9 January 1918, WP, DLC; *Washington Post*, 10 January 1918.

⁵³ Press Release, 9 January 1918, and Wilson to Baker, 9 January 1918, WP, DLC.

⁵⁴ For example, see the *New York Times*, 10 January 1918; the *New York World*, 10 January 1918; the *Washington Post*, 10 January 1918.

⁵⁵ U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 3rd sess., 3 December 1917 to 19 January 1918, p. 810.

⁵⁶ *New York Times*, 11 January 1918; *Washington Post*, 11 January 1918; *New York World*, 11 January 1918; *The Independent*, 2 February 1918; “Woman Suffrage Crosses Its Jordan,” *Literary Digest*, 19 January 1918, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Bass to Wilson, 20 May 1918; Wilson to Bass, 22 May 1918, WP, DLC.

anxious — the issues are so tremendous! They are so tremendous as to justify the ardent appeal for your support.”⁵⁸ To the intractable Senator Christie Benet (D–S.C.) he appealed four times in writing and at least once in person.⁵⁹ To Senator John K. Shields (D–Tenn.) Wilson wrote: “Not a little of the faith which the rest of the world will repose in our sincere adherence to democratic principles, will depend upon the action which the Senate takes in this now critically important matter.” When Shields continued to resist, Wilson pressed further, declaring that the amendment was an “essential psychological element in the conduct of the war.”⁶⁰ On 7 June 1918, he served notice on the entire Senate via a published letter to Catt:

The full and sincere democratic reconstruction of the world . . . will not have been completely or adequately attained until women are admitted to the suffrage. The services of women during this supreme crisis of the world’s history have been of the most signal usefulness and distinction. The war could not have been fought without them, nor its sacrifices endured. It is high time that some part of our debt of gratitude to them should be acknowledged and paid, and the only acknowledgement they ask is their admission to the suffrage. Can we justly refuse it?⁶¹

When, upon the death of Senator Ollie M. James (D–Ky.), Wilson asked Governor Augustus O. Stanley to appoint a prosuffrage replacement, the governor complied. On learning, shortly before the scheduled vote, that Senator Robert L. Owen (D–Okla.) was about to leave Washington on an extended trip, Wilson persuaded the prosuffrage senator to postpone his departure until after the roll call.⁶² Last but not least, Wilson continued to meet with Catt and various senators in order to coordinate their activities as the date of the vote drew near.⁶³

On Sunday, September 29, two days before the vote, Catt wrote to the president another letter in “sheer desperation.”⁶⁴ According to her tally they were still two votes short. She asked if he could make one more public statement to appear in the newspapers before the reckoning. Earlier that morning, Secretary

⁵⁸ Wilson to Wolcott, 9 May 1918, Wilson Collection, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J. (hereinafter WC, NJP).

⁵⁹ Wilson to Benet, 22 May 1918, copy in WC, NJP; also 18, 26, and 27 September 1918, WP, DLC; Wilson Appointment Books, 23 September 1918, WP, DLC.

⁶⁰ Wilson to Shields, 20 and 26 June 1918, WP, DLC.

⁶¹ Wilson to Catt, 7 June 1918, WP, DLC.

⁶² Wilson to Stanley, 30 August 1918 (Stanley appointed himself), and Wilson to Owen, 19 September 1918, WP, DLC.

⁶³ Wilson met with Senators John F. Shafroth (D–Colo.), Joseph E. Ransdell (D–La.), Joseph T. Robinson (D–Ark.), Henry F. Hollis (D–N.H.), supporters of the amendment, on June 24; with Catt and Bass on June 13 and September 16; with Governor Richard I. Manning (D–S.C.) on September 23, and with Senator Martin (D–Va.) on 25 September 1918 (Wilson Appointment Books, WP, DLC). He also wrote again, on September 27, to Senators Shields, Benet, Overman, Martin, and Wolcott. See also Wilson to Leon S. Haas of the Louisiana State Senate, 4 June 1918, and Wilson to Senator David Baird (D–N.J.), 31 July 1918, WP, DLC

⁶⁴ Catt to Wilson, 29 September 1918, WP, DLC.

McAdoo had invaded Wilson's customary Sunday retreat to make an equally "desperate" plea. He suggested that Wilson address the Senate the next day. When Wilson questioned whether the Senate might resent such unprecedented action, McAdoo pointed out that, even if the extraordinary step failed to convince two more senators, public opinion would be so stirred that additional pro-suffrage senators would be elected in November, thus insuring the amendment's passage by the new Congress.⁶⁵ McAdoo's idea was not without merit. Then too, Catt's letter was in hand. Her impassioned review of the splendid work of women during the war also contained the warning that "if the Amendment fails, it will take the heart out of thousands of women, and it will be no solace to tell them that 'it is coming.' It will arouse in them a just suspicion that men and women are not co-workers for world freedom, but that women are regarded as mere servitors with no interest or rightful voice in the outcome."⁶⁶

Wilson gave the Senate thirty minutes' notice before driving up to Capitol Hill on Monday, 30 September 1918. He was accompanied by all but one member of his cabinet.⁶⁷ In his short, eloquent speech, he restated his belief that the adoption of the amendment was "clearly necessary to the successful prosecution of the war and the successful realization of the objects for which this war is being fought." He concluded with a final request: "The executive tasks of this war rest upon me. I ask that you lighten them and place in my hands instruments, spiritual instruments, which I do not possess, which I sorely need, and which I have daily to apologize for not being able to employ."⁶⁸

For all his effort, Wilson was barely out of the Senate chamber when Senator Oscar W. Underwood (D-Ala.) rose to speak against the amendment. The Senate rejected woman suffrage the next day, in spite of Wilson, 62 to 34—two votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority.⁶⁹

THE FINAL VOTE

The Armistice, signed on 11 November 1918, brought an end to the world war. From that point on, Wilson's time was almost entirely occupied with world politics. Before leaving the country for the Paris Peace Conference, however, at Catt's behest he again urged Congress to pass the suffrage amendment in his Annual Message on December 2.⁷⁰ The new Sixty-sixth Congress would not take up the matter until the following spring. By May, suffrage forces expected the House to repass the amendment overwhelmingly; in the Senate, where the roll call was scheduled for June 4, they were still one vote short.⁷¹ The key to vic-

⁶⁵ William Gibbs McAdoo, *Crowded Years* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton, 1931), pp. 496–98.

⁶⁶ Catt to Wilson, 29 September 1918, WP, DLC.

⁶⁷ Secretary of State Robert Lansing (and his wife) opposed woman suffrage.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, 1 October 1918; Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers*, 5: 264–67.

⁶⁹ Peck, *Catt*, p. 297.

⁷⁰ Catt to Wilson, 26 November 1918; Wilson's Annual Message, 2 December 1918, WP, DLC.

⁷¹ For an analysis of this Congress, see Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, pp. 319–28.

tory, in Alice Paul's judgment, lay in the hands of three newly elected and as yet uncommitted senators. One of them was William J. Harris (D-Ga.), a personal friend of Wilson's. Late in April, Paul had sent her congressional liaison to discuss with prosuffrage Democrats, including Tumulty (Wilson's secretary), the possibility of getting the president to use his influence with Harris, who was then vacationing in Italy.⁷² Tumulty cabled Wilson about the urgency of the situation on May 2. Wilson thereupon summoned the senator, who arrived in Paris on May 6. After conferring with Wilson, Harris immediately sent word that he would return to the United States and cast the decisive vote in favor of woman suffrage. Six days later, with the outcome now seemingly assured, a second "uncommitted" senator, Henry W. Keyes (R-N.H.), announced that he would also vote in the affirmative.⁷³ On May 20, Wilson cabled another message to Congress: "Through out all the world this long delayed extension of suffrage is looked for. I, for one, covet for our country the distinction of being among the first to act in this great reform."⁷⁴ One final senator, Frederick Hale (R-Maine), shifted his vote to the prosuffrage column, and on June 4, with little debate, the Senate passed the amendment, 56 to 25. Speaker Frederick H. Gillett (R-Mass.) and Vice-President Thomas R. Marshall signed the joint resolution later that afternoon.⁷⁵

During the fifteen months of work for ratification that followed, Wilson was preoccupied with international treaty negotiations, debates with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a strenuous western campaign on behalf of the League of Nations—all of which helped to bring about his physical breakdown. He suffered a stroke on 2 October 1919, which left his left side paralyzed. While convalescing, Wilson sent messages to the legislatures of Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Louisiana, Delaware, and North Carolina urging them to ratify the amendment, as well as personal notes to all the governors of all the southern states.⁷⁶

By the summer of 1920, the ratification process had stalled. In June, the amendment was one state short of the required thirty-six. The Tennessee legislature, which was out of session, had not responded to the appeals of the Woman's party and NAWSA for reconvention. "Our only hope lies in Washington," wired a Catt lieutenant. "In Tennessee all swear by Woodrow Wilson. If he will but speak, Tennessee must yield." Wilson telegraphed Governor Albert H. Roberts, imploring him to call a special session of the legislatures. His influence prevailed.⁷⁷ The legislature met and engaged in heated debate for

⁷² Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party*, pp. 415–16.

⁷³ Tumulty to Wilson, 2 May 1919; Cary T. Grayson to Tumulty, 5 May 1919; Wilson to Tumulty, 6 May 1919, Joseph P. Tumulty Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. See also *New York Times*, 10 and 16 May 1919.

⁷⁴ Baker and Dodd, *Public Papers*, 5: 494.

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, 23 May and 5 June 1919.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, 26 February, 3 March, 19 May, and 3, 24, and 26 June 1920.

⁷⁷ Wilson to Roberts, 24 June and 19 August and Roberts to Wilson, 25 June and 19 August 1920, WP, DLC; see also, *HWS*, 6: 617–25.

several days. On August 18, by one vote, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Susan B. Anthony amendment. On 26 August 1920, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby signed the proclamation alone in his office, bringing to an end the historic crusade which had begun nearly 100 years before.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Although women suffragists fully realized the importance of presidential support for their movement, historians have limited their assessment of Wilson's role primarily to his early resistance to suffrage. In an attempt to broaden and reevaluate that historical interpretation, this article has focused on two specific questions that together provide a new perspective on the politics of the Nineteenth Amendment.

First, there is the question of Wilson's motivation. Why did he so vigorously promote the amendment after opposing it for so long? Wilson was, in most cases, an astute politician. In both New Jersey and Washington, he demonstrated a great capacity to read his constituency and articulate the issues accordingly. In the New Jersey referendum of 1915, he voted for suffrage because he could not reasonably have done otherwise. Facing a tough reelection campaign in 1916, if he indeed did swing over to the federal amendment at that point—and it is not at all clear that he did—it was surely in keeping with his second burst of progressivism, designed in part to woo the Roosevelt loyalists and others over to the Democratic party. Then too, his uncompromising speech before the Senate in September 1918, though obviously an act of sincerity, nevertheless was aimed at obstinate Democrats as the mid-term elections loomed ahead.

But this is an incomplete explanation. It does not account for his numerous efforts at other times. Like most politicians, Wilson was capable of transforming political necessity into personal advocacy. Although in 1913 he was clearly encumbered by paternalistic proscriptions regarding the role of women in society, the women of the country, through a gradual process of education and political pressure, were able to disabuse him of at least some of those encumbrances. After 1916, he habitually described the suffrage amendment as “a very wise act of public policy and also an act of fairness,” and sometimes lamented to suffrage delegations that there were some men who “illustrated the fact that they could not learn.”⁷⁹ It should also be noted that throughout his career—from the Graduate College controversy at Princeton to the crusade for the League of Nations—Wilson, an unreconstructed, romantic moralizer, had a predilection to work for particular measures, once he had become convinced of their desirability, with the zeal of a missionary. To him, woman suffrage was not simply a measure to establish equal voting rights; once the United States entered the war

⁷⁸ *New York Times*, 19 and 27 August 1920.

⁷⁹ Wilson to Pou, 14 May 1917; remarks to suffragists, 3 October 1918, WP, DLC.

it became an issue upon which nothing less than “the full and sincere democratic reconstruction of the world” depended. Practically all of his speeches and writings on suffrage, especially after April 1917, clearly suggest the presence of such Wilsonian fervor. The question of motivation, thus, has a tandem answer, as Wilson himself once proposed, commending the amendment to the governor of Alabama in 1919: “My judgment is based on the highest considerations of both justice and expediency.”⁸⁰

Second, did Wilson’s efforts make a difference? Both the National Woman’s party and NAWSA understood well the politics of getting the amendment passed. Both organizations were prepossessed with obtaining his support as quickly as possible, although each employed widely divergent tactics in so doing. Once converted to federal suffragism, Wilson’s exertions were manifold. From 1914 through 1920, he held some fifty interviews with various suffrage delegations and consulted with members of Congress at least eighty times, often on his own initiative. In addition to addressing the Senate on three occasions, he urged at least fifteen state legislatures to take action on state amendments. Letters to senators and congressmen, too numerous to cite in their entirety, number over 100. And perhaps most importantly, he secured the decisive votes in the House in 1918, the decisive vote in the Senate in 1919, and the decisive state vote during the ratification process in 1920.⁸¹

Wilson was an active supporter of woman suffrage for a little over three years. The Constitution was changed because of the work of groups such as NAWSA and the Woman’s party, as well as the work of thousands of women over the span of more than two generations. Yet it cannot be denied that Wilson’s role was pivotal. As Alice Paul told reporters shortly after his first public endorsement of the federal amendment in January 1918, “It is difficult to express our gratification at the President’s stand. We knew that it, and perhaps it alone, would ensure our success. It means to us only one thing—victory.”^{82*}

⁸⁰ Wilson to Thomas E. Kilby, 12 July 1919, Kilby Official Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Ala., copy in WC, NJP.

⁸¹ For a further assessment of Wilson, see Catt to Josephus Daniels, 28 February 1924, Josephus Daniels Papers, DLC; Gardener to Baker, 14 April 1925, Ray Stannard Baker Papers, DLC; Gardener to Baker, 11 June 1925, copy in the Edith Bolling Wilson Papers, DLC; and Maud Wood Park to Inez Haynes Irwin, memorandum (c. 1920), NAWSA Papers, DLC.

⁸² *New York Times*, 10 January 1918.

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