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The Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Referendum of 1915

Robert S. Grandfield

On Tuesday, November 2, 1915 there was a general election in Massachusetts that included contests for governor, lieutenant governor, and many other statewide elected offices. Also included were four referendum questions, one of which dealt with woman suffrage. The question was whether to amend the state constitution by striking the word "male" from the qualifications of voters.¹ This question was the cause of a fierce political battle that had started over fifty years earlier and did not end until 1919, when Massachusetts became the eighth state to ratify the 19th amendment to the United States Constitution, granting women the right to vote in all elections.

The convention of feminists at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 was the beginning of the movement for woman suffrage. The strategy of the suffragists was to place the issue before male voters in statewide referendums. From 1870 to 1910 there were 480 campaigns in 33 states to get the issue of woman suffrage submitted to the voters; only 17 resulted in actual votes.² Of the seventeen referenda, only four were successful. Women were given the vote in Wyoming in 1890, Colorado in 1893, and Idaho and Utah in 1896.³ In order to get a referendum before the voters, suffragists had to petition the state legislature to submit the question to the voters.

In 1895 in Massachusetts there was a "mock referendum" on the question of woman suffrage.⁴ The referendum was not legally binding but was authorized by the state legislature to indicate popular (male) preference. A special ballot was included for those women who had been allowed since 1879 to vote for local school committees, but ballots were cast by only 23,000 of the more than 600,000 women in that category. The measure was soundly defeated.⁵ This meaningless "fake referendum" had no effect except to spur the work of the anti-suffrage forces within the state.⁶

Every year from 1896 until 1915 the Massachusetts Legislature granted hearings to women asking for the franchise; finally in 1914 a resolution to

WOMEN OF MASSACHUSETTS

These **BILLS** for the Welfare of Women and Children **WERE DEFEATED** by YOUR LEGISLATURE at Its Last Session

1. To prohibit men from taking girls to a hotel and registering as man and wife. This Bill was recommended by the White Slave Commission. **DEFEATED.**
2. To protect young girls, by raising the age of consent from sixteen to eighteen. **DEFEATED.**
3. To require physicians to report cases of abuse of girls under sixteen. **DEFEATED.**
4. To provide a cottage for inebriate women similiar to hospital provision for men. Now inebriate women are sent to jail or a reformatory. (A new barn for the men's inebriate hospital was granted.) **DEFEATED.**
5. To give women the right to vote on local liquor license. **DEFEATED.**
6. To permit women to serve on Health Boards. This Bill was favored by the Committee on Public Health. **DEFEATED.**
7. To aid women in industry by granting the four recommendations proposed by the Minimum Wage Commission. **DEFEATED.**
8. To authorize the Chief of Police to order fire drills in a factory where necessary for the safety of the workers. **DEFEATED.**
9. To notify women school voters when their names are dropped from the registered list, as men are notified. **DEFEATED.**
10. To give women cleaners in public buildings the rate of wages prevailing in private employ. Men now receive the same rate in public as in private employ. **DEFEATED.**
11. To give working women an eight-hour day. (The only states where women have an eight-hour day are suffrage states.) **DEFEATED.**
12. To increase from 24 to 36 the number of Factory Inspectors for the 40 000 places of employment where 247,041 women and children work. **DEFEATED.**

Good Laws Mean Welfare, Happiness, Righteousness.
Bad Laws Mean Sickness, Misery, Crime.

Legislators Listen to the Voters.
Women Must Become Voters

MASSACHUSETTS WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION, 55 Boston Street, Boston

Pro-suffrage handbill, from the Sophia Smith Collection
(Women's History Archive), Smith College.

authorize a referendum passed 168 to 39 in the House of Representatives and 34 to 2 in the Senate.⁷ This represented a major step for the suffragists—it was the first time the resolution had received the required two-thirds vote. The measure passed again in 1915 by a similar count and so was placed on the ballot in November.⁸

The political battle between the “pro” and “anti” suffragists was a highly pitched and emotional one that had its start well before 1915. Massachusetts was the birthplace of such suffrage leaders as Susan B. Anthony and the home of many liberal and progressive causes. There was a national convention of feminists in Worcester in 1850, and the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1870.⁹ Yet the state was also the home of the oldest and most influential anti-suffrage organization in the country, the Massachusetts Association Opposed To The Further Extension of Suffrage To Women (MAOFESW), founded in 1896. Few of the women members in this organization did any active work but they were connected through family and marriage with some of the richest, most powerful, and best organized groups of men in the state. Consequently their influence was out of proportion to their numbers.¹⁰

The main argument of the anti-suffragists was that suffrage would place an additional and unbearable burden on women whose natural place was in the home!¹¹ It was asserted that women did not need voting rights because the men adequately represented them. There was a huge array of literature against suffrage appealing to both men and women. Using many additional arguments they claimed that woman suffrage would upset the balance of society, put men out of work, take women away from the home, and put an end to social reform.

A pamphlet published in October 1912 by the MAOFESW, entitled *Opinions of Eminent Persons Against Women Suffrage*, illustrates some of the arguments used. Included in the booklet were excerpts from talks by Daniel Webster, President LeBaron R. Briggs of Radcliffe College, Ida M. Tarbell, and Secretary of State Elihu Root. The main focus of the pamphlet was that involvement in politics would downgrade women and place too great a burden on them, while preventing them from carrying out their main responsibility of educating the young in the home.¹² Another pamphlet, published in 1913 by the Massachusetts Anti-Suffrage movement was entitled *Eminent Catholic Prelates Oppose Woman Suffrage*.¹³ In it were strongly worded statements by five American archbishops who were against woman suffrage. Still another handbill issued by the Woman's Anti-Suffrage Association of Massachusetts was entitled *Women Suffrage: A Menace To Social Reform*, written by Margaret C. Robinson. It argued that woman suffrage would destroy the non-partisan position of women and the influence they had for bringing about improvement and social change.¹⁴

The “antis” appealed on every level — political, social, and religious. One handbill warned husbands to protect their wives and children from harm and neglect — defeating woman suffrage would “save” mothers from the exposure to the criminal element that resulted from jury duty. The “anti” literature was published by a variety of committees, associations, and leagues. It is difficult to verify the actual existence of all these groups. In May 1912 the Man’s Anti-Suffrage Association was organized and its executive committee consisted of ten lawyers, one cotton broker, one technology professor the treasurer of Harvard University, and the treasurer of the Copley Society.¹⁵ In 1914 the MAOFESW claimed members in 387 cities and towns across the state.¹⁶ Although their numbers may not have been great, it appears that the “antis” were well-financed and well-organized. They even mailed out a pamphlet to every voter in the state just before the referendum, at a cost of several thousand dollars.

The financial backing for the “antis” campaign in the 1915 referendum was not entirely from women who were convinced that suffrage would mean disaster for females. Under the Corrupt Practices Act, a committee of more than five people had to be formed to allocate the funds of any group which spent over twenty dollars to support or defeat a constitutional amendment; financial records had to be filed with the state. After the resounding defeat of the suffrage referendum the pro-suffragist *Women’s Journal* investigated the election expense accounts of the “antis” filed with the Massachusetts Secretary of State. Approximately eighty percent of the contributions of the “antis” were from men. One contribution of \$31,695 was from 135 men, an average of about \$235 each.¹⁷ The anti-suffragists’ financial support came primarily from “bankers, brokers and directors of the monied section of Boston.”¹⁸

The liquor interests in Massachusetts were also against woman suffrage and lent the “anti” cause some financial and political assistance. It was in their interest to fight against woman suffrage because it was felt that women would support temperance. Aside from the Progressives the Prohibition party was the only other party to endorse the suffrage amendment in the election.¹⁹ The *Springfield Republican* of October 23, 1915 reported that local liquor interests had been busy fighting suffrage using skilled politicians in a low-key campaign.²⁰ On election day pink slips with the saying “Good for 2 drinks if woman suffrage is defeated” were distributed at bars and saloons across the state.²¹ Although the liquor interests were not as politically vocal as some of the other “anti” groups, they nonetheless were probably just as effective in convincing male voters to oppose woman suffrage.



Pro-suffrage handbill, from the Sophia Smith Collection
(Women's History Archive), Smith College.

The pro-suffrage forces had been at work in Massachusetts since 1870 with the founding of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA). By 1910 it was a small but vital political force. The Woman Suffrage Party was formed in that year with a membership of approximately 25,000; by 1915 it claimed a membership of about 250,000²²Efforts were made to reach labor unions and other organizations which had contact with the "man in the street," many of whom were politically ignorant of the cause of woman suffrage. Two other important organizations that promoted the cause were the College Equal Suffrage League (CESL), made up of college students and alumni across the state, and the Boston Equal Suffrage Association For Good Government (BESAGG);²³ There were numerous other smaller but equally important groups of men and women who actively worked in support of the 1915 referendum.

The basic thrust of the pro-suffrage argument was equality and equal treatment. A handbill put out by the MWSA listed twelve reasons why women should vote, and among them was the argument that those who obey the laws should help make them and that the laws affected women as much as men.²⁴ It was also argued that as women were taxed they should be allowed to vote. In addition, the handbill declared that only about 36,000 women in the state were against suffrage, and that the wishes of a few should not govern the majority.²⁵ In 1914-15 the MWSA led by Mrs. Teresa Crowley conducted a statewide canvass of registered voters in the state and averaged 1500 calls per week. Using MWSA workers as well as local volunteers the group estimated they reached between one-half and two-thirds of the voters and they got more than 100,000 to sign pledge cards and another 50,000 to express support for woman suffrage.²⁶

AN APPEAL TO MEN

You should VOTE AGAINST WOMAN SUFFRAGE
for ten thousand reasons.

We mention but SIX.

As women, WE DO NOT WANT the strife, bitterness, falsification and publicity which accompany political campaigns.

Our political interests ARE NOT SUFFERING at the hands of our fathers, husbands and brothers.

We have woman's greatest right—to be free from the political medley. We do not want to lose this freedom.

We ASK THE MEN OF MASSACHUSETTS TO DEFEND US and vote NO on suffrage.

You are not SORRY now, but if women are given the ballot you may REGRET it, when it's too late.

Put a cross before the word "NO" on November 2nd, and win our gratitude.

Vote NO Yes No Nov. 2.

TELL YOUR FRIENDS TO VOTE NO.

Massachusetts Woman's Anti-Suffrage Association.

MRS. JAMES M. CODMAN, President.

MRS. C. P. STRONG, Secretary.

Anti-suffrage handbill, from the Sophia Smith Collection
(Women's History Archive), Smith College.

Most of the pro-suffrage literature was published by the MWSA and the CESL. For every argument put forth by the "antis" there was almost always a rebuttal by the "pro" forces. An interesting note is that although neither side enlisted the support of organized labor, the literature of both groups was union printed and bore union markings. The bulk of the pro-suffrage financial support came from proceeds of fairs, sales, entertainment and the like. About four-fifths of the personal contributions were from women, with an average donation of \$17.²⁷

The pro-suffragists held open-air meetings and rallies, which were seen as the best method of getting the issue before an often uninformed public. In 1909 four women took a "trolley tour" across the state from Springfield to Boston.²⁸ The slogan of the Massachusetts movement was "Votes For Women," and automobiles, trollies and trains filled with suffragists often stopped to conduct an open-air rally in the busiest part of town. Leaflets and buttons were passed out, petitions circulated, and questions answered.²⁹ This type of activity proved very successful and it was reported that many converts were won. Other tactics used were "voiceless speeches" (a series of placards in storefront windows), pro-suffrage sections in parades, as well as literature distributed at baseball games and other public events. Press releases were continually supplied to newspapers across the state and most journals were willing to publish articles on woman suffrage.³⁰ Throughout the two years preceding the 1915 referendum, the MWSA kept five salaried speakers in the field and supplemented their efforts with countless volunteers. By the time of the November election there were about 200 local leagues and committees across the state.³¹ The pro-suffragists were not as well financed as the "antis" but they had an extensive network of grass-roots organizations which brought the issue before the voters of Massachusetts.

As the November election neared, the intensity of the fight increased. There were pro-suffrage parades in October in both Boston and Springfield. The Springfield parade had about 1000 marchers including female students from Mount Holyoke College in caps and gowns, men's groups, nurses, and schoolteachers. The suffragists' color was yellow — the marchers carried yellow banners and flowers. There was some disruption by the "reds," anti-suffragists who sold flowers and carried banners saying "Vote No." There were no physical confrontations, however.³² The Great Woman Suffrage "Victory" parade in Boston on Saturday October 16, 1915 had more than 10,000 women marchers. Both sides were well represented, with "antis" wearing red roses and the suffragists yellow camelias.³³ The morning of the parade some homes in the Back Bay section of Boston that were draped with anti-suffrage bunting and banners had the decorations torn off by unknown persons. This incident caused a fair amount of controversy, and the headlines of the *Boston Globe* that evening read "Antis Are Indignant At The Attack On Back Bay Homes."³⁴

*Miss Virginia Tanner As
Victory at Head of Parade*



From *Springfield Union*, October 24, 1915.

Editorial support and newspaper coverage of the upcoming referendum was varied. The *Springfield Republican* printed a few editorials in favor of woman suffrage while the *Boston Globe* did not take a stand on the issue.³⁵ The evening *Globe* of October 20 ran the headline "Anti-Suffrage Victory Grows" and carried a front page story on the expected defeat of the amendment. The article mentioned the fact that even though President Woodrow Wilson was for suffrage, his fiancée, Mrs. Norman Galt, opposed it.³⁶ The *Valley Echo*, a weekly newspaper serving the greater Westfield area, also printed an editorial stating that in its opinion "equal suffrage is not good for Massachusetts and at present a large majority of women do not want the ballot."³⁷ The paper, however, did mention suffrage-related activities in the three weeks preceding the referendum and editorialized that it had given freely of its space to those who hold contrary opinions.³⁸

On Monday November 1, 1915 the *Springfield Republican* and both editions of the *Boston Globe* carried front page advertisements by the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association and the Women's Anti-Suffrage Committee. Each side claimed that the majority of women in the state held their respective position. Newspaper forecasts of the following day's election and the referendum predicted a heavy turnout because of the suffrage amendment but predicted that it would probably be defeated while representatives from both sides predicted victory.³⁹

On election day, November 2, 1915, the suffragists had about 8000 women at the polls, holding "Votes For Women" signs and banners. These women were treated with respect by men voters, and their only harassment came from schoolchildren who yelled "suffragets" at them.⁴⁰ The weather on election day was fair and the voter turnout was fairly heavy.

The proposed amendment to give women the right to vote in Massachusetts was defeated by a vote of 294,953 to 163,351, almost a two to one margin.⁴¹ The total number of votes cast was the largest to that date in a referendum in Massachusetts.⁴² The "antis" showed surprising strength in the cities, where the suffragists had concentrated their campaigns, as well as in rural areas. The only city or town in the state to vote in favor of suffrage was Tewksbury, with a vote of 149 to 148.⁴³ The vote throughout the state was uniform with the margin of defeat about the same everywhere.⁴⁴

REFERENDUM VOTE ⁴⁵

Cities/Towns	For	Against
Boston	31,479	53,654
Springfield	4967	7448
Westfield	987	1392
West Springfield	472	814
Holyoke	2378	4297
Northampton	789	2197
Amherst	321	706
County	For	Against
Hampden	11,135	18,397
Hampshire	2707	6784
Franklin	2188	4127
Berkshire	5832	10,498

Despite the rather large margin of defeat the suffragists were not disappointed. Although the “antis” gloated over their victory the attitude among the defeated was one of postponement. Mrs. Gertrude Leonard, chairperson of the executive council of the MWSA, said “the returns indicate a defeat for the suffrage amendment by two to one. This means one out of every three men in the state believes in equal suffrage. We now only have to convince one half as many men to complete our majority.”⁴⁶ The November 3, 1915 issue of the *Springfield Republican* carried an editorial expressing the thought that even it was defeated, woman suffrage was inevitable; the *Boston Globe* expressed similar sentiments.⁴⁷ The *Valley Echo* noted that as a rule a considerable proportion of voters in the western part of the state did not bother to vote; this was the case with suffrage referendum.⁴⁸

There were several reasons for the defeat of the woman suffrage amendment in the referendum of 1915. The anti-suffrage movement had a long tradition in Massachusetts and was well financed and organized. According to one contemporary analysis,

The population of the state had changed since the early days when Massachusetts had been a starting point of liberal movements. Progressive citizens had been leaving and going westward and in turn their places were filled with waves of immigrants from Europe. These newcomers tended to be ignorant and filled with Old World

ideas as to the role and subjection of women. The religious question also entered in and although the Catholic Church took no official stand on the issue many Catholics believed that women suffrage would be a step towards socialism, which the Catholic Church opposed. Many Protestants felt that the Catholic women's vote would be unduly influenced by priests.⁴⁹

The suffrage amendment was almost doomed to failure. Yet inspite of all this the woman suffrage movement in Massachusetts was ultimately successful in achieving its goal.

When the federal suffrage amendment was passed in 1919 the pro-suffrage movement quickly mobilized for the ratification drive. Through their speedy efforts Massachusetts became the eighth state to ratify the nineteenth amendment giving women the vote nationwide. Its final ratification in 1920 was a mere five years after the suffrage amendment had been defeated in Massachusetts and it was a tribute to the women who fought for its passage. By refusing to be defeated and never losing hope the proponents of woman suffrage in Massachusetts were able to realize their goal only a few years after it had suffered a political and social setback at the hands of a minority of influential people who financed the opposition to suffrage.⁵⁰

NOTES

1. *Valley Echo*, October 22, 1915, p. 9 col. 6.
2. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 228.
3. Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, p. 228.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
7. Ida Husted Harper, in *Journal of Women's Suffrage*, VI (New York 1922) p. 290.
8. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 299.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
11. Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, p. 306.
12. *Opinions of Eminent Persons Against Women Suffrage*, published by the Massachusetts Association Opposed To The Further Extension Of Suffrage To Women, (October 1912), in Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library.
13. *Eminent Prelates Oppose Woman Suffrage*, published by the Massachusetts Anti-Suffrage Committee, in Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library.
14. Margaret C. Robinson, *Woman Suffrage A Menace To Social Reform*, published by the Massachusetts Women's Anti-Suffrage Association, in Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library.
15. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 288.

16. Untitled handbill published by the Massachusetts Association Opposed To The Further Extension of Suffrage To Women, in Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library.
17. *Women's Journal*, XLVII (January 15, 1916), p. 17.
18. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 289.
19. *Springfield Republican*, November 2, 1915 p. 1 col. 2.
20. *Springfield Republican*, October 23, 1915 p. 2 col. 3.
21. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 289.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
23. Sharon Hartman Strom, "Leadership and Tactics in the American Woman Suffrage Movement: A New Perspective From Massachusetts," *Journal of American History*, LXII (September 1975), p. 300.
24. *Twelve Reasons Why Women Should Vote*, published by the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association, in Sophia Smith Collection of the Smith College Library.
25. *Springfield Republican*, November 1, 1915 p. 9 col. 2.
26. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 284.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
28. Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, p. 262.
29. Strom, "Leadership and Tactics. . ." in *Journal of American History*, XLVII, 309.
30. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 285.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
32. *Springfield Republican*, October 24, 1915 p. 1 col. 6-7.
33. *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1915 evening edition p. 1.
34. *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1915 evening edition p. 1.
35. *Springfield Republican*, November 1, 1915 p. 8 col. 2 and October 23, 1915 p. 12 col. 2.
36. *Boston Globe*, October 20, 1915 p. 1.
37. *Valley Echo*, October 29, 1915 p. 6 col. 2.
38. *Valley Echo*, October 15, 1915, October 22, 1915, and October 29, 1915.
39. *Boston Globe*, November 1, 1915 p. 1 and *Springfield Republican*, November 1, 1915 p. 1.
40. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 p. 3 col. 3.
41. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 p. 1.
42. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 289.
43. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 p. 2 col. 5.
44. *Boston Globe*, November 4, 1915 p. 1 col. 4.
45. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 pp. 2-6.
46. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 p. 1.
47. *Springfield Republican*, November 3, 1915 p. 10 col. 3 and *Boston Globe*, November 3, 1915 p. 1.
48. *Valley Echo*, November 5, 1915 p. 5 col. 2.
49. Harper, *JWS*, VI, 289.
50. Strom, "Leadership and Tactics. . ." in *Journal of American History*, XLVII, 315.