Jane Addams and the Suffrage Movement

By Louise W. Knight, author of Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy, 2005.

Living from 1860 to 1935, Jane Addams is best known as the co-founder of the first settlement house in the United States, Hull House in Chicago. She was also the author of many articles and eleven books, and one of the nation’s most popular public speakers. The issues she worked on included a wide range of social reforms: child labor, the eight-hour day, strike mediation, women’s suffrage, sex trafficking, juvenile justice, adult education, immigrant rights, civil rights, freedom of speech, the death penalty, and peace. But she did not start out supporting all of these issues and, especially with women’s suffrage, Addams’ advocacy developed gradually over time.

Addams’ father, John Huy Addams, an Illinois state senator, heard Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Livermore make the case for married women’s property legislation in 1869 at a public gathering in Springfield, Illinois. Sympathetic to the legislation, he reported back to his family that he was less impressed with Stanton’s speech than with Livermore’s. (Stanton was in Illinois for the state’s first woman suffrage convention in Chicago where the Illinois Woman Suffrage Association was founded. In college, Jane Addams believed in the cause of woman’s suffrage but she later explained that this was less out of her own conviction than because it was her father’s view. Throughout her twenties and part of her thirties, Jane Addams, though considering herself a suffragist, took no interest in the cause of women voting.

In her early 30s, Addams began to become political. She took her first, reluctant step in 1893, when friends persuaded her to join them to lobby for proposed child labor legislation moving through in the Illinois legislature. Her experiences at Hull House were pushing her to do it. She knew many children who worked 10 and 12-hour days. She wanted an effective law that would compel them to be in school. And then there was the influence of newly arrived Hull House resident Florence Kelley. Kelley had been lobbying state legislatures for years back East and now, in Illinois, was deeply involved in pushing for the new child labor legislation. Under these pressures, Addams went to Springfield with her friends, and lobbied. And the bill became law. The experience showed her that politics could sometimes accomplish real change.

In 1895, Addams watched Florence Kelley exercise political power in an aldermanic campaign in the Nineteenth Ward. Though the reform candidate they supported lost by a wide margin, Addams and Kelley reflected afterward on what lessons they had learned. One was that defeating any candidate was difficult if nonvoters were in charge of his opposition. Another lesson was that the reform candidate might have won if the women of the ward had been able to vote. Something clicked for Addams. She saw that to achieve her present goal – to clean up city politics -- working class women in the ward and around the city needed the vote and women leading political reforms needed the vote to have any credibility with the voters, i.e., with men.
Jane Addams gave her first suffrage speech in 1897. The occasion was a reception that the Massachusetts Women’s Suffrage Association had organized in her honor in Boston. When its leaders heard she would be in the city to give a lecture, they were eager to take advantage of her visit. By this time Addams was a prominent national figure, both because Hull House was so famous and successful, and because of her own lecturing around the country and her writings in national publications. Addams spoke only briefly at the reception, but what she said was freighted with the personal meaning. Clearly thinking of herself, she said that women had civic duties that could not be cast off, but that it was hard for women to know they had these duties if they did not put them into practice. She said, “If we do not act on our civic duties, they tend to slip away and become intangible.” Addams’s appearance at the reception, though an important moment in her path to engagement with the suffrage cause.

In 1906 she finally embraced the suffrage movement. Why the change? Neither Addams nor Kelley was willing to become active in the movement until the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) included working women in its efforts. This was agreed to in 1905 and Florence Kelly joined the board the same year. The next year, 1906, Addams agreed to attend the NAWSA annual meeting for the first time.

Beginning that year, Addams took to the lecture circuit to speak for woman’s suffrage. For the next seven years, although she never stopped pushing for other reforms, Jane Addams put her heart and soul into winning women the vote. She travelled thousands of miles, from California to New York State and addressed every sort of audience – clubs, labor unions, colleges, reform conferences, teachers’ meetings, churches and large public gatherings. Her speeches and essays on suffrage circulated widely, in pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, including the Ladies Home Journal, and in conference proceedings. She even appeared in a commercially-made film, a melodrama, Votes for Women.

NAWSA leaders were thrilled to finally have Addams working for suffrage and in 1911, she was named to its board, elected a vice president, and began attending monthly meetings in New York City when she could. The Women’s Trade Union League, of which Addams was a cofounder, added suffrage to its position platform and was now closely cooperating with NAWSA. And, NAWSA had added equal pay for equal work and industrial safety to its platform.

Publicity was a big part of NAWSA’s work. One of Addams’ speeches, “Why Women Should Vote,” was published in the Ladies Home Journal in 1911 and was widely circulated as a NAWSA pamphlet. Also in 1911, the Illinois Woman Equal Suffrage Association organized a public campaign to get a state suffrage bill into law. It rented a special train to bring hundreds of women, Addams among them, from forty women’s organizations - including trade unions - from Chicago to Springfield. She and others gave speeches out the back of the train at whistle-stops along the way to crowds of mostly men, and lobbied legislators once they arrived at the capital. The suffrage bill passed the Illinois Senate but was defeated in the House.
1912 was a presidential election year, which then, as now, meant a large turnout of voters at the polls, and NAWSA and its affiliated state chapters, working hard, had gotten suffrage on the ballot in six states. The plan was to send pro-suffrage speakers to those states ahead of the November elections. Addams was assigned to speak to four Midwestern states. She was also invited to be an at-large member of the Illinois delegation to the Progressive Party convention.

She accepted for two reasons. First, she supported the Progressive Party platform, which contained resolutions drawn from the recommendations of a committee of social workers she had helped to organize. Equally important, she later explained, she accepted because she thought the Progressive Party offered the country the best way to achieve a federal suffrage amendment. At the convention she lobbied the platform committee but the committee, obeying candidate Theodore Roosevelt’s instructions, retained its endorsement of woman suffrage that omitted how it would be achieved. Because the party platform did not endorse a federal amendment, it was implicitly endorsing the state by state strategy that was providing so slow and difficult.

By early August all three party conventions had completed their work. While neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party had endorsed suffrage, they both made new energetic efforts to organize women to support their candidates by marching and volunteering and, in states where they could, voting. The two old parties created or strengthened their women’s affiliate organizations, although women could still not serve in the party proper. In the new Progressive Party, the situation for women was groundbreaking. Roosevelt instructed the party to give women full and equal standing in the party structure. Jane Addams was named a member of the Cook County and Illinois Progressive committees and was one of four women named to the National Progressive Committee.

By early September of 1912, when the campaign officially began, Addams was on the road. As a campaigner for Roosevelt, she expanded the number of states she would visit from four to twelve. Day after day she endorsed the Progressive Party platform, Roosevelt for president, and women’s suffrage. Huge crowds, mostly male, turned out to hear her speak. She wrote her sister afterward, “I had the best chance to talk woman suffrage that I ever had in my life. I talked it to vast audiences of men. They would not have come to a suffrage meeting or a social reform meeting but they would come to a political meeting, and there they had it driven into them night after night and day after day.”

Jane Addams’s plunge into partisan politics shocked many. Women were supposed to be nonpartisan and remain above the fray. That had long been the position of the NAWSA, which was nonpartisan. The former chair of the association’s press committee, Ida Husted Harper, who had close ties to the Democratic Party and was opposed to Roosevelt’s candidacy, sent a sharply critical letter to the editor in the New York Times. She dismissed the significance of the Progressive party suffrage plank, criticized Addams for “violating the unbroken tradition that the members of the NAWSA be absolutely nonpartisan,” and called for Addams to resign as vice president. In response, Addams
issued a statement saying that while the NAWSA was nonpartisan, its individual members were free to be as partisan as they liked. Addams was also criticized for her partisanship by some prominent men. They were offended, or so they claimed, that an unmarried woman should be promoted as an admirable figure to the public. Addams was undeterred by the criticism she received and continued to work for the party.

By Election Day, Addams was back in Chicago. Unable to cast a vote, she watched men troop to the polls as she awaited returns at a friend’s house, where she had collapsed in exhaustion. The results were, in a way, a win for progressivism, since the two progressive presidential candidates – Roosevelt of the Progressive Party and Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic Party nominee – together got a majority of the vote. However, with William Howard Taft, the Republican Party nominee, and Roosevelt in effect splitting the Republican vote, Woodrow Wilson was swept into the presidency and on his coattails Congress swung Democratic. But suffrage supporters had some good news – three states were added to the suffrage column that year.

President-elect Woodrow Wilson was no supporter of women’s voting rights. This was not surprising, since the Democratic Party’s leadership was dominated by the southern states, who defended the states’ right to determine eligibility. At best, Wilson was willing to accept that some states would continue to grant women the vote. When NAWSA held its 1912 convention shortly after the election, arguments about how to achieve the federal amendment under the Wilson Administration rose to a fever pitch.

Addams agreed with a group of younger women led by their peer, Alice Paul, who wanted NAWSA to support pro-suffrage candidates of either party for Congress. With Addams running interference on Paul’s behalf, the leadership decided that Paul could chair the Congressional Committee and raise money from NAWSA members for its efforts. Paul’s first project was to hold a massive suffrage parade the day after Wilson’s inauguration in early March.

The March 1913 parade was a big success for Paul, and gained national publicity for the suffrage cause, but Addams had to miss it. In February 1913 she and Mary Rozet Smith left the country for a five-month trip to Europe and the Middle East. The journey was Addams’ first really sustained vacation in nearly eighteen years and it was much needed after the strain of the 1912 campaign.

This trip also meant that Addams missed the final push to gain Illinois women the right to vote. A quick and effective campaign was launched in the spring of 1913 and by summer Illinois women had achieved access to a partial ballot that would put thousands of women in the voting booth. On June 11, 1913, Illinois women gained the right to vote in local and federal elections, but not state elections since the Illinois Constitution prohibited it. Illinois was the first state east of the Mississippi to grant women the vote, and the vote was significant because Illinois was such a populist and progressive state, and its women were now voting for President.
The passage of the 1913 Illinois suffrage law meant that in 1916 Addams was able to vote in a presidential election for the first time. Both parties’ candidates sought her endorsement. Republican Charles Evans Hughes sent Theodore Roosevelt as his emissary to seek Addams’s endorsement. President Woodrow Wilson sent her a huge bouquet of sixty long-stemmed American Beauty roses when she was recovering from surgery, implicitly seeking her endorsement as well. Finally, Addams made her announcement. After praising President Wilson for his domestic progressive policies, she told the press she would cast her vote for him. Grateful, he sent another, equally massive bouquet of roses. Addams was the first woman to have her national political endorsement be sought by either party, let alone both. She had risen further in national politics than any woman in history.

World War I broke out in 1914. Addams, a pacifist, resigned from the NAWSA board and made the re-energized peace movement, in which she had long been active, a priority. She became president of the (U.S.)Women’s Peace Party, and president of the Women’s International Peace Committee, which was renamed the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) after the war ended. But her work with WILFP also marked a return to the issue of woman suffrage since the League strongly supported women organizing for the vote in local and national leagues in countries around the world.

During the war years, support for the suffrage amendment in the United States grew. Six more states gave women the vote between 1913 and 1918, and NAWSA, and its trade union and club allies, and Alice Pauls’ suffrage group, now renamed the National Woman’s Party (NWP), all were pushing for it. Finally, in January 1918, President Wilson, prompted less by the NWP’s picketing of the White House than by the politics of war and need to protect the Democratic majority in Congress, endorsed the amendment, and within months Congress approved it and sent it to the states. After a two-year ratification campaign, Tennessee became the final state to ratify in August 1920. On August 26, 2020 the Nineteenth Amendment was signed into law.

The seventy-two-year campaign for a federal amendment was finally over, but the amendment hardly completed the job of all women having the vote. Black women in the south, like black men, would remain disenfranchised until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enforced. Native American women and men, gained the vote in 1924, and Asian American women and men in 1952.

For Jane Addams, the fight for the vote and the gaining of the vote were transformative experiences. When she co-founded Hull House in 1889, she had not been able to imagine how women could be politically engaged and by the time of her death in 1835, she was the most prominent political woman in the United States.

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