"Not a Tinker's Damn"

The Politics of Suffrage in the South Dakota Election of 1918

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By the time it appeared on the November 1918 ballot, woman suffrage had suffered defeat in five previous elections in South Dakota: 1890, 1898, 1910, 1914, and 1916. Suffragists at both the state and national levels desperately wanted to avoid yet another electoral campaign. As historian Eleanor Flexner described suffragist sentiment following the failed 1914 election, "Suffragists in growing numbers asked, what on earth was the use of one more unsuccessful campaign in South Dakota?"[1] Yet, suffrage would succeed in 1918. What explains this victory in the state in which it had proven so elusive? Did suffragists succeed in fashioning and promoting arguments that finally won over the hearts and minds of the political leadership and voters of South Dakota, or was something else at work?

Consistent with an emerging scholarship on woman suffrage more generally, the story of suffrage in South Dakota suggests that male politicians supported suffrage when there was a strong incentive to do so; where electoral competition was high and the organizational capacity of suffragists was perceived to be significant. In such a context, suffrage was more likely to receive male support regardless of whether they recognized the moral imperative underpinning suffragist claims. As Rene E. H. Stevens, a national field organizer assigned to South Dakota, would flatly state later in the campaign: "You can rest assured that none of the old machine politicians of either party care a tinker's [damn] about . . . [woman suffrage] . . . carrying."[2]

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1. Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, rev. ed. (1959; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 277.

2. Stevens to Mrs. John L. Pyle, 16 Aug. 1918, Folder 3, Box 5, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers, Richardson Collection, I. D. Weeks Library, University of South Dakota, Vermillion. Pyle's

The conventional "official" narrative that first appeared in volume six of the *History of Woman Suffrage* series, edited by Ida Husted Harper in 1922, emphasized proponents' efforts over the long history of suffrage in the state.[3] Ruth B. Hipple, South Dakota Universal Franchise League (SDUFL) press chair through the 1918 campaign, informed this account, which held that by 1914, "the hard work, the deep devotion to the cause of the men and women of preceding years had begun to bear fruit." Suffragists, in this telling, had successfully made a case for the justness of their claims, as "years of education had begun to change public opinion."[4] Harper's book also portrays a seemingly inexorable evolution where "each campaign had shown a growth in favorable sentiment and there seemed every reason to believe that another one would be successful."[5] The answer to the self-posed question of "what won the state," according to Maria S. McMahon, the NAWSA field director and ranking national officer in South Dakota, was "persistent, intensive, quiet work"; specifically, efforts to change men's opinions.[6]

Context and contingency play a larger role in other accounts, such as that of Mary I. ("Mamie") Shields Pyle. Leading her third suffrage campaign after becoming SDUFL president following the failed effort of 1910, Pyle emphasized the rhetorical power of suffragist claims, especially the concept of citizenship as the basis of female voting rights. In these accounts, World War I, which the United States entered in April 1917, was crucial. "The war . . . brings us the strongest arguments in favor of woman suffrage," Pyle wrote to national suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt.[7] This argument rested on the fact that non-naturalized

papers have been digitized and are available online through the Digital Library of South Dakota (explore.digitalsd.org).

3. For early histories of the suffrage movement in South Dakota, *see* Harper, ed., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), 6:585–95, and Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Shuler, *Women and Suffrage Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1926.) The two most well-known scholarly sources devoted exclusively to suffrage in South Dakota are Dorinda Riessen Reed, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota Commission on the Status of Women, 1975) and Patricia O'Keefe Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota: The Final Decade, 1910–1920," *South Dakota History* 13 (Fall 1983): 206–26.

4. Harper, ed., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6:588.

5. Ibid., p. 591.

6. McMahon quoted ibid., p. 593.

7. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. 1918, Folder 1, Box 4, Pyle Papers.

males could vote in South Dakota provided they had completed "first papers" declaring their intent to seek citizenship after meeting various requirements, for which there was a seven-year time limit. In the context of the war, a number of these non-naturalized residents had been labelled as "enemy aliens." According to Pyle's assessment, "By disenfranchising [women], men are classing them with aliens. This puts the question in its true light for the first time and greatly strengthens our position."[8]

Despite these apparently favorable circumstances, leaders at both the state and national levels remained cautious about the prospects for woman suffrage in South Dakota. While state legislation the previous year had already put suffrage on the ballot in 1918 for the sixth time, the passage of federal legislation became a real possibility when the United States House of Representatives approved a constitutional suffrage amendment that January. Suddenly, developments in South Dakota took on a renewed importance for national suffrage leaders. They worried that the state amendment's failure might imperil subsequent ratification of the federal amendment by the South Dakota legislature. More generally, they worried that South Dakota might set a broader precedent for expecting state-level referendum victories—in states that had adopted such provisions—as a precondition for ratification of the federal amendment. Finally, they were concerned that a state-level campaign in South Dakota would have serious resource implications for a national ratification campaign.[9]

Thus, suffrage leaders at both levels considered requesting the withdrawal of the state-level ballot measure in South Dakota to avoid a long and costly electoral campaign. Instead, they hoped that the federal amendment would pass and be ratified by a sufficient number of states in time for the 1920 election. The rationale provided by Catt, National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) president from 1900 to 1904 and again from 1915 to 1920, makes evident that this assessment was based on a strong preference for legislative rather than electoral politics. "We want to lift the whole question away from the electorate

8. Pyle to South Dakota Universal Franchise League (SDUFL) Chairmen, 26 Mar. 1918, Folder 9, Box 1, ibid.

9. Catt to Judge Charles Whiting, 18 Feb. 1918, Folder 5, Box 1, Catt to Whiting, 28 Feb. 1918, Folder 6, Box 1, Whiting to Catt, 6 Mar. 1918, Folder 8, Box 1, all ibid.

and into the legislatures, where it properly belongs," she wrote. The reasoning was clear. If suffrage sentiment among the political leadership had "advanced tremendously," Catt doubted that it had "advanced much among the more ignorant, illiterate, and especially the foreign population of certain varieties." She concluded that it would be "an easier matter to push the ratification of the suffrage amendment with the legislatures, which represent a more intelligent class than a referendum with the rank and file voter."[10] Catt would advise Pyle not to ask for withdrawal of the existing South Dakota suffrage ballot measure only as the result of a sharp exchange with Judge Charles A. Whiting, a strongly pro-suffrage state supreme court justice. Whiting's position, which he communicated to Catt in no uncertain terms, was that asking for withdrawal would be "but little short of a crime," as no one "except all those organizations and forces that worked in behalf of the submission have any right to ask for its withdrawal."[11]

Having decided not to request withdrawal, suffrage leaders were stunned to learn—with no advance notice and without being consulted—that the state Republicans intended to combine both woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement in a single ballot question at a special legislative session. The calling of a special session in March 1918 by Republican Governor Peter Norbeck, first elected in 1916 and running for reelection in 1918, had been politically motivated. Republican campaign organizers and advisors were keenly aware of the electoral challenge the Nonpartisan League (NPL) posed given its success elsewhere. Most notably, the NPL had swept North Dakota by surprise in 1916, capturing the house and the governorship, and was poised to win control of all three branches of government in that state in 1918.[12] W. H. ("Harry") King, chair of Norbeck's reelection committee, was convinced that the NPL would be a "serious political factor" in the campaign.[13]

10. Catt to Whiting, 15 Mar. 1918, Folder 8, Box 1, ibid.

11. Whiting to Pyle, 20 Feb. 1918, Folder 6, Box 1, ibid. *See also* Whiting to Catt, 20 Feb. 1918, ibid.

12. *See* Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 141–45.

13. King to Hon. R. A. Bielski, 14 Mar. 1918, Folder: "Political Campaign 1918," Box 84, Peter Norbeck Papers, Richardson Collection.

Carrie Chapman Catt presided over the National American Woman Suffrage Association twice, at the turn of the twentieth century and again at the time the Nineteenth Amendment won approval.

At the same time, Norbeck's advisors also recognized the serious political risk in calling a special session, noting, "The state's people . . . seem to feel there is absolutely no necessity for it."[14] The Republicans' primary justification was the ostensible "paramount duty" of the legislature to amend election law so that servicemen posted out of state would be able to vote in the 1918 election, a point on which all parties agreed.[15] The substantive legislative agenda, however, enabled the Re-

14. Kenneth Sellers to W. H. King, n.d., "Political Campaign 1918," Box 84, Sellers to King, 20 Feb. 1918, "Political Campaign #2, 1918," Box 82, both ibid.

15. South Dakota, *Journal of the House, Fifteenth Legislature, Special Session* (1918), p. 13.

publicans to implement a series of measures largely co-opting the NPL platform. Thus, it was only following discussion of a twine plant, aid for highways, banking, rural credits, and a whole host of other issues, that the governor would propose combining woman suffrage with alien disenfranchisement.

Upon learning of the proposal at the SDUFL headquarters in Huron via a telephone call from an officer in Pierre, Pyle raced to the state capital late the night before the opening of the special session and arrived just in time to attend the governor's morning address, which had already started. Norbeck's comments on the issue focused on limiting voting rights to naturalized citizens. According to the governor, first-paper voters "have enjoyed practically all the rights of citizens . . . yet now claim exemption from military service on the grounds that they are aliens." In response, he would "recommend that the Equal Suffrage Amendment now pending, be amended so as to require full citizenship as a basis for all suffrage."[16] His support for woman suffrage remained implicit, and he would not otherwise directly mention suffrage or offer any justification whatsoever for combining the two provisions. In the only explicit rationale ever offered, Senator Hans Urdahl justified the

16. Ibid., p. 16.

Members of the Nonpartisan League, seen here on the South Dakota Capitol steps in 1921, posed a threat to the state's established political parties in 1918.

combining of the two as contributing to the war effort, arguing that the passage of suffrage "would be assured and the suffrage lobbyists and campaigners would be spared the necessity of doing any campaigning this fall and summer," presumably allowing them to focus on war work.[17] Neither Norbeck's nor Urdahl's statements acknowledged the justness of suffragist claims.

Originally, suffrage leaders had thought that the move was openly hostile, having been "introduced and fought for by one of our greatest opponents in the legislature."[18] Norbeck's endorsement eased Pyle's concern. "My mind was considerably relieved," she would note, as the amendments proposed by Governor Norbeck himself were "not coming from an unfriendly source."[19] Rene Stevens, the professional NAWSA field organizer assigned to South Dakota, would remain skeptical: "Are we really to have the backing of the patriotic men of the state in pushing the thing through? Do you feel this special session of the legislature has helped us forward on our way?"[20] Furthermore, she wondered, "Are the men going to help us or did they tack that on so we would carry the whole load?"[21]

The stark contrast between Stevens's assessment and Pyle's abiding faith in the governor's principled motives was indicative of their differing perceptions of the path to suffrage and the likely determinants of success. Presenting the type of political analysis that did not appear elsewhere in correspondence among state or national suffragist officers, Stevens considered the electoral challenge facing the old-line parties and their perceptions of the suffrage movement's organizational capacity and political influence. The contrast between her portrayal and later "official" suffragist accounts is also striking. The latter mirrored the assumption that supportive men had been convinced of the justness of the suffragist cause, a view that underpinned Pyle's favorable reaction to Governor Norbeck's ostensibly "friendly" amendments. In contrast, Stevens's analysis was based, first, on the recognition that

17. *Pierre Daily Dakotan* quoted in *Woman Patriot* (Washington, D.C.), 21 May 1918.

18. Maria S. McMahon to Nettie R. Shuler, 18 Mar. 1918, Folder 9, Box 1, Pyle Papers. It is unclear who McMahon was referring to here.

19. Pyle to Stevens, 26 Mar. 1918, ibid.

20. Stevens to Pyle, 24 Mar. 1918, ibid.

21. Stevens to Pyle, 25 Mar. 1918, ibid.

fear of the NPL drove both old-line parties. In this interpretation, combining woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement was purely tactical, the result of "extensive collusion" between the two main parties in their "effort to save their old machines against the League."[22] A second crucial factor in these political calculations were legislators' perceptions of the political influence and organizational capacity of the suffrage movement. As women did not yet have the vote, the former stemmed from the latter. For Stevens, electoral politics and political expediency—not the rhetorical power of suffragist claims or any recognition of the justness of those claims—explained support for woman suffrage. In this understanding, it did not matter whether male politicians gave a "tinker's damn."

Stevens's argument that political expedience explains the linking of woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement remains compelling. The NPL's support for suffrage was widely recognized, and many anticipated the party's endorsement of the straight suffrage measure slated for the 1918 ballot.[23] As such, support for suffrage on its own would have been consistent with the broader Republican strategy of co-opting the NPL platform. Had woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement remained separate, the NPL would have had the option of supporting the former while remaining neutral on the latter. With the two combined, remaining neutral on alien disenfranchisement while supporting woman suffrage was no longer an option. The NPL would be forced into the difficult position of either supporting Amendment E, as the joint woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement measure was now called, and alienating voters in immigrant communities—a core pillar of its expected electoral support—or opposing it and facing opposition from the suffragists. The relatively low political price paid by the Republican Party in painting the NPL into this corner was implicit support for woman suffrage. After all, given its dismal electoral track record in the state, suffrage still might not pass, not that it mattered to the political calculations of the legislators proposing it. As noted earlier, the governor and other proponents could soft-pedal their support for the suffrage dimension of the package. Finally, Republican strategists were likely aware of how easy it would be to pin responsibility for the

22. Stevens to Pyle, 16 Aug. 1918, Folder 3, Box 5, ibid.
23. Whiting to Catt, 6 Mar. 1918, Folder 8, Box 1, ibid.

combining of the two issues on the suffragists, which is precisely what would happen.

State and national suffrage leaders divided sharply on the issue. Officers for NAWSA were deeply concerned by the combining of the two measures. Soon after Pyle left for Pierre, McMahon wrote headquarters with a dire assessment: "This would be a death blow to us, because it would mean the antagonizing of the foreign vote." Despite personally receiving a telegram from Catt hours earlier that instructed Pyle not to ask for withdrawal of the state suffrage ballot measure, McMahon pled for leave to do the opposite. "That they are both being submitted at the same time," she wrote, "is going to cause them to be connected in the minds of the foreign voter and will prove almost fatal to us." She argued that this fact alone was reason enough to ask for "withdrawal from the campaign" until after "this unnaturalized vote has been eliminated." The national officers mistakenly believed that Pyle "will, of course, do every thing in her power to separate the two bills."[24]

What they did not know was that Pyle would in fact work to keep the two provisions together.[25] The reasons for her favorable assessment were twofold. First, she emphasized the measure's introduction by Governor Norbeck out of an apparently genuine belief that he was committed to woman suffrage and had no ulterior political motives. Secondly, she continually insisted "these would be two contradictory amendments" and that there was simply no other way, constitutionally, for both issues to appear separately on the ballot. According to Pyle, being presented together in one amendment made them "wholly constitutional." Moreover, "the Governor and the Senators who were back of this measure, had it thoroughly investigated by legal authorities, before it was finally presented."[26] There is no evidence whatsoever for the latter claim.

A counteramendment in the state house requiring each amendment to be voted on separately, Pyle wrote, came close to "side-tracking us over on to the old[-]school amendment which gives women the vote.

24. McMahon to Catt, 18 Mar. 1918, Folder 9, Box 1, Pyle Papers.

25. Pyle most likely spoke in favor of the combination to the Senate Committee on Elections. Pyle recounted that Senators Lincoln and Marvick "came out and hunted us up and insisted that we go in and talk before the elections committee, as they wanted a little clearer understanding of what we wanted." Pyle to Stevens, 26 Mar. 1918.

26. Pyle to Mrs. C. H. Lawrence, 20 June 1918, Folder 14, Box 2, Pyle Papers.

In her role as leader of the South Dakota Universal Franchise League, Mary Shields Pyle traveled to Pierre multiple times to lobby for woman suffrage legislation.

It was so plausible that it caught even many of our best friends sleeping."[27] With a tied vote and the speaker subsequently voting against the proposal, the counteramendment failed and the original combined amendment passed. The tied vote clearly suggests that at the very least half of the house believed the two separate measures would have been constitutional. Upon returning to headquarters in Huron, Pyle would work assiduously at convincing her colleagues that linking woman suffrage and alien disenfranchisement "greatly strengthens our position."[28] Pyle's rhetoric would take on ever-greater flourish: "I feel that this is the greatest thing that any legislative body of men have ever done for the suffrage cause."[29]

Catt's response was far more equivocal. "Whether it is a good thing . . . is a question which is as yet not clear in my mind," she wrote.[30] On the

27. *Journal of the House, Special Session* (1918), p. 13.
28. Pyle to SDUFL Chairmen, 26 Mar. 1918.
29. Pyle to Mrs. C. N. Herried, 28 Mar. 1918, Folder 9, Box 1, Pyle Papers.
30. Catt to Pyle, 29 Mar. 1918, ibid.

one hand, Catt would recognize that "the political or the anti-suffrage association which attempts to line . . . up against the amendment, will be open to the criticism of being pro-German." For Pyle, the main achievement of the measure was that it placed the anti-suffragists "into the tightest place they have ever been in our state. How can they fight an amendment that calls for full Americanization . . . of the ballot?"[31] On the other hand, Catt trenchantly pointed out that support for female suffrage would not lead non-naturalized first-paper voters to vote in favor of their own disenfranchisement. "The voters on first papers will have the opportunity to vote on their own disenfranchisement," she argued. "A very great many of them are opposed to suffrage any way and probably all of them are."[32] Pyle's assessment, as conveyed to the national office, was more optimistic if perhaps unrealistic: "While many of the foreigners may vote against our amendment because of the alien clause, a great many of them will vote for it because they are loyal Americans, even though they are foreign born."[33]

Over the campaign, Catt remained unconvinced. She speculated that the measure might provide greater incentive for affected immigrants to cast ballots. "I have thought about this many times," she wrote, "and have wondered whether they would turn out in a body to [vote]."[34] Years later, Catt and NAWSA official Nettie Shuler asserted that a significant factor had been the neutralization of out-of-state opposition, noting "the absence of organized opposition that usually entered a campaign State from the outside . . . being due in part to the alien clause in the amendment."[35]

State suffrage leaders immediately leaned toward focusing on the alien disenfranchisement component of the referendum campaign. For example, one suggested a plan of attack using campaign literature that would "not mention woman suffrage at all."[36] Another noted, "We must get into this game of being hard on the question of citizenship."[37] Pyle's response revealed both her preferred strategy and her view of

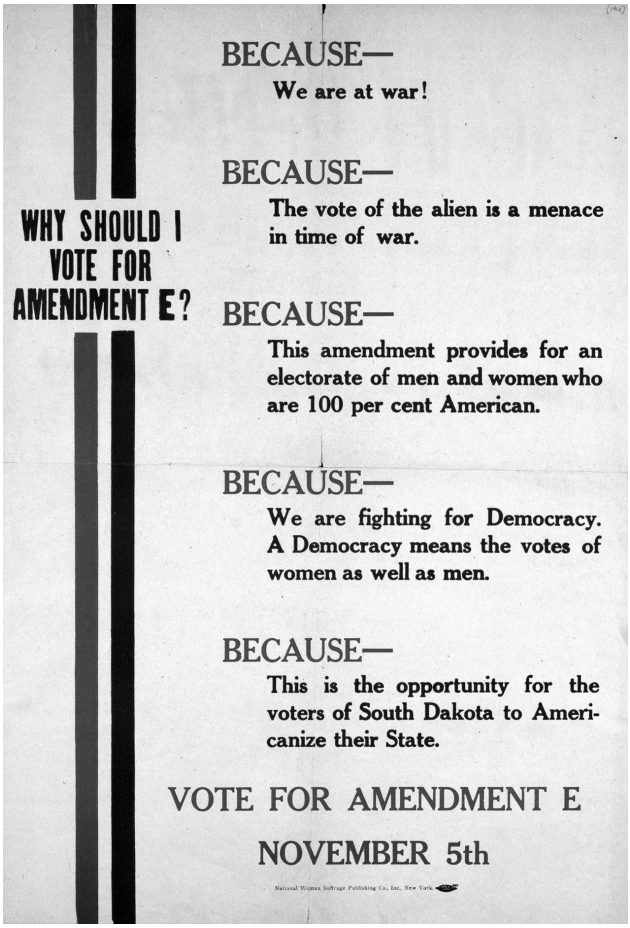
31. Pyle to Mrs. C. E. Hager, 26 Apr. 1918, Folder 4, Box 2, ibid.
32. Catt to Pyle, 29 Mar. 1918.
33. Pyle to Rose Young, 1 Apr. 1918, Folder 1, Box 2, Pyle Papers.
34. Catt to Pyle, 16 Aug. 1918, Folder 5, Box 3, ibid.
35. Catt and Shuler, *Women and Suffrage Politics*, pp. 304–5.
36. Ruth B. Hipple to Pyle, 7 Apr. 1918, Box 2, Folder 2, Pyle Papers.
37. Mabel Rewman to Pyle, 28 Mar. 1918, Folder 9, Box 1, ibid.

the national organization's preferred approach: "We do need to mention woman suffrage. However, I will have a problem on my hands with these trained [national] organizers, who find it hard to think in any other line than suffrage."[38]

The link with disenfranchisement would indeed become a political liability. Negative news coverage emerged almost immediately. The *Pierre Daily Dakotan* would report that the attempt to pass the amendment "not on its merits, but by a subterfuge which will deprive those who wish to oppose equal suffrage and support the full citizenship clause" had, among legislative members, "lost the suffragists many friends." The *Dakotan* concluded, "Many aver that the attempt will lose both measures."[39] Other news and editorial coverage in the state would be critical, if less strident. "The questions should have been submitted separately," stated the editor of the Iroquois newspaper. "They have no bearing one upon the other and this double-header plan prevents the voter from expressing his actual wishes."[40] Initially, the *Dakotan* suggested, "The women lobbyists were determined to get the two combined." Further, according to the newspaper, Senator Urdahl supported the amendment so that passage of the suffrage component would be assured.[41]

Once the combining of the two amendments became a political liability, the suggestion that the suffragists themselves had been responsible became even more explicit. In June, a suffragist volunteer reported to Pyle, "When someone brought up the idea [at the Eastern Star Convention] that the men were responsible for this question in its present status, Senator Stone contradicted that in a rather forceful manner and said that we were responsible for the whole deal and he had talked to Mrs. Pyle before hand." Pyle asked her close confidant Mabel F. Rewman, SDUFL finance chair, to speak with Stone, "making him know he is not telling the truth."[42] Similarly, discussion of the combined measures at the annual meeting of the state bar association would "intimate that this was done at the instigation of the women."[43] Long after

38. Pyle to Hipple, 8 Apr. 1918, Folder 2, Box 2, ibid.
39. *Pierre Daily Dakotan* quoted in *Woman Patriot*, 21 May 1918.
40. *Iroquois Chief* quoted ibid.
41. *Pierre Daily Dakotan* quoted ibid.
42. Pyle to Rewman, 17 June 1918, Folder 13, Box 2, Pyle Papers.
43. Whiting to Pyle, 3 Aug. 1918, Folder 4, Box 3, ibid.



In their publicity efforts, suffrage advocates emphasized the alien disenfranchisement aspect of Amendment E.

the fact, when it was clear that the combining of the two issues had not sunk the amendment, even Catt and Shuler would claim that suffragists were responsible: "The war had created a feeling of caution concerning voting privileges in the hands of aliens." As a result, "the South Dakota women . . . saw their opportunity and urged a bill which would combine woman suffrage and the qualification of citizenship for all voters."[44]

National headquarters became immediately concerned with the South Dakota campaign. NAWSA swiftly dispatched Shuler to South Dakota over Pyle's objections. Pyle bridled at the intervention, telling

44. Catt and Shuler, *Women and Suffrage Politics*, pp. 304–5.

Hans Urdahl, seen here as a state senator in 1913, was among the Republicans who supported combining woman suffrage with the measure limiting voting rights to citizens.

a colleague, "I dislike very much to always be holding opposite ideas from these people who think they know."[45] With the intervention of the national organization, the South Dakota campaign would be reoriented in late April toward relatively conventional activities, including women's petitions, the holding of suffrage schools, and Red Cross work. The petition tactic had been a non-negotiable requirement for NAWSA financial assistance. The basic idea was to gather women's signatures on suffrage petitions and circulate them to male voters, either by mail or by publishing a list of signatories in local newspapers, to counter anti-suffragist claims that women themselves did not want the vote.

45. Pyle to Mrs. S. V. Ghrist, 11 May 1918, Folder 7, Box 2, Pyle Papers.

These petitions would become the centerpiece of on-the-ground suffrage efforts in South Dakota. Another initiative directed by the national organization was a series of "suffrage schools." Headlined by national officers McMahon and Shuler, the schools would be presented over two days at each of seven locations across the state during a three-week period in June 1918. The program included sessions on topics such as organization, press and publicity, and methods. From the outset, Pyle was skeptical of the suffrage schools.[46] Specifically, she was concerned by national organizers' focus on the woman suffrage rather than the alien disenfranchisement dimension of the combined ballot measure. Her assessment to Catt was curt: "I can not say what the result of the school will be to the work in this state."[47]

46. Catt and Shuler, *Women and Suffrage Politics*, p. 304; Pyle to Mrs. M. M. Bennett, 4 May 1918, Pyle to Mrs. Charles H. Lawrence, 6 May 1918, Pyle to Mrs. M. L. Smart, 6 May 1918, Folder 6, Box 2, Pyle to Ghrist, 11 May 1918; SDUFL, *School of Methods* (pamphlet), n.d., Folder 19, Box 7, all in Pyle Papers.

47. Pyle to Catt, 11 June 1918, Folder 11, Box 2, Pyle Papers.

Nettie Shuler arrived in South Dakota in the summer of 1918 to help redirect the campaign for Amendment E.

For their part, state suffrage leaders focused on Red Cross work. Catt was wary of the "unimpressive psychology" of war work and Red Cross work as a means to bolster male support for suffrage.[48] Nevertheless, the SDUFL offered to "suspend all suffrage activities and place our organization entirely at [the Red Cross's] disposal" for the duration of the coming drive.[49] The group diligently attempted to redefine suffrage work as "war work" to reinforce women's contributions as citizens and make a claim for voting rights. "We want to serve our state and country, not only in our own way, but in every way," one representative asserted. The initiative was also clearly calculated to promote the public image of the SDUFL as a group with significant organizational resources and capacity. In prominently publicizing its offer to the Red Cross, the SDUFL described itself publicly as "a body . . . which has a well organized working force in every county."[50] Careful cultivation of this image of organizational capacity played a role later in the campaign.

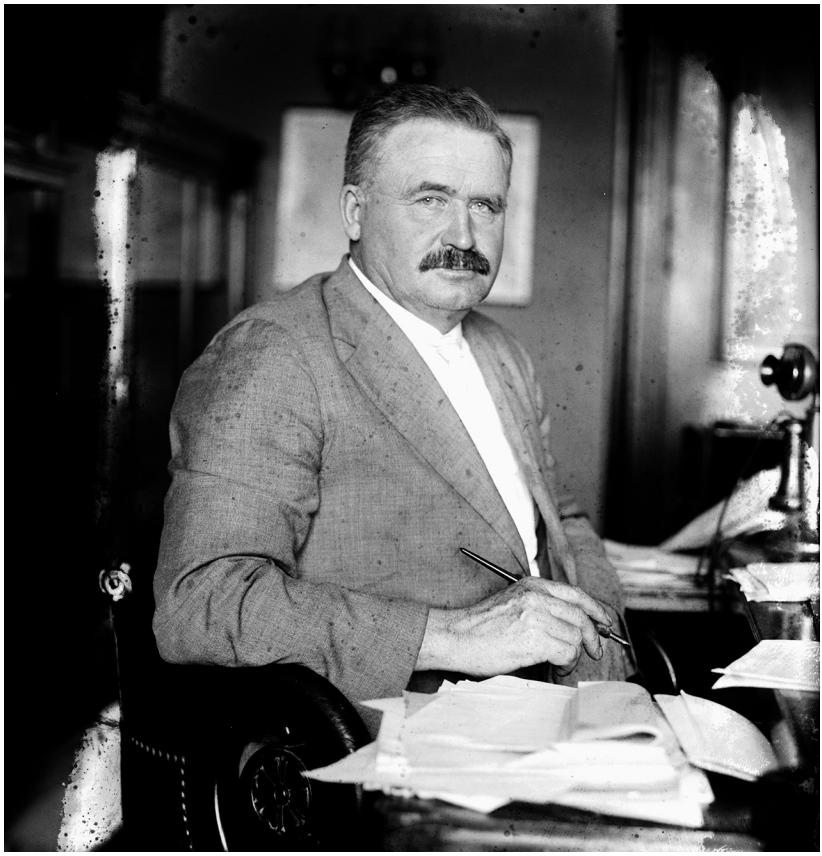
In addition to these conventional activities, the SDUFL would turn, in early summer, to what Pyle herself would refer to as a new "phase" in suffrage work.[51] In late June, Governor Norbeck paid a surprise visit to SDUFL headquarters in Huron. "I had a very good conversation with Governor Norbeck, yesterday, here at the office," Pyle reported, "and found out that he . . . spoke for our amendment."[52] In and of itself, the governor's visit suggests that he recognized the political significance of the organization. What Pyle and Norbeck specifically discussed remains unknown; neither Pyle's nor Norbeck's papers—or any other historical account for that matter—otherwise reference the meeting. Pyle, however, suddenly shifted her efforts to focus on the issue of "aliens" voting illegally on expired first papers. She explored the possibility of challenging such voters on election day, the timing of which hardly seems coincidental. If the governor had, in fact, suggested this tactic to Pyle, there was a clear electoral incentive for him to do so. All immigrants would have been subject to verifying their naturalization status with written proof that they had either taken out their "second

48. Catt to Whiting, 15 Mar. 1918, Folder 8, Box 1, ibid.
49. Pyle to Robert Gamble, 3 May 1918, Folder 6, Box 2, ibid.
50. McMahon to "My Dear Mr. Editor", 13 May 1918, Folder 7, Box 2, ibid.
51. Pyle to Catt, 26 July 1918, Folder 3, Box 3, ibid.
52. Pyle to Stevens, 21 June 1918, Folder 14, Box 2, ibid.

papers," thus having become naturalized, or that their first papers were not expired. Such requirements likely would have suppressed immigrant voter turnout. While the suffragist leadership did not give any consideration to these partisan electoral effects in planning such an initiative, suppressing the immigrant vote clearly would have been disadvantageous to the NPL, whose potential supporters were concentrated in immigrant communities.[53]

Pyle's efforts were as extensive as they were sudden. She had not previously mentioned interest in alien disenfranchisement in her correspondence. On the same day as the Norbeck meeting, Pyle wrote a se-

53. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, pp. 124–28.



Governor Peter Norbeck no doubt recognized the political advantages of combining the women and immigrant voting measures into Amendment E in 1918.

ries of letters, including one to the federal government's alien property custodian, A. Mitchell Palmer, requesting any available statistical information on enemy aliens in South Dakota.[54] Another was to Jonah L. ("Doane") Robinson, superintendent of the South Dakota Department of History who later became famous for conceiving the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, requesting information on both the number of men voting on first papers and the number of enemy aliens in the state.[55] Within the next week, erstwhile *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* reporter H. W. Troth, an unofficial voluntary SDUFL operative, would discuss the issue at Pyle's request with Edmund W. Fiske, an assistant United States district attorney. Fiske suggested that the SDUFL apply to the War Department and request that the United States marshal provide the names and addresses of all enemy aliens in the state.[56] Pyle's response was enthusiastic: "If they grant it to us, it will certainly be of great assistance."[57]

Troth would also consult with United States District Attorney R. P. Stewart, who "seriously doubted if there is any way to stop a German enemy alien from voting." Troth noted, somewhat ominously, "There is a way, however, if the American public that votes is permitted to know . . . just who those enemy aliens are. The public can sympathize with the Norwegian or other good foreigner . . . but it is apt to have little use for the German."[58] Subsequently, Pyle asked Hipple to "dig along on this line and see what you can unearth" and sought advice from Judge Whiting in regard to the plan.[59] Pyle also attempted to make the state council of defense consider the task its "special responsibility," which presumably would require it to aid the suffragists financially.[60] Troth proposed to the state council that county councils be asked to prepare lists of residents and "learn who in such county was fully naturalized

54. Pyle to Palmer, 20 June 1918, ibid. There is no record that Palmer ever responded to what his office probably thought of as a somewhat bizarre request.

55. Pyle to Doane Robinson, 20 June 1918, ibid. Robinson would reply with the information the following day. Robinson to Pyle, 21 June 1918, ibid.

56. Troth to Pyle, 3 July 1918, Folder 1, Box 3, ibid.

57. Pyle to Troth, 6 July 1918, ibid. There is no subsequent written record of the SDUFL making any application to the War Department.

58. Troth to Pyle, 19 July 1918, Folder 2, Box 3, Pyle Papers.

59. Pyle to Hipple and Pyle to Whiting, 23 July 1918, Folder 3, Box 3, ibid.

60. Pyle to Catt, 26 July 1918.

As press chair for the South Dakota Universal Franchise League, Ruth Hipple (front row, third from left) headed the organization's publicity efforts.

and who was not and be prepared in November to challenge accordingly." Further, he noted that "in order to have such a plan effective, it would have to be done quietly and without agitation of any sort."[61] Troth would report to Pyle, "I also saw the chairman of the county council here and believe we will get cooperation when it is necessary."[62]

Finally, Pyle turned to Catt and the national organization in late July. "I have a great big scheme in my head," she wrote, "that I wish very much we might be able to put over." Pyle went on to describe the plan to identify individuals voting on expired first papers, stating, "You can readily see that this would hinder the voting of many men." The challenge to these individuals' voting credentials "would have to be very quietly done," she suggested, "with no chance of leakage, until election day, when, as these men appeared to cast their ballot, they could be

61. Troth to George W. Wright, 6 July 1918, Folder 1, Box 3, Pyle Papers.

62. Troth to Pyle, 9 July 1918, ibid. No commitment of resources on the part of the Council of Defense appears to have been forthcoming.

challenged." Pyle recognized the cost and person-power involved: "It would take a large sum of money to employ people who would go after this and stay on the job until after the election, in each county." She then informed Catt that any suggestions "would be gladly received."[63] Although ultimately dismissive, Catt conceded, "You certainly have a proposition which is an important one." Even so, she was clearly unwilling to devote any NAWSA resources, writing, "It might be a good idea . . . but to employ the necessary men to do it would probably mean more cost . . . than you will be able to compass."[64] After this tepid response, the plan was effectively dead. Despite later claims that suffragists under the direction of Pyle and Catt policed the polls where aliens presented a "problem," such activity likely never occurred.[65] However, the extensive planning that took place along such lines helps explain why some recalled that it did in fact happen.

All of this effort and planning came to naught because the state suffrage organization lacked the necessary organizational capacity and resources. Though state-level political figures such as Urdahl perceived the group as powerful and capable, national officers had been concerned about the South Dakota campaign from the outset. After Shuler's second visit to the state in June, her assessment was scathing: "Things look hopeful here. Not because of the activity of the women—for I never saw greater apathy, but because there is real interest among the men to get the Citizenship bill passed. This at the present though is only visible in spots. There is much to do."[66]

Certainly, the campaign had faced a range of serious challenges, the war context chief among them. Competition between suffrage volunteer work and war work posed a significant problem "since women do not like to run the risk of criticism for doing [anything] else but Red

63. Pyle to Catt, 26 July 1918.

64. Catt to Pyle, 8 Aug. 1918, Folder 4, Box 3, Pyle Papers.

65. *See* Reed, *Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota*, pp. 107–11. Reed's account is based exclusively on an interview with Pyle's daughter Gladys in 1954, thirty-six years after the fact. Reed's account is restated in Paula M. Nelson, "Defending Separate Spheres: Anti-Suffrage Women in South Dakota Suffrage Campaigns," in *Equality at the Ballot Box: Votes for Women on the Northern Great Plains*, ed. Lori Ann Lahlum and Molly P. Rozum (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2019), p. 155.

66. Shuler to Boyd, n.d., Folder 14, Box 5, Pyle Papers. Somehow, this letter ended up in Pyle's possession. She would have been aware of its contents.

Cross work."[67] Despite strenuous and sustained efforts to reframe suffrage work as "war work," suffragist volunteers remained concerned that they would be labeled as "slackers" and possibly have their doors "marked with yellow paint, the slackers' insignia."[68] Certainly, some of this concern was genuine but, for Pyle, it also "has made a fine subterfuge for neglecting the suffrage campaign work."[69]

In addition, the campaign would have to contend with the conditions caused by the H1N1 influenza pandemic known widely as the Spanish Flu. Pyle would conclude that the pandemic "has certainly hit the suffrage campaign a hard blow."[70] Fear of influenza made field work exceptionally difficult. "This epidemic has terrorized people to such an extent that they are afraid to either go out of their houses or go into them," Rewman wrote Pyle, adding, "You can see how terror stricken people are."[71] Individual suffrage workers in South Dakota, including McMahon, would be afflicted with influenza during the campaign. To the suffragists' horror, Catt herself would telegram just prior to her planned trip to South Dakota, "Got it myself."[72] The banning of large public meetings also seriously derailed suffrage campaign plans. Competition with war work and the influenza outbreak hindered petition drives in particular. As early as July, Pyle noted, "I began to feel so depressed over the fact that the petition work is moving along so slowly . . . every where with the exception of a few places."[73]

Quite early on, the suffrage campaign would run into serious financial difficulty. By early July, Pyle stressed to Rewman "how important it is that the financial machinery be in running order. In fact, we must stop this heavy work unless plans are made whereby funds can be secured."[74] A telegram from one of the paid organizers powerfully

67. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. 1918.

68. Stevens to Pyle, 10 May 1918, Folder 7, Box 2, Pyle Papers.

69. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. 1918.

70. Ibid.

71. Rewman to Pyle, 14 Oct. 1918, Folder 3, Box 4, Pyle Papers.

72. Catt to Pyle, 6 Oct. 1918, Folder 2, Box 4, ibid. On 8 October, national headquarters would wire that Catt was under medical orders not to travel and that NAWSA Recording Secretary Justine Wilson would be taking her place. Mary G. Hay to Pyle, 8 Oct. 1918, ibid. With all major meetings cancelled due to the influenza epidemic, the correspondence suggests Wilson only addressed a single meeting on her trip to South Dakota.

73. Pyle to Ghrist, 9 July 1918, Folder 1, Box 3, Pyle Papers.

74. Pyle to Rewman, 6 July 1918, ibid.

captures the dire financial situation. "Must have money . . . absolutely necessary," she demanded, noting, "Miss Crossley[']s and Miss Pidgeon[']s [paid suffragist organizers] checks not received either[.] Much embarrassed."[75] Individual SDUFL leaders including Pyle herself would personally sign bank notes to cover the campaign shortfall. "I went to the bank yesterday, in desperation and borrowed. . . . This must be the end!" Pyle exclaimed.[76] The national organization was clearly aware of the financial situation, with Shuler noting, "I can quite see that you are feeling the pressure of the campaign financially."[77] By the end of the campaign, the various women who had signed bank notes on its behalf collectively owed $4,000—the equivalent of just under $60,000 today. The stress was magnified as they realized that their ability to raise funds after the vote was over would be negligible. As Pyle wrote, "It will be a rather desperate fate for some of us, unless we can raise money in these next few weeks and it will be impossible to raise the money after."[78]

Tensions would also arise between the state volunteer leadership and the national professional leadership over the appropriate balance between and roles of volunteer and professional workers. This issue surfaced most clearly regarding the establishment a professionalized press department. Since early April, the SDUFL had tried to recruit Troth, who had been volunteering his services to the SDUFL, as its press chair. Catt supported the idea and told Pyle unequivocally that she hoped the state organization would meet his salary demands, which Pyle considered excessive. By June, however, the state leadership decided it was not in a financial position to meet his terms, and Troth returned to the *Argus-Leader*'s employ. Press work would be left in the volunteer hands of Hipple, who was clearly lukewarm about retaining the post.[79]

The national headquarters continued to have serious concerns about press work in South Dakota. "I wish to ask," wrote Catt, "just what you are doing in the press. [Rose Young, NAWSA press chair] does not glean from your press clippings that much is being done. . . . There ought to be

75. Ida Stadie to Pyle, 9 July 1918, ibid.

76. Pyle to Rewman, 11 July 1918, ibid.

77. Shuler to Pyle, 11 July 1918, ibid.

78. Pyle to Rewman, 5 Oct. 1918, Folder 2, Box 4, ibid.

79. Hipple to Pyle, 7 Apr. 1918, Folder 2, Box 2, Hipple to Pyle, 2 May 1918, Pyle to Troth, 8 May 1918, Folder 6, Box 2, Pyle to Hipple, 17 May 1918, Folder 8, Box 2, Catt to Pyle, 21 May 1918, Folder 9, Box 2, Pyle to Troth, 8 June 1918, Folder 11, Box 2, all ibid.

suggestions for editorials and editors thanked and spanked and the usual work done. Let me know what your plan is and just what, if anything, is being done."[80] The SDUFL leadership was simply not convinced in regard to the value of professional press work. As Pyle concluded upon realizing that many male voters were not even aware of Amendment E, "Our experience showed us that there was a great need to reach them more personally than through the papers. People read feverishly all the war news but let other news paper stuff go by."[81] Given that the SDUFL did not have a professional press department and that, at least in the view of national headquarters, publicity and press work had been sorely lacking, she might have drawn the opposite conclusion just as easily.

Serious conflict had also arisen among the professional suffrage organizers. McMahon's post-campaign report to NAWSA's national executive board, as quoted in the official NAWSA history of which it became part, referred to the group of organizers deployed in the state as "this efficient, faithful little band."[82] To say that the claims were inaccurate would be an understatement. A mid-October confrontation between McMahon and a junior field organizer, Stella Crossley, prompted the resignation of the latter and provided the pretext for a showdown between McMahon and another field organizer, Gertrude Watkins, whose appointment to South Dakota McMahon had initially opposed. Watkins, as self-appointed spokesperson for the junior field organizers, demanded that McMahon apologize to Crossley for their prior conflict under threat that all four junior organizers would leave the state.[83]

For Pyle, this discord seemed to confirm her favorable view of the state organization vis-á-vis the national. She wondered "whether it is now wiser to trust the remainder of the campaign to the hands of the local committees . . . rather than to trust the fate of our campaign to temperamental people like this."[84] The dispute would consume the attention of the state suffrage leadership for the rest of the campaign and was sufficiently serious to involve national organizers including Shuler and,

80. Catt to Pyle, 13 July 1918, Folder 2, Box 3, ibid.

81. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. 1918.

82. Harper, ed., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6:593.

83. McMahon to Pyle, 13 June 1918, Folder 12, Box 2, McMahon to Stella Crossley, 14 Oct. 1918, Folder 3, Box 4, Crossley to McMahon, 17 Oct. 1918, Folder 4, Box 4, Gertrude Watkins to Pyle, 24 Oct. 1918, and Watkins to Pyle, 26 Oct. 1918, Folder 5, Box 4, Pyle Papers.

84. Pyle to Shuler, 24 Oct. 1918, Folder 5, Box 4, ibid.

Rose Young (top, left) appears with Anna Howard Shaw (bottom, second from left) and other national suffrage leaders after a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson around 1917.

ultimately, Catt herself.[85] By the end of October, neither state nor national officers could ascertain the whereabouts of these staff members. They did not know whether they had continued to work in the state, or whether they had left South Dakota entirely. Indicative of the vitriol the imbroglio engendered, Pyle would write to Catt in the final days of the campaign: "The most nearly Anti action that we had to meet is the action of the three misguided girls in our own midst, who were willing to remove all the workers possible for the sake of having their own way."[86]

It is difficult to imagine the campaign ending any more disastrously. Catt's assessment, penned the day before the election, was powerfully heartfelt albeit highly revealing. "My heart aches for you, and I know what terrible distress you must be in," she wrote. "It makes me feel anxious as to the result, but I shall hope and pray victory will perch on your standard in any event."[87] Pyle's own assessment was somber,

85. Ibid.; Catt to Pyle, 4 Nov. 1918, Folder 7, Box 4, ibid.

86. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. [1–2 Nov.] 1918, Folder 1, Box 4, ibid. The letter is misdated 2 October but was probably written on 1 or 2 November.

87. Catt to Pyle, 4 Nov. 1918.

as she noted, "This campaign is mighty nearly finished. Many of our original plans materialized and many have not."[88]

Nevertheless, on 5 November 1918, Amendment E would pass, with 63 percent of the men voting in favor (*see* Table). Interpreting this outcome, however, is more challenging than it might first appear. Comparisons with the 1916 result, for example, are difficult to draw. First, the 1916 vote was on a straight female suffrage amendment. Second, perhaps due to the influenza epidemic, the war context, and concerns on the part of immigrant communities regarding anti-alien hostility at the polls, voter turnout dropped by almost one-third from 1916 to 1918. Moreover, the percentage of voters who cast ballots either for or against suffrage fell from nearly 87 percent to just under 82 percent.[89] Amendment E, then, passed despite earning roughly 4,000 fewer votes in favor than the 1916 measure, which failed. In comparison, nearly 30,000 more men voted against suffrage in 1916 than did so two years later. Suffrage passed not because more men voted for it, but because far fewer voted against it. A question for further research is the degree to which the depressed voter turnout was structured—for example, being systematically more depressed in rural areas or areas with a higher immigrant population—such that it might explain the outcome. That is, to what degree did the fact of *who* voted determine the outcome relative to the question of *why* individuals voted one way or the other on Amendment E? Did suffragists convince a significant number of male voters to change their minds on the issue?

One hundred years on, the story of woman suffrage in South Dakota continues to be the subject of vigorous scholarly debate. As a critical juncture in the attainment of suffrage nationally, a historically accurate depiction of this development is tremendously important in and of itself. It also contributes significantly to our knowledge of the politics of suffrage more generally. Different understandings among current scholars have concrete historical precursors in the suffragists' own thinking about the path to voting rights. Recent versions of the argument that suffrage supporters gradually won over male voters, which comes across so clearly in the histories suffragists wrote themselves,

88. Pyle to Catt, 2 Oct. [1–2 Nov.] 1918.

89. Only a bare majority of all voters (51.6 percent) in the 1918 election voted in favor of Amendment E.

Table 1. South Dakota Female Suffrage Referendum Results, 1890–1918

	ELECTION (overall)	SUFFRAGE BALLOT MEASURE						
	Turnout (as % of male voting age pop)	Take-up (suffrage measure ballots as % of all ballots cast)	Turnout (as % male vote age pop)	YES			Total Votes on Suffrage	
				% on suffrage ballot measure	% of all ballots cast in election	% of male voting age pop.	Yes	No
1890	80.4%	88.2%	70.1%	33.5%	29.5%	23.7%	22,972	45,682
1898	66.7%	56.8%	37.8%	46.2%	26.2%	17.5%	19,698	22,983
1910	59.4%	87.9%	52.2%	38.0%	33.4%	20.2%	35,290	57,709
1914	55.6%	91.9%	51.1%	43.5%	39.9%	22.2%	39,605	51,519
1916	74.3%	86.9%	64.6%	47.8%	41.6%	30.9%	53,423	58,350
1918	52.1%	81.8%	42.6%	63.0%	51.6%	26.9%	49,318	28,934

Source: South Dakota Secretary of State, South Dakota Political Almanac. Available online at https://sdsos.gov/elections-voting/assets/BallotQuestions.pdf. Accessed 23 June 2020. Limited female suffrage in school elections was defeated in the 1894 elections but is not included here due to the incomparability of data.

have been compellingly presented.[90] Other recent scholarly works focus on partisan electoral calculation and opportunities for successful coalitions with other political actors that rested, in part, on perceptions of the influence and organizational capacity of suffragist organizations.[91] In these latter interpretations, suffrage was attained "not because of progressive ideas about women or suffragists' pluck."[92] Such understandings are consistent with the kind of political analysis Rene Stevens offered in 1918: that attaining suffrage hinged on considerations of electoral politics, not on whether male political leaders, legislators, or voters actually gave a tinker's damn.

90. Perhaps most notable is historian Sara Egge's work focusing on the various philosophical justifications for female suffrage and how such arguments fit—or did not—with public attitudes. *See* Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018). *See also* Egge, "Ethnicity and Woman Suffrage on the South Dakota Plains," in *Equality at the Ballot Box*, ed. Lahlum and Rozum, pp. 218–39.

91. *See* Corrine M. McConnaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Dawn Langan Teele, *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018).

92. Teele, *Forging the Franchise*, overleaf.