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**School Suffrage and the Campaign for Women Suffrage in
Massachusetts, 1879-1920**

By

Edmund B. Thomas, Jr.

The seventy-fifth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was celebrated in 1995, with special postage stamps, newspaper editorials, and television specials. As our attention focused on this celebration, and considering the relatively low voting rates today, we may wonder how many women actually voted in the Presidential election of 1920. How many women took advantage of the rights earned after three-quarters of a century of agitation?

Massachusetts election officials, regrettably, did not keep statistics on voting by sex on or after 1920. A single voting list was maintained, so determining how many women voted in 1920, or in any succeeding year becomes a matter of estimation rather than of fact. The state does have statistics on women registering to vote and voting before 1920, and that is the focus of this study. Because before Massachusetts ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote, women in the Bay State did have limited voting rights. They had the right to vote for school committees, and only for school committee candidates, from 1879 to 1920.¹

¹Statistics on women voters before 1920 can be found in three documents: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *House Document 369* for 1881 gives the figures for 1879 and 1880; Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *House Document 175* for 1889 lists the voting statistics for 1881 to 1888; and Massachusetts, Secretary of the Commonwealth, *Public Document 43 Number of Assessed, Polls, Registered Voters...*

An examination of *Public Document 43*, the official source for Massachusetts election statistics since 1890, reveals that 110,000 Massachusetts women were registered to vote for school committee candidates in 1919. Since this was roughly equal to one-eighth of the potential voters and approximately one-fifth of the annual vote by males for governor of Massachusetts, the numbers seemed very statistically significant, and worthy of investigation.²

The woman suffrage movement started in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Massachusetts women were there to assist in the birth of the movement. And this New York meeting was soon followed by several others, held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850 and 1851.³

Francis W. Bird, a renowned abolitionist and Radical Republican, seems to have introduced the first resolution calling for woman suffrage into the Massachusetts House of Representatives in the late 1860s. When this resolution was ignored, petitions were circulated and signed by approximately eight thousand residents of the Commonwealth, urging woman suffrage. As a result, starting in 1869, the Great and General Court decided to hold hearings on the issue. This became an annual event for the next half-century, as women, and their male supporters, tried to persuade the legislature to grant suffrage equality regardless of sex. Originally, the call was for a constitutional amendment for general suffrage, although later lesser reforms, such as municipal suffrage, or the right to vote on liquor licenses, were also advocated at these hearings. Those supporting the reform, at least at first, tended to be from the Radical wing of the Republican Party.⁴

The latter document was published each and every year from 1890 to 1920. The figures for 1889 could not be located in the State Library.

²Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, *Number of Assessed Polls, Registered Voters ... 1919 ...* (Boston, 1920).

³Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (Rochester, N.Y. 1886), vol. I.

⁴*Ibid.* III: 286-289; William S. Robinson, "Warrington" *Pen-Portraits* (Boston, 1877): 116-117; and Dale Baum, "Women's Suffrage and the 'Chinese Question': The Limits of Radical Republicanism in Massachusetts, 1865-1876," *New England Quarterly* LVI (March, 1983): 60-77.

After a decade of agitation, in 1879, women got what they had not even asked for - school suffrage. The concept of granting women the right to sit on school committees and to vote for its members was becoming a very popular one in the 1870s. Four states and two territories, not including the full woman suffrage territories of Utah and Wyoming, had already established school suffrage by 1870. By 1880, nine more states and an additional territory would enact school suffrage laws. The popularity of school suffrage, as opposed to full woman suffrage, was that conservatives could join liberals on this issue, since the education of youth was clearly considered as being within the sphere of influence of women. The conservative Congregational minister Joseph Cook of Tremont Temple testified in favor of school suffrage and also the right of women to vote on liquor license referenda at the 1879 legislative hearings on woman suffrage. Both issues were, to Reverend Cook, clearly in the realm of family, home, and child-rearing. Women deserved these rights because they were within the natural sphere of women.⁵

Women suffragists in Massachusetts were concentrating their request in 1879 on municipal suffrage. They had not asked for school suffrage, and they were surprised when the legislative committee which handled suffrage matters recommended unanimously that it be granted to women in 1879. Perhaps it was the inspiration of neighboring New Hampshire, which had adopted school suffrage in 1878. Perhaps it had some association with the 1878 campaign for governor by General Benjamin F. Butler. Butler was a Republican, and a supporter of woman suffrage, who scared the Bay State Brahmin Republicans more than any other individual in the 1865-1885 period. After several unsuccessful attempts to gain the Republican nomination for governor, he jumped back to the Democrats, from whence he came in the 1850s, and he ran as a Democratic candidate several times before becoming governor in the 1882 elections.⁶

⁵ Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, III: 287-289; James Kenneally, "The Opposition to Woman Suffrage in Massachusetts, 1865-1920." unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1063, pp. 65-73; and Clifford L. Lord and Elizabeth H. Lord, eds., *Historical Atlas of the United States* (New York, 1944): 126-127.

⁶ See Kenneally, "Opposition to Woman Suffrage," chapter 3.

Whatever the reason behind this sudden legislative shift, suffragists may have been surprised by the legislative committee's recommendation, but they felt that it was worth lobbying for, and suffragists worked diligently to get the bill enacted in 1879. It passed the Senate by a 24-11 vote in late March, and survived the often crucial "third reading" vote in the House, 129-69 on April 10. Four days later, the bill passed almost without comment, and was sent to the governor for his signature.⁷

Women in the Bay State were elated with this victory. Temperance women in groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union believed that the right of women to vote on local option (liquor licensing) would soon follow. Suffragists were elated, feeling that it would be very difficult to prevent full woman suffrage in the future since the "logic" of the antis was destroyed by the mere fact of granting school suffrage.⁸

Yet, what had women really gotten? While any election contest could become heated and controversial, there were not usually major campaigns for the right to be on school committees. Often, there was no real contest at all, with voters being asked to vote for three of the following, when only three names appeared on the ballot. Furthermore, not every woman over the age of twenty-one could vote. First she had to be literate in English. Second, unless she already paid taxes in Massachusetts, a woman had to ask to be assessed for the annual poll tax, and then she had to show the paid receipt for either real estate taxes or the poll tax prior to being allowed to register to vote. This was to be an annual process – women were expected to register in each and every year.⁹

Only 3,464 women registered to vote in 1879, and only 2,291 of them actually cast ballots in the city and town elections of that year. The low number might have been due in part because most towns held their elections in the first three months of the year, and the act was not in place until the second half of April. At least one active suffragist, Lucy Stone,

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, esp. p. 73.

⁹ Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, *Acts and Resolves passed by the General Court of Massachusetts for 1879* (Boston, 1879), chap. 223, pp. 559-560.

did not register to vote in 1879 because town officials insisted that she had to register as Mrs. Blackwell, a name that she had refused to use, on principle.¹⁰

The figures for 1880, the first full year the law was in operation, were not much better. In that year, 4,566 women registered to vote, but only 1,967 actually voted – a smaller number and a much smaller percentage than in 1879. The figures are worse for 1881, with 3,349 registered, and only 1,571 voting, and worse still in 1882, when under 3,000 registered and only 1,346 bothered to vote. The results were truly dismal, if we consider the fact that in 1881 the legislature altered the school suffrage law to eliminate the annual re-registration procedure, provided that a woman remained in the same location and continued to pay a poll tax.¹¹

Harriet Robinson noted in the 1880s that school committee elections were not vital ones with either male or female voters. Novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps complained similarly that “the self respect of a woman was not met by the limited school suffrage bill.” And Benjamin Butler, in his inaugural address as governor of Massachusetts in 1883 paraphrased Ms. Phelps as he spoke disparagingly about a law with so many restrictions which, in the end, granted women so very little in the world of politics.¹²

The low turnout of women at the polls was not cited against them in legislative hearings. Women did not really want the right to vote, except for a tiny group of radical agitators, because they did not vote when granted an opportunity to do so. Even suffragists felt the need to explain away their poor showing at the polls with Harriet Robinson noting that a school committee election was not “a vital one with either male or female voters” so it was difficult to get women registered solely to vote in this election. The number which had registered and voted, to

¹⁰ See Kenneally, “Opposition of Women Suffrage,” p. 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; and Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, *Acts and Resolves passed by the General Court of Massachusetts in the Year 1881* (Boston, 1881), chap. 191, pp. 501-502.

¹² Stanton, *History of Woman Suffrage*, III, 288; and Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman Suffrage,” 77-79.

Ms. Robinson, was a measure of the “women who have long been in favor of suffrage.”¹³

While there continued to be annual hearings on the issues of municipal suffrage and liquor license suffrage, no one in Massachusetts government in the early 1880s was doing anything constructive to promote an extension of the franchise. Even a solid supporter of women’s rights like governor John Long seemed to have been lost.¹⁴

And then the school suffrage, because it became entangled in ethnic and religious bigotry and hatred, started to color and distort the picture. The Boston women who believed in the right to vote had formed the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association or MSSA in 1880. This nonpartisan group made annual recommendations for school committee, issuing its own “ticket” in the days when parties produced voting ballots rather than the state.¹⁵

Starting in 1881, each city and town in the state was required to vote annually on whether to issue liquor licenses for the ensuing year. The Bay State legislature was usually pro-temperance, and while it avoided voting for prohibition, it often modified the “license law” to the advantage of temperance advocates. One such modification closed all places that served liquor at eleven p.m., instead of the previous midnight closing time. Another modification, in 1882, forbade the issuing of any liquor license within forty feet of a public school. Rather than force several “saloons” to close their doors, the Boston School Committee in 1884 voted to close down the Franklin Street School. Eliza Trask Hill, activist in the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association and an ardent temperance supporter, was not alone in believing that Dr. John D. Blake was the member of the Boston School Committee most responsible for this decision, and he became the only incumbent targeted for defeat by the M.S.S.A. in the next election. Since Dr. Blake was the only Catholic who was up for reelection, Archbishop John Williams felt that Blake had been singled out because of his religion, and Boston Democrats agreed.¹⁶

¹³ Quoted in Stanton, *History of Woman Suffrage*, III, 288.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 273; Lois Bannister Merk, “Boston’s Historic Public School Crisis,” *New England Quarterly* 37 (June, 1958), 172-175.

¹⁶ Merk, “Boston’s Public School Crisis,” pp. 175-176; Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman Suffrage,” pp. 151-153, and Wendell D. Howie, “Three Hundred Years of the

Their school committee ticket dropped two women who were running for re-election, claiming that they were old “Know-Nothings,” and the fight was on. The number of women voting in Boston in 1884 jumped from 650 to 1,026, but the Democratic ticket prevailed.¹⁷

At least one priest in 1885 urged Catholic women to go out and defend their faith at the polls. Democratic politicians, many of whom in Boston were Irish Catholics, joined in and registered approximately 1,350 Catholic women in 1885. Archbishop Williams disagreed with this policy, saying “I do not believe in the Church meddling with politics in any shape.” The Massachusetts School Suffrage Association decided to defuse a potentially explosive situation, and so they visited the most outspoken priests, explaining that the issue against Dr. Blake was temperance, and not religion. They also announced that there would be two Catholics on their school committee ticket for 1885. The number of women voting in Boston in 1885 doubled, with 2,062 women actually casting ballots for school committee, out of the potential 2,238 women who were registered to vote in the city.¹⁸

The tensions of 1884-1885 were successfully defused after the unofficial discussions between Catholic activists and the M.S.S.A. The number of women registered to vote declined by fifty percent in 1886, and only 878 women voted in Boston that year. In 1887, only 724 Boston women bothered to vote. Yet, ethnic tensions did not disappear. They were under the surface in Boston, but they remained potentially powerful.¹⁹

The Irish-Yankee clashes were now a half-century old, but unlike the ante-bellum period, the Irish in the 1880s now made up half of the Boston voters, and they voted solidly Democratic. Yankee prejudice against Catholics and Jews had not evaporated, but in fact was about to make a rebirth in the second Know-Nothing era of the late 1880s and early 1890s. This second wave of religious and ethnic bigotry seems to

Liquor Problem in Massachusetts,” *Massachusetts Law Quarterly*, XVII (May, 1933), 79-300.

¹⁷ Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman Suffrage,” pp. 152-154.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-158; Merk “Boston’s Public School Crisis,” pp. 176-179.

¹⁹ See Footnote 1 above, and Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman’s Suffrage,” pp. 156-158.

have stemmed from the so-called “New Immigration” which began in 1880. It would lead to the formation of the American Protective Association in 1887 and the Boston-based Immigration Restriction League in 1894.²⁰

This second wave of bigotry would see the anti-Irish Boston Brahmins joined by the Bay State’s second largest immigrant group, the British-Americans who had migrated from Canada, and especially from the Maritime Provinces.²¹ These British-Americans were militantly anti-Catholic, and one of them, William J.H. Traynor of Detroit, would become the leader and chief spokesman for the anti-Catholic and anti-immigration American Protective Association in the 1890s. The A.P.A. would call for a total ban on immigration, despite the fact that many of its members, including its president, W.J.H. Traynor, were immigrants themselves.²²

The political volcano of religious and ethnic prejudice did erupt in Boston in 1888. The beginning of the troubles came when Father Theodore A. Metcalf of South Boston’s Gate of Heaven Church objected to the history lessons being taught by a Mr. Travis at Boston English High School. Travis’s treatment of the Middle Ages and the indulgence issue specifically were considered very offensive to Catholics. When challenged, Travis insisted that his textbook, William Swinton’s *Outline of the World’s History*, supported him. The textbook subcommittee of the Boston School Committee investigated the situation and decided that Swinton’s book was, indeed, prejudiced against Catholics, and replaced it with Anderson’s *New General History*. Meanwhile Mr. Travis was

²⁰ See Donald L. Kinzer, “The American Protective Association: A Study of Anti-Catholicism, 1887-1911” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1954); and John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1955).

²¹ See Horace G. Wadlin, ed., *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1895* (7 vols., Boston, 1896-1900), I: 700-701. Of the 764,930 foreign-born in Massachusetts in 1885, 258,247 were Irish, 141,583 were from English-Canada and the Maritime Provinces, 109,763 from French-Canada, and 81,970 from England. The English-Canadian figures are often obscured by the practice of listing New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island separately from Canada.

²² *New York Times*, June 19, 1894, p. 9; and U.S. House of Representatives, 53rd Congress, 3rd Session, H.R. 8774, “A Bill Relative to Immigration and Naturalization,” introduced by Mr. William S. Linton, Republican from Michigan.

offered a new assignment, teaching something other than history at Boston English.²³

Boston area Protestants, unfortunately, considered Anderson's text to be prejudicial to the Protestant viewpoint. Claiming that both Travis and Swinton were being persecuted, a mass meeting was called for July 12 at Faneuil Hall. When an overflow crowd of 1,500 showed up for the meeting, the organizers switched the site to Tremont Temple, so more people could be accommodated. The speakers focused their attention on what they claimed was Catholic conspiracy to undermine the public school system, and they established a Committee of One Hundred to protect the public schools. The bigotry of this group is easily documented, since they called for immigrant restriction, and end to tax exemptions on church property, and the denial of both the right to vote and the right to hold public office for anyone who owed "ecclesiastical" allegiance to any foreign prince, potentate, or state. They also wanted to exclude Catholics from positions on the school committee and as teachers in the Boston public schools.²⁴

The Republican Party responded by running an all-Protestant school committee ticket in 1888, and that ticket was supported by both the Boston branch of the WCTU and the Committee of One Hundred. The Massachusetts School Suffrage Association split on the issue. Eliza Trask Hill, the wife and the daughter of temperance ministers, agreed with that all-Protestant ticket, while Mrs. Edith Cheney considered it to be bigotry, and she bolted from the parent organization. As a result, there were several organizations which were actively engaged in urging women to register and vote in the upcoming election.²⁵

Archbishop Williams repeated his earlier statements that he did not want the Catholic Church to get involved in politics, but many Irish

²³ Merk, "Boston's Public School Crisis," pp. 180-183; Kenneally, "Opposition of Woman Suffrage," chapter 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; and Judith B. Ranlett, "Sorority and Community: Women's Answer to a Changing Massachusetts" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1874), p. 267. Ranlett refers to school suffrage in this period as "a Protestant weapon with which to beat back the forces of alcohol and Catholicism."

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Catholic politicians ignored his advice and set out to register as many Catholic women in Boston as possible.²⁶

The Protestant groups had an early lead and almost all the 3,000 women who registered to vote in Boston by early September of 1888 were Protestants, according to the *New York Times*, which considered that story important enough to cover. In mid-September, both Protestant and Catholic groups were granted desks in the Assessor's Office of Boston City Hall, to assist potential voters, and a remarkable number of women, 4,600, paid poll taxes in just two days. Three quarters of them were Protestants. At that point, Irish politicians really got moving, apparently paying the poll taxes for their poorer constituents, and soon groups of Irish women, each led by a male "guide," were seen entering the Assessor's office each evening. By October 2, the *New York Times* reported that there were almost equal numbers of women registered from each religious group. The *Times* was in error, however, because it was judging from among the 23,368 women who paid their poll taxes. Over 3,100 of those, however, failed to register to vote; it is believed that almost all of those were Catholic women who initially went along with local politicians, only to be later dissuaded by their priests, who condemned political activity by women.²⁷

On December 11, 1888, election day for the Boston School committee, the weather was cold, windy, and rainy throughout the day, but 19,490 women voted in spite of the weather conditions. While there were around 10,000 Catholic women registered to vote, the most intelligent estimates are that 13,000 of the 19,000 voters were Protestants. The Democratic school committee ticket received only around 6,000 more votes than the Democratic mayoralty candidate, and so it is assumed that this is the number of Catholic women who actually cast their ballots. The other 13,000 women voters were divided among the Republican, the Citizens (temperance), and Cheney's Reform tickets. When the ballots were tabulated, all the victors were Protestants.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *New York Times*, September 26, 1888, p. 2, and October 2, 1888, p. 5. Kenneally, "Opposition of Woman Suffrage," p. 241 noted the economic stratification, with Protestant women registering during the daytime, and Irish women after work at night.

²⁸ *New York Times*, December 13, 1888, p. 1; Merk, "Boston's Public School Crisis," pp. 183-189; and Kenneally, "Opposition of Woman Suffrage," pp. 242-245.

The ferocity of the contest for Boston School Committee brought out almost 19,500 women voters. In the rest of the state, with almost 350 cities and towns, there were only 5,000 women exercising their right to vote in that year. Only nineteen women in Springfield bothered to vote in 1888, and only 44 in Worcester, while 108 cast their ballots in Fitchburg. The differences are obviously the result of local interest. When one's vote counts, when issues or personalities of candidates create interest in a political contest, people are far more likely to show up at the polls, than when there are not contests, or when it appears to be a choice between "Tweedledum" and "Tweedledee." Five times as many women voted in Fitchburg than in Springfield in 1888, because voting seemed to be important to Fitchburg women that year. Obviously, that was even more true for Boston.²⁹

The bigots were obviously encouraged by their 1888 victories. They had defeated Boston's first Irish-Catholic mayor, Hugh O'Brien, at the same time as it removed various Catholic school committee members. Now, they continued their campaign to eliminate all Catholics from the Boston School Committee in 1889. In that year, however, there were fewer women participating in the contest. While almost 19,500 had cast ballots in 1888, just over 10,000 women voted in 1889. Catholic women supposedly boycotted the election, but from the numbers cast, there were also 3,000 fewer Protestant women at the voting booths. Perhaps the level of intolerance dissuaded these women from participating.³⁰

In 1890, there were no Catholics left on the Boston School Committee. The final Catholic member, Judge Fallon, had resigned in protest early in 1890, when the textbook committee adopted what he considered another very prejudiced history textbook. At that point, the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, and statistics cited in Footnote 1, above.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, December 24, 1888, p. 1, reported charges of illegal voting in Boston, noting that some Republican wards had more votes counted than there were votes cast. The implication was that on this last year before the secret ballot was in effect, Republican women cast general tickets instead of voting just for the school committee. The *Times* felt that some women probably used the wrong ballot by mistake, but doubted that 3,000 women did so, and thus stole the election from Hugh O'Brien. Any ballot theft would seem to be impossible, which considering the fact that the State Legislature (1888, chapter 353) enacted a law in May, 1888, which required that women's ballots be clearly marked "For School Committee Only" on the back, while men's ballots were prohibited from having any markings on the reverse side of the ballot.

Republicans felt that they had to nominate two Catholics for the school committee, if they had any hopes of winning the race for mayor. The Republicans apologized to Eliza Hall and other extremists, for putting Irish names on their ticket. This time, a little less than 7,500 Boston women voted for school committee, and only half of the nativist's ticket was elected.³¹ Boston's struggles against bigotry would not involve women voters directly in the future. And while this paper will not go into the East Boston riots of 1895, or any other 1890s activities of the American Protective Association or the Immigration Restriction League, the reader is cautioned that the nativists were still around and still active in this period.

Once the vote for Boston School Committee ceased to be so intense an issue, the number of women registered to vote dropped considerably. The total number of women registered for school suffrage in Massachusetts had dropped from a high of 28,066 in the hectic year of 1888 to 18,158 by the much calmer year of 1892. And this drop occurred despite the fact that the poll tax had been abolished as prerequisite for women voting. But starting in 1893, the number of women registered to vote showed a steady increase from year to year, and reached 35,895 in 1895. And the women registered to vote were now not overwhelmingly from Boston. Boston women comprised four-fifths of the women who were registered to vote in 1888, but would decline to less than the one-fifth figure which it would be expected to have, considering its percentage of women in the total state population.³²

After 1890, politically active women were back fighting their own issues, lobbying yearly in the legislature for municipal suffrage, or at least for the right to vote in the annual local option liquor referenda. But woman suffrage had been almost permanently scarred by the Boston school fights of the 1880s. When an Eliza Trask Hill or a Reverend Joseph Cook testified in favor of extending the suffrage at legislative hearings, it was hard for Irish-Americans not to consider their comments as nativistic, because they, themselves, were bigots. Hill, in 1894, publicly associated woman suffrage with "Protestantism, nativism,

³¹ Kenneally, "Opposition of Woman Suffrage," pp. 248-249.

³² See Footnote 1, above.

education, and breeding,” not exactly the best reasons to induce Catholic support for the cause.³³

The Republican Party in Massachusetts was the party of woman suffrage. The *Boston Pilot* probably spoke for most Democrats when it declared in 1894 that any Democrat who supported woman suffrage was either a knave or a fool.³⁴

Had the Republicans been united behind woman suffrage, this reform would have passed easily, since the Republicans invariably controlled both the legislature and the governorship. But, as James Kenneally ably demonstrated, only the very liberal Republicans supported woman suffrage. The very powerful Brahmin element in the Massachusetts Republican Party was strongly opposed to rights for women. Had they been Germanic instead of Anglo-Saxon in origin, their motto for women might have been “*kinder, kuchen, and kirche*.”³⁵

So, with the Democrats united against woman suffrage and only a minority of Republicans favoring it, progress for women was very difficult to achieve. Some suffragists viewed the “mock” referendum of 1895 as a virtual trap to eliminate the woman’s issue, rather than as a sincere attempt to expand the suffrage. It was a non-binding vote on municipal suffrage, to which registered women voters were invited to participate. Those favoring woman suffrage were opposed to this vote, because they had everything to lose and nothing to gain from it.³⁶ If the referendum won, the legislature was under no legal compulsion to actually grant women the right to vote for mayor or selectmen. If the referendum failed, those who were opposed to extending the suffrage would be able to point to the vote as a rationale for doing nothing. If too few women voted in the referendum, it would “prove” that most women were not interested in gaining the right to vote.

An analysis of the legislative votes on woman suffrage in 1895 confirms the belief that the legislators were not sincere when they agreed

³³ Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman Suffrage,” chapter 7.

³⁴ *Boston Pilot*, March 31 1894, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 260.

³⁵ Kenneally, “Opposition of Woman Suffrage,” chapter 9; and “Woman Suffrage and the Massachusetts Referendum of 1895,” *Historian XXX* (August, 1968): 617-633.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

to an informational referendum in 1895. The Massachusetts House, on March 5, 1895, voted 87-127 against granting women the right of municipal suffrage. On May 17, they voted 96-63 to have an informational referendum on this question in the upcoming state election. Among the 87 supporters of woman suffrage in March, only 29 voted for the referendum in May, 30 voted no. Among the 127 opponents of municipal suffrage in March, 61 were willing to hold a referendum in May, and only 26 continued to vote no. The rest of the legislature avoided the May vote. Only 55 members voted the same way both times, while 91 “changed” their minds. Interestingly enough, only 12 Democrats switched their positions between the two votes, while 79 Republicans did so.³⁷

The story of 1895 had been told before, and it does not need repeating here. The suffragists entered the campaign very reluctantly, for the reasons expressed above. The anti-suffragists were equally upset in 1895 by the thought they did not care to register to vote. Some 42,676 women registered to vote in the 1895 referendum, a figure almost 6,800 higher than the figures on women registration in 1895, and 3,000 above the official registration figures issued in 1896. This means that one out of every six women eligible to vote in the 1895 referendum had registered to vote specifically to participate in this referendum, and almost half of them were immediately removed from the voting rolls.³⁸

Yet, when it came to the actual vote, only 23,000 women actually cast ballots. The 1895 vote is dismal any way you look at it. Over a third of the men who cast ballots for governor did not even bother to vote on the municipal suffrage referendum. Officially, 31.7 percent of the men voted in favor of municipal suffrage. But, if we include those who ignored the question, the figure drops to a meager 20.3 percent of the men voted in favor of municipal suffrage. While 96 percent of the women voting voted in favor of municipal suffrage, only 54 percent of the registered women bothered to cast ballots, and maybe 4 percent of the women who could have registered to vote bothered to do so. The

³⁷ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1895* (Boston, 1895) pp. 450-453 and 1180-1182. Party affiliations can be found in Alfred S. Roe, ed., *Massachusetts Year Book and City and Town Register, 1895* (Worcester, 1894), pp. 243-250.

³⁸ Public Document 43, for 1895.

women opposed to extension of the suffrage tried to claim that the registered women who did not vote were opposed to woman suffrage. If so, and the argument is dubious, only 52 percent of the women registered for school suffrage favored municipal suffrage for women.³⁹

After 1895, the annual hearings before the legislature continued, but they were rather *pro forma*. No one expected women to gain a legislative victory, and no victories occurred. Sharon Hartman Strom implies that woman suffrage was on the downside even before the 1895 mock referendum, with 64 of 90 Massachusetts chapters of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association disbanding by 1895.⁴⁰

The issue of woman suffrage would again become an active issue during the Progressive Era, and Massachusetts would have another referendum on woman suffrage in 1915, a vote in which women were not permitted to participate. For most of the years between 1895 and 1915, however, it looks like a period when everyone talked and nothing happened. The Seneca Falls women died off, and a new generation rose to carry on the issue. College students and laboring groups were tapped to provide support for the woman suffrage issue. Sharon Strom has shown how suffragists, unable to reach the uncommitted, left their meeting halls and went out into the streets, to preach. Using booths at scheduled fairs and festivals, as well as open air meetings, the suffragists worked hard to win over uncommitted women and men to the issue of equal suffrage for all.⁴¹

The 1915 referendum on woman suffrage in Massachusetts was restricted to male voters. Articles have appeared on the campaign strategies of both the suffragists and the anti-suffragists in 1915. One can also see a graphic illustration of the male support for woman suffrage in the Bay State in 1915 in the recent *Historical Atlas of Massachusetts*, although it is erroneously labeled as voter sentiment on the 1919 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Neither of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, See also Kenneally, "Woman Suffrage and ... 1895," p. 630.

⁴⁰ Sharon Harman Strom, "Leadership and Tactics in the American Woman Suffrage Movement: A New Perspective from Massachusetts," *Journal of American History*, LXII (September, 1975), pp. 296-315.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

these articles nor the map, however, in any way measure female support of woman suffrage in Massachusetts.⁴²

But there is at least one measurement of interest in woman suffrage, by women, for 1915 – and indeed for the entire quarter century after the 1895 mock referendum. An examination of the number of women registered to vote for school committees shows a steady growth in the number of women committed on this issue throughout the quarter century 1895-1920. After 1894, there were always at least 35,000 women registered to vote in Massachusetts. The minimum number registered to vote reached the 40,000 level in 1901, the 50,000 level in 1911, and the 100,000 level by 1915. School suffrage may not have been much to talk about, but increasingly the women of the Bay State felt that they had to demonstrate that they indeed wanted the right to vote by registering to vote. The numbers fluctuate from year to year but generally they were going upwards as can be seen in the graph on woman registered to vote in Massachusetts. While women were not permitted to participate in the 1915 referendum, over 100,000 women in Massachusetts quietly announced their desire for the franchise by registering for the only elections they were permitted to participated in that year.⁴³

The enclosed map shows where women were registered to vote in 1915. In five Bay State communities, Woburn, Natick, Leicester, Concord, and Perersham, a majority of the potential woman voters were registered to vote in 1915 with Perersham leading the state by having just under 60 percent of eligible women actually registered to vote. On the other hand, 40 towns still had no women actually registered to vote in 1915 and another 97 had less than five percent of its eligible women registered.⁴⁴

A computer comparison of women registered to vote in 1915 with various nationalities in Massachusetts in 1915 indicated that the correlation between women voting and the percentage of Yankees in a

⁴² *Ibid.*; Louis L. Stevenson, "Women Anti-Suffragists in the 1915 Massachusetts Campaign," *New England Quarterly* 58 (March, 1979), 80-93; and Richard W. Wilkie and Jack Tager, eds., *Historical Atlas of Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 88.

⁴³ Statistics from Public Document 43, 1893-1919 used to construct this graph.

⁴⁴ Public Document 43, 1915.

town (defined as native born men and women with native born parents) was $-.0725$ while the same comparison with Irish people, both foreign born and those of Irish parents, was a positive $.2168$. While these numbers are entirely too low to be proof, they do tend to confirm the belief that woman suffrage was becoming a Democratic, and even an Irish Democratic cause.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* and Charles F. Gettemy, ed., *Massachusetts: The Decennial Census 1915* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1918), Table 18.