

# Looking Back, Looking Forward

## *The Limitations of Past Perspectives*

Margaret Smith Crocco

History, like writing, is a process of constant revision. Each new generation rewrites the story of the past based on new evidence, shifting perspectives, and new questions that arise based on these and other factors. As Julie Des Jardins has shown, the historical enterprise itself changes over time, with gender and race contributing to new understandings as they are centrally implicated in what she calls “the politics of memory.”<sup>1</sup> In short, new scholars bring new questions.

Looking back from today’s vantage point at the 1995 issue of *Social Education*, “Breaking the Chains,” which marked the 75th Anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment,<sup>2</sup> the limitations of the historiographic record about the women’s suffrage movement at that time are now clear. Although attention was given in the issue to the tensions between African American and white women involved in the movement, and to the key leadership of African American women such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, insufficient coverage was given to other complexifying factors. Over the last 25 years, the accumulation of new research, fresh perspectives, and challenging questions have altered understandings of the story, especially the persistent and oppressive racism that has shaped so much of the nation’s history, the women’s suffrage struggle, and, indeed, our present circumstances as a nation today.<sup>3</sup>

Despite some attention to these issues, “Breaking the Chains” also failed to address other aspects of citizenship, specifically the relationship between voting and racial/ethnic identity. These issues are essential to a more honest reckoning with the unfinished business of the Nineteenth Amendment that chiefly affected white women and some

women of color living outside the Jim Crow South. Among the overlooked topics that are important to a fuller understanding of these matters would be consideration of citizenship and voting by groups of men and women post-1920, such as Asian Americans,<sup>4</sup> Native Americans,<sup>5</sup> Latinx,<sup>6</sup> felons,<sup>7</sup> and others. These groups, like women, have from time to time and in certain states either been disenfranchised or had their citizenship questioned in the ongoing effort to advance the United States as a “white man’s republic.”<sup>8</sup> As historian Allan J. Lichtman puts it:

... for most of U.S. history, the American political leadership has considered suffrage not a natural right but a privilege bestowed by government on a political community restricted by considerations of wealth, sex, race, residence, literacy, criminal conviction, and citizenship. The notion of privileged access to the vote survives into our own time, albeit in subtler forms than before.<sup>9</sup>

This 2020 issue of *Social Education*, marking the centennial anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, seeks to

broaden understanding of the suffrage story in several ways: by considering the strategies and tactics used by the suffragists to foment their agitation—strategies and tactics that have become popular vehicles of political protest (Woynshner); by acknowledging the ways in which further work was needed to secure voting and other rights for all women (Brown, Batt and Brown; McClure); by acknowledging the need for women in positions of political leadership and for stories about their accomplishments (Sdunzik and Johnson; Libresco [in the May/June 2020 *Social Education*]), Winslow; and by placing the U.S. women’s suffrage story within the context of the larger struggle for women’s rights worldwide (Engebretson). This September 2020 issue will not return in a systematic fashion to the histories of women’s suffrage as told by the articles in “Breaking the Chains.” Instead, the focus here is on extending the story of the women’s rights struggle of the 19th and early 20th centuries into the 20th and 21st centuries as ongoing movements for achieving women’s equality in politics and society more generally.

Placing the centennial of ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment within this broader landscape enables connections to what historian Eric Foner has called the nation’s “second founding”<sup>10</sup>—the constitutional changes in balance of power between the federal government and the states as a result of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments passed during

the Reconstruction era. Despite the monumental nature of these amendments and their potential for political and societal change, Foner notes that “by the early twentieth century, with the acquiescence of the Supreme Court, the Fifteenth Amendment had been essentially nullified throughout the South.”<sup>11</sup> Sadly, in 2013, we again saw the complicity of the Supreme Court in reversing these advances with its *Shelby County v. Holder* 5-4 decision, limiting the purview of these amendments and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>12</sup> The Supreme Court has also countenanced various strategies adopted by the states that are aimed at voter suppression by affirming the constitutionality of laws related to gerrymandering and voter IDs.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the Nineteenth Amendment is best understood as part of the cumulative legacy of civil rights efforts to expand the franchise. Although we mark the centennial of the women’s suffrage amendment here, we do so while acknowledging the many flaws and limitations related to racism and classism associated with the women’s rights movement. We present these articles in the spirit of recognizing the ongoing work necessary to move women and persons of color towards equality as civic actors. In light of actions by state governments to restrict who gets to vote as well as how and when people can vote (e.g., in-person versus mail-in balloting; voting hours and poll locations, etc.), it’s clear that race and racism remain greatly implicated in the exercise of the franchise—as with all civil rights. An equally important lesson of our history over the last 100 years is, as Foner says, “Rights can be gained, and rights can be taken away.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, since 1920, feminists have argued about whether the Nineteenth Amendment, with its emphasis on access to the ballot box, is sufficient to bring about equality for women. It is important to remember that, even in 1920, suffragist Alice Paul considered the amendment inadequate to this task. She and others of this mindset first proposed an Equal



The cover of the September 1995 issue of *Social Education*, which marked the 75th Anniversary of women’s suffrage.

Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1923.<sup>15</sup> Although their effort failed, Paul reintroduced the ERA in 1943, modifying its language to align with the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments. Over the next several decades, the amendment was proposed to Congress regularly but did not gain passage until 1972. However, the ERA failed to gain sufficient support for ratification by the states during the original seven-year timeframe. In recent years, the amendment has been revived and supporters have renewed a push for ratification.<sup>16</sup> There are disagreements about this course of action that sometimes reflect differences of race and class within the contemporary women’s movement. The effort to gain support for ratification requires a significant investment of energy and funds. Some question whether it is the best way of advancing social, political, and economic equality. One conclusion widely shared by feminists reflecting back on the last century is that access to the vote has not ushered in equality for all women.

### Women Voters

What impact has the Nineteenth Amendment had over the last century on politics and voting in the United States? The long history of the women’s suffrage struggle and the shorter history

of presidential elections since 1920 have demonstrated that women are neither a monolithic entity nor do they vote as one. Even though journalists and pundits have tended to rely on stereotypes and clichés when discussing the “woman voter,” such characterizations mask the very real ways that factors other than gender—such as race, class, region, religion and various historical and contextual factors—shape the choices women make at the ballot box. A recent analysis of women’s voting underscores this point: women vote a lot like men.<sup>17</sup> When a Democrat is favored by the electorate, women and men tilt in that direction, as is true when a Republican is favored, albeit to varying degrees, especially in recent years. As of 1980, women began to turn out in greater numbers than men for presidential elections, although in both cases the percentage of those who vote is low in comparison with other advanced democracies.

Over the last century, women’s lives have changed dramatically. In terms of marriage and the family, occupation, and educational level, women’s status and roles in American society are markedly different in 2020 than they were in 1920. Concomitantly, women’s voting choices have come to diverge more markedly from men’s choices in presidential elections. Since 1980, scholars have noted a “gender gap” in these elections, albeit the size of this gap is strongly influenced by region, religion, and race.

More highly educated women and single women have skewed Democrat in their voting, giving greater emphasis than men to social welfare issues such as federal and state support for preschool education; enhanced family leave policies; access to healthcare, including abortion rights; and longer unemployment benefits. Still, as Wolbrecht and Corder write: “Women are far less likely to report that their gender identity is extremely important to their voting decision compared to the importance that African American voters report for their racial identity.”<sup>18</sup> These authors note the work of political scientists Erin Cassese and

Tiffany Barnes in warning against “an inflated sense of cohesion among women.”<sup>19</sup> They comment:

As we saw in 2016, observing that women are more likely to vote Democratic than are men (which they are across virtually every demographic category) does not necessarily mean a majority of women vote Democratic in every case. Black and Hispanic women voted overwhelmingly for Democrat Hillary Clinton, even more so than black and Hispanic men, but a majority of white women (and a super-majority of white men) cast their ballots for Republican Donald Trump, consistent with patterns now decades old.<sup>20</sup>

This comment underscores the degree to which aspects of a woman’s identity (race, religion, region, etc.) often are more salient at the ballot box than gender, thus making it difficult to provide simple answers to questions about the impact of the Nineteenth Amendment on American politics since 1920.

### Education and Change

Finally, in considering the importance of giving women the right to vote and other efforts to bring greater equality to their status as American citizens, we tie together the ideas presented at the outset about historiographical shifts, the suffrage movement, and the role of education in promoting social justice.

The contributions to this issue all recount efforts—through heroic individuals and steadfast, committed mass movements—aimed at social and political change. Education is often implicated in these stories of change: for example, Shirley Chisholm was a teacher, as were many original suffragists, and Title IX’s impact has been felt across kindergarten to graduate education. Over the last 30 years, we’ve made some strides in curricular change in terms of whose story gets told in social studies—albeit

not enough, to be sure.<sup>21</sup> The opportunities for educating in more inclusive ways and for transformative social and political change are endless, but perhaps the actors—teachers and teacher educators—who are central to the enterprise underestimate the potential for making a difference through their work.

As we deal with a global pandemic that has produced rapid and unsettling changes, we might contemplate the variety of ways in which change occurs in a society. Will this crisis provoke a dramatic resetting of our priorities as a nation? Older women have seen changes over the course of their lives, changes that have been both gradual and dramatic in their cumulative impact—from changes in the proportion of women in higher education and the workforce to same-sex marriage. Will the changes wrought by the current crisis precipitate other changes? Will women—and men—be able to leverage the crisis for positive ends that produce a more just and equitable society? Or will we go back to the status quo ante, failing to recognize the massive inequality of this nation while we witness so many citizens failing to get the support they need to weather this pandemic?

Scholars point to numerous factors that play a role in bringing about social and political change: the importance of civil resistance,<sup>22</sup> shifts in norms, policy choices, and the law,<sup>23</sup> evolving sociological contexts and the emergence of new role models,<sup>24</sup> the quiet yet significant contribution of networks and cascades in fomenting bottom-up change,<sup>25</sup> and, of course, disasters, pandemics, and other shock events.<sup>26</sup> The women’s movement that produced the Nineteenth Amendment has, along with the civil rights movement of the last 100 years more broadly, reflected the role of all these factors in moving their causes along.

We can see in the contributions to this issue and other *Social Education* articles about the civil rights movement in recent years the significance of political actors as role models,<sup>27</sup> as well as the efficacy of coalitions and movements in inspiring

others to attempt change.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the women’s suffrage movement, too much of its history has been written from the top down, with an inordinate amount of attention given to the “big women” (Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony) of the past. Too little attention has been given to women of color in these histories and the ways in which the story unfolded differently in various regions of the country. Too often, educators fail to move beyond “a single story” of women’s suffrage towards a more complex and nuanced understanding of the past, putting it within the context of the long civil rights movement, as well as the continuing struggle to bring about a more just and equal society for all citizens.<sup>29</sup>

Women represent well over 70 percent of all teachers, and their numbers continue to grow within the ranks of teachers and teacher educators, professors, and researchers. Nevertheless, what is clearly needed across all these domains is greater diversity among those who work in schools and institutions of higher education, especially within social studies. Only in so doing will teaching and research be better informed by an understanding of how women’s, men’s, and trans-gendered individuals’ experiences within history and contemporary society converge and diverge.

Over the last several years, the field of social studies has benefited from renewed attention to K-12 civic education, the urgent need for teaching about politics, even in these fractured times, and the central place of controversial policy issue discussions and deliberations in schools and colleges.<sup>30</sup> As practitioners and teacher educators encourage these discussions, questions should be raised about how issues and their solutions get framed and who benefits, or not, from this framing. Will suggested policy courses of action in response to the issue framing affect men and women in the same way? Will all women be affected in the same fashion or will there be differential effects around race, class and sexual orientation? Which expert voices are introduced into the



discussion as evidence? Are these expert voices or sources exclusively male or reflective only of the male experience? To what extent does the curriculum out of which these issues have emerged include, marginalize, or silence the stories and voices of women? Of women of color? Of gays and lesbians and transgendered individuals?<sup>31</sup>

NCSS offers practitioners a variety of pedagogical supports for making curriculum more inclusive and multi-perspectival through its periodicals and C3 Framework *Bulletins* (e.g., 113, 114, 116), all of which address the history of marginalized groups.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in 2020, the organization called explicitly for greater attention to teaching about women from an intersectional standpoint in its Board of Directors' approved position statement, "Supporting Curricular Promotion and Intersectional Valuing of Women in History and Current Events."<sup>33</sup> Along with the articles contained within this special issue of *Social Education*, the position statement seeks to affirm the idea that women are not a monolithic group today, nor have they been in the past.

In the future, one can hope that those who teach and do research within the field of social studies will ask original questions and pursue new perspectives that open up the field in an even fuller way than in the past to multiple perspectives and multiple stories. Social studies educators play a critical role in providing young citizens who are both civic actors and future voters with insights into the nation's past along with its contemporary concerns. Only by bringing women—all women—fully into these stories, inquiries, and discussions will the promise of the Nineteenth Amendment to bring women into the role of full citizen be fulfilled. Although voting is an essential part of democracy, marked here by the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, citizenship rests upon a more comprehensive appreciation of the ways in which all of us who are citizens have both shared—and not shared—the same rights and privileges. 🌍

## Notes

1. Julie Des Jardins, *The Historical Enterprise: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 2004); Rosalie Metro has reflected on the selectivity of history writing in relationship to school-oriented history textbooks in her article, "The White Gunman, the Anti-Semitic Automaker, and Other Dilemmas of a History Textbook Author," *Social Education* 83, no. 3 (2019): 138-141; and Lisa Tetrault has addressed the memorialization of the early women's suffrage movement in her book, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
2. Margaret Smith Crocco, "Breaking the Chains: The 75th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage," *Social Education* 59, no. 5 (September 1995).
3. Among the many revisionist histories on suffrage are the following: Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2019). For two recent articles in *Social Education* related to teaching about suffrage, see Corinne Porter and Kathleen Munn, "Forging a Path to the 19th Amendment: Understanding Women's Suffrage," (pp. 248-255) and Amanda Campbell and Stephen Wesson, "Leading Students to Explore Suffragists' Legacy of Civic Engagement through a Biographical Play" (256-260). Both of these articles appeared in the October 2019 issue of *Social Education* 83, no. 5.
4. Gary Y. Okihiro, *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015), 88; also, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Land* (Boston: Little Brown, 1989); Brook Thomas, "China Men, *US v. Wong Kim Ark* and the Question of Citizenship," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1998), 689-717; and Clare Ching Jen, "The Possibilities of Asian American Citizenship: A Race and Gender Analysis," *Ethnic Studies Review* 34 (2011), 157-183. For an article in *Social Education* on teaching this topic, see Sara Lyons Davis, "Suffrage, Activism, and Education in the Era of Chinese Exclusion: Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee," *Social Education* 83, no. 6 (2019): 356-360.
5. Allan J. Lichtman, *The Embattled Vote in America: From the Founding to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), 142. An excellent book on white supremacist thinking as it pertains to citizenship for groups such as Mexican Americans and Filipino Americans, who often came to the United States as temporary laborers, is Mae M. Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
6. G. Cristina Mora, *Making Hispanics* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2014). See also: Maribel Santiago, "Erasing Differences for the Sake of Inclusion: How Mexican/Mexican American Students Construct Historical Narratives," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 45, no. 1 (2017): 43-74 as well as Santiago's "Teaching a New Chapter of History," *Phi Delta Kappan* 94, no. 6 (2013): 35-38.
7. Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 110. Educators might also see Jane Bolgatz and Ryan Crowley, "Voting Rights Act of 1965: In Whose Interest?" *Social Education* 79, no. 5 (2015): 239-243; Charles H. Withers, "The Stewart Sisters v. The Steamer *Sue*: Nineteenth-Century Black Female Activism," *Social Education* 84, no. 1 (2020), 24-30; Andrea M. Hawkman and Antonio J. Castro, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," *Social Education* 81, no. 1 (2017), 28-32.
8. Stephen Kantrowitz, "White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism, and the Two Citizenship of the Fourteenth Amendment," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 10, no. 1 (2020): 29-53. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/cwe.2020.0002; Lichtman, 36.
9. Lichtman, 3.
10. Foner
11. Foner, 164. For a comprehensive history of the ways in which the Supreme Court contributed to sanctioning state and federal laws for racial inequality, see Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004).
12. Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Invalidates a Key Part of Voting Rights Act," *New York Times* (June 25, 2013). Digital edition.
13. Carol Anderson, *One Person, One Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy* (New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury Press, 2018); Gilda R. Daniels, *Uncounted: The Crisis of Voter Suppression in America* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2020).
14. Foner, 175.
15. The original text Alice Paul proposed read as follows: "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction. In the 1940s, when the amendment was re-introduced, Paul re-wrote it to say: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." [www.equalrightsamendment.org/the-equal-rights-amendment](http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/the-equal-rights-amendment)
16. The Equal Rights Amendment, originally proposed in 1923 and passed by the Senate in 1972 before beginning the ratification process, adopts the language Paul introduced in her 1940s revision.
17. Christina Wolbrecht and J. Kevin Corder, *A Century of Votes for Women: American Elections since Suffrage* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
18. *Ibid.*, 229.
19. *Ibid.*, 230. The admonition cited by Wolbrecht and Corder comes from Erin C. Cassese and Tiffany D. Barnes, "Reconciling Sexism and Women's Support for Republican Candidates," *Political Behavior* 41(2019) 677-700.
20. *Ibid.*, 241.
21. A powerful example of work within the field of social studies aimed at social and political transformation by way of curricular and educational change is that of former NCSS president James Banks, often called "the father of multicultural education." His work has brought together citizenship education, multicultural education, and global education in unparalleled fashion. For a compendium of some of his most important writings see James A. Banks, *Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected Essays* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2020).
22. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2014).
23. Cass R. Sunstein, *How Change Happens* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020).
24. Wolbrecht and Corder, 212-214.
25. Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks, Hierarchies, and the Struggle for Global Power* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

26. Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).
27. For more information on women as role models in politics, see, for example, Barbara Winslow's biography, *Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change, 1924–2005* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2014); and Jennifer Steinhauer, *The Firsts: The Inside Story of the Women Reshaping Congress* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020), on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Sharice Davids, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Katie Porter, and other women elected to the House of Representatives in 2018.
28. The civil rights movement also includes efforts by LGBT+ individuals for recognition and equal rights. Many useful materials suitable for K-12 schools for teaching about this aspect of U.S. history can be found at: <https://unerasd.org/resource/curriculum>.
29. The phrase “a single story” is associated with the writer Chimamanda Adichie, whose TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” is widely known: [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).
30. Among the notable works in this genre of publication are the following: Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Wayne Journell, *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Engaging with Contentious Issues* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2017); Avner Segall, Margaret Crocco, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, and Rebecca Jacobsen, “Lessons Learned about the Challenges of Classroom Deliberations,” *Social Education* 82, no. 6 (2018): 336–342; Margaret Crocco, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, R. Jacobsen, and Avner Segall, “Less Arguing, More Listening: Improving Civility in Classrooms” *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 5 (2018): 67–71.
31. As Stephen J. Thornton put it in 2003, there has always been and continues to be “silence on gays and lesbians in the social studies curriculum.” Much the same could be said of many other groups in our nation’s history. See, for example: Sohyun An, “Asian Americans in American History: An AsianCrit Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 244–276 or Wayne Journell, “An Incomplete History: Representations of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 48, no. 2 (2009): 18–32.
32. NCSS publishes the following periodicals: *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, *Middle Level Learning*, *Social Education*, and *Theory and Research in Social Education*. The C3 Framework Bulletins are as follows: NCSS Bulletin 113, *Social Studies for the Next Generation*; NCSS Bulletin 114, *Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework: Exploring Inquiry-based Instruction in Social Studies*, eds. Kathy Swan and John Lee; and NCSS Bulletin 116, *Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework: Part Two*, eds. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant.
33. This statement calls upon social studies educators across school and college levels to include greater attention to women—from an intersectional perspective—in the teaching of social studies, offering recommendations for policy and practice along with a rationale for this inclusion. The principal authors are Thomas A. Lucey, Margaret Crocco, Barbara Cruz, and Andrea Libresco, authors (2020), It is available at: [www.socialstudies.org/positions/supporting-curricular-promotion-of-women-in-history-and-current-events](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/supporting-curricular-promotion-of-women-in-history-and-current-events)

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