

THE ROOSEVELTS DISAGREE: THE DEBATE ABOUT WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

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Calling women who wanted the vote ‘Soapbox Militants,’ Kate Roosevelt and her socially and financially-secure New York City group wanted no part of the Suffrage Cause. Instead they aligned themselves with the Anti-Suffrage Movement.

An independent woman and a member of the politically-active Roosevelt Family Kate Shippen Roosevelt opposed women gaining the right to vote. In her diary, written from 1912-19, Mrs. Roosevelt, the widow of Theodore Roosevelt’s first cousin, Hilborne L. Roosevelt, often expressed her negative views on this heated debate.

Describing women’s right to vote as, “simply unnecessary,” Mrs. Roosevelt did not mince words. She along with, for the most part middle to upper-middle class, conservative Protestants like herself subscribed to the notion that women were biologically destined to be childbearers and homemakers. In this realm, anti-suffragists felt women had total domestic freedom in their own homes and it was going against the laws of nature to shake-up the status quo. Of course men thought this was a great philosophy, leave the “little woman at home” while they made all the important business and political decisions. Nearly as many anti-suffrage groups sprang up throughout the country as did pro-suffrage groups, but apparently they were not as vocal or did not have the same political and financial support as their opponents.

Men and women regularly stood on soapboxes to give speeches.

Miss Minnie Bronson, secretary of the Association Opposed to Woman’s Suffrage, called suffrage a “dangerous experiment” and blamed the relatively new Progressive Party for promoting it.

In 1912, the leader of the Progressive Party, also known as the Bull Moose Party, was none-other than the civic-minded politician, Theodore Roosevelt. He was seeking his party's nomination to run against William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson for President of the United States. Many of his speeches were laced with the topic of women's rights.

The Progressive Movement was meant to energize American Politics. It was Roosevelt's remedy to cure the ills that plagued American society. Its philosophy was that if enfranchised women supported the movement's reforms, the party would be perceived as more moral and compassionate. Their goal was to counter the anti-suffrage claim that suffrage was incompatible with the woman's place in the home and that politics was a dirty business that would soil the pristine persona of the female.

Theodore Roosevelt, the consummate politician and strategist knew he had a tiger by the tail and wasn't letting go. In 1912, at the presidential convention in Chicago, he made a bold but calculated move. He asked Jane Addams to give the speech nominating him to run as his parties' candidate for President of the United States. She would go down in history as the first woman to speak at a national convention.

By then, Jane Addams was well-known for her social activism and for establishing Hull House in the slums of Chicago. She was also Vice President of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association.

As the author of a column in the *Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "Why Women Should Vote." Addams had been gaining notoriety on the subject of suffrage since 1910. Officially, the magazine opposed woman's suffrage, but sales swayed some of their editorial content and Jane Addams became a regular contributor.

Addams' counter-part in New York City was Lillian Wald, who with the help of Teddy Roosevelt and other socially-active liberals like Jacob Riis, started the Henry Street Settlement House.

Even though Kate Roosevelt's politics differed from those of her relative, Teddy, she kept track of his comings and goings often commenting on his politics in her diary. In October, 1912 she wrote, "Everyone went to the rally at Madison Square Garden for Theodore." Her comments were not coy or at-all family-oriented. She continued, "His politics are the politics of the very far future. They are too altruistic, idealist and unwanted for the human nature of the present day!"

On April 25, 1913 Kate Roosevelt went to New York City's elite Colony Club, to hear Mrs. John Martin speak on behalf of the anti-suffrage side. A member of the New York State Association opposed to Woman Suffrage Mrs. Martin was an outspoken devotee of its cause. For this reason she was often called upon to share her views. The garden parties held at her estate in Tomkinsville, New York, were well-attended and well-known.

One year later, on April 3, 1914, Mrs. Roosevelt's diary mentions Mrs. Martin speaking at the home of Mrs. Henry Seligman, wife of the millionaire banker. Their home at 30 West Fifty-Sixth Street was the setting for a rally against Woman's Suffrage. Although Mrs. Roosevelt did not attend, her diary included a clipping from the *New York Times* describing the No-Votes-For Women event. According to the *Times*, Mrs. Martin proceeded to tear to tatters the great new cause. The audience listened to her demolition of the suffrage movement "We are not merely against feminism, but for the family. We cannot reconcile feminism and the family. We hope to hear the sound of women's feet, walking away from the factory and back to the home."



Immigrant children attend art class at Hull House, 1911.

Dr. Anna Shaw, President of the National American Women's Suffrage Association called anti-suffragists the "home, hearth and mother crowd." Obviously, she was not interested in any of these identities. When asked why there was no marriage in heaven, Dr. Shaw brazenly responded, "Because there are no men in heaven." Like many suffragettes, she felt that men were not necessary and women, banding together could take care of themselves and live happily ever-after in a female-dominated world and after-life. When she died in 1919, at her beside was Lucy Anthony (Susan B. Anthony's niece). Called her "intimate companion," Lucy Anthony lived with Dr. Shaw for thirty years.

The Woman's National Anti-Suffrage League was established in London on July 21, 1908 with a mission to oppose women being granted the vote in the United Kingdom's Parliamentary elections, although it did support their having votes in local government elections. It was founded at a time when



Dr. Anna Shaw, about 1914.

there was a resurgence in support of women's suffrage in England.

The movement crossed the Atlantic and landed in New York in 1897 under the auspices of the New York State Association Opposed to Woman's Suffrage. By 1908 it had more than 90 members active in publishing pamphlets, giving speeches and organizing rallies. Mrs. William Winslow Crannell published the *Anti Suffragist* quarterly from 1908 to 1912. Later called the *Woman's Protest*, it was published by the organization at large.

The Anti-Suffrage Movement was active throughout the country, but New York seemed to be the cog from which the wheel turned. Officially formed in 1911, and called the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, it was headquartered in New York. Although specific reasons for opposing women voting varied throughout differing regions of the country, the national organization was united in its general opposition. It was not limited to New York or just to conservatives. It had its champions all over the country, coming from many walks of life, even those who traveled in liberal circles.

Emma Goldman, one of the most well-known liberals at the time, worked to rally the anti-suffrage contingent. . A feminist ahead of her time, one would think she would champion the cause of suffrage for women. An advocate of free-love, she campaigned against women voting on the grounds that women were more "inclined toward legal enforcement of morality (as in the Women's Christian Temperance Union); that women were the equals of men; and that suffrage would not make a difference." She also

argued, "Activists ought to advocate revolution rather than seek greater privileges within an inherently unjust system."

Another anarchist who spoke on the subject was Max Eastman, who addressed the debate from a different direction. When Mrs. Roosevelt heard him speak she referred to him in her diary as a "ranting radical."

Lucy Price, the youngest, and one of the most effective crusaders for anti-suffrage often challenged Max Eastman to debate at New York's Cooper Union. As a newspaper reporter in Cleveland, Price was tenacious. When Ohio was adopting a new constitution in 1913, giving voters the opportunity to include a clause that would give women the vote, she handled the fight. She presented her side so well that suffrage was defeated in a conclusive manner. Like military leaders going from one battlefield to another, Lucy Price and others traveled the country voicing their opinions.

Miss Alice Chittenden, then President of the Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* dated February 11, 1915. In it she stated, "Opposition to woman suffrage is not merely an effort on the part of a few women to keep other women from voting, as is sometimes foolishly said, but that it is based upon principles which are so fundamental that women have organized a movement which is daily growing in strength, and which is directed wholly against the enfranchisement of their sex. The Woman Suffrage Movement, is in fact, the only woman's movement in history which women themselves have banded together to oppose one another."

In a letter dated, May 24, 1915, former Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson responded to Miss Chittenden, "Suffrage is not a natural right. No class of the community can insist upon the right to vote as it could upon the right to life and liberty. I am opposed to woman suffrage because I believe it would throw an additional strain upon the efficiency of government."

Mrs. Roosevelt's diary attests to her approval of Miss Chittenden and her allies. Kate Roosevelt commented how she had enjoyed seeing her friends at New York's elite Colony Club wearing colors contesting the movement. "The loveliest frocks carrying the tints of French gray and mauve were worn by those opposed to woman's suffrage." Delicate colors and pastels representing the demure nature of women were often worn by anti-suffragists as opposed to the bold gold and yellows worn by the suffragettes.

In another diary entry Mrs. Roosevelt shares her thoughts on women and the perception that they were disenfranchised, for example, "Mrs. Hanks makes five thousand dollars a year as a buyer for a large department store."

The world around her was changing and Mrs. Kate Roosevelt, unlike Cousin Teddy and even her own sister, wanted to keep the status quo. "The whole



A clipping from Kate S. Roosevelt's diary quoting Mrs. Martin.

Christian world has gone dance-mad. The same situation came about when the waltz and polka were introduced into the drawing room.” Her feelings are reflected in her choices of which theater productions she was involved in. Two of them have very revealing titles: “Her Husband’s Wife” and “The Road to Yesterday.”



The Anti-Suffrage movement depicted women as home-loving ideals.

of the White House. Is it an American organization or has it been transformed into a bureau for German Propaganda? They have done the cause of woman’s votes a grave injury by accusing the President and Elihu Root of deceiving Russia. The women were finally arrested after several exhibitions of themselves and their banners. This happened when the Russian Mission was visiting the White House. The suffrage women exhibited banners with insulting implications in them directed against President Wilson and Mr. Root who is going on a special mission to Russia. One of the women was Mrs. Lavinia Lewis. She is rather out of her mind, but the world at large does not know this.” In all fairness to the proponents of women’s suffrage, most of their leaders including Dr. Anna Shaw, President of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement did not approve of this controversial demonstration.

Mrs. Roosevelt’s diary ends in 1919: American women won the right to vote in 1920. There is no record of her feelings when suffrage was achieved, but we can imagine her reaction. Her familial opponent, Theodore Roosevelt died in 1919, never having been able to celebrate the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. But from his speeches, actions and early writings (including his Harvard senior thesis on the equality of women), we can be certain he felt victorious!

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Mrs. Roosevelt’s views on the dance craze called “the Tango” are even more conservative: her diary contains a newspaper clipping stating that even “doctors are warning of its evils.”

One doctor who was not interested in the dance fad sweeping the country, but rather concerned about woman’s suffrage was Dr. William Thompson Sedgwick. The noted epidemiologist, bacteriologist, and prominent figure in the sphere of Public Health spoke at the Colony Club. Mrs. Roosevelt’s diary quoted him as saying, “Women voting would throw the world back one thousand years.”

The average New Yorker, Mrs. Roosevelt felt was “so full of arguments for and against women’s getting into politics, having the vote and doing things that it would seem thus only men were really fit for.”

As the fight for women’s rights occupied center stage, another fight was looming. The World War in Europe and the United States’ probable eventual involvement was on everyone’s mind. The subject of woman’s suffrage took on a new twist as it evolved into a discussion of the role of women in general. Even Mrs. John Martin, the militant anti-suffrage spokesperson, began talking about the status of women after the war. At a gathering of the League for Political Education at Carnegie Hall in 1916 she debated Mrs. Forbes Robertson Hale on the question, “Is mankind advancing?”

By 1917, the country had entered the war and the Suffragettes were still fighting their own battle. Mrs. Roosevelt’s diary overflows with clippings and comments about the war, but she still has some room for her views on the Suffrage Movement.

A newspaper clipping with the headline reads, “For Woman Suffrage or for the Kaiser?” Alongside this she writes, “The National Woman’s Party maintains suffrage pickets in front



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