

BUILDING THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS: SOUTH CAROLINA AS A CASE STUDY

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My PhD thesis is on the League of Women Voters in South Carolina from 1947 until 1960. Today I would like to talk about my wider project, its historical context and implications. I chose to study the League of Women Voters because while the League has been studied at the national level, there has been a lack of case studies on the local and state branches of the League. The South Carolina League provides an interesting case study as this League grew after World War Two and during the 1950s confronted many controversies as they attempted to grow and gain support in the state. Many of the problems they faced were typically “Southern” in nature. Finally, the early years of the South Carolina League, the 1950s, was an important time for women’s activism with the problems of anti-communism and racial tensions contributing to the difficult climate in which these women operated.

Topics of Discussion

This paper will cover the historical context of my work, the formation, aims and identity of the South Carolina League, the motivation of the women who joined the League in South Carolina. Finally I will examine the impact and limitations of the League during the 1950s, and conclude by asking what this study can demonstrate.

Historical Context

This study builds on arguments made for an increased focus on the local chapters of the League of Women Voters. (Bucy 2002, Tyler 1996, Gilmore 1996) The study also

contributes to the work of historians who have attempted to further our understanding of the role of women from 1920-1960 (Ware 1981: 2). Historians have asked that we define politics more widely in order to understand women's roles in this period better (Tyler 1996: 2). By looking at women working in grassroots politics through the League I believe my work contributes to this expansion of understanding. There is also a need to see women's motivations beyond sex – for example class, ethnicity, race, education and other factors contribute to women's motivation and interest in politics (Tyler 1996: 29-30).

Historians of women in the South have called for an increased focus on regional differences, for example work on the suffrage movement in the South has brought this to the fore (Wheeler 1993: xiv). Overall, this study contributes to the review of the approach to women's political history in the United States. Even in one state, differences in approach and results between groups within one organization are illuminating. Studies of South Carolina women have set precedents for focussing on this previously understudied state, for the subject of women's activism (Johnson 2004, Jones 2004, Synnott 2004).

Formation, Aims, Identity

The South Carolina League was formed in 1947 with the first Local Leagues formed in Charleston, Columbia and Spartanburg. By the early 1950s there were also Leagues in Greenville and Hartsville, and a state League was formed. From the outset the National League expected the local Leagues to focus on their local communities and their development. It was expected that the provisional local Leagues would make a study of their local town or city government before they were granted permanent status. There was quite a variation in the different Leagues in South Carolina – from the mill areas of Spartanburg and Greenville, to the small town of Hartsville, Columbia, the state capital and finally the conservative and historic Charleston.

The membership of the League was mainly middle class women with similar educational and family backgrounds. As the 1950s progressed, more and more young women were encouraged to join. Women who were not "native" to the state sometimes encountered difficulties in their work within the League. Mrs. Hersey of Greenville was still called a "Yankee" even though she had lived in the state for twenty-five years (Simons to Hersey, 6 October 1954). The South Carolina League also faced problems getting to a state consensus on certain issues, as President of the State League explained to the National President in 1951 (Simons to Lee, 5 August 1951).

One of the major problems faced by the League from its early days was that of race membership. Charleston was one of the first Southern League's to allow black members, though initially they were in separate study units (*News and Courier*, 1 April 1956). By 1954 the Florida League wrote to ask for advice from the Simons, who was State President and had been the President of the Charleston League when the decision to allow black women to join was made (McIntosh to Simons, 2 December 1954).

The Southern Leagues gained a strong position in the National organization during these years. Many issues affected Southern Leagues differently to Leagues elsewhere in the nation. As Carolina Toms wrote to another League women on the subject of her being chosen to represent at the national convention:

I've not been picked for my Southern sympathies, but because I'm a practical politician, and I get up on my feet and say flatly that if the national League adopts items like federal aid to education (which might have an integration tag); or civil rights, or even Home Rule for D.C., the Southern communities won't go along and it might seriously injure the League in these parts. The Southern girls stand together like the filibustering senators, and so far we've been successful in keeping these items (except Home Rule) from being on the national platform.

(Toms to Bartram, 5 April 1960)

Motivation

It is important to try to understand the motivation of women in South Carolina to participate in public life through an organization like the League. Sarah Leverette, President of the Columbia League in the late 1950s, explains her desire to join the League as fulfilling her need to discharge the responsibilities which came with the rights she was born with (Interview with Sarah Leverette). As well as the need women felt to fulfil their responsibilities in society, the League also provided a social function. There was some controversy over the League's social role. The Columbia League had "one social function" in 1958, at the Columbia Art Museum (Welcome and Introduction, 16 October 1958). The issue of serving refreshments was discussed throughout the 1950s. While some League members, and the national board felt that refreshments made the League into something of a social club, others in South Carolina felt that refreshments broke the ice and helped move discussion along (Columbia Board Meeting, 5 February 1959).

Another report stated that time was at a premium for women, so refreshments and social time should be kept to a minimum in the meetings (Report, August 1956). While some women would have appreciated the opportunity to mix with others outside the home, other women felt that their time was perhaps at more of a premium. When it came to cultivation and growth, and encouraging new members, coffee hours and social time were seen as fundamental (Columbia Meeting, 25 September 1958). The role of the League as a social group varied across time, across different localities, and affected members differently depending on their home and work circumstances.

The place meetings were held was seen as another motivating factor for members. It was felt by many that meeting in women's homes was the preferred method

(Spartanburg Board Meeting, 8 February 1959). Meeting times varied from League to League, and many experimented having unit meetings at lunchtimes, in the morning and in the evenings, to allow working women to attend. Attendance at the different times of day varied from League to League (Greenville Board Meeting, 30 August 1960).

Impact

The League gained visibility and support from 1947 to 1960. Harriet Simons wrote about the value of the support of Charleston newspaper *The News and Courier*, and by 1953 she felt that “the League is beginning to make itself felt” (Simons to Roettinger, 6 May 1953). Two members of the League went on to become part of elected politics during the 1950s - Virginia Gourdin and Martha Thomas Fitzgerald. They continued to work with the League, and this shows that looking at non-partisan groups and party politics for women separately may not always be effective. There was a definite blurring of these boundaries in South Carolina in the 1950s, and my thesis will explore this further.

One of the most important roles the League took on in South Carolina in the 1950s was to provide service to voters at election time. A non-partisan organization, the League took pride in the fact that they provided impartial information on candidates and the issues at stake in local and state elections. The role League women played in this contributes to the idea that women are more interested in issues than in personalities in electoral politics.

Limitations

During the period this study covers, the South Carolina League faced many challenges, opposition and criticism. Some examples of this include:

1. Concerns by some women in Orangeburg that the race policy of the League made it a “dangerous” organization. This surfaced when Harriet Simons went there to try to start a local League up in 1949 (Simons to Strauss, 18 November 1949).

2. Concerns in Spartanburg over the National League stand on foreign trade. The National League supported a low tariff, which did not go down well in Spartanburg, a textile production centre. Many League members there were related to mill owners, and were compromised by the National League position (Erwin to Lee, 27 January 1955).

3. The issue of the public schools and segregation in which the League became involved in 1952. South Carolina wanted to amend its constitution to close the public schools (to avoid integration) and the League took a stand against the amendment as they were in support of public education as an organization (Simons to Erwin, 15 February 1956).

4. There were concerns about race issues when the League took up the issue of jury service for women. South Carolina was one of the last states not to permit women to sit on juries. Senators succeeded in blocking the attempts of the League in getting legislation passed for ten years – they used the argument that white women would have to mix with black men and women when they shared on juries. This campaign brought a lot of attention to the League (*The State*, 4 April 1958; Toms to Horner, 13 January 1958; From the Spartanburg Papers, 4 April 1958).

5. The Hartsville League faced controversy during a primary election in 1956. Though the South Carolina was a one party state, they could still be accused of being partisan if they supported one candidate over another. This made life very difficult when there

was one candidate they all supported, and another they felt to be corrupt (Wiggins to Simons, 16 June 1954).

In all these controversies and others, the League women learned that often it was best to keep quiet in order to avoid difficulties. They risked losing face as an organization if they were too often seen as partisan, pro-integration or having communist associations. During the 1950s it was incredibly hard for a group of women in the South to avoid one or all of these accusations, and this is one of the reasons I think it is important to recognize how much they achieved in spite of these circumstances (Greenville Board Meeting, 10 Nov 1954; Simons to Erwin, 15 February 1956).

Conclusion

The main contribution of this case study and is to show that we have underestimated women's political development between 1920 and 1960, particularly in the South. It has already been cited that local grassroots organization was important - case studies needed to follow up this idea and build new ones. This case study shows dynamic women, working in various settings (state capital, mill town, small town) and shows that their motivations are varied, and link old club work and providing a social outlet for women while also a setting to pursue new challenges. These women confronted numerous obstacles – the place and time in which they acted is very influential. Controversy was not all bad, as Caroline Toms pointed out:

“at least controversy keeps people interested”
(Toms to Erwin, 2 April 1956)

The South Carolina League achieved much through their organizing during the 1950s, and made women visible at a public level, and gave them valuable experience in dealing with politicians, the press, and other women's organizations.

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