



Women's Suffrage in the Americas: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead

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Abstract

I have the privilege of leading an international team of researchers exploring Women's Suffrage in the Americas. This essay outlines the history of our project, discussing some of the challenges we have encountered and the ways in which we have chosen to address them. It outlines the lists of commonalities and differences we have developed to contrast the different national cases, and it describes the categories into which we have placed the countries, based on shared characteristics. Finally, it charts a course for future work on women's suffrage, outlining some of the many areas where we still lack adequate understanding.

Keywords: The Americas; Female Suffrage; Feminism; Women.

El sufragio femenino en las Américas: Lecciones aprendidas y retos futuros

Resumen

Tengo el privilegio de liderar un equipo internacional de investigadoras que exploran el sufragio femenino en las Américas. Este ensayo describe la historia de nuestro proyecto; describe algunos de los desafíos que hemos encontrado y las formas en que hemos elegido abordarlos. Enumera las listas que hemos desarrollado para contrastar los diferentes casos nacionales, los puntos que comparten en común y sus diferencias. También explica las categorías en las que hemos colocado a los distintos países, en función de algunas características compartidas. Finalmente, traza un curso para el trabajo futuro sobre el sufragio femenino, destacando algunas de las muchas áreas en las que aún nos falta una comprensión adecuada.

Palabras clave: Las Américas; Sufragio femenino; Feminismo; Mujeres.

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Women’s Suffrage in the Americas: Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead

1. Introduction

For many years, I have had the privilege of leading an international team of researchers on an exploration of Women’s Suffrage in the Americas. The forthcoming volume by the same title, from the University of New Mexico Press, emerged from that experience. Here, we summarize some of the lessons learned from these experiences.

Suffrage history occupies a strange position in feminist historiography. On the one hand, because gaining the vote is such a visible historical marker, typically accompanied by the same, ample document trail that any major legislative or executive action produces, it is the most likely piece of feminist history to be known by the general public. On the other hand, because of this same visibility, it often appears that more is known about the history than really is. Young scholars entering the field may be drawn into newer subfields like gender studies or sexuality, assuming that most of the work on big questions about women’s history has already be done. As a result, many countries have surprisingly little written about the one even in women’s history everyone thinks they know about. As countries begin to mark their centenaries of landmark extensions in many countries, our project joins others attempting to make headway.

This essay outlines the history of our project, discussing some of the challenges we have encountered and the ways in which we have chosen to address them. It outlines the lists of commonalities and differences we have developed to contrast the different national cases, and it describes the categories into which we have placed the countries, based on shared characteristics. Finally, it charts a course for future work on women’s suffrage, outlining some of the many areas where we still lack adequate understanding.

2. Our Project

This project began many years ago when a colleague, Dr. Patricia Harms of Brandon University in Manitoba, Canada, and I realized that there were no publications available to use in our classrooms to teach about Latin American suffrage in a comprehensive way. Asunción Lavrin, her dissertation supervisor and lifelong mentor, had cleared a path for work like that with the 1998 publication of *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lavrin, 1998, c1995). Lavrin’s work only examined three countries; however, for many years, it was the best available text for a comparative view of the hemisphere. At the time, Carolina Barry had not yet published *Sufragio femenino: Prácticas y debates políticos, religiosos y culturales en la Argentina y América Latina* (Barry, 2011). When she did, it dramatically advanced our understanding of the hemispheric struggle for the vote, but there was still no equivalent in English. There was no text at all that encompassed Anglo and Francophone North America, placing them in hemispheric context. Dr. Harms and I found this strange, given the fact that Pan American feminism played such a strong role in most national histories of which we were aware. We approached the University of New Mexico Press too see if they, like we, saw the potential value in such a work. They enthusiastically agreed.

The difficulty of creating such a compendium of hemispheric knowledge soon became clear. Obviously, no single person could possess enough knowledge to explore such a vast territory with any degree of accuracy. It took a whole year to find, read, and then recruit specialists willing to work as part of an international, collaborative team. Once assembled, we faced more challenges, some material to the subject at hand and others logistical. On the logistical side, we knew we would advance our understanding much faster through live, in-person conversations than any other way. We were scattered across the Americas, however. Where would we be able to find enough money to afford such an opportunity? The answer came after several years of smaller gatherings at different conferences and many grant-writing frustrations in the form of an extraordinary opportunity provided by the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The NEH offers prestigious and extremely competitive grants for scholars to explore topics in the

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humanities intensively in summer learning opportunities, called “NEH Summer Institutes.”¹ We won a grant to create such an institute over the summer of 2018, where we invited not only the collaborators on the research project, but also thirty other historians, political scientists, and gender scholars to spend two weeks together on the campus of Carthage College in Wisconsin, USA. The contributors to this dossier, like the contributors to the forthcoming volume from the University of New Mexico Press, are a mix of the original collaborators together with the invited scholars whom we met at the Summer Institute.

That summer, in person, and subsequently via Zoom and endless email exchanges, we discussed the material issues our project presented. For example, how should the book be organized? Chronologically? Geographically? By type? Each of these options presented its own problems. If we were to organize countries chronologically by date of suffrage extension, we would have to determine a standard for which extension to use—should the date be the attainment of universal suffrage (in which case, some countries would come late in the 20th century)? The date of the first federal extension (in which case, some countries would come early, even if they had enfranchised very few voters)? What about regional extensions? What kind of vote? Municipal, provincial, federal? Optional or obligatory? The dizzying number of dates for possible use made this option undesirable. Suffragists themselves often relied on simplified charts or maps with a single date assigned to each country when “women” voted, but organizing our volume in a way that duplicated those well-known dates would only serve to further entrench the public’s confusion about which women really voted, when, how, and where. In a similar way, any geographic ordering would only reinforce the erroneous perception that countries that are close to one another must have similar histories. They do not.

Ordering country studies by type had many advantages. It would not only avoid the issues discussed above, but might subtly undermine incorrect, but commonly held assumptions about both chronology and geography. Instead, it might draw out similarities among national histories that might not otherwise be viewed side-by-side, and juxtapose countries that others might think must share things in common by virtue of mere proximity. It might, however, create a different kind of over-simplification. All theoretical frameworks necessarily suffer from a degree of arbitrariness. When you drill down into the history, every story is unique. Any classification system we chose would inevitably gloss over important differences for the sake of intellectual coherence. A reasonably successful system, however, would do far more than instruct readers in the particular histories of the various countries. It would help them to see patterns that would allow future researchers to ask ever more interesting questions.

The greatest challenge lay in deciding the criteria for categorization. It would be tempting to focus on the strategies suffragists used to press their case - to classify countries by trying to qualify the kind of suffrage movement they had. Upon reflection, this approach proved impossible, however. All of the histories were characterized by diversity. Suffragists were both diverse and divided. Their strategies typically varied by group and also changed over time. Any attempt to qualify single country’s activism would never withstand scrutiny. The only alternative was to emphasize the state, to examine the circumstances under which a given extension took place. This approach would be less appealing from a feminist perspective because it shifts the attention away from the women who belong at the center of the history. It also would not satisfactorily resolve the chronology problem, since different suffrage extensions took place over time under different regimes.

In the end, there was no perfect solution. We chose to classify the countries by type, using categories that emphasized the state. The choice was not arbitrary, but rather a calculation balancing the pros and cons of each option. Not all collaborators agreed. The categories themselves underwent extensive revisions and re-articulations over time. We also changed how we spoke about them. In the original iteration, we had “models,” which we later changed to “scenarios.” “Constants” and “variables” became “commonalities” and “differences.” These changes of nomenclature were not superficial, but meaningful. They emerged from conversations

¹ Funding both for the Institutes as a whole as well as for individuals desiring to participate is extremely competitive. Scholars from across the country apply for the opportunity to spend between one and four weeks with experts on a given topic. They work intensively for the duration of the Institute, typically eating and sleeping on the same campus, spending almost all of their time together, advancing their collectively knowledge.

with political scientists, who were confused by this humanist’s use of terms that had specific meanings in their discipline. We discovered how challenging it was even to communicate with clarity and specificity across discipline, region, and academic culture. Historians in one environment are considered humanists, while they are social scientists in another. Scholarly discussions that bear enormous significance in one field, in one academic environment, might not even be taking place elsewhere. A critical word like “intersectionality” meant different things to different people studying different things, in different countries. The categories described below, then, should be understood as negotiated compromises, quasi-arbitrary constructions that reveal many useful aspects of suffrage history. It is our earnest hope that no reader think of them as the last word on the subject, but rather the beginning of a conversation that should continue well into the future.

What follows are the results of our efforts where they currently stand. First will come a brief list of commonalities and differences among the various national cases, then the five “Scenarios,” or categories, into which we have placed the countries. They are the (II?) Liberal Democratic Scenario, the Crisis of Representation Scenario, the Delayed Liberal Scenario, the Perceived Conservative Strategic Advantage Scenario, and the Imperialist Scenario.

2.a. Commonalities and Differences

In order even to consider a typology of suffrage extensions, I began keeping lists of characteristics that I thought were broadly shared among different countries’ histories versus those that seemed particular to only one or two. As discussed above, I initially thought of these as suffrage “constants” and “variables,” but these terms proved to create more confusion than they resolve. We now refer to both as “factors,” and shared characteristics are “commonalities,” while particular ones are “differences.” These terms are direct, straightforward, and have no special connotations within any discipline. The earliest lists were far too long. Similarly lengthy conversations and reflection were required to winnow them down to a manageable number. In their current form, there are three of each.

The similarities include the broad historical trajectory of when and how feminism emerged in late nineteenth-century ladies’ clubs, then broadened and diversified. That diversity, which only increased over time, is another similarity. All women’s movements were divided ideologically, as well as by race/ethnicity and class. The final similarity is less tangible but at least as important as the first two, and it involves broadly shared assumptions about gender that influenced thinking about women’s political participation. Of special importance was the assumption that women were more likely to be religious and conservative than men.

The first two differences have to do with the historical moment in which a given suffrage movement took place vis-à-vis the national and international political environment at the time. It could matter a great deal, for example, whether suffragists were working before or after the United Nations adopted a posture that encouraged women’s political rights. Broadly speaking, the international women’s movement gained strength and momentum over time. For that reason, suffragists could count on more perceived international pressure later in the 20th century than they could earlier. In the same way that the international environment mattered, the national political environment could be determinative: Was the government more or less authoritarian? Were leaders anticlerical (thus potentially influenced by the assumption of feminine religiosity discussed above?) Were they concerned with appearing modern and progressive on women’s rights? Answers to these questions vary according to time and place.

The final difference has to do with the suffragist movement itself. Some movements were better than others at overcoming divisions, or employing successful strategies to persuade whomever it was that had the power to enact a suffrage extension. In some countries, brilliant strategies, perfectly executed, may have failed, at least temporarily, so we cannot draw a direct line between the activities of the suffragists and the extensions. We can, however, maintain that some suffragists were more effective than others in persuading powerbrokers to support them, and that these levels of efficacy were particular to the national context in which they occurred.

2.b. Scenarios

(II?) Liberal Democratic Scenario

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In this section, Eugenia Rodríguez, Veronica Strong-Boag, and Susan Goodier wrote chapters on Costa Rica, Canada, and the United States, respectively.² Originally, we grouped these countries together because their suffrage histories took place within the context of both regional and federal government structures that more or less followed liberal democratic norms regarding electoral practices, adherence to law, and the limited, checked, and balanced exercise of executive authority. In many countries, the ultimate decision whether to grant or delay a suffrage extension lay in the hands of a single individual exercising varying degrees of authoritarian power. By contrast, in these three cases, the decision rested primarily in the hands of the legislature, whose members were in turn elected constitutionally, even though the electorate may have represented a minority of the actual population.

While this interpretation seemed sensible to many Latin Americanists, including Dr. Rodríguez, the North American perspective was different. The current historiography on US and Canadian suffrage does not stress the democratic nature of the process. On the contrary, it stresses the myriad ways in which different subaltern groups have been systematically excluded from liberal democratic institutions, placing both their “liberal” and “democratic” nature in question. The North Americans were appalled at the characterization of their countries’ histories, given the role that enslavement, genocide, and countless legislative sleights of hand had played in ensuring that a small, wealthy, Euro-descended, male minority would maintain its grip on power, to the general exclusion of everyone else. On the other hand, as Dr. Rodríguez pointed out, one has a different perspective from the vantage point of Costa Rica, where the exclusion of poor and indigenous residents from the full benefits of citizenship also has a long history, but where the contrast between their own history and that of a neighbor like Nicaragua is hard to miss.

After numerous conversations, Dr. Goodier suggested the right approach that would balance both perspectives would be to highlight the tensions between both truths by casting the scenario as (II?) Liberal. The question mark after “II” suggests the tension between the ways in which the history was “liberal” and the ways in which it was “illiberal.” In this way, authors could acknowledge that an elected and independent legislature—not an authoritarian dictator—passed the laws that extended the suffrage to different groups over time. At the same time, however, they could explore in their chapters the important ways in which even the hemisphere’s models of liberal democracy have frequently been neither liberal nor democratic.

Crisis of Representation Scenario

In this section, Teresa Novaes, Adriana Valobra, and Guiomar Dueñas wrote chapters on Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia.³ This Scenario originated with the problematic characterization “populist,” which doubtless generated the most controversy and greatest challenges of the categories in the volume. Despite the fact that Getulio Vargas, Juan Perón, and Gustavo Rojas Pinilla were, at various points in their careers, characterized as “populist,” numerous problems emerged with the idea of categorizing them together in this fashion. Not least of these was the fact that Vargas is not considered to have entered his “populist” period when he extended the franchise to literate women in 1932. The word “populist” itself posed problems of its own, since its usage has become so widespread, referring to so many leadership styles, as to render it virtually meaningless. Additionally, characterizing these three authoritarian-leaning leaders as having enfranchised women to gain their electoral support—in a typically “populist” fashion—would be misleading. Perón, for example, could not have been sure, even with Evita’s help, that Argentine women would repay him with their support. In this sense, the move was less strategic than it has been cast, and must have been mixed with a degree of ideological sincerity than is sometimes acknowledged. In enfranchising all women and not just a literate minority, Perón was also taking a much larger gamble than either Rojas Pinilla or Vargas, both of whom likely felt confident that the restricted, non-obligatory, female vote would likely be relatively low.

In spite of these arguments against the use of the word “populist,” which we ultimately decided to remove, the scholars in this category agreed that the three leaders in question did share things

² For examples of contributions to the field from these scholars, see Goodier (2013); Goodier y Pastorello (2017); McClung (1972); Rodríguez Sáenz (2016b, 2016c, 2016a, 2016d); Strong-Boag et al. (2015); Strong-Boag y Gerson (2000).

³ For examples of contributions to the field from these scholars, see Barry (2011); Dueñas Vargas (1997); Dueñas Vargas et al. (2000); Dueñas Vargas (2015); Marques (2013, 2016, 2019); Marques y Melo (2008); Valobra (2010, 2018).

in common that were relevant to understanding the varying ways women achieved the suffrage in the Americas. All three represented a new kind of leadership that emerged out of a dissatisfaction with the limited successes the liberal project that been able to deliver. Liberalism had oversold itself, promising economic prosperity, equality before the law, and fair and equitable representation in political decision-making. It had largely failed to deliver on these promises in every area. Dissatisfaction with the status quo had given rise to leaders willing to experiment with different forms of political authority, supported by a populous willing to negotiate away some of their liberal ideals in exchange for material improvements and a different kind of political voice within a framework that emphasized corporatism over the individual. It was within this context of political experimentation that all three leaders made their separate decisions to extend the vote to some or all women. For that reason, we have characterized the scenario as emerging from three examples of what we see as a much broader “crisis of representation”, which was resolved differently in different national contexts.

Delayed Liberal Scenario and Perceived Conservative Strategic Advantage Scenario

The next two scenarios should be viewed together, as they are really two sides of the same coin. Both have to do with the assumption of female religiosity discussed above—one of the “commonalities” that seems to be widely spread across varying political contexts throughout the Americas. In the Delayed Liberal Scenario, liberal leaders with a reputation for anticlericalism might have support women’s rights, but might also have been fearful of empowering a section of the electorate they assumed was more conservative and religious (especially in Roman Catholic contexts) than the men who already voted. In this Scenario, we see leaders who promise to enact women’s suffrage, but then inexplicably delay doing so, sometimes for decades. The Perceived Strategic Advantage Scenario is just the opposite, where a more conservative-leaning set of leaders may not embrace feminism, but might see a strategic advantage to increasing political participation among a group they think share their conservative values, even if those values are, paradoxically, anti-feminist.

Claudia Montero, María Paz Vera, Victoria González Rivera, and I wrote chapters on Chile, Nicaragua, and Mexico to explore the Delayed Liberal Scenario,⁴ while Erin O’Connor and Roisida Aguilar wrote on Ecuador and Peru to look at the Perceived Conservative Strategic Advantage.⁵ It was evident from the start that the Delayed Liberal Scenario was going to be a clearer cut case than the Perceived Strategic Advantage. Twentieth-century liberals were often not shy about expressing their concerns about female religiosity. The discussed it in speeches, debates, letters, and in print. Mexico had the most dramatic history of anticlericalism, spanning nearly a century by the time suffragists pressed their cause, but they were not alone in having attempted to create a more secular society by attacking church power and wealth.

Conservative suffrage extensions, however, are more complicated. Earlier historiography confidently asserted that conservative leaders enfranchised women for purely instrumental reasons, but more recent work suggests a more nuanced view is probably more accurate. We still feel that Ecuador and Peru are useful places to look at to understand why leaders who may have seemed antagonistic to suffragists might have enfranchised some women much earlier than other leaders in other countries who were much louder in their supposed support of women’s rights. We have learned, however, to have humility when seeking to comprehend these decisions, understanding that more than one motivation may have been at play.

Imperialist Scenario

The last Scenario in our compilation was added after the 2018 Summer Institute in direct response to two sets of conversations that took place there. The first conversation was well-trodden ground for the Latin Americanists at the Institute, but was not especially understood by scholars who had focused their careers on North America, and that was the role US imperialism had historically played in the hemisphere. Political, economic, and military proximity to the United States reduced

⁴ For examples of contributions to the field from these scholars, see Gálvez et al. (2019); González-Rivera (2001, 2011); S. E. Mitchell (2015); Stephanie Mitchell (2015); S. E. Mitchell y Schell (2007); Montero (2017, 2019); Stuvan y Fermandois H. (2011-).

⁵ For examples of contributions to the field from these scholars, see Aguilar Gil (2002); Barry (2011); O’Connor (2007, 2014); O’Phelan et al. (2006); Rosas Lauro (2019).

the ability of some government to make sovereign decision about voting rights, among many other important issues. Caribbean scholars present at the gathering were especially conscious of this history and the way it had impacted women's suffrage. The second conversation was introduced by the only scholar of the Philippines, Augusto Espiritu, who argued forcefully that the Philippines not only shared similarities with nations in the Caribbean basin whose political history was shaped by US imperialism, but that it should be considered a part of the Americas. Despite its geographic distance from the rest of the hemisphere, the Philippines's shared history of colonialism, first from Spain and then the US, means that culturally, linguistically, and historically, it has more in common with Latin America than it does with other nations that may be physically closer.

As a result of these two conversations, we decided to add a Scenario to include Puerto Rico (Roxanna Domenech) and the Philippines (Christine Peralta).⁶ The degree to which other countries that shared a neocolonial relationship to the United States might also share a history of US influence with regards to women's suffrage has yet to be determined.

We do not feel that these five Scenarios tell a complete story. Certainly, it would be possible to classify the same country into more than one Scenario, depending on which aspect of the history we wanted to highlight or which suffrage extension we decided to emphasize. Several of our authors have noted when features of their country's history could place them in a different category. By the same logic, we could have chosen to group the same countries together differently. By choosing different suffrage extensions to focus on, or by drawing the readers' attention to some other characteristic they have in common. We are also confident that other scenarios could be added that would highlight different aspects of suffrage history. For example, Guatemala, Cuba, and Venezuela granted suffrage extensions in the context of revolutionary movements in which women played prominent roles. An earlier iteration of this project included a "Revolutionary Scenario", but judicious concerns about the length and scope of the project led us to draw a line at the five that are currently part of the volume. To say that "further research is required" on this topic is an understatement. The rest of this essay will discuss some of the many areas where much more work is needed.

3. Ongoing issues and areas for future research

3.a. Binary Thinking

A persistent frustration we have found with much of the extant historiography involves the way too many narratives fall into false binaries. For example, too many spend time arguing that suffrage was either a top-down or bottom-up affair. It is past time to accept two patent truths: 1) in no case were women in a position to enfranchise themselves, and 2) the men who did have the necessary power never would have done so without vigorous and effective suffrage agitation, both at home and abroad. It should be self-evident that the endless arguments over whether women's suffrage was "conquered" or "granted" are pointless (Przeworski, 2009). It was obviously a combination of both.

A related question to the argument over "conquered" versus "granted" involves how to weigh ideology versus power. Like the previous argument, this one is also sometimes cast as a false binary, when the truth is obviously that both individuals and groups are motivated by a combination of considerations. Our project assumes, for example, the "office seeking principle," which asserts that people who hold power are less likely to do things that threaten their ability to hang on to power, and more likely to do things that are likely to extend the reach of their power (Lehoucq y Molina Jiménez, 2002). Enlarging the franchise by extending the vote to any group typically presents a mix of opportunities and risks for different political factions. Clearly, it is useful for historians to understand and communicate which groups felt they stood to gain by including women—either all women or a certain group of women—in the electorate. To ignore the political geography of power would be foolish.

⁶ For examples of contributions to the field from these scholars, see Gordon-Mora y Universidad Metropolitana (Río Piedras, San Juan, P.R.). *Escuela de Ciencias Sociales, Humanidades y Comunicaciones* (2013); *Inicio / Revista Cruce*, 2022); Pangilinan et al. (2020); Walton-Roberts (2022).

Eugenia Rodríguez is especially effective in demonstrating this for Costa Rica. Like most of our authors, she narrates the story of the suffrage movement: the strategies they employed, the arguments they used, the obstacles they faced. Then she goes on to clarify the political/legislative context within which what had once proved impossible suddenly became possible. Suffrage extension are the results of many intersecting variables: teleological explanations of any sort will no longer do.

Looking at suffrage through the lens of power, however, does not obviate our responsibility for taking ideology seriously. People in power usually have principles, and they usually would prefer to act in accordance with those principles when possible. People are sometimes swayed by argument to change their positions, as in the famous US case, when the last delegate from Tennessee changed his vote at the last minute after reading a letter from his mother. He had intended to vote against the measure, but her personal appeal made the difference in passing—by just one vote—the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibited restriction of the franchise on the basis of sex.

Close examinations of legislative debates over suffrage reveal the importance of taking debate and ideology seriously, but without ignoring their very real intersection with considerations that have more to do with power. Teresa Cristina de Novaes Marques’s chapter on Brazil does an extraordinary job of examining that intersection. She began with the legislative debates on suffrage, noting the thinkers each delegate cited to support their opinions. Then, remarkably, she used the legislature’s own library to read the actual copies of those thinkers’ works that the legislators likely had used to inform themselves about the European philosophical debates they employed to argue for or against women’s suffrage. By immersing herself in the ideological worldview of the legislators who debated suffrage, she is able to give us a clear understanding of why one political leader might have been receptive to suffragists’ demands, while another might have bluntly refused to engage.

Through the same methodology, however, Novaes was able to discover inconsistencies in legislators’ thinking. They might, for example, borrow ideas from two European authors whose philosophies were incompatible with one another. In this case, she concludes that the lawmakers were probably less sincere in their appreciation of the philosophy and more concerned with persuading opponents for reasons that likely had more to do with factional power rather than ideology.

In a related fashion, we should avoid painting individuals and groups with too broad an ideological brush, classifying them for simplicity’s sake, when the reality was more complex. It is tempting, for example, to want to sort suffragists by whether they relied mostly on “maternalist” arguments or mostly on “equality based” arguments. In reality, many suffrage apologists alternated between these rhetorical strategies depending on the circumstance, even though they seem, on the surface, to be contradictory.

A final troublesome binary is usually not stated, and it involves how much attention we should pay to the individual versus how much attention to pay to groups, organizations, or institutions. Because the personal is the political, individuals’ matter. All historical events are the product on individuals’ stories, and to overlook the relevance of a Bertha Lutz, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Eva Perón, never mind a Juan Perón, Getulio Vargas, or Lázaro Cárdenas would be foolish. It is easy to overdetermine an outcome, however, by focusing too much on a single individual to the exclusions of others. The trick is to tell a balanced story that includes as many of the relevant factors as possible. Balancing perspectives is the subject of the next section.

3.b. Perspective

While this book is about looking at women’s suffrage in hemispheric context, it is not properly an examination of the transnational networks that prominent suffragists in every country were always aware of and usually a part of. A great deal of work remains to be done connecting national and international perspectives. All of our collaborators are aware of the importance of the relationships their most prominent feminists maintained with activists in other countries, but it is difficult to connect what happened domestically with international events. Mexico, the US, and Canada have made strides.

This work is complicated by the lopsided historiography on international feminism. There were at least five international women's movements that influenced and interacted with each other. The first of these movements, the World Women's Christian Temperance Union, was less important in the Americas than it was in Europe, Asia, and Africa, but it nevertheless began the pattern that later organizations would adopt of sending emissaries abroad, creating and connecting chapters to form a genuinely transnational organization. The second movement did not begin as a women's movement at all, but rather as women's participation in international scientific congresses in Latin America, principally the southern cone (Lavrín, 1998, c1995). Those beginnings produced an autonomous, first Latin American, then pan-American women's movement, which emerged after women were excluded from these congresses. The third movement, which has received the lion's share of the attention in this historiography, is the one usually referred to as "the" International Women's Movement (Rupp, 1997). It began simultaneously with the second, but among elite women in Europe and the United States. Many Latin American activists, wary of US imperialism, preferred to organize amongst themselves, but far less is known about them. Transatlantic organizing tends to emphasize the North Atlantic, even when Latin American feminists may have preferred alliances with Spanish or Portuguese activists. Recently, Katherine Marino's pathbreaking *Feminism for the Americas* has greatly enhanced our understanding of the PanAmerican women's movement (Marino, 2019; Threlkeld, 2014). While Threlkeld and Marino have substantiated Lavrin's observation about how historians have duplicated the US imperialist perspective, ignoring or underplaying Latin American and panhispanist connections (Lavrín, 1998, c1995; Threlkeld, 2014). This whole area of research badly needs buttressing.

The fourth movement was a semi-intentional offshoot of the socialist International (Lopes y Roth, 2000). One of the most pervasive similarities among suffrage movements was the sometimes creative and sometimes destructive tension between socialist and bourgeois feminists. While this pattern played itself out in many national contexts, the socialist side of the history is far less known than the bourgeois side. On the one hand, it is obvious that poor people have fewer resources than wealthier people, and are therefore less likely to be able to participate in international conferences. On the other hand, poor, working class, rural, indigenous, and Afro-descended women occupy a tiny fraction of the historiography whether they were socialist or not. We simply have very little knowledge whatsoever of subaltern women's activism, which often failed to leave its mark in the archives of the settler colonial state and associated civil institutions. Veronica Strong-Boag's chapter on Canada draws on the somewhat stronger Canadian work done on socialist feminism, and Susan Goodier's chapter on the United States takes pains to include indigenous, Black, Asian, and Latina voices when they come into the narrative that produced the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution. Even she acknowledges, however, how little professional academics know about these communities' histories. In countries with, for example, indigenous majorities, that silence is deafening.

The fifth movement was Catholic (Andes, 2019). Very little work at all has been done on transnational Catholic women's activism. Feminist historians' biases in favor of left-leaning, self-identified feminists in the past have led to neglect of conservative women's political agency, which can include suffragism. Especially in countries (Ecuador, Perú) where conservative leaders may have enfranchised women on the strength of their belief in women's likelihood to support conservatism with their votes, overlooking conservative women's organizing is foolhardy. In other countries as well, however, organized conservative women were important elements to the suffrage story, if only because their strength caused liberals to hesitate in enfranchising women at all. Prior to 1919, Catholic women's organizations engaged in charity as well as movements for social welfare reform, but they did not advocate for women's political rights. On the contrary, Catholics argued, universally, for the preservation of women's traditional roles. In 1919, however, even Pope Benedict XV grudgingly acknowledged that voting rights for women were a "social necessity in some countries, that is in order to counter the generally subversive votes of the socialists." After 1940, pan-hispanist women's organizing was exclusively conservative and Catholic. Its adherents were typically wealthy, educated, and well-connected. In Chile, Vanessa Tessada has shown how women who were active in the transatlantic, panhispanist movement organized by the Spanish Falange were critical to the success and longevity of Pinochet's dictatorship (Tessada S., 2013). Still, we know very little about the impact of transatlantic

women’s organizing on Latin America. Most of the extant work focuses exclusively on the North Atlantic.

International women’s movements were connected to one another in important ways. They were also indissolubly linked with both national and international contemporary politics. It is not at all coincidental that the same time period saw the rise of mass politics across the hemisphere, commonly associated with a shared aspiration for modernity. In the same way that modernity was everywhere associated with a coherent set of characteristics such as science, hygiene, consumerism, and temperance, it was also (paradoxically, in this age of hyper-nationalism) associated with internationalism. All historians know that national leaders universally aspired to be perceived as modern. In this way, activists working transnationally were able to impose a cost on national leaders for delaying women’s suffrage. Suffragists working within the national context leveraged the work done internationally by accusing their leaders of being backwards and anti-modern. Despite this obvious connection, our work on suffrage in the various national contexts is usually separate from the work on the international context.

Even within a national context, we sometimes struggle to connect local and regional histories to the national and international story. Adriana Valobra’s chapter on Argentina discusses the remarkable fact that historians have yet to document what has long assumed to be the first provincial women’s suffrage extension, under Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Despite the fact that this is one of the nation’s most important and well-studied political leaders, no one has yet been able to locate any evidence that the supposed extension actually took place. Veronica Strong-Boag, our Canadianist, is leading a research project that will ultimately produce seven volumes of new research that should add significantly to our understanding of Canadian provincial suffrage history.⁷ This is especially important in the Canadian context, where the vote was achieved at the federal level before it was universally achieved at the provincial level. Canada’s suffrage history was marked by wide variations across its vast geography, but even smaller, more densely populated countries might benefit from her approach. Once the work has been done to view the history from a regional perspective, we will need to connect it to the national and international context to make sense of the whole.

3.c. Inclusion and Exclusion

At its core, suffrage history, like the broader field of citizenship studies, is fundamentally about inclusion. As early as the 1880s, French feminists were asking judges to clarify whether the term “français” in the law applied to women as well men, and if it did, what about “citoyen” (Teele, 2018, p. 3)? A half-century of linguistic, legislative, and legal wrangling ensued throughout the western world to ensure that nationality did not equal citizenship, and if it did, that citizenship did not necessarily come with voting rights. Paying taxes was one thing, exercising political power was entirely another. Inclusion, as it turns out, it also usually about exclusion.

Even preliminary exercises in which we have asked ourselves which groups were excluded as some groups were included in the exercise of political rights have led us to a pessimistic conclusion. It appears that most, if not all, histories were characterized by numerous exclusions based on class, race, and ethnicity, all of which overlapped and intersected with gender. The suffrage movements themselves invariably suffered from similar divisions. Puerto Rican feminists, for example, were not alone when they negotiated away the rights of their less-educated, working-class sisters in exchange for suffrage rights for themselves. In the United States, even the somewhat less racist white leaders from North caved in to Southern, white, feminist racists to exclude Black feminists as a federal extension began to look possible for themselves. Black women had to wait forty-five more years for the franchise. Radical extensions like Argentina’s, which did not delineate between groups of women, were the exception, rather than the norm.

One of the more ambitious goals of our project has been to find a way to see all of the dates that are truly relevant to women’s suffrage history on a single timeline. We have worked with a graphic designer to explore data visualization techniques that might allow us to hold the

⁷ *Women’s Suffrage and the Struggle for Democracy* is the title of the series from University of British Columbia Press. See UBC Press (2022) for details on which volumes have been released and which are still forthcoming.

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complexity such an approach would imply without confounding the viewer with so much data that the chart would become meaningless. The challenges to achieving this goal, however, have been so numerous that we have yet to make significant progress in this direction. It is my hope that, once we are able to complete the printed volume, we can set about creating tools like this. In order to be able to teach suffrage history effectively, we need to be able to communicate clearly the numerous and creative ways people with power have managed and continue to manage to avoid sharing it as broadly as possible with others.

Conclusions

Much of what we have learned so far is frustrating. Our goal was to be able to tell a coherent story of how women achieved the suffrage in such a way that might encourage teaching and learning about women's history, especially at the undergraduate level. As we have seen, however, adopting this approach risks glossing over real historical complexities of what happened at the provincial and local levels in order to tell a broader story with a bird's eye view. Similarly, it has been difficult to resolve the tension between the understandable goal of having women's history focus on women (in this case, suffrage activists) and the realities of state power and masculine dominance of politics. Since suffragists could not extend the vote to themselves, we have had to focus more of our attention than we might want emphasizing state power and the parties that fed political office.

Many important questions remain that were outside the scope of our project. We know very little, for example, of the impact of women's voting after suffrage is extended to different groups. Studies that look at the impact of women's voting tend to begin much later than the suffrage extensions when women were initially enfranchised. Data are not always available to be able to look at how and whether a suffrage extension mattered electorally, and even when they are, myths that can only be described as sexist persist. Adriana Valobra's chapter, for example, shows that while it is commonly assumed that Perón's extension is what kept him in power, the truth is that he would have been elected all the same if no woman had cast a ballot. One of the most important lessons we have learned is to assume nothing, question everything.

As this essay has shown, we still do not know, across the hemisphere, which women voted when, at what level, whether it was mandatory or optional, and how it mattered. Indigenous, Asian, and Afro-descended women are still so radically under-studied that many authors are able to say little with regards to their political activity. Whole national histories are largely missing from the narrative. There were countries we wanted to include, but could not because the historiography was so thin. We still have little understanding about the interplay between the international movement and domestic politics. In sum, our work together has continually raised more questions than it answers.

At the same time, our work together has been immensely fruitful. Nearly all of the people who have worked with us in some way, some fifty scholars, have taken what they have learned from the collaboration and turned it into lesson plans, published books and articles, conference papers, grant proposals, and other projects. Our conversations about authoritarianism, neocolonialism, liberal and illiberal democracy, intersectionality, religion, populism, pro and anti-feminist ideology—all of these discussions have not only grown our understanding of women's suffrage history, but forced us to connect women's history to the other relevant historiographies with which it intersects. This dossier is evidence of the wisdom of connecting scholars from different academic environments and geographical regions. While the barriers to effective communication go well beyond language, working with a truly diverse set of thinkers makes the intellectual and ideological boxes we all fall into visible, and therefore easier to climb out of.

A final benefit I will mention relates to perhaps the most important question of all, which Asunción Lavrin raised in her lecture, which concluded our NEH Summer Institute in 2018. She asked us whether we thought the suffragists had worked so hard and sacrificed so much merely so that women could vote, or whether the franchise was always about something bigger, a means to an end. She suggested that we are shortsighted when we imagine that it was the former. Suffragists, she argued, were always working for more than mere inclusion. They wanted the vote because they wanted to transform their societies to make them more just. This reminder has stayed

with me since the moment she uttered the words. I have frequently had cause to observe that the friendships and collaborative work that has emerged from studying women’s suffrage mimics the relationships suffragists forged within and across international boundaries when they were fighting for the vote.

Lavrin asked us what we thought women had accomplished since achieving suffrage, and whether our foremothers would be satisfied with the progress towards justice we have made, using the tools they won for us. It is a strange historical moment we find ourselves living in now. We see women’s rights advancing in places that would have seemed improbable not that long ago, like Chile and Ireland. At the same time, parts of Europe and the United States are not only losing ground in protecting our rights, but seem once again to be placing the whole project of liberal democracy in question. As historians, we are only too keenly aware that history is anything but the clean and even march towards progress that so many 19th century thinkers imagined. There is no natural law that will inevitably evolve societies in the direction of progress. We can just as easily annihilate ourselves as expand access to the means to live a life with dignity to all. Rising authoritarianism in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, however, reminds us of the truth in Winston Churchill’s observation about democracy. We may yet fail, but the suffragists were not wrong to place their hopes in building a government of and by the people. It is still the worst form of government, except for all the others.

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