A Fight of Gender Equality: Our Suffragist Role Models

[ABSTRACT]

This paper examines the legacy of Canadian suffragists in the realm of women’s political representation by analyzing some of their successes and failures and the methods in which they used to arrive at those results. Feminist movements and the fight for equality and systemic change are only increasing and becoming more widely participated in as time moves forward, making it of the utmost importance to acknowledge our foundational change-makers and to pull lessons from their methods and attempt to apply them to modern-day movement tactics. Using work from various notable authors, such as Carol Bacchi, Erin Steuter and Sue Findlay, this paper follows the suffragists’ path to enfranchisement (the right to vote) and develops bridges between historical and modern feminist calls to action. While it is noted that our time periods are vastly different, many basic elements can be examined, and it is shown that these bridges are crucial to learning how to navigate current and future fights for change with the desired success.

[INTRODUCTION]

The issues of the necessity of women’s rights and the reality of gender inequality have been present in both societal and political conversations for quite some time and are the focus of numerous social movements. These issues mentioned above are systemic and institutionally embedded, meaning they are not topics that one discussion or social movement can solve – evident when looking back through history. Social movements do not simply develop from nothing. As Mary Mossman addressed in 1986, the “assertion that ‘equal rights for women are necessary’ assumes the existence of inequality and the need for societal change,” the exact societal change movements hope to attain (Mossman 1986, 31). There is much ground we have yet to cover to gain proper women's rights and equality. As historians have stated, “we are entering a new age of suffrage studies,” where the influence of activists before us “remain key and controversial in a liberation movement that continues into the present” (Strong-Boag 2010, 84). In this new age, it is essential to look at historical movements that succeeded in making fundamental changes to shape the world and political climate we now live in. By revisiting these movements and their members, we can analyze their methods and tactics, pick apart their successes and draw lessons from their failures.

My focus in this paper will be on the Canadian suffragist campaigns in the early 20th century. I will search to answer the following question: how were suffragists successful in gaining foundational roles of female representation during the early 20th century, and how can feminists and feminism advocates today pull lessons from their methods and failures? My research will look at how the suffragists combined their campaign with other reforms, how the social attitudes of suffragists shaped their goals and advocations, and how the times' political climate plays a prominent role in campaign values and results.

[LITERATURE REVIEW]

In the early 20th century, Canadian suffragists successfully broke the way and gained momentum in the ongoing fight for gender equality and women’s rights. Much research exists on those methods, and reflections on how we interpret their actions continue today. Suffragists combined their effort with other reforms and organizations like the Temperance Crusade (Jack, 1985) and the Protestant Churches to expand their support – the male reformer members of those groups wanted good Christian women to support them politically (Bacchi, 1989). The relationship between suffrage and anti-suffrage campaigns impacted the extent to which the suffragists were able to move forward successfully. As with anything, there will always be an opposition, and as Erin Steuter noted, women are the only group to actively organize against their own emancipation (Steuter 1992). The time's social attitudes determined which issues were brought forth and supported and which ones weren't. Many have agreed that the focus of suffragists wasn’t on challenging traditional gender roles, but instead on bringing women and their rights into the political sphere (Bacchi 1982 & 1978), (Holton 1992), (Findlay 1998).

In a study on uptake and genre, Katja Thieme addresses the importance of media representation and coverage on public interpretation and their development of opinions. One simple misrepresentation or shadow coverage can completely change the game, which the Canadian suffragists experienced (Thieme 2006). Whether through newspapers, television, or radio, media coverage and releases have always been the primary source of news information for citizens. What is said by the media is taken as the truth and often trusted, creating the danger of false news and misrepresentations. Canadian suffragists fell victim to the events of media misrepresentation frequently, significantly impacting their public image and support.

It is crucial to look at the political climate and historical context of movements and issues such as suffrage. As pointed out by Veronica Strong-Boag, “it remains historically important that women did not give up on their fight for greater equality” (Strong-Boag 2010, 85). Acknowledging the weight of their requests for that time and understanding why larger ones would have made no sense, nor have been attainable, is vital in understanding their perspective and how impactful their results were to the many feminists and gender equality activists that have followed them (Bacchi 1978).

[RESEARCH]

One of the Canadian suffragists’ keys to success was their ongoing connections with other organizations and social reforms. The Temperance Movement and Suffrage had a time overlap, providing reformers with the opportunity to join forces and work together to benefit one another. While these organizations ran independently, there was strength to be found in approaching the primary issue together: the desire for women’s right to participate in public life and affairs (Blocker 1989, 476). The connection with the Temperance Crusade, in turn, attracted men, some who were in support of prohibition and some who joined for personal gain. These men wished to gain the support of “good conservative Christian women”; therefore, they felt it necessary to support these women’s movements, a very self-interested act but beneficial to all (Bacchi 1989, 24).

Additionally, the Suffragists’ alliance with the Protestant Church was a critical factor in their success, as “the social gospel played an important role in the political awakening of women” in the areas which were satisfied with upholding the traditional role of women in the home (Bacchi 1989, 58). The basis of the relationship and endorsement between suffrage and the Church was on the preconceived notion that the vote of Christian women would act as a counterweight to the vote of immigrants and paupers, thus, supporting the Church and their values (Bacchi, 1982; Bacchi 1989, 62). Some say the success of Canadian suffrage was due primarily to the highly conservative nature of the time. I would go as far as to say that the conservative nature simply complimented the women's commitment and drive (Steuter 1992, 292). Their success from alliances was not without opposition, however. While an anti-suffrage movement never fully developed in Canada, there were still those who were opposed. “Through their campaign, ‘the women never took a single step forward without being pushed back first by all of their opponents’” (Thieme 2006, 286). The fight for suffrage was by no means an easy one, but women claimed their stance and didn’t step down until they were successful, which is something we can now look at with respect and attempt to follow.

Social attitudes towards Canadian suffragists and reformers played a significant role in shaping their campaign strategies, values and goals. What people considered important and unimportant was evident when looking at the focus of the suffrage campaigns. Diversified and accessible education for women and a prominent role in creating a generation of purity was of utmost importance to many suffragists (Bacchi, 1978).

The desire to create a generational purity occurred both on a social and biological level. Socially, the Protestant elite attempted to reimpose pure values on the deviant society (Bacchi 1978, 460); biologically, methods such as environmentalism (euthenics) and eugenics were consulted to filter out and remove undesirable biological weaknesses from the next generation (Bacchi, 1978).

Firstly, education in areas where men were the sole actors, particularly in law and medicine, was addressed. Suffragist Emily Stowe, who campaigned for women’s professional education and occupational opportunities, started the first women’s medical college in Canada in Toronto, giving women the chance to study medicine within their own country for the first time (Bacchi 1982, 577). Women’s admission to law school was a battle that lasted at least a decade. In the case of the French Case in 1905, the courts were concerned with the long-term implications of allowing women into law school, specifically women's natural progression to move further up in the judicial system. The judicial branch was meant for men and only men, as they were the natural defenders and protectors of women, for, at the time, women still were not legally considered Persons (Mossman 1986, 33-34). The French Case brought forward a significant point in the conversation that was later addressed in The Persons’ Case: the requirement of legal precedents if one desires to be successful. If women, suffragists, and feminists wished to make a legal change, they would need to have precedents on their side; however, one cannot set a precedent without first making a legal change. (Mossman, 1986).

The goal of creating a pure generation was a natural progression from the desire to become more educated and socially involved. The scientific debate was whether it was to be done through environmentalism or eugenics. The suffragists tended to favour environmentalism, as it allowed them to play a more active role (Bacchi 1978, 463). The suffragists were most concerned with improving women's health and fitness, as a pure race cannot be created without optimal health and physiology. Their foremost goal of achieving this was to get women out of the factories, as their work posed the most threat to their health (Bacchi 1978, 467). The suffragists also touched on women's sexual health, insisting on upholding “a strict Victorian code of morality” and implementing an anti-sex sex education program to teach the young about transgressional consequences (Bacchi 1978, 471). Such an implementation is much different from Canada's current outlook on sexual health education; however, they felt it necessary to maintain generational purity. This string of educating young women and maintaining their health set them up to bring their maternal destiny into the political world, as the “government had become housekeeping on a grand scale and women were still the most natural housekeepers” (Bacchi 1978, 468).

In addition to the push for female participation in professional education and occupations, the social attitudes were also highly influenced by outside forces and the comparisons to other suffrage movements worldwide, specifically the US and Britain. Canada lacked significant news coverage on its suffrage activities, and most of what Canadians were seeing was the coverage of English Suffragette’s militant activities. As a result, many associated the suffragettes’ behaviour with that of Canadian suffragists and inferred that they were also taking violent actions to achieve their goals – which wasn’t heavily supported (Thieme 2006). Though militant acts weren’t present in Canada, militancy managed to play an influential role through the ongoing discussion of its meaning and gained a fair amount of uptake. Was militancy an effective means of action? Was it acceptable? What did it mean to be militant? A suffragist group acting by militant methods was referred to as suffragettes and acknowledged to be using violent or aggressive means of reform, such as the British suffragettes (Thieme 2006, 280). Canadian suffragists tended to focus on their own issues and typically did not affiliate with or lobby for a specific political party. If they gained support from parties, it was accepted; however, they did not partner with them to secure support. Dependency upon another organization to be successful was not something suffragists were known to believe in; the notion of women's independence was a strong one (Thieme 2006, 283). This incorrect characterization of Canadian suffragists as on par with British suffragettes shows the weight of media representation and the effects that it can have on success, which we continue to see in current times, especially as media grows.

Finally, the social perceptions of what entailed being a suffragist influenced how they portrayed and organized themselves. The suffrage movement provided nations with a new meaning for women's identity and what it meant to be a woman. More often than not, the line of a suffragist and an ‘average woman’ overlapped; they maintained an ordinary life and managed to do it all exceptionally, in proper superpower form (Holton 1992, 11). Women had decided it was their time to contribute their views and have their voices heard, and it was well past due. It is important to understand the meaning of women having the vote in that period; it went well beyond the surface level political implications; it blended the lines between the sexual politics of the home and formal political participation (Holton 1992). Their steps began to bring women into the social and political sphere, steps we expand upon today and continue up the staircase of participation. Without them, we would be decades behind at best, and “the sphere of women is only limited by her capabilities” (Bacchi 1989, 31).

Political climates play a large role in both the methods and results of social movements, particularly during the fight for enfranchisement. Suffrage was an important time for Canada. Not only were they fighting for the vote, but also to change the legal definition of women (famously known as the Persons’ Case), the legal methods regarding the inclusion of women, access to diverse education and the ability to have a career regardless of marital status, and adjusted workforce laws of women (Mossman, 1986; Bacchi, 1982). Women were politically defined by their sexual, procreative functions and roles within the family and household, while men were the main actors in political affairs. Reflecting on the suffrage movement brings into light the fundamental question of what it truly means to be a man or woman (Conrad, 2003). The structural democratic practices have historically, and still do, work to disadvantage women and minorities. Conrad, in her article, *Addressing the Democratic Deficit: Women and Political Culture in Atlantic Canada,* notes that “by indulging in the narcissism of small differences as we do, we avoid the larger truth that women everywhere in Canada are under-represented in formal political practices” (Conrad 2003, 83). Representation continues to be a central issue of women’s equality for feminists in Canada, as the representation institutions are restricted to men (Findlay 1998, 293). With this in mind, the suffragists used the political climate of the time, wartime politics, to their advantage. They succeeded in making way for women’s political rights by receiving the right to vote. During those trying times, women’s patriotic behaviour swayed individuals who had not already believed that women should have the vote. It was declared that women had earned the honour of the vote, and political pragmatism had won them the victory. (Bacchi 1989, 142-143). The federal government made their final decision based on yet another preconceived notion that granting women the vote would guarantee women's voter support of conscription (Bacchi 1989, 139). Had suffrage occurred during a different time, one in which the government was not deeply reliant on every possible vote, the suffragists may not have been as successful or succeeded at all. The wartime pressure was enough to keep the ball rolling and help them receive the desired outcome.

[DISCUSSION]

Through my research, I have found that Canadian suffragists' success and failures in the early 20th century can be used to create lessons and set guidelines for feminists and advocates working towards gender equality and representation today. These results should be taken into account when considering how the changes that suffragists and reformers achieved during their time were fundamental to the achievements we have been able to make since then; the demands we place nowadays, however, appear much more extensive in comparison. In a broad and more general sense, women’s rights advocates can follow the suffragists' footsteps by maintaining a strong stance for what they believe in and not backing down from the fight, even when support dwindles or barriers present themselves. Looking back through history, it becomes evident that one should push back stronger when opposition presents itself if they genuinely wish to achieve success. Another important lesson to take away would be the beneficial use of resources and aid. There is no harm in combining forces and using the results to each organization’s benefit; this is something advocates do quite well – the feminist movements in present days have joined with the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, and Pride initiatives. In terms of how activists today can follow the footsteps of history, it is critical to recognize that reformers who are self-interested are more of a cause to inequality than a solution; thus, to be truly successful, an organization or movement must share the same goals and values and intend on benefitting everyone as opposed to just themselves (Strong-Boag 2010). It is also pertinent to acknowledge how they were fighting and how society has changed since then. Demands made today tend to be placed by more liberal mindsets. A complete restructuring of society's structural inequalities would have been a confusing and unattainable ask at that time. As a society, we now fight for a change of cisgender norms, have a stronger sense of just versus unjust policies and actions, and include intersectionality into the conversation. Violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights are no longer ignored. Due to the changing political sphere, social movements have become more creative to overcome their blockages. Methods such as joining with the Church or making change through conservative values are no longer options. As a society, we are not threatened by the shift in the family unit like suffragists had been. Understanding the significance of their actions and researching what makes success and what doesn’t put modern-day society on a pathway for achieving success as society evolves. Had I used different resources, I would have focused more on comparing the glass ceilings that early 20th century suffragists and reformers reached and the ones that present-day feminists and advocates reach and the reasons behind them. Yes, they are successful and make changes, but what stops them from continuing to move upwards?

[CONCLUSION]

In this paper, I have explored how the 20th-century suffragists successfully achieved foundational steps of female political participation and looked at how feminist advocates today can learn and pull lessons from their actions. Women’s rights and gender equality is a battle that we have started but are nowhere near finishing. With influential and successful historical figures to learn from, such as suffragists, society can continue to take steps towards justice. This new age of suffrage studies is crucial in learning from them and reflecting upon their choices instead of merely noting what they did and giving praise or disdain. The importance of combining resources, social attitudes and the political climate still rings true today, and in some ways, can be more challenging to overcome. The move towards liberalism in Canadian society both enables and disables the demands of social change we go forward making today. The suffragists should be, and are, viewed as role models for current evolving feminist activists, women from whom we grow through studying their failures and celebrating their successes. Advocates from both then and now are working to make Canada a more just nation (Strong-Boag, 2010).

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