

Female anti-suffragists opposed women's right to vote during the Progressive Era—yet in the process, they utilized political techniques and eventually came to understand the benefits of political participation.

BY SUSAN GOODIER

# Anti-Suffragists

**D**uring the Progressive Era (1890–1917), virtually every woman involved in philanthropy chose one side or the other in the woman suffrage controversy. Intelligent, capable women on both sides of the issue often hailed from the same social class and were involved in many of the same reform organizations. After the 1917 referendum granting enfranchisement in New York State, many anti-suffrage women accepted their new status, joined the Republican Party, and shifted their energies to educating other women on the importance of the vote.

We can explore this politicization process through the activities of an anti-suffrage leader, Alice Hill Chittenden (1869–1945). Between 1917 and 1926, Chittenden went from being president of the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage to being president of the Women's National Republican Club. Her political growth suggests that anti-suffragism may have served as a way for resistant women to accept a



NEW YORK REPUBLICAN STATE COMMITTEE

political role, and it embodies the political gains and experiences of many women as they moved from disenfranchisement to that role.

## Women Opposed

The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage was founded on April 8, 1895 by women who, the year before, had temporarily organized to prevent members of the New York State Constitutional Convention from removing the word “male” from the constitution. According to their prospectus, the purpose of the Association was to organize women in opposition to woman suffrage,

educate members on the ideas of anti-suffragism, and influence men to continue to protect women through legislation. The Association had five presidents during its tenure; Alice Hill Chittenden served as the last one, from January 1913 until December 1917. The granddaughter of Simeon Baldwin Chittenden, a Republican who served in the House of Representatives from 1874 to 1881, Chittenden was born in Brooklyn, where she lived most of her life. Her father was an attorney and the family was quite well off.

During the twenty-three years that she was involved with anti-suffrage, Chittenden and her colleagues learned and utilized political behavior, whether or not they recognized it as such. They appropriated a number of political techniques, especially those used by suffragists, to promote their campaign goals. For example, in contrast to the yellow suffragists used, anti-suffragists chose pink—for roses, paper, enrollment cards, and leaflets—to indicate their political position and to remind

*Above: Virtually nothing is known about Alice Hill Chittenden's early life, nor is it clear whether she had any formal education. But by the age of twenty-five, she began her involvement with anti-suffragism by attending meetings with her mother.*



*President Calvin Coolidge poses with members of the New York Women's Republican Club, which Chittenden helped to found.*

# as Politicians

people of their campaign. Many also wore lapel pins to show their affiliation.

Demands for anti-suffrage speakers such as Chittenden were great on the suffrage circuit. "Antis" spoke at labor and Masonic organizations, Rotary and Elks Clubs, the Young Men's Hebrew Association, normal colleges, philosophical societies, granges, churches, and girls', mothers', and women's cultural and political clubs—especially Republican clubs. They were also a presence at state and local fairs. They sponsored luncheons, lecture series, and presentations on "The Menace of Feminism" and similar topics.

However, anti-suffragists were never as adept as suffragists at fundraising. Chittenden once asked members of her audience to continue giving money to charity, but to give to anti-suffrage the money they would normally spend on a new hat, a pair of gloves, or on theatre or opera tickets—"and perhaps the men would be willing to give up some of their cigar money." Like suffragists, antis

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met with state legislators whenever possible, usually with Chittenden in attendance. Although they were less experienced in lobbying than suffragists, antis were politely received and developed political expertise as their campaign progressed.

### **Confronting the Opposition**

Debating the opposition was, for a time, a favorite political technique for both sides, and Chittenden was frequently

a panel member in these debates. The early ones must have been a bit confusing, however, since each side was determined to make its point irrespective of the point the opponent had just made. So, for instance, when a suffragist remarked that "We must have clean milk," an anti-suffragist replied that "Government is founded on force." Many of the newspaper accounts of debates indicate that the women were enjoying themselves despite the seeming non-sequiturs and the competition.

Women became increasingly polarized around suffrage, however, and the confrontations could be brutal. According to newspaper reports, Carrie Chapman Catt once invited Alice Chittenden to speak at her suffrage "school" in September 1913, warning that she would be "heckled" by suffragists. Chittenden accepted, appearing "cool and dignified" and wearing her colors on her hat and an "anti ribbon" pinned to her frock. Members of the audience often erupted into laughter or hearty applause during parts

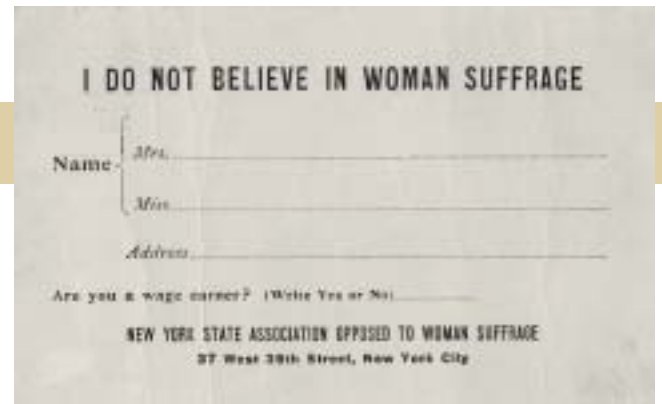


of her speech. Chittenden remained composed, even during the heckling, and some of the suffrage applause was certainly in admiration of her equanimity.

#### Other Issues for Women

Anti-suffrage women, like suffragists, encouraged higher education and other advancements for women, including the appointment of women to governmental positions, as when Chittenden and the president of the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage offered their official approval for Katherine B. Davis's appointment as commissioner of charities and correction in New York. But even as they encouraged women to continue their involvement in charitable, philanthropic, and educational activities, they argued that women would better serve the state "as a non-partisan body of disinterested workers" rather than as voters.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 was of particular concern to antis. As Chittenden stated, "[A]nti-suffragists always put patriotism



and the best interests of their country, State, or city above all other considerations." She often reiterated the anti-suffragists' support of national preparedness and universal military service, as well as the willingness of all antis to render services to the nation with no expectation of any reward. Antis immediately committed their organizational and fundraising resources to President Woodrow Wilson for war preparedness efforts and to the Red Cross for relief efforts. By the fall of 1917, Chittenden had worked with both anti-suffragists and suffragists to raise \$46,000 for Red Cross efforts.

Suffragists had the political wherewithal to work for various goals simultaneously. However, antis could not effectively campaign against suffrage and do war work at the same time. Antis believed that all political activity should be set aside until the war was over and normal life could resume. They were contemptuous of the stand taken by suffragists who argued that the United States government had "raised armies and navies without [their] consent" and "declared war without [their] sanction." Antis aligned suffragists with the Woman's Peace Party and accused the suffrage organization of being "lukewarm in its loyalty." In turn, suffragists accused antis

of being "warmongers."

In spite of their efforts, antis were not rewarded as a result of their commitment to war relief during the Great War—just as suffrage support for the Civil War had not gained women the franchise fifty years earlier. The final blow to the New York anti-suffrage campaign came in September 1917, when suffrage supporters in the upper echelons of the federal government conceived of the idea to reconsider woman suffrage as a "war measure," an idea President Wilson supported as "wise." As a result, New York State women were enfranchised on November 7, 1917. One week later, Alice Chittenden was encouraging former antis "to line up with the several political parties." She also said that she would "probably join the Republicans, as my affiliations have been entirely with the G.O.P."

#### Acceptance

Perhaps receiving some criticism for conceding defeat so quickly, Chittenden then called a conference for December 8 at her home on Madison Avenue to ask antis to shift their efforts toward blocking the federal woman suffrage amendment. The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage was reorganized as the New York State Women Voters'

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Anti-Suffrage Party. Yet by January 1918, Chittenden was serving as a canteen volunteer worker with the Red Cross, and she spent the next two years abroad in Nova Scotia, France, and Germany. When she returned to the United States, she served as president of the New York State unit of the Women's National Overseas Service League—and immediately publicized her support for Republican candidates in state and federal campaigns. She subsequently served on election and political advisory committees, organized innumerable political events, and often spoke at Republican meetings in New York State and elsewhere. Chittenden was vitally interested in discussions of the perceived success or failure of woman suffrage, determined that it would succeed.

### The Newest Republicans

Following women's disappointing experience with the GOP during the 1920 presidential campaign, Chittenden helped to found the Women's National Republican Club of New York City, along with Henrietta Wells Livermore, Pauline Sabin, and other members of the New York Republican Women's State Executive Committee. Chittenden's forte was educating women in the political process and training them to work for Republican candidates. During her tenure as president of the club, the "school of politics" was begun. The school was repeated in New

York City and in various locations around the state.

For many antis in New York, most of the impetus to work against woman suffrage dissipated after the referendum in 1917; as far as they were concerned, the decision had been made. Others agreed with a comment in the *New York Times* that "[a]mid the many pressing vital problems, domestic, foreign, economic, industrial, with which the United States has to deal, the intrusion of feminism is grotesque." Any persistent anti-suffrage sentiment in the state did not come from Chittenden and other moderate state leaders. Many former New York antis also joined the Republican Party, the political party most connected to business and property, since many of these women found Republicanism strongly related to their sense of themselves as Americans and as elites. Like former suffragists, Chittenden and other antis were looking for a way to share in women's political power; dutifulness was inextricably linked to anti-suffragism, and these former antis considered the vote a responsibility, not the right suffragists argued it was. These women were actually a crucial part of the transitional phase between progressivism and the New Deal era.

Perhaps the reason most anti-suffragists did not have to face the dilemma of whether or not to join a party once suffrage became a reality was that they, unlike suffragists, had never conceived of

reforming politics in the first place. Instead, their focus on education served to convince moderate anti-suffragists that acquiring the vote was not as alarming as they had previously imagined. By studying politics so carefully in their efforts to prevent enfranchisement, many of these anti-suffragists were possibly less opposed to the vote than previously thought. Their experience in war preparedness and relief efforts during World War I may have also served another purpose: these women may have used the war, clearly a significant distraction from their agenda, as justification to stop fighting suffrage. After enfranchisement, most politically astute women gravitated to one or the other of the parties; this was broadly acknowledged as the only "path to political effectiveness," although many suffragists and a few anti-suffragists joined the non-partisan League of Women Voters.

Politically, the 1920s was an exciting decade for many women, even for those who had been anti-suffragists. And to a great extent, party politics served to eliminate some of the divisions between former anti-suffragists and suffragists. Alice Hill Chittenden took the lessons of political involvement she had learned as president of the New York anti-suffragists, made a commitment to furthering women's political involvement, and transferred her energies to party politics—specifically the Republican Party—in innumerable ways. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The most useful resources for this article were the Jon A. Lindseth Collection of American Woman Suffrage at the Kroch Library of Cornell University; the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection at the Library of Congress; the collections of the Man Suffrage Association Opposed to Political Suffrage for Women and a full roster of the *Republican Woman* at the New York Public Library; and the Clinton Political Equality Club collection at the Clinton (New York) Historical Society.