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Ups and downs in the history of American women's suffrage

In 2008, 10 million more women voted than men. But this year, because of a likely strong showing by Republicans, women will probably lose ground in Congress for the first time in three decades.

By Mary Walton

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Leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Assn. were thrilled when William Howard Taft agreed to address their convention in 1910, the first U.S. president to do so.

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They were less thrilled, though, when he proceeded to compare women to Hottentots, and not in a good way. "The theory that Hottentots or any other uneducated, altogether unintelligent class is fitted for self-government at once or to take part in government is a theory that I wholly dissent from," the president said.

Hottentots! His words were greeted with hisses. Taft, however, saw no need to apologize. In April 1910, women could vote in only four sparsely populated Western states, and the political risk to a president who insulted the distaff half of the nation's population was negligible.

Ten years later, the 19th Amendment was signed into law. Tuesday marks the 90th anniversary of the first election in which women the country over could vote. Today's candidates dare not ignore them. But what difference have they really made?

The dire predictions of anti-suffragists a century ago now seem laughably quaint. Enfranchised females, it was said, would indulge in politics to the exclusion of motherhood and wifely duties. "You are the queens of the domestic kingdom," warned Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore. "Do not stain your garment with the soil of the political arena." One Nebraska broadside in 1914 claimed that women's suffrage was linked to socialism, "which advocates free love and institutional life for children."

For their part, the suffragists claimed that women's influence would clean up politics, ensure family-friendly legislation and promote world peace. Shortly after women won the vote, members of Congress and state legislatures scrambled to please them by enacting a sheaf of reforms, including a measure to curb maternal and child mortality, an upgrade to the civil service merit system and a child labor amendment to the U.S. Constitution that was never ratified. New polling places sprouted in schools and churches, replacing the barber shops, saloons and pool halls where men had voted.

But though women's political status had changed, their place in the social order had not. They voted much as men did, and in smaller numbers. Politicians soon ignored them.

The suffragists' notion of female voters as a force for peace did not win them political allies. On the eve of a congressional declaration of war in 1917, Alice Paul, a Quaker and chairwoman of the militant National Woman's Party, whose members were picketing the White House demanding the vote, met with Montana Rep. Jeannette Rankin, the first and then only woman in Congress. Paul told her, as she would later recount in an oral history, that "women were the peace-loving half of the world and that by giving power to women, we would diminish the possibilities of war."

Rankin's "no" vote on authorizing World War I was immediately held up by anti-suffragists as proof that women were wimps on national defense. (In 1941, on the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, Rankin did it again!)

As late as 1984, vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro was asked, on "Meet the Press," if she could push the button to launch nuclear weapons. No such doubts were raised in 2008, however, when Hillary Rodham Clinton ran for president. It was she, not her primary opponent Barack Obama, who voted to authorize the war in Iraq.

After six decades of trailing the male electorate, in 1980 more women than men cast ballots. By 2008, 10 million more women than men voted.

Susan J. Carroll, a senior scholar at Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics, suggests three reasons for the gender gap. More women are single and financially independent and often head households; more wives are collecting the substantial paychecks that come with professional and managerial positions; and finally, since the launch of the women's movement in the 1960s, women have come to see their interests as different from men's. They trend Democratic, says Carroll, because Democrats are more supportive of the so-called compassion issues that women value — education, healthcare and the government's social safety net.

It's as the suffragists originally predicted.

Democratic women outnumber Republican women 13 to 4 in the U.S. Senate and 56 to 17 in the House. Given the prospects of a Republican rout in Tuesday's elections, it is likely that the number of women in Congress will shrink for the first time in three decades.

Today's sorry state of political discourse, where even female candidates rip into each other like pit bulls, would doubtless dismay the suffragists of a century ago. But years after the suffrage victory, when she was focused on passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, Alice Paul mused that "if we get freedom for women, then they probably are going to do a lot of things that I would wish they wouldn't do; but it seems to me that isn't our business to say what they should do with it. It is our business to see that they are free."

Mary Walton is the author of "A Woman's Crusade: Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot."

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