

Prohibition and Suffrage During World War I: The War's Dual Impact

Jason Fu¹ and Charles Argon[#]

¹The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, China

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how World War I impacts two Progressive Era reforms—Prohibition and women suffrage—both positively and negatively. While the war promoted the passage of two constitutional amendments, it reduced the two movement's commitment to reform that would benefit the society. Prohibition became quasi-authoritarian, intruding individual rights; suffrage turned conservative by adopting racist justifications in order to win support. This paper proposes a hypothesis that could explain this turn from progressivism to authoritarianism and conservatism, and discuss the two movements in detail to support the hypothesis.

Background: The Progressive Era and World War I

The Progressive Era, which flourished in the United States from the 1890s to the 1920s, was a time of social, economic and political reform aimed at solving problems mainly caused by the growth of big corporations. During the Gilded Age, business leaders garnered great wealth, increasing the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Poverty became a severe issue, so was corruption. Many politicians not only formed connections with the business leaders, granting them special rights, but also paid the poor for votes. The wealth and political rights of Americans were thus undermined. The Progressive Era was characterized by the impulse to reform, or Progressivism, which included economic regulations as well as the promotion of democratic practices.

In 1917, after repeated attacks from Germany, the United States participated in the First World War. Its participation greatly undermined the Progressivism. This was because at the federal level – the level most vital to the reforms, passing laws to fulfill the demands of such movements – the momentum of reform declined. The wartime repression of civil liberties turned the government from progressivism towards an authoritarian style of politics, limiting individual rights and repressing radicals. The Espionage Act prohibited statements against the government and the war. Meanwhile, radical labor unions such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) were repressed and characterized as criminal. This directly contradicted with earlier democratic actions aimed at promoting labor's causes. Not only has the Wilson administration turned away from progressivism, its path back to supporting reforms were blocked as well. Under President Woodrow Wilson the Democrats – the majority of the Congress when wartime repression was passed – lost the support of radicals, liberals and disappointed citizens, and the 1918 midterm election was a total success for the Republicans. After this, the Republican majority obstructed the progressive acts of Wilson, such as the Treaty of Versailles. Though the Progressivist ways of thinking had currency among a significant wing of the Republican Party, due to party competition, many Republicans challenged progressive Democrats' influence in the federal government and undermined progressivism through their opposition to social change brought by the Democrats. Progressivism had thus gradually been replaced in the federal government: first from authoritarianism during wartime measures, then from the conservatism of Republicans.

Despite the wartime decline of progressivism in the federal government, two progressive constitutional amendments were passed and ratified: the 18th Amendment (and the related Volstead Act) banning the

manufacture, transportation and sale of liquor, and the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. This essay focuses on the impact of World War I on the two movements behind 18th and 19th Amendment: Prohibition and women suffrage. Both reforms had strong progressive roots but were only slowly gaining support before 1917. The war helped these movements achieve unprecedented success, as the reformers could exploit war-related justifications to advance their causes. They successfully convinced many in the federal government to come to their support. On the other hand, World War I also undermined Progressivism in the two movements because Prohibition demonstrated quasi-authoritarianism while suffrage demonstrated conservatism. This was because a mismatch occurred between rising expectations and the reality that the war had only elevated the two movements to the brink of passing constitutional amendments. Many unconvinced, tough-minded opponents remained firm on their positions and offered challenges. Nevertheless, the reformers were unwilling to give up as their goal suddenly became feasible. Under this situation, they had to resort to new justifications to gain support from opponents—ones different from their original progressive causes and the war-related justifications. The Prohibitionists (those who favored outlawing liquor) made frustrating changes in response to opponents who discredited their originally proposed soft constitution. As a result, in the Volstead Act (designed to enforce the 18th Amendment), they tried to force their radical idea of a completely dry nation on all citizens, a rather authoritarian method. After this, they did not manage to return to their pre-war progressivism but instead followed the authoritarian style throughout the 1920s. Suffragists similarly employed rather conservative means, discriminating against African Americans and immigrants to gain support. They, however, only appeared to be mildly conservative during this process of convincing opponents and remained progressive during the 1920s when many of them continued to lobby for equal rights.

Prohibition

First, the reason why Prohibition was progressive must be clarified, and two main arguments suggest this nature. One was its aim to reduce social evils, such as domestic abuse and poverty caused by low efficiency of work after being drunk as well as by the drain on family budget from alcohol consumption. Another was its claim to reduce the political corruption caused by liquor businesses. An infamous example was the Whiskey Ring under President Ulysses Grant (1869-77). Government official John McDonald helped a group of distillers who had bribed to underpay some excise taxes by intentionally undercounting liquor volumes.

Prohibition had achieved some but limited success before the war, passing bills at the federal level to solidify the ban on liquor in the dry states as well as attempting to promote the idea of a dry nation. The Anti-Saloon League (ASL) was the major force pursuing the federal amendment for Prohibition. In 1913, it secured the passage of the Webb-Kenyon Law. The law banned transportation of liquor into dry states, making their regulatory laws much easier to enforce (at this time, there were nine dry states). Together with local laws in other states, “more than 50% of the United States population was then under prohibition.” Being able to secure and enforce prohibition at state and local levels was an important milestone for the Prohibitionists. However, the support for prohibition was not enough for a constitutional amendment. The Hobson Resolution, which “called for a national prohibition amendment to the Constitution” was promoted in 1914 by the ASL but failed to reach a two-third majority.

The War gave Prohibitionists new justifications. They no longer stuck to their progressive causes, but instead focused on the war and patriotism which were greatly appealing. First, by linking liquor to the German American brewers – the main manufacturers in the United States – Prohibitionists exploited anti-German sentiments during wartime to advance their own cause. Second, Prohibitionists argued for wartime conservation of grains as a reason to ban liquor. These two arguments usually come together in their promotion. In a political cartoon named “The Hun Rule Association”, a group of beer kegs were marching with placards stating the social evils of alcoholic beverages, such as “we cause poverty and crime” and “we are against progress”. Another placard also wrote “we waste grains”. The beer kegs showed faces resembling Germans and referred to

them as “huns”. The Prohibitionists did undoubtedly use this cartoon to remind people of the harms of alcohol (their initial justification). More importantly, they aimed to use the ethnic and economic elements of this cartoon to gain support. By successfully combining the original social evils cause with the anti-German sentiment and the wartime conservation argument, the Prohibitionists fully exerted the war context to advance their cause. This tactic proved very successful. Whereas the Hobson Resolution in 1914 received a vote of 197-190, failing to meet the re-quirement of a two-thirds majority, in 1917 the Eighteenth Amendment was passed in the House by 282-128. This revealed the war’s great impact on winning support for Prohibition in just a short amount of time.



Figure 1. Cartoon: Hun Rule Association

The war, nevertheless, only pushed Prohibitionists to the brink of success while raising their determination and expectations. There were still opponents and to convince them, the Prohibitionists had to resort to different tactics. The Prohibitionists had originally conceived of a mild Amendment, which imposed loose regulation at the federal level on liquor industries while pursuing bone-dry laws in the state level. This was possibly what many politicians of the Anti-Saloon League wanted in the federal level as the focus of ASL was greatly put on saloons instead of individual buyers. During the debate of the Hobson Resolution in 1914, a subcommittee in favor of the Resolution argued that “the saloon, not the drinker, was the focus of their amendment.” When they were promoting the passage of the Amendment, however, opponents like Oscar Underwood argued that a constitutional amendment was unnecessary because all the laws needed for this soft Amendment had already been passed. He was thinking of measures like the Webb-Kenyon law that were already enforced bone-dry laws in several states. Opponents were unable to see the necessity of another amendment. This challenge was posed by wets and other, more neutral politicians. To win the support of moderates, Prohibitionists have to adopt new arguments. Unwilling to abandon their pursuit, the Prohibitionists justified themselves by saying that the Amendment was the final step of previous legislation. The war had elevated Prohibition’s popularity, gave them confidence and raised their expectations for achieving their goal of an Amendment, making a harsher legislature viable. Thus, they were compelled to include more provisions in the Amendment to differentiate it from previous bills. They began to pursue harsher bone-dry laws. At the same time, the war elevated Prohibition’s popularity and gave them confidence and raised their expectations, making a harsher legislature viable and expedient. Therefore, the 18th Amendment banned the “manufacture, transportation and sale” of alcohol “for beverage purposes”. This included individuals, clearly a sign that Prohibition was moving in a more radical

direction. While the war did not directly lead to the bone-dry laws being applied nationally, by pushing the work of Prohibitionists to the brink of success and elevating their confidence and expectations, it was instrumental in letting them adopt this idea in order to achieve an amendment.

The implementation of this bone-dry idea proved to be quasi-authoritarian because the Prohibitionists were now trying to enforce their own view upon private citizens across the whole nation. This trend was not temporary, but lasted for a much longer time and existed beyond the Amendment. As the 18th Amendment “did not forbid the purchase or use of liquor” and thus allowed a demand to still exist while only the suppliers were persecuted, the Volstead Act contained even tougher measures. It had more restrictions and was influenced heavier by the radical idea of limiting individual rights. Government officials sometimes searched personal property without warrants. By ruling that intoxicating liquor meant “one-half of 1 per centum or more”, the number of arrests due to drunkenness increased significantly. The Prohibitionists were no longer helping to reduce the “social evils” which had been one of the most important reasons for Prohibition. In fact, according to “The Hun Rule Association” political cartoon, crime was one of the social evils that Prohibitionists accused alcohol of causing. Instead, they were now so affected by the bone-dry idea and the desire for all people to follow their set rules that they were willing to put many more people in prison, even those who did not necessarily commit any crimes after drinking liquor. Moreover, “the act refused trial by jury in some cases; it confiscated personal property.” All of these measures were direct violations of the Bill of Rights, the foundation of American civil liberties. The Volstead Act neglected many basic freedoms just as how many Americans perceived that the federal government violated freedom of speech in its wartime repression.

This new authoritarian style continued throughout the 1920s, becoming more and more unpopular until the repeal of the 18th Amendment by the 21st Amendment in 1933. The opponents called the Volstead Act “a Draconian statute in the great charter of our liberties.” Even some old believers now turned against Prohibition. Pauline Sabin had once supported the movement because she thought it would benefit her son, but later became a key leader of a women anti-Prohibition organization, claiming “children are growing up with a total lack of respect for the Constitution and for the law.” She directly demonstrated how Prohibition changed from a progressive movement making society more just and bringing hope to women and children to a quasi-authoritarian movement that disregarded civil liberties. Thus, the Prohibitionists, especially those in the Anti-Saloon League who led the design of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act, had let quasi-authoritarianism become their style of politics instead of progressivism through their concessions to opponents such as Underwood.

Suffrage

The suffrage movement was also quite developed before the war but achieved few successes at the federal level. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was the major organization of the movement. After realizing that achieving suffrage state-by-state was unlikely, NAWSA first supported the actions of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns to make the first step towards federal-level suffrage with the march on Washington in 1913 before the inauguration of Wilson. Paul and Burns eventually split with the NAWSA to form the National Women’s Party (NWP), another major suffrage organization. Before 1917, eleven states granted women full suffrage.

The war gave suffragists the valuable justification of patriotism, and they grasped the chance to advance their cause. First, with more women given the opportunity to work, the suffragists vanquished “the age-old argument that women should not vote because they did not bear arms”. Second, as the government asked more from women, there was a change in the relationship and it was natural that the federal government should grant women more rights, or “their patriotism will be far less exalted, their service less spontaneous, their devotion less fervid”. Third, the war became the test of the legitimacy of democracy inside the country as it was advancing liberty internationally. Catt mentioned in her speech, “political tyranny for American women born

under our flag, educated in our schools, trained by our institutions – this is the democracy fostered and upheld by the American Republic, the democracy we take into the partnership of democratic nations.” It was ironic to suffragists that the federal government tried to spread democracy abroad while not giving women the right to vote at home. Wilson eventually realized this as well as he came to support suffrage. In his “Equal Suffrage” speech in front of Congress, in which he attempted to persuade congressmen to support suffrage, he asked: “We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of sacrifice and suffering and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and of right?” This suggested that it was undemocratic and unjust to let women sacrifice selflessly without granting them suffrage.

Moreover, anti-immigrant sentiment was also used. The war justified women’s criticisms of immigrants. “During WWI, suffragists used the increasingly accepted idea of voting as a right—and specifically as a right of people who had fulfilled their obligation to the state—to argue for woman suffrage.” Catt in her “Address before Congressional Hearing”, mentioned that while the vote was a “duty to aid the reclamation of democracy from the degradation”, ignorant immigrants could vote after their five-year naturalization. Naturalized immigrants, as Catt believed, did not fulfil their duty of upholding democracy. Besides naturalized immigrants, resident immigrants (immigrants who were not naturalized) were also attacked. Because of a “disconnect between citizenship and voting rights”, by 1917, seven states allowed resident immigrants to vote. By fulfilling obligations to the nation, especially during World War I (when women contributed greatly on the home front), they contrasted themselves with resident citizens who were “exempt from the obligations of citizens, including military service” but could vote. The suffragists’ obligation arguments thus gained much validity due to their war effort and the wartime context which promoted such discriminations against immigrants. German immigrants were probably the most attacked. Why did many suffragists attack immigrants? One reason had to deal with suffragists’ discontent and jealousy of the voting right of immigrants who they deemed inferior. Another reason, as mentioned in Catt’s speech, was that some immigrants were bribed to vote against suffrage in the states where women were campaigning. As the First World War promoted women’s obligation justification, the suffragists were using it as a chance to exact revenge on immigrants who had voted against women suffrage. These arguments aligned suffragists with politicians who wanted to disenfranchise immigrants because they were confident that women would vote for this affair once they were enfranchised.

The impact of the war on suffrage is best seen through the change in Wilson’s attitude towards the movement. On the eve of U.S. participation in World War I, in 1916, Wilson offered only vague support for women’s rights. He refused to support a federal Amendment for women suffrage as a part of the Democratic Platform; however, in his later speech at the NAWSA September 1916 convention, he assured the suffragists that he did “not come to fight anybody, but with somebody”. This vague statement shows that he did not oppose the suffragists, but also did not necessarily express any enthusiasm towards the movement. Wilson’s first public support for the Amendment came on January 9, 1918, just before the House vote. His change of attitude mainly came as a result of NAWSA’s war efforts, as well as the work of Democratic member Elizabeth Merrell Bass, who repeatedly warned Wilson of “the difficulty of winning the mid-term elections if suffrage did not pass”. Bass served to show how suffrage had become an important political issue which could impact elections after the War. Thus, by making the President accept the movement and making the movement vital enough to party politics, the war greatly promoted the suffrage movement.

Just like Prohibition, the suffrage movement was also only on the brink of success around 1918. Though Wilson eloquently supported the women in his “Equal Suffrage” speech, linking it to war and democracy, the immediate vote in the Senate failed to reach a two-thirds majority. Wilson was unable to change the minds of several Democrats. This was the first indicator of how suffrage was still not a completely guaranteed success. However, as Bass predicted, suffrage had become a point of competition between the Republicans and the Democrats. It was probably clear to both parties that the suffrage Amendment was going to be passed in the near future, and whichever party promoted it first could gain the most support in the following election. Thus, women could tackle opposition from several Democrats rather easily. With Wilson failing to

complete the business, the women “campaigned hard in the 1918 elections, helping to generate new Republican majorities in Congress”. The Amendment was passed by the determined Republicans, who wanted to “claim victory for their party after years of Democratic control of Congress”. The work of women in influencing the midterm election thus solved this first crisis.

Next came the ratification process, which also revealed that suffragists still needed to exert themselves in face of opposition and became proof that they did not remain progressive. The racial prejudice in the South was constantly increasing “the closer the suffrage legislation came to passage”. During the ratification process, substantial opposition came from the perception that “black women were eager to win the right to vote in the entire region”. Many of the anti-suffrage government officials in southern or border states repeatedly warned in state sessions of the domination of African Americans were the 19th Amendment to be ratified. One such person, ex-Louisiana governor Ruffin Pleasant, argued: “Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment not only would give suffrage to the white women but to the Negro women of the State. If we ratify the Nineteenth Amendment we ratify the Fifteenth and give suffrage to the Negro man.”

These voices of the South became an urgent issue that the suffragists had to address. For the Amendment to be ratified, the suffragists needed 36 states. Yet they were unable to rely solely on all states outside of the South. Several states had regular sessions much later after Congress passed the Amendment and a special session was required (many were hesitating whether to hold such sessions for the issue). Meanwhile, the anti-suffragists were also lobbying against ratification. It was thus impossible to not lobby for votes in the Southern and border states. In trying to win the promote ratification in these regions, suffragists used the “white supremacy” argument as they promised to uphold the racial theory. It is difficult to know whether suffragists upheld white supremacy as a mere and pragmatic tactic or as a true belief. The suffragists themselves were probably split between these two groups. Regardless, it was clear that this approach was necessary. The women “believed it essential to move quickly, before the aura of wartime faded”. Having witnessed an enormous increase in their support, the suffragists were obviously unwilling to give up. Moreover, they were desperate to succeed before the upcoming 1920 presidential election, as Catt repeatedly mentioned. This expediency issue, combined with the strong opposition of the South, caused many suffragists to use such a conservative tactic no matter what they believed. Thus, claims such as “the votes of 260,000 white women can be relied on to stand solid against any measure or any man who proposes to question Anglo-Saxon supremacy”, which upheld white supremacy were made by many suffragists.

Though many southern states stood opposed, this justification certainly yielded positive results to the suffragists. Of the 36 states, 6 southern states ratified the amendment, including Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia. Except Oklahoma, which had given full suffrage to women in 1918, none of other states had given women full suffrage prior to the Amendment (Texas and Arkansas did give women the right to vote in presidential elections). Without alienating themselves from African Americans, the suffragists would certainly meet huge oppositions from the anti-suffragists. This method likely prevented more states from further refusing the Amendment on the grounds of racial prejudice. Thus, the tactic was certainly helpful to the women.

Therefore, as the war was insufficient and the women desperate, they had to use the conservative tactic of racial prejudice to win support in the South, regardless of their own views on race. However, unlike Prohibition, suffragist conservatism was mild. The hostile attitude towards immigrants had never left the suffrage movement in the first place. Many midwestern suffragists had attacked immigrants since these voters often opposed women suffrage. Anna Howard Shaw, president of NAWSA at the time, attacked immigrants in her speech “to a large crowd at a Congregational Church in Yankton County, South Dakota” and accused immigrants of being ignorant and unable to take on political responsibilities. But Catt, speaking to Congress about immigrants, certainly a further step towards conservatism. As for the use of racial prejudice, throughout the Progressive Era, African Americans had always been left out by many of the reformers. Furthermore, the anti-suffragists, who argued suffrage “would open an additional door to black voting” in order to win support

from southern states, were certainly more aggressive to the rights of African Americans than the suffragists. Yet the need for lobbying and ratification had certainly prompted white suffragists as a whole to employ more intensely racial rhetoric to counter opposition from anti-suffragists. Thus, in the field of race, suffragists transitioned to mild conservatism.

NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt was one example illustrating how the war did make suffragists more conservative in race. Catt certainly did not uphold “white supremacy” initially. At the 1903 NAWSA convention, immediately after speaker Belle Kearney argued that the South would be compelled to “look to its Anglo-Saxon women” to retain white supremacy, Catt mentioned how the Anglo-Saxon race was once inferior to the Romans and urged the guests to “understand each other’s ideas on the race question and solve it together.” Catt’s action – not aligning herself with the previous speaker who up-held white supremacy – certainly showed that she at least did not support the idea. While not directly attacking those holding such racial views, her use of historical knowledge was probably meant to remind the white supremacists that they should be tread carefully. Instead, they should work and perfect them-selves, as she mentioned that “the race that will be dominant through the ages will be the one that proves itself the most worthy.” Furthermore, Catt had a rather friendly relationship with several African American reformers. “Mary Church Terrell (first president of the National Association of Colored Women)” praised her “as being without race prejudice.” With all these pieces of evidence, it can be inferred that Catt was generally had much less racial prejudice prior to the war.

However, in 1917 as the lobbying for suffrage was increasing, she upheld white supremacy. In her essay collection *Woman Suffrage by Federal Constitutional Amendment*, she mentioned that “if the South really wants White Supremacy, it will urge the enfranchisement of women” and that “white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women suffrage.” The chapter title “Objections to the Federal Amendment” revealed that her audience was likely the opposers of suffrage. Therefore, this sudden change of attitude was a response to the argument that enfranchising women would threaten white supremacy. What she mentioned in her essay did not show zealous support for white supremacy, but she did uphold it and clearly hoped to use this argument to reduce opposition. This was the first sign of how upholding white supremacy was more of a tactic to Catt. The remarks of her in the 1903 convention on race also supported this. Another example is from a November 1917 article she wrote for *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP, a major organization pursuing rights of African Americans) in which she defined that democracy applied to everyone regardless of “race, color, creed” and “sex”. Women would “stick to democracy” and the franchise would enable suffragists to improve politics. The aim of her article was obviously to gain support from African Americans for women suffrage. She appealed to them by promising that women and African Americans were both pursuing democracy, and the enfranchisement of women would help improve the situations of African Americans. She also promoted herself as someone caring about racial issues by expressing sympathy towards recent crimes done to the community. Many suffragists like Catt probably had to resort to white supremacy to deal with opposition from the South, but this argument seemed to remain a tactic to them. Moreover, the suffrage movement did return to progressivism in the 1920s as suffragists like Alice Paul continued to lobby for equal rights. The war thus had a notable but limited effect on suffrage.

Conclusion

The war greatly helped Prohibition and suffrage by pushing them to the brink of success. However, there were still some rather tough-minded opposers, and neither the original justification nor the war-related ones were enough to sway their minds in a short time. The desperate leaders, seeing that the war had increased support so much, refused to give up and thus had to deviate from progressivism and use either authoritarian-like or mildly conservative arguments to achieve the “final push”. These two “exceptions” prove the trend of declining progressivism and validate the negative influence of World War I on the Progressive Era.

Having discussed the similarities of suffrage and Prohibition, their differences can also be discussed. One question is why Prohibition was affected much more by World War I than the suffrage movement. The answer deals the notion of power and right. With suffrage, the women were pursuing their rights as citizen, something exclusive to them. The prohibitionists led by the ASL in Congress wanted to have control over the whole country's use of liquor and this required power to enforce laws. With more seats in Congress taken by dry congressmen and the war offering more power to the government, the Prohibition movement gathered much more power. After meeting opposition and thus giving in to the radical temperance idea, they then used this power to enforce their vision of a bone-dry nation on all the people, a goal different than the initial one of reducing social evil and political corruption. Suffrage could turn to conservatism as a tactic, but their goal of achieving rights for the repressed was largely progressive and could not be undermined much by the means.

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