

NO. 18. "THE MAP PROVES IT!"
 CAMPAIGNING FOR AMERICAN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE WITH MAPS

Commentary by Christina E. Dando

Advocates for women's voting rights in the United States began in 1908 to incorporate into their rhetoric thematic maps of the variable degree of women's suffrage, state by state.¹ Appearing first on the pages of the *Woman's Journal*, such maps were eventually employed on broadsides and posters, fans and calendars, floats and billboards. The suffragists even became "living suffrage maps" at parades and pageants, personifying states with their dress color reflecting their state's status on the suffrage map.² Such maps became so pervasive that writers and speakers needed only refer to them, confident that their audiences would know and understand the image.

As the suffragists embraced the map, they molded it to communicate their message more effectively. The first map highlighted in black the states that had granted women full suffrage; states with limited suffrage were patterned; and states with no suffrage were left white. By 1911, the map had been transformed for a national message: states with full suffrage were now in white and states without suffrage were black. By inverting the map, switching from using black to show the states *with* suffrage to showing the states *without*, the map's emphasis shifted from documenting success to identifying areas needing work. The map now offered a visual suffrage argument: the vote emancipates women; being denied the vote keeps women "in the dark," shackled.

The use of black and white in cartography to reflect moral values had been used since at least the 1820s.³ The suffragists' use of black and white was further complicated by the underlying issue of race in the United States. Many early suffrage activists were abolitionists, but by the early twentieth century, the suffrage movement had divided, with some arguing for suffrage for all, others for white suffrage only. The issue of race spilled onto the suffrage map. A map broadside distributed by the Austin Woman Suffrage Association proclaims, "Won't you help us make Texas white?" The Nevada campaign referred to Nevada, the last non-suffrage state in the West, as the last 'black spot' in the West. The map described on the present broadside begins with the whole map "as black as Egypt." These loaded statements play on the map's colors as well as race: white was associated with cleanliness, honor, civilization, and enlightenment; black with dirty, evil, lack of civilization, and ignorance.⁴ The moral implications of color tied into women's roles in American society at the time. Viewed as integral to proper homes and society, women represented civilization. Suffragists argued that the vote was necessary for women to protect their families, as part of what some have termed "municipal housekeeping."⁵ As good "housekeepers," they would of course want to make the nation "spotless."

By itself, the suffrage map appears elementary, easy to make and reproduce, seeming to convey a simple message ("look at the little suffrage map"). Yet the map was in fact anything but simple, embodying a complex set of cultural and political messages. From 1908 until 1920 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the suffrage map could be found throughout the United States. As American women worked on social justice issues, they adopted political means to advance their cause, including maps, drawing on consumer culture, changing the practice of politics in the United States. Suffragists wielded the power and authority of maps to enact change in their cultural and political landscape: it is a persuasive as well as a propaganda map. The map both *marked* the steady progress while it *argued* for the diffusion of suffrage eastward.

1. A map depicting suffrage was used in Chicago's municipal suffrage campaign in 1906 or 1907, but has not yet been located. See Catherine W. McCulloch, Letter to the Editor, *Woman's Journal* 39, no. 3 (18 January 1908): 12.
2. Mrs. A. McMahan, "How to Win a State," *Woman Citizen* 3, no. 25 (1918): 508.
3. Michael Friendly and Gilles Palsky, "Visualizing Nature and Society" in *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World*, ed. James R. Akerman and Robert W. Karrow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 207–53, esp. 240–41.
4. Farhad Dalal, *Race, Colour and the Processes of Racialization: New Perspectives from Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis and Sociology* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 140–44 and 153–57.
5. Steven M. Buechler, *The Transformation of the Woman Suffrage Movement: The Case of Illinois, 1850–1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 27 and 166.

Quotes on the broadside are from: *Woman's Journal* 43, no. 12 (13 March 1912): 91; "Moving Map at Carnegie Hall," *Woman's Journal and Suffrage News* 44, no. 6 (8 February 1913): 48; and Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (New York, 1881–1922), 5:429. The map is from the National Woman Suffrage Publishing Company, 1917, and appears courtesy of the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries.

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The broadsheet was designed by Sarah Noreen and hand printed on Gilbert Esse Pearlized Cocoa cover stock using a Vandercook 4T press at the Silver Buckle Press, University of Wisconsin–Madison, under the direction of Tracy Honn. It was printed from photopolymer plates made by Boxcar Press in Syracuse, New York. The type is a digital setting of Mrs Eaves, designed by Zuzanna Licko of Emigre. Two hundred and fifty copies have been numbered and dated.

Published 2010 by the History of Cartography Project, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 550 North Park Street, Madison, WI 53706-1404, U.S.A.

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