The Feminist Political Campaign for Eugenic Legislation in New Jersey, 1910-1942

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By

Alan R. Rushton

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For Nancy

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PREFACE

In the early 20th century, the field of eugenics was concerned about the birth of healthy and intelligent human offspring. These qualities were not only important for individual lives, but necessary for the well-being and future advancement of the community and society at large. Eugenics appealed to many women because it appeared to provide a scientific basis for reproduction. A successful eugenics program, then, could be identified as an important issue for women in general, who were the guardians of the family.

Women who became enthusiastic supporters of eugenics in the United States and Britain were predominantly upper-middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They generally came from well-to-do and educated families who believed modern scientific theories, such as eugenics, could be applied to improve the family and the community. Daniel Kevles observed that approximately half of the members of the Eugenic Education Society in England were women, as were one-quarter of the organization's officers before World War II.[1] There were two classes of membership within the Society: full members paid a higher annual fee and could vote on organizational business, while associate members paid a reduced fee and could participate in all the other activities of the reform group. Lyndsay Farrall enumerated the membership at its peak in 1913, and found 40 per cent of regular members and 68 per cent of associate members were women.[2]

In contrast, when the American Breeders Association formed in 1906, it had no female members. Its Committee on Eugenics began operation in 1910 and appointed no women officers.[3] The American Eugenics Society became the most prominent eugenic reform organization, and had an all-male Board of Directors when chartered in 1926. An enumeration of all members has yet to be completed, but a total of 156 people served on the Advisory Council before World War II. These individuals were particularly committed to the cause of eugenics, and included only 12 women members (8 per cent).[4]

While American women had little opportunity to influence national eugenic policy, as individuals and in their social organizations, they did influence public interest and implementation of eugenic legislation in several states, including California, Georgia, North Carolina and Vermont.[5] Although the New Jersey Legislature passed one of the first eugenic sterilization measures in 1911, the role women played in the planning and lobbying for such state legislation has remained essentially unknown.

When I began to examine the possible role women played in advocating eugenics in New Jersey, I found numerous newspaper and magazine articles, as well as organizational archives, that discussed the issue beginning shortly after 1900. Members of organizations such as the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the League of Women Voters and both Republican and Democratic Women's Clubs all became involved in the campaign to pass eugenic sterilization legislation on an almost-annual basis from 1911 to 1942. The New Jersey reformers consulted with the American Eugenics Society to draft legislation and provide speakers for the public hearings to promote the need for such legislation if the state was to have a healthy future.

After the reformers' initial success in 1911, every subsequent attempt to educate the public and influence legislators to support such measures failed. A well-organized and vocal Catholic minority in the state strenuously opposed eugenics as immoral and unscientific, and dissuaded politicians from supporting such a controversial issue. The reasons why this social and political issue became embroiled in religious contention provides a case study of how good intentions can succeed, or fail repeatedly, depending upon the lobbying skills of each group's adherents.

I wish to thank my historian colleague Michael Lackey for his careful study of an early draft of the work. Nancy Spencer Rushton has once again served as copy editor and cheerleader for this multi-year project. The arrival of the COVID pandemic blocked access to most research sources, but librarians at several institutions provided materials for me in these difficult times. Buff Barr at the Interlibrary Loan Office of Hunterdon County Library found many books that moved the project along. Bob Heym from the New Jersey State Library in Trenton furnished copies of legislation that failed to be enacted in the New Jersey Legislature. The North Jersey History and Genealogy Center at the Morristown-Morris

Township Library in Morristown provided material from the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs. Steven Tettamanti of the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark assisted with records from the Woman's Club of Orange. Christine Lutz and Alexandra DeAngelis of the Special Collections and University Archives at the Rutgers University Library provided material from the New Jersey League of Women Voters. Kelly Banks of Special Collections at Princeton University Library found material on the National Christian League for the Promotion of Social Purity, the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the League of Women Voters. Candace Reilly and Frances Lyon from Special Collections at Drew University Library provided archival material from the Methodist Church in New Jersey. Alan Delozier and Brianna LoSardo welcomed me to review the archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Newark at the Walsh Library of Seton Hall University.

This book examines a former era's opinion of persons with limited intellectual and social capabilities. The terms used to describe them are clearly pejorative in our current time, and were, no doubt, hurtful to such persons. As researchers, however, it is important to use this language only in its historical context, else we overlook the factual consequences experienced by the "unfit."

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INTRODUCTION

UGLINESS/DISABILITY/DEGENERATION

According to semioticist Umberto Eco,

> Beauty is, in some ways, boring. Even if its concept changes through the ages, nevertheless a beautiful object [or person] must always follow certain rules … Ugliness is unpredictable, and offers an infinite range of possibilities. Beauty is finite. Ugliness is infinite …[1]

Ugliness is also relational. Ugly people are often perceived as deformed and degenerate, and are then conceptually related to a group of citizens, whose physical characteristics appeared to be inherited, making such people "feared and dreaded" by "normal persons."[2]

Ugliness was to be contrasted with beauty, as illness is often distinguished from health. "Ugliness is the diseased and sick human. In the same way, beauty bears the stamp of a perfect harmony of all physical, mental and spiritual functions; ugliness is the expression of all this disharmony and of all physical and mental disturbances."[3] With this line of thinking in mind, the ugly and disabled presented a "catastrophe" for the person, his family and community as well.[4] They were "ill and infectious," damaged and damaging to society.[5] On both medical and aesthetic grounds, people typically viewed disability and ugliness as a "horror."[6] To be ugly was not merely an aesthetic opinion, but also reflected a "moral failing," an absence of intrinsic value as a person in the social order. These were sub-par and sub-human individuals.[7] A 1901 writer for the magazine *Woman's Physical Development* declared, "Health is beauty; ugliness is sin."[8]

At the same time, Charles Henderson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, articulated the ideal human form depicted in classical sculpture and art. Deformities meant "exceptional departures from type." Physical differences were "vulgar" and threatened "the destruction of the human state, the corruption of blood, the curses of heredity." He thought the application of the new scientific theory of eugenics would provide

the means to ensure "that more children will be born with large brains, sound nerves, good digestive organs … We wish the parasitic strain, the neuropathic trait … the foul diseased to die out." He sought to educate the "great, awkward, sentimental, unthinking public" on the importance of eugenics for the future health of society.[9]

Deviation from the accepted norm for society implied perversion. Ugliness or disabilities were seen to identify a disorder involving a person, family and society as a whole. The loss of "normalcy" evoked fear in many people; individual differences threatened order and hence control in society. The disabled did not conform to the accepted standards and rules of the community, and so were accused of inhibiting the progress of society's goals of "health, vigor, strength, cleverness and intelligence" for the future.[10]

At the beginning of the 20th century, the ugly were treated as foreign and even horrible. Many American cities passed ordinances termed "ugly laws," prohibiting the physically deformed and disabled from appearing in public spaces such as streets and parks. One could not promote attractive architecture and verdant parks if the government allowed access to those who did not comply with community criteria for order and efficiency, it was thought. Removing those with perceived physical abnormalities reflected the opinion of those in power to protect the 'normal' people from what they considered to be distasteful experiences. Governments defined the "norms of society," and marginalized opportunities for privilege and employment to only certain classes of citizens. This development in social standards connected urban laws, eugenics, immigration restriction, and city improvement campaigns. The "others" who did not integrate presented a "cultural danger to the nation."[11]

The physical characteristics of the ugly and disabled were assumed to have a biological basis. Francis Galton, who outlined the tenets of the new science of eugenics, noted as early as 1869, "Those who are the least efficient on physical, intellectual and moral grounds, forming our lowest class" had features hereditary and determined at birth.[12] Max Nordau's *Degeneration* in 1892 affirmed that degenerate persons had a distinctive set of "somatic features" and were born in families of other degenerates.[13] The physical differences of the "other" were fixed deviations from normal and were pathological.[14] The English lawyer S. A. K. Strahan observed that the insane, criminal and idiot had a strong family likeness. They all sprang from the same parental lines. There was no physical beauty to be

found in this class. He thought most normal people felt an "instinctive feeling of revulsion" after interaction with this "ill-favored and deformed" group.[15]

Somatic and mental inferiority then usually had recognizable physical stigmata. The Boston educator David F. Lincoln declared in 1902 that feeblemindedness indeed had an anatomical basis for the disorder.

> The evidence of constitutional weakness, slow growth, inferior size, of defects in the function of palate, teeth, ears, skull etc., all were associated with poor sight and hearing; defective articulation, inability to grasp objects or use the legs, and psychic weakness in any or all respects, and in many cases, there is manifest disease—as rickets, palsy, hydrocephalus, cretinism—to which we can put as a cause … The ultimate anatomical basis of these defects, their general constitutional character, is admitted, and their ultimate incurability is … distinct …[16]

Dr. D. E. McBroom from the Faribault Asylum in Minnesota concluded, "The majority [of feebleminded people] are stunted, misshapen, hideous specimens, that arouse feelings of repulsion …"[17] They lacked the beauty and morality to function in modern society.

Eugenics aligned the biological worth of one's physical body with its social worth, i.e., how each person could meaningfully participate in and contribute to the advance of the community.[18] This concept of "ableism" defined who was a member of the useful social class. The disabled demonstrated variable degrees of impairment in society, reflecting their diminished value to the nation as a whole.[19] In the late 19th century, the concept of normality came to mean the usual in contrast to the disabled who were definitely "sub-normal." These people required societal resources for "care, control, rehabilitation and education."[20] Those in power typically decreed that a deviant body disqualified a person from full participation in community affairs.[21]

The application of eugenics during the Progressive Era provided the rationale for emphasizing the societal value of normalcy and the eventual perfection of the citizen.[22] The notion of normalized and idealized people evolved into the concept of a nationalistic race of individuals with physical appearance, and physical and mental capabilities to be measured against that ideal. A citizen's social worthiness then depended upon his or her contribution to the progress of the state.[23]

In the early 20th century in the United States, mass culture reflected in newspapers, theater productions, literature and commercial advertising idealized the wholesome healthy Caucasian baby and athletic adult as the normative "racial type." Thereafter, society had to guard against genetic assault on this exemplar national stock. Eugenicists at the time claimed that undesirable traits had a biologic basis and could be prevented by limiting reproduction of the disabled, degenerate and inefficient ugly persons.[24] Albert Wiggam, who lectured for decades on eugenics before American audiences, claimed the physical attractiveness of a person was the best external indicator of hereditary fitness. Health, intellect, beauty and morality all reflected desirable "inner forces." He sought to educate the public that personal taste should really reflect personal beauty. If the ugly were rejected, married couples would fill their homes with "beautiful wives and handsome husbands." These individuals would, no doubt, also produce numerous healthy and beautiful children.[25]

Eugenics recognized human variation as a risk, rather than a character that potentially would produce a more resilient and heterogeneous population in the future. Eugenicists feared degeneration and believed if disability could be eradicated, society would truly enter a new and utopian era. Eugenicists urged careful identification of the unfit and then action to prevent their production of more deviant individuals, for the good of the "American race." Applied eugenics then designated two classes of human beings:

1. Normal and fit to reproduce;
2. Defective and unfit to reproduce.

Bad breeding had to be stopped by social segregation or surgical sterilization.[26] Eugenics seemed to offer a "modern" and objective approach to social problems because it was cloaked in prestigious biological science, based upon "the laws of nature."[27]

Henry H. Goddard of the Vineland School in New Jersey declared in 1914 that the life of the disabled, just as the feebleminded, was such that, "It would be better for him and for society had he never been born."[28] The hope for a successful future in America then would be a perfect society of homogeneous citizens, cleansed of all undesirable elements by government intervention.[29] The best people now desired familiar fellow citizens, and even more, "We desire identicalness," to lessen the fear of losing what is accepted as "normal."[30]

The eugenicists offered a simple interpretation to the complex crisis of the perceived degeneration of American society at the time.[31] In 1915, Dr. Charles Haiselden of Chicago predicted if society would consistently sterilize the defectives for three generations, he believed no other degenerates would in all likelihood be born in the future.[32]

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CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR POLITICS

The feminist writer Gerda Lerner observed that women have traditionally been categorized as conservative and passive; they were observers, not actors in history. But in the late 19th century, American women discovered they had political power in their social organizations to radically change the status quo. Although they lacked the vote, the sheer number of their members allowed women's organizations to draft political measures and then generate public pressure that eventually provided models for mass reform movements into the 20th century. The key question for historians to assess, then, is what did the women actually do?[1]

New Jersey women began their political activity with a vigorous campaign against alcohol sale and abuse shortly after the Civil War. An 1874 report on groups of "The Temperance Women" described how members focused on "prayer, song and exhortation." The women held public prayer meetings, kneeling on the sidewalks in front of taverns. Their public efforts resulted in the closure of many local saloons for lack of male patronage. When the police arrived to break up the demonstrations, they discovered the women in the campaign were "the most delicate, refined, highly-educated wives, mothers and sisters from the best families," but prepared to go to jail for the cause.[2] Another article from 1885 described the campaign for legislation to teach children in public schools the dangerous effects of alcohol on human physiology. "The Temperance Women" now invaded the halls of government in Trenton to influence political leaders. They decorated desks in the Senate with "handsome bouquets of flowers" to encourage the legislators to support this important measure.[3] The action of the "reform women" allied them with the class-related issues addressed by their husbands and fathers. They accomplished civic action even without suffrage.[4]

When reform-minded women organized the national Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in the 1870s, their leaders recognized that legislation against the sale of alcoholic beverages would come slowly if

only men had the power in state legislatures to make such laws. WCTU President Frances Willard transformed the organization from a single-issue movement and established approximately 40 departments to focus the group's efforts on a broad array of community matters.[5] She advocated for women's political power and urged members to support suffrage organizations in their home states. The WCTU membership grew dramatically and peaked at approximately 176,000 by 1890.[6]

A parallel movement began among the women's clubs that had developed in hundreds of towns throughout the country after the Civil War. Middle-class and upper-class women who had some free time from family and household chores met periodically to read and discuss works of literature. The feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman applauded such efforts to begin the transition of mothers and wives to modern women. In her opinion, the club movement was "one of the most important sociological phenomena of the century … making as it does the first timid steps toward social organization of these so long unsocialized members of our race."[7] One historian concluded that Gilman possessed "the most important feminist assessment of women's position in America."[8]

During the 1890s, local clubs shifted their attention from genteel art and literature to coordination of campaigns designed to improve local parks, schools, libraries and health facilities for women and children.[9] Rheta Childe Dorr, who also became active in the suffrage movement, noted,

> Woman's place is in the home, but home is not contained within the four walls of an individual house. Home is the community. The city full of people is the Family. The public school is the real Nursery. And badly do the Home and the Family and the Nursery need their mother.[10]

Helen M. Winslow concluded that women's clubs had become "a splendid force for righteousness whose future is intertwined with the destiny of nations."[11] Dallas Judge Ben Lindsey agreed: "Scarcely without exception it has been the members of the women's clubs … who have assured the passage of nearly all the advanced legislation … for the protection of the home and the child."[12] Women were now involved in much more than pleasant social chats.

A British visitor, Lord James Bryce, observed at this time,

> Associations are created, extended and worked in the United States more quickly and effectively than any other country … These associations ramified over the country and have great importance in the development of opinion, for they rouse attention, excite discussion, formulate principles, submit plans, embolden and simulate their members …

He believed these actions enhanced the vitality of American democracy.[13]

The local enthusiasm demonstrated by women and the successes they achieved gradually coalesced into state and then a national organization for coordinated social reform. In 1890, Jane Cunningham Croly met with leaders of 52 women's social clubs to form the General Federation of Woman's Clubs (GFWC) to integrate goals with other women's groups such as the WCTU.[14] Local clubs swelled the national membership to more than 1 million women by 1910.[15] In 1914, the GFWC urged its state chapters to work for women's suffrage, which fueled the national effort to convince Congress on the importance of the vote for women citizens.[16]

While the women of this era sought equality in law and opportunity, they also emphasized that they were uniquely different from the men who held political power. Women claimed to be more "moral, nurturant, pacific and philosophically disinterested, whereas men were competitive, aggrandizing, belligerent and self-interested."[17] Reform-minded women stated their purpose was to preserve the safety of their homes and families; it was their moral duty. A good woman "had to supervise moral standards of her community, or wickedness would destroy the home she had uplifted." When women obtained the vote, they would certainly progress from "housewife to lobbyist," and alter the course of legislation in America.[18] They sought a moralistic form of government at all levels of society.[19] J. Stanley Lemons described the goal of such women in their organizations as working to save "the nation from its sins."[20]

One example of legislative success involved mothers' pensions. By 1920, 40 states had passed these reform laws. Reasons cited for this rapid legislative effort have relied on cultural and ideological factors. State partisan politics did not appear to play a major role in enactment of such laws. One important influence not previously recognized was the importance of action by women's voluntary groups agitating for social legislation. Even before suffrage, women were able to work through voluntary associations to generate public debate that resulted in social legislation.

For example, the GFWC National Convention endorsed mothers' pensions in 1912. Women's groups created "sudden, nationwide groundswells of public opinion in favor of particular kinds of legislative reforms …" The women's federations took up the cause and engaged in remarkably "widespread and simultaneous public education and legislative lobbying" that resulted in successful reform laws.[21] Women came to recognize that a winning outcome of such struggles required collective action and not merely good feelings or hope for the future.[22]

When Carrie Chapman Catt assumed leadership of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1915, she welcomed the members of the WCTU and the GFWC into the public campaign for the vote. Women learned that their lobbying in large numbers could have significant effects. One contemporary commentator warned, "The politician has no hiding place when the suffragists get after him."[23] Winifred Harper Cooley noted the importance of suffrage for all women, for it would come to be a tool for a "complete social revolution." The vote would permit freedom for women's active expression in public life, and provide an "opportunity to share in any civic and professional capacity."[24]

The campaign for voting rights encouraged a generation of reform-minded women to join the New Jersey Woman Suffrage Association (NJWSA) which counted 120,000 members by 1918. Until they achieved their goal, the suffragettes held 2500 outdoor and 250 indoor rallies, and distributed 2 million pieces of literature each year, all designed to encourage men in power to favor the 19th Amendment. Fourteen militant suffragettes marched from Newark, New Jersey to Washington DC to draw national attention to the campaign for the woman's vote.[25] Former New Jersey Gov. Woodrow Wilson, now United States President, finally endorsed the measure, which became law in 1920.[26]

Thousands of women throughout the country labored for generations to achieve suffrage. The NWSA had now accomplished its goal, and most members resigned to carry on their own lives in the community.[27] Obtaining the vote was necessary, but now women had to learn how to use it to accomplish their reform objectives. Anna Howard Shaw, Past President of the NWSA, lamented, "I am sorry for you young women who have to carry on the work in the next 10 years, for suffrage was a symbol, and now you have lost your symbol. There is nothing for women to rally round."[28] Carrie Chapman Catt recalled the joy of women united to achieve the vote. "How I do pity those who have felt none of the giving, of

the oneness of women struggling, serving, suffering, sacrificing for the righteousness of women's emancipation."[29] She cautioned amid celebrating the achievement of 1920, "Winning the vote did not end the woman's campaign for equality and justice because many a hard-fought battle lies ahead …"[30]

The Suffrage Amendment was not an end point, but initiated programs of social reform, increased civic activity and establishment of organizations that focused on women's issues.[31] At the same time, women attempted to focus on implementation of their individual rights and new opportunities, recognizing that further unified action in the political arena would be difficult and exhausting.[32] Carrie Chapman Catt told the women they now were "free and equal citizens," but they had to master the political process. "You won't be welcome, but there is the place you must go."[33] The vote signaled merely the continuation of women's involvement in advocating their agenda for good and efficient government.

As the 1920 general election approached, leaders of the major political parties welcomed the new voters by organizing specific Republican and Democratic women's organizations. They viewed the neophyte voters as "wives, mothers and [campaign] workers," not as persons who would advocate specific reform measures.[34] Ruth Harman McCormick of the National Republican Women's Committee urged the ladies to,

> rally to the support of the party which … protects the interests of the family and the women and children … If women will bring their fresh enthusiasm, their distinctive viewpoint, and their quick instincts to cooperation with men's long experience, they can form a powerful political partnership.[35]

Carrie Chapman Catt agreed that women should actively participate in the political parties, but not blindly accept opinions of the male party leaders. The men in power had no idea how women would vote. Would they choose "principle over party loyalty … or sentiment over practicality?" All sought to entice the "woman vote," whatever that meant.[36]

Women had obtained the vote, but quickly learned they lacked the skills to compete in the political process. They were hesitant in pressing individual legislators to endorse their progressive ideas; they were not prepared to "campaign" in the political arena.[37] The results of the 1920 election revealed that only approximately one-third of women turned out to vote.[38] A survey in Chicago assessed why women there had not voted. Many said

they had "no interest in politics."[39] Democratic Committeewoman Emily Newell Blair in 1925 declared, "I know of no politician who is afraid of the woman vote on any question under the sun."[40] Women's potential political capital declined because the reform movement had fragmented; there were no large blocks of women voters supporting specific issues or candidates.

Women voters were no more motivated by altruism than men. Male politicians discovered that women voted as did their husbands and fathers. Therefore the "woman vote" posed no real threat to upsetting the traditional flow of power within state and national governments.[41]

Shortly after the 1920 election, members of the NWSA formed the National League of Women Voters (NLWV) to educate women in the art of voting intelligently and using their votes to improve the community.[42] The league evolved primarily as an organization to promote good government, not as a political action party.[43] It provided a forum for women to discuss personal, family and social concerns, and then to support and lobby candidates who agreed with these goals. The women presented a moral point of view to achieve public good and social welfare. The league members planned to build public opinion and support specific legislation. To this end, the organization sponsored candidates meetings, conducted study groups, provided testimony before legislative committees, and distributed printed leaflets in order to advance its work in the public interest.[44] Some members worried that many women were too polite, modest and pacific to win political discussions. Margarette Newell urged women "to start fights, get publicity, gain followers and take risks" in political campaigns.[45] The NLWV competed for members with the major political parties during the 1920s. At one league convention, ladies of strong partisan sympathies "assailed in unmeasured terms" the fact that the leaders had not counseled "all its members to join either Republican or Democratic parties."[46] Some members feared that joining a political party would compromise their conscience, but the suffrage campaign had proven that united action was the only means to achieve true political reform.[47]

The NLWV responded to such criticism by guiding the formation of the Women's Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC) as an umbrella syndicate to coordinate political action of several women's groups. By 1925, the Washington-based office represented the interests of 21 national women's organizations with more than 12 million voting members. State and national legislators recognized this potential voting bloc and accepted

the goal of passing specific reform measures such as the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Bill that promoted community health. The delegates at the 1918 GFWC Biennial Convention voted to strongly endorse the proposal. Articles in the *Woman's Home Companion*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping* and the *Ladies Home Journal* that arrived monthly in millions of American homes also encouraged Congress to vote for the measure. Local women's groups throughout the country organized petition drives and letters to newspaper editors on the issue. The women convinced governors of 34 states to publicly endorse the bill as well. Legislators received a "deluge of letters and telegrams." One US Senator believed his office counted one letter for every woman in his entire state. Representatives from the WJCC interviewed 50 congressmen per day until all the legislators had personally been urged to vote in favor of the act. The American Medical Association (AMA) acknowledged how effective this concerted lobbying had been. "It was one of the strongest [efforts] that has ever been seen in Washington." The male politicians feared this campaign would mean a unified women's bloc of votes in the future and agreed with the ladies' issue. Pres. Harding signed the bill in November 1921.[48]

The GFWC members were largely responsible for the flood of letters to Congress. Many historians agree that Congress would not have enacted such legislation without the sustained powerful advocacy of local and state units of women's voluntary associations.[49] Their success empowered members of the WJCC constituent groups to consider a wider scope of federal management regarding human welfare in general.[50] Legislators, however, learned that there was considerable debate among the constituent groups about what legislation should be endorsed. They saw there would be no women's bloc vote on most issues on election day.[51] At this time, it was becoming clear that the influence of the traditional parties was declining, while interest groups and the development of public opinion were becoming more effective means of influencing legislators.[52]

By 1930, some political groups worked to convince voters that the many reforms proposed by the WJCC were "communist-inspired and opposed to American traditions of local autonomy and individualism."[53] Centralized government regulation of much of individual freedom appeared unappealing to many citizens at the time, and the political influence of the organization dwindled dramatically.

Women and Politics in New Jersey

In 1905, the *Cranbury Chronicle* reprinted an article from the *London Express* on eugenics, a new science that claimed knowledge of human heredity could be applied to the improvement of marriage choices. Francis Galton was convinced that many desirable human characters were hereditary and better children would be born if society could identify the best parents. The writer H. G. Wells suggested another possible means for human improvement would be to legislate the sterilization of human failures and prevent the birth of more unfit children.[54]

Three years later, New Jersey Assemblyman John D. Prince introduced a bill to create a commission designed to investigate the causes of crime and degeneracy. He claimed, "No question of the present day is more important than that which deals with the treatment of our defective and degenerate classes." He noted that charity and medical care now allowed the weak and mentally defective to survive, "when formerly they would have died." He believed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and epileptics all arose from the same bad family stock. The state prisons and asylums were "crowded beyond capacity." He concluded it was time for the state to take official cognizance of "this impending peril." The proposed commission would include nine citizens, both men and women, to investigate causes of degeneracy, defectiveness and criminality, and then recommend the "best methods for alleviating these conditions."[55]

Dr. Charles A. Rosenwasser, a specialist in the treatment of alcohol abuse, chaired the commission. Mrs. Caroline B. Alexander, from a politically prominent Hoboken family, shared her experience with juvenile delinquents to the members.[56] The commission heard testimony by Dr. David Weeks from the Village for Epileptics at Skillman. He reported that nearly all the residents there had a family history of the disorder and should not be permitted to reproduce.[57] Dr. Rosenwasser summarized the commission findings at a meeting of the AMA in 1909. All its members agreed on the important role played by heredity in the development of the "defective and delinquent" classes. He warned, "There is an urgent need of doing something to lessen the propagation of the unfit." He also reported that sterilization of defectives and delinquents had been successfully applied in several other states already.[58]

Mrs. Alexander subsequently became a public advocate for a sterilization campaign in New Jersey. Women's organizations accepted her challenge

to first investigate and then advocate for such legislation designed to improve the quality of community life in the state. Between 1911 and 1942, progressive women in their alliances coordinated by the New Jersey League of Women Voters (LWV) lobbied lawmakers in Trenton to consider 15 proposed sterilization bills (Table 1-1).

The historian Nancy F. Cott has noted that if a woman's bloc of voters was to succeed in promoting a particular bill, there had to be a clearly identified priority on the issue.[59] New Jersey women sought to communicate their concerns about this one particular threat to society, reminding the legislators that the voters "had over them the power of political life or death" at reelection time. The women advised legislators to pay attention to the petitions and personal letters they received on proposed bills that could result in socially important matters.[60] How a small group of reform-minded women in New Jersey sought to enlist the support of like-minded citizens in this quest over three decades provides the basis for this book.

Table 1-1
New Jersey Sterilization Bills 1910-1942
(A Assembly, S Senate)

Year	Bill Number	Legislator	Status
1910	A 445	White	Failed[a]
1911	A 297	Davidson	Failed[b]
1911	A 362	White	Passed[c]
1924	A 294	Davis	Failed[d]
1925	S 240	Williams	Failed[e]
1926	A 58	Bostock	Failed[f]
1927	S 113	Abell	Failed[g]
1929	A 54	Pursel	Failed[h]
1930	A 13	Pursel	Failed[i]
1933	S 240	Willis	Failed[j]
1934	S 162	Leap	Failed[k]
1935	S 50	Leap	Failed[l]
1936	A 395	Geddes	Failed[m]
1937	A 247	Stokes	Failed[n]
1938	A 405	Stokes	Failed[o]
1942	A 170	Shepard	Failed[p]

[a] B. H. White, "Bill 445," *Minutes of Votes and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the State of New Jersey*, (1910): 523.