Making the Democratic Party a Partner: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Women’s Joint Legislative Conference, and the Women’s Division of the New York State Democratic Party, 1921-1927*

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The historiography about women’s participation in political parties during the 1920s has undergone a significant change in the past twenty years. Paula Baker, who wrote “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political History, 1780-1920” in 1984, was the most important voice in this historiography.1 Baker conceived of the change in women’s political status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as emerging from their contributions to voluntary organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. By joining such organizations, Baker argued, middle-class women entered the public arena by addressing such issues as temperance.2 But by the beginning of the Progressive Era, women’s organizations realized that their old means of persuasion, such as petitions to state legislatures, constituted an ineffective means of addressing the problems of American society. Thus women’s organizations began to turn to state action, particularly labor legislation, as a means of accomplishing their goals. Baker notes that “alone, they were powerless to remove the source of the problem, only to face the growing number of its victims.”3 Thus such organizations as the National Consumers’ League and the New York Women’s Trade Union League formed networks with political agencies such as New York State’s Factory Investigating Commission to further their social legislative goals.

With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women’s groups hoped that their newly acquired suffrage would increase women’s influence in the political process. Baker concluded, however, “that woman suffrage had little impact on women or politics has been considered almost axiomatic by histo-

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rians. It failed to help women achieve equality. 4 Recent historians, while not totally disagreeing with Baker, nonetheless argue that the decade did demonstrate important developments for women in party politics. As Suzanne Lesbock states, "Somewhere between the rhetorical flourishes of the suffragists and the show-me attitude of their detractors lurk possibilities for more interesting ways of posing and answering these questions." 5 Works such as Robyn Muncy's Creating a Female Dominion, Nancy Cott's The Grounding of Modern Feminism, and Kristi Andersen's After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal, have demonstrated women's influence in the creation of the federal social welfare system and in state politics during the 1920s. 6 Perhaps the most important contribution lies in Jo Freeman's recent book, A Room at a Time: How Women Entered Party Politics. 7 In her book, which traces the development of women's participation in party politics from 1920 through 1970, Freeman argues that "party women" did make significant advancements in the five decades between the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the rise of the women's liberation movement.

Anna L. Harvey, in her 1998 Votes Without Leverage: Women in American Electoral Politics, 1920-1970, counterargues that in the 1920s women's organizations, wedded to a nonpartisan agenda, relinquished control over political issues to the political parties. Women's organizations never regained their influence until the 1960s, when the party system began losing its effectiveness. 9 Harvey also agrees with J. Stanley Lemons that while the Women's Joint Congressional Conference undertook a successful agenda from 1920 through 1925, the late 1920s witnessed a different story. 10 The central weakness of Harvey's argument lies in the fact that she does not consider the efforts of the Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Party after 1924.

This article contributes to the growing literature about the participation of women in partisan politics during the 1920s. While many historians and biographers have extensively analyzed Eleanor Roosevelt's activities in the 1920s, no one has concentrated on her association with the Women's Joint Legislative Conference. 11 From 1921 through 1927, Eleanor Roosevelt made important contributions to the Conference's agenda, although she was never in the forefront of its activities except for a brief and disappointing appearance before the New York Joint Legislative Conferences on Labor and Industry in 1925. In addition, she held only a few offices in Conference organizations, most notably in the Women's City Club of New York. Unlike her fellow "player," Mary Van Kleeck, however, Roosevelt did have two important sources of outside support. First, her status as both wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of New York State's leading Democratic politicians, and niece of Theodore Roosevelt, one of the nation's most dynamic presidents, helped her create an identity separate from the Joint Legislative Conference's reform efforts. Second, the Women's Division of the party, which
included persons affiliated with the Conference, such as Marion Dickerman and Caroline O'Day, gave Roosevelt an additional source of power.

With these independent sources of power, Roosevelt contributed one key element to the Joint Legislative Conference's success in the late 1920s and early 1930s: she helped make the New York State Democratic Party a partner in the process of passing the Conference's agenda. While party leaders Al Smith and Robert F. Wagner had always supported the 48-hour bill and the minimum-wage measure, the state Democratic Party had never officially made the measures part of its platform. Roosevelt, through the Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Party, changed this policy in two ways. First, with the assistance of party women, she successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the 48-hour bill in the 1924 Democratic state party platform. Second, the Women's Division garnered support for the Joint Legislative Conference agenda by publishing and editing the Women's Democratic News, by traveling constantly throughout New York State, by making speeches on the Conference's behalf, and by effectively making use of the mass media.

The Conference also played an important role in the political education of Eleanor Roosevelt. From 1921 through 1922 the New York League of Women Voters helped Roosevelt learn the complexities of legislative agendas and the coordination of women's joint efforts. The New York Women's Trade Union League taught Roosevelt the problems of working women, which helped to seal her approval of labor legislation. The Women's City Club of New York enabled her to appeal to middle-class women, an important part of the Conference's efforts.

1921-1924: “An Intensive Education” for Eleanor Roosevelt

In 1931 former Democratic Party National Committee member Emily Newell Blair wrote an article entitled, “Why I Am Discouraged About Women in Politics.” Blair had become a member of the National Committee in 1920, a year when the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote in federal elections. Women reformers had hoped that the new right could give women a decisive voice in political affairs. Eleven years later, however, Blair concluded that the promise had become hollow. Initial gains achieved by women in the 1920 Republican and Democratic national conventions, she stated, had vanished. “Far from participating equally with men in politics,” Blair claimed, “they [now] participate in leadership hardly at all.” While women had been elected to national party committees, committee members by 1931 simply left their votes in the control of the male majority. “I find politics still a male monopoly,” Blair sadly concluded.

Although no evidence shows Eleanor Roosevelt's reaction to Blair's negative analysis, she would have sharply disagreed. The future First Lady saw the political system, particularly the Democratic Party, as a means of promoting
women's issues, including labor legislation. In 1928 Roosevelt penned an article that stated in part:

If women believe they have a right and duty in political life today, they must learn to talk the language of men. They must not only master the phraseology, but also understand the machinery which men have built up through years of practical experience.

By this time Eleanor Roosevelt herself had become the model she described: someone who talked the political language and manipulated the party machinery as well as her male counterparts. The process of her education in the American political system began in 1921, when Roosevelt first encountered the Women's Joint Legislative Conference through the New York League of Women Voters.

Eleanor Roosevelt came to the League with an already-extensive political background. Her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, had served as President from 1901 through 1909, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her husband, had just completed an unsuccessful campaign as the 1920 Democratic vice-presidential candidate. In contrast, Eleanor's own political involvement came at a slower pace. Busy with raising six children after marrying in 1905, she only participated peripherally in her husband's prewar political activities. But this changed with the United States' entry into World War I in 1917. Eleanor volunteered for service with the American Red Cross in Washington, D.C., where Franklin served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1920, when her husband ran for vice-president, Eleanor traveled throughout the country, gaining a new perspective on both the nation and political campaigning. As she confessed to a newspaper reporter during the campaign, "I am interested in politics, intensely so."

Two other factors increased Eleanor Roosevelt's interest in political involvement at this time. First, as her biographers Joseph Lash and Blanche Wiesen Cook have demonstrated, Eleanor's discovery in 1918 of her husband's affair with their social secretary Lucy Mercer proved a life-changing experience. She turned to politics not only as a means of softening the blow, but also of finding a sphere separate from her husband's life. Second, Franklin's polio attack in the summer of 1921, and his subsequent paralysis, forced his wife to become a connection between her recuperating husband and the political world which he formerly moved so easily in. As historian Lois Scharf notes, "her activities [now] extended in two directions—voluntary reform societies and clubs on one hand, partisan politics on the other."

With an increased interest in both reform and party politics, Eleanor Roosevelt found a ready home in the League of Women Voters in 1921. Narcissa Vanderlip, a Joint Legislative Conference member and a former New York suffrage leader, invited her to join the organization. To assist Roosevelt
in her new duties of following the New York State legislative agenda, Vanderlip further introduced Roosevelt to League official and lawyer Elizabeth Read. Read and her companion, Esther Lape, also co-edited the League's newspaper, *The City-State-Nation*. Eleanor's experience with co-editing the newspaper later proved invaluable when she started a newspaper with the Women's Division. As she later commented, the experiences constituted an "intensive education."

As Roosevelt continued working with her League of Women Voters colleagues, her confidence and skills quickly grew. "The rest of us," Lape recalled later, "were inclined to do a good deal of theorizing. She would look puzzled and ask why we didn't do whatever we had in mind and get it out of the way. As you may imagine, she was given many jobs to do." Roosevelt assumed greater responsibility in the organization, becoming chairperson of the League's Legislative Coference.

By late 1921, however, the New York League of Women Voters, smarting from its public clash with Governor Nathan Miller, began concentrating on nonpartisan issues, in effect leaving the Joint Legislative Conference. Feeling restless with the League's new nonpolitical agenda, Roosevelt made two important connections with Joint Legislative Conference leaders. First, she befriended Mary Elizabeth Dreier, a fellow member of the League's Board of Directors. Dreier quickly brought her new colleague into the New York Women's Trade Union League. Second, and most importantly, Roosevelt met Nancy Cook and her partner, Marion Dickerman.

Nancy Cook first met Eleanor Roosevelt when she invited the rising woman reformer to speak at a Democratic fund-raising dinner in late 1921. Since her partner's defeat in the 1919 state elections, Cook had become deeply involved in the Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Party, created after the successful suffrage referendum of 1917. Cook soon became a key assistant to the Women's Division's new chairperson, Harriet May Mills. As Dickerman later recalled to historian Kenneth Davis, "for Nancy's career, [my] campaign was decisive. Political work was filled with tingling combative excitement that made teaching to her comparatively dull and tame." After Eleanor's nervous but successful speech at the Democratic fundraiser, Cook came to Hyde Park many times, bringing Dickerman with her. The trio soon became an "almost inseparable" group until the mid-1920s.

By early 1924, Roosevelt had become an important force in the Women's Division, becoming its finance chairperson and vice-president. She also expertly wielded power within the New York State Democratic Party. Frances Perkins later remembered meeting Roosevelt at Division headquarters. Eleanor sat at a desk, talking to a Democratic committeewoman on the telephone. Perkins heard Roosevelt say that it was insufficient to print up handbills and hold party meetings. "Don't waste your breath," Roosevelt added. "Don't waste
your gasoline." Roosevelt later told Perkins that the party needed to expand its activities, attracting new Democrats as well as the party faithful. It was a principle she would faithfully follow for the next three years.  

Besides establishing a power base in the Democratic Party, Roosevelt also strengthened her new relationship with the Women’s Trade Union League by meeting Rose Schneiderman. Schneiderman later related how she and Roosevelt met at the latter’s New York City apartment to eat supper. During the meal, Schneiderman later recalled, “we talked about the work I was doing. Mrs. Roosevelt asked many questions but she was particularly interested in why I thought women should join unions.”  

Roosevelt not only became personal friends with Schneiderman, but also became a key, if understated, influence within the Trade Union League. She raised funds for the organization, taught classes for working women seeking a better education, and participated in policy decisions. Schneiderman and her Trade Union League colleague, Maud Swartz, found themselves invited to Campobello, the Roosevelts’ summer retreat, many times during the 1920s.  

By 1924 Eleanor Roosevelt had completed her “intensive education” in political affairs, establishing important connections with the Women’s Division and Joint Legislative Conference organizations such as the Trade Union League. Now it was time to use these ties to facilitate the Conference’s agenda.

1924-1926: Making the New York State Democratic Party a Partner

Eleanor Roosevelt came into prominence in Democratic Party affairs at a time when the nearly-one-hundred-year-old party faced its most dramatic transformation. Throughout the 1920s the national Democratic Party was itself engulfed in a struggle between two factions: the traditionally powerful, rural-based, and Protestant coalition in the South and Southwest, and the rising, urban-based, and predominately Roman Catholic and immigrant-based faction elsewhere. Al Smith, New York State governor throughout most of the 1920s, became the primary representative of the urban faction. From 1924, when he first sought the Democratic presidential nomination, through 1928, when he finally received his party’s blessing, Smith gathered together a formidable coalition of working-class and middle-class supporters in New York State. Working women’s support became key to the success of this coalition. Eleanor Roosevelt and her Joint Legislative Conference-affiliated coterie helped make the Conference and the New York State Democratic Party formidable partners from 1924 through 1926 by lobbying at state conventions, traveling through New York State, and publicizing the Conference’s agenda through the Women’s Division’s newspaper.
In April 1924 the New York State Democratic Party gathered in Syracuse, New York, to support Smith’s presidential effort. Eleanor Roosevelt seized the opportunity to make the Joint Legislative Conference’s 48-hour bill a key element of the state Democratic Party’s agenda in the fall elections. But Roosevelt also felt that an increase in women’s representation in the state party, particularly on the delegation to the upcoming national Democratic party convention in New York City, was needed before any change in the agenda would be possible. To accomplish this goal, Roosevelt engaged in a strategy that combined private lobbying with grassroots mobilization.

Eleanor Roosevelt first tried to woo her main opponent, “Boss” Charles Murphy, who still controlled the party machinery. Murphy had been the primary motivator behind the creation of the Factory Investigation Commission, which formulated and passed an ambitious agenda of labor legislation in New York State from 1911 through 1915. But Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt knew from bitter experience how tough Murphy could be in political infighting. FDR had made his early reputation fighting Tammany’s attempts to appoint political cronies to key state positions. When the brash young politician attempted to gain the Democratic Party nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1914, Murphy quietly but effectively prevented him. Learning a lesson, Franklin D. Roosevelt afterwards made sure that Murphy stayed on his side in any political disputes.

Keeping Murphy’s political power in mind, Eleanor Roosevelt privately lobbied the New York City political boss for the addition of two women delegates, and two alternates, to the national convention delegation. She only encountered stony silence from the Irish politico. “I have wanted you home the last few days,” Eleanor informed her traveling husband just before the convention opening, “to advise me on [this] fight.” “I imagine,” she confidently continued, “it is just a question of what he dislikes most, giving me my way or having me give the papers a grand chance for a story by telling the whole story at the women’s dinner Monday night and by insisting on recognition on the floor.”

Frustrated with her failure to negotiate a quiet settlement, Eleanor Roosevelt now turned to her women party colleagues. Addressing them at a dinner as the April 1924 party convention opened, Eleanor bluntly put the issue at stake. “We have had the vote for four years,” she declared to the appreciative audience, “and some very ardent suffragists seem to feel that instead of gaining power the women have lost.” If women wanted real political power, she continued, they needed to “gain a place of real equality” by working with, not against, their male counterparts.

Having garnered grassroots support from the Women’s Division, Roosevelt now went to Albany with a women’s delegation to visit Governor Al Smith. She
had already laid the groundwork for Smith’s cooperation by previously announcing that she would lead New York State Democratic women in a fight to support the Governor’s labor program, including the 48-hour bill.13 When Smith announced his support of the inclusion of four additional women delegates to the party convention, Murphy and Tammany Hall quietly but effectively acquiesced.14 A triumphant Roosevelt now told the press, “We go into the campaign feeling that our party has recognized us as an independent part of the organization.”15

Eleanor Roosevelt’s strategy reached its culmination at the state Democratic Party convention in September 1924. At the convention, Roosevelt introduced a Trade Union League-sponsored resolution that the Democrats include the 48-hour bill in its platform. The party hierarchy granted the request, although a still-resentful Tammany Hall denied Democratic women the right to sit on the party’s executive committee.16 This pettiness could not disguise the fact that the New York State Democratic Party now officially advocated the Conference agenda.

Not every woman reformer agreed with Eleanor Roosevelt’s goal of promoting a progressive agenda within the political party system. In November 1924, Crystal Eastman, a drafter of the Equal Rights Amendment, member of the National Women’s Party, and an attorney, wrote a letter to the progressive magazine, The Nation, “Feminists Must Fight,” in which she maintained that women should work together for equality. “[The ERA] can never be won [in the political system],” Eastman declared. “It must be fought [for] and it will be fought [for] by a free-handed, nonpartisan minority of energetic feminists to whom politics in general . . . will continue to be a matter of indifference as long as women are classified with children.”17

Some historians have agreed with Eastman’s assessment of the effectiveness of women working within the political system. Paula F. Pfeffer argues, for example, that Roosevelt’s reliance upon women’s “patronage networks,” through which she made contacts and helped her friends acquire jobs in the Democratic party, actually hurt working women, the supposed beneficiaries of the Conference’s agenda. Upper-class women, with their natural connections to political elites, could take advantage of the networks that their lower-class colleagues never could. In addition, according to Pfeffer, “Roosevelt and her cohorts maintained a condescending attitude toward their working-class sisters.”18

Pfeffer’s argument is not convincing for two reasons. First, Roosevelt not only used her political network to promote her upper-class counterparts such as Caroline O’Day, but also working-class colleagues such as Rose Schneiderman. As previously stated, she worked extensively with Schneiderman in Trade Union League affairs. Second, Roosevelt’s entree into the political system did not guarantee success. The 1920s was a difficult decade for Democratic women, both in New York State and across the nation. While the state Democratic Party allowed women to serve on the party state committee, and theoretically
allowed men and women to be elected from every one of the 150 New York State Assembly districts, reality proved far different. In 1926, for example, the Democratic state chairperson attempted to remove Caroline O'Day from her vice-chairperson position, claiming that she only held the position by “courtesy.” Only an effective counterattack by Eleanor Roosevelt and O'Day's colleagues in the Women’s Division saved O'Day's position. Things proved no different for women in the national Democratic scene. For example, the party did not allow women to sit on its permanent platform committee until 1940, twenty years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Finally, when Roosevelt became head of a special committee at the 1924 Democratic National Convention, her proposed agenda, which included a minimum-wage bill and a 48-hour workweek for women, was defeated at the hands of the Resolutions Committee. The women delegates therefore found out, as a New York Times article later described it, that “politics [was] still masculine.” Despite these frustrations, Eleanor Roosevelt deeply believed in the Conference’s agenda, feeling that passage of the 48-hour bill required working through the party system, however frustrating the process.

Her goal of including the 48-hour bill in the state Democratic agenda now achieved, Roosevelt now turned her attention to utilizing the Women’s Democratic News as a tool to pass the 48-hour bill. She began the newspaper in 1925 with close friends Elinor Morgenthau and Caroline O'Day. Louis Howe, Franklin D. Roosevelt's close political advisor, evidently advised Eleanor to begin the newspaper as a means of advancing her public policy goals.

Few issues of the Women’s Democratic News survive, but the remaining copies give a sense of how the newsletter assisted the Conference's efforts during the 1920s in two ways. First, the newspaper provided a ready forum to discuss the latest developments in Albany. The outstanding example came in March 1926 when the state legislature dismissed the 48-hour bill for the last time. On the cover of that month’s issue, Roosevelt and her co-editors put the following message within a black border:

LEST WE FORGET

This is the list of assemblymen who heeded the voice of the exploiters of Labor and once more killed the 48-hour bill under the absurd pretext that thirteen years of legislative investigation was not enough.

The article then listed the 76 Republicans who had voted against the Joint Legislative Conference measure, then noted: “DEMOCRATS: None.” The Women’s Democratic News thus served as an effective polemical counterbalance to such earlier conservative women’s papers as The Woman Patriot. The newsletter...
ter also gave Democratic women and Joint Legislative Conference supporters the latest information about party developments throughout the state. County chairpersons, for example, reported their monthly activities in the *Women's Democratic News.*

Besides publicizing Joint Legislative Conference issues in the *Women's Democratic News*, Roosevelt and her coterie also traveled extensively through New York State from 1924 through 1927 to promote the Conference's agenda. Roosevelt showed great resiliency during the often-exhausting travels. On one trip, she and a volunteer motored to a local party chairperson's residence, only to see him quickly fleeing into his house. When the chairperson's wife claimed that he was away, Roosevelt calmly said, "All right, we will just sit here on the steps until he comes." After an hour of waiting, the chairperson's spouse told Roosevelt that her husband might not return until the next day. "It doesn't matter," Roosevelt averred. "We have nothing else to do. We'll wait." Finally the quarry came out to talk to Roosevelt and her colleague.

To support her in these extensive travels, Roosevelt often went with Dickerman, Cook, and Caroline O'Day. O'Day became a key supporter of Roosevelt and the Joint Legislative Conference in the Women's Division. Although her personal records do not survive, enough evidence exists to show her deep influence. Born around 1869, O'Day moved to New York State in 1901 after marrying a wealthy Standard Oil official, Daniel T. O'Day. After her husband's death in 1916, O'Day worked in women's organizations in New York State, first on the subject of pacifism, then on social legislation. Membership in the CLNY, the Trade Union League, and Lillian Wald's settlement house led O'Day to support women's labor legislation and the Democratic Party. By 1923 O'Day had garnered two important positions: a board membership on the State Board of Charities and the chairpersonship of the Women's Division. O'Day provided a vivid description of the quartet's travels in March 1926. During a period of two weeks, she reported, the coterie traveled throughout upstate New York, including the cities of Rye, Glens Falls, Utica, Watertown, Oswego, and Jamestown, meeting with committeewomen, associate county chairpersons, and regular women members of the Democratic Party.

Besides publishing and political canvassing, the Women's Division also used political speechmaking and news reporting to garner statewide support for the 48-hour bill. Marion Dickerman became the primary speaker for the Conference. The 1919 State Senate campaign gave Dickerman the confidence to appear before audiences on a wide variety of topics, ranging from "The World's Challenge to the American Woman" to "Legislation of Interest to Women." Dickerman's Joint Legislative Conference colleagues and political allies contributed endorsements to Dickerman's pamphlets describing her oratorical skills. Al Smith gave the most fulsome praise, stating that Dickerman...
was “well prepared by education and experience to speak upon public questions before any organization. I know of no one who could discuss them better, especially from the women’s viewpoint.” Thus the Governor lent his popularity to the Joint Legislative Conference cause. The Division’s efforts also made use of a new media source: radio. In the mid-1920s radio was fast becoming a popular means of reaching audiences with political messages. Eleanor Roosevelt swiftly took advantage of this new medium. For example, she addressed a statewide radio audience in April 1925 about the Women’s City Club of New York, calling it a “clearing house for civic ideals.”

While the 48-hour bill went through its final stages, Roosevelt and the Women’s Division’s efforts proved successful in other ways. In September 1926 the state Democratic Party finally allowed women to sit on the Executive Committee. O’Day now found herself elected as vice-chairperson of the Party. At a dinner celebrating the victory, Eleanor Roosevelt, Belle Moskowitz, and Elinor Morgenthau toasted the new vice-chairperson. Mindful of the need for new advances, Roosevelt continued to promote women in the Democratic Party. In a speech delivered in January 1927, for example, she criticized the male majority of the Democratic Executive Committee for their “inability to comprehend the value of sustained organization.” “Men think they can organize the vote six weeks before election,” she continued. The value of painstaking organization had become clear the previous year, when the women’s reform coalition gathered to defeat a long-term nemesis, U.S. Senator James W. Wadsworth, Jr.

1926: The Women’s Joint Legislative Conference Helps Defeat James Wadsworth

In early 1926 James W. Wadsworth, Jr., announced his intention to run for a third term in the U.S. Senate. While six years had elapsed since the tumultuous effort to defeat Wadsworth in 1920, wounds still lingered among Joint Legislative Conference leaders. Wadsworth had tenaciously opposed any extension of Progressive Era reform throughout the 1920s, including the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act, the first federal measure to enlist governmental aid for young, disadvantaged mothers. Wadsworth’s wife had also attacked Mary Elizabeth Dreier and Rose Schneiderman through her influential right-wing newspaper, The Woman Patriot. The 1926 Senatorial campaign now presented an opportunity for the Joint Legislative Conference to avenge these earlier slights. The major difference between 1920 and 1926 lay in the fact that the Conference now had important connections with the Women’s Division. When the New York League of Women Voters, cautiously nonpartisan since 1921, quickly squelched rumors that it opposed Wadsworth for a third term, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Women’s Division swiftly seized the opportunity.
The Women's Division's efforts seemed initially futile for three reasons. First, Wadsworth showed a formidable ability to appeal to both Republicans and Democrats. While he supported most Republican initiatives, Wadsworth opposed both the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, the federal statute that made the consumption of alcohol illegal in the United States. In the 1920 election, he had achieved the impressive feat of carrying every borough of a normally Democratic New York City.55 "At best any Democrat running against Senator Wadsworth will have a hard fight," a New York Times reporter concluded in early July.56 Second, Republican women quickly endorsed Wadsworth and gathered support for him. Republican women leaders representing 35 New York State counties announced their support of Wadsworth in mid-April, 1926. By mid-July, Republican businesswomen were canvassing offices to garner support for their candidate and organizing speaking tours throughout the state.57 Finally, the Democrats could not at first decide on the appropriate Senate candidate. Several candidates announced their availability, but no definite candidate emerged until September, when State Supreme Court Judge Robert F. Wagner Sr. became the leading contender and eventual nominee.58

Wagner had three strengths as a candidate. First, he had established an impressive record as a state legislator from 1905 through 1919, which included his four years as Factory Investigation Commission chair. Second, Wagner enjoyed a reputation for fairness and integrity, rare for someone who came from the Tammany organization.59 Third, and perhaps most importantly, Wagner was well known to women reform leaders in New York State. Mary Elizabeth Dreier had served as a fellow commissioner on the Factory Investigation Commission with Wagner from 1911 through 1915, and Frances Perkins had led Wagner, who was then State Senator, on a tour of upstate New York factories. Thus, Wagner could readily count on the Conference's support.

Wagner's long political experience and connections with reform interests could not obscure the fact that his campaign against Wadsworth would be difficult. First of all, Wadsworth as a scion of Genesee County, a rural area south of Rochester, had long-standing ties with powerful upstate interests, as his two consecutive elections to the U.S. Senate demonstrated.60 Wagner had retired from the New York State Senate in 1919 to accept election to the New York State trial bench and therefore did not have the same statewide appeal as his former Factory Investigation Commission colleague Al Smith, who had successfully won reelection as New York governor since 1918, except for the years from 1920 through 1922. Wagner's eight years of judicial experience had contributed to making made his speechmaking abilities a "sad disappointment."61 Thus he needed all the assistance he could get from friendly groups.

Democratic women quickly passed a resolution announcing their "active support" for Wagner and denouncing Wadsworth as "insincere, unprogressive, and
the friend of special privileges against the interests of the people as a whole.”

The Women’s Division then rose to the challenge in two ways. First, the evidence suggests that Wagner and his women supporters decided to appeal to working-women’s interests throughout the state. This represented an extension of the Joint Legislative Conference’s “new” strategy for the 48-hour bill. Second, and most importantly, Eleanor Roosevelt and Caroline O’Day used the tactics honed in the 48-hour bill fight in support of Wagner during the fall campaign.

From its first campaign press release in September 1926, the Wagner organization emphasized the judge’s long-time interest in women’s issues. “Justice Wagner,” the press release stated, “was one of the earliest advocates of votes for women and worked untiringly until the woman’s suffrage amendment was adopted.” “He also,” the press release continued, “took an active part in the passage of the school teachers’ equal pay bill.” Campaign pamphlets also emphasized Wagner’s support of labor legislation. “He has been a consistent supporter of legislation for the protection of women and children,” one typical pamphlet read. “He favored the bills,” the pamphlet continued, “. . . [for] a living wage for women and children [and for] . . . restricting [working women’s] hours in industry.” Another pamphlet, entitled “What Every Woman Knows,” contrasted Wagner’s record of support for women’s labor legislation against Wadsworth’s “uncompromisingly hostile” attitude.

Perhaps the most important effort of the Women’s Division during the Wagner-Wadsworth campaign came from Eleanor Roosevelt and Caroline O’Day. In the previous two years the two women through their affiliation with the Joint Legislative Conference had developed political skills they now put to the test. Roosevelt concentrated on speechmaking while O’Day canvassed the potentially troublesome upstate New York area. Eleanor possessed extensive experience from previous campaigns. In 1924, for example, she had canvassed the state for Al Smith’s successful gubernatorial campaign against her cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Now she used all the weapons in her arsenal. In one speech she quoted her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, who had said in 1914 that “it is rarely that a public man champions the right of big business to do wrong as openly as Mr. Wadsworth.” Eleanor Roosevelt’s penultimate effort came before the Women’s City Club in October. “Mr. Wadsworth,” she told the appreciative audience, “is a country squire of the seventeenth century attempting to function in this, the twentieth century.” Roosevelt also debated with two other City Club women about the three senatorial candidates and supported the Democratic Party platform before another club audience, maintaining that the platform represented the “human side of government.”

In conjunction with Roosevelt’s efforts, O’Day traveled through several upstate counties in mid-October. “I found strong sentiment in favor of Governor
Smith and Judge Wagner . . . in the most unexpected areas,” she reported in a press release from Wagner headquarters. “[The country women],” she added, “are especially drawn to . . . Wagner because of the very real interest he has taken in the welfare of women and children.” One wonders at the accuracy of these reports, because of the strong Republican presence upstate. But the report shows how far the Women’s Division, and implicitly the Joint Legislative Conference, went in support of Wagner.

Wagner narrowly defeated Wadsworth by an 116,000-vote margin in November 1926. The major reason for Wagner’s victory probably lay in the fact that Franklin W. Cristman, Prohibitionist Party candidate for the U.S. Senate, attracted “dry” votes from Wadsworth. Wadsworth’s biographer notes that “had Cristman not run, Wadsworth would easily have gotten enough votes to cover Wagner’s plurality.” While the efforts of the Women’s Division did not win the election for Wagner, women still made significant contributions to the 1926 senatorial campaign. Two contemporary reports indicate how important the Women’s Division contributions were to the Senator’s defeat. First, Mary Garrett Hay, who still smarted from the scars inflicted on her by her fellow Republicans in 1920, triumphantly told a New York Times reporter that women constituted an important reason for the Wadsworth defeat. In addition, when Wadsworth later sent his papers to the Library of Congress, he interestingly included an anonymous telegram sent to him right after the election. It simply stated: “THE WOMEN OF NEW YORK STATE DID NOT FORGET.” The humiliation of 1920 had been avenged.

The 1926 Senatorial campaign proved decisive in three other ways. First, a long-time opponent of women’s reform had been replaced by someone with a staunch record of support for working women. Over the next 23 years Robert F. Wagner supported many measures that built on the foundation laid by the Factory Investigation Commission. Of particular note is the Wagner Act of 1935, which secured labor collective-bargaining rights for the first time. Second, the election results demonstrated that the counternetwork was continuing its slow and steady decline, a fact confirmed by the relatively easy passage of the 48-hour bill by March 1927. Third, and most important, Wagner’s campaign showed that unlike the early 1920s, the Joint Legislative Conference had learned to unite behind a concerted effort. The effort undoubtedly had a positive psychological effect on the 48-hour-bill campaign.

Conclusion

By 1927 Eleanor Roosevelt had become a political power in her own right, perhaps more well-known than her husband, then considering running for gov-
ernor. She, now as a leader, entered Democratic politics on the national stage when Belle Moskowitz asked her to oversee Smith's presidential campaign for women's votes. Eleanor Roosevelt decided to leave most of her Joint Legislative Conference positions when her husband narrowly won his gubernatorial race in November 1928. She resigned from her positions at the Women's Division, the New York Women's Trade Union League, and the Women's City Club of New York. Her name also disappeared from the Women's Democratic News. In a farewell speech to the Women's City Club in March 1929, Eleanor Roosevelt said that she missed not having "direct political responsibility anymore." She, however, retained substantial power behind the scenes.

What did Eleanor Roosevelt and her Joint Legislative Conference-affiliated supporters in the Women's Division accomplish from 1921 through 1927? The primary goal, making the Democratic Party a partner in the effort to pass the 48-hour bill, had been accomplished. But another, longer-term goal was also met, albeit indirectly. Joint Legislative Conference leaders forged a strong relationship with the man who would later further their agenda in the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Rose Schneiderman had been the primary motivator behind this key relationship. Shortly after seeing Roosevelt give his dramatic "Happy Warrior" nominating speech for Al Smith at the 1924 Democratic National Convention, she invited Franklin to address the Women's Trade Union League. In her visits to Hyde Park with Maud Swartz after 1925, moreover, the women labor leaders discussed trade unionism and labor legislation with Roosevelt. "He was soon learning from these girls a great deal about the trade union movement," Frances Perkins later remembered. "He saw [the situation] in a new light." The Trade Union League also celebrated its 25th anniversary at the Roosevelts' Hyde Park estate. After the celebration Schneiderman frankly gushed her admiration for FDR. She related in a letter how the "girls" had praised him afterwards for his "kind face." "As for me," Schneiderman added, "well, I wish there were a million like you and Eleanor."

The efforts of the Women's Joint Legislative Conference from 1918 through 1927 provided a catalyst for reform in a decade in which conservatism reigned supreme. For the next six years, as the Great Depression radically changed the political landscape, the Conference would concentrate on the minimum-wage bill dismissed from its agenda in 1923.

Notes


8. Freeman, A Room at a Time, 227.


10. Harvey, Votes Without Leverage, 4-6.


14. Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 753.


18. Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 261

19. Quoted in Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 261.

20. Wattrous, In League With Eleanor, 4.

21. Wattrous, In League With Eleanor, 4. Roosevelt originally met Dreier and Rose Schneiderman in
1919, when she accompanied her husband on a European battlefield tour and the two NYW­TUL leaders attended an international women’s labor conference in Paris. Scharf, Eleanor Roosevelt, 67.

22. Harvey, Votes Without Leverage, 90.


24. Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 278.


34. Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 289. Murphy died just eleven days after Smith’s announcement. Ward, A First-Class Temperament, 690.


39. Harvey, Votes Without Leverage, 180.


42. Susan Ware, “ER and Democratic Politics,” 49.


44. Elinor Morgenthau’s relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt stands as an interesting one. Very close friends and Hyde Park neighbors, Morgenthau still did not always get along with Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, disapproving of their seeming control of Roosevelt. Unfortunately, none of Morgenthau’s letters to Eleanor Roosevelt during the 1920s survive. See Henry Morgenthau III, Mostly Morgenthau: A Family History (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1991), 254-256, and his interview with Emily Williams, August 30, 1978, in the FDR Library.


46. Women’s Democratic News, March 1926, 1, original in the FDR Library.
47. See letter from Rose Schniederman to Eleanor Roosevelt, September 6, 1924, NYWTUL Papers, Microfilm Edition, Reel 12.


51. See Box 6, Folders 2, "Alfred E. Smith," and 4, "Speeches, 1919-1939," especially pamphlet, "Marion Dickerman," Dickerman Papers, FDR Library. See also letter to Marion Dickerman from Eleanor Roosevelt, August 7, 1925, Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence, 1925-1937 Folder, Dickerman Papers, FDR Library.


65. "What Every Women Knows," in Folder 1, Box 402, Wagner Papers.

66. Ward, A First-Class Temperament, 701.

67. Quoted in Fausold, James W. Wadsworth, Jr., 197.


72. Fausold, James J. Wadsworth, Jr., 199.
73. For a different conclusion, see Perry, “Defying the Party Whip,” 104.


75. Telegram, November 3, 1926, in Container 20, Series 3, “Senatorial Campaign, Nov. 1-Dec. 24, 1926,” folder, James W. Wadsworth Jr. Papers, Wadsworth Family Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. Perry includes the same telegram in her essay on Mary Garrett Hay and has an interesting discussion about the state of Wadsworth’s papers. See Perry, “Defying the Party Whip,” 104, and 107, n. 25. I agree with Perry’s conclusion that Wadsworth did tidy up his papers before giving them to the Library of Congress; the folders contain very little besides letters from staunch supporters and his mostly cut-and-dried replies. It thus makes it more astonishing that Wadsworth included the telegram from an anonymous opponent.

76. Ware, “ER and Democratic Politics,” 49.

77. Ware, “ER and Democratic Politics,” 51.

78. See letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Ethel Dreier, December 11, 1928, Ethel Dreier Papers. See also letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to William Bray, October 20, 1928, cited in Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 320.


83. Letter from Rose Schneiderman to Franklin D. Roosevelt, June 12, 1929, Franklin D. Roosevelt Gubernatorial Papers, F.D.R. Library.