

The Political Development of Female Civic Engagement in Postwar America

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Past research has identified several factors that help explain what happened to civic engagement after World War II, but it has not adequately explained how these factors mattered to particular groups of citizens defined by gender, race, or class. This essay reexamines the dominant account of postwar civic decline by highlighting the relational nature of political change and the processes through which social groups transform. It explores the development of three women's associations: the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), and Woman's Division of Christian Service (WDCS) (predecessor of the United Methodist Women). A variety of postwar changes—in the realities of women's lives, the appearance of new social movement organizations, and the formation of the United Nations, for example—pressured the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS to adopt new organizational methods that blurred civic–political distinctions. Postwar women's associations experimented with the structures, strategies, and identities now common to modern-day interest groups, providing a critical foundation for a new politics of gender that would emerge in the 1960s. If these reinvented and ascendant organizations were more attuned to emerging political opportunities, however, they also translated into less active and less inclusive forms of participation.

In 1939, a group of Methodist churchwomen formed the Woman's Division of Christian Service (WDCS), combining more than one million members from six women's missionary societies that had existed since

The author would like to thank Kristi Andersen, Elisabeth Clemens, McGee Young, Kathleen Laughlin, and the editors and anonymous reviewers from *Politics & Gender* for their thoughtful contributions to this manuscript. Draft sections of this essay were presented at 2004 annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Journal of Policy History, and the Social Science History Association.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/05 \$12.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. © The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. Printed in the United States of America.
DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X05050166

the 1800s. The WDCS was *civic* in 1939: Its membership was broad, widespread, and active; it was decentralized, linking local churchwomen to national settings through autonomous “federated” chapters; and its primary mission focused on nurturing good citizenship through the education of public opinion and missionary enterprise. Members of the WDCS were motivated by a complex set of beliefs. They embraced citizen activism in “public affairs,” but eschewed the messier stuff of “politics”—that part of the public realm, churchwomen believed, driven by “pressure groups” and “partisanship” rather than the public interest or reasoned public opinion. Shortly after World War II, however, the Woman’s Division changed in ways that made these distinctions more tenuous. Within a decade, the WDCS began sending a paid legislative representative to Capitol Hill to carry churchwomen’s political interests to national elites. In 1963, they staffed an office at the Church Center for the United Nations and began centrally coordinating local church activities with international causes. In 1972, the division was renamed the United Methodist Women (UMW), a “newly inclusive organization”; by this time, they were employing a staff of 26, operating a full-time legislative affairs office in Washington, DC, and regularly holding “consciousness raising” sessions to discuss matters such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. In the early 1980s, leaders of the division worked to secure “NGO” status to become part of a growing sector of nongovernmental organizations in the United States and a more effective partner with their international sister, the World Federation of Methodist Women.

In approximately three decades, the primary organization of Methodist womanhood had been transformed from a mass membership association focused on civic action and education to a highly professionalized, centralized, and more explicitly political organization, self-consciously redesigning itself to become an NGO in an internationalized civic realm. Although not all groups embraced change as readily, a similar story could be told for other women’s associations after World War II. “Let organized women of color forget their fear of being called political!” exclaimed a member of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC), the oldest, and at one time largest, civic association of African-American women in the nation. Moving beyond their traditional focus on community activities, African-American clubwomen of the 1950s experimented with new political tactics, hiring a lobbyist, creating a public relations program, adopting business management principles, and endorsing protest. Clubwomen in the primarily white

General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) made similar pronouncements about the need to modernize the identity that inspired club organizing. "The day of the sewing circle is past," the GFWC president declared in the *New York Times* in 1948. These and other groups—the American Association of University Women (AAUW), National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPW), League of Women Voters (LWV), and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)—participated in a transformation in postwar civic life by adopting, in various degrees, new organizational strategies: collecting statistical data, appointing observers to the UN, maintaining roll-call voting records at national headquarters, or filing amicus curiae briefs with the Supreme Court.

In short, postwar women's associations were pioneers of experimentation with the sorts of organizational structures, identities, and strategies that would come to define modern-day interest groups, helping to pave the way for new forms of female activism in the latter half of the twentieth century. This transformation did not occur without consequence. Prior to World War II, women's associations had promoted a particular kind of female activism, one that was diversified, embraced expansive social aims relevant to the lives of a broad segment of the population, and claimed legitimacy on behalf of female citizens in the public realm. Ascendant organizations in the second half of the twentieth century may have been more attuned to emerging political opportunities and better able to secure material and political benefits for women alongside the 1960s emergence of the second-wave women's movement. But newer organizations also promoted a less-inclusive gender politics; they provided fewer opportunities for the participation of ordinary citizens, relied more on leaders than on rank-and-file members, and were less likely to mobilize diverse sets of women into broader forms of political participation.

This essay argues that the postwar era was a critical period in which women's civic associations were compelled to "become political." "Becoming political" did not simply mean seeking influence in the American political process—something that women's associations had always done. It meant, instead, a change in the ways leaders and members sought influence—in the organizational strategies and structural arrangements they employed to further their goals and in the identities around which they marshaled members and validated female activism. A variety of postwar developments contributed to the shift from civic to political, including socioeconomic factors and changes in the realities of women's lives;

institutional factors, such as the declining status of bureaucratic agencies dedicated to women's policy concerns; the appearance of new social actors and social movement organizations alongside the nationalization of civil rights struggles; changing racial and gender identities; and the formation of the United Nations, which created new avenues for civic engagement on a global scale. These developments redefined female citizens' participation in public affairs after World War II. Leaders, in particular, realized that their associations lacked the capacity to benefit from new political opportunities without significant internal change and without reinventing clubwomen's and churchwomen's sense of what could legitimately be called "civic" work. Organizationally, they pushed their associations toward greater centralization, professionalization, and modernization, developments not uncommon to self-preservation impulses of social groups during times of uncertainty. More important, leaders and members of women's associations were pressured to "drop the mask of old-time nonpartisanship," as the *Woman's Home Companion* put it, traversing a boundary that had legitimized the female voluntary association, and indeed female citizenship itself, for the first half of the twentieth century (Holly 1955).

Evidence for this argument is gleaned from the convention proceedings, correspondence, and national magazines of three long-standing women's associations: the Woman's Division of Christian Service, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Although past research suggests that associations such as these reached prominence in earlier decades of the twentieth century only to become anachronistic by the New Deal (Chafe 1972; Giddings 1984; Wesley 1984; White 1999), new research suggests that the WDCS, GFWC, and NACWC were among the most significant membership organizations of the postwar associational boom. These were quintessential *civic* associations in the sense understood by scholars like Robert Putnam (2000) and Theda Skocpol (2003); widespread federations of active local chapters, they were both sources of political leverage and important schools of citizenship for millions of American women.

There were certainly other significant associations, including the AAUW, BPW, LWV, YWCA, National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), and National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) (Gruberg 1968; Hartmann 1994, 1998; Lynn 1994; Stuhler 2000; Ware 1992). Like the WDCS, GFWC, and NACWC, these organizations were chapter based; they emphasized training for citizenship; they promoted a public voice for women; and historically they identified their purposes as edu-

cational, civic, or nonpartisan, rather than political per se. However, these associations were smaller and their memberships tended to be more elite; few matched the WDCS, GFWC, or NACWC's size or prevalence in the lives of average women who might not otherwise be politically engaged. The WDCS and GFWC enrolled more than 1% of the U.S. female population in 1955 (Skocpol 2003);¹ similarly, the NACWC enrolled more than 1% of the black female population in many states and remained one of the last autonomous organizations of African-American clubwomen.² This essay focuses on the WDCS, GFWC, and NACWC because they were among the largest associations of the 1950s within their target populations, and because they represent the economic, racial, religious, and geographic diversity of postwar civic engagement.

This essay extends a burgeoning revisionist history that has recast the mid-twentieth century, not as the "doldrums" of women's activism (Rupp and Taylor 1987), but rather as a critical period in which women remained politically active and feminist ideas germinated in a variety of institutions and organizations (e.g., Cobble 2004; Deslippe 2000; Hartmann 1998; Meyerowitz 1994; Ware 1992). It also reexamines the dominant account in the civic engagement literature, one that views the 1950s as a "golden era" of associational activity but that fails to consider how political and civic participation have been historically constructed along the lines of gender (Putnam 2000). The origins of associationalism were closely connected to gender roles, separating men and women into different associations and reinforcing a gendered construction of politics (see Andersen 1992; Lebsack 1992; Sklar 1995; Skocpol 1992). Men's and women's associations may have shared the joys and frustrations of rising and falling memberships, but postwar civic decline had different political consequences for male and female citizenship. If previous research has made strides in thinking about how and why civic life changed (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003), it has covered less ground explaining how these changes mattered to particular groups of citizens, especially as these were defined by gender, race, or class. Thus, this essay contributes to the literature on American political development by highlighting the relational nature of political change

1. According to Skocpol (2003), among women's associations, only the Order of the Eastern Star (auxiliary to the Masons) and the Woman's Missionary Union also crossed the 1% mark in the mid-twentieth century.

2. A foremost work on the NACWC is White's *Too Heavy a Load* (1999), which argues that the association became obsolescent after Mary McCleod Bethune formed the National Council of Negro Women in 1935. However, White's research was conducted before the complete NACWC records were available and, therefore, presumes a fate for the NACWC that itself is worthy of inquiry.

and the processes through which social groups, in responding to change, themselves transform.

POSTWAR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

American civic life changed profoundly after World War II. Following a brief expansion in the immediate postwar years, by the early 1960s most civic associations—including business and professional associations and male and female fraternal organizations—had experienced periods of rapid and severe membership loss, a pattern of deterioration that would characterize the fate of civic groups throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This decline was accompanied by (and perhaps precipitated by) new forms of citizen participation, including the rise of modern-day interest groups, or what Putnam (2000) calls “tertiary organizations,” that differed not only in organizational form and strategy from old-line civic associations but also in ideological purpose and mission.

Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* is an essential starting place for documenting civic change after World War II, but it is less helpful for understanding the causes of that change. For Putnam, generational replacement, demographic shifts such as the movement of women into the labor force, and urban sprawl are responsible for civic disengagement. Yet Putnam’s critics (e.g., Skocpol 2003; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999) have rightly pointed out that his discussion of civic decline hinges on factors outside the polity, unrelated to politics or political institutions. In contrast, Skocpol (2003) argues that the “great civic transformation” resulted in part from sociocultural changes—new technologies and shifting attitudes about race and gender, for example—but it was also intimately connected to political and institutional change, including a burst of federal legislation that bolstered liberal activism and the emergence of the “rights revolutions” of the 1960s and 1970s. Additional changes, Skocpol suggests, including the receptiveness of the courts to organized interests, an increasingly professionalized Congress, and reorganization within the federal bureaucracy, multiplied “entry” points for particular types of organizations to access the political system. As a result, professionally managed organizations and interest and advocacy groups flourished, gradually overshadowing membership associations of the civic generation. There were other important developments after World War II that Skocpol’s institutionalist account overlooks. Of significant conse-

quence (and surprisingly absent from almost all research on postwar political development), the formation of the United Nations in 1945 changed political opportunities for voluntary associationalism, creating incentives and providing resources for civic groups to mobilize members around international causes. Indeed, emerging opportunities for the kinds of professionally managed organizations Skocpol identifies are perhaps best seen in the burst of NGO organizing that followed the UN's formation.

More important than the particular factors Skocpol includes (or fails to include) among the causes of the postwar civic transformation is the dynamic of political change she identifies. In particular, she emphasizes the ways institutional change can reshape organizational incentives and political opportunities, encouraging political actors to adopt particular organizational forms and tactics and to utilize certain resources. In *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (1992), she called this the "fit" between the identities, goals, and capacities of social groups and changing political arrangements (see also Clemens 1997). Simply put, institutions shape the ways and extent to which social groups participate in the public realm. In the postwar era, the reorganization of agencies within the federal bureaucracy and the composition of political coalitions may have strengthened the position of some groups, such as veterans' lobbying organizations, at the same time that they undermined others (Skocpol 1995). Women's voluntary associations were especially limited in national policy influence after World War II by the accelerated weakening of the Children's and Women's Bureaus, bureaucratic allies that had previously enabled their authority in social welfare domains. Institutional change also affects the ways social groups understand their own identities and evaluate possibilities for political action (Lieberman 1995). If the increasing openness of the courts created new levers of political influence for civil rights organizations, for example, it also unsettled the radically decentralized organization that had sustained the mobilization of African-American women for half a century; clubwomen would be compelled to refashion their own strategies and organizational identity in response.

The challenge for scholars of American political development is not simply to identify the causes of the postwar transformation in civic life but to grasp more fully the ways in which change occurred in and across different kinds of organizations. The formation of the UN, for example, was especially important to women's associations, which were removed from meaningful participation in national political institutions and hopeful that an international arena might offer greater legitimacy in the face

of limited welfare state expansion at home. Yet at the same time that the UN heightened the stakes of civic engagement, it simultaneously compelled clubwomen and churchwomen to question the goals and tactics of their associations, pushing them away from locally rooted community activities toward centralized, elite-led organizations in which women's rights were conceived as human rights. Deborah Minkoff (1995) has shown that the postwar era was a period of profound organizational growth and diversification, particularly for African Americans and for women. The watershed in organizational activity, however, was constituted by and primarily benefited newly formed advocacy and protest organizations; long-standing voluntary associations focused on local action and citizenship did not fare as well. In short, processes of political change are inherently relational. Skocpol underemphasizes this point. In *Diminished Democracy* (2003), she suggests that organizational innovation in the 1960s and 1970s resulted from elite abandonment of old-line voluntary associations; careerist leaders, eager to cast off outdated organizational identities, particularly those drawn around gender and race, she argues, were pushed to centrally managed organizations. Although this view recognizes the significance of race and gender to associationalism (which Putnam's does not), it views postwar civic engagement in ecological terms and overlooks processes of change within particular organizations struggling to reinvent themselves in a changed political landscape.³ In contrast, this essay suggests that leaders—and members—of women's associations responded to postwar change in dynamic ways; they were eager to take their place in national and international domains but unsure about how to integrate new organizational forms in an historically gendered universe of civic associationalism.

HOW WERE THEY CIVIC? WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the 1950s, members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, and the Methodist Woman's Division of Christian Service continued, in renewed form, a century-long tradition of female civic engagement. Each traced its roots to the "women's era" of organizing, a movement among American women who had entered public life through autonomous mutual benefit societies, missionary societies, charitable institutions, literary and educa-

3. I am grateful to Elisabeth Clemens for helping me to see this point.

tional circles, antislavery associations, and self-help groups. In what has become a familiar story to students of gender and American political development (Baker 1984; Clemens 1993, 1997; Cott, 1987; Gordon 1994; Lerner [1972] 1992; Scott 1991; Skocpol 1992), women's associations at the turn of the twentieth century—groups like the GFWC, National Consumers' League (NCL), or Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)—related their causes to a broad maternalist rhetoric that claimed the moral best interest of society and to a distinct mode of activism rooted in public education and nonpartisan political mobilization. A contemporary described this approach as “the maternal and housekeeping instinct made community-wide and trained in its outlook” (Buck 1949). In the first part of the twentieth century, this brand of activism proved especially effective when combined with decentralized organizations linking together local, state, and regional federations. Female reformers of the Progressive era pressured legislatures to pass bills along nonpartisan lines, secured favorable rulings from courts otherwise unsympathetic to organized interests, and developed close ties with civil servants in newly created administrative agencies in ways that furthered their public goals and bolstered the mobilization of members.

Although their associations have never been static, the organizational and identity-related features that sustained women's voluntary associations in the early twentieth century had lingering consequences for female mobilization in later decades. Of particular importance, the Progressive era opposition between “civic” and “political” hinged on gendered understandings of citizenship. Nonpartisan mobilization was successful prior to suffrage, for example, because women were removed from formal channels of political participation; the same approach may have been limited after 1920, when it became more important to link organizational goals to electoral targets and to integrate party politics with women's interests (Harvey 1998; see also Andersen 1992; Lemons 1973). Organized womanhood met significant institutional challenges in the New Deal, when structures of governance and policy implementation shaped citizenship in terms of gender. As Suzanne Mettler (1998) suggests, the emergence of dual federalism thwarted the mobilization of a nationalized women's movement at precisely the time when state-by-state approaches were no longer as effective in achieving policy change on behalf of women. Nonetheless, women's organizations continued to mobilize during and after the New Deal, further adapting strategies in response to political and institutional change. Scholars have noted the emergence of a “New Deal network of women,” for example, in which a small set of female professionals

picked up an agenda that once required a mass movement, creating a policymaking role for women, recruiting women into government positions, demanding political patronage, and generating awareness of women as a group (Ware 1981; see also Muncy 1991).

This legacy of organizational adaptation—an ongoing process that simultaneously reaffirmed and reinvented Progressive era traditions of female organizing—informed the structures, strategies, and identities of women’s voluntary associations such that by the 1950s, the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS could still be aptly called “civic.” The purposive goals of women’s associations were closely connected to particular membership and organizational characteristics. They had active, widespread, and generally unrestricted memberships in which face-to-face interactions among local members (not a mere affiliation with a distant national headquarters) were the norm. Each enrolled sizable portions of the female population; in the 1950s, membership reached 826,000 clubwomen in the GFWC, between 50,000 and 100,000 African-American women in the NACWC, and almost two million churchwomen from 26,000 local church societies in the WDCS. The organizational structures of these groups, moreover, were decentralized, linking local members to national action through federated state and regional chapters. Decentralized structures, what one GFWC member called the “clubwoman’s trinity: club, state, and the general federation,” were important in a number of respects. They created an internal career path for members and helped coordinate unified action while preserving local autonomy, for example (Skocpol 2003). More important, as Clemens (1997) and Skocpol (2003) have argued, federated chapter-based associations encouraged “two-way communication” between members and leaders, fostering translocal identities, educating members about the politics of state and nation, and, in the process, transmitting important political information and skills to ordinary female citizens.

There were differences among these organizations, the most important of which fell along race and class lines in complex ways. The GFWC’s practice of maternalism, for example, was inextricably linked to white middle-class notions of female propriety. Similarly, NACWC members were primarily elite and professional women, and the association’s emphasis on racial uplift—what clubwomen called “a finer Negro womanhood”—was infused with class politics (White 1999). Yet black clubwomen’s civic activities were inseparable from efforts to combat racial as well as gender oppression. The Woman’s Division shared with the GFWC and NACWC a moral reform tradition rooted in middle-class

conceptions of womanhood (Frances Willard's "evangelical domesticity"), but its sheer size made it more racially and economically diverse. Segregation continued as the norm in church societies well into the mid-1950s, but as the church became increasingly involved in civil rights struggles, the WDSC took greater steps than either the GFWC or the NACWC to bridge racial divisions and to foster cross-class relations, building alliances with civil rights organizations and labor unions, for example.

Despite these differences, as *civic* associations, the GFWC, NACWC, and WDSC shared similar conceptions of citizenship, helping to define their relationships with other organizations and a shared role in the American political process. As Elisabeth Clemens (1993) notes, forms of organization signal an identity, both to an organization's own members and to others. Beyond their concrete policy goals—which in the 1950s ranged from federally funded day care to education to environmental conservation to equal pay—clubwomen's and churchwomen's emphasis on nonpartisanship and public education enabled them to differentiate their organizations from "political," "pressure," or "special interest" groups. "The [GFWC] has no axe to grind—no selfish interests," one of its leaders explained. This mission of clubwomen was, instead, to "formulate" public opinion, "wholly without prejudice and with an ever expanding civic consciousness" ("Editorial" 1946).⁴ To be sure, the NACWC clarified, women's voluntary associations sought to expand "the opportunity for organized women to serve efficiently in all fields relating to government," but this goal did not qualify them as a "political" organization; rather, the NACWC was an "educational" group: "We prepare our women on questions of local as well as national scope," one leader explained, "[so] that they will be prepared to act intelligently and not be led by the opinions or decisions of others." "Individual responsibility" was the "key to effective citizenship participation."⁵ In this vein, clubwomen and churchwomen were encouraged to become active citizens by voting, joining political parties, participating in debates, testifying before legislative committees, and, when possible, running for public office. Civic life was a "means to develop our own personalities," suggested leaders of the WDSC (Ransohoff 1950). A dense net-

4. General Federation of Women's Clubs Archives (hereafter GFWCA), Dorothy (Mrs. Hiram Cole) Houghton, Second Vice-President, June 1947, New York, NY, Convention Records (RG 3), 1947 Convention Proceedings.

5. Pamphlet, "Legislation Committee: 1955–1956 Program"; and "Government by Public Opinion," Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1895–1992, Part 1: Minutes of National Conventions, Publications, and President's Office Correspondence (microfilm) (Bethesda: University Publications of America, 1994) (hereafter NACWC, Part 1).

work of local chapters, moreover, was most likely to generate a broad and diversified, rather than a parochial, approach to public life. “No superficial snap judgments will do in club life or in politics,” one GFWC president explained (Buck 1948).

These, then, were the features that made the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS civic: decentralized operations; widespread, active face-to-face memberships; an identity of nonpartisan, or “nonpolitical”; an approach to politics emphasizing the education of public opinion; purposes defined by “good citizenship” understood as active participation and individual responsibility in the public realm. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, this combination of structure, strategy, and identity was significant, not only because it afforded women’s associations leverage in a public realm that impeded their participation in conventional political channels. Just as important, the features that made the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS civic promoted the capacities and dispositions of democratic citizenship among millions of American women, enlarging their public roles and advancing gender equality. As the president of the GFWC wrote in 1948, club life was “an excellent training ground for women as citizens” (Buck 1948).

POSTWAR OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Despite the strain of wartime on organizational resources and apprehension that anticommunist fears might chill female activism, World War II generally expanded women’s civic universe, further unsettling the division between women’s public and private lives and broadening their international consciousness. Clubwomen became “almost overnight world citizens and global thinkers,” commented one leader of the GFWC; the *New York Times* reported that her federation added more than five million international members between 1947 and 1948.⁶ The formation of the United Nations in 1945 expanded the possible reach of U.S. civic engagement further, “challeng[ing] woman to make the sphere of her endeavor and activity the ‘world household’”—a task for which the special qualities of female citizenship seemed a good fit (“Untitled” 1945).

Although African-American women faced extraordinary obstacles to political participation in the mid-twentieth century, members of the NACWC were nonetheless equally encouraged by early civil rights victories. Following Harry Truman’s 1948 executive order instituting equal

6. “5,102,000 Overseas Join Clubwomen,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1948.

treatment in the armed forces, for example, Mary McLeod Bethune declared before a convention of clubwomen that “woman’s day is here!” A “social era is being born,” another NACWC leader confirmed, pointing to the growing significance of the “women’s vote” after World War II.⁷ Others proudly noted widening opportunities as evidenced by the election of state and local black women legislators in Ohio, Michigan, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania (Boehm 1995).

Nonetheless, women’s associations faced a series of obstacles that largely prevented them from linking local civic activities to political development in the mid-twentieth century. Shifting arrangements of national political institutions blocked familiar doors of policy authority for female reformers after World War II, and this made the mobilization of clubwomen and churchwomen more of a struggle. Neither the Truman nor Eisenhower administrations made domestic reform a priority, while a divided Congress left new departures in social policy to states and localities (Skocpol 1995; Sundquist 1968). Several prominent women’s associations, including the GFWC, NCL, BPW, and WTUL, for example, backed a national equal pay bill, but their influence was confined to the states—although 13 states passed equal pay laws between 1946 and 1960, 104 similar bills failed between the 79th and 87th Congresses (C. Harrison 1989; Laughlin 2000; Zelman 1982). “You know we are being criticized because we are not quickly passing the legislation coming before our Congress,” asserted a GFWC vice president to clubwomen’s 1947 convention. “Many of the issues we have stood for have not been implemented as we have hoped,” agreed a disappointed member of the WDCS; others complained about “isolationist senators” unfriendly to “needed foreign policies” (Stevens 1945; Stevens, Weber, and Bender 1951). Progress in civil rights domains proved especially disappointing to African-American clubwomen and Methodist churchwomen. Three years after the creation of Truman’s Commission on Civil Rights, leaders of the WDCS observed that “the legislative score is zero.” The only “bright spots” in the area of civil rights “were nonlegislative” (“Toward Brotherhood” 1950).

Changes in administrative agencies further undercut both the moral authority that female reformers claimed over domestic policy and their long-standing routes to political influence. Leaders in the GFWC, central members of a postwar “progressive coalition” that included the AAUW,

7. Minutes and Records of the Golden Jubilee 50th Anniversary and 25th National Convention of the National Association of Colored Women, July 27–August 2, 1946, NACWC, Part 1.

YWCA, NCJW and LWV (Lynn 1992), were particularly frustrated by the powerlessness of chief bureaucratic allies in social policy domains. Following the first White House Conference on Children in a Democracy in 1940, for instance, the GFWC spearheaded a national movement among women's associations concerned with juvenile delinquency, issues that President Truman defined as belonging "logically and practically to the women of America." Opportunities to have a meaningful impact in these areas, however, were limited by the lack of real policy authority in the Children's Bureau and underfunding and understaffing of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, formed in 1953. As was the case with equal pay, several states passed juvenile delinquency legislation in the early 1950s, but General Federation leaders regularly complained about a lack of federal support for their localized efforts.

Time-tested methods of public education and decentralized, nonpartisan organizing seemed ill-equipped to respond to emerging national issues in other policy areas, too. Conflicts between national- and state-level organizing were thrown into stark relief with the increasing nationalization of civil rights struggles. Although federal aid to education had long been on the GFWC's national agenda, for instance, by 1952, clubwomen had dropped it from their program in response to a stalemate between the president and Congress, and to growing tensions between federal and state governments bubbling over civil rights issues. The GFWC president in 1952 noted that "many state's [*sic*] members object to Federal aid to education." "We have had many requests from states not to bring up the matter again," she continued, "and, of course, we believe in states' rights" (in E. Harrison 1952). If states' rights issues masked racism within clubwomen's own ranks (and it is likely that they did), these tensions nonetheless suggested that General Federation leaders were unsure about how to combine an increased role for the federal government in social policy with a tradition of civic action and local responsibility. Leaders of the Methodist Woman's Division found themselves in frequent conflict with local churchwomen over similar matters; a handful of members accused the Woman's Division of adopting the programs of civil rights groups like the Congress of Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, rather than positions that had been democratically developed by churchwomen themselves.

African-American clubwomen were also unsure about how to pursue a nationalized struggle for racial equality with the features that defined them not as a political group but as a civic group. It was increasingly clear to the NACWC leadership that clubwomen's state-by-state efforts

on behalf of black womanhood were doomed to fail so long as the federal government could override state legislation and so long as southern and border states continued to block antidiscrimination measures. The “absence of a unified continuity of purpose and a misunderstanding of program building and the amount of effort expended on amateurish and outmoded [*sic*] procedures,” an association pamphlet asserted, were of special concern. But political tactics prominent among burgeoning civil rights organizations did not easily map onto clubwomen’s civic identity or their local strategies for molding public opinion. As a result, the NACWC suffered strained relations with groups like the National Council of Negro Women and the NAACP. “The NCNW tends to glamorize their Inter racial [*sic*] work more than does NACW[C],” one clubwoman noted. In an overt reproach to civil rights organizations, one prominent NACWC leader argued that African Americans had not yet achieved full freedom as citizens, but that this freedom would not come about by “ranting,” “rioting,” or “displaying the worst side of our race,” but only in “quiet ways and quiet talk with those of EQUAL Christian minds who are trying to help us.”⁸

Leaders of the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS initially looked inward for solutions to stalled progress and to the increasingly evident decline in organizational memberships. The Woman’s Division partially blamed itself for congressional stalling on key legislative issues: “So few of us have protested by letter, wire, or personal contact!” leaders cried (“Mid-century” 1951). Mary Church Terrell told a conference of African-American clubwomen that “we are not as strong as we should be because we have failed to publicize what we are doing.”⁹ Associational records suggest that organizational proliferation in the 1950s was an added strain. More than 90% of all local GFWC clubs had been organized prior to 1930, while competition from younger organizations limited the expansion of existing state federations.¹⁰ In the WDCS, leaders complained of “documented instances” in which clubwomen were “making sizable gifts to both national and local organizations” other than their own. A public relations consultant hired by the NACWC noted that “several organizations similar in composition and purpose to [the] NACWC had

8. “Government by Public Opinion”; Marguerite I. Hall, National Chairman, Legislation, to Legislative Chairmans [*sic*] of All Clubs, June 5, 1951, State Correspondence, Ella Phillips Stewart Administration, NACWC, Part 1.

9. 1946 Convention Minutes, NACWC, Part 1.

10. “State Women’s Club Federations Warned to Admit Girls Over 16 or Face a Decline,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1953.

appeared on the national scene” and had “succeeded in winning wide acceptance and support from the public.” In consequence, the consultant concluded, the NACWC was “losing its identity.”¹¹

Following a well-publicized convention of the GFWC in 1949, the *New York Times* queried Eleanor Roosevelt (herself a clubwoman) about the potential for women’s associations to make a difference in postwar political affairs. She replied, with a laugh, that “that depends on how much you really do. If all you do is talk and pass resolutions, that has very little value, but if you go into your communities with a real education program, that has great value.”¹² Roosevelt’s remarks captured the sense that women’s clubs were increasingly vulnerable to charges of frivolity, yet she may have overestimated the potential of women’s associations’ conventional arrangements and strategies in a changed political environment. This fact was more obvious to associational leaders. “Club life has been a struggle, a struggle to keep club women supporting a club program,” one NACWC state president complained. “I fear that younger organizations, better informed, may usurp our place,” another worried. Organizational adaptation after World War II was, thus, provoked by opportunity and crisis. This fact was perhaps best captured by GFWC president Chloe Gifford when, in 1960, she asked of her federation: “What does it stand for? What does it do? How does it do it?”¹³

CHANGING FORMS OF FEMALE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, 1945–1960

Changing institutional and political realities after World War II created incentives for associational leaders to begin experimenting with new organizational methods. For some, the choice was clear: “We haven’t got time to sit building up public opinion brick by brick,” one GFWC leader

11. Sadie Mae Tillman and Mrs. Porter Brown to Conference and Jurisdiction Officers of the Woman’s Society of Christian Service, December 10, 1959, Tillman, Sadie Mae (Mrs. J. Fount) Correspondence, 1954–1964, Records of the Women’s Division of Christian Service of the General Board of Ministries, United Methodist Church Archives—General Commission on Archives and History, Madison, New Jersey (hereafter WDSCA); Ernest E. Goodman to Dr. Rosa L. Gragg, February 17, 1960, Rosa L. Gragg Administration, Correspondence, NACWC, Part 2.

12. Cited in Doris Greenberg, “Treaty is Backed by Women’s Clubs,” *New York Times*, 30 April 1949.

13. State President of the Missouri Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs to President Christine S. Smith, Christine S. Smith Administration, Smith Correspondence, NACWC, Part 1; “A Voice That Is Still,” *National Notes* leaflet, undated, Jennie D. Moton Administration (from Moton Family Papers), NACWC, Part 1; GFWCA, President Chloe Gifford, Report to the Executive Committee (undated), Presidents’ Papers (RG 2), Papers of Chloe Gifford, 1958–60.

argued; “we’ve got to insist on being with men in key positions.”¹⁴ A “lack of familiarity of technique of action rather than lack of interest in social problems,” a WDCS pamphlet explained, “often proves the stumbling block.” Churchwomen needed to be convinced that “political action is not just another interest; it is the way democracy works.” “Let organized women of color forget their fear of being called political!” one NACWC member declared. Instead, clubwomen should “gird themselves for a fight at the polls.” “The time has come,” agreed the GFWC president, “when we should discard the outmoded idea that we are a *non-political organization* because we are *not*” (Neff 1945).¹⁵ If leaders articulated a shared vision of the future of female activism, however, in practice the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS differed in the extent to which they adopted new structures, strategies, and identities.

The General Federation of Women’s Clubs

Decentralized structures had been an asset for the GFWC in the early part of the twentieth century, but they proved an obstacle to national action after World War II. The “isolation of local clubs” was a frequent topic in the pages of the *General Federation Clubwoman*; members complained about diffuse and unorganized programs at the state and local levels, overlap and redundancy with the programs of other civic organizations, and the failure of many clubs to follow through on projects in compliance with national headquarters (Mandigo 1950). “Other women’s national and international organizations,” GFWC President Katie Ozbirn argued, prospered “due to continuity” of their programs. The BPW, for example, was successful because, she argued, unlike the radical decentralization of the GFWC, “each and every local club [of the BPW] . . . adopt[ed] the program [of the national] totally.”¹⁶ In this vein, GFWC leaders took steps toward greater coordination of clubwomen’s civic activities; they sent prepared speeches to local speakers to ensure consistency of the clubwomen’s message and created a communications office to help publicize achievements. They also hired a public relations con-

14. Lucy Greenbaum, “Clubwomen Hear Pleas to Help DP’s,” *New York Times*, 25 June 1947.

15. “Primer on Political Action,” pamphlet, Program Resources—Folder 2, 1942–1964, Christian Social Relations, WDCSA; “Women’s Clubs and Public Affairs,” editorial, *National Notes*, c. 1950, 24, NACWC, Part 1; “A Look at the 1960–62 Calendar,” GFWCA, Program Records (RG 7), Katie Ozbirn, 1960–1962, emphasis in original.

16. GFWCA, Report to Board of Directors, September 20–22, 1961, Washington, D.C., Presidents’ Papers (RG 2), Papers of Katie Ozbirn, 1960–62.

sultant and reinvigorated “club institutes”—sessions in which national leaders traveled to local chapters to promote uniformity of programs. Although the General Federation had a long-established headquarters in Washington, DC, leaders augmented their center of operations in the postwar years, adopting “business principles” and “modern” financial and personnel systems. In addition to streamlining and centralizing some club activities, the GFWC created departments of public affairs and legislation in the 1950s to keep local clubs informed of developments on Capitol Hill and to provide instructions to local members on particular actions, congressional letter-writing campaigns, for example. Members were also mobilized into emergent policy domains, such as programs designed to “translate” UN programs to citizens at the local level.

Clubwomen eagerly turned their public opinion skills toward new causes—they sent more than six thousand telegrams and distributed more than 40 thousand pieces of literature in support of the UN—but they regarded more drastic change cautiously. Following the BPW’s new, and much publicized, postwar strategy of endorsing specific female candidates for political office, for example, the GFWC struggled over whether and how to adopt similar tactics without jeopardizing long-standing traditions of nonpartisan civic involvement; in the end, they decided not to make this move. Similarly, a 1956 publicity memo explained that although the GFWC had registered as a lobby—as was required, at the time, of all groups with an active legislative program—the federation remained distinct from special-interest groups. “To really function as a lobby group,” the memo explained, “we would need a sizeable full-time staff working at GFWC, plus a professional representative.”¹⁷ In contrast, one leader suggested, the federation merely participated in “some lobbying, in the sense of appearance at congressional hearings and in sending requests for support of GFWC-approved legislation.”¹⁸ Rather than supporting specific laws or partisans, clubwomen supported principles.

The reality of most club members remained centered in local nonpartisan civic activities. As the *Woman’s Home Companion* wryly noted in 1955, the GFWC was among those women’s groups “still heavy on orchids and light on results” (Holly 1955). Coupled with the lack of institutional supports that had once sustained middle-class women’s civic engagement in social policy domains, the political legitimacy of the GFWC suffered. Membership dropped precipitously in the early 1960s.

17. GFWCA, Resolutions and Legislation (RG18).

18. “No Smugness Seen in Women’s Clubs,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1947.

The federation did continue to mobilize an aging cohort of middle-class, primarily white women in civic affairs—nearly eight thousand local clubs wrote letters to members of Congress in 1962, for instance. But clubwomen’s programs in the 1960s and their steadfast commitment to nonpartisan local action seemed increasingly at odds with pressing national issues, such as civil rights (still conspicuously absent from the federation’s agenda), and with the willingness of other women’s associations to take stronger political—and partisan—stands on matters related to gender equality. If larger transformations in the organization of civil society expanded the possible reach of clubwomen’s public activism, these same transformations simultaneously confined the impact of the GFWC to state and local, and increasingly conservative, issues.

The National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs

Many African-American clubwomen, too, were reluctant to politicize their association, although leaders of the NACWC pushed them in that direction with determination. As early as 1941, Jennie Booth Moton, the NACWC president, worried that clubwomen were in danger of becoming “hopeless back numbers,” unless they became “more conscious of National politics”; the association, she insisted, needed “lobbyists and live wire politicians regularly on the job in Washington, D.C.” Five years later, NACWC leaders were adamant about the need to nationalize. Clubwomen should “join forces with every other organization among us using its efforts to orient all minority groups into American life,” the national president, Christine Smith, argued in 1946.¹⁹ Smith urged the association to affiliate with the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), a motion that clubwomen had rejected when former NACWC president, Mary McCleod Bethune, first formed the council in 1935 (White 1999). Although such a move would have symbolized national unity, members again turned down the motion. The NCNW represented a new kind of national interest group, serving as a coordinating committee for existing black women’s organizations and, thanks to Bethune’s national prominence, making regular use of insider strategies and pressure-group tactics (Giddings 1984; Gordon 1994; White 1999). In part, it was the council’s growing visibility in the mid-twentieth cen-

19. Convention Minutes 1941, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; 1946 Convention Minutes, NACWC, Part 1.

tury that pushed association leaders toward greater professionalization and modernization, at times over members' objections.

Like the GFWC, the NACWC became more centralized in the 1950s. Association leaders instituted new financial and personnel systems in their headquarters operations, formed a board of trustees, and established a centrally coordinated program "to be followed by each club." They hired two public relations coordinators over the course of the mid-twentieth century, each an attempt, explained one prominent leader, to "increase the level of prestige of the organization." Additional changes included strengthening ties with political elites, stabilizing the association's treasury, appointing an observer to the UN, and securing tax-exempt status and a federal charter. Clubwomen in the NACWC were somewhat more accepting of new political strategies than their GFWC counterparts. They formed a legislative committee shortly after World War II and, more significantly, answered Moton's call for "live wire politicians" with the appointment of a lobbyist "to look after the interests of all women," "to work for the passage of civil rights legislation," and "to make known the opinion of the Negro women" to elected officials.²⁰

Civil rights legislative and judicial victories further convinced the NACWC of the need for new methods of political influence. Following the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown*, for example, the NACWC called on local and state federations to help with its implementation. The repercussions of *Brown* were strongest among the NACWC leadership, who, in communications, began discussing the promise of emerging social movement strategies. "We can achieve full citizenship," the NACWC president argued, "only through laws enacted by the elected representatives of all the people, and by Supreme Court decisions interpreting the law." The association's legislative director encouraged clubwomen to "work closely with [their] nearest N.A.A.C.P. branch," because "coordinated efforts are more effective than isolated ones." "Withhold from buying from Woolworth's, Kresges, Grants and Kress Variety stores," directed another leader, because, along with the ballot, the dollar was a powerful political tool in the "Fight for Freedom." Clubwomen were encouraged to conduct block-system voter registration campaigns, to "join the NAACP and support all of their programs," and to hold protests and nonviolent demonstrations in support of southern students involved in

20. Mrs. Mamie Moore, "Across the Nation and Around the World for Freedom," speech presented to the Southeast District State Association of Colored Women's Clubs Meeting, June 20, 1960, Zanesville, Ohio, NACWC, Part 2; Convention minutes 1946, NACWC, Part 1.

integration struggles. Stepping beyond their traditional emphasis on citizen education, the association's resolution committee publicly declared clubwomen's "faith in the philosophy of the Non-violent approach to the solution of the problems of racial conflict." Representing a major shift in organizational strategy, the association went "on record" in support of electoral candidates who endorsed civil rights legislation—a step the GFWC had been unwilling to take, and a step that many clubwomen believed moved the association closer to the status of a Washington insider.²¹

Many in the association hoped that their involvement in highly visible civil rights campaigns would "increase public understanding" of the NACWC in the face of weakening public stature. After a decade of fits and starts in which membership rose and fell, convention delegates seemed increasingly willing to admit that the NACWC was becoming insignificant among national organizations. They mulled over the new "science" of public relations as one possible way to revitalize the association, and experimented with involvement in emerging policy issues, such as the investigation of employment discrimination and policy brutality, and federally funded research and development programs. At the same time that NACWC leaders tried to modernize their association, however, they also continued to assert the importance of a civic approach to organizing black womanhood—a contradiction that may have confounded some members. One member worried that "lack of knowledge of the purpose of the association" was leading some clubs to withdraw from the NACWC. Another argued in convention that political action would not "cure the disease of prejudice" without "the kind of sound and unified public opinion" that clubwomen had a special role in formulating. Clubwomen were never far removed from the civil rights movement, but they were reluctant to sacrifice what one member defined as the "human element" of civic organizing that could not be captured by merely passing laws or politicking with national leaders.²² By the mid-1960s, the association was struggling under financial strain, membership loss, and weakened connections to both political elites and other black

21. Irene McCoy Gaines Administration, NACWC, Part 1; "Work Tool to Aid in Implementation of Anti-Segregation Legislation," Rosa Slade Gragg Administration, NACWC, Part 2; Moore, "Across the Nation and Around the World for Freedom"; Mrs. Willie Mae Taylor, Report of the Resolutions Committee, July 30, 1964, NACWC 34th Biennial Convention and 68th Anniversary Session, Denver, Colorado, 1964, NACWC, Part 1.

22. Tressie M. Tabor to Rosa Gragg, April 19, 1961, Rosa Slade Gragg Administration, 1958–1964, NACWC, Part 2; Convention Minutes, Twenty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the NACW, August 2, 1954, District of Columbia, NACWC, Part 1.

organizations. Ultimately, NACWC leaders failed to transform clubwomen's civic engagement into nationalized civil rights activism.

The Woman's Division of Christian Service

To a greater extent than did the GFWC or NACWC, the WDCS undertook the reeducation of its own membership after World War II, teaching churchwomen "how to become more effective in influencing legislation" through new organizational and political tactics (Bartlee 1946). They published a "Primer of Political Action," held training seminars in Washington, DC, and discussed in convention "good and bad" "pressure group strategies." Similar to positions created by other groups, the division formed a "Washington Office Representative" to transmit legislative information to local members; unlike similar offices, it became a full-scale legislative agency, employing lobbyists and experts on "world political-action techniques" by the 1960s. Foreshadowing strategies common to modern-day interest groups, the WDCS started publishing a record of congressional activities in its national magazine, *Methodist Woman*, in the early 1950s; by the end of the decade, they were maintaining a roll-call voting record at their national headquarters. Methodist churchwomen's efforts to centralize their association were more drastic than clubwomen's, too; in the 1960s, the WDCS officially separated the administration of "local church activities" from the most political arm of the division, leaving a core group of leaders at the national level responsible for developing a legislative agenda and, in the words of one governing board leader, "more effective ways of translating the interest thus generated into action in local situations" (Stevens 1978).²³ With advice from an outside consulting firm, the WDCS reduced administrative staff, eliminated officers' positions in local chapters, reorganized the division around "sound management principles," and sought to place "a charismatic leader" in a general executive position. Opportunities for leadership in the WDCS increasingly depended on expertise; one leader noted that "the old plan of moving up—from one office to another—is inadequate. . . . Today offices are highly specialized and we have to get the best person to fit that office" (Exman 1952; Stevens 1978).

The eagerness with which the WDCS embraced organizational change may have been facilitated by its ties to other institutions increas-

23. "Handbook for the Woman's Society of Christian Service, 1964," Christian Social Relations, Records of the Women's Division, WDCSA.

ingly active in new forms of public activism. In 1952, for example, the WDCS adopted the strategy of “friend-of-the-court” (*amicus*) briefs, in support of the NAACP legislation against school segregation, following a similar move by the National Council of Churches (Stevens 1978). Likewise, churchwomen began collecting statistical data on the social and economic position of blacks in conjunction with groups like the United Council of Church Women, in an effort to advance shared policy goals and to bolster liaison relationships with the UN. The World Federation of Methodist Women (WFMW), the international sister of the WDCS, emerged in the late 1960s as the central vehicle for churchwomen’s international work, generating international coalitions, mobilizing churchwomen around emerging global issues—environmentalism, refugee issues, health care—and drawing the WDCS into a lengthy campaign, begun in 1955, to gain official nongovernmental organization status with the UN (which would be granted in 1983). “Increasing international awareness,” commented leaders of the division, affirmed their faith in particular sorts of political action—public appeals to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, for example.²⁴ Indeed, it was the WDCS that, in 1963, provided the critical financial backing for the Church Center for the United Nations, thereby formalizing the participation of religious associations in UN activities.

In 1964, following a major reorganization of the Methodist Church, missionary work was permanently separated from the WDCS, ending a century-long tradition of female missionary organizing and leaving the national Woman’s Division to more overtly political causes. In 1972, culminating a decade of organizational change, the WDCS was reinvented as a “new inclusive organization,” the United Methodist Women (UMW). The name “United Methodist Women,” leaders argued, implied “a less rigid structure,” described “not merely a meeting but a being,” avoided “faddish terminology,” and was “easily identifiable and descriptive.”²⁵ The new organization, still governed by the Women’s Division (having changed its name in 1968 from Woman’s to Women’s—a reflection of changing gender identities), claimed approximately 1.5 million members, employed a staff of 26, and was described by one leader, tellingly, not as a civic association but as a “superstructure, a business organized for efficiency, doing bookkeeping, accounting, evaluation of program;

24. United Church Women of the National Council of Churches, “The New Nations, Women and the Church, 1959–1960,” booklet, Women Folder 1, 1956–1958, WDCSA.

25. Background Papers: Reports—“One New Inclusive Organization” 1971, Records of the Women’s Division, WDCSA.

setting goals and trying to solve problems” (Campbell 1975, 15, 19). While the new organization was intended to strengthen local organizing, centralization and coordination were key goals. The meaning of the division’s long-running slogan, “All Action is Local,” suggested one prominent leader, “varied with the changing times and the earth’s shrinkage.”²⁶ With this transformation, the UMW sustained mobilization and political action well beyond the 1950s, remaining a politically significant, if changed organization.

CONCLUSION: THE CIVIC ROOTS OF MODERN FEMINISM

The 1950s opened to the origins of the modern women’s movement. Not all clubwomen and churchwomen identified as feminists—the Woman’s Division defined itself as “part of the movement to improve the status of minority social, economic, and racial groups,” rather than “feminist”²⁷—but many members of the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS did view their associational activities as part of an ongoing struggle for gender equality. A member of the NACWC in the early 1960s explained that “the Black Woman has become a part of Women’s Liberation,” but noted that clubwomen had been “liberated for so long we just call it work.”²⁸ Changes in the realities of women’s lives may have necessitated a new gender politics. White argues, for example, that the NACWC, and to some extent the NCNW, failed to appreciate the diversity inherent in black womanhood and, thus, did not recognize the complex intersections of race, gender, and class that defined African Americans’ realities—what Bethune had called the “particularity flung at NACWC clubwomen” (White 1999, 174). Historically inclusive of more particularized identities, clubwomen’s and churchwomen’s civic identities may have conflicted with heightened racial and gender consciousness emerging in the second half of the twentieth century. In the GFWC, one member accused her federation of failing to support enlarged public roles for women: “When a woman pokes her head up above the group, you shoo her down. . . . You don’t stand behind your women.” “Changes in woman’s traditional roles have had dislocating effects for all,” agreed the GFWC president in 1962. “The

26. *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report, 1963–1964*, 66, Records of the Women’s Division, WDCSA.

27. *Journal of the Executive Committee*, New York, NY, September 21, 1948, WDCSA.

28. *Minutes of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, 1974*, Atlanta, Georgia, Records of the NACWC, Part 1.

phenomenon of the American clubwoman is not new," she continued, "but her avocation of clubwoman is increasingly challenging."²⁹

Struggles over identity were closely linked to struggles over organization and strategy. Clubwomen and churchwomen confronted such questions as Who are we? How should we organize? What is the difference between a "civic" and a "political" group? The changing landscape of postwar civic engagement may be best characterized, as Skocpol (2003) suggests, as a shift "from membership to management," rather than a story of simple decline. Nonetheless, past research has underappreciated the ways particular organizations responded and, in some cases, transformed. Of particular importance, postwar civic engagement was circumscribed by a gendered construction of politics, one that shaped the ways association leaders and members evaluated opportunities for political participation and attempted to reinvent their organizations in response to political and institutional change. Clubwomen and churchwomen understood themselves to be nonpartisans, and they understood their associations to be engaged primarily in the education of citizenship. New strategies—affiliating with the UN, engaging in litigation, endorsing electoral candidates—necessitated a change not only in organizational structure but also in the self-understandings that informed clubwomen's and churchwomen's civic participation. Political scientists and historians have largely failed to recognize larger transformations in the organization of civil society, the backdrop against which female civic engagement was recast as modern interest-group politics.

The implications of the transformation in female civic engagement are perhaps best captured in the hesitancy with which clubwomen and churchwomen responded to postwar change. In convention, local members worried that overt political strategies would compromise a long history of decentralized female participation rooted in public education and nonpartisan civic engagement. Citizenship, one clubwoman explained, was "more than a ballot dropped in a box on election day." "Why must our nose be in politics?" one churchwoman asked; another agreed that local church activities ought not to include "women's lib" (in Campbell 1975, 136). These expressions of uncertainty, in retrospect, make mid-twentieth-century women's associations easy targets for allegations of cultural conservatism. To the extent that modern forms of political activism are beset by particularized interests and disunity,

29. Convention Proceedings, 1947; Untitled speech, September 11, 1962, GFWCA, Presidents' Papers (RG 2), Papers of Margaret Long Arnold, 1962–64.

there is an interesting irony to this argument. Female voluntary associations have never been completely inclusive; leaders of the GFWC, NACWC, and WDCS in the 1950s represented the well-to-do, and most, though not all, aspired to and promoted middle-class notions of womanhood. But female civic engagement promoted a broad civic identity and a wide range of social and political issues with the potential to transcend what might have otherwise been a divisive and fragmented group of female citizens. As civic associations, these organizations shaped conceptions of female citizenship among American women by promoting the values and providing the skills that political theorists from Tocqueville to Putnam have argued are essential for democracy. Perhaps most remarkable was the degree to which broad-based democratic concerns became central to the lives of ordinary citizens. These values, skills, and concerns resulted from a careful blend of participatory, decentralized structures linked to national initiatives; broad-based, very large, and relatively diverse memberships; an emphasis on good citizenship; and a focus on the education of public opinion and nonpartisan participation in public affairs. "There is no clearer expression of the democratic process than in voluntary organizations," suggested the GFWC president in 1954.³⁰

It is not clear that modernized associations or newly emerging interest groups or NGOs mobilized female citizenship in the same ways or even that this was one of their goals. Reinvented organizations remained important to women's social, political, and material progress. The United Methodist Women, for example, continued to shape churchwomen's political participation over the course of the twentieth century, enrolling more than one million members in 25 thousand local chapters at the dawn of the twenty-first century ("Active Culture" 1999). Yet large memberships were no longer necessary for the UMW to obtain its goals. Similarly, although the civil rights movement undoubtedly increased African Americans' engagement as American citizens, its impact on long-standing voluntary associations is less clear. It is certain that as "civic" and "political" organizing came into conflict in the mid-twentieth century, the experiences of clubwomen and churchwomen at the grassroots were altered. The postwar era did not simply substitute national forms of organizing for local forms. The transformation was much more complex than that. Women's associations were also involved in an ideological struggle over the very meanings and purposes of being "civic." Their delibera-

30. GFWCA, Presidents' Papers (RG 2), Chapman, 1954-56.

tions offer new insight into the politics of gender in later decades by focusing on organizational changes that occurred between the first- and second-wave women's movements. Future research should continue to address questions about the ways in which organizations born of the post-war era mobilized female citizenship in different ways, toward different ends. This research is crucial if we seek a fuller appreciation of how gender has mattered to American political development and civic engagement, and if we seek a better understanding of the ways in which female citizens have been incorporated into the polity.

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