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**Monkey Cage** Analysis

## 4 lessons for today's Women's Marchers from the suffrage movement

By Corrine McConnaughey

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*This is the first post in our series on what social science can tell us about the Women's March. The other posts will appear in the coming days. — TMC editors*

After this past weekend's Women's March on Washington, many are asking if this is the start of a renewed movement for women's rights. I'm a political scientist who has spent my career studying the very first women's rights movement: the one for voting rights. Here are its four important lessons for today's organizers.

### **1. It's fine not to know exactly what the policy objectives are yet**

Both before and after Saturday's marches across the country and around the world, observers asked what the goal might be. March organizers released an official platform, but it offered more broad principles than immediate policy goals. The concern: Without a concise policy agenda, the march will lead to nowhere.

In reality, that's not necessarily a problem. The first public meeting explicitly called in the name of women's rights — the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 — is considered the start of the suffrage movement. True, it included the right to vote on its — very long — official list of policy grievances, the Declaration of Sentiments. But suffrage was the item attendees objected to most, for fear the demand was so radical it would divide a movement.

So what's the lesson? When a movement begins, the final goal may not yet be clear. It can be hard to see the political possibility in what has for so long has been impossible. Even if Saturday's marches don't immediately deliver a clear policy objective, they might be the start of a movement that will. We may well be surprised, as some early women's rights organizers were, by which grievances become the central rallying cry.

## **2. The Women’s March on Washington was impressive. But the sister marches may be more politically important**

The D.C. Women’s March was apparently among the capitol’s largest ever. Ongoing data collection efforts by scholars Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman put the crowd size somewhere between a low estimate of 470,000 and a high of 680,000.

But the estimated 3 million or more who attended one of the hundreds of “sister marches” across the country and the globe may matter more for organizing.

Consider women’s suffrage politics in Colorado, as I detailed in my book, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment.” In 1875, national suffrage leadership sent two organizers to the state, thinking it was ready for the vote. The national organizers couldn’t interest anyone. One shocked organizer reported that “we were told in Central — one of the places where we could not get a hearing — that we must advertise a *dogfight*, then we could get a crowd.”

Everything changed once Colorado women organized themselves. Local suffragists knew better. They linked women’s suffrage to 1893’s surging populism — and won Colorado women the right to vote that year. The lesson: A locally developed strategy can be far more effective than one imposed from above.

Further, Holly McCammon’s research on the suffrage movement finds that local organizing generally diversified the movement, decentralized decision-making, and spurred conflict among movement leaders — which led to more effective and innovative tactics.

So will the local marches lead to local movement organizing? That seems likely, given that sister marches were not products of a national committee, but of existing local leaders and organizations that stepped in to produce and affiliate their local action. Existing local organizational infrastructure and political knowledge has thus already passed a first test.

The next important test is whether local groups can keep the newly-active involved. This may even require a willingness to establish entirely new organizations that unify old and new interests. Like locally built suffrage organizations, these groups will be most effective if they take advantage of local political opportunities while also staying connected to a national politics of equal rights. That feedback loop of innovation from local to national helps organizations build strength.

## **3. Policies change when elite incentives change — even without changing anyone’s hearts or minds**

This may be a social movement scholar’s most repeated message. Movements do not win by changing hearts and minds; they win by changing the incentives facing political elites.

To be sure, a social movement can deploy public opinion as a strategic asset. But not only does public opinion in favor of a cause or policy not ensure its political success, public sentiment about protest is quite often negative.

But elite incentives can be moved in many other ways.

As I detailed in an [earlier Monkey Cage post](#), new organizational partnerships and newly contentious partisan political environments produced radical changes in the viability of new voting rights for women. After years of defeat or neglect, suffrage movement success came when partisan political elites found themselves facing broader coalitions for the cause — particularly in moments of electoral uncertainty.

The Women’s March is in some ways already there. It erupted after a [peculiarly competitive election](#). Moving at a moment when the political chess board is in disarray gave the march prominence and power. Whether any emerging demands are met depends less on whether the march changed public opinion than on whether its successor movement can give elites more reasons to move to its side.

#### **4. Coalitions are hard but necessary movement work. And women may have an advantage here**

Susan B. Anthony, arguably the most famous suffrage leader, opposed coalitions. She warned repeatedly that the suffrage movement should isolate itself from other causes, once imploring an organizer to “know nothing — push nothing — but suffrage.” That backfired, making it easier for political elites to dismiss suffrage.

Later national leaders changed strategies, learning from local activists — like those Colorado women — that partnering with groups like unions and farmers’ organizations resulted in dramatic leaps forward.

And yet making coalitions work is hard. The long list of [challenges](#) includes [lopsided cooperation](#), fights over priorities and strategy, and even noticing common ground.

Central to making suffrage coalitions work was the cross-identity bond of womanhood. It was women within organized labor who pushed unions to contribute to the suffrage cause. Women in the Grange and Farmers’ Alliances pulled in the farmers’ lobby. Women of color in civil rights organizations articulated the link between themselves and white women’s suffrage organizing.

Still, the suffrage movement too often gave its coalition partners short shrift. After drawing on the strength of women’s diversity to leverage coalitions for suffrage, leadership repeatedly fell back to emphasizing white, middle-class, urban women’s voices.

Women have a particularly powerful political tool in their common identity, but one that will take more careful leadership decisions than those of suffragists to reach its full potential. A diverse group of women organizers at the helm of the Women’s March was important for just this reason: It builds the coalitional potential of a new movement. Whether coalition approaches continue — both nationally and locally — will matter tremendously for any future movement’s effectiveness.

[Corrine McConaughy](#) is associate professor of political science at George Washington University. She specializes in how political identities — from party identification to race, gender and ethnicity — are formed and function in the U.S. political system.