

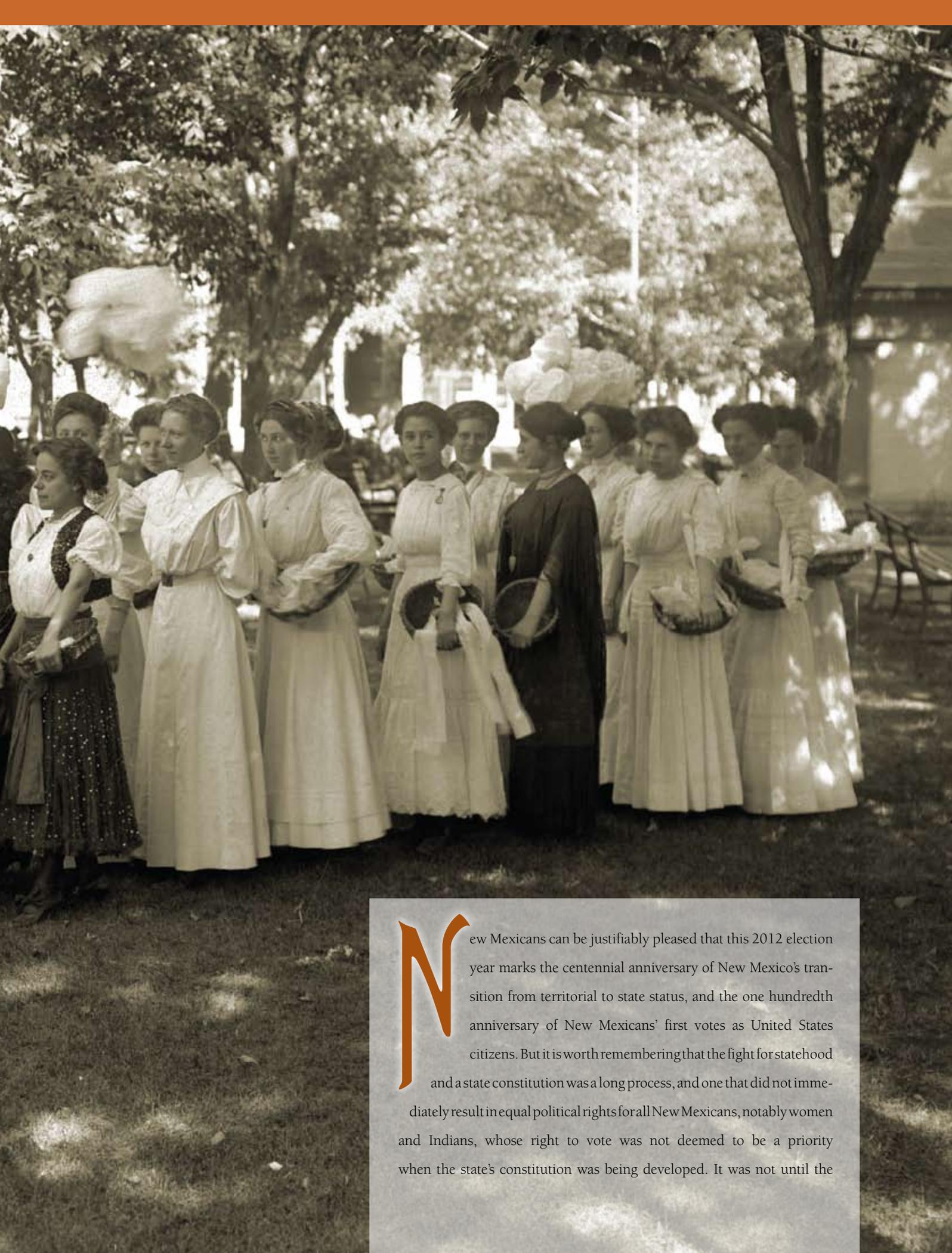
Statehood for Whom?

New Mexico's Journey to
Universal Voting Rights
for Women

By Jason Shapiro



This group of women and girls is gathered at an unidentified event on the Santa Fe Plaza in 1912.
Photograph by Jesse Nusbaum, courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 139014.



New Mexicans can be justifiably pleased that this 2012 election year marks the centennial anniversary of New Mexico's transition from territorial to state status, and the one hundredth anniversary of New Mexicans' first votes as United States citizens. But it is worth remembering that the fight for statehood and a state constitution was a long process, and one that did not immediately result in equal political rights for all New Mexicans, notably women and Indians, whose right to vote was not deemed to be a priority when the state's constitution was being developed. It was not until the



Three unidentified women in Cimarron, New Mexico, ca. 1909-13. Photograph by Edward A. Troutman, courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 149674.

ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920 that women in New Mexico were able to vote—and they were the last women in the West to gain the franchise.

The question of why it took so long for women in New Mexico to be allowed to vote can only be answered with reference to several factors that encompass both national and local issues. For women, the national issues involved the long fight for women's suffrage that began with the famous conference organized in 1848 by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Seneca Falls, New York. This conference was the first step towards the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. The local issues involved elements that distinguished New Mexico from a number of other western states, many of which had granted women the right to vote long before the beginning of the twentieth century.

A general point to consider is that throughout history, whenever circumstances change, there are always people with a vested interest in the way things are who try to impede or even reverse the changes. People with privileges tend to want to keep them and prevent others from obtaining the same privileges. Even the American Revolution, the seminal event that resulted in the creation of our nation, was not the unvarnished celebration of human rights that it is often portrayed to be. Disenfranchised groups such as Black slaves, women, Indians, and the very poor were not much affected by the Revolution, at least in terms of their ability to participate in the political life of their newly minted nation, because none of these groups were given suffrage rights under the United States Constitution. Looked at differently, America's new Constitution limited "full citizenship" so as to define racial and gender categories that kept women, Blacks, and Indians

as less than complete participants in the nation's political life until the twentieth century.

New Mexico (including the area that later became the State of Arizona) officially became a United States territory in 1850 as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the United States–Mexican War in 1848. The process of statehood required another sixty-two years, and it was not until January 6, 1912, that President William Howard Taft signed a proclamation that made New Mexico the nation's forty-seventh state. Statehood did not automatically confer universal suffrage. This was not an oversight, nor was it because New Mexicans had not thought about who had the right to vote. New Mexico's constitution, ratified in 1910, set forth the voting rights of its citizens as follows: "Every male citizen of the United States, who is over the age of twenty-one years, and has resided in New Mexico twelve months . . . except idiots, insane persons, persons convicted of a felonious or infamous crime unless restored to political rights, and Indians not taxed, shall be qualified to vote in all elections for public officers.¹ It further states, "The right of any citizen of the state to vote, hold office, or sit upon juries, shall never be restricted, abridged, or impaired on account of religion, race, language or color, or inability to speak, read, or write the English or Spanish languages."²

Although the voting rights of Hispanic and non-English-speaking males were specifically provided for, New Mexico's constitution was silent about women's suffrage rights. In addition, Indians were specifically prohibited from voting, along with idiots, insane people, and felons—an interesting juxtaposition whose investigation is beyond the scope of this essay.

Although women had been granted minimal rights—for example, the right to vote in local school board elections—this situation was not what many people had in mind with respect to universal suffrage. Unfortunately, the only way that women in New Mexico could have expanded those rights was through an amendment to the new state constitution. In 1912 any amendments to the constitution would have required a three-quarters majority of the (male) voters in every county.³ As a practical matter, a constitutional amendment was not only burdensome, it was almost impossible for women to secure full voting rights by those means. By the early twentieth century, many people had accepted the position that it would take an amendment to the United States Constitution to insure women's suffrage.

However much we might like to think of New Mexico as a state in the avant-garde of many social movements, there is no disputing the fact that New Mexico lagged behind numerous western states in its treatment of women's suffrage. The territories of Wyoming (1869), Utah (1870), Washington (1883), Montana (1887), Arizona (1910), and Alaska (1913) were among the earliest jurisdictions in the United States to allow women to vote. In addition, the states of Wyoming (1899), Colorado (1893), Utah (1895), Idaho (1896), Washington (1910), California (1911), Kansas (1912), Oregon (1912), Nevada (1914), and Oklahoma (1918) all granted women the right to vote prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.⁴

By 1918 New Mexico was the only western state that had not granted voting rights to women. A multiplicity of factors, often reflecting local conditions and concerns, may have contributed to the support women's suffrage received among the western states and territories, but that still begs the question of what distinguished New Mexico from all of these other jurisdictions in its unwillingness to grant women the right to vote. It was not until 1920, when the New Mexico Legislature ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, that women were finally allowed to vote in New Mexico. An obvious question is, "What took New Mexico so long?"

In a comprehensive historical treatment of voting rights in the United States, Alexander Keyssar highlights several factors that historians have claimed made western states more receptive to women's suffrage than other areas of the country: the egalitarian influence of frontier life and western populism, the desire to encourage settlement in a sparsely settled region, a western revival of a kind of Puritan desire to purify politics, and a recognition of women's importance in the political process caused by the overwhelming male-to-female population imbalance in the West.⁵ Generally, those western states with the largest gender imbalances were ones most eager to grant women's suffrage: "The scarcity of women, it appears, reduced the political costs and perceived risks for men. The imbalance also provided an incentive for Western legislators to adopt woman suffrage as a lure to attract more women to their jurisdictions."⁶

If Keyssar is correct in his explanation of why certain western states favored women's suffrage early on, his analysis also helps to explain New Mexico's reticence on this issue, because virtually none of those factors applied to New Mexico.



For example, neither egalitarian or Protestant reformist ideology was able to make much headway against the authoritarian opposition of the Catholic Church, which was outspoken in its resistance to women's suffrage in New Mexico and elsewhere. Consider this excerpt from a speech given by a Catholic priest in Denver in 1886:

Though strong-minded women who are not satisfied with the disposition of Providence and who wish to go beyond the condition of their sex, profess no doubt to be Christians, do they consult the Bible? Do they follow the Bible? I fear not. Had God intended to create a companion for man, capable of following the same pursuits, able to undertake the same labors, he would have created another man; but he created a woman, and she fell. The class of women wanting suffrage are battalions of old maids disappointed in love—women separated from their husbands or divorced by men from their sacred obligations—women who, though married, wish to hold the reins of the family government, for there never was a woman happy in her home who wished for female suffrage.⁷

Part of the Church's opposition was based upon its efforts to maintain power over its adherents by opposing any reforms that could alter existing social relationships and so undermine what it viewed as traditional expressions of morality, marriage, and home life. The underlying idea was that women should remain at home and not even participate in politics. The Catholic Church used its literal and figurative "bully pulpits" quite effectively among immigrant Catholic communities in order to block women's suffrage. In addition to Church opposition, New Mexico's traditional, patriarchal social structure may have contributed to the delayed acquisition of voting rights by New Mexico women. Although she was not specifically referring to New Mexico, Elizabeth Cady Stanton could have been when she famously

wrote, “Here is the secret of the opposition to woman’s equality in the state and the church; men are not ready to recognize it in the home.”⁸ Again, this was not a sentiment unique to New Mexico, as many people in the nineteenth century viewed women as integral parts of families, rather than as individual actors in their own right.

New Mexico is one of the oldest portions of the United States colonized by Europeans. Juan de Oñate founded San Gabriel, the first permanent Spanish community in New Mexico, in 1598. Santa Fe was officially founded in 1610, and Albuquerque in 1706. Agriculturally oriented Hispanic settlements expanded throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but New Mexico remained a largely rural territory well into the twentieth century. When one considers that San Luis, the oldest town in Colorado, was not even founded until 1851, a full 250 years after New Mexico’s first permanent settlement, one can appreciate some of the fundamental historical and demographic differences among even adjacent western states. Families had been part of the Spanish *entrada* into New Mexico since Oñate’s foray in 1598, and the continuing expansion of Hispanic influence in New Mexico owed as much to the formation of family-based agricultural communities as it did to ongoing military and religious efforts. By the early twentieth century, New Mexico had been occupied by Europeans and Americans for more than 300 years and had maintained a much more balanced male-to-female ratio than any number of other western states. From that standpoint, there was no impetus

Opposite: Unidentified woman in Cimarron, New Mexico, ca. 1909-13. Photograph by Edward A. Troutman, courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 149774.

Right: Unidentified woman in Cimarron, New Mexico, ca. 1909-13. Photograph by Edward A. Troutman, courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 149773.



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for politicians to devise policies designed to encourage more women to immigrate to New Mexico.

On the other hand, part of the culture of New Mexico's historic and traditional communities was the persistence of traditional ideas about gender roles that could be threatened by something new, such as allowing women to vote. Hispanic males in particular seemed to have opposed granting New Mexico women the right to vote, not only through the nineteenth century, but well into the twentieth century as well, in part because of a fear of change and the loss of social control.⁹

There may have been another, more political and economic, reason for Hispanic male opposition. Prior to the twentieth century, the majority of Hispanic males were affiliated with the Republican Party. The Democratic Party was associated with Anglos and perhaps southern (read Texas) slavery and did not begin to expand its influence and challenge Republican hegemony in New Mexico until after 1911. Over time a balance was struck between the parties in which the Anglo Democrats were able to assert legislative control in exchange for assurances of state government jobs. Neither party actively encouraged political participation by women, and the irresistible push for women's suffrage concerned Hispanic males who viewed the process as a threat to the status quo and their privileges, specifically their continuing access to government jobs.¹⁰ Whatever its origin, there seemed to be an assumption in New Mexico that women were not entirely fit for public life, and that lack of fitness included the prohibition against voting.

New Mexico's cultural conservatism with respect to voting rights is ironic, considering that under Spanish colonial law, women in New Mexico had more legal rights, particularly with respect to the ownership and transfer of land and other property, than women in the English colonies. A Spanish woman inherited property from her parents on an equal basis with any brothers, controlled her own property during her marriage, and upon the death of a husband received no less than half of the community property accumulated during the marriage. Unlike women in most English colonies, as well the states that were later formed from them, New Mexico women were able to enforce these rights by bringing legal actions in their own



names.¹¹ This is not to say that men and women were treated as complete equals under Spanish colonial law, only that in some respects women in New Mexico traditionally had more legal rights than their Anglo contemporaries. Voting was not one of those rights.

In any event, some of these traditional cultural ideals became enmeshed with conservative political views that also retarded women's suffrage. For example, a number of members of New Mexico's "political establishment," including Senator Thomas B. Catron, who served from 1912 to 1916, strongly opposed women's suffrage. As one New Mexico woman noted after Senator Catron rebuffed a delegation of women lobbying for his vote, "He thinks

all we are good for is to stay home, have children, have more children, cook, and wash dishes." Catron, together with many other politicians, may have correctly gauged the political pulse of the male (voting) population of New Mexico, but their view was not monolithic. For instance, Albert Fall, Catron's senatorial colleague, was much more supportive of allowing women to vote.¹² What appeared to be a solid wall of opposition was in fact not so solid, because irrespective of the influences of religion, culture, and politics, many men and women were unwilling to passively accept the idea that women in New Mexico should not be allowed to vote.

One of the leading figures in the national women's suffrage movement was Alice Paul (1885–1977), a Quaker whose mother was a very active member of the National American Women's Suffrage Association. While studying social work in England in 1907, Paul became exposed to the more militant approach adopted by British suffragettes, and she returned to America as a much more radicalized supporter of women's voting rights. Although Paul was a member of the National American Women's Suffrage Association, she also formed her own group, the Congressional Union, in order to focus on what she saw as the critical goal—passage of a constitutional suffrage amendment. Paul's Congressional Union became especially active in New Mexico, and while the union's efforts received a more positive response among Anglo women, eventually it was able to reach into the Hispanic community. Those efforts took time.

Opposite: Maria Adelina Emilia Otero Warren (1881-1965), ca. 1930. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 089756.

A biographical analysis of 107 New Mexican suffragists who were active during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals that only one of those women identified herself as Catholic, seven more were identified as “Spanish-surnamed,” and only eight stated that they had been born in New Mexico.¹³ In other words, to the extent that women’s suffrage was initially being pushed in New Mexico, it was not generally an issue that native-born, Catholic, Hispanic women focused on. Rather, the women’s suffrage movement in New Mexico was something that was supported by a select group of Anglo women—women who had moved to New Mexico and were married to what might be called “elites,” prominent men with careers in business, law, and government. The challenge for women in New Mexico was in how to expand the acceptance of women’s suffrage within all of New Mexico’s communities.

One person who responded to Alice Paul’s arguments was Adelina Otero-Warren (1881–1965), a member of an old and influential New Mexico family, who attended college at a time when many women didn’t even finish high school. When her uncle, Miguel Otero, was appointed New Mexico’s territorial governor in 1894, Adelina moved to Santa Fe and became active in a number of public-policy issues, including women’s suffrage. Otero-Warren became a member of Paul’s Congressional Union and rose to become the head of the union in New Mexico. In that position, and with her network of connections, she was able to reach both Hispanic and Anglo women to support the lobbying efforts directed at New Mexico’s congressional delegation for passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

In addition to her work on behalf of women’s suffrage, Otero-Warren served as one of New Mexico’s first female government officials, holding positions as Santa Fe superintendent of schools and chair of the State Board of Health. It may be the case that New Mexico’s traditional social and religious culture and conservative politics discouraged women, particularly Hispanic women, from demanding voting rights, but by the early twentieth century, the efforts of national figures such as Alice Paul, and local figures such as Adelina Otero-Warren, finally resulted in the passage

and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, and New Mexico joined the rest of the nation in allowing full suffrage for women. ■

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NOTES

1. New Mexico Constitution, Article VII, Section 1.
2. New Mexico Constitution, Article VII, Section 3.
3. New Mexico Constitution, Article VII, Section 3.
4. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), Table A-20, 368.
5. Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 157–58.
6. Sebastian Braun and Michael Kvasnicka, *Men, Women, and the Ballot: Gender Imbalances and Suffrage Extensions in US States*, Kiel Working Paper No. 1625 (Kiel, Germany: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2010), 31.
7. See, e.g., Joseph Projectus Machebeuf, “Woman’s Suffrage: A Lecture Delivered in the Catholic Church of Denver, Colorado,” February 6, 1877, selections reprinted in *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 3, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (Rochester: Charles Mann Printing, 1886; New York: Source Book Press, 1970), 720–21.
8. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “On Marriage and Divorce,” in *A History of the National Woman’s Rights Movement for Twenty Years with Proceedings of the Decade Meeting Held at Apollo Hall, October 20, 1870*, by Paulina Wright Davis (New York: Journeymen Printers, 1871), 60.
9. Stanton, “On Marriage and Divorce,” 26.
10. Joan M. Jessen, “Disenfranchisement Is a Disgrace: Women and Politics in New Mexico, 1900–1940,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 56 (1, January 1981), 29.
11. Deborah A. Rosen, *Women and Property across Colonial America: A Comparison of Legal Systems in New Mexico and New York*, 3rd series, *William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2, April 2003), 355–81.
12. Braun and Kvasnicka, *Men, Women, and the Ballot*, 7–18.
13. Jessen, “Disenfranchisement,” 15.