

Chapter Eight

Carrying On: Early Ambitions, Small Victories

Women in every state voted for the first time in November of 1920, and the League of Women Voters (LWV) was ready with a long list of intentions for the new Congress in 1921. Many of their goals were not directly feminist, as the LWV differed from its mother, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, in being multi-issue, whereas the NAWSA had the sole aim of winning the vote. With that accomplished, longtime lobbyist Maude Wood Park became president of the League, and it joined other organizations, especially the General Federation of Women's Clubs, to promote dozens of legislative items. Park, in fact, called the agenda “a kettle of eels,” as there were so many slippery parts.

Ultimately, only a few federal agenda items directly related to women would come to fruition during the politically conservative 1920s—and those were early in the decade. The nation swung away from the progressive agenda of Democrat Woodrow Wilson after World War I: the Senate rejected his League of Nations, and voters chose three Republican presidents—Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Harding was deeply flawed, involved in both financial and sexual scandals; indeed, his sudden death fueled rumors of other scandals including malpractice by attending physicians and poisoning by his wife. His vice president, Coolidge, was contrastingly puritanical and taciturn—except for his famous proclamation that the “business of America is business.” He wholly supported the demise of the labor, farmer, and consumer organizations that had been successful in the Progressive Era,

and the resulting decline in middle-class incomes was a factor in the collapse of the economy soon after Hoover won in 1928. That election was a defining point in America history for another reason: Democrats lost largely because their nominee, New York Governor Al Smith, was Catholic. The nation still was not religiously tolerant enough for a non-Protestant president.

With conservatives firmly in charge in Washington throughout the decade, the liberal goals that the League and other women's organizations had adopted in the first flush of victory became increasingly hopeless—and the one successful legal reform of importance to feminists did not cost any money. That was the 1922 Cable Act, which corrected blatant discrimination against women in immigration law. It was the only progressive change in that body of law, however, as Congress put such severe quotas on newcomers with legislation in 1921 and 1924 that immigration virtually ended—another factor in the coming economic collapse. For women, however, the Cable Act reversed an injustice and was directly related to their recent enfranchisement.

Formally called the Married Women's Citizenship Act (or Married Women's Independent Nationality Act), its sponsor was John L. Cable, a Republican of Ohio. Prior to the Cable Act, if an American man married a foreign woman, she immediately was endowed with his citizenship—but the opposite was true for women: if an American woman married a foreigner, she lost her citizenship, no matter how long she and her ancestors had been in the United States. Few people had cared about this inequality until female citizens were allowed to vote, and then it became important. The legislative victory was especially sweet for longtime feminists because one of their pet peeves from the days of Susan B. Anthony onwards was the frequency with which male immigrants voted without anyone checking on their citizenship.

More than any other public figure, Ruth Bryan Owen was affected by women's inferior position in citizenship. She was the daughter of three-time Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, but when she married a British army officer in 1910, she lost her American citizenship. He died soon after World War I, as did her father, who had retired to Miami, and Ruth was left to support four children. With help from her very politically astute mother, Mary Baird Bryan, she became the first congresswoman from the South—yet the incumbent she defeated in 1928 argued on the House floor that she was not eligible because of nuances in citizenship law. The problem arose again in the next decade: President Franklin