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CITIZENS NOW!
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY
TAMPA WOMEN IN 1920
by Jeff Hutchison

The most popular and important aspect of the women’s rights movement in the early twentieth century was the question of the vote. The suffrage movement had stagnated for nearly fifty years, but, when coupled with other progressive reforms, it gained a second wind as state after state ratified the Susan B. Anthony amendment to the United States Constitution. By World War I, the question was no longer if suffrage would become a reality but how soon, and in 1920 final approval of the Nineteenth Amendment made woman suffrage a reality.¹

This article examines the arrival of woman suffrage in Tampa, Florida. It focuses primarily on the year 1920 with particular concentration on the special election in October 1920 because it was the first opportunity for Tampa women to vote. The thesis of this article is that the significance of the special election was largely women’s participation in it. Tampa women wanted the vote not (at least initially) to advance any specific agenda, but simply to enjoy the full meaning of citizenship. Once they became participants, they used their new power in gender-neutral ways to advance causes more related to economic or racial considerations than to gender factors. Thus, despite the hopes of some suffrage advocates and the fears of some men, women in Tampa did not vote as a bloc.²

Tampa was a growing and prosperous city in 1920. Nevertheless, it was struggling with the major strike of the century in the cigar industry and a serious downturn in shipbuilding and repair, an industry that had boomed during the war. The city government consisted of a strong elected mayor and a city council composed of representatives from each of the city’s wards. Nearly fifty years earlier a relatively homogeneous population of 800 residents had adopted this form of government. It had changed little except to add more wards as the city grew. By 1920, the city government was serving a very diverse population of more than 51,000.³ There had been previous attempts to change the city government, but all had failed to garner popular support. Finally, in the spring of 1920, city voters passed a measure to create a Charter Committee. The sole function of the Charter Committee was to write an amendment to the city charter that, if accepted by the voters in October, would bring Tampa fully into the Progressive Era (already a thing of the past elsewhere) by instituting a commission form of government.

The commission form of government was a popular progressive reform that more than one hundred cities around the nation had already adopted. Its objective was to wrest power from traditionally conservative political machines and to make the performance of city executives more professional. It was a means of putting power in the hands of “reformers.” In practice, commission-based governments encompassed three characteristics. First, all commissioners were elected at-large rather than by individual wards. This change eliminated “safe” seats in gerrymandered districts and made the entire city commission responsible to a single democratic majority. Second, the strong mayor became little more than a ceremonial position. A city manager, hired by and responsible to the city council, exercised executive authority. In theory, city managers would be trained career bureaucrats and therefore more professional and efficient...
An antisuffrage cartoon showing the “Suffragist-Feminist” leaving home to participate in politics, which “masculinizes women and feminizes men.”

Cartoon from Votes for Women! edited by Majorie Spruill Wheeler.
than elected amateurs. Finally, the concepts of initiative, recall, and referendum were incorporated into city charters to give the electorate an oversight and intervention capability should city officials stray too far from the will of the majority. All of these features were in the proposed amendment of Tampa’s Charter Committee which completed its work in June 1920. The charter amendment was debated in the city from then until the special election on October 19, 1920. Throughout this period, Tampa women were disenfranchised spectators in the political process.

Tampa’s 1920 population included 25,610 women of whom 10,704 were citizens and over twenty years of age. Of these 10,000 who would become eligible to vote, probably more than ten percent belonged to one or more of Tampa’s multitude of clubs. Most of these clubs were primarily but not exclusively women’s clubs. Some, such as the Tampa Civic Association and the Tampa Women’s Club, were very well organized and remain active today. Others formed for more specific, short-term functions. The Women’s Protective League, for example, organized in May 1919. Claiming 500 members, it sought to rid the city of houses of ill-fame. These reformers petitioned state legislators to pass laws to prohibit such houses, and while waiting for the legislature to act, they offered to provide “moral report cards” on any young man on request from any of the city’s young ladies.

A recent study of women’s clubs in Tampa found that “enfranchisement had never been a primary objective of clubwomen.” But like an onion, this finding needs to be peeled back a
layer. Most of Tampa’s women’s clubs belonged to the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, a statewide organization that in 1919-1920 emphasized education, Americanization, and child welfare. The Federation, following the lead of the nationwide General Federation, considered suffrage a political matter “outside the orbit of the Federation’s program.” The charters of the clubs may represent official independence from suffrage, but fail to reflect the feelings and activities of individual clubwomen. Club members, including Federation leaders, attended and spoke at the Florida’s Statewide Equal Suffrage Convention, held in Tampa from October 30 through November 1, 1919. And both the Tampa Civic Association and the Tampa Women’s Club held “Suffrage Days” for educational purposes. Generally, however, the Federation felt that the active work for suffrage should be left to organizations specifically formed for that purpose. The Tampa Equal Suffrage League was just such an organization.

Beginning in December 1917, the League’s twenty-one members met regularly in the courtroom at city hall. But the League attracted little attention, and its activities have been left largely undocumented. A history of Tampa women noted that the League's officers were “apparently middle-class women, whose names were not the known names of local leadership ...” However, this judgment may underestimate the League’s first president, Mrs. I.O. Price. If Mrs. Price was not well known in December 1917, she would be soon. Some background on Mrs. Price reveals a typical middle-class clubwoman.
Ada Price and her husband, Ivil, came to Tampa sometime between 1911 and 1916. Ivil, a commercial traveler (traveling salesman), settled his wife and their children in a home on Bayshore Boulevard. Ivil changed jobs at least once a year, holding various sales positions until 1922 when he became a deputy chief marshal. He stayed in the marshal’s office until 1929. He spent part of that year as a customs appraiser before retiring. In 1918 the Prices moved to a house on Morgan Street in Tampa Heights, where Ivil resided for more than two decades. Murlin, the oldest son, had arrived in Tampa in 1911, possibly before his parents, and worked as a clerk and musician. In 1922 he started what would become one of Tampa’s most successful music stores and music publishing houses. During the war, Murlin served in the Army. His brother, Hugh, served in the Navy and worked as a stenographer, clerk, and salesman before joining Murlin’s business as sales manager. Sister Edith was a student in 1917. She later worked as a clerk and as assistant librarian for the Tampa Public Library before also joining Murlin’s business as vice president. Murlin’s wife, Edna, succeeded Edith as vice president. They all lived at home even after Hugh and Murlin married. The married couples moved out when they could afford their own homes.  

Ada Price would have been nearly fifty years old when she assumed the leadership of the Equal Suffrage League. She was a featured speaker at the Equal Suffrage Convention when it met in Tampa in 1919, and she served two terms in 1919 and 1920 as president of the prestigious Tampa Civic Association. It is a compliment to describe Mrs. Price as a model of Progressive Era republican motherhood.

The Tampa women’s clubs are a window through which we can view middleclass suffragists like Mrs. Price. These women eagerly anticipated suffrage and prepared for it with nonpartisan, educational programs. Their activities reveal some extent of the anticipation that the clubwomen felt as suffrage approached.

All the clubs had similar formats for their meetings. They included musical entertainment (usually by one of the members), a light lunch or dessert, and a guest speaker or discussion of a book or popular issue. Reports of club activities show the range of their interests. The meeting of the Tampa Woman’s Club on April 2, 1919, hosted several out-of-town speakers who addressed suffrage and women’s roles in society. A guest from Virginia defended woman suffrage, telling the gathering: “Women want the ballot so that they may have a voice as to the conditions under which women and children are to work.” Mrs. Edgar Lewis, president of the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, followed with a “tribute to Motherhood, as being the highest standard of work for women.” In June 1920, the club adopted the project of beautifying the new Children’s Home, the public schools, and other locations. They extended an invitation to the city's other clubs to join them in the effort.

In March 1920, Judge Horace Gordon (soon to become mayor) gave a talk on suffrage to the Tampa Civic Association. At the following meeting, the club members developed their program for the next year. It included a systematic study of citizenship and cleaning vacant city lots. In April, the association turned its attention to the problem of the quality of milk being produced at local dairies. A guest speaker described the problems and invited the ladies to visit, some of the dairies and see for themselves. They not only accepted this invitation, but made it a combined event that had participation from at least nine clubs. A month later streets and playgrounds were
on the agenda. The members agreed to contact clubs in other cities to see if there had been any success in getting a commissioner appointed to coordinate city beautification efforts. They also selected a committee to visit mayor-elect Gordon to address the plight of the city’s playgrounds.14

The Tampa Business and Professional Women’s Club met regularly in 1920. On July 15, a speaker urged fellow members to prepare for their part in politics. In August they invited former Mayor D.B. McKay to speak on the subject of “closed shops.”15 The club announced no position on the issue but took more than casual interest.

This brief survey of club activities shows that while suffrage may not have been a primary objective of clubs, the women were not indifferent; suffrage and other political issues were very much on their minds. The survey also indicates that clubwomen had changed little since the turn of the century. In a study of these earlier Tampa clubwomen, one historian concluded:  

Of all Tampa’s residents, these women were the likeliest to live in nuclear families, reside in privately owned houses, and accept the ideology of separate sexual spheres. They, like their counterparts across the nation, assumed that home and city were two distinct entities and that the latter could be improved by an infusion of values from the former.16

In early 1920, Tampa’s women remained disenfranchised, but they were no longer disengaged, as the vote loomed on the horizon.

Throughout the summer the suffrage question garnered significant national headlines, especially considering that 1920 was also a presidential election year. North Carolina had a chance to be the magic thirty-sixth state required to ratify the Susan B. Anthony amendment, but the legislature soundly defeated the measure. Not content with their own victory, sixty-three members of North Carolina’s legislature signed an urgent telegram to Tennessee legislators urging them “not to force suffrage upon the people of North Carolina.”17 Back in Tampa, Mrs. Flossie Taylor opened the August 12 meeting of the Tampa Business and Professional Women’s Club with a statement that women would soon be voting whether they wanted to or not. Mrs. Taylor was referring to the continuing ambivalence of some women towards suffrage in the face of inevitable ratification. Mrs. Elizabeth Bernard added that many business women “do not understand what the two great parties of the country mean.” She argued that the time had come for women to study the questions of the day so that they could “intelligently align themselves on the right side.”18

Despite the Tarheels’ efforts, Tennessee ratified the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920, and woman suffrage became the law of the land. The Tampa Tribune, which had generally trivialized woman suffrage, responded to the event with the statement that “there is no need for alarm over this new entrant to the voting booth.... Most of those who vote will be the mothers of the country; and we believe, a mother is a mother still, the holiest thing alive.” The Tribune advocated “full and immediate registration of women.”19

The Tampa Daily Times had a somewhat longer record of support for suffrage. Typical of the Times position is an editorial on May 20, 1920, in which editor D.B. McKay wrote that “woman has made good in every business and commercial life; she has made good professionally, in

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medical and even legal circles, she will yet make good in politics for the day is as surely coming as the sun rises and sets.” In June, McKay noted that even women who did not want the vote were taking a greater interest in politics, and he advised politicians to start paying attention to women.20 The Tribune’s subsequent change of heart signaled that the competition for women’s votes between the two sides on the charter issue had begun. Meanwhile, the clubwomen of Tampa were preparing to vote.
Representatives from most local women’s clubs met at the home of Mrs. T.M. Shackleford, president of the Tampa Woman’s Club, on September 4. This enthusiastic gathering decided that the clubwomen as one combined group should study citizenship, municipal government, and the responsibilities of voters, so they scheduled a series of meetings, called an “Open Forum for Women Voters.” The weekly series appears to have been very popular, attracting men as well as women.21

At its September 24 meeting, the Tampa Civic Association voted to invite “some well informed man to give instructions on voting.” At the next meeting the group staged a mock election complete with the arrest of one member who tried to vote a second time.22 The Tribune covered the September 29 meeting of the Kiwanis Club that featured Mrs. R.A. Ellis, vice president of the Tampa Women’s Club, reassuring men that the ballot will “in no way change woman herself, but that she will be just as domestic and homeloving as ever.... The hand that rocks the cradle,” she said, “may rock the candidates, but the owner of that hand will not have to turn her back on her home life to do it.”23

The Business and Professional Women’s Club invited one of the city’s commissioners to talk about property taxes and education. At the November 4 meeting, they celebrated the “twenty-first birthday of American women” in recognition of their achieving political maturity.24

For Tampans the overriding election issue in 1920 was the proposal to amend the city charter. The idea of converting to a commission government was first put to the voters in the primary election in March 1920. The existing government consisted of a mayor and city council. The mayor, D.B. McKay, had held that office continuously since 1910. As mayor, he also served as chairman of both the Board of Public Works and the City Board of Health. The remaining duties were distributed among eleven councilmen and a few appointees. The city’s ten wards each elected one councilman, and the city at-large elected one more. In the years immediately preceding the charter amendment, the city council included men with surnames such as Ramos, Maggio, Sendoza, and Sierra, reflecting the ethnic diversity of the city and the ability of Latins to have a voice in ward-based elections.25

Blacks and Latins comprised fifty eight percent of the city's voting-age population, but their political impact was limited. The Latin community included many aliens who were barred from voting, and African Americans faced severe legal restrictions. In addition to having to pay a poll tax to vote, blacks could not participate in local primaries which were run by the White Municipal Party and open to whites only. Thus, black men who met requirements of age and citizenship and who paid the poll tax had the right to vote only in meaningless general elections where candidates selected in the white primary ran unopposed. This may explain why the entire county had but seventy-five qualified black voters in 1918. When the large non-naturalized immigrant population is deleted, the remaining Latin voters were clustered in such a way that seven of the city’s ten wards become effectively native white.26 However, wards six and seven in Ybor City routinely elected at least one councilman with a Latin surname.

The charter amendment proposed to reduce the city council from eleven members to five, all to be chosen at-large, making it more difficult for the large Latin minority to elect one of their own in the city-wide elections. One of the five commissioners would serve as the
mayor-commissioner but would exercise little additional authority. The commissioners would hire a professional manager to act as the city’s executive.27

Tampans, led by the two daily newspapers, divided immediately on the charter issue. The *Tribune* backed the change as forcefully as it could. The *Times* somewhat reluctantly also supported a switch to commission government as late as March 1920, just before the primary election. But when the Charter Committee proposed an amendment featuring an emasculated mayor, editor McKay switched sides. One of his great frustrations as mayor had been his inability to accomplish his goals. He could not support any reform that diluted the mayor’s authority even more.28 The opposing editorial pages became a major battleground for the reform movement.

The forums sponsored by the women’s clubs were genuinely educational and nonpartisan. Other less educational and very partisan clubs soon formed. These clubs had both male and female participants. The Commission Government Club organized first, sponsoring rallies to encourage voters to support the amendment. The Home Rule Club sprouted spontaneously when a mass meeting of the opposition looked for a more formal and permanent structure. The club elected a chairman and seven vice presidents, all of whom were clubwomen. Among the vice presidents were Miss Kate Jackson, Mrs. H.C. Macfarlane, Mrs. D.B. Givens, and Mrs. T.W. Ramsey. These names would appear on any short list of the city’s most prominent women.29

Clubwomen actively engaged in the debate. The *Tribune* ran a series of interviews under the caption “Citizens Explain Why They Support Charter.” Mrs. T.L. Karn, Mrs. Amos Norris, Mrs. Sumter L. Lowry, Mrs. L.M. Broyles, and Mrs. Elizabeth Adams were featured clubwomen.30 Mrs. Norris later became the first female candidate for a commission seat but finished eighth in the primary election on November 15. Only the top five finishers moved on to the general election.31

Both papers accused their opponents of pandering to the black vote. The *Times* charged Mrs. Norris and Mrs. R.G. Albury, “prominent among club women of Tampa,” with promising Negroes they would have more rights under the commission government.32 The *Tribune* a few days earlier claimed that charter opponents were campaigning to register black women to offset
white women’s votes. By their estimate, however, the registration of white women was still running ahead.\footnote{33}

The \textit{Times} generally made specific mention of women when it reported political meetings. For the mass meeting on October 4, “the court room was filled, perhaps a majority of the attendance being women.” When the final charter debate was held at the Tampa Bay Casino, “attendance was about equally divided as to men and women.”\footnote{34}

The newspapers and political clubs actively encouraged Tampa’s women to register and vote. The city council joined in that effort by passing an ordinance regulating registration and voting that was particularly favorable to women. The ordinance exempted women from the poll tax and provided separate voting booths for women. Further, the city attorney allowed women to certify their age at registration as simply “twenty-one plus.”\footnote{35}

The election on October 19, 1920, was a special election in several ways. There were no candidates, no personalities to appeal to the voters. There was only one issue – the charter amendment, which was approved by a vote of 3,769 to 2,999. This is the kind of election that often draws little voter interest. So it is not surprising that of the 22,647 potentially eligible voters, only 9,845 registered for the election.\footnote{36} Women comprised thirty-eight percent of this total. The percentage of women registered equaled or approached fifty percent in the largely native-white wards but fell to around twenty percent in the heavily immigrant wards. It is also not surprising that only seventy-five percent of those who registered actually voted. The election day turnout was still seventy-six percent greater than that for the primary election the previous March. The \textit{Times} noted that many of the cigar makers engaged in the long strike had left the city between March and October, and the paper estimated that women cast “more than fifty percent of Tuesday’s vote.”\footnote{37} If women cast half the vote, then they had a turnout of about ninety percent which seems reasonable for their maiden voyage into the political arena. It appears that the women very likely decided the outcome of the election, but how did the women vote?

Because there were no candidates in the election, there were no pro-suffrage or anti-suffrage personalities to consolidate voting blocs. The single issue ballot was perfectly gender-neutral. While we have no exit polls to cite, it is apparent from the campaign that the women, actively engaged in both the Commission Government and Home Rule clubs, split on the issue. But along what lines?

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Mrs_Sumter_L_Lowry_Sr.jpg}
\caption{Mrs. Sumter L. Lowry, Sr.}
\end{figure}

Photograph courtesy of Ann Lowry Murphey.
As John Buenker notes in his book *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform*, not all “progressive reforms” were, in fact, either “progressive” or “reforms,” but instead became just changes instituted by political factions either to retain or capture power. An analysis of Tampa’s election returns at the precinct and ward level shows that one definite result of the change to commission government was a shift of power from an ethnically diverse city council to a native-white city commission; this meant a shift away from equal ward representation (including Ybor City) to the city’s white fringes which dominated at-large commission elections. The research for this article did not determine the Charter Committee’s intent, but the ethnic cleansing of the city council was a definite, if unintended, outcome. Indeed, no Latin surnames appear on the city council during the entire eight-year life of commission government. This shift was not unnoticed at the time and may have motivated some extreme actions. In the first municipal election under the charter, according to a newspaper report, “Councilman P.G. Ramos was arrested on the charge of aiding a voter to vote more than once, and two others were arrested and charged with having voted more than once.” Whether or not this was routine procedure in Latin precincts under the old system, it appears to be evidence of acknowledgment by Latins that they would have to win more than their ward to get representation on the new city commission. A majority of the women apparently voted to ensure that the city government would stay safely in the hands of middle- and upper-class native whites.

The probability that women voters were motivated more by social and economic considerations than gender factors is consistent with events in other parts of the country, where historians have found significant attitude shifts regarding citizenship and suffrage at the end of the nineteenth century. Earlier, beginning in seventeenth-century New England, citizenship had been justified on the basis of familial position; the freeholder was at once the head of the household and a citizen. By contrast, nineteenth-century citizenship was posed as a direct relationship between the individual and his government. The anti-suffragists still reflected the seventeenth-century view by holding that the unit of society was the family, not the individual. Thus, according to one scholar, “A man voted not for himself alone but for all the members of his family, as their political representative.” Women’s actions in Tampa’s special election demonstrated how outdated these views had become. Even the *Tribune*, no true advocate of suffrage, declared that the suffrage amendment enfranchised women, not wives, or daughters, or widows.

In preparing for and casting their first ballots in 1920, Tampa clubwomen operated as citizens, publicly exercising their new political rights. While they showed little support for the Equal Suffrage League in actively promoting the issue, women’s clubs made serious efforts to prepare for women’s entry into the political process. When the quest became reality, these women enthusiastically joined the public debate. On election day they delivered an unprecedented turnout of registered voters and cast the deciding votes. The single motivation that best explains the actions of Tampa's clubwomen was best expressed by the Civic Association’s Mrs. Ada Price on October 4, 1920, when “after roll call and current events,” she “addressed the club, calling the members for the first time fellow citizens.” She thus followed in the footsteps of suffragists who, according to one historian, “did not simply want political power; they wanted to be citizens, to stand in the same relationship to civil government as men did.” Those Tampa women, who participated in the 1920 vote on the charter amendment, finally realized this aspiration.

2 This finding supports the thesis of Ellen DuBois in “The Radicalism of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement,” *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Fall, 1975), 63-71.


4 Pauline Lawes, *The Blue Book, Tampa*, 1917 (Tampa: Press of Tampa Tribune Pub. Co.,1917), 20-43. *The Blue Book* lists the Salvation Army, the WCTU City Federation, the YWCA, the Tampa Women's Club, the Tampa Civic Association, the Saturday Card Club, the Scotch Club, the Wednesday Club, the Student’s Art Club, the Friday Morning Musicale, and a variety of yacht and country clubs. A host of church clubs and circles, Red Cross Auxiliaries, the Business and Professional Women's Club, and more fail to exhaust the list.

5 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 23, 1919, 11.

6 Maryclare Crake, “‘In Unity There is Strength’: The Influence of Women’s Clubs on Tampa, 1900-1940” (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1988), 7.


9 Blackman, *Florida Federation*, 35.


12 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 28, 1919, 5; *Tampa Daily Times*, May 18, 1920, 6.


14 The Tampa Civic Association (TCA) Papers is a small collection of meeting and financial records located in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa. These observations are from the Minutes for 1920, 93-99.

15 “Closed shops” is a reference to the on-going cigar workers' strike. McKay, both as mayor and as editor of the *Tampa Daily Times*, led the effort to break the strike.


17 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 12, 1920, 1. In the context of the source for this quote, the “right side” has no politically partisan meaning. Taylor is referring to her perceived obligation of voters to be fully informed when making decisions in the voting arena.

18 Ibid., August 13, 1920, 9.

19 Ibid., August 19, 1920, 8.
20 *Tampa Daily Times*, June 4, 1920, 4.


22 TCA Papers, Minutes for 1920, 103, 110.

23 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September 30, 1920, 5.


27 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 22, 1920, 1.


29 Ibid., October 20, 1920, 7, and October 6, 1920, 3.

30 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September 26, 1920, 7A; September 27, 1920, 3, and September 28, 1920, 4.

31 *Tampa Daily Times*, November 16, 1920, 11.

32 Ibid., October 8, 1920, 1.

33 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September 29, 1920, 9.

34 *Tampa Daily Times*, October 5, 1920, 1, and October 16, 1920, 1.


36 *Tampa Daily Times*, October 18, 1920, 5, and October 20, 1920, 3.

37 Ibid., October 20, 1920, 3.


39 *Tampa Daily Times*, November 16, 1920, 11.


42 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 20, 1920, 8.

43 TCA Papers, Minutes for 1920, 104-105.