

# PUBLICATION

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## On My Bookshelf: *Sisters, the Lives of America's Suffragists*

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Against the backdrop of the 2016 presidential election that pitted Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump, it was fascinating for our BakerReads group to spend some time with a book tracing the personal histories of five of the women leaders of the Suffragist movement: Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Willard and Alice Paul. And on Election Day, there were media reports about Susan B. Anthony's grave in Rochester, N.Y., which was covered with "I voted" stickers.

Unlike many dry accounts in history books about the Suffrage Movement, *Sisters, the Lives of America's Suffragists*, gave us personal profiles of the women behind the 19th Amendment added to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. They had husbands, children, families, disagreements, societal disdain and even competing organizations, but they managed to overcome insurmountable odds, including violence and prison cells. Only one of the women we read about, Alice Paul, lived to actually cast a vote in a presidential election, but they all made that most prized element of democracy available to future generations of women.

Sounding eerily similar to modern times, here were some of the issues faced by these five women:

### Work-Life Balance

The leaders in the suffrage movement struggled mightily with something that today we call "Work-Life Balance." In fact, one of the leaders profiled in our book, Susan B. Anthony, believed that marriages and children distracted women from the critical work that needed to be done to gain the right to vote.

### Appearance

Given the dress code considered appropriate for women in the 18th century, it had to be uncomfortable for the Suffragists to travel about the country lobbying and making speeches. There was even a move to shorten the length of the dresses, but this so-called "bloomer" look didn't last long. Elizabeth Cady Stanton fumed out loud that men might understand if they had to wear the garb that women were expected to wear. As she put it, "Take a man and pin three or four large tablecloths about him, fastened back with elastic and ribbons. Then drag all of his own hair to the middle of his head and tie it tight, and hair pin on about five pounds of additional hair with ribbon. Then pinch his waist into a corset and give him gloves a size too small and shoes ditto. Finally, give him a hat that will not stay on without torturing elastic and frill to tickle his chin."

Although the dress code for women has evolved over time, it remains a big factor in the workplace.

### Assertiveness vs. Aggressiveness

Another vexing thing that the women in our book faced was the criticism that they were being "shrill" in their advocacy for women's rights. It was observed that it was OK for a woman to pursue a cause, but only with a lady's proper humility.

### "Women's" Issues

There is much dialogue in modern-day campaigns about so-called "women's issues." Back in the day of our Suffragists, the so-called women's issues were centered around such societal problems as temperance, abolition, equal education, etc. In modern campaigning, it is still often assumed that women care about societal issues, but not about the same issues that men debate such as the economy and national security.

As we read this book about the Suffrage Movement, we were joined in the Washington, D.C. office for our discussion by Nancy Johnson, a former Congresswoman from Connecticut, whose grandmother, Margaret Wishard, penned a powerful article in 1892 about women who traveled the country giving lectures on the issues of the day. For a woman to appear at a podium in those days was frowned upon, but Ms. Wishard asserted, "As naturally as the birds sing with the daybreak, is the voice of women heard with the dawn of the republic. The two are necessary to each other."

We were also joined in our office by Cissy Baker who spoke about the legacy of her father, [Senator Howard Baker Jr.](#), related to supporting women in politics and civic duty, and supporting the importance of voting.