


BOOK REVIEW

***The Suffragist Peace: How Women Shape the Politics of War.*
Robert F. Trager and Joslyn N. Barnhart. Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2023. 272 pp. \$19.99 (hardcover). ISBN:
9780197629758.**

Angie Torres-Beltran 

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

doi:[10.1017/S1743923X24000102](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000102)

In 1893, New Zealand granted women the right to vote in national elections. Over one hundred years later, in 2015, women in Saudi Arabia were enfranchised but only in local elections. This expansion of rights marks women's entrance into both domestic and international politics, where newly capable women voters can influence the trajectory of foreign affairs. It is at this intersection of women, voting, and war in *The Suffragist Peace: How Women Shape the Politics of War* that Robert F. Trager and Joslyn N. Barnhart explore the often-overlooked role that women play in shaping conflict resolution.

The authors carefully examine political life before and after suffrage to examine women's representation in the electorate and the long-term implications of these changes on international conflict. Trager and Barnhart begin in Chapter 1 by demonstrating how early beliefs in democracy were thought to bring “prosperity and perpetual peace” (1). However, historically all-men voting publics promoted policies to extend threats and engage in war. War and conquest served as indicators of masculinity and honor that, if opposed, threatened the good of the nation (7). In Chapter 2, the authors document how women's early efforts for suffrage were sought not only as ends for themselves but as “means to social and political change” (Chapter 2, p. 38). By drawing on historical data in letters, newspapers, and other documents, the authors demonstrate how early suffragists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Jan Addams, believed that women's political preferences differed from men and votes from half of the electorate would bring about transformative change—specifically peace—as World War I loomed in the horizon. Chapter 3 explores whether these gendered differences exist. The authors present compelling evidence rooted in biology, gender studies, history, and psychology, that both nature and nurture shape human behavior (64). Intuitively, the authors suggest that consistent gender differences are a result of “both underlying biological differences, and the way those differences are subsequently shaped by the external environment”

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Women, Gender, and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

(64). On average and across space and time, women are less aggressive and less likely to support the use of military force against other countries (65). The puzzle, then, is whether women's pacifist preferences translate into patterns of conflict.

In Chapter 4, Trager and Barnhart provide cross-national evidence to demonstrate how extending suffrage to women can change public preferences regarding war. Using extensive data on women's suffrage and conflict initiation from 1816 to 2010, the authors find that democracies with women's suffrage are significantly less likely to engage in violence (Barnhart et al. 2020). By addressing the gender gap in the acclaimed democratic peace theory—that argues that democracies do not go to war with one another (Russett 1993)—the authors suggest that democratic institutions alone are not sufficient for peace. Peace relies, in large part, on whose preferences are reflected on the ballot—with women voters paving the way to a more peaceful and just world.

One of the book's strengths lies in its historical case studies that provide a comprehensive analysis of women's activism through the suffrage era. In Chapter 5, Trager and Barnhart trace how women's votes had an influence on critical foreign policy decisions. In the USA, it was Woodrow Wilson's commitment to peace ahead of his re-election in 1916 that led women in the West to elect the more peaceful candidate. Similar events occurred in Britain, where a political poll conducted in 1938 documented that only 43 percent of men, in comparison to 56 percent of women, supported Neville Chamberlain's peaceful attempts to handle Hitler's aggression in Central Europe. At the end of the Cold War in the USA, women's concerns promoted candidates to take a more conciliatory approach towards foreign policy. With over 75 percent of women feeling "worried" or "very worried" about nuclear war, women were able to pressure politicians to make a committed effort towards peace with the Soviet Union, ushering in the end of the Cold War era. These individual cases of women's influence on national security were representative of a broader trend towards peace.

Women leaders were also key to Trager and Barnhart's account; however, not in the way one would assume. Because women are subject to masculine traits deeply rooted in political institutions (Enloe 1990; Sjöberg 2011), women in executive positions are likely to be as hawkish as their male counterparts (126). This response, the authors argue, may eventually create opportunities for other women in power to change what this leadership is and can become. We can see some of those changes today. Feminist foreign policy, which introduces a gendered lens to national security, is on the forefront of many countries' security agenda, with Sweden paving the way in 2014 (Vogelstein and Rachel 2019).

The book concludes with examples across three continents to demonstrate women's pacifying force. With evidence from the Four Mothers in Israel bringing an end to the invasion of Lebanon; women's fight for peace following the Liberian civil war and the election of Africa's first women president; and women's movements in Japan to prevent the revision of their pacifist constitution, the authors highlight how women's suffrage alone is not enough to sustain peace. In these cases, it was women's political activity outside of the ballot box that led the demand of peace and stability (156). Throughout the book, the authors acknowledge the challenges and setbacks faced by women's pursuit of peace, recognizing that not all women shared a unified vision of peace. This nuanced approach adds

credibility to their narrative and avoids essentializing women, offering a balanced perspective on the complexities of women's political preferences.

By understanding how women's votes shaped foreign policy around the world, Trager and Barnhart offer necessary insights into gender differences, the sources of conflict, and democracy more broadly. As millions of women exercise their ability to vote and gain more agency, peace should follow suit. *The Suffragist Peace* is a necessary and important book to those interested in the intersection of gender and international security.

References

- Barnhart, Joslyn N., Trager, Robert F., Saunders, Elizabeth N., and Dafoe, Allan. 2020. "The Suffragist Peace." *International Organization* 74 (4): 633–70.
- Russett, Bruce 1993. *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Enloe, Cynthia 1990. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. University of California Press.
- Sjoberg, Laura 2011. "Gender, the state, and war redux: feminist international relations across the 'levels of analysis.'" *International Relations* 25 (1): 108–34.
- Vogelstein, Rachel B. 2019. "Five Questions on Feminist Foreign Policy: Margot Wallström," Women around the World Blog, Council on Foreign Relations, November 18, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/five-questions-feminist-foreign-policy-margot-wallstrom>

Angie Torres-Beltran is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at Cornell University: at787@cornell.edu