



**CATHOLICISM, ANTICLERICALISM,  
AND THE QUEST FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN CHILE**

**Erika Maza Valenzuela**

**Working Paper #214 - December 1995**

**Erika Maza Valenzuela**, Academic Coordinator of the Kellogg Institute, is completing her dissertation on "Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Chile, 1874–1953," at Saint Antony's College, Oxford University.

The author is very grateful to her thesis supervisor Alan Angell for his advice and many incisive comments on previous drafts of this paper. She also wishes to express her gratitude to Samuel Valenzuela for sharing his knowledge of Chilean history and for his encouragement and belief in the significance of this research. Her gratitude extends as well to many professors, colleagues, and friends at the Latin American Centre of Saint Antony's College, at the Kellogg Institute, and in Chile, especially Alan Knight, Juan Manguashca, Eduardo Posada, Carlos Malamud, Iván Jaksic, Caroline Domingo, Robert Pelton, CSC, Robert Fishman, Sol Serrano, and Carolina Fernández.

## **ABSTRACT**

Catholic countries typically enfranchised women later than Protestant ones, and analysts have long argued that this delay was due to the influence of Catholic political and Church leaders as well as to the effects of a Catholic culture. By examining the history of the extension of suffrage to women and women's political participation in Chile since the mid-nineteenth century, this paper challenges that widely held notion. It shows that Catholic and Conservative leaders were the earliest voices in favor of extending suffrage to women. It also shows that Catholic women were involved in political and social affairs from an early date in the country's history as an independent nation, and that they developed feminist views. The paper concludes that the delay in enacting a women's suffrage bill for national elections in Chile (1949) was caused by the wariness of the anticlerical parties regarding the effects of such a measure on the balance of electoral forces, especially since the elections were very competitive and the electorate was small. Given the long-standing and visible association of socially prominent and politically influential women with the Catholic Church and Catholic beneficence institutions, there was a widespread expectation—which proved to be correct as seen in the municipal elections in which women first voted beginning in 1935—that women voters would tend to favor the Conservative Party.

## **RESUME**

Debido a que típicamente en los países católicos las mujeres obtuvieron el derecho al sufragio después que en los protestantes, los analistas han atribuído este retraso a la influencia de una cultura católica sobre los líderes políticos y eclesiásticos. Basándose en un estudio de la historia del sufragio femenino y la participación política de las mujeres en Chile desde el siglo XIX, este artículo rechaza dicha noción. Fueron líderes católicos y conservadores los primeros en favorecer la extensión del sufragio a la mujer. Las mujeres católicas participaban en la vida política y en las instituciones sociales chilenas desde los comienzos de la República, y prontamente desarrollaron posiciones feministas. Este ensayo concluye que el retraso en aprobar el proyecto de ley de sufragio femenino en las elecciones presidenciales y parlamentarias (1949) se debió a la resistencia de los partidos anticlericales: temían que el voto femenino alteraría el equilibrio de las fuerzas electorales, efecto que podía magnificarse porque las elecciones eran muy competitivas y el electorado pequeño. Dado el vínculo histórico altamente visible entre la Iglesia y mujeres políticamente influyentes y de rol protagónico en las instituciones educacionales y de beneficencia católicas, era previsible que el voto femenino favoreciese al Partido Conservador, resultado que se produjo en las elecciones municipales en que participaron las mujeres a partir de 1935.

The history of suffrage extension in Europe and the Americas shows an earlier enfranchisement of women in Protestant rather than Catholic countries. While the former granted women the vote by the 1920s, the latter generally began to enfranchise them in the 1930s, with most cases occurring after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Analysts of women's suffrage, such as Richard J. Evans, have attributed the difference to the manner in which these religions molded national cultures and politics. Protestantism led to a greater emphasis on individual rights rather than duties, and it was more conducive to liberalism. Thus, feminism in what Evans calls a 'radical,' i.e., prosuffrage form, emerged earlier and more massively in a Protestant environment.<sup>2</sup> Catholics, in the words of Evans, showed "opposition on principle to female suffrage," argued more strongly that "women's place was in the home," and fostered an "ideology of female piety, motherhood and domesticity."<sup>3</sup> However, even though anticlerical groups in Catholic countries may have been more progressive regarding women's roles in society, they did not favour their enfranchisement because they feared that the greater religiosity of women would translate into more votes for their proclerical opponents. As Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau have written in reference to the French Third Republic, which ended in 1939 without granting the women the vote, "it was the fear of the Church's influence over women which blocked their suffrage under the Radical-Socialist Republic. Those in power feared that women, most of whom were assiduous churchgoers, would favour the clerical parties and thus endanger the Republic."<sup>4</sup> In short, the militantly Catholic segments of these national societies may have stood to gain from women's votes, but they did not believe in the propriety of women's participation in politics; and while the anticlerical sectors may have been generally more favorable to women's rights, they rejected women's enfranchisement for fear of its electoral consequences.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For a listing of the dates of women's enfranchisement, see Elisa Boulding et al., *Handbook of International Data on Women* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), pp. 250–51. The only Catholic countries that gave women the vote before 1930 were Austria, Poland, and Czechoslovakia (all in 1919), Ireland (1922), and Ecuador (1929).

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Evans's *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia 1840–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977) is the most comprehensive comparative study of women's suffrage. It systematically develops the notion that Protestantism was more conducive to the earlier enfranchisement of women than Catholicism.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Evans, "Feminism and Anticlericalism in France, 1870–1922," *The Historical Journal* 25, no. 4 (December 1982), pp. 947, 949.

<sup>4</sup> Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau, "France," in Joni Lovenduski and Jill Hills, eds., *The Politics of the Second Electorate* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 113. General De Gaulle granted women suffrage by a decree of his provisional government in August of 1944.

<sup>5</sup> The extent to which the French anticlerical forces were in favour of suffrage in principle, aside from purely electoral considerations, has been questioned by other authors. See James F. McMillan, "Clericals, Anticlericals and the Women's Movement in France under the Third Republic," *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (1981), pp. 361–76; and Steven Hause with Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), chapter 8.

This article returns to these issues by examining the process of suffrage extension to women in Chile. A Catholic country with a long history of elected governments with male literate suffrage since 1874 and considerable women's activism in the pursuit of equal social, civil, and political rights, Chile delayed enfranchising women until 1934 for municipal elections and 1949 for national ones. In this sense, it falls well within the Catholic country pattern of late women's suffrage. And yet the history of this case shows that while the anticlerical sectors were as fearful of enfranchising women as their Latin Catholic European counterparts, the pro-Church side of Chilean politics saw early on the convenience of enfranchising women in order to enhance its electoral base. In this sense, Catholic politicians and the Church hierarchy were either more progressive or more pragmatic, or both, than seems to have been the case with their counterparts in Latin Europe.

A significant difference between the Chilean Conservative sectors and their Latin European counterparts can only be mentioned here. The Chilean Catholic Conservative sectors fully accepted the republican definition of the Chilean political regime since the early years after independence from Spain and contributed to defining its democratic constitutional framework. In this sense, they behaved similarly to Conservative groups in Protestant democracies, and like them, the Chilean Conservatives came to view women as a new block of potential voters among whom they would have significant advantages over their opponents, thereby enhancing their ability to secure positions of power. By contrast, the Catholic and Conservative sectors of Latin Europe supported monarchical regimes and rejected the Republican and democratic alternatives that had emerged. Thus, while Chilean Catholic Conservatives could see early on that enfranchising women would enhance their ability to operate as a party in a democracy, for their Latin European counterparts—especially French and Italian—this position was much harder to assume since it meant accepting the wider regime. Ramón Subercaseaux, the Chilean nineteenth- and early twentieth-century diplomat, perceived this difference clearly. He noted in his memoirs that European republicans had declared war on religion in the name of the Republic, with the result that “those who wanted to be republicans while keeping their religion had nowhere to turn to. And those who were monarchists, even if they were free thinkers, became allies of the Catholics who were proscribed for being so.” Consequently, in France and in Europe in general “to be a Catholic has meant to profess antirepublicanism, to be a republican has signified atheism, and all of this without discussion.”<sup>6</sup> Subercaseaux added that all his relatives in France, who were Catholics of noble origins, were “conservatives and antirepublicans who worked actively in local

---

<sup>6</sup> Ramón Subercaseaux, *Memorias de ochenta años. Recuerdos personales, críticas, reminiscencias históricas, viajes anécdotas*. (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1936, 2nd ed.), Tomo I, p. 385.

politics and in elections. I had great difficulty in making them understand how in Chile I was also a conservative but a republican like the most fervent of them.”<sup>7</sup>

The first advocate of women’s suffrage in Chile, in 1865, was a Catholic-Conservative political leader, Abdón Cifuentes, and the Church-linked Conservative Party was the first to formally introduce, in October 1917, a women’s suffrage bill in the Congress.<sup>8</sup> Upper-class Catholic women were the first to take the initiative, through demonstrations in 1856 and by publishing a periodical in 1865, to make their views publicly known on the political-religious controversies of the moment. In their periodical they forcefully asserted their right to take public positions on issues, and they lamented their political exclusion. Groups of women, most probably linked to the Catholic-Conservative Party, sought to register to vote (with a number of them accepted as voters) in 1875. They hoped to assert their citizenship rights in the wake of a 1874 law extending the suffrage to all Chileans who could read and write. Hence, ‘radical’ feminism to use Evans’s term, emerged within Catholic circles early on.

Moreover, as was the case with Protestant women in Europe and the United States, upper-class Catholic women in Chile were very active in creating beneficence and charitable organizations, hospitals, old-age hospices, unions for women workers, schools for poor girls, orphanages, and other protective institutions for women. Since many of the beneficence activities were designed to deal with problems faced by poor women and with the lack of educational opportunities for girls, such activities heightened their feminist outlook and made them all the more sensitive to their lack of full political rights. In this sense, the progression that Evans identifies for Protestant women from social action to demanding political rights can be seen in Chile as well.

Evans implies that feminist objectives formed a coherent whole, from advocating women’s education, to divorce, legal equality, female suffrage, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Under such a conception of feminism, Catholic women following the teachings of the Church on matters of divorce and abortion could hardly be considered feminists. However, Evans’s conception draws excessively from experiences in Protestant countries where suffragism became an additional element within a whole constellation of feminist attitudes. There is no reason why the most religious of the Catholic women leaders could not follow, as occurred in Chile, the teachings of the Church on matters such as divorce, contraception, and abortion but still be in favor of women’s suffrage, education,

---

<sup>7</sup> Subercaseaux, p. 387.

<sup>8</sup> Cámara de Diputados, *Boletín de sesiones extraordinarias*, Tomo 1, Session of 25 October 1917, pp. 56–61, 75. The bill was introduced by Conservative Deputy Luis Undurraga and was cosigned by Conservative legislators Eleazar Lezaeta, Rafael L. Gumucio V., Arturo Irrarzával, Roberto Peragallo, Alejandro Lira, Carlos Castro, E. Claro, and Rafael Urrejola.

<sup>9</sup> See how Evans links the various feminist demands together in his “Feminism and Anticlericalism in France,” p. 947.

and other rights. In fact, the vote could be seen as an instrument to ensure that the Church's positions, including those on family issues, were followed in national legislation. As Karen Offen has noted in her comparative historical review of feminism, it can develop "within a variety of cultural traditions," and hence, it is questionable to use any single version of feminism as its fundamental model.<sup>10</sup> Her own definition of feminism embraces all its historical forms. She defines feminists as men or women "whose ideas and actions...meet three criteria: a) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretation of their lived experience and needs...and values...in assessing their status in society relative to men; b) they exhibit consciousness of [and] discomfort at...institutionalized injustice (or inequity) towards women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and c) they advocate their elimination of that injustice by challenging...the coercive power, force or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture."<sup>11</sup> Feminism in this sense can have a Catholic variant, and it can express itself, among other ways, in attitudes favoring equality of voting rights.

The focus in this article will be on the attitudes towards women's voting rights of Chile's Catholic and Conservative leaders, and on Catholic women's political actions and social organizations between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Given the fact that the Catholic and Conservative groups favored women's voting rights before the anticlerical sectors did so, it is not possible to argue, as Evans and others do in focusing on European experiences, that the delay in enfranchising women in Chile was a result of ingrained Catholic cultural traditions and conceptions regarding the domestic roles of women which prevented their participation in public affairs. Judging from their public statements, Chilean Catholic and Conservative leaders, both men and women, saw no incompatibility between women's maternal and family responsibilities and their involvement in electoral politics. After the Conservative Party introduced the women's suffrage bill in 1917, the delay in enfranchising women was primarily due to the opposition of the anticlerical sectors who feared its electoral consequences. As a result of women's involvement in political controversies from the 1850s on, both the clerical and the anticlerical groups were convinced that women's votes would favor the Conservatives.

This paper will begin by showing that women's political involvement in early Republican Chile was molded by the rise of sharp controversies over the role of the Catholic Church in Chilean politics and society. The Church encouraged women's public participation in the debates related to these issues. However, the relationship between the Church and Catholic women leaders was

---

<sup>10</sup> Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach" in Gisela Bock and Susan James, eds., *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 82. This definition is compatible with the conception used by Asunción Lavrin in her "The Ideology of Feminism in the Southern Cone, 1900–1940," *Working Paper*, Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, no. 169, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Offen, p. 83.

not simply one of subordination of the latter. As this essay will demonstrate, the educational and beneficence activities of the Church relied heavily on the assistance of organized Catholic women, some of whom also contributed large sums for their facilities and operations. These organizations became a channel for political partisanship in favor of Church and Conservative Party positions, but they also led Catholic women to develop feminist views. Following the social Christian doctrines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they demanded not only suffrage rights and civil equality with men but also a wide range of changes to improve the status of women. The organizational capacity of Catholic women proved to be a significant political asset for the Conservative Party, as shown by the party's decisive victory among women voters in the municipal elections of 1935, the first ones in which women participated. The paper will conclude with an analysis of the difficulties encountered in the passage of the bill for women's suffrage in national elections. The Conservatives' success in the municipal elections of the 1930s and 1940s made the anticlerical parties—although in favor of enfranchising women in principle—reluctant to approve the requisite bill despite the fact that by the 1930s women's suffrage had become widely accepted as a normal right in a democracy. The main sources for this analysis, which pays close attention to the public discourses and in some cases the private opinions of major leaders, are the periodicals and other publications of the Catholic Church and of women's organizations; memoirs, publications, and interviews in the main magazines and newspapers of women's leaders and politicians; and letters and documents found in the archives of the Archbishopric of Santiago.

### **The Early Development of Catholic Women's Political Action**

The question of women's suffrage in Chile cannot be understood without examining the clerical/anticlerical cleavage in the country's politics. It affected the way in which Chilean political parties were first formed, the nature and objectives of women's organizations, and the divisions among them. Class divisions also subsequently determined the formation of Chilean political parties, and the resulting political and social differences were reflected in the composition of the women's movement as well. However, the clerical/anticlerical cleavage retained an overriding importance on the issue of women's suffrage.

The origins of the clerical/anticlerical conflict go back to the early years of Chilean independent government. It was a conflict over issues related to the prerogatives of the Church within the state and society. The first controversies arose over the state's involvement in the creation of secondary and higher education, in particular the National Institute and the University

of Chile.<sup>12</sup> The issue that sparked the formation of the Chilean Conservative, Radical, and Liberal Parties—the so-called sacristan question in 1856—had to do with the right of civil courts to intervene in the governance of the Church.<sup>13</sup> Other issues of importance later in the century were whether the Church should retain a complete monopoly over all religious practices, the cemeteries, and the registry of births and marriages through the sacraments, and whether family law should be subordinated to canonical law. The Conservative Party became a determined defender of Church prerogatives and views over national issues and legislation, the Radicals the leading force favoring secularization, and the Liberals—while agreeing mainly with the Radicals—assumed more moderate positions.<sup>14</sup> As the Left rose and laid increasing stress on class divisions, it also assumed militantly anticlerical postures because of the identification of Conservatives (and hence the Catholic clergy) with families of upper-class colonial origins.<sup>15</sup> Even though Church and state were divided in 1925 which diminished the importance of the issues in the clerical/anticlerical conflict, the political divisions along these lines retained their significance.

As noted earlier, after Chile became an independent nation the first major issue on which groups of women made their views publicly known was the sacristan controversy of 1856. The incident deserves a special mention since it set the tone for the later involvement of women in political affairs.

### **The Involvement of Women in the Sacristan Controversy, 1856**

The controversy had to do with the right of state courts to intervene in matters pertaining to church governance. At the height of the problem, women who were close to the Church hierarchy mobilized to defend the Archbishop of Santiago and head of the Chilean Church, Rafael Valentín Valdivieso, who was sentenced by the Supreme Court to exile and confiscation of his

---

<sup>12</sup> See Sol Serrano, *Universidad y Nación. Chile en el siglo XIX* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1993), chapters 1 and 2. See also Iván Jaksic and Sol Serrano, “In the Service of the Nation: The Establishment and Consolidation of the Universidad de Chile, 1842–79,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (February 1990), pp. 139–71. After the establishment of these institutions at the beginning of 1840, the clerical/anticlerical conflict diminished, but it reappeared strongly during the 1870s; see Serrano, chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>13</sup> All standard histories of nineteenth-century Chile discuss this controversy, given its importance in the formation of Chilean parties, a point forcefully noted in Francisco Antonio Encina, *Historia de Chile* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1949), p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Samuel Valenzuela, *Democratización via reforma: La expansión del sufragio en Chile* (Buenos Aires: IDES, 1986). See also Timothy Scully, *Rethinking the Center: Party Politics in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Chile* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> For a recent and exhaustive study of the lineages of upper-class Chilean families of colonial origin, see Julio Retamal Faverau, Carlos Celis Atria, Juan Guillermo Muñoz Correa, *Familias fundadoras de Chile (1540–1600)* (Santiago: Zig-Zag, 1992).



possessions for not obeying its order reinstating two Church canons to their priestly functions. Crescente Errázuriz, himself an eye witness to the events as Valdivieso's nephew and aide, says the women tried unsuccessfully to convince the Supreme Court Justices and the Church canons, whose civil suit to overturn their dismissal by the Archbishop produced the dramatic outcome, to back down.<sup>16</sup> Francisco Encina notes that one of the women who knew the President of the Republic, Manuel Montt, since his childhood, went to tell him that the Archbishop could only be expelled from the country "over our dead bodies," because the women would throw themselves in front of the carriage taking him to the port. The Archbishop's house was surrounded by men and especially women, the latter in mourning, lamenting the Archbishop's fate.<sup>17</sup>

Was the loyalty expressed by these women to Archbishop Valdivieso simply a result of their religious fervor and fanaticism, as most authors who mention this incident indicate? There is no reason to doubt that these women were very religious. However, this is not the only explanation for their commitment to the Archbishop.

Valdivieso was determined to increase the autonomy of the Church from civil power. One of the means to do so was to find independent sources of finance for Church institutions. Wealthy women through their donations and testaments were important sources for such funds.<sup>18</sup> Valdivieso took the initiative to organize women to support the Church's social, educational, and beneficence work, as exemplified by his creation of a Society of Women for Christian Charity in 1851.<sup>19</sup> One of Valdivieso's concerns was the education of women, which probably resulted from the interest expressed by wealthy women themselves in this matter.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Crescente Errázuriz, *Algo de lo que visto* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1932), pp. 116–17. Following in his uncle's footsteps, he also became Archbishop of Santiago.

<sup>17</sup> See Encina, pp. 239–40; Scully, pp. 34–43. On the women's organization during this incident, see Teresa Pereira, "La mujer en el siglo XIX" in Teresa Pereira, Isabel Zegers, and Valeria Maino, *Tres ensayos sobre la mujer chilena: Siglos XII, XIX y XX* (Santiago, Editorial Universitaria, 1978), which contains the above-cited quote drawn from Francisco Encina's history, p. 154. Pereira's essay is an excellent overview of a wide range of women's activities during the nineteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> There are many notices in Church publications regarding donations by wealthy women to Church institutions. See, for instance, in Valdivieso's time the 1849 will of María del Tránsito de la Cruz in *Boletín eclesiástico del Arzobispado de Santiago* VI, Book XXVIII (1880), pp. 769–99. De la Cruz made provisions for money to be given for a chapel and authorized the Archbishop of Santiago to oversee the correct implementation of her wishes regarding a school for one hundred poor girls. This led to a long dispute with her heirs, as the Archbishop sued them to take control of the school for not following the stipulations of the will.

<sup>19</sup> See *Boletín Eclesiástico* IX, book XXV (1887), p. 1032. The society was to contribute, according to Archbishop Valdivieso's decree, to the betterment of the "moral and material condition of the poor, giving the proper preference to the education and protection of women, and to lend assistance to hospitals, asylums, and orphanages."

<sup>20</sup> Wealthy women often expressed concern for girls' education, as could be seen in de la Cruz's will. See supra. In 1853 Valdivieso invited French nuns of the Sacred Heart to the country to establish a school for girls in Santiago on the lines of one already established in Valparaíso. In 1854, following a suggestion by the Minister of Education, the nuns were also asked to start a school to train women teachers, the first such school in the country. See Remedios Bravo,

Because Valdivieso needed the support of wealthy women, he probably paid close attention to their views and concerns, something no other important leader of Chilean society at the time had reason to do to the same extent. Moreover, these women felt that it was proper and largely accepted for them to intervene in public affairs over matters of religious and Church concerns. Thus, the women who supported Valdivieso in 1856 were probably not committed to him simply out of religious fervor but as the result of well-established connections between them and the Archbishop in the pursuit of mutually agreed objectives. The ties between wealthy women and beneficence and educational activities need to be examined more closely, given the effects these activities would later have on women's political involvement.

### **Catholic Women's Efforts in Beneficence and Education**

In the early nineteenth century most educational and beneficence institutions were in the hands of the Church. After independence, the state began to create educational institutions under its auspices and to limit Church control in secondary and higher education, as noted above, leading to the first incidents of state/Church conflict. Anticlerical women, who first began to raise their voices in public organizations in the 1870s, devoted their most important efforts to expanding educational opportunities for women in institutions under state control.<sup>21</sup> However, the state did not have the necessary resources to create and maintain a sufficient number of educational and welfare institutions to meet the needs of the country. Thus, it was essential throughout the nineteenth century to rely on private initiatives and on Church resources to expand the number and capacity of these institutions.

The first private and Church-linked beneficence organization to emerge was the Institute of Fraternal Charity (*Instituto de la Hermandad de Caridad*). It was created soon after independence in 1818, although its origins date back to a religiously inspired pledge made by leading figures of the independence movement while in exile in 1815 to devote themselves to

---

"Escuela Normal No 1, 1854–1927" in Sara Guerin de Elgueta et al., *Actividades femeninas, 1877–1927* (Santiago: La Ilustración, 1928), p. 141. See also in the same book Ana Díaz Garcés, "Contribución de las Congregaciones y Sociedades Católicas a la educación de la mujer," p. 308.

<sup>21</sup> For comprehensive and excellent accounts of the development of education in Chile, see Amanda Labarca, *Historia de la enseñanza en Chile* (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Universitaria, 1939), and Sol Serrano, *Universidad y Nación. Chile en el siglo XIX* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1993). The state created secondary and higher education institutions only for men, although beginning in the 1850s there were three secondary schools for women with state subsidies. Hence, a major demand of the secularized and anticlerical women leaders was the establishment of state-run and private, but non-Catholic, secondary schools for women, as well as access for women to the University of Chile, which was controlled by the state. Such access was granted in 1877, and over the next decades the state began to open secondary schools for women as well as for men throughout the country.

caring for the ill and needy.<sup>22</sup> The Institute sponsored the creation of hospitals, some of which, like the *San Juan de Dios* and *San Francisco de Borja* in Santiago, still exist today. The board members of the Institute were initially men, but women also became actively involved in its activities. Through the above mentioned Society of Women for Christian Charity, Archbishop Valdivieso, who in 1824 was the Institute's young chaplain, formally gave women a leading role in it in 1851.

By the early 1850s, upper-class women had also organized a Women's Beneficence Society (*Sociedad de Beneficencia de Señoras*), which served as an umbrella organization for a wide variety of activities, many of them explicitly designed to assist women and girls.<sup>23</sup> This Society established a branch in Valparaíso, founded by Juana Ross de Edwards, in 1855.<sup>24</sup> The daily operations of the activities sponsored by these women were entrusted to religious congregations of European nuns. Among the first to work in post-independence Chile were the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul (*Hermanas de la Caridad de San Vicente de Paul*). The 1854 census lists 363 of them in the country.<sup>25</sup> The numbers of nuns would expand considerably over the next decades as more orders were invited by the Church and by women's groups to administer educational and beneficence institutions. In 1857, for instance, the Women's Beneficence Society of Santiago invited nuns of the Good Pastor (*Buen Pastor*) in order to further expand the activities the nuns had first begun two years earlier when some of them had arrived in Chile at the initiative of Archbishop Valdivieso.<sup>26</sup> Soon established in all major Chilean cities, the Good Pastor nuns ran asylums and correctional institutions for women, homes and schools for orphan girls, schools for the deaf mute, as well as regular schools for well-to-do girls.<sup>27</sup> The Sisters of Providence (*Hermanas de la Providencia*) also arrived in Chile in the beginning of the 1850s. By 1875, according to the census, there were 1,131 nuns in Chile.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See *Actividades femeninas*, "Instituciones de beneficencia," pp. 499–501.

<sup>23</sup> This society is listed in an *Almanaque estadístico y comercial para el año 1853* (Santiago: Imprenta del Mercurio, 1852). The following women were members of the Society's board: Antonia Salas de Errázuriz, president; Josefa Larraín de Aldunate, vice-president; Enriqueta Pinto de Bulnes, secretary; Nicolasa Toro de Correa, treasurer; and Rosa Carrera de Aldunate, Camen Velazco de Alcalde, Carmen Gana de Blanco, Emilia Herrera de Toro, Magdalena Vicuña de Subercaseaux, Rosa Concha de Cerda, Manuela Portales de Morán, Dolores Errázuriz de Salas, Rita Larraín de Echevarría, members.

<sup>24</sup> See Carmen Valle, *Un alma cumbre: Juana Ross de Edwards* (Santiago: Imprenta y Editorial "San Francisco," 1944), p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> See *Censo Jeneral de la República de Chile levantado en abril de 1854* (Santiago: Imprenta del Salitre, 1858), cuadro 4a.

<sup>26</sup> *Actividades femeninas*, "Instituciones femeninas de beneficencia," p. 517.

<sup>27</sup> From 1855 to 1927, according to one estimate, the order's 18 Houses of the Good Pastor served 2,116,197 women and girls. See in *Actividades femeninas*, "Instituciones femeninas de beneficencia," pp. 517–19.

<sup>28</sup> The census figures are listed in Miguel Cruchaga, *Estudio de la organización económica y de la hacienda pública de Chile 1* (Santiago: Imprenta los tiempos, 1878–1880), pp. 168–69.

Donations by women were an important source for the acquisition of properties, the construction of buildings, and the equipment and funding for daily operations of Church-run educational and beneficence institutions.<sup>29</sup> It is impossible to know how many women with sufficient independent means to make such contributions there were in the country. However, considering that the 1875 occupational census listed 11,915 women as 'proprietors,' 5,986 as 'agriculturers' (*agricultores*), and 4,586 as 'retail merchants' (*comerciantes*), and assuming that only 5% of these women were wealthy, that leaves over one thousand women with sufficient means to make contributions.<sup>30</sup>

Juana Ross de Edwards was the greatest single contributor to Church-run educational and beneficence institutions. After the death in 1878 of her husband, Agustín Edwards, she became the richest person in the country.<sup>31</sup> She died in 1913 and, with her husband while he lived, she is reported to have contributed approximately 200 million pesos to the Church and to educational and social institutions, most of them run by the Church.<sup>32</sup> According to one estimate read at her funeral and other evidence presented by her biographer, she donated the property, funded the construction, and contributed to the maintenance and operation of seventeen hospitals and sanitariums, numerous schools (including one in Jerusalem) and orphanages for girls, homes for widows, housing for workers, and over twenty churches and chapels.<sup>33</sup> Ross's importance for the Church led her in 1884 (twenty-nine years before her death) to be received in a personal audience of one hour by Pope Leon XIII.<sup>34</sup> Wealthy Chilean women not only donated their money to these causes but were directly involved with Church and government officials in decisions regarding their establishment and operation.

### **The First Women's Periodical and the First Proposal to Enfranchise Women, 1865**

After the sacristan affair Catholic women continued to defend publicly positions taken by the Church. The next major controversy was a legislative initiative to interpret more liberally article 5 of the Constitution (which made Catholicism the official state religion) in order to permit non-

---

<sup>29</sup> Pereira, pp. 147–52, discusses the extent of the contributions of wealthy women to these institutions. This can also be seen in the many references to bequests and donations by women in the *Boletín eclesiástico*.

<sup>30</sup> Miguel Cruchaga, p. 169.

<sup>31</sup> See the listing of the top Chilean fortunes in the 1880s in Sergio Villalobos, *Origen y ascenso de la burguesía chilena* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1987), pp. 53–58.

<sup>32</sup> Valle, p. 78. During Ross's life time the peso oscillated between forty-five and seven pence sterling.

<sup>33</sup> Valle, p. 97, 267–68.

<sup>34</sup> Valle, p. 138. Valle considers Juana Ross "to embody Leon XIII's Christian socialism in Chile, and that she was, with foresight, precursor of some of the current social laws, including workers' housing and leasing laws," p. 315.

Catholics to hold religious services. Church officials viewed this as unacceptable as well as unconstitutional first step toward ending their exclusive control over all religious expressions in the country. In 1865, as the Congress debated the matter, Catholic women founded a weekly periodical, the *Eco de las señoras de Santiago*, to oppose granting dissident religions the right to establish public centers of worship. Women also attended sessions of Congress that discussed the issue and even disrupted them with noisy demonstrations in the Chamber galleries and outside the building.<sup>35</sup>

The *Eco* is the first periodical publication by women in Chile. It is unfortunately not possible to know exactly who the editors of the periodical were because they did not sign their articles or only used initials. Twelve issues appeared from 13 July to 7 October 1865, all printed at the presses of *El independiente*, a Conservative Party newspaper. There is no indication regarding the *Eco*'s circulation. However, the periodical invited submissions from women and seemed to receive more than it could publish.<sup>36</sup> The editors warned that they would not publish articles that arrived anonymously and added that only contributions sent by women would be considered.<sup>37</sup> The periodical announced forthcoming meetings of Catholic women's groups, such as those of an 'Institute for Charity,' and it called on women to support with monetary contributions Church institutions for delinquent and orphaned girls.<sup>38</sup> The *Eco* received attacks from *El ferrocarril*, the main anticlerical newspaper of the time, so this initiative by Catholic women did not go unnoticed. The *Eco* ended its publication after the Congress allowed dissidents the right to hold services in private only. The women greeted this as a positive outcome, one that they supported from the start.<sup>39</sup>

As the *Eco* indicated in a brief reference, other women raised their voices publicly to support the rights of non-Catholics.<sup>40</sup> However, at the time the anticlerical women were neither as vocal nor as well organized as the Catholic ones. In 1877 anticlerical women created a weekly periodical, *La mujer*, whose objective was to promote women's education and their legal and civil equality.<sup>41</sup> Anticlerical politicians already perceived the link between the Church and women when they referred to the fact that the Conservative Party and the clergy had mobilized their

---

<sup>35</sup> See Ricardo Donoso, *Las ideas políticas en Chile* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1967), pp. 159–61.

<sup>36</sup> *El eco de las señoras de Santiago*, I, 5 (10 August 1865), p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *El eco*, I, 10 (11 September 1865), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> *El eco*, I, 4, (3 August 1865), p. 4; I, 6 (17 August 1865), p. 3; I, 11 (24 September 1865), pp. 2–3.

<sup>39</sup> Donoso, p. 161. The law passed on 27 July 1865 had two articles: one stated that non-Catholics could hold religious services in private, and the other one gave non-Catholics the right to operate private schools where their children could be taught their religious beliefs. This latter article opened the way to the creation of Protestant schools.

<sup>40</sup> *El eco*, I, 7 (24 August 1865), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> See Pereira, pp. 166–267.

'feminine reserves.'<sup>42</sup> Hence, enfranchising women was bound to be seen, already, as a political asset for the Conservative Party. One of the principal leaders of the party, Abdón Cifuentes, then a member of Congress, was probably motivated by this conclusion when he advocated the enfranchisement of women in a 1865 speech. It is worth citing his speech, entitled "On Suffrage Rights for Women," extensively.

Cifuentes argued that in order to exercise a certain right, it was necessary to have "intelligence to know what is true and good (*la verdad y el bien*), the will to have the right, and the freedom to exercise it." He then asked rhetorically "do or do not women have these essential qualities giving them the necessary capacity...to exercise a right? Would you deny that they have intelligence and the will to know and to love what is true and good? Would you deny that they have a soul created like that of men in the semblance of God? If in the name of religion and of reason, if in the name Christianity and of philosophy, you proclaim the existence of the soul in this half of humankind; if in the name of reason and religion you proclaim her a companion and not a slave of men, by virtue of what principles do you declare her forever incapable of exercising political rights? By virtue of what principles do you condemn her to be eternally absent from public affairs, as if they were irrational beings? Where is the natural law that corresponds to the human law removing women from public life in perpetuity? It does not exist. The only thing that exists is the history of the robbing (*despojo*) of the weak by the strong, of the rights of women by men—a shameful history of humanity because it is the history of abuses."

Cifuentes argued further that "if societies are constituted principally to protect the rights (*la razón y justicia*) of the powerless before those who have more power, who can doubt that women have greater interest in the good organization and betterment of human societies? Who if not the weak, who if not women, who...depend more than men on social protection, could have a greater interest in making sure that the social institutions and magistrates really perform efficiently in protecting the rights of the weak? If political order can harm women as much as any man, with what right do you close the legal doors for women to defend themselves, and to seek redress in the same political terrain that has damaged them? You impose taxes on women, and they pay them; but you prohibit them from interfering in the investment of the funds they contribute. The fact that women do not have voice and vote to oversee the public goods that concern them and to oversee the conduct of the administrators they are paying, reveals the extent of their legal incapacity."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Donoso, p. 161, citing the expression used by a deputy in the Congress when referring to women's demonstrations over the religious freedom issue.

<sup>43</sup> These excerpts from Cifuentes's speech were read by Luis Undurruga, Conservative Party Deputy, when he introduced an electoral reform bill to grant women the vote in 1917. See Cámara de Diputados, *Boletín de sesiones extraordinarias*, Tome I, Session of 25 October 1917, pp. 56–61.

Clearly, Cifuentes expressed what can be seen, following Offen's above-noted definition, feminist views. Of all the Conservative deputies of the late nineteenth century, Cifuentes was also probably the closest to the Catholic hierarchy. A deeply religious man, Cifuentes took an active part in beneficence institutions such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and was a founder and advisor to Catholic Union groups, including those of women and of workers. He was also a strong supporter of women's education. As Minister of Education in 1871, he created—or recreated—a program in the University of Chile's School of Medicine to train women obstetricians.<sup>44</sup> These courses were the first step in opening the doors to higher education for women. However, it was only in 1877, by a decree of the Liberal Minister José Luis Amunátegui in response to repeated requests made by the principals of two private high schools, Antonia Tarragó and Isabel Lebrún de Pinochet, that women were allowed into all university careers.<sup>45</sup> Cifuentes also taught for years in Catholic women's secondary schools, and as a young student convinced his father to educate his sister.<sup>46</sup> Cifuentes's Catholicism by no means led him, as indicated by his speech and actions, to view women as acting solely in the domestic sphere. As a defender of Church interests, he saw women as allies in the political struggles of the time. Since women did not vote in national elections anywhere in the world at the time, in taking this initiative

---

<sup>44</sup> Abdón Cifuentes, *Memorias 2* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1936), p. 39, says that he created these courses. According to historian Sol Serrano, courses for women obstetricians had already existed since 1830, although offered irregularly, under the direction of French medical doctor Lorenzo Sazié, in which case it would be more accurate to say that Cifuentes reopened them in 1871 (personal correspondence dated 8 March 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Antonia Tarragó was the director of the private high school Santa Teresa, founded in 1863, and Isabel Lebrún de Pinochet of the high school of her own name, founded in 1875. See *Actividades femeninas*, section on "La enseñanza femenina particular en Chile," written by María Eugenia Martínez, pp. 375–77 and pp. 378–80, for a description of the petitions by the educators. According to this source, p. 376, Antonia Tarragó, in 1872, was the first to ask the University Council for admission of her women graduates to the University. The Council referred her petition to the Minister of Education, Cifuentes at the time, for a resolution. Tarragó insisted again before the Council every end of school year, asking in addition for "University examination committees for her high school's graduates," Eugenia Martínez, *op. cit.*, p. 376. It is worth mentioning that, since 1842, the secondary education exams were under the control of the state's higher education authorities; see Serrano, *op. cit.* pp. 222–25. As Serrano explains, p. 239, footnote 51, the petition by Tarragó in 1872 was "an indirect result of the Cifuentes decree on freedom of exams." This decree issued on 15 January 1872 recognized high school degrees granted by private schools, among others, Catholic ones, without their having to subject their students to examinations by state teachers. In the context of the time, Cifuentes's initiative strongly benefitted women's education. Sol Serrano points out that in response to the first memorandum by the University Council on Tarragó's petition, the Ministry of Public Education asked the same Council to take a decision on the matter. The Council answered, according to Serrano, p. 239, footnote 51, "on 17 November 1873 [...] that it did not have any objections to women obtaining university degrees." Cifuentes's decree raised political controversies and he had to resign from his position in August 1873. The matter of women's admissions to higher education was resolved finally with the Amunátegui Decree of 1877.

<sup>46</sup> See Cifuentes, p. 35.

Cifuentes was simply reflecting his perception of Chilean women, the country's political conditions, and his party's possible gains. Catholicism and advocacy of women's suffrage were not incompatible but went, rather, hand in hand.

Nonetheless, the women of the *Eco* expressed, at least in their publication, an ambiguous attitude towards the vote. They noted in the first issue that not having the right to vote was "shameful" (*deshonorable*), but at the same time they stated that they "accept" and even "justify" and "applaud" the decision to not give them voting rights.<sup>47</sup> In a later issue, they alluded favorably to a "lawyer-deputy" (Cifuentes) who suggested granting "us political rights." They made a point of asserting that such a suggestion shows "that our mission is not circumscribed to the home," but they added that they did not "covet" (*apetecemos*) political rights.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the women of the *Eco* expressed veiled prosuffrage views in other comments. When attacked by anticlerical politicians stating that they were not knowledgeable enough to have an opinion over the issue of freedom of worship, they countered by asking "who has made you into judges of the intelligence and enlightenment (*ilustración*) of citizens? And above all, who has given you the right to eliminate from general political rights all those Chileans that you claim are ignorant?" They asserted that there were as many Chilean women who were "enlightened" (*ilustradas*) as there were men.<sup>49</sup>

The feminism of the women of the *Eco* appeared most clearly when they forcefully argued that their domestic role was not incompatible with their right to assume a public defense of their ideas through journalism. They noted pointedly that although they did not have voting rights, "you have not sealed our lips, nor could you seal them... We have the right to write, and we will write..."<sup>50</sup> In a subsequent article, the women wrote: "they tell us the mission of women is domestic and nothing more. Forgive us, ladies and gentlemen who so think: *You are wrong (os equivocais)*."<sup>51</sup> They justified their position referring to the many areas in which women were involved in public affairs through history, including in military roles. They concluded that we "wives and mothers, widows and daughters of families, all have time and money to dedicate to the happiness of Chile."<sup>52</sup> This and other spirited defenses of nondomestic roles for women by the very Catholic women of the *Eco* contradict Evans's notion that such expressions of feminism were inimical to Catholicism.<sup>53</sup>

---

47 *El eco*, I, 1 (13 July 1865), p. 1.

48 *El eco*, I, 4 (3 August 1865), p. 2.

49 *El eco*, I, 7 (24 August 1865), pp. 1–2.

50 *El eco*, I, 1 (13 July 1865), p. 1.

51 *El eco*, I, 4 (3 August 1865), p. 2. Italics in original.

52 *El eco*, p. 2.

53 Evans, *supra*.



After the *Eco* ceased its publication, groups of Catholic women returned to express public support for Church positions in 1874. *El estandarte católico*, the Catholic Church's newspaper published between 1874 and 1891 under the direction of Crescente Errázuriz, printed on November 14 a list with the names of 185 women who had congratulated Archbishop Valdivieso for the "victory of the Church in the Senate."<sup>54</sup> The discussion in the Senate concerned a reorganization of the Judicial system. In a compromise worked out with the Vatican, the new law eliminated the right of the civil courts, including the supreme court, to judge cases exclusively related to the internal affairs of the Church, as had been the case with the sacristan question. In return, the law also eliminated the *fuero eclesiástico*, the immunity of the clergy from prosecution by the Civil Courts in all matters that fell under the scope of civil law.<sup>55</sup> The women whose names appeared in *El estandarte* had written to the Archbishop on October 27, and *El ferrocarril* questioned whether there were as many women signers as an earlier report had indicated; it is for this reason that the Church newspaper published their names in full. Not to be outdone *El ferrocarril* listed the names of 200 women who were against the position of the Church. It seems that this is the first time that anticlerical women expressed their position publicly in such numbers. *El estandarte católico* then published a list of women in Chillán who had joined those of Talca.<sup>56</sup>

### **The 1874 Electoral Law and the First Efforts by Women to Register as Voters**

At the suggestion of a Conservative deputy, Zorobabel Rodríguez, the electoral law of 1874 established literacy as the only requirement for the enfranchisement of adult 'Chileans.' The new law bypassed the 1833 Constitution's income and property requirements for the exercise of voting rights by stating simply that "those who know how to read and write will be presumed by right to have the necessary income to vote." As a result the numbers of voters increased from about fifty thousand to about one hundred and fifty thousand throughout the country.<sup>57</sup>

At the time electoral registration had to be done for each election year on the previous November. When the time came in November of 1875 to register under the new electoral law for the congressional, municipal, and presidential elections of 1876, groups of women in various

---

<sup>54</sup> *El estandarte católico*, I, 100 (14 November 1874), p. 2. The article is entitled "The Ladies of Talca."

<sup>55</sup> This issue is discussed by Donoso, pp. 209–11, although he does not mention the women signers in this case.

<sup>56</sup> *El estandarte*, I, 104 (19 November 1874), p. 2, reports on *El ferrocarril's* contention regarding the numbers of anticlerical women as well as the reaction from women in Chillán.

<sup>57</sup> See J. Samuel Valenzuela for a history of this law.

cities of the country attempted to register. After all, the new law gave the vote to literate 'Chileans.'

The first indication that previously disenfranchised citizens were attempting to register in the electoral rolls came when two Mercedary priests in Santiago were reported to have been accepted as voters. The new law had omitted any explicit reference to the long-standing prohibition of voting rights to the clergy in religious orders, just as it had not explicitly excluded women. In a discussion of the incident in the Senate, the Liberal Senator Vicente Reyes raised his voice in protest arguing that "it establishes a pernicious and dire precedent, because tomorrow there will be no reason to deny a woman who has free administration of her property the right to register." He added in reference to the clergy in religious orders that "as all the senators know, the regulars are not active citizens because the Civil Code establishes that they cannot exercise civil rights, and thus they are morally barred from exercising political rights." Reyes then proposed a new law explicitly denying political rights to the clergy in religious orders and to all women.<sup>58</sup>

In the next session of the Senate, the Liberal Senator Melchor de Santiago Concha asked Reyes to eliminate from the bill the exclusion of women. He noted, as reported by *El estandarte*, "that there had never been a single case of a woman wanting to exercise voting rights" and that he did not believe it would ever occur, "because no one would think of granting women such rights." Reyes agreed because "it is evident to every one that women do not have voting rights."<sup>59</sup>

Senator Concha misjudged the interest of women in exercising voting rights. Both he and Reyes were also mistaken about how evident it was that women were not supposed to vote under the 1874 law, because electoral registration boards in several cities subsequently concluded that the new law gave women voting rights. On 13 November 1875, the week after the Concha-Reyes discussion in the Senate, the Minister of Interior reported to the Chamber of Deputies that he had received a telegram indicating that the Electoral Registry Board of San Felipe had registered a woman. The minister asked for the Congress's opinion on the matter.<sup>60</sup>

*El estandarte* reproduced the reasoning the San Felipe Electoral Registry Board followed in deciding, by four votes to one, to register Domitila Silva y Lepe, who was the widow of a former Governor (*Intendente*) of the province. The Board noted that she met the requirements demanded by the law to vote (she was Chilean and she knew how to read and write), and that she did not fall into any of the categories of individuals who were barred from voting (such as those

---

<sup>58</sup> The transcription of the senate discussion appears in *El estandarte católico*, II, 399 (8 November 1875), p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> *El estandarte católico*, II, 399 (8 November 1875), p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 404 (13 November 1875), p. 3.

who were insane or who had been condemned to jail terms of more than three years). The Board further clarified this point by indicating that the legal notion of “*active citizens* with the *right to vote* evidently includes women, not only because the law has not explicitly excluded them, but also because the word *citizen* (*ciudadano*) is used to refer to both sexes. That is the meaning of the word in the natural and obvious use of the language, as well as following its grammatical rules.” Indeed, the masculine singular is also the generic form in Spanish. Thus, the Board concluded that the law granted “women the same political rights as men.”<sup>61</sup> Given this decision it is very likely that other women registered to vote as well in that city. Historians such as Pereira and Urzúa Valenzuela indicate that a group of women, not just one, had registered in San Felipe,<sup>62</sup> although there is no evidence of this in *El estandarte*.

*El estandarte* does reveal that “more than eight women” were allowed to register to vote in La Serena. This information is contained in a letter, reproduced by the newspaper, written by a member of the Electoral Registry Board to M. A. Matta. The author of the letter says that despite his arguments against the decision, the president of the Santa Lucía Electoral Registry Board of La Serena and, presumably, the majority of its members had gone ahead and registered the women. The letter notes that some of the women were married, and that their husbands had also signed the registry to show that “they gave their wives permission to register.”<sup>63</sup> In a subsequent issue, *El estandarte* reprinted the names and voting registry numbers of nine “*señoritas*” of “well-known families” that were published originally by the anticlerical newspaper *El progreso*.<sup>64</sup> They had also been added to the lists of voters in La Serena. Given the fact that these were single women, they were presumably a different group from the previous one. *El estandarte* also reprinted a letter written on 15 November from Casablanca stating that the Electoral Registry Board had accepted Clotilde Garretón de Soffía as a voter. In this case “the Board agreed unanimously that the law did not prevent her from registering, and that there was no impediment in calling her *citizen* (*ciudadano*) because she met all the requirements stipulated in the law.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 406 (16 November 1875), p. 1. All italics are in the original.

<sup>62</sup> Teresa Pereira, p. 163; Germán Urzúa Valenzuela, *Historia política de Chile y su evolución electoral (desde 1810 a 1992)* (Santiago: Editorial Jurídica de Chile, 1992), p. 239. As far as I know, the first commentator to mention not one, but a group of women in San Felipe who registered to vote, was Martina Barros de Orrego in her “El voto femenino,” *Revista chilena*, II, 12 (December 1917), p. 392. Barros de Orrego should remember the incidents of the year 1875—as translator of John Stuart Mills’s *The Subjection of Women* in 1872 she should have followed events concerning women with interest by 1875—but she cites as her evidence an anecdote she heard “many times” from Ramón Barros Luco. Barros Luco was the Minister of Finance at the time.

<sup>63</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 406 (16 November 1875), p. 2. See also Pereira, p. 163

<sup>64</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 411 (22 November 1875), p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 409 (19 November 1875), p. 2.

This is all still very fragmentary evidence of what may have been an even broader attempt by women to register as voters. It is surprising that no women were reported to have registered in Santiago, but this may well have occurred. However, the available evidence does suggest that these women were registering to vote as part of a Conservative Party strategy to enhance its electoral base. The Conservatives had broken their alliance with the Liberal government of Federico Errázuriz in 1873, because of their disagreements with the latter's educational policies emphasizing state control over schools and curricula and over other issues of concern to the Church. The 1874 law expanding the suffrage to all literate Chileans resulted from a Conservative Party effort to reduce the control the government had over the electorate. This control had allowed governments until then to obtain large majorities for official candidates.<sup>66</sup> For the 1876 elections the Conservatives hoped to include in the electoral rolls as many of their supporters and dependents as they could in order to reduce the congressional representation of the new Liberal and Radical governmental alliance. As a Vicar of the Archdioceses of Santiago, José Ramón Astorga, wrote in 1883 reviewing the events of the last years, after the break with Errázuriz, "Catholics understood that they were facing the beginning of a legal despotism that liberalism wanted to implant in Chile. They were persuaded that if the Conservative Party, representative of Catholic traditions, did not have in Congress a good number of voices, liberalism would not pay any attention to true social interests but would, instead, only approve anti-religious laws. Therefore, Catholics decided to work actively in the elections of deputies and senators of 1876. This was...in accordance with the interests of the Church and very worthy of the support of the clergy..."<sup>67</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the electoral registration of the women in La Serena point to the fact that they responded to this Catholic opposition strategy. The Santa Lucía registry board of that city was presided by Domingo Ortiz, a clergyman and Rector of the local seminary.<sup>68</sup> The board member who opposed the women's inclusion in the electoral lists was most probably anticlerical. He denounced this decision in the above-quoted letter to M. A. Matta, most likely Manuel Antonio Matta, one of the founding leaders of the anticlerical Radical Party. In the reports on the second group of women in La Serena, the article in *El estandarte* mentioned that the *señoritas* had expressed political opinions, the majority favoring the candidacy of Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, who at that point, despite his Liberal background, had the support of the Conservative Party.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the report on the woman who registered in Casablanca takes it for granted that she supported the opposition, because it ends by noting that "the government

<sup>66</sup> See J. Samuel Valenzuela, chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Boletín eclesiástico del Arzobispado de Santiago*, VIII, 34 (1885), p. 860.

<sup>68</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 406 (16 November 1875), p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 411 (22 November 1875), p. 1. See also Donoso on Vicuña Mackenna's political stand, p. 306.

circles are deeply depressed; each time they think of the new electoral law they sigh remembering their past power.”<sup>70</sup>

These attempts by women to register to vote led the Congress in the electoral law of 1884 to explicitly add women to the categories of disenfranchised individuals.<sup>71</sup> The legislature of 1881–84 did not include any members of the Conservative Party. As Vicar Astorga recalled in his 1883 article, “the Conservative Party decided to abstain from the elections of 1881. This allowed President Santa María to elect many deputies and senators who would have been honorable members of the Roman Senate at the time of Caligula. The laws on [secularizing] cemeteries and on civil marriage and civil registry, the elimination of the Faculty of Theology [from the University of Chile], and constitutional reform in the most oppressive and tyrannic sense were passed without discussion. This was a direct consequence of the abstention of the clergy and the Conservative Party in the 1881 elections.”<sup>72</sup> Astorga thought this was a mistake the party had to avoid in the future. Hence, *it was the most anticlerical Congress in Chilean history that explicitly denied women by law the right to vote*. The Conservatives and the Catholic clergy proved early on to be more supportive of voting rights for women, even if this stance may have emerged from a broader political opposition strategy rather than a principled position in favor of women’s rights, assuming that Cifuentes’s attitudes were exceptional.

Even the most prominent of the feminist women in the 1870s and early 1880s, Martina Barros de Orrego, subsequently drifted away from the Liberal and anticlerical associations of her youth towards the Conservative Party and the Catholic Church. Barros had been educated by a Protestant British woman until age 11 and subsequently by her uncle, the Liberal educator and historian Diego Barros Arana. Through him, she met all the leading Liberal and Radical intellectuals and politicians of the time.<sup>73</sup> In 1872 she translated and published John Stuart Mills’s *The Subjection of Women* with a lengthy prologue in which she discussed and forcefully rebutted the arguments against granting women the vote.<sup>74</sup> She supported the principal anticlerical legislation of the early 1880s, but she was deeply disappointed when the same Congress explicitly denied women the vote in the 1884 electoral law. It was this “bitter experience,” as she noted in an article published in the wake of the Conservative’s women’s suffrage bill in 1917, that

---

<sup>70</sup> *El estandarte*, II, 409 (19 November 1875), p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> A constitutional provision forced the Congress to review the electoral law every ten years.

<sup>72</sup> *Boletín eclesiástico*, VIII, 34 (1885), p. 860.

<sup>73</sup> See Gonzalo Vial, *Historia de Chile* (1891–1973), tome 1: *La sociedad chilena en el cambio de siglo (1891–1920)* (Santiago: Editorial Santillana del Pacífico, 1984), pp. 103, 107, et passim.

<sup>74</sup> Martina Barros Borgoño, “Prólogo” in *La revista de Santiago II* (1872–73), pp. 123–24. The prologue and translation were published serially in this periodical.

Martina Barros’s early education with a Ms. Whitelock, who founded a school soon after her arrival in Chile in 1856, led her to a life-long admiration of England. For details of her education and early life, see Martina Barros de Orrego, *Recuerdos de mi vida* (Santiago: Editorial Orbe, 1942), pp. 54–69.

led her to “affiliate myself with the defenders of suffrage rights.”<sup>75</sup> She deplored the fact that the anticlerical leaders were willing to consider granting women greater civil rights but not the vote.<sup>76</sup> She subsequently became devoutly Catholic. In the first decades of the twentieth century she collaborated with beneficence societies and with the Ladies’ Club (*Club de Señoras*), a cultural and literary society of upper-class Catholic women. During the 1920 presidential election she favored the candidacy of her brother Luis Barros Borgoño who was a Liberal supported by the Conservatives.<sup>77</sup> Barros’s biography is noteworthy because her feminism and prosuffragism played an important part in leading her away from the anticlerical circles of her youth to the Church and the Conservative Party.

The Conservatives continued, decades later, to be at the forefront on the issue of women’s voting rights and the party’s Congressmen were the first to introduce, as noted above, a women’s suffrage bill to Congress in 1917. On that occasion the sponsor of the bill, Deputy Luis Undurraga, quoted approvingly Abdón Cifuentes’s 1865 speech. He also praised the beneficence work of Chilean women by recounting the many contributions to health and other institutions of Antonia Salas de Errázuriz, arguing that it was certainly an injustice not to have given women the vote.<sup>78</sup>

### **Beneficence Activities as a Means of Religious-Political Partisanship**

With the deepening of clerical/anticlerical conflicts during the Santa María government (1881–86), educational and beneficence activities in Chilean society took on an element of religious-political partisanship. This is reflected, for instance, in Juana Ross’s instructions to her brother in a letter written from Rome in 1884. She told him to turn over a school she was building for the state in Llay-Llay, uncharacteristically, “without equipment of any kind, because I don’t want to give this government [of President Domingo Santa María] any presents because it has behaved very badly.”<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Martina Barros de Orrego, “El voto femenino,” I, 9 (December 1917), pp. 392–93. Such ‘defenders’ were mainly the Conservatives. She also notes that she favors a proposal to legalize divorce that was before Congress in 1917, p. 393.

<sup>76</sup> Barros de Orrego, “El voto femenino,” p. 393. According to Barros de Orrego, Ignacio Zenteno was apparently the only Liberal leader who publicly supported women’s suffrage in so far as he defended the right of the women who had registered in 1876 to vote. On account of this attitude, he was forced to resign his ministerial position in the Errázuriz government and was sent to a diplomatic post in the United States. Barros de Orrego, “El voto femenino,” p. 392.

<sup>77</sup> Barros de Orrego, *Recuerdos de mi vida*, pp. 285–86; 297–89. Barros also travelled to Rome with Amalia Errázuriz de Subercaseaux, where they were received by the Pope; idem, pp. 323–28.

<sup>78</sup> Cámara de Diputados, *Boletín de sesiones extraordinarias*, Tomo 1, Session of 25 October 1917, pp. 56–61.

<sup>79</sup> Valle, p. 125.

In 1884, at a time when relations between the Chilean government and the Vatican were broken, the hierarchy decided to create the Catholic Union (*Unión Católica*) in order to further involve the laity in supporting the Church's positions and influence in society.<sup>80</sup> The Union's centers channeled Catholic efforts to organize unions, mutual aid societies, and cooperatives among poorer and working-class segments of the population, where anticlerical influence was strongest. According to historian Ramírez Necochea, such organizations often began in the same communities where the anticlerical and leftist groups had recently established similar ones.<sup>81</sup> Abdón Cifuentes, who was also the President of the Catholic Circle of Workers (*Círculo Católico de Obreros*), traveled across the country in 1886 to create the Catholic Union's Departmental Councils and to train their men and women leaders. He sought to prepare them for "struggles in public life" and to teach them "the imperative duty of all Catholics of organizing and working for the defense of our faith, our rights, and our religious freedom."<sup>82</sup> The statutes of these organizations for popular sectors stipulated that offering religious education to their members was a priority. They all had a patron saint, and their participants had to be practicing Catholics, who were barred from belonging to any 'lay' (i.e., anticlerical) organization as well as from reading their press—a prohibition extending to all Catholics.<sup>83</sup> Women's groups, led by upper-class women, became one of the components of the Catholic Union.

The involvement of Catholic women in beneficence work increased during the turn of the century decades as part of an effort to further enhance the scope of Church social activities. To this end, Amalia Errázuriz de Subercaseaux, together with several other prominent Catholic women leaders, founded the Chilean Women's League (*Liga de Damas Chilenas*) in 1912. It grouped upper-class women whose aim was to "cooperate with the Church's actions and to work

---

<sup>80</sup> See *Boletín eclesiástico*, IX, 35 (1887), pp. 432–47, reports on the First General Assembly of the Catholic Union (*Unión Católica*). The Pope's blessing to the Catholic Union in 1885 appears in *idem*, pp. 661–63. The Third Catholic Union General Assembly, celebrated in December 1886, resolved "not to abandon to the enemies of the faith the field of politics. [Catholics] should exert their rights of citizenship for the good of religion, in accordance with the recommendations repeatedly stated by eminent authorities of the Church, including his Holiness Leon XIII." It also decided to try to "prevent from reaching high positions in public service, either as legislators, magistrates, or presidents, persons who will in one way or another do damage to religious interests," *idem*, p. 1117.

<sup>81</sup> Hernán Ramírez Necochea, *Historia del movimiento obrero en Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones LAR, 1986, second edition), pp. 272–73. According to this author, this tactic was part of the 'divisionist' and 'reactionary' actions among popular sectors of the Catholic Church.

<sup>82</sup> In addition to Santiago, he founded chapters in Valparaíso, Talcahuano, Puerto Montt, and Ancud. Abdón Cifuentes, *Memorias 2* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1936), pp. 244–46.

<sup>83</sup> See for example *Boletín eclesiástico*, IX, 35 (1887), pp. 610–11; and XII (1895), pp. 205–6, and pp. 641–45. The prohibition against reading 'anti-Catholic' publications appears on p. 444.

The elaborate statutes of a Society of Women Workers of Valparaíso (*Sociedad de Obreras Católicas de Valparaíso*), in which the requirements and restrictions placed on the members of Catholic Mutual Aid societies can be appreciated, appear in *Boletín eclesiástico* XIII (1899), pp. 591–602.

for the success of Christian morality and civilization.”<sup>84</sup> The League had 150 active members in Santiago in 1919 and other chapters in cities across the country.<sup>85</sup> It relied on local parish churches, most of which had organized Catholic Women’s Leagues (*Ligas Femeninas Católicas*) and Catholic Associations of Young Women (*Asociaciones Católicas de la Juventud Femenina*), to recruit some of its members and to obtain volunteers to support its activities.<sup>86</sup> The League created libraries, cooperatives, schools, and theaters. For women working in manufacturing and in occupations such as seamstresses, office and store clerks, the League sponsored ‘unions’ that functioned mainly as mutual aid societies.<sup>87</sup> These competed with the numerous unions and mutual aid societies organized at the time by leftist and anticlerical leaders of the labor movement.

The Church-sponsored “Women’s Society of St. Vincent de Paul” (*Sociedad Femenina Conferencias de San Vicente de Paul*), founded in 1890, had more numerous membership than the Women’s League. The Society had 35 sections with 800 members in Santiago in the early 1920s. Women’s League leaders also participated in the Society and, given their social origins, often became leaders of some of the Society’s sections.<sup>88</sup> The latter’s aims were to support poor families, assist people during earthquakes, provide food for the unemployed, house destitute

---

<sup>84</sup> *La Iglesia y la Liga de Damas Chilenas* (Santiago: Imprenta “La Ilustración,” 1927). The fact that these were mainly upper-class women can be seen by examining the names on the League’s various boards between 1912 and 1928: Amalia E. de Subercaseaux, Elena Roberts de Correa, Adela Edwards de Salas, Juana Ossa de Valdés, Amelia Valdés de Huidobro, Mercedes Vial de Ugarte, Inés Rivas de Errázuriz, Ana Errázuriz Mena, Blanca Vial de Valdés, Matilde Larraín de Echeverría, Isabel Pérez de Errázuriz, Amelia Fernández de Undurraga, Mercedes Santa Cruz de Vergara, Teresa Ossandón G., Lucía Solar de Fernández, Inés Cifuentes, Marta Walker Linares, María Lyon de Cousiño, Teresa Salas de Hunneus, M. Luisa M. C. de Edwards, Ana Luisa Ortúzar de Valdés, Juana Browne de Subercaseaux, and Elena Ross de Tocornal. This roster of names of wealthy Chilean families echoes that of the Women’s Beneficence Society of the 1850s.

<sup>85</sup> A list of the 150 names of the League’s members in Santiago in 1919, prepared by its secretary Mercedes Vial de Ugarte, can be found in Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1918–1928*, under “Liga de Damas.”

<sup>86</sup> Judging from the membership lists in three of Santiago’s Church districts in 1923, there were about 2,000 active women in these organizations in the capital. The lists appear in forms with the title of “Censo femenino de la acción social” in Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1914–1928*.

A Women’s Student Federation (*Federación Estudiantil Femenina*) and a Federation for Primary School Instruction (*Federación Pro-instrucción Primaria*) were also affiliated to the Women’s League. See *Actividades femeninas*, p. 588.

<sup>87</sup> In her 1914 correspondence with Monsignor Rafael Edwards, Amalia E. de Subercaseaux mentions how busy she was in organizing a union for women workers as part of her work with Women’s League. Loc. cit. It was probably the Union of Women Employed in Retail and in Offices (*Sindicato de Señoritas Empleadas de Comercio y Oficinas*) created by the League in 1914. The League also created in the capital the Union of the Needle and of Seamstresses (*Sindicato de la Aguja, Costura y Modas*) in 1915 and the Union of Factory Workers of the Sisters of Charity (*Sindicato de Empleadas de Fábrica de las Hermanas de la Caridad*), also in Santiago, in 1923. The first of these unions had 535 members and the other two had 350 and 220 members respectively. *Actividades femeninas*, pp. 585–91.

<sup>88</sup> Amalia E. de Subercaseaux was, for example, president of the San Miguel section of the Society, according to its 1923 *Censo femenino de la acción social*, in the Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago.



widows, visit sick people, and so on. The members of the society in Santiago were reported to have visited one thousand families each week in 1926.<sup>89</sup> Catholic women also founded and participated actively in the Society for the Protection of Children (*Sociedad Protectora de la Infancia*). They also formed the Women's Commission of the National Board for Children (*Comisión de Señoras del Patronato Nacional de la Infancia*), and collaborated with its eleven Drop of Milk (*Gota de Leche*) programs, which fed poor children and mothers, and its network of crèches.<sup>90</sup>

Adela Edwards de Salas, Juana Ross de Edwards's granddaughter, was a wealthy member of the board of the Women's League from its founding. In 1918 she formed the White Cross (*Cruz Blanca*). Its aims were to house and educate young girls who had been abused or abandoned; to house expectant and nursing single mothers and young victims of prostitution, giving them an education by qualified personnel to facilitate their reinsertion into society or to return them to their families; to promote legal reforms to protect children against exploitation and to prohibit white slavery; and to create judicial commissions to ensure that sanctions were applied to those who had abused and perverted children as well as to prevent these abuses from happening by educating, through the press and through lectures, landowners, factory owners, and poor mothers. Edwards also took the initiative to found the first Chilean order of nuns, the Congregation of Merciful Love (*Congregación de las Esclavas del Amor Misericordioso*), whose charter was accepted by Pius XI in 1927, to be in charge of the White Cross's school, maternity care, and hospital.<sup>91</sup> The hospital dealt with many cases of venereal disease, given the White Cross's attempt to rehabilitate young and under-age prostitutes. Years later it was closed and its building was turned into an old-age home for poor women. Edwards's institutions are still functioning in Santiago today. Like her grandmother, Adela Edwards contributed her time and

---

<sup>89</sup> *Actividades femeninas*, pp. 526–27.

<sup>90</sup> *Actividades femeninas*, pp. 531–46. Another important organization run by upper-class Catholic women was the Women's Association against Tuberculosis (*Asociación de Señoras contra la Tuberculosis*) founded in 1901. In 1901 it had four honorary presidents: María Errázuriz de Riesco, Emilia Herrera de Toro, Delfina Cruz de Pinto, and Enriqueta Bulnes de Pinto. Its president that year was Ana Swinburn de Jordán and its board had twenty women members, *Actividades femeninas* (pp. 547–54). Other Church-related organizations reported in 1927 included the Beneficence Works of María (*Obras de Beneficencia del Purísimo Corazón de María*), founded in 1890 (p. 529); Food for the Children of Chile (*Ollas Infantiles de Chile*), founded in 1908; the Women's House of Santa Monica (*Asilo "Santa Mónica" para Señoras*), founded in 1909; the Society Santa Lucia for the Protection of the Blind (*Sociedad Protectora de Ciegos "Santa Lucía"*), founded in 1923; the "Elías de la Cruz" Store for the Poor (*Almacén de los Pobres "Elías de la Cruz"*), founded in the wake of the 1922 earthquake; and The Nest Rebeca Bello (*El Nido Rebeca Bello*). See *Actividades femeninas*, pp. 556–67.

<sup>91</sup> *Actividades femeninas*, pp. 594–98. See also Adela Edwards de Salas, *Memoria de la Cruz Blanca*. 1929. *Sociedad con personería jurídica y cuya finalidad es proteger a la joven y remitir a la mujer por la mujer* (Santiago: Imprenta y litografía "Casa Amarilla," 1929), pp. 22–24, 31–32; and *Breve reseña de la Congregación Esclavas del Amor Misericordioso de Jesús y María Reparadoras Eucarísticas. Suscinto compendio de sus estatutos* (Santiago: Imprenta Artuto Prat, 1927).

money as well to establishing primary, secondary, and technical schools for poor girls. She also founded a student hostel for women university students from the provinces. Edwards wrote articles and legal initiatives that she gave to legislators on women's working conditions and rights, as well as on alcoholism and organized prostitution.<sup>92</sup>

The leaders of the Women's League saw themselves primarily as agents in promoting a Catholic vision of social life. Their sense of responsibility for correcting societal ills, especially those afflicting women, stemmed from their religious outlook. This distinguished them from the anticlerical women, whom they viewed as adversaries in a struggle for the allegiances and identities of Chilean people. As anticlerical women also became involved in educational and social action activities by the turn of the century, Catholic women felt a duty to limit these women's influence by further extending their own work. For example, in a letter written in 1914 by Amalia Errázuriz de Subercaseaux to Monsignor Rafael Edwards, Vicar of the Armed Forces, she urged that the Church proceed rapidly with "the foundation of the Red Cross of Women before the masons, who are very fond of these humanitarian activities, take it over. I would like with all my soul that our Catholic women, led by you, initiate it." The Bishop responded favorably asking Subercaseaux to form the first group of women to back it up, and within three months the institution had been created.<sup>93</sup>

Amalia de Subercaseaux's concerns regarding possible anticlerical influences in the Red Cross did not stop there. In a subsequent letter to Monsignor Edwards, she noted her apprehension that the newly formed Red Cross "could take an excessively liberal tone, and become antagonistic to the Women's League. My idea is that these organizations should remain allied without depending one from the other..." In yet another letter she suggested that it was best to consider the first group of women who were named 'directors' at the initial meeting of the Red Cross not as 'directors,' but as 'founding members,' and that the names of all the women who were present at that meeting should be added to the list of 'founding members.' In this manner "we will permit ourselves the liberty to choose calmly and with experience the best Board of Directors. The group that has been named leaves me uneasy (*no me deja tranquila*). I fear that something of that which I wanted to avoid by making the effort to found the Red Cross may still introduce itself."<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> I thank Sister Tránsito and Sister Gloria of the *Refugio de la misericordia* in Santiago for providing me with copies of Edwards's publications and a typescript summary of her biography.

<sup>93</sup> Letter of Amalia Errázuriz de Subercaseaux to Monsignor Rafael Edwards, 1 August 1914, in Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1914–1928*, "Cruz Roja." The Bishop's answer was dated 6 August 1914.

<sup>94</sup> In Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1914–1928*, section devoted to the "Cruz Roja." The first quoted letter has no date; the second one is dated 23 October 1914. Both are part of a series of letters written in close succession.

A similar anticlerical partisanship can be detected in a 1919 letter written by Adela Edwards de Salas to Monsignor Edwards, a younger relative of hers. In it she urged him to send to the local chapter of the Women's League in Concepción, a city where Masons were very influential, more copies of a book with the proceedings of a Marian Congress of Women (*Congreso Mariano Femenino*) that had been held under the sponsorship of the Women's League in July 1918. She saw the book as "the best expression of Chilean women, just as they are, and not as the sectarians want them to appear." She added in her letter that it was "a patriotic duty to translate the book into English, and to send it to the United States, where Amanda Labarca is speaking ill of Catholic Chilean women."<sup>95</sup> Amanda Labarca, who travelled frequently to the United States and Europe on government missions to study educational innovations and to attend feminist meetings, was a member of the Radical Party and the foremost leader of the anticlerical women's movement in the first half of twentieth century. The fact that religion was a main point of contention between these leading figures among Chilean women is illustrated by Labarca's summing up her life-long commitment in a 1943 interview as an effort to lead women into "activities directed by themselves, separating them insofar as possible from ecclesiastical influences."<sup>96</sup>

### **From Social Beneficence to Political Action**

The greater organization of Catholic women and their deeper involvement in social and beneficence works provided new opportunities for the expression of feminist views as well as demands for suffrage and other women's rights. Thus, the Women's League Marian Congress in 1918 included many sessions that had to do with religious and family life and the proper education of children, but it also discussed the living conditions of poor women, the low wages and many difficulties faced by working women in deficient work environments, the need to create unions for women to help them present their grievances, and so on.<sup>97</sup> Press reports reviewing the proceedings of the Congress noted that several women had expressed strong views in favor of women's political rights. Rosa Rodríguez de la Sotta, for example, was quoted as saying that "politics is part of collective life...and women cannot be excluded from it without violating their personal dignity and the mission they must accomplish in society." Isabel Irrazabal de Pereira

---

<sup>95</sup> In Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1914–1928*, section devoted to the "Liga de Damas."

<sup>96</sup> Georgina Durand, *Mis entrevistas* 1, p. 226. For a biography of Amanda Labarca, see Catharine Manny Paul, "Amanda Labarca H.: Educator to the Women of Chile," Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1967 (University Microfilms no. 67–11, 120).

<sup>97</sup> A detailed program with a précis of the topics to be discussed in the Marian Congress can be found in the Archivo del Arzobispado, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards*, "Liga de Damas."

called for changing the Civil Code as it pertained to women and added that she thought with “all the strength of my soul that if there is justice we should have the right to vote, because we are conscious beings just like men, and we suffer the weight of the laws that they impose on us.”<sup>98</sup>

The forcefulness with which the principal leaders of the Catholic women’s movement expressed feminist views and asserted the need for new social and political rights for women can be appreciated in Adela Edwards de Salas’s 1929 book on the activities of the *Cruz Blanca*.<sup>99</sup> In it she tried to explain why so many poor young women fell into prostitution. She related this to the lack of religious and moral education, the disorganization of the family, the visible wealth of some who display an enviable life of luxury, but above all she focused on the fact that women could not earn a decent living because “there are so many who profit by exploiting women to whom they pay miserable wages.”<sup>100</sup> She elaborated this point by providing examples from various forms of working-class employment. She noted that women’s salaries were normal when they were unionized. But when they were not, and especially when they worked by piece and at home, the wages were grossly insufficient. She then discussed white-collar employment, asserting that women in these occupations could not sustain a middle-class lifestyle because they “earn almost always half of a man’s salary, even though they may work more or the same amount; this is one of the main causes for the loss of many of them [to prostitution].”<sup>101</sup> To explain the difference between men and women’s wages, she wrote that “women’s salaries have been considered merely as a complement to the earnings of the father or the husband, even though it is almost always the women who actually sustain the family... Men spend everything on themselves... The enormous increase in the salaries of [male] blue-collar workers only enrich the taverns, leaving families in the same misery as before.”<sup>102</sup> In order to remedy these situations, Edwards advocated legislation to establish a minimum wage and to require equality of wages between men and women.<sup>103</sup>

Edwards also asserted that there was a legal inconsistency between Santiago’s Municipal Regulations and the Civil Code, which facilitated the corruption of minors. The first permitted the registration of unmarried women over eighteen as prostitutes (even though Edwards noted that in practice no one bothered to check if girls met that age), while the second only granted unmarried women legal capacity at age twenty-five. “In other words,” Edwards concluded, “in order to be an

---

<sup>98</sup> Article entitled “Feminismo católico,” written by Eliodoro Astorquiza and published probably in *La unión*, filed in Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, *Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards, 1914–1928*, section devoted to the “Liga de Damas.”

<sup>99</sup> See Edwards, *Memoria de la Cruz Blanca*, 1929.

<sup>100</sup> Edwards, p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> Edwards, p. 14.

<sup>102</sup> Edwards, pp. 15–16.

<sup>103</sup> Edwards, p. 34.

honest woman you had to be twenty-five years old, but to be a lost one the laws authorized and permitted you to be so at eighteen! How well one can see that in all aspects the laws are made exclusively by men!"<sup>104</sup>

Edwards noted that the White Cross was dedicated to pressuring legislators into increasing the penalties for the crime of the corruption of minors, and that this should be the first and foremost goal of a "well-understood feminism."<sup>105</sup> However, in her view it was not enough to try to change these laws as well as those on women's salaries by lobbying legislators. She also forcefully asserted that "women's suffrage rights should not be denied, as has been the case until now, so that women may defend themselves."<sup>106</sup>

By bridging social and political action, Edwards de Salas became the most prominent Catholic Women's movement leader in the interwar period. In 1931 she was named national president of Women's Catholic Action (*Acción Católica de Chile*). In 1932 she asked Archbishop José Horacio Campillo for permission to resign from the presidency of Catholic Action to found a women's political party, the Women's National Action of Chile (*Acción Nacional de Mujeres de Chile*, ANMCH). The new group was, naturally, a close ally of the Conservative Party. In a 1935 interview Edwards explained her reasons for stepping up her political involvement in terms that are reminiscent of Evans's description of this change among Protestant women involved in philanthropy and social activism.<sup>107</sup> She noted that women had realized that "there were no laws to protect women...and if there were, those in charge of enforcing them did not do so. Hence, [the only solution] is for women to obtain, just like men, full civil and political rights. The social assistance and beneficence movement was therefore transformed, by the circumstances, into a movement of political action."<sup>108</sup>

---

104 Edwards, p. 19.

105 Edwards, p. 20. She wanted those convicted of corrupting minors to be condemned to forced labor.

Edwards showed an active concern over this issue all her life. In a letter to Monsignor Rafael Edwards on 8 September 1918, she asked him what he thought of the legal bill she had sent him on white slavery (*trata de blancas*). She also asked him to have the Social Hygiene League (*Liga de Higiene Social*) endorse it. She added that the Congress was to discuss a new bill introduced by Mr. Eliodoro Yáñez, a Liberal Deputy, on this matter, but that "it was too soft and will not change anything." She then insisted that a "law on residence is indispensable if one wants to eliminate 'white slavery' in the country. Mr. Tito Lizoni, a Social Christian Deputy has already introduced a bill to Congress that I think should be reactivated." In *Archivo del Arzobispado de Santiago, Correspondencia del obispo Rafael Edwards*, "Liga de Damas."

106 Edwards, p. 20.

107 Evans, pp. 33, 37.

108 *Zig-Zag*, 5 April 1935, n.p.

### **The Political Repercussions of the Women's Vote in Municipal Elections, 1935–47**

If a reference to Chile's predominantly Catholic culture and the opposition of Catholic political leaders cannot explain why women were enfranchised for national elections after the Second instead of the First World War—as occurred in leading Protestant democracies—what accounts for this delay?

The most plausible explanation points to anticlerical opposition. By the time Conservative Party legislators took the initiative to present a women's suffrage bill in 1917 there was, as shown in this paper, a long history of involvement by women in support of Church positions in Church/state conflicts. The Church hierarchy and the Conservative Party had supported and even encouraged this participation by women in public affairs. Moreover, the links between the Church and women's primary and secondary education as well as the visible leadership of wealthy women in the creation and administration of Church-connected beneficence institutions, many of which served women, were well known features of Chilean society. This close association between women and the Church led the anticlerical sectors, who always had a majority over the Conservatives in Congress, to postpone women's suffrage. In their perception, the women's vote would only enhance the Conservative's electoral base, a perception that the Conservatives has undoubtedly long shared as well.

In addition, the extension of suffrage to women was to occur in a context that already included a highly competitive electoral system with clearly defined parties of the Right, Center, and Left. The size of the electorate was small given the apathy of eligible voters who failed to register and the exclusion of women and illiterates. Therefore, extending the vote to women—a decision that could double the numbers of voters—had the potential to alter the balance of the parties' electoral fortunes throughout the country. This was not a measure that legislators and local party leaders would accept lightly.

The right of property-holding women (and of foreign men who were legal residents) to vote in municipal elections was introduced into Chilean legislation by a decree-law of the then dictator Carlos Ibáñez del Campo in 1931, although no municipal elections were held under his government.<sup>109</sup> After the fall of Ibáñez in July 1931, several short-lived governments succeeded him. Stability was restored with the election of Arturo Alessandri to the presidency in October 1932. New electoral legislation was needed to renew municipal authorities, and women's groups (including those of anticlerical and leftist leanings) lobbied strongly to retain women's suffrage as

---

<sup>109</sup> *Boletín de leyes y decretos de Gobierno* XCX, May 1931 (Santiago: Dirección General de Prisiones, Taller Imprenta, 1931), pp. 1464–81.

laid down in Ibañez's decree-law but without the property requirement. The new municipal government law was enacted in 1934 and included the right of women and of foreign resident aliens of both sexes to vote and be elected for municipal councils. A new electoral registry for women and foreign residents was established, and separate polling places for them were created. As a result, their votes were counted separately.<sup>110</sup> Extending the vote to women exclusively for the municipal contests was seen as an acceptable solution to the women's suffrage question by the anticlericals. In this manner they could test women's political inclinations without putting national electoral positions at risk. They could also begin a process of building political organizations among women within the parties; the women's sections of major parties all date their inception to the mid thirties.<sup>111</sup> The first elections under the new law took place in April 1935.

The municipal elections of the 1930s and 1940s did not provide enough of an incentive for many women to register to vote. As is shown in Table 1, the number of women voters increased very slowly until the 1952 presidential elections, at which point only 27.2% of all potential women voters registered. Only 9% of all women eligible to vote registered nationwide for the 1935 elections. Therefore the results of these elections, especially those of 1935, cannot be taken as necessarily representative of the political inclinations of the overall potential women's electorate. Rather, the results reflected the capacity of the different parties to register women voters and to mobilize them on the day of the election. Table 1 also shows that the percentage of the potential male electorate that registered during this period was also relatively low. It oscillated from 35.6% in 1935, when all voters had to reregister, to 63.9% for the 1952 presidential elections. Moreover, the table shows that there no dramatic improvements in the rate of literacy during this period that could enhance the size of the voting population.<sup>112</sup> The decline

---

<sup>110</sup> The 1934 law appears in Contraloría General de la República, *Recopilación de leyes por orden numérico, con índices por número, ministerios y materias* CI (Santiago: Imprenta Nacimiento, 1934), pp. 241–55. The details of the legal process also appear briefly in Beatrice Hall, "Woman Suffrage in the Americas," *Bulletin of the Panamerican Union* LXX (January–December 1936), pp. 424–28.

<sup>111</sup> See Edda Gaviola A, Ximena Jiles M., Lorella Lopestri M., Claudia Rojas M., *Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones. Historia del movimiento femenino chileno 1913–1952* (Santiago: Centro de análisis y difusión de la condición de la mujer, "La Morada," Fempress, ILET, Isis, Librería Lila, Pemci, CEM, 1986), pp. 46–48, and appendix.

<sup>112</sup> In an effort to present a more accurate picture of the size of the population registered to vote over the total potential number of voters, table 1 has estimated the illiteracy rates for the population over 21 years of age. The official figures refer to the population over 8 years of age in 1920 and 1930, and over 15 in 1940; Cruz Coke, *Historia electoral*, p. 37, uses them to calculate the potential electorate without considering that the population under 21 has a higher rate of literacy. The estimate in table 1 was calculated for 1930 on the basis of the percentage of illiteracy among children aged 12–14, the overall rate of illiteracy, and figures showing the age distribution of the population. This permits a subtraction of the 8–21 age group literates from the total number of literates to estimate the adult literacy rate. The estimate was further adjusted according to the difference between male and female literacy rates in the population as a whole, and in subsequent years by a decline proportional to the drop in the general rate of illiteracy for men and women.

TABLE 1

## Population and Electorate in Chile, 1932–1952\*

Year and Type of Election	1932 P	1935 M	1938 M	1941 M	1944 M	1947 M	1952 P
Total Population	4,495,000	4,700,000	4,914,000	5,149,000	5,440,000	5,748,000	6,295,000
Population over 21	2,247,500	2,350,000	2,457,000	2,574,500	2,720,000	2,874,000	3,147,500
Men	1,112,700	1,163,500	1,216,500	1,274,600	1,346,700	1,422,900	1,558,300
Women	1,134,800	1,186,500	1,240,500	1,299,900	1,373,300	1,451,100	1,589,200
% Male & Female Literate Population over 21	73 (M) 71 (W)	73 (M) 71 (W)	74 (M) 72 (W)	74 (M) 72 (W)	76 (M) 74 (W)	76 (M) 74 (W)	78 (M) 76 (W)
Literate Men over 21	812,300	849,400	900,200	943,200	1,023,500	1,081,400	1,215,500
Literate Women over 21	805,700	842,400	893,200	935,900	1,016,200	1,073,800	1,207,800
Total Registered to Vote	429,772	378,590	612,749	700,143	765,092	657,485	1,105,029
Men	429,772	302,541	512,042	575,625	619,312	529,741	776,625
Women	—	76,049	100,707	124,518	145,780	127,744	328,404
% of Potential Electorate who Registered	52.9	22.4	34.2	37.3	37.5	30.5	45.6
Men	52.9	35.6	56.9	61.0	60.5	49.0	63.9
Women	—	9.0	11.3	13.3	14.3	11.9	27.2
% of All Adults Registered	19.1	16.1	24.9	27.2	28.1	22.9	35.1
Votes Cast	343,982	327,711	485,006	490,271**	498,434	552,034	954,131
Men	343,982	264,598	410,247	408,160	410,373	442,835	666,871
Women	—	63,113	74,759	80,744	88,061	109,199	287,260
% of Abstentions	20	13.4	20.8	30.0	34.8	16.0	13.4
Men	20	12.6	19.9	29.1	33.7	16.4	14.2
Women	—	17.0	25.8	35.2	39.6	14.5	12.6
% of All Adults Casting Votes	15.3	13.9	19.7	19.0	18.3	19.2	30.3

\* The women's electoral figures include a small number of male foreign residents. P stands for presidential election and M for municipal election.

\*\* This figure includes blank and null votes (1,367).

Sources: Dirección General de Estadística, *Sinopsis Geográfico-Estadística de la República de Chile* (Santiago: Sociedad Imprenta y Litografía Universo, 1933), pp. 49, 88. Isabel Zegers and Valeria Maino, "La mujer en el siglo XX," in Lucía Santa Cruz, et al., *Tres ensayos sobre la mujer chilena. Siglos XVIII, XIX, y XX* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1978), p. 211. The population figures (higher than those in the censuses due to revisions) are taken from the Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, *Población total por provincias Chile 1885–1960* (Santiago: Dirección de Estadística y Censos, 1964). The electoral data is from the Dirección de Registro Electoral, Santiago, Chile.

In the 1930s and 1940s, those over 21 are almost exactly 50% of the total population.



in adult illiteracy over the twenty-year period was only about 5%, which seems to be the lowest of any two decades in Chile's entire history of independent government.<sup>113</sup>

The tendency of women to favor the Conservative Party continued through the municipal elections of 1947, although the difference between their preferences and those of the male electorate decreased with respect to the 1935 results. The 1935 elections deserve special attention, given the strong support the women voters gave the conservative candidates and given the fact that they were the first ones in which women voted.

### **The 1935 Municipal Elections**

The results of these elections are shown in table 2. The Conservative Party won almost half of the women's votes, an overwhelming victory that increased its general vote total to 26.6%. While the Conservatives had a slight edge over their main opponents, the Liberals and the Radicals, in the men's vote, the women's vote made them clearly the largest electoral force in the country. All the parties with the exception of the Conservatives decreased their share of the national vote, given the effect of the women's preferences. It should be noted that the independent lists were in many cases not really independent of the parties, but rather were formed as a result of regional and even local party pacts, including some of Conservatives candidates. The Communist Party also ran 'independent' candidate lists; in Santiago they were sub-labeled Popular Action (*Independiente-Acción Popular*). Therefore, it is impossible to determine exactly what the 16.9% 'independent' vote represents. The Democrat and Democratic Parties did very poorly among women, despite having since 1924 a women's party (the *Partido Demócrata Femenino*) associated with their originally unified Democratic Party and considerable numbers of women activists in their mutual aid societies.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, the party elected two women councilors out of the ten candidates it presented nationwide.

The Conservative Party also showed a greater interest—or ability—to present women candidates in the 1935 elections than the other parties. As can be seen in table 3, a disproportionate third of the 65 women candidates throughout the country were either Conservative or affiliated to Edwards de Salas's ANMCH. Moreover, as shown in table 3 as well, the Conservative and ANMCH alliance elected two-thirds of all the successful women candidates. Given that Conservative-ANMCH pact instructed women voters to vote for women candidates in

---

<sup>113</sup> See the figures in Dirección General de Estadística, *Sinopsis geográfico-estadística de la República de Chile* (Santiago: Sociedad Imprenta y Litografía Universo, 1933), p. 87; Isabel Zegers and Valeria Maino, "La mujer en el siglo XX," in Lucía Santa Cruz, et al., *Tres ensayos sobre la mujer chilena. Siglos XVIII, XIX, y XX* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1978), p. 211.

<sup>114</sup> See Cecilia Salinas, *La mujer proletaria. Una historia por contar* (Concepción: Ediciones LAR, 1987), for a description of women's participation in mutual aid societies and unions.

TABLE 2

## Results of the 1935 Municipal Elections

Party	Women's Vote	Men's Vote	Total Vote	% of Women's Vote	% of Men's Vote	% of Total Vote
Agrarian	452 (10.5%)	3,871 (89.5%)	4,323 (100%)	0.7	1.5	1.3
Conservative	29,870 (34.3%)	57,304 (65.7%)	87,174 (100%)	47.3	21.7	26.6
Democrat	2,425 (8.4%)	25,238 (91.6%)	27,663 (100%)	3.8	9.5	8.4
Democratic	1,560 (7.9%)	18,193 (92.1%)	19,753 (100%)	2.5	6.9	6.0
Liberal	11,736 (17.4%)	55,835 (82.6%)	67,571 (100%)	18.6	21.1	20.6
Radical	7,912 (13.0%)	52,720 (87.0%)	60,632 (100.0%)	12.5	19.9	18.5
Radical Soc.	350 (10.0%)	3,164 (90.0%)	3,514 (100.0%)	0.6	1.2	1.1
Socialist	69 (13.3%)	448 (86.7%)	517 (100%)	0.1	0.2	0.2
Social Repub.	465 (16.1%)	2,421 (83.9%)	2,886 (100%)	0.7	0.9	0.9
Independent*	8,274 (14.4%)	45,404 (84.6%)	53,678 (100%)	13.1	17.2	16.4
TOTAL	63,113	264,598	327,711	99.9**	100.1**	100.0

\*The independent row includes lists of various orientations, including a list sponsored by the Communist Party.

\*\* Figures do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Total registered to vote: 76,049 in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 302,541 in the men's registry.

Total abstentions (and null and blank votes): 12,936 (17%) in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 37,943 (12.6%) in the men's registry.

Sources: Dirección General de Estadística, Estadística Chilena. Sinopsis 1937, vol. 10, 12 (December 1937), p. 860; and Dirección de Registro Electoral, "Cuadro Sinóptico de Elecciones Municipales, 1935–1967," typescript and manuscript, Santiago, n.d. The women's votes have been calculated based on a comparison of these two sources; the vote total in the latter is mistaken and was recalculated. The figure of 76,049 for the women's registry appears in Ricardo Cruz Coke, *Historia electoral de Chile, 1925–1973* (Santiago: Ediciones Jurídicas de Chile, 1984), p. 43. The official data no longer exist in either published or raw form in the Dirección del Registro Electoral.



the districts where they presented them, it is likely that the overwhelming success of the Conservative women candidates was due to this concentration of the party's women voters on them.<sup>115</sup> No other campaigns including women candidates gave the same instructions.

**TABLE 3**

**Women Candidates for the 1935 Municipal Elections by Party**

Parties	Candidates		Elected Councillors	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Conservative + ANMCH	21	32.3	16	64.0
Liberal	7	10.8	3	12.0
Radical	11	16.9	2	8.0
Independents*	11	16.9	1	4.0
Democrats	10	15.4	2	8.0
A Women's Party**	1	1.5	1	4.0
Republican Union	2	3.1	0	0.0
Nazi	1	1.5	0	0.0
Social Republican	1	1.5	0	0.0
Total	65	99.9	25	100.0

\* Includes Communist Party candidates and excludes one woman, Dora Sagredo Aedo of Yungay commune, who ran under an independent list but was identified by the *La Nación* as a member of the ANMCH. She has been added to the Conservative candidates.

\*\* This party (Partido Femenino) registered one candidate, Guillermina Ortiz, in the Commune of Los Sauces. She was elected.

Source: Prepared with information drawn from *La Nación*, Santiago, 7–8 April 1935.

In Santiago province, the Conservatives presented ten women candidates, nine of whom were elected, four of them in the metropolitan Santiago area. The only unsuccessful candidate, Isabel Subercaseaux Errázuriz, ran in the commune of San Miguel in metropolitan Santiago. For the municipality of Santiago itself the Conservatives ran three women candidates, including Adela Edwards de Salas. The other two, Natalia Rubio and Elena Döll de Díaz, were also associated with the Catholic social action and beneficence movement. Rubio was the head of the Women's Retail and Office Employees Union and leader of the Patriotic National Action (*Acción Patriótica de Mujeres de Chile*, APMCH), a scission from Edwards's party that was also in a pact with the

<sup>115</sup> The Conservatives' instruction to women voters to vote for women candidates appeared in the press at the time. See for example, *La Nación*, (Santiago), 8 April 1935, p. 6. Given the practice of distributing already marked ballots to voters at campaign headquarters (and in the case of the Conservatives, probably at Church-related institutions as well), it is all the more likely that these instructions were followed.

Conservatives. Elena Döll was treasurer of the White Cross and a top leader of Edwards's party. As Table 4 indicates, Adela Edwards de Salas obtained 5,417 votes, the largest number among all Conservative candidates. Natalia Rubio obtained 2,018 votes and Elena Döll de Díaz 1,337. The Conservative Party ran six men as candidates for Santiago's municipality but the three women obtained 47% of the total vote for the Conservatives. They were easily elected to the Municipal council, whereas none of the women candidates in the rival lists came close to succeeding.

**TABLE 4**

**Support in the 1935 Municipal Elections for Women and Men Conservative Party Candidates in Santiago's Communes Grouped by the Socioeconomic Level of their Wards (*subdelegaciones*)**

Comm. Soc-Ec. Level	Adela Edwards de Salas		Natalia Rubio		Elena Díaz de Döll		Women's Candidates Total		Men's Candidates Total		Conservative Party Total	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
High	881	16.2	185	9.2	69	5.2	1,135	12.9	2,839	28.8	3,974	21.3
Middle	1,683	31.1	624	30.9	853	63.8	3,160	36.0	2,408	24.5	5,568	29.9
Middle Lower	442	8.2	242	12.0	51	3.8	735	8.4	623	6.3	1,358	7.3
Mostly Lower	1,497	27.6	563	27.9	246	18.4	2,306	26.3	2,393	24.3	4,699	25.2
Low	914	16.9	404	20.0	118	8.8	1,436	16.4	1,589	16.1	3,025	16.3
<b>TOTAL VOTES</b>	<b>5,417</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2,018</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,337</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8,772</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9,852</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18,624</b>	<b>100</b>

If the electoral results cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the political inclinations of the women's electorate, as suggested above, where did the women candidates' votes come from? The Conservative women candidates in Santiago probably drew many votes from women who were associated as employees, clients, and/or members of the social beneficence and union-like organizations that they led. The social action work of the candidates could have its pay-off in votes. A clue to this fact can be found in a comment by one of the legislators of the Block of the Left, Juan Pradenas Muñoz. He indicated disparagingly that the Right had registered, among others who were under the influence of the Catholic Church, "the inmates of the asylums and hospices...and of the White Cross..."<sup>116</sup> Other anticlerical commentaries pointed disapprovingly to the large number of nuns who voted. The Socialist's weekly, *Consigna*, noted that the 'reactionary' parties had won by establishing "all the necessary nuts and bolts for a perfect electoral machinery...consisting of the massive electoral registration of all the nuns, women, brothers, and other elements who have absolutely no link to the true

<sup>116</sup> Quoted by Héctor de Petris Giesen, *Historia del Partido Democrático. Posición dentro de la evolución política nacional* (Santiago: Dirección General de Prisiones, 1942), p. 111.

national interest because they are all...vulgar agents of foreign interests implanted in Chile.”<sup>117</sup> A Radical commentator looked forward to the next “purely political elections, when neither nuns, nor the daughters of Mary, nor ‘proper’ ladies” would be able to vote, predicting that the Radical Party, by increasing the numbers of voters, would win a clear majority.<sup>118</sup> Hence, the lopsided victory in favor of the Conservatives led the anticlerical commentators to blame the influence of the Church over women voters. Women leaders of the Left were also deeply disappointed with the electoral results.<sup>119</sup>

Table 4 also shows the breakdown of the Conservative candidates’ votes by the socioeconomic level of Santiago communes’ wards (*subdelegaciones*). Only one of the fourteen wards, containing 19.8% of Santiago’s voters in 1935, can be considered an upper-class residential area. The Conservative Party’s women candidates drew only 12.9 % of the votes from that ward, while the party’s men candidates obtained 28.8%. The fact that the Conservative women candidates relied proportionally very little on votes from the upper-class ward is consistent with the notion that their votes probably drew considerably from mobilizing women in the social action and beneficence organizations, which were not located in the upper-class ward. Parenthetically, the Radical Party drew 26.1% of its votes from the upper-class ward, a proportion that was close to that of the men Conservative Party’s candidates. For purposes of these comparisons, Table 5 contains the distributions of the votes for other selected parties and a leftist party alliance in the same wards.

Comments on the Right were understandably favorable to the preferences women had shown in the election. *El mercurio* noted that women’s votes “were an important reinforcement for the parties of the Right. In this sense Chilean women have not been the exception to their counterparts in other countries of the world where female suffrage has been established. For women order and public peace are the essence of their concept of life.”<sup>120</sup>

The outcome of the elections understandably gave the anticlerical sectors a powerful reason to want to avoid extending the suffrage to women for legislative and presidential contests. In an interview in *Acción femenina* shortly after the 1935 elections, Pedro Aguirre Cerda, then President of the Radical Party, was asked when women could be granted the vote in national elections. He responded that the party remained in favor of women’s suffrage in principle, but that there would be a tendency to “want to postpone it...until a more opportune moment.” He added that “if we were to precipitate it now, we would leave the party in the impossibility of carrying out

---

<sup>117</sup> *Consigna, semanario oficial del Partido Socialista*, Santiago, 13 April 1935, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> *La Nación*, 9 April 1935, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> See the reminiscences of Marta Vergara, *Memorias de una mujer irreverente* (Santiago: Editorial Gabriela Mistral, 1974), p. 222. Vergara was a candidate for the Communist Party in Santiago, although she turned to the Right in her later years.

<sup>120</sup> *El mercurio*, Santiago, 8 April 1935, p. 2.

the rest of its program, given the fact that women have, frankly, favored the Right. I think, however, that this is a warning that should lead us to a maximum of activity in favor of the liberation of women. Their current opinions will be one more reason for us to worry about their culture.”<sup>121</sup> A meeting of women of the Radical Party that took place after the 1935 elections even voted against extending the suffrage to women in national elections.<sup>122</sup>

---

**TABLE 5**

---

**Support in the 1935 Municipal Elections for Selected Center and Left Parties in Santiago’s Communes Grouped by the Socioeconomic Level of their Wards (Subdelegaciones)**

Comm. Soc-Ec Level	Left Block (Block de Izquierda)*		Radical Party		Democrat Party		Communist Party		Total Santiago Electorate	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
High	872	10.3	872	26.1	411	12.8	39	5.0	9,687	19.8
Middle	1,853	21.9	570	17.1	429	13.3	171	22.1	11,872	24.2
Middle Lower	668	7.9	239	7.1	429	13.3	83	10.7	3,722	7.6
Mostly Lower	2,270	26.8	929	27.8	688	21.3	224	28.9	12,678	25.8
Low	2,798	33.1	733	21.9	1,267	39.3	258	33.3	11,088	22.6
<b>TOTAL VOTES</b>	<b>8,461</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,343</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,224</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>49,047</b>	<b>100</b>

\* The *Block de Izquierda* was a pact of the Radical Socialist, Democratic, Socialist of Chile, and Communist Parties, although the Communists ran a separate list as well.

Sources: The voting results were taken from *El Mercurio*, Santiago, 9 April 1935, p. 1. The information for the socioeconomic level of each ward (*subdelegación*) can be found in René Millar Carvacho, *La elección presidencial de 1920. Tendencias y prácticas políticas en el Chile parlamentario* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1981), pp. 182–83, 186.

---

**The Municipal Elections of 1938, 1941, 1944, and 1947.**

The Conservative share of the women’s vote began to decline in the two subsequent municipal elections, as can be seen in Tables 6 and 7. In 1938, it received 39% of the vote and in 1941, 25.9%. It seemed that the party had been able to mobilize its electoral clientele among women very rapidly but that the 1935 vote was its ceiling. Thus, 29,870 women voted for the

---

<sup>121</sup> *Acción femenina*, Santiago IV, no. 6 (May 1935), p. 20.

<sup>122</sup> Recalled by Elena Caffarena in an interview with Georgina Durand. Durand, *Mis entrevistas* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1943, vol. 1), p. 200.

TABLE 6

## Results of the 1938 Municipal Elections

Party	Women's Vote	Men's Vote	Total Vote	% of Women's Vote	% of Men's Vote	% of Total Vote
Agrarian	755 (8.0%)	8,638 (92.0%)	9,393 (100%)	1.0	2.1	1.9
Conservative	29,163 (27.2%)	77,926 (72.8%)	107,089 (100%)	39.0	19.0	22.1
Democrat	2,058 (11.0%)	16,643 (89.0%)	18,701 (100%)	2.8	4.1	3.9
Democratic	818 (7.0%)	10,898 (93.0%)	11,716 (100%)	1.1	2.7	2.4
Liberal	12,899 (14.2%)	77,937 (85.8%)	90,836 (100%)	17.2	19.0	18.7
Communist- "National Democratic"	1,889 (6.5%)	27,175 (93.5%)	29,064 (100%)	2.5	6.6	6.0
Radical	10,348 (10.5%)	88,070 (89.5%)	98,418 (100%)	13.8	21.5	20.3
Republican Action	1,946 (23.7%)	6,262 (76.3%)	8,208 (100%)	2.6	1.5	1.7
Socialist	3,777 (7.6%)	45,729 (92.4%)	49,506 (100%)	5.1	11.1	10.2
Independents	11,106 (17.9%)	50,969 (82.1%)	62,075 (100%)	14.9	12.4	12.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74,759</b>	<b>410,247</b>	<b>485,006</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Total Right</b>	<b>46,821 (20.0%)</b>	<b>187,406 (80.0%)</b>	<b>234,227 (100%)</b>	<b>62.6</b>	<b>45.7</b>	<b>48.3</b>
<b>Total Popular Front</b>	<b>16,832 (8.9%)</b>	<b>171,872 (91.1%)</b>	<b>188,704 (100%)</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>41.9</b>	<b>38.9</b>

Total registered to vote: 100,707 in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 512,042 in the men's registry.

Total abstentions: 25,948 (25.8%) in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 101,795 (19.9%) in the men's registry.

Source: Calculated from Dirección del Registro Electoral figures.



TABLE 7

## Results of the 1941 Municipal Elections

Party	Women's Vote	Men's Vote	Total Vote	% of Women's Vote	% of Men's Vote	% of Total Vote
Agrarian	692 (12%)	5,085 (88%)	5,777 (100%)	0.9	1.2	1.2
Conservative	20,950 (26.2%)	58,956 (73.8%)	79,906 (100%)	25.9	14.4	16.3
Democrat	357 (12.4%)	2,513 (87.6%)	2,870 (100%)	0.4	0.6	0.6
Democratic	2,543 (9.7%)	23,695 (90.3%)	26,238 (100%)	3.1	5.8	5.4
Liberal	18,437 (19.7%)	74,931 (80.3%)	93,368 (100%)	22.8	18.4	19.0
Radical	19,642 (13.4%)	126,765 (86.6%)	146,407 (100%)	24.4	31.1	29.9
Socialist	8,572 (12.2%)	61,860 (87.8%)	70,432 (100%)	10.6	15.2	14.3
Independent*	9,551 (14.9%)	54,355 (85.1%)	63,906 (100%)	11.9	13.3	13.0
TOTAL	80,744	408,160	488,904	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* Includes Communists.

Total registered to vote: 124,518 in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 575,625 in the men's registry.

Total abstentions: 43,774 (35.2%) in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 167,465 (29.1%) in the men's registry.

Source: Calculated from Dirección del Registro Electoral figures.

party in 1935 and 29,163 did so in 1938, while in 1941 this number declined to 20,950. As more women registered to vote, the Conservative share of the female electorate obviously declined. By contrast the Radicals seemed to be doing better and better among women. From their dismal 13.1% in 1935 they increased very slightly to 13.8% in 1938, but then their vote almost doubled to 24.4% in 1941. This result can be explained by the popularity of the Radical President Pedro Aguirre Cerda, who had been elected in December 1938 as leader of the Popular Front coalition. This meant that the Radical Party had almost equaled the Conservative Party's female vote in

1941 and that, given its strong advantage among men, it had gained a much larger total national vote (29.9%) than the Conservatives, who were reduced to 16.3%. Aguirre Cerda's Popular Front coalition partners, the Communists and Socialists, also scored strong gains. They obtained about 27% of the total national vote, and about 21% among women.

The year 1941 seemed to be a propitious one to extend the suffrage to women, given the electoral results in April. President Aguirre Cerda had submitted a women's suffrage bill to the Congress in January 1941 which Elena Caffarena, a lawyer and leader of the MEMCH (a feminist association linked to the Popular Front), had drafted in 1940.<sup>123</sup> By the late 1930s the anticlerical women's organizations as well as the political parties of the Center and Left were all seemingly in favor of voting rights for women in national elections. However, Aguirre Cerda died in late 1941, and without his leadership and as politicians once again shifted their attention to the unexpected presidential election, the suffrage bill died as well.

Women's groups then took the initiative to insist that the Congress resuscitate the suffrage bill. This was done mainly under a new umbrella organization formed in 1944 by Amanda Labarca, the FECHIF (*Federación Chilena de Instituciones Femeninas*), which included more than 200 women's organizations of all inclinations.

A new version of the bill to extend the suffrage to women was presented to the Senate on 20 June 1945, sponsored by legislators of all parties, namely the Conservative, Liberal, Radical, Socialist and Communist Parties.<sup>124</sup> However, as can be seen in Table 8, the municipal elections of 1944 had shown an increase in support for the Conservatives: they gained 30.4% of the women's vote and 20.9% of the national vote. By contrast, the Radical Party's share of the vote decreased among women as well as among men, leaving it with 24.7% of the national total. The other anticlerical parties did equally badly. This result evidently diminished the willingness of the anticlerical legislators to approve the women's suffrage bill. The legislation was consistently put off, even though some senators (such as José Maza, and Marmaduke Grove in May 1946) occasionally insisted that it should be approved.

In the 1947 municipal elections, as Table 9 shows, the Conservatives gained 30% of the women's vote and 20.2% of the total national vote and the Radicals 17% and 20%, respectively. But the big surprise was the result obtained by the Communist Party, whose women's vote increased to 11.8% and total vote to 16.5%, making it the third strongest party in Chile. More importantly, the Communists were virtually tied with the Conservatives in the male vote (17.8% for

---

<sup>123</sup> Angélica Meza, *La otra mitad de Chile* (Santiago: CESOC, 1986), p. 55.

<sup>124</sup> The list of sponsoring congressmen of the women's suffrage reform bill approved in 1948 appears in Senado de Chile, *Boletín de sesiones ordinarias*, Tomo 1, Sesión Novena, 20 July 1945, p. 475. The record of the previous legislative motions regarding women's suffrage is briefly recounted in the preamble to this legislative reform project, p. 474.

TABLE 8

## Results of the 1944 Municipal Elections

Party	Women's Vote	Men's Vote	Total Vote	% of Women's Vote	% of Men's Vote	% of Total Vote
Agrarian	671 (12.1%)	4,852 (87.9%)	5,523 (100%)	0.8	1.2	1.1
Conservative	26,808 (25.7%)	77,570 (74.3%)	104,378 (100%)	30.4	18.9	20.9
Communist "National Progressive"	3,906 (12.1%)	28,313 (87.9%)	32,219 (100%)	4.4	6.9	6.4
Democrat	333 (8.5%)	3,591 (91.5%)	3,924 (100%)	0.4	0.9	0.8
Democratic	5,793 (12.7%)	39,942 (87.3%)	45,735 (100%)	6.6	9.7	9.3
Liberal	14,227 (19.8%)	57,578 (80.2%)	71,805 (100%)	16.2	14.0	14.4
National Falange	3,806 (24.5%)	11,727 (75.5%)	15,533 (100%)	4.3	2.9	3.1
Radical	18,137 (14.7%)	105,001 (85.3%)	123,138 (100%)	20.6	25.6	24.7
Socialist	5,448 (12.9%)	36,802 (87.1%)	42,250 (100%)	6.2	9.0	8.5
Socialist Workers	1,232 (11.1%)	9,818 (88.9%)	11,050 (100%)	1.4	2.4	2.2
Independents	7,700 (18.0%)	35,179 (82.0%)	42,879 (100%)	8.7	8.5	8.6
TOTAL	88,061 (17.7%)	410,373 (82.3%)	498,434 (100%)	100	100	100

Total registered to vote: 145,780 in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 619,312 in the men's registry.

Total abstentions: 57,719 (39.6%) in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 208,939 (33.7%) in the men's registry.

Source: Calculated from Dirección del Registro Electoral figures.

TABLE 9

## Results of the 1947 Municipal Elections

Party	Women's Vote	Men's Vote	Total Vote	% of Women's Vote	% of Men's Vote	% of Total Vote
Agrarian Labor	4,309 (17.4%)	20,446 (82.6%)	24,755 (100%)	3.9	4.6	4.5
Conservative	32,791 (29.4%)	78,651 (70.6%)	111,442 (100%)	30.0	17.8	20.2
Communist	12,868 (14.1%)	78,336 (85.9%)	91,204 (100%)	11.8	17.7	16.5
Democratic	3,751 (15.0%)	21,183 (85.0%)	24,934 (100%)	3.5	4.8	4.5
Liberal	15,279 (20.9%)	57,932 (79.1%)	73,211 (100%)	14.0	13.1	13.3
Liberal Progressive	325 (26.3%)	912 (73.7%)	1,237 (100%)	0.3	0.2	0.2
National Falange	3,819 (20.6%)	14,751 (79.4%)	18,570 (100%)	3.5	3.3	3.4
Radical	18,538 (16.8%)	92,032 (83.2%)	110,570 (100%)	17.0	20.8	20.0
Radical Democratic	4,103 (15.2%)	22,974 (84.8%)	27,077 (100%)	3.7	5.2	4.9
Socialist	9,088 (18.9%)	39,062 (81.1%)	48,150 (100%)	8.3	8.8	8.7
Socialist Authentic	209 (21.2%)	775 (78.8%)	984 (100%)	0.2	0.2	0.2
Independents	4,119 (20.7%)	15,781 (79.3%)	19,900 (100%)	3.8	3.5	3.6
TOTAL	109,199 (19.8%)	442,835 (80.2%)	552,034 (100%)	100	100	100

Total registered to vote: 127,744 in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 529,741 in the men's registry.

Total abstentions: 18,545 (14.5%) in the women's and resident aliens' registry and 86,906 (16.4%) in the men's registry.

Source: Calculated from Dirección del Registro Electoral figures.



the Conservatives and 17.7% for the Communists), which served as a basis to examine political trends for the next legislative elections.

This result alarmed not only the Conservatives but also the Radicals, who for decades had been either first or second in the electoral contests. It also coincided with the new international alignments created by the beginning of the Cold War. The Radical Party president, Gabriel González Videla, decided to break his government coalition with the Communists and turned to a governing alliance with, among others, the Conservatives. In the new political context the clerical/anticlerical division seemed much less important, and the greater propensity of the women to vote for the Right became an asset to the parties that focused on the Communist threat. Hence, the Radicals and Conservatives made every effort to accelerate the enfranchisement of women at that point, counteracting efforts by the Chamber of Deputies to delay it once again. In view of its certain eventual approval, it finally became politically counterproductive for parties to be seen opposing the bill, and it was approved unanimously in the Senate and with only one vote against it in the Chamber of Deputies. The law was enacted in January 1949.<sup>125</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The evidence in the Chilean case does not support Evans and other analysts who attribute the lateness of women's enfranchisement in Catholic countries to the influence of Catholicism. The delay in Chile, i.e., the fact that women's enfranchisement on an equal basis to men occurred in the late forties and not around 1920, was not caused by opposition from the Catholic Church and its closely allied political leaders to women's active participation in public life. Neither can it be attributed to the absence of prosuffrage feminism among Catholic women, i.e., those who were supposedly affected most directly by the limitations imposed by a Catholic culture. There was a rich history of Catholic women's involvement in beneficence activities and in political affairs, leading to the rise of a Catholic form of feminism that favored women's suffrage while seeking to contribute to the success of the Church's teachings in all aspects of social life.

The association between Catholic positions and public activism on the part of women was established quite firmly by the latter part of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Conservative Party was seen by all groups in Chilean politics as the most likely beneficiary of the women's vote, a perception that was strongly confirmed in the 1935 municipal elections, the first in which women participated. Although women's suffrage became a widely adopted feature of mainly Protestant democracies after World War One, in Chile the anticlerical sectors were its main opponents. While they supported other rights for women and advocated measures such as the divorce law, they resisted women's enfranchisement for fear of its political consequences.

---

<sup>125</sup> Contraloría General de la República XXXVI, 1948–1949, *Recopilación de leyes por orden numérico* (Santiago: Imprenta Nacimiento, 1949), pp. 241–47.

