
Politics and Professional Societies: The Women's Classical Caucus and the NOW ERA Boycott

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Abstract: This case examines the role of academic societies and their members in political movements. It focuses on the Women's Classical Caucus' (WCC) efforts to relocate the American Philological Association's (APA) 1980 Convention from Louisiana because the state had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The WCC annually attended the APA's national convention yet worked specifically to promote women's scholarship in Classical Studies. The WCC also hoped to advance opportunities for women outside of their academic society, leading to their participation in the NOW ERA Boycott, which refused to support the economies of states that rejected the ERA. After the APA repeatedly denied the WCC's proposals for relocation, the WCC promoted a 'partial boycott' of the 1980 APA convention, prompting members of both the WCC and APA to question whether an academic organization dedicated primarily to Classical scholarship should take a position on this political matter. The ensuing debates among members reflect the diverse risks that organizations must weigh in combining professionalism with politics. Politics can promote conflict in even the smallest of settings; therefore, professional societies must proceed with caution in the face of a political decision, constantly reconsidering what affects their choices will have for the future of their organizations.

Introduction

On December 29, 1977, at the American Philological Association's (APA) annual convention, the Women's Classical Caucus (WCC) voted unanimously in favor of the following resolution:

- (1) The APA shall no longer meet in any state which has not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment.
- (2) The APA shall find an alternative location for the 1980 meeting if the State of Louisiana does not pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the next legislative session.
- (3) The APA shall make public its reasons for taking any action prescribed by this resolution (Skinner 1978a, 2).

The subsequent morning, the WCC presented this resolution to the APA Board of Directors, comprised of 11 men and 15 women. Their deliberation featured a variety of arguments, from "disapproval of the ERA itself" to concern over cancelling the "honorable

obligation” they had already established to hold the convention at the Fairmount Hotel in Louisiana (Skinner 1978a, 2). Multiple directors additionally highlighted “the APA’s traditional non-involvement in political issues” (Skinner 1978a, 2). If they relocated the meeting, the APA would demonstrate organizational approval of the ERA, yet it had never taken such a public political stance and, thus, had no guidelines for doing so. With these thoughts in mind, the directors cast their ballots, rejecting the proposal by a single vote.

In response to the APA’s rejection of their proposal, the WCC launched a letter campaign in the Spring of 1978, asking their members to write to APA directors and ask that they reconsider their December 30th decision. Feeling that the directors’ decision trivialized a matter of great importance, the WCC sought to communicate with them that “a commitment to equal rights for women [was] more important than a commitment to a hotel” (Skinner 1978b, 2). By the following Fall, their attempts proved successful, and the APA Directors agreed to poll their membership at the upcoming annual meeting (Skinner 1978c). Thus, at the 1978 APA Convention, the WCC’s resolution fell into the hands of nearly 550 classicists in attendance. Only a small percentage of this number were WCC members; therefore, the first time that most APA members heard about the WCC’s proposal occurred on the same day in which they had to vote on it. Once the votes were tallied, the results read as follows: approximately, 100 classicists abstained, 300 favored keeping the 1980 meeting in New Orleans, and only 150 voted in favor of the WCC’s resolution.

Despite the WCC’s efforts, they were unsuccessful in their attempts to find an alternative meeting location. Shifting their focus to WCC members and the 150 APA members who had voted for relocation, the WCC continued to promote its resolution through Spring and Fall newsletters. This means of communication allowed the WCC Board of Directors to initiate additional letter campaigns and encourage members to circulate pro-ERA pamphlets within their departments. The WCC nevertheless continued to support members who needed to attend the 1980 meeting in search of employment. During this time, the WCC Board acted through the voice of Marilyn B. Skinner, their WCC newsletter editor, working to demonstrate growing support for the ERA among classicists. Individually, however, each WCC and APA member faced a decision about their involvement in the 1980 meeting: they could boycott the Louisiana convention, attend while publicly supporting the ERA, or participate in the convention as if the resolution had never existed.

The Equal Rights Amendment of 1972

In its earliest form, the Equal Rights Amendment, first named the “Lucretia Mott Amendment” by its creator, suffragette Alice Paul, read thus: “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction” (S.J.Res. 21). For the following 50 years, dedicated supporters presented the amendment to Congress until its passage by both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. On March 22, 1972, Congress sent the following revised and edited ERA to state legislatures for ratification:

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification (H.J. Res. 208).

For each amendment since the 18th, with the exclusion of the 19th, Congress allotted seven years for its ratification “to avoid the uncertainty of having amendments linger indefinitely before the States” (Kalfus 1999, 437). Therefore, Congress required three-fourths of the states (38) to approve the ERA by 1979 for it to become the 27th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. By 1973, only a year after the amendment arrived in state legislatures, 30 states had ratified the ERA. However, after this initial wave of support, a mere five additional states ratified the amendment while five states also rescinded their initial votes, returning the total number of ratifications to 30.

As the March 22, 1979 deadline approached, the National Organization for Women (NOW) mobilized over 100,000 ERA supporters to march in Washington, D.C., for an extended ratification period (Francis 2015). This proposed extension sparked dispute among Constitutional scholars who felt that if “sufficient support for the ERA” existed, there would be no need for an extension (Berry 1986, 70). Extension supporters, on the other hand, urged that the recent rescissions reflected a need for ongoing debate on the ERA. In the wake of this controversy, the House and Senate approved the extension, lengthening the deadline until June 30, 1982. However, no additional states ratified the amendment during this period, and the ERA failed to become the 27th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The APA and the WCC

In 1972, the same year that Congress sent the ERA to state legislatures for ratification, women classicists banded together to form the Women’s Classical Caucus, an affiliate organization to the APA. The majority of WCC members were also APA members; therefore, the entire WCC membership met only once a year at the APA’s annual convention. The APA, founded in 1869 as the foremost academic society for North American Classical scholars, held annual three-day meetings for classicists to present papers, attend panels, and seek employment among a variety of additional activities. Of the 164 first APA members, only eight were women (McManus 1997). By 1972, over a century after the APA’s inception, 70% of APA members identified as male while 30% identified as female. This gender division closely reflected the distribution of male and female classicists teaching at the collegiate level in 1972-North America (American Philological Association 1973).

Although women held eight of the APA’s 101 Presidencies by 1971—the year before the WCC’s founding—women classicists continued to experience sexism within their departments as well as from the APA. Within the APA’s published 1971 *Proceedings*, “the words *woman/women* do not appear at all,” and a report in the same *Proceedings* on employment in Classics contains all male, he/him/his pronouns (McManus 1997, 35). Furthermore, the experiences of women in Classics Departments across the country fared little better. For example, Sarah Pomeroy, one of the founders of the WCC and its first chairperson, “lost a tenure track position at Hunter College in 1966 because she became pregnant” (McManus 1997, 36). Frustrated with discrimination yet empowered by the recent re-emergence of the women’s movement, APA members Marilyn Arthur, Leona Ascher, Judith Hallet, Sarah Pomeroy, John Sullivan, and Dorothea Wender founded the Women’s Caucus of the APA, an organization “open to all individuals... concerned with the problems encountered by women involved in the classics profession” (McManus 1997, 37). Working in Classics, a field where women’s voices were traditionally absent—the first APA panel devoted to Classical research on women did not occur until 1972—the WCC founders aimed to create a space for mentorship and increased discussion of women in Classical academia while working to revive the voices of women in antiquity.

The earliest published record of WCC members dates to the fall of 1976, by which time there were 100 registered WCC members, 95 of whom were women. Furthermore, nearly all women members of the WCC were APA members, yet there was still a small percentage of women involved with the APA who did not join the WCC. WCC members met annually at the APA's Convention where they routinely held a general-body meeting, a panel on ancient women, a WCC breakfast, and an evening cash-bar event. A steering committee led the organization, maintaining contact with WCC members throughout the year via Spring and Fall editions of the WCC newsletter. From these publications, the steering committee and officers shared information on the WCC's governance, upcoming meetings, and employment opportunities. The newsletters additionally praised women classicists for their achievements and cited WCC members' research and published works.

The NOW ERA Boycott

At the Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women in June 1966, a group of women privately gathered, frustrated that Conference leaders refused their attempts to introduce a resolution "to end sex discrimination in employment" (National Organization for Women 2011). Attendee Analoyce Clapp recalls, "28 women met to set up a temporary organization for this purpose: To take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (National Organization for Women 2011). The National Organization for Women (NOW) resulted from this conversation and proceeded to quickly blossom. By October 1966, NOW contained 300 female and male members and was on its way to becoming "the largest organization of feminist grassroots activists in the United States" (National Organization for Women 2016).

Having promoted passage of the ERA since 1967, NOW formed programs to endorse the ERA, learning from other organizations' demonstrations of ERA support. In 1974, the American Association of University Women became the first organization to announce an economic boycott in support of the ERA, refusing to meet in states that had not ratified the Amendment. Within the following year, the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors and Professional Women's Clubs adopted similar policies. Inspired by this "lobbying tool," the NOW National Conference created a "Boycott Committee" in 1977 to encourage other organizations to "[adopt] a resolution establishing a policy of not holding conventions or meetings in states where the ERA [remained] unratified" (Loutzenhiser 1980, 507-8). The boycott then became colloquially known as the "NOW Boycott" or the "ERA Boycott."

Once NOW began promoting the ERA economic boycott, a diverse range of organizations started to participate, including the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, and the Unitarian Universalist Association. As academic organizations, such as the Philosophy of Science Organization, American Political Science Association, and the APA, also began to demonstrate support of the NOW boycott, a new form of controversy arose. Members in these and similar groups began questioning the "moral responsibilities, if any, that professional societies [had] with respect to such social issues" (Hull 2002, 552). Regardless of their personal feelings, some scholars felt that "social activism [was] not [their] role" as members of scholarly organizations (Hull 2002, 556). Others believed that if the social movement was "closely connected" to the goals of the organization, participation should be indisputable (Hull 2002, 556). Still, additional members questioned whether participation placed the desires of individual members over those of the whole society, alienating dissenting members in the process.

The WCC and the NOW Boycott

The conflict that plagued academic organizations in deciding their role in the NOW Boycott extended to members of the WCC and APA, evinced by the WCC's annual questionnaires. Each year, the WCC distributed questionnaires to candidates running for positions on the APA Board. In the three years leading up to the controversial 1980 meeting, at least one section of the questionnaire asked candidates to share their thoughts on meeting in Louisiana despite the state's refusal to ratify the ERA. In the resulting responses from 15 men and 6 women running for the APA offices of Second Vice President and Board Director, no candidate expressed outright disapproval of the ERA itself, yet many questioned whether the APA, an academically motivated organization, should involve itself in the politics of the NOW boycott (Skinner 1978d, 1979c, 1980d). These candidates further grappled with how much to allow their political views to influence their status as “[classicists] and [members] of a professional organization” (Skinner 1978d, 12).

Responding to a 1978 question asking candidates if they favored “the proposal that the APA should no longer meet in any state which has not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment,” Martin Ostwald, candidate for APA Director, bluntly advocated against APA involvement: “No. The APA is a professional, not a political, organization” (Skinner 1978d, 14). Over half of the remaining candidates' replies echoed Ostwald's, expressing concern over the APA's present and future participation in politics if they joined the NOW Boycott. As additional candidate for Director, Eleanor Huzar, expressed, “taking the ERA stand would . . . provide a precedent of political involvement for the membership which could cause prolonged controversies” (Skinner 1978d, 13-14). The WCC had sparked conversation among men and women classicists who were questioning how participation in the NOW Boycott would affect the APA in the future. Additionally, by this time, ratification of the ERA had slowed to a dramatic halt. Every state that would ratify the ERA had already done so, and some states were even working to rescind their initial vote, compelling classicists to wonder whether the APA should take its first political stand in a dying movement.

However, if the APA refused to participate in the NOW Boycott, members of both groups could still interpret their refusal as a political stance against the ERA (Spear 1984). 1979 Candidate for Director, Eva C. Keuls, struggled with interpreting the APA's decision as an affront to women in Classics and across the country: “I regret that the APA passed up this opportunity to take a public stance in favor of women's rights” (Skinner 1979c, 14). Keuls viewed the APA's inaction as a missed opportunity to participate in a movement larger than the classical field. Furthermore, for many WCC members, especially WCC newsletter Editor Marilyn B. Skinner, ignoring the NOW Boycott undermined the work of women classicists, contributing to their continued struggle for “personal and professional equality” (Skinner 1979b, 5). Skinner perceived the APA's refusal to join the economic boycott as yet another instance of a male dominated group ignoring the needs of its minority members, effectively writing the matter off when it directly impacted the lives of women classicists. Certainly, then, some classicists interpreted the APA's refusal as disapproval of the ERA or, if nothing else, a statement that the ERA—and, by extension, the women whose rights the ERA affected—were not worthy of the APA's attention.

A mediating question then arose: could the APA and WCC reach a compromise to satisfy both those in favor of the NOW Boycott and those in disagreement? Recognizing that the APA had already signed a contract with the Fairmount Hotel in New Orleans, 1979 Candidate for APA Director, Eleanor Leach, suggested that rather than relocate the convention, the APA “[give] Women's Studies a very prominent place on the program—perhaps in a featured panel—and

[make] some arrangements for publicity in local news media” (Skinner 1979c, 14). Additional members shared Leach’s position on taking smaller-scale action in the name of “financial and legal [obligations] to the 1980 Convention site as well as “proper geographic distribution of APA meetings,” planning instead to hold future meetings in states that supported the ERA (Skinner 1980d, 12). Members of both the APA and WCC wrestled with personal involvement in the 1980 APA Convention as well as the APA’s organizational involvement. The range in positions garnered from these questionnaires reflects the diverse and often contradicting views of WCC and APA members, foreshadowing the inter- and intra-organizational conflict that would arise both during and after the 1980 Convention.

WCC Last Efforts

In the wake of the APA’s resolve to hold their 1980 meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, the WCC prepared for the convention by mobilizing its members through multiple initiatives. From 1978 to 1980, the WCC officers communicated their plans to WCC and APA members through the WCC newsletter. In the Spring of 1979, WCC officers began encouraging those in favor of relocation to withhold their dues, ranging from \$8 to \$20, from the APA and donate the money to the NOW-ERA fund. Through articles which newsletter editor Marilyn B. Skinner organized, the WCC officers further encouraged members to send letters of disapproval to the APA Secretary, explaining their lack of satisfaction with the APA’s decision and detailing why they choose to withhold dues (Skinner 1978a, 1978b). Lastly, the WCC officers planned to organize a mass mailing to all APA members concerning the withheld dues, yet the organization soon retracted this plan upon realizing that they did not possess the funds necessary to mail so many letters to the APA members (Skinner 1979b).

In addition to these actions, the WCC also outlined the extent of their involvement in the 1980 Convention. Although the WCC board made their disapproval of the 1980 meeting quite clear through their efforts to retract funds from the APA, they did not completely discourage WCC members from attending the convention. Moreover, the WCC leadership never called for a complete boycott of the convention out of understanding for the WCC members who felt compelled to go to the convention in order to seek employment, to attend interviews with prospective employers, or to conduct interviews with prospective employees (Skinner 1979a). While the WCC officers refused to criticize members by ordering a complete boycott of the convention, they nonetheless spoke against attendance of the meeting unless completely necessary: “The WCC strongly urges any member who has no immediate reason to attend the APA meetings to stay away” (Skinner 1979a, 3). Furthermore, in an effort to emphasize their absence from the convention, the WCC steering committee planned to cancel the WCC’s traditional convention panel, breakfast, and evening cash-bar events for the 1980 Louisiana meeting.

In the WCC’s final newsletter to its members before the 1980 convention, they proposed strategies for those who felt compelled to attend. As an extension of the NOW Boycott, they primarily urged that members in attendance contribute “as little money as possible into the economy of the State of Louisiana” through finding alternative housing with local friends or family (Skinner 1980c, 3). They also suggested dining only at restaurants which supported the ERA, yet the WCC did not include a list of such restaurants nor suggest how members might locate them individually. To continue spreading the WCC’s message throughout the convention, the WCC officers planned to provide petition flyers and buttons for supporters to circulate at the convention site. Finally, they urged members to publicize their activism by garnering the attention of local New Orleans media (Skinner 1979b). The WCC put forth these tactics to both discourage

participation in the APA 1980 Convention and support members who needed to attend. However, the WCC Officers had no means of knowing in what capacity members would attend the New Orleans meeting or whether their efforts would have a meaningful effect on the Louisiana economy, and thus further their goal of promoting ERA ratification.

Epilogue

On December 29, 1980, the New Orleans' *Times-Picayune*, the city's foremost newspaper, addressed the WCC's 'partial boycott.' WCC steering committee member Eleanor Wimett shared with the *Times* that "many conventioners [stayed] with friends . . . and . . . brought food from home" in an effort to follow the WCC's suggestion to contribute as little money as possible to the Louisiana economy (Fuller 1980, 1). In addition, Kim Gandy, the Louisiana NOW Coordinator, helped table at the convention with pro-ERA buttons. However, many of those in attendance who had interviews or were attempting to find work were reluctant to wear one lest they be negatively judged by potential employers.

Despite this success in garnering media attention for the WCC's partial boycott, in the Fall of 1981, the APA Secretary-Treasurer released startling statistics on the convention's monetary achievement. Of 1000 rooms blocked for the APA convention, attendees occupied 932, the 2nd highest APA convention total in the organization's history. Furthermore, excluding room service and additional charges, hotels received about \$130,000 in revenue from the convention, a 10-15% increase from the previous year's meeting in Massachusetts, a state far more accessible to the demographic of APA members (Bagnall 1981).

Most prominently, as a product of the WCC boycott, divisions arose between the APA and WCC. APA members who disapproved of the boycott felt that the WCC members' refusal to send in their dues had gone too far, punishing the Classical society as a whole instead of working directly against anti-ERA groups (Skinner 1980b). Many WCC members felt that the majority male APA continued to mask women's voices and refused to incorporate women's needs and ideas (Skinner 1980a). These tensions were then exacerbated by the sparse communication between the WCC officers and APA board, reduced only to written correspondences.

In the first article of the WCC's 1980 Fall newsletter, printed immediately before the December convention, Marilyn B. Skinner reflected on the "tensions and discomforts" of the WCC and APA's relationship (Skinner 1980b, 2). However, the organizations, sharing many members, soon began to repair their relationship. Sensing this division, in the Spring 1981 WCC newsletter, the APA released the following "Regrets Resolution," offering promise for the future of both organizations:

We deeply regret the absence of those many, dedicated members who felt that they could not in good conscience attend a convention in a state which had not yet ratified the Equal Rights amendment. We would hope in the future to avoid any situation which would create divisiveness among us or prevent full participation on the part of all our members (Culham 1981, 2).

Contemplating both the WCC's attempts to relocate the APA's 1980 Louisiana Convention and the resulting tensions from the APA's resolve to hold the Convention in New Orleans reveals the implications of organizations' involvement in political movements. When faced with making political choices, organizations must understand that no decision can exist in isolation. Repercussions accompany each choice, and the likelihood of appeasing every member within an

organization is slim. In addition, organizations cannot simply refuse to make a decision—a group of members will automatically perceive their inaction as a political stance against the matter at hand. Regardless of an organization’s academic status, its membership is comprised of people with a diverse array of identities and beliefs that influence their lives and perceptions of society. If an organization attempts to ignore a political issue, it discredits its members who the political issue directly impacts.

Therefore, no matter what conclusion an organization comes to, it must foresee the diverse effects its actions will have for its members. Furthermore, an organization should foster discussion among members, allowing all people to have their voice heard. Only when its members feel heard can the organization return to focusing on its foremost goals as a cohesive unit.

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