

FANNIE BARRIER WILLIAMS

Women in Politics

NOVEMBER 1894

Fannie Barrier Williams (1855–1944), born in Brockport, New York, and the first African American to graduate from Brockport Normal School, quickly became part of Chicago's black elite when she moved there with her lawyer husband in 1887. The only African American woman appointed to a position on the Board of Lady Managers that oversaw the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, Williams spoke to its World's Congress of Representative Women, one of the few African American women offered a public role at the world's fair. Her speech, "The Intellectual Progress of Colored Women," presented a sweeping survey of black women's aspirations and accomplishments but said little about formal politics. In this 1894 article, Williams challenged women to use their new-found political power wisely: "We ought not to put ourselves in the humiliating position of being loved only for the votes we have." More specifically, she worried that if black women voted along strict party lines, such a stance might benefit the interests of whites in power more than the general interests of African Americans. To avoid that outcome she called on women "to array themselves, when possible, on the side of the best, whether that best be inside or outside of party lines." For African Americans traditionally loyal to the Republican Party for its role in ending slavery, the invitation to jump party lines on matters of principle was a fraught issue.

American women are beginning to see the end of their years of struggle for equality of suffrage. The arguments are nearly all in and the signs of a favorable verdict are everywhere apparent to those who understand the trend of things.

Fragmentary suffrage, now possessed by women in nearly all the states of the union, carries with it the triumph of the principle contended for, and its extension to complete and national suffrage is as logically certain as any thing can be. Just how soon the complete enfranchisement of women will be realized depends largely upon the use we make of our present gains. The false reasoning of the opposition having been overcome, we have now to fight only the prejudices in opposition. When

the opposing man sees women actually voting, and looks in vain for the evils predicted, his prejudices will yield and he will gladly join the forces that are fast making for their complete emancipation.

Nothing in the whole social progress of humanity is more interesting and more suggestive of the persistency of rightness than the steady gain of womankind in those larger relationships of human life and civilization, in which the stronger, as well as the gentler virtues, are tending to increase her importance.

Are women ready to assume the responsibilities of this new recognition of their worth? This question is of immense importance to colored women. For the first time in our history we are to receive public attention and have our womanly worth tested by the high standards of important public duties.

Must we begin our political duties with no better or higher conceptions of our citizenship than that shown by our men when they were first enfranchised? Are we to bring any refinement of individuality to the ballot box? Shall we learn our politics from spoilsmen and bigoted partisans, or shall we learn it from the school of patriotism and an enlightened self-interest? If our enfranchisement means only a few more votes added to the republican and democratic sides, respectively, of political issues, there certainly has been no gain for the cause of principle in American politics. If our enfranchisement is to contribute nothing to the corrective forces of independence in American politics, there will be much disappointment among those who believed that the cause of temperance, municipal reform and better education would be more surely advanced when the finer virtues of women became a part of the political forces of the country.

Our women in Chicago are now, for the first time, getting a taste of politics. By virtue of a recent act of wholesome generosity of our legislators, women are permitted to vote for trustees of the state university. Two women have been duly nominated on the republican and democratic tickets respectively for this office. Fortunately, the nominees are equally meritorious candidates. Although the offices to be filled are purely nonpartisan, our newly fledged suffragists are ranging themselves eagerly in the democratic and republican camps and are campaigning for their respective sides on purely party grounds. So far

the campaign speeches and methods have not been elevated in the least degree above the dead level of partisanship. Our own women, too, have gone into the fight with a party zeal that would be satisfactory to the most exacting "boss." Without wishing to discredit the good motives of our women, or to criticise captiously their conduct in the campaign, I believe this new opportunity for self-help and advancement ought not to be lost sight of in our thirst for public favors, or in our eagerness to help any grand old "party." We ought not to put ourselves in the humiliating position of being loved only for the votes we have. The sincerity of white women, who have heretofore so scorned our ambitions and held themselves aloof from us in all our struggles for advancement, should be, to a degree, questioned. It would be much more to our credit if we would seek, by all possible uses of our franchise, to force these ambitious women candidates and women party managers to relent their cruel opposition to our girls and women in the matter of employment and the enjoyment of civil privileges. We should never forget that the exclusion of colored women and girls from nearly all places of respectable employment is due mostly to the meanness of American women, and in every way that we can check this unkindness by the force of our franchise should be religiously done. If, however, we burden our hearts and minds solely with the anxiety for the success of a party ticket for party reasons, we shall be guilty of the same folly and neglect of self-interest that have made colored men for the past twenty years vote persistently more for the special interests of white men than for the peculiar interests of the colored race.

There is no good reason why our women should not be made to feel sufficiently independent not only to make their peculiar interests a motive in the exercise of the franchise, but also to array themselves, when possible, on the side of the best, whether that best be inside or outside of party lines. Much more ought to be expected of colored women in 1894 in the exercise of their suffrage than was expected of the colored men who first voted under the 15th Amendment.

It is now a good time in woman's clubs and organizations of all kinds for women to prepare themselves, by the best lessons of citizenship, to exert a wholesome influence in the politics of the future. The importance of the suffrage, as a means

to complete emancipation from the impositions of prejudice should be eagerly taught, and brought home to the conscience of our women everywhere. It is more than probable that issues of immeasurable importance to the weal of our country, and requiring for their adjustment a larger amount of intelligent patriotism than has yet been exacted from the American conscience, will make demands on us by the time universal suffrage becomes one of the organic laws of the land.