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Joshua Hall
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Public Choice Analyses of American Economic History

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Contents

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Chapter 1
Club Women and the Provision of Local Public Goods

Jayme Lemke and Julia R. Norgaard

1.1 Introduction

As non-voting citizens with limited opportunities for formal education, women in the 19th and early 20th century United States had to get a little creative in their attempts to influence their communities and the nation. Many traditional paths to influence were made difficult if not impossible for most women to access. However, this does not mean that women were not politically and practically influential in their communities in significant ways.

One particularly important vehicle for women seeking to make a public difference was the formation of clubs, associations, and other voluntarily formed social organizations. Navigating within historical constraints, "women used clubs as a means of adaptation to the role society had set for them" (Martin 1987, p. 30). These clubs were a way for women to get together, educate themselves, and figure out how to better their communities. Over time, these women's clubs became constructive segments of society and an opportunity for women to gain a legitimate voice and to influence their communities.

Club women in the 19th century successfully organized the production of a wide variety of club goods and goods commonly considered to be public in nature. The goods provided by women's clubs included educational services, such as kindergartens, work training programs for the poor or unemployed, and training for teachers; social safety net programs, such as orphanages, settlement homes for recent immigrants, and care for the aged and sick; and a wide variety of public amenities and services, including trash removal, street lighting, parks and playgrounds,

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sidewalks, community landscaping, and conservation (Knupfer 1997; Lerner 1974). Wood (1914, p. 80), Manager of the Bureau of Information for the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1914, wrote:

> Thousands of towns, cities and hamlets can bear testimony to the work of these organized women: there are more sanitary and better ventilated schoolhouses; there are more numerous parks and more cleanly streets; there are district nurses who visit the sick poor in their homes and give instruction in the simple rules of wholesome living; there are sanitary drinking fountains for man and beast; there are vacation schools and playgrounds; there are juvenile courts and equal guardianship laws; there are cleaner markets; there are many free public libraries and thousands of traveling libraries; there is a lessening of objectionable bill-board ornamentation; there is a determined campaign, nation-wide, against the housefly; there is a more intelligent knowledge of the prevention and care of tuberculosis; in short, there is scarcely any movement for the betterment of living conditions or for the social and moral uplift of the American people that has not received a helping hand from the club women.

These and other club and local public goods were regularly provided by women's clubs throughout the 19th century in nearly every region of the country. They were widespread, productive, and fulfilled many of the functions that would come to be absorbed by state and local governments in the 20th century.

The impressive extent of public goods provision by women's clubs calls into question the idea that individuals voluntarily acting to advance a shared interest will inevitably fail because of free rider problems. In the classic formulation, collective action is likely to fail in any group of significant size because no individual actor will find it in their interest to contribute to generating benefits that they will enjoy even if they fail to contribute. In the words of Olson (1965, p. 7) "... when a number of individuals have a common or collective interest—when they share a single purpose or objective—individual, unorganized action (as we shall soon see) will either not be able to advance that common interest at all, or will not be able to advance that interest adequately".

This attitude towards the voluntary provision of public goods by individuals led Elinor Ostrom (1987) to suggest an alternative approach to Olson's theory. Although the incentive alignment problems highlighted by Olson's theory are substantial, she argued that the approach fell short when it assumed incentive alignment problems would lead to provision failures. Ostrom characterized this as a theory of collective inaction rather than a theory of collective action, one that couldn't explain the observed behavior of individuals in public contexts (Ostrom 1987, [1998] 2014). Similarly, Shepsle (1989) describes the rational choice theory of collective action as taking an essentially atomistic conception of individual behavior, attempting to explain social outcomes by simply aggregating individual self-interested behaviors. The problem is that "[t]here is no glue holding the atoms together; there is no society" (Shepsle 1989, p. 134). As a result, behavior like voting for reasons other than pure expression and voluntarily contributing to public goods go unexplained, or are offered as evidence of irrational behavior (Cason and Mui 1997; Bolton et al. 1998; Bardsley 2008).

In this paper, we call attention to a phenomenon that has been under-recognized by other approaches to the study of public goods provision. In addition, we contribute to the study of historical institutions and institutional change by interacting the historical

study of women's social organizations with institutional analysis and theoretical approaches to the study of collective action (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Olson 1965; Oates 1972; Ostrom 2010). There are two lessons we draw from this exploration of the history of women's clubs. First, the production of club goods consumed and provided by the members—most notably opportunities for educational and social advancement—were an important device that encouraged both local public goods provision and monitoring of contributing members. Second, the nested nature of women's clubs resulted in significant interaction and entanglement between women's clubs and local governments in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Sect. 1.2, we offer a general history of women's clubs in the 19th and early 20th century United States. In Sect. 1.3, we introduce relevant theory and articulate the logic of the provision of local public goods, which in reality are somewhere between public and private goods as traditionally defined. In Sect. 1.4, we discuss the role of educational and social opportunities as encouraging and structuring the provision of local public goods by women's clubs and explain the logic behind the relationships between women's clubs and local governments in a polycentric system. Section 1.5 concludes.

1.2 History of Women's Clubs in the 19th and Early 20th Century US

Women formed clubs for a variety of productive purposes throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Their influence became so notable that in 1917, when United States Commissioner of Education Claxton (1917) feared that entry into World War I would cause the public schools to suffer, he reached out to club women; "our schools must now be so sustained and improved as to enable them better to prepare our boys and girls for life and work in the new age ... in all this probably no others can be quite so helpful as the club women of the country" (Claxton 1917, p. 327). One assessment of women's club activity estimates that there were 680 clubs in operation in the United States by 1839 (Bowden 1930). And by the 1920s, there may have been as many as six million women involved in women's club activities (Bowden 1930; Scheer 2002). These clubs were financed both through dues and through fundraising within their communities.

Women's clubs were particularly prominent in the Northeast in the early part of the 19th century. As the country shifted westward, so did women's associations. By the 1830s, there were robust networks of women's clubs in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and at Oberlin College and as far west as Jacksonville, IL (Melder 1967). In the late 19th and early 20th century, black women's clubs and women's clubs formed to provide basic community and social services in the Western territories also became important components of the ever-growing network of American women's clubs (Lerner 1974; Scheer 2002).

1.2.1 Religious Roots and Community Support

The first women's clubs were formed for the purposes of supporting religious missions and caring for those in need. Religiously-oriented clubs such as The Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes and the Female Domestic Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New York and its Vicinity supported religious causes in a variety of ways. They raised funds for religious missionaries, operated Sunday schools, distributed Bibles, and participated in "observing and reforming the religion and morals of the inhabitants" (Melder 1967, p. 235). Some of these clubs grew quite large. For example, The New Hampshire Missionary Society was supported by a network of over 50 local women's clubs whose members paid dues of one cent each week. And the women of the Female Missionary Society of the Western District of the state of New York raised over $2,000, approximately $34,000 in today's dollars, from across 46 towns and villages in 1816 alone (Melder 1967).

Women's clubs also served as important social safety nets for the poor, ill, abandoned, or otherwise struggling members of local communities. These clubs often focused their energies on women, who had fewer ways to support themselves in the absence of family support. The Cambridge Female Humane Society was one early version of such a club. Founded in a small village in Massachusetts in 1814, these club women were focused on caring for the "indigent sick", particularly females and those who could not work to support themselves (Scott 1991). They would pay for the doctors' and apothecaries' bills of the people in their care by soliciting support and assistance from their fellow community members or raising money on their own, often in rather entrepreneurial ways. For example, the Society engaged in profitable speculation by buying wood in the summer when the price was low and wood was abundant, storing it until the winter, and then selling it for a higher price (Scott 1991).

Other early women's clubs were formed expressly for the purpose of caring for orphans or widows. One of the first of these organizations was the Impartial Female Humane Society, founded in Baltimore in 1802. They were focused on providing care for widows by helping them find employment. They eventually broadened their efforts to address aging women's needs, and the Society is still serving women today as the Pickersgill Retirement Community (Pickersgill Retirement Community 2018). Other similar organizations were formed in Philadelphia, New York, Salem, Newburyport, Massachusetts, and other towns and cities throughout the Northeastern United States (Melder 1967). The Phyllis Wheatley Home in Chicago, IL was particularly celebrated in the early 20th century for their poverty relief efforts. This club provided low cost accommodations to support women and girls in need. Some of these women were single girls seeking work or education at the nearby University of Chicago. Between 1907 and 1914, members of the Phyllis Wheatley Club had lodged over three hundred and assisted over five hundred women and girls in employment searches (Knupfer 1997).

1.2.2 Provision of Local Public Goods and Club Goods

In addition to serving as social safety nets, women's clubs have been actively involved with both the production and provision of education—both for themselves and for their communities—from the earliest days of the women's club movement. In 1800, associations in Baltimore and New York opened schools to teach the less fortunate "the 3 r's, needlework, good conduct, and morals" (Melder 1967, p. 237). Some of these clubs, such as the Female Society for Relief of Indigent Women and Children, were interested in promoting education as a remedy to poverty. This Rhode Island-based club founded and managed a school for children beginning in 1801 in order to provide basic education to the poor and those with little access to more formal education (Scott 1991). Many clubs were particularly interested in providing kindergarten as a supplement to existing public education. These clubs believed that kindergarten was an essential component to children's education and advancement into a structured schooling environment. The Pennsylvania Federation of Women's Clubs passed a resolution that recommended starting free kindergartens to other clubs and educational committees, something that is largely provided by local governments today (Ward [1906] 2003).

Women's clubs also aimed at educating the adult populations in their communities, including establishing libraries to increase access to reading material for community members. For example, a women's club in New Mexico "succeeded in raising the money to build and equip, without the aid of any great philanthropist, a ten-thousand-dollar library which has a collection of about four thousand volumes, maintains a children's room with story-telling hours for the little children" (Wood 1914, p. 81). Some black women's clubs also organized community educational opportunities by arranging for visiting guest lectures or operating libraries, sometimes in cooperation with local colleges (Lerner 1974). An estimated 75–80% of all public libraries in the United States were started by women's clubs (Scheer 2002). In a study of women's clubs active between 1900 and 1925 in California, Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado, Scheer (2002) found that 42% of these clubs administered local libraries and 15% established kindergartens or other programs to provide or encourage education. Not all libraries formed by women's clubs and other voluntary associations were enduring institutions—libraries in the Northeastern United States survived an average of thirty-five years (McMullen 1987)—but many eventually came to be supported and even managed by local governments, contributing to their durability (Dain 1996).

Women's clubs along the Western frontier provided local public services that were often sorely lacking within their barely-established communities. Many of the Western clubs were quite small, with twenty-five active members or less, and were providing services in locales where financial resources were difficult to come by, which makes their accomplishments all the more notable (Scott 1991; Scheer 2002). In Scheer's (2002) study of Western women's clubs, he found that 34% of clubs provided public works or social services for their communities. These social services ranged from building parks and community centers, to arranging for trash removal and street repairs, to subsidizing health clinics and tuberculosis screenings

(Scott 1991; Watts 1993; Scheer 2002). Women's clubs also played an important role in the water and other environmental conservation efforts that first emerged as important considerations in the dry desert and desert-adjacent areas of the West (Binkley 2002). They were also instrumental in beautification movements. The Ladies of the Outdoor Circle in Hawaii conserved and developed the natural beauty of their local landscape by planting shade trees and hibiscus, cleaning up vacant lots, and removing old infrastructure (Watts 1993).

Black women's clubs became important providers of local public goods in the years following emancipation (Lerner 1974). In addition to the standard slate of local public goods provided by other women's clubs, black women's clubs established social service programs targeted towards integrating recently freed slaves and providing community services that existed but were denied to the black population. For example, in Atlanta in 1908, there were no playgrounds or parks for black children until the Atlanta Neighborhood Union women's club procured permission to use space on the grounds of Morehouse College and solicited donations of equipment and workmen from local businesses (Lerner 1974). Black women's clubs continued to provide alternatives to a variety of goods and services otherwise denied to African American populations well into the 20th century. For example, the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs provided housing from 1919 to 1950 for black students who were denied access to University of Iowa campus dormitories (Breaux 2002).

1.2.3 Political and Regulatory Influence

Similar to how the kindergartens and libraries created by women's clubs eventually came to be provided by local governments, women's clubs performed a variety of regulatory functions that would come to be formalized by governments and various regulatory agencies over time. For example, in the 1890s, the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs started school visiting committees which would consist of club members visiting local schools and making suggestions for improvements (Steinschneider 1994). These clubs enabled women to exercise a greater deal of direct influence on their local educational organizations than they would have otherwise because they lacked the right to vote. Later in the century, clubs would become involved with pushing for inspection of both schools and work environments.

An important, and particularly pervasive, function of women's clubs was their advocacy of a variety of social and legal reforms throughout the century. The moral reform of prostitutes and campaigns in opposition to slavery were popular causes of the 1830s women's clubs (Melder 1967). Later in the century, women's clubs became actively involved in working towards temperance, suffrage, and a variety of labor reforms. In 1873, the Women's Christian Temperance Union mobilized its members to advocate for prison reform, child labor laws, protective legislation for working women, and temperance (Watts 1993).

Political and social activism does involve incurring costs for the purpose of bringing about non-excludable improvements in a political or legal order, and as

such is interesting from the perspective of seeking to understand the resolution of collective actions problems. However, in part for the sake of tractability, the focus of this initial exploration will be limited to the direct production or provision of goods and services rather than efforts to bring about changes in law or norms.

1.3 The Theory of Goods that are Neither Public Nor Private

Scholars in economics and political science have distinguished between public and private goods since at least the time of Paul Samuelson's (1954) exposition of the problem of the under-provision of public goods by competitive markets. Public goods are characterized by non-excludability in provision and non-rivalry in consumption. Private goods are characterized by the fact that production and consumption decisions do not affect third parties.

The Bloomington school of public choice and institutional analysis has long emphasized the error in thinking of goods as either purely private or purely public (Ostrom 2010). In reality, the production or consumption decisions surrounding most goods and services have the potential to generate externalities along some margin. Further, there is no such thing as a good that is purely non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Even the most canonical example of a public good, the provision of national defense, requires making decisions about the allocation of goods and services that are both excludable and rivalrous. For example, any given anti-ballistic missile can only cover one region at once, creating rivalry over its allocation, and providers of national defense could actively exclude some regions from consideration of which geographic areas will be protected (Coyne 2015).

Consequently, rather than investing unnecessary effort into dichotomizing goods as either public or private, a more productive path forward is to discuss goods and services in terms of the degree to which they exhibit the characteristics of publicness (Ostrom 2010). The more costly it is for a provider to isolate the benefits to a particular individual and exclude non-contributors, the greater the collective action problem. This degree of publicness is highly sensitive to context, and the same good or service may be subject to a different degree of publicness depending on external characteristics. For example, a highway will be better described by the characteristic of rivalry in consumption during rush hour than during other times of day.[1] Further, some goods may exhibit some of the characteristics associated with publicness, and therefore the existence of a collective action problem, but not exhibit other typical characteristics. For example, common pool resources are rivalrous, but it can be difficult to exclude potential consumers (Ostrom and Ostrom [1977] 1999).

Other types of goods, such as club goods and toll goods, can be produced in such a way that non-contributors are excluded, but consumption within the included group

[1] Thanks to Peter Boettke for providing us with this example.

meets the condition of non-rivalry (Buchanan 1965; Ostrom and Ostrom [1977] 1999). However, not all goods produced by clubs are club goods by this formulation. A 'club,' in the sense of an organization created by its members for the purpose of generating some good or service for mutual benefit, may also produce goods or services that are rivalrous in consumption. However, they produce these goods and services in the club because it would be more costly for each of them to produce the good or service individually than as part of a cooperative arrangement. Similarly, clubs can be viewed as a type of technology by which people create a set of rules that transforms a good that would otherwise seem to be non-excludable into one where non-contributors can be excluded (Ostrom and Ostrom [1977] 1999). For instance, the fish in a lake surrounded by twenty homes, each with a different owner, may seem to be a non-excludable resource. But when the twenty homeowners form a club wherein they agree to a set of terms under which the stream of profits extending from harvesting the fish are shared, the resource becomes more private and less public in nature.

Another important feature of clubs is that the entry and exit—and sometimes expulsion—of members enables clubs to enforce adherence to agreed upon contributions or standards of behavior. The ability of clubs to exclude non-members enables them to discourage free-riding and other bad behavior through internal contracts and enforcement mechanisms (Buchanan 1965; Stringham 2015). Further, due to the voluntary nature of club membership, members are able to opt into preferred governance structures, or create new structures of their own. Competition among clubs encourages club leaders to meet the needs and desires of their members so as to ensure prolonged membership. In this way, clubs function as mutually reinforcing systems in which members and potential members act not only to serve the functions the club was designed to perform, but also to monitor and ensure that other members perform their duties.

Since rules can exist just within the club and do not have to apply to the greater society, individual clubs have the capacity to tailor their monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to suit the preferences of their particular members. These mechanisms dovetail with the incentives and constraints faced by their individual members. With small, local groups, private parties are able to take steps that encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior when it comes to providing goods for their local communities. Private groups take steps to minimize opportunism because they wish to successfully provide specific goods to meet their community's needs (Williamson 2005).

Understanding of the provision of local public goods by women's clubs in the 19th and early 20th centuries will be limited if the full context in which these clubs were operating is not considered. This requires recognition of the polycentric nature of the political system within which the women's clubs were operating. Polycentric systems are those in which there are multiple, autonomous centers of decision making operating within the same overarching structure of rules and relationships (Ostrom et al. 1961; Ostrom 2010, [1991] 2014). Like most providers of local public goods, the women's clubs were operating in a polycentric system in which a variety of governmental and nongovernmental organizations operating at a variety of scales

were engaged in efforts to address some of the same problems as the women's clubs, such as poverty or lack of education. Gaining this understanding requires us to resist oversimplifying our characterization of what it can mean to be a provider or producer of a public good. We must instead recognize that "[t]he public economy need not be an exclusive government monopoly. It can be a mixed economy with substantial private participation in the delivery of public services" (Ostrom and Ostrom [1977] 1999, p. 75). This description is certainly accurate with respect to the activities of the 19th century women's clubs.

1.4 The Organization of Collective Action by Women's Clubs

The organization and methods of the 19th century women's club movement is a significant historical case against which theories of local public goods provision within polycentric systems can be tested. In this section, we focus on two facets of the operation of the women's clubs. First, we consider opportunities for education and social advancement as incentivizing women's contributions to the production of local public goods, and as creating the opportunities for mutual monitoring required for enforcement of consistent contributions to maintenance of the local public goods. Second, we consider how the interactions between the women's clubs and the other layers of the polycentric system within which they were nested affected both the operations of the clubs and the future provision of public goods by local governments.

1.4.1 Overcoming the Collective Action Problem

The greatest struggle that the women's clubs might have expected to face in their efforts to provide local public goods is the free rider problem. Indeed, a member of the leadership of the General Federation of Women's Clubs wrote in 1914 that;

> The truth is that the civic department has now outlived its period of amateur effort, and that the work has grown too large for the hands of the volunteers who are attempting to carry it. If we are to get, not our maximum, but even a fair proportion of efficiency from the splendid unselfish desire now awake and alive in club women who are civic workers, then we must introduce into our work that to which every volunteer work must grow: The cooperation of trained and paid organizers (Wood 1914, p. 86).

Concern that members may shirk or irregularly contribute does not require that we postulate individuals who are selfish or motivated only by narrow economic concerns. Even civic-minded individuals can be reasonably expected to vary in the types of other-regard they would most like to show, and even when goals are shared, there can be reasonable disagreement over the strategies they expect will be most effective. Wherever individuals require regular contributions of time, money, or effort

from others but have no means to enforce contribution, there is potential for irregular contributions to endanger the stability of the project in question.

In the case of women's clubs in the 19th and 20th centuries, the most consistent means through which contributions were monitored and enforced was through the offering of educational and social opportunities that were inaccessible to club members who did not consistently meet the obligations associated with membership. These rewards were particularly valued due to women's exclusion from many traditional educational opportunities. For most of the century, it was not impossible for women to receive some form of advanced education, but opportunities were not widely available and promoted (Martin 1987). In 1837, Oberlin College became the first American university to admit female students. However, it wasn't until the establishment of land grant universities and the relative scarcity of male students during the Civil War years that women came to represent a significant proportion of the college age population. Some of these women attended separate women's institutions established by existing universities, like Barnard College at Columbia University and Evelyn College at Princeton University (Graham 1978). By 1870, the college population was 21% female; by 1890, the college population was 35.9% female (Bolt 1993). So, although women's access to education improved significantly during the later decades of the 19th century, their opportunities remained restricted.

The women's clubs met this demand for opportunities for women. The clubs offered educational conversation and self-study in exchange for their contributions to service projects. Some of these conversations were highly practical, covering topics such as child care, household management, gardening, health, and hygiene (Lerner 1974). Others better fit a more standard model of a liberal education, such as group study of literature and history.[2] Various study-club programs focused on giving women an opportunity to learn and to have a platform on which they could speak their mind. Many women started their club studies as listeners. After gaining their confidence and voice, they would eventually graduate to presenters and discussion leaders within their clubs (Martin 1987). Some clubs invited outside lecturers to speak, including prominent intellectuals or faculty from nearby universities. However, most clubs favored having their own members present because it enhanced their speaking and communications skills (Martin 1987). Clubs enabled both self-study and learning from experts.

As a representative example, consider The Friends in Council Club started in 1866 in Quincy, Illinois (Martin 1987). Starting with a small group of 12 women, this club began as a reading group. Members would practice reading aloud and discussing the readings and chosen topics. They studied a random selection of readings for the first year then spent two years studying the works of Plato. They became an official women's club in 1869 and decided on a more formal method of organization for their studies. They covered "State of the Roman Empire and the Appearance of Christ", "Attempts at National Organization—Cortes of Spain", and "Present Aspect

[2]Despite generally being an exceptional opportunity for women to exercise their voices, there were two subjects that many clubs explicitly discouraged discussing, out of fear of controversy: religion and women's suffrage (Binkley 2002).

of Russia" (Martin 1987, p. 89). The Current Events Club from El Paso Texas spent an entire year studying Roman history. They also read the essays "Can Criminals Be Reclaimed?", "Women as Rulers", and "Sanitation in the Home and Community" to further their knowledge of these subjects, selected by members (Martin 1987, p. 88). Some clubs began as exclusively literary associations and only took on community improvement projects after they were more developed (Binkley 2002).

In additional to education on literature, history, philosophy, and politics, clubs provided women with opportunities to develop business and organization skills through the practice of club organization:

> There is no question that these women were personally, seriously, heavily committed to their organizations. For many, their organizational work was a form of occupation that shaped the hours of their days and gave purpose to their lives. Their clubs, even the most social ones, were not simply a way of filling leisure time, but often a way of eliminating leisure altogether. Their offices took on the aspects of a regular job, with all the incumbent responsibilities, accountabilities, restrictions, challenges, and duties of any job - complete, sometimes, with an expense account. There was always psychic income, though usually not monetary income (Roth 1994, p. 83).

Self-education within women's clubs abounded to the point where self-study and the organization of educational opportunities could be considered a near-universal characteristic of club life. When Caroline French Benton (1915) wrote *The Complete Club Book for Women*, her suggestions on how to start a club were largely focused on the educational aspects of club life, but she recognized that continuing education was inextricable from the public services performed by the clubs. Her description of club membership is that of three groups of women coming together in order to work towards shared goals: (1) "women who have for years been absorbed in home-making and child-rearing" who the club "must offer ... an opportunity for self-development"; (2) "young women,—perhaps college graduates,—[who] have no sympathy with this desire; they have had enough of books! They demand that all the energies of the club shall be devoted to the good of the community, to the 'larger housekeeping,' to preparation for citizenship"; and (3) a group that lies somewhere in the middle, who already maintain a regimen of self-education and value "practical work outside the home" but lack the self-confidence to carry it out on their own (Benton 1915, pp. 1–2).

So, in Benton's treatment, the educational and public goods provision of club activity are intimately linked. They are not simply two activities appearing on the same meeting schedule, but rather are an example of what James Buchanan might have called politics as exchange (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Brennan 2012; Gwartney and Holcombe 2014). Rather than conceptualizing collective action as an enterprise predicated on the use of force, the politics-as-exchange paradigm instead emphasizes the voluntary negotiation over both goals and strategies of public betterment. A group of people, with a common goal but with different ancillary interests and different preferences surrounding the strategy of how that goal should be accomplished, devise a system in which they can cooperate together for mutual benefit. Further, in doing so, they accomplish goals that should be impossible to achieve in a

narrow rational choice conception of politics that emphasizes the free rider problem and other pathologies of collective action.

These educational opportunities were distinct from those sometimes offered by the clubs for non-members, typically poorer women in the community who the club sought to educate as a means of poverty alleviation. For example, the Phyllis Wheatley Club in Chicago offered two distinct sets of classes. The poor women of the community were taught skills such as cooking and sewing, while classes put on for the club members centered around presentations on art, literature, music, philosophy, social theory, political commentary, advances in medicine, and more by club members or invited guest lecturers (Knupfer 1997).

Binkley (2002) suggests that by working in groups that had a decidedly domestic bent, club women evaded some of the antagonism that other more individualistic women faced when attempting to challenge male authorities. Indeed, Mary (Wood 1914, p. 79), Manager of the Bureau of Information for the General Federation of Women's Clubs, wrote in 1914 that women's increasing civic activism was merely "the extension of the home making instinct of women and the broadening out of the mother instinct of women, that led them out into paths of civic usefulness". This view is compatible with the suggestion that these clubs had no grand gender upheaval in mind.

The other primary means through which contributions to club services were ensured was in the important role that clubs played in shaping women's social advancement. The perceived connection between club membership and ones' personal advancement was explicit enough that the motto of the National Association of Colored Women was "lifting as we climb" (Knupfer 1997, p. 222). Club members were often from the middle or upper classes, and club membership was coveted as an indication of ones' social status (Lerner 1974; Knupfer 1997). This was particularly true early on in the women's club movement, with clubs that encouraged broader based participation not emerging until later (Binkley 2002). Social events were both fundraisers and forms of compensation for the club members. A ball thrown by the Phyllis Wheatley Club in 1917 was heralded as "the grandest society affair that Chicago has ever had," with "the most popular and beautiful young ladies and debutantes of the season" in attendance (quoted in (Knupfer 1997, p. 228)).

The promise of social rise through club participation was real. Although most clubs were comprised primarily of upper and middle class women (Knupfer 1997), some clubs, particularly later in the 19th century, brought together women from across social classes. These women became close friends and supported one another beyond the boundaries of formal club activity. Of members of the 38th Street Society, Irene Tracy writes:

> The Club working girl does not feel that she is looked down on, but feels that she has gained the respect, love, sympathy, and loyalty of a stanch friend, while the women of leisure feels she has gained a true friend in the girl who has to go out in the world alone day after day, who has learned so well how to help herself, and is such a true, womanly woman; for there is something strong and self-reliant about her; she is to be trusted (quoted in (Murolo 1997, p. 37)).