Melanie Beals Goan’s new book is a thoroughly researched, lively narrative which reminds us that state-level suffragists wielded the same political and organizational skills as their counterparts at the national level. We meet the suffragists we expect to meet, including Laura Clay and Madeline McDowell Breckinridge, but also many other women who worked with the Kentucky Equal Rights Association (KERA), or, in the case of African American women, who were not included in KERA membership. Writing a state-level history of woman suffrage is not an easy task since it is difficult to include all geographic regions equally and to give each important suffragist her due. Goan, however, has managed to do just that.

Her attention to all geographic areas of Kentucky is one of the strengths of this book and is indicative of the broad yet deep dive into manuscript collections, newspapers, and possibly every available source on Kentucky’s suffrage movement. Goan clearly explains the beginnings of suffrage activism in the older cities in the eastern part of the state, the increasing power of progressive women in Louisville, the challenge of organizing suffrage associations in locales that had to be reached via mule, the indifference of many women to the suffrage fight especially in the western part of the state, and the overt racism of some suffragists from across Kentucky. Her wide lens extends to Kentucky politics and male politicians. Goan makes it clear that KERA members were well-acquainted with the state’s elected officials and knew how to work the world of Kentucky politics. National suffrage leaders appear on occasion in this story, but the focus remains on the political work of the KERA.

While most books on suffrage address race and class, Goan’s strong, nuanced handling of race in Kentucky places it among the best discussions of this crucial aspect of any state level
suffrage movement. The issue was complex. Most KERA members did not want to include African American women in its membership, and African American women apparently were not inclined to join anyway—their reform work was channeled through the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. When white and black women in the late nineteenth century voted in school board elections (later rescinded) in Kentucky, black women turned out in large numbers, perhaps in larger numbers than white women. So, the interest in voting was strong, but social barriers prevented the two very active groups from joining forces and working together.

The woman suffrage centennial has inspired the publication of many new books and even those that closely focus on the decades-long national suffrage story or on the ratification of the nineteenth amendment manage to mention state level and local suffrage efforts. This makes sense, of course, because suffragists not only had to convince women in their states to support suffrage, but also had to pressure their state and national legislators to back them as well. Hence, without state level work, the amendment would have most likely been lost for several more years. Most new books also focus, more strongly than prior works, on the diversity of the movement and the roles that race and class played in the work for the vote. As Goan states, suffrage was a “messy process” (5). Her book is a model for other state-level studies of this messy process as it takes its place among the important new work inspired by the suffrage centennial.

Anita Morgan

IUPUI