

How Women Won the Right to Vote

In 1848, a small group of visionaries started a movement to secure equal rights for women in the United States. But it took more than 70 years just to win the right for women to vote.

After male organizers excluded women from attending an anti-slavery conference, American abolitionists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott decided to call the “First Woman’s Rights Convention.” Held over several days in July 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, the convention brought together about 300 women and 40 men. Among them was Charlotte Woodward, a 19 year-old farm girl who longed to become a printer, a trade then reserved for males.

By the end of the meeting, convention delegates had approved a statement modeled after the Declaration of Independence. The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments began with these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal...”

The declaration then listed “repeated injuries” by men against women, claiming that men had imposed “an absolute tyranny” over women.” These “injuries” included forcing women to obey laws that they had no voice in passing. They included making married women “civilly dead” in the eyes of the law, without rights to property, earned wages, or the custody of their children in a divorce. The injuries included barring women from most “profitable employments” and colleges.

The convention also voted on a resolution that said, “it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right” to vote. This resolution provoked heated debate. It barely passed.

In the middle of the 19th century, most Americans, including most women, accepted the idea of “separate spheres” for males and females. Men worked and ran the government. Women stayed home and cared for the family. This notion was based on the widely held assumption that women were by nature delicate, childlike, emotional, and mentally inferior to men.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (seated) with Susan B. Anthony (standing). (Wikimedia Commons)

In the United States and in other democratic countries, the right to vote (also called the “elective franchise” or “suffrage”) remained exclusively within the men’s “sphere.” The Seneca Falls declaration promoted a radical vision of gender equality in all areas of American public life, including women’s suffrage. Women in most states did not gain the right to vote until 1919, after their role in American society had dramatically changed.

Susan B. Anthony and the Women’s Suffrage Movement

One of the main leaders of the women’s suffrage movement was Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906). Brought up in a Quaker family, she was raised to be independent and think for herself. She joined the abolitionist movement to end slavery. Through her abolitionist efforts, she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1851. Anthony had not attended the Seneca Falls Convention, but she quickly joined with Stanton to lead the fight for women’s suffrage in the United States.

The Civil War interrupted action to secure the vote for women. As a result of the war, however, the role of women in society began to change. Since many men were fighting, their wives and daughters often had to run the family farm, go to work in factories, or take up other jobs previously done by men.

After the war, Anthony, Stanton, and others hoped that because women had contributed to the war economy, they along with the ex-slaves would be guaranteed the right to vote. But most males disagreed.

The Republicans who controlled Congress wrote three new amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment awarded citizenship to all people born within the United States and granted every person “the equal protection of the laws.” The 15th Amendment dealt with voting. It stated: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It failed to grant women the right to vote.

In 1869, Anthony and Stanton organized the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) to work for a federal constitutional amendment, guaranteeing all American women the right to vote. Some activists disagreed with this tactic. They believed the best way to get the vote for women was to persuade the legislatures of each state to grant women suffrage.

Ironically, the first place to allow American women to vote was neither the federal government nor a state. In 1869, the all-male legislature of the Territory of Wyoming passed a law that permitted every adult woman to “cast her vote ... and hold office.” In the West, pioneer women often worked shoulder-to-shoulder with men on farms and ranches and thus proved they were not weak or inferior.

Meanwhile, in Rochester, New York, Anthony conspired with sympathetic male voting registrars who allowed her and other women to cast ballots in the 1872 presidential election. The following year, she was put on trial for illegally voting, a criminal offense. The judge at Anthony’s trial ruled that because she was a woman, she was incompetent to testify. The jury found her guilty, and the judge ordered her to pay a fine of \$100. Anthony told the judge she would never pay it. She never did.

In 1875 in the case of *Minor v. Happersett*, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that women were citizens under the 14th Amendment. But the court went on to say that citizenship did not mean women automatically possessed the right to vote.

The ‘Anthony Amendment’

In 1878, the NWSA succeeded in getting a constitutional amendment introduced in Congress. The proposed amendment stated, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” This became known as the “Anthony Amendment.”

While NWSA lobbied Congress for the “Anthony Amendment,” another advocacy group, the American Woman Suffrage Association, concentrated on campaigning for women’s right to vote in states and territories. Before 1900, only a few of these efforts in the western territories succeeded.

When the Territory of Wyoming applied for statehood in 1889, Congress threatened to deny it admission because its laws allowed women to vote. In response, the territorial legislators wrote Congress, “We will remain out of the Union a hundred years rather than come in without the women.” The following year, Congress admitted Wyoming as a state, the first one with women’s suffrage. This set the trend for a few other Western states to pass women’s suffrage laws (Colorado, 1893; Utah, 1896; and Idaho, 1896).

In 1890, the two national women’s suffrage organizations merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the president. Susan B. Anthony took over in 1892 and remained president until she retired in 1900.

In the late 1800s, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was actually the largest national organization promoting women’s suffrage. The WCTU led a “Home Protection” movement aimed at prohibiting “strong drink” because of its damaging effects on men and their families. WCTU leaders realized that to increase its influence and affect lawmakers, women needed to be able to vote.

White and middle-class women dominated the WCTU, NAWSA, and most other national women’s groups. The groups usually rejected black women for fear of alienating white supporters in the racially segregated South. In addition, the groups rarely recruited immigrant women. The failure to include all women in the movement, while politically expedient, undermined the cause.

Toward the turn of the 20th century, Congress dropped its consideration of the Anthony Amendment, and in the states, most attempts to grant women the right to vote failed. Heavy opposition from traditionalists and liquor and brewing interests contributed to these defeats.

The Role of Women Continued to Change

The concept of a new American woman emerged after 1900. Writers and commentators described the “new woman” as independent and well-educated. She wore loose-fitting clothing, played sports, drove an automobile, and even smoked in public. She supported charities and social reforms,

including women's suffrage. She often chose to work outside the home in offices, department stores, and professions such as journalism, law, and medicine that were just opening up to women. The image of the "new woman" also usually made her white, native born, and middle class.

By 1910, "feminist" was another term being used to describe the "new woman." Feminism referred to a new spirit among a few middle-class women to liberate themselves from the old notion of "separate spheres." An early feminist writer condemned this traditional view of the role of women since it prevented their full development and robbed the nation of their potential contribution.

Of course, working outside the home was nothing new for poor white, immigrant, and black women. They toiled as housekeepers, factory workers, and in other menial jobs in order to survive. Female factory workers earned only a quarter to a third of what men earned for the same job. There were no sick days or health benefits. Women were known to have given birth on the floors of factories where they worked. Since they did not have the right to vote, they had little opportunity to pressure lawmakers to pass laws that would have improved their wages and working conditions.

The Final Push for Women's Suffrage

Western states continued to lead way in granting women's suffrage. Washington state allowed women the right to vote in 1910. California followed in 1911. Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon passed laws the next year.

The presidential election of 1912 saw the two major parties, the Republicans and Democrats, opposing women's suffrage. But the 1912 election featured two major independent parties, the Progressives (led by former Republican President Theodore Roosevelt) and the Socialists (led by Eugene Debs). Both the Progressives and Socialists favored women's suffrage. And they received about one-third of the votes cast.

Alice Paul headed NAWSA's effort to lobby Congress to consider again the Anthony Amendment. Brought up as a Quaker, Paul (1885–1977) graduated from Swarthmore College and received postgraduate degrees in social work. Traveling to Great Britain, she encountered radical feminists demanding the right to vote. She joined them in hunger strikes and demonstrations. On returning to the United States, she joined NAWSA.

In 1913, 28-year-old Paul organized a massive parade in Washington, D.C. Hostile crowds of men attacked the marchers, who had to be protected by the National Guard.

Paul and the president of NAWSA, Carrie Chapman Catt, disagreed over using public demonstrations to promote women's suffrage. Catt (1859–1947) had grown up in the Midwest, graduated from Iowa State College, and gone on to work as a teacher, high school principal, and superintendent of a school district (one of the first women to hold such a job). She worked tirelessly for women's causes, and in 1900 she was elected to succeed Anthony as president of NAWSA.

Catt's tactics contrasted sharply with Paul's. She preferred to quietly lobby lawmakers in Congress and the state legislatures. Paul favored demonstrations. Both leaders, however, were dedicated to equal rights for women.



Library of Congress

In the election of 1916, Catt supported Democratic President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was running on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." Paul opposed Wilson. She parodied his slogan, saying, "Wilson kept us out of suffrage."

Paul broke with NAWSA and founded the National Woman's Party. Soon afterward, she organized daily picketing of the White House to pressure President Wilson to support the Anthony Amendment. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, Paul kept up the picketing. The women demonstrators silently carried signs with slogans like "Democracy Should Begin at Home" and "Kaiser Wilson." Onlookers assaulted the White House picketers, calling them traitors for insulting the wartime president.

In June 1917, police began arresting the picketers for obstructing the sidewalks. About 270 were arrested and almost 100 were jailed, including Paul. She and the others in jail went on hunger strikes. Guards force-fed the women hunger strikers by jamming feeding tubes down their throats. The force-feeding was reported in all the major newspapers. Embarrassed by the publicity, President Wilson pardoned and released them.

Meanwhile, women replaced men by the thousands in war industries and many other types of jobs previously held by men. By 1920, women made up 25 percent of the entire labor force of the country.

President Wilson was disturbed that the push for women's suffrage was causing division during the war. He was also deeply impressed by Carrie Chapman Catt. In January 1918, he announced his support for the Anthony Amendment. By this time, 17 states as well as Great Britain had granted women the right to vote. Wilson's support helped build momentum for the amendment. In the summer of 1919, the House and Senate approved the 19th Amendment by a margin well beyond the required two-thirds majority. Then the amendment had to be ratified by three-fourths of the states.

Those opposed to women's suffrage, the so-called "antis," assembled all their forces to stop ratification. The liquor and brewing industries, factory owners, railroads, banks, and big city political machines all feared women would vote for progressive reforms. Southern whites objected to more black voters. Some argued that the 19th Amendment invaded states' rights. Others claimed that it would undermine family unity. Besides, the "antis" said, wives were already represented at the ballot box by their husbands.

But state after state ratified the amendment. With one last state needed for ratification, the Tennessee legislature voted on the amendment. The outcome depended on the vote of the youngest man in the Tennessee state legislature. He voted for ratification, but only after receiving a letter from his mother, urging him to be a "good boy" and support women's suffrage. Thus, on August 18, 1920, half the adult population of the United States won the right to vote.

Women voted nationwide for the first time in the presidential election of 1920. Among the new voters was 91-year-old Charlotte Woodward, the only surviving member of the Seneca Falls Convention. In her lifetime, she had witnessed a revolution in the role of women in American society.

For Discussion and Writing

1. In what ways did the role of women in American society change between 1848 and 1920?
2. Do you think Alice Paul or Carrie Chapman Catt had the best strategy for winning the right to vote for women? Why?
3. Why do you think women won the right to vote in 1920 after failing for more than 70 years?

For Further Reading

Matthews, Jean V. *The Rise of the New Woman, The Women's Movement in America, 1875–1930*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.

Schneider, Dorothy and Carl. *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920*. New York: Facts on File, 1993.

ACTIVITY

Petitioning President Wilson

In this activity, students will petition President Wilson to support the Anthony Amendment.

1. Form the class into small groups. Each group will write a petition to President Wilson, listing arguments why he should support the Anthony Amendment.
2. Each group should review the article to find arguments in favor of the amendment. The group should also list counter-arguments against the positions taken by the “antis” who opposed the amendment.
3. Each group should only list those arguments on its petition that all members of the group agree with.
4. Each group should read its petition to the rest of the class.
5. The class members should then debate what they believe was the best argument for persuading President Wilson to support the “Anthony Amendment.”