

## Divisions Among the Suffragists

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Even in communities where black and white women worked together to promote suffrage, most black women formed their own organizations and the rank-and-file membership of these groups lived separate lives. White National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) members were often more liberal regarding the color line, yet they also hoped to attract a larger following in the South and often catered to the racial prejudices of some of their members. For example, 5,000 suffragists from across the country met in Washington, DC, under the auspices of the NAWSA in 1913. The white leadership declared that representatives of black women's organizations should march in their own separate columns behind the whites.

Ida Wells had been a member of NAWSA for many years, and although she had formed an organization for black suffragists in Chicago, her presence in Washington, DC, was as part of the integrated Illinois chapter of NAWSA. As a result, the decision that Wells must march in the back of the column angered her and several other Illinois women who vowed to march alone with Wells between the members of various black suffrage associations and the NAWSA. The rest of the white suffragists worried that the presence of white and black women marching in the same column might offend Southerners at the very moment when the suffrage movement was beginning to gain ground in that area of the country. As the march began, the insults hurled from the men who had lined the streets led few to notice that Wells had joined the otherwise white procession.



*Wells-Barnett marching with other women suffragists in a parade in Washington, D.C., 1913*

Despite her willingness to stand by them as they crossed a gauntlet of jeers and taunts, most whites would have preferred that Wells and other black women would have not participated at all. As had been the case with other movements for social justice, the failure to overcome racial prejudice would reduce the effectiveness of the suffrage movement. For example, the Southern States Women's Suffrage Conference was dedicated to promoting state laws that would explicitly limit the vote to white women despite the obvious contradiction with the Fifteenth Amendment.

The suffrage movement also remained divided between those who accepted society's notions of gender and those who sought to challenge those conventions. The conservative wing of the women's suffrage movement stressed the compatibility of voting within the unique character and responsibilities of women in society. Others were more radical, advocating not only suffrage but also complete gender equality in all aspects of society. These two ideas about suffrage were evident in a debate between sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman and NAWSA president Anna Howard Shaw. Shaw emphasized the ways that voting was consistent with women's roles in the home. She advanced the more conservative idea that women could purify politics and promote reform in ways that were compatible with the notion of a separate sphere of activity for women and men. Gilman saw the vote more as a step toward emancipation from the separate sphere, eliminating one of the ways that women's confinement to the home had been perpetrated and justified in the past. Radicals such as Gilman represented a small minority even within the suffrage movement. However, their ideas would have a profound impact as they represented the vanguard of the feminist movement during this era.