

Overview of Women's Suffrage in the United States

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Women in the Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century, for many women, activity was limited to the domestic life of the home and care of the children. Women were dependent on the men in their life, fathers or husbands, and after marriage did not have the right to own property, maintain their wages, or sign a contract, much less vote. In colonial America most African American women were considered property.

White, middle class women were expected to be obedient wives, never to express an opinion independent or counter to their husband's. It was considered improper for women to travel alone or to speak in public.

Immigrant women and women of color, nevertheless had to work outside the home, often in domestic labor or sweatshops. In the nineteenth century taking a job was considered neither respectable nor something that an honest woman would do, and women who did so were considered to have given up their claim to gentle treatment and were often exploited by their employers.

The Seneca Falls Convention

The women's suffrage movement was formally set into motion in 1848 with the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were among the American delegation to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840. Because they were women, they were forced to sit in the galleries as observers. After this poor treatment, upon returning home they decided to hold their own convention to "discuss the social, civil and religious rights of women."

Using the Declaration of Independence as a guide, Stanton drafted the Declaration of Sentiments which drew attention to women's subordinate status and made recommendations for change, including calling for women to have "immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as these citizens of the United States."

After the Seneca Falls Convention, the demand for the vote became the centerpiece of the women's rights movement.

Suffrage during the Civil War

During the Civil War, women's suffrage and the abolition movement were closely connected. Activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and slave-born Sojourner Truth lectured and petitioned the government for the emancipation of slaves with the belief that, once the war was over, women and slaves alike would be granted the same rights as the white men.

At the end of the war, however, the 14th and 15th amendments, expanding the right of suffrage to all men, including former slaves, fractured the suffrage movement. Some political leaders felt that offering votes to black men could produce an immediate political gain, particularly in the South, that the women's vote could not.

The 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment proved an affront to the women's movement; it defined "citizenship" and "voters" as "male", and raised the question of whether women were considered citizens of the United States at all. The exclusion of women was further reinforced with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which enfranchised black men.

In a disagreement over these Amendments, the women's movement split into two factions. In New York, Stanton and Anthony established the radical National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Henry Blackwell organized the more conservative American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in Boston.

These two groups later merged in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) under the leadership of Elizabeth Stanton.

Winning the Vote

In 1878, the Woman's Suffrage Amendment was first introduced to Congress. With the formation of numerous groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and, the Women's Trade Union League, the women's movement gained momentum and attention during the 1890's and early 1900's.

During the U.S. involvement in World War I the suffrage campaign was eclipsed, as women pitched in for the war effort. However, in 1919, after years of petitioning, picketing, and protest parades, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed by both houses of Congress and in 1920 it became ratified under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

AMENDMENT XIX

Ratified August 26, 1920

1. 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.
2. Congress shall have power to enforce this Article by appropriate legislation.