

Suffrage and the U.S. Constitution

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The 19th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, passed by Congress on June 4, 1919 and ratified by the states in August 1920, reads:

“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. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”

The United States Constitution is an amazing document. The men who wrote the Constitution were wise enough to know that they could never anticipate the questions and issues that we face today. They intentionally used vague language and left much up for interpretation. Most importantly, they included a provision to amend the constitution so that the document could grow and change with the nation they established.

Originally, the decision of who could vote was left up to the states to determine. In the colonial period, many states limited to the vote to male property owners and required voters to pay a poll tax. However, a number of states and territories allowed women to vote before 1920.

The passage of the 14th and 15th amendments after the civil war expanded the right to vote to include all male citizens who are 21 years old. The 14th amendment to the Constitution, adopted on July 9, 1868, provided that the right to vote may not be denied to any male citizen who is at least 21 years of age. The 15th amendment, ratified in 1870, specified that “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.”

These amendments caused a great rift among those fighting for women’s suffrage, many of whom had been staunch abolitionists, fighting alongside former slaves like Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.

During the 19th century much of the suffrage movement was focused on getting state legislators to pass laws allowing women to vote. In 1913 Alice Paul and Lucy Burns established the Congressional Union for Women Suffrage and focused on a constitutional amendment as the best way to guarantee women’s right to vote. They succeeded on August 18, 1920 when the 19th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution was ratified.

The most recent change to the Constitution with regard to suffrage was in 1971, when the 26th amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

The story of suffrage in the United States has been one of gradual increase in access and expansion of the rights of citizenship, in keeping with our expressed desire “to form a more perfect union”.