

Overview of Women's Suffrage in the United States

Compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics

Women in the Nineteenth Century

For many women in the early nineteenth century, activity was limited to the domestic life of the home and care of the children. Women were dependent on the men in their lives, including fathers, husbands, or brothers. Once married, women did not have the right to own property, maintain their wages, or sign a contract, much less vote. In colonial America, most Black women were considered property. Women were expected to obey their husbands, not express opinions independent of, or counter to, their husbands'. It was considered improper for women to travel alone or to speak in public.

Immigrant women, women of color, and low-income women 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 July 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. 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, Harriet Tubman, and 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 white men.

At the end of the war, however, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments fractured the suffrage movement. 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 National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which

promoted universal suffrage and opposed the Fifteenth Amendment. Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Henry Blackwell organized the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in Boston, which supported the Fifteenth Amendment and had Black and white members. Many Black women worked for women's suffrage and leading reformers, including Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell, established the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) and campaigned in favor of women's suffrage and improved education.

The NWSA and AWSA merged in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and later Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt. The NAWSA campaigned for women's suffrage at both the national and state levels, and several key states approved women's suffrage because of the organization's lobbying. In 1916, one of NAWSA's members, Alice Paul, believing the organization was too moderate in its approach and focus on state-level campaigns, founded the National Women's Party, which protested at the White House in support of a national amendment and resulted in the imprisonment of suffragists. In response to public outcry about the prison abuse of suffragists, President Woodrow Wilson reversed his position and publicly supported a suffrage amendment.

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 1890s and early 1900s. 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.*

Sources and additional materials

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<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/15th-and-19th-amendments.htm>

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<https://www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-women-and-the-nineteenth-amendment.htm>

Library of Congress: Women's Suffrage:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/womens-suffrage/>