



Suffragists campaigning for the right to vote in 1920, just before the amendment was ratified. (*Library of Congress*) <https://www.thenation.com/article/august-26-1920-the-19-th-amendment-is-ratified-granting-women-the-vote/>

Ahead of Their Time: The U.S. Women's Suffrage Movement

Vision and Motivation

The women's suffrage movement in the United States emerged in the mid-19th century from a broader women's rights movement. In the first part of the century, women were active in a range of reform causes, particularly the abolitionist movement, which sought to end slavery. Future suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked for equal property rights for women in the 1840s, and she and her husband actively opposed slavery. Her future collaborator and fellow suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony, was involved in the temperance movement, which opposed the consumption of alcohol. Activism for these causes gave both women valuable connections and experience, but also fueled their frustration by underlining women's social status as inferior to men. While attending a temperance convention, Susan B. Anthony was told that women were expected to listen and not speak. Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended an anti-slavery convention in London that barred

female delegates from taking a seat alongside the men. From the frustration she felt, her idea of organizing a convention focusing on women's rights was born. Stanton later wrote:

My experience at the World Anti-slavery Convention, all I had read of the legal status of women, and the oppression I saw everywhere, together swept across my soul....It seemed as if all the elements had conspired to impel me to some onward step. I could not see what to do or where to begin—my only thought was a public meeting for protest and discussion.¹

Her thoughts became a reality when she and friends met over tea to plan a meeting on women's rights. The resulting Seneca Falls Convention, held on July 19-20, 1848, is now widely credited as the origin of the women's rights movement in the United States.

The centerpiece of the Convention was a Declaration of Sentiments, which Stanton wrote. Invoking the principles behind the American Revolution, she argued that it was unjust for women to be governed without their consent and be subjected to taxation without representation. Paraphrasing the U.S. Declaration of Independence, she wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men *and women* are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.^{2,3}

Following Jefferson's text, the Declaration of Sentiments presented a list of 18 grievances, including that women were deprived of "the first right of a citizen, the elective franchise" and were subjected to men "usurping the prerogative of Jehovah" as they claimed the right to assign to women "a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God."⁴ Convention participants voted on and passed all 18 resolutions. The idea of women voting was the most controversial resolution, passing only after many hours of heated debate.

The Declaration of Sentiments was a powerful call to action. Stanton's document

1- Elizabeth Cady Stanton. *Eighty Years and More* New York. T. Fisher Unwin, 1898. p. 148. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/stanton/years/years.html#IX>

2- Italics added

3- See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments, July 19, 1848 at <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/the-declaration-of-sentiments-july-19-1848/> and in Persian at <https://tavaana.org/en/content/seneca-falls-declaration-sentiments-and-resolutions>

4- United States' Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>

voiced women's demands in no uncertain terms, concluding that "because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States."⁵ In the words of one activist, despite years in which she "pined for that freedom of thought and action that was then denied to all womankind," it was the Seneca Falls meeting that "gave this feeling of unrest form and voice," leading her to act.⁶ She was not alone. Within a few years, women's rights conventions were held regularly all over the country. Obtaining a woman's right to vote soon became the principal focus of the movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony devoted the rest of their lives to the cause of women's suffrage. Despite the "self-evident" principles upon which women based their arguments, it ultimately took seven decades until all women had the right to vote.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton By Unknown - Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10372994>

5- Stanton, Declaration of Sentiments, op. cit.

6- Quoted in "Why a Woman's Rights Convention?" in <http://www.rochester.edu/sba/suffrage-history/womens-rights-convention-in-seneca-falls-ny/>

Goals and Objectives

The goal of the suffrage movement was the legal recognition of women's right to vote. Activists pursued this goal on two separate fronts, the individual state governments and the U.S. Congress. Suffrage activists wanted state legislatures and/or Congress to pass constitutional amendments recognizing women's right to vote.

Beginning in 1850, yearly national conventions took place to set goals and strategies. Activists founded local equal rights groups and national organizations to work for women's suffrage. Activists generated much of their publicity through public speaking and writing. Lucy Stone, head of a national women's organization in the 1870s, became an acclaimed public speaker, traveling the country to lecture about women's rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the New York State Legislature in 1859 and become one of the first women to speak before a U.S. legislative body.

Hundreds of petition campaigns also contributed to the cause's publicity. Initially, activists focused on the weight of moral arguments to win public support for women's suffrage. In the latter half of the 19th century, however, they also incorporated direct political strategies. Suffrage activists were far out in front of mainstream society's views on the proper role of women at the time, and progress was slow. However, they did achieve some victories, gaining the vote in some states and Western territories by the end of the 19th century as well as partial voting rights elsewhere in the country. They also won the support of various civic organizations and interest groups, many of whom contributed to women's lobbying efforts. During the movement's final phase in the early decades of the 20th century, increasing numbers of state and national political leaders favored women's right to vote. Yet, the process of swimming against the current of social attitudes and custom was long and arduous.

Leadership

The principal founding leaders of the suffrage movement were two close friends, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Stanton was a talented writer and thinker, and Anthony became known as the Napoleon of the suffrage movement due to her brilliant organizing skills. In the early 1900s, influential second-generation leaders emerged, notably Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul. As president the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Catt developed the strategy that led to the adoption of a national woman's suffrage amendment in 1920. Paul was the driving force behind NAWSA's successful lobbying of the U.S. Congress as well as the mass mobilizations and protest actions carried out in the early 1900s. In 1916, Paul founded the National Women's Party.

Suffrage leaders utilized inclusive, democratic leadership principles throughout the

movement's long trajectory. A coordinating committee organized annual national conventions, and voting during these conventions decided the goals and strategies for the coming year. Stanton, Anthony, and other leaders collaborated closely and showed both personal courage and tenacity in the face of adversity. With seven children, Stanton was often homebound. Anthony frequently took care of Stanton's children while Stanton wrote speeches for Anthony to deliver at conventions she had organized. The two women disagreed often – their letters to each other reveal scathing honesty when one thought the other was wrong – but they had unfailing respect for each other and a commitment to facing challenges as a team.⁷

Suffrage leaders showed personal courage in advocating for women's right to vote, engaging in civil disobedience and risking jail. Anthony was arrested and tried for voting illegally in 1872, and she disrupted Independence Day celebrations in 1876 by reading a "Declaration of the Rights of Women of the United States."⁸ Stone refused to pay her taxes to protest taxation without representation. Paul was arrested and imprisoned for demonstrating in front of the White House in 1917.



Susan B. Anthony By Engraved by G.E. Perine & Co., NY - <https://archive.org/stream/historyofwomansu01stanuoft#page/n603/mode/2up>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15251802>

7-Katy June Friesen. Old Friends Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Made History. *Humanities*. July/August 2014 Volume 35, Number 4 <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2014/julyaugust/feature/old-friends-elizabeth-cady-stanton-and-susan-b-anthony-made-history>
8-<https://feminist.org/blog/index.php/2014/07/04/july-4-1876-suffragists-present-declaration-of-rights-of-the-women-of-the-united-states-to-pennsylvania-senator/>

To enlist support, suffrage leaders cultivated relationships with other reformers, interest groups, politicians, and public figures. The close ties between anti-slavery and women's rights activists meant there was overlap and mutual support between these groups. Abolitionist leaders and prominent freed slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, were active supporters of women's rights. The freed slave and orator Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I A Woman," was given extemporaneously at the 1851 National Woman's Suffrage convention in Ohio.⁹ Suffrage leaders also sought the backing of religious groups such as Quakers and Unitarians, as well from more conservative churches, though the latter effort met with little success. They also gained the support of those working on labor rights, such as the main farmers' organization, the Grange, as well as the American Federation of Labor.

The most serious challenge to their success occurred after the civil war, when the national American Equal Rights Association, split into two rival organizations over questions of strategy. The North's victory in the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) ushered in the end of slavery and the emergence of freed slaves as a new group of citizens. The 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution were proposed to formalize their rights to citizenship and suffrage. Women's suffrage leaders were divided on whether to support these amendments. One of the new organizations, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by Stanton and Anthony, argued that Congress should not pass the amendments unless they included women as well as freed slaves in the rights they extended. The other group, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, supported the Republican Party – which controlled the government at the time and which Blackwell helped found – and the passage of the new amendments, while hoping to obtain eventual Republican support for a woman's suffrage amendment. It was a gamble to back the Republicans with no guarantee that a women's suffrage amendment would be introduced in return. As it turned out, neither group got what they wanted. Both amendments passed as written, Republican support for giving women the vote did not materialize, and the movement remained divided. One group concentrated on political advocacy at the state level, and the other focused primarily on working with the U.S. Congress. After talks amongst leaders, the groups voted to re-merge, forming the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890.

Suffrage leaders struggled against restrictive social norms as well as the prevailing interpretation of the law. They responded by ignoring the former and challenging the latter. Despite deep-seated opposition to women participating in public affairs

9- The women's movement was not free from racial bias, however. Many in attendance urged the Chair-woman not to let her speak, concerned that support for women's rights would be damaged if it were linked to rights for blacks as well. The Chairwoman allowed to speak and her speech was received with cheers. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman." <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm> and <https://tavaana.org/en/content/aint-i-woman-sojourner-truth>

and speaking in public, female leaders addressed legislatures, conventions, and gatherings of all kinds and even gave speeches on street corners. They continued to regularly organize women's rights conventions despite legal obstacles; in many states, married women could not sign contracts, making it hard to arrange for conventions halls, printed materials, and other necessary items. Nonetheless, female activists organized meetings, founded organizations, challenged laws, and defied pervasive social conventions.

Civic Environment

At the time of the Seneca Falls Convention, the United States' experiment in democratic, republican government was in its seventh decade. Despite the fact that the country was founded on the principles of freedom and equal rights for all citizens, both law and custom kept women in a subordinate status to men. Married women were legally controlled by their husbands; they could not sue in court, divorce an abusive husband, gain custody of their children, or own property. As the English jurist William Blackstone wrote, "Husband and wife are one and that one is the husband."¹⁰ Speaking in public was considered "promiscuous activity."¹¹ Women generally did not attend college or earn a living, except within the socially acceptable positions of teachers, seamstresses, domestic- or mill workers.

By the time women gained the right to vote nationally, another seven decades had gone by. The country experienced huge changes during this period, including the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, geographic expansion, industrialization, and economic growth. One constant, however, was the freedom of thought, expression, and political activity citizens' experienced during the movement's seventy-year history. This environment enabled women's activism in the interstices between restrictive social norms and legal principles that proclaimed-- in their words, if not in practice-- rights and freedoms for all citizens. Opportunities for individualistic, norm defying behavior existed, despite obstacles, and many women bucked convention to attend college and enter so-called "male" professions. A women's club movement emerged in the 1870s with chapters all over the country. Leading feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote passionately in defense of women's economic independence in "Women and Economics."¹² Influential thinkers such as Margaret Fuller and England's John Stuart Mill defended women's rights. Mill's

10- Quoted in <http://www.rochester.edu/sba/suffrage-history/stantonanthony-friendship>

11- Ibid.

12- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *Women and Economics*. 1898. <https://tavaana.org/en/content/women-and-economics-charlotte-perkins-gilman> and <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/gilman/economics/economics.html>

“The Subjection of Women” argued that women should be able to vote.¹³ Social and economic changes over the course of the 19th century gradually led to more opportunities for women outside the domestic sphere. Even the invention of the bicycle, which became popular in the 1890s, helped change the image of women as frail and sheltered by contributing to their mobility and independence. By the early 20th century, more women were attending college and entering professions previously closed to them. Susan B. Anthony once said the bicycle’s invention did more for woman’s emancipation than anything else. While this was surely an overstatement, it highlights the connection between social attitudes and customs on the one hand and legal change on the other.

Message, Audience, and Outreach Activities

To win support for women’s right to vote, Anthony and Stanton used moral and religious arguments, drew on principles of equality found in the Constitution and other laws, and appealed to different groups’ interests.

Stanton emphasized human dignity, universal justice, and the belief that men and women were created equal under God in arguing that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men. “We are responsible to (God) alone for the right cultivation and employment of our minds and hearts...it is not for man to say ‘Thus far shalt thou go and no far.’”¹⁴ Invoking the Bible, Stanton argued, “the best of Books is ever on the side of freedom and we shrink not from pleading our cause on its principles of universal justice and love.”¹⁵ In her 1892 speech to the U.S. Congress, “The Solitude of Self,” she linked Protestantism’s belief in the primacy of the individual’s conscience to the republican ideal of individual citizenship, declaring that both women and men should be free to develop all their faculties. “Who,” she asked, “can..dare take on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?”¹⁶

Suffragists also based their arguments on the contradictions between women’s subordinate status and the guarantees of rights and freedoms found in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In an 1873 speech, “On Women’s Right to Vote,” Susan B. Anthony argued that the Constitution’s use of the term “people”

13- Mill, John Stuart. The Subjection of Women. 1869. <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/mill1869.pdf> and <https://tavaana.org/en/content/subjection-women-john-stuart-mill> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller

14- Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressing the Seneca Falls Convention, July 19, 1848. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/address-on-womans-rights-july-19-1848/>

15-Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressing the Seneca Falls Convention, July 19, 1848. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/address-on-womans-rights-july-19-1848/>

16- Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The Solitude of Self. <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/the-solitude-of-self-jan-18-1892/>

– the word “male” appeared nowhere in the main body of the document – clearly included women in its legal guarantees.¹⁷ According to Anthony:

The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons, then, women are citizens; and no state has a right to make any law, or to enforce any old law, that shall abridge their privileges or immunities. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws of the several states is today null and void, precisely as is every one against Negroes.¹⁸

In an 1854 address to the New York State legislature drawing on state laws, Stanton reminded the assembled politicians that the “Bill of Rights, 2 R.S., 301, says that no authority can, on any pretense whatever, be exercised over the citizens of this state but such as is or shall be derived from, and granted by, the people of this state. Now, gentlemen, we would fain know by what authority you have disfranchised one-half the people of this state?”¹⁹

Suffragists also framed their message to appeal to the interests of various groups whose support they needed. Throughout the 19th century, a large segment of society including women and mainstream religious groups held a paternalistic view of family life and feared that giving women the vote would destroy the family and threaten social stability. Suffragists countered that giving women the vote would purify politics, elevate public affairs, and preserve the family. The effort to attract support sometimes led to questionable tactics. Attempting to increase support in conservative southern States, leaders appealed to racial bias, arguing that giving women the vote would preserve white supremacy because there were more white women than freed slaves. Anthony went along reluctantly, and suffrage leaders later rejected policies that would exclude any race or class from the right of suffrage.

To deliver their message, leaders employed four major strategies: 1) political advocacy 2) publicity 3) legal challenges 4) civil disobedience and nonviolent protest.

Since the ultimate goal was legal reform, activists endlessly lobbied elected officials and other political leaders to support legislation recognizing women’s right to vote. Between 1870 and 1910 alone, activists organized over 400 petition campaigns to put the question of women’s suffrage to a vote in 33 states. Leaders wrote letters to political parties urging their support, addressed party conventions, and, in some,

17- United States Constitution.1787. <http://constitutionus.com/>

18-Susan B. Anthony, A Woman’s Right to Vote. 1873. <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/anthony.htm> and <https://tavaana.org/en/content/womens-right-vote-susan-b-anthony> also see United States Constitution <http://constitutionus.com/>

19- Elizabeth Cady Stanton Address to the Legislature of New York, February 14, 1854 <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/address-to-the-legislature-of-new-york-feb-14-1854/>



Women marching in suffrage parade, New York City, 1917. By Unknown - The New York Times photo archive, via their online store, here, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2948583>

even tested political boundaries. Stanton declared herself a candidate for U.S. Congress in 1866 to call attention to the legal anomaly that although she was barred from voting no law stopped her from running for office. In 1872, the author and activist Victoria Woodhull formed a political party and declared herself its candidate for president. In 1910, Alice Paul formed the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage within the NAWSA to lobby members of Congress for a women's suffrage amendment. In 1916, Paul went on to found the National Women's Party.

To generate publicity, activists gave speeches and lectures around the country and used all forms of written media to spread their views. They wrote articles and established journals, newspapers, and newsletters championing women's suffrage and other rights, such as: equal pay for equal work; rights of divorce, inheritance, and custody; and, access to jobs and education. Anthony and Stanton started a newspaper called "Revolution" in 1868. Lucy Stone founded the weekly feminist "Woman's Journal" in 1870. Stanton published a controversial book called "The Woman's Bible" in 1890, which analyzed scripture to rebut claims that the Bible supported women's subordination to men.

During the 1870s, Anthony and Stanton experimented with a strategy of encouraging women to bring forth lawsuits challenging their lack of voting rights in court. Hundreds of women tried unsuccessfully to cast ballots and brought lawsuits

asserting their constitutional rights had been denied. They used legal arguments based on the newly enacted 14th amendment, which stated that no state “shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States...nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”²⁰ The strategy ended when the Supreme Court rejected this interpretation of the law in an 1875 case. Susan B. Anthony was arrested for voting, tried in court and ultimately fined \$100. She refused to pay this “unjust penalty,” and, in fact, never did. The speech she gave at her trial disparaged the ruling against her:

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people - women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government - the ballot.²¹

In the early 1900s, activists used non-violent direct action techniques to deliver their message. Women’s marches attracted enormous publicity. In 1912, activists in New York organized a 12-day, 170-mile Hike to Albany to deliver a suffrage petition to the governor. In 1913, activists formed the Army of the Hudson and marched 250 miles from New York to Washington, D.C. Arriving on the eve of President Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration, hundreds of women were injured when a mob attacked them. The resulting national publicity gave the movement new momentum. Forty thousand women from all over the country marched in New York City in 1915. Other acts called attention to politician’s lack of support for women’s suffrage. Alice Paul burned copies of Woodrow Wilson’s speeches in the park opposite the White House in 1914. The National Women’s Party organized its supporters to picket the White House in 1917. Calling themselves “Silent Sentinels,” the women held banners asking “How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?” After demonstrating for several months, hundreds of demonstrators were arrested on charges of obstructing traffic, and 168 were imprisoned. The public outcry resulting from the imprisoned women’s hunger strike led the government to release them and admit that the arrests were a mistake. In 1919, the National Women’s Party lit and guarded a “watchfire for freedom” in Washington, D.C. They kept it lit until the suffrage amendment passed both houses of Congress on June 4, 1919.

20-For text of 14th amendment to U.S. Constitution see Legal Information Institute <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxiv>

21- Susan B. Anthony, *A Woman’s Right to Vote*. 1873. Op.cit.

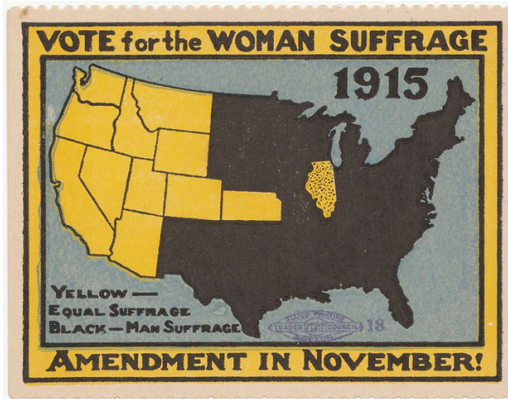


https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Official_program_-_Woman_suffrage_procession_March_3,_1913_-_crop.jpg

The purpose of these activities was to build public and political support for legal reforms recognizing women's right to vote. Progress was slow. Serious resistance to women voting persisted, including opposition from women themselves. Beginning in the 1870s, female anti-women's suffrage associations sprung up in twenty states, copying suffragists' strategies and methods. The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage helped defeat a 1915 state suffrage referendum. A number of trades and businesses opposed women voting for fear it would lead to costly reforms outlawing child labor and establishing health and safety standards for the workplace. The liquor industry feared that women would vote for laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol.

At the same time, however, women's activism combined with changing social attitudes gradually eroded many of the earlier biases against women's involvement in public affairs. No longer a fringe cause, women's suffrage entered mainstream politics. A national amendment to the U.S. Constitution making it illegal to deny the right to vote because of an individual's sex was introduced in the Congress in 1878. The same amendment was introduced at each session of Congress for the next forty years.²² The earliest successes were in the western part of the country. Women won the right to vote in the territories of Wyoming in 1869, and Utah in 1879. Washington, California, Kansas, Arizona and Illinois gave women the vote between 1910 and 1913. By 1915, women had full voting rights in fifteen states. In other areas, women had partial voting rights, meaning they could vote in municipal elections or in special

22- On the 19th amendment, granting suffrage to women, see: <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=63>



By Unknown - Cornell University: Persuasive Cartography: The PJ Mode Collection, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=49451616>

elections concerning taxes, schools or other matters. In 1916, the first woman was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, Jeannette Rankin of Montana.

When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the NASWA under Carrie Chapman Catt's leadership made a strategic decision to support the war, despite the pro-peace stance of many activists. Women threw themselves into the war effort on the home front, helping the Red Cross and filling men's jobs while they were away fighting. This greatly increased public sympathy toward giving women the vote. President Woodrow Wilson dropped his opposition and backed a woman's suffrage amendment in 1918, influenced by women's contribution to the war effort and growing public support among the electorate. Wilson ultimately played a pivotal role in convincing Congress to pass the "Susan B. Anthony Amendment" as it was then called. In the summer of 1919, both Houses of Congress voted in favor of the 19th amendment in the same form it was first introduced in 1878. It officially came into effect in August 1920 after being ratified by the required three-quarters of the State legislatures. That November, all female citizens in the U.S. could legally vote in the presidential election. It is necessary to note that many groups of non-white women in the U.S. did not gain the right to vote under this amendment, such as Native American women, many black women, and Asian women, but would become eligible to vote only under future legislation, some passing decades later²³. While the Fifteenth Amendment, which was passed in 1870, guaranteed the right

23- For a more comprehensive look at what populations were given the right to vote, see *Al-Jazeera's* interactive: <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2016/us-elections-2016-who-can-vote/index.html>

for all citizens to vote regardless of race, the definition of citizen was too narrow at the time to encompass more than white men. It was not until 1924 with the passage of the Snyder Act that Native Americans were classified as citizens and able to practice this right theoretically. Even then, it was not until 1947 that state barriers to Native American suffrage were lessened. In 1952, under the McCarran-Walter Act, individuals with Asian ancestry were granted the right to become citizens. Their pathways to citizenship had been blocked under previous legislation and court rulings, some dating back to the late 1800s: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 denied Chinese individuals from applying for citizenship; the Supreme Court ruled in 1922 that those with Japanese heritage were unable to apply for naturalized citizenship; and, in 1923 the Court also ruled “Asian Indians” were prohibited from naturalizing. Until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many social and economic barriers were in place to severely inhibit the ability of many black Americans, especially those in southern states from exercising their right to vote; some of these tactics included literacy tests, tax and other economic barriers, and physical intimidation at registration and voting places. While access to the vote swelled in the decades after the 19th Amendment was passed, social barriers remain in place.



Women casting their votes in New York City, c. 1920s. *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.* (digital file no. 00037) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/woman-suffrage#ref284444>

Legacy

Women's suffrage was the first successful non-violent protest movement in America. Its legacy endures. After ratification of the 19th amendment, the NAWSA became the League of Women Voters. The League continues to promote women's involvement in U.S. politics.²⁴ Women today use many of the same techniques Anthony, Stanton, Paul, and others developed. Suffrage activists were ahead of their time in utilizing the law to achieve social change empowering marginalized groups. They were particularly savvy in pinpointing language and principles found within the law and within religious and moral thought to make their case. Even working within an open political and civic environment, and aided by legal principles and constitutional rights written in gender-neutral terms, suffrage activists struggled for seven decades to win enough political support for their cause. Recognizing the challenge is half the battle, however. In a letter to Stanton, the activist Angelina Grimke Weld offered these words of encouragement: "The very truths you are now contending for, will, in fifty years, be so completely imbedded in public opinion that no one need say one word in their defense; whilst at the same time new forms of truth will arise to test the faithfulness of the pioneer minds of that age, and so on eternally."²⁵

24- League of Women Voters. <https://www.lwv.org/>

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Learn More

New and Analysis

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