

2019-2020: Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the American Women's Right to Vote

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"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"(Center, 2019, p. 1).

Abstract

The article deals with one of the most significant achievements in the history of American women – the right to vote. The 19th amendment guarantees all American women the right to vote. Achieving this milestone required lengthy and difficult struggle; it took decades to achieve victory through agitation and protest. The article discusses how in the beginning in the mid-19th century several generations of woman suffrage supporters lectured, wrote, marched, lobbied and practiced civil disobedience to achieve what many Americans considered a radical change of the Constitution. Few early supporters lived to see the final victory in 1920.

Keywords: Voting Rights, Women's Suffrage Movement, 19th Amendment, 100th Anniversary

Introduction

The Emergence of Women's Suffrage Movement

The woman suffrage movement in the U.S. began in 1848, when the women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. For the next 50 years, woman suffrage supporters worked to educate the public about the importance of woman suffrage. The foremost leaders of the movement like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women's rights pioneers, suffragists circulated petitions and lobbied Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to enfranchise women (Museum, 2019).

In the wake of the Civil War, however, reformers decided to focus their message exclusively on the right to vote. The year 1869 was especially important as during this period of time two different factions of the suffrage movement emerged.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony created the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). This association opposed the 15th Amendment on the basis that it excluded women and directed its effort toward changing the law. Later on, there was established the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) by a prominent lobbyist for women's rights – Lucy Stone (The Women's Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019). As we read in the archive of the U.S. House of Representatives, "Leaders of the AWSA rejected the NWSA's agenda as racially divisive and organized with the aim to continue a national reform effort at the state level. Although California Senator Aaron Sargent introduced in Congress a women's suffrage amendment in 1878, the overall campaign stalled" (The Women's Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, p. 1). Finally, the NWSA also shifted its efforts to the individual states where reformers hoped to start a ripple effect to win voting rights at the federal level.

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During the 1880s, these two factions were used to struggle to maintain momentum. However, none of the factions managed to attract broad support from women. “A crusade in political education by women and for women, and for most of its existence, a crusade in search of a constituency,” (Woloch, 2010, p. 328), this is how a historian Nancy Woloch described early suffragists’ efforts.

During the 1880s and 1890s middle-class women decided to expand their sphere of activities further outside the home, this attempt helped to legitimize the suffrage movement and provided new momentum for the NWSA and the AWSA. In the 1890s, these two wings decided to unite and create the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019). “Led initially by Stanton and then by Anthony, the NAWSA began to draw on the support of women activists in organizations as diverse as the Women’s Trade Union League, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and the National Consumers League” (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, p. 3).

Suffragists’ Efforts to Pass the 19th Amendment

For the next two decades the NAWSA worked as a nonpartisan organization focused on gaining the vote in states. The first state to grant women complete voting rights was Wyoming in 1869. Three other western states—Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896)—followed shortly after NAWSA was founded (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, p. 4). But before 1910 only these four states allowed women to vote. It is interesting to know why the West was first in this regard. According to some historians, during this period of time the Western part of the country was progressive in terms of extending the vote to women, in part, because there were so few of them on the frontier. “Granting women political rights was intended to bring more women westward and to boost the population” (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, pp. 4-5). Other scholars state that “women had long played nontraditional roles on the frontier and were accorded a more equal status by men. Still others find that political expediency by territorial officials played a role” (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, pp. 4-5). Besides, scholars suggest that western women organized themselves effectively to win the right.

Between 1910 and 1914, the NAWSA intensified its lobbying efforts and the following states granted women the right to vote: Washington, California, Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon. In Illinois, future Congresswoman Ruth Hanna McCormick of Illinois helped lead the fight for suffrage as a lobbyist in Springfield when the state legislature granted women the right to vote in 1913. “This marked the first such victory for women in a state east of the Mississippi River. A year later Montana granted women the right to vote, thanks in part to the efforts of another future Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin” (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920, 2019, p. 5). At the turn of the century, the woman suffrage movement became a mass movement, and the reason of this dealt with the fact that women reformers during this period of time were striving to pass reform legislation. However, many politicians were unwilling to listen to a disenfranchised group. Thus, over time women began to realize that in order to achieve reform, they needed to win the right to vote (Museum, 2019).

Noteworthy is the activism of women suffragist organizations in the 20th century under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), was a moderate organization (Center, 2019). The NAWSA started organizing campaigns to enfranchise women in individual states, and at the same time lobbied President Wilson and Congress to pass a woman suffrage Constitutional Amendment. In the 1910s, NAWSA’s membership numbered in the millions (Center, 2019). The second group, the

National Woman's Party (NWP), was a more militant organization. The NWP undertook radical actions, including picketing the White House, in order to convince Wilson and Congress to pass a woman suffrage amendment (Museum, 2019).

As a result of the efforts of NAWSA and NWP, the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, which granted women the right to vote. We can say that, in the Progressive Era, this achievement of women is considered to be the most significant. In the history of the United States, this was the single largest extension of democratic voting rights, noteworthy is that it was achieved peacefully, through democratic processes (Museum, 2019).

2019 – Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Women's Right to Vote

On June 4, 2019 Americans celebrated 100th anniversary of the Women's Right to Vote (Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment, 2019). 100 years ago, on that day the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed by both chambers of Congress. According to the National Archives, the House of Representatives first passed the amendment on May 21, 1919 and two weeks later, on June 4, the Senate followed with a vote of 56 to 25. The next year, following approval by three-fourths of state legislatures, the amendment was ratified into the Constitution (Pascus, 2019).

The passage of the 19th Amendment caused an uproar in American politics, as it provided a new era in the political life of the U.S. "In fact, many historians can point a clear line from the passage of the 19th amendment to the passage of Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s and the current movements seeking to offer greater federal protections for gay and transgender Americans" (Pascus, 2019, p. 4).



Photograph shows women lining up for parade; woman in front leading with baby and carriage; women, dressed in white and wearing sashes "Votes for women" carrying flags and banner. Suffrage parade, New York City, May 4, 1912 (Pascus, 2019).

Conclusion

As it was mentioned above, the 19th Amendment emerged in American politics during the first decades of the 20th century (Progressive Era), in a time when the country experienced an increased social activism and economic reform. Suffragists like Jeannette Rankin, the first female member of the House of Representatives, brought greater attention to the rights of women. Certain states like California, Washington and Arizona passed their own legislation granting women either full or partial suffrage in the early 1910s. Wyoming was the first to do so in 1869, when it was still a territory (Pascus, 2019).

The 19th Amendment was crucial in terms of changing the American electorate forever. There are some names of women who cannot be left without mentioning while discussing the history of American women: “Winnifred Huck of Illinois, the first woman to win a special election to Congress; Gladys Pyle of South Dakota, the first woman elected to the Senate without previously been appointed; Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress; Patsy Mink of Hawaii, the first non-white woman and Asian American woman elected to Congress; Shirley Chisholm of New York, the first African American woman elected to Congress; and Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois, the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate” (Pascus, 2019, p. 3).

We should mention Nellie Ross of Wyoming as well, the first female governor, Sandra Day O’Conner, the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Nancy Pelosi, the first female Speaker of the House.

Today, more than 68 million women vote in elections because of the courageous suffragists who never gave up the fight for equality.

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