The fight for women’s right to vote lasted more than 80 years. Women organized in their states or territories as well as petitioned for a constitutional amendment. From the beginning, suffragists sought to make women’s rights debates public. In the 1870s, they adopted civil disobedience by attempting to vote. When Black women were excluded from some suffrage organizations, they formed separate advocacy groups. In the 1910s, activists staged nonviolent tactics of protest like parades and picketing. Eventually, the movement culminated in the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Nevertheless, until the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the right to vote for some women was often suppressed.

This poster exhibition aims to give a more complete account of the struggle for women’s right to vote by considering the complex, cumulative way in which multiple forms of discrimination intersected in women’s lives.
Women’s Voting Rights Originated in the Women’s Movement

The focus on voting rights grew out of a much longer campaign for women’s legal rights. In most states until the 1880s, when a woman married, her husband assumed control of her person, property, and money. The women’s movement sought to increase women’s rights.

The antislavery movement also played a role. When some male abolitionists blocked women from joining their organizations, women formed their own societies, including the first female antislavery society, in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1832. Black women were among its founders.

By the first national women’s rights convention in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, women of all races were decrying laws that assumed that “citizen” meant “white male.”

Lucy Stone marriage protest, 1855
When feminist Lucy Stone (1818–1893) wed activist Henry Blackwell, the couple composed this denunciation of “the injustice of the present laws of marriage which annihilates the legal identity of the woman.” Stone kept her birth name after marriage.

Courtesy of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University; Papers of the Blackwell Family, 1831–1981

Sarah Parker Remond
Sarah Parker Remond (1815–1894) forged alliances with other free Black women, as well as white women, when she participated in several antislavery societies in Massachusetts. In 1853, after being forcibly ejected from her seat at an opera because she was Black, Remond sued the Boston Athenaeum and won $500. In winning, she recognized the value and power of her words, and in 1856 she became a paid lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

Albumen silver print, c. 1853. Courtesy of Seneca Falls Historical Society

Abigail Scott Duniway
Abigail Scott Duniway (1814–1915), whose husband voted, urged women to gain the right to vote. She argued that women were “unprotected, untrained, unemancipated.”

Albumen silver print, c. 1890. Courtesy of Oregon State Historical Society; gift of Mr. John Heinnich, Salem, Oregon

Lucretia Coffin Mott
A devout Quaker, Lucretia Mott (1793–1880) worked tirelessly for abolition and for women’s rights. She helped found the racially integrated Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (1833), helped organize the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls (1848), and was the first president of the American Equal Rights Association (1866). Surprisingly, she did not advocate for women’s suffrage but did support marriage reform, saying marriage was “civil death” for women.

Albumen silver print, c. 1865. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Frederick W. Back

Amelia Bloomer
Some reformers sought an end to restrictive corsets and cumbersome skirts. Activist Amelia Bloomer (1818–1894), who started one of the first newspapers for women, endorsed a look that combined a short skirt with loose trousers. This was a revolutionary alternative for women who were accustomed to wearing restrictive clothing.

Daguerreotype, c. 1853. Courtesy of Seneca Falls Historical Society

the injustice of the present laws

VOTES FOR WOMEN
A Portrait of Persistence
Organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery. This project received support from the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative.

Smithsonian
Many educated white women became outraged when the 15th Amendment granted Black men the vote first. Suffragists split into two factions: one pursued a new constitutional amendment while the other accepted the 15th Amendment, but thought changing laws state by state was the better course.

Those who wanted a new amendment acted on the fact that the 14th Amendment established anyone born in the United States was a citizen. They went to the polls claiming, as citizens, they already possessed the ballot—which they would argue in court. In 1874 the Supreme Court ruled that, according to the 15th Amendment, voting is not a right of citizenship, but a privilege accorded by states' laws—and dealt the movement a severe blow.
The 14th Amendment states that anyone born or naturalized in the United States is a citizen. But it goes on to specify voters must be male. The 15th Amendment asserts the vote cannot be denied because of race, color, or “previous condition of servitude.” But it leaves women out of the picture. These amendments contained enough ambiguity to allow local laws and regulations to deny the vote, education, and other benefits to many citizens. Native Americans were not even granted citizenship until 1924.

Women of color organized beyond merely voting rights. Confronting a wide range of social issues, they worked to educate their people, confront white authority, claim their dignity, and campaign for justice.

**The Concept of Citizenship Seems Straightforward, but...**

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In the 1890s, the image of the “New Woman”—young, athletic, educated, and devoted to progressive ideas, especially suffrage—emerged as a radical social force in American society. Awakening the public to an awareness of gender inequality, she ushered in a new century. Black and white women alike embraced the idea of the New Woman, and the image of an educated woman freely moving outside the home inspired many. Women saw education as the first step to progress.

The New Woman

Mary McLeod Bethune

As a teacher in Florida, Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) became acutely aware of the dual oppression of racism and sexism that Black girls faced. In 1904, she founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls. The school’s classical liberal education gave students the tools they needed to become community leaders.

Mary Church Terrell

Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) became an activist in 1892 after a friend was lynched. A leader for Black women’s citizenship rights, she was the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. In an 1898 speech, she described Black women’s efforts as “lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go . . .”

Anna Julia Haywood Cooper

As a teacher, writer, lecturer, and activist, Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858–1944) pioneered a path for the liberal arts education of Black women.

Margaret Murray Washington

Principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Margaret Murray Washington (1865–1925) worked to improve the lives of Black women in the segregated South. She was not an active suffragist, but she was a founding member of the National League of Colored Women, which promoted the cause.

Image description:
The New Woman, 1895

Many women used bicycles to move more freely and quickly through their communities. Images like this one became associated with women’s rights.

Zinc engraving by Charles Dana Gibson
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

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Albumen silver print by H.M. Platt, 1884
Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives

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Gelatin silver print, c. 1917
Courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana

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BECAUSE OF HER STORY
Smithsonian
Equality is the Sacred Law of Humanity, c. 1903–1915

The use of symbols drawn from ancient Greece and Rome appealed to conservative values and asserted the respectability of the suffragist movement. A woman in profile wears a winged petasos helmet as a way to illustrate her role as a divine messenger of equality, while the bundle of sticks around an axe symbolizes strength through unity. Egbert Jacobson, a graphic designer and a leader in color theory and typography, was married to a prominent suffragist, Franc Delzell Jacobson—and he, like many men, supported her cause.

Lithograph by Egbert C. Jacobson
Courtesy of Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University
In the 1910s, suffragists in the United States decided publicity was their best course of action to change the country’s mindset about women’s voting rights. Inspired by the work of British suffragettes, and led by Alice Paul, they turned to non-violent spectacles considered shockingly militant for women at that time, most notably parades and picketing of the White House.

On March 3, 1913, Paul and the National Woman’s Party organized thousands of women—many wearing white—to march down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. The women’s march attracted a crowd of more than 500,000 and upstaged the inauguration speech of President Wilson the next day. This was the first time anyone had ever staged a non-violent march on Washington.
In the fight for the vote, suffragists took risks women today don’t think of as dangerous. But protesting in public, such as picketing the White House, was considered unseemly and undignified. Mary Church Terrell was the only Black woman to participate, in part due to prejudice, but also because being jailed was life-threatening for women of color.

In 1915—a time when it was rare to see women driving—suffragist “envoys” drove across the country and gathered more than 500,000 signatures in a “monster petition.” During World War I, suffragists sponsored all-women teams of doctors and nurses to the front lines, where they endured direct bombardment. These compelling tactics created massive support for the suffrage cause.
Suffrage Map, 1919

This map shows which states allowed women to vote before the 19th Amendment. Suffragists used such maps to track their progress and to persuade states that were reluctant to give women the vote. Note how the map depicts the various levels of suffrage women had, and how, from state to state, it differed.

From The Woman Citizen, March 22, 1919

Courtesy of Ronnie Lapinsky Sax
Women’s Ballot Box, Indiana, 1870–1892
Some states let women vote for the school board, but not for political offices representing the public. To keep women from voting in restricted races, polling places used separate boxes for women’s votes. In 1917 Indiana women enjoyed a four-month period in which they could vote in any election. Then the law was repealed. Courtesy of Ronnie Lapinsky Sax.

The 19th Amendment Was an Incomplete Victory

A bill for amending the Constitution and giving women the vote passed both chambers of Congress in 1919. The suffragists finally triumphed in August 1920 when 36 states—the necessary three-fourths of the country’s 48 states—voted to ratify it:

“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.”

But passage of the 19th Amendment was not a final triumph for Americans’ right to vote. Racist laws still blocked many people of color from voting, and kept Native Americans and Asian immigrants from becoming citizens. The true conclusion to the 19th Amendment was the 1965 Voting Rights Act, protecting the vote for all Americans.