VOTES FOR WOMEN
A Portrait of Persistence

A Smithsonian Exhibition
With help from Ashley Dees,
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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 a national issue. In the 1890s, they adopted civil disobedience by attempting to vote. When Black women were excluded from some suffrage organizations, they formed separate advocacy groups. In the 1920s, activists staged defiant tactics of protest like picketing and picketing. Eventually, the movement culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Nevertheless, until the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the right to vote for some women was often suppressed.

This poster exhibits six of the many important women who worked tirelessly for women’s suffrage.

Smaller images:


ABRAHAM LINCOLN. Carving by Thomas G. Rogers, 1863. Cedar, 71 x 12 1/2 x 12 in. (180.3 x 31.8 x 30.5 cm). Gift of the American Women’s Suffrage Association and Dr. William H. Seward. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.


BECAUSE HER STORY
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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 1840s, 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 1833. 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.”
Constitutional Arguments and Women's Voting Rights

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 fought changing laws state by state was the better course.

Those who wanted a new amendment acted on the fact that the 15th Amendment established a promise that 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 1895, the Supreme Court ruled that, according to the 15th Amendment, voting is not a right of citizenship, but a privilege accorded by state laws—and dealt the movement a severe blow.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony
Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. She was a leader in the women's rights movement andampioned the cause of women's suffrage. Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) founded the New York Woman Suffrage Association and was a leader in the women's rights movement. She was a strong advocate for women's suffrage and played a key role in the movement.

Voters of Mississippi
The possessory right to vote in Mississippi was respected by the Supreme Court in 1896. However, the suffrage movement continued to fight for the right to vote. The National American Woman Suffrage Association was formed in 1890 and continued to advocate for women's suffrage through legal and political means.

Because of Her Story
Smithsonian
The Concept of Citizenship Seems Straightforward, but...

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.
onward and upward

The New Woman

In the often-told stories of the “New Woman”—young, articulate, educated, and devoted to progressive ideas, especially suffrage—a radical social force in American society, awakening the public to an awareness of gender inequality, she emerged in the 19th century. Black and white women alike embraced the idea of the “New Woman,” and the image of an educated woman firmly moving outside the home inspired many. Women saw education as the first step to progress.
the first nonviolent march on Washington

Suffragists Were Political Geniuses

In the early 19th century, women in the United States decided publicly was the 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 nonviolent strategies that continued shocking and militant for women at that time, most notably parades and picketing of the White House.

On March 3, 1913, Paul and the National Women'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 300,000 and upstaged the inauguration speech of President Wilson the next day. This was the first time anyone had ever staged a nonviolent march on Washington.
courage and patriotism
American Suffragists Had Courage

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 unbecoming. Mary Church Terrell was the only black woman to participate, in part due to prejudice, but also because being jailed was lifetime threatening for women of color.

In 1915—a time when it was rare to see women drinking—suffragist "merry" drove across the country and gathered more than 100,000 signatures in a "mcerber petition." During World War I, suffragists sponsored all women in the war zone to the front lines, where they endured direct bombardment. These compelling tactics elicited massive support for the suffrage cause.
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. Racial 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.

“We are sick and tired of being sick and tired” - Fannie Lou Hamer, 1964
"A gripping desire to serve and achieve persisted my being from early childhood, though at that immature stage, I knew not the name for the strangely excited feeling and sensation that enveloped me. Certain strains of my mother's blood of African royalty blended with my own warm blood which jointly lent to an ever swelling stream of a great consciousness of purpose. For I had a "yearning and longing for higher things."

-Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune papers: The Bethune Foundation Collection.

Writings, Diaries, Scrapbooks, Biographical Materials, and Files on the National Youth Administration and Women's Organizations, 1918-1955

Library Database:
Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century

Alice Paul, the National Woman's Party and the Vote:

The first civil rights struggle of the 20th century.

eBook
Reports and hearings on woman suffrage, relative to amendments to Constitution that right to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex

Document contains Senate and House reports from the 47th, 48th, and 82nd Congresses on woman suffrage, including hearings held Jan. 23, 1880 and Mar. 7, 1884. Document also contains hearings on woman suffrage held Mar. 13, 1912 (p. 71-100).

Library Database: Congressional Publications
EXTENDING THE RIGHT OF SUFFRAGE TO WOMEN

HEARINGS

THE COMMITTEE ON WOMAN SUFFRAGE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SIXTY-FIFTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

ON

H. J. RES. 200

JANUARY 3, 4, 5, AND 7, 1918

Extending the Right of Suffrage to Women.
Committee on Woman Suffrage.

Hearing Date: Jan. 3-5, 7, 1918.
Library Database: Congressional Publications

WOMAN SUFFRAGE WINS IN HOUSE BY ONE VOTE

274 For to 136 Against Submitting Amendment.

Senate is in Doubt
On Suffrage: Against It on Former Votes

DOUBT NOW IN SENATE

Polls Indicate Two-Thirds Cannot Be Obtained.

Woman Suffrage Wins in the House by One Vote:

247 For to 136 Against Submitting Amendment

Library Database:
The Washington Post (1877-2001)
NATION-WIDE SUFFRAGE
FAVORABLY REPORTED

Vote in Senate Next Session—
Hawaii Suffrage Bill Passed
—More Pickets Arrested.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 12.—The Susan B. Anthony resolution for nation-wide woman suffrage by constitutional amendment was favorably reported today by the Senate Suffrage Committee, and will take a place on the calendar for a vote at the session beginning in December.

Nation-wide Suffrage Favorably Reported:
Vote in Senate Next Session


Library Database:
The New York Times (1857-1922)