

# The Struggle for Suffrage: From Impossibility to Accepted Reality

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Today, many women vote with ease. The action itself is not difficult, but it is very meaningful. With every button press, ripped chad, and inked-in box by a woman, the desires of those fundamental woman's suffrage activists are being fulfilled, their effort acknowledged. The right to vote for women in the U.S. is important and its history makes it all the more significant. The woman's suffrage movement was built upon the notion of simple democratic actions being available to all in the face of a system that denied them this.

The movement began in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York at a convention, which gave way to the Declaration of Sentiments. This Declaration, modeled after the Declaration of Independence, voiced the demands of the women and men present: "that all men and women are created equal" and that it is a government's duty, and truly their purpose, to ensure that the inalienable rights of all its citizens are secured ("The Gilder"). This commonplace event, a congregation of like-minded individuals, would lead to a prolonged movement for women's suffrage.

However, many of those at the convention were abolitionists first. As the 15th Amendment, one that would make it illegal to deny the right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous servitude" ("Constitute"), came to the forefront of activist's concern, priorities were uncovered and debated. The crucial question began to be asked: should woman's suffrage be a priority when black men were so close to the vote? For many, the answer was "no." For Susan B. Anthony, on the other hand, the notion of the "Negroes' Hour" was ridiculous. When a schism developed in the women's suffrage movement because of this issue, she sided with the proponents for delayed universal suffrage over immediate suffrage for only black males. The separation wouldn't last. In 1890 the two separate factions joined to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) ("Women"). This simple act of fighting and reconciliation led to a stronger organization.

NAWSA would find itself divided after some years again, but the different factions would each make strides towards success. This time, Alice Paul would be the one to make the divide. Her organization, the National Women's Party (NWP), took more radical actions than she believed current NAWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt would ("National"). Paul's and the NWP's prime directive was swaying President Woodrow Wilson in favor of a women's suffrage amendment by picketing outside the White House ("Women"). They were arrested for their efforts. In the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia, the picketers, led by Alice Paul, went on hunger strike and were force fed, but news of this made the public sympathetic ("Alice"). Paul and the other women were soon released, and not long afterwards, President Wilson voiced his support for a woman's suffrage amendment ("Alice").

The constitutional amendment now had to be ratified by the states. Success was uncertain, but in the end, the three-fourths majority was fulfilled by a young Tennessee General Assembly member, Harry Burn ("Women"). Really, it was his mother who appealed to him through a note and gave him a yellow heart beneath his red rose ("Women"). And so, in August of 1920 the 19th Amendment was passed, giving citizens of the United States the right to vote regardless of sex ("Constitute"). With a simple note, the tide was turned.

The 19th Amendment was not the end, though, because in America, black women alongside black men were being stonewalled from their right to vote. The Civil Rights movement in 1964 turned heavily towards voter registration and rights campaigns like that of Freedom Summer in Mississippi (Rogers). The negative responses, sometimes violent, to such campaigns and marches pushed President Johnson to streamline the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act outlawed practices meant to discriminate at voter registration and the polls and urged federal enforcement and observation where necessary. This made it possible for the thousands of black female voters to follow, unhindered, in the footsteps of their white counterparts in 1920.

In the present when someone mails in a ballot or shows up to a voting center, it feels like nothing special. We take for granted something that, for some, was more than one hundred years in the making. We shall forever be indebted to the women and men who committed themselves to this struggle and fought on in ways that we can all

emulate. We congregate. We argue. We reconcile. We protest. We write. We listen. We vote.

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