

# The History of the 19th Amendment

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Women in New York City line up to vote for the first time in 1920 after the passage of the 19th Amendment. Photo: Underwood Archives/Getty Images

Ratified on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted American women the right to vote — a right known as woman suffrage. At the time the U.S. was founded, its female citizens did not share all of the same rights as men, including the right to vote. It was not until 1848, that the movement for women’s rights launched on a national level with a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, organized by abolitionists Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880). Following the convention, the demand for the vote became a centerpiece of the women’s rights movement. Stanton and Mott, along with Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and other activists, formed organizations that raised public awareness and lobbied the government to grant voting rights to women. After a 70-year battle, these groups finally emerged victorious with the passage of the 19th Amendment.

## Origins of women's suffrage in the U.S.

During America’s early history as a nation, women were denied some of the key rights enjoyed by male citizens. For example, married women couldn’t own property and had no legal claim to any money they might earn, and no female had the right to vote. Women were expected to focus on housework and motherhood, not politics.

The campaign for woman suffrage did not begin in earnest in the decades before the Civil War. During the 1820s and 1830s, various reform groups proliferated across the U.S. — temperance clubs, religious movements and moral-reform societies, anti-slavery organizations — and in a number of these, women played a prominent role. Meanwhile, many American women were beginning to chafe against what historians have called the “Cult of True Womanhood;” that is, the idea that the only “true” woman was a pious, submissive wife and mother concerned exclusively with home and family. Put together, these factors contributed to a new way of thinking about what it meant to be a woman and a citizen in the United States.

## **Suffrage movement gets organized**

It was not until 1848 that the movement for women’s rights began to organize at the national level. In July of that year, reformers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York (where Stanton lived). More than 300 people — mostly women, but also some men — attended, including former African-American slave and activist Frederick Douglass (1818-95). In addition to their belief that women should be afforded better opportunities for education and employment, most of the Seneca Falls delegates agreed that American women were autonomous individuals who deserved their own political identities. A group of delegates led by Stanton produced a “Declaration of Sentiments” document, modeled after the Declaration of Independence, which stated: “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.” What this meant, among other things, was that the delegates believed women should have the right to vote.

Following the convention, the idea of voting rights for women was mocked in the press and some delegates withdrew their support for the Declaration of Sentiments. However, Stanton and Mott persisted — they went on to spearhead additional women’s rights conferences and they were eventually joined in their advocacy work by Susan B. Anthony and other activists.

## **National suffrage groups established**

With the onset of the American Civil War (1861-65), the suffrage movement lost some momentum, as many women turned their attention to assisting in efforts related to the conflict between the states. After the war, woman suffrage endured another setback, when the women’s rights movement found itself divided over the issue of voting rights for black men. Stanton and some other suffrage leaders objected to the proposed 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would give black men the right to vote, but failed to extend the same privilege to American women of any skin color.

In 1869, Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) with their eyes on a federal constitutional amendment that would grant women the right to vote. That same year, abolitionists Lucy Stone (1818-93) and Henry Blackwell (1825-1909) founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA); the group's leaders supported the 15th Amendment and feared it would not pass if it included voting rights for women. (The 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870.) The AWSA believed women's enfranchisement could best be gained through amendments to individual state constitutions. Despite the divisions between the two organizations, there was a victory for voting rights in 1869, when the Wyoming Territory granted all female residents age 21 and older the right to vote. (When Wyoming was admitted to the Union in 1890, woman suffrage remained part of the state constitution.)

By 1878, the NWSA and the collective suffrage movement had gathered enough influence to lobby the U.S. Congress for a constitutional amendment. Congress responded by forming committees in the House and Senate to study and debate the issue. However, when the proposal finally reached the Senate floor in 1886, it was defeated.

In 1890, the NWSA and the AWSA merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The new organization's strategy was to lobby for women's voting rights on a state-by-state basis. Within six years, Colorado, Utah and Idaho adopted amendments to their state constitutions granting women the right to vote. In 1900, with Stanton and Anthony advancing in age, Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) stepped up to lead the NASWA.

## **Progress and civil disobedience**

The turn of the 20th century brought momentum to the woman suffrage cause. Although the deaths of Stanton in 1902 and Anthony in 1906 appeared to be setbacks, the NASWA under the leadership of Catt achieved rolling successes for women's enfranchisement at state levels. Between 1910 and 1918, the Alaska Territory, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota and Washington all extended voting rights to women.

Also during this time, through the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women (later, the Women's Political Union), Stanton's daughter Harriot Stanton Blatch (1856-1940) introduced parades, pickets and marches as means of calling attention to the cause. These tactics succeeded in raising awareness and led to unrest in Washington, D.C.

On the eve of the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) in 1913, protesters thronged a massive suffrage parade in the nation's capital, and hundreds of women were injured. That same year, Alice Paul (1885-1977) founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, which later became the National Woman's Party. The organization staged numerous demonstrations and regularly picketed the White House, among other militant tactics. As a result of these actions, some group members were arrested and served jail time.

In 1918, President Wilson switched his stand on women's voting rights from objection to support through the influence of Catt, who had a less-combative style than Paul. Wilson also tied the proposed suffrage amendment to America's involvement in World War I (1914-18) and the increased role women had played in the war efforts. When the amendment came up for vote, Wilson addressed the Senate in favor of suffrage. As reported in *The New York Times* on October 1, 1918, Wilson said, "I regard the extension of suffrage to women as vitally essential to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which we are engaged." However, despite Wilson's newfound support, the amendment proposal failed in the Senate by two votes. Another year passed before Congress took up the measure again.

## Getting the vote

On May 21, 1919, U.S. Representative James R. Mann (1856-1922), a Republican from Illinois and chairman of the Suffrage Committee, proposed the House resolution to approve the Susan Anthony Amendment granting women the right to vote. The measure passed the House 304-89 — a full 42 votes above the required two-thirds majority.

Two weeks later, on June 4, 1919, the Senate passed the 19th Amendment by two votes over its two-thirds required majority, 56-25. The amendment was then sent to the states for ratification. Within six days of the ratification cycle, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin each ratified the amendment. Kansas, New York and Ohio followed on June 16, 1919. By March of the following year, a total of 35 states had approved the amendment, one state shy of the two-thirds required for ratification. Southern states were adamantly opposed to the amendment, however, and seven of them — Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia — had already rejected it before Tennessee's vote on August 18, 1920. It was up to Tennessee to tip the scale for woman suffrage.

The outlook appeared bleak, given the outcomes in other Southern states and given the position of Tennessee's state legislators in their 48-48 tie. The state's decision came down to 23-year-old Representative Harry T. Burn (1895-1977), a Republican from McMinn County, to cast the deciding vote. Although Burn opposed the amendment, his mother convinced him to approve it. (Mrs. Burn reportedly wrote to her son: "Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification.") With Burn's vote, the 19th Amendment was ratified. Certification by U.S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby (1869-1950) followed on August 26, 1920.

On November 2 of that same year, more than 8 million women across the U.S. voted in elections for the first time. It took over 60 years for the remaining 12 states to ratify the 19th Amendment. Mississippi was the last to do so, on March 22, 1984.

## Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph in the section "Getting the vote" BEST reflects the central idea that the states were split over support of the 19th Amendment?
  
- 2 Which of the following statements accurately represents the relationship between the article's CENTRAL ideas?
  - (A) Until the 1900s, women were denied many of the basic rights guaranteed to male citizens; with the hard work of government leaders, women were able to gain some of those rights through the 19th Amendment.
  - (B) During the 1800s and early 1900s, activists formed organizations and launched campaigns for women's suffrage; eventually, the 19th Amendment was passed and ratified, granting women the right to vote.
  - (C) The fight for women's suffrage centered around efforts to lobby for voting rights on a state-by-state basis; most Northern states supported voting rights while most Southern states opposed them.
  - (D) National suffrage groups convinced President Wilson to propose an amendment to the Constitution; regardless of his support, Congress did not choose to initially pass the amendment.
  
- 3 The author develops the idea that the women's suffrage movement faced obstacles in each of the following ways EXCEPT:
  - (A) by describing the struggle to organize enough protesters for parades and demonstrations
  - (B) by highlighting the failure of a constitutional amendment to pass in the Senate in 1886
  - (C) by describing how the movement was divided over the issue of voting rights for black men
  - (D) by highlighting the negative reaction to Stanton and Mott's convention in New York
  
- 4 According to the article, each of the following helped to secure women's right to vote EXCEPT:
  - (A) the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt
  - (B) the persuasiveness of Harry Burn's mother
  - (C) the changing opinion of President Wilson
  - (D) the endorsement of religious reform groups

## Answer Key

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**Paragraph 14:**

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