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The Battle for the 19th Amendment and Women's Right to Vote

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Suffragettes picketing in front of the White house. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Sometimes it feels like the United States, as a society, has made major strides in the ongoing fight for gender equality. And sometimes reality rears its ugly head and you realize, well, the country still has a [long way to go](#). The truth is, women continue to fight every day for equal rights, and it wasn't that long ago that the female population (roughly half of the United States) was prohibited from participating in politics — until the 19th Amendment changed that.

Passed by Congress June 4, 1919, and ratified Aug. 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment finally granted women the right to vote in America. "The 19th Amendment prevented states from limiting the right to vote based on sex," says **Allison K. Lange, Ph.D.**, assistant professor of history at Boston's Wentworth Institute of Technology and author of "**Picturing Political Power: Images in the Women's Suffrage Movement.**" "Women started voting in Wyoming in 1869 and won the vote in other states in later years. They also could often vote in local city elections or school board elections before the 19th Amendment. Even so, the 19th Amendment was revolutionary because it enfranchised more people than any other law in U.S. history."

The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention

Well before the Civil War broke out, many women were beginning to push back against the idea that their role nothing more than a submissive wife and mother dealing with her home and family. At the same time, women were playing leading roles in reform groups, religious movements and anti-slavery organizations. All of these actions helped redefine what it meant to be woman in 19th-century United States.

But that was just the beginning of a battle for female political input that wasn't won quickly or easily. The first real proposal for the idea of women's suffrage as a goal began at the **Seneca Falls Convention**, the first women's rights convention in the United States. It was held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. More than 300 people — both men and women — attended, including African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass and leading women's rights advocate, **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, one of the meeting organizers. She kicked off the event with a rousing speech:

We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed — to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to have such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in case of separation, the children of her love.

The delegates wrote a "[Declaration of Sentiments](#)" describing women's grievances and demands, and called on women to fight for equality. The convention passed a list of 11 resolutions, including a ninth resolution that encouraged women "to secure themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise" — their [right to vote](#). It was by far the most controversial — even prompting many women's rights supporters to pull their support — and barely passed. But it also became the foundation of the women's suffrage movement going forward.



Suffragettes of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage marching during a parade in New York City circa 1913; the women at the front are holding a banner that reads "We demand an amendment to the United States Constitution enfranchising women".

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What Came After Seneca Falls

[In the years following](#), women of all ages began writing about, marching for and practicing civil disobedience — even referring to the Declaration of Sentiments — in an effort to change the Constitution, which originally permitted only [land-owning, white men, aged 21 and older to vote](#).

By the time the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was well established. It was formed in 1890 by suffragists Lucy Stone, Alice Stone Blackwell, [Susan B. Anthony](#), Harriot Stanton Blatch, Rachel Foster and Elizabeth Cady Stanton when the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) merged.

Members were encouraging women's rights supporters to join in the war effort and arguing that women deserved to vote because their experience and voices were critical in the political conversation. NAWSA's work, in addition to the protests of the National Woman's Party's (NWP), led to a widespread interest and fight for women's suffrage.

"'Suffrage' was a popular term in the 19th century, and it means the right to vote," Lange says. "Americans discussed male suffrage, female suffrage, black suffrage, etc. Today, people often associate the term with the women's voting rights movement."

The 19th Amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1878, but it [took more than 40 years](#) of organizing, petitioning, picketing and more to finally get it ratified. Over the decades, different strategies were employed to try and get the amendment passed. Some attempted to get suffrage acts passed in each individual state. The tactic worked to an extent: By 1912, nine western states adopted woman suffrage.

Other advocates went to court to challenge male-only voting laws, and some suffragists organized and participated in parades, hunger strikes and silent vigils. Regardless of the type of action these supporters took, these women almost invariably encountered countless forms of verbal, and even physical, abuse.

By 1916, almost all the major suffrage organizations formed a united front to pass a constitutional amendment. New York officially adopted woman suffrage in 1917 and a year later, President Woodrow Wilson changed his original position on the matter and declared support for the amendment.

Finally, on May 21, 1919, the House of Representatives passed the amendment, and the Senate followed two weeks later. In 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment — with three-fourths of the states in agreement, the U.S. was finally able to officially adopt the new policy. The 19th Amendment states: "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."



Alice Paul unfurls a banner from the balcony of the National Women's Party headquarters after the 19th Amendment was ratified giving women the right to vote.

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But Women Still Had to Fight to Vote

As impactful as the 19th Amendment was, it didn't end the struggle for female political representation. "It's important to keep in mind that the 19th Amendment did not grant all women the right to vote," Lange says. "Many poorer women and women of color were still subject to poll taxes, literacy tests and other restrictive laws. American women gained greater access to the polls through other laws like the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Puerto Rico granted women the vote in 1929. So, the 19th Amendment opened up opportunities, but many women still had to fight for the vote."

While the suffrage movement didn't put an end to **sexism** in society, its participants and leaders left lasting legacies. "My research examines the ways that women used pictures to persuade Americans to support women's rights," Lange says. "Some of the women who did this most effectively were Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Mary Church Terrell and Alice Paul. All of them challenged popular cartoons that mocked suffragists as manly monsters who threatened American values and gender roles."

Lange's research has turned up countless tales of how these women, in particular, upheld, strengthened and propelled the suffrage movement.

"In the 1860s, Sojourner Truth sold her portrait to support herself and emphasize that black women were respectable, hard-working people who deserved freedom from enslavement and rights," Lange says. In the 1870s and 1880s, Susan B. Anthony also became an icon of the movement, offering supporters an image of what female political leaders could look like.

"In the 1890s, Mary Church Terrell, first president of the National Association of Colored Women, responded by distributing her own images of highly educated, elegant black women to win respect for the reforms she sought."

Lang also says in the 1910s, Alice Paul used new image technology that allowed her to reproduce photos from the newspapers. She staged parades and the first-ever pickets of the White House to get attention and win support for the cause (see more in the sidebar below). These kinds of photos of women in such visible, political spaces proved to be very newsworthy, and convinced Americans of the suffragists' dedication to the cause.



Silent Sentinels staged a two-and-a-half-year protest in front of the White House for Women's Suffrage until the 19th Amendment finally passed both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

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Now That's Dedication

A group of women dubbed the **Silent Sentinels** and organized by Alice Paul, Lucy Burns and the National Woman's Party began a two-and-a-half-year long protest on Jan. 10, 1917, for Women's Suffrage. The women protested for six days a week in front of the White House until June 4, 1919, when the 19th Amendment finally passed both the House of Representatives and the Senate.



19th Amendment FAQ