Women’s Suffrage Prior to Nineteenth Amendment

Although early suffragists were not successful in passing a federal constitutional amendment to give women the right to vote, activists worked hard at the local and state levels throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They formed local organizations, proposed new state laws, and campaigned for state-wide referenda that gave women the right to vote in some elections, often those relating to education (for example, school board elections). In 1869, the Wyoming territory granted women the right to vote in all elections, a right they kept when Wyoming was admitted as a state in 1890. Many other western territories and states did the same.

Referenda: A direct popular vote on a proposed law or constitutional amendment.
Alice Paul Hangs the Ratification Banner at Suffrage Headquarters

After Congress approved the 19th Amendment in June 1919, the amendment had to be ratified by three fourths of the states. Fortunately, suffragists were well organized at the local level to pressure state legislatures into approving the amendment. To keep track of the amendment's progress, the National Women's Party created a "ratification flag", sewing on a star for each state that ratified the amendment. When Tennessee became the 36th state to approve the amendment—and the final of the necessary three-fourths of the states—triumphant suffragists, led by Alice Paul, hung the flag in Washington, D.C on August 18, 1920.

"Upon the word that Tennessee had ratified, Alice Paul unfurled the Woman's Party ratification banner with its thirty-six victory stars, and from the balcony of the headquarters it proclaims the triumph of the cause for which the Woman's Party was founded--the national enfranchisement of the women of America."

Source | National Photo Company, When Tennessee the 36th state ratified, Aug 18, 1920, Alice Paul, National Chairman of the Woman's Party, unfurled the ratification banner from Suffrage headquarters, in The Suffragist, Vol. 8, No. 8, (September 1920); from Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Creator | National Photo Company

Item Type | Photograph

The National Women’s Party Pickets the White House

A new militant suffrage group, the National Women’s Party (NWP), formed in 1916. Led by Alice Paul, the NWP began picketing the White House. The militants criticized President Woodrow Wilson for going to war “to make the world safe for democracy” in World War I, while in the United States women were denied the right to vote. Police arrested the picketers for blocking traffic and a judge sentenced them to seven months in prison. Paul and other prisoners went on a hunger strike to protest the harsh treatment they received there. The willingness of the picketers to be arrested, their campaign for recognition as political prisoners rather than as criminals, and their acts of civil disobedience in jail shocked the nation and brought attention and support to their cause.

Militant: strongly active and aggressive in support of a cause

Civil disobedience: refusing to obey certain laws in order to change a law or government policy

*Helena Hill Weed serving a 3 day sentence in prison for carrying a banner reading “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed”*

*Helena Hill Weed serving a 3 day sentence in prison for carrying a banner reading “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed”*

*Photograph of fourteen suffragists picketing in front of the White House in 1917. The banner reads “Mr. President How Long Must Women Wait For Liberty”*


Petition from the Citizens of Massachusetts in Support of Women’s Suffrage

During the 1870s and 1880s, hundreds of petitions bearing the signatures of thousands of people flooded Congress, asking for a suffrage amendment. Local activists went door-to-door in their communities, gathering the signatures of sympathetic women and men. These Massachusetts activists followed a template circulated by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; the template provided the proper wording for a petition and suggested that there be separate places for the signatures of men (who could vote) and women (who could not). Suffrage leaders compared their methods to similar anti-slavery petition drives, also led by women, in the antebellum period.

**Vocabulary**

**Petitions:** requests signed by many people  
**Suffrage:** right to vote  
**Template:** example  
**Antebellum:** before the Civil War
To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States.  
In Congress Assembled:

The undersigned, citizens of the United States, Residents of the  
State of Massachusetts, County of Essex, City of Salem, earnestly  
pray your Honorable Body to submit to the several States the  
following Amendment to the National Constitution, now pending  
in Congress (Senate Resolution No. 55, House Resolution No. 175)

Article 16

Sec. 1. The right of suffrage in the United States shall be based on citizenship, and 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, or for any reason not equally applicable to all citizens of the United States.

Sec. 2. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Men

Women

(List of Signatures)  (List of Signatures)

Ten Thousand Women March for the Right to Vote

Suffrage activists staged a huge parade up Fifth Avenue in New York City on May 10, 1913. Over 10,000 women and men marched, and a crowd of over half a million lined the streets to watch. New Yorkers were inspired by women who had marched in protest during Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration two months earlier in Washington, D.C. There, suffragists were spit on and attacked. By parading, women claimed a place for themselves in the public sphere. The tactic was borrowed from the labor movement and reflects the growing influence of working women in the suffrage movement.


Creator | H.H. Russell

Item Type | Photograph

The Declaration of Sentiments (edited)

In 1848 a group of 300 women and men, organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, met in Seneca Falls, New York to outline a list of demands for women’s equality. The Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the U.S. Declaration of Independence, included a list of grievances directed at the male-led government. It was signed by sixty-eight women and thirty-two men, including Frederick Douglass. Women’s rights activists held annual conventions until the Civil War broke out in 1861.

. . . 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; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . . The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, [in order to establish] an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to [the] world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to [vote].

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice . . .

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the [vote], leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.

Now . . . we insist that [women] have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

The Supreme Court Declares that the Constitution Does Not Protect Women's Right to Vote

Female suffragists were disappointed when the final language of the 15th Amendment did not specifically protect the right of women to vote. Some women activists opposed the amendment for this reason. Virginia Minor was one of those activists. Partly inspired by western territories granting universal suffrage, partly to test how well the 14th and 15th Amendment would protect women’s rights, Minor tried to register to vote in 1872. After she was denied, Minor and her husband sued the registrar; the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The court delivered this unanimous decision.

The question is presented in this case, whether, since the adoption of the 14th amendment, a woman, who is a citizen of the United States…has the right of suffrage…

There is no doubt that women may be citizens…sex has never been made one of the elements of citizenship in the United States. In this respect men have never had an advantage over men… The direct question is…whether all citizens are necessarily voters.

It certainly is nowhere made so in express terms. …It cannot for a moment be doubted that if it had been intended to make all citizens of the United States voters, the framers of the Constitution would not have left it to implication.

…[It] is now too late to contend that a government is not republican…because women are not made voters… If suffrage was intended to be included within its obligations, language better adapted to express that intent would have been employed.

…If the law is wrong, it ought to be changed; but the power for that is not with us… No argument as to woman’s need of suffrage can be considered. We can only act upon her rights as they exist…

Source: U.S. Supreme Court, Minor vs. Happersett, 1875; in Linda K. Kerber and Jane De Hart Matthews, Women’s America; Refocusing the Past (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
"Votes for Women"

Those opposed to women’s suffrage claimed that participating in politics would expose women to the sort of immorality and corruption from which they were usually shielded in their traditional role as housewives. In time, as one anti-suffragist warned, the vote would “turn women into men,” and they would neglect their domestic duties of raising children and keeping house. Such charges conveniently ignored the many thousands of women who were part of the workforce in the early twentieth century. Women cartoonists such as Katherine Milhous and Jessie Banks pointed out that earning a living as factory workers, nurses, or domestic servants did not “unsex” women, and neither would voting.
Women Appeal for a Suffrage Amendment

Suffrage activists were disappointed that the 15th Amendment did not explicitly protect women’s right to vote. Susan B. Anthony and others formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, based in Washington, D.C., to pressure Congress to pass an amendment that would guarantee women’s suffrage. The N.W.S.A. sent this appeal to hundreds of local groups, calling for a large petition drive to build support in Congress for a women’s suffrage amendment. Two years later, Senator Sargent of California, a friend of Anthony’s, introduced a women’s suffrage amendment. Within four years, both the Senate and House of Representatives had formed “special committees” on women’s suffrage.

To the Women of the United States:

Having celebrated our Centennial birthday with a National jubilee, let us now dedicate the dawn of the Second Century to securing justice to Woman.

For this purpose we ask you to circulate a petition to Congress, just issued by the “National Woman Suffrage Association,” asking an amendment to the United States Constitution, that shall prohibit the several states from disfranchising any of their citizens on account of Sex…

…We urge the women of this country to make now the same united effort for their own rights, that they did for the slaves at the south, when the 13th amendment was pending… [Then] the leading statesmen who welcomed woman’s untiring efforts to secure the black man’s freedom, frowned down the same demands when made for herself. Is not liberty as sweet to her as to him?

…[Making up] as we do one-half the people, bearing the burdens of one-half the National debt, equally responsible with man for the education, religion and morals of the rising generation, let us with united voice send forth a protest against the present political status of Woman…