

The History of Women's Suffrage



(Library of Congress photos)

The women's suffrage movement lasted at least 70 years, from the first formal women's convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, to the passage of the 19th amendment. English women won full voting privileges later than American women, but women in both countries began the worldwide suffrage movement.

Beginnings of the Women's Suffrage Movement

Changing social conditions for women during the early 1800's, combined with the idea of equality, led to the birth of the woman suffrage movement. For example, women started to receive more education and to take part in reform movements, which involved them in politics. As a result, women started to ask why they were not also allowed to vote. One of the first public appeals for woman suffrage came in 1848. Two reformers, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, called a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., where Stanton lived. The men and women at the convention adopted a Declaration of Sentiments that called for women to have equal rights in education, property, voting, and other matters. The declaration, which used the Declaration of Independence as a model, said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal. ..." Suffrage quickly became the chief goal of the women's rights movement. Leaders of the movement believed that if women had the vote, they could use it to gain other rights. But the suffragists faced strong opposition. Most people who opposed woman suffrage believed that women were less intelligent and less able to make political decisions than men. Opponents argued that men could represent their wives better than the wives could represent themselves. Some people feared that women's participation in politics would lead to the end of family life.



*Illustration for 28th Annual
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Association*

Growth of the Women's Suffrage Movement



The drive for woman suffrage gained strength after the passage of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which gave the vote to black men but not to any women. In 1869, suffragists formed two national organizations to work for the right to vote. One was the National Woman Suffrage Association, and the other was the American Woman Suffrage Association. The National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Stanton and another suffragist named Susan B. Anthony, was the more radical of the two organizations. Its chief goal was an amendment to the Constitution giving women the vote. In 1872, Anthony and a group of women voted in the presidential election in Rochester, N.Y. She was arrested and fined for voting illegally. At her trial, which attracted nationwide attention, she made a stirring speech that ended with the slogan "Resistance to Tyranny Is Obedience to God."

The American Woman Suffrage Association, led by the suffragist Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, was more conservative. Its main goal was to induce individual states to give the vote to women. The two organizations united in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union and other organizations also made woman suffrage a goal. During the early 1900's, a new generation of leaders brought a fresh spirit to the woman suffrage movement. Some of them, including Carrie Chapman Catt and Maud Wood Park, were skilled organizers who received much of their support from middle-class women. These leaders stressed organizing in every congressional district and lobbying in the nation's capital. Other leaders, including Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, and Stanton's daughter Harriot E. Blatch, appealed to young people, radicals, and working-class women. This group of leaders devoted most of their efforts to marches, picketing, and other active forms of protest. Paul and her followers even chained themselves to the White House fence. The suffragists were often arrested and sent to jail, where many of them went on hunger strikes.

Institutions Formed to Promote Women's Suffrage



Several influential organizations formed in the late 1800's to promote women's right to vote. Some of the organizations existed strictly to promote women's voting rights, but others, such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, sought women's suffrage along with other goals. (pictured above: 1st Women's Congress) (Library of Congress photos)

The National Woman Suffrage Association



In 1869, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and worked for a woman suffrage amendment to the Constitution. The chief goal of the NWSA was an amendment to the Constitution giving women the vote. The NWSA also demanded equal education and equal employment opportunities for women. Anthony served as president of the group from 1892 until 1900. Carrie Catt served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1900 to 1904, and from 1915 to 1920, when Amendment 19 to the United States Constitution was passed, giving women the right to vote.

In 1890, the NWSA joined with the more moderate American Woman Suffrage Association to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Suffragists held conventions, waged state-by-state campaigns, and distributed literature to win support for their cause.

The American Woman Suffrage Association

In 1869, Lucy Stone helped establish the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) which worked for women's right to vote. The association became a major women's organization. Its main goal was to induce individual states to give the vote to women. In 1890, the AWSA joined with the National Woman Suffrage Association, which Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton formed in 1869. The new organization was called the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and it held conventions, waged voting campaigns and distributed literature in support of women's voting rights.

The League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that promotes informed, active public participation in government. Both men and women may belong to the league. It has about 1,300 local groups in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The league believes that political education helps create a sense of responsibility in Americans for democratic government. It encourages all eligible Americans to register and vote, and it provides nonpartisan information on candidates and issues before elections. It does not endorse candidates or political parties. The League of Women Voters selects local, state, and national issues for study and legislative action. It has supported international cooperation; the improvement of air and water quality; election reforms; and equal opportunity in education, employment, and housing. Local and state leagues have worked for changes in city charters and state constitutions, court reforms, and improved services in education, health, and welfare. The league formed in 1920 as an outgrowth of the woman suffrage movement in the United States. Its headquarters are in Washington, D.C.