

1920: WOMEN GET THE VOTE

by Sam Roberts



Women who led the suffragette movement and fought for the right to vote.

In 1776, Abigail Adams warned the Founding Fathers needed to “remember the ladies.” Or, she warned, “we are determined to foment a rebellion. We will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

That summer, the Declaration of Independence was passed. It said all men are created equal. But it did not say anything about women’s equality. It took another 144 years before in 1920, the 19th Amendment was passed. The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote in every state. It said the right to vote cannot be denied because of gender, and it was a long time coming.

“WOMANIFESTO”

In 1848, the movement for women’s rights gained momentum. Women met at a Women’s Rights

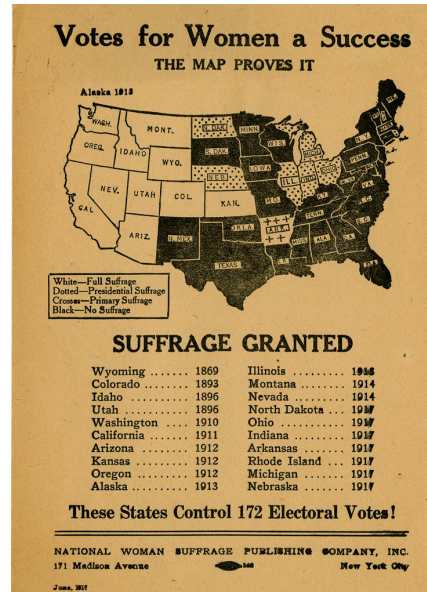
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convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y. There, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote a “Womanifesto.” It was patterned on the Declaration of Independence. It demanded equal voting rights, also known as universal suffrage. This shocked even Stanton’s supporters. “I saw clearly,” Stanton said, “that the power to make the laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured.” Others helped Stanton fight for women to be able to vote. It wasn’t easy. Women fighting for the vote experienced hardship, but they persevered.

WYOMING IS FIRST

Women staged demonstrations and pressed their case state by state. In 1869, the Wyoming Territory gave women the vote. This was likely because there were very few women residing there. Hence, there was no danger that women could force their will on the male majority.

In 1878, a constitutional amendment was introduced in Congress. After years, in 1887, the Senate voted against it. Yet the women’s voting movement was slowly gaining support. More women were graduating and working outside the home. Many Americans began asking: Why couldn’t women vote? Numerous people were against it too.



This flyer was used by suffragists in 1919 to help gain support for the Nineteenth Amendment. The map it depicts shows the different levels of suffrage held by women in different states.

In 1918, after much picketing by suffragists, President Woodrow Wilson decided to support the amendment. The next year, both houses of Congress voted to change the Constitution. Within a little more than a year, 35 of the required 36 states had voted to approve the amendment. The last stand for anti-suffragists was in Tennessee in 1920. After two roll calls, the vote was tied, 48–48. Then Harry Burn, the youngest member, switched sides. He voted to approve because he had received a letter from his mother. The letter read “Hurrah and vote for suffrage!”



Suffrage advocates threw the very first White House picket protest. For two and a half years, six days a week, they held up signs saying, “How long must women wait for liberty?” and “Mr. President, what will you do for woman suffrage?”

GRADUAL CHANGE

In 1920, women across America had the right to vote in a presidential election. But newly enfranchised women voted in much smaller numbers than men. Change came slowly. In 1972, Congress passed an Equal Rights Amendment that made it law to treat women and men equally. The Equal Rights Amendment failed, though, after being approved by only 35 of the necessary 38 states. By 1980, however, women surpassed men for the first time in turnout for a presidential election. By 2022, 45 women had been governors, 144 women were members of the Congress, and the first woman was serving as vice president of the United States.