

The Right to Vote - Draft Notes

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 - efforts to gain the right to vote persisted for more than seventy years
 - eventually gave rise to the nation's largest mass movement for suffrage, as well as a singular countermovement of citizens opposed to their own enfranchisement
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- decades later, the reaction against universal suffrage retarded its progress
- Black suffrage and women's suffrage were closely linked issues everywhere in the 1860s and in the South well into the twentieth century
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 - rich and poor
 - married and single
 - Protestants and Catholics

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From Seneca Falls to the Fifteenth Amendment

- The movement to enfranchise women in the United States had its legendary beginnings at a convention held in July 1848, in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York
- The convention was held in a local church
 - attracted nearly three hundred people, including many men
 - After two days of discussion, one hundred of the participants approved and signed a set of resolutions calling for equal rights for women, including "their sacred right to the elective franchise"
- Declaration of Sentiments
 - Laws made only by men, the declaration detailed, relegated women to an inferior place in the social, civil, and economic order

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 - “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal”
 - “We declare that the elective franchise should belong to all men and women who are represented in the halls of legislation” and “approved on all sides”
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Why no female franchise?

- Although women were regarded as intelligent adults, they were viewed as having capacities different from those of men
 - capacities appropriate to private life and the domestic sphere rather than the public world of politics
- Women were treated in law as members of families rather than as autonomous individuals
 - Women excluded for the same reason that the poor and propertyless were disfranchised in the late 1800s: they lacked the independent resources necessary for participation in electoral politics
- Women did not seem (to men) to be endangered by their inability to vote
- Nowhere did the enfranchisement of women seem likely to vest Republicans or Democrats with any discernible partisan advantage

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- Women did not seem (to men) to be endangered by their inability to vote
 - women were considered to be under the control and protection of men, whether by the men of their families, primarily by husbands and fathers (“natural protectors”), or by the state
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The timing of Seneca Falls and the Rise of Suffrage

- Women remained outside the polity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and efforts to promote their inclusion were rare
- The decades preceding Seneca Falls had witnessed:
 - the expansion of an urban and quasi-urban middle class in much of the North who valued and embraced an expansion of civil, economic, and political rights
 - the number of women in the paid labor force increased sharply
 - the antislavery movement that proved to be a breeding ground for advocates of women's rights
 - spillover effects of the era's broader democratizing current
- The termination of property and taxpaying restrictions on voting and debates about the enfranchisement of aliens and African Americans, threw open the logical and rhetorical doors to the further expansion of suffrage.

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- The public embrace of democracy was as broad as it ever had been
 - the war and the plight of former slaves had energized the language of universal rights
 - the Republican Party, home of the staunchest advocates of civil and political rights, was firmly in power
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But the optimism was short-lived. The Republican Party's support for universal rights was not as strong as it seemed. The party's leaders were divided on the issue of whether to grant the franchise to former slaves. The party's support for universal rights was not as strong as it seemed.

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Pushback happens immediately

- Within months of the war's end, Republican leaders and male abolitionists began to signal their lack of enthusiasm for coupling women's rights to black rights
- "One question at a time. This hour belongs to the negro." - Wendell Phillips
- The Fourteenth Amendment disheartened suffragists and made clear that the Republican Party could not be counted on to promote suffrage for women
 - the amendment undercut the claims of women by adding the word "male" to the pathbreaking guarantee of political rights
- the number of Republicans committed to enfranchising the former slaves was growing rapidly, but many of these men, whatever their personal convictions, feared that this goal would be jeopardized by simultaneously pursuing the controversial cause of women's suffrage

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The Fifteenth Amendment's Crushing Blow

- With the passage and ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 and 1870, the causes of black (male) and women's suffrage were decisively severed
- the national drive for suffrage expansion, beginning with Seneca Falls, came to a close
 - the status of women at best unchanged;
 - arguably, women were worse off, because the Fifteenth Amendment appeared to implicitly condone political discrimination based on sex

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- The *Fourteenth Amendment*, which declared that “all persons” born or naturalized in the United States were citizens of the nation and the state in which they resided
 - Women, as “persons,” were unquestionably citizens
 - the franchise was an intrinsic feature of citizenship: the Constitution, therefore, already guaranteed women the right to vote in federal elections
- Various dictionaries, including Webster’s, actually defined an American citizen as someone entitled to vote and hold office

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 - they infringed on Virginia Minor's right of free speech, which was protected by the First Amendment
 - they violated the *Fourteenth Amendment's* command that states not abridge the "privileges or immunities" of citizens of the United States.
- Voting, the Minors claimed, was one of those privileges
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Suffrage Convictions

- Supporters of women's suffrage sincerely and deeply believed not only in the rightness of their cause but in the power of their simple egalitarian arguments: women were capable adult citizens and as such ought to be able to choose the lawmakers and laws that governed them
- Suffragists lived in an era when a righteous cause –the abolition of slavery– that had triumphed over ferocious, entrenched opposition
- They had witnessed not only the end of slavery but also an extraordinary transformation of popular views and laws regarding Black suffrage
 - which was seen as first supported only by those on the fringes of politics but acquired the backing of the Republican Party and then been enshrined in the Constitution
- If one accepted the premise that voting was a right, natural or otherwise, it was not a long leap from black to women's suffrage
- Black suffrage triumphed (albeit temporarily) not because the polity had become convinced of the virtues of equal rights or universal suffrage but due to the unique political exigencies of Reconstruction and the political goals of the Republican Party

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- NWSA's strategy was to pressure the federal government to offer women the same constitutional protections given to freedmen in the Fifteenth Amendment
- Proposed Amendment: "the right of suffrage in the United States shall be based on citizenship" and that "all citizens... shall enjoy this right equally without any distinction or discrimination whatever founded on sex"
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- Utah did the same in 1870 and 1896 (interrupted by a brief period when the federal government stripped Utah's women of the suffrage as a curious step in its effort to rid the territory of polygamy)
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Partial enfranchisement

- A significant number of locales (states, counties, and municipalities) where partial suffrage was adopted
 - permitted women to vote in
 - municipal elections
 - on liquor licensing matters
 - for local school boards and on issues affecting education
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 - women's virtues were seen as a counterweight to the corruption of men
 - women were different, and that difference would be a boon to American political life
- Has a conservative thrust as well: the virtues of women could be counted on to preserve the traditional social order, to protect property, order, and stability, particularly against the vices of the urban working class

Essentialist argument

- A more essentialist strand of argument: that women possessed particular qualities or virtues that would improve the character of politics and governance
 - were embraced by many male politicians who seemed more comfortable stressing women's unique virtues rather than their similarity to men
 - women would elevate the tone of politics
 - would be less corruptible and more likely to promote policies favoring social justice, peace, and sobriety
- This argument became preeminent by the end of the 1870s
 - women ought to be enfranchised not because they were identical to men but precisely because they were different
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Less noble reasons for suffrage

- At times in the 1870s and 1880s, this rationale went a giant step beyond fairness and acquired a more overtly politicized, racist edge
 - female suffrage would benefit society because white native-born women outnumbered—and would outvote—blacks, the Chinese, aliens, or transients
 - the political dominance of “Americans,” therefore, would be insured by the enfranchisement of women
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 - they did, however, argue that women would be dominated by politicians, the police, and the press
 - some insisted that the proposed enfranchisement of women would rob the white male of citizenship and leave a large number of “non-citizens” actually enfranchised
 - others (including anti-suffrage women) claimed that non-white men in fact did not want to be enfranchised
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Other reasons not to franchise females

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- There was anxiety that enfranchising women would deform natural gender roles and destroy family life
 - admitting women into the public arena would encourage promiscuity, undermine the purity of women, and expose them to the irresistible predations of men
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Suffragists rebuking critics

- Many women themselves were either opposed indifferent to their own enfranchisement
- The demand for suffrage was most resonant among middle-class women, women from families engaged in the professions, trade or commerce, and educated women who lived in cities and developing towns
- These were the women whose experiences and desires clashed most directly with traditional norms and who were most likely to seek the independence, autonomy, and equality that enfranchisement represented
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Upper-class anti-suffragists

- Farm women, living in greater isolation and in more traditional social structures, were less responsive to calls for suffrage as well as more difficult to mobilize into collective action
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- The fact that the vast majority of the population was not in favor of women's suffrage was a major reason why male voters and politicians were resistant to the suffragists' demands for universal suffrage. The opposition to the suffragists' demands for universal suffrage was also fueled by the fact that the vast majority of the population was not in favor of women's suffrage.

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 - in part for cultural reasons and in part because they always sought to keep the electorate as manageable as possible
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- The West was unusually receptive
 - All of the states that fully enfranchised women in the 1800s were west of the Mississippi, as were most states that held suffrage referendum
- What seems to have tipped the balance in a handful of western states was a combination of several additional ingredients:
 - the republican influences of frontier life and western Populism
 - the desire to encourage settlement
 - opportunities presented by the convening of constitutional conventions at statehood
 - a more fluid pattern of party competition
 - a highly visible number of working-class transients who labored in mining, railroading, and agriculture
- Most western states between 1850 and the 1890s did not experience the massive growth of an industrial working class that triggered such an antidemocratic reaction in the East and Midwest

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 - overwhelmingly of single males; female enfranchisement offered political benefits to the settler population
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- The period from 1896 to 1910 came to be known among suffragists as “the doldrums”
 - few concrete gains
 - Although the issue was raised repeatedly in state legislatures and constitutional conventions, there were no new additions to the suffrage column
 - Massachusetts was the only state to implement a form of limited municipal suffrage that was overwhelmingly defeated and for which only 2,000 women (out of a possible 500,000) turned out to vote
- In the South, the statistical argument was simply no match for the frenzied political circus that was disfranchising Blacks and poor whites in one state after another
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- Whatever its statistical validity, the anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-working class argument in favor of women's suffrage was inescapably weakened by its own *internal contradictions*
- An **antidemocratic** argument in favor of enlarging the franchise could neither overwhelm nor outflank the simpler, more consistent conservative view that the polity should be as *narrowly circumscribed* as possible

A Mass Movement

- Shifts were under way that would soon change the movement's direction and fortunes;
- The first decade of the twentieth century proved to be less a period of failure than of fruitful stock-taking and coalition building
- The movement became socially and ideologically more diverse, attracting both elite and working-class supporters to complement its middle-class base Female workers
- By 1900, roughly one fifth of the labor force was female, and many of these women held poorly paid, semiskilled jobs
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- **They were convinced that state intervention could ameliorate their working conditions and that such intervention would be forthcoming only if they were enfranchised**

- Thanks in part to this convergence of working-class interest in suffrage with the suffragists' interest in the working class, the campaign for women's suffrage became a mass movement for the first time in its history after 1910
- The movement also began to win some new victories
 - Washington permitted women to vote in 1910, followed by California in 1911, and Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon the following year; Illinois, in 1913, decided to allow women to vote in presidential elections and for all state and local offices not provided for in its constitution; and the next year, Montana and Nevada adopted full suffrage.
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- Also in 1910, a petition favoring a federal amendment was signed by more than 400,000 women and was presented to Congress
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 - A new surge of organizing began in 1910, rooted in an urban and quasi-urban middle class that had grown rapidly in preceding decades
 - By 1913, every southern state had a suffrage organization allied with NAWSA
 - but the middle class relatively small and the rural world was large and difficult to reach
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The Nineteenth Amendment

- In 1914 and 1915, the suffrage movement stood at a crossroads
 - Women were fully enfranchised in some states and had partial suffrage in many
 - Still, the movement for political equality still faced an uphill, obstacle-laden struggle
 - Victories had been won, but defeats were more numerous, and none of the heavily populated states of the Northeast and Midwest had granted women the right to vote
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- The National Woman's Party (NWP) was founded in 1916, and its members adopted the "Demand for Equal Rights" platform of 1918, which called for a federal amendment to the Constitution that would guarantee equal rights for women
- The NWP also adopted the "Equal Rights Amendment" (ERA) language

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 - ① the partial enfranchisement of women: **some women already could vote in all elections, and many could vote in some elections**
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 - The age-old argument that women should not vote because they did not bear arms was no longer applicable
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Convincing the Senate

- The Senate, where anti-suffragist southern Democrats constituted a proportionally larger bloc, took an additional year and a half to endorse the amendment
- After months of relentless political pressure and careful targeting of Republican and Democratic holdouts, the Senate (by a large Republican majority and a small Democratic one) finally came on board in the summer of 1919
- “essential to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which are engaged. . . We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of sacrifice and suffering and toll and not to a partnership of privilege and of right? This war could not have been fought. . . if it had not been for the services of women.” - *Woodrow Wilson*

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 - they also believed it essential to move quickly, before the aura of wartime faded
- Anti-suffragists geared up for battle, denouncing the Nineteenth Amendment as a violation of states' rights and a giant step toward socialism and free love
 - To no one's surprise, the South remained recalcitrant
- In the end, it was approved only by the four border states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, and Arkansas
- On August 18, 1920, Tennessee, by a margin of one vote, became the thirty-sixth state to vote positively on the amendment; a week later, after ratification had been formally certified, the Nineteenth Amendment was law

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The Nineteenth Amendment Section 1: **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** Section 2: **Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation**

- It is a well-known irony in American history that politics did not change very dramatically after women were enfranchised
- The electorate nearly doubled in size between 1910 and 1920, but voting patterns and partisan alignments were little affected
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How things changed

- Political life in the 1920s was not nearly as vibrant or energetic as it had been in the 1890s or the latter years of the Progressive era
 - despite the identification of women with social reform, reforms were few during the first decade that women could vote
- The issue agenda did change, though

• The issue agenda women introduced was injected into the political system even if concrete reforms were slow to materialize

• The early-century language of the 1920s was defined by pragmatism. The female electorate did often promote legislation that had not been political and organizational focus in the earlier movement

• Female support of a government of business leaders in response to labor law reform, for example, was a far cry from the earlier support of labor law reform by women's organizations

How things changed

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- Although some (but not many) Black women were able to register to vote
 - the Democratic Party remained firmly in power
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- So, why was there opposition?

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