The Right to Vote - Draft Notes

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Women's Suffrage

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- efforts to gain the right to vote persisted for more than seventy years
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- decades later, the reaction against universal suffrage retarded its progress
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From Seneca Falls to the Fifteenth Amendment

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- 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*"
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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
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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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After the Civil War

- As the war ended and Reconstruction began, leaders of the suffrage movement were optimistic
- 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
  - also felt that their claim to the franchise had been strengthened by the energetic support women had lent to the war effort

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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 protected the rights of women by adding the word male to its guarantees 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

- *Some suffragists turned briefly to a legal strategy for gaining the right to vote*
- *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*

Minor v. Happersett (1875)

- *In 1872, Virginia Minor sued a St. Louis registrar who prevented her from registering to vote. She Claimed:*
  - *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*

Another Legal Challenge

- Suffragists took another legal tack as well: they promoted tax rebellions among female property owners in the late 1860s and early 1870s
- women refused to pay their taxes as long as they were prevented from voting, insisting that it was unconstitutional to impose the obligations of citizenship on them while they were deprived of political rights
- "No taxation without representation" remained a resonant slogan
  - activists showed research demonstrating that women in fact paid a sizable portion of the taxes in many municipalities

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- women refused to pay their taxes as long as they were prevented from voting, insisting that it was unconstitutional to impose the obligations of citizenship on them while they were deprived of political rights
- "No taxation without representation" remained a resonant slogan
  - activists showed research demonstrating that women in fact paid a sizable portion of the taxes in many municipalities

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
- **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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NATIONAL
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MARSHAL

Regrouping

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  - Founded by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton
- 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"
- "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"
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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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- A significant number of locales (states, counties, and municipalities) where partial suffrage was adopted
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    - on liquor licensing matters
    - for local school boards and on issues affecting education
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- 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
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  - they insisted that women themselves would be degraded by participating in politics
  - some maintained that the prospect of being dragged down "into the very filth and pits of degradation and human misery" would ensure that only the "worst" women actually would vote
  - others (including anti-suffrage women) claimed that most women in fact did not want to be enfranchised
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  - 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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  - 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 South

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- The movement was slow to gather steam in the South
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  - 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:
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  - 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 residents who labored in mining, railroading, and agriculture
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Essentialist theme

Essentialist emphasis was reinforced by the increasingly common claim that women had distinct economic and social interests that could only be protected by possession of the right to vote. White middle-class suffragists placed new weight on the argument that the enfranchisement of women would compensate for and counterbalance the votes of the ignorant and undesirable

In the South, of course, the American Republic was thought to be threatened not by immigrants but by Blacks It was argued that "the medium through which to retain the supremacy of the white race over the African" In both the North and South, the notion that women were the antidote to undesirable voters led many suffragists, including Stanton, to join the conservative chorus calling for literacy tests as a means of shaping the electorate **Suffragists effectively abandoned the principle of universal suffrage in favor of increasingly popular class-based limitations on electoral participation**

“the doldrums”

The period from 1896 to 1910 came to be known among suffragists as “the doldrums” Although the issue was raised repeatedly in state legislatures and constitutional conventions, there were no new additions to the suffrage column. 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 In the North, the parallel push for suffrage for educated women collided head-on with the powerful middle-and upper-class desire to shrink the electorate

Internal contradictions

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

Coalition building

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; in 1905, there were 50,000 women in New York's garment industry alone New emphasis on working women had both ideological and pragmatic attractions for suffragists. Female workers were described as "exemplars of independent womanhood" They were also vulnerable and exploited victims of industrial capitalism whose plight readily tapped the broad impulses of Progressive-era social reform

That suffrage would never be achieved until it had gained the electoral support of working-class men–which meant emphasizing class as well as gender issues Working women themselves, as well as their activist leaders, displayed new interest in acquiring the right to vote This arose in part because of their difficulty unionizing and winning workplace conflicts **They were convinced that state intervention could ameliorate their working conditions and that such intervention would be forthcoming only if they were enfranchised**

State-level Victories

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. In 1912, Congress expressly authorized the territory of Alaska to enfranchise women if its legislature so chose

New allies

In 1910, President William H. Taft agreed to address the annual convention of NAWSA That same year, a petition favoring a federal amendment, signed by more than 400,000 women, was presented to Congress In 1912, the Progressive Party endorsed women's right to vote, and in March 1913, Woodrow Wilson's inauguration was partially eclipsed by a suffrage parade of 5,000 women in Washington The following year, a Senate committee reported favorably on a federal amendment, and for the first time in decades a draft amendment was brought to the floor of Congress for a vote But, opposition remained strong, particularly in the eastern half of the country.

By the latter years of the Progressive era, African Americans had been successfully disfranchised throughout the South, and most whites were intent on keeping it that way Politicians were loath to tinker at all with electoral laws, and they feared that *Black women might prove to be more difficult to keep from the polls than Black men* –because Black women were believed to be more literate than men and *more aggressive about asserting their rights* , and also because women would be unseemly targets of repressive violence Many Southerners were convinced that a federal amendment would open the doors to **Washington's intervention in elections, to enforcement–so glaringly absent–of the Fifteenth Amendment** and any subsequent amendment that might appear to *guarantee the voting rights of Black women*

The Nineteenth Amendment

President Woodrow Wilson declined to endorse women's suffrage, evasively reiterating his view that suffrage was a state issue The national Democratic Party was similarly unresponsive The Republican platform of 1916, in contrast, endorsed the cause, albeit in watered-down language 1916 election >- The 1916 elections set in motion two distinctive partisan dynamics that had surfaced periodically in suffrage struggles since the 1840s > + the first resulted from the partial enfranchisement of women: **some women already could vote in all elections, and many could vote in some elections** > + such circumstances gave women leverage to reward or punish politicians because of their (or their party's) stance on the Nineteenth Amendment > + The second dynamic was that of the "endgame," the dynamic of possible or impending victory: **once it seemed likely or even possible that women's suffrage eventually would be achieved** , either nationally or in an individual state, **the potential political cost of a vote against enfranchisement rose dramatically**

In 1917, the United States entered World War I The most critical impact of the war was the opportunity it gave suffragists to contribute to the mobilization The age-old argument that women should not vote because they did not bear arms was no longer applicable "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."

Federal success The suffragists' able handling of the war crisis, coupled with continuing political pressure on Congress and the president, was rewarded in January 1918 The president, in an extraordinary address, announced his support of a federal suffrage amendment "as a war measure" The next day, the House of Representatives voted in favor of the Nineteenth Amendment: the victory was won by one vote, with the Democrats splitting almost evenly while more than 80 percent of Republicans voted favorably.

Convincing the Senate

The Senate, where antisuffragist 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 State Ratification Ratification depended on winning virtually every state outside of the South and the border states Antisuffragists 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 **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**

The Nineteenth Amendment

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**

After ratification

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 **Women, moreover, did not rush out to vote in huge numbers: electoral turnout was even lower among women than among men**

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 New issues, particularly those affecting women and children, were injected into the political arena, even if concrete reforms were slow to materialize The social welfare programs of the 1930s were colored by the concerns of the female electorate and often promoted by women who had cut their political and organizational teeth in the suffrage movement Franklin Roosevelt's appointment of Frances Perkins as secretary of labor (and as the first woman to hold a cabinet position) would not have happened without the Nineteenth Amendment

The suffragists' prediction that the enfranchisement of women would not jeopardize white supremacy in the South proved to be on the mark Although some (but not many) Black women were able to register to vote, the Democratic Party remained firmly in power, segregation and Black disfranchisement persisted, and the federal government steered clear of voting rights issues for another four decades **Sex, thus, did not prove to be a significant dividing line in the American electorate** : some gender gaps in voting did occur in the early years (as well as more recently), but they were not large, and few issues sharply divided men and women.

Women certainly were empowered by enfranchisement, and their lives consequently (if gradually) may have changed in a host of different ways, but they tended to vote for the same parties and candidates that their husbands, fathers, and brothers supported Class, race, ethnicity, and religion remained the more salient predictors of a person's voting behavior Why was there opposition The very absence of dramatic change after 1920 inescapably leaves one wondering what the adamant resistance was all about Why, given the rather placid outcome, did so many men oppose women's suffrage for so long? Why did it take women seventy years after Seneca Falls to become enfranchised?

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE – AND BEYOND THE QUIET YEARS CHAPTER 7 TO BE ADDED Racial Tensions The South was a cauldron of racial tension in the 1950s African Americans pressed forward against the boundaries of America's caste system, demanding an end to social segregation and second-class citizenship Fighting for Rights Black citizens marched, rallied, boycotted buses, wrote petitions, and filed lawsuits to challenge the Jim Crow laws that had kept them in their place for more than half a century The widespread resistance to integration only underscored the Black community's need for political rights, but throughout the 1950s