

Wave, Susan: Modern American Women. Boston: MIT Press, 2002.



### CHAPTER 5

## *The Final Push for Suffrage*

The woman suffrage movement called on the energies and political skills of three generations of American women. Even as the movement melded into the mainstream of Progressive reform in the early 20th century, its success was never a foregone conclusion. A combination of factors, including women's patriotic contributions to the home front during World War I, helped to push the 19th Amendment over the top. On election day 1920, 26 million women were eligible to go to the polls as a result.

Dividing the suffrage movement into three distinct periods—1848–1869, 1869–1890, and 1890–1920—helps explain its shifting priorities and tactics over its more than seven decades of existence. The first period, from 1848 to 1869, began at the Seneca Falls convention, the first women's rights convention ever held in the world, where the Declaration of Sentiments included a controversial call for the ballot. Historian Ellen DuBois has pointed out how radical such a demand was in the mid-19th century, because it challenged the separation of the spheres into men's (public) and women's (private). The suffrage plank barely passed the assembled convention.

During the first 20 years of the women's rights movement, it was closely allied with abolitionism and the struggle to end slavery. Disagreements in the immediate post-Civil War period about the priorities of freed blacks versus women's rights led to a severing of this link. With the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, black people won their freedom and black men won the right to vote. As feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony pointed out, however, now that the word *male* was in the constitution as a definition of voting rights, it would take another constitutional amendment to enfranchise women.

By 1869, an independent woman suffrage movement had emerged in the United States. The period between 1869 and 1890 was not marked by any great breakthroughs for the cause. Only two territories allowed women the vote—Utah in 1869 and Wyoming in 1870. The suffrage movement on the national level split into two rival wings, mainly over whether to work on a state basis or the federal level. In 1890, the rival wings reunited as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).

By 1890, the suffrage movement was on the threshold of new activism and success. In part, the movement was more palatable because it was less radical. Instead of early demands by feminists such as Stanton for divorce and women's economic emancipation, the movement leaders now stuck very closely to the sole demand of the vote. And increasingly suffragists argued for the vote not as a challenge to conventional notions about women's proper sphere, but as an extension of that sphere. Women cited their domestic orientation as the reason they needed the vote. They could do for the country what they did for their homes and families. Suffragists also played up women's supposed moral superiority. This tactic of accepting conventional views of women and exploiting them was highly successful, especially as the Progressive reform spirit gathered strength.

As late as 1910, the woman suffrage movement had won the vote in only four states, but the tide was turning. New leadership, notably the NAWSA presidency of Carrie Chapman Catt from 1915 to 1920, revitalized the movement with a winning plan. Attention-grabbing tactics, such as suffrage parades and open-air meetings, won publicity. The movement also branched out into immigrant and working-class urban communities to mobilize support. Suffragists effectively pointed out the irony of fighting to make the world safe for democracy in World War I, while the female population remained disfranchised at home. Militant tactics, such as picketing the White House and conducting hunger strikes for the cause, won support.

But probably the main reason women finally won the vote in 1920 was that it was now a far less radical demand than it had been in 1848. Try to imagine how 19th-century political history would have been revolutionized if women had actually received the vote around the time of the Civil War. Compare that to the small ripple that occurred when women were finally granted the vote in 1920. Women's roles had changed dramatically since the mid-19th century, with women actively participating in work, education, and voluntary organizations outside the home. The meaning of politics had also changed, so that the vote was less a potent symbol of political participation for men by 1920 than it had been at the height of the separate male political culture of the previous century.

Although granting the vote can be seen as a conservative measure that had little impact on women's equality, it is wrong to underestimate what the vote meant to the millions of women who campaigned so hard for its attainment. To the "new women" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was an affront, a slap in the face, that they were not allowed this basic democratic right. Going to the polls would be confirmation of women's new roles as full citizens, the public equals of men. Of course, such sentiments were more likely held by white middle-class women, who shared most of the privileges of their class with men except the vote. But black women and working-class women also campaigned for the vote, seeing it as a tool that could be useful in broader political and economic struggles.

What made the suffrage movement so powerful was that it brought together a diverse range of individuals and organizations in a broad coalition dedicated to a common goal. To attain that goal, women's groups pioneered in innovative political tactics and legislative strategies that showed that women could work

together effectively on common causes. While we may look back at the vote and see it as a fairly minor reform, women at the time had a far different perspective.

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The Women's Suffrage Movement in the Progressive Era

The Final Push for Suffrage:

3 periods of the women's suffrage movement:

The First 20 years: 1848-1869

Independent Women's Suffrage Movement: 1869-1890

New Activism & Success: 1890-1920

How did women win the vote?

What was the impact?