

The History of the 19th Amendment

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Women in New York City line up to vote for the first time in 1920 after the passage of the 19th Amendment. Photo: Underwood Archives/Getty Images

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed on August 18, 1920. This law gave American women the right to vote. At the time the U.S. was founded, women did not share all the same rights as men. The movement for women's rights began on a national level with a meeting in Seneca Falls, New York. Following the convention, the demand for the vote became a central part of the women's rights movement. The movement was known as the "suffrage" movement. "Suffrage" refers to the right to vote. Activists formed groups that raised awareness and pressured the government to give voting rights to women. After a long battle, these groups finally won their victory with the passage of the 19th Amendment.

Origins of women's suffrage in the U.S.

During America's early history, women were denied some of the key rights enjoyed by men. For example, women did not have the right to vote. They were expected to give their attention to housework and motherhood, not politics.

During the 1820s and 1830s, this changed. Many women started to push back against the idea that the only "true" woman was a wife and mother devoted to her family.

Suffrage movement gets organized

In 1848, the movement for women's rights began. In July, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women's rights gathering at Seneca Falls, New York. More than 300 people attended. They believed that women should be given better opportunities. They also agreed that women should have political rights, like the right to vote.

National suffrage groups established

In 1869, Stanton joined together with another activist named Susan B. Anthony. They formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). The NWSA wanted to pass an amendment to the Constitution that would give women the right to vote. That same year, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The AWSA thought it would be easier to give women the right to vote a different way. The group wanted to pass amendments to individual state constitutions.

In 1890, the NWSA and the AWSA merged together. They formed a new group called the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). This group planned to push for voting rights state by state. Within six years, Colorado, Utah and Idaho gave women the right to vote. In 1900, Carrie Chapman Catt became the leader of the NAWSA.

Progress and civil disobedience

In the early 1900s, the NAWSA had many successes. Between 1910 and 1918, 17 states and territories gave voting rights to women.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson became a supporter of women's voting rights. He argued for an amendment to the Constitution. But when a plan for such an amendment came up for a vote, it failed to pass. Another year passed before national lawmakers considered the amendment again.

Getting the vote

When Congress voted again on the amendment in 1919, it passed. Then the amendment was sent to the states to be approved. To become a law, two-thirds of the states had to vote in favor of the amendment.

By March of the following year, a total of 35 states had approved the amendment. To reach a two-thirds majority, one more state needed to approve it. Seven Southern states had already rejected the amendment. In the end, it was up to Tennessee to make the final decision.

Tennessee's lawmakers were evenly divided. Representative Harry T. Burn had to cast the final vote to break the tie. Although Burn was against the amendment, his mother convinced him to support it. With Burn's vote, the 19th Amendment became law.

On November 2, 1920, more than 8 million women across the U.S. voted in elections for the first time. It took over 60 years for the remaining 12 states to approve the 19th Amendment. Mississippi was the last to do so, in 1984.