

Hail to the Nineteenth Amendment!

Ryan Pham examines the background to a historic piece of legislation

The 19th Amendment was ratified on August 18th, 1920, and marked the day women in America won their right to vote. Their struggle to gain the right to vote, or suffrage, can be traced back to 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. It was there that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized a Women's Rights Convention, which would later be known as the Seneca Falls Convention, to discuss the rights of women. This 2-day event from July 19th-July 20th was attended by over 300 people including the notable abolitionist, Frederick Douglass.

At the end of the convention, after much debate, the "Declaration of Sentiments" was officially signed by only 100 of the over 300 attendees. This Declaration of Sentiments was closely modeled and inspired by the Declaration of Independence and is still arguably the most vital piece of feminist history in American history. Written mainly by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it boldly reasserts: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal*"

Following the convention and publication of the declaration, it was met with mixed reactions with some voicing their support while others voiced in opposition. Nevertheless, historians point to the convention and the declaration as to the first wave of feminism in the United States.

However, the American Civil War broke out and the women's suffrage movement was sidelined as the American people turned their attention to more pressing matters. After the war's end, the women's suffrage movement faced internal division as some opposed the [15th Amendment](#), which gave all men, regardless of race and color, the right to vote. Many within the women's suffrage movement argued for their movement on the basis that white women should be allowed to vote before black men whereas many others in their movement supported the 15th Amendment regardless if it passed before women's suffrage.

This conflict would largely divide the suffragette movement into two main camps in 1869, 1 year before the federal ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), formed by Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, believed that women's suffrage was to be won by a federal constitutional amendment but opposed the 15th Amendment.

The American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), formed by abolitionists Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, believed that women's suffrage was to be won through individual states amending their constitutions rather than the federal government committing to it. They also firmly supported the 15th Amendment.

The first major victory for the suffrage movement would come from the Territory of Wyoming when it voted to ratify women's suffrage into its territorial constitution in 1869. Although this was mainly to [attract more settlers and to gain political power from women](#), it still stands as a turning point for the suffragette movement. The law would guarantee women over the age of 21 the right to vote and when finally admitted as a state in 1890, kept the law on women's suffrage

into its state constitution. Within a couple of years following the Territory of Wyoming's passing of women's suffrage, [many other territories and states would soon follow.](#)

In 1869, the NWSA and AWSA would reconcile their differences and merge into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). This new organization would adopt its former parent AWSA's suffrage strategy of fighting for women's suffrage on a state-by-state basis. However, with notable figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton stepping down from leadership due to age, the suffragette movement would need a new figure to lead them.

Enter Carrie Chapman Catt. Under Catt's leadership, NAWSA would expand its influence through protests and lobbying. Eventually, they would garner enough attention and influence to even be able to influence President Woodrow Wilson to change his stance on women's suffrage in 1918. It was around this time that he would argue for women's suffrage on the basis that since they were [contributing to the war effort, then they should be allowed to vote.](#)

Even with President Wilson's support, the proposed amendment allowing white women to vote would not be ratified when brought to the Senate that year. When it was again introduced by Representative James R. Mann of Illinois on May 21, 1919, it was able to pass through both houses of Congress.

The final state for an amendment to be passed would require state legislatures to vote on the issue. It was there that the 19th Amendment met yet another obstacle. Half of the US states at the time opposed the amendment and it was a close call. When it came time for Tennessee to vote, it was a tie with the final vote coming from a young 23-year-old representative named Harry T. Burn. Everyone expected him to say "Nay" as he usually sided with the anti-suffragette movement. However, before he cast his crucial vote, he reached into his pocket and found a letter from his mother. It read: *"Dear Son, ... Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers' speech, it was very bitter. I've been waiting to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet.... Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt with her "Rats." Is she the one that put the rat in ratification, Ha! No more from mama this time. With lots of love, Mama."*

It was then that he voted "Aye" and the 19th Amendment was ratified.