

# The History of the 19th Amendment

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.28.17

Word Count **872**



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. It granted American women the right to vote — a right known as woman suffrage. At the time the U.S. was founded, its female citizens did not share all the same rights as men, including the right to vote. It was not until 1848 that the movement for women's rights launched on a national level with a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, organized by activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Following the convention, the demand for the vote became a central part of the women's rights movement. Stanton and Mott, along with other activists, formed organizations that raised public awareness and pressured the government to grant voting rights to women. After a 70-year battle, these groups finally emerged victorious with the passage of the 19th Amendment.

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

During America's early history as a nation, women were denied some of the key rights enjoyed by male citizens. For example, married women couldn't own property, and no woman had the right to vote. Women were expected to focus on housework and motherhood, not politics.

During the 1820s and 1830s, various reform groups, such as anti-slavery organizations, spread across the U.S. In a number of these groups, women played an important role. Meanwhile, many American women were starting to resist the idea that the only "true" woman was a wife and mother focused on home and family.

## **Suffrage movement gets organized**

It was not until 1848 that the movement for women's rights began to organize at the national level. In July, reformers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. More than 300 people attended, including former African-American slave and activist Frederick Douglass. The people at Seneca Falls believed that women should be given better opportunities for education and employment. They also agreed that American women deserved to be involved in politics. A group of delegates led by Stanton produced a document called the "Declaration of Sentiments." Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, it said that "all men and women are created equal." What this meant, among other things, was that the delegates believed women should have the right to vote.

## **National suffrage groups established**

In 1869, Stanton joined with Susan B. Anthony to form the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Their goal was to pass an amendment to the Constitution that would grant women the right to vote. That same year, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The AWSA believed voting rights for women could best be gained through amendments to individual state constitutions.

In 1890, the NWSA and the AWSA merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The new organization's plan was to push for women's voting rights on a state-by-state basis. Within six years, Colorado, Utah and Idaho adopted amendments to their state constitutions granting women the right to vote. In 1900, with Stanton and Anthony getting older, Carrie Chapman Catt stepped up to lead the NAWSA.

## **Progress and civil disobedience**

The beginning of the 1900s brought strength to the woman suffrage cause. Under the leadership of Catt, the NAWSA achieved rolling successes for women's voting rights at state levels. Between 1910 and 1918, 17 states and territories extended voting rights to women.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson became a supporter of women's voting rights. He tied a proposed suffrage amendment to American's role in World War I and the increased role women had played in the war efforts. When the amendment came up for a vote, Wilson addressed the Senate in favor of suffrage. However, the amendment proposal failed in the Senate by two votes. Another year passed before Congress took up the measure again.

## Getting the vote

On May 21, 1919, Representative James R. Mann proposed the House resolution to approve the amendment granting women the right to vote. The measure passed the House by a vote of 304-89. This was a full 42 votes above the required two-thirds majority.

Two weeks later, the Senate passed the 19th Amendment by two votes over its two-thirds required majority, 56-25. The amendment was then sent to the states to be ratified, or approved. By March of the following year, a total of 35 states had approved the amendment, one state short of the two-thirds required for the amendment to pass. Southern states were strongly opposed to the amendment, however. Seven of them had already rejected it before Tennessee's vote on August 18, 1920. It was up to Tennessee to tip the scale for woman suffrage.

The outlook appeared bleak, given the position of Tennessee's state legislators in their 48-48 tie. The state's decision came down to 23-year-old Representative Harry T. Burn to cast the deciding vote. Although Burn opposed the amendment, his mother convinced him to approve it. With Burn's vote, the 19th Amendment was ratified.

On November 2 of that same year, 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 pass the 19th Amendment. Mississippi was the last to do so, on March 22, 1984.