

# Famous Speeches: Susan B. Anthony's "Women's Rights to the Suffrage"

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A portrait of American civil rights leader Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906). Frances Benjamin Johnston/Wikimedia Commons

*Editor's Note: The year before making this speech, Susan B. Anthony was fined \$100 (which would be considered nearly \$2,000 today) for voting illegally in the 1872 election between Ulysses S. Grant and Horace Greeley. Instead of paying up, Anthony made speech after speech, fighting for women's voting rights. Anthony died in 1906 and was sadly unable to see her goal realized when women were finally given the right to suffrage in 1920. She also never paid her \$100 fine.*

Friends and fellow citizens: I stand before you tonight under indictment for the supposed crime of having voted at the last presidential election, without having a lawful right to vote. It shall be my work this evening to prove to you that in thus voting, I not only committed no crime, but, instead, simply exercised my citizen's rights, guaranteed to me and all United States citizens by the National Constitution, beyond the power of any state to deny.

The preamble of the Federal Constitution says:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people — women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government — the ballot.

For any state to make sex a qualification that must ever result in disfranchising one half of the people, is to pass a bill of attainder. It is an ex post facto law, changing the legal consequences of an act, after the act has been committed. It is therefore a violation of the supreme law of the land. By it the blessings of liberty are forever withheld from women and their female posterity.

To them this government has no just powers derived from the consent of the governed. To them this government is not a democracy. It is not a republic. It is a hateful aristocracy; a hateful oligarchy of sex; the most hateful aristocracy ever established on the face of the globe; an oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor. An oligarchy of learning, where the educated govern the ignorant, or even an oligarchy of race, where the Saxon rules the African, might be endured; but this oligarchy of sex, which makes fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons the oligarchs over mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters of every household — which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects, carries dissension, disharmony, and rebellion into every home of the nation.

Webster, Worcester, and Bouvier all define a citizen to be a person in the United States, entitled to vote and hold office.

The only question left to be settled now is: Are women people? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being people, then, women are citizens; and no state has a right to make any law, or to enforce any old law, that shall limit their privileges or protections. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws of the several states is today null and void, precisely as is every one against black Americans.