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Le droit de vote des femmes aux États-Unis, 1776-1965

Claire Delahaye



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CONTENTS

Introduction

EXPLORING WOMAN SUFFRAGE HISTORY AND ISSUES IN CONTEXT	11
A Few Words to Start: Terminology	11
Woman Suffrage: A Complex Question.....	13
No Constitutional Right to Vote	14
The Meaning of the Nineteenth Amendment	14
Considering Women as a Group	15
A History of Patriarchy	16
Gender as a Historical Concept	17
The Contested Theory and Variable History of U.S. Suffrage and Citizenship	18
The Meaning of the Ballot.....	20
Putting Woman Suffrage in Context.....	21
<i>Making women’s political participation visible, 22 • Women’s arguments for the vote, 23 • The woman suffrage movement as a social movement, 23 • The role of American institutions, 24 • Exploring women’s power, 24 • The racial politics of woman suffrage, 25 • Suffrage economics, 25 • Suffrage intersections, 26</i>	
Historiography as a Site of Struggle.....	27
Organization of the Book	30

1. WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE CASE OF NEW JERSEY (1776–1807)	33
Reclaiming the Role of Women During the Revolution.....	33
Women’s Experiences During the Colonial Period.....	35
Women’s Experiences During the Revolution	36
Debating Women’s Roles and Rights	39
An Evolving, Yet Exclusionary Conception of Citizenship	43
Republican Motherhood	46
The Curious Case of New Jersey	48

A Political Backlash Against Women	52
The Centrality of the American Revolution	53
2. THE ANTEBELLUM WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT [1800S-1861]	55
The 19 th -century Context	57
<i>Suffrage and citizenship, 57 • The expansion of women's educational opportunities, 59 • An increasing number of women in the labor force, 60 • The centrality of the domestic ideology, 60</i>	
A Complex and Diverse Network of Reform Organizations.....	61
Abolitionism and Women's Rights	64
Seneca Falls: An Origin Story	69
<i>A controversial resolution , 71 • An origin story, 72</i>	
The First Women's Rights Conventions	73
Knitting Communities Together	75
3. OF HOPES, DISILLUSIONS AND REORGANIZATIONS: THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION [1861-1880S] ..	78
The Civil War	80
Suffrage Hopes	83
<i>The Creation of the American Equal Rights Association, 84 • The Fourteenth Amendment in Congress, 86</i>	
The Demise of the Abolitionist / Women's Rights Coalition	87
<i>Dissension, 87 • Two organizations are born, 90</i>	
New Directions in Activism	92
<i>Testing the limits of the Constitution while protesting women's disenfranchisement, 92 • Black women's activism, 94 • Developing local agitation for suffrage, 96 • An amendment to the federal Constitution?, 99 • Competition and coalitions in the women's movement, 99</i>	
4. OF SUFFRAGE RENAISSANCE, RESISTANCE AND COMPROMISSION [1890-1910]	102
Societal Transformations, Suffragism, and Progressivism	103
<i>A time of societal change, 103 • Women's growing public involvement, 105 • Increased educational and professional opportunities, 105 • The role of women's clubs, 107 • The role of progressivism, 108 • Gender, race and suffragism, 109</i>	

Reorganizing the Suffrage Movement	112
<i>Carrie Chapman Catt's leadership, 112 • Working on a transnational movement, 114 • Black women organizing towards suffrage, 115</i>	
Suffrage Compromissions and Resistance	118
<i>Imperialism & white supremacy, 118 • Resisting the vote: The antis organize, 121</i>	
5. MAKING SUFFRAGE A MASS MOVEMENT (1910-1920).	125
New Methods to Sell the Vote: Suffrage Communication and Publicity	126
<i>Suffrage militancy, 126 • All the street's a stage, 127 • Suffrage commodities and popular culture, 129 • Negotiating suffragists' public image, 130</i>	
Politicizing Efforts	132
<i>Suffrage organizations: between networks, alliances and conflicts, 132 • State campaigns, 135 • An amendment to the US Constitution, 136 • Lobbying in Washington, 137 • Making the vote a partisan issue?, 139 • Using the vote, 140</i>	
The Ambiguous Role of the First World War	140
<i>A paradoxical context, 141 • A violent and oppressive public sphere, 142 • Suffrage not a legislative priority, 142 • Suffragists' response to the war, 143 • The National Woman's Party's criticism of Wilson's administration, 144</i>	
6. A LONG-LASTING BATTLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS (1920-1965)	145
The Adoption and Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment	147
<i>Women's activism after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, 148</i>	
Disenfranchisement in the South.....	150
Black Women's Unfinished Battle	154
Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement	155
Conclusion	163
Bibliography	167

List of Abbreviations

AERA: American Equal Rights Association
AWSA: American Woman Suffrage Association
COFO: Council of Federated Organizations
CORE: Congress of Racial Equality
CU: Congressional Union
DNC: Democratic National Convention
ERA: Equal Rights Amendment
ICW: International Congress of Women
IWSA: International Woman Suffrage Alliance
MFDP: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW: National Association of Colored Women
NAWSA: National American Woman Suffrage Association
NWP: National Woman's Party
NWSA: National Woman Suffrage Association
SCLC: Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC: Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
VRA: Voting Rights Act
WCTU: Woman's Christian Temperance Union

Introduction

EXPLORING WOMAN SUFFRAGE HISTORY AND ISSUES IN CONTEXT

A FEW WORDS TO START: TERMINOLOGY

Women's rights activists recognized language as a site and an instrument of struggle, a way to shape meaning and thus to shape the world's reality. Let's start by clarifying a few terms in context used by activists and historians.

In the 19th century, the singular "woman" was often used by activists to draw attention to the natural and individual rights of women *as women* and to demonstrate the political community of women. As Nancy Cott puts it, "Nineteenth-century women's consistent usage of the singular *woman* symbolized, in a word, the unity of the female sex. It proposed that all women have one cause, one movement."¹ Therefore, most activists at the time used the expression "woman suffrage." Cott adds that to modern ears the singular sounds awkward. That is why scholars may prefer to use "women's suffrage."

Even though the term "feminism" did not appear until the end of the 19th century and did not become popular until the 1910s, some

1. Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1987, p. 3.

historians use it to highlight the continuity within the history of feminism and the links, legacy and transmission of ideas between generations of activists.¹ Others also choose to use the term because it adequately describes the convictions and beliefs of 19th century activists.² Some scholars however will prefer the term “protofeminists,” or “pre-feminists.” You might also come across the term “feminist-abolitionist,” which is used to specifically refer to the coalition between abolitionists and women’s rights advocates in the 19th century.

Ellen Carol DuBois explains that the expression “women’s rights” dates back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, “when it signified a revolutionary approach to women’s nature and prospects, advocated by a tiny group of Anglo-American radicals and tainted by its association first with the French Revolution and then with socialism.”³ The expression was later widely used to refer to the civil and political rights of women. In keeping with the broad use of the singular “woman” previously mentioned, you will find “Woman’s Rights,” which was used in the call published in newspapers to announce the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

In the American context, the term “suffragette” was often used in the early decades of the 20th century to refer to the women who belonged to the radical British movement, and often to ridicule them. The term had first appeared in the *Daily Mail* in 1906, and was used the same year in the *New York Times*, which gave the following definition, “a woman who ought to have more sense.”⁴ Therefore the most commonly used term in the U.S. suffrage movement was “suffragist.” Yet some suffragists reclaimed the term, to show they were unconventional or radical, while others tried to distance themselves from it.⁵

1. For a discussion of when the term feminism came into use, and the difference with other expressions, see Cott, *ibid.*, p. 3-6.

2. This is what Bonnie Anderson argues, when she admits that historians debate whether it is appropriate to use the term before it actually existed, yet she writes that “no other term adequately describes the wide range of these people’s convictions and beliefs,” *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women’s Movement, 1830-1860*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 3.

3. Ellen Carol DuBois, “A Vindication of Women’s Rights,” in *Woman Suffrage and Women’s Rights*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1998, p. 283.

4. “Some Oxford Definitions,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1906.

5. A thirty-year old British activist named Bettina Borrman Wells, who wanted the U.S. movement to imitate the British movement and its spectacular and sensational methods, created a New York organization named the American Suffragettes. She wanted to ban the word “ladylike,” and have women “get out and fight.” This group organized the first

WOMAN SUFFRAGE: A COMPLEX QUESTION

In her book chapter “Three Questions about Womanhood Suffrage,” British political scientist Carole Pateman asks three simple yet provocative questions: Why did womanhood suffrage take so long? Why did women organize against their own enfranchisement? And why was the vote won in the end?¹ Such seemingly basic queries lead Pateman to examine an array of issues, which proves that there are no short answers to questions about the history of women’s suffrage, which touches on numerous themes. Indeed, the battle for women’s suffrage was not just about politics, it was also a social, cultural, and moral debate. Of course, it concerned democracy and institutions and constitutional questions about representation—who got to vote, on what grounds and how?—in short, political rights. But it was also related to what it meant to be a woman. Women, who constitute half of the population, were excluded from the polity on the basis of their sex. This was not a question about women’s essence or nature, even though the justification for exclusion might be based on such ideological constructs, but a political matter. Furthermore, women’s suffrage concerned issues of equality and difference. Indeed, if men and women were created equal, why did women not vote? Or to rephrase, did women’s exclusion from the franchise mean that they were not equal to men? These questions highlight that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are relational—in other words directly connected.

The following introduction will attempt to clear some of the intricate problems, notions, and issues connected to the history of woman suffrage. It was conceived not only as an entry point into the subject, but also as a tool box to help candidates scrutinize and navigate the topic at hand. That is why this rather lengthy introduction will first clarify some of the key concepts and problematic questions related to the history of woman suffrage used by historians to frame the topic. It will also focus on the context of the suffrage movement, and particularly explore how the history of the suffrage movement connects to

open-air meetings in New York in 1907, and the first march in 1908, even though they had been denied a permit. See Ellen Carol Dubois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 101-104.

1. Carole Pateman, “Three Questions about Womanhood Suffrage,” in Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, eds., *Suffrage and beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, Auckland, NZ, Auckland University Press, 1994, p. 331-348.

its broad political, social and cultural contexts. Finally, it will provide candidates with information about historiography.

NO CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO VOTE

Before we go any further, it is important to stress that *the American Constitution does not guarantee the right to vote*, which means that in the United States, “a right to vote” does not exist and is not part of the original 18th century text of the U.S. Constitution. At the federal level, four constitutional amendments deal with voting rights: the Fifteenth Amendment requires that the voting rights of U.S. citizens may not be abridged on account of race, color, or previous conditions of servitude; the Nineteenth Amendment on account of sex; and the Twenty-sixth on account of age. The Twenty-fourth Amendment prohibits Congress and the states from conditioning the right to vote in federal elections on the payment of a poll tax or any other type of tax. It appears that these amendments *clarify certain ways in which it is forbidden to limit the vote*.

The U.S. Constitution leaves the appointment of voters to the states, which means that in the absence of a specific constitutional provision or constitutional law, *states are free to establish qualifications for suffrage*. They establish the rules and the regulations concerning voting. The fact that the states establish qualifications for suffrage explains the diverse situations regarding suffrage in the United States throughout its history, and why the question under scrutiny focuses on “women’s suffrage” and not the Nineteenth Amendment alone.

THE MEANING OF THE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT

The Nineteenth Amendment prohibits the states and the United States from denying the right to vote to US citizens on the basis of sex. Because of the diversity of suffrage situations in the states, the implications of its ratification to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 differed greatly: for instance, in certain states such as New York or California, Black and white women could already vote in local, state, and federal elections. In Illinois, Black and white women had partial suffrage, which meant that they could vote in certain elections. In other states,

the Nineteenth Amendment did not “give” women the vote. Indeed, while representing a milestone in the history of U.S. democracy and women’s rights, the Nineteenth Amendment meant that states could no longer bar women from voting by writing “male” into a state’s qualifications, but they could use other means to prevent people from voting, especially in the South and the West. This was often the case, since the success of the Nineteenth Amendment coincided with the apogee of post-slavery racial politics.

To disenfranchise Blacks, states used poll taxes—essentially voting fees—, which many poor, Black sharecroppers could not pay. Alternatively, they used understanding clauses, which often entailed, for the aspiring voter, reading a passage of the state constitution and having to explain it to the registrar. Most Black women—and men—were barred from voting in the South. Other people such as Americans of Asian descent or Native Americans could not vote after 1920 either.

This explains why the 2020 suffrage centennial brought to the fore important conversations about the dynamics of memorializing and celebrating. Many criticized a whitewashing of history, which celebrated an amendment for some women only and prolonged the invisibility of the plight for the women who were still disenfranchised after 1920.

Thus, the question under scrutiny, which invites us to reflect on the history of women’s suffrage between 1776 and 1965, that is, from the Declaration of Independence to the Voting Rights Act, goes far beyond the history of the Nineteenth Amendment. It encourages us to consider dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the long history of American democracy in an intersectional perspective and to take into consideration the history of women in all their diversity and differences, by exploring how issues of race, class or geography might have an impact on their enfranchisement or disenfranchisement.

CONSIDERING WOMEN AS A GROUP

“As half the population,” historian Alexander Keyssar stresses, “women constituted the largest group of adults excluded from the franchise at the nation’s birth and for much of the nineteenth century.”¹ Women could even represent the majority of the population in numbers and yet be an oppressed and subordinated minority relative to

1. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, New York, Basic Books, 2000, p. 172.

men. As “woman” was a category used to exclude women from political citizenship, all women as a group shared the same status.

Therefore, women who participated in the women’s rights movements did so as women, which means that their demands were connected to the recognition that there were specific power issues linked to their social positions *as women*. Some of these women were radical, others more conventional, or even conservative. They however all acknowledged that women shared a common plight, and common interests that led them to collectively organize to be in a position to shape politics.

However, this joint situation did not mean that all women faced identical forms of subordination. All women were excluded from institutional politics, yet as wives, daughters or mothers could exert some power through the men in their families. Women were exploited but also exploiters. White women owned slaves and often turned a blind eye to the sexual exploitation of Black women in their own homes. It is therefore important to acknowledge that women as a group were oppressed, but also that some women ignored, or benefited from and participated in other forms and systems of oppression than those solely based on sex. Sex was far from being the only battleground for equal rights. Race, class, and citizenship status were also at stake in the struggle.

Sectional differences and differences in religion, sexuality and imperial inheritance are other factors that shaped women’s experiences and their positions of power. These differences, as those mentioned above, are important to consider. They might shed light on strategic choices when women formed coalitions or tried to formulate equality within diversity, and might explain why some women rejected the vote to maintain their interests or chose to favor certain political strategies.

A HISTORY OF PATRIARCHY

The history of women’s suffrage is part of the larger history of patriarchy, a social and political organization in which men hold power. American women’s social, political, economic and legal situation was ruled by a system of laws in which men had the upper hand and the authority. For instance, women’s legal status made them completely dependent on their husbands, who had a right to their wives’ property,

labor and body. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the fight for women's rights started with a fight for women to have the right to retain their property and to have access to education and employment. The right to vote was one demand among others, as illustrated by the 1848 Declaration of Sentiment, a document signed by women at a women's rights convention, protesting women's inferior status and listing resolutions for the equality of women.

Carole Pateman, whom we mentioned above, explains that patriarchal resistance to women's emancipation is one of the reasons why women's suffrage took so long: "It was not merely participation in the government of the state that was seen to be at issue, but the patriarchal structure of relations between the sexes and conceptions of masculinity and femininity."¹

What this last observation suggests is that representations of masculinity and femininity are central to the conversations about men and women's rights and about citizenship. This reference to the role of sex as a social, political, and cultural construct leads us to scrutinize the concept of gender.

GENDER AS A HISTORICAL CONCEPT

Gender was explored by Joan Scott as a category of historical analysis in a 1986 article:

The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.²

To elaborate on Scott's definition, she invites historians to consider what are, at a given moment in history, the representations, images, ideas and concepts that constitute what societies understand as male and female, which are often understood as fixed binary opposites. But they are not, since they have changed over time, and Scott encourages us to deconstruct "the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation."³ Moreover, Scott insists that gender is embodied in politics, in social organizations and institutions. For instance,

1. Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

2. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986), p. 1067.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1068.

gender plays a central role in household and family constructs, but also in the labor market, in education and in politics. Scott indeed refers to universal male suffrage as “part of the process of gender construction.”¹ It shows that gender plays a role in distributions of power and in whether and how men, or women, have access to material and symbolic resources. Finally, Scott considers how gender also affects individuals through gender identities. How do people navigate gender norms and expectations? How are gender identities shaped through cultural representations, social activities, organizations and practices? For women, winning the vote meant overturning not just laws but also ideas about gender roles.

The analysis of the history of women’s suffrage contained in this book will consider these different elements and explore issues of representation: how did Americans view and discuss women’s suffrage? How did the movements for and against women’s rights use ideas about gender to make their case? How does the history of women’s suffrage show that U.S. politics and institutions are gendered—that is to say, based on normative expectations and prescriptions of what women and men should do?

Before turning to a presentation of the historical context, let us take a look at the concept of citizenship in the United States.

THE CONTESTED THEORY AND VARIABLE HISTORY OF U.S. SUFFRAGE AND CITIZENSHIP

Even though the notion of citizenship is one of the most essential political concepts, its history in the United States shows that it has been highly disputed both in theory and in practice. As Linda Kerber notes, “citizen” is “an equalizing word.”² Going back to the founding generation that produced a new philosophy of the relationship between state and citizen, and to the Fourteenth Amendment, Kerber notes that all persons “are entitled to equal protection of the laws, and all citizens are bound equally to the state in a web of rights and obligations.”³ The rights of citizenship include full political rights and the

1. *Idem*.

2. Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1998, p. xx.

3. *Idem*.

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