

Slide 1: Title

Thank you for this opportunity to share some of the fascinating history of the women's suffrage movement. On this slide you can see the text of the 19th Amendment, also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. It became part of our Constitution 100 years ago and 144 years after the Constitution was written. This achievement represents 72 years of political struggle over several generations of women. This is also the home page of our coalition's website which includes five women's organizations: local chapters of the League of Women Voters and AAUW, Midday Women's Alliance, The Women's Fund, and the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Slide 2: Quakers to suffragists

The abolitionist movement gave birth to the women's suffrage movement in our country. This painting depicts the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention in London. There were two key women abolitionists who met at this convention. If you look closely at the painting, you notice only men are debating. The women were seated behind a screen on the right.

Slide 3: Lucretia Mott

Sitting behind that screen was Mrs. Lucretia Mott. She and her husband, both Quaker ministers, were leaders in the abolitionist movement in Philadelphia. As Quakers, they also believed in equality between men and women.

Slide 4: Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The young Elizabeth Cady Stanton, on a honeymoon trip with her husband, was also seated behind that screen with Mrs. Mott. These two women fumed over their exclusion from the debate and before leaving London, they vowed to hold a women's rights convention in America.

Slide 5: Seneca Falls Convention

Eight years later, Elizabeth Cady Stanton found herself living in the small town of Seneca Falls, New York. When Lucretia Mott came to visit her, the two women made good on their pledge and organized the first women's rights convention.

Slide 6: Declaration of Sentiments

The main event of this 1848 convention was "The Declaration of Sentiments" written primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She modeled it after the Declaration of Independence written 72 years earlier. Interestingly, women's suffrage was finally achieved 72 years later in 1920.

Slide 7: Resolutions

In addition to the Declaration of Sentiments, 11 resolutions were also presented. Only one was controversial: the idea of giving women the right to vote. It wasn't until the esteemed abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, rose to speak in favor of it that enough were persuaded to give it the slim margin it needed to pass.

Slide 8: Map of Iroquois

So, where did these early suffragists get these reformist ideas? They lived in a society in which women were completely subordinate to their husbands under the law. They had no property rights, no right to divorce, even no right to custody of their children. But they weren't the only women in America at the time. Seneca Falls was on Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) land, a confederation of five sovereign nations.

Slide 9: Matilda Joslyn Gage

Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and most notably Matilda Joslyn Gage all had contact with Indigenous women. Gage wrote extensively about them and must have spent a lot of time with them because she was admitted into their Wolf Clan and their Council of Matrons. She discovered that for over a thousand years, Indigenous women had had political voice in this land.

Slide 10: Native vs European women

Native Americans were part of a matriarchal society. The line of the chief descended through the mother so it would have been unthinkable for women not to have political authority. In the patriarchal society of European Americans, once married, a woman was considered to be the property of her husband. Since the founding of our country, property ownership was accepted as a prerequisite for voting and during colonial times, women were actually able to vote if they were property owners. But gradually, colony by colony, and then state by state, the franchise was taken away from women as their political power grew in importance. So, the women's suffrage movement that began in the mid-19th century wasn't about gaining the right to vote, but regaining it.

Slide 11: The Constitution

And Native Americans not only influenced women suffragists. They also influenced the founding fathers. Benjamin Franklin served as ambassador to the Iroquois Confederacy, which had existed for four centuries before Columbus arrived on our shores. Its government was based upon the concept of "We the people". In 1988, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution acknowledging that the Iroquois Confederacy provided the basis for the U.S. Constitution. Benjamin Franklin invited two representatives of the Iroquois Confederacy to the Constitutional Convention. After being introduced to the delegates, they had one question: "Where are your women?" they asked.

Slide 12: Joining Forces

At the time of the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, brimming over with reformist ideas, was also tied down with her growing family. She would eventually have 7 children. She needed a partner to take her ideas out into the world. In 1851, she found one in Susan B. Anthony. Stanton said, "I forged the thunderbolts. She fired them." They were unlikely allies. Stanton had been raised in conservative upper middle-class home and chose the path of marriage and family. Susan B. Anthony was a Quaker, accustomed to the idea of the equality of men and women. Like Stanton, she had begun her activism as an abolitionist. She refused to marry and relinquish her rights to a husband. Together, they would lead the women's suffragist movement for the next 50 years.

Slide 13: Civil War

When the Civil War broke out, these two women leaders made a strategic decision: they would suspend their campaign for women's rights and focus all their efforts on abolition and the Union cause. This work provided them with a blueprint for the women's rights movement that would follow. And they believed that once the Civil War was over, a grateful nation would reward them with the right to vote. They were wrong.

Slide 14: Reconstruction Amendments

These are the Reconstruction Amendments all passed in the wake of the Civil War.

The 14th amendment used the word "male" for the first time in the Constitution. Stanton and Anthony were outraged and refused to support it. Susan B. Anthony said, "I would rather cut off my right hand than ask the ballot for the black man and not the woman." They also lobbied unsuccessfully to add the word "sex" to the 15th amendment. The women were told to wait their turn. One major social reform in a generation was enough, and that this was "the negro's hour".

Slide 15: Split in the Movement

As a result, Stanton and Anthony parted ways with other women's rights advocates such as Lucy Stone who supported the reconstruction amendments. Two organizations emerged from this controversy: The National Woman Suffrage Association led by Stanton and Anthony, and the American Woman Suffrage Association led by Stone. This was a significant setback to the movement until 1890 when the two groups merged to face a new century.

Slide 16: The West Leads the Way

Toward the end of the 19th century, several western states joined the union and granted women the right to vote in their state constitutions. It seemed the natural order of things where the rigors of frontier life required women to work alongside their husbands and where the population was sparse, having more voters meant more political power. Wyoming was the first state to enter the union with full women's suffrage in 1890. Colorado followed in 1893 after a successful state-wide referendum. By 1918, women had full voting rights in 15 states.

Slide 17: New Energy for a New Century

At the dawn of the 20th century, women's roles in society were rapidly changing. World War I brought urgent demands for women's labor. Membership in unions was surging and becoming integrated with the women's rights movement thanks to the efforts of Harriet Stanton Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Blatch also successfully merged the former National and American Woman Suffrage Associations into the new National American Woman Suffrage Association. I think it's interesting that the NAWSA formed in 1890 adopted Sacagawea as its symbol. And in England, British suffragists were inspiring a new generation of American women's rights leaders to adopt more militant tactics.

Slide 18: Alice Paul and Carrie Chapman Catt

But once again, the women's suffrage movement fractured. Alice Paul had been to England and experienced firsthand the radical movement there, including an arrest, a prison hunger strike, and many force feedings. She returned to the U.S. intent on bringing more radical tactics to the American suffragist movement, although as a Quaker, she rejected violence in favor of civil disobedience. Paul resolved to devote her energy and her impressive Ivy League credentials to the cause of women's rights and formed The Woman's Party. She insisted that a federal constitutional amendment was necessary.

On the more moderate front was the National American Woman Suffrage Association led by Dr. Anne Howard Shaw, a venerable grand dame of the suffrage movement. She took a more measured approach, and opposed radical tactics. Shaw was succeeded by Carrie Chapman Catt who had previously worked side-by-side with Susan B. Anthony. Catt also disapproved of Alice Paul's campaign of civil disobedience and worried it would threaten the fragile political coalition she was building in support of women's suffrage, but she also believed in a more aggressive approach than had been taken by Anne Howard Shaw.

Slide 19: The Silent Sentinels

Beginning in January, 1917, Alice Paul led an effort to picket in front of the White House. With American soldiers now fighting in World War I, this act of civil disobedience was often met with public scorn. The women were arrested, cast in prison, tortured, and violently force-fed. But once word of their mistreatment leaked to the press, public sentiment began to turn in their favor.

Slide 20: The Winning Plan

Carrie Chapman Catt was a shrewd political strategist, and she had a winning plan. It was unveiled in 1916 and called for simultaneously working for suffrage in state legislatures as well continuing to lobby for a federal constitutional amendment. The logic was that once a critical mass of enfranchised women was achieved by individual states, a federal amendment would be inevitable. The plan worked just as Catt had envisioned.

Slide 21: Exclusion

But there were casualties. For the white middle and upper-class women who led the women's suffrage movement, Black women's suffrage was a thorny problem. Most viewed Black women's suffrage as a race rather than a gender issue. Throughout the country, however, there were Black women's clubs working even harder to confront two daunting obstacles: gender and racial inequality. Ida B. Wells was one prominent Black suffragist from Chicago who helped found the National Association of Colored Women and later the NAACP. The Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was founded in 1913 by 22 Black women at Howard University.

Slide 22: 1913 Parade

The Sorority's first public act was to participate in the 1913 Woman Suffrage Parade in Washington D.C. organized by Alice Paul. The Delta women were told to march at the end of the parade, but in this photo, believed to be the only one taken of them, these 22 courageous women can be seen marching along with their white sorority sisters. The always defiant Ida B. Wells, also told to go to the back of the parade, waited on the sidelines and when her Illinois delegation passed by, she jumped in line to march with them.

Slide 23: The Final Showdown

The fight to pass the federal amendment in Congress was a dramatic, 18-month long effort, occurring some 40 years after the amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1878. Fast forward to June, 1918. By this time, women suffragists had become skillful lobbyists, and they knew the vote would be close. In fact, the margin was so close that some representatives had to be summoned from their sickbeds, one was carried in on a stretcher, and one left his wife's deathbed (at her urging) to cast their votes. The bill was passed in the House, but The Senate proved a much tougher fight, and the necessary 2/3 support was not achieved. At that point, Carrie Chapman Catt put in motion what she called, "a plan for making trouble". The NAWSA would cast aside its non-partisan mantle, and actively work to unseat senators who opposed women's suffrage in that fall's election.

Slide 24: Prison special

Meanwhile Alice Paul's National Woman's Party kicked its public protests into high gear culminating with a nationwide campaign to sway public opinion called "The Prison Special". Women who had been jailed for protesting traveled across the country by train, proudly wearing their "Jailed for Freedom" pins. They spoke to over 50,000 people. The result was an avalanche of letters of support sent to Congress from constituents. By the time the 66th Congress took up the question again in June of 1919, public support was overwhelming, and with some new faces in the Senate, a women's suffrage amendment finally passed both houses of Congress.

Slide 25: First to Ratify

On June 5, 1919, state legislatures received the official papers from the U.S. Congress for the proposed 19th amendment. It now had to be ratified by ¾ of the states. The legislatures in Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin all ratified the amendment five days later on June 10, 1919. Illinois was the first to vote by a half hour, but before the votes could be certified, the official papers had to be hand-carried across the country to the Secretary of State's office in Washington, D.C. The 76-year old former Wisconsin Senator David James, a longtime advocate of women's suffrage, was chosen to be the messenger. He arrived in the nation's capital on June 13 and presented Wisconsin's official papers just a few minutes before the messenger from Illinois arrived.

Slide 26: Tennessee Seals the Deal

Delaware was supposed to be the final ratification state, but the vote unexpectedly failed there, so all attention turned to Tennessee. In the hot summer of 1920 the entire political apparatus of the country, the "suffs", the "antis", the special interest lobbyists, the Republicans and the Democrats in the midst of a presidential election campaign, all descended on Nashville for the final push. When the fateful day arrived for the vote, the red rose of the "antis" dominated in the lapels of the state assemblymen. It looked as if the suffragists were going to lose. As the roll call proceeded however, a young freshman legislator named Harry Burn switched his vote following the admonition of his mother in a letter he received from her at the last minute. She told him, "Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the RAT in ratification." That one vote on August 18, 1920 changed the lives of half the population of the United States.

Slide 27: Victory at last!

As state ratifications progressed, Alice Paul began sewing her “victory banner” adding another star for each new state. Wisconsin was the first and Tennessee was the 36th and final state to ratify. On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment was certified as part of the US Constitution in a private ceremony in Washington D.C. Neither Alice Paul nor Carrie Chapman Catt was invited to attend the ceremony in order to avoid a public spectacle. Despite the fact that both women had devoted their lives to the cause of women’s suffrage, they never could see eye-to-eye about how to achieve it.

Slide 28: Victory for whom?

1920 was a landmark year for white women voters, but many other women were left behind. It wasn’t until 1952 that Asian Americans were given the right to vote. Native Americans had to wait until 1957. And it was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that Black women were finally able to vote throughout the country. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act which has opened the door to an increasing amount of voter suppression laws.

Slide 29: LWV

Six months before the 19th amendment was certified, Carrie Chapman Catt founded a new organization that she called “a mighty political experiment” designed to help the newly enfranchised women carry out their civic responsibilities. That organization is the League of Women Voters, also celebrating its centennial this year. The League has grown to over 700 chapters and 400,000 members.

Slide 30: ERA

As soon as the 19th amendment was certified, Alice Paul wrote and proposed an Equal Rights Amendment. It was first introduced in Congress in 1923. In 1943, it was renamed “The Alice Paul Amendment.” It was introduced 48 times in every session of Congress until it finally passed in 1972. It took another 49 years to gain ratification of ¾ of the states. In January of 2020, Virginia became the 38th and final state to ratify. The ERA has yet to be certified as part of the Constitution as there are several legal challenges to resolve.

Slide 31: Questions?