

# ■ Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

**Date:** August 18, 1920

**Author:** Susan B. Anthony; U.S. Congress

**Genre:** law; constitutional provision

## Summary Overview

The movement for women's voting rights challenged societal and legal barriers that denied women equal participation in democracy and governance. It emphasized the belief that all individuals, regardless of gender, deserve the same rights and opportunities to influence laws and policies that affect their lives.

After a long and protracted struggle by suffragists and women's rights advocates, on June 4, 1919, the United States Congress voted to approve the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing women the right to vote. The campaign for women's suffrage began in the 1840s and lasted nearly eighty years. The battle embraced a multitude of strategies and spanned two generations of leaders. It was not until the aftermath of World War I (1914–1918) that the long-anticipated passage of a constitutional amendment legalizing suffrage for women in the United States finally occurred. Its author, Susan B. Anthony, and its proponents had hoped the amendment would follow on the heels of the Fifteenth Amendment, providing for universal male suffrage in 1870. Their hope for a sixteenth amendment allowing women to vote was frustrated, however, and they had to settle for a fifty-year struggle in opposition before the Nineteenth Amendment was proposed.

The Nineteenth Amendment was approved by the House of Representatives in a vote of 304 to 89 and by the Senate in a vote of 56 to 25. The Sixty-sixth Congress proceeded to send the bill to the states for ratification. During the following fourteen months, thirty-six state legislatures voted in favor of the amendment, leading to its acceptance on August 18, 1920. As expected, the greatest support for the amendment derived from the Midwest and trans-Mississippi regions of the United States, with the states of the Northeast lagging behind only slightly. The strongest opposition came primarily from the South.

Anthony, the author of the amendment, did not live to see the passage or ratification of her proposal. Her death in 1906 followed a long career as a suffragist and general reformer. She wrote a women's suffrage amendment in 1878 and persuaded a sympathetic senator from California, Aaron Augustus Sargent, to introduce the measure in Congress that year. Although Congress failed to act on the resolution, it became a focal point for suffragist activity and public attention. Anthony's resolution, also known as the "Anthony Amendment," was reintroduced in every session of Congress with its wording unchanged until its passage forty-one years later, in 1919.

Final acceptance of the amendment can be attributed primarily to the plan introduced by Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), at that organization's annual meeting in 1916 at Atlantic City, New Jersey. She called for cooperation across the suffragists' spectrum and the mobilization of state and local organizations for the cause. The plan also suggested the targeting of unsympathetic legislators at all levels. By 1918 she had secured the endorsement of President Woodrow Wilson. Although it required another eighteen months of diligence, the goal was accomplished, and women across the United States voted in the presidential election of 1920.

## Defining Moment

The movement for women's suffrage in the United States can trace its beginnings to the eighteenth century and the period of the American Revolution.

Women such as the playwright and historian Mercy Otis Warren; the writer and educational reformer Judith Sargent Murray; and Abigail Adams, the wife of President John Adams, questioned the traditional

H. J. Res. I.

**Sixty-sixth Congress of the United States of America;  
At the First Session,**

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the nineteenth day of May,  
one thousand nine hundred and nineteen.

**JOINT RESOLUTION**

Proposing an amendment to the Constitution extending the right of suffrage  
to women.

*Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States  
of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein),  
That the following article is proposed as an amendment to the Constitution,  
which shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution when  
ratified by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several States.*

**"ARTICLE ————.**

"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or  
abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

"Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate  
legislation."

*F. H. Lilett*

*Speaker of the House of Representatives.*

*Thos. R. Marshall*

*Vice President of the United States and  
President of the Senate.*

roles and limitations placed on American women. While Adams wrote to her husband advising him not to forget women at the same time that American male leaders were deliberating the rights of men, Murray contemplated the inequality of educational opportunities extended to male and female children. She argued, “How is the one exalted and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education that are adopted! The one is taught to aspire, the other is early confined and limited.” An Englishwoman, Mary Wollstonecraft, laid the theoretical bases and raised the fundamental questions pursued by American women’s rights advocates for the next 120 years. The most fundamental and, at times, controversial tenet of her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was that the rights of men and of women were identical.

In the 1840s, during a period of more generalized reform efforts, the issue of women’s rights emerged as a concerted cause. In the midst of earlier movements advocating reforms in education and prisons, abolition, and temperance, women began to question their status. Many outspoken advocates of reforms in education and for the abolition of slavery, such as Sarah Grimké, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Anthony, found the suppression of their voices on the ground of their femininity frustrating and indicative of their larger problems. The exclusion of women from the World Anti-Slavery Conference in London in 1840 resulted in the direct comparison of slaves’ and women’s lack of freedoms. The Women’s Rights Convention that met at Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848 marks the official beginning of the women’s rights movement in the United States. More than three hundred individuals, including Stanton, the Quaker social reformer Lucretia Coffin Mott, and the former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, attended the conference, and at its conclusion sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the Declaration of Sentiments. Over the next decade the movement advocated not only for woman suffrage but also for more radical ideals, such as women’s property rights, the abolition of a double standard in divorce laws, and the rights of women to testify and to sign contracts. The movement attracted supporters to the cause, most notably Anthony, who attended the annual convention in

Syracuse in 1852. During the late 1850s and 1860s the movement’s leaders and grassroots supporters channeled their efforts into Civil War work and the strident advocacy of abolition. They also conjectured that along with African Americans they would be legally recognized at the end of the struggle.

Although their hopes did not materialize, the training and experiences garnered during this period served them well during the decades that followed the war. In 1866 Stanton and Anthony established the American Equal Rights Association, an organization open to white and African American women whose aim was universal suffrage. The suffragists suffered a setback in 1868 when the states ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, which extended the protections of the Constitution to all citizens but defined a citizen as specifically male. Disputes over how to deal with crises created by the amendment’s ratification and the proposed Fifteenth Amendment created a breach in the movement resulting in the establishment of two rival organizations. In 1869 Stanton and Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in New York. The more radical of two organizations, the NWSA limited its membership to women only and campaigned for a variety of women’s social and economic issues in addition to suffrage. Its rival organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), was more conservative in nature. Its founders, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Henry Browne Blackwell, limited participation in national meetings to recognized delegates and its mission solely to suffrage. Its members believed that social and economic issues distracted their energies and alienated influential supporters. Rather than working for a national resolution, the group advocated a state-by-state approach to accomplishing its goal.

In 1878 Anthony wrote what would become known as the Anthony Amendment. Modeled on the recently ratified Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing suffrage to all men regardless of race, this resolution would remove gender as a qualification for suffrage. Anthony and her colleagues in the NWSA persuaded a sympathetic senator from California, Aaron A. Sargent, to introduce it to Congress on January 10, 1878. Congress declined to act on the proposal, but its supporters continued to reintroduce it at every

session of Congress until its eventual passage forty-one years later.

During that period the woman suffrage and rights movements underwent a multitude of changes and challenges. Perhaps most significant was the reconciliation of the NWSA and AWSA in 1890. Initiated in 1887 by members of the AWSA and negotiated by Alice Stone Blackwell (the daughter of Lucy Stone and Henry Browne Blackwell), their merger into the National American Woman Suffrage Association marked an important turning point in the movement. While the early leaders of both factions remained visible, younger women took up the standards and continued the fight. Anthony was among the last of the earlier generation and carefully cultivated her successors, Catt and Anna Howard Shaw. By 1910 all of the first generation had passed from the scene. Between 1890 and the passage of the Anthony Amendment by Congress in 1919 a variety of organizations joined the fight. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union had from its inception in 1878 supported woman suffrage as a tool for promoting temperance. The National Council of Jewish Women (1893), the National Association of Colored Women (1896), and the Women's Trade Union League (1903) broadened the movement's base of support and drew in women left at the fringes by the NAWSA, which tended to represent white, Protestant women of the middle and upper classes. The movement also had its opponents, including mainstream politicians, businessmen, liquor manufacturers, factions of the Catholic Church, and other women. The best-organized dissenting faction, the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, emerged in 1911, led by Mrs. Arthur Dodge.

By the 1910s the question concerning woman suffrage became when and not if it would be achieved. In 1916 the NAWSA president, Catt, introduced her plan at the group's annual meeting in Atlantic City. She called on her membership to mobilize women at all levels of society, to curry support from all sources, and to target politicians whose positions were antithetical to the goal of woman suffrage. At the state level, a number of legislatures authorized partial or state suffrage. Another factor that worked in their favor was the growing anti-immigration sentiment

across the nation. Ironically, many white, Protestant men of the middle and upper classes saw the suffragists and the allied causes as sympathetic to their interests and a way of balancing out the growing pool of naturalized immigrants joining the cadre of voters.

While the United States's entry into World War I temporarily dampened the suffragists' efforts as the majority of suffragists put their energies into war work, their patriotism and service ultimately had great benefits. Their efforts swayed many of their opponents to the cause. The most significant convert was President Woodrow Wilson, who voiced his support for the amendment in 1918.

It took an additional eighteen months to unseat some of the suffragists' staunchest opponents in Congress. The Anthony Amendment passed through the House in May 1919 and was approved by the Senate on June 4 by a vote of fifty-six to thirty-two. Fourteen months later, on August 18, 1920, the state of Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state legislature to ratify the resolution, and the Nineteenth Amendment became law.

### Author Biography

Defining exactly who authored the Nineteenth Amendment is somewhat difficult. Susan B. Anthony is generally credited for its initial submission to Congress through her friend and sympathizer Aaron Sargent. After its first reading it became known as the Anthony Amendment in her honor. The amendment, itself, however, is a rewording of the earlier Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed universal male suffrage. Anthony, Stanton, and other leaders of the NWSA contributed to the cause.

Susan Brownell Anthony was born to Quaker parents, Daniel and Lucy, in Adams, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1820. Honoring the Quaker sensitivity for gender equality, her parents provided all of their children, male and female, an advanced education at a private Quaker boarding school in Philadelphia. There Anthony trained as a teacher and acquired her lifelong zeal for activism and reform. When Anthony's family relocated to Rochester, New York, in 1845, they continued to engage in a broad range of reform movements, including abolition, temperance,

education, labor, and women's rights. Both of her parents and her sister Mary signed the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls in 1848. It was through this connection that Anthony met Elizabeth Cady Stanton and attended her first women's rights convention in Syracuse in 1852. Anthony became involved in work for women's rights through her engagement in the temperance movement. Active in the Daughters of Temperance, Anthony was refused the right to speak at a Sons of Temperance meeting in 1853, and the New York state legislature refused to recognize a petition limiting sale of alcohol circulated by Stanton and herself because most of the 28,000 signatures were by women.

Anthony, who never married, worked tirelessly for the suffragist movement for more than fifty years. During the 1850s Stanton, Anthony, and others allied themselves with the abolitionist movement and ultimately the Republican Party because they believed that their support would be rewarded by the extension of suffrage to women along with African American men. In the aftermath of the Civil War, frustrated and angered by their deliberate exclusion, they established the American Equal Rights Association in 1866 and an affiliated newspaper, the *Revolution*, in 1868. When the suffrage movement split in 1869, Anthony and Stanton established the NWSA to advocate not only suffrage but also broader social and economic reforms for women. Anthony and several

others were arrested in Rochester in 1872 when they attempted to test the limits of the Fifteenth Amendment by voting in the presidential election. Although they successfully cast their ballots, they were later arrested, convicted, and fined. Anthony refused to pay the fine, hoping to take the case to the Supreme Court. Her plans were foiled by her lawyer, who paid the costs himself to keep Anthony out of jail.

In 1877, using the Fifteenth Amendment as model, she authored the Anthony Amendment, and Senator Sargent submitted it to Congress on January 10, 1878. Although both the House and the Senate refused to consider the action, Anthony saw its presentation at every session of Congress until her death in 1916. The tradition of the Anthony Amendment continued until its eventual passage in 1919.

Between 1878 and her death in 1906, Anthony continued to promote her cause. She participated in the reunion of the NWSA and the AWSA in 1890 and served as the NAWSA's second president (after Stanton) until 1900. She also broadened her horizons to establish the International Council of Women in 1888 and the International Woman Suffrage Council in 1904. To celebrate her eighty-sixth birthday, Anthony delivered the "Failure Is Impossible" speech, the title of which became the rallying cry of the woman suffrage movement. She returned to Rochester, New York, and on March 13, 1906, at her home, Anthony succumbed to congestive heart failure.



## Historical Document

### Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Sixty-sixth Congress of the United States of America; At the First Session,

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the nine-teenth day of May, one thousand nine hundred and nineteen.

Joint Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution Ex-tending the Right of Suffrage to Women.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following article is proposed as an amendment to the Constitution, which shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the Constitution when ratified by the legislature of three-fourths of the several States.

ARTICLE———.

“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”



## Glossary

**abridged:** reduced or limited

**account of sex:** by reason of gender

**Joint Resolution:** resolution to both houses of Congress

**ratified:** approved or sanctioned, in this case by state legislatures

**suffrage:** right to vote

## Document Analysis

The document is divided into three parts: a preface, a definition of the desired goal, and the amendment itself. The amendment itself contains two sections.

The preface explains that the resolution is before the first session of the Sixty-Sixth Congress. (This count refers to the number of different Houses of Representatives elected since 1787.) The preface also includes the date, May 1919, and the location of the meeting, Washington, D.C.

The second portion of the document describes the resolution and the process of congressional approval and ratification by the states. The proposed amendment mandates a change in the U.S. Constitution to permit women to vote. It also indicates that in a joint session, both the House of Representatives and the Senate must approve by at least a two-thirds majority the resolution on the floor. It proceeds to state that the resolution becomes law when legislatures in “three-fourths” of the states (thirty-six) ratify it.

The final part of the document is the amendment itself. It states that gender does not constitute a basis for the denial of suffrage and thus defines women as citizens. It also affirms the right of the federal government to pass other legislation to enforce the suffrage provision.

Anthony is usually credited with authorship of the Nineteenth Amendment. She wrote a version of the amendment in 1877, basing its wording on the Fifteenth Amendment, which said that the right to vote could not be denied on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude (that is, slavery). A sympathetic California senator, Aaron Sargent, submitted the amendment to the U.S. Congress, which refused to take action on it. As the proposal was resubmitted in every session of Congress in the decades that followed, it came to be referred to as the Anthony Amendment.

After Anthony's death in 1906, pressure for passage of the amendment began to mount. It culminated in 1917 after the United States entered World War I. Early that year, the so-called Silent Sentinels, a group of suffragists led by Alice Paul, among others, began a two-and-a-half-year picket (with Sundays off) of the White House, urging President Woodrow Wilson to

support a suffrage amendment. Public opinion began to sway in favor of the suffragists when it was learned that many of the picketers had been arrested and sentenced to jail, usually on thin charges of obstructing traffic, and that the conditions the jailed women endured were often brutal. Alice Paul, in particular, was subjected to inhuman treatment and launched a hunger strike in protest until she and the other protestors were released after a court of appeals ruled the arrests illegal.

Finally, on January 9, 1918, Wilson announced that he supported the amendment. On January 10, 1918, the House of Representatives narrowly passed the amendment, but the Senate refused to consider the matter until October, when the measure failed by just three votes. In response, the newly formed National Women's Party, led by Alice Paul, mounted a campaign against legislators who supported the Democratic Party's resistance to bringing the suffrage amendment to a vote in Congress and were up for reelection—as she and her supporters had done in 1914. These efforts, along with efforts to mold public opinion, were successful, for on May 21, 1919, after the House of Representatives passed the measure by a vote of 304 to 89, the Senate, on June 4, passed it by a vote of fifty-six to twenty-five. The amendment was then submitted to the states for ratification. The first state to ratify it was Illinois. Thirty-six states needed to ratify the amendment for it to become part of the Constitution. That number was reached on August 18, 1920, when Tennessee, following contentious debate and two deadlocked roll calls, ratified it after one legislator, Harry Burn, changed his vote on the urging of his mother. Oddly, several states throughout the South initially rejected the amendment and were quite slow to ratify it later, the last being Mississippi in 1984.

The language of the amendment is simple and straightforward. A preface notes that the resolution, dated May 1919, is before the first session of the Sixty-sixth Congress in Washington, D.C. The preface is followed by a description of the resolution and the process of approving it, including congressional approval and ratification by the states. In particular, it says that the resolution has to be approved by a two-thirds majority in both the House of Representatives

and the Senate and that it must be ratified, or approved, by three fourths of the states—at that time, thirty-six states (out of forty-eight). The third part of the document is the text of the amendment itself, stating that citizens cannot be denied the right to vote on the basis of sex and that Congress has the power to enforce the amendment by legislation.

### Essential Themes

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Despite the many predictions made concerning the effects of woman suffrage, the actual impact was relatively mild. While politicians now paid greater attention to women's issues, political activity and legislation did not become more feminine in nature, as both detractors and advocates had predicted. The welfare and social causes perceived as falling into women's spheres found only slightly more favor than they had prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. The suffragists also faced a difficult question: what was next.

After ratification, one particular transformation occurred rapidly. The NAWSA ceased to exist and reconstituted as the League of Women Voters. The avowed purpose of the organization was to provide responsible leadership and information for women who were new to political activity. Among their challenges was to chart a path between allying with existing political parties and forming an independent political organization. Catt and others felt that the only way to accomplish their larger goals was to work through existing party structures. Other women, such as the social reformer Jane Addams, advocated policies of continued separate activity and independence. In the end, the league plotted a policy of nonpartisan activity aimed at keeping members informed and politicians honest in their approaches and promises to female voters.

Politicians at all levels reacted to their new female constituents cautiously. During the early 1920s local, state, and national legislators enacted laws favorable to women. Female lobbies and information campaigns had enough impact to affect legislative

decisions. These concerned issues of maternity, length of the workday, and safety concerns. The predicted humanitarian transformation of politics caused by the infusion of feminine values, however, did not materialize, and by mid-decade their influence waned. The majority of women voted along lines that had more to do with their diverse socioeconomic statuses and their racial and ethnic backgrounds than any perceived nurturing instincts.

As American politics in general grew more conservative, women's rights advocates began to reconsider some issues deemed too radical only a decade earlier. Suffrage alone did not resolve the inequities still visited upon women; gender discrimination continued to exist. In 1923 Alice Paul of the National Woman's Party introduced the Equal Rights Amendment that would eventually bear her name. The Paul Amendment, or ERA, contended that equal rights could not be limited on the basis of gender. For Paul and those who were like-minded, the Nineteenth Amendment was merely the first step in the battle for equity.

—Martha Pallante, PhD; Michael J. O'Neal, PhD

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