



Women march for the right to vote in New York City in 1912.

Women's Suffrage Movement

by Tina Gianoulis

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Deriving from the word for the pieces of broken pottery once used to cast votes, *suffrage* means the right to vote in elections. Full suffrage is usually defined as not only the right to vote but to run for office as well.

Since most governments, even democratic ones, developed along patriarchal principles, many early republics permitted only men to vote. Even in the often-idealized Athenian democracy of fifth-century B. C. E. Greece, neither slaves nor women were permitted to vote.

Many women have spoken out against the gender-biased policies of their governments, and during the second half of the nineteenth century American women began an organized struggle to gain the right to vote in national elections. Though the fight to gain suffrage would last for several generations, the actions of U. S. suffragists, as those fighting for female suffrage called themselves, were part of a movement to improve women's rights throughout the Western world.

The women's suffrage movement, which began during a time of great social change in the mid-1800s, was closely linked with a women's rights movement, sometimes called the first wave of feminism. As they would during the women's liberation movement, which peaked during the 1970s, almost a hundred years later, lesbian and bisexual women led the American movement for women's suffrage.

Nineteenth-Century Beginnings

As long as men have made laws abridging the rights of women, there have no doubt been women who spoke out against those laws. Many of their voices have been lost. However, one important early statement was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792. This work exerted great influence on the nineteenth-century suffragists.

The atmosphere of social reform that characterized the nineteenth century was fertile ground for an organized women's movement. This movement flourished throughout Europe, but was especially energized by the work of women in the United States and Great Britain.

The event that marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in the U. S. was the Seneca Falls Convention, held in New York state on July 19 and 20, 1848. Organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, and attended by about 250 women and 40 men, the convention addressed many issues of women's rights, including the right to vote.

Close to a hundred of the attendees signed the Declaration of Sentiments drawn up by Stanton, which outlined women's oppression and demanded equality with men. Reports of the convention in the press were mostly condescending and contemptuous, with the exception of those by some progressive journalists such as the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had attended the event himself.

Many of the activists in the budding women's suffrage movement were also strong abolitionists, who worked to end slavery in the United States. During the Civil War years (1861-1865) most stopped their activities on behalf of women's rights, in part because they devoted their energies to supporting Northern troops and the cause of abolition.

Many suffragists believed that once the war was won and Black slaves became citizens with full rights, both Black and white women would be given full suffrage as well. However, when the war ended, many national leaders continued to argue against giving women the vote. Many suffragists regarded this as a betrayal, and they reacted with bitter disappointment. The different priorities concerning votes for women and votes for Black men led to a split within the movement.

From the National Women's Suffrage Association to the League of Women Voters

Some suffragist leaders, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, accused the Republican party of abandoning support for the rights of women in favor of the rights of Black men. In May 1869, they formed a group called the National Women's Suffrage Association.

Other members of the movement, including Julia Ward Howe and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, disagreed with the confrontational tactics of the NWSA and prioritized the legalization of the rights of former slaves. They formed the American Women's Suffrage Association in November 1869. By 1870, the worst fears of the NWSA had been confirmed: the fifteenth amendment to the U. S. Constitution was passed, granting the right to vote to Black men, with no mention of women.

Stanton and Anthony responded by sending a petition to Congress in 1871 requesting female suffrage. When that did not work, Anthony led a group of women to an 1872 election site to attempt to vote. She was arrested for "knowingly, wrongfully, and unlawfully voting."

By 1890, the two U. S. women's suffrage organizations merged, forming the National American Women's Suffrage Association, which in 1919 became the League of Women Voters.

British Suffragists and the Nineteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a discouraged U. S. suffrage movement received renewed energy from the confrontational tactics of militant suffragists in Great Britain, where women like Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christobel not only marched in the streets, but also cut telegraph wires and broke store windows to call attention to their cause.

They were reviled by the male press, as were the American women inspired by them who picketed the White House during World War I demanding the vote and comparing President Woodrow Wilson to the German Kaiser.

Meanwhile, some localities and newly admitted states, mainly in the West, began granting women the right to vote in local and state elections.

Eventually, whether worn down by decades of women's activism or by the demands of modernity, early in 1919 Congress passed the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution, granting women the right to vote in national elections. It was ratified by the required number of states before the end of 1920. Equal suffrage was granted to women in Great Britain in 1930.

Lesbians in the Movement

Modern experience tells us that when movements arise that seek to improve the status of women, lesbians are often in the leadership. There are several reasons for this. One is that lesbians, who often do not live

under the protection of men, are more sharply aware of the legal and social disadvantages that women face.

Also, those who choose to act on their love of women are often strong women who have learned to overcome their fear of the consequences of speaking out against oppression. In addition, those who work closely with other women in political struggles are likely to develop intimate relationships with their sister workers, making women's movements both places that attract and form lesbians.

Within the "first wave" feminists of the women's suffrage movement, there are many who have long been thought to be what we now recognize as lesbian or bisexual, though they may not have identified as such. A striking number of the leaders of the women's suffrage movement were involved in "romantic friendships" or "Boston marriages."

Susan B. Anthony herself was a lifelong spinster who developed passionate friendships with other women, among them Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Anna Dickinson. Carrie Chapman Catt, who led the National American Women's Suffrage Association after Anthony retired in 1910, was known to have a close and significant relationship with Molly Hay. Anthony's niece, Lucy Anthony had an intimate life partnership with another NAWSA president, Anna Howard Shaw.

Many of these relationships existed side by side with a more conventional marriage, as was the case with Stanton and Catt. Another married suffragist was Lucy Stone, who not only continued her important relationships with women after her marriage, but also became famous for not taking her husband's name, inspiring a trend among young women, who called themselves "Lucy Stoners."

Rumors of lesbianism also surrounded many of the well-known British suffragists, among them Emmeline Pankhurst, who was said to have a relationship with Ethel Smyth, a lesbian composer. Her daughter Christobel had intimate connections with Mary Blathwayt and Annie Kenney.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.