Woman suffrage

**Woman suffrage** is the right of women to vote. Today, women in nearly all countries have the same voting rights as men. But women did not begin to gain such rights until the late 1800’s, and they had to overcome strong opposition to do so. The men and women who supported the drive for suffrage were called *suffragists*.

**In the United States**

During colonial times, the right to vote was limited to adult males who owned property. Many people thought property owners had the strongest interest in good government and so were best qualified to make decisions. Most women could not vote, though some colonies gave the vote to widows who owned property.

By the mid-1700’s, many colonial leaders began to think that all citizens should have a voice in government. Such slogans as “No Taxation Without Representation” and “Government by the Consent of the Governed” expressed this belief.

After the United States became an independent nation, the Constitution of the United States gave the states the right to decide who could vote. One by one, the states abolished property requirements. By 1830, nearly all the states had given all white male adults the vote. New Jersey had given women property owners the vote under its state constitution of 1776. But in 1807, the state took away that right, limiting voting rights to white men.

**Beginnings of the movement.** Changing social conditions in the early 1800’s encouraged the woman suffrage movement. Women received more education and began to take part in reform movements and in politics. As a result, they started to ask why they could not vote.

One of the first public appeals for woman suffrage came in 1848. Two reformers, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, called a women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, where Stanton lived. The men and women at the convention called for women to have equal rights in education, property, voting, and other matters. They adopted a Declaration of Sentiments modeled on the Declaration of Independence of 1776. The 1776 document declared that “all men are created equal.” The 1848 declaration proclaimed that “all men and women are created equal.”

Suffrage became the chief goal of the women’s movement. Leaders of the movement believed that if women had the vote, they could use it to gain other rights.

The suffragists faced strong opposition. Most people who opposed woman suffrage believed that women were less intelligent and less able to make political decisions than men. Some people feared that women’s participation in politics would lead to the end of family life.
**Growth of the movement.** The drive for suffrage gained strength after the passage of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. This amendment gave the vote to black men but not to any women. In 1869, suffragists formed two national organizations to work for the vote. One was the National Woman Suffrage Association. The other was the American Woman Suffrage Association.

The National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Stanton and another suffragist named Susan B. Anthony, was the more *radical* (extreme) of the two organizations. Its chief goal was an amendment to the Constitution that would give women the vote. In 1872, Anthony and a group of women voted in the presidential election in Rochester, New York. Anthony was arrested and fined for voting illegally. At her trial, which attracted nationwide attention, she made a speech that ended with the slogan “Resistance to Tyranny Is Obedience to God.”

The American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, was more conservative. Its main goal was to persuade individual states to give women the vote. The two groups united in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and other groups also made suffrage a goal.

During the early 1900’s, new leaders brought a fresh spirit to the movement. Some, including Carrie Chapman Catt and Maud Wood Park, were skilled organizers who got much of their support from middle-class women. These leaders stressed organizing in every congressional district and lobbying in the nation's capital. Other leaders, including Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, and Stanton’s daughter Harriot E. Blatch, appealed to radicals and working-class women. These leaders devoted most of their efforts to marches, picketing, and other active forms of protest. Paul and her followers even chained themselves to the White House fence. The suffragists were often arrested and sent to jail. Many of them went on hunger strikes, refusing to eat as a form of protest.

**Action by individual states.** In December 1869, women won the vote in the Territory of Wyoming. One month later, in January 1870, women in the Utah Territory also won the vote. Wyoming entered the Union in 1890 and became the first state with woman suffrage. Colorado adopted woman suffrage in 1893, and Idaho in 1896. By 1920, 15 states—most of them in the West—had granted full voting privileges to women. Twelve other states allowed women to vote in presidential elections.

**The 19th Amendment.** The woman suffrage amendment was introduced in Congress in 1878. It failed to pass but was reintroduced in every session of Congress for the next 40 years.

During World War I (1914-1918), the contributions of women to the war effort increased support for a suffrage amendment. In 1918, the House of Representatives held another vote on the issue. Spectators packed the galleries, and several congressmen came to vote despite illness. Unable to walk, Henry A. Barnhart, a congressman from Indiana, was brought in on a stretcher. Representative Frederick C. Hicks of New York left his wife’s deathbed—at her request—to vote for the amendment. The House approved the amendment, but the Senate defeated it. In 1919, the Senate finally passed the amendment and sent it to the states for approval.
By late August 1920, the required number of states had ratified what became the 19th Amendment. The amendment says, “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.”

**In other countries**

**New Zealand.** In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women full voting rights. The Election Act of 1893 gave New Zealand women the right to vote in all elections. Previously, New Zealand women could vote only in school and municipal elections.

**Australia.** The suffragists Henrietta Dugdale and Annie Lowe founded Australia’s first women’s suffrage association in Melbourne in 1884. In 1895, South Australia became the first colony in Australia to grant women the vote and the first place in the world to allow them to run for office. In 1897, Catherine Helen Spence became the first woman in Australia to seek political office. She ran for, but did not win, a seat at the Australasian Federal Convention. The convention was a gathering where representatives of the six Australian colonies wrote a constitution under which they might unite.

The Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902 granted all Australian women the right to vote on a national level. It also gave them the right to run for political office.

**United Kingdom.** Emmeline Pankhurst led the fight for woman suffrage in the United Kingdom. In 1903, she formed the Women’s Social and Political Union. Pankhurst and her followers, including her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, called themselves *suffragettes*.

At first, the British suffragists tried peaceful means to bring their cause to the notice of the British Parliament and the public. When peaceful methods failed, the suffragists became more *militant* (aggressive). Many suffragists chained themselves to the railings outside buildings, such as the Houses of Parliament in London. Many suffragists were arrested and sent to prison, where they were treated harshly. Some imprisoned suffragists went on hunger strikes and were force-fed. In 1918, Parliament gave women over 30 the right to vote. In 1928, it extended the vote to all women over 21.

**Canada.** In 1912, Nellie McClung helped found the Winnipeg (Manitoba) Political Equality League, which campaigned for woman suffrage in Canada. In 1916, Manitoba became the first Canadian province to give women the right to vote in provincial elections. Saskatchewan and Alberta granted women suffrage later in 1916. Many other provinces followed. In 1918, Canada’s federal government gave all women over 21 the right to vote in federal elections, even if they still could not vote in provincial elections. Women in Quebec could not vote in provincial elections until 1940.

**Other countries** that enacted woman suffrage during the early 1900’s included Finland, Germany, and Sweden. During the mid-1900’s, China, France, India, Italy, Japan, and other nations gave women the vote. By the late 1900’s, women had the vote in almost every country where men had it. In 2015, women in Saudi Arabia voted in and won elections for the first time. Vatican City is the only country in which women are not allowed to vote but men...
have the right. However, some countries still deny voting rights to many or all of the people.

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