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### General Article: **Battle for Suffrage**

On March 3, 1913, [Woodrow Wilson](#) arrived in Washington for his inauguration as president of the United States. But upon arrival, he was dismayed to find there was no crowd to greet him. People gave up meeting the president in order to observe a bigger spectacle down on Pennsylvania Avenue, a woman suffrage parade. Five thousand women, sporting purple, violet, and gold banners, had united under the leadership of suffragist Alice Paul to march through Washington in demand of their right to vote. Shouted and jeered at as they processed, these women braved the hostile crowd while gaining significant publicity for their cause.



*Library of Congress  
The Washington, D.C. suffrage parade,  
March 3, 1913*

The movement of women into the public and political spheres had been gaining in momentum and popularity since the mid-19th century. Women demanded suffrage as early as 1848. The Seneca Falls convention brought together 200 women and 40 men, including feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, to make the claim for full citizenship. The delegates believed women to be citizens not limited in any way to their roles as wives or mothers. In the language of the founding fathers, they wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal." They rejected Victorian domesticity and its separation of women and men into private and public spheres, respectively. It was at Seneca Falls that the suffrage movement first began.

Women entered into public life more and more in the years after the convention. In part this was linked with the expansion of educational opportunities at the time. Women's colleges sprouted up all over the country, enrolling young, mainly white middle-class women. By 1870 there were 11,000 female students at these institutions of higher education. A decade later, there were 40,000. These women received a progressive education and, in their college experiences, found an inspiration to put their knowledge to good use. Half of all college-educated women in the late 19th century never married. Instead, they joined married women to form associations concerned with extending the "maternal" role into the public sphere: to educating young children, instituting benefits for the poor, and improving health conditions for women and children. The voluntary associations formed included the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, numerous settlement houses, and a revitalized suffrage movement.

Yet society severely challenged women's efforts to enter public life. Through the 1890s, "scientific" reports were being released which showed that too much education could seriously hurt the female reproductive system. In 1905 former [president Grover Cleveland](#) wrote in the *Ladies' Home Journal* that female voting would upset "a natural equilibrium so nicely adjusted to the attributes and limitations of both [men and women] that it cannot be disturbed without social confusion and peril." In retaliation, women set out to show that rather than disrupt the social

order, woman suffrage would instead maintain it. Bringing their "natural" roles as mothers and nurturers into the public arena, women would be able to impose a kind of "civic housekeeping" upon the competitive and corrupt (male) state. The feminization of government would act as a means of reform and encourage a more nurturing role of the state toward its people. The general rise of social and political reform at the time furthered their cause. Female suffragist Reverend Anna Garlin Spencer said in response to the new role of government, "the instant the State took upon itself any form of educative, charitable, or personally helpful work, it entered the area of distinctive feminine training and power, and therefore became in need of the service of woman." Women like Spencer, representing the mainstream, moderate suffrage movement, were not arguing for a complete transformation of their role in society, but rather a conservative extension of it.

By 1890 with a significant pool of college-educated women and women's organizations behind it, the movement became much more respectable. This had much to do with the formation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt. The National Woman Suffrage Association had been formed in 1869 under Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1890 the organization combined with the rival American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, and gathered renewed force. Its platform took the moderate argument by declaring that women, being inherently different from men, would restore moral order and harmony if allowed the vote. Yet NAWSA also upheld the racist ideologues of the day. Excluding black women from membership, it garnered significant support from southern women by asserting that the white woman's vote would maintain white supremacy in the South. In response, black women, such as Mary Church Terrell, formed their own organization to further suffrage in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

By the 1910s woman suffrage had become a mass movement. A parallel and much more radical movement was being carried out in Britain. Led by Emmaline Pankhurst, British suffragettes resorted to violence, riots, and arson to effect their aims. Their burning of buildings, blowing up of mailboxes, and hunger strikes gained critical publicity for the suffragists' cause. American women such as Alice Paul and Lucy Burns trained under and participated in British suffrage demonstrations and returned to the U.S. to form the Congressional Union in 1914. The C.U. followed in the British tradition in its tactics. It frequently picketed the White House and denounced Wilson and the Democratic party for its failure to enfranchise women. NAWSA, on the other hand, wooed the administration by remaining respectable at all times and showing a feverish patriotism during the war. While being often at odds, the two organizations actually complemented one another. The C.U., with its outlandish demonstrations, gained significant publicity for the movement while it cast NAWSA in a more respectable light.

The efforts of both organizations finally produced results in 1919 when an amendment for suffrage passed both houses of Congress. But it was later stalemated for ratification in the Southern states. Many southerners believed that white supremacy would be threatened if women, with their emotional susceptibility to the unfortunate, were to gain the vote. NAWSA and the National Women's Party (the successor of the Congressional Union) tenaciously continued to campaign and in 1920, Tennessee was the last state to ratify. The 19th Amendment had the immediate result of granting 26 million women, half the nation's population, the right to vote.

The 1920s saw the demobilization of the country after World War I and the rise of a consumer and leisure-oriented society. These two factors contributed to foster a less hospitable decade for political reform. The number of women in the workplace continued to rise, but very slowly. Much more, the nature of this work was white collar, such as typing, sales, and stenography, and reserved largely for white women only. Although women continued to be politically active, it was not with the single-minded fervor which the campaign for the vote had given them.

While suffrage did not produce the immediate results hoped for by its supporters nor did it

include minority women in the successes it did effect, it did lay the groundwork for future women to seek out a life of independence and public activity. Women would gradually come to realize the power of their citizenship and their vote. The 19th Amendment, in the legacy of the 14th Amendment and its granting of citizenship to blacks, and as a predecessor of the Civil Rights Law of the 1960s, was another stepping stone in the fight for America's promise of equal rights for all. Women such as Eleanor Roosevelt were awakened to a new level of political consciousness by their right to vote. Suffrage greatly facilitated their efforts to lead public lives and to inspire others following in their footsteps.



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