

## The Significance of the Nineteenth Amendment

Since the dawn of democracy in the ancient city-state of Athens, voting has seemingly always been exclusively for men; women, despite being major contributors to society, were never granted political representation. When the United States was founded in 1776, although being based on the idea that all people are “created equal,” they failed to deviate from this patriarchal trend. Facing centuries of oppression and inequality, the women of America won the right to vote by establishing a coherent movement at the Seneca Falls Convention, overcoming misogynistic sentiments, and being particularly active during WWI. Although women still experience inequalities in America today, the Nineteenth Amendment created a more equal society and helped the United States further embody a “land of the free.”

In July of 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of early suffragists met at the Seneca Falls Convention. Together, they prepared the Declaration of Sentiments, which advocated for an equal society in which women were not seen as inferior and possessed the right to vote. The argument for suffrage was rather simple: women are contributive Americans who deserve to be considered citizens, and as citizens, they should be politically represented. This straightforward reasoning was met with strong opposition. Several groups believed that a woman’s purpose was to be a submitting mother and wife and that they were not capable of making sound political decisions. Others argued that the political ideas of a woman were represented in their husband’s vote. The suffrage movement faced disapproval from its origin, yet by actively cooperating and relentlessly writing, marching, delivering speeches, and lobbying, the movement began to gain impetus. One state at a time, suffrage laws were passed.

When Woodrow Wilson delivered his war message to Congress in April of 1917, he described the war as a fight to “bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.” Yet women in the United States, constituting half of its population, were still denied

political representation and were therefore unequal. The suffrage movement gained even more momentum during this time, using Wilson's push for worldwide freedom and equality for the advancement of their own rights. Even with a World War afoot, suffragists such as Alice Paul continued to explicitly voice their opinions, and several of them were jailed for their activities. Around the country, women also took on the responsibility of maintaining the nation's economy and workforce. As over four million men joined the military, women took on jobs in war production and agriculture, and ultimately were vital in winning the war. These important contributions only strengthened public support for women's suffrage, and Americans began to see women as more than wives and mothers. In 1919, Congress finally passed the Nineteenth Amendment, stating that the rights of citizens could not be restricted by sex. It was ratified by the states a year later, forever changing the societal role of women.

The political effect of the Nineteenth Amendment was profound. The 1916 presidential election witnessed 18 million Americans vote; by 1924, this number had risen to 29 million. This new wave of female voters became leaders in reform movements, such as education improvement and child welfare. The feminine voice was no longer politically suppressed. On the voting level, men and women became equals, each possessing the same political power with the ballot. America, a country founded on "liberty and justice for all," was more democratic than it had ever been before.

The effects of this revolutionary amendment were not limited to the political sphere. Women now had the power to enact laws that would directly advance their economic and social status. Birth control soon became legal in the United States, further eradicating patriarchal social expectations. New feminist movements urged women to become more independent and pursue professional education and careers, and the passage of new laws made these movements

possible. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the wage gap decreased with more women in professional occupations and progressive labor laws, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

Despite the enormous leaps women have made towards equality, their status remains slightly lower than that of men. In Congress today, women comprise 23.7% of members. Although this number seems to be trending upward, it represents the continuation of male dominance in the political realm. Other fields of employment are no different; gender norms and discrimination have resulted in a wage gap where women earn \$0.81 for every man's dollar. Outside of America, millions of women face threats to their freedom and experience constant oppression. As a country that has always vowed to protect democracy and promote equality on a worldwide scale, it is our duty as Americans to contribute to a global society in which women are capable of expressing their ideas freely, without fear of persecution. Until these discriminatory policies are abolished, the fight for women's equality will continue.

The struggle for women's suffrage in America was lengthy and arduous, and even after its passage, centuries of inequality and traditional gender patterns have prevented women from gaining complete political equality. Nevertheless, the amendment opened up a myriad of opportunities for women, all of which have contributed to a more equitable and democratic America. Perhaps one day, women will attain full equality and thousands of years of male-dominated society will come to a long-awaited end.

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