Celebrate the Right to Vote

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The Long Struggle for Suffrage

Once the 19th Amendment was ratified, more women engaged in political activity. Passed by Congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment is short and clear: “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.” Getting enfranchisement for women was difficult and never certain.

Women had been seeking the right for decades. New Jersey, whether by intention or oversight, in its 1776 constitution included women in the electorate: “All inhabitants who are worth at least 50 pounds and have lived in New Jersey for a year, they shall have the right to vote.” Not many women met the qualifications but the right was stated. Western states and territories to encourage settlement responded to suffragists’ appeals. Wyoming, in 1890, being the first to pass enfranchisement legislation.

By 1918 women held the right to vote in fifteen states. Women organized, petitioned and protested in front of the White House; they marched, they sang, and were arrested. We provide KidsPost articles and a research activity to learn their stories. There were supporters and opponents among men and women. Ida B. Wells, a courageous journalist, was also a suffragist who fought racism within the movement.

Women immediately engaged in political activity. They registered to vote and attended classes; they faced opposition and threats. Still more than nine million women voted in the 1920 presidential election. Women ran for office locally, statewide and eventually on the national stage. Victoria Woodhull to Belva Lockwood, Margaret Chase Smith to Shirley Chisholm, Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton and now Kamala Harris sought the highest offices.

The fight for civil rights and equality did not end in 1920, but in 2020 there is reason to celebrate the right to vote.
Mother knows best: Here’s how women got the right to vote

After years of protest marches, arrests and hunger strikes by women demanding the right to vote, in the end it came down to 24-year-old Harry Burn … and his mother.

Burn was the youngest member of the Tennessee legislature in 1920 as the nation heatedly debated if women should have the right to vote, called suffrage. Fifteen states, mostly out West, allowed it. Now the question was, should the U.S. Constitution be amended (changed) so that women in every state could vote?

The legislatures of at least 36 states needed to say yes for this change to become law as the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That process is called ratification.

By August 1920, 35 states had approved the amendment. Seven states, including Virginia and Maryland, had voted no. Tennessee’s legislature was going to be the...
last to vote that year, and intense pressure was felt by lawmakers on both sides.

That’s where Harry Burn enters our story. Burn appeared to be a “no” vote. For one thing, he wore a red rose, the symbol of the anti-amendment crowd, on his jacket. But when the final tally was taken August 18, he surprised everyone by voting “yes.” The measure passed, 49 to 47, making women’s suffrage the law of the land.

Anti-amendment forces were outraged. They called Burn a traitor to men and accused him of taking a bribe to switch sides. He denied it. He said he had planned to vote no but had just received a letter from his mother, Febb Burn, urging him to vote for suffrage. “Don’t forget to be a good boy,” she ended her letter, which her son had in his pocket when he voted.

“A mother’s advice is always safest for her boy to follow,” he told fellow lawmakers the day after the vote, according to a Chattanooga News story. Burn added that he believed women should have equal voting rights. Both Burn and his mother continued to receive threats, but neither backed down.

Years later, Burn reflected on his role in history. He said he had not understood at the time why his mother, “a college woman … who took an interest in all public issues,” could not vote, while the men who worked her farm, some of whom were unable to read or write, could.

When Burn realized that hot August day in 1920 that he was going to go on record “for time and eternity” on the merits of women’s suffrage, “I had to vote for ratification,” he said, “and free 17 million women from political slavery.”

Freedom didn’t happen right away. Some states said passage of the 19th Amendment came too late in the year for women to register for the November election or pay a special fee called a poll tax. Other states added tough residency requirements or dusted off old literacy (education) tests to keep Black women and others from voting, in some cases for years.

Even so, about 8 million women did cast ballots for the first time in the November 1920 presidential election, or 30 percent of the total vote. The number has been growing ever since. In 2016, women cast more than half of the 138 million votes recorded.

— Marylou Tousignant

August 18, 2020

How amendments happen

The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the country. Since 1789, it has been changed (amended) 27 times. The first 10 amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, were approved in 1791.

The 27th and most recent amendment was approved in 1992 but was first proposed in 1789. As you can tell, amending the Constitution is neither quick nor easy.

There are two ways to start the process: (1) At least two-thirds of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate approve the proposed amendment; or (2) Two-thirds of the states ask Congress for a national convention to consider amendments. (The convention method has never been used.)

To complete the process, the legislatures or special conventions in at least three-fourths of the states must ratify the amendment.

In 1920, when the 19th Amendment was ratified, there were 48 states (Alaska and Hawaii were still territories), so 36 was the magic number. Today, with 50 states, approval by at least 38 states is needed to ratify an amendment.
Who helped women get the vote? 
Meet three important suffragists.

It took hard work for decades to get the 19th Amendment passed 100 years ago.

Imagine your class at school is about to elect its president for next year, but the girls are told they can’t vote. Only the boys can. Does that seem fair?

Yet that’s how much of the United States was 100 years ago. With some exceptions, mostly in the expanding West, women could not vote. Activists called suffragists (pronounced SUFF-ri-jists) had been protesting this for decades. But it wasn’t until 1920, when the 19th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution, that women
gained equal voting rights.

June 4, 2019, marks the 100th anniversary of Senate passage of the proposed amendment, sending it to the states for final approval (called ratification). By August 1920 the necessary 36 states had acted, and the amendment became law. American women could now vote in all elections.

Some very determined women worked for years to secure that right. Following are three short profiles:

**D.C. protest leader**

Alice Paul grew up in a Quaker household that supported women’s education and equality. While studying in England, she joined its voting-rights movement, learning tactics such as hunger strikes and militant protests.

Back in Washington in 1913, she led a march on Pennsylvania Avenue. As 8,000 women marched, thousands of people showed up to jeer them. In 1917, Paul was arrested protesting outside the White House. In jail, she refused to eat and was force-fed. Doctors even threatened to send her to a hospital for people thought to be mentally ill.

“Seems almost unthinkable now, doesn’t it?” she told an interviewer in 1974, reflecting on the “extreme contempt” directed at suffragists.

In 1923, Paul co-wrote the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, prohibiting gender discrimination. Congress passed it in 1972, but it was never ratified by the states.

**Voice for African Americans**

Hallie Quinn Brown was the daughter of former slaves whose Ohio home was a stop on the Underground Railroad escape route for slaves. Brown had several careers in her long life, and she became a highly respected educator, author, lecturer and civil rights activist. She spoke to a wide range of people, including illiterate children and Britain’s Queen Victoria (twice!).

Brown often spoke about women’s rights and civil rights for black people.

Her involvement with the suffrage movement led her to found the Colored Women’s League of Washington, DC, which in 1896 became part of the National Association of Colored Women. As its president in the 1920s, she helped begin the effort to preserve the home of abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

**‘General Jones’**

Rosalie Gardiner Jones had to overcome more than angry men as an outspoken women’s suffragist. Her mother and sister were as fiercely anti-suffrage as she was in support of it. Jones led pro-suffrage treks through New York’s mud and snow to spread the word about her passion — hikes her mother called ridiculous.

At a Wall Street rally in 1911 in New York City, Jones and others were pelted with eggs and tomatoes. She wasn’t fazed. The next year she led a 150-mile, 12-day march to New York’s state capital, Albany. She followed that with a 200-mile, 20-day walk to Washington to join Alice Paul’s march on Pennsylvania Avenue.

She was known as “General Jones” because of her army of followers. They were known as “pilgrims.”

— Marylou Tousignant
June 3, 2020
Read more about the suffragists

- “Bold and Brave: Ten Heroes Who Won Women the Right to Vote” by Kirstin Gillibrand (ages 6 to 9).

- “You Want Women to Vote, Lizzie Stanton?” by Jean Fritz (ages 8 to 12).

- “Who Was Susan B. Anthony?” by Pam Pollack and Meg Belviso (ages 8 to 12).

- “Rightfully Ours: How Women Won the Vote” by Kerrie Logan Hollihan (ages 9 and older).

- “Alice Paul and the Fight for Women’s Rights” by Deborah Kops (ages 10 and older).

- “The Lesson of the Lark,” by Laura Knight Cobb (ages 11 and older)

- “History Smashers: Women’s Right to Vote” by Kate Messner (ages 7-12)

- “How Women Won the Vote” by Susan Campbell Bartoletti (ages 7 to 12)
Women Who Sought Their Rights and Vote

In a letter to her husband who is attending the Continental Congress in 1776, Abigail Adams wrote:

“[I]n the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

It took until 1920 for passage of the 19th Amendment to achieve women’s suffrage. Many women fought for equal rights — organizing, marching and petitioning, protesting and being imprisoned, facing opposition and winning recognition. On August 18, 1920, when Tennessean Harry Burn cast his vote the Amendment was ratified. Burn had a letter from his mother in his pocket that urged him to vote for suffrage and “Don’t forget to be a good boy.”

Select one of the following women to research her story. Answer these questions and others that you have about women who sought their right to vote.

• When did she live? What were the values of the time period?
• How and why did she get involved in the suffrage movement?
• What were the attitudes of others toward her?
• How did she distinguish herself in the women’s suffrage movement?
• What was the extent of her impact on getting the vote and establishing that right?

Susan B. Anthony
Mary Louise Bottineau Baldwin
Janie Porter Barrett
Anna Whitehead Bodeker
Mary McLeod Bethune
Harriott Stanton Blatch
Margaret Brent
Hallie Quinn Brown
Lucy Burns
Nannie Helen Burroughs
Bertha Pitts Campbell
Mary Anne Shad Cary
Carrie Chapman Catt
Paulina Wright Davis
Charlotte Forten Grimke
Sarah Grimke
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
Rosalie Gardiner Jones
Barbara Jordan
Daisy Elizabeth Adams Lampkin
Mabel Ping-Hua Lee
Belva Lockwood
Mary Munford
Lucretia Mott
Genara Pagán
Alice Paul
Jeanette Rankin
Nellie Tayloe Ross
Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin
Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Lucy Stone
Mary Church Terrell
Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman
Lila Meade Valentine
Maggie Lena Walker
Ida B. Wells
Frances Willard
Victoria Woodhull
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkála-Šá)
Ann Telnaes | *Suffragists were the original ‘nasty’ women* August 17, 2019

The Washington Post’s Ann Telnaes expresses her visual commentary in animation, visual essays, live sketches and traditional print. The second woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning (2001), her clean style, whether in black and white or deep colors, communicates with knowledgeable allusions.

1. Ann Telnaes used red, white and blue in this editorial cartoon.
   a. Why is white an appropriate color for the figure on the left?
   b. What do the clothing worn and its color say about the figure on the right?

2. The editorial commentary is focused on the action of women.
   a. What action is taking place in the image?
   b. What is used instead of a baton?
      What does its “red” color communicate?
   c. What does the idiom “pass the torch” mean?

3. Details are carefully selected by editorial cartoonists.
   a. What is the significance of the sash and year?
   b. Which Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified on August 18, 1920?
   c. What rights were established in that Amendment?

4. Telnaes often has several allusions in her work.
   a. What is the meaning of “nasty”?
   b. Who called Hillary Clinton and other women “nasty”?
   c. Check out the Urban Dictionary definition of “nasty.” Which definition of “nasty” is Telnaes using in her cartoon’s title?

5. What does the action in the cartoon express about women — then and now — who seek their rights?
The 19th Amendment didn’t grant Puerto Rican women suffrage

At the centennial of the 19th Amendment, we should make visible the hidden history of the U.S. empire

By Anne S. Macpherson

This month marks the centenary of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibited the federal and state governments from denying voting rights on the basis of sex. The amendment mostly benefited White women. Most women of color continued to lack access to the ballot for decades because of race-based denial of citizenship or the terror tactics of White rule. That’s the story for the 50 United States. But if we widen our view to include the U.S. empire, we can see that the racially diverse women of Puerto Rico, despite being U.S. citizens, were completely left out of the 19th Amendment.

It took until 1935 for all Puerto Rican women to gain access to the ballot, through local laws rather than due to constitutional reform at the federal level. Women’s struggle for the vote reveals the undemocratic nature of American imperialism, which still harms Puerto Ricans today.

The United States took over Puerto Rico in 1898, first militarily and then by treaty with Spain. Military occupation ended in 1900 with the U.S. Congress establishing a civilian government in the colony. Congress rolled back the universal male suffrage that Spain had granted in 1897 and weakened
the Puerto Rican legislature by making its decisions subject to veto by Congress, the president and the U.S.-appointed governor. Bills that legalized divorce in 1902 — popular with women and restored male suffrage in 1904 were allowed to become law as they played to specific U.S. interests in those moments.

Congress finally made all Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens in 1917. But citizenship for Puerto Ricans was not enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, came with no promise of statehood or federal voting rights and did not improve Puerto Ricans’ lives in any tangible way. As intended, U.S. citizenship bound Puerto Rico closer to the United States as a colony.

With U.S. corporate agriculture accelerating landlessness and men earning low seasonal wages in coffee, tobacco and especially sugar, women’s earnings became crucial to reducing malnutrition and child mortality. Working-class women increasingly took jobs in tobacco processing and needlework for U.S. and Puerto Rican companies. Like workers throughout the United States, these women joined unions and strikes and experienced brutal repression by employers and imperial and local authorities. Many working-class women joined the Socialist Party, which strategically advocated for women’s suffrage from its founding in 1915.

And yet, to most Puerto Rican legislators, women’s suffrage was unthinkable. They believed it would tarnish the domestic virtue of “their” women and erode men’s right to represent the family. They also believed it would also harm legislators’ class interests by boosting Socialist votes. Puerto Rican suffragists — with wealthy wives and middle-class teachers organized separately from Socialist workers — mobilized in the 1910s to change legislators’ minds. But a 1919 bill for women’s suffrage failed.

In 1920, Puerto Rican suffragists hoped U.S. imperial rule would bring a progressive expansion of women’s rights by including Puerto Rico in the 19th Amendment. But the amendment — probably as an oversight — did not bar governments of U.S. colonies from denying women the vote. On Sept. 1, 1920, suffragist and labor activist Genara Pagán walked into a Puerto Rican voter registration office to test the proposition that the amendment had granted her access to the vote as an American citizen. Denied registration, she filed a complaint that prompted the governor to consult with the powerful Bureau of Insular Affairs in Washington, D.C. The complaint prompted a question the governor needed to answer: Did the 19th Amendment apply in the colony he governed? The bureau, steeped in racist views of Puerto Rican women as causing overpopulation and poverty, firmly responded that it did not.

Congress did not overrule this bureaucratic fiat or Puerto Rican leaders’ chauvinism, despite having the authority to do so. Prominent U.S. suffrage organizations ignored the exclusion of Puerto Rican women from the 19th Amendment — just as many of them ignored the struggles of women of color to gain citizenship or exercise voting rights within the states.

Puerto Rican suffragists battled on. Some helped turn out male voters for Socialist candidates. Many pressured the Puerto Rican legislature to give women access to the ballot — bills failed in 1921 and 1923. In 1924, two women filed suit to force the courts to rule on whether the 19th Amendment applied in Puerto Rico. Both lost in the Puerto Rico Supreme Court, whose justices were appointed by the U.S. president.

Dynamics shifted after 1925. Locally, Puerto Rican Socialists gained traction by forming an electoral coalition with an establishment party. Pressure from that coalition pushed the Puerto Rican Senate to pass a compromise bill for literate women’s suffrage, but Socialists ultimately blocked the measure in the House because it didn’t go far enough. In Washington, however, well-connected Puerto Rican suffragists won the support of the National Woman’s Party and through it the leaders of key congressional committees. Thus, the U.S. House passed a bill for universal women’s suffrage in Puerto Rico in late 1928, and the Senate moved toward doing the same in early 1929.

Having Congress intervene in local affairs to enfranchise women would have humiliated Puerto Rican political leaders, who valued local autonomy over women’s suffrage. Upper-class suffragists, who disdained non-White working women, signaled enfranchising literate women would be enough. Thus in April 1929, the Puerto Rican legislature acted before the U.S. Senate could do so, overcoming Socialist objections and extending voting rights to the minority of Puerto Rican women who could read and write. The governor signed the bill into law, and Congress retreated, permanently.

Not until another electoral coalition including Socialists won control of the Puerto Rican legislature in 1933 did it become possible to extend suffrage to all women. In March 1935 — after three years of strikes and protests by women workers suffering Depression conditions — universal women’s suffrage became local law.

Today U.S. imperialism continues to afford Puerto Ricans fewer federal rights and benefits than citizens in the 50 states. Puerto Ricans cannot vote in presidential elections or for members of Congress, although they do elect a nonvoting “resident commissioner” to the House of Representatives. Congress has also set lower Medicare and Medicaid caps for Puerto Rico. In recent years, the federally appointed debt-restructuring board that favors Puerto Rico’s creditors has slashed health and education spending.

Yet Puerto Ricans persist, as did their predecessors who struggled for the vote a century ago. In 2019, popular protests forced Gov. Ricardo Rosselló to resign after journalists exposed misogynist, homophobic, violent messages among his coterie. Those mass protests reflected deep anger over political leaders’ mismanagement of already inadequate federal hurricane relief funds after Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017.

Women in the United States enfranchised in 1920 by the 19th Amendment were overwhelmingly White. Women of color
An Integrated Curriculum of The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

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1. Review the following term before reading the guest commentary:
   centenary, chauvinism, colony, coterie, fiat, imperial rule, misogynist, progressive, socialism, suffrage, suffragist

2. What does the author mean by “U.S. imperialism”? 

3. The third paragraph summarizes the changing relationship of the United States to Puerto Rico. Select one of the examples. Explain how this could be demeaning to Puerto Ricans and/or women.


5. What reasons did Puerto Rican legislators have for being against women’s suffrage?

6. What reason does the author give for Puerto Ricans being denied the right to vote in 1920?

7. State an example of racism in women’s suffrage organizations. How does this reflect attitudes at that time toward women and, in particular, women of color?

8. Maneuvering took place in 1929 between Congress and Puerto Rican political leaders.
   a. Summarize what actions were taken.
   b. Do you think this was progress? Explain your answer.
   c. What led to full suffrage in 1935?

9. The last three paragraphs focus on today’s political situation in Puerto Rico.
   a. What limits to Puerto Rican U.S. citizens face on their rights?
   b. What limitations are made on the benefits provided by U.S. citizenship?
   c. What were reasons for protests in 2019?

10. Has the professor of Caribbean and Latin American history been persuasive in arguing that voting rights of Puerto Rican women have been curtailed by U.S. imperialism? Explain your response.

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Retropolis

Ida B. Wells gets her due as a Black suffragist who rejected movement’s racism

By DeNeen L. Brown

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Her image is arresting. Hundreds of people walking through Washington’s Union Station this week paused to look at the huge photo mosaic of anti-lynching crusader and suffragist Ida B. Wells-Barnett on the marble floor.

The portrait, designed by visual artist Helen Marshall using thousands of smaller photos of women who fought for the right to vote, commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which was ratified on Aug. 18, 1920.

Colleen Shogan, vice chair of the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission, which organized the display, said it was “a strategic decision” to highlight Wells-Barnett.

“She was a suffragist, a civil rights activist, an anti-lynching journalist who helped spawn the anti-lynching movement in the United States,” she said. “We hope people will learn not only about Ida B. Wells — her story is impressive — but also learn the story of the thousands of other women depicted in the mosaic.”

“Our Story: Portraits of Change,” on display at Union Station until Aug. 28, includes Sojourner Truth, an enslaved woman who freed herself before becoming an abolitionist, a freedom fighter and suffragist; Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator and political activist who founded the National Council of Negro Women; and Mary Eliza Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women.

It also tells the story of Zitkála-Šá, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, “a Yankton Dakota Sioux writer and political activist who fought for women’s suffrage and Native American rights,” according to the commission, and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, “the first Chinese woman in the United States to earn her doctorate and an advocate for the rights of women and the Chinese community in America.”

Wells-Barnett, better known by her maiden name Ida B. Wells, was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who won a posthumous Pulitzer in 2020 for “courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching.”

She also confronted racism in the suffrage movement and did not flinch.

Wells-Barnett, who was born enslaved in July 16, 1862, in Mississippi, wrote that she believed the power of the vote would help protect Black people from the horrors of oppression, lynching and racial terror.

“Wells-Barnett traveled internationally, shedding light on lynching to foreign audiences,” according to the National Women’s History Museum. “Abroad, she openly confronted white women in the suffrage movement who ignored
lynching. Because of her stance, she was often ridiculed and ostracized by women's suffrage organizations in the United States. Nevertheless, Wells-Barnett remained active in the women's rights movement.

Wells-Barnett created a suffrage group for Black women in Chicago. She wrote in her autobiography “Crusade for Justice” that when she saw “that we were likely to have a restricted suffrage, and the white women of the organization were working like beavers to bring it about, I made another effort to get our women interested. With the assistance of one or two of my suffrage friends, I organized what afterward became known as the Alpha Suffrage Club. The women who joined were extremely interested when I showed them that we could use our vote for the advantage of ourselves and our race.”

In 1913, Wells-Barnett traveled from Chicago to Washington to attend a suffrage parade, organized by suffragists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, (NAWSA). The association debated the demand by Southern women that Black women march in the back.

Paul argued the parade should be segregated by race, believing White women would refuse to march alongside Black women.

“As far as I can see, we must have a white procession, or a Negro procession, or no procession at all,” Paul told an editor in 1913.

On March 3, 1913, one day before the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson, the marchers gathered.

“Clad in a white cape astride a white horse, lawyer Inez Milholland led the great woman suffrage parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation's capital,” according to the Library of Congress. “Behind her stretched a long line with nine bands, four mounted brigades, three heralds, about twenty-four floats, and more than 5,000 marchers.”

The women were jeered and assaulted as they walked.

Wells-Barnett had no intention of abiding by the rules segregating the parade. She stood on the sidelines until the marchers from Chicago passed, then fearlessly, she stepped to the front of the procession.

“I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition,” she wrote later. “I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race.”

The Chicago Daily Tribune published a photo of Wells marching up front.

“Mrs. Ida Wells Barnett, a brilliant” Black woman, “who is one of the leaders of her race and has lectured in the cause of the Negro man and woman throughout Europe and America, had come from Chicago to the parade with the Illinois delegation of women but some of the marchers from states further south had objected to her presence,” according a 1913 Detroit Free Press story.

“The Illinois women want me to march in their section,” she told the reporter, “and I shall. Illinois is Lincoln’s state, you know. I don’t believe Lincoln’s state is going to permit Alabama or Georgia or another state to begin to dictate to it now. As Illinois comes along I’ll join them.’ And Mrs. Barnett did.”