

The Nineteenth Amendment and Women's Suffrage Part 4: The Progressive Era and Ratification

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This Legal Sidebar is the fourth in a six-part series that discusses the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which recognized women's voting rights. Shortly before Election Day 2022, a group of people [gathered in Rochester, New York](#), to honor the late social reformer and women's rights activist, Susan B. Anthony. About 150 years earlier, Anthony [cast a ballot](#) in the 1872 presidential election. She was arrested and charged with illegally voting as a woman in violation of federal law. She unsuccessfully claimed that the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) gave her the right to vote as a privilege of citizenship. A federal district court [imposed a fine](#) of \$100 on Anthony, but she never paid it. As the nation marks the 150th anniversary of Anthony's vote—and the 2020 centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification—Congress may be interested in the history and impact of the women's suffrage movement and the Nineteenth Amendment. Additional information on this topic will be published in the [Constitution Annotated: Analysis and Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution](#).

The [Progressive Era](#), which lasted from the late 1890s to the early 1920s, was a period of increased political activism and social reform in the United States. During this era, the [National American Woman Suffrage Association](#) initially [emphasized](#) state-level efforts to secure voting rights for women. Article I, Section 2, Clause 1 of the Constitution [gave states](#) the ability to determine voter qualifications for congressional elections based on the qualifications required to vote in state elections. By 1916, women [had obtained](#) full voting rights in eleven western states and partial voting rights in many others. Nonetheless, the slow pace of progress at the state level spurred activists such as Carrie Chapman Catt to [intensify their efforts](#) to obtain an amendment to the Constitution recognizing women's right to vote. Some suffragists, such as Alice Paul, combined traditional advocacy efforts with more [radical forms of protest](#), including parades, picketing, and hunger strikes in support of a federal amendment.

The year 1917 marked a [turning point](#) in the fight for women's suffrage. In that year, the first woman elected to Congress, Representative Jeannette Rankin of Montana, took office. (Montana had [granted](#) women equal suffrage rights in 1914.) In addition, New York passed a referendum approving women's suffrage, becoming the first eastern state to do so. As the United States entered World War I in April 1917 to fight for democracy abroad, it became more difficult for opponents of women's suffrage to argue that

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women should be denied a fundamental democratic right at home. By the end of the year, the women's suffrage movement had secured significant political support for a federal amendment, but obtaining the approval of Congress and the state legislatures proved to be a difficult task.

The language that would become the Nineteenth Amendment was first introduced in Congress during the Reconstruction Era. In 1878, Senator Aaron Sargent of California introduced a joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution that [would have prohibited](#) the federal and state governments from restricting U.S. citizens' voting rights "on account of sex." This language was modeled after the [Fifteenth Amendment's](#) prohibition on race-based voting restrictions. The Senate did not act on Senator Sargent's proposal at the time; however, it later [voted down](#) the proposed women's suffrage amendment, as reintroduced, in 1887.

In December 1917, [Representative John E. Raker of California](#) reintroduced the joint resolution proposing a women's suffrage amendment in the 65th Congress. During the House of Representative's debate on the resolution, proponents argued that women should have the right to vote because they had played a key role in the nation's labor force during World War I. U.S. allies, including Great Britain, had already granted suffrage to many women. At least one Member of Congress argued that the extension of the franchise to women would recognize their increasing social and economic independence from their husbands. Proponents also noted that many women paid taxes without having a role in choosing their political representatives.

Opponents generally argued that amending the Constitution to recognize women's suffrage would intrude on each state's authority to determine the composition of its electorate and disrupt the traditional notion of the American family. A few Members objected because the Nineteenth Amendment would, at least on paper, enfranchise African American women. Despite some opposition, the joint resolution narrowly achieved the two-thirds majority needed for passage in the House on January 10, 1918.

The Senate debated the joint resolution for several months in 1918. Senate debates touched on many of the same issues as the House debates, including women's contributions to the war effort, states' rights, and race. In September 1918, shortly before the midterm elections, President Woodrow Wilson gave a [speech](#) to the Senate in support of the women's suffrage amendment. President Wilson noted that women supported the nation's fight in World War I and contended that the United States could not fight for democracy abroad while denying women the right to vote at home. In addition to arguing that women's suffrage was key to winning the war, Wilson stated that the resolution of the nation's "great problems" after the war would "depend upon the direct and authoritative participation of women in our counsels." The day after Wilson's speech, on October 1, 1918, the Senate rejected the joint resolution proposing the women's suffrage amendment. The amendment again failed in the Senate during the 65th Congress on February 10, 1919.

In May 1919, after the new 66th Congress convened, President Wilson [called a special session](#) of the national legislature to consider a number of issues, including the women's suffrage amendment. Progress in Congress was swift. The House passed the joint resolution proposing the Nineteenth Amendment on May 21, 1919, and the Senate approved it on June 4, 1919. Thereafter, it was sent to the states for ratification. Although the new Congress acted quickly on the Amendment, more than a year elapsed before it attained the three-fourths majority of the states necessary for ratification on August 18, 1920. About a week later, on August 26, U.S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby [certified](#) the Amendment to have been ratified.

Despite the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification, many African American women and other female minority groups throughout the United States [continued to face significant obstacles](#) to voting, such as poll taxes and literacy tests. These barriers were addressed when the states ratified the [Twenty-Fourth Amendment](#) in 1964. Congress then enacted the [Voting Rights Act](#) in 1965 to enforce the [Fifteenth Amendment](#).

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