

The Transnational Women's Suffrage Movement: how the vote was won in the USA, 1848-1920

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2018 marked the centenary of the passing of the Representation of the People Act with numerous events held to celebrate 100 years of the women's vote in the UK. The Act granted property-owning women (and the wives of property-owning men) over the age of 30 the right to vote in parliamentary elections. As a result some 8.4 million women were enfranchised and women could for the first time stand for election to the Westminster Parliament. Renewed interest in the British suffrage movement comes at a time when the 'international turn' in women's history has encouraged new research into the transnational women's suffrage movement.^[1] The historiography of transnational women's organisations, for example the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), further illustrates the global nature of female activism throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.^[2]

The 'Women's Suffrage' collection (from several of the source archives) contains a wide selection of significant primary source documents relating to the history of the transnational suffrage movement. The sources illuminate the history of the suffrage movement in Britain and North America, along with papers relating to the policies and activities of the IWSA. This essay will focus on the campaign for the women's vote in the United States during the period 1848-1920. To do so allows for interesting comparisons to be drawn with the British suffrage movement. It also highlights the peculiarities of the American struggle in the run up to the 2020 commemorations marking the centenary of the women's vote in the USA.

1848-1869: Emergence, organisation and consolidation



The first formal meeting of the American suffrage movement took place at Seneca Falls, New York in July 1848, two decades before the emergence of the British suffrage movement. The Seneca Falls Convention was the idea of a number of female activists, most notably Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had become friends through their involvement in the World Anti-Slavery Movement. Aware of the discrimination and inequalities experienced by women worldwide, they were keen to bring together likeminded individuals to launch a new campaign for women's rights. The Convention was called to discuss the civil and political rights of women and a Declaration of Sentiments was presented for debate to the 300 men and women attending.[3] This manifesto highlighted the inequalities experienced by women in American society and declared that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal'.[4] This was a radical document, which proclaimed that 'the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries...on the part of man toward woman...[having established] an absolute tyranny over her'.[5] To break free, women needed to have access to all the privileges of democratic citizenship, including the vote.

In the wake of Seneca Falls, further Conventions on women's rights were held in a number of states with the aim of building a critical mass of support for the women's vote. This included Arkon, Ohio where in 1851 the former slave and activist Sojourner Truth challenged the Convention to include poor and black women in the campaign for the vote.[6] The participation of black female activists in the suffrage cause drew together the two most significant nineteenth century movements for democratic rights: abolitionism and Women's Suffrage. However as the historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn writes, 'Black women had to fight both racial and sexual discrimination, a condition never adequately recognised by white suffragists'.[7]

The outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 forced a pause in the nascent suffrage campaign. Four years later, at the close of the war, the passage of the 14th Amendment awarded the right to vote to men – including the recently freed slaves – while excluding women from the franchise. At the 11th National Convention held in New York City in May 1866 a new body, the American Equal Rights Association, was set up to spearhead the campaign for the women's vote. With women excluded from the 14th Amendment, the campaign for the women's vote continued at state level. In 1877 Kansas became the first state to vote on the question of the female franchise. Although unsuccessful the Kansas campaign gave activists including Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton the opportunity to flex their activist muscles and develop the skills necessary to become leaders of the national suffrage movement.[8]

By 1869 the American suffrage movement was represented by two countrywide organisations: the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA). For decades the two groups functioned separately, divided by the question of how to best frame demands for female enfranchisement and in opposition over the rights of former slaves within the campaign.[9] The NWSA was based in New York and led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. This organisation was associated with the Democratic Party and argued that the focus of their campaign should be on federal reforms to win the female suffrage. Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, supporters of the Republican Party, set up the AWSA in Boston in 1869. In contrast to the NWSA, this organisation's objective was to defend black male suffrage rights in Southern States in the era of Jim Crow and win the women's vote, state by state.[10]

Having more than one campaigning group within a broader social movement is not usual, as evidenced by the British suffrage movement. Here numerous suffrage societies campaigned for the women's vote, including the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). These national bodies operated successfully alongside lesser-known groups, for example the Manchester Men's League for Women's Suffrage and the Central National Society for Women's Suffrage.

1869-1910: Success and disappointments

The first US state to grant women the same voting rights as men was Wyoming in 1869.[11] By 1896 three further states - Utah (1870), Colorado (1893) and Idaho (1896) - had all extended the franchise to women. Historians have argued that one of the main reasons women were granted the equal

franchise in these western frontier states was to illustrate that the West was no longer 'the wild land it had been, but a place for families'.^[12] Despite these early successes, 44 states continued to deny women citizens the right to vote on equal terms with men. Resistance to women having the right to vote remained significant. Anti-suffrage propaganda argued that women were unsuited for politics and public life and that women had little interest in voting. (See 'If the Anti Were..'). (See 'Anti-Suffrage Pamphlets, Leaflets and Handbills').

Acknowledging the major challenges ahead, the NWSA and AWSA merged in 1890 to form the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The decision to present a united front was common amongst suffrage movements elsewhere. For example in the UK the NUWSS was established in 1897 to bring together disparate suffrage societies to ensure a more effective campaign. The newly formed NAWSA set its sights on winning the women's vote state by state, reasoning that once local success was achieved voters would be more willing to support federal reform. In 1900 Carrie Chapman Catt, a suffrage activist who had played a significant role in the successful Colorado campaign, became the new leader of the NAWSA. Chapman Catt is acknowledged as one of the most influential leaders of the American suffrage movement. She was also a key figure in the transnational suffrage movement and in 1902 established the IWSA to facilitate greater cooperation among women from different nations.

Capitalising on their success in western states the NAWSA published a leaflet in January 1909 entitled 'Facts Stronger than Theory'. The intention here was to highlight how the social and economic rights of women and children were best protected in states with equal voting rights. As in Britain, American campaigners linked winning the vote to social policy reforms, for example equal pay, employment opportunities, divorce law and housing. (See 'It Makes a Difference'). Challenging the idea that women had no interest in life outside the home, the suffrage movement argued that it was women who were responsible for ensuring the welfare of their children. Mothers needed the vote so that they could demand higher food standards, better housing provision, and the right to live in an environment where their children could grow up safely. (See 'Handbill Entitled Women in the Home').

1910-1920: The long road to victory

Between 1910 and 1914 the women's franchise was extended to women in six additional states: Washington, California, Oregon, Arizona, Nevada, Montana and Kansas.^[13] Whilst these successes were welcomed, the pace of reform remained agonisingly slow. The established political parties, Republican and Democratic, were reluctant to support the enfranchisement of women. The reason for this was that there were no guarantees female voters would support their party. In response to this stalemate a new suffrage society was established in 1907, the Equality League of Self Supporting Women, which later changed its name to the Women's Political Union (WPU). Keen to bring greater attention to the cause, the WPU adopted some of the eye-catching tactics familiar to the British Suffrage Movement, for example organising parades of up to 20,000 women in New York.^[14]

As the historian Alexander Keyssar notes, the American women's suffrage movement was successful in attracting support from the powerful American labour movement; this ensured that - from 1910 - it would become a mass social movement.^[15] The connection between the rights of women voters and US workers is dramatically illustrated in a suffrage cartoon depicting 605,436 women wage earners from Pennsylvania marching out from schools, offices, factories and mills, to demand the right to vote (See '605, 436 Women...'). Another valuable source of support came from the National College Equal Suffrage League, which succeeded in mobilising thousands of female graduates in the campaign for the vote.^[16] (See 'National College Equal Suffrage League Material').

In addition, American campaigners benefited from support provided by the British suffrage movement. Emmeline Pankhurst, leader of the militant WSPU, visited the US three times between 1909 and 1913. (See 'Advertisement for the Second American-Canadian Lecture Tour of Mrs Pankhurst'). With her exceptional rhetorical skills, Pankhurst succeeded in raising funds for the British movement while at the same time rallying support for 'the cause' in the US. ^[17] Her now famous 'Freedom or Death' speech was delivered in Hartford, Connecticut, during her 1913 tour.^[18] It is noteworthy that the use of militant tactics, and in particular violent action, was not as prevalent in the US as in the UK.

However some activists within the movement regarded recourse to militant tactics necessary at times to win the vote for women.

In 1913 tensions over militancy prompted activists Alice Paul, Anne Martin and Lucy Burns to set up the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage (CU). This new body prioritised federal reform and endorsed militant action. When studying in the UK Alice Paul had joined WSPU and was imprisoned for her suffragette activities. On returning to the US, Paul devised ways of introducing militancy into the American campaign. Aware of the interest the media had shown in suffragette militancy in Britain, Paul set about organising pickets of the White House and mass rallies as a way of bringing greater public attention to the campaign for the women's vote.

In 1916 the CU set up the National Women's Party (NWP) (See '[Campaign Text Book of the National Women's Party 1916](#)') to campaign locally against Democratic candidates, even if they personally advocated reform. This hostile action was justified by the Party's refusal to support an equal franchise amendment to the Constitution. At the same time Alice Paul continued to engage in militant protest and, in October 1917, was arrested and sentenced to seven months imprisonment for 'obstructing traffic' outside the White House. Like WSPU members in Britain, she went on hunger strike and was subjected to forcible feeding 'several times a day for three weeks'.^[19] (See '[Women's Suffrage Protests](#)').

By 1915 the NAWSA had a membership of over 100,000 and continued to campaign using more traditional constitutional methods.^[20] That year Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the association, implemented what was referred to as 'the winning plan'. The idea was to focus resources on the dual aim of pushing through a federal amendment, while at the same time continuing to support state based campaigns.^[21] Despite America's entry into the First World War in April 1917 the campaign continued. A major victory was achieved later that year when New York voted in favour of the equal franchise. The persistent canvassing of the NAWSA and the headline grabbing protests of the NWP proved an effective combination. Added to this successful mix was the support given by the NAWSA to the war effort and women's participation in war work. All of these activities undermined the case made by anti-suffrage campaigners and undoubtedly helped secure Republican and Democratic Party support for reform.

In January 1918 Democratic President Woodrow Wilson proposed a federal amendment to introduce the equal franchise and the House of Representatives endorsed the measure by one vote.^[22] Despite significant lobbying on the part of the NAWSA and the NWP, the Senate refused to pass the amendment by the required two-thirds majority. Deeply disappointed suffrage campaigners vowed to continue their fight for political equality. The defeat must have been particularly galling as just one month later women ratepayers over 30 in Britain won the right to vote. Down but not out the American campaign continued throughout 1918 and 1919 resulting in state victories in South Dakota, Michigan and Oklahoma.

Tactics employed in these on-going campaigns ranged from traditional lobbying and campaigning to militant protests. Cartoons published in suffrage society journals, for example *The Woman's Journal*, *Woman Citizen* and *The Suffragist* were a notable feature of the American suffrage campaign. Katharina Hundhammer writes that pro-suffrage cartoons were 'a powerful influence in the movement for national woman suffrage'. She suggests that the positive depiction of women in these cartoons challenged stereotypical representations of suffrage activists as 'male-featured and unattractive'.^[23] (See '[Not So Unbecoming, Afterall?](#)' M15 & '[My, How You Have Grown in Four Years](#)').

With the support of individual states, and the realisation that the women's vote was nothing to fear, Senate finally ratified the 19th Amendment in August 1920. The news was met with delight by campaigners, many of whom had devoted their lives to fighting for 'the cause'. The 19th Amendment extended the right to vote to all women on equal terms with men. Despite this guarantee, many African American women in Southern States were unable to vote as racial discrimination and segregation resulted in their continued exclusion from the electorate. The NWP, Jad Adams explains, refused to support black women suffragists on the grounds that 'black women were discriminated against in the same way as black men, and this was a race issue and not a women's rights issue, so they felt under no obligation to help'.^[24]

This overview of the American suffrage campaign reveals commonalities with other social movements in terms of organisation, tactics and the role of leaders within the movement. These features are all reflected in the collection of documents gathered together under the theme 'Women's Suffrage'. Papers within the collection illustrate the particular complexities of the American context. The international links between American activists and fellow campaigners in Britain and the IWSA are also well documented. The evidence presented vividly demonstrates the dynamism of the transnational suffrage movement. In this decade of centenaries, the 'Woman Suffrage' collection reminds us of the importance of the suffrage campaign and encourages further study of this fascinating episode in women's history.

[1] See, for example: Jad Adams, *Women & the Vote: A World History*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 2014 [\[OpenURL\]](#); Rodney Cooney, *Winning the Vote: The Triumph of the American Suffrage Movement*, (American Graphic Press: Santa Cruz), 2005 [\[OpenURL\]](#); Patricia Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, (Auckland University Press: Auckland), 2013 [\[OpenURL\]](#); and Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 2018. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[2] See, for example: Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton), 1997 [\[OpenURL\]](#); and Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia), 2015. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[3] (See document: ['The first convention ever called to discuss the civil and political rights of women'](#)).

[4] [Ibid.](#)

[5] [Ibid.](#)

[6] Adams, *Women and the Vote*, p.143. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[7] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington), 1998 [\[OpenURL\]](#) cited in Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, p.13. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[8] (see ['The Life of Lucy Stone'](#) M88).

[9] Adams, *Women and the Vote*, p.148. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[10] [Ibid.](#) [\[OpenURL\]](#) The Jim Crow era refers to the years between the late 1860s to the early 1960s when racial discrimination and segregation in Southern States of the US allowed for the denial of basic citizenship rights to African Americans, including the right to vote.

[11] [Ibid.](#), pp.149-156. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[12] [Ibid.](#), p.158. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[13] [Ibid.](#), p.174. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[14] Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, pp. 158-9. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[15] Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, (Basic Books: New York), 2000 [\[OpenURL\]](#) cited in Adams, *Women and the Vote*, p.232. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[16] Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, p.89. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[17] *Ibid.*, pp.102-3. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[18] "Great speeches of the 20th century: Emmeline Pankhurst's Freedom or death", *The Guardian*, 27 April 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/27/greatspeeches> [Accessed 23 April 2018]

[19] Cooney, *Winning the Vote*, p.357. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[20] Adams, *Women and the Vote*, p.232. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[21] *Ibid.*, p.236. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[22] *Ibid.*, p.238. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[23] Katharina Hundhammer, *American Women in Cartoons 1890-1920*, (Peter Lang: Frankfurt), 2012, pp.66-67. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

[24] Adams, *Women and the Vote*, p.244. [\[OpenURL\]](#)

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