About this #SuffrageSyllabus

This syllabus, part of the Schlesinger Library’s Long 19th Amendment Project, takes students through a semester-long course of readings and assignments on the broad subject of women’s political rights in the United States. Organized around a series of turning-point moments from the creation of the independent nation in 1776 to the present day, the syllabus places American women’s still-unfinished struggle for full and equal citizenship in a broad intersectional context. The effort to build this #syllabus began with an open call on social media by the unit creators and Johns Hopkins historian Martha Jones, who has been instrumental in many parts of the Long 19th Amendment Project. Many responded to that call; Cathleen Cahill, Mary Chapman, Andrew Cohen, and Beverly Palmer contributed particular ideas that directly shaped the result. We have cast a wide net in the topics, readings, and approaches outlined in this course, which has meant making hard choices about coverage and content. We hope that individual instructors will adapt as well as adopt this syllabus, diving deeper into particular questions and creating alternative frameworks for exploration.

Such an inquiry could begin almost anywhere; women in many parts of the world have fought for their emancipation since antiquity. During the early modern period, a lively print debate on “the woman question” raged in Western Europe, producing foundational texts that later women’s rights thinkers built on. From the age of revolutions forward, those advocating for the rights of women often allied with thinkers and activists seeking the abolition of slavery.
Our syllabus takes up this vexed question of origins in two moments, exploring the political status of American women in the era of the founding, c. 1776, and again c. 1848, often—and wrongly—credited as the dawning of the American women’s rights movement. The second two-week unit circles around the year 1870 and the refounding of the political nation through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments in the wake of the Civil War. The passage in 1920 of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution serves here as an inflection point in longer and deeper struggles to reconstruct the American polity: “We the People,” as the Constitution’s famous preamble puts it. Created during the 19th Amendment’s centennial, the syllabus opens that anniversary date through a pair of units, one focused on the United States and the other taking a global and anticolonial view. The fifth unit of the course, takes the story forward into the civil rights era, to 1965, with the passage of the Voting Rights and Immigration and Naturalization Acts, which built on the work of past activists to achieve the franchise for African American women and men in the southern United States, and which loosened the racial strictures that had governed American immigration for decades. The penultimate unit of the course centers on 1982, a year that witnessed the simultaneous reauthorization (and strengthening) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the expiration of the ratification clock for the Equal Rights Amendment, which many feminists had long imagined as the culminating act of American women’s citizenship.

The work of American women’s citizenship remains in many ways incomplete. The course’s final week, created by a group of Harvard undergraduates working on various facets of the Long 19th Amendment Project during the summer of 2020, offers teachers and students multiple pathways to reckon with the present and build the future.

The #SuffrageSyllabus team:
Lisa Tetrault, Carnegie Mellon University (1776, 1848)
Manisha Sinha, University of Connecticut (1870)
Corinne T. Field, University of Virginia (1920, US)
Durba Mitra, Harvard University (1920, Colonial / anti-colonial world)
Liette Gidlow, Wayne State University (1965)
Katherine Turk, UNC Chapel Hill (1982)
Ciara Hervas, Patricia Liu, Fariba Mahmud, Jessica Morandi, and Toluwalope Moses, Harvard College (2020 and beyond)

Rachel Guberman, Digital Humanist, Long 19th Amendment Project
Jane Kamensky, Long 19th Amendment Project Principal Investigator
In 1776, the leaders of 13 of Britain’s American colonies launched a novel form of government: a republic, in which leaders would derive their authority from the consent of “the People,” exercised via the suffrage, or the vote. Their claim that the United States could self-govern, through elected representatives, broke with a monarchical system of government, where kings determined by hereditary succession were thought necessary for harmony and order. In the ensuing years, this founding idea, that the citizens of a republic could govern themselves, spread far beyond those the signers of the Declaration of Independence or those who ratified...
the U.S. constitution envisioned as “the People,” with all sorts of Americans, women included, insisting that they too could rule themselves.

The story of women insisting that they too should be able to vote in many ways began at the nation’s founding—with their large-scale exclusion. We’ll never know the full extent of women’s own strivings for self-governance, as their voices were rarely recorded and preserved—particularly those who were not free, white, or elite. But we can see that this those voices existed, loud enough for the founders to hear, because they commented on how alarmed they were to see ideas about political self-determination spreading among the general populace.

Many women—those even further outside the halls of national political power—defined self-government differently. Few indigenous peoples sought to be part of this new nation, or to claim the “voting rights” it promised. Free and enslaved African Americans often concentrated instead on ending the deadly forces of chattel slavery.

If early voices raised the question of women’s voting in the years surrounding 1776, a concerted social movement did not coalesce for several decades. Beginning the history of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement in 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, where women boldly demand the right to vote at the first women’s rights convention, is a standard convention, though less a historical fact than a politically advantageous story that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony invented some thirty to forty years later. The pair created this story as a response to political crises inside and outside the women’s suffrage movement after the American Civil War (1861-1865).

In fact, by the 1840s, a discernable chorus of women were demanding the vote, among many other rights demands. The most audible part of that chorus, the antebellum women’s rights movement, which grew out of the anti-slavery struggle, took shape by the 1850s and consistently sought women’s enfranchisement. Yet the story of women and voting is much larger than this. As a result, it has numerous beginnings, because it is, in fact, many different stories—some still waiting to be told.

Inspired by the unrealized ideals of the American Revolution, determined Americans—often with women leading them—have slowly transformed this nation into a democracy: something the founders explicitly warned against. The achievement of American democracy, then, belongs to everyday citizens excluded from the founders’ visions, who leveraged social protest to forge, over centuries, a more perfect union.
Week 1: Who Should Vote?

The founding generation’s system of representative government was wildly experimental. Wary of centralized national power, their anxious debates ended up producing a patchwork system, governed by the states and localities, who had the ultimate say over who could vote within their boundaries. The federal Constitution remained mute on that issue. Although we think of the history of the franchise in the United States as a national story, its first chapters in fact unfolded in the individual states and in local institutions, where women began to bring their unfilled demands and, in some cases, even voted.

Primary Sources:

The evolving, improvisational nature of an American government was evident from the nation’s beginning, as the founders themselves tried to determine the basis for voting. They clearly worried about the franchise becoming wide-spread, including the possibility of it extending to women. Two more things arise in John Adams’s 1776 letter to Massachusetts jurist James Sullivan. One vexes the whole of suffrage history: a presumption that the women in question are white. The second speaks to the reasons for excluding women in the first place. Voting constituted power, and elite, white men intended to monopolize that power.


As debate raged about who might participate in the new, representative government, Abigail Adams joined the fray, telling her husband, John Adams, to “remember the ladies.” Although Abigail Adams’s 1776 demand is well known, it is often dismissed as a joke, or a throw-away line. This is mistaken. When we pair her famous “remember the ladies” passage with her other letters, we see that she was quite serious, continuing to press the issue.


Although most states required that voters be “male,” New Jersey included no such requirement in its first state constitution, meaning women could—and did—vote, if they met the other qualifications as well. New Jersey’s first constitution also had no racial qualification, and at least one African American woman is believed to have voted. After 1807, New Jersey joined the rest of the states in requiring that voters be “male,” effectively barring all women, regardless of race.

1776 New Jersey State Constitution, Article IV, State of New Jersey Department of State. https://www.state.nj.us/state/archives/docconst76.html#page3

In the 1838, some women secured “school suffrage” in Kentucky, gaining the ability to vote in school elections. This ability to vote in certain types of elections, but not fully, on the same terms as men—called “partial suffrage”—was how many women over the nineteenth century experienced voting.

Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Using Abigail Adams’s online letters, read more about her life during and thought about the place of free, white women at the nation’s founding. Does she consider or see other women, who are not free, white women? Why or why not?

Using online state constitutions, look at how eligible voters are defined in original thirteen states at their founding. What are the commonalities? What are the differences?

Using online newspaper databases, find an election and read about how campaigning and voting took place. Have groups do separate searches and compare what voting looked like in different locales.
As women, black and white, joined the abolition movement and advanced forceful arguments on the slavery question during the 1830s, they met with backlash for breaching their idealized passive domestic roles. In response, some began defending their public, political rights, and they birthed an antebellum women’s rights movement, which took strong shape by the early 1850s. Although these women demanded the vote, they always folded it into a larger constellation of demands, from equal pay to equal education. Outside the abolitionist movement, women also agitated for rights reforms through the same mechanisms: petitioning, speaking, writing, organizing, protesting, and outright resisting. Across all of this work, women disagreed about how useful or primary the vote was, often prioritizing other reforms. The work of antebellum women’s rights, then, was not primarily centered on women’s suffrage. Those two things are neither equivalent, nor interchangeable. Yet an invented narrative around the 1848 meeting at Seneca Falls has encouraged us to believe that they are. That storyline has been largely a free, white women’s story and eclipses broad-based agitation among women of color, non-binary people, and even other free, white women—including their own, often differently located, agitation around the ballot.

Primary Sources:

People assigned female at birth sometimes who, for whatever reasons, donned “male” attire and attempted to vote, were sometimes successful. Historian Andrew W. Cohen has found multiple examples, including this 1840 instance.

- “Police Office,” *Morning herald* (New York), 16 April 1840, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Lib. of Congress, [far right column].
  https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030312/1840-04-16/ed-1/seq-1/

Some women demanded the vote before 1848. Historians have found multiple examples of New York women petitioning their state legislature for the ballot in 1846. These demands, historian Dawn Winter determined, originated among women active in the temperance movement, rather than abolition. Petitioning governmental bodies was a standard way disenfranchised women made their political voices heard and felt, especially at the state level, since states regulated voting.
  https://nysl.ptfs.com/data/Library1/Library1/pdf/7564896_1846.pdf

Born free in Massachusetts to an upper-class Black family, Sarah Parker Remond gave her first speech when she was just 16 years old. For many Black women, destroying chattel slavery was a far more urgent call than voting rights for women. Remond leverages anxiety about the success of the American democratic experiment to condemn slavery.

• Sarah Parker Remond, “Miss Remond in Manchester,” The Anti-Slavery Advocate, 34:2, October 1, 1859, 274-75. https://speakingwhilefemale.co/anti-slavery-remond/

Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped write the “Declaration of Sentiments, the manifesto issued the July 1848 women’s rights meeting in Seneca Falls, New York—a local, impromptu gathering and the first known women’s rights convention in the U.S. The nearly 300 people assembled spent two days debating the Declaration’s contents. All twelve resolutions (demands) passed unanimously, except for the ninth, women’s demand for the elective franchise. That resolution passed when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass stood to defend it.


Lucy Stone, a Massachusetts native, was one of the first women to get an equal college education, at Oberlin, where she was drawn into social activism. In 1847, she began speaking publicly for women’s rights and soon rose to prominence as a leading abolitionist and women’s rights crusader. For Stone and others, the vote was never an end in itself, but a method to change the many legal and social disabilities women faced.

• Lucy Stone, “Disappointment is the Lot of Women,” Address to the Women’s Rights Convention at Cincinnati, Ohio, October 17, 1855. https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/disappointment-is-the-lot-of-women-oct-17-1855/
Secondary Sources:


Teresa C. Zackodnik, “We Must Be Up and Doing”: A Reader in Early African American Feminisms (Broadview Press, 2010).

Suggested Assignments:

Why do you suppose antebellum folks were so concerned with strict sex segregation, including in voting?

Using the reader “We Must Be Up and Doing,” read the speeches of free, black women. What were their concerns? Where and how did voting fit into them?

In a newspaper database, search “Seneca Falls” and “woman’s rights, “narrowing to July 1848, to determine how the national press responded to news of the first women’s rights convention and its suffrage plank.
In the Schlesinger online collections, find the proceedings from the 1850 Worcester National Women’s Rights Convention and read through it. What was the new, mainstream antebellum women’s rights movement about? Make a list of their demands, in your own words. Whose interests were represented in their demands? How many have been achieved? From what states did women come—and what does this tell you? What types of women and men are there speaking and taking part—and what does that tell you? How centered is the vote?
The year 1870 marked an important turning point in the history of women’s suffrage in the United States. The decades preceding 1870 witnessed the emergence of a women’s rights movement and women’s activism within the movement to abolish slavery. Women’s activism reached its zenith during the Civil War and Reconstruction period. Most women involved in these campaigns saw their own cause as interconnected with that of enslaved and, after emancipation, freedpeople. However, with the passage of the 14th and 15th constitutional amendments that enfranchised adult Black men, women’s suffragists divided into two groups:
those who retained their commitment to abolitionist feminism and those who sought to fight for women’s rights by any means necessary, including an expedient repudiation of the abolitionist commitment to racial equality.

Women’s rights activists organized themselves into two competing suffrage organizations and, after 1870, continued their long battle for the vote. Many forms of subsequent women’s activism—in temperance, social reform, churches, and clubs—intersected with the suffrage movement, because prominent women in these endeavors were suffragists. African American women developed their own organizations and clubs to fight both for the franchise and against new forms of racial oppression after the end of Reconstruction. After the schism in the suffrage movement, African American women were the true inheritors of the legacy of intersectional abolitionist feminism, fighting simultaneously for Black and women’s rights. Even as suffragists drew on lessons learned from Reconstruction politics—the use of federal law and constitutional amendments to win rights—evocations of racist ideas and tactics by some of them would bedevil the suffrage movement.

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Week 1: Women’s Mobilization During the Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War and Reconstruction marked the high point of abolitionist feminism. Women campaigned for emancipation and Black rights, and northern women were active in behalf of the Union cause. In 1863, white and Black abolitionist feminists formed the Women’s National Loyal League, which sent thousands of petitions for emancipation to Congress. During the war, Black and white northern women joined freedmen’s aid and relief societies and became teachers in freedmen’s schools. Other women, such as Mary Livermore, worked for the United States Sanitary Commission and became suffragists after the war. Freedwomen in the South fought their enslavers, combated racial and sexual abuse, and sought to use the Freedmen’s Bureau to protect their rights in freedom. African American women became politically active in the Republican Party and Reconstruction politics even though they had no right to vote. Some of them, including the Rollins sisters of South Carolina, founded the first women’s suffrage organizations in the South.
Primary Sources:

Selections from Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (1863).
http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3837

https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofmee00wome/page/10/mode/2up

Selections from Mary Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford, CT, 1888).
https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822020059424&view=1up&seq=1

https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/taylorsu/taylorsu.html


https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005789561

Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Look at the digitized records of *The Liberator* (1860–1865), available from the Boston Public Library, to explore the following topics:

- The war work of abolitionist women
- The experiences of freedwomen during the Civil War
- Speeches and writings by northern women during the war

**Week 2: The Emergence of the Suffrage Movement During Reconstruction**

During Reconstruction, abolitionist feminists formed the American Equal Rights Association to fight for Black and women’s suffrage. A schism developed in the organization when a group of suffragists led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony decided to oppose the 14th and 15th Amendments (passed in 1868 and 1870 respectively), which gave Black men the right to vote. Stanton and Anthony partnered with racist Democrats who wanted to overthrow Reconstruction. Most abolitionist feminists supported the Reconstruction amendments and were shocked by Stanton and Anthony’s expedient tactics. They called instead for a 16th Amendment that would enfranchise women. By 1869, the women’s movement had split between abolitionist feminists like Frances Watkins Harper and Lucy Stone, who founded the American Woman Suffrage Association, and suffragists led by Stanton and Anthony, who founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. In the 1870s, Black and white suffragists from both groups would try to vote under the 14th Amendment.

Primary Sources:


Reconstruction Constitutional Amendments, 13th, 14th & 15th Amendments. [https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1524](https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1524)


**Secondary Sources:**


**Suggested Assignments:**

Look through the digitized Blackwell Family Papers at Radcliffe’s Schlesinger Library and explore the personal and political partnership between Henry Blackwell and Lucy Stone in the suffrage movement.


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**Suggestions for Further Exploration**


Was 1920 the turning point in American women’s political history, the moment when women won the right to vote? Or was passage of the 19th Amendment one phase in an ongoing struggle that began before 1830 and continues today? How you answer this question depends in large part on where you look and whom you center in your sights.
If you focus on women in Pennsylvania, or white women with property in Virginia, then August 18, 1920—when the Tennessee Legislature ratified the 19th Amendment—was the watershed moment that made women voters. If you look further west, however, it was women’s votes in the states and territories that had already permitted them, sometimes for decades, that helped persuade reluctant congressmen to get behind the amendment in the first place. If you shift your gaze south, or to Native territory in the West, you notice the ongoing activism of women barred from the polls not by sex but by barriers tied to race, including literacy tests, poll taxes, racialized violence, and the strictures of federal Indian policy. And finally, if you consider the nation’s external borders, then the years around 1920 appear geared toward exclusion rather than inclusion, with the Immigration Act of 1918 enabling the deportation of radical women born outside the United States and the Immigration Act of 1924 barring all immigrant women from Asia and sharply limiting those from southern Europe and Africa. If 1920 was a turning point, then, it was certainly not one that unequivocally welcomed women as voters; rather, it made clear that some women counted as American citizens while, and in some ways because, other American women did not.

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Week 1: Who marched?

On March 3, 1913, more than five thousand women marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., to demand the right to vote. The event ended in chaos as crowds harassed the marchers, but photographs and publicity materials from the protest circulated widely, publicizing who marched and the ways they styled themselves as modern citizens. These documents show white women presenting themselves as if reaching back to a glorious Anglo-Saxon past in order to lead the progress of civilization onward. But cartoons circulating at the time reveal anxieties that Native women had exercised political influence before European colonization, and that women in republican China were pulling ahead of their sisters in the United States because Guangdong Province enabled women to vote (briefly) in 1911. Meanwhile, women of color—including African Americans, Filipinas, Latinas, and Chinese Americans—continued their longtime fight to define the political priorities of the suffrage movement. The primary and secondary sources gathered for this week explore the contested status of whiteness in the women’s suffrage movement of the 1910s and document how women of color differed from white women in their understanding of the importance of the vote.
Primary Sources:

Anna Howard Shaw Speech on Women’s Suffrage Campaign in South Dakota, ca. 1890, Anna Howard Shaw Papers in the Mary Earhart Dillon Collection, A-68. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in American, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.  
https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:460224908$3i

http://id.lib.harvard.edu/images/olvgroup1000190/catalog

https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:26288118?n=103

https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:24974200

Suffrage Poster Depicting Inez Milholland Boissevain Dressed in White, Riding a White Horse, as She Did for the March 3, 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C. (1913).  
https://images.hollis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/100kie6/HVD_VIAolvwork365799

Joseph Keppler, “Savagery to ‘Civilization,’” Puck, May 16, 1914, p. 4. Library of Congress,  
https://www.loc.gov/item/97505624/

https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:26312858?n=183

Secondary Sources:


**Suggested Assignments:**

Pick one image from the primary sources assigned for this week and explain what it tells us about how woman suffragists styled themselves as citizens.

Using one of the secondary readings, explain a strategy that women of color used to assert leadership in the women’s suffrage movement. Did this strategy imply an understanding of the vote that was different from or similar to that envisioned by the visual propaganda of the suffrage parade?

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**Week 2: Who was still fighting for the vote after 1920?**

Week two zooms in on the political activism of Mary Church Terrell to explore how Black women sustained activism both before and after the 19th Amendment. As documented here,
Terrell toured the country as a women’s suffrage lecturer, organized Black women voters in the Republican Party, and demanded that Congress pass legislation against lynching. Terrell would remain active through the 1950s, when, as an old woman, she led protests against segregation in Washington, D.C. Her long career demonstrates one woman’s hopes for the 19th Amendment, her deep disappointment in its limitations, and her sustained commitment to building a more inclusive democracy. The secondary readings offer broader context for understanding Terrell’s ideas and strategies.

**Primary Sources:**

Mary Church Terrell, [Three-quarter length portrait](http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.68742/), seated, facing front, between 1880 and 1890, Library of Congress, digital collections. 


Mary Church Terrell, “Address Delivered at the International Congress of Women in Berlin, Germany,” [also German translation], June 13, 1904, in Mary Church Terrell Papers, Speeches and Writings, 1866–1953, Library of Congress, digital collections.  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490363](https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490363)

[http://id.lib.harvard.edu/via/olvwork20016060/catalog](http://id.lib.harvard.edu/via/olvwork20016060/catalog)

Mary Church Terrell, “What the Colored Woman Can and Should Do at the Polls” [1926], Mary Church Terrell Papers, Speeches and Writings, 1866–1953, Library of Congress, digital collections.  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490427](https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490427)

Mary Church Terrell, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Speeches and Writings, 1866–1953, Library of Congress, digital collections.  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490543](https://www.loc.gov/item/mss425490543)
Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Compare one of Mary Church Terrell's speeches before 1920 with one she delivered after. Did the passage of the 19th Amendment change her understanding of women and the vote?

Based on the secondary readings assigned for this week, do you think that the passage of the 19th Amendment was a major turning point in US women’s history? Why or why not?

Suggestions for Further Exploration


Unit 4

1920s: Colonialism, Anticolonialism, and the Question of Women’s Suffrage

Durba Mitra
Carol K. Pforzheimer Assistant Professor at the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study
Assistant Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Harvard University
https://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/people/durba-mitra

When American women achieved the vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, most of the people in the world were colonized with little to no access to political rights. American and European women’s movements had complex and often contradictory relationships to the imperial project. Many American and European women made radical claims for the right of women around the world to access the vote. Yet American and European feminists were often complicit in their nations’ imperial projects, and some were strong advocates for colonialism, promoting ideologies of racial difference and imperial benevolence through the language of women’s rights. They depicted women of color in the metropole and colonized women as not yet developed: not mature enough for the vote. This unit explores the imperial foundations of
American and European feminisms and the key role of colonial understandings of racial
difference and white supremacy in the fight for women’s suffrage around the world. Further, in
contrast to complex histories of western feminism’s imperial roots, this unit highlights the work
of feminists in anti-colonial feminist movements who fought for liberation from colonialism
while fighting for full social and political rights for women.

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**Week 1: Women’s suffrage and the imperial project**

This week asks students to analyze the place of colonial ideologies of white supremacy, racism,
and civilizational difference in the history of women’s rights, with a focus on British and
American feminist imperial projects. To enrich this groundbreaking scholarship on imperial
feminisms, students will read primary sources like Katherine Mayo’s polemic *Mother India*.
Mayo’s life and writing reveal an interconnected history of feminist participation in American
imperialism in the Philippines, American supremacist projects of Anti-Black policing, and the
suppression of the anti-colonial movements of Mohandas K. Gandhi and others by the British.

**Primary Sources:**

Mrs. Samuel Francis Gaches, *Good cooking and health in the tropics*. (Manila : American
Guardian Association, 1922).
https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822031035918&view=1up&seq=31

and Company, 1925). http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300901h.html

http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300811h.html#ch-29 (Links to an external site.)

**Secondary Sources:**

Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture,


**Suggested Assignments:**

Analyze the images that are included in Katherine Mayo’s *The Isles of Fear* (1925):

- How are the people positioned in the images?
- What are they wearing?
- Why do you think Mayo uses these images?
- How do these images represent Filipino peoples?

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**Week 2: Anticolonialism, Transnational Feminism, and the Fight for All Women’s Rights**

This week asks students to analyze how the fight for suffrage, and more broadly, women’s rights, was global in scale, yet based in local and national struggles for rights, equality, and
freedom. It highlights the writings of women outside of the US who fought for women’s rights in the colonial world and postcolonial world as part of broad struggles for racial justice, worker’s rights, national independence. These women offer a wide range of perspectives on women’s rights. From their writings and speeches, we learn how women all over the world imagined a future where women had equality, citizenship, and dignity.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


**Suggested Assignment:**

From these primary readings, what are some key words that we could use to describe anti-colonial feminist understandings of equality? Do Funmiyalo Ransome-Kuti and Renuka Ray see equality in the same way? If not, how do these perspectives differ?

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**Suggestions for Further Exploration:**

“Timeline of first women’s suffrage in majority-Muslim countries,” Wikipedia.  

“Timeline of women’s suffrage,” Wikipedia.  


Despite the ratification of the 19th Amendment, many women in the United States still could not vote. White primaries, “literacy tests,” and threats of violence blocked hundreds of thousands of southern Black women from casting ballots. In thirteen states, poll taxes impeded voting access for poor women of all backgrounds, but any woman there who lacked an independent income found herself vulnerable to disfranchisement if her husband or father refused to pay the tax. Most Native American women remained ineligible to vote until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act; but for many, this grant of citizenship was unwelcome, and they held fast to tribal identification instead. Unnaturalized immigrant women—who even at their century low, in 1950, numbered more than one million—could not vote under any circumstances.
Nor did the 19th Amendment address other disparities between the sexes. In 1923, at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Seneca Falls convention, suffragist Alice Paul echoed the broad call for women’s rights issued in 1848 and proposed a new amendment to ensure that “men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” The proposed ERA languished for the next four decades, and in 1963, the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and relying on the work of attorney Pauli Murray, produced an extensive account of ongoing sex discrimination in American life. It was a sorry list that included deep disparities in employment opportunities, pay scales, and access to education, consumer credit, jury service, and more.

Both voting rights and women’s rights were more fully realized in and around 1965, when the Voting Rights Act established effective federal oversight of elections and forged the strongest protections yet for American voters of all backgrounds. After its passage, African Americans in southern states—the largest group of persons still denied voting rights in the United States—flocked to the polls, electing African American candidates to local and state offices and transforming social movements, party politics, and policy agendas. Before the end of the decade, diverse women’s liberation movements—movements that were inflected, always, by sexual/gender identity, race, and class—sought a wide range of freedoms, including reproductive rights, welfare rights, and a revised ERA. Especially after the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision liberalizing access to abortion, conservative women counter-mobilized to challenge feminists at every turn, creating grassroots organizations that reshaped party politics.

American women’s political interests were diverse and always extended far beyond electoral politics and women’s rights. The social ferment of the 1960s brought new concerns to the fore. As the Cold War reordered relations among nations, and people of color threw off colonial rule, the United States sank deeper into the quagmire of Vietnam. American immigration policy shifted course with the 1965 passage of the Hart-Celler Act, also known as the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which opened the country to large-scale immigration from Asia and Africa for the first time. The Black Freedom and antiwar movements spawned a broad “rights revolution” in which diverse groups pressed claims for equity and autonomy in crusades for Chicano/a rights, worker’s rights, Native American rights, gay rights, disability rights, and more. Women were central actors in every cause.
Passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) on August 6, 1965, marked the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement. For the first time since the collapse of Reconstruction, the federal government stepped in to offer meaningful protection for southern African Americans’ voting rights. Section 5 of the VRA required states and localities with a history of voter suppression to get approval from the US Department of Justice before they changed voting procedures, giving the VRA enforcement powers that previous legislation had lacked. In the years to come, the VRA protected voting rights for Americans of every race and ethnic background and also made ballots available in languages other than English.

Black women had been laying the groundwork for the VRA for decades. Septima Clark launched literacy programs in the South Carolina Sea Islands in the 1920s to prepare local citizens to pass literacy tests. Ella Baker worked for the NAACP in the 1940s, helped organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1950s, and founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s. Dorothy Cotton trained voting rights activists as the director of the SCLC’s Citizenship Education Program. Fannie Lou Hamer focused the nation’s attention on the violence of voter suppression with her riveting testimony before the Democratic National Committee in 1964. The party rejected her attempt to desegregate the Mississippi Democratic Party that year, but in 1968, she returned to the convention as an official delegate. Important as these exceptional leaders were, uncounted and unnamed southern Black women offered essential support when they prayed, marched, organized, fed volunteers, and raised funds. They transformed their ties to family members, neighbors, coworkers, and friends into networks of resistance that inspired courage and sustained the struggle.

When President Lyndon Johnson signed the VRA into law, enfranchised southern Blacks surged to the polls. In every southern state, the percentage of registered Black voters jumped. In Alabama, it tripled; in Mississippi, it increased tenfold. But the Black Freedom Movement energized Black voters everywhere. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm (D-NY) blazed a trail to become the first Black woman elected to Congress, and in 1972, she became the first African American to run for president. African Americans succeeded in electing mayors in major U.S. cities, including Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana (1967), Coleman Young in Detroit (1973), and, in a southern first, Maynard Jackson in Atlanta (1973). In time, Black women built themselves into a decisive electoral force. Since 1994, they have displayed the sharpest partisan preference of any demographic group. And in 2008 and 2012, they produced the highest voter turnout of any group, helping to elect and re-elect Barack Obama.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

African American women in the early 1960s were still agitating for voting rights. How did their experience alter the meaning and significance of the 19th Amendment?

Reflect on June Jordan’s poem about Fannie Lou Hamer. How does the poet characterize Hamer’s trauma and contribution?

♦

Week 2: From Voting Rights to Women’s Liberation

The Civil Rights Movement precipitated a flowering of radicalized social movements in the United States from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. Civil rights morphed into Black Power; draft resistance kindled the antiwar and free speech movements; Native American and Chicano/a voices demanded redress for land expropriation and labor exploitation; and queer New Yorkers pushed back against abusive policing. Women took part in all these movements and more, and at the same time demanded emancipation for themselves.

The women’s liberation movement encompassed many movements for liberal reform and radical change. The National Organization for Women (NOW) sought inclusion and equality for women in all sectors of society and put the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion access at the top of its agenda. Indeed, the ERA enjoyed a new level of public support as Congress passed it by the required supermajorities and sent it to the states for ratification in 1972. Feminists hailed the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision as a victory for reproductive freedom. For many women, however, feminism infused the fight for other causes. Welfare rights advocates sought economic security. Women of color insisted on freedom from forced sterilization. Immigrant rights advocates pursued reforms both before and after the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 opened up immigration from Asia and Africa. Environmentalists called for pollution reduction. Marxist revolutionaries sought the end of capitalism itself. Anti-feminists, too, embraced political activism in movements to stymie school desegregation, limit abortion, and halt the ratification of the ERA. Women used ballots to advance many of these causes, yet electoral politics was never their only path to political change. Rather, they embraced tactics ranging from petitioning and professional lobbying to marches, boycotts, poetry readings, hunger strikes, walkouts, sit-ins, teach-ins, and die-ins to push their causes forward.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


**Suggested Assignments:**

Describe “the” women’s liberation movement. One movement, or many?

In the 1910s, NAWSA leader Anna Howard Shaw described anti-suffragists as the “Home, Heaven, and Mother Party.” Characterize the concerns of conservative white women activists in the early 1970s. How do they echo the concerns of anti-suffragists in the 1910s? In what ways do their concerns depart from those of their early-twentieth-century counterparts?

◆

**Suggestions for Further Exploration**

“*The American Promise.*” Excerpt from President Lyndon Johnson’s speech on the Voting Rights Act delivered March 15, 1965. Posted by the LBJ Presidential Library at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNjIw5f2K9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNjIw5f2K9g)

“*Angela Davis Documentary.*” In the Papers of Angela Y. Davis, MC 940, Schlesinger Library. Available at [https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/sch01609c03142/catalog](https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/sch01609c03142/catalog)


Two landmark events recast the trajectory of American citizenship in June 1982, and they pointed in opposite directions. The first, a major victory for social justice advocates, was led by some of the same figures in, and adopted the tactics of, the Civil Rights Movement. The second revealed how gender equality had become a wedge that cleaved the nation’s culture and politics, portending a hostile future for the democratic movements born in the 1960s.

“No one questions that the Voting Rights Act has changed the face of American politics, particularly in the South,” Time magazine noted in 1981, as portions of the law were soon to expire. Its advocates built a campaign that culminated in a months-long march from Alabama to Washington, D.C. to dramatize its historic significance. After a resounding victory in the House,
the act seemed stuck in the US Senate, where conservatives echoed the defense of states’ rights that Ronald Reagan had trumpeted across the southern states that carried him to the presidency in 1980. Moderate Republican senators brokered a compromise that yielded the most bipartisan and strongest VRA yet. President Reagan signed it into law on June 29, 1982. For conservatives, this was a setback, but their movement was making inroads elsewhere.

The very next day, the Equal Rights Amendment expired after a decade-long drive to ratify it. To many feminists, the proposed constitutional amendment, which had languished in Congress for decades since Alice Paul first proposed it, in 1923, was the ultimate referendum on how sex mattered for citizenship. Buoyed by a social climate that was favorable to new notions of gender equality, both houses of Congress had affirmed the ERA by huge majorities by 1972. Feminists’ protests, persistent lobbying, and advancement into policymaking roles had made their ideas seem normal and even inevitable. But a new partnership between social and business conservatives helped make the ERA the terrain where feminists and anti-feminists fought over competing visions for society. As women-led grassroots organizations sprang up to fight the amendment, the ratification drive stalled in state legislatures, three short of the thirty-eight it needed to become law.

Week 1: The Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982

The temporary provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act were set to wind down in 1982. The fight to extend them revealed the depth of American political polarization. To those on the left, the law not only remained essential but needed strengthening, as attorney Gerald Horne explained. To conservatives like the longtime segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), the provisions of the VRA that singled out southern states were “faulty and unfair.” He pledged to support the law’s extension if it applied to all fifty states, but opponents viewed this as a craven effort to drown its watchdogs in extra work. Thurmond and others, under pressure from moderate Republicans and civil rights activists, ultimately supported a strong VRA reauthorization. Even President Reagan, who had once been ambivalent, called the right to vote “the crown jewel of American liberties” as he signed it into law.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Drawing from one primary and one secondary source, explain how the Civil Rights Movement of the previous two decades laid the groundwork for voting rights advocates’ victory in 1982.

Compare Horne’s description of the southern communities where a strong VRA was still needed with political leaders’ more abstract debates about the law, as Berman conveys them. Did advocates at the grass roots and in the halls of Congress agree on why the VRA was needed? Which group’s strategies were more effective?
President Ronald Reagan helped usher in a new conservative movement that eventually led to the gutting of the VRA in the 2013 US Supreme Court case *Holder v. Shelby County*. Analyze Reagan’s speech. Are his words a complete embrace of expanded voting rights, or do they hint at how the battle over voting rights would continue?

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**Week 2: The Equal Rights Amendment**

When feminists revived the ERA, which some had pursued since the 1920s, they kept its simple text largely intact. The amendment handily cleared both houses of Congress in 1972. It seemed destined for passage as part of the broader currents of change sweeping American life in the early 1970s. “Human rights apply equally to Soviet dissidents, Chilean peasants, and American women,” Representative Barbara Jordan (D-TX) told the National Women’s Conference in Houston, defining its work as essential to American policy. While feminists predominated at that 1977 gathering, anti-feminists organized across town, decrying gay rights, sex education in schools, and the decline of the family wage. As their efforts slowed and then reversed the ERA’s momentum, feminists pointed out that the issue was not solely a matter of women’s preferences; certain industries were heavily invested in the amendment’s demise. The anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly celebrated the ERA’s expiration in 1982 and expressed her hope that its defeat would “enable us to move ahead to solve the real problems that confront the nation,” implying that matters of gender and family belonged in the private sphere. Conservatives defeated the ERA, but feminists kept the fight a public one.

**Primary Sources:**


KHOU-TV, Houston, National Women’s Conference segment, Fred Rhodes for CBS News, 1977. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw7bR5K0D5Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw7bR5K0D5Q)


**Secondary Sources:**

Lisa Levenstein, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’: The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *Journal of American History* 100 (March 2014), 1114–1138.


**Suggested Assignments:**

Analyze the NOW advertisement and the Schlafly article. What different reasons do they offer for the ERA’s failure to be ratified in 1982? In these documents, do you see any points of agreement between feminists and anti-feminists?

Both the Rymph and Levenstein readings emphasize tensions among women who were on the same side of the ERA question. How do you think those internal tensions shaped what happened to the amendment?

Using one primary source and one secondary source from this section, consider how the ERA debate connected to broader historical developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Should gender politics be centered in accounts of that period?
Suggestions for Further Exploration:


This year, 2020, marks a century since the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which expanded the American electorate to include women. At face value, this constitutional change should have been a final victory for voting rights, a last chapter in the universal suffrage movement that advocated first for enfranchising all white men and then for both Black and women’s suffrage. Yet, as evidenced by previous units of the Suffrage Syllabus, the fight for equal
enfranchisement did not end in 1920, and has not ended still. The unfinished business of the 19th Amendment lies in addressing the many ways in which the United States continues to fall short of ensuring voting equality for all.

Gender identity remains relevant to the electoral process. Women have voted at higher rates than men in every election since 1964, yet they remain drastically underrepresented in elected positions. However, modern voting rights activists use an intentionally broader and more intersectional lens than did the proponents of the 19th Amendment. Suffrage is intimately tied to citizenship, and the effective denial of the franchise to many immigrants, residents of US territories, and indigenous people leaves gaping holes in the American electorate. Additionally, many citizens—especially those who are people of color, transgender, nonbinary, previously incarcerated, young, or low-income—must overcome pervasive voter suppression efforts at the state and federal levels, ranging from strict voter ID laws and voting roll purges to felony disenfranchisement and gerrymandering. In response to these ongoing injustices, voter mobilization organizations are working to increase civic engagement across party lines, especially among young voters and historically underrepresented communities.

The suffrage movement has come a long way over the past century, but it is clear that the voting equality movement is far from over. And as for the next century? With continued advocacy, education, and resistance, America could be closer than ever to achieving truly equal enfranchisement—the elusive goal of one person, one vote—as we together weave the brilliant and variegated fabric of We the People.

**Gender and Voting Patterns:**

[https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/equal-rights-amendment-explained](https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/equal-rights-amendment-explained)

[https://cawp.rutgers.edu/footnotes/gender-gap-voting-setting-record-straight](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/footnotes/gender-gap-voting-setting-record-straight)


**Citizenship:**


[https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=uclf](https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=uclf)


[https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/hayduk_-_chapter_2.pdf](https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/hayduk_-_chapter_2.pdf)


**Voter Suppression:**


[https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/voting-rights/11-barriers-voting/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIpOeq-oaq6gIVY-W1Ch3g4QC0EAAYAiAAEglXovD_BwE](https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/voting-rights/11-barriers-voting/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIpOeq-oaq6gIVY-W1Ch3g4QC0EAAYAiAAEglXovD_BwE)


https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-voter-id-impact/

Civic Engagement and Renewal:

https://www.fairvote.org/what_is_proportional_representation_and_why_do_we_need_this_reform

https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/voting-reform


https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/12/14/478750/strengthening-democracy-modern-civics-education/


https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report

**Get Involved!**

Advocacy and organizing for equal enfranchisement continue today. Regardless of identity, age, geographic location, party affiliation, or previous political experience, you can continue the fight for voting equality—a pillar of our constitutional democracy—by engaging with the organizations below and with groups in your local community.

Black Voters Matter Fund: Organization working to increase voter registration and turnout and advocating for electoral reform policies.
https://blackvotersmatterfund.org/

EMILY’s List’s WOMEN VOTE!: Initiative mobilizing women voters on behalf of EMILY’s List’s endorsed pro-choice Democratic women candidates.
https://www.emilyslist.org/pages/entry/women-vote

http://www.equalrightsnow.org

Fair Fight: Georgia-based organization advocating for fair elections and voter participation.
https://fairfight.com/

Fair Vote: Nonpartisan organization advocating for structural electoral reforms, such as ranked choice voting.
https://www.fairvote.org/

National Conference on Citizenship’s Civic Renewal Initiative: Initiative of a congressionally chartered organization that is building a network of universities, nonprofits, and public officials to lead civic renewal in communities.
https://ncoc.org/civic-renewal-initiative/
RepresentWomen: Organization researching representation of women in politics and educating PACs, donors, party leaders, and elected officials about reforms.  
https://www.representwomen.org/

Rock the Vote: Largest nonpartisan organization solely dedicated to mobilizing the youth vote.  
https://www.rockthevote.org/

Stand Up Republic: Cross-partisan organization pushing for electoral reform, accountable government, and healthy media.  
https://standuprepublic.com/

Think Social Impact’s Woke Vote: Nonprofit program investing in long-term voter engagement and the mobilization of voters of color.  
https://wokevote.us/

When We All Vote: Nonpartisan celebrity-founded nonprofit working to increase voter turnout.  
https://www.whenweallvote.org/

Winning 4 Women: Organization building a grassroots network of right-of-center women leaders and supporting free-market conservative women running for federal office.  
https://winningforwomen.com/

Women Creating Change: New York–based charity working to help women develop and strengthen the skills and resources needed to engage in local civic life.  
https://wccny.org/