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.

♦

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 here 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


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, “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


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

Secondary Sources:


Alison M. Parker, Articulating Rights: Nineteenth-Century American Women on Race, Reform, and the State (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), chap. 5.

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


