19TH AMENDMENT

Woman suffrage parade, Washington, D.C., 1913
National Archives, Records of the War Department

When the nation's founders drafted the Constitution in 1787, they made no mention of women. At the time, women were generally excluded from political and, in many ways, public life. Enslaved women were excluded entirely. White women were under the protection and authority of their husbands or fathers. In most cases, they could not vote, own property, make contracts, go to court, or control any money they earned.

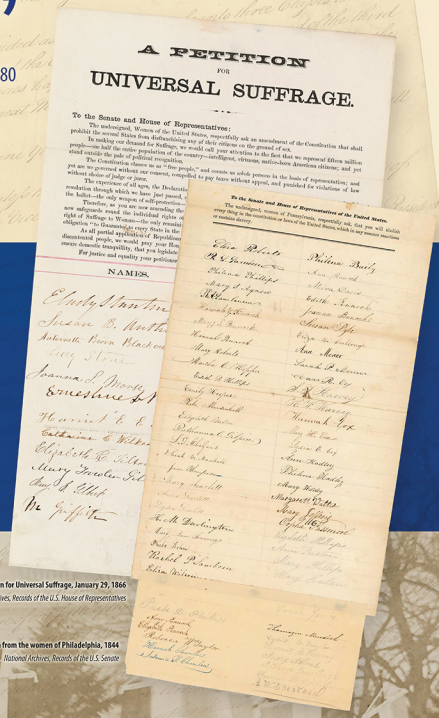
"YOU CAN GO TO MEETINGS; YOU CAN VOTE RESOLUTIONS; YOU CAN ATTEND GREAT DEMONSTRATIONS ON THE STREET; BUT, AFTER ALL, THE ONLY OCCASION WHERE THE AMERICAN CITIZEN EXPRESSES HIS ACTS, HIS OPINION, AND HIS POWER IS AT THE BALLOT-BOX."

— Zerelda G. Wallace at hearing of Senate Judiciary Committee, January 1880

Official program for the Woman Suffrage Procession held in Washington, D.C., March 3, 1913
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

SO HOW DID WOMEN EXERCISE THEIR VOICE?

Many women participated in boycotts, signed public pledges and petitioned, fundraised, and organized other women into activist groups to voice their opinions about the anti-slavery movement, the sale and consumption of alcohol, working conditions, and public education.


A PETITION FOR UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE.

To the Senate and House of Representatives:

NAMES.

Petition for Universal Suffrage, January 29, 1866
National Archives, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives

Anti-slavery petition from the women of Philadelphia, 1844
National Archives, Records of the U.S. Senate

Some Women Could Vote Before the 19th Amendment

Before the 19th Amendment changed the Constitution to read the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex," millions of women already had the right to vote. The Constitution leaves voting eligibility requirements up to the states. Therefore who can vote, and what they can vote on, has varied from state to state over time. Before the 19th Amendment's ratification 15 states had already granted women at least some voting rights. However, because states decide voter qualifications, some women remained unable to vote after the 19th amendment for other reasons.

Suffragists protest President Wilson outside the White House, 1917
National Archives, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs

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