

Nineteenth Amendment

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(1920)

WHAT IT SAYS

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

THE FIRST WOMAN IN CONGRESS

As a woman suffrage advocate in the western states, Jeannette Rankin helped persuade her home state of Montana to grant women the right to vote. She then took the next step. She successfully ran for Congress as a Republican in 1916 and became the first woman to serve in either house of the national legislature. As a representative, she focused on domestic social reforms, but as a pacifist she was also concerned about keeping the United States out of World War I in Europe. In 1917, she cast one of the fifty votes in the House against a declaration of war. In 1918, Rankin lost the race for senator from Montana, thus failing to become the first woman senator. She retired from Congress and spent the next two decades engaged in social work, giving lectures, and ranching in Montana. In 1940, with Europe engaged in the Second World War, she ran again. In the Republican primary she challenged the incumbent congressman, Jacob Thorkelson, who was a Nazi sympathizer, and defeated him. Ironically, Rankin was serving in the House in December 1941, when Japan made a surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Withstanding enormous pressure, Rankin cast the sole vote in Congress against going to war. She remained true to her pacifist belief, but this highly unpopular vote ended her career in politics. She chose not to run for reelection in 1942. Indeed, voters in her western Montana district replaced their isolationist Republican congresswoman with an internationalist Democrat, Mike Mansfield, who as a young man had served in all three of the existing branches of the U.S. military. (Mansfield, who rose to become majority leader of the U.S. Senate, later shared Rankin's opposition to the Vietnam War.) Rankin resumed her social activism, devoting the rest of her life to working with the National Consumers League and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In the 1960s, when she was in her eighties, she protested against the Vietnam War. After her death in 1973, the state of Montana donated a bronze statute of its first woman representative to the U.S. Capitol. "I cannot vote for war" is inscribed on its base.

WHAT IT MEANS

Throughout the nineteenth century, most women were excluded from voting and holding elective office. Beginning in 1848, women organize a suffrage movement to win the right to vote. Some western states grant women voting rights, and Montana elects a woman to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1916. After a century of women’s petitions, parades, and protests, Congress responds with the Nineteenth Amendment. Although the amendment gave Congress the authority to enact legislation to implement it, the states did not resist granting women the right to vote and hold office.



“It was we, the people, not we . . . the male citizens, but we, the whole people, who formed this Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people—women as well as men.”

—Susan B. Anthony, 1873
speech to suffrage supporters in
New York City



Nineteenth Amendment

Women's rights conference is held in Seneca Falls, New York

→ 1848

About three hundred women and men gather for a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss various ways of obtaining woman suffrage. They issue the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," modeled on the Declaration of Independence, calling for equal treatment of women and men under the law, and voting rights for women.

Woman suffrage associations are founded

→ 1869

Differences in opinion between women activists over the relationship between woman suffrage and the movement for racial equality split the women's rights movement. Allegiances divide between two main organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman Suffrage Association, which is led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Stanton and Anthony break with their abolitionist supporters and accuse them of emphasizing African American civil rights at the expense of women's rights.

First woman is nominated for President

→ 1872

The attorney Victoria Chafin Woodhull becomes the first woman to run for President of the United States, as a candidate of the Equal Rights Party. Neither she nor any other woman is allowed to cast a vote in that election.

Wyoming gives women the right to vote

→ 1890

Wyoming, which as a territory had allowed women to vote, joins the Union and becomes the first state to permit women to vote and hold office. In 1893, Colorado grants women the right to vote, followed by Utah, Idaho, Washington, California, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona, Illinois, Montana, Nevada, New York, Michigan, South Dakota, and Oklahoma in the years before the Nineteenth Amendment is ratified.

The National Women's Party organizes White House protests

→ 1916

Alice Paul and Lucy Burns form the National Women's Party to lobby for a federal constitutional amendment that will allow women to vote. In 1916, the party organizes protests at the White House to dramatize their case. Police arrest the demonstrators and charge them with obstructing traffic. Some of those arrested refuse to pay their fines and are sent to prison. President Woodrow Wilson pardons the protesters in 1917.

First woman is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives

→ 1916

Soon after women gain the vote in Montana, Jeannette Rankin wins election as the Republican candidate for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. She serves one term and then loses a race for the U.S. Senate. Rankin later serves a second term in the House from 1941 to 1943. In 1932, Hattie Caraway of Arkansas becomes the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate.

TIMELINE

Susan B. Anthony is arrested for attempting to vote

1872

Susan B. Anthony attempts to cast her first vote to test whether the Fifteenth Amendment will be interpreted broadly enough to guarantee women the right to vote. She is arrested, tried, and found guilty of “unlawful voting” in Canandaigua, New York. Anthony refuses to pay the \$100 fine, but is never jailed.

The right to vote is not a “privilege” of citizenship

1874

In *Minor v. Happersett*, the U.S. Supreme Court upholds a Missouri law limiting the right to vote to male citizens. The Court rejects Virginia Minor’s claim that the state law deprives her of a “privilege or immunity” of citizenship in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court reasons that the privileges and immunities clause does not create new rights, but only guarantees the rights of citizens that were recognized at the time of the Constitution’s drafting.

The Susan B. Anthony Amendment is introduced in Congress

1878

Although Anthony has collected more than ten thousand signatures from twenty-six states in support of her proposed constitutional amendment that will guarantee women the right to vote, Congress refuses to act on it. Anthony testifies before every Congress from 1869 to 1906 to ask for passage of a voting rights amendment.

Women vote in the 1920 elections

1920

Seventy-two years after the Seneca Falls Convention first called for women’s voting rights, the Nineteenth Amendment permits women to vote in the 1920 elections. Only one person who signed the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Charlotte Woodward, is still alive and able to exercise her right to vote. The National American Woman Suffrage Association establishes the League of Women Voters to encourage women to use their newly acquired right to vote. The league promotes greater participation in the democratic process, advocates on a wide range of public policy issues, and sponsors debates between candidates for political office.

The Nineteenth Amendment neither gives nor denies a woman’s right to serve on a jury

1922

In a South Carolina murder case, the defense protests the exclusion of women from the jury following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. In *Mittle v. South Carolina*, the supreme court of South Carolina finds that the Nineteenth Amendment cannot be read to grant a right to vote or participate in jury service. It simply says that gender cannot be a basis for discrimination when determining voting qualifications. If men are allowed to vote, women are as well.

Women can be excused from jury duty

1961

In 1961, women are eligible to serve on juries in all but three states. Florida is one of seventeen states that exempt women from jury duty unless they voluntarily register to be called. After an allmale jury convicts a Florida woman of murdering her husband when she discovered his infidelity, the woman argues that the jury’s verdict might have been different if the jury had included women, who were more likely to be sympathetic with her. She notes that in 1957, when the trial took place, only 220 women had registered for jury duty, out of 46,000 registered women voters in the county. In *Hoyt v. Florida* (1961) the Supreme Court rules that the Florida statute is based on a reasonable assumption that women are “still regarded as the center and home of family life,” and so can be excused from mandatory civic duties.