

The 19th Amendment: Votes for Women

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When written in 1789, the U.S. Constitution allowed the individual states to determine who could vote in elections. None of the states at that time allowed women to vote except New Jersey, and it revoked this right in 1807.

Women tried over the years to get the right to vote, but it was not until 1848 that a strong campaign for women's voting rights began. The movement has often been called the suffrage movement, based on the definition of suffrage, which means the right to vote in elections. Members of the women's suffrage movement became known as suffragettes.

The U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) slowed the suffrage movement. After the war, the U.S. ratified the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The suffragettes had been hopeful that the amendment would be written to allow women to vote. However, that was not the case. Instead, in Section 2 the Fourteenth Amendment provides a penalty if a state denied any man the right to vote, but there was no penalty if women were denied the right. States continued to prohibit women from voting. Some territories, such as Wyoming and Utah, did allow women to vote, but the territories were not yet states.

The suffragettes brought several lawsuits in an attempt to gain their voting rights. The courts decided against them. In 1878 a constitutional amendment was introduced in Congress to allow women to vote, but for decades it had little support and did not pass.

The suffragettes did not stop; they worked instead to change the laws in individual states. Beginning in 1910, state legislatures, especially those in western states, began granting women the right to vote. This gave the suffragettes the momentum they needed. While Congress rejected the constitutional amendment in 1914 and 1918, President Woodrow Wilson called a special session of Congress in late spring of 1919 to vote on the amendment. It passed.

The amendment was short:

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

After passing Congress on June 4, 1919, the Nineteenth Amendment then had to be approved, or ratified, by two-thirds of the state legislatures. At that time there were 48 states, so 36 states had to approve the amendment. Some legislatures were not meeting, so it took some time to get enough states to ratify the amendment. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, and it became a law. Finally, women were guaranteed the right to vote.

Questions

1. What does *ratify* mean?
2. What state allowed women to vote in the 1700s?
3. At that time, how many states had to approve the amendment for it to become law?
4. What was a suffragette?
5. When did the Nineteenth Amendment become a law?