



Carrie Chapman Catt: The Woman of the Hour and Purpose

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

“[T]he time is past when we should say: ‘Men and women of America, look upon that wonderful idea up there: see, one day it will come down.’ Instead, the time has come to shout aloud in every city, village, and hamlet, and in tones so clear and jubilant that they will reverberate from every mountain peak and echo from shore to shore: ‘The Woman’s Hour has struck.’”

The women listening that day drew strength and inspiration from their speaker, Carrie Chapman Catt. They had assembled at the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) meeting in Atlantic City. They were prepared for action. For 68 years, American women had been fighting for the right to vote. There had been minor successes and major setbacks. It was 1916, and only a few far western states, such as Wyoming and Utah, had granted women the right to vote. Most women in the rest of the nation could be jailed if they even tried to vote.

Over the years, the disjointed work of suffragist organizations had generated few productive results. Some leaders believed in attacking the issue first at the state level. Others thought the only solution was an amendment to the U.S. Constitution and focused their energies on petitioning Congress. A few wanted to follow the example of English suffragists and took a militant approach. For example, the National Woman’s Party orchestrated sit-ins and hunger strikes. Some of the more reserved suffragists spread word of their cause through organized afternoon teas and small parades.

The movement that began with the first women’s rights convention in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, seemed to be failing by the early 1900s. Carrie Chapman Catt was determined to save it.

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Catt was an educated woman with a strong will and fighting spirit. She grew up in Charles City, Iowa, and graduated from Iowa State College in 1880, the only woman in her class. She became a teacher, then principal, then superintendent for Mason City schools. After a year of marriage, she was left a widow, and decided to devote her time and energy to a public cause. She joined the Iowa Woman’s Suffrage Association in 1886 and quickly rose through the ranks to leadership positions.

After remarrying in 1890, Catt began working with suffragists nationwide. Her reputation as a speaker grew, and in 1892, Susan B. Anthony asked her to testify before Congress on a proposed constitutional amendment that would grant women the vote. By 1900, Catt

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had been elected to succeed Anthony as president of the NAWSA. During her tenure, Catt became known as a strong leader whose vision and ability to compromise strengthened the organization.

In 1904, her husband's illness led Catt to resign her position. His death the following year, as well as that of Anthony in 1906, left her devastated. She took her suffrage work overseas and spent the next nine years working as president of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, which she had helped organize in 1902.

While she was abroad, the NAWSA (and the movement) struggled under divided leadership. In 1914, seeking to encourage unification amongst the suffragists, Catt declared, "To the wrongs that need resistance, To the right that needs assistance, To the future in the distance, Give yourselves!" She returned home in 1915 to resume her position as president of NAWSA. A year later, at the 1916 Atlantic City convention, she unveiled a new strategy, which she dubbed the "Winning Plan."

The Winning Plan called for an amendment to the United States Constitution as its ultimate goal, but it also encouraged the development of state and local initiatives. She wanted to attack the issue on all fronts. If a state offered equal voting rights, women in that state should campaign for the federal amendment. If the state appeared open to the idea of voting rights, women should work together and organize at the state level. If not, women should devise smaller, local campaigns. Keeping her eyes on the ultimate purpose, Catt refused to be distracted by competition with the other groups working for women's suffrage, arguing that all of the various organizations would play a role in the drive for ratification.

The NAWSA adopted the strategy, and Catt traveled the country encouraging cooperative, persistent action. The Winning Plan clearly defined the NAWSA's goals and ways to achieve them. Catt provided an overall strategy and a role for each group in the push for women's suffrage. In four years, her vision would become a reality.

While establishing a base of state and local support, Catt approached national leaders with the proposed amendment. She impressed President Wilson and many members of Congress, and the NAWSA lobbied tirelessly. Catt curbed their petitions, however, while the country was embroiled in World War I.

The contributions that women made to the war on the home front may have helped NAWSA when it resumed lobbying in 1919. The amendment passed both the House and the Senate in June, and President Wilson came out in favor of it. It moved quickly to the states for ratification.

Over the next year, state and local support became critical to the initiative's success. Antisuffragists organized rallies to persuade legislators to vote against the amendment. Some legislators left their states to prevent the quorum required for a vote, stalling or defeating the amendment's passage. Local suffrage associations monitored the referendum process to ensure its validity.

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On August 24, 1920, Tennessee became the vital 36th state to ratify. Two days later—72 years after the start of the suffragette movement—the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted, stating: “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.”

Catt’s Winning Plan had emerged victorious. “The Woman’s Hour” had struck. In the time before and after the amendment’s passage, Catt established the League of Women Voters, which was dedicated to informing the newly enfranchised citizenry about the issues of the day. In her later years, she wrote a book about the suffrage movement, took a role in the child labor movement, and became an activist for world peace. Throughout her life, Carrie Chapman Catt inspired others to clarify their purpose, take initiative, get involved in the political process, and vote. Catt strove tirelessly to achieve her purpose: winning an equal voice for women. She accepted nothing less than that.