

# The Movement Unites (1890-1920)

**Directions:** Keep these discussion questions in mind as you read the background essay, making marginal notes as desired. Respond to the reflection and analysis questions at the end of the essay.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the advantages of achieving a constitutional amendment protecting women's right to vote, rather than seeking to directly persuade a sufficient number of voters to support their mission?
2. Are there limits to the will of the majority in a democracy?
3. Are there limits to the will of the majority in a republic?
4. Is the U.S. a republic or a democracy?

## Introduction

The movement for women's suffrage had made great strides by the end of the nineteenth century. Rooted in the ideas of the Declaration of Independence and given strength through the determined and unrelenting efforts of its supporters, the movement was on the verge of victory. The final steps included both moderate and conciliatory actions led by Carrie Chapman Catt and courageous and controversial actions led by Alice Paul. Paul, a thorn in the side of the more conservative members of the movement and of President Woodrow Wilson, exercised constitutionally protected rights to challenge injustice through civil disobedience. Her confrontational tactics alienated some but also helped galvanize the movement to finally win passage of the **Nineteenth Amendment** and secure the right to vote for American women.

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of a time of healing and

strengthening of the women's suffrage movement: the two branches came back together. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) had been focused on achieving a constitutional amendment, while the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) had worked on persuading the states to give women the vote in their state constitutions. These two groups reunited and formed the **National American Woman's Suffrage Association**, or NAWSA, in 1890. Since the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had been ratified without addressing women's suffrage, the stage was set for their combined energies and talents to finally persuade the states and the nation that denying women the vote was incompatible with the Founding principle of equality.

## Women in Public Life: Labor Reform

While the NAWSA lobbied state and federal lawmakers, the suffrage movement gained

strength as larger numbers of women turned to work outside the home to support themselves and their families. By 1900, over 3 million American women were working for wages. Very often, these women worked in poor and hazardous conditions. Indeed, most workers—adults and children alike—labored seven days a week for long hours in conditions that would shock most people today. In one tragic incident, 146 people, almost all of them young immigrant women, were killed when the **Triangle Shirtwaist Factory** went up in flames in 1911. Many were unable to escape because the doors had been locked to prevent workers from taking extra breaks or stealing. Many were convinced that women needed a more direct influence on laws governing working conditions in factories and other workplaces.

Frances Perkins was a young sociology professor in 1911, visiting with friends when they heard fire engines and screams nearby. They rushed outside to see the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in flames. Perkins later explained:

“We could see this building from Washington Square and the people had just begun to jump [from the upper floors] when we got there. They had been holding until that time, standing in the windowsills, being crowded by others behind them, the fire pressing closer and closer, the smoke closer and closer. [As firefighters struggled to deploy a net to catch them] finally ...they couldn’t wait any longer. They began to jump. The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk...Everybody who jumped was killed.” —Frances Perkins, Lecture at Cornell University, September 30, 1964.

Perkins had already been a settlement house worker and a reformer lobbying for laws to improve working conditions. She described the Triangle Factory fire as a pivotal moment in her life, prompting her to devote her career to such



▲ Photograph of firemen putting the fire out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, March 25, 1911, first published on front page of New York World. (ILR School, Cornell University)

reforms as an end to child labor, a minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and laws prohibiting unsafe work places. President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 would appoint Perkins Secretary of Labor,

making her the first female cabinet member. In Roosevelt's administration, she went on to help draft the Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Women sought to participate in **labor unions** in response to dehumanizing working conditions. The Triangle Factory fire helped grow the power of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900. The ILGWU, one of the first labor unions with mostly female members, negotiated for more humane working conditions and better contracts from factory owners. It and other labor unions lobbied state and federal government for stronger safety regulations. Suffragist Mary Ware Dennett said about the Triangle Factory fire, "It is enough to silence forever [the claim that] working women can safely trust their welfare to their 'natural protectors.'... to the sort of protection, care, and chivalry that is indicated by the men who allow 700 women to sit back to back, wedged in such close rows between machines that quick exit is an impossibility; a ten-story building with no outside fire escapes... We claim in no uncertain voice that the time has come when women should have the one efficient tool with which to make for themselves decent and safe working conditions—the ballot." A widespread suffragist slogan was, "A vote is a fire escape."

## Women in Public Life: Temperance

Women also continued to play a significant role in public life through participation in and support of such social reforms as settlement houses to help poor immigrant families, labor reform, and the **temperance** movement. This "**Municipal Housekeeping**", an allusion to a traditional role in the home, became a popular phrase for this work in "cleaning up" towns in cities.

The efforts of Frances Willard and many others helped lead thirty-eight states to enact

state-wide **prohibition** laws by 1915. Women also worked to change education practices and curriculum: by the early twentieth century, every state required its public schools to provide instruction on temperance. And of course, the crowning achievement of the temperance movement was nation-wide prohibition, which would go on to be enacted by constitutional amendment in 1918. The work of women involved in such social reforms over the half-century since the Seneca Falls Convention provided rich experience in mobilizing, organizing, and creation of social institutions intended to align American society with principles such as equality and inalienable rights. The suffragists capitalized on the experience and the networks created through these efforts in order to galvanize women around suffrage.

## Suffrage Struggling

Amid other progressive reforms of the early twentieth century were amendments to the Constitution, including income tax (1913), direct election of senators (1913), and prohibition (1919). The women's suffrage movement, however, struggled to gain support for a constitutional amendment. Although the 1912 **Progressive**, or "**Bull Moose**" Party made women's suffrage part of their platform, their candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, was defeated.

The United States Congress was not eager to give women the vote. In 1911, California Senator J. B. Sanford, Chairman of the Democratic Caucus, argued:

"Suffrage is not a right. It is a privilege that may or may not be granted. Politics is no place for woman [and] consequently the privilege should not be granted to her... The mothers of this country can shape the destinies of the nation by keeping in their



places and attending to those duties that God Almighty intended for them. The kindly, gentle influence of the mother in the home and the dignified influence of the teacher in the school will far outweigh all the influence of all the mannish female politicians on earth.”

Other arguments against suffrage included that women were already represented in government by their husbands, that women could not be full citizens because they did not defend the nation in war, the assertion that divorce rates and crime had risen in states with women’s suffrage, and the claim that most women did not actually want the right to vote. It is difficult to know the percentage of women who opposed women’s suffrage. While women formed national organizations advocating their right to vote as early as 1869, the **National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage** was founded in 1911.

Suffragist Alice Paul saw that it was time to step forward. Paul had been raised by Quaker parents and had

attended women’s suffrage meetings with her mother since she was a little girl. After earning her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from New York School of Philanthropy (now Columbia University), she went to England to earn her Ph.D. There she observed the more confrontational (but generally non-violent) tactics of British suffragists, including picketing and hunger strikes. Paul began to take a stronger leadership role in NAWSA, and decided to make her move around the time of Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration.



▲ A 1914 photograph of female activists next to a horse-drawn wagon with sign, “National American Woman Suffrage Association founded in 1869 supports Bristow-Mondell Resolution drafted by Susan B. Anthony, 1874.” (Library of Congress)



▲ Official program - Woman Suffrage Procession, Washington, D.C. March 3, 1913, showing woman, in elaborate attire, with cape, blowing long horn, from which is draped a “votes for women” banner, on decorated horse, with U.S. Capitol in background. (Library of Congress)

## 1913 Women's Suffrage Procession

Banking on the national attention that would be focused on Wilson's inauguration, Paul convinced NAWSA to hold a procession in Washington, D.C. the day before Wilson's inauguration. Paul and her fellow suffragists would, as the program described, "march in a spirit of protest against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded." On March 3, 1913, more than eight thousand marchers from all over the United States and the world joined the procession in support of women's suffrage. The procession included floats, marching bands, and groups mounted on horses. In keeping with common segregation practice of the day, African Americans including Ida B. Wells-Barnett were expected to walk in the back of the parade. Mrs. Barnett bristled at the segregation, refused to comply, and unobtrusively joined the parade flanked by white women. The marchers encountered hostile crowds who tried to disrupt and block their way. Aggressive spectators shouted insults, shoved and tripped the marchers. Violent scuffles occurred, with little action by the police to restore order. More than 100 marchers were treated for injuries. Congress later investigated the event and concluded that the procession route had not been adequately secured.

Four days later Paul and others met with President Wilson, who told them it was not the right time for a constitutional amendment. Rather than feeling dissuaded, Paul increased her efforts. She founded a new group, the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage. This group distributed pamphlets and held peaceful protests, lobbying Congress to propose a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. Paul's tactics of picketing and hunger strikes might seem tame in modern times, but a century ago, they were considered radical and unseemly

behavior for women. In 1914 Paul was losing patience with the ability of NAWSA to effect change. She wrote in a letter, "It is better, as far as getting the vote is concerned I believe, to have a small, united group than an immense debating society." In 1916 Paul officially split from NAWSA and formed a new organization, the **National Woman's Party**, or NWP.

## Carrie Chapman Catt's "Winning Plan"

Also in 1916, Carrie Chapman Catt became president of NAWSA. Though she was not always successful, Catt worked hard to bring the movement together. She proposed working at both the state and national levels. Her plan called for an amendment to the Constitution as its ultimate goal, but it also encouraged the development of state and local initiatives. If a state offered equal voting rights, the women in that state should campaign for the federal amendment. If the state appeared open to the idea of voting rights, they would organize at the state level. All the groups working for ratification needed to work together, even if they did not see eye to eye on tactics.

When the United States entered World War I, Paul's tactics fell under even greater scrutiny. Would women's suffragists support the president and the country, or would they hinder the war effort? Catt decided to curb NAWSA's petitions and instead focus on the war effort. She hoped this decision would earn favor by turning NAWSA into a symbol of patriotism and love of country.

Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, on the other hand, did not pause their efforts because the country was at war. In fact, they claimed that the war shined a light on Wilson's hypocrisy: The U.S. was fighting what Wilson called a war to make the world "safe for democracy," when half the U.S. population did not have the right to vote. In 1917, the National





▲ Throughout 1917, the National Woman's Party held constant vigil in front of the White House. (Library of Congress)

Woman's Party held constant, silent vigil in front of the White House, protesting throughout the day, regardless of the weather. The peaceful sentinels broke no laws. However, their continued picketing drew the criticism that they were disloyal by distracting the nation during wartime. Mobs attacked them, knocked them to the ground, and shredded their banners while the police stood by, refusing to intervene.

In October of 1917, police announced that protesters in front of the White House would be arrested. Though Paul and her companions were peacefully exercising their First Amendment rights, they were arrested and jailed on charges of blocking traffic, and subjected to brutal treatment while in the Washington, D.C. Jail and in the Occoquan Workhouse. The suffragists were housed in freezing rooms, forced to wear filthy, scratchy prison uniforms, and provided food that was often spoiled or filled with worms. The workhouse was unsanitary, and prisoners were forced to share cells, bedding, and dishes with people who had

contagious diseases. As protesters were arrested, new women stepped up to picket in their places until they too were arrested. Over time, the jail sentences grew longer and physical mistreatment escalated to beatings and other forms of torture.

Paul, who was jailed for seven months and fed only bread and water, grew so weak that she was sent to the prison hospital. To protest the treatment used against the suffragists, she began a hunger strike and then was force-fed through the nasogastric method. With the prisoner restrained, a tube was forced through the nostril, down the back of the throat, and into the stomach. Then liquid food, such as raw eggs mixed with milk, was funneled into the tube. The grotesque procedure often resulted in the prisoner vomiting violently.

Public opinion had initially been against the NWP for impeding the war effort, but sympathy for Paul increased when reports surfaced regarding the ruthless treatment that she and other suffragists suffered.

## Victory at Hand

With the change in public opinion and the end of the war (World War I ended when Germany surrendered on November 11, 1918) the suffragists were on the verge of victory. World War I increased the momentum of the suffrage movement as more women moved into the workforce to take the place of men who had gone off to fight the war. The contributions that women made to the war on the home front may have helped NAWSA when it resumed lobbying. The Progressive Movement's call for the people to have a more direct voice in government also gave weight to the idea that women should vote. The amendment prohibiting the national government and state governments from denying the vote based on sex passed in both houses in June, 1919. President Wilson, whose attitude toward Alice Paul was hostile, respected and admired Carrie Chapman Catt. He had announced his support of the amendment in 1918. He said, "We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of right?" It would then be up to the states for ratification. On August 24, 1920, Tennessee became the critical thirty-sixth state to ratify. Two days later—seventy-two years after the start of the suffrage movement—the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted.

### The Nineteenth Amendment

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.



▲ Virginia Arnold holding Kaiser Wilson banner, 1917. Library of Congress.



▲ On August 18, 1920, Alice Paul unfurled a banner with 36 stars, signifying ratification by 36 states and the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment. (Library of Congress)

## REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. How did greater participation by women in the labor force strengthen the cause for women's suffrage?
2. The Temperance Movement, led largely by women, succeeded in amending the Constitution (something that had been done only 18 times to that point in U.S. history) before most American women could cast a vote. How would you respond to someone who pointed to this fact as evidence that women did not need voting rights in order to achieve their political ends and civic objectives?
3. What was Alice Paul's background? What are some ways her upbringing and young adulthood influenced her style as a reformer?
4. How did Carrie Chapman Catt work to unify the women's suffrage movement?
5. How did the U.S. entry into World War I affect the women's suffrage movement?
6. Using the **Principles and Virtues Glossary**, give examples of ways in which people involved in the debate over women's suffrage demonstrated any three of the constitutional principles and any three of the civic virtues listed below. Complete the charts on the next page.
  - **Principles:** equality, republican/representative government, popular sovereignty, federalism, inalienable rights, freedom of speech/press/assembly
  - **Virtues:** perseverance, contribution, moderation, resourcefulness, courage, respect, justice

Principle	Example & Explanation



Virtue	Example & Explanation

### A Pathway for Change



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