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Panel: Before the 19th Amendment

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

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.

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.

Panel: How Did Women Win the Vote?

The fight to win women the right to vote in the United States was not easily or quickly won.

To win women access to the polls, a diverse group of suffragists—individuals who supported giving voting rights to women—fought for more than 70 years using many different strategies:

- Some focused on amending the U.S. Constitution while others worked to change state election laws.



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- Suffragists lobbied privately in their parlors and publicly in the halls of Congress.
- They wrote articles, circulated petitions, gave speeches, organized marches, and were sometimes imprisoned for their protests.

Over time, these tactics won political support for woman suffrage necessary for ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.

Government of the people, for the people and by the people is but partially realized so long as woman has no vote.

—Adella Hunt Logan, 1905

A Struggle within the struggle

African Americans played an important and active role in the woman suffrage movement. Because of their race, however, black women were not always welcome at white-led suffrage meetings and demonstrations. African American women formed their own clubs to pursue reform issues, including woman suffrage. By 1900, there were more than 300 black women's clubs nationwide.

Many resisted opening polls to women. Why?

Some men and women argued, among other reasons, that women's involvement in politics would change her role in the family and take power away from men. Others believed the decision of who votes belonged to the states. Formed in 1911, the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage had branches in 25 states by 1916.

Panel: A Constitutional Victory

The ratification of the 19th Amendment was a landmark moment in American history that dramatically changed the electorate. It enshrined in the United States Constitution fuller citizenship for women and a more expansive democracy for the nation.

"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"

—19th Amendment, August 18, 1920

It was a continuous, seemingly endless, chain of activity. Young suffragists who helped forge the last links of that chain were not born when it began. Old suffragists who forged the first links were dead when it ended.

—Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler





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Why is Tennessee's ratification of the 19th Amendment significant?

After Congress passed and proposed a woman suffrage amendment, three-fourths or 36 states at that time, had to ratify the 19th Amendment before it could be added to the Constitution. Many states quickly approved the 19th Amendment, and by the end of March 1920 only one additional state was needed for ratification. On August 18, 1920, after calling a special session of the state legislature, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment.

Our Ability to Amend

The Founders personally made it hard, but not impossible, to change the Constitution. In 1869 the first amendment proposing suffrage for women was introduced in Congress. It took 50 years and 900 proposals for Congress to pass a resolution that became the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

Panel: What voting rights struggles persist?

Even after the 19th Amendment was ratified, millions of women remained unable to vote.

- Puerto Rican women were excluded from the 19th Amendment. All adult women didn't gain the vote till 1935.
- The lack of U.S. citizenship limited voting rights for many Native Americans and Asian immigrant women. All Native Americans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1924. Asian immigrants couldn't become citizens until 1952.
- African American voters, especially in the South, faced discriminatory measures meant to keep them from the polls until most of those practices were outlawed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- Many Latin American and other immigrant or indigenous citizens faced language barriers to voting.

It's important that young people know about the struggles we faced to get to the point we are today. Only then will they appreciate the hard-won freedom of blacks in this country.

—Amelia Boynton Robinson

Your vote is your voice

The 100 years since the ratification of the 19th Amendment has seen voting rights expanded to millions more women after many ongoing struggles against voter discrimination succeeded. However, people continue to fight to expand and protect voting rights today. The best protection for your voting rights is to use the most powerful political tool any citizen has— your voice!





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Another landmark voting rights victory

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was landmark civil rights legislation that outlawed discriminatory voting laws and practices designed to keep blacks and other voters of color from the polls. The act enfranchised millions of new voters. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down an important provision to enforcing the law. In recent years, some states have passed election laws that advocates say prevent fraud, but critics argue are intended to suppress voting rights.

