

The Growing Role of Women in America

In 1828, America was still a young country. The creation of a new constitution, foreign invasion, and westward expansion were just some of the many challenges the infant nation navigated through in just over 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And for a nation that prided itself on a vision of equality unlike any other seen throughout the world, there were even more challenges to overcome. Just one of these was the expansion of democracy, a growing theme that helped to elect Andrew Jackson, the so-called champion of the common man, to the presidency in 1828.

One may ask what exactly the expansion of democracy is. To answer this question, some context is needed. Think back to the United States Constitution. Is there any guarantee of a citizen's ability to vote? Surprisingly, the answer is no. Instead, throughout the United States, land ownership was often a requirement for citizens to vote. Not only did someone have to own land, but they also needed to be a male and white. So again, the same nation that claimed to value equality did not have equal standards among its populace. This inequality was gradually starting to change around Jackson's election, and by 1830, ten states provided for universal white male suffrage, compared to just three states in 1800 (New Hampshire, Vermont, and Kentucky).¹ Thus, more voices began to be heard on election days over the years.

Coupled with the lack of equal access to the polls was the lack of equality in many other spheres. Two of the greatest challenges to this were the "peculiar institution" of slavery and the lack of women's rights, specifically the denial of women's suffrage. Proponents of both abolition and women's suffrage often asked how a nation that declared its independence with the famous quote that "all men are created equal" could deny the fundamental rights of freedom and equal application of the laws.

Given the lack of true equality, reformers had to seek other modes of civic participation in the absence of the right to vote. Throughout the antebellum period, many women came to find their voice through one of nearly a dozen different social reform movements. Public education, mental health, temperance, and treatment of prisoners, in

¹ Steven Mintz. "Winning the Vote: A History of Voting Rights." The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, n.d. Web. 29 Dec. 2016.

addition to abolition and women's suffrage, were just some of the many movements that drew individuals from all parts of American society to their cause. Even though they could not vote for a certain candidate, women could contribute to the causes they felt passionately about by attending rallies, publishing written works, boycotting goods, or purchasing others that guaranteed some profits to go towards supporting a cause.

Naturally, suffrage had a sacred place in the hearts of many Massachusetts women. Many questioned why, in an age that was focused on expanding democracy, women's suffrage was not a given. In 1848, the famed Seneca Falls Convention met in Seneca Falls, New York. This convention, which was more of a regional convention, inspired similar ones like it. In 1850, the first national convention was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, at which many Massachusetts women's rights advocates spoke. However, the 1850s was a tumultuous time in the nation as the debate over slavery intensified, and while the causes of suffrage and abolition were often joined, abolition became the more pressing issue in the eyes of many reformers at that time. The Civil War put women's suffrage on hold, and it would not gain traction again until the dawn of the Progressive Era in the 1890s.

In many ways, the Progressive Era continued the unfinished work of the age of the common man. Women throughout the United States campaigned tirelessly for what they saw as their right to vote. Some towns and cities across the country began to grant suffrage to women in municipal elections. In 1890, the state of Wyoming was admitted to the Union with a state constitution that provided for women's suffrage, thus becoming the first state to grant suffrage to all regardless of gender. Then, in 1893, Colorado granted suffrage to women. Other states continued to follow suit, but in those where the measure did pass through a ballot referendum, success was often by a narrow margin. In 1915, the voters of Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts voted against women's suffrage.²

The efforts of the suffragists ultimately paid off in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The wording of the amendment was the same as it was in 1878, the first time the amendment was proposed in Congress.³

² "Woman Suffrage Timeline (1840-1920)." *National Women's History Museum*. n.p. Web. 30 Dec 2016.
<<https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/history/woman-suffrage-timeline>>

³ *ibid.*