

THE PATH TO EQUALITY: WOMEN AND AFRICAN AMERICANS WINNING THE RIGHT TO VOTE

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From the time of America's inception, the right to vote was one that was given only to a privileged few landowners. Many different groups of people have been denied the right to vote throughout American history. Of these groups, women and African Americans had the longest, and maybe the most important, fight for the vote. These are groups that were essential in the establishment of the United States, from the time of colonization through the declaration of independence from Great Britain.

The first laws related to voting came during the colonial and revolutionary times when the right to vote was restricted to male property owners. In a time when African Americans were still slaves and they themselves were considered property, landowners were mostly rich white males. These laws also restricted women because at the time not only was it rare for a woman to own property, they generally relied on their father or husband for financial support. The legal and practical restrictions on voting seemed to be specifically targeting these groups, as it would take many years and a hard fight for either group to finally win their right to vote.

African Americans fought hard for the right to vote. It was an uphill battle from the start. African Americans began their fight for the right to vote with the fight for freedom. Africans were enslaved and brought to the Americas on ships. They were used as cheap labor, especially on plantations where they grew crops for the owner's profit. It was not until Congress abolished slavery with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment that male slaves had a chance at the right to vote. Even then, African Americans were not treated as equals and lacked fundamental skills, such as reading and writing, which held them back from advancing in society. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment was passed, and former slaves were deemed American citizens by the United States Constitution. This was a big step in the right direction, but there were still many barriers to overcome. The states still had the power to decide on voting regulations. States used many discriminatory rules to keep blacks from voting. The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment marked the end of racial discrimination with regard to voting. It explicitly states that the right to vote cannot be denied by the federal or state governments because of race. The states countered this with other more subliminal forms of discrimination. They used African Americans' social weaknesses against them to keep them from voting. Some of the tactics included adding voting taxes which, knowingly, most poor African Americans were unable to pay. They also included literacy

tests which many African Americans could not pass in order to vote. Many of these former slaves were not educated enough to read or write at the level necessary to pass the evaluations. Jim Crow Laws, as some of these laws were termed, were strategically used to keep African Americans disenfranchised. These laws were very common in the southern states but were not exclusive to the south. State governments in the north, such as New York, also used these discriminatory laws. As a backlash to the Reconstruction Amendments, which ended slavery and granted citizenship to free slaves, Jim Crow Laws continued to make it difficult for African Americans to be represented democratically. “A careful reading of New York’s constitutional history reveals that at the very time that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments forced the state to remove its nefarious property requirements for African-American voters, New York changed its law from allowing to requiring disenfranchisement of those convicted of ‘infamous crimes’” (Wood and Budnitz). Erika Wood and Liz Budnitz show one example of how the state governments would use these discriminatory laws, bending the rules set by the federal government any way possible to continue to restrain certain groups from using their right to vote. When that did not work, government officials would resort to violence as a way to intimidate the black voters. Police officers would sic dogs on potential African American voters, hose them down, and use other illegal and violent tactics to deprive them of the right to vote.

Women also had a long fight to gain their right to vote. Their role in society at the formation of the United States was a complementary one to men. In certain respects, they were viewed as second-class citizens. Most women during these times did not earn a living and relied on the head of the household, which was usually their father or husband, to support them. Women were expected to take care of the home, the children and their husband, while the male took care of the finances. This was not a role women were content to accept, as it left them unable to vote and be represented in the country’s decisions. This dissatisfaction eventually led to the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY. In 1840, after two women, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady, were denied access to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, they decided to hold their own convention in 1848, almost a decade later. This sparked the beginning of women’s activism and a fight for change and for equal rights.

From the women’s suffrage movement emerged many strong and brave women willing to sacrifice for the greater good. Susan B. Anthony was one of these women. She is most known for being arrested in November 1872 for voting in the presidential election. The federal government claimed she had registered and voted illegally since New York state law only allowed qualified males to vote. At trial, her attorney’s argument was based on Ms. Anthony’s belief that the Fourteenth Amendment granted her the right to vote since she was an American citizen. The government countered that the Reconstruction Amendments did not give voting rights to both genders, but only prohibited

discrimination against voting based on race. Ms. Anthony's attorney reiterated that his client voted in good faith believing she truly had the right to vote, but this argument was not enough to exonerate her (Gordon). Although Ms. Anthony's attempt to vote was a crime she had to answer for, I believe it was worth it because it brought awareness to the women's suffrage movement that eventually gained them the right to vote. Ms. Anthony and the fourteen other women who voted with her on that day showed a united front among women and demonstrated their willingness to go to great lengths in order to achieve their goal of attaining the right to vote. Decades later, women would eventually gain the right to vote with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which clarifies that neither the federal nor state government can deny the right to vote because of gender.

The poverty of African Americans was exploited and used to restrict them from voting. The first laws for voting stated that the voter must be an owner of property. These were times when no black men were property owners; in fact, they were owned and considered the property of their master. Slavery was still prevalent during and long after the fight for our country's independence from Great Britain. Decades would pass before African Americans were freed and able to own anything. Another tactic the government used to restrict these groups from voting was imposing taxes. The U.S. Voting Rights Timeline shows that in 1870 voting taxes were imposed in some states shortly after the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment, which stated that the right to vote cannot be denied based on race (Northern California Citizen Project). In reality, these taxes made it extremely difficult for African Americans to vote.

These two groups, women and African Americans, had a common enemy that would eventually lead them to joining forces. Both groups were seeking equality and were being refused the right to vote. One of the first signs of solidarity between the groups came with the writing and publishing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1852. This historical piece of literature was an anti-slavery novel written by a white woman. It was used as a tool to spread anti-slavery rhetoric, and this support coming from an educated white woman was very powerful at the time. It was the second best-selling book of the nineteenth century following the Bible. More than a decade later in 1866, both groups would show unity once again with the formation of the American Equal Rights Association by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. It was an all-inclusive group dedicated to suffrage for all (Northern California Citizen Project). Although the Association would eventually disband because of disagreements in strategy, it inspired the development of other groups with like causes to carry on the fight.

Despite the various legal and social restrictions, African Americans and women ultimately won the right to vote. The system was rigged against these groups from the start, and as they fought for their right to vote and slowly made progress, the government would find a new obstacle to put in the way of their

goal. Both groups fought resiliently for the vote as they felt it was their right as citizens. They fought together at times, sharing a common goal. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed. The act forbade the states from imposing any discriminatory restrictions on voting laws. The federal government created ways to verse the states on these matters and regulate any unfair and discriminatory methods used against any group, man or woman. It took a very strong effort from these minority groups to get to this point. African Americans and women were a large part of the force behind bringing equality in voting, leading to fair representation in the democratic process of our government. If not for the struggles and sacrifices of African Americans and women, many of us would still be disenfranchised today.

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