

After more than seventy years, the Nineteenth Amendment finally granted women the right to vote. The women's movement had gone through times of high democratic spirit as their strong male-female coalitions made strides toward enfranchisement, strides that were quickly reversed by decades of severe disillusionment of Americans toward the notion of universal suffrage. In the end, it was only in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the women were able to create a mass-based movement, a strong commitment to social reform, and play upon partisan and political dynamics that they could find themselves in a position to let World War I sentiments usher in their long-awaited success of securing the right to vote.

Hard, discouraging times plagued the women's movement in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction era. The passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments came to be viewed as setbacks by women's suffragists, as they removed previous Republican loyalty to the Women's cause in favor of focusing solely on African Americans and firmly implanted the idea of male voting rights into the Constitution (Keyssar 179). In order to change the direction of the movement, suffragists began to organize more tightly, and as a result they could better campaign through strategically created precincts and appeal to a wider variety of women. In order to appeal to an enlarged citizenry, Jane Addams and Florence Kelley recognized the need to reverse an unsuccessful xenophobic campaign (Keyssar 202). After echoing the popular antidemocratic rhetoric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (the promotion of education and residency requirements, as well as the "statistical argument" that women could numerically override the black vote) women realized that only by embracing, not denouncing, a social reform goals as part of their suffrage movement, could they garner support from female, and male, workers (Keyssar 191).

The National American Women Suffrage Association took a progressive shift and “linked to the growing concern with social reform, moreover, was a new stress on the economic roles and needs of women” (Keyssar 204). Plus the NAWSA gained credibility in comparison with more militant suffrage groups that were causing disorder at this time. The creation of the Women’s Trade Union League served to expand the women’s movement’s base of support by drawing upon members of other social movements. A women’s movement that in the past was characterized as highly elitist and class-based now found itself appealing to an intersection of all classes and races. Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor secured the support of trade unions and united the shared goals of the labor and women’s movements (Keyssar 205). After 1910, as a result of “this convergence of working-class interest in suffrage with the suffragists interest in the working class, the campaign for women’s suffrage became a mass movement for the first time in its history” (Keyssar 206). This combination of such organizational and ideological shifts, helped enhance the weight that a plethora of women’s groups could together place on political leaders.

By solving some intra-movement discrepancies, such as whether to pursue a state-by-state suffrage campaign or a federal constitutional amendment, the various and numerous branches of the women’s movement could come together. The NAWSA and more militant Congressional Union both decided to launch a campaign for a federal amendment and subsequent ratification process requiring three-fourths of the states (Keyssar 212). With women’s suffrage finally gaining attention in the national political arena, the idea of women’s suffrage began to seem inevitable to many, despite fierce opposition. This “end-game” dynamic in politics cause many to jump on the women’s suffrage “bandwagon”; they saw the potential for a women’s victory and out of fear of the political reprisals of women, and their supporters, if and when they did get the vote, women’s suffrage became too powerful to publicly vote against (Keyssar 214).

World War I eventually served to catapult the women's cause into fruition. Women suffragists highlighted their wartime roles and Wilson recognized that women were increasingly indispensable to the war effort and that their contributions warranted the right to vote (Keyssar 216). He came to support and promote the federal suffrage amendment, the Nineteenth amendment, to be supported as a "war measure". The women finally saw their struggle nearing its end. Ironically, the right of women to vote came only when men believed that granting this vote would have little effect on politics.

The women, in a time filled with tendencies to narrow rather than expand voting rights due to anti-immigrant sentiments, finally succeeded in gaining suffrage. Their necessary ideological shift in their rhetoric coupled with efforts to organize helped them acquire the mass based movement capable of influencing the political scene and contributing to World War I, which would then serve as the impetus of the passage of the 19th amendment.