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### The History of Suffrage and Women Voters



*We interviewed Kate Kelly of the [America Comes Alive](#) website on the history of women's suffrage in the United States in honor of the anniversary of the 19th Amendment.*

*Share with us something most women might not know about the struggle for suffrage.*

People tend to forget that most types of social progress require a long time and a lot of effort. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 was a good first step with many others subsequent steps being taken by leaders like Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Carrie Chapman Catt.

It also involved—and required—regular women who did not get written about in the history books. I love this little-told story from Vineland, New Jersey. These were regular women who decided to try to exert their right to vote in 1868:

As was the custom of the day, male election judges sat at a table with a ballot box and supervised the election as voters came to drop in their ballots. Women set up a table opposite the men and placed on their table a similar box. As women arrived at the polls, they attempted to cast a vote in the regular ballot box. When they were turned away by the male judges, they approached the other table and dropped their ballots in the women's ballot box. They then went to the homes of friends and neighbors to care for those women's children so that the others, too, could protest.

*How would you say the concerns over giving women the vote played out after suffrage? Were those concerns validated or invalidated?*

They were resoundingly invalidated. Those against women gaining suffrage felt that the social fabric of the country would be destroyed, that families would fall apart, and that the women would organize a political party to elect only women candidates to public office.

A document created in 1914 by an association calling itself the Nebraska Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage created a 14-point flier about why women should not be given the vote. The document noted that because women were apolitical, they were best suited to run civic boards and oversee child welfare. Another reason noted was, "We believe that the interests of all women are as safe in the hands of men as they are in those of other women."

*What is the first year that we can really see the impact of a female voting block?*

The 1956 presidential election was the first election where the

winning candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was greatly aided by receiving a significant bloc of votes from women. The proportion of women voting for Ike was six percent higher than the proportion of votes the candidate gained from men.

In 1964, more women voted than men for the first time. Since that time, women voters regularly outnumber men.

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*Have women voters historically shown party loyalties, or are we willing to cross party lines and vote for individual candidates based on issues?*

For the most part, women began voting and have continued to show the same tendencies as men to vote along party lines.

*What issues would you say are historically "women's issues" in the U.S.?*

Anything that involves the female body is a woman's issue, unfortunately. This ranges from domestic violence and abortion rights, and also includes the importance of women being included in medical studies. We need to know how heart disease—or anything else—presents in women as well as in men.



Child-related issues tend to be more of a “woman’s” issue, and women still trail men in earning power and types of employment, and, while there are men who see this as discriminatory, women are the most invested in these areas.

*How have voting women impacted the direction of the country?*

In the 1950s there was a campaign to “Scratch the hacks,” and for the most part, I believe that women are more adamant about upholding civic responsibility and encouraging good values.

One of the reasons Nebraska did not want to give women the vote in 1914 had to do with the fact that, on some level, it would mean that voters thought that government needed to be “cleaned up.” Both men and women can prove to be honest and trustworthy, but, overall, I think women are more likely to look for those qualities in their elected officials.

*Given the strength of women as a political force, why do you think we still have so few women in politics?*

Our national political process has become so arduous that it is harder and harder to attract good people of either gender.

Many women are involved in local and state politics where they are somewhat removed from the public eye, and there is nothing wrong with that. One expert noted that the “closer you are to the ground, the easier it is to get things done,” so perhaps women feel they are more effective working locally.

But things are changing, and they will continue to change over time. Today, 90 women serve in the U.S. Congress: 17 in the Senate, and 73 in the House. The number of women in statewide elective executive posts is 71, while the proportion of women in state legislatures is 24.5%.

In California we have seen the rise of the independently wealthy female candidates (Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina), who are willing to invest heavily in their own campaigns. As women move forward in the business world, others like Whitman and Fiorina will also decide to enter politics. And, of course, we have to nod to Hillary Clinton. Neither Clinton started without much money, but they have shown there is a route to the top for both genders.

*What do you see as the next step for American women along the political timeline?*

We will have a female president within the foreseeable future, and I hope we will finish what the women of 1923 started...the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. As Alice Paul said when she launched the 1923 campaign: “We shall not be safe until the principle of equal rights is written into the framework of our government.”

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