



Motor Corps and Canteen volunteers from the Detroit chapter of the American Red Cross, taking a break from delivering supplies to flu victims. Photo credit: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1918 Pandemic Historical Image Gallery.

Women's Suffrage and the Pandemic of 1918

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"Everything conspires against women suffrage. Now it is the influenza."

— A suffragist
quoted in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* in 1918

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus, has caused tremendous upheaval in the daily lives of people in the United States and around the globe. Not since shortly after the turn of the century has the world seen a disease cause so much disruption, discord, and death. The pandemic of 1918, more commonly known as the "Spanish Flu pandemic," involved a novel strand of influenza. The Spanish Flu killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide—more than the 14th Century Black Plague.¹

In the United States alone, it killed an estimated 675,000 people.² And as COVID-19 has caused the cancellation of numerous events planned to celebrate the hundred year anniversary of the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, the current pandemic also reminds us that the pandemic of 1918 nearly derailed the women's suffrage movement.

Getting the 19th Amendment to a vote: The suffragist's pre-pandemic war efforts prove fruitful

When the U.S. Congress declared war against Germany in April of 1917, critics initially condemned the women's suffrage movement. The United States was at war, and anything that diverted attention away from the country's war effort was

deemed unpatriotic. As a result, a number of women, including many suffragists, swapped their right to vote efforts for those necessitated by the war.

In a recent book, Allison Lange, author and history professor at the Wentworth Institute of Technology, notes that tens of thousands of nurses served in the Army and Navy Nurse corps in the United States and on the front lines in Europe during the war.³ Millions more volunteered for the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and countless other organizations by helping to raise money, roll bandages, sew blankets, prepare meals, and provide other material support for U.S. soldiers. Women also entered the workforce in large numbers, taking up traditionally male jobs in offices, factories, and agriculture—marking a major shift from prior domestic employment.

Recognizing that their patriotic ef-

forts led to increased goodwill among the American public, some suffragists sought to relocate that goodwill back to the demand for the right to vote. For example, in a speech designed to be read as an open letter to Congress, prominent suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt noted that “[m]en and women are paying the frightful cost of war and bearing its sad and sickening sorrows together. Tomorrow they will share its rewards together in democracies which make no discriminations on account of sex.”⁴

Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by a vote of 274 to 136.⁷ On September 30, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson voiced his support for the amendment and implored the Democrat controlled Senate to deliver “justice to women.”⁸ The question was: did the suffragists have the votes they needed to pass the amendment? The following day, however, the suffragists had their answer as the amendment fell two votes short of the two-thirds present and voting required for passage, 53-31.⁹

The amendment failed for two primary

Champ Clark, a Democrat from Missouri, came down with the flu on October 7. The same day, Congress closed all of its public viewing galleries and by the middle of the month, nearly every lawmaker in Washington D.C. was either sick or taking care of someone who was sick. There was no action being taken on the amendment or any other legislation.¹²

Suffragists, already stung by the amendment’s defeat in the Senate, found themselves unable to pursue lobbying efforts in states where referendums on women’s voting rights would be held. For example, in Louisiana, “all was ready for beginning a whirlwind campaign on October 1, when suddenly just before that date the influenza epidemic broke out and no assembling of people was allowed.”¹³ In South Dakota, another referendum state, there were “plans developed for a renewed and revised campaign,” when the pandemic struck and cut off “all possibility of public speaking and even meetings in open air.”¹⁴

To make matters worse, the November mid-term elections were rapidly approaching, and suffragists wanted to step up their campaign efforts for pro-amendment candidates in those states whose Senators had voted against the amendment a month prior. But rallies, speeches, and other political activities were suspended because of the pandemic. A train tour of previously arrested suffrage protestors that was anticipated to draw large crowds along its route from Washington D.C. to Oregon was postponed.¹⁵ Catt was metaphorically “chained to her bed” with the flu. Things were so bad that in Wyoming in late October, “it was considered immoral for six women to meet in a parlor...” Instead, the “only way was to campaign by dodgers and street signs.”¹⁶

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Other suffragists, such as Maud Younger of the National Women’s Party (“NWP”), however, took a more direct approach. Younger and other NWP suffragists embarked on a tireless lobbying campaign designed to gain the vote of those Senators, including Idaho’s William Borah, who had voted “no” on the national suffrage amendment bill in 1914.⁵ For instance, if a senator was known to arrive at his office at 7:30 a.m., Younger had a lobbyist waiting outside his office at 7:29. Some senators appreciated the NWP’s persistence and some did not. “Nagging!” Senator Irvine Lenroot of Wisconsin is said to have exclaimed after one such encounter. “If you women would only stop nagging!”⁶

Defeated but undeterred: The U.S. Senate narrowly rejects the 19th Amendment

The combined efforts of Catt, Younger, and many other suffragists paid dividends, however. On January 10, 1918, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the 19th

reasons. First, some senators, like Borah, were opposed on anti-federalist grounds. Although Borah supported women’s suffrage—in fact, women had been able to vote in Idaho since 1896—Borah insisted that the issue was best left to be resolved by the individual states.¹⁰ Second, other senators, in particular southern Democrats, opposed the amendment by employing a combination of racist and sexist ideology: women simply did not possess the emotional or intellectual capacity to make a rational decision when voting, and black women in particular posed a threat because they would undoubtedly vote Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln.¹¹

The movement in peril: The pandemic hits Washington D.C. and the rest of the nation

Only a few days after the amendment’s defeat in the Senate, the pandemic of 1918 gripped Washington, D.C. The House majority leader, Claude Kitchin, a Democrat from North Carolina, fell ill on October 6. The speaker of the House,

The fight lives on: Adaptation and resilience

Because they could not hold public gatherings, the suffragists instead focused their efforts in more personal ways, such as writing letters, making telephone calls, and taking out ads in the newspaper. More than a million pamphlets were printed for distribution by suffragist supporters to hang from door to door.¹⁷ Suffragists “emphasized their patriotism and quoted

the president saying that votes for women was a proper reward for their wartime sacrifice.”¹⁸

Again, the suffragists’ persistent and varied efforts paid dividends. Suffrage referendums in South Dakota, Michigan, and Oklahoma all passed by a wide margin.¹⁹ The November mid-term elections also notably resulted in the Democrats losing control of the Senate and included prominent wins by pro-suffrage candidates in Massachusetts and Delaware.²⁰

In Idaho, William Borah retained his seat in the Senate, but—fearing that his opposition to the suffrage amendment would cost him the election—allegedly did so only after striking a back room deal with NWP leader Alice Paul in which Borah agreed to vote in favor of the suffrage amendment if reelected.²¹ Borah would later renege on the supposed deal and vote against the amendment again in 1919.

Renewed enthusiasm: At long last, passage and ratification

As the pandemic began to wane, the 66th Congress convened on March 4, 1919, and soon took action on the suffrage amendment. The U.S. House of Representatives again approved the amendment on May 21, 1919. And on June 4, 1919, with the necessary votes finally in place, the Senate approved the national suffrage amendment with two votes to spare, 56 to 25.²² Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan quickly ratified the amendment, and other states soon followed. Idaho ratified the amendment on February 11, 1920.²³ On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to approve, and the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was fully ratified.²⁴

The pandemic of 1918 nearly upended the suffragists’ attempts to gain equal voting rights. One hundred years later, however, as COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc across the United States, the 19th Amendment’s passage and ratification reminds us of what can be accomplished with a mixture of determination, creativity, and perseverance.

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Endnotes

1. “History of 1918 Flu Pandemic,” <https://www-cdc.gov.libproxy.boisestate.edu/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>.
2. *Id.*
3. See Alisha Haridasani Gupta, *How the Spanish Flu Almost Upended Women’s Suffrage*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/us/spanish-flu-womens-suffrage-coronavirus.html#commentsContainer> (citing Allison Lange, PICTURING POLITICAL POWER: IMAGES IN THE WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT (2020)). It was also, for the first time, a more diverse group of women, as 18 black nurses were admitted to the Army Nurse Corps and American Red Cross, which had previously admitted and deployed only white nurses. See Suyin Haynes, *Persevere Through the Highs and Lows: What We Can Still Learn From the Suffragists Who Fought for the Right to Vote During the 1918 Flu Pandemic*,

TIME, June 3, 2020, <https://time.com/5833604/1918-flu-pandemic-women-suffrage-movement/>.

4. Carrie Chapman Catt, Open Address to the U.S. Congress – November 2017, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/address-to-congress-november-1917/>.

5. Women’s Suffrage Centennial Part III: The Last Trench, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/People/Women/Part3_TheLastTrench.htm.

6. *Id.*

7. Gupta, *supra* note 3.

8. Women’s Suffrage Centennial Part III, *supra* note 5.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* Regarding his opposition to the amendment, Borah wrote to a constituent “I am aware ... [my position] will lead to much criticism among friends at home.... I would rather give up the office” than to “cast a vote ... I do not believe in.” *Id.*

11. Gupta, *supra* note 3; see also Kimberly A. Hamlin, *How racism almost killed women’s right to vote*, WASH. POST, June 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/04/how-racism-almost-killed-womens-right-vote>.

12. Gupta, *supra* note 3.

13. *Id.* (quoting ELIZABETH CADE STANTON, ET AL., 6 HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE 224 (1922)).

14. Ellen Carol DuBois, *A pandemic nearly derailed the women’s suffrage movement*, NAT’L GEOG., Apr. 20, 2020, [https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/04/pandemic-nearly-derailed-womens-suffrage-movement/#close.\(citation omitted\)](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/04/pandemic-nearly-derailed-womens-suffrage-movement/#close.(citation%20omitted)).

15. *Id.*

16. Gupta, note 3 (quoting INEZ HAYNES IRWIN, THE STORY OF THE WOMAN’S PARTY (1921)).

17. DuBois, *supra* note 14.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. Women’s Suffrage Centennial Part III, *supra* note 5.

22. *Id.*

23. Idaho and the 19th Amendment, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, Apr. 6, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/idaho-and-the-19th-amendment.htm>.

24. Women’s Suffrage Centennial Part III, *supra* note 5.