

Woman Suffrage Centennial | The Senate and Women's Fight for the Vote

United States Senate Historical Office

Women demanded political equality even before the nation's founding. In March of 1776 Abigail Adams instructed her husband, John Adams, to "remember the ladies" as he and other delegates to the Continental Congress drafted founding principles for a newly independent nation. For more than a century, even while denied access to the ballot box, women continued to engage in politics as abolitionists, petitioners, runaways, plaintiffs, correspondents, spouses, preachers, and public speakers. Political activists met at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 to organize a national movement for women's legal and political rights. During the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction, while lawmakers in Congress debated the legal and civil rights of formerly enslaved people, women petitioned Congress for their own right to vote. Those efforts failed, but suffragists continued to carry the torch for reform throughout the post-war years and into the 20th century.

In 1878 Senator Aaron Sargent became the first member of Congress to formally propose a constitutional amendment specifically to extend voting rights to women. The Senate never voted on Sargent's proposal, but the idea and the suffragists who supported it persisted. Senators—some of them working closely with activists—continued to debate women's political rights over the next four decades as suffrage lobbyists ramped up pressure on members of Congress. After several failed attempts, the Senate finally approved a constitutional amendment for woman suffrage on June 4, 1919. Ratified in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution includes only 39 words, two sentences that represent the work of generations of activists and a dedicated group of congressional reformers.

Nineteenth Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Part I: To Bestow the Ballot

As the 39th Congress convened on December 4, 1865, woman suffragists were planning their strategy. The Senate and House of Representatives would soon appoint a joint committee of 15 members, known as the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, to examine the problems of a war-torn nation. The Civil War had concluded eight months earlier and among the committee's responsibilities was defining the legal and political rights of four million formerly enslaved persons. Women activists insisted that lawmakers should consider extending voting rights to them, too.

The First Amendment to the Constitution protects the right of citizens to petition government about issues of concern. Using the same strategy they had employed to fight for the abolition of slavery, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and other activists organized a

petition campaign, collecting signatures to send to members of Congress in support of suffrage for women. “The undersigned, Women of the United States, respectfully ask an amendment of the Constitution that shall prohibit the several States from disfranchising any of their citizens on the ground of sex.” Stanton and Anthony observed that while women were counted as “whole persons” for the purpose of representation, they “are governed without...consent, compelled to pay taxes without appeal, and punished for violations of law without choice of judge or jury.”¹

The efforts of Anthony and Stanton paid off. Woman suffrage petitions flowed into Congress during the winter of 1866 while lawmakers debated Reconstruction matters, but senators lacked enthusiasm for the cause. “I present [this woman suffrage] petition at this time, as it has been sent to me for this purpose,” Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA), the man who had championed rights for freedmen, explained to his colleagues on February 14, 1866. “But I ...do not think this is a proper time for the consideration of that question.” Others agreed. When John Henderson of Missouri presented petitions to the Senate a week later, he called them unnecessary. “The petitioners’ claim that as we are proposing to enfranchise four million emancipated slaves, equal and impartial justice alike demands the suffrage for fifteen million women.” Unlike black men, Henderson argued, women did not need suffrage “as a means for their protection.” Renowned abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison—friends to Stanton and Anthony—insisted that Reconstruction represented “the negro’s hour” and, therefore, was not a time for debating women’s rights.²

Suffragists’ persistence complicated the Joint Committee’s effort to establish new criteria for apportionment and representation in Congress. Many lawmakers, expressing traditional views about women’s primary role in society as mothers and homemakers, refused to imagine them as political actors. “By law women and children were not regarded as the equals of men...mature manhood is the representative type of the human race,” insisted Senator Jacob Howard of Michigan. Howard’s attitude about women’s place in public life mattered; he was a central figure in the drafting and revising of the Fourteenth Amendment. Approved by the Senate on June 8, 1866 (and ratified July 9, 1868), it explicitly defined for purposes of representation “the whole number of male citizens 21 years of age in each state,” and granted citizenship to all persons “born or naturalized in the United States,” including formerly enslaved persons. Two years later, Congress approved the Fifteenth Amendment (ratified February 3, 1870) prohibiting states from disenfranchising voters “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The

¹ Petition for Universal Suffrage which Asks for an Amendment to the Constitution that Shall Prohibit the Several States from Disfranchising Any of Their Citizens on the Ground of Sex, Petitions and Memorials; Resolutions of State Legislatures which were Presented, Read, or Tabled during the 39th Congress, 1865 – 1867; 1865; Record Group 46, U.S. Senate; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

² Laura Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race, and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 123; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage, Volume 2: 1861-1876* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc., 1985), 94, 96-97, 123.

suffragists' petition campaign had failed. Neither amendment allowed for the extension of voting rights to women.³

Not to be dissuaded, women also worked to extend suffrage at the local and state level. In 1867, for example, Kansas voters considered amending the state constitution to provide for “impartial suffrage” without regard to race or sex. Senator Samuel Pomeroy, elected to the U.S. Senate by the Kansas legislature in 1861, vigorously campaigned for the measure. “I have gone boldly—fearlessly—into the movement! And it must succeed!” Pomeroy enthusiastically proclaimed to suffragist Anna Dickinson on October 16, 1867. After Kansas failed to approve the measure, Pomeroy took his proposal to the Senate. He introduced a resolution to amend the Constitution on December 7, 1868. “The basis of suffrage in the United States shall be that of citizenship, and all native or naturalized citizens shall enjoy the same rights and privileges of the elective franchise,” it read. Two days later, Pomeroy rose again. “I present the petition of 55 citizens of Maine,” he proclaimed, “praying that...the right of suffrage may be extended to males and females equally.” Three days later, the Senate agreed to let Pomeroy’s bill “lie upon the table,” and there it remained, never to be taken up again.⁴

Ten years passed before the Senate again considered a woman suffrage bill. On January 10, 1878, Senator Aaron Sargent of California (whose wife, suffragist Ellen Clark Sargent, was a friend to Anthony) introduced a resolution for an amendment to the Constitution to provide for woman suffrage: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Sargent requested that his colleagues take the unusual step of allowing suffragists to personally address members of the Senate. “We ask that women may be permitted in person, and on behalf of the thousands of other women who are petitioning Congress...to be heard...before the Senate and House.” The Senate agreed, and the following day suffragists testified before members of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections. “One half of our human family are women,” observed Stanton. The Constitution provides for a government “of the people,” she explained. “Does any one pretend to say that men alone constitute races and peoples?” Reverend Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained in the nation, urged senators to take action. “Let us have at an early day, in the *Congressional Record*, a report of the proceedings of this committee, and the action of the Senate in favor of our right to vote.” Senators listened politely, but most remained unconvinced. The committee’s majority recommended that Sargent’s proposal be “indefinitely postponed.” Only a few senators voiced their dissent. “The American people must extend the right of Suffrage to Woman or abandon the idea that Suffrage is a birthright,” concluded Senators

³ Senator Jacob Howard, *Congressional Globe*, 23 May 1866, 2767.

⁴ S. Pomeroy to Miss Anna Dickinson, 16 Oct 1867, Anna E. Dickinson papers, Box 11, Correspondence, 18591951, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Senator Samuel Pomeroy, *Congressional Globe*, 7 and 9 Dec 1868, 6, 27.

George Hoar (R-MA), John H. Mitchell (R-OR), and Angus Cameron (R-WI).⁵

George Hoar served as a vocal proponent for woman suffrage until his death in 1904. First elected to the Senate by the Massachusetts state legislature in 1877, Hoar was an intellectually curious and determined lawmaker who quickly earned the respect of colleagues in both parties. Unafraid to take unpopular political positions, in the 1880s Hoar joined a small—but steadily growing—Senate minority who supported suffrage for women. With the assistance of colleague Henry Blair, a New Hampshire Republican, Hoar proposed a measure to form a select committee to explore the issue, which won Senate approval on January 9, 1882. Five months later, on June 5, the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage favorably reported a constitutional amendment to the full Senate for its consideration. “We conclude...every reason...which bestows the ballot upon man is equally applicable to the proposition to bestow the ballot upon woman.” Despite Hoar’s efforts, it took another five years for the Senate to take its first vote on a suffrage amendment. It failed by the lopsided margin of 16 to 34.⁶

The Senate’s failure to pass the amendment was not surprising. By 1890 only one state in the nation, Wyoming, had extended full suffrage to women. A few states and municipalities allowed women to vote on specific issues, such as education. A vast majority of senators remained unconvinced of the wisdom of woman suffrage, and they expressed their opposition in a variety of ways. Some insisted that women’s most significant contributions to society came in their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. “In her hands is placed a moral and spiritual power far greater than the power of the ballot,” explained Senator Joseph Brown (D-GA) during a typical Senate debate on the subject in 1887. Others suggested that a majority of women did not want to vote. “The small number of petitioners, when compared with that of the intelligent women of the country, is...evidence...[of] no general desire to take up the heavy burden of governing,” pronounced the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections in 1878. Some cautioned that consenting to the demands of suffragists would lead to other demands for gender equality, such as pay equity. Noting that suffragists complained of their inability to shape policy,

⁵ Letter to the United States Congress from Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and Others in Support of Women’s Suffrage,” Dec 1871, 1865; Record Group 46, U.S. Senate; NARA; “Arguments Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in behalf of a Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Prohibiting the Several States from Disenfranchising United States Citizens on Account of Sex,” 11-12 Jan 1878, 5, 28-29; (Washington: GPO, 1878); Stanton and Anthony, *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 2, 94, 96-97; “Report No. 523 to accompany bill S. Res. 12,” Committee on Privileges and Elections, U.S. Senate, 45th Cong. 2d Sess., 14 Jun 1878, 2; “Views of the Minority,” Committee on Privileges and Elections, Report 523, Pt. 2, U.S. Senate, 45th Cong. 3d Sess., 1 Feb 1879 (Washington: GPO, 1879), 3-9.

one close observer inquired, “What do they want to reform? Give me a single example of a law they would pass which men would not.”⁶⁷

As the popularity and influence of the woman suffrage movement grew, antisuffragists—women and men alike—also began to organize. In 1895 New York State antisuffragists formed their own organization and battled to defeat a series of state-wide suffrage bills. (They succeeded until 1917.) Borrowing from the suffragists’ playbook, they launched vigorous petition campaigns. In 1911 New York “antis” founded the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.⁸

Suffragists answered their opponents on the public speaking circuit, in their ongoing petition efforts, and as witnesses before Congress. Some dared to cast ballots in federal and state elections, leading to arrests and jail time. Elizabeth Cady Stanton anticipated that women “exasperated with a sense of injustice” would inevitably lose patience with intransigent lawmakers. The issue of woman suffrage “will eventually be settled by violence,” she predicted. That prediction proved prophetic.⁹

⁶ Senator Joseph Emerson Brown, *Congressional Record*, 25 Jan 1887, 982; “Report to accompany bill S. Res. 60,” Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage, U.S. Senate, 47th Cong. 1st sess., 5 Jun 1882; *Congressional Record*, 25 Jan 1887, 1002.

⁷ “Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, U.S. Senate, 45th Cong. 2d sess., 14 Jun 1878, (Washington: GPO, 1878), 1; “What Female Suffrage Will Do,” *Washington Post*, 23 May 1882, 2; A Veteran Observer, “The Woman Question,” *New York Times* 25 Feb 1869, 2.

⁸ Susan Goodier, *No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 9-10.

⁹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Hearing before the Committee on Woman Suffrage,” U.S. Senate, 50th Cong. 1st sess., 2 Apr 1888, (Washington: GPO, 1888), 5-8.

Part II: The Siege of the Senate

In 1913 suffragists opened a new chapter in their battle to amend the Constitution. They believed that the results of the 1912 election presented new political opportunities. Party control in the Senate changed for the first time in 20 years, and voters sent Democrat Woodrow Wilson to the White House. Alice Paul, a seasoned activist and a national leader in the movement, planned a series of public events to grab the nation's attention, beginning with a massive suffrage parade in the nation's capital, followed a few months later by the so-called "Siege of the Senate" petition drive.

On March 3, 1913, on the eve of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, women and men from across the nation, including a few U.S. senators, prepared to march from the Capitol down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Department of Treasury building near the White House. Anticipating a massive turnout, Congress had directed the District of Columbia's superintendent of police to prevent interference with the suffrage parade. African-American suffragists, calling for the same rights that had been extended to black men in 1870 with the Fifteenth Amendment, lined up to march. White suffragists hastily conferred and then instructed black women to march in a segregated group at the back of the parade. That morning, leaders of the parade peacefully departed the Capitol grounds as planned, but as they turned up Pennsylvania Avenue, a surging crowd of spectators blocked their passage.¹⁰

Mayhem followed. Suffragists later reported that they endured lewd comments from spectators "drunk enough for the lockup." Women claimed to have been physically assaulted while police stood idly by. Helen Taft, wife of outgoing president William H. Taft, watched the chaos unfold from an observation platform before quickly retreating to the White House. One suffrage leader charged that "Hoodlums [had been] given possession of the streets." As violence escalated, the War Department was forced to call in the cavalry, which arrived too late to establish order. A subsequent Senate investigation, which drew upon dozens of eyewitness accounts, concluded that "uniformed and...special police acted with more or less indifference while on duty." The committee blamed law enforcement for failing to ensure public safety but carefully avoided "singl[ing] out any particular individual for reproof or condemnation." The DC chief of police was later forced to resign his post.¹¹

With public sympathy for the suffragists soaring, the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage submitted its recommendation that the Senate approve a constitutional amendment. "In this Republic the people constitute the Government," the committee concluded in its report of June 13, 1913. The committee introduced S. J. Res. 1, a bill to amend the Constitution to allow

¹⁰ Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (New York: Amistad, 2008), 514-519.

¹¹ *Suffrage Parade*, "Report of the Committee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate, Pursuant to S. Res. 499, of March 4, 1913...With Hearings and List of Witnesses," U.S. Senate, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., 29 May 1913 (Washington: GPO, 1913), iii-xvi.

women to vote. Progress! It was now time for the next step in Alice Paul’s carefully planned attack on Congress: the Siege of the Senate.¹²

On July 31, 1913, members of the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage greeted enthusiastic suffragists at a rally in Hyattsville, Maryland. “We welcome you to the national capitol as the representatives of hundreds of thousands of patriotic men and women of the [nation],” shouted Senator George Chamberlain of Oregon to boisterous cheers from the crowd. Some attending the rally that day had driven thousands of miles to hand-deliver their petitions to members of Congress. When the speeches concluded, suffragists and senators piled into automobiles and drove the last leg of their journey—six short miles—to Washington, D.C.¹³ At the Capitol, women crowded into narrow Senate corridors as the carefully planned “Siege of the Senate” began. In the Marble Room, an ornate meeting area near the Senate Chamber, they jostled for space to present petitions bearing more than 75,000 signatures to their senators. When the Senate convened a short while later, senators who supported suffrage rights quickly took to the floor and introduced petitions for women of their home states. Giving women the vote, Reed Smoot of Utah observed reassuringly, “has made no daughter less beautiful, no wife less devoted, no mother less inspiring.” Even senators opposed to woman suffrage, feeling pressure from the lady lobbyists, offered petitions. “I wish to say that I am opposed to the passage of the amendment,” explained John Thornton of Louisiana, before obediently submitting a petition. “Whatever may be my personal view on this matter,” James Martine of New Jersey confessed, “I would be a veritable coward [should] I not present this petition.” Senator Robert Owen of Oklahoma, a member of the Committee on Woman Suffrage, implored his colleagues to consider the suffrage issue “with [an] unbiased mind, free from prejudice or passion.”¹⁴ Owen, a committed suffragist, understood that activists were growing impatient. For more than three decades, they had persistently—and politely—lobbied their representatives in Congress for the right to vote. Most senators had listened courteously and had dutifully accepted the petitions but had done little to advance the cause. By 1913 nine states had adopted full suffrage for women, and more than a dozen others had extended partial voting rights. Yet the goal of adopting a constitutional amendment remained elusive, blocked by a coalition of opponents from both political parties.

Despite the well-planned lobbying efforts, therefore, considerable opposition remained, with opponents offering a variety of arguments against woman suffrage. Some insisted that the measure undermined states’ rights. “Under our form of government, with its 48 sovereign republics, all of these questions [of elector qualifications] are, in my opinion, properly and

¹² “Woman Suffrage,” Report to accompany S.J. Res. 1, Committee on Woman Suffrage, 13 Jun 1913, U.S. Senate, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington: GPO, 1913), 1-6.

¹³ “Suffrage Autoists Besiege Senators,” *New York Times* 1 Aug 1913, 7; “Women Force Their Claims on Senate,” *The Sun*, 1 Aug 1913, 1.

¹⁴ “Senate Besieged by Suffragettes,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 Aug 1913, 9; *Congressional Record*, 31 Jul 1913, 2941-2952.

inherently State questions and not Federal questions,” explained Senator Porter McCumber of North Dakota. “I am one of those who believe that the privilege of voting ought to be controlled by each State,” insisted Senator Nathan Bryan of Florida. “It is wholly wrong for Arizona to say to Maine who her voters shall be.”¹⁵

In committee hearings and during floor debates, anti-suffragists also expressed concerns about the prospect of extending suffrage to *all* women, concerns driven in part by demographic changes in the United States. Since the mid-19th century, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from nations around the world had established homes in the United States. Would newly arrived immigrants gain citizenship and also enjoy the right to vote in federal elections? And the issue of race, rarely off the table during any debate of this time, became a major component of the battle over woman suffrage. Some senators were willing to consider suffrage rights for white women but insisted on denying those rights to African-American women. The “suffrage cause draws upon itself the burden of the race question in the South,” Idaho senator William Borah explained to one suffragist. “You will never carry the required thirty-six states for a constitutional amendment,” he insisted, “until you repeal the Fifteenth Amendment.” Nor were debates about race confined to southern states. “If Chinamen are allowed to vote [in Oregon]...why should not my wife or daughter vote,” inquired Senator Harry Lane of Oregon.¹⁶

Anti-suffragists feared that casting ballots would distract women from their homemaking responsibilities and predicted that giving women the vote would increase divorce rates. Suffragists would abandon their children, they claimed. Anti-suffragists implored lawmakers not to allow a small minority of “feminists,” “agitators,” and “socialists” to dictate choices for the rest of women—a majority of whom, they argued, did not want to vote.¹⁷

Those who supported a national suffrage amendment moved to reassure their Senate colleagues that they had nothing to fear by extending voting rights to women. “The State in which I live has already adopted woman suffrage,” Senator Lane explained. “We have learned to have no fear of their participation in matters of public concern.” Others implored their colleagues to embrace change. “Why does convention, precedent, and custom deny to women the most precious privilege of citizenship?” inquired Senator Miles Poindexter of Washington.¹⁸ The Senate debate dragged on, month after month. In late winter of 1914, even suffrage supporters conceded the futility of their task. “I am now inclined to think that [the Constitutional amendment] can not secure the requisite majority,” acknowledged Senator Moses Clapp of Minnesota. “Friends of the measure do not hope to pass it,” Borah confided to Bertha Green of

¹⁵ Senator Porter McCumber and Senator Nathan Bryan, *Congressional Record*, 3 Mar 1914, 4211, 4197.

¹⁶ Senator William Borah to Mrs. Bertha Stull Green, 24 Feb 1914, and newspaper clipping, box 16, General Office File, 1913-1914; WBP, MCLOC; Senator William Borah, *Congressional Record*, 3 Mar 1914, 4213; Senator Harry Lane, “Woman Suffrage,” Hearings Before the Committee on Woman Suffrage, United States Senate, 63rd Cong., 1st Sess., on S.J. Res. 1 (Washington: GPO, 1913), 40.

¹⁷ Senator Nathan Bryan, *Congressional Record*, 3 Mar 1914, 4203-4209.

¹⁸ Senators Harry Lane and Miles Poindexter, *Congressional Record*, 17 Mar 1914, 4954, 4958.

Mountain Home, Idaho. “The measure was introduced simply for the purpose of discussion.” On March 5, 1914, Senator J. K. Vardaman of Mississippi made a final effort to break the impasse. He proposed amending the woman suffrage amendment to repeal the Fifteenth Amendment.¹⁹ On March 19, 1914, for the second time in Senate history, senators prepared to cast their vote for a constitutional amendment to provide for woman suffrage. First, senators handily defeated Vardaman’s proposal to repeal the Fifteenth Amendment, 19-48. Then they defeated, with a 21-44 vote, a second proposal by Mississippi’s John Sharp Williams to amend the woman suffrage amendment to provide that “the right of white citizens” would not be denied on account of sex. Finally, the Senate voted on S. J. Res. 1, the constitutional amendment to provide for woman suffrage. Approval required two-thirds of senators *present and voting*. The vote fell 11 votes short of that threshold—35 senators approved, and 34 opposed.²⁰

Failure—but now senators were “on record” on the issue of woman suffrage. During the next few years, suffragists would use that roll-call tally to devise a renewed lobbying strategy. They would carefully target those 34 senators who opposed the measure. If they could not be persuaded to change their vote, then suffragists would work to defeat them at the polls. Just as victory came into sight, however, a congressional declaration of war threatened to postpone their plans.

¹⁹ Senator Moses Clapp, *Congressional Record*, 3 Mar 1914, 4195; Senator William Borah to Bertha Green, 24 Feb 1914, box 16, General Office File, 1913-1914, WBP, MCLOC; Senator J.K. Vardaman, *Congressional Record*, 5 Mar 1914, 4338.

²⁰ *Congressional Record*, 19 Mar 1914, 5088-5108.

Part III: The Last Trench

Following the midterm election of 1916, suffragists believed that congressional approval of a national suffrage amendment to the Constitution was near. Montana voters had elected the first woman to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. Women had won the right of full suffrage in a dozen states, and suffrage measures were on the ballot in 10 others. As suffrage petitions continued to pour into Congress, both national parties adopted planks supporting suffrage at the state level. In the White House, President Woodrow Wilson supported woman suffrage but contended that it was an issue best decided by the states. When the 65th Congress convened in March 1917, senators insisted that “if the president wants [the amendment] to pass... [we will] vote for it.” Then, just as momentum for the amendment was building, a declaration of war threatened to undermine that progress.²¹

When Congress declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917, critics denounced the suffrage movement as unpatriotic. Suffrage must be put aside, they insisted. This was war. Many women—including many suffragists—abandoned the drive for an amendment and threw themselves into the war effort. Across the nation, women rallied to the cause, serving as military nurses, in clerical positions on army bases, and as radio operators and translators. On Capitol Hill, Senate spouses formed a Red Cross volunteer unit, meeting weekly to roll bandages, sew blankets, and provide other material support for U.S. soldiers. Despite calls for them to stand down, however, other suffrage activists saw the wartime experience as opportunity rather than hindrance and continued to pressure members of Congress on behalf of the constitutional amendment.

Among those who continued lobbying throughout the war was Maud Younger, who led the effort for the National Woman’s Party (NWP). Born in 1870 to a wealthy San Francisco family, Younger had helped California suffragists win the right to vote in 1911. Her skills as a lobbyist brought her to the attention of NWP’s Alice Paul, who invited her to join the national campaign in Washington.

Younger took Washington by storm and immediately went to work developing a complex intelligence-gathering operation. Focusing on senators who had voted no on the national suffrage amendment bill in 1914, Younger and other NWP lobbyists meticulously documented every detail of those members’ daily routines on small index cards. If a senator claimed his constituents did not support the amendment, Younger coordinated letter-writing campaigns in his home state. 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 responded brusquely to these well-coordinated efforts. “Nagging!” Senator Irvine Lenroot of Wisconsin exclaimed after one such encounter. “If you women would only stop nagging!” The senator’s words stung. “I wondered if he thought... we liked going to the Capitol day after day, tramping on marble floors, waiting in the ante-rooms—

²¹ *Congressional Record*, 30 Sep 1918, 10942; *Congressional Record*, 1 Oct 1918, 10981, 10985.

sometimes rebuffed, sometimes snarled at,” Younger later recalled. “I wondered if he thought we could do it for anything but a great cause.”²²

While American doughboys fought for democracy overseas, suffragists adopted wartime rhetoric to criticize powerful institutions at home. They picketed the White House, carrying banners which read, “We shall fight for things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—democracy,” and, “Mr. President, how long must women wait for their liberty?” They were arrested for obstructing traffic and imprisoned at Occoquan Workhouse just outside Washington, D.C., where they staged hunger strikes and endured forced feedings and physical assaults. Press accounts described their brutal treatment at the hands of law enforcement, drawing a stark contrast to Wilson’s wartime goal of “Mak[ing] the World Safe for Democracy.” Public outcry prompted the president to finally call for action. Describing the national suffrage amendment as a vital war measure, Wilson urged members of Congress to support the woman suffrage amendment. On January 10, 1918, the House approved the amendment. The question remained, did suffragists have the votes they needed in the Senate?²³

To be sure they could answer that question with a resounding “yes,” suffrage lobbyists doubled their efforts. Their constant presence in the Capitol irritated lawmakers. Senators complained when suffragists holding banners blocked doorways of the Senate Office Building. Alice Paul patiently explained that the obstruction would continue as long as men continued to block their bill. When suffragists marched down Constitution Avenue and disrupted traffic, Capitol Police arrested them. Senators objected to the “un-American demonstrations” on the Capitol grounds and denounced protestors as “cranks and agitators.” The *Washington Post* condemned suffragists’ “unlawful assemblages or attacks” on lawmakers as counterproductive. Some suffragists seemed to enjoy provoking the intransigent lawmakers. Determined to see the amendment pass, suffragists ignored the complaints and protests continued unabated.²⁴

Some senators, however, appreciated the effort. Andrieus Jones of New Mexico, chairman of the Committee on Woman Suffrage, relied upon the activists to whip votes for the amendment. It’s likely that he shared with them information that he gathered about colleagues who, having voted no in 1914, may be persuaded to change their vote. At the top of that list, no doubt, was William Borah, an influential Republican of Idaho.

A commanding presence in the Senate, Borah was known to be combative, obstinate, and vain. Though he supported suffrage for women—women in Idaho had enjoyed the right to vote since 1896—he opposed a national suffrage amendment, insisting it was an issue best left to the

²² Maud Younger, “Revelations of a Woman Lobbyist,” *McCall’s Magazine*, Sept-Nov 1919.

²³ Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party, 1910-1928* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).

²⁴ “Suffrage Militant,” *Washington Post*, 8 Aug 1918; Senator Reed Smoot, *Congressional Record*, 8 Aug 1918, 9211; “Memorandum for Senator Borah, Statement of Women’s display of banners at the entrance to the Senate Office Building,” 10 Oct 1918, box 67, WBP, MCLOC.

states. When the House approved the measure, Borah immediately announced his opposition. “I am aware...[my position] will lead to much criticism among friends at home,” he wrote a constituent. “I would rather give up the office” than to “cast a vote... I do not believe in.”²⁵

In office since 1907, in the wake of the Seventeenth Amendment Borah faced election by popular vote for the first time in 1918. Determined to flip his vote—or unseat him—suffragists coordinated a relentless campaign in Borah’s home state. “Will you get as many people as you possibly can, especially from [Borah’s] own party, to wire him requesting that he vote [for the amendment],” implored Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to a friend. Petitions from Idaho constituents poured into Borah’s office, and Republican Party leaders began to worry that the senator’s position would damage party prospects in the fall election. Even former president Teddy Roosevelt weighed in with a personal note to Borah, encouraging him to reconsider his position. As the November election drew near, the typically self-confident Borah had reason to worry about potential defeat.²⁶

President Wilson worried, too. He feared that if the Senate, with the Democrats in the majority, rejected the amendment, suffragists would target his party in the midterm election. Wilson decided to take a bold step. On September 30, 1918, he delivered a brief, impassioned speech in the Senate Chamber, pleading with senators to deliver “justice to women.” In particular, the president sought to persuade a coalition of southern Democrats and northeastern Republicans, known as the “unholy alliance,” who opposed woman’s suffrage for reasons that were by now all too familiar. “Do not force upon [the states] the enfranchisement of those women who are not of our race,” implored one opponent. Others argued that women possessed neither the intellectual nor emotional capacity to make reasoned decisions. Still others chaffed at the thought of relenting to the demands of the so-called “petticoat brigade.”²⁷

Having delivered his address, Wilson returned to the White House to wait. On the following day, October 1, the Senate took up the suffrage bill. Suffragists, dressed in white gowns with purple sashes, watched impatiently from the gallery as the final debate began. Supporters offered one last defense of the bill. Women had selflessly supported the war effort, Senator Charles S. Thomas of Colorado observed. “Why do we ask American doughboys to fight for Europeans’ right to self-determination,” Thomas wondered, while “50 per cent of our population is disenfranchised”?²⁸

After the debate concluded, Senator Jones successfully beat back efforts to amend the bill, and the roll call began. When the final vote was cast, the amendment fell two votes short of

²⁵ William Borah to Joe T. Young, Oct 15, 1918, William Borah to Mrs. Minnie Priest Dunton, 11 Feb 1918; box 67, WBP, MCLOC.

²⁶ William Borah to M.J. Sweeley, 21 May 1918; Theodore Roosevelt to Senator Borah, 26 Apr 1918; box 67; WBP, MCLOC.

²⁷ *Congressional Record*, 30 Sep 1918, 10942; and 1 Oct 1918, 10981, 10985.

²⁸ *Congressional Record*, 1 Oct 1918, 10981, 10985.

the two-thirds present and voting required for passage, 53-31. Disappointed, Andrieus Jones promised to call another vote before the congressional session ended in March 1919.²⁹

Where would suffragists get the two votes necessary to pass the amendment through the Senate—their so-called “Last Trench”? Alice Paul dialed up the pressure on Borah. With the assistance of local women, Paul convinced the Idaho Republican Party to adopt a party plank supporting a national suffrage amendment. Would Borah defy his own state party and continue to oppose the bill? Occupied with war-related measures, Borah remained in Washington in the weeks before the election, but his chances for reelection were looking grim. His projected lead over his opponent had virtually disappeared. In desperation, Borah made an appointment to see Alice Paul. When that fateful meeting concluded, Paul wired a statement to Idaho suffragists: “We have talked over the...situation with Senator Borah,” Paul wrote, “and our understanding...is that he will carry out his platform and vote for the suffrage amendment if elected.” Aware of Borah’s long opposition to the amendment, a few suffrage leaders remained skeptical. Did Paul get Borah’s commitment in writing? Would he indeed support the amendment? While Paul told her lieutenants in Idaho to stand down, Borah wired his supporters to inform them that his position had not changed.³⁰

On November 5, 1918, just as Wilson had feared, suffragists punished congressional Democrats for failing to approve the national suffrage amendment. Thanks to his pledge to the National Woman’s Party, William Borah fared better, besting his opponent by nearly 30 points. In March of 1919, Republicans would assume the majority in the House and Senate, and Senator Borah would be among them.

During the lame-duck session that convened on December 2, 1918, Senator Jones scheduled another vote. As the vote drew near, Borah remained coy, issuing no public statements. At a heated Democratic caucus meeting on February 6, South Carolina’s William Pollock joined 19 other Democrats and declared his support for the bill, providing one of the two additional votes needed for passage. Suffragists expected Borah to provide the last vote.³¹ On Monday, February 10, 1919, the Senate prepared to vote. “This is no new proposition before the American people,” observed Senator Pollock as the roll call began. The fate of the bill was soon known. Coming early in the roll call of senators, Borah betrayed Alice Paul and the Idaho suffragists and voted no. When the final vote was tallied, the suffrage amendment fell one vote short of the required two-thirds majority, 55-29. Suffragists seated in the galleries quietly hung

²⁹ *Congressional Record*, 1 Oct 1918, 10987-10988.

³⁰ “Women Centre Fight on Borah,” *The Farmer*, 18 Oct 1918, 6; Western Union Telegram, Marcella S. Pride, Boise Idaho, to Sen WM E Borah, 26 Oct 1918; Wm. E. Borah to Mrs. Alfred Budge, 28 Oct 1918; *The Meridian Times: Meridian ID*, 1 Nov 1918; William Borah to Joe T. Young, Oct 15, 1918; box 67, WBP, MCLOC; Maud Younger, “Revelations of a Woman Lobbyist,” *McCall’s Magazine*, Nov 1919, 51; “Doubts Borah Will Support Suffrage,” *New York Tribune*, 30 Oct 1918, 9.

³¹ “Democrats Hold Suffrage Caucus,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 Feb 1919, 1.

their heads. Anticipating that the next Congress would approve the bill, one irritated suffrage leader called the Senate vote a “futile delay...to betray the people.”³²

The battle was lost, but the war continued. The 66th Congress convened on March 4, 1919, and soon took up the bill. The House quickly approved it on May 21. In the Senate, several newly elected members had publicly pledged their support for the amendment, making the suffragists reasonably confident of its passage. On June 4, 1919, suffragists packed the Senate gallery once again. “There was no excitement,” Maud Younger later recalled. “The coming of the women, the waiting of the women, the expectancy of the women, was an old story.” After so many years of fighting for their rights, suffrage activists in the gallery and across the nation found this final vote to be almost mundane. In a bipartisan effort, senators approved the national suffrage amendment with two votes to spare, 56 to 25. A few minutes later, Vice President Thomas Marshall joined prominent suffragists for a signing ceremony in his office in the Capitol. The amendment had passed a major hurdle; now it would go to the states for ratification.³³

Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan quickly approved the national suffrage amendment, and other states steadily followed. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to approve, and the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. The woman suffrage amendment had taken decades of hard work and sacrifice on the part of suffragists and a well-coordinated lobbying effort to get it through the House and Senate. Women voted in national elections for the first time in the fall of 1920. The goal of extending voting rights to all women, however, remained elusive, as some states continued to disenfranchise African-American women and men well into the 20th century. Four decades later, when the House and Senate approved the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law, Congress completed the job by providing enforcement mechanisms to protect voting rights under the provisions of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

³² “Woman Suffrage Loses by One Vote,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 11 Feb 1919, 1; “Woman Suffrage Fails in Senate; One Vote Lacking,” *The Hartford Courant*, 11 Feb 1919, 16.

³³ “Suffragists Think They Will Have Majority in New Senate,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 Nov 1918, 8; Maud Younger, “Revelations of a Woman Lobbyist,” *McCall’s Magazine*, Nov 1919, 51.