**History 211 US Constitution**

**Discussion Transcript for March 24, 2020**

**Main Reading: Essays by Judith Wellman, Ellen Dubois, and Akhil Amar**

Taken together, these three essays cover the story of the women’s suffrage movement from 1848 to 1920. Students should have learned (or reviewed previous learning) about early feminist efforts (like the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention), latter Reconstruction-era battles over including the word “male” in the 14th and 15th amendments, and the story of the “endgame” for suffrage that explains how the 19th Amendment won passage in 1920 (one hundred years ago!).

**“Finding Pinsker’s Mistake” Challenge**

**Winners =** **Joshua Riebel and Jordyn Ney,** who each get 1 point for realizing that I said that Stanton and Anthony and their Women’s Loyal League helped collect OVER one million signatures on their petition for the 13th amendment, when I should have said they tried to collect one million signatures but eventually collected about 400,000 names (still an amazing accomplishment).

The following are selections from student comments & questions with some responses from Prof. Pinsker

**Origins**

STUDENT COMMENT: Wellman's piece touched on the importance of equality and the use of the Declaration of Independence as the document to prove the injustice occurring. She wanted to show how women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton used their intellect and power to push for abolitionists as well as women's rights, showing their desire for equality amongst all citizens.

**Gender and Race**

STUDENT COMMENT: In the Dubois essay, she references Elizabeth Cady Stanton's disdain for the wording in the reconstruction amendments, more specifically the use of the word "male." In class and in the essay we had discussed the growing tension between the women's suffrage and black suffrage movements, referencing a heated exchange with Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I also recall learning about activists like Sojourner Truth, who pointed out that although white women are treated gently- black women do not receive the same treatment, in her "Aint I a Woman Speech."

QUESTION: Often the struggle of slavery is seen through the lens of the male slave, but what did the reconstruction era look like for women who were former slaves?

*ANSWER: The question about black women is an important one –but difficult to answer because it requires a careful review of sometimes-elusive evidence. Sojourner Truth’s famous speech provides one view –but the most common version of her speech is full of mistakes. You can see a comparison at this site:* <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>

*Or view a good example of a modern-day reading (of the wrong text) on YouTube here:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry_i8w2rdQY&feature=youtu.be> *For those really interested, here’s a good short biographical essay of Truth by historian Nell Painter:* [*http://www.nellpainter.com/assests/pdfs/articles/A29\_SojTruthExotic.pdf*](http://www.nellpainter.com/assests/pdfs/articles/A29_SojTruthExotic.pdf) *Anyway, I don’t mean to pile on more reading, but the point is that if you’re interested in knowing how black women responded to constitutional developments during this era, it sometimes requires more careful research than other subjects because they were among the most marginalized figures of nineteenth-century American life. But still, it’s possible to do. Check out this 2018 honors project from Dickinson student Sarah Goldberg:* <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/hist-prohibition/>

Sarah did great work uncovering the role of nineteenth-century black female reformers in Atlanta. They were not primarily interested in suffrage, however, but rather temperance or the prohibition of alchohol. Many nineteenth-century women (white and black) cared more about fighting alchohol addiction than they did about securing voting rights. In fact, the Eighteenth Amendment (Prohibition) was ratified three years before the Nineteenth Amendment. Both owed their success primarily to female activists of both races.

**Suffrage Movement**

STUDENT COMMENT: Until the passage of the 19th amendment, the Women’s Rights Movement was led by two organizations: the National Woman’s Suffrage Association and the American Woman’s Suffrage Association, both which took a number of approaches to appeal to politicians. They differed in that one focused on changing State Constitutions to include the enfranchisement of women while the other wanted to change the Federal Constitution. Their efforts gained national attention and even the Editor of the New York Tribune (the most prominent newspaper of the time) said that the women made a clear, rational point that if all men are truly created equal as the Declaration of Independence suggests, then women should be afforded the right to vote.

*Answer: This observation is a key one that everybody should remember. The women’s suffrage movement splintered after the Civil War into two rival organizations: NAWSA or the National and AWSA or the American. It was the National the focused on achieving the Anthony Amendment to the federal constitution and it was the American which led the way on state-by-state suffrage campaigns. Eventually, in the 1890s, these two competing groups merged and became known as NAWSA (pronounced naw-suh).*

**Endgame**

STUDENT COMMENT: Amar also mentions how some men did not change their position on women's rights until it became politically pressing for them to do so if they had long-term political ambitions as more states began passing legislation up until the 1919 Amendment. Another thing I did not know until I took your survey class was that women were allowed to vote in some states for a few elections before it was outlawed (as opposed to never being legal in the first place).

STUDENT COMMENT: The Amar article implies that outlying areas such as the western states and New Zealand originally allowed women's suffrage because there were more men than women, thus the threat of women outvoting men was diminished.  This suffrage also increased the likelihood that women would travel to these areas if it meant garnering freedom from male-dominated society.  While women sent delegations to congress between 1896 and 1909 only four states gave women the right to vote.  The Eastern states did not want to share their power with women, but as time passed women began to convince male voters and lawyers to fight for their cause.  This resulted in seven states passing suffrage acts between 1910 and 1914.  This success lead to Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, to start a campaign in 1916 that culminated in the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

*Answer: Several of you noted the favorable politics of the endgame that Amar describes in his piece. It took feminists years to gain ground on a state-by-state basis in their campaign for women’s suffrage, but once achieved, there was no going back. Women, unlike African Americans, were too large a demographic force to face restriction on their voting rights in the same way that African American men suffered during the era of poll taxes and grandfather clauses. Moreover, once white male politicians in the eastern states began to suspect that change was coming, they felt pressure to curry favor among future women voters. The same was true for presidential candidates in 1912 and 1916. But one element that all of the essays underplay and yet which I want our class to remember is that women were voting in many elections prior to 1920. Many states that did not adopt women’s suffrage for federal elections, nevertheless did so for other types of elections (local, school board, state, etc.). That’s what helped pave the way for people coming to terms with such a big social change. They got comfortable with women voting, and even with women campaigning for office. To really appreciate this often-forgotten fact, check out the website “Her Hat Was in the Ring,” which documents over 7,000 female candidates in American elections before 1920:* <http://www.herhatwasinthering.org/>