

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for October 8, 2020
Women's Suffrage

Main Readings: Baker, chapters 1-3 (Alison Parker, Nell Painter, Faye Dudden)

So far in this course about the history of elections, we have focused mainly on elections. But in doing so, we have given less attention to voting rights than perhaps we should. However, now begins a section of the semester devoted to studying one of the most persistent struggles for voting rights in American history –and on the centennial of its crowning achievement. Jean Baker's collection of essays offers a series of new insights on the story of the campaigns for women's suffrage.

Here is a selection of student comments.

ORIGIN OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

STUDENT COMMENT: Allison M. Parker's essay, "The Case for Reform Antecedents for the Woman's Rights Movement", analyzed the struggle to establish the women's rights movement. Parker discussed the key components of the campaign, including equal wages, marriage rights, access to education, temperance, and suffrage. In the early 1800s, working-class women fought against their lack of equal pay. When the prohibition of alcohol began, women in the working class increased their participation in the movement due to their family's safety being jeopardized by their husbands' alcoholism. Female rights advocates believed that the right to vote would grant them equality. Women no longer wanted to be forced to comply to the power of the male figures in their life. The women involved in the temperance movement proved how women's voices were just as powerful and pushed other women to question their role in society. This shift allowed leaders such as Frances Wright, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Margaret Fuller to challenge female educational rights. They pushed the limits to see how equal education could empower women and provide them with the chance to excel in diverse professions and to establish themselves in society. A pivotal moment in the movement, which Parker highlighted, is the Seneca Falls Convention, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott gathered women together to draft a Declaration of Sentiments. The Declaration described their desire for all men and women to be equal and provided with the same access to natural rights. Their message from the convention proved that women deserved to vote and could hold public office positions."

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

STUDENT COMMENT: "The woman's rights movement did not begin as an organized entity of its own, but found its origins in many different places before it snowballed and coalesced into the organized group of women that won the right to vote and continued to fight on a variety of other fronts. The movement as it can be understood today can trace its beginning to an influential essay by Mary Wollstonecraft in England -- *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*. This revolutionary essay was a product of a very

revolutionary time during the French Revolution and the end of the American Revolution not a decade earlier, and thus provided radical ideas for the time they were written. Wollstonecraft asserted that women deserved equal education and the right to develop themselves to their fullest extent regardless of their sex. The priority of women of this generation in America however was not suffrage, which only became a priority after the mid-nineteenth century Seneca Falls convention, and especially after the Civil War. The movement during this era also hoped it to be beneficial to draw parallels between their movement and other movements in order to bolster both of them. Margaret Fuller noted that white women and slaves both faced oppression under the law. Though the extent that slaves were treated by the law was far different from the way that white women were affected, a large part of the woman's rights and suffrage movement was dedicated to the abolition of slavery, even as they were not allowed "to participate in [abolitionist] conventions until the 1850s" (Parker, 29). Their dedication to this movement was hopefully to pay off as rights were granted to black people (mostly black men), but none of the reconstruction amendments made any mention of women. During the post-Civil War debates of the late 1860s, Sojourner Truth expressed her outrage at the prospect of women not being acknowledged in the coming amendments saying that if black women were not freed and recognized in the same way that black men were being freed, "the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before" (Painter, 43). Unfortunately, black women were not freed to the same extent as men until much later. The early woman's suffrage movement had a rough start, as attaching itself to other movements helped those movements without them providing much of anything in return."

EQUALITY OR PURITY?

STUDENT COMMENT: "One of the most interesting things about the women's suffrage movement was how it functioned within the cultural norms concerning the inequality of women and men. This reminded me of how even in the abolition movement, inequality between the races was accepted as scientific fact. Women, just as African Americans, had forever been seen as completely different and subservient to white men both culturally and religiously for most of human history. Even within the movement, this idea of difference between the genders, was not just accepted but was actually one of the main reasons it started. Though women were seen as subservient to men, they were also seen as morally purer, which led to the Cult of True Womanhood which sought to change society for the better. Generally wealthy housewives fought to make society more moral through aid societies and the prohibition, among other causes. The fight to get women the right to vote did not come from women wanting to be seen as equal to men, it came from the idea that by voting, women could help make society purer more directly. In fact, most of the movements that brought forth the idea of women's suffrage did not deal with getting equal rights for women with the exception of the fight for secondary education. This use of cultural norms to advance women's suffrage was reflected in the overwhelmingly wealthy, non-working class women who led the movement. The movement did push for some reforms to help women in the workplace but "the agenda of working class women was less prominent in the movement overall" (Parker). This is reminiscent of the abolition movement which after achieving their goal of emancipation, did not do much to improve the rights of African Americans and

continued to view them as unequal. The suffrage movement was built on the cultural norms of the day, yet used them to gain the right to vote for women and led to eventual equality for women just as over time, after the abolition of slavery, the rights of blacks gradually improved even though that was not the core motivation of the movement.”

WOMEN AND ABOLITIONISM

STUDENT COMMENT: “The rise of the women’s rights movement is inextricably tied with abolitionist efforts in the antebellum period. Abolitionism inspired the women’s rights movement as it led many women to identify with the plight of slaves and recognize their own circumstances. Women came to realize a theme; laws, marriage laws especially, treated husband and wife as one. That one, in reality, was the man. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, “He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead” (Baker, 34). Sarah Grimke made the correlation to slavery, arguing that marriage “soon led [men] to regard women as property,” leaving wives with “very little more liberty, or power, in some respects, than the slave” (Grimke). Therefore, lots of effort was dedicated to protecting women in marriage, such as Stanton’s campaign for the Married Woman’s Property Act which would keep women from losing all property rights to the man (Baker, 32). In addition, the women’s rights movement was propelled by the exclusion of women from the abolitionist movement. Stanton attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention with her husband, a delegate, in 1840. The convention voted to exclude women from the United States’ delegation (Ibid, 33). This was not a lone case, as abolitionist organizations also routinely restricted women from participating. Also in attendance at the conference was Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister and abolitionist who had been an ally of William Lloyd Garrison and the founder of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, but had yet to be truly drawn into the women’s rights movement (Ibid, 27). That changed when Mott and Stanton met for the first time at the 1840 convention and, due to the exclusion of women, resolved to hold a convention dedicated to women’s rights. In 1848 they got around to it and organized the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention (33). By awakening women to their own state of oppression and often excluding women themselves, abolitionists inspired women to start a distinct women’s rights movement.”

PIONEERING PROTESTS

STUDENT COMMENT: “Of the three essays, Dudden’s writing was the most intriguing to me. Her thesis successfully fights back at “the assumption that women had to win the vote before they could hope to exercise political power or influence” through a compelling narrative of women petitioners, lobbyists, public speakers, protestors, and convention-organizers in the political arena of the 1850s and 1860s. What I find most interesting, though, is how the actions of disenfranchised women of the past contain striking similarities to the actions of young Americans under the legal voting age today. Being denied the right to vote does not erase political convictions, especially in times of great national tension. For women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, that tension came in the form of the Civil War; for today’s young Americans, it comes in the form of a global pandemic, a national reckoning on racial justice, an unprecedentedly divided national political system, a rapidly warming planet, and

countless other crises. When the ballot box remained off-limits, the women's rights movement turned to what Dudden calls the "New York strategy," fighting for their cause with every resource they had to make their voices heard. They pioneered the system used today by disenfranchised young people. Without the women's rights movement of the 1850s and 1860s, there could be no political clubs in high schools, no social media hashtags and trends, and no great protests and marches. Without the movement, there could be no Isra Hirsi or Marley Dias. Political participation in spite of disenfranchisement is available to passionate young people today thanks to the women's movement of the 1850s and 1860s, and Dudden is right; it is far past time that we stop perpetuating the narrative that suffrage is necessary for any sort of political influence."