

Women's Suffrage Movement Primary Source Analysis Activity

1900-1919: The Final Push for the 19th Amendment

Activity Overview: In this 50-minute activity, you will work in small groups to analyze primary sources from the women's suffrage movement. Each group will examine different perspectives on women's voting rights and then share their findings with the class.

GROUP 1: Suffragist Strategy - Carrie Chapman Catt's "The Crisis" (1916)

Historical Context

In September 1916, Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), delivered this speech at a special convention in Atlantic City. She argued that suffragists faced a critical moment requiring coordinated national action.

Primary Source Excerpt

"I have taken for my subject, 'The Crisis,' because I believe that a crisis has come in our movement which, if recognized and the opportunity seized with vigor, enthusiasm and will, means the final victory of our great cause in the very near future...A crisis is a culmination of events which calls for new considerations and new decisions."

"The liquor forces have developed an organized opposition, apparently supported by large funds, which has been an active factor in every campaign except two since 1890...A powerful force is arrayed against our cause, and it scruples at nothing."

"Over our heads, up there in the clouds, but tantalizingly near, hangs the roof of our edifice—the vote. What is our duty? Shall we spend time in admiring the capstones and cornice? Shall we lament the tragedies which accompanied the laying of the cornerstones? Or shall we, like the builders of old, chant, 'Ho! all hands, all hands, heave to!' and while we chant, grasp the overhanging roof and with a long pull, a strong pull and a pull together, fix it in place forevermore?"

Source: *The Woman's Journal and Suffrage News*, September 16, 1916

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. What is the main argument Catt is making about the state of the suffrage movement in 1916?
 2. Who does Catt identify as opponents of suffrage? What does this tell you about the political landscape?
 3. What assumptions does Catt make about her audience and what they need to do?
 4. How might anti-suffragists have responded to Catt's strategic call to action?
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GROUP 2: Radical Tactics - Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party (1917)

Historical Context

Alice Paul broke with NAWSA in 1913 to form the National Woman's Party, which employed more militant tactics including picketing the White House during World War I. Picketers were arrested, jailed, and force-fed when they went on hunger strikes.

Primary Source Materials

Images to analyze:

- Photographs of suffragists picketing outside the White House gates in 1917
- Signs reading: "Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?" and "We Shall Fight for the Things We Have Always Carried Nearest Our Hearts—For Democracy"
- Newspaper accounts of arrests and imprisonment of picketers
- Reports of force-feeding of hunger strikers in Occoquan Workhouse

Historical Note: Over 500 women were arrested for picketing between 1917-1919. Many were sentenced to workhouses where they faced brutal conditions.

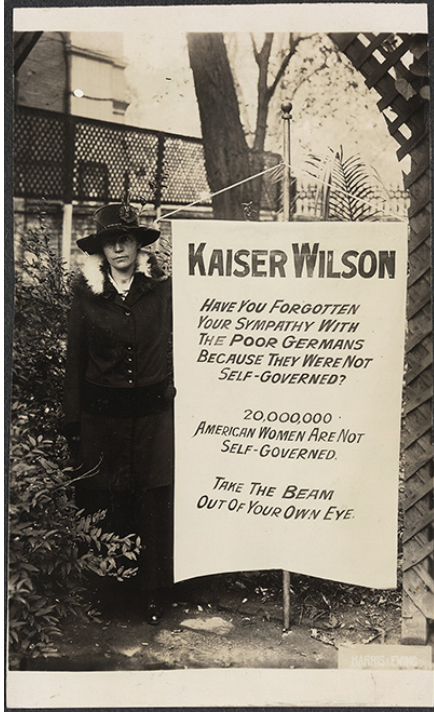


Figure 1 Harris & Ewing. Virginia Arnold (b. 1880), holding "Kaiser Wilson" banner, August 1917. Reproduction. NWP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (094.00.00)



Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. How did the National Woman's Party's tactics differ from NAWSA's approach?
2. Why do you think Alice Paul chose to picket the White House during wartime?

3. What risks did women take by participating in these demonstrations?
 4. How might the public have viewed these "militant" suffragists differently from moderate suffragists?
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GROUP 3: Anti-Suffrage Perspective

Historical Context

Opposition to women's suffrage was organized and well-funded. The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS) was founded in 1911. Anti-suffragists included both men and women who believed voting would damage women, families, and society.

Primary Source Materials

Anti-Suffrage Arguments (from pamphlets and postcards, 1900s-1910s):

- "Women do not want to vote. The great majority of women do not wish the burden of the ballot placed upon them."
- "Voting would mean competition of women with men instead of co-operation."
- "Women's suffrage would double the ignorant vote and put the home under the rule of the most ignorant."
- "The mother's influence is needed in the home. She cannot be two places at once."

Visual Arguments: Anti-suffrage postcards depicted:

- Neglected children crying while mothers attended political meetings
- Men forced to do housework and childcare (portrayed as humiliating)
- Suffragists depicted as masculine, aggressive, or unattractive
- Predictions of family breakdown and social chaos



Figure 2: Gustin, E. W., Artist. Election Day!. , ca. 1909. Jan 21. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/97500226/>.

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. What are the main fears expressed by anti-suffragists about women voting?
2. What assumptions do these arguments make about women, men, and family roles?
3. Who do you think these arguments were designed to persuade?
4. How do these arguments reflect broader anxieties about social change in early 20th century America?

GROUP 4: The Race Question - Ida B. Wells and the 1913 Suffrage Parade

Historical Context

The 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession in Washington, D.C. drew over 5,000 participants the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. Black suffragists, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, faced pressure to march separately from white suffragists.

Primary Source Account

From the *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1913:

Grace Wilbur Trout, president of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association, informed the Illinois delegation that parade organizers "advised us to keep our delegation entirely white" because southern women would not march otherwise.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett responded, her voice trembling with emotion: "If the Illinois women do not take a stand now in this great democratic parade then the colored women are lost...There is a difference which you probably do not see. I shall not march with the colored women. Either I go with you or not at all. I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race."

Wells-Barnett initially left the room when told to march separately. However, when the parade began, she emerged from the crowd and joined the Illinois delegation in the middle of the march. Two white Illinois suffragists, Virginia Brooks and Belle Squire, walked by her side in solidarity.

Context: NAWSA leadership often excluded or marginalized Black women to avoid alienating southern white support. After the 19th Amendment passed, many white suffrage organizations defined Black voting rights as "a race issue, not a gender issue."



Figure 3: Ida B. Wells and the Alpha Suffrage Club marching. From the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 5, 1913. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-noble-endeavor-ida-b-wells-barnett-and-suffrage.htm>

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. What strategic compromises was the suffrage movement willing to make regarding race?
 2. What was at stake for Ida B. Wells in this confrontation?
 3. How does this incident reveal tensions within the suffrage movement?
 4. Why might the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act be considered more significant than the 19th Amendment for Black women's voting rights?
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GROUP 5: Wartime Arguments - Women's War Work and Suffrage (1917-1918)

Historical Context

During World War I, American women took on new roles in factories, offices, and volunteer organizations. Suffragists argued that women's patriotic service proved they deserved full citizenship rights.

Primary Source Arguments

Suffragist propaganda (1917-1918):

- Posters showing women in war work with text: "Women are serving. Give them the right to vote."
- References to British women receiving suffrage in recognition of war service
- Arguments that it was hypocritical to ask women to support democracy abroad while denying them democracy at home



Figure 4 Harris & Ewing, photographer. WOMAN SUFFRAGE. BONFIRE ON SIDEWALK BEFORE WHITE HOUSE. District of Columbia Washington D.C. Washington D.C. United States, 1918. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016869613/>.

Example: National Woman's Party picketers held signs quoting President Wilson's war speeches back at him: "We Shall Fight for the Things We Have Always Carried Nearest Our Hearts—For Democracy, For The Right of Those Who Submit To Authority To Have A Voice In Their Own Governments."

Opposing view: Some argued women should postpone suffrage demands during wartime to focus on patriotic service. Alice Paul's wartime picketing was seen by some as unpatriotic and resulted in arrests.

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. How did World War I change the suffrage debate?
 2. Why was it effective for suffragists to quote Wilson's own democratic rhetoric?
 3. What tensions existed between "militant" and "patriotic" approaches during wartime?
 4. How might opponents have criticized using war service to justify voting rights?
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GROUP 6: Working Women's Perspective - Rose Schneiderman and Labor Suffrage

Historical Context

Rose Schneiderman, a Polish Jewish immigrant and cap maker, became a leading labor organizer and suffrage speaker. She connected voting rights to economic justice and workers' rights, particularly for immigrant and working-class women.

Primary Source Excerpt

Rose Schneiderman, speaking to New York senators (1912):

"We hear our anti-suffragettes saying, 'Why, when you get the vote it will hinder you from doing welfare work, doing uplift work.' Who are they going to uplift? Is it you and I they want to uplift? I think if they would lift themselves off our shoulders they would be doing a better bit of useful work..."

We want to tell our Senators that the working women of our State demand the vote as an economic necessity. We need it because we are workers and because the workers are the ones that have to carry civilization on their backs.

What does all this talk about becoming mannish signify? I wonder if it will add to my height when I get the vote. I might work for it all the harder if it did. It is too ridiculous, this talk of becoming less womanly, just as if a woman could be anything else except a woman."

Schneiderman's famous phrase (1912): "What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist—the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too."

Discussion Questions for Your Group

1. How does Schneiderman's argument for suffrage differ from middle-class suffragists' arguments?
 2. What does she mean by "bread and roses"? Why is this phrase significant?
 3. How does Schneiderman use humor to respond to anti-suffrage arguments?
 4. What class tensions within the suffrage movement does her speech reveal?
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Whole-Class Discussion Questions (After Group Presentations)

1. **Conflicting Strategies:** What were the main strategic disagreements within the suffrage movement? Which approach do you think was most effective?
 2. **Compromise and Principle:** When, if ever, is it acceptable for a social movement to compromise its principles (like racial equality) to achieve its primary goal?
 3. **Multiple Perspectives:** How did race, class, and ethnicity shape different women's experiences of and arguments for suffrage?
 4. **Opposition:** Why do you think women as well as men opposed women's suffrage? What does this tell us about social change movements?
 5. **Historical Parallels:** What similarities do you see between the suffrage movement's debates and contemporary social movements?
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