

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE



Abigail Adams and other isolated voices urged voting rights for women at the time of the American Revolution, to no avail. In 1848 women convened at Seneca Falls, New York, to demand legal and political rights, including the vote, and they kept up their demand during the postwar debate on the enfranchisement of the freedmen. In 1869 two organizations emerged, the National Woman Suffrage Association, which fought for federal voting rights via a Constitutional amendment, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which sought victories in the states. A woman suffrage amendment was introduced in the Senate in 1878 but gained little backing and was seldom debated. By the 1890s nineteen states allowed women to vote on school issues; three allowed them to vote on tax and bond issues; Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho allowed full political rights.

In 1890, fearing (correctly) that the movement was about to stall in the face of the typical male view that "equal suffrage is a repudiation of manhood," the two main suffrage organizations combined in the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which focused its efforts on the most promising states and on Congress. Raising the level of argument and agitation as best they could, suffrage leaders met annually to resolve, write, speak, and strategize. Several more states now gave women the vote, including the key battlegrounds of Illinois and New York. Pressure thus built in Congress to pass a suffrage amendment.

World War I proved the turning point. President Woodrow Wilson, an opponent of woman suffrage, wanted women's organizations to support the war. Most of them did so and even served in the government—but only after he promised to support a suffrage amendment. Wilson told the Senate in 1918 that the vote for women was "vital to the winning of the war." In 1919 Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment. Ratification came the next year. After a century of struggle, women had the vote.

Born in Wisconsin in 1859, Carrie Chapman Catt, whose presidential address to the Woman Suffrage Association in 1902 is reprinted below, worked her way through Iowa State Agricultural College, read law, was a high-school principal, and in 1883 became one of the country's first female school superintendents. Twice widowed, in the

1880s Catt became an organizer for women's suffrage in Iowa, and in 1900 succeeded the great suffragist, Susan B. Anthony, as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. In 1915 she led a drive to make New York the first eastern state to give the vote to women. She then helped lead the campaign that finally resulted in the Nineteenth Amendment that gave the vote to women everywhere in the country. Increasingly committed to the struggle for world peace, Catt was a staunch supporter of the League of Nations and later the United Nations. When she died in New York in 1947, she was widely recognized as one of the outstanding women of her time.

Questions to Consider. Why did Catt in this address argue that women faced twice the obstacles to popular voting that ordinary men had faced previously? Did it strengthen or weaken her argument for suffrage to mention specific instances of sex prejudice, as she did in paragraph four? Was she right to describe such prejudice as "outside the domain of reason"? What did Catt mean by the "New Woman"? Were the opponents of women's suffrage all male? Catt's last paragraph argues that the liberty from male domination that women had finally achieved in their homes should now logically be extended to freedom from male domination in politics. Was Catt right that all women as of 1902 had achieved domestic independence? If so, do you find this reasoning persuasive?



Address to the Woman Suffrage Association (1902)

CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT

The question of woman suffrage is a very simple one. The plea is dignified, calm and logical. Yet, great as is the victory over conservatism which is represented in the accomplishment of man suffrage, infinitely greater will be the attainment of woman suffrage. Man suffrage exists through the surrender of many a stronghold of ancient thought, deemed impregnable, yet these obstacles were the veriest Don Quixote windmills compared with the opposition which has stood arrayed against woman suffrage.

Woman suffrage must meet precisely the same objections which have been urged against man suffrage, but in addition, it must combat sex-prejudice, the oldest, the most unreasoning, the most stubborn of all human idiosyncracies.

What *is* prejudice? An opinion, which is not based upon reason; a judgment, without having heard the argument; a feeling, without being able to trace from whence it came. And sex-prejudice is a pre-judgment against the rights, liberties and opportunities of women. A belief, without proof, in the incapacity of women to do that which they have never done. Sex-prejudice has been the chief hindrance in the rapid advance of the woman's rights movement to its present status, and it is still a stupendous obstacle to be overcome.

In the United States, at least, we need no longer argue woman's intellectual, moral and physical qualification for the ballot with the intelligent. The Reason of the best of our citizens has long been convinced. The justice of the argument has been admitted, but sex-prejudice is far from conquered.

When a great church official exclaims petulantly, that if women are no more modest in their demands men may be obliged to take to drowning female infants again; when a renowned United States Senator declares no human being can find an answer to the arguments for woman suffrage, but with all the force of his position and influence he will oppose it; when a popular woman novelist speaks of the advocates of the movement as the "shrieking sisterhood"; when a prominent politician says "to argue against woman suffrage is to repudiate the Declaration of Independence," yet he hopes it may never come, the question flies entirely outside the domain of reason, and retreats within the realm of sex-prejudice, where neither logic nor common sense can dislodge it. . . .

Four chief causes led to the subjection of women, each the logical deduction from the theory that men were the units of the race—obedience, ignorance, the denial of personal liberty, and the denial of right to property and wages. These forces united in cultivating a spirit of egotism and tyranny in men and weak dependence in women. . . . In fastening these disabilities upon women, the world acted logically when reasoning from the premise that man is the race and woman his dependent. The perpetual tutelage and subjection robbed women of all freedom of thought and action, and all incentive for growth, and they logically became the inane weaklings the world would have them, and their condition strengthened the universal belief in their incapacity. This world taught woman nothing skillful and then said her work was valueless. It permitted her no opinions and said she did not know how to think. It forbade her to speak in public, and said the sex had no orators. It denied her the schools, and said the sex had no genius. It robbed her of every vestige of responsibility, and then called her weak. It taught her that every pleasure must come as a favor from men, and when to gain it she decked herself in paint and fine feathers, as she had been taught to do, it called her vain. . . .

When at last the New Woman came, bearing the torch of truth, and with calm dignity asked a share in the world's education, opportunities and duties, it is no wonder these untrained weaklings should have shrunk away in horror. . . . Nor was it any wonder that man should arise to defend the woman of the past, whom he had learned to love and cherish. Her very

weakness and dependence were dear to him and he loved to think of her as the tender clinging vine, while he was the strong and sturdy oak. He had worshiped her ideal through the age of chivalry as though she were a goddess, but he had governed her as though she were an idiot. Without the slightest comprehension of the inconsistency of his position, he believed this relation to be in accordance with God's command. . . .

The whole aim of the woman movement has been to destroy the idea that obedience is necessary to women; to train women to such self-respect that they would not grant obedience and to train men to such comprehension of equity they would not exact it. . . . As John Stuart Mill said in speaking of the conditions which preceded the enfranchisement of men: "The noble has been gradually going down on the social ladder and the commoner has been gradually going up. Every half century has brought them nearer to each other"; so we may say, for the past hundred years, man as the dominant power in the world has been going down the ladder and woman has been climbing up. Every decade has brought them nearer together. The opposition to the enfranchisement of women is the last defense of the old theory that obedience is necessary for women, because man alone is the creator of the race.

The whole effort of the woman movement has been to destroy obedience of woman in the home. That end has been very generally attained, and the average civilized woman enjoys the right of individual liberty in the home of her father, her husband, and her son. The individual woman no longer obeys the individual man. She enjoys self-government in the home and in society. The question now is, shall all women as a body obey all men as a body? Shall the woman who enjoys the right of self-government in every other department of life be permitted the right of self-government in the State? It is no more right for all men to govern all women than it was for one man to govern one woman. It is no more right for men to govern women than it was for one man to govern other men.