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We Owe It All to Them: Suffragettes Then and Now

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The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, which guarantees and protects a woman's constitutional right to vote. This anniversary offers an opportunity to reflect on this milestone of democracy and to explore its relevance to the suffragette of today. To understand "now," a short review of "then" is useful.

The entry of the United States into World War I was pivotal to the women's suffrage movement. In 1917, the [National American Woman Suffrage Association](#) encouraged its supporters to join in the U.S.'s war efforts using that contribution to argue that women deserved the right to vote because they were patriots, caregivers, and mothers. At this same time, the National Woman's Party [began daily pickets](#) of the White House demanding that the government take action to create voting rights for all women. Together these two groups pushed the nation towards acceptance of woman's suffrage, including support from President Woodrow Wilson who, although an early objector to such rights, ultimately became a vocal supporter telling members of the U.S. Senate, "We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" The result was the August 18, 1920 ratification of 19th Amendment which states, "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."

After ratification, female activists began to use the power of the female vote to press Congress into reforming social issues, including legislation for mothers and infant care, marital rights, and even a 1923 proposal for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to ban discrimination based on sex. World War II brought women into the workplace and with it, perhaps a broader view of their worlds and their power to influence legislation and policy. Then, the 1960s brought a renewal of a demand for the passage of the ERA (which continues to this day), and legislation to ensure that women of color were afforded their right to vote. It wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, that all women, without regard to race or ethnicity, were granted the same right to vote that white women had enjoyed for over 40 years.

Jump ahead to 2020 and we see the new suffragettes in the form of governors, mayors, congresswomen, senators, and activists: Stacey Abrams helped register over 800,000 new voters in the state of Georgia in advance of the 2020 presidential election, and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, and other women made credible runs for the U.S. presidency leading up to the 2020 election. However, are we using our right of suffrage to its fullest as those women in white did in 1920?

The adage "when women vote, women are elected" was going to serve as the basis of this feature, but upon deeper consideration, this isn't accurate in recent election years. The statistics of voter turnout in the last decade or so demonstrate that we CAN do better. Without a doubt, there was historic voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election – over 150 million Americans cast their ballots. But did you know that barely over 50 percent of the voters turning out were women?¹ Hard to believe considering that women made up more than 60 percent of eligible voters in every prior presidential election dating back to 2000!²

Midterm elections tell a similar, but no less valid story – women voters turn out in the 40 percent range historically, but in the 2018 midterm election more than 50 percent of voters were women.³

In 2016, when 63.3 percent of voters were women, we elected 105 U.S. Congresswomen into the House of Representatives, out of the 535 total representatives. But in the 2018 midterm election, when only 50.6 percent of voters were women, we elected five more Congresswomen, for a total of 110 (of 535). And this year, when only 52 percent of the voters in the presidential election were women, we elected a record 127 women to the House of Representatives, making up 23.7 percent of the 535 Congresspeople representing our country.⁴

While the work of the suffragettes is far from over, neither is the battle – the battle to get equal representation in the highest bodies of government. How can we – working women, mothers, daughters, sisters, nieces, cousins – continue the work of the suffragettes who fought so tirelessly for our right to vote? We can reach out to other women, those in our families, in our inner circles, in our extended networks, and encourage them to vote. Encourage them to vote not just in the "big ticket" elections (i.e., every four years in a presidential election), but in every election in their municipality, county, and state. Change starts at home, and we can all do better to help encourage and empower the women in our lives to vote – make sure they're registered, make sure they request their mail-in ballots (at least until COVID is behind us), and make sure they are educated about the candidates that best fit with their ideologies. No matter your political beliefs, we think we can all agree that the future becomes brighter when we all vote.

And in the wise words of Eve's father, Lindsay Cann, "If you don't know who to vote for, vote for the woman."

¹ See <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-elections/exit-polls>, last accessed November 18, 2020.

² See <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf>, last accessed November 18, 2020.

³ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1096293/voter-turnout-midterms-by-gender-historical/>, last accessed November 18, 2020.

⁴ See <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2020>, last accessed November 18, 2020.