The 19th Amendment's Effect on the Political Climate of the United States of America

By William Sherrill, Lincoln Academy

The 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified on August 18th, 1920 giving American women the right to vote. Since the amendment's inception, women have played a pivotal role in the United States' elections. In fact, more women voted more often than men since 1964 (Center for American Women and Politics.) In a modern democracy, voting is not just a privilege, it is a right. By allowing women to vote, the 19th Amendment ensured that government actions reflect the wishes of the entire people.

The first hints of women’s suffrage began in the mid 1800s. In 1848 the Seneca Falls Convention was held to discuss "the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women" (Seneca County (NY) Courier.) A suffragist by the name of Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the meeting. She presented a paper called The Declaration of Sentiments; the goal of this document was to draw attention toward the suffragist movement. Stanton gained recognition from her work with the convention, and soon she met Susan B. Anthony. The pair would later go on to lead the National Woman Suffrage Association.

Despite the traction it was gaining, the suffragist movement was halted in 1861 by the start of the Civil War. However, upon the war's end, many women attempted to widen the 15th Amendment to include females. This attempt proved futile. Even so, Susan B. Anthony attempted to vote in the 1872 election and was subsequently caught and arrested. The ensuing Supreme Court case, United States v. Susan B. Anthony, drew attention toward Anthony's cause. Yet the movement did not die there.

Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming all granted women suffrage before the 19th century ended. The movement had its big breakthrough 19 years later, when President Wilson responded to a query regarding the creation of a Congressional Committee on Woman Suffrage. Wilson stated: "I think it would be a very wise act of public policy, and also an act of fairness to the best women who are engaged in the cause of woman suffrage" (Wilson.) With presidential support, the amendment rapidly passed through congress and was eventually adopted on August 18th, 1920.

The process of ratifying the 19th Amendment was tedious. Thirty-six states had to ratify the amendment before it could be adopted. Many states quickly ratified the amendment but Tennessee was ultimately the deciding factor. In fact, the vote in the Tennessee House of Representatives was tied 48-48 until Representative Harry T. Bum changed the ballot. He changed his vote due to a letter that his mother had sent him, "'Dear Son ... Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt.... Don't forget to be a good boy'" (Newman). Despite being ratified nationwide, a number of southern states were late in passing the amendment. In fact, Mississippi was the last state to ratify the amendment in 1984.

Despite being adopted, the 19th Amendment did not help some women. Many black women started to experience the same voting discrimination as black men had previously experienced. They realized that states would enforce racist literacy and grandfather laws in order to stop black voters from doing their civic duty. These laws were eventually abolished, for both men and women, when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed. This act "prevents states from enforcing a range of discriminatory practices legislated to prevent African Americans from participating in the voting process" (Batten.) Despite the 19th Amendment's issues, it still plays an important role in allowing women the right to
As with any major piece of legislation, the 19th Amendment forced a change in politics. Electorally, women were no longer second-class citizens; instead women could have a voice in the government of their country. Politicians were no longer allowed to focus only on their male constituents; they now had to focus on all of their constituents. For the first time, women’s opinions mattered in government. Women with their own political ideas started running for public office. In fact, a woman had held a high public office before the 19th Amendment's adoption. Jeannette Rankin had been elected the sole Representative for Montana in 1917. The first woman was elected to the Senate in 1932. Notably, Margaret Chase Smith, of Maine, became the first woman to hold a seat in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. More recently, women have started to receive nominations for Vice President and start bids for President. The 19th Amendment granted women their inalienable right to vote and because of that, women are closer to gaining equal footing with their male counterparts. However, societal changes must occur before misogyny is no longer commonplace.

To conclude, the 19th Amendment granted women more than just their right to vote. It opened the door for women to express their thoughts in a political manner. The United States of America is stronger because of the 19th Amendment; no democracy can truly be democratic unless everyone is equally represented. Absolutely nobody should be considered a second-class citizen, especially when it comes to the rights that create the foundation of a democracy. Just like Harry T. Bum, everyone has a mother, and that woman should not be deprived of the ability to vote.

Works Cited


