Equal Rights for Washington Women

Washington State Historical Society
Women’s History History Consortium
In 2010, the State of Washington celebrates the 100th anniversary of when most Washington women permanently achieved the right to vote or “suffrage” in 1910. Washington women had voted from 1883 to 1888, but their voting rights were revoked by the Washington Territorial Supreme Court. Washington’s victory in 1910 was a pivotal event in the campaign which culminated in the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 enacting women’s suffrage nationally. With their long-standing civic voice, Washington women have made their mark in Washington history while continuing the struggle for equal rights.

THE EARLY WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In July 1848, seventy-two years after the American colonies declared their independence from England, a handful of American women called a meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, to declare independence from the “absolute tyranny” of men. Some 300 participants in the first Women’s Rights Convention — both women and men — debated the merits of a document they called a Declaration of Sentiments. Consciously modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the document declared that “all men and women are created equal.”

Just six years after the Seneca Falls Convention, in 1854, Seattle pioneer and legislator Arthur A. Denny proposed a bill in the first Washington Territorial Legislature “to allow all white females over the age of 18 years to vote.” Although it failed, Denny’s bill was the first of many attempts to enable women to vote in Washington. Washington women gained additional rights during the early years of the territory. By an 1869 law, women in Washington could share property equally with their husbands. By the early 1870s, they could vote in school district elections.
In an 1870 territorial election, Thurston County women Mary Olney Brown and her sister, Charlotte Emily Olney French, were among a handful of women who attempted to vote in Grand Mound, Littlerock, and Olympia.

They used the rationale that post-Civil War federal constitutional amendments had granted them voting rights as citizens. As the women attempted to cast ballots, as excited courier on horseback raced from the scene, yelling, "They're voting! They're voting!" The Olympia women voters were rejected but fifteen other women's votes were tallied in the election. However, their ballots did not permanently change women's voting rights in Washington.

In 1871, noted eastern suffragist Susan B. Anthony, accompanied by Oregonian Abigail Scott Duniway, embarked on a two-month tour in Washington Territory to help mobilize local suffragists. Anthony spoke before the legislators in Olympia and succeeded in getting a suffrage bill introduced, although it failed to pass. However, she joined with local men and women to establish the first Washington Territorial Woman's Suffrage Association devoted to achieving women's voting rights.
Women won the right to vote in 1883 when the Territorial legislature enacted women's suffrage, but victory was fleeting.

Seeing women as moral reformers, the saloon lobby feared a vote for women was a vote for prohibition of the sale of alcohol. In the span of five tumultuous years, the suffrage law was upheld, overturned, reinstated and overturned again. Women lost the vote, but not their voice, and for the next 20 years, fought to regain their rights.

When Washington Territory approached statehood, women hoped to persuade delegates to include the right to vote in the new constitution.

Women flooded the constitutional convention with petitions when it convened on July 4, 1889. Questions abounded: Should the issue be decided by the legislature or the people? Should women be permitted to vote in municipal elections? School elections? Only the right for women to vote in school elections was included in the constitution. The constitution was ratified by a territory-wide vote on October 1, 1889 and Washington was admitted as a state on November 11, 1889. However, the separate general women's suffrage proposal lost by 19,000 votes.
WASHINGTON WOMEN
WIN THE VOTE

Suffragists redoubled efforts in 1898 campaigning for a state constitutional amendment enabling women to vote.

The results were closer than in 1889, but the amendment still lost by 9,882 votes. Suffragists faced widespread opposition, as the anti-vote cut across ethnic, economic and political lines.

In February 1910, Washington’s legislature again put a constitutional amendment for women to vote before male voters. Suffrage leaders had twenty months to educate voters and build support before the November 1910 vote.

Under the banner “It’s a matter of justice,” they assembled a statewide grassroots organization and engaged in sophisticated media tactics.

Coalition building was critical and suffragists enlisted labor groups, suffrage organizations, trade associations, churches and local farmers’ organizations such as the Grange. Women worked to persuade the only people who could vote – their husbands, fathers and brothers.

On November 8, 1910, the amendment passed overwhelmingly – 52,299 voted in favor of ratification versus 29,676 against – a convincing, nearly two-to-one margin.

Every county approved the amendment. Not all women gained the vote. Most Native American women, immigrant Asian women, and those who could not read and speak English were all still barred from the ballot box until citizenship and other restrictions were lifted later in the 20th century.

Washington became the fifth state – following Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Idaho – to permanently enact women’s suffrage. At a post-election banquet, May Aikewright Hinson gave partial credit to “the broad-minded ideas of the men of Washington, who stand for a square deal in all things.”
Washington Women Go National

Washington's triumph in 1910 created new momentum nationally as the first 20th century state to enact women's right to vote.

It had been 14 years since a state had enacted women's suffrage. After Washington, other states quickly followed—California in 1911; Oregon, Kansas and Arizona in 1912; Alaska Territory in 1913; and Montana and Nevada in 1914. Still the battle for the national amendment was long and difficult, with Washington's voting women working to empower their sisters to vote. Finally, after decades of struggle, Congress took action in 1919. Under intense pressure, Congress passed the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution and sent it to the states for ratification. It stated that 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.

Late but Still Great

Ironically, Washington was the next to last of the 36 states needed to ratify the 19th Amendment. In March 1920, the measure carried unanimously in both houses of the Washington legislature. Representative Frances Haskell, from Pierce County, the fourth woman elected to the legislature, introduced the resolution. The state proved its "greatness" she said, by "the character of its men and women who today are extolling to all the women of America the privilege of the ballot." Five months later, Tennessee was the final state necessary to ratify the amendment, which was made official on August 26, 1920.
Many women in the 1960s and seventies pursued equal rights as “Second Wave Feminists.”

They championed equal rights amendments at both the state and national levels. They worked to bring equality in funding for women’s athletics and they pursued equal pay laws for state employees, among other causes.

Through the efforts of women’s groups including the National Organization for Women, the American Association of University Women, and the League of Women Voters, Washington voters passed an Equal Rights Amendment to the state constitution in 1972. Facing opposition from groups such as I-HOW (Happiness of Women) and the League of Housewives, the amendment narrowly passed. Materially advancing sexual equality, the legislation mandated changes to over 130 state laws relating to discrimination in insurance, credit, child support, and labor.

**Fight for National Rights**

First proposed by suffragist Alice Paul in 1923, the campaign for a national Equal Rights Amendment was revitalized in the 1970s. Congress passed the amendment to the Constitution in 1972 and sent it to the states for ratification. Washington ratified in 1973, one of 35 states to do so. But that was short of the number required and the deadline for ratification expired in 1982. The ERA has been introduced in every Congress since 1982 but not re-authorized for submission to the states for ratification.
Young women’s lives changed dramatically in 1972 when they gained equal access to athletics and academic programs in high school and college via Title IX, an amendatory section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Title IX law has been renamed the Paty T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act to honor the Hawaii congresswoman who championed its passage. The law states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal assistance.” Washington State enacted similar language for state-funded school activities in 1975.

Despite enactment of Title IX, room for improvement remained in sports-funding equity. In 1979 students and coaches at Washington State University filed suit under the state’s ERA amendment in Blair v. Washington State University. The plaintiffs’ strategy was to improve support for women’s college sports by including men’s football in determining parity funding. Although they lost the suit at first, the decision was reversed on appeal in 1987 when the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, increasing funding for women’s sports in all four-year state colleges and universities.

Today, WSU, like most state universities, boasts a successful women’s athletic program, competing in nine sports in the Pac-10 Conference.
After the state enacted women’s suffrage in 1910, Washington women began to run for office in ever-increasing numbers. Over 230 women have served in the Washington legislature since 1913.

Elected in 1912 and serving in the 1913
Washington House of Representatives, Frances C. Atwell from Burlington and Dr. Nona J. Crake from Tacoma were the first two women to serve in the state Legislature. Rhoda Hurn from Spokane was the first woman to serve in the state Senate in 1923. Josephine Corns Preston, elected in 1912 as Superintendent of Public Instruction, was the first woman to serve in a statewide office.

In the mid 1960s, women of color began holding office as well. While Representative Margorie Peter King (appointed 1963) was Washington’s first black female legislator, Peggy Marie became the body’s first elected African-American woman in 1971. Representative Velma Viktora was the first Filipina American (elected in 1992); Senator Margarita Pimentel (elected to the I-house in 1988 and the Senate in 1992) was the first Latina.

For almost 25 years Washington has been a leader in electing women to the state legislature. From 1993 to 2004 Washington led the nation in the percentage of female state legislators. In 1999 and 2000 Washington boasted the highest percentage of female legislators in the nation’s history, with 41 percent women. In 2009, women comprised approximately one-third of the state’s legislators.

Washington women have served as Superintendent of Public Instruction, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Commissioner of Public Lands, and Insurance Commissioner. Nine women have served on the state supreme court over time. Washington women have also held elected positions on local school boards, local courts, special purpose districts, city councils, county commissions and councils, and as county executives throughout the state’s history. In 2009, eight of the federally recognized tribes in Washington had women chairpersons.

Washington elected its first woman governor, Dixy Lee Ray, in 1976 and its second, Chris Gregoire, in 2004. In 2005, it became the first state to have a woman governor and two women U.S. Senators, Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, in office at the same time.