



Women's Suffrage in Oklahoma

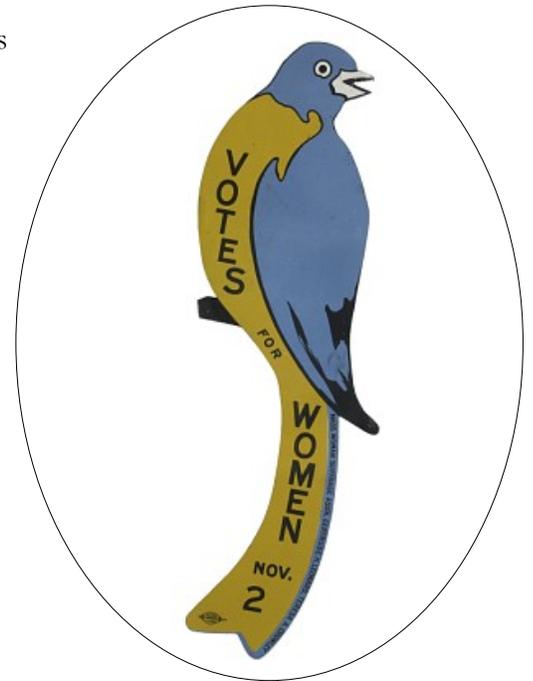
OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

The United States of America is unique in so many ways. One of the main features shaping American identity is **democracy**. Democracy is at the heart of the United States narrative, and voting is an important part of that story. Those in the United States who are 18 years or older and are legal citizens have the right to vote in local and national elections. Voting is important because it allows each individual to have their voice heard about decisions made by the government that affect politics, the economy, education, and many other parts of society. The right to vote is a defining feature of what makes the United States a democracy.

Although most citizens can enjoy the right to vote today, there was a time in this nation's history when that was not the case. The federal government did not grant women the right to vote until the year 1920 with the **ratification** of the **Nineteenth Amendment**.

Suffrage is a word meaning the right to vote in elections. So, when someone is not given the right to vote, they do not have suffrage. This exhibit discusses the road to suffrage for women in Oklahoma.

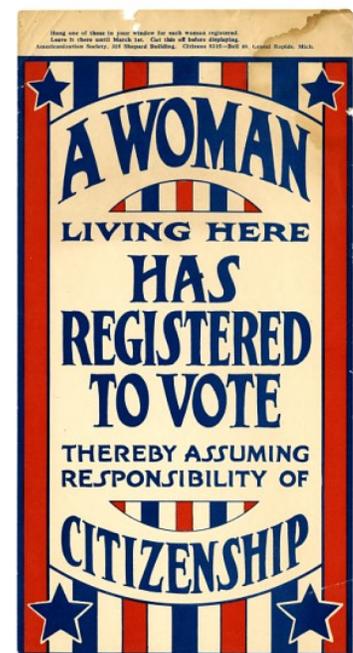
The people of Oklahoma are representative of many others across the country, some fighting for women's suffrage and some against. Suffrage was **controversial** and brought to light a number of questions for the state and for the country. Explore this fascinating part of Oklahoma history that captures the how the state helped expand democracy!



A suffrage cartoon (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).¹



Women on a wagon for a suffrage parade (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).²



A suffrage poster (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).³

Expanding the Franchise

At first, the franchise—meaning the right to vote—was restricted to only white male landowners. The qualifications for those allowed to vote changed. The right later extended to both property owners and property less white men. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment acknowledged the right of formerly enslaved African American men to vote. Eventually, in 1920 the federal government recognized women’s right to vote as well.

Gender Relation

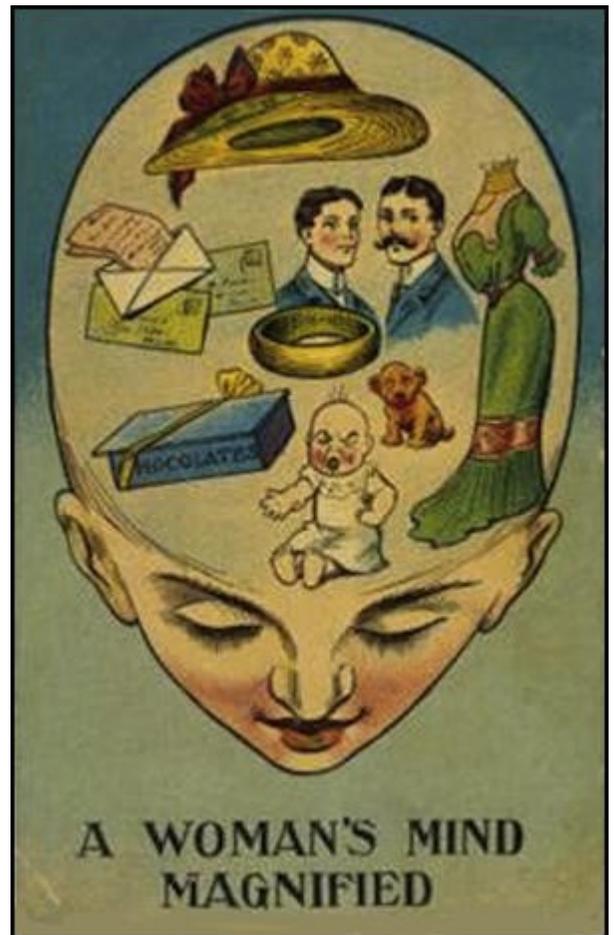
To modern-day citizens, it might be difficult to understand why suffrage for women took so many years. However, it is important to recognize that people back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries related to gender differently than we do. In the early 1900s, the United States and Oklahoma often divided the jobs and responsibilities of society based on gender. **Gender roles** are the expectations that an individual should take care of certain tasks and act a certain way simply because they are male or female. These roles made it difficult for women to be involved in politics, which was traditionally seen as a male responsibility.

The gender roles for women at this time centered on standards set by the “cult of domesticity” or the “**cult of true womanhood.**” These terms refer to the rules set for women by the culture and society of the time. These rules regulated how women should think, speak, dress, and behave. These guidelines limited women to a role in which their sole responsibility was to take care of the home and children. Anything else, such as politics, the economy, and jobs outside the home, should be left to men. Women were supposed to be **submissive** to this gender order.

If a woman wanted to participate in culture outside these specific roles, other people might see her as a poor mother or bad at being a woman. Furthermore, it was often believed that only men had the capacity to handle the more complex aspects of society. Some believed women were biologically and mentally **inferior** and less able to understand topics outside of **domestic** life.

Today, these beliefs are seen as **sexist**. Men are not better or more capable than women simply because of their gender. Women have the same mental capacity and capability as men.

However, the mood in the country and in Oklahoma was changing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to the efforts of many **suffragist** groups, made of both men and women, people began to see the roles of women in a new light. Expanding women’s traditional gender roles to include politics marks a new kind of respect—respect that allows for more diversity in government.



A 1906 artist’s take on what women think about (image courtesy of the Suffrage Postcard Project).⁴

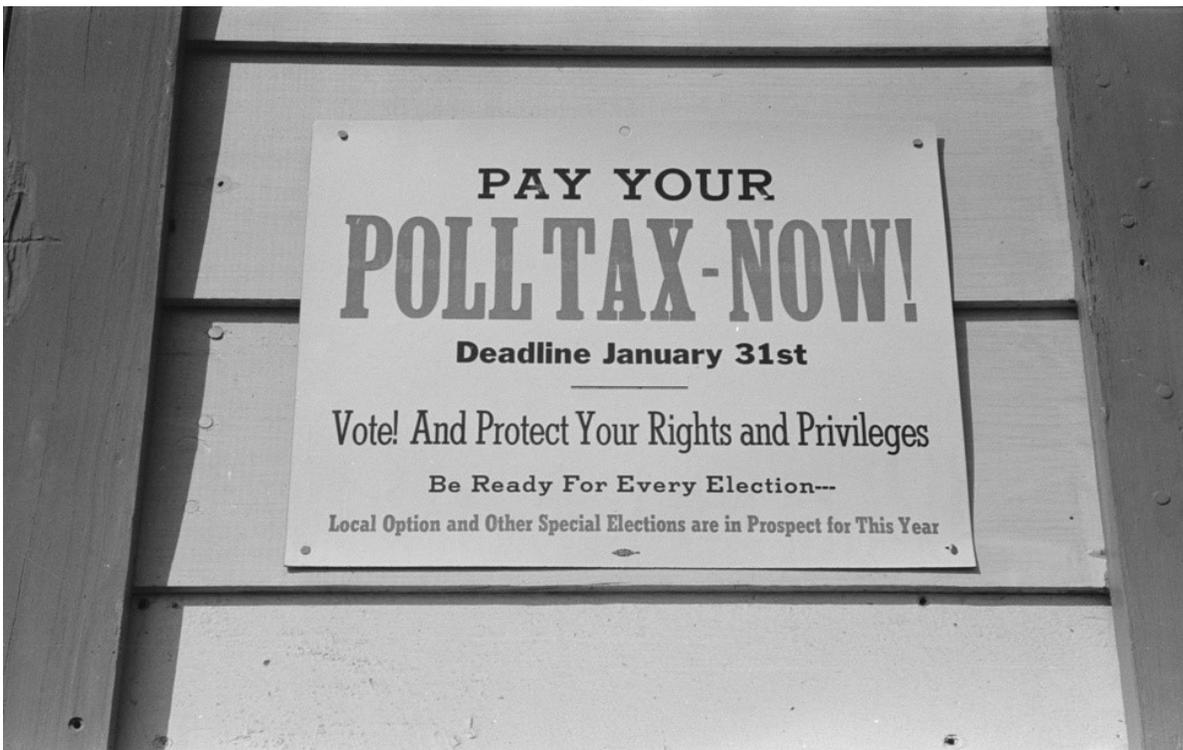
Minority Struggle

Although technically eligible to vote after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, minority women continued to face obstacles in exercising their right. In 1870 the **Fifteenth Amendment** passed, granting every male, regardless of race, the right to vote. As a result, those who did not want to extend voting to non-whites added a number of voting requirements in an effort to limit the minority vote. This same **prejudice** followed the Nineteenth Amendment when women were granted the right to vote.

These requirements came in a variety of forms. Both whites and Blacks took **literacy tests**. The government took away a person's right to vote if they failed the literacy test. Additionally, the government created **poll taxes to levy** against African Americans as a way to limit their ability to vote. Those unable to pay these expensive fees lost the right to vote. States, including Oklahoma, used these methods across the country.

The federal government denied American Indians the right to vote in a variety of ways. In 1876 the Supreme Court stated that **indigenous** peoples are not considered citizens and not eligible to vote in the United States. Further acts on both state and federal levels denied American Indians the right to vote over the years. In 1901, Congress granted citizenship and voting rights to Indians living in Indian Territory. In 1924 American Indians were granted full citizenship, yet they also faced many of the obstacles discussed above. Even after citizenship, each state had the right to determine its voting privileges for its citizens. As a result, it was not until 1962 that the last state officially guaranteed American Indians the right to vote.

Despite new ways to limit minority voting, expanding the franchise to include women also expanded minority votes. Voting gave people with traditionally less power more representation.



A sign for poll taxes (image courtesy of the Library of Congress.)⁵

Suffrage as a Social Movement

The suffrage battle was mainly fought through a variety of **social movements**. Citizens often formed groups and organizations to promote their position. Both those in support of women's suffrage and those against women's suffrage developed these organizations or "societies." Both sides of the suffrage movement found ways to convince the public of their position.

These organizations commonly spread their arguments by publishing bulletins, pamphlets, and magazines. These little booklets or leaflets typically provided a summary of their position alongside drawings or cartoons. This type of literature resembled the **propaganda** circulating for the war effort.

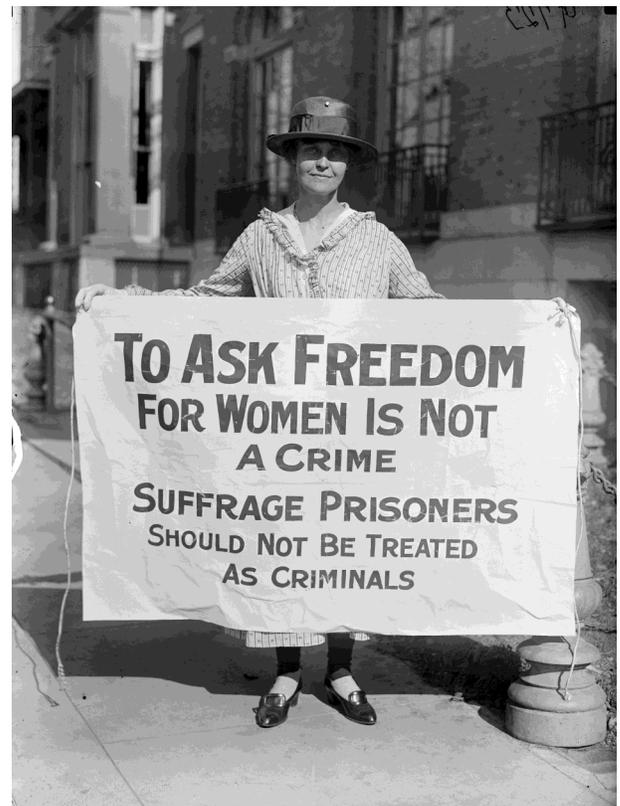
In addition to literature, both sides organized associations, participated in rallies, and **petitioned** the government about suffrage.



A suffrage magazine (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).⁶



An anti-suffrage poster (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).⁷



A suffrage protestor (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).⁸

Impact of World War I on Suffrage

The United States entered **World War I** in the year 1917. The war effort demanded men from all over the country, including Oklahoma, to go overseas and fight in Europe. In order for families to keep an income and free their men up to fight in the conflict, many women stepped up and took on jobs previously held by the men. Women also participated in the **Red Cross** and in **Liberty bond** sales. The role that women had in aiding the country in this way led to female **empowerment**.

The sacrifice women made during the war showed their patriotism. Their effort helped prove to men that women had the ability to engage in society and politics outside the home. After the war, many women began to advocate more persistently for suffrage since they felt they had proved themselves capable of managing responsibilities outside of domestic life.



Political cartoon of Uncle Sam saying that this female army nurse is worthy enough to vote (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).⁹

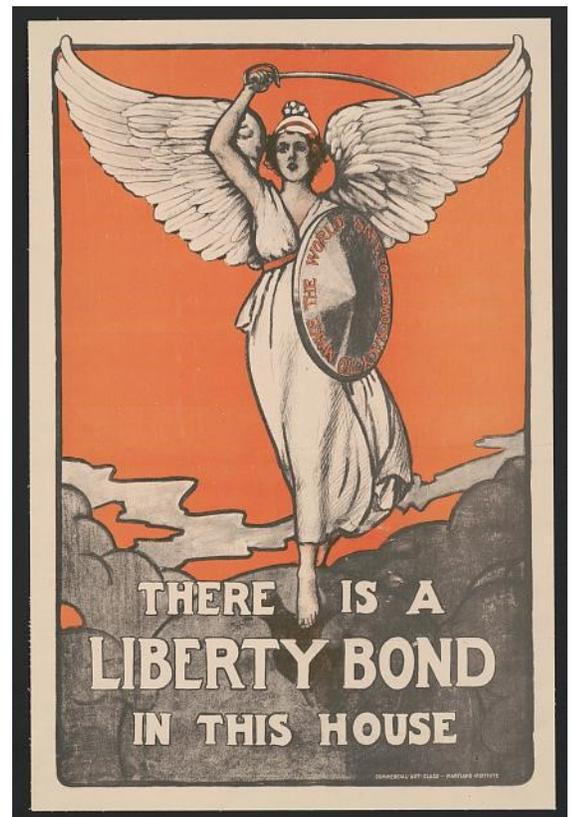


Image of a Liberty bond poster (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).¹⁰

Suffragists

The term “suffragist” refers to a person in favor of equal voting rights. Oklahoma had both male and female suffragists who developed organizations to more effectively **lobby** for women’s right to vote.



A suffrage pin (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).¹¹

WSAO is not the only suffrage organization developed at this time. The Territorial Woman Suffrage Association and the Oklahoma Territory Equal Suffrage Association are both examples of suffrage organizations that led to the creation of the Oklahoma Woman’s Suffrage Association. These groups were active in politics and proposed suffrage bills to the state legislature a number of times before the bill finally passed in 1918. See the “Amendment Process” page for more details on the political process!

Prohibition refers to the effort made to limit alcohol in society. Prohibitionists sought to end the production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol. Women led the prohibition movement. These leaders felt that too much alcohol led to bad behavior at home, at work, and in society. Prohibitionists developed organizations called **temperance unions** to help produce **reform**.

The women of these temperance organizations wanted to use their vote to add prohibition laws. As a result, prohibition and suffrage were closely linked. The **Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)** formed in Oklahoma Territory and began the fight for suffrage in the territory when it later joined forces with **National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)** in 1890. This group eventually established a separate chapter for the territory called the Women’s Suffrage Association of Oklahoma (WSAO). The



A suffrage postcard (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).¹²



A group of suffragists picketing (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).¹³

Anti-Suffragists

Anti-Suffragists opposed women gaining the right to vote. Interestingly, both men *and* women made up the groups of anti-suffragists. It can be difficult to understand why some women were opposed to gaining suffrage; however, many women agreed with the men who worried that allowing women to vote resulted in poor family care and **contradicted** female cultural responsibilities.

As discussed, prohibition played a role in women's suffrage. On the other side of prohibition were the pro-alcohol or pro-liquor parties that opposed women's suffrage in an effort to maintain the business and distribution of alcohol. Worried that giving women the right to vote would result in further restriction or even end the alcohol business, pro-liquor factions, such as the Saloon Keeper's League, joined forces with anti-suffrage organizations.

Institutions like the **National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS)** established the Oklahoma Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage in reaction to the growing call for suffrage. The Oklahoma Anti-Suffrage Association was established in 1918 with Alice Robertson as president. Anti-Suffragists did not petition, picket, and protest like the suffragists. "Antis" held that politics and speaking in public were not appropriate for a woman. Instead, anti-suffragists held teas and fundraisers while subtly handing out literature to state legislators.



The headquarters for the NAOWS (image courtesy of the Library of Congress.)¹⁴

The Amendment Process



Robert L. Owen (18516, W. P. Campbell Collection, OHS).¹⁵

Suffragists tried year after year to add equal voting rights to the state constitution in Oklahoma. Efforts began in 1890 when the **Women's Christian Temperance Union** proposed the suffrage issue to the House of the first Oklahoma Territorial Legislature. The House voted "no" but did grant women the right to vote in school elections.

Again, in 1897 and 1899, supporters of equal voting brought the suffrage amendment to the territorial legislature. The proposal passed in the House both times; however, the Committee on Elections of the Council postponed ratification, which gave anti-suffragists the chance to rally support within the legislature resulting in its rejection.

The Constitutional Convention in 1906 marked a massive effort by Oklahoma suffragists who secured support from suffrage organizations around the country. There was also support for suffrage within the group of delegates. Male political leaders who supported suffrage at the Convention include successful lawyer and eventual US senator, Robert L. Owen, and union leader, Peter Hanraty.

Despite seemingly widespread support, certain influential delegates such as president of the convention, William Murray, and Democratic Majority Leader Charles Haskell led a strong opposition campaign against suffrage.

In addition to a strong anti-suffrage presence at the convention, delegates passed through a town holding school elections. The voters were mostly African American. As discussed in the "minority struggle" section of the exhibit, the desire to withhold the vote from Blacks was a major motivating factor in denying suffrage. Many delegates voted against suffrage and the proposal died.



Governor Charles Haskell (4301.A, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).¹⁶



A print of all the delegates present at the 1906 Oklahoma Constitutional Convention (21412.M3831.1 , Z.P. Meyers/Barney Hillerman Photographic Collection, OHS).¹⁷

In 1910 a widespread petition to include suffrage on the next ballot circulated throughout Oklahoma. The hope was to show state government a **constituent** majority existed in favor of suffrage. Although successful, the state also issued two voter regulations that restricted the suffragette's voice. One restriction, known as the **"grandfather clause,"** made it difficult for black people to vote. The second regulation said that any ballot that did not vote included on the suffrage question counted as a "no" vote. The combination of these regulations meant that the suffrage effort lost once again.

Suffragists saw the 1918 state constitutional vote as the next major opportunity to make equal suffrage a part of Oklahoma. The months leading up to the vote saw a social and political battle in the state. Both those for and against suffrage campaigned throughout Oklahoma and filled the press with their arguments.

W. C. McAlester, a known anti-suffragist, headed the State Election Board and did everything in his power to keep the suffrage measure from passing. His tactics included only printing half the number of ballots and limiting soldiers' access to state question ballots. After exposing these efforts as **voter fraud**, the Oklahoma House and Senate finally voted in favor of women's suffrage, two years before the Nineteenth Amendment passed!

Biographies

The women highlighted here are only a few of the many involved with the suffrage and anti-suffrage movements during the late 1800s to mid-1900s in Oklahoma. Follow the links on the bibliography page for even more information about these women and other important Oklahomans!

Katie H. Himrod Biggers (1849–1935)

Katie H. Himrod Biggers is an extremely important figure in Oklahoma suffrage history. Biggers acted as the president of the Oklahoma Women's Suffrage Association (OWSA) from 1904 to 1911. Women in Oklahoma knew it was time to organize when it appeared that statehood would be coming within the next few years.

Statehood motivated women in Oklahoma Territory because it provided a fresh opportunity to “get in on the ground floor” of **legislation**, specifically legislation that would not require **an amendment** to but could include women from the start of this new chapter of history.

In order for a piece of legislation to pass, such as the women's right to vote, there needed to be a **consensus** of more than half of the **delegates** present at a convention. Elected political representatives from around Oklahoma and Indian Territories made up the conventions. Both sides presented their arguments for or against women's suffrage. Biggers actively worked with delegates planning to attend the 1906 **Oklahoma Constitutional Convention** in an attempt to gather votes in favor of women's suffrage.

Biggers organized suffrage campaigns by mailing petition forms, traveling to speak to various organizations, and seeking political **allies** in the Oklahoma state government. A constant opponent to Biggers was Kate Barnard, an anti-suffragette, and in 1910 the two women ran against each other for commissioner of charities. Barnard won by 28,796 votes.

Even after her time as the president of OWSA, Biggers continued to write pro-suffrage publications in the *Marlow Review* and other Oklahoma newspapers. She later became vice president of the Marlow Suffrage Club in 1918.



A suffrage button (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).¹⁸

Myrtle Archer McDougal (1866–1956)

Another famous Oklahoma suffragist is Myrtle Archer McDougal. One of the ways that suffragists organized was through **women’s clubs**. Oklahoma and Indian Territory maintained their own Federation of Women’s Clubs. These social organizations connected women to each other throughout the territories. McDougal was elected president of the Indian Territory Federation of Women’s Clubs from 1907 to 1908. Just a couple years later she was elected president of the Oklahoma Federation of Women’s Clubs from 1910 to 1913.

Her accessibility to the women of Oklahoma and Indian Territories was valuable in spreading suffragist and prohibitionist ideas. In addition to these causes, McDougal was also an advocate for other issues that concerned women, such as sanitation, education, and state support for families.



Myrtle McDougal (standing on left) with Democratic National Committee members (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).¹⁹

McDougal found ways to be a champion for women even after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Once women were allowed to vote in national and state elections, a number of positions opened up on a variety of federal and state committees for women. McDougal was elected to the Democratic National Committee and the Women’s Club Federation Peace Committee.

She later received a number of recognitions, awards, and degrees that all confirm her value as an influential leader in women’s rights.

Alice Robertson (1854–1931)

Alice Robertson grew up in a missionary family in Creek Nation, Indian Territory. She led a life of political **activism** and is a famous anti-suffragist from Oklahoma.

“Miss Alice” is well known for being the first woman from Oklahoma elected to Congress. Her journey began as a **stenographer** for the Indian Office in Washington, DC and soon after she became a secretary for an Indian School. Robertson displayed a passion for American Indian affairs throughout her life.

Continuing her experience in education, she began a full-time fundraising effort for Muscogee (Creek) schools and she later became the head of Minerva Home, a **boarding school** for American Indian girls. Between her educational **campaigns** and her role in providing for troops during World War I, Robertson worked with many politicians, which provided her with connections that helped her election in later years. People throughout the state recognized her as a motherly and caring figure.

Although a strong and politically active woman, Robertson advocated against women’s suffrage. She became the vice president of the Oklahoma Anti-Suffrage League. Robertson claimed she knew from her own experience that it is **burdensome** for a woman to do a man’s work.

In 1920 Robertson ran for Congress and won a seat as a Republican representative for Oklahoma. Interestingly, the same year that women gained the right to vote Robertson, an anti-suffragette, was elected to office.



Picture of Alice Robertson. (2012.201.B1093.0227, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).²⁰

Catherine Ann “Kate” Barnard (1875—1930)



Kate Barnard proved to be a woman at the forefront of politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Oklahoma. While being a strong female political figure, she is also one of the state’s leading anti-suffragettes during her time.

Barnard is known as the first woman elected to a statewide government office in Oklahoma. In her role as commissioner of Charities and Corrections, she advocated for social-justice reform. Barnard made it her mission to secure better conditions and rights for orphans, individuals with mental disorders, protection for American Indians, child laborers, and prisoners. Barnard also actively promoted education reform.

Although Barnard maintained a position as a political leader, her opinion on women’s suffrage was negative.

Kate Barnard (106, Oklahoma Historical Society Photography Collection, OHS).²¹

Activities

Interpreting Claims: Newspaper Article

Women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt pressure to live by certain cultural and social standards. Some women found these expectations to be confining, especially when it came to the ability to file for divorce.

Mrs. Jane Welsh-Strong and her husband agreed to file for divorce by claiming her freedom under the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. Mrs. Welsh-Strong argued that because her husband was not making any money, being a stay at home wife in a home with no means was involuntary servitude.

The Thirteenth Amendment reads as follows:

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

Read the excerpts below from a 1909 newspaper article published by the *Curtis Courier*, a local Oklahoma newspaper, that outline Mrs. Welsh-Strong’s arguments.

“I have to work all the time. I don’t get any money for it. My husband can’t make much money.”

“Its terrible to have to bring children into the world and know that you won’t have money enough to care for them and educate them and give them a right start in life. That’s what I call slavery. Wasn’t that one of the strongest points against slavery, that mothers were forced to see their children brought into this world without a future for them?”

“Men seem to think that washing, scrubbing, taking care of a house without means; worrying about bills you can’t pay, wanting clothes you can’t get, wishing the very best for your children, and knowing they can’t have it— men don’t see that as slavery.”

Answer the questions below.

1. What is your reaction to reading these quotes?
2. What is the connection between the Thirteenth Amendment and women’s rights? Why is this woman using it as grounds for divorce?
3. How do you think the era of suffrage was influenced by the Civil War?

Incorporating Historical Evidence: Writing Prompts

Answer the following open-ended questions with examples from the e-exhibit.

1. Why were people opposed to women gaining the right to vote?
2. How did World War I affect the suffrage movement?
3. What role did racial prejudice play in the suffrage effort?
4. How did the temperance movement affect suffrage?

Reading Critically: Image Contrast

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines propaganda as "ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause."

Evaluate the two posters below and answer the following questions:

1. What message is each poster trying to convey? What evidence is there to support your opinion?
2. How does each poster fit the definition of propaganda?
3. Why are images a powerful tool to influence people?
4. What are the positives and negatives of looking at propaganda posters?
5. Explain how you develop a balanced view of an issue.



(image courtesy of the Smithsonian)²²

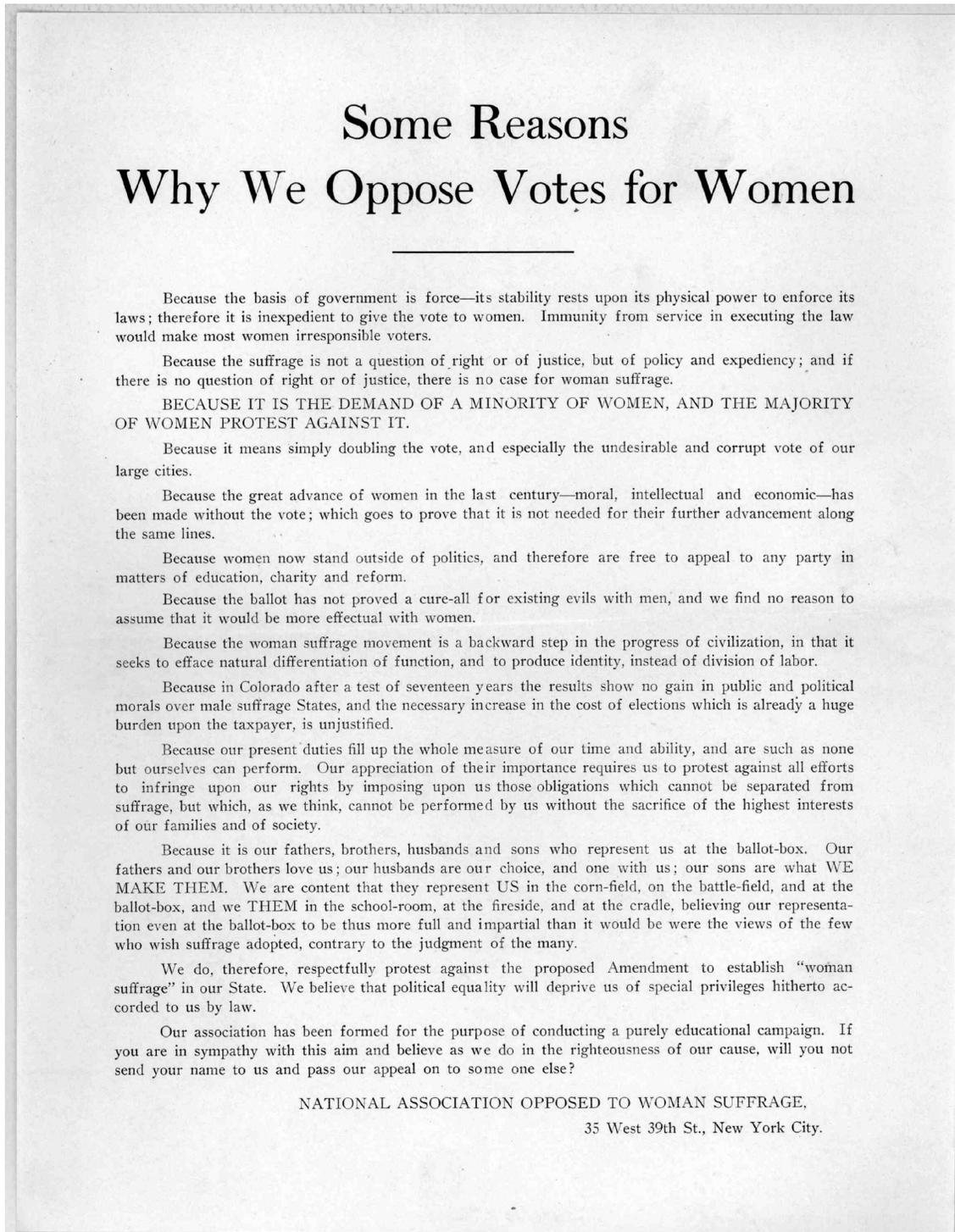


(image courtesy of the Smithsonian)²³

Reflection: Primary Source Activity

The Anti-suffragists made appeals to congress just like the suffragists. The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage wrote the article below, outlining their position. Read and answer the following questions.

1. What is your reaction to reading this article? What specific evidence from the text supports your feelings?
2. Did anything surprise you about the anti-suffrage position? Explain.
3. Do you agree with anything from the text? Do you disagree with anything from the text? Explain.



(Document image courtesy of the Library of Congress)²⁴

Constructing a Presentation: Create Your Own Banner

Suffragists commonly used banners to advertise their message during demonstrations. This was an effective way of spreading their ideas and arguments for equal suffrage. Look below to see examples of suffrage banners.



A woman holding a suffrage banner (image courtesy of the Library of Congress)²⁵

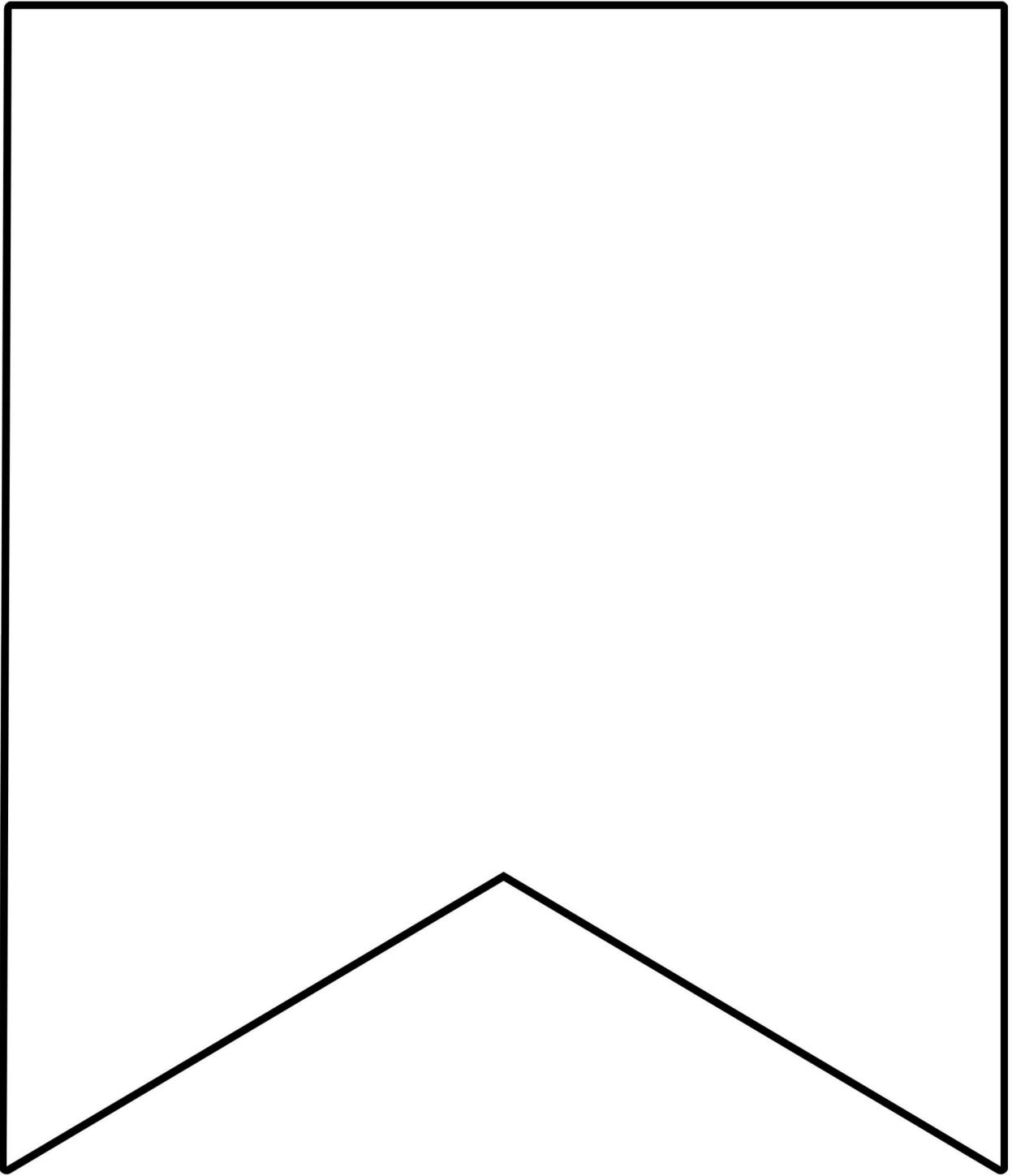


Photo of a suffrage banner (image courtesy of the Smithsonian).²⁶



Two women holding banners (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).²⁷

Now, design your very own suffrage banner! Banners typically held a brief sentence or two that promoted the suffrage cause. Think about all the information you have learned about suffrage and try to make a convincing statement of your beliefs.



Glossary

activism: Working to support or oppose a controversial or political issue.

allies: Two parties that agree to work together for a greater cause.

amending: To change the words of a law.

boarding school: A school where students live while it is in session.

burdensome: distressing or troublesome

campaigns: An individual or group effort to bring about a desired result.

consensus: An agreement among a group.

constituent: A person who is represented by an official figure.

contradict: To be the opposite of what was previously said.

controversial: When a topic causes people to disagree.

cult of true womanhood: Cultural expectations held by some regarding female gender roles.

democracy: A system of government influenced by the whole population, typically by elected officials.

delegate: A person who represents other people.

domestic: Referring to the home and activities at home.

empowerment: Gaining freedom or power to control your own situation.

Fifteenth Amendment: The 1870 amendment to the Constitution that gave all men regardless of race or previous servitude, the right to vote.

gender roles: The expectation that an individual should be responsible for certain tasks and act a certain way simply because they are male or female.

grandfather clause: A legal mechanism used by some southern states that allowed those eligible to vote before 1866 (white men) to be exempt from the new voting requirements. This meant that Black citizens, who just received the right to vote in 1870, had to pass additional tests and pay taxes in order to vote.

indigenous: The original or earliest known inhabitant of a place.

inferior: To be regarded as less than or not as good as something or someone else.

legislation: Rules, laws, or policies made by states, the federal government, or other organizations.

levied: To bring a charge or tax against someone.

Liberty bond: A bond the US government sold to citizens to raise funds during World War I.

literacy tests: Reading tests that used to determined if someone was allowed to vote.

lobby: To advocate for something.

National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage: A major national organization working to oppose women's suffrage; founded in 1911.

National American Woman Suffrage Association: When the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association merged in 1890, it became the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

nineteenth amendment: Grants women the right to vote.

Oklahoma Constitutional Convention: The 1906 convention that created a constitution for the state of Oklahoma.

petition: To formally ask for something.

poll tax: A charge levied on a voter.

prejudice: An unfair opinion about someone or something.

Prohibition: The movement to end the sale, production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol.

propaganda: The spreading of information to hurt or help a cause.

ratification: To officially approve. The states ratified the nineteenth amendment; this officially allowed women to vote.

Red Cross: A disaster relief organization.

reform: To change something for the better.

sexist: Bias based on gender.

social movement: Action taken by a large group to achieve a political goal.

stenographer: A person who writes shorthand to record official records.

submissive: Obeying without arguing.

suffrage: The right to vote in elections.

suffragist: A person that supports the right of women to vote.

temperance unions: groups organized to limit or ban the sale and use of alcohol.

voter fraud: Illegally interfering with an election by increasing or decreasing a particular candidate's vote share.

Women's Christian Temperance Union: Formed in 1873, a national organization of women working to limit or ban the sale and use of alcohol.

Women's Clubs: It was very common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for women to organize clubs for social, intellectual, charitable or political purposes.

World War I: A war fought from 1914 to 1918 between the Allies, notably Britain, France, Russia, and Italy, and the Central powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire.

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