

# A Centennial History of the Fight for the 19th Amendment

by Donna Seaman

The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified by Congress on August 18, 1920, reads in its entirety: “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. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” These 39 words reversed a grave injustice by granting America’s women, half the population, the right to vote and participate in their democracy. This succinct, straight-forward declaration was the result of 75 years of fervent, grueling, contentious, and courageous advocacy and activism.

DuBois, a history professor and woman suffrage scholar, meticulously and vibrantly chronicles every phase of this arduous, complicated, cross-country battle, profiling its leaders, tracking their evolving strategies, charting fissures within the movement, and documenting the vehement, often underhanded opposition. The story of suffrage in the United States is dramatic, infuriating, paradoxical, and saturated with sexism and racism.

DuBois breaks through the dull casings that have calcified around the best-known suffragists, including Susan B. Anthony, and brings them forward as complex and compelling individuals. DuBois also vividly, if briskly, profiles many activists who will be new to readers as she chronicles with agile exactitude and fluent analysis how the suffragist movement generated an ever-morphing network of fiercely competitive organizations. Suffragists traveled the country giving lectures and meeting with politicians, published newspapers, marched, and endured insult and injury as the battle raged on through the Civil War, the creation of new states in the West, economic crises, a presidential impeachment, and the injustices and horrors of Reconstruction.

A majority of suffragists initially called for universal suffrage, aligning themselves with Frederick Douglass and other African Americans fighting for their right to vote. But the Fifteenth Amendment, granting men of color the right to vote, struck like an earthquake. While Lucy Stone and other

suffragists supported this advance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her followers, in their rage and frustration, and with an eye to winning over states in the deeply sexist and racist South, betrayed the movement’s moral center by suggesting that suffrage be limited to females who were white and educated. Other painful schisms opened over immigrants and more daring advocacy strategies.

A new generation of young, independent career women stepped up, as well as such inspiring leaders as political strategist Carrie Chapman Catt, journalist and reformer Ida B. Wells, and educator and activist Mary Church Terrell, one of the first African American women to earn a college degree. Alice Paul, who held a PhD in political science, instigated daily picketing at the White House before and during WWI. Harassed, attacked, arrested, and brutally mistreated, Paul and her “Silent Sentinels” turned the tide.

The anti-suffrage forces included a disconcerting number of women, and politicians who restored to lies, mockery, and myriad dirty tricks. DuBois’ detailing of the sordid attempts to thwart the Nineteenth Amendment confirms the malignancy of misogyny, which is rampant still, just as our democratic system remains vulnerable to corruption. DuBois’s account of the pitched endgame skirmishes that finally brought the amendment to ratification on August 18, 1920, leaves us in awe and dismay.

*Suffrage* is one of many recent and forthcoming books appearing in recognition of the hundredth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, a landmark to celebrate, to be sure, yet there is still much to be done. Women, especially women of color, must still fight for equality. Voter suppression is still a serious concern, and the security of our elections is in jeopardy. *Booklist’s* Women in Focus project will highlight books about women throughout the year in the hope that this special coverage will inspire reading recommendations, book discussions, exhibits, and events. The more we know about our past and our present, the more progress we can make toward achieving true equality and a strong, just democracy.



★ **Suffrage: Women’s Long Battle for the Vote.**

By Ellen Carol DuBois.

Feb. 2020. 384p. illus. Simon & Schuster, \$28 (9781501165160). 324.6.