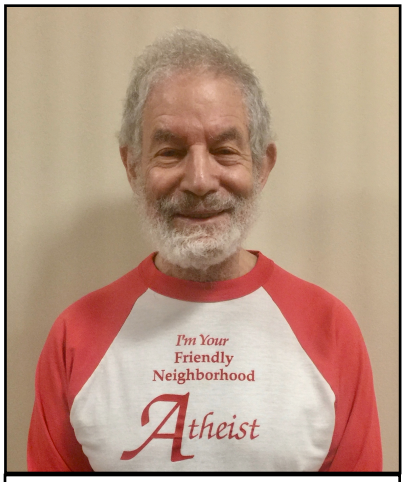
2020: The 100-Year Celebration of Women Voting

by Herb Silverman

During America's early history, women were denied basic rights enjoyed by male citizens. For example, married women couldn't own property and had no legal claim to money they might earn, and no woman had the right to vote. Women were expected to focus on motherhood and housework, not politics. In 1848, the movement for women's rights was launched on a national level with the Seneca Falls Convention organized be **Elisabeth Cady Stanton** and **Lucretia Mott**. More than 300 people attended, mostly women, but also some men, including former African-American slave, orator, author, and activist **Frederick Douglass**.



Pictured above is **Herb Silverman**. He is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Silverman is the founder of the Secular Coalition for America.

The *Declaration of Sentiments*, mainly authored by Stanton, was presented at the Seneca Falls Convention and paralleled the American Declaration of Independence, but with women included. It asserted that both men and women are endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Stanton explained how the government and a patriarchal society oppressed women. She called for women's suffrage as well as participation and representation in the government. She also referred to women's lack of property rights, and inequality in divorce law, education, and employment opportunities. The document insisted that women be full citizens, granted all the rights and privileges that are granted to men.

Following the Convention, the demand for the vote became a centerpiece of the women's rights movement. Stanton and Mott, along with **Susan B. Anthony** and other activists, raised public awareness and lobbied the government to grant voting rights to women. In 1866, Stanton, Anthony, and several other suffragists drafted a universal suffrage petition demanding that the right to vote be given without consideration of sex or race. **Thaddeus Stevens**, a congressman from Pennsylvania and ardent abolitionist, agreed that voting rights should be universal and introduced the petition in the United States Congress. Despite these efforts, the 14th Amendment, which provided equal protection under the law and gave former slaves the right to vote, was passed in 1868 without an adjustment to allow women the right to vote.

The National Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1869 by Anthony and Stanton, who served as its president for 21 years. They focused not only on female suffrage, but also on women's broader rights like gender-neutral divorce laws, a woman's right to refuse her husband sexually, increased economic opportunities for women, and the right of women to serve on juries. They were joined by **Sojourner Truth**, a former slave and feminist, as well as **Matilda Joslyn Gage**, who later helped Stanton write *The Woman's Bible*.

Even though Anthony was an agnostic, she didn't like Stanton's open criticism of religion because she feared it would lose supporters for the suffragette movement. In particular, Anthony was displeased with Stanton's publication of *The Woman's Bible*. The book was justifiably critical of religion. In *The Women's Bible*, Stanton said, "The Bible and the church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the emancipation of women," and "Surely the immutable laws of the universe can teach more impressive lessons than the holy books of all the religions on earth."

Stanton also said, "I have endeavored to dissipate religious superstitions from the minds of women, and base their faith on science and reason, where I found for myself at last that peace and comfort I could never find in the Bible and the church."

The National Woman Suffrage Association tried unsuccessfully to include women in the 15th Amendment, passed in 1870, prohibiting the government from denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

With the hope that the United States Supreme Court would rule that women had a constitutional right to vote, suffragists made several attempts to vote in the early 1870s and then filed lawsuits when they were turned away. Anthony succeeded in voting in 1872 but was arrested for that act and found guilty in a widely publicized trial that gave the movement fresh momentum. After the Supreme Court ruled against them in 1875, suffragists began a decades-long campaign for an amendment to the United States Constitution that would enfranchise women.

Activist **Alice Paul** in 1917 established a group called the Silent Sentinels which began protesting outside **President Woodrow Wilson**'s White House. For more than two years they spent six days a week holding up signs including, "How long must women wait for liberty?" and "Mr. President, what will you do for woman suffrage?"

When policemen began arresting Silent Sentinels for obstructing traffic, Paul organized a hunger strike in prison. Finally, President Wilson became a supporter of the right for women to vote.

Senator **Aaron A. Sargent**, a friend of Anthony, introduced into Congress a women's suffrage amendment in 1878 — the wording echoed the Declaration of Sentiments. More than forty years later it would become the 19th Amendment with no changes to its wording. Its text is identical to that of the 15th Amendment except that it prohibits the denial of suffrage because of sex rather than "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

The House and Senate passed the 19th Amendment in 1919, but it still needed three-fourths of the states (36) to approve. By March of the following year, a total of 35 states had approved the amendment, one state shy of the necessary three-fourths.

Southern states were adamantly opposed to approval of the Amendment. Giving women the right to vote seemed like

an expansion of the right to vote that had been "recently" (50 years prior) extended to blacks — a move the South had forcefully opposed. The South viewed the proposed constitutional amendment as an encroachment on states' rights. Also, southern white men believed the role of women in public should be very limited.

Seven southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina, Maryland, Mississippi, and Louisiana) had rejected the amendment before Tennessee's vote on August 18, 1920. The outlook looked bleak for Tennessee's voting to ratify the 19th Amendment. The state's decision came down to 24-year-old **Representative Harry T. Burn** to cast the deciding vote. Although Burn opposed the amendment, his mother convinced him to approve it. **Febb Ensminger Burn** reportedly wrote to her son on the day of the vote: "Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification." **Carrie Chapman Catt**, who campaigned for the 19th Amendment, served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and was founder of the League of Women Voters. Representative Burn later said, "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow." The 19th Amendment was finally ratified, 72 years after the Seneca Falls Convention promoting women's rights and suffrage.

On November 2, 1920 more than 8 million women across the United States voted in elections for the first time. It took almost 64 years for the remaining 12 states to ratify the 19th Amendment.

My home state of South Carolina did not ratify it until 1969. While women began to vote in South Carolina in 1920, a new law prevented them from serving on juries until 1967. Mississippi was the last state to ratify the 19th Amendment, on March 22, 1984.

The Equal Right Amendment (ERA), which would prohibit all discrimination based on gender, received the necessary ratification in 38 states. Yet because of the length of time it took for ratification, is still being litigated to determine if the ERA Amendment should be added to the Constitution. The 12 states that failed to ratify the ERA Amendment, including my home state of South Carolina, are Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, Utah, Florida, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Louisiana.

Women fighting for equality during the early part of the twentieth century focused on political equality. Yet to come were issues like workplace inequality, gender pay gap, sexual harassment, violence against women, and the #MeToo movement. Wifehood and motherhood are no longer regarded as women's most significant professions.

Women now have more educational opportunities than ever before. Nurse and teacher (and maybe Catholic nun, if you consider that a profession) used to be pretty much the only professional positions open to women. In 1900, women earned only 19 percent of bachelor's degrees. Since 1980, women have surpassed men in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred annually in the United States.

American women have certainly come a long way in many aspects of life, but progress won does not mean the struggle is over. Workplace discrimination and limited political power are good examples of issues still in need of progress. ◘

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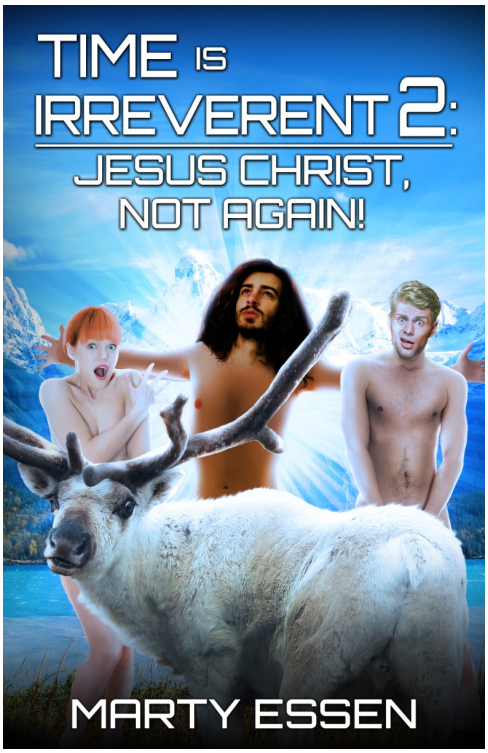

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