

# **BATTLE FOR THE BALLOT: THE STORY OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN THE UNITED STATES**

## **PANEL 1: INTRO & NATIONAL NARRATIVE**

One hundred years ago, Tennessee became the 36th and final state needed to ratify the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, declaring that the right to vote shall not be denied based on sex. It required several generations of organizers from different backgrounds, races, and sexualities to win the battle for women's suffrage in 1920. It took even longer for the U.S. to grant voting rights to women of color. As our nation reflects upon this anniversary, it is important to recognize not only the triumphs in the story of women's suffrage, but also the trials in those left behind and those who are still fighting for equal franchise.

The foundational meeting for the modern women's suffrage movement occurred in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Called together by national leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, this conference produced the Declaration of Sentiments, which proclaimed all men *and* women were created equal. For the next 70 years, a diverse group of suffragists utilized different strategies to fight for equality of the vote. Women wrote articles and lobbied in the halls of Congress, while others circulated petitions, organized marches in the streets, and held persistent watchfire demonstrations in front of the White House. A strong anti-suffrage countermovement existed, especially in the South, but the steadfast activism and combined tactics of

suffragists ultimately won support for the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

## PANEL 2: TENNESSEE NARRATIVE

### **THE PERFECT 36: TENNESSEE'S ROLE IN RATIFICATION**

The road to Tennessee becoming “the perfect 36” was long and arduous, and the struggle in Nashville was the toughest for even the most experienced suffragists. The South was a particularly difficult battleground for suffrage because many of its white citizens detested the movement’s earlier connections to abolitionism, and the subordination of women was deeply rooted in the region’s laws and religious beliefs. Despite such obstacles, black and white women leaders emerged in Tennessee and adopted a variety of tactics to win support for suffrage.

In 1889, Lide Meriwether formed the state’s first suffrage league located in Memphis, called the Equal Rights Association. During the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897, suffragists met in the Woman’s Building and formed a statewide organization. Yet, the movement in Tennessee was strongest from 1910 onward with constant lobbying of politicians and calls for mass meetings. Some of our state’s important leaders included **Anne Dallas Dudley**, who became president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage League before her election as Vice President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. There was also radical activist **Sue Shelton White**, who was the Tennessee chair of the National Woman’s Party and was arrested for White House demonstrations in 1919. Another trailblazer was educator and activist

**Juno Frankie Pierce**, who addressed the state suffrage convention in May 1920 to advocate for the black women's right to vote and equality in all forms of government.

Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment because of the hard, complicated work of these women and their fellow suffragists, who put years of intense pressure on the governor and the state legislature to stand up for equality when it came time for the final vote on August 18, 1920.

### PANEL 3: VOTING RIGHTS TODAY

#### VOTING RIGHTS SINCE 1920

- 1924 — Congress passed the **Indian Citizenship Act**, which granted citizenship to all indigenous Americans, but states still disenfranchised them from voting.
- 1961 — the **23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment** is ratified, which gave residents of Washington, D.C. the right to vote for presidents. However, these residents remain excluded from Congressional representation.
- 1965 — Congress passed the **Voting Rights Act** to remove discriminatory practices that barred people of color from voting.
- 1971 — the states ratified the **26<sup>th</sup> Amendment**, which lowered the voting age to 18 years old and ensured that young men fighting in the Vietnam War could also vote.
- 1993 — Congress enacted the **National Voter Registration Act** to make it easier for all Americans to register to vote and maintain registration.

#### Voting Rights Today

Several factors can affect a person's right to vote today. State legislatures in charge of redistricting can intentionally manipulate the district boundaries, an act known as gerrymandering, to discriminate against a group of voters based on their political views or race. The process of cleaning up voter registration lists can also affect citizens.

While it is necessary to remove voters who have died or moved, some jurisdictions wrongfully purge eligible voters, which forces these voters to cast provisional ballots or they do not vote at all. Millions of Americans living in one of the five U.S. territories do not have the right to vote in federal elections. There are also millions of Americans excluded from voting due to criminal disenfranchisement laws, which strip voting rights from people with criminal convictions. Voting rights are not guaranteed for many, so the fight for equality continues.