

Women's Equality Day

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 24 August 2022 08:48

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/women-3gen-s440.jpg>



This upcoming Friday, August 26th, is Women's Equality Day in the United States. As we celebrate the anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we also recognize there is more work to be done for equality and women's rights.

BRUNSWICK, WI - This Friday, August 26, we celebrate Women's Equality Day and the 102nd anniversary of the 19th Amendment. I personally know and work with so many women that are influential leaders and work hard for a better Wisconsin, and I find it difficult to imagine a time when women were barred from participating in our democracy and so many other elements of our society.

Twenty states and territories extended voting rights to women prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment through their own legislative processes, but Wisconsin was not among them. In 1884 Wisconsin women were allowed to vote on school matters, but a short five years later the State Supreme Court rescinded this small democratic participation. For the next thirty years, the Wisconsin State Senate and Assembly would try twenty-one times in various manners to enfranchise women, but they all would fail.

After failing on the state level in many places around the nation, women suffrage leaders and organizations started to focus on a constitutional amendment – no easy task. Yet in May of 1919, U.S. Representative James R. Mann (R-Illinois) proposed a resolution to approve the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, which was then sent to the states for ratification.

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On June 10, 1919 Wisconsin and Illinois voted to ratify the amendment, but Wisconsin became the first state to approve it when Illinois was forced to vote again a week later due to a clerical error.

It took another fourteen months for the required three-fourths of the states to ratify the Amendment, and it was by no means a popular piece of legislation. The last state to ratify, Tennessee, hinged on the vote of one anti-suffragist, who nonetheless voted in support after hearing from his mother.

Eight days later, on August 26, 1920, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby certified the 19th Amendment. A few months later over eight million women across the nation cast their ballots for the first time.

It's important to note that while the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, many women of color would wait decades to be able to exercise their right to vote due to oppressive poll taxes, literacy tests and other barriers.



It took decades and a lot of personal sacrifice on behalf of the suffragists for women to have the right to vote in the United States. Leading suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, from Ripon, Wisconsin, spearheaded the “Winning Plan” to ratify the 19th Amendment in 1916. She went on to create the League of Women Voters, which for over one hundred years has been focused on increasing voter participation in our democracy.

On Women's Equality Day we celebrate how far we have come, but also acknowledge all we have yet to accomplish. In 1984 women began to outpace men in turning out to vote in presidential elections, and that gap continues to widen.

As women continue to own more of the share of the vote, voting accessibility becomes increasingly important to keep women exercising their hard fought voting rights. Every absentee

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voting change and every early vote change disproportionately affects women.



Voting rights are fundamental for all people to own a stake in their democracy, but we can't ignore the other societal issues plaguing women in our country. Reproductive rights, pay equity and gender bias are some of the issues that must be addressed to bring about true equality.

We can and must do better for women. Huge strides in advancement over hundred years ago should give us the courage to take the big steps today for equality. I hope you will join me in celebrating Women's Equality Day with reflection and renewed action for the rights of women across Wisconsin.