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## Introduction

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# SPECIAL FORUM: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID THE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT MAKE?

## *Introduction*

**Liette Gidlow, Section Guest Editor**

As the debate over ratification of the Susan B. Anthony Amendment to enfranchise American women intensified after the Great War, both suffragists and antisuffragists believed that a great deal was at stake. Suffrage proponents promised that, armed with the ballot, women would tackle the great social issues of the day and usher in a new era of progress and peace. Antisuffragists, by contrast, worried that suffrage would damage women's elevated moral stature and threaten the very stability of life in the home. Now, in 2020, historians have the opportunity to reconsider those predictions using a century's worth of evidence. A hundred years out, what difference did the Nineteenth Amendment make?

The Nineteenth Amendment is popularly celebrated for enfranchising half the population overnight and fulfilling the American promise of democracy. Two narratives, distinct but entwined, promote this perspective. In one version, aptly termed "the master narrative" by the historian Nancy Hewitt, the woman suffrage struggle started with Elizabeth Cady Stanton at Seneca Falls in 1848 and, after much struggle and sacrifice, succeeded with the ratification of the Anthony Amendment in 1920.<sup>1</sup> In an alternative interpretation, the Nineteenth Amendment completed the American democratic project of suffrage expansion, a project that began in the early national period when states repealed freeholder restrictions and when a growing economy expanded property ownership and rendered them moot. The march toward full inclusion continued during the period of "Jacksonian democracy" when states granted "universal" suffrage to white men; traversed the color line with the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870; and concluded in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment brought women into the ranks of the voting public.

Many historians, however, question both the framing and the tenor of these interpretations. They argue instead, for example, that woman suffrage was but one of many demands made by mid-nineteenth-century women's rights reformers, and often not their top priority; or that many aspects of women's lives and politics persisted across "the great divide" of 1920, emphasizing continuity, not change; or that electoral politics was but one tool women used to bring change to their communities. Some scholars

stress that alternative strategies, like labor mobilization and community organizing, sometimes yielded tangible results when voting did not or that some women, in particular African American women in the Jim Crow South, found that after ratification they still could not vote. Others further argue frankly that, on policy grounds, the Nineteenth Amendment was a bust: the voter turnout for women in the 1920s was low, the suffrage coalition splintered, and the newly enfranchised women failed to push through a fresh wave of progressive reform. In these interpretations, not much changed after women got the vote. The suffrage amendment—highly anticipated and hotly debated—landed with a thud.<sup>2</sup>

In this forum, women's history scholars with diverse areas of expertise navigate between a triumphalist narrative of progress and a dispirited narrative of failure. These essays, although varied in approach, share three common threads. First, they recognize the intersectional identities of the women whose stories they tell and offer interpretations that reflect these complexities. Second, they extend the field of vision both backward and forward in time—backward to recall a sense of contingency for historical actors who could not know that a federal woman suffrage amendment would be adopted, and forward to identify consequences of the amendment that may have taken decades to develop. Third, they interrogate the boundaries of the nation by considering internal “borders” created by processes of racial formation and settler colonialism, spaces that were incorporated into the nation but governed by what the political scientist Partha Chatterjee called “the rule of colonial difference.”<sup>3</sup>

The authors in this forum also make the case that the significance of woman suffrage was not limited to women themselves. They illustrate how the question of women's right to vote was deeply implicated in the politics of white supremacy both before and after ratification. They highlight tensions that the amendment raised for women who, drawing on multiple sources of identity and affiliation, identified as members of communities instead of, or as well as, rights-bearing individuals. Individually and collectively, these essays contribute to a reinterpretation of the Nineteenth Amendment that is intersectional, inclusive, nuanced, and balanced.

Finally, I note with sadness the passing of one of the contributors to this collection, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. Her lifetime of work on African American women's struggle to vote continues to inform and inspire, and it was a deep honor to talk with her as she worked on her essay. Dr. Terborg-Penn completed this essay for the forum in December of 2018, and it is humbling to present here what is believed to be her last finished piece of writing for publication.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nancy A. Hewitt, "From Seneca Falls to Suffrage? Reimagining a 'Master' Narrative in U.S. Women's History," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1–38.

<sup>2</sup>Lori D. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Nancy F. Cott, "Across the Great Divide: Women in Politics before and after 1920," in *Women, Politics, and Change*, ed. Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 153–176; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920–1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); and Anna L. Harvey, *Votes without Leverage: Women in American Electoral Politics, 1920–1970* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10.