In 1776, the leaders of 13 of Britain’s American colonies launched a novel form of government: a republic, in which leaders would derive their authority from the consent of “the People,” exercised via the suffrage, or the vote. Their claim that the United States could self-govern, through elected representatives, broke with a monarchical system of government, where kings determined by hereditary succession were thought necessary for harmony and order. In the ensuing years, this founding idea, that the citizens of a republic could govern themselves, spread far beyond those the signers of the Declaration of Independence or those who ratified the U.S. constitution envisioned as “the People,” with all sorts of Americans, women included, insisting that they too could rule themselves.
The story of women insisting that they too should be able to vote in many ways began at the nation’s founding—with their large-scale exclusion. We’ll never know the full extent of women’s own strivings for self-governance, as their voices were rarely recorded and preserved—particularly those who were not free, white, or elite. But we can see that those voices existed, loud enough for the founders to hear, because they commented on how alarmed they were to see ideas about political self-determination spreading among the general populace.

Many women—those even further outside the halls of national political power—defined self-government differently. Few indigenous peoples sought to be part of this new nation, or to claim the “voting rights” it promised. Free and enslaved African Americans often concentrated instead on ending the deadly forces of chattel slavery.

If early voices raised the question of women’s voting in the years surrounding 1776, a concerted social movement did not coalesce for several decades. Beginning the history of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement in 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, where women boldly demand the right to vote at the first women’s rights convention, is a standard convention, though less a historical fact than a politically advantageous story that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony invented some thirty to forty years later. The pair created this story as a response to political crises inside and outside the women’s suffrage movement after the American Civil War (1861-1865).

In fact, by the 1840s, a discernable chorus of women were demanding the vote, among many other rights demands. The most audible part of that chorus, the antebellum women’s rights movement, which grew out of the anti-slavery struggle, took shape by the 1850s and consistently sought women’s enfranchisement. Yet the story of women and voting is much larger than this. As a result, it has numerous beginnings, because it is, in fact, many different stories—some still waiting to be told.

Inspired by the unrealized ideals of the American Revolution, determined Americans—often with women leading them—have slowly transformed this nation into a democracy: something the founders explicitly warned against. The achievement of American democracy, then, belongs to everyday citizens excluded from the founders’ visions, who leveraged social protest to forge, over centuries, a more perfect union.
Week 1: Who Should Vote?

The founding generation’s system of representative government was wildly experimental. Wary of centralized national power, their anxious debates ended up producing a patchwork system, governed by the states and localities, who had the ultimate say over who could vote within their boundaries. The federal Constitution remained mute on that issue. Although we think of the history of the franchise in the United States as a national story, its first chapters in fact unfolded in the individual states and in local institutions, where women began to bring their unfilled demands and, in some cases, even voted.

**Primary Sources:**

The evolving, improvisational nature of an American government was evident from the nation’s beginning, as the founders themselves tried to determine the basis for voting. They clearly worried about the franchise becoming wide-spread, including the possibility of it extending to women. Two more things arise in John Adams’s 1776 letter to Massachusetts jurist James Sullivan. One vexes the whole of suffrage history: a presumption that the women in question are white. The second speaks to the reasons for excluding women in the first place. Voting constituted power, and elite, white men intended to monopolize that power.


As debate raged about who might participate in the new, representative government, Abigail Adams joined the fray, telling her husband, John Adams, to “remember the ladies.” Although Abigail Adams’s 1776 demand is well known, it is often dismissed as a joke, or a throw-away line. This is mistaken. When we pair her famous “remember the ladies” passage with her other letters, we see that she was quite serious, continuing to press the issue.


Although most states required that voters be “male,” New Jersey included no such requirement in its first state constitution, meaning women could—and did—vote, if they met the other qualifications as well. New Jersey’s first constitution also had no racial qualification, and at least one African American woman is believed to have voted. After 1807, New Jersey joined the rest of the states in requiring that voters be “male,” effectively barring all women, regardless of race.

In the 1838, some women secured “school suffrage” in Kentucky, gaining the ability to vote in school elections. This ability to vote in certain types of elections, but not fully, on the same terms as men—called “partial suffrage”—was how many women over the nineteenth century experienced voting.
Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Using Abigail Adams’s online letters, read more about her life during and thought about the place of free, white women at the nation’s founding. Does she consider or see other women, who are not free, white women? Why or why not?

Using online state constitutions, look at how eligible voters are defined in original thirteen states at their founding. What are the commonalities? What are the differences?

Using online newspaper databases, find an election and read about how campaigning and voting took place. Have groups do separate searches and compare what voting looked like in different locales.
Week 2: 1848: A Rising Chorus

As women, black and white, joined the abolition movement and advanced forceful arguments on the slavery question during the 1830s, they met with backlash for breaching their idealized passive domestic roles. In response, some began defending their public, political rights, and they birthed an antebellum women’s rights movement, which took strong shape by the early 1850s. Although these women demanded the vote, they always folded it into a larger constellation of demands, from equal pay to equal education. Outside the abolitionist movement, women also agitated for rights reforms through the same mechanisms: petitioning, speaking, writing, organizing, protesting, and outright resisting. Across all of this work, women disagreed about how useful or primary the vote was, often prioritizing other reforms. The work of antebellum women’s rights, then, was not primarily centered on women’s suffrage. Those two things are neither equivalent, nor interchangeable. Yet an invented narrative around the 1848 meeting at Seneca Falls has encouraged us to believe that they are. That storyline has been largely a free, white women’s story and eclipses broad-based agitation among women of color, non-binary people, and even other free, white women—including their own, often differently located, agitation around the ballot.

Primary Sources:

People assigned female at birth sometimes who, for whatever reasons, donned “male” attire and attempted to vote, were sometimes successful. Historian Andrew W. Cohen has found multiple examples, including this 1840 instance.

- “Police Office,” *Morning herald* (New York), 16 April 1840, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Lib. of Congress, [far right column].
  https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030312/1840-04-16/ed-1/seq-1/

Some women demanded the vote before 1848. Historians have found multiple examples of New York women petitioning their state legislature for the ballot in 1846. These demands, historian Dawn Winter determined, originated among women active in the temperance movement, rather than abolition. Petitioning governmental bodies was a standard way disenfranchised women made their political voices heard and felt, especially at the state level, since states regulated voting.

Born free in Massachusetts to an upper-class Black family, Sarah Parker Remond gave her first speech when she was just 16 years old. For many Black women, destroying chattel slavery was a far more urgent call than voting rights for women. Remond leverages anxiety about the success of the American democratic experiment to condemn slavery.

- Sarah Parker Remond, “Miss Remond in Manchester,” *The Anti-Slavery Advocate*, 34:2, October 1, 1859, 274-75. [https://speakingwhilefemale.co/anti-slavery-remond/](https://speakingwhilefemale.co/anti-slavery-remond/)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped write the “Declaration of Sentiments, the manifesto issued the July 1848 women’s rights meeting in Seneca Falls, New York—a local, impromptu gathering and the first known women’s rights convention in the U.S. The nearly 300 people assembled spent two days debating the Declaration’s contents. All twelve resolutions (demands) passed unanimously, except for the ninth, women’s demand for the elective franchise. That resolution passed when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass stood to defend it.

- “Declaration of Sentiments,” manifesto from the Seneca Falls, New York, Women’s Rights Convention, 1848. [https://www.loc.gov/item/rbcmiller001107/](https://www.loc.gov/item/rbcmiller001107/)

Lucy Stone, a Massachusetts native, was one of the first women to get an equal college education, at Oberlin, where she was drawn into social activism. In 1847, she began speaking publicly for women’s rights and soon rose to prominence as a leading abolitionist and women’s rights crusader. For Stone and others, the vote was never an end in itself, but a method to change the many legal and social disabilities women faced.

- Lucy Stone, “Disappointment is the Lot of Women,” Address to the Women’s Rights Convention at Cincinnati, Ohio, October 17, 1855. [https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/disappointment-is-the-lot-of-women-oct-17-1855/](https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/disappointment-is-the-lot-of-women-oct-17-1855/)

**Secondary Sources:**


Teresa C. Zackodnik, “*We Must Be Up and Doing*”: *A Reader in Early African American Feminisms* (Broadview Press, 2010).

**Suggested Assignments:**

Why do you suppose antebellum folks were so concerned with strict sex segregation, including in voting?

Using the reader “*We Must Be Up and Doing,*” read the speeches of free, black women. What were their concerns? Where and how did voting fit into them?

In a newspaper database, search “Seneca Falls” and “woman’s rights, “narrowing to July 1848, to determine how the national press responded to news of the first women’s rights convention and its suffrage plank.

In the Schlesinger online collections, find the proceedings from the 1850 Worcester National Women’s Rights Convention and read through it. What was the new, mainstream antebellum women’s rights movement about? Make a list of their demands, in your own words. Whose interests were represented in their demands? How many have been achieved? From what states did women come—and what does this tell you? What types of women and men are there speaking and taking part—and what does that tell you? How centered is the vote?