Despite the ratification of the 19th Amendment, many women in the United States still could not vote. White primaries, “literacy tests,” and threats of violence blocked hundreds of thousands of southern Black women from casting ballots. In thirteen states, poll taxes impeded voting access for poor women of all backgrounds, but any woman there who lacked an independent income found herself vulnerable to disfranchisement if her husband or father refused to pay the tax. Most Native American women remained ineligible to vote until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act; but for many, this grant of citizenship was unwelcome, and they held fast to tribal identification instead. Unnaturalized immigrant women—who even at their century low, in 1950, numbered more than one million—could not vote under any circumstances.

Nor did the 19th Amendment address other disparities between the sexes. In 1923, at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Seneca Falls convention, suffragist Alice Paul echoed the broad call for women’s rights issued in 1848 and proposed a new amendment to ensure that “men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its
“jurisdiction.” The proposed ERA languished for the next four decades, and in 1963, the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and relying on the work of attorney Pauli Murray, produced an extensive account of ongoing sex discrimination in American life. It was a sorry list that included deep disparities in employment opportunities, pay scales, and access to education, consumer credit, jury service, and more.

Both voting rights and women’s rights were more fully realized in and around 1965, when the Voting Rights Act established effective federal oversight of elections and forged the strongest protections yet for American voters of all backgrounds. After its passage, African Americans in southern states—the largest group of persons still denied voting rights in the United States—flocked to the polls, electing African American candidates to local and state offices and transforming social movements, party politics, and policy agendas. Before the end of the decade, diverse women’s liberation movements—movements that were inflected, always, by sexual/gender identity, race, and class—sought a wide range of freedoms, including reproductive rights, welfare rights, and a revised ERA. Especially after the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision liberalizing access to abortion, conservative women counter-mobilized to challenge feminists at every turn, creating grassroots organizations that reshaped party politics.

American women’s political interests were diverse and always extended far beyond electoral politics and women’s rights. The social ferment of the 1960s brought new concerns to the fore. As the Cold War reordered relations among nations, and people of color threw off colonial rule, the United States sank deeper into the quagmire of Vietnam. American immigration policy shifted course with the 1965 passage of the Hart-Celler Act, also known as the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which opened the country to large-scale immigration from Asia and Africa for the first time. The Black Freedom and antiwar movements spawned a broad “rights revolution” in which diverse groups pressed claims for equity and autonomy in crusades for Chicano/a rights, worker’s rights, Native American rights, gay rights, disability rights, and more. Women were central actors in every cause.

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**Week 1: Race, Gender, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965**

Passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) on August 6, 1965, marked the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement. For the first time since the collapse of Reconstruction, the federal government stepped in to offer meaningful protection for southern African Americans’ voting rights. Section 5 of the VRA required states and localities with a history of voter suppression to get approval from the US Department of Justice before they changed voting procedures, giving the VRA enforcement powers that previous legislation had lacked. In the years to come, the VRA protected voting rights for Americans of every race and ethnic background and also made ballots available in languages other than English.
Black women had been laying the groundwork for the VRA for decades. Septima Clark launched literacy programs in the South Carolina Sea Islands in the 1920s to prepare local citizens to pass literacy tests. Ella Baker worked for the NAACP in the 1940s, helped organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1950s, and founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s. Dorothy Cotton trained voting rights activists as the director of the SCLC’s Citizenship Education Program. Fannie Lou Hamer focused the nation’s attention on the violence of voter suppression with her riveting testimony before the Democratic National Committee in 1964. The party rejected her attempt to desegregate the Mississippi Democratic Party that year, but in 1968, she returned to the convention as an official delegate. Important as these exceptional leaders were, uncounted and unnamed southern Black women offered essential support when they prayed, marched, organized, fed volunteers, and raised funds. They transformed their ties to family members, neighbors, coworkers, and friends into networks of resistance that inspired courage and sustained the struggle.

When President Lyndon Johnson signed the VRA into law, enfranchised southern Blacks surged to the polls. In every southern state, the percentage of registered Black voters jumped. In Alabama, it tripled; in Mississippi, it increased tenfold. But the Black Freedom Movement energized Black voters everywhere. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm (D-NY) blazed a trail to become the first Black woman elected to Congress, and in 1972, she became the first African American to run for president. African Americans succeeded in electing mayors in major U.S. cities, including Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana (1967), Coleman Young in Detroit (1973), and, in a southern first, Maynard Jackson in Atlanta (1973). In time, Black women built themselves into a decisive electoral force. Since 1994, they have displayed the sharpest partisan preference of any demographic group. And in 2008 and 2012, they produced the highest voter turnout of any group, helping to elect and re-elect Barack Obama.

**Primary Sources:**


Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

African American women in the early 1960s were still agitating for voting rights. How did their experience alter the meaning and significance of the 19th Amendment?

Reflect on June Jordan’s poem about Fannie Lou Hamer. How does the poet characterize Hamer’s trauma and contribution?
Week 2: From Voting Rights to Women's Liberation

The Civil Rights Movement precipitated a flowering of radicalized social movements in the United States from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. Civil rights morphed into Black Power; draft resistance kindled the antiwar and free speech movements; Native American and Chicano/a voices demanded redress for land expropriation and labor exploitation; and queer New Yorkers pushed back against abusive policing. Women took part in all these movements and more, and at the same time demanded emancipation for themselves.

The women’s liberation movement encompassed many movements for liberal reform and radical change. The National Organization for Women (NOW) sought inclusion and equality for women in all sectors of society and put the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion access at the top of its agenda. Indeed, the ERA enjoyed a new level of public support as Congress passed it by the required supermajorities and sent it to the states for ratification in 1972. Feminists hailed the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision as a victory for reproductive freedom. For many women, however, feminism infused the fight for other causes. Welfare rights advocates sought economic security. Women of color insisted on freedom from forced sterilization. Immigrant rights advocates pursued reforms both before and after the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 opened up immigration from Asia and Africa. Environmentalists called for pollution reduction. Marxist revolutionaries sought the end of capitalism itself. Anti-feminists, too, embraced political activism in movements to stymie school desegregation, limit abortion, and halt the ratification of the ERA. Women used ballots to advance many of these causes, yet electoral politics was never their only path to political change. Rather, they embraced tactics ranging from petitioning and professional lobbying to marches, boycotts, poetry readings, hunger strikes, walkouts, sit-ins, teach-ins, and die-ins to push their causes forward.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Describe “the” women’s liberation movement. One movement, or many?

In the 1910s, NAWSA leader Anna Howard Shaw described anti-suffragists as the “Home, Heaven, and Mother Party.” Characterize the concerns of conservative white women activists in the early 1970s. How do they echo the concerns of anti-suffragists in the 1910s? In what ways do their concerns depart from those of their early-twentieth-century counterparts?
Suggestions for Further Exploration


“Angela Davis Documentary.” In the Papers of Angela Y. Davis, MC 940, Schlesinger Library. Available at https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/sch01609c03142/catalog


Eithne Luibheid, Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).


