Two landmark events recast the trajectory of American citizenship in June 1982, and they pointed in opposite directions. The first, a major victory for social justice advocates, was led by some of the same figures in, and adopted the tactics of, the Civil Rights Movement. The second revealed how gender equality had become a wedge that cleaved the nation’s culture and politics, portending a hostile future for the democratic movements born in the 1960s.

“No one questions that the Voting Rights Act has changed the face of American politics, particularly in the South,” *Time* magazine noted in 1981, as portions of the law were soon to expire. Its advocates built a campaign that culminated in a months-long march from Alabama to Washington, D.C. to dramatize its historic significance. After a resounding victory in the House of Representatives, the act seemed stuck in the US Senate, where conservatives echoed the defense of states’ rights that Ronald Reagan had trumpeted across the southern states that carried him to the presidency in 1980. Moderate Republican senators brokered a compromise
that yielded the most bipartisan and strongest VRA yet. President Reagan signed it into law on June 29, 1982. For conservatives, this was a setback, but their movement was making inroads elsewhere.

The very next day, the Equal Rights Amendment expired after a decade-long drive to ratify it. To many feminists, the proposed constitutional amendment, which had languished in Congress for decades since Alice Paul first proposed it, in 1923, was the ultimate referendum on how sex mattered for citizenship. Buoyed by a social climate that was favorable to new notions of gender equality, both houses of Congress had affirmed the ERA by huge majorities by 1972. Feminists’ protests, persistent lobbying, and advancement into policymaking roles had made their ideas seem normal and even inevitable. But a new partnership between social and business conservatives helped make the ERA the terrain where feminists and anti-feminists fought over competing visions for society. As women-led grassroots organizations sprang up to fight the amendment, the ratification drive stalled in state legislatures, three short of the thirty-eight it needed to become law.

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**Week 1: The Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982**

The temporary provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act were set to wind down in 1982, and the fight to extend them revealed the depth of American political polarization. To those on the left, the law not only remained essential but needed strengthening, as attorney Gerald Horne explained. To conservatives like the longtime segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC), the provisions of the VRA that singled out southern states were “faulty and unfair.” He pledged to support the law’s extension if it applied to all fifty states, but opponents viewed this as a craven effort to drown its watchdogs in extra work. Thurmond and others, under pressure from moderate Republicans and civil rights activists including Coretta Scott King, ultimately supported a strong VRA reauthorization. Even President Reagan, who had once been ambivalent, called the right to vote “the crown jewel of American liberties” as he signed it into law.

**Primary Sources:**


https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/62982b

Secondary Sources:


Suggested Assignments:

Drawing from one primary and one secondary source, explain how the Civil Rights Movement of the previous two decades laid the groundwork for voting rights advocates’ victory in 1982.

Compare Horne’s description of the southern communities where a strong VRA was still needed with political leaders’ more abstract debates about the law, as Berman conveys them. Did advocates at the grass roots and in the halls of Congress agree on why the VRA was needed? Which group’s strategies were more effective?

President Ronald Reagan helped usher in a new conservative movement that eventually led to the gutting of the VRA in the 2013 US Supreme Court case Holder v. Shelby County. Analyze Reagan’s speech. Are his words a complete embrace of expanded voting rights, or do they hint at how the battle over voting rights would continue?

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Week 2: The Equal Rights Amendment

When feminists revived the ERA, which some had pursued since the 1920s, they kept its simple text largely intact. The amendment handily cleared both houses of Congress in 1972. It seemed destined for passage as part of the broader currents of change sweeping American life in the early 1970s. “Human rights apply equally to Soviet dissidents, Chilean peasants, and American women,” Representative Barbara Jordan (D-TX) told the National Women’s Conference in Houston, defining its work as essential to American policy. While feminists predominated at that 1977 gathering, anti-feminists organized across town, decrying gay rights, sex education in
schools, and the decline of the family wage. As their efforts slowed and then reversed the ERA’s momentum, feminists pointed out that the issue was not solely a matter of women’s preferences; certain industries were heavily invested in the amendment’s demise. The anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly celebrated the ERA’s expiration in 1982 and expressed her hope that its defeat would “enable us to move ahead to solve the real problems that confront the nation,” implying that matters of gender and family belonged in the private sphere. Conservatives defeated the ERA, but feminists kept the fight a public one.

**Primary Sources:**


KHOU-TV, Houston, National Women’s Conference segment, Fred Rhodes for CBS News, 1977. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw7bR5K0D5Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw7bR5K0D5Q)


**Secondary Sources:**

Lisa Levenstein, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’: The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *Journal of American History* 100 (March 2014), 1114–1138.


**Suggested Assignments:**

Analyze the NOW advertisement and the Schlafly article. What different reasons do they offer for the ERA’s failure to be ratified in 1982? In these documents, do you see any points of
agreement between feminists and anti-feminists?

Both the Rymph and Levenstein readings emphasize tensions among women who were on the same side of the ERA question. How do you think those internal tensions shaped what happened to the amendment?

Using one primary source and one secondary source from this section, consider how the ERA debate connected to broader historical developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Should gender politics be centered in accounts of that period?

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Suggestions for Further Exploration:


