

A Brief History of Woman Suffrage in North Dakota

A National Movement for Suffrage

In July 1848, a group of about 300 women and men, gathered at a chapel in Seneca Falls, New York to discuss women's rights. The result of that meeting was a document called The **Declaration of Sentiments** (<https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm>) in which 100 signers asked that women be allowed to vote (exercise the elective franchise). Over the next two decades, the women's right movement became organized as the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. Through national and local meetings, speaking tours, and newspaper publicity, the suffragists kept the issue before the public for 72 years.

Wyoming Territory granted women the right¹ to vote in all elections in 1869. Other states and territories especially in the West vigorously debated woman suffrage from the 1860s to 1920. A woman suffrage bill was introduced in the Dakota Territory legislature in 1868, but failed to pass both houses. Suffrage bills were introduced in the Dakota Territory legislature from time to time, but did not have enough votes for passage.

Woman Suffrage in Dakota Territory

Women had gained the right to vote in Dakota Territory school elections in 1883. They could also sit on local school boards and hold office as Superintendent of Public Instruction for city or county school districts. During these years, **school suffrage** was spreading among the states and territories. Many people considered school suffrage an extension of the mother's appropriate interest in her children's education.

In 1885, J. A. Pickler, a legislator from southern Dakota Territory introduced a full woman suffrage bill. Though the bill was received by his fellow legislators with laughter, he led the bill to successful passage in both houses and it was sent to Governor Gilbert Pierce. Pierce had indicated that he might approve the bill, but when it arrived on his desk, he declined to sign it. He had a long list of reasons including that women did not want the vote and that voters (men) would have to approve any extension of voting rights.

Governor Pierce was wrong about women's interest in voting. A growing number of women did want to vote and began to organize Votes for Women clubs around the state. Few of these

¹ There is much discussion about the word "right" and whether women already possessed the right to vote (as an inalienable right) and campaigned to secure the *privilege* or *power* to vote. However, 19th century literature usually uses the phrase "right to vote" and women asked that legislative bodies "grant the right to vote."



organizations were strong enough to last more than one year, but women's interest in voting could not be denied. Women and men who campaigned across the country for women's rights visited North Dakota. **Susan B. Anthony**, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Henry Blackwell visited North Dakota to help women organize effective associations and campaigns for woman suffrage. Blackwell, a suffragist from Boston, spoke to the state constitutional convention in July 1889 suggesting that the constitution should either list women as qualified electors or include a clause that would allow a future legislature to pass a woman suffrage bill.

In 1893, **Elizabeth Preston** (later Preston Anderson) became president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) of North Dakota. She recognized, as did many WCTU members, that the best chance to preserve prohibition legislation in North Dakota was to encourage woman suffrage. Preston attended every legislative session to keep an eye on prohibition and suffrage issues that came before the legislature. During the 1893 session, Preston witnessed the passage of a full woman suffrage bill. The governor was waiting to sign the bill, but political shenanigans prevented the bill from getting to the governor. Eventually, the bill was set aside in order to conduct other legislative business, the House expunged the record, and the 1893 woman suffrage bill disappeared.

Failure and Success in North Dakota

In 1912, several Votes for Women Leagues organized in North Dakota. Grand Forks and Fargo had strong organizations and took the lead in a statewide effort to support legislative action. Three full suffrage bills were introduced in the 1913 legislature. One failed, but the other two succeeded. One of these was a state constitutional amendment which had to be approved by two legislative sessions and then sent to the voters for approval. The other was a suffrage law which had to be approved, according to the state constitution, by a "majority of the electors voting at a general election." The suffragists worried that this majority would be hard to achieve since the wording was understood to mean that any voter who did not vote on the suffrage measure at the general election would be counted as voting against it.

Around this time, some women and men formed an organization to oppose woman suffrage. The **North Dakota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage** was led by Ida Clarke Young. Though the "antis" as they were known raised as much publicity as possible, they could not change the course of events that led to the expansion of women's rights in North Dakota.

The suffrage law was presented to voters at the general election in 1914. The bill failed to pass because, as outlined in the constitution, anyone who voted on any office or measure, but did not vote on the suffrage measure was counted as voting against the measure. Elizabeth Preston



Anderson and Clara Darrow, president of the Votes for Women League, published a notice in state papers arguing that the failure of the bill should not be understood to represent voters' position on suffrage. If the votes had been counted in the ordinary way that all other measures are counted, voters would have approved the measure by 12,000 votes. Nevertheless, in the 1915 legislative session, legislators did accept the vote as a mandate by the people and declined to pass the suffrage amendment for the required second time.

The 1917 legislature was filled with a new group of legislators. A majority of House members were affiliated with the Nonpartisan League (NPL). The League had pledged to support woman suffrage. Suffrage groups in North Dakota were well organized and kept the attention of the public through their conventions, speakers, and articles in state newspapers. Suffragists approached the campaign with a different idea. In order to avoid the lengthy and uncertain process of a constitutional amendment, or the risky voting requirements of a full suffrage law, suffrage supporters asked Senator Oscar Lindstrom to introduce a **limited suffrage bill**. If passed, this bill would not need to be approved by voters, because it did not offer women full voting rights. The bill allowed women to vote for president of the United States and most city and county officials. Women could not vote for legislators or governor. Suffragists were satisfied that the limitations would be enough to ensure passage of the bill.

The 19th Amendment

At the national level, the suffrage campaign was organized on two levels. Suffragists were working in every state for state suffrage laws and in Congress to secure passage of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Finally, on June 4, 1919, the **19th amendment** to the constitution was approved by the U.S. Senate (<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=63#>) and went to the states for approval. North Dakota received a beautifully prepared document inviting the state to either convene a special group to address the amendment or to present the amendment to the state legislature. The legislature had met in regular session between January and April 1919, and would not meet again until January 1921. The amendment had to be approved months before the next regular session, so the governor called the legislature into special session. The legislature had several items on the agenda, but with little trouble, both houses approved the 19th amendment on December 1, 1919. The governor signed the document on December 5, 1919. North Dakota was the 20th state to **approve the amendment**. In August, 1920, the amendment finally had all the necessary state votes (two-thirds of the states had to approve the amendment for it to become part of the constitution) and was certified by the U.S. Secretary of State on August 26, 1920. Women all over the country – even in states that had refused to ratify the amendment – had the right to vote in all elections. The 72-year campaign was over.

