

Leading Up to 1920 - Woman's Suffrage In Illinois

Illinois women gained the right to vote in 1913 and though it was a partial vote it was a powerful one as it included voting for presidential electors among other state and local offices. A broad coalition of organizations and supporters had made the win possible, creating alliances across class, culture and race that were hard won and proved hard to maintain after the victory. The Illinois Equal Suffrage Association and the Chicago Political Equality League (the largest suffrage organizations in the state) were joined by the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Illinois, and the Women's Trade Union League, among others.

The new right was not immediately secure as the bill was challenged several times in the courts as being unconstitutional. The liquor interests were the main challengers as they were fearful that Illinois women would vote in statewide prohibition. Even though the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law in 1913, suffragists in Illinois did not rest easy and continued to fight for the federal amendment that would secure the right.

In 1914 the big challenge for the suffragists was getting women to register and getting them to vote. One of the anti-suffrage arguments was that women did not actually want to vote and once they were able to they would not show up at the polls. Illinois suffragists were determined to prove this wrong and worked hard to reach women all over the state and encourage them to use their new right. They were very successful and 20,000 women registered to vote in Chicago alone that year. A big factor in their success was their public information campaign. This included one of the largest suffrage parades the country had ever seen. In May 1914, 15,000 women marched down Michigan Avenue in Chicago to express their support. The Illinois Governor and Chicago Mayor were also present.

As the national suffrage movement encountered differences in these years over tactics and approach, so too did the movement in Illinois. One of the main sources of contention was whether to continue to work for state suffrage - and spend scarce resources in the state-by-state effort - or to work for national suffrage and a constitutional amendment. In Illinois this led to the formation of the Suffrage Amendment Alliance which focused on gaining federal constitutional support for women's right to vote.

In June 1916 the Republican Convention was held in Chicago and many Illinois women were among the 5,000 who marched to the convention hall in Chicago in a tremendous rainstorm. Their efforts convinced the convention to include a Woman's Suffrage plank in the party platform, and persuaded Presidential candidate Charles Evans Hughes to endorse the proposed constitutional amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The national suffrage campaign was very involved in the election, asking all women who could vote (which now included Illinois women) to vote against any candidate (local, state or national) who opposed women's suffrage. That fall the Presidential election was held and the votes of Illinois women played a significant role in Illinois remaining a Republican state. The

Democrat candidate, Woodrow Wilson, won the election and the battle for full suffrage continued as the Democrats were the anti-suffrage party at the time.

The years leading up to the federal amendment included the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association and its leaders continuing to work to add women's suffrage to the Illinois constitution. This required a constitutional convention and the IESA was an active participant in the convention and in creating the drafts of legal language that would secure voting rights for women in the state. The new constitution passed in January 1920 with full suffrage for Illinois women included, but the statewide campaign was overshadowed by the simultaneous work for the national amendment.

The federal suffrage (19th) amendment passed in the House of Representatives on June 4, 1919. Illinois suffragists were ready for an immediate response with their fight for the new constitution and the Illinois legislature ratified the 19th amendment on June 10th. Though there later was some discussion about who was actually first (because the Illinois vote had to be certified) it was later confirmed that IL was the first state to ratify, one hour ahead of Wisconsin. Ratification by the 36th state, Tennessee, came 12 months later and the 19th Amendment to the Constitution took effect on August 26, 1920.

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