Women in the Political World Today

**Directions:** Keep these discussion questions in mind as you read the background essay, making marginal notes as desired. Respond to the reflection and analysis questions at the end of the essay.

**Discussion Questions**

- Skim the quotes shown in Appendix B: Timeline and Quotes and select for discussion a few that most powerfully express the pathway toward legal equality for women.
- Regarding the principle of equality, have we achieved the promise of the Declaration of Independence? Are we there yet?

**Overview**

Before and after they won the right to vote, women have played an active role in American politics and public life. In the 1920s, the newly enfranchised women did not agree how to take the next steps towards legal equality. From the beginning of American history to the present, women of all backgrounds and political persuasions have exercised their First Amendment rights, voicing concerns that reflect their understandings of what constitutes the best way of life for a free people.

What historians call First Wave Feminism encompassed the period from the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention to 1920 when the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteed the right of American women to vote. The focus during this period was on removing legal barriers to women’s participation in political life. Even before the Nineteenth Amendment had been ratified, NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt founded the League of Women Voters, whose initial purpose was to provide non-partisan education for women’s new civic responsibility of voting. Just as they had advocated several different approaches to win the vote, the newly enfranchised women did not all agree on the next steps they should take in pursuit of full legal equality. State laws limiting women’s property rights, opportunity to serve on juries, education and job prospects, and other roles in society continued to be barriers to women’s civil, economic, and social goals.

**Equal Rights Amendment Proposed 1923**

The National Woman's Party advocated an equal rights amendment to the Constitution, requiring that men and women would be treated exactly the same under all U.S. laws. In 1923, Alice Paul proposed an amendment stating, “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” The amendment had many prominent supporters among professional women.
But many others did not support this idea. In particular, many “labor feminists” disagreed, arguing for “specific bills for specific ills.” In other words, these women argued that not all laws that treated men and women differently were bad. Discriminatory laws that hurt women should be repealed, of course, but they believed others, such as laws aimed at protecting women from especially long work hours, or laws requiring maternity leave should remain. About fifty years later, another equal rights amendment proposal would again fail to gain sufficient traction and fall in defeat.

As large numbers of women entered the work force during World War II, some in Congress spoke up to ensure equal pay for equal work. Republican Representative Winifred C. Stanley proposed a bill banning wage discrimination based on sex in 1942, but the bill failed. The 1944 Republican Party platform included support for an equal rights amendment. By the end of World War II, a generation had passed since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Many women of child-bearing age who worked outside the home during the war returned home, but others remained in the workforce. According to Department of Labor statistics, the labor force participation rate of women ages 16 – 24 declined slightly and leveled off through the 1950s, but labor force participation rates of women older than that have continued to rise throughout the succeeding decades.

The President’s Commission on the Status of Women 1963

Just as the suffrage movement had gained strength alongside other social and legal reforms, the women’s movement of the 1960s developed alongside a Civil Rights Movement. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 directing federal contractors to “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed and that employees are treated during employment without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.” This gave rise to what came to be called “affirmative action,” or taking steps to ensure greater numbers of minorities (and, later, women) were provided opportunities and access to various settings like college and the workplace.

President Kennedy was concerned about protecting equal rights for women. However, the proposed equal rights amendment stirred up fears of threats to women’s traditional roles among some conservatives across the country, and he needed to walk carefully in order to avoid angering those tradition-minded Democrats. Kennedy’s solution was the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, whose goal was to make recommendations for, “services
which will enable women to continue their role as wives and mothers while making a maximum contribution to the world around them.”

Run by Esther Peterson, Assistant Secretary of Labor, and chaired by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the committee of 20 lawmakers and philanthropists examined employment practices, labor laws, tax regulations, and other factors that they believed contributed to inequality. The commission issued its report in 1963, calling for a number of reforms including:

- Equality of jury service
- Reform of property and family laws that disadvantaged women
- State laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work
- Tax deductions for child care for working parents
- Expansion of widow’s benefits under Social Security
- Expanded adult education
- Taxpayer-funded maternity leave
- Taxpayer-funded universal day-care

One immediate response to the commission report was that Congress passed the Equal Pay Act (1963), prohibiting wage discrimination based on gender within the same jobs. The commission also likely heightened the sense among Americans that the national government should play an active role in promoting women’s equality.

**The Feminine Mystique and Second Wave Feminism**

The express goal of the president’s commission had been to safeguard the important role of wives and mothers in the home, while expanding their opportunity to pursue additional roles and responsibilities in society. As did most of the earlier advocates for women’s equality, the commission valued the work of homemakers and wished to protect mothers’ vital role in the family. A new, “second wave” of feminism was about to gain strength and it challenged the assumption that this was necessarily the most vital role of women.

The same year that the commission released its report, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a critique of the middle-class nuclear family structure. Friedan pointed to what she called “the problem that has no name,” or the pervasive, below-the-surface dissatisfaction of middle-class housewives that she herself had experienced. Friedan argued these homemakers whose husbands provided a comfortable living for their families had been lulled into a false...
consciousness, believing themselves happy when they were actually bored and unfulfilled. This delusion was the “mystique.” If Friedan believed there was a cultural “myth” of a happy housewife, she created a new, competing narrative alongside it of frustrated wives held captive in what she called “a comfortable concentration camp.” While not every woman agreed that housewives were being fooled into believing themselves happy, this landmark book drew many white, middle-class women to what was called Second Wave Feminism.

Second Wave Feminists rejected the idea that gender roles or morality flowed out of natural law. They believed gender roles were purely social constructs, and that morality, especially as it related to sexual conduct, was subjective. In their view, it was generally the consent or lack of consent between adults that made an act right or wrong.

Second Wave Feminists went beyond the legal equality as defined by earlier reformers to advocate also for measures intended to bring about equality of outcome. Groups such as the National Organization for Women, which Friedan helped found, lobbied for taxpayer-funded day care, no-fault divorce, legalized abortion (including taxpayer-funded abortions through Medicaid), and other reforms.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The momentum for civil rights and women’s rights would converge again a year later. President Kennedy had asked Congress to pass legislation “giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.” Congress began claiming authority under the Interstate Commerce Clause to regulate private businesses, reasoning that discriminatory practices by “public accommodations” such as restaurants and hotels affected citizens’ abilities to travel between states.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial segregation in private businesses that served the public, and banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. It also banned discrimination in places receiving federal funds such as public universities.

Congress passed the Voting Rights Act the next year banning racial discrimination in voting. This federal law helped protect the rights of African American men and women in places where legal barriers such as literacy tests had been erected to prevent them from voting.
The Story Continues

Social scientists debate the effects of the cultural changes brought about by Second Wave Feminism. Many point to the numerous objective measures showing women today enjoy greater autonomy than at any time in U.S. history, and perhaps that of the world: high standards of living, educational attainment, and broad career choices. Yet, the National Bureau of Economic Research found in 2009 that subjective assessments of happiness were not keeping up:

“By many objective measures, the lives of women in the United States have improved over the past 35 years, yet we show that measures of subjective well-being indicate that women’s happiness has declined both absolutely and relative to men. [Women] in the 1970s typically reported higher subjective well-being than did men.”

Second Wave Feminism was followed in the 1990s by Third Wave Feminism, which focused on layers of oppression caused by interactions between gender, race and class. And as has happened with all social movements fought in the name of women, many women rejected the movement and held more conservative views.

What effect has women’s suffrage had on politics?

It should be noted that, just as there are class, ethnic, and racial divisions among males, as well as other specific issue positions that influence an individual’s political choices, the same divisions exist among women. Women do not generally vote as a block. However, given that important caution, there are some identifiable differences between the voting trends of women compared to those of men. The Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University tracks those trends. Beginning in the 1920s, women were a little more likely than men to favor the Republican Party, but that trend began to reverse by 1980, and women since then have continued to be more likely to favor the Democratic Party. In presidential elections since that time, women have preferred the Democratic candidate over other parties by four to ten percentage points. Since 1980, women’s turnout rate has been a little higher than that of men. Further, women are more likely than men to favor a more active role for the federal government in expanding health care and basic social services, to advocate restrictions on guns, to support same-sex marriage, and to favor legal abortion without restrictions.

In addition to making their mark as voters, women have gradually made their mark as...
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Successful candidates. In 1916, the first female member of Congress, Jeannette Rankin, won her bid to represent her district in Montana. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm of New York became the first African American congresswoman (though it should be noted that she did not want to be remembered by that description, but as a person who “had guts.”) According to CAWP data, in 1971 women made up three percent of people elected to U.S. Congress, seven percent of statewide elective offices, and 0 in state legislatures. In 2016, Democrat Hillary Clinton became the first female presidential candidate of a major party. In November 2018, women comprised 20% in U.S. Congress, 23.4% in statewide elective offices, and 25.5% in state legislatures. In the November 6 midterm elections, voter turnout across the nation was the highest in any midterm election in 100 years, with 50.1% of the voting-eligible population casting their ballots. As of January 2019, a record 121 women serve in the 116th United States Congress, 102 years after Jeannette Rankin was elected. Following the midterm election, women comprised 23.6% in U.S. Congress, 27.6% in statewide elective offices, 28.6% in state legislatures.

Horace Greeley wrote in 1848, “When a sincere republican is asked to say in sober earnest what adequate reason he can give, for refusing the demand of women to an equal participation with men in political rights, he must answer, none at all. However unwise and mistaken the demand, it is but the assertion of a natural right, and such must be conceded.” Frederick Douglass in 1869 asked Susan B. Anthony whether she believed granting women the vote would truly do anything to change the inequality under the law between the sexes. She replied, “It will change the nature of one thing very much, and that is the dependent condition of woman. It will place her where she can earn her own bread, so that she may go out into the world an equal competitor in the struggle for life.” The political environment has changed considerably since the early days of women’s struggle for suffrage and equality. The participation of women in the public sphere has helped make the American republic more representative, and has removed many of the restrictions that formerly stood between individuals and the enjoyment of their natural rights.

Women of all backgrounds and political persuasions act on their understandings of what constitutes the best way of life for a free people, and suffrage is one of many important ways that they participate in public life. The principle of freedom of speech, press, and assembly, enshrined in the First Amendment, ensures the legal right to express one’s opinions freely, orally or in writing, alone or through peaceable assembly, no matter how offensive their point of view may seem to others. These First Amendment guarantees have been and will continue to be integral to the efforts of those seeking social and legal reforms in America.

Reflection and Analysis Questions

1. What action did Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party advocate after women won the right to vote?
2. What was the goal of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women?
3. The President’s Commission recommended eight reforms:

- Equality of jury service
- Reform of property and family laws that disadvantaged women
- State laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work
- Tax deductions for child care for working parents
- Expansion of widow’s benefits under Social Security
- Expanded adult education
- Taxpayer-funded maternity leave
- Taxpayer-funded universal day-care

List each of these reforms on the table below to indicate whether they are natural and inalienable rights or rights granted by civil society.

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4. In the years leading up to the Commission, most women were married in their early 20s. Families had more children during this time than any other in American history (known as the Baby Boom), but they spaced their children more closely together so mothers were finished having babies at a younger age than other generations. What effect might this have had on women’s concerns at the time?

5. What is Betty Friedan’s connection to Second Wave Feminism?

6. Betty Friedan wrote, “The feminist revolution had to be fought because women quite simply were stopped at a state of evolution far short of their human capacity.” How does this view compare to that of early advocates for equality and suffrage such as Abigail Adams, Angelina Grimké, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, or Carrie Chapman Catt?

7. In what ways did the principle of freedom of speech, press, and assembly empower Second Wave Feminists, as well as their opponents?

8. Consider the “official” and “unofficial” methods of change. Direct action aimed at winning the vote had an impact, but so did opportunity to participate more fully in the workforce. How might expanding opportunities for work outside the home have reinforced – or hindered- the movement to win the vote?
9. Use the **Principles and Virtues Glossary** as needed and give examples of ways the varying approaches to post-1920s efforts to expand rights for women reflected any three of the constitutional principles below. Further, give examples of how such reform efforts require individuals to demonstrate any three of the civic virtues listed below.

**Principles:** equality, republican/representative government, popular sovereignty, federalism, inalienable rights

**Virtues:** perseverance, contribution, moderation, resourcefulness, courage, respect, justice

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**A Pathway for Change**