

# Nevertheless, They Persisted.... Suffragists ... Through the 1918 Flu Pandemic

By Tinka Friend – Riverside Woman’s Club [tinkafriend@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tinkafriend@sbcglobal.net)

*One hundred years have passed since the 19th Amendment was ratified and added to the Constitution in 1920. The year 2020 was meant to be one of celebration and commemoration of this event. Then the pandemic came. Centennial plans ground to a halt and events were scrapped as an extraordinary era of social distancing was ushered in.*

*Except, it had all happened before, during the Spanish flu, which arrived in 1918 and complicated plans for women’s suffrage then, too. Suffragists found themselves making their case amid the panic of a pandemic. Illness was everywhere, gatherings were banned and canceled plans became the norm. Sound familiar?*

*This presentation looks back at this slice of history, which bears so many parallels to our current circumstances and the persistence that was, and is, required. See how many parallels you can find. (I found 10.)*



When the United States entered the First World War in April 1917, many suffragists across the country, quickly aligned themselves with President Woodrow Wilson’s decision, and helped to mobilize for the war effort. During the war, tens of thousands of nurses served in the Army and Navy Nurse corps in the United States and on the front lines in Europe. Millions more women volunteered for organizations like the American Red Cross and Women’s Clubs, helping roll bandages, prepare meals, pack and ship supplies, and organize fund-raisers.

Women began filling the labor gaps that the soldiers had left behind, and took up farming and working in factories. Many were also selling Liberty Loans, government bonds that helped fund the war, persuading citizens to put war bonds in their family budget. Women’s Clubs also purchased war bonds themselves. All of this demonstrated women’s patriotism and how incredibly valuable women were to American society. Posters across the country at the time depicted nurses in their white uniforms as **heroes**.

Carrie Chapman Catt and several prominent suffragists recognized this growing good will toward women, and used it to tie their war contributions back to demand for the vote. Momentum kept building. In November 1917, New York became the 12th state to grant women the right to vote. Two months later the House easily approved the amendment to the Constitution. And on Sept. 30, 1918, President Wilson supported the amendment and urged the Senate — which was controlled by his Democratic Party — to approve it too.

“We have made partners of the women in this war,” he said in the Senate Chamber. “Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil, and not a partnership of privilege?” The day after Wilson’s stirring speech, the amendment was defeated in the Senate, lacking just two votes of the two-thirds majority.

It failed for two key reasons: Some senators just weren't comfortable with a federal mandate, wanting to leave it to the states. Other senators, especially southern Democrats, were opposed to the idea of allowing black women to vote. A fact the suffragists recognized, and had minimized the role and visibility of black women in their national campaigns in an attempt to appeal to a more resistant audience.

Just a few **days** after the defeat in the Senate, the Spanish flu hit Washington, D.C., hard. The House majority leader, came down with the flu on Oct. 6. The House speaker also fell ill. On Oct. 7, Congress closed its public viewing galleries. Hundreds of deaths were reported in the capital every week. By mid-October, with most lawmakers either out sick or tending to the sick, almost all legislative action ground to a near halt.

At this same time, Carrie Chapman Catt lay sick in bed in New York, suffering with the same influenza from the Spanish flu pandemic that was rapidly spreading across the country and killed close to 200,000 people just in that same October alone. She was extremely ill. As concerned as she was with the pains of the flu, Catt was also worried about the carefully planned suffrage strategies that were being derailed.

The 19th Amendment was, at that moment, hanging by a thread in Congress. And the national suffrage movement, led in large part by two organizations — Catt's National American Woman Suffrage Association and Alice Paul's National Woman's Party — had managed to create great momentum only to see it quickly evaporate as the country shut down all public gatherings and ordered people to stay home.

Added to this, the midterm elections in early November were approaching. Then, as now, political activities, like rallies and speeches, were suspended. At this point, suffragists across the country, hurt by their defeat in Congress, were determined to kick out the senators who voted against the amendment. They also needed to campaign in South Dakota, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Michigan, where voting rights for women would be on the ballot.

In Chicago, on Oct. 26, the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association went ahead with its planned annual convention, although chairs were set four feet apart and the general public was kept out. The suffragists however, according to The Chicago Tribune, "showed their scorn of the flu germ by appearing maskless,". They must have felt they had to appear invincible.

In Wyoming, in late October, one suffragist wrote in a letter that the influenza pandemic was "so bad that it was considered immoral for six women to meet in a parlor,". The "only way was to campaign by dodgers and street signs." Forced to virtually abandon public gatherings, the suffragists, using the communication technology of their times, turned to constant telephone calls and sent letters and took out ads in newspapers. Hoping that men would vote in favor of women's suffrage in the referendums.

Though ill, Catt wrote in a letter to suffrage workers across the country, "This new affliction is bringing sorrow into many suffrage homes and is presenting a serious new obstacle in our referendum campaigns and in the Congressional and Senatorial campaigns."

What Catt did not realize when she sent the letter was that the flu, along with World War I, would end up helping the suffragists' cause, cementing women's suffrage in the American Constitution two years later.

The need for nurses to help fight the pandemic across the country was growing. Women, including many suffrage workers, moved out to tend to the sick. There was such a desperate need for nurses that the Red Cross reversed its previous reluctance to deploy black nurses. Up to then, black women were,

in theory, allowed to serve as nurses and were trained, however were not actually sent out as part of the war effort. But, as the pandemic grew, a number of black nurses were sent into homes that had previously not been opened to “colored” nurses. Women fighting the flu became really important, not just for gender, but also for race. At this moment, Americans could see the value of women in general, but also the value of women of color.

In those November elections, the anti-suffrage side lost control of the Senate, and several new pro-suffrage legislators voted in. The referendums in South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Michigan passed as well. Both the House and the Senate approved the amendment the following year, starting a strenuous ratification campaign in every state before it was successfully entered into the Constitution in 1920.

A century later, just as the country was preparing for celebrations to mark the amendment’s centennial **and** facing an important election, the coronavirus pandemic brings America to a standstill again. Drawing upon the suffragists’ pandemic struggles, we can learn valuable lessons from them.

It takes **persistence** and taking disappointment and turning it into momentum. Even though our fore-mothers were masters at protesting, they were never *just* protesters. They used all the tools of democracy and learned to use the system to change the system.

May we heed their wisdom and example.

---

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/us/spanish-flu-womens-suffrage-coronavirus.html>