

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



*Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment: Primary Sources, Activities, and Links to Related Web Sites for Educators and Students*. National Archives and Records Administration.

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Published on H-Survey (August, 1998)

Nineteen ninety-eight marks the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls woman rights convention, an event often cited as the opening round of the American woman suffrage movement. To commemorate that event, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has developed a web site to introduce students to the history of the struggle for voting rights for women in the United States from 1848 to the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920. The site is part of NARA's "Digital Classroom," which includes a set of teaching activities on subjects as diverse as "Launching the New United States Navy" and "Jackie Robinson: Beyond the Playing Field." Like the other web sites in the series, it makes use of documents from the National Archives of the United States to introduce its subject to students via primary sources. The site has four major sections of interest to history instructors: 1) the "Documents" section has nine texts that document important moments in the quest for a woman suffrage amendment; 2) "Failure is Impossible" is a script for a play about the suffrage movement that was originally produced to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the 19th amendment; 3) the "Teaching Activities" section suggests ways that the site can be used in the classroom, and 4) the "Related Web Sites" section gives links to other sites of interest to students of the American woman suffrage movement. All of these will be useful to teachers in tracing the general history of the national movement, introducing students to the ideas and accomplishments of prominent woman suffragists, and offering hands-on experience in the techniques of primary source analysis. But because the activities and materials in this site are aimed primarily at high school students and their teachers, college-level instructors will need to place the material in a broader context and should supplement the site materials with a more diverse range of sources to reflect the diversity and complexity of the suffrage movement.

The documents chosen for this project cover a wide time span, from the end of the Civil War to the ratification of the woman suffrage amendment by Tennessee in 1920. The majority of the documents are in the form of standard texts, mostly petitions, memorials or letters to Congress. The single exception is a photograph of a protester outside the Wilson White House, holding a sign that compares the President to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. While most of the sources document the activities of elite white women who were members of the American or National Woman Suffrage Association, the NARA editors have also attempted to include a decent sampling of materials from different aspects of the history of the movement, including the activities anti-suffragists and black suffragists. Without question, the strongest feature of the materials presented in this site is the feeling of immediacy in viewing the photographs of the original documents. While collections of suffrage documents in books would undoubtedly provide a deeper look at the suffrage movement and cover a greater range of sources, this medium comes close to replicating the feeling of examining material in an archive. For example, the "Documents" section lets students view an 1871 petition to Congress signed by, among others, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Olympia Brown, and Susan B. Anthony. The reproduction allows the students to see the document as a researcher would see it—in all its original elegant simplicity—and the NARA "Written Document Analysis Worksheet" guides them through the steps of analyzing it in all its aspects. Another advantage of the site for teachers of a survey course may be its very compactness: for a short unit on the suffrage movement, the limited amount of material could be a boon. However, choosing just nine documents to represent the more than seventy-year sweep of the movement for woman suffrage is an unenviable task. Instructors using this site need to be

alert to the inherent limitations of any such selection, and in this case the limitations are considerable. For example, of the nine documents provided, five span one decade from 1868 to 1877; the remaining four are chosen from the final three years of the movement leading up to the victory in 1920. Forty crucial years from 1877 to 1917 are thus left undocumented. This gap obscures some important dynamics in the evolution of the movement, including the debates over whether to pursue a state-by-state or a national strategy, the changing ideology and tactics of the suffragists (particularly the embrace of anti-immigrant and anti-black attitudes by many members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the relations between the suffrage movement and the labor movement, and the role of suffrage radicals such as Alice Paul and her colleagues in the Congressional Union and National Woman's Party. Moreover, the nine documents at hand tend to give a "Great Women" approach to suffrage history, emphasizing only the activities of nationally prominent leaders and their quest to persuade the national legislators to grant the vote to American women. This approach runs the risk of encouraging students to think of woman suffrage purely as a "top down" movement, while lionizing the most prominent leaders by downplaying the more controversial aspects of their activities. Any college-level examination of the suffrage movement should probe the complexity and challenge of interpreting the movement, by taking account of the hard choices that suffragists had to make, rather than telling their story just as a battle of good against evil, en-

lightenment against prejudice. The gaps left by the documents are filled somewhat in the script of the play "Failure is Impossible," by Rosemary H. Knowler, which weaves together the words of more than a dozen major figures in the suffrage movement from Abigail Adams to Carrie Chapman Catt. Here we still hear from major leaders, but from a wider spectrum than the documents provide, including Sojourner Truth, Mary Ware Dennett and Harriot Stanton Blatch. The play also fills in some background, by making reference to some of the changing conditions that underlay the changes in the movement, including the growing problems of working-class women and the frustrations and victories of the state-by-state struggle for enfranchisement. High school students should find the script and accompanying materials useful, although the material may not be challenging or nuanced enough for many college students. The "Teaching Activities" section urges instructors to supplement the materials presented in the site by assigning the students additional research, a suggestion which is most welcome. Some of the teaching suggestions provide assignments which urge the students to go beyond the Web to consider additional sources that would help fill in the gaps left by the necessarily selective presentation of documents. In a day when students tend to go no farther than their nearest web page, the most important thing is to have teachers who use web sites such as this one as the jumping-off points for the deeper investigations of history that they are intended to be, rather than as final destinations.

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**Citation:** Sarah M. Henry. Review of , *Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment: Primary Sources, Activities, and Links to Related Web Sites for Educators and Students*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14869>

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