Woman Suffrage in Oregon

The campaign to achieve voting rights (also called suffrage or the franchise) for Oregon women from 1870 to 1912 is part of a broad and continuing movement at the regional, national, and international levels to secure equality and full citizenship for women. Oregon has the distinction of placing the question of votes for women on the ballot six times—in 1884, 1900, 1906, 1908, 1910, and 1912—more than any other state.

The national suffrage campaign spanned the years from the women's rights convention held in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, to the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 26, 1920. Western states and territories saw most of the earliest victories for woman suffrage (Wyoming, 1869, 1890; Utah, 1870, lost 1887, regained 1896; Colorado, 1893; Idaho, 1896; Washington, 1883, lost 1887, regained 1910; California, 1911; Oregon and Arizona, 1912; Alaska Territory, 1913; Nevada, 1914). This was due in part to territorial and statehood politics and to the support of political groups such as the Populists and Progressives.

Oregon's woman suffrage activities were tied to the regional and national movement: national and regional leaders visited Oregon to organize and support the work, and Oregon suffragists visited other states to assist them with campaigns. Yet, as with other measures, race and ethnicity were often barriers to the vote for Oregon women.

The history of the woman suffrage movement in Oregon falls into three distinct phases. The first phase, from 1870 to 1900, included early action, organization, and attempts to pass woman suffrage legislation in the state. The second phase included the use of the new Oregon System of initiative and referendum. From 1900 to 1912, a second generation of suffragists built successful coalitions and used modern techniques of mass advertising in the new consumer culture. In a final period, from 1912 to 1920, Oregon suffragists were a part of national suffrage organizations and politics that led to the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Early Organization and Legislative Attempts, 1870-1900

The question of votes for women first appeared in Oregon, if only briefly, in the debates that took place in the state Constitutional Convention in August and September 1857. Delegates discussed who should have the right to vote and proposed that the right should belong only to white male citizens. David Logan of Multnomah County moved "to strike out male before citizen," but his motion lost, apparently without debate. What emerged was a state constitution that made voting a privilege for white men only and prevented all women and all men of color from exercising that right, with specific prohibitions against African Americans, Chinese Americans, and those of mixed heritage or "mulattos." Woman suffrage in Oregon was tied to questions of race and ethnicity from the beginning.

The movement for woman suffrage in Oregon began in Salem and Albany in 1870, when local equal suffrage associations organized with both women and men as members. Building on the momentum generated by national leader Susan B. Anthony's Pacific Northwest speaking tour in 1871, supporters formed the Oregon Woman Suffrage Association in 1873. Oregon women joined in the strategy known nationally as the "New Departure" to claim voting rights under the 14th and 15th amendments following the Civil War (the U.S. Supreme Court struck down these claims in *Minor v. Happersett* in 1875).

In October 1872, Oregon suffragists petitioned the state legislature to pass a statute "instructing judges to receive and count the votes of women in their various precincts in the coming November election" and held a mass meeting in Salem. Four Portland women–Abigail Scott Duniway, Maria Hendee, Mrs. M.A. Lambert, and Mrs. Beatty, an African

American—joined Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Minor, and other women across the nation who attempted to vote in the November presidential election. The election judge in Oregon accepted the four women's ballots but put them "under the [ballot box] and not inside." Even though they were not counted, these first votes were important symbols that linked the claims of Oregon women with those of other activists around the country.

Some Oregon women gained the right to vote in school elections as a step toward broader access to the franchise, a goal for which women in other states were also campaigning. In 1862, Oregon lawmakers had granted the vote in school elections to "women who are widows, and have children and taxable property in the district." Women could vote because of their particular relationship to men and families, not because they had an individual right to cast a ballot.

An 1878 statute provided that citizens who had property, who were older than twenty-one, and who had lived thirty days or more in the district "upon which he or she pays a tax" could cast a vote in school elections. While this statute removed marital status as a requirement, many Oregon women continued to be excluded from voting because of legal barriers to holding property based on race and ethnicity; others were excluded based on economic status. Even this limited right to vote was vulnerable. When election judges prevented Eugene women from voting in local school elections in March 1897, suffragist Laura Harris sued the judges. In *Harris v. Burr* (1898), the Oregon Supreme Court upheld the right of taxpaying women to school suffrage.

In this early period, Abigail Scott Duniway took the lead in Oregon's campaign for the franchise. Like many early suffrage leaders in western states, Duniway was a journalist, and she used her newspaper, the *New Northwest* (1871-1887), to publicize the cause and to build networks with news items, letters, and opinions from local and national readers. She also attended national suffrage conventions and went on speaking tours. Duniway viewed the vote as part of a broad campaign to achieve equal economic and social rights for women.

Suffragists had to find a way to persuade male voters to support the franchise for women, and Duniway believed that the best strategy was what she termed the "still hunt" —a behind-the-scenes campaign with influential people that would not arouse public interest or opposition. As the movement progressed, she came into conflict with local and national leaders who believed that open campaigns with active grassroots associations and coalition building were the most effective means to achieve the vote.

Most historians see Duniway as a gifted journalist and orator who built important momentum for the cause, but many also point to her shortcomings as an ineffective organizer who had difficulty dealing with people. One key conflict emerged between Duniway and members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), who supported woman suffrage as a way to enact legislative limits on alcohol. By the 1884 campaign, Duniway had come to believe that supporters of prohibition were ruining any chance of suffrage success. She feared that male voters and well-financed brewing and liquor interests would equate the women's vote with prohibition and kill any suffrage statute. Members of the WCTU were an important suffrage constituency in Oregon and the nation, and Duniway came to emphasize the problems with prohibition to such an extent that it became one of the signal problems of her campaign. She alienated supporters, engaged in a public and acrimonious argument with national leaders, and diminished the possibility of building coalitions.

Any change to the state constitution required that a bill pass both houses of the state legislature in two successive sessions and then be ratified by voters. Members of the legislature debated woman suffrage in the 1872 and 1874 sessions, but the measure did not pass. In 1880, a bill passed the House and Senate and one passed again in 1882, but voters defeated the measure in 1884 with supporters at just 28 percent.

Suffrage activists got another bill passed in 1895, but the Oregon House in 1897 did not organize due to factional disputes. The 1899 legislature passed the measure, but voters defeated woman suffrage on the ballot in 1900, this time with 48 percent of voters in support. Because of these challenges, most suffragists were eager to see the initiative and referendum passed so they could put the measure directly before the voters on the ballot.

The Progressive Era and a Second Generation of Suffragists, 1900-1912

After the state's 1902 adoption of the initiative and referendum system and with plans being made for the Lewis and Clark Exposition and Oriental Fair in 1905, Oregon suffragists lobbied successfully to have the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) hold its convention in Portland. The convention in the summer of 1905 was an impressive success. Susan B. Anthony, Anna Howard Shaw, and other well-known suffragists gave stirring speeches,

and national leaders agreed to assist with a strategic campaign for the 1906 Oregon election. With public support from many of Oregon's political leaders, including Mayor Harry Lane and Governor George Chamberlain, Oregon's suffrage movement became visible and popular. This energized local efforts, raised the number of suffrage groups to about fifty around the state, and brought national attention and support to the Oregon cause.

Oregon's 1906 campaign was one of the first to use the tactics of the modern suffrage movement. Local groups conducted strong grassroots organizing, with speeches, meetings, advertising, and the distribution of suffrage literature. NAWSA contributed $18,000 to the effort, and President Anna Howard Shaw and other national organizers were in Oregon for the campaign. Clara Colby came to Portland to publish her *Woman's Tribune* , a national suffrage weekly newspaper.

Despite all these efforts, the 1906 campaign met with defeat. Liquor and business interests used the press, public relations, and dollars to oppose the measure. There were also internal conflicts, particularly between Abigail Scott Duniway and national leaders, and many local suffragists distanced themselves from Duniway after the campaign.

The 1906 measure received 44 percent support, and a subsequent measure in 1908 gained just 39 percent. In 1910, Duniway put forward a taxpayers' equal suffrage initiative that stated: "no citizen who is a taxpayer shall be denied the right to vote on account of sex." Many progressives and wage earners opposed the measure as class-based legislation that privileged women who were property holders. Support for suffrage in the election dropped to 37 percent.

Across the state, suffragists regrouped for the campaign of 1912. Historians attribute the success of the campaign to a number of factors. One was Oregon's "local grievance." Because of the successful campaigns in Washington (1910) and California (1911), Oregon was now surrounded by states that had granted suffrage to women, and suffrage workers appealed to state pride.

Another factor was successful coalition-building. There were about seventy groups across the state and twenty-three in Portland alone, including neighborhood groups, the Men's Equal Suffrage League of Multnomah County, a Chinese American equal suffrage league, and a league representing African American suffragists, headed by Hattie Redmond and Katherine Gray. The Portland Woman's Club Suffrage Campaign Committee, led by Sara Evans, Dr. Esther Pohl Lovejoy, Elizabeth Eggert, and Grace Watt Ross, helped coordinate work with national and regional leaders in NAWSA and a visit by Anna Howard Shaw. Lovejoy formed Everybody's Equal Suffrage League with a particular goal of including wage-earning women in the cause. In addition, Abigail Scott Duniway was ill for most of the campaign, which meant that other groups and leaders could take on a stronger role.

Like their successful colleagues in Washington and California, Oregon suffrage workers again used techniques designed to appeal to a new consumer and mass media culture, including advertisements, leaflets, theater presentations, and mass meetings. In November 1912, Oregon voters approved woman suffrage by 52 percent. On November 30, as a symbol of her long suffrage legacy, Abigail Scott Duniway wrote and signed Oregon's Equal Suffrage Proclamation at the request of Governor Oswald West.

The success of the 1912 campaign, which removed the word "male" from voting privileges outlined in the Oregon Constitution, did not mean that all Oregon women could vote. First-generation women (and men) who migrated from Asia were prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens and could not cast a ballot. Native American women, except those married to white men, were also ineligible for U.S. citizenship until federal legislation in 1924. Racial and ethnic barriers to citizenship and voting persisted.

Oregon and National Suffrage Movements, 1912-1920

Enfranchised women in Oregon and other western states faced particular dilemmas as national organizations debated strategies for achieving national woman suffrage. After the 1912 campaign, many women in Oregon continued the work by assisting with other state campaigns and pushing for a federal suffrage amendment. Some remained part of NAWSA, and others joined a new group, the Congressional Union (CU), later called the National Woman's Party. In 1914, leaders of the CU announced that they would hold the Democratic Party, then in power in Congress and the White House, responsible for the failure of a national suffrage amendment. They sent organizers to states where women could vote to lobby against Democratic candidates. In Oregon, this meant opposing Senator George Chamberlain, a staunch supporter of woman suffrage and an ally of NAWSA activists.

Dr. Esther Lovejoy, Sara Evans, Millie Trumbull, and other NAWSA supporters were deeply offended by this policy because it went against their own careful coalition-building in Oregon politics. But CU supporters in Oregon, including Mary Cachot Therkelsen, Dr. Florence Sharp Manion, and Clara Wold, believed that the strategy was the only way to move the federal suffrage amendment to a vote. Senator Chamberlain won re-election in 1914, and the issue caused a division among Oregon women suffragists from 1914 to 1919.

Suffrage supporters in both groups put aside many of their differences to work for the ratification of the federal suffrage amendment in Oregon. Activists hoped to make the state one of the first to ratify the amendment in 1919 as a show of support for votes for all women and as a tribute to the state's pioneering role in the effort. But they, with other western state supporters, encountered resistance that delayed the ratification process.

The U.S. Congress passed the 19th Amendment on June 4, 1919. Thirty-six state legislatures then had to ratify the amendment to place it in the federal constitution. That June, Oregon's biennial legislative session had been adjourned for over three months. Governor Ben Olcott opposed a special session and would only consider one if Oregon's participation was needed to make the difference in ratification or if forty-seven of the ninety members of the Oregon house and senate requested it. They would have to agree to pay all of their own expenses (estimated collectively at $5,000).

Local members of the National Woman's Party (formerly the CU) and NAWSA affiliates put aside their differences to form a ratification committee. They met with legislators and the governor, orchestrated a successful letter-writing campaign, and publicized the cause. They organized regional meetings with senators and representatives, advertised, and sent out press releases. They also coordinated actions with national suffrage leaders, who came to Oregon.

In the end, the ratification committee was unable to secure the pledges of forty-seven legislators, but Governor Olcott decided to call a special session in response to requests from the state industrial accident commission to address worker legislation. During the session, both houses adopted House Joint Resolution 1, introduced by Representative Sylvia Thompson, on January 12, 1920, making Oregon the twenty-fifth state to ratify the 19th Amendment. Thirty-six states ratified the amendment by August 1920, and the U.S. Constitution finally removed sex as a barrier to voting rights.

Results of Woman Suffrage in Oregon

The achievement of suffrage in Oregon led to many important developments for women's full citizenship rights. After suffrage, women sought elective office and worked to create legislation that would improve conditions for women and address women's equality. Marian B. Towne of Jackson County was the first woman elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1914, and Kathryn Clarke of Glendale won a special election in January 1915 to serve in the Oregon Senate. Two cities had all-female city councils—Umatilla in 1916 and Yoncalla in 1920. Legislation in 1921 granted women the right to sit on juries. Voters approved local option for prohibition in 1914, although some Oregon women, including Nan Wood Honeyman, were involved in the Woman's Organization for Prohibition Reform, which lobbied to repeal prohibition.

Changes in federal legislation also benefited Oregon women. Sex was included as a prohibited category of discrimination in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and in Title IX to the Educational Act of 1972, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex under any educational programs or programs receiving federal funds, including sports. Oregon ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1973 and re-ratified it in 1977 as a show of support in the continuing national campaign (the ERA has not yet been ratified). Supporters were not successful in passing a state ERA, but in 1982 Oregon Supreme Court Justice Betty Roberts found in *Hewitt v. State Accident Insurance Fund Corporation* (*SAIF*) that Article I, Section 20 of the Oregon Constitution—which states that "no law shall be passed granting to any citizen or class of citizens privileges, or immunities, which, upon the same terms, shall not equally belong to all citizens" —provided equal protection and was, in fact, a state equal rights clause.

Across all three phases of Oregon's movement for woman suffrage, from nineteenth century early organization and first steps, to Progressive Era activism with new mass media tactics, the use of initiative and referendum, and coalition-building, to the final stages of work for a federal amendment, Oregon suffrage supporters made vital contributions to the achievement of women's full citizenship. When leaders worked to include constituents across lines of race and ethnicity, they garnered particular success, while barriers to full inclusion held back the achievements for all women. Oregon activists were early participants and helped shape the rest of the nation's campaign for votes for women. The state's suffrage history comprises a vital part of the local, regional, national, and international movement

for women's full citizenship that continues today.

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