

Votes for Women — Overdue Emancipation or Misguided Social Change?

Critical Thinking: In this section you will analyze opposing viewpoints on women's suffrage.

8 In 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed American women the right to vote, was finally ratified, it was a climactic milestone in their long struggle to secure the same basic rights of citizenship possessed by men. From the time of the American Revolution, when Abigail Adams had vainly urged her husband John to "remember the ladies" in the government that he and his male colleagues were forming, American women had had an uphill battle to secure their rights. "It is evident that women, generally," a Revolutionary-era politician had declared, "are neither by nature, nor habit, nor education . . . fitted to perform this duty [of voting] with credit to themselves, or advantage to the public." In the 1830s and 1840s, pioneer feminists such as Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) received their political education in the antislavery movement. As abolitionist and women's rights organizer Abby Kelly (1810-1887) put it, American women "have good cause to be grateful to the slave, [for in] striving to strike his iron [chains] off, we found most surely, that we were *manacled* ourselves." Mott, Stanton, and other activists, at a meeting in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, issued a "Declaration of Sentiments" declaring that "all men and women are created equal" and demanding "the sacred right of the elective franchise." However, when the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the vote to African American males, was ratified in 1870, American women — both black and white — were again left out.

The National Woman Suffrage Association was formed in 1890, but suffragists still faced furious opposition. "Equal suffrage," a Texas senator thundered, "is a repudiation of manhood." The National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (founded in 1911) claimed that suffrage, socialism, and feminism were just "three branches of the same Social Revolution." A member of the latter organization dismissed the suffragists as "an imitation-of-man movement" deserving "the condemnation of every normal man and woman." It was not until the United States entered World War I in 1917, when hundreds of thousands of American women worked in factories and served as Red Cross and Salvation Army volunteers, that their demand for the vote was finally taken seriously. The first of the following readings is an excerpt from a speech urging women's suffrage delivered in 1910 by Oklahoma senator Robert L. Owen (1856-1947). An enthusiastic progressive, Owen was part Cherokee and earlier had demanded citizenship for Native Americans.

Women compose one-half of the human race. In the last forty years, women in gradually increasing numbers have been compelled to leave the home and enter the factory and workshop. Over seven million women are so employed, and the remainder of the sex are employed largely in domestic services. A full half of the work of the world is done by women. A careful study of the matter has demonstrated the vital fact that these working

women receive a smaller wage for equal work than men do, and that the smaller wage and harder conditions imposed on the woman worker are due to the lack of the ballot.

Women are the equals of men in intelligence. . . .

10 Many women have a very hard time, and if the ballot would help them, even a little, I should like to see them have it. . . . Equal pay for equal work is the first great reason justifying this change of governmental policy.

15 There are other reasons which are persuasive: First, women, take it all in all, are the equals of men in intelligence, and no man has the hardihood [daring] to assert the contrary. . . .

20 The man is usually better informed with regard to state government, but women are better informed about house government, and she can learn state government with as much facility as he can learn how to instruct children, properly feed and clothe the household, care for the sick, play on the piano, or make a house beautiful. . . .

25 The woman ballot will not revolutionize the world. Its results in Colorado [women had voting rights in four western states — Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming], for example, might have been anticipated. First, it did give women better wages for equal work; second, it led immediately to a number of laws the women wanted, and the first laws they demanded were laws for the protection of the children of the state, making it a misdemeanor to contribute to the delinquency of a child; laws for the improved care of defective children; also, the Juvenile Court for the conservation of wayward boys and girls; the better care of the insane, the deaf, the dumb, the blind; the curfew bell to keep children off the streets at night; raising the age of consent for girls; improving the reformatories and prisons of the state; improving the hospital services of the state; improving the sanitary laws affecting the health of the homes of the state. Their [women's] interest in the public health is a matter of great importance. Above all, there resulted laws for improving the school system. . . .

35 It has not absolutely regenerated society, but has improved it. It has raised the educational qualification of the suffrage, and has elevated the moral standard of the suffrage, because there are more criminal men than criminal women. . . .

40 The great doctrine of the American Republic that "all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed" justifies the plea of one-half of the people, the women, to exercise the suffrage. The doctrine of the American Revolutionary War that taxation without representation is unendurable justifies women in exercising the suffrage.

The second reading is an excerpt from a speech delivered in 1910 by Mrs. Gilbert E. Jones, an opponent of votes for women.

Taxation without representation is tyranny, but we must be very careful to define what we mean by the phrase. If we adopt the suffrage attitude, "I pay taxes, therefore I should vote," the natural conclusion is that

- 5 everybody who pays taxes should vote, or we have a tyrannical form of government. Remember that this argument is used in an unqualified way. We have a "tyranny" here, we are told, because some women pay taxes, yet do not vote. If this is true without any qualification, it must be true not only of women, but of everybody. Accordingly, this government is tyrannical if corporations pay taxes, but do not vote; if aliens pay taxes, but do not vote; if minors pay taxes, but do not vote; if anybody pays taxes, but does not vote. The only correct conclusion is, not that women should vote because some of them pay taxes, but that every taxpayer should be given the privilege of the ballot. . . .

Married women
should be kept out
of industry. . . .

- A very conscientious investigation by this League [an anti-suffrage group] cannot find that the ballot will help the wage-earning woman. Women must resort to organization, association, and trade unions, and then they can command and maintain a standard wage. Supply and demand will do the rest.
- 20 Women are not well trained and often very deficient and unskilled in most of their occupations. They are generally only supplementary workers and drop their work when they marry. When married, and home and children are to be cared for, they are handicapped way beyond their strength. Married women should be kept out of industry, rather than urged into it, as scientists, physicians, and sociologists all state that as women enter into competitive industrial life with men, just so does the death rate of little children increase and the birth rate decrease.

- Anti-suffragists deplore the fact that women are found in unsuitable occupations. But the suffragists glory in the fact that there are women blacksmiths, baggage masters, brakemen, undertakers, and women political "bosses" in Colorado. . . .

- The suffrage leaders say that a woman without the vote has no self-respect. We must then look to the suffrage states to find the fulfillment of the woman's true position, complete — worthy, exalted, and respected. . . .

- 35 Have the saloons been abolished in any of the suffrage states? No. . . . Are the streets better cleaned in the states where women vote? No, they are quite as bad as in New York City and elsewhere. . . .

- Are there laws on the statute books that would give women equal pay for equal work? No, and never will be.

- 40 Are women treated with more respect in the four suffrage states than elsewhere? Not at all. . . .

CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

PART A ANALYZING THE READINGS

Answer each of the following questions.

- Distinguishing fact from opinion.** List several facts and several opinions that Robert Owen offered in support of women's suffrage.

- Analyzing cause and effect.** Why might the result of women voting in Colorado, as Owen observed (line 25), "have been anticipated"?
- Distinguishing fact from opinion.** List several facts and several opinions that Mrs. Gilbert Jones offered in opposing votes for women.
- Checking consistency.** Was the conclusion about the relationship between tax-paying and voting drawn by Mrs. Jones in lines 1–15 correct? Why or why not?
- Identifying assumptions.** What assumptions about the role of women are contained in lines 16–31 of Mrs. Jones' speech?

PART B EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Determine your opinion of each of the following statements, indicating the response that best expresses your view. Be prepared to defend your opinions in classroom discussion.

- Women's influence on American politics has been beneficial.
 - strongly agree
 - agree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
- Taxpaying should have nothing to do with the right to vote.
 - strongly agree
 - agree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
- The principle of "equal pay for equal work" should be enforced throughout the American economy.
 - strongly agree
 - agree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
- Because women bear children, they are more likely than men to be concerned for the weaker and disadvantaged members of American society.
 - strongly agree
 - agree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
- The American family has suffered as a result of women working outside the home.
 - strongly agree
 - agree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree

PART C WRITING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Select one of the following writing projects and complete it in a brief composition (three to five paragraphs).

- Making comparisons.** Contrast Owen's and Jones' perceptions about women's role in American society.
- Predicting consequences.** If Jones were correct in her assumptions about women, what should the consequences of giving them the vote have been?
- Formulating appropriate questions.** Create a dialogue between Jones and an imaginary suffragist that is a member of her audience in 1910. Your suffragist should ask questions that display the weaknesses of Jones' arguments, and in her answers Jones should defend her position.