

# A Short History of Women's Equality Day

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August 26 of each year is designated in the U.S. as Women's Equality Day. Instituted by Rep. [Bella Abzug](#) (D) and first established in 1971, the date commemorates the passage of the 19th Amendment, the Woman Suffrage Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted women the right to vote on the same basis as men. Many women still had to fight for the right to vote when they belonged to other groups that had barriers to voting: people of color, for instance.

Less well known is that the day commemorates the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, held on August 26 on the 50th anniversary of the passage of women's suffrage.

The first public body to call for the right of women to vote was the [Seneca Falls convention for women's rights](#), at which the resolution on the right to vote was more controversial than other resolutions for equal rights. The first petition for universal suffrage was sent to Congress in 1866.

The 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was sent to the states for ratification on June 4, 1919, when the Senate endorsed the Amendment. The passage by the states proceeded quickly, and Tennessee passed the ratification proposal in their legislature on August 18, 1920. After turning back an attempt to reverse the vote, Tennessee notified the federal government of the ratification, and on August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment was certified as ratified.

In the 1970s, with the so-called second wave of feminism, August 26 again became an important date. In 1970, on the 50th anniversary of the 19th Amendment's ratification, the [National Organization for Women](#) organized the [Women's Strike for Equality](#), asking women to stop working for a day to highlight inequalities in pay and education and the need for more child care centers. Women took part in events in 90 cities. Approximately 50 thousand people marched in New York City, and some women took over the Statue of Liberty.

To commemorate the voting rights victory, and to rededicate to winning more demands for women's equality, member of Congress Bella Abzug of New York introduced a bill to establish Women's Equality Day on August 26. She did this as a means of commending and supporting those who continued to work for equality. The bill calls for an annual presidential proclamation for Women's Equality Day.

Here is the text of the 1971 Joint Resolution of [Congress](#) designating August 26 of each year as Women's Equality Day:

WHEREAS, the women of the United States have been treated as second-class citizens and have not been entitled the full rights and privileges, public or private, legal or institutional, which are available to male citizens of the United States; and

WHEREAS, the women of the United States have united to assure that these rights and privileges are

available to all citizens equally regardless of sex; and

WHEREAS, the women of the United States have designated August 26, the anniversary date of the passage of the [19th Amendment](#), as symbol of the continued fight for equal rights: and

WHEREAS, the women of United States are to be commended and supported in their organizations and activities,

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that August 26th of each year is designated as Women's Equality Day, and the President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation annually in commemoration of that day in 1920, on which the women of America were first given the right to vote, and that day in 1970, on which a nationwide demonstration for women's rights took place.

In 1994, the presidential proclamation by then-President [Bill Clinton](#) included this quote from Helen H. Gardener, who wrote this to Congress in asking for the passage of the 19th Amendment: "Let us either stop our pretense before the nations of the Earth of being a republic and having 'equality before the law' or else let us become the republic we pretend to be."

A presidential proclamation in 2004 of Women's Equality Day by then-President George W. Bush explained the holiday this way:

On Women's Equality Day, we recognize the hard work and perseverance of those who helped secure women's suffrage in the United States. With the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, American women gained one of the most cherished rights and fundamental responsibilities of citizenship: the right to vote.

The struggle for women's suffrage in America dates back to the founding of our country. The movement began in earnest at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when women drafted a Declaration of Sentiments proclaiming they had the same rights as men. In 1916, [Jeannette Rankin](#) of Montana became the first American woman elected to the United States House of Representatives, despite the fact that her fellow women would not be able to vote nationally for four more years.

President Barack Obama in 2012 used the occasion of the proclamation of Women's Equality Day to highlight the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Trade Act:

On Women's Equality Day, we mark the anniversary of our Constitution's 19th Amendment, which secured the right to vote for America's women. The product of profound struggle and fierce hope, the 19th Amendment reaffirmed what we have always known: that America is a place where anything is possible and where each of us is entitled to the full pursuit of our own happiness. We also know that the defiant, can-do spirit that moved millions to seek [suffrage](#) is what runs through the veins of American history. It remains the wellspring of all our progress. And nearly a century after the battle for women's franchise was won, a new generation of young women stands ready to carry that spirit forward and bring us closer to a world where there are no limits on how big our children can dream or how high they can reach.

To keep our Nation moving ahead, all Americans — men and women — must be able to help provide for their families and contribute fully to our economy.

That year's proclamation included this language: "I call upon the people of the United States to celebrate the achievements of women and recommit to realizing gender equality in this country."

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