



American **Voices:**
*The Right
to Vote*

Florence Jaffray Harriman (1870–1967) holds a banner with the words “Failure Is Impossible. Susan B. Anthony. Votes for Women.”

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BY DAVID MERKOWITZ

The American Promise is found in the Declaration of Independence, written when the gathered colonials met in Philadelphia and sought to ground their claim on the assertion that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The challenge of the last 250 years has been to expand that promise to include all American citizens and invite them into the political process through the ballot box.

A mind-bending aspect of suffrage expansion in the United States is that the individuals who sought to expand access to the ballot box did not have the right to vote themselves. This was true of the expansion of suffrage to property-less white men in the 1820s, African American men in the Civil War era, women in the 1910s, Native Americans in the 1920s, African Americans again in the 1950s and 1960s, and 18- to 20-year-olds in the early 1970s. The movements to expand access had to be successful on two fronts. First, they had to develop a common sense of purpose—that their citizenship included equal access to the ballot—and then convince those with the vote that the American promise would be better kept if the circle of suffrage continued to expand.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the passage of the 15th Amendment and the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment, we are called on to commemorate those Americans who devoted their lives to making sure America fulfilled its founding promise. They carried significant burdens that came from the long and often seemingly fruitless push to expand the circle of American citizenship. And yet, each possessed a sense of mission and an aptitude for perseverance that carried them through dark nights and heady days. They each had to reckon with the tendency for social and political progress to ebb and flow across American history. In some moments, the circle expanded quickly and widely, and the future seemed destined to continue to deliver on the hope of the American Promise—but suddenly the mode turned, and then came the even harder battle to maintain that openness.

Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony are primarily figures of the nineteenth century. Their lives span from the closing days of the Early Republic in the late 1810s through the peak era of Industrial America at the turn of the twentieth century. They were born before the railroad and the telegraph transformed American life, and by the time their lives ended those technologies had completely remade American society and culture. Where it took a person over a week to travel from New York to Ohio in 1830, by 1900 it took less than a day, and information could travel even faster. Movements for social change in the first half of the 1800s were built upon face-to-face communication, including the lecture circuit and conferences; letters, both public and private; and newspapers, often with small circulations. By the close of the 1800s, technology offered the possibility of marshaling ever-larger crowds from across the nation and directing that energy toward those in power. A truly national press developed, and farmers on the edge of the prairie increasingly consumed similar information as those on the island of Manhattan. Much of the activism by Douglass and Anthony revolved around speaking tours, letter writing, and publishing newspapers.

Coralie Franklin Cook was among the last generation of African Americans born into slavery. Her life stretched from the opening days of the Civil War through the opening days of World War II.

In her lifetime, African American men gained and mostly lost access to the ballot box, especially in Confederate states, and women and Native Americans gained access to the vote for the first time. Like Douglass, she experienced the highs and lows of the suffrage movement, so that the movement to expand voting rights to women eventually left behind a similar push to maintain voting rights for African American men (and to fully include African American women). She also witnessed the onset of the breakup of the Old South as African Americans headed north seeking greater economic and political freedom.

Alice Paul was part of the younger generation of activists who finally achieved the long-sought suffrage for women; those women, however, were mostly white. Born in the midst of the Gilded Age, she came of age as the first generation of women who achieved a semblance of independence in the large cities across the country. For the first time, women—mostly younger—were able to get jobs in corporations, government, and the academy. While these positions were mostly auxiliary, such as secretarial work, a young woman in the city could imagine a life that was less reliant on male support. While poor and working-class women had long been part of the paid economy, the rising movement for women’s suffrage and women’s rights was able to tap into the growing number of educated women in at least one stage in their lives when they were independent of their parents and husbands. Alice Paul was part of the leading edge of this movement. When she died in 1977, she had succeeded in including sex in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and dedicated her life’s work to the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have instituted full women’s equality into the Constitution.

Paul Robeson experienced the ups and downs of African American life across the twentieth century. He came of age during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s when the first Great Migration brought African American culture to the American public in stage productions and movies. While many of these presentations supported the deeply racist ethos of the time, Robeson and his peers broke new ground. Robeson also experienced the ill-fated attempts to secure civil rights during the 1930s and 1940s that, while building a foundation for what came later during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, had only limited success in gaining universal suffrage for African Americans across the country. This earlier era of civil rights activism was often tied up with a dalliance with Communism and other forms of radical leftism, which often short-circuited the participation of those activists when the later Civil Rights Movement had its greatest prominence after the mid-1950s. Robeson suffered for his activism, though he lived to see the great successes of the Civil Rights Movement transform American society.

Anthony, Douglass, Franklin Cook, Paul, and Robeson were unwilling to accept the notion that the American Promise was not open to them. They believed that the larger the circle of American citizenship, the better the nation could serve the interests of all its residents. They each had to find ways to convince those with power to surrender some of their power, while pushing hard for the interests of those lacking the vote and a voice in American politics. How did each of these figures draw on the American Promise to make their case? How can we work to make the circle of American citizenship larger today? ♥

Hear from five historical figures unwilling to accept that the American Promise was not open to them.