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| |  | | --- | | The Centennial of the 19th Amendment this month is an appropriate time to look at Theodore Roosevelt’s evolving view on women’s suffrage. The organized women’s suffrage movement in America began in 1848 at a meeting in Seneca Falls in the Finger Lakes region of New York. “It is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise,” was one of the resolutions adopted at that meeting. New York did permit women to vote in school board elections in 1880, an example of limited suffrage. When Theodore Roosevelt served in the New York State Assembly he voted for a bill extending partial suffrage, explaining that what “women accomplished with their school ballot in Oyster Bay” had impressed him.  In his first message as governor of New York in 1899, TR recommended to the legislature “gradually extending the sphere in which suffrage can be exercised by women.” However, it was not expanded during his term. He had written to Susan B. Anthony, “I do not attach the importance to it [suffrage] that you do.” Moreover he blamed the attitude of women for not getting all the rights they could get under the present laws.  When Roosevelt became president, Anthony and other suffragists sent letters, telegrams, petitions, and held private meetings with him, urging him to publicly support full women’s suffrage. He refused to do so, though he and Edith Roosevelt did hold a reception at the White House for suffragists attending the annual meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1904. Interestingly, Edith privately supported suffrage, but would not speak publicly for it before her husband did.  Susan B. Anthony repeatedly asked Roosevelt to support suffrage. She told him that it would earn him a place in history with Abraham Lincoln, comparing women’s suffrage to the Emancipation Proclamation. TR adhered to traditional Victorian views of women, seeing their primary role as wives and mothers. Suffrage was still a controversial political issue in the first decade of the twentieth century.  TR summarized his views on suffrage in a letter to his sister Anna (Bamie) Cowles in June 1911: “I have never said very much about it, and always to the same effect, that I tepidly favored its application wherever it was shown to be desired by the majority of women themselves, but that I did not regard it as a reform of much consequence.” He reiterated these views in an editorial in *The Outlook* magazine in February 1912. While supporting women’s rights and equality of rights, he advocated a referendum by women on suffrage, but he also said he didn’t think suffrage would make much of a difference.  As we know, TR did not receive the Republican Party’s nomination in 1912, and he became the Progressive Party’s candidate. He sent his proposal for a suffrage referendum by women to the platform committee. They promptly rejected it and adopted a plank supporting a federal amendment for women’s suffrage. Roosevelt embraced this position a few weeks later in a speech on suffrage in Vermont. He explained there and later in his 1913 *Autobiography* how his views on suffrage had changed. He said that it was women reformers, including Jane Addams and Frances Kellor**,** who had convinced him that women needed the vote to secure better conditions for working women and the poor.    Though TR and the Progressive Party lost their bid to regain the presidency in the election of 1912, Roosevelt remained a champion to many in the suffrage movement. Six months later TR accepted an invitation to speak at a suffrage fundraiser in New York City. NAWSA President Anna Howard Shaw introduced Colonel Roosevelt as “the biggest addition to the cause in the past year.” The *New York Times* reported he was “easily the lion of the hour” and spoke for nearly an hour to a capacity crowd at the Metropolitan Opera house. Earlier that day, he had written to his daughter Ethel Derby in Paris about the meeting, “Ugh! How I loathe these speeches!” Nonetheless, he continued to work for suffrage the rest of his life. The growing acceptability of suffrage in 1912-1913 is reflected in the increasing thousands participating in suffrage parades in New York City.  The Roosevelts entertained at Sagamore Hill 300 suffragists and some anti-suffragists they hoped to convert on September 8, 1917, launching the campaign for New York’s second referendum on a state suffrage amendment. (In 1915, only 42 percent supported suffrage.) The 1917 vote was successful, with more than 53 percent of the men voting positively. The victory had broader significance since New York had the largest population and brought more votes to Congress for a suffrage amendment, as well as being the first state in the East to vote for full suffrage.  One of the last letters Roosevelt wrote was to a Republican senator from New Hampshire to urge him to vote for the suffrage amendment. In his column he prepared for the February 1919 *Metropolitan Magazine,* which was published posthumously, his final sentence was “And there should be no further delay in giving the women the right to vote by federal amendment. It is an absurdity longer to higgle about the matter.”  The federal amendment finally passed both houses of Congress by June 1919 and the required three-fourths of the states ratified it in the next fourteen months. Wilson signed the proclamation of ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 26, 1920. That date has been celebrated as Women’s Equality Day since 1973. Some states that had rejected the amendment subsequently ratified it (e.g., South Carolina in 1969, Georgia and Louisiana in 1970, and Mississippi in 1985). Many Black women and men in the South were prevented from voting by literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation until after the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.  The women’s suffrage movement was a radical and audacious idea and ridiculed for many decades. TR’s support for suffrage in 1912 and thereafter contributed to its success, though he certainly was not alone nor the most important figure. However, Roosevelt has received little attention in histories of the suffrage movement, including on how his position evolved.  **Additional information:** Many books have been published on the women’s suffrage movement and its leaders, e.g., *Suffrage* by Ellen Carol DuBois (2020), *Why They Marched* by Susan Ware, (2019), and *The Woman’s Hour* by Elaine Weiss. Each of these authors is in the excellent recent television documentary, *The Vote,* whichis streaming on the PBS website. Kathleen Dalton’s, *Theodore Roosevelt* (2002), has more than most biographies on TR and suffrage. Antonia Petrash includes a chapter on TR in her *Long Island and the Woman Suffrage Movement* (1913). Anyone who wants specific references for quotations and sources for the article above can e-mail me ([**Natalie.Naylor@Hofstra.edu**](mailto:Natalie.Naylor@Hofstra.edu)). | |