



Historical Overview of the National Woman's Party

Origins in the NAWSA Congressional Committee

The origins of the National Woman's Party (NWP) date from December 1912, when [Alice Paul](#) (1885-1977) and [Lucy Burns](#) (1879-1966) were appointed to the National American Woman Suffrage Association's (NAWSA) languishing Congressional Committee. Paul and Burns were young, well-educated Americans who worked with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in the militant wing of the British suffrage movement. Radicalized by their experiences in England—which included violent confrontations with authorities, jail sentences, hunger strikes, and force-feedings—they sought to inject a renewed militancy into the American campaign. They also endeavored to shift NAWSA's attention away from winning voting rights for women at the state and local levels to securing an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to enfranchise women nationally.

Their first activity on NAWSA's behalf was to organize a massive national suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., in March 1913.



Contingent of women representing foreign countries in the March 3, 1913, suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. L & M Ottenheimer.

[About this image](#)

This parade was modeled on the elaborate suffrage pageants held in Britain and local marches organized in New York by the Women's Political Union (WPU) and its leader Harriot Stanton Blatch (1856-1940). Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), married an Englishman and became active in the militant British suffrage campaign. She supported NAWSA's appointment of Paul and Burns, who shared her enthusiasm for British-inspired tactics.

The March 3, 1913, parade coincided with President Woodrow Wilson's

inauguration and put the president-elect and Congress on notice that NAWSA would hold the Democratic Party responsible if it failed to pass a women's suffrage amendment. Bands, floats, and more than 8,000 marchers participated, representing nearly every state and most occupations.

Despite assurances of police protection, crowds of men mobbed the parade route—some of them threatening or injuring the marching women. The police declined to intervene, and the public outcry was intense. Even NAWSA officials, leery of Paul's affiliation with British suffragettes, conceded afterwards that the parade and ensuing police debacle had “. . .done more for suffrage, to establish firmly those who were wavering, and to bring to our ranks thousands of others who would never have taken any interest in it.”¹ (For a fuller description of the parade, see [“Marching for the Vote: Remembering the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913.”](#))

Despite the publicity that such events generated, Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919) and later Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947), as presidents of NAWSA, remained skeptical. They feared that militant tactics would endanger state victories, antagonize Congress, and make it difficult to gain widespread support for ratifying women's voting rights if a federal amendment

were passed by Congress. They believed that British-influenced tactics and the strategy of targeting the party in power would not work in the United States where a bipartisan coalition usually was needed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority vote in Congress and states' ratification.

Establishment of the Congressional Union and Its Early Tactics

Increasingly at odds with NAWSA leadership and interested in raising funds and pursuing activities outside NAWSA's scope, Paul and Burns founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (CU) in April 1913. The NAWSA Congressional Committee and the CU were separate entities, but Paul chaired both, and the executive boards were identical. The CU, initially consisting of women in the District of Columbia who supported the Congressional Committee, established its own weekly journal, *The Suffragist*, in November 1913. One month later, immediately following NAWSA's annual convention, Paul was told that she could retain her chairmanship of the Congressional Committee only if she resigned from the CU and abandoned the policy of holding all Democrats responsible for congressional inaction on suffrage. Paul refused, as did Lucy Burns and the other committee members. NAWSA removed them and selected a new Congressional Committee. Two months later, in February 1914, NAWSA and the CU went their separate ways when the NAWSA board voted against readmitting the CU as an auxiliary member.

From 1914 to 1917, the CU, with its national headquarters in Washington and state branches throughout the country, instilled in the flagging American suffrage campaign an energy and militancy reminiscent of the early radicalism of Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906). CU members held street meetings, distributed pamphlets, organized elaborate parades and pageants, heckled candidates, collected signatures on suffrage petitions, mounted billboards on public highways, and orchestrated coast-to-coast automobile and train tours of suffrage speakers. The CU also arranged for deputations of women to meet with the president, encouraged western women already enfranchised to vote as a bloc in the 1914 congressional and 1916 presidential elections, and kept an extensive card index file on every member of Congress as an aid in its relentless lobbying effort. All of its tactics were designed to generate interest and publicity, attract new supporters, and pressure public officials.



Suffrage envoys from San Francisco greeted in New Jersey on their way to Washington to present a petition to Congress containing more than 500,000 signatures. November-December 1915.

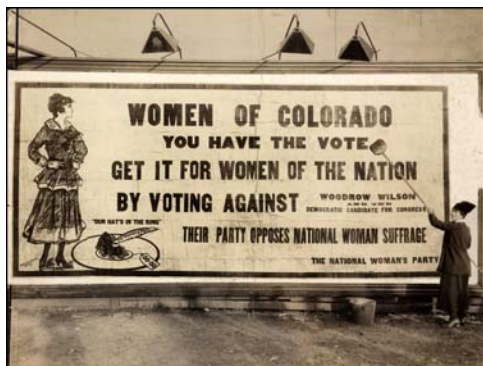
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Formation of the National Woman's Party

In early June 1916, the CU sponsored a convention in Chicago for women in the West who had achieved voting rights in their states. The National Woman's Party (NWP)—also briefly known as the Woman's Party of Western Voters or simply the Woman's Party—emerged as a result of this conference. CU member and Washington lobbyist [Anne Martin](#) (1875-1951) of Nevada became the NWP's first chairman. The goal of the world's "first women's political party" was to remain independent of the existing political parties and to campaign on a platform

consisting of one plank—immediate passage of the Susan B. Anthony federal suffrage amendment. The CU continued to exist in states where women did not have the vote; the NWP replaced the CU in western states that had passed women’s suffrage. The two groups coexisted until March 1917 when the voting and non-voting wings reunited in a single organization under the NWP name.

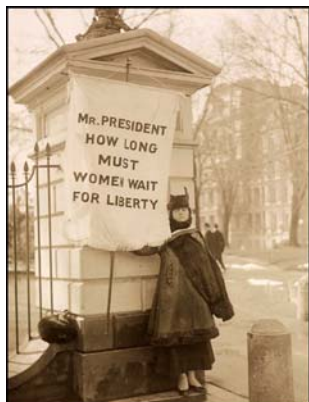
From June to November 1916, both the NWP and CU concentrated on the upcoming elections. They picketed the national conventions, met with presidential and congressional candidates, and sent organizers into the enfranchised states to lobby for the federal suffrage amendment and oppose all Democratic Party candidates. In late October, suffrage speaker [Inez Milholland Boissevain](#) (1886-1916) collapsed while speaking on stage in Los Angeles. She died on November 25 and was widely regarded as the first martyr of the American women’s suffrage movement. A memorial service was held on Christmas Day in the U.S. Capitol, and resolutions were prepared for President Wilson’s attention. When Wilson angrily dismissed the suffragists’ demands, Paul decided, with Blatch’s urging, to escalate their agitation.



NWP member puts up a billboard in Denver during the 1916 election campaigns.

[About this image](#)

Picketing, Arrests, and Imprisonment



“Silent sentinel” Alison T. Hopkins at the White House gates on New Jersey Day. January 30, 1917.

[About this image](#)

On January 10, 1917, the CU and NWP instituted the practice of [picketing](#) the White House, the first political activists to do so. Every day for the next two months, regardless of weather, women marched in a line from CU headquarters to the White House, where they took up their stations as “silent sentinels.” In order to keep the press interested, special days were scheduled for picketing by college women, wage-earners, and representatives from various states, occupations, and professional affiliations. President Wilson initially tolerated the pickets, waving to them as his car pulled through the gates. However, when the United States entered World War I four months later, the political climate changed, and criticism of the government became less acceptable.

Unlike other suffragists, including longtime pacifists who stopped campaigning for the vote and devoted themselves to war work, the NWP neither publicly supported the war nor halted agitating for women’s voting rights.

The NWP highlighted the government’s hypocrisy of supporting democracy abroad while denying its women citizens the right to vote at home. NWP criticism of the government was viewed as unpatriotic by many and even seditious and subversive by some, especially the soldiers and sailors who were among the most visible instigators of mob violence against the pickets. The party firmly defended the rights of free speech, free assembly, and dissent. NAWSA’s Catt publicly disassociated her organization from the NWP’s “unladylike” behavior and the “unwelcome” publicity it generated, although NAWSA benefitted by appearing more

moderate and approachable to politicians who were beginning to rethink their antisuffrage positions.

On June 22, 1917, suffrage pickets began to be arrested on the technical charge of obstructing traffic. As the summer progressed, more arrests followed and longer prison sentences were handed down. The women were **imprisoned**—usually in unsanitary conditions, sometimes beaten (most notably during the November 15 “Night of Terror” at Occoquan Workhouse), and often brutally force-fed when they went on hunger strikes to protest being denied political prisoner status.

Women of all classes risked their health, jobs, and reputations by continuing their protests. One historian estimated that approximately 2,000 women spent time on the picket lines between 1917 and 1919, and that 500 women were arrested, of whom 168 were actually jailed². The NWP made heroes of the suffrage prisoners, held ceremonies in their honor, and presented them with commemorative pins. Women went on publicity tours dressed in prison garb and talked about their experiences in prison in order to win public support for their cause.



Suffrage prisoner Lucy Branham, in prison costume, being filmed while addressing an open-air meeting [detail]. 1919.
[About this image](#)

Congressional Passage of 19th Amendment and Ratification Campaign

Government officials found it increasingly difficult to refuse the vote to women who were contributing so much to the war effort. Antisuffragist arguments about women’s mental and physical inferiority were difficult to sustain as women took over jobs vacated by men drafted into military service. In addition, the NWP’s militant tactics and the public support its members garnered from their imprisonment, combined with persistent, low-key lobbying, eventually forced President Wilson to endorse the 19th Amendment on January 9, 1918. The next day, it passed in the House of Representatives.



Alice Paul unfurls the ratification flag from NWP headquarters after Tennessee becomes the 36th state to ratify 19th Amendment. National Photo Co. August 18, 1920.
[About this image](#)

Obstructionists from southern and eastern states delayed passage in the Senate until June 1919, during which time NWP members continued to lobby and protest. They established picket lines in front of the U.S. Capitol and the Senate Office Building in October 1918; started a watch fire campaign on January 1, 1919, in front of the White House to pressure President Wilson to lobby recalcitrant senators to pass the suffrage amendment; burned Wilson’s words and image in

effigy; and sent suffrage prisoners on a cross-country speaking tour aboard a train named “Democracy Limited” in February and March 1919.

On May 21, 1919, the U.S. House of Representatives again passed the Susan B. Anthony federal suffrage amendment, and on June 4, the U.S. Senate followed suit. The enactment of the amendment initiated a 14-month campaign for ratification by 36 states. During this time the NWP sent national organizers into key states to help local NWP members coordinate ratification efforts. Finally, on August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th

Amendment. Antisuffragists tried to overturn the vote, but after six more days of legal maneuvering, the Tennessee governor signed the certificate of ratification and mailed it to Washington on August 24. Two days later, on August 26, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby signed the 19th Amendment into law.

Equal Rights Amendment and Post-Suffrage Activities

Once suffrage was achieved, the NWP regrouped and focused its attention on passing a federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), drafted by Paul and first introduced in Congress in December 1923. The party withstood attacks from women's groups who opposed the ERA as a threat to sex-based protective labor legislation and kept the issue alive for decades until the renewed ERA campaign in the 1970s.

Throughout the 20th century, the NWP remained a leading advocate of women's political, social, and economic equality. In the 1920s, the NWP drafted more than 600 pieces of legislation



NWP envoys, comprised mostly of western women, motor to Rapid City, South Dakota, to meet with a vacationing President Calvin Coolidge and ask his support of the Equal Rights Amendment pending in Congress. July 1927.

[About this image](#)

in support of equal rights for women on the state and local levels, including bills covering divorce and custody rights, jury service, property rights, ability to enter into contracts, and the reinstatement of one's maiden name after marriage. It launched two major "Women For Congress" campaigns in 1924 and 1926 and lobbied for the appointment of women to high federal positions. The party also worked for federal and state "blanket bills" to ensure women equal rights and was instrumental in changing federal legislation to provide equal nationality and citizenship laws for women, including the Cable Act of 1922 and its subsequent revisions—the Dickstein-Copeland Bill of 1934 and the Equal Nationality Treaty of 1934.

Also in the 1930s, the NWP fought successfully for the repeal of Section 213 of the Legislative Appropriations Act of 1932 (Economy Act), which prohibited federal employees from working for the federal government if their spouses also were federal employees. NWP lobbying helped to eliminate many of the sex discrimination clauses in the National Recovery Administration's codes and assisted in the adoption of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

International feminism became an increasing interest of Paul and the NWP as early as the 1920s. Paul formed an International Advisory Council to the NWP in 1925 and assisted in the establishment of the Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW) at the Sixth Pan-American Congress in Havana, in 1928. She also formed a World Woman's Party in 1938, which first assisted Jewish women fleeing the holocaust and then became the NWP's office for promoting equal rights for women around the world, especially in the years immediately before and after World War II. The NWP helped both Puerto Rican and Cuban women in their suffrage campaigns and was instrumental in the lobbying for the establishment of a permanent United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

The NWP successfully campaigned for the inclusion of Title VII in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and remained a political action committee until 1997. Its greatest impact, however, was during the suffrage campaign (when its membership reached its height at 50,000) and the two

decades thereafter, which is the 25-year period featured in *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*.

For more detailed information on the NWP's activities, see the [Detailed Chronology \(PDF\)](#) associated with this Web presentation.

Notes

1. Mary Ware Dennett to Alice Paul, 3 February 1913, and Anna Howard Shaw to Alice Paul, 5 March 1913, National Woman's Party Records, Group I, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. ([Return to text](#))
2. Linda G. Ford, *Iron Jawed Angels: The Suffrage Militancy of the National Woman's Party, 1912-1920* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1991), 3. ([Return to text](#))