

A Tale of Two Pandemics That Left a Mark on Women's History

"Everything conspires against women suffrage. Now it is the influenza."

- The New Orleans Times-Picayune, October 10, 1918

By Nicole Evelina

If you're anything like me, you were more than a little upset when COVID-19 came along and shut down Women's History Month activities right in the middle of March. There's only one month a year when the national spotlight is turned on women and suddenly, the pandemic not only (rightfully) overshadowed it, but canceled all our eagerly anticipated and well-planned events. Granted, compared to the public health risk, this was completely the right thing to do, but it still stung.

Now, as the pandemic enters its third month with no signs of stopping, it is very clearly threatening activities planned for the once-in-a-lifetime centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment in August. Across the country, events are being taken online, postponed or canceled—some organizations are even extending their celebrations into 2021 in the hope things will get better.

But would you believe all of this has happened before? In a bizarre case of history repeating itself, the Nineteenth Amendment almost didn't happen because of a pandemic—the Spanish flu. It was wreaking havoc in its second wave in the fall of 1918, just as scientists and doctors are predicting will happen this fall with COVID-19. And also like this year, 1918 was an election year, though a mid-term rather than a presidential election.

In the fall of 1918, The Nineteenth Amendment was still very far from a done deal. It was languishing in Congress. The House had passed it and President Woodrow Wilson supported it, but the Senate refused to pass it out of fear of what a national amendment that gave black women the right to vote might do to their power, especially in the South. But after several canceled

votes, their support was waning, and Senators were only two votes away from passing the historic legislation.

Before the flu caused massive shutdowns and forced people to stay home (sound familiar?), there was strong public support for the bill. This was thanks in part to an unlikely source: World War I and the visibility it gave women as nurses, workers and bond-selling patriots. It also didn't hurt that outspoken suffragists like Alice Paul were quick to point out the hypocrisy of the U.S. being willing to fight for democracy across the ocean while refusing to grant half its population the right to vote.

By the beginning of October 1918, many lawmakers were suffering from the flu, which meant two important things: legislative activity was pretty much at a standstill and rallies for the November election were canceled. Even our own Carrie Chapman Catt, who called for the formation of the League of Women Voters in St. Louis in 1919, was stricken. She was bedridden at her home in New York with a very serious case and unable to continue to lead the American Woman Suffrage Association as closely as she would like.

Quarantine and social distancing measures—most contemporary reports cite four feet instead of today's six-foot rule—meant a much-anticipated train tour for the suffragists through key states had to be canceled. Just as today our events are going virtual, the suffragists of 1918 turned to the social media of their day—letter writing, advertising and telephone calls—to try to keep the momentum going as they fought against the public's fear for their lives to get them to understand the ongoing importance of a woman's right to vote. Instead of trying to convince people on a mass level, many suffragists started with their friends and family, others braving the flu by going door-to-door with pamphlets, and many signing petitions in four key states—

Oklahoma, South Dakota, Louisiana and Michigan—urging men to vote for local referendums that would enfranchise women in those states.

Their efforts paid off. In November, the referendums in Oklahoma, South Dakota and Michigan passed and power in the Senate turned Republican, ushering several suffrage supporters into office. Seven months later, in June 1919, the bill finally passed the Senate. But there was still much work to be done. Over the next 15 months, three-fourths of states had to ratify the amendment for it to become law, which finally happened when Tennessee passed it on August 18, 1920. Two days later, women were officially granted the right to vote in the United States.

While our modified/canceled celebrations one hundred years later pale in comparison to the actual event and the hundreds of thousands of lives lost in both pandemics, they are still a blow to female morale. In a country that hasn't even passed an Equal Rights Amendment despite nearly a century of fighting for it and decades of lobbying, we need all the encouragement and attention we can get. However, what happened in 1918 also teaches us that if we are persistent and keep fighting, we will eventually triumph—pandemic be damned.

Sources

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