

Name: _____ Class: _____

Address to Congress on Women's Suffrage

By Carrie Chapman Catt
1917

Until the early 20th century, women in America were denied suffrage (the right to vote) in political elections. It wasn't until June 4, 1919 that Congress passed the 19th Amendment, which granted women their right to vote. Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) campaigned for the 19th Amendment, and was considered a leader among women's suffrage. In the following address to Congress in November 1917, Catt argues for the rights of women. As you read, take notes on the rhetorical devices Catts uses to make her case.

[1] Woman suffrage is inevitable... Three distinct causes made it inevitable.

First, the history of our country. Ours is a nation born of revolution, of rebellion against a system of government so securely entrenched in the customs and traditions of human society that in 1776 it seemed impregnable. From the beginning of things, nations had been ruled by kings and for kings, while the people served and paid the cost. The American Revolutionists boldly proclaimed the heresies¹: "Taxation without representation is tyranny." "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." The colonists won, and the nation which was established as a result of their victory has held unflinching that these two fundamental principles of democratic government are not only the spiritual source of our national existence but have been our chief historic pride and at all times the sheet anchor of our liberties.



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Eighty years after the Revolution, Abraham Lincoln welded those two maxims² into a new one: "Ours is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Fifty years more passed and the president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, in a mighty crisis of the nation, proclaimed to the world: "We are fighting for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts: for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government."

All the way between these immortal aphorisms³ political leaders have declared unabated faith in their truth. Not one American has arisen to question their logic in the 141 years of our national existence. However stupidly our country may have evaded the logical application at times, it has never swerved from its devotion to the theory of democracy as expressed by those two axioms⁴...

1. **Heresy (noun):** a provocative and often offensive theory or belief
2. **Maxim (noun):** general rule
3. **Aphorism (noun):** a saying which indicates truth
4. **Axiom (noun):** a self-evident truth that requires no proof

- [5] With such a history behind it, how can our nation escape the logic it has never failed to follow, when its last un-enfranchised⁵ class calls for the vote? Behold our Uncle Sam floating the banner with one hand, "Taxation without representation is tyranny," and with the other seizing the billions of dollars paid in taxes by women to whom he refuses "representation." Behold him again, welcoming the boys of twenty-one and the newly made immigrant citizen to "a voice in their own government" while he denies that fundamental right of democracy to thousands of women public school teachers from whom many of these men learn all they know of citizenship and patriotism, to women college presidents, to women who preach in our pulpits, interpret law in our courts, preside over our hospitals, write books and magazines, and serve in every uplifting moral and social enterprise. Is there a single man who can justify such inequality of treatment, such outrageous discrimination? Not one...

Second, the suffrage for women already established in the United States makes women suffrage for the nation inevitable. When Elihu Root, as president of the American Society of International Law, at the eleventh annual meeting in Washington, April 26, 1917, said, "The world cannot be half democratic and half autocratic. It must be all democratic or all Prussian⁶. There can be no compromise," he voiced a general truth. Precisely the same intuition has already taught the blindest and most hostile foe of woman suffrage that our nation cannot long continue a condition under which government in half its territory rests upon the consent of half of the people and in the other half upon the consent of all the people; a condition which grants representation to the taxed in half of its territory and denies it in the other half a condition which permits women in some states to share in the election of the president, senators, and representatives and denies them that privilege in others. It is too obvious to require demonstration that woman suffrage, now covering half our territory, will eventually be ordained in all the nation. No one will deny it. The only question left is when and how will it be completely established.

Third, the leadership of the United States in world democracy compels the enfranchisement of its own women. The maxims of the Declaration were once called "fundamental principles of government." They are now called "American principles" or even "Americanisms." They have become the slogans of every movement toward political liberty the world around, of every effort to widen the suffrage for men or women in any land. Not a people, race, or class striving for freedom is there anywhere in the world that has not made our axioms the chief weapon of the struggle. More, all men and women the world around, with farsighted vision into the verities⁷ of things, know that the world tragedy of our day is not now being waged over the assassination of an archduke⁸, nor commercial competition, nor national ambitions, nor the freedom of the seas. It is a death grapple between the forces which deny and those which uphold the truths of the Declaration of Independence...

Do you realize that in no other country in the world with democratic tendencies is suffrage so completely denied as in a considerable number of our own states? There are thirteen black states where no suffrage for women exists, and fourteen others where suffrage for women is more limited than in many foreign countries.

Do you realize that when you ask women to take their cause to state referendum you compel them to do this: that you drive women of education, refinement, achievement, to beg men who cannot read for their political freedom?

5. **Un-enfranchised (adjective):** without the right to vote

6. Prussia was a historic ruling state in the former German empire that existed until 1947. The term "Prussian" came to be used to emphasize the aggressiveness and militarism of the aristocratic class that once dominated Prussia and the German empire.

7. **Verity (noun):** a true principle or belief

8. A reference to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, which prompted the beginning of WWI.

- [10] Do you realize that such anomalies as a college president asking her janitor to give her a vote are overstraining the patience and driving women to desperation?

Do you realize that women in increasing numbers indignantly⁹ resent the long delay in their enfranchisement?

Your party platforms have pledged women suffrage. Then why not be honest, frank friends of our cause, adopt it in reality as your own, make it a party program, and “fight with us”? As a party measure – a measure of all parties – why not put the amendment through Congress and the legislatures? We shall all be better friends, we shall have a happier nation, we women will be free to support loyally the party of our choice, and we shall be far prouder of our history.

“There is one thing mightier than kings and armies” – aye, than Congresses and political parties – “the power of an idea when its time has come to move.” The time for woman suffrage has come. The woman’s hour has struck. If parties prefer to postpone action longer and thus do battle with this idea, they challenge the inevitable. The idea will not perish; the party which opposes it may. Every delay, every trick, every political dishonesty from now on will antagonize the women of the land more and more, and when the party or parties which have so delayed woman suffrage finally let it come, their sincerity will be doubted and their appeal to the new voters will be met with suspicion. This is the psychology of the situation. Can you afford the risk? Think it over.

We know you will meet opposition. There are a few “women haters” left, a few “old males of the tribe,” as Vance Thompson calls them, whose duty they believe it to be to keep women in the places they have carefully picked out for them. Treitschke, made world famous by war literature, said some years ago, “Germany, which knows all about Germany and France, knows far better what is good for Alsace-Lorraine than that miserable people can possibly know.” A few American Treitschkes we have who know better than women what is good for them. There are women, too, with “slave souls” and “clinging vines” for backbones. There are female dolls and male dandies. But the world does not wait for such as these, nor does liberty pause to heed the plaint of men and women with a grouch. She does not wait for those who have a special interest to serve, nor a selfish reason for depriving other people of freedom. Holding her torch aloft, liberty is pointing the way onward and upward and saying to America, “Come.”

- [15] To you and the supporters of our cause in Senate and House, and the number is large, the suffragists of the nation express their grateful thanks. This address is not meant for you. We are more truly appreciative of all you have done than any words can express. We ask you to make a last, hard fight for the amendment during the present session. Since last we asked a vote on this amendment, your position has been fortified by the addition to suffrage territory of Great Britain, Canada, and New York.

Some of you have been too indifferent to give more than casual attention to this question. It is worthy of your immediate consideration. A question big enough to engage the attention of our allies in wartime is too big a question for you to neglect.

Some of you have grown old in party service. Are you willing that those who take your places by and by shall blame you for having failed to keep pace with the world and thus having lost for them a party advantage? Is there any real gain for you, for your party, for your nation by delay? Do you want to drive the progressive men and women out of your party?

9. **Indignant** (*adjective*): angered by unfairness

Some of you hold to the doctrine of states' rights as applying to woman suffrage. Adherence to that theory will keep the United States far behind all other democratic nations upon this question. A theory which prevents a nation from keeping up with the trend of world progress cannot be justified.

Gentlemen, we hereby petition you, our only designated representatives, to redress our grievances by the immediate passage of the Federal Suffrage Amendment and to use your influence to secure its ratification in your own state, in order that the women of our nation may be endowed with political freedom before the next presidential election, and that our nation may resume its world leadership in democracy.

- [20] Woman suffrage is coming – you know it. Will you, Honorable Senators and Members of the House of Representatives, help or hinder it?

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word “impregnable” mean as it is used in paragraph 2? [RI.4]
 - A. Difficult to defeat or break from
 - B. Prone to radical change
 - C. Focused on the welfare of its people
 - D. Set in its ways; comfortable

2. PART B: Which phrase provides the best support for the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “of revolution, of rebellion”
 - B. “so securely entrenched”
 - C. “customs and traditions”
 - D. “human society”

3. How does the following quotation from paragraph 5 contribute to Catt’s overall argument?: “Behold our Uncle Sam floating the banner with one hand, ‘Taxation without representation is tyranny,’ and with the other seizing the billions of dollars paid in taxes by women to whom he refuses ‘representation.’” [RI.5]
 - A. It emphasizes the patriotism of women in order to convince Congress that women are just as deserving of the vote as men.
 - B. It contradicts the beliefs of the American Revolution, suggesting that antiquated creeds have no place in modern society.
 - C. It suggests that women should not be forced to pay taxes if they are not given a vote.
 - D. It points out the hypocrisy of disenfranchisement for women when compared to fundamental American beliefs.

4. Catts begins paragraphs 8-11 with the phrase “Do you realize...” Why is this structure effective in helping Catts make her argument? [RI.5]
 - A. It allows the reader to identify Catt’s strongest argument for suffrage.
 - B. It emphasizes the multitude of injustices and ironies against women brought upon by disenfranchisement.
 - C. It questions the knowledge of the members of Congress, suggesting their ignorance.
 - D. It asks Congress to consider the ways in which suffrage for women would improve the welfare of all Americans.

5. What is Catt's main purpose in this speech? Support your answer with evidence. [RI.6]
