

Right of Women to Vote

Katherine Metzel Debs writes in 1910 in *The Appeal to Reason* newspaper outlining arguments for women's right to vote.

**Right of Women to Vote**

BY KATHERINE M. DEBS

To my mind there is no valid argument against the right of women to vote on equal terms with men. The proposition is self-evident that woman, being a human being and a citizen of the community, the same as man, is entitled to equal rights, privileges and opportunities.

Let me ask this simple question: What justice is there in compelling women to obey laws they have no voice in enacting? This question has never been answered and never can be answered except in one way.

If woman is less than a human being, less than a citizen, a mental weakling, requiring man as a guardian; if she is but the property appendage and convenience of her lord and master, then I submit she ought not to have the right to vote, but should in all meekness resign herself to her divinely (?) appointed lot, the echo of her husband, the servant of her sovereign, satisfied to spend all the days of her life in the realms of mental inferiority and political non-existence.

But woman has all the essential qualities of man, not excepting mentality and initiative, and if she is to develop the best there is in her, she must be free and she must be the equal of man in respect to every right and every opportunity required for the untrammelled expression of her voice and will.

Lester F. Ward, greatest of American sociologists, says: "We have no conception of the real amount of talent or of genius possessed by woman." No, for the reason that woman has never had the chance to unfold, to develop her latent powers and energies and to show the world what she is really capable of accomplishing.

But there has been a wonderful change of sentiment upon the woman question during the last few years and the change will be still greater during the years immediately before us. Old prejudices, ignorant customs and barbaric traditions are being swept aside. The new spirit, the spirit of the coming social democracy, is asserting itself everywhere and the world is beginning to heed its cry and to reshape its institutions, based upon mutual economic interests and the absolute equality of the sexes.

As a Socialist I see no reason why woman should not be the comrade of her husband upon equal terms in all the social, moral and political affairs of life as well as in the struggle for existence, and I am proud that the Socialist party, the party that is spreading so rapidly over all the world, proclaims as one of its cardinal principles, that woman is and ought to be, and shall be the equal of man in all essential respects, and his inferior in none.

Those who declare that to engage in politics would degrade woman will pardon me if I venture to suggest that they would better change their politics. The kind of politics that will degrade a woman will also degrade a man, and no man ought to engage in the kind of politics that degrades his wife and mother.

As for the women who protest that they do not need and do not want the ballot, I think they unconsciously offer the strongest possible evidence in favor of the ballot.

But it is particularly in the name of the five millions of wage-working women in the United States that I raise my voice in behalf of unrestricted woman suffrage. These women have to go out in the world and compete with men in industry, in business, in educational and professional life, and why should they not have the same political rights and privileges? As a rule they are the victims of the most unjust discrimination in respect to wages and treatment, because they lack even the limited means of self-defense with which their male competitors are provided by their manhood suffrage.

If the pampered pets of society do not want to vote, the working women do, and for reasons that no society queen, such as Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, with all her brilliant sophistry, can successfully deny.

Thirty years ago Susan B. Anthony, the noble champion of woman suffrage in the early days of the movement, was treated with almost brutal contempt by the "better element" of society, in the city of Terre Haute; today her name is honored throughout the civilized world.

The cause of woman's rights is advancing with the cause of man's intelligence, and no matter how many obstacles may be thrown in its way by ignorance, prejudice and sordid self-interest, the time is coming when women will be the equal of man, when both will be free, when society will rise to a higher plane, and enter into a larger and nobler life.

Source: Katherine M. Debs, "Right of Women to Vote," *Appeal to Reason*, Girard, Kansas. June 11, 1910, p. 2.

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Historical Era

**THE EMERGENCE OF
MODERN AMERICA
(1890-1930)**

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Right of Women to VoteDocument Type: **Newspaper article**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

In an article from the *Appeal to Reason* newspaper, Kate Metzel Debs, wife of five-time Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, presents arguments for the right of women to vote, especially working women.

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SOURCING THE SOURCE

The author of this article is Katherine (Kate) Metzel Debs, wife of Eugene V. Debs. Born in 1857 to German immigrant parents, she grew up in Butchertown, a German neighborhood in Louisville, KY. After her father's death in 1862, her mother remarried and the family moved to Terre Haute, IN where Kate met and married labor organizer Eugene V. Debs. He helped found the Socialist Party of America. As a Socialist candidate, he ran for US president five times. In addition to being an active supporter of her husband and his cause, working behind the scenes to ensure his success, Kate Debs also worked for her local Women's Franchise League which advocated for women's suffrage. In this 1910 article, Kate expressed her views on the reasons women should be given the right to vote, and as a Socialist, she gave special emphasis to working class women.

Intended Audience: The intended audience was subscribers and readers of *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist newspaper published in Girard, KS. In addition to subscribers nationwide, the newspaper was sold at rallies and speeches wherever Debs or other Socialists spoke. The newspaper was intended to be shared and discussed widely. The Socialists were advocates for women's equality, making it part of their party platform from its founding in 1901. However, it would be 1920 before women's suffrage was achieved.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE **Historical Context**

Katherine Metzel Debs was born in Pittsburgh, PA to German immigrant parents who left their home country after the failed political revolutions of 1848. Her mother's Stuber family settled in Louisville, KY in the German neighborhood of Butchertown, considered a haven for political radicals. One of their core beliefs was universal suffrage, meaning the right to vote for all adults. Her parents met and married in Louisville, but briefly fled to Pittsburgh after the 1855 Bloody Monday riots in Louisville, which saw native-born Protestants attack German and Irish immigrant neighborhoods. After her father's death in 1862, Kate's mother moved in with her parents in Butchertown where Kate spent her early childhood. In 1866 her mother Katherine married J.J. Baur, widower of her sister, and the family relocated to Terre Haute, IN.

Kate married Eugene V. Debs in Terre Haute in 1885 when he was Secretary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, a labor union based in Terre Haute. Kate assisted in the office and was his personal secretary. He helped found the first nationwide labor organization of railway workers, the American Railway Union. For his role in the 1894 Pullman Strike, which shut down rail traffic across the US, Eugene Debs spent six months in the McHenry County jail in Woodstock, IL where Kate moved to help with his correspondence. Upon his release, Debs declared himself a Socialist and helped found the Socialist Party of America. The Socialists advocated for many changes, including worker's rights, the 8-hour day, an end to child labor, and women's suffrage. Kate continued to work alongside her husband during this time and shared his beliefs, declaring herself to be a Socialist in 1908, but she rarely made public appearances or speeches.

Kate Debs was a long-time supporter of women's suffrage and was active in her local chapter of the Women's Franchise League, which drew much support from working-class women. In this respect, Debs and the League were quite different from many of the middle- and upper-class leaders of the women's rights movement. Those women were able to afford domestic help which freed their time to volunteer for charitable and other causes, including women's suffrage. They tended to be more educated than working-class women. The message of many women's suffrage groups typically focused on how suffrage could positively impact the lives of middle- and upper-class women. They argued that giving middle- and upper-class, mostly Protestant, women votes would empower them to bring about societal changes that most concerned them, such as Temperance. However, few addressed the issues facing working-class women whose lives were consumed by working to provide even the basics for their families. Workers' wages were so low that often entire families, including children, were forced to work simply for their family to survive.

The Socialist Party of America was dedicated to alleviating the misery of the working-class through the ballot box. They believed in ballots, rather than bullets to bring about a more just society. This meant that instead of a violent revolution to bring about change, the Socialists would organize voters to elect party members to political offices where they could peacefully bring about the changes they sought through legislation. The Socialist Party grew rapidly from its founding in 1901, claiming over 113,000 members in 1917. Eugene V. Debs was a presidential candidate in 1900, 1904, 1908, and in 1912 he received almost 1 million votes. In 1920, Debs ran for president from his prison cell in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary where he had been sentenced to 10 years for violation of the Espionage Act during WWI. Once again, he received almost 1 million votes.

Debs and the Socialist Party were long-time supporters of women's equality, including the right to vote. Socialist women argued that Socialism would not upset the existing social order of society, but would eliminate stresses on women caused by the poverty so many experienced under capitalism. Thus, women could fulfill their traditional roles of wife and mother, and still embrace the progressive ideals of Socialism.

The *Appeal to Reason* was the largest Socialist newspaper in the country, with a circulation as high as 550,000 per week and had 450,000 subscribers when this article was published in 1910. It featured news for and about the working-class, including a women's column to inform women on the finer points of Socialism as it related to them. As women's confidence grew through their education, they were able to venture out into the world of public speaking, especially to the large camp meetings held in the West where Socialists would gather for several days listening to speakers. Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and other western states became hotbeds of Socialism in the early 20th century. But other cities in the East, such as Milwaukee and Toledo, also supported Socialism, with 74 American cities electing Socialist mayors in 1911. Voters in Milwaukee, WI elected Victor Berger to the US House of Representatives in 1910, making him the first Socialist to serve in Congress. In 1911, voters elected Socialists to legislatures in nine different states. These victories were achieved mostly without women's votes because with only a few exceptions, women were not allowed to vote.

The women's suffrage movement faced an uphill battle convincing both men and women of the need to expand the right to vote to all adults. Men argued it would take women out of their natural and traditional place in the home and bring them into the corrupt world of politics. It would lead to divorce, promiscuity, and even child abandonment. Some women (Debs calls them the "pampered pets of society") feared losing their place as the moral leaders of society, concerned that voting would place them on equal footing with men in the public arena. Others argued women were not smart enough to understand politics and the issues involved. But, more educated women, such as Alice Paul, who founded the National Women's Party in 1913, argued that women deserved the right to vote as much as men simply because they were human beings, born with the same natural rights as men - life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

Kate Debs clearly laid out an argument for women's suffrage based on natural rights. Natural rights are those which every human being has simply by being born. This idea was spelled out in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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." When Debs writes the "proposition is self-evident that woman being a human being and citizen," she is simply stating that if women are humans just like men, they deserve the same "rights, privileges and opportunities." This was the argument made by the Founding Fathers in 1776 in declaring their independence from Britain. By using the familiar language of the original Declaration, Kate Debs attempts to show her readers that the idea of women's suffrage is patriotic and is grounded in the founding of the nation.

She also raises the point of women being subject "to laws they have no voice in enacting." The Declaration of Sentiments issued at the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 had made this argument many years earlier. The authors of the Declaration of Sentiments purposely used the familiar language of the original Declaration of Independence, but added the word women to make explicit that, as used in the Declaration of Independence, the word "men" had a universal meaning encompassing all mankind. "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men **and women** are created equal..." Similar to the original Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments included a list of grievances, in this case women's grievances against men, including "He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice." The colonists had made the same argument against King George III in the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Debs refutes the argument that women were not smart enough to vote, citing the sociologist Lester Ward, who recognized that women had never had the chance "to unfold," by which he meant to demonstrate their full potential or "to develop her latent powers or energies," by which he meant to acquire knowledge and skills through education and experience. He viewed women as equal to men, or perhaps even superior to men. Ward was a founder of the American Sociological Association in 1906. Sociology, which studies the structures of society and the interactions of human beings, was a new field of study in the early 20th century. This was a time when more and more people began to see science as a way of understanding everything, with less reliance on religion and superstition. Scientists, such as Ward, were respected as authorities.

But Kate Debs' strongest case for women's suffrage is reserved for the specific needs of working women, who, she reminded readers, regularly "go out in the world and compete with men in industry, in business, in educational and professional life." She argued that women must be able to defend themselves, just as men did. The ballot would help working-class women achieve their goals of safer working conditions, the 8-hour day, and the end of child labor by giving them the power to elect people who would write the laws which governed their lives. This was consistent with Socialists' core belief that the working-class had a right to have economic and political control over their lives. Debs connected women's suffrage to the eventual

success of the Socialist movement, writing “the time is coming when woman will be the equal of man...when society will rise to a higher plane.”

As for the anti-suffragist argument that politics was a dirty and corrupt business that would degrade women, Debs states that such a politics “would also degrade a man.” She argues that men should not be engaging in the type of politics which would lead them, or their wives, and mothers, into immorality. To Kate Debs and the Socialists, women were truly equal to men on all facets of life, thus they deserved the right to vote. Her optimism about the eventual success of the Socialist movement is evident when she writes that “the coming social democracy is asserting itself everywhere.”

GLOSSARY

Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. A labor organization founded in 1873 to promote sobriety, safe working conditions, and respect for the men who stoked the fires on steam locomotives on the railroads. As Secretary, Eugene V. Debs was responsible for recruiting new members, maintaining membership rolls, and producing a monthly magazine distributed to members.

Lester F. Ward. Served as first president of the American Sociological Association in 1906. His writings were popular with Progressive Era reformers. He was a strong proponent of equal rights for women, even arguing that women might be superior to men, rather than inferior. He was a proponent of higher education and government involvement to improve society.

Declaration of Sentiments. A statement issued by the first woman’s rights convention held in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. Based on the original 1776 Declaration of Independence, it spells out the grievances of the signers who faced unequal treatment simply because they were women.

Espionage Act. An Act passed by Congress during World War I (1917) which, among other things, made it illegal to obstruct the military draft. Eugene V. Debs was found guilty of violating the Act for a speech he gave in Canton, Ohio in 1918 and was sentenced to ten years in Federal prison. From his prison cell, he ran for President of the United States in 1920; he received almost one million votes.

Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish. Was a leader of the elite social circle called “The Four Hundred” who dominated New York City high society during the Gilded Age. She owned homes in New York City and Newport, RI and was known for hosting elaborate parties. Her husband was director of National Park Bank of New York City, and president of the Illinois Central Railroad. In a 1909 *New York Times* newspaper interview, she stated her alliance with anti-suffrage forces, declaring “women will not benefit from mixing in the mire of politics” and that “any attractive woman can draw what she needs from most men.”

Pullman Strike. In 1894 workers at the Pullman company, which made railroad cars, in Pullman, IL (just outside of Chicago) went on strike after wages and hours were cut by the company. The federal government got involved due to the disruption of mail trains, and eventually the courts issued an injunction that declared the strike illegal and ordered strike leaders to end the strike. Eugene V. Debs was president of the American Railway Union at the time, and was one of the strike organizers.

Socialist Movement. Socialism offers a critique of capitalism and an alternative vision of how to organize society. The goal of Socialism is to spread wealth evenly and to treat all people fairly. Socialism took various forms in countries around the world. The American socialist movement was inherently democratic and gradualist, meaning that its leaders believed in elections rather than revolution to bring about a socialist society.

Susan B. Anthony. One of the founders of the woman’s rights movement in the US, Anthony was an early champion of women’s suffrage. Although she was not involved in the first woman’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848, she soon joined forces with the convention organizers and became a leader of the

new movement. In 1879 Eugene V. Debs invited Anthony to speak on women's right to vote in his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana. During her visit, she was met with jeers on the street and was shouted down during her talk.

Sophistry. A subtle, tricky, superficially plausible, but generally fallacious method of reasoning. It is generally done to deceive people. The argument sounds good, but is based on untruths.

Suffrage. Suffrage is the right to vote. Originally, only white, male, property owners were allowed to vote in the United States. Over time, this right was expanded to include more men, but women were mostly excluded until the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920, which specifically gave women the right to vote in all elections. Men and women who favored women's right to vote were known as a suffragists.

Temperance. Showing restraint in all things, especially food and drink. In the 19th century, the Temperance Movement tried to convince people to abstain from all alcoholic drinks. This eventually led to the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution which outlawed the manufacture, sale, and/or distribution of alcohol in the US (known as Prohibition).

Women's Franchise League. One of many suffrage organizations which worked to secure the right to vote for women. It was especially active in Indiana, with many local chapters. After passage of the 19th Amendment which gave women the right to vote in all elections, the League, which was an affiliate of the National American Women's Suffrage Association, joined NAWSA in forming the League of Women Voters, which is still active today.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- According to this article, how would the lives of working women improve if they had the right to vote? What difference could women make in society if they could vote?
- Who do you think was the main audience for this article? Men or women? Both? Working-class or middle- and upper-class people? Who would take more convincing? Why?
- Why might the author have decided to write about Lester F. Ward in the article? To write about Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish in the article?

Historical Era

- How did society tend to view women who advocated for equality and the right to vote? Were working-class women judged differently than upper- or middle-class women?
- Women had been fighting for the right to vote since the mid-19th century. Although this article appeared in 1910, women did not gain the right to vote until 1920. Why did it take so long for this right to be gained?

Labor & Working Class History

- What were the Socialist Party of America's goals? How would granting women the right to vote help achieve those goals?
- How, specifically, would working-class women benefit from the right to vote? Would their gains come from someone else's loss? What special challenges faced non-white women as they worked for suffrage?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Debs, Katherine Metzel. "Right of Women to Vote." *Appeal to Reason*, June 11, 1910, p. 2. Accessed 2/10/2022 @ <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/appeal-to-reason/100611-appealtoreason-w758.pdf> This article is in the public domain because it was published in 1910, more than a century ago.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Web-based & Other Media

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CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

[NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1B](#): Compare the New Nationalism, New Freedom, and Socialist agendas for change.

This document offers insight into the goals of American socialists, and how their notions of equality were connected to socialist ideals.

[NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1C](#): The Limitations of Progressivism and the alternatives offered by various groups.

This document provides an opportunity to consider the kinds of pro-suffrage arguments that resonated with Socialists and working-class women, and to evaluate these against the pro- and anti-suffrage arguments of middle- and upper-class women as well as working-class men.

Common Core Standards: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.rh.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.