

California

1871—Ellen Van Valkenburg attempted to add her name to the voter registration rolls in Santa Cruz County. After the county clerk refused to register Van Valkenburg, she sued, arguing that the 14th Amendment granted her citizenship, which guaranteed her voting rights. The California Supreme Court ruled against Van Valkenburg, stating that citizenship did not guarantee women the right to vote.

1879—Suffragists collected over 2,500 petition signatures to amend the California Constitution, which only allowed “every white male” to vote. The petition urged delegates to update the constitution to state “no citizen of the State shall be disenfranchised on account of sex” which delegates rejected.

1890—Temperance leaders Beaumelle Sturtevant-Peet, Sarah Severance and fellow Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) members led suffrage efforts. The next year, suffragists submitted testimony in favor of a suffrage bill, and Sturtevant-Peet delivered a petition with roughly 15,000 signatures urging passage. The bill stalled, leaving insufficient time for passage.

1910—A newly-seated Legislature approved a referendum suffrage provision. To create referendum support, the California Equal Suffrage Association, led by Elizabeth Lowe Watson, focused on Northern California support. The Political Equality League of Los Angeles, led by businessman John Hyde Braly, and the Votes for Women Club (VWC), led by attorney Clara Shortridge Foltz, prioritized Southern California.

Suffragists targeted rural voters to balance backlash from city dwellers opposing Prohibition. In addition to car tours and press materials, suffragists distributed translated documents to local immigrant communities. In Southern California, suffragists distributed three million pieces of literature and 90,000 “Votes for Women” buttons. Suffragists also used electric signs and billboards for publicity.

October 10, 1911—Suffragists won the referendum with 125,037 votes in favor to 121,450 votes opposed.

November 1, 1920—California ratified the 19th Amendment.

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