Woodrow Wilson & Women’s Suffrage

Essential Question:
How did President Wilson’s views on women’s suffrage change over time?

Context:
In 1920, the states ratified the 19th Amendment to our Constitution. This amendment gave women in this country the right to vote. The political and social battles that led to this amendment are known collectively as the women’s suffrage movement.

By the early 1900s, the women’s suffrage movement was long underway. But in this Progressive Era, it became a major political issue. There were two main groups fighting for women’s suffrage: the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and its offshoot, the National Women’s Party (NWP). Both groups worked tirelessly to promote the voting rights of women and to gain the support of a president who was politically detached from the issue.

In the beginning of his presidential career, President Wilson attested that voting rights were a state issue that did not require federal attention. Suffragists saw this as contrary to their movement. Then, due in large part to the circumstances of World War I, President Wilson changed his stance on women’s suffrage when he made it a federal concern. In 1918, he asked Congress to consider an amendment to the Constitution that granted women the right to vote. By 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified by the states, and women gained the right to vote in America.

Lesson Ideas:
In this lesson, students will synthesize information from several primary sources to explain how and why President Wilson changed his stance on the women’s suffrage movement. In addition, this lesson offers opportunities to incorporate the Common Core Standards into social studies.

Idea #1:
Read the sources and answer the accompanying questions.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Idea #2:
Create a graphic organizer (or use the sheet provided) to determine how President Wilson’s views on women’s suffrage changed over time.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Idea #3:
Write a paragraph explaining President Wilson’s changing position on women’s suffrage. Cite evidence from the sources to substantiate the claims made.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
Source 1: Letter from President Wilson to Governor Eugene Noble Foss (August 17, 1912)

“I am very much obliged to you for your considerate and candid letter of yesterday. I may say to you very frankly that I do not think that it would be best to bring the woman suffrage question into the national campaign, so far as we are concerned. It is not a national question but a state question. So far as it is a state question, I am heartily in favor of its thorough discussion and shall never be jealous of its submission to a popular vote. My own judgment in the matter is in an uncertain balance, I mean my judgment as a voting citizen.”

Source 2: President Wilson speaking to a delegation from the National Woman Suffrage Convention (December 8, 1913)

“I want you ladies, if possible — if I can make it clear to you — to realize just what my present position is. Whenever I walk abroad, I realize that I am not a free man; I am under arrest. I am so carefully and admirably guarded that I have not even the privilege of walking the street. That is, as it were, typical of my present transference from being an individual with his mind on any and every subject, to being an official of a great Government and, incidentally, or so it falls out under our system of Government, the spokesman of a Party. I set myself this strict rule when I was Governor of New Jersey and have followed it as President, and shall follow it as President, that I am not at liberty to urge upon Congress policies which have not had the organic consideration of those for whom I am spokesman.

In other words, I have not yet presented to any legislature my private views on any subject, and I never shall; because I conceive that to be a part of the whole process of government, that I shall be spokesman for somebody, not for myself.”
Source 3: Testimony of Carrie Chapman Catt to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Woman Suffrage (December 1915)

“I have discovered that when a man believes in woman suffrage it is a national question; and when he does not believe in it he says it is a question for the states.”

Note: Carrie Chapman Catt is the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She sees Wilson as one of the “non-believers” due to his stance of suffrage being a state issue and not a federal one.


Note: By 1916, many of the western states had extended full voting rights to women. These were Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Washington, California, Arizona, Kansas, Oregon, Montana, and Nevada.

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Source 5: Letter from President Wilson to Carrie Chapman Catt (January 25, 1917)

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
January 25, 1917

My dear Mrs. Catt:
May I not express to you and your organization, as well as to the women of North Dakota, my congratulations upon the passage by the Legislature of that State of a bill granting to the women of the State the right to vote for presidential electors and for municipal officers? As you know, I have a very real interest in the extension of the suffrage to the women, and I feel that every step in this direction should be applauded.

Cordially and sincerely yours,
WOODROW WILSON

Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, President, National American Women Suffrage Association
1626 Rhode Island Avenue, N. W., Washington, D. C.

Source 6: Photograph of Picket Line (February 1917)

Note: The National Woman’s Party picketed outside of the White House beginning in January 1917. Many of the picketers were arrested, and some were jailed.

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Source 7: Resignation Letter of Dudley Field Malone to President Wilson (September 7, 1917)

“I think it is high time that men in this generation, at some cost to themselves, stood up to battle for the national enfranchisement of American women.”

Note: Dudley Field Malone served as the collector of the Port of New York. He was considered a friend to President Wilson and a supporter for Wilson’s entire political career. Malone offered his resignation to President Wilson twice because of the way the suffrage situation was being handled. This excerpt is from the second resignation and was accepted by President Wilson. Malone went on to aid the suffragists with his legal services.

Source 8: President Wilson’s speech to Congress (September 30, 1918)

“GENTLEMEN OF THE SENATE: The unusual circumstances of a world war in which we stand and are judged in the view not only of our own people and our own consciences but also in the view of all nations and peoples will, I hope, justify in your thought, as it does in mine, the message I have come to bring to you. I regard the concurrence of the Senate in the constitutional amendment proposing the extension of the suffrage to women as vitally essential to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which we are engaged…. It is my duty to win the war and to ask you to remove every obstacle that stands in the way of winning it.

Are we alone to ask and take the utmost that our women can give, -- service and sacrifice of every kind, -- and still say we do not see what title that gives them to stand by our sides in the guidance of the affairs of their nation and ours? We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right? This war could not have been fought, either by the other nations engaged or by America, if it had not been for the services of the women, -- services rendered in every sphere, -- not merely in the fields of effort in which we have been accustomed to see them work, but wherever men have worked and upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself. We shall not only be distrusted but shall deserve to be distrusted if we do not enfranchise them with the fullest possible enfranchisement, as it is now certain that the other great free nations will enfranchise them.”

Note: This speech was given before the Senate voted on the 19th Amendment. The House of Representatives had already passed the amendment with the necessary 2/3 vote. Even with President Wilson’s endorsement, the amendment failed to pass in the Senate in 1918. It would be nearly a year before the amendment was again brought to Congress.
Questions:

1. In his letter to Governor Eugene Noble Foss, President Wilson states that women’s suffrage “is not a national question, but a state question.” What does he mean?

2. Why does President Wilson not explain his personal views on suffrage to Congress? (See Source 2.)

3. How was Carrie Chapman Catt significant to the women’s suffrage movement?

4. Were there states in the United States that allowed women to vote prior to the 19th Amendment? (Cite evidence from the sources to answer.)

5. In Source 6, where are the women picketing?

6. What cost did Malone accept in the battle for women’s suffrage?

7. What does enfranchisement mean?

8. What is President’s Wilson position on a national women’s suffrage amendment in 1918? (Cite evidence from Source 8.)

9. How does President Wilson’s position on women’s suffrage relate to World War I? (Cite evidence from Source 8.)

10. In Source 8, President Wilson states, “We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?” What does he mean by this?
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