

Tea – 4 – 2 – Vote

'Women's Equality Day' Commemorates the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution

Collective memory pinpoints the history of women's suffrage to Quaker teacher Susan B. Anthony who in 1837 was the first to stand up for equal pay for women teachers. Discouraged that the post-Civil War campaign for voting rights for Black-Americans did not extend to women, Anthony founded the American Equal Rights Association in 1866 and the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1868. She is the first woman ever to be depicted on U.S. currency – the new dollar coin in 1979.

It all started at a tea party: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott met for tea in Seneca Falls, New York, eight years after having met at the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, where they were neither allowed to sit with their husbands in the main hall nor speak at the convention. That afternoon they laid out the plans for the first Woman's Rights Convention to be held on July 19 and 20, 1848, at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls. Though she fought for her cause until her death in 1906, Anthony did not attend the Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls for which Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also a Quaker, had drafted the 'Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions'. Based on the American Declaration of Independence, the 'Sentiments' called for equality with men before the law, in education and employment. It was also the first official demand that women be given the right to vote in the United States.

The struggle, long and particularly difficult since women were not allowed to speak at public forums, lasted 72 years. On August 26, 1920 the 19th Amendment became law. Only one woman who had attended the Woman's Rights Convention was still alive to vote in the Presidential election of that year.

Winning the Right to Vote from Overseas

It was just thirty years ago that another very important bill was signed into effect: U.S. citizens living overseas were given the right to vote in federal elections. Two American women living in Paris were instrumental in winning that right. The following account of that campaign, 'Reliving the Tea Party', has been adapted from the *Unknown Ambassadors*, by Phyllis Michaux.

Reliving the Tea Party

In June 1973, a group of overseas Americans, the Bipartisan Committee on Absentee Voting, with a representative in Washington, persuaded Senator Charles McC. Mathias, Jr. to introduce a bill whose main provision was to abolish domicile and residence requirements as preconditions for absentee voting in federal elections.

In September 1975, the bill was still lingering in Congress. Among other problems, the Justice Department, suspicious of voter fraud, did not support it.

A grassroots campaign, however, was underway which would eventually turn the tide. Americans Resident Overseas (AARO) had been given the use of the administrative facilities of the American Chamber of Commerce in France, to coordinate a letter-writing campaign to Congress. Working with other American Chambers of Commerce in Europe, the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), veterans' groups, alumni associations, schools, churches and just about any American organization that could be located, it became possible to reach individuals throughout Europe and beyond.

Generating letters from around the globe in pre personal computer days was not easy. Many people had never even tried to vote and were unsure of their congressional district or the name of their congressmen. They also needed the name and number of the bill. What to say? What terms to use? All of these questions discouraged action. As for members of Congress, these

letter-writers were not actual, but only potential constituents. One or two letters was not enough to get any real attention; many more were needed.

Fortunately, Sonja Beaumont Mincbere, a former president of both Association of American Wives of Europeans (AAWE) and FAWCO, came up with a salvaging idea when she was at Phyllis Michaux's office, as she often was, to help update the AARO mailing lists. In the afternoon, they would always have their cup of tea while discussing how to get more people involved in the letter writing campaign to Congress. On this particular day, Sonja picked up a tea bag, waved it around and exclaimed, "Tea Party, Boston!"

She had found the solution. It was simple, direct and catchy. They wrote a brief message on AARO stationary:

1773

There was a Tea Party
because of no representation

1975

We mail you this tea bag because of the
OVERSEAS CITIZENS VOTING RIGHTS ACT
so that

1976

We will be able to vote for you

Support HR-3211 & S-95

A short cover letter was prepared, telling the addressee to staple a tea bag to the letter and mail it to the congressman. They sent one copy to everyone on their mailing list, counting on them to copy and distribute as many as possible. And they did. By December 1975, the reconciliation bill had passed the House, 374 to 43. **The Chairman of the House Administration Committee stated that the mail received in his office on behalf of this bill had exceeded by five or six times the amount that had come in on any other issue that year.**

The Justice Department's continued opposition to this bill was led by Antonin Scalia who had persuaded the Attorney General to urge the President not to sign it. The Bipartisan Committee Representative, Gene Marans, decided to go over the head of the Justice Department. He asked Senator Barry Goldwater, a co-sponsor of the bill, to call President Ford's legal counsel. Senator Goldwater's message to the White House was: "Listen, you damned fools, there are more Republicans in Paris than there are in Detroit, and Ford doesn't want to be the first president since the Reconstruction to veto a voting-rights bill."

President Ford signed the bill on January 2, 1976. Direct political life had begun for Americans living overseas.

Women Now in Office and Running in 2006

To further honor Women's Equality Day, here a few numbers of interest taken from two nonpartisan websites: *Center for American Women and Politics*, *Eagleton Institute of Politics*, *Rutgers University* <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu> and *Women Under Forty Political Action Committee*, <http://www.wufpac.org>

Today, 81 out of 535 House and Senate seats are held by women (52 Democrats and 29 Republicans). In 2005, there were only four women under forty in Congress, but there were 26 men under forty.

Senate: To date, 18 women are considered candidates for the Senate in fourteen states (13 Democrats, 5 Republicans).

Of these 18 women, 6 are incumbents expected to run for re-election (4 D, 2 R); 3 are running for an open office (3 D, 0 R); 9 are challengers (6 D, 3 R).

House of Representatives: To date 161 women are considered candidates for House seats (112 Democrats, 49 Republicans) and an additional 3 incumbents are considered candidates for delegate to Congress from the District of Columbia, Guam and the Virgin Islands.

Of these 161 women, 65 incumbents are expected to run for re-election (42 D, 23 R); 31 are running in 20 districts with open seats (21 D, 10 R); 65 women are running as challengers (49 D, 16 R).

Women under Forty: 12 candidates are currently still running for a Congressional seat (11 Democrats, 1 Republican).

When you read this list, you can just imagine Susan B. Anthony with a cup of tea and a DSL connection.

**Have you requested your overseas absentee ballot yet?
Just go to www.ovf-rava.org to do it now!**

By Marina Mecl, Director, Voter Outreach, Overseas Vote Foundation; Lucy Laederich, U.S. Liaison for FAWCO;

Resources:

Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO), <http://www.fawco.org/>
Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) <http://www.overseasvotefoundation.org> Non-profit, non-partisan, Internet-based voter services and support to overseas Americans and members of the military and their families

Association of Americans Resident Overseas (AARO), <http://www.aaro.org>

Project-Vote-Smart, <http://www.vote-smart.org/>, for a list of **all** the candidates, male and female

Special thanks to: Phyllis Michaux, author of *Unknown Ambassadors*, founder of AAWE and AARO and surviving co-founder of the tea bag campaign