

Politics

## **Subject**

Tennessee Women in Politics

## **Description**

Tennessee women participated in politics at varied levels throughout the state's history. Contributions took the form of grassroots campaigning for male candidates, activism and protesting, lobbying, the suffrage movement, and eventually running for office themselves. These women believed they had voices that needed hearing. They struggled and fought for the country to recognize and validate their ideas. These women paved the way for future political participation, clearing the road a little bit at a time. They refused to sit on the sidelines and let only men play the game.

## **Rally Participation**

Before Tennessee women even had the right to vote, they rallied around candidates in two major presidential elections. In the early part of the 1840s, women participated in parades and political rallies and as Michael McGerr argues, they did so to express their own political views. DeFiore writes that women "participated in outdoor politics" which were similar to religious camp meetings. At these political rallies, some women stuck to traditional roles such as preparing food, yet others could be seen evoking emotional responses to speakers and even making speeches of their own. In the case of one infamous woman, Fanny Wright, who founded a controversial utopian community outside of Memphis, wrote pamphlets endorsing presidential nominee, Martin Van Buren. She was used as political arsenal for the Whig party to attack the Democrats. DeFiore argues that after 1848, political campaign styles altered, leaving many outspoken women in the silent shadows.

## **Fight for Suffrage**

As the fight for women's suffrage got underway in Antebellum American, many of the early suffragists were also abolitionists. Taylor, among others, argues that connection may be the reason the suffrage movement did not take hold in Tennessee until much later, after the war. According to Taylor, Mrs. Lide A. Meriwether formed a suffrage club in Memphis, Tennessee in 1889. Meriwether campaigned for both, the suffrage movement and the temperance movement, which she believed needed women's votes in order to pass. One prominent leader of the Tennessee suffrage movement was Anne Dallas Dudley. According to Sims, Dudley was "socially prominent and eminently respectable" as well as the epitome of the "southern lady." Dudley went on to become the third vice president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Another of the state's later prized fighters for the Women's Suffrage Movement was native Tennessean, Sue Shelton White. According to historian James P. Louis, White was "politically oriented" and labeled a "practical idealist." She was a leader who was able to play in the contemporary political field and used it to the movement's advantage. According to Dewey Grantham, "the Tennessee reformers won a partial victory by

persuading the state legislature to permit women to vote in presidential and municipal elections” and focused their attentions on the national cause. In 1920, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth (decisive) state to ratify the nineteenth amendment.

After winning the vote, women were determined to show up in large numbers. In Nashville, suffragists even struck a unique alliance with African American women. If the African American women turned up to vote, the suffragists would support various social services in the community. As an alliance as this did not take effect in any other Tennessee city, this was truly unique to Nashville. Goodstein argues this was contradictory to the “bitter post-war race relations” that affected the South (and the South’s men). Women were more apt to be inclusive and take advantage of such an alliance in a tough political arena.

### **Running for Office**

As far as running for federal office, Tennessee women have had trouble winning due to the state’s conservatism, argues Grantham. So far, no Tennessee women have served in the U.S. Senate and only six have served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Notable however, was Roberta Church, of Memphis, who served as the Minority Groups Consultant to the U.S. Department of Labor. Church was an advocate for black voters in Tennessee before her appointment. Local and state level politics however, have a richer women’s involvement. Lois M. DeBerry became the second African American woman to serve in the Tennessee State Legislature. DeBerry ran for the house seat when she was just twenty-five years old and was elected to represent Shelby County. DeBerry urged more women to get involved in politics and was even quoted saying, “women are more honest [in politics].” DeBerry had a colorful history during her nearly forty years of service, including a battle over a ‘Cohabitation’ bill that was swept through the House without DeBerry and her other female colleagues ability to propose an amendment (The bill dealt with alimony payments to former spouses who began cohabitating with a new partner). DeBerry ended her forty year political service when she lost her battle to cancer in 2013.

### **Conclusion**

The road to women’s political participation in Tennessee has been rocky and colorful. In Antebellum America, women could be seen participating at outdoor political rallies in the south. However, as the political arena changed, so did women’s participation. The state got off to a slow start in accepting women’s suffrage because of its connection to the abolitionist movement, but became the deciding state to ratify the nineteenth amendment. Women ran for and won key positions in local and state governments. However, Tennessee still has some ground left to cover when it comes to female participation in federal government.

### **Further Reading**

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DeFiore, Jayne Crumpler, ”COME, and Bring the Ladies: Tennessee Women and the Politics of Opportunity during the Presidential Campaigns of 1840 and 1844.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 51/4 (Winter 1992), 197-212.

Goodstein, Anita Schafer, "A Rare Alliance: African American and White Women in the Tennessee Elections of 1919 and 1920." *The Journal of Southern History* 64/2 (May 1998), 219-246.

Grantham, Dewey W., "Tennessee and the Twentieth-Century American Politics." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54/3 (Fall 1995) 210-229.

Louis, James P., "Sue Shelton White and the Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, 1913-20." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 22/2 (June 1963), 170-190.

Sims, Anastasia, "'Powers that Pray' and 'Powers that Prey': Tennessee and the Fight for Woman Suffrage." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50/4 (Winer 1991), 203-225.

Taylor, Elizabeth, "A Short History of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 2/3 (September 1943), 195-215.

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