



Evolving Narrative

From Solidarity to Schism: How the 15th Amendment Divided the Suffrage Movement

Historical Context

Ratified in 1870, the 15th Amendment granted Black men the right to vote by prohibiting voting discrimination based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” While this was a milestone in the fight for civil rights, it also fractured the women’s suffrage movement, exposing deep tensions around race and power. Prior to the Civil War, many women’s rights leaders had collaborated closely with abolitionists, believing that universal suffrage, for both Black Americans and women, would be achieved together. But when the 15th Amendment was passed with no mention of gender, suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed it, arguing that it unjustly prioritized Black men over white women. In doing so, they used racist and elitist language to make their case. Stanton, for example, warned against granting the vote to what she called “Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung” – derogatory references to Irish, Black, German, and Chinese men – while educated white women were left disenfranchised. Anthony argued that it was unacceptable for uneducated men to have the ballot while white women did not. Their rhetoric reinforced racial hierarchies, suggesting that white women were more qualified to vote than people of color, regardless of their shared exclusion from political life. Frederick Douglass, a former ally and longtime supporter of women’s rights, disagreed. He insisted that Black men needed the vote urgently as a matter of survival, especially in the face of lynching and racial terror during Reconstruction. For Douglass, the ballot was “safety,” whereas Anthony and Stanton framed it as a matter of equality and status. The debate culminated in a split in the suffrage movement. Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), opposing the 15th Amendment unless it included women. In contrast, Lucy Stone, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and others formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), which supported the amendment and worked to secure women’s voting rights through state campaigns. This division reflected not just strategic differences but also the racism and classism that underpinned parts of the white-led suffrage movement. It would take decades, and hard-fought efforts by both Black and white women, to begin healing these divides and building a more inclusive vision of voting rights.

Connection to Habit

The suffrage movement was once widely portrayed as a unified fight for women’s rights, but deeper analysis reveals racial tensions and exclusions within it. By revisiting the 15th Amendment debate and acknowledging the voices of Black suffragists and critics of white supremacy in the movement, we gain a fuller and more accurate picture of history. Evolving narratives help us see that history is not static; new perspectives and questions can reshape what we know.

Discussion Questions

- How did the 15th Amendment test the alliances between abolitionists and suffragists?
- In what ways did racism show up in Stanton and Anthony's responses to the amendment?
- What role did urgency and survival play in Douglass's argument for Black male suffrage?
- How did Frances Ellen Watkins Harper represent a more intersectional view of rights and justice?
- Why is it important to revisit these divisions within the women's suffrage movement today?

Suggested Activity

Materials:

- [15th Amendment Role Play Cards](#) (need scissors to cut role cards)
- Notebook paper
- Digital timer

Step 1: Group Role Play Prep [15 mins]: Divide students into groups of four. Each person in the group receives one role card that includes a brief context and the historical figure's position (quote) on the 15th Amendment:

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- Susan B. Anthony
- Frederick Douglass
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Students read the context and quote for their assigned figure they should answer the following questions from their figure's point of view :

- What is your main argument?
- How does race, gender, or class shape your view?
- What do you hope for and fear?

Each person will prepare a short 30-60 second statement based on those questions to present to the other historical figures in their group.

Step 2: Living Debate [15 mins]: In three-minute rounds, each person in the group presents their figure's viewpoint statement and responds to one follow up question from a peer to which the student will respond from that historical figure's perspective.

Step 3: Evolving Narrative Reflection [5-10 mins]: Students write a quick reflection on how their view of the suffrage movement evolved:

- What surprised you?
- How did this activity challenge the traditional narrative of the suffrage movement?
- Why is it important to revisit historical debates like this?

Primary Sources

15th Amendment Quote Role Play Cards

Elizabeth Cady Stanton Quote (1869)

“If that word 'male' be inserted, it will take us a century at least to get it out... The negro can be bought, can be owned, can be oppressed, and degraded, and still he is not denied the right to vote. But we, the mothers of the race, are to be left with no political existence.”

Context: Stanton opposed the 15th Amendment for excluding women and used racist comparisons to argue that white women were more deserving of the vote than formerly enslaved men.

Susan B. Anthony Quote (1869)

“I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the negro and not the woman.”

Context: Anthony believed women should not be asked to wait for the vote and felt betrayed by the prioritization of Black male suffrage. Her frustration led her to use exclusionary language.

Frederick Douglass Quote (1869)

“When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans... then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own. But the manhood of the race has been crucified... Let the Negro have the right of suffrage; you women will have it as soon as you want it.”

Context: Douglass argued that Black men needed the vote as a matter of life and death. He supported women’s suffrage but believed the urgency was greater for formerly enslaved men.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Quote (1866)

“You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life... We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity.”

Context: Harper, a Black suffragist and abolitionist, emphasized the need for intersectional justice. She called out both racism and sexism, urging unity while acknowledging the layered oppression faced by Black women.