

Illinois Women Gain the Vote in 1913

In 1913 Illinois became the first state east of the Mississippi to give women the right to vote. It was a limited vote, but a powerful one. Illinois women were able to vote in all elections where it was not specifically prohibited by state law, and this included choosing Presidential Electors, as well as filling various Municipal and Township offices.

Why 1913? Several factors were in play that year but a big one was a change in leadership and tactics in the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association. Evanstonian Catharine Waugh McCulloch was an attorney who had written the suffrage bill and faithfully carried it to the Illinois legislature for 20 years, but each time legislators rejected it. McCulloch had developed the strategy for partial suffrage in the 1890s and had served for more than 20 years on the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association Legislative Committee. The new leadership that took charge in 1913 was younger, more socially connected and more conservative, and they brought with them a new approach. They decided to blend public events, like the auto tours and parades, with a “quiet hunt” for votes in the legislature, rather than an active and open legislative campaign. This new group was led by Grace Wilbur Trout from Oak Park.

Elected President of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association in 1912, Trout organized a statewide campaign to build public support for women’s suffrage. She made sure that a local suffrage club was formed in each Senatorial district. She used her media connections to get favorable newspaper coverage of IESA activities. She strategically planned public events throughout the state, in order to highlight local suffrage supporters. In Springfield, Trout and her legislative team worked hard to build bipartisan support. She kept the IESA’s legislative lobbying behind the scenes, so as not to arouse activity from opponents, especially the powerful liquor industry, and leave open the possibility of converting anti-suffrage legislators.

Four political parties were represented in the Illinois legislature in 1913: Republicans, Democrats, Progressives and Socialists. The Progressive Party, strongly in support of suffrage, held a balance of power in the House. The IESA simply needed a handful anti-suffrage legislators to support moving the bill through the legislative process. Trout’s argument was simple -- all she asked for was to be given a “square deal,” meaning an up or down vote on the issue.

Trout’s team decided to first get the bill passed in the Senate, which they did with multi-party support on May 7 with a vote of 29 yes to 23 no. To get the vote passed in the House, they appointed “Captains” who made personal calls to their assigned legislators and they visited districts where there were undecided and influenceable legislators. Dramatic last-minute efforts, including forming a “telephone brigade” to call the Speaker of the House William McKinley every 15 minutes to show widespread support; sending telegrams to all supporters to ensure their presence at the vote; arranging for cabs to collect missing supporters; and stationing monitors at the House chamber door to prevent supporting legislators from leaving and anti-suffrage lobbyists from entering, finally produced favorable results. The Presidential and Municipal Voting Act passed the House on June 11, 1913 with a vote of 83 yes to 58 no.

Excitement over this moment was widespread throughout Illinois and the U.S. In one

simple act, the number of presidential electors that women were voting for went from 37 to 54. Though they were described as jubilant, the women also looked ahead and wisely saw that the work was not yet done. The Illinois bill would be challenged in the courts, especially by the liquor interests, and would face repeal. Though the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law in 1913, the fight would not be truly over until a federal amendment was gained in 1920.

Compiled by Lori Osborne (Member, League of Women Voters of Evanston) with help from the following sources:

“Chronology of the Woman’s Rights Movement in Illinois” by Catharine Waugh McCulloch. (Illinois Equal Suffrage Association, 1913).

“Sidelights on Illinois Suffrage History” by Grace Wilbur Trout (*Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, July 1920).

Both of these original sources can be found in a search of World Cat – www.worldcat.org.

Celebrating 100 Years: Remembering the Past to Inform the Future - a publication of the League of Women Voters of Illinois in honor of the 100th Anniversary of women’s suffrage in Illinois in 2013. The research files for the 2013 anniversary and other materials housed at the Evanston History Center, were also sources.