

*A Brief History of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Illinois*  
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The Illinois women's suffrage movement began in 1855 with the formation of the state's first suffrage association in Earlville, a small town in LaSalle County west of Chicago. Suffrage conventions held in 1869 linked early Illinois suffrage activism to the national movement, and resulted in the formation of the first statewide suffrage organization, the Illinois Woman Suffrage Association (IWSA).

The national suffrage movement was sharply divided in the years following the Civil War over issues and strategies, including whether African-American men should be granted suffrage in the 15th Amendment. In addition, some suffrage activists believed that the way to attain suffrage was through a state-by-state approach and partial suffrage measures. Others pressed for a federal amendment granting full suffrage, emphasizing the vote as a woman's constitutional right of citizenship. Reconciliation between the groups would not take place until the formation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890.

In 1891, the Illinois state legislature passed a law allowing women to vote for elective school offices. This renewed suffrage activism in the state. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Harbert, the IWSA adopted a new name, the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association (IESA), and transformed its mission as well from "political equality with men" to "political enfranchisement of women." In 1894, the elite Chicago Woman's Club established a separate organization to work for the vote, the Chicago Political Equality League (CPEL).

Between 1902 and 1910, CPEL and other Chicago activist-women mobilized around the charter reform movement, believing that a new municipal charter would give Chicago greater control over its internal affairs and enfranchise the city's women. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the attempt to achieve municipal suffrage succeeded in mobilizing nearly one hundred Chicago women's groups in support of suffrage. These include the Chicago Women's Trade Union League, which encouraged support among workers and immigrants, and the Alpha Suffrage Club, which activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett organized among African-American women.

After 1910, the IESA was determined to find a way to gain victory. Early in 1913, IESA established headquarters in Springfield in order to be close by as legislators considered new suffrage bills. They organized nearly every senatorial district in the state with local groups prepared to pressure the state legislature to vote yes on women's suffrage. And they mounted a successful public relations campaign, with auto tours and parades to spread support. Finally, aided by the recent election of many Progressive candidates in 1912, Illinois women won the vote with passage of the Presidential Suffrage Bill or "Illinois Law" in 1913.

With the passage of this law, Illinois became the first state east of the Mississippi to give women the right to vote. The legislation granted Illinois women the vote in federal and municipal elections not otherwise restricted in the Illinois constitution to men, and this included presidential electors. This meant that in 1916, Illinois women were effectively voting for President. Illinois activists—and their important victory in 1913—helped propel the national movement toward the ultimate goal: a federal amendment granting full suffrage to women which was attained in 1920.

**Compiled by Lori Osborne with help from the following sources:**

“Ahead of Their Time: A Brief History of Woman Suffrage in Illinois” by Mark Sorenson  
(*Illinois Heritage*, Nov-Dec 2004)

*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.

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

Additional sources: research files for the 2013 anniversary and other materials, housed at the Evanston History Center.