

# Battle for the Ballot

*The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote*

By Elaine Weiss

Viking

REVIEW BY ERIN AUBRY KAPLAN

THIS DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE BACKROOM FIGHT to ratify the 19th Amendment, set in a hot summer in Tennessee in 1920, is a genteel but bare-knuckled political thriller in which the most powerful currents of American politics—sexism, racism, corporatism, coordinated activism—simmer and then come to a boil over the effort to finally extend the vote to women. In 1919, Congress passed the amendment, but per the Constitution, a minimum of 36 states was needed to ratify it before it became law. After ratifications stall at 35, Tennessee emerges as the state most likely to provide the magic number.

But likely hardly means easy. Tennessee is a guard of the Old South, and though it has already granted women limited voting rights, many of its citizens revere the notion of states' rights and reject any federally imposed law as an extension of Union domination. And then there is the time-honored Southern womanhood that needs to be protected from, among other things, the awful possibility that giving the vote to all women will necessarily empower black women—and thereby endanger the Southern way of life for everyone. When suffragists (or “Suffs”) from the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Woman's Party descend on Nashville to lobby for the ratification that will push universal suffrage across the finish line, they're met with equal force by their adversaries: the female anti-suffragists and their many allies, including the textile, liquor and railroad industries and other corporate interests. In this increasingly high-stakes battle, both sides are passionate and prepared, and Weiss is evenhanded in describing not just the ideologies but the personalities of the women involved, from NAWSA chief Carrie Chapman Catt to the fiery Sue White and Alice Paul of the Woman's Party to Tennessee's main “anti-Suff” warrior, the infinitely resourceful Josephine Pearson. Despite the dead seriousness of the issue, Weiss' narrative is energetic and buoyant even at the most critical moments—especially at the critical moments, as the Tennessee legislature approaches the vote and both camps begin pulling out the stops with maneuvers that become ever more outrageous.

Weiss embraces the inherent outrageousness of this story but also the nuance, and while the constant negotiating and backstabbing is meticulously recounted—the account reads like a reality show, impossible to predict—she

is primarily interested in illuminating the big picture. America in 1920 is not yet the democracy on which it's building its reputation as a world power and moral light. In the same fraught summer, an ailing Woodrow Wilson is stumping for the U.S. to join the League of Nations, and the ratification fight is really about holding the country accountable to its chief ideal: equal treatment of all citizens.

This is a story about a victory, but Weiss doesn't shy away from the longstanding moral complications of the suffrage movement. Abolition and women's rights had common roots and were spiritually aligned from the beginning, yet half a century earlier, after the Civil War, white Suffrs, including at one point the venerated Susan B. Anthony, would not or could not support extending equal protection and the vote to all “male citizens” as the 14th and 15th amendments specified. The fragile coalition of abolitionists and suffragists broke partly over women's sense of betrayal over black freedmen securing a basic right they also should have secured—even though in the 1920s South those earlier amendments were still largely unenforced.

Whatever personal empathy they had for racial justice, the 1920 Suffrs were willing to forgo it for the good of what Weiss calls the Cause. While Pearson and her Tennessee State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage propagandized the worst sorts of anti-black imagery, the Suffrs, reflecting the racism that permeated America, believed they needed to reassure Tennesseans that the women's vote would not disturb white supremacy, which was not up for debate or negotiation. *The Woman's Hour* does not let this damning fact diminish the genuine heroism of the ratification fight, but Weiss pointedly allows the ironies, and the tensions therein, to stand. She eloquently catalogs modern-day freedom struggles that nearly a hundred years later still include voting rights. Let's hope that the renewed fight for democracy in the Trump era will further unify a constituency historically fractured by race and resolve any lingering tensions for good.

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