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Eleanor Roosevelt opposed women getting the right to vote

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Even Annie Nathan Meyer, Eleanor Roosevelt and Ida Tarbell were opposed to women's suffrage.

They were some of the most accomplished American women of the early 20th century: a college founder, a journalism pioneer, a suffragist who had been on the front lines with Susan B. Anthony, a future feminist icon.

And they all opposed the constitutional amendment that gave them the right to vote.

Meet the Antis, the female activists who nearly defeated the 19th Amendment in the summer of 1920. "It was a shocker," said Elaine Weiss, whose new book *"The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote"* (Viking) details the six-week statehouse battle in Nashville, Tenn., that finally gave voting rights to women. "The idea that there were women who were against their own freedom was really startling to me."

In 1919, both houses of Congress voted in favor of the giving women the vote. But it had to pass muster in 36 of the nation's 48 state legislatures to become law.

After 35 states passed the amendment, and a dozen rejected or refused to vote on it, it all came down to Tennessee.

"We are determined to prevent women from descending to the political level of men," declared Charlotte Rowe, a top "Anti" strategist. Lawmakers who favored it, she warned, "will prostitute your civilization."

At age 22, Annie Nathan Meyer almost single-handedly established Barnard College as the women's affiliate of Columbia University. "She was a force of nature," Weiss said. But for Meyer, a committed social reformer, women's powers of "soft suasion" were far more valuable than their ballots would be. Women would lose their influence if they got down and dirty in the political realm, she argued.

Fearless muckraker Ida Tarbell, the mother of investigative journalism, blasted "our confused and rather stupid notion of the meaning of equality," saying that the sexes "cannot be made equal by exterior forces like trousers, ballots, the study of Greek."

Even future First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1920, was a meek political wife with no interest in winning the vote for herself.

"I took it for granted that men were superior creatures and knew more about politics than women did," she wrote. When a state referendum gave New York women the right to vote in the 1918 election, Eleanor refused to cast a ballot.

Some Antis had racist motives. Laura Clay of Kentucky fought for suffrage at Susan B. Anthony's side but wanted voting rights reserved for white women only. Meanwhile, imposing the vote on unwilling Southern women would "crucify us on a Federal cross with the same nails used by our Republican conquerors," fumed Nina Pinckard of Alabama.

Even so, the well-organized suffragists had done intensive lobbying throughout Tennessee that won them some solid support in the statehouse. Republicans from the Appalachian hill country and Democrats from progressive Memphis favored the amendment. It passed easily in the state Senate, 25 to four, but the House of Representatives was bitterly divided.

It all came down to the single vote cast by 24-year-old Harry Burn, the youngest member of the legislature and an obedient son. That morning, he had received a letter of instruction from his mother, Phoebe: "Hurrah and vote for suffrage, and don't leave them in doubt."

In the gallery, "Suffs rose to their feet and roared," Weiss writes, while Antis hurled abuse. Burn ducked out a window, tiptoed along a ledge and escaped through the state legislative library.

Once the right to vote was enshrined in the US Constitution, the suffragist movement splintered. But the Antis soldiered on. “The Antis learn to use the vote in ways the Suffs don’t,” Weiss said. “They move from anti-suffrage to anti-communism . . . and against anything they saw as state-imposed social engineering.”

Anti arguments reverberated, influencing a long line of right-wing women from Phyllis Schlafly to Sarah Palin and beyond. “In opposing what would turn them into political animals,” Weiss added, “they actually became successful political animals.”