

Alice Paul: The Journey of a Leader

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The right of suffrage is considered a fundamental aspect of the core values of the United States. Until the early 20th century, this right had not been granted to half of the population: women. Had it not been for a multitude of determined men and women, including Alice Paul, the 72-year long battle would not have been won. Without her leadership and dedication, the long fight to grant suffrage to women might not have been successful.

Born and raised in New Jersey to a family that embraced gender equality, Alice Paul attended women's suffrage meetings with her mother from a young age. These early memories set Paul on a path to promote radical changes in society's mindset that she would eventually help establish. While in England studying social work, she witnessed an incident that would transform her. During a local women's rights rally, Christabel Pankhurst, a women's suffrage advocate, was forced off the stage because of her political views. The Pankhursts, a family notorious for their support of the enfranchisement of women, recruited Alice Paul to their movement. They were all arrested on multiple occasions and were subject to cruel treatment. While in prison, these women led by Paul, went on hunger strikes. In response, they were force-fed. Paul described how her head was pushed back and a tube was inserted into her nose. This did not deter Alice Paul who was reported to have cheerfully declared that she would have done it all again.

Alice Paul brought this radicalism from England back home in 1910. She joined the National American Woman's Suffrage Association and organized a massive parade in front of the White House. As the police watched and refused to interfere, the women endured insults, obscenities, and violence. Because of this event, the topic of suffrage was brought into the limelight for discussion, exactly what the NAWSA wanted.

After splitting with the NAWSA, Paul set up her own organization, the National Women's Party and organized "Silent Sentinels," a group of women who stood outside the White House and protested the lack of women's rights despite the possibility of violence and imprisonment. The response was brutality. Young and old alike, suffragists were beaten and forced into unsanitary prison cells. Prison officials even moved Alice Paul to a sanatorium in hopes of declaring her insane. When the news of the abuse of the prisoners was exposed, the public was outraged. Because of this outrage, President Wilson, previously against suffrage, announced his support of the movement. In 1919, the House of Representatives and the Senate passed the 19th amendment and on August 18th, 1920, the last state ratified it. On August 26th, 1920, the arduous battle was finally won for American women, thanks to the dedication of thousands and the leadership of Alice Paul.

In an interview, Alice Paul once quoted her mother, saying, "When you put your hand to the plow, you can't put it down until you get to the end of the row." For Paul, the ratification of the 19th amendment was not the "end of the row." She would later earn three law degrees, create the World Woman's Party, lead a coalition that developed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and authored the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. Throughout her entire career, from her first suffrage meeting with her mother to her death in her hometown of Moorestown, New Jersey, she exhibited unabated determination for the fight for gender equality that continues until today. The Women's Rights Movement has been forever changed by the simple Quaker girl who was Alice Paul.

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