

Suffrage celebrations ‘bittersweet’ for women of color whose fight continued after 19th Amendment

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Like people across the country, Utah state Rep. Sandra Hollins is celebrating the major suffrage milestones this year. But, she adds, they’re “sort of bittersweet.”

A hundred years ago this week, U.S. women won the right to vote through the ratification of the 19th Amendment. In February, Utahns celebrated the 150th anniversary of women in the state first becoming enfranchised.

The benefits of these landmark achievements were largely limited to white women, though. Women of color continued to fight for full enfranchisement for decades after 1920. When the 19th Amendment was ratified, Native Americans and many people of Asian ancestry couldn’t even become U.S. citizens. Women of color fought for equal suffrage, not knowing when it would be extended to them because of their race, said Rep. Karen Kwan, Utah’s first Chinese American lawmaker. It’s “humbling,” the Murray Democrat said.

“I find that a lot of the celebrations are leaving out that women were left out. They’re concerned about women getting the vote, but they do not discuss that not every woman had the vote,” said Tarienne Mitchell, an archivist at the Church History Library. She is the subject matter expert for Black people in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It was 55 years ago that the Voting Rights Act prohibited discriminatory practices, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, that were put in place after the Civil War and kept people of color from voting. An amendment 10 years later further expanded rights for minority groups by providing bilingual election materials.

“For me, it’s a sense of duty and a sense of pride to cast my ballot because I know the history of how I got there,” said Hollins, the first Black woman to serve in the Utah Legislature. Black women “were part of that movement,” the Salt Lake City Democrat said, even if their role hasn’t been featured as prominently as white suffragist leaders.

The stories of women of color need to be told, according to Jennifer Robinson, who’s studied Native American voting rights and is associate director of the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute.

“The hope is that when we study and learn more about people of color and their experiences in our country, and the challenges that they’ve had to get their right to vote, that we have a more full understanding of our nation’s history,” Robinson said.

The struggle over voting issues continues today, she said. Nationally, there are debates about voting by mail. In San Juan County, groups such the Rural Utah Project and American Civil Liberties Union of Utah have worked to remove barriers to Native Americans’ ability to vote.

The 19th Amendment was “a huge turning point” and that “step forward can’t be overstated,” said Katherine Kitterman, historical director for Better Days 2020, a nonprofit that promotes Utah’s suffrage history.

“That was the largest enfranchisement of American citizens in U.S. history up to that point. ... It’s a big deal to have women’s voting rights enshrined in the Constitution,” she said. But, she added, “we do a disservice if we make it sound like that work ended in 1920.”

‘Never take it for granted’

Unlike many of their white peers, women of color often didn’t have the luxury of focusing solely on suffrage during the national movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, according to Kitterman.

“Black women ... know that the right to vote on paper means nothing if you can be lynched and intimidated from the polls, as they see happening, especially in the American South at the time,” she said.

Women of color “had to pick their battles,” Mitchell said, “and voting may not have been the high priority on the list when it comes to housing and education and work and those types of things.”

Mitchell thinks about her own mother, who was in her early teens living in North Carolina when the Voting Rights Act was signed. Around the same time, she had an opportunity to attend the local white high school but “ended up having to renege her application” when the man who owned the land where her parents were sharecroppers threatened to evict them over her attendance, according to Mitchell.

Hollins’ family members were involved in the civil rights movement, she said. Her aunt told her about the protests, people being arrested and put in jails, and the retaliation and threats they received.

“For me, how could I not vote knowing what people have gone through, what my family has gone through?” Hollins said.

Former state Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck has “visceral memories” of getting bundled up in her snow gear to tag along with her mother to the voting booth in the 1960s. They lived in Riverton and were one of the few Latino families at the time, she said. The two watched the political parties’ conventions together and discussed policies.

“When you’re a child,” said Chavez-Houck, “that really does make an imprint.”

Brandy Farmer was a teenager when her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, became a citizen. Farmer said she remembers how excited her mother was and that she couldn’t wait to vote for the first time.

“Everyone who has the right to vote should never take it for granted,” said Farmer, president of Centro Civico Mexicano and vice president of the Women’s State Legislative Council of Utah.

Voting during a pandemic

With the general election less than three months away, Nikila Venugopal, voting rights coordinator for ACLU Utah, has a list of issues she’s working on to ensure communities of color and other historically disenfranchised groups are able to vote. That includes helping people who are in Utah jails awaiting trial to register.

One of the biggest questions right now, Venugopal said, is, “What does voting look like during a pandemic?” While Utah already has a vote-by-mail system, which is helpful, “we do need to maintain some safe and accessible in-person voting options for folks, who, for example, need language assistance ... who might need disability accommodations, or other assistance.”

Venugopal and her team continue to monitor how mandates from a 2016 voting-rights lawsuit are being implemented in San Juan County. The settlement required the county to provide in-person voter assistance in the Navajo language, among other items.

Meanwhile, Rural Utah Project has worked to register thousands of voters in the county. Last year, it partnered with Google to offer residents Plus Codes, an open-source mapping technology that provides physical addresses for people who didn’t previously have them, making it easier to register to vote.

During the coronavirus pandemic, “we had to get pretty creative” to keep other registration efforts going, said Tara Benally, a field director for the organization. The group started drive-thru options to safely interact with people.

Venugopal and the ACLU also are working on prepaid postage for mail-in ballots, which 18 counties in the state do not provide. People shouldn’t have to pay to vote, according to Venugopal, and while the U.S. Postal Service will deliver a ballot without a stamp, “most people don’t know that,” she said.

“We also have to acknowledge that in a country that has seen centuries of voter suppression of communities of color using pretty shady tactics,” she said, “if you tell ... communities of color, ‘Don’t worry about it. All you have to do is leave a stamp off your ballot and mail it in, and it will get there,’ that’s going to be met with some healthy skepticism.”

Becky Jacobs is a Report for America corps member and writes about the status of women in Utah for The Salt Lake Tribune. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep her writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by clicking here.