

Guest column. Herald-Times

Guest column: Voting issues remain, so educate yourself and vote

- By Lisa-Marie Napoli and Ann Birch

This guest column was written by Lisa-Marie Napoli, director of Indiana University Political and Civic Engagement, and Ann Birch, president of League of Women Voters of Bloomington-Monroe County.

The month of August suggests hot, sleepy days with summer lingering and the cooler, more hectic fall season yet to come. But for the women of this country, August means much more.

It marks the culmination of a fight for suffrage that had been going on practically since our country was founded. The passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on Aug. 18, 1920, gave 26 million women the right to vote. Now, 100 years later, we commemorate the suffrage movement, but we also recognize its shortcomings. In a recent editorial (dated 8/7/20, “Do not underestimate persistence, resolve of Black women”), Audrey McCluskey spoke of powerful Black women and filled in some important pieces of suffrage history, especially the stories of women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune. For many years, these women and their compatriots have gone unrecognized, just as they were excluded by white suffragists of the 1800s and early 1900s. Other minority groups, such as Native Americans, were also left out.

Even after passage of the 19th Amendment and its certification on Aug. 26, 1920, suffrage for women was not universally embraced. Obstacles to voting, particularly for people of color, immediately emerged, such as literacy tests, poll taxes and residency requirements. It would take another 45 years for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to provide equal enfranchisement. And even with this law, resistance to women voting remained. It took until 1984 for Mississippi to ratify the 19th Amendment, the last of the 48 states (in the 1920 U.S.) to take this action.

Under pressure from the ongoing battle for the Equal Rights Amendment, in 1973 President Richard Nixon issued Proclamation 4236 establishing Women's Equality Day on Aug. 26. The proclamation began, in part: "The struggle for women's suffrage, however, was only the first step toward full and equal participation of women in our Nation's life. In recent years, we have made other giant strides by attacking sex discrimination through our laws and by paving new avenues to equal economic opportunity for women. ... And yet, much still remains to be done."

Indeed. Women's issues — such as equal worth, equal pay, fair treatment, constitutional protections and other issues — still exist. Additionally, electoral access issues are critical to observe as they continue to impact some women and minority groups. At the top of the list is voter suppression, seen in gerrymandering, unfair practices in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, and the current debates about mail-in ballots.

This month is a time to commemorate the progress of voting rights, to recognize those who worked for equality, to reduce barriers to voting and to make informed decisions to elect leaders at all levels who can move us toward a just and equal society. To respond specifically to voter disenfranchisement issues, we must do our part, urging our representatives to strengthen the Voting Rights Act, educating ourselves on the ballot and candidates, and shining a light on issues of social inequity, especially those related to gender and race.

The bottom line is to pay attention to the issues, determine where candidates stand in relation to these issues, and get out to vote! Consider the phrase from the civil rights era, "One Person, One Vote." Please remember, each vote makes a difference, and that difference is you.