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## What We Talk About When We Talk About Votes for Women (to 8 Year Olds)

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My foot doctor made me do it.

As head of the PTA at a Brooklyn public school, having listened to my tales of female derring-do in the suffrage movement while treating my dastardly *plantar fasciitis*, Dr. Stephanie decided that children ought to know what it took to win the right to vote. She set it up.

The walls were still institutional green and gray, the desks Lilliputian, the security more intense and more visible than when it was in second grade. Clearing leftover crepe paper and board games off the auditorium stage floor, I connected my laptop, pulled down the screen and waited. In flowed unruly lines of wildly chattering children, predominantly black and Hispanic, in groups of perhaps thirty, with young white teachers as shepherds.

I've spoken in august halls to throngs of grownups, but this was my toughest audience.

Opening patter -- "everybody tell me your name, all at once." A few sentences about voting and democracy (boring!) and then my question: "how many of you think it's a good thing that women, as well as men, can vote?" All of them did, though some of the boys took a second to agree and looked a bit smug when they did. None of this happened quietly.

Then the bad news, the drama, the surprise: for a long time in our history, females were not allowed to vote. Shocking! Until 1917, only men could vote in New York State. They didn't quite believe me. Much shushing was required from the teachers. History itself is a tough concept -- long ago, longer ago than when your parents were born, things happened that still matter and have something to teach us now. Calling it "our history" was problematic because the actual past of some children was more likely to include Fidel Castro than Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The concept of exclusion was slightly less tough, depending on what the kids heard at home, but exclusion of women makes little sense to eight year olds in whose world all the authority figures are women, from their mothers to their teachers to their school principal.

Still, I pressed on, noting that here and there was a girl looking shy and thoughtful or a pair of girls elbowing each other in a "get that!" kind of way.

I started the slide show and the decibel level went down. Slightly.

So what did women do if the government said they could not vote? Here is what they did.

I showed suffrage workers passing out leaflets or speaking on street corners, usually a lone woman engulfed by a sea of male onlookers. The children giggled. Then I showed images of suffrage parades on Fifth Avenue. (Those from Brooklyn are harder to come by.) Bingo!

If it registered that the thousands of women marching and carrying flags were white, nobody said a word because -- guess what? There were horses! A mounted troop of women setting out from Washington Square in 1912. Inez Millholland in body armor astride a black steed. The kids could not sit still. Horses!



The screen went dark and I asked: "What happens if somebody says you're not allowed to do something you really believe you have a right to do? What do you do when things are unfair?"  
I prayed nobody would protest homework.

They resisted my misbegotten attempts at orderly discussion, shouting various remedies for injustice in one big aural blur until one boy raised his hand and the grownups quieted the babble. The boy stood proud.

"I would tell Obama," he said. And the cheering would not stop.

I hadn't the heart to say that appealing to presidents did not win the vote for women or that many 20th century suffrage activists gave up on convincing elected officials to do the right thing and took to the streets.

Bells rang. End of period. Onward the kids, clattering.

Well, I thought, at least, they will remember the horses.

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