

**WOMAN'S DUTY TO VOTE.  
SPEECH AT THE ELEVENTH  
NATIONAL WOMANS RIGHT'S  
CONVENTION, HELD IN NEW  
YORK, MAY 10, 1866**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649231584

Woman's Duty to Vote. Speech at the eleventh national womans right's convention, held in New York, May 10, 1866 by Henry Ward Beecher

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**HENRY WARD BEECHER**

**WOMAN'S DUTY TO VOTE.  
SPEECH AT THE ELEVENTH  
NATIONAL WOMANS RIGHT'S  
CONVENTION, HELD IN NEW  
YORK, MAY 10, 1866**



# WOMAN'S DUTY TO VOTE.

---

SPEECH BY

**HENRY WARD BEECHER,**

AT THE ELEVENTH NATIONAL

WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION,

HELD IN

NEW YORK, MAY 10, 1866.

---

It may be asked why, at such a time as this, when the attention of the whole nation is concentrated upon the reconstruction of our States, we should intrude a new and advanced question. I have been asked, "Why not wait for the settlement of the question that now fills the minds of men? Why divert and distract their thoughts?" I answer, Because the question is one and the same. We are not now discussing merely the question of the vote for the African, or of his status as a new-born citizen. That is a fact which compels us to discuss the whole underlying question of government. That is the case in court. But when the judge shall have given his decision, that decision will cover the whole question of civil society, and the relations of every individual in it as a factor, an agent, an actor.

Now, if you look back, you shall see that the history of the development of man for the last thousand years—before that, but more obviously and noticeably since—has been collection for the sake of distribution. In order to guard interest against brute force, it was needful that guilds, and franchises, and fraternities, and professions should be es-

established. Just as when we light a candle in flaring winds we take every precaution, not to hide the light, but to protect it until it has strength to burn without protection, and then let it stand to give light to all that are in the house, so it was necessary for law to protect itself. It was needful for medicine, too, as it were, to intrench itself and ward off empyrics. It was needful for various mechanical trades to defend themselves. And it has been said that these were the bulwarks and the very advanced guards of popular democratic liberty. But so soon as, by guilds, and franchises, and fraternities, and professions, a principle had become so strong that it needed no longer to be protected, it then had worn out its time, and become a kind of aristocracy. And in our day the great distributive tendency has set in. The principle of democracy is so well established now that learning is not confined to a learned class; medicine is not confined to the medical profession; law is not confined to lawyers; and the ministrations of the gospel, thank God, is not confined to ministers of the gospel. Everywhere it is becoming more and more acknowledged or apparent that the functions that used to be given to men of professions are becoming part and parcel of the right of every citizen who shows himself capable of exercising those functions. It needs now no reformation, no convention, to teach us that a man may take the Word of God in his hand, and go down into any street, and preach the gospel to every living creature. Once it would have required a man to make his peace with a civil magistrate to do that; for only the hand of ordination was supposed to give a man the right to preach. But now that is over, almost without discussion. It is not now thought necessary for a man, if he knows the law, to consult a lawyer. A man has a right to be healthy without a doctor, and to step aside, if he pleases, from the methods which have been prescribed by the schools of medicine. A mother is better than many a doctor that is called to attend the child; and I think that nurses will one

day be considered the best and chiefest of doctors. Good doctors already consider themselves as but men standing between officious friends and the patient to keep off medicine. And the time will come, has come, when any man may enter, by the simple right of capacity to do it, into any calling, profession, or business in life. There was a time when, in some lands, if the father was a cooper, the son must be a cooper too. There was a time when, if a man was born in a barrel, he must live in a barrel all his life! There was a time when a man felt as much bound to follow the profession that his father did, as a man, being born a man, feels bound to continue a man, or a woman, being born a woman, feels bound to continue a woman. Now that is changed. Christian civilization, the progress of democratic ideas, is making itself felt everywhere. Men are scholars, without belonging to a scholastic class. Men are practitioners in every one of the professions, without belonging to the professional class. Men have a right to be statesmen by virtue of their citizenship. There is more power to-day in one citizen of Massachusetts than at any one time there was in a score of English nobles. These changes are going on by reason of the working of this grand democratic element. All the interests of society are experiencing a change; and society itself, in its structure, is also experiencing a change.

All the world over, the question to-day is, Who has a right to construct law, and to administer law? Russia—gelid, frigid Russia—cannot escape the question. Yea, he that sits on the Russian throne has proved himself a better democrat than any of us all, and is giving to-day more evidence of a genuine love of God, and of its partner emotion, love to man, in enfranchising thirty million serfs, than many a proud democrat of America has ever given. (Applause.) And the question of emancipation in Russia is only the preface to the next question, which doubtless he as clearly as any of us foresees—namely, the question of

is there in history, what is there in physiology, what is there in experience, that shall say to this tendency, marking the line of sex; "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther?" I roll the argument off from my shoulders, and I challenge the man that stands with me, beholding that the world-thought to-day is the emancipation of the citizen's power and the preparation by education of the citizen for that power, and objects to extending the right of citizenship to every human being, to give me the reasons why. (Applause.) To-day this nation is exercising its conscience on the subject of suffrage for the African. I have all the time favored that: not because he was an African, but because he was a man; because this right of voting, which is the symbol of everything else in civil power, inheres in every human being. But I ask you, to-day, "Is it safe to bring in a million of black men to vote, and not safe to bring in your mother, your wife, and your sister to vote?" (Applause.) This ought ye to have done, and to have done quickly, and not to have left the other undone. (Renewed applause.)

To-day, politicians of every party, especially on the eve of an election, are in favor of the briefest and most expeditious citizenizing of the Irishmen. I have great respect for Irishmen—when they do not attempt to carry on war! (Laughter.) The Irish Fenian movement is a ludicrous phenomenon past all laughing at. Bombarding England from the shores of America! (Great laughter.) Paper pugnation! Oratorical destroying! But when wind-work is the order of the day, commend me to Irishmen! (Renewed laughter.) And yet I am in favor of Irishmen voting. Just so soon as they give pledge that they come to America, in good faith, to abide here as citizens, and forswear the old allegiance, and take on the new, I am in favor of their voting. Why? Because they have learned our Constitution? No; but because voting teaches. The vote is a schoolmaster. They will learn our laws, and learn our Con-



stitution, and learn our customs ten times quicker when the responsibility of knowing these things is laid upon them, than when they are permitted to live in carelessness respecting them. And this nation is so strong that it can stand the incidental mischiefs of thus teaching the wild rabble that emigration throws on our shores for our good and upbuilding. We are wise enough, and we have educational force enough, to carry these ignorant foreigners along with us. We have attractions that will draw them a thousand times more toward us than they can draw us toward them.

And yet, while I take this broad ground, that no man, even of the Democratic party (I make the distinction because a man may be a democrat and be ashamed of the party, and a man may be of the party and not know a single principle of democracy), should be debarred from voting, I ask, is an Irishman just landed, unwashed and uncombed, more fit to vote than a woman educated in our common schools? Think of the mothers and daughters of this land, among whom are teachers, writers, artists, and speakers. What a throng could we gather if we should from all the West call our women that as educators are carrying civilization there! Thousands upon thousands there are of women that have gone forth from the educational institutions of New England to carry light and knowledge to other parts of our land. Now, place this great army of refined and cultivated women on the one side, and on the other side the rising cloud of emancipated Africans, and in front of them the great emigrant bend of the Emerald Isle, and is there force enough in our government to make it safe to give to the African and the Irishman the franchise? There is. We shall give it to them. (Applause.) And will our force all fail, having done that? And shall we take the fairest and best part of our society; those to whom we owe it that we ourselves are civilized; our teachers; our companions; those to whom we go for

counsel in trouble more than to any others ; those to whom we trust everything that is dear to ourselves—our children's welfare, our household, our property, our name and reputation, and that which is deeper, our inward life itself, that no man may mention to more than one—shall we take them and say, "They are not, after all, fit to vote where the Irishman votes, and where the African votes?" I am scandalized when I hear men talk in the way that men do talk—men that do not think.

If, therefore, you refer to the initial sentence, and ask me why I introduce this subject to-day, when we are already engaged on the subject of suffrage, I say, This is the greatest development of the suffrage question. It is more important that woman should vote than that the black man should vote. It is important that he should vote, that the principle may be vindicated, and that humanity may be defended ; but it is important that woman should vote, not for her sake. She will derive benefit from voting ; but it is not on a selfish ground that I claim the right of suffrage for her. It is God's growing and least disclosed idea of a true human society that man and woman should not be divorced in political affairs any more than they are in religious and social affairs. I claim that woman should vote because society will never know its last estate and true glory until you accept God's edict and God's command—long raked over and covered in the dust—until you bring it out, and lift it up, and read this one of God's Ten Commandments, written, if not on stone, yet in the very heart and structure of mankind, *Let those that God joined tog ther not be put asunder.* (Applause.)

When men converse with me on the subject of suffrage, or the vote, it seems to me that the terminology withdraws their mind from the depth and breadth of the case to the mere instruments. Many of the objections that are urged against woman's voting are objections against the mechanical and physical act of suffrage. It is true that all the forces

of society, in their final political deliverance, must needs be born through the vote, in our structure of government. In England it is not so. It was one of the things to be learned there that the unvoting population on any question in which they are interested and united are more powerful than all the voting population or legislation. The English Parliament, if they believed to-day that every working man in Great Britain staked his life on the issues of universal suffrage, would not dare a month to deny it. For when a nation's foundations are on a class of men that do not vote, and its throne stands on forces that are coiled up and liable at any time to break forth to its overthrow, it is a question whether it is safe to provoke the exertion of those forces or not. With us, where all men vote, government is safe; because, if a thing is once settled by a fair vote, we will go to war rather than to give it up. As when Lincoln was elected, if an election is valid, it must stand. In such a nation as this, an election is equivalent to a divine decree, and irreversible. But in Great Britain an election means, not the will of the people, but the will of rulers and a favored class, and there is always under them a great wronged class, that, if they get stirred up by the thought that they are wronged, will burst out with an explosion such that not the throne, nor parliament, nor the army, nor the exchequer can withstand the shock. And they wisely give way to the popular will when they can no longer resist it without running too great a risk. They oppose it as far as it is safe to do so, and then jump on and ride it. And you will see them astride of the vote, if the common people want it. But in America it is not so. The vote with us is so general that there is no danger of insurrection, and there is no danger that the government will be ruined by a wronged class that lies coiled up beneath it. When we speak of the vote here, it is not the representative of a class, as it is in England, worn like a star, or garter, saying, "I have the king's favor or the government's promise