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Marking a landmark moment for all

Daily Herald Editorial Board

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Today marks a watershed moment in our nation's history.

Know what it is? Any plans to celebrate the occasion? Ninety years ago this day, the United States secretary of state signed into law the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution giving women the right to vote.

That significant moment in history securing that basic civil right for one of the two genders in existence came after a more than 70-year struggle that saw pioneering "radical" women jailed and physically abused as they fought for justice.

Ninety years ago today. Not all that long ago, really. We still have women among us who lived during a time when this basic but powerful activity was prohibited. Denied to their mothers and grandmothers, older sisters and aunts.

Illinois played a pivotal role in the struggle, and Illinois and suburban women continue to mark our history, politics and policy. And they should continue to by exercising their right, speaking out and working to change policies that affect us all.

Illinois did not allow women to vote in presidential and local elections until 1913 and, according to votingwomen.org, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin were the first three states to ratify the 19th Amendment on June 10, 1919.

From the start, Illinois and its suburbs have been home to pioneering women. Libertyville's Clara Colby is listed as the first woman to vote, having cast a ballot for a new town hall while, papers at the time reported, her husband stayed home to "scrub clothes in the laundry."

There is Jane Addams, the Cedarville, Ill., native social worker and suffragist who founded Chicago's Hull House and was one of the first women to win a Nobel Peace Prize.

And Illinois has elected 14 female members of Congress. The first was Chicago Republican Winnifred S. Huck, only the third woman elected to Congress, just two years after the 19th Amendment ratification. Huck was the first wife and mother elected to Congress. Republican Ruth Hanna McCormick worked as a Springfield lobbyist who helped pass the law allowing Illinois women to vote in some elections in 1913 before she moved on to Congress. Democrat Emily Taft Douglas, an early leader of the League of Women Voters and an internationalist who was the wife of former U.S. Sen.

Paul Douglas and a cousin to President William H. Taft, beat isolationist Republican Stephen Day in 1945, according to the Women in Congress website.

In more recent times, Rockford Republican Lynn Martin moved from Congress to Labor Secretary and Chicago Democrat Carol Moseley Braun became the first black woman in the U.S. Senate. Now, of course, we also have Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who hails from Park Ridge. In the suburban trenches all along the way, women have been leading and agitating for change. Former Democratic state Rep. Eugenia Chapman of Arlington Heights is credited with helping start community colleges in Illinois. Republican Giddy Dyer of Hinsdale joined her in supporting the Equal Rights Amendment and also passed DuPage County's first clean air ordinance. Chapman worked with Republican Virginia B. Macdonald of Arlington Heights to establish a women's center at Harper College. And on-it goes.

Nice, you say, but big deal? Indeed, they were a big deal and, indeed, women shaping our lives still are a big deal. Men, can you imagine your life without women? Women, can you imagine your life without other women? American women have come a long way in 90 years and society is the better for it. Women vote in greater numbers than men and have for years, nationally and in Illinois. They very well can and should vote, write laws, lead and play even more influential roles in what the next 90 years, and beyond, may bring us all.