Some things never go out of style. Take the white suit: It looked as fresh at recent State of the Union addresses, sported by a wall of congresswomen, as it did 100 years ago when a coalition of Jewish, Protestant, Catholic and African-American women donned the pristine hue to wage war against sexism—and win the vote for women in August 1920 with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

From the Woodrow Wilson-era yellow rose—the suffragists’ symbol in Tennessee, the final state to ratify the amendment—to the Trump-era pink pussy hat, branding has accompanied activism in women’s fight for political representation. Indeed, those yellow roses have sprouted again at the Suff Shop, which sells everything from brooches to coasters in a nod to the merchandise—slogan-bearing pencils, messenger bags, dishware and other household items emblazoned with supportive sayings—that suffragists handed out as fundraising incentives a century ago.

And as America celebrates the centennial of female suffrage this year, what’s striking is how much today’s female leaders have in common with our activist foremothers, many of whom were Jewish. A century before Twitter, theirs was a story replete with petty rivalries, political marriages of convenience, eye-catching antics and tabloid-friendly arrests at demonstrations that wouldn’t be out of place in 2020 America.

Perhaps the best example is Anita Pollitzer, a granddaughter of a Prague rabbi who went from teaching Hebrew school in Charleston, S.C., in the early 20th century to working alongside Alice Paul, a notorious anti-Semite who headed the influential National Woman’s Party. As a white-clad member of the Silent Sentinels, the in-your-face NWP protest group, Pollitzer pestered Wilson’s White House until she was dragged off by the police. (Pollitzer’s other claim to fame is championing the artwork of her Columbia University Teachers College classmate, Georgia O’Keefe.)

Or consider Ernestine Rose, a 19th-century rabbi’s daughter from Poland who reinvented herself as an American atheist, freethinker and colleague of leading social reformer Susan B. Anthony. Rose, who described herself as “a feminist from the age of five,” lectured on abolitionism before becoming president of the National Women’s Rights Convention in the 1850s.

“Rose was a real anomaly; there were so few non-White Anglo-Saxon-Protestant women in the movement then,” says Pamela Nadell, who directs the Jewish Studies Program at American University and whose latest book is America’s Jewish Women: A History From Colonial Times to Today. But from its beginnings at the upstate New York Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, “there’s an incredible complexity to the women’s movement and to women’s activism,” Nadell adds, “as the elites in America are challenged by the dramatic transformations in American society.”

From New York City’s Lower East Side to the San Francisco Bay Area, waves of immigration in the early 20th century were changing America’s ethnic complexion. World War I sent thousands of Americans overseas and created a new order in Europe and the Middle East; the Ottoman Empire dissolved, Zionism flowered and the League of Nations emerged. Marxists everywhere cheered Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution. These developments brought people and ideas from around the world into contact with each other, creating the ferment for social change.

Against this backdrop, Jewish...
women were key mobilizers for suffrage. Activists, often dressed in white, shouted from soapboxes, organized marches (including a 1913 staged procession in front of the White House featuring floats and horses), wrote letters to editors and politicians, even went on hunger strikes that resulted in being force-fed by police. By grabbing headlines with these stunts, suffragists hoped to extend to all American women a right that some had enjoyed in limited instances since the 1830s, when parts of Kentucky were the first in the nation to allow female taxpayers—widowed property owners, for instance—to vote in school elections.

By 1918, President Wilson was persuaded to support a proposed 19th Amendment to the Constitution, and by May 1919, the House of Representatives voted in favor. The Senate followed, and the amendment’s success was sealed when Tennessee ratified the measure in August 1920. It was the 36th state to do so, fulfilling the requirement that three-fourths of the then-48 states vote in favor of ratifying the amendment.

It had been the gradual, state-by-state expansion of voting rights prior to 1918 that had built support among members of Congress for the national amendment. Western states such as Washington and California were the first to enact statewide suffrage, beginning in 1910.

“These were newer places that had a little bit more of a frontier mentality, so they were less wedded to tradition,” explains Judith Rosenbaum, a historian who heads the Jewish Women’s Archive. But it was New York—then the largest state, and always the East Coast bellwether—that lent momentum for a nationwide push. New York’s successful 1917 statewide referendum, after several failed attempts, revealed the power of an increasingly multicultural America. African-American, Irish, Italian and Jewish men were critical blocs despite anti-Jewish rhetoric from progressive Jewish women have<br>between trips to Palestine. “The Solomons’ story speaks to the importance of the vote as a means of upward social mobility,” Klapper notes of the karma, divine order or not, that has tarnished Cathy Stanton’s legacy.

It was one thing for individual Jewish women to make common cause with anti-Semites, however, and another for Jewish organizations to lend formal support. “The National Council for Jewish Women was crawling with suffragists,” says Klappe, “but the organization never endorsed suffrage.” There were constant reminders that Jews were seen “as not truly American, not good enough. So collectively, there was this feeling that, ‘Well, they don’t want us.’” Likewise, Hadassah declined involvement in the cause. The exception was a 1918 telegram from the organization to Wilson, urging him to support the women’s vote. Hadassah was focused more on issues in then-Palestine, where Zionist women looked to American suffragists as inspiration for an egalitarian state. Still, many Hadassah women were devoted to the vote. They included Rachel Szold Jastrow, sister of Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold—they and their six sisters were rabbi’s daughters, too—who represented the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association at the State Legislature. Rose Jacobs and Irma Lindheim, two early Hadassah presidents, advocated for suffrage in between trips to Palestine.

“Jewish women helped to bridge the class divide,” says Rosenbaum. “They helped working-class women understand why it was worth their while to work with upper-class women to get the vote, and upper-class women to understand why having the vote would be an important tool to protect women of all classes.”
the Daughters of the American Revolution, tracing their ancestry to the Colonial era. Their cousins included “New Colossus” poet Emma Lazarus and Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo.

“And they hated each other,” Klapper says of the Nathan sisters. “One was for suffrage and the other was like, ‘Not me!’ ” The activist Maud Nathan lobbied Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson and led rallies on behalf of the women’s vote, while Meyer countered what she called Nathan’s “utterly abhorrent” and “noisy” efforts with anti-suffrage speeches at Barnard. Like many elites, Meyer was skeptical of the 19th Amendment. In 1925, Florence Prag Kahn of California became the first Jewish woman elected to Congress.

Indeed, it was many years before suffragist ambition translated into real political clout, despite some early outliers, one of whom—Republican Jeanette Rankin of Montana—was elected by male voters in 1916 to Congress years before ratification of the 19th Amendment. In 1925, Florence Prag Kahn, a Republican from California, became the first Jewish congresswoman in 1925.

As the euphoria of victory subsided, progress was fitful for women who dreamed of political equity. Voter turnout on Election Day One—November 2, 1920—was a disappointment, says Klapper, and the right, she became involved with the League of Women Voters,” notes Klapper.

The Congresswoman In 1925, Florence Prag Kahn of California became the first Jewish woman elected to Congress.

The Suff Shop (womensvote100.shop) is an online emporium for suffrage swag: shirts and magnets featuring the yellow rose, feminist-slogan drinkware and ornaments, even framed replicas of the rose, feminist-slogan drinkware and ornaments, even framed replicas of the 19th Amendment. The Suff Shop (womensvote100.shop) is an online emporium for suffrage swag: shirts and magnets featuring the yellow rose, feminist-slogan drinkware and ornaments, even framed replicas of the 19th Amendment.

The 2020 Women’s Vote Centennial Initiative (2020centennial.org) counts among its partners the Jewish Women’s Archive and the National Museum of American Jewish History. You’ll find upcoming programs, reading lists and test-your-knowledge quizzes for all ages, classroom resources (including an archive of primary source documents) and souvenir merchandise.

Beyond showing up at the polls, Jewish female activists turned their energies toward other causes: workers’ and civil rights, nuclear disarmament, the peace movement of the 1960s, Zionism.

The White House has long been a favorite rallying spot for political activists.

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MARKING 100 YEARS

The Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission (womensvote100.org) offers a wealth of historical information, a calendar of centennial events and a virtual, curator-led gallery tour of “Rightfully Hers: Women and the Vote” at the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C. Be sure to check out all the kids’ activities, including printable Susan B. Anthony paper dolls, a suffrage reading list and more.

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PBS celebrates the centennial with a documentary film, “The Vote,” and a collection of suffrage-related films (pbs.org/show/celebrating-womens-vote-centennial).