

What maps made by 20th century suffragists can teach about holding leaders to account on climate change

November 30 2021, by James Cheshire

Maps provide a powerful tool for demonstrating inequality. Credit: VCULibraries/Flickr, CC BY-SA 4.0

I'm a geographer who's produced [many maps](#) depicting human effects on the environment—and demanded we create more of them. A question I am increasingly asked is: how do you not feel powerless in the face of such depressing data?

With climate anxiety now affecting young people's [mental health](#), and widespread doubt about whether limiting global warming to 1.5°C is possible, it can be tricky to answer. What I've found is that we can use a surprisingly commonplace tool to communicate danger and to bring about positive change: the map.

Throughout history, it has generally been society's elites who have used maps to exploit, not help, the planet and its people. They've used them to [pinpoint oil reserves](#), [carve up continents](#) and [justify wars](#). But maps can also be used to empower and defend those who face seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Over a century ago, the women's suffrage movement developed one of the largest ever [map-based campaigns](#), spanning decades and continents, as part of its drive to give women the [vote](#). We need to use their principles if we are to persuade leaders not just to deliver but to improve upon the promises made at the recent UN climate conference COP26.

What the Suffragists did

Suffragists used maps [to celebrate](#) jurisdictions across the world that had given women the vote—and to shame those that had not. They reasoned

that the action of some policymakers would highlight the inaction of others, betraying the most misogynist politicians and their supporters.

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ALASKA, 1912

WHITE STATES, FULL SUFFRAGE
SHADED STATES, PARTIAL SUFFRAGE
DARK STATES, NO SUFFRAGE

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**RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY STATE CONVENTION OF
NEVADA WOMEN'S CIVIC LEAGUE AT
RENO, NEVADA April 27, 1916.**

Whereas we women voters of Nevada and members of the Nevada Women's Civic League firmly believe in the principle of woman suffrage and are working for its establishment for the women of the nation by means of an amendment to the United States Constitution and

Whereas the women of the country have been unfairly dealt with by the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives in the treatment accorded the Susan B. Anthony amendment therefore be it

RESOLVED that we in convention assembled protest as enfranchised women against the action of the Judiciary Committee in indefinitely postponing a report of the suffrage measure and thus depriving the representatives of the people of the opportunity of voting upon this question of vital importance to the nation and be it further

RESOLVED that we call upon the committee for an immediate and favorable report that the House may pass the measure at the present session of Congress and that we earnestly urge the Senate to take immediate favorable action upon the Anthony Amendment which is now upon the Senate calendar. Be it also

RESOLVED that a copy of this resolution be sent to President Wilson, Majority leader Kern of the Senate, Minority leader Callinger, Speaker Champ Clark, Majority leader Eithin, Minority leader Mann of the House, all the members of the Judiciary Committee and the congressional delegation from Nevada.

(Signed) Anne H. Martin
President
Mrs. S. W. Belford
Recording Sec'y

Maps were central to political lobbying. Credit: National Archives Catalog

American suffrage maps with the headline "[Votes for Women a Success](#)" showed the US states that had granted women the right to vote. To challenge those with backward views, some versions of the map were also adorned with provocative statements such as "How long will the republic of the United States lag behind the monarchy of Canada?"

In 1930s Europe, where France was still withholding votes for women, suffrage campaigns [published maps](#) showing the country's outdated approach to democracy in contrast to its neighbors such as Belgium, under the banner "French women can't vote! French women want to vote!"

Suffrage maps were plastered on walls, hung across streets, paraded on sandwich boards, printed in newspapers and even used to [petition](#) the US Congress.

Geographer [Christina E. Dando](#) has pointed out how American suffragists' work was not just focused on creating maps, but changing them. For example, the map below was submitted by the Nevada Women's Civic League to the US [judiciary committee](#), which was resisting granting women the right to vote nationwide. As the catalog entry for the map [tells us](#), "this petition shows that women were not just lobbying Congress in general, but strategically pressuring committees to act."

In the US, the [19th amendment](#) guaranteeing all women the right to vote [was ratified](#) in August 1920. But the fight for equal access to the ballot box was far from over.

Racist voter suppression policies were enacted in many states against women of color, who were themselves [creating maps](#) to campaign against the horrors of lynching. It was only after the [Voting Rights Act](#) was passed nearly 50 years later, on August 6, 1965, that such policies were outlawed. Even today, maps [remain a weapon](#) in the continuing fight to achieve fair racial representation in some US states.



High nitrogen dioxide concentration is shown in yellow and red colours. Credit: Atlas Of The Invisible, Author provided

Modern maps

In the past, creating maps to counter the status quo—or indeed creating

pretty much any map at all—would have required significant design expertise, a lot of manual effort and the financial means to print and promote it.

Today, these challenges can be overcome more easily. The majority of sites and [social media platforms](#) are free, do not conform to national borders, and are out of government reach. That means that images that hold those in power to account can spread more freely. So it's time to use maps to challenge the greatest social and political crisis of our time: the destruction of our planet's environment.

Take a look at this map of nitrogen dioxide—a gas released into the atmosphere by burning [fossil fuels](#)—from a hot July day across Europe in 2019 (click to make it bigger). High levels [can damage](#) health, create [acid rain](#) and contribute to the [greenhouse effect](#). Although the map shows gas moving around, it's clearly concentrated in certain areas. There's a big cloud caused by shipping in Marseille and spots marking industrial plants around Dusseldorf.

Map of nitrogen dioxide concentration

Rather than view this as purely an image of scientific interest, we should see it as a call to action. Living beneath the swirls of nitrogen dioxide are policymakers who can design tougher legislation, such as introducing low emission zones, to erase the yellow marks from this map.

The battle for women's equality is clearly not over, but the idea that at least half the adult population should be legally deprived of a vote is now unconscionable in all but the most extreme jurisdictions. Maps created for women, by [women](#), helped make this so. Now, let's unleash the political power of maps to ensure that a failure to act on the environment becomes unconscionable too.

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