

Britain 1851-1951

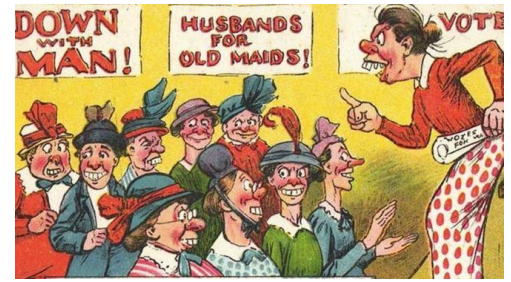
Issue 3 Notes



HIGHER ISSUE 3	FACTORS
An evaluation of the reasons why some women were given the vote in 1918	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing attitudes to women in society • Suffragist campaign • Suffragette campaign • Women in the war effort, 1914–18 • Example of other countries

Introduction: Women and the Vote

In 1928 women were given the franchise on equal terms with men. This was the culmination of years of campaigning by women's suffrage groups, but also the consequence of changing attitudes to women over the preceding 50 or so years, not only in Britain but throughout the world. Also, the Great War certainly had a part to play in changing attitudes towards women. While most historians agree that the factors below all played a part in women gaining greater political equality by 1928, they often disagree on the relative importance and significance of each factor.

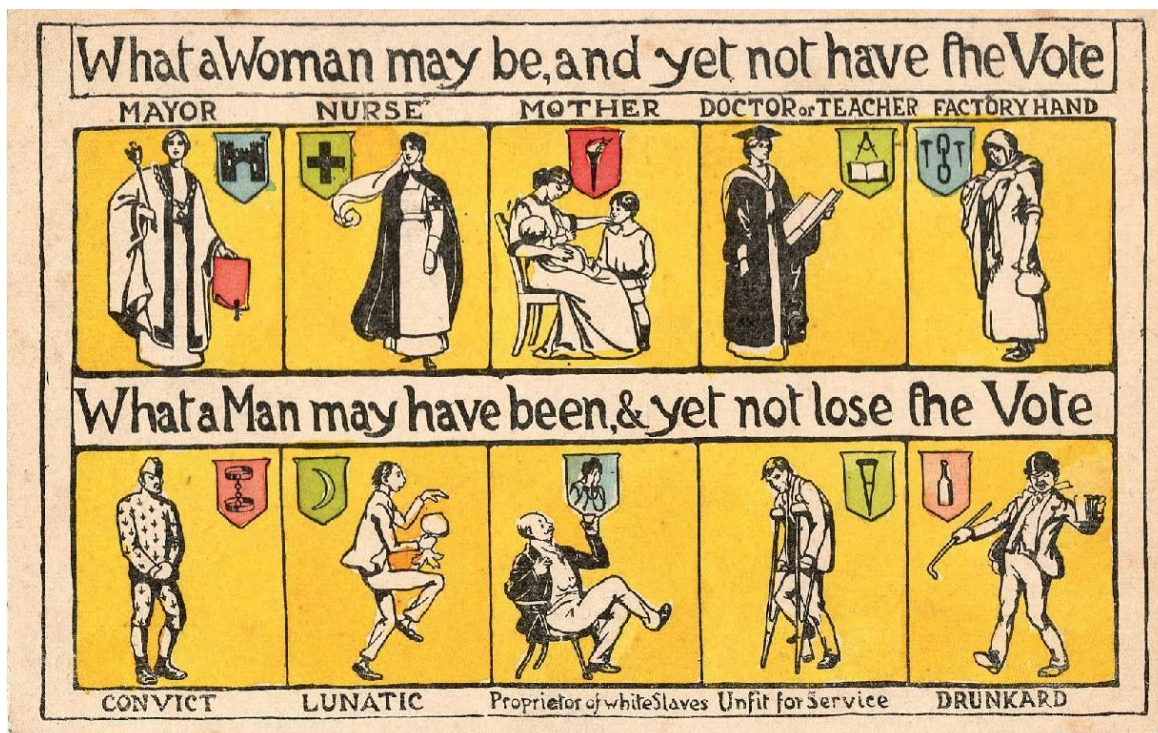


The traditional view of a woman's place in society had kept them out of the political sphere since democracy was established in Britain:

- Women were seen as physically, mentally, emotionally and morally inferior to men
- It was felt that women could not be trusted to vote rationally
- A woman's sphere of influence was seen to be the home and raising children
- Public life, including politics was seen to belong to the male sphere of influence
- It was believed that women involved in politics would neglect their responsibilities at home
- It was assumed that women did not need the vote - their husbands took that responsibility
- Some women even believed that females were not capable of understanding politics

Many women themselves, including Queen Victoria, agreed that women should not take part in politics. Women did not just lack political equality. Women had few legal rights, especially once married: all possessions became her husband's, while she had no rights over her children. Domestic abuse was commonplace, legal and widely seen as acceptable.

“The profoundly educated women rarely make good wives or mothers”
Sarah Sewell, Women and the times we live in 1868.



An evaluation of the reasons why some women were given the vote in 1918

1. Changing Attitudes to women in society

In the mid nineteenth century women were generally seen as being intellectually inferior to men. Legally, women had few rights and socially, women were expected to fulfil the role of the dutiful wife or devoted mother. Moreover, the vast majority of men, and some women, firmly believed that that women were simply different in character to men. However, as the century wore on, attitudes and laws concerning women's role in society changed.

In 1857, a law was passed that allowed women to divorce husbands who were cruel to them or husbands who had left them. Women gained more financial independence in 1870 as they were now legally allowed to keep the money they earned, and the 1882 Married Women's Property Act gave women rights over property. Also, in 1891 women could not be forced to live with husbands unless they chose to. All these laws meant that women had more rights, and can be seen as an important shift in the way society perceived women.

In the mid to late nineteenth century, women became increasingly active in public affairs. Between 1870 and 1894, women gained the right to vote for and stand for election to school boards, county councils, the Boards of Guardians for poor houses and Parish and District Councils. Also, women became members of political organisations.

In education, more opportunities slowly opened up to women, for example, in 1870 the first university college for women, Girton College, was set up. In 1879, women's colleges were founded at the renowned and highly respected Oxford University. A year later the 1880 Education Act was passed which meant all five to ten year olds including girls, had to attend school/ As more and more opportunities emerged for women in education, so



*Figure 1 -Elizabeth Garrett Anderson
First Woman Doctor in England*

new professions opened up to those who had degrees.

By the turn of the century women had trained and were successfully practising as teachers, lawyers and social workers. Also, the number of women doctors increased. By moving into roles previously dominated by men, women were challenging and changing centuries-old stereotypes. Indeed, when we consider all the changes discussed it is clear that attitudes towards women's role in society had altered. Millicent Fawcett, a leading campaigner for women's suffrage at the time, argued

that these social changes were vital in the eventual winning of the franchise. That being said, these changes had not seen politicians even come close to granting women the franchise and it was clear to many that a forthright and active campaign on this issue was necessary. The more females became successful in the 'male' world, the more it became acceptable. Many men began to see the stereotypical view of women as outdated. This, in turn led many to question women's exclusion from politics. However, even though women were making some progress they were still expected to leave their jobs when they

were married (the marriage bar), women were not awarded degrees by universities and the numbers of women serving on local councils was very small – 24 out of 11,140

Summary of Laws that showcase a change in attitude

A number of laws were passed to improve female standing in society. All of these laws paved the way for further reform in favour of women:

- 1873 Infant Custody Act – increased women's rights over children including the possibility of sole custody in the case of divorce
- 1882 and 1893 Married Women's Property Acts – women now personally owned property that had been purchased before and during marriage, if it had been purchased with her own finances
- 1870 and 1872 Education Acts – compulsory education for girls and boys from 5-12 years of age
- 1894 Local Government Act – women gained the right to vote and stand for elections at local council level, although a property and tax qualification had to be met.

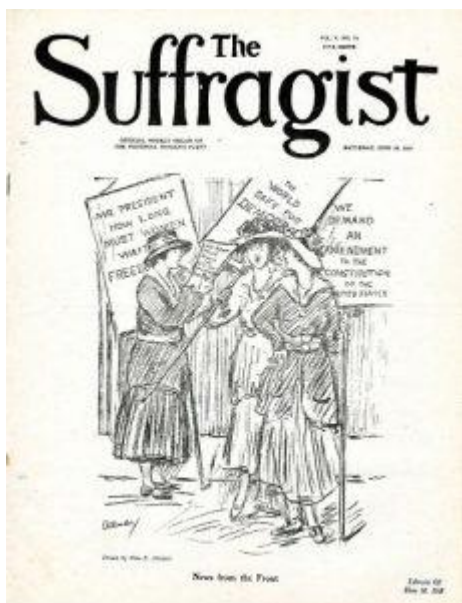
2. The women's suffrage campaign: the NUWSS

Organised campaigns for women's suffrage began in 1866. When Parliamentary Reform was being debated in 1867, John Stuart Mill proposed an amendment that would have given the vote to women on the same terms as men. But it was rejected by 194 votes to 73. The campaign gained momentum after this.

19th century feminists talked about "The Cause". This described a movement for women's rights generally. While it had no particular political focus, by the close of the century the issue of the vote became the focus of women's struggle for equality.

Campaigners for women's rights recognised that unless women had the vote their ability to influence and effect real change was extremely limited. With this in mind, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed in 1897. They were later nicknamed the "Suffragists" and were led by Millicent Fawcett.

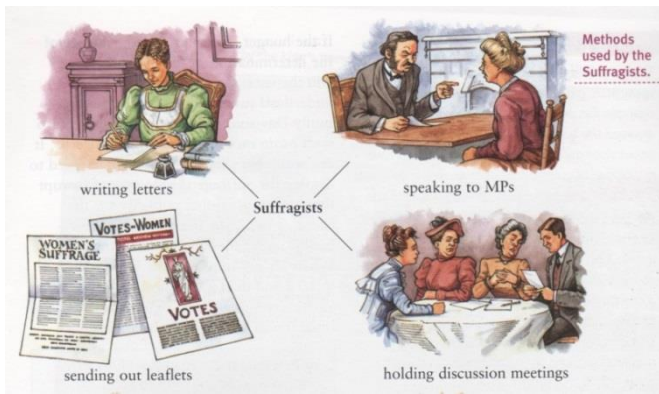
The Suffragist believed that the best way to convince politicians and those in power to grant the franchise to women was to gain their respect through peaceful, moderate tactics. They held meetings, distributed pamphlets, organised petitions and lobbied politicians to introduce parliamentary bills on the issue of women's suffrage. By the early 1900s, the Suffragists were flourishing, with a rising membership and an efficient nation-wide organisation. By 1914, the NUWSS had approximately 54,000 members, the majority being middle class respectable citizens. One tactic used by the Suffragists was to hold meetings. These took place in local branches and by 1914 there were over 400 NUWSS branches, from London to Shetland.



Lobbying

The suffragists believe in achieving change through parliamentary means and used lobbying techniques to persuade Members of Parliament sympathetic to their cause to raise the issue of women's suffrage in debate on the floor of the House. Between 1870 and 1884 debates on women's suffrage took place almost every year in Parliament. This succeeded in keeping the issue in the public eye as Parliamentary proceedings were extensively covered in the national and regional press of the time. There was some criticism that by concentrating so heavily on the activities in Parliament, the movement sacrificed opportunities to mobilise mass support throughout the rest of the country.

The leaders of the suffragists was exclusively middle class but some of the more radical member recognised early on that the movement needed the support of the working class women.



The Suffragists were certainly successful in gaining some publicity for their cause, but perhaps not as much as they would have hoped. Their peaceful, moderate tactics did not gain headlines in newspapers. That being said, the Suffragists were successful in convincing many MPs to support their cause and in 1910, 1911 and 1912, Parliament heard arguments for and against a bill for limited female suffrage. Many MPs voted for it again

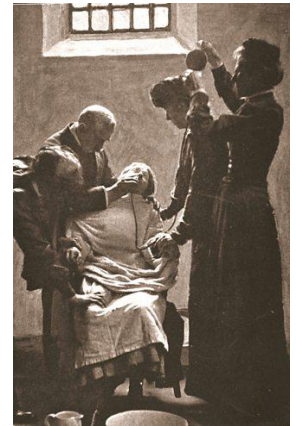
and again, and it could be argued that they did so partly because of the campaigning by Suffragist. Indeed, when women did gain the vote in 1918, it was passed into law by many politicians who had been lobbied by Suffragists over the previous 20 years. However, they still didn't win the vote despite no less than 4 attempts to introduce women's suffrage in parliament and there was still a lot of anti-suffrage feeling for example Queen Victoria was an outspoken, opposition figure to women's enfranchisement. In addition, the NUWSS failed to gain the support of the most important Member of Parliament, the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. The NUWSS have been criticised for being too cautious. They only proposed that a small proportion of propertied, wealthy, married women should be enfranchised.

Despite historians now recognising the success of the Suffragists campaigns in influencing politicians, at the time many women felt that the NUWSS was not doing enough to get their points across. In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst broke away from the NUWSS and formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). They would later be nicknamed the "Suffragettes" and would have an explosive impact on the campaign for the vote.



3. The women's suffrage campaign: Suffragettes - WSPU

The suffragettes believed that direct action was needed to gain publicity for their cause and re-focus the media and politicians on their cause. Their motto was "Deeds not Words." Suffragettes would heckle MPs at public meetings, chain themselves to railings, organise large rallies, marches and petitions and even engage in illegal activities such as setting post boxes on fire and slashing expensive paintings in art galleries. These illegal activities often landed Suffragettes in prison, where many went on hunger strike in protest at not being considered political prisoners. The government responded by instructing prisons to force-feed the Suffragettes. When this became widely reported, there was considerable sympathy for the Suffragettes from both men and women. Again, the government responding by putting an end to force-feeding and putting in place the Prisoners (Temporary discharge for ill-health) Act 1913. This meant that any women who went on hunger strike were released until they became well again, at which point they were re-arrested and put back in jail. It was dubbed the "Cat and Mouse Act" for obvious reasons.



Source A: Written by a modern historian

The Suffragettes' militant tactics certainly gained plenty publicity for their cause but very rarely in a positive way. Newspapers and cartoonists made fun of them and it led some Suffragists to claim they were doing more harm than good to their cause. Some men said the actions of the Suffragettes simply proved that women should not have the vote. The Suffragists disapproved of the tactics and there was an obvious split in the women's suffrage movement as a result. It is interesting to note that as the Suffragette campaign became increasingly violent in the years before the war, so membership of the NUWSS grew as disillusioned women left the WSPU. Also, the Suffragettes made few friends among the political class who saw them as dangerous terrorists, especially when attempts were made to blow up or set on fire politician's houses.

Examples of their militant campaign

From 1912 onwards they became more militant in their methods of campaign. Law-breaking, violence and hunger strikes all became part of their campaign tactics:

- 1905 - heckling of Sir Edward Grey
- 1908 – window-smashing campaign on government buildings
- 1909 – Prime Minister Herbert Asquith is attacked
- 1909 – Marion Dunlop goes on hunger strike in prison, sparking a spate of copycats
- 1913 – Emily Davison is killed when she jumps in front of the King's horse at the Derby



Impact of the movement

Historians debate the effectiveness of the different groups in the struggle for women's suffrage:

- Some modern historians argue that the influence of NUWSS has not been given enough credit
- Membership of this organisation remained high throughout the period
- Many women, who became alienated from the Suffragettes because of their militancy, switched allegiance to the Suffragists
- Some historians argue that the activities of the WSPU were critical in keeping women's suffrage high on the political agenda
- Others believe that its violent tactics actually delayed votes for women by its "irresponsibility" in attacking private property

Positives

The groups disagreed over tactics, but their message was consistent and they regularly worked together.

In some cases, the rough treatment of many Suffragettes arrested and jailed during their protests won increasing sympathy and support from the public:

- Force-feeding of prisoners on hunger strike brought a great public outcry against the government.
- The Prisoner's Temporary Discharge for Ill Health (Cat and Mouse) Act also brought public sympathy for the protesters.

The commendable behaviour of the Suffrage movement during the war, including the suspension of protests for the sake of national unity, proved that the women were far from unreasonable.

Negatives

- The tactics of the WSPU received massive publicity but much of it was negative
- Some argued that women who acted like this did not deserve the vote
- At one point, Churchill proclaimed that "their cause has marched backwards"
- Opposition to militant campaigning was so strong that organisations evolved from 1908 to form the National League For Opposing Woman Suffrage in 1911

Overall, it is clear that the Suffragettes mobilised opinion for and against the suffrage campaign. Perhaps without the publicity they raised politicians may have ignored the issue of votes for women. However, for opponents of women's suffrage, the Suffragettes' actions simply provided proof that women could not and should not be trusted with the vote.

4. The part played by women in the war effort, 1914-1918

When Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914 it only took the NUWSS two days to decide to suspend its political campaigning for the vote. The WSPU were given £2000 by the government to stage a march and a propaganda campaign demanding 'Womens' Right to Serve' and help the war effort

The Suffragettes even changed the name of their newspaper from *The Suffragette* to *Britannica* and they focussed on patriotism rather than feminism for the duration of the war. Both Suffrage campaigns gained support and respect due their willingness to get behind the war effort and 'muck in' rather than potentially sabotaging Britain in the war by continuing their campaign. However, the Suffragettes were criticised by some for their sudden willingness to cooperate with the government and the pacifist Womens' Freedom League and some more extreme Suffragettes accused them of betrayal.

Suffragettes also started the 'white feather' campaign to encourage recruitment, using them as symbols of cowardice on men who were not in uniform AS men flocked to recruiting stations to sign up, so women filled the void they left. Throughout the war women took on roles in government departments, the post office, as clerks in business, public transport and as land workers. Perhaps the most famous role that many women took on during the war was that of the "munitionette": a worker in many munitions factories creating



weapons for war. Indeed, by Armistice Day munitions factories were employing 950,000 women. The fact that women stepped ably into these roles certainly gained them a lot of respect and admiration from men across all classes. Politicians were also quick to praise the efforts of women. The war certainly did see a change in the way women were perceived and was important for this reason. At the outbreak of World War I women signed up to be nursing sisters and voluntary aid detachment nurses (V.A.D.s) on the frontlines for many different reasons. The VAD provided nurses for injured soldiers, and women were also employed in roles such as ambulance drivers.

When women were granted the vote in early 1918, it was easy for politicians to claim, rather patronisingly, that women had "earned" it for all their hard work in the war. In fact, while war work certainly played a part in women gaining the vote, it is rather a simplistic explanation. The



fact that the vote was only given to women over 30 who owned property or were married to someone who did meant that most of the young, working class women who had gone into work during the war were still without the vote. The war had clearly not benefitted them politically. Also, there had been significant moves towards female enfranchisement before the war, with an increasing number of MPs supporting the idea. Therefore, it could be argued the war simply sped up a process that was already underway. It is important to also remember that women did not gain the franchise on the same terms as men until 1928, ten years after the war. On balance, the efforts of women during the war were of course important in them gaining the vote, but it would be naive to ascribe too much weight to this one factor when so much had occurred before it.

Historians take different views on how much impact war work had on the decision to grant limited enfranchisement in 1918. Some believe that the extension of the franchise to include women was a token of gratitude for their effort during the war. Historian Gifford Lewis believes that "The highly skilled and dangerous work done by women during the war was probably the greatest factor in the granting of the vote to women." However, women had been working for years in industry and business with little political recognition for their contribution. Historians including Arthur Marwick have argued that the Great War only accelerated a process that had started well before 1914. While it's possible that women's role in the workplace would have earned them political advancement eventually, it was the war which highlighted the economic and strategic value of women to the country. The contribution women made during the war had an impact on attitudes to women. Politicians and the general public alike recognised that women deserved greater political rights. It also dispelled any remaining widespread beliefs that women were unable to cope with traditionally male jobs. The Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men over 21, whether they owned property or not. The act gave the vote to women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification, or whose husband did. This represented 8.5 million women - two thirds of the total population of women in the UK. However, the women who benefited in 1918 were mature and married females. It had been younger, mainly single women who had contributed so much in the munitions factories and elsewhere. They were given no recognition by the government until 1928. In contrast to Britain, in France women were not enfranchised at that time, despite their war effort. It could be argued this was due to there being no French equivalent to the women's suffrage movement in Britain before the war. It can also be argued that the idea that the war changed perceptions of women's roles in society is not necessarily true. Women were paid less than men for carrying out the same jobs, and when soldiers returned from the war, women were expected to give up their jobs. Asquith, who claimed that women's war work had changed his view on women's suffrage, described female voters as 'a dim lot, for the most part hopelessly ignorant of politics'.

Paula Bartley summarises this view of the war's impact;

'It would be naïve to believe that women received the vote solely for services rendered in the First World War'

5. The Example of other countries

The women's suffrage movement was not limited to Britain and it had been in fact very successful all across the globe. By the time the USA entered the war in 1917; many states had given women the vote. Also, years before this, in 1906, Finland granted women the vote. What is more, counties in the British Empire, such as New Zealand (1893) had given the vote to women. No disasters had occurred in these countries and the political systems had remained stable, despite warnings from anti-suffrage campaigners. British politicians often saw themselves as being in charge of the greatest democracy and Empire on earth and were perhaps keen to demonstrate that they could keep up with the next great reform in politics. With this in mind, perhaps the example of other countries did influence some politicians to be more open to the idea. Also, the fact that women in other countries had the vote cannot have failed but provided hopes for the British suffrage campaigns and instil in them a determination to see their cause through to the end. In addition, the Russian revolution in 1917 saw the autocratic Tsar who denied people democracy ousted in a bloody revolution and killed by the poorer Bolsheviks in Russia, which sent shockwaves and fear of revolution around the world. The fear of revolution was a real one in Britain and middle class Brits were terrified of Communism, it may be the case that the Rent Strikes in Glasgow in 1915 had added to government's fears that the working class and women would not wait patiently for the vote forever. It was likely that between 1914-18 British politicians were far more concerned with the war effort on the Western Front and at home than they were with events in Russia and many historians have downplayed 'Red Clydeside' and the importance of the Rent Strikes.

Britain, 1851-1951

Historiography

ISSUE 3:

An evaluation of the reasons why women won greater political equality by 1928

Changing Attitudes to women in society:

“The profoundly (well) educated women rarely make good wives or mothers...(they) seldom have much knowledge or pies and puddings nor do they enjoy the interesting work of attending to small children”. (Sarah Sewell)

Martin Pugh argues that **“their participation in local government made women’s exclusion from national elections increasingly untenable”.**

With regards to various legal, educational and professional advancements that were made by women in Britain, John Kerr and James McGonigle argue that the “overall effect of these developments was to erode male prejudices”.

“(Arguments) against giving women the vote) are both out of date and out of place. They might have been correct and proper two of three centuries ago...but not in the 20th century, when we women have for years, by common consent, taken an active part in public affairs, when they are members of town councils, boards of guardians and...Are prominent members of political associations...” (Millicent Fawcett, 1912)

The women’s suffrage campaigns: the NUWSS and WSPU

Paul Bartley argues that an important reason women were given the vote in 1918 was because **“several suffragist MPs were promoted to the Cabinet” in the preceding years.**

Sandra Stanley Holton argues that the Suffragist were vital in women gaining the vote **“especially...in securing the strong position by their cause at the outbreak of war”.**

“The cause of Woman Suffrage is not as strong in this House today as it was a year ago, and everybody knows the cause. Everyone knows the reasons is purely and simply that certain women have broken the law in a way we all deplore...The way in which certain types of women, easily recognised, have acted in the last year or two, especially in the last few weeks...has brought so much disgrace and discredit upon their sex” (Lord Robert Cecil, 1912)

The example of other countries

Paula Bartley argues that politicians were influenced by the fact that women elsewhere had already gained the vote: **“It would have been a peculiar embarrassment if the mother of democracy Britain, lagged behind other countries.”**

The part played by women in the war effort, 1914-1918

AJP Taylor argues that **“War smoothed the way for democracy – it is one of the few things to be said in its favour”**.

Constance Rover argues that the war was important because it saw women being openly praised and a change in public opinion become clear: **“Public opinion became overwhelmingly favourable towards women”**.

Historian Gifford Lewis believes that **“The highly skilled and dangerous work done by women during the war was probably the greatest factor in the granting of the vote to women.”**

Historians including Arthur Marwick have argued that the Great War only accelerated a process that had started well before 1914.

Example Questions

1. The part played by women in the war effort was the main reason why some women were given the vote in 1918. How valid is this view?
2. To what extent was the militant Suffragette campaign the most important reason for the achievement of votes for some women by 1918?
3. To what extent was the examples of other countries the main reason why women were given the vote in 1918?