

What were the arguments for and against female suffrage?

Note: the proper name for votes for women is 'Female Suffrage'

In the nineteenth century, new jobs emerged for women as teachers, as shop workers or as clerks and secretaries in offices. Many able girls from working-class backgrounds could achieve better-paid jobs than those of their parents. They had more opportunities in education., for example a few middle-class women won the chance to go to university, to become doctors. Laws between 1839 and 1886 gave married women greater legal rights. However, they could not vote in general elections.

The number of men who could vote had gradually increased during the nineteenth century (see the Factfile). Some people thought that women should be allowed to vote too. Others disagreed. But the debate was not, simply a case of men versus women.

How effective were the suffragist and suffragette campaigns?

Who were the suffragists?

The early campaigners for the vote were known as suffragists. They were mainly (though not all) middle-class women. When the MP John Stuart Mill had suggested giving votes to women in 1867, 73 MPs had supported it.

After 1867, local groups set up by women called women's suffrage societies were formed. By the time they came together in 1897 to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), there were over 500 local branches.

By 1902, the campaign had gained the support of working-class women as well. In 1901-1902, Eva Gore-Booth gathered the signatures of 67,000 textile workers in northern England for a petition (signed letter) to Parliament.

The leader of the movement nicknamed 'The Suffragists' was Millicent Fawcett. She believed in peaceful and legal campaigning. She argued her

case with MPs, issued leaflets, presented petitions and organised meetings.

She thought that it was very important to keep the issue in the public eye: at every election, suffragists questioned the candidates on their attitudes to women's suffrage. She talked of the suffragist movement as being like a glacier, slow but unstoppable.

By 1900 they had achieved some success, gaining the support of some Conservative MPs, as well as the new but rather small Labour Party. The party that they needed to win support from however, was the Liberal Party because they were the largest party in Parliament and therefore the government. The problem was that many less important Liberal MPs supported votes for women but the Liberal leaders were against it.

This was because they feared that if the vote was given gradually to women (as it had been done to men) only better-off women would get the vote, and these women would vote for the Conservative Party.

Generally most Conservatives didn't support votes for women because they believed it was 'too much change too quickly'.

The Labour Party was too small and not important enough to be of much help to the Suffragists. They were more interested in the rights and conditions of workers and saw votes for women as a distraction.

Finally, the parties had bigger worries than female suffrage, such as war in South Africa and the Empire. There always seemed to be an issue which took priority.

No party was prepared to adopt female suffrage as party policy, so it never got priority in Parliament. It was left up to individual MPs to introduce private bills, which were never allowed the time they needed to get through. In the years up to 1900, fifteen times Parliament received a bill to give women the vote; fifteen times the bill failed.

Who were the suffragettes ?

This lack of success made many suffragists angry. As a result, in 1903, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst founded a new organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Mrs Pankhurst thought that the movement had to become more extreme or 'militant' if it was to succeed. The *Daily*

Mail called these new radicals 'suffragettes', and they soon made the headlines.

The suffragettes disrupted political meetings and interrupted politicians. The Liberal Prime Minister, Asquith, who was firmly opposed to women's suffrage, came in for particularly heavy abuse.

1908: direct action begins

After another series of bills aimed at giving women the vote failed, the Suffragettes made a decision in 1908, to step up their campaign. For example, the suffragette Edith New began making speeches in Downing Street (where the Prime Minister lived); to stop the police from moving her on, she chained herself to the railings and so was arrested.

In the same year, some suffragettes threw stones through the windows of 10 Downing Street (the Prime Minister's house). In October, Mrs Pankhurst, her daughter Christabel and Flora Drummond were sent to prison for encouraging a crowd to 'rush' the House of Commons.

The suffragettes believed that the government did nothing about female suffrage because it did not think that it was a serious issue. The suffragettes wanted to make women's suffrage a serious issue - one that the government could not ignore. That was the aim of their militancy: a woman getting arrested for her cause was news. It showed how important the vote was to her. Processions and petitions by the Suffragists - however large - were easily ignored.

The Suffragettes were therefore supporters of Direct Action.

Reactions to direct action

The reaction of the public was mixed. Some people were sympathetic. Some were worried. Others were hostile.

How did the Suffragists react ?

The reaction of the suffragists was also mixed. Many suffragists thought the Suffragettes brave - particularly the fact they were prepared to go to prison, but, as the suffragette campaign became more violent, relationships between the suffragists and suffragettes became very difficult.

The suffragists believed that you could not claim a right to vote by violent, illegal methods (such as smashing windows). They also believed that militancy would put off MPs who might otherwise back the cause of votes for women.

Both groups Suffragists and Suffragettes, knew that tensions between the two groups did not help the cause, and Christabel Pankhurst called

for the two groups to join forces, Millicent Fawcett did not want her movement to be identified with militancy and so she refused.

The main thing that Millicent Fawcett was unhappy about was not Suffragist methods but the fact that the lack of action on the part of politicians has caused the Suffragettes to take up militant action.

1911: the Conciliation Bill

Note: What is an 'Act' and what is a 'Bill' ? - an act is better known as a law. It is voted on and passed in Parliament by members of parliament (MPs). A Bill is the name it is given BEFORE it is passed by MPs (eg when it is still being debated or changed by MPs). Until it is voted and passed by MPs it is ALWAYS called a Bill.

In 1911 the government promised to introduce votes for women as part of a Bill called the 'Conciliation Bill', all the 3 main parties in Parliament agreed to support it which won all-party support.

The suffragettes therefore stopped their militant action. The suffragists held an incredible 4000 meetings (30 per day) to support the bill. It got a majority of 167 - the biggest ever. It looked as if success was just around the corner.

BUT...Asquith the Prime Minister decided to change the Conciliation Bill. He could do this because he was the most powerful politician in Parliament, could influence what Bills passed and what Bills didn't.

Asquith changed the Conciliation Bill so that it gave **all** men the vote and **ADDED** a section to it to allow some women the vote. (this was rather than a Bill which dealt with votes for women separate to men).

The problem was that most Members of Parliament (MPs) wanted **SOME** men to have the vote only, this meant they would not support a bill to allow **ALL** men the vote. Unfortunately because votes for women was tied to **ALL** men getting the vote, if MPs decided **NOT** to support the **ALL** men version of the Conciliation Bill it meant **NO WOMEN** got the vote.

Both suffragists and suffragettes were understandably furious.

The suffragist response

The suffragists' response was to lead a group to see the Prime Minister to persuade him to change his mind. They also decided to support the Labour Party at the next election, since it was the only party completely committed to votes for women; they organised a peaceful pilgrimage from Carlisle to London involving thousands of suffragists. They offered free membership to working women.

The suffragette response

the suffragette response was to increase their campaign of violence (although usually violence against property not people). They smashed windows, set fire to post boxes, bombed churches and damaged cricket pitches and golf courses, telephone wires were cut, art galleries closed after suffragettes slashed valuable paintings. As a result, more and more suffragettes were sent to prison.

In prison, the suffragettes continued to protest by going on HUNGER STRIKE. The government responded by ordering the force feeding of protesters. The suffragettes made posters showing what force-feeding was like and comparing it to torture. Force feeding was brutal and degrading, and it won a good deal of public sympathy for the suffragettes.

In 1913, the government passed a new Law which allowed hunger strikers to leave prison, recover a little and then be put in prison again to finish their sentence. This got the nickname the 'Cat and Mouse' Act. The government decided to do this because they were worried that a Suffragette would die in prison as a result of hunger strike or the stress on the body of force - feeding. This would make the person who died a MARTYR (someone who dies for what they believe in) and therefore lend support to the cause.

The 1913 Derby

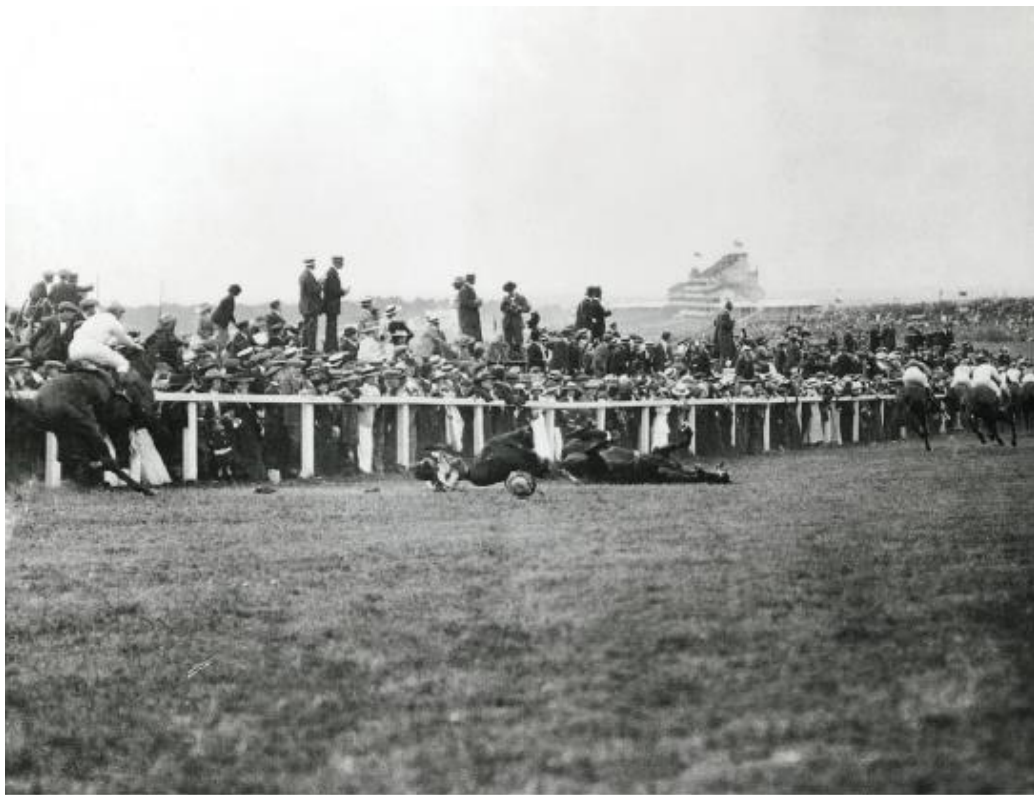
In June 1913 came the most famous protest of all: the death of Emily Davison.

Case study: the death of Emily Davison

In June 1913, the day of the world-famous horse race, the Derby, at Epsom race course. Emily Davison, an experienced suffragette campaigner fell under the horse of King George VI (who was watching at the time along with other members of the Royal Family. She had been in prison nine times as part of the suffragette campaign. She had set fire to post boxes and even a post office and had been on hunger strike while in prison. It is believed that she rushed out and tried to catch hold of one of the horses, but was killed in the process.

At the time, some people thought that Emily Davison had committed suicide, that she intended to kill herself, however, a different explanation later emerged. It appeared to be a demonstration that had gone terribly wrong. The King's horse, Anmer, was running in the race. Emily Davison thought it would be good publicity to attach a suffragette banner to it as it galloped by. It would enter the finishing straight literally flying the suffragette flag. She had been seen practising stopping horses in a lane near her home in Morpeth for some weeks previously. Sadly, when it came to the real event she misjudged the speed and power of the onrushing racehorses. She was hit and killed.

Her funeral, ten days later, was attended by thousands of suffragettes.



A newspaper photograph of the events that led to the death of Emily Davison on 5 June 1913. The *Daily Mail*'s headline in reporting the event was 'Day of Sensations at Epsom'.

The impact of the suffragettes

Negative -

There is little doubt that the suffragettes' increasing violence meant less support for votes for women from some who believed that legal methods

only should be used. By 1913, many suffragettes were in prison, and the Pankhursts were in exile in Paris.

They had also damaged their own cause, because they gave their opponents a reason for rejecting women's suffrage.

If MPs gave in to violence on this matter, then what hope would they have when the Irish protested violently for HOME RULE, or the dockers or mine workers rioted for higher wages?

Suffragettes had lost the goodwill of many of their leading supporters

From 1911 onwards, each time the issue was raised in Parliament there was a bigger majority against women's suffrage.

Positive +

The suffragettes had certainly raised the profile of the issue. Even more disturbing was that the suffragette leaders believed that the government had become more serious about passing a votes for women bill only after militancy had started.

Decades of suffragist campaigning had achieved nothing but empty promises from MPs.

What impact did World War One have ?

However, the situation changed completely in August 1914 when the government declared war on Germany. Both suffragist and suffragette leaders called off their campaign and devoted all their energies to supporting the war effort. This war work would prove to have far-reaching consequences for women.

How far did women contribute to the war effort?

As soon as the war broke out in 1914, both the suffragists and the suffragettes suspended their campaigns for the vote. The suffragists worked to persuade the men of Britain to join the army, suffragettes staged a huge demonstration demanding that women be allowed to work in munitions factories, all suffragettes were released from prison.

Another group, put different pressure on men to 'join up'. The Order of the White Feather encouraged women to give white feathers to young men not in the armed forces. The white feather was a symbol of a coward.

The Mothers' Union published posters urging mothers to get their sons to join up.

Women members of the Active Service League took an oath to promise to encourage young men to join up.

From an early stage in the war, British industry began to suffer a desperate shortage of labour. By early 1916, Britain had up to 2 million workers fewer than were necessary to keep the country going.

In offices, women were soon employed in place of the male clerks who joined up, and by the end of the war half a million women had replaced men in office jobs. Government departments employed a further 200,000 female clerks.

In factories, progress was much slower. Opponents thought that women would not learn the necessary skills, feared trouble from the unions and believed that women could be paid less and that this would be a threat to men's wages. Most unions did not even accept female members.

By 1916, the shortage of factory workers was desperate, especially in munitions (weapons) factories and increasing numbers of men, were needed at the front. For practical reasons, factory owners had little choice but to take on women workers.

The government set an example to private industry by employing women in its own munitions factories. By the end of the war, almost 800,000 women had taken up work in factories. The evidence soon showed that even with very little training they were as skilled as men.

Munitions work was tiring and dangerous. As the war went on, shifts got longer and longer. There were disastrous accidents, such as the explosion at Silvertown in the East End of London, in January 1917. In August 1916, medical reports publicised the effects on women of handling TNT explosives. These included breathing difficulties, rashes and yellowing of the skin (women explosives workers were nicknamed 'Canaries' because they got yellow skin as a result of jaundice). Most had digestion problems, some blood poisoning and even brain damage.

As the war continued more and more women stepped in to fill the gaps. Women gained access to a whole range of jobs that had previously been men only. They worked as bus conductors, postal workers and farm labourers, and delivered coal. Some 1.6 million extra women workers took part in war work. They became grave diggers, road layers, welders, steel workers and bus drivers.

There was a Women's Volunteer Police Service in most of the major cities. Some 260,000 women served in the Women's Land Army. In 1918, the first women's army unit (the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAAC) was founded, although members were never involved in front-line fighting. There were women nurses in medical stations near the front line.

The Salvation Army sent female volunteers as nurses, cooks and helpers to aid soldiers and civilians in France.

Women workers came from many different backgrounds. Some married women took on their husbands' jobs, but it was mostly unmarried women who took jobs in factories. The government called on middle-class families to do without their servants; with higher wages and better conditions in factories, many servants were quick to go into the factories.



An official war painting of women at work in a munitions factory.

Area of work	Women in 1914	Women in 1918	Women replacing men
Metals	170,000	594,000	195,000
Chemicals	40,000	104,000	35,000
Food and drink	196,000	235,000	60,000
Timber	44,000	79,000	23,000
Transport	18,000	117,000	42,000
Government	2,000	225,000	197,000

Why were some women given the vote in 1918?

The government realised that with so many soldiers serving abroad that if there was an election millions would be unable to vote unless the law was changed. (at the time citizens living outside Britain were not allowed to vote in elections). This was clearly unfair to soldiers who were serving abroad. They wanted to change the voting system to allow the 'hero' soldiers to vote.

Votes for Women supporters believed they could take advantage of these plans for changing the vote. Women had shown themselves to be capable and responsible under the strains of war. By 1916 women were even serving in the armed forces. There was no backlash against the votes for women movement now.

The House of Commons passed the Representation of the People Act in 1917 by a massive majority, (for every one who voted no, seven voted yes). It was given a rougher ride in the Lords, but even so was passed by 63 votes. It became law in 1918. As a result of the Act, all males aged over 21 gained the right to vote. Women over the age of 30, and women over 21 who were also householders or married to householders, also gained the vote - a total of about 9 million women.

This showed that old fears about women having the vote had not entirely disappeared. Although all men now had the vote, MPs were prepared to support votes only for older married women, or women who owned property and were therefore considered more responsible.

It was, of course, mainly the young, single working-class women who had done most of the war work and they were the ones who did not gain the vote.

Women could now also stand for Parliament and in 1919 Nancy Astor became the first woman MP to take her seat in the Commons. (The first woman MP to be elected was Countess Makiewicz, but as an Irish Republican supporter she refused to sit in a Parliament in London.)

Full voting rights for women were not granted until 1928.

There were three stages in the emancipation (freedom) of women. The first was the long campaign of propaganda and organisation at the centre of which, patient, unwearying and always hopeful, stood Dame Millicent Fawcett. The second was the campaign of the militants. The third was war.

Had there been no militancy and no war, the emancipation would have come, although more slowly. But without the faithful preparation of the ground over many years by Dame Millicent Fawcett and her colleagues, neither militancy nor the war could have produced the crop.

From the obituary to Millicent Fawcett in the *Manchester Guardian*,

6 August 1929.



A suffragette poster from 1909, protesting about force feeding.



An anti-suffragette poster, typical of the sort of attitude suffragettes faced.

Votes
for
women
1894-1918