

History Topic of the Month

Votes for Women

On the 3rd of November 2020, America voted on their next President. In December 2019, the UK held a General Election. We take it for granted everyone has an equal say in these elections. However, in both countries women only won the right to vote in the last 100 years. Before then, they had no say in who governed the countries they lived in.



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A woman on a suffragette parade in 1914 carries a banner saying "Help us to win the vote".

Why did women not have the vote?

In both the USA and the UK, before the 20th century, only men with property could vote. During the 19th century a series of reform bills gave more British men the right to vote (although millions of the poor still could not). In the USA, all white men were given the right to vote in 1856, and the 14th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870 gave all men the right to vote (although many states passed laws making it harder for non-white men to vote). The Constitution didn't mention women.



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National American Woman Suffrage Association campaigners in 1914.

The beginning of the US campaign

In 1848, American women's suffrage campaigner Elizabeth Cady Stanton organised a convention at Seneca Falls, which declared women should have equal rights. However, after the American Civil War, many in the movement couldn't agree on how to fight for it. Many women were angry that the 14th Amendment didn't guarantee women's rights. Others were worried attacking the Amendment might put the rights of non-White Americans at risk.

In 1890, the **National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)** was formed. By the 1910s, under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, the NAWSA was focused on getting individual states to change their laws to give women the vote. If three quarters of the states supported woman's suffrage, they would have enough votes in the Senate to amend the Constitution. Changing the Constitution would force every state to change its laws.

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In 1884 Belva Ann Lockwood, a lawyer, became the first woman to run for President. (The Constitution, while not allowing women to vote, didn't stop them from standing for election.) Although she got less than 1% of the vote, she spoke all over the country and helped make women's suffrage a national issue.

In 1872, Susan B. Anthony managed to vote in the US Presidential election. She was arrested, fined and sentenced to prison. After her trial, she said "my natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights are all alike ignored". In a similar case in 1867 in Britain, a shop-owner named Lily Maxwell had met the property requirements to vote. But her vote was ruled out by the Court of Appeal. Both cases won huge national attention.

Britain: The campaign goes national

In the 19th century, most British women's rights movements were local and small scale. This changed when the National Union of Women's Suffragette Societies (NUWSS) was founded in 1897 by Millicent Fawcett. For the first time, the movement had clear leadership. They held meetings and marches and published pamphlets to campaign for women's right to vote. By 1914 the NUWSS had over 100,000 members.

But many felt the government would only listen to actions not words. In 1903, Emmaline Pankhurst formed the Suffragettes. Many Suffragettes took more aggressive actions such as refusing to pay taxes, abusing MPs, chaining themselves to railings and smashing windows of businesses and government offices. The most radical used arson and bombs – the Chancellor David Lloyd George's new (and empty) house was bombed in 1910.



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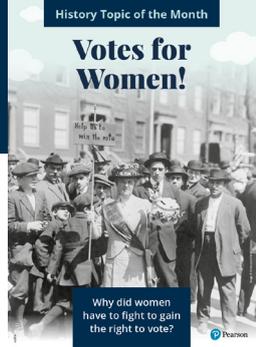
A statue of the English suffragist and union leader Millicent Fawcett, an early feminist campaigner for women's suffrage.

The government responded harshly to the Suffragettes, arresting hundreds. In prison, many protested by refusing to eat. The government ordered these women to be force-fed. A tube was forced down their throats and food poured down it. Public sympathy for the Suffragettes rose.

Both the NUWSS and the Suffragettes helped make the cause internationally famous. But many argued that the campaign should not use violence to make its points. Others thought peaceful protest had failed and left women with no option.

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In 1913 Emily Davison was killed when she tried to interrupt the Derby. Carrying suffragette flags, she ran onto the course and tried to grab the reins of a horse owned by George V. She was tragically killed, and her funeral was attended by 50,000 people. There was huge public backlash against the government and the cause won many new supporters.



Contributer: © Everett Collection/Shutterstock

National Women's Party demonstration in front of the White House in 1918. The banner protests President Wilson's failure to support women's suffrage.

USA: A national campaign

Local state campaigns had a number of successes. By 1913, nine Western states, including California, had given women the right to vote. The NASWA had been inspired by campaigns in Britain, holding large marches and rallies.

Alice Paul had been jailed in England and force-fed in prison. In 1913, she organised a march in Washington the day before the inauguration of Democratic President Woodrow Wilson, who was opposed to women's suffrage. Thousands of women marched. It was a huge success and helped make the issue national. For the first time a women's suffrage amendment to the constitution was debated in the House of Representatives.

Alice Paul formed the National Woman's Party (NWP). While NAWSA was the "respectable" side of the movement, the NWP made dramatic protests inspired by the Suffragettes. Protestors camped outside the White House, displaying signs like "How long must women wait for liberty?". This was the first ever protest to be held outside the White House.

There were tensions about race in the women's movement. Some campaigners wanted black and white campaigners segregated. Others were worried many potential supporters would be put off if they saw black people as part of the movement. In 1913, leading civil rights campaigner Ida B Wells was told that she and other black women could only join a group at the back of the march. Wells refused and took her rightful place at the front of the Illinois delegation. No one asked her to move.

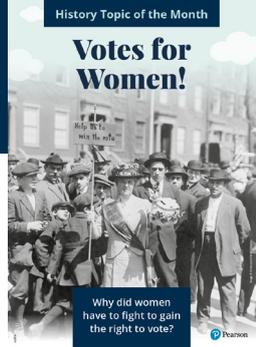


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A 1990's US stamp honouring Ida B Wells, one of the greatest campaigners for civil rights in American history.

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Why did women have to fight to gain the right to vote?

The impact of the war

The First World War broke out in 1914. In Britain, the NUWSS and the Suffragettes supported the war. The Government released many women from prison. With the men fighting on the front, millions of women started working in factories, farms, hospitals, the armed services and thousands of other businesses. By 1918, 80% of all weapons in Britain were made by women.



Contributer: © Everett Collection/Shutterstock

Women making Browning machine guns during WW1. 1918-19.

When the US joined the war in 1917, the same thing happened: as men left for the front, women started working in businesses like steel mills and oil refineries. The NAWSA supported the war. The NWP didn't – Jeanette Rankin, the first woman elected to congress, voted against it. Many NWP members (including Alice Paul) were arrested. In prison they were force-fed – an action that, just like in the UK, made the US public more sympathetic towards their cause.

In both the UK and US, women had become vital for the war effort and the economy, earning wages and keeping businesses running. Public opinion increasingly supported the idea of giving women the vote.

Victory at last?

In the UK, the Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918. This gave the vote to all men over the age of 21 and all women over the age of 30 who owned property or were married to men with property. Eight million women now had the vote – but millions did not, many of them women who had worked in the factories. In November 1918, women could stand for parliament. Nancy Astor became the first woman to sit in Parliament.

However, many women lost their jobs once the men returned. It wasn't until 1928 that the Equal Franchise Act gave the vote to all men and women over the age of 21. Five million more women gained the vote.

In the US, in 1919 the 19th Amendment of the Constitution was passed. It guaranteed the rights of women to vote. Carrie Chapman Catt said "thousands [of women] gave years of their lives" to get women recognised by the Constitution.



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A statue in Plymouth of Nancy Astor, the first woman to sit in the House of Commons as an MP.



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Problem solved?

Despite winning the right to vote, women still had many issues to campaign on. In many other areas – from employment rights to marriage rights – women were still unequal to men. The campaign to protect and grow the rights of women in both the UK and the USA continues today.

The fight to give women the vote was international. New Zealand had been the first country to give women the vote, in 1893. Many countries gave women the vote after the First World War – but many others did not. France gave women the vote in 1944, Mexico in 1953, Switzerland in 1971 and Saudi Arabia became the last country to give (limited) voting rights to women in 2015.

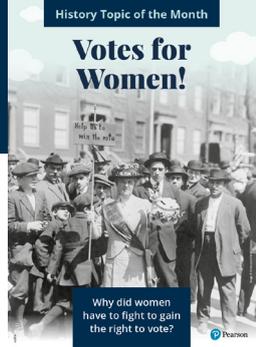
Discussion points

- How would you feel if you didn't have a say in what happened to you? How would that make you feel?
- Why do you think so many people were against women having the vote?
- Why do you think people found it hard to agree on the best tactics to win the right to vote?
- The UK and US governments thought the public reaction would have been even worse if a woman had starved to death in prison. Do you think they were right? Why?
- Which method do you think worked best to win the right to vote? Was it the peaceful campaign, or was it the more radical methods used by the Suffragettes and Alice Paul? Are actions more convincing than arguments?
- Why do you think Emily Davison's death was so shocking to people?
- The war – and women working – completely changed some people's attitudes to women's right to vote. Why do you think this is?
- What else can you find out about Ida B Wells and her long campaign for civil rights?
- What can you find out about other struggles women have had to gain equal rights to men?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources has a degree in History. He created this worksheet using various sources including Pearson's Key Stage 3 textbook *Exploring History Book 3* and the websites included in our reading

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Why did women have to fight to gain the right to vote?

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Reading list



Books

Rise Up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes by Diane Atkinson (Feb 2018)

Deeds Not Words by Helen Pankhurst (Feb 2018)

Why They Marched: Untold Stories of the Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote by Susan Ware (Nov 2020)

The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote by Elaine Weiss (Mar 2019)

Votes for Women!: American Suffragists and the Battle for the Ballot by Winifred Conkling (Jan 2020)

Exploring History Book 3 by Rosemary Darryl and Rob Bircher, (2017)

Articles

[Women's Suffrage](#)

[A Century after Women's Suffrage, the Fight for Equality isn't over](#)

[The Complex History of the Women's Suffrage Movement](#)

[Women's Suffrage Timeline](#)

[NUWSS Pamphlets](#)

[Women's Suffrage "The First Humble Beginnings of an agitation..." Helen Taylor, 1866](#)



Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.



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Women's Suffrage hikers who took part in the walk from New York City to Washington, D.C. to join the National American Woman Suffrage Association parade of March 3, 1913.