# Women's right to vote

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from the Ancien Régime to the modern period is characterized by the gradual affirmation of a society of citizens, which supplanted the society of orders and divine right monarchies. In the representative governments that gradually emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century, the general will was expressed through the voting of the electoral body. However, for a long time women were excluded from citizenship by means of arguments which reveal a hierarchical vision of gender relations. Women wanted to participate in matters of state, notably in creating the laws to which they had previously only been subject. Some of them created associations and, soon thereafter, women's suffrage movements on both the national and international level. Decades of struggle and lobbying led, in the twentieth century, to women's right to vote in different European states, at a pace that varied depending on the national political context.

The concept of citizenship was based on notions of individual liberty and equality developed during the eighteenth century, and marked a break with the representation of societies founded on so-called natural inequalities. Both republican and liberal conceptions of citizenship were based on the fiction of the political subject's independence (economic, personal) and autonomy (intellectual). However, theorists of civil society, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)—who provided a theoretical basis for the representation of the masculine and feminine spheres—attributed these qualities to men and confined women to the domestic sphere, which was simultaneously thought of as being opposed to and subordinate to the public sphere. This gendered division at the foundation of modern democracies served for a long time as a justification for excluding women from citizenship.

For instance, after the French Revolution, which granted women civil equality but refused to give them political rights, most thinkers in Europe continued to deny women the right and the aptitude to vote. For the theorists of early liberalism, such as the Scottish reformer James Mill (1773-1836), women were represented by the men of their family—fathers, brothers, or husbands—a fact that reflected the census-based suffrage of the Restoration and July Monarchy by taking into consideration the fortune they provided. Yet for defenders of women's right to vote, including James's son John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), it was impossible for one sex to represent the interests of the other, just as it was impossible for one social class to defend the interests of another. The opponents of women's suffrage also put forward arguments based on the fact that women did not bear arms, a usual criterion for access to citizenship. The German feminist Hedwig Dohm (1831-1919) retorted that while men risked their lives for their country on the battlefield, women did the same each time they bore a child. Most anti-suffragists, who were convinced of the existence of "natural" boundaries between the aptitudes of the two sexes, thought that women would lose the qualities specific to them if they exercised the right to vote. Extending the rights and obligations of the citizen to women would thus threaten the proper functioning of the family, and ultimately of the state.

While the organization of suffrage movements came late, voices spoke out as early as the French Revolution for including women in citizenship rights: after the French mathematician and philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) came Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) and her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791), the English woman of letters Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), and the Prussian civil servant Theodor G. von Hippel (1741-1796). Over the course of the nineteenth century, during debates regarding the reform of the electoral system such as in England in 1832 and 1867, women took the notion of political representation at its word, and requested that parliaments and political parties give them the right to vote so that their interests would be effectively represented. Women participated in the People's Spring, which shook the majority of European states in 1848, and demanded true universal suffrage, not the one declared as such by the Second Republic in France, which established an exclusive democracy where only men aged 21 or over were concerned. Moreover, once the revolution was crushed and order restored (in Prussia, Saxony, Austria, etc.), laws concerning associations and the press became stricter specifically with regard to women.

As rulers remained deaf to their demands, women themselves organized for their cause, and beginning in the 1860s formed regional and later national suffrage associations. After the creation of a federation in the United States in 1890, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was created in Great Britain in 1897, the Deutscher Verein für Frauenstimmrecht in Germany in 1902, and l'Union française pour le suffrage des femmes in France in 1909. These organizations were members of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, founded in Berlin in 1904, which presented itself as a human rights movement.

The consensus that united these movements, however, struggled to overcome the lines of division between them: often, class consciousness won out over that of gender, preventing women's associations from bourgeois and labour circles from coming together in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and France. Moreover, in multiethnic states such as the Danubian Monarchy, in which national minorities encountered one another, women mobilized separately. Finally, ideological and strategic considerations divided suffrage movements. Some female militants stressed

arguments of equality, while others insisted on the contributions to citizen life made by qualities considered to be specific to women. Most suffragists were legalists, and thus made use of petitions, peaceful demonstrations, or Republican banquets. Others however, such as English "suffragettes"—a minority that was disapproved of by the moderate majority—opted for civil disobedience and even violence to attract the public's attention to their demands. As for the female worker's movement, it organized an International Women's Day in 1911 at the initiative of the German Clara Zetkin (1857-1933). On the eve of the First World War, the women's suffrage movement was at its height, but also at an impasse.

While the right to vote had already been granted to the women of a number of US states since 1869, Finland was the first to take the step in 1906, through a reform that established a parliament elected by universal suffrage. It was followed by Norway in 1907 (with an electoral census until 1913), and then Denmark and Iceland in 1915. The First World War created the conditions that allowed the introduction of the right to vote in a number of countries: Russia in 1917 (following the revolution), Latvia, Estonia, Poland, the United Kingdom (notably with age restrictions until 1928), Germany, and Austria (following the overthrow of monarchies and the establishing of republics) in 1918, followed by the Netherlands and Luxembourg in 1920. In Spain in 1931, the newly-established Second Republic granted women the right to vote, despite the objections of the feminist representative Victoria Kent (1891-1987). Putting forward the role played by French women during the war as well as their specific qualities, the Consultative Assembly in Algiers granted women the right to vote in April 1944, in accordance with the wishes of General de Gaulle. Greece had to wait for the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy in order for suffrage to become universal in the Constitution of 1952. These cases emphasize the importance of national political contexts in the granting of the right to vote, as well as the role played by the two global conflicts. Yet more than a simple reward, women's right to vote was a conquest achieved by suffrage movements, who demanded it and prepared the way for decades.

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