

1.2 A wider franchise and debates over suffrage

The **suffrage** (also known as the **franchise**) is the ability or right to vote in public elections. In the present day all adults over the age of 18 possess this right, provided they have registered to vote. British and Irish citizens have reciprocal rights to vote in each other's countries. Commonwealth citizens are allowed to vote, as are UK nationals who have lived abroad for less than 15 years. The only categories of people who are excluded from taking part in parliamentary elections are:

- people under the age of 18
- EU citizens (apart from those from the Irish Republic), although they can vote in local elections
- Members of the House of Lords (on the grounds that they have a permanent voice as members of one of the two Houses of Parliament)
- prisoners (this exclusion is subject to a challenge from the European Court of Human Rights, but to date the government has ignored it)
- those convicted of a corrupt or illegal electoral practice, who are barred for 5 years
- people who are compulsorily detained in a psychiatric hospital.

Key term

Franchise/suffrage
the ability, or right, to vote in public elections.

Key milestones in the widening of the franchise

From the late Middle Ages to the early 19th century, no major reform of the electoral system occurred. There were numerous anomalies.

- There were two types of constituency: the counties and the boroughs (or towns), which varied considerably in size. In the counties, the right to vote was restricted to those who owned freehold property worth at least 40 shillings, or £2 in value. Voting qualifications in boroughs varied according to a range of local rules and traditions. In some boroughs all freemen were entitled to vote, whereas in others it depended on property ownership or the payment of some kind of local tax.
- The distribution of parliamentary seats had not kept pace with economic growth and population movement, so some tiny boroughs retained an historic right to return MPs. In many cases a wealthy patron effectively nominated the MP. Meanwhile, emerging industrial towns were yet to acquire representation of their own.
- Plural voting allowed wealthy men, who owned property in more than one constituency, to vote more than once.
- By custom, women were excluded from voting, although there had been occasional examples of women who owned property in their own right exercising the franchise.

This meant that the electorate totalled approximately 400,000 men by the early 19th century.

The Great Reform Act of 1832

The Great Reform Act of 1832 brought about the first major change, by:

- abolishing the separate representation of the most underpopulated 'rotten boroughs' and creating seats for urban areas, such as Manchester
- granting the vote to some new categories of people in the counties, including tenant farmers and smaller property holders

- creating a standard qualification for the franchise in the boroughs, so it now applied to all male householders living in properties who paid a yearly rental of £10 or more – i.e. the middle classes, who were growing in importance as a result of the industrial revolution.

The electorate increased to an estimated 650,000, equivalent to 5 per cent of the adult population.

The vote was extended further in a series of stages, as it became clear to the governing classes that gradual reform would not provoke violent revolution. They were persuaded that the cautious admission of more people to the franchise was the best way to avert such an upheaval.

However, property (owned or rented) remained the test for admission to the franchise throughout the Victorian era. It was not until 1918 that possession of the vote was treated as a citizen's right, and even then it was not granted to women on the same basis as men. Although class, gender and age remained obstacles to voting for centuries, ethnicity was never specified as grounds for exclusion from the franchise.

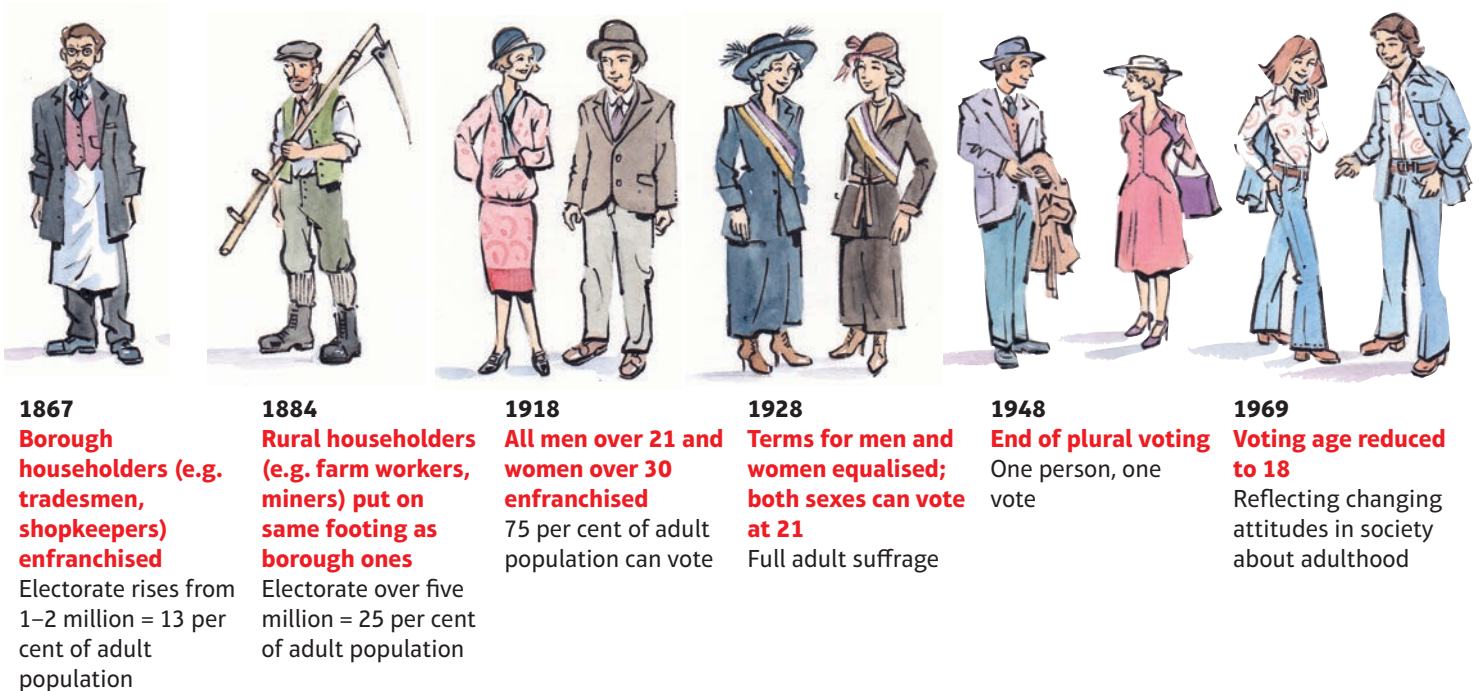


Figure 2.1: The development of the electoral system after the Great Reform Act of 1832

The work of the suffragists and suffragettes to extend the franchise

The exclusion of women from the franchise was largely unchallenged until the late 19th century. It was assumed that married women were represented by the votes cast by their husbands. Illogically, women were allowed to vote in local council elections but not in parliamentary elections, on the grounds that only men should have a say in issues of national and imperial importance.

The situation began to change with the establishment of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1897, under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. Members, known as 'suffragists', were mainly middle-class women who believed in non-violent methods of persuasion,

such as peaceful demonstrations, petitions and lobbying MPs. There was evidence that the climate of opinion was changing by the turn of the century, but for more radical campaigners progress was too slow. Emmeline Pankhurst, a former suffragist who was supported by her daughter Christabel, formed the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Dubbed 'suffragettes' by the popular press, the WSPU attracted both working- and middle-class support and used more militant tactics than the NUWSS. Its aim was to attract publicity and put pressure on parliament through attacks on well-known institutions and the disruption of political meetings and other prominent male-dominated public activities. For example, in 1913, suffragette Emily Davison threw herself under the king's horse at the Epsom Derby.

The suffragettes attracted hostility but also a degree of sympathy for their strength and endurance. Suffragettes who were imprisoned for their activities went on hunger strike, leading the authorities to resort to force-feeding. This gave the movement valuable publicity and depicted the liberal government of the day as unreasonably harsh. Nonetheless, the suffragettes showed moderation in suspending their campaigning on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.



Suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst in prison during the suffragette campaign for equal voting rights.

Female enfranchisement, admittedly on a limited basis, eventually came through the 1918 Representation of the People Act. The act was passed mainly due to growing pressure to give the vote to all working-class men, in recognition of the fact that many who had served in the armed forces were not householders – so they had no stake in the political system for which they were expected to lay down their lives. Women over the age of 30, who were householders or wives of householders, were granted the vote at the same time.

The effectiveness of the two female suffrage movements remains controversial. Some historians have argued that the quiet, undramatic work of the suffragists has not been recognised, and that the violent methods of the suffragettes alienated potential supporters. Another line of argument is that the willingness of women to serve in vital industries during the war, filling the gaps left by men on military service, persuaded the government of their fitness for the vote. However, the vast majority of female war workers were younger, unmarried women, who did not benefit directly from the 1918 legislation.

It seems likely that the suffragette movement was important because it kept the issue of voting rights on the agenda in the decade before the First World War. Politicians of all parties may have concluded in 1918 that, if they did not grant the vote to some women, the campaign would restart, in a political environment much more favourable to the idea of equality.

A case study of a current movement to extend the franchise: Votes at 16

The most ----- group still excluded from the franchise are 16 and 17 year olds. The Votes at 16 Coalition, formed in 2003, won an early success by securing a study of the issue by the Electoral Commission. Although the report came down on the side of no -----, a number of individual Liberal Democrat, Labour and SNP MPs kept the issue alive in the House of Commons. Labour MP Julie Morgan ----- a private member's bill in 2008, which ran out of parliamentary time.

An important ----- for the campaign came when 16 and 17 year olds were allowed to vote in the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, and the Scottish parliament voted the ----- year to allow them to take part in its own elections. At UK ----- by the time of the 2015 general election, all ----- parties except the Conservatives were in favour of extending the precedent. The Electoral Reform Society also supports votes at 16.



Figure 2.2: What are the arguments for and against votes at 16?