

# Women's Suffrage in Britain

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## Introduction

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing number of British women began mobilizing to challenge existing patriarchal gender hierarchies in politics, economics, and culture. Of course, gender inequalities in Britain remain today. So rather than talk about gender inequality as whole, it's helpful to limit discussion to just one central and essential component of these changes: the right of women to participate formally in the political decisions determining the nature and direction of their country, i.e. the right to vote.

1905 was not the most notable year in women's political rights. Nonetheless, it provides a vantage point from which to see the broader process of changing gender norms unfolding. Amid the expansion of the vote for men through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first country where women won the right to women at the national level was New Zealand in 1893, followed by Australia (1894-1902) and Norway (1913). It was not until the burst of democratic sentiment in the aftermath of World War I that a large shift was made, and women gained the right to vote in dozens of other countries. In many places, women did not gain the right to vote until much later. Today only Vatican City completely limits women's right to vote, though women's ability to participate in political governance varies by location.

## WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN BRITAIN

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### INTRODUCTION

### CONTEXT OF THE 1905 PETITION FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

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***Emmeline Pankhurst addressing a crowd***

While we sometimes present the trajectory of women's increasing self-governance as the gradual but inevitable triumph of something we call "progress," such narratives often focus primarily on the successes of women's suffrage movements. But to understand history, it's also important to look at the failures as well. For instance, in 1905, the British Parliament refused to consider a bill to give women the right to vote. In fact, this was only one of many such refusals—in Britain and elsewhere – that often get ignored in accounts that seek to tell a story that ends with the outcome we know in retrospect. However, at the time, many saw women voting not as the outcome of progress, but as hostile to progress. By focusing on the failure women's suffrage bill in 1905, we can see that history does not necessary or inevitably pull toward some known end, but its outcomes are contingent, depending on decisions that many people make within specific contexts.

### ***London Houses of Parliament***



## **Key Terms:**

Women's Suffrage

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The Enlightenment

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Industrialization

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Women's Social and  
Political Union

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Emmeline Pankhurst

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Women's  
Enfranchisement Bill of  
1905



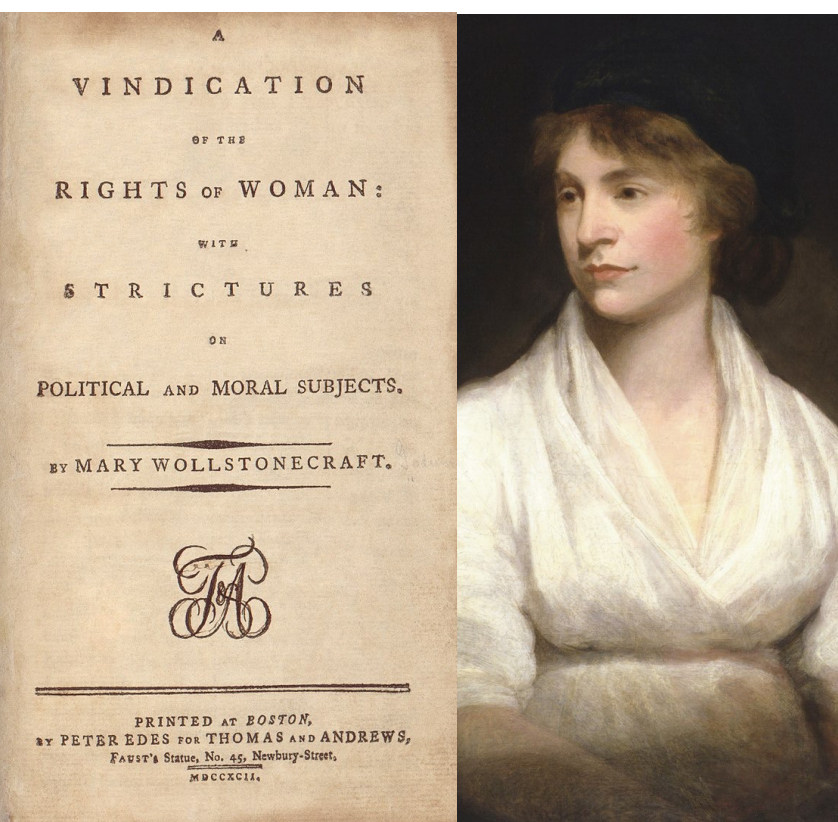
## Context of the 1905 Petition for Women's Suffrage

Critical to understanding the long-term trends that led to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century debates about women's suffrage is the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a period of debates among educated 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans, in which many intellectuals challenged standard political orthodoxies, including about the relationship between governments and the governed. Many participants in these debates advocated (to greater or lesser extents) that ordinary people should have the ability to participate in their own governance. In some cases, notably in France, monarchies were toppled as citizens demanded the ability, right, and/or duty to govern themselves. French revolutionaries thus called for democracy. While Britain retained its monarchy, more and more men gained voting rights in a series of so-called Reform Acts passed in 1832, 1867, and 1884. However, there remained property restrictions defining which men could vote.



**Portrait of Olympe de Gouges**

Already during the Enlightenment, some thinkers began advocating for women's suffrage as well. In France during the 1780s, the French Marquis de Condorcet argued that if democratic politics simply required the capability for reason and moral thinking, there was no basis to exclude women. In during the French Revolution, the political activist Olympe de Gouges demanded that the newly-approved *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* be rewritten to include women. Three years later in Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women should have equal political and economic rights to men in her work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). While such views initially gained some positive reception in Britain, they remained out of the mainstream and gradually Wollstonecraft's call for women's engagement in politics grew increasingly unpopular.



In addition to the trends stemming from the Enlightenment, a second development associated with modernity also shaped the long struggle for suffrage. Industrialization upended the exclusively-male guilds that had long overseen and regulated many occupations. In the new factory-based labor, women came to make up a substantial portion of the urban workforce. Mass migration to the cities (where factories were mostly situated) meant that members of the new so-called working class were also in close contact with one another, both on the factory floor and in working-class neighborhoods.

**Title page of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (far left); Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, 1797 (left)**



***Strike Committee of the Matchmaker's Union,  
which went on strike against the Bryant & May  
match factory in 1888 to demand better working  
conditions for women and girls***

As a result, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, worker organizations like trade unions emerged, which aimed to address serious problems emerging for industry workers, including poor wages and dangerous working conditions. People who led and joined such workers' organizations sought to improve working conditions through participation in the political process.



STRIKE COMMITTEE OF THE MATCHMAKERS' UNION.



***Police clashing with a march of  
striking women, 1871***

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such organizations became an integral part of pushes for the enfranchisement for poor and propertyless men. The working-class Chartist Movement of the 1830s-50s, which drew on this activism, pressured the government for a range of political reforms, including expanding the numbers of men who had the right to vote. Chartism was supported by millions, including working women. Police often clashed with mass demonstrations of such political activists. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the question of women's suffrage increased became part of these larger questions about debates about expanding voting rights more generally.

Initially, most supporters for women's suffrage were middle- and upper-class women, who had the time and resources to get involved in such political activism. Groups of and for women attending to the advancement of their legal status (in terms of property ownership, contractual rights, and marital rights) began in the 1850s. The philosopher Harriet Taylor (later Harriet Taylor Mill) advocacy for women's political rights mid-century helped spur the creation of Britain's first women's suffrage societies in the 1860s. These early activists had some successes. Their advocacy helped pass the 1869 the Municipal Franchise Act, which gave single women who owned property the right to vote in municipal and school board elections. Over the next twenty years, these organizations gained support through on-going public meetings and petitions.

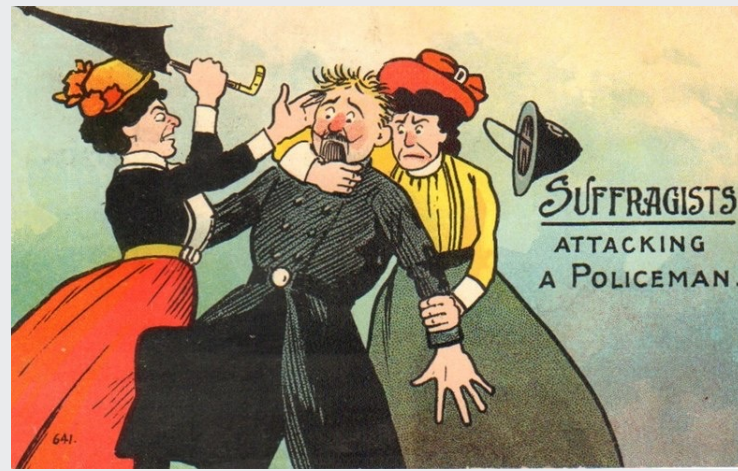
While retrospectively, we can see a general pattern toward women's increasing access to ballot boxes, these developments did not seem inevitable or self-evident at the time. In fact, they were very much contested. In 1870, the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill (drafted by Richard Pankhurst and introduced into Parliament by the reformer Jacob Bright), would have extended the women's franchise to all British elections, was debated in Parliament, but failed to garner sufficient political support. Repeated attempts to pass the bill through the 1870s also failed. Even the support of women's suffrage by Conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli, who served as prime minister from 1874 to 1880, could not overcome firmly entrenched opposition in both leading political parties. Meanwhile, the political agenda of the 1880s turned to other democratic reforms and the women's issue was sidelined until the turn of the century.



***Harriet Taylor Mill, c. 1830***



Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deeply rooted cultural beliefs about the supposedly inherent natures of men and women (held by both women and men) proved a key barrier to the women's suffrage movement. Most arguments in favor of women's suffrage were summarily dismissed by the people who held the most political power. In addition, as multiple groups of people sought increased political and legal rights, tensions between their agendas sometimes emerged. At times, middle-class women and working-class women found themselves at odds, particularly on the question of whether the vote should be extended only to those who owned property.



**Anti-Suffragette Postcard, c. 1905-1910**

The opposition itself lobbed a range of arguments against women's suffrage. Often, they took the stance that the inherent (and "obvious") differences between the sexes meant that women were incapable of the rationality needed for political participation. Many opponents also argued that married women would (and should) be subservient to their husbands, or that it was sufficient that their husbands represent them politically.

At times, suffrage movements attempted to leverage such patriarchal views to serve their own ends. For example, some argued that because male colonial subjects were considered incapable of voting and thus could not represent their wives, white British women should have the right to vote in order to speak on behalf of colonial women. In this way, middle-class British women occasionally leveraged patriarchal ideas, as well as the imperial project, the "civilizing mission," and their supposed racial superiority in order to appeal for political rights.

Not all arguments in favor of women's suffrage, of course, rested on the subjugation of others. Many supporters of women's suffrage responded to their opponents by pointing out the ability of women to vote was only correct in light of the democratic values espoused by British political leaders. Such arguments also met with resistance. Opponents argued that the right to vote was in fact predicated on an agreement—that the government represented the people and served the country, but that only those who "contributed" had a vested stake, and thereby "earned" a say.



Thus the fact that women did not contribute to military service, for instance, was used to explain why they should not participate in voting. Opponents of women's suffrage also argued that engaging in politics would lead women to neglect their roles as mothers of Britain's next generation or their contributions as workers to Britain's economic prosperity, and thus endanger the nation as a whole.

**Headquarters of the American National Anti-Suffrage Association, 1914**





***Bird's eye view of the city of  
London, c. 1905***

## **The Women's Enfranchisement Bill of 1905**

Despite setbacks through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century the push for women's suffrage continued. By that time, the focal point was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), established in 1903 under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst (the widow of Richard Pankhurst, mentioned earlier). The WSPU was dedicated to securing the vote at a national level. It was also a women's only group, although with active support from some men, particularly from the increasingly important Labour Party as well as from allied socialist and union groups.

Pankhurst's organizational and lobbying efforts, combined with the Parliamentary leadership of Kier Hardy, a Labour Minister of Parliament, led to the introduction of the Women's Enfranchisement Bill. It was set for debate on May 12, 1905, but opponents deliberately extended the debate on the previous bill, so there was no time to debate (much less vote) on the bill. Under Parliamentary rules, the window closed and the suffrage movement was shut out for another year. Pankhurst was furious and, together with over 300 supporters illegally stayed in the lobby of the House of Commons to protest.



Thereafter, some in Britain's women's suffrage movement (including the WSPU) became increasingly radical, employing demonstrations, acts of arson, and attacks on government property. In October, WSPU members disrupted a public meeting during the Parliamentary election campaign and were arrested, accused of assaulting police.

***Group of suffragettes standing  
outside Parliament, London***

As arrests became increasingly common, activists continued to seek ways to draw attention to their cause, even behind prison walls. Many members of the WSPU engaged in hunger strikes while in jail. When prison authorities resorted to force-feeding inmates through nasogastric tubes, the WSPU cited such tactics to illustrate the brutal tactics of state officials and their maltreatment of women. Such increasingly active and violent campaigns attracted great notoriety, but did not produce Parliamentary results.



***WSPU Hunger Strike Medal with a bar indicating the recipient was fed by force, 1909***



***Emmeline Pankhurst being arrested, June 1914 (left);  
Emmeline Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst in prison dress (right)***

With the start of World War I in 1914, Pankhurst and other leading women determined to put their efforts on hold for the duration of the war. Women's contribution to the war effort—in factories, hospitals, and otherwise—led many to recognize their valuable contributions to society. While some opponents of women's suffrage expected to return to their earlier roles in society following the end of the crisis, the political will for broad electoral reforms had grown, opening a chance for women's enfranchisement.

In 1918, Parliament passed the Representation of the People Act. The act removed residence and property restrictions on men over the age of 21 almost completely, nearly doubling the male franchise (from 5.2 million to 12.9 million). It also guaranteed the right the vote to women over the age of 30, who either met minimum residency or property qualifications, or whose husbands did. As a result, nearly 8.5 million British women had the opportunity to vote for Parliamentary representatives for the first time in 1920. In 1928, the Representation of the People Act gave suffrage to another five million women by removing all qualifications not also applied to men.<sup>7</sup>



## Conclusion

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The neglected Parliamentary vote of 1905 in Britain may seem unremarkable in the long run. After all, the first Parliamentary vote on some form of women's voting rights in local elections had happened over forty years earlier, and women wouldn't gain the right to vote in national elections until over a decade later. Yet if we were to focus only on the start and end dates, we would skip over the efforts of thousands of women (and some men) that had unfolded over decades. Moreover, without these efforts, there may never have been an 'end date'—a day of triumph for this campaign—without the many unremarkable dates along the way... the days on which "nothing" happened, the days on which only the minutest developments occurred.

The history of women's enfranchisement in Britain illustrates the pitfalls of overemphasizing specific turning points. This is particularly true in light of the entanglement between the suffrage movement and the broader trends of modernity it was a part of. The context—ongoing debates about political inclusion; industrialization; workers movements; and even empire—not only shaped the changing social, economic, and legal status of women, but the drive for women's rights itself, and even how these rights were argued for or against.

Despite its failure, then, the Parliamentary Bill of 1905 is significant. Of course, the proposal drew on the earlier efforts of those seeking political rights and equality. Its failure also spurred the radicalization of the WSPU and the women's suffrage movement writ large. But for historians, a close analysis of the ways it was debated in the moment (provided among your primary sources for this lesson), also illustrates the relationship between this fight, and the broader political, economic, and social currents unfolding across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Moreover, thinking across our case-studies in this module, we can also see aspects of the debate about women's suffrage in Britain reflected in similar debates taking place at the same time elsewhere. Much of the study of history is understanding and articulating processes and dynamics across time, as well as connections and correlations across space. The Women's Enfranchisement Bill of 1905 offers us an opportunity to practice both of these skills.

***Emmeline Pankhurst at a  
meeting of the WSPU,  
1906***





# Further Reading

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# Image Citations:

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Women Selling 'Votes for Women' in the street, July 1908, The Women's Library Collection, LSE Library, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:27Votes\\_for\\_Women%27\\_sellers,\\_1908.\\_\(22680013228\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:27Votes_for_Women%27_sellers,_1908._(22680013228).jpg)

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Mrs. Pankhurst Addressing a By-Election Crowd, from Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story, New York: Heart's International Library, 1914, Public Domain, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34856/34856-h/34856-h.htm>

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John Opie, Mary Wollstonecraft, c. 1797, National Portrait Gallery, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mary\\_Wollstonecraft\\_by\\_John\\_Opie\\_\(c.\\_1797\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_Wollstonecraft_by_John_Opie_(c._1797).jpg)

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Strike committee of the Matchmaker's Union, CC: BY-SA 4.0, Wellcome Images, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strike\\_committee\\_of\\_the\\_Matchmaker%27s\\_Union\\_Wellcome\\_L0010182.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strike_committee_of_the_Matchmaker%27s_Union_Wellcome_L0010182.jpg)

Cartoon showing police brutality against the match makers' demonstration, The Day's Doings, Saturday May 6, 1871, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Days\\_Doings\\_-\\_Saturday\\_6\\_May\\_1871.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Days_Doings_-_Saturday_6_May_1871.jpg)

Miniature portrait of Harriet Taylor, c. 1830, CC: BY: SA, Public Domain, LSE Library, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harriet\\_Taylor,\\_c1830\\_\(6882958014\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harriet_Taylor,_c1830_(6882958014).jpg)

## Page 5:

Postcard: Suffragists attacking a policeman, c. 1905-1910, Ann Lewis Women's Suffrage Collection, <https://lewissuffragecollection.omeka.net/items/show/2114>

National Anti-Suffrage Association, Harris & Ewing, Photographer, 1914, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.86115/>

## Page 6:

Bird's Eye View City of London, c. 1905, Postcard, Valentine's Series, Great Britain, CC: BY-SA 2.0, pellethepoet, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pellethepoet/24028481238>

Group of suffragettes standing outside Parliament, London, c. 1910, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a45273/>

## Page 7:

Mabel Cappers WSPU Hunger Strike Medal with Fed by Force Bar, September 1909, CC: BY-SA 3.0, Johnny Cyprus, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WSPU\\_Hunger\\_Strike\\_Medal.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WSPU_Hunger_Strike_Medal.jpg)

Mrs. Pankhurst being carried by a policeman, as two other men stride along beside, during her arrest, Underwood & Underwood, photographer, 1910, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D. C., Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c33006/>

Mrs. Pankhurst and Miss Christabel Pankhurst in Prison Dress, from Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story, New York: Heart's International Library, 1914, Public Domain, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34856/34856-h/34856-h.htm>

## Page 8:

Women's Social and Political Union meeting, 1906, with Flora Drummond, Christabel Pankhurst, Annie Kenney, Emmeline Pankhurst, Charlotte Despart, and two others, LSE Library, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meeting\\_of\\_Women%27s\\_Social\\_and\\_Political\\_Union\\_\(WSPU\)\\_leaders,\\_c.1906\\_-\\_c.1907.\\_\(22755473290\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meeting_of_Women%27s_Social_and_Political_Union_(WSPU)_leaders,_c.1906_-_c.1907._(22755473290).jpg)