

Why did Democracy Develop in Britain?

Pressure Groups

One of the motives historians believe had some sort of effect on the extension of the Franchise is the Pressure Groups which existed at the time. The pressure groups of the time prior to the 1867 Reform Act, such as the Reform Union and The Reform League, were responsible for organising mass demonstrations, such as 100,000 people in Glasgow and the riots in Hyde Park 1866, in an attempt to gain the attention of the people they wished to grant them the vote. Other historians, however, claim that these pressure groups had no influence over whether or not the Government implemented reform pointing out that the conditions of the 1867 Reform act went beyond the demands of the Pressure groups leaders themselves. Later pressure groups such as the Trade Unions and the suffragettes, who used militant methods in their campaign for suffrage, did have some influence over politicians and the changes that occurred. It is fair to say that the early pressure groups had very little influence over the Government's decision to introduce reforms however the later pressure groups were influential in encouraging further reform and the extension of the franchise.

Changing attitudes to Working Classes

Another motive that is credited with being a factor that influenced the reforms and the extension of the Franchise was the changing attitudes of the upper classes toward the lower classes. The opinions of the upper classes towards the poor began to change progressively during the campaign for the extension of the franchise. It gradually became clear to the upper classes that the lower classes had become more respectable and better educated. An example of this was the skilled workers in Britain's cities; known as "Artisans", who had become more educated and altogether more respectable. These people had attended night schools, taken active interests in Local politics and had improved their living standards. This helped change the upper classes' opinions showing them that the lower classes were good for more than simply working for them. A prime example of the lower classes impressing the wealthy was when they refused to work with cotton from Southern America, during the American civil war, as they actively promoted slavery. These sort of actions convinced many politicians and upper class people that many of the lower classes were educationally and morally worthy of having the vote. A further example of these changing opinions was the belief of Gladstone that people in rural areas were skilled with good morals and should be given the vote. The changing attitudes of the upper classes towards the lower classes were an important development that obviously was a contributing factor in the extension of the franchise. The upper classes' view of the lower classes was vital if they were to attain the vote as they were the people in the position to grant them suffrage. By the upper class changing their view, that the lower classes were only fit for working, and recognising their qualities and morality they were able to acknowledge that these people were responsible enough to be given an influence in how the country was run.

Effects of Industrial revolution

The industrial revolution is considered by many historians to be a major motive behind the extension of the franchise. The industrial revolution was a major event which changed where people lived, how and where they worked and how they viewed their positions within Britain's changing society. One of the main results of the industrial revolution was the change in where people lived. Due to the improvement in agricultural methods and technology the majority of the British public, who had previously lived in rural areas, were forced to move into cities in search of work. This vast movement of rural citizens, known as the Highland clearances in Scotland, led to urbanisation where most lived in cities. This shift in the population also led to the decline in power of the landed aristocracy and an increasing influence of those who had made money from the factories in the new towns and big cities. This shift in power meant that this new wealthy middle class had an argument that since they were creating money for the country they should be granted the vote and an influence in who controlled the country. The Industrial Revolution can be considered a significant reason for the extension of the franchise as the lower classes had become a vital part of British society and couldn't be ignored, in terms of suffrage, by those in power any longer.

Growth of Information

Another motive put forward by historians in terms of the extension of the franchise was the growth in access to information. This new access to information was largely down to the growth of the railway system that began to appear in Britain. The railway provided people throughout Britain quick, up to date and important information in the form of cheap daily newspapers. The growth in access to information ended people's ignorance to politics. The spread of these cheap newspapers gave the British public political information and, for the first time, an insight into the different policies of the different parties. Also the development of the new printing presses and libraries continued the public were exposed to even more information regarding the politics of the country. On top of this the education of the public began to improve, after the 1872 Education act, which meant that more people were able to understand more of what was happening with British politics. This improved intelligence of the nation and better access to information acted as an important motive for reform as ignoring this more intellectually talented nation could have led to serious protest and potential revolution if it wasn't altered.

Political Advantage

Yet another factor considered by historians in the extension of the franchise is the political advantage that came with giving the lower classes the vote. The Conservatives aimed to steal the policy of the Liberals and give the vote to the public. This became known as the Tories trying to steal the Whigs "clothes". The Conservatives hoped that by giving the vote to those who didn't have it they would vote for the party who gave them suffrage in the next election. The Conservatives were desperate for votes after being out of power for twenty years and were desperate to win the next election. Under the leadership of Benjamin Disraeli the conservatives looked to take advantage of the Liberals collapse over

electoral reform. The Conservative party stole the Liberals "clothes" in 1867 and ruined their chances of winning support of the working class men. Political advantage was a huge factor in the extension of the Franchise as it effectively gave the party who granted suffrage to the lower classes the support of a significant percentage of the voting population and ensured their status as a major political force whilst also, as they thought, acting as a shield against the Socialist Labour Party and their growing popularity among the working classes.

World War One

Another and perhaps the most important motivation in extending the franchise was world war one. In the aftermath of the war politicians became concerned and looked to enfranchise more men. They wished to do this as many men had lost the residency requirements, as they were forced to move home during the war, which were previously demanded in order to vote prior to the war. The politicians recognised that it wasn't right that men who had risked their lives during the war, for their country, should return home and find that they had lost their right to vote. Further more the nature of the relationship between the government and the men in Britain had changed after 1916 when they introduced conscription that forced men to join the army or do work of national importance. Woman had also proved their worth to the country in the war carrying out the jobs left by the men who had gone abroad to fight in the armed forces. These events meant that the Government could no longer ignore the issue of suffrage. The Government were forced to realise that they couldn't ignore the men they had forced to fight and the woman had proved themselves capable and intelligent citizens when called upon the vote any longer. The 1918 Representation Act followed this and granted all men 21 or over the vote and woman over the age of 30. This was followed up by the passing of the 1928 Representation of the People Act which put woman on the same democratic rights as men. The First World War was definitely and perhaps the most influential factor in the extension of the franchise. It gave the British public to show the Government that they were worthy of the vote and put them in a moral and political situation where they had no option but to grant them it.

How Democratic was Britain by 19**

Increasing the number of people able to vote.

Pre 1832	Only upper class land owning males could vote, about 4.16% of the population.
1832	Middle class males added to the voters roll, still property based, about 7% could vote.
1867	Skilled working class males in the cities get the vote, still property based, about 16% could vote.
1884	1867 Act extended to rural workers under the same conditions, about 29% of the population can now vote, still only males.
1918	All men over 21 get the vote and women over 30. No property condition. About 74% of the population can now vote.
1928	Women get the vote on the same conditions as men, over 21. About 97% of people can now vote.

1969 Voting age dropped to 18.

Redistribution of seats

Pre 1832 Most of the seats in the House of Commons were rural, landowner controlled.

1832 Some redistribution to reflect population shifts to cities, but still largely rural.

1867 Further redistribution reflects the trend to urbanization.

1885 Principle of single M.P. constituencies adopted, as well as the idea of largely speaking equal sizes of population in each and 18 new seats created. Distinction between Borough and County seats abolished.

Public Voting

1872 Ballot Act; Voting to be secret therefore less intimidation.

Ability to stand as an M.P.

Pre 1858 Requirement for landed estate worth 610 pounds to be a County M.P. 300 pounds in boroughs.

1911 M.P.s to be paid.

Corruption.

1883 Amount of money spent on an election limited and controlled.

Elections

1911 Elections reduced from within every seven years to every five years

Power of the House of Lords

Pre 1911 The unelected House of Lords could throw out any legislation it did not like.

1911 The power of the House of Lords reduced to delaying Bills only.

Issues outstanding

Plural voting still allowed till after World War 2.

The Monarch still has to give Royal assent. In theory a refusal could stop an Act becoming law.