

Why did Women get the Vote in 1918?

Women's contribution to the war

It is true that women's war work was important to Britain's eventual victory in World War 1. As casualty rates increased on the battlefield and conscription was introduced to swell the ranks, women were needed to fill the gaps on the Home Front. Industries that had previously excluded women now welcomed them. Women worked as conductors on trams and buses, as typists and secretaries and nearly 200,000 women found work in government departments. Thousand worked on farms, at the docks and even in the police. The biggest increase in female employment was in the previously male dominated engineering industry. Over 700,000 women were employed making munitions and facing considerable danger, not just from explosions but also from the chemicals they used.

A traditional view put forward by historians is that it was women's work during the war that led to the vote being granted in 1918 as a 'thank you.'

The war had showed their economic value and resulted in a fundamental change in attitudes towards women and their role. It also opened the eyes of men to their capabilities and revealed them as citizens in every sense. However, it was only seen as temporary. It gave women financial independence and improved their self respect Robert Roberts noted that *'It undoubtedly snapped strings that had bound them in so many ways to the Victorian age. Wives in the shop no longer talked about 'my boss' or 'my master'. Master had gone to war and Missus ruled the household, or if he worked close to her in a factory, turning out shell cases on a lathe and earning little more than she did herself. Housewives left their homes and immediate neighbourhood more frequently, and with money in their purses went foraging for goods even into the city shops, each trip being an exercise in self education. She discovered her own rights'*

The war had opened the 'Pandora's box' of letting women realise that they were in so many ways as rational as men and could function in the public sphere.

Once they had found this out, they were unlikely to 'unlearn' it after the war finished.

The historian Alasdair Gray has the view that the War was the most important influence in women gaining the vote, *"No one will ever know if the suffragettes or suffragists had the better tactics for winning the vote. For by August 1914 Britain was at war . . . millions women became a key part of the war effort making shells, bombs, guns and uniforms. In January 1918, women were rewarded when the wartime government passed the Representation of the people Act giving a vote to all women over 30 years of age."*

Evidence against the view.

However, other historians find such a view both naïve and simplistic, overlooking the pre -1914 changes of attitude and ignoring certain important points.

Firstly, after the War was over women were ejected from the men's work they had done during the war years and in both government policy and commercial advertising the idea that a woman's place was in the home was as strong as it had ever been.

Secondly, women who worked long hours and risked lives in munitions factories were mostly single, and in their late teens or early 20s. The women who were given the vote were "respectable" ladies, 30 or over, who were property owners or married to property owners. Therefore, it is clear that women's efforts in the war did not directly benefit or enfranchise those who had actually done their bit in the war, weakening the argument that women were granted the vote because of their War effort. As the historian Paul Bartley says, *"It would be naïve to believe that women received to vote solely for services rendered in the First World War. It must be remembered that only women over 30 were given the vote and the very women who had helped in the war effort - the young women of the munitions factories - were actually denied the vote."*

Thirdly, another argument against the simple view that war work made recognition of women's rights inevitable is to consider the French situation. During the war French women worked just as hard supporting the war effort but after the war there was no 'thank you' in recognition of their efforts.

Pleases note: Always remember that overall, the war was important to an extent in women getting the vote as it allowed women to prove their worth to a male chauvinistic society.

Government & Politics

The war caused a softer attitude and made it easier for Asquith to retreat from his entrenched position without loss of face as he was not now giving in to violence, but to a rational group of people helping the nation in an emergency. The war also changed the relationship between governors and people. It also showed a need for overall reform as politicians grew anxious to enfranchise more men, many of whom had lost their residency qualification for the right to vote as a result of moving home for war service.

Change of Prime Minister

During the war, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who was against votes for women, was replaced by David Lloyd George who was more willing to accept change. He also brought into the cabinet supporters of votes for women such as Balfour, Bonar Law, Arthur Henderson and Lord Robert Cecil. Therefore, there was more chance of reform due to a change of personnel at the top of Government.

Creation of a Coalition Government

The war also created a Coalition government which led to all the main political parties' leaders being part of the government. This offered the prospect of an all party agreement on women's suffrage putting to rest the old fear that one party might benefit from the enfranchisement

of women. Therefore, it could be argued that votes for women came about due to the political parties working together (for the first time) on the issue of women's suffrage.

Electoral reform required due to the war

The war resulted in the issue of voting returning. Politicians grew anxious to enfranchise more men, many of whom had lost their residency qualification for the right to vote as a result of moving home for war service. Before 1918 voters had to be established in a permanent address for one year. It was politically unacceptable to tell those ex-soldiers (they had forced to fight by conscription) they had lost their right to vote, so the rules had to change. To create change Asquith set up an all-party parliamentary committee in 1916 chaired by the speaker of the House of Commons to examine the issue of electoral reform (the so called Speakers Conference). It would have been wrong for politicians to leave women out of the changes that were going to occur in the franchise which led to the House of Commons granting the vote to women over 30 by a majority of 385 to 55 in June 1917. Therefore, it is clear that electoral reform was an issue politicians were analysing before the end of 1918 making the argument that women were granted the vote as a 'thank you' weak.

Suffrage Movements

The Suffrage movements supported the Government as the NUWSS almost immediately abandoned its political campaigning and the WSPU started a pro war propaganda campaign to encourage men to join the forces and for women to 'have the right to serve'. They had showed what women wanted and it can be argued that the work done by the suffrage movement before the war was important as it showed the reward that women expected after the war was over.

Fear of resurgence in militancy once the war was over

Some historians such, as Constance Rover, believe that it was the government's fear of militancy returning after the war that resulted in women being enfranchised. As she said, "*it was obvious that the campaign would recommence once the war was over if nothing was done to enfranchise women. It would have been extremely embarrassing and probably unpopular to imprison women who had played such an important part in the war effort.*"

Example of other countries

Britain giving women the vote was merely reflecting an international trend towards full democracy. Women in New Zealand, Australia, Finland, Denmark and Norway had already been enfranchised. Canada granted voted for women in 1917 as had 4 American States. It would cause political embarrassment in Britain (the mother of parliaments) if she had lagged behind granting votes for women. Therefore, it could be argued that the vote was granted to women in Britain as it would be embarrassing for countries in its Empire to have enfranchised women and for Britain not to have. Britain claimed to be the Defender of Democracy? Could this be true if 50% of the population could not vote while they were working for the war effort?

World War One was a Watershed

World War One was a watershed where the idea of old world and new occurred so that everything could now be negotiated after the war. In this climate people felt that nothing would ever be the same again and women voting did not seem such an alien idea.

Mood after the War

Britain was war weary and there was worry about social disorder and upheaval after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the government wanted to ensure that women would be unlikely to restart a campaign for suffrage after the war was over.

The war put the issue in perspective as before the war the vote was seen a major issue between women who were disenfranchised and an all male government and electorate, but after the death of 750,000 men possibly it did not seem so important to a war weary nation.