

Module 02: Should Women Vote? The Politics of Suffrage

Conclusion

Although European countries had granted women the right to vote by the middle of the twentieth century, the question of women's suffrage has become an important political issue in other areas of the world struggling for independence, self-determination, and democracy. Women in most Latin American countries received the right to vote during the political changes of the 1930s and 1940s, as populist regimes looked to broaden their bases of support. Nationalist movements throughout Africa and South Asia included women's suffrage among their liberal demands for the rights of citizenship and equality. In East Asia, women's suffrage came with military defeat, revolution, or independence from colonial authority. In the Middle East, a number of secular regimes granted women the right to vote in the 1960s. In several countries, however, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, governments continue to invoke religious justifications for denying women the right to vote.

In many countries, including the European nations surveyed in this module, the question has changed from, Should women vote? to, What is the significance of women voting? In many ways, women's suffrage seems to have had relatively little effect on politics. Opponents of suffrage argued that allowing women to vote would have threatened the pillars of society, such as the family, the church, or the political parties. While those institutions have undergone far-reaching changes in the last century, few would credibly argue that women's suffrage exerted much influence. On the other side of the debate, many proponents argued that granting women the right to vote would result in fundamental changes in political processes at home and abroad. Yet voting results indicate that women tend to vote along lines very similar to men, which suggests that women's suffrage has not brought about the changes desired. In the end, the argument that women deserved the right to vote because they should be treated as men's equals proved the most persuasive answer. Once enfranchised, women voted similarly to men and thus must share the credit (or blame) for the positive (and negative) consequences of citizenship in the modern world.

The most important impact of the women's suffrage campaign can then be found not in the seemingly straightforward question of voting, but rather in the changing roles and identities of women in the modern state. The suffrage campaign of the 1900s and 1910s helped lead the way for the "new women" of the interwar period

and for the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, each of which continued to redefine the relationship between gender and politics. Women heads of state in Great Britain, Israel, India, and Pakistan, women's resistance to authoritarian rule in Latin America, Afghanistan, and Iran, the mass mobilization of women on behalf of the revolutions in Russia, China, and Cuba, the women involved in nationalist and anti-colonialist struggles in South Asia and Africa, and the daily acts of non-conformity and self-assertion throughout the world all illustrate the continuing influence of the suffrage movement's insistence that women be treated as equals within the greater political community.