



All About women's suffrage

100 years of votes for

For women in the UK today, the right to vote might seem completely normal. However, it took a lot of campaigning by women (and men) over many years before it became a reality. A hundred years ago this week, some women in the UK were given the right to vote for the first time. It was a momentous occasion, but people campaigning for gender equality today say there is still much work to do.

How did it all begin?

For a long time, women had fewer rights than men. They couldn't own property or vote for their local Member of Parliament (MP), so didn't have any say over their lives. From the mid-19th century, women began to say this wasn't fair. In 1897, Millicent Fawcett decided something must be done.



Millicent Fawcett

Suffragists or suffragettes?

In the early 1900s, there were two main groups campaigning for women's suffrage, a term used to describe the right to vote. There were the "suffragists", who used peaceful methods, such as writing letters and starting petitions. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) were suffragists led by Millicent Fawcett. The other main group were the "suffragettes", who were determined to win the right to vote by any means. Their campaigning sometimes included illegal and violent acts, which attracted lots of attention. The leading suffragette group was called the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903.



WSPU leader
Emmeline
Pankhurst.

THEN



An early protest for the right to vote.



HOLLOWAY MEDAL

On 13 October 1908, 60,000 campaigners tried to rush into the House of Commons to draw attention to their cause. Although unsuccessful, Emmeline Pankhurst was awarded a medal by the WSPU for helping to organise it. The original medal is in Parliament's art collection.

Women in the House of Commons

First female MP

The first woman to be elected as an MP was Constance Markievicz (right) in 1918. However, for political reasons she did not take up her seat. The first female MP to take up her seat in the Commons was Nancy Astor the following year.



First female Prime Minister

The first female Prime Minister was Margaret Thatcher. First elected as an MP in 1959, she became Leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and Prime Minister in 1979.





women

Find out more about one of the biggest battles for gender equality.



Created in collaboration with the UK Parliament's Education Service. To learn more about the history of the women's suffrage movement, visit parliament.uk/teach

NOW



COLOURS OF PROTEST
Suffragettes wore purple for loyalty and dignity, white for purity and green for hope.

A 2018 protest demanding equal rights and opportunities for women.

Acts of Parliament

In 1914, the First World War broke out. As men left to fight, more than a million women entered the workforce and took on their jobs, such as working in factories. As a result of their contribution, and with pressure from campaigners, it became necessary to consider giving women the right to vote. On 6 February 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed by Parliament. This gave nearly all men (40% of whom could not vote before the war) and women over the age of 30 who owned property the right to vote for the first time. A separate Act of Parliament in 1918 – the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act – allowed women to become MPs for the first time. In 1928, the Equal Franchise Act gave equal voting rights to all women and men at the age of 21. The voting age was lowered to 18 in 1969, which is the voting age today.



During the First World War, women replaced men in the workplace.

What's the situation now?



In the UK, as a result of the 2017 general election, there are now 208 female MPs and 442 male MPs, meaning there are more female MPs than ever before. However, many people think that if we are to have true gender equality, then the House of Commons – the place where MPs debate political issues and propose new laws – should be equally balanced between men and women.

First black female MP

Diane Abbott was elected to the Commons in 1987, becoming the first black female MP. She has been an MP for 31 years and currently serves as the shadow home secretary in the Labour Party.



First female Speaker

In 1992, Betty Boothroyd became the first female Speaker of the House of Commons, a role that is more than 750 years old. The Speaker makes sure that debates in the Commons are fair.

