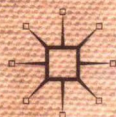


THE AFTERMATH *of* SUFFRAGE

*Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain,
1918–1945*



Edited by
JULIE V. GOTTLIEB
AND RICHARD TOYE



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Senior Lecturer in Modern History, University of Sheffield

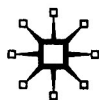
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Also by Julie V. Gottlieb

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in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century. What Difference Did the Vote Make? (co-edited with Esther Breitenbach, 2010) and *Happy Families? History and Family Policy* (2010). She is a convenor of History and Policy (www.historyandpolicy.org)

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Introduction

Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye

There was a momentous sense of achievement when the Representation of the People Act was passed in March 1918 by 385 to 55 in the House of Commons. Amongst other important provisions, the Act granted most women over thirty the right to vote. Of the entirely new elements introduced by the Act – the naval and military voter and the woman voter – the latter excited the most expectation and anxiety. It was reported that while there was never such an outwardly tame general election as that held on 14 December, 1918,

there was one section of electors to whom, however externally calm, the election must have brought a thrill. The women are said to have voted in crowds, in some London constituencies greatly outnumbering the men, and in their eagerness forming queues at the more populous polling stations, for all the world as though they were out for the impossible butter or meat before the Food Controller took us on hand.¹

This ravenous anticipation was dampened by frustration on the part of those still excluded from the franchise, and the women's rights campaigner Mary Macarthur pointed to the paradox that although 'the vote was conceded to women on the ground of their services in the war', the Act 'excluded the vast majority of women war-workers'.² Another ten years would pass before British women secured the vote on the same terms as men, under the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act (1928).

This, however, was not the end of the story, although it has sometimes been treated as such. In March 2011, during the British referendum campaign on the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV), a group of leading historians wrote to *The Times*. In explaining their opposition to AV, they referenced the 'long fight for suffrage [which] established the principle of one man or woman, one vote' and claimed that for 'the first time since 1928 and the granting of universal suffrage, we face the possibility that one person's casting ballot will be given greater weight than another'.³ Leaving

aside the merits of their argument about modern day voting reform, what was significant was the way these historians treated 1928 as a great historical end-point. This was misleading. In fact, plural voting for Westminster elections persisted for another twenty years, until the Representation of the People Act (1948) abolished the university constituencies and the right of property owners resident elsewhere to vote in both places. (The Act also did away with the remaining two-member seats, which allowed voters to split their preferences between parties.) Even then, plural voting in Northern Ireland for the Stormont parliament and for local government continued until abolished by legislation in 1968.⁴ And even today, plural voting for the City of London Corporation continues: indeed the business franchise there was *increased* in 2002.⁵ The 1928 settlement did not even solve permanently what it meant to be politically adult: 18–20 year-olds received the vote only in 1969, and there have been calls since then for enfranchisement at sixteen. Indeed, 16- and 17-year-olds will be able to vote in the referendum on Scottish independence scheduled for 2014.

The messy and partial nature of the post-World War I settlement becomes even clearer if we place the United Kingdom in the context of its Empire. New Zealand women secured the vote in the 1890s, and Australian ones (except for aboriginals!) soon followed. White women secured the vote in Kenya in the 1920s but black ones had to wait until independence in the 1960s. In the interwar years, some British women activists lent their support to calls for women's enfranchisement in India. The Government of India Act (1935) granted votes to women and men on the same terms but because a property qualification was involved only a small number of women actually benefitted.⁶ Full enfranchisement had to wait until independence. In other words, even in 1928, the idea of 'one man or woman, one vote' was not held as an immutable principle by the collectivity of Britain's lawmakers. It was a principle that was held to apply in certain important circumstances, but not irrespective of special interests and local conditions.

This book explores the aftermath of suffrage in Britain, keeping in mind the international dimension as well as the connections between gender, electoral law and political culture. We do not see either the 1918 or 1928 Acts as symbols of the termination of a heroic struggle but rather as important landmarks in an ongoing negotiation surrounding citizenship and the public sphere. Nor are we exclusively concerned with women. The 1918 Act was, of course, important for the fact that it granted some women the right to vote in parliamentary elections. But it was equally significant for enfranchising, for the first time, almost – but not quite – all adult men. (Due to residency requirements, only 93 per cent of the adult male population had the vote in 1921. Meanwhile, many who had the parliamentary vote were unable to vote in local elections.)⁷ It is hardly possible to account for the impact of these phenomena unless they are considered in parallel. Discussion of appropriate 'feminine' behaviour naturally had to

take into account what 'masculine' behaviour was thought to be, and vice versa. Legal equality in terms of voting rights by no means meant that politics lost its gender dimension. And gender discourse remained important even in fields such as imperial and foreign policy where one might not expect gender to have been at issue.⁸ Too often, the different literatures on men's and women's politics in this era have failed to engage with one another, but in recent years there have been encouraging signs that this is changing. Although most of the chapters in this book focus on women's politics, they nonetheless reflect an awareness of this need for dialogue. We do not claim that this volume fully achieves the sexual desegregation of modern British political history, but we do believe that it make a contribution towards it.

Equally, the gender politics of the inter-war years cannot be understood apart from the broader context of the period. World War I had left a complex legacy of (contested) state growth and redefinition of national and gender identities. Nicoletta Gullace has argued that the basis for citizenship was recast during the Great War as patriotism, not manhood.⁹ From a slightly different perspective, Mary Hilson has suggested that during the 1918 election politicians constructed women's experience of war 'only in terms of their relationships to men, not in terms of their independent experiences: as the heads of households, as consumers struggling with high food prices, or as workers'.¹⁰ After the war an increasingly active proto-welfare state, still committed nonetheless to certain forms of economic orthodoxy such as balanced budgets, was faced with large scale unemployment in traditional industries on the one hand, and the growth of new industries and associated social change on the other. The importance of religion in politics was declining, but there was still a (fragmented) non-conformist vote that was up for grabs as the Liberals struggled.¹¹ The Empire emerged from the war expanded in territorial extent but militarily overstretched and under challenge from nationalist movements. A relatively benign European outlook in the late 1920s was converted by 1933 to an undeniably threatening scenario: many observers foretold the imminent collapse of civilization.¹²

In party political terms, the Conservatives were dominant but not unchallenged, in an era which saw the first two (minority) Labour governments. The Liberals faced an all-but-unstoppable decline: the genuine multi-party politics of the 1920s was replaced after 1931 by a *de facto* Labour-Conservative two party system. (Ross McKibbin argues that what emerged after 1918 was 'a restored Edwardian politics, together with many of its mental habits and its rhetoric, but without the one thing – the progressive alliance – which gave it life and coherence'.)¹³ Changes in political culture and gender roles went hand in hand. Jon Lawrence suggests that politicians became increasingly keen to distance themselves from the rowdy and disruptive behaviour that had become a well established part of electoral ritual.¹⁴ The emergent revised ideas of what constituted political manliness did not just shape

arguments between the parties. Rather, ideas about gender were themselves in part the product of the inter-party rhetorical battle.

The relationship between political culture and the legislative framework of electoral politics was also mutually reflexive. The 1918 Act was not only about about a more equalized suffrage (and the extension of vote to servicemen), but also involved important changes to the distribution of parliamentary constituencies, alterations in residence requirements and in the definition of 'household', and changed rules on election expenses.

Given its complexities, it is understandable that the question of its impact on the fate of the parties has been controversial. The 'franchise factor' debate of the 1970s and 1980s centred on the question of how far the rise of the Labour Party could be explained by the expansion of the working-class electorate that the Act brought about. H.C.G. Matthew, Ross McKibbin and J.A. Kay argued that 'Not only was the new electorate divided by class in a way that increasingly excluded the Liberals, but it was less likely to respond to policies that demanded a comparatively high level of political intelligence.'¹⁵ In response, Peter Clarke cast doubt on the assumption that 'the pre-1914 electorate was significantly more open to reasoned argument because it was smaller and richer'. He also argued that 'Labour's electoral support was not socially distinct from that of the Liberal party' and that the Liberals had been successful at playing the new game of class politics prior to the war.¹⁶ Then, on the basis of a more sophisticated understanding of how one qualified to vote under the old electoral system, Duncan Tanner argued persuasively that 'there were no inherent sociological reasons why the newly enfranchised men should have voted solidly for Labour'. Furthermore: 'If they did so after 1918, itself a dubious proposition, then the explanation is to be found not in the simple fact of electoral reform, but in the altered political or social context.'¹⁷ In 1992 Michael Dawson introduced a new factor: the provisions of the Act in relation to election expenses. By restricting what could be spent, in what they thought was their own interests, the established parties succeeded in making it economical for Labour to fight many more seats, including unwinnable ones, with damaging consequences for the Liberals.¹⁸ As these factors affected electoral outcomes and the fates of the parties, so too they shifted the ground on which future elections would be fought.

Indeed, the 1918 Act changed significantly the ways in which parties campaigned and canvassed during elections. Stuart Ball has noted the impact on the Conservative Party of the shift away from an electoral system based on property tenure: 'Local associations during the 1920s [...] evolved from being relatively small groups of men supervising work based on electoral law into much larger popular congregations of both sexes with social, propaganda and campaigning functions.' (This in turn diminished the importance of the Primrose League, a voluntary body allied with the Tory party, which had previously been a key vehicle for such roles.)¹⁹ In the case

of Labour, changes in the party's constitution, combined with the effects of war including participation in the coalition government, intersected with the Act to produce a new form of constituency politics.²⁰ The advent of individual party membership created a new campaigning resource, but the new Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) also established a potential source of tension with the movement's more powerful trade union wing. Arguably, the Liberal Party's failure in these years was less the product of class-based electoral determinism than of its own inability to come to terms with these new realities as its rivals did (albeit not without difficulties of their own).

An important change over the last forty years, then, is that few historians now think that 'class politics' is a sufficient description of how parties structured their appeals.²¹ David Jarvis has shown how the Conservatives, in the new era of mass enfranchisement, did not simply target the working class as a whole, but tailored their message to suit different groups within it, including women.²² And although, from another perspective, 'high political' approaches remain popular, few historians would now be as confident as Maurice Cowling was in 1971 that there were only fifty or sixty politicians who 'mattered', and that backbench, party and public opinion could be left to one side for the purposes of analysis.²³ Philip Williamson – himself by no means unsympathetic to Cowling – reminds us that 'politicians are not just policy-makers, tacticians, and administrators. They are also public figures for whom speech-making and publication is a principal function, precisely because politics is a *public* activity'.²⁴ Party politics in the aftermath of suffrage era, moreover, was intrinsically connected to other forms of civil society activity.

Women's historians have tended to approach these issues from different angles. They have been interested in the period after suffrage almost as an afterword to the dramatic narrative of the great struggle and formidable movement, constitutional and militant, for women's suffrage. Historians of British feminism have developed a more nuanced interpretation of what happened to the feminist movement after the vote was won, offering important correctives to the initial impression that the movement lost its cause, its organising zeal, and its personnel and personalities after the First World War.²⁵ This revision of earlier impressions and prejudices has been facilitated by a newer interest in women's entry into politics in the post-war years.

The majority of the chapters in this volume concern women, both the adjustments they had to make as citizens, either as individuals or in a range of groups, and the way the formal political and party systems integrated their demands and sought to appeal to them. We are thus interpreting the nature of citizenship, both in terms of status and practice, and it will be useful to evoke Rose and Canning's definition: citizenship should be understood as 'a political status assigned to individuals by states, as a relation of belonging to specific communities, or as a set of practices that define the relationships between peoples and states and among peoples within communities.'²⁶ The

gendering of politics, political institutions and political culture, also needs to go beyond high and elite politics, and Thane and Breitenbach have reminded us that 'although representation in formal political institutions is a significant measure of women's exercise of the rights of citizenship, it is not the only means by which women can engage with politics and the state, nor the only means by which they can influence policy'.²⁷

In 2000 Pedersen remarked on the paucity of work on women in twentieth century British politics, noting that politics had dropped out of gender history in favour of cultural analyses that offered 'thick description' but sidestepped causal analysis and the study of change.²⁸ Since Pedersen's provocative thoughts on 'The Future of Feminist History', it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that it is just this approach that has burgeoned. British political history is being gendered, and gender historians are again thinking in terms of political processes. At the same time interest in inter-war politics and the application of new methodologies and theoretical perspectives have advanced the debates and moved us on considerably from empirically driven high politics. The collaboration represented by this collection is the bringing together of these aspects, and by so doing desegregating modern British political history, or at the very least suggesting the ways in which that can and should be done. In this process we can identify a number of leitmotifs in the experience, discourse, and representation of the aftermath of suffrage. What were the popular and personal responses to the achievement of suffrage? Was suffrage revolutionary or did it just feel that way?

Pugh has noted the gradualist and evolutionary nature of suffrage reforms in British history. Aside from annual parliaments, all the objectives of the Chartists were met by 1918, the Chartist movement 'serving as a reminder that an abrupt organisational decline cannot be taken as an adequate indication of failure, but merely represent a stage in the evolution of a movement'.²⁹ What this suggests then is that women, men, politicians and the Press may have expected revolutionary change with the advent of suffrage, but in keeping with British political traditions, this was to be evolutionary if not long-drawn out. Cowman has more recently also passed an optimistic verdict on women's post-enfranchisement achievements by focusing on their successful integration in party politics, even when this more often than not involved sex-segregated party structures, and on the presentation of party policy. Each party 'clearly believed that there was a collective "woman's vote" to be captured, and that their electoral success could well depend on securing this'.³⁰

In the first flush of excitement after the motion passed that women could stand as MPs, 17 did so in the 1918 General Election (on 25 October that year the House of Commons passed the motion that women could stand for Parliament), having only had three weeks to mount their campaigns. This would be a false start for women on the starting line of parliamentary