

Volume 21, Number 1, September 2018

Revision

The impact of women voters

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Consider the following question on the topic of the women being granted the franchise in 1918, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

To what extent were the actions of the suffragettes responsible for women gaining the vote in 1918?

Student answer with commentary

The Representation of the People Act of 1918 gave the vote to all adult males and women over the age of 30. As a result, women made up some 8 million of the 21 million electorate, and 10 years later, in 1928, they would gain the vote on the same terms as men with women over 21 being granted the franchise. There were a number of reasons why they were granted the vote, with many historians until recently arguing that it was as a token of gratitude for their war work, but this view has been challenged, with some arguing that the war actually delayed the vote. If this is the case then the actions of the various suffragist and suffragette groups, as well as a change in government attitude, were the key reasons why women were granted the vote.

The opening paragraph shows an awareness of the issues surrounding the granting of the vote to women in 1918. It also displays a sound factual understanding, referencing the two acts of 1918 and 1928. The answer is aware of the issues that need to be considered and the historiographical debate surrounding them and how it has changed.

The pre-war suffrage movement did much to prepare the ground for women's votes. This is made even more apparent when the situation in Britain is compared with that of France, where women, despite their wartime efforts, were not granted the vote as there had not been a pre-war suffrage movement. The actions of the suffragette movement, particularly their militant measures such as smashing windows, burning letter boxes, attacking MPs and chaining themselves to railings, had brought them national attention. It might be argued that such violence alienated many and actually delayed the granting of the vote, with opponents arguing that such behaviour showed they were irrational and unfit to vote. Similarly, even the government felt unable to grant the vote as they would be seen to be giving in to violence. However, violent action took place alongside more traditional methods such as petitioning parliament, lobbying MPs and demonstrating. They also tried to end the impasse between themselves and the Liberal government by supporting the Conciliation Bills and while negotiations continued the WSPU called a truce. It was the defeat of the bills that added to the sense of injustice. However, to argue that the violence which followed delayed the granting of the franchise is to misunderstand the actions. Peaceful methods had failed, but even the violence that was used was restrained and the attacks made were on property not on life, even if they were willing to sacrifice their own. It would be impossible to deny the success of these propagandist efforts. Their

magazine, *Votes for Women*, had a circulation of 40,000 by 1914, while their bravery and commitment won them sympathy, particularly the force-feeding which followed from their arrests and subsequent hunger strikes, and forced the government to pass the 'Cat and Mouse Act' to avoid creating martyrs. Similarly, the violence they suffered at meetings from male opponents or the police gained them further support, suggesting that the pre-war actions played a crucial role in at least preparing the ground for the granting of the vote.

The opening paragraph deals with the named factor first. This is a sensible approach as it ensures that sufficient time is given to the focus of the question. There is precise evidence to support the line of reasoning and the argument followed is placed in a wide context by comparing the situation with that of France. The discussion is balanced with the answer also considering the counter-argument that pre-war activities delayed the vote. However, the response does reach a supported judgement and argues convincingly that the actions were a propaganda success and again supports this with precise evidence and brings the argument back to the statement made at the start of the paragraph.

In 1918, when women were granted the vote, billboards announced 'The Nation Thanks the Women', suggesting that a grateful nation, overwhelmed particularly by the sacrifice of those who had worked in the munitions factories had been given the vote as a reward for their efforts. The war certainly changed the perceptions of some about women and their role in society. It is true that women were now accepted in the world of work and that this ultimately led to their involvement in politics. However, many working-class women were already working in munitions factories, it was really only middle-class women who saw a change in their role. War did change the nature of work done by many working-class women, who saw the opportunity to escape from domestic service and sweated labour. Many did take up jobs in the war industries, often working long hours and in dangerous conditions, with some 37% of those who worked in Woolwich Arsenal suffering from TNT poisoning. Moreover, women's suffrage movements had also shown their patriotism by suspending their activities during the war. Although Asquith stated in 1917 that 'How could we have carried on the war without them' and 'I find it impossible to withhold from women the power and the right of making their voices directly heard' following their contribution, such comments discount the work that had been put in by the pre-war suffrage campaign. It may even be argued that the war actually delayed the granting of the vote to women. Before the war broke out conciliatory gestures were being made by some influential MPs: Asquith himself received deputations from the NUWSS, John Simon came out in support and Lloyd George offered a place on his platform to suffrage speakers. There is also evidence that the Liberal party was exerting pressure on prospective MPs to support women's suffrage, while the leadership appeared willing to make it part of the party programme. There is obviously no guarantee that any of this would have come to fruition, but it would certainly not have been taking place without the pre-war efforts of the suffrage movement.

The first sentence provides a strong opening to the argument that the war played a crucial role in the granting of the vote. The response again shows a good factual knowledge and this is not simply deployed but is used to drive the answer forward. The billboard message and the quotations from Asquith are particularly well used. The discussion is also balanced, with the answer considering both sides of the argument about the importance of wartime work in the granting of the vote. Once again, this is well supported by reference to Woolwich Arsenal. The balance in the argument is seen throughout the paragraph and again this is backed up by precise factual knowledge, which allows a judgement based on the preceding discussion to be reached.

Ultimately it was the government who granted them the vote, but this should be seen alongside the general need for franchise reform. The system prior to 1918 meant that many men who fought in the war were denied the vote as they had not occupied a dwelling for at least a year before the election. This led to the Speaker's Conference in 1916 where it was agreed that changes were needed. Changes in Parliament certainly helped this change. A number of pro-suffrage MPs, such as Balfour, Bonar Law and Henderson, had been promoted to the Cabinet and replaced MPs who were opposed to granting women the vote. Similarly, the formation of a coalition government meant that it was less of a party issue, and by granting the vote to those over 30 it was believed that no party would gain. The war had also given the opportunity to those MPs, such as Asquith, to change their views without losing face. Thus the changing political situation, and not just in Britain but in the Empire where women had often already been granted the vote, made it easier to pass the legislation.

There is a great deal of information in this paragraph, some of which would have benefited from greater development. However, in the time allowed examiners will not expect all aspects to be fully developed and the response covers a good range and the points made in this paragraph are all relevant and clear. As with the previous paragraphs the argument is supported by relevant and accurate factual material. It would have been a good idea to mention some of the Empire where women did gain the vote, such as New Zealand, but even without this a convincing argument and judgement are reached.

It is therefore clear that women did not achieve the vote in 1918 solely because of their contribution to the war nor because of their pre-war campaigns. Those young women who had worked in the munitions factories did not get the vote in 1918 and would have to wait a further 10 years. It was given to older, often married women who were considered more responsible who would help promote stability in the face of the fear of widespread unrest and strikes. The political climate in 1918 was very different from that of 1914 and it would have been impossible for the government to have adopted the same measures they had used in 1914 against women who had participated in the war effort, attitudes had changed and the government recognised this. How far this was due to the pre-war campaign of the suffragettes and suffragists or to the wartime efforts of women is a matter of debate.

The conclusion is particularly strong. It weighs up the issue and is a clear example of where a synthesis of reasons, rather than just one factor, provides the strongest argument. Although a new point about the respectability and more 'conservative' behaviour of older voters is brought in it is used to take the earlier argument on, not to make a new point. The response places the development in the wider political context of postwar unrest, but is also able to bring together the points made in the earlier paragraphs about pre-war developments, war-work and political change to reach a convincing overall judgement about the role of women in the gaining of the vote in 1918.

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