

# Milestones in the extension of the franchise

In the UK today all citizens aged 18 and over are allowed to vote in public, political elections, with the exception of only a small number of individuals. This entitlement is known as universal suffrage, is granted to 71.5% of the population and is protected by law.

**1867**

In perspective, the 1832 Act was more of an administrative exercise — reforming constituency boundaries and barely bringing 2% more men to the polls. The Representation of the People Act 1867 (the Second Reform Act), on the other hand, was a major move to enfranchise the urban male working classes. It was the product of a significant shift in thinking about citizenship, democracy and rights over the intervening decades. The Chartist movement had put universal male suffrage, the secret ballot, and other social reforms at the top of the political agenda. The American Civil War (concluding in 1865) had come to symbolise enfranchisement and progressive democratic ideals, thereby emboldening liberal campaigners.



Suffragettes in 1912 at a protest march in London

**1969**

The Representation of the People Act 1969 lowered the voting age to include 18–20-year-olds of both genders. Voters in this younger age bracket were considered to be better educated, better informed and more socially and economically independent than previously. Parliament passed the Act and so removed the final barrier to universal adult suffrage.



**Pre-1832**

Prior to 1832 only a tiny fraction of the population voted for the individuals who represented them. Selection of the UK's representative assembly lay in the hands of a wealthy, male, land-owning elite. Elections took place in 'boroughs' — the number of electors within them ranged from under 10 (these were known as 'rotten boroughs') to over 12,000. The qualifications to be able to vote varied widely from one region to another, though less than 4% of the total population were eligible.

**1832**

The most significant changes brought in by the Representation of the People Act of 1832 — known widely as the Great Reform Act — were to extend the franchise to around 800,000 people (one in five male adults and around 6% of the total population), and to create seats in the House of Commons to represent the cities that had begun to spring up as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace. The Act also disbanded many rotten boroughs by redrawing constituency boundaries.

**1887**

The Third Reform Act extended the vote to all working men. Strictly speaking, the Act entitled all men holding land valued at more than £10, or paying annual rent of £10, to vote. Although the size of the electorate increased to more than 5.5 million, the Act still left all women and 40% of adult men disenfranchised.

**1918**

The Representation of the People Act in 1918 made women eligible to vote in UK-wide elections for the first time. The Act enfranchised women over the age of 30 (subject to minimum property qualifications), as well as all men over the age of 21. The 1918 Act came at a time of significant social and political change for women. The workplace was transforming, with the availability of clerical jobs and some professional careers — such as in healthcare and education — for the first time.



A woman voting for the first time, 1918

**The future**

Areas of contention concerning the franchise still remain:

- Should 16- and 17-year-olds be permitted to vote, as they were in the Scottish independence referendum in 2014?
- Should adult prisoners continue to exercise their right to vote despite being in jail?

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