Of all aspects of the relationship between women and politics, it is women’s political participation that has received most sustained attention from political science. There is a substantial literature on the subject, some more, some less sympathetic to the feminist perspective. Quantitative evidence, though uneven in its coverage, is relatively abundant and expanding.

Yet despite its volume, the literature is in some ways disappointing. First is the problem of bias, not simply in the evaluation, but also in the perception of ‘facts’, as far as these can be distinguished. Such bias occurs not only in the sexist accounts of the 1950s and 1960s but, more disarmingly, in some feminist critiques. Bias is no doubt unavoidable in social science, even at its most rigorously behaviourist. How much more so in a field so emotive, so concerned with questions of ‘prejudice’ and ‘consciousness’ as this.

The other main problem is that the forms of participation studied have been largely confined to politics, narrowly and conventionally defined. At the level of grass-roots political behaviour, interest has centred upon participation within formal, constitutional, government-oriented institutions or procedures. This leaves largely uncharted a whole range of political behaviour which influences decision-making in society, and provides a quite misleading view of women’s political involvement.

The extent of women’s participation in grass-roots politics

Voting

Within this narrowly conceived range of political behaviour, studies of women have concentrated on voting patterns. The political
importance of voting is in dispute. An elector provided with a choice of candidates clearly has more impact than if faced with a single slate. Yet even in a competitive party system, the value of the individual vote is questionable. Given the infrequency of elections, the at best limited choice of candidates, the profusion of safe seats, the inadequacy of the information supplied to the electorate and the independence of candidates once elected, political scientists tend to stress the psychological satisfaction voting gives the voter and its role in legitimising the political authorities and systems, functions no so different to those diagnosed in totalitarian states. Such cynicism can be overdone. The policy changes following the 1979 British General Election have at the least reminded us that, cumulatively, votes can sometimes matter very much.

The relationship of the vote to other forms of political participation is also unclear. Voting is sometimes understood as the first step in a succession of increasingly demanding political acts, but it may be more realistic to view it as logically distinct, as:

A unique form of political behaviour in the sense that it occurs only rarely, is highly biased by strong mechanisms of social control and social desirability enhanced by the rain-dance ritual of campaigning, and does not involve the voter in major informational or other costs (Marsh and Kaase, 1979, p. 86).

Although voting may have its limitations as a criterion of political participation, women’s exercise of the vote has especial meaning against the background of suffragist struggles. The suffragettes, however mistakenly, perceived the vote not simply as a symbol of political emancipation but as a means to effective political participation. In Britain and the United States they endured severe privations to gain it. Women still do not everywhere possess the same formal voting rights as men, though since women finally gained the vote in Liechtenstein in 1986, the only exception at national level is Saudi Arabia. In certain countries they have only very recently been enfranchised, the most well-known example being Switzerland, where women were unable to vote in national elections until 1972. How fully have women exercised their hard-won franchise?

In some countries, including incidentally not only socialist states but also Australia, voting is in effect compulsory; our interest is