



Women's suffrage and the growth of the welfare state *

BURTON A. ABRAMS & RUSSELL F. SETTLE

Department of Economics, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA

Accepted 19 March 1998

Abstract. In this paper we test the hypothesis that extensions of the voting franchise to include lower income people lead to growth in government, especially growth in redistribution expenditures. The empirical analysis takes advantage of the natural experiment provided by Switzerland's extension of the franchise to women in 1971. Women's suffrage represents an institutional change with potentially significant implications for the positioning of the decisive voter. For various reasons, the decisive voter is more likely to favor increases in governmental social welfare spending following the enfranchisement of women. Evidence indicates that this extension of voting rights increased Swiss social welfare spending by 28% and increased the overall size of the Swiss government.

1. Introduction

In the early 1980s Meltzer and Richard (1981) presented a model which suggests that the distribution of income plays an important role in determining the size of government. More specifically, their model implies that the equilibrium size of government increases as the income of the decisive voter falls relative to mean income. As the income of the decisive voter falls relative to the mean, that voter rationally supports more governmental redistribution which disproportionately raises costs on those above the mean. In this journal Meltzer and Richard (1983), using U.S. time-series data for the periods 1937–40 and 1946–76, reported evidence that growth in governmental outlays for redistribution was due, at least in part, to a decline in median income relative to mean income.

Changes in institutional arrangements regarding voting rights can produce sudden and significant changes in the relative income position of the decisive voter. In support of this proposition, Husted and Kenny (1997) present evidence from U.S. states during the period 1950–88 that changes in poll taxes and literacy requirements added significant numbers of less affluent people to the voting rolls and raised welfare spending. This finding lends additional support to the Meltzer-Richards hypothesis.¹

* The authors wish to acknowledge helpful comments from Lawrence Kenny and an anonymous referee.

We provide another test of the importance of expanding the voting franchise by investigating the policy effects of extending voting rights to women.² We add an international dimension to the analysis by studying the budgetary response of the Swiss government following a 1971 national referendum that enfranchised women. In Section 2, we discuss how expanding the franchise to women could affect the equilibrium size of government. Sections 3 and 4 present the data, empirical model, and findings. Section 5 offers concluding remarks.

2. Women's suffrage and the decisive voter

Initially we model marriage as a contract between two individuals agreeing to share all household income (or joint income). Under this assumption, individual income for married individuals would be one-half of joint income. If all voters are securely married, government taxes and subsidies are based solely on individual income, and tastes of men and women for government outlays are identical, then extending the voting franchise from men to both men and women would not affect the Meltzer-Richard equilibrium size of government. Under these circumstances, the mean and median individual incomes remain unchanged. Extending the franchise to women would produce the same effect as giving every man two votes. Similarly, the median voter would also be unaffected by allowing only women to vote. The voting rules of men only, women only, or universal suffrage are neutral in such a world.

If marriages are not secure, if taste for government outlays differ between men and women, or if marriage is not universal, then the choice of a voting rule is not neutral. Changes in the voting rule can be expected to affect median and mean incomes. Adding all females to the electorate adds single as well as married women to the voting rolls. This is likely to affect the position of the decisive voter. In a world where property rights to future household income are attenuated because of divorce or the death of a spouse, an individual's expected income might differ from half of joint income. If one of the members of a marriage would experience substantially lower income in the event of a marital disruption, then he or she would rationally support a higher Meltzer-Richard tax rate and size of government. Finally, differences in taste for government that are gender specific can be expected to affect the decisive voter when changes in the voting rule alter the gender mix of the electorate.

At the time of the Swiss referendum extending voting rights to women, evidence indicates that prospective female voters differed substantially from their male counterparts. Women in jobs comparable to those held by men generally earned lower incomes. Gretler and Mandl (1973: 83) report that for Swiss industrial employees the ratio of women's average earnings to men's