CHAPTER 2

The Final Suffrage Debates, 1920s and 1930s

Mill published *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. After that, in the final third of the nineteenth century, French, British, and American legislatures repeatedly put the vote for women on their agendas but failed to act on it favorably, even though the world beyond family had widened for women in Europe and the United States. Women’s wage work, long needed in factories and mines, now expanded to include typists, switchboard operators, bank tellers, secretaries, nurses, teachers, clerks, and shopgirls. Opportunities increased for women to earn college and university degrees in women’s colleges and public and private universities. New legislation expanded women’s property rights and reformed divorce to be fairer to wives.

The British, American, and French victory in World War I exacted an enormous cost: nearly 1.5 million French forces killed, nearly 1 million British, and 126,000 Americans. War and industrial growth disrupted everyday life and produced changes in dress codes, employment, leisure entertainment, modes of transportation and communication, and sexual mores. All these developments made the boundaries between private life and the public world easier to cross and sometimes invisible. When representatives debated enfranchising women, both supporters and opponents knew that the vote would bring women into the political world as full citizens who would become the majority of eligible voters.

Organized associations fighting for women’s suffrage grew and received increasing press attention in all three countries. Early in the twentieth century, some suffragists—dramatically in Britain and to a lesser extent in the United States—began to use militant tactics such as breaking laws, disrupting legislatures, and confronting police. One can debate whether this strategy advanced or retarded the cause of suffrage, especially when authorities responded harshly and cruelly with jail sentences and force-feeding of those arrested and thereby
Women Representatives in Britain, France, and the United States

won them some sympathy, particularly since most of them were deemed “respectable” middle-class ladies.

In France, women’s political engagement dated back more than a century. In 1793, the revolutionary Jacobins had curbed the activism of women of the popular classes, although male radicals had benefitted from it. Napoleon’s Civil Code restricted women to the private sphere. During the Restoration and the July Monarchy, Eugénie Niboyet, Jeanne Deroin, and Desirée Véret, all St. Simonians, published journals and wrote about women and liberty but did not particularly emphasize the franchise. Niboyet and Deroin did lead a suffragist movement in 1848, unsuccessfully pressing the Provisional Government to grant women the franchise. Léon Richer and Maria Deraimes organized suffrage societies in the 1860s, and during the Third Republic in 1876, Hubertine Auclert founded a society called Suffrage des femmes. Suffrage supporters were most active in the decade before the First World War, but they divided along party lines. Suffrage foundered largely on the question of laïcité, the belief, chiefly among affiliates of the Radical and Socialist parties, that women would never support secular parties and would always vote as their priests instructed. In all three countries, suffrage movements overturned traditional feminine propriety and deference and thereby generated strong law-enforcement responses and organized opposition.

Some western territories in the United States enfranchised women in their constitutions when they achieved statehood, beginning with Wyoming in 1869. In Britain after 1867, every parliamentary session took up the issue of women’s suffrage until it finally passed in 1918. The first French petition for admission of women to the franchise was submitted to the National Assembly in 1882. These bitter, multigenerational battles in all three countries involved the broad themes that Tocqueville and Mill had addressed: the legitimacy of the national state, clashing conceptualizations of the common good, and the political power of women and men. For those who believed that the franchise was not a universal right but a privilege of citizenship to be deserved, the contributions of women during the First World War persuaded many people that they had earned the right to vote.

Representatives in all three legislatures frequently mentioned how other countries were handling women’s suffrage. The French in particular often contrasted their tradition of collective sovereignty with Anglo-Saxon individualism. Historians frequently assert, often with scanty evidence, that British and American politics are quite similar because they share a common-law tradition and an individualist political culture. French politics are different, because of code law, a history of repeated revolutions, and a universalist doctrine of sovereign citizenship. If these broad comparisons hold, we would expect debates over the franchise to be structured differently in France than in Britain and the United