

The Global Struggle for Suffrage Expansion: The European Case for Male Suffrage in the Nineteenth Century*

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As a result of a gradual extension of suffrage in most European countries by the First World War the right to vote was granted to the overwhelming majority of adult males or to the entire male population over a certain age. This phenomenon was a truly groundbreaking change of the political sphere: the elitist politics, granting decision-making power only to a small group of wealthy property owners now opening up and giving way to mass politics.

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The changing legal framework, rapidly growing urbanization (see the paper by Zinkina, Ilyin, Korotayev in this volume) and literacy as well as the increasing role of monetary wealth in determining a person's social status (see the paper by Zinkina, Andreev, and Mosakova in this edited volume) and the rise of nationalism among the oppressed nations – all these factors could hardly fit the situation when the opportunity to participate in the state governance is given only to a small minority. As a result, the whole nineteenth century, especially starting from the 1830s, was the century of a fight for voting rights.

Of all the political and social reforms introduced in Europe during the nineteenth century, none represented a sharper break with the past than manhood suffrage. Never before had any sizable community been able to sustain a form of government in which civic equality was granted to every adult male regardless of class, property, or education. ... The exclusion of the lower classes from participation in the political process was everywhere regarded as essential for stable government. The purpose of the state was precisely to maintain economic and social distinctions, which were believed to be timeless and ineradicable. ... Yet after 1815 the enfranchisement of the lower classes gradually became a reality (Hamerow 1989: 285).

Table 1 presents some data on the electoral law reforms which led to the most significant enfranchisement increase in a number of European countries (as well as Argentina and Uruguay).

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Table 1. The impact of electoral law democratization upon the proportion of the enfranchised population (meeting the requirements for age and sex)

Country	Year of the reform	The proportion of the enfranchised before the reform, %	The proportion of the enfranchised after the reform, %
Argentina	1912	?	All males
Denmark	1849	3	73
Finland	1906	9	87
France	1848	3	91
Greece	1864	?	All males
Great Britain	1884	36	64
	1918	64	89
Italy	1912	32	90
Netherlands	1917	69	95
Norway	1898	43	90
Spain	1868	11	All males
Sweden	1907/09	34	78
	1918/20	78	96
Switzerland	1848	Depending on the canton	All males
Uruguay	1918	63	All males

Source: Collier 1999: 28.

One should understand that the figures presented in Table 1 do not refer to the percentage of eligible voters in the general population, but rather their share in the population that meets the age and sex requirements – in other words, the proportion of men over a certain age covered by the right to vote. The introduction of universal female suffrage came several decades later.

Let us consider some cases of the introduction of universal male suffrage during the nineteenth century.

In the United States the right to vote, first covering only adult white male property owners, was significantly extended under President Andrew Jackson (elected in 1828). Jackson persuaded almost all states to abolish the franchise based on the possession of property. This step greatly increased the number of the middle class and the poor among the voters (note that the poor were mostly inclined to vote for the Democratic Party represented by Jackson). Thus, in the 1830s almost all white males in the US received the right to vote, this means not only citizens, but in many states also immigrants who only arrived recently and just began the naturalization process. After the Civil War, the Constitution was amended to guarantee the right to vote for the black male population as well. Finally, at the beginning of the twentieth century fifteen states provided the right to vote to women, and in 1920 this right was enshrined at the national level (Dwyre 2010: 33; Testi 1998: 387–388).

In Europe, France was the pioneer in the introduction of universal male suffrage. In 1792 the entire adult male population got the right to vote in the election of the National Convention.¹ Napoleon Bonaparte kept the simulacrum of universal male suffrage; how-

¹ National convention was the highest legislative and executive body of the First French Republic during the French Revolution.

ever, during the restoration of the Bourbons income qualifications were introduced for voters: to be eligible to vote a man should have to pay at least 300 francs a year of direct taxes (which applied to about 0.3 per cent of the total population). The universal male suffrage was fully restored only in 1848 with the proclamation of the Second French Republic. At that time the number of voters grew by more than thirty times, from 300 thousand to 9.3 million people (Hamerow 1989: 305). Paradoxically, however, soon afterwards Napoleon III took the advantage of this universal suffrage to establish the Second French Empire via national referendums.

In Belgium, according to the Constitution of 1831, the right to elect representatives to the lower house of parliament was extended only to citizens who paid minimum annual tax. When this Constitution was adopted, a movement for universal suffrage had not yet emerged, and such financial restrictions of enfranchisement were taken for granted. Organized campaigns for universal male suffrage began to appear around 1860. According to the amendments made to the Constitution in 1893 all men over 25 years old were entitled to vote. As a result of this reform the number of voters, according to some estimates, grew more than tenfold (Carstairs 1980: 49–51).

In mid-nineteenth century Netherlands, only about 2.5 per cent of the population were enfranchised: men over 23 years old belonging to a certain income bracket (varying from province to province). A series of successive reforms, extending the right to vote increased the numbers remarkably, now being 6.5 per cent of the population (1887), later 12 per cent (1896), and, finally, the universal male suffrage was approved in 1917 – after only two years; in 1919, the universal female suffrage was approved as well (Carstairs 1980: 61).

In the UK the reform of electoral law took almost a century. The 1832 reform increased the number of voters by more than one-and-a-half times; the voter registration was introduced that year as well. By 1867, the number of voters nearly doubled mainly due to the urban-dwellers with working class status; the further increase in the number of voters resulted from the reforms in 1884 (when suffrage greatly extended among the rural population) and in 1918 (Hamerow 1989: 302–304; Carstairs 1980: 189–190; Self 2000: 6–9, 13–18).

The North German Confederation introduced direct, equal, and secret elections to Parliament in 1867, the same year the universal male suffrage was granted. In the German Empire this right was in force from 1871 onwards and in 1918 it was extended to women. Some researchers suppose that, when introducing universal male suffrage, Bismarck's intention was not so much concerned with providing the population with greater democratic freedoms; instead he aimed on gathering support for the crown among the masses of the rural population (Hamerow 1989: 306–307; Carstairs 1980: 162).

The history of modern Italian electoral law originated in Piedmont – from there the constitution and electoral system were extended to the entire Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Under this system, the right to vote was granted to less than 2 per cent of the population, namely to the educated men over 25 years of age owing some property. In 1882 the minimum age was lowered from 25 to 21 years, and the property qualifications were somewhat loosened. Finally, in 1912 all men older than 30 years received the right to vote, regardless of property ownership and the level of education. Men aged from 21 to 30 years old could vote if they met the property qualifications or after military service. Thus, the male suffrage became nearly universal, and the number of voters increased from less than 3 million to nearly 8.5 million (Carstairs 1980: 149–150; Hamerow 1989: 307; Romanelli 1998: 12–13).

Thus, the nineteenth century was the time of the introduction of universal male suffrage which later gradually acquired global scale. Not only Europe but also the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile took decisive steps in this direction. The major reforms implied the abolition of the income or property qualifications for the voters. Some countries also abolished the literacy qualifications as well as discrimination based on race, and, finally, reduced the voter age requirements.

However, this does not mean that the democratization of suffrage and the emergence of mass politics culminated in the nineteenth century. A no less important phenomenon, namely the introduction of universal female suffrage occurred in the most advanced countries at the very end of the 'long 19th century', but most countries followed this path only in the twentieth century. Among the pioneers in this area one can name New Zealand (1893), Australia (1894), Finland (1906), Norway (1913), Denmark (1915), Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands (all in 1919), and others.

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