

1. Stages in the Electoral History of Western Europe

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The history of voter enfranchisement and universal suffrage is part of the history of the quest for and achievement of civil rights and political freedoms. The demand for voter enfranchisement cannot generally be separated from a broader demand for social equality and the general struggle for rights and freedoms.

It is a story of social conflict. The quest for universal suffrage in Europe was an important aspect of the social and political emancipation of newly emerging social classes during the 19th century—first an urban middle class, then the industrial proletariat—and then, by extension, the transformation of the peasantry. The banner of universal suffrage was first raised by the liberal movement of the 19th century, and later in the same century by the socialist parties. The development of trade unions and political parties implied a move away from absolute political control by crowned rulers and landowning aristocracies: trade unions and political parties were crucially important in the realization of the demand for universal suffrage. Later, from the last quarter of the 19th century onwards, came the struggle against the industrial bourgeoisie and governmental bureaucratic elites towards increased general social and political autonomy.

Landmarks for Freedom

In the West European region as a whole, several landmarks can be identified on the road to full or universal voter enfranchisement. The first seeds were sown by the

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English Bill of Rights of 1689 and the French Revolution, especially the latter, which had an impact on many other countries both in and outside Europe. Second, although the liberal revolutions which took place across Europe in 1848 were unsuccessful, the ideas which inspired them gained ground during the nineteenth century. Third, there was the period between the First and Second World Wars when voting rights were legally recognized for large sectors of the population, especially women. Finally, there was the period after the Second World War when the right to vote was made truly universal—in practice if not by law—thanks to the democratic commitment of the victorious Allies and the unprecedented socio-economic prosperity which was built in the post-war period.

The fight for rights and freedoms throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Western Europe had a historical antecedent in the signing of the Bill of Rights in England in 1689, which the English elite imposed on the new King and Queen of England, William III of Orange and his wife Mary, after the ousting of King James II, a Catholic. The Bill declared the rights and liberties of the subjects, and settled the succession of the crown. It was followed by the Act of Toleration of 1690 on religious practices and the revival of the earlier Triennial Act preventing the King from dissolving Parliament at will and establishing that general elections should be held every three years. The franchise at the time was however limited to the landowning aristocracy and the upper levels of an urban bourgeoisie, and included only males in their mid-20s and over. This predated by almost 100 years the revolution fought by the European émigrés in North America which led to independence in 1776 and laid the foundation of an electoral democracy in the United States of America with the constitution of 1787, just two years before the French Revolution of 1789. In France, universal suffrage was granted to adult French men in 1848 by the February revolution which toppled Louis Philippe. As a consequence, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was elected president on the basis of his name alone. The Paris Commune of 1871—an attempted proletarian revolution—ruled that municipal councillors could be elected by universal suffrage. However, regime changes in different countries brought reversals from time to time of some of the advances achieved, for example in France.

Gender, Property, Age, and Education as Barriers to Voter Enfranchisement

Between 1870 and the 1940s, universal suffrage was established for males in Austria, Denmark, Italy, France, Germany, Spain and Switzerland. During the same time period, in other countries the male suffrage already estab-

lished was further extended to practically the entire male adult population—Belgium, Finland, Norway, the United Kingdom and Sweden. While in many of these countries women's right to vote was legally established after the First World War in recognition of the supportive role played by women during the conflict, in some countries the gender barrier was the last to fall after a century of struggle for the female franchise. There are states in Europe where women were only enfranchised a few decades ago, most notably Switzerland in 1971 and the micro-state of Liechtenstein in 1984.

The earliest countries in Europe to give legal recognition to women's right to vote were Finland in 1906 and Norway in 1913. The struggle for women's suffrage was particularly intense in the UK, with the Chartist movement demanding the suffrage for women from the 1840s, followed by the Labour Party after it was founded in 1900. Socialist parties in many other European countries also incorporated the right to vote for men and women alike into their programmes. The inter-war period and the aftermath of the Second World War saw women being given the right to vote in many European countries—Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland, Sweden and the UK in 1918-1919; Hungary in 1920; Spain in 1931; France in 1944; Italy in 1945; and Greece in 1952 (see chapter 4). In general, it can be said that barriers to enfranchisement based on property were lowered in the countries of Europe during the late 19th century, age barriers had come down by the early 20th century, and education and gender barriers only finally disappeared by the middle of the 20th century or even later. Needless to say, these are general trends within which each country has taken its own road towards universal suffrage, setting its own landmarks.

Once male suffrage was granted, the first barrier to the exercise of the new right was a property barrier. Although male suffrage was granted throughout Europe in the revolutionary years after 1848, voter eligibility was mostly limited by property or tax qualifications until much later in the century, and in some cases well into the 20th century, when voting rights were extended beyond the boundaries of the propertied classes. 'Universal' male suffrage actually fell well short of being universal. In Great Britain, for example, the property qualification was called the 'lodger' vote as it implied the ownership of a freehold or the occupation of premises of a certain value. In Spain, where 'universal male suffrage' was first established by the Cadiz Constitution of 1812, this was in actuality a right for the bourgeoisie and was only extended to the wider propertied classes in 1837. The wider suffrage after 1837 was called the censitary vote, which could only be exercised by citizens who paid taxes above a certain amount

(censo). Only 3.5 per cent of the population could vote under this system, which was a relatively high proportion within the European context of the time: it was similar to the percentage in Great Britain and the Netherlands, and much higher than that of Belgium, where 1 per cent of the population were actually able to vote, or France under Louis Philippe, where the figure was 0.67 per cent. The 1844 coup d'état in Spain reversed the situation by once again limiting the exercise of universal suffrage to the upper bourgeoisie. With the restoration of democracy during the last quarter of the 19th century there was a progressive reduction of the tax threshold above which the right to vote applied. Property limitations were less severe in countries like Greece, where the 1844 constitution established universal suffrage for those holding land property. Due to the predominance of small peasant ownership, the suffrage in Greece now became almost universal.

A second barrier to the right to vote was age. In general, a minimum voting age between 23 and 30 was the rule until later in the 20th century, when it was set at 18. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was 24 in Austria, 25 in Belgium, Prussia, the Netherlands and Norway, and 30 in Denmark. In Sweden the voting age for general elections was lowered to 21 from 23 only in 1945. In the UK, where women had been granted the right to vote in 1918, the voting age for women then was 30; it was reduced to 21 in 1928, and the voting age for both men and women was further lowered to 18 in 1969. In France, the right to vote at age 18 was also established in 1969. Most recently, the German state (*Land*) of Lower Saxony (*Niedersachsen*) lowered the voting age in local elections to 16 in 1995. Other German states have since followed, and three Austrian states (*Länder*) have also introduced a voting age of 16 in local elections. In contrast, the voting age for elections to the Italian Senate remains at 25. Also until late in the 20th century, a common qualification for the exercise of the right to vote was literacy: voters should know how to read and write.

Following these reflections on the history of voting rights in Western Europe, some brief comments on the present-day frontiers in the advance of the actual practice of universal suffrage are appropriate.

Among the major challenges are the following:

- *making voting easier* for the elderly and the disabled. Postal voting and easier access to polling stations are making voting easier for the disabled, and an international association has been set up to promote this cause;
- *improving the efficiency* of voting from abroad. A cross-national study of nationals voting from abroad has recently been carried out under the auspices of the national electoral authority of Mexico, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE). An assessment of the experiences of postal voting in Spain, Portugal and Austria, and of a mixed system in Sweden, has also been conducted (<<http://www.universidadabierta.edu.mx>>);
- *allowing non-nationals who are resident* to vote in local elections in European Union countries (European Commission 2002); and
- *the assessment of the impact of electronic voting on participation*, considering questions of efficiency and the quality of the vote, and possible drawbacks for example in the area of electoral integrity (see chapter 5).

References and Further Reading

European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Application of Directive 94/80/EC on the Right to Vote and to stand as a Candidate in Municipal Elections* (Brussels, May 2002)

Universidad Abierta, <<http://www.universidadabierta.edu.mx>>

Inter-Parliamentary Union, <<http://www.ipu.org>>