

# 4. Women and the Vote in Western Europe

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- *Did you know that women in Liechtenstein gained the right to vote only in 1984?*
- *Did you know that, as overall turnout is declining in Western Europe, women have become more likely to exercise their right to vote than men?*

### **The Right to Vote: An 80-Year Battle**

European women first achieved the right to vote in 1906 in Finland, a country that was in the process of becoming independent from tsarist Russia. Women participated in the national struggle against the tsar's decision to reverse the autonomous status the country had enjoyed. This movement culminated in a parliamentary reform that extended the universal right to vote to both sexes. Soon after, before the First World War broke out, women were given the right to vote in other Nordic countries, with the exception of Sweden. The right to vote in municipal elections had often preceded the suffrage in parliamentary elections.

Figure 4.1 shows that in many countries female suffrage was achieved in the aftermath of the First World War so that by the end of 1919 women were able to vote in the majority of West European countries. In Germany, two social democratic parties formed the first post-war government and introduced the equal voting right that had been one of the issues on their political agendas. In a number of countries the right to vote was gained in two

## Part I: Current Issues in Voter Turnout

**Figure 4.1: When Women Gained the Suffrage**

Country	The right to vote	The right to stand for election
Finland	1906	1906
Norway	1913	1907
Denmark	1915	1915
Iceland	1915	1915
Austria	1918	1918
Germany	1918	1918
Ireland	1918 (1928*)	1918
United Kingdom	1918 (1928*)	1918
Belgium	1919 (1948*)	1921
Luxembourg	1919	1919
Netherlands	1919	1917
Sweden	1919	1919
Portugal	1931 (1976*)	1931
Spain	1931	1931
France	1944	1944
Italy	1945	1945
Malta	1947	1947
Greece	1952	1952
San Marino	1959	1973
Monaco	1962	1962
Andorra	1970	1973
Switzerland	1971	1971
Liechtenstein	1984	1984

\* All restrictions lifted.

Source: <<http://www.ipu.org>, [www.db-decision.de/CoRe](http://www.db-decision.de/CoRe)>.

stages. Belgium, Ireland and the United Kingdom initially placed restrictions on the women's vote. For example, in the UK the franchise was initially only given to married women, women householders and women university graduates aged 30 years or over.

The next countries to extend the right to vote to women were Portugal and Spain in 1931. A female doctor and a widow, Carolina Beatriz Ângelo, had already voted 20 years earlier in Portugal as the law gave the right to vote to the head of the family without defining the sex of this person. In France, women were given the right to vote in 1944 by decree of General Charles de Gaulle after the Senate had repeatedly blocked proposals aimed at enfranchising French women. Italian women acquired the right to vote in 1945 after the fall of fascism, having participated in the liberation movement.

The last West European countries to grant the vote for women were the micro-states of San Marino, Monaco, Andorra and, finally, Liechtenstein—the latter in 1984. It had taken nearly 80 years for all European women to gain

a right to vote. Some of them will soon be celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage, while others have had the vote for less than 20 years.

### Gender Differences in Turnout

Only limited information is available on the differences between men and women where voter turnout is concerned because most countries do not break down figures by gender. Only Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway and Sweden do so. The available data is thus not representative of West European countries as it is mostly provided by small Nordic countries.

The data shows that the levels of turnout between men and women differ, producing a 'gender gap'. The size of the difference varies across time and countries, but, as figure 4.2 shows, more men than women turned out to vote until the 1980s in most of the countries under comparison. However, the difference between men and women has been modest since the 1960s. Overall, the gender gap has shrunk in the post-war era and reversed since the mid-1980s so that more women than men now turn out to vote.

### Possible Explanations

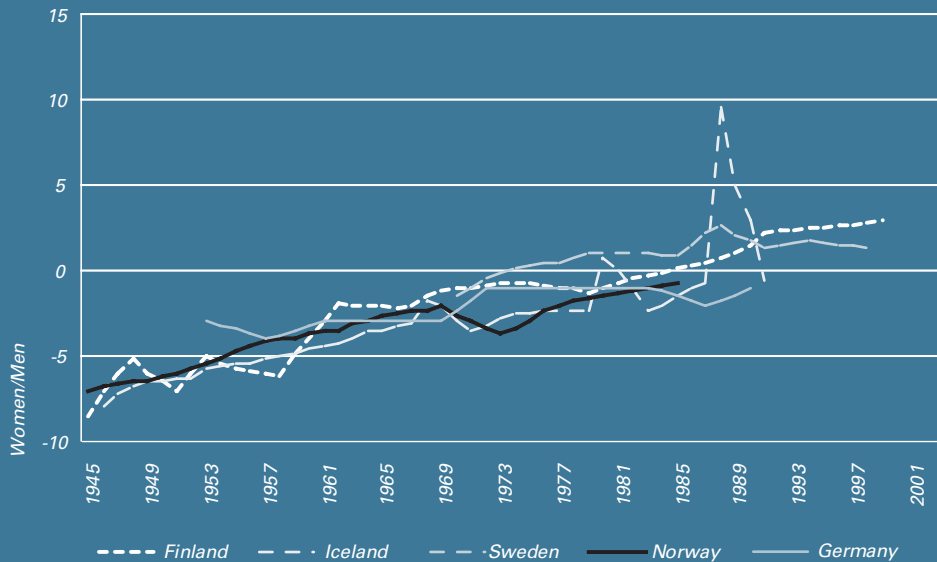
Many factors have been offered to explain gender differences in voter turnout. However, some researchers suggest that there is in fact no gender difference when the fact that women are over-represented in groups with lower levels of participation is taken into consideration (Newman and Sheth 1984). Similarly, some argue that focusing on the gender gap prevents us from understanding that it is certain groups of women, as opposed to all women, that account for the gender gap (Greenberg 1998). Nevertheless, national election surveys conducted in 19 countries worldwide show that level of education has a strong impact on the different voting behaviour as between men and women. Women at lower levels of education are considerably less likely to vote than men with the same level of education (Norris 2002). It can therefore be assumed that an improvement in women's educational level during the post-Second World War era is an important factor in explaining why women's turnout has improved. Work and socio-economic status, among other factors, are weaker explanatory factors in explaining differences in voter turnout between men and women (Norris 2002).

### The Future and Implications of Women's Higher Turnout

Women in older age groups are less likely to vote than the men of their age. However, the trend is the reverse in younger age groups (Norris 2002). From this it follows that women's turnout can be expected to rise in the

# Voter Turnout in Western Europe

**Figure 4.2:** The Gender Gap\* in Voter Turnout



\* The gender gap is the difference between men and women in voter turnout.

future as well as a younger generation replaces the older.

Some political parties have recognized women as a critical electoral force. For example, in the 1997 British electoral campaign, female voters were targeted by all the major parties (Hayes and McAllister 2001).

Much attention has been paid recently to the question *who* women vote for. Traditionally, women tended to vote more than men for the centre-right (Duverger 1955; and Lipset 1960). By the 1980s this tendency had weakened or reversed in many West European countries. In the Netherlands, Denmark and Italy women had become more left-wing than men, and in other West European countries they have become less conservative than they were (Inglehart and Norris 1999). Women's higher turnout, in conjunction with the trend of weakening support for conservative parties and a leaning towards the left, is having an increasing impact on the political map of Western Europe.

### Call for Countries to Disaggregate Turnout Figures by Gender

International IDEA invites electoral authorities to help in collecting voter turnout data that is broken down by gender. This is important for the following reasons:

- to confirm or challenge beliefs about differences in voting behaviour between men and women;
- to provide valuable research data making it possible to

identify trends across time and countries; and

- to serve as a basis for the design, targeting and evaluation of campaigns to get people to vote.

### References and Further Reading

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