

***“It was the militant suffragette campaign, more than any other factor, that led to the achievement of female suffrage in 1918.”***

**How valid is this view?**

In 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed as a militant female suffrage society by Emmeline Pankhurst. This group used violent tactics to campaign for woman's suffrage because they were unhappy with the status of women in Britain socially, politically, economically and legally. This status was slowly improved from 1850 and by 1918 they were partially enfranchised by the Representation of the People Act which gave most women over 30 the vote, although it was not until 1928 when a further act was passed that women gained franchise on equal terms as men – everyone over 21 could now vote. Historians debate the importance of the Suffragettes in gaining women's suffrage but also how other factors contributed to enfranchisement. These other factors include: the peaceful campaign of the Suffragists; the changing perceptions of women in society; wider democratic changes in Britain and the rest of the world; and finally, women's work in World War One. This essay will argue that the Suffragettes did more damage than good to the women's cause and that not only were there more important factors, but the changing status of women was in fact the root cause.

Some feminist historians argue that the Suffragettes made a positive impact on women's suffrage. It is believed by some historians that the militant tactics the WSPU used such as smashing windows, setting light to post boxes and pouring acid on golf courses, gained the cause attention from the media and the government. Historian Midge MacKenzie argues that the Suffragettes “revitalised the question of votes for women” showing that some historians believe that the WSPU gained public interest in the cause and raised the profile for women's suffrage. However their illegal acts often landed them in prison, which led to Suffragettes maintaining protests while in jail by going on hunger strikes. This was first started by Marion Wallace Dunlop in 1909 and many Suffragettes copied her, all prepared to be martyrs for the cause. The government tried to tackle this problem by force feeding the women, creating public outrage and sympathy for the Suffragettes. The government then passed the Prisoner's Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act in April 1913, which was more commonly known as the “Cat and Mouse Act” because it enabled the hunger striking Suffragettes to be released from prison and then be put back in once they

had recovered. This arguably shows that the government was being worn down by the Suffragettes as they were finding it harder to come up with new ways to deal with the protestors. Some historians believe that this led to the government being more ready to give the vote to women, as a way of ridding themselves of the problem of Suffragette militancy. Therefore, it can be argued that the Suffragettes helped the cause because they forced the government to pay attention to them and this helped lead to the enfranchisement of women in 1918.

However, many historians now argue that their impact was in fact, more negative. A more contemporary view of the Suffragettes is that they hindered the cause more than helped as Martin Pugh rightly argues, "there are no grounds for the view that the WSPU shifted public opinion in its favour, rather the reverse." The militant tactics of the WSPU harmed the cause as although they attracted attention, they reinforced the idea that women were reckless and couldn't be trusted with the vote. The Daily Express reflected how the WSPU alienated public opinion when they printed in 1908, "these women who unite to disorder and riot shall be punished with the utmost severity." The Suffragettes not only shifted the opinion of the press, but more importantly, the opinions of politicians, including Churchill who commented that as a result of WSPU militancy, "their cause has marched backwards." The WSPU's campaign even alienated women, after 1910 the membership of the WSPU was in decline, as many women left to join the peaceful Suffragists. Further proof that the Suffragettes did not help the cause is that groups such as the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, set up in 1911, were formed to oppose the WSPU and by 1913 the opposition was so strong that it was in fact dangerous for Suffragettes to speak in public meetings. Therefore, although Suffragettes did gain publicity for the cause, this publicity was largely negative and undermined the progress the peaceful Suffragists were already making. This negative publicity they brought with their violence also made it less likely that the Government would enfranchise women as they could not be seen giving in to terrorism.

The work of the Suffragists is another factor in women's suffrage and historians debate how successful they were in gaining votes for women. The Suffragists belonged to a group called the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) which was formed in 1897 and led by Millicent Fawcett. In contrast to the

WSPU, these campaigners used peaceful, law-abiding methods to fight for the women's cause such as making speeches, holding rallies, handing out leaflets and writing to MPs about the cause. They were also successful in persuading some MPs to introduce Private Members' Bill by lobbying them. Traditionally, the NUWSS has been seen as too quiet and peaceful to have made any mark on the media and the government for the cause. Some historians claim that the Suffragists were easily ignored by politicians and did not get attention from the media, meaning that they failed to get their message into the public eye. They have also been criticized for being too elitist as their initial goal was to gain votes for middle class, single women householders. This was due to their gradualist approach which meant instead of demanding all women to be enfranchised they tried to gain the vote in stages. This approach has often been criticized for being too slow and lacking in ambition. It was also believed that after 40 years of campaigning the peaceful tactics had gained very little success, and it was this frustration that drove some Suffragists to form the WSPU in 1903 so they could campaign more aggressively. Therefore, the traditional view of the Suffragists is a very negative one as they were initially viewed as too cautious and didn't make a great impact on the cause. However, a more contemporary view shows the NUWSS were underestimated and made more progress than initially believed.

Many historians now rightly favour the view that the Suffragists made great progress for the cause and have been underestimated. The initial view that the NUWSS was too elitist has now been questioned because they attracted support from many working class women and as historian Dianne Atkinson rightly argues the NUWSS "had the most to offer working-class women." Furthermore, although women had not gained the vote by the early 1900s, Suffragists had made significant progress in gaining the backing from other organisations such as many trade unions and even the newly formed Labour Party. This meant that together they could increase pressure put on the government for extending the franchise for both men and women – at this time many working class men were also disenfranchised. Although it was true that many Suffragists initially left to join the WSPU, by 1910 when the WSPU increased its militancy, it was declining in membership, while the NUWSS was gaining supporters: by 1914 they had 480 branches with 53,000 members nationwide. Suffragists also made a significant impact in gaining the backing from MPs as by

1914 it was estimated that 50% of MPs were in favour of women's suffrage. In 1912, the Conciliation Bill which would have enfranchised around a million women, was sadly defeated, however it was only by a margin of 18 votes showing that the NUWSS had made significant progress in gaining the support of MPs. Therefore, it is clear that the NUWSS made far more progress than that of the WSPU and they were in fact undermined by the militancy of the Suffragettes.

However, the work of women's suffrage societies wasn't the only factor leading to female enfranchisement, and some historians argue that the changing perceptions of women since 1850 was the root cause. Morrison, Morrison and Monaghan rightly argue that "by the end of the Victorian era there is no doubt that the cause of women's rights had made significant progress." The perception of women in 1850 was that they were "second class citizens" who were inferior to men socially, economically, legally and politically. Most importantly, they did not have the vote because they were viewed as "too stupid" to be trusted with such a responsibility. However, from 1850 onwards the attitude towards women began to change. With the improvements in the attitude towards women it became increasingly untenable for men to continue denying them the vote. There were many pieces of legislation passed after 1850 that improved women's rights. The 1873 Custody of Infants Act improved women's legal rights as it enabled them to gain custody of their children, should they get divorced. Their legal rights were further improved by the 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act which ensured that women had custody of their children if their husband died – previously the children would be sent to live with the late husband's family. The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1884 gave women the same rights over property as single women and allowed them to have an independent income. These acts therefore showed that women did not need to rely on men for stability and they were no longer considered property of men. Women's rights in education also improved as with the Education Acts of the 1870s, all children – including girls – had compulsory education. Women also now had access to a higher standard of education as women's colleges were set up such as the Girton College in 1874 and the Cheltenham Ladies' College. Universities also began to open their doors to women by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. As women were now able to read and write, they had an access to information which enabled them to be more politically aware. As women were now educated, men could now no

longer claim that their brains were smaller and that they were too stupid to be trusted with the vote. This higher education also enabled women to get better paying jobs and improved their social standing. In employment there were also improvements, although many women still worked in low-paying and low-status jobs such as those in textile factories, between 1861 and 1911 there was a 307% increase of female workers in non-manual jobs – “white-collar” office jobs like typists. There was also an increase of women in the professions such as teaching, nursing and social work which proved that they were capable of jobs that were previously deemed “unfit” for women, and that their contributions to society and the economy were important to Britain. This meant it was arguably inevitable for women to gain suffrage as they were further proving that they were mature and responsible and could be trusted with the vote. Even the political rights of women had been improved after 1850. The 1869 Municipal Franchise Act gave single female householders the vote in local elections and the 1894 Parish Councils Act allowed women to serve on urban and district councils, proving that women could not only be trusted with the vote, but were responsible and were contributing to British political life at a local level. Historian Martin Pugh rightly argues that “their participation in local government made women's exclusion from national elections increasingly untenable.” Therefore, by the early 1900s, the perceptions of women had changed massively, and the improvements in women's status made it increasingly untenable for the Government to continue denying the vote to women and ignoring the contributions they made in society.

Although the changing perception of women was the root cause, some historians argue that the wider growth of democracy in Britain and abroad was another important factor in spurring on changes in women's democratic rights. Some historians argue that as the franchise was being extended for men – the 1832 Great Reform Act gave the vote to middle class men, and the 1867 Second Reform Act enfranchised skilled workers in urban areas, then 1884 Third Reform Act extended the vote to “respectable” working class men in the countryside – it made sense that the franchise would soon be extended to “respectable” women. It can be argued that as the 1918 Representation of the People Act eventually enfranchised all men over 21, it also presented the Government with an opportunity to enfranchise many women for the first time as well. Furthermore, Britain saw itself as the “mother of

democracy" yet many countries had already enfranchised women before them including New Zealand in 1893, Australia, Norway, Denmark, Finland and many states in America. This caused embarrassment for the British Government as the supposed "mother of democracy" still denied the vote to over half of its population while many "lesser" countries had already enfranchised women. This embarrassment was a contributing factor leading to female enfranchisement as the British Government felt that they needed to live up to their own standards of democracy. Therefore, women's enfranchisement can be seen as a part of the wider democratic changes in both Britain and abroad, although it was not the most important factor, it was still another issue that encouraged the government to reform women's political rights.

The final factor that many historians argue was also important in gaining women's suffrage was the impact of World War One. During the war, women had to fill in the jobs that men had left when they left to fight as soldiers; this meant that women did valuable work during the war that was essential to Britain's success. Both Suffragists and Suffragettes halted their campaigns to contribute to the war effort, showing that they were loyal to their country; Emmeline Pankhurst even renamed the Suffragette newspaper the "Britannia" and in 1915 organised a huge march through London in which women demanded the "right to serve". Women's labour was not used until 1915 when the war became a "total war" meaning that the people back in Britain were just as involved as the men fighting in the trenches. Many women joined the Women's Land Army where they grew the food that fed the nation during times of rationing. Women also got a chance to work in positions that were previously considered unsuitable for women such as jobs in offices, hospitals and factories. Over 700,000 women worked in munitions factories producing the weapons and ammunition used in the war, which was a very dangerous job as 237 women were killed in explosions and 104 women died from TNT poisoning. Although women were not allowed to fight, they still supported the armed forces in organisations such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) in which women worked as nurses to help wounded soldiers in France and Belgium; and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs) where women drove ambulances. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the work done by women during the war resulted in female enfranchisement because, as some women were enfranchised in 1918, the vote

can be seen partly as a "reward" for their wartime efforts. The war was also important as it provided women with the opportunity to "undo" the damage the Suffragettes made on the cause and for women to prove their worth to society, as John Ray rightly argues, "Their war efforts succeeded where the Suffragette campaign had failed." It also allowed the government to give the vote to women without looking like they were "giving in" to Suffragette terror, as historian AJP Taylor rightly argues, "War smoothed the way for democracy." However, it is over simplistic to assume that the impact of the war was the sole reason for women's enfranchisement since after the war only women over 30 who were householders, wives of householders or university graduates could vote, leaving out a great deal of younger women who had also contributed during the war. As women only got the vote on equal terms with men in 1928, the war must not have been a direct cause. Some historians even argue that the war hindered the progress toward female franchise. Paula Bartley argues that women were close to achieving franchise and were discussing the matter with the Prime Minister Asquith just weeks before war broke out, she believes "in many ways the war may have delayed the franchise rather than expedited it." However, it cannot be proved that women would have even gained the vote in 1914 if the war hadn't broken out, nor to what extent they would have been enfranchised. Therefore, a more accurate view of the impact of the war is that it acted as a "catalyst" which sped up the already on-going toward women's suffrage. Historian Stevenson rightly argues that "the war was as much the occasion as the cause of growing female emancipation." Overall, it is clear that the war acted as a catalyst for women's suffrage as it provided the government with a way to give some women the vote, as a "reward", without appearing to give into the militant WSPU.

In conclusion, the view that the Suffragettes were the most important factor in gaining female suffrage is not valid, for many reasons. While the Suffragettes did have some successes, such as grabbing media attention and bringing publicity to the cause, this publicity was mainly negative and their militant behaviour only reinforced previous ideas of women being too stupid and too reckless to be trusted with the vote. Therefore, the Suffragettes were arguably the least important factor in gaining votes for women as they did more harm than good for the cause. The Suffragists, however, were arguably more important than the WPSU as they made

steady, albeit slow, progress by using peaceful methods to gain the backing of MPs and show how responsible women can be. More importantly, the wider democratic trends in Britain and abroad made votes for women more likely as the franchise had already been extended gradually for men, and the pressure from other countries which had already introduced universal franchise arguably pushed the government in favour of women's suffrage. The impact of the First World War was arguably even more important as it acted as a catalyst for female suffrage as it was no longer justifiable to deny women the vote after their valuable contributions to the country during the war. Finally, the most important factor was the changing perceptions of women in society because this change in attitude made it increasingly untenable for the government to deny the vote to women. Therefore this factor was the root cause, as it meant that the eventual enfranchisement of women became inevitable and indeed without this factor, women's views of themselves would not have been changed, and they would not have been inspired to campaign for the franchise. Without this campaigning the government would have had no reason to consider giving the suffrage to women in the first place. Overall, it is clear that the view is not valid as the Suffragettes were the least important factor in women's suffrage, as not only were there other more important factors, but the changing perception of women was the root cause behind all the other factors that eventually led to female suffrage.