Women's Suffrage in Britain: Mobilization of Women Voters during the Interwar Period

حق الاقتراع للمرأة في بريطانيا:

حشد الناخبات خلال فترة ما بين الحربين

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Article info:	Abstract
	This paper examines the relationship between the new women voters and political parties in Britain from 1918 to 1939. After a long fight, the women's suffrage movement reached its main aim. This does not mean, however, that gender equality has been achieved. Suffragists expected a long, hard struggle, and that proved to be the case. During the 1920s and 1930s, the women's movement was even more determined, which allowed certain legislative revisions. The interwar period is a key period in the histories of women and party politics in Britain because it was definitely a period in which women were increasingly involved in British politics. The increased participation of women in the world of politics meant that they would also be concerned with political parties, and these latter had to adapt to the new situation. Political parties were aware of the importance of having the largest number of women voters by their sides because their voices could be decisive. The aim of this paper is not only to discuss the relationship between women and party politics, but also to shed light on what has changed in party politics after some women gained the vote in 1918.

الكلمات المفتاحية:	ملخص
النسوية بريطانيا ما بين الحربين العالميتين الأحزاب السياسية حق المرأة في الاقتراع.	تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين الناخبات الجدد والأحزاب السياسية في بريطانيا من عام 1918 إلى عام 1939. وبعد معركة طويلة ، وصلت حركة حق المرأة في التصويت إلى هدفها الرئيسي. لكن هذا لا يعني أن المساواة بين الجنسين قد تحققت. توقع أنصار حق الاقتراع صراعًا طويلًا وشاقًا، وقد ثبت أن هذا هو الحال. خلال عشرينيات وثلاثينيات القرن الماضي ، كانت الحركة النسائية أكثر تصميماً، مما سمح ببعض التعديلات التشريعية. تعتبر فترة ما بين الحربين العالميتين فترة حاسمة في تاريخ المرأة والسياسة الحزبية في بريطانيا لأنها كانت بالتأكيد فترة شاركت فيها النساء بشكل متزايد في السياسة البريطانية. تعني المشاركة المتزايدة للمرأة في عالم السياسة أنها ستكون معنية أيضًا بالأحزاب السياسية، وكان على هذه الأخيرة أن تتكيف مع الوضع الجديد. كانت الأحزاب السياسية تدرك أهمية وجود أكبر عدد من الناخبات إلى جانبها لأن أصواتهن يمكن أن تكون حاسمة. الهدف من هذه الدراسة ليس فقط مناقشة العلاقة بين المرأة والسياسة الحزبية ، ولكن أيضًا لتسليط الضوء على ما تغير في السياسة الحزبية بعد فوز بعض النساء في التصويت عام 1918.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of suffragists and the women's suffrage movement in general, when campaigning for the right to vote, was for women to become part of the decision-making in politics. Although the enfranchisement of women over 30, householders or wives of householders, took place in 1918 and the complete enfranchisement in 1928, the general election of 1918 remains a turning point in the history of women's suffrage in Britain. Obtaining the right to vote was certainly an achievement, but it was only the beginning of a long fight for women's rights. It is important to know that the vote was a means, not an end in itself, intended to improve the political and social status of women. Political parties had to adapt quickly in order to gain women's confidence and to avoid losing them in favour of an exclusively female political party. Indeed, the mobilization of women voters was crucial during the interwar period (1918-1939). With more and more women involved in public and political life, political parties had to find suitable methods to appeal to the female electorate.

2. Feminism and Suffrage

Stereotyping can be a drawback or an advantage to both genders. Thanks to women's movements, 'Gender' has taken such an impact that it has become an important dimension of research in many fields; it equally helps to raise awareness of how noxious gender discrimination can be (Thane P. M., 2003). The term 'feminism' and women's movements have gone through many tensions. It has not always been accepted by all women regardless of how strongly active they were. Although they campaigned to achieve equal rights such as equal pay and equal opportunities, to some women 'feminism' went hand in hand with aggressiveness and hostility towards men. Dora Marsden commented, "We recognise … that [feminism] is a word which carries a good deal of odium; but it has so established itself that we feel there is nothing for us to do but to employ it and to give it a new significance." (Marsden, Woman's Future, 1911) The association of aggressiveness and hostility towards men with Feminism requires a deeper understanding since most feminists are neither. As a matter of fact, the rejection of the label 'feminist' by some women does not mean the rejection of the idea of gender equality (Thane P. M., 2003).

'To be considered as full citizens' was the main aim of feminists of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Suffrage feminists "accepted the terms of liberal political discourse – that power lay in the vote and thus directed the brunt of their attack on the centralised power of the state." (Kent, Sex and Suffrage 1860-1914, 1987) According to them, women's presence was necessary to run the state. Some feminists demanded equality and women's inclusion; others argued that women's participation in politics would be an advantage. Keir Hardie claimed, "Whilst [women's] influence in politics will be humanising it will also be strengthening, and much of the chicanery and knavery of political life will go down before her direct march upon the actual" (as cited in Villiers, 1907).

During the 19th century, women were involved in their families or communities but hardly in party politics. It was until near the end of the century that the extension of the franchise and the prohibition of paid canvassers pushed parties to invite women to work for the two main political parties. Besides, women participated in socialist groups. Their participation in politics, and contact with parties raised all kinds of questions about what role and responsibility should a woman occupy (Hannam, 1995).

In their attempts to appeal to women, the male-dominated political parties were sending contradictory messages. Hunt, in her study of the Social Democratic Federation, explains that the process of politicization was extremely gendered. The position of women in their homes and their families seemed to be a problem to Socialists because it could delay men's activism. However, the influence that women could have on their families was not negligible; hence, their support was important (Hunt, 1996).

Before the vote, the attitude of the Conservative Party towards women was no less ambiguous. Although it was a male body, the party called for women's mobilization, yet ignoring their needs. This can be noticed in the magazines and literature of the Party. The only times when women were represented

it was as "stimulus to male action in defence of honour and property" (Jarvis, Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in The 1920s., 1994). The Conservative Party was obviously represented by men, and its main focus was men's interests. During the 1900s "domestically centred values articulated by the Primrose League began to gain ground." (Jarvis, Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in The 1920s)

Political parties have attracted large numbers of women to work for them without having the possibility to belong to the main party organizations (as cited in Hunt, 1996). The Primrose League welcomed women (1884), and its purpose was to educate women in politics and to arouse their interest. According to them, women had to work alongside men. Walker explains that the League was willing to encourage women to be responsible and politically aware; however, "the argument that women had a special backroom role to play which was based on the traditional qualities of the old rather than the new woman, postponed the day of equality." (as cited in Hunt, 1996) It can be noted that the Conservative and Liberal auxiliaries helped women get into politics by instructing them its details. Despite the links that may have existed between the leaders of the women's organizations and that of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, women had hitherto played only a mainly auxiliary role that it now seemed necessary to review so that they can participate in the selection of candidates and not only work for them during election campaigns, as had been the case until then (Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux-Guerres en Angleterre, 1998, pp. 230-231).

On the other hand, there were women in the labour movement who supported that women's experiences and interests were completely different from those of men; therefore, separate organizations were necessary. In 1884, the Women's Cooperative Guild was created and it comprised married working-class women. Its aim was to improve maternity care, resolve issues related to divorce and housing (Hannam, 1995). In 1906, the Women's Labour League was created to support the Labour Party. It invited women to help the Labour Party during elections. It strove for the improvement of the social, health and industrial lives of working-class women (Rowan, 1982). Whether feminists or not, all women activists had the same woman-centred approach and all were convinced of women's moral superiority and caring qualities. Nonetheless, the relationship between party political beliefs and feminism remained complex and the combination of both was difficult to manage (Hunt, 1996).

The aim of women who were interested in politics was not merely to participate in the political framework on the same ground as men, but also achieve a revision of political practices. "In so doing they helped to shape twentieth-century concepts of democracy, citizenship and the role of the state. As members of elected public bodies, they infused their work with humanistic values and refused to accept a male version of what local government was all about." (as cited in Hannam, 1995) Philanthropists and social reformers also contributed in shaping new ideas related to the family and the state which were "forged both in relation to their gendered (and often contested) concepts of duty and citizenship and to their shared conviction that on the commitment to social action depended social progress." (as cited in Hannam, 1995) Although initially women were motivated by ideas such as equal rights and the necessity to participate in decisions that impact their lives, certain liberal beliefs about equality and individualism have been challenged by philanthropists and women working in local government who were capable of demonstrating certain values and their sense of moral purpose (Hunt, 1996).

Starting from the 1850s women's involvement in politics consisted in membership of women-only pressure groups. The Women's Local Government Society, the Women's Labour League and the Women's Liberal Federation all dealt with different issues, but when the opportunity arose to campaign together, they did. The one thing they had in common was the conviction that women could be more active citizens and participate significantly in public life (Hunt, 1996).

3. Interwar Period and the Women's Vote

Initially, most women wanted the vote to improve their living conditions and those of their children. Many women came to realise that their philanthropic work could not cope enough with increasing misery; therefore, they were drawn to the campaign for the vote (Prochaska, 1980). Women's role in politics was becoming essential knowing that a male dominated politics could never improve their social conditions. Millicent Fawcett was convinced that "women bring something to the service of the state different to that which can be brought by men" (as cited in Holton, Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918, 1986, p.12). Everyone's contribution was welcome during the war, including women, who benefited from the war experience. "Women have yet fully to learn that however insignificant they may think themselves, in the great world of politics, the possession of the vote endows them with a real significance in the eyes of their representatives or would-be representatives in Parliament." (as cited in Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux-Guerres en Angleterre, 1998, p. 226)

Historians remain sceptical when it comes to the advantages of the war for women. They claim that the war reinforced traditional gender roles (Hilson, 2001). The 1918 election was a good example of the traditional gender roles. Women's experience of war was not based on their own experiences as workers or consumers, but on their relationships to men. Indeed, women who were concerned with the vote were mainly wives and mothers. Furthermore, the participation of this section of women did not mean that women were instantly welcomed to the male dominated world of politics. Politicians in the Labour Party blamed women for their defeat. They believed, however, that when men returned home from war they would vote for Labours. Men were seen as defenders of the nation, while women's citizenship remained tied to their role as defenders of the race (Hilson, 2001).

Many historians addressed the issue of the pre-war suffrage movements, but the issue of post-war suffrage women's politics received less attention. (Hilson, 2001) This can be misleading in the sense that one can think that the woman question ended with the vote of women in 1918, but the struggle was far from its end. Deirdre Beddoe referred to the issue saying, "It is as though "the woman question" was solved in 1918, when women over thirty were "given" the vote" (Beddoe, 1989). Lately, historians working on feminist movements have recognized that the struggle of women continued after the Representation of the People Act in 1918. Beaumont states that the feminist movement certainly witnessed a diminution after 1918, but it succeeded in attracting bigger numbers (Molinari, Educating and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931, 2014). In addition, the reform gave limited possibilities and the movement was aware that much was left to achieve. Brian Harrison asserts, "Women's suffrage has nowhere produced any far-reaching short-term change in the balance of political forces, or even in the relative influence of parties" (Harrison B. , 1987). Harrison points out that the reform of 1918 giving partial enfranchisement was only a way to reinforce the actual political system by integrating women and keeping the same terms (Harrison B. , 1987). The vote was granted to women because men were unable to do so. Most of them went missing, not yet demobilized or died at war. The interests of women were not the centre of the vote; they were only meant to be used as proxies for men (Hilson, 2001).

The interwar period was uncertain. Women became a new factor in politics, and there were doubts about what this new electorate could add to the world of politics. Conservatism, domestic policy and the relations of the nation with the rest of the world all could be influenced. The interwar period was also a time of great change in British party politics. The changes in the world of politics and women's entrance to British politics happened almost simultaneously. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act became law, and the partial enfranchisement of women (women over the age of 30 who were on the local government register, or who were wives of men on the local government register) took place as they were allowed to vote in

parliamentary elections for the first time. During the same period, women benefited from new legislation giving them the opportunity to run as candidates for parliament. The following year, the first female MP was elected (Baxter, 2013).

After gaining the vote, women had different possibilities: stay in single-sex pressure groups, join existing political parties, fight for broader feminist goals, focus on women's interests, or claim equality with men. New organizations were formed, relations between women and political parties were reviewed, and many publications addressed women or 'the new voter'. They were either meant to help a political party gather more voices or to educate women in their new citizenship and to awaken their interest in politics. Enfranchisement was also followed by campaigning for improved health care, housing, education and much else as welfare which was a priority, but not the only objective set by women (Thane P. , 1996).

Events before the interwar period and since the winning of the vote made it difficult for feminists to make progress. Unemployment, Fascism and the risk of a second war were the priority of the time (Kent, Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain, 1993). It became more difficult to be bound together by a common cause; consequently, the movement suffered a division. Feminists could not stay united because it was not possible to agree on a common purpose, or even on the same methods and strategies. The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), which was a new organization based on the former NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), aimed to achieve equal suffrage and "all such other reforms, economic, legislative and social as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women." (Kent, Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain, 1993, p. 116) According to the president of the NUSEC, Eleanor Rathbone, equality could not be reached until social reforms about women's issues, such as special needs as mothers, economic dependence within the family, and other reforms concerning the role of women in the house and the workplace, were dealt with (Smith, 1996). Their aim was not to reach equality with men, but rather use their experience as women in order to achieve their goals. Women who were interested in politics were not involved in feminist groups; they rather took part in more general reform campaigns or in political parties. The new generation of women, who voted for the first time, had no particular interest in female-only issues which they considered demeaning (Bruley, 1986).

4. Women Voters and Political Parties

After 1918, the female electorate became very interesting to the two parties and they started to make efforts to gain their votes. The partial enfranchisement proved a real boon to political parties, which needed to secure the votes of nearly 8.5 million women voters (Hilson, 2001). The participation of the new voters was important in determining the course, and even the outcome, of electoral politics. "It is a commonplace among politicians that the party which first learns how to attract the women's vote will be in power for half a century —but no one yet knows how it is to be done." (as cited in Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux- Guerres en Angleterre, 1998, p. 245)

The Conservatives had been skilled enough when dealing with women's mobilization, thanks to organizations like the Primrose League (Jarvis, Mrs Maggs and Betty: the Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s, 1994). During the 1920s, the conservative women's organisation created a support base for all classes, but association with the cause of preferential trade with the empire allowed formal membership to grow bigger in the years succeeding 1926.The Conservatives appeal to the female electorate relied also greatly on the evocation of patriotism. There were two main reasons why women were drawn to patriotism: the first reason was that it was argued that they could only vote as proxies for men and the second, was because their wartime experiences were to some extent marginalised (Hilson, 2001).

The Conservatives created a magazine to appeal to women voters entitled Home and Politics. David Jarvis provides a description of how the Conservative party saw its women supporters, "Conservative woman was

responsible, not feckless; hard-headed without being hardhearted; dedicated to Empire, not paralysed by misplaced guilt." (Jarvis, Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women, 1994) However, the traditional role of women in the house should not be altered. The aim was to convey the idea that politics of the Conservative Party would not prevail over domestic responsibilities (Bruley, 1986). Moreover, the trade union politics and male dominated culture of the Labour party were arguments constantly used by the Conservative Party in order to influence the home-centred working-class woman (Hunt, 1996).

The political context was different as the Labour party gained more importance and about to become the second main political party, most of the organisations fighting for women's enfranchisement were collapsing and being substituted by women groups, and the newly enfranchised women had different ideas than those of the old generation of feminists (Molinari, Educating and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931, 2014). The Labour Party focused on welfare reforms instead of equality between man and women so as to appeal to female voters. They believed that the women's condition had to change in order to achieve political and social change. Besides, this condition could hamper men's progress as well (Hannam, 1995). The beliefs of the Labour did not discourage women from supporting the Party. As soon as they were allowed to join the new women's sections, they did massively. The number of women who joined the party increased dramatically: in 1920-21 there were between 60,000 and 80,000 women in constituency parties, mainly organized in women's sections, then around 120,000 in 1923, 150,000 in 1924 and, from 1927 to 1939, between 250,000 and 300,000 (as cited in Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux- Guerres en Angleterre, 1998). During the interwar period 50% of the members were women, (Graves, 1994); impressive figures when remember that the Women's Freedom League (WFL) had hardly included more than 4,000 members on the eve of the war. Although the views of the Labour Party based on class were obvious and male trade union dominated, many women including

ex-suffragists joined the Labour Party hoping to put forward their feminist issues (Hunt, 1996). Being a member of the Labour Party meant to support their party policy, especially concerning class issue. Indeed, Ellen Wilkinson, an old member of the NUWSS and a Labour MP, who was highly concerned with industrial workers and the unemployed, was ready to stand for women issues, but only from a class perspective, far from any feminist perspective (Hannam, 1995).

The sections of women in parties were responsible of defining the role played by women in politics (Caine, English Feminism 1780-1980, 1997). But, the challenge of the Labour Party was to bring together the ideology of the male trade unionists and working women (Law, 1997). Nonetheless, the voice of the housewives was important to Labours and considered by some as being essential to their election victory in 1929. The Labours attracted women thanks to ideas they defended such as insurance and development of a consumers' council. Besides, the Labours were a more democratic option to the female voter.

Women activists aspired to bring to light various issues concerning women such as equal pay, better working conditions, women's health and other social reforms. However, when it came to controversial matters, like family allowances and access to birth control advice, trade union movement rejected them (Hunt, 1996). According to Johanna Alberti, working for the Labour Party was not meant to help feminism, and the bond that had been created by women when they were working together for the suffrage movement was lost (Alberti, 1989). Unlike Alberti, Thane thinks that the party supported the use of civil rights by women and their elections to local bodies in order to have an impact on policies. She also points out that women helped to improve health care at local levels, and that it was thanks to them that welfare has become part of the Labour policy. However, she suggests that women's ambitions in the party were greater than their gains. Always faced with the dilemma of women's needs and class unity, women of the Labour Party used to avoid any confrontation with the male leadership of the party (Hunt, 1996).

By the end of the 1920s, the Labours had succeeded in reducing the Conservatives' lead without, however,

ever being able to eliminate it. Both experienced a similar development: rapid growth in the 1920s, peak reached towards the end of the decade, small decline then stabilization in the 1930s. The Liberals, on the other hand, despite the significant importance of the Women's National Liberal Federation (WNLF) at the end of the war, made no attempt, until 1927, to integrate this liberal feminine organization to the general structure of the party. While the Conservatives and Labours had already made major reshuffles which they expected would enable them to be able to considerably increase their female membership, the Liberal Party, at its annual meeting of 1919, devoted to the question only a brief intervention by Mrs. Corbett-Ashby who tried to draw the attention of her colleagues to the important role that can be played by women in the recruitment of women voters (as cited in Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux- Guerres en Angleterre, 1998).

Unlike the two opponent women's organizations, the WNLF did not play a very important role for the party in mobilizing female voters and did not itself experience any expansion: after a sharp decline at the start of the decade (from 95,217 in 1920 to 66,200 in 1924), the number of its members never managed to regain its post-war importance. It is difficult not to see, in this inability of the Liberal Party to adapt and recruit massively among the female electorate, one of the factors of its decline in the interwar period, considering that women's organizations were to play a key role in recruiting new members and, at the time of elections, in mobilizing women voters (Molinari, Les Consequences du Droit de Vote des Femmes dans L'entre-Deux- Guerres en Angleterre, 1998).

During the general election of 1922, there were 33 female candidates, which was a relatively small number; nonetheless, this was considered an accomplishment by the Women's Freedom League, considering that women had been involved in politics for only 4 years. It was not an easy task to convince political parties to select women as candidates (Laura Shepherd-Robinson, 2002). Although the number of women in parliament was small, politicians could not ignore them.

Interwar women's organizations had as objectives to reach new reforms and to educate the new voter. Mobilization of women and the promotion of active citizenship were the missions of women's sections of both parties. The Conservative and Labour parties dreaded the idea that women would form a party for and by women; additionally, the new voters had a great asset to political parties: women had no allegiance to any party. As Nancy Astor maintains, "A woman in many cases has a more courageous and unfettered mind. She is not bound down by traditions; and as women have no political past they will have a clearer political future." (as cited in Hilson, 2001) Great efforts were made by the two parties to rally women's groups to their cause. The women's Labour League and the Women's Unionist Organisation were notably helpful to their parties (Molinari, Educating and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931, 2014). Political parties were well aware that the woman's vote could prove to be a decisive factor in elections.

Some Political scientists assert that women voters were conservative; consequently, they could affect neither legislation nor the political system (Blondel, 1965). As voting is secret, there is a lack of statistical evidence during the interwar period and that is also due mainly to the fact that opinion polls developed only after Second World War (Thane P. M., 2003). It is not known for certain how women voted. Nevertheless, George Bernard Shaw pretends that they "voted for hanging the Kaiser [and] rallied hysterically round the worst male candidates," (Shaw, 1929, p. 452). Different theories can be made about women's political behaviour before 1930s, but it cannot be based on facts as no studies or surveys were made during the interwar period. After the 1928 Representation of the People Act extended the franchise to all British women over the age of twenty-one, the number of female electorate reached 5.24 million. Parties did not miss the opportunity to mobilise women; numbers grew rapidly to reach 250,000-300,000 between 1927-1939 for Labour, and 1 million in 1928 for the Conservatives' Women's Unionist Organisation (as cited in Molinari, Educating

and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931, 2014). The Liberal party, on the other side, excluded the Women's National Liberal Federation until 1927 (Molinari, Educating and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931, 2014).

5. Conclusion

Throughout the period under study, women played an increasingly active role in politics. Their work in different women's organisations has allowed them to gain confidence and experience. Many women argued that change would not happen without participating in mixed-sex political parties. Of course, this could not happen without conflicts about their loyalty to political parties, which could in turn jeopardise women's rights and needs. The challenge of appealing to the female electorate was faced by political parties and politicians from different backgrounds, especially those who were opposed to women's suffrage during the pre-war period.

During the interwar period, and especially during the first general election in 1918, which was the first participation of women as voters, political parties had to adapt to the new situation and find a way to appeal to the new electorate. The success of political parties in appealing to women voters lied in their discourse, which had to stay as far as possible from separatist ideologies of gender and class, but rather send unifying messages of patriotism. Another factor contributing to the success of parties was that the message had to consider the voter as an active participant. Though political parties did a great deal to attract votes and memberships of women voters, they were not always ready, on the other hand, to offer in return concrete answers to their demands.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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