

Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century

What Difference Did the Vote Make?

Edited by
Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane

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IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Contents

List of tables and figures	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Contributors	xi
1 Introduction <i>Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane</i>	1
2 Women and political participation in England, 1918–1970 <i>Pat Thane</i>	11
3 ‘Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies’: the role of the Labour Women’s Sections in shaping political identities, South Wales, 1918–1939 <i>Lowri Newman</i>	29
4 Count up to twenty-one: Scottish women in formal politics, 1918–1990 <i>Catriona Burness</i>	45
5 Scottish women’s organizations and the exercise of citizenship c. 1900–c. 1970 <i>Esther Breitenbach</i>	63
6 The ‘women element in politics’: Irish women and the vote, 1918–2008 <i>Mary E. Daly</i>	79
7 ‘Aphrodite rising from the Waves’: Women’s voluntary activism and the women’s movement in twentieth-century Ireland <i>Lindsey Earner-Byrne</i>	95
8 Conflicting rights: the struggle for female citizenship in Northern Ireland <i>Myrtle Hill and Margaret Ward</i>	113

9	'Apathetic, parochial, conservative'? Women, élite and mass politics from 1979 to 2009 <i>Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs</i>	139
10	Feminist politics in Scotland from the 1970s to 2000s: engaging with the changing state <i>Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay</i>	153
11	Women and political representation in post-devolution Scotland: high time or high tide? <i>Fiona Mackay and Meryl Kenny</i>	171
12	Devolution, citizenship and women's political representation in Wales <i>Paul Chaney</i>	189
13	The refuge movement and domestic violence policies in Wales <i>Nickie Charles</i>	209
	Selected bibliography	227
	Index	235

Tables and Figures

Table 2.1	Women candidates and MPs (UK and N. Ireland)	13
Table 2.2	Municipal councils: representation of women, 1920–70	16
Table 4.1	Scotland: Women MPs, 1918–90	46
Table 8.1	Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, 1998	131
Table 9.1	MPs elected to the House of Commons, 1983–2005, by sex and party	140
Figure 9.1	Sex and turnout at general elections, 1964–2005	147
Table 11.1	Scottish Parliament 2007 by party, gender and type of seat	177
Figure 11.1	Proportion of women among MSPs, by party, 1999–2007	178
Figure 11.2	Proportion of women candidates, by party, 1999–2007	179
Table 11.2	Percentage of women elected by date of election and type of elected office	184
Table 12.1	Women candidates and elected AMs: 1999 elections to National Assembly for Wales	193
Table 12.2	Women candidates and elected AMs: 2003 elections to National Assembly for Wales	193
Table 12.3	Women candidates and elected AMs: 2007 elections to National Assembly for Wales	194
Table 12.4	Gender equality: content analysis of party manifestos in the devolved elections, 1999–2007	196
Table 12.5	The incidence of key terms featuring in political debate recorded in the Official Record of the first term of the National Assembly for Wales, 1999–2003	199
Table 12.6	Social policy divergence: welfare support, funding and regulation in Wales	204

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Introduction

Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane

The enfranchisement of women in Britain and Ireland in the early twentieth century was a defining moment in the acquisition of rights of political citizenship for women, putting them formally on an equal footing with men. But the exercise of such political rights remained differentiated by gender, since civil and social rights, acquired both before and since enfranchisement, have only slowly eroded gender inequalities in access to power. Indeed, there is a continuing asymmetry in the capacity of men and women to exercise their formal rights of political citizenship, illustrated by the under-representation of women in formal political institutions. Throughout the twentieth century the language of citizenship and rights has been articulated differently by women at different times in different contexts, but, as this book shows, from their acquisition of the vote onwards women have sought to make a reality of their rights of citizenship.

Inevitably, a collection such as this cannot provide a comprehensive account of women's political action in Britain and Ireland throughout the twentieth century, not least because both historiographical and contemporary research still have substantial gaps. We believe, however, that, as it stands, this collection serves as a useful corrective to a commonly accepted view of women's relative lack of interest in politics between the 1920s and the late 1960s and to the belief in a decline in women's activism since the 1980s. The women's suffrage movement and the Women's Liberation Movement are often described as 'first' and 'second wave' feminism respectively, a terminology criticized for implying that there were no forms of feminist action between the 1920s and the late 1960s. Since the purpose of this book is to examine women's activity in what may be broadly defined as political processes throughout the twentieth century, it is evident that we do not subscribe to a view of women's periodic political dormancy. Nonetheless, women's activism has taken place in changing constitutional, political and social contexts, which have presented both opportunities and obstacles and necessitated adaptation from women's organizations. Many women's organizations have exhibited patterns of expansion and decline over time, with discontinuities between generations of organizations. The patchwork of women's activities throughout the century shows division and fragmentation as well as the emergence of broad alliances around particular issues from time

to time. The metaphor of 'waves' of feminism thus reflects the changing dynamic of women's mobilization at different times rather than describing alternating periods of activism and dormancy.

WOMEN AND FORMAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

By the early twentieth century there were active campaigns for women's suffrage across Britain and Ireland. Also by this period women were acquiring the right to stand for election for local public office, such as membership of school boards, Poor Law Guardians, and some other local authorities. Women's representation in such bodies was to gain considerable impetus from enfranchisement, which was local as well as national. The forms of public institutions, criteria for eligibility for election, and the timing of women's access differed across Britain and Ireland, while reforms to local government structures, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, tended to reduce opportunities for women to stand for office at this level. However, women became an established part of local government from the 1920s, though their representation remained low until the 1960s and 1970s. The historiography of women in local government is limited and further research is needed, particularly since local government has served as a training ground for political office at national level.

At the time of women's enfranchisement in Britain there was speculation as to how women would vote, whether as a bloc for a particular party or whether women's parties would emerge. Consequently, the major political parties made efforts to attract women voters and members, often creating special structures for women, such as women's sections. This interest in women as voters and members was not necessarily sustained, though it has re-emerged periodically. Women have not voted as a bloc, rather demonstrating allegiance to political parties on broadly similar lines to men, though at times with apparent divergences. For example, in 1950s Britain, women were more likely than men to vote Conservative, which seems to have given rise to a myth of women's innate political conservatism. More recently, in Scotland, several surveys have indicated that support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) is stronger among men than women, though the SNP shows little sign of wishing to address this gender imbalance. Only in recent decades have reliable survey data allowed a gender analysis of voting behaviour – data on UK general elections indicate no significant differences between men's and women's voting preferences since the 1980s. For earlier decades, other forms of evidence need to be investigated, such as press reports, though this is unlikely to prove conclusive.

A further question concerns the propensity of women and men to join parties. Those who join political parties, whether male or female, have only ever been a small proportion of the population, but men appear to have been more likely than women to join. The gender distribution of party membership is difficult to establish. If parties, anxious about decline, are currently wary of publishing membership figures, historical evidence indicates that women's membership

of political parties rapidly became substantial after enfranchisement, and that women were sometimes the majority of members in specific localities, as for example, in some Welsh and English Labour Party branches in the inter-war years. The role of women in building party support and organization has often been reduced to the dismissive stereotype of 'making the tea'. While there was typically a gender division of labour among party activists, and women occupied a less powerful position within party hierarchies, this is a caricature that obscures the real importance of women's contribution to the development of party political cultures and solidarity. The life of the party could embrace families and generations, as observed of the Labour Party in Wales, and this was likely to be true elsewhere of the Labour Party, of the Communist Party, such as the 'Little Moscovs' in the mining communities of Scotland and South Wales, and of the socializing dimension of the Conservative Party's Primrose League. In Northern Ireland, political allegiances have been deeply embedded in community and social life, with women actively maintaining loyalties in Protestant or Catholic communities.

Perhaps one reason for the focus of historians and political scientists in studies of women and politics on numbers of women in parliaments is that this provides a definite measure, while other dimensions of women's political activity cannot be systematically quantified over time, whether voting behaviour or party membership. Nor are there data systematically comparing women's representation in local government across Britain and Ireland for this period. Existing evidence on local government suggests that women's representation has tended to be higher than at parliamentary level for as long as women have been eligible for election. However, with the creation of the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament the rule that the lower the level of government the higher the level of women's representation was overturned.

In recent decades, neither the UK nor Ireland has performed well in international comparisons of levels of women's representation in national parliaments. The later decades of the twentieth century did, however, witness increases in levels of women's representation in the Dáil and in the Westminster Parliament, as in many other countries. It was notably an Irish achievement to elect the first woman to the Westminster Parliament, Sinn Féin member Constance Markievicz, who refused to take her seat. The political settlement in Ireland in the 1920s saw the creation of the Irish Free State, later the Republic of Ireland, the partition of Ireland with the retention of the six counties of Ulster as part of the UK, and a devolved parliament at Stormont, which sat from 1920 to 1972. However, the political turmoil of the 1920s in Ireland caused leading women political activists to exclude themselves from high political office, because of their opposition to aspects of the constitutional settlement. This, and the dominance of a Catholic ideology firmly placing women in the home and enshrined in the 1937 constitution, led to an overwhelming male dominance within the Dáil until the 1960s. While the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement boosted campaigning for women's representation, the work of earlier women's

organizations led to the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women, which first reported in 1972. Between 1977 and 1997 the proportion of women deputies in the Dáil increased, though it seems to have reached a plateau thereafter. Family connections and the cultivation of a personal vote, significant characteristics of Irish politics, appear to obstruct women's political careers, as the time commitment needed to foster constituency support is often too great for women with caring responsibilities.

Between 1920 and 1972, 20 women stood for election to Stormont and nine were elected. In the inter-war years no women were elected to Westminster from Northern Ireland, while between 1945 and 1972 three women were elected to Westminster – two Unionists, and, most famously, nationalist candidate Bernadette Devlin in 1969. Following Bloody Sunday in 1972, the British government imposed direct rule on Northern Ireland, removing political representation within Northern Ireland and subsequently curtailing the powers of local government, effectively disenfranchising large sections of the population.

Low levels of women's representation at Westminster also characterized England, Scotland and Wales between 1918 and the end of the century. Only in 1997 did women's representation at Westminster see a marked rise to 18 per cent, still relatively low by international standards. By the late 1980s, debates about women's representation in politics were becoming widespread, especially among Labour Party activists. Women's success in getting All Women Shortlists adopted by the Labour Party was a major factor in increasing women's representation. Following the challenge to All Women Shortlists under the Sex Discrimination Act, the Labour government amended the Act in 2002 to enable political parties to take action to increase women's representation. Equality guarantees remain controversial, however, and increases in women's representation, or even maintenance of the current level, are not guaranteed at the anticipated election in 2010.

Debates about women's representation became a key part of devolution campaigns in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The political opportunities created by constitutional reform have proved favourable for increasing women's political representation, as in other countries. In Scotland and Wales, though campaigns and political cultures differed considerably, the adoption of specific measures to increase women's representation achieved this success, most notably the Labour Party practice of the twinning of seats. These were the outcome of campaigns and negotiations by women's organizations. In Northern Ireland the formation of the Women's Coalition was crucial in securing seats for women at the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and in embedding gender and other equality commitments within this. While the devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland has had a troubled history, enduring a period of suspension, it has also seen women's representation rise, compared with the previous record in Stormont and at Westminster, though it remains lower than that in Wales and Scotland.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL CHANGE

The years following women's partial enfranchisement in 1918 saw further campaigning for full enfranchisement and the flourishing of new women's organizations. In Britain, many suffrage organizations transformed themselves into Women Citizens' Associations and Societies for Equal Citizenship, while organizations such as the Women's Institutes in England and Women's Rural Institutes in Scotland, established during the First World War, were similarly concerned with educating women in the rights of citizenship and how to use them. Working-class organizations, such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, similarly promoted active citizenship. Training women in practical skills such as public speaking; supporting women as candidates for local government or parliament; and educational activities on economic and social questions were common practices of women's sections of political parties also. A plethora of organizations emerged at national, regional and local levels, concerned with a wide range of issues, including married women's rights to property, divorce law reform, women's right to sit on juries (introduced in 1919 in England and Wales, and in 1920 in Scotland), the need for women police officers, maternal and child welfare, equal pay and women's working conditions, the marriage bar in employment, and much more. Contraception and abortion were campaigning issues, as was sexual abuse of women and children. Male-dominated institutions, whether political parties, the police or the courts, were reluctant to acknowledge women's needs or demands for action, and it was not until the 1960s that such issues became matters of wide public debate. The Women's Liberation Movement played a crucial role in making reproductive rights and sexual and physical abuse key areas of public policy.

Historical research into women's organizations in the inter-war period suggests that there was flourishing culture of associational life across Britain, among men as well as women, and that such organizations influenced legislative change and local provision, such as health facilities for women and nurseries for children. Assessing the precise impact of such organizations is unavoidably difficult and the different patterns of activity in different parts of Britain need research. Women's organizations in England are known to have lobbied for legislative change in the 1920s and 1930s, but there is as yet no systematic comparison with Scotland or Northern Ireland, for which legislation was often separately enacted. While research on women's organizations in Northern Ireland in this period remains particularly limited, groups such as the Belfast Women's Citizens' Union promoted women's participation in public life, and women appear to have continued to play an active role in philanthropic and religious organizations.

In Ireland, the Irish Women's Citizens' Association, established in 1918, emerged directly from the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association, and was eventually absorbed into the Irish Housewives' Association, founded in 1942. In the 1920s the National Women's Council was formed to promote reforms relating to women and children, while women's organizations lobbied for the right to sit on juries, which they gained in 1927. In the 1930s the

Irish Women's Social and Progressive League was established to challenge the 1937 Constitution's definition of women's primary role as being in the home. The Irish Countrywomen's Association, the largest civil organization in Ireland, aimed to improve living conditions for women in rural Ireland, though it did not challenge traditional views of gender relations. Both ICA and IHA were non-denominational, though led by Protestant women, which in Catholic Ireland meant absence of official government support. Such organizations did, nonetheless, secure improvements for women, though, in the face of religious divisions and Catholic family ideology, were less successful than women's organizations in Britain in influencing legislative change.

The Women's Liberation Movement was to emerge across Britain and Ireland within a few years from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. 'Second wave' women's movements internationally have shared a common agenda of equal rights, equal opportunities, reproductive rights, and challenging violence against women. However, political and cultural contexts varied across Britain and Ireland, shaping the emphasis, tactics and strategies, and successes of women's movements in different countries. This book provides neither a comprehensive account of 'second wave' feminism – the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and feminist action in succeeding decades – across the four nations, nor a systematic assessment of its impact, both areas in need of more investigation. However, several chapters advance claims for the impact of second wave feminism, for example, in enhancing women's representation in political institutions across Britain and Ireland; in influencing policy debates in Ireland on contraception, abortion, violence against women, and divorce; in generating a flourishing network of women's groups and influencing the peace process and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland; and in shaping the policy agenda in Scotland and Wales since devolution. Contemporary analyses by sociologists and political scientists delineate the concerted and sustained action required to place 'strategic women' in positions where they can change policy, but also underline the persistent resistance to gender equality. Gains in representation may be insecure and feminist policy agendas can be co-opted and perhaps neutralized, even where implementation has been apparently successful.

CONCLUSION

This collection has aimed to explore the experience of women in politics – formal and informal – across the four nations of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. The respective jurisdictions within Britain and Ireland are not evenly covered, with England having the lowest profile. To some extent this reflects the still too common belief that evidence relating to England can unproblematically be thought of as evidence about 'British' society, politics and history. Ironically, this has led to scholarly neglect of specifically English experience. Though the demise of the 'British' women's movement has sometimes been lamented, as elsewhere in the UK there has been continuity of feminist action in various parts

of England, whether the rejuvenated Fawcett Society based in London, black and Asian women's organizations in Leicester, Manchester, Birmingham, Brixton and elsewhere, Women's Aid groups across England, or feminist influence within the trade union movement and local government. This provides a strong argument for further comparative research, not just at 'national' level, but at regional and local levels, between areas with strong regional identities, such as Yorkshire or the North East or South West of England, and between cities.

Both the similarities and the national and regional distinctiveness that a comparative perspective reveals add to our understanding of women's changing status. Taking the long view of women's political activity, broadly defined, there are similarities in timing, forms of organization, and issues around which women have mobilized. Both the women's suffrage movement and the Women's Liberation Movement were international phenomena, in which women across Britain and Ireland took part. Women-only organizations were characteristic of these movements, though they also had male supporters. After gaining the vote, suffragists created a new generation of organizations focusing on the rights of citizenship, which was accompanied by a flourishing of women's associational culture from the 1920s, continuing even into the 1950s, a period in which women's activism has been believed to have been almost non-existent. Many such organizations encouraged active citizenship, though they were more differentiated in their objectives than were suffrage campaigns, concerned as they were with a range of policy issues and special interests. Women's entry into formal politics also took place in similar ways and at similar times, such as women's entry to local public office. After 1918 women used their votes, joined political parties, and stood for election, gaining representation at Westminster and in the Dáil, though this remained at low levels for all parts of Ireland and Britain until late in the twentieth century. 'Second wave' feminism led to increasingly vocal concern with women's representation in formal political institutions by the late 1980s. Since then, increases in representation have taken place, though unevenly across nations and parties, and the debate goes on as to how to achieve parity.

There have, however, been differences. Women in Ireland, North and South, have found it harder to increase their political representation. Periods of conflict, the nature of political party systems, and the influence of religion in shaping views of women's role, have all contributed to this situation. Changing the law on divorce, and provision of contraception and abortion, proved more achievable reforms in Britain, with Northern Ireland remaining closer to the Republic in its moral values and attitudes to gender roles. Increases in women's participation in the labour market and reductions in family size, which were general trends across industrialized countries in the later twentieth century, and which have underpinned demands for gender equality, emerged later in Ireland than in Britain. This is not to say that it is only in Ireland that religion has been influential, but its impact elsewhere is less clear. The Calvinist heritage in Scotland has been seen as creating a more patriarchal and morally authoritarian culture than in England, and there is some evidence for this view, such as the later liberalization of the

law on homosexuality in Scotland. Furthermore, religious belief remained an important motive for women's involvement in public life in inter-war Britain as well as Ireland, whether in philanthropic organizations, the temperance movement, or organizations such as the National Vigilance Association. The different legislative frameworks within the UK have also meant that legal reform has not proceeded simultaneously in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For example, divorce law reform occurred later in Scotland than in England and Wales, women had to campaign to have the Sex Discrimination Act extended to cover Northern Ireland, and the 1967 Abortion Act does not yet apply there.

Women's actions as citizens have been conditioned by the nature of the states which govern the territories in which they live. Within the twentieth century both Irish and British states have witnessed major processes of reconfiguration: Irish independence and partition of Ireland with the six counties of Northern Ireland remaining in the United Kingdom; devolution of power to Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1972, then a period of direct rule, followed by a new devolution settlement in 1999; growing administrative devolution to Scotland over the twentieth century, followed by political devolution in 1999; devolution to Wales in 1999, with increasing powers subsequently devolved, as Wales aspires to powers similar to those of the Scottish Parliament. There have been local government reforms and reorganizations within all jurisdictions, and enhancement of the state's role in welfare provision. Membership of the European Union has also shaped economic development. In the Republic of Ireland it has led to major economic and social change, and influenced the regulation of women's employment conditions across Britain and Ireland. Such reconfigurations of the state have not always operated to create opportunities for women's access to political institutions. For example, the creation of an independent state in Ireland and partition of the North from the South reduced opportunities for women's political representation, while recent constitutional changes in the UK, the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, have provided opportunities for women to increase their political representation.

That women's representation in political institutions has increased very slowly is indisputable, given that full enfranchisement of women on equal terms with men was achieved in Ireland in 1922 and in the UK in 1928. Nonetheless, both the role of women in formal political institutions and the status of the positions they occupy have increased over time. Although representation in formal political institutions is a significant measure of women's exercise of the rights of citizenship, it is not the only means by which women can engage with politics and the state, nor the only means by which they can influence policy. This collection challenges the historical orthodoxy that, after gaining the vote, women had little impact upon political life until the late twentieth century. It explores the range of women's political activities across Britain and Ireland throughout the century, within the limitations of existing research, and it aims to encourage further research. Through political reforms, legislative change and public provision of welfare, women have acquired increased autonomy, greater economic

independence, more control over reproduction and greater access to political power. Political parity, economic equality, and full control by women of their own bodies are yet to be achieved, but we can take encouragement from the historical record of women's collective action. Changing patterns of organization and mobilization are evident, but if fragmentation has occurred, so has regeneration and renewal. Above all, what the record shows is the continuing commitment of women to active citizenship.

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Women and political participation in England, 1918–1970

Pat Thane

BEFORE THE VOTE

Women who were independent householders – mainly better-off widows and unmarried women – gained the municipal vote in England and Wales in 1869 and the county council vote in 1888. This also enabled them to vote for the existing separate local Poor Law Boards and for School Boards, when the latter were established in England and Wales in 1870. About one million women were eligible to vote at local level by 1900. Women voters were immediately eligible for election to Education Boards, until their abolition in 1902, when there were about 270 elected female members. Women bitterly opposed the abolition and persuaded the Conservative government to require the co-optation of at least one woman to each of the local authority Education Committees that succeeded them, an unusual act of positive discrimination – in a field of activity defined as firmly within ‘women’s sphere’ – which increased the numbers of women members to 679 by 1914–15, though ‘few boards appointed more women than they had to.’¹ After a struggle, women succeeded in being, gradually, elected to Poor Law Boards, which survived until 1929. Eighty were elected in 1890, 893 in 1895, and, after a further extension of the local franchise for men and women, 1,546 by 1914–15. Women were not permitted to stand for election for town or county councils before 1907: 48 had gained election by 1914–15.²

This experience in local government spurred some women to demand the national vote also, though others argued that women’s political role should be confined to the local, largely social service-oriented, sphere, for which they were assumed to have a special aptitude.³ However, women played an important role in elections – national as well as local – before they had the national vote. Élite and aristocratic women had long exerted influence in elections based on a very restricted male franchise.⁴ The expanded male franchise following the 1884 Reform Act spurred the political parties to canvass and organize the new, larger, more complex electorate, leading to the formation of the mass political parties that dominated much of twentieth century politics. For this purpose women were useful, and the parties organized women’s associations which grew rapidly. The Women’s Liberal Federation grew from 1886 to a membership of 133,215 in