

MAPPING WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE 1911

SUFFRAGE SOCIETY GUIDE

Below is a guide to the women's suffrage societies currently featured on the suffrage map. More societies will be added to the guide as the map develops.

NUWSS - NATIONAL UNION OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE SOCIETIES

The NUWSS was a law-abiding society that officially formed in 1897 bringing together over 500 local suffrage societies from across the country. In 1907, it underwent a root and branch reorganisation under the leadership of Mrs Millicent Fawcett and emerged as a much more effective society and the largest in the Votes for Women campaign.

The NUWSS was persistent in petitioning, lobbying, and pressuring Members of Parliament to grant women the vote throughout the campaign and also ran an effective outreach programme holding summer schools and other events across the country to educate people about the benefits of women having the vote. The NUWSS also organised large processions and a huge tour around the country in 1913 known as the 'Women's Pilgrimage'.

At first, the law abiding NUWSS was sympathetic with the law breaking 'suffragettes' of the WSPU whose early tactics of heckling and disrupting government meetings captured press attention reinvigorating public interest in the long running campaign. However, the NUWSS was totally opposed to the escalation of suffragette tactics to more violent methods – later this included a campaign of arson and even bombings – which it believed was harming public and political support for votes for women.

Politically, the NUWSS was closely aligned with the governing Liberal Party despite its consistent refusal to grant Votes for Women. However, in 1912, the NUWSS effectively gave up on the Liberal Party and instead began supporting candidates of the parliamentary Labour Party helping them to win local and parliamentary seats by raising money through an Election Fighting Fund. This switch by the NUWSS happened because the Labour Party had by then committed to supporting votes for women in parliament.

When the partial vote was finally granted to some qualified women in 1918, the NUWSS changed its name to the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and continued to work for the political equality of women and men and for gender equality more broadly. Women finally got to vote on the same terms as men in 1928.

WSPU - WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

The WSPU was founded in Manchester in 1903 by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and several other women frustrated at the lack of progress on Votes for Women after years of peaceful campaigning. The WSPU had its roots in the working-class labour movement and was willing to break the law for the cause. Its tactics often described as 'militancy' began with its members and leaders heckling and disrupting speeches by government ministers typically shouting out 'Votes for Women!' or putting unsolicited questions about votes for women to the speaker. This behaviour deemed 'unladylike' at the time, captured newspaper headlines and drew fresh attention to the women's cause. By 1906, the WSPU moved its headquarters to London - the country's political epicentre – to step up their headline grabbing activities or 'spectacle' politics. The society organised

mass processions and demonstrations to show women's demand for the vote; held 'raids' on the House of Commons; and 'suffragettes' as they became known, publicly 'confronted' cabinet ministers opposed to women's suffrage outside their homes and even on holiday leading to numerous arrests.

WSPU militancy escalated further when government promises made on votes for women were repeatedly broken. A campaign of arson and vandalism, window smashing and targeted building bombings began, with suffragettes deliberately seeking arrest and imprisonment. Numerous suffragettes went on hunger strike in prison to protest their treatment as 'criminal' rather than 'political' prisoners and then as a tactic to secure early release. This led the government to introduce forcible feeding for suffragettes and the 'Cat and Mouse Act' which allowed suffragettes who became ill through a cycle of hunger striking and/or brutal force feeding, to be temporarily released from prison then rearrested upon recovery [For more information about the Act and Forcible Feeding, see our Suffrage Glossary]. Undertaking risky militant stunts to draw attention to the votes for women cause led to the death of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison who was trampled under the King's horse at Epsom Derby in 1913.

When war broke out in 1914, suffragettes still imprisoned were released and given 'amnesty' by the government, so long as they stopped suffragette activity and helped the war effort instead. At the behest of WSPU leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst who fully supported the war, many ceased votes for women campaigning but others broke away and formed new votes for women societies.

WFL - WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE

In 1907 a split occurred within the WSPU chiefly because the Pankhurst's changed the society's democratic decision-making process to a more autocratic model which they believed better suited their plans for more direct, militant action. The WSPU leadership had also begun to move away from its roots in the working-class labour movement. Several WSPU women led by Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Greig wished to keep the democratic constitution and were unhappy with the WSPU's new policy which decreed that it would not undertake campaign work on behalf of Labour Party candidates standing in elections. Consequently, this group of WSPU women formed a new break away society called the Women's Freedom League (WFL) which was headed by elected leader Charlotte Despard. The WFL operated under a democratic constitution and retained very close ties with the labour movement and Labour Party. The society engaged in its own 'militant' or law-breaking acts but generally favoured strategic acts of civil disobedience such as tax and census resistance, rather than more violent and destructive methods employed by the WSPU later in the campaign. As its name implies, the WFL had a much broader agenda than just campaigning for votes for women, working for women's equal pay, access to professions and beneficial social reforms. The WFL continued campaigning for votes for women (though it suspended militant activity) during the First World War and inaugurated the Women's Police Volunteers after the Home Office refuse to let women enrol as special constables. The WFL continued to campaign for women's equal voting rights with men until it was achieved under the Equal Franchise Act, in 1928.

CUWFA - CONSERVATIVE AND UNIONIST WOMEN'S FRANCHISE ASSOCIATION

The CUWFA was founded in 1908 with the purpose of forming 'a bond of union between all Conservatives and Unionists who are in favour of the removal of the sex qualification and the extension of the franchise (vote) to all duly qualified women.' This women's suffrage society was aligned with the Conservative and Unionist Party which represented a coalition formed in 1866 between the Conservative Party and a faction

of the governing Liberal Party that was against Home Rule in Ireland (see glossary on Home Rule). The Conservative and Unionist Party coalition eventually split in 1922 and what remained we now know as the modern Conservative Party.

CLWS - CHURCH LEAGUE FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

The CLWS was founded in 1909 with the aim of bringing together, on a non-party basis, 'suffragists of every shade of opinion who are church people in order to secure for women the vote in Church and State'. The peaceful methods used for CLWS campaigning for the vote were described as 'devotional and educational'. The CLWS produced several pamphlets arguing why the church should support the votes for women campaign, and at the same time, challenged the suppression of women's voices within the church. This often-meant tackling church leaders, not all of whom were keen to hear women's voices in politics or in church matters, although many ordinary clergymen were supportive of votes for women with some playing prominent roles in the campaign.

MLWS - MEN'S LEAGUE FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Many men supported votes for women and worked alongside female colleagues to help them achieve it. Some men organised their own societies in support of the cause as the campaign gathered momentum. The MLWS was founded in 1907 by Herbert Jacobs with the aim of encouraging men to use their electoral power and privilege – their votes - to help obtain votes for women on the same terms as men. The MLWS was law abiding in its methods which consisted mostly of propaganda work – sending letters and deputations to MP's and prospective parliamentary candidates arguing for women's right to vote and holding suffrage meetings. Nevertheless, it also supported law breaking women's suffrage organisations the WFL and the WSPU whenever it could. Many of the MLWS leading figures were professional men such as solicitors, writers and doctors.

For more information visit: www.mappingwomensuffrage.org.uk