



# War and the political zeitgeist: Evidence from the history of female suffrage

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the upheaval associated with warfare, empirical evidence linking conflict with institutional development is limited. This paper examines the hypothesis that international wars accelerated democratization by fostering political inclusion. Employing survival analysis, I find that during the 20th century, nations engaging in external conflict were more than twice as likely to extend the franchise to women in the post-conflict period, even after controlling for other commonly cited determinants of suffrage adoption. I explore several potential mechanisms for this association and find evidence consistent with stories which connect war with increased national unity, ideological fervor, and international posturing. Finally, examining conflict-induced changes in sex ratios and female labor force participation suggests that the underlying determinants of suffrage expansion at the national and sub-national level differ.

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## 1. Introduction

The 20th century witnessed a remarkable expansion of voting rights, with 187 of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations granting female suffrage. While by all accounts this represents one of the most rapid and dramatic advancements in democracy and human rights in recorded history, the underlying determinants of women's suffrage expansion are not well established. This issue is challenging to address empirically, particularly in cross-sectional analysis. Apart from isolated cases such as the United States and the United Kingdom, relevant historical data are largely non-existent and the prevailing wisdom contends that successful national suffrage campaigns contain too many idiosyncrasies for generalization. The present analysis seeks to overcome these obstacles by focusing on one major catalyst of suffrage expansion for which detailed historical records do exist: inter-state warfare.

Recent research suggests that many female suffrage extensions occurred during periods of political turmoil, such as in the years ensuing independence from colonial rule or in those following international conflicts (Aidt and Dallal, 2008; Przeworski, 2008; Braun and Kvasnicka, 2009; Ticchi and Vindigni, 2009; Bertocchi, 2011; Aidt and Jensen, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Using survival analysis, I show that participation in external conflict by a nation previously lacking female suffrage more than doubles the probability of female

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of conflict, Przeworski (2008), Bertocchi (2011), and Aidt and Jensen (2012) suggest that suffrage extensions were more common during post-war years than during pre-war periods. Similarly, Aidt and Dallal (2008) and Braun and Kvasnicka (2009) argue that the timing of the World Wars matches that of suffrage expansion for a number of states. Acemoglu and Robinson (2000, 2001) explore the possibility that the elite extended franchise to limit social unrest and revolutionary sentiment.

enfranchisement in the immediate post-conflict period, even after controlling for other commonly theorized determinants of suffrage expansion. Furthermore, this effect persists, with nations experiencing an elevated hazard rate of suffrage adoption over the subsequent decade post conflict. Despite the strength of this connection, the causal mechanisms underlying this association have been the focus of limited empirical examination, although some attention has been paid to this subject in theoretical exercises such as those in [Ticchi and Vindigni \(2005, 2009\)](#). This paper provides a detailed exploration of these underlying channels.

The evidence presented here suggests that participation in an external war likely increased the benefit of enfranchisement from the perspective of the existing elite. Using observable characteristics of the international conflicts themselves to discern the channels through which this relationship operates suggests that war brings to the forefront issues of ideology and democracy on the international stage and facilitates national unity and political cooperation on the home front. I show that these factors appear to have a larger impact on suffrage expansion at the national level than conflict induced changes in sex ratios and in female labor force participation.<sup>2</sup> These results also suggest that factors which have been identified as important for sub-national suffrage expansion are different than those at the national level, implying that distinct theory may be needed to explain institutional change in each setting.

A closely related strand of literature examines the determinants of female suffrage expansion empirically.<sup>3</sup> [Braun and Kvasnicka \(2009\)](#) evaluate this decision among US states and show that states with sex ratios skewed in favor of men were more likely to extend suffrage, suggesting an important role for the relative size of a population in influencing the cost of enfranchisement. The authors also find that states with larger manufacturing sectors and higher levels of Catholicism were less likely to extend suffrage. In a cross-country setting, [Bertocchi \(2011\)](#) studies female suffrage expansions among a sample of 22 countries over the period 1870 to 1930 and shows that richer countries were more likely to extend female suffrage earlier while more Catholic countries and countries where women already had the ability to divorce were less likely to do so.<sup>4</sup> She also finds that the inclusion of a dummy for 1920 is positive and significant, suggesting that World War I might have accelerated the timing of suffrage, but finds no statistical significance to the interaction between this variable and other regressors. Perhaps the clearest empirical effort connecting suffrage and war is that of [Przeworski \(2008\)](#), which individually includes covariates in a set of probit models to evaluate existing theories of democratization across multiple types of suffrage expansion (e.g. gender, class, universal). The author documents a positive connection between the removal of class requirements on suffrage and unrest, between all types of suffrage expansion (male, female, universal) and war, and a negative association between level of Catholicism and female suffrage.

This research also builds on an existing literature examining the role of war in effecting institutional change more broadly. In their analysis of civil war, [Blattman and Miguel \(2010, p. 42\)](#) argue that “the social and institutional legacies of conflict are arguably the most important but least understood of all war impacts.” Conflict is disruptive to the established social order and the historical genesis of numerous economic and political institutions has been shown to be fundamentally intertwined with warfare. For instance, conflict has been associated with the development of the nation state itself ([Lane, 1958; Bean, 1973](#)). Similarly, economists have suggested that the need to raise revenue to fund war coffers spurred the development of constitutions, capital markets, provision of public services and taxation capacity ([North and Weingast, 1989; Besley and Persson, 2008; Dincecco, 2011; Dincecco et al., 2011](#)). Furthermore, existing work shows that the vacuum created by conscription on the factory floor positively influenced female labor force participation and relative wages ([Abott, 1917; Goldin, 1991; Acemoglu et al., 2004](#)).

Related studies have shown that underlying economic conditions can have an important impact on gender equality, with the relative value of male and female labor being used to explain skewed sex ratios, differences in female labor force participation across countries, and attitudes toward women in the workplace ([Qian, 2008; Alesina et al., 2013](#)). In the same vein, periods of war present a plausibly exogenous shock to labor market opportunities for women, to existing institutions, and to social norms governing acceptable behavior. War could promote gender equality and thus foster suffrage through many channels, such as by changing relative wages, by altering the sex ratio through the disproportionate loss of males in combat, or by creating political upheaval and opportunities for constitutional reform (for example, following regime change or the creation of a new state).

While expanded suffrage can be viewed as an important constitutive component of development in and of itself, the inclusion of female voters into the electorate has also been shown to influence political and economic outcomes. Research spanning many settings, including U.S. state governments ([Lott and Kenny, 1999](#)), Switzerland ([Abrams and Settle, 1999](#)), Western Europe ([Aidt and Dallal, 2008](#)), Swedish municipalities ([Svaleryd, 2009](#)), and Latin America ([Aidt and Eterovic, 2011](#)), has found that female suffrage marked a political turning point because median female preferences helped expand the size and role of government. This conclusion is echoed in [Bertocchi \(2011\)](#) who builds a model in which women display stronger preference for public goods, and in [Braun and Kvasnicka \(2009\)](#) who suggest that US states with larger manufacturing bases initially resisted female suffrage because female voters were more likely to push for labor laws. Similarly, [Grier and Maldonado \(2012\)](#), in an analysis of Latin American economies, argue that suffrage expansions and the corresponding accumulation of experience with electoral participation have a strong positive influence on subsequent institutional development.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) describes data construction and presents summary statistics on suffrage and war. [Section 3](#) documents a robust association between war and suffrage expansion using hazard analysis. [Section 4](#) considers historical evidence linking female suffrage and war and explores potential mechanisms through which war could have influenced suffrage extension. [Section 5](#) concludes.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, this research is complementary to the studies of [Engerman and Sokoloff \(2003\)](#), [Lizzeri and Persico \(2004\)](#), and [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000, 2001\)](#), which emphasize the important role played by an established elite in franchise extension.

<sup>3</sup> Outside economics empirical examinations of suffrage expansion can be found in [Ramirez et al. \(1997\)](#), [McCammon et al. \(2001\)](#) and [Przeworski \(2008\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> Restricting her sample to this set of countries allows for the inclusion of a very rich set of covariates.

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