



# Men, women, and the ballot: Gender imbalances and suffrage extensions in the United States

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## Abstract

Women's suffrage led to one of the greatest enfranchisements in history. Voting rights, however, were not won by force or threats thereof, a fact leading political economy theories find hard to explain. Studying the timing of suffrage extensions in US states between 1869 and 1919, we find that a scarcity of women strongly promoted early transitions to women's suffrage. Such scarcity significantly reduced the political costs and risks for male grantors of the suffrage. It might also have made women's suffrage attractive as a means to attract more women.

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'Sex antagonism [...] is sure to be reflected in the political. This factor, however, will play a far bigger part in the East than it does in the West - a far bigger part in the New England States, for instance, where the females outnumber the males [...] than it does in the Mountain States, where the males outnumber the females [...].'

[Journalist George MacAdam on "Obstacles in Path of Nation-wide Suffrage", *The New York Times*, January 27, 1918.]

## 1. Introduction

Voting rights are among the most important and far-reaching rights a group may obtain. In history, these rights have often been won by force, or they were granted

by the ruling elite because of otherwise imminent threats of revolution and social unrest. Leading political economy theories on suffrage extensions also stress these push factors and argue that in the past, the elite were often forced to extend the franchise in order to quell revolutionary threats from the disenfranchised (see [Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000, 2001](#); [Conley and Temimi, 2001](#)). However, several extensions in history clearly cannot be accounted for this way. The most ubiquitous and greatest such extension is the enfranchisement of women. On no occasion did women win the right to vote because they used force or threatened to do so. It was men who gave women the right to vote, yet never to avert revolution or social unrest.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reviewing historic suffrage extensions in the UK, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000\)](#) in fact acknowledge that threats of revolution did not play any role for the enfranchisement of women in 1918.

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In the history of suffrage extensions, women's suffrage has to be counted one of the most important. Cutting through all social classes, it gave political representation to unprecedented numbers and changed fundamentally the role and understanding of women in societies. By dramatically changing the eligible electorate, women's suffrage also had a sizeable effect on the growth of government and the use of public resources (see [Lott and Kenny, 1999](#), and [Miller, 2008](#), for the US, or [Aidt et al., 2006](#), for European countries). The ubiquity, scale, and consequences of women's suffrage extensions make them a subject of great interest for political economy analyses — and their 'voluntary nature' also a prime historical example of political power sharing by choice.

In this paper, we study the timing of women's suffrage extensions at the level of US states and territories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From a historical perspective, the spread of women's suffrage in the US is of particular interest, as US jurisdictions (i.e., states and territories) rank among the first political entities in modern times that granted women voting rights.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, from an analytical perspective, suffrage extensions in the US exhibit two advantageous features. First, suffrage extensions did not coincide with fundamental changes in the economic and political regime, as has been the case in many European countries after World War I/II. Second, all jurisdictions already had male suffrage and belonged to one and the same country, which provides for a basic degree of homogeneity in the economic, judicial, and political realm. Compared with a cross-country analysis, both features significantly aid identification. In particular, potentially confounding influences and trends at the national level are of no concern, as they are immaterial for cross-state variations in the extension of suffrage to women.

Between 1869, when the all-male legislature of Wyoming Territory first granted women the right to vote, and the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which brought universal women's suffrage, 29 US jurisdictions enfranchised women. Rates of suffrage adoption over this period, however, differed markedly across regions (see [Fig. 1](#)). Of the 12 jurisdictions that granted women access to the ballot by 1914, 10 lie in the

West (the two exceptions are Kansas and Illinois); and so do all five jurisdictions that enfranchised women before the turn of the century (Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming). Changes in social values, and possibly other national trends, undoubtedly popularized the women's suffrage cause over time, as evidenced by higher rates of suffrage adoption from 1915 onward. However, such trends cannot possibly explain the marked regional pattern in the timing of suffrage extensions. Region- and state-specific factors must have accelerated the transitions of individual jurisdictions to women's suffrage. It is these factors that we seek to unearth. To identify these factors and gauge their respective importance, we estimate discrete-time hazard rate models of state and territory transitions to women's suffrage using decennial US census data.

Our results provide strong evidence that women obtained the right to vote earlier in US jurisdictions in which they accounted for a smaller share of the adult population. This result survives a battery of robustness checks, including the estimation of linear probability models with state-level fixed effects. Indeed, sex ratio imbalances appear to be the single most important determinant of jurisdictions' transitions to women's suffrage. Very high sex ratios (ratios of men to women) were a distinctive feature of all Western jurisdictions except New Mexico and Utah, and to a lesser extent also of Midwestern jurisdictions, and can thus explain the marked regional pattern documented in [Fig. 1](#). The relative scarcity of women in the West, it appears, has fundamentally altered the power calculus for men, the pre-female-suffrage electorate and potential grantors of voting rights. In the American West, the enfranchisement of few rather than many women carried lower potential costs for men in terms of any devaluation of their own vote and influence than in other parts of the country ([Kenny, 1999](#)). Women's suffrage also posed much lower risks to political stability in the West, as the already enfranchised male voters by far outnumbered potential female voters. What is more, western legislators might have viewed women's suffrage as a viable tool to attract more female settlers, to publicize their regions, and, in the case of territories, to gather support for their bid to statehood. Settlers were still needed in large numbers to develop the sparsely populated region and build civil society. By attenuating the severe male marriage market squeeze, a more balanced sex ratio also had the potential to increase the attractiveness of Western jurisdictions in the eyes of prospective (unmarried) male migrants. Thus, high ratios of men to women both reduced the costs and increased the benefits of women's suffrage to the male grantors.

<sup>2</sup> 19th century pioneers include Wyoming Territory (1869), Utah Territory (1870), Washington (1883), Colorado (1893), and Idaho (1896). Internationally, suffrage states (or subnational jurisdictions) appeared only very late in the 19th century. They include the British colony of New Zealand (1893) and the British dominions of South Australia (1894) and Western Australia (1899). The first European countries (and the only ones prior to World War I) to grant women access to the ballot were Finland (1902) and Norway (1913).

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