

Women and the Right to Vote

“A woman is as much out of place at the polling booths as a man is in the kitchen.”
-The Advertiser editorial (Adelaide),
1891.



Women in Australia were not permitted to vote in federal elections until 1902 – that’s only a little more than 100 years ago! In the 1880s Australian Suffragettes began fighting for the right to vote. Their campaign for suffrage (the right to vote) included public protests - a popular form of democratic dissent.

When the movement started, it was widely thought that only men should participate in politics and that women and children should not. Despite public resistance, from the 1880s to 1890s, every Australian State and Territory had at least one Suffragette society. They held debates and public meetings, published leaflets and organised letter-writing campaigns. They argued that a government that represented the people should also include the views and voices of women, as laws affect both women and men.

Politics and Australian Women in the late 1800s

The traditional role of women in society was primarily as mothers and wives and their domain was almost exclusively limited to the household. However, by the late 1800s, women made up 20% of the overall Australian workforce and 30-40% of the urban workforce. The growth in nursing and teaching jobs created new opportunities for women. These types of jobs were considered ‘respectable’ for women outside of the home. Eventually, society’s understanding of the role of women began to change.

However, many men and some women continued to oppose the Suffragettes’ demand for voting rights for women, claiming that women were too ‘emotional and consumed with trivial matters’ to be able to make important political decisions. Another argument against recognising women’s right to vote was that it would give married men an unfair advantage of two votes as it was assumed that a wife would vote as her husband did.

In 1895, South Australia became the first state to recognise women's right to vote, and the right to be elected to parliament. This was achieved at the federal level in 1902. You can find the dates that women achieved suffrage in Australia in the table on the next page. Around the same time, women around the world were also campaigning for the right to vote.

Year	Key Development
1863	VIC The Electoral Act refers to 'all persons' when discussing landowners which unintentionally gives women the right to vote. This is amended in 1865 to exclude women.
1884	VIC Henrietta Dugdale formed the first Australian women's suffrage society in Melbourne.
1895	SA Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised.
1897	SA Catherine Helen Spence is the first woman to stand as a political candidate in Australia. She stood as an SA delegate to the Federal Convention, although she was told she could not sit even if she won.
1899	WA Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised.
1902	NSW Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised. Federal The Commonwealth Franchise Act passed, recognising the right of all women (with the exception of Indigenous women) to vote in Federal elections. At this time, women also became eligible to stand for Parliament.
1903	TAS Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised (House of Assembly only). Federal Four women stand as candidates in the federal election - Nellie Martel, Mary Ann Moore Bentley and Vida Goldstein for the Senate, and Selina Siggins for the House of Representatives.

Year	Key Development
1905	QLD Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised.
1908	VIC Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised.
1911	NT & ACT Women's rights to vote and to stand in elections recognised.

Opposition to women's suffrage

There were various reasons presented for why women should not vote. These include:

- It was assumed that women would not vote independently and therefore married men would gain an additional vote as their wives would vote the same way as they had.
- Women were considered to be too emotional and irrational to take on the important role of contributing to the state or country's decision making.

Key figures

Many women were key to the women's suffrage movement, either in taking leading roles in campaigns or in government positions. Particularly notable were Edith Cowan, Vida Goldstein, Louisa Lawson and Catherine Helen Spence.

Key events and organisations

- 1891 'Monster Petition'
- 1894 United Council for women's suffrage.

Sources:

- National Museum Australia: "Women's suffrage" At: http://www.nma.gov.au/online_features/defining_moments/featured/womens_suffrage (accessed 31/3/18)
- Parliament of Australia: "Votes for Women" At: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/women (accessed 31/3/18)
- Parliament of South Australia: "Women and Politics in South Australia – Some of the arguments in the Women's suffrage debate" At: <https://www.parliament.sa.gov.au/ABOUTPARLIAMENT/HISTORY/WOMENINPOLITICSINSOUTHAUSTRALIA/Pages/SomeoftheargumentsintheWomensuffragedebate.aspx> (accessed 31/3/18)