



Tithe an Oireachtais  
Houses of the Oireachtas

1918  
2018

Vótáil 100  
Mná san Oireachtas

# Celebrating 100 years of “Votes for Women”

1918 was the first time Irish women were permitted by law to vote and run in parliamentary elections.

1918 was also the year in which the first woman was elected to the British Parliament at Westminster.



Countess de Markievicz

Countess de Markievicz, who was elected in a Dublin constituency, never took her seat at Westminster. Instead, she joined the revolutionary first Dáil, becoming the first female TD.



1918



2018

#Vótáil100

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

Great Reform Act restricts parliamentary vote to “male persons”	1832	
John Stuart Mill presents petition to Parliament asking for votes for women	1866	25 Irish women sign the petition to Parliament
Second Reform Act increases electorate but continues to exclude women	1867	
	1872	North of Ireland Society for Women’s Suffrage established in Belfast
	1876	Dublin Women’s Suffrage Association established
Third Reform Act increases electorate but continues to exclude women	1884	The first women graduate from an Irish university
	1898	Local Government (Ireland) Act allows women to vote and run in district council elections
Women’s Social and Political Union is established – militant campaign begins	1903	
Herbert Asquith becomes Prime Minister and blocks a Bill on women’s suffrage	1908	Irish Women’s Franchise League established
Black Friday - hundreds of women are injured when police attack a march on Parliament	1910	
Parliament Act revokes House of Lords veto	1911	
English suffragettes follow Asquith on his visit to Dublin and are imprisoned for acts of violence	1912	Home Rule Bill introduced without including votes for women - militant campaign begins
Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-health) Act, called the Cat and Mouse Act, introduced to tackle female hunger strikers	1913	
First World War begins	1914	Cumann na mBan established
	1916	Proclamation of the Irish Republic specifically includes Irish women
Representation of the People Act enfranchises women aged at least 30 who own property. Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act permits women to stand for election	1918	Countess de Markievicz becomes first woman elected to House of Commons
	1922	Constitution of the Irish Free State gives the Dáil vote to all citizens aged 21 and over “without distinction of sex”

## In the mid-1800s, most people accepted that women and men occupied separate spheres.

Women were seen as inherently delicate, passive and nurturing. It was thought that they were best suited to the domestic sphere rather than public life.

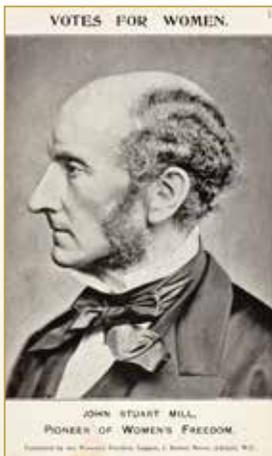
Upper and middle class women were not expected to work. Women could not go to university, and were therefore excluded from professions such as law and medicine. Marriage was regarded as a woman's natural destiny.

When a woman married, she no longer had a legal identity of her own. Her husband was the legal guardian of their children above a certain age. A married woman could not own property until Parliament passed the Married Women's Property Act in 1870.

The Parliament of Great Britain and Ireland was made up entirely of men, elected by men. Women began to realise that the only way they could change how the law treated them was by having a vote in parliamentary elections.

Society does best when each sex performs the duties for which it is especially ordained.

*Rev. John Gregg,  
Dublin 1856*



John Stuart Mill MP

In 1832, the first petition to Parliament asking for votes for women was presented. However, when the Great Reform Act was passed that year, it specifically restricted the right to vote to “male persons”.

The Great Reform Act also left the majority of men without the right to vote in parliamentary elections. The right to vote was reserved for men who owned a certain amount of property. A mass movement began to demand voting rights for all men aged at least 21. They presented petitions to Parliament and held mass meetings attended by tens of thousands of people.

The Government responded by proposing a new reform Bill. In 1866, John Stuart Mill presented a petition signed by some 1,500 women, including 25 Irish women, asking for women to be included. Mill later proposed an amendment to the Bill that would extend the vote to all householders regardless of sex. It was defeated by 196 votes to 73. The Second Reform Act of 1867 gave the vote to most working class men living in towns, but continued to exclude women.

**Workmen need other protection than that of their employers, and women other protection than that of their men.**

*JS Mill MP,  
House of Commons,  
20 May 1867*

### The parliamentary vote was just one of the aspects of society nineteenth century feminists wanted to change.

Access to education and the right to own property after marriage were important goals for which women campaigned. Women also called for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and some historians argue that it was this issue that first galvanised women to take a stand against their Government.

The Contagious Diseases Acts were a response to the problem of venereal disease in the British army. Under the Acts, suspected prostitutes could be forcibly examined and detained for treatment at special lock hospitals such as the one near the

Curragh army camp in County Kildare.

The first national feminist organisation in Ireland was the

Irish branch of the Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, founded in 1870.



Isabella Tod

**The men who devised such legislation meant to make it easy and safe to snatch at sensual pleasures, without caring at what cost to those who sinned with them.**

*Isabella Tod,  
1878*

In 1878, girls were permitted to take public school exams. Medical schools began to accept women and by the first decade of the 20th century women could go to university. In 1870, the Married Women's Property Act permitted married women to own property, and women who owned a certain amount of property could participate in local government. The Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed in 1886.



The first women graduate from an Irish university

**In the late nineteenth century, women formed organisations to campaign for the vote.**



Thomas and Anna Haslam

In Dublin, Anna Haslam, with her husband Thomas, founded the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association, which later became the Irishwomen's Suffrage and Local Government Association. In Belfast, Isabella Tod established the North of Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage. Many other suffrage organisations were formed all over Ireland, including the Sligo Women's Suffrage Association founded by Eva Gore-Booth and her sister Constance, later Countess de Markievicz.

Suffragists campaigned for women to be included in the next set of electoral reforms. They organised public and private meetings, invited speakers from England and wrote letters to politicians.

Opponents of female suffrage argued that women's delicacy and innocence must be preserved by keeping them in the private sphere.

Woman is endowed with, a most delicate organization which, sways the whole course of her life; it influences her actions, and her mode of thought, and its effect is to make mankind afford her protection rather than turn her adrift in the vortex of political life.

*Sir Joseph Pease,  
House of Commons,  
12 June 1884*

What we ask is that women shall no longer be treated as children or as lunatics, but that they shall vote or abstain from voting as they please for Members of this House.

*Major General Alexander,  
House of Commons,  
12 June 1884*

Married women were thought to be able to use their feminine influence to sway their husbands' voting choices. Giving them a vote could spoil the harmony of their homes. It was also argued that women's lack of physical strength to enforce laws would weaken those laws.

The Third Reform Act of 1884 increased the electorate by extending the provisions of the 1867 Act to rural areas. However, a motion to include women in the Act was defeated in the House of Commons by 271 to 135 votes.

### In the early 1900s, some women made a conscious decision to leave aside peaceful campaigning methods and embark on a militant campaign.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst established the Women's Social and Political Union in Manchester and called on women to use "deeds not words" to achieve suffrage. Women disrupted political meetings, threw stones at the Government Ministers and smashed shop windows. These women were dubbed "suffragettes" by the British press, a name they embraced and used to differentiate themselves from the more peaceful suffragists.

In Ireland, a group led by Margaret Cousins and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington broke away from Anna Haslam's IWSLGA and established the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908. Its members were ready to use militant methods if necessary. In 1909, Cousins spent three weeks with the WSPU in England learning militant tactics to use in Ireland. She also took part in the 1910 march on the House of Commons, later known as Black Friday, during which women were beaten and assaulted by police.

In 1912, the IWFL launched their first militant activities. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and other women went to the centre of the British administration in Ireland, Dublin Castle, and broke the windows. The women were sentenced to a month in Mountjoy jail.



Hanna Sheehy  
Skeffington

Over the following two years, 27 suffragettes were imprisoned in Ireland for their disruptive actions. Once in prison, they went on hunger strike until they were granted the privileges usually granted to political prisoners.

In July 1912, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, visited Ireland. Three members of the WSPU followed him from London to protest against his anti-suffrage stance. They threw an axe at the Prime Minister as he passed through Dublin in a carriage accompanied by John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. They were later intercepted setting fire to the theatre where Asquith was due to speak.



Two of the women were sentenced to five years imprisonment, joining the Irish suffragettes already imprisoned in Mountjoy. Although some Irish suffragettes resented this foreign influence, many sympathised with the harshness of their sentences. Unlike the Irish women, the English women were treated as criminals. When the English women went on hunger strike to demand political status, they were force fed.

### The Irish suffrage campaign was complicated by the big issue that dominated Irish politics: Home Rule.

Irish politicians had spent decades campaigning for a parliament in Ireland and female suffrage was an unwanted distraction.

The British women attacked any election candidates who did not support their cause. In Ireland, however, to protest against Irish Parliamentary Party politicians was seen as anti-nationalist and jeopardising Home Rule.

Instead of directly opposing their MPs, Irish women campaigned to have votes for women included in the forthcoming Home Rule Bill. However, The Prime Minister, Asquith, was vehemently against suffrage, and the Irish MPS were fearful of pressing him on what they saw as a side issue.

Sir Edward Carson has not been sent to jail. He has been making precisely the same kind of speeches that I made up to the month of March last.

*Emmeline Pankhurst,  
13 November 1913*

The failure, in 1912, of this campaign was what triggered the first militant protests in Ireland.

Suffragettes faced strong opposition. Their public meetings drew crowds of hecklers who booed loudly and drowned out their speeches. After the British women's attack on Asquith, there was violent disorder at suffrage meetings in Dublin, with women mobbed in the streets and forced to make hurried escapes on trams.



British suffragettes observed the events in Ireland with interest. The British feminist newspaper *Votes for Women* warned Irish women against putting their efforts into fighting for Irish freedom in the hope that their rights would be granted afterwards by a grateful party. Emmeline Pankhurst noted the impunity with which the Unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson, advocated revolution, whereas she had received long prison sentences for her militant speeches.

**The Home Rule Bill was passed in 1914, however the outbreak of the First World War meant its enactment was postponed until peace was restored.**

Although some Irish suffragists kept campaigning for the vote, many now focused on the war effort. Others put their energies into striving for Irish independence.

Cumann na mBan was established in 1914. Its manifesto called on “all Irishwomen who realise that our national honour and our national needs must be placed before all other considerations”. They rejected the goal of winning the right to elect members to a foreign parliament and instead looked to a future in which they would be full citizens of an Irish Republic.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

When the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, they addressed “Irishmen and Irishwomen” and pledged that Ireland’s future national government would be “elected by the suffrages of all her men and women”. Some 300 women took part in the Rising, acting as medics and despatch carriers under fire but also fighting alongside the men.

Meanwhile in Britain, the government needed to reform the electoral register, which excluded many men who were on military service or who were doing other work useful to the war effort. The government also decided to give women the vote.

In February 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men aged at least 21, or 19 if they were on military service, and women aged 30 or older who were university graduates or owned a certain amount of property. To have given men and women the vote on equal terms would have resulted in women outnumbering men on the electoral register. The Act tripled the electorate in Britain and Ireland.

In November, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act was passed allowing women to become MPs on the same terms as men.

In December, a general election was held in Britain and Ireland. Of the 17 women who stood for election, two of them, Winifred Carney and Countess de Markievicz, stood in Ireland. Only one woman, Countess de Markievicz, was elected to the House of Commons. However, she never took her seat in Westminster. Instead, she joined the MPs who started a revolutionary parliament in Dublin and declared Ireland’s independence.

Irishwomen achieved full voting equality with men in 1922, when the Constitution of the Irish Free State permitted all citizens who had reached the age of 21 to vote for members of Dáil Éireann.



Winifred Carney



Countess de Markievicz

### Women in Irish parliamentary politics today

The number of women elected to the Oireachtas has increased over time but remains well below 50%. In 2012, an Act was passed incentivising political parties to ensure at least 30% of the candidates they put forward for elections were women. In the 2016 general election, 35 women were elected to Dáil Éireann, an increase of 40% on the previous election. Women now make up 22% of the Dáil membership, the highest proportion in the history of the State.

### Discover more about Irish women and the vote

Visit our website to

- learn out about the first female Members of the Dáil and Seanad
- discover the legacy of the Irish suffragists
- find out about the commemorative events hosted by the Houses of the Oireachtas

[www.oireachtas.ie/votail100](http://www.oireachtas.ie/votail100)



Members of Dáil Éireann, 1921

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