

# Growth of democracy essay sample



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In the 1850s, the people of Britain had many problems and were very dissatisfied. The total population at the time was twenty-two and a quarter million. There was also rapid social and economical change. People had moved from the rural areas to the more urban areas of the country to work in the new industrial towns which were growing up. Since these towns had to accommodate the increasing numbers of people, housing was thrown up quickly and cheaply and this led to sanitation problems and the spread of disease.

People had very low life expectancy due to poor living and working conditions. People, especially the working classes were discontented and were looking for reform but they had no voice in politics and therefore no way to express themselves politically because they did not have the right to vote. Extension of the franchise would mean giving the vote to all adults in Britain, regardless of gender and social status. This however would take a number of decades, from 1832 until 1918 or even 1928. There were four major Reform Acts between 1832 and 1918.

These Reform Acts happened because of the Industrial and Agricultural revolutions taking place throughout Britain during the 19th and early 20th centuries in this essay, I will explain why each of these reforms had to be introduced. The Industrial and Agricultural revolutions brought great change to the demographics of Britain. New machines on farms meant that fewer men were needed to work the land and this left many people unemployed. Luckily, at the same time, new industrial towns were growing up in places like Manchester and Lancashire and people were needed to work in the factories.

This meant people were on the move from the rural areas of the country to the more urban areas. This was a demographic change but it also had knock on effects on the parliamentary system; seats had to be redistributed to make the system fairer. The industrial revolution created a wealthier middle class and a more vocal working class. With better communication and education, people heard about new political ideas. Skilled workers felt it was their moral right to be represented in parliament. They saw education as a way forward to improve their living and working conditions.

The Great Reform Act, 1832, gave the vote to men over 21 who owned or rented property worth more than £10 per year in rateable value. This meant that 7% of the population could now vote. The act did not satisfy the working classes however as only the upper and middle classes could vote. The Chartist Movement campaigned to get the vote in the 1830s- 40s but it had died out by 1848. The Great Reform Act was the first step towards democracy, but the country still had a long way to go before it could call itself a democracy.

The Second Reform Act, 1867, was introduced because of both internal and external pressures on Britain to become more democratic. New political ideas such as democracy (the right to govern and rule yourself and liberalism (the right to express opinions freely) had emerged in Europe and as Britain had supported these ideas in Italy with unification, she could not deny her people their rights. There had also been revolutions in France. Some feared this might happen in Britain and so it hindered reform at first. Later others were keen to grant reform to avoid violence.

Groups inside Britain were also putting pressure on the government for more change. These groups included trade unions, the labour party and suffrage groups. The working class were becoming more educated and respectable and so politicians no longer saw them as an unruly mob and felt they were more deserving of the vote. The Second Reform Act, 1867, increased the electorate by 1 million voters. Now one in three men could vote. However the right to vote still depended on property ownership and the value of the property owned. Nevertheless, the 1867 Reform Act was an important step towards democracy.

The old belief that the working classes were an unthinking mob was ending. The Education Acts in Scotland and England meant the population was becoming more educated and literate. By the 1880s another new political idea was spreading in Europe. This was Socialism. Socialism means taking away the means of production and distribution away from private ownership and giving it to the community as a whole. The government hoped that by giving the vote to the working classes, they would become involved in normal politics rather than support this new and dangerous revolutionary idea.

The 1884 act doubled the electorate, bringing it up to five million. This was a move towards democracy but far less so than is often supposed. For the right to vote was still linked to a complex series of property related qualifications rather than simple the demographic principle of universal suffrage. There were significant groups still not included by the qualifications, i. e. male live-in servants, sons who still lived at home, soldiers in barracks and paupers. Plural voting still existed and women were no where near getting the vote.

World War One was an exceptional war which brought great change in many ways. It was a catalyst which sped up change in the reform system. The war helped politicians to see that the residency qualification was foolish for soldiers coming back from war could not be told they were not allowed to vote. It also helped parliament see the value of the men willing to die for their country. Soldiers as young as the age eighteen had been conscripted. It was simply not acceptable not to allow them to vote. Consequently the voting age was lowered to eighteen.

The war altered the thinking of politicians and especially their approach to women being enfranchised. By 1918, there was a belief that parliament represented the people of Britain and not just the owners of property as it previously had. After all the franchise reform that year was officially called the Representation of the People Act. This was a very significant step to democracy. The electorate had trebled, from roughly seven million to twenty-one million. 8.5 million Women over thirty were given the vote.

The industrial working class had become, for the first time, the majority in a mass electorate, this was to play a part in a changed political identity, as it helped the labour party to grow. In 1928 there was further franchise reform as all women were given the vote on equal terms to men. In conclusion, many factors influenced the extension of the franchise up to 1918. There was a growth in democracy in Britain for many reasons Economic change caused by the Industrial and Agricultural revolutions in Britain meant that different places especially in the North and Midlands of England had to be represented.

This was the first thing to bring change. Everyone wanted a say in government. The people wanted social change to improve living and working conditions but they needed a voice in parliament first. Better communication and improved education meant a greater interest in democracy. The great reform act was only a start - other acts would bring more change and eventually Britain would become a democracy. The impacts of world war one sped up change even more and helped further extend the franchise to women.