

# Women's suffrage in england



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The investigation assesses whether violent militant tactics by the Women's Social and Political Union founded by Emmeline Pankhurst from 1903 to 1914 were necessary in order to gain women's suffrage in England. I will be using several primary sources. One of them is written by Emmeline Pankhurst herself in 1914 called My Own Story. The other is written by her daughter Sylvia E. Pankhurst called The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst. I will also use snippets from local newspapers like The Morning Post. Other works will be analyzed like The Fighting Pankhursts by David Mitchell and You Wouldn't Want to Be a Suffragist! by Fiona Macdonald.

To evaluate whether or not the tactics used by Pankhurst's group was crucial in the fight for the right to vote, this investigation will use these sources to look into public opinions. The reactions and outlooks on the WSPU from the press, government, and the general public will all be considered. Also, I will examine the three stages of the WSPU; before violent militant tactics were used, during, and after.

## **Part B: Summary of Evidence**

Their slogan was: ' Deeds, not words!' The group's militancy first took non-violent forms from giving speeches, petitions, rallies, newsletters, etc. The actions turned extreme; chaining themselves to park railings, breaking shop windows, setting mailboxes on fire, digging up golf courses, burning down railway stations and churches.[1]

Each time they took part in a violent protest, arrests occurred. The British government hoped that this would stop them from protesting again.[2]

On May 12, 1905, a bill for women's suffrage was denied and the Union began a rowdy protest outside the Parliament building, which police tried to force away. Pankhurst considered this event to be a successful demonstration of how militancy can capture attention.[3]Pankhurst said, "We are at last recognized as a political party"[4]

The WSPU had a bad relationship with the Liberal party. They protested against candidates that were a part of the ruling government because they refused to pass it, which forced them into a conflict with the Liberal Party. [5]WSPU was often blamed for spoiling elections for the candidates. Pankhurst was once attacked by Liberal supporters who blamed her for ruining their chances against the Conservatives. They beat members and threw rocks and rotten eggs.[6]

In 1909, the members vowed to go on hunger strikes whenever they were imprisoned.[7]However, the Government counteracted this with force feeding.[8]The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies led by Millicent Fawcett were disappointed that these publicity stunts were "the chief obstacles in the way of success of the suffrage movement in the House of Commons." [9]

Snippets from an article in the Morning Post: "The Suffragette newspaper must be put a stop to. Proceedings would be taken immediately against any person who made a speech in encouragement of the union's course of conduct." They called the WSPU "a danger to the civilized community" and "a vast amount of public inconvenience to the public." They disapproved of The Suffragette newspaper because it was "a danger to society" since it "

contained articles approving and praising those who fortunately had been detected by the police in the act of committing crimes.”[10]

The Independent Labour Party organized a committee for women suffrage and formed a Conciliation Bill so the WSPU suspended their actions, but this truce was ended when it was obvious the bill would not pass when the Prime Minister, Lloyd George wrote to The Times demanding the rejection of the Conciliation Bill, “ to demonstrate the folly of militant tactics,”[11]The Bill was lost by fourteen votes and the WSPU accused Lloyd George of having organized the defeat. The Judge insisted upon a verdict of guilty saying “ If I had observed any contrition or disavowal of the acts you have committed, or any hope that you would avoid repetition of them in future, I should have been very much prevailed upon.”[12]

In 1912, WSPU came up with arson as another militant tactic and used it for the next two years. Pankhurst’s approval of property damage led many to leave the Union.[13]

In the Daily Mail, they referred to the WSPU in a derogatory term “ suffragette”, which they used to their advantage by coining their own unique name.

When World War I came around, the women realized it was no time for protests and focused on supporting the British against the German. They joined in the war effort working as nurses, building up mother and infant clinics, restaurants, workrooms for unemployed, urged women to aid industrial production, etc.[14]In 1918, the British Parliament gave the vote to British women age 30 or over.[15]

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Word Count: 597

## **Part C: Evaluation of Sources**

I thought it would be fitting to use parts of Emmeline Pankhurst's autobiography from the internet called My Own Story. It was published in 1914 in the midst of all the controversy the WSPU was being put under the spotlight for. Her purpose for the autobiography was so that the public would hear about the women suffrage cause through her own words and not the newspapers, who often criticized the suffragettes. Since this source is written from the leader of the WSPU herself, the value in it is that it is the best form of primary source available. First-hand accounts of situations and events are available through this autobiography. My Own Story also provides Pankhurst's take on the militant tactics her group used in order to get their message across. This however, can as well be a limitation. This source only provides Pankhurst's opinions and not the opinions of the Government and politicians, which I need in order to assess whether or not the Union's tactics were crucial in achieving women suffrage. Obviously Pankhurst will be in favor of anything the WSPU does, so I mainly just need this source to clarify what really happened in the years of 1903 to 1914.

The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst is another primary source written from another perspective. The author is Emmeline's daughter, Sylvia E. Pankhurst, who was involved with the WSPU until 1914. Her purpose was to inform the public of her mother's life from the perspective of someone who personally knew her. There is value in the fact that Sylvia is Emmeline's daughter and that she was actually a part of the suffragettes. She was there in the actual events, so we know that her statements are accurate or close to what really

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happened. However, this book is limited because of Sylvia's bias towards her mother. The book is written to praise her mother's actions.

Word Count: 314

## **Part D: Analysis**

Does violence ever resolve anything? The Women's Social and Political Union sure believed so. Their slogan "Deeds, not words!"<sup>[16]</sup> highlights their actions over the years of 1903 to 1914. As their tactics turned extreme, WSPU headlines became frequent in the British news.<sup>[17]</sup> The members of the WSPU felt that violence was the only way they could obtain suffrage and some historians believe that it is what successfully won them the vote, but I believe that it actually slowed down the process. It is important to understand that it is not because of the violent militant tactics her suffragettes, which was a derogatory term coined by the Daily Mail<sup>[18]</sup>, used that won women the vote, but rather what they did after they chose to end the violence.

The violence was only successful in one way, in that it brought about much publicity. Newspapers provided the public with reports of events and the suffragettes were pleased that their cause was becoming open to the public. Their first highly publicized event was on May 12, 1905, when a bill for women's suffrage was denied and the WSPU decided to protest outside the Parliament building, ending in a battle with the police. Pankhurst felt that this was a "successful demonstration on how militancy can capture attention"<sup>[19]</sup> and even expressed in her autobiography *My Own Story* that this helped them to become "recognized as a political party."<sup>[20]</sup> They

however received a lot of backlash for their actions. An article in the Morning Post talked about how a politician felt that the WSPU's newspaper, the Suffragette, must end because it is " a danger to society" since it " contained articles approving and praising those who fortunately had been detected by the police in the act of committing crimes." [21] The fact that a politician would publically express his harsh thoughts on the WSPU shows that his feelings were general throughout the Parliament.

As the WSPU became increasingly militant, they formed unfriendly relationships with the Government. I think that instead of opening up the politicians' eyes on supporting their cause, it just made them more annoyed and intransigent. One example was their relationship with the Liberal Party. Since the WSPU only focused on suffrage for women, they quickly opposed parties that did not make it their priority including the ruling government. [22] Pankhurst recalls in her autobiography being blamed for spoiling elections for the Liberal candidates against the Conservatives and being beaten and thrown rocks at. [23] Another example of how much the Government detested Pankhurst's Union was the situation with the Conciliation Bill. Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter, Sylvia E. Pankhurst, recalls what happened in her novel; the Independent Labour Party wanted to call truce with the WSPU by forming a committee for women suffrage if the suffragettes suspended their actions. [24] However, the Prime Minister Lloyd George issued a statement to The Times demanding the rejection of the Conciliation by voting with the Members of Parliament. [25] When the Bill was lost by fourteen points, it went to Court with Lloyd George accused of having organized the defeat by persuading Members to vote against it. [26] The

Judge dismissed the case probably because the Government had more power than the women had and because the Judge knew that the members of the WSPU were lawbreakers who were looked upon as undeserving in the politics world.

Suffragettes were continually arrested at their violent protests as the Government hope that they would stop protesting.[27]They decided to create a stir with hunger strikes in an attempt to force the Government to give into their demands, rather than see them starve to death.[28]The Government stayed persistent and force fed the women with straps and tubes. By this point, the public was growing irritated with the group as even Millicent Fawcett, leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and once a supporter of the WSPU, became disappointed with these publicity stunts that she claimed were hindrances to the suffrage movement.[29]Even their own members became fed up with the Union when in 1912, they came up with arson as another militant tactic setting fire to political buildings and theaters.[30]Several did not approve of this and left the Union. The more they tried to cause a stir, seems like the more the public grew weary of their cause. The arrests in the press were repetitive and for years nothing really progressed, showing that even though the country knew about their cause, less people began to care. The male politicians persisted in not allowing women suffrage probably because they felt that if women behaved like criminals, then they should not be given the same rights as voters.

The more extreme they got, the more they alienated people to support their cause. Even though their actions attracted lots of publicity, violence left towns unsafe and ended up giving them the opposite of what they intended,

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which was the public disapproving of the women suffrage cause. Opponents of women's suffrage in Parliament referred to the violent tactics in debates on why women suffrage should not be granted.[31]The Parliament and WSPU had reached a stalemate; the more violence the suffragettes used, the more unwilling Parliament was, and the more Parliament was obstinate, the more violent the suffragettes became.

When World War I started, the suffragettes decided to suspend their activities since the violence of the war would render the women's militancy as weak and they realized they should exert their energy onto supporting their country so they joined in the war effort by working as nurses and building clinics and workrooms for unemployed.[32]Their hard work gained them a new reputation with the public. It wasn't until 1918 at the end of the war that the Parliament granted the vote to women 30 years of age or older. [33]

Word Count: 748

## **Part E: Conclusion**

The fact that women did not get the right to vote until 4 years after the war started and the suffragettes suspended their militant actions shows that it was their war efforts that aided them and not their violence. I believe that violent militant tactics were not necessary in order to gain women's suffrage. The tactics helped them positively in their early years, but once arson and bombing started to take place, antagonism against them aroused. There is no doubt that it gained them great publicity and allowed their cause to be heard around England, but their actions worked against them as they

became more violent through the years. I think, even quite possibly, the Women's Social and Political Union was unnecessary because there were several other peaceful groups out there. The 1918 Act was passed as recompense to the women for their war efforts, not because the Parliament finally listened to the angry cries of the suffragettes.

Word Count: 158

## **Part F: Sources**

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