

# *Confirmation of Women's Suffrage in the Constitution: A Comparative Study of Britain and the United States*

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**Abstract:** The recognition of women's suffrage at the constitutional level is an important symbol of achieving gender equality and women's emancipation. This paper reviews and compares the factual context of women's suffrage confirmation in the United Kingdom and the United States, explores the historical reasons for the loss of women's power at the constitutional level and the similarities and differences of the suffrage movement in the two countries under different cultural traditions and political systems, aiming to demonstrate the decisive influence of the type of constitutional system on the way of women's movement, and provide a historical model for the protection of women's rights in modern times.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the development of modern capitalist economy, European and American countries have carried out bourgeois revolutions and established bourgeois states. In order to consolidate the achievements of the bourgeois revolution, revolutionary leaders usually write a constitution after gaining power, clearly fixing the contents of state rights, political system, civil rights and other contents that meet the constitutional requirements of the bourgeoisie. Although there are major differences in constitutionalism in different countries, their core is always inseparable from the value orientation of "democracy, equality, freedom, and human rights", and these slogans are also "promises" to the people at the time of the revolution to seek maximum social support.

Democratic politics is the core embodiment of the constitutional system, and the right to vote is the most critical part of democratic politics, because the lack of suffrage means that it is impossible to choose one's ideal political representatives, to make one's own political demands, and to make decisions on political issues. Looking back at the bourgeois revolution, women either went out of their homes to actively participate in the political revolution, industrial production, or to ensure logistics and take care of the family, and women have always been solid allies and active partners of the revolution. In the early days of many constitutional states, this was almost the same practice.

This raises the question, why are those countries that claim to be "democratic" so paradoxically unified on such an unconscionable matter as "women do not have the right to vote"? How did women actively fight to regain their suffrage? What is the significance of their struggle for today's equality between women and men?

In order to explore the above questions, this paper will make a comparative analysis of the path of women's constitutional suffrage in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The analysis of the British and American samples is mainly based on the following considerations. Britain was the earliest constitutional country, enacting the Bill of Rights as early as 1689, while the United States was the first country to introduce a written constitutional code. Moreover, both countries have experienced a change process from no suffrage to the right to vote on the issue of women's suffrage, which is convenient for analyzing the reasons for women's loss of power in the early constitutional period. In addition, the political systems of the two countries are very different, the United Kingdom is a parliamentary system, while the United States is a separation of powers, and the difference in political systems will have an important impact on the path of the women's suffrage movement.

## **2. The timeline of the confirmation of women's suffrage in Britain and the United States**

### **2.1 The key node of women's suffrage in the UK**

After the Glorious Revolution in England in 1689, the Bill of Rights formulated by the revolutionaries established the principle of "parliamentary sovereignty", and the bill on the subject of suffrage did not clearly stipulate that it was determined according to local customs, and these customs without exception only stipulated that men with certain property had the right to vote. Since then, the age and property conditions for male suffrage have been gradually relaxed, such as the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832, which lowered the property requirements and more men have gained the right to vote. The issue of women's suffrage was not discussed for the first time until the Female Suffrage Amendment in 1867, but this proposal did not receive enough attention. In 1918, the British Parliament passed the "People's Representation Act" to include women over the age of 30 and with certain property in the eligibility of voters, but even so, one-third of women were still excluded, and the age and property requirements of female suffrage subjects were not consistent with men. The real equality of suffrage between women and men in the UK was in the Equal Suffrage Act of 1928, which stated that "A woman shall be qualified to be registered as a parliamentary elector in like manner as a man at the age of twenty - one years in respect." of her residence, or her own occupation of business premises. The wife or husband of a person entitled to be registered in respect of the occupation of business premises shall also be entitled to be registered in respect of those premises." [1] The bill aligns the eligibility of women and men for suffrage.

### **2.2 The key node of women's suffrage in the United States**

The historical context of women's suffrage in the United States is relatively simple, divided into two stages. The U.S. Constitution was established in 1787 and officially entered into force in 1789. Although there were already a number of feminist pioneers who spoke out for women's political rights at the time of the constitution, Abigail Adams even wrote to her husband, John, who was involved in the drafting of the Constitution Adamspie: "I really hope you will be more generous to us women, think more about our rights, and don't put unlimited rights in the hands of husbands!" But they were all ignored. The Constitution ultimately leaves the determination of the qualifications of the right to vote to the states to stipulate, and the Constitution itself does not explain this.

According to the regulations of each state, only men are set as the subjects of suffrage, and women do not have the right to vote. It was not until the 19th Constitutional Amendment in 1920 that it was introduced, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." [2] Only then does gender discrimination explicitly prohibit. Since then, American women have gained the right to vote.

### **3. The reasons why women were not recognized for their suffrage in the early days of Anglo-American constitutionalism**

#### **3.1 The common reasons why British and American women do not have the right to vote**

First of all, from the perspective of ideology and culture, both Britain and the United States are influenced by androcentrism, believing that women should naturally be attached to men, and women do not have the rational thinking required to participate in politics and discuss politics at all, and cannot think correctly about political issues. Moreover, women are easily influenced by the will of men in the family, so women's decision-making is not independent, so there is no need to confirm women's right to vote. Since women have never been considered rational people, do not educate her like men, do not cultivate her intellect, then it is helpless that some modern women seem to have no political rationality, and more importantly, there is no evidence to prove that women do not have human intelligence. Therefore, the above concept is actually an oppressive argument to prevent women from gaining power in a patriarchal society.

Secondly, from an economic point of view, women have no right to control property. Even after the Industrial Revolution, especially during the war, women actively or passively participated in work to receive labor remuneration, but in modern patriarchal society, women not only could not achieve equal pay for equal work with men, but even women's wage income needed to be handed over to their fathers or husbands. In modern times, property is an important reference to distinguish whether a person has political ability, if there is no independent property right, it means that the subject is not a politician, and if he cannot pay taxes, it means that he is not a citizen of the country. If you don't even have citizenship, how can you talk about the right to vote?

Finally, from the perspective of the backward traditional gender division of labor, men in Britain and the United States divide human society as a whole into the social sphere and the family sphere, the external social sphere is dominated by men, including political decision-making, economic activities, public affairs, war and peace, while the internal family sphere is regarded as a "trivial matter" that women are responsible for. Women should never talk about politics and public life beyond the scope of the family sphere, otherwise it will be considered that they have deviated from their social responsibilities.

On the basis of the above common reasons, the reasons for women's lack of suffrage in the United Kingdom and the United States are different due to different historical traditions.

#### **3.2 Reasons under the circumstances of the United Kingdom**

Britain is a country with a long aristocratic history and relatively monolithic religious beliefs, and the traditional patriarchal structure is complete and stubborn. The constitutional monarchy formed after the Glorious Revolution in England was the result of the game between the British aristocracy and the British king, but it still belonged to the transfer of power between men, and the social and political status of women did not improve accordingly. As the "winners", the male aristocracy has long controlled the parliament in charge of the country's political power, using the parliament as a tool for their own interests, they are concerned about the interests of the bourgeoisie, more precisely, the interests of bourgeois men, and compared with the men who hold state power, British women pay more attention to social welfare reform and other fields, which is inevitably inconsistent with the requirements of the ruling class.

From the perspective of religious ideology, there is also considerable resistance to the confirmation of women's suffrage. The Church of England from the 17th to the 18th centuries inherited the Protestant family-oriented view, limiting women's duties to the family, and women's identities were nothing other than wives and mothers. Non-conformist denominations from the mid-to-late 18th to

the 19th centuries also viewed women's suffrage as a destruction of the God-set gender division of labor. and the Victorian era in the mid-19th century emphasized women's moral responsibility in the family. As a country with a long religious tradition, British women must overcome the shackles of religion if they want to participate in political activities.

### **3.3 Reasons under the national conditions of the United States**

The national conditions of the United States and the United Kingdom are very different. The United States is an emerging immigrant country, with a short history of founding, and American citizens come from different ethnic groups and have different living habits and beliefs, so the United States does not have a unified and deep cultural tradition, nor does it have the same deep aristocratic political roots as the United Kingdom. It is a democratic republic that emphasizes the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers. Under this national situation, the reason why American constitutionalists refused to affirm women's suffrage was that they believed that American citizens should have the virtues of reason, independence, and public spirit, and that only those who possess these federal virtues should have the right to vote. Male politicians believe that women have been dominant for a long time, have no economic dominance, have not received a good education, and do not have the public spirit necessary to participate in national politics. This logic is really the prejudice of male politicians, but when women cannot speak or are not heard, their language can represent the language of humanity, and their perception is "truth".

## **4. The path and way of British and American women to fight for suffrage**

Due to the differences in the political systems of the United Kingdom and the United States, the strategies of British and American women to fight for their rights are bound to be significantly different. However, since Britain and the United States are both constitutional countries, and the women's rights movement is also a human social practice activity, based on the principle of universality of human practice, they will naturally have certain paths that overlap, which I will discuss in detail next.

### **4.1 The path of British women**

Compared with American women, British women's struggle paths can be summarized as two types: focusing on parliament and fierce struggle.

Under the British constitutional monarchy, core rights such as the right to vote have long been controlled by male aristocrats, and the principle of "parliamentary supremacy" stipulated in the British Bill of Rights allows parliament to hold significant political power. At that time, British women had no citizenship and could not become representatives of parliament, so British women could not directly submit bills to parliament, so British women took an indirect path, that is, to find their own "spokespersons" in parliament. The main role of these "spokespersons" is to bring women's opinions to Parliament in their own names and to fight for women's suffrage proposals; They will also choose the right time to propose personal proposals, legal amendments or resolutions; If there is a debate in parliament related to women's interests, they need to defend women based on women's rights in the debate process. Not only that, with the awakening of women's consciousness and the needs of women's movements, some women's rights organizations have emerged in the UK, which need to have dialogues with government officials, so that "spokespersons" can act as a bridge between them and the government.

This moderate willingness to focus on parliament does have a certain voice, at least giving women a channel to participate in politics, even if indirectly behind the scenes. However, in the context of

the traditional patriarchal system in the UK, vested interests will not easily let go of women's formal qualifications to participate in politics. After repeated moderate petitions to no avail, Britain gave birth to a second path of women's movement, fierce protest.

Britain has always had a tradition of revolutionary resistance, with the Charter Movement and the Workers' Strike movement being typical examples. British feminist organizations such as the Women's Social and Political Alliance have drawn on this fierce form of protest, and they have expanded their social influence and expressed their protests by smashing windows, confronting the police, going to prison, storming parliament, etc. It is more important to elevate the issue of women's suffrage from seemingly "insignificant women's issues" to the level of political events, forcing them to face up to women's demands.

Because Britain is a unitary country, they must focus on the center, and because Britain is a parliamentary country, fighting for rights from parliament can directly hit the core of the problem.

#### **4.2 The path of American women**

At the beginning of the founding of the United States, the United States consisted of thirteen states, and the federal government did not have much central authority, and each state had a considerable degree of autonomy. The subjects of the right to vote in each state are also stipulated by their own laws. In the United States in the nineteenth century, women in states other than New Jersey had no suffrage, and in the seemingly enlightened state of New Jersey, women's suffrage was also deprived of its suffrage under the attacks and political framing of patriarchal forces, and New Jersey women's suffrage became a victim of partisan struggles.

Under the American federal system, the path of resistance of American women gradually spread from state to federal. From the perspective of the overall diffusion direction, it shows the characteristics of west to east. The women's movement started in the western states of the United States because the western United States was an undeveloped area at that time, with sparse population, little cultural exchange, and a very simple social composition, and women faced much less resistance to the movement than in the east. This path choice proved to be extremely correct, because the first state to confirm women's suffrage since the women's movement was Wyoming in the west.

In addition, the separation of powers system in the United States is also an important reason why the path of women's resistance in the United States is different from that in the United Kingdom. The U.S. Constitution divides public power into three parts: legislative, executive and judicial, which are held by Congress, the president and the Supreme Court respectively. If American women want to leverage Congress to amend the Constitution, it is a natural path to pressure them through the judiciary. As a result, American women continue to express their demands through suffrage lawsuits, challenging the legal interpretation of women's lack of suffrage. Although these lawsuits were not won, the idea that women have citizenship and that women should have the right to vote has been spread again and again through judicial debate, which has driven a change in social concepts.

Fundamentally speaking, the United States, as a newly established country, has no aristocratic tradition, is not as deeply influenced by religion as Britain, and the United States, as an immigrant country, has reserved the soil for accepting multiculturalism.

#### **4.3 The common path of British and American women**

The voting rights that women in Britain and the United States fought for were a difficult process of "starting from scratch" - not only did there be no relevant legal provisions and traditional customs stipulating women's political rights and identities, but even the concept that women should have independent personalities did not exist. Therefore, the first step for British and American women is to reshape their ideas within society, change the misconceptions at that time, and mobilize the masses

of the two countries, especially women, to participate in the women's suffrage movement as much as possible.

Based on this objective and realistic need, there must be a systematic and stable platform for women's voices. As a result, women in both Britain and the United States have successively formed a number of women's rights organizations to create social attention and strengthen the power of action on women's suffrage issues. For example, Emmeline in the United Kingdom Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Alliance, an organization that marked the pinnacle of the British women's rights movement, which later became a core force in the British women's movement. There is a similar organization in the United States, Elizabeth Cuddy Stanton and other representatives organized the Seneca Falls Conference, the first women's rights conference in the United States, where they issued the "Emotional Declaration" and clearly laid out the demand for women's suffrage. In 1869, American women organized the National Women's Suffrage Association, which focused primarily on pressuring the federal government to amend the Constitution. At the same time, the American Woman Suffrage Association focused on fighting for women's suffrage rights in various states. The two organizations merged in 1890 to form the "National American Woman Suffrage Association", aiming to integrate national resources and gather energy to move the women's movement from division to unity. The historical significance of these women's rights organizations is not only that they objectively fight for women's rights, but more importantly, they fully demonstrate women's action and decision-making power, and effectively deny the argument that "women are not politically capable".

In addition, the women's rights movement is a means rather than an end, and just as the bourgeois revolutionaries wrote the constitution after establishing the bourgeois regime and fixed the revolutionary results, the final foothold of the women's suffrage movement should be to clearly define women's suffrage rights at the constitutional level. As a result, the U.S. Congress, under pressure from various states and public opinion, passed a constitutional amendment to stipulate that "elections shall not be discriminated against on the basis of sex", and the United Kingdom also passed a constitutional legal document to unify the eligibility of women and men as voting subjects. So far, the two countries have taken a major step forward on the issue of gender equality.

## 5. Conclusion

Gender equality is an important criterion for measuring the level of modernization and civilization of a society and a country. Looking back at the struggle of women in Britain and the United States, we know that women's rights are by no means a product of nature, let alone easy to obtain - in the process of women's struggle for rights, like any other revolutionary movement, it is a dark history full of blood and tears.

Gender oppression is as hateful as class oppression, but when modern British and American bourgeois men shouted "democracy, freedom, and equality" in order to resist the absolute monarchy and the oppression of the colonial powers, did they ever see that the women who fought side by side with them, who also had human wisdom and virtue, were still in a legally "inhuman" state? Have they ever thought that this "natural human right" actually includes women?

The purpose of reviewing the road of women's suffrage struggle in Britain and the United States is not only to understand this period of human history, but more importantly, to provide some thinking and enlightenment for further realizing equality between women and men in modern times.

First of all, as women who account for half of the world's population, they should have the right to participate in political life, women do not need to be represented or voiced, and the state of having a gender population in the world and a monopoly on political affairs by a single gender is also an autocracy. Women's political demands and political activities should be directly expressed and

practiced by women. Women are not lacking in political ability and political courage, and the world needs women's wisdom and should listen to women's voices.

Secondly, although today's women have more rights and freedoms than modern women, the narrative of "women belong to the family" has not been eradicated, and the idea that "women's affairs are equal to trivial things" still remains. If all the family responsibilities that should be shared by women and men are handed over to women, how can women have the time and space to participate in political life? Therefore, we need to constantly break the backward concept of gender division of labor, break the boundaries between society and family, and allow women and men to move around in two spaces without barriers, share responsibilities and enjoy rights.

Finally, from a legal perspective, the law is an important line of defense to defend the equality of women and men. Legal provisions can promote the transformation of social thinking, because the legal provisions themselves represent a value orientation. In the case of explicit legal provisions, even if some people have negative opinions that women have the same rights as men, the law can correct this misconception through the implementation of laws again and again. Therefore, the protection of women's rights and interests is inseparable from the role of the law. As the fundamental law of the country, the Constitution should clearly recognize women's political status and social contributions. Only in this way can women achieve true liberation. "Gender liberation is an integral part of the final and comprehensive liberation of mankind, and is one of the tireless pursuits of many socialists." [3]

## References

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