Women's Suffrage in Early 20th Century Italy

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Abstract

While there are numerous studies on women's rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in previous research, few papers focus on women's suffrage. The establishment of women's suffrage is important when considering women's entry into politics, and it is necessary to discuss and examine the process of the establishment of women's suffrage and the different historical backgrounds that accompanied it. This research examines the debate on women's suffrage in Italy up to the 20th century liberal period (prior to the establishment of the Fascist regime): in the Kingdom of Italy, which was established in 1861, only men were granted limited voting rights. This was followed by the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1912, but women were never granted even limited voting rights. Why was the right to universal suffrage granted to men, but not to women? To answer this question, this research examines the views of the then Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, who introduced male universal suffrage but rejected women's suffrage, the logic of the Socialist Party, which supported women's suffrage, and the arguments of activists and thinkers.

Introduction

In Italy, a system of universal male suffrage was introduced in 1912 (Law No. 666 of 1912). This was led by Giovanni Giolitti, after whom the Giolitti era (l'età giolittiana) is generally regarded as the flowering of parliamentary democracy at the beginning of the 20th century. This is because it is generally understood and positively perceived as representing the interests of diverse social forces, including the working class, the peasantry and the urban and rural middle classes, along with an increasing number of voters within the framework of the state. However, the 1912 Electoral Law did not grant women the right to vote at all. Despite the existence of discussions in Italy at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century about granting women the right to vote, Giolitti, who introduced a male universal suffrage system, did not recognise women's suffrage. The purpose of this report is to seek an answer to this question as to why this was the case.





1. The debate up to the end of the 19th century

This section provides an overview of the debate on women's suffrage up to the end of the 19th century, which is the premise for this discussion. In pre-unification Italy, women were granted the right to vote in local elections in some states. For example, from the mid-19th century, in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and in the Kingdom of Lombardo-Veneto, then under the Austrian Empire, women were entitled to vote in local elections if they were taxpayers. On 20 November 1849, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany passed a law granting women the right to vote in local elections. In 1861 Italy achieved unification. It was the Kingdom of Sardinia that led the unification, and in fact the Kingdom of Italy was created through the annexation of the other regions of Italy by the Kingdom of Sardinia. Therefore, the institutions of the Kingdom of Sardinia were inherited by the Kingdom of Italy, and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Italy inherited the Alberto Charter, which did not allow women the right to vote. The reasons for the non-recognition of women's suffrage in Sardinia can be summarised mainly as the inherent domestic nature of women, which made them unsuitable for political participation. Even after unification, there were attempts to grant women the right to vote locally, but women were not granted the right to vote throughout the 19th century.

On the other hand, despite the lack of results, many 19th century politicians held the belief that women should first be entitled to vote in local elections and later in national elections. The idea became relatively accepted and there was a certain segment of the population that supported giving women the right to vote in local elections. Participation in central state politics was seen as incompatible with women's nature to devote themselves to home and family, whereas local politics, on the other hand, was seen as an area where childcare and welfare were more involved, and therefore compatible with women's nature and able to express the typical female tasks of the home without distortion. The logic of granting the right to vote was different for women than for men. Unlike men, for whom the extension of the right to vote was linked to equality and rights, the idea was that women could gain local suffrage as an extension of the domestic office, not as a right, but by demonstrating competence in matters related to the domestic office, which is a typically female office. (In fact, Sidney Sonnino was a long-time advocate of women's participation in local elections). In fact, the British Parliament's decision to grant women the right to vote in local elections in 1869 was precisely because of the idea of extending women's unique domestic nature and abilities in local politics.

Women from the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Lombardo-Veneto kingdom, who had previously retained the right to vote, lost their voting rights after unification. In 1861, women in Lombardy claimed to be 'cittadine italiane' and there were moves to reassert their pre-unification right to vote and extend it to the whole of Italy, but this was never achieved. Ubaldino Peruzzi, in 1863, had called for the extension of local voting rights to women taxpayers, provided they were unmarried or widowed, but women were considered ineligible to vote, and the debate to give women local voting rights came to an end. Unlike married women, who had to seek representation from their husbands, they were considered to be able to secure their own interests because they were not recognised by their marital status. Indeed, in 1869, only unmarried women were given the right to vote locally in the UK, and it took 25 years from then until the right was extended to married women. There were subsequent attempts to give women the right to vote in local elections against a political background of increasing pressure for universal male suffrage.

2. The feminist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

This section discusses how women's suffrage was asserted in the feminist movement in Italy at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Anna Maria Mozzoni, a leading Italian women's activist, already referred to women's suffrage in the late 19th century, saying that women should have the right to "protest against the status quo, call for reforms and, if not the right to be elected, at least the 'right to vote'". Mozzoni was already referring to women's suffrage in the second half of the 19th century. Mozzoni refers to women's suffrage in her book La donna e i rapporti sociali (Women and Social Relations). Mozzoni argued that giving women the right to vote was the only way to lead Italy towards a modern society. In 1877, Mozzoni presented a petition to Parliament calling for women's suffrage in national elections. The aim was to argue for women's right to vote in national elections, first by recognising women's suffrage in national elections, which would then include women's suffrage in local elections. The petition demanded that women be considered municipalities and that they be granted legal capacity. In the petition, Mozzoni stated that women are just as intelligent as male voters and that granting women the right to vote in national elections would cost them nothing. Her ideas were endorsed and supported by a number of educationists, including the well-known educationist Maria Montessori. Women activists, led by Mozzoni, argued that not being able to vote was tantamount to not existing, but women's raison d'etre was explicitly linked to motherhood, and giving women the right to vote was rejected. However, their campaign for the right to vote did not substantially weaken throughout the 20th century. Although Mozzoni's advocacy was not sufficient to win women's suffrage at the legislative level, her work is considered an important contribution to women's suffrage.

3. The feminist movement before the passage of universal male suffrage

This section examines the movements of the feminist movement that took place before the passage of universal male suffrage. The focus here is mainly on the petition submitted on 25 February 1907 calling for women to have the right to vote. The petition was drafted by Mozzoni in 1906, signed and submitted by approximately 10,000 women. The petition read: 'We (women) are municipal citizens, we pay taxes, we create wealth, we pay the painful blood money of motherhood, so we have the right to vote'. Women demanded the same right to vote in national elections as men, arguing that they paid the tax of motherhood and contributed to the functioning of the state with their labour and money. Although women's suffrage never materialised as a result, on the day it was submitted, a large crowd of women and others crowded the halls of Parliament.

In fact, Roberto Mirabelli, a member of the Republican Party, was very understanding of the petition and said that the issue of giving women the right to vote, which had already been raised in the UK and France, should also be discussed in Italy. Mirabelli pointed out, among other things, that there is no law excluding women from the right to vote in local elections, and stated that as long as the principle of municipal and political equality exists, it should be interpreted as allowing women to exercise the right to vote. In fact, the law did not explicitly exclude women from the right to vote in local elections; it was merely customary.

Activists continued to call for women to be granted the right to vote: in 1910, in the socialist theoretical journal Critica Sociale, the socialist Anna Kuliscioff stated the injustice of not allowing women the right to vote. She wrote: 'Which of the arguments that apply to men's right to vote cannot equally apply to women's right to vote... (omitted)... If we say that illiterate people have political rights because they are also producers, then the number of women workers, farmers and employees is increasing day by day. Is not the function and sacrifice of mothers, who at least offer their children to the army and workplaces, equivalent to military service? Are taxes paid only by men?" referring to the establishment of the Socialist Committee for Women's Suffrage (il Comitato Socialista per il suffragio femminile) in the following year, 1911. Kuliscioff wanted the right to vote as a right, indiscriminately and without discrimination for all women, regardless of whether they were rich or poor, educated or not. This idea of Kuliscioff would later influence the Socialist Party.

4. Views in favour of women's suffrage

On the other hand, there were supporters of women's suffrage in parliament as well. This section discusses the views of those in favour in parliament, mainly in the Socialist Party. Some members of the Socialist Party, such as Filippo Turati, had proposed the inclusion of women in the 1912 Electoral Law, and during the debate on male universal suffrage on 8 May 1912, Turati stated that he wanted an electoral law that included "all Italians" regardless of anatomical and biological differences. Having already established his reputation as a socialist, Tulati voted in favour of women's suffrage for the Socialist Party as a whole and, like his wife Kuliscioff, insisted that women should be given equal rights and opportunities. Furthermore, in a debate on 15 May 1912, Tulati stated that 'the Socialist Party will vote in favour of women's suffrage... (omitted)... I would ask the Prime Minister why this reform is more dangerous than the right to vote for five million men".

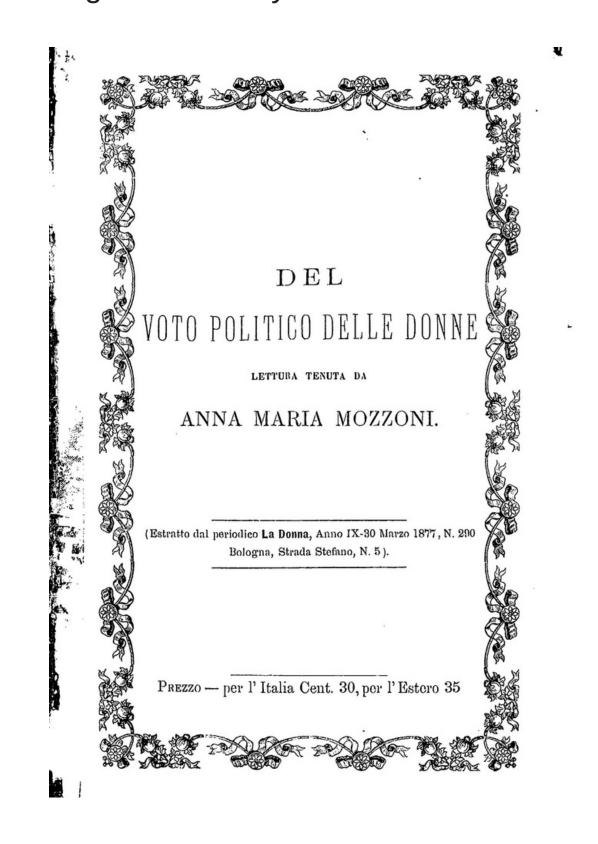
Furthermore, former Prime Minister Sonnino, who was a leading politician alongside Giolitti, was also one of those in favour: 'I am one of the few who approve the proposal to give women the right to vote. Women are... (among others).... like any other power or interest, they should be given the weapons shown by the right to vote, so that they can defend their rights". Alongside Sonnino, other members of the left-wing parliamentary party outside the Socialist Party, such as Mirabelli and Claudio Treves proposed an amendment with Turati to allow women the right to vote.

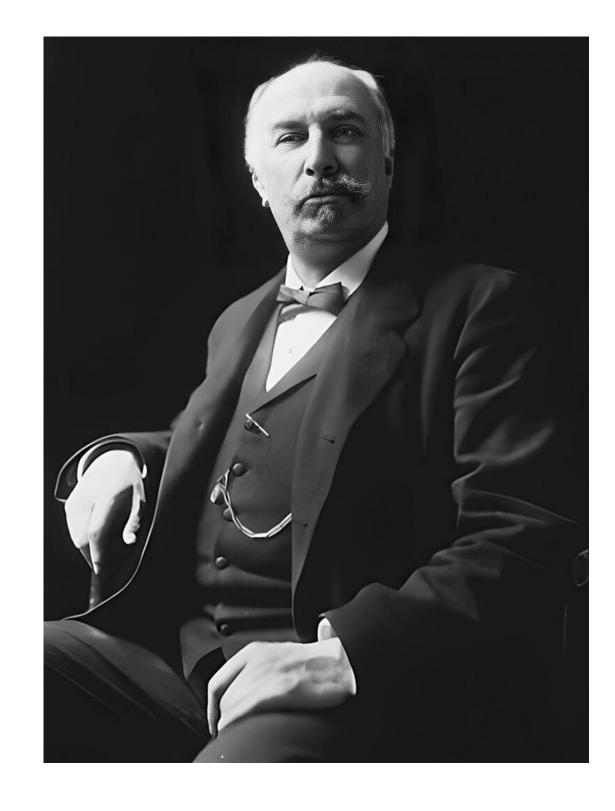
5. The establishment of universal male suffrage and the logic of Giolitti and other opponents of women's suffrage

This section discusses the views of opponents of women's suffrage and examines the logic behind Giolitti's refusal to grant women the right to vote. Giolitti's interest in granting women the right to vote was low, and he did not even recognise the right to limited elections for women. The main reason for this was Jolitti's emphasis on the fact that women lacked military service and were therefore considered to have less social experience than men. Indeed, in a debate on 15 May 1912, Giolitti had stated that 'giving women the right to vote is like taking a leap in the dark' and that it was not permissible to give women the right to vote, mainly because of their lack of social experience. Other opponents were represented by Domenico Ridola and Carlo Cavagnari. Ridola said: 'Women's suffrage is not only a political issue, but also a scientific and biological issue... (omitted)... The ultimate mission of women has been described in one word: motherhood", while Cavagnari said: "Women have been given a wonderful and beautiful mission in our society. They can demonstrate their virtues in many ways... (among others)... I do not want women to face the uncomfortable battle of electoral politics. If women are allowed to vote, don't you think there will be more conflicts in the family?' Their opinions can be summarised as being strongly opposed to the granting of voting rights, mainly arguing that women have motherhood. In other words, the reasons for the opponents' opinions were no different from those of the 19th century in terms of physical differences and emphasis on motherhood, as the main opposition was an emphasis on motherhood based on physical differences such as pregnancy and childbirth, and on natural differences that men and women are inherently different. The idea of the 'mother' was not a new one in the 20th century. This view did not change much in the 20th century as it did in the 19th century, but on the other hand, as there were frequent moves to grant women the right to vote in local elections in the UK and some Pacific Ocean countries, influenced by neighbouring countries, the growing social interest in women's suffrage led to an increase in women in parliament in the 20th century.

On 15 May 1912, a bill proposed by Turati and others of the Socialist Party to grant women the same universal suffrage in national elections as men was rejected by 48 of 263 voters in favour, 209 against and 6 abstaining. On the other hand, the Milanese daily newspaper Corriere della sera reported on 16 May 1912, the day after the Congress, on its front page that 'Women's suffrage rejected by the Chamber of Deputies', indicating a greater public interest in women's suffrage than in the 19th century. Furthermore, in the November-December 1912 issue of Nuova Antologia, there is a column on 'Feminism in Denmark', which states: 'Needless to say, women are voters are eligible to be elected as city councillors... (omitted)... There are ten women on the Copenhagen City Council". The Danish portrayal of women being more independent, with the right to vote locally and to do labour, was against the background of a growing movement in other European countries and North America to grant women the right to vote, as well as in Italy at the time. It is thought that there was growing social interest in giving women the right to vote in Italy at the time, against the backdrop of growing movements to grant women the right to vote in other European countries and North America.

The Electoral Law of 1882 (Law No 593 of 22 January 1882) listed completion of primary compulsory education as a requirement for granting the right to vote, and was based on the idea that literacy was a condition for the right to vote, but Giolitti abolished the literacy requirement and emphasised the granting of the right to vote for adult men, irrespective of literacy, and he argued for the abolition of the literacy requirement and the granting of the right to vote to adult men irrespective of literacy, considering it as a life experience rather than an ability. In other words, by emphasising the importance of life experience, Giolitti argued that a person's intellectual maturity could be gained not only from schooling but also from experience, and that it was important to focus on spiritual maturity rather than on schooling that only aimed at passing exams. Thus, in the 1912 Electoral Act, the condition for the granting of the right to vote was changed from the ability of literacy to life experience and military service experience. The amendments to the Electoral Act also removed the limit on the amount of tax paid, granting male universal suffrage to all adult males aged 30 and over in 1912, and the 1912 Electoral Act maintained the constituency system of two-part constituency voting. This amendment abolished the literacy requirement for men aged 30 and over and granted them the right to vote unconditionally. Thus, while Giolitti emphasised that a man with a good life experience could exercise the right to vote, he had other intentions than this idea. Giolitti had two intentions in passing universal male suffrage: the first was to counter the Socialist Party, which was emerging as a traditional liberal political party at the time. The Socialist Party had been formed at the end of the 19th century and had gained support by, among other things, organising workers in the industrial areas of the north. Second, there was a political desire to capture the Catholic vote, which was not politically organised. When the liberal state was established, the Catholic Church prohibited the faithful from voting in the lower house elections in reaction to the loss of territory and leadership following the annexation of Rome in 1870. Throughout the 19th century, no Catholic parties were formed and no Catholic MPs were born, with the first Catholic MP in 1904. Although the first Catholic MP was born in 1904, it was not until after the First World War that a political party was organised. Therefore, it was Giolitti's intention to win the unorganised Catholic vote, expand his support base and compete with the Socialist Party. In other words, it is thought that Giolitti's intention in passing universal male suffrage was to make the new masses into voters, so that they would join political forces; or, to paraphrase, Giolitti's granting of universal male suffrage was mainly to consolidate his own power, and not from a democratic perspective.





Corriere della Sera, 16 Maggio 1912 per le nuove elezioni-generali che, come già l'on. Giolitti disse alla Camera, dovran-Il voto alle donne respinto alla Camera con 161 voti di maggioranza sersi perwaass che il tipo di scheda propo Curiosità dell'appello nominale (Per telefono al "Corriere della Sera...) SONNINO demanda se, stabilitasi la resi-denza come il luogo ove il diritto elettorale l presidente Marcora apre la seduta sile seguire l'assegno mentre i document de seri potranno essere prodotti più tardi: — seri potranno essere prodotti più tardi: — un'altra riguarda le proposte dirette a migitiorare il servizio affidato al litanco di Napoli, per le rimesse dei fondi degli emigranti e vien rispesto che solo la più importante fra censaria una legge, conscribe la questione re-sta sub pudice. E poi all'ordine del giorno l'elezione contestata del 10 marzo p. p. a Tea-no (proclamato l'avv. Giuseppe Lonardo con-tro Zanfagna). Per casa la Giunta dese ele-Joseph La Lemis, Leonardi, Libertini Pasque-le, Lonemari, Lociani Magliano, Magni, Halcangi, Nanfredi Manfredo, Mango, Manna, Ravaini, Harangoni, Harenglia, Marsotto, Masi, Materi, Hendaia, Hessanootte, Min-ri, Modice, Moline, Montavit, Montaveco, Monta, Horando, Morelli-Oualcierotti, Monta Gastano, No-Una restrizione del diritto di voto l'on. Giolitti e da staccarai dal soggio aloce: e sostiene che il testo proposto dalla Abbiamo parlalo brevemente stasera cos Vaccare, Valescani, Valle Gregorie, Vicini, spirato allo stesso concetto, dichiarando di valore - egli ha detto - all'osservazione chiedere su di esso la votazione nominale.

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Conclusion

From the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the topic of granting women the right to vote was increasingly discussed in newspapers and magazines, and based on trends in other countries, particularly in the West, the Socialist Party and women's activists became increasingly active in favour of the idea, and there was growing interest in the topic among the general public. Even before the 1912 Electoral Act introduced universal male suffrage, there were numerous debates about women's suffrage, both in parliament and in society. Throughout the Giolitti period, with the introduction of the male universal suffrage system, the demand for debate on women's suffrage in parliament, and the activities of women activists, various women's suffrage movements were observed, but women's suffrage was not recognised either in national elections or in local elections in local politics as a popular space.

Giolitti's recognition of male universal suffrage was not so much a municipal right as a way of strengthening his own position against the threat of the Socialist and Catholic parties, and his failure to recognise women's suffrage was also in accordance with his own electoral strategy. It is likely that he feared that giving women the right to vote would put him at a relative disadvantage, as he feared that the Socialist Party and the Catholic Party would receive women's votes. It can be said that Giolitti could not grant women the right to vote because he would not have taken the view that the right to vote was a municipal right. In other words, Giolitti did not grant women the right to vote because it would have benefited his opponents, so to speak. Although the ostensible reason for not allowing women the right to vote was the traditional view that women's role was limited to the home and that they were not part of the municipal community, the actual reason may have been the fear that the right to vote would be converted into suffrage, or the political calculation that this vote would be directed towards the opposing political forces. This may have been because Giolitti's policy is generally appreciated as the flowering of parliamentary democracy in Italy during the Giolitti era, as it is generally understood and positively perceived as representing the interests of diverse social forces, including the working class, peasants, urban and rural middle classes, within the framework of the state, with an increasing number of voters. However, the limitation of democracy in Italy at the time was that it did not grant women the right to vote as a municipal right. Subsequently, there were moves by the Italian People's Party for women's suffrage. The Socialist Party insisted on women's suffrage as a municipal right, but what logic the People's Party developed in response will be discussed at another time.

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