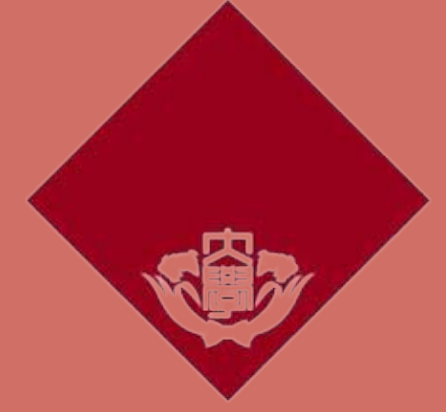


Women's Suffrage in Early 20th Century Italy

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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'être* 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, Turati 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, Turati 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.

