

History of women's suffrage in South Australia

What is suffrage?

Suffrage is a term that refers to a person's ability to participate in society by being able to vote at elections. Being able to vote is a key part of citizenship and allows each person to have their say about what is important to them and what they think their lives should be like.

In South Australia before 1894, only men were allowed to vote in elections, which many people – both men and women – believed was not right. In 1888, they formed a group called the Women's Suffrage League to convince people that women should be allowed to vote, too. Some of their reasons were:

- women were educated and intelligent
- it was not right that half the people in the community should not be allowed to vote
- women paid taxes, so they should be allowed to vote
- a strong need for better laws protecting and supporting women and families, and that women should therefore have a say in electing people that would pass these sorts of laws.

People who didn't want women to be allowed to vote argued that many women did not want to vote, that they were too busy looking after babies or doing housework, and they didn't have time to be interested in politics.

How was suffrage for women won in South Australia?

Women's groups, such as the Women's Suffrage League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), campaigned to gain the vote for women as a way of gaining a political voice for a range of social values that many women felt were unrepresented in parliament. These values included children's rights, girl's rights, women worker's rights and the desire for temperance (reducing the amount of alcohol sold and consumed).

Group members were organised and determined, and gained support for suffrage anywhere and everywhere they could, all across South Australia. They wrote letters, distributed petitions, wrote to newspapers, gave speeches, distributed information, visited politicians and held meetings, fetes and fundraisers. Members of these women's groups often had connections with similar groups overseas, and would attend and speak at international conferences.

Key suffragists from this time include Mary Lee and Catherine Helen Spence, as well as Elizabeth Webb Nicholls (President of the WCTU twice during the period 1889-1904 and credited with having gained 8,268 of the 11,600 signatures on the largest petition), Lady Mary Colton, Serena Thorne Lake, Rose Birks, and Augusta Zadow (first 'Lady Inspector' of factories).

The suffragists achieved their goal on 18 December 1894, when the *Adult Suffrage Bill* passed in the South Australian Parliament, allowing women to vote and stand for parliament.

Those involved in the first wave of the campaign for women's votes are known as 'suffragists'. The term 'suffragette' is largely associated with the English women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s, which began after the vote was achieved for women in South Australia.

Aboriginal women and the vote

Aboriginal men living in South Australia had the right to vote when the South Australian Constitution passed in 1856. South Australian Aboriginal women were given the right to vote under colonial laws in 1894, but they were often not informed of this right or supported to enrol to vote. In some cases, Aboriginal people were actively discouraged from enrolling or voting.

The *1902 Commonwealth Franchise Act* removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's right to vote in federal elections. In 1962, this right was reinstated in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not included in the census until the 1967 Referendum. This change gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a symbol of recognition, and gave the Australian Government power to address inequalities in society.

When we reflect upon our history and both the imperative and impact of women being able to vote and be heard, we need to acknowledge the injustice, pain and suffering felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the past and still today.

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