

Who were the Suffragette's?



By the start of the 20th century there were two main elements in the campaign for votes for women, the **suffragists** and the **suffragettes**. The dividing line between these two strands was about tactics.

On the one hand, the suffragists wanted to act within the law and follow the route of political persuasion to win support for their cause. It was felt that any actions that broke the law would allow their opponents to portray them as irresponsible and provide further excuses to deny women the vote.

On the other hand, there were those who were frustrated by the lack of progress and non-confrontational approach of the suffragists. Some felt that it was time to pursue a course of civil disobedience and **direct action**, even if that meant breaking the law. They felt that if they caused enough problems for the authorities, then the government would be forced to address the issue.



The Suffragists

The suffragists were led by **Millicent Fawcett**, head of the **National Union for Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)**. It was founded in 1897 but merged with other organisations that dated back to the 1860s. Its aim was to win women's suffrage through considered debate and campaigning, such as petitions and non-violent marches.

The Suffragettes and the Pankhurst family

In 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed when **Emmeline Pankhurst** and her daughters became disappointed with the lack of progress by the NUWSS. It decided upon an approach that was more direct and confrontational, which we refer to as militancy. These campaigners were labelled '**suffragettes**' by the press. It was meant as an insult, but the name stuck and was used by the members of the WSPU themselves.

The Pankhurst family, originally from Manchester, led this new struggle of militant suffragettes. Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter **Christabel Pankhurst** were at the forefront of the WSPU'S campaigns and were arrested many times.

The militant tactics employed by the suffragettes shocked society. A large number of the suffragettes were middle-class women from respectable and well-connected families. In the very traditional atmosphere of the early twentieth century such behaviour was considered scandalous. However, there was also a lot of support, as seen by the 1908 demonstration in London that was attended by over 300,000 activists, the largest in British history.



Under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst, the WSPU decided to use direct action to force the government to award the vote to women.