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Suffragists & Suffragettes

Women in the UK were granted the vote in national parliamentary elections on the same terms as men in 1928 – it has remained that way ever since. Going further back in time, some women (those over 30 who met the relevant property qualifications) were given the vote following the conclusion of WW1 in 1918. However, before the outbreak of WW1, two groups campaigned for the right for women to vote. The Suffragists (NUWSS) were formed in 1897 and Suffragettes (WSPU) were formed in 1903; both groups aimed to secure women the vote in parliamentary elections. However, they differed markedly in their strategies. The Suffragists, led by Millicent Fawcett, campaigned using only legal means. In contrast, the Suffragettes, led by Emmeline Pankhurst, were prepared to break the law in order to secure the right to vote. Which group had the biggest impact pre-1914? In this episode, Patrick supports the contributions of the Suffragists and Elliott supports the Suffragettes. It is worth noting, however, that both editors are of the opinion that it was actually the advent of WW1 that provided the context for the biggest shift towards women gaining the vote.

Patrick's arguments that the NUWSS had a bigger impact than the WSPU	Elliott's arguments that the WSPU had a bigger impact than the NUWSS
The NUWSS were a far larger group with a much wider and continuously growing support base by 1913, while the WSPU were losing members due to their militancy. By 1913, the NUWSS had 100,000 active members, whereas the WSPU had just 2,000. NUWSS membership grew seven-fold between 1908 and 1914 – the years of WSPU militancy.	The WSPU grew out of the dissatisfaction at the ponderous ineffectiveness of the NUWSS – thus it is irrelevant that the NUWSS were a larger group, in terms of membership, for they were never able to translate those numbers into action. The Suffragettes, on the other hand, were women of 'Deeds not Words'. In this sense, the WSPU had an impact that far outweighed the sum of its parts.
The NUWSS used a wide range of law-abiding tactics to court public-support for the right of women to vote, such as meetings, publishing pamphlets and lobbying MP's, which is generally seen as effective by Historians such as Dr Rowbotham. Whereas, according to Professor Tombs, the WSPU jettisoned public support and sympathy by breaking the law. As a result, an impasse was reached by 1914.	The WSPU was able to achieve a level of publicity for the cause of female enfranchisement that the NUWSS could only ever have dreamed of. The issue was placed on the national agenda and was supported by the likes of MP Bamford Slack who introduced a female suffrage bill into parliament, and Prime minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman.
The NUWSS formed in 1897 to unify the disparate, uncoordinated and provincial strands of the female suffrage movement into a cohesive, national organisation under the leadership of the dynamic and highly esteemed Millicent Fawcett. Its long-term impact on the quest for the vote cannot be underestimated.	Established in 1903 with only 6 members, by 1908 the WSPU were organising a 300,000-strong protest in Hyde Park, generating more income than the Labour Party in 1908, and conducted meetings the Royal Albert Hall 20 times between 1908 and 1918.
By 1914, the Liberal Government were no longer against giving women the vote in principle and largely agreed with what the NUWSS & WSPU wanted - but refused to grant it because of the violent strategies used by the WSPU. In essence, while the NUWSS were aiding the cause, the WSPU were ultimately holding it back.	The militant tactics ushered in a new era of impatience at the inequality faced by women. The publicity generated by the Suffragettes forever destroyed the patriarchal view of women in the UK as weak, subservient and unable, and revealed the keen injustice perpetrated by state machinery against women searching for equality with men.

Don't forget to check out Dr Elliott L. Watson's free website: www.thecourseworkclub.com and follow him at @thelibrarian6 on Twitter.
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