

Voting Rights : A Comparative Perspective on the History of British and American Voting Rights

Program: International and Comparative Studies (English track)

Instructor: Alexandra SIPPEL

Total number of hours: 20 hours

ECTS: 5

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course examines the ways in which voting became universal in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and in the United States of America. It does so in a comparative perspective, focusing on how such notions as “democracy”, and even as “man” or “people” became more and more inclusive, often driven by the militancy of those who had been excluded from political decision-making. While democracy has come to appear as a desirable norm in Western institutions has a long history and was by no means a given in past centuries.

Although they are very different today, British and American institutions stem from a common source: the American colonies found their inspiration in the system that prevailed in modern Britain, which also framed the rhetoric of “liberty” and of the “rights of the free-born Englishman” (and then man) in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. As Enlightenment and revolutionary ideas gathered momentum in the late seventeenth and then in the late eighteenth centuries, radicalism emerged, questioning and demanding that working men too should be able to choose their lawmakers, or even to make the law as elected members of the House of Common in Britain. The course will examine the reaction of British authorities to these universalist claims, especially at a time when male suffrage gained ground in the young American Republic.

The nineteenth century was a time of growing challenges on both sides of the Atlantic and the question of slavery and of the rights of emancipated slaves will make up an important chapter in this study. The Civil War and Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution and the ways in which states attempted at circumventing them form an interesting aspect of the question. A later session will be devoted to how segregation and discriminations were addressed and curtailed during the Civil Rights Movement. The course will also address the ways in which this movement reverberated across the Atlantic, especially in Northern Ireland where voting discriminations still prevailed.

Women’s voting rights provide an excellent example of how easily ideas and militants travelled from one side of the Atlantic to the other and of how different tactics served the strategy of winning the

vote for women. We'll also see how the specific contexts of each country influenced women's rhetoric and even their sense that they too were entitled to rights that had been reserved to privileged men. In doing so, we'll use the notion of "maternalism" that hinges on the complex position of middle- and upper-class women who belonged to the dominant order in terms of their class, but who shared the plight of the unenfranchised in other respects.

Most of the seminar will be dedicated to national (as in federal in the US) elections. But the last sessions will be dedicated to more local/regional voting rights and will address elections within states on the one hand, as well as the process and working of devolution in the UK. The last session addresses democracy as work-in-progress and will raise unanswered questions regarding the voting systems of plurality voting as well as the role of indirect elections or unelected assemblies in contemporary western democracies.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Comparing and contrasting the evolution of voting rights in the US and UK, and how plurality voting evolved in both countries.
- Questioning the words "democracy" and "people" or even "men" to show how universal suffrage was by no means a given. Analysing the ways in which popular representation was associated with the risks of a senseless "mob" seizing power.
- Reflecting on how the rights (or indeed absence thereof) of some impacted the militancy of others.

ASSESSMENT:

Students will be given a written assignment in the last session of the course. 2 hours, no documents or connected devices allowed.

LEARNING RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY:

This course is based on official documents, research papers and research monographs. It is also illustrated by press articles and Youtube videos that are used to provide short introductions and overviews of given topics. The following bibliography is a selection of the academic sources I used for this course that can be of interest to students.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

BERMAN, Ari. Give us the Ballot, *The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

BLAIS, André, ed. *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post? The Politics of Electoral Reform*. Oxford: University Press, 2008.

BOLT, Christine. *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

BONIN Hugo, *At the sound of the New Word Spoken: Le Mot "démocratie" en Grande-Bretagne, 1770-1920*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2024.

DOOLEY, Brian. Black and Green, *The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America*. London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1998.

GLENN, Richard and KREIDER Kyle, *Voting Rights in America, A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2020.

HUNT BOTTING, Eileen. *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016.

MAY, Gary. *Bending Toward Justice, The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Ó DOCHARTAIGH, Niall. *From Civil Rights to Armalites, Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 (1997).

RISER, R. Volney. *Defying Disfranchisement, Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890-1908*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010.

THOMPSON, Joseph, E. *American Policy and Northern Ireland, A Saga of Peacebuilding*. Wesport and London: Praeger, 2001.

CALENDAR:

- **SESSION 1:** INTRODUCTION. Today's democratic institutions and their origins prior to 1776.
- **SESSION 2:** Militants for male suffrage in nineteenth-century Britain.
- **SESSION 3:** Male suffrage in the young American Republic.

- **SESSION 4:** Nineteenth-century reforms in Britain and Ireland. Ending religious discriminations and enfranchising some of the working-class population.
- **SESSION 5:** The American Civil War and its aftermath, from Reconstruction Amendments to re-segregation.
- **SESSION 6:** Women's militancy for the vote, a transatlantic approach.
- **SESSION 7:** The Civil Right's Movement and its transatlantic reverberations – the case of Northern Ireland.
- **SESSION 8:** Local Elections: some state elections in the US and Devolution in the UK.
- **SESSION 9:** Some contemporary challenges: Voting age, abstention, gerrymandering, further reform of the Lords, the electoral college...
- **SESSION 10:** Final exam, 2 hours, usual time and place.

COURSE AUTHOR:

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