Role of pressure groups

It was not just women who campaigned for the vote. Various pressure groups representing working class men put pressure on the Government to extend the franchise. In 1864 the National Reform Union was established, campaigning for a secret ballot, equal seat distribution and votes for all taxpayers. The Union was mainly made up of middle class men, some of whom were already enfranchised, but many who were seeking the right to vote for themselves. Founded in the same year, the Reform League was a much more radical movement. Whilst the also campaigned for the secret ballot, the League also supported universal manhood suffrage – i.e. votes for all men. The League was far more working class in orientation and had a far larger following than the Reform Union.

The pressure exerted from these two groups was undoubtedly a factor in Gladstone’s Reform Bill, put before Parliament in 1866. The Bill failed to pass Parliament as opponents of reform saw it as too extreme, whilst supporters of reform argued that it did not go far enough. The failure of the Bill to pass Parliament was met with widespread demonstrations. On 23rd July 1866 a demonstration march was organised by leaders of the Reform League with the plan to meet at London’s Hyde Park. It is estimated that over 200,000 people took part in the demonstration. However, when they reached the gates of the park they found the gates locked and a line of 1600 police in their way. The march soon descended into a riot. The desire for reform was clear for all to see and made it clear to the government the dangers of withholding the franchise from the working classes. Parliament eventually agreed upon the 1867 Reform Act the following year, this time under the leadership of Benjamin Disraeli’s Conservatives. Thus, pressure groups undoubtedly played a significant role in the passing of the 1867 Reform Act.

There is less evidence to suggest that the 1884 Representation of the People Act was influenced by pressure groups. However, as we have previously seen, the NUWSS and the WSPU played a significant role in keeping up the pressure for further political reform. Undoubtedly both groups kept the issue of wider reform in the news headlines - be it through sympathy for their plight or outrage at their tactics.
Social and economic change

The industrial revolution occurred in Britain from 1750 to 1850. This period of industrialisation drastically changed people’s lives: it changed where they lived and worked; how they worked; and how they felt about their position in society. Following the industrial revolution, the working classes worked together in large factories in new towns and cities. Thousands of people with the same work pattern provided great potential for the spread of new ideas amongst the workers and for the opportunity to organise protests. Furthermore, the development of basic education and cheap popular newspapers raised the political awareness of the working classes. The spread of railways helped the spread of information, allowing national newspapers to be distributed. Railways also allowed the political parties to become national and gave politicians the opportunity to spend more time in their constituency than at Westminster.

The industrial revolution also created wealth among factory owners. This middle class men with new found wealth argued that they should have more of a say in running the country. Their case was particularly strong as their overseas trade was vital to the economic success of the country. Therefore, Parliament could not afford to deny these men involvement in the political process.

With increasing industrialisation came the skilled working classes. The skilled working classes were viewed with more respect than working class labourers as they required more education to develop their skill. The skilled working class too became vital to the economic success of Britain; therefore it became increasingly difficult to argue that these men were undeserving of political representation. The skilled working classes were the main beneficiaries of the 1884 Reform Act.

Increasing urbanisation led to pressure for redistribution of parliamentary seats, towns and cities which boomed in the industrial north of England had massive populations but very few MPs and voters at the start of the period. The 1867, 1885 and 1918 reform acts all involved seat redistribution that sought to recognise the impact of urbanisation and create equal constituencies.

The Great War can also be seen as a period of significant economic change which contributed towards reform. The realisation that women were capable of performing a vital economic role in terms of Impact of the Great War on the key issue of votes for women; realisation of the jobs they performed was a factor in the passing of the 1918 Reform Act.
Political advantage

Politicians often believed they could gain political advantages from passing reforms with the belief that if they extended the right to vote, those who gained the vote would reward the party who passed the reform with their vote at the next election. Until 1900 British politics was dominated by two parties – the Conservatives and the Liberals. The 1867 Reform Act was passed by the Conservatives after being in opposition for many years. Arguably, the passing of this act was aimed at trying to win votes from those who would benefit from the Act.

However, the Liberal party also tried to gain political advantage through the passing of Reform Bills. John Bright a key Liberal figure argued for secret ballot, to free the working class electorate from fear of retaliation by bosses and landlords. Furthermore it is possible to argue that the passing of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act was a tactical move by the Liberals. By limiting the amount spent on elections, they may have been seeking to reduce advantages held by the wealthier Conservatives.

Reforms could also be used as a way of distracting the media and the public from other problems facing the government. The multiple Reform Acts of the 1880’s could be seen as partly motivated by an attempt to distract from foreign policy problems facing the Liberal government. Furthermore, in the passing of the Redistribution of the Seats Act (1885), the Liberals hoped to gain support from urban voters who were now more fairly represented in Parliament.

In contrast the opportunity of coalition government during World War One may be considered in light of the fact that no one political party was behind the reform and, theoretically, all could benefit from the extension of the franchise to men and women.

The emergence of the Labour Party in the 1900s can also be seen as an important factor behind reform. From the outset the Labour Party was supportive of votes for all men and women over the age of 21, therefore, other parties may have attempted reforms to try and win these new voters from the Labour Party.

Changing political attitudes

Throughout the 19th century attitudes were gradually changing. Political reform was no longer seen as a threat to the existing order and was increasingly accepted as a necessary change. Individual politicians such as William Gladstone, leader of the Liberals in the 1880s can be seen as particularly influential in creating reform. Gladstone was responsible for the passing of multiple reform bills, from the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal practices Act to the 1885 Redistribution of the Seats Act. He had also tried early reform in 1866, but this did not make it through Parliament. Development of political beliefs that argued for intervention such as Socialism: Labour argued for universal suffrage.

Attitudes to women were also changing significantly. Women had been accepted into local government and school board elections. World War One was undoubtedly a catalyst which sped up a process of changing attitudes.

Example of other countries

Britain considered herself to be the cradle of modern democracy. Other nations had extended the franchise and Britain could not be seen to be falling behind.

The United States of America was particularly influential in more spreading liberal ideas. Lincoln’s Gettysburg address ‘a government of the people, for the people, by the people’ was claimed as a standard to which Britain should be aiming by reformers.