

# How best can we tell the story of Britain's journey to democracy?

History

Enquiry: Why are different stories told about Britain's journey to democracy?

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# Britain's journey to democracy

By 1928, Britain could be described as a democracy. All adults could vote in general elections for members of parliament. However, it took a long time for Britain to become democratic. For over a hundred years before 1928 many different people had campaigned for the vote and parliament only gradually increased the number of voters. The story of how Britain changed to become democratic is interesting. But it is also interesting that different stories are told to describe this change. Why is this?



# Why do people tell the Whig Story?

The Whig story describes how Britain gradually made progress throughout its history. The story implies that Britain's rulers wisely shared power with a larger and larger number of people. By doing this gradually, Britain became more powerful.

One reason why Whig historians, like Thomas Babington Macaulay, tell this story is that it makes Britain sound good. The Whig story presents the British government as wise and stable. If historians feel **patriotic** about Britain's past, they might be attracted to telling this Whig story. This does not mean Whig historians are lying. But their patriotic feelings might lead them to carry out research into speeches made in parliament and the letters of Britain's leading politicians. This type of research might provide more details to support a Whig story.



# Why do people tell the working class story?

The working class story describes how Britain's workers struggled to get the vote. It focuses on the actions of ordinary working people. The story often looks at how working class people suffered, like in the Peterloo Massacre, and how they worked together to solve their own problems, like in the Cooperatives. The working class story suggests that it was the actions of workers that forced parliament to extend the franchise.

Many historians are attracted to the working class story because they believed the Whig story was incomplete. These historians think focusing on the words of Britain's rulers will give a one-sided picture of what Britain was really like. Historians, like E.P. Thompson, aim to rescue the stories of the poor. As a result they do research in local areas and find out what workers in these places were doing and writing. So, these historians aim to tell a story that is more representative of the people that lived through trying to win the vote.



# Why do people tell the suffragette story?

The suffragette story focuses on how a group of women used radical methods to try to win the right to vote. The story focuses on how “**deeds**, not words” were necessary to force the government to give women the right to vote. The suffragettes used attention-grabbing tactics to put pressure on parliament to change the law.

One reason why lots of people are attracted to telling the suffragette story is because it is so exciting. Leading suffragettes, like Emmeline Pankhurst, themselves contributed to making the story interesting by publishing autobiographies and memoirs. In these books they describe the **militant** tactics used by the suffragettes in detail. They also explain why the mainstream peaceful womens’ franchise movement was not working. Another reason why historians think telling the suffragette story is important is because it corrects what they see as a misleading part of the Whig story. The suffragette story shows the vote was won ‘from below’ rather than given from above. What this means is that Britain’s rulers did not willingly extend the franchise. Ordinary people had to put pressure on Britain’s rulers to share power.



# Glossary

**Deeds:** actions

**Militant:** describing the willingness of to use violence to achieve aims

**Patriotic:** feeling proud in one's country



# Comprehension Questions

1. What are the differences between the three stories of Britain's journey to democracy?
2. Why do different people tell different stories about Britain's journey to democracy?

## Extension

3. Is it possible to describe Britain's journey to democracy in a way which represents all three stories? Have a go at trying to write a paragraph summarising how Britain became a democracy which most historians would think is a fair story to tell.
  - Think carefully about which individuals (if any) you mention
  - Think carefully about the start and end point

