Contents

Introduction vii

One Pioneers of Suffrage 3

Two Giving Women a Voice 31

Three Broadening the Struggle 63

Four Winning the Provincial Franchise 97

Five Reaching for Representation 135

Conclusion 173

Acknowledgments 177

Sources and Further Reading 178

Photo Credits 193

Index 195
ON 25 NOVEMBER 1935, Idola Saint-Jean, one of the most radical feminists of her time, wrote to Mrs. Hernance Roy, a supporter of women’s suffrage: “When the history of suffrage is written, the role played by our politicians will cut a sad figure beside that of the women they insulted.” As Saint-Jean suggests, members of the Quebec legislature – especially the French Canadians – were strongly opposed to women having the right to vote, and they were not afraid to express their opinions in a heavy-handed fashion. During the 1920s and 1930s, when suffrage was debated in the Legislative Assembly, politicians felt free to shout sexually charged insults at the women who demanded this fundamental right.

Suffrage was the centrepiece of the early-twentieth-century feminist movement, and achieving it took a lot longer in Quebec than elsewhere in North America. In Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, most women won the vote during or just after the First World War. In some Australian and American states, as well as in New Zealand, they were enfranchised long before the twentieth century. Quebec women, by contrast, could not cast a provincial ballot until 1940. Like their counterparts in France, Belgium, and Italy, Quebec suffragists waged a long, bitter campaign, and the fact that women of European descent had already obtained the vote in other parts of Canada played a role. Politicians, intellectuals, and French Canadian clergy resisted giving Quebec women the vote because its absence reinforced the cultural difference of Canada’s only majority French-speaking, or francophone, province.

In fact, Quebec women had been the first in Canada to vote. Those who satisfied certain landownership conditions could vote from 1791 until 1849, when that right was taken away. The atypical
Political rights such as the right to vote have been considered human rights since the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Article 21.1 states, “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.”

path travelled by Quebec women – from frontrunners to last place – is the central theme of this book. As its title suggests, it tells the story of their struggle for political enfranchisement, but it also details the loss or gain of other rights – legal, social, and economic – that generally extend from suffrage. In other words, suffrage is not treated as an isolated question but as the fulcrum for a group of individual and collective rights that are associated with human rights today.

In 1948, when the United Nations declared that voting was a human right, it echoed arguments that Quebec suffragists had put forward in earlier decades. On 8 April 1936, in a speech broadcast on radio station CKAC, Idola Saint-Jean declared, “We want [women] to enjoy the freedom of being human.” She felt that excluding them from political life denied them their humanity, pure and simple, and for two reasons. First, because they could not elect their representatives, they were relegated to an inferior civil status. Second, the absence of political rights led to other forms of exclusion and discrimination that prevented women from acting independently and preserving their dignity. In Saint-Jean’s view, they needed the vote to eradicate inequalities between the sexes and to overcome male domination.

Thérèse Casgrain, no doubt the most influential Quebec suffragist of her day, agreed. In an 8 June 1934 broadcast, she stated,
“Women suffer living conditions that are imposed upon them by a society in which men dominate.” She continued, “For women, the right to vote [is] the only logical means compatible with our political system to ensure them the sanction that they must have at their disposal to be recognized and to maintain their rights.” Clearly, like Saint-Jean and many others, Casgrain felt that enfranchisement represented not only an end in itself but also a way to guarantee that women would enjoy all of their rights as citizens.

Surprisingly, though historians have discussed Quebec women’s suffrage in numerous essays and in books on the history of women, feminism, citizenship, or parliamentarianism, it has never been given a book-length treatment. Catherine Cleverdon, an American historian, was the first to write about women and the vote in Canada. In her book *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, published in 1950, she offers a sweeping history of the suffrage movement and its associations, on a national scale and in the provinces. The book painted a portrait of key events and characters in broad strokes and provided an early framework from which to interpret them. Republished in the 1970s during an era of feminist resurgence, it inspired a generation of historians and helped build women’s history into a distinct research field.

Cleverdon showed that Canadian women had engaged in difficult battles but that their struggles for the vote had been much more civil than those mounted by British and American women. Canadian suffragists, she argued, employed patience rather than force, persuasion rather than violent demonstrations or harassment tactics. The difference, she contended, stemmed from the conservatism of Canadian society and of the suffragists themselves, who encountered apathy and even opposition from the great majority of women. She remarked that if winning women’s suffrage in Canada was generally “more a struggle than a fight,” it was in Quebec that “the struggle came nearest to being a fight” – a reference to the irreconcilable positions of those for and against
suffrage, who continued to clash until the beginning of the Second World War.

Since Cleverdon’s book first appeared, historians have tried to explain why Quebec women took so long to gain the vote. Two explanations stand out: conservativism in the province and the nationalist convictions of its male elite. However, neither male politicians nor the Catholic Church opposed enfranchisement on principle. Rather, civil and religious authorities took a stance based on what they stood to gain or lose in allowing women to vote. In France, the Catholic Church supported female suffrage because its leaders expected that women would vote against elected representatives who favoured secularism (the principle of separation of the state from religious institutions). Not surprisingly, the elected representatives themselves opposed women's suffrage for exactly the same reason. In Quebec, where the idea of strict neutrality of the state in religious matters did not exist, differences between politicians and the Catholic clergy were much less marked, at least on the question of women and the vote. Politicians and the clergy – both bastions of male power – consequently acted together to oppose female suffrage, which they believed could disrupt the sociopolitical order.

In other words, the fears of male elites lurked behind the antagonism to suffrage. In their opinion, it would cause French Canadian traditions – embodied in the figure of the mother who

\[ \text{The term “suffragette” is generally reserved for activists, mainly British, who were notable for their vigorous battles and even violent actions. Those who adopted less radical, more peaceful tactics were called suffragists.} \]
was completely absorbed in her household and children – to crumble, along with male domination. Given these fears, it’s impossible to understand the struggle of Quebec suffragists without considering the “national question” and the roles that nationalists assigned to men and women to safeguard the nation. The experience of other countries, in the West and elsewhere in the world, offers good reason to take this dimension into account. Irish nationalists, for instance, opposed the female franchise because they believed it would undermine the traditional image of the Irish woman, which was integral to their movement. In both Ireland and Quebec, however, feminists and nationalists managed to overcome their differences over suffrage and form alliances because many early-twentieth-century feminists were as nationalistic as their male compatriots.

But did the bonds between French Canadian feminist and nationalist movements hamper the suffragist cause? When feminist historians tackled this question in the 1970s, they were rather harsh. Many advocated democracy and equality between the sexes, so they deplored that the suffragists had emerged exclusively from the bourgeoisie, or middle class. They denounced the suffragists’ unconditional acceptance of woman’s role in the family and their unquestioning allegiance to the Catholic Church. According to feminist historians, the francophone suffragists’ attachment to family and religious values – two pillars of French Canadian national identity – led them to show diffidence, and even total submission, to the clergy, an attitude that undercut their demands for equality. This lack of radicalism may explain their failure to obtain the right to vote at the same time that other Canadian women did. However, radicalism or a high degree of activism didn’t produce immediate results for suffragists in other countries, as the experience of the English suffragettes shows. Authors who have written about the thoughts and actions of the second generation of suffragists have been more sympathetic. As they have underlined, second-generation suffragists
such as Casgrain and Saint-Jean (who founded new suffrage organizations in the 1920s and kept fighting right up to the final victory) were less nationalistic and more independent from the clergy than earlier proponents of enfranchisement in Quebec. Their approach was just as egalitarian and combative as that of their English Canadian counterparts.

But exactly how determined, or even radical, were Canadian suffragists? For feminist historians of the 1970s, demanding the right to vote in the name of equality of the sexes would seem to have been the only rationale worth rallying behind. In the 1990s and 2000s, however, a new generation of historians throughout the Western world demonstrated that many suffrage associations and activists had invoked the difference between the sexes as a reason for enfranchisement. If permitted to vote, these women asserted, they could bestow their maternal qualities on society. The predominance of this logic prompted historians to see it as an ideology distinct from feminism, one known as maternalism. This new perspective suggests that it was not exceptional for French Canadian feminists to legitimize their demands for suffrage by invoking the maternal nature of women. It could even be suggested that in emphasizing their maternal mission they were less paralyzed by conservatism and more concerned with the idea of empowering women. Moreover, in Quebec as elsewhere, suffragists employed both maternalist and egalitarian arguments, and we can presume that some of those who used maternalist arguments did so not necessarily out of deep conviction but to reassure a male audience particularly resistant to the idea of formal equality between men and women.

Maternalist arguments in favour of female suffrage also laid siege to the idea of separate spheres for men and women, the ideology that underpinned the patriarchal order. Born during the French and American Revolutions, this ideology reserved the public sphere for men and the private sphere for women, at least
in theory. Confined to the home, women would devote themselves to educating their children and caring for their households. In fact, this dichotomous vision of the respective roles and places of the sexes never kept women from circulating or acting in different ways in the public sphere. However, this view of gender roles had a significant impact on how nineteenth-century Western societies conceived the relationship between women and the political world. In fact, it was in the name of separate spheres that the right to vote was withdrawn from women in Lower Canada (later known as Quebec) during the nineteenth century. Without denying the centrality of the maternal and domestic role of women, those who employed maternalist arguments often insisted that the border between the two spheres was porous. The household, they stated, was not a cloistered space totally separated from the rest of society. In reality, the private sphere was influenced by the public sphere. Given this, why should women not, in turn, be able to influence the political world to make society better and thus protect their households? In other words, the maternalist conception of relations between the private and public spheres can be interpreted as a form of challenge to the patriarchal order – something that opponents to women's suffrage understood clearly.

The struggle for the vote involved the social action of elite women, who, after the turn of the twentieth century, formed groups and created charitable or reformist associations that coalesced into the women’s movement and later came to be known as feminism. Their goal was to fight various social problems associated with industrialization, and they demanded the vote to better influence political powers and bring about social reform. Even if they could not vote, these elite women nevertheless saw themselves as citizens who had a right to participate in managing the affairs of state. Their involvement in the reform movement was a type of political activism. In this sense, the history of
women’s suffrage demands a broader conception of political history and citizenship, one that makes room for those who could not vote but who nonetheless intervened in the public sphere to transform society.

Women’s social action helped pave the way to the vote and equality for women, but it also required suffragists and reformers to present themselves as models and educators to the working and immigrant classes that they claimed to aid. There were exceptions, but most leaders of the women’s movement came from the middle class and shared its prejudices. They rarely took into account the priorities or needs of disadvantaged populations, on whom they simply wanted to impose their values. Some historians have even contended that bourgeois women in English Canada saw the vote not as a right for all women but as a means to increase their own moral influence over the poorer classes. This argument has been criticized for lacking nuance and for over-emphasizing the conservatism of suffrage leaders. The fact remains, however, that most suffragists were privileged, and they managed to attract only a limited number of working-class and rural women to the cause. We know little about why these women shunned the right to vote, but we do know they were particularly numerous in Quebec and that their refusal is a fundamental aspect of the history of suffrage.

Research has also shed light on the eugenicist and even racist ideas of some English Canadian suffragists. The vast majority of them were white, and their maternalism caused many to view reproduction, both biological and social, as essential to strengthening what they considered the superior Anglo-Saxon race. This type of discourse, permeated with terrible prejudices, was stimulated by fears of race suicide or degeneration, which they believed would be brought on by declining birth rates among English Protestants and rising immigration rates among races that were deemed foreign and inferior. Some historians argue that the
conservatism of the suffragist movement in Canada is explained, in large part, by its desire to be associated with the construction of a white, colonial society. English Canadian activists wanted to participate in the British imperial enterprise, and to do so, they were forced to present themselves in a respectable light – that is, as moderates.

Other studies have shown that suffragists throughout Canada did not share a uniform view of race: they conceived racial differences in varied ways that were not always hierarchical. We know little about attitudes in Quebec, but we do know that the black and Asian communities were very small in the first half of the twentieth century; in 1921, each community comprised about two thousand people, who lived mostly in Montreal. Consequently, the white population’s fears of and animosity toward these communities were not expressed as virulently or in as organized a way in Quebec as they were in British Columbia and Nova Scotia, for example. Nevertheless, francophone activists did employ racist logic. For example, they cited as unfair the fact that women in “uncivilized” countries could vote, whereas they themselves could not. In addition, their lack of interest in the situation of Indigenous women, whom they never mentioned, constituted a form of unspoken racism.

Indigenous women did not participate in the suffrage movement. Nor did they gain the right to vote federally in Canada until the 1960s. But their struggle against various forms of violence and discrimination since that decade – that is, their political activism – stands alongside earlier demands for the franchise or legal equality for married women. Indigenous women battled for the abolition of provisions in the Indian Act that deprived them of their Indian status if they married white men and denied them the right to belong to their own communities (and all the privileges associated with them). The concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes the complexity of identity and the intermingling of
various forms of discrimination, calls on us to consider Indigenous women’s struggles as but one of many manifestations of the feminist fight for democracy.

This book is inspired by arguments and concepts such as maternalism developed by multiple generations of feminist historians and political scientists. I pay particular attention to the ideology of separate spheres and to the national question that coloured debates on women’s suffrage until the mid-twentieth century because they are essential to understanding the resistance that Quebec suffragists faced, including from the many women who said that they did not want to vote. The refusal of these women to have a democratic right conferred upon them is essential to an overall portrait of the struggle for women’s suffrage. In a similar vein, it is important to scrutinize all the arguments made by those pushing for suffrage, even the less glorious ones. To that end, and to capture the experiences of women in all their diversity, To Be Equals in Our Own Country spans more than two centuries, from 1791, when certain women in Lower Canada were granted the franchise, to today, when all women in Quebec can vote but many contend that it is not enough to ensure their full participation in liberal democracy.