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“Woman Suffrage Would Undermine  
the Stable Foundation on Which  
Democratic Government is Based”:  
British Democratic Antisuffragists,  
1904–1914

From 1904 to 1914, the British debate on women’s suffrage was at its height. Suffragism has been the subject of numerous studies, however, few have paid attention to its opponent, “antisuffragism”. This article focuses on antisuffragists’ speeches, pamphlets and books to examine their uses of “democracy” and grasp the conceptual struggles at play. Most “Antis” painted women’s suffrage as a step towards a degenerate democratic society. However, more surprisingly, some also mobilised the democratic vocabulary positively, as a reason to disallow women the vote. Several authors considered that “democracy” rested on the capacity of the majority to impose its decisions through physical force—thus rendering a government elected by women impotent. Politicians also opposed granting women suffrage on a censorial basis since it went against the “democratic spirit of the time”. These findings demonstrate the increased importance of “democracy” in Britain and how a “conservative subversion” of the concept was attempted.

Keywords: antisuffragism, Britain, conceptual history, democracy, suffrage

## Introduction

For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, “democracy” was a highly controversial concept in British politics, and in Europe in general (Innes and Philp 2013, chaps 7–9; Saunders 2013a; Kurunmäki, Nevers and Velde 2018). Members of Parliament (MPs) and the political elite were anxious to distinguish the British parliamentary model from unstable democratic rule (Bonin 2020). Pasi Ihalainen’s recent work has shown how it is only with the 1918 Representation of the People Act that most political actors finally embraced a democratic idiom (Ihalainen 2017, chap. 4.1). Nonetheless, before World War I, “democracy” played a key role during the debates surrounding women’s right to vote in national elections.

Indeed, from 1904 to 1914, the British suffragist movement was at its height. In an international context marked by breakthroughs in cis-women’s rights across Europe and the British Empire (Markoff 2003; Ruthchild 2010), as well as increased labour militancy on the domestic front (Béliard 2014), the debate on women’s suffrage polarised public opinion. While the suffragist movement has been the subject of countless studies (Griffin 2012; Kent [1987] 2005; Mayhall 2003; Pugh 2002; Purvis and Holton 2000), the question of its opponents’ relationship with “democracy” has seldom been analysed.

Albeit antisuffragism has been attracting more scholarly attention in recent years, it has generally been characterised as a reactionary and antidemocratic movement. But, in order to understand the place of the word “democracy” in the debates on women’s suffrage, one needs to understand not only the place of the democratic and constitutional idioms in the pro-suffrage movement (Holton [1986] 2002; Barnes 2018), but also to study their challengers. Drawing on conceptual history, antifeminist studies and democratic theory, this article asks how did the “Antis” use “democracy” in their arguments, and what can these uses tell us about the political struggles of the day?

During the period under study, while the meaning of “democracy” varied considerably, three main trends can be distinguished: political, societal and categorial (Saunders 2013a). “Democracy” could refer to a type of political regime, generally associated with (male) universal suffrage. In this political sense, the British state was not necessarily seen as a democracy (since only 60% of adult males voted), while countries like France and the United States were. In its second meaning “democracy” designated a type of society, characterised by “an equality of conditions,” to borrow Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous formulation. In

this use, the word was often seen as a modern process (“democratisation”), associated with industrialisation, urbanisation and the emergence of “mass culture.” Finally, the expression “the democracy” signified the people, and especially the working classes in opposition to “the aristocracy.” As the following pages make clear, British antisuffragists’ use of “democracy” varied between these three axes.

By using antisuffragist<sup>1</sup> books, pamphlets and discourses as primary sources, this article grasps the conceptual redefinitions of democracy at play between 1904 and 1914 in the struggle between suffragists and antisuffragists. At first, most Antis seemed to have a profound distrust of “democracy” and painted women’s suffrage as the ultimate step towards a degenerated democratic society.

However, throughout the years, a second, and more surprising trend emerges: some antisuffragists also mobilised the democratic vocabulary positively, as a reason to disallow women the vote. A challenge to women’s suffrage in the name of “democracy” seems to us particularly incongruous today.

Nevertheless, it is a good illustration of the gendered nature of the term at the beginning of the twentieth century in Britain, and of the conceptual debates surrounding it. Two “democratic antisuffragist” tendencies emerged at that time: I call them the “physical force” and “moderate” democratic antisuffragists. The first, resolutely Anti, considered that while democracy was synonymous with equality, it did not imply an arithmetic equality. Thus, democracy as a political regime must guarantee the political equality of its citizens, but since women are naturally—and physically—different, they cannot be granted the same rights. The second trend was more circumstantial, but seemed to have a greater impact on the suffragist movement. For these “Moderate” antisuffragists, giving women the right to vote on a property basis went against the democratic spirit of the time and thus needed to be resisted.

It should be remembered that in the United Kingdom in the 1900s, to vote, one needed to own or occupy a property of a certain minimum value. This meant nearly 40% of adult men were still excluded from the franchise (Holton [1986] 2002, 53). Thus, there were three possible ways of extending the right to vote: 1—“women’s suffrage,” conferring the vote to women on the same property qualifications as men; 2—“man-

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1 On the relationship between antisuffragism and antifeminism, I follow Lucy Delap for whom “it is helpful, then, to distinguish antisuffragism, as a specific campaign, from antifeminism, which represents a much more diverse cultural and political discourse” (2005, 381). In this article, the focus is on antisuffragism.

hood suffrage,” meaning universal adult male suffrage; and 3—“adult suffrage,” conferring the vote to adult men and women. This last label had a certain ambiguity: some “adultists” were mainly in favour of extending the right to vote to men—which led some suffragists to prefer the more explicit banner of women’s suffrage (Holton [1986] 2002, chap. 3). Conversely, some suffragists might choose to call themselves adultists, as the term offered a more universalist perspective.

After a brief overview of the British Antisuffragist movement (part I), this article focuses on their positive uses of “democracy.” Two different strands are explored: what I termed the “physical force democratic Antis” (part II) and the “moderate” ones (part III). In conclusion, I propose more general reflections on the “subversion” of concepts from a conservative perspective.

### Revisiting the Antis

In British historiography, the opposition to women’s suffrage was first depicted as a reactionary movement, characterised by a strong adhesion to the idea of a natural distinction between men and women. Brian Harrison’s classic *Separated Spheres* (1978) argued that antisuffragism “rested on a clear view of the male and female temperament, physique and intellect” ([1978] 2013, 56). Barbara Kaplan-Tuckel’s thesis similarly claimed that antisuffragist MPs “maintained that females occupied socio-political status that was fundamentally and naturally different from the status occupied by men” (Kaplan-Tuckel 1983). In general, historians were more concerned with recovering the voices of suffragist men and women than reconstructing the arguments of a few obscurantists on the “wrong side of history.”

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a renewed interest in antifeminism meant that such claims were revisited. Several authors have instead underlined how the borders between suffragism and antisuffragism were porous. Julia Bush has demonstrated that while some anti-suffragists did resort to a gendered “separated sphere” rhetoric, some pre-eminent antisuffragist women combined it with a more positive strand, “the forward policy” which defended an active role for women as citizens (Bush 2002, 2007; Joannou 2005). While Lucy Delap resituated antisuffragism within the larger context of Edwardian debates about gender (Delap 2005), Martine Faraut argued that the Antis were, paradoxically, heir to Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas on women and citizenship (Faraut 2003). Ben Griffin has resituated the Antis’ discourse

in the reconfiguration of Victorian and Edwardian masculinities (Griffin 2012, chap. 9–10). By reassessing the uses of “democracy” within the antisuffragist literature, this article follows these various reconsiderations of the “Antis” to underline that they cannot be dismissed as antidemocratic reactionaries as was easily thought.

Indeed, just like the suffragist movement was heterogeneous, defining the Antis position when it comes to “democracy” can be difficult. It is clear that antisuffragist organisations and individuals, especially those with aristocratic ties, often positioned themselves as antidemocratic. As Bush explains:

Organized anti-suffragism often chose to cast itself in the role of last remaining bulwark of civilisation and rational government, holding back democratic forces which endangered far more than merely the efficiency of parliament: the abandonment of restraints upon democracy would be rapidly followed by subversion of the gender order and of society itself (2007, 15).

This opposition to “democracy” could be on several levels: political, societal or categorial. Antisuffragists were often critical of democratic government, of the egalitarian principles underlying democratic societies, and had a strong fear of “the rabble.” For example, positivist and jurist Frederic Harrison (spouse of Ethel Bertha Harrison, an important member of the *Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League*) argued that women’s suffrage “would have a tendency to [intensify] all the evils of our present democracy, and destroying all the present value of the moral influence of women in things political” (1908, 136–37). On the other hand, Rhodesian antisuffragist Ethel Colquhoun criticised in *The Vocation of Women* (1913) the current “tendency in both democratic and feminine education (...) to encourage a superficial knowledge and to stimulate self-consciousness” (1913, 213). But not all antisuffragists displayed such a strong contempt for “democracy.”

Indeed, several antisuffragists were also careful to point out the power of words, and especially of the word “democracy.” Harold Owen, in his *Woman Adrift* (1912), argued that “To the man who is hypnotised by the very words »Democracy« and »Progress,« so hypnotised that he cannot distinguish the thing from the name, arguments are useless” (30). Far from abandoning “democracy” to the suffragists, some Antis tried to reclaim the word. As the “imperial activist” (Riedi 2000) Violet Markham expressed in a February 1912 speech, she rejected women’s suffrage on the grounds it “will not promote true liberty or true democracy. You must discriminate carefully between real and nominal extensions of

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those great principles” (Markham 1912). As the following section demonstrates, not all Antis were thus willing to leave the powerful word “democracy” in the hands of the suffragists: for some of them, “true democracy” meant a government resting in the hands of men.

Before diving in, a last word on the scope of this research. As historians have been claiming for quite some time now, women’s suffrage was a highly transnational movement, whether in the British Empire or beyond (Fletcher, Levine and Mayhall 2000; Rupp 2011). With the progressive adoption of women’s suffrage at the national level in New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902), Finland (1906) and Norway (1913), international comparisons became more frequent and organisational structures developed (Markoff 2003). However, as Bush notes, anti-suffragists in Britain were less concerned with movements abroad—although they did link with their counterparts in the United-States (Bush 2007, 10). Nonetheless, as Sharon Crozier-De Rosa underlines, as the examples of New Zealand and Australia were increasingly mobilised by suffragists, the Antis had to revisit their claims to universality. Emphasising the socio-economic differences between Britain and the colonies, the Antis argued that due to the “burden” of the empire, British women were “doubly unsuited” to voting (Crozier-De Rosa 2013, 56). However, as the following makes clear, while some Antis did refer to the international context, it seems that comparison was not one of their favourite rhetorical tools, especially when it came to the question of “democracy.”

Although this article focuses on the British case, extensive research on antisuffragist discourses in other countries, as well as their transnational connections could help to deparochialize the analysis. What kind of rhetoric did Antis in countries with different and more generally positive uses of “democracy,” such as France and the United-States, mobilized? Inversely, what role did the word play in suffragists’ and antisuffragists’ struggles where voting rights were absent (such as Russia) or formal (such as Germany)? While researchers have been studying and underlining the transnational nature of political movements such as socialism and feminism, a similar perspective should be adopted by those investigating conservative forces. Through this contribution, I hope to lay some groundwork for such a future endeavour.

Democracy as the Threat of Violence: The Physical Force Antis

The first democratic antisuffragist trend was clearly a minority in the British political landscape, both in relation to the larger Anti movement,

and to other political forces. It nonetheless deserves some attention. For these Antis, there was an incompatibility between the political inclusion of women and democratic government. The arguments put forward changed, but they generally boiled down to the issue of physical strength and the resulting political incapacity of women. These authors considered that power in a democracy ultimately rested on the ability of the majority to impose its decisions through force. In this perspective, including women would distort the democratic process, creating majorities composed of people physically incapable of imposing their will to the others. This type of rhetoric appeared as early as the 1880s, when the anti-suffragist movement began to emerge.

In 1889, novelist Mary Augusta Ward and several other public figures published a tribune in *Nineteenth Century* entitled “An appeal against female suffrage.” The text struck a careful balance between acknowledging a public role to women, while denying them the parliamentary vote. Praising women’s participation in School Board and Boards of Guardians, the signatories argued that this “emancipating process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women” (Ward 1889, 782). The question of the physical differences between men and women was already—and would continue to be—a favourite trope of antisuffragist discourse (Bush 2007, 11; Jorgensen-Earp and Jorgensen 2016; Sanders and Delap 2010, XLI–XLII). However, it took a new turn throughout that period.

Indeed, during the same year, jurist and Liberal Party member Heber L. Hart published a book entitled *Women’s Suffrage and National Danger*. While most of his arguments for opposing the suffragists were relatively common, he did innovate by linking the question to “democracy.” Hart stated that “the whole rationale of democracy must disappear if we repudiate presumable intellectual and moral fitness as the basis of the electoral Franchise” (Hart 1889, 38). For him, this “intellectual and moral fitness” could not be achieved by women, because, even in democracies, the government “is grounded upon force—upon the power of the majority” (Hart 1889, 157–58).<sup>2</sup>

2 In the United States, Francis Parkman advanced a similar argument a few years before Hart. In an article in *The North American Review*, the historian argued: “Since history began, no government ever sustained itself long unless it could command the physical force of the nation; and this whether the form of the government was despotism, constitutional monarchy or democracy. [...] Finally, the majority in a democratic republic feels secure that its enactments will take effect, because the defeated minority, even if it does not respect law, will respect a force greater than its own” (Parkman 1880, 26). Parkman’s arguments were compiled in a popular pamphlet *Some of the Reasons Against Woman Suffrage* (1890), which was eventually published in Britain (Marshall 1997, 81).



The notion of a government resting on physical force, of course, preceded Hart. What was novel about his claim is the relation he establishes between democracy, understood as “majority rule,” and the physical capacities of the voters. While no explicit in 1889, Hart eventually spelled out the argument twenty years later, in a pamphlet published by the *Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League*. On the opening pages, he stated that “if the suffrage were granted to women, the majority of votes cast at an election would bear no ascertainable relation to physical power. (...) *Democratic institutions would no longer be self-supported*” (Hart 1908, 3). For Hart, since democratic government rested on the capacity of the majority to subdue the minority through force, women’s suffrage would turn things around. Indeed, a government elected by a majority of women could be successfully resisted by a minority of men, thus undermining the constitutional balance of modern democracy. Contrary to some of the more reactionary Antis mentioned earlier, Hart thus denied women the vote not because he thought democracy to be a scourge, but in order to preserve its foundations.

In the twenty years between Hart’s two texts, this type of argument became more widespread in Britain. For example, in 1905, the well-known Radical MP Henry Labouchère opposed women’s suffrage “as a Radical and a Democrat” because “after all, women were different from men physically and intellectually” (HC Deb, 12 May 1905, vol. 146 col. 226). More nuanced, the Unionist legal scholar, Albert V. Dicey argued that democracies were too “emotional” and that giving women the right to vote would only aggravate the problem, which would have the effect of “weakening English democracy” (Dicey 1909, 61, 91).

Between 1908 and 1914, as the suffragist movement grew in popularity and intensity, anti-suffragist arguments increasingly focused on the issue of physical strength and the differences between men and women (Jorgensen-Earp and Jorgensen 2016). In 1912, Hart’s 1889 book was republished under the title *Women’s Suffrage: A National Danger* (Hart 1912). At the same time, Winston Churchill’s secretary and Liberal MP Alexander MacCallum Scott published *The Physical Force Argument Against Woman Suffrage*. He prefaced the book by stating:

Instead of being a necessary consequence of Democracy and Justice, Woman Suffrage would undermine the stable foundation on which Democratic Government is based [because] the only stable form of government is one which secures that the balance of political power is in the same hands as the balance of physical power. (Scott 1912)

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MacCallum Scott's pamphlet was probably the clearest and most influential expression of what could be termed "physical force democratic antisuffragism." Tellingly, it was summed up in the widely distributed *Anti-Suffrage Handbook* edited by the *National League for Opposing Women Suffrage* (1912, 60–3).

MacCallum Scott's arguments offer an interesting example of the subversion of concepts with a conservative objective. To affirm that woman suffrage undermined democracy, he had to argue that democracy (in a political sense) boiled down to the threat of physical violence. The power of the majority rested not on its popular legitimacy, but on its capacity to impose its decisions through force. By doing so, MacCallum Scott went against another discourse, which underlined the power of democracy (understood as universal male suffrage) to defuse social conflicts. Dating at least to the 1840s, this was exemplified in the opposition between "the ballot and the rifle," by Republicans in France and Chartists in Britain (Rosanvallon 1992, 372–87; Gurney 2014). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the international peace movement was also founded on the tenet that "democratic government was antithetical to militarism" and violence (Laity 2002, 157). MacCallum Scott was thus clearly subverting one of the arguments favoured by Radicals and Liberals in favour of democracy in a political fashion.

The suffragist response to the rhetoric used by MacCallum Scott also mobilised a democratic discourse and evoked this idea of "democracy as social peace." Then well-known suffragist Agnes Maude Royden, responding directly to MacCallum Scott, stated "The vote is the democratic way of bringing that [spiritual and moral] force to bear on the problems of government and we are committed to democracy" (Royden 1912, 13). While most nineteenth century suffragists framed their demands in terms of the "constitutional idiom" (Barnes 2018), at the turn of the century, more suffragists presented their demands by appealing to the democratic ideal. In this context, Royden—and others—were keen to reclaim a democratic discourse against the Antis.

This type of "physical force democratic antisuffragist" rhetoric seemed to become particularly explicit in 1911–1914. As mentioned, those years witnessed "the Great Labour Unrest," an unprecedented wave of strikes and militant actions in Britain (Béliard 2014). These events raised larger questions about the "condition of England" and the role of the State in addressing social conflicts (Thompson 2014). It is thus not surprising that Antisuffragists shifted their discourse to appeal to the (male) working-class. Their democratic rhetoric had the advantage of being both compatible with the political inclusion of male workers, while denying women the right to vote.

This was precisely the road taken by Almroth Wright, a famous bacteriologist and immunologist. A well-known Anti, he published in 1913 a book against women's suffrage in which he followed almost *verbatim* MacCallum Scott's arguments. According to Wright, democracy and "the internal equilibrium of the State (...) would be endangered by the admission to the register of millions of electors whose vote would not be endorsed by the authority of physical force" (Wright 1913, 33). Wright was not opposed to an extension of the suffrage to working-class men. Indeed, he explicitly stated that the admission of more men under the franchise made the government stronger by making the application of laws harder to resist. But he was also careful to specify that, on the opposite "an extension which takes in any women undermines the physical sanction of the laws" (Wright 1913, 33).

It is, however, a socialist that offered the most elaborated democratic defence of the exclusion of women from the electoral sphere: Ernest Belfort Bax. An important figure of the *Social Democratic Federation*, the editor of the party paper, *Justice*, Bax established himself as a notorious antifeminist and masculinist figure with the publication of *The Legal Subjection of Men*, a book republished in 1908 (Bax [1896] 1908). Although his ideas on women's suffrage were considered "eccentric" within the socialist movement, he took advantage of his position to divulge them on numerous occasions (Bax 1889; 1907; 1912). Thus, his *New Catechism of Socialism* (1904), written with Harry Quelch, argued that "the relation of sex is largely unique in its character as implying an organic difference, and not a mere social one, and hence quite distinct from the relation of class or of race" (Bax and Quelch 1903). And from this "organic" difference, Bax justified the political inequality between the sexes.

His essay *The Fraud of Feminism*, published in 1913, when the suffragist movement was at its height, offers a synthesis of his thinking on the issue. According to him, "The illegitimate application of the modern democratic notion of the equality of classes and races, to that of sex, has contributed to the modern revolt against natural sex limitations" (Bax 1913, 28). Bax considers that the extension of suffrage has always taken place in democracies through the abolition of social barriers (class, race), never biological barriers (sex, species).

And this distinction allows him to affirm that "this difference rules out the bare appeal to the principle of democracy per se as an argument in favour of the extension of the suffrage to women" (Bax 1913, 155–56). Democrat and antisuffragist, such was the explicit position held by Bax.

## Not a Democratic Proposition: The Moderate Antis

If what I labelled the “physical force democratic Antis” were a marginal—but vocal—part of the antisuffragist movement, several more opportunistic uses of “democracy” were made during the debates on women’s suffrage. Here it was not so much the political inclusion of women that was deemed problematic, but the various projects to extend the right to vote to women on a censorial basis. The argument went that the enfranchisement of “proprieted ladies” and not “working women” was against the democratic spirit of the time, since it enshrined social distinctions. This antisuffragist trend was particularly visible in parliamentary debates and reveals another dimension of the conceptual struggles around “democracy” at the time.

In February 1908, Liberal MP Henry York Stanger introduced a private member’s bill to extend the right to vote to women on a censorial basis. Surprisingly, several Liberal MPs justified their opposition to the proposition in the name of “democracy.” For them, only adult suffrage could be seen as democratic, as any other measure would only reinforce the elitist nature of the electoral system. For Maurice Levy, York’s project “was a retrograde measure going back to the old reactionary days of the property qualification. It would not democratise the House of Commons, but make it less representative than it was at the present time” (HC Deb 28 February 1908, vol. 185 col. 252; Clement Edwards, HC Deb 28 February 1908, vol. 185 col. 262). Out-of-doors, Emily Maud Simon developed the same type of arguments on behalf of the *Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League*, claiming that the proposal would not give women workers the right to vote. Thus, according to her, the suffragist movement “can in no sense be regarded as having a democratic basis” (Simon 1908, 3–4). This “societal” and “categorical” uses of “democracy,” as meaning popular and especially working-class women, would gain traction in the following years. As for York’s bill, even if a majority of MPs did vote in favour, the Commons Speaker and the government defeated his proposition.

Between 1908 and 1910, the actions of the suffragist movement grew in intensity: demonstrations, breaking of windows (June 1908), picketing in front of the Commons (July 1909) and hunger strikes for female prisoners (summer 1909). Following the January 1910 election,<sup>3</sup>

3 The January 1910 election led to the following results: Liberal 274 (loss of 123 compared to 1906), Conservative & Liberal-Unionist 272 (gain 116), Irish Parliamentary 71 (loss 11) and Labour 40 (gain 11). Asquith’s Liberal government stayed in power with the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party.

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a committee was set up on the issue of women's suffrage, composed of MPs from all four parties. The more bellicose *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU) agreed to stop its pressure tactics for a while (Wingarden 1999, 118). The committee produced a *Conciliation Bill* which was introduced in June. It aimed to reconcile, on the one hand, aspirations for universal suffrage and, on the other hand, a property-based enfranchisement of women. Voting rights were to be based on "the independent occupation of property" (Holton 1986, 70), thus, according to its supporters, the bill would give the right to vote to one million independent women (widows and single women), nearly 80% of whom were working women.

However, it was precisely on the democratic nature of this *Conciliation Bill* that the debates stalled. According to Conservative M.P. Frederick Edwin Smith, since the proposal aimed to extend suffrage to "proprieted ladies" and not "working women," there was a "profoundly undemocratic quality in the provisions of this particular measure" (HC Deb, 11 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 55–56).

Liberal M.P. Charles Lyell made similar arguments: "So far from this Bill being a step along the democratic path, it will be erecting a barrier against which many friends of democracy will labour in vain for a great number of years" (HC Deb, 11 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 138). It was therefore in the name of democracy, understood as an egalitarian society that some MPs refused to extend the right to vote to women homeowners.

This was indeed the line of thought of important Cabinet figures such as Home Secretary Churchill and Prime Minister Herbert H. Asquith. For the former, "it is not merely an undemocratic Bill; it is worse. It is an antidemocratic Bill. It gives an entirely unfair representation to property, as against persons" (HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 224). The second was even more explicit about its definition of democracy. According to Asquith, "By democratic I understand a measure which does not create but removes distinctions—a measure which, in granting new political rights, grants them upon some intelligible principle of equality as between the different classes of claimants" (HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 253). The creation of new women voters on a property basis was, they argued, as contrary to the egalitarian spirit of democracy. Asquith went even further, approaching the "physical force Antis" examined earlier, by evoking the fact that the "democracy wages [*sic*] war against artificial, and not against natural discriminations" (HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 247). As mentioned, this distinction between an artificial and social distinction (based on property) to be abolished, and a natural one (based on gender) to be maintained was particularly impor-

tant in Bax's argument. But most parliamentarians were not so draconian. They merely justified their opposition to the *Conciliation Bill* by stating that the enfranchisement of women based on property was not democratic in the societal sense of the word.<sup>4</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, these debates witnessed then Conservative leader Arthur Balfour attacking Asquith's speech and defending women's suffrage in the name of democracy. For Balfour, there was "no use in manipulating the word »democracy« and turning it round and round." If the Liberals were playing at being democrats and considered that the measure presented as undemocratic, it was only to allow MPs "who willingly or unwillingly have allowed themselves to become inconveniently pledged to women's suffrage, to get out of those pledges on some broad ground." Balfour, arguing he was not a hypocrite, declared to be prepared to vote for the *Conciliation Bill*, particularly because he defined democracy as "government by consent" and when "a class feels itself as a class excluded, and outraged by being excluded" (HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 256–258), it was the duty of democrats to include it in the political arena. The previous day, Keir Hardie, leader of the Labour Party, had also insisted that "if anyone opposes this Bill on the ground that it is not democratic it shows he understands neither the question nor the terms of the Bill" (HC Deb 11 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 142). Several other parliamentarians also pointed out the democratic nature of the measure by stating the majority of new women voters would belong to the working classes.<sup>5</sup>

This debate on the democratic aspects of the *Conciliation Bill* in Westminster echoed the debate in the press. In the weeks before and after the deliberation, several suffragist newspapers questioned the meaning of "democracy" and pointed out the Liberal hypocrisy.<sup>6</sup> The following year, when two separate major figures of the suffragist movement, Sylvia Pankhurst and Millicent Fawcett, published their accounts of this period, both also attacked the duplicity of Churchill and Asquith regarding the democratic quality of the *Conciliation Bill* (Fawcett

4 See Allen Baker, HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 275; David Lloyd George, HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 309. Socialist H. Quelch brought forward a similar argument (Quelch 1910).

5 See David Shackleton, HC Deb, 11 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 47; Walter McLaren, HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 212; Henry George, HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 col. 243; Alfred Mound, HC Deb, 12 July 1910, vol. 19 cc277.

6 *Common Cause*, May 2, 1910; *The Vote*, May 25, 1910; *Common Cause*, July 14, 1910; *The Vote*, July 23, 1910; *Votes for Women*, July 29, 1910; *The Vote*, July 30, 1910; *Common Cause*, August 18, 1910; *The Vote*, August 27, 1910.

1911; Pankhurst 1911). As summarised in an August 1910 *Common Cause* editorial: “We wonder how long it will be before the male electors awake to the knowledge that those leaders who talked most about »Democracy« are those who have in truth no respect whatever for representative government” (*Common Cause*, August 4, 1910). It is clear from these articles that suffragists were increasingly claiming the right to vote in the name of democratic equality and following the principles of representative government. While some did so in the name of a “feminisation of democracy” (Blease 1910, 219), where women’s particular interests in health, housing and education would benefit the nation as a whole, this type of argument seemed to be secondary in the democratic discourses.

As for the 1910 *Conciliation Bill*, although passed by a majority of 110 votes on July 12, it was set aside by the government and abandoned following the December 1910 election.<sup>7</sup> In May 1911, a slightly amended *Conciliation Bill* was reintroduced in the House by George Kemp to give the franchise to women householders. In his opening speech, Kemp pointed out that “those who are responsible for this Bill believe that it is a democratic Bill,” particularly because “the vote would be granted in fair proportion to [women of] all classes in the country” (HC Deb, 5 May 1911, vol. 25 col. 738–739). The pamphlets produced by the suffragist movement also detailed the different social classes from which the new voters would come. The moderate *National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies* (NUWSS) called on the British public to support this measure for three reasons: “Because it is just. Because it is moderate. Because it is democratic” (NUWSS 1911b). And to those who defended adult suffrage, the NUWSS retorted that a partial victory was better than nothing given the current composition of the Commons: “the Conciliation Bill is small [but] it is democratic” (NUWSS 1911a).

In Westminster, the arguments of the suffragists seemed to bear fruit, since no MPs opposed the measure on the basis of its undemocratic character. However, we can see some MPs rejecting the *Conciliation Bill* using the argument of physical force. Thus, for Liberal-Unionist Halford Mackinder, women should be content to exert their influence on men and not to vote since “a vote is a cheque or draft on power, and, ultimately, on physical power.” For him, “The whole history

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7 The December 1910 election, on the issue of the People’s Budget vetoed by the House of Lords, gave similar results to the preceding: Liberal 272 (loss of 2), Conservative & Liberal-Unionist 271 (loss 1), Irish Parliamentary 74 (gain 3) and Labour 42 (gain 2).

of democracy has consisted simply in that you recognise force (...) and that, by giving the vote, you seek to obtain the acquiescence of those who have power in the government of the country" (HC Deb, 5 May 1911, vol. 25 col. 763). MacCallum Scott would defend a position similar to the one he took in his pamphlet the following year. For him, the physical inferiority of women condemned them to remain outside the electoral sphere, since "democracy has built itself up by physical force; democracy maintains itself by physical force" (HC Deb, 5 May 1911, vol. 25 col. 793).

But these arguments did not prevent the 1911 *Conciliation Bill* from being approved by more than 288 MPs (versus 88) for a second reading. Subsequently, a tug-of-war between the suffragist movement and the Asquith government ensued. On several occasions, the Liberals assured suffragists that time would be set aside for parliamentary debate on the bill in 1912. However, in November 1911, Asquith announced that he would introduce a *Manhood Suffrage Bill* the following year, where the issue of women's suffrage could be freely discussed. The government also maintained that the *Conciliation Bill* could be dealt with in the House in parallel. The NUWSS approached the situation with some optimism, while the WSPU felt cheated by Asquith and renewed its militant actions (Mayhall 2003, 104). In the suffragist press, calls for opposition to manhood suffrage in the name of "complete democracy" multiplied,<sup>8</sup> notably under the impetus of the left wing of Labour, which refused to adopt a reform without including women's suffrage (Holton 1986, 73). In December 1911, a meeting of the NUWSS, the *Women's Liberal Federation* and the *Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association* led to the creation of a *Women's Suffrage Joint Campaign Committee* responsible for coordinating parliamentary work. These organisations agreed to demand "a measure of enfranchisement on broad and democratic lines" (*The Vote*, December 23, 1911).

These efforts proved to be vain. Dissent in the Liberal Cabinet meant that the promised reform was postponed until the following year. The *Conciliation Bill*, now seen as an alternative, was introduced in the House in March 1912. Parliamentary debates were a repetition of precedents. Suffragists defended the democratic nature of the proposed measure, while their opponents reiterated that it was not really

8 *Votes for Women*, November 24, 1911; *Common Cause*, November 30, 1911; *Common Cause*, December 07, 1911; *Votes for Women*, December 08, 1911; *Votes for Women*, December 22, 1911; *Votes for Women*, January 12, 1912; *Votes for Women*, February 16, 1912; *The Vote*, February 24, 1912; *Common Cause*, March 28, 1912.



democratic.<sup>9</sup> MacCallum Scott repeated his belief that the balance of political power rested in the balance of physical force and that “among nations that we call democratic (...) the unit of physical force is the individual male citizen” (HC Deb, 28 March 1912, vol. 36 col. 722). MPs rejected the measure, this time at 222 to 208. Several factors are put forward to explain this defeat: the prospect of wider reform for some Liberals, the absence of several Labour members following a mining strike, the fear of Irish nationalists that the debate on women’s suffrage would encroach on the Home Rule issue, but also the militant actions of the WSPU in the weeks leading up to the vote (Wingerden 1999, 132; Pugh 2002, 140–41).

The failure of the 1912 *Conciliation Bill* is generally regarded as a turning point for the suffragist movement. From that point on, the NUWSS abandoned any hope that a Liberal government would ever pass women’s suffrage. A rapprochement with the Labour Party then took place, notably through the creation of the *Election Fighting Fund*, which made the financial and material resources of the NUWSS available to Labour candidates during by-elections in 1912 and 1913 (Holton 1986, 4). It also appears to be a transition period for the anti-suffragists, as their democratic rhetoric diminished. For example, in the debates on the government *Reform Bill* in June 1912 and January 1913, no MPs opposed the extension of the right to vote—and an amendment to give women the vote—on the basis of democracy. Both Liberals and Conservatives defended the importance, in a democracy, of giving all citizens the right to vote equally.<sup>10</sup> However, the Chair of the Commons decided that the amendment concerning women’s suffrage distorted the original proposal and the *Franchise and Registration Bill* was eventually dropped (Holton 1986, 92).

In May 1913, Liberal MP Willoughby Dickinson introduced a private member’s bill to give women homeowners the right to vote. Defeated by 266 to 219 votes, this was to be the last time that issue of women’s suffrage was raised in Westminster until 1917 and the debates

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9 For the “democratic argument” see Alfred Moritz Mond, HC Deb, 28 March 1912, vol. 36 col. 624; Philip Snowden, HC Deb, 28 March 1912, vol. 36 col. 709. For the counter-argument, see Harold Baker, HC Deb, 28 March 1912, vol. 36 col. 633–634.

10 For the Liberals, see Joseph Pease, HC Deb 17 June 1912, vol. 39 col. 1327; Joseph King, HC Deb 17 June 1912, vol. 39 col. 1398; William Byles, HC Deb 17 June 1912, vol. 39 col. 1425. For the Conservatives, see Alfred Lyttelton, HC Deb 24 January 1913, vol. 47 col. 886; John Rolleston, HC Deb 24 January 1913, vol. 47 col. 929; Hugh Cecil, HC Deb 27 January 1913, vol. 47 col. 1086.

leading up to the adoption of the *1918 Reform Bill* (Ihalainen 2017, 232–35). In May 1913, proponents of women’s suffrage continued to stress the importance of allowing women to vote in a democratic society.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Prime Minister Asquith reiterated his opposition to such a measure, in particular because for him democracy aimed “at the obliteration of arbitrary and artificial distinctions. Democracy has no quarrel whatever with distinctions which nature has created and which experience has sanctioned” (HC Deb 06 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1911). But this kind of statement seemed to have been more and more marginal in the parliamentary arena. And if 1913 saw the publication of the physical force democratic Antis works of Wright and Bax discussed above, it is increasingly clear that the suffragist movement had successfully appropriated “democracy” and a democratic rhetoric, leaving the Antis to grapple with the label of “antidemocrats.”

### Conclusion: Subversion for Conservation?

As these examples demonstrate, the “democratic rhetoric against women’s suffrage,” much like the opposition to women’s enfranchisement, cut across party lines. High-ranking Liberals, pre-eminent Conservatives and eccentric Socialists could all mobilise “democracy” against any gendered extension of the franchise. To do so, they either resorted to complex arguments linking physical force and democratic government, or, mundane and fashionable attitude, contrasted propositions to grant women the vote on a censorial basis with the egalitarian and democratic spirit of the times.

The recovery of these forgotten—and sometimes quite odd—uses of “democracy” by Antisuffragists is not only valuable to historians and rhetoric scholars. These discourses also offer a clear example of a conceptual subversion in a conservative fashion. Subversion is generally understood as a disruption of the status quo. Revolutionary and popular movements often have to engage in subversion both on the theoretical and practical level. Conceptually, they can 1) (re)appropriate established categories, 2) challenge connotations or 3) create new meanings. In Britain—and one could argue that similar processes were at play across Europe—the struggles around “democracy” offer examples of all three.

<sup>11</sup> James Parker, HC Deb 5 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1749; Philp Snowden, HC Deb 5 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1902; Edward Grey, HC Deb 6 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1937; Athelstan Rendall, HC Deb 6 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1960–1961; George Touche, HC Deb 06 May 1913, vol. 52 col. 1976.

As mentioned, political and cultural elites eschewed democracy in the nineteenth century. Popular movements, from the Chartists to the Socialists and the Feminists, had to challenge the negative and riotous images associated with the term, reinvent democracy as a modern concept, and push it in new directions (social democracy, industrial democracy, “true democracy,” etc.).

However early twentieth century British Antis were also engaged in conceptual subversion. By redefining “democracy” as a government resting on both majority rule and physical force, they challenged previous associations between democratic government and social harmony. Of course, this idea of democracy as the rule—or tyranny—of the majority was a common interpretation of democratic government in Western political thought at the time. These Antis, by drawing both on this conception of democracy and a “realist” understanding of politics as the never-ending struggle for power, were reinterpreting democratic government in a new way. Far from being a consensual discussion between peers, “democracy” was foremost about the creation of a majority capable of potentially coercing minorities.

But the Antis were not only merging different understandings of “democracy.” Figures like Wright, Bax and Asquith also appropriated democratic arguments by defending male suffrage while rejecting women’s suffrage by drawing a strong line between “artificial” and “natural” distinctions. In doing so, they were also anxious to challenge associations between “democracy” and “universal.” Far from an ever-expanding project, democracy could and should be limited: to men, and in a context increasingly marked by social Darwinism and eugenics, to white men especially. This defence of the political inclusion of men at the expense of the exclusion of women resonates strongly with Carole Pateman’s idea of “sexual contract” (1988), the fraternity of men being justified by their alleged superiority over women.

Through this “conservative subversion” of democracy, the British Antis—whether doctrinal or opportunistic—were grappling with the increased popularity of the word. Like many political movements, they realised the importance of certain keywords and refused to let their opponents master them. As Robert Saunders has demonstrated, a similar process of “conservative subversion” can be seen at play in the Conservative party regarding the Irish question between 1900 and 1914. By contesting the legitimacy of Home Rule through a democratic discourse and playing the Cabinet against the people (Saunders 2013b), Conservatives not only accommodated themselves to democratic principles but also tried to push “democracy” in new directions. While the uses might have been

more tactical than doctrinal, they nonetheless reflect a certain inclination to subvert the concept in order to defend the established order.

In conclusion, even if the Antis lost the battle of suffrage in 1918, the continued opposition to women's suffrage in 1920s Britain (Binard 2014) proves that the war around "democracy" raged on for many more years. Indeed, one could argue it still wages on.

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**Tytuł:** “Prawa wyborcze kobiet osłabiłyby stabilną podstawę, na której opiera się rząd demokratyczny” – brytyjscy demokratyczni antysufrażyści (1904–1914)

**Abstrakt:** Między 1904 a 1914 rokiem brytyjska debata na temat prawa wyborczego kobiet osiągnęła szczyt intensywności. Tymczasem, choć sufrażyzm był jak dotąd przedmiotem licznych badań, niewiele uwagi poświęcono przeciwnikom praw wyborczych kobiet – antysufrażystom. Artykuł koncentruje się na przemówieniach, broszurach i książkach, publikowanych przez antysufrażystów, i ma na celu prześledzenie ich intelektualnych zmagania z pojęciem demokracji. Jak się okazuje, większość z nich przedstawiała nadanie kobietom praw wyborczych jako krok w kierunku degeneracji społeczeństwa demokratycznego. Jednak, co bardziej zaskakujące, niektórzy antysufrażyści używali również demokratycznego języka w sposób pozytywny, wskazując za jego pomocą powody, dla których kobiety nie powinny głosować. Kilku z analizowanych w tekście autorów uważało, że „demokracja” opiera się na zdolności do narzucania woli większości siłą, co czyniłoby bezsilnymi rządy, wybrane przez kobiety. Sprzeciwiano się również sufrażyzmowi dlatego, że był on postrzegany jako nurt, rozwijający się wbrew “demokratycznemu duchowi” tamtych czasów. Poszczególne przykłady, zgromadzone w tekście, wskazują na rosnące znaczenie pojęcia demokracji w Wielkiej Brytanii w początkach XX wieku, oraz odkrywają próby zdefiniowania go jako kategorii konserwatywnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** demokracja, historia pojęć, prawo wyborcze, sufrażyzm, Wielka Brytania