

Suffrage in England in the 19th and the early 20th centuries

Abstract

The diploma thesis address the issue of suffrage in England in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Attention is paid primarily to the reform acts governing elections to the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, which were passed in years 1832, 1867, 1884-85, 1918 and 1928. The implementation of these reform acts led to the transition from the archaic form of suffrage, which persisted without major changes from the period of the late Middle Ages, to a universal and equal suffrage with direct and secret voting in the form which in the United Kingdom prevails, with minor amendments, to the present. This transformation was completed in 1928. In addition, the development of the municipal elections legislation, changes in a qualification of the Members of the Parliament and other changes in electoral legislation, especially in the legislation dealing with electoral corruption, are mentioned. There is also outlined a political and public debate on electoral reform, with an emphasis on parliamentary relevant debate.

The text of the thesis is divided into six sections, corresponding to the chronological development. The first section focuses on the description and evaluation of the unreformed suffrage prior to 1832. The second section discusses the circumstances of the passing and impact of the "Great Reform Act" of 1832. The third section deals with the time span between the reforms of 1832 and 1867 and e.g. describes the suffrage demands of the Chartists. The theme of the fourth section is the reform effort of the 1860s, represented primarily by the distinct concepts of William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. The substance of the Disraeli's Reform Act of 1867, as well as of some related regulations, are expounded. The fifth section concerns the electoral reform of 1884-1885, which resulted in the unification of the suffrage in the counties and in the boroughs, and in the dominance of the single-member constituencies. The sixth section deals with women's suffrage, reform proposals in the period before and during the First World War, and finally with the Reform Act of 1918, which introduced the universal suffrage of men and the extensive suffrage of women. The diploma thesis ends with the Representation of the People Act of 1928, equalizing suffrage of men and women.