



Victorian Women Vote 1908–2008

Organisations involved in the fight for the vote.

In Victoria, a number of women's groups were established in the struggle for women's social, legal, political and economic emancipation. They campaigned persuasively and forcefully for women's right to vote.

These organisations were made up of people across political and class lines.

They used different tactics and actions to secure suffrage, including holding meetings, circulating petitions, sending deputations to present their case to the Premier and forming resolutions at public meetings. They lobbied candidates and MPs, distributed pamphlets and leaflets, wrote letters to newspapers and organised lecture tours, particularly to regional and rural areas.

Among the main groups were:

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria (WCTU) was founded in 1887 when the 12 existing local branches in Melbourne suburbs and regional Victoria joined together to form a Colonial Union.

The WCTU was an influential organisation run for and by women and was involved in many social reform campaigns.

Primarily dedicated to promoting total abstinence from alcohol and other harmful drugs, the WCTU became a major supporter of the campaign for women's suffrage as it believed that power at the ballot box was the only way to achieve the organisation's goals and to influence social policy and legislation.

The WCTU's influential period lasted until WWII. Its numbers were greatest in the 1920s and its political position was at its most progressive in the 1930s and 40s. The movement continues today.

Have you ever noticed the Woman's Christian Temperance Union drinking fountain, which stands opposite the Queen Victoria Market in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne?

Erected in 1901, the granite and marble fountain was installed after great agitation by the WCTU for the provision of clean drinking water in public places, particularly drinking taps and fountains. The fountain was donated by the WCTU to the City of Melbourne to commemorate Federation and to coincide with the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York.

More information: www.heritage.vic.gov.au/admin/file/content6/c3/wctu%20fountain.rtf



Victorian Women Vote 1908–2008

The Victorian Women's Suffrage Society

The Victorian Women's Suffrage Society, the first women's suffrage society in Australia, was founded in 1884, largely as a result of the efforts of Henrietta Dugdale.

Dugdale is claimed to be Victoria's first activist for women's suffrage, having publicly advocated women's suffrage since 1868, along with married women's property rights and the admission of women to the universities.

The Society's platform was 'To obtain the same political privileges for women as now possessed by male voters'. It had both male and female members.

The United Council for Woman Suffrage

The United Council for Woman Suffrage was originally formed in Melbourne in 1894, thanks largely to the efforts of Annette Bear-Crawford, who became its foundation president and secretary.

The Council's aims were to:

- coordinate and amalgamate suffrage societies;
- lobby members of parliament and municipal councillors about women's suffrage;
- educate the public about women's suffrage; and
- train women speakers to address meetings.

The Council included representatives from suffrage societies, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Vigilance Society.

The Council foundered with Bear-Crawford's absence in Britain and her death there in 1899. It was transformed when Vida Goldstein became its organising secretary before resigning in 1901.

The Council continued as an effective coordinating body for the suffrage campaign, often working with Goldstein's new group, the Women's Political Association, until Victorian women gained the vote in 1908.



Victorian Women Vote 1908–2008

Victorian Woman's Suffrage League

The Victorian Woman's Suffrage League (sometimes referred to by contemporaries as the Woman's Franchise Society) was founded in 1894 at a meeting organised by Annette Bear-Crawford in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union headquarters in Melbourne.

Its formation was prompted by the belief that the three existing groups working for women's suffrage in Victoria – the Australian Women's Suffrage Society, the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union – were all associated with extremist views.

The League's platform was votes for women on the same terms as men. Founded on a Christian, non-party basis, the organisation was set up so that moderate women could comfortably join. It ceased in 1908 with the granting of the vote to women in Victoria.

Australian Women's Suffrage Society

The Australian Women's Suffrage Society was established in 1888 by Brettana Smyth.

Smyth had been a member of the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society but was forced to form a new group because of her outspoken opinions on birth control. She became convinced that, in addition to the lack of political rights, the problem facing most women was frequent and involuntary childbearing.

The Society had both male and female members including Dr William Maloney, 'the Little Doctor', a member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly who introduced several (unsuccessful) women's suffrage bills into parliament between 1889 and 1894. The Society disbanded with Brettana Smyth's death in 1898.

Women's Federal Political Association

Vida Goldstein set up the Women's Federal Political Association in 1903 to educate women in political matters. In March 1904 its name was changed to the Women's Political Association of Victoria (WPA) to focus on the State's campaign for suffrage, as well as to more efficiently organise women's votes in the interests of the home and children, efficient government at all levels, and improved social and industrial conditions.

In an attempt to challenge the party ticket system, the WPA stated it was non party political and refused to affiliate with any political party, although its sympathies lay with the Political Labor Council, predecessor in Victoria of the Australian Labor Party. The WPA supported Goldstein in her attempts to be elected to the federal parliament and adopted a pacifist stance in World War I, when a parallel organisation, the Women's Peace Army, was formed so that Labor Party women could join. The WPA's journal, the Woman Voter, was edited by Goldstein.

Both the Women's Political Association of Victoria and the Women's Peace Army were disbanded in 1919 when Goldstein travelled overseas.



Victorian Women Vote 1908–2008

National Council of Women of Victoria

The National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV) was formed in 1902 at the urging of Tasmanian activist Emily Dobson, Victorian philanthropist and society hostess Janet Lady Clarke, and leading suffragist and feminist, Vida Goldstein, among others.

Designed as an umbrella organisation, NCWV comprised more than 35 organisations by the end of its first year of operation.

Like the International Council of Women (ICW) to which it was affiliated, NCWV aimed to include all women activists 'whether they be advocates of the ballot or opposed to women's suffrage'.

Although NCWV delegates listened to lectures in favour of suffrage by Goldstein and others, it did not take an open position in favour of votes for women until after the ICW decision to support the cause in 1904. The decision to establish a standing committee on suffrage and citizenship in 1906 marked a turning point in the Victorian campaign, since this brought to the cause organisations representing large numbers of non-political women.

The NCWV became active in the campaign and decided to organise broad-based deputations to the Premier. Although the NCWV may not have played a major part in the struggle before this time, its official active support in the last two years was critical.

References:

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0219b.htm>

<http://www.ncwa.org.au/aboutus.html>

Judith Smart, Adjunct Professor, RMIT University, and Principal Fellow, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne.

*Image Vida Goldstein courtesy Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
Image The Age courtesy Newspaper Collection, State Library of Victoria.*