

Published by:  
Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development

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Publication number: H-2267

Print: Norwegian Government Administration Services 09/11 - 50

# From political rights to political power

## The enfranchisement and empowerment of women in Norwegian local politics 1910–2010



**From political rights to political power:  
The enfranchisement and empowerment of women  
in Norwegian local politics 1910-2010**

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Norway*

In 2010 one hundred years have gone since women got the right to vote in Norwegian local elections. Simultaneously women were given the opportunity to run for office in local government. When the Storting passed the resolution in spring 1910 it was an important event not only in the history of the women's movement but in Norwegian political history at large. Another three years would still go by until women were granted the same rights in parliamentary elections. The local suffrage reform thus fits into a larger scheme: Democratic and social innovations have been tested at the local level before they were carried out at the national scene. Thus, it is important to ask what were the preconditions for success in 1910, and what were the consequences of the legal breakthrough for women's actual political influence. Did political rights lead to political power?

Before entering the discussion on female suffrage a short outline on the Norwegian local government and electoral system is needed. Although Norwegian local authorities have no formal constitutional protection, local self-government enjoys strong support within the population as well as among political elites. Compared to most other Northern European countries Norwegian municipalities

are small. The average population of municipalities is approximately 10.500, but the majority of municipalities have fewer inhabitants. Thus the median population size is approximately 4.500. Currently, Norway has 430 municipalities and 19 counties. However, when female suffrage was introduced the number of municipalities was 661, with an average population of about 3.500. Local elections are conducted every four years, separately from parliamentary elections. But up to 1931, local elections were held on a three-year basis. The electoral system for local elections in Norway gradually changed from a plurality system to a system of proportional representation. In 1896, the proportional system was allowed for the first time in local elections. From 1919 on, a system of proportional representation was made compulsory if more than one list was put forward. Today, basically all municipalities employ the system of proportional representation. 94 % of all local councillors are elected from lists run by national parties.

The first Local Government Act dates back to 1837. Although it may be argued that democratic principles formed an underlying cause of the legislation, democracy comprised only a relatively meagre proportion of the population. By the turn of the century however, universal suffrage for males was launched. In 1901 a restricted number of women were given the vote, and in 1910 full female suffrage was introduced. Twenty-five years earlier, in 1885, the organised struggle was initiated through the foundation of the Association for female suffrage.

At the outset suffrage activists faced the strategic dilemma of whether to pursue an all-out victory in the shape of equal rights, or whether to go for piecemeal reform. In practice the stepwise approach was to be the more influential. However, this came at a price. Women's right to vote was accepted only on the condition that women proved themselves sufficiently "mature" to participate in political life – and it was up to the male politicians to decide if they would pass the test.

The organised struggle on women's behalf was clearly a decisive factor behind the suffrage extension in 1910. But the battle may have gone on for another few years if it had not been for an important window of opportunity opening up just after the turn of the century. The fight over women's right to vote was embedded in a conflict over what was to be the future role of local government in Norway. By the emerging progressive forces local government was seen as a potential venue for the realisation of a radical political programme that aimed at the extension of public welfare and economic equalisation. Given that local government was considered to be a potential vehicle for pursuing left-wing political ideas it was also to be a battle-ground for the main political forces at central level. The crucial question was what kind of local government system the 250.000 new female voters would support. Eventually, the more liberal forces had their way arguing that excluding groups from political life would only mean a further radicalisation. Socialism, it was

claimed, had to be fought on the basis of universal suffrage.

So, to what extent did the female vote alter political life after it was launched in 1910? Paradoxically it can be argued that the lack of impact from the new section of the electorate was a precondition for success. According to the contemporary debate experience had proved that female voters did *not* represent values that differed markedly from their male counterparts. Hence, there was no reason to fear that the newly acquired rights would be exploited for the purpose of seeking political power! Extension of the suffrage formally paved the way for women to exert political influence in the same manner as men. Yet it was to take long before women started to impose themselves as voters or elected councillors, let alone in the local political power elites.

As for turnout, female voters lagged considerably behind males during the first elections after the reform. However, from 1987 on a slightly higher proportion of female than male voters turn out at local elections. The process of entering local elected office was considerably slower. The first 60 years was characterised by standstill, but with a few leaps forward. One such leap was made shortly after WWII, when female representation in local councils rose from around three per cent to approximately six per cent. The 1971 local elections were to signify a watershed in the representation of women. Even if the total proportion of women did not exceed 15 %, the symbolic impact of having

gained female majorities in some of the largest municipalities was significant. Thus, the 1971 elections served as a source of inspiration for potential female recruits, and as a catalyst for the burgeoning women's movement in the early and mid-seventies.

So, when formal rights were won at such an early stage, what took women so long in gaining political influence? Evidently, this particular case serves as a reminder of the distance between formal rights on the one hand, and the actual realisation of these rights on the other hand. Although women acquired formal political rights through the enfranchisement in 1910, their legal status was still weaker than men's. For instance, not until 1938 did women gain equal rights to office in the civil service.

Even more important than civil rights were social rights. The gradual extension of rights to various public services removed many of the practical hurdles for women who wanted to take part in civic and political life. Public provision for social security and insurance as well as arrangements for care and nursing gradually meant that women grew more independent and thus free to take part in activities outside home.

Women's entry into local councils exceedingly gained momentum after the women's movement mobilised in the late sixties and early seventies. In other words, developments within civil society left an impact on the political institutions. Not least did women's associations

contribute in proliferating knowledge about the electoral system and how to exploit this in favour of female candidates. On the basis of such knowledge, concerted voter actions were initiated so as to maximise the chances of having women elected. Moreover, women's associations formulated strategies to cope with life as a councillor.

As more female politicians were elected councillors, women as a group grew in self-consciousness. Having reached the level of a "critical mass" it was easier for female councillors to enter the rostrum or to engage actively in political processes without being branded as different. One of the foremost effects of women's entry into local political institutions is probably one that is not easily measured in quantifiable terms. The mobilisation of women in order to increase female political representation has signified a new perspective on political competence. Female politicians have gained acceptance for the view that their own background and experiences provide valuable inputs to political decision-making processes. Thus it can be said that the entry of women in local politics has provided legitimacy to other groups' claims that local councils should be socially representative of their constituencies. Finally, specific experiences enable female councillors to raise particular issues that otherwise may have been left unattended. For instance, without the surge in female representation we may not have witnessed a similar local government commitment in the expansion of kindergarten services.

Norway has been a forerunner in equality between the sexes as well as regarding social rights in general. Although there is still some way to go before women enjoy the same political representation as men, Norway does stand out as a success in the way women have been integrated into local political life. In recent years institutional developments have served to ease women's passage to power: The political parties' self-imposed introduction of candidate list quotas for women (40 %) as well as the provision for 40 % female representation in all local government committees and municipally owned enterprises. However, it is unlikely that these institutional arrangements would have been implemented without the preceding developments described above. Three general conditions seem to have played a vital part in laying the foundation for the achievements that have been made. *First*, the question of female suffrage was launched within a favourable reform climate. Although there was a genuine risk of failure, the controversy over the role of local government provided a window of opportunity for the spokesmen of female suffrage. *Second*, the extension of social rights enabled women to fulfil their political rights. Thus, the acquirement of political rights alone was not enough to gain political influence. Not least, universal right to education has been an important leverage for the realisation of political rights. *Third*, a vibrant women's liberation movement complemented the efforts being made through the formal political institutions. Civil and political institutions were able to support each other mutually.