

If the following topic was on the list to select from:
Expansion of Political Rights to Women (and Feminism)

Significance Essay – Pre-Write

First: took a walk and pondered the criteria of significance, what I believe, and what I know just from recalling the topic: Motherhood, Nationalism, and Women’s Political Role, 1848-1940.

What I believe? What may draw me to this topic as being most significant?


Where do I draw a chronological line that indicates start of something. For example, the demand to expand political rights to women did not begin in 1848, nor even in the French Revolution. How important were the philosophizing of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment to shaping the debate even if most men and perhaps few women would have demanded equal political and civil rights?

The ideas can originate in another era, but the significance of the impact may only be realized or acknowledged later. For example, most people during the Scientific Revolution (mid 1500s-1690s) did not realize they were in the midst of this “new” era or age, but the before and after picture look different in retrospect.

I do believe that for an event to be significant, that many people should eventually be affected, but not necessarily at the point of origins (if the date of origins can be determined with certainty).

As a woman, I am inherently interested in when and how women (at least in the United States and by extension western Europe) gained equal political rights, and why others were opposed. While women have equal rights and, in theory, equal opportunity, I don’t believe that we have gained full equality (e.g. wages, promotions, continued discrimination in certain areas of employment).

Now compare my original thoughts to the list of potential ways to judge significance:

<p></p> <p>“...in trying to make sense of history, one cannot escape from the idea of significance. History, to be meaningful, depends on selection and this, in turn, depends on establishing criteria of significance to select the more relevant and to dismiss the less relevant.” ~ Tim Lomas¹</p> <p>Use the questions in the course calendar and Writing to Learn exercises to determine focus and establish criteria.</p> <p>Determining Significance</p> <p>No Scientific Rule to Determine Significance</p> <p>As Stéphane Lévesque notes, there are no scientific rules about what make something significant, but several factors shape historians’ choices.²</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Importance<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Was it important to those who lived it?b. Did it influence their behaviors?2. Profundity<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. How deeply were people affected?3. Quantity<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. How many people were affected?b. Be careful not to allow the need for large number to shape analysis4. Durability<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Should an event last a long time to be significant? What would that length of time be?b. How does one determine durability if the beginning and end are unclear?c. How does the before and after picture compare?d. Be careful not to assume that only long-lasting events be significant.5. Relevance<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Did the event have to be relevant to contemporaries?b. Does the event have to be relevant to the historian?c. Does the event have to be relevant to present-day developments?d. Be careful not to avoid presentism; what is relevant changes with time and each person. <p>Additional (More Troubling) Factors?</p> <p>In judging relevance, we must acknowledge that “where we stand determines what we see.” However, we must also abide by the standards of the historical profession. Stéphane Lévesque elaborates and suggests three additional factors that might shape how we determine significance.¹ These pose more challenges to meeting the standards of history (see American Historical Association Statement of Standards). If, for example, we are driven by intimate interests, symbolic significance, or to provide contemporary lessons, do we risk misinterpreting the past.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Intimate Interests<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Is the event more personal or intimately of interest, e.g. family history, ancestry?b. Be careful, because our personal investment may lead us to dismiss what is relevant if it does not jibe with personal interests.2. Symbolic significance<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. “Is the event emblematically important? Does it represent something significant in the collective consciousness?”b. Be careful, because this approach may lead to binary thinking if we create labels of us vs. them. What is more, it might lead us to exaggerate a turning point. For example, World War I (1914-1918) is often interpreted as a major turning point in European cultural history, even though evidence of these changes were present before 1914.3. Contemporary Lessons<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Are we drawn to a past event to explain or make analogies to current events?b. Be careful, when we engage in this approach, we risk failing to understand the past on its own terms, in its own context.	<p>In reviewing this list and comparing it to my initial beliefs, criteria that I might incorporate into my essay:</p> <p>Importance: certainly the expansion of political rights was an inflammatory topic given the advocates and opponents.</p> <p>Profundity: not easy to discuss number of people affected except in the most generic sense that in theory women are the other half of any population.</p> <p>Durability: Built in momentum during the nineteenth century culminating with right to vote as evidence of political equality (even if actual equality not achieved).</p> <p>Relevance: relevant to the people of the time and in our age</p> <p>Intimate interests: duh. I am a woman so I have intimate interests, but I don’t think that is clouding my judgment about determining significance.</p>
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What facts do I know that might be relevant?

Women gained the right to vote in many western countries in the years before and after WWI. The right to vote is an example of political rights be extended, but not really proof that fundamental change has occurred.

Some women were demanding equal political and civil rights during the French Revolution. Olympe de Gouges was executed during the Reign of Terror (1793-1794) because her beliefs were deemed so radical.

When Jeanne Deroin demands equal rights for women in the French Revolution of 1848-1849, she will not succeed, but she is not executed for her beliefs.

Opponents to the expansion of political rights argued that women did not have the moral, intellectual, or physical abilities to exercise their political rights can be seen in the French Revolution, in 1858 (Proudhon) and repeated by Wright in 1913.

The choice of documents (in "Chapter Ten: Motherhood, Nationalism, and Women's political Role, 1848-1940") lead me to believe that many women argued that motherhood entitled them to political rights because they were raising future generations, and that they were not inferior in intellect or morality even if their physical strengths differed. Lily Braun, an aristocrat and socialist in 1898 Germany, argued that working class women should be given equal pay, improved working conditions, better education.

Do any documents in this chapter undermine my interpretation that the expansion of political rights was not significant?

At first glance, you could argue that that the two fascist authors might be turning back the clock, but their context is quite different. In Italy, political freedom did not really exist under the Italian fascist ruler, Benito Mussolini, and 1940 France is half-occupied by Germany and half controlled by French fascists (Petain), so the nature of the debate has shifted. YET both sources (Sarfatti and Lebrun) both emphasize the important role that women play in shaping society.

And the opponents to expansion of rights (Proudhon and Wright) are arguing vociferously against women which indicates that they find the expansion of political rights to be significantly bad if it occurred.