HUMA 5630
Digital Humanities

Discourse Analysis of Women's Suffrage Movement in British Press (Pre-1928)

香港科技大學
THE HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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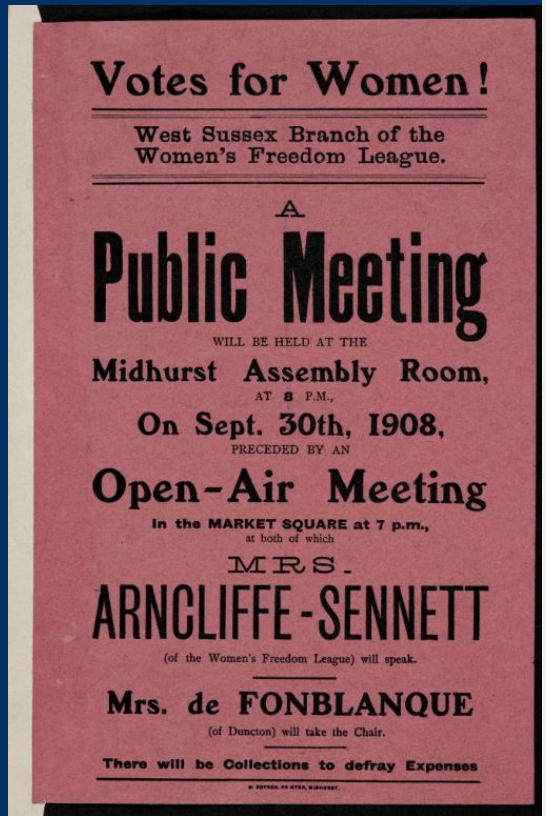

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Part 1
Research Background & Significance

婦女能頂半邊天

“Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations.”
——Queen Victoria

The Reasons for Women Being Excluded from Politics

1. Prevailing beliefs: Women’s natural role was domestic and that their supposed traits—conservatism, nervousness, timidity—made them unfit for politics;
2. Patriarchal traditions in which the family was male-headed and women occupied a subordinate, dependent position.

Timeline

1867: John Stuart Mill's amendment for gender-neutral franchise debated (defeated).

1870s–1890s: Expansion of constitutionalist campaigning; petitions, public meetings, and suffrage journals.

1897: National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) formed under Millicent Fawcett (constitutional strategy consolidated). suffragists

1903: Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) founded; militant "Deeds, not Words" tactics begin. suffragettes

1914–1918: War reshapes public perceptions; suffrage organizations redirect efforts.

1918: Representation of the People Act enfranchises women 30+.

1928: Equal Franchise Act grants women equal voting rights at age 21.

Timeline

1867 — The first formal parliamentary debate on women's suffrage took place, but failed.

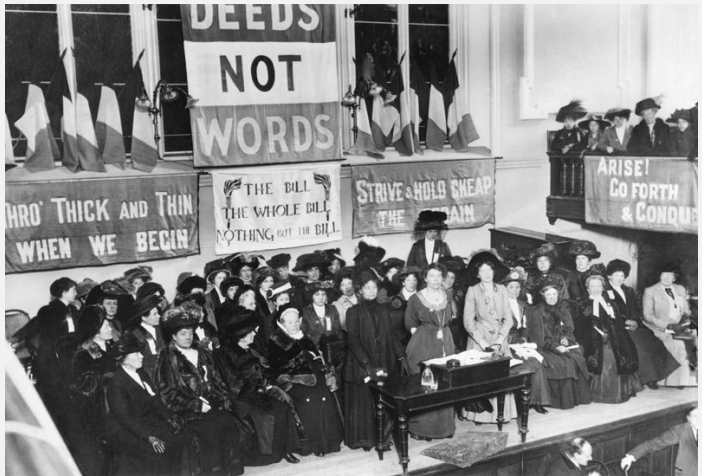
1897 — NUWSS founded

1903 — WSPU founded

1914-18 — The outbreak of World War I brought about a change in the status of women.

1918: Representation of the People Act enfranchises women 30+

1928 — Equal Franchise Act grants women equal voting rights at age 21

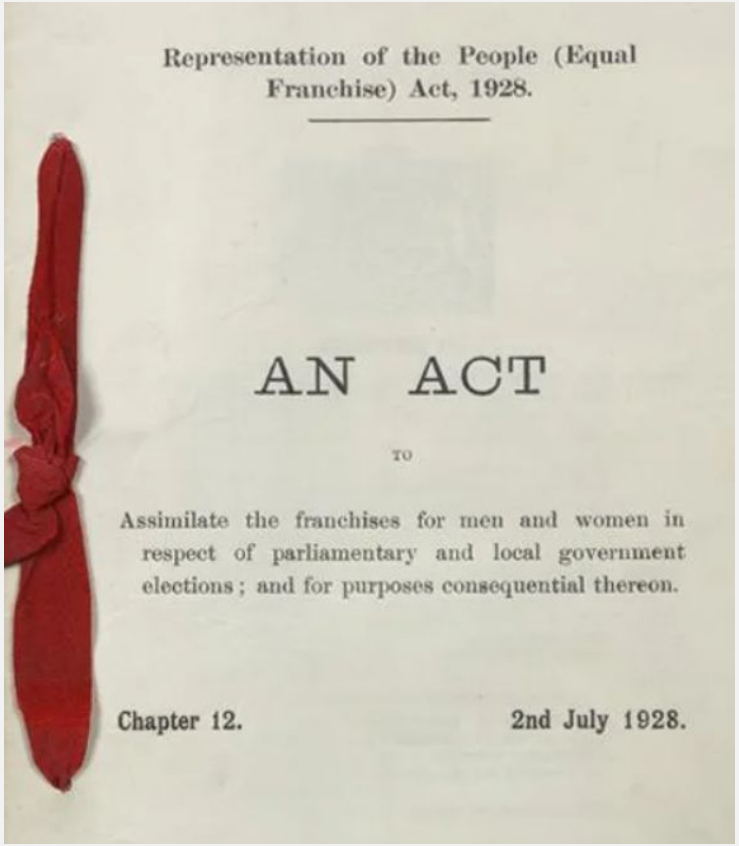


Research Background

At that time, the women's suffrage movement was a crucial component of social and political transformation.

In 1928, the Equal Suffrage Act finally granted British women equal voting rights with men, marking the **success** of decades of suffrage movements.

British newspapers and reader's letters served as key platforms for public opinion, reflecting shifting societal attitudes toward women's suffrage.


Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, 1928.

AN ACT

TO

Assimilate the franchises for men and women in respect of parliamentary and local government elections; and for purposes consequential thereon.

Chapter 12. 2nd July 1928.

Literature Review

Social History from the bottom up

Sandra Stanley Holton(1986): *Feminism and Democracy*

Sophia A. van Wingerden(1999): *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928*

Cultural History with Discourse Analysis

Ann Heilmann(2002): *Words as Deeds: debates and narratives on women's suffrage*

Digital Humanities

Kat Gupta(2016): *Representation of the British Suffrage Movement*

- ❏ Corpus linguistics
- ❏ Critical Discourse Analysis
- ❏ *The Times*

Research Significance

A systematic, large-corpus-based study examining how mainstream public opinions frame women's suffrage movements and how this framing evolves over time and across events remains a gap in the literature.

Our research aims to complement existing research on women's suffrage movements by providing **a systematic analysis of media discourse**, revealing shifts in language, themes, and sentiment over time, and deepening understanding of the **interactive relationship between public opinions and social movements**.

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Part 2
Research Methods & Processes

Research Methods

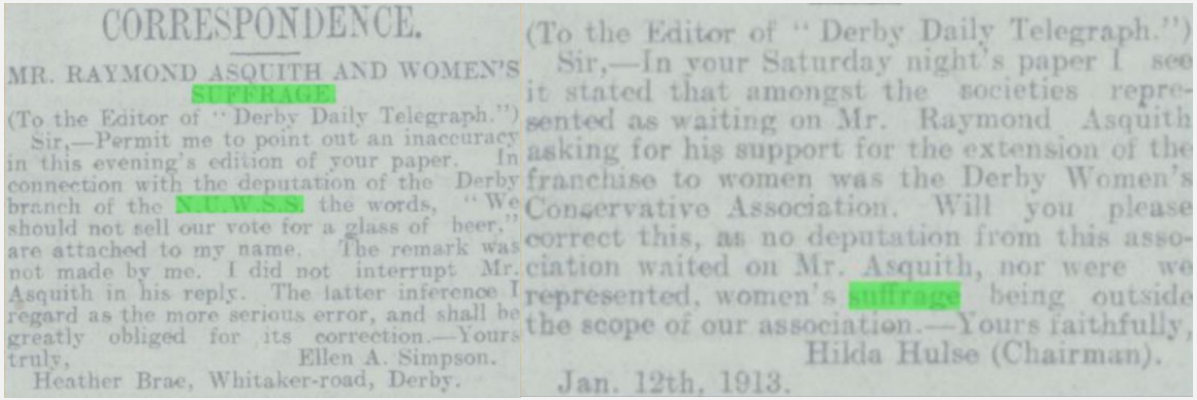
Our study employs a combined approach of corpus linguistics and computational text analysis.

1. **Corpus Construction**
2. **Terms Distribution&Word Cloud:** Identifying key phrases to establish an initial understanding of the corpus.
3. **Named Entity Recognition:** Identifying entities such as organizations to reveal the evolution of the movement.
4. **Document Clustering:** Understanding the inherent holistic structure of the corpus.
5. **Sentiment Analysis:** Analyzing shifts in textual sentiment to explore the correlation between public sentiment and historical events.
6. **Topic Modeling:** Identifying thematic structures to reveal the focal points of discussion across different periods.

Research Processes: Corpus Construction → Data Analysis → Interpretation of the Results

Corpus Construction

Source: British newspapers (e.g. The Times) and readers' letters from Gale Digital Scholar Lab.
Selection Criteria:
Period: Pre 1928
Content Type: Newspapers + Journals
Document Type: Editorial + Letter to the Editor
Keyword: "suffrage" ; "WSPU"; "NUWSS"; suffragist*; suffragette*
Numbers: 1,150 (OCR＞75%)



CORRESPONDENCE.

MR. RAYMOND ASQUITH AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

(To the Editor of "Derby Daily Telegraph.")

Sir,—Permit me to point out an inaccuracy in this evening's edition of your paper. In connection with the deputation of the Derby branch of the N.U.W.S.S. the words, "We should not sell our vote for a glass of beer," are attached to my name. The remark was not made by me. I did not interrupt Mr. Asquith in his reply. The latter inference I regard as the more serious error, and shall be greatly obliged for its correction.—Yours truly,

Ellen A. Simpson.

Heather Brae, Whitaker-road, Derby.

(To the Editor of "Derby Daily Telegraph.")

Sir,—In your Saturday night's paper I see it stated that amongst the societies represented as waiting on Mr. Raymond Asquith asking for his support for the extension of the franchise to women was the Derby Women's Conservative Association. Will you please correct this, as no deputation from this association waited on Mr. Asquith, nor were we represented, women's suffrage being outside the scope of our association.—Yours faithfully,

Hilda Hulse (Chairman).

Jan. 12th, 1913.

Source	No
Times	184
Exeter and Plymouth Gazette	95
Aberdeen Journal	90
Dundee Courier	83
Derby Daily Telegraph	73
Western Daily Press	51
Others	574

Editorial, The Derby Daily Telegraph, Jan. 13, 1913, Vol. 63, p. 1

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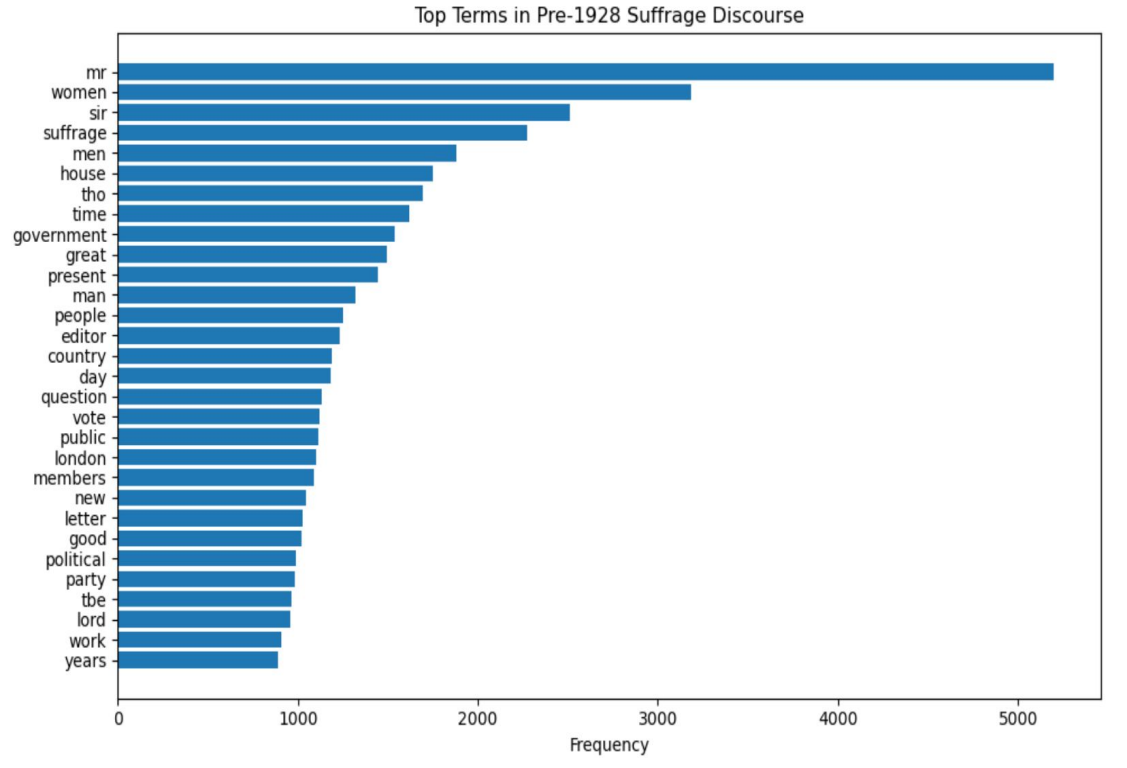
Part 3
Data Analysis & Preliminary Findings

Overview of Terms Distribution (Cleaned Top Terms)



Key findings :

1 The most frequent term is "mr", followed closely by "women", "sir", "suffrage" and "men" The prominence of honorifics like "mr" and "sir" demonstrates the formal and male-dominated language environment of the time.

2 The high frequency of "women" and "suffrage" reflects the central focus on the rights of women and the suffrage movement itself.

3 Other frequently mentioned terms such as "house", "government", "vote" "public", "political" and "party" indicate that discussions were closely tied to political processes and institutions, reflecting the political nature of the debate over women's enfranchisement.

4 Terms like "editor", "letter" and "present" suggest the significance of reader correspondence, editorial opinion, and real-time discussion within newspapers and periodicals.

Word Cloud of Terms

The word cloud illustrates the frequency of key terms used in British newspapers and readers' letters regarding women's suffrage prior to 1928.

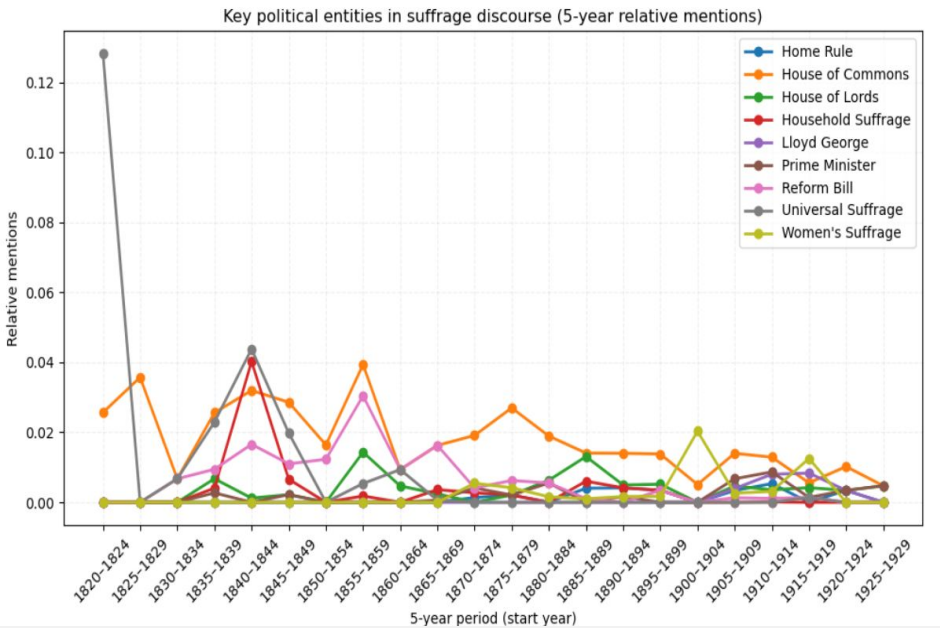
Key findings:

"Women" is by far the most prominent word, confirming that the discourse was fundamentally centered on the rights and roles of women in society.

Other large terms like "suffrage","men", "government", "house", "vote", "public", "country", "political", "party" "members", "time" and "editor" reveal the political nature of the discussion, emphasizing debates around voting rights, parliamentary activity, and the role of government institutions.

The frequent appearance of words such as "present", "great", "question", "day", "letter", "london", "work", "years", "lord", "man" and "people" suggests that conversations were not only institutional but also public, temporal, and personal.

Keyword political entities in suffrage discourse



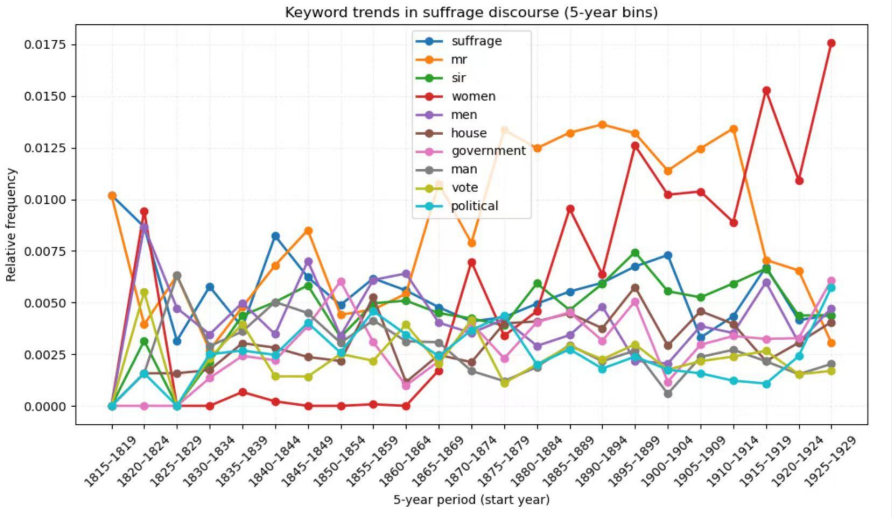
The diagram shows that as the British suffrage movement progressed, the discourse broadened from universal suffrage to more specific debates about women's suffrag. This reflects both the evolution of suffrage campaigns and growing attention to related legislation.

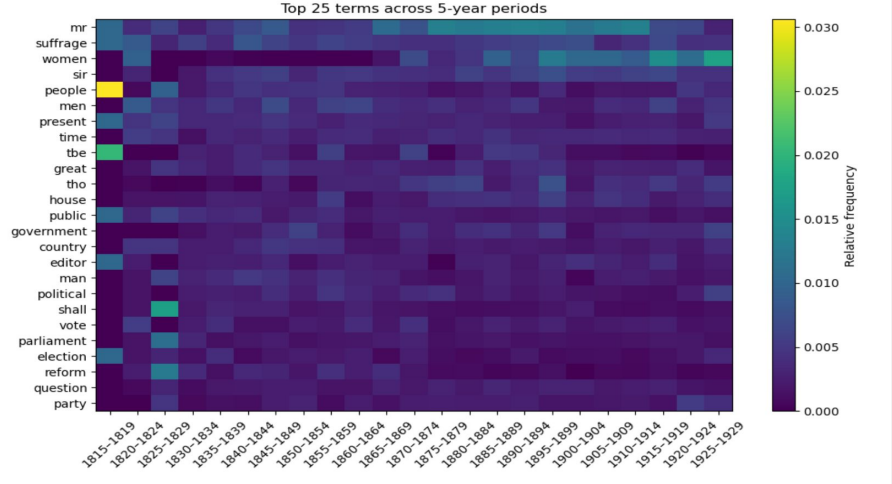
The chart tracks the proportion of mentions of key political entities in British suffrage discourse from 1820 to 1929, aggregated in five-year periods. Each line represents an entity (e.g., House of Commons, Prime Minister, Women's Suffrage), showing how frequently each was discussed relative to the total discourse in election-related contexts.

Key findings:

Historical Shifts: Universal suffrage sees a dramatic spike early on and then sharply declines, suggesting initial focus followed by less sustained discussion.

Parliamentary Bodies: The House of Commons consistently receives more attention than the House of Lords, though both fluctuate. The Commons shows periodic peaks, reflecting its central role in election reforms.





The first chart shows keyword trends in the suffrage discourse from 1815 to 1929, using five-year bins for relative frequency of selected keywords. The second image visualizes the distribution of the top 25 most mentioned terms across the same time periods.

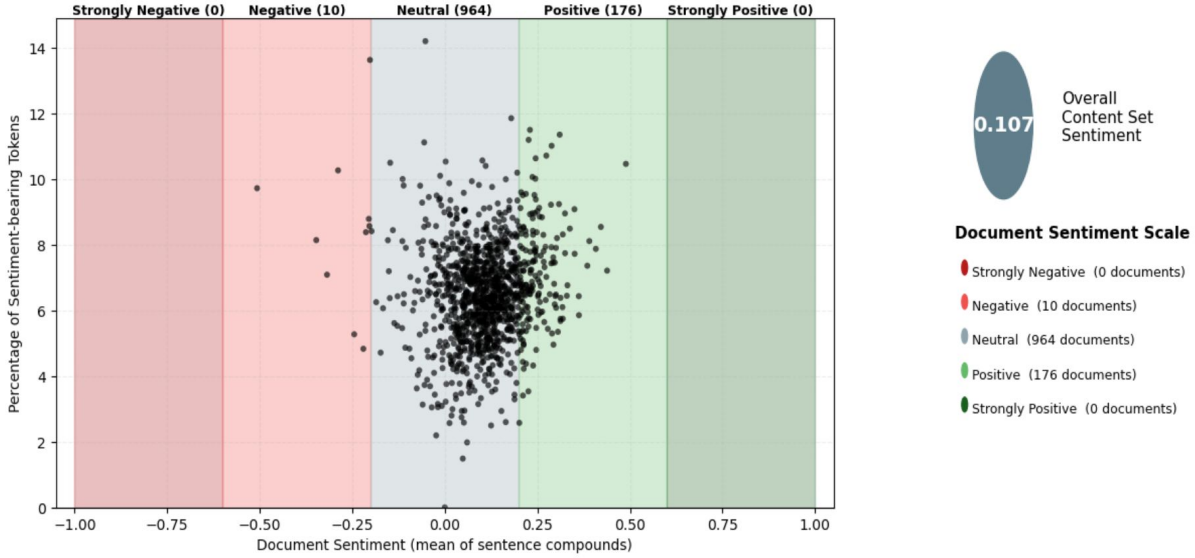
Key findings:

1 Rising Prominence of “Women”: The frequency of "women" increases dramatically after 1870, peaking in the final decade, signifying growing public focus on women’s issues and suffrage as the movement gained momentum and approached key legislative milestones.

2 Stable Political Discourse: Terms like "suffrage," "men," "sir," "government," "vote," and "political" remain prominent throughout, demonstrating the ongoing importance of debate about representation, voting, and politics.

3 Temporal Trends: Both visualizations show notable surges in suffrage-related terminology in late periods (early 1900s onwards), reflecting heightened political and societal activity surrounding legislation and public advocacy.

Document Sentiment Overview



This sentiment distribution highlights that, while women's right to vote was a significant social debate, public discourse as captured by media and letters was mostly balanced and cautious rather than extreme or impassioned. The slightly positive overall sentiment could indicate a subtle tilt towards acceptance or approval of women's suffrage, but the predominance of neutral positions demonstrates a careful, measured discussion in the public sphere during this period.

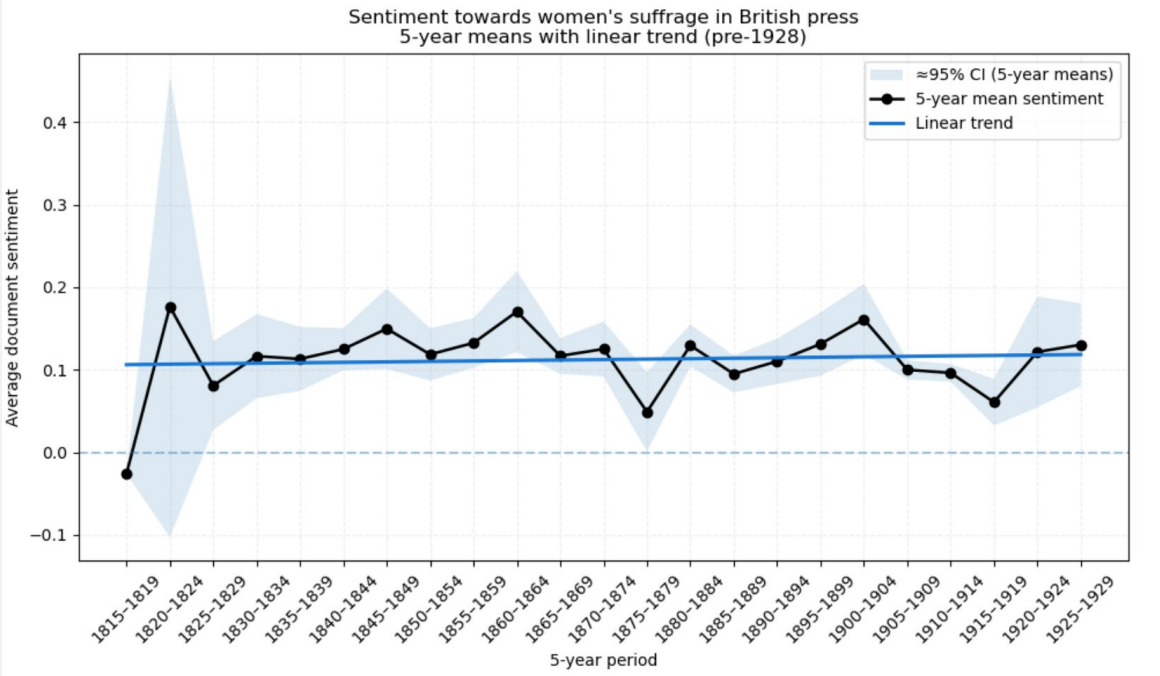
The chart presents a sentiment analysis of British public opinion regarding women's suffrage before 1928. The sentiment scale divides responses into five categories: strongly negative, negative, neutral, positive, and strongly positive.

Key findings from the chart:

1 Overwhelming Neutrality: The vast majority of documents (964) are classified as neutral, which suggests that discourse around women's suffrage was mostly factual, objective, or restrained in sentiment.

2 Mild Positivity: 176 documents show positive sentiment, while only 10 display a negative attitude. There are no documents identified as strongly negative or strongly positive.

3 Concentration Around Neutral: Most data points cluster around the center, with very few outliers, indicating a low proportion of polarized opinions.



This analysis reveals that British media coverage of women's suffrage was consistently measured and slightly positive. The absence of extreme sentiment swings and a steady linear trend reflect a mature, stable public conversation in the press.

The chart shows the sentiment trajectory of British press coverage on women's suffrage from 1815 to 1929, with sentiment averaged over five-year periods and a linear trend line applied. Each black dot represents the five-year mean sentiment, while the blue area marks the 95% confidence interval.

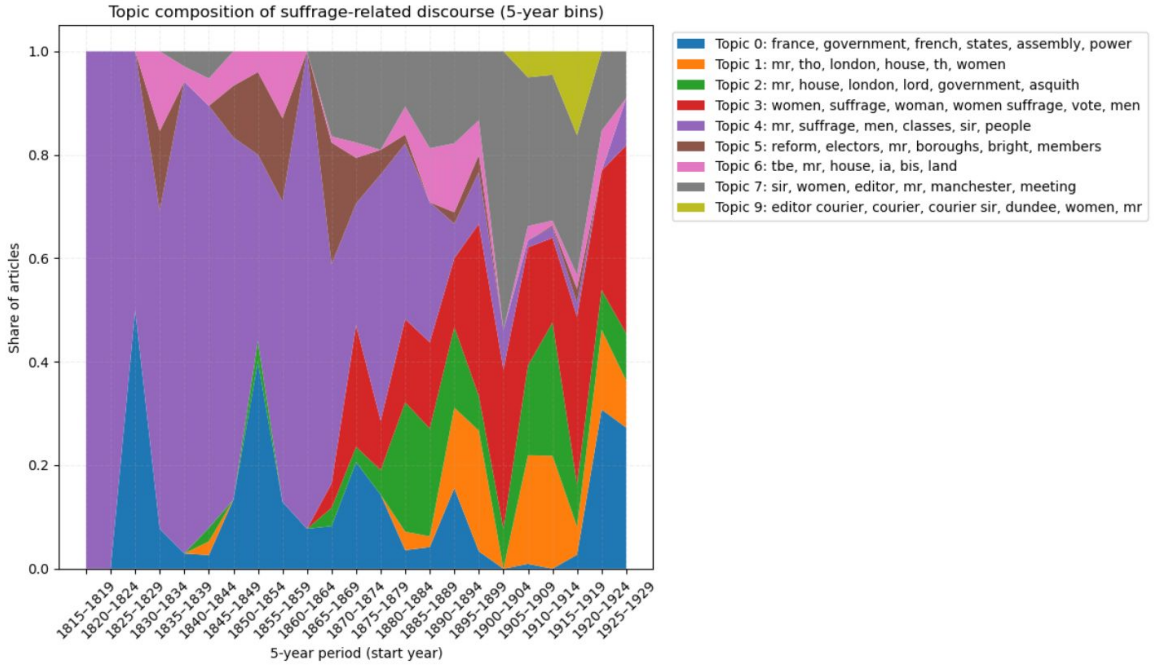
Key findings:

1 Generally Positive Sentiment: Throughout the timeline, the average document sentiment remains mostly above zero, suggesting enduring mild positivity in how newspapers addressed women's suffrage.

2 Variable but Stable: While there are some fluctuations and brief dips, sentiment largely holds within a narrow, positive range. Notably, there are no extended periods of negative sentiment.

3 Linear Trend: The fitted linear trend line grows steadily, indicating a growing public support for women's political participation across the period.

Topic composition of suffrage-related discourse



This topic composition analysis reveals how the public discourse surrounding women's suffrage evolved from homogeneity and institutional focus toward greater variety and specificity. The findings indicate both the maturing of the suffrage movement and the increasing sophistication of public discussion leading up to the landmark changes in women's voting rights.

The chart presents the topic composition of suffrage-related discourse in British newspapers and readers' letters from 1815 to 1929, grouped into five-year periods. Each colored band represents the share of articles dominated by a particular topic.

Key findings:

Topic Shifts: The composition of topics fluctuates significantly over time. Some periods are dominated by a single topic (e.g., Topic 4 in early years), while others display a more diverse mix.

Expansion and Diversification: From about the 1860s onward, topic diversity increases, with more visible shifts in public discourse. The late 19th and early 20th centuries see rising shares for topics directly referencing suffrage and reform, signaling increased public attention and complexity in debates.

Modernization: In the final decades (1900–1929), the chart shows heightened complexity and less dominance by any single topic, reflecting the broadening nature of suffrage debates and the engagement of multiple perspectives, actors, and issues.

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Part 4
Conclusion & Future Work

Conclusion

This research provides a detailed analysis of British public discourse on women's suffrage from 1815 to 1929, drawing on newspaper articles and readers' letters. The study reveals several key findings:

1 The most prominent terms in suffrage-related discussions were "women", "suffrage", and honorifics such as "mr" and "sir", reflecting both the focus on gender and the formal, male-dominated environment of the time.

2 Discussions were primarily centered on political institutions, voting rights, and the suffrage movement itself, with increased attention and complexity in public debates as the movement matured.

3 Sentiment analysis shows discourse was generally neutral or mildly positive, with few extreme opinions expressed, indicating a balanced and careful approach in media coverage.

4 Over time, the diversity of topics increased, public attention broadened, and references to women's suffrage intensified as reforms approached.

Future Work

1 Investigate individual voices and narratives within the suffrage movement using more granular text analysis to capture perspectives beyond aggregated sentiment and word frequencies.

2 Compare British discourse to other national contexts to assess differences and similarities in public attitudes and media strategies around women's enfranchisement.

3 Examine the impact of major events and legislative changes on discourse by aligning peaks in keyword and topic trends with specific historical milestones.

4 Expand the dataset to include visual media, pamphlets, and activist materials to provide a richer, multidimensional picture of the suffrage movement's presence in public life.

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Thanks for Listening!

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