FEMALE SUFFRAGE IN SLOVENIA

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Historical Background

Slovenia was among the latecomers to women’s enfranchisement. Slovenian women were fully enfranchised in 1945, in Josip Broz Tito’s new Yugoslavia. Enfranchisement was considered a gift from the Communist Party, which had gained power after the war. But the road towards women’s right to vote in Slovenia was long, dating back to the 19th-century Austro-Hungarian monarchy seated in the crown land of Carniola.\(^1\) All Slovene lands were part of medieval hereditary Habsburg dynasty legacy, but Carniola was the only region with a Slovenian majority (Ljubljana, the capital of Carniola, became the undisputed center of all Slovene Lands). In Carniola, as in the rest of Austria, the constitutional law of 1861 first introduced elections for the provincial diets. From 1861 on parliamentary representatives were delegated from the provinces, elections by voters only took place from 1873 on. The electoral system combined property and educational qualifications with the concept of a representation of interests through corporate bodies—curias.\(^2\) In Slovenia, as in Austria, female taxpayers could vote in municipal elections, under the same census qualification as men, beginning in 1849\(^3\). Yet they could not cast their votes personally, but had to sign a special authorization to a male proxy, who could cast the ballot on their behalf. From 1861 to 1884, female taxpayers also had the right to vote by proxy for all curias of the Carniolian diet. After 1884, women could only vote in the curia of great landownership and chamber of commerce and trade.\(^4\) Women had no right to vote

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\(^1\) Slovenian territory was divided into the historical crown lands of Carniola, Styria, Carinthia, city of Trieste, Gorizia and Gradisca, and Istria, with their own diets united under the crown of the Habsburg dynasty.

\(^2\) Curias were corporate bodies partly formed after medieval and early estates. There were four curias: great landownership, cities and towns, chambers of commerce, and industry and the rural communities.

\(^3\) Ljubljana, was a special case, as teachers were enfranchised without tax qualifications in 1910. It was rare for women to be included in the higher education qualification in the Monarchy.

\(^4\) Melik V., *Volitve na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: 1965) 136–137.
for the parliament (Reichsrat), although women had the right to vote for the Reichsrat in the curia of great landowners. In 1896 a general curia with suffrage for men was added, but the other curiae continued to exist. The curia system (and the fraction of women’s suffrage) was only abolished in 1907 when universal and equal suffrage for men was introduced.

At the turn of the century, there emerged in the province of Carniola three political parties that would shape Slovenian history through the end of World War II. The conservative Catholic Party Slovenska ljudska stranka (SLS) was established in 1891 in Ljubljana. This was the only party that succeeded in gathering mass support, as it addressed the largest social strata in Carniola—the peasants. It further succeeded in combining the most conservative Catholic demands with Christian social movements which propagated equal and general rights to vote, including those of women. The Yugoslav Social Democratic Party (Jugoslovanska socialdemokratska stranka) (JSDS), established in 1896, had no such impact. Although the Social Democrats declared their goal to be universal suffrage, regardless of sex, as a party of urban workers the JSDS had trouble finding members in rural Carniola. Established in 1894, the Liberal Party, Narodno napredna stranka, was the least successful in becoming a mass political party, using more archaic strategies and remaining a party for property owners. Indeed, though it proclaimed some liberal principles, the Liberal Party was conservative with regard to social and political equality. Each party established its own structure, relied on different associations for political and ideological breeding and counted with newspapers with parallel trust networks. All of this produced intense political polarization.

After World War I, the ‘window of opportunity’ to push for women’s suffrage opened in Slovenia. The Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, was established, uniting Slovenian and Croatian territories with the Kingdom of Serbia. New opportunities seemed to emerge for women and for female enfranchisement within the new state. However, expectations proved misguided. The two strongest Yugoslav political parties, and the most important political players in the Yugoslav state from which most governments were established, were patriarchal parties committed to tradition. The Serbian Radical Party, for one, established

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5 The western part of the Slovene Lands (the Slovene Littoral and the western part of Inner Carniola) was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy. In 1920, in the Carinthian Plebiscite, the majority of Carinthian Slovenes voted to remain in Austria.