

## PUBLIC POLICY BLOG

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# Why does it take so long until social movements gain the power to shape politics?

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### **Executive Summary**

Throughout centuries, the road to gain power for social groups has been rocky. From labor unions to “Climate Youth” and women’s rights, social movements have shown that gaining political power and social recognition can be achieved by the expression of ideas. Strikes, protests, and public speeches are only a few examples of how these movements manifest their needs and ideas to shape politics. When ideas empower actors, policy changes can be the result. However, this development happens at different paces because ideas can be more or less coherent, powerful and widely shared. Furthermore, domestic contexts can influence these processes.

### **The role of power and ideas in social movements**

The heterogeneous environment within which policymakers work to gain power and take decisions affects policy change. Actors’ ideas, beliefs and needs spread at different paces. This is because individuals and groups can use diverse ideational elements to affect others’ beliefs. Often, social groups face challenges in influencing beliefs and norms to shape politics. There are several reasons why gaining power through ideas takes time.

Social movements often emerge from “under-class” groups who lack meaningful access to institutionalized means of power.

Ideas are heterogenous and can mean different things to different people. To gain relevance, translate into power and ultimately shape politics, ideas require a shared understanding. Social groups can promote this for instance through persuasive actions, a process that can take time.

The context in which ideas develop may influence the process of gaining power.

For social movements the relationship between power and ideas is fundamental. Even without institutionalized access to the policy-making arena, they can exert influence on the policy process and trigger policy changes. Ideas matter in shaping politics for instance during agenda setting but also at other policy stages.

Despite lacking formalized power, social movements can employ different strategies to manifest and express their ideas. For instance, they can persuade others to accept and adopt them, by presenting them as viable policy alternatives. A persuasive tool of social movements is mass-mobilization; strikes, protests and public campaigns. Also, they can use ideational and institutional elements to gain recognition among mass public and elites, for instance, through public speeches.

### **From Labor Unions, to “Climate youth” and Women’s rights:**

How can a focus on ideas explain the long process of gaining power for labor unions and the “Climate youth”?

Labor unions have long been important political actors, mobilizing voters and influencing political representation and economic inequality. Since the end of the 19th century large coalitions of employees used strikes as a persuasive “symbol” to shape politics. Nevertheless, gaining political influence often took long due to weak ideational elements. In fact, mass-based tactics encounter several obstacles, from problems of coordination and communication to the need for competent organizations and leaders. Also, by advocating for a structural change, the group attempts to align against the powerful. But more powerful societal actors can employ tactics such as repression, intimidation, divide and conquer and control of media. These methods hamper the capacity of the social movement to express their ideas and gain power, resisting or slowing down the process of shaping politics.

In “Climate youth” shared ideas exist at the global level. This movement uses its moral authority to gain recognition among the institutions and is characterized by a charismatic leader, Greta Thunberg. Her speeches, together with the global strikes, function as persuasive tools to gain recognition among institutions and ultimately power to shape politics. In comparison to other social movements, leadership, diverse persuasive tools and the

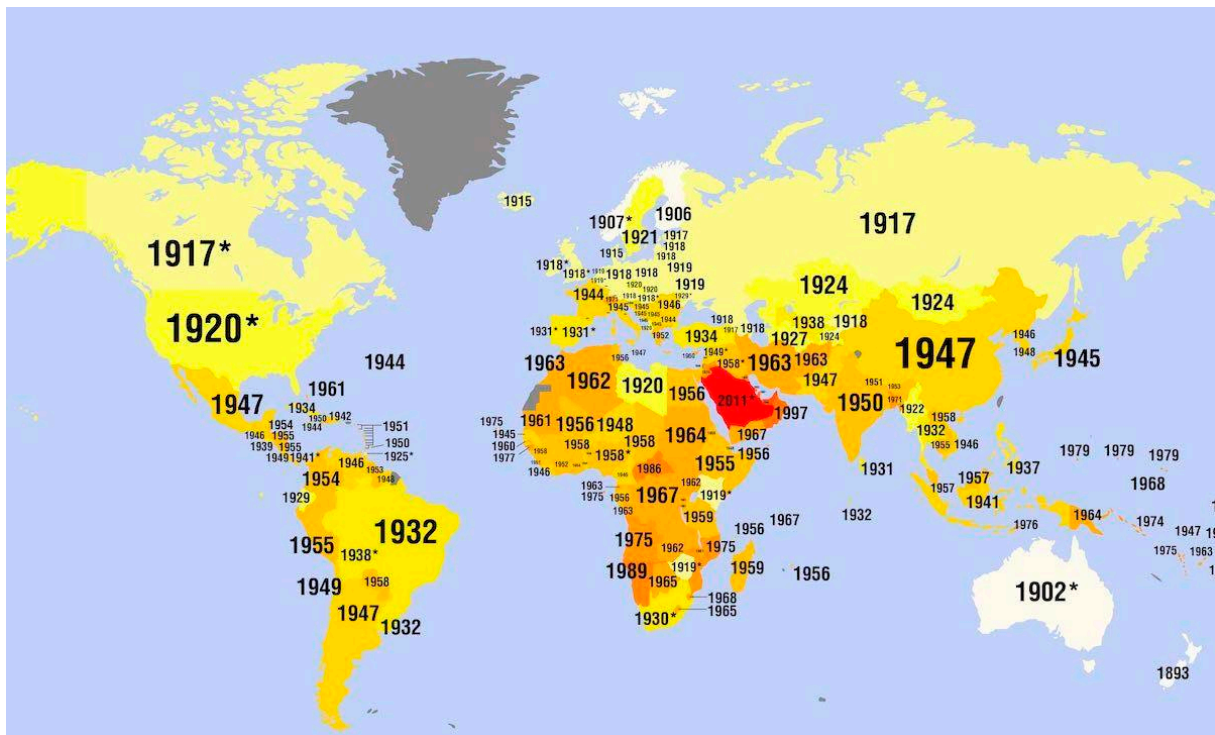
communication of ideas through social media allow this movement to gain power in a quicker way.

A more in-depth look into the women's rights movement and in particular on the Swiss case reveals some of the dynamics between ideas and power in more detail.

Social inequality has been a key determinant of discrimination against women and became one of the main reasons for the formation of the movement for women's rights. Until the 20th century, women in most countries of the world were deprived of the opportunity to participate on equal terms in many spheres of social life, including education, sports, employment and politics.

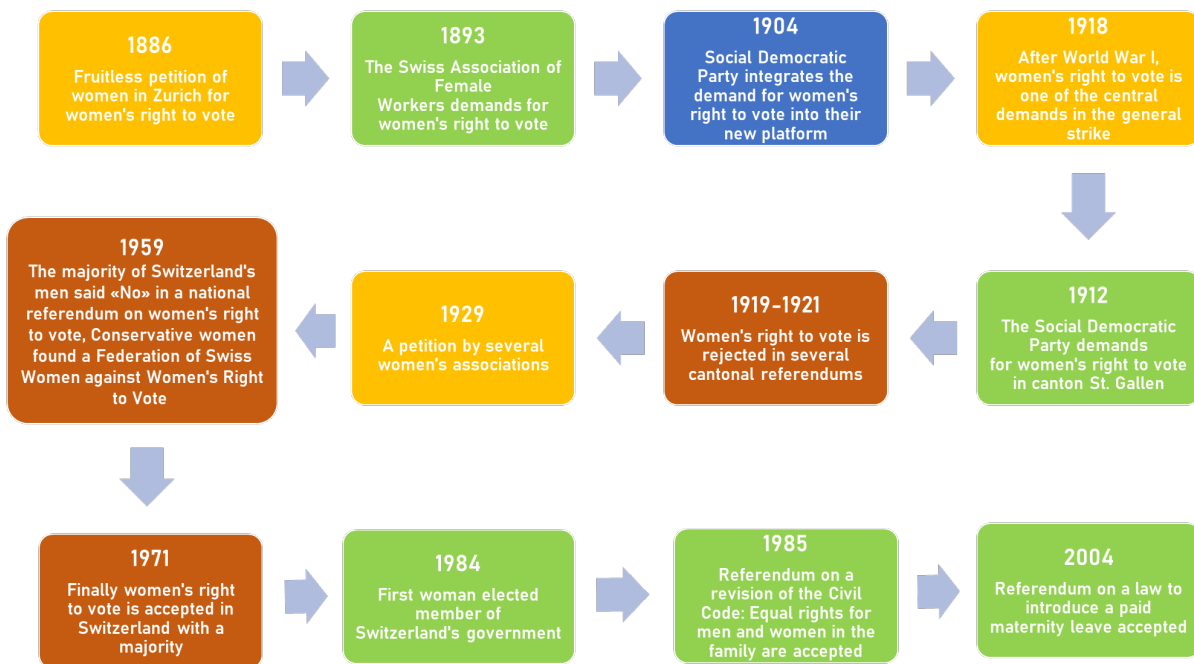
The quest for political participation through female voting rights became a "symbol" for this movement and a strategy to gain power. At the end of the 19th century, the refusal to grant women the right to vote led to the formation of an organized suffragist movement and an increase in the number of public actions for gender equality in many countries. In this movement, increasingly shared ideas of equality formed coalitions. Massive global campaigns and strikes have been the political tools to gain recognition among political authorities and ultimately shaped institutions.

Several aspects have prolonged the struggle for women's rights, such as the political system, historical path-dependencies, traditions, political events and methods of actions. For example, the date when women obtained the right to vote differs significantly across countries. Often, changes in the political system were paralleled by developments in female suffrage. For example, the Soviet Union, Austria, and Germany granted women the right to vote together with the abolition of the monarchy.



Map: Year women have obtained the right to vote. Source:  
[https://nosikot.livejournal.com/5029477.html?utm\\_source=embed\\_post](https://nosikot.livejournal.com/5029477.html?utm_source=embed_post)

Other countries such as Switzerland took longer to implement these changes. Although based on a functioning democratic tradition, new ideas encountered significant internal resistance. Since 1886, women actively fought for their rights through various peaceful methods, but the political system limited the development of this process. For instance, in 1959 Swiss men rejected women's right to vote in a national referendum. In the same year, conservative women founded a Federation of Swiss Women against women's right to vote, stressing internal divisions of the movement that significantly complicated the process of achieving the goal. After almost 10 years of open protests, on February 1971 women's right to vote was finally accepted in Switzerland.



Chronological timeline: Switzerland's Long Way to Women's Right to Vote. Source: <http://history-switzerland.geschichte-schweiz.ch/chronology-womens-right-vote-switzerland.html>.

The case shows that although women's ideas were expressed and openly discussed at the global level, the long history of discrimination and weak political instruments to gain recognition hindered that ideas could turn into power. In addition, the women's struggle for rights in different countries demonstrates that democracies have not necessarily been more progressive than other forms of government. Rather, it stresses that ideas take time to materialize and gain power, irrespective of the political system.

## Conclusions

Ideas can be powerful to bring policy change, as shown by different social movements. Yet it can take a long time until ideas gain the power to shape politics. As different cases show, this is often caused by a lack of structured organization of the opposition of political authority. Particularly when ideas originate from marginalized groups in the society, non-representation in the political process and institutions resistant to change can negatively impact on their spread in politics. In addition, contextual and historical differences have impacted on the pace that ideas could gain political power. Finally, ideas are abstract concepts reflecting people's beliefs. Thus, from when expressed to persuade others until gaining political recognition that lead to concrete policy changes, ideas need to consolidate and reflect a shared meaning – a process that takes time and can encounter obstacles.