Electoral reform and the political modernization of England, 1832–1841

PHILIP SALMON


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SUMMARY

Philip Salmon re-examines the place of the Reform Act of 1832 in English parliamentary history as a supposed turning point which averted revolution. Recent scholarship has shown that already before 1832 English radical traditions favoured popular constitutional reform over republicanism, and that changes to the electoral system were in practice not extensive after 1832. The analysis of pollbooks reveals, however, that the incidence of party-based voting was higher after the reform. The author explains how changes in the electoral laws, including those for local elections in the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, altered the nature of electioneering. The new, more bureaucratic electoral laws on voter registration and qualification, on the manner of taking the poll, and on permitted election costs, all placed a premium on party organization for both local and national elections. The legal complexities led to the formation of local party associations to tackle them, as especially the registration of party supporters as voters required constant vigilance between elections. The adversarial system of registration was a key element in the rise of party-based voting in the 1830s. Confrontational electoral practices politicized the electorate for local as well as national contests, and so contributed to the advance of more persistent party allegiances at both levels. This constitutional realignment underpinned the growth of a more modern English representative democracy.

This article is about the changes made to the English representative system by the ‘Great’ Reform Act of 1832 and its often overlooked corollary, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835.¹ For many years it was widely accepted that the 1832

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¹ Respectively An Act to amend the representation of the people in England and Wales, passed on 7 June 1832, and An Act to provide for the regulation of municipal corporations in England and Wales, passed on 9 September 1835. Hereafter these laws, which can found in The Statutes of the United

Reform Act was a key factor explaining why England, unlike much of Europe, had managed to avoid a major revolution during the first half of the nineteenth century. With its redistribution of parliamentary seats to the industrial centres of northern England, and extension of the vote to the middle classes, the Reform Act was regarded as a wise concession to popular feeling by liberal-minded aristocrats, which had provided just enough democracy for England to escape relatively unscathed from the revolutionary threats of 1830 and 1848. In more recent years, however, this traditional view of the significance of the Reform Act has been challenged on a number of different levels. First, many studies of popular politics have traced the emergence of a distinctive political culture and reforming agenda in Britain many years before the Act was passed. English radical traditions, in particular, have been shown to have diverged sharply from the rest of Europe from the late eighteenth century onwards, favouring popular constitutional reform rather than Painite republicanism. This very distinctive ‘pressure from without’ was clearly evident in the formation of the Political Unions during 1830–32, which Nancy LoPatin has recently demonstrated played a crucial role in providing extra-parliamentary support for the Reform Act as it made its stormy passage through the British parliament. Rather than laying the foundations for nineteenth-century ‘English exceptionalism’, these studies would seem to suggest that the Reform Act was actually a product of it.

Reinforcing this dismissal of 1832 as a unique turning point in English politics, a second group of historians have questioned the electoral impact of the Reform Act itself. The first seriously to challenge its popular significance was Norman Gash. His influential Politics in the Age of Peel (1953) emphasized what he saw as the continuing dominance of aristocratic control and corruption in nineteenth-century elections, and concluded that ‘there scarcely was a feature of the old unreformed system that could not be found in existence after 1832’. Taking this interpretation a stage further in the 1960s and 1970s, an American sociologist, D.C. Moore, used public records of voting behaviour, pollbooks, to try to show that after 1832 electors increasingly voted the same way as their landlords, as part of ‘deference communities’. Rather than democratizing the English voting system, he argued that the Reform Act had increased aristocratic control over the

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rural electorate, and that this had been intended by its Whig promoters. Moore’s conclusions, in particular, were quickly discounted, but subsequent work in the 1980s has challenged the status of the Reform Act from yet another perspective, by presenting a far more positive picture of the electoral system before 1832. Frank O’Gorman’s account of the unreformed electoral system, in particular, demonstrated that most eighteenth-century electorates were not ‘corrupt, narrow and servile’, and that elections, far from being closed to popular involvement, were genuinely ‘public, participatory and partisan’ events. Just as English popular protest had differed markedly from the rest of Europe during the eighteenth century, so too had the vitality and responsiveness of the English representative system.

There is no denying the importance of this body of work on the eighteenth century and its portrayal of the emergence of a distinctly English political culture before 1832. Over the past ten years, however, new evidence has also begun to emerge about the way in which the electoral reforms of the 1830s may have been responsible for a second restructuring of English political development. James Vernon’s postmodernist analysis of ordinary people’s involvement in politics, for instance, has drawn attention to the Reform Act’s ‘restrictive’ details, and its role in bringing about what he sees as an officially regulated ‘closure of the public political sphere’ during the nineteenth century. Studies of popular protest have also demonstrated how dissatisfaction with the electoral system helped to fuel new forms of revolutionary discontent. The new voter registration procedures, in particular, have been shown to have dominated the ‘six points’ demanded by the revolutionary Chartist movement.

A second important discovery has been made about voting behaviour after 1832. The late John Phillips’s pioneering work on pollbooks revealed the ‘critical, indeed, watershed role of the Great Reform Act’ in the development of party-based voting. Using modern computer techniques to compare the votes of individuals over time, Phillips demonstrated that the probability (or ‘hazard rate’) of a party vote being repeated at another election increased substantially after reform. At the same time the likelihood of an elector casting a non-party vote, by ‘splitting’ his two votes between candidates from different parties, diminished. ‘The “Great” Reform Act’, he concluded, ‘justified its epithet by altering Eng-

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land's political environment profoundly.\(^{13}\) Phillips's work on electoral behaviour has convincingly demonstrated the rise of far more persistent forms of voter partisanship after 1832. But as O'Gorman and others have pointed out, his concentration on the 'outputs' of elections neglects all the other components of electioneering which preceded a poll. Drawing on his knowledge of these in the unreformed period, O'Gorman has suggested that it was not long before the 'newer impulses' identified by Phillips 'weakened themselves'. At the same time, however, he has readily acknowledged the need for a 'firmer overall model of the post-1832 electoral system', linking 'campaign processes with political considerations'.\(^{14}\)

Was there a significant restructuring of the English representative system in the 1830s, as some recent studies of popular politics and voting behaviour have indicated? Addressing this question and responding to O'Gorman's prompt, this paper assesses the impact of some of the key changes that were made to election law in the 1830s. The first section reveals how the Reform Act's details concerning voter registration, far from being mere 'small print', actually transformed the business of obtaining the vote, leading to new forms of party organization and providing a much-needed explanation for the type of voting behaviour identified by Phillips. More significantly, however, the second section demonstrates how these changes to election law not only affected the electorate, where most scholarly attention has traditionally been focused, but also local bureaucracy. Their 'knock-on' effects encouraged nationally oriented forms of party organization to multiply through all levels of English society, from the parish vestry to the new boards of guardians and annually elected municipal councils. As a result a far more uniform political culture was established, which laid the foundations for England's long-term political stability.

II

One of the more immediate changes arising from the Reform Act would have been noticed at the poll itself. Many procedures which had previously been regulated by a mixture of local custom and ancient laws now became standardized for the first time. As well as establishing a nationwide system of voter registration, the Act also prescribed the precise times, location and manner of taking and declaring the poll, along with all the official costs that could be charged to the candidates. These included 'by the day' payments of two guineas for each deputy appointed by the returning officer, and a further guinea for each of the clerks employed to record the votes in the polling booths. Seven hours were permitted for voting on the first day, and eight on the second, when the polls had to close by 4 p.m. Declarations of the return, which in the counties were scheduled to take place two days later, had to be made 'not later than 2 pm in the afternoon'.\(^{15}\) Even


\(^{14}\) O'Gorman, 'The electorate before and after 1832', pp. 181–3.

\(^{15}\) 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 739–41, clauses 62–71.
the official language of the poll became standardized. The questions and oaths that could be put to the voter, which in the borough constituencies had varied widely, were now strictly confined to the words contained in the Act, 'any law or statute, local or general, to the contrary notwithstanding'.

Another difference would have been noticed in the physical appearance of elections, and not just in terms of the vastly expanded electorate of many constituencies. The practice of holding an election 'in any church, chapel or other place of worship', which had been common in New Shoreham, for example, was now prohibited. Another new stipulation was that 'a reasonable number' of polling booths be provided and that there be a limit of 'six hundred voting at one compartment' in the borough constituencies. This encouraged the traditional wooden hustings used for the nomination speeches and declaration of the poll to become more elaborate in structure after 1832. The height of this central and symbolic feature of the electoral landscape grew considerably, with polling areas and barriers usually being constructed on the ground floor, beneath an enclosed (and increasingly roofed) platform for the various officials, the candidates and their key supporters. Add to this the host of popular election manuals and treatises on election law that were published in the wake of 1832, and it is clear that the Reform Act was an important step in the move towards a far more officially regulated system of conducting a poll.

By far the most significant difference between unreformed and reformed elections, however, occurred before the poll had taken place. This was the introduction of a new annual voter registration system for determining who could and who could not vote in a parliamentary election, the details of which took up almost a third of the entire Reform Act. Before 1832 electors had had to establish their right to vote at the poll itself. This had often led to long delays and legal disputes between rival candidates about the qualifications of their opponents and friends. With the enfranchisement of £10 householders in the boroughs and £50 occupiers in the counties, however, it was clear that such delays would only get worse. By separating the business of claiming the vote from the business of casting it, the Whig government responsible for the Reform Act not only hoped to reduce the length and cost of elections, but also to remove party rivalry from the process of scrutinizing and verifying voters. An election, as the Whig *Edinburgh Review* ar-

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16 Ibid., pp. 738–9, clause 58.
17 Because of the Reform Act's disfranchisement of non-resident voters, however, not all borough constituencies had larger electorates after 1832.
18 'New Shoreham 1820–32', History of Parliament draft article; 2 William IV c. 45, p. 741, clause 68.
19 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 740–41, clauses 64, 68.
20 For example William Carpenter, The electors' manual (London, 1832); J.D. Chambers, A complete dictionary of the law and practice of elections (London, 1837); James Coppock, Electors' manual, or plain directions by which every man may know his own rights, and preserve them (London, 1835); T. Paynter, The practice at elections being plain instructions (London, 1837); George Price, Complete election guide (London, 1832); A.J. Stephens, A practical treatise on the law of elections, with directions for candidates, electors, agents, returning officers, overseers, claimants, and objectors (London, 1840).
21 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 738–41, clauses 26, 36–60, 72. For a recent discussion, on which much of the following paragraphs are based, see P. Salmon, Electoral Reform at Work. Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–1841 (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 19–42.
gued, would no longer be a ‘scene of delay, confusion and expense, all endless and intolerable’.\textsuperscript{22}

But while the time allowed for polling was drastically reduced by the Reform Act, from a previous maximum of two weeks to just two days, the new procedures for compiling the new electoral registers increased the amount of activity associated with electoral participation. Instead of the vote being conferred only at election time, and only then in the event of a contest taking place between rival candidates, the franchise now had to be acquired annually, irrespective of whether or not an election was actually held. In a procedure lasting almost five months of every year, potential voters had to submit personal claims, check pre-prepared lists, and harass local officials to see that their names and addresses had been accurately recorded. They then had to hand over a one-shilling registration fee (a source of considerable complaint), and settle all of their local taxes by a certain date, in order to have their names inserted on a provisional electoral roll. Finally, in a process aimed at eliminating unqualified electors, each person claiming the vote would have to be prepared to ‘defend’ their entitlement against a possible objection in an open court of law, known as a revising barrister’s court, often at only three days’ notice.\textsuperscript{23}

Crucially, any person claiming the vote was entitled to challenge another’s electoral rights, but without having to state the reasons for their ‘objection’. This made preparing a defence in advance extremely difficult. Inaccurate descriptions of the voter or his qualification, a discrepancy in the rate-book, uncertainty over the rateable value of a property, or even just an initial missing from a name, could all result in an electoral disqualification. The fact that many clauses of the Reform Act were subject to a wide range of interpretation only served to complicate matters. Even the most apparently uniform franchises came to embody a wide variety of different qualifications in practice. Historians often refer to the £10 householders as a monolithic group, but under clause 27 of the Reform Act, occupation of ‘any house, warehouse, counting-house, shop, or other building’ being held ‘either separately, or jointly with any land’ formed an entitlement.\textsuperscript{24} The effects of this imprecise terminology, framed ‘most colloquially’ and ‘in terms which no lawyer can interpret’, became immediately apparent at the first registration.\textsuperscript{25} In Staffordshire, for example, it was reported that:

\begin{quote}
there have been some hundreds of hours of public time and, no doubt, some thousands of pounds of the public money consumed in debating the meaning of the word ‘shop’, a word which has no construction standing upon statutable or other legal authority ... In one place the sense of shop has been limited to describe those houses, or parts of houses, in which goods are exposed to sale publicly, in another
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Edinburgh Review} 56 (October 1832), p. 247.

\textsuperscript{23} The revising barristers responsible for holding these courts were appointed by the senior judge of assize, except in Middlesex, where they were chosen by the Lord Chief Justice of the court of King’s Bench: 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 733–6, clauses 41 and 49.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 729, clause 27.

\textsuperscript{25} Staffordshire Advertiser, 3 November 1832.
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place, the construction has been extended to all buildings or parts of buildings, in which persons engaged in trade or manufacture carry on their business. The £10 franchise was complicated even further by the fact that clause 27 appeared to allow the value of different buildings and land to be added together, to form a cumulative qualification. Thus possession of land with a shed, a tool house, a goose house or other building, which together were worth £10 per annum in terms of their rental value, might entitle a voter to this franchise. In Ripon, for example, a John Brown successfully claimed a £10 borough vote for a cow house and a dilapidated shed together worth £15 a year. Other voters were able to qualify by 'sheds for cattle' alone, which had been 'built with brick and covered with tiles'. Critics might complain that clause 27 'could not mean to establish pig-sty tenements under the Reform Act', but the recorded rulings of the revising barristers suggest that it frequently did.

Similar problems affected the county franchise qualifications. The right of shareholders to qualify as 40-shilling freeholders, for example, produced conflicting decisions by the revising barristers. As one newspaper observed, 'in Middlesex, the barrister decides that a share in the New River Company is not a freehold; step across the line into Hertfordshire, and the New River votes are all good'. A more acute problem arose over clause 23 of the Reform Act, which enfranchised trustees or mortgagees in receipt of the profits and rents of an estate, and clause 26, which disfranchised any trustee not in receipt of rents and profits 'for his own use for six months at least'. The issue was whether a vote conferred under one clause might be cancelled three clauses later. It was a question with profound implications, particularly for the trustees of Dissenting chapels. The experience of the parish of Madeley in South Shropshire, where all seven trustees 'in receipt of rents of freehold in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel' vanished from the electoral register of 1836, was not uncommon. As a revising barristers' manual explained, 'it was considered that the period of enjoyment (six months) and not the mode of enjoyment formed the essential part of the enactment. We now think, however ... that where a trustee has personally no beneficial interest in the trust estate he is not qualified to vote.'

These types of legal difficulties meant that voters were often forced to bring large numbers of documents in support of their claims to the revising barrister's court, where they often had to wait for days until their case was called. However, they received no compensation for the time wasted, even if an 'objection' to their

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26 Ibid.
29 Edward Deacon, *A letter ... on the bill now pending before the House of Commons for the more effectual registration of voters in the election of members of parliament* (London, 1837), pp. 20–21.
32 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 738–9, clauses 23, 26.
33 Shropshire Record and Research Centre, QE/6/2/2–3.
vote proved to be totally unfounded, or ‘frivolous and vexatious’. Not surprisingly, some were unable to turn up. At the first Newcastle-under-Lyme registration of 1832, for instance, ‘54 of the 235 objections sustained were the result of the voter not appearing to uphold his claim’.35 Others found the whole process so daunting that they declined to register at all. In Preston, for example, a local paper complained of the ‘few persons thinking it worthwhile’ to register, adding that ‘to the poor man who reckons his earnings by pence’, the one-shilling registration fee ‘is a very serious and important amount’.36

It was the sheer complexity of this whole registration process, combined with the large numbers who simply failed to claim their entitlement, which provided the opportunity for one of the most important electoral developments of the 1830s: the formation of local party associations for attending to the registers.37 The need for local parties to maximize their electoral support became acute after the unexpected general election of 1835, with its resulting balance of parties in the House of Commons. Spurred on by Sir Robert Peel’s brief government of 1834–5, literally hundreds of Conservative associations were established right across the country, as the Tory journal *Blackwoods’ Edinburgh Magazine* explained, in order ‘to obtain lists of all the voters on the Conservative interest who can be put on the roll in every borough and county’.38 One of the first activities of the Buckingham Conservative Association, for example, was ‘to make a return of the persons entitled to vote and not on the register’.39 With the active assistance of a newly formed central Reform Association in London, Liberal associations were also formed, as the inaugural meeting of the Northamptonshire Reform Association declared, ‘with a view of objecting to the claims of such as are not likely to vote in the Liberal interest’.40

The impact of these organizations was keenly felt at the next registration of October 1835, when the size of the electorate increased by an impressive 10 per cent in the boroughs and 22 per cent in the counties.41 These increases represent the largest expansion of the electorate to occur in a year in which there was no act broadening the franchise. They are all the more remarkable given that an unprecedented number of objections were also brought by local parties against their political opponents. In Warwickshire, for instance, the local Liberals objected to every single farmer, or tenant-at-will, on the county registers. In Middlesex the Tories went one better and objected to every single elector who had earlier voted for the Liberals, about half the entire constituency, while in the West Riding almost 7,000 voters attended the courts to defend their votes against ‘frivolous’ objections.42 The fortunes of local parties, in these circumstances, became heavily

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35 *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 3 November 1832.
36 *Preston Chronicle*, 19 October 1833.
39 Buckinghamshire Record Office, Archdeacon MSS D/AR/81/75/15, fol. 27.
40 Northamptonshire Record Office, Fitzwilliam MSS, Fitz. misc. vol. 503, Oct. 1835.
dependent upon the number of supporters who could be placed upon the registers each year, and the number of opponents who could be excluded. As a prospective Liberal candidate for the constituency of North Devon noted in 1837, 'I wait for the registration before I cross the Rubicon, and I shall not commit myself by becoming a candidate unless I am satisfied that I stand on firm ground'.

O'Gorman concluded his account of the unreformed electoral system by suggesting that 'the new party clubs after 1832 were very like the old' and that 'even registration was little more than a streamlined means of locating voters'. There were, however, significant differences between these new constituency organizations and earlier electioneering clubs. First, in order to attend effectively to each year's registration the new party associations had to be almost constantly active. They had to recruit large numbers of local activists and lay on lavish social functions to keep up enthusiasm and support outside of election times. As the Leeds Mercury pointed out, 'a plodding shopkeeper on a committee who sees that the registration is attended to does more good than a dozen wealthy squires who reserve all their energy for the election itself'. Here lies the birthplace of the modern constituency association, with its permanent offices, salaried agents, regular social events, and host of willing volunteers. With their young Conservative clubs, working-class operative societies and even women's associations, the Tories, in particular, excelled at this new kind of continuous political activism. A number of historians have even suggested that these activities brought about a shift in political personnel. In his recent account of Cornwall politics, for instance, Edwin Jaggard discovered that the new registration committees led to 'various gentry families who had once been their chief political managers' being 'elbowed aside by attorneys, farmers, "plodding shopkeepers" and others eager to assist their party'.

Historians of the West Riding have also observed that registration 'had a profound effect on the balance of power', and 'reduced the importance of the influential gentleman in politics'. Similar developments have been noted in Staffordshire by G.B. Kent, who concluded that the county's new party associations made the great territorial magnates 'a somewhat antiquated form of electioneering influence'.

What really made this type of activity so different, however, was its degree of contact with the individual voter. Annual registration by itself made the whole structure of political campaigning and recruitment far more intense at the local level, but the system of objections described earlier also injected a highly con-

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43 Devon Record Office, Acland (Broad Clyst) MSS 1148M/box 8/17, Buller to Acland, 22 December 1837.
45 Leeds Mercury, 26 November 1836.
46 For a more detailed discussion see Salmon, Electoral Reform, pp. 58–86.
49 G.B. Kent, 'Party politics in the county of Staffordshire during the years 1830 to 1847', MA diss. (Birmingham, 1959), ch. 7 [unpaginated].
frontational element into the whole process, which affected voters in a very personal way. At any revision they might be forced to defend their vote against a partisan objection, at considerable inconvenience and financial expense. On the other hand, they could leave such business to a local association, as a known supporter. Both responses helped to politicize the electorate, by encouraging voters either to confront or to identify with a local party well in advance of any election that might take place. Indeed, it was precisely because of this that the parties were increasingly able to predetermine the outcome of an election during the 1830s. As one commentator noted after a particularly successful Tory registration campaign in North Devon, 'come an election when it may, there is now no doubt whatever of the Conservatives securing a sure majority'.

This brings us to the first major assertion of this paper, which is that the adversarial system of registration was a key component in the widely noted rise of party-based voting after 1832. Confrontation in the registration courts, intensified by the whole courtroom process of claims and objections, provided an annual public platform for party conflict. As The Times noted in 1839, 'a general registration resembles a general election in most points'. Registration not only heightened the importance of party attachments, but also lessened the space for the independent voter. Neutral or 'floating' voters were often objected to by both political parties and effectively 'squeezed', in the hope that the voter would be forced to declare a party preference. Each elector might be canvassed as many as three times by each party in the lead time to an annual registration revision. After an initial survey of partisan support, someone different would conduct a second canvass in order to ensure accuracy; then a cross-canvass would take place, which would involve posing as an agent of the opposition and attempting to solicit promises of support from 'suspect' voters. These methods forced awareness of party into every elector's home and, by combining local issues with a national cause, brought the politics of Westminster much closer to the electorate. Viewed from the perspective of the 1830s, the patterns of voting behaviour of the unreformed and reformed electorates were therefore markedly different. Gary Cox has demonstrated that the increase in party voting that occurred in 1837 was the largest for any general election held between 1831 and 1910. Similar trends have been noted by local historians such as Tom Nossiter. Far more significantly, however, it is clear that voters not only became

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50 The Times, 30 October 1839. For details of this campaign and similar ones in other counties see Salmon, Electoral Reform, pp. 146-82.
51 The Times, 5 November 1839.
52 Parliamentary Papers, 1835 (547) viii, p. 142; ibid., 1846 (451) viii, pp. 192–206.
more partisan after 1832, but as Phillips and others have shown they also became far more likely to sustain their partisanship in successive elections. The operation of the registration system, and its exploitation by local parties, provide a much-needed explanation for this important development.

III

The impact of the Reform Act on constituency politics was not, however, limited to parliamentary elections. Indeed, the tendency of historians to judge its impact only in these terms has served to obscure its true significance. The rest of this article demonstrates how some of its 'small print' also affected key institutions of nineteenth-century government, most notably the parish, the poor law, and the annually elected town councils established by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Under clause 27 of the Reform Act possession of the new £10 household franchise was made entirely dependent upon the prompt payment of all local rates. This formal link between votes and taxes was most symbolically confirmed by the fact that the new one-shilling registration fee, payable every year, had to be collected by the overseers as part of the parish poor rate. Of course, the principle of connecting voting rights with taxation was hardly new. In the unreformed electoral system there were 37 'scot and lot' boroughs in England with an inhabitant ratepayer franchise, 12 boroughs where the freemen also had to pay rates, and 3 more 'burgage' boroughs where the rate-paying tenants of certain properties possessed the vote. What made the new regulations so different, however, was the requirement for voters to register every year. Rather than being able to fall behind with their rates and then settle their accounts at election time, as was so often the case before 1832, borough voters now had to pay their rates by 20 July each year, or else be struck off the registers. This far more stringent relationship between 'a man's right of voting' and 'the day and hour of his paying the King's taxes' greatly increased the scope for disfranchisement and the political importance of local taxation. Manchester's voters had an early taste of the potential electoral influence possessed by their poor law administrators in 1833, when 245 of them were disfranchised after 'a new poor rate was made a few weeks before 5 April, and many persons had not paid it at the time the lists were made out'. In neighbouring Salford, a few years later, a Liberal board of guardians deliberately delayed the levy of a rate in order to prevent the disfranchisement of their own supporters. Similar activities occurred at the Leicester Union,

57 2 William IV c. 45, p. 729, clause 27.
59 2 William IV c. 45, p. 729, clause 27.
60 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3rd ser. 32, p. 1170.
61 Manchester Herald, 2 October 1833.
where it was reported that 'not a single question was mooted which was not made a political one', and the Tories, who had quickly captured control, until 1845 used 'its authority to partisan ends'.

Capturing control of the local rates became an important goal for many of the new constituency associations. Preston’s new Operative Conservative Association, for example, attached almost as much weight to 'gaining a majority on the local board of guardians' as they did to their parliamentary activities. The Bradford Operative Conservative society, established in 1837, also played a major role in securing the election of Tory guardians until 1844. The importance they attached to such work is clearly revealed in their surviving minute book. On the eve of a typical election, for example, 'the president, treasurer and secretary impressed upon the meeting the necessity of every member using his influence in the ensuing election of Poor Law guardians to secure the return of fit and proper persons of Conservative principles'.

The link between rates and registration could provide the overseers, collectors and churchwardens responsible for rate collection with considerable powers of disfranchisement. Their most straightforward tactics involved failing to collect the full amount and creating small arrears. This occurred at Cheltenham in 1841, when an assistant overseer, who was also the brother of the Liberal party agent, collected the rates so as to favour Liberal voters. A more sophisticated ruse was employed at Bristol, where it was reported that the overseers’ practice of failing to collect the registration fee with the poor rates gave them 'immense power in influencing the registration'. Of course voters might become wise to certain tactics and take precautions. But as the Manchester Guardian observed, by 'a hundred tricks of the tax collectors' the elector might 'most innocently' lose his vote. Salford’s assistant overseer, for example, was discovered to have predated the receipt of rates in order to prevent the disqualification of many Tories, while ensuring Liberal voters in the same position were struck off, an abuse which eventually led to his dismissal for 'fraud upon the franchise of the duly qualified ratepayers'. A letter from a disgruntled Lambeth voter in the 1835 general election described a widespread experience. Responding to a request for support from the Liberal candidate, he replied 'my servant and next door neighbour ... have lost the right of voting owing to the neglect of the collector of poor taxes, which as I have been informed, has been the case with many other persons'.

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64 D. Walsh, 'Working class political integration and the Conservative Party: a study in class relations and party political development in the North-West, 1800-1870', PhD diss. (Salford, 1991), p. 413.
66 Cheltenham Examiner, 20 October 1841.
67 Parliamentary Papers, 1835 (547) viii, p. 395, minute 6553.
68 Manchester Guardian, 18 October 1834; The Times, 16 October 1834.
69 Fraser, Urban Politics, pp. 66, 86–8.
70 Lambeth Archives iv/3/66, Slade to Tennyson, 29 December 1834.
With parish officers possessing such potential influence over the borough franchise, it is not surprising that their election was often contested along party lines. Numerous local studies have observed how, after 1832, 'political attitudes became hardened and most local institutions, from the court-leet, corporation, vestry, improvement and police commissions to the election of church wardens and poor law officials, became politicized'. As David Eastwood's recent survey of English provincial government has noted, 'where before local politics had been given a partisan edge by custom, tradition, and the prerogatives of status, the period after 1832 saw the emergence of a local political culture which was more formally, even structurally, partisan'. Of course, the administration of the urban vestry and the poor law created its own particular conflicts and disputes. However, the extent to which parliamentary electioneering began to intrude upon local contests and encourage them to be fought along clear national-party lines is now becoming evident from surviving voting records. Official pollbooks do not exist for parish elections, but the papers of the election solicitors employed by the new constituency associations mentioned earlier can fill in some of the gaps. One such set of papers for Lichfield reveals a remarkable correlation between the way people voted in the 1841 parliamentary election and their party preference at a subsequent parish poll for an assistant overseer. Of the voters who participated in both contests, an impressive 90 per cent polled at the parish level precisely as they had in the earlier parliamentary election, by reproducing their previous party preference.

The implications of this are worth pausing to consider more closely. The pioneering work of the late John Phillips showed that voters increasingly began to opt for the same party in successive parliamentary elections after 1832. Repeat or fixed partisanship became a key feature of reformed voting behaviour, distinguishing it from pre-1832 forms of party-based voting. What the latest studies of individual voting behaviour have started to reveal, however, is the extent to which this new type of persistent partisanship was not just confined to national elections, where most attention has traditionally been focused, but also became transferred to local polls. In stark contrast to other periods, such as the second half of the twentieth century, voters began to behave exactly the same way in parliamentary and local elections after 1832, viewing all their political choices in essentially national-party terms. This new and remarkably rigid form of partisanship was nowhere more apparent than in the new municipal elections introduced in 1835.

71 Walsh, 'Working class political integration', p. 148.
72 Eastwood, Government and Community, p. 165.
73 Analysis based upon the polling returns in Lichfield Joint Record Office, Messrs Hinckley, Birch and Exham solicitors' papers, D15/4/11/6-9.
Municipal pollbooks from this period, which have survived in greater numbers than historians have previously supposed, reveal two key features. First, the degree of party-based voting in the new council elections was extremely high, and sometimes even surpassed that of a parliamentary poll. At Poole, for example, 85 per cent of the electors cast a clear party vote in the first council contest of 1835, compared with just 70 per cent at that year's general election.75 Figure 1 reproduces part of the surviving pollbook for the first council election held at Norwich on 26 December 1835. The number of straight party votes, for all six Tories or all six Liberals, is immediately apparent. William Adams, for instance, can clearly be seen to have cast all of his six votes for the Liberal candidates, who were arranged by the pollbook's publisher in the right-hand columns. Thomas Barnes, by contrast, cast all six of his votes for the Tory candidates, who were listed on the left. Taken together, 81 per cent of the 2,207

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saint Andrew</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayton James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakeley Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnes Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon Richard Mackenzie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betts John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrett Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedford Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boswell John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker Benjamin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden John</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The six Tory candidates (in the left-hand columns) were Moore, Turner, Winter, Fisher, Bedford and Harper. The six Liberal (on the right) were Foster, Geldart, Johnson, Spratt, Waite and Willett.


**Figure 1** Extract from the Norwich municipal pollbook of 1835

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electors who polled at this election cast all six of their votes for either all the Tory or all the Liberal councillors.76

The second and most striking feature to emerge from these pollbooks is the large number of voters who exhibited exactly the same party preference at the municipal level as they did in parliamentary elections. William Adams, for instance, voted for all six Liberal councillors (see Figure 1), but his choice was no mere isolated incident. The surviving parliamentary pollbook shows that he had voted for two Liberal MPs at the earlier general election. Similarly Thomas Barnes, who cast all six of his votes for Tory councillors, had also backed both Tory candidates at the parliamentary election.77 Processing all of Norwich's municipal electors in this way reveals that an impressive 1,287 out of a possible 1,456 voters (90 per cent) chose to repeat their previous parliamentary preference. Put into context, over half (58 per cent) of Norwich's first municipal turnout polled at the local level precisely as they had done nationally. Applying the same methods to Canterbury's first council election reveals much the same picture. Here 82 per cent of the electorate who participated in both elections simply repeated their previous parliamentary voting preference.78 Similar high levels of 'repeat partisanship' were also the dominant form of electoral behaviour in Bristol, Colchester, Liverpool, Poole and Shrewsbury, to name but a few.79

Why was there such a marked degree of nationally oriented party voting in the first town council elections? One reason for this development was the overlap that existed between the parliamentary and municipal electorate. Although there was no minimum property qualification for the new municipal franchise, this was outweighed by a very significant extension of the rate-paying requirements already in force for parliamentary voters. Whereas £10 householders only needed to have occupied their property for a year and to have paid all but the last three and a half months' taxes, all municipal voters had to have been resident rate-payers for three years and to have paid all but the previous six months' taxes.80 The disfranchisement caused by these more stringent rate-paying and residency requirements not only reduced the size of the municipal franchise well below the parliamentary one in many boroughs;81 far more significantly, it meant that any attention to the municipal registration would also have an important 'knock-on' effect on the parliamentary registers, and vice versa.

Because of the way the two franchises were constructed, party gains and losses on one set of electoral registers correlated closely with those of the other. Not only were the potential sources of disfranchisement in practice the same, but the adversarial court-room procedure of claims and objections used for compiling the

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76 British Library 10361 c. 50 (2), Poll for municipal councillors (Norwich, 1836), pp. 1–68.
78 Based on an analysis of Canterbury City Library U802.781, 1835 municipal pollbook; Bodleian Library, 1835 Canterbury parliamentary pollbook.
79 Phillips, 'Unintended consequences', pp. 103–4; Salmon, Electoral Reform, pp. 228–32; Institute of Historical Research, 1835 Liverpool municipal pollbook, and 1837 Liverpool parliamentary pollbook.
80 2 William IV c. 45, p. 729, clause 27; 5 and 6 William IV c. 76, p. 1013, clause 9.
registers was almost identical and occurred at the same time each year. By objecting to the votes of their known political opponents, and by enlisting and defending as many supporters as possible, parties were able to use the annual registration of council voters to influence the parliamentary registers as well. In Canterbury, for example, it was ‘admitted on all hands’ that the first municipal revision would ‘materially affect the prospects of party at the succeeding parliamentary contests’, and under the ‘direction of the secretary to the Conservative Club’, the Tories served nearly 250 objections against their opponents. In Norwich the first municipal registration had to be repeatedly postponed for party objections to be considered. ‘Municipal elections’, as the Conservative party election manager Francis Bonham was advised, ‘ultimately operate on the parliamentary return.’ Unwittingly, municipal reform transferred the very same registration system that was to have such a dramatic impact on English parliamentary elections to the new town councils as well. No one seems to have noticed this at the time, but then it was only after the Municipal Corporations Act had passed in September 1835 that the dramatic struggle over the parliamentary registers of that year took place.

This connection between the municipal and parliamentary electoral system goes a long way towards explaining the involvement of constituency parties, whose main concern was winning parliamentary elections, in the new council town elections. But a final question remains. How were the parties able to persuade so many electors to cast all of their multiple votes for candidates from the same party? With six, or in some cases as many as 12, votes to dispose of in the first municipal elections, how likely was it that voters should select councillors exclusively from one party in what was, after all, a local poll? Here the new system of voting papers introduced for town council elections assumes a central significance. Just as local parties were drawn into assisting their supporters in the annual registration courts, they now helped to guide them through the complexities of the first council elections by issuing pre-printed ballot papers, rather like those already in use in some states in America, which it only remained for the voter to sign (see Figure 2). In the week before Canterbury’s first council contests, for example, the Liberal committee sat daily ‘for the purpose of supplying the burgesses with voting papers, and all information respecting the elections’. ‘Let no one throw away a single vote’, they declared. Posters for Birmingham’s

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82 2 William IV c. 45, pp. 736–9, clauses 49–54; 5 and 6 William IV c. 76, pp. 1015–8, clauses 9, 15–18, 22.
83 Kent Herald, 5, 19 November 1835.
84 Norfolk Chronicle, 5, 12, 19 December 1835.
85 British Library, Peel MSS Add. 40616, fol. 93v, Graham to Bonham, 22 September 1839.
86 Of the 178 councils created in England and Wales, 89 (50 per cent) had warding arrangements that gave each elector 12 votes, 30 (17 per cent) gave each elector 9 votes and 56 (31 per cent) gave each 6 votes. Only three boroughs were different. In Leeds each elector had four votes, in Liverpool three, while in Bristol the number of votes varied according to ward. See 5 and 6 William IV c. 76, pp. 1047–51.
87 For further details see Salmon, Electoral Reform, pp. 226–7.
88 Kent Herald, 24 December 1835.
**Borough of Shrewsbury, Dec. 26, 1835.**

I VOTE for the undermentioned Persons to be Councillors of the STONE WARD WITHOUT of this Borough.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHRISTIAN NAME AND SURNAME OF PERSONS VOTED FOR</th>
<th>PLACE OF ABODE OF PERSONS VOTED FOR</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION OF PERSONS VOTED FOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JOHN HAZLEDINE,</td>
<td>COLEHAM</td>
<td>IRON-FOUNDER.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN GREGORY Brayne,</td>
<td>ABBEY FOREGATE</td>
<td>TANNER.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS DONALDSON,</td>
<td>JUDITH'S BUTTS</td>
<td>GILDER.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEREMIAH MARSHALL,</td>
<td>COLEHAM</td>
<td>WOOL-STAPLER.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN TOMKIES,</td>
<td>ABBEY FOREGATE</td>
<td>SKINNER.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHARD HILDITCH,</td>
<td>BELLE VUE</td>
<td>GENTLEMAN.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shropshire Records and Research Centre, Shrewsbury Borough Records, DA5/120/1/1

Figure 2  Shrewsbury municipal voting paper, signed John Hazledine
elections similarly advised voters to contact their ward committees, 'who will supply them with voting cards'. At Poole the 'Conservative list' of council candidates was white and the 'Radical list' blue, making each slate easily distinguishable. Shrewsbury's parties left nothing to chance and produced differently coloured party-strips for use in each council ward, an example of which is reproduced in Figure 2.

More work remains to be done on nationally oriented party involvement in municipal elections after the 1830s, especially in terms of the expanding nature of the municipal electorate and the continued use of party ballot papers. But the message of this preliminary survey is unequivocal. The reforms to election law implemented in the 1830s not only help to account for the rise of party-based voting behaviour in English parliamentary elections after 1832, but also provide a much-needed explanation for what has been described as 'one of the defining features of early Victorian politics', namely the 'politicising of minor institutions'.

IV

Over half a century ago, an appeal was made for the historian of English politics to have far more 'regard for the working constitution of the county'. On the basis of such an approach, this paper has drawn attention to the electoral impact of the 1832 Reform Act in two key areas. First, the practical operation of the new voter registration system introduced a powerful new form of highly personal contact between elector and party, which provided a permanent mechanism for conducting the heat of national politics down into the localities, irrespective of whether or not an actual poll took place. After 1832 the 'knock-on' effects of registration led to the establishment of permanent party organizations for attending to the annual revision, and to the rise of electoral behaviour which was substantially more partisan and likely to be sustained in subsequent polls. Registration, as the Conservative leader Sir Robert Peel acknowledged, provided 'a perfectly new element of political power' and even began to 'determine the policy of party attacks'.

Second, and most important, the Reform Act's long-overlooked interconnection with other institutions of nineteenth-century government began to transform the nature of politics in the constituencies by encouraging nationally oriented party organization to become a far more prominent feature of local bureaucracy. The new annual elections for town councillors, in particular, became the site of political struggles organized along national party lines.
England’s political divergence from the rest of Europe undoubtedly owed much to the emergence of a distinctive political culture in the eighteenth century. But this paper also suggests that its divergence was reinforced by changes to election law in the early nineteenth century, which helped to impose a far more uniform national party framework across all levels of English society. It was upon the basis of this constitutional realignment of local politics with national parties that England’s modern representative democracy was to be established.