Local Politics and Partisanship: the Electoral Impact of Municipal Reform, 1835

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History of Parliament

The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, with its creation of new town councils and annual municipal elections, occupies a central place in the development of civic administration and urban government in England and Wales. It also had far reaching political and party implications. These have generally been explored either from the perspective of its parliamentary sponsors and opponents at Westminster, or through local case studies charting the dynamics of municipal politics in specific towns. Relatively little comparative work, however, highlighting the structural and technical relationship that existed between the new municipal and parliamentary electoral systems has been done. In particular, the crucial link between the municipal and parliamentary voter registration process and its stimulus to party organization of both council and constituency politics has not received the attention it deserves. This paper explores the nature of this important interconnexion, and re-assesses the impact of municipal reform on electoral organization and party performance at both the local and national political level.

Over the past ten years our understanding of electoral behaviour in the first decade of reformed politics has undergone a major change. Using the information contained in borough pollbooks, a number of historians have studied the voting habits of individual electors over time, scrutinizing their behaviour in successive contests. These computer-based 'longitudinal' analyses of voting have shown that the probability, or 'hazard rate', of a party vote being repeated in a subsequent election increased substantially in this period. The pioneering work of the late John Phillips, in particular, emphasized the 'critical, indeed watershed, role of the Great Reform Act' by demonstrating that after 1832 party-based attachments became far more persistent, and far less changeable. At the same time the likelihood of an elector in a double-member seat 'splitting' his two votes between candidates from different parties decreased substantially in the boroughs.

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1 This is an expanded version of a paper presented to the 'Parliaments, Representation and Society' seminar at the Institute of Historical Research on 11 Feb. 1997. I remain indebted to the late John Phillips for his comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Chris Kyle and Howard Spencer in the preparation of this article.


he selected for study. 'The “Great” Reform Act', he concluded, ‘justified its epithet by altering England’s political environment profoundly.¹³

The introduction of annual town council elections in 135 parliamentary boroughs therefore occurred at a time when persistent party-based voting was fast becoming the norm in parliamentary contests. What psephologists are only just beginning to discover, however, is the extent to which the first council elections of the 1830s also became infused with these new patterns of voting behaviour. Recent work by Phillips and Charles Wetherell, centred around a ‘longitudinal’ analysis of contests held in Shrewsbury, concluded that ‘voters in the council elections behaved much as they did in parliamentary elections’, and that ‘electorates viewed both parliamentary and municipal political choices in essentially national terms’.¹⁴ Phillips’ similar analysis of the Bristol electorate revealed that ‘if someone voted for the Whigs nationally, that person voted for the Whigs locally’, and that ‘the same rule applied for Tory voters’.¹⁵ This is an important discovery. It cannot be explained simply by the fact that many municipal electors also qualified for the parliamentary vote, and were therefore already experienced or conditioned in terms of partisan voting. Possession of a local vote, and a parliamentary vote, does not mean that they have to be used in the same way. In the latter half of the twentieth-century, for example, the electorate frequently behaved quite differently in local and national elections.¹⁶ Electing a body to administer local affairs is not the same as electing a national government, and the issues and criteria involved in local council elections are frequently far removed from the political agenda and importance attached to a general election. Local contests may provide an opportunity to express disaffection with national government policy, especially midway through a term of office, but predicting the outcome of a general election on the basis of local results is notoriously unreliable. The type of voter response elicited in one set of elections is not necessarily repeated in another.

Why then should electors have voted the same way in local and national contests during the 1830s? Why did party triumph over provincialism, and the kind of electoral behaviour and political activity involved in the selection of M.P.s increasingly dominate the election of local town councillors as well? These questions will be addressed specifically in the second part of this paper. First, however, the general validity of Phillips and Wetherell’s claims need to be tested. To what extent do their generalizations about municipal and parliamentary voting, centred around their ‘longitudinal’ analyses of polls in Shrewsbury and Bristol, accurately reflect the experience of other towns as well?

¹⁶ This is manifest both in results and turn-out. See Local Elections Handbook, ed. Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (Plymouth, 1985), et seq.
Municipal pollbooks, unlike their more prestigious parliamentary counterparts, are rare, and were probably never intended for publication. In addition, few sets of council voting papers appear to have survived intact beyond the legal minimum requirement of six months. Those that did probably suffered the same fate as other borough election records which were destroyed in 1907. Selecting towns where complete records of both parliamentary and municipal polls have survived, and where constituency boundaries were the same, limits the number of possible case studies to about half a dozen, including Canterbury and Norwich. These are two exceptionally well documented constituencies where a 'longitudinal' comparison of both types of election has yet to be undertaken, and where Phillips' and Wetherell's conclusions about local and national voting behaviour in this period can be put to the test.

The first council elections were held on 26 December 1835. Canterbury, with 869 newly registered municipal voters, was divided into three wards; Norwich, with 2,401, was allocated eight. In both cities, each ward returned six councillors and each voter therefore had six votes at his disposal, making this one of the most complex set of elections in British history. Figure 1 reproduces part of the voting in Norwich's eighth ward, in the parish of St Michael Coslany, as recorded in the existing pollbook. The first voter listed, Zachariah Abbs, can clearly be seen to have cast all of his six votes for the six Liberal candidates, who were arranged by the pollbook's publisher in the right-hand columns. Benjamin Crotch, by contrast, cast all his votes for the six tory candidates listed on the left. It can be seen that most voters chose to use all their six votes, but some, like Henry Ling, used less and instead 'plumped' for five of the tory candidates. Others, like Thomas Durrant, 'plumped' for just two. The number of straight party votes, for all six Tories or all six Liberals, is immediately apparent and suggests a high level of partisanship at this particular poll. However, it is the correlation between voting behaviour at this contest and the previous parliamentary election which provides the real measure of the strength and solidity of these party-based attachments. Zachariah Abbs may have voted for six Liberal councillors in this council contest, but how did he behave in the general election? Was his partisan preference a persistent phenomena, or simply an isolated incident? The surviving parliamentary poll book shows that he also voted for the two Liberal candidates, Edward Vernon Harbord and Frank Offley Martin, in the general election. By the same token Benjamin Crotch, who voted for six tory councillors, also cast a vote for both the Conservative parliamentary candidates, Lord Stormont and Robert Campbell Scarlett. Both of these electors cast straight party votes which corresponded exactly with their voting behaviour in the previous parliamentary contest.


The following analysis is based upon: Bodl., G. A. Kent 8o 213, Poll of the Freemen and Electors (Canterbury, 1835); Institute of Historical Research, BC.25, Ward Lists of Burgesses of the Borough of Canterbury (Canterbury, 1835); Canterbury City Lib., U802.781, Poll of the Burgesses Voting for Town Councillors (Canterbury, 1836); Bodl., G.A. Norf. 8o 106(2), Register of Electors with the Poll for Members to Serve in Parliament (Norwich, 1835); B.L., 10361 c.50 (2), Poll for Municipal Councillors (Norwich, 1836). Constituencies where similar comparisons might be possible are Colchester, Ipswich, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sandwich.
Fig. 1: Extract of municipal poll taken in the eighth ward, Norwich, 1835.

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The six tory candidates (in the left-hand columns) were Hankes, Steel, Troughton, Fromow, Day, and Gillman. The six Liberal (on the right) were Bateman, Beare, Davey, Enfield, Francis, and Finch.

The voting of Thomas Robinson, however, is more difficult to assess. Although he supported both tories in the 1835 parliamentary election, in this council contest he cast five votes for the tories but gave his sixth to a Liberal (see Figure 1). One Peckover Hill was even less partisan, voting for two tory and four Liberal councillors, while William Clarke chose to share or ‘split’ his six municipal votes equally between the parties. With twelve or more candidates standing in each ward, and the ability of each elector to cast six or less votes, the number of voting possibilities in this municipal contest was vast. In theory there were over 6,000 different ways in which each elector could vote, although far fewer permutations were actually recorded on the day.

In order to determine the proportion of municipal electors who were simply repeating their parliamentary voting behaviour, therefore, party-based voting in these council contests has been defined in the following way. Either a) the voter cast all his six votes for one party, b) the voter cast five votes for one party and one vote for the other, or c) the voter ‘plumped’ for three or more candidates from one party. Thus Peckover Hill (see Figure 1) is not considered to have repeated his parliamentary vote for the Liberals at this municipal contest because, by choosing two tory and four Liberal councillors, he did not show a firm enough Liberal bias. Similarly, Thomas Durrant’s mere two ‘plumps’ for the tories are considered insufficient for him to be viewed as a partisan, whereas Thomas Robinson’s selection of five tory councillors are deemed to have outweighed his single vote for a Liberal candidate. Setting the criteria for partisan voting this strictly allows for a very tough assessment of the relationship between parliamentary and municipal voting.

The accuracy of the results has been maximized by investigating the electoral behaviour of every council voter who polled at the previous parliamentary election, rather than a sample. In Canterbury, parliamentary electors (including all those who cast a non-party vote) accounted for 539 (72 per cent) of the 749 voters in the first council contest of 1835. In Norwich, they constituted 1,444 (65 per cent) out of a total municipal turn-out of 2,207. Although there were subtle variations between the different wards, caused by the unpopularity of some candidates among their own party supporters and the odd additional candidate, these ‘experienced’ voters demonstrated a quite remarkable degree of partisan consistency. In Canterbury, an impressive 400 voters out of a possible 487 (82 per cent) chose to reproduce their previous parliamentary partisan allegiance. Put another way, over half (53 per cent) of the total turn-out of 749 voters at Canterbury’s first municipal election were not just ‘experienced’, but also ‘persistent’ political partisans, who polled at a local level precisely as they had done nationally. Examining electoral support for the parties separately, 156 voters out of a possible 220 (71 per cent) chose to repeat their partisan ‘plump’ for the single tory parliamentary candidate by voting for tory councillors. The level of persistent partisanship was even more impressive on the Liberal side, where the presence of two candidates in the general election had made party-based voting more straightforward. No fewer than 244 voters out of a possible 267 (91 per cent) repeated their partisan choice of two Liberal M.P.s by voting for Liberal councillors as well. Canterbury’s municipal voters, like those in Shrewsbury and Bristol, clearly behaved much as they had in the parliamentary election. Viewed from the perspective of this council contest, which is one of a handful where a direct compari-
son between local and national electoral behaviour can be made, the increasingly fixed forms of voter choice evinced in the general elections of the 1830s were quickly reproduced in provincial political polls as well.

In Norwich, where there was already a legacy of nationally-oriented partisanship in the city's untypical 'open' corporation contests, the proportion of electors effectively repeating their parliamentary preference in the new municipal polls was even higher. In the first council election, 1,287 electors out of a possible 1,456 (88 per cent) chose to reproduce their previous parliamentary allegiance. Again, this solid phalanx of persistent partisans accounted for over half (58 per cent) of the total municipal turnout of 2,207 voters. Unlike Canterbury, however, there was little to choose between the parties in terms of the consistency of the support they received. On the Conservative side, 646 voters out of a possible 729 (89 per cent) followed through earlier votes for both Conservative M.P.s by opting for Conservative councillors as well. For the Liberals, 641 voters out of a possible 697 (92 per cent) transferred their parliamentary allegiance straight into the municipal arena, backing both Liberal candidates in January 1835 and Liberal councillors in December.

These results corroborate the conclusions drawn by Phillips and Wetherell. Canterbury and Norwich's first municipal elections not only produced high levels of partisanship, but also an extremely high incidence of repeat voting among those electors who were already 'experienced' at the parliamentary level. These voters appear to have invested local representation with a national-oriented partisan perspective right from the start, eschewing provincial prejudices in favour of party-based political alignments. Moreover, this occurred in spite of the vast and complex array of voting possibilities open to them, and the far more localized factor of personality. Caricatures and satires of prospective councillors, such as those published in the run up to Norwich's first municipal elections at one shilling a piece, lampooned their subjects as well-known community figures rather than agencies of party. In both constituencies local party organizations had an important role to play here, helping to foster party platforms by preparing and campaigning as if for a parliamentary contest, and assisting their supporters at the poll. However, their active presence in these municipal elections ultimately begs even more questions than it solves. Why were the methods and mechanisms of parliamentary elections also deployed in council contests? Why were the dynamics of nationally-oriented partisanship so quickly and effectively transferred to the local political arena? These developments were not planned, still less anticipated. Even in Norwich, where elections to the old corporation had been unusually popular and partisan, it was noted with surprise how the new council elections 'excited more than mere local interest'. Why this should have been the case, and how municipal reform affected party performance in national elections, are the remaining subjects of this article.

11 See Municipal Characters or Waggery to the Whigs (Norwich, 1836) which has 26 such caricatures, published between 28 Oct. and 26 Dec. 1835.
12 The Times, 28 Dec. 1835.
Many municipal electors, it has been seen, also possessed a parliamentary vote. The reason for this was relatively straightforward, though very few seem to have realized it at the time. In a letter sent to Francis Place, one of the few who did, explained that, 'In the English municipal Bill if I am not mistaken, a three years residence is exacted as a qualification beyond the assessment to poor and borough rates, this is monstrous and I believe causes the number of municipal Electors to be less numerous than the parliamentary ones.' Thus although there was no minimum property qualification for the municipal franchise, in practice this was outweighed by a very significant extension of the ratepaying and residency requirements already in force in the parliamentary franchise. Under the terms of the final act, all municipal burgesses had to have been resident ratepayers for at least three years, and to have paid all but the previous six months' taxes. By contrast only one years' rateable occupancy, with payment of all but the last three and a half months' taxes, was required for the £10 householder franchise. In addition, actual residence of three years within the borough was exacted for municipal voters, though not necessarily at the same address, compared with only six months for parliamentary electors.

The disfranchisement caused by these much stricter ratepaying and residency requirements had two important consequences. First, contrary to all expectations, it reduced the size of the municipal franchise to well below that of the parliamentary in many boroughs. Bryan Keith-Lucas was one of the first to systematically demonstrate that 'the total parliamentary franchise was greater than the municipal by about 15%' in the 39 boroughs he selected for study. Shena Simon's earlier comparison of municipal and parliamentary electorates in Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, also revealed that 'in three out of the five towns the municipal list was less than the parliamentary by about 2,000 voters'. More recently Phillips and Wetherell discovered that 'the 4,361 ten-pound householders in Bristol outnumbered the municipal electorate by themselves'. In Canterbury 1,467 electors were registered for the 1835 parliamentary election compared with only 869 for the first council contest, while at Norwich the 4,240 strong parliamentary electorate dwarfed the municipal roll of 2,401.

A second result of these extra ratepaying and residence requirements was that those who met them were usually fairly wealthy, and also able to qualify as £10 householders. Based upon his sample of 39 constituencies, Keith-Lucas estimated that nearly 73 per cent of the municipal electorate also possessed the parliamentary vote. Phillips' more detailed work on municipal and parliamentary electorates in Bristol, Beverley and Shrewsbury revealed that approximately two-thirds of the municipal electors possessed...

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13 B.L., Add. MS 35150 (Place MSS), f. 262: Col. L. Jones to Francis Place, 4 July 1837.
14 Cf. 2 Will.IV c.45 p. 729, clause 27, and 5 & 6 Will.IV c.76, p. 1015, clause 9.
17 For some of the technical pitfalls associated with using the municipal and parliamentary returns compiled by the home office, rather than original registers, see Philip J. Salmon, 'Electoral Reform at Work. Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–1841', University of Oxford D.Phil., 1997, pp. 263–5.
18 Keith-Lucas, Local Government Franchise, p. 61.
both franchises, a proportion broadly in line with the 63 per cent calculated by David Walsh for Preston, and the 72 per cent and 65 per cent witnessed earlier for Canterbury and Norwich.\textsuperscript{19}

This structural similarity between the two electorates was further enhanced by the fact that relatively few ratepayers of less than £10 annual value qualified only for a municipal vote. Small properties, particularly those under £6 annual value, were not necessarily assessed to the rates. In Manchester, which was incorporated in 1838, only about a quarter of the householders actually paid the poor rate.\textsuperscript{20} In Norwich, where the lowest rated house was about £7 yearly rental value, almost 1,500 poorer householders were completely excluded from the municipal franchise due to the fact that they paid no rates at all.\textsuperscript{21} Others were disfranchized because in order to save the parish the cost of collecting many small sums they ‘compounded’ their rates with their landlords. In practice this meant that it was the landlord’s name, rather than the householder’s, which appeared in the list of ratepayers used to compile the electoral registers.\textsuperscript{22}

The municipal electorate was therefore a microcosm of the parliamentary. Contrary to recent studies which have tended to assume both a quantitative and qualitative gulf between the local government franchise and the parliamentary, a very substantial overlap existed between the two electorates.\textsuperscript{23} In the context of the 1830s, this overlap was to prove fundamental. It meant that any attention to the municipal registration would have a direct bearing upon the parliamentary registers, and vice versa. Voter registration, an important innovation of the Reform Act, occurred every year, in every constituency, in order to establish who could vote and who could not, well in advance of any election that might take place. During the 1830s, local party agents increasingly used the annual registration revision to try and disfranchise as many of their opponents as possible, and to help defend their own supporters against ‘objections’ made by the other party. If an elector was ‘objected’ to, he had to arrange for proof of his qualification to be made before a revising barrister, in what was effectively a court of law. The elector, however, received no compensation for the loss of time or expense involved in defending his qualification, even if the ‘objection’ turned out to be completely unfounded, or ‘frivolous’. The process was further complicated by the fact that any voter, or even person claiming the franchise, had the right to challenge any other voter’s or claimant’s entitlement, but without having to specify the grounds for their objection until the day of the actual registration revision. This made preparing a defence in advance almost impossible.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{21} Parliamnetary Papers (1835) VIII, 136, minutes 2447–50.

\textsuperscript{22} See Salmon, ‘Electoral Reform at Work’, p. 218.


Objections were therefore extremely easy to make, and much more difficult to defend. Insufficient descriptions of the voter or his property, a discrepancy in the ratebook, uncertainty over the rateable value of a house, an initial missing from a name; the list of obscure technical objections which might be brought against an opponent was almost endless. In Newport, Monmouth, for example, nine voters were ‘objected to for having laid a bet or wager upon the event of an election’. In Carlisle, a Thomas Hindmore was struck off the register after ‘an agent managed to prove that he was an idiot in possession of property’. The popularity and hereditary use of certain names, especially in Wales, and the fact that spelling had yet to settle into a modern standardized form, provided ample ground for objections based upon ambiguities or confused identity. In Monmouth there were five John Morgans and five John Williams on the municipal electoral register, all of whom had to be adequately distinguished from one another.

Because of the very substantial overlap between the municipal and parliamentary franchise, a loss of the municipal vote on the basis of such a technicality would invariably result in a parliamentary disqualification as well. Those electors who lost the municipal suffrage for falling into arrears with their rate payments, for example, also lost the parliamentary. This might seem odd, given that the length of rateable occupancy demanded for the municipal vote was, at face value, the most stringent, but in the municipal franchise the requirements over prompt payment were also a little more relaxed. Not only were municipal voters allowed until 31 August to pay their rates, compared with an earlier settlement date of 20 July for parliamentary electors, but they were also required to pay only those rates which had accrued by 28 February, compared with 6 April in the parliamentary franchise. Therefore a loss of the municipal suffrage for non rate-payment automatically implied the loss of the parliamentary vote as well.

This curiously neglected link between the two registration systems encouraged local political parties, whose main concern was winning parliamentary elections, to participate directly in the municipal political arena. By objecting to the votes of their known political opponents, and by enlisting and defending as many supporters as possible, local political organisations were able to use the annual revision of municipal burgesses to gain a majority on both the municipal and parliamentary electoral registers. In Canterbury, for example, it was ‘admitted on all hands’ that the first municipal revision of 1835 would ‘materially affect the prospects of party at the succeeding parliamentary contests’. According to the Liberal Kent Herald, ‘In the early stage of the registration under the Municipal Corporations Act, the Tories, maddened by the anticipation of defeat, employed every means to reduce the Liberal interest to a minority [and] served objections upon nearly two hundred and fifty of the Liberals, nearly a third of the whole constituency!’ These ‘frivolous and vexatious objections’, complained the paper’s editor, were carried out ‘under the direction of the Secretary to the Conservative Club’. Similar activities occurred in

25 National Library of Wales, Leonard Twiston Davis MSS, 4589.
27 Nat. Lib. Wales, Leonard Twiston Davis MSS, 4593.
28 Nat. Lib. Wales, Leonard Twiston Davis MSS, 4592.
29 Kent Herald, 19 Nov. 1835.
30 Ibid., 3 Dec. 1835.
Norwich where a ‘most tedious and irritating’ municipal revision had to be postponed twice for ‘objections to be considered fully’. It was momentarily enlivened by the revising barrister issuing an official ‘reprimand’ to one of the reform candidates for frantically attempting to tear up objections which had been accidentally lodged against his own supporters.31 Such mistakes became far less common over time. Indeed, as the awareness and sophistication of tactics in the registration courts increased, it was not uncommon for parties to become quite evenly matched. At the ninth Bolton municipal revision, for example, a Liberal agent attempted to ‘disfranchise the burgesses of Little Bolton’ for non-payment of a defunct borough rate, having previously ‘made out a list of Liberals who were to be called upon to pay the rate, and thus pocket the franchise’. The Conservatives’ response was to lodge nearly two thousand objections against ‘both friends and radicals, in order to consume the time allowed by law to revise the burgess lists, and so fall back upon the last year’s burgess roll’. As a result, after less than a week, the assessors were forced to concede that it would be ‘impossible to go through the list, and that therefore it would be a waste of time to go on with the revision’. The previous year’s electoral roll was accordingly adopted by the mayor, who hoped that the next registration would not prove ‘a similar ridiculous farce to the one they had just got rid of’.32

Party involvement in municipal affairs was further facilitated by the fact that the annual municipal registration process was not only very similar to the parliamentary, it also occurred at almost exactly the same time. Parliamentary lists were revised by the barristers at any time between 15 September and 25 October of every year. After the anomaly of the first municipal registrations, which were conducted by specially appointed revising barristers, subsequent municipal lists had to be revised by the mayor and two annually elected assessors during the first fortnight of October. Both lists had to be completed by the end of October, and both electoral registers were then valid for a period of one year beginning on 1 November.33 This structural and procedural link between municipal and parliamentary registration not only helps to account for the emergence of clear party slates in many of the new council elections. Far more fundamentally, it also explains why so many electors chose to behave in a similar way in local and national elections during the 1830s.

Recent research on the reformed electoral system has suggested that the contested nature of registration politics provided the key to the rapid electoral polarization of the reformed decade. Partisanship grew from the registration process itself, by heightening the importance of party attachments at a local level and lessening the space for the ‘independent’ voter in the political process.34 Neutral or ‘floating voters’ often found themselves objected to by both political parties and effectively ‘squeezed’, in the hope that the voter would be forced to declare a party preference.35 In the run up to an annual registration revision each elector might be canvassed as many as three times by each

31 Norfolk Chronicle, 5, 12, 19 Dec. 1835.
32 Bolton Municipal Registration. The Disfranchising Whigs. The Revision of the Burgess Lists Taken from the Bolton Chronicle (Bolton, 1843), pp. 1, 22–44.
33 2 Will.IV c.45, pp. 736–9, clauses 49 and 54; 5 & 6 Will.IV c.76, pp. 10 16–18, clauses 18 and 22.
34 Salmon, ‘Electoral Reform at Work’, passim.
35 Parliamentary Papers (1835) VIII, 12; ibid. (1846) VIII, 192–206.
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party. After an initial survey of partisan support, a second canvass would be conducted by someone different 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 brought the agency 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.

Confrontation in the courts, accommodated and accelerated by the adversarial structure of registration, not only gave public expression to local party conflicts on a protracted annual basis. It also affected each voter in a highly personal and unprecedented way. At any revision he might be forced to defend his vote against a partisan objection, at considerable expense and inconvenience to himself. Alternatively he could leave such business to a local party association, as their acknowledged adherent. Both responses helped polarize the electorate, by forcing the voter either to confront a local party, or to identify with a local party, well in advance of any election that might take place. It is in this context that national-oriented electoral behaviour and party participation in the municipal political arena need to be reassessed.

At face value the results of the first municipal elections justified the worst fears of the tories and the confident boasting of the reformers. The vast majority of the new councils were overwhelmingly whig or radical. Tory victories only occurred in a small number of towns, like Nottingham, where the Liberals had been in control of the old corporation. These first election results, however, were coloured by a spirit of reaction and confusion, and many reformers were lulled into a false sense of security. The tories, by contrast, were galvanized into furious activity and in 1836 The Times gave details of 25 boroughs where they had made substantial municipal gains. In Shrewsbury, as Phillips demonstrated, ‘the Conservatives fought back quickly’, eventually winning complete control of the council in 1839. Kent’s Conservatives quickly regained control of Maidstone, Rochester and Dover. An initial Liberal triumph in Warwick also proved ephemeral, with the tories regaining ‘political control in one of the two wards as early as 1837’.


38 Beverley, Bridport, Colchester, Coventry, Dover, Durham, Grantham, Guildford, Ipswich, Leeds, Liverpool, Macclesfield, Monmouth, Newark, Norwich, Nottingham, Poole, Preston, Reading, St. Alban’s, Stamford, Tewkesbury, Windsor, Worcester and York. See The Times, 3–5 Nov. 1836.


In some boroughs, like Monmouth, the extra work of fighting the municipal registrations was simply taken up by organizations and agents already engaged in the annual parliamentary registration contests. But in others separate organizations were soon established, specifically focused on fighting the municipal revisions. In Colchester, Ipswich, Lancaster, Leicester, and Leeds, for example, the tories established special branch associations in each of the new municipal wards. In Preston, an Operative Conservative Association dedicated to 'paying a careful and vigilant attention to the parliamentary and municipal registrations' was started. Its attention to the municipal registers helped ensure a succession of gains in Preston's subsequent council elections and by 1841 the Conservatives had control of 43 seats, compared to the Liberal's meagre five. The importance of municipal registration in stimulating this type of local party activity was especially evident in Bristol where, after a second year of disappointing council elections in 1836, the tories established a 'new society' exclusively dedicated to the management of municipal contests. In line with its purpose a leading Tory councillor and alderman, Thomas Daniel, was appointed as president.

Not every constituency association plunged headlong into municipal politics. Some initially rejected involvement with council elections. Two months after its formation in 1837, for example, the Banbury Conservative Association resolved not to 'interfere with the elections of Town Councillors for the ensuing year'. But with so many of the borough's municipal voters (86 per cent) also registered as parliamentary electors, party performance in the annual municipal registration revisions could not be simply ignored. By 1839, electoral reality had forced this association, like so many others, to attend to the annual revision of burgesses as well.

Local activists and M.P.s were quick to perceive this important link between council contests and parliamentary polls. Because of the overlap between the two electoral systems, municipal elections became an increasingly important annual indicator of partisan support in a parliamentary contest, allowing local constituency associations to monitor opinion and make bold, even over optimistic, party predictions well in advance of a declaration. 'Impenetrably dull must be the cranium who for one moment can cherish a hope ever again to return Radical members for the borough of Poole', boasted one contributor to The Times after the tories had won all three council seats in the south ward, 'the stronghold of the Radicals', in 1836. On the strength of their municipal gains in 1839 the Conservatives of Bury St Edmunds resolved to run a second Tory candidate at the next parliamentary election, despite the expensive contest that this would provoke. Lichfield's municipal contests were also considered to be 'of great

42 Nat. Lib. Wales, Leonard Twiston Davis MSS, 4655, 1835 municipal registration notes.
44 Preston Pilot, 16 July 1836.
45 Walsh, 'Working Class Political Integration', p. 423.
47 Oxfordshire County Archives Service, Acc. 1259, BCA I/1, Banbury Conservative Association minute book, entries for 30 Oct. 1837 and 29 Oct. 1839; Parliamentary Papers (1837–8), XLIV, 827.
48 The Times, 9 Nov. 1836.
consequence as to the Parliamentary election'; the results of 1840 apparently having 'settled the parliamentary contest'.

In some boroughs the local M.P. took an acute interest, even an active involvement, in the municipal registrations and council contests. In Bridgnorth, for example, the Conservative M.P. Thomas Whitmore allocated money specifically for fighting the borough's municipal revisions, subscribing £52 12s. 4d. in 1837 and £81 5s. 6d. in 1838. At Shrewsbury the Liberal representative Robert Slaney helped to organize the council campaigns and, on the eve of an election, would personally address the assembled municipal electors. Until his retirement in 1837, Sir Richard Vyvyan and his principal agent Henry Bush played a major role in directing the municipal campaigns of Bristol's tories. New councils openly courted and cultivated connexions with their M.P.s, both sitting and prospective. George Dashwood, for example, regularly attended dinners of High Wycombe's Liberal council, held in the Red Lion, before being returned unopposed for the borough in 1837. Even where an M.P. abstained from personal involvement in municipal affairs, it was not uncommon for him to publicly acknowledge the services of the leading party activists on the council. After important municipal gains at Hertford in 1838, for example, the tory M.P., Lord Mahon, held a dinner for the town clerk in 'honour of his services to the Conservative cause'. Two years later, after the defeat of the only radical candidate in the council elections, 'the return of a second Conservative' in the event of a parliamentary contest was said to be 'certain'.

The importance of these local council contests and their link with national party performance was ultimately reflected in the election correspondence received by the central party managers and their deputies. In 1838, for instance, one campaigner confidently predicted to Francis Bonham that 'the effect of our majority in the Town Council will tell at last; and I find our friends clearly of opinion, that it was wise to begin with the Municipal Majority, which in turn the Parliamentary cannot fail to follow'. In a similar vein, Lord Mahon informed Bonham that in Dover 'the new Mayor to be chosen this autumn is Mr. Thompson, a warm Conservative, and that the other vacancies in the Municipal body will in like manner be supplied from the Conservative party so that there may be reason to expect a corresponding improvement in the Parliamentary franchise'. The link between municipal and parliamentary registration also encouraged the politicization of another set of municipal elections, which are often overlooked. On 1 March every year, the burgesses of every borough elected two auditors, to oversee finance, and, more importantly, two assessors, to act with the
mayor as revising barristers and returning officers. Control of these positions could yield considerable partisan advantage. With the support of the assessors, for instance, it was possible for the mayor to manipulate the whole municipal registration process for party purposes. Early abuses, such as the case of York's Liberal mayor who attempted to manipulate the 1836 revision, led to the enactment of a special but ineffective provision in 1837, allowing king's bench to alter municipal registers through a writ of mandamus and, where necessary, supervise municipal registration directly. Although the act prevented the legitimacy of the presiding officers being used to challenge a return, in practice it did little to curtail corruption. Liberal gains in the Ipswich council elections of 1837, for example, were attributed by the Ipswich Journal to the partisan bias of the mayor and the two assessors in conducting the municipal registration. In Bristol the tory mayor, J. K. Haberfield, created delays at the 1838 revision and prevented the burgess roll from being finished in time for the election. Bristol's 1838 municipal contest was therefore fought on the basis of the 1837 registers, which proved 'triumphantly advantageous to the Conservatives'. A more blatant example of mayoral manipulation of the registers was committed by George Hudson, the railway tycoon, in his capacity as the new tory mayor of York. In 1839 Hudson 'set both law and reason at defiance' when he quashed 100 Liberal objections against tory burgesses on the grounds that the city of York did not have a 'burgess' list because its people were 'citizens'. This helped the tories gain an even larger majority on York's 1839 council. Because of the link between the two registration systems, any municipal advantage was certainly worth pursuing. As Sir James Graham reminded Bonham during one particularly bitter contest, 'the Municipal Election is already ours and this ascendancy will ultimately operate on the Parliamentary Return'.

Municipal gains did not, however, translate into immediate control of the new councils. The methods adopted for determining their composition meant that it was some time before electoral successes fed through into the council chamber. After the anomaly of 1835, when the first councils had to be chosen in their entirety, only a third of the council seats came up for election in each year, meaning that one-third of those elected in 1835 remained in office until 1838. (The choice of councillors who had to make way in 1836 and 1837 was based upon the number of votes they had received in 1835, those with the highest serving the longest. Thereafter every councillor served a three year term.) In addition, one quarter of the council served as aldermen nominated by the councillors in 1835; one-half of them appointed for three years, the other half for six. Although the most popular councillors to be elected in 1835 stepped down from office in 1838, one-half of those selected as aldermen in 1835 would not have retired until 1841. The tendency of councillors to appoint their defeated friends as aldermen

60 Atton, 'Municipal and Parliamentary Politics', p. 53.
63 Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', pp. 332–5.
64 B.L., Add. MS 40616 (Peel MSS), f. 93: Graham to Bonham, 22 Sept. 1839.
65 See 5 & 6 Will.IV c.76, pp. 1018–9, clauses 25 and 31.
helped to prolong these earlier partisan orientations even further, turning the aldermanic bench into a sort of 'haven for defeated councillors'.\textsuperscript{67} Put simply, those who were elected into office in 1835 would still have composed exactly half the council on the eve of the 1838 elections. 1839 was therefore the first year in which the composition of town councils was not directly, or indirectly, influenced by the anomaly of the first municipal contests. Significantly, the election results of that year gave the tories a further 78 council seats, allowing them to take control of 24 more corporations.\textsuperscript{68} One year later, Bonham informed the Conservative leader Sir Robert Peel that he was 'just winding up a rather extensive correspondence as to the Registrations and the Ensuing Municipal Elections, of which some three or four will be most important in their results, and I may add that this year is likely to prove more strongly than any previous one the truth of my conviction that, in England at least, the Municipal Reform Bill has done hardly any, if any mischief'.\textsuperscript{69}

This paper has focused on the impact of municipal reform as it affected the composition, registration and electoral dynamics of two nominally distinct, but overlapping, urban electorates. Two final aspects of municipal reform which had a direct effect upon party performance in national contests must also be briefly considered. The first relates to corporate control over local patronage and spending. In the 1835 general election, the loss of 57 borough seats to the tories was attributed by Liberal party managers almost exclusively to the continuing influence of the unreformed corporations, most of which were considered to be strongholds of anglicanism and toryism.\textsuperscript{70} Their distribution of charitable bequests and dispensation of local appointments had provided ample opportunity to gain what the Liberals saw as an unfair electoral advantage. Such perceptions were reinforced by the fears of many tories, who were anxious over the likely consequences of municipal reform. One tory M.P., for example, predicted to the House that it would lead to the loss of 58 Conservative seats.\textsuperscript{71} Lord Falmouth privately warned Peel that 'without their influence, working naturally though silently, hardly a single Conservative could have been returned' in Cornwall.\textsuperscript{72} Both sides, for different reasons, therefore believed that municipal reform would destroy what in many places had amounted to a tory monopoly over local patronage.

The hope of Liberal activists like Joseph Parkes, that the act would 'break to pieces the tory Cliques of the Old Corporators, and in the article of patronage alone make a great dent in the influence over the Parliamentary Elections', however, was both naïve

\textsuperscript{67} Atton, 'Municipal and Parliamentary Politics', p. 56.
\textsuperscript{69} B.L., Add. MS 40428 (Peel MSS), f. 342: Bonham to Peel, 27 Oct. 1840.
\textsuperscript{70} See Finlayson, 'The Politics of Municipal Reform', p. 674, n. 5.
\textsuperscript{71} Hansard, Parl. Debs, 3rd ser., XXIV, col. 767.
\textsuperscript{72} B.L., Add. MS 40420 (Peel MSS), f. 207: Lord Falmouth to Peel, 9 June 1835.
and over optimistic.\textsuperscript{73} In theory, one of the obstacles which had prevented the Liberals from building an effective patronage system in the boroughs had been removed by abolition of the unreformed corporations. As Parkes explained to Lord Brougham, municipal reform's chief advocate in the Lords:

It is not known to the Government but it is a fact that the Liberals are naturally looking to the municipal patronage, county attorneys to town clerkships, Liberal bankers to treasurerships, etc. Now our supporters have a right to indulge these influences, it is human nature. All this must be well considered in any ultimate determination.\textsuperscript{74}

However, as The Times observed, very few of the new reformed councils had sufficient means at their disposal to influence parliamentary elections directly.\textsuperscript{75} As the legal successors of the unreformed corporations, they not only took over their property and income but often inherited considerable debts. Many corporations during the 1820s had spent vast sums in defending their actions and constitutional status against attacks from reforming lawyers in the courts. Stafford corporation, for example, had incurred legal 'debts and liabilities' of £8,500 and by 1833 the interest on their mortgage alone accounted for almost half of their total annual expenditure. Not surprisingly, one of the first actions of the new Stafford council was to sell off property.\textsuperscript{76} Moreover, on the amendment of the Lords those clauses giving the most potential electoral influence to the new councils were either successfully struck out, or at least delayed. Their power to grant licenses, for example, was rejected, while a moratorium was effectively placed on the new councils' control over charitable trusts.\textsuperscript{77} All bye-laws, as one astute pamphleteer complained, had to be submitted to the government for approval or veto within 40 days.\textsuperscript{78} Beyond their control over local policing, set out in the original act, the new councils therefore had relatively little local autonomy. It was only through subsequent legislation that they assumed the administrative and civic roles traditionally associated with urban governance.

Second, and far more importantly, the original municipal corporations bill introduced by the whigs in the summer of 1835 had proposed a total abolition of the parliamentary freeman franchise after the death of the present freemen.\textsuperscript{79} Although subsequently dropped it was this proposal, combined with the attack on tory municipal oligarchies, which lent the original bill its overwhelmingly partisan character. Parkes, for example, had predicted to Lord Durham that: 'The corporation bill will be poison to Toryism. It is really good and efficacious . . . We burke the freemen, and by a clause

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{73} Lambton MSS (Viscount Lambton, Lambton Estate Office, Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham): Parkes to Durham, 23 Oct. 1835. I am indebted to William Thomas of Christ Church, Oxford, for providing his transcripts of these and other letters of Parkes.
\item \textsuperscript{74} University College London, Brougham MSS: Parkes to Brougham, 18 Aug. 1835.
\item \textsuperscript{75} The Times, 29 Dec. 1835.
\item \textsuperscript{76} William White, Directory Of Staffordshire (Sheffield, 1834), p. 140; V.C.H. Staffordshire, VI, 226.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Finlayson, 'The Politics of Municipal Reform', p. 680. Transfer of municipal charitable trusts was delayed until 1 Aug. 1836 to allow time for the charity commission, with Brougham at its head, to investigate.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Weasal Wideawake, King versus People . . . Certain Provisions of the Municipal Corporations Bill (1835), pp. 13–14.
\end{itemize}
which will be a subject of great conflict close the doors for ever against all inchoate rights and future perpetuation of the freedom for the Parliamentary franchise. Parkes' assumption that freemen tended to vote tory, however, requires careful qualification. As a partisan measure, the attempt to abolish the parliamentary freeman franchise was based more on a long-standing political prejudice than recent electoral reality. In Canterbury, for example, where freemen voters formed over half of the city’s parliamentary electorate, they were not overwhelmingly tory partisans in the 1835 election. But by 1837, after the passage of municipal reform, they were. Indeed, as Figure 2 illustrates, the two Liberal candidates secured a greater proportion of the freemen's votes than their tory rival in the 1835 election. Two years later, however, the Liberal vote among the freemen dropped and tory support increased from 42 to 52 per cent. The behaviour of the £10 householders, by contrast, remained almost identical, with approximately a third of the £10 householders voting tory, and just over half voting Liberal at both elections. The same feature emerges from many other boroughs. Before the passage of municipal reform Newcastle's freemen, like Canterbury's, demonstrated no marked propensity to vote tory. In the 1835 election, for example, 42 per cent of the freemen voted Liberal, while 43 per cent cast a non-partisan 'split' or 'plump'. Only 15 per cent of the freemen demonstrated a clear tory preference by 'plumping' for the single tory candidate, John Hodgson. The following by-election of 1836, while admittedly not strictly comparable, nevertheless indicated a marked increase in their tory support, with 67 per cent of the freemen voting for Hodgson, compared with only 37 per cent of the £10 householders. Significantly, this intense tory bias did not then lapse but was sustained into the far more comparable general election of 1837, where 65 per cent of the 2,833 votes cast by the freemen were for the two tory candidates. Work by other local political historians confirms the same basic trend. Studies of St Albans and York, for example, have shown that Conservative support among the freemen increased substantially after municipal reform. In her analysis of Durham's reformed elections, Paula Radice identified a 'new tension between freemen and £10 voters following the debates over municipal reform', and found that freemen were twice as likely to plump Conservative than £10 householders in the 1837 contest. Similarly at Bristol, on the eve of the first municipal elections, the principal tory agent estimated that there would be a 'majority of freemen in our favour [of] about One thousand'. The whigs' so called 'abuse' of the freemen was also cleverly exploited by Conservative central managers in their 1837 election campaign. The Carlton Club distributed 'for general use' an article by William Mackworth Praed on 'the doings of the Whigs with the freemen', which had been originally addressed to his Yarmouth constituents. Municipal reform, at least in the medium-term, seems to have turned

80 Lambton MSS: Parkes to Durham, 1 June 1835.
81 Based upon Northumberland R.O., Ridley (Blagdon) MSS, ZR1 25/70, Poll for Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1835 (Newcastle, 1835); Northumberland R.O., Blackett-Ord MSS, 324 A/70, Poll for Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1837; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', p. 250.
82 See Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', pp. 251, 326.
grateful freemen voters into firm and persistent tory supporters. As the Liberal activist Joseph Parkes subsequently admitted to Lord Brougham:

We committed a great mistake in the Bill. It was absurdly foolish, impolitic and hopeless to attack the Freemen Parliamentarily. I always remonstrated against it nor was it exactly fair to attempt it thro’ the Municipal Bill. I pressed its abandonment even after the first Commons majority. We were clearly fighting a Windmill, and causing unpopularity among a large class of the People. These were my private opinions. Campbell aggravated the harm by blagguarding the Freemen as a class; that was not necessary.86

Contrary to popular perception, therefore, municipal reform did not produce significant electoral dividends for the Liberals. In fact, in terms of parliamentary election results it proved a bitter disappointment. In the 135 parliamentary boroughs actually affected by municipal reform, which together returned 235 M.P.s, the tories won 114 parliamentary seats, and the Liberals 121, in the general election of 1835. These tory

Fig. 2: A comparison of votes cast by freemen and £10 householders in the Canterbury parliamentary elections of 1835 and 1837.

Sources: Bodl., G. A. Kent 80 213, Poll of the Freemen and Electors (Canterbury, 1835); Canterbury City Lib., U802.781, Poll of the Freemen and Electors (Canterbury, 1837); Parliamentary Papers (1837–8), XLIV, 831. This analysis assumes that non-partisans either ‘split’ their two votes between tory and Liberal candidates, or, where a party had two candidates in the field, ‘plumped’ for just one of them.

successes, it was believed, were largely attributable to the corrupt influence of the unreformed corporations. Yet in the 1837 election, after the passage of the Municipal Corporations Act, the tories did even better in these boroughs, winning a further five seats from the Liberals. By 1841, the tories were in a position to take well over half these seats. In other words, in those boroughs where the Liberals believed that elected councils would be most efficacious, they won 121 seats before reform, and 107 seats six years after.87 Viewed from the perspective of activists like Joseph Parkes, the abolition of the ancient ‘closed’ corporations clearly failed in many of its primary partisan objectives. It did not create an expanded householder franchise, it antagonized the freemen voters but was unable to curtail their electoral rights, and it was never able to provide a heterogeneous Liberal party with an effective system of local partisan patronage. As Keith Atton concluded in his analysis of parliamentary and municipal politics in Ipswich, ‘the hopes of those who had organized the reform were not fulfilled’.88

At the municipal level the consequences of reform were wholly unanticipated. Some degree of local party activity in council elections was, of course, to be expected, especially given the legacy of party involvement in many of the unreformed corporations and the partisan passions and expectations aroused by reform. The frequency and intensity of national contests also provides some explanation for the emergence of clear party platforms in local government elections during the 1830s. But it does not explain why, contrary to the experience of later periods, the type of voting behaviour and response elicited in national contests was so clearly reproduced at a local level in the selection of town councillors. Why, as we saw earlier, did party triumph over provincialism, and the kind of electoral behaviour involved in the selection of M.P.s increasingly dominate the election of local town councillors as well?

Here the contested nature of registration politics in the first decade of reform assumes a central significance. It was the crucial link between the municipal and parliamentary registration process which attracted local party organizations, whose main focus was parliamentary, to participate in the municipal arena. Because the outcome of municipal registrations had a direct bearing upon the composition of the parliamentary electorate, the kind of political organization and electoral behaviour associated with the election of M.P.s increasingly became the norm in council contests as well. This curiously neglected link between the two registration systems helped ensure the wholesale politicization of municipal contests, along clear national party lines. Municipal reform’s main impact, in these circumstances, was to help bring the politics of Westminster much closer to the electorate, and help infuse local affairs with an increasingly national partisan perspective.

If we are to move our understanding of reformed electoral politics beyond the regional diversity of local case studies, it is clear that attention must be focused on what was common, as well as what was unique, to each constituency in this period. With so few municipal pollbooks available, there exists a need to move beyond the politics of

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87 The 135 parliamentary boroughs affected by municipal reform are listed in 5 & 6 Will. IV c.76, pp. 1047–51, schedules A and B. Between them they returned 235 M.P.s. Using Dod’s Electoral Facts 1832–1853, ed. H. J. Hanham (Brighton, 1972) and George Crosby, Crosby’s Parliamentary Record (York, 1841) to determine partisan affiliation, the division of seats was as follows: 1835 election: tories 114, Liberals 121; 1837 election – tories 119, Liberals 116; 1841 election – tories 128, Liberals 107.

the poll and to re-construct the practical and constitutional context in which all local parties operated, and the act of voting actually took place. It is only by considering the technical electoral processes that affected every voter, in every constituency, that some of the gaps can be filled, and a model of reformed electoral transactions apposite to the system as a whole can begin to be constucted.  

89 These themes are explained more fully in my forthcoming Electoral Reform at Work (Woodbridge).