The 1818 general election: More change than meets the eye

Philip Salmon

This year marked the two hundredth anniversary of the 1818 general election, the first of a series of elections held after the Napoleonic wars which began to reconfigure the structure of British politics in the years prior to the 1832 Reform Act. Although the final outcome of this election apparently changed little—the Tory government led by the long-serving Prime Minister Lord Liverpool remained firmly in power—beneath the surface a number of important developments took place, which helped to transform the operation of British politics both in Parliament and in the constituencies.

Men who had never had the opportunity to vote now suddenly found themselves potentially able to poll

Despite being the first election to be held after the French and Napoleonic wars, at a time of huge economic distress and uncertainty, 1818 has attracted surprisingly little attention from political historians. In many ways, though, it broke new ground, ushering in a new age of party conflict and new forms of political activism.

Far from being the easy victory for the Tories suggested by the final result, the election was intensely fought. Indeed, more seats were contested in 1818 than at any time since 1734, with almost a third (100) of all constituencies going to the polls. Given that uncontroverted or ‘walk over’ elections were by this time a well-established norm — 80 per cent of constituencies on average failed to field rival candidates between 1741 and 1812 — this dramatic upsurge in contests marked a major change, both for politicians and would-be voters.

Men who had never had the opportunity to vote now suddenly found themselves potentially able to poll, often on the basis of franchise requirements which had become obsolete through lack of use. This was especially true in the borough constituencies, where disputes over local voting qualifications that had not been used in decades caused endless delays and disruption at the polls. One result of this was that many of the 1818 contests dragged on not just for days, but for weeks, though only the county polls in Berkshire and Kent managed to reach the maximum permitted length of fifteen days. With elections also being staggered over time rather than all commencing on the same day — a process which enabled defeated candidates to stand elsewhere if their finances could bear it — the entire 1818 general election ended up lasting from 17 June until 18 July.

More importantly, these local franchise disputes created by the upsurge in contests helped to fuel a new interest in ancient charters and voting privileges, especially in places where a local corporation or patron had annexed control of the parliamentary representation. Campaigns to restore ‘ancient rights’ and ‘open your borough’ became increasingly common in the aftermath of this election, aiding the emergence of local reform groups and the personnel and ideas that would ultimately coalesce around the broader movement for parliamentary reform in 1831–32.

Many of the 1818 contests dragged on not just for days, but for weeks

In carriages, paying for agents, bands, banners and decorations, and bribing voters. MPs and their patrons often went to extraordinary lengths to avoid a contest, engineering all sorts of back-room and cross-party deals.

Rather than face such an outlay in 1818, many long-serving MPs simply chose to retire. Indeed the turnover of parliamentarians in 1818 was the highest for over seventy years, with 155 novice MPs being returned for the first time. Moreover, rather than being ‘absent and idle’, as Lord Grenville observed, this new cohort of MPs were ‘of a more zealous and active nature’, a feature which helps to explain the steady rise in the number of MPs making speeches and taking part in votes and other proceedings over the ensuing years.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the 1818 election, however, was the platform that it gave to the anti-establishment Radicals and more advanced Whigs after decades of wartime puzzling and suppression. This was to prove especially significant in the larger provincial towns, away from the more famous radical battlegrounds such as Westminster, where so much attention...
Men who had never had the opportunity to vote now suddenly found themselves potentially able to poll

Despite being the first election to be held after the French and Napoleonic wars, at a time of huge economic distress and uncertainty, 1818 has attracted surprisingly little attention from political historians. In many ways, though, it broke new ground, ushering in a new age of party conflict and new forms of political activity.

Far from being the easy victory for the Tories suggested by the final result, the election was intensely fought. Indeed more seats were contested in 1818 than at any time since 1754, with almost a third (150) of all constituencies going to the polls. Given that uncontested or 'walk over' elections were by this time a well-established norm — 80 per cent of constituencies on average failed to field rival candidates between 1761 and 1812 — this dramatic upsurge in contests marked a major change, both for politicians and would-be voters.

Men who had never had the opportunity to vote now suddenly found themselves potentially able to poll, often on the basis of franchise requirements which had become obscure through lack of use. This was especially true in the borough constituencies, where disputes over local voting qualifications that had not been used in decades caused endless delays and disruption at the polls. One result of this was that many of the 1818 contests dragged on not just for days, but for weeks, though only the county polls in Berkshire and Kent managed to reach the maximum permitted length of fifteen days. With elections also being staggered over time rather than all commencing on the same day — a process which enabled defeated candidates to stand elsewhere if their finances could bear it — the entire 1818 general election ended up lasting from 17 June until 18 July.

More importantly, these local franchise disputes created by the surge in contests helped to fuel a new interest in ancient charters and voting privileges, especially in places where a local corporation or patron had annexed control of the parliamentary representation. Campaigns to restore 'ancient rights' and 'open your borough' became increasingly common in the aftermath of this election, aiding the emergence of local reform groups and the personnel and ideas that would ultimately coalesce around the broader movement for parliamentary reform in 1831–32.

Many of the 1818 contests dragged on not just for days, but for weeks

The 1818 general election: More change than meets the eye

Philip Salmon

This year marked the two hundredth anniversary of the 1818 general election, the first of a series of elections held after the Napoleonic wars which began to reconfigure the structure of British politics in the years prior to the 1832 Reform Act. Although the final outcome of this election apparently changed little — the Tory government led by the long-serving Prime Minister Lord Liverpool remained firmly in power — beneath the surface a number of important developments took place, which helped to transform the operation of British politics both in Parliament and in the constituencies.
is usually focused. Aided by a surprisingly coherent set of policies centred around reducing taxation and state expenditure, introducing parliamentary reform, and improving civil liberties (including Catholic emancipation), Radical and Whig candidates put up a remarkable fight in many places, prising about thirty-five major borough seats away from supporters of the Tory government. It was only the government’s similar number of gains in smaller and often corrupt constituencies that evened things out, reducing the opposition’s overall gain to a mere six MPs.

The final 1818 election result may have left the Commons looking very much the same as before, with Lord Liverpool’s ministry commanding a comfortable majority, but the greater number of actual polls and the way seats changed hands indicated how politics in the constituencies was becoming far more contested and polarized. Significantly, more people were able to vote in this election that at any time since 1734, many of them for the first time as part of a new post-war generation of voters. These trends towards more contests, higher levels of voter participation, and increasing party divisions on key issues would become ever more apparent at the next four elections, culminating in the sweeping victory of 1831 for the Whigs and their Reform Bill.

Further reading:

Dr. Philip Salmon is editor of the History of Parliament’s section on the House of Commons, 1832–68. He and his team write about their work at The Victoria Commons – victoriacommons.wordpress.com – where this article first appeared. You can also follow them on Twitter @TheVicCommons

---

The Conservative History Group lecture at Party Conference 2018

Andrew Roberts on his new book:

**Churchill: Walking with Destiny**

Monday 1 October, 12.45 p.m.
Hall 1, ICC, Birmingham

A full Conference pass will be needed to enter the secure zone

---

Votes for Women: a century of female suffrage