

Electoral Reform at Work Local Politics and National Parties 1832-1841

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Philip Salmon took on an ambitious project when he began his study of parliamentary reform and the electoral system. He looked at how the Reform Act of 1832 affected 'the business of obtaining the vote' (p. 1) and the organisation of those electors into political parties with heightened partisanship at both the national and local level. Salmon wanted to understand 'how the Reform Act's long overlooked constitutional interaction with other institutions of early nineteenth-century government . caused new types of nationally-oriented party structures to multiply through all levels of British politics.' (ibid)

The outcome, *Electoral Reform at Work*, does this and so much more. Salmon delves deeper into the implementation of the Reform Act at almost every level than any previous examination. He looks at electoral behavior before 1832 and re-examines the regional and national implementation of the extended franchise after the December 1832 general election (which first gave voice to the new voters and the newly-created electoral boroughs). He also explores how political partisanship became more clearly defined with each local and parliamentary election and with it, the growth of national party affiliation. While these connections have been examined in other studies, what separates Salmon's research from its predecessors is his balanced examination of how, precisely, the new post-1832 electoral system and growing partisanship affected individual political consciousness and political party development and platform formation in the early Victorian age. His simple, but provocative theory - 'that the manner in which people acquired their vote had a powerful impact on how they perceived and used it' (p. 2) - puts all the research on parliamentary reform, 1832, electoral behaviour and voting patterns, and the rise of political parties in the early Victorian era that he and predecessors have done in a more meaningful and compelling light.

At the heart of Salmon's multi-faceted thesis is his 'insistence that the study of voting behaviour cannot be separated from the physical and constitutional context in which it took place' (p. 10), an approach that he contends separates it from earlier works in this field. The Reform Act's greatest impact was not limited to the newly enfranchised who voted for the first time in December 1832, but also resided in the fact that the enfranchisement and redistribution of representation 'helped impose a far more nationally-oriented political system upon local parochial, municipal and administrative life.' (p. 10) Salmon argues that 'the key to the rapid electoral politicization of reformed politics . lay in the practical working of the representative system itself, particularly the legislative ambiguities of the new and imperfect voter registration process.' (p. 10-11) In short, Salmon contends that these developments resulted in a post-1832 political world that was 'not only distinctly 'reformed', but also far more recognisably modern than has previously been supposed.' (p. 11)

The first third of the study examines the implementation of the post-1832 electoral system and how emerging political parties attempted to manage it. Salmon walks the reader through the new voter registration system and its new demands. The system was clearly cumbersome and placed responsibility for registering on each individual attempting to acquire the vote and allowed for opponents of potential electors to oppose them, thereby forcing them to prove themselves in a nearly court-like setting. This adversarial process contributed to the fact that constituencies with uncontested races or with no Tory candidates standing for a parliamentary seat offered potential electors little incentive to register. Other legal and financial restrictions resulted in the registration numbers falling below expected levels.

This indifference or voter laziness, Salmon argues, contributed to the growing politicization of the registration process after 1835, when more parliamentary seats were contested and party affiliation had become more clear-cut. Local registration societies, Salmon demonstrates, grew more vehement in objecting to voters who supported opposition candidates and otherwise increased partisan tensions. The system of voter registration itself became adversarial and this only served to produce heightened tensions between local parties and candidates.

Simultaneously, Salmon contends, the development of political party 'ad hoc' committees, commissions and political clubs such as the Carlton and Westminster Reform Clubs, ushered in a new conception of how political recruitment and 'management' should or could deal with voter registration. Political leaders of both parties were cautious when seeking any central control over registration. Some extra-parliamentary political organizations were torn apart by ideological or socio-economic divisions, while others failed to maintain influence over members after the battle for reform was won. Whether local organizations were influenced by Radicals, Reformers, Tories, former Political Unionists, or Anglican clergymen, all resisted national centralized party control, at least initially. Salmon's use of the correspondence of Sir Robert Peel and Joseph Parkes to their respective political allies clearly shows that local mobilisation in registering unregistered voters became a highly politicized experience.

While Salmon demonstrates that the new post-Reform Act annual voter registrations fostered a competitive

and sometimes combative approach to party development, he also argues that that emerging 'modernisation' of Victorian politics maintained many links to the traditional world of electioneering as revealed by Frank O'Gorman and others. Polling, canvassing of candidates and other campaign rituals continued, though altered slightly, after 1832. There were stricter regulations about where polling could take place and for how many hours a day. The law standardised the official language of the poll. Canvassing, an expensive and formidable task for any candidate, continued after 1832, as did chairing, but Salmon argues that they became less and less reliable, a development demonstrated by growing local political protocols and absenteeism of electors at the events themselves. In larger constituencies, even ceremonial contact became suspect, as local party activists took greater control of the events and the contact that candidates had with the voters was reduced.

Salmon makes a compelling case for a very significant development in polling after 1832: that during the 1830s and even more so in the 1840s, county constituents could get to the polls more cheaply and easily than ever before, thanks to the railways. This neglected area of electoral politics, he argues, certainly affected the relationship between canvassing and polling. Nonetheless, changes and convention went hand-in-hand in the post-Reform Act years, with the resulting climate providing

an important counterpoint to partisanship by offering an alternative way of viewing a candidate's performance and fitness for representation, and by allowing plenty of space for voter choice, local independence and the politics of negotiation within the electoral process. (p. 115)

The second segment of the book looks specifically at how the post-Reform Act system took shape in the counties. Taking on a challenge made by the late John Phillips more than a decade ago, Salmon undertakes an astounding assessment of some 50,000 rural voters and presents a series of examinations of voter registration and landowner influence in north Devon, south Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire, west Somerset, north Wiltshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. (These particular areas were selected in order to avoid overly partisan newspaper reporting of accounts of political activity, and as those which offered ample accounts by local party agents as the chief source of information concerning the electoral registration and polling process.) Salmon convincingly shows that rather than being deferential, county electors exhibited the same patterns of behaviour consistent with borough electors. There was a decline in unanimity among parish voters after 1835 in all but one of his selected rural areas, as voters made their opinions known at county meetings and through petitions and the provincial press.

While constituency associations began to form in the counties for the purpose of voter registration, political divisiveness often undermined their effectiveness. For example, Salmon's detailed examination of the West Riding of Yorkshire, the largest parliamentary constituency with over 30,000 voters in 1839, clearly shows that local Tories were more united in their electoral plans (objecting to voter registration and organising Conservative Associations for co-ordinating pro-Tory activity throughout the region) than Liberals, Radicals and Reformers. Divided amongst themselves as to additional parliamentary reform measures, Church disestablishment and specific legislation such as the New Poor Law, the new Whig-Liberal alliance failed to work together in objecting to Tory voter registration, instead skewing the powerbase of the alliance towards the more urban and radical elements. While the West Riding experienced the shift differently than the other areas studied, they all reveal that another political 'entity' was starting to displace local landowners from their pre-reform position of influence and mirrored political shifts taking place in the boroughs.

Another facet of this argument looks at turnout rates for occupiers and freeholders in the counties. They were evidently high, especially in contested elections. Indeed, Salmon shows quite clearly that the 'Chandos clause' -targeting the £50 tenant-at-will, supposedly the most susceptible to the influence of landlords - was ineffective in keeping away voter registrants. While occupiers displayed greater support for Conservative candidates than freeholders, Salmon calculates that such a difference translated into only small percentages of the total electoral outcomes. Additionally, out-voters played a critical role in electoral outcomes, comprising between 12 and 25 per cent of the total registered electorate.

In short, Salmon's work in the counties convincingly identifies common electoral behaviours in rural areas that are comparable with trends in the boroughs. His contribution to the long-overdue historiographical rejection of D. C. Moore's work is irrefutable, in its demonstration of a growing national and declining local control over political matters in the post-Reform Act.

The final section of the study reassesses more familiar territory: the impact of the Reform Act on boroughs. But here Salmon focuses on 'the process of politicisation . from an institutional as well as an electoral perspective.' (p. 13) Salmon once again tests the force of 1832, by examining how such bureaucratic institutions as parish vestries and other localized governing bodies affected the implementation of the New Poor Law. Obviously, the expansion of the electorate changed the whole process of levying local rates and administering those monies. The new rate-paying clause of the Reform Bill and its enforcement made voter registration even more problematic, as impoverished electors found rate collection tied directly to political participation. Salmon examines the cavalier manner in which the Whig leadership included this clause in the bill, reassuring itself that they would be correcting evident abuses in the old 'scot and lot' constituencies. He also shows that the Whigs and Liberals did not bargain for the potential disfranchisement of supporters, as proof of poor rate payment became routinely pursued by local voter registration committees. Proof of payment, rates that were directly linked to the cost of electoral participation, increasing numbers of 'oligarchies' of parishioners controlling rates - all affected who could afford to register to vote and go to the polls.

Essential to successful implementation of the reformed electoral system was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Salmon makes this abundantly clear in his calculations in the chapter aptly titled 'No Representation without Taxation'. When control of poor relief transferred from parish vestries to boards of guardians who implemented a uniform system of rates and collections, the significance on electoral practices in boroughs was self-evident. Using studies of the poor law in local political party development, Salmon discusses the increased partisanship of poor relief and battles for its control. Election onto boards was as hotly contested in some regions as were parliamentary seats. Party affiliations took over: as Salmon observes,

the electoral dynamics of the New Poor Law not only helped to fuel political tensions at the local administrative level and infuse parish affairs with an increasingly sophisticated partisan agenda, but the extra-parochial structure of the new unions also physically broadened their psephological impact. Political conflicts, which had previously been confined to a single parish or town, now expanded into surrounding areas. (p. 199)

This very provocative chapter provides the basis for what is a long-overdue study: the electoral dimension to the poor relief system.

The last chapter extends this kind of inquiry to the Municipal Reform Act. The link between parliamentary electoral reform and municipal corporations has received much scholarly attention, but it is the nature of that interconnection on which Salmon focuses his research. The reform measure in 1835 succeeded in implementing a uniform system and eliminating much of the authority - via spending and patronage - of corrupt and closed corporations. What few expected, Salmon argues, was that the new municipal electorate was often smaller than the parliamentary electorate, thanks to new rate-paying and residency requirements. Nonetheless, he shows that the two electorates overlapped considerably, for

not only were the potential sources of disfranchisement in practice the same - receipt of poor relief, arrears of rates, residential mobility - but the adversarial process of claims and objections employed in compiling both types of register was almost identical and occurred at the same time each year. (p. 221)

By examining local partisan organisation and polling practices, Salmon shows that identical problems of partisanship and combativeness emerged at the local as at the national level, when it came to complying with new voter registration rules. The newly contested nature of voter registration brought political parties into municipal as well as parliamentary electoral spheres, changed the composition of both electorates and, as Salmon convincingly argues, had a profound impact on both electoral and bureaucratic politics at the municipal level.

If Salmon's goal was merely 'to fill an obvious gap in the historiography of the Great Reform Act of 1832, by examining . "small print"' (p. 238), he has certainly succeeded with this outstanding study. With probably the most complete table of registration and polling returns by borough and county in the 1830s, Salmon provides all the numerical evidence a reader could wish for in support of his work. His bibliography reveals tremendous local record office archival material, well beyond the polling book. He has examined dozens of manuscript collections, provincial newspapers, broadsides, Parliamentary bills and papers, as well as the prerequisite municipal and parliamentary poll books in the writing process.

It is for achieving his second objective, to 'relate the widely-noted emergence of more modern types of voting behaviour after 1832 . [and add] a further layer of sophistication to the ideological and sociological explanations of politics provided in more conventional accounts' (p. 238), that Salmon deserves real kudos. He beautifully weaves the newly contentious nature of post-1832 voter registration with the myriad ways in which that contentiousness could translate into partisanship. Objections to an individual registering to vote, enforcing rate-paying, supporting extra-parliamentary organizations, polling, voting at the local level after 1835 - all are reflections of the growth of modern political partisanship and party organisational goals of delivering votes out of the framework which structured the registration process for new parliamentary electors after 1832. Salmon fully acknowledges that ideological arguments and commitment to principles still played a role in early Victorian politics in Great Britain, but an undeniably national system of political action and political behavior emerged. It is a truly outstanding contribution to the field of parliamentary and electoral history.

Many historians, myself included, have put forward the case that 1832 was critical in understanding the evolution of modern British politics. Salmon's book affirms that interpretation with a wealth of evidence that raises new questions about the interconnections between national and local modern political identities and behaviour. One can only hope that Dr. Salmon chooses to answer some of these very questions in his future work.

The author is pleased to accept this review and welcomes further comments

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