3.1 Reform of parliament, c1780–1928

KEY QUESTIONS

- How effective were pressures for change to the franchise in the years c1780–1928?
- How significant were changes in the distribution of seats in the years c1780–1918?

KEY TERMS

Constitution
A set of laws and agreed principles that set out rules on how a country is governed. Although Britain does not have a single written constitution, it does have a set of constitutional rules that are based largely on custom and practice.

Vested interests
In politics, individuals or groups of people who benefit from existing political arrangements, usually at the expense of others.

INTRODUCTION

In 1780, in common with all European countries, Britain did not possess a written **constitution**.

Instead, the country's system of government and its electoral system were both governed by a haphazard collection of laws and customs that had grown up since the 15th century and the early years of the reign of Henry VI. It is perhaps too generous to refer to a 'system', because neither the right to vote nor the national distribution of seats were organised in any rational way. Over the next 150 years, a number of significant reforms were carried out, which were intended to make the electoral system reflect the changing distribution of the population and the new economic forces which had grown up through the industrialisation of the country. By 1928, despite the retention of a monarchy and an unelected House of Lords, Britain had been transformed into a parliamentary democracy based on universal suffrage.

For half a century from 1780, no changes were made to the electoral system. In part, this was due to the powerful opposition mounted by **vested interests** in the House of Commons and the House of Lords: even the great reforming prime minster Pitt the Younger was unable to pass a mild reform in 1785. Far more important, however, was the impact on British politics and society of the French Revolution. What had begun as a modest programme of constitutional reforms in 1789, had, by 1793, degenerated into the execution of the king and queen, a reign of terror throughout France, and war against the leading powers of Europe. Fearing that Britain might become infected with a revolutionary spirit, Pitt and his successors turned against reform for a generation.

Ideas for parliamentary reform might have been held back for a time, but a number of long-term factors were at work which meant that sooner or later change would have to be addressed. Since the mid-18th century, the industrialisation of the Midlands and northern England had led to the rapid growth of towns and cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Oldham and Stockport.

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At the same time, new social classes were growing in number – middle-class manufacturers and traders, along with a large working class that manned the factories. By the 1820s, many leading politicians recognised that change was necessary and would have to be managed carefully.

In 1832, after two years of parliamentary debate, accompanied by extra-parliamentary protests, the First Reform Act passed into law. Contemporaries dubbed it the 'Great Reform Act', but many were disappointed by its provisions, which excluded the bulk of working-class men from the **franchise**. Nonetheless, the Act set a valuable precedent for further change. In 1867, the Conservative Party's leading minister in the House of Commons, Disraeli, managed the passing of the Second Reform Act, which to the surprise of many, enfranchised large numbers of the urban working classes. The Liberal leader, Gladstone, continued this process in 1884 with a third Act, which extended the vote to many agricultural labourers in the counties.

KEY TERM

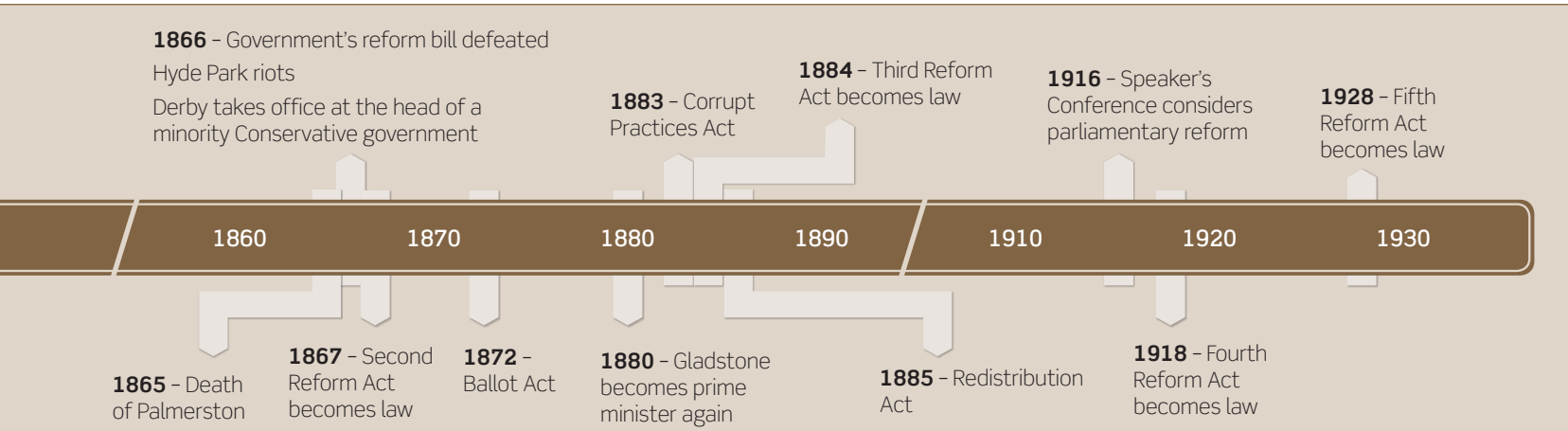
Franchise
The right to vote, also known as the suffrage.

Despite all these changes, there were still some 40 percent of adult males who had not received the vote. At that time, the franchise was not given to men unconditionally, but only to those who had a stake in the country through the ownership or tenancy of property. The First World War would undermine this principle, while at the same time bringing about a dramatic change in the status of women.

By 1916, all political parties agreed that it was indefensible that young men could be sent to fight and to die in the war, but did not have the right to vote. This injustice was remedied with the Reform Act 1918, which finally ended the system of property qualifications and established universal male suffrage. The Act also took the first tentative steps in the direction of female suffrage by enfranchising women over the age of 30. General elections over the next decade showed that there had been no dramatic changes to the voting system, and the 1928 Act finally conceded universal suffrage for all men and women aged 21 or over.

While the change over time from a small number of male voters in 1780 to universal suffrage by 1928 was an important development in parliamentary reform, the simultaneous changes in the distribution of parliamentary seats have sometimes been overlooked. A major alteration to the distribution of seats, which is still in operation today, came with the Redistribution Act 1885. Two-member constituencies had been established as early as 1430, but in 1885 most of these were swept away with the creation of single-member seats, which remain recognisable today. This change proved to be very beneficial to the Conservative Party through the creation of suburban seats around the large cities, which insulated these areas from both the Liberal and, later, the Labour parties in the cities.

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HOW EFFECTIVE WERE PRESSURES FOR CHANGE TO THE FRANCHISE IN THE YEARS c1780–1928?

The franchise c1780 and its significance for representation of the people

The right to vote in elections held in Britain today belongs to all men and women aged 18 and over whose names are included on the electoral register, which is drawn up each year. An exception to this rule was made in 2014, when young people in Scotland aged 16 and 17 were allowed to vote in the referendum on independence. In 1780, however, only adult males could vote. The county franchise was uniform across the country, but in the boroughs the right to vote varied from one constituency to another.

KEY TERMS

Freeholder
A male who owned land or property outright.

Borough
A town or small city that had once been given special privileges by royal charter.

Constituency
One of the areas into which the country was divided for election purposes. These varied considerably in geographical size and population.

Self-perpetuating clique
A small group of individuals who had the power to maintain their position indefinitely.

The county franchise

In the English and Welsh counties, the right to vote had been established during the reign of Henry VI in 1430, giving the vote to all **freeholders** of property worth 40 shillings (£2) a year. This simple qualification had established a uniform county franchise that remained unchanged for 400 years. Over time, however, inflation and the rising price of land had increased the number of men qualified for the franchise.

The borough franchise

Historian Eric Evans described pre-reform elections as a 'haphazard business', and this description certainly applied to voting rights in the **boroughs**. Unlike the county franchise, the right to vote in the English boroughs was not uniform, with very wide variations from one seat to another.

At one extreme were open boroughs, where the vote was exercised by many men who met various qualifications, such as the direct payment of the local poor rates. Preston, in Lancashire, was one of the most open boroughs in the country. Here, the vote was given to all men, whether resident or not, who were in the **constituency** at the time of the election. The electorate in open boroughs ran into thousands. Around 20 boroughs had large electorates of over 1,000 men, notably Westminster, with its 11,000 voters. These boroughs were noted for their sturdy independence, and were not very susceptible to influence.

Scot and lot boroughs gave the vote to males who paid their local tax, or scot; while in potwalloper boroughs the vote could be exercised by those who possessed a hearth where they could boil, or wallop, their pots. These boroughs also had electorates of at least several hundred men.

Seats with large numbers of voters were the exception rather than the rule. Many boroughs had very small electorates, rarely exceeding 100 voters.

In burgage boroughs, the right to vote belonged to men who owned various properties, and ownership of these votes was carefully protected. Sometimes the inhabitants of a town would challenge the burgage owners, but to no avail.

Corporation boroughs were towns where the only voters were members of the town council. These councils were **self-perpetuating cliques** who filled vacant seats on the council by nomination rather than election. Most corporation boroughs were, by modern-day standards, extremely corrupt, and the electors of several towns were quite content to sell their votes to the highest bidder. The Suffolk town of Sudbury was notoriously corrupt in this respect: in the 1761 election, the town advertised its two seats for sale to the highest bidder. Sudbury was so corrupt that it was disfranchised in 1844.

Treasury boroughs were parliamentary seats that came under the control of government departments, which were the chief employers in a town. Many ports along the south coast of England, such as Portsmouth and Plymouth, were under the influence of the Admiralty, and returned MPs who would give unswerving support to the government of the day.

Finally, many constituencies were described as pocket or rotten boroughs. Most of the property in a pocket borough was owned by one person, who therefore was able to nominate his chosen candidates for election to parliament. Rotten boroughs had once been areas of economic activity, but over time had become depopulated, but still retained their parliamentary representation. In the late Middle Ages, Dunwich in Suffolk had been a well-known international port with substantial trade to and from Europe.

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Frequent heavy storms and coastal erosion meant that the port had long ago been claimed by the sea, but the tiny village which remained still retained two MPs. Old Sarum in Hampshire had been a thriving community in the Middle Ages, but its inhabitants moved to what is now Salisbury. By 1780, Old Sarum was little more than a heap of mossy stones frequently visited by people curious to see one of the most corrupted boroughs in the country, and perhaps to glimpse one of its seven electors.

The size of the electorate

It is impossible to assess with any accuracy the size of the electorate in 1780 because the registration of electors was not established until the Reform Act 1832. However, a survey carried out in 1780 estimated that in England and Wales there were 214,000 electors out of a population of eight million. As late as 1831 in Scotland, where the right to vote was much more restricted, just 4,500 men in a population of 2.6 million qualified for the vote.

Elections and 'interests'

To a modern observer, the old representative system appears hopelessly corrupt and in need of long-overdue and radical reform, but this was not how it appeared to contemporaries. Indeed, until the 1790s, there was no significant pressure for parliamentary reform from any section of society. Eighteenth-century opinion was broadly content with an electoral system that was not concerned with a system based on population, but rather was able to represent various national 'interests', such as agriculture, trade and banking.

General elections today witness contests in virtually every parliamentary seat between a number of political parties with different ideologies and programmes. This was not the case in the 18th century. In the election of 1784, for example, there were only 72 contests, and in several constituencies there were no contested elections at all throughout the 18th century. Elections could be very expensive affairs, as rival candidates sought to persuade electors to vote in their favour, often accompanied by substantial bribes. 'Treating', which included the provision of large quantities of food and beer to voters and non-voters alike, was an accepted practice.

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SOURCE 1

The Election, Chairing the Member, 1755. This painting, by the famous painter and engraver William Hogarth, illustrates the boisterous involvement of many different classes in elections in the middle of the 18th century. The painting shows a victorious candidate for the Oxfordshire constituency being carried through the streets in a traditional, though chaotic, celebration of his election.



Although the electorate was small in 1780, elections were often very colourful affairs, with thousands of people turning up to watch the progress of the poll. The county of Hertfordshire experienced many contested elections in the 18th century, and the extent of popular involvement in the election is shown in Source 2.

SOURCE 2 *Ipswich Journal*, 1 May 1784, describing local involvement and campaigning in a Hertfordshire election.

> Thursday the election for Hertfordshire came on at the county town. Mr Plumer rode in from Ware, at the head of a most numerous cavalcade of freeholders, attended with a band of music. Lord Grimston's party then appeared, and made a respectable show, though their numbers were nothing like equal to Mr. Plumer's. His Lordship had his band of music likewise. Mr. Plumer's flags were simply decorated with the words 'Plumer and independence', while those of Lord Grimston held out 'Grimston, and the rights of the King and of the people'. After the two parties had occupied the ground for a full hour, Mr Halsey rode in at the head of his friends, and a very creditable figure they made. His flags bore the words 'Halsey and Plumer, independence and no aristocracy'. At length all the three parties adjourned to the town-hall, and the poll began. At the close the numbers stood as follows: For Mr. Plumer, 1900. Lord Grimston, 1297, Mr. Halsey, 1073.

Some historians, notably Frank O'Gorman, have analysed the unreformed electoral system, and have concluded that in many ways it actually worked quite well. O'Gorman argued that an important feature of the system was that it was concerned, not with numerical, but with virtual representation. MPs sat at Westminster, not as representatives of the voters who had put them there, but in order to champion those interests that made up the economic and political life of the nation. This explains why there were so many seats in the south of England, representing the great agricultural interests of the day, along with the government's control of the royal dockyard towns such as Plymouth and Portsmouth on the south coast. Men purchased boroughs, not to represent themselves, but rather to champion a powerful interest such as trade, shipping, banks or brewing. In 1820, the Alexander brothers purchased Old Sarum in order to further their interests in the East India Company and in merchant banking in Calcutta. Even the slaves of the West Indies sugar plantations had an indirect voice through the election of anti-slavery MPs such as William Wilberforce.

As long as the electoral system represented the overall interests of the nation, it continued to enjoy broad support. However, from the second half of the 18th century new forces were coming to bear on industry and the economy. The industrialisation of parts of the Midlands, Lancashire and the north-east of the country led to a gradual change in the balance of the economy, away from the agricultural south and east and towards the growing and densely populated towns further north. Industrialisation also changed the social structure of the country, with the emergence of a new middle class of factory owners, managers and bankers, and of an even larger urban working class. Industrial interests were not strongly represented in the parliaments of the late 18th century, and pressure began to grow for these new forces to be represented within parliament.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Old Corruption

Many contemporaries referred to the electoral system in the late 18th century as 'old corruption'. They, and several later historians, condemned the representative system as hopelessly out of date and in need of drastic reform.

1 Write down four points that agree with this viewpoint, and four points that challenge it.

2 What overall conclusion can you draw?

Pressures for change and reasons for resistance

The impact of the French Revolution

Before 1830, parties and governments were not deeply concerned with trying to change the electoral system. In 1785, the prime minister, William Pitt, introduced a modest proposal to buy out 36 small boroughs and transfer their seats to the counties and to London, but he was defeated on the issue and did not return to reform thereafter.

It was the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and its impact on British politics and society, that sparked a serious interest in reform and widespread demands for change. The various movements for reform, however, were divided on aims and methods. At one extreme were several radical movements demanding extensive reform. The Society for Constitutional Information, which championed full universal suffrage, had been founded in 1780 by Major Cartwright, but made little headway in its early years. The London Corresponding Society, founded in 1792, promoted the rights of the skilled working class, and gained wide support among northern towns and cities.

Other groups supported ideas that were much less radical. Alarmed by the spread of radical and democratic ideas, a number of leading Whig politicians formed the Friends of the People in 1792. They hoped to control the pace of change by promoting modest amendments to the electoral system: their stated objective was simply to obtain 'a more equal representation of the people in Westminster'. Their support of reform in the House of Commons in 1793 came at an unfortunate time for the Whigs. The French king, Louis XVI, had been executed, Britain was now at war with France, and Pitt's government was more concerned with the successful prosecution of the war than with considering domestic reform. Whig motions for reform were heavily defeated, and the Friends of the People disbanded. Thereafter, the government moved rapidly to suppress reform activity. **Habeas corpus** was suspended in 1794, and the Seditious Meetings Act 1795 led to a significant decline in the influence and activities of reform groups. Leading members of the London Corresponding

KEY TERM

Habeas corpus
A writ that can be issued by any court, requiring prison officials to provide legal proof that they have the power to detain a prisoner. If this proof is not provided, the prisoner will be released.

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Society were charged with **sedition**, and the society, along with its provincial groups, was outlawed under the Corresponding Societies Act 1799.

KEY TERM

Sedition
Open activities, whether through speeches, demonstrations or organisations, which are deliberately intended to provoke violence or rebellion against the established government of a country.

Post-war unrest, 1815–30

The work and influence of the radical reformers in the 1790s, and in the years 1815–20, are covered in detail in Chapter 3 (pages 64–83). The French wars ended in 1815, but Britain did not enjoy a post-war period of domestic peace. Growing unemployment, economic distress and the impact of industrialisation produced a toxic mixture of grievances. Matters were made worse by the Corn Law 1815. The law was aimed at protecting the economic interests of the landed class through the imposition of a duty on imported corn. Working people feared that the price of bread would rise as a result, while manufacturers feared that their workers would demand higher wages to protect themselves and their families. There was widespread opposition to the Corn Law, which was intensified thanks to a bad harvest in 1816. A number of extra-parliamentary protests were organised throughout the country under the general watchword of 'reform'. In the short term, popular protests failed in the face of determined opposition by the government and local authorities, who were not afraid to use military force against radical agitation. A reform meeting, held at Spa Fields in London in 1816, developed into a riot which was suppressed by the city authorities with military support; and in 1819, volunteer yeomanry were responsible for the deaths of 11 people in the famous 'Peterloo Massacre' (see Chapter 3, pages 68–70). In the long term, however, the events of the post-war years led to a revival of interest in parliamentary reform, which became more organised and effective in the late 1820s.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The Corn Laws
The Corn Laws were introduced at the end of the Napoleonic Wars to counter the threat of cheap foreign imports flooding the British market. The laws, introduced by Liverpool's government, imposed duties on imports in order to protect farmers' profits. The Corn Laws were modified in 1828 and abolished altogether in 1846. They were regarded by middle-class industrialists and by the working class as an example of parliament protecting the interests of the large landowners.

By 1820, the government had neutralised most radical activity and the pressure for political reform had subsided. In part, this was due to a general revival in the economy and the decline of distress, which seemed to confirm the belief of the radical journalist William Cobbett: 'I defy you to agitate any fellow with a full stomach'. Another reason for the political calm in the years after Peterloo was the expert leadership of the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, who held together a government of reformers and conservatives. This period of relative tranquillity was shattered following Liverpool's death in 1827, when, after the brief administrations of Canning and Goderich, the Duke of Wellington became prime minister in 1828. Over the next few years, the unity of the Tory Party would be shattered, and its long political supremacy, dating back to Pitt's administration formed in 1783, would come to an end. The end of Tory dominance came, not so much through the growing confidence of their political opponents, but through internal divisions, especially over religious issues.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Lord Liverpool (1770–1828)
Liverpool was prime minister during the period 1812–27, and was the longest-serving prime minister of the 19th century. He steered the country through many domestic and foreign crises, but was associated in the public mind with the repressive policies of 1815–20. During the 1820s, Liverpool was able to support a number of liberal measures. He was a talented politician, and managed to hold his government together despite extra-parliamentary pressure for change. He was also able to keep a number of talented ministers in the government, even though a number of them, such as Peel, Home Secretary between 1822 and 1827, and Canning, foreign secretary during the same time, held widely different political views.

Many Tory backbenchers were strong supporters of the Anglican Church and of its dominant role in national life, and were opposed to measures which might weaken its supremacy. In 1828, the Whig leader, Lord John Russell, challenged the Anglican Church with his proposal to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. These Acts dated back to the reign of Charles II and prevented Protestant dissenters such as Baptists and Congregationalists from holding government offices. By the 1820s, the Acts were not rigorously enforced, and were largely symbolic. At first, Wellington opposed repeal, but then gave his reluctant support, despite some opposition from his own backbenchers.

A further measure of religious reform, the Catholic Relief Act 1829, had far more serious implications for the unity of the Tory Party. In 1828, Vesey Fitzgerald was appointed to the Board of Trade, and had to seek re-election in his Irish constituency of County Clare. It was assumed that his election would be a formality. However, the leader of the **Catholic Association** in Ireland, Daniel O'Connell, decided to challenge existing anti-Catholic laws by standing against Fitzgerald. O'Connell defeated Fitzgerald easily, but was unable to take his seat because he would not swear the oath of allegiance to the Crown. Wellington was a long-standing opponent of Catholic relief, but he recognised that to deny O'Connell his seat could lead to widespread and destabilising unrest throughout Ireland. His views were confirmed by his colleague Sir Robert Peel (Source 3).

KEY TERM

Catholic Association
Founded in 1823 by the Irish politician Daniel O'Connell, with the single aim of ending all political and religious disabilities for Catholics, in Ireland and throughout Britain. The association charged a membership fee of just one penny a month. It therefore attracted a huge membership throughout Ireland, and was the first political organisation which mobilised mass support for its cause.

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SOURCE 3 Sir Robert Peel, in a memorandum to the Duke of Wellington in 1829 on the large military presence in Ireland.

> In the course of the last six months, England, being at peace with the whole world, has had five-sixths of the infantry force of the United Kingdom occupied in maintaining the peace and in police duties in Ireland. I consider the state of things which requires such an application of military force much worse than open rebellion.
>
> The state of society in Ireland will soon become perfectly incompatible with trial by jury in any political cases. The Roman Catholics have discovered their strength in respect to the elective franchise. Let us beware that we do not teach them how easy it will be to paralyse the Government and the law, unless we are prepared to substitute some other system of criminal jurisprudence for the present system.

Wellington, therefore, reluctantly supported the Catholic Relief Act 1829, which repealed most anti-Catholic legislation. The electoral power of Irish Catholics was limited by a further Act which raised the Irish franchise qualification from 40 shillings to £10. After a further by-election, O'Connell took his seat in the House of Commons in 1830.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Duke of Wellington (1769–1852)
Wellington's successful campaigns against Napoleon had established his position as a national hero by 1815. Yet his political career was much less successful. He was prime minister during the period 1828–30, when his profound conservatism led him to oppose any measures of parliamentary reform, and led to the fall of his government in 1830. He was succeeded as Tory leader in 1833 by Peel, and did not serve in government again. His prestige and national popularity only recovered after he retired from political life in 1846.

While many Tory MPs were prepared grudgingly to accept the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, they bitterly criticised Wellington for passing Catholic relief. Some of the more extreme Tories, known as the ultras, now began to give their support to parliamentary reform. They believed that MPs in a reformed parliament would have to take account of widespread anti-Catholic feeling in the country, and would not have supported Catholic relief.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Forces making for parliamentary reform

1 Examine the importance of each of the following factors in promoting the cause of parliamentary reform:
   a) The French Revolution and its impact on British domestic politics.
   b) Post-war economic and social distress.
   c) The government's response to religious issues, 1828–30.
2 In your opinion, which of these factors was the most significant in driving the cause of reform?

Representation of the People Act 1832

The fall of Wellington's government, 1830

In June 1830, George IV died. The **general election** that followed saw Wellington returned to office, but his standing within the Tory Party was damaged by the return of several MPs who supported parliamentary reform. Wellington, who had tried to resist the religious changes of 1828–29, was not prepared to support any reform measure, and made this clear in an unwise speech in the House of Lords in November (Source 4).

SOURCE 4 Wellington speaking in the House of Lords, 2 November 1831. His speech was recorded in the Lords' official record, using the formal 'third-party' language of the day.

> He had never read or heard of any measure up to the present moment which could in any degree satisfy his mind that the state of the representation could be improved, or be rendered more satisfactory to the country at large than at the present moment. He was fully convinced that the country possessed at the present moment a Legislature which answered all the good purposes of legislation, and this to a greater degree than any Legislature ever had answered in any country whatever. He would go further and say, that the Legislature and the system of representation possessed the full and entire confidence of the country.

Soon afterwards, the government was defeated on a vote in the House of Commons and Wellington resigned. The Whig leader, Earl Grey, formed a government of Whigs and other reforming groups – the first Whig government since the Ministry of All the Talents in 1806–7. The new ministry would change the course of British politics dramatically.

Pressure for franchise reform in 1830

The fall of Wellington's government in November 1830 removed the most important barrier to political reform. When Grey took office at the end of 1830, most people, inside and outside parliament, expected that he would address the issue of franchise reform. **Extra-parliamentary pressure** had become so intense that some sort of reform was almost inevitable.

KEY TERMS

General election
The election of representatives to the House of Commons from constituencies throughout the UK.

Extra-parliamentary pressure
Agitation for change or reform that originated from outside parliament.

There were several conditional (long-term) and contingent (short-term) factors that promoted the cause of reform.

Conditional factors

- The French revolution had a profound influence on British political life. Reformist ideals, especially those promoting liberty and equality, had become widespread and were strongly supported by many sections of society, particularly those who were excluded from the franchise.

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- Many working people, especially those in industrial towns, were becoming increasingly politicised. A large number of pamphlets and newspapers spread radical political ideas to a wide and receptive audience. The most influential journal of all was William Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register.*
- The early 19th century saw the growth of large political meetings in many parts of the country. Some of these focused on a single issue, such as opposition to the Corn Laws, but many others, including the Peterloo meeting of 1819, demanded a comprehensive reform of parliament.

Contingent factors

- The Tory Party had been in power since 1812. During the late 1820s, party unity began to fragment, mostly because of religious issues, but also because of Wellington's unbending opposition to change.
- The country faced severe economic crises in the late 1820s. The harvests of 1828–30 were poor, resulting in higher food prices in the towns.
- Agricultural distress was widespread in the southern and eastern counties of England. The hardship experienced by farm workers was so severe that in 1830 it sparked the Swing Riots.
- Extra-parliamentary protests became increasingly organised, notably with the creation in 1830 of the Birmingham Political Union by the banker Thomas Attwood. Attwood intended to bring together into one single organisation the new industrial middle classes and the skilled working class, united by the single aim of parliamentary reform.
- Events in France once again influenced reform activity in Britain in the early 1830s. The 1830 July revolution in Paris swept the Bourbon king, Charles X, from the throne and replaced him with Louis Philippe, who was more acceptable to the French middle classes.
- In 1830, working people were prepared to take up the issue of franchise reform. They saw reform, not as an end in itself, but as a means of ensuring a better life for themselves and their families. Cobbett sums up their hopes and ambitions in 1831 in Source 5.

SOURCE 5

From Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register*, 1 April 1831. Cobbett was a radical journalist whose *Weekly Political Register* reached a national audience. He was a vigorous champion of the poor, especially agricultural labourers. *Rural Rides*, recounting his tours of southern and eastern England in the mid-1820s, remains in print today.

Will a reform of Parliament give the labouring man a cow or a pig; will it put bread and cheese into his satchel instead of infernal cold potatoes; will it give him a bottle of beer to carry to the field instead of making him lie down to drink out of the brook; will it put upon his back a Sunday coat and send him to church, instead of leaving him shivering with an unshaven face and a carcass half covered with a ragged smock-frock? Will parliamentary reform put an end to the harnessing of men and women by a hired overseer to draw carts like beasts of burden; will it put an end to the system which caused the honest labourer to be fed worse than the felons in the jails?... The enemies of reform jeeringly ask us, whether reform would do these things for us; and I answer distinctly that IT WOULD DO THEM ALL!

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The Swing Riots (1830)

Since the late 18th century, major changes had taken place in the countryside. The growth in the rural population created a surplus of agricultural labourers, which led to a decline in wages. Matters were made worse by the introduction of agricultural machinery, especially the threshing machine. A succession of poor harvests from 1828 sparked the Swing Riots in 1830 (so-called because many farmers were sent threatening letters signed by the fictitious Captain Swing). The riots, centred on southern England and East Anglia, were characterised by arson on a large scale and the destruction of threshing machines. They were suppressed in 1831: 19 men were executed, 500 were transported and a further 600 were imprisoned. The scale of the riots was a factor in persuading the government to introduce parliamentary reform.

Agricultural unrest continued on a small scale after 1831. There were several attempts to form trade unions for farm workers, but these were ended with the Tolpuddle Martyrs case (see Chapter 4, page 86).

The reform bills of 1831–32

TIMELINE: THE CRISIS OF REFORM, 1830–32

1830

Revolution in France

Outbreak of the Swing Riots

Fall of Wellington's government

Earl Grey appointed prime minister at the head of a Whig-dominated government

1831

March: Russell introduces the first reform bill

April: Government defeated in the House of Lords; general election called

June: Whigs return with a substantial majority; second reform bill introduced

October: House of Lords rejects the second reform bill; rioting breaks out throughout the country

1832

March: Third reform bill passed in the House of Commons

May: Lords attempt to wreck the bill; government resigns; the Days of May; Whigs return to power

June: Third reform bill becomes law

December: First election under the Reform Act; Whigs take 441 seats, the Tories 175

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Grey decided on a comprehensive reform which he hoped would settle the issue once and for all. In his instructions to the committee, formed to draw up a reform measure, he wrote that he wanted it to be substantial enough to satisfy public opinion and to remove the possibility of further innovations.

In March 1831, Lord John Russell presented the first reform bill (the third version of which later passed as the **Representation of the People Act 1832**) to the House of Commons. MPs on all sides were stunned by the radicalism of the measure. Russell proposed to retain the historic county franchise, the 40-shilling freeholder, but his proposals for the borough franchises appeared to be almost revolutionary in their scope. Under the terms of his bill, Russell intended to sweep away all existing voting qualifications in the boroughs and replace them with a uniform franchise of £10 householders, i.e. those who occupied property with an annual value of £10.

KEY TERM

Representation of the People Act
Between 1832 and 1928, there were five parliamentary reform Acts. They were officially entitled Representation of the People Acts, but almost all contemporaries and later historians have referred to the first three measures as the Reform Act 1832, the Second Reform Act 1867, and the Third Reform Act 1884.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Lord John Russell (1792–1878)
Russell's strong support for individual liberties led him to support the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828. His role was vital in steering reform through parliament in 1831–32. During the 1830s, Russell expressed the view that the Reform Act was a final settlement, but a further reform bill which he supported as prime minister in 1866 was unsuccessful.

Sir Robert Inglis was one of the leading opponents of reform. A leading Tory backbencher, Inglis came to prominence through his bitter opposition to measures which he believed would weaken the position of the Church of England within national life.

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SOURCE 6 Sir Robert Inglis speaking in the House of Commons, 1 March 1831.

This House is not a collection of Deputies... We are not sent here day by day to represent the opinions of our constituents. We are sent here to legislate, not for the wishes of any set of men, but for the wants and the rights of all...

Our constitution is not the work of a code-maker; it is the growth of time and events beyond the design or the calculation of man... There is no evidence that our house was ever elected upon any principle of a representation of population... [the House of Commons] is the most complete representation of the interests of the people, which was ever assembled in any age or country. It is the only constituent body that ever existed, which includes within itself those who can urge the wants and defend the claims of the landed, the commercial, the professional classes of the country; those who are bound to uphold the prerogatives of the Crown, the privileges of nobility, the interests of the lower classes, the rights and liberties of all people. How far, under any other than the present circumstances, the rights of the distant dependencies, of the East Indies, of the West Indies, of the colonies, of the great corporations, of the commercial interests generally... could find their just support in this house, I know not.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Differing views on the reform bill

1 Read Source 6. In your own words, outline the argument that Inglis makes against the reform bill.

2 To what extent is Inglis' argument more persuasive than Wellington's in Source 4?

Debates on the proposals revealed great divisions between the supporters and opponents of reform, and on 22 March the bill passed its second reading by just one vote (302–301). The narrowness of the government's victory meant that the bill was unlikely to pass into law. When Grey was defeated on an amendment, the government resigned and William IV dissolved parliament, calling a general election.

The last general election to the unreformed parliament returned the Whigs and their allies with a majority of more than 130 seats over the Tories. A second reform bill was introduced that passed easily through the House of Commons. A significant amendment to the county franchise came with the Chandos Clause. Proposed by the Marquis of Chandos, the amendment would extend the electorate in the counties beyond the 40-shilling freeholders by enfranchising tenant farmers who paid a rent of £50 a year for their land. The proposal would lead to a significant increase in the county electorate, and would grant the vote to a number of tenant farmers.

The bill was sent to the House of Lords in October 1831, where the peers, who were not influenced by popular pressure throughout the country, rejected the measure by 41 votes. The peers' action led to violent rioting in many towns and cities. The disturbances in Bristol were especially serious. Several hundred young men assembled in Queen Square and rioted for three days, during which they burned down the Bishop of Bristol's palace and attacked several homes and businesses.

Grey and his colleagues spent the winter of 1831–32 trying to win over sufficient peers to allow the bill to pass. A third reform bill passed through the House of Commons in March 1832, and the House of Lords passed the second reading by just nine votes. However, on 7 May, the House of Lords tried to wreck the bill by voting to postpone discussions on the redistribution of seats. Grey believed that the only way to secure the third reform bill's passage through the House of Lords was if William IV would create a large number of pro-reform peers. When the king refused Grey's request, the government resigned.

The action of the peers led to the Days of May, when national protests were organised in favour of the bill and against the Lords. Attwood and the Birmingham Political Union played a prominent role in the protests, which were aimed at preventing the return of Wellington as prime minister. In the end, Wellington was unable to form a government, largely because Peel would not support him, Grey returned to office, and William IV agreed to the creation of sufficient peers to allow the bill to pass. Faced with this unprecedented threat, the Lords gave way and passed the third reform bill in June 1832.

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EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The Days of May (1832)

The Days of May was a period of large-scale extra-parliamentary protest aimed at preventing Wellington becoming prime minister. Trade came to a standstill in some cities, large public demonstrations were held, and many petitions were presented to parliament protesting the action of the House of Lords. The Birmingham Political Union and other organisations urged people to take their money out of the banks, and London was placarded with the slogan 'to stop the duke, go for gold'. Many contemporary observers believed that a revolutionary situation was developing, and it was only halted with Grey's return to office.

The impact of the Reform Act on the franchise

In the counties, the old 40-shilling franchise was retained, and the Chandos amendment gave the vote to tenant farmers who rented property worth £50 a year.

The Reform Act swept away the confusing number of borough qualifications. For the first time, a standard borough franchise was established, enfranchising male householders with a house worth £10 a year.

In the English counties the electorate was increased by 55 percent, from 240,000 voters to 370,000. The borough electorate rose from c200,000 to 280,000 men, an increase of 40 percent. The most dramatic changes came in Scotland, where the pre-reform electorate of 4,500 soared to over 64,000 voters.

The uniform borough franchise appeared to be a radical measure, but it was hedged round with qualifications. Electors had to have been resident in their home for at least one year, and had to pay the **poor rates**. Many men in industrial towns moved house very often in search of work, and thus did not qualify for the vote. Equally, a uniform national franchise of £10 enfranchised many men in towns where rents were high, such as London, but its impact was much less in the northern towns such as Manchester and Leeds, where rents were much lower.

KEY TERM

Poor rate
An annual charge made on every property in a parish. The money raised was used exclusively to relieve the poor.

Several boroughs actually saw a reduction over time in the size of the pre-reform electorate. Those men who already had the vote in 1832 were allowed to retain their right to vote, but over time their numbers inevitably dwindled, and some boroughs saw a significant fall in the size of their electorate in the years to 1867.

Many people were bitterly disappointed with the Reform Act. The skilled working classes had high hopes of being admitted to the franchise, but the borough franchise of £10 was too high a hurdle for most of them. One way in which they expressed their grievances was to support the Chartist movement (see Chapter 4, pages 84–105), which flourished in the late 1830s and 1840s.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

The extent of reform in 1832

1 The Representation of the People Act 1832 is popularly referred to as 'The Great Reform Act'. Study the factors that led to reform, and the changes that the 1832 Act made to the franchise.

2 In your opinion, does the Act deserve to be known as 'The Great Reform Act'?

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Historians and the Reform Act 1832

Historians have interpreted the Reform Act in different ways. J.R.M. Butler, in *The Passing of the Great Reform Bill* (1914), suggested that the Act moved the UK towards a fully democratic system, and Stephen Farrell's article in *History Today* (July 2010) is entitled *Reform Act: A First Step Towards Democracy*. Other historians have been less complimentary. Norman Gash, writing in *Aristocracy and People* (1979), asserted that the Act was 'no more than a clumsy but vigorous hacking at the old structure to make it roughly more acceptable'. On the other hand, Eric Evans, in *The Forging of the Modern State* (1983), suggests that, while the Reform Act can be seen as an aristocratic measure, designed to preserve as much of the old system as possible, it nonetheless paved the way for further change, and 'opened the door on a new political world'.

Politicians realised that, if parliament could be subject to a fundamental reform, the whole philosophy of reform could be extended to other areas of national life. The 1830s and 1840s would witness a flurry of reforms, to the Poor Law and to local government, as well as the growing regulation of mines, factories and banks. Moreover, the Act of 1832 marked the beginning, not the end, of parliamentary reform. The history of parliament during the succeeding century was punctuated by further electoral reform.

Representation of the People Act 1867

The revival of interest in parliamentary reform

In 1834, the Tory leader and future prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, declared his belief that the Reform Act was 'a final and irrevocable settlement of a great constitutional question', and most politicians agreed that further changes to the constitution were not necessary. Even Russell, the champion of reform in 1831–32, spoke in 1837 against further electoral changes, thus earning for himself the nickname of 'Finality Jack'. The Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s revived interest in the issue for a while (see Chapter 4, pages 84–105), but thereafter it appeared that the public became indifferent to further political change. Reform bills were introduced by the Liberals in 1859 and 1860, but evoked very little interest or enthusiasm.

One major obstacle to reform was removed in October 1865, with the death of the prime minister, Viscount Palmerston. Palmerston had agreed with Peel that parliamentary reform was a settled issue and he vigorously opposed those members of his government who were prepared to take up the issue. The most prominent Liberal minister who came out in favour of reform was William Gladstone, who declared in 1864 that 'every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal fitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution'. On Palmerston's death in 1865, Russell, who had steered the 1832 Act through parliament, became prime minister, and reform was once again placed on the political agenda.

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EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

William Gladstone (1809–98)

Gladstone was elected to parliament in 1832 and soon made his mark as a 'stern, unbending Tory'. He held minor offices in the 1830s and 1840s, but left the Tory Party when it split in 1846 (see Chapter 2, page 50). In 1859, Gladstone was one of a number of leading politicians who came together to form the Liberal Party. Between 1868 and 1894, he held office as prime minister on four occasions, more than any other politician before or since. His later years in office were dominated by his unsuccessful attempts to grant Home Rule to Ireland.

Gladstone's Liberalism encompassed gradual political reforms, financial orthodoxy and a strong sense of moral duty, which stemmed from his deeply held religious beliefs. He stamped his political views on the Liberal Party for a generation.

Unlike 1831–32, there was no substantial pressure from outside parliament for reform before 1865. The economic distress of the late 1840s had gradually declined, and was followed by sustained growth as the Industrial Revolution drove Britain to a position of economic pre-eminence in the world. With no real grievances to drive demands for reform, the 1850s and early 1860s were largely free from political agitation.

By 1865, however, developments at home and abroad had reawakened interest in parliamentary reform, and pressure for franchise reform grew. The growth of mass-circulation newspapers allowed people to follow the unification struggle in Italy of 1859–60, and the Polish revolt of 1863, with great interest. The American Civil War (1861–65) had a major impact on public opinion. The war, and the naval blockade of the south, meant that the southern states were unable to export raw cotton to the textile mills of Lancashire. The subsequent cotton famine was accompanied by widespread unemployment and distress in northern towns and cities. Nonetheless, the mill workers were unwavering in their support for Lincoln and the northern states, and against the southern institution of slavery. Their attitude persuaded many, especially leading Liberals and radicals, that a limited extension of the franchise to 'the respectable working classes' would not pose a serious threat to the existing political order.

The demand for reform was driven by a number of organised groups, similar to Attwood's Birmingham Political Union of the early 1830s. The Reform Union, formed in 1864, gained support among the prosperous middle classes, who saw reform as a means of furthering their own commercial interests, as well as challenging what they regarded as the inefficiency and waste of national government. Newspaper reports on the Crimean War (1854–56) had demonstrated the incompetence of the military and civilian leadership, which had caused a large number of deaths in the armed forces. The National Reform Union believed that franchise reform would lead to a more efficient and effective government. At home, the Northcote–Trevelyan report of 1854 condemned the inefficiency of the civil service and recommended that entry to the service should be based on merit rather than class. The Reform Union supported institutional as well as parliamentary reform: it promoted a moderate extension of the franchise and the introduction of a secret ballot.

The Reform League, formed in 1865, was a much larger and more formidable body. It differed from the Reform Union because of its commitment to universal manhood suffrage rather than the more modest household suffrage favoured by the Reform Union. The league had a strong following among trade unionists and the skilled working class, who hoped that parliamentary reform would lead to improved trade union rights as well as more extensive labour laws. Although the league was far more radical than the Reform Union, both organisations agreed to work together to promote parliamentary reform.

By the end of 1865, the Reform Union and the Reform League had developed strong national organisations that could call on widespread backing to pressure MPs into supporting franchise reform.

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The Tories and the Second Reform Act

Russell had become prime minister in October 1865, with Gladstone as his Chancellor of the Exchequer. In March 1866, Gladstone introduced a reform bill in the House of Commons. This was a modest affair, which would reduce the borough franchise from £10 to £7, and extend the county franchise to tenants paying an annual rent of £14 or more. Gladstone's proposals would add around 200,000 voters in the boroughs and 170,000 voters in the counties. Vigorous opposition from Disraeli and the Conservatives, and from many uncompromising Whigs, led by Robert Lowe and the **Adullamites**, caused the bill to fail and led to the government's resignation in June. A minority Conservative government took office, with Lord Derby as prime minister and Benjamin Disraeli as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

KEY TERM

Adullamite
An anti-reform faction within the Liberal Party whose members were opposed to any change to the electoral system. Robert Lowe was the leading Adullamite: his speeches could not conceal his hatred of the working classes, describing them as 'unreflective and violent people'.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81)
The son of a Jewish Italian father, Disraeli was elected as a Tory MP in 1837. He became a bitter opponent of Peel in the 1840s because the latter did not promote him to high office. Disraeli played a pivotal role in bringing down Peel's government in 1846 over the repeal of the Corn Laws. He served briefly as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1852 and 1858–59, and it was as chancellor for a third time that he steered the Second Reform Act through parliament in 1866–67.

Unlike Gladstone, Disraeli was keen to attack social injustice, and passed several important social reforms during his ministry of 1874–80, which appealed to the new mass electorate. He promoted ideas of 'one-nation Conservatism', which influenced the development of the Conservative Party long after his death. His importance is described in Chapter 2 on page 51.

Few people expected the Conservatives to take up the issue of franchise reform, but Derby and Disraeli had several reasons for doing so. The Conservative Party had been in the political wilderness for 20 years, ever since they split over the issue of the Corn Laws in 1846. Derby and Disraeli had held office briefly in 1852, and in 1858–59. On both occasions their governments were little more than holding operations, which ended once the Liberals had regrouped and were ready to return to office. Derby and Disraeli were no longer prepared to govern simply at the pleasure of their political opponents. Instead, they were keen to restore the image of the Tory Party to operate as a major political force. Now that reform was on the political agenda, they decided to seize the initiative and put forward their own proposals. Disraeli was even prepared to outflank the Liberals with a substantial and radical measure.

The Tories' decision to reform was also influenced by events outside parliament. The Reform League organised meetings in Trafalgar Square in support of Gladstone's reform bill and, following the defeat of the bill, the league organised a number of mass protests and disturbances. A meeting of 200,000 people at Hyde Park in July became a riot, as railings were torn down and the police had to call for support from the Life Guards. Despite these setbacks, the league continued to pressure parliament over the winter of 1866–67.

The economic situation declined dramatically in 1866. In May, the financial house of Overend and Gurney collapsed, leading to a run on the banks and the collapse of many companies. The rest of 1866 saw little improvement in the economic situation. Heavy rains had wiped out many crops, and meat prices shot up as the virulent rinderpest disease wiped out many herds of cattle.

Thus, there were a number of factors pressuring for reform in 1865–67, as well as significant attempts to resist change.

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Factors promoting reform

- Since 1860, there had been a dramatic rise in the circulation of the popular press, a reflection of growing interest in politics and reform.
- The Reform Union and the Reform League organised mass demonstrations, including the Hyde Park riots, to put pressure on MPs to support parliamentary reform.
- Economic distress was widespread, especially in the cotton towns of northern England as a result of the cotton famine.
- The Conservative Party was ready to take up the cause of reform.

Factors promoting resistance

- The more conservative Liberals, known as the Adullamites, offered strong resistance in parliament to any reform measure.
- Not all Conservatives were prepared to support reform. Their resistance was led by Cranborne, later Lord Salisbury.
- There was little genuine enthusiasm within parliament for reform.
- The landed gentry, who had sided with the South in the American Civil War, feared a dilution of their power and influence.

It was against a background of economic and social distress, as well as extra-parliamentary pressure, that Disraeli introduced his reform proposals in February 1867. The very idea of reform led to splits within the Tory Party, as three ministers, Cranborne, Carnarvon and General Peel, immediately resigned. Disraeli withdrew his original proposals and decided on a far-reaching and radical measure, which was introduced in March.

The Reform Act 1832 had resembled very closely Russell's original proposals of 1831. However, the Second Reform Act 1867 bore very little resemblance to Disraeli's original proposals. What began as a proposal to enlarge the borough electorate by 227,000 was changed dramatically as it passed through the House of Commons, and ended up doubling the national electorate.

SOURCE 7 The Hyde Park riots of 1866. Supporters of the Reform League are tearing down railings in the park, while the police attempt to maintain order. From an engraving printed in the *Illustrated London News*, 4 August 1866.



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Disraeli's bill of 18 March 1867 proposed to give the county franchise to those who rented land worth £15 a year, a substantial reduction on the £50 rent level set in 1832. Disraeli also proposed to extend the borough suffrage to all householders of two years' residence who paid rates directly to their local authority. However, this apparently radical measure was hedged around with qualifications. Lodgers in towns would not qualify, nor would the large number of **compounder** tenants. To offset the new borough electorate, a number of 'fancy franchises' were proposed, granting the vote to university graduates, members of 'learned professions' and those with £50 in the bank.

KEY TERM

Compounder
A tenant who paid a combination of rent and rates to the landlord of the property, who then paid the rates separately to the local authority.

The leaders of the National Reform Union and the Reform League felt that the Tory proposals were too modest, and decided to put further pressure on parliament with demonstrations in London and throughout the country. Despite the government's attempts to ban it, a meeting in Hyde Park was arranged for 6 May. A crowd of 200,000 people turned up to listen to speeches demanding reform, with 15,000 special constables, police and the armed forces held in reserve in case rioting broke out. Contemporaries suggested that the era of mass political activity had returned, for such a huge demonstration of popular feeling had not been seen since the Chartist demonstrations of the 1830s and 1840s. However, it is not clear whether the meeting influenced either the government or the House of Commons.

Disraeli's strategy on the reform bill had been decided long before the Hyde Park meeting. He was ready to accept substantial amendments to the bill as long as they were not proposed by the Liberal front bench. He wanted to ensure that the final Act could not be claimed by the Liberals as reflecting their own proposals, but that it was a Tory measure through and through. While he rejected some measures, such as the proposal by John Stuart Mill to concede votes for women, he accepted some very radical amendments that changed the bill almost beyond recognition.

Disraeli's intention to accept a number of amendments in order to save his bill led to dramatic changes in the proposed borough franchise. The residency qualification of two years was reduced to one year, and the vote was extended to lodgers, also of one year's residency, who paid rent of £10 a year. A third amendment was the most important of all. Proposed by a Newark MP, Hodgkinson's amendment would abolish the distinction between compounders and those who paid their rates in person. This measure alone would enfranchise 500,000 men. To universal astonishment, not least to Hodgkinson himself, Disraeli accepted an amendment whose effect was to create household suffrage as the basis of the borough franchise. Disraeli quietly dropped the 'fancy franchises' and the bill passed into law in August 1867.

The impact of the Representation of the People Act 1867 on the franchise

Gladstone's franchise proposals of 1866 would have extended the national franchise by around 370,000 men. Disraeli's Act, in comparison, virtually doubled the electorate, to two million voters.

In the counties, the historic 40-shilling franchise was retained. The electorate was increased by giving the vote to owners or leaseholders of land worth £5 a year, and landowners whose property had a rateable value of £12 a year. The reform expanded the county electorate from 540,000 to 800,000.

The borough franchise was given to all householders who had lived in a property for 12 months, and to lodgers, also of 12 months' standing, who occupied lodgings worth £10 in rent. The extension of the borough franchise was impressive. The borough electorate in 1866 numbered around 510,000 voters: the Second Reform Act created an urban electorate of 1,200,000. The number of working-class voters rose significantly, and in many constituencies, such as Sheffield and several London boroughs, the majority of the electorate was now drawn from the working class.

Despite the apparent radicalism of the Act, universal male suffrage had not been conceded. It is true that one in three adult males could now vote, instead of one in five before 1867, and that, for the first time, the majority of electors were working class. However, the franchise remained, as it had always been, based on property and a stake in the country. While householders were granted the vote, other male members of their family were not so fortunate. Moreover, the one-year residency qualification effectively disqualified the large number of people who moved house or lodgings, even within the same town, in search of employment.

There was little common ground between the bills introduced by Liberal and Conservative governments in 1866–67, but they shared one characteristic: neither party was prepared to concede the vote to what was known as the 'residuum'. These were the very poorest urban classes, unskilled, largely uneducated labourers, whose families lived in appalling conditions in slum properties. For the residuum, life was a constant struggle simply to survive. Not only were they ignored by the political parties, but the skilled working classes, who viewed themselves as the 'aristocracy of labour', regarded the residuum with undisguised contempt.

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ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Similarities and differences

The following list of factors influenced the passing of both the Reform Act 1832 and the Second Reform Act 1867:

- Influences from overseas
- The state of the economy
- Extra-parliamentary pressure
- Party advantage
- The press
- The extension of the franchise.

1 List these factors in a table, with two further columns headed 'Similarities' and 'Differences'. Complete the table with one or two sentences highlighting similar and different ways in which each factor influenced the two Acts. For example, although both Acts extended the franchise, you might decide that the 1867 changes were more radical simply because the vote was given to far more people than in 1832.

2 When you have completed your table, write a short paragraph on which of the two Acts was, in your opinion, more far-reaching. Give reasons for your choice.

As the reform bill made its final passage through the House of Lords, Derby commented that 'we are making a great experiment' and 'taking a leap in the dark'. In 1832, the existing electorate had increased by 50 percent to 650,000, but the Second Reform Act saw a doubling of those entitled to vote to almost two million. The Reform Act 1867 marked the beginning of a clear shift of political influence, away from the traditional agricultural interests in the south of England and towards the manufacturing towns of the Midlands and the north.

The parties had to adjust to the new electoral landscape in many ways. Working-class voters expected reforms that tackled their grievances. The 1830s and 1840s had seen a number of reforms following the 1832 Act, and there was a similar burst of reform after 1867. Throughout the 1870s, both Liberal and Conservative governments responded to the new political environment with a wide range of reforms that tackled issues such as education, urban housing, public health and the rights of trade unions. The parties also recognised that they had to win the support of the electorate, and thus national party organisations were established to take the party's messages to the new voters (see Chapter 2, pages 56–57).

Representation of the People Act 1884

The election of 1880, which returned Gladstone to office for a second time, was the third to be fought under the terms of the Reform Act 1867. Despite the gloomy predictions of many politicians, such as Derby, who saw the Act as a 'leap in the dark', the elections of 1868, 1874 and 1880 saw no fundamental shift away from the traditional contests between Tories and Liberals (though the rise of the Irish Home Rule Party, which took 63 seats in 1880, marks the beginning of a new and difficult phase in Anglo-Irish relations).

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Extra-parliamentary pressure played a significant part in the reform crises of 1831–32 and 1866–67, but there was no significant pressure from inside or outside parliament for further changes to the electoral system. However, Gladstone found it difficult to justify the maintenance of separate borough and county franchises, with household suffrage in the boroughs, but a more restrictive £12 suffrage in the counties. The experience of living with the Second Reform Act suggested to Gladstone that it would be safe to enfranchise agricultural labourers in the countryside. He may have been influenced by partisan advantage, since many assumed that any new county voters, such as small tenant farmers and agricultural labourers, would be likely to vote for the Liberals, and thus weaken the hold of the Tories and the aristocratic landowners in the counties.

Although there was no pressure for a further extension to the franchise, Gladstone introduced a reform bill in 1884. The measure proposed to replace the separate and unequal franchises for counties and boroughs with a single national qualification granted to male householders and £10 lodgers. It passed easily through the House of Commons, but was blocked in the House of Lords, thanks to the intervention of the Conservative leader Lord Salisbury. Salisbury was aware of the simple electoral fact that the Liberals' strength came from the boroughs, while the Tories dominated the county seats. Salisbury feared that the widening of the franchise would weaken the Conservative Party dramatically and establish Liberal dominance over towns and countryside alike. The rejection of the bill thus reflected the concerns of both Salisbury and his party.

In October 1884, Queen Victoria urged the parties to negotiate to end the deadlock. Party leaders met at Salisbury's London home and agreed the Arlington Street compact: the Tories would allow the reform bill to pass as long as it was followed by a major redistribution of seats. Following the Arlington Street compact, the Third Reform Act passed into law with little debate. For the first time in British parliamentary history, there was a uniform national electoral qualification based on household suffrage in towns and counties. Once again there was a dramatic increase in the size of the electorate, which rose by 84 percent to 5.5 million: some 2.5 million new voters were admitted to the franchise, a far greater numerical increase than in 1832 or 1867.

Contemporary observers, and many historians, believed that the Third Reform Act had established a democratic electoral system in Britain, but this was far from the case. Household suffrage excluded many adult males. The sons of householders, servants, members of the armed forces, as well as most of the 'residuum', the many unskilled and casual labourers who did not meet the residency qualification, and, of course, women – all these remained disfranchised. Recent research has suggested that the Act excluded 40 percent of adult males from the franchise, an issue that was not addressed until the First World War.

Representation of the People Act 1918

Many Victorian politicians expressed alarm at successive increases in the size of the electorate brought about by the Reform Acts of 1832–84. The increase in numbers of a few hundred thousand men in 1832, 700,000 in 1867, and even the 2.5 million enfranchised in 1884, pale into insignificance beside the Fourth Reform Act 1918, which tripled the electorate from 7,000,000 to 21,000,000 and, for the first time, gave the vote to over eight million women.

In 1916, Britain had been at war for two years. An election had been due in 1915, but was postponed until after the war. An election would have been impractical because, despite the work of the boundary commissioners, equal electoral districts had been impossible to maintain, and the electoral registers were hopelessly out of date. Moreover, an election fought under the 1884 franchise would have meant that hardly any soldiers fighting on the Western Front would have qualified to vote.

The government addressed the issue of reform with the appointment of the Speaker's Conference of 1916, at which representatives of the main political parties drew up a number of proposals for electoral reform.

The conference proposed two significant changes. Firstly, all adult males aged 21 and over were to be given the vote. The war service of younger men was also recognised with a proposal that men aged 19–20 who had fought in the war would be entitled to vote in the post-war election. Universal male suffrage, the central demand by radical reformers for a century, was finally conceded in the Fourth Reform Act 1918, and Britain had taken one of the last steps towards becoming a fully fledged democracy.

The triumph of adult male suffrage, and the enfranchising of over five million adult males, however, has been overshadowed in the popular imagination by the proposals made to the Speaker's Conference on women's suffrage.

The Speaker's Conference decided that the issue of female suffrage could no longer be ignored. However, leading politicians were reluctant to give the vote to women on the same terms as men. The huge loss of life on the Western Front would have made female voters the majority in the post-war electorate.

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SOURCE 8 The Labour Leader Keir Hardie addressing a large suffragette meeting in Trafalgar Square, 1908.



As a result, the Speaker's Conference moved towards female suffrage in a very cautious fashion. The 1918 Act enfranchised women aged 30 and over, as long as they were householders or the wives of householders, university graduates or rented property valued at £5 per annum. These restrictive terms meant that over 20 percent of women over 30 did not qualify for the vote because they were unable to meet the stringent qualifications.

Women were now able to stand for election to parliament, and several did so in the 1918 election. The first woman to be elected was Countess Marckievicz, a member of the Irish party Sinn Fein, but she never took her seat, since Sinn Fein's 73 members had agreed to boycott parliament. The first woman to sit in the House of Commons, Nancy Astor, took her seat in 1919.

A commonly held view on the granting of votes for women in 1918 is that it rewarded women for their war work, whether in munitions, on farms or as nurses on the Western Front. However, most women involved in these activities were under 30, and so failed to qualify for the vote in 1918. The opponents of equal suffrage for men and women were perhaps influenced by the memory of the violent suffragette agitation which had clouded politics in the years before 1914, and feared its revival in the difficult post-war era.

Representation of the People Act 1928

The general elections in the years 1918–24 saw little change in voting habits, and this persuaded political leaders that it would not be dangerous to introduce universal suffrage for both men and women. However, providing equal voting rights to women after 1918 was not without controversy. There has been historical debate over how equal franchise rights were achieved in 1928. Feminist societies, notably the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), which had formed from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1918, continued to point out the inequalities between female and male voters. Just 1 in 15 of employed women could vote as the majority of professional women rented their accommodation and therefore failed to meet the property qualifications to vote.

The reform of 1918 kept working women disenfranchised. The Labour Party's failed 1919 women's emancipation bill, which would provide equal suffrage rights to women from the age of 21, was followed by equal franchise bills almost every year in the early 1920s. The Labour government of 1924 fell before it had a chance to introduce any suffrage reform. Between 1918 and 1927, the NUSEC kept the question of equal franchise open in parliament. More important than public pressure or Labour's efforts was the Conservative Party's determination, under Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's leadership, to attract women voters. Until 1927, the majority of the party's backbench MPs opposed equal franchise for women on reaching 21, but the party's leadership believed that women were the key to the party's future. The women's organisation in the party was the fastest growing element within it, with more than a million female Conservative Party members by 1928. Women were more likely than men in the 1920s to vote Conservative. The Conservative Party tended to do much better in constituencies with higher proportions of female voters, while Labour struggled in areas where more women voted. Baldwin supported equal franchise from 1924, and in 1927 his cabinet agreed to extend the franchise to women at the age of 21. They wanted to secure new women voters as Conservative supporters.

Despite this Conservative support for equal suffrage, in 1927 opponents of equal suffrage mounted one last attempt to prevent the reform. The *Daily Mail* published several articles claiming that reform meant giving the vote to 'flappers'. The newspaper portrayed these women as young, single, sexually active and politically ignorant women. This stereotype was aimed at stirring up Conservative opposition to Baldwin's extension of the franchise. Those opposed also claimed that the extension would create a majority of women voters who would vote as a single unified bloc, which would bring about the feminisation of political culture. Nevertheless, the 1928 equal franchise bill passed comfortably in the Commons by 387 to 10 votes, becoming in law the Representation of the People Act. This Act gave women the vote on the same terms as men, adding a further 5.2 million women to the electorate. Within just ten years, women had gone from being completely unenfranchised to a majority position in the electorate, with 14.5 million women voters, compared with 12.25 million men. Millicent Fawcett, a leading campaigner for the suffrage and for women's rights, was present in parliament when the bill completed its passage into law. She wrote: 'It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the reform bill on 20 May 1867. So I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning'.

A Level Exam-Style Question Section C

To what extent was reform of the franchise in the years 1780–1928 influenced by extra-parliamentary pressure? (20 marks)

Tip

You need to know when pressure from outside parliament influenced ministers and MPs, and you should reach a judgement on the importance of the suffragettes in the making of the Acts of 1918 and 1928. You should also analyse the significance of other relevant factors, such as the collapse of the Tory Party in 1830, the intention of most politicians to secure some advantages for their party, and the importance of other factors.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Why did it take so long to achieve universal adult suffrage?

1 The transition from an aristocratic electoral system to one based on universal adult suffrage took almost a century. Explain briefly how each of the following points helped or hindered the process of change in the years 1832–1928:

- The prevailing state of the economy
- The attitude of the working class to franchise reform
- The campaign for women's suffrage.

2 Which other factors, in your opinion, were of major importance either in promoting or hindering the process of change?

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HOW SIGNIFICANT WERE CHANGES IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE YEARS c1780–1918?

Each of the Reform Acts passed in the years 1832–1918 included provisions for the redistribution of parliamentary seats to take account of changes in the franchise. The national distribution of seats in 1780 became increasingly indefensible with the growth of new areas of population in the Midlands and the north. Although the Whig government's reforms in 1832 did not attempt to make constituencies of fairly equal size in terms of population and the number of electors, MPs did try to create an electoral map that was broadly acceptable to the new electorate.

The problems of representation, c1780

- There were 558 parliamentary seats in England, Scotland and Wales. This number rose to 658 after the Act of Union of 1800 abolished the Irish parliament and provided 100 Irish seats for the Westminster parliament.
- There were 122 county seats, with each county, regardless of size, represented by two MPs.
- The boroughs and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge comprised a total of 436 seats. The number of electors in each borough varied dramatically. Smaller boroughs consisting of 500–1,000 voters were sometimes under the direct control of the government, notably naval bases along the south coast of England.

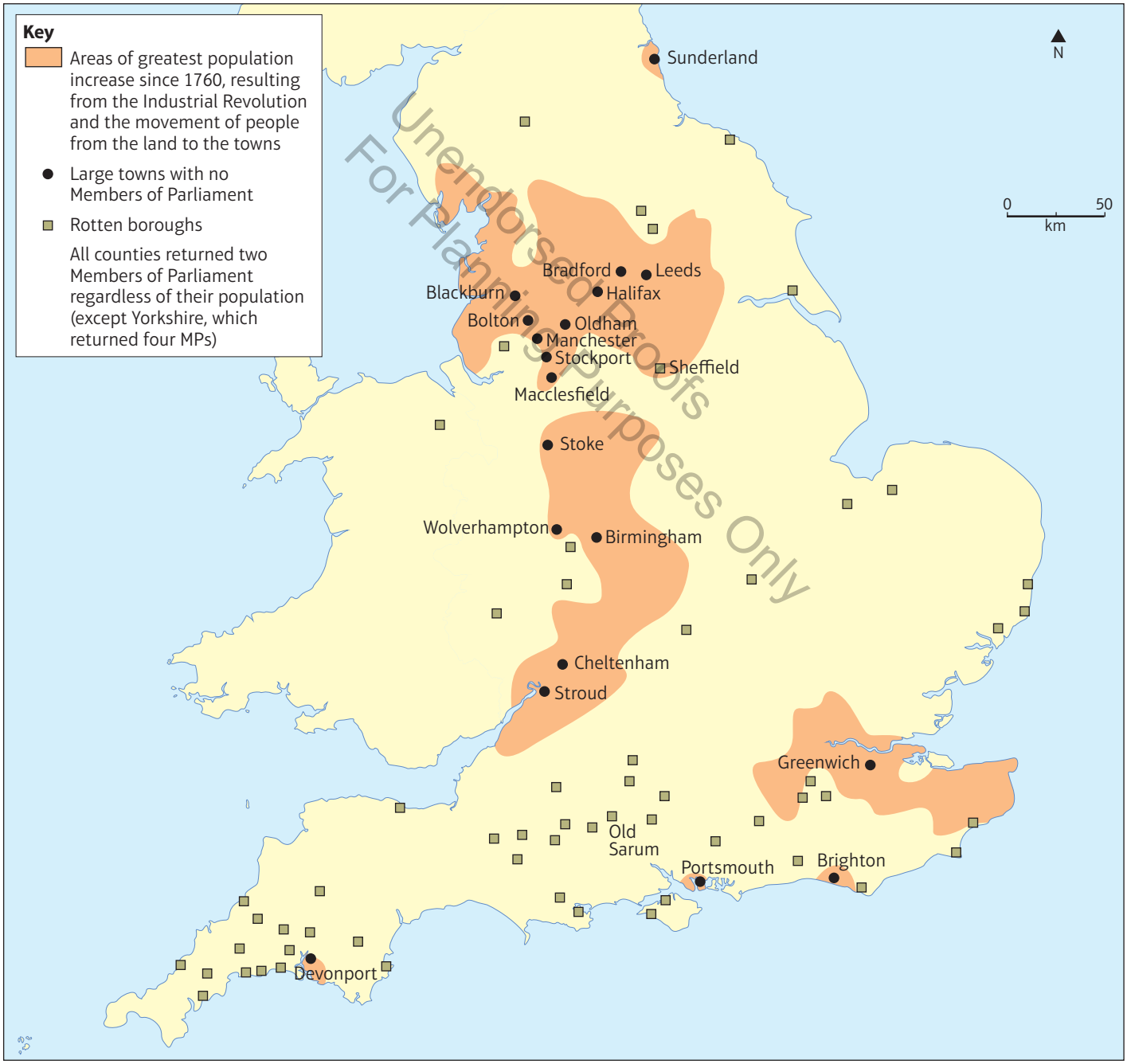


Figure 1.1 Parliamentary representation before 1832.

- In many smaller boroughs, the electors were quite content to sell their votes to the highest bidder. The Suffolk town of Sudbury was notoriously corrupt in this respect, and in 1844 it lost both of its MPs.
- The practice of sending two MPs to parliament to represent each county in the UK had been a consistent feature of the electoral system since the reign of Henry VI. The granting of MPs to boroughs was a more haphazard affair. In many cases, seats were allocated to towns that possessed some economic or religious significance. Although depopulation or economic decline reduced the population and the electorate in many boroughs, they retained the right to send one or two MPs to parliament.

Figure 1.1 shows that the distribution of seats at the end of the 18th century was heavily weighted towards the south and south-west of England. To the south of a line drawn between Bristol and London were seats that returned 40 percent of all MPs to Westminster. Cornwall returned 44 MPs in all, just one seat fewer than the 45 MPs elected for the whole of Scotland. Moreover, the representative system did not take into account the changes in the distribution of population that had been taking place throughout the 18th century. The growing populations of industrial areas, especially in the Midlands, Lancashire and Yorkshire, were not reflected in the electoral system. By 1780, Lancashire's population was four times that of Cornwall (1,300,000 compared with 300,000), but Lancashire returned just 14 MPs to Cornwall's 44.

The failure of Pitt's proposals

Pitt had displayed his commitment to parliamentary reform before becoming prime minister in December 1783. He was following in the footsteps of his father, Pitt the Elder, who had proposed some measures of reform in the 1750s and 1760s, but without success. Pitt entered parliament in 1781 as member for the pocket borough of Appleby in Westmorland, and soon made his mark as a champion of parliamentary reform. He was influenced by Christopher Wyvill, whose Yorkshire Association was founded in 1780 with the aim of eliminating corruption in parliament. Early in 1782, Pitt proposed the creation of a committee to address several issues concerning parliamentary representation, but was easily defeated. In May 1783, he made a more specific proposal, to disfranchise a number of corrupt boroughs and transfer their seats to the counties. Once again, his measure was defeated, though by a smaller margin than before.

Pitt made a third attempt at reform in 1785. In April, he introduced a detailed measure that would abolish 36 corrupt boroughs and transfer their seats to London and to the counties. Borough owners would be given financial compensation for the loss of what was regarded as their personal property. Pitt hoped that his personal standing as prime minister might gain him support, especially from the independent MPs, though opposition to the measure remained strong. George III was openly hostile to the measure, and there was no groundswell of opinion in the country as a whole for reform. Fox, who was Pitt's chief opponent in the House of Commons, had long supported reform, and was ready to support Pitt on the issue. However, he refused to accept Pitt's suggestion that £1 million should be made available to compensate the owners of seats. Fox and his supporters therefore opposed the bill presented to parliament in April 1785.

In his speech proposing the reform bill, Pitt referred to the opponents of the measure, and the reasons why they could not support reform (Source 9).

SOURCE 9 From the speech that Pitt made in the House of Commons on 18 April 1785 in support of his reform proposals. Here, Pitt identified the principal opponents of the bill, and the reasons for their opposition.

> Those who, with a sort of superstitious awe, reverence the constitution so much as to be fearful of touching even its defects, had always reprobated every attempt to purify the representation. They acknowledged its inequality and corruption, but in their enthusiasm for the grand fabric, they would not suffer a reformer, with unhallowed hands, to repair the injuries which it suffered from time. Others who, perceiving the deficiencies that had arisen from the circumstances, were solicitous of their amendment, yet resisted the attempt, under the argument, that when once we had presumed to touch the constitution in one point, the awe which had heretofore kept us back from the daring enterprize of innovation might abate, and there was no foreseeing to what alarming lengths we might progressively go, under the mask of reformation. Others there were, but for these he confessed he had not the same respect, who considered the present state of representation as pure and adequate to all its purposes, and perfectly consistent with the first principles of representation.

Pitt's bill was defeated in the House of Commons by 248 votes to 174. He remained a supporter of parliamentary reform, but in the years after 1785 he had more pressing issues to contend with. The French Revolution, and the explosive growth in radical activity and ideas, meant that Pitt never took up the issue again. In 1792, the Whig Charles Grey introduced a reform proposal that was almost identical to that championed by Pitt. Pitt strongly opposed the measure, which he claimed would lead to the overthrow of the British constitution.

Reasons for resistance to and key changes brought about by reform

Representation of the People Act 1832

Most extra-parliamentary pressure for reform in the years c1780–1830 focused on demands for the extension of the franchise, with redistribution being only a secondary issue. Concern over widespread corruption in the boroughs, and the ease with which their members could be dragooned into supporting the government of the day, were brought into sharp relief with the controversy over Catholic relief in the late 1820s.

The decision made by Wellington's government to pass a Relief Act in 1829 was opposed in many areas, especially in the universities. Peel had served as MP for Oxford University since 1817. His support of Catholic relief led him to resign his seat in January 1829 and force a by-election in an attempt to regain the support of the university's electors. Anti-Catholic feeling in Oxford was so strong that Peel was defeated in February, just a few days

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before he was due to introduce the relief bill in the House of Commons.

A solution to Peel's predicament came from the town of Westbury in Wiltshire. Sir Manasseh Lopes, one of the town's MPs, and owner of the borough, resigned his seat. Within a week, a by-election was held and the town's three electors awarded the seat to Peel. Manoeuvres such as these influenced many people to support demands for a more equitable distribution of seats.

In 1830, the prime minister, Earl Grey, ordered a comprehensive review of the whole electoral system that would inform the government's proposals in the reform bill. The review's findings revealed the impact of industrialisation and population change, and highlighted the widespread variations in the distribution of seats:

- Thirty-three English towns had a population of over 10,000 people, but returned no MPs. They included Manchester and Salford (133,788), Birmingham (85,416) and Leeds (83,796).
- Twenty-seven English boroughs had had no contested elections in the previous 30 years.

The Reform Act 1832 introduced important changes to the franchise, which added the propertied middle classes to the electorate, but changes to the distribution of seats were in many ways more radical:

- Fifty-six boroughs with a population below 2,000 lost both of their parliamentary seats.
- Thirty boroughs of between 2,000 and 4,000 people lost one MP.
- Forty-four new borough seats were created, with many of them going to the new industrial towns and cities in the Midlands and the north.
- The influence of the new borough seats was partially offset by the granting of 65 extra seats to the counties.

The Whigs had been determined to remove the worst excesses of the old representative system, but did not intend to introduce any mathematical uniformity in the distribution of seats. The new seats, especially in the boroughs, were created to reflect economic interests rather than the populations of the towns. Salford in Lancashire had an electorate of 1,497, while Reigate in Surrey had just 153; both towns returned one MP. In the Scottish counties, Perthshire's 3,180 electors returned one MP, as did Sutherland's electorate of just 84.

Figure 1.2 shows the extent to which redistribution gave large towns separate representation in parliament after 1832. Anomalies remained, however: Tamworth in Staffordshire, for example, remained under the control of Peel's family. Peel's father had represented the seat since 1790, and on his death in 1830 Peel left Westbury to take control of the family seat. There were also many larger towns, especially in Yorkshire and Warwickshire, which did not have separate representation. Although London and the counties gained several seats, they remained under-represented in terms of population.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Pitt and Grey

Some historians have argued that it was the level of support in parliament that explains the failure of Pitt's proposals in the 1780s and Grey's success in 1832. Suggest two other reasons to explain the different outcomes of both men's measures.

Representation of the People Act 1867

By the mid-1860s, organisations such as the Reform League began to campaign not only for universal suffrage, but also for measures to remedy the imbalance in the distribution of seats. For instance, 334 borough MPs represented a total of 9.5 million people, while the 11.5 million people in the counties had just 162 members. To many contemporaries, the most important feature of the Reform Act 1867 was the substantial increase in the size of the electorate brought about by the introduction of household suffrage in the boroughs. A measure of redistribution was undertaken, though it appeared to be less substantial or significant than the changes made in 1832.

Disraeli, however, believed that redistribution was 'the very soul of the question of reform'. He realised that extending the vote to many of the working classes might, in the short term at least, work to the disadvantage of the Conservatives, and tried to limit its significance through changes to the electoral map.

The Act made changes to the number of seats in both boroughs and counties:

- Boroughs with a population below 10,000 lost one or both of their MPs.
- Eleven new constituencies were created, and the number of MPs for Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham was increased from two to three.
- The English and Welsh counties were allocated an extra 25 MPs.
- Scotland was given five more seats, and three new university seats were created.

The most important feature of the 1867 redistribution was its impact, not in the new boroughs, but in the counties. Firstly, a further 25 seats for the counties led to a strengthening of the landed interest, whose members tended to favour the Conservatives rather than the Liberals. Secondly, the creation of new borough seats meant that their electorates would not be voting in the counties, where they might challenge the entrenched power of the nobility and the large landowners.

The 1868 election result suggests that Disraeli had miscalculated the effects on the Conservatives of redistribution. Rather than increasing its representation, the party lost eight seats as Gladstone's Liberals stormed to power with a substantial majority. In the longer term, however, the Conservatives established themselves as a major force in British politics, partly as a result of the changes brought about by Lord Salisbury in 1885.

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Figure 1.2 Parliamentary representation after 1832.

Ballot Act 1872

The year 1868 saw the first general election fought under the Reform Act 1867, and Gladstone's Liberal Party secured a strong parliamentary majority. Gladstone was concerned by the publicity given to the widespread corruption and intimidation that took place before and during the poll, and therefore he proposed measures to tackle corruption and protect electoral secrecy with the introduction of the secret ballot. The corrupt practice measures were dropped, but the government pressed on with the secret ballot, which had been one of the points demanded by the Chartist movement in the 1830s and 1840s.

Some MPs believed that the bill would reduce corrupt practices and save many voters from their baser instincts. These members believed many of the new electorates were open to bribery or intimidation, which would be reduced by the secret ballot.

The bill was not controversial, and passed easily into law in 1872. While it may have ended some of the worst forms of malpractice,

its initial effects were not clear, and the influence of landlords in the counties and factory owners in towns continued to affect some electors. Perhaps the most important short-term effect of the ballot was seen in Ireland. Supporters of Irish Home Rule were now less open to intimidation, and the Home Rule movement grew dramatically over the next 20 years.

Corrupt Practices Act 1883

Issues of parliamentary reform loomed large during Gladstone's second ministry (1880–85). Many MPs were scandalised by the widespread bribery and corruption that had taken place during the 1880 election, one of the most corrupt and expensive elections for many years, and the Liberals prepared to tackle an issue of growing importance.

An unforeseen consequence of the redistribution of seats carried out in 1867 was that, once borough seats were freed from the aristocratic influence that controlled the surrounding counties, they became open to electoral competition. Many candidates, Liberal and Conservative, spent large sums of money trying to secure the votes of the growing electorate. Their methods included simple bribery, treating (the provision of free food and drink) and 'colourable employment' (the engaging of voters in nominal jobs). Historian H.J. Hanham's research suggested that, between 1865 and 1884, 64 English boroughs 'possessed a corrupt element', of which 21 were 'extremely corrupt'.

Sudbury had been disfranchised for corruption on a large scale in 1844, but dubious practices remained a prominent feature in electoral contests. A Royal Commission was appointed in 1880 to investigate the 1880 election that took place in Sandwich in Kent (Source 10).

SOURCE 10 Report of the Royal Commission on the election in Sandwich, 1881.

> Observing the nature and manner of the bribery committed at the contest between Mr. Crompton Roberts and Sir Julian Goldsmid, the general expectation that money would be distributed in bribery, the almost universal willingness and even avidity to accept bribes, the great proportion of the population implicated, the ease with which the most extensive bribery was carried out, the organisation for the purpose of bribery, which was far too facile and complete to be inexperienced, the readiness on the part of many to accept bribes from both sides, and the total absence of a voice to warn, condemn, or denounce, we cannot doubt that electoral corruption had long and extensively prevailed in the borough of Sandwich.

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The Corrupt Practices Act 1883 set stringent limits on campaign expenses. In England and Wales, candidates could spend no more than £710 for the first 2,000 voters and £40 for each additional 1,000 voters. Candidates and their agents were required to keep detailed records of expenditure, and stiff penalties could be imposed if malpractice was proved in the courts. Although there was some evidence of illegal practices after 1883, the Act finally brought an end to the culture of electoral corruption that had existed for centuries.

Redistribution Act 1885

The Redistribution Act 1885 was the work of the Tory leader, the Marquess of Salisbury. This is perhaps a little surprising, since, as Viscount Cranborne, he had resigned from Derby's cabinet in 1867 in opposition to Disraeli's proposed reforms. However, the Conservative victory in 1874 convinced Salisbury that the extension of the franchise had not damaged the Tory Party, and that franchise changes were in many ways less important than the national distribution of seats. In 1884–85, he worked on this issue with unusual energy.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Marquess of Salisbury (1830–1903)

Lord Salisbury was MP for Stamford in Lincolnshire from 1853 until 1868, when he was elevated to the House of Lords on the death of his father. As an MP, he had opposed the Reform Act 1867, and resigned from the government in protest. He was a member of Disraeli's cabinet between 1874 and 1880, and as foreign secretary played a leading role in European affairs. On Disraeli's death in 1881, Salisbury became Tory leader in the House of Lords, and was responsible for the terms of the Redistribution Act 1885. Salisbury was prime minister on three occasions: 1885–86, 1886–92 and 1895–1902. He was largely responsible for the development of 'Villa Toryism', which was widely supported by the suburban electorate, but he was very reluctant to carry out large-scale social reforms promoted by radical members of his cabinet. He embodied the traditional qualities of aristocratic conservatism.

One of the effects of the rising population in towns and cities was the development of the suburb. These were areas outside the city centres where middle-class factory owners and managers settled, free from the overcrowding and pollution of the centres of towns, but within easy reach by train or tram. In electoral terms, the suburbs, whose residents were largely Conservative voters, possessed only limited value to the Conservatives. If they voted within their county, they simply increased an existing Conservative majority; if their homes were within the borough's boundaries, their votes were often insufficient to dent a healthy Liberal majority.

The Arlington Street compact favoured the creation of equal electoral districts (like the ballot, a demand made by the Chartists). Salisbury went even further with his proposal to establish single-member constituencies. This was a radical departure from the existing practice that dated back to the 15th century: in 1885, 70 percent of all MPs sat in multi-member constituencies. Salisbury believed that equal electoral districts that would choose just one MP would provide significant electoral benefits for the Tories. Many suburbs would become constituencies separate from the towns, providing a possible inbuilt advantage for the Conservative Party.

In 1884, boundary commissioners were appointed to determine the new electoral geography. They drew up proposals based on one parliamentary seat for a population of around 50,000. The Redistribution Act 1885 saw 28 boroughs with populations of over 50,000 remain as two-member constituencies, but in all other cases single-member seats were established. The number of seats for each large city would now reflect population size. Liverpool, for example, had nine seats; Leeds had five. There were substantial changes made in the counties, again dependent on population size. Smaller counties such as Cumberland and Norfolk gained no extra MPs; the number of county seats in Lancashire rose from eight to 23, and in Yorkshire from ten to 26.

Taken together, the changes brought by the reforms of 1883–85 transformed the electoral landscape. Hanham believed that 'the years 1880–86 marked a significant break in electoral politics'. The main reason for this dramatic change is arguably down to redistribution rather than to the wider franchise established in 1884. Henceforth, political life was dominated by class rather than by interests. As Lang pointed out, 'redistribution in effect, grouped constituencies by class: middle-class suburbs, working-class inner-city areas, landed class counties and so on'. The general election of 1885 confirms this view: for the first time MPs drawn from industry and commerce outnumbered those related to the aristocracy.

Salisbury proved justified in his view that the single-member suburban constituencies would become Conservative strongholds and essential to the party's success for many years. Indeed, Evans noted that 1885 'provided what was probably the biggest single boost his party ever received. The electoral hegemony of the Conservative Party in the years 1886–1997 owed more to the shrewd cynicism of the Marquess of Salisbury than it did to the meretricious chicanery of the Earl of Beaconsfield'.

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Representation of the People Act 1918

The year 1918 saw no major redistribution of seats in England. Some major towns and cities gained seats, a process which, like 1867, limited the growth of urban influence in the counties. The Easter Rising in Ireland, in 1916, prompted a general rearrangement of Irish seats designed to increase the influence of the Unionist Party, the Irish equivalent of the Conservatives.

Between 1832 and 1918, patterns of redistribution were designed to provide some advantage to the party in power. The process was taken out of the hands of politicians in 1944, when independent boundary commissions were established to monitor the size of each constituency's electorate and recommend boundary sizes where appropriate. Parliament may not amend the boundary commission's decisions; they must be accepted or rejected as a whole.

A Level Exam-Style Question Section C

'Redistribution of seats was carried out mainly to reflect changes in Britain's economic landscape.' How far do you agree with this opinion on parliamentary redistribution in the years 1780–1918?
(20 marks)

Tip

You should analyse redistribution in the years 1780–1918, focusing on the extent of change and the increasing representation given to towns and cities. Then consider other relevant factors making for redistribution, such as attempts to eliminate corruption, and the aim of making the representative system overall acceptable to the growing electorate.

THINKING HISTORICALLY Cause and consequence (7a & b)

Questions and answers

Questions that historians ask vary depending on what they think is important. It is the questions that interest us that define the history that is written. These questions change with time and place. Different historians will also come up with different answers to the same questions, depending on their perspectives and methods of interpretation, as well as the evidence they use.

Below are three historians who had different areas of interest.

G.M. Trevelyan	E.P. Thompson	Michel Foucault
A political historian who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Was interested in the idea that humanity is constantly advancing through history towards democracy. Believed that Britain's political system was a triumphant product of progressive historical change.	An economic and political historian who lived in the 20th century. Was interested in the role of radical political movements and how they contributed to historical change in the 19th century. Was politically left-wing, and worked to emphasise the part played by the working classes in English history.	A French philosopher and historian of ideas who lived in the 20th century. Was interested in how governments control society and the techniques they adopted to maintain order. Believed that the extension of liberties to individuals was actually a way for governments to continue governing. Argued that extensions of political representation to the middle and working classes were ways of avoiding revolution and maintaining the peace.

These are some key events in the reform of parliament between 1780 and 1928:

Reform Act 1832	Ballot Act 1872	Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s
French Revolution	Second Reform Act 1867	Lack of political representation for women in the 19th century
Women's suffrage in 1918	Failure of reform bills in 1831 and 1832	Third Reform Act 1884

Work in groups of between three and six to answer these questions:

1 Which of these events would have been of most interest to each historian? Explain your answer.

2 Each take the role of one historian and devise a question that would interest them about each of the events.

3 Discuss each event in turn. Present the questions that have been devised for each historian and offer some ideas about how they would have answered them.

4 For each event, decide as a group which question is the most interesting and worthwhile of the three.

Answer the following questions in pairs:

5 Identify the different ways that each historian would approach writing an account of the passing of the Reform Act 1832?

6 In what ways would Trevelyan and Thompson differ in their explanations of the significance of the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s? What would be the focus of their arguments?

Answer the following questions individually:

7 All three historians may produce very different accounts and explanations of the same piece of history. Of the three historians, whose account would you prefer to read first? Explain your answer.

8 Do the differences in these accounts mean that one is more valid than the others?

9 Explain why different historical explanations are written by different historians.

10 Explain why different explanations of the same event can be equally valid.

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ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

The Redistribution Act 1885

1 How far do you agree that the Redistribution Act was the most important change to the electoral system in the years 1867–85?

2 Write three paragraphs in which you agree with the statement in question 1, focusing on the Redistribution Act.

3 Write a further three or four paragraphs on the reforms passed in the years 1867–83, highlighting one change that you think could be considered as more important than the Act of 1885. Explain your reasons.

ACTIVITY
SUMMARY

Key turning points

1 The table below shows the changing size of the British electorate in the years 1780–1928.

1780	214,000
First Reform Act 1832	800,000
Second Reform Act 1867	2,000,000
Third Reform Act 1884	5,400,000
Fourth Reform Act 1918	21,400,000
Fifth Reform Act 1928	26,700,000

The figures suggest that the Fourth Reform Act 1918 was the most significant of the Reform Acts because of the substantial increase in the size of the electorate.

a) Give reasons to support the view that the 1918 Act was the most important of the Reform Acts.

b) Choose one of the other Acts that might be considered the key turning point in the changes to the franchise in these years. Explain your choice.

2 The Acts of 1832 and 1867, and the Redistribution Act 1885, saw major changes in the distribution of seats across Britain. Which development do you think was more important in the creation of a more representative electoral system in these years: the extension of the franchise or the redistribution of seats? Explain your choice.

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