LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

1.8 ELECTIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elections are the means by which political power is periodically re-legitimated and, potentially, redistributed. Widespread participation in such significant events provides an opportunity for analysts to explore ideas and hypotheses regarding social forces and ideological currents. The simple act of returning a candidate gives expression to a multitude of thoughts and feelings, each the product of both individual and wider social circumstances. In determining the relative weight of these for many acts at an election, it becomes possible to chart the course and consequences of political movements. For that reason, the explanation of electoral behaviour forms an ideal 'shop-window for social science research methods',[1] where historical sociology and history meet.

Parliamentary elections characteristically reveal the interplay of three factors: interests, ideas, and institutions.[2] The role of interests, once the dominant mode of enquiry into eighteenth-century elections and now in danger of being thrown out with Lewis Namier's bath-water,[3] is a clear possibility for investigation, including quantitative analysis. Meanwhile, ideas represent a second point of contact between the electors and the elected. Furthermore, institutions and customary conventions frame the rules of engagement by which the outcome of elections is determined.

The analysis of voting behaviour at elections is more straightforward than that of everyday life's more open-ended decisions, since electors generally have a limited set of choices. Moreover, they are constrained by the rules of the electoral game, of which the most fundamental are eligibility to stand as a candidate and eligibility to vote. Within each constituency the electoral choice is the same for everybody, made at the same time with much the same information, and all voters are identified

by the same characteristics.

Historians' conceptions of what constituted the 'political nation' have shifted greatly since L.B. Namier in 1929 described the dreams of the 'nation-forming class' as being focused upon the House of Commons.[4] Since there were many whose dreams went unfulfilled, Namier's own conception must logically include the unsuccessful candidates as well as those elected to the Commons. More recently, the 'political nation' has been held to encompass not just the county gentry and the major office holders of the provinces, but also the parliamentary electorate and a vast army of minor office holders throughout the country.[5]

At a broader level, data in the LED throw light on the actions of a still wider public, as the electoral behaviour of thousands of Londoners may be seen as instances of activity in what has been defined as the 'bourgeois' public sphere.[6] While the extent to which there was a new and rigid public/private dichotomy introduced in this period has been disputed,[7] the public nature of the electoral process is beyond doubt.

Furthermore, historians' conceptions of eighteenth-century English society have shifted markedly since the 1970s, when the population was broadly dichotomised as sundered between an aristocratic elite and the oppressed poor.[8] But from the 1980s onwards the urban 'middling sorts' have been increasingly the focus of attention, leading to a burgeoning literature of its own.[9]

Meanwhile, studies of electoral politics have focused upon smaller borough constituencies, which comprised a majority of English parliamentary constituencies. However, there has been a strange neglect of the large and populous boroughs, which were widely held by contemporaries to be more representative of the elusive 'public opinion'. In particular there has been a neglect of the vast metropolis of London, where electoral contests were frequent, the number of active electors was great, and the political consciousness of the electors was high.[10] This analysis and associated website sets out to remedy that situation and simultaneously to offer data that allow others to do the same.

Notes

1   M.N. Franklin, *The decline of class voting in Britain: changes in the basis of electoral choice, 1964-83* (Oxford 1985), p. 2.

2   See, for example, C. Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the corn laws to free trade: interests, ideas, and institutions in historical perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. 2005).

3   Namier's advocacy of interests over ideology (he dismissed social theories as 'flapdoodle') generated enthusiasm from his Namierite followers but then a fierce counter-reaction: see L. Colley, *Namier* (1989), pp. 90-7.

4   L.B. Namier, *The structure of politics at the accession of George III* (2 vols, 1929; 2nd edn, 1957), p. 1.

5   A. Fletcher, *Reform in the provinces: the government of Stuart England* (New Haven, Ct, 1986); and M. Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: office-holding in early modern England' in T. Harris (ed.), *The politics of the excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 153-94.

6   On which, see J. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt, 1962), trans. T. Burger as *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, 1989).

7   See esp. J.A. Downie, 'Public and private: the myth of the bourgeois public sphere', in C. Wall (ed.), *A concise companion to the Restoration and eighteenth century* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 58-79.

8   Namier, *Structure of politics*; and E.P. Thompson, *Customs in common* (1991), containing essays first published between 1967 and 1978, together with new material. A neo-conservative historiography has portrayed eighteenth-century England as an aristocratic ancien regime society: see J.C.D. Clark, *English society, 1688-1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 1985); idem, *English society, 1660-1832* (Cambridge, 2000). But many others have contested that interpretation.

9   Among the most accessible are J. Hoppit, *A land of liberty? England, 1689-1727* (Oxford, 2000); P. Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727-83* (Oxford, 1989); and B. Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006). For a broad overview, see P. Langford, *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689-1798* (Oxford, 1991). For London, see esp. P. Earle, *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London, 1660-1730* (1989) and idem, *A city full of people: men and women of London, 1650-*

1750 (1994). For general context, see also J. Barry and C. Wilson (eds), *The middling sort of people: culture, society and politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994); and for the later part of the period, L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (1987; 2nd edn, 2002); and D. Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c.1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

[10]   The politics of London in the earlier eighteenth century has been studied by G.S. de Krey, *A fractured society: the politics of London in the first age of party* (Oxford, 1985); and N. Rogers, *Whigs and cities: popular politics in the age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989). For some redress of the neglect of the later period, see also M. Cragoe and A. Taylor (eds), *London politics, 1760-1914* (2005); and C. Parolin, *Radical spaces: venues of popular politics in London, 1790-c.1845* (Canberra, 2011).