

LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

7.5 ELECTORAL TURNOUT

Determining the population of eligible electors before the introduction of electoral registration remains intractable. There are no lists of electors in pre-reform Westminster and Middlesex, while rate books and Land Tax assessments are at best only proxies for such lists. Indeed, tax records have their own inherent weaknesses.

Moreover, in Westminster with its rate-paying franchise the actual relationship between rate-paying and voting was not as simple as it at first appeared. For example, partners in business enterprises in pre-reform Westminster appear to have been allowed to vote if each of their names were entered in the rate book for a single address. The parliamentary committee that adjudicated Hood's petition against the return after the Westminster election of 1788 heard that Westminster had 16,394 inhabited houses in 1788, of which 1,845 were headed by women.¹ Yet it also heard allegations that some voters had polled for houses, for which they were not personally assessed for rates. Hence historians are working with approximations, rather than with precisely determined figures.

London livery lists may be used to establish a population of eligible London electors, but there is evidence that some of these lists were themselves compiled from poll books, while others may suffer from the failure of some livery companies to submit lists of their members. Even the introduction of electoral registration in 1832 failed to establish an accurate population of eligible electors, since there is evidence that some of Westminster's scot and lot electors, who were also qualified as £10 householders, were registered more than once.²

Meanwhile the poll data for Marylebone in 1837 and 1838, drawn from a marked electoral register of 1840, must systematically under-record the totals, by excluding those who participated in those elections and who were removed from the register before 1840.

Nonetheless, for what they are worth, known estimates of unpolled electors at key moments for which data have survived are shown in

Table 82. As might be expected, the levels of turnout varied. In heated contests, such as London in 1727, the turnout (79 per cent) was very impressive, given that at the time of every election there were electors who were ill, indifferent, absent, moved away permanently, or deceased.

All the known turnouts in Table 82 – from a low 54 per cent to a high 79 per cent – compare tolerably well with turnout levels in twenty-first century Britain. At the general election in 2001, the national turnout was a long-term low of 59.4 per cent of those on the electoral register (not a complete match with the resident population of the UK); whilst in 2010 the turnout was 65.1 per cent.³

Before the advent of full democracy in the twentieth century, possession of the right to vote was a cherished specific rather than universal right. Not all voters chose to use it. But as many did, proportionately, in the proto-democratic constituencies, as do voters under full democracy.

Table 82
Unpolled (non-voting) electors in the LED

Constituency	Year	Poll ID	Polled	Un-polled	Total	Turnout (%)
London	1701	25	5,539	2,259	7,798	71
London	1727	33	6,762	1,791	8,553	79
London	1847	48	11,381	9,888	21,269	54
Westminster	1852	67	8,549	6,334	14,883	57
Marylebone	1841	52	8,192	3,378	11,570	71

Source: LED.

Notes

¹ TNA, PRO 30/8/237, fo 784.

² *BPP* (1836), XLIII, p. 404.

³ Data from www.ukpolitical.info/turnout: self-described as a free non-partisan resource for voters, journalists, students, and all interested in UK electoral politics.