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British M. P. s, The Electorate and Parliamentary Voting 1861 - 1926

Valerie Cromwell

It is important to seize the opportunity to compare the difficulties associated with the study of the relationship of social structure with political behaviour in different western European countries in the modern period. This paper outlines my research project on House of Commons' voting. It should be set in the context of recent work on the British electorate and the elected.

The 1950's proved a launch pad in many ways: they saw a series of new approaches by both historians and political scientists, which initiated a wealth of valuable research. Since then the structure of the British electorate and the working of the political system have been steadily uncovered from very different angles.

The four chief areas of interest which came to prominence were:

1) Electoral Reform

It is perhaps important to emphasise here that articulate reforming groups in nineteenth-century British society, unlike similar groups in continental Europe, had little occasion to take issue with an abstract notion like 'the state': even rebels and radicals focussed their zeal on the reform of institutions, above all of Parliament. Parliamentary reform in the 1830's meant electoral reform to the Whigs within Parliament just as much as to the Political Unions outside. The same was to be true throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Two significant studies on the impact of different reform bills on the electorate and on political party development in response to those changes were that of Norman Gash (1832) and Harold Hanham (1867)¹).

2) General Elections

(i) *Contemporary*: Pioneered by R. B. McCallum and A. Readman (1945) and continued by H. G. Nicholas (1950), that series of 'on the spot' accounts of each general election which are now identified with his name were taken over for the 1951 election by David Butler, who had assisted both earlier studies. Based on a research group at Nuffield College, Oxford, these studies have become ever more sophisticated and spawned, what was described, originally as a joke, "the science of psephology". Covering election manifestos, party organisation, press coverage and extensive interviewing of candidates and the electorate, their material, now housed at the E.S.R.C. Data Archive, is enormously valuable²).

1) Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel: a Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation. 1830 - 1850* (1953); Harold J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (1959).

(ii) *Historical*: Encouraged by the methodology and success of these contemporary investigations, historians attempted similar work on past elections e.g. Trevor Lloyd. (1880) 3). Perhaps one of the most significant studies from the point of view of this meeting was Henry Pelling's *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885 - 1910* (1967).

3) Members of Parliament

The History of Parliament Trust was set up to commission research on the biography of every member of Parliament. Its model was to be the work on the Commons (1439 - 1509), which had appeared in 1936 - 38, largely the responsibility of Col., later Lord, Wedgwood. A large team of researchers was recruited under the direction of eminent parliamentary historians initially including Sir John Neale and Sir Lewis Namier, but the first volumes did not appear until 1964. At present, the published volumes end in 1820. There seem to be no plans to continue the work nor, sadly, to computerise them 4).

4) Political parties

A new interest in the role of contemporary political parties provoked a range of research into British party development, reaching back into the seventeenth century. The work of Gash and Hanham on the efforts of the local political organisers to come to terms with a widening electorate inspired further work

2) R. B. M c C a l l u m and A. R e a d m a n, *The British General Election of 1945* (Oxford, 1947); H G. N i c h o l a s, *The British General Election of 1950* (1951); David B u t l e r, *The British General Election of 1951* (1952); *The British General Election of 1955* (1955); with Richard R o s e, *The British General Election 1959* (1960); with Anthony K i n g, *The British General Election of 1964* (1965); *The British General Election of 1966* (1966); with Michael P i n t o - D u s c h i n s k y, *The British General Election of 1970* (1971); with Dennis K a v a n a g h, *The British General Election of February 1974* (1974); *The British General Election of October 1974* (1975); *The British General Election of 1979* (1980); *The British General Election of 1983* (1984); A. J. P. T a y l o r, "Down with Psephology", in: *Daily Herald* (17 May 1951); William P i c k l e s, "Psephological Dyspepsia", in: *Twentieth Century* (July 1955), p. 30.

3) Trevor L l o y d, *The General Election of 1880* (Oxford, 1968); D. C. S a v a g e, *General Election of 1886 in Great Britain and Ireland* (Ph. D., London, 1958); Mary E. Y. E n s t a m, *The Khaki Election of 1900 in the United Kingdom* (Ph. D., Duke 1968); A. K. R u s s e l l, *Liberal Landslide* (Newton Abbot, 1973); M. Charlita B r a d y, *The British General Elections of 1910* (Ph. D., Fordham, 1947); Neal B l e w e t t, *The Peers, The Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (1972).

4) *The House of Commons, 1439 - 1509* (2 vols., 1936 - 38); S. T. B i n d o f f (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1509 - 1558* (3 vols., 1982); P. H a s l e r (ed.), *The House of Commons 1558 - 1603* (3 vols., 1981); B. D. H e n n i n g (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1660 - 1690* (3 vols., 1983); R. S e d g w i c k (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1715 - 1754* (2 vols., 1970); Sir Lewis N a m i e r and J. B r o o k e (eds.), *The House of Commons 1754 - 1790* (3 vols., 1964); R. G. T h o r n e (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1790 - 1820* (1986).

particularly in the field of local politics e.g. John Vincent's work on the Liberal party and Edgar Feuchtwanger's on the Conservative party 5).

Resourceful work has continued in all these areas. It was however to be the fast developing capacity of computers together with ever-more sophisticated statistical techniques which offered ways into the study of both the electorate and voting in Parliament.

The Electorate

Two great sources are available for the study of the British electorate which are now being extensively exploited.

1. Pollbooks

Until the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, a magnificent series of electoral pollbooks exist which list the names and votes of voters for the vast majority of constituencies since the late seventeenth century. Pollbooks have been analysed for the pre-1832 period by Geoffrey Holmes, William Speck and John Phillips 6). For "reformed" England, T. J. Nossiter, in his study of the north-east between 1832 and 1874, has shown with what sensitivity pollbook and other electoral data can be used to bring out the complexity of local political opinion 7). The most recent attempt to relate patterns of party voting and growth of party orientation to pressures on central government is that of Gary Cox 8). The continued existence of double-member constituencies till 1885 facilitates the study of cross-party voting and party loyalty based on the poll-books.

2. The Census

The other major source is that of the government population census. The first reliable census was taken in 1841: it has been repeated since then at ten-year intervals. Each census is different in format. There are, of course, enormous difficulties in linking electoral with census data since British electoral and census

5) John R. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857 - 1868* (1966); E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, (Oxford, 1968).

6) Geoffrey Holmes, *The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party* (Lancaster, 1976); John A. Phillips, *Electoral Behaviour in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters and Straights* (Princeton, 1982); William A. Speck, "The Electorate in the First Age of Party", in: Clyde Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party, 1680 - 1750* (1987); *Tory and Whig: the Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701 - 1715* (1970); and W. A. Gray, "Computer Analysis of Pollbooks: an Initial Report", in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 43 (1970); and R. Hopkinson, "Computer Analysis of Pollbooks: a Further Report", *Ibid.* 48 (1975); John R. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge, 1967).

7) T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North East, 1832 - 1874* (Brighton, 1975).

8) Gary Cox *The Efficient Secret: the Cabinet and the Development of Political Parties in Victorian England* (New York, 1987).

districts, like those in Germany, were and are quite different. These difficulties have not discouraged attempts to link social data from the census with electoral data. Pelling's *Social Geography* (1967) was one of the first. A substantial and somewhat neglected study is that of W. L. Miller (1977) who has provided an ambitious relational model based on voting since 1918 9). Kenneth Wald has more recently (1983) provided a quantitative analysis of the relations between various social forces and the patterns of party support in general elections from 1885 to 1910: he used primarily regression analysis on the census data 10). John Turner is currently using census data to challenge the accepted view of Coalition and Liberal support in the electorate in the years after 1918 11). For the more recent period, a number of studies by social psychologists and political scientists have used wide scale interviewing as well as data provided by the Nuffield British Election Studies to focus on motivation for electoral choice, the social basis for voting and what has been described as "the decline of class voting in Britain 12)."

Voting in Parliament

Roll-call analysis is, of course, not new. It was indeed from Commons' division list analysis that, in 1901, A.L. Lowell provided ample evidence of the tightening of party organization in Parliament 13). The difficulty in analysing Commons' voting has always been that of scale. It was only in the 1960's, with the pioneering work of William Aydelotte, that computer analysis of Commons' voting was attempted in the hope of overcoming the obstacle of scale. The problem was simply that, as far as Britain was concerned, the methods of roll call analysis, which had been applied elsewhere, had been applied to groups with significantly fewer participants and to fewer votes than are to be found in any British peacetime parliamentary session since the early nineteenth century. Aydelotte applied well-tested statistical methods in his analysis of particular

9) W. L. Miller, *Electoral Dynamics in Britain Since 1918* (1977).

10) Kenneth D. Wald, *Crosses on the Ballot: Patterns of British Voter Alignment since 1885* (Princeton, 1983).

11) John Turner, "The Labour Vote and the Franchise after 1918: an Investigation of the English evidence", in: Peter Denley and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *History and Computing* (Manchester, 1987).

12) Hilde T. Himmler et al., *How Voters Decide* (1985); Mark N. Franklin, *The Decline of Class Voting in Britain: Changes in the Basis of Electoral Choice, 1964 - 1983* (Oxford, 1985); Patrick Dunleavy and Christopher Husbands, *British Democracy at the Crossroads* (1985); Anthony Heath, Roger Jewell and John Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford, 1985).

13) A. L. Lowell, "The Influence of Party upon Legislation in England and America", in: *Annual Report of the American Historical Association I* (1901). See also his chapter on "The Strength of Party Ties" in his *Government of England*, 2 vols. (New York, 1908) II pp. 71 - 88,

Commons' divisions and of selected groups of M.P.s in the 1840's 14). He was to be followed rapidly by others seizing on particular divisions or groups of M.P.s 15): John Fair has recently extensively reworked Lowell's data on 1886 - 1918. Davis and Huttenback have linked social data on M.P.s to Commons' votes on imperial issues 16).

There have also been attempts to link M.P.s' voting behaviour with political activity in the constituencies. Aydelotte had already also taken the lead here with work on the 1840's: in the event, he drew very guarded conclusions 17). Two political scientists, Gary Cox and Hugh Berrington, pursued the problem 18). Cox has attempted a much longer period, a heroic task, using evidence of voting in dual-member constituencies to great effect to clarify the relationship between party voting in the constituencies with that in the Commons. Berrington focussed more on dissident groups in the major parties and their experience in the constituencies, hoping to tease out the strength of identity of policy between the national party leadership and local caucuses. Both established that votes became more party orientated, but found it difficult to relate

14) William O. Aydelotte, "Voting Patterns in the British House of Commons in the 1840s, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5 (1963) pp. 134 - 163; "Parties and Issues in Early Victorian England", in: *Journal of British Studies*, 5 (1966), pp. 95 - 114; "The Disintegration of the Conservative Party in the 1840's: a Study of Political Attitudes", in: *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*, edited by W. O. Aydelotte, A. G. Bogue and R. W. Fogel, Oxford, 1972, pp. 319 - 346; "Constituency Influence in the British House of Commons, 1841 - 1847", in *The History of Parliament Behaviour*, edited by W. O. Aydelotte (Princeton, 1977), pp. 225 - 246.

15) Thomas W. Heyck, *The Dimensions of British Radicalism: the Case of Ireland, 1874 - 95* (London, 1974); Hugh Berrington, "Partisanship and Dissidence in the Nineteenth-Century House of Commons", in: *Parliamentary Affairs*, 21 (1968) pp. 338 - 74; James C. Hamilton, *Parties and Voting Patterns in the Parliament of 1874 - 1880* (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Iowa, 1968); Derek E. D. Beales, "Parliamentary Parties and the 'Independent' Member, 1810 - 1860", in: *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain*, edited by Robert Robson (London, 1967), pp. 1 - 19; Peter Fraser "Party Voting in the House of Commons, 1812 - 1827", in: *English Historical Review* xcvi (1983) pp. 763 - 784; John R. Bylisma, "Party Structure in the 1852 - 1857, House of Commons: a Scalogram Analysis", in: *Journal of Inter-disciplinary History*, vii (1977) pp. 617 - 635; P. M. Gurovich "The Continuation of War by Other Means: party and politics, 1855 - 65", in: *The Historical Journal* 27 (1984) pp. 603 - 31; W. C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis: the British House of Commons in 1886* (Oxford, 1988).

16) John D. Fair, "Party Voting Behaviour in the British House of Commons, 1886 - 1918", in: *Parliamentary History* 5 (1986) pp. 65 - 82; Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback with Susan G. Davis, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: the Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860 - 1912* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 267 - 300.

17) William O. Aydelotte, "Constituency Influence", pp. 225 - 246.

18) Gary Cox, "The Development of a Party-Orientated Electorate in England, 1832 - 1918", in: *British Journal of Political Science*, 16 (1986) pp. 187 - 216; Hugh Berrington, *op cit.* pp. 338 - 74.

that party identification directly with greater party cohesion in the Commons. Their work suggests that, from the 1880's, it was to be national and parliamentary pressures that encouraged party conformity: it became less important for an M.P. to settle in a compatible constituency and there was less need to ensure that his Commons' votes indicated a sympathy with constituency opinion.

The aim of my research was to find a method which would permit the analysis of all divisions in a parliamentary session in a way which would distinguish similar and dissimilar patterns of voting behaviour 19). Only if suitably sensitive and flexible techniques of computer analysis were available would large scale analysis of Commons' voting be possible. A pilot project applied computer methods of multidimensional scaling and other techniques of multivariate data analysis to all divisions in one parliamentary session (1861) to test the suitability of those techniques. It was hoped to analyse the voting behaviour of all M.P.s in such a way that as full and as unbiased a picture of that voting behaviour as possible could be drawn. Coloured computer maps were prepared to demonstrate similarity and dissimilarity of voting behaviour. All divisions were analysed. Why? There is always interest in landmark divisions: even now they are printed in full in *The Times*. Major individual divisions have an obvious significance at moments of high political tension and at times of large or of hairsbreadth majorities. On the other hand, by looking at all divisions, it was hoped to provide an indicator of discrimination and resource.

Success in the pilot project resulted in substantial funding for a major research project. All Commons' divisions in each parliamentary session at five-early intervals between 1861 and 1926 are being analysed. The research should provide the basis for the most comprehensive analysis of British parliamentary voting so far attempted and make possible clear assessment of the changing patterns of parliamentary voting in the crucial period of modern British party development. Table A indicates the size of the task being undertaken. The five-year interval between parliamentary sessions studied was chosen as being close enough to

19) Research on House of Commons' voting, 1861 - 1926, has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Research Grant E 00230051). A pilot project to test statistical methods for the analysis of all divisions in one parliamentary session (1861) was also funded by the E.S.R.C. (Research Grant HR 6801). Detailed descriptions of the methods and results of the pilot project are to be found in my End-of-Grnt Report HR 6801 Computer Analysis by Multidimensional Scaling of House of Commons' Division Lists (1861) available at the British Library in London, Clive O s m o n d, "Multidimensional scaling, cluster analysis and simulation study applied to dissimilarity data arising in politics, ethnology and taxonomy" (unpublished Ph. D., University of Bath, 1981) and my "Mapping of the political world of 1861: a multidimensional analysis of House of Commons Divisions Lists", in: *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vii (1982), pp. 281 - 297. The computer maps developed in the pilot project together with all the associated data and computer programs have been deposited at and may be consulted via the Economic and Social Research Council's Data Archive at the University of Essex, Colchester, England.

assess the changing behaviour of individual M.P.s over time and yet distant enough to distinguish changed group behaviour over time. One of the major challenges for the statisticians associated with the project is the development of suitable statistical and computer techniques for handling the longitudinal aspects of the analysis.

Although that analysis remains to be done, patterns of behaviour can already be distinguished by straightforward statistical techniques. As in all roll call analysis it is the abstention from voting, the "missing values", which present a major analytical difficulty and where collaborative work can be extremely helpful. It must however be remembered that abstention has its political usefulness. For both leaders and backbenchers, it was, and is, often easier to avoid voting than to take an exposed political and personal position. Disraeli's poor voting record in 1861 (56 votes out of a total of 187) clearly demonstrate a desire to maintain a low profile while struggling to hold his party together. When Prime Minister in 1876, Disraeli still only voted 106 times in a total of 241 divisions. It must however be noted that such a low voting record on the part of a political leader must be seen against the general pattern of voting participation. Table A shows that pattern.

As might be expected, gradually many more M.P.s were voting. There were, of course, enormous fluctuations in the figures. To give an idea of what could happen - in 1891, the highest voter voted in virtually all divisions, 415 of 416, but, in that year, only 23 M.P.s voted more than 350 times. Table A's last two columns carry the most significant information i.e. the effect of using 50 % of a session's divisions as a benchmark. By 1911, a high voting year, just over half of the M.P.s voting still voted in less than half the total number of divisions. Only by 1926 had the figure dropped below a half. Thus, it must be emphasized that the steady increase of voting participation must be seen as very gradual from a very low base - whatever the level of party cohesion in the votes. It is against this gradual steady increase of voting that the voting of leading politicians must be matched. Disraeli's apparently poor voting record can be set against other party leaders' voting profiles. In 1886, a difficult parliamentary year, ending with a split in the Liberal party, Gladstone voted in only 28 of a total of 143 divisions; in 1911, a high voting and tense year, Asquith voted only 150 times in a total of 451; in 1926, the year of the General Strike, Stanley Baldwin voted in 312 divisions out of a total of 563. Thus, although the Commons in general were voting more, their party leaders show a very different pattern of voting, which is being pursued. This variable participation pattern suggests that multidimensional scaling techniques are particularly appropriate.

Computer maps are to be produced for all categories of divisions and sub-groups of M.P.s. The methods of analysis and the resulting maps distinguish similarity and dissimilarity of behaviour: it is however necessary to compare the map positions of an M.P. with his cumulative voting performance. For example,

TABLE A

Table of voting participation by M.P.s in individual sessions

Total given in brackets includes M.P.s eligible to vote, who did not vote.

Session	Total no. divisions	Highest no. of votes by an M.P.	Total no. of individual M.P.s voting	M.P.s voting over 50 % of total no. of divisions	% of M.P.s voting who vote in 50 % of total no. of divisions
1861	187	182	654(662)	71	89.14
1871	270	269	648(655)	127	80.40
1876	242	241	652(660)	125	80.82
1881	411	408	647(649)	153	76.35
1886	143	139	676(677)	155	75.44
1891	416	415	675(685)	136	79.85
1896	419	418	670(675)	205	69.40
1901	482	481	671(673)	246	63.34
1906	501(2)*	500	680(683)	421	38.09
1911	451	443	688(692)	335	51.31
1916	67	65	609(678)	121	80.13
1921	370	356	641(650)	180	71.92
1926	563	560	615(620)	363	40.98

(Table derived from research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Research Grant E 00230051)

* One unnumbered division included.

in 1876, Mitchell Henry, a Liberal, voted in nearly 43 % of his votes against his party. However, he only voted 59 times. Of his 25 "dissident" votes, 16 were on the issue of slavery. This pattern of voting will affect his map position on the 1876 map for all divisions and, amongst the category maps, only that for slavery. In interpreting the results of the analysis, it is important therefore to take account of low or skewed voting performance.

The data assembled in the project in machine-readable form is threefold:

1. The votes - that is the House of Commons' division lists. These are lists of names of those voting "Aye" or "Noe" with Tellers.

2. Biographical material on all M.P.s (4146), sitting 1861 - 1926. This data

is in a INGRESS database on a VAX computer system. The database includes constituency information.

3. The subjects of the votes categorised in a complex and refined format.

The main thrust of the research is the tracing of party groupings and the triggers of political change. The organization of the database also makes possible the drawing out of the voting profiles of particular groups of M.P.s and of the significance of particular categories of divisions. It offers an excellent opportunity for comparative research on political élites and legislative voting elsewhere. It is ready for the application of whatever future methodological advances may emerge.