

## Lecture 1 handout: the unreformed electoral system

### Structure of the lecture:

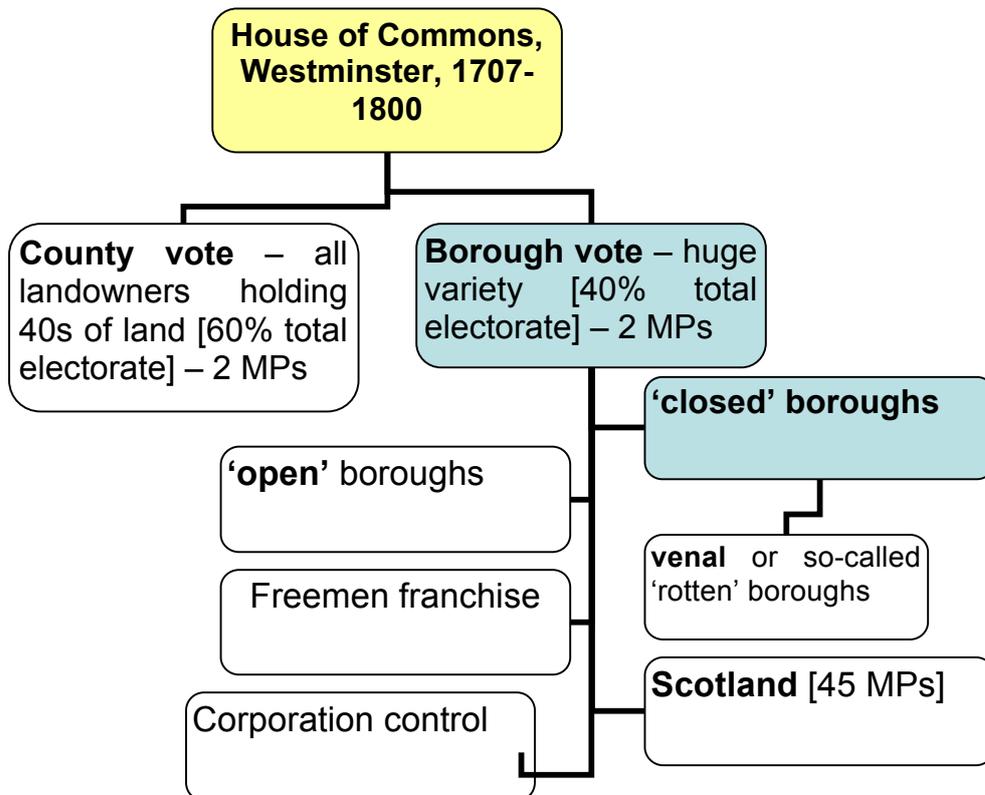
- introduction to the whole module
- key words and concepts
- William Hogarth's election series of 1754
- structure of the unreformed electoral system
- historiography of the electoral system and 'participatory politics'

### Key words and concepts:

Glorious Revolution.....  
'Balanced Constitution'.....  
Liberty and corruption.....  
Patriot.....

**Key themes:** democracy was still a bad word, and the 1832 Reform Act was far from inevitable.

### The eighteenth-century British electoral system – how representative was it?



- **venal boroughs** - about 20 - restricted to the main landowner who owned or bought the seat and whoever he chose as the voters – going price for a safe seat for one parliament was £1500 in 1754, £2000 in 1761.
- **‘closed’** boroughs – still restrictive to patrons who possessed the properties that conferred the franchise on their owners – but closed boroughs not all under control of one patron – particularly endemic in the south west- in Cornwall, only about 1400 voters elected 42 borough MPs. Truro had 24 voters, and by 1792 Rye had six and Helston only two.
- **Scotland** - total electorate returning all 45 Scottish MPs after 1707 was three to four thousand voters. The 30 County MPs in Scotland were elected by a mere 2662 voters – the remaining 15 MPs were chosen by the self-perpetuating town councils of the royal burghs – By 1784 Henry Dundas could deliver 22 out of the 45 Scottish seats to William Pitt the Younger’s interest – in 1790 he could contribute 34.
- In 38 boroughs in England and Wales, and in the royal burghs of Scotland, the members of the **town corporation** controlled the representation – in these electoral contests were rare and the return of members was usually controlled by a few rich families.
- Over 80 boroughs where patrons owned considerable land, **freemen** had the franchise. Nearly half the English borough representation involved a franchise of freemen – some very large proportions were freemen – Nottingham Newcastle and Warwick as high as 40%. Many of this type of borough created new freemen just before general elections – e.g. Liverpool and Bristol.
- **Open boroughs** – relatively free from patron control – independent voters – particularly the case in the counties – the ‘country’ gentlemen who valued their independence – largest was Yorkshire – 15-20,000 voters. In a few boroughs – very wide franchise, including freeholders or any man who rented or owned a house. These were always contested and lively. Westminster had between 8000 and 12,000 voters. In Preston, Lancashire, nearly every resident male householder had the vote = 25-50% of all adult males had the vote.
- Some large towns had **no representatives** at all – especially those which had grown rapidly through industrialisation – e.g. Manchester, Birmingham.

**Sources:** F. O’Gorman, ‘Electoral deference in "unreformed" England: 1760-1832,’ *Journal of Modern History*, 56 (1984), 399; I. Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and revolution: Governance and Violence in eighteenth century England* (1992), p. 209.

### **Models of participatory politics:**

1. Lewis Namier.....
2. Frank O’Gorman, John Phillips, H. T. Dickinson.....

3. Jurgen Habermas.....
4. E. P. Thompson, Nicholas Rogers, James Epstein  
.....
5. gender historians, e.g. Elaine Chalus.....

**Key points about eighteenth-century elections:**

- Parliament seen as central body to enable local acts and interests rather than dictate national policy
- Most boroughs patronised by propertied elites - Yet opinions of voters courted by candidates and patrons - deference and participation
- Elections as theatre - Non-voters still involved

**Further reading**

F. O'Gorman, 'The unreformed electorate of Hanoverian England: the mid eighteenth century to the Reform Act of 1832,' *Social History*, 11:1 (1986), 33-52

F. O'Gorman, 'Electoral deference in "unreformed" England: 1760-1832,' *Journal of Modern History*, 56 (1984), 391-429

J. A. Phillips, 'Participatory politics in Hanoverian England,' *Social History*, 16:2 (1991), 223-30

P. Langford, 'Property and virtual representation in eighteenth century England,' *Historical Journal*, 31:1 (1988)

R. Sweet, 'Freemen and Independence in English Borough Politics, 1770-1830,' *Past and Present*, 161 (1998)

F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Politics: the unreformed electoral system of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (1989)

H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1994)