

Excerpts from **Hill, Brian. 'Parliament, Parties and Elections (1688–1760)'. *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Ed. H. T. Dickinson. Cornwall: Blackwell, 2002. 55-68.**

“During the century and a half before 1688 parliament grew in importance: most similar institutions in Europe disappeared under the impact of absolutist monarchy. Co-opted by Henry VIII to legitimize his seizure of supreme authority in the English church, parliament acquired a major stake in the political establishment. Succeeding reigns saw parliamentarians challenge the crown’s authority in national finance, the law and even government. In the civil wars of the 1640s, however, the Long Parliament’s resort to force proved dangerous, for the army turned against the parliament itself. After 1660 a restored monarchy recovered some of its powers by prolonging the life of the compliant Cavalier Parliament for nearly two decades. When this body became too turbulent Charles II and James II used their prerogative power to dissolve both it and the four succeeding short-lived parliaments, and also claimed the right to suspend or dispense with existing legislation. A growing cult of divine right monarchy, demanding passive obedience and non-resistance from subjects, appeared to threaten earlier parliamentary gains, and the political nation removed James in the Revolution of 1688 with minimum use of force.”

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“In the aftermath of the Revolution most peers and members of parliament (MPs) were agreed that a further enhancement of their power was needed, and they passed the Bill of Rights to limit the powers of monarchy, the Triennial Act to regulate the life of parliament, and the Treason Act to prevent monarchs from using treason law against political opponents. Above all, MPs ensured that parliament would have regular and prolonged meetings, providing a permanent forum to counter monarchy’s continuous presence. This objective was achieved by a variety of means, especially the voting of financial supplies to government for only one year at a time. The sanction process was aided by the need of post-Revolution monarchs to raise money for expensive wars against France. Determined and sustained use of the power of the purse, to prevent rulers from ever again intimidating or dispensing with parliament, transformed the political scene, assisting a long-term process of reducing the power of the crown.

Of all changes after 1688 none was more visible than parliament’s continual presence, compared with the long periods of non-parliamentary rule experienced under the Stuarts and earlier, such as the ‘eleven-year tyranny’ of the 1630s and two intervals of nearly three years each in the 1680s. Moreover, from 1689 onwards the business of both houses took up many months of every year, in contrast to the often truncated parliamentary proceedings of a few weeks, or even a few days, before 1688. Beyond permanence and frequency of meeting, MPs were not prepared to go. The electoral system remained largely unchanged and there was no general desire to revive experiments of the Interregnum in the 1650s such as a wider franchise, equal distribution of borough seats by number of voters, or the abolition of the House of Lords. Such measures would have smacked of republicanism, social equality and equal distribution of property, ideas which post-Revolution society was not prepared to air openly, though these ideas lingered on among common men and intellectuals until the time was ripe for a new outburst from the later 1760s, in the era of ‘Wilkes and Liberty’.

The new prestige which parliament enjoyed even outside Britain in the eighteenth century, as a result of successfully establishing its regular presence on the political scene, had some important results for the nature of government. Under the Stuart monarchs financial supplies offered by the Commons had rarely erred on the side of generosity. The various expedients by which these monarchs had tried to supplement their income, such as secret subsidies from a foreign power, prerogative taxes of dubious legitimacy, and the sale of irreplaceable assets, had resulted in a marked and national lack of confidence in Stuart kingship. But four or five years of parliamentary financial control after the

Revolution of 1688–9 brought remarkable changes. With parliament willing and able to allot taxation for funding interest payments on government loans, the resources of an increasingly prosperous financial community were opened dramatically, allowing William III to fight a major war on a scale never available to his predecessors. Britain's military successes under Marlborough in the next reign were the direct result of a new confidence in government, signalled by such major steps as the Million Loan of 1693, the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694 to channel City wealth into the Treasury, and the gradual emergence of a funded national debt.

By the late seventeenth century the parliament of England and Wales had a lower house of 513 members, a number enhanced by forty-five new members in the union with Scotland's parliament in 1707, bringing the total for the Commons of Great Britain to 558. Nearly all English constituencies returned two members, a practice not phased out until the nineteenth century. Two-member constituencies allowed some flexibility, since electors could use their second votes to allow minority parties or groups to acquire the second seat. Rival parties sometimes agreed informally to put forward only one candidate each, avoiding the expense of a contested election. The national electorate was large enough to express public opinion fairly accurately, especially in the larger-franchise constituencies, even though representation deteriorated somewhat as population increased, while a new 'last determinations' law in 1729 hampered the increase of voters by custom. There was no secret ballot and electors identified in poll books were open to various pressures, especially in the smaller boroughs.

Contemporaries recognized two types of constituency: counties and boroughs. The forty counties of England, which returned eighty members, had a uniform franchise, the forty-shilling freehold, and each enjoyed electorates of several thousands. Large urban boroughs too could have thousands of voters. But the great majority of borough seats had electorates of only a few hundred, in some cases even fewer. It was the small electorates in particular which stood open to patron pressure, bribery and corruption, and made up the legendary 'pocket' boroughs. The widely varying franchises prevailing in the boroughs, based on ownership of property, payment of local rates, freedoms, or membership of corporations, aided dubious electoral practices. English counties and the large-franchise boroughs, having too many voters to be in any patron's pocket, enjoyed much prestige as true indicators of public opinion, and their representatives in parliament were regarded as the elite of MPs. General interest in politics was not confined to voters. Wider participation in political discussion was ensured by the newspaper press, which grew rapidly after parliament's inadvertent abandonment of censorship in 1695. By 1760 there were four dailies, five or six thrice-weeklies and four weeklies serving London and the southeast, and dozens of other weeklies elsewhere. Knowledge of current political issues spread far more widely than in pre-Revolution days, adding to electoral pressure on MPs from informed public opinion. The right of petition to parliament was widely used, sometimes concerted between areas, and was not confined to voters.

Under the Triennial Act of 1694 parliament had to be re-elected at least once every three years. The intention of its devisers was not only to ensure the continuity of parliament but also to lessen the opportunity for ministers in the Commons to build up a subservient 'Court party' of officeholders without the electorate having an early opportunity to reject them. In practice general elections came so often, on average every two years between 1695 and 1715, that the constituencies remained in constant turmoil, and ministerial management of the Commons often became impossible. The Septennial Act of 1716 increased the permitted time between elections to a maximum of seven years, and parliament often subsequently went the full period. If the earlier measure helped to ensure the legislature's permanence, the later one retained this but calmed political life and allowed a new growth of patronage in both Westminster and its constituencies.

Membership of the House of Commons consisted overwhelmingly of landed gentry, though there were increasing numbers of lawyers, financiers and businessmen. The latter elements used their

wealth to buy into substantial landownership, as required by an act of parliament of 1711. There were no working-class MPs, though patrons could sometimes evade this landed qualification act and could bring into the Commons able men who did not themselves possess the necessary landed property. Many candidates for election paid large sums for their seats, though the outcome of such expenses was far from guaranteed in any but the most docile of constituencies. MPs were unpaid as such and many had an adequate private income to sustain the expenses of being an MP, but some sought remuneration from government offices, many of which are now held by permanent civil servants. Major 'placemen', who held government office, were usually expected to vote for the government of the day. Other perquisites such as honours, local offices, tax collectorships and magistracies were welcome to all MPs, for either themselves or their supporters; but such lesser benefits did not carry so much obligation to the government, if any.

The House of Lords was of similar social composition to the lower chamber, but peers were on the whole richer. The hereditary principle dominated, with a minority of bishops and senior law officers as non-hereditary members. The absence of any responsibility to an electorate made the Lords particularly prone to pressure from crown or ministers, and the upper house was usually compliant to government's wishes. Peers could sometimes apply restraint to the Commons but usually tried to avoid confrontation with the elected chamber, especially over money matters, for by 1689 the convention that the Lords could not reject money bills was already observed. Where taxation was concerned, the peers preferred not to offend public opinion, which they accepted was better represented by the Commons."