

The Great Reform Act's Impact on the Size of the English Electorate: A Re-consideration

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Abstract:

This article argues that some recent scholarship which examines the Great Reform Act (1832) from the perspective of trends occurring during the prior, “unreformed” era has understated the impact of the Act on the size of the English electorate. The expansion of the electorate brought about by the Act, although modest when compared with the electorate’s expansion after 1867, was quite significant when viewed in the context of prior trends. Within a few years of the Act’s passage, the percentage of adult men who enjoyed the franchise had increased by well over 50 percent. Just as important, the Act had created an electoral system under which this proportional increase was largely maintained in the face of massive population growth.

Keywords: Great Reform Act, Victorian Politics, Great Britain, English Electorate

1. Introduction

Although no longer viewed as the midwife of British democracy (as was often the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries),¹ the Great Reform Act of 1832 continues to occupy an important place in the landscape of modern British political history. In recent years, much of the debate about the Act has focused on the ways in which it altered—or failed to alter—the practice of politics at the constituency level.² At the same time, historians continue to assess the significance of the Act with reference to another important metric—that of its impact upon the overall size of the English electorate (Hilton, 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Wasson 2010; Evans, 2011). Although very little has been added to our understanding of the precise nature of that impact in recent years, this question was the occasion of a great deal of historiographical controversy in the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1989, Frank O’Gorman put forward the novel argument that the “impressive” (p. 182) rate at which the electorate was expanding during the forty years prior to the Reform Act was increased only modestly by the Act. Others, such as James Vernon (1993), went a step further, and claimed that the Reform Act actually slowed down that pre-1832 rate of expansion. Although a

¹ See, for instance, Jephson (1892); McCarthy (1902); Ostrogorski; (1902), Marriott (1913); and Trevelyan (1920).

² Phillips (1992); Vernon (1993); Jaggard (1999); Salmon (2002); Markus (2008); and Gleadle (2009).

few scholars (Beales, 1992; Jupp, 2006) pushed back against certain aspects of O’Gorman’s case, most tended either to embrace (Price, 1999; Garrard, 2002), or to ignore (Mitchell, Wasson) this revised understanding of the Reform Act’s impact on the size of the electorate. This article argues that this “skeptical” interpretation of the Reform Act’s impact upon the size of the electorate is vastly overstated. Indeed, when the expansion of the English electorate during the period between the Great Reform Act (1832) and the Second Reform Act (1867) is placed fully in the context of England’s 18th and 19th century population dynamics, it becomes clear that the Act inaugurated an era of electoral expansion that was markedly more impressive than the distinctly lackluster expansion that had been taking place since the 1790s. Put another way, the Reform Act did in fact make the British political system significantly more representative than it had been.

2. Re-contextualizing the impact of the Great Reform Act on the size of the English Electorate

Scholars have been addressing the question of the Reform Act’s impact on the size of the electorate since the mid-nineteenth century, but only since the 1970s has it aroused much controversy. Prior to that time, most historians followed the lead of the Victorian statistician John Lambert (1889), who was the first to compare the (estimated) electorate of 1831 with the first “registered” electorate of 1832/3.³ He was not very impressed with what he found, insisting that “although the legislation of 1832 was a great step in the way of progress, we must not exaggerate its effects in regard to enfranchisement. In England . . . the number of voters added to the constituencies barely amounted to 220,000” (p. 951).⁴ In the early 20th century, Charles Seymour (1915) adopted both Lambert’s figures and his tone, arguing that “far fewer votes were conferred than might have been expected . . .” (p.163). For both writers, nonchalance about the size of the increase flowed less, perhaps, from the data itself, than from the particular context in which they chose to place it—that of the more substantial increases wrought by the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884.⁵

With very few exceptions, Lambert’s data—and his cautious interpretation of it—remained the standard until the 1970s.⁶ But in 1973, John Cannon offered a revised estimate of the 1831 electorate, reducing Lambert’s estimate by 16% (from 435,000 to 366,000). These figures suggested that the first-year increase in the electorate effected by the Act “was nearer to 80% than the 50% usually quoted . . .” (p. 259). Over the course of the next decade or so, Cannon’s view of a more robust increase in the electorate replaced Lambert’s interpretation as the standard view.⁷

However, in the late 1980s, Cannon’s numbers were themselves made the subject of an important revisionist critique. Noting that Cannon’s estimate of the 1831 electorate was based on the number of

³ Prior to the publication of Lambert’s article, two other statisticians, William Newmarch and John Biddulph Martin, had written about the growth of the electorate after 1832, but had not attempted to compare the size of the unreformed electorate to its reformed counterpart. See Newmarch (June 1857; September 1857; March 1859; and June 1859) and Martin (March 1884).

⁴ As his data makes clear, Lambert actually means the figures for England *and* Wales. All of the data presented here is for England and Wales only, and does not refer to the entire U. K.

⁵ Lambert’s figures show an increase of 50% in 1832, 88% in 1867, and 67% in 1884.

⁶ The exceptions resulted, in all cases, from confusion of some sort. Marriott (1913) believed that the Act added 455,000 electors, an addition that “more than tripled the electorate” (p.82). This appears to have been the result of simply confusing the size of the increase estimated by Lambert (220,000) for the size of the unreformed electorate (which Lambert had estimated to be c. 435,000). A. L. Morton (1938) made the same error (p. 358). Harold Perkin (1969) made the error of comparing the unreformed electorate of England and Wales to the Reformed electorate of the entire U.K. (p. 313).

⁷ Cannon’s figures are employed by, among others, Evans (1983); Bentley (1996); and Stewart (1989).

persons actually voting rather than the number eligible to vote, Frank O’Gorman (1989, p. 179.) argued that this figure must be increased by 20% in order to make it comparable to measurements of the reformed electorate (which enumerate the number eligible to vote). The figure thus arrived at—439,200—adheres closely to Lambert’s original estimate of 435,400, a fact which perhaps goes a long way towards explaining the rapidity with which O’Gorman’s revision has been accepted. But O’Gorman’s analysis went beyond the simple restoration of the pre-Cannon status quo. Unlike previous skeptics of the Act’s impact on the size of the electorate, O’Gorman was concerned to root his skepticism in the context of the *pre-Reform* electorate, rather than in the context of the larger electorates that were to emerge after the Second and Third Reform Acts. He argued that the increase in the electorate wrought by the 1832 Act is less impressive when put in the context of pre-Reform electoral expansion. “The electorate,” he noted, “was rapidly increasing in size long before the Act of 1832” (p. 181). Moreover, he emphasized that changes in the size of the electorate must be placed in the context of a rapidly expanding population. As a consequence of the Reform Act, he argued, “the electorate increased as a percentage of adult males from about 14% to about 18%, a discernible and significant difference but scarcely the stuff of which political revolutions are made. Between 1689 and 1832 the electorate as a percentage of adult males wavered between 14% and 25%. The increase effected by the 1832 Reform Act was well within these limits” (p. 182).⁸ As will be seen, there is a bit more to be said on these points. Nevertheless, in situating the Reform Act both in the contexts of ongoing population growth and electorate growth, O’Gorman provided important new insights about *how* to measure the Act’s impact on the size of the electorate.

If O’Gorman was interested in demonstrating the modesty of the Reform Act’s impact on the size of the electorate, some who have followed him have gone a step further, arguing that the Act actually slowed down, or even reversed, prior trends in the growth of the electorate. James Vernon (1993) has argued that “the real effect of the Reform Act was that of a brake, or at least a restraining force, upon the already expanding and dynamic unreformed electorate” (p. 33), and that, indeed, “the Reform Act served to restrict, rather than to expand, the official political arena” (p. 45). Miles Taylor (1997) appears to concur at least partially in this sentiment. Focusing on the period between the First and Second Reform Acts, he argues that the borough electorate, at least, “actually contracted in real terms” during these years: “By and large, in an age of rapid urban population growth and mobility, the size of the borough electorate went down . . .” (p. 60). This new notion that the Reform Act actually slowed down—or even reversed—the expansion of the electorate has gained wide acceptance (Price; Garrard). Yet, neither Vernon’s nor Taylor’s claims are drawn from enumerations of the English electorate as a whole. Rather, their claims are based upon extrapolations from the experiences of select groups of constituencies—an approach which is highly problematic given the remarkably heterogeneous character of both the unreformed and reformed electoral systems.

Nevertheless, Vernon and Taylor, like O’Gorman, have helped to refine our understanding of *how* to measure the impact of the Reform Act on the size of the electorate. It is no longer sufficient to attempt to measure the Act’s impact with reference only to the growth of the electorate between 1831 and 1833. Rather, the entire period between the First and Second Reform Acts must be taken into account. At the same time, the expansion of the electorate during this period must be placed in the context, not of the *future* expansion which would occur as a consequence of the Second (1867) or Third (1884) Reform Acts, but of the expansion which had occurred in the decades *prior* to the Act. And finally, long-term trends in the

⁸ However, as Beales (1992, p. 142) has pointed out, O’Gorman miscalculated the percentage of adult males entitled to vote in 1831: the actual figure should be 12.4%. O’Gorman (1993) has acknowledged this error. Beales (1992, p. 142) and, more recently, Jupp (2006, pp.235-6) have noted that this error renders far less plausible O’Gorman’s rejection of the notion that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a steep decline in the proportion of the population who were electors.

expansion of the electorate must be placed in the context of the dynamic demographic changes which England experienced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What follows is an attempt to re-assess the impact of the Great Reform Act in light of these considerations.

3.1 The Expansion of the Electorate between 1831 and 1866

Table 1. England and Wales: Population Growth versus Electorate Growth, 1689-1715; 1715-1790; 1790-1831; 1831-1866; 1866-1883; 1883-1886

Year	Population	Electorate	Population Growth	Electorate Growth	% Population Growth	% Electorate Growth
1689	5,400,000	240,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1715	5,800,000	300,000	400,000	60,000	7.4	25.0
1790	8,500,000	338,000	2,700,000	38,000	46.6	12.7
1831	13,896,797	439,200	5,396,797	101,200	63.5	29.9
1866	21,409,684	1,056,659	7,512,887	617,459	54.1	140.1
1883	26,627,000	2,618,453	5,217,316	1,561,794	24.4	147.8
1886	27,522,000	4,380,540	895,000	1,762,087	3.4	67.3

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

Table 1 delineates the main features of the growth of the electorate and the population in England and Wales between the Glorious Revolution and the passage of the Third Reform Act. The era of “the rage of party” (c. 1689-1715) saw the electorate expand at three times the rate of population growth. But for most of the remainder of the eighteenth century, and right down to the eve of the First Reform Act, the electorate expanded at a much slower rate than did the population. O’Gorman is certainly correct to note that a major acceleration in the expansion of the electorate can be seen beginning in the late eighteenth century. During the period 1790-1831, the electorate expanded by about thirty percent, an expansion that seems roughly comparable with its growth rate during the “rage of party”. Crucially, however, the rate at which the electorate expanded during this period was less than half of the rate of population expansion. A very different picture emerges for the period 1831-1866. During these years, the electorate expanded at a rate that was more than 4.5 times greater than its rate of expansion during the previous 42 year period. Moreover, this rate of expansion was almost three times greater than the rate of overall population growth.

However, it might reasonably be argued that the figures in Table 1 do not reveal enough about the actual contours of the electorate’s expansion during the reformed period. After all, these figures lump together the large first-year increase in the electorate with its subsequent growth over the next 33 years. Tables 2 through 5 address this issue.

Table 2. England and Wales: Population Growth versus Electorate Growth, 1790-1831; 1831-1832/3; 1833-1866

Year	Population	Electorate	Population Growth	Electorate Growth	% Population Growth	% Electorate Growth
1790	8,500,000	338,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1831	13,896,797	439,200	5,396,797	101,200	63.5	29.9
1832/3	14,328,471	656,000	431,674	216,800	3.1	49.4
1866	21,409,684	1,056,659	7,081,213	400,659	49.4	61.1

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

Table 2 reveals that the first-year expansion in the electorate brought about by the Act represented an increase of about 50 percent. But significantly, even when this one-year increase is discounted, the expansion of the electorate continued to outpace population growth for the remainder of the period. Of course, it is unreasonable to assume that the growth of the electorate occurred at a completely stable rate throughout this period. Tables 3, 4 and 5 address this point as well as the available published data allows.

Table 3. England and Wales: Population Growth versus Electorate Growth in the 1830s

Year	Population	Electorate	Population Growth	Electorate Growth	% Population Growth	% Electorate Growth
1831	13,896,797	439,200	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1832/3	14,328,471	656,000	431,674	216,800	3.1	49.4
1834	14,520,297	669,386	191,826	13,386	1.3	2.0
1835	14,724,063	675,432	203,766	6,046	1.4	0.9
1836	14,928,477	789,012	204,414	113,580	1.4	16.8
1837	15,103,778	801,126	175,301	12,114	1.2	1.5
1838	15,287,699	811,057	183,921	9,931	1.2	1.2
1840	15,740,813	825,357	435,114	14,300	2.9	1.8

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

Thanks to the work of Philip Salmon (2002, p.23), we know the size of the reformed electorate for every year of the 1830s but one. In most of these years, the expansion of the electorate roughly kept pace with the expansion of the population. The obvious exception is the expansion that occurred between 1835 and 1836. The remarkable registration of 1835 (which produced the electorate eligible to vote in 1836) took place on the heels of a completely unexpected parliamentary election. Many men who were qualified, but who had not registered because they had believed that the huge majority enjoyed by the Whigs in the parliament elected in 1832 was a guarantee that there would be no election before the statutory seven years had expired, were thereby disabused of the notion of the predictability of parliamentary affairs, and hastened to have their names placed on the register. The increase in the electorate thus occasioned represents over one-fourth of the entire expansion of the electorate between 1833 and 1866. Moreover, the two large increases in the electorate in the 1830s—50 percent in 1833, 17 percent in 1836—together represent over half of the total increase between 1831 and 1866. Thus, most of the overall expansion of the electorate that occurred under the provisions of the Reform Act did in fact occur in the 1830s.

Table 4. England and Wales: Electorate Growth versus Population Growth, 1831-1837; 1837-1866

Year	Population	Electorate	Population Growth	Electorate Growth	% Population Growth	% Electorate Growth
1831	13,896,797	439,200	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1837	15,103,778	801,126	1,206,981	361,926	8.7	82.4
1866	21,409,684	1,056,659	6,305,906	255,533	41.8	31.9

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

Table 4 illustrates, indeed, that for the period after 1837 the expansion of the electorate was outpaced by the expansion of the population—although not nearly to the extent that had been the case prior to the Reform Act. For the period 1790 to 1831, the population expanded at more than twice the rate that the electorate expanded. For the period 1837 to 1866, it expanded about 25% more rapidly than the

electorate. Unfortunately, information on the size of the electorate during the 1840s, 50s and 60s is far less complete than is that for the 1830s. However, available data allows us to measure its growth in ten-year increments if 1837 is taken as the starting point.

Table 5. England and Wales: Electorate Growth versus Population Growth, 1831-1837; 1837-1847; 1847-1857; 1857-1866

Year	Population	Electorate	Population Growth	Electorate Growth	% Population Growth	% Electorate Growth
1831	13,896,797	439,200	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1837	15,103,778	801,126	1,206,981	361,926	8.7	82.4
1847	17,150,018	882,781	2,046,240	81,655	13.5	10.2
1857	19,256,516	945,036	2,106,498	62,255	12.3	7.1
1866	21,409,684	1,056,659	2,153,168	111,623	11.2	11.8

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

These numbers confirm the long-held notion that there was a real slow down in the growth of the electorate in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Indeed, there is evidence that the electorate actually contracted slightly in the early 1850s.⁹ But significantly, this slowdown was not maintained; in the decade prior to the Second Reform Act the growth of the electorate actually kept pace with population growth.

3.2 The Electorate as a Proportion of the Population

Another way to examine the expansion of the electorate brought about by the Act is to compare the proportion of the population that possessed the franchise before the Act with the proportion that possessed it afterwards. Comparing the electorate to the population as a whole, however, presents a significant difficulty, since in the middle decades of the nineteenth century over 45 percent of the population was comprised of persons under the age of 21. Since even today those under the age of 18 are not considered to be “unenfranchised” potential voters, it must be allowed that this type of comparison yields an unduly pessimistic impression of the system’s representativeness. On the other hand, it is no longer possible to blithely accept Norman Gash’s (1977) claim that “a much fairer standard of comparison” (p. 89) is to be had by comparing the electorate only to adult males. Although it must always be borne in mind that the electorate was exclusively male during this period, there is no reason that more modern conceptions about the nature of representation might not also be consulted. Measuring the electorate against the entire adult population (those aged 21 and over) yields proportions that are most fully in line with these conceptions. But because each of these methods has some comparative value, all three are employed in Table 6.

⁹ See Appendix 1.

Table 6. England and Wales: Electorate as Proportion of Population, Adults and Adult Males

Year	Population	Adults	Adult Males	Electorate	Electorate as % of Population	Electorate as % of Adults	Electorate as % of Adult Males
1689	5,400,000	n. i.	1,161,000	240,000	4.4	n.i	20.7
1715	5,800,000	n. i.	1,247,000	300,000	5.2	n.i	24.1
1790	8,500,000	n. i.	1,955,000	338,000	4.0	n.i.	17.3
1831	13,896,797	7,532,064	3,543,683	439,200	3.2	5.8	12.4
1832/3	14,328,471	7,749,699	3,657,748	656,000	4.6	8.5	17.9
1837	15,103,778	8,184,968	3,885,877	801,126	5.3	9.8	20.6
1847	17,150,018	9,338,053	4,475,810	882,781	5.1	9.4	19.7
1857	19,256,516	10,516,774	5,025,149	945,036	4.9	9.0	18.8
1866	21,409,684	11,656,686	5,548,371	1,056,659	4.9	9.1	19.0

(For sources, see Appendix 2, Table 10)

This data reveals that O’Gorman is quite correct to assert that the Reform Act did not introduce a previously unheard of proportion of the population into the ranks of the enfranchised. Indeed, it is quite striking to note that on the eve of the Second Reform Act, the proportion of adult males who possessed the franchise was marginally smaller than that proportion had been in 1689, and about 20 percent smaller than it had been in 1715. However, Table 6 also reminds us that by 1790, the proportion of 1715 had decreased by 28 percent, and that an additional decrease of 29 percent had occurred by 1831. Hence, O’Gorman’s (1989) claim that “between 1689 and 1832 the electorate as a percentage of adult males wavered between 14% and 25%” (p. 182) masks a crucial fact: far from “wavering,” the proportion of adult males entitled to vote was declining significantly for most of this period. Although there was also a decline in this proportion between the years 1837 and 1866, it was only about 8 percent.

With the data from Tables 1-6 before us, it appears quite difficult to sustain O’Gorman’s contention that “the tendencies within the unreformed electorate to increase its numbers in response to demographic and social change were accelerated, not created, by the Reform Act of 1832” (p.182). By any measure, this claim seems overly sanguine about electoral expansion during the forty or so years prior to the Reform Act. If the period 1831 to 1866 is considered as a whole, it must be acknowledged that the Reform Act completely reversed the trend that had been underway during the previous 40 years whereby the population grew at twice the rate of the electorate. Even if we confine our attention to period after 1837, we must conclude, at the very least, that the “acceleration” spoken of by O’Gorman was profound. Perhaps more importantly, though, the data presented here demonstrates that James Vernon’s notion of the Reform Act as “a brake, or at least a restraining force, upon the already expanding and dynamic unreformed electorate” (p. 33) is wholly unfounded.¹⁰ While this may have been the case in some constituencies, it was not the case for the country as a whole.

¹⁰ Equally unfounded are the claims of those who have relied upon—or, in some cases, attempted to elaborate upon—Vernon’s theory. Richard Price (1999) contends that the Reform Act “did not reverse the long-term trend of an electorate that comprised a diminishing proportion of the population. Indeed, the post-1832 electorate was more selective than the old, unreformed electorate. Statistically, 1832 may even have slowed down the expansion of the electorate; the pace of the increase intensified quite noticeably from the late eighteenth century” (p.274). This claim is flawed in virtually every particular. John Garrard’s (2002)

4. The Expansion of the Borough Electorate vs. the Expansion of the County Electorate

Thus far, the data presented here has focused on the electorate as a homogenous entity. But for all that it changed, the Reform Act perpetuated the distinction between county constituencies and borough constituencies, county franchises and borough franchises. Tables 7 and 8 reveal important disparities in the growth of the Borough and County electorates during the Reformed era.

Table 7. England and Wales: Growth of Borough Electorate vs. Growth of County Electorate, 1831-1866

Year	Borough Electorate	Borough Electorate Growth	County Electorate	County Electorate Growth	% Borough Electorate Growth	% County Electorate Growth	% of Total Electorate that is Borough Electorate
1831	188,391	n/a	247,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	43.3
1866	514,026	325,635	542,633	295,633	172.9	120	48.6

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

Table 8. England and Wales: Growth of Borough Electorate vs. Growth of County Electorate, 1831-1833; 1833-1837; 1837-1847; 1847-1857; 1857-1866

Year	Borough Electorate	Borough Electorate Growth	County Electorate	County Electorate Growth	% Borough Electorate Growth	% County Electorate Growth	% of Total Electorate that is Borough Electorate
1831	188,391	n/a	247,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	43.3
1832/3	286,428	98,037	369,830	122,830	52.0	49.7	43.6
1837	322,061	35,633	479,065	100,235	12.4	27.1	40.2
1847	378,358	56,297	513,152	34,087	17.5	7.1	42.4
1857	439,046	60,688	505,988	-7,164	16.0	-1.4	46.5
1866	514,026	74,980	542,633	36,645	17.1	7.2	48.6

(For sources, see Appendix 1, Table 9)

For the period as a whole, both electorates more than doubled; but the expansion of the borough electorate was greater, both in real and proportional terms. Both electorates experienced first-year expansions of about 50 percent; but after that, the two groups followed very distinct trajectories. The borough electorate proceeded to expand at a relatively steady rate, whereas the county electorate, after a major growth spurt in the mid-1830s, settled down to much slower rates of expansion, and even experienced a slight contraction between 1847 and 1857. The data in Table 8 in fact challenges the traditional assumption that the county electorate experienced an important increase in the early to mid-1840s as the consequence of the registration drives of the Anti-Corn-Law League and its opponents. On the contrary, the augmentation to the county electorate during this period was modest, compared to the very significant expansion of the mid-1830s. That expansion, indeed, had far outstripped the expansion of the borough

contention that "Indeed, the pre-reform electorate was expanding rapidly and kept pace with rising population at least as well as its post-1832 counterpart" (p.26) is equally unsupported by the data.

electorate, with the surprising consequence that in 1837, the percentage of the electorate that was qualified in virtue of a borough franchise had actually declined from what it had been on the eve of the Reform Act. Moreover, it now appears that the notable decline in the expansion of the overall electorate in the late 1840s and early 1850s can be attributed much more to the contraction of the county electorate during that period than to any real change in the borough electorate's rate of expansion.

Hence, the data for England and Wales as a whole contradicts Miles Taylor's assertion that "the borough electorate in the decades between the First and Second Reform Acts actually contracted in real terms . . ." (p. 60). There were in fact *some* boroughs where this occurred, but their experience does not seem to have been typical. What Taylor perhaps means to argue (and at times does) is that many boroughs experienced a decline in the *proportion* of their populations that enjoyed the franchise.¹¹ But this was mainly attributable not to the actual contraction of borough electorates, but to the fact that the larger towns and cities—most of which were parliamentary boroughs—were the main loci of population expansion during this period. In many cases, the expansion of their electorates did not keep pace with their rapidly expanding populations. But, as we have seen, the proportion of the overall population that enjoyed the franchise was actually higher in 1866 than it was in 1833, and this fact is attributable more to the expansion of the borough electorate than to the expansion of the county electorate.

5. Conclusion

Professor O'Gorman (1989) has commented that the increase in the size of the electorate brought about by the Reform Act represents "a discernible and significant difference but scarcely the stuff of which political revolutions are made" (p. 182). This is a fair assessment, although perhaps a bit too cautious. The expansion of the electorate brought about by the Act, although modest when compared with the electorate's expansion after 1867, was quite significant when viewed in the context of prior trends. Within a few years of the Act's passage, the percentage of adult men who enjoyed the franchise had increased by well over 50 percent. Just as important, the Act had created an electoral system under which this proportional increase was largely maintained in the face of massive population growth. It is now an historical cliché that the importance of the Great Reform Act is not to be found mainly in the number of persons added to the electorate; but this truth should not blind us to the very important expansion of the electorate that the Act did bring about.

Appendix 1. Population and Electorate Data for England and Wales, 1689-1886

Population figures for the period prior to 1801 are estimates. Beginning in 1801, the Government conducted a census every ten years. The figure for 1831 is thus the enumerated figure provided in the census return of that year. For the nineteenth century census returns, see the *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population*, vols. I-XXV (1968). A helpful summation of the population figures for each census year between 1831 and 1891 can be found in vol. XX, p. 413, Table 34. For non-census years, unless otherwise specified I have relied upon the estimates provided in the census return of 1881. These can be found in vol. XX, pp. 78-79.

¹¹ Taylor seems to want it both ways, stating at times that the size of the borough electorate "contracted in real terms" or "went down" (p. 60), while at other times stating that there was a "relative shrinkage" or a "relative diminution" (p.56). Taylor does, in fact, offer evidence of proportional decline in a number of the larger boroughs. Out of the 40 large boroughs he examines, 25 experienced proportional declines between 1832 and 1861; fifteen, however, saw proportional increases (p.57).

For the period before the Reform Act there were no registers of electors, so all figures are estimates. The 1832 Reform Act established a registration system, but there was never a national register. Registration was done at the constituency level only. All of the national registration figures that exist for the period after 1832 are therefore the result of contemporaries, or historians, adding together the figures for all of the constituencies to arrive at the national total. All published figures for the national electorate are included in the table below. A problem arises from the fact that the total number of names listed on a given constituency register was always somewhat greater than the actual number of *individuals* eligible to vote. This was particularly true in the early and mid-1830s, when some wealthier men sought to safeguard their franchises by listing more than one qualifying property (although they could only qualify in virtue of one of them). Also, prior to the Registration Act of 1843, a man who was registered could lose his qualification if he sold, or ceased to occupy, the property in virtue of which he had been placed on that year's register.¹² His name would be on the register, but he would be ineligible to vote. Moreover, it was possible for a man to qualify in multiple constituencies—for instance, for a borough and for the county in which the borough was located (although not for the same piece of property). Although it is sometimes possible to differentiate the “real” (or “bona-fide”) electorate from the nominal registered electorate at the constituency level, there is no reliable way of estimating it for the national electorate. Thus, the figures for the post-1832 period, based on the number of names listed on the registers, exaggerate to some extent (possibly about 10%) the total number of individuals eligible to vote.¹³ But this is less of a problem than it appears to be, at least for the purposes of comparison with the pre-reform electorate. This is because the pre-reform estimates are also inflated. It was actually more common for individuals to possess qualifications in multiple constituencies prior to the Act than after it. Both before and after the Act, it was possible for a man to qualify in more than one county constituency. But before the passage of the Act, it was also possible for a man to be qualified to vote in more than one borough. The Act essentially did away with this possibility by establishing a residency requirement as one of the qualifications for obtaining a borough franchise. The figures for the pre-Reform electorate are derived from adding up the estimated electorate for each constituency. Hence, they no more take account of individuals with multiple qualifications than do the post-Reform figures.

Another difficulty that must be addressed is that the registration system was not based on the calendar year. The first register went into effect on November 1, 1832, and was in effect until October 31, 1833. This system lasted until 1843, when the start date was pushed back to December 1. In all cases, the registration figures presented here are the figures for the main part of the year listed. For instance, the figure for 1833 represents the register that went into effect on November 1, 1832, and remained in effect until October 31, 1833. Thus, the 1832 election, fought in December of that year, was decided by what is here categorized as the 1833 electorate. No other general elections during this period were held in November or December.

¹² For the 1843 Registration Act, see John Prest (1977), pp. 73-77.

¹³ The Victorian statistician William Newmarch (June, 1857, p. 175) argued for the reduction of the registration figures by “not less than 6 percent” in order to arrive at the number of individuals entitled to vote.

Table 9. Population and Electorate Data for England and Wales, 1689-1886

Year	Population	Electorate	Borough Electorate	County Electorate
1689	5,400,000 ^a	240,000 ^a	n. i.	n. i.
1715	5,800,000 ^a	300,000 ^a	n. i.	n. i.
1790	8,500,000 ^a	338,000 ^a	n. i.	n. i.
1831	13,896,797 ^b	439,200 ^a -or- 435,391 ^e	188,391 ^f	247,000 ^f
1833	14,328,471 ^c	656,000 ^a -or- 652,777 ^e	286,428 ^f	369,830 ^f
1834	14,520,297 ^c	669,386 ^f	286,790 ^f	382,596 ^f
1835	14,724,063 ^c	675,432 ^f	289,941 ^f	385,491 ^f
1386	14,928,477 ^c	789,012 ^f	318,058 ^f	470,954 ^f
1837	15,103,778 ^c	801,126 ^f	322,061 ^f	479,065 ^f
1838	15,287,699 ^c	811,057 ^f	330,328 ^f	480,729 ^f
1840	15,740,813 ^c	825,357 ^f	335,319 ^f	490,038 ^f
1847	17,150,018 ^c	882,781 ^g	372,258 ^g	510,523 ^g
1852	18,193,206 ^c	920,100 ^h	411,000 ^h	509,100 ^h
1853	18,404,368 ^c	914,283 ^h	404,393 ^h	509,890 ^h
1854	18,616,310 ^c	909,346 ⁱ	403,592 ^k	505,754 ^k
1857	19,256,516 ^c	945,036 ^j	439,046 ^j	505,988 ^j
1863	20,625,855 ^c	1,003,693 ^g	469,608 ^g	534,085 ^g
1866	21,409,684 ^c	1,056,659 ^e	514,026 ^e	542,633 ^e
1869	22,223,299 ^c	1,995,086 ^e	1,203,170 ^e	791,916 ^e
1883	26,627,000 ^d	2,618,453 ^e	1,651,732 ^e	966,721 ^e
1886	27,522,000 ^d	4,380,540 ^e	1,842,191 ^e	2,538,349 ^e

^a O’Gorman (1989, p. 179, Table 4.3).

^b *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, v. XX, p. 413).

^c *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, v. XX, pp. 78-79).

^d Mitchell and Deane (1962, p. 9).

^e Seymour (1915, p. 533).

^f Salmon (2002, p. 23, Table 1).

^g Martin (1884, p. 112, Table A6).

^h Newmarch (June, 1857, p. 171; 183; 185).

ⁱ Calculated from T. C. Banfield, *The Statistical Companion for 1854*, cited in H. J. Hanham, “Introduction,” in Dod (1972, p. xvii).

^j Newmarch (Sept., 1857, p. 316).

^k T. C. Banfield, *The Statistical Companion for 1854*, cited in H. J. Hanham, “Introduction,” in Dod, (1972, p. xvii).

Appendix 2. English and Welsh Population Data: Adults and Adult Males, 1689-1871

The calculation of the proportion of the population that was adult (defined here as aged 21 and over) or adult male for this period presents several difficulties. The most obvious is that there are no precise figures for adults or adult males for the period before 1841. The census of that year was the first to enumerate the population by age *and* gender. But even for the period after 1841, it is necessary to estimate the figures for non-census years. For the period prior to 1831, I have relied on O’Gorman’s figures for the population as a whole, and his estimates of the proportions of the populations that were adult male. I have found no estimates for the proportions of the populations that were adult (gender inclusive) for this period. For the year 1831, the figure for the number of adult males is derived by applying O’Gorman’s estimate of the proportion of the population that was adult male to the enumerated population figure of that year. The figure for the number of adults in 1831 is derived by applying the proportion of the population that was adult in 1841 to the enumerated population figure of 1831. For the non-census years after 1831, the figures for the number of adults and the number of adult males have been estimated by calculating the average annual increase between two census years, and adding the appropriate sum to the figure for the earlier census year. This means that the figures for the period between 1831 and 1841 are necessarily a bit more speculative than those for the period after 1841, since the 1831 figures are estimated, not enumerated.

Table 10. England and Wales: Adults and Adult Males, 1689-1871

Year	Population	Adults	Adult Males	% of Population that is Adult	% of Population that is Adult Male
1689	5,400,000 ^a	no information	1,161,000 ^b	no information	21.5 ^c
1715	5,800,000 ^a	no information	1,247,000 ^b	no information	21.5 ^c
1790	8,500,000 ^a	no information	1,955,000 ^b	no information	23.0 ^c
1831	13,896,797 ^d	7,532,064 ^f	3,543,683 ^g	[54.2] ^h	25.5 ^c
1833	14,328,471 ^e	7,749,699 ⁱ	3,657,748 ⁱ	[54.1] ^j	[25.5] ^j
1837	15,103,778 ^e	8,184,968 ⁱ	3,885,877 ⁱ	[54.2] ^j	[25.7] ^j
1841	15,914,148 ^d	8,620,238 ⁱ	4,114,006 ⁱ	54.2 ^k	25.9 ^k
1847	17,150,018 ^e	9,338,053 ^m	4,475,810 ^m	[54.4] ⁿ	[26.1] ⁿ
1851	17,927,609 ^d	9,816,597 ⁱ	4,717,013 ⁱ	54.8 ^k	26.3 ^k
1857	19,256,516 ^e	10,516,774 ^m	5,025,149 ^m	[54.6] ⁿ	[26.1] ⁿ
1861	20,066,224 ^d	10,983,558 ⁱ	5,230,573 ⁱ	54.7 ^k	26.1 ^k
1866	21,409,684 ^e	11,656,686 ^m	5,548,371 ^m	[54.4] ⁿ	[25.9] ⁿ
1871	22,712,266 ^d	12,329,813 ⁱ	5,866,168 ⁱ	54.3 ^k	25.8 ^k

^a O’Gorman (1989, p. 179, Table 4.3).

^b Calculated using O’Gorman’s population figures (see “a”) and O’Gorman’s figures for the percentage of the population that were adult males (see “c”).

^c O’Gorman (1989, p. 179, Table 4.2, note “c”).

^d *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, vol. XX, p.413).

^e *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, vol. XX, pp. 78-79).

^f Estimated using the population figure enumerated in the 1831 census (see “d”) and the estimated figure for the proportion of the population that were adults in 1831 (see “h”).

^g Calculated using the population figure enumerated in the 1831 census (see “d”) and O’Gorman’s figure for the proportion of the population that were adult males (see “c”).

^h Estimated proportion of the population that was adult in 1831, based on the figure for 1841, the first year for which the census enumerated the number of adults. This estimate is not likely to be very far off, since for the census years between 1841 and 1871, the figure was never higher than 54.8, nor lower than 54.2.

ⁱ Estimated by calculating the average annual increase between 1831 and 1841, and adding the appropriate sum to the 1831 estimate. These figures—estimates based in part on other estimates—are obviously not precise, but they remain within, or very close to, the proportional boundaries yielded by the enumerated figures of the census years between 1841 and 1871.

^j Estimated proportion, calculated from the non-census year estimates of the adult population or the adult male population (see “i”).

^k Calculated from *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, vol. XX, p. 397).

^l *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Population* (1968, vol. XX, p. 397).

^m Estimated by calculating the average annual increase between census years, and adding the appropriate sum to the previous census year’s enumerated figure.

ⁿ Estimated proportion, calculated from the non-census year estimates of the adult population or the adult male population. In all cases, the estimated proportions remain within the proportional boundaries yielded by the enumerated figures of the census years between 1841 and 1871 (see “m”).

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