Democratizing from Within:
British Elites and the Expansion of the Franchise

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Abstract

Between 1832 and 1918, a set of gradual reforms broadened the franchise in Great Britain from less than 5% of all adult males before 1832 to universal male suffrage in 1918. Why did the political class in Britain willingly cede power to the masses rather than seeking to preserve the status quo? We revisit this question by studying how elite preferences regarding the scope of democracy changed over the course of this period. We use roll call votes on franchise reform in the House of Commons between 1830 and 1928 to estimate the preferences of MPs regarding the size of the franchise. We follow Bateman et al. (2017) in using an adapted ideal point estimation procedure which uses information on the policy content of key votes to improve the intertemporal comparability of our estimates. Our preliminary results imply three main conclusions. First, the process of democratization in Britain was partisan rather than consensual: although the median MP generally came to support a more generous franchise with time, conservative MPs were almost united throughout in opposing almost any suffrage extension. Second, the pace of electoral reform was governed by two factors: the gradual leftward drift of Liberal MPs, which accelerated from the mid-19th century onwards, and the conservatism of early Liberal leaders. Our initial analyses suggest that the process of social and economic modernization in Britain may explain much of the variation in legislator preferences we observe.

Britain stands out in the democratization literature as the paragon of an endogenous and peaceful transition to full democracy. Robert Dahl famously cast England as an example of a development path successfully leading, through the balanced expansion of liberalization and participation, from a "closed hegemony" to a "polyarchy" (Dahl 1971). Gabriel Almond classified Britain as an example of a centripetal political system – with pragmatic, moderate, stable policy preferences and bargaining strategies that arguably made democracy feasible. Indeed, over a period of one hundred years, its ruling elites oversaw a set of gradual reforms to broaden the franchise – roughly doubling it every generation – from around 10 percent of all adult males to 17.5 percent in 1832, then to 33 percent in 1867, over 50 percent in 1884, and universal (male) suffrage in 1918. Full universal suffrage came with the final reform of 1928 granting the right to vote to young and/or propertyless women. The process of political liberalization was not limited to the expansion of the franchise but rather accompanied by equally fundamental reforms to get rid of rotten boroughs, suppress the sale of votes, secure the secrecy of the ballot, and so on.

Explaining why British political elites willingly decided to share power with the whole population has been the object of an extensive and contested academic debate. For Barrington Moore (1966), the 16th-century commercial revolution and the assertion of parliamentary institutions in the 17th century established the foundations for the rise of a British bourgeoisie, its progressive integration with the old aristocracy, and a smooth transition to liberal democracy. According to more recent work, political elites chose to democratize elections once a changing economy and social structure reduced the redistributive costs of expanding the franchise (Boix 2003; Ansell and Samuels 2015). Alternatively, political reform has been attributed to pure electoral calculations – with conservatives and liberals competing with each other to attract new segments of voters (Lizzeri and Persicò 2004) or particular economic elites (e.g. industrialists in Britain) in-

terested in increasing the number of voters supporting their preferred policies (Llavador and Oxoby 2005). Finally, others have stressed the decision of political elites to introduce universal suffrage in exchange for universal conscription (in a situation of war) (Tichhi and Vindigni 2010) or as a compensation for the sacrifices made at the front (Scheve and Stasavage 2016).

To assess the nature and causes of democratization, social scientists have mainly relied on cross-country comparisons, employing a varying (over time growing) number of cases and years.[1] Although there has been cumulative progress in the last decades on the causes of democratic transitions and democratic consolidation (Geddes 2007; Treisman 2017), the democratization literature contains, at least, a key theoretical limitation with important empirical implications. Its explanatory models rely on two stylized assumptions about the nature and number of political actors. First, they proceed to classify them, somewhat arbitrarily, in different types or groups such as softliners, hardliners, radicals, moderates, wealthy, poor, and so on. Second, they attribute to them a set of arguably plausible but untested preferences and beliefs. As a result, we know little about the true nature and distribution of political players and of their political and policy goals.[2]

So far, very few studies have examined the empirical plausibility of the "microfoundations" of democratization models. Almond, Flanagan and Mundt (1973) trace the historical development of the electoral reform of 1832 by examining the actual structure of votes in the House of Commons. Aidt and Franck (2013) explore the same question quantitatively, examining the social and economic covariates of parliamentary votes. Lizzeri and Persicò (2004) and Bronner (2014) consider the reform of 1867.[3] Because all these studies focus on one particular moment, single decision or isolated reform, they suf-

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[1]For recent studies, see, for example, Przeworski (2009) for a specific study on the extension of the franchise; Boix (2011) for an analysis of the introduction of democracy.

[2]For a classical defense of this modeling strategy even when it relies on "mistaken" assumptions, see Friedman (1953).

[3]Although very different in its philosophy and execution, Treisman's (2017) paper also examines historical processes – in his case to assess where elites introduced democracy deliberately or "by mistake". Mares and Queralt (2015) model, in turn, the vote over the income tax in Britain in 1842.

fer from two main weaknesses. First, they offer few insights on the causes underlying the overall democratization process in England and how it may relate to the process of social and economic modernization – probably overplaying the importance of strategic choices by elites. Take, for example, the problem of whether popular agitation and revolutionary threats preceded democratization spells or not. Following Acemoglu and Robinson's (2006) theory, Aidt and Jensen's (2014) empirical study concludes that the presence of Swing riots in 1830 and 1831 induced voters to choose pro-reform candidates, leading to the decision of British parliamentarians to widen the franchise in 1832. However, one can equally point to instances in which strong popular mobilization resulted in no reforms (the Chartist petitions of the 1840s, signed by hundreds of thousands of individuals) or where reforms succeeded without much popular pressure (as in 1884).

Second, and relatedly, they may misinterpret the motivations of politicians at the time of extending the franchise. For example, some of these studies conclude that growing party competition prompted liberal and conservative politicians to expand the franchise to mobilize new voters in the expectation that the latter would then vote for the reform-minded politician that had extended the franchise to include them. Yet they forget that by expanding the electorate, politicians also risked alienating the support of already enfranchised citizens, and that political elites would only accept new voters to the extent that the preferences of these voters would not be too costly in policy terms – or, more precisely, that the costs of including these voters would be lower than the costs of keeping them out of the ballot box – something that may depend on the heterogeneity of preferences, degree of mobilization, etc. of both insiders and outsiders. A research design that deals with one reform at a time cannot credibly examine all those questions. Instead, one needs to compare the preferences and strategies of political actors during instances of reform with moments when there were none.

Two recent lines of research offer more promising avenues for assessing the underlying

structure of interests towards democracy. Svolik (2017) has designed a battery of survey experiments to evaluate the true attachment of non-elites to democratization.[4] Fresh (2018) has matched a panel of British parliamentarians with economic variables over a period of two centuries to analyze the impact of industrialization on elite turnover and the presence of political dynasties.

In this paper, we attempt to both measure the nature of elite (revealed) preferences toward democracy and determine how they related, in interaction with Britain's social and economic modernization, to the expansion of democratic institutions in Britain. With those goals in mind, we perform two tasks. In the first place, we map out the evolution of political elite preferences in Britain toward the male franchise from 1830 to 1918, employing information on how the members of the House of Commons (MPs) voted on electoral issues from 1830, that is, two years before the first electoral reform, to the fourth electoral reform (1918) which introduced universal male and partial female suffrage. We also consider, in separate estimations, the preferences toward the female franchise from 1867 (the first time the House of Commons voted on the issue) until 1928. We then reconstruct, with the aid of well-established ideal point estimation techniques that measure and model roll-call votes (McCarty 2010), the level of polarization of the House of Commons on this issue as well as the policy location of all MPs. Following the contribution of Bateman, Clinton and Lapinski (2017), who show that current methods employed to characterize elite ideological differences that do not account for the policy content of roll-call votes distort our analysis and representation of the underlying policy space(s), we use actual information about the real or potential franchise effects of reform proposals to anchor roll call votes in a fixed policy space (defined by an enfranchised male population from 0 to 100 percent), and construct an augmented matrix of roll-call votes which includes how (some) elites would have voted in votes in which they did not

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[4]Treisman (2018) shows that opinions in standard surveys of either public opinion or political elites are of little value predicting democratic breakdowns.

actually participate. In the second place, we connect the evolution of ideal points to UK's process of economic development and to the gradual expansion of the British electorate. After reconstructing the preferences of British MPs over the size of the franchise, we explore the relationship between elite behavior and democratization by considering the relationship between policy positions and covariates like the type of constituency and population density.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 offers a brief conceptual discussion to fix our theoretical and empirical expectations. Section 2 describes the methods we have employed to construct the distribution of ideal points (on democratization) of British parliamentarians – including a comparison with ideal point estimation models that do not constrain preferences according to substantive information (i.e. the actual content of the examined roll calls). Section 3 presents our general results and finds that policy positions shifted to the left gradually but that the timing of that transformation was strongly related to internal partisan changes. Section 4 links the evolution of policy positions to the passage of actual reforms: there we show that, although the process of political liberalization depended on fundamental underlying factors (for example, the replacement of a Whig parliamentary party by a true liberal party), its timing was determined by the agenda-setting powers of the party leadership. Section 5 explores the covariates of parliamentary preferences, and in particular the implications of economic circumstances (industrialization, wealth). Section 6 concludes.

1 Theory

A recent and growing literature explains democratic stability as a political equilibrium in which political actors accept fair and competitive elections because the expected policy losses from shifting to democracy and losing control over government with some non-negative probability (what Robert Dahl (1971) referred to as "costs of toleration" in his

seminal book Polyarchy) are smaller than the ?costs of repression? incurred to maintain a dictatorship (Dahl 1971; Przeworski 1991; Weingast 1997; Boix 2003; Ansell and Samuels 2014).

A simple way to develop that general insight for the purposes of this paper (and its exploration of Britain's evolution from a system with an extremely restrictive franchise to one with full universal suffrage) would be as follows. In a democracy, voters determine their policy-maker, the tax rate, and the level of redistribution. In a standard political economy model, taxes are set by the median voter – with higher taxes the more right-skewed income distribution (among those that have the right to vote) is. By contrast, in an authoritarian (or, more generally, a non-fully democratic) regime, decisions are made and taxes are set by a fraction of the electorate. Authoritarianism is, logically, not cost-free: the ruling clique incurs a cost to exclude low-income voters from rebelling, establishing a democracy (or an authoritarian regimes that excludes the old elites), and potentially imposing some onerous redistribution scheme on the old elite.

In that set-up, policy-makers will only favor democratization when the redistributive threat of a democratic system (where everybody votes) declines. This would happen under one of the three following circumstances. First, support for democracy becomes rises when the income gap between the median voter and high-income individuals declines, i.e., when inequality falls, to the point that taxes on high-income earners fall below the costs of authoritarian repression. Second, democratization is preferred once high incomes rise above a certain threshold. Assume that the marginal utility of additional income declines with income to the point of approaching zero: rich voters will oppose any meaningful expansion of the franchise (and a corresponding increase in taxes) in poor countries: however, they will become increasingly indifferent to higher taxes when their per capita income increases.[5] Last but not least, democracy becomes easier to

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[5]For the declining utility of additional income to lead to democratization, the (welfare effects of the) costs of exclusion should not decrease at the same rate. This happens if a higher income among low-income voters raises their ability to resist political exclusion through a convex function. In this plausible

accept when the specificity and immobility of wealth declines. As capital becomes more mobile, taxes decline because capital holders can credibly threaten exit. The costs of democracy become sufficiently low to convince wealthier voters to accept democratic institutions. By contrast, in unequal territories (with immobile assets), the threat of high taxes under democracy compels high-income individuals to support restrictive electorates and authoritarian institutions.[6]

Finally, let us add, to that economic and constitutional structure, an electoral environment where political agents (organized in two main partisan coalitions) compete in a one-dimensional space (defined by economic issues) by placing themselves to the left and right the median voter. Although constrained by the equality and income effects described above, the "left" party will lobby for a broader franchise provided two conditions are met: the redistributive effects of the reform do not fall on their current voters; and the party expects to benefit from the vote of new electors (who will, typically, enter on the left of the political space). The "right" party will, by contrast, resist most democratization efforts both because its electors will likely bear most of the new tax pressure and because its parliamentarians will find hard to attract the newly enfranchised electorate.

2   Mapping Legislator Ideal Points

To explain why certain members of the British elite acquiesced to franchise expansion at particular historical junctures, we first use parliamentary votes on franchise reform to estimate each British legislator's latent preferences over the percentage of adult men to be enfranchised. To do so, we adapt the ideal point estimation procedure proposed by Bateman, Clinton and Lapinski (2017), which incorporates information about the policy

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scenario, for example, poor individuals earning a subsistence wage can hardly spare time and effort to organize collectively but they do when they become more productive.

[6]For a full formalization of the argument and for the exploration of additional democracy-enabling conditions (such as the emergence of capital-labor complementarities), see Boix (2003), chapters 1 and 4.

content of different roll call votes to enable the interpretation of ideal points in terms of support or opposition to specific policy proposals.

Ideal point estimation techniques combine information from legislators' observed roll call votes with a spatial voting logic in order to estimate the ideological preferences of legislators on one or more latent dimensions. Therefore, as in spatial models of voting, ideal point estimators assume that legislators have preferences defined over policy alternatives that can be represented as points in a Cartesian policy space. Moreover, they typically assume that legislators vote sincerely, have single-peaked and symmetric preferences, and make voting errors infrequently. Thus, when choosing between two alternatives, a legislator will tend to vote for the policy alternative closest to his ideal point (or most preferred policy). However, beyond their commitment to this general framework, extant ideal point estimators vary considerably in, for instance, the assumptions they make about the functional form of legislators' utility functions, or the distribution of voting errors (Poole 2000; Poole and Rosenthal 2011; Clinton, Jackman and Rivers 2004).

Although many studies have used ideal point estimates to make inferences about long-run trends in elite preferences and behavior (e.g. McCarty et al. 2016 on polarization in America), over-time comparisons of this nature assume that the cardinal interpretation of the estimates does not change over time (i.e. a legislator with an ideal point of 1 in 2000 is twice as extreme as a legislator with an ideal point of 0.5 in 1950). However, ideal point estimates from different eras may not be directly comparable under two circumstances: first, when legislator behavior is influenced by partisanship and the extent of policy disagreement between parties on an issue changes over time; and, second, when the content of the legislative agenda changes substantially over time. Neither of these concerns are resolved by standard fixes for improving the overtime comparability of ideal point estimates—such as using bridging legislators or allowing for a linear trend in legislator ideal points (as in DW-NOMINATE).

In response to these concerns, Bateman et al. (2017) suggest two additional steps to improve the intertemporal comparability of ideal point estimates: first, restricting attention to roll call votes in a specific policy domain, and second, using information on the policy content of a subset of key votes to infer the behavior of legislators on votes that occurred when they may not have been serving. This second step effectively increases the number of bridging legislators very substantively, improving the accuracy with which policy spaces in different eras are bridged. Looking at the evolution of legislator preferences on civil rights since 1877, Bateman et al. show that their approach shrinks the standard estimate of current polarization in the US House of Representatives (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016) by almost one half. When Social Security is considered instead, the estimated level of polarization falls by about a third.

To apply this procedure to our case, we restrict attention to votes on bills and motions between 1826 and 1918 that dealt with male franchise reform (and 1867 to 1928 for the female vote). Relying on the dataset compiled by Eggers and Spirling (2014), we identify 325 such votes in this period. From these votes, we select 28 votes for the imputation procedure (and 16 for the females franchise). These are votes where the choices of MPs were plausibly non-strategic (e.g. final or take-or-leave votes), and where the franchise implied by a successful vote was relatively straightforward to calculate. To calculate the approximate percentage of men that would be enfranchised if a particular vote was successful, we combined historical census data, information from relevant parliamentary debates in Hansard and historical commentary on the implications of each vote (Seymour 1915; Saunders 2011).

Consistent with a spatial voting logic, we assume that legislators have Euclidean preferences over differing franchises and that their voting decisions on these votes reflect their sincere preferences on the issue. For each vote, we assume that the cutpoint dividing Yea and Nay votes is located at the midpoint between the proportion of individuals

enfranchised by the vote and the status quo franchise. That is, legislators voting Yea prefer some franchise above the cutpoint, and legislators voting Nay prefer some franchise below the cutpoint. For instance, consider the parliamentary vote on a Chartist petition to introduce universal male suffrage on 12 July 1839, on which 46 legislators voted Yea and 235 legislators Nay. By our calculations, the legal male franchise after the 1832 reform was 17.5%. Assuming that a preference for universal male suffrage implied a preferred franchise of 99%, we infer that the cutpoint dividing Yeas and Nays on this vote was 58.25%. Therefore, those who supported this motion ideally preferred a franchise greater than 58.25%, whereas those who opposed this motion ideally preferred a franchise of less than 58.25%.

An important corollary of this logic is that a legislator who voted in favor of, for instance, the Chartist petition of 1852, would not necessarily vote in favor of later proposals to increase the franchise. For instance, a legislator might have voted in favor of the Chartist petition of 1852 but against the March 1909 motion in favor of universal male (and limited female) suffrage. This is because, as the status quo franchise was 52.6% following the 1884 reform, the cutpoint dividing Yea and Nay votes in March 1909 was 75.8% rather than 52.6%. This means that legislators whose preferred franchise was between 52.6% and 75.8% may have voted for universal male suffrage in 1852, but would prefer the 1884 status quo to the 1909 proposal.

This logic is illustrated in Figure 1. Here, individuals A, B and C are hypothetical legislators who were present in parliament in both 1852 and 1909. As a consequence, all three legislators were able to vote on the Chartist petition of 1852 as well as the March 1909 motion, which implied a male franchise of 99%. In Figure 1, the ideal point and vote choice of each legislator is marked alongside the location of the status quo and the proposal on a unidimensional policy space – with Yea votes marked in green and Nay votes in red. For each vote, the midpoint between the status quo and the proposal is

Figure 1: Illustrative Example

Chartist Petition of 1839
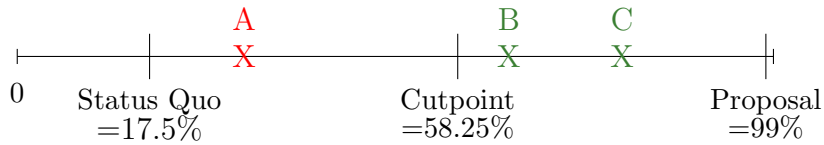

March 1909 Motion
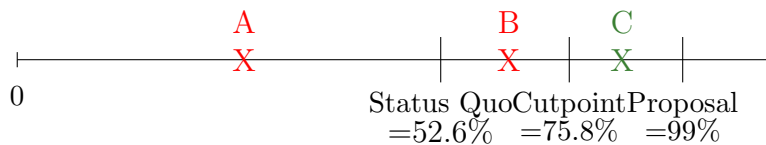
the cutpoint dividing Yea and Nay votes on that proposal. Legislator A, who has fairly conservative views on the franchise, has an ideal point located to the left of the cutpoint on both instances, and so votes against both proposals. Legislator C is very liberal on this issue, and having an ideal point located to the right of the cutpoint on both issues, votes for both proposals. However, Legislator B – who would ideally like a male franchise of about 62% – votes for the Chartist petition of 1852 but against the 1909 proposal, preferring the status quo franchise of 52.6% to having 99% of men enfranchised.

Accordingly, for each key vote, we calculate the cutpoint dividing Yeas and Nays that is jointly implied by the proposal and the prevailing status quo.[7] For votes which proposed franchise expansion, we infer that legislators who voted Yea to these votes would support all votes with cutpoints below the cutpoint of the vote under consideration. Meanwhile, legislators voting Nay would also oppose all measures with cutpoints above that of the vote under consideration. For votes on proposals to maintain or *reduce* the franchise, we infer that legislators voting Yea would also oppose franchise expansion measures with lower

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[7]For votes at committee stage or on amendments, the status quo is taken to be the franchise agreed in previous votes on the same bill. Thus, for instance, the relevant status quo for the 8 August 1867 vote opposing one of the Lords amendments to the Representation of the People Act suggested is 32.25% (the franchise if the amendment was upheld) rather than 17.5% (the approximate legal male franchise following the 1832 reform).

cutpoints, and support franchise reduction measures with higher cutpoints.[8] However, legislators voting Nay would support franchise expansion and oppose franchise reduction measures with lower cutpoints. In the appendix, we list the 28 votes selected for the imputation procedure for the male franchise, the 16 votes selected for the female franchise, the relevant status quo, the franchise(s) that would result if the vote was successful, and the inferred cutpoint.

Figure 2: MPs' Estimated Male Franchise Preferences without Imputation
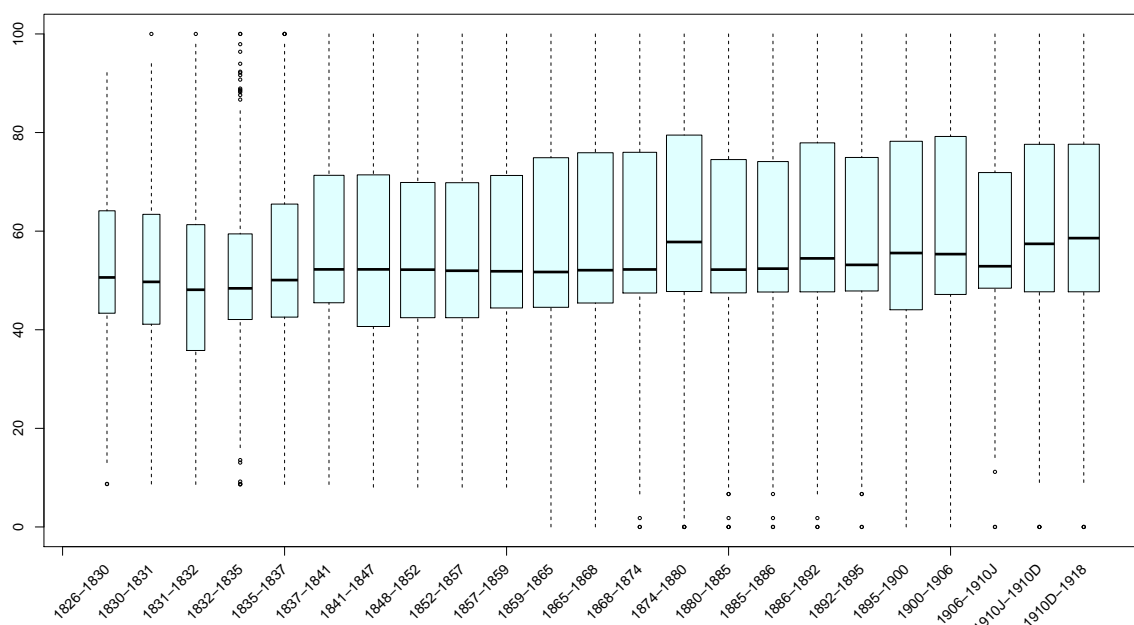
As in Bateman et al. (2017), legislator ideal points are assumed to be fixed over time, and so any changes in the distribution of preferences are driven by replacement rather than changes in individual preferences. Also following Bateman et al., we use a Bayesian item response theory (IRT) model to estimate legislator ideal points. Finally, we do not impute votes for a franchise (i.e., male or female) for the small number of legislators whose

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[8]Of the 28 votes we use for imputation, only one implied a reduction in the agreed franchise – specifically, a June 1917 vote to incorporate an ownership vote into the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

Figure 3: MPs' Estimated Male Franchise Preferences with Imputation
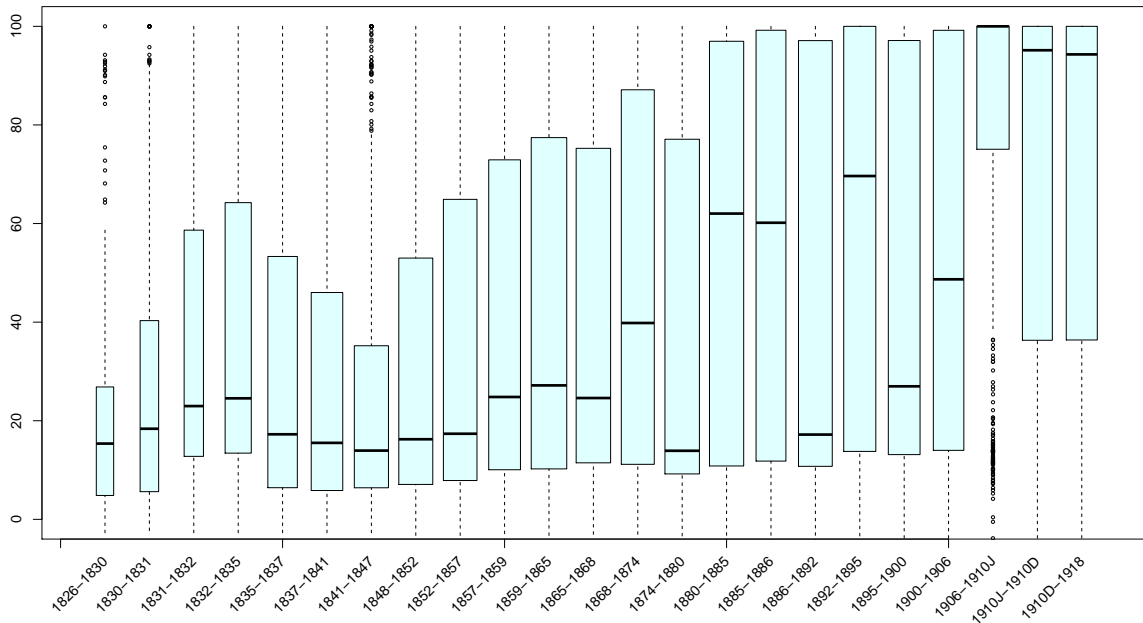
voting behavior on key votes for that franchise was inconsistent with the logic outlined above (though we do still estimate their ideal points on the basis of their actual votes).[9]

To aid interpretation, we generate predicted values of the franchise preferred by each legislator given their estimated ideal point, and the relationship between roll call locations and cutpoints that is implied by the estimates. Specifically, we regress the cutpoint of each key vote, in terms of percentage of men or women enfranchised, on its estimated midpoint. We use a generalized additive model (GAM) to estimate this relationship, as the relationship between the estimated midpoints and the assumed cutpoints appears nonlinear. Based on the relationship we estimate, we generate predicted values for each MP's preferred male franchise given their estimated ideal point location on the same

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[9]Of the 5,495 legislators whose decisions we analyze, only 348 legislators – 6.3% of the total – voted inconsistently on at least one of these key votes. We do not impute the behavior of these legislators on votes where they were not present in order to avoid contrary imputations, but also because these are legislators for whom the sincere voting assumption is arguably inappropriate.

scale.

To illustrate the impact of imputation on legislators' ideal point estimates, Figures 2 and 3 display the ideal male franchise preferred by members of the British House of Commons between 1830 and 1918 with and without imputation, respectively. In order to study legislator preferences on this issue alone, we construct both figures using only votes relating to franchise reform and not those on other issues. However, Figure 3 differs from Figure 2 in relying on an augmented matrix of roll call votes where we incorporate information on how a legislator would have voted on a roll call for which they were not actually present – using policy content to anchor a subset of key votes relative to other key votes on franchise reform, and using the reasoning outlined previously in this section to infer the direction in which each legislator would likely have voted.

A comparison of these two figures lends considerable face validity to our approach. Figure 2 reveals improbably little change in variance of MP preferences over the course of three franchise extensions and almost a century, and there is no visible trend in the preferences of the parliamentary median. This is in line with criticisms raised by Bateman et al. (2017), who note that when using standard approaches, the scope of political conflict in the United States appears unchanged between the mid-19th and late 20th centuries despite "the profoundly changing political, economic, and social circumstances in the United States over time" (p. 4). By comparison, in Figure 3, we observe a leftward drift in the overall distribution of legislators as well as in the parliamentary median over time – as we would expect to see in an era which began with only 10.5% of the adult male population eligible to vote and ended with the extension of universal suffrage.

3   Liking Democracy

As discussed in the previous section, Figure 3 displays the distribution of ideal points on the estimated ideal male franchise for the members of the House of Commons by legis-

lature from 1830 to World War One. More precisely, it indicates the revealed preference of the parliamentarian at the median (dark line) and first and the third quartiles (tips of box) as well as the location of the most extreme MPs (tip of dashed lines).[10] It also depicts the franchise determined by the law in place: notice that the calculation of the franchise is made at the beginning of each period; due to population and income growth, its actual extent changed over time, generally experiencing a slight upward drift.

Figure 3 reveals three main facts. First, the median parliamentarian moved toward a more liberal or democratic position over time – broadly in line with the reforms eventually passed in 1832, 1867, 1884 and 1918. Second, variance remained quite high throughout the whole century: the distance between the MPs in 25th and 75th percentile in ideal franchise was, with the exception of the 1840s, 60 percentage points or higher until the early 20th century. Last but not least, the alignment between the ideal point of the median parliamentarian tracked the legal status quo. It did so imperfectly at times, with the former jumping around the latter as a function of the party in power. The median parliamentarian had a more expansive position toward the franchise under the liberal majorities in the 1830s, late 1850s and 1860s. By contrast, it became less progressive once conservatives secured strong majorities in the last decades of second half of the 19th century. The fact that franchise conditions did not change automatically following shifts in parliamentary majorities seem to reflect the role of strategic considerations and the power of (generally centrist) agenda setters – something we discuss later on in Section 4.

Figure 4 reports the median (plus 25th and 75th percentiles and outliers) of liberal and conservative MPs separately. The width of bars are drawn proportional to the number of seats controlled by each party right after the election. The liberal median favored a franchise almost three times wider than the one passed by parliament in 1832 during the following two decades. It then shifted to over 60 percent in the early 1850s and, ten years

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[10]The data for the period before 1832 relies on the roll calls on electoral issues that took place in 1830 and 1831 (and before the elections that led to the reform approved in 1832).

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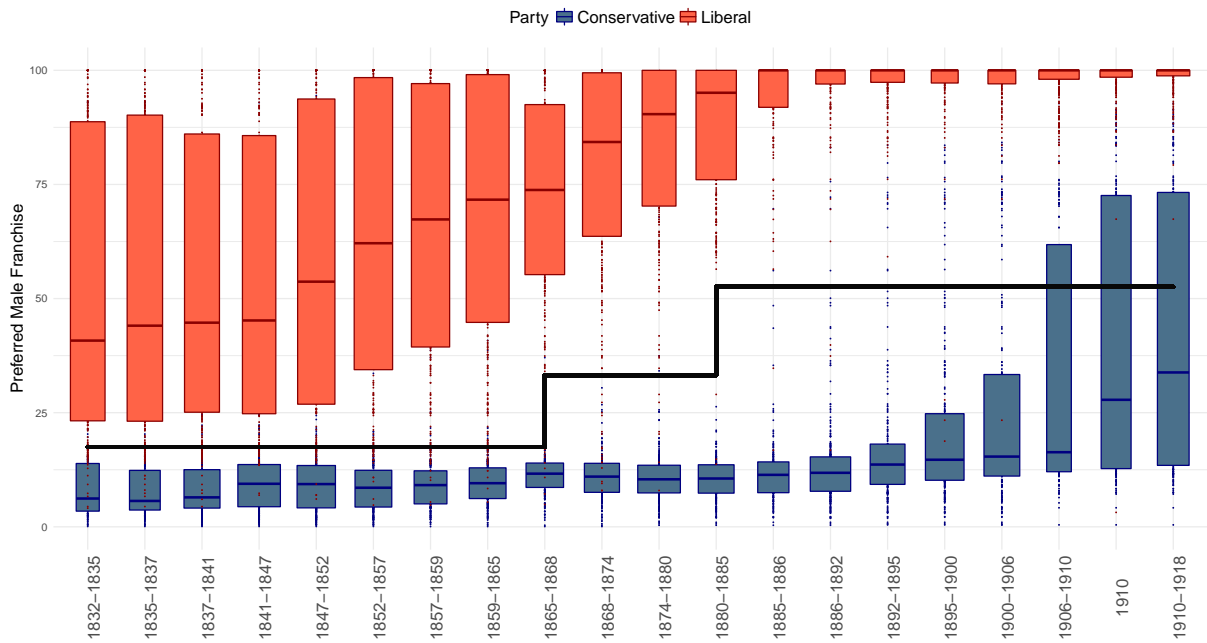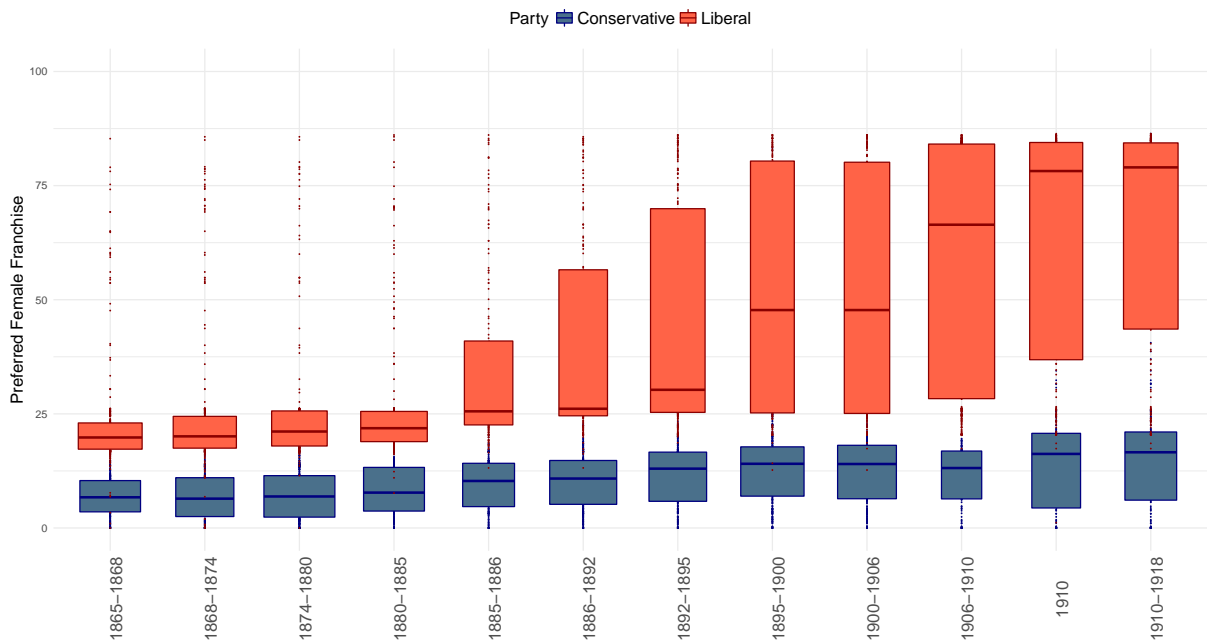Figure 4: Major Party Preferences on Male Suffrage

Figure 5: Major Party Preferences on Female Suffrage

later, it gradually moved to the left, reaching 80 percent by the time of the third reform of 1884. By 1906, at the time of the radical turn engineered by Asquith and Lloyd George, the liberal median was close to 100 percent – the level achieved with the fourth electoral reform of 1918. The liberal party did not just become more progressive. It also gained in cohesiveness. Right until the second electoral reform of 1867, the positions of its core (those parliamentarians between the 25th and 75th percentile in the distribution of ideal points) ranged from about 40 percent of men enfranchised to above 80 percent. By 1890 it ranged from around 80 to 95 percent. In contrast to liberals, Tories hardly changed during most part of the 19th century. The conservative median only reached an ideal point of 15.5 percent after the liberal onslaught of 1906, and became rapidly more progressive in the succeeding two parliaments. During this same period, the conservative party also became more diverse: it was only after 1906 that the position of the conservative MP in the 75th percentile of the party distribution crossed the legal status quo of 1884.

Figure 5 graphs, in turn, the evolution of MP preferences regarding the female franchise between 1867, when the House of Commons voted on a proposal introduced by John S. Mill to grant women the suffrage in equal terms with men, and 1928, when the British Parliament approved the female universal suffrage. Conservatives remained strongly opposed until World War One: the median Tory MP favored a female suffrage below 25 percent as late as the 1910s. By contrast, a majority of Liberals supported the equalization of female and male suffrage conditions by the Parliament of 1906. Support for a female franchise declined in relative terms (that is, with respect to the male franchise) during the discussion of the Representation of the People Act approved in 1918: women younger than 30 were denied the right to vote. As explained publicly by Willoughby Dickinson, a Liberal MP, one of the leading supporters of the female franchise and a member of the interparty Conference that had drafted the bill, that age limit had been agreed upon as a compromise to avoid giving women a majority over men, who had been

Figure 6: Party Median Preferences on Male Suffrage
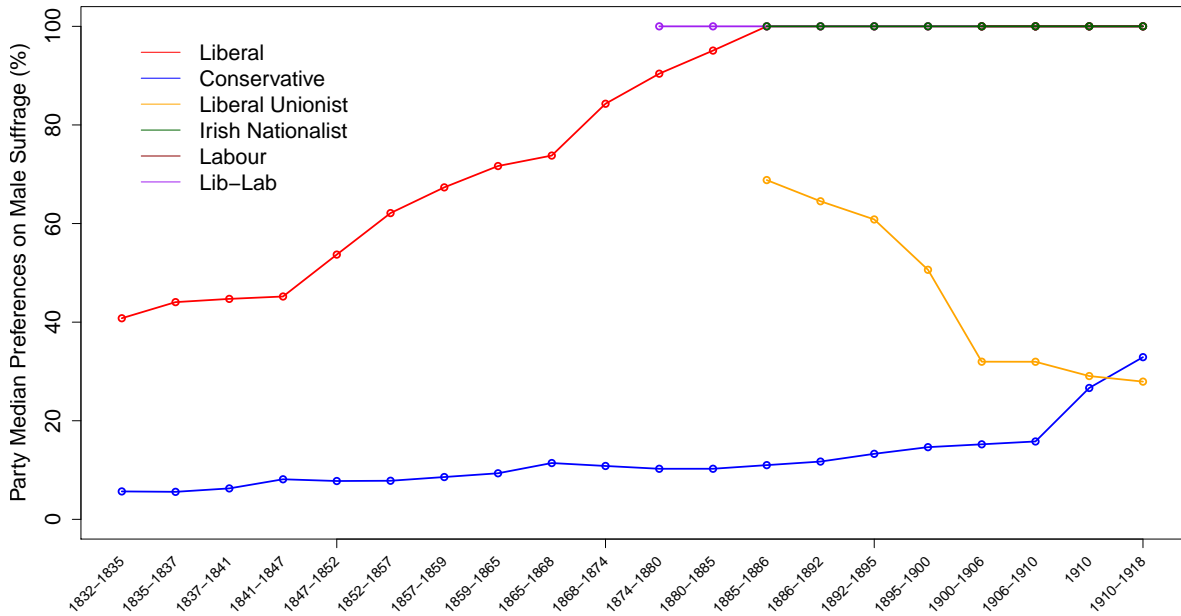
decimated in the European war, at the ballot box (Morris 1921:145-6).

The growing polarization of attitudes toward constitutional issues in the second half of the 19th century appears even more clearly in Figure 6, which reproduces the median parliamentarian for the main partisan groups in the House of Commons. Liberals trended upwards after the second electoral reform but their leftward drift accelerated after Liberal Unionists split following an intraparty dispute over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. Liberal Unionists aligned themselves with extremely conservative positions – a result of either ideological similarities or strict party discipline. Figure 6 also shows that, predictably, Lib-Lab MPs were the most favorable to support universal suffrage. Irish Nationalists were, with the exception of two parliamentary terms, to the left of Liberals. For the two main parties, Liberals and Conservatives, the difference between party medians widened from about 40 percentage points until the late 1840s to more than 70 percentage points in 1890s. It was only with World War One that party differences

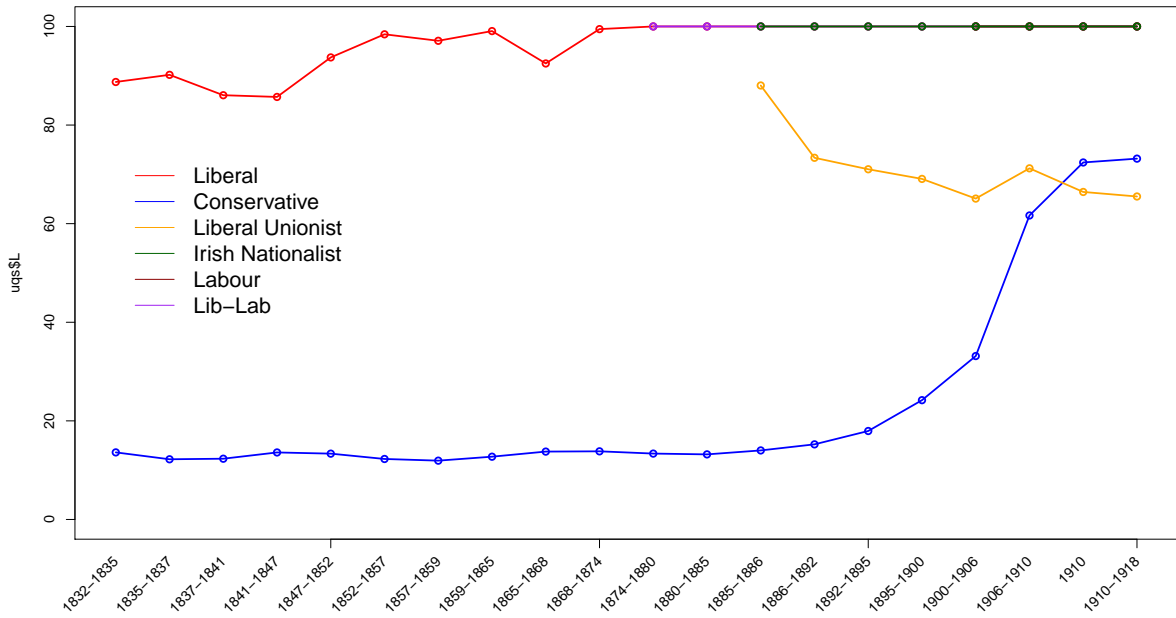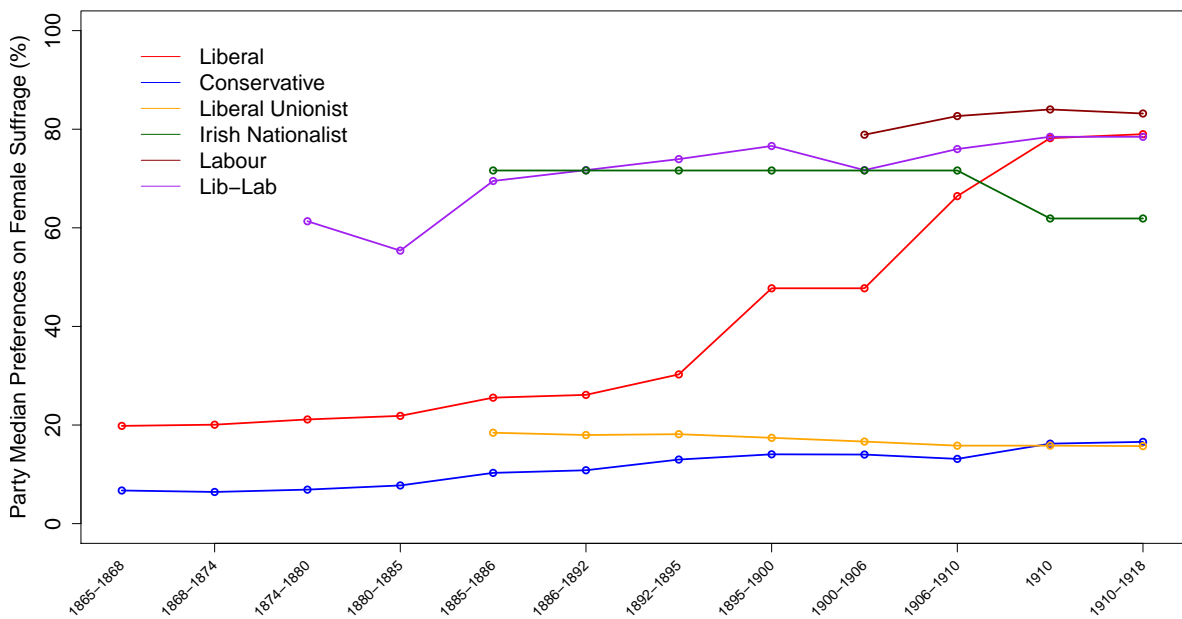Figure 7: Upper Quartile of Party Preferences on Male Suffrage

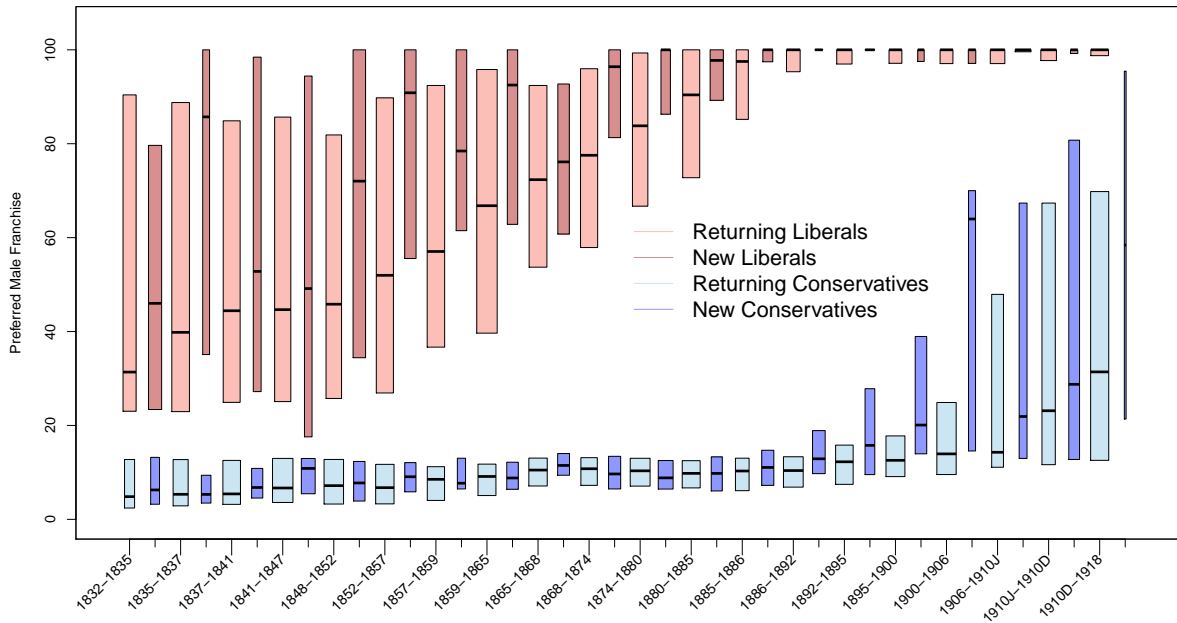Figure 8: Party Median Preferences on Female Suffrage

declined, as conservatives opposed to universal suffrage became a minority.

Figure 7 shows the ideal points of the parliamentarian in the 75th percentile in each party. Two things stand out when we compare their evolution with the location of the medians in the liberal and conservative parties. In the first place, the "radical" quartile within the liberal party was consistently in favor of a broad franchise since the 1830s – the ideal point was at 80 per cent from the 1832 parliament until the 1874 legislature and then rose to over 90 percent in the late 19th century. Once again, it was the Whig center that gradually became more similar to the left wing of the liberal party. Such a transformation mostly happened through a process of parliamentary replacement. Figure 9 compares the position of returning MPs (those who had served in a previous legislature) with new MPs (those who had never served in any previous legislature), divided by party. The darker bars depict new MPs. The distribution of liberal newcomers was consistently to the left of continuing MPs, especially between the 1850s and the turn of the 20th century. Afterwards, the liberal party was fairly united in its defense of universal male suffrage.

In the second place, Figure 7 shows also that the "left" wing of the Conservative Party started to distance itself from the conservative median at the end of the 19th century but, most particularly, after 1906. The strong liberal showing of 1906 probably nudged the conservative party to the left. As with liberals, change came in part through personnel turnover. Figure 9 compares newcomers and continuing conservative MPs, and depicts growing divergence between these two groups from the 1890s onwards. By 1900, the median new conservative favored a male franchise of more than 40% of adult men, but the median returning conservative still favored something around 20%. During this period, the parliamentary conservative party also became substantially more heterogeneous: note that after the first election of 1910, the conservative parliamentarian in the 75th percentile of the distribution of newcomers was almost indistinguishable from the median liberal.

Figure 9: MP Preferences on Male Suffrage by Party and Intake

Before the war started, change was already in the air.

Figure 8 explores the evolution of the preferences of party medians toward the female franchise. Once again, Conservatives were extremely reluctant to grant the right to vote to woman. By contrast, Liberals and Labour supported an increasingly progressive franchise. The Irish Nationalist median tracked the Liberal median until the turn of the century. Afterward, he straddled in between Conservatives and Liberals, arguably for strategic reasons: to defeat Liberal initiatives on suffrage that fell short of male universal suffrage and to press London to make concessions on Home Rule.

4   Leaders vs. Backbenchers

Laws changed in response to changes in the positions taken by MPs in the House of Commons, as expressed over a multitude of roll call votes on electoral matters, but it did

conditional on the position of agenda setters.

Figure 10 depicts the status quo as well as the ideal points of both the liberal and conservative medians and of the liberal and conservative party leaders. Notice that the conservative leadership coincides with the very restrictive views of the conservative median. By contrast, the Whig/liberal party leaders (Russell, Palmerston, Gladstone, Cavendish, again Gladstone after 1874) were located below the liberal median – with positions similar to liberals in the bottom quartile of the liberal distribution. Right after the first electoral reform, Russell, who led the party in the House of Commons from 1834 until 1855, preferred only a slightly more progressive position than the status quo. A similar logic prevailed during the first years under Palmerston's leadership – at the end of the 1852-57 parliament – when the median parliamentarian was essentially in favor of the existing franchise.

Figure 10: Party Median vs. Leader Preferences on Male Suffrage
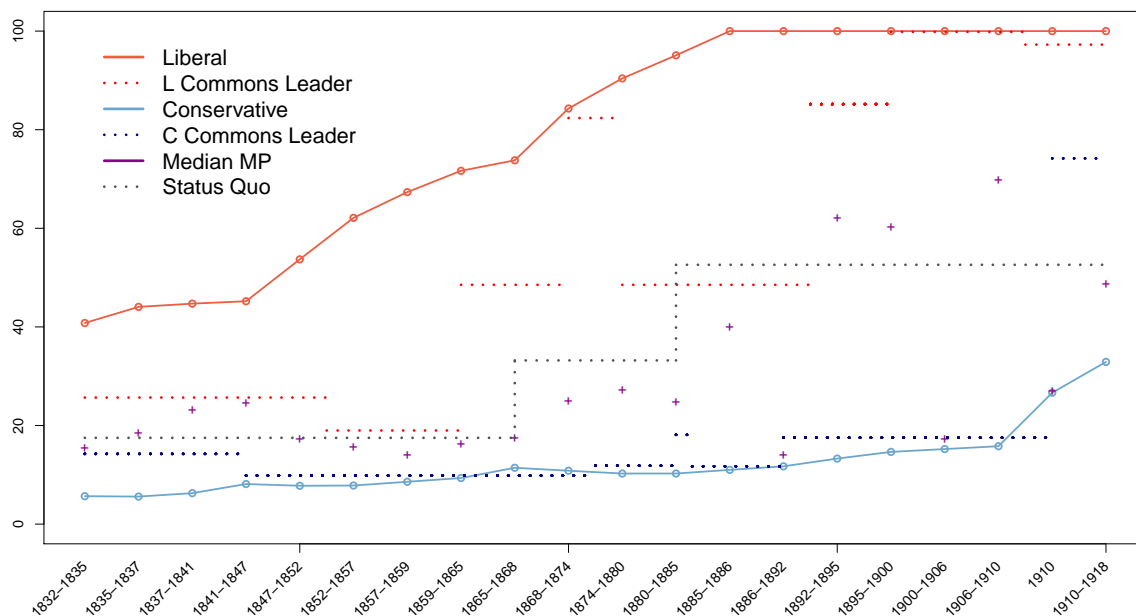
The legal status quo in suffrage was correlated with the position of the median parlia-

mentarian throughout the first half of the 19th century: the 1826 and 1830 parliaments resisted any reform; the elections of 1831 triggered a Whig victory and the first electoral reform; then, with the exception of the 1832 parliament – which delivered a strongly progressive majority – up until the 1857 parliament, the median parliamentarian coincided with the status quo.

After 1857 and until the conservative victory of 1874, the median parliamentarian shifted to the left of the status quo. The Liberal victory of 1857 created a decisive majority in favor of a broader franchise. The median parliamentarian now preferred a franchise including about 30 percent of all men and the liberal party median favored a franchise two times larger. Radical and backbencher pressure for reform was therefore intense. And, yet, it took three legislatures and a conservative leadership to pass the second reform of 1867.

The stability of the existing status quo arguably derived from the distribution of preferences within parties (and, in particular, within the liberal party) and the role played by governing party leaders in setting the parliamentary agenda. Palmerston, the Liberal party leader was, with an estimated ideal male franchise of about 20 percent, was closer to the Whig faction than the median of his party. Naturally unwilling to open Pandora's box and the door to mass democracy, his 1859 proposal only proposed marginal changes to the post-1832 status quo, only expanding the franchise by 2 to 3 percentage points according to our estimations. Russell and the majority of the Liberal party defeated the proposition, leading to new elections. In the following parliament, the median parliamentarian veered slightly to the right but the Liberal party, on the whole, became even more progressive on the franchise issue. However, new proposals, which would have expanded the franchise by 5 to 6 percentage points of the electorate, failed to pass – arguably because Russell could not prevent defections by the more moderate liberal parliamentarians.

Under the stewardship of Derby and Disraeli, the conservative minority government

that followed was able to do what moderate Whig leaders had not done. Bolstered by the support of their own party (with reactionary but very cohesive preferences) and of moderate liberals, they could pass a reform (backed by most liberals, either through tactical votes or abstention) that shifted the status quo franchise to include about 30 percent of all men. Disraeli?s reform derived directly from the strategic calculations of the Tory leader. Even though the male franchise we estimate Disraeli to have preferred was approximately 9% – lower than the 1867 reform would eventually imply – Disraeli must have calculated that allowing the liberals to take the lead would have resulted in a worse electoral reform for Tory interests over time. With the Liberal party gravitating to the left on the issue, galvanized by the rising political figure of Gladstone and the entry of new, increasingly progressive MPs (see again Figure 9), the expansion of the franchise was unavoidable. By passing a slightly amplified version of Russell's reform, Disraeli could prevent an even wider reform. More crucially, he could control the process of redistricting, packing urban voters, who naturally supported Liberal candidates, in boroughs, and drawing the remaining districts to keep a working Conservative majority in them (Smith 1966).

5   Why Did Some MPs Like Democracy?

Which factors might explain the wide variation in the attitudes of British MPs to democracy, as well as their transformation over the course of a century?

Long-run trends in economic development offer one explanation. According to a simple model of interest representation, legislators should have advocated a franchise structure that maximized the electoral influence of their natural constituencies. As a result of the first industrial revolution, urban interests grew in number and influence within many constituencies. In response to their demands, urban MPs pushed for the extension of voting rights to the new middle classes emerging in the most dynamic towns. By contrast, in

Figure 11: Conservative MP Preferences on Male Suffrage by Constituency Type
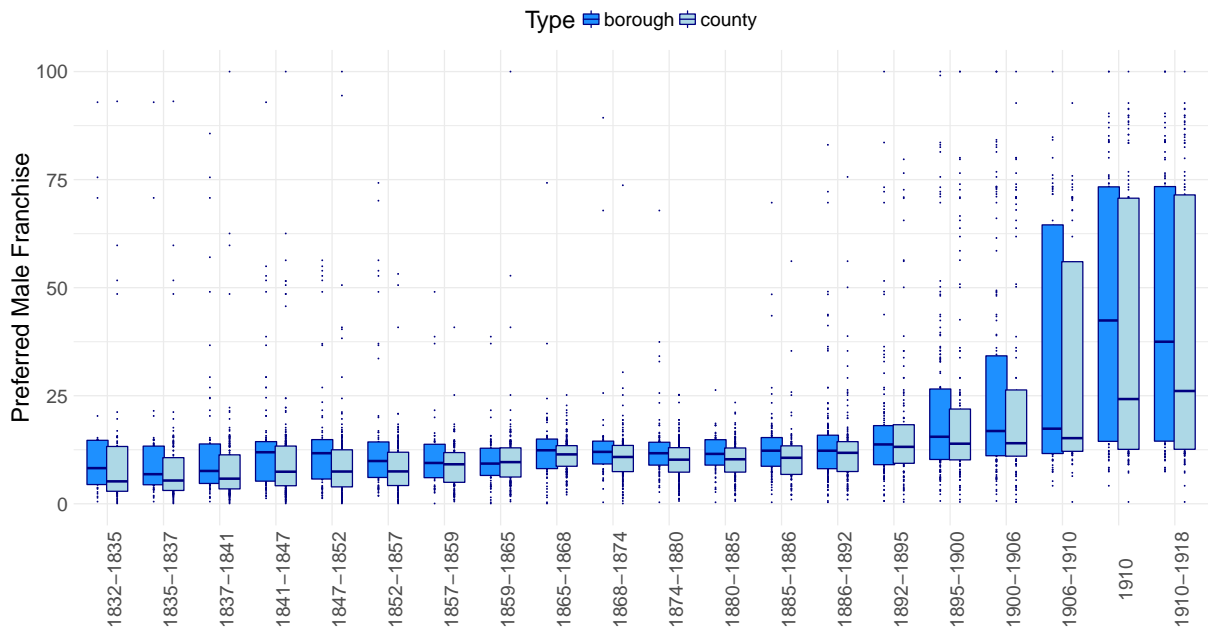
Figure 12: Liberal MP Preferences on Male Suffrage by Constituency Type

Figure 13: MP Ideal Points and Proportion Unskilled in 1852, 1865, 1880 and 1906 Parliaments

(a) Parliament of 1852–1857

(b) Parliament of 1865–1868

(c) Parliament of 1880–1885

(d) Parliament of 1906–1910
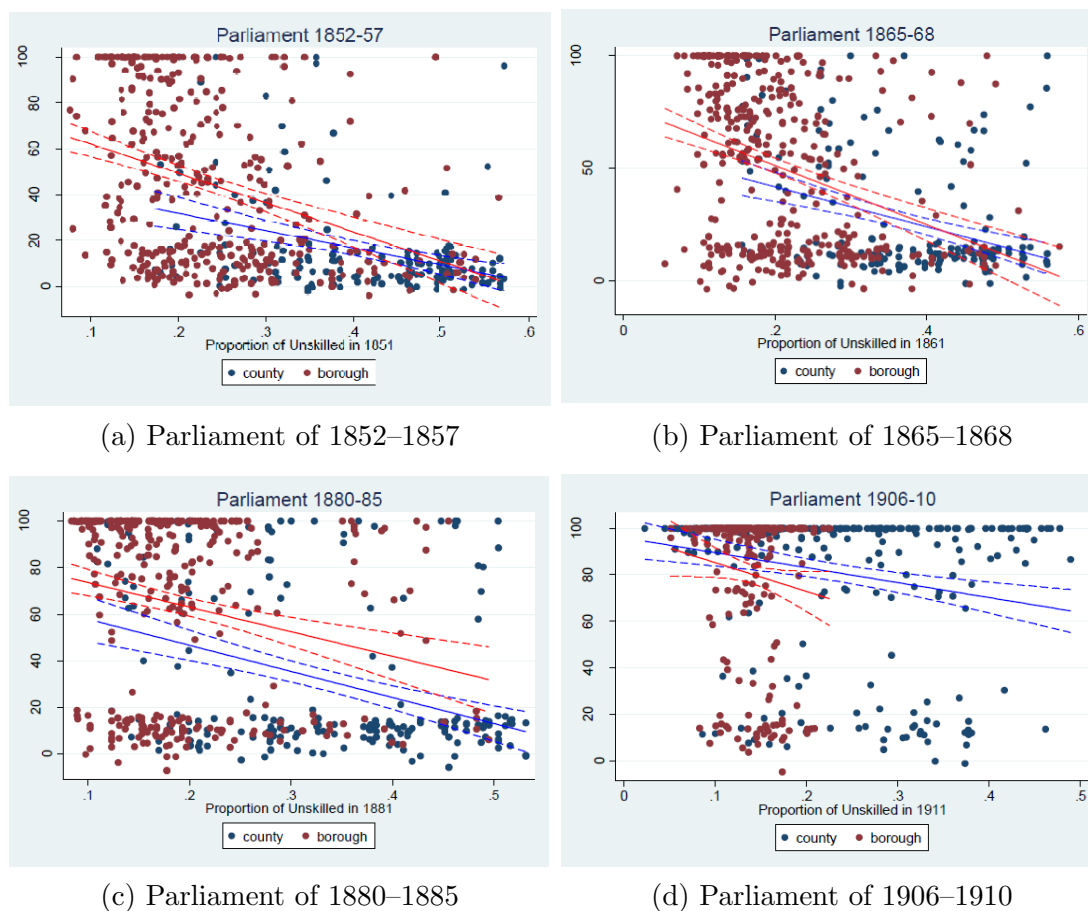
rural areas, where landowners controlled elections – often through a patronage system (Stokes et al. 2016, Velasco Rivera 2017) – their representatives blocked any significant electoral reform. If this were the case in Britain, we would expect MPs representing boroughs to favor franchise extension, but MPs representing counties (frequently landowners themselves) to be hostile to any franchise expansion that might weaken their grip on their constituency.

To evaluate the importance of economic development in explaining the patterns we observe, we consider how the ideal points of MPs (in each legislature) might have varied

as a function of type of constituency (borough versus county) and population density (as a proxy for industrialization). Figures 11 and 12 show the distribution of ideal points of conservative and liberal MPs broken down by type of constituency. Among Conservative MPs, there is little evidence that franchise preferences varied substantially by type of constituency in any era. Certainly, conservative MPs representing counties had extremely reactionary attitudes with respect to the franchise – very much in line with a model predicting that landholding interests should oppose democratization. However, the median conservative MP representing a borough typically had similar franchise preferences to the median conservative county MP – although the preferences of borough conservatives exhibit slightly higher dispersion (Figure 11).

There was a larger gulf between liberal MPs representing counties and those representing boroughs, especially in the early and mid-nineteenth centuries (Figure 12). Consistent with the modernization thesis, in all legislatures, the median liberal county MP favored a smaller franchise than the median, typically very progressive, liberal borough MP – although liberal MPs of both types varied considerably in their franchise preferences. However, the divergence between those two types of liberal MPs collapsed over the course of the century, essentially vanishing after the third reform of 1884–85. So did the variance among liberal MPs: by the 1880s, both county and borough liberal MPs appear, on average, to agree on the need for an expansive male franchise.

As briefly sketched in Section 1, the position of parliamentarians with respect to franchise expansion depended on the impact that a wider electorate may have on the chances MPs may have to retain their seat and, more fundamentally, on the effects of the franchise on policy making. That was, in turn, a function of (at least) one of the following three structural conditions. First, parliamentarians representing constituencies with a mass of (still unenfranchised) poor voters should have been more reluctant than MPs from middle-class constituencies to extend the right to vote. Second, MPs from

constituencies with high levels of fixed wealth should have more unlikely to vote for a broad franchise. Third, redistributive tensions should have decline as incomes grew across the board: even if inequality or asset specificity remained unchanged, a higher income reduced the utility loss associated with taxes on wealthy individuals.

Figure 13 plots the ideal points of MPs and the proportion of unskilled workers in the legislatures of 1852, 1865, 1880 and 1906 for English and Welsh constituencies (Panels A, B, C, and D).[11] The graphs include the linear prediction as well as 95 percent confidence intervals. Each figure distinguishes between county and borough constituencies (depicted in blue and red respectively). In all four figures, the relationship is negative and estimated with a substantial degree of precision. Parliamentarians running in constituencies with a substantial number of unskilled workers put considerable resistance to the idea of expanding the franchise. An unequal distribution of income mattered for the political preferences of MPs.

In line with our second theoretical expectation, the nature of wealth seemed to matter too. After conditioning for the proportion of unskilled workers in their constituencies, parliamentarians representing counties, which had a substantial amount of landed wealth, were more opposed to a wider franchise than member of parliaments returned from boroughs.

Finally, income growth mattered. Compare the legislatures of mid-nineteenth century with the parliament of 1906. The steepness of the slope of the linear relationship declined over time – arguably because the welfare losses of including poor individuals fell for the already enfranchised, and overall richer, voters.

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[11]In order to measure the proportion of unskilled workers in each constituency, we aggregated and matched individual-level census data from 1851, 1861, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 to the corresponding electoral district for that census-year. To determine whether an individual was an unskilled worker, we identified the HISCLASS code corresponding to each worker's occupation (as recorded in the census), and classified individuals belonging to classes 11 and 12 as unskilled workers. Individual-level census data was obtained from the Integrated Census Microdata (ICeM) project, and parish and constituency boundaries from the Great Britain Historical Database.

6 Tentative Conclusions

Why did British elites vote, through four successive reforms, to extend the franchise to the masses between 1832 and 1918? We shed new light on this question by estimating the franchise preferences of British parliamentarians in this period, and exploring how they might relate to the process of economic and social modernization in 19th and early 20th century Britain. To ensure that the preferences we estimate are substantively meaningful and comparable over time, following Bateman et al. (2017), we restrict attention to votes directly relating to the franchise, and use actual information about the real or potential franchise effects of reform proposals to, first, anchor key votes, and second, impute the behavior of legislators on key votes for which they were not actually present.

We find that, as expected, the parliamentary median embraced a progressively more generous franchise over time, but that there was a substantial partisan divide on the franchise issue that persisted till, at least, the beginning of the First World War. In particular, while the median liberal parliamentarian consistently favored a much larger franchise than the legal status quo, conservative parliamentarians were almost united throughout in opposing almost any suffrage extension. Moreover, this gulf widened rather than dissipated with time, as variance in opinion within the liberal party collapsed while the liberal party median continued to drift leftwards and the conservatives largely stayed put. In light of these findings, we suggest that the relative conservatism of liberal party leaders on this issue and their disproportionate influence over the parliamentary agenda may explain why, despite the progressivism of liberal parliamentarians throughout and a sympathetic parliamentary median after 1857, the second electoral reform was only passed in 1867 and under a conservative government.

We speculate that the process of social and economic modernization in Britain may explain the leftward drift in MP preferences on the franchise issue, as well as some of the within-party variation we observe. Consistent with these hypotheses, we find that, at least

within the liberal party and at least until 1884–1885, MPs who represented borough seats typically favored a larger franchise than MPs representing county seats. Additionally, we find a strong and negative association between MPs' franchise preferences and social structure. Parliamentarians elected in unequal constituencies and in districts with landed wealth were more likely to oppose the expansion of the franchise to sectors that would jeopardize the status of the already enfranchised electors. Development, however, seemed to have a softening effect on the opposition to universal suffrage.

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Appendices

A Key Votes on Franchise Reform

Table 1: Key Votes on Male Suffrage

Date of Vote	Estimated Roll Call Location	Proposed Male Franchise	Status Quo	Cutpoint
1. 28 May 1830	-0.218	99	10.5	54.75
2. 22 March 1831	0.611	15.5	10.5	13
3. 6 July 1831	0.623	15.5	10.5	13
4. 19 September 1831	0.561	17.5	10.5	14
5. 22 March 1832	0.550	17.5	10.5	14
6. 4 June 1839	0.128	22.3	17.5	19.9
7. 12 July 1839	-0.295	99	17.5	58.25
8. 3 May 1842	-0.290	99	17.5	58.25
9. 14 May 1844	-0.278	99	17.5	58.25
10. 28 February 1850	-0.275	99	17.5	58.25
11. 2 April 1851	0.044	22.3	17.5	19.9
12. 25 March 1852	-0.261	99	17.5	58.25
13. 27 April 1852	0.165	22.3	17.5	19.9
14. 19 February 1857	0.130	22.3	17.5	19.9
15. 13 March 1861	0.285	20	17.5	18.75
16. 10 April 1861	0.139	22.6	17.5	20.05
17. 13 April 1864	0.248	20.0	17.5	18.75
18. 11 May 1864	0.154	22.6	17.5	20.05
19. 27 April 1866	0.071	23.9	17.5	20.7
20. 17 May 1867	0.449	27.5	20.12	23.81
21. 20 May 1867	0.129	28.4	27.5	27.95
22. 8 August 1867	0.096	33.2	32.25	32.725
23. 4 March 1879	0.013	52.6	33.2	42.9
24. 7 April 1884	0.007	52.6	33.2	42.9
25. 19 March 1909	-0.669	99	52.6	75.8
26. 6 June 1917	-0.512	96	99	97.5
27. 7 June 1917	-0.266	98	52.6	75.3
28. 28 March 1917	-0.270	98	52.6	75.3

Table 2: Information on Key Votes on Male Suffrage

Date of Vote	Notes	Implied Male Franchise (%)
1. 28 May 1830	Motion demanding universal male suffrage proposed by MP Daniel O' Connell.	99
2. 22 March 1831	Second reading of first iteration of the Reform Bill.	15.5
3. 6 July 1831	Second reading of second iteration of the Reform Bill.	15.5
4. 19 September 1831	Third reading of the Reform Bill.	17.5
5. 22 March 1832	Third reading of the Reform Bill, after incorporating Lords' amendments.	17.5
6. 4 June 1839	Motion proposing to expand the county franchise.	22.3
7. 12 July 1839	Chartist petition demanding universal male suffrage.	99
8. 3 May 1842	Chartist petition demanding universal male suffrage.	99
9. 14 May 1844	Chartist petition demanding universal male suffrage.	99
10. 28 February 1850	Motion demanding universal male suffrage proposed by MP Joseph Hume.	99
11. 2 April 1851	Second reading of County Franchise Bill.	22.3
12. 25 March 1852	Motion demanding universal male suffrage proposed by MP Joseph Hume.	99
13. 27 April 1852	Motion requesting leave to introduce bill to expand the county franchise.	22.3
14. 19 February 1857	Motion requesting leave to introduce bill to expand the county franchise.	22.3
15. 31 March 1861	Second reading of County Franchise Bill.	20
16. 10 April 1861	Second reading of Borough Franchise Bill.	22.6
17. 13 April 1864	Second reading of County Franchise Bill.	20
18. 11 May 1864	Second reading of Borough Franchise Bill.	22.6
19. 27 April 1866	Second reading of the Representation of the People Bill.	23.9
20. 17 May 1867	Amendment to abolish compounding of rates and rents, expanding the borough franchise. Tabled by MP Hodgkinson. No division.	27.5
21. 20 May 1867	Liberal amendment to reduce copyhold franchise to £5. Committee vote.	28.4
22. 8 August 1867	Commons vote on Lords' amendment to retain £10 copyhold franchise.	33.2
23. 4 March 1879	Motion to extend borough franchise to counties.	52.6
24. 7 April 1884	Vote supporting continued debate on the Representation of the People Bill.	52.6
25. 19 March 1909	Second reading of the Representation of the People Bill.	99
26. 6 June 1917	Proposal to reintroduce the ownership vote.	96
27. 7 June 1917	Vote on Clause 1. of the Representation of the People Bill.	98
28. 28 March 1917	Asquith motion demanding universal male suffrage with residence qualifications.	98

B MP Preferences over the Female Franchise

Table 3: Key Votes on Female Suffrage

Date of Vote	Estimated Roll Call Location	Proposed Female Franchise	Status Quo	Cutpoint
1. 20 May 1867	-0.547	0	28.4	14.2
2. 12 May 1870	-0.209	33.2	0	16.6
3. 3 May 1871	-0.235	33.2	0	16.6
4. 26 April 1876	-0.213	33.2	0	16.6
5. 19 June 1878	-0.205	33.2	0	16.6
6. 12 June 1884	0.254	52.6	0	26.3
7. 27 April 1892	0.270	52.6	0	26.3
8. 3 February 1897	0.267	52.6	0	26.3
9. 19 March 1909	0.660	61	0	30.5
10. 12 July 1910	0.319	52.6	0	26.3
11. 28 March 1912	-1.059	9.3	0	4.65
12. 6 May 1913	0.214	44.8	0	22.4
13. 28 March 1917	0.539	61	0	30.5
14. 6 June 1917	4.338	59	61	60
15. 19 June 1917	0.471	60	0	30
16. 29 March 1928	3.215	98	60	79

Table 4: Information on Key Votes on Female Suffrage

Date of Vote	Notes	Implied Female Franchise (%)
1. 20 May 1867	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	28.4
2. 12 May 1870	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	33.2
3. 3 May 1871	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	33.2
4. 26 April 1876	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	33.2
5. 19 June 1876	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	33.2
6. 12 June 1884	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	52.6
7. 27 April 1892	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	52.6
8. 3 February 1897	Proposal to enfranchise women on same terms as men.	52.6
9. 19 March 1909	Proposal to enfranchise some women.	61
10. 12 July 1910	Proposal to enfranchise some women based on household and occupation qualifications.	52.6
11. 28 March 1912	Proposal to only enfranchise female householders residing in a different parliamentary division from their husbands.	9.3
12. 6 May 1913	Proposal to enfranchise women older than 25 who were either married to a householder or householders themselves.	44.8
13. 28 March 1917	Proposal to enfranchise all women older than 30.	61
14. 6 June 1917	Proposal to reintroduce the ownership vote.	59
15. 19 June 1917	Proposal to retain female enfranchisement clause in bill.	60
16. 29 March 1928	Second reading of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Bill.	98