

Constituency Influence Upon Parliament in the 1840's*

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Historians have disagreed with regard to the major question of the extent of the influence of the electorate over parliament in the period after the reform legislation of 1832. Some have regarded it as considerable, while others have pointed to the continuance of the apparatus of control from above in local politics and have insisted that Members of Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century were virtually independent of the wishes of their constituents. Doubtless the truth lies somewhere between, but it would be interesting to know just where it lies: how far the political attitudes of Members of Parliament followed the presumed wishes of their constituents and, if there was such a relationship, what was the nature of the mechanism that produced it. In this paper an attempt was made to show how it might be possible to make some headway with this problem even with the limited data that we have for British politics a century and a quarter ago. We don't know in any detail the wishes of constituents but it may be allowable, for purposes of argument, to hypothesize these from the demographic features of constituencies, their type, location, and size. We have much more information about the attitudes of Members of Parliament but, in a twenty-minute report, no attempt could be made to describe these in detail and it seemed better to set up as the dependent variable merely a two-way party division, the Conservatives as opposed to the miscellaneous group of entities that may loosely be described as the "Liberals." It turned out that there was a considerable correlation between constituency and party: in Ireland the north and south tended respectively to the right or to the left; in England, Wales, and Scotland, on the other hand, the main difference was between counties and boroughs. Among the borough members, those representing the smaller boroughs tended to the right, those representing the larger ones to the left. There was, in England, Wales, and Scotland, a strongly marked tendency for rural constituencies to send Conservatives to parliament and for urban constituencies to send Liberals. It is less clear what mechanism produced this pattern. It is hard, now, to ascertain the ways constituents had of exerting pressures on their representatives, but something

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can perhaps be done with figures on election contests in 1841 and with figures on re-election to the succeeding parliament. Such tests, however, proved on the whole negative, and it is difficult to show that constituents brought pressures on their representatives in ways that can now be clearly observed. If results of this kind continue to appear, they will raise some serious questions about the way in which the representative system of that period functioned and challenge some of the widely accepted assumptions on the subject. There are, however, a lot of other matters that will have to be considered. This statement was merely a brief sketch for illustrative purposes. A fuller discussion of the problem and a more detailed account of the findings will be presented in a later paper.