

## Worksheet for British Elections before the Great Reform Act

### SOME KEY TERMS:

*Borough:* a constituency based around a town or city

*Canvassing:* soliciting votes in advance of an election

*Chairing:* the carrying of a candidate or MP around a constituency in a celebratory procession

*Constituency:* The unit for electing Members of Parliament

*County:* A constituency embracing the whole of a county

*Franchise:* The qualifications needed to participate in an election

*Patron:* a member of the elite in a position to support candidates and mobilize voters in a dependent relation with them.

*Plumper:* a voter who casts only one of his two votes

*Poll:* The casting/counting of votes at an election

*Pollbook:* the record of the votes cast in an election

*Splitter:* a voter who divides his votes between opposing sets of candidates

*Straight:* a voter who casts both his votes consistently.

*Treating:* giving supporters free food or drink

### KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN RELATION TO THE TOPIC

1. Before listening to the lecture, think carefully about how you understand the casting of a vote in a modern general election influences its outcome. How do voters decide which way to vote? How does a vote for an individual MP potentially lead to a change of government? Who decides who is to be prime minister? Then during the lecture, think how what is being described does or does not map on to that understanding.
2. Clearly the eighteenth century had a more limited electorate than modern Britain. But what considerations could have been used to justify the exclusions that were made from the franchise? Think again about modern elections. Is *everybody* allowed to vote? If not, how would modern exclusions be justified? How different would the principles be from those employed to justify the eighteenth-century system?
3. How could you best characterize the differences between the 'traditional' approach to the unreformed electoral system and that set out in the second half of the lecture? Are historians looking at the same evidence?
4. How useful is the idea of 'corruption' in understanding the working of the eighteenth century system?
5. How were local MPs chosen where you live in the eighteenth century? And who were the MPs? Explore the History of Parliament online to find out:  
<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/research/constituencies/1754-1790> (If your town is not listed, look for the county in which it is situated).

### Further Reading

There are useful surveys of MPs and constituencies on the History of Parliament website, although some of these are quite dated in their interpretation:

<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/research/surveys>

The London electoral history website gives detailed accounts of behaviour in the capital city:

<http://leh.ncl.ac.uk/>

Professor Penelope Corfield discusses the practice of open voting here:

[www.penelopejcorfield.com/election-special-whats-wrong-with-the-old-practice-of-open-voting-standing-up-to-be-counted/](http://www.penelopejcorfield.com/election-special-whats-wrong-with-the-old-practice-of-open-voting-standing-up-to-be-counted/)

Most modern textbooks on the eighteenth century will have good introductions to the eighteenth-century electoral system. A good example, putting it in the wider context of the constitution, is chapter 14 of Paul Langford's *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford University Press, 1989). Anything written earlier is unlikely to reflect the recent trends in scholarship.

If you are interested in the role played by women, there is a good case study by Professor Elaine Chalus here: <https://thehistoryofparliament.wordpress.com/2015/04/29/horsham-is-lady-irwins-borough-the-power-of-the-18th-century-political-widow/>