The Reform Act of 1918 – the advent of democracy

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The Representation of the People Act of 1918 (often referred to as the ‘1918 Reform Act’ or, less frequently, the ‘Fourth Reform Act’¹) was a landmark in modern British history and the most substantial and significant change in the composition of the political nation ever to take place.² The increase in the electorate was far larger than that of any previous measure, both numerically and proportionately, and the 1918 Reform Act marked a fundamental change in the principles upon which the franchise was based, one element of which was the admission of women to the parliamentary suffrage for the first time.³ In essence, the vote became a matter of adult citizenship, although at first this was restricted for women by an age limit of 30 and a basic property qualification, until a further measure in 1928 equalised the terms for both genders as simple residence and legal adulthood (which in this period was 21 years of age). The extent of the change can be measured by the proportion of the adult population registered as electors: this was 29.4% in 1910, 79.5% in 1919, 90.9% in 1929, and 98.6% in 1939 (the latter increase being due to more thorough registration, not to any further change in the electoral system).⁴ The greater scale of the 1918 Reform Act than any previous measure is shown in the following table:

Table 1: *Increases in the United Kingdom Electorate 1831-1929*⁵

The university franchise is not included. The figures up to 1918 include the whole of Ireland, but those for 1924 and 1929 only include Northern Ireland. In December 1910 the electorate in Ireland was 683,767 and in 1918 it was 1,926,274; for comparison, the electorate of Northern Ireland in 1924 was 610,064. The increase in 1885 is affected by the large addition in Ireland, where the number of voters more than trebled from 224,018 in 1883 to 737,965 in 1885, a rise of 329.4%. The 1885 increase in England, Scotland and Wales was 2,008,602 (68.6%).

<i>Reform Act</i>	<i>Electorate before</i>		<i>Electorate after</i>		<i>Increase</i>	
	<i>year</i>	<i>number</i>	<i>year</i>	<i>number</i>	<i>number</i>	<i>%</i>
1832	1831	515,930	1832	806,050	290,120	56.2
1867	1866	1,366,818	1868	2,462,529	1,095,711	80.2
1884	1883	3,152,912	1885	5,675,461	2,522,549	80.0
1918	1910	7,663,415	1918	21,324,231	13,660,816	178.3
1928	1924	21,648,609	1929	28,735,491	7,086,882	32.7

The 1918 Reform Act swept away the accumulated variety of property-based qualifications which had previously made electoral registration a complex legal area, and in the process repealed fifty statutes and amended fifty-seven others.⁶ The act introduced an almost-universal male franchise from the legal age of adulthood on a simple residential basis.⁷ There was no required minimum value of the residence occupied, no necessity to be a ratepayer (the local government tax), and no longer was there an exclusion of those who had been in receipt of poor relief.⁸ The qualifying period was reduced from twelve months to six, and qualifying was made easier as it was no longer to be affected by changes of residence that were within the same borough or county, or from an adjoining borough or county.

The effect of introducing adult male suffrage was far from uniform across the nation, as the proportion of men enfranchised under the previous system varied greatly between different types of constituency. Although their economic nature was the fundamental factor, the differing degrees of enfranchisement were not a direct extrapolation from their class composition, as it was the type of abode even more than its value that determined the ease or difficulty of obtaining the vote. It did not require much property to qualify under the pre-1918 system, but it did require particular kinds and it also required some permanence of abode. It was comparatively easy for the householder – however humble – to get on the register, and generally difficult for the lodger, about whom there were complicated rules and past judgements in case law concerning exclusive access (the possession of a latch-key, etc.), the relative value of furnished and unfurnished rooms, and so on.⁹ A crucial factor was the way in which the registration system operated and the effect of the lengthy qualifying period

that was required, as a change in the type of qualification or removal to another constituency (and for certain types of accommodation, such as lodgers, even a change of address within the same constituency) resulted in removal from the register and having to start all over again. The voter had to be in possession of the necessary qualification for 12 months before registering, and then there was a six month gap between the preparation of the register in July and when it came into effect on the following first of January; in consequence, the average period for qualification before 1918 was two years one month.¹⁰

This affected the working class in the industrial towns and cities to a greater extent than the less mobile population of the rural areas and small towns. It was estimated that in the county seats on average 5% of voters moved constituency each year, whereas in urban industrial areas it was 20-30% and in London 30-40%.¹¹ When combined with other factors such as the disqualification from having been in receipt of poor relief, this produced large variations in the proportion of adult male enfranchisement between the poorer districts of large cities at one end of the scale and the old-established country towns at the other. The average level of adult male enfranchisement in England and Wales was 59.8% in the boroughs and 69.9% in the counties, but this conceals much wider disparities, ranging from only 39.3% in Liverpool Everton and 42.6% in Bethnal Green, to 73.1% in Scarborough, 75.0% in Oxford and 78.6% in the Montgomery Boroughs in Wales.¹² The 1918 Reform Act's simple entitlement and shorter qualifying period resulted in a much more complete and evenly-distributed male enfranchisement, with the consequence that the proportionate increase was much greater in some places than others. Thus in Scotland, the increase in the male electorate from 1910 to 1921 was 165% in the ship-building town of Greenock and 120% in the Dunfermline Boroughs, but in the counties it was only 51% in Argyll and 35% in Galloway. The contrast can be summed up by the county of Fife, where in the industrial and coal-mining West Fife constituency the male electorate increased by 81%, but in rural and small town East Fife it grew by only 31%.¹³

The act included two special temporary provisions relating to the male franchise: men who had served or were serving in the armed forces 'in or in connection with the present war' could vote if

aged 19 or over,¹⁴ whilst those who had registered as conscientious objectors were disfranchised for the duration of the war and the following five years, unless they had undertaken war service (such as in the army medical corps or on minesweepers) or other ‘work of national importance’ and had obtained a certificate confirming this from the central tribunal established under the Military Service Act of 1916.¹⁵ The ban on conscientious objectors had not been part of the proposals for reform of the Speaker’s Conference in January 1917, and resulted from an amendment moved by the Conservative party chairman, Sir George Younger, in November 1917, but it reflected parliamentary and public attitudes at the time.

The 1918 Reform Act broke new ground in introducing votes for women. This was on a substantial scale, but with limitations: women had to be over the age of 30, and – a fact which is often forgotten – there was also a property requirement. As a contemporary guide to the act by a legal expert noted, ‘there is a material difference, besides that of age, between the qualifications which confer the parliamentary franchise ... on a woman and those which confer it on a man.’¹⁶ A woman had to qualify personally for the local government franchise or be married to a man who did so, either as the occupant of a ‘dwelling-house’ (for which there was no minimum value or rent), or as the occupier of land or premises with an annual rental value of at least five pounds.¹⁷ The local government qualification in the 1918 Reform Act remained very similar to the previous parliamentary franchise, and so was more restricted than the simple ‘residing’ which was now all that was necessary for the male parliamentary vote. For both men and women, the local government requirement was to be ‘occupying as owner or tenant’, and whilst this covered many forms of accommodation, lodgers in furnished rooms were specifically excluded.¹⁸

The restrictions to the female parliamentary franchise in the 1918 Reform Act – particularly the age restriction – had been put in place to meet concerns that women, who were slightly more than half of the population, would predominate in the new electorate, which together with adult male suffrage was too much of a leap in the dark. The members of the Speaker’s Conference had had no precise data upon which to base their eventual compromise proposals, which was partly why their

report left it for parliament to decide between the ages of 30 and 35.¹⁹ The former was adopted, and it was estimated after the act was passed that it would enfranchise around six million women.²⁰ This proved to be a significant under-estimate, and the new registers for the 1918 general election included nearly 8.5 million women, which was more than the total male electorate of 7.7 million at the previous general election in December 1910. However, the form of the franchise excluded around one-third of adult women, of whom approximately one-third were aged over 30 but did not meet the property qualification – particularly domestic servants living in their employer’s property,²¹ lodgers in furnished rooms and hostels, and those living with relatives other than a husband (usually parents or grandparents), where their relative was the owner or tenant and thus the local government elector.

Table 2: *The Male and Female Electorate 1910-29*²²

<i>Election</i>	<i>Male electorate</i>		<i>Female electorate</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	
1910 Dec.	7,709,981	100.0	-	-	7,709,981
1918	12,913,166	60.4	8,479,156	39.6	21,392,322
1929	13,657,434	47.3	15,193,925	52.7	28,851,359

Plural voting was abolished for residential properties – a person owning or renting several abodes might be registered in several constituencies, but could now only cast a residential vote in one of them²³ – but it remained in two other forms. The first of these was the business franchise, under which the owner or occupier of business premises which had an annual rental value of at least ten pounds, in another constituency from the one where they were a residential voter, was entitled to cast a vote in that constituency. Furthermore, each of the partners in the business qualified for a vote if the value of the premises when divided gave each of them a share worth ten pounds or more; however, the business franchise did not apply to either the directors or the shareholders of limited companies. One significant change introduced when the bill was passing through parliament was that constituencies which were divisions of the same city or town would be treated as entirely separate for the purposes of

the business franchise, which had not been the case before. Previously, a voter who lived in Sheffield Brightside and had business premises in Sheffield Central had not qualified for a second vote because this was within the same borough, but now they would do so. The number of plural voters was considerably reduced from the pre-war level of around 450-475,000 in England and Wales,²⁴ and it was now a much smaller proportion of the total electorate. However, the business vote remained a significant factor in a number of urban seats, especially in the central and business districts of the larger cities. In 1918, the business vote in England and Wales was 159,013 (0.9% of the English and Welsh electorate), and it grew steadily to reach 211,257 (1.1%) in 1924. The 1918 Reform Act allowed women who qualified for the business vote in their own right to exercise this in addition to their residential qualification, but stipulated that women could only vote once on qualifications derived from their husbands, and naturally almost all women chose to use the residential vote in the constituency in which they lived. However, the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 removed this restriction and allowed wives a second vote based on their husbands' business qualification. In consequence, in 1929 the number on the business premises register in England and Wales jumped to 371,594 (1.5% of the enlarged English and Welsh electorate); it then remained close to this figure in 1931 and 1935.²⁵

The second form of plural voting was in the university seats. Cambridge and Oxford universities had returned members of parliament since the early seventeenth century, and in 1800 and 1867 this had been extended to other universities.²⁶ In the 1918 Reform Act, the further expansion of higher education was recognised by increasing the number of university seats from nine to fifteen. The two existing Scottish university seats were merged into a single constituency, which was given a third MP; single member seats were created for the National University of Ireland, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Wales, and a two-member Combined English Universities seat was established for the more recently founded English universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Durham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield (to which Reading was added in 1928). However, this number was reduced to twelve following the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, as the two seats of Trinity College Dublin and the one of the National University of Ireland were removed from the House of

Commons together with the other constituencies in the area that became the Irish Free State. The 1918 Reform Act also expanded the qualification for the university franchise. Before 1918, voting in the Cambridge, Oxford and Trinity College Dublin constituencies required the possession of an MA degree – which could be obtained simply by paying around £25 to upgrade the bachelor's degree, but many did not choose or afford to do this.²⁷ It now became the case in all of the university seats that all graduates were entitled to vote; in addition, in the case of Cambridge and Oxford, which allowed women to attend as students but did not confer degrees upon them, women were qualified to vote if they had fulfilled the university's condition of residence and passed the final examinations.²⁸ However, the Act's age restrictions still applied, and so women had to be over the age of thirty to exercise the university franchise.

The voters in the university constituencies were scattered throughout the British isles and empire.²⁹ The elections were therefore conducted by postal ballot, and the university seats with more than one MP were the only constituencies in which the 1918 Reform Act introduced proportional representation, using the single transferable vote system.³⁰ However, the unit size of these three double-member and one triple-member constituencies was too small for the system to be effective, especially as in most cases the Conservative majority amongst the voters was so large that it swamped any Liberal or Labour minority. What did occur was the election of a few non-party independents, but that was due more to the cultural characteristics of the university electorate than the voting system. Retaining the university representation had been a recommendation of the Speaker's Conference, and both the principle and its logical expansion were uncontroversial during the passage of the bill. However, both university representation and the business franchise were abolished by the post-1945 Labour government in the Representation of the People Act of 1948.

Table 3: *The Representation of the University Seats 1918-35*³¹

This table analyses the twelve university seats in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; it does not include the three southern Irish university seats, which ceased to exist in 1921.

<i>Party</i>	<i>1918</i>	<i>1922</i>	<i>1923</i>	<i>1924</i>	<i>1929</i>	<i>1931</i>	<i>1935</i>
Conservative	9	8	9	8	8	8	7
Liberal	3	4	2	3	2	2	2
Independent	-	-	1	1	2	2	3

The 1918 Reform Act placed one further limitation on plural voting, that no matter in how many ways or places a person might be qualified to register, in an election they could cast no more than two votes.³² Thus, a person having a residential vote in one constituency, a business premises vote in another, and – being a graduate – a vote in one of the university seats, could only exercise two of those franchises.

The Speaker's Conference unanimously proposed the introduction of proportional representation in the boroughs which were large enough to have three or more MPs; these were to be arranged in constituencies returning between three and five members, in which each elector would have a single transferable vote.³³ More contentiously, the conference passed by a majority the recommendation that in single-member seats when more than two candidates were nominated, the alternative vote system should be used.³⁴ However, when the conference report was eventually debated in the house of commons on 28 March 1916, the prime minister, David Lloyd George, undermined these proposals by indicating his lack of enthusiasm for proportional representation; it was not 'in quite the same category' as the other recommendations, and indeed 'not an essential part of the scheme'.³⁵ This opened the door to the report's recommendations being treated as a list which could be adopted or amended selectively, rather than an indivisible whole, and it overtly encouraged the discarding of proportional representation – about which the views of MPs were certainly divided. The majority of Conservative MPs were opposed to both forms of proportional representation, but there was support amongst Conservative peers for the single transferable vote as the means of

retaining some representation of the middle class in the towns, where they would be a beleaguered minority after the advent of adult male suffrage. On the other hand, many Liberal and Labour MPs favoured the alternative vote; this had been a proposal in the pre-war era of their 'progressive alliance', and they expected to gain from it in Conservative-held areas, especially in the counties. Views on the alternative vote more closely paralleled party lines than did those on the single transferable vote, but there were many unpredictable cross-currents in the house of commons. Some of these were based on past convictions for or against proportional representation, but others were matters of personal expediency in reaction to how their own constituency would be affected. The application of the scheme to London was particularly disliked by most of its MPs, both Conservative and Liberal, and they played an important role in the foundation of the Anti-Proportional Representation Committee in 1917.³⁶

The result was a protracted series of motions and amendments, and during the second half of 1917 various proposals were defeated or approved, often by narrow and temporary majorities. Early in the committee stage of the bill, the single transferable vote scheme was defeated on 12 June 1917 by 149 to 141, with 85 Conservative MPs voting against it, and it was again rejected on 4 July by 201 to 169.³⁷ On 9 August, when the alternative vote was approved by a single vote, the party division on this issue was clear: the MPs who opposed it consisted of 113 Conservatives and 13 Liberals, whilst those in favour comprised two Conservatives, 98 Liberals, 17 Labour and 10 Irish Nationalists.³⁸ At the report stage, the single transferable vote scheme was rejected again by the larger margin of 202 to 126 on 22 November, whilst later on the same day the alternative vote was reaffirmed by 150 to 121. Finally, on 5 December, two days before the bill passed its third reading in the Commons, the single transferable vote was inserted for application only to Ireland by 181 to 117. The Conservative Party remained strongly opposed to the alternative vote, and when the bill reached the Conservative-dominated house of lords, on 22 January 1918 it was removed and replaced by the single transferable vote. When the bill went back to the Commons, they rejected the Lords' amendments by 223 to 123 on 30 January, and next day by the much narrower margin of 178 to 170 reinstated the alternative

vote. There was then a final flurry, with the house of lords in turn reversing this on 4 February, and on the following day the lower house removing the single transferable vote again by 238 to 141, and restoring the alternative vote by the narrowest of margins (195 to 194), although only for borough constituencies. On 6 February, the Lords then removed the alternative vote for a third time and the Commons again rejected their amendments, after which a compromise was quickly agreed.³⁹ Liberal and Labour MPs feared losing the bill entirely, and did not wish to risk the attainment of their pre-war objectives of adult male suffrage and the restriction of plural voting by insisting on the alternative vote, whilst the peers did not wish to press their amendments to the point of provoking a constitutional crisis. The result was that the alternative vote was dropped from the bill entirely, as was the single transferable vote for the territorial constituencies, and the provision was inserted that a royal commission be appointed to draw up a scheme for the application of proportional representation in 100 seats.⁴⁰ The Representation of the People Act then completed its passage, and received the royal assent on 6 February 1918.

Chaired by Speaker Lowther, the royal commission worked swiftly and on 13 April 1918 published its plan, under which the larger towns and cities would be formed into 24 constituencies of between three and seven members each, returning a total of 99 MPs. However, given the extension of the franchise, these multi-member seats would have very large electorates; few of the MPs sitting for one of the existing smaller divisions liked the prospect of being submerged in the larger unit. The scheme was rejected by the House of Commons on 13 May by 166 to 110, and thus apart from its application in the four university constituencies which returned two or three MPs, proportional representation was cast into limbo. By default, the 1918 Reform Act retained the first-past-the-post system for all of the territorial constituencies, which with the exception of twelve surviving double-member boroughs (see below), were all to be individual single-member seats.

The fewer and more straightforward franchise qualifications in the 1918 Reform Act were paralleled by the introduction of a simpler and less partisan system of registration. Since 1832, the register had been compiled by the Poor Law overseers from the rate-books and any other claims that

were lodged, but now the preparation of the registers was made the responsibility of local government officials, who were required to make 'a house to house or other sufficient inquiry'.⁴¹ This did away with the previous system in which party agents could put the cases of some voters to be registered, and make objections to the claims of others, in the annual Revision Court before a barrister appointed to oversee this process; in the smaller electorates before 1914, adding a couple of hundred of your supporters and securing the removal of a similar number of your opponents could be decisive.⁴² As part of this change, the costs of the Returning Officers were to be paid by central government; previously each candidate had paid an equal share of the costs in their constituency (which in December 1910 had averaged £280), in addition to their election expenses, but now they were relieved of this charge. The 1918 Reform Act also introduced two electoral registers in each year, instead of the previous one; the 'spring' register was to come into effect on 15 April for six months, and the 'autumn' register on 15 October for the next six months. However, in 1926, with the government under pressure to economise, this costly and time-consuming procedure was abandoned and a single annual register was reverted to, coming into force on 15 October; at the same time, the residential qualifying period was reduced to three months.⁴³

Another new feature in the 1918 Reform Act was a postal ballot for members of the armed forces, who were placed on a list of 'absent voters' in the constituency where they would otherwise have qualified as resident, with their votes to be included in the count there; it was under this provision that servicemen voted in the general election of December 1918, and again in 1945.⁴⁴ The act also allowed voting by proxy if they were serving in a location too remote for postal ballots to be returned in time, and gave discretion to registration officers to allow proxies for merchant seamen, harbour pilots and fishermen if they could show that they were likely to be at sea on polling day.⁴⁵ Following the demobilisation of 1919-20, during the inter-war period the number of absent voters was relatively small: in 1924, the first election for which there is a national total, it was 184,201, which was 0.84% of the whole electorate.⁴⁶ However, this was an innovation from which much wider civilian postal balloting was to develop after 1948.

The legislation setting limits on election expenses which was enacted in 1883 had proved effective in tackling corrupt practices, and there was no need to do anything substantial in that area.⁴⁷ However, the average election expenses of candidates had risen since 1885, reaching a peak of £861 in January 1910, and the Speaker's Conference was 'strongly and unanimously of opinion that the expenditure at present entailed in fighting a contested election is unjustifiable, and should be materially reduced'.⁴⁸ A new formula was needed in relation to the much larger electorate, and so the 1918 Reform Act stipulated that the maximum expenditure was 7*d.* per voter in a county constituency and 5*d.* per voter in the more compact borough seats.⁴⁹ This had the desired effect and the average of candidates' expenses in the general elections of 1922-29 was £683; following the reduction of permitted amount in county seats to 6*d.* per voter in 1929, the average fell further to £506 in 1931 and £536 in 1935.⁵⁰ The one innovation in 1918 was the requirement that a candidate upon nomination had to lodge a deposit of £150 with the returning officer, which was returned to them only if they received at least one-eighth of the votes cast; otherwise, it was forfeited to the crown.⁵¹ This was a substantial sum in these times: in 1925, the average annual income of an agricultural labourer was £73-109, and of a building labourer £143; amongst skilled workers, a railway engine driver earned £187-234 per annum, and a printing compositor £192.⁵² However, this was less of a problem for Labour Party candidates than it might appear, as many of them were sponsored by a trade union for their election expenses. In the 1918 general election, only six Labour and three Conservative candidates lost their deposits, although 44 Liberals did so; however, that was the Liberal Party's highest number until 1945. Both Labour (35) and the Conservatives (18) had their highest total in the 1929 general election, but this was a consequence of both parties nominating their largest number of candidates in the inter-war period and contesting many hopeless prospects.⁵³

Three other provisions in the 1918 Reform Act related to election campaigns. The first of these entitled candidates to make use of rooms in public elementary schools in the constituency to hold election meetings. This was not free, as is sometimes stated, as the local education authority or school managers were permitted to make a charge for preparing the room beforehand and returning it

to its normal state afterwards, and for heating, lighting and cleaning (and for any damage incurred).⁵⁴ However, these costs were very small and, as they did not include any element for the use of the room as such, they were considerably less than hiring a meeting place commercially. Of equal significance, in the rural constituencies they provided reasonably accessible venues amongst the scattered villages. This provision of the act was helpful to all candidates in keeping their expenses down, especially in the county divisions; it may have marginally been most helpful to Labour candidates in these seats, because their party was weakest in the agricultural areas and there was less trade union sponsorship.

The second provision was that each duly nominated candidate was entitled to one free postal delivery to every registered elector in the constituency, 'containing matter relating to the election only, and not exceeding two ounces in weight'.⁵⁵ This was almost always used by candidates for their election address, which was a printed leaflet containing their personal message and policy statement. However, whilst the Royal Mail delivered this without charge, it had to be prepared by the candidates and their supporters, at their own expense. This was not just a matter of printing sufficient thousands of copies of the election address, but also of putting these into envelopes addressed to each voter – the latter was not part of the postal service's responsibility. One consequence of this was that local constituency associations would often keep in stock a sufficient supply of envelopes, ready to be addressed by the voluntary members when a general election was announced, with the aim of being the first to get their candidate's address into the hands of the voters.

Finally, a significant change in the conduct of elections was the provision that polling should take place everywhere on the same day.⁵⁶ This was quite different from the practice which had been followed from the earliest times, in which different districts selected their own day. In the general elections from 1885 to 1910, the polling in different constituencies had been spread over a period of between 15 and 17 days, which had the effect that the results in the early seats could affect opinion in those that voted later, such as when the Conservative Party leader, Arthur Balfour, lost his seat in 1906.⁵⁷ The previous system had also made it easier to use plural votes, but as these were now being limited to just one additional vote, the change to a uniform polling day made little extra difference in

this respect. The 1918 Reform Act's new provision standardised the length of campaigns, as all seats now had the same interval between the announcement of the election and the polling day. This marked a final stage in the evolution of elections from being a collection of local contests, with local issues and the standing of local candidates playing an important and even determining role, into a more uniform national experience in which the programmes, propaganda and leaders of the parties at the national level were the crucial factors, and candidates were mostly voted for according to their party label.

As had been the case with the previous Reform Acts, the 1918 act included a redistribution of constituencies and redrawing of their boundaries. The same procedure was adopted, of appointing three boundary commissions (one for England and Wales, one for Scotland, and one for Ireland) to draw up detailed proposals in accordance with the instructions passed by parliament; the innovation in 1918 was that all three commissions were chaired by the Speaker. In 1885 the Third Reform Act had made the most radical and extensive changes in the political map by introducing large numbers of single-member constituencies, particularly through partitioning the cities into many smaller seats. The Speaker's Conference recommended 'the principle that each vote recorded shall, as far as possible, command an equal share of representation in the House of Commons',⁵⁸ and the reform bill based upon its proposals sought to achieve this by having constituencies based upon a standard population size. The initial instructions to the commissioners in May 1917 specified that the number of MPs for each county or parliamentary borough would be one for every 70,000 population, plus an additional member if the remaining population was above 50,000; a county or borough with a population of between 50,000 and 70,000 would retain one MP, whilst those with less than 50,000 'shall cease to have separate representation'. However, the strict application of these mathematical criteria was made more difficult by two of the other instructions; first, that the total number of MPs 'shall remain substantially as at present', and second, that the boundaries of constituencies should, 'as far as practicable', coincide with the local government boundaries.⁵⁹

There were concerns that the geographical size of constituencies in thinly-populated rural regions would become unmanageable, and together with the desire of the Conservative Party to defend the agricultural interest, this led to a resolution being passed by the house of commons on 18 June 1917 which amended the instructions. The commissioners were now given more freedom of action, and could ‘depart from the strict application of these Instructions in any case where it would result in the formation of constituencies inconvenient in size or character’. The resolution also abandoned proportional representation: the original instructions had been that boroughs whose population entitled them to between three and five MPs should be a single constituency, and those entitled to six or more MPs should be divided into constituencies each returning between three and five MPs, but, following the rejection of the single transferable vote six days earlier, the resolution of 18 June laid down that ‘the Commissioners shall act on the assumption that proportional representation is not adopted’.⁶⁰

The boundary commissions worked quickly, with that for England and Wales reporting its proposals on 27 September 1917, and that for Scotland on the next day. There then followed a stage of representations from the public, which came mostly from local authorities and the constituency associations of the political parties, after which Local Inquiries were held – there were 120 of these in England and Wales, affecting a total of 465 constituencies.⁶¹ These resulted in some minor revisions of boundaries, which in some cases worked to the advantage of the political party that had been most active and effective in presenting its case (generally the Conservatives), but no substantial changes. However, even with the greater flexibility that the amended instructions had allowed, the eventual proposals found it necessary to add 31 more territorial MPs; together with the six additional university seats, this increased the house of commons from 670 to 707 members.⁶²

The revision of boundaries and reallocation of seats which took place in 1918 was primarily caused by the changes in population patterns since 1885. There had been a continued growth in the urban population, particularly in the cities, and a consequent decline in the rural areas, especially the more remote. Thus whilst Wales, Scotland and Ireland each received just one more territorial seat, London gained three seats and the number of English borough constituencies rose from 166 to 193,

even though a number of ancient boroughs (including five county towns⁶³) lost their status and were merged into their counties. The largest additions were in the biggest cities: Glasgow expanded from seven to 15 seats, Birmingham from seven to 12, and Manchester from six to 10. As Table 4 shows, whilst the Conservative Party was able to maintain its share of wins in the large cities after 1918, the Liberals' share slumped to one-third of the pre-war level; the beneficiary of this was the Labour Party, whose overall proportion of wins rose to match the previous Liberal share.

Table 4: *The Effects of Constituency Redistribution in the Cities 1895-1929*⁶⁴

This table analyses the cities of mainland Britain which after 1918 returned five or more MPs, and compares party performances in the five general elections before and five general elections after the 1918 Reform Act. In 1895-1910, Liberal Unionists are counted as Conservatives, and in 1918 Coalition Liberals are counted as Liberals. Independents and minor parties are not included; generally these were only elected occasionally, but it should be noted that throughout the period 1895-1929 one of the seats in Liverpool returned an Irish Nationalist MP.

City	/	1895-1910							/	1918-29						
		no. of seats	Cons. wins		Liberal wins		Labour wins			no. of seats	Cons. wins		Liberal wins		Labour wins	
			no.	%	no.	%	no.	%			no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Glasgow		7	18	51	13	37	3	9		15	31	41	4	5	38	51
Birmingham		7	35	100	0	0	0	0		12	52	87	0	0	7	12
Liverpool		9	37	82	3	7	0	0		11	41	75	2	4	7	13
Manchester		6	11	37	13	43	6	20		10	25	50	7	14	18	36
Sheffield		5	16	64	7	28	2	8		7	16	46	5	14	14	40
Leeds		5	5	20	17	68	3	12		6	12	40	5	17	13	43
Bristol		4	7	35	13	65	0	0		5	9	36	9	36	7	28
Edinburgh		4	7	35	13	65	0	0		5	11	44	6	24	8	32
TOTAL		47	136	58	79	34	14	6		71	197	55	38	11	112	32

The region with the most marked increase was south-east England, and especially in the two northern ‘home counties’ of Middlesex and Essex, where the number of constituencies more than doubled, from 18 to 37. At the other end of the scale – and country – the ‘district of burghs’ constituencies in Scotland, each of which grouped together a number of small towns, were reduced from 13 to six; even so, the remainder still had electorates under 32,000.⁶⁵ The 1918 Reform Act also marked a further stage in the extinction of the medieval form of the two-member borough seat, in which each elector had two votes. This now survived in only ten English, one Scottish and one Irish towns of compact size where the population merited two MPs,⁶⁶ and in the special case of the City of London;⁶⁷ elsewhere, the single-member division had become the universal pattern in the territorial constituencies.

The amended instructions to the commissioners to take the character of the area into account had the effect of creating more economically homogenous constituencies than previously, especially in industrial areas. After 1918 there was a larger number of seats which had a high proportion of working-class voters, and particularly more dominated by coal mining; the number of constituencies with more than 30% of occupied men working in the coal industry increased from around 35 before 1914 to 66, of which 30 had over 50% engaged in coal mining.⁶⁸ This pattern benefitted the trade union-based Labour Party, and it has also been argued that the number of safe Conservative seats was increased, with more constituencies having a significant middle class element together with the retention of a substantial number of agricultural seats – 86 constituencies had more than 30% of their occupied male population engaged in agriculture.⁶⁹ Some of the highly agricultural areas had been Liberal strongholds and continued to return Liberal MPs in the 1920s, but in general that party benefitted least from the redistribution, which added to the problems that it faced after 1918.

The 1918 Reform Act established our contemporary electoral system in almost every recognisable way, and it can be argued that the changes since then have been little more than tinkering – none have been a departure in principle, and none have added more than a relatively limited proportion of new voters. The most significant subsequent measure, the Equal Franchise Act of

1928,⁷⁰ is often regarded as simply a delayed instalment of the 1918 Act, completing its work by removing its largest anomaly. It led to the second-largest admission of new voters, and there were 7.1 million more electors on the registers for the May 1929 general election than there had been four and a half years previously in the election of October 1924. However, not all of this increase was previously disqualified female voters, as during these several years the general growth of population had added more men aged over 21 and women over 30 who met the existing criteria. David Butler has calculated that the increase in the number of women registered from 1928 to 1929 was 5,299,301, which was 18.4% of the electorate at the general election in May 1929 (for which a special register came into force on 1 May).⁷¹ Of those who were newly qualified by the 1928 act, about one-third were aged over 30 but had been excluded by the property restrictions, whilst those aged between 21 and 30 were certainly not mostly the frivolous and hedonistic ‘flappers’ characterised by the opponents of the measure.⁷² Many of them were working women, in factories, shops and offices (the 1921 census found that 62.2% of women aged 20-24 were working outside the home), whilst a high proportion of those over 25 were married.⁷³

The only change in the franchise that has occurred since 1928 was not primarily an electoral reform, but rather the necessary consequence of the change in the legal definition of adulthood when this was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1969. The consequent increase in the electorate from 1969 to 1970 was 2,630,134; at 7.1%, this was proportionately by far the smallest of any franchise extension.⁷⁴ The next substantial redistribution of constituencies after 1918 took place in 1948,⁷⁵ and in 1949 a consolidating act established a procedure of recurring periodic reviews. The first of these resulted in only minor changes in 1958 and the second, which reported in 1969 but was delayed by the Labour government and not implemented until 1970, was more extensive;⁷⁶ in more recent decades, the boundary commissioners have engaged upon a more frequent cycle of revision to match the shifting pattern of population. Other than this, there have been only minor changes in the electoral machinery established in 1918, of which the most important has been the expansion of postal voting in recent decades, including allowing British citizens living overseas to cast a vote. When more radical change

was proposed in the referendum of 2011 on the introduction of proportional representation, it was rejected by the electorate, just as the house of commons had done during the passage of the 1918 Reform Act.

2

Despite its scale and lasting legacy, the 1918 Reform Act has attracted remarkably little attention from historians. Its main provisions were described (with some simplifications) in David Butler's account of the contemporary electoral system, first published in 1953;⁷⁷ apart from this, specific analysis of the act as a whole is limited to a single monograph published in 1978 and one more recent article.⁷⁸ There is a vast literature on women's suffrage up to 1914 and a growing body of work on women and politics in the inter-war period, but comparatively little – and still less recently – that directly focuses upon even this most famous aspect of the 1918 enfranchisement.⁷⁹

The 1918 Reform Act was followed by a period of unparalleled turbulence in the party system, this being the only occasion when a long-standing party of government declined to minor party status and was replaced by an alternative governing party. However, at first the impact of the changes introduced by the act was almost invisible in the historiography, which focused upon political issues and conflicts during the First World War and their consequences for the Liberal and Labour parties. The early and influential analysis of the decline of the Liberal Party by Trevor Wilson published in 1966 had no listing in its index for the 1918 Representation of the People Act (or even for broader terms such as 'electoral reform' or 'franchise'), and curiously neither did Ross McKibbin's pioneering examination of the development of the Labour Party between 1910 and 1924, although his introduction declared that it was founded 'upon a proposition argued implicitly in the book: that the 1918 Representation of the People Act ... transformed the conditions under which Labour grew.'⁸⁰ Later on the same page, he made two linked assertions: 'Much of this new electorate voted Labour in 1918, but had it been enfranchised it would probably have done so in 1914 as well.' From this a considerable controversy developed over the following two decades, in particular following the fuller

argument for the significance of the ‘franchise factor’ in the rise of the Labour Party, written jointly by McKibbin with H.C.G. Matthew and J.A. Kay, which appeared in the *English Historical Review* in 1976.⁸¹ They argued that the 1918 Reform Act was ‘of first importance in Labour’s replacing the Liberal Party’, in which ‘the introduction of universal franchise ... was a critical element’, and that there was ‘a latent Labour vote in the pre-war electorate, which would have been mobilised with more candidates’.⁸² The contention of the ‘franchise factor’ thesis was that the change in the electoral system was more significant for the rise of Labour (and, therefore, the decline of the Liberals) than the events of the First World War (especially the Liberal split of 1916), which historians examining the Liberal Party – particularly Wilson and Peter Clarke – had put centre stage.⁸³

During the following decade, the case for the ‘franchise factor’ was questioned first by Peter Clarke, then Michael Hart, and finally and most extensively by Duncan Tanner. Clarke’s response mainly focused on the appendix to the ‘franchise factor’ article which had contested his previous argument that there was a correlation between high levels of enfranchisement and Liberal support before 1914, as evidence of a continuing Liberal appeal to working-class voters.⁸⁴ Hart further developed the argument that the war was the crucial factor in the Liberal decline, as it left the party divided, lacking in new policies and effective leadership, and in an apparently right-of-centre orientation, and that it was these problems rather than the expansion of the franchise which gave Labour the opportunity to displace it in the industrial constituencies after 1918.⁸⁵ He also pointed to the remaining size of the Liberal vote under the new franchise in the 1922 and 1923 general elections, and to Liberal electoral successes in the inter-war period in constituencies where there had been low levels of enfranchisement before 1914 and thus the largest increases after the 1918 Reform Act.

Tanner’s seminal article scrutinised the nature of the pre-war electorate and questioned the extent to which the unenfranchised male population was composed of the working class.⁸⁶ He showed that ‘the system discriminated against lodgers more than anyone else’, who were mostly ‘younger and single people’, both working class and middle class, whilst the large number who qualified under the household franchise were older men, generally married or widowed, but from all social strata

including some of the poorest. Tanner's calculation of the increase in the working-class proportion of the electorate from 67% before 1914 to 78% after the 1918 Reform Act was significantly below that of previous studies, which had suggested a rise from 60-62% to 80%.⁸⁷ For these reasons, he argued that the new male voters under the 1918 Reform Act were not mainly drawn from a social 'sub-class' who might have significantly different views from existing working-class voters, but were younger men who were of the same class as their older householder fathers and more likely to share their outlook than greatly diverge from it. This has seemed to conclude the 'franchise factor' debate, although another aspect of the effect of the First World War and the changes in the electoral system was examined in the article by Michael Childs on the effects of changing generations.⁸⁸

The only other work to focus specifically on the impact of the 1918 Reform Act has been Michael Dawson's article of 1992, which highlighted the significance of the changes to the limits on election expenses.⁸⁹ He argued that these particularly benefitted the Labour Party and enabled it to become a truly national party by contesting a large number of seats, and further that Labour's ability to run candidates in rural and suburban seats where they had little hope of winning had the effect of preventing Liberal victories and thereby undermining their main rival. In the same year there appeared John Turner's major study of politics during the First World War, which concluded with a detailed statistical analysis of the 1918 general election.⁹⁰ In the mid-1990s, Michael Dyer examined the nature and operation of the electoral system in Scotland from the Third Reform Act to 1929, and in an article traced the fortunes of the Scottish 'district of burghs' type of constituency over a longer period.⁹¹

During the last two decades, the focus has moved to the impact of democracy on political culture, both generally and within particular parties. Kevin Jefferys has written a history of democracy in Britain since 1918, whilst Clare Griffiths has discussed mid-twentieth century attitudes to mass democracy.⁹² The changes in the public culture of politics during election campaigns in the inter-war period, particularly relating to violence and concepts of masculinity, which were due mainly to the legacy of the war but also to the inclusion of women, have been discussed by Jon Lawrence and

Kit Good.⁹³ The political culture of the inter-period has been discussed by Pat Thane, particularly in relation to the role of women after gaining the suffrage,⁹⁴ by Helen McCarthy in relation to new non-party voluntary movements,⁹⁵ and by David Thackeray on women's roles within Conservative politics in the period spanning before, during and after the achievement of suffrage.⁹⁶ As far as the political parties are concerned, most attention has been given to the Conservatives' adaptation to the developments of the First World War and their successful navigation of the new democratic environment between the wars.⁹⁷ There has been no comparable national analysis of the fortunes during the war and the immediate post-war period of the Labour Party since Duncan Tanner's major study published in 1990,⁹⁸ or of the Liberals for much longer, although there have been valuable regional and local case-studies.⁹⁹

The consequence is that the 1918 Reform Act is almost always in the background, and the spotlight of historical enquiry rarely shines directly upon it. Even more than in its origins and passage, this is the case with its provisions and impact, and for that reason this centennial collection has concentrated upon the latter. The first three articles examine the main political parties, assessing their response to the act and its consequences for their fortunes in the inter-war era. Stuart Ball discusses the Conservative Party, which before 1914 opposed adult male suffrage and was divided over the question of female suffrage; as the party of property and privilege, it might have been expected to struggle in the environment of a mass electorate overwhelmingly dominated by the working-class. Instead, it became the dominant party of the inter-war period and it has been the most electorally successful party during the century since 1918. There were several reasons for this, but one of them was the way in which the Conservatives took the maximum possible benefit from the changes brought about by the 1918 Reform Act, whilst also managing to avoid the most dangerous potential threats. Gavin Freeman analyses the role of the electoral changes in the decline of the Liberal Party, and argues that its problems were exacerbated not by any inevitable effects of the 1918 Reform Act itself, but by the failure of the leadership, organisation and constituencies to make any rapid and effective response to the changes that it brought. This was due to the divided state of the Liberal Party, together

with a lack of drive and vision from Asquith, who remained party leader even when out of the house of commons in the crucial period of 1918-20; in that sense, it was the contingent event of the First World War that was the prime factor in the Liberal decline. Chris Wrigley analyses the role of the act in the dramatic advance of the Labour Party from its limited Edwardian base to becoming a governing party and the accepted alternative to the Conservatives, and argues that its passage compelled Labour to overhaul its organisation and expand its appeal beyond its pre-war core base of male working-class trade unionists, to appeal to working-class women and white-collar workers. In a parallel with Freeman's analysis, Wrigley concludes that the expansion of the trade union movement during the war provided the Labour Party with greatly enhanced financial resources and an organisational base at a crucial moment when the Liberals were in disarray.

The middle three articles take a regional perspective, and analyse the impact of the 1918 Reform Act in three parts of the United Kingdom which had very different socio-economic environments, political cultures and previous electoral histories. Ian Cawood examines the ways in which the act affected politics in the wider west midlands area. He finds significant elements of continuity with pre-war politics, although the change in the scale and nature of the electorate led the parties to seek new methods of mass communication. The Conservative and Unionist Party was the most successful in doing this, and this was a factor in enabling it to continue to dominate politics in the region – especially in Birmingham until 1929 – despite the advance of Labour. Ewen Cameron assesses the impact of the 1918 Reform Act in Scotland, focusing particularly on the effects of the redistribution proposals. Although the overall number of Scottish constituencies remained almost unchanged, within this there was a substantial reallocation of seats from the rural regions of the north and south to industrial west Scotland, and especially to Glasgow which was awarded an additional eight seats. In this process, more than half of the 'districts of burghs' type of constituency were eliminated and many of the remainder were recast. These developments aroused much controversy and opposition, and the arguments deployed in defence of the seats proposed for abolition are analysed. The article concludes that the changes in Scotland created conditions that were favourable

to the rise of the Labour Party in the 1920s. John Coakley looks at the 1918 Reform Act in Ireland – a topic largely neglected by historians – and considers it in the context of Ireland’s different previous franchise history, which led to a near-tripling of its electorate in 1918, and the recent political events which enabled Sinn Fein to exploit the opportunity provided by the enlarged electorate. He assesses the nature of the act’s provisions as they applied to Ireland, the outcome in Ireland of the first general election under its terms, the extent to which this was conditioned by the terms of the act, and the longer-term consequences of the measure. He concludes that the 1918 Reform Act has had a powerful and lasting impact upon Irish republicans, as for the first time it enabled the whole Irish nation (or rather its adult male component, which for many contemporaries was all that mattered) to voice its demands, and that this mandated the establishment of an independent republic in a united Ireland, which in their eyes no subsequent election has had the authority to annul.

The final three articles examine other significant impacts and legacies of the 1918 Reform Act. Martin Farr considers its consequences for the place that gave it birth, the House of Commons, and he examines the expectations and realities of parliament in the democratic age. There was some disillusion, with criticism from both within the chamber and outside that the outcome had been an unrepresentative and therefore undemocratic House of Commons, and that the legislature had become merely an appendage of the executive. He analyses how the implications of the act were envisaged and how they were experienced, and discusses the legislature that resulted, its members, and how they changed its procedures and conventions, and adapted to the new political environment. Adrian Bingham looks at the view of the 1918 Reform Act and its effects from outside, through the reactions of the press during its passage and afterwards. In this darkest period of the First World War, newspapers across the political spectrum revealed a deep disillusionment with the divisiveness of partisan politics and the party machines. Much of the national press hoped for a revitalised democracy that could face the challenges of post-war reconstruction, and, in their hope of breaking away from the party machines, he finds widespread support for the introduction of proportional representation. Finally, Mari Takayanagi examines how the Speaker’s Conference of 1916-17 affected the position of

women, and looks forward from the 1918 Reform Act to the attainment of equal suffrage in 1928. She considers the hurriedly-passed measure of October 1918 which allowed women to become MPs and the related legislation which removed other sex disqualifications, and traces progress in parliament towards the equal franchise bill of 1928, which followed from pledges given by the Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin, in the 1924 general election campaign and controversially by the Home Secretary in the following Conservative government, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, in February 1925.

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- ¹ This is unlike its predecessors – the First (also known as ‘Great’) Reform Act of 1832, the Second Reform Act of 1867, and the Third Reform Act of 1884 – which are almost always described in this way.
 - ² For the general context of franchise extension from 1832 to 1918, see E.J. Evans, *Parliamentary Reform in Britain c.1770-1918* (Harlow, 1999); I. Machin, *The Rise of Democracy in Britain 1830-1918* (Basingstoke, 2000); J. Garrard, *Democratisation in Britain: Elites, Civil Society and Reform since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2001).
 - ³ For the origins, passage and provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1918, see generally M. Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906-1918* (1978); D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1953); R. Blackburn, ‘Laying the foundations of the modern voting system: the Representation of the People Act 1918’, *Parliamentary History*, xxx (2011), 33-52; and for specific aspects, J. Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict 1915-1918* (New Haven & London, 1992); J.D. Fair, *British Inter-Party Conferences: A Study of the Procedure of Conciliation in British Politics, 1867-1921* (Oxford, 1980); M. Pugh, ‘Politicians and the woman’s vote 1914-1918’, *History*, lix (1974), 358-74; J.D. Fair, ‘The political aspects of women’s suffrage during the First World War’, *Albion*, viii (1976), 274-95; M. Hausmann, ‘The impact of the Great War on the discussion of women’s suffrage’, in *Change and Inertia: Britain under the Impact of the Great War*, ed. H. Berghoff & R. von Friedeburg (Bodenheim, 1998), 121-40; A. Clark, ‘Gender, class and the constitution: franchise reform in England 1832-1928’, in *Re-Reading the Constitution*, ed. J. Vernon (Cambridge, 1996), 230-53; J. Hart, *Proportional Representation: Critics of the British Electoral System 1820-1945* (Oxford, 1992); D. Tanner, ‘The Parliamentary electoral system, the Fourth Reform Act, and the rise of Labour in England’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, lvi (1983), 205-19.
 - ⁴ Percentages calculated from population and electorate figures in *A History of British Elections Since 1689*, ed. C. Cook & J. Stevenson (2014), table 9.39, 253 (the percentages given there are incorrect); the 1910 figure is for the January electorate, not the December. In 1929 half a million men who were entitled to the vote had not bothered to register for it: *Registrar-General’s Statistical Review for 1929* (1930-31), ii, 136.
 - ⁵ Figures for 1831, 1866 and 1884 calculated from those for Scotland and Ireland by Sir John Lambert, ‘Parliamentary franchises past and present’, *Nineteenth Century* (December 1889), 958, and those for England and Wales revised by Charles Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales: The Development and Operation of the Parliamentary Franchise 1832-1885* (1915), 533, in *A History of British Elections Since 1689*, ed. C. Cook & J. Stevenson (2014), 252-3. Figures for 1832, 1868, 1886 and 1910-29 from *British Electoral Facts 1832-1987*, ed. F.W.S. Craig (Aldershot, 1989), 66-9.
 - ⁶ Sir H. Fraser, *The Representation of the People Act, 1918, with Explanatory Notes* (1918), xxv. For a summary of the previous franchises, see Blackburn, ‘Laying the foundations of the modern voting system’, 37.
 - ⁷ The act stated that ‘A man shall be entitled to be registered as a parliamentary elector for a constituency (other than a university constituency) if he is of full age and not subject to any legal incapacity and (a) has

the requisite residential qualification; or (b) has the requisite business premises qualification': *Representation of the People Act 1918* (7 & 8 Geo. V, c.64), section 1, sub-section 1; 'the requisite residential qualification' was defined in sub-section 2 as simply 'residing in premises in the constituency'. The term 'legal incapacity' was not defined in the 1918 Reform Act itself, although there were separate statements that a person who was not a British subject could not qualify (section 9, sub-section 3) and that 'a person who is an inmate or patient in any prison, lunatic asylum, workhouse, poorhouse, or any other similar institution shall not by reason thereof be treated as resident therein for any purpose of this Act'; section 41, sub-section 5. However, these clauses were defining an absence of qualification, and as the guide to the act by a legal authority explained, 'a legal incapacity is quite distinct from an absence of the qualifications required by this Act to enable a person to be registered or to vote at an election', but was 'some quality inherent in a person or for the time being irremovable in such person, which, either at Common Law or by Statute, deprives him of the status of a parliamentary elector'. The exclusions of this nature were those which still mainly remain in force: members of the house of lords, holders of a small number of legal and administrative offices related to the conduct of elections, foreign nationals, the insane (defined as 'a lunatic who is not in a lucid interval'), the severely mentally-handicapped (two terms were used to define this, the contemporary expression 'an idiot', and 'an imbecile who is not *compos mentis*'), prisoners serving sentences 'with hard labour or exceeding twelve months', and those who within a certain number of previous years had been convicted of corrupt or illegal practices in parliamentary or local government elections: Fraser, *Representation of the People Act*, 4-7.

- 8 Although this was not a radical departure (as removing this bar had been recommended by both the majority and minority reports of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws in 1909), it was not one of the unanimous recommendations of the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform and was only passed by an unspecified majority. The recommendation was also not for complete exemption, but 'that no person who has received poor relief other than medical relief for less than thirty days in the aggregate during the qualifying period, shall be disqualified from being registered as a parliamentary elector': Cd. 8463, *Report of the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform*, The Speaker to the Prime Minister, 27 Jan. 1917, paragraph 35. However, in the eventual act the poor relief disqualification was removed completely: *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 9, sub-section 1.
- 9 Thus Herbert Williams, when living at home with his mother, did not qualify for the parliamentary or local government franchise: Sir H. Williams, *Politics – Grave and Gay* (1949), 44; the pre-1918 system is extensively discussed in D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), 102-23, and N. Blewett, 'The franchise in the United Kingdom 1885-1918', *Past & Present*, xxxii (1965), 27-56.
- 10 Blewett, 'Franchise in the United Kingdom', 35.
- 11 Blewett, 'Franchise in the United Kingdom', 36.
- 12 H.C.G. Matthew, R.I. McKibbin & J.A. Kay, 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review*, xci (1976), 727-31.
- 13 M. Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvident Democrats: The Scottish Electoral System, 1884-1929* (Aberdeen, 1996), 118.
- 14 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 5, sub-section 4.
- 15 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 9, sub-section 2.
- 16 Fraser, *Representation of the People Act*, 69.
- 17 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 4, sub-section 1, provision (c); the exact wording was 'if she ... (c) is entitled to be registered as a local government elector in respect of the occupation in that constituency of land or premises (not being a dwelling-house) of a yearly value of not less than five pounds or of a dwelling-house, or is the wife of a husband entitled to be so registered.' Following this, section 4, sub-section 3 stated: 'A woman shall be entitled to be registered as a local government elector for any local government electoral area (a) where she would be entitled to be so registered if she were a man; and (b) where she is the wife of a man who is entitled to be so registered in respect of premises in which they both reside'. The term 'dwelling-house' was defined later in section 41, sub-section 8: 'The

expression “dwelling-house” includes any part of a house where that part is occupied separately as a dwelling-house.’

¹⁸ *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 3, defined the local government franchise qualification for men as ‘occupying as owner or tenant any land or premises’, but followed this by stating in section 3, provision (ii), ‘for the purposes of this section the word tenant shall include a person who occupies a room or rooms as a lodger only where such room or rooms are let to him in an unfurnished state’; Fraser, *Representation of the People Act*, 40-2, 68-71; Pugh, *Electoral Reform*, 111-12.

¹⁹ *Report of the Speaker’s Conference*, paragraph 33; the recommendation for female suffrage was not unanimous, but by an unspecified majority.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 6 June 1917, 4; Fraser, *Representation of the People Act*, xxviii.

²¹ They did not qualify in the same way as lodgers in furnished rooms, their employer being the householder.

²² *British Electoral Facts*, 78, 68.

²³ *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 8, sub-section 1.

²⁴ Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 100; Blewett, ‘Franchise in the United Kingdom’, 46, suggests an overall figure of 500-600,000.

²⁵ Butler, *Electoral System*, 146; the 1928 act also made men eligible for a vote derived from their wives’ occupation of business premises, but this was presumably a much smaller number, and also still limited by the rule that no person could cast more than two votes. Figures from *British Electoral Facts*, 78; the figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland were not published.

²⁶ Trinity College Dublin was given one seat at Westminster in the Act of Union in 1800 and a second seat in the 1832 Reform Act, and in the 1867 Reform Act three further university seats were created: one for London, one jointly for Aberdeen and Glasgow, and one jointly for Edinburgh and St Andrews; J.S. Meisel, *Knowledge and Power: The Parliamentary Representation of Universities in Britain and the Empire* (Oxford, 2011), 24-32, 36-44.

²⁷ Meisel, *Knowledge and Power*, 41; Asquith was one distinguished Oxford graduate who did not do so.

²⁸ *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 4, sub-section 2.

²⁹ The 1918 Reform Act relaxed the witnessing requirements for postal ballots for university electors who were overseas, which previously had required the signature of a Justice of the Peace; it was estimated in 1930 that 8% of university voters lived overseas: Meisel, *Knowledge and Power*, 42.

³⁰ For details of how this operated, see *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*, ed. F.W.S Craig (2nd edn, 1977), appendix i, 676-84.

³¹ *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*.

³² *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 8, sub-section 1.

³³ *Report of the Speaker’s Conference*, paragraph 23; P. Catterall, ‘The British electoral system 1885-1970’, *Historical Research*, 73, (2000), 156-74. It has been calculated that after the redistribution proposed by the Boundary Commissioners, this would have affected 211 of the 569 English, Welsh and Scottish territorial constituencies: Hart, *Proportional Representation*, 181.

³⁴ *Report of the Speaker’s Conference*, paragraph 36.

³⁵ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xcii, col. 492, 28 March 1917; J. Grigg, ‘Lloyd George and electoral reform’, in *The Political Culture of Modern Britain: Studies in Memory of Stephen Koss*, ed. J.M.W. Bean (1987), 165-77. Lloyd George’s view was reinforced in briefings to lobby correspondents before the first reading of the bill: *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 1917, 4.

³⁶ Catterall, ‘British electoral system’, 165.

- 37 Different voting figures for the divisions during the passage of the bill are given in various books and articles (particularly Pugh, *Electoral Reform*, and Hart, *Proportional Representation*); some variations are due to errors, but generally in the case of Commons divisions the discrepancies are due to whether or not the two tellers on each side are counted as having voted. The division list figures here have been checked with the official record of debates and are the ones given there, which in the case of the house of commons do not include the tellers, as technically they have not voted in the lobby which they counting.
- 38 *The Times*, 11 Aug. 1917, 7. These figures included the two tellers on each side, who were two Conservatives for the ‘No’ vote and two Liberals for the ‘Aye’ vote; the result recorded for the division was actually 124 against and 125 in favour: *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xcvi, col. 652, 9 Aug. 1917.
- 39 Sanders diary, 10 Feb. 1918, in *Real Old Tory Politics: The Political Diaries of Sir Robert Sanders, Lord Bayford: 1910-1935*, ed. J. Ramsden (1984), 100.
- 40 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 20, sub-section 2, provision (a).
- 41 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, first schedule, ‘Form of Register’, rule 6; the Act created the position of Registration Officer, which for a county division was to be the clerk of the county council, and for a borough division the clerk of the borough council: section 12, sub-section 2.
- 42 G.A. Jones, ‘Further thoughts on the franchise 1885-1918’ *Past & Present*, xxxiv (1966), 134-8; K. Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England 1880-1910* (2016).
- 43 *Representation of the People (Economy Provisions) Act 1926* (16 & 17 Geo. V, c.9); Blackburn, ‘Laying the foundations of the modern voting system’, 34.
- 44 It was only in 1918 and 1945 that the counting of ballots did not take place immediately after the poll and was delayed (by two weeks in 1918 and three weeks in 1945) to allow for the return of the servicemen’s postal votes from overseas. After causing frustrating delays in the counting at by-elections since 1918, an amending Act in 1920 limited postal voting to within the United Kingdom and instead servicemen overseas could appoint proxies; by this time the armed services had been much reduced in number: Butler, *Electoral System*, 49.
- 45 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 23, sub-sections 1, 2 and 4, and first schedule, rules 16 & 17.
- 46 *British Electoral Facts*, 97.
- 47 C. O’Leary, *The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections, 1868 to 1911* (Oxford, 1962); W.B. Gwyn, *Democracy and the Cost of Politics in Britain* (1962); K. Rix, ‘The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections? Reassessing the Impact of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act’, *English Historical Review*, cxxiii (2008), 65-97.
- 48 *Report of the Speaker’s Conference*, preamble to paragraph 28.
- 49 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, fourth schedule.
- 50 *British Electoral Facts*, 61-2.
- 51 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 26.
- 52 Calculated from Ministry of Labour statistics provided in reply to a question, *HC Deb.*, fifth series, clxxxvii, col. 671-3, 30 July 1925.
- 53 *British Electoral Facts*, 82.
- 54 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 25.
- 55 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 33, sub-section 2.
- 56 *Representation of the People Act 1918*, section 21, sub-section 1; the deadline for the nomination of candidates would also be on the same day everywhere.

- ⁵⁷ The period of 15-17 days does not include the Orkney & Shetlands constituency and the university seats, which usually held their poll about a week after the other constituencies had completed: *British Electoral Facts*, 151.
- ⁵⁸ *Report of the Speaker's Conference*, paragraph 13.
- ⁵⁹ Instructions to the Boundary Commission for England and Wales, May 1917, reproduced in D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the United Kingdom's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies* (Manchester, 1999), 52-3.
- ⁶⁰ Amended instructions, 22 June 1917, reproduced in Rossiter et al., *Boundary Commissions*, 54.
- ⁶¹ These were conducted by the Assistant Commissioners, of which 11 had been appointed for England and Wales, 11 for Scotland and seven for Ireland; Rossiter et al., *Boundary Commissions*, 51-2.
- ⁶² Cmd. 8756-8, *Representation of the People Bill, 1917: Redistribution of Seats, Report of the Boundary Commission (England & Wales)*, 3 vols (1917).
- ⁶³ Canterbury, Colchester, Peterborough, Shrewsbury and Warwick.
- ⁶⁴ *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885-1918*, ed. F.W.S Craig (1974); *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*, ed. F.W.S Craig (2nd edn, 1977).
- ⁶⁵ M. Dyer, 'Burgh districts and the representation of Scotland, 1707-1983', *Parliamentary History*, xv (1996), 302-4.
- ⁶⁶ These were Blackburn, Bolton, Brighton, Derby, Norwich, Oldham, Preston, Southampton, Stockport and Sunderland in England, which had an average electorate of 69,405 in 1922 (two constituencies were not contested in 1918); Dundee in Scotland, which had 83,676 electors in 1918, and Cork City in Ireland (until the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921). Other towns which merited two MPs were divided into separate seats, such as Birkenhead, Croydon, East Ham, Middlesbrough and Rochester.
- ⁶⁷ Instruction no. 8 in the original instructions of May 1917 was that 'The City of London shall continue to return two Members'; Rossiter et al., *Boundary Commissions*, 52. The City was a special case partly due to its historic prestige and economic importance, and because it had few residents but a large business vote; in the 1931 census, only 7,085 of the electorate of 43,902 had qualified on the basis of residence.
- ⁶⁸ M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (2nd edn., 1981), 116.
- ⁶⁹ J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902-40* (1978), 123; Kinnear, *British Voter*, 119-24.
- ⁷⁰ *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928* (18 & 19 Geo. V, c.12).
- ⁷¹ Butler, *Electoral System*, 145.
- ⁷² *Daily Mail*, 30 & 31 March 1927; A. Bingham, "'Stop the Flapper Vote folly': Lord Rothermere, the *Daily Mail*, and the equalization of the franchise 1927-1928", *Twentieth Century British History*, xiii (2002), 17-37. For the effects on extending the franchise, see J. Rasmussen, 'Women in Labour: the flapper vote and party system transformation in Britain', *Electoral Studies*, iii (1984), 47-63; J. Rasmussen, 'The political integration of British women: the response of a traditional system to a newly emergent group', *Social Science History*, vii (1983), 61-95; P. Lynn, 'The impact of women: the shaping of political allegiance in County Durham 1918-1945', *The Local Historian*, xxviii (1998), 159-75.
- ⁷³ *Census of England and Wales, 1921: Occupation Tables* (1924), 54, shows that 62.2% of women aged 20-24 were working outside the home, and that 66.3% of women aged 25-34 were married or widowed.
- ⁷⁴ *British Electoral Facts*, 76.
- ⁷⁵ The National Government considered a redistribution measure after twenty years, in 1937-38, but did not proceed with it: TNA, PREM 1/255. If they had done so, it would have made a Labour victory at the next election (expected in summer or autumn 1940) even more unlikely, because the population increase in London and the Home Counties had continued since 1918, and as on the latter occasion a redistribution would have divided existing Conservative seats into a larger number of new ones.
- ⁷⁶ Rossiter et al., *Boundary Commissions*, 83-104.

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- 77 Butler, *Electoral System*.
- 78 Pugh, *Electoral Reform*; Blackburn, 'Laying the foundations of the modern voting system'.
- 79 Pugh, 'Politicians and the woman's vote'; Fair, 'Political aspects of women's suffrage'; Hausmann, 'Impact of the Great War on the discussion of women's suffrage'.
- 80 T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* (1966); R.I. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974), xv.
- 81 Matthew et al., 'Franchise factor', 723-52, reprinted in R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), 66-100.
- 82 Matthew et al., 'Franchise factor', 736, 740.
- 83 P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).
- 84 P. Clarke, 'Liberals, Labour, and the franchise', *English Historical Review*, xcii (1977), 582-9, with a response by Kay, McKibbin and Matthew, 589-90; see also P. Clarke's review of McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, in *English Historical Review*, xci, 157-63.
- 85 M. Hart, 'The Liberals, the war, and the franchise', *English Historical Review*, xcvi (1982), 820-32.
- 86 Tanner, 'Parliamentary electoral system'; these arguments were further set out in Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 102-23; D. Tanner, 'Elections, statistics and the rise of the Labour Party 1906-1931', *Historical Journal*, xxxiv (1991), 893-908.
- 87 Tanner, 'Parliamentary electoral system', 216; Matthew et al., 'Franchise factor', 733; N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: the General Elections of 1910* (1972), 363-4.
- 88 M. Childs, 'Labour grows up: the electoral system, political generations, and British politics 1890-1929', *Twentieth Century British History*, vi (1995), 123-44.
- 89 M. Dawson, 'Money and the real impact of the Fourth Reform Act', *Historical Journal*, xxxv (1992), 369-81.
- 90 Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*; see also the preliminary findings in J. Turner, 'The Labour vote and the franchise after 1918: an investigation of the English evidence', in *History and Computing*, ed. P. Denley and D. Hopkins (Manchester, 1987), 136-43; J. Turner, 'Sex, age and the Labour vote in the 1920s', in *History and Computing II*, ed. P. Denley, S. Fogelvik & C. Harvey (Manchester, 1989), 243-54.
- 91 Dyer, *Capable Citizens*; Dyer, 'Burgh districts'.
- 92 K. Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (2007); C. Griffiths, 'Dubious democrats: party politics and the mass electorate in twentieth-century Britain', in *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. B. Moore & H. von Nierop (Oxford, 2006), 30-46.
- 93 J. Lawrence, 'The transformation of British public politics after the First World War', *Past & Present*, cxc (2006), 185-216; J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009); K. Good, "'Quit ye like men": platform manliness and electioneering 1895-1939', in *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. M. McCormack (Basingstoke, 2007), 143-64.
- 94 P. Thane, 'The impact of mass democracy on British political culture, 1918-1939', in *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945*, ed. J.V. Gottlieb and R. Toye (Basingstoke, 2013), 54-69; P. Thane, 'What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918', *Historical Research*, lxxvi (2003), 268-85; see also M. Hilson, 'Women voters and the rhetoric of patriotism in the British general election of 1918', *Women's History Review*, x (2001), 325-47; C. Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918-1928* (1997); J. Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-1928* (Basingstoke, 1989); H. Jones, *Women in British Public Life 1914-1950: Gender, Power and Social Policy* (Harlow, 2000).

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- ⁹⁶ D. Thackeray, 'Home and politics: women and Conservative activism in early twentieth-century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, xlix (2010), 826-48.
- ⁹⁷ J. Stubbs, 'The impact of the Great War on the Conservative Party', in *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918-1939*, ed. G. Peele & C. Cook (1975), 14-38; Ramsden, *Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 114-27; R. McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative Party and the "public" in inter-war Britain', in McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, 259-93.; D. Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and class politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, cxi (1996), 59-84; A. Taylor, 'Speaking to democracy: the Conservative Party and mass opinion from the 1920s to the 1950s', in *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s*, ed. S. Ball & I. Holliday (2002), 78-99; M. Hendley, 'Constructing the citizen: the Primrose League and the definition of citizenship in the age of mass democracy in Britain 1918-1928', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vii (1996), 125-51; N. Keohane, *The Party of Patriotism: The Conservative Party and the First World War* (Farnham, 2010); D. Thackeray, 'Building a peaceable party: masculine identities in British Conservative politics c.1903-1924', *Historical Research*, lxxxv (2012), 651-73; D. Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth Century England* (Manchester, 2013); S. Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918-1945* (Oxford, 2013), 35-93, 168-71, 331-7, 512-22; N. Fleming, 'Women and Lancashire Conservatism between the wars', *Women's History Review*, xxvi (2017), 329-49.
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