

Reform acts

Since the door to reform was opened in 1832, the British electorate has changed dramatically. Track the crucial legislation below

The road to democracy

With hindsight it would appear that from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the First World War, Britain was on a trajectory towards universal suffrage. However, this would diminish both the intense struggle for those outside the electoral system to obtain the vote, and the frequent pronouncements by governments of the day that the latest measure of reform would be the last. A host of extra-parliamentary groups including Political Unions, Chartists, the Reform League and women's suffrage societies kept up pressure on successive governments to increase the electorate. Bills often went through several manifestations and often the final version was far more radical than the first incarnation.

The 1832 Reform Act for example was put forward three times, being passed in the Commons but rejected by the House of Lords until the government threatened to swamp the chamber with Whig peers in order that it should pass. The Act was relatively moderate, increasing the electorate from 366,000 to 650,000 — around 18 per cent of adult males. A late amendment by the Marquess of Chandos diluted some of the provisions by enfranchising £50 tenants-at-will who typically voted as instructed by their landlords. The 1867 Reform Act doubled the number of adult men who could vote, granting the franchise to all heads of households in boroughs and to lodgers who paid a rent of £10 a year or more. It was far more radical than the more modest measure introduced by the Liberals a year before, but Disraeli persuaded the Tory party to back the measure, suggesting that a grateful electorate would reward the party by voting them into office.

The 1884 Reform Act established a uniform franchise across the country (until then, county and borough electorates had been treated differently). The electorate was still some way off 'one man, one vote', with only male heads of households exercising the franchise. Forty per cent of men and all women were still outside the political nation. This changed in 1918 when the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all adult men and women over the age of 30. An all-party Speaker's Conference convened in 1916 had realised that universal suffrage was now essential because many young men fighting for their country would return without the vote. The age restriction for women was put in place so that there would not be more female voters than male. Women eventually received the vote on the same terms as men in 1928.

Reform of the electoral system

Although the focus has often been on *who* received the vote, as important is the way in which the electoral system operated. Most reform acts either included or were followed by Redistribution of Seats Acts. 1832 abolished rotten or pocket boroughs which had tiny electorates but also ensured that large urban constituencies included a large portion of rural hinterlands to ensure the agricultural interest was still represented.

Part of Disraeli's 'fancy franchises' in 1867 were to increase the number of MPs for some large urban seats to three. This meant that as each voter only had two votes, a Conservative would almost certainly be elected, even in the most radical of constituencies. The 1885 Redistribution Act redrew boundaries to make constituencies more equal in size and also ensured that each was represented by only one MP.

Equally important were efforts to reduce electoral corruption. In 1854, a Corrupt Practices Act sought to define unfair and venal actions for the first time. The Act gave the first complete definition of bribery, stating that any person who gave, lent or promised money or other valuables to a voter to induce him to vote was guilty of bribery. It was also illegal to accept money or gifts in return for the vote. Election auditors were established to check accounts but it was not until 1883 that the amount spent on elections was standardised. The 1872 Secret Ballot Act ensured that votes were cast in private to reduce influence and pressure being put on electors.

The conduct of municipal elections was often more advanced than parliamentary contests. Many ballots for local government were held in private before the 1872 Act standardised the practice across all municipal and parliamentary contests. Women were also able to vote at a local level long before 1918. In 1869, women ratepayers and heads of households were enfranchised in municipal elections and by 1894 this right had been standardised across all local bodies, also allowing women to elect Poor Law Guardians and School Boards.



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