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Introduction: The Politics of Dissent at the Time of the Great Reform Bill

'What has religion to do with politics?' The question was asked in a handbill posted in Nottingham in the run-up to the election of the first reformed House of Commons in December 1832. Signed only 'a Protestant Dissenter,' the handbill supplied the answer with yet another rhetorical question: 'How can there be any sound politics without religion?'[1]

The importance of the role played by religion in understanding modern British history has been accepted in various degrees for much of the last century. Indeed, it was the combined influence of Methodism and broader evangelicalism in the church and dissent that the French historian Elie Halévy identified as having *made* modern England.[2] Recent scholarship has further confirmed the far-reaching significance of religion in British history well into the nineteenth century,[3] but until the last decade, it was striking how relatively little attention historians of Britain paid to those protestants outside the Church of England.[4] Granted, these dissenters never amounted to a majority of English men and women—but as active religionists, they came by mid-century very near to equalling the Anglicans, and at the local level they often surpassed the establishment in influence and even membership.

Yet in spite of the evident importance of religion in shaping nineteenth-century politics and society, and the renewal in attention on dissent, there has never been a consensus on the role played by religious dissent—beyond an agreement that it mattered. Consequently, unsubstantiated conjectures have all too often been passed as proven fact. It has, for instance, been confidently asserted that dissenters were the backbone of the liberal party.[5] But it has also been asserted, as often and with as great confidence, that at least half of them, the Methodists, were staunch conservatives. Still other historians have embraced the 'no

politics' rule of the first half of the nineteenth century, that is, that Wesleyan Methodists refrained from political activity altogether. And whatever their ordinary allegiance, it has been argued that at various times the alienation of nonconformists from their liberal allies, usually demonstrated by abstention, exercised a powerful influence on elections. Then again there has been speculation on the effect of nonconformist alienation from one another, particularly as indicated in the aforementioned case of Wesleyans from the older dissenting denominations, and the undoubted break between a traditional Unitarian leadership and a burgeoning evangelical rank and file. This hardly leaves us much firm ground for assessing the political significance of a body of electors of generally accepted importance.

Some of the modern historian's confusion in discussing dissent no doubt arises from the complications involved in knowing whom to identify as dissenters and, consequently, what sort of numbers they represented. Ironically, dissenters did not exist, at least not in a formal sense, before the 1650s or 1660s, when a series of acts designed to restrict their activities and eventually drive them out of existence gave them legal reality for the first time. (Earlier, it had simply been assumed that everyone who was not a Catholic was a member of the Church of England.) By dictating that clergymen in England and Wales must use the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* for public worship, the 1662 act of uniformity created dissenting or nonconformist clergymen, by ejecting from their livings those who refused to conform. Thus a single act of legislation made dissenters of roughly one-fifth of the clergy of the Church of England. They dissented from the doctrines or forms of the Church of England, and either could not accept one or more of the Thirty-nine Articles of Faith, or disapproved of some part of the *Book of Common Prayer*. They dissented and they refused to conform: hence the names their followers were to bear with pride for two centuries. The five-mile act of 1665 further restricted dissenting clergy by prohibiting them from living or preaching within five miles of any town they had formerly served.

The indirect impact of these two acts on the laity is hard to measure, but others were enacted to restrict the nonconformist rank and file, as well. The corporation act of 1661 required all members of town governments to take the Anglican communion as a qualification for office; the conventicle act of 1664 outlawed meetings of five or more dissenters for purposes of worship; and the test act of 1673 provided that all who held office under the crown must, to qualify for that office, take communion in an Anglican church. Yet how many people were affected as dissenters

remains unclear. A few years later, James II judged there to be as many dissenters as Anglicans in England. This estimate was ridiculously high, and reflected his political motives, desirous as he was to downplay the extent of the influence of the Church of England, as a means of reasserting Roman Catholicism in England. Others have put the figure as low as a mere 5 per cent of the population, which is just as certainly too low.

At any rate, dissent as a percentage of the population declined throughout much of the eighteenth century, as indeed did religiosity in England generally,[6] although the period did witness two related developments, the effects of which would be felt fully only in the next century—the birth and expansion of the movement founded by John Wesley, and a wider evangelical revival, which came to transform trinitarian dissent. Due in large measure to these phenomena, English dissent grew impressively for much of the nineteenth century, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population. But even then, there remains debate over details. In the first half of the century, most contemporary estimates reckoned dissenters between a tenth and a quarter of the population,[7] and one modern historian has estimated that 30 per cent of England was nonconformist in 1820.[8] Even when we consider seemingly sound evidence, such as the census of religion, the data are still open to interpretation.[9] Nonetheless, based on the finding of the 1851 census, it seems likely that 18.9 per cent, or less than a fifth, of the population of England attended non-Anglican services at mid-century.[10] This figure, which seems unimpressive in its own right, becomes more substantial when compared against the rate of Anglican attendance, which was only 20.2 per cent, or slightly more than a fifth, of the English population. For the 1851 census of religion appears to have revealed that 60.9 per cent of the men, women and children in England, or far more than the combined number of churchgoers, did not attend any religious service on census Sunday.[11] Anglicans were therefore only slightly ahead of the protestant nonconformists and other Christians, accounting for 51.6 per cent, or slightly more than half, among those who attended a religious service on census Sunday. Their claim to be an established religion seemed more dubious than ever.

In respect to those ten millions who attended no service at all, the census's original compiler allowed that 42 per cent, or more than two-fifths, of society might, on any given Sunday, be legitimately absent from church or chapel.[12] By this reckoning, still over three millions who had no unavoidable impediment failed to attend any religious service. Contemporaries rather naïvely regarded the 1851 census,

based on attendance, as accurately representing belief,[13] and therefore judged some one-third of the English population to hold no religious conviction.[14] Subsequent scholarship discredits so literal a reading of the census data,[15] and it seems likely that tiredness, sickness, overwork, and related matters—especially among the working classes—were a greater impact than hostility or indifference to religion, in influencing non-attendance in church or chapel.[16]

So it is evident that the distribution of chapel or churchgoers, as part of the whole population, means very little. Nevertheless, it is probably true that the one-third of the English population who did not attend a religious service on census Sunday were also, in most cases, without the vote or much other social or political influence. What this meant was that, even among regular churchgoers, Anglicanism could no longer lay a realistic claim to its demand for a dominant place as the established religion. Moreover, as suggested above, the full potency of an interest group, religious or otherwise, is not always accurately measured as the sum of its apparent parts, and in many cases, nonconformist missions, outreach, and other forms of organizations may well have further boosted their influence on English society, political and otherwise.

The peculiar character of England's system of parliamentary representation, for instance, particularly after the reform act of 1832, increased the electoral, and consequently the political, weight of dissent throughout much of the nineteenth century. On the eve of parliamentary reform, about 55 per cent of the electors cast votes for candidates standing for counties, but county members comprised only 16 per cent of the House of Commons.[17] Thus over one-half of the English electorate returned less than one-sixth of the members of parliament. The other 45 per cent of the electorate voted in borough constituencies, which returned the lion's share of MPs, and dissenters tended to be clustered in urban areas. Thus even before the repeal of the corporation act in 1828, before which non-Anglicans had been electorally disadvantaged by officially nurtured prejudice and close tory corporations, nonconformists benefited from this disparity. One historian has estimated dissenters' share of the electorate in 1832 (i.e. on the eve of reform) around one-fifth which, taken with the population estimates in that period, suggests that nonconformists were not under-represented in the pre-reform era.[18]

Through the repeal of the so-called test acts in 1828, dissenters in England had realized much of their object of civil equality.[19] Curiously, this may have made them more, rather than less, keen for parliamentary reform. For so long as the stigma of the test acts remained, its removal

took centre-stage in any dissenting political agenda, and parliamentary and even other religious reforms took second place. But dissenters still had a number of grievances. England remained a confessional society into the mid-nineteenth century, and to be outside the established church affected one's status. In stark terms, membership in the Church of England remained a vital requisite for full participation, full benefits and, arguably, even for full citizenship.[20]

This, in part, was what inspired dissenters to support parliamentary reform. The campaign to repeal the test and corporation acts had proved what effective organization could accomplish, and with that major grievance removed, dissenters were ready to turn their efforts to lesser ones. They recognized that the removal of their other grievances would require a strong voice in parliament, and therefore they were eager for its immediate reform. This was achieved in 1832, and with that milestone behind them, dissenters turned to more personal goals: church rate abolition, admission to the universities, marriage and burial rights, and so on. To all these ends, it was natural for the dissenters of the mid-nineteenth century to remain allied with the whigs, who had, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm, championed civil and religious liberty for the better part of a century-and-a-half. And in maintaining their alignment with the whigs—or, as they were increasingly called from this point onward, liberals—nonconformists unsurprisingly adopted many tenets of liberal ideology, even when they were apparently distinct from religious concerns. Thus free trade, the abolition of slavery, and parliamentary and municipal reform—all which might be called liberal issues—were in the nineteenth century, as they had been in the eighteenth century, dissenting issues as well. They were judged as directly related to the greater cause of civil and religious liberty, which had long been a whig and dissenting slogan, and would remain a liberal and dissenting one.

Religion was clearly a hot topic, and the continuance of an established church became increasingly hard to square with a society that claimed to cherish equality before the law. Any resident of a parish, for instance—whether Anglican or not—was liable to pay a local tax for the support of the church, as well as to pay a tithe to support the clergy. Such incongruities were especially galling after 1832 and, in the view of one authority on Victorian religion, such matters 'made immediate difference to a man's practical thinking *and his vote if he had a vote*.'[21] Other historians have agreed, and noted more specifically—although not always with substantiating evidence—that dissenting electors voted

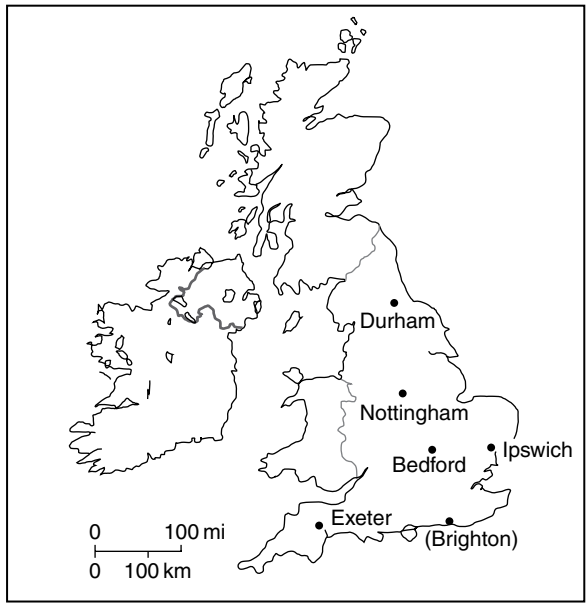
to return liberal candidates as members of parliament, and Anglicans preferred conservatives.[22]

Curiously, no recent study has investigated the political activity of dissenters in what was arguably the most important period of English constitutional history in the nineteenth century—that is, the years immediately following the first reform bill of 1832. One recent work studies the somewhat later mid-Victorian period, and examines the politics of dissent from the period between the general elections of 1847 and 1867, or up until the second reform bill, which dates the author identifies as

> the period from the time when English Evangelical Nonconformists began to mobilise as a self-conscious, distinctive force within national politics—replacing a trust in the leadership of the Whigs with a desire to place their own men in Parliament—until many of those very people, by then securely in the Commons, as well as their Nonconformist supporters, began to place their trust in the leadership of Gladstone.[23]

The same historian gives priority to the role played by nonconformist principle, informed by biblical and theological convictions, which led ineluctably to justice and equality. Another work has taken the case up again, for the period after the third reform bill of 1885 and well into the twentieth century, to show that nonconformity 'was generally the most potent predictor of the vote.'[24] But no one has yet seriously pursued similar questions for the period just after the first reform bill of 1832, and certainly no one has focused specifically on the voting behaviour of Methodists and other nonconformists. This study argues that the comparative neglect of the period before the two works previously mentioned has distorted and diminished the role of dissent in the period, and that the patterns of political alignment demonstrated for the second half of the nineteenth century were equally true of the first half, at least as far back as the reform crisis of the early 1830s.[25]

Local studies have tended to support such conclusions, to varying degrees and in a necessarily limited context, but no one has yet addressed the question on a broad scale and in a systematic manner.[26] The present research, which examines five general elections and over a dozen by-elections in five English boroughs—representing unique regional economic interests and dominant local industries, as well as different prevailing varieties of dissent—greatly clarifies this picture (Map 1.1) in a framework of national significance.[27] Its focus on these 40 electoral



Map 1.1 Location of six English boroughs

contests and four parliaments between 1832 and 1847 is not only a significant period in English constitutional history, but also one in which all the major issues which thereafter divided dissenters from the Anglican establishment (and the politically liberal from the politically conservative)—church rates, for instance, education, and the disestablishment of the Church of England—made their appearance. It is in this formative period that fuller comprehension of the political behaviour of dissent is particularly crucial, for, as the present study argues, these same issues divided not only dissenters from Anglicans, but also liberals from conservatives.

This research reveals, through a combination of conventional and innovative approaches, a clear connection between dissenting religion and liberal politics, and an only slightly weaker association between Anglicanism and conservatism. It also demonstrates that, politically speaking, Wesleyans and the older dissenting denominations were virtually one, and nothing suggests that any major nonconformist denomination ever acted to support conservatives.

Moreover, the weight religion carried in inspiring public opinion regularly trumped other issues which have conventionally received

more attention in most treatments of the period: that is, controversies surrounding the new poor law, responses to economic and agricultural depression, attitudes to Chartism, schemes of national education, and so on. These matters were regularly subordinated to the concern—virtually inescapable in the nineteenth century—of the relation of church and state, and the role of dissent outside that relationship.

But the present research argues that religion did more in the early- and mid-nineteenth century than merely define the terms of political debate in England, and that dissent did more than merely lend a hefty bloc of electoral support to liberal candidates seeking seats in parliament. By adding the divide between political liberalism and conservatism to the division that already existed in society between dissenters and Anglicans, English nonconformists, in their aggressive challenge to the status quo, took a long step in the direction of creating the two-party system familiar later in the century. Whereas electors and even MPs were generally not fixed in their positions on, what seem to us, vital questions regarding domestic, colonial and foreign policy, they were for the most part resolutely fixed in their positions regarding the special roles of church and state, and the place of dissent as regarded that relationship. The argument developed in the following chapters strongly supports the conclusion that, at both the constituency and the parliamentary levels, religion was the engine that drove English politics throughout the nineteenth century.

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