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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Politics

CHALUS Elaine

Mots-clés

Dining
Elections
Public Sphere
Tories
Whigs
Women

Résumé

Sociability was intrinsic to British politics in the eighteenth-century. For Members of Parliament and members of the House of Lords, politics was face-to-face and personal, operating through social networks, personal connexions and extended family interests. Much political networking, solicitation, manoeuvring, and negotiation took place in mixed-sex social arenas that included women, or were hosted by women. The importance of sociability and its place in political culture becomes very apparent when considering what could happen when issues or election campaigns became so divisive that sociability broke down.

Sociability was intrinsic to British politics in the eighteenth-century. For Members of Parliament and members of the House of Lords, politics was face-to-face and personal, operating through social networks, personal connexions and extended family interests. While the importance of ideological differences rose and fell over the century — Whig/Tory party

divisions peaked prior to the passage of the Septennial Act in 1716 and then faded away, only to begin slowly to re-emerge in the early nineteenth century — sociability and social politics (the use of social situations for political ends) were vitally important constants in eighteenth-century British political culture. Westminster politics extended well beyond Westminster, as MPs and members of the Lords regularly spilled out of the overcrowded debating chambers of the Houses of Parliament into the men's clubs and great London townhouses, into assembly-rooms, ballrooms, dining rooms, the theatre, and the opera.1 There, they could be found using social situations to seek support for pet projects or important pieces of legislation, testing the waters for creating consensus, discussing the issues of the day, making useful political contacts, or even requesting patronage, pensions or preferments for themselves or their clients. Moreover, it is important to remember that much of this networking, solicitation, manoeuvring, and negotiation — be it about policy or patronage, factional alliances, or elections — took place in mixed-sex social arenas that included women, or were hosted by women.2

Although women were prevented by custom from voting, holding most patronage appointments or taking seats in the Lords (even if they were peeresses in their own rights), politics ran through the lives of women from politically active families — and their political activities largely took place through the social arena, whether it was in London or in the provinces. Like their male counterparts, they used social situations to gather and disseminate political news and gossip, discuss men and measures, facilitate networking and build or maintain factional allegiances, or seek patronage for themselves or their clients. Important political hostesses, such as Mary, Lady Hervey (1700–68), or Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806), used their social skills to political effect. Lady Hervey's famous dinners for select groups of '*bel esprits*', mixed established and up-and coming politicians with beautiful and/or witty women. Her invitations could be openly political, as was the case in November 1758 when she invited the leading Opposition politician and Paymaster of the Forces, Henry Fox, to dinner. Fox, who was keen to gain Opposition supporters, recorded the event: 'On Thursday at Ly Hervey's to meet a very amiable young Man, of great Merit — Lord Charlemont —'.3

The importance of sociability and its place in political culture becomes very apparent when considering what could happen when issues or election campaigns became so divisive that sociability broke down. Perhaps the most famous example of the former can be found in the societal response to the Regency Crisis of 1788. The breakdown of George III's mental health in November 1788 precipitated months of fierce political manoeuvring. The animosity and political divisions that developed between the followers of the Prince of Wales, who sought the establishment of a Regency with the prince as Prince Regent, and the followers of the First Lord of the Treasury (Prime Minister), William Pitt the Younger (supported by Queen Charlotte), who feared the political outcome of such an appointment and strongly opposed it, was such that elite Society itself formed opposing camps and common civility was a victim. By the end of December, the Regency had become the dominant and divisive topic of conversation and relations between supporters of the factions were fractious.

Lord Jersey complained to his old friend, Lady Spencer, 'I have been witness to very few unpleasant scenes, but I have heard that many, almost too serious, have occurred when accidental opposite opinions have met in private houses'.[4] Lord Sydney similarly laid the blame for the enmity to women's political involvement: 'We have seen no times when it has been so necessary to separate parties in private company. The acrimony is beyond anything you can conceive. The ladies are as usual at the head of all animosity, and are distinguished by caps, ribands, and other such ensigns of party.'[5] Using fashion and accessories to make material political statements was not new at the time, and the Regency Crisis saw the female supporters of the prince adopt an expensive and visually striking Regency Cap, complete with the princes three feathers and his motto, while the male members of the Constitutional Club, who supported Pitt and the court, disported themselves in a blue, orange and white uniform. These visual statements had their social consequences, with women of one faction greeting the entrance of those from the other with distinctly unladylike hooting and groaning,[6] and the duchess of Gordon, a strong supporter of Pitt, using distinctly unladylike language to the prince himself at a ball: 'The Prince ask'd the Dutchess of Gordon to wear such a Cap; she said she would sooner be hang'd.'[7]

Sociability also played a vital part in the eighteenth-century electoral cycle. Recent research by the Eighteenth-Century Political Participation and Electoral Culture project (ECPPEC) has established that there were 11,672 elections and by-elections in England between 1695 and 1832. Of these, 28.44% were fully contested (i.e., they went to the poll).[8] While this figure looks low and many contests never went all the way to a poll, there were few seats that were totally secure and many partial campaigns. If we can rely on Frank O'Gorman's claim that up to three-quarters of all elections saw some degree of contest, then there were approximately 8,754 over the course of the long eighteenth century.

The social dimension of electoral politics was particularly important in the eighteenth century when party structures had not yet taken shape and electoral politics was highly personal. Political interests had to be maintained between elections. One way politically ambitious elite families did this was by holding weekly public days at their country houses during the summer. Public Days showed off political families as *families*. Husbands, wives and children, as well as available members of the extended family, would make a concerted effort to please by entertaining established local supporters, waverers and potential recruits with food, flattery, music and dancing. Their elaborate court clothing signified their respect for their guests, but the formality of the clothing needed to be balanced by a natural and approachable manner: egos had to be stroked without an obvious show of condescension.

A similar situation obtained at the annual race meets. Race Weeks were usually held in the county towns or market towns any time from early July through September. They were community gatherings that brought the local political elite together with the more important non-resident landholders and a substantial portion of the electorate. As a result, they were often openly politicized, with the leading or aspiring political families sponsoring breakfasts, dinners and balls, and giving cups and trophies as prizes for the races themselves. Dressed in their best court clothes and bedecked with jewels, the members of leading political families

used the social events of Race Weeks to reinforce the family's standing in the locality through their presence and ostentatious display, as well as through their conscientious attention to civility and the paternalistic niceties of hospitality. The nonstop socializing could be exhausting, though, as Lady Polwarth indicated when anticipating her attendance at the Kelso Races in 1774: 'Kelso Races begin next Tuesday, & a tolerable fatiguing time it will be: three days of public Breakfasts, Races at Noon, public Dinners & Balls at Night. So if I drop down in a Country Dance […] you must Comfort yourself like Cato, when he says, "My boy has done his Duty!" '.9

Sociability became even more important during election campaigns. Eighteenth-century elections could be carnivalesque episodes of self-conscious political theatre characterized by rituals of social inversion. Elite candidates were expected to step temporarily out of their social sphere and mix with, or even cater to, their social inferiors. Civility and sociability mattered in securing votes. Voters expected treats and feasts and candidates who would not think themselves above sharing a drink. Voters and their womenfolk also expected candidates and their agents to be properly respectful when canvassing. Arrogance, disrespect, intimidation or abusive language could result in lost votes, but the reports of the Select Committees on controverted elections (those elections whose outcomes were challenged all the way to Parliament) reveal that a breakdown in electoral sociability could also annoy voters or their wives enough to have them act as a witnesses for the opposing candidate in Parliament.10

While eighteenth-century elections had a reputation for being rough-and-tumble, violence at the hustings reflected a serious breach of the unspoken contract of sociability between candidates and crowd. An example of the riot which took place at the hustings on the afternoon of the second day of the poll for the Bedford election of 1830 is illustrative. The hustings were a performative, theatrical space, where candidates were forced to interact directly with an irreverent, noisy, sometimes aggressively alcohol-fueled public made up of a mixture of supporters of all candidates and none. They were usually temporary, sturdy wooden structures situated in a conveniently open, central part of the town, often the market square. Stairs led to a raised and roofed platform on which the candidates, their political agents and/or key supporters gathered, as well as various election officials, such as the sheriff and under sheriff (if there was one). The hustings served as a stage for the announcement of voting totals and for the daily speeches by the candidates that were given at the close of every day's poll. These speeches ritually gave thanks to the voters for their votes and often made comments about the promise of votes or success to come in the next day (or days') voting. They could be short and simple, or long-winded, entertaining or informative. Candidates were expected, however, to show respect to their audience throughout (and to take their hats off when they addressed the crowd).

The riot in Bedford was precipitated by a speech at the end of the second day's polling by one of the candidates, William Henry Whitbread.11 As the candidate with the most votes, he spoke first. In trying to criticise the popularity of Frederick Polhill's, the candidate who was running a close second in the poll, he cast aspersions on the character of Polhill's supporters

in the crowd. He claimed that while Polhill and his supporters talked ‘a vast deal about Independence’, the only claim most of his supporters had to “independence”, was being “independently drunk”.’

This was an attack on the respectability of the crowd and the response was immediate — and angry:

> The most tremendous uproar followed this declaration, and an immediate attempt was made to obtain summary redress. Loud cries of “Down with him,” and other fearful menaces proceeded from the crowd, the whole body of whom appeared at once to be propelled towards the hustings. The confusion was heightened by the endeavours of many of the most timid to make their escape. The women screamed, the boys scampered in all directions, the constables and stavesmen gathered together in a solid square, for the protection of themselves and the speaker, who had called forth such a dangerous display of the public wrath […]. (44)

A full riot was prevented only when Polhill forced his way to the front of the hustings, and succeeded in talking the crowd down, establishing a temporary truce. However, when it appeared that Whitbread and Polhill’s opponent, the third candidate, Lord John Russell, were going to flee the hustings, their horses having been brought to the rear of the hustings, the crowd rioted.

> They mounted with great difficulty, surrounded by thirty or forty stavesmen, but were no sooner again visible, than constables and all were encompassed in the midst of hundreds of the gallant Electors. A battle royal followed. The staves flew about the heads of the Independents;—the Candidates were speedily dismounted—Mr. Samuel Whitbread's coat was torn every atom from his back, and part of the skirt affixed to a conquered constable’s staff, as the banner of the insulted party. (44)

Once again, Polhill and his friends managed to re-establish order. They got his band to strike up ‘Oh! dear, what can the matter be’, and gave orders to form a procession. This allowed Whitbread and Russell to escape to one of the taverns hired in their interest, while Polhill, accompanied by his band and his friends, marched his supporters — reportedly 12 abreast and upwards of a thousand strong — to their headquarters in the George Inn for more speeches, drinks and dinner.

Although the remainder of the poll was rough, there was no violence to echo this riot. Whitbread and Pollhill were in due course elected to the town’s two seats and Whitbread’s chairing — the carrying of the victorious candidate around the town in a sumptuously decorated chair — was allowed to go forward without any recurrence. The town gloried, however, in Polhill’s triumph over Lord John Russell. The description of his chairing, as given by the editor of the local newspaper, is particularly interesting not only for what it reveals about the colour and vibrancy of the spectacle, but also especially its depiction of the

restoration of civility after the election. The contagion of the contest had dissipated and the warmth of feeling that it had engendered had been transmuted once again into sociable civility — represented by the elegantly dressed, smiling women, the ‘merry peal’ of church bells, the tasteful richness of the decorated chair, and the careful order of the procession.

> The streets were crowded to a degree that access became almost difficult. The windows of almost every house were thronged with elegantly dressed females, the greater portion of them clothed in dresses of purple, the colors of the triumphant member of the town. All were decked with cockades, and, if possible, an additional loveliness was excited in their appearance by the grateful smiles of approbation they so unsparingly bestowed. It was a sight for Britons to gaze on with feelings of pride and exultation. The bells of all the churches struck up simultaneously a merry peal; and precisely at four o'clock, the necessary arrangements being completed, the procession set out in the following order, from the George Inn:
>
> 500 Men on foot, eight abreast.
>
> THE BAND.
>
> TWENTY-FIVE SPLENDID COLORS, With Mottos suitable to the occasion.
>
> CAPTAIN POLHILL
>
> IN THE CHAIR,
>
> Which was composed of the richest purple silk, with ornaments of gold, and profusely covered with rosettes of Bedford lace. The whole adorned with laurels, and tastefully placed upon a break. (56)

Modern political scientists have only recently began to take seriously the part played by emotions in politics — its importance in shaping voters’ decisions and the part it plays in the creation of political communities and political commitment. ‘Politics is’, as David P. Redlawsk acknowledged bluntly in 2006, ‘about feeling.’12 He might as easily have said the same thing about sociability, particularly for the eighteenth century when elite politics was familial and face-to-face, when modern party allegiances and structures had not yet taken shape, and when electoral politics was highly personal. Sociability mattered. It provided the ground rules for political discussion and debate; it facilitated the formation of political alliances and was of central importance in holding factions together; its conventions are reflected in the canvasses, treats, and balls of the electoral cycle; and a shared understanding of sociability underpinned the transactions between patrons, candidates, agents and voters. If we want to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the operation of the political culture of the eighteenth century, we need to take the parts played by both emotions and sociability seriously.

1. Elaine Chalus, Elite Women in English Political Life, c.1754–90 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also the outstanding article by Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery that traces politicians' movements about London and confirms this: Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery, 'The Political Day in Georgian London, c.1697–1834', Past & Present (vol. 252, n° 1, 2021), pp. 101–137.

2. Elaine Chalus, 'Elite Women, Social Politics and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-Century England', The Historical Journal (vol. 43, n° 3, 2000), pp. 669–97.

3. British Library, Add. Ms. 51,416, fol. 57, 'Henry Fox to Lady Caroline Fox', Pay Office, 28 Nov. 1758.

4. British Library, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 112, 'Jersey to Lady Spencer', London [31 Dec. 1788].

5. 'Sydney to Cornwallis, London, 21 Feb. 1789', in Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis, ed. by Charles Ross, 3 vols, (London, 1835), vol. 2, p. 406.

6. 'Journal, London, 2–3 Mar. [1789]', in Betsy Sheridan's Journal, ed. by William Lefanu (Oxford, 1986), p. 153.

7. 'Lady Stafford to Granville Leveson Gower [London], 12 Feb. 1789', in Lord Granville Leveson Gower (First Earl Granville) Private Correspondence 1781 to 1821, ed. by Castalia, Lady Granville, 2 vols (London, 1916), vol 1, pp. 14–15.

8. With thanks to Dr James Harris of ECPPEC for providing these figures.

9. Wrest Park Papers, L30/9/60/32, Lady Polwarth to Marchioness Grey, Wrest, 19 May 1774.

10. See, for example, Trial of the Taunton Election Petition, before a Committee of the House of Commons, February 23rd, 1831 (Taunton: W. Bragg, 1831), pp. 90–6, 115–21, 124–5, 270–87.

11. For the details of the Bedford riot described below, see R. M. Muggeridge, Esq., A History of the Late Contest for the Representation of the Borough of Bedford, Commenced before the Assessor, Monday, August 2nd. And concluded Thursday, August 12th. 1830. (Hertford: S. Staughton, 1831), pp. 44–57.

12. David P. Redlawsk (ed.), Feeling Politics: Emotion in Political Information Processing (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-10.

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