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English Franchise Reform in the Seventeenth Century

The roots of franchise reform in the seventeenth century are of interest to historians both of Britain and of America. In the new world and in England important steps toward democratic suffrage were taken in the first half of the century. The Virginia charter of 1619 granted voting privileges to all adult male inhabitants regardless of property.¹ Later governments qualified this liberality, but an important precedent was established. In England Leveller tracts and the classic Putney Debates aired arguments that bore no immediate practical fruits but that foreshadowed later reforms. Both developments are startling enough to raise urgent questions about origins. Where did such striking innovations come from? Were they altogether unprecedented, or were they, as seems more probable, modifications of already existing ideas about suffrage?

In both cases tentative explanations have been proposed. The generous provisions of the Virginia charter have been accounted for by the desire of the colony's sponsors to attract settlers. Unusual political privileges were a lure to draw Englishmen to the new world. The soldiers' insistence on a wider franchise has been attributed to three factors: the confidence they derived from their large role in Cromwell's victories, the logical development of the natural right and contract theory of government, and the democratic impulse implicit in Puritan Independency. Heady with military successes and religious zeal, the soldiers boldly carried the conception of contract to its conclusion and demanded that Parliament be elected by the people to whom it was theoretically responsible.²

Doubtless these explanations have validity; there is good evidence for both. But neither the Virginia charter nor the Putney Debates are rightly understood unless still another factor is kept

1. Probably apprentices but not servants were excluded. Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven, 1934), I, 184.

2. Wesley Frank Craven, *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, 1607-1689* (n. p., 1949), p. 136; Perez Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution* (London, 1954), pp. 13-17; G. P. Gooch, *English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 122; William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955), pp. 298-300; Wilson H. Coates, "An Analysis of Major Conflicts in Seventeenth-Century England," in William A. Aiken and Basil D. Henning (eds.), *Conflict in Stuart England: Essays in Honour of Wallace Notestein* (London and New York, 1960), pp. 30-32. For a recent discussion of seventeenth-century franchise, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 107-160.

in view: franchise reform was a significant, if muted theme in Parliament through a large part of the century, especially in the 1620's. Many of the major figures in the anti-Court party in that decade favored a broader suffrage. Because of unfortunate obscurities in the record, the connections with Virginia and with the Levellers and Putney must remain for the present imprecise. But research designed to illuminate the origins of either the Virginia charter or the soldiers' proposals should certainly look toward the prolonged suffrage reform movement in Parliament.

The strength of the reform impulse was revealed in the repeated efforts after 1620 to broaden the parliamentary franchise. Most probably it was the electoral controversies in the Parliament of 1614 that disposed the House to improve procedures. In 1621 the Commons heard a bill for general electoral reform in both shires and boroughs.³ Near the beginning of the session Henry Poole asked that a committee be appointed to decide how electoral disputes might be settled. As one record of the debates reports, his was "a good motion and well liked of." The bill resulting from Poole's motion granted the franchise in counties to freeholders of four pounds *per annum* and copyholders of ten pounds *per annum*. In the boroughs, all freemen inhabitants were to receive the franchise, except in places where there were less than twenty-four freemen; in this case, all the inhabitants were to vote, exclusive of men receiving alms.⁴

In the same session, the House further displayed its generosity by ruling in favor of the popularly elected candidate at Oxford. Wentworth, one of the candidates, won a hundred more of the commoners' votes than his opponent, Blundell; but Blundell received all but one of the magistrates' votes, and two-thirds of the Common Council approved him. Disregarding the argument of Blundell's counsel that the commons had no right to vote, the Committee on Returns ruled that "the election was to be made by the Commons and not by the Magistrates," and Wentworth was seated.⁵

3. Wallace Notestein, Frances H. Relf, Hartley Simpson (eds.), *Commons Debates, 1621* (New Haven, 1935), II, 42; III, 411-12; IV, 421-22.

4. The boroughs were of larger importance, and they subsequently received more attention. Boroughs not only supplied four-fifths of the House of Commons, but their franchise was often narrower than the franchise in shires. In many boroughs a closed corporation of a dozen or two men were the sole electors of parliamentary burgesses. The remainder of the freemen, not to mention the other inhabitants, had no voice in elections. In the shires, by contrast, every forty shilling freeholder could vote.

5. Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, *Commons Debates, 1621*, II, 47-48; IV, 32-33.

Notwithstanding these indications of a reforming temper in the Parliament of 1621, the bill for revising the franchise failed to pass. For that matter, none of the bills for "due elections" introduced into subsequent Parliaments in this decade survived a third reading.⁶ Yet the reports of the Committees on Privileges and the resolutions passed in the House demonstrate the existence of a strong if not dominant pressure for electoral reforms. Glanvill's committee in 1624 and 1625 consistently seated candidates chosen by the town commons in place of those returned by the closed corporations — unless it could be proven that a custom from time out of mind granted the privilege of election to a select group. In Cirencester, Pontefract, Winchelsey, Stafford, and Chippenham disputes turned on the townsmen's right to vote. In each case the committee approved the candidate chosen by the larger body of voters over the man elected by a small circle of magistrates and prominent burgesses.⁷ The Bletchley case was an exception. The committee awarded the seat to the representative elected by the select group of burgage-holders. But the committee carefully explained that "more persons than in the case in question ought to have voice in the election of burgesses to the parliament;" only by prescription may a smaller number claim an exclusive privilege to vote.⁸

The committee's report on Cirencester revealed the radical conception underlying their decisions. Cirencester, though possessing the privilege of electing representatives to Parliament, was not an incorporated borough. Unsure of the qualifications of the electors, the under-sheriff who was conducting the election opened the polls to all freeholders. The committee decided he had not gone far enough. They disallowed his decision and ruled that

there being no certain custom, nor prescription, who should be electors, and who not, we must have recourse to common right, which to this purpose was held to be, that more than the freeholders only ought to have voices in the election; namely all men, inhabitants, householders, resiants [*sic*] within the borough.

Not just freeholders, the committee declared, but all residents should vote, and the Commons accepted their resolution.⁹

6. *Journals of the House of Commons*, I, 513, 572, 641, 649-50, 686, 759, 818, 885-86.

7. John Glanville (ed.), *Reports of Certain Cases, Determined and Adjudged by the Commons in Parliament in the Twenty-first and Twenty-second Years of the Reign of King James the First* (London, 1775), *passim*; cf. the 1623 Dover Case, *Commons Journals*, I, 748.

8. Glanville, *Reports of Certain Cases*, pp. 33ff.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 107; *Commons Journals*, I, 708, 792.

This principle was repeated in the ruling on the Pontefract dispute, a similar case, where it was resolved that "there being no charter nor prescription, for Choice, the Election is to be made by the Inhabitants, Householders, Resiants [*sic*]." ¹⁰ It is clear that the committee, which included more than fifty members of the House, thought that in the absence of specific provisions to the contrary, every man had the right to vote.

The decisions of the Committee on Privileges in the Parliament of 1628 continued in this spirit. In judging contested returns from Boston, Colchester, Warwick, and Bridport, the choices of the commoners were preferred above those of a limited number of town burgesses. The mayor and council of Warwick managed to accumulate signatures from two hundred citizens on a petition disclaiming the commoners' right to vote. Undisturbed by the people's willingness to deny themselves their privileges, the Committee declared that if only one commoner claimed the right to vote, his case would be heard. ¹¹

Seemingly in an effort to sustain and generalize these decisions, the committee, in connection with the Boston case, reported to the Commons their resolve "that the Election of Burgesses, in all Boroughs, did, of common Right, belong to the Commoners; and that nothing could take it from them, but a Prescription and a constant Usage beyond all Memory." ¹²

To modern ears, this declaration sounds democratic. It was not. It did not emerge from a democratic theory of contractual government or popular sovereignty. Perhaps the vague but powerful conception of common right moved some parliamentary leaders to favor a modest widening of the franchise. But democratic conceptions cannot have been very important, for the bill introduced in 1621 increased the property qualification for voting in the counties. The parliamentary tradition of franchise reform primarily aimed at the prevention of electoral corruption, and in the boroughs, though not in the counties, a wider franchise seemed suited to do just that.

Since the early years of James's reign, Parliament had protested

10. *Commons Journals*, I, 715.

11. *Ibid.*, I, 882, 893, 876, 907.

12. *Ibid.*, I, 893; cf. I, 882. It is possible, of course, that the Parliament referred to town freemen when they said commoners. In that case ownership of property and admission to the town would be voting requirements in most places. But in light of the declarations of the committee in 1624-25, it is more likely that commoners was used here in the broader sense of inhabitants and householders. By either definition the resolve of the Parliament implied a radical reform in many boroughs.

Court interference in elections. In the session of 1614 especially, the House had objected to the practice of sending letters to boroughs urging the election of a certain candidate.¹³ The Commons vigorously defended the right of its Committee on Privileges to judge disputed elections, apparently with the hope of weeding out candidates elected under undue influence. Ostensibly these objections were not motivated by party feelings. Members of the Court party were not the only ones rebuked for interfering in elections. The Commons deplored manipulations of any sort. Mayors and bailiffs who had the habit of returning themselves from the towns they controlled were equally reproachable for disturbing the ancient method of selecting the House of Commons.¹⁴ Protecting the privileges of the commons in elections was simply a method of preventing powerful individuals, whether in the town oligarchies or the nobility, from upsetting the due processes of election.

The franchise reform bill of 1621 was an extension of earlier efforts to guarantee the proper election of Parliament. Along with the provision for enlarging the franchise were measures to regulate the issuance of writs and to insure a proper warning of the legal electors, two parts of the procedure which had been subject to illegal manipulation.¹⁵ These applied to both towns and counties. Broadening the electoral base, however, was the key item in the bill for reforming towns, because boroughs controlled by a select body were especially susceptible to corruption. Collusion among the mayor and the twelve or twenty-four burgesses who ruled the town occurred all too frequently, and so small a group could easily fall under the influence of some person outside the town. The select groups in many towns owed their power to certain members of the Court party. These powerful individuals would obtain a charter for the borough which excluded the freemen from elections. In return for this favor, the town oligarchy felt obliged to elect the candidates nominated by their influential friends. To combat this alliance, the Committee on Privileges in 1624 ruled that no charter could deprive the commonalty of electoral privileges they had previously held, and the reform bill of 1621 provided that "no Lord to comaund by letter and to be returned."¹⁶

13. Thomas L. Moir, *The Addled Parliament of 1614* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 42, 53-54.

14. *Commons Journals*, I, 468.

15. Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, *Commons Debates, 1621*, II, 277.

16. Glanville, *Reports of Certain Cases*, pp. 54-55; Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, *Commons Debates, 1621*, III, 411-12.

The position of the reformers is illustrated in a statement made in connection with the Chippenham case in 1624. The town's ruling body had at first divided evenly in the choice of one of their representatives. When the select body called in the freemen to help decide the issue, they unanimously voted for Sir Francis Popham. Perhaps a little abashed by this overwhelming display of popular opinion, one of the corporation members changed his vote in favor of Popham's opponent. Although the tie in the corporation was now broken, the freemen returned the name of Popham as the properly elected candidate.

When the case was carried to the Commons, the Committee on Privileges ruled for Popham and then proceeded to explain why. The charter of Queen Mary, which had excluded the freemen from voting, could legally incorporate the town or alter its internal government, but it could not "abridge the general freedom and form of elections for burgesses to the Parliament, wherein, as aforesaid, the commonwealth is interested." The reason for this prohibition was clear. If a charter restricted the franchise to a bailiff and twelve others, another charter might further limit voting privileges to a bailiff and one or two burgesses or to the bailiff alone. Such a restriction would be

against the general liberty of the realm, that favoureth all means tending to make the election of burgesses [to Parliament] to be with the most indifferency; which, by common presumption, is when the same are made by the greatest number of voices that reasonably may be had, whereby there will be less danger of packing, or indirect proceedings.¹⁷

In 1624 the Committee could presume that a large body of voters would be less easily corrupted than a small group. They argued for a large electorate, not as a principle of individual rights, but as a means of obtaining an honest Parliament. The virtue of a broad franchise lay in the intractability of large numbers, not in its usefulness in measuring the popular will. When Sir Edward Cecil in 1624 said that the House of Commons "is violent for free elections," the word "free" meant open to all freemen, but he also meant free from outside influence.¹⁸ The parliamentarians believed that in practice the first freedom assured the second. In 1623 there was less interference in the boroughs' choices than

17. Glanville, *Reports of Certain Cases*, pp. 54-55.

18. Mary A. E. Green (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, of the Reign of James I, 1623-1625* (London, 1859), p. 192; *Commons Journals*, I, 748.

earlier, and this fact encouraged Sir William Pelham to hope that the recently elected Commons would be "compounded of honest religious gentlemen." "The country augurs good," he said, "because there has been less labour than usual to bring in particular men."¹⁹ The ideal of an "honest" and "religious" Parliament, elected without improper attempts to "bring in particular men," was the chief motivation for the democratic measures introduced into the House in the third decade of the century.

Probably a less idealistic intent motivated the advocates of reform too. The small group of reform parliamentarians who led the debates and dominated the committees probably recognized that returns from a broad constituency strengthened the anti-Court forces. The leaders of those forces must have known that in most cases the general body of town inhabitants would elect, in preference to the candidate of a peer, a representative with anti-Court inclinations.²⁰ It is hard to believe that the Committee on Privileges would have seated the popularly elected representative quite so frequently if the commoners regularly chose partisans of the Crown.

Lesser men may have supported these decisions for strictly selfish reasons also. Lady de Villiers has argued that the newly enfranchised boroughs opened an avenue into Parliament for ambitious gentry. Established boroughs presented a similar opportunity for politically minded gentlemen. The election of representatives in the sixteenth century little concerned many towns. A few local officials customarily selected the two burgesses, though illegally. Other towns failed to return representatives for long periods, and in the interim the qualifications for voting were confused or forgotten. In both cases, an aggressive politician could challenge the control by the select body and propose a poll of all the freemen.²¹

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, local peers, the Court, and the townsmen all awakened to the benefits of controlling borough seats. Usually the town oligarchies yielded to the requests of the local peer and readily returned his candidate. The town commons, however, often opposed the choice of the oli-

19. Green, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1623-1625*, p. 162.

20. William M. Mitchell, *The Rise of the Revolutionary Party in the English House of Commons* (New York, 1957), pp. 106-07, 116; Christopher Hill, *Oliver Cromwell, 1658-1958* (London, 1958), p. 12; Evangeline de Villiers, "Parliamentary Boroughs Restored by the House of Commons," *E. H. R.*, LXVII (1952), 195.

21. De Villiers, "Parliamentary Boroughs," *E. H. R.*, LXVII (1952), 183-85, 190, 196; J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (New Haven, 1950), p. 247; cf. pp. 140-52.

garchy, and in that difference of opinion the gentry found their opportunity. They could present themselves as candidates in an open election, and often obtain a majority.²² If the town oligarchy objected and held their own election, the case was carried to the Committee on Privileges where the candidate chosen by the town commons would almost invariably be seated.

Seeing the success of those who contested a borough election on these grounds, aspiring politicians in every area where seats were scarce undertook to challenge the town oligarchy by appealing to the town commons. If the pressure to find seats for the gentry was as substantial as Lady de Villiers suggests, the Committee's policy of favoring wide participation in parliamentary elections would receive the approval of many gentlemen inside and out of the House of Commons.

The impulse for franchise reform thus operated at three levels. Besides the principled desire for honest elections, the anti-Court group in the Commons wished to strengthen their numbers, and aspiring gentry hoped to win seats in Parliament by appealing to the populace. Altogether, these conditions may account for the reforms advocated in the Commons in the 1620's.

There is, however, an unfortunate gap in the argument. These observations rest on a fact which itself calls for explanation: the tendency of the town commons to elect anti-Court men in preference to partisans of the Crown. A definitive explanation awaits a vast amount of research in local records where, if anywhere, the economic, political, and social status of town populations is in its raw form recorded. Perhaps in time the nature of local social and economic conflicts will be better understood and the correlations with larger political controversies defined. Until then, however, probably the best way to complete the argument is to cite a case where the town inhabitants' reasons for supporting a reform candidate were visible.

The election of Sir Edwin Sandys from Sandwich in 1620 is relevant both because of his relation to Virginia and because his success illustrates the forces at work in town politics. Sandys appealed to Sandwich for a number of reasons. In the first place, Sandwich commoners in 1620 were interested in the recovery of their voice in elections to the House of Commons. A few years earlier the Privy Council had granted a charter excluding commoners from elections to avoid the tumults which frequently arose

22. Hill, *Cromwell*, p. 12; De Villiers, "Parliamentary Boroughs," *E. H. R.*, LXVII (1952), 195.

under the old system. Sandys did not force himself on the people, one of his enemies reported, "but uttered his affections to the place and people there with compassions, how they had lost some of their liberties, which would be recovered againe."²³

In the second place, shipping monopolies given to London cloth merchants had seriously cut down exports from Sandwich. In 1621 the town submitted a petition to Parliament complaining that their major shippers and merchants were moving nearer to London for want of business, and the entire town was being hurt. Sandys was well known as an enemy of monopolies, and his opposition to the East Indies Company especially endeared him to Sandwich.²⁴

Finally, Sandys had the support of a "rabble of Scismaticall Sectaries." Richard Marshe, a correspondent of the Secretary to the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, thought the town's failure to elect Sir Robert Hatton, Sandys' opponent and the candidate favored by the town oligarchy, was owing to Sir Robert's close connection with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Marshe blamed the visit of one "Marstone, a Precyse Preacher," some eight or nine years before for the antipathy these religious radicals felt towards the Archbishop. Sandys' advantage over Sir Robert may also have come from his sympathy for the Puritans' desire to find a "Haven" somewhere.²⁵ With his large interest in the Virginia Company, Sandys was a likely man to help prospective religious refugees.

As a champion of popular election rights, the opponent of monopolies, and a friend to religious radicals, Sandys entered the election with good reason to expect popular backing. On the election day the people indeed displayed their approval of him and, on the same occasion, demonstrated their resentment of the mayor.²⁶ For the election of the first burgess the mayor nominated Sandys, Hatton, and Jacobs, confident that Sandys would lose to Jacobs, a local favorite. Doubtless the mayor intended to exclude Sandys from candidacy in the second election. Complaints could then be answered by arguing that the people had decided against Sandys in the first contest.

To the mayor's surprise Sandys was elected first. In the next election the mayor nominated a string of candidates including Hatton, whom the oligarchy preferred, but omitting Jacobs, the

23. Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, *Commons Debates, 1621*, VII, 567-72.

24. *Ibid.*, VII, 593-96, 567-70.

25. *Ibid.*, VII, 567-70.

26. At the outset an objection was raised to the election writ because it did not say the "Cominalty, to make the choyse . . ." *Ibid.*, VII, 567-70.

local favorite. Outraged at this cavalier manipulation of the proceedings, the commons "raved of breach of liberties" and threatened to petition Parliament. One indignant man told the mayor he would be cursed for "breaking their liberties." Hatton obtained a slim majority from the select body of electors, but when the case was brought before the Committee on Privileges, his election was voided because he had not received approval of the town commons.²⁷ Through the sympathy of the parliamentary group in the Commons, Sandwich triumphed over the mayor, and in the ensuing session with Sandys' aid mitigated their troubles.²⁸

Undoubtedly many of the gentry disapproved of Sandys' willingness to accommodate the populace in Sandwich. His appeal to popular forces, while always dignified, was nonetheless direct. Not all of the gentry by any means concurred in this attitude or favored a broadened franchise. John Winthrop, for example, reluctantly allowed the freemen in the Massachusetts Bay Company to elect their governor only after they demanded their charter rights. Even then, he allowed none but church members to become freemen, thus severely limiting the franchise. Enough of the gentry in England were of a mind with Winthrop that none of the successive bills for "due elections" introduced in the 1620's passed. Many gentlemen relied on the town oligarchies for their seats. Even if they agreed with the anti-Court party on other measures, they could not risk an election opened to all commoners.

Nonetheless, among the men who most often spoke against the Crown and who most frequently served on committees in the 1620's, belief in the popular right to election was common. Sir Henry Poole moved the introduction of the reform bill in 1621. Sir George More, in the same session, chaired the Committee on Privileges and delivered decisions on disputed elections which consistently favored the commoners.²⁹ In 1624 Glanvill chaired the same committee when Sir Edward Coke was a member and consistently ruled for the return of voting rights to all inhabitants.

27. *Ibid.*, VII, 567-70; IV, 181. Sandys' election was validated because for some reason the commons had been permitted to vote for him.

28. Probably it was partly through Sandys' influence that the Committee on Privileges restored the right to vote to Sandwich commoners. Though he could not obtain the dissolution of the London monopoly, Sandys tried to help Sandwich merchants by limiting transport fees on goods going to Sandwich. *Commons Journals*, I, 568, 572. Sandys also asked the Archbishop of Canterbury for permission to send Brownists and Separatists to Virginia. Wesley Frank Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company, the Failure of a Colonial Experiment* (New York, 1932), pp. 277-78.

29. *Commons Journals*, I, 624.

Sir John Eliot often spoke for common rights, and, as mentioned, Wentworth, Popham, and Sandys were personally involved in election disputes turning on the right of all inhabitants to vote.³⁰ Most of the men who shaped the opinion of the anti-Court party advocated a popular parliamentary franchise—primarily as a means of preventing undue interference in elections.

The provision for a popular franchise in Virginia would not have alarmed these men. A colony in the new world gave Sandys unusual opportunities to express his political views in practice, but the views themselves were not exceptional. Many of the gentlemen prominent in the Commons would have wished Virginia's election procedures to prevail in England too. The accusation of an enemy that Sandys intended to erect a free popular state in Virginia probably was near to the truth, but he was neither eccentric nor alone in this project.³¹ Both factions in the Virginia Company formulated the liberal charter of 1619. One of Sandys' associates was Popham who a few years later was to benefit by the assertion of popular election rights in Chippenham. Another associate was Sir Thomas Smith, leader of the faction opposing Sandys. About the same time, Smith helped frame the Bermuda government, which also had a popularly elected assembly.

There was an element of propaganda in these innovations: the Virginia Company needed settlers from England, and a ruling body under popular control appealed to prospective immigrants. Especially urban populations, among whom the agitation for free elections centered, would be attracted to a colony where their political aspirations could be realized.³² There was a practical advantage in establishing a popular assembly, but Sandys and his associates also sincerely believed it was the proper and best form of government.

The Virginia charter and the resolves and decisions of Parliament in the decade following 1620 were not the end of the movement for suffrage reform. Not by sweeping declarations, but by a pattern of small actions, the Parliament of 1640 showed that the long interruption after 1629 had not killed the reform impulse. In 1640 in two disputed elections the Commons seated the popu-

30. John Forster, *Sir John Eliot, A Biography, 1590-1632* (London, 1864), II, 271-74.

31. Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company*, pp. 277-78.

32. The establishment of popular government in Virginia was probably connected with the Company's attempt to get a bill through Parliament directing corporate towns to send their surplus poor to Virginia. Both were part of the campaign to increase migration. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, I, 134.

larly elected candidate and declared that the inhabitants and not a select body alone should vote.³³ An act for reforming abuses at elections was read once, and later a committee to study the same problem was appointed, including on it Pym, Strode, Cromwell, Falkland, and Hyde.³⁴ The grounds for granting the franchise to all inhabitants were still there, for the Crown, in a few instances, had tried to win seats by its old methods. Packing and indirect proceedings still angered the Commons; the attempts of the Earl of Arundel to get his secretary elected in Arundel provoked a long debate.³⁵ In certain boroughs advocacy of the commoners' right to election could win a candidate votes.³⁶ On the floor of the Commons there were no urgent appeals for franchise reform comparable to those heard in earlier Parliaments. The success of the anti-Court party at the polls eliminated the need for vigorous action against electoral corruption. Nonetheless, the movement for franchise reform, gathering velocity in the 1620's, had sufficient momentum to carry it into the 1640's. A greater measure of democracy in elections, if not among the most prominent planks of their platform, was one of the principles clearly associated with the parliamentary party.

As would be expected, Ireton and Cromwell accepted these views. Cromwell, for example, in the decade before the Long Parliament, protested the grant of exclusive political control to a select group in Huntingdon.³⁷ And Ireton's pamphlets in the summer of 1647 voiced a demand for electoral reform. In the Putney debates both men expressed their complete willingness to see some enlargement of the franchise. The belief in reform itself was never questioned.

The revolutionary extremes manifest among the lower classes, however, made Ireton and Cromwell more reticent about granting the vote to all inhabitants than their political predecessors of twenty years earlier. Enclosure riots, rent defections, mobs in London, and, above all, unremitting pressure from the army for an uncompromising stand against royal power led the gentry to

33. *Commons Journals*, II, 14-15, 47, 117; cf. *ibid.*, IX, 585-86; J. H. Sacret, "Restoration Government and Municipal Corporations," *E. H. R.*, XLV (1930), 244-45.

34. *Commons Journals*, II, 16, 333.

35. Willson H. Coates (ed.), *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* (New Haven, 1942), p. 260.

36. R. N. Kershaw, "The Elections for the Long Parliament, 1640," *E. H. R.*, XXXVIII (1923), 506.

37. Sacret, "Restoration Government and Municipal Corporations," *E. H. R.*, XLV (1930), 236.

doubt the felicity of their alliance with the unpropertied classes.³⁸ Cromwell and Ireton feared property and settled class order would fall if the unenfranchised multitudes were given political power. The Levellers criticized not only the Long Parliament but Cromwell himself for his dalliance with the King and for his reluctance to force the Parliament to prosecute revolutionary aims more rapidly. Cromwell and Ireton could see that a popularly elected Parliament might diverge sharply from the comparatively moderate course favored by most of the gentry. Thus at the time when conservatives had gone over to the King, comparatively radical figures like Cromwell and Ireton also moved to the right and became more wary of the lower classes. Whether or not they knew exactly how liberal earlier anti-Royalists had been on the question of franchise enlargement, these two understandably were far more cautious than Eliot or Sandys.

Cromwell and Ireton did not by any means altogether abandon the tradition of electoral reform. But instead of relying mainly on a broader franchise to prevent undue corruption, Ireton proposed a redistribution of seats according to rates. The "multitude of burgesses from decayed or inconsiderable towns," he wrote, "doth give too much . . . opportunity for men of power to frame parties in Parliament to serve particular interest[s], and thereby the common interest of the whole is not so minded . . ." Parliament elected by the method he proposed would be worthy of the trust of the nation.³⁹ The *Heads of Proposals* formalized the requests made in his pamphlets; it recommended the redivision of electoral districts according to their taxes and urged the removal of Parliamentary burgesses from poor or decayed towns.⁴⁰ By proposing these measures, Ireton stayed in the mainstream of election reform without risking what seemed in 1647 like a dangerous concession to popular forces.

The Levellers fully agreed with Ireton's methods of preventing electoral corruption. The *Agreement of the People* contained an article on the reorganization of voting districts which closely resembled the one in the *Heads of Proposals*, and Lilburne had proposed a similar scheme in 1646.⁴¹ In the same year Overton said

38. Hill, *Cromwell*, pp. 12-14.

39. A. S. P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and Liberty, Being the Army Debates (1647-9) from the Clarke Manuscripts* (London, 1938), pp. 407-08.

40. Samuel R. Gardiner, *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution, 1625-60* (Oxford, 1906), p. 317.

41. John Lilburne, *London's Liberty in Chains Discovered* (London, 1646), p. 53.

it was "a most heinous crime" to influence the free choice of parliamentary electors. The large petition of the Levellers in June, 1647, declared that no government is more just than that ruled by a Parliament based on the "free choice of the people."⁴²

But a corrupt Commons meant something different to the Levellers in the autumn of 1647 than to the anti-Court party in the 1620's. Not merely illegal interference by mayors or sheriffs nor packing by the Crown made the members of Parliament appear "rotten" to the Levellers. Anyone disposed to negotiate with the King, show respect for the traditional rights of the House of Lords, or hesitate in the pursuit of all the radicals' revolutionary aims was thought to be corrupt. Since most of the House of Commons was of this mediating temper in 1646 and 1647, the Levellers felt they had been deserted at Westminster and that stringent measures must be taken to assure an upright Parliament. One of these was enlargement of the franchise. The radicals were certain that a Parliament fairly elected by all the commoners would concur with their program.

Before 1647 none of the extremists would have expected a debate on suffrage. In 1645 Lilburne in *England's Birthright Justified* referred casually to the right of every commoner to vote for his representatives. Others spoke of the representative nature of the Commons without bothering to mention electoral arrangements.⁴³ Not until after July, 1647, did it occur to the Levellers that they must argue for manhood suffrage. Until then they seemed to assume that everyone in the parliamentary party understood that the franchise was part of the English birthright. But when Ireton made no mention of franchise enlargement in the *Heads of Proposals*, the Levellers formulated their position.

In *The Case of the Army Truly Stated*, October, 1647, Wildman called upon the present House of Commons to remove "all obstructions to the freedom and equality of the people's choice of their representers, either by patents, charters, or usurpations by pretended custom. . . ." He placed manhood suffrage alongside the right of the Commons to be the supreme lawmaker and to control all government officials. These were the things, he said, "against which the King hath contended and the people have

42. William Haller (ed.), *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638-47* (New York, 1934), III, 370, 399.

43. *Ibid.*, III, 353, 357-59, 399; Joseph Frank, *The Levellers, a History of the Writings of Three Seventeenth-Century Social Democrats: John Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 61-63.

defended with their lives, and therefore ought now be demanded as the price of their blood."⁴⁴ Opening the polls to all men clearly was not a new idea produced by the revolutionary ferment. It was an old and respected proposal, worthy of company among the foremost principles of the Independents. Though not pertinent to the political situation of the past seven years, it had again in 1647 become as crucial as it had been to the anti-Court members of the Commons in the 1620's. The Levellers made their plea for democracy confident that it would not fall on ears unaccustomed to hearing proposals for franchise reform..

The Army Agitators who argued for wider suffrage at Putney were, of course, disappointed. Cromwell and Ireton agreed on reform but separated from the Agitators on the issue of how far into the lower ranks of society suffrage should be extended. Ownership of property, the generals felt, must be the dividing line; the soldiers disagreed. After Ireton had confounded them with his distinction between natural and constitutional rights, Sexby expressed his disillusion. Had the revolutionary leaders let it be known a wider franchise was not their aim too, he said, fewer men would have enlisted: "We have engaged in this kingdom and ventured our lives, and it was all for this: to recover our birthrights and privileges as Englishmen: and by the arguments urged there are none . . . I wonder that we were so much deceived."⁴⁵ Ireton expressed his regrets, but he did not explain why so many men assumed that the English birthright included suffrage.

The conventional reading of the Debate holds that the Agitators may have been heroic, but that Ireton was historically more sound. The English birthright did limit suffrage to property-holders; the Agitators asked for a radical innovation. This interpretation must be modified. The idea of broadening the suffrage goes back at least as far as the Parliaments of twenty years earlier to distinguished leaders of the House of Commons. They, not the Levellers, were the innovators. It is true that the Leveller reforms were somewhat more radical than the earlier declarations in the Commons. The Levellers asked for manhood suffrage, with the exception of servants and delinquents, while the Commons resolutions called only for all borough inhabitants to vote, leaving a

44. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 434.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

property qualification in the counties.⁴⁶ Yet when one considers that Parliament had discussed admitting certain copyholders to the franchise along with borough residents, the Leveller proposal was not an immense departure. The Agitators were simply drawing on the legacy of reform bequeathed by anti-Royalists of the 1620's. The soldiers' disappointment as expressed by Sexby was not that Ireton and Cromwell rejected an appealing new idea but that they reneged on an old one.

An understanding of the earlier reform movement thus illuminates the significance of the suffrage debate at Putney. The two parties stood in the same line of thought—they both assumed that suffrage must be enlarged to some degree and that electoral corruption must be eliminated—but they interpreted the tradition differently. The actual bills and resolutions introduced in the 1620's were in aggregate sufficiently ambiguous to leave room for disagreement. Some offered the franchise to all borough freemen, who were almost always property-holders, while others specified that all residents ought to vote. The effect of the reform movement in that decade was to deposit in the minds of the parliamentary party a vague conviction that wider participation in elections would prevent undue influence from the Court. Controversy arose in 1647 over what elements of reform were to be emphasized. In the fear of social eruptions, Ireton recommended measures to prevent electoral corruption without unduly widening the franchise. The Agitators advocated broader suffrage so as to obtain a Parliament sympathetic to their principles. Both groups expressed in part the same impulse inherited from their predecessors but in a manner favorable to their respective positions in 1647.

Though the Levellers' aspirations were defeated, the franchise reform impulse had a life of its own among the gentry and was not easily erased. More respectable figures than John Lilburne advocated extending the franchise, even after the radical Levellers had fallen from grace in the eyes of Cromwell. In his *Oceana*, Harrington proposed that all freemen—by which he meant all men who were not dependent on others for a livelihood—should have the right to vote. As late as 1659, despite the apparent imminence of the Restoration, he opposed curtailment of repub-

46. Their exception of servants is understandable if one remembers that the original grounds for enlarging the franchise were to prevent undue influence in elections. The Levellers explained themselves by saying that servants were too likely to be influenced by their masters. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

lican principles. The only way to avoid aristocratic domination in elections, he argued, was to allow the people to vote. His disciple, Stubbe, also stood by the standard argument that political power was best fixed in the people because as a whole they were least likely to be corrupted.⁴⁷

Plans for electoral reform were not simply theoretical speculations either. Vane and Hesilrige declared in Richard Cromwell's Parliament that the right of election belonged to all the people, but the House was unwilling to take a stand on the issue.⁴⁸ In the Restoration, Charles' policy of remodelling charters to win control of borough seats in the Parliament provoked a series of Whig attempts to restore voting privileges to the populace at large. In the Newark case of 1677 the Commons denied the right of Crown charters to limit the franchise to a corporation. And in 1679 the Whigs proposed that in all except five boroughs the vote should be given to all residents of a year who paid taxes.⁴⁹ Throughout the 1670's and 1680's bills were introduced to reform electoral procedures, but none passed the third reading.⁵⁰

The Putney Debates and the Virginia charter can thus be recognized as part of a larger movement among Englishmen in the second and third decades of the seventeenth century. It was not a democratic movement. Democracy meant rule by the mob, the supremacy of the popular will in its lowest form, in contrast to the rule of the wise and just who could provide for the commonwealth better than the people could provide for themselves. A broad franchise did not imply this base kind of government to the Parliaments of the century. Experience with borough populations convinced many of the gentry that the people would select from those qualified to rule the men who would serve the kingdom best. During the Revolution radical excesses implanted the fear in Cromwell and Ireton that elections by the people would lead to destruction of private property and the social structure, the gro-

47. Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution*, pp. 139, 158-60; Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, *The Good Old Cause, The English Revolution of 1640-60* (London, 1949), pp. 141-42; James Harrington, *The Oceana and other Works*, ed. John Toland (London, 1747), p. 479.

48. Godfrey Davies, "The Election of Richard Cromwell's Parliament, 1658-9," *E. H. R.*, LXIII (1948), 497; *Commons Journals*, VII, 806-07.

49. David S. Ogg, *England in the Reign of Charles II* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 480-82, 461.

50. *Commons Journals*, IX, 297, 308, 310, 322, 374, 383, 385, 411, 585, 639, 649, 650; X, 35, 364, 524; XI, 338, 344. This reform fervor faded after 1688 as prominent Whigs brought borough after borough into their orbits of influence. It seemed increasingly inexpedient thereafter to curb practices which the Whigs themselves now followed.

tesque consequences of outright democracy. But before 1645 and after 1660 many of the gentry were inclined to trust the mass of people to choose wise rulers and, most important of all, to reject the pawns of the Court who were odious to gentry and commoners alike. These conceptions, erected into principle, emboldened the framers of the charter of 1619 to grant liberal electoral privileges in Virginia and provided the assumptions on which the Levellers and Agitators rested their case.

The specific proposals of the radicals were not exceptional. But the Levellers' willingness to argue with their leaders and go beyond them to win control of Parliament if they could revealed a new spirit in the lower classes. Because they were conscious that the success of the revolution depended on the army in which they served, the common soldiers found courage to make demands of their leaders. Their proposals themselves were not extraordinary, but the force and independence with which they were offered were. Instead of relying upon gentlemen wiser than themselves to rule, Cromwell's army was prepared to dictate principles of government. The purpose of their franchise reform was to obtain leaders who would listen when the people spoke. In this the Levellers gave a foretaste of the kind of democracy which in future centuries would use popular elections for far more radical purposes than seventeenth-century reformers ever intended.

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

APPENDIX

Electoral Reform Bills Introduced into Parliament, 1621-88

The provisions of bills read in the House in the seventeenth century are not well enough known to ascertain exactly what electoral reforms each Parliament wished to effect. The contents of most bills are described in but one line and can only be inferred from the few bills that are known and from the decisions of the Committee of Elections and Privileges. However, a listing of the actions taken in Parliament may be useful as an indication of the persistence of the reform impulse.

1621

"Sir H. Poole: — In respect of the Questions about these Things, and of the Wrongs by Blanks, Letters, & c. whereby no free Election in Effect; a Committee, to consider of some Bill to prevent it. — Allowed a good Motion."⁵¹

"An Act for the Election of Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses, to serve in Parliament," passed the second reading.⁵² The provisions of the bill were as follows:

51. *Commons Journals*, I, 513.

52. *Ibid.*, I, 641, 649.

Directions for Counties:

1. Writs for election to be delivered to known messengers and the time of delivery noted.
2. The Sheriff to publish his receipt of the writ in every county market town within fourteen days after it arrives and at least six days before the election.
3. The election to be held at the next county court day after the receipt of the writ unless the county day is less than fourteen days later. In that case the election is to be on the second county court day.
4. The election to be held in the same town as the county court, unless the "infection" is there; in which case the closest market town to be the place of election.
5. The election to be between nine and eleven in the morning.
6. If the outcome is uncertain, the voters for each man are to stand together and if necessary be counted.
7. The electors are to be four pound freeholders and residents, or ten pound copyholders of inheritance liable for the payment of wages on their land.
8. Proclamation is to be made that unqualified voters are not to participate on pain of imprisonment and perpetual disqualification. Dubious voters are to be examined on oath.
9. All representatives must possess a freehold of one hundred pounds annual worth and live in the county at least six months of the year.

Directions for cities and boroughs:

1. The election writ to be published within fifteen (?) days after it is received and eight days before the election.
2. The freemen inhabitants are to vote unless there are less than twenty-four. In that case the inhabitants are to vote excluding recipients of alms. The greater number of voters is to elect.
3. Elected representatives are to be either a steward of the borough, a freeholder, or born in the same county.
4. The mayor shall determine the qualified voters by administering an oath.
5. No letters are to be read or posted at the election.
6. Elected representatives are not to "surrender."
7. Men unqualified to vote who are present at the election are to be imprisoned.⁵³

1623

Sir H. Spiller moved for the bill of elections. The committee directed to "take the two Bills for Elections, and to draw them into one Bill."⁵⁴

1625

"An Act for the due Election and free Choice of the Knights of the Shires, and of the Citizens, and Burgesses, of Cities, Boroughs,

53. Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, *Commons Debates*, IV, 421-22; III, 411-12.

54. *Commons Journals*, I, 686.

and Towns-corporate, to be sent to the Parliament" given a first reading.⁵⁵

1628

"An Act for the more due Election of Knights, Citizens, and Burgeses, to serve in Parliament" rejected on the second reading.⁵⁶

1673

"A Bill to regulate the Elections of Members to serve in Parliament" was read the second time and committed.⁵⁷

1675

"A Bill for Regulating Election of Members to serve in Parliament was read the first time.⁵⁸

"A Debate arising, concerning the Regulating the Election of Members to serve in Parliament; and the exorbitant Drinking and Expences at Elections; Resolved, &c. That a Committee be appointed, to prepare and bring in a Bill for regulating the Elections of Members to serve in Parliament."⁵⁹

1676

"A Bill for regulating the Elections of Members to serve in Parliament" was read a second time.

"A Clause was presented to House, to prevent Bribery and excessive Drinking, at Elections of Members to serve in Parliament, and twice read."⁶⁰

1677

An order passed that candidates for election are not to give any meat or drink exceeding ten pounds value to any persons to have voice in elections in any place except the house where the candidate has lived for at least six months. Nor are candidates to make any gifts or promises or obligate themselves to any elector or to any town or county before an election. Such actions are to be counted as bribery, and a person so doing is not to be allowed to sit in Parliament.⁶¹

1679

"A Bill for the better regulating the Election of Members to serve in Parliament" was read a second time.⁶²

Provisions of the bill:

1. County franchise to include householders who are inhabitants of one year, at least twenty-one years of age, having an estate in fee of at least £200 and paying scot and lot.
2. A standard franchise to be established for all boroughs except London, York, Norwich, Exeter, and Bristol. All householders who are inhabitants of one year, paying scot and lot and at least twenty-one years of age to vote.

55. *Ibid.*, I, 818.

56. *Ibid.*, I, 885-86.

57. *Ibid.*, IX, 308, 310.

58. *Ibid.*, IX, 322.

59. *Ibid.*, IX, 374.

60. *Ibid.*, IX, 385.

61. *Ibid.*, IX, 411.

62. *Ibid.*, IX, 585.

3. A penalty of £500 and disability to sit in Parliament for anyone giving bribes or rewards for votes. The borough where the bribery was committed to be disenfranchised, and some other borough in the county or the county at large to receive the forfeited franchise.
4. Borough officers accepting gifts or rewards for disregarding bribery to be fined £100 and to lose their franchise.
5. Burgesses not to make suit for wages for service in Parliament. Arrears of such wages to be discharged.
6. Sheriffs, mayors, and bailiffs to complete elections at the appointed time and place without adjournment.
7. Persons influencing officers to make false returns and the guilty officers to be punished and the election voided.
8. No future Parliament to continue more than two years.⁶³

1680

"A Bill for regulating the Elections of Members to serve in the Commons House of Parliament" was read the first time.⁶⁴

"A Bill to prevent the Offences of Bribery and Debauchery in the Election of Members to serve in the Commons House of Parliament" was read the first time.⁶⁵

63. *Somers Tracts* (London, 1748), Pt. 1, I, 63-66.

64. *Commons Journals*, IX, 649.

65. *Ibid.*, IX, 650.