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Introduction

It is a mistake to think, that the Supream [sic] or Legislative Power of any Commonwealth, can do what it will.

—JOHN LOCKE, *THE SECOND TREATISE OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT* (1689)

If you are desirous of knowing the spirit of our constitution, and the policy which predominated in that great period which has secured it to this hour, pray look for both in our histories, in our records, in our acts of parliament, and journals of parliament.

—EDMUND BURKE, *REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE* (1790)

THE BRITISH CONSTITUTION in the eighteenth century was often referred to as one of limited government. But what made it limited? Was it limited because it had a strong popular element that gave the people a say in politics by choosing their representatives? Because it was a mixed constitution, in which all the country's interests had a share and could check and balance one another? Because the law applied to the governed and the governors alike? Because the crown-in-parliament, rather than the monarch alone, was sovereign? Because the people had rights, legal, natural, or both, which the government could not violate? Or because political power was checked by the constitution? A qualified case could be made for all these suggestions. Far from being stable, the meaning of the British constitution in the eighteenth century was changing and contested. But one critical argument was that the British constitution had a *spirit*, meaning that it had essential qualities and principles that were derived from its history and political tradition. This language has become associated with the Scottish Enlightenment and with Montesquieu, the author of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), which contains two influential chapters on the British constitution.¹

1. J.G.A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," *Historical Journal*, 3 (1960), pp. 125–43, reprinted in *Politics, Language, and Time*:

In the eighteenth-century Anglophone world, however, the language of “spirit” was first made popular by the man who instructed Montesquieu about British politics, namely Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke.² The “spirit of the constitution” was a key term in all of Bolingbroke’s major political works; previously, others had used the phrase only a couple of times in passing.³ In the Bolingbrokean idiom, the spirit of the constitution, which could be deduced from its logic and its history, was meant to promote freedom. This idea implied that the form of the constitution could remain intact after its spirit had departed, as in the early history of the Roman Empire, when the republican institutions were ostensibly kept but were dominated by the emperor. Fittingly, Bolingbroke coined the term “unconstitutional”⁴ and invented the metaphor of the “tree of liberty,” by which he referred to the British constitution and which later became a key symbol for British reformers as well as American and French revolutionaries.⁵

What precisely did it mean and what were the consequences of the idea that the British constitution had a spirit that epitomized, promoted, and

Essays on Political Thought and History (Chicago, 1989 [1971]), pp. 202–32, at 225. See also Sylvana Tomaselli, “The Spirit of Nations,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 7–39.

2. Philip Hicks, “‘The Spirit of Liberty’: Historical Causation and Political Rhetoric in the Age of Hume,” in *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer*, ed. Mark Spencer (University Park, 2013), pp. 61–80. For Bolingbroke’s influence on Montesquieu, see Robert Shackleton, “Montesquieu, Bolingbroke, and the Separation of Powers,” *French Studies*, 3 (1949), pp. 25–38.

3. Bolingbroke, *Remarks on the History of England* (1730–31), in *Historical Writings*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Chicago, 1972), p. 304; Bolingbroke, *Dissertation upon Parties* (1733–34), “Letter on the Spirit of Patriotism” (1736), and *Idea of a Patriot King* (1738), in *Political Writings*, ed. David Armitage (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 22, 77, 81, 112, 118, 133, 151, 205, 250, 251. There is one reference to “the spirit of the constitution” in Roger Acherley, *The Britannic Constitution: Or, the Fundamental Form of Government in Britain* (London, 1727), p. 494, and one reference to “the spirit of our constitution” in *Cato’s Letters* on July 22, 1721; see *The Fifth Collection of Cato’s Political Letters in The London Journal* (London, 1721), p. 62.

4. Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, p. xvi. No earlier entries can be found in Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), though its data are not complete and word searches are not entirely reliable.

5. Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, pp. 118, 154. Part 1 of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963) is titled “The Liberty Tree,” though the metaphor is not discussed in any detail and Bolingbroke is not mentioned in Thompson’s classic study. Bolingbroke’s creation of the metaphor seems to have been largely unnoticed in the secondary literature; see, e.g., Bernard Richard, *Les Emblèmes de la République* (Paris, 2012), pp. 125–44; J. David Harden, “Liberty Caps and Liberty Trees,” *Past & Present*, 146 (1995), pp. 66–102; Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree: A Genealogy,” *The New England Quarterly*, 25 (1952), pp. 435–58. But see Staughton Lynd, “Beard, Jefferson and the Tree of Liberty,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 9 (1968), pp. 8–22, at 15.

was based on liberty? This book engages with these questions by looking at political debates about parliamentary reform between the middle of the seventeenth century and the early nineteenth century.

To begin, we must understand that when the English thought about their freedom in relation to their constitution in the eighteenth century, they had in mind something that was at once broader and more specific than the common treatments of liberty in political theory (which discuss, for instance, positive, negative, and republican liberty).⁶ This book seeks to show that it may not always be helpful to think of liberty in terms of rival conceptions. At least in eighteenth-century Britain, political actors and thinkers tended to think of freedom not first and foremost in theoretical or philosophical terms but rather in relation to specific practices and institutions that were taken to embody and secure liberty. The freedom that they tended to be concerned with was national rather than universal and experiential rather than abstract.

As the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott argued, every society “has its own manner of thinking about [freedom and power], a manner which springs from its native experience.” For Oakeshott, the history of English freedom—distinct from Roman *libertas*, French *liberté*, and German *Freiheit*—“is not the history of an abstract idea, but the history of the establishment of procedures which enable men to enjoy their recognized rights” and “the history of the transformation of the ‘liberties’ of medieval society into the freedoms of modern England.”⁷ English freedom stemmed not from any single principle—whether that was private property, parliamentary government, or even the rule of law—but rather from what all characteristics of English society seemed to point to: “the absence from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power.” In politics, authority was diffused between past, present, and future. In other words, politics had a strong traditional component but not one that dominated all political considerations. Power was further dispersed and shared among society’s interests, as well as between the administration and the opposition in parliament. “The secret of [England’s] freedom,” wrote Oakeshott, “is that it is composed of a multitude of organizations in the

6. See recently Quentin Skinner, *Liberty as Independence: The Making and Unmaking of a Political Ideal* (Cambridge, 2025), and Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), and classically, Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 118–72. For the non-domination theory of liberty as emerging most explicitly during debates about toleration during the Restoration period, see Jeffrey R. Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (Cambridge, 2020), ch. 4.

7. Michael Oakeshott, “Freedom and Power,” in *What Is History? And Other Essays*, ed. Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter, 2003), p. 242. See also Max Skjönsberg, “Michael Oakeshott on Libertarianism, Conservatism, and the Freedom of the English,” *Cosmos+Taxis*, 10 (2022), pp. 7–14.

constitution of the best of which is reproduced that diffusion of power which is characteristic of the whole.”⁸

The tradition of English freedom emphasizing the diffusion of power, as described by Oakeshott, fits somewhat uneasily with what is often considered to be the centerpiece of British politics and its history: parliamentary sovereignty.⁹ “Somewhat” is an important qualifier, as the development of parliamentary sovereignty is also related to the emergence of limited monarchy. In the Middle Ages, laws could be made by parliament as well as by royal ordinances. But the Reformation enabled the institution of the “supremacy and omnicompetence of [parliamentary] statute,” argued the leading Tudor historian Sir Geoffrey Elton. According to Elton, Thomas Cromwell’s recognition that “in law and on earth there is nothing that an act of parliament cannot do . . . established the sovereignty of the king in parliament, otherwise known as constitutional or limited monarchy.”¹⁰ The king’s independent legislative and taxation powers were then struck down by judges in the reign of James I.¹¹ After disputes about sovereignty led to civil war, notions of the sovereignty of the king in parliament came to the fore in the second half of the seventeenth century, when the restoration of the mixed and balanced constitution in 1660 had to be reconciled with sophisticated theories of sovereignty advanced by Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes. The marriage between mixed constitutionalism and the sovereignty of the modern state was most famously theorized by William Blackstone in the eighteenth century, though this insistence on parliamentary sovereignty ended up costing Britain much of its empire in North America. In the best-known nineteenth-century formulation of parliamentary sovereignty, Walter Bagehot acknowledged that “Hobbes told us long ago, and everybody now understands that there must be a supreme authority, a conclusive power in every state on every point somewhere.”¹²

Yet many Englishmen used to believe that the constitutionality of laws, even when passed by parliament, could be called into question. In contrast to

8. Michael Oakeshott, “The Political Economy of Freedom,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, 1991 [1962]), pp. 388–90.

9. One response to this difficulty is that different interests are themselves balanced and represented in parliament. However, this explanation is only partly applicable to a time when political parties were not universally accepted and were often seen as factions. See Max Skjøsberg, *The Persistence of Party: Ideas of Harmonious Discord in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2021), esp. ch. 1. Separately, we must note that Oakeshott was a firm believer in the sovereignty of statutory law, and he believed that there was no standard external to the office of the legislator that could determine the *jus* (rightness) of the *lex* (law). See Michael Oakeshott, “The Rule of Law,” in *On History and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, 1999 [1983]), pp. 150–51.

10. G. R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* (London, 1969 [1955]), pp. 167–68.

11. G. W. Keeton, *The Passing of Parliament* (London, 1952), p. 37.

12. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge, 2001 [1867]), p. 150.

Elton's description of the elevation of parliamentary sovereignty under Henry VIII as paving the way for constitutional and limited government, Bolingbroke wrote in 1734: "The single reign of Henry the Eighth will serve to show, that no tyranny can be more severe than that which is exercised by a concert with Parliament."¹³ In the same work, Bolingbroke further contended that "there is something which a Parliament cannot do. A Parliament cannot annul the constitution."¹⁴ When making these pronouncements, Bolingbroke acted as a self-proclaimed champion of the Country party, an alliance with roots in the seventeenth century aiming to unite all parties in defense of the ancient constitution and the people in opposition to an increasingly centralized, expensive, and allegedly corrupt government.¹⁵

By investigating such oppositional political discourse in the so-called long eighteenth century, roughly between the Restoration in 1660 and the First Reform Act in 1832, this study shows that there was a powerful political tradition in this period that placed less emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of parliament and statute and more emphasis on the idea that fundamental laws and principles limited political power, even when exercised by parliament.¹⁶ This idea was at the heart of the notion that England (and Britain after 1707) had a constitution, perhaps even an ancient one. These fundamental laws and principles were sometimes equated with natural law, which in the English case had been revealed through the course of history. But more often, Englishmen simply insisted that they had legal rights that they enjoyed as an inheritance from time out of mind. Though these rights were often considered an ancient bequest, they had been enshrined in constitutional milestones such as Magna Carta (1215),¹⁷ the Petition of Right (1628), the Habeas Corpus Act (1679), and several pieces of legislation passed between 1689 and 1701 that collectively became known as the Revolution Settlement.¹⁸ The Revolution Settlement comprised the Bill of Rights (1689) and the Act of Settlement (1701); some

13. Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, p. 94.

14. Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, p. 165.

15. Max Skjönsberg, "Patriots and the Country Party Tradition in the Eighteenth Century: The Critics of Britain's Fiscal-Military State from Robert Harley to Catharine Macaulay," *Intellectual History Review*, 33 (2023), pp. 83–100.

16. Studies of developments in constitutional theory rather than political discourse more broadly tell a different story; see, e.g., Mark Francis and John Morrow, "After the Ancient Constitution: Political Theory and English Constitutional Writing," *History of Political Thought*, 9 (1988), pp. 283–303; William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019).

17. H. T. Dickinson, "Magna Carta in the Age of Revolution," *Enlightenment and Dis-sent*, 30 (2015), pp. 1–67; Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Roots of Liberty: Magna Carta, Ancient Constitution, and the Anglo-American Tradition of Rule of Law* (Indianapolis, 1993); and Anne Pallister, *Magna Carta and the Heritage of Liberty* (Oxford, 1971).

18. See esp. John Phillip Reid, *The Ancient Constitution and the Origins of Anglo-American Liberty* (DeKalb, 2005).

argued that it also included the Triennial Act (1694), which confirmed the supposed historic right not only to regular sessions of parliament but also to frequent elections—though others contended that the act was actually unconstitutional because the English had an ancient right to annual elections.

The Power of Parliament

Englishmen in the eighteenth century believed that the people's constitutional rights, which can be summarized as the rights to be governed by consent and not ruled or taxed arbitrarily, were meant to be protected by the institution of parliament and more specifically by the House of Commons, representing the people.¹⁹ The British political system merits special attention: Its institutional setup, along with its press freedom and a growing reading public, created a framework in which the people were seen as both a legitimatizing force and potentially politically active. There were representative institutions elsewhere in pre-democratic Europe, but Britain was a special case because it was a rising imperial state and the only “great power” in eighteenth-century Europe with a strong representative institution at the national level. Additionally, Britain boasted the representative institution with the longest and most unbroken history. The British system was admired by foreign commentators, with Montesquieu describing the British constitution as having political liberty as its direct purpose.²⁰ But though Britain was seen as comparatively free, the irregularities of its system of representation, with its decayed and corrupt “rotten boroughs,” were absent from other representative systems such as Sweden's during its “Age of Liberty,” while Hegel commented that the voting system for provincial assemblies in the German states did not display the same “anomalies” as Britain's unreformed system.²¹

19. However, for the complexity of representation in the eighteenth century—when not only members of the House of Commons but also the monarch, the House of Lords, and the judiciary were viewed as representatives of the nation and the people—see Ian Harris, “The Authentication of Burke's *Reflections*: Church, Monarchy and Universities, 1790–1791,” *History of Political Thought*, 43 (2022), pp. 81–130. For the concept of “the people” in the history of political thought, see James A. Harris, “The People in Modern Political Thought: An Outline History,” *History of European Ideas* (July 23, 2025), pp. 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2025.2531531>, and Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge, 2005).

20. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. A. M. Cohler et al. (Cambridge, 1989 [1748]), p. 156. See also Paul Langford, “The English as Reformers: Foreign Visitors' Impressions, 1750–1850,” in T. C. W. Blanning and Peter Wende, eds., *Reform in Great Britain and Germany, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 101–19.

21. Michael Roberts, *The Age of Liberty: Sweden, 1719–1772* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 69–71; G.W.F. Hegel, “On the English Reform Bill” (1831), in *Political Writings*, ed. Lawrence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1999), p. 236.

Between one in five and one in six adult males had the right to vote in the eighteenth century, though this could vary greatly among the constituencies, and many were either much less or much more democratic.²² Yet all members of Britain's third estate were presumed to be *virtually* represented in the House of Commons, and in practice this meant that members of parliament were supposed to represent their entire community, and indeed all commons as a corporate body, and not only their voters. After annual sessions of parliament began in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, parliament became the centerpiece of the political system. To be sure, the daily routine of political actors, before the professionalization of politics in the nineteenth century, involved other key spaces, including social gatherings in townhouses, coffee-houses, clubs, and commercial entertainment establishments, as well as the royal court.²³ But increasingly, the center of political action was parliament, especially the House of Commons, as it gained full control of the purse when the traditional prerogative revenues were removed after the Glorious Revolution. The House of Lords remained central as a second chamber, the highest court in the land, and a key source of government ministers.²⁴

The immense power of parliament meant that it was also seen as the institution that could ruin England.²⁵ To ensure that parliament would be an instrument of freedom and not political slavery, many Englishmen insisted that it had to be independent and free from corruption. As Bolingbroke claimed, it was the crown's influence over parliament that allowed Henry VIII to "establish tyranny by law."²⁶ For eighteenth-century reformers in the

22. See chapter 9 for the franchise and parliamentary system in the eighteenth century.

23. Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery, "The Political Day in London, c. 1697–1834," *Past & Present*, 252 (2021), pp. 101–37.

24. See esp. John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984), and Corrinne C. Weston, *English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords 1556–1832* (New York, 1965). While the most effective heads of ministries in the eighteenth century sat in the House of Commons—Robert Walpole (1721–42), Henry Pelham (1743–54), Lord North (1770–82), and William Pitt the Younger (1783–1801 and 1804–6)—the great majority of cabinet ministers were members of the House of Lords. It was unusual to have more than a couple of cabinet ministers in the House of Commons. Robert Walpole, for instance, was the only commoner in the ministry in the first half of his period in office, until 1730. But while the longest-serving prime ministers were commoners, it should be noted that the great majority were peers: the Earl of Godolphin (1702–10), the Earl of Oxford (1711–14), Viscount Townshend (1714–16), Earl Stanhope (1717–18), the Earl of Sunderland (1718–21), the Earl of Wilmington (1742–43), the Duke of Newcastle (1754–56 and 1757–62), the Duke of Devonshire (1756–57), the Earl of Bute (1762–63), the Marquess of Rockingham (1765–66 and 1782), the Earl of Chatham (1766–68), the Duke of Grafton (1768–70), the Earl of Shelburne (1782–83), and the Duke of Portland (1783).

25. John Toland, *The Art of Governing by Partys* (London, 1701), p. 56; Bolingbroke, *Political Writings*, p. 165; William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (4 vols., London, 1765–69), I, pp. 156–57.

26. Bolingbroke, *Historical Writings*, p. 225.

Bolingbrokean tradition, parliament had to be composed in the right way as well as elected frequently.

This book underlines the centrality of the frequency of elections for reformers in the long eighteenth century.²⁷ According to the nineteenth-century constitutional theorist A. V. Dicey, the legal sovereign (parliament) had to be properly representative of and accountable to the political sovereign (the voters).²⁸ One might say that the temporary sovereign needed to be responsive to the permanent sovereign. But we may even want to de-emphasize the language of sovereignty altogether—which British political thought in the eighteenth century often, though not always, did²⁹—and instead shift our focus to constitutionalism as a way of limiting and controlling state power.³⁰ In eighteenth-century political debates, it was often denied that parliament could lawfully undermine fundamental rights and the fabric of the constitution.³¹ This notion is now more associated with the American understanding of constitutionalism than with the British tradition, since the American Revolution—triggered because the Americans felt that their rights as Englishmen had been violated—eventually changed the way people thought about the form a constitution should take.³² This book will show, however, that constitutionalism as a way of limiting and controlling state power is a

27. This complements John Cannon's study, which "limited [its] enquiry to the two most important aspects of reform—namely changes in the franchise and changes in the distribution of seats." See Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1973), p. xii.

28. A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (Indianapolis, 1982 [1885]), p. 27.

29. Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, 2018), esp. ch. 3. To be sure, the question of sovereignty rose to prominence during the American crisis, when the British, supported by Blackstone, insisted on parliamentary sovereignty. The most notable exemplar was Samuel Johnson's pamphlet, which argued that "in sovereignty there are no gradations." See Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny* (London, 1775), p. 24. But we must always bear in mind that most formulations of parliamentary sovereignty in the eighteenth century held that British sovereignty was not unitary in a Hobbesian sense but entailed at least a degree of separation of powers and ample checks and balances.

30. See esp. Scott Gordon, *Controlling the State: Constitutionalism from Ancient Athens to Today* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

31. "There is something logically incoherent about the modern doctrine of constitutionalism; for it places a limit on supreme political authority without denying its existence." Gordon J. Schochet, "Introduction: Constitutionalism, Liberalism, and the Authority of Politics," *Nomos*, 20 (1979), pp. 1–15, at 11.

32. Linda Colley, "What Happens When a Written Constitution Is Printed? A History Across Borders," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (2021), pp. 75–88; Charles Howard McIlwain, *Constitutionalism: Ancient and Modern* (Indianapolis, 1975 [1940]). Note that the British parliamentary tradition remained crucial as inspiration in nineteenth-century Europe and beyond; see Selinger, *Parliamentarism*.

tradition with deep roots in English political discourse and that it continued to be significant for longer than might have been expected.

Several studies stress the impact of the American crisis after 1765 on British reform movements.³³ But though the American protest against taxation without representation instigated debates that put a spotlight on the irregularities of the representative system,³⁴ British reformers drew on a long-standing domestic tradition—a tradition that in turn had a crucial impact on the American Revolution, as well as the framing of the US Constitution. Historians and commentators often remark on the irony that the US, having rebelled against the British monarchy, ended up with such a strong unitary executive.³⁵ What is striking about the US Constitution, however, are the

33. E. C. Black wrote that the American crisis “probably contributed as much as any single factor to the direction of radical activity in Great Britain.” See E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extra-parliamentary Political Organization, 1769–1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), p. 28.

34. Defending the Stamp Act, Secretary to the Treasury Thomas Whately wrote, “The Instances that have been mentioned prove, that the Right of the Parliament of *Great Britain* to impose Taxes of every Kind on the Colonies, has been always admitted; but were there no Precedents to support the Claim, it would still be incontestable, being founded on the Principles of our Constitution; for the Fact is, that the Inhabitants of the Colonies are represented in Parliament: they do not indeed chuse the Members of that Assembly; neither are Nine Tenths of the People of *Britain* Electors; for the Right of Election is annexed to certain Species of Property, to peculiar Franchises, and to Inhabitaney in some particular Places; but these Descriptions comprehend only a very small Part of the Land, the Property, and the People of this Island: all Copyhold, all Leasehold Estates, under the Crown, under the Church, or under private Persons, tho’ for Terms ever so long; all landed Property in short, that is not Freehold, and all monied Property whatsoever are excluded: the Possessors of these have no Votes in the Election of Members of Parliament; Women and Persons under Age be their Property ever so large, and all of it Freehold, have none. The Merchants of *London*, a numerous and respectable Body of Men, whose Opulence exceeds all that *America* could collect; the Proprietors of that vast Accumulation of Wealth, the public Funds; the Inhabitants of *Leeds*, of *Halifax*, of *Birmingham*, and of *Manchester*, Towns that are each of them larger than the Largest in the Plantations; many of less Note that are yet incorporated; and that great Corporation the *East India* Company, whose Rights over the Countries they Possess, fall little short of Sovereignty, and whose Trade and whose Fleets are sufficient to constitute them a maritime Power, are all in the same Circumstances; none of them chuse their Representatives; and yet are they not represented in Parliament? Is their vast Property subject to Taxes without their Consent? Are they all arbitrarily bound by Laws to which they have not agreed? The Colonies are in exactly the same Situation: All *British* Subjects are really in the same; none are actually, all are virtually represented in Parliament; for every Member of Parliament sits in the House, not as Representative of his own Constituents, but as one of that august Assembly by which all the Commons of *Great Britain* are represented.” Thomas Whately, *The Regulations Lately Made Concerning the Colonies, and the Taxes Imposed upon Them, Considered* (London, 1765), pp. 107–9.

35. See esp. Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

extensive powers it affords to the legislature. Article I, Section 8 outlines that Congress has the right to lay and collect taxes, borrow money, regulate commerce, establish uniform laws for naturalization and bankruptcy, coin money and regulate the value of foreign currencies, punish counterfeiting, establish post offices, “promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts” through patents, constitute tribunals, punish pirates, declare war, raise and support armies, provide and maintain a navy and a militia, and “make all Laws that are necessary and proper” to execute these powers. The extraordinary power of Congress is partly controlled by the separation of powers and checks and balances, masterfully explicated in the *Federalist* and prefigured in the constitution for Massachusetts drafted by John Adams.³⁶ But the power granted to Congress also explains the amount of detail in Article I of the US Constitution on how elections of representatives should be regulated. Such content must be understood against the backdrop of the debate about parliamentary reform in Britain. Most state legislatures in colonial America had annual elections, as did most state constitutions after 1776, a practice John Dickinson told the Constitutional Convention was borrowed from the “antient [*sic*] usage” in England.³⁷ Elbridge Gerry said at the Convention: “The people of New England will never give up the point of annual elections, they know the transition made in England from triennial to Septennial elections, and will consider such an innovation here as the prelude to a like usurpation.”³⁸ Gerry was referring to the Septennial Act of 1716, a pivotal event in British political and constitutional history at the heart of the present study. William Pierce, a delegate from Georgia, remarked that septennial parliaments had been “reprobated by most of [England’s] patriotic Statesmen.”³⁹ His allusion was to the protagonists of this book.

Article I describes Congress as a lawmaking body, which the English parliament had been since at least the fifteenth century. But the history of parliament goes further back.⁴⁰ The House of Commons, like most representative institutions in medieval Europe, had two historical functions. The first was to aid the executive branch of the constitution by raising taxes. Facilitating

36. For this tradition, see M.J.C. Vile, *Constitutionalism and the Separation of Powers* (Indianapolis, 1998 [1967]).

37. Max Farrand, ed., *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (3 vols., New Haven, 1911), I, p. 360.

38. Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, I, p. 214.

39. Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, I, p. 218. In the end, the Convention agreed on biennial popular elections for the House of Representatives and sexennial indirect elections for the Senate. James Madison referred to regular elections as the “republican principle” that would ensure that no minority faction could dominate the government. Crucially, the US Constitution also stipulated that Congress “shall assemble at least once in every Year” (Art. 1, Sect. 4), following the English Bill of Rights of 1689.

40. See chapter 1.

funding was the main business of most early modern parliaments and usually the reason they were called. Their second original function was to present and redress grievances, public or local, often via petitions.⁴¹ These two functions can be summarized under the headings of *auxilium* (help) and *consilium* (counsel). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European monarchs tended to increasingly regard representative institutions as exclusively arenas of *auxilium* and usually as instruments to provide money to meet the fiscal needs of war-driven governments.⁴² Notably, the Stuart kings of England subscribed to this view, though this ended up costing Charles I his head and James II his throne.

In Elton's revision of constitutional history, the English parliament appeared as an instrument of government already in the Tudor period.⁴³ In a similar vein, modern work on parliamentary politics in the century after the Glorious Revolution, including that of John Brewer and more recently William Selinger, has tended to place more emphasis on *auxilium* than on *consilium*.⁴⁴ In such interpretations, cooperation between the executive and the legislature was a critical feature of the British political system after 1689. In this specific sense, Britain was unexceptional; like modern governments, early modern monarchs and ministers preferred to use representative assemblies to find support for policies already adopted and decisions already made. The Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume notoriously argued that corruption in the technical sense of executive influence over the legislature made the British political system workable.⁴⁵ But not all of Hume's contemporaries saw it that way. This book reclaims parliament as a locus of conflict by focusing on the notion of parliament as a check on the executive, as well as ideas about and agitation for reforming parliament and rendering it more responsive to the people. Though the British were inclined to highlight mixture and balance rather than the strict separation of powers, the complete merging of the executive and the legislature was far from unopposed. Indeed, most ideas of reform in the eighteenth century, from holding more frequent elections to the parliamentarian-cum-philosopher Edmund Burke's administrative reform, were directed toward making the House of Commons more independent of

41. Brodie Waddell and Jason Peacey, eds., *The Power of Petitioning in Early Modern Britain* (London, 2024).

42. See esp. Michael A. R. Graves, *The Parliaments of Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, 2001).

43. Chris R. Kyle, "Constitutionalists, Despots, Whigs, and Revisionists: Tudor Parliamentary History in the 20th Century," *Parliamentary History*, 40 (2021), pp. 59–80.

44. John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); Selinger, *Parliamentarism*.

45. David Hume, "Of the Independency of Parliament" (1741), in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, rev. ed. 1987), pp. 42–46.

the crown's influence.⁴⁶ Most reformers sought to restore what they believed to have been an earlier balance of the mixed constitution by appealing to different ideas about the constitutional past.

The Constitution as a Metanarrative

This is the first book-length study in more than fifty years of the history of parliamentary reform between the seventeenth century and the passing of the First Reform Act.⁴⁷ Most studies of reform tend to focus more closely on the period from the 1760s or indeed the 1780s.⁴⁸ This is also true of histories of the origins of British radicalism, unless they take the 1790s as their starting point.⁴⁹ Histories of the so-called Real Whigs, or the English republican and commonwealth traditions, conventionally take a longer perspective, though they rarely trace continuities beyond the American Revolution and usually pay insufficient attention to political developments. This study differs from works on both radicalism and republicanism in a number of ways, but especially in placing the history of parliamentary politics and debate at the center. Rather than as a historian of political theory, I have proceeded as a historian of tradition, whose task, to borrow the words of J.G.A. Pocock, is “that of discovering and articulating the languages in which the inhabitants of an era did in fact present their society and cosmos to themselves and to each other.”⁵⁰ The guiding idea is that the tradition that dominated British political discourse

46. See Ian R. Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late Eighteenth Century British Politics* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 216. The published version of one of Burke's key speeches on administrative reform was titled *A Plan for the Better Security of the Independence of Parliament, and the Economical Reformation of the Civil and Other Establishments* (London, 1780).

47. Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform*. Cannon's book is still very useful as a broad overview and as an interpretation, but it is not entirely reliable as a narrative.

48. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780–1850* (Cambridge, 2003). See also Joanna Innes, “People and Power in British Politics to 1850,” in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750–1850*, ed. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2013), pp. 129–46.

49. Mark Hulliung, *The Rise and Fall of English Radicalism, 1760 to 1800* (New York, 2025); Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Cambridge, 2013); M. T. Davis, ed., *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848* (London, 2000); Simon Maccoby, *English Radicalism, 1762–85: The Origins* (London, 1955). But see Glenn Burgess and Matthew Festenstein, eds., *English Radicalism, 1550–1850* (Cambridge, 2007).

50. J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 290. In this particular instance, Pocock is referring to the “historian of ideology”; a term I have largely avoided, but the point is relevant for his notion of the history of “traditions” and “languages.” See his essays in J.G.A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge, 2009). And for a sobering warning about the pitfalls of considering political thought before about 1800 through the lens of the anachronistic category of “theory,” see

in the eighteenth century had a specific focus on the British constitution and that competing understandings of it formed the metanarrative of the period's political and intellectual history.

The rich historiography of the intellectual Anglophone world in the “long” eighteenth century has been heavily influenced by several metanarratives and languages in the past decades. First, the commonwealth, civic humanist, or republican interpretation, most famously formulated by Pocock but with important predecessors, including Caroline Robbins, and notable successors, such as Quentin Skinner.⁵¹ Second, an interpretation of English society as dominated by religious identity and discourse, associated with the works of J.C.D. Clark and the many studies he has inspired.⁵² A third metanarrative views eighteenth-century political debate and thought as centrally preoccupied with trade and international conflict, pioneered by Istvan Hont and his disciples.⁵³ The present book suggests an alternative focus: political debate centered on the constitution. This is by no means a unique angle,⁵⁴ yet it is often overlooked by intellectual historians.⁵⁵ While this book will demonstrate

David Kearns and Ryan Walter, “Office, Political Theory, and the Political Theorist,” *Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), pp. 317–37.

51. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975); Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II Until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998). The literature on the republican paradigm is vast, but see recently Hannah Dawson and Annelien de Dijn, eds., *Rethinking Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2022).

52. J.C.D. Clark, *English Society: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 2000 [1985]); Brian Young, “Religious History and the Eighteenth-Century Historian,” *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), pp. 849–68.

53. Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). For his influence, see Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2017), and Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

54. See esp. the work of social and cultural historians on “popular constitutionalism”: James Epstein, *Radical Expressions: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (London, 2014 [1994]); Benjamin Weinstein, “Popular Constitutionalism and the London Corresponding Society,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 34 (2002), pp. 37–57; John Belchem, “Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” *Social History*, 6 (1981), pp. 1–32. For the nineteenth century, see also James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), and the essays in James Vernon, ed., *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996).

55. But see J.G.A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century; A Reissue with a Retrospect*

the prominence of this phenomenon, I do not suggest that the constitutional language clouded all the other interpretations. Mark Philp has written that most political writers in the 1790s drew freely on a wide range of traditions and political idioms.⁵⁶ That is doubtless true of most writers in the long eighteenth century, too. But Philp is right in giving the constitutional dimension pride of place: “The eclecticism of their intellectual reference points led to extremely rich and fertile political debates, but what held these debates together . . . was that political controversy revolved around conflicting interpretations of the constitution, its institutions and its practices that were directly influenced by ongoing struggles in parliamentary politics.”⁵⁷

With reference to earlier sources, David Wootton has argued that political languages such as ancient constitutionalism, natural rights, and republicanism were frequently combined in the same texts, and any attempt to prioritize one over the other is a fool’s errand.⁵⁸ He writes:

Locke established natural rights and the principle of government by consent, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for liberty (including religious liberty). The neo-Roman republican theory defined liberty as the absence of the capacity to tyrannize. And the language of checks and balances explained how a constitution could be constructed so that liberty was maximized.

This pattern is similar to that of many thinkers in the so-called commonwealth tradition in the eighteenth century, from Walter Moyle to Catharine Macaulay, as well as late eighteenth-century reformers such as John Cartwright. Yet, especially among the parliamentary class, many were more thoroughly constitutional. For them, the British constitution had historically guaranteed legal rights and the principles of government and taxation by consent, thereby providing a constitutional foundation for freedom and indicating how liberty could be maximized while ensuring stability.

(Cambridge, 1987 [1957]). As the subtitle of this book indicates, however, Pocock’s classic study is primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with developments in historiography. See also Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, and Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁵⁶ Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain*, p. 118.

⁵⁷ Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain*, p. 118.

⁵⁸ David Wootton, “Liberty, Metaphor, and Mechanism: ‘Checks and Balances’ and the Origins of Modern Constitutionalism,” in *Liberty and American Experience in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Womersley (Indianapolis, 2005), pp. 209–75, at 270–71. See also Peter Lake, “The ‘Political Thought’ of the ‘Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I,’ Discovered and Anatomized,” *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), pp. 257–87, at 284, and Pocock’s warning that “the languages of politics . . . must be thought of as plural, flexible and non-final” in *Political Thought and History*, p. 74.

For the eighteenth-century reformers, the corruption of the constitution and parliament necessitated restoration and reform, which were almost invariably distinguished from innovation. In this way, eighteenth-century writers addressed one of the conundrums of the “common law mind” of the seventeenth century: How could the constitution be altered and yet remain the same? For these writers, reform was acceptable when it conformed to the spirit of the constitution and in particular if it could revive that spirit. Burke famously wrote: “It cannot . . . be too often repeated; line upon line; precept upon precept; until it comes into the currency of a proverb, To innovate is not to reform.”⁵⁹ This was arguably already an axiom, as the same sentiment was expressed by radical reformers such as Burke’s antagonist Richard Price—“Call no more (absurdly and wickedly) reformation, innovation”—and Cartwright, who wrote, “Making our Parliaments annual and our representation equal can neither of them in any sense, nor without a direct falsehood, be styled innovations. Both of them were the antient [*sic*] practice of the constitution.”⁶⁰

As the historian Joanna Innes has pointed out, whereas *renovatio* implied improvement, *innovatio* connoted a pernicious change in classical Latin, and this connotation was reflected in eighteenth-century vocabulary.⁶¹ Hume pointed out that the ancient Greeks and Romans tended to conflate innovation and rebellion.⁶² “Reform” originated from “reformation,” meaning the revival of a former order, as in the intention behind the Protestant Reformation;⁶³ indeed the two terms were often and continuously used interchangeably. The crucial Machiavellian argument in eighteenth-century political discourse was the idea that constitutions and governments, like all living things, decay over time, necessitating a return to first principles as a way to escape reverting to Aristotelian and Polybian cyclicity.⁶⁴ This meant that nearly all calls for reform had a strong historical and traditional component.⁶⁵ The Genevan constitutional writer Jean-Louis De Lolme wrote in 1775 that the popular

59. Edmund Burke, *A Letter to a Noble Lord* (London, 1796), p. 16.

60. Richard Price, “A Discourse on the Love of Our Country” (1789), in *Political Writings*, ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge, 1991), p. 196; John Cartwright, *Take Your Choice!* (London, 1776), p. 15.

61. Joanna Innes, “‘Reform’ in English Public Life: The Fortunes of a Word,” in *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, pp. 71–97, at 73–4.

62. David Hume, “Of the Original Contract” (1748), in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, p. 487.

63. See also Derek Beales, “The Idea of Reform in British Politics, 1829–1850,” in *Reform in Great Britain and Germany, 1750–1850*, pp. 159–74.

64. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, 1998), p. 209; Innes, “‘Reform’ in English Public Life,” p. 75. For the theme of classical mixed constitutionalism, see recently Dan Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin* (Princeton, 2025), chs. 1–2.

65. For the English politico-historical tradition, see classically Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge, 1944).

opposition in England always had “a far greater probability of success, in raising among the People the notions familiar to them of legal claims and long-established customs, than in arguing with them from no less rational, but less determinate and somewhat dangerous doctrines, concerning the original rights of mankind.”⁶⁶

According to Hume, presenting innovation as restoration was merely tactical: “The spirit of innovation is in itself pernicious . . . a truth so obvious, that the popular party [i.e., the Country party] themselves are sensible of it; and therefore cover their encroachments on the crown by the plausible pretence of their recovering the ancient liberties of the people.”⁶⁷ As historians, we need to be skeptical of Hume’s skepticism. The key focus of this book is not on what people believed but on what they said and wrote. While the intention is not to show that all eighteenth-century reformers truly believed that they were recovering ancient liberties rather than introducing new ones, their private correspondence often suggests that many may have been sincere in that belief. Moreover, though it is true that reformist arguments were sometimes based on questionable history, this study shows that the reformers drew on both constitutional precedent and a long-standing and intellectually rich tradition. Even those among them who were not strictly speaking ancient constitutionalists, including the Lockean Protestant Dissenters in the second half of the eighteenth century, were steeped in the Bolingbrokean-infused Country party tradition and did not shy away from appealing to the spirit of the constitution.

The oppositional and reformist discourse treated in this book reveals how arguments for change were formulated within a culture dominated by constitutional traditionalism. This is not meant as an indictment. Such discourse formed a cornerstone of political culture of the eighteenth-century Anglophone world, and it was not only the method by which arguments for improvement could be formulated but also the way that opposition to the government could be justified. The significance of this discourse can hardly be overstated. That there always was a legal opposition to the government, in parliament and often “out of doors” as well, might ultimately have been responsible for making Britain a limited and free government in the eighteenth century.⁶⁸ The shared idiom of constitutionalism allowed for the sustained development

66. Jean Louis De Lolme, *The Constitution of England; Or An Account of the English Government*, ed. David Lieberman (Indianapolis, 2007 [1775]), p. 24n.

67. David Hume, “Of the Coalition of Parties” (1758), in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, p. 496. Hume’s historical research showed that the English constitution “like all others, has been in a state of continual fluctuation.” See David Hume, *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (6 vols., Indianapolis, 1983 [1754–61]), IV, p. 355n.

68. Archibald S. Foord, *His Majesty’s Opposition, 1714–1830* (Oxford, 1964).

of legal opposition, so central to modern political freedom⁶⁹ and vital for balance in Britain as the House of Commons became increasingly dominant.⁷⁰ Opposition was acceptable when it could be justified in constitutional terms; this was crucial at the time when the institutions of parliamentary democracy were tested. And in a period when the power and scope of government increased, it was beneficial to have constitutional stalwarts who fought for traditional freedoms and who wanted great alteration without desiring anything new.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 sketches the main outlines of the history of the English parliament, as well as many strands of the ancient constitutional and common law tradition, with particular emphasis on seventeenth-century events and authorities. Figures such as John of Salisbury, Henry of Bracton, John Fortescue, Edward Coke, John Selden, Matthew Hale, the Earl of Clarendon, William Prynne, the Levellers, the commonwealthmen, and the first Whigs and Tories are discussed against the backdrop of ideas about parliamentary reform during the Civil Wars, the Interregnum, and the Restoration period. The structure of party ideologies plays a key role in chapter 2, which traces the rise of the Country party tradition in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution and as a response to the Financial Revolution in the 1690s. The chapter charts the contribution made to this eclectic tradition by Whigs such as John Locke and John Toland, as well as the Tory Jonathan Swift and the Jacobite Francis Atterbury. I argue that although the Country party tradition, centered on a critique of an increasingly centralized and expensive government, was originally a strand of Whiggism in the 1670s, it became dominated by Tories led by Robert Harley in parliament in the 1690s and early 1700s.

Chapter 3 shows how the party realignment became entrenched after the Hanoverian Succession, as the Tories became a permanent opposition party. The chapter homes in on the Septennial Act of 1716 as a critical constitutional milestone, when the frequency of elections was changed from three to seven years. The chapter's focus is on the debate in parliament generated by the septennial bill and especially the Tory party's forceful opposition, in parliament as well as in the press, particularly through Archibald Hutcheson. Although ancient constitutionalist critiques of modern legislation became a cornerstone of eighteenth-century Toryism, the chapter closes by showing that Whigs such as Henry Fielding continued to draw on this flexible tradition.

69. Jeremy Waldron, "Loyal Opposition," in *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), ch. 5.

70. Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe and America* (New York, 1964 [1950]), p. 28.

Chapter 4 continues the investigation of the Tories under George II (r. 1727–60) with a detailed examination of the parliamentary party’s persistent but failed attempts to repeal the Septennial Act along with Bolingbroke’s attacks on Walpole and the Whig Supremacy in *The Craftsman*. The chapter concludes with a review of the career and writings of the Oxford Tory William Blackstone, who along with many other Tories transitioned into a supporter of the Hanoverian state after the accession of George III in 1760.

Chapter 5 shows how oppositional politics once again became a hallmark of various forms of Whiggism in the aftermath of George III’s accession, including the “radicalism” of John Wilkes and John Sawbridge, as well as the Rockingham Whig party connection, which is studied through one of its key supporters in the commercial city of Bristol, the leading Quaker Richard Champion. But far from all reformers identified with the Whigs; Sawbridge’s sister, the celebrated historian Catharine Macaulay, was fiercely anti-Whig, and while she had no truck with seventeenth-century divine right Toryism, she drew inspiration from the political writings of Country Tories such as Charles Davenant, Swift, and Bolingbroke. Chapter 6 concentrates on the different strands of oppositional Whiggism in parliament in the 1760s and 1770s, specifically on the competing Chathamite and Rockinghamite traditions. The chapter highlights the centrality for these disparate Whig connections of the issue of administrative and financial reform, known as economical reform, which for a brief period provided common ground between Chathamites such as the Earl of Shelburne and the Rockinghamite Burke. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Duke of Richmond, the aristocratic Whig who in 1780 put forward the most comprehensive proposal for reform in parliament in the eighteenth century.

Chapter 7 turns to the extra-parliamentary landscape in the 1770s and the reformers whom John Stuart Mill later labeled the “historical radicals,” who argued for far-reaching parliamentary reform, especially annual elections, as an ancient right and often as a way to recover the Saxon constitution. These reformers adopted the rhetoric and some of the arguments of the Levellers, common lawyers, and historians of the seventeenth century, as well as those of Tories and the Bolingbrokean Country party platform in the first half of the eighteenth century. The chapter also demonstrates the ways many British reformers championed the American cause but proposed various schemes of reform to save the empire rather than accepting separation. The American revolutionaries, for their part, drew on the writings of several of the “historical radicals,” notably the *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771), along with the long-standing ancient constitutional and Country party traditions at large. The American cause was also supported by several Protestant nonconformists, who constituted a major part of the reformist coalition in British politics in the second half of the century. Through a study of Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and others, chapter 8 illuminates the Protestant

Dissenters' proximity and indebtedness to the Country party and the constitutional tradition of reform. This perspective seeks to complement studies that concentrate on the theological roots of the Protestant Dissenters' political reformism. Though it was no coincidence that Protestant Dissenters were overrepresented in radical political circles, the content of the parliamentary reform package they espoused was analogous to that of earlier, contemporary, and later programs promoted by Anglicans, whether Latitudinarian or High Church.

Chapter 9 explores the records of the many extra-parliamentary groups and organizations that were formed between the late 1770s and the late 1780s, including those of the county association movement, the Westminster Committee, the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), and the Revolution Society. The prominence of constitutional thought for these societies and clubs is evident, especially in the activities of SCI, set up to distribute the works of writers on the English constitution from Fortescue to Bolingbroke, and the Revolution Society, originally established to celebrate the legacy of the Glorious Revolution. Chapter 10 turns to the debate about parliamentary reform in the House of Commons in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, which is approached through the two leading parliamentarians of the era: William Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox. Though often known as a modern Tory who defended the status quo, Pitt was in fact an independent Whig and the leading champion of parliamentary reform in the House of Commons in the first half of the 1780s before giving up the issue and eventually changing his mind after the outbreak of the French Revolution. Fox was equally inconsistent, taking up and abandoning the question of parliamentary reform on numerous occasions during his nearly four decades in parliament. Though their support of parliamentary reform was sporadic and, at least in Fox's case, strongly dependent on political calculation as opposed to principle, their continuous engagement with the question underlines its significance.

Chapter 11 examines the political environment in Britain in the wake of the French Revolution, when a wide range of reformist individuals and groups emerged and reemerged. But while Thomas Paine and the United Irishmen and other similar societies in Britain used language that was explicitly republican and even revolutionary in the final decade of the eighteenth century, the mainstream of British reformism remained firmly anchored in the national constitutional tradition. I argue that in terms of argument, language, and rhetoric, the French Revolution altered remarkably little on the reformist side in Britain. The chapter further adumbrates the government's clampdown on reformist and oppositional politics in the final years of the eighteenth century, as well as the revival of a reform movement in the early nineteenth century in the form of a small parliamentary force led by Francis Burdett, agitation by the radical William Cobbett, and a philosophical and utilitarian strand centered on Jeremy Bentham. The chapter closes with a discussion of the final

years of Major John Cartwright's fifty-year-long career as a reformer and man of letters. While acknowledging significant philosophical, religious, and class differences among these strands, the chapter emphasizes the existence of a shared reform program, now explicitly called "radical," and heavily indebted to its eighteenth-century predecessors.

Chapter 12 traces the legacies and transformations of the Foxite Whig party and the Pittite governmental coalition in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The chapter's particular focus is on the events leading up to the First Reform Act and arguments for reform put forward by a new generation of Whigs, such as Lord John Russell and Thomas Babington Macaulay, who regarded themselves as being influenced by an eclectic Whig tradition that included Burke—even though he had been opposed to parliamentary reform. Crucially, the Whigs of the 1832 Reform Act argued that the system of representation needed to be revamped for the constitution to retain its spirit. The more cerebral among them, notably T. B. Macaulay, combined this rhetoric with the insights of Scottish Enlightenment historiography and sociology, but the chapter demonstrates the persistence of the Bolingbrokean idiom as an essential part of the language of reform.⁷¹ Instead of censuring the Whig Supremacy, however, the Whigs of the First Reform Act tended to focus on the growth of executive influence since the accession of George III and especially the establishment of the Younger Pitt's political system, alongside the identification of longer-term changes in population, wealth, and education.⁷² The Whigs can thus be said to have resynthesized "the two polar propositions [of Whig ideology] that liberty was ancient and that liberty was modern and progressive."⁷³ While giving due credit to the achievements of the Whigs, this book resists the temptation to interpret parliamentary reform as a straightforward Tory-Whig question. Some "Ultras" supported versions of reform out of spite for their erstwhile leaders, the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel, and many of the most radical reformers such as Francis Burdett and William Cobbett were Tories rather than Whigs and certainly included the Whig Supremacy as part of their onslaught on "Old Corruption." Though

71. "Historians need to understand that the history of discourse is not a simple linear sequence in which new patterns overcome and replace the old, but a complex dialogue in which these patterns persist in transforming one another." J.G.A. Pocock, "Preface, 1989" in *Politics, Language and Time*, pp. ix–x.

72. Robert Walpole's premiership was more heavily criticized than it had been by Burke's generation, however; compare Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford et al. (9 vols., Oxford, 1970–2015), IV, p. 416, and Lord John Russell, *An Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution, from the Reign of Henry VII to the Present Time* (London, 2nd ed., 1823 [1821]), p. 398.

73. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, p. 383. Pocock traces this achievement to John Millar, whose *Historical View of the English Government* (1787) was initially dedicated to Charles James Fox.

he was critical of the First Reform Act, this was also true of the young radical Benjamin Disraeli, whose politics of Tory democracy were inspired by the eighteenth-century Tories, notably Bolingbroke, and shaped in opposition to what Disraeli viewed as Whig oligarchy. Against this backdrop, it should not surprise us that Disraeli was responsible for the more democratic Second Reform Act of 1867.

The book concludes by arguing that reform debates were a central feature of politics during Britain's "ancien régime" and that criticisms of the political system based on the flexible language of the spirit of the constitution were integral to the country's political culture. This reformist tradition did not need any ancillary impetus from Dissenter theology, though it certainly buttressed the case.⁷⁴ Finally, although high political, cultural, and social factors are necessary to explain the timing of reform, intellectual history helps us understand what kind of options were available to the reformers, as political agendas need substance. In this way, ideas can modify not only discourse but also political systems. And it bears repeating that the ability of constitutional frameworks and cultures to accommodate reform can make revolutions avoidable.

74. Cf. Clark, *English Society*, p. 382.

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