

Arthur Spirling, March 19, 2014

British Political Development: A Research Agenda

Introduction to LSQ Special Issue

The development of the modern Westminster system, between the First Reform Act of 1832 and Fourth Reform Act of 1918, is remarkable for at least three reasons. First, because its emergence was swift and yet peaceful. While massive suffrage extensions ushered in cohesive legislative parties along with large changes to the operation of government and a pronounced decline in corrupt practices, blood-shed was virtually absent. Second, the system that resulted from these earlier reforms exhibits notable stability: today, the UK continues to use institutions—including its electoral arrangements and parliamentary procedure rules—set in place by the Victorians. The third reason for attention, clear from cursory study of comparative politics, is the successful widespread implantation of the developed Westminster system to other polities, with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India being perhaps the most obvious examples.

Typically inspired by some combination of the above, historians' treatments of institutional development in the period start at least with Bagehot's *The English Constitution* of 1867. More recently, political scientists have become interested in the same set of issues, and the landmark contribution is Gary Cox's 1987 "The Efficient Secret", which laid the theoretical groundwork for the next generation of scholars in the area. Current efforts are complementary to his, and BPD as an intellectual endeavor has three distinct features:

1. micro-narratives. Broadly, the application of rational choice theories to specific, important decisions undertaken by actors of the day (an approach pioneered by Iain McLean).

2. new data and methods. Recent times have seen the official release and/or gathering of vast new datasets of speeches, electoral returns, legislative and other political activity. These data call for appropriate techniques of measurement and inference.
3. a ‘comparative’ perspective on development. BPD is not an insular movement: rather, it turns to literatures across political science (including American politics) and other disciplines to provide hypotheses and methods for the data at hand.

Ultimately, BPD is concerned with two things: *causes* of particular episodes of fundamental change and the *consequences* of those changes. In keeping with the fact that the Westminster system evolved as a series of legislative responses to internal and external stimuli, note that the ‘change’ that must be explained and explored—such as the passing of anti-corruption statutes—is generally the product of a parliamentary decision. This is the case with the papers in this volume.

They begin with Laura Bronner’s article “Property and Power: MPs Assets and Support for Democratization in the 1867 Reform Act.” Bronner gathers an impressive new data set from 19th Century sources on economic interests to show that, contrary to much recent social science theory, land owners were not more hostile to a widening franchise and the potential expropriation it might cause.

Scott Moser and Andrew Reeves are similarly intrigued by the Second Reform Act, and similarly skeptical that ‘interests’ mattered for MP decisions. They begin their analysis by noting that it became law under a minority Conservative administration, despite the fact that an earlier Liberal bill—in a majority Liberal chamber—had failed. Moser and Reeves point to a change in rhetorical strategy, whereby discussions of the bill were more limited and less technical in scope. They test their argument in a methodologically innovative way,

using ‘topic models’ for analyzing speeches.

Concerned with a different though equally fundamental piece of legislation of the era, Christopher Kam considered the Ballot Act, that made voting secret in the constituencies. Like Moser and Reeves, Kam “Enfranchisement, malapportionment, and Institutional Change in Great Britain, 1832–1867” notes that bills with identical intent to the one that passed had previously failed. Kam collects individual level data on MPs for the period and shows that the most likely explanation for the success of the 1872 bill was the strategic retirement of more conservative (i.e. more anti-secret ballot) MP types, induced by the expanded franchise of the Second Reform Act.

In “Franchise Extension and the British Aristocracy”, Samuel Berlinski, Torun Dewan and Brenda Van Coppenolle turn their attention to the *consequences* of the Second Reform Act. They ask whether the types of members who appeared in the House of Commons, and in the Cabinet, changed as a result of suffrage extension. To do this, they compile a dataset of MPs’ backgrounds, including membership of the British aristocracy. The result is a resounding negative, and speaks to the “stickiness” of social power: while Britain became more democratic, the composition of its elite did not go through an immediate change. They report similar findings for the later franchise extension of 1884.

Edwin Camp, Avinash Dixit and Susan Stokes take BPD, especially the decline in corrupt practices, in a comparative direction with “Catalyst or Cause? Legislation and the Demise of Machine Politics in Britain and the United States”. They consider the decreasing effectiveness of election agents—men employed to bribe locals into voting for particular candidates—as electorates got larger and wealthier. Using a formal model, they show that as suffrage expansion and economic growth began to ‘bite’, legislation banning agents from

operating became increasingly likely to be passed and obeyed.

In the final article, “Electoral Security as a Determinant of Legislator Activity, 1832-1918: New Data and Methods for Analyzing British Political Development” Andrew Eggers and I report on a large new database of MPs and their actions for the period on which BPD focusses. We put this to use by examining members’ behavior over time as they balanced cross-cutting loyalties: the interests of their parties in the Commons, and their constituents at home. We demonstrate that modern theories—emphasizing that more marginal members tend to play to their home crowd voters—hold for our data.

Understanding the advent and results of fundamental reforms is a ‘first order’ endeavor; the ‘second order’ literature that grows out of this will deal with longer term consequences that may be harder to measure. These include new pressures to reform, brought about by circumstances that Westminster systems are typically thought to avoid: for example, at the time of writing, Britain is governed by a coalition of parties, while Canada and Australia have experienced minority governments in the recent past. Alternatively, scholars might seek to understand how well the Westminster experience of, for example, anti-corruption drives would apply to non-Westminster systems in developing democracies. Having built a firm base, we leave such efforts for future research.