The Political Economy of Suffrage Reform:  
The Great Reform Act of 1832∗

GARY COX†  ADRIANE FRESH‡  SEBASTIAN SAIEGH§

March 9, 2020

Abstract

Prominent scholars have viewed the Great Reform Act as a concession made by incumbent elites in order to defuse a revolutionary threat. In this paper, we argue that the threat from below did not entail a significant risk of regime overthrow and was addressed by establishing professional police forces in all provincial towns and half the counties. Such forces had been stoutly opposed by the gentry since the Glorious Revolution, on the grounds that they would increase Crown power too much. To make professional police forces palatable to the middle class required reforming both budgets and elections at all levels of governance (national, municipal and county), so as to ensure taxpayers that their representatives would control the finances of the new forces.

∗We thank Ben Ansell, Frances Rosenbluth, David Samuels, and seminar participants at Nuffield College and Sciences Po for their comments; and Toke Aidt and Raphael Franck for sharing their data.
†Authors are listed alphabetically. William Bennett Munro Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, Stanford University; gcox@stanford.edu
‡Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, Duke University; adriane.fresh@duke.edu.
§Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, UC San Diego; saiegh@ucsd.edu
Theories of suffrage expansion can be divided into two broad families. In a family of redistributive theories, broader voting rights lead to a redistribution of income away from the old elite. Thus, suffrage expansions occur only under duress, when the existing elite would otherwise risk an even worse outcome (revolutionary expulsion from power). In a family of collective-action theories, broader voting rights elicit larger contributions to public goods. Suffrage expansions occur only when the existing elite cannot finance some valuable new public project(s) by itself. Common in the study of business corporations, collective-action theories have also been used to explain franchise extensions in polities.

In this paper, we offer a collective-action account of Britain’s Great Reform Act, perhaps the most storied of all suffrage adjustments. We agree with the redistributive (aka revolutionary-threat) theorists that British elites sought to restore order in the wake of revolutions on the continent and riots at home. Crucially, however, we argue that Lord Grey’s government offered suffrage rights, not as a concession to deter the middle class from supporting rebellion, but rather as an inducement to convince the middle class to contribute tax revenues to the state. In our view, suffrage rights were part of a package of reforms that broadened the regime’s tax base, thereby increasing its capacity to deal with social disorder.

During the reform crisis, both Tory and Whig administrations sought to quell disorder by force. However, the Tories operated within the parameters of the unreformed polity’s budget, parliament, and police, whereas the Whigs simultaneously reformed all three of these interlocking institutions. Within a half decade of the Grey Ministry’s first entry into power (1830), annual budgets had been imposed on all public spending at both the national and municipal levels, taxpayer suffrage had been implemented for elections at both levels, and professional police forces had been founded in all the major towns of England and Wales. The new police represented the single largest new civil expenditure ever undertaken by the municipal corporations and were paid for by new taxes levied by taxpayers’ elected representatives at the local and national levels. Existing revolutionary-threat accounts say nothing about this robust expansion of state policing capacity, while existing collective-action accounts focus on other, much later expansions in state capacity.

In order to flesh out the account just sketched, we first explain why Britain — unlike its continental rivals — lacked professional police forces (prior to 1829). We then use statistics on British rioting to show that previous surges in disorder, even when larger than the 1830s spike, were not associated with any serious consideration of parliamentary reform. After describing the “Swing” riots that swept over England in 1830-31, we explain the logic of the Whigs’ response to that challenge. While revolutionary-threat theorists view suffrage reform as a stand-alone measure to mitigate a threat from below, we view it as part of a package of measures intended to deal with two competing risks — the Scylla of royal absolutism and the Charybdis of mass turbulence. In elaborating our view, we highlight several features of the Whigs’ strategy that, while unnecessary if their goal was simply to concede redistributive power, were essential if they sought to broaden the regime’s tax base without raising worries of executive misuse of the resulting revenues.

Asking who would have benefited from an effort to enhance the state’s credibility, and hence its capacity, we argue two points. First, those enjoying more of the rents afforded by the unreformed budgetary system should have opposed the whole reform project. Second, those bearing more of
the private policing costs implied by the unreformed police system (on which more below) should have favored the whole reform project. We provide evidence consistent with these expectations from the vote in the House of Commons that brought down Wellington’s Ministry in 1830, the parliamentary election of 1831, and the location and expenditure of the new police. We also compare our approach with the two main explanations of the Great Reform Act in the political economy literature.

Beyond the case of the Great Reform Act, our account potentially generalizes to all suffrage expansions that occurred after (or simultaneously with) the introduction of comprehensive annual budgets controlled by the legislature. Such expansions should have been (i) incremental and (ii) followed by the provision of new public goods valued by both old and new voters. We provide systematic evidence supporting the first of these implications and qualitative evidence supporting the second in our discussion section. Our account also suggests that instances of democratization can be deeply linked to fundamental concerns about who controls the coercive apparatus of the state. Disorder can increase the value of police as a public good, but in situations without credible guarantees about who controls that coercive power, franchise reform alone may not suffice to provide the good.

The Post-Revolution Constitution

North and Weingast famously argued that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 broadly enhanced state credibility, thereby sparking Britain’s economic and military rise. The post-Revolution state, however, had two distinct components. The fiscal-military component, financed by a budget subject to annual approval by parliament, became more credible. The civil component, still financed by a lifetime “Civil List” grant to the Crown, was no more credible than it had been before the Revolution. The monarch retained full discretion over how to spend Civil List revenues and was not required to inform the House of Commons in any way until almost a century later. The resulting expenditures ranged between 27% and 35% of total current expenditures in the peacetime years 1699-1701, a considerable amount of money. Cox shows that, because they could neither defund the civil state, nor dismiss the Crown appointees who staffed it, MPs refused to create centralized civil bureaucracies.

Elite opposition to centrally controlled civil bureaucracies was most adamant regarding police forces. Louis XIV had established a professional police force in Paris in the 1660s and many continental powers subsequently set up urban forces on the Paris model. However, the “state constabularies, not only in France, Germany and Russia but also in Austria, Spain, Italy, and even in liberal Holland and Belgium, served the negative function for Englishmen of models that were to be avoided, not emulated.” British elites believed continental police forces had disciplined the lower orders but that they had also trampled elite liberties and thus been instrumental in establishing royal absolutism. In thinking through the trade-off that professional police entailed—better control of the lower orders versus larger risks to their own interests—the English gentry decided they feared the Crown more than the mob. As the Abbé le Blanc reported in 1737 during his travels, “the English said they ’had rather be robb’d . . . by wretches of desperate

To avoid central control over domestic policing, the gentry insisted that order should be kept through the voluntary, unpaid and decentralized efforts of country squires. Charles James Fox, leader of the Whig opposition, expressed the traditional view in 1792 during a parliamentary debate:

The police of this country was well administered ... by gentlemen who undertook to discharge the duty without deriving any emolument from it, and in the safest way to the freedom of the subject, because those gentlemen being under no particular obligation to the executive power, could have no particular interest in perverting the law to oppression.

How deeply the gentry opposed police can be illustrated by considering the Gordon riots of 1780, “nearly a week of unchecked, appalling rioting” in London. When the government, in response, sought to establish a paid police force in the metropolis, they faced withering opposition based on the threat to English liberties that such a force would represent.

The absence of professional police forces meant that local elites had to maintain order in their own locales, entailing several types of cost. One type of cost was unpaid labor, such as service as a magistrate or in the Yeomanry Cavalry. The latter were volunteer corps that turned out frequently under the orders of magistrates to control social disturbances, including enclosure protests, food riots, Luddites, as well as disaffected demobilized servicemen. Another type of cost was property damage. Finally, there were the dues paid to thousands of private associations which helped to catch and prosecute offenders, as well as insure members’ losses. The expenses associated with keeping the peace varied widely across the elite, depending on the location of their estates. Moreover, as we shall show below, private costs surged during the reform crisis.

### Revolutionary Threats and Suffrage Reform

Przeworski has documented a cross-national correlation between elite perceptions of revolutionary threat and male suffrage expansions in the 19th century. In this section, we investigate whether a cross-temporal correlation existed between violence and suffrage reform in the case of Britain. Our independent variable, based on yearly counts of the frequency with which British newspapers used the word “riot,” correlates highly (a correlation coefficient of .76) with Tilly’s previous riot counts for the 19th century. However, our counts extend back to 1750, whereas Tilly covered only the south of England for the 18th century.

Our basic finding, illustrated in Figure 1, is that no correlation exists between rioting and any

---

12Palmer 1988, p.72. The trade-off between fear of state predation and fear of rebellion in building state capacity has been considered by, among others, Bates 2000 and Ansell and Samuels 2014.
14Lawrence 2014, p. xi.
15Philips 1980, pp. 166-67. As G. Hay 2017 notes, another example, of the typical parliamentary opposition to the extension of professional policing can be found in Sir Francis Burdett’s comments in Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 18 January 1812, Vol. 21, Para. 212.
17Voth and Caprettini 2017.
19Przeworski 2009.
20Horn and Tilly 2009. We correlate the percentage of riot terms in total documents from our newspaper corpus with the count of violent incidents from the Tilly data in the post-1800 period.
Figure 1: Trends in newspaper corpus mentions of riots and reform, 1750-1850

Sources: Authors’ calculations based on word searches in The Times and the Eighteenth Century Burney Newspaper’s Collection. See the notes below for more details.

Notes: The above plot presents the trends in keyword mentions in major newspaper collections from 1750 to 1850. The trends are normalized by the number of documents to reflect the secular trend in newspaper growth during the period. The search term for reform was “parliamentary reform” and the search term for riots was simply “riots.” We exclude mentions of “France” for the riot series account to eliminate discussions of continental riots (like the Shelbourne riots of 1784) that did not represent within-Britain disorder. The vertical line indicates the passage of the 1832 Great Reform Act.

measure of reform effort — motions, bills or acts — in the eighty years prior to the reform crisis. Our findings corroborate Morrison’s observation that social disorder, even when comparably severe to that experienced during the reform crisis, was not associated with serious consideration of reform before the 1830s.

If elites were motivated exclusively by threats from below, then it is not clear how to explain the negligible correlation between rioting and reform prior to 1830. If instead elites worried about two competing risks — the Scylla of Crown power and the Charybdis of mass turmoil — then the secular decline of the first threat helps explain why it was only in the 1830s that rioting finally coincided with reform. Parliament began curbing the Crown’s independent control over the Civil List in the 1780s. The Whigs, in combination with disaffected backbench Tories, managed to subject more and more of the Civil List to increasing levels of parliamentary scrutiny, and to abolish sinecures and other forms of Crown patronage. The result was a “waning of the influence of the crown.” As Crown influence shrank, the rentier class, who constituted the most consistent opponents of budgetary and parliamentary reform, also shrank.

Each reduction in the Crown’s ability to provide rents only made further budgetary reform easier. Moreover, the decline in Crown influence should also have reduced political opposition to suffrage reform. Morrison has argued that, when royal influence was still potent, the Whigs refrained from stoking popular support for electoral reform, lest royalist forces use any resulting disorder as a pretext for rebuilding Crown power. The decline in Crown influence made it safer to mobilize popular support behind electoral reform.

Finally, the general fear of Crown influence underpinned the specific fear of establishing professional police forces subject to Crown control. Thus, as budgetary reforms chipped away at Crown influence, police reform should have become more and more viable.

\[^{21}\] To confirm the lack of correlation visually apparent in Figure 1, we regressed the number of reform efforts (motions, bills, acts, or the sum of all) on various lagged counts of riots (for details, see the web appendix). In the appendix we also detail the construction of our riot variable and show that previous continental revolutions (1792, 1820) did not predict reform proposals.

\[^{22}\] Morrison 2011.


\[^{24}\] Foord 1947, Harling 1996.

\[^{25}\] Morrison 2011.
Our Account

During the reform crisis, we argue that the Whigs offered suffrage rights to broaden the regime’s tax base. Just as a business corporation must offer voting rights to its new share-holders, so the Whig aristocracy had to offer voting rights to the middle-class property owners it sought to bring into political partnership. A more credible civil state could (1) attract more revenues to deal with a variety of challenges, including the problem of restoring order; and (2) help cut through the Gordian knot that had previously made professional police forces politically infeasible. To flesh out the account just sketched, we describe the context of reform, the logic of the Whigs’ response, and then detail the specific measures they undertook.

The context of reform

In late July 1830, an uprising in Paris overthrew King Charles X. In addition to provoking an immediate and sharp increase in British Consol yields, the Paris uprising sparked several revolutions on the continent and likely inspired the Swing riots, a wave of rural disturbances that began a month later. The Swing riots were vast; Holland documents some 2,818 distinct violent incidents, mostly involving arson, machine breaking, animal maiming, and assault.

The logic of suffrage rights as an inducement

If the Whigs offered suffrage rights as an inducement to the middle class, with the aim of broadening the regime’s tax base, then their reforms should have had several specific features. First, since taxpayers’ representatives would not authorize new taxes if they lacked control over how the new revenues would be spent, suffrage rights should have been combined with reforms ensuring legislative control of the state budget. As we explain below, the Whigs’ first major reform when they came to power ensured that MPs would, for the first time, control all civil spending. Previous accounts have ignored this feature of the Whig reform agenda.

Second, suffrage expansion should have been limited to those who could pay taxes. Allowing the poor to vote would have been pointless if the aim was to broaden the tax base; and would moreover have diluted middle-class property owners’ control. To show that contemporaries understood the latter point, consider Napoleon III’s “poison pill” strategy in 1850. Facing demands for legislative control over state spending, Napoleon III pre-emptively instituted universal manhood suffrage. Once the poor could vote, middle-class property owners were much less interested in ensuring that elected representatives could control the budget, since those representatives were much less likely to serve middle-class interests.

In Britain, the Whigs flipped Napoleon III’s strategy—disenfranchising existing poor voters in order to give taxpayers undiluted control over elections. This meant that the new budgetary powers the Whigs had just conferred upon MPs would be more reliably exercised in taxpayers’ interests. Indeed, the Whigs disenfranchised enough poor so that electorates shrank in one-third of parliamentary constituencies. Previous accounts have largely ignored the significant element of disenfranchisement that the Great Reform Act entailed.

26 Easterbrook and Fischel 1983
27 cf. Barzel and Kiser 2002
28 Dasgupta and Ziblatt 2015, p.16.
30 Holland 2005
31 Pittaluga, Cama, and Seghezza 2015
32 Salmon 2009
Table 1: The Whig reform agenda in England and Wales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act of Parliament (or Proposal)</th>
<th>Budgetary</th>
<th>Electoral</th>
<th>Police</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Reforms of national institutions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil List Act, 1831</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Reform Act, 1832</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Boundaries Act, 1832</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne’s proposal on national police, 1832</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Reforms of municipal institutions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting and Watching Act, 1833</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporations Act, 1835</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Reforms of county institutions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Rates Act, 1834</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bill to establish councils for the management</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of county rates in England and Wales, 1837-8</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Police Act, 1839</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The table lists the major proposals promoted by the Whigs to reform national, municipal and county institutions in England and Wales. The Whigs promoted similar reforms in Scotland (e.g., the Burgh Police (Scotland) Act of 1833) and at other levels of local government in England and Wales (e.g., Hobhouse’s Vestries Act of 1831).

Third, budgetary and suffrage reforms should have preceded, or coincided with, police reforms. The reason for this was the deep and long-standing opposition among the English gentry to any form of professional and centrally supervised police forces. To allay traditional fears that such forces would become tools of the central government, the Whigs needed budgetary reforms to ensure that police budgets would be subject to control by elected representatives; and suffrage reforms to ensure that elected representatives would be beholden primarily to taxpayers.

We have argued that the Whigs offered a package of budgetary and suffrage reforms that were complements in producing a state whose agencies, and most notably the police, would credibly serve middle-class interests. In the rest of this section, we detail the Whigs’ reform agenda, paying particular attention to whether suffrage rights were combined with budgetary reforms, limited to taxpayers, and granted prior to or simultaneously with police reforms.

**National reforms**

Table [ ] Panel A, lists the Whigs’ main proposals to reform national institutions under three headings—budgetary, electoral and police. The Whigs used a motion to investigate the Civil List, rather than a motion to reform parliament, as their preferred vehicle to bring down Wellington’s government. Once in power, the Grey Ministry quickly enacted the Civil List Act 1831 (1 Wm IV, c. 25). This act ensured that all expenses of the civilian government would henceforth be subject to parliamentary scrutiny, appropriation and audit. Annual expenses of “no less than £696,000 [were] brought within the cognizance and control of Parliament.”

Reducing the Crown’s unilateral budgetary control had been a central principle of Whig thought since the Glorious Revolution. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, Edmund Burke’s Civil List Act of 1782 renewed the Whigs’ commitment to budgetary reform, inaugurating a half

---

[34] Roberts 1966, North and Weingast 1989
century of incremental efforts to put the Civil List under parliamentary control. The Civil List Act of 1831 completed this reform project, ending the fiscal bifurcation of the unreformed state—and assuring that the House of Commons would control the entire budget.

As regards electoral reform, the ministry’s first proposal was for pure taxpayer suffrage. This makes sense, if the Whigs’ goal was to assure taxpayers that they would control elections. It also made partisan political sense, since the majority of existing poor voters supported the Tories. While Tory-sponsored amendments saved the votes of some poor voters, the enacted reform still disenfranchised large numbers of poor voters and approximated the original goal of suffrage censitaire.

After their national-level budgetary reforms had been completed and their electoral reforms were under way, the Grey Ministry announced their intention to investigate “the best means of improving the Municipal Police of the kingdom” in the King’s Speech of December 1831. Several months later, Lord Melbourne (the Home Secretary) circulated a bold plan to create a national police force among his ministerial colleagues, the budget of which would have been controlled by parliament. However, the cabinet opted for a more decentralized approach to urban policing, as described next.

**Municipal Reforms**

While institutional reforms were sequenced at the national level—budgets first, then elections, then police—they were simultaneous at the municipal level (see Panel B of Table 1). Soon after passage of the Great Reform Act, the Lighting and Watching Act of 1833 offered simultaneous budgetary, suffrage and police reforms to the unincorporated towns in England and Wales. The Burgh Police (Scotland) Act of 1833 offered similar but more ambitious reforms for the Scottish burghs. Two years later, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 reformed 178 English and Welsh boroughs, requiring that (1) the borough’s taxpayers elect the town council; (2) the town council approve an annual and auditable budget; and (3) the town council establish, pay, and regulate a constabulary force. Although Lord John Russell judged that the budgetary provisions were “the most important part, no doubt” of the bill, they attracted little discussion and no amendments. Similarly, the “very important” police provisions were not controversial. Given the security afforded by the electoral and budgetary reforms, Country MPs who previously “would not tolerate even the idea of a police force” over which Crown ministers had supervision now sanctioned the creation of centrally supervised police forces in every major town.

It is important to stress that the Whigs’ urban policing measures were not simply corollaries of Sir Robert Peel’s famous Metropolitan Police Act (1829). That act financed a metropolitan police force while leaving the Civil List intact and thus preserving the unreformed budgetary system. In order to address traditional worries that police would increase Crown influence, the act established a separate Receiver to handle all monies funding the police; and subjected the Receiver’s accounts to annual parliamentary scrutiny. Fiscally speaking, then, the metropolitan police were paid in the same way that the armed forces were.

Some contemporaries advocated financing police in the provincial towns on the same model. For

---

36 Salmon 2009
37 Philips and Storch 1994, p.79.
38 Philips and Storch 1999
39 H C Debates xxviii, p. 554.
40 D. Hay 1975, p.18.
41 Lyman 1964, pp.150-51.
example, a pamphlet published by Montague Gore (soon to be a Whig MP), and recounted in *The Times* on 14 January 1832, proposed

the establishment of a police force similar to that of London, in all considerable towns... [In] answer to the objection of such a measure placing too much power in the hands of the Crown, [Mr Gore recommended] that the Police Bill, like the Mutiny Bill, should be made annual, and thus the real control and authority over the new force be vested in the legislature[42]

In contrast to Gore’s approach, the Grey Ministry proposed a more radical way to finance the police. They first abolished all unreformed budgets at both the national and municipal levels, replacing them with annual and auditable budgets. They then financed the new police using a combination of local rates approved by town councilors and central transfers approved by MPs.

It is important also to note that the new police represented a major new expense. Looking at the costs paid through local taxation, 81 boroughs that established police forces in 1836 pursuant to the Municipal Corporations Act (1835) reported their expenditures to parliament[43] On average, police expenses constituted 23% of each borough’s total. Assuming that other municipal expenses did not change between 1835 and 1837[44] this implies that police expenses caused an immediate 30% increase in borough expenditures, on average. This was by far the largest new civil expenditure program ever undertaken by the municipal corporations. Indeed, from the Revolution to the reform era, the municipal corporations were rarely entrusted with new duties by local taxpayers, who almost invariably preferred to set up special-purpose units of government whose budgets they could control[45] The central government also shouldered a portion of police-related expenses, as it hired central staff in order to exercise the Home Secretary’s supervisory role and made fiscal transfers. While we are not aware of a detailed accounting of these expenses, it is worth noting that the central government’s total civil expenditures, expressed as a percentage of GDP, declined on average by 4.7 percentage points per year in the last twenty years before the Municipal Reform Act, and increased on average by 1.0 percentage points per year in the first twenty years after. A structural breaks test (a Wald supremum test) is consistent with the hypothesis that a break in civil spending occurred in 1836[46]

**County reforms**

At the county level (see Panel C), the Whigs first reformed budgetary procedures (via the County Rates Act 1834) and then sought to renovate county governance along the lines of their earlier municipal reforms. Although their 1837-38 proposal failed, the County Police Act (1839) enabled counties to form police forces, something that about half promptly did. Thus, within a decade of the Grey Ministry’s entry into power, all boroughs and half the counties had established police forces; middle-class property owners were paying most of the taxes to support these forces through local rates and national taxes; and middle-class voters were reasonably assured that these forces...
would not become tools of royal (or executive) oppression, since their elected representatives had a firm grip on the purse strings.

Summary

The Whigs’ commitment to budgetary reform was well known before the Grey Ministry came to power. Ministers announced their intention to proceed with parliamentary reform as soon as they came to power, and about a year later declared their ambition to reform the police as well. Subsequently, at all levels of government, they sought to establish annual budgets, taxpayer suffrage, and professional police forces subject to supervision by the Home Secretary. The Ministry never proposed reforming suffrage rights pertaining to a level of government whose budgets remained unreformed. Nor did they ever propose establishing police forces in units of government that still had unreformed budgets and elections. On four separate occasions, Ministers packaged budgetary, electoral and police reforms together in single bills.

Our interpretation is that the Whigs were constructing a polity in which taxpayers would control the election of MPs, who in turn would control the expenditure of public monies, thereby ensuring that police forces (and other public services) would not be controlled by unaccountable (local or national) executives. Our account is similar to those that view the Great Reform Act as sealing an alliance between the aristocracy and the middle class. For example, Gash argued that “the primary purpose of the Reform Bill...was to rally middle-class support round the aristocratic system.” We differ from such traditional accounts primarily by focusing on the main immediate goal that an alliance between the aristocracy and middle classes would have had—the restoration and maintenance of social order—and the main institution through which they could achieve that common goal – the new police.

In revolutionary-threat theories, expenditure on a state’s repressive apparatus is a substitute for expanding the suffrage. The state can restore order either by conceding new suffrage rights (in which case it can spend less on repression) or by increasing repression (in which case it can preserve the existing electorate).

In our account, taxpayer suffrage—achieved by enfranchising the non-voting rich and disenfranchising the voting poor—allowed the state to credibly commit to its taxpayers (when combined with budgetary reforms). Thus, adjusting suffrage rights was a complement to—indeed, a necessary pre-condition for—re-organizing and re-financing the state’s repressive efforts.

Rents, Riots and Reform

If our account is valid, then MPs’ support for the Whigs’ package of reforms should have depended substantially on how many rents they (or their patrons) would have to forego due to budgetary reform, as well as the private costs of amateur policing they (or their patrons) could expect to avoid thanks to police reform. To explain the first of these elements (rents), note that the monarch in the long eighteenth century routinely allowed ministers to use sinecures, pensions, government contracts, Church preferments and many other inducements—constituting what contemporaries called “the influence of the Crown”—to secure MPs’ loyalty. Since the Crown controlled both

---

48 Gash 1979, p.147.
49 Our case study resonates with the broader analysis of Ferejohn and Rosenbluth 2017, who similarly emphasize that military threats (in their case, international) can in some circumstances induce elites to bring other social elements into partnership via ‘democratic’ reforms.
50 Foord 1947, Harling 1996
civil patronage and the Civil List—the “fountain from which all blessings flowed”—ministers could and did shower rents on their supporters. Indeed, “government bureaucrats and placemen,” along with other appointees such as “Anglican clerics, soldiers, . . . and judges” accounted for a significantly greater percent of British half-millionaires under the unreformed than the reformed polity.

As noted above, the Whigs had long pushed for reform of the Civil List, with the avowed aim of reducing Crown influence. Thus, those who enjoyed more rents under the unreformed budget should have tended to oppose the Whigs. We have already explained that the absence of professional police in Britain imposed private policing costs on property owners. It is important to note that the Swing riots of 1830-31 increased those costs.

Figure 2 shows the sums that were actually expended for the Yeomanry and Volunteer Corps in England and Scotland from 1816 to 1842. An early spike in expenditures corresponds to 1820, after the disaster of Peterloo. A significant reduction in expenditures took place in 1828, after Canning’s government decided to eliminate those corps that had not been called out in aid of the civil power within the previous ten years. The Yeomanry disbandments, however, had to be reversed three years later to cope with the Swing Riots of 1830. Another reduction of expenditures took place in 1838, but with less dramatic results. Considering annual changes in expenditures, these rose by roughly 220% in 1831, compared to a 59% increase in 1820.

Something similar occurred with other peacekeeping costs. The Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the County Rates (1836) provides data on expenditures by private associations on prosecutions over the period 1830-34. If one focuses on the 21 associations providing data for all five years, one finds that their costs in 1830-31 were 74% larger on average than their costs in 1833-34.

In our view, these sharply higher private costs should have made the Whigs’ reform agenda more attractive to those bearing the costs. In the next several sections, we explore how well the distribution of rents and the local intensity of Swing rioting predicted (1) how local MPs voted when the Whigs’ moved their main budgetary reform; (2) how constituencies voted in the 1831 general election, widely viewed as a referendum on the Whigs’ main electoral reform; and (3) how quickly and fully boroughs and counties adopted the Whigs’ police reforms.

---

51 Reitan 1966, p.323.  
Wellington’s Fall

By the time the House of Commons assembled for its first meeting after the election of 1830, rioting was peaking and “the government’s inability to restore order in the Tory counties disillusioned its own supporters...” Hoping to take advantage of the government’s awkward position, the Whigs moved for an inquiry into the Civil List on 15 November 1830, knowing that approval of their motion would be tantamount to a vote of no confidence in the government.

As far as we know, no quantitative analysis of the subsequent vote has been conducted. Here, we focus on the behavior of English MPs. By November 1830, rioting had not yet spread to Wales, and it never did spread to Scotland or Ireland. Of the 482 English MPs still alive and eligible to vote in the Civil List division, 147 (31%) voted against the motion to reform the Civil List, 145 (30%) did not vote, and 190 (39%) voted in favor.

Biographies of those who did not vote indicate that, for many, abstention was intentional. In other words, there were three levels of support for reform: opposition (voting against the motion); waffling (not voting); and support (voting for the motion). We conduct ordered probit analyses below, seeking to discern what determined a member’s level of support for reform.

In particular, we investigate whether MPs with lower rents and higher policing costs were more likely to support the Whigs’ inaugural reform motion. We estimate the rents each MP enjoyed under the old regime by whether they served in either a “nomination” or a “rotten” borough. We assess policing costs by counting the number of Swing riots that occurred prior to 15 November 1830 within 10km of each borough or university constituency. For county constituencies, we count the total number of riots occurring within county borders prior to 15 November 1830.

The timing of the confidence vote is not ideal from the perspective of assessing how much the Swing riots affected the boroughs because 71% of them had not experienced any nearby riot by 15 November 1830; and only 5% had experienced five or more. In contrast, riot exposure in the counties varied widely, allowing one to assess their impact with more confidence. In addition to rents and riots, we control for (i) the Whig share of the vote in the 1826 election; (ii) how the constituency’s members voted on Lord John Russell’s motion (of 23 February 1830) to give direct representation to Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester; and (iii) each MP’s attitude toward Catholic Emancipation (which some historians, such as Clark argue was a key factor in Wellington’s fall). Since historians often use how each member voted in the division we are studying to decide their partisan affiliation, we do not control for party affiliation at the MP level.

Table 2 shows the results of our analyses (with errors clustered at the constituency level). Looking at the control variables, we see that more votes for the Whigs in the 1826 election, as well as more votes for Russell’s reform motion in parliament, both strongly predicted support for reform of the Civil List (and hence for bringing in a Whig Ministry). However, attitudes toward Catholic Emancipation had no significant effect. MPs from more “rotten” constituencies (according to Aidt and Franck’s index) were less likely to support reform. This accords with one of our main hypotheses.

In Model 1, we find that MPs whose constituencies experienced more nearby Swing riots were more likely to support reform. That said, Model 2 reveals that rioting had a substantial association with county MPs voted on the Civil List but little or no association with how non-county

53 Quinault 1993, p. 197.
54 Member biographies can be found at https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/. For some examples of intentional abstention, see the articles on the Hon. George Anson, Thomas Tyrwhitt Drake, and Lord Bath.
55 We coded MPs’ votes from the division list in Hansard’s, checking against each member’s biography at
Table 2: Relationship between the swing riots and the Civil List vote of 15 November 1830

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Civil List Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whig Constituency Vote Share, 1826</td>
<td>0.012***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform Support by then-MP, 1830</td>
<td>0.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotten Borough Index</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Catholic Emancipation</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(1 + Number of Riots)</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>0.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County × ln(1 + Number of Riots)</td>
<td>0.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-Sqrd</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors robust to clustering at the constituency level presented in parentheses.

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Notes: The above table presents the results from estimating equation $CL_{votei} = \alpha + \beta_1whig_i + \beta_2reform_i + \beta_3rotten_i + \beta_4catholic_i + \beta_5ln(1 + riots_i) + \beta_6county_i + \epsilon_i$, where $i$ indexes the parliamentary constituency. We measure the vote on the Civil List ($CL_{vote}$) as -1 for a vote against, 0 for no vote, and 1 for a vote in favor. We use ordered probit to estimate the above equation. Our sample are the 482 English MPs eligible to vote in the division, and we cluster our standard errors to reflect the 282 constituencies with MPs voting. The variables for the Whig share of the constituency vote in 1826 ($whig$), Support for Russel’s reform in 1830 ($reform$) and the index for the rottenness ($rotten$) of the borough are from Aidt and Franck [2015]. MP support for Catholic Emancipation ($catholic$) was coded by the authors from History of Parliament Project Biographies. The number of riots ($riots$) is the number of Swing Riots in the county measured before the Civil List vote date (5 November 1830) from data provided by Holland [2005]. We take add 1 before taking the natural log since some counties did not experience the Swing Riots. MPs voted. This may reflect the fact that so few boroughs had experienced any “riot treatment” by the time of the division under study. In any event, all that we can claim at this point is that support for the Civil List motion among county MPs was significantly associated with the number of Swing riots that each county had experienced by 15 November 1830. This is consistent with our hypothesis that local elites who bore higher private protection costs under the unreformed policing system were more likely to support bringing in a Whig Ministry. Some of these MPs may simply have been dissatisfied with Wellington’s handling of the riots; others may have thought the Whigs would mount a more effective response within the confines of the unreformed polity; and still others may already have realized that the Whigs were likely to establish new police forces [60].

https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/.

56 We use a variable coded by Aidt and Franck [2015]
57 The data come from Holland [2005]
58 Clark [1985]
59 Aidt and Franck [2015]
60 Philips and Storch [1994].
The 1831 Election

The peak of Swing rioting occurred in November and December of 1830. Thus, by examining events in 1831 we can assess how elites responded after the bulk of the riots had occurred. In particular, we consider the election of 1831, held between April 28 and June 1.\footnote{In this era, elections were held over several weeks, not on a single day.}

Aidt and Franck have already shown that the pro-Whig vote swing from 1830 to 1831 was substantially blunted in “nomination” and “rotten” boroughs.\footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}} Since the patrons of such boroughs tended to receive a higher share of the unreformed system’s rents, the MPs they nominated tended to oppose reform.

These authors also persuasively show that the Whigs posted stronger electoral gains in constituencies that were exposed to more Swing riots (cumulatively, prior to the election). Their OLS results indicate that “exposure to one additional riot within a radius of 10km from a constituency increased the share of Whigs elected in that constituency by 0.47 percentage points relative to past Whig support.”\footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}, p. 526.} Were a constituency to move from the first quartile of riot exposure to the third, the share of seats won by the Whigs would increase by 5.2 percentage points. Their instrumental-variables results (which can be interpreted as causal) suggest even stronger effects.

Our interpretation is that elites experiencing a higher riot intensity in their own locale (prior to the election of 1831) should have faced higher private costs of property protection and, thus, should have become more likely to support the Whigs. Some might have retrospectively rewarded the Whigs for Lord Melbourne’s vigorous suppression of the Swing riots in the half year he had been Home Secretary.\footnote{\cite{Brock1973}, p. 134.} Others might have anticipated that the Whigs would make good on their earlier promise of police reform, as indeed they began to do early in the first session of the reformed parliament.

Aidt and Franck view their results differently. They assume that elites nearer to Swing rioting perceived a higher threat of rebellion than more distant elites\footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}, p. 506.} and thus interpret their results as supporting Acemoglu and Robinson’s “revolutionary threat” theory.\footnote{\cite{Acemoglu2000, Acemoglu2006}} We see two main problems with this interpretation.

First, it is not clear why elites exposed to more riots could not persuade elites exposed to fewer riots that a serious revolutionary threat existed. In standard models, asymmetric private information can survive only if informed actors cannot credibly communicate with uninformed actors.\footnote{\cite{Fearon1995}} We know that British elites had many opportunities to discuss threats facing the regime. They wrote innumerable letters, read the same newspaper articles and parliamentary reports, and attended the same parliamentary debates. Thus, estimates of the regime’s probability of survival should have been uniform among elites, regardless of how many riots they personally witnessed, unless there was some inability to communicate credibly. Aidt and Franck’s interpretation implicitly relies on the existence of such an impediment but no one has explicitly argued that one existed.\footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}}

Second, had there been a significant surge in the risk of regime overthrow, then investors should have decreased their holdings of regime-dependent securities—such as pound sterling notes, British Consols, and Bank of England stock—as these might become worthless after revolutionaries seized

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}}
\item \footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}, p. 526.}
\item \footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}, p. 134.}
\item \footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}, p. 506.}
\item \footnote{\cite{Acemoglu2000, Acemoglu2006}}
\item \footnote{\cite{Fearon1995}}
\item \footnote{\cite{Aidt2015}}
\end{itemize}
power. The general point is that, when a regime faces an existential threat, its currency, bonds and other financial commitments should impound that threat. For example, the Russian ruble, tsarist debts and government-related stocks all collapsed during the Russian Revolution. In contrast, Britain’s regime-dependent securities followed very different courses during the reform crisis—some holding steady, some appreciating in value, some declining. These varying trends in British securities are not consistent with investors placing bets on regime survival.

The Swing Riots and the New Police

We have argued that the Swing riots increased the private policing costs that elites bore in the unreformed polity, thus increasing their demand for professional police forces paid by a broader tax base. If this account is valid, then areas experiencing more intense rioting should have taken up the Whigs’ police reforms with greater alacrity. In this section, we show that this was the case.

Although all were required to establish police forces by the Municipal Reform Act (1835), how much boroughs spent on their new forces was left up to their respective town councils. In this section, we examine 147 provincial English towns that had no police forces prior to 1836 and reported their expenditures to parliament in 1837-38. We exclude London, which established a force in 1829, as well as 11 provincial towns that established police forces via special acts prior to municipal reform. For each of the included boroughs, we know that they spent nothing on professional police forces before 1835, but (potentially) spent non-zero amounts in 1837 and 1838. We measure our outcome as per capita police-related expenditure \( \text{expenditure}_{it} \) in borough \( i \) and year \( t \).

We model this expenditure as depending on two main factors that affected local property owners’ demand for protection. First, more populous towns tended to have greater urban crime, which we would expect to increase demand for police services. Thus, we include \( \ln(\text{pop}_{it}) \), the logged population of borough \( i \) in the 1831 census, and linearly interpolated for 1837 and 1838 (bracketing by 1831 and 1841). Second, to assess whether towns with more tumultuous hinterlands spent more, we include \( \ln(1 + \text{rioters}_{30km_i}) \), the logged number of Swing offenders within 30km of each borough in 1830-31 (plus 1) interacted with an indicator equal to 1 \( (\text{post}_t) \) in the years after the municipal reform was passed.

All boroughs included in our analysis were on a parallel trend of expenditure on professional police—none at all—prior to 1835. In that year, the Municipal Reform Act required all of them to

---

69 Cox and Saiegh 2019
70 Aidt and Franck 2019 have also investigated how English MPs voted in the division that precipitated the 1831 election. Their analysis does not bear on our hypothesis—that local rioting increased local elites’ private costs, thus generating support for reform—because they measure violent events only at the county level.
71 Our data are from the Abstract of the statement of monies received and expended on account of certain boroughs in England and Wales for 1837, and the same title for 1838. Note that the sample of municipal boroughs in this analysis is very different than the sample of parliamentary boroughs considered in Table 2.
72 Specifically we look at post-1837 since this is the first post-reform year that we have data available. The data on rioters is the total (apprehended) Swing Riot offenders as geolocated from Holland’s data. In ArcGIs, we located municipal boroughs, and calculated the percentage of the geolocated offenders within a given concentric distance from the borough. Note that this measure of rioters is distinct from the number of riot incidents.
73 This is certainly true in terms of expenditure on professional police subject to central supervision. If we loosen the definition of “professional” police to any officer (e.g., a constable or serjeant at mace) given a salary and charged (even if not exclusively) with policing duties, and drop the requirement that they be subject to central supervision, it is still largely true that there was no spending on so-defined police prior to 1835. Examining the first 70 sample boroughs listed in the appendices to the First Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales (1835)), 80% spent nothing on so-defined police, while another 17% spent less
Table 3: Relationship between the swing rioters and urban police expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Police expenditures per capita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(Population)</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1837</td>
<td>0.017***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(1 + Number of rioters 30km) × Post-1837</td>
<td>0.0032***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00093)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(1 + Number of rioters 20km) × Post-1837</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(1 + Number of rioters 10km) × Post-1837</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations (Borough x Year)</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Sqrd</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors robust to clustering at the constituency level presented in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: The above table presents the results from estimating equation $policeExp_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1\ln(population_{it}) + \beta_2post1835t + \beta_3(ln(1 + rioters_{i}) \times post1837t) + \epsilon_{it}$ where $i$ indexes the municipal borough and $t$ indexes the year. The sample of boroughs are those in England that had not yet established police forces in 1835 when the Municipal Corporations Act was passed. The sample of years are 1831, 1837 and 1838. Population is available decennially and linearly interpolated for non-decennial years. The dependent variable is measured as total police-related expenditures per capita ($policeExp$), $\alpha_i$ are municipal borough fixed effects, post1837 is in indicator equal to 1 after 1837 and the passage of the reform (note that this is a pooled cross-sectional specification and we don’t take into account different trends, only levels, after the passage of the reform due to our limited data), and rioters measures the number of Swing Riot offenders (i.e. rioters) detained within a given concentric distance from the municipal borough.

create professional police forces. Insofar as that Act was exogenous to any individual municipal borough, we would not expect the potential outcomes of municipal expenditure to differ across the boroughs. Our specification includes municipality fixed effects that account for any time-invariant municipality-level features that might have affected police expenditures. But we must still assume that no factors, other than population, varied overtime and affected both riot exposure and police expenditure.

Table 3 Model 1, displays our main results (with cluster-robust standard errors). The constant term reveals that boroughs with the smallest populations (1,500) and no nearby riots spent virtually nothing on the police before the reform, confirming that boroughs included in the sample were on a parallel trend. Regarding the relationship between riot exposure and post-reform police expenditures, a natural way to assess their interaction is to measure the extent to which the effect of these two factors together exceeds the effect of each considered individually. In this case, because there were no expenditures on professional police prior to 1835, the combined effect of both factors, the coefficient $\beta_3$, necessarily exceeds the product of the effects of these factors considered separately.

In terms of these factors’ individual effects, the results indicate that boroughs that did not experience any riots within 30km in 1830-31 increased their total per-capita police-related expenditures by 0.017 pounds in the years after the municipal reform was passed. To assess the additive effect of riots, we estimate the predicted post-reform expenditures setting the different rioters measures than 20 pounds per annum. Only Oxford (70 pounds) and Bristol (468 pounds) had larger expenditures.
at their mean values. Next, we compute the marginal effect of riot exposure as the difference between the predicted outcomes and the estimated post-reform expenditures of boroughs without any riots in 1830-31. Consider the case of boroughs where at least one Swing Riot offender was detained within a 30km radius. The mean value of the variable $ln(1 + r_i)$ is 4.19. The associated linear prediction of the total per-capita police-related expenditures for such a representative borough amounts to .0304 pounds (with a .003 standard deviation) in the years after the municipal reform was passed. These results reveal that the post-1837 increase in per-capita police-related expenditures was roughly 77% higher in towns that experienced an average amount of riots within a 30km radius in 1830-31 relative to boroughs without any riot exposure.

In Models 2 and 3, we repeat the analysis using the number of Swing riots within 20km and 10km, respectively. The results are very similar, regardless of which measure of riot intensity we use. In terms of riots’ additive effects the mean values of the variables $ln(1 + r_{i20km})$ and $ln(1 + r_{i10km})$ are 2.86 and 1.31, respectively. The associated linear predictions of the total per-capita police-related expenditures for both types of representative boroughs amount to 0.0307 pounds (with a standard deviation of 0.003) in the years after the municipal reform was passed.

If riots increased fears of rebellion among those elites near enough to personally witness their effects, then such elites could have supported increased funding for the British Army, which was the main institution tasked with quelling rebellion in the unreformed polity. If instead riots increased the private costs born by those elites whose properties were attacked, then affected elites should have become more likely to support the creation of publicly funded police forces. Consistent with this latter hypothesis, we have shown that the local intensity of Swing rioting was associated with higher per-capita police expenditures in the boroughs that established forces after the Municipal Corporations Act (1835).

**Related Literature**

In this section, we consider how our argument relates to the two most prominent political-economic models of the Great Reform Act.

**Suffrage expansions to defuse revolutionary threats**

In the version of their model most often applied to the first Reform Act, Acemoglu and Robinson view temporary threats from below as inducing elites to buy off the middle class with suffrage rights, in order to deter them from allying with the masses in rebellion. We agree with Acemoglu and Robinson that the English elite were deeply concerned with social disorder. However, our account differs from theirs in four main ways.

First, we do not think elites perceived a significant risk that revolutionaries would topple the existing regime. We agree with Gash that British elites were firmly ensconced in power; with Turner that “rural laborers generally lacked the literacy, ideology, and organization to pose a serious threat to the state” and with Cox and Saiegh that investors did not behave as if they saw a significant threat of regime overthrow. Although many spoke of “rebellion” for rhetorical effect, we argue that elites’ main concern was with localized property damage caused by rioting that was mostly non-revolutionary.

---

74 Gash 1979, pp. 5-6.
75 Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006
76 Gash 1979.
78 Cox and Saiegh 2019.
Second, had suffrage rights not been adjusted, we think the middle class would have been unlikely to join the lower classes in rebellion. As Aidt and Franck note, the Swing rioters had no middle class allies organizing them. More generally, Evans has noted that “urban and commercial propertied opinion...feared disorder and threats of revolution from below a sight more than it hated aristocratic rule.” In our view, the middle class had a different exit option: should budgetary and electoral reforms not be granted, they would continue their refusal to support new taxes to fund the civil state. They had been exercising this option through their representatives continually since 1689, so it was very credible that they would continue to do so if the polity remained unreformed.

Third, we do not view the Whigs’ suffrage reform as a stand-alone concession to the middle class to defuse a revolutionary threat. Instead, we argue that suffrage reform was combined with budgetary reform in order to navigate between two threats. The risk of resurgent royal power was addressed by giving parliament control over all civil spending, making the state more transparent and credible. Once that task had been accomplished, suffrage rights were removed from the voting poor and given to the non-voting middle class, in order to ensure that tax-paying property owners controlled elections. The combined budgetary and suffrage reforms thus gave the middle class state institutions that would credibly respond to their interests. They could vote to tax themselves in order to provide such services as they wished. The first major service upon which both the old elites and the middle class agreed was police reform, in order to deal with the threat from below with a substantially enhanced capacity.

Consistent with the position we take, there was no tax-and-transfer redistribution after 1832. National taxes did not go up, nor did the central government increase its provision of public goods. At the local level, taxes did increase to fund the new police. But the main service the police provided—protection of property—confused a benefit on each property owner proportional to the value of his/her property. Since taxes paid were also proportional to property value, Meltzer-Richard redistribution was not even possible at the local level, which is where the police were mostly financed.

**Suffrage expansions to improve the provision of public goods**

As do we, Lizzieri and Persico envision increasing demand for new local public services as driving the English elite’s support for reform. However, the services they focus on are public health and education, whereas we emphasize the police. We view demand for public health and education as unlikely drivers, since spending on neither increased much in the first decade after reform. In contrast, spending on police surged.

Lizzieri and Persico view patronage politics as the main problem preventing the provision of new services and suffrage reform as the cure. They argue that “extension of the franchise caused a shift away from special-interest politicking toward a more public-oriented legislative activity.” The logic was that “increasing the number of voters reduces the fraction of the electorate that can be wooed with ad-hominem promises and therefore, by comparison, increases the electoral value of policies with diffuse benefits.”

---

79 Aidt and Franck 2015, p. 15.  
80 Evans 2000, p. 17.  
81 Cox 2018.  
82 Timmons 2011.  
83 Meltzer and Richard 1981.  
84 Lizzieri and Persico 2004.  
86 Lizzieri and Persico 2004, p. 713.
In contrast to Lizzeri and Persico’s exclusive focus on electoral incentives, we also consider a structural defect in parliament’s financial control—the existence of a large mass of off-budget funds that the executive had full discretion to spend. In our view, the unreformed budgetary and electoral systems were complements in producing corruption. The Civil List provided a ready source of benefits, while the rotten and nomination boroughs provided a ready supply of MPs who could accept such benefits without harming their electoral prospects. Thus, reformers simultaneously abolished discretionary funds in the Civil List and eradicated rotten boroughs in the electoral system.

Conclusion

We have argued the Great Reform Act was part of a package of reforms intended to build a state that would credibly serve middle-class interests. In particular, political reform offered a way to create professional police forces, fund them with taxes, and put them under ministerial supervision, while assuring the gentry that the resulting forces would not become akin to a standing army under Crown control.

The reforms gave voting rights to middle-class citizens for the same reason that firms offer such rights to prospective share-holders. Investors must be able to check executives’ misuse of funds, else they will not voluntarily invest.\(^\text{87}\)

Voting rights alone, however, were insufficient. In the unreformed polity, some domestic public services were still financed by funds that lay outside the annual purview of elected representatives. If this state of affairs continued, then voting rights would be of little value to taxpayers in controlling domestic services, because their elected representatives would lack financial control. Thus, both suffrage and budgetary reforms were essential to attract a new infusion of equity from the middle class.

The necessary trio of reforms were offered in quick succession at the national level. The Grey Ministry first pushed through the Civil List Act (1831), ensuring that MPs would control all public spending. It then pushed through the Great Reform Act (1832), ensuring that the middle class would control MPs’ elections. While the reform bill was still in progress, the Ministry began to consider a scheme for a national police force, before opting to pursue a more decentralized approach.

At the borough level, the Municipal Corporations Act (1835) implemented the analogous reforms all at once. Its budgetary clauses ensured that councilors would control all local spending; its suffrage clauses ensured that middle class voters would control town councilors’ elections; and its police clauses required every borough to establish a professional police force, giving the Home Secretary overall supervisory control.

At the county level, the Whigs enacted budgetary reform (1834), sought electoral reform (1837-38), and then enacted the permissive County Police Act (1839). Within a decade of the initial budgetary-cum-suffrage reforms at the national level in 1831-32, all boroughs and half the counties had established police forces.

A prominent school of democratic theorists, including Acemoglu and Robinson and Boix, views elites facing revolutionary challenges as having two mutually exclusive options: repression or (concessionary) reform.\(^\text{88}\) In our account of Britain’s reform era, the adjustment of suffrage rights

\(^{87}\)Easterbrook and Fischel 1983, Bolton and Dewatripont 2005, p. 527

\(^{88}\)Acemoglu and Robinson 2000, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Boix 2003
was part of a broader effort to enhance the state’s credibility, allowing an expansion of its repressive
capacity vis-a-vis the lower orders. Thus, our account is closer to the political economy literature
stressing the connection between state credibility and military capacity\(^89\) and to theories stressing
the importance of endowing equity investors with voting rights\(^90\).

\(^{89}\) e.g., North and Weingast 1989, Dincecco 2009, Ansell and Samuels 2014, Ferejohn and Rosenbluth 2017
\(^{90}\) e.g., Easterbrook and Fischel 1983, Bolton and Dewatripont 2005, Burzel and Kiser 2002
References

Prentice, Archibald (1851). *Historical sketches and personal recollections of Manchester: Intended to illustrate the progress of public opinion from 1792 to 1832*. London: Charles Gilpin.


Online Appendix

“The Political Economy of Suffrage Reform: The Great Reform Act of 1832”

Appendix is for online publication only.

Appendix Contents

A  Riots and Reform in the Newspaper Corpus ........................................................page 25
B  Repression of Riots ....................................................................................................page 26
1 A. Riots and Reform in the Newspaper Corpus

To more formally evaluate the relationship implied in Figure 1 in the main text of the paper, we consider a simple time series specification in which we relate newspaper corpus mentions of riots, to the total number of bills that considered either suffrage reform or parliamentary reform more generally.

Our simple specification takes the form

\[ reform_t = \alpha + \beta \text{riots}_t + \epsilon_t \]  

(1)

where \( t \) indexes the year; \( reform_t \) is one of two measures, either the count of reform-related bills considered in parliament, or the percentage of documents in the newspaper corpus that mention reform; and \( \text{riots}_t \) is one of two measures, either the newspaper corpus mentions of riot activity (excluding documents that also mention France), or the post-1800 violent incidents from Horn and Tilly [2009].

The correlations are presented in Table A1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proposed Bills</th>
<th></th>
<th>Newspaper Reform Mentions</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \text{riots}_t )</td>
<td>(1) -0.31** (0.13)</td>
<td>(2) -0.073 (0.060)</td>
<td>(4) 0.046 (0.069)</td>
<td>(5) 0.029 (0.064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \Delta(\text{riots}<em>t - \text{riots}</em>{t-1}) )</td>
<td>(3) -0.00029 (0.0015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0032* (0.0019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \text{riots}_t ) (Horn &amp; Tilly)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsv. (Years)</td>
<td>83 82 33 83 82 33</td>
<td></td>
<td>1750-1832 1750-1832 1800-1832 1750-1832 1750-1832 1800-1832</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year range</td>
<td>1750-1832 1750-1832 1800-1832</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* \( p < 0.1 \), ** \( p < 0.05 \), *** \( p < 0.01 \)
2 B. Repression of Riots

As Bend notes, having been out of power for the majority of the early nineteenth century, the Whigs were eager to demonstrate competence in the early months of their minority government. Prime Minister Charles Grey gave Home Secretary Viscount Melbourne ample powers to suppress social unrest, by any and all means: “... Magistrates were advised to swear in special constables; to form local defense associations; military detachments were dispatched to reinforce provincial forces and assisted in the arrest of leaders; royal pardons were offered to supplement local rewards to identify and convict incendiaries; Bow Street officers were dispatched to aid in their detection; and inaction or conciliation to the will of the crowd was severely reprimanded ...”

In addition, the Grey Ministry resorted to a 1812 statute that introduced the death penalty for the destruction of machinery to further suppress any serious disturbances. According to Archibald Prentice’s account:

"On the 9th of January [of 1831], judgement of death was recorded against twenty-three prisoners, for the destruction of a paper machine in Buckinghamshire; In Dorset, on the 11th, against three, for extorting money, and two for robbery; at Norwich fifty-five prisoners were convicted of machine breaking and rioting; at Ipswich three of extorting money; at Petworth twenty-six for machine breaking and rioting; at Gloucester upwards of thirty; at Oxford twenty-nine; and at Winchester out of upwards forty convicted six were left for execution. Four of these were afterwards respited; but two of them were executed on the 15th. At Salisbury, forty-four prisoners were convicted, of whom two were executed on the 25th. In the whole upwards of eight hundred of the rioters were tried ... and all of those who were convicted, with the exception of the four cases mentioned, were sentenced to various terms of transportation and imprisonment."

Finally, as noted in the main body of the paper, the 1828 Yeomanry disbandments, were reversed in 1831 to cope with the Swing Riots (see Figure 2).

---

1 Bend 2018
2 Bend 2018, p. 208.
3 Prentice 1851, pp. 372-373.