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ARTICLE

Suffrage and the Secret Ballot in Eighteenth-Century London Parishes

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Abstract

This article argues that pre-nineteenth-century elections at a sub-national level have an important place in the history of 'modern' voting practices. It does this through a discussion of unusually well-documented election disputes in eighteenth-century London parishes. Previously neglected records of litigation in the ecclesiastical courts reveal that parish elections in this period generated arguments which did not take place at a parliamentary level until the following century: arguments over votes for women, votes for religious minorities, and the secret ballot. Customary electoral rules came under increasing pressure in the early eighteenth century as London's population grew and changed in character. In some parishes, this produced a narrowing of the traditional ratepayer franchise, allowing only male Anglican ratepayers a vote in parish elections. Elsewhere, groups or individual residents successfully pushed for a more inclusive franchise which allowed ratepaying women, Dissenters, and Jews a voice in parochial politics. Similarly mixed practices emerged with regard to electoral procedure: residents who feared the overbearing influence of their neighbours pressed for a secret ballot, while others insisted on the merits of an open poll. These cases illustrate the importance of small-scale local institutions as key sites of innovation in the history of electoral reform.

The history of voting rights and electoral processes has been substantially rewritten in recent years. Gone are the old stories of democracy's forward march through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the inevitable expansion of franchises, the victorious overthrow of oligarchy and corruption. In their place are complex accounts of highly contingent reforms taking place at different times and in different ways across the globe, not always in the name of 'democracy', which in any case had innumerable meanings depending on the particular context.[1] In

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[1] Important examples include: Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, eds., *Women's suffrage in Asia* (London, 2004); Malcolm Crook and Tom Crook, 'Reforming voting practices in a global age: the

Britain, an important aspect of this revised account is the recognition that many important developments took place at the local level before the national. Beginning in the 1830s, a series of statutes authorized wider franchises and more secret voting practices in parishes and municipalities than would be countenanced in parliamentary elections for decades to come.[2]

This article pushes the story back even further into the history of local government; specifically, to a period of electoral experimentation in eighteenth-century London parishes. Parishes were remarkably flexible electoral institutions. This made them a crucial venue for developing new political practices, several of which were later codified by nineteenth-century legislation. In this respect, the gap between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' electoral cultures was not as wide as some scholars have suggested. Protracted debates over suffrage and the secret ballot, often associated with the brave new politics of the nineteenth century – prizing competition over unanimity, secrecy over openness, individual over communal rights – were in fact a significant feature of eighteenth-century parish elections.[3]

Eighteenth-century London was a buzzing hive of electoral activity. As well as hotly contested parliamentary elections, there were elections of sheriffs, aldermen, coroners, common councillors, inquest men, beadles, sextons, constables, surveyors of the highways, overseers of the poor, churchwardens, parish clerks, scavengers, and the lord mayor. The capital, especially the City of London at its heart, was home to 'the most active and experienced electorate to be found anywhere in the country'.[4] Londoners lived in a complex web of overlapping franchises, many of them dating back hundreds of years. In the early eighteenth century, these long-established arrangements came under increasing strain as the city's population became larger and more diverse. At parish level, these conditions gave rise to arguments which did not take

making and remaking of the modern secret ballot in Britain, France and the United States, c.1600–c.1950', *Past & Present*, 212 (2011), pp. 199–237; Justin Willis, Gabrielle Lynch, and Nic Cheeseman, 'Voting, nationhood, and citizenship in late-colonial Africa', *Historical Journal*, 61 (2018), pp. 1113–35; José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, and Eduardo Zimmermann, 'Democracy in Spanish America: the early adoption of universal male suffrage, 1810–1853', *Past & Present*, 256 (2022), pp. 165–202. On 'democracy' in this context, see Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, eds., *Re-imagining democracy in the age of revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850* (Oxford, 2013).

  [2] John A. Phillips, 'England's "other" ballot question: the unnoticed political revolution of 1835', *Parliamentary History*, 24 (2005), pp. 139–63; Sarah Richardson, *The political worlds of women: gender and politics in nineteenth century Britain* (New York, NY, 2013), ch. 4. See also John Prest, *Liberty and locality: parliament, permissive legislation, and ratepayers' democracies in the nineteenth century* (Oxford, 1990).

  [3] For example: Crook and Crook, 'Reforming voting practices', p. 209; Eduardo Posada-Carbó, *Elections before democracy: the history of elections in Europe and Latin America* (New York, NY, 1996); Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet, and Peter Pels, eds., *Cultures of voting: the hidden history of the secret ballot* (London, 2007), pp. 3–5. Some scholars of pre-modern voting also take this view: Serena Ferente, 'Introduction', in Serena Ferente, Lovro Kuncevic, and Miles Pattenden, eds., *Cultures of voting in pre-modern Europe* (Abingdon, 2018), p. 6; Keith M. Brown, 'Toward political participation and capacity: elections, voting, and representation in early modern Scotland', *Journal of Modern History*, 88 (2016), pp. 1–33, at p. 5.

  [4] Edmund Green, Penelope Corfield, and Charles Harvey, eds., *Elections in metropolitan London 1700–1850*, I: *Arguments and evidence* (Bristol, 2013), p. 60.

place in parliament until a century or more later: arguments about votes for women, votes for religious minorities, and the secret ballot.

Some of these arguments were long-standing features of pre-modern electoral politics at the sub-national level. Ballots had been used by some urban corporations for centuries, and members of some (Protestant) religious minorities were often able to vote in both municipal and parliamentary elections. But the eighteenth-century London parish was a particularly favourable context for such practices to be adopted, disputed, extended beyond what was plausible elsewhere, and for all of this to be recorded in detail. A rich body of scholarship on parochial office-holding has demonstrated the importance of the parish as a site of direct participation in government. Parish officers were the indispensable cogs in the machinery of state, turning policy into practice at a local level.[5] Less attention has been paid to the fact that most of these officers were elected, making the parish a key venue for indirect as well as direct political engagement. Churchwardens, overseers, surveyors of the highways, and other parish officers were chosen annually; parish clerks, sextons, lecturers, and even some clergy were elected whenever there was a vacancy. These elections were almost entirely regulated by custom rather than statute or canon law.[6] A particular parish's customary rules could be difficult to pin down, especially when confronted with new categories of voters or novel voting procedures. This made parish elections ripe for litigation. Londoners sued one another over parish elections in Chancery, Queen's Bench, Common Pleas, Quarter Sessions, and the Court of Aldermen, often using more than one court at the same time. More than any of these, however, disputed elections were brought before the ecclesiastical courts.

The papers of the bishop of London's consistory court, the vicar-general's court, and the Court of Arches (which heard appeals from other ecclesiastical courts) contain more details of parish elections in the capital than any other surviving sources.[7] Neglect of this material has led some scholars to conclude that elections at the parish level were dull, rarely contested, and generally not

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[5] Joan Kent, 'The centre and the localities: state formation and parish government in England, circa 1640–1740', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 363–404; Mark Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic', in Tim Harris, ed., *The politics of the excluded, c. 1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001); Henry French, *The middle sort of people in provincial England, 1600–1750* (Oxford, 2007).

[6] Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century courts repeatedly upheld the supremacy of custom in the election of parish officers: Nutter v St Mary Somerset (1606), reported in British Library (BL), Add. MS 25205, fo. 41; case of St Aphage, Canterbury (1610/11) 13 Co. Rep. 70, 77 *English Reports* (*ER*) 1479; Warner's case (1619) Cro. Jac. 532, 79 *ER* 546; Evelin's case (1639) Cro. Car. 551, 79 *ER* 1074; Stoughton v Reynolds (1734) Strange 1046, 93 *ER* 1023; Berry v Banner (1791) Peake 212, 170 *ER* 133.

[7] Some of these records have been used in case-studies of politics in particular parishes: Mark Goldie and John Spurr, 'Politics and the Restoration parish: Edward Fowler and the struggle for St Giles Cripplegate', *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994), pp. 572–96; Peter Lake, *The boxmaker's revenge: 'orthodoxy', 'heterodoxy' and the politics of the parish in early Stuart London* (Manchester, 2001). The only previous general study of election litigation in ecclesiastical courts is W. T. Morgan, 'Disputes before the consistory courts of St Davids concerning elections of churchwardens', *Journal of the Historical Society of the Church in Wales*, 3 (1953), pp. 93–8. Morgan's analysis was restricted by his reliance on Act Books, which contain far less detail than the depositions used here.

worth much attention.[8] This article draws on the records of 29 of the best-documented election disputes, which generated a total of 331 depositions covering well over a thousand pages.[9] Most of these cases were heard in the early eighteenth century, a period of intense argument over corruption and oligarchy in the government of London parishes. Very few parish election cases were heard after 1740, perhaps due to a wider decline in the volume of ecclesiastical litigation.[10] Londoners continued to dispute parish elections at common law, though this rarely produced such extensive documentation.[11]

Previous scholarship on eighteenth-century parochial politics has been dominated by the long shadows of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who described a contest between 'select' and 'open' vestries in London as a struggle between oligarchy and democracy.[12] More recent studies have uncovered the pre-history of this contest in the seventeenth century, the relationship between select vestries and the creation of new parishes, and the significance of campaigns against select vestries in the development of Westminster as a centre of oppositional ratepayer politics.[13] What follows is an attempt to move away from the legacy of the Webbs and connect the electoral life of parishes to wider political histories in a new way. Under the particular circumstances of early eighteenth-century London, parishes became venues for intense electoral argument and innovation. A century later, some of the practices adopted in this period became the statutory norms of local democracy. More broadly, the London parish provided a seedbed for ideas which later emerged as central demands in movements for electoral reform.

I

The political culture of eighteenth-century London parishes was dominated by ratepayers. Most parishes operated on a ratepayer franchise. Some of the

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[8] Peter Earle, *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London, 1660–1730* (London, 1989), p. 263; Brian Chapman Dudley, '"The constitution of this realm": political decision-making, office-holding, and religious change in England's parishes, 1559–1700 (Ph.D. thesis, University of Virginia, 2013), pp. 228–30.

[9] On depositional evidence, see Frances E. Dolan, *True relations: reading, literature, and evidence in seventeenth-century England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013), pp. 111–53.

[10] The London consistory court heard only three more parish election cases in the remainder of the eighteenth century. On the decline of ecclesiastical litigation, see R. B. Outhwaite, *The rise and fall of the English ecclesiastical courts, 1500–1860* (Cambridge, 2007).

[11] For example: Mary O'Connor, 'Politics, parliament and the vestry: a study of St Leonards Shoreditch' (MRes thesis, King's College London, 2016), pp. 35–46; Arthur Burns, '"My unfortunate parish": Anglican urban ministry in Bethnal Green, 1809–c.1850', in Melanie Barber, Gabriel Sewell, and Stephen Taylor, eds., *From the Reformation to the permissive society* (Woodbridge, 2010).

[12] Beatrice Webb and Sidney Webb, *English local government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: the parish and the county* (London, 1906), pp. 3–276.

[13] Julia F. Merritt, 'Contested legitimacy and the ambiguous rise of vestries in early modern London', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 25–45; Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London lives: poverty, crime and the making of a modern city, 1690–1800* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 148–57; Gillian Williamson, '"From behind the counter": the 1742 select vestry campaign', *London Journal*, 42 (2017), pp. 218–37.

larger parishes, especially in Westminster, were governed by select vestries, but even they often allowed all ratepayers to vote on major decisions or participate in the election of certain officers. About three-quarters of the capital's parishes were governed by open vestries of all ratepayers, particularly the smaller parishes of the City of London where some residents also participated in various forms of civic government. Given the sheer number of elections involved, with numerous officers chosen every year in every parish, the ratepayer franchise was probably the most frequently exercised voting right in eighteenth-century London.

What was the ratepayer franchise? Put simply, all those who paid their taxes towards relief of the parish poor and repair of the parish church had a right to vote. Taxation and representation went hand in hand, following the Roman principle *quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet* – what touches all (in financial terms) should be considered and approved by all. Anyone who contributed to parochial funds had a right to influence how they were raised and spent, either directly by voting at meetings to fix the rates or agree on expenditure, or indirectly by voting for officers who managed these matters on their behalf. Ratepayers were also supposed to be financially independent and therefore immune to electoral bribery or coercion.[14] This made them an attractive constituency to some political radicals. The small number of scot-and-lot parliamentary boroughs which granted suffrage to all ratepayers became centres of radical opposition in the second half of the eighteenth century, Westminster being the most spectacular example. The City of London, in which ratepaying freemen elected aldermen and common councillors, periodically provided a similarly supportive climate for radical demands.[15] Since the mid-seventeenth century, there had been occasional calls from Levellers and radical Whigs (including John Locke) for a parliament elected largely or entirely by parish ratepayers.[16] In the land-based hierarchy of Hanoverian Britain, urban ratepayers in particular symbolized an alternative starting point for doing politics.

Like all suffrage qualifications, ratepaying enfranchised some people by excluding others. Ratepayers were predominantly middle-aged men of the middling sort. Those exempt from parochial taxes on the basis of poverty had no say in parish elections. Anyone who received rather than contributed to poor relief was absolutely prohibited from voting. Perhaps most importantly, as rates were collected on a house-by-house basis, only heads of household could be ratepayers; married women, servants, apprentices, and children living with their parents were all subsumed into their domestic superior's vote. Voters' credentials were checked by reference to rate-books which listed the names of household heads but none of their domestic subordinates. In this

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[14] On ratepayer 'independence', see Jonah Miller, 'Patricians, plebeians, and parishioners: parish elections and social conflict in eighteenth-century Chelsea', *Social History*, 47 (2022), pp. 372–94.

[15] George Rudé, *Hanoverian London, 1714–1808* (2nd edn, Stroud, 2003), pp. 162–82.

[16] Mark Knights, 'John Locke and post-revolutionary politics: electoral reform and the franchise', *Past & Present*, 213 (2011), pp. 41–86.

way, the majority of residents in a parish were disqualified by their age, gender, or social status.

The division between householders and everyone else was reflected in the everyday language of parochial belonging. In depositions given to the church courts, the word 'parishioner' was not a neutral label given to anyone resident in a parish; it referred specifically to heads of household. Deponents were asked to say how long they had lived in a parish and – not the same thing – how long they had been a parishioner there. For example, a carpenter from East London stated that he 'ab[ou]t thirty Years last past has lived & now lives in the parish of St Mary Whitechappell afores[ai]d & served his apprenticeship there and this Dep[onen]t has kept a house and been a Parish[ione]r & Inhabitant of the s[ai]d parish ab[ou]t twenty four Years'. During the six years of his apprenticeship, he did not consider himself a 'parishioner' or 'inhabitant'. It was only when he began to 'keep a house' that he rose to that status. A coachman told the London consistory court 'he hath been a Parishioner and Inhabitant of the said Parish of Laurence Poultney [sic] for the space of eight years last paying Scott and bearing Lott & hath lived in the neighbourhood about twenty five or twenty six years'. For seventeen or eighteen years, he had 'lived in the neighbourhood' without being a 'parishioner'. When a Chelsea churchwarden opened an election by proclaiming 'lett none poll but what are Parishioners', he meant that only householding and ratepaying residents of the parish were allowed to vote.[17]

Unsurprisingly then, heads of household also dominated ecclesiastical litigation over parish elections. As Alexandra Shepard has shown, deponents to the church courts in this period were relatively representative of the overall population in demographic terms: about half of those who deposed at the London consistory court in this period were women and the majority of deponents were under forty-five years old.[18] By contrast, those who deposed in parish election cases were almost all men and substantially older than the population at large. Of the 331 people who testified in the cases considered here, only eight were women, none of whom had voted in the elections they described.[19] The average age of witnesses in the consistory court cases was 44.8, in cases heard before the vicar-general it was 46.8, and in cases at the Court of Arches it was 54. Most of these people had lived in their parish for a long time; the average lengths of residence among deponents to each court were 20.1 years, 21.1 years, and 31.2 years, respectively. One reason for this skew towards older witnesses of long local standing was that courts often wanted information on previous elections to assess litigants' claims about parochial custom. But they also wanted details about what had taken

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[17] London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), DL/C/0268, deposition of Isaac Arters, 25 June 1731, fo. 136; DL/C/0636, deposition of Joseph Minns, 17 Feb. 1740, fo. 386; DL/C/0634, Robert Hopperton, 2 Feb. 1721, fos. 39–44v.

[18] Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for oneself: worth, status, & the social order in early modern England* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 19, 22–3.

[19] The eight women were: a servant and her mistress who witnessed a fight between two candidates, the former servant of a male ratepayer, three wives or widows of vestrymen, a male sexton's daughter and his wife, both of whom ran errands to facilitate their parish's elections.

place in the particular election at issue, so the profile of deponents had to substantially overlap with the profile of those who actually took part.

The basic effect of the ratepayer franchise was to make parish elections the preserve of patriarchs. And yet, in the early eighteenth century, it was also a source of surprisingly radical innovation. London's changing demography, its increasingly complex housing arrangements, and growing religious diversity all raised questions about exactly who counted as a ratepayer and which kinds of ratepayer should be permitted to take part in parish politics.

II

The early eighteenth century was not the fastest phase of London's growth, but between 1700 and 1750 the capital's population still expanded by about 15 per cent.[20] This expansion had several effects which are important here. A growing mismatch between the number of people and the number of houses, combined with new building styles developed after the fire of 1666, led to the rise of increasingly complex accommodation arrangements. The equation of one house with one household and therefore one ratepaying voter could not always be sustained under these circumstances. A more fundamental challenge came from the rise of female-headed households. Growing numbers of single and widowed women who paid their own rates laid claim to ratepayer status and the political rights that went with it. Finally, London was also becoming more and more religiously diverse. Parishes, as units of both spiritual and secular administration, symbolized the unity of church and state. The capital's burgeoning communities of religious minorities – especially Dissenters and Jews – strained the relationship between ratepaying and membership of an Anglican community, sometimes to breaking point.

More and more Londoners lived in lodgings or other kinds of house-sharing arrangements. Analysis of the 1695 marriage duty tax returns carried out by the 'People in Place' project revealed 'densely packed units of housing, with multiple and separate households cohabiting and sharing entrances, stairwells, yards, and cooking and washing amenities.'[21] Arrangements like these made it more difficult to say who was a ratepaying householder and who was not. In one disputed parish election, two men's voting credentials were questioned because they 'did live both in one house' and paid the poor rates 'jointly between them'. Did this give them two votes, one shared vote, or none? One of their neighbours argued they should both be allowed to vote because there were 'distinct doorways' to the parts of the house where each man lived.[22] Business partners presented a similar difficulty where they shared

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[20] E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy 1650–1750', *Past & Present*, 37 (1967), p. 44.

[21] Vanessa Harding et al., *People in place: families, households and housing in early modern London* (London, 2008); Gillian Williamson, *Lodgers, landlords, and landladies in Georgian London* (London, 2021); Mark Merry and Philip Baker, '"For the house her self and one servant": family and household in late seventeenth-century London', *London Journal*, 34 (2009), pp. 205–32, at p. 211.

[22] LMA, DL/C/0634, deposition of Cater Fowler, 19 Jan, 1721, fos. 27–30; deposition of Robert Hopperton, 2 Feb. 1721, fos. 39–44v.

taxable premises. An act passed in 1725 addressed this problem for wardmote and City of London elections but not for parishes. Nonetheless, its provisions – which restricted house-sharers and business partners to one vote between them – seem to have been adopted by some London parishes in subsequent elections. As one churchwarden announced at the start of a 1726 election, 'of Two partners in Trade one only should have a vote'.[23]

Other questions of suffrage were not so easily resolved. Even where it was clear who the head of a household was, the general profile of that person was changing, especially in terms of gender and religion. London's population balance tilted in the later seventeenth century to make it a majority-female city. Expanding opportunities in the textile trades and service industries allowed more women to set up households of their own and the rapid growth of the navy meant many households, especially in the eastern riverside districts, were headed by women whose sailor husbands were absent or dead.[24] At the start of an election in St Botolph Bishopsgate, one resident asked the churchwarden 'whether singlewomen paying Scott & Lott had a right to poll'. After some discussion – perhaps with the ratepaying women who were present at the time – the churchwarden announced that they did have that right. On the other hand, at an election in St James Clerkenwell the churchwarden announced that everyone who paid the poor rates had a right to vote, 'women excepted'. A local gentleman 'objected and insisted that women should have a Right to poll and thereupon the said words (women excepted) were struck out'. Often, the only evidence of women voting comes from men complaining about it. At an election in St Dunstan in the West, the disappointed losing candidate claimed that 'many women voted', all of them ratepaying householders who, he believed, had no right to vote.[25] In other parishes, especially when there was no dispute about the result of an election, ratepaying women's votes may have been counted without controversy.

Votes for women were not entirely new. Systematically excluded from civic elections in favour of freemen, women were able to participate in parliamentary elections where the franchise was attached to property ownership. Freeholding women had sometimes voted in parliamentary elections until the mid-seventeenth century.[26] In the eighteenth century, they were restricted

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[23] Nicholas Rogers, 'The City Elections Act (1725) reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, 100 (1985), pp. 604–17; LMA, DL/C/0263, deposition of Thomas Bray, 25 Oct. 1726, fos. 120–1. See also DL/C/0268, deposition of Thomas Budgen, 8 Nov. 1731, fos. 148–51.

[24] Roger Finlay, *Population and metropolis: the demography of London, 1580–1650* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 139–42; Laura Gowing, *Ingenious trade: women and work in seventeenth-century London* (Oxford, 2021); Craig Spence, *London in the 1690s: a social atlas* (London, 2000), p. 77.

[25] LMA, DL/C/0251, deposition of William Ford, 30 Mar. 1710, fo. 453; DL/C/0263, deposition of John Honeycott, 26 Oct. 1726, fos. 123–6; DL/C/0200, personal answer of Ralph Mairo, 9 June 1726, fo. 282v.

[26] Patricia Crawford, 'Public duty, conscience, and women in early modern England', in John Morrill, Paul Slack, and Daniel Woolf, eds., *Public duty and private conscience in seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 65–7. In 1640, women's votes were discounted in the Suffolk parliamentary election 'although they might in law of have been allowed': BL, Harley MS 158, fo. 285v.

to voting through male proxies or acting as carriers of votes between men.[27] In London parishes, ratepaying women's status as voters was never as secure as their male counterparts. Appeals to blunt misogyny, or assumptions about the proper division between public and private life, could easily outweigh the principle that ratepaying and householding qualified a person to vote regardless of gender. In St Michael Queenhithe, for example, ratepayers were routinely summoned to parish elections by notes left at their houses by the parish clerk, with the exception of 'Widdowes who are Housekeepers & Parishion[er]s who nev[er] are summoned to any Vestry'.[28] In 1738, in a case first discovered by Hilda Smith, the election of a woman as sexton of St Botolph without Aldersgate was disputed on the grounds that she had only won on the strength of votes from ratepaying women. Her opponent sued in King's Bench, arguing that 'decency and the policy of the law exclude women from popular elections'. Against this was the unity of taxation and representation: 'those who contributed to maintain the elected should be electors'. The justices, after long consultation, decided the women's votes should be counted. Their reasoning, however, was that offices like that of sexton were essentially private rather than public, so there could be no harm in allowing women to participate in choosing them: 'this is considered as a private trust in the women, they having interest, as parishioners, in these things'. As one of the justices quickly pointed out, 'this cannot determine that women may vote for members of Parliament, as that choice requires an improved understanding, which women are not supposed to have'.[29] Women who voted in parish elections did so as ratepayers with a financial 'interest' in parish affairs, not as individuals with an abstract right to citizenship.

Householding women continued to vote in some parish elections and be excluded from others throughout the eighteenth century and, as Sarah Richardson has shown, into the nineteenth.[30] This made it possible, with little fanfare, to formalize the enfranchisement of women in parish politics by statute in 1831, just a year before women were formally excluded from voting in parliamentary elections for the first time by the 1832 Reform Act. The permissive 1831 Vestries Act stipulated that no one should be permitted to vote in a parish election 'unless he *or she* shall have been rated to the Relief of the Poor'. The same gender-neutral ratepaying criteria were extended to elections of boards of guardians under the New Poor Law of 1834 and confirmed for parish elections in 1855.[31] Ratepaying women's right to vote in parish elections thus gained legislative support even before the better-known enfranchisements in relation to municipal corporations and school boards in 1869 and 1870. It

[27] Elaine Chalus, 'Women, electoral privilege and practice in the eighteenth century', in Katherine Gleadle and Sarah Richardson, eds., *Women in British politics, 1760–1860* (Basingstoke, 2000).
[28] LMA, DL/C/0251, deposition of James Playstead, 8 Nov. 1709, fos. 376–80.
[29] Olive v Ingram (1738–9) 7 Mod. 263, 87 *ER* 1230; Hilda Smith, 'Women as sextons and electors: King's Bench and the precedents for women's citizenship', in Hilda Smith, ed., *Women writers and the early modern British political tradition* (Cambridge, 1998).
[30] Richardson, *Political worlds of women*, pp. 89–93.
[31] 1 & 2 Will. IV c. 60, s. 7; 4 & 5 Will. IV c. 76 ss. 38–41; 18 & 19 Vict. c. 120 s. 15.

seems likely that this resulted, in part, from the fact that women had already been voting in some London parishes for over a century.

In those parishes which excluded women from the franchise, female rate-payers acted as vehicles for the transfer of voting rights between men, as they did in some parliamentary boroughs.[32] In St Botolph without Aldgate, men could qualify as ratepayers if they had recently married women who 'were Widdows or unmarried Women at the time of makeing the said Rate [and] are set downe and rated'. Parishes which rejected female participation altogether were, in terms of gender, even more exclusive than those governed by select vestries. Where officers were chosen by a small number of men, it was possible for their wives to wield some influence. Anna Lewin, married to a vestryman in St Mary le Strand, recommended her preferred candidate for parish clerk to 'one of the principal Inhabitants of the said parish' who set about arranging the appointment accordingly.[33]

London parishes were similarly varied in their treatment of ratepayers who were not Anglicans. The Corporation and Test Acts which barred Dissenters from civic and military offices did not apply to parochial office-holding, still less parochial voting. Nor did their later successor the Occasional Conformity Act. The Toleration Act exempted those who could not swear oaths to the Church of England from service as churchwarden, but again said nothing about participation in the process of choosing parish officers.[34] Indeed, even in parliamentary and corporate elections, Dissenters who could not stand for office were often able to vote.[35] Unlike urban corporations or parliamentary constituencies, however, parishes were key units of Anglicanism as well as administration. This, combined with the growth of religious minorities in eighteenth-century London, produced extended arguments over the electoral rights of non-Anglicans – not only Dissenters but also Catholics and, most strikingly, Jews.

In 1715, the losing candidate in an election for lecturer of the combined parishes of St Michael Royal and St Martin Vintry claimed that over half of his opponent's votes had come from Dissenters. This rendered them invalid because, he argued, when the minister 'gave leave to the parishioners to Choose a Lecturer...he did not intend that the Dissenters within the said parishes should intermeddle in the said Choice'. The minister's views on this subject became a matter of dispute, with some claiming to have 'heard him declare that they had no right'. Those who wanted the Dissenters' votes to be counted pointed out that many Dissenters, despite not attending church, contributed to the maintenance of the lectureship and therefore ought to have a voice in choosing lecturers. Even those who vehemently opposed this

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[32] Chalus, 'Women, electoral privilege and practice', pp. 15–23.

[33] LMA, DL/C/0199, personal answers of William Barwell, 27 June 1713, fo. 314v; DL/C/0258, deposition of Anna Lewin, 27 June 1719, fo. 275v.

[34] 13 Car. II St. 2 c. 1 (1661); 25 Car. II c. 2 (1673) s. 15; 10 Ann. c. 6 (1711); 1 W. & M. c. 18 (1689) s. 7.

[35] James E. Bradley, *Religion, revolution and English radicalism: non-conformity in eighteenth-century politics and society* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 91–120; Paul Halliday, *Dismembering the body politic: partisan politics in England's towns, 1650–1730* (Cambridge, 1998).

argument admitted that, according to parochial custom, 'Dissenters paying to Church & Poor have a right to vote or poll at the Election of Churchwardens & other parish Officers.' It is unclear which (if any) of these arguments proved decisive before the ecclesiastical court.[36]

Dissent was sometimes a smokescreen for other causes of division. It was not unusual for deponents on both sides of a disputed election to accuse the other of benefiting from Dissenting votes.[37] Even where the accusations were all on one side, this did not always indicate a genuine doctrinal polarization. As one witness sagely observed, if a candidate 'had more votes or pollers for him or on his side who were Dissenters from the Church of England…hee would not then have made objections ag[ains]t Dissenters as haveing no right'. It seems likely that Dissenters voted in some parishes without controversy, just as they sometimes sat in vestries and held parish offices.[38]

Other kinds of religious heterodoxy may have found fewer enclaves of acceptance. Litigation over an election in St Botolph without Aldgate produced long lists of those voters alleged to be Dissenters, Catholics, or Jews. One candidate insisted that none of these votes should be counted. The other argued that Quakers and other Dissenting groups 'have & had a Legall Right to vote & poll' but that Catholics and Jews 'have not a right'.[39] Since formal readmission in the mid-seventeenth century, London's growing Jewish population had been concentrated in particular parishes, especially around Aldgate and Dukes Place. This may explain what several residents of St James Dukes Place meant when they said it was customary for potential parish clerks to be nominated by 'the most & chiefest of the *English* Inhabitants'.[40] Jews were prevented from voting in parliamentary and civic elections by the requirement to take an oath 'upon the true faith of a Christian', but there was no general practice of demanding oaths before voting at a parish level, leaving the legal situation unclear.[41]

One Jewish ratepayer's attempt to vote in the election of a parish clerk gave rise to a remarkable argument about the franchise in parochial politics. In March 1728, the rector of St Andrew Undershaft announced that although he was entitled under canon law to choose a new parish clerk himself, he would allow the parishioners to make their own choice 'for this Turn only'. Candidates were put forward and an election took place under the supervision of Robert Myre, a churchwarden of French descent. Two ratepaying Jewish

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[36] Lambeth Palace Library (LPL), VH 77/45/3, libel of Webster against Bainbrigg, 30 June 1715; VH 77/45/4/3, deposition of William Broadway, 19 July 1715; VH/45/6/1, deposition of Henry Freeman, 22 July 1715.

[37] For example: LMA, DL/C/0243, Bowler con Wilson (1691); DL/C/0268, Smith con Simpson & Smith (1713).

[38] LMA, DL/C/0253, deposition of Robert Dennett, 2 July 1713, fo. 254v; Simon Dixon, 'Quakers and the London parish, 1670–1720', *London Journal*, 32 (2007), pp. 229–49.

[39] LMA, DL/C/0199, personal answers of William Barwell, 27 June 1713, fo. 313v; Charles Dymon, 22 June 1713, fo. 317.

[40] Jacob Selwood, *Diversity and difference in early modern London* (Farnham, 2010), p. 131; LMA, DL/C/0239, deposition of Francis Beech, 17 Feb. 1679, fo. 133v; deposition of John Webster, 17 Feb. 1679, fo. 136. My italics.

[41] Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), p. 113.

residents, Abraham and Isaac Francia, came to the church to cast their votes.[42] Myre refused to allow this, and the papers of the consistory court provide two very different versions of what happened next.

According to Myre, Isaac Francia behaved himself 'in a very rude and quarrelsome manner', calling the churchwarden 'Scoundrell' and other unpleasant names. Myre said he calmly explained that 'Isaac Francia being a Jew had not a Right to vote.' When Francia insisted, Myre 'replyed in a civill manner I will neither refuse or admitt you but will if you agree put it to the Vestry'. A quick show of hands clearly indicated that those present did not think Francia should be allowed to vote and there the matter ended, apart from a little more abusive language from Francia. According to Francia himself, the abuse was all in the other direction. Myre 'refused to take his Poll severall times' on the grounds that he was Jewish, then 'p[re]tended by his own Authority to put it to the vote' despite protests from Francia and others. When he continued to press his claim, Myre called him 'an impudent Jew Fellow, a troublesome Jew, and a sorry fellow and threatned...to fight or beat him when he gott out of the Church'.[43] Rumours circulated about Myre calling Francia an 'Impudent Jew' and threatening to beat him, as well as about Francia's supposed reply: 'a Jew was as good as a Frenchman'. One of those present at the election was said to have told Francia 'he had no Busynesse there Why did not he get him to his Synagouge [sic] he was a troublesome Jew'.[44]

Despite this and other instances of blunt antisemitism, Francia insisted that his contribution to the poor rates gave him an inalienable right to vote. Even after the show of hands had gone decisively against him, he argued that 'it signified nothing putting such Question for no one could give his Right or property away and he had a Right and property to give his Vote at the s[ai]d Election'.[45] He repeated this argument when, almost two weeks after the election, the rector was asked to settle the ongoing controversy by declaring 'whether in the Concession Hee made for Choice of Parish Clerk Hee intended that any besides the Christian Parishion[er]s should bee admitted to have any Vote'. He answered that he had not intended to grant any such latitude, but this was irrelevant to Francia, who thought 'his Right to poll was grounded as being a parishioner paying all Dues and his Father being naturalised'.[46] Nothing said or done by any rector or churchwarden could interfere with this kind of 'Right'.

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[42] LMA, P69/AND4/B/001/MS04118/002, vestry minute book of St Andrew Undershaft, fo. 10. I have found no connection between these Francias and Francis Francia, who was acquitted of Jacobite treason at the Old Bailey in 1717: *The tryal of Francis Francia* (London, 1716 (old style)).

[43] LMA, DL/C/0200, personal answers of Robert Myre, 11 July 1729, fo. 212v; personal answers of Isaac Francia, 13 June 1729, fo. 211–211v.

[44] LMA, DL/C/0265, deposition of Samuel Freeman, 28 Aug. 1728, fos. 146–147v; DL/C/0266, deposition of Philip van den Enden, 13 Nov. 1729, fo. 87v; DL/C/0266, deposition of Timothy Motteny, 29 Oct. 1729, fo. 83v.

[45] LMA, DL/C/0265, deposition of Thomas Barnes, 28 Aug. 1728, fos. 148–149v.

[46] LMA, P69/AND4/B/001/MS04118/002, 12; DL/C/0265, deposition of William Smith, 31 Aug. 1728, fos. 150–151v.

Francia may have been influenced by laws allowing the children of natura-lized 'aliens' to inherit their property, or by debates about the status of 'stran-gers' and their children in the corporation of London.[47] Regardless of how he got there, Francia produced the strongest articulation of a ratepayer franchise which could accommodate the capital's growing diversity. Like the disputes over ratepaying women's votes, arguments about Jews and Dissenters put pres-sure on the custom of ratepayer suffrage. In some parishes, that custom was over-ridden by hostility to the participation of anyone other than Anglican (or at least Christian) patriarchs. In others, people like Isaac Francia raised cus-tom to the level of a right: those who paid for parish government, whatever their gender or religion, had a right to decide who carried it out. Needless to say, such an inclusive franchise at the parliamentary or civic level was barely conceivable at the time.

III

Isaac Francia's declaration of rights is the most eye-catching aspect of the 1728 St Andrew Undershaft election dispute, but it may not have been the root of the matter. In the late 1720s, St Andrew's was one of several parishes rocked by controversy over a highly contentious piece of electoral technology: the secret ballot.

Balloting was familiar to many eighteenth-century Londoners as an alterna-tive to voting by show of hands or open poll (in which voters announced their preference aloud for clerks to record). It had been ordinary electoral practice in some urban corporations and livery companies since the sixteenth century, and there were sporadic calls for balloting in the election of MPs from the 1690s.[48] Balloting had well-known precedents in ancient Rome, biblical Israel, and the labyrinthine electoral procedures of the Venetian republic. Even some private organizations used ballots to choose their officers, including the East India Company and the Bank of England. In 1705, an anonymous pamphleteer argued that it would be no great shock to introduce balloting in parliamentary elections because 'the Ballot is practis'd already in part amongst us, in lesser bodies'.[49]

Malcolm and Tom Crook have distinguished between this long history of bal-loting and 'the modern secret ballot' of the nineteenth century, which involved standardized ballot papers and screens or compartments to ensure secrecy when filling them in. Prior to this, ballots in municipal and other local elections were often signed by voters, undermining any idea of anonymity.[50] In

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[47] 11 Will. III c. 6 (1700); Selwood, *Diversity and difference*, pp. 113–14.

[48] Charles Gross, 'The early history of the ballot in England', *American Historical Review*, 3 (1898), pp. 456–63; Mark Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation in later Stuart Britain: partisanship and political culture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 188–9. See also Hilary J. Bernstein, 'The benefit of the ballot? Elections and influence in sixteenth-century Poitiers', *French Historical Studies*, 24 (2001), pp. 621–52.

[49] James Harrington Jr, *The benefit of the ballot: with the nature and use thereof particularly in the republick of Venice* (London, 1680); *The patriots proposal to the people of England concerning the ballot: the best way of choosing their representatives in parliament* (London, 1705), p. 7.

[50] Crook and Crook, 'Reforming voting practices, p. 201.

eighteenth-century parish elections, however, secrecy does seem to have been the central idea associated with balloting, both by its proponents (as a guarantee against undue influence) and its detractors (as a cloak for electoral fraud).

Balloting in parish politics was a novelty of the 1720s. The lack of anything beyond customary regulation allowed it to be adopted suddenly and disputed vehemently by those who were caught off guard. From 1726 to 1729, four bouts of litigation over parish elections involving the secret ballot were brought before the consistory court. It is not clear why the ballot emerged as an alternative electoral method at this particular moment. The 1720s witnessed what Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker have called a 'radical re-crafting of the administrative landscape of London' through the creation of new parishes, new Watch Acts, and the rapid spread of parish-run workhouses. But only one of the four parishes involved in litigation over the secret ballot was a new creation, none of them received Watch Acts, and none had yet founded workhouses at the time of the elections in question.[51] There is no obvious connection between the four parishes or their disputed elections – St Dunstan in the West and St George in the East needed new lecturers, St Andrew Undershaft chose a new parish clerk, and St James Clerkenwell elected a new curate. Each election was organized under a different kind of parish constitution, though all were ultimately conducted on a ratepayer franchise. In all four parishes, however, those who called for ballots appear to have been motivated by the same thing as modern advocates of balloting over other electoral procedures: fears of undue influence in an open vote.

St Dunstan in the West was governed by a select vestry which stretched back to 1601. Like many others, this select vestry had been abolished during the civil wars and restored alongside the monarchy and the established church in the 1660s. In 1714, a dispute between the parish's scavengers and its churchwardens over expenses for a lavish dinner resulted in accusations of systemic corruption in the secular courts and in print.[52] In 1717, the old select vestry was 'sett aside by the Lord Chief Justice' and replaced one whose members were annually elected by a meeting of the ratepayers. This hybrid constitution was further complicated by the existence of a trust which managed a bequest left to the parish by one Dr Thomas White in the early seventeenth century. One of the purposes of the bequest was to fund a parish lectureship, and this had attracted a string of high-profile candidates, some of them going on to become bishops. The choice of lecturer was originally made by select vestrymen doubling as trustees of Dr White's gift, but trusteeships had then descended by personal inheritance and by the 1720s no one was entirely sure who the trustees were. This, combined with the 1717 switch to an elected vestry – described by one of its members as 'only a Committee appointed by the

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[51] Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London lives*, p. 148; Timothy Hitchcock, 'The English workhouse: a study in institutional poor relief in selected counties, 1696–1750' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1985), Appendix.

[52] Webb and Webb, *Parish and county*, p. 191; *The art of being honest for a little time, or the method of making parish rates to chastise the inhabitants* (London, 1714); *Historical account of the constitution of the vestry of St Dunstan's in the West* (London, 1714).

parish' – meant that when the parish's lecturer retired in 1726 it was not obvious how to decide on a successor.[53]

At a meeting of the elected vestry, several members argued that 'the Right of choosing a Lecturer was in the parishoners [sic] in general'. This was vehemently opposed by Colonel Robert Gower, an apothecary who had enriched himself 'by Trade by Moneys in the Funds and by Rents and Incomes'. Gower claimed to be one of the trustees of Dr White's bequest and was so enraged by the prospect of an election that he demanded to have his name 'struck out of the Vestry Book & he did not design to come any more there'. Nonetheless, notice was given for a general meeting of the parishioners – that is, the ratepayers – to choose a new lecturer. About a hundred people attended and agreed, by show of hands, to hold an election on a ratepayer franchise. There was then a 'Dispute ab[ou]t voteing & Ballotting & the Managem[en]t of the s[ai]d Election'. The same Colonel Gower who had opposed an election was even more firmly opposed to the use of ballots. None of the deponents recorded what he said, or the contents of 'a speech shewing the Benefit of Ballotting' made by another resident, but those present decided (again by show of hands) that the ballot was preferable to an open poll. A date was set, and over the course of two days more than five hundred enfranchised parishioners came to the vestry room, had their names checked against the books of poor rates, and 'gave in papers or Ballots containing the Name of the said Candidates as they were for'. These ballots were put into several glasses including one specifically 'for the Ladys' – 'widows & Inhabitants & Housekeepers w[i]thin the said parish' who 'pay to Church & poor'.[54]

No objections were made during the electoral process, but when the results were in the losing candidate – who was also the parish curate, and who had the support of Colonel Gower – claimed votes cast by ballot could not be trusted. The fact that most ballots only included the name of the chosen candidate (not the voter) made it impossible to carry out an effective scrutiny. According to the losing candidate, 'many persons did vote who did not pay to the Church Rate' and 'many women voted...who this R[esp]ond[ent] is advised cannot have a right to vote'. Unsurprisingly, supporters of the winner argued that only genuine ratepayers had been able to ballot, though some of them did seem a little uneasy about votes cast by female ratepayers, insisting that they 'did not introduce any Woman whatsoever to the said Election'. They did their best to downplay the potentially radical implications of the ballot; freed from the overpowering gaze of parish elites like Colonel Gower, all sorts of people could make all sorts of political choices.[55]

A few months later, the election of a curate for St James Clerkenwell collapsed entirely under the strain of calls for a secret ballot. The parish had

[53] LMA, DL/C/0263, deposition of Robert Gower, 28 June 1726, fos. 216–19; DL/C/0200, personal answers of Ralph Mairo, 9 June 1726, fo. 283; DL/C/0263, deposition of John Brome, 23 and 27 June 1726, fos. 199–202.

[54] LMA, DL/C/0263, deposition of Tomyns Dickins, 24 May 1726, fos. 196–198v; deposition of Robert Gower, 28 June 1726, fos. 216–19.

[55] LMA, DL/C/0200, personal answers of Ralph Mairo, 9 June 1726, fo. 282v; DL/C/0263, deposition of James Northall, 29 June 1726, fos. 220–221v.

an open vestry and a lively electoral culture, so much so that canvassing for a new curate had begun 'Months and Years' before the death of the incumbent. When he did eventually die, the parish's ratepayers gathered to discuss the terms of the forthcoming election. This was the occasion, mentioned above, when a suggestion that female ratepayers should be excluded was rejected by a local gentleman and 'the said words (women excepted) were struck out' of a document detailing agreed 'Resolutions' on the franchise. The same gentleman, John Fuller Esq., also led the resistance against balloting. When the question of election procedure arose, there were 'sev[era]l Arguments and speeches...touching the Methods of Balloting and polling' but no agreement was reached. Fuller argued that 'the Method of Ballotting was a fraudulent way in order to deprive them of their Rights and Privileges'. Whenever anyone tried to speak in favour of a ballot, Fuller led a chorus of 'No Ballott No Ballott a Poll a Poll', accompanied by vigorous waving of hats.[56]

Eventually, the parish clerk suggested a 'division' to settle the question. Those in favour of a ballot were told to stand in the eastern part of the church, those who wanted a poll in the western part. The parishioners 'divided accordingly and held up hands and hollow'd', at which point most witnesses thought balloting had the support of a clear majority. John Fuller, however, insisted that the question be settled formally by a poll, so the parish began three days of voting on how to vote. Fuller continued his efforts to derail proceedings by getting hold of the poor rate books and refusing to hand them over to those conducting the poll, making it impossible to check voter qualifications. When it was all over and a date was finally set for an election (by ballot), Fuller arranged a 'pretended Election' in the churchyard, in which he and his preferred candidate received votes in an open poll, 'standing at a Tombstone'. It is not clear whether the planned election by ballot ever took place.[57]

What did John Fuller mean when he described balloting as a 'fraudulent' method of voting which would deprive parishioners of 'their Rights and Privileges'? Open voting was often understood to guarantee honesty and adherence to one's principles under the glare of public scrutiny. Where only heads of ratepaying households were enfranchised, it also gave everyone else the opportunity to hold them accountable for their political decisions as representatives of the collective interest.[58] But it is difficult not to imagine more sinister motivations lurking behind the opposition of gentlemen like Fuller and Colonel Gower to anonymous voting. In the final two parish battles over the ballot, there is no need for imagination.

The St Andrew Undershaft election in which Isaac Francia made his declaration of rights as a ratepayer was fought between two distinct 'partys', each

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[56] LMA, DL/C/0263, deposition of Andrew Crosse, 9 Nov. 1726, fos. 131–3; deposition of John Honeycott, 26 Oct. 1726, fos. 123–6.

[57] LMA, DL/C/0263, deposition of Thomas Bray, 25 Oct. 1726, fos. 120–1; deposition of John Theedam, 4 Nov. 1726, fo. 128; deposition of Adam Batty, 29 Oct. 1726, fo. 127.

[58] Ferente, 'Introduction', p. 4. See also Matthew McCormack, *The independent man: citizenship and gender politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005). These were among the grounds for objection to the secret ballot later put forward by John Stuart Mill in *Considerations on representative government* (London, 1861), ch. 10.

supporting one candidate for parish clerk. Francia belonged to one of one of these parties; the churchwarden Robert Myre, who refused to let him vote, belonged to the other. Myre had already infuriated his opponents by insisting that the election proceed by poll rather than ballot. There had been 'great Debates' about this, but Myre would not allow the question to be decided by a show of hands. This prompted 'Very high Words' from several people present, and everyone seems to have understood what Myre was up to. A local plasterer later told Myre 'that he took the Right Way to bring his Friend in' – that is, to secure his preferred candidate's election – because 'if he had gone by Ballot he had lost his point'. Myre's desire to control the outcome was not satisfied by his success in this regard. Once polling began, he insisted on taking down votes 'with his own Hands & would not suffer the Vestry Clerk to take the same'.[59]

Balloting threatened the operation of informal influence in electorates made up of ratepayers who were notionally equals but actually enmeshed in tangled hierarchies of wealth and power. This was clearest of all in the election of a lecturer for St George in the East. The parish was separated from Stepney by statute in 1729 but, unlike many other new parishes, was not required to set up a select vestry. Instead, the founding Act stipulated a slightly restricted ratepayer franchise, with only those who paid 2s per month or more eligible to vote. On this basis, the parish chose its first churchwarden, parish clerk, and other officers without incident. The election of a lecturer was different. It was held in a school house in Farthing Fields (the new Hawksmoor church was not yet finished) with just over 200 qualified voters present, representing something like a tenth of the parish's households.[60]

Almost immediately, 'a Debate arose' about the respective merits of balloting and scratching (a widely used electoral method in which voters publicly 'scratched' a line alongside or underneath the name of their chosen candidate). One group of residents argued for a ballot, describing it as 'the most fair and free way to proceed to prevent any Influence or Management on the votes'. More specifically, they said that 'Mr Raines a Brewer and Mr King an Attorney two of the parishioners of the s[ai]d parish would in any other Method of Election have a very great Influence over sev[era]l of the Votes'. This referred to Henry Raine, whose breweries had brought him enough money to found Raine's School, and John King, who had dealings with many residents through his legal practice.[61]

The attempt to stave off the influence of these men was entirely unsuccessful. 'Mr Raines & Mr King insisted on the s[ai]d Election being proceeded in by scratching' and a show of hands (in which their influence may already have been felt) produced the result they wanted. To make matters worse, they

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[59] LMA, DL/C/0265, deposition of William Burges, 8 Aug. 1728, fos. 144–5; deposition of William Smith, 31 Aug. 1728, fos. 150–151v; deposition of Thomas Millward, 23 Oct. 1728, fos. 181–182v.

[60] 2 Geo. II c. 30 (1729); Robert Henry Hadden, *An East End chronicle: St George's in the East parish and parish church* (London, 1880), pp. 14–17; M. Dorothy George, *London life in the eighteenth century* (2nd edn, London, 1965), p. 408.

[61] LMA, DL/C/0201, personal answers of John Wilkinson, 27 Mar. 1732, fo. 424; DL/C/0269, deposition of Edward Benson, 19 Oct. 1730, fos. 207–208v.

got themselves chosen as 'inspectors' of the scratching, responsible for ensuring that only those who were qualified were able to vote. The same group who had called for a secret ballot complained that this would allow the two men 'to influence their Customers & Agents as they might come to the said Scratch Rolls'. Such influence would be magnified by the fact that votes 'were not taken as usual before the whole Vestry in the large Room but in a private Room' so that only the voter, vestry clerk, two parish officers, and inspectors Raine and King were present. This was the wrong kind of secrecy, giving free rein to the operation of influence without restraint by public scrutiny. Even Henry Raine himself admitted that he pointed some voters to the scratch roll of his preferred choice. It was hardly surprising when that candidate won, or when the losing candidate alleged that Raine and King had 'procured by Menaces & other management to influence great numbers' in the use of their votes.[62]

Influence could be a major force in parish politics. The choice of parish officers, like the choice of MPs, generated allegations of bribery, treating, threats, and all kinds of electoral corruption.[63] The smaller scale of parochial contests made hierarchical relationships between voters inescapable. It may also, however, have made strategies to overcome those power imbalances more immediately possible. Minimally constrained by canon law and statute, parishes could adopt whatever electoral processes they liked. The cases of balloting presented above were, by definition, controversial. At least two of the parishes involved, however, had previously held elections by ballot without any apparent controversy. A deponent from St Dunstan in the West revealed some experience of the format when he told the consistory court 'it is not usual to reduce the Candidates in cases of Ballotting' – that is, voters chose between a full set of candidates at the same time, rather than reducing them down to two as might be done by show of hands before a poll. The parishioners of St Andrew Undershaft had voted by ballot at least once previously; one deponent wanted 'to proceed by Ballot as they had done in the Election of a Lecturer some time before'.[64] In 1731, after the dust raised by disputes over the ballot had settled, St Anne's Limehouse elected a parish clerk by ballot without even discussing alternative options. A small electorate (about seventy ratepayers worth £15 a year or more) wrote down their choices 'upon Slips of Paper cut Equally alike' and put them into a churchwarden's hat. These details survive because the result was a draw, beginning a labyrinthine series of tense negotiations, re-runs, attempts at arbitration, and ultimately lawsuits. But no one raised any complaints about the secret ballot.[65]

[62] LMA, DL/C/0269, deposition of Edward Meadows, 15 Feb. 1731, fos. 211–212v; DL/C/0269, deposition of Henry Raine, 22 Jan. 1732, fos. 227–228v.

[63] Miller, 'Patricians, plebeians and parishioners'.

[64] LMA, DL/C/0263, John Brome, 23 and 27 June 1726, fo. 202; DL/C/0265, deposition of Samuel Freeman, 28 Aug. 1728, fo. 146.

[65] Austin con Jarvis and Babstock (1731): LMA, DL/C/0201, fos. 13–24; DL/C/0269, fos. 7–45.

IV

Arguments over the secret ballot in parish politics fed into the developing pro-
gramme of radical electoral reform. Practices and principles developed in the
vestry were reworked to apply to the national level. As Gillian Williamson has
shown, John Wilkes's campaigns for the secret ballot (and other reforms)
emerged from the same groups of ratepaying Londoners who had campaigned
for the secret ballot in parish elections in 1742. One of those ratepayers was
the father of John Horne Tooke; another was his schoolteacher.[66] As with
votes for women, it seems likely that early parochial use of the ballot eased
the passage of legislation supporting the practice at parish level in the 1830s.[67]

More generally, the parish as a political institution was central to some
reformers' visions of the future. William Godwin envisaged a parish-based sys-
tem of hyper-local government in *Political justice*; Thomas Spence called for 'a
convention of Parochial Delegates' to constitute 'a beautiful and powerful New
Republic' in place of the existing central government.[68] In 1838, when William
Lovett drafted the first version of the People's Charter, he proposed that par-
liamentary elections should be carried out by secret ballot at a parish level,
staffed by parish officers.[69] Of course, the parish could be a site of reaction
just as easily as reform. In the 1790s, for example, vestries and parish officers
were central to the organization of loyalist opposition to radicalism.[70] The
point is not that parish politics leant one way or the other, but that parishes
were highly flexible political institutions, allowing a degree of electoral experi-
ment and argument rarely found elsewhere in the eighteenth century. As the
Victorian parish propagandist Joshua Toulmin Smith later put it, parishes were
'the truest School' for political life.[71]

The loose legal framework of parochial custom made it equally possible to
argue for an exclusive or a radically inclusive model of the ratepaying voter,
for the tradition of open polling or the innovation of secret balloting. These
arguments had different results in different parishes, depending on their
demographic and religious makeup or the force of individual personalities.
The cases discussed above represent a tiny fraction of the electoral activity
which took place in eighteenth-century parishes. Some of that activity was
undoubtedly dull, predictable, and unresponsive to social change, but some
parishes decided to accept votes from women, Dissenters, and Jews, or to
elect their officers by secret ballot, without these matters becoming so contro-
versial that they wound up in court. There is no uniform story of parish

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[66] Williamson, "'From behind the counter'", pp. 224, 233.

[67] Phillips, 'England's "other" ballot question', pp. 155–7; Frank O'Gorman, 'The secret ballot in
nineteenth-century Britain', in Bertrand, Briquet, and Pels, eds., *Cultures of voting*, pp. 23–30.

[68] William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning political justice* (London, 1793), II, ch. 22; Thomas Spence,
The restorer of society to its natural state (London, 1801), p. 17.

[69] *The People's Charter; being the outline of an Act to provide for the just representation of the people of
Great Britain* (London, 1838), pp. 19–31.

[70] Austin Mitchell, 'The Association Movement of 1792–1793', *Historical Journal*, 4 (1961), pp. 56–
77, at p. 65; Mary Thale, ed., *Selections from the papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792–1799*
(Cambridge, 1983), p. 63.

[71] Joshua Toulmin Smith, *The parish* (2nd edn, London, 1857), p. 9.

elections in the eighteenth century, only a collection of rapidly changing and highly variable political practices.

This mutability is what gives parishes a significant place in the history of electoral reform. Parishes could change their electoral procedures quickly and relatively quietly, making inconceivable innovations possible or even commonplace. Some novelties became orthodoxy, others soon disappeared into obscurity. Women's suffrage and the secret ballot had long been part of London parishes' electoral repertoire when they were given legislative endorsement in the nineteenth century. By contrast, Isaac Francia's claim to an entirely secular ratepayer franchise was never enshrined in any statute. These were just a few of the many models of political participation to emerge from the jostling world of eighteenth-century parish politics.