

The emergence of party-based political careers in the UK, 1801-1918

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Abstract

We document the emergence of a nomination hierarchy within the 19th-century UK parties and the development of norms that ensured incumbent re-nomination and seniority progression through that hierarchy. We offer a property rights theory of why these norms developed; and show that the reform acts, which reduced the influence of patronal peers and increased party-centered voting, were the main drivers of development. The overall effect was to transform a system in which political careers were only loosely organized by the parties into one in which they dominated career prospects.

Key words: nomination control; seniority systems; British political development

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1 Introduction

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, would-be members of the United Kingdom’s House of Commons secured their nominations by leveraging family connections and seeking the patronage of landed magnates (Sack 1980). Yet, by the 20th century, nominations were controlled by national and local party organizations (Ostrogorski 1901). How and when did political careers based on family and aristocratic networks give way to party-based careers?

Recent work examining the class and dynastic composition of the House of Commons (e.g. Berlinski, Dewan, and Van Coppenolle 2014; Van Coppenolle 2017; Fresh 2020) has illuminated the *decline* of families and magnates as the main avenues into political careers. In this paper, we look at the flip side, the *rise* of parties as the dominant vehicles structuring political recruitment and advancement.

Focusing on the first century after the union with Ireland (1801-1918), we highlight two consequences of the reform acts (in 1832, 1867 and 1884) that affected politicians’ career opportunities. First, after each reform act, the number of constituencies controlled by patronal peers (“patronal constituencies”) declined and the number of constituencies where nominations were controlled through local and central party institutions (“partisan constituencies”) increased. Second, after each reform act, voters became more party-centered (Cox 1987). This meant that nomination in a district safe for one’s own party increasingly ensured victory, while nomination in a district safe for the other party increasingly ensured defeat. We view these two structural shifts as creating a "nomination hierarchy" within each party. At the bottom of the hierarchy were constituencies that were safe for the other party, in the middle were competitive districts, and at the top were constituencies that were safe for one’s own party.

Since everyone wanted seats that were safer for their own party, the emergence of the nomination hierarchy should have sparked intra-party competition for nominations. In order to explore the nature of the resulting competition, we exploit two main datasets—one documenting British MPs’ electoral and office-holding histories over the period 1835-1918 (Eggers

and Spirling 2014) and one providing similar information for the pre-reform era (which we compiled from the History of Parliament Trust and Craig 1973 [Smith 1844-1850]). The bulk of the paper examines three consequences that the growing number of partisan constituencies, combined with the growing prevalence of party-centered voting, should have produced.

First, increasingly party-centered voting should have increased the proportion of partisan constituencies that were “safe” for one party or the other. We show that the distribution of seats did skew toward “safe,” especially after the third reform act.

Second, incumbent re-nomination norms should have emerged—either as spontaneous (Sugden 1986) or leadership-encouraged (Riker and Sened 1991) ways of regulating internecine fights over nominations. To provide evidence for this claim, we rely on regression discontinuity designs to explore how incumbency (past winning) affected politicians’ progress through the emerging nomination hierarchy.

Third, first-time parliamentary candidates should have been forced to begin their careers in constituencies where they would have to fight against long odds. The most valuable nominations would be claimed by incumbents and those who were “next in line” to claim winnable nominations. Newcomers should thus have begun their careers in constituencies that were increasingly difficult for anyone from their party to win—thereby getting in line for better spots as they opened up. To show this, we compare cohorts of new candidates just before and just after each reform act, showing that the post-reform cohorts were nominated in significantly less winnable constituencies.

After documenting these three patterns in members’ electoral careers, we consider their parliamentary careers. In particular, we show that MPs increasingly served in *some* sub-cabinet office before ascending into the cabinet and that particular sub-cabinet offices, which we dub stepping-stone offices, were particularly associated with later ministerial service. We also show that MPs holding cabinet or stepping-stone posts were increasingly likely to win re-election, consistent with their being increasingly favored in the party-wide competition for winnable nominations. In other words, the modern practice of parties protecting their

leaders by giving them safe constituencies appears in the period we study. Finally, we provide evidence that progress through the emerging nomination and office hierarchies was contingent on a member being sufficiently loyal to the party whip.

Our work contributes to several literatures. First, and most directly, it explores the historical development of political parties in the UK (Cox 1987; Eggers and Spirling 2014, 2016; Kam and Newson 2019). A party’s ability to control which candidates run as its nominees is a defining feature of modern political parties—yet there is no sustained examination of when and why British parties established this ability and how they dealt with the resulting intra-party competition.

Second, we contribute to the broader comparative literature that examines political “seniority systems.” Most of these studies focus on the use of seniority to regulate legislators’ access to offices (e.g., Epstein et al. 1997; Jenkins 1998; McKelvey and Riezman 1992; Muthoo and Shepsle 2014). Here, we investigate the relatively under-studied topic of how parties use seniority to regulate candidates’ access to nomination spots (cf. Cirone, Cox, and Fiva (2020)).

2 The Development of British Political Parties

By the end of the 19th century, Britain’s political parties approximated the “Westminster model” familiar to political scientists (e.g. Lijphart 1999; Dewan and Spirling 2011). As we shall use the term, this ideal type entailed party domination of both the electoral and legislative processes. In the electoral arena,

- the two major parties competed in virtually all districts;
- party leaders exerted significant influence over nominations (Ranney 1965); and
- voters reliably supported their parties’ nominees (Butler and Stoke 1971).

Within the House of Commons,

- the two major parties competed over virtually all public bills (Dewan and Spirling 2011);
- the majority party’s leaders exerted significant influence over the legislative agenda (Cox 1987; Eggers and Spirling 2014); and
- MPs reliably supported their parties’ positions on whipped votes (Lowell 1902; Eggers and Spirling 2016).

Thus, in both the electoral and legislative arenas, party leaders had substantial influence in choosing the competitors—whether nominees or bills—and marshalled cohesive voting blocs in support of their favored competitor(s).

In the first three decades of the 19th century, the Westminster features just listed were largely absent. For example, between 1802 and 1830, only 27% of constituencies were contested on average (**mitchell1967**); control of about one third of all nominations was decentralized to between 90 and 101 patronal peers (Sack 1980, p. 919); and 22% of voters split their votes between the parties (Cox 1987, p. 105).¹ Similarly, the parties only occasionally competed on public bills, the majority leaders had little grip on the legislative agenda, and party cohesion in the division lobbies was weak (Hawkins 1998, p. 72).

Things began to change in the 1830s. The Great Reform Act of 1832 abolished 57 of the so-called “rotten” or “nomination” boroughs, where the patronal peer’s nomination was tantamount to election (Sack 1980). As Figure 1 shows, this reduced the percentage of constituencies that were patronal from over 50% to about 14%. At the same time, local constituency nominating committees began to solicit help in finding candidates from party whips and party-affiliated clubs (Thevoz 2018, pp. 199–200).

Mirroring party leaders’ increased influence over nominations, the House of Commons adopted a standing order in 1835 mandating that Wednesdays would henceforth be “Order

¹The patronal peers used their powers largely to nominate (and elect) their own family members (Rivera 2016), thus illustrating the general point that decentralized nomination procedures promote “dynastic” politicians (Smith 2018).

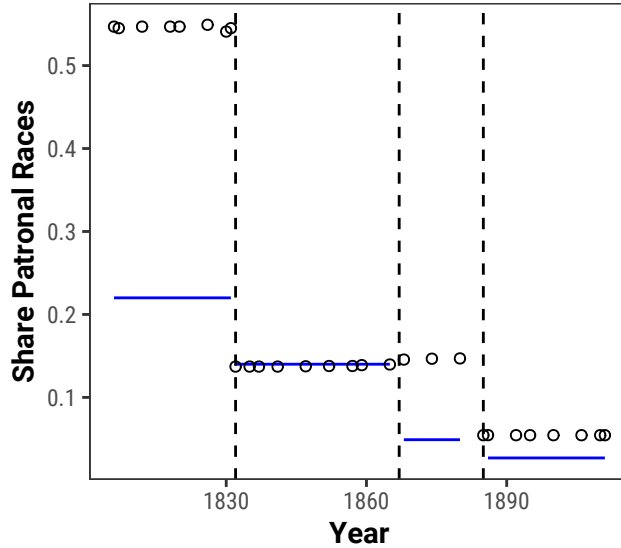


Figure 1: Share of patronal constituencies over time. Patronal constituencies coded from (Sack 1980) for the pre-reform era, (Gash 1977, appendix D) for 1832-67, and (Hanham 1959, appendix iii) for 1867-. Gash covered only boroughs, whereas Sack and Hanham covered both boroughs and counties. If both Sack and Hanham listed a county as patronal, then we coded it as patronal in the intervening period as well. Blue lines indicate average per cent of voters splitting their votes between parties in each era, as reported by Cox (1987, p. 105).

Days,” giving the government a third day on which it effectively controlled the legislative agenda (Fraser 1960); and both major parties founded their modern whip organizations (Cox and Ingram 1992; Sainty and Cox 1997). Accompanying these important institutional changes, the percent of English MPs with identifiable party affiliations increased from about 85% to 100%, and the rate at which MPs switched their party affiliations declined from about 9% to 1%.²

Despite these important changes in British party politics, the Westminster model was still not closely approximated. In the electoral arena, on average 14 percent of voters continued to split their votes between the parties (see Figure 1), so that “independent” MPs could still run their own campaigns and win partly on the strength of a “personal vote” (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Kam and Newson 2019). In the legislative arena, private members still controlled two days in the legislative work week and could craft their own, often bipartisan,

²Authors’ calculations based on party identifications in Craig (1977) and Eggers and Spirling (2014).

bills—about 20 percent of which succeeded (Cox and Ingram 1992).

The next two reform acts, however, marked further reductions in independents' opportunities. Figure 1 shows that the share of patronal constituencies declined substantially after the Third Reform Act; and that the average percent of voters splitting their votes fell to 4.9% after the second, and to 2.7% after the third, reform act. Meanwhile, within the House of Commons, the success rate of private members' bills was cut in half after both the second and third reform acts (Cox and Ingram 1992). Thus, MPs increasingly needed their party's support both to gain office and to achieve their legislative goals.

3 Partisan careers and incumbent re-nomination norms

Because candidates faced no residency requirements, they could seek nomination in any constituency. As the number of partisan constituencies increased, the possibility of widespread intra-party competition over nominations arose. What would the resulting competition have looked like?

We can consider nomination in non-patronal constituencies from a property rights perspective. Sugden (1986) models property rights in general as conventions corresponding to the dictum that "possession is nine-tenths of the law." Those in possession of a valuable resource are expected to defend it in equilibrium, thereby raising others' expected cost of attempting to take it. In some cases, this can lead to general respect for property, even with no state enforcement.

Applied to nominations, Sugden's theory predicts that incumbents—those currently "in possession" of the nomination spot they last received—would be expected to defend their spots in equilibrium, thereby motivating potential challengers to look elsewhere. An alternative theory, due to Riker and Sened (1991), views property rights as "top-down" creations. Applied to nominations (as for example by Jenkins (1998)), this theory would predict that party leaders might support incumbents' claims to re-nomination in order to reduce intra-

party competition, tie members to their parties (exiting MPs would forfeit their claims on future nomination), and increase whip loyalty (if leaders could make re-nomination conditional on MPs’ voting behavior). Here, we do not need to choose between the "bottom-up" and "top-down" theories. We simply argue that incumbent re-nomination norms should have arisen in both major parties—either spontaneously or via leadership promotion—when competition for the two major parties’ nominations increased.

Assuming that candidates mainly wanted to win, the value they assigned to being nominated in a given constituency would simply have been their probability of being elected (once nominated). Thus, as candidates came to believe that constituencies could be ranked along a spectrum from “safe” for their own party to “safe” for the other party, and that any credible candidate from their party would have a similar chance of victory in any given constituency, all co-partisans would perceive a clear hierarchy of nominations over which they might compete.

In the next section, we document when this hierarchy emerged. This sets the stage for our analysis of when norms of re-nomination and career progression emerged to regulate intra-party competition.

4 Measuring the Value of Nominations

Focusing just on the partisan constituencies, we measure the value of being nominated in a particular constituency based on past results in that constituency. Our aim is to forecast the Conservative seat share, using simple information that contemporaries would have known. To that end, let C_{ct} denote the share of seats that the Conservatives hold in constituency c after general election t , and U_{ct} be a dummy variable indicating whether c was uncontested at general election t . We then estimate the expected share of seats that the Conservatives will win in constituency c at the time of election t using linear regression:

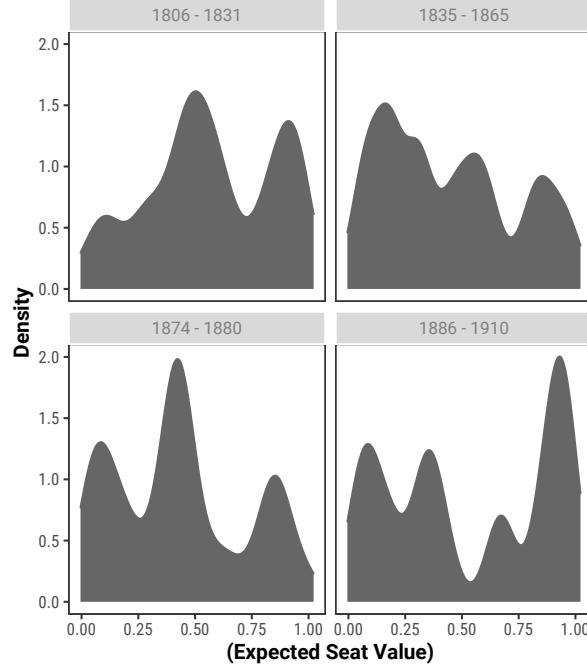


Figure 2: Constituencies became more partisan over time. The figure shows the pooled distribution of expected Conservative seat shares across constituencies, by reform era.

$$\mathbb{E}[C_{ct}] = \theta_t + \beta_{1t} C_{c,t-1} + \beta_{2t} U_{c,t-1} + \beta_{3t} C_{c,t-1} \times U_{c,t-1} \quad (1)$$

Equation 1 predicts the Conservatives' seat share using a year effect, the Conservatives' lagged seat share, the lagged contest status, and the interaction of the two.³ All slope coefficients are allowed to shift in each year.

We interpret the fitted values, \hat{C}_{ct} , as proxies for how contemporaries would have viewed the Conservatives' chances of winning in constituency c in year t based on the last election's result. Conservatives (Tories) would have preferred being nominated in constituencies with higher values of \hat{C}_{ct} , while Liberals (Whigs) would have had the opposite preference.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of \hat{C}_{ct} in four different eras: (1) pre-Reform (1806 - 1831); (2) after the First Reform Act (1835 - 1865); (3) after the Second Reform Act (1874

³Computationally, we estimate the model pooled across years, with year fixed effects, and year fixed effects interacted with each of the three β coefficients.

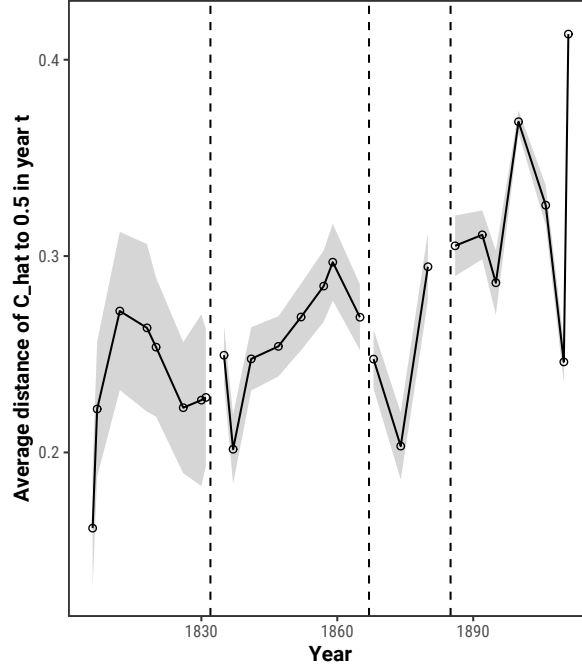


Figure 3: Constituencies became safer over time. The figure shows the average absolute difference to a perfectly competitive seat in each year, computed as: $\sum_c |\hat{C}_{ct} - 0.5| / N_t$, where N_t is the number of partisan constituencies in year t . The following elections were excluded due to missing data associated with redistricting: 1832, 1885.

- 1880); (4) after the Third Reform Act (1886 - 1911).⁴ During the first period, there was a substantial “middle mode”, corresponding to districts that returned one Conservative and one Liberal. This mode shrank after each reform act, disappearing after the third, when virtually all double-member districts were replaced by single-member districts.

The collapse of the middle mode meant that there was a larger stock of safe Conservative and Liberal seats than there had been previously. Figure 3 illustrates this by graphing the average safeness of districts, measured by $|\hat{C}_{ct} - 0.5|$, across time. Average safeness increased after the First and Third Reform Acts.⁵

All told, the nomination hierarchy within each party should have become significantly clearer after the first and especially the third reform act. At the same time, the constituencies that remained outside the parties’ growing nomination hierarchies — the remaining patronal

⁴We drop the first election year in each period, as our estimates are based on lagged data and a number of constituencies were redrawn at each reform act.

⁵(Appendix C reports on the evolution of safeness for patronal constituencies.)

constituencies – were declining in number. Thus, we expect increasing pressure to regulate intra-party competition for the valuable nominations that party leaders could influence.

5 Intra-party competition for nominations

To examine the nature of intra-party competition for nominations, we consider the stages of a typical parliamentary career. What were candidates' first parliamentary nominations like? When they won, how did victory affect their prospects for future re-nomination or "promotion" to a better constituency? We tackle these questions in reverse chronological order, beginning in this section with the effects of winning.

5.1 Data

In the analyses that follow, we primarily rely on the British Political Development database (Eggers and Spirling 2014) for the period after 1832. For the period 1801-1831, we compiled similar data from the History of Parliament Trust and Craig (1973) [Smith 1844-1850].

A major challenge is that candidates' names do not appear in a consistent manner across time. In addition to facing two clear discontinuities (1832, 1885) in how names were encoded, some candidates' names changed over time even within periods of consistent coding — for example, when they gained additional honorifics. To deal with name changes, we processed names by dropping honorific titles and standardizing their format.⁶

⁶We converted all names to lowercase, dropped honorifics, and only retained the initials of every part except for the full surname. *William Edward Gladstone* thus becomes **w e gladstone**. Shortening first and middle names to initials is (unfortunately) necessary because the Eggers-Spirling database only maintains initials for unsuccessful candidates. We can check this procedure's success in the post-1832 period by using the unique IDs that Eggers and Spirling assigned for the time each MP actually sat in parliament. In addition, we conducted hand checks of a random sample of losing candidates to ensure that our method worked.

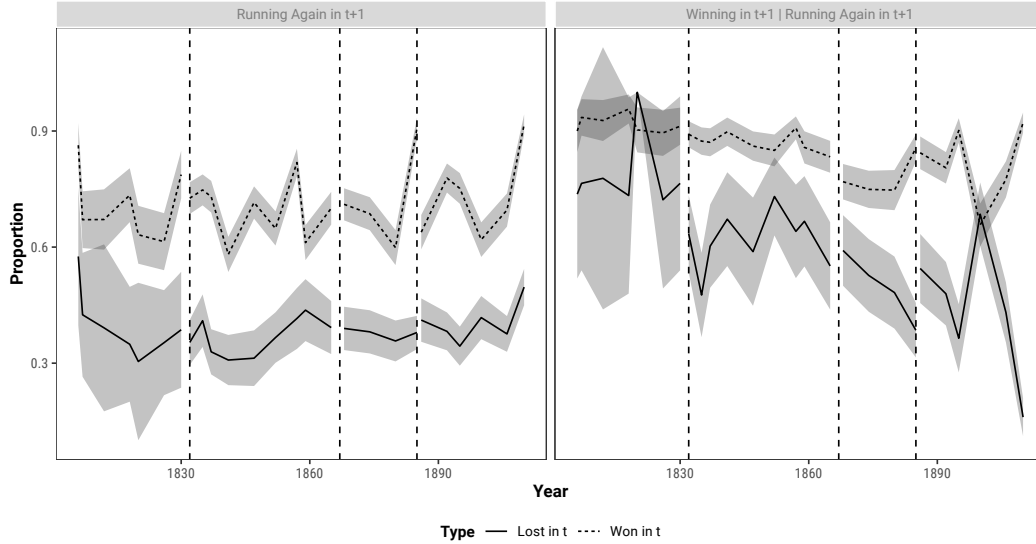


Figure 4: Non-incumbents face a harder time being nominated again, and winning again. The Figure shows the proportion of winning and losing candidates who ran again in the next election (left panel); and the proportions winning, conditional on running again (right panel).

5.2 Regression discontinuity designs

We first present some aggregate statistics. Figure 4 shows how winning affected the proportion of candidates running again (left panel) and, conditional on running again, winning (right panel). As can be seen in the left panel, winners were about thirty percentage points more likely to run again than losers, with the gap being fairly stable over the century. In the right panel, in contrast, we see a clear trend. Prior to the first reform act, winners were only slightly more likely to win again, conditional on running, than were losers. But this gap then widens steadily across the century, reaching over forty percentage points after the third reform act. This is consistent with the idea that incumbents were increasingly favored in the competition to get nominations in winnable constituencies.

The evidence just presented, while suggestive, is muddled by concerns about selection. To mitigate such concerns, we also use regression discontinuity designs to investigate whether bare winners differed from bare losers in their likelihood of running again the next election. To the extent that bare winners and losers are as-if randomly assigned, any advantage that

the former enjoyed over the latter will reveal the causal effect of past winning (incumbency) on future re-nomination and winning.⁷

We define the forcing variable in each constituency by averaging the vote share of the last winner and the first runner-up, and then subtracting this average from each candidate's vote share. For example, in a four-candidate two-seat constituency in which the vote shares were $V_1 > V_2 > V_3 > V_4$, we compute $T = (V_2 + V_3)/2$ and $e_j = V_j - T$ for $j=1, 2, 3, 4$. The variable e_j indicates how many votes above (or below) the threshold T candidate j is. Given that the remaining patronal constituencies were rarely contested, our analysis here effectively focuses on the non-patronal constituencies.

The response variables we investigate are whether a candidate runs again in the next election in any constituency and whether a candidate wins a seat in the next election. In all cases, we restrict attention to candidates who remained in the same party (either Conservative or Liberal) at time t and $t - 1$.

We group the data into a moving window covering five general elections. The window moves incrementally within three periods: pre-reform (1802-1830), between the first and third reform acts (1835-1874), and after the third reform act (1886-). The window jumps at the first and third reform acts. That is, the last pre-1832 window is 1807-1830, while the first post-1832 window is 1835-1857, and there is a similar jump in 1885. Figure 5 shows our results for running again (left panel) and winning (not conditional on running) (right panel).

5.2.1 Winning and running again

Bare winners and losers should have differed in their probability of re-running for two main reasons. First, the losers should have been more likely than the winners to voluntarily drop out of electoral politics. Regardless of the stage of their career, almost winning would probably have encouraged many politicians to try again; but actually winning would have encouraged them even more. Second, in the non-patronal constituencies, bare losers of seats

⁷See a large literature about contemporary incumbency effects and difficulties with causal interpretation (Caughey and Sekhon 2011; Eggers, Fowler, et al. 2015).

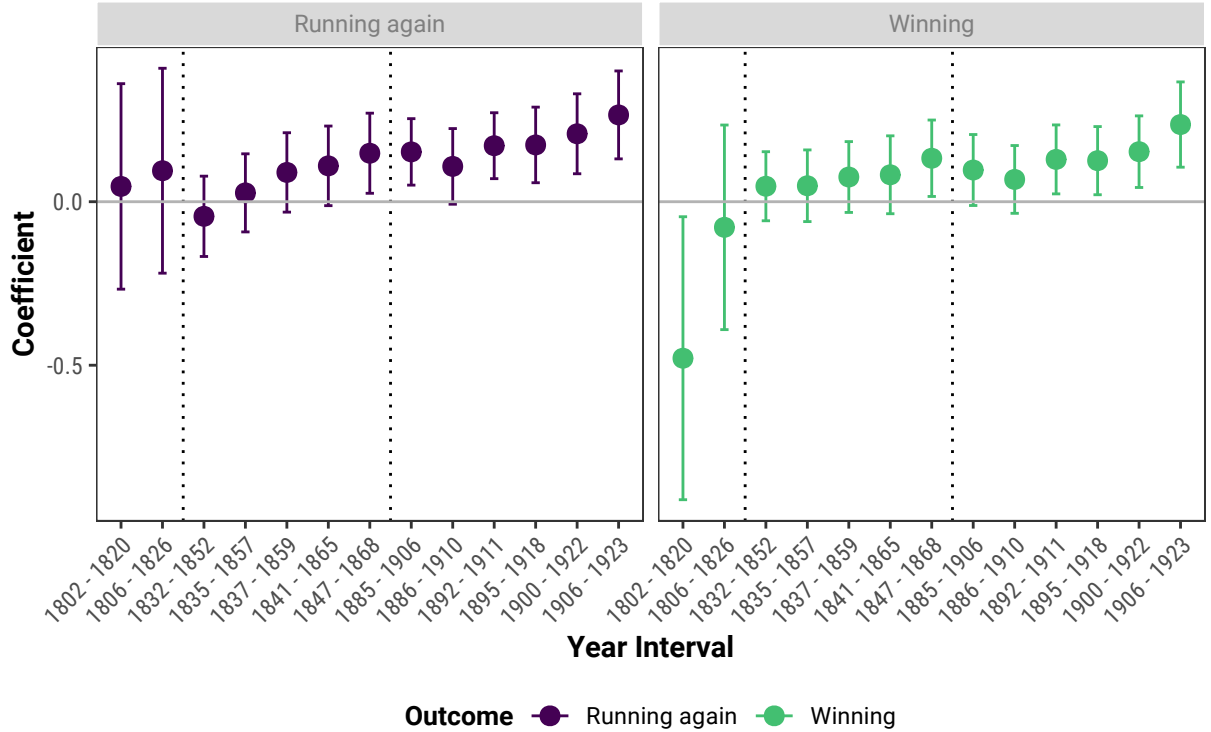


Figure 5: Incumbents develop an advantage in re-nomination and winning over time. Figure shows regression discontinuity estimates in a moving window spanning 5 elections.

perceived as winnable should have been more likely than bare winners of such seats to be de-selected, since the sin of under-performance was less pardonable if it cost a seat.

Looking at the left panel of Figure 5, we see a more consistent incumbency effect after the first reform, and especially after the third reform act. The effect reaches almost a twenty-five percentage point advantage near the end of the time series.

5.2.2 Winning and winning again

Our discussion thus far has focused only on the probability of dropping out of politics (voluntarily or via deselection). But winners can be rewarded by their parties' nominators in two ways—by being re-nominated; and by being given a “better” constituency. Thus, we should also consider whether bare winners secured more winnable spots than bare losers. To address this, we examine the probability of winning at t as a function of performance at

$t - 1$.

Note that both bare losers and bare winners self-select whether to run again. Thus, the composition of unobservables among bare losers *who run again* may differ from the composition of unobservables among bare winners *who run again*, even if the sets of all bare winners and all bare losers are balanced. This selection issue has been increasingly widely recognized in the recent literature and has motivated several scholars to recommend that RD analyses focus on *unconditional* incumbency effects (De Magalhaes 2015; Dahlgaard 2016; Hyttinen et al. 2018). Instead of conditioning on re-running, which is causally downstream from the treatment (and risks creating imbalance), these scholars include all bare losers and bare winners at $t - 1$ in their samples and ask whether winning at $t - 1$ affects winning at t . We follow this procedure here.

To explain our approach further, let z_{t-1} denote lagged win margin and $p_{jt}(z_{t-1})$ be a candidate’s probability of securing a nomination in constituency j at time t , conditional on their lagged win margin. Let q_{jt} be the probability of winning, if nominated in constituency j at time t . We view candidates who fail to secure any re-nomination as receiving a nomination in constituency 0, conferring a probability $q_{0t} = 0$ of winning; and denote their probability of receiving that “nomination” by $p_{0t}(z_{t-1})$. A candidate can end up in constituency 0 through death, voluntary withdrawal from electoral politics, or by seeking but failing to secure a nomination. Otherwise, they receive a nomination in constituency $j \in \{1, \dots, J\}$.⁸

Given the notation just introduced, the unconditional probability of winning at time t can be written $\sum_{j=0}^J p_{jt}(z_{t-1})q_{jt}$. Our RD recovers the change in $\sum_{j=0}^J p_{jt}(z_{t-1})q_{jt}$ at the discontinuity ($z_{t-1} = 0$).⁹ This change summarizes how winning affects a candidate’s chances of securing nominations in constituencies 0, 1, \dots , J , while weighting each constituency by the candidate’s probability of winning a seat if nominated there. The more that winning depresses p_{0t} , raises the probability of re-nomination in the same constituency, and improves

⁸We ignore the possibility that candidates run simultaneously in more than one constituency, something that about 5% of candidates did in the pre-reform era.

⁹Introduce more details on RD, especially bandwidth selection following Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014)

the chance of securing nomination in a better constituency, the larger the effect of winning at $t - 1$ on winning at t will be. Thus, an unconditional analysis of winning allows us to assess the combined effects of incumbent re-nomination (in the same constituency) and seniority progression (to better constituencies).¹⁰

Our results, shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 5, show that winning had a positive but insignificant effect on winning again after the first reform act, with the effect becoming larger and statistically significant after the third reform act. Between the first and third reform acts, re-nomination was not tantamount to re-election. The reasons for this included poor coordination between co-partisan candidates (Kam and Newson 2019), variations over time in whether a constituency was actually contested, and relatively high levels of split voting. After the third reform act, almost all districts were single-member, many more were regularly contested, and almost all voters were party-centered. Thus, each party’s incumbents typically sat in districts that were safe for their party, so that re-nomination meant re-election.

6 Humble Beginnings

As incumbent re-nomination norms emerged, other patterns should have become more evident in members’ careers. First, each party might have sought to reduce intra-party competition for ‘open’ spots, created by the retirement of incumbents, by outlining conventional career paths. Writing in the early 20th century, Lowell (1902, p. 51) noted that if multiple Conservatives sought the same nomination, party leaders sought to “persuade all but one of them to withdraw,” with “the disinterestedness of the man who withdraws naturally [giving] him a certain claim to future consideration.”

¹⁰Our view of how winning at $t - 1$ affects winning at t differs substantially from studies of the incumbency advantage in the US, which have typically assumed that (a) candidates can only run in a single district and (b) voters are candidate-centered. Given those assumptions, the incumbency advantage has been viewed as stemming mainly from incumbency improving a candidate’s expected vote share in the general election. In our case, assumptions (a) and (b) do not hold: candidates could run in any constituency and voters were increasingly party-centered. Thus, the mechanisms thought to be at play in the US case are largely absent in the post-1832 UK, so that our RD estimates can be interpreted mainly as showing re-nomination effects.

Second, those wishing to begin a parliamentary career should increasingly have found that the winnable spots for their party were already occupied by incumbents and those on conventional career paths, motivating them to begin their careers by contesting “unwinnable” seats. Lloyd (1965, p. 265) has claimed that “by 1910 contesting a hopeless seat was accepted as a way for a politician to earn the gratitude of his party.” In this section, we consider when new politicians began to accept “humble beginnings” in the form of “unwinnable” initial assignments.¹¹

The left panel of Figure 6 shows the proportion of each new cohort winning. For both first-time Conservative and first-time Liberal candidates, the probability of winning steps down considerably after each of the first three reform acts. Whereas a clear majority of first-timers won before the First Reform Act, only a third did so (on average) after the Third Reform Act.¹²

The right-hand panel of Figure 6 presents the data in a somewhat different way. Let $\hat{C}_{Lib,t}$ denote the mean predicted conservatism of the constituencies in which the new Liberal cohort ran in year t , and $\hat{C}_{Con,t}$ be the corresponding figure for the new Conservative cohort. The right-hand panel plots the difference, $\Delta_t = \hat{C}_{Lib,t} - \hat{C}_{Con,t}$, across time. In the pre-reform era, both new Liberals and new Conservatives appear to have gravitated toward winnable constituencies, producing a negative value for Δ_t . We then see a jump up in Δ_t after passage of the first reform act, consistent with new candidates finding it necessary to begin their careers in more difficult terrain. The Peelite Schism (1847) appears to “reset” the party system insofar as new candidates’ incentives were concerned, and the two parties’ entering cohorts were very similar from 1847 until 1865. Both the second and third reform acts then produce further jumps up in Δ_t .

¹¹Members’ pre-parliamentary careers are beyond the scope of the present investigation. However, we can make one observation. In some countries, local offices are common stepping-stones toward a parliamentary career (Cirone, Cox, and Fiva 2020). In the 19th century UK, however, Lowell (1902, p. 50) reported that there were no feeder offices, tenure of which predicted receipt of (first-time) parliamentary nominations. Indeed, “a man frequently goes into the House of Commons without holding previously any elective office. This might, in fact, be considered the general rule.”

¹²Note that landslide elections, like the Liberal win in 1907, are outliers

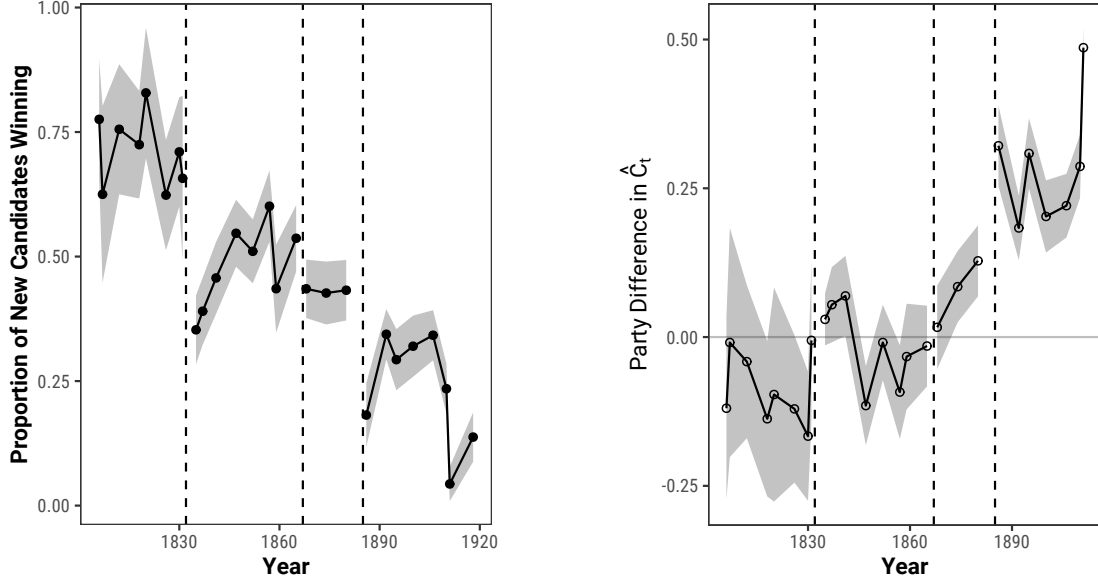


Figure 6: New candidates become less successful and start in worse seats over time. The figure on the left shows the proportion of first-time candidates winning, by election year. The figure on the right shows the difference in predicted Conservative seat share between Conservative and Liberal first-time candidates, by election year. The following elections were excluded due to missing data associated with redistricting: 1832, 1885

These reform act effects can be explored further by running two-way fixed effects models in a window including the three elections before and after each reform act. The unit of analysis is a new candidate and the dependent variable is the expected Conservative share of the seats in that candidate’s constituency. The model includes a party fixed effect (specifically, a dummy variable identifying Liberals) and year fixed effects. The regressor of primary interest is an interaction between being Liberal and post-reform. The coefficient on this regressor indicates whether new Liberals tended to differentiate from new Conservatives after each reform act. We expect a positive coefficient, indicating each party’s entering cohort forged into enemy territory more extensively after each reform. This model has some of the flavor of a differences-in-differences analysis, although the data do not constitute a proper panel. The results (see Table 1) show positive jumps at each reform act, with the jump after the third act being statistically significant.

Although our analyses do not admit of causal interpretations except under strong as-

Table 1: Two-way Fixed Effects Model Estimates. Estimates show the effect of being a Liberal candidate on the seat value compared to a Conservative candidate.

	1832 Reform Act	1868 Reform Act	1885 Reform Act
Liberal	0.011 (0.033)	0.033 (0.015)	0.054 (0.013)
Liberal * post-Reform	0.013 (0.035)	0.038 (0.021)	0.043 (0.020)
Unit FEs	Y	Y	Y
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y
Num.Obs.	802	1384	1519

All estimates are with robust standard errors clustered at the constituency level. Sample includes all first-time candidates in the three elections before and after the respective Reform Act.

sumptions, we think that cumulatively the evidence can be interpreted as follows. After each reform act, party leaders had a relatively high demand for candidates who would contest the other party’s seats, and entering cohorts perceived that they would ultimately be rewarded for doing so. Thus, despite the fact that individual candidates bore most of the cost of campaigning, and those costs were high and stable (see Kam and Newson 2019), we see a systematic trend toward first-time candidates running increasingly hopeless campaigns. Since the immediate return to these inaugural campaigns was an increasingly good approximation of zero, candidates must have been receiving some other form of compensation for their efforts. The most obvious such compensation would be a promise of securing a more winnable nomination in future.

7 Career paths within parliament

In this section, we consider the emergence of an “office hierarchy” within the House of Commons and of conventional “career paths” through the combined nomination-and-office hierarchy. In the unreformed polity, members sometimes vaulted immediately into the cabinet—as Pitt the Younger did, when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer barely a year and a half

after his first election (and then Prime Minister a year and a half later, at the age of 24). By the 20th century, however, MPs typically advanced from the back benches to one or more sub-cabinet posts, and thence to a cabinet post (Kam 2009, pp. 190–191); a hierarchy of offices was in place. Moreover, each party used its increasing influence over nominations to give office-holding MPs safe seats, thereby protecting its parliamentary leaders.

As with our study thus far, we ask some basic questions. When did an office hierarchy emerge? When were office-holders first favored in the competition for nominations? Was the quid pro quo for advancement loyalty to the whip?

7.1 The office hierarchy in the House of Commons

In this section, we consider the extent to which holding certain offices heralded future promotion into the cabinet. Our data are from Eggers and Spirling (2014), who document all the offices that each MP held in the post-1832 era. Figure 7 lists all the sub-cabinet offices in the dataset on the horizontal axis, showing for each whether the office was more likely to be held by MPs who served in the cabinet at some point in their careers than those who never did. As can be seen, about half the offices (those listed on the right) are equally likely to be held by ever-cabinet and never-cabinet MPs. We shall call the leftmost 10 or 20 offices in Figure 7, those that were more often held by future cabinet ministers than permanent backbenchers, stepping-stone offices. As can be seen, parliamentary secretaries and under-secretaries of various sorts are the most common stepping stones.

In Figure 8, we plot the decadal values of $\Pr[\text{ever cabinet}|\text{stepping-stone office}]$. That is, for all MPs holding a stepping-stone office in a particular decade, we calculate the proportion who eventually serve in the cabinet. This is the upper curve in the figure. The lower curve gives the proportion of MPs not holding a stepping-stone office (either no office or an office on the right-hand side of Figure 7) who eventually serve in the cabinet. The difference in the two curves provides a simple bivariate estimate of whether holding a stepping-stone office predicted promotion into the cabinet. The horizontal axis is arranged so that 1840 refers to

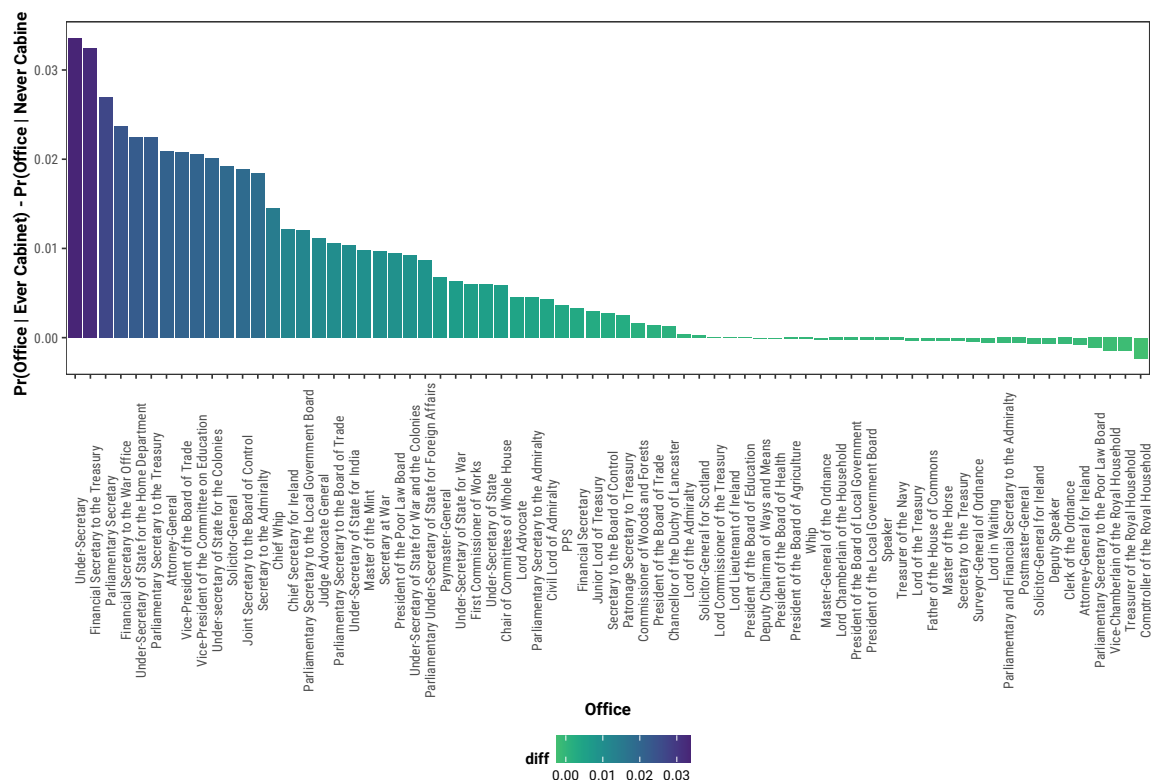


Figure 7: Which offices were most predictive of future Cabinet positions?

the decade 1840-49 and similarly for the other years reported. We drop the 1830s because we have incomplete and scanty data.

Figure 8 demonstrates two main points. First, those not serving in a stepping-stone office rarely reached the cabinet (the lower curve never exceeds about 1 percent). From that perspective, it appears that a conventional route into the cabinet already existed by the first decade for which we have complete data (the 1840s).

Second, those holding a stepping-stone office were substantially more likely to see future service in the cabinet than their counterparts who held no such office. We interpret the overtime pattern in the upper curve as follows. The decline from the 1840s to the 1850s reflects the impact of the Peelite schism (1847). After this schism, MPs were less sure which parties would survive and more likely to switch parties. This made any deal whereby an MP served in a lower office in order to get in line for the cabinet less credible on both sides. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the predictive association between stepping-stone

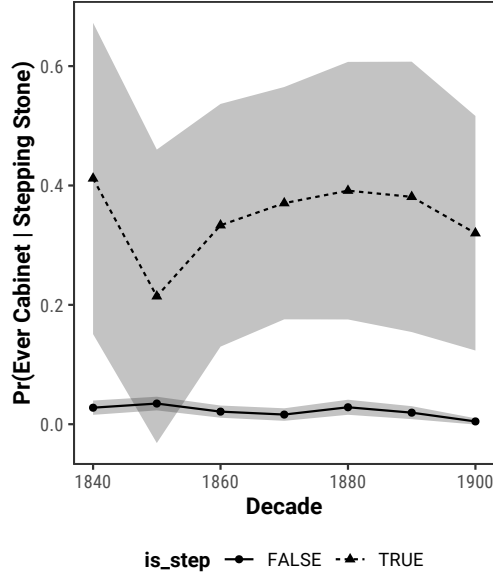


Figure 8: The probability of attaining a cabinet-rank office, by whether the MP held a stepping-stone office.

offices and the cabinet is at its nadir in the 1850s. As the British party system returned to its two-party mold beginning in the 1860s, the bivariate association between holding a stepping-stone office and eventually reaching the cabinet returned to a higher level.

7.2 The quality of office-holders' nominations

The right panel of Figure 9 shows that MPs holding cabinet or stepping-stone posts became more likely to win re-election, relative to other MPs within the governing party. While there is a period in the 1840s in which no advantage appears, beginning in the 1850s a systematic advantage for office-holders appears and grows sharply in the 1860s. It appears that the modern “norm” that those on a ministerial career track be nominated in safe districts was established after the Peelite schism was resolved, when the modern Liberal and Conservative parties emerged, and reached a mature form soon after the second reform act.

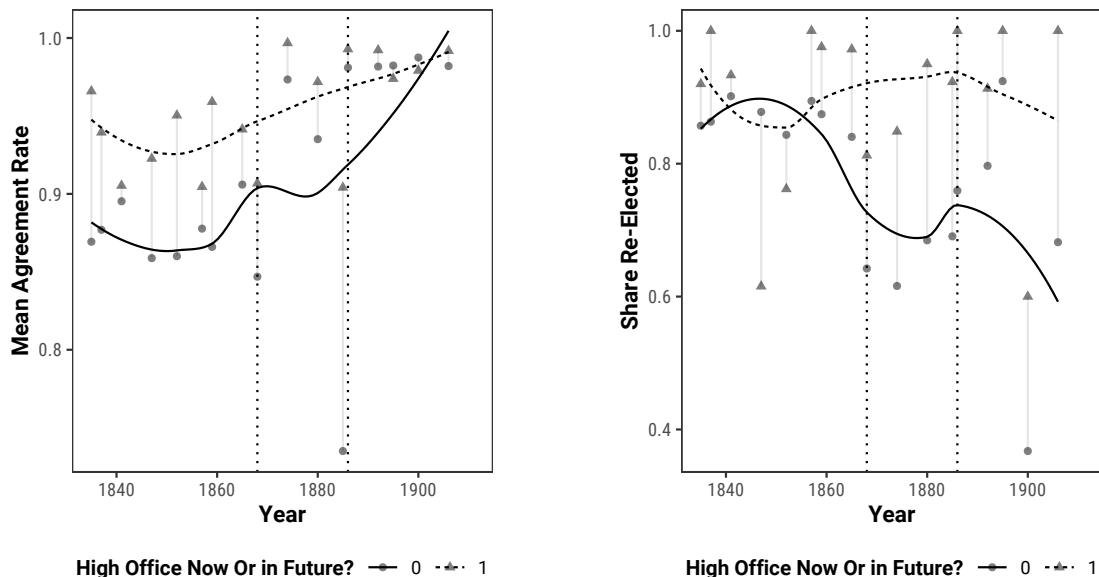


Figure 9: MPs ascending to more senior positions tended to be more loyal and enjoyed higher re-election rates. The left panel shows the mean cohesion score for all government MPs grouped by whether they will serve in the Cabinet or a stepping stone office in the future or already are in a stepping stone office, versus those never to serve in a high office. The right panel retains the same grouping, but shows the share of MPs successfully running for re-election instead.

7.3 Whip loyalty

In this section, we explore the extent to which those on a ministerial career track were more loyal to their party’s whip.

Scholars have been interested in whether party leaders use nomination control to discipline their parliamentary troops since Ostrogorski (1901), Lachapelle (1911), and Schattschneider (1942). The issue has been more recently examined in the British context by Cox (1987) and Eggers and Spirling (2014) and Eggers and Spirling (2016).

The left panel of Figure 9 shows that future office-holders were about 4 or 5 percentage points more loyal than their backbench colleagues until the third reform act, after which backbenchers and frontbenchers were equally loyal. The smoothed curve somewhat obscures how quickly backbenchers caught up with frontbenchers after the third reform act but the reader can see this by looking at the raw data in the graph.

8 Conclusion

The early 19th-century British party system was nothing like the “Westminster” system for which the country became famous over the next century. One of the most important differences concerned the parties’ *lack* of control over who could run for election under their labels. Nomination was highly decentralized, with patronal peers—not selected in any way by the parties themselves—choosing party nominees in many constituencies (Sack 1980). While it is well known that the parties’ local and central leaders did eventually come to control nominations, no one has systematically analyzed how increasing party control affected members’ careers. In this paper, we consider the processes by which parties extended their control over nominations and test several predictions about how careers changed as a consequence.

We have argued that the parties took over nominations in part by the direct tactics of abolishing the “rotten” boroughs (first reform act) or expanding electorates so that aristocrats could no longer control outcomes (second and third reform acts). In other words, the parties put their chief competitors, the patronal peers, out of business.

Another important part of the story, however, is that voters became increasingly party-centered over the course of the century, especially after each reform act. More party-centered voting increased the proportion of constituencies that were safe for one party or the other, and raised the likelihood that co-partisans would compete to be nominated in constituencies that were safe for their own party. Most of the paper presents a “property rights” theory of how such competition might have been regulated, either by the spontaneous or leadership-promoted emergence of seniority norms, and provides evidence consistent with the hypothesis that such norms strengthened after each reform act.

In particular, we present evidence that each reform act increased adherence to incumbent re-nomination and seniority progression norms. As incumbents and those next in line to become incumbents took the best spots, newcomers were forced to accept increasingly unwinnable initial assignments. At the top of the hierarchy, cabinet ministers increasingly

received safe nominations; and the path into the cabinet increasingly went through specific stepping-stone offices. After the third reform act, all of these patterns were clearly evident in the relevant statistics.

It is hard to pick out one of the reform acts as crucial. All of them reduced the influence of patronal peers and increased party-centered voting, so they can be viewed as three doses of the same medicine. The first reform act was clearly the largest single attack on the patronal peers; and led to the birth both of local party associations and centralized party clearinghouses for nominations in the London clubs. The 1860s and the second reform act stand out as when newcomers first began accepting tough initial assignments and cabinet ministers first began receiving a consistent leg up in the competition for nominations. The third reform act stands out in terms of affecting the distribution of safe districts and when party careerism reached modern levels.

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Appendices

A Descriptive Statistics

Year	Party	Opposed		Unopposed	
		\# Candidates	\# Candidates	\# Winners	\# Winners
1802	C	101	69	139	139
1802	L	77	39	88	88
1806	C	89	56	165	165
1806	L	59	40	122	122
1807	C	102	76	190	190
1807	L	83	39	120	120
1812	C	79	58	193	193
1812	L	69	35	112	112
1818	C	135	95	169	169
1818	L	130	67	103	103
1820	C	98	60	204	204
1820	L	100	69	119	119
1826	C	153	97	198	198
1826	L	123	72	107	107
1830	C	146	97	186	186
1830	L	126	75	129	129
1831	C	118	63	149	149
1831	L	132	92	184	184
1832	C	284	109	66	66
1832	L	526	336	109	109
1835	C	283	154	121	121
1835	L	349	205	144	144
1837	C	364	194	121	121
1837	L	371	214	100	100
1841	C	282	156	212	212
1841	L	273	155	113	113
1847	C	205	109	205	205
1847	L	257	157	136	136
1852	C	300	169	159	159
1852	L	349	189	87	87
1857	C	202	117	148	148
1857	L	330	200	176	176
1859	C	196	101	194	194
1859	L	283	174	181	181
1865	C	264	146	143	143
1865	L	355	209	160	160
1868	C	341	175	93	93
1868	L	472	267	121	121
1874	C	381	225	125	125
1874	L	422	188	52	52
1880	C	461	178	58	58
1880	L	451	308	40	40
1885	C	587	237	10	10
1885	L	458	214	7	7
1886	C	284	213	87	87
1886	L	388	140	37	37
1892	C	396	225	24	24
1892	L	485	242	11	11
1895	C	340	221	101	101
1895	L	402	158	10	10

B Measuring \hat{C}_{ct}

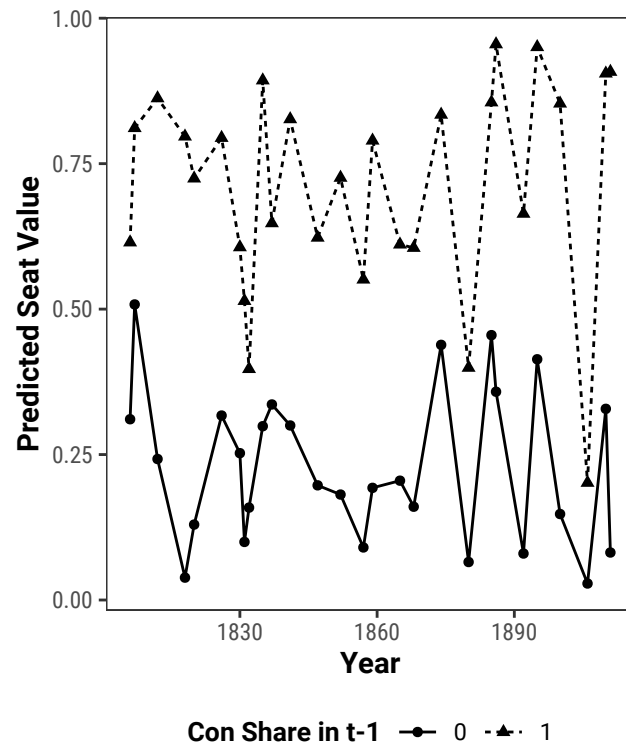


Figure 10: Predicted Conservative Seat Share for Constituencies With Conservative Seat Share 0 or 1 in Previous Election

C Patronal constituencies

In this appendix, we briefly show that the patronal constituencies behaved differently than the partisan constituencies in several ways. First, the patronal constituencies do not separate into safe Liberal and safe Conservative categories as quickly or as clearly as the partisan constituencies. This can be seen in Figures 11 and 12. Second, MPs beginning in patronal constituencies, especially Conservatives, did not show as large a decline in their chance of winning as their colleagues starting in partisan constituencies (see Figure 13). This suggests that Conservative peers were allowing their favorites get into parliament without having first to prove their mettle by contesting unwinnable constituencies.

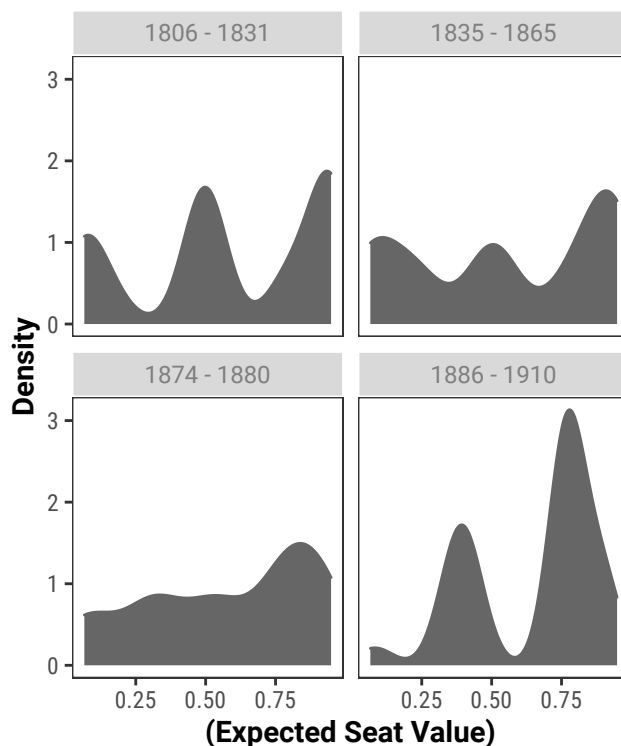


Figure 11: Patronal constituencies did not become more partisan

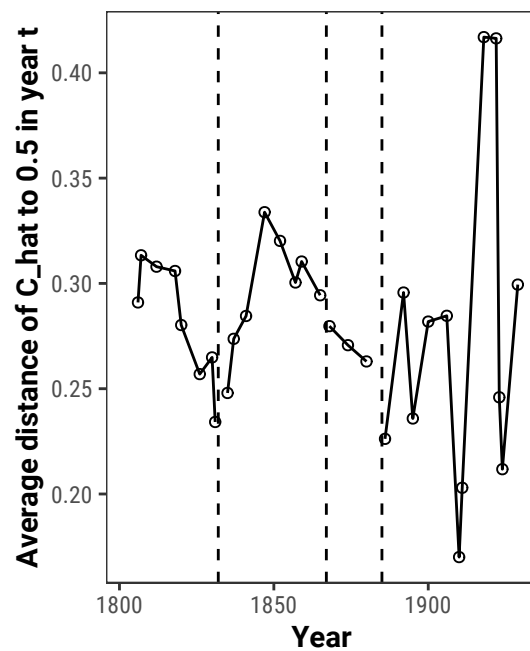


Figure 12: Patronal constituencies did not become more safe

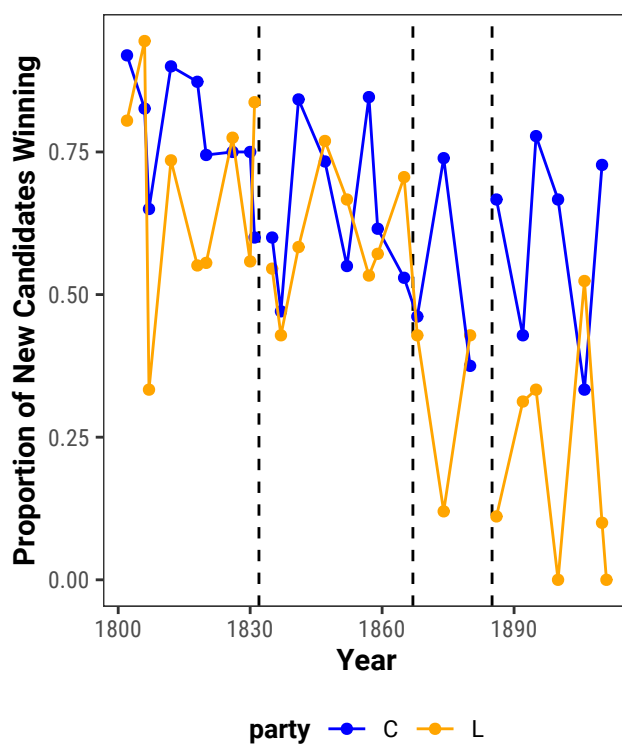


Figure 13: Attenuated trend in patronal constituencies (especially for Conservatives)

D Humble Beginnings



Figure 14: Candidates who were unsuccessful and ran multiple times see their probability of winning next time decrease over time regardless of whether they had won some time in the past or not. Sample restricted to candidates who lost the election at time t , which was at least their second time running. Note that winning probabilities are still higher than for first-time candidates (likely some selection effect: if i've lost multiple times before but will run again, there's something special about me.)

E Double Candidacies

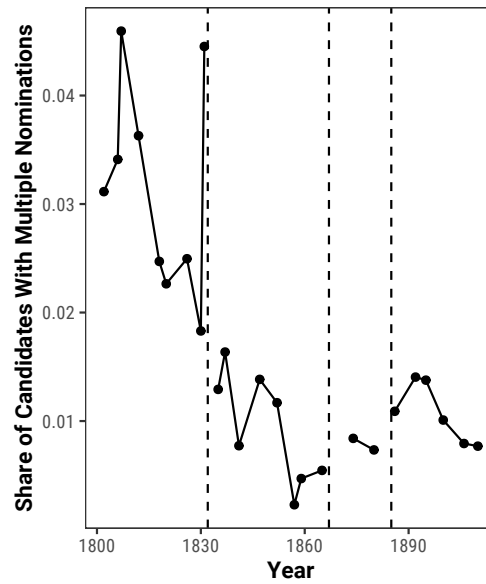


Figure 15: Very few candidates ran in with multiple nominations in the same election.