

Lincoln Love

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LINCOLN'S WORLD: ELECTION-TIME IN BRITAIN, 1832-1867

by Matthew Noah Vosmeier
(continued from previous issue)

Research on British popular political behavior in the second third of the nineteenth century suggests that the British traveler

in New York City came from a diverse political world. There are various ways to interpret this world, from looking at voting behavior to popular political movements among the disfranchised (such as Chartism, which called for annual Parliaments and universal manhood suffrage, for instance). For some historians, particularly those who study the effects of the 1832 reforms on political activity in county elections, the idea of "deference" is a useful means to analyze voting behavior in an



A lively election day in Guildford for MP from the western part of the county of Surrey, from *The Illustrated London News*, September 29, 1849. William John Evelyn was young and unknown, but "well-qualified, from his position in the county and the property he possessed in it," and was nominated on the Saturday prior to the election. After a show of hands indicated Evelyn's popularity, a poll was set for the following Tuesday and Wednesday, but Tuesday's results prompted Evelyn's opponent to withdraw from the contest early. The newspaper complained that such scenes were "much more attractive ... before ... the Englishman's privilege was shorn of its beams by the unsparing shears of Reform. The country-people, wearing the colours of their candidates, and the squabbling parties, however, remind us of the olden election glories, as do the flags streaming from the houses." Late Tuesday, however, disturbances broke out, windows were broken, and "brickbats and flowerpots were also freely thrown."

ordered English society. Historian David Cresap Moore explains that the concept of "deference" is often attributed to the British journalist Walter Bagehot, who, in his analysis of British parliamentary government, *The English Constitution* (1867), used the term as "a means of legitimizing the structure of English society as, apparently, he understood it." Bagehot did not define "deference" succinctly, but explained that England was a nation "deferential by imagination, not by reason," and that Britain's political system was consistent with this trait. The "mass of the English people," he wrote, deferred to "what we may call the theatrical show of society," and thus, the English constitution had established a division between government's "dignified parts," which "excite and preserve the reverence of the population," and the "efficient parts, — those by which it, in fact, works and rules." Largely comfortable with the political system that the 1832 bill had inaugurated, by 1867, he was nevertheless aware that an extension of the suffrage was likely. That year, in fact, the vote was granted to most members of the working class. Nevertheless, he did not favor an electoral system of "ultra-democratic suffrage" to replace that instituted with the 1832 Reform Bill. Most disfranchised English folk, Bagehot believed, preferred not to think about political issues:

If we wish to comprehend what England really is, we should fancy a set of Dorsetshire peasants assembled by the mud-pond of the village.... The utmost stretch of the wisdom the conclave could arrive at would be, "Ah, sir, you gentlefolks do know; and the Queen, God bless her! will see us righted."⁸

Moore, however, used the concept of deference in a more analytical way to see how groups of rural electors voted. From this perspective, partisanship and political ideology are less important than social relationships, or as Moore put it, a better question than asking "on what the different voters voted for" was asking "with whom they voted." Men often voted, Moore explains, as a bloc, with their landlords or employers. This behavior reveals much about society and the workings of politics on the local level. For election managers during the period, knowing how individuals voted helped them to assess the direction of the campaign and would help reveal "exactly what influence or influences might be brought to bear upon each prospective voter." The political elite who supported the Reform Bill of 1832 did not consider such influence as corrupt because it stemmed from a "legitimate" deferential relationship. Thus, writes Moore, the 1832 bill did take "a step towards democracy," but more important, its electoral changes acted to "restore to the landed interest that influence ... thought indispensable to the safety and prosperity to the country."⁹

Studies of various districts did find similar evidence of "deferential" behavior, though other factors shaped political behavior as well. For instance, according to historian R. J. Olney, the votes of small landholders in rural Lincolnshire were harder to influence; a tenant whose family had lived on certain property for generations was protected by local opinion from what has been called a landlord's "psychological coercion." In addition, these farmers discussed the agricultural issues that concerned



The hustings in Covent Garden, from The Illustrated London News, February 21, 1846. While most in this lively crowd are focused on the speakers, a small group of disfranchised subjects converse among themselves.

them all, voting "with their neighbors as well as for their landlord," and exerting influence on their candidate's positions. In Durham in this period, writes historian T. J. Nossiter, while voting was seen as an "intermittent function" and "was far more a question of personal service than an expression of individual opinion," over time, with industrialization, the organization of trade unions and various voluntary associations, "the processes of social change favoured the politics of individualism." In a recent study of voting in four boroughs, historian John A. Phillips has worked to revive the reputation of British popular politics in this period and has offered evidence that, even with the limits and failures of the Great Reform Bill, it changed political practices and strengthened partisanship at the local level around national issues, and ultimately, "established a new pattern of politics which began the inexorable movement towards parliamentary democracy."¹⁰

As this era from 1832 to 1867 was coming to a close, thirty-five years after Trollope's thoughts and the passage of the First Reform Bill, Walter Bagehot published his book *The English Constitution*. Like Trollope, he exemplified the attitude of political observers who preferred reasoned political deliberation and disliked the tendency of mass partisan politics to create an oversimplified and polarized political discourse. As Bagehot discussed British politics, he periodically referred to the workings of politics and government in America. In contrast to the American electoral system, the British system inau-



Bagehot wrote that Lincoln was reelected in 1864 by “an actually choosing nation” because he embodied the northern cause. Bagehot, however, did not favor electoral reform that would bring an “ultra-democratic suffrage” to Britain. This Harper’s Weekly woodcut sides with Lincoln’s party by caricaturing McClellan’s supporters as unworthy voters controlled by party bosses. [See Neely, *Lincoln Encyclopedia*, p. 101] Note the marked similarities between the stereotyped voter on the right and the apparently disfranchised subject in the foreground of the previous figure.

gured in 1832 exhibited a certain flexibility by moving in tandem with public opinion, by which he meant primarily the interests and ideas of the middle classes — “the ordinary majority of educated men” or, more colorfully, “the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus.” The British political system, he thought, resulted in a voting public with informed opinions because parliamentary debates over conflicted political issues could have dramatic and important results, whereas a “presidential government” could only be turned out at a scheduled election. Interestingly, because he focused on political arguments rather than on public displays of partisanship, the result of this electoral system, he thought, was that “the [American] nation was ‘not specially addicted to politics,’” in the sense of sustained public debate, because citizens could have “no influence” on “decision-making” between election years. This also explained, he thought, why “so literary a people as the Americans — ... who read so many newspapers — should have such bad newspapers”:

... they have not the same motive to be as good as the English papers. At a political “crisis,” as we say — that is, when the fate of an administration is unfixed, when it depends on a few votes, yet unsettled, upon a wavering and veering opinion — effective articles in great journals become of essential moment. The *Times* has made many ministries.

In the United States, he argued that it was only “at the electing moment,” the nation’s “instant of despotism,” when Americans would invest their time on political issues.¹¹

Even then, he felt, America’s presidential elections, with their “machinery of caucuses and combinations too complicated to be perfectly known” tended to elevate men of unknown ability, like Abraham Lincoln in 1860. British subjects knew what ideas William Gladstone and Lord Palmerston represented. In contrast, Americans in 1860 elected the largely unknown Lincoln, who “happened to be a man, if not of eminent ability, yet of eminent justness”; nevertheless, Bagehot argued by analogy that “success in a lottery is no argument for lotteries.” It was only during the presidential election of 1864, “when all the Federal states had set their united hearts on one single object,” that he “was voluntarily re-elected by an actually choosing nation” and “embodied the object in which everyone was absorbed.”¹²

For himself, Lincoln was far too practical and far too much a part of his own political culture to have analyzed America’s electoral system as Trollope, Bagehot, or even Dickens’s contributing writer in New York City did. Having spent much of his career in the rough-and-tumble politics of a prairie society, he likely would not have thought it useful to consider the political style of the settled and ordered English countryside. Nevertheless, the influence of nineteenth-century liberalism was at work in both societies, and it is interesting for us to see the two political cultures in parallel. Historians of both countries have made intriguing observations about the complex influences on voters’ decisions, including those shaping personal identity within and identification with a local community. It seems likely, in any case, that as the British traveler toured New York City, he interpreted and assessed election-times in America in light of elections in his home country, at once startled by the differences and perhaps amused by the similarities between politicking peoples.

Notes

8. Moore, *Politics of Deference*, pp. 434-435; Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London, 1867), p. 326, 51, 5, 332-337.
9. Moore, *Politics of Deference*, pp. 10-11, 2, 410, 229.
10. R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics, 1832-1885* (London, 1973), pp. viii, 38-43, 44, 243; T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion, and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North-east, 1832-1874* (New York, 1974), pp. 49, 47, 128, 123, 203; John A. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs*, pp. 5, 303.
11. Bagehot, *English Constitution*, pp. 50, 33, 23-25.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 35.



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NEWS FROM THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION

LINCOLN LEGACY CONFERENCE IN LOUISIANA

The first Lincoln conference ever held in the Deep South was staged at Louisiana State University at Shreveport September 17-18, 1992 — thanks in large measure to the cosponsorship of the Abraham Lincoln Association.

During the two-day meeting, thirty-five papers were delivered to the participants, who also received written greetings from then-President George Bush ("We do well to study and remember Lincoln's life and legacy, and I am confident that this conference will contribute to greater public understanding of this extraordinary individual") and from Louisiana Governor Edwin W. Edwards ("It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you to the first Lincoln Conference in the Deep South...on a campus that is an outgrowth of our sixteenth president's Land Grant College Act"). Shreveport Mayor Hazel Beard greeted the attendees personally.

Among the papers presented during the twelve sessions were "Lincoln's Views of the Founding Fathers" by Ronald D. Reitveld; "Lincoln and the Apocalyptic at Mid-Century"; and "Lincoln's National Debt" by Thomas F. Schwartz, curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln collection at the Illinois State Historical Library, along with ALA President Frank J. Williams (who also gave the paper "Lincoln and Leadership: An International Perspective"), were among those who led session discussions. William D. Pederson, who serves on the LSU-Shreveport History and Social Sciences faculty, was the conference co-director.

The ALA also co-sponsored, from June 8-July 2, 1993, a teachers' institute on Lincoln at LSU-Shreveport, another groundbreaking event born out of ALA support.

"Not since Lincoln excluded certain counties of Louisiana from the Emancipation Proclamation has so much attention been focused there on our sixteenth president," said Frank Williams. "The ALA-LSU connection has reaped major rewards in terms of scholarship and the education of teachers, and I look forward to broadening this important relationship as a major way of introducing Lincoln to new audiences everywhere."

NOTES FROM THE ASSOCIATION LEDGER

The ALA has contributed or raised nearly \$77,000 over the past six years for the work of the Lincoln Legal Papers Project. ALA President Frank Williams affirms that the ongoing research and publication effort is one of the Association's key undertakings for the 1990s.



The Association's great publishing venture of an earlier generation — *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, issued in 1953 — continues to generate acclaim, not to mention income. President Williams reported that the ALA received in January 1993 a \$1,000 royalty from the publishers, Rutgers University Press, for a new sale of the nine-volume set for a book club edition. It was, of course, the History Book Club's famous edition of the *Collected Works* that introduced thousands of new readers to the words of Lincoln in the 1960s.

Another recent ALA publishing enterprise, the Lincoln on Democracy Project, has resulted in editions of the sixteenth president's speeches and writings on liberty and freedom in both English and Polish. Earlier this year, a Japanese-language edition was published by Kadokawa Shoten Ltd., one of Japan's leading publishing houses.

JOINING THE ALA

To join the ALA — or to obtain more information on membership benefits — write Membership, The Abraham Lincoln Association, Old State Capital, Springfield, IL 62701. Memberships are available at several levels, all of which include a subscription to the twice-yearly *Journal*: Individual (\$25); patron (\$50); sponsor (\$125); benefactor (\$250); and corporate (\$500).