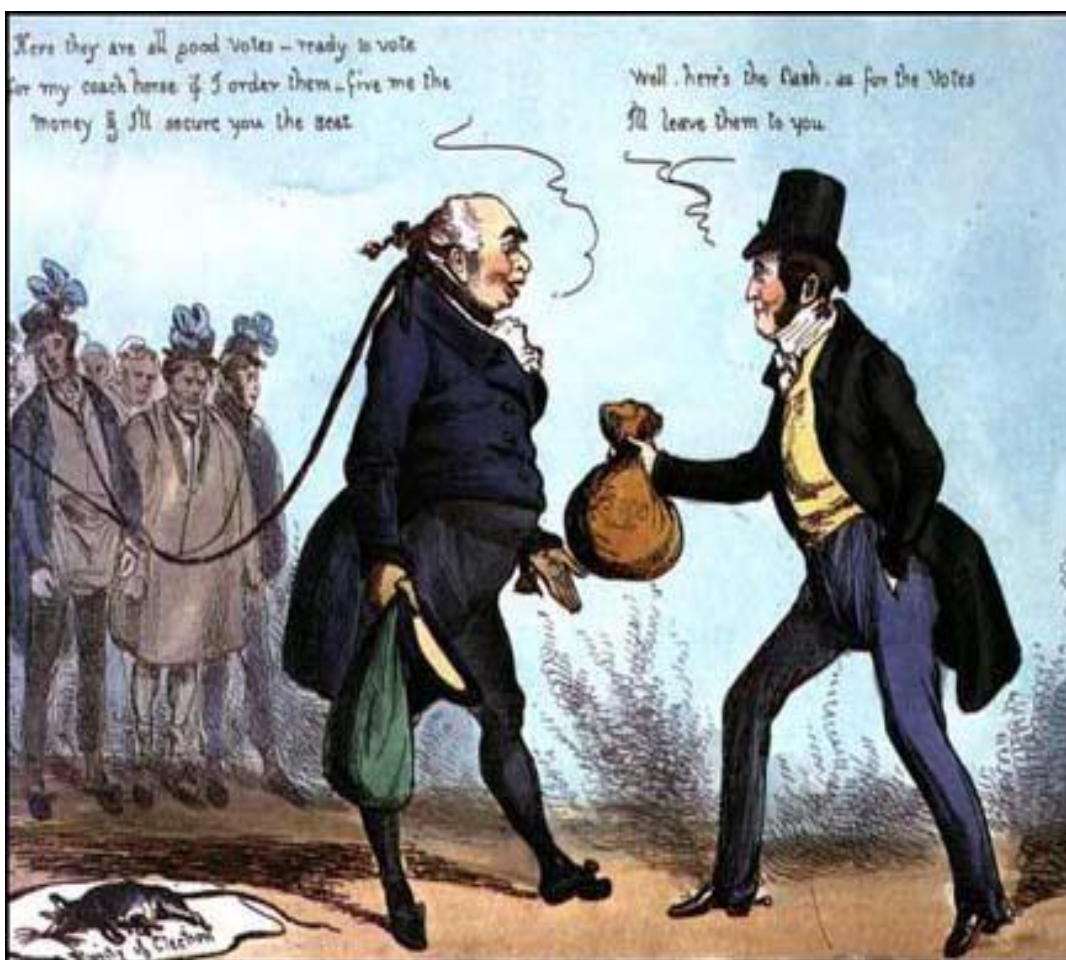


## Rotten Boroughs

A rotten borough was a parliamentary constituency that had declined in size but still had the right to elect members of the House of Commons. Plympton Earle had been a prosperous market town in the Middle Ages but by the 19th century it had declined to the level of a country village. Newtown on the Isle of Wight had been a market town but by the time of the 1832 Reform Act it had been reduced to a village of 14 houses.

Most of these constituencies were under the control of one man, the patron. Rotten boroughs had very few voters. For example, Dunwich in Suffolk, as a result of coastal erosion, had almost fallen into the sea and by 1831 only had thirty-two people had the vote. Old Sarum, in Wiltshire, only had three houses and a population of fifteen people. With just a few individuals with the vote and no secret ballot, it was easy for candidates to buy their way to victory.



W. Heath's cartoon *How to Get Made and M.P.* (1830)

Borough	Patron	MPs	Houses in Borough	Voters in 1831
Bramber	Duke of Rutland	2	35	20
Callington	Lord Clinton	2	225	42
Dunwich	Lord Huntingfield	2	44	32
East Looe	John Buller	2	167	38
Gatton	Sir Mark Wood	2	23	7
Old Sarum	Earl of Caledon	2	3	11
Newtown	Sir Fitzwilliam Barrington	2	14	23
Plympton Earle	Earl of Mount Edgcumbe	2	182	40

## **Primary Source:**

### **1) Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791)**

The county of Yorkshire, which contains near a million souls, sends two county members; and so does the county of Rutland which contains not a hundredth part of that number. The town of Old Sarum, which contains not three houses, sends two members; and the town of Manchester, which contains upwards of sixty thousand souls, is not admitted to send any. Is there any principle in these things?

### **(2) William Wilberforce, describing his election at Hull in 1807.**

By long-established custom the single vote of a resident elector was rewarded with a donation of two guineas and the expenses of a freeman's journey from London averaged £10 a piece. The letter of the law was not broken, because the money was not paid until the last day on which election petitions could be presented.

Source: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/>