

The Reform Act of 1832

Between 1770 and 1830, the Tories were the dominant force in the House of Commons. The Tories were strongly opposed to increasing the number of people who could vote. However, in November, 1830, Earl Grey, a Whig, became Prime Minister. Grey explained to William IV that he wanted to introduce proposals that would get rid of some of the rotten boroughs. Grey also planned to give Britain's fast growing industrial towns such as Manchester, Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds, representation in the House of Commons.

In April 1831 Grey asked William IV to dissolve Parliament so that the Whigs could secure a larger majority in the House of Commons. Grey explained this would help his government to carry their proposals for parliamentary reform. William agreed to Grey's request and after making his speech in the House of Lords, walked back through cheering crowds to Buckingham Palace.

After Lord Grey's election victory, he tried again to introduce parliamentary reform. On 22nd September 1831, the House of Commons passed the Reform Bill. However, the Tories still dominated the House of Lords, and after a long debate the bill was defeated. When people heard the news, Reform Riots took place in several British towns; the most serious of these being in Bristol in October 1831.

On 7th May 1832, Grey and Henry Brougham met the king and asked him to create a large number of Whig peers in order to get the Reform Bill passed in the House of Lords. William was now having doubts about the wisdom of parliamentary reform and refused.

Lord Grey's government resigned and William IV now asked the leader of the Tories, the Duke of Wellington, to form a new government. Wellington tried to do this but some Tories, including Sir Robert Peel, were unwilling to join a cabinet that was in opposition to the views of the vast majority of the people in Britain. Peel argued that if the king and Wellington went ahead with their plan there was a strong danger of a civil war in Britain.

When the Duke of Wellington failed to recruit other significant figures into his cabinet, William was forced to ask Grey to return to office. In his attempts to frustrate the will of the electorate, William IV lost the popularity he had enjoyed during the first part of his reign. Once again Lord Grey asked the king to create a large number of new Whig peers. William agreed that he would do this and when the Lords heard the news, they agreed to pass the Reform Act.

Many people were disappointed with the 1832 Reform Bill. Voting in the boroughs was restricted to men who occupied homes with an annual value of £10. There were also property qualifications for people living in rural areas. As a result, only one in seven adult males had the vote. Nor were the constituencies of equal size. Whereas 35 constituencies had less than 300 electors, Liverpool had a constituency of over 11,000.

Source:

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Terms of the Reform Act of 1832

Disenfranchisement Clauses

- 56 nomination or rotten boroughs returning 111 MPs lost their representation
- 30 boroughs with less than 4,000 inhabitants lost one MP each
- Weymouth and Melcombe Regis gave up two of their four MPs

Enfranchisement

- 65 seats were awarded to the counties
- 44 seats were distributed to 22 larger towns including Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and the new London metropolitan districts
- 21 smaller towns were given one MP each
- Scotland was awarded 8 extra seats
- Ireland was given 5 extra seats

Franchise Qualification

The borough franchise was regularised. The right of voting was vested in all householders paying a yearly rental of £10 and, subject to one year residence qualification £10 lodgers (if they were sharing a house and the landlord was not in occupation).

In the counties, the franchise was granted to:

- 40 shilling freeholders
- £10 copyholders
- £50 tenants
- £10 long lease holders
- £50 medium lease holders
- Borough freeholders could vote in the counties if their freehold was between 40 shillings and £10, or if it was over £10 and occupied by a tenant.

Chesterton's Critique of the Reform Act

The franchise has never been largely and liberally granted in England; half the males have no vote and are not likely to get one. It was never granted in reply to pressure from awakened sections of the democracy; in every case there was a perfectly clear motive for granting it solely for the convenience of the aristocrats. The Great Reform Bill was not passed in response to such riots as that which destroyed a Castle; nor did the men who destroyed the Castle get any advantage whatever out of the Great Reform Bill. The Great Reform Bill was passed in order to seal an alliance between the landed aristocrats and the rich manufacturers of the north (an alliance that rules us still); and the chief object of that alliance was to prevent the English populace getting any political power in the general excitement after the French Revolution. No one can read Macaulay's speech on the Chartists, for instance, and not see that this is so. Disraeli's further extension of the suffrage was not affected by the intellectual vivacity and pure republican theory of the mid-Victorian agricultural labourer; it was effected by a politician who saw an opportunity to dish the Whigs, and guessed that certain orthodoxies in the more prosperous artisan might yet give him a balance against the commercial Radicals. And while this very thin game of wire-pulling with the mere abstraction of the vote was being worked entirely by the oligarchs and entirely in their interests, the solid and real thing that was going on was the steady despoiling of the poor of all power or wealth, until they find themselves to-day upon the threshold of slavery. That is *The Working Man's History of England*.

The reform Acts of the 19th Century

The three Reform Acts, of 1832, 1867, and 1884, all extended voting rights to previously disfranchised citizens. The first act, which was the most controversial, reapportioned representation in Parliament in a way fairer to the cities of the industrial north, which had experienced tremendous growth, and did away with "rotten" and "pocket" boroughs like Old Sarum, which with only seven voters (all controlled by the local squire) was still sending two members to Parliament. This act not only re-apportioned representation in Parliament, thus making that body more accurately represent the citizens of the country, but also gave the power of voting to those lower in the social and economic scale, for the act extended the right to vote to any man owning a household worth £10, adding 217,000 voters to an electorate of 435,000. Approximately one man in five now had the right to vote.

For many conservatives, this effect of the bill, which allowed the middle classes to share power with the upper classes, was revolutionary in its import. Some historians argue that this transference of power achieved in England what the French Revolution achieved eventually in France. Therefore, the agitation preceding (and following) the first Reform Act, which Dickens observed at first hand as a shorthand Parliamentary reporter, made many people consider fundamental issues of society and politics.

The 1867 Reform Act extended the right to vote still further down the class ladder, adding just short of a million voters — including many workingmen — and doubling the electorate, to almost two million in England and Wales. It, too, created major shock waves in contemporary British culture, some of which appear in works such as Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and Ruskin's *Crown of Wild Olive*, as authors debated whether this shift of power would create democracy that would, in turn, destroy high culture.

The 1884 bill and the **1885 Redistribution Act** tripled the electorate again, giving the vote to most agricultural laborers. By this time, voting was becoming a right rather than the property of the privileged. However, women were not granted voting rights until the **Act of 1918**, which enfranchised all men over 21 and women over thirty. This last bit of discrimination was eliminated 10 years later (in **1928**) by the **Equal Franchise Act**.

Source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/reform.html>