

Zitierhinweis

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The reforms to Britain's electoral system between 1867 and 1885 significantly changed how elections were fought. By the end of the process the House of Commons was elected from constituencies of roughly equal size, with larger cities and counties subdivided. There were limits to how much candidates could spend on their election campaign, which helped to reduce corruption through bribery and treating. While there was no manhood (let alone universal adult) suffrage, there was now a mass electorate to which the parties needed to appeal in order to win elections.

This had a significant effect on how political parties operated, leading to the establishment of formal national party structures, the increased need for local volunteers to promote the party's cause at election time and, which is the focus of this study, the emergence of a new breed of party official – the professional agent, who co-ordinated political campaigning at constituency level. These changes have been described as the arrival of professionalised politics. Yet although paid agents were in many ways the personification of this new electoral professionalism, it is a role that has been neglected by historians. Studies of high politics have ignored them as insignificant local officials. At the same time, their position within the party machine have put them outside the interests of practitioners of the 'new political history' with its focus on popular culture and opinion.

Perhaps it was (and may be even today) in the nature of the paid constituency agent's role to be under-appreciated, doing the hard work behind the scenes while the candidate or MP achieves power, or at least a degree of celebrity. The cover of this volume shows an agent hard at work at his desk, surrounded by piles of pamphlets, posters and voter list, commenting: 'Wish I could get a holiday like the M.P.'s – and people call this a lull in politics.' Dr Rix's excellent volume rescues this obscure and beleaguered figure from the shadows, an achievement that is valuable both for its own sake and because it sheds light on historiographical debates such as the balance between local and national issues in election campaigning, the differing cultures of Conservative and Liberal parties, and the extent to which the Conservatives achieved electoral dominance during this period by suppressing voter turnout. In addition, it presents a vivid picture of the realities of electoral organisation. Dr Rix highlights both the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act and the Third Reform Act of 1885 as crucial to the emergence of the professional constituency agent. The first introduced limits to how much candidates were permitted to spend on their election campaigns. Prior to this, the legal role of election agent had generally been carried out by solicitors, who saw elections as an opportunity to make money. The new spending limits reduced these financial rewards. The 1885 Act increased the size of the electorate and thus the scale of campaigning parties needed to engage in, making it harder for solicitors, who could not devote themselves to politics full-time, to carry out the agent's role effectively.

This prompted the rise of the professional constituency agent, who was employed by local constituency associations to manage election campaigns and political organisation between elections. Perhaps their most important and specialised task concerned electoral registration. During this period, local constituency associations had a key role in the compilation of the electoral register. They had to ensure that as many of their own supporters and as few of their opponents' as possible were registered to vote by carrying out an extensive canvass to compile lists of voters to be included on the electoral register and by objecting to the inclusion of opposition voters who were not entitled to be on the register. Any disputed cases were then resolved in 'revision courts' in front of a barrister. This aspect of an agents' work alone required a detailed knowledge of electoral law, 118 separate pieces of legislation. Despite the increased use of professional agents, their role was never as firmly established as many of them would have wished. Some constituency associations continued to use solicitor agents. Not everyone considered it respectable to carry out paid political work and agents were often viewed as sinister 'wire-pullers', with a similar reputation to that of spin doctors today. As a result, paid agents craved recognition in terms of being accepted as part of a legitimate profession and of being valued by the party leadership. Both Liberal and

Conservative agents set up their own professional associations, which then published specialist journals and devised a system of examinations so that it was possible to become a 'qualified' agent. Their contribution was increasingly recognised by party grandees: H.H. Asquith, Home Secretary at the time, told a meeting of Liberal agents in 1893 that their profession had 'great dignity and importance'. Yet their existence was always somewhat precarious. Agents could suddenly find themselves surplus to requirements as soon as an election was over. The Liberal agents' journal lamented that agents were expected to master 'a most intricate branch of the law', appear in the revision courts and to address mass meetings all 'for the salary of an inferior foreman'.

If they felt their work was inadequately recognised at the time, they have been largely forgotten by posterity too. Agents receive few mentions in the memoirs of the politicians they helped to elect and little has been written about them by historians. Through some impressive research, and by marshalling a wide range of sources, Dr Rix has helped to set this right. She has compiled biographical details of 199 constituency agents, divided roughly equally between Conservatives and Liberals to present a collective biography and to provide a vivid impression of their working lives. They came from an eclectic mix of backgrounds. Many had pursued or trained for professions, including law, teaching, journalism and accountancy. A surprising number could be considered working class. Twenty per cent of Liberal agents in the sample fit this category, and the role of professional agent providing an opportunity for social mobility.

Most paid agents moved constituencies during the course of their working lives. This enabled them to spread knowledge and expertise across the country, unlike the old solicitor agents who were usually tied to a one place. In doing so they contributed to a greater standardisation of political campaigning across the country. In discussing this aspect of political agency, Dr Rix sheds light on the question of how far politics during this period was primarily local or national. This is a question that has provoked differing opinions among historians, from those who see Gladstone's Midlothian campaign in 1879–80 as marking a key step towards modern-style national election campaigns to others who regard the transition as taking place much later – even after the first world war. Dr Rix wisely avoids joining in the attempt to pin down a specific date when politics became truly national. Instead, she shows how agents acted as a bridge between local and national campaigning, in particular how national questions were used and adapted to suit local needs. This is surely a more fruitful approach. After all, throughout this period and even before general election results showed distinct national swings tempered by noticeable local and regional variations – a phenomenon that persists to this day.

In her chapter on election campaigns, Dr Rix outlines the growing influence of the national party organisation on local campaigns, particularly in producing a range of leaflets, pamphlets and posters for distribution by constituencies. At the most intensely contested general election, that of January 1910, Conservative and Liberal headquarters respectively supplied around 50 million and 40 million pieces of literature to constituencies. Although this might be supposed to have led to a more standardised election campaign across the country, local agents retained a lot of discretion, not only producing their own material explaining how a national issue applied to their own constituency, but also localising leaflets by deciding what national material to order and to whom it should be distributed – an example of what today would be known as targeting. One Conservative agent warned: 'DON'T leave a handbill dealing with the cotton trade with an agricultural labourer, or vice versa.'

Agents were aware of how issues that were dear to the heart of the party faithful could alienate voters. They sought to neutralise negative stereotypes of their party. For Liberal agents this applied in particular to temperance reform. An article in the *Liberal Agent* journal warned that 'the Liberal party has in many cases associated itself with attacks on the pleasures of the people', pointing out that many Liberal voters also liked their 'pint of mild' or 'three of scotch'. A party agent in Ipswich warned not to 'let the Temperance Party drag us

about at their chariot wheels'. Dr Rix's research here provides a useful insight into how election campaigns involved putting pragmatism above ideological purity. Historians have tended to focus on the zealous advocates of single causes, whether temperance, tariff reform or disestablishment, and Dr Rix provides a valuable service in highlighting the perspective of the pragmatists.

Another issue discussed here is the extent to which Conservative electoral dominance between 1886 and 1900 was achieved through an essentially negative strategy of low turnouts and keeping as many voters as possible off the electoral register. This view, which had become something of an orthodoxy, has come under challenge recently from historians. Dr Rix's research tends to support the revisionist view. There is little evidence of any systematic attempt to keep whole groups of voters off the register, merely attempt to maximise the number of Conservative voters registered and minimise the number of Liberals. So, in one case a Conservative agent argued for individual rooms in police barracks to be treated as separate dwellings because police officers were deemed to be likely supporters. Dr Rix concludes that if low registers and electoral turnouts were a maxim of Conservative campaigning, 'no-one had told the agents'.

Overall, this book manages to break new ground in terms of the subject matter researched at the same time as making a significant contribution to current historiographical debates. As the author acknowledges, it has been a long time in the making – it is based on her 2002 Cambridge University doctoral thesis. While in the meantime, Dr Rix has published widely on matters related to the subject-matter of this volume, her various articles and book chapters have felt like appetisers for the main dish. During my own doctoral research, I was despatched by an examiner to consult the original thesis in the Cambridge University History Library. Pleasant enough though that experience was, I am sure that other students of the period will welcome the fact that this volume makes the fruits of Dr Rix's research more easily available to a wider readership.

The author would like to thank Dr. Sharpe for his thorough and generous review, which she is pleased to accept.