Parliamentary Selection
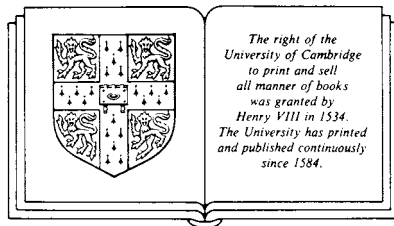
Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England

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Contents

1

Parliamentary Selection

I

THE MARTIAL FEATS of Caius Marcius earned him the appellation
Coriolanus. When he returned to Rome after his greatest triumph his
mother, Volumnia, exulted: "I have lived to see inherited my very wishes.
... Only there's one thing wanting, which I doubt not but our Rome
will cast upon thee."[1] This crowning accolade was selection as consul,
a veneration of honor and merit reserved for the noblest Romans. The
process, in Shakespeare's Rome, was one of nomination by the senate
and approbation by the citizenry. The body of senators would meet to
select a candidate to be presented to the people. Marcius's heroism
against the Volscians concluded a career of gallantry that even the aged
Cominius felt himself unable to describe. He was nobly born and bred,
and his valor – "the chiefest virtue" – could not "in the world be singly
counterpoised."[2] He was adopted by the senate unanimously in the belief
that "he cannot but with measure fit the honors which we devise him."[3]

It remained only for Coriolanus to present himself for the people's
assent. This aspect of the selection process involved the symbolic hum-
bling of the recipient of high honors. The nominee, in the "gown of
humiliation," perambulated the public squares requesting the voices of
the citizens. It was the act of petition that was paramount – "the price
is to ask it kindly."[4] In turn, the people demanded some show of the
nominee's merit. In the case of warriors, this meant the display of wounds
suffered in the service of the state:

All dates are given in old style with the year reckoned to begin on January 1.
[1] William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, act II, scene i, lines 194ff. All references are to the
    Arden Shakespeare.
[2] Ibid., II, ii, 84ff.
[3] Ibid., II, ii, 123.
[4] Ibid., II, iii, 75.

Your voices: for your voices I have fought; watched for your voices; for your voices bear of wound two dozen odd; battles thrice six I have seen ... .for your voices have done many things; some less, some more: your voices: Indeed I would be consul."[5]

But Coriolanus did not ask it kindly. He implored the senators to dispense with the public rites and he discharged his obligation grudgingly. There was no false modesty in his abhorrence of the spectacle of his bravery; he eschewed it before the senate as well as before the citizens: "I had rather have my wounds to heal again than to hear say how I got them."[6] But his humility was not unadulterated. He despised the common people and deplored their role in affirming his elevation. He recoiled from begging their "needless vouches," and only stern persuasion could induce him "to crave the hire which first we do deserve."[7] As he moved from crossroad to marketplace performing the requisite obeisance, he mocked the plebians and derided their ceremony. Even the citizens' eager approval provoked his scorn.

Coriolanus's consulship was not to be. His haughtiness and his indifference to the welfare of the plebians – already demonstrated when he opposed the free distribution of grain to avert famine – had roused the tribunes, the representatives of the people, against him. His implacable foe, Brutus, precisely summarized Coriolanus's attitude toward selection: "He would miss it rather than carry it but by the suit of the gentry to him and the desire of the nobles."[8] He and Sicinius persuaded the citizens to withdraw their assent. As the senators convened to celebrate Coriolanus's elevation, the tribunes led a delegation to protest it. This unexpected reversal of fortune unleashed Coriolanus's deep-seated rancor: "Must these have voices that can yield them now, and straight disclaim their tongues."[9] Such dishonorable conduct was all that could be expected from unhonorable men. His tirade against the tribunes quickly passed the bounds of treason. The banishment, revenge, and tragic fall of Coriolanus all stemmed from his failure to be selected consul of Rome.

Shakespeare's account of the candidacy of Coriolanus is an apt starting place for a discussion of the process of parliamentary selection in early modern England. There is of course much in fiction that is not likely to be as sharply defined in life. The dramatist needs conflict to propel action. Few parliamentary selections make as good a story as does the tragedy

[5] Ibid., II, iii, 125ff.
[6] Ibid., II, ii, 69.
[7] Ibid., II, iii, 113.
[8] Ibid., II, i, 232.
[9] Ibid., III, i, 32.

of Coriolanus. But in a play that rarely strays from the accounts of Plutarch and Livy, the episode of Coriolanus's consulship is entirely of Shakespeare's devising.[10] Moreover, these scenes so accurately portray the process by which officeholders were selected in the early seventeenth century that one must conclude that Shakespeare had first-hand experience, either of wardmote selections to the London Common Council or of parliamentary selections themselves. It is rare to have the testimony of so acute an observer. Thus it is worth reflecting on the central tenets of selection as Shakespeare recreated them.

First, selection was not resolved by choice. This is of paramount importance. If any choosing was done, it took place informally before Coriolanus's nomination:

1 Off.: How many stand for consulships?
2 Off.: Three they say: but tis thought of every one
         Coriolanus will carry it.[11]

Nomination was made within the body of the nominators. It was their gift to bestow. The candidate neither presented himself, proclaimed his abilities, nor promised beneficial performance. It was only necessary that he have a sponsor among the senators to put forward his name. This was done in an encomium of those qualities that fitted the office to him – attributes already possessed, deeds already accomplished. There was no question of Coriolanus's seeking the consulship:

1 Cit.: Tell us what hath brought you to it.
  Cor.: My own desert.
2 Cit.: Your own desert!
  Cor.: Aye, not mine own desire.[12]

Secondly, selection took place without a contest. The senators made their nomination unanimously, endowing the candidate with the dignity of their office. When the tribunes sought to arrest Coriolanus after his treasonous speech, the senators pledged with one voice, "We'll surety him."[13] Indeed, the fact that the candidate did not seek his place meant that opposition was more an attack upon magistracy – "to unbuild the city and to lay all flat" – than upon the individual involved.[14] Not only was there every expectation that the candidate nominated by the senate would become consul, the entire process depended upon this result. The

10 Plutarch's account, no less garbled as to procedure than Shakespeare's, is of an election among three candidates in which people made choice of the other two.
11 Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, II, ii, 2ff.
12 Ibid., II, iii, 65ff.
13 Ibid., III, i, 176.
14 Ibid., III, i, 196.

senators never doubted the fulfillment of their wish. After his nomination Coriolanus was toasted: "To our noble consul we wish all joy and honor." The tribunes were apprised of the decision reached by the senate and directed to present it to the people: "We recommend to you, tribunes of the people, our purpose to them."[15]

It is the people's role, and Shakespeare's attitude toward it, that has so perplexed modern commentators. Certainly, there was nothing democratic about their participation; nor was there anything antidemocratic in Shakespeare's depiction of it. Like the senate, the plebians acted collectively, but they gave assent rather than consent. Coriolanus called their voices "needless vouches," and even the tribune Sicinius described the ceremony as "the custom of request."[16] They took no part in generating candidates, and they had no candidates from which to choose. The most they could do was to withhold their assent and bring the process to a halt. This colloquy among three citizens is the best possible description of how rights and responsibilities blended together in the selection process:

1 Cit.: Once if he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him.
2 Cit.: We may, Sir, if we will.
3 Cit.: We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do; for if . . . he tells us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them.[17]

It was participation that was essential to the plebians – "neither will they bate one jot of ceremony."[18] If selection affirmed honor, then those who participated in it, in whatever capacity, must be seen as honorable. This was precisely the objection that Coriolanus raised against participation by the multitude. Selection to office did not confer honor, it confirmed it. It recognized noble qualities and distinguished them. This was what Coriolanus meant by "the hire that first we do deserve." To seek for confirmation of honor among those least able to recognize it was to diminish both officeholder and office – "by Jove himself, it makes the consul base."[19] Though part of his own honor stemmed from merit, Coriolanus viewed birth and upbringing as more essential elements, and feared that these qualities were in danger of dilution by the masses:

> Thus we debase
> The nature of our seats, and make the rabble
> Call our cares fears; which will in time

[15] Ibid., II, ii, 151.
[16] Ibid., II, iii, 141.
[17] Ibid., II, iii, 1ff.
[18] Ibid., II, ii, 139.
[19] Ibid., III, i, 106.

> Break ope the locks of the senate, and bring in
> The crows to peck the eagles.[20]

Finally, in Shakespeare's recreation of the selection process failure equals catastrophe. Riot, near rebellion, death and destruction all flow from this one event. If selection affirms the honor of the individual and confirms the harmony between patricians and plebians – the underlying harmony of the state – then dissent forcefully expresses the opposite. The rage that overcame Coriolanus was in equal parts the fury of the individual and of the state. To allow the "mutable rank-scented many" a voice of assent was bad enough, but to allow them to reject a nominee was to create an equality as dangerous as it was unnatural. Coriolanus could predict only the most extreme consequences for the state and for his class:

> This double worship,
> Where one part does disdain with causes, the other
> Insult without all reason; where gentry, title, wisdom
> Cannot conclude but by the yea and no
> Of general ignorance; – it must omit
> Real necessities, and give way the while
> To unstable slightness.[21]

In this he was the prophet of his own doom.

Coriolanus is frequently described as Shakespeare's most political play, meaning that it raises issues most recognizably political to the modern mind. It can be read as a play about class struggle and as a play about liberty and oppression. A. C. Bradley, who rejected this view, nevertheless ascribed Coriolanus's fall to the tragic flaw of pride. He was a character out of step with his times, unlike Menenius, who could drink a cup of wine and flatter the commons even while lecturing to them on the virtues of nobility. If Coriolanus was not as ambitious as Macbeth, he was as unyielding as Othello. His rigid values were matched by those of Brutus and Sicinius. In their clash is found the central conflict of the play. By this reading, it is neither a great theme nor a great play.[22] But by elevating the episode of the consulship to the center of the action, we can see the tragedy in a different light – as that of a society whose structures and values are incapable of absorbing the tensions and conflicts within it.

The selection process depicted by Shakespeare depends upon an identity of interest within society. It is grounded upon participation rather

[20] Ibid., III, i, 134.
[21] Ibid., III, i, 141.
[22] A. C. Bradley, *Coriolanus* (1912).

than choice, and on unanimity rather than majority. The senate had no more right to dispense with the assent of the people than did the people to reject the nominee of the senate. It was their agreement that was mutually reinforcing and that defined honor and worth. Yet throughout the episode, Shakespeare presents an undercurrent of disharmony, an expression of views that would render traditional practice inadequate. While one citizen asserted that the people could not deny Coriolanus their voices, another believed that "we may, Sir, if we will." One asked the crowd, "Are you all resolved to give your voices?" He then answered the murmur of discontent: "But that's no matter, the greater part carries it."[23] There is even a hint that the individual voice is as important as the collective one: "He is to make his requests by particulars; wherein every one of us has a single honor in giving him our own voices with our own tongues."[24]

Similarly, Brutus and Sicinius are out of step with the common notion that selection is a celebration of honor. This is a view that both Coriolanus and the citizenry share, however different their notions of who should participate in it. Selection was a social distinction that affirmed virtue rather than a political act that necessitated performance:

2 Off.:   He hath deserved worthily of his country.... He hath so planted his honor in their eyes and his actions in their hearts that for their tongues to be silent, and not confess so much were a kind of ungrateful injury.[25]

But for the tribunes, the selection of Coriolanus was above all a political issue. "Our office may, during his power, go to sleep."[26] They could not be persuaded of his virtue by Menenius because it was not his virtue that they sought. They saw their own office in the same political sense that they projected his.

Honor and dishonor, virtue and power – these are at the core of the episode of the consulship and ultimately of the tragedy itself. More importantly, all are at the core of the process of parliamentary selection in early modern England. The clash of values at which Shakespeare dimly hinted would, over the course of the seventeenth century, emerge as one of the defining characteristics of the selection process. Assent would become choice, and the dire consequences of rejection would recede. For the first time election – that is, contests among candidates for majority decisions – would become an important element in the system by which men were chosen to Parliament. A process of social

[23]   Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, II, iii, 37.
[24]   Ibid., II, iii, 44.
[25]   Ibid., II, ii, 24.
[26]   Ibid., II, i, 218.

distinction would give way to one of political calculation, and along the way England would be brought as close to collapse as was Coriolanus's Rome.

<div align="center">II</div>

The selection of members to Parliament is a subject on which it is difficult not to be Whiggish. The electoral process is so fundamental to modern participation in politics that we have an intuitive understanding of its operation. Parliamentary elections are now elaborate events, carefully coordinated and even more carefully studied. The adversarial nature of the process, the competition among the candidates, the interest groups that form the electorate – these are the very stuff of politics itself. Psephologists with their computer graphics mesmerize us with predictions of marginals and swings, of issues and preferences, of winners and losers. It is only to be expected that efforts to study past elections take these categories as their starting point.

In studying the history 'of elections it is hard to view the past as anything less than an imperfect version of the present. The march of parliamentary reform is one of the cherished traditions of British democracy and one of the few that remains untarnished. The enfranchisement of class upon class of citizens opened the way for participatory democracy, for social equality, and for the liberation of women. It is a truism of modern politics that legitimacy is based on consent and that consent is given at elections. The principle of one person, one vote is no longer an issue of politics; it is an issue of justice.

Thus to enter into a discussion of a system in which none of these principles was yet recognized is necessarily to enter into an alien world. We cannot help but explore its features along the lines on which it ultimately developed. What were the requirements for participation at elections? Who held rights to elect, and who to be elected? Who nominated candidates and on what basis? What were the legal sanctions and safeguards of the system? Was it equitable even to those who participated in it? These are the questions that have dominated writing on the subject for generations, whether by local antiquarians, jurists, or professional historians. The classic work of the Porritts, *The Unreformed House of Commons*, crystallized generations of research and immortalized the anachronistic nature of the investigation.[27]

That work also froze into place the supercharged language in which the subject is discussed. Perhaps there is no more evocative phrase in

[27]   E. and A. Porritt, *The Unreformed House of Commons*, 2 vols. (1903).

the history of political reform than "rotten borough." It calls to mind
not only the inherent corruption in the old system of representation but
also its inevitable decay. Against the disease of rotten boroughs there
could only be purgatives, quarantines, or surgical cleansing. Indeed, the
metaphor became more potent as the science of medicine advanced.
Rotten boroughs, like lepers, were pariahs in a new age of political
awareness. Once representation became the right of individuals rather
than of communities and once participation became voting at elections,
then rotten boroughs became as indefensible as the divine right of kings.
Though they were not completely and immediately swept away, they
were ultimately doomed.

The phrase rotten borough is but one example of how the language
used to describe the old electoral system denies that system its own
integrity. Because rotten borough is so obviously a metaphor, it is easy
to call attention to the problems inherent in using it as a description of
the early modern system. Since a borough existed by grant of rights
from the Crown, and since one of those granted rights was to send
representatives to parliament, a rotten borough is a contradiction in
terms. What was later thought to be rotten about nineteenth-century
boroughs was a conflation of two different things: that they had rights
granted to them that were denied to others, and that they had rights
they were no longer thought fit to exercise. In the early modern context,
of course, the whole point about corporate rights, or chartered rights,
or manorial rights, was just such exclusivity. They were granted in ex-
change for something of value – loyalty, service, fines, rents – and they
were normally granted to communities in perpetuity. The point is per-
haps made more forcefully when one realizes that in the Middle Ages
the community of Torrington, Devonshire, was granted the right not to
have to send members to Parliament.[28]

This problem of descriptive language pervades our subject. One ob-
vious case is the use of the word *voting*. In early modern parlance,
electors gave voices rather than votes and spoke of having voices to give.
The distinction was never precise because the modern meaning of voting,
let alone the process, remained inchoate. But giving voices had descrip-
tive meaning, as voting does today, both rhetorically and actually. Rhe-
torically, giving voices meant giving assent, agreeing to something rather
than choosing it. Actually, giving voices meant appearing at the place
of election to shout or say aye to the proposal of the nominee's name.
The shout was a ritual of affirmation and celebration. As a process, it

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[28]   In 1661 Torrington petitioned, unsuccessfully, to have its members restored. *Calendar
of State Papers Domestic Series 1661–62*, p. 579.

was both anonymous and unanimous. It was the very opposite of voting. The same difference can be observed between the early modern term *standing* for a seat and the modern term *running* for one. Running implies competition and competitors, standing implies individual worth and service. Men stood as the representatives of their communities, however defined, rather than running to represent constituencies within it. Neither the process nor the ideas are analogous, and even more neutral modern words like *candidacy* are fraught with implications of competition.

Yet it is not enough to point out that there are differences between our own language and that of our ancestors. Giving voices, or standing for a seat, are phrases sufficiently jarring to our ears that we can guard against their misconstrual. But there is other language, shared language, that is more complicated to deconstruct. It is not simply imprecision that is the problem. Unaware of how distinctions would evolve, and which ones would become important, contemporaries could mean both less and more by the phrases they chose. Take the phrase "free election." Both early modern and modern meanings impart a sense of equity, an absence of corruption or of overwhelming power. Free choice was un-pressured choice. Though the idea that selections should be uncon-strained was present, the definition of constraint had peculiar parameters. In the seventeenth century there was a clear notion – though not always a clear articulation – of what constituted laboring for voices and of what threatened a free election. That distinction was implicit, and we shall encounter it in its context. But there was another concept inherent in the early modern meaning of a free election, one entirely absent from our own. This was the notion that for an election to be free it was to be made without opposition. Listen to the Earl of Suffolk, in considerable fury, lecture the townsmen of Saffron Walden: "As I am Lord of the town and most of you my tenants (if there were no other respect) that you give your *free* consent and voices to my good friend, Sir Edward Denny, Knight, which if you shall not...I will make the proudest of you repent it."[29] Listen again to the Aldermen of Thetford who selected Sir Robert Cotton to be a member of Parliament in 1625:

Notwithstanding you are a stranger to us, yet upon the commendation of the right honorable, the Earl of Arundel, our most worthy Lord we have made choice of you to be a burgess for our borough of Thetford....Our election being so free and general that you had not one voice against you.[30]

[29] British Library, Egerton Mss., 2644, fol. 138. See Chapter 3 of this book for the context of this comment.
[30] Thomas Martin, *The History of Thetford* (1779), Appendix.

Most destructive of all the language that we bring to this subject is its identification as the history of elections. By labeling the process as electoral, we define it as competitive. Its two most important features become voters and voting. Although historians have chosen to devote most of their attention to them, electoral contests occurred only occasionally in early modern England.[31] What is less appreciated, however, is that these were truly exceptional events, events that violated anticipated patterns of behavior rather than fulfilled them, events that were aberrant rather than normative. Even as they became more common after the Restoration, they remained novel aspects of the process by which representatives were chosen.

That process is much better described as one of parliamentary selection. It was a process in which patrons and peers, civic dignitaries and officeholders, community leaders and community neighbors were designated members of Parliament without opponents, competition, or votes. Contemporaries did not make the linguistic distinction between selection and election, but it is a difference that they would readily have understood.[32] Elections involved divisive choices usually made at polls; selections involved harmonious choices usually made by acclamation. Thus a study of parliamentary selection will not be focused on contests or franchises, on freeholders or corporate freemen, but on the process itself. Only in that context will the importance of elections come to be apparent and their emergence in the late seventeenth century come to be appreciated.

III

In early modern England, political choice was subsumed within a wide system of social relations. Complex notions of honor, standing, and deference, shared but not always articulated, helped to regulate and absorb conflict between and within loosely defined status groups. The selection of members of Parliament, an intermittent event for county property holders and members of designated boroughs, was but one part of a continuing process of social distinction. Despite the uniqueness of Parliament in the political history of the nation, in the ongoing life of the communities that chose its members, parliamentary selection existed in a broader context. For peers of the realm, a summons to the House of Lords was a prescriptive right, another attribute of their nobility. For

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[31]   It is of course impossible to prove a negative. Positive evidence of uncontested choice is unusual. Normal conduct is generally unremarkable and unremarked upon.

[32]   Indeed, in the seventeenth century the word *election* held religious rather than political significance.

members of the small group of dominant gentry families within the
county communities, it was both a responsibility of service and a privilege
conferred on them by kin and neighbors. For rich merchants of large
boroughs, it followed as part of the *cursus honorum* of civic office; while
for gentlemen and lawyers, who obtained the majority of borough seats
parceled out to patrons, it was an occasion to follow their own busi-
nesses, advance their careers, or simply partake of the delights of the
capital. The recurrent directives to sheriffs and returning officers for the
selection of discreet and learned men to provide counsel to the monarch
– "the Queen . . . desires to be served with men of understanding and
knowledge" – were inevitably met with the same mix of gentry, lawyers,
and merchants whose education, wealth, and governmental experience
rose at no greater rate than did that of the classes from which they were
drawn.[33]

Although fitted within the common methods of choice and distinction
that governed social relations, parliamentary selection had unique di-
mensions as well. It was hedged about by arcane legal rules that could
be invoked or ignored according to whim and which took on increasing
importance with the expansion of the common law. While it was the
duty of the counties equally, it fell to boroughs in a haphazard fashion
and with a dizzying complexity of customs to regulate participation.
Patterns of representation had once been functional and had reflected
the general distribution of human and material resources. But, like much
else in the social system, this had been eroded by demographic and
economic expansion. Over the centuries merchant guilds had grown into
urban centers or had deteriorated beyond prospect of resuscitation; pop-
ulation shifts had stretched the flesh and muscle of the economic body
away from an ossified distribution of seats. The forty shilling freehold
which determined the county franchise had once identified men of sub-
stance, but it was now crippled both by price inflation and by changing
concepts of tenurial relations.

In differing ways all these factors affected the methods by which
communities selected members to Parliament. In the largest part, the
process of selection conformed to patterns determined by local circum-
stance. Some corporations followed formulas for parliamentary selection
that mirrored their more frequent processes of selecting civic officers.
Broad or narrow participation by freemen, freeholders, or inhabitants
had as much to do with their integration into corporate life – as jurymen,
ratepayers, and minor officials – as with the prescription of ancient

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[33] Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports, *Report on the Manuscripts of the Mar-
quis of Salisbury*, VII, 410.

charters. The patronage of landed magnates depended upon some natural tie, either as high stewards, civic benefactors, or owners of town lands. But such influence equally turned upon the vagaries of mortality, minorities, or the competence of governmental officials, and these — combined with the irregular gaps between parliaments — prevented customary, informal arrangements from congealing into fixed patterns.

Similarly, county selections differed according to social structure, population, and wealth. In counties the keynotes of parliamentary selection were honor and deference. Men were chosen members of Parliament or given the right to nominate members on the basis of criteria largely social in nature. This was especially true of the senior knight of the shire, which by the early seventeenth century had become a mark of social distinction that outweighed all other factors. Counties whose internal social elites were dominated by one or two families — like Herefordshire or Surrey — honored these men and their heirs regularly. Counties like Kent or Somerset, which had more variegated elites, developed patterns of rotation. In many places the leading magistrates, perhaps at assizes or quarter sessions, met together in anticipation of the day of election and nominated the two candidates who would be chosen. In others, the candidates emerged in a less tidy manner, writing to each other and their friends, assessing the likeliest intentions of their equals and superiors, and adhering to a code of conduct that served to winnow the field to the two who were to be chosen at the county court.

Because boroughs comprised an exotic mixture of the great urban areas of the realm and the passing remnants of medieval prosperity, they made their selections more variously than did counties. In large and flourishing places — like York, Bristol, or Exeter — indigenous citizens could be honored in the same fashion as in counties. Distinguished alderman, past mayors and sheriffs completed their course of honor by selection to Parliament. A legal officer, especially a recorder, might be designated as one of the town's representatives, as was done at Reading, Bedford, and many other places. Communities might have specific individuals to whom honor was due for other reasons: a lord of the manor who had let the use of land and buildings at uneconomic rents; a neighboring gentleman who had established a local school; a privy councilor who had defended and procured a charter, as did Archbishop Laud for his birthplace of Reading. All of these categories of members or their nominees, though lumped together under the opprobrious label of "patronage," were part of the natural relationships — the symbiotic relationships — that protected the rights and privileges of communities on the one hand and extended the rank and standing of the individual on the other.

The Elizabethan innovation of creating the office of high steward at reincorporations is a case in point. High stewards were usually great men of the realm, socially superior to any within the borough and politically powerful in their own right. They performed service to the borough in a host of ways, including acting as arbitrators of local disputes. Their deeper interest might lie in the proximity of their estates to the borough or in an obligation, such as serving as county lord lieutenant, to ensure its good governance. From the borough they gained the privilege of recommending nominees for a variety of posts, of which parliamentary representatives were only the best known. They were not parliamentary patrons as we generally meet them – power brokers moving into weak and undefended territory to operate something akin to a protection racket. Nor, mutatis mutandis, were those government officials who were also given rights of nomination in specific and logical places like the Cinque Ports, the Isle of Wight, or the towns in the Duchy of Lancaster.

Like counties, boroughs organized their selections to provide the same number of candidates as there were places at their disposal, usually two. Indeed, the dyadic nature of parliamentary selections was a most effective safety valve. It allowed local interests, competing patrons, or distinguished individuals room to maneuver.[34] Until the new charter granted to Reading in 1637, the corporation always sent its recorder and a nominee of its high steward; Leicester generally accepted a nominee of the Earl of Huntington and one of the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Dover selected the lieutenant of its castle. Scores of other places worked out similar and changing patterns. There can be no question about the relationship between the putative franchise and the actual process of selection: There was none. The internal history of boroughs reveals the local context from which appropriate arrangements developed; among the more interesting were the lotteries organized in places like Cambridge, York, and Great Yarmouth.

None of these dimensions to the process of parliamentary selection can be usefully described as political. Of course, in one sense politics pervades all social relations. Categories such as sexual politics or the politics of the family remind us that no human relations are devoid of political meaning. But they also remind us that we cannot confuse generic and specific meanings of what is essentially an amorphous analytic category. The problem is complicated by the fact that in the early modern world there was no separation between the social and the political.

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[34] In Wales the competitive pressures were much greater, as both shires and town were single-member constituencies. Welsh electoral contests were among the most brutal of the period. See especially J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (1949).