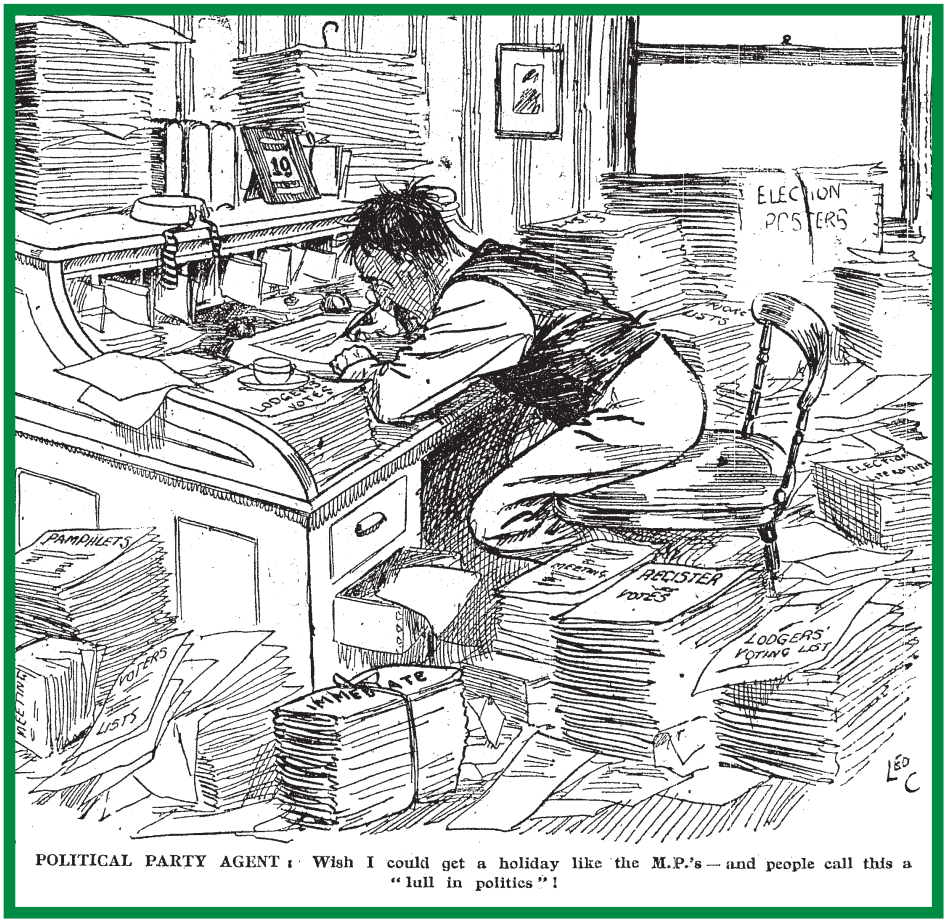
# PARTIES, AGENTS AND ELECTORAL CULTURE IN ENGLAND 1880–1910




POLITICAL PARTY AGENT: Wish I could get a holiday like the M.P.'s — and people call this a "lull in politics"!

Kathryn Rix

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# PARTIES, AGENTS AND ELECTORAL CULTURE IN ENGLAND, 1880–1910

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*Kathryn Rix*


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FOR
ANTONY, DANIEL AND JAMES

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# *Acknowledgements*

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Kathryn Rix
June 2016

# *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| Bodl. Lib | Bodleian Library |
| BL | British Library |
| CCO | Conservative Central Office |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library |
| FTU | Free Trade Union |
| HCLF | Home Counties Liberal Federation |
| LCA | Liberal Central Association |
| LCC | London County Council |
| LCLU | London and Counties Liberal Union |
| LLRU | London Liberal and Radical Union |
| LPD | Liberal Publication Department |
| LRC | Labour Representation Committee |
| LSE | London School of Economics |
| MCAA | Metropolitan Conservative Agents' Association |
| MLF | Midland Liberal Federation |
| MUCA | Midland Union of Conservative Associations |
| NALSA | National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents |
| n.d. | not dated |
| NLF | National Liberal Federation |
| NRU | National Reform Union |
| NSCA | National Society of Conservative Agents |
| NSCUA | National Society of Conservative and Unionist Agents |
| NUCCA | National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations |
| SCALA | Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents |
| SCLA | Society of Certificated Liberal Agents |
| TRL | Tariff Reform League |
| WYAS | West Yorkshire Archive Service |
| YLF | Yorkshire Liberal Federation |
| YUCA | Yorkshire Union of Conservative Associations |

| | |
|---|---|
| *BIHR* | *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* |
| *CAJ* | *Conservative Agents' Journal* |
| *EHR* | *English Historical Review* |
| *HJ* | *Historical Journal* |
| *HR* | *Historical Research* |
| *ODNB* | *Oxford dictionary of national biography* |
| *PP* | *Parliamentary papers* |
| *PLG* | *Primrose League Gazette* |
| *VS* | *Victorian Studies* |

# *Introduction*

The electoral reforms of 1883–5 transformed the British political system. Politicians were confronted with the challenge of harnessing the support of a mass electorate both in boroughs and, after the extension of the franchise in 1884, in counties. The electoral map was completely redrawn, with redistribution into mainly single-member constituencies in 1885. The framework within which election campaigns were conducted was fundamentally remodelled by the more stringent corrupt practices legislation of 1883. The decades after 1880 also witnessed a major upheaval in local government, with county councils established in 1888 and parish and district councils in 1894. Central to politicians' response to this new electoral landscape, in what has been described as 'an age of transition', was a dramatic increase in the activities of party organisation at national, regional and local level.[1]

This book provides the first major study of a crucial component of this organisational expansion: the constituency agents of the Liberal and Conservative parties.[2] In 1880 the typical agent was a solicitor, who undertook registration and electioneering work on a part-time basis in conjunction with his legal practice. Between 1880 and 1910 a significant shift took place, with solicitor agents being replaced by full-time professional agents. Although the electoral politics of this period have been the subject of numerous studies, historians have paid relatively little attention to the agents, despite the fact that their endeavours – in registering voters, managing the election campaign and superintending the social and educational activities of local party associations – were essential to the functioning of the late Victorian and Edwardian polity. Indeed the chairman of the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations (NUCCA) lauded the agents in 1894 as 'the foundation of our present electoral system'.[3]

The chief Liberal agent, Sir Robert Hudson, provided telling insights into the agents' critical, but often overlooked, role in an after-dinner speech to

1 E. H. H. Green, 'An age of transition: an introductory essay', in E. H. H. Green (ed.), *An age of transition: British politics, 1880–1914*, Edinburgh 1997.

2 For ease of reference, the term 'agent' rather than 'secretary' – used interchangeably by contemporaries – has been adopted throughout this work. For example, Joseph Maltby is referred to as Conservative agent for Manchester, rather than secretary to the Manchester Conservative Association. Using the term agent rather than secretary also avoids confusion with the separate position of honorary secretary of the local constituency association, a post held on a voluntary basis.

3 Cambridge University Library, *The Tory* xxiii (Dec. 1894), 671 (microfilm pagination).

the Newcastle upon Tyne Liberal Club in November 1909. Attending 'as a representative of Liberal organisation and of Liberal Agents', he observed that:

> If you go for a sea-voyage, you will find a number of charming gold-braided officers, who walk the bridge, navigate the ship, and determine its course – always with the hidden assistance of certain rather grimy engineers down below. It is on behalf of those hidden workers of the Liberal Party that I thank you for the honour done to me this evening.[4]

It is this intermediary position which the agents occupied between politicians and those whom they sought to represent which makes them such an interesting and fruitful subject of study. They provided a vital link between politics at Westminster and at grass-roots level, helping to bridge the gap between the parties and the people. As Hudson's analogy suggested, agents were invaluable in relieving MPs and candidates of some of the more mundane or unappealing tasks involved in dealing with the demands of a mass electorate. At elections, candidates could not avoid the 'unwelcome ordeal' of the public meeting, with agents largely working behind the scenes to oversee the campaign logistics.[5] Between elections, however, agents were much more visible and often shouldered much of the burden of engaging with voters. The agents were also a key point of contact between national party organisers at Westminster and rank-and-file party members, enabling a two-way channel of communication between the centre and the localities. Yet these were by no means straightforward and unproblematic connections, for there were tensions and ambiguities both in the relationship between the agents and the central parties, and in the relationship between the agents and the people.

Underpinning this book is a belief in the importance of understanding what Jon Lawrence has termed 'the interconnectedness of politics'. Discussing the potential common ground which exists between historians of high and popular politics, and the possibilities for 'reintegrating political history', Lawrence asserts that historians 'need to take seriously the injunction to focus critical attention on the interrelationships between the worlds of "elite" and "popular" politics', avoiding 'unhelpful dichotomies' such as high/low, centre/periphery and elite/popular.[6] His work on the political meeting has demonstrated one highly productive means of studying these interactions.[7] In

4 Bristol University Library, Special Collections, *Liberal Agent* lix (Jan. 1910), 118–19.

5 J. Lawrence, *Electing our masters: the hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford 2009, 10.

6 Idem, 'Political history', in S. Berger, H. Feldner and K. Passmore (eds), *Writing history: theory and practice*, London 2003, 195–9. See also his *Speaking for the people: party, language and popular politics in England, 1867–1914*, Cambridge 1998, 61–3.

7 Idem, 'Contesting the male polity: the suffragettes and the politics of disruption in inter-war Britain', in A. Vickery (ed.), *Women, privilege and power: British politics, 1750 to the present*, Stanford 2001, 201–26, 368–80; 'Fascist violence and the politics of public order in inter-war Britain: the Olympia debate revisited', *HR* lxxvi (2003), 238–67; and *Electing our masters*.

analysing the agents within the different but intersecting contexts in which they operated – assessing their local organisational efforts in the constituencies, their relationship with politicians and central party organisers, and the activities of their professional bodies at national and regional level – this book aims to shed new light on the dynamics of politics in this crucial period in the development of the modern British political system.

The lack of detailed consideration of the agents in previous historical analyses may stem partly from the fact that they have fallen between two stools. For historians of 'high politics', the agents at constituency level have been explored only insofar as they formed a loyal and supportive element of the party machinery. Thus Peter Marsh discusses the Conservative constituency agents within the context of 'the Middleton machine', observing that 'apart from questions of organization and registration, the agents evinced no wish to guide the party. That was the business of M.P.s and of the leadership.'[8] The agents have fared little better among historians of popular politics, for the integral role which they played within the party hierarchy means that these activists have been considered as set apart from 'the people' and thus not a priority for those seeking to write 'history from below'. Marc Brodie's illuminating work on *The politics of the poor* analyses the social, cultural and economic influences on the politics of London's East End between 1885 and 1914, refuting the idea that Conservative electoral success rested on a 'slum vote'. However, despite the close attention which he gives to the mechanics of electoral registration and the influence 'visitors' might exert over voters, he makes only passing references to the party agents who directed this registration and canvassing work.[9] Reacting against electoral sociology's emphasis on the 'triumph of party', revisionist historians have tended to emphasise popular suspicion of party.[10] Useful though this corrective is, it should not be allowed to relegate the agents to the status of party wire-pullers undeserving of study. Philip Salmon's work on registration and electioneering after the 1832 Reform Act has demonstrated the valuable insights which detailed analysis of the nuts and bolts of party organisation can provide into the functioning of the political system as a whole.[11]

Existing work on the agents has focused largely on those who ran the central party machinery. Francis Schnadhorst's endeavours have been examined by Barry McGill, while his successor as chief Liberal agent, Robert Hudson, was

8 P. Marsh, *The discipline of popular government: Lord Salisbury's domestic statecraft, 1881–1902*, Hassocks 1978, 198.

9 M. Brodie, *The politics of the poor: the East End of London, 1885–1914*, Oxford 2004, 66.

10 J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, 'Introduction: electoral sociology and the historians', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds), *Party, state and society: electoral behaviour since 1820*, Aldershot 1997, 16.

11 P. Salmon, *Electoral reform at work: local politics and national parties, 1832–1841*, Woodbridge 2002.

the subject of a biography published in 1930.[12] The work of the Liberal Chief Whips at party headquarters has been considered in Neville Masterman's biography of Tom Ellis, articles by Trevor Lloyd and H. W. McCready on Herbert Gladstone and an edited volume of J. A. Pease's papers.[13] On the Conservative side, Edgar Feuchtwanger's articles on John Gorst (chief Conservative agent, 1870–7 and 1880–2), Viscount Chilston's biography of Aretas Akers-Douglas (Conservative Chief Whip, 1885–95) and the works of Richard Shannon, John Ramsden and Peter Marsh provide equivalent coverage.[14] However, even here there are gaps. While the absence of the long-serving (1885–1903) chief Conservative agent, Richard Middleton, from the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* was rectified with the 2004 edition, his successors during this period – Lionel Wells, Arthur Balfour Haig and Percival Hughes – still do not feature, and the entry on his predecessor, George Bartley (1883–5), makes only a passing mention of his organisational role.[15]

Beyond these studies of the central party machinery, there has been far less work on the agents. Arthur Fawcett produced a short history of the Conservative agents in 1967, but he emphasised that it 'must be looked upon as no more than a starting point for a far fuller survey', and it is essentially an institutional history of the National Society of Conservative Agents, rather than a study of the agent as a political figure.[16] There is no corresponding history

12 B. McGill, 'Francis Schnadhorst and Liberal party organization', *Journal of Modern History* xxxiv (1962), 19–39; J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson: a memoir*, London 1930. Both also have entries in the *ODNB*.

13 N. Masterman, *The forerunner: the dilemmas of Tom Ellis, 1859–1899*, Swansea 1972, ch. xi; T. Lloyd, 'The Whip as paymaster: Herbert Gladstone and party organisation', *EHR* lxxxix (1974), 785–813; H. W. McCready, 'Chief Whip and party funds: the work of Herbert Gladstone in the Edwardian Liberal party, 1899–1906', *Journal of Canadian History* vi (1971), 287–303; *A Liberal chronicle: journals and papers of J. A. Pease, 1st Lord Gainford, 1908–1910*, ed. C. Hazlehurst and C. Woodland, London 1994. On Gladstone see also C. Mallet, *Herbert Gladstone: a memoir*, London 1932. There are other biographies of Gladstone's predecessors as Chief Whip, but these offer little detail on party organisation: I. Gordon, *Edward Marjoribanks Lord Tweedmouth K.T., 1849–1909: notes and recollections*, London 1909; W. Griffith, *Thomas Edward Ellis, 1859–1899*, Llandybie 1959; W. Jones, *Thomas Edward Ellis, 1859–1899*, Cardiff 1986.

14 E. J. Feuchtwanger, 'J. E. Gorst and the central organisation of the Conservative party, 1870–1882', *BIHR* xxxii (1959), 192–208, and 'The Conservative party under the impact of the Second Reform Act', *VS* ii (1959), 289–304; Eric Alexander Akers-Douglas, 3rd Viscount Chilston, *Chief Whip: the political life and times of Aretas Akers-Douglas, 1st Viscount Chilston*, London 1961, and 'Aretas Akers-Douglas 1st Viscount Chilston (1851–1926): a great Whip', *Parliamentary Affairs* xv (1961–2), 39–57; R. Shannon, *The age of Disraeli, 1868–1881: the rise of Tory democracy*, London 1992, and *The age of Salisbury, 1881–1902: Unionism and Empire*, London 1996; J. Ramsden, *The age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902–40*, London 1978; Marsh, *Discipline of popular government*. On Gorst see also A. Hunter, *A life of Sir John Eldon Gorst: Disraeli's awkward disciple*, Ilford 2001.

15 John Boraston, chief Liberal Unionist agent from 1891 (and principal Unionist agent from 1912) also has an *ODNB* entry.

16 A. Fawcett, *Conservative agent*, London 1967, p. vii.

of the Liberal agents. At constituency level, H. J. Hanham's *Elections and party management* provides a very useful account of the work of local agents, but does not extend beyond 1885.[17] George Comfort's 1958 study of the agent focused primarily on the contemporary situation, with only a cursory summary on the Conservative agents before that date.[18] Occasional glimpses of the constituency agent's work may be gleaned from studies of local politics, such as those of John Howe on Liberal organisation in Gloucestershire, Alex Windscheffel on metropolitan Conservatism, Patricia Lynch on rural Liberalism, James Moore on urban Liberalism and Luke Blaxill on Suffolk, but these provide at best a partial picture of the agents' activities.[19] Although there has been much valuable and interesting recent work on late Victorian and Edwardian politics, it has tended – under the ongoing influence of the linguistic turn – to focus on questions of language and the construction of party identities, with the structures of party organisation peripheral to its concerns.[20]

This book brings the agents to the fore to address three key themes which are central to understanding electoral politics between the Third Reform Act and the First World War. The first is the professionalisation of political organisation. Part-time solicitor agents, whose registration and electioneering efforts were usually an adjunct to their legal practice, were increasingly being superseded by full-time professional agents who handled the work of party organisation in the constituencies on a year-round basis. This major development is generally taken as read as part of the modernisation and nationalisation of the political system after 1880. Ewen Green, for example, observes that, with the Third Reform Act, 'the age of professionalized politics had arrived'.[21] Yet while this transition is widely accepted, there has been no systematic attempt to investigate the nature, timing and extent of the professionalisation of political agency, nor its implications for political and electoral culture. Although electoral sociology's assumptions about the 'modernisation' and 'nationalisation' of political life have been challenged, particularly by scholars who have argued

17 H. J. Hanham, *Elections and party management*, 2nd edn, Hassocks 1978, ch. xi.

18 G. O. Comfort, *Professional politicians: a study of British party agents*, Washington, DC 1958, 43–7. For a more recent political science perspective see J. Fisher, D. Denver and G. Hands, 'Unsung heroes: constituency election agents in British general elections', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* viii (2006), 569–86.

19 J. R. Howe, 'Liberal party organisation in Gloucestershire before 1914', *Southern History* ix (1987), 115–125; A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in imperial London, 1868–1906*, Woodbridge 2007, 90, 96; P. Lynch, *The Liberal party in rural England, 1885–1910*, Oxford 2003, 149; J. R. Moore, *The transformation of urban Liberalism: party politics and urban governance in late nineteenth-century England*, Aldershot 2006, 54, 157, 203–4, 239; L. Blaxill, 'Electioneering, the Third Reform Act, and political change in the 1880s', *Parliamentary History* xxx (2011), 353–4.

20 See, for example, M. Roberts, '"Villa Toryism" and popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885–1902', *HJ* xlix (2006), 217–46, and 'Constructing a Tory world-view: popular politics and the Conservative press in late-Victorian Leeds', *HR* lxxix (2006), 115–43.

21 Green, *Age of transition*, 11.

for the enduring significance of locality, a critical lens has yet to be turned on what 'professionalized politics' meant in practice, an omission which this book aims to redress.[22]

The relatively few existing works on the agents have considered them within the confines of the party machinery. Despite their strenuous efforts to achieve professional status, acquiring professional trappings such as examinations and journals, the agents do not feature in any history of the professions during this period. Yet the agents' activities cannot be fully appreciated without considering them in the wider socio-economic context of late nineteenth-century professionalisation. The Liberal agents established their first professional body, the Liberal Secretaries and Agents' Association, in 1882. By 1887 it was known as the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA). In 1893 a breakaway organisation, the Society of Certificated Liberal Agents (SCLA), was founded by agents keen to emulate other professions (and their Conservative counterparts) in holding examinations and issuing certificates which proved their members' competence. The NALSA and the SCLA settled their differences and merged in 1901 as the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA). The National Society of Conservative Agents (NSCA) was founded in 1891 as a federation of regional agents' associations, most of which were established between 1887 and 1891, although the earliest agents' body, the North of England Conservative Agents' Association, dated back to 1871. It and two other regions (the Home Counties and Metropolitan agents) did not affiliate to the NSCA until 1905.[23]

The professionalisation of political agency is explored in a variety of ways here. The forces driving this process are analysed, considering not only the impact of changes to the electoral system, such as the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act, but also how the spread of professional agency was affected by factors such as party finance and other local circumstances. The development of agency as a profession is discussed both within the context of expanding party organisation and as part of the broader movement towards professionalisation, in which agents were one of many occupational groups aspiring to improve their status by means of professional organisation. The professionalisation of agency is revealed to be a more gradual and complex process than existing accounts allow. This was undeniably a key period in the development of the professional political agent. Yet although solicitor agents were on the wane, professional agency had by no means been universally adopted by 1910. Moreover, contrary to the established view, it is evident that professionalisation was not necessarily synonymous with the modernisation or nationalisation of the political system, a theme discussed further below.

This study also remedies a striking omission in our understanding of profes-

22 Lawrence and Taylor, 'Electoral sociology', 17.

23 For a fuller discussion of the history of the Liberal and Conservative agents' associations see chapter 3 below.

sional agency: if agents no longer came predominantly from the ranks of solicitors, what were their backgrounds, and how did this affect party organisation? A. L. Lowell in 1908 likened them to 'the non-commissioned officers in the army': 'Their work is essential to success, but they have no hope of promotion beyond their own grade. Their position is perfectly well understood.'[24] Yet although agents were not drawn from the same class as MPs and, as indicated by Hudson's contrast between 'gold-braided officers' and 'grimy engineers', had a lesser status, they performed a crucial role as a point of contact between the parties and the people. Agents were instrumental in relieving politicians of many of the routine or uncongenial duties essential to the functioning of the electoral system in an era of mass enfranchisement. Whereas MPs' and candidates' face-to-face encounters with electors (and non-electors) were in many cases sporadic, confined largely to the election campaign or efforts at political education between elections, the agent was a more permanent presence representing the party within a constituency, and had regular and direct dealings with local inhabitants. Stanley French, Liberal agent for Wellington in Somerset, described in 1910 how his registration activities acquainted him even with those in the constituency's most far-flung reaches. Accompanied by his wife, child, maid, office lad and dog, he cycled around the constituency each summer, camping overnight, and collecting information for registration claims and objections. His evening campfire attracted visitors and French recounted that 'a pleasant hour can be spent in chatting with the farmer on whose ground you are pitched, or in sympathising with a disappointed applicant for small holdings, or settling the politics of the nation with the local Liberal workers'.[25] Similar informal experiences of politics were recorded by Michael Sykes, a former apprentice clog-maker turned Conservative lecturer, who toured Yorkshire with the 'Balfour van' in 1895 and 1907–8.[26] Such interactions were as much the stuff of party politics as the set-piece meetings or local social functions attended by MPs and candidates, and the value of the agents being 'day by day in touch with public feeling' was acknowledged by leading figures such as the Conservative party chairman, Arthur Steel-Maitland.[27]

This feeds into the second major theme explored in this work: party activity at grass-roots level during what was a key period in terms of the balance of power between the Liberal and Conservative parties, with Conservative hegemony in the decades after 1885 ended abruptly by Liberal victory in 1906. Party organisation has often been accorded significant explanatory weight in assessing the parties' shifting electoral fortunes, with Conservative success seen

24 A. L. Lowell, *The government of England*, London 1908, i. 483.

25 *Liberal Agent* lx (Apr. 1910), 172–8, quotation at p. 178.

26 K. Rix, '"Go out into the highways and the hedges": the diary of Michael Sykes, Conservative political lecturer, 1895 and 1907–8', *Parliamentary History* xx (2001), 209–31.

27 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Conservative Party Archive, *CAJ* xxxii (Jan. 1914), 31.

as owing much to their greater organisational prowess.[28] At the 1906 election, in contrast, Herbert Gladstone's efforts as Chief Whip have been regarded as contributing to the Liberal landslide.[29] While much of the detailed research on party organisation and electoral politics during this period has concentrated on one or other of the two main parties, this book provides a comparative study of Liberal and Conservative activities. Although the main focus is on the two established parties, the impact of professional organisation on the Labour party is also considered, for by 1910 – chosen as the end date for this work as it saw the last general elections before the electoral system was overhauled in 1918 – Labour had clearly emerged as a political force, with the return of forty-two MPs that December. However, in terms of professional agency, it lagged far behind its opponents, with only a small number of full-time agents. In defining the scope of this work, it should also be noted that discussion of constituency-level politics focuses largely on England and, to a lesser extent, Wales. Scotland's differing registration procedure, with greater activity by public authorities limiting the need for party intervention in the process, provided one reason why professional agency was far less extensive there.[30] Although the agents' professional associations were theoretically national bodies, in practice their reach did not extend to Scotland or Ireland.[31]

One of the principal questions which has preoccupied historians in examining the extra-parliamentary activities of the Liberal and Conservative parties is how the ideals and beliefs espoused by each party's members were reflected not only in the policies that they presented to the electorate, but also in the organisational structures and methods through which they sought to cultivate their political appeal. John Vincent's seminal study of the mid-Victorian Liberal party, published in 1966, showed how the pillars of popular Liberalism – 'the new cheap press, militant Dissent in its various forms, and organized labour' – helped to shape the party's identity.[32] Liberalism's growing links with Nonconformity and associated causes such as temperance affords a prime example of how the prevailing attitudes within a party influenced the practicalities of organisation: the question of whether drink should be permitted in Liberal clubs was a recurrent dilemma for Liberal organisers. In contrast with this Liberal sobriety, historians of popular Toryism have emphasised the party's conviviality, which manifested itself not only in the fêtes, dances and tea parties of the Primrose League, but also in the party's identification with 'the pleasures of the people', such as sport and the public house, as highlighted by Lawrence in his study of

28 For a summary of the historiography see Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism*, 84–5.

29 A. K. Russell, *Liberal landslide: the general election of 1906*, Newton Abbott 1973, ch. ii.

30 Lowell, *Government of England*, i. 483–4.

31 On registration agents in Ulster see B. M. Walker, 'Party organisation in Ulster, 1865–92: registration agents and their activities', in P. Roebuck (ed.), *Plantation to partition: essays in Ulster history in honour of J. L. McCracken*, Belfast 1981, 191–209.

32 J. Vincent, *The formation of the British Liberal party, 1857–1868*, London 1966, 289.

Wolverhampton.[33] A cumulative picture has emerged of the differing cultures of the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberal approach to politics has been characterised as a more rational, sober and serious-minded one, while the Conservatives have been seen as more proficient at creating a social appeal. Such distinctions continue to be reinforced by recent research, be it Christopher Stevens's work on the 'beer, billiards and "baccy"' of the Conservative club movement in West Yorkshire, Paul Gliddon's discussion of the qualms which the Liberal-backed North of England Newspaper Company had about publishing betting news, or Matthew Roberts's analysis of Leeds Conservatism's links with sporting and other leisure interests.[34]

This book uses the agents to approach these long-running debates about party identity from a new angle, exploring the differences (and similarities) between Liberal and Conservative activity during this period. Investigation of the agents' backgrounds reveals that they reflected many of the characteristics traditionally associated with their parties: Liberal agents tended to be Nonconformist, for example. However, there are indications that, influenced by their day-to-day contact with the wider populace, Liberal agents were more attuned than some party members to the dangers of conforming to the stereotypes outlined above. Rather than pitting themselves against the 'pleasures of the people', these grass–roots organisers saw the value of developing the social side of party organisation. Conversely, Conservative agents realised that their party could not rely on 'beer and bonhomie' to secure adherents, and urged the importance of political education. Another key area where party attitudes are generally regarded as divergent is registration, with the belief that the Conservatives favoured low levels of enfranchisement.[35] This is subjected to a similar re–evaluation from the agents' point of view, challenging the assumption that the Conservative party sought to avoid engaging with a mass electorate, and instead presenting a more nuanced picture of the rival parties' approaches towards the register. Examining the agents' professional journals, much of the content of the Liberal and Conservative organs is interchangeable, with discussion of the technicalities of registration or the complexities of corrupt practices legislation. Despite their diverging political loyalties, Liberal and Conservative agents had more in common than might be supposed when it came to facing the challenges of organising a mass electorate.

33 M. Pugh, *The Tories and the people*, Oxford 1985; J. H. Robb, *The Primrose League, 1883–1906*, New York 1942; J. Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *EHR* cviii (1993), 634–44.

34 C. Stevens, 'The Conservative club movement in the industrial West Riding, 1880–1914', *Northern History* xxxviii (2001), 121–43; P. Gliddon, 'Politics for better or worse: political Nonconformity, the gambling dilemma and the North of England Newspaper Company, 1903–1914', *History* lxxxvii (2002), 227–44; Roberts, 'Constructing a Tory worldview', 123, 133.

35 Marsh, *Discipline of popular government*, 195; E. H. H. Green, *The crisis of Conservatism*, London 1995, 126; Shannon, *Age of Salisbury*, 313.

The final broad theme addressed is the complex and shifting interactions between the local and the national dimensions of politics. Although many historians have considered the emergence of 'class politics' during this period, scholarly attention has also been directed towards analysing the transition from the local sphere to the national sphere as the principal focus of electoral politics.[36] There is, however, a lack of consensus as to when this shift took place. In the introduction to their influential collected volume *Party, state and society*, Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor analyse the development of the study of electoral politics from its origins in the mid-1950s, considering the implications – positive and negative – of the pervasive influence of the 'electoral sociology' approach from the 1950s through to the 1970s. Discussing how more recent studies have begun to challenge some of the established orthodoxies derived from the electoral sociology model, they identify the 'modernization and nationalization of the electoral system from the 1870s onwards' as one of the most significant areas in which earlier interpretations are being revised. Historians are re-assessing whether it is helpful to see 1880 as a watershed between 'the "traditional" electoral politics of the pre-1880 period, in which local, aristocratic and religious influences remained paramount' and 'the more modern voting behaviour of the post-1880 period, in which national and class issues began to predominate'.[37] Hanham's classic 1959 study, *Elections and party management*, provides one example of a work which saw the years 1880 to 1886 as marking a 'break in English political life'.[38] Martin Pugh subsequently concurred that the 1880s were 'the key decade of change', during which British politics 'took on recognizably modern characteristics'. He argues that the 1880 election 'may, with some justification, be regarded as the first modern election', not least because it produced 'a national campaign'.[39]

However, other historians date the key turning–point much later. Peter Clarke argues for 'an increasingly national pattern' to electoral behaviour after the First World War.[40] His work on Lancashire suggests that the ambit of politics was still changing from local to national during the Edwardian period, and points not to 1880 but 1910 as the dawning of a new age of electoral politics, entering 'a world in which the Grand Old Man would not have been at home'.[41] Lawrence has pushed the timing of change later still, for while he sees the First World War as marking a new phase in the nationalisation of political debate, he also highlights the continued importance of 'the politics

36 For discussion of the historiography and its relationship to the debate on 'class politics' see also Blaxill, 'Electioneering', 343–5.

37 Lawrence and Taylor, 'Electoral sociology', 1–26, quotations at pp. 11, 17.

38 Hanham, *Elections and party management*, p. xxx.

39 M. Pugh, *The making of modern British politics, 1867–1939*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1993, 3. On the mid-1880s as a political watershed see also R. Price, *British society, 1680–1880*, Cambridge 1999, 286–91.

40 P. F. Clarke, 'Electoral sociology of modern Britain', *History* lvii (1972), 53.

41 Idem, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Cambridge 1971, 406–7.

of locality' in the inter-war period.[42] His research on Wolverhampton's politics between 1867 and 1914 concentrates on 'the mediation of local and national, formal and informal practices within the context of a specific locality'.[43] More recent studies, such as that of Windscheffel on London Conservatism, have similarly tended to focus less on identifying the onset of the nationalisation of politics and more on explaining the ways in which 'national politics was mediated by local conditions and peculiarities', echoing Duncan Tanner's assertion that between 1900 and 1918, 'politics in the constituencies were a mixture of "national" and "local" strategies and images'.[44]

The agents' crucial role as intermediaries between Westminster and the constituencies enables this study to provide a fresh perspective on this debate. Rather than seeking to delineate a straightforward transition from local to national, it aims to explore how the interactions between the local, regional and national dimensions of politics shaped electoral culture between 1880 and 1910. The professionalisation of party organisation has been seen as part and parcel of the modernisation and nationalisation of electoral politics after 1880, but it is argued here that this cannot automatically be assumed to be the case. On the one hand, it is possible to trace ways in which the spread of professional agency contributed to greater uniformity in certain aspects of electoral culture – in the techniques of canvassing, for example. Yet this did not necessarily come about because of a 'top-down' process of direction from party headquarters; the horizontal bonds of the agents' professional networks were an important force in transmitting ideas between constituencies. At the same time, however, the agents' network did serve as a valuable channel for communication between the centre and the localities, and these activists increasingly looked to party headquarters for guidance, resources and support for their own professional aspirations. Yet, on the other hand, studying the agents also affirms the persistence of local diversity, with agents' organisational efforts responding to the needs of their particular constituencies. It was, by and large, the constituencies rather than the central parties that wielded power over the agents, and the independence of local party associations from headquarters interference was a persistent refrain throughout this period. This was not merely rhetoric, for central organisers did not wish their activities to supplant local organisational effort. While party headquarters offered an increasing array of resources such as political literature to the constituencies, local activists played a critical role in mediating this central provision before it reached voters.

The records of the agents' professional associations, largely untapped by historians, are the most significant source in this analysis of the agents. The minute books of the NSCA and the correspondence of its first honorary secre-

42 J. Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics, 1867–1914', in Lawrence and Taylor, *Party, state and society*, 97.

43 Idem, *Speaking for the people*, 63.

44 Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism*; D. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900–1918*, Cambridge 1990, 81.

tary, Isaac Lyons, have been consulted, together with the records of the Metropolitan Conservative Agents' Association. The NSCA's professional journals, *The Tory* and the *Conservative Agents' Journal* (*CAJ*) provide valuable insights not only into the agents' professional activities, but registration, electioneering and party organisation generally. On the Liberal side, the minute books of the SCLA (later the SCALA) and its Lancashire and Cheshire branch have been studied, as have *The SCLA Quarterly* and its successor, *The Liberal Agent*. At central party level, the minute books of the Liberal Central Association (LCA) and the annual reports of the National Liberal Federation (NLF) and the NUCCA have been consulted, alongside papers and correspondence relating to Aretas Akers-Douglas, Richard Middleton, Charles Geake of the Liberal Publication Department (LPD), Herbert Gladstone and Francis Schnadhorst. The extant records of regional party organisations, which have received relatively little scholarly attention, have also been examined.[45] At local level, archival and newspaper material relating to Liberal and Conservative organisation in a range of constituencies has been studied, and much use has been made of biographies and memoirs of MPs, candidates and agents. Another previously under-used but extremely valuable source was contemporary election manuals, which were considered alongside parliamentary debates and reports of election petition judgements.

It is essential to understand the framework within which the professionalisation of agency took place, and chapter 1 re-evaluates the key electoral reforms of this period and their impact on the development of party organisation. The reasons why these reforms made it increasingly desirable for local associations to appoint full-time professional agents in place of part-time solicitor agents are analysed. The implications of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act for electioneering and party organisation are re-assessed, and it is argued that to describe this legislation as 'the charter of the new breed of party agents' is an over-simplification.[46] The significance of the Third Reform Act, the registration laws and the growing number of local government elections for the professionalisation of political organisation are also considered. This chapter concludes with an outline of the key structures of central, regional and local party organisation during this period.

Chapter 2 assesses the nature, timing and extent of the shift towards professional political agency. This was a gradual, partial and uneven process, reflecting the continued diversity which prevailed in local party organisation. Even by 1910 there were constituencies which had yet to employ a full–time professional agent, with finance often a determining factor. Nevertheless, it is evident that this was a key transitional period in the rise of the professional

45 On the Liberal side, the minute books or annual reports of the Yorkshire, Midland, Lancashire and Cheshire, and Home Counties Liberal Federations have been consulted, while for the Conservatives, the records of the Yorkshire and Midland Unions of Conservative Associations were examined.

46 Shannon, *Age of Salisbury*, 79.

agent. This chapter then turns to prosopography, with a collective biographical study of almost two hundred agents, affording a unique opportunity to shed light on these grass-roots party activists. The agents' backgrounds, the factors influencing their political mobilisation, their careers as agents and their involvement in local social and philanthropic activities are considered. Significantly for a group who often served as local figureheads for their party, agents came to a surprising extent from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds. Another important discovery is the high levels of geographical mobility among professional agents, which had clear implications for the development of a more uniform national electoral culture. Yet the agents were also deeply rooted in the affairs of their local community, providing a practical example of the interactions between national and local forces in political life.

The agents need to be examined not just as a key element of the structures of party organisation, but also within the broader socio-economic context of late nineteenth-century professionalisation. Chapter 3 analyses the agents' efforts to secure the benefits of professional status, emulating other occupational groups in establishing their own professional bodies, and hoping to overcome the political agent's previously poor reputation. It examines the activities of the NSCA and its Liberal counterparts in providing professional education, through meetings, examinations and journals. In addition to equipping members with the requisite knowledge and skills to undertake an agent's duties, these associations created bonds between fellow professionals and offered a forum for the exchange of best practice, again contributing to a greater uniformity in certain areas of political work. The second half of this chapter considers how the agents' aspirations to professional status, particularly when it came to questions such as pay and employment conditions, were affected by the differing financial and electoral fortunes of local parties. It also explores the developing relationship between the agents and central party organisers, considering the ways in which agents sought support from headquarters to improve their status, and the limitations of central party influence over the constituencies during this period.

Turning to the agents' endeavours in the constituencies, chapters 4 and 5 analyse three key aspects of party work: registration, political education and social activities. Approaching these issues from the agents' perspective allows new light to be shed on Liberal and Conservative efforts to harness the support of a mass electorate. Chapter 4 examines the essential role which agents played in the workings of the registration system. It takes issue with the assumption that the Conservatives wanted to keep the numbers of registered electors low, suggesting that the parties' attitudes towards the register were more complicated than this interpretation allows, and that financial considerations and differing local circumstances were often paramount in determining the nature of party registration work. It also argues that Conservative efforts at political education, in which agents often played an important role, must be taken seriously, rather than dismissing the Conservatives as 'social

rather than truly political'.[47] Chapter 5 looks at the other side of this debate, re-evaluating the parties' approach to the 'social side' of politics in the light of the evidence provided by the agents. In particular it contends that Liberal agents were aware of the problems created by the prevailing culture within their party when it came to 'the pleasures of the people' and endeavoured to find ways to overcome the idea that Liberalism was the creed of dull, temperance-abiding moralisers.

Having considered the agents' endeavours between elections, Chapters 6 and 7 explore the election campaign, analysing in particular the balance between local, regional and central input, and the implications of this for electoral culture. Chapter 6 examines the critical issue of candidate selection. Here, in a reflection of their allotted place within the party organisation, as noted in Lowell's comments above, agents played a minimal part. Instead it was local party chairmen or other leading local politicians, whose social standing was usually closer to the candidates whom they sought to secure, who took the lead. This chapter looks at the potential influence exerted by a local candidate and the ways in which this appeal could be challenged by opponents. It also assesses the power which the central parties could wield over the choice of candidate, arguing that while headquarters officials played a significant role in advising and guiding both candidates and constituencies, they rarely coerced, even in cases where candidates were granted financial support. Finally, chapter 7 assesses the two key means by which the parties' electoral message was conveyed to voters: the speaking campaign and the distribution of election literature. The agents played a vital role in managing the logistics of the election campaign, albeit one which was largely behind the scenes as the candidates took centre-stage. While the speeches of major figures and their reporting in the press increasingly gave the sense of a 'national' campaign, the election speech remained a critical element of the local political arena, providing a crucial opportunity for candidates to forge a relationship with their constituents. Election literature was the major item of election spending by candidates throughout this period, and this chapter concludes by assessing the relative significance of central, regional and local provision in this critical aspect of the campaign. While central and regional party organisations were pouring greater resources into the constituencies, this material supplemented rather than supplanted locally produced literature, and it was local party activists such as the agents who decided how best to incorporate it into the campaign at constituency level.

By focusing on the agents in this way, this book challenges previous assumptions about the development of electoral politics during this crucial period. The process of professionalisation should not be taken as read: it was more complex and more ambiguous in its effects than existing interpretations allow. In particular, the professionalisation of politics cannot be directly equated with

47 Ramsden, *Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 50.

the nationalisation of politics: what the agents reveal is the ways in which the parties' efforts to engage with a mass electorate were shaped by the intersecting local and national forces in operation. Despite the expanding activities of central party bodies, issues of locality continued to exert a significant influence on electoral politics throughout this period.

# 1

# *The Changing Electoral System*

The expansion of party organisation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a significant change in the figure of the party agent: 'the agents, who only devoted a portion of their spare time to political work, gradually gave place to men who made political organisation, registration work and electioneering, a profession'.[1] This chapter analyses how the reform of the electoral system stimulated the development of party organisation after 1880, focusing in particular on why the employment of full-time professional agents rather than part-time solicitor agents became increasingly desirable.

Political organisation in the constituencies was not a new phenomenon, as Frank O'Gorman's work on the Hanoverian electorate indicates.[2] However, the establishment of permanent local party associations with a broad membership base was rare prior to the Second Reform Act.[3] The extension of the borough franchise in 1867 encouraged party organisation in urban areas, with the formation of party associations and political clubs. These were involved with registration work, as well as providing political education, social activities and auxiliary bodies such as benefit societies.[4] In the counties, party organisation was rather more limited before 1885. The National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations (NUCCA), established in 1867 with the aim of encouraging local organisation, got off to a slow start, but by 1877 there were reportedly 791 Conservative associations in existence.[5] Electoral defeat in 1880 spurred the Conservative leadership to take a greater interest in local organisation.[6] The National Liberal Federation (NLF) was formed in 1877 to promote the establishment of representative constituency associations along the lines of the Birmingham Liberal Association. Although William Gladstone's speech to the inaugural conference conferred a degree of official party approval on the

1 *CAJ* v (Jan. 1903), 25.

2 F. O'Gorman, *Voters, patrons and parties: the unreformed electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832*, Oxford 1989.

3 Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal party*, 118–31.

4 On party organisation between 1867 and 1885 see Hanham, *Elections and party management*; Pugh, *Making of modern British politics*, 15–18; and J. Garrard, 'Parties, members and voters after 1867', in T. R. Gourvish and A. O'Day (eds), *Later Victorian Britain, 1867–1900*, London 1988, 127–50.

5 NUCCA, *Annual conference reports*, 1877.

6 E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, democracy and the Tory party: Conservative leadership and organization after the Second Reform Bill*, Oxford 1968, 143.

NLF from the start, by 1880 political associations on the Birmingham model were found in only sixty-seven boroughs and ten county constituencies.[7]

So far as the appointment of agents in the constituencies was concerned, it was solicitors who formed 'the most numerous class of political organisers' before 1885, undertaking registration work and managing elections.[8] While lists of voters were compiled before 1832, it was the First Reform Act which inaugurated the electoral register. Although it was the parish overseers who were legally obliged to compile the register, which was then scrutinised by the revising barrister, in practice political parties came to play a significant role in the registration process, drawing up lists of those eligible to be registered, lodging claims on behalf of supporters and objections to the qualifications of opponents, and defending these claims and objections in the annual revision courts. J. A. Thomas has outlined how the overseers' shortcomings, the apathy and indifference of many voters and the complexities of registration encouraged the participation of party registration societies and agents in this work.[9] Their legal expertise, together with the local knowledge acquired through their legal dealings, made solicitors an obvious choice to serve as registration agents, employed either by the MP or prospective candidate, or by local Liberal and Conservative associations, usually on a part-time basis. Although some non-solicitors were appointed as registration agents prior to 1880, Hanham found that in 1874 there were only fifty-four English constituencies with Conservative agents who were not solicitors.[10]

The legal profession's involvement in electioneering can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Robert Robson suggests that it was a natural progression for the attorney who managed a candidate's estate and legal affairs to handle his political interests. Although this centred largely on election management, the attorney also oversaw his employer's political interests between elections.[11] In his study of the Hanoverian election agent, E. A. Smith argues that as electoral organisation became increasingly complex, it developed into 'virtually a specialized branch of the work of local solicitors'.[12] Legal dominance of election management was such that in 1858, *The Law Times* claimed that 'solicitors are the real Parliament makers'.[13] Legal publishers produced election manuals, commonly written by solicitors or barristers. Lawyers were also prominent in

7 *The Times*, 13 Apr. 1880.

8 Hanham, *Elections and party management*, 239.

9 J. A. Thomas, 'The system of registration and the development of party organisation, 1832–1870', *History* xxxv (1950), 81–98. On the role of local parties in registration after 1832 see also Salmon, *Electoral reform at work*, 27ff.

10 Hanham, *Elections and party management*, 240; CCO, *Conservative agents and associations in the counties and boroughs of England and Wales*, London 1874.

11 R. Robson, *The attorney in eighteenth century England*, Cambridge 1959, 96–9.

12 E. A. Smith, 'The election agent in English politics, 1734–1832', *EHR* lxxxiv (1969), 12.

13 *Law Times*, 10 July 1858, cited in *Charles R. Dod's Electoral facts from 1832 to 1853 impartially stated*, ed. H. J. Hanham, Brighton 1972, p. xliv.