

The electioneering methods of the Victorian Conservative Party and how they shaped Scotland's political culture



*Focusing on the Scottish Conservative Party's innovative electoral registration activities in the 1830s and 1840s, as well as its use of illegitimate tactics to influence electors, **Gary D. Hutchison** discusses how the party shaped the underlying culture of Scottish politics.*

Data-driven elections are here to stay. The social media age provides political parties with the opportunity to gather ever-more information on the electorate. More personalised appeals to voters are the result. Alongside these newer approaches, older, [more direct methods of courting voters](#) are the subject of renewed attention. Grassroots canvassing, involving face-to-face contact with potential voters, remains popular.

Yet both of these approaches – up-close and personal, and data-driven – are far from novel in British politics. They flourished throughout the mid-Victorian period – indeed, the structure of the British electoral system encouraged the [Scottish Conservative party in particular](#) to pursue both strategies simultaneously.

The 1832 Reform Act(s) transformed the political culture of the United Kingdom and, more practically, how elections were conducted. A separate Reform Act for Scotland was needed because that country possessed, and still possesses, a separate legal framework. [Scotland had its own pre-existing electoral traditions and norms](#), its own culture, and its own ideological landscape. The historian Norman Gash described Scotland in this period as a 'distant and Whiggish country' in the eyes of contemporaries at Westminster. Its politics was thought to operate according to different rules, and to be particularly hostile to conservatism.

In response to this, the Scottish Conservative Party adopted a range of tactics to improve their position. The highly restricted franchise, allowing only wealthy property-owning or property-renting men to vote, played a large role in this. Constituency electorates were measured in the low thousands, or even the hundreds. In most seats, it was possible for parties to personally canvas every single voter. Many voters actively expected candidates to visit them personally to solicit their support. Many Victorian candidates for parliament enjoyed access to a unique source of data which does not exist today – lists of how electors had *actually voted* at previous elections. There was [no secret ballot](#) – at each and every election, every voter had their vote publicly recorded. Their choice was noted and analysed by the wider public, and often by both parties.

Given manageably small numbers of voters, and concrete information on their previous choices, the Scottish Conservative Party placed a substantial emphasis on personal canvassing: rather than relying on professional party workers, they sought to attract voters through canvassing by the 'friends, neighbours and equals' of the new electorate. However, this was only on the frontlines – behind the scenes, the party built up an unparalleled level of professional organisation across many Scottish constituencies in the 1830s, outshining the opposing Scottish Liberals. This allowed them to systematically and precisely target their efforts – surviving lists of voters, annotated by party agents, contain very detailed information which far surpasses that available to modern data-miners. In many documents, each and every voter in a constituency was individually listed, as was their previous voting record and likely future choice.

Alongside this, gathered information ranged from ideological positions on specific issues, to personal religious belief, to more obscure areas, such as whether a voter's wife would in fact dictate her husband's vote choice and should thus be canvassed instead, or if intermittent joint pain might prevent a voter from walking to the polling booth. Such information was collected from the very 'friends, neighbours, and equals', who conducted canvassing. Other information was also listed – whether a voter might be susceptible to bribery, or if their employer or landlord could be asked to exert pressure upon them. [Corruption](#) and undue influence were common in the period, and the public nature of voting choices meant that many voters did not, or could not, vote solely according to their opinion on the candidates or issues of the day.

Both political parties engaged in dubious practices, but the Scottish Conservatives were more adept at this; they were also the richer party, and so could afford to bribe or entertain voters (known as 'treating') more freely. Moreover, almost all Scottish landowners were Conservative. This, combined with the uniquely concentrated nature of Scottish landownership, meant that influence could be brought to bear on agricultural tenant-voters.

Influence, whether by legitimate canvassing or otherwise, often favoured the Conservatives. However, intimidation favoured their opponents. While newspaper reports of landlord intimidation damaged the Conservatives' reputation, its actual extent and effect was exaggerated by the predominantly-Liberal Scottish press. Conversely, the unpopularity of the Conservative party in Scotland meant that intimidation of its voters was widespread. This was largely ignored by the press. In the party lists of their voters, notes like 'Voted tho' intimidated' were far from uncommon.

Unable to shed its reputation as the party which had opposed the enfranchisement of the very electorate it was now appealing to, Scottish Conservatives instead sought to reshape and expand that very electorate. If challenged, voters had to prove their right to vote every year at special Registration Courts – this was an arduous process. Parties quickly took over this responsibility for their supporters, with the Scottish Conservatives proving particularly adept at this. Their own voters were kept on the electoral roll, but many Liberals struck off. The Scottish Conservative party played a significant role in setting the starkly partisan tone of politics for generations to come – a significant section of the electorate possessed their votes because of, or in spite of, strenuous Conservative efforts.

The methods used by parties often become part of the political narrative, for better or worse. The electioneering methods favoured by the Scottish Conservative and Liberal parties were increasingly exposed by the expanding newspaper press. While both Liberals and Conservatives fought in the Registration Courts, it was the Conservatives who received the lion's share of bad publicity. As electorates gradually expanded, their strategy of focusing on personal appeals and intimate knowledge of voters became less effective and less practical.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Scottish Conservative party pursued a vigorous and innovative strategy, far more so than their Liberal opponents. At a disadvantage in terms of ideological appeals, it combated this by carefully adapting its approach to Scotland's distinctive and radically transformed electoral landscape. Organised and successful efforts for the targeted canvassing of individual voters helped the party to recover ground, as did their efforts in the annual Registration Courts. Beyond election periods, their activities reached into many different areas of everyday life. As such, these activities had the effect of making the country more politicized, as a greater numbers of Scots developed more rigidly partisan allegiances, regardless of whether they possessed the vote. Ever-increasing numbers were brought into the political sphere, making politics more public and more popular.

However, they did not adapt their methods to changing circumstances. Over time, the party retreated from practices which had previously brought them into close and personal contact with the electorate, and wider society more generally. For both parties, public speaking and personal canvasses were declining, as policy appeals and the printed word became more important. The space between the 'formal' politics of the Scottish Conservative Party and the 'informal' political world of voters and non-voters widened as the century progressed. Nevertheless, the party played a critical role in shaping Scotland's politics during a formative period. Scotland's political culture was notably distinctive – this distinctiveness owed a great deal to the activities of the Scottish Conservative party.

Note: the above draws on the author's published work in [Historical Research](#). All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: by [Clem Onojeghuo](#) on [Unsplash](#).