Modern social and institutional developments in Belfast are entangled with politics to an even greater extent than in other cities. It is to the political severance of the North from the rest of Ireland that Belfast owes its present role as an administrative and, in a modest sense, cultural centre. It is the political link with Britain that has provided financial aid for the post-war restructuring of the economy, and technological assistance for the ailing shipbuilding and aircraft industry. The British link has also provided a political and financial stimulus to the development of welfare services and housing (far more extensive than in the Republic) which as we have seen became one of the main preoccupations of the Council and its committees.

While the latter channel services which are generally regarded as necessary and non-controversial, they also serve as a major base (along with the Stormont Parliament) for Unionist hegemony in the city. It is in fact the Unionist hegemony in local government which has been a major focus for the disturbances which began in 1968 and which persist.

Given the circumstances from which it emerged and the religious hostilities which have supported it, Unionist predominance in local government could hardly fail to be criticised. The major concern of this chapter is to examine the conditions under which the Unionist hegemony described in the last two chapters continued after the political reforms of 1896, and the constitution of the Province in 1920, and under which it existed at the time of our survey. In the course of analysis we shall try to answer the question of how far Unionist predominance was secured through such institutional arrangements as the drawing of ward boundaries, methods of voting and the continued restriction of the local government franchise.
after 1945, and how far it genuinely reflected the political preferences of the majority of the population.

In Belfast as in most other large cities these preferences are channelled through votes for political parties. Accordingly, we shall in this chapter examine the electoral fortunes of the parties which have emerged and regrouped over the seventy years since 1897. In Chapter 7, on the basis of survey responses, we turn to the related question of what factors influenced party voters – at least under the one-party dominant system of the mid-1960s.

The context of party competition in any relatively democratic system is the extent and intensity of popular participation. As a preliminary to discussion of parties we have to consider the development of the Belfast local franchise from 1897 to 1967 and estimate the degree to which any section of the population could be said to be involuntarily excluded from voting at the latter date. We then use turnout in local elections as a further measure of the effects of involuntary exclusion and as an indicator of voluntary withdrawal from normal political activity. Turning to party competition itself, we consider how far various parties have benefited or lost by existing electoral arrangements. Our analysis of these points is based mainly on electoral and census statistics. These not only reveal the grass roots of political developments previously described but provide a further historical perspective within which to view the survey findings presented in subsequent discussion.

THE BELFAST FRANCHISE 1897–1967

The disfranchisement of persons not holding property (and not the spouse of a property owner) from local government elections has been a main grievance that the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland has sought to redress. The slogan ‘one man, one vote’ has also been aimed at the plural votes enjoyed by business proprietors and landlords in virtue of their multiple property holdings in the city. A comparison of the proportions of adults excluded from the local franchise in Belfast and comparable British cities shows however that for almost the first half of the twentieth century a limited local franchise was neither unique to Belfast nor peculiarly restrictive there. The third of all adults enfranchised before the First World