Both contemporary and recent commentators agree that the passing of the First Reform Bill in 1832 was a landmark in the development of democracy in Britain. It initiated major changes in British politics, ‘a complete and entire change of our whole political system’. The Act enlarged the suffrage and marked the beginning of wider incorporation and greater participation within the political community, a process that ended with the achievement of full, equal adult suffrage after 1948. More recent interpretations of the Act have emphasized its conservative aims, or its organizational consequences. In either case the political changes that came after 1832 affected the electoral process, and were accompanied by long-term social changes that altered the context of voting too.

But the immediate effects of the enfranchisement on greater incorporation, and subsequent participation, were uneven. There were significant regional variations in voting and political competition in the period between 1832 and further reform in 1867, with systematic differences between the more urban and the more rural constituencies. These are most apparent in England, and so a more detailed analysis of English constituencies may identify some of the major factors contributing to electoral change and voting behaviour in this period.

As well as changing the franchise, the 1832 Act eliminated some of the anomalies of the pre-Reform electoral system. Many of the constituencies with small and very small electorates were disfranchised, and the seats made available were redistributed both to the counties and to unrepresented boroughs. Reform struck at the basis of the ‘old corruption’ and, like the later controversies over the Corn Laws and the grant to the Catholic institution at Maynooth, it became an intense and widely discussed national political issue.
These three issues had features in common. None were short-term and all were linked to very fundamental and divisive questions in British society and politics. Reform affected the structure of political power, the position of political elites and the nature of the political community. The Corn Law crisis sprang from the issue of free trade and was linked to the problems of agriculture and manufacturing industry. Maynooth raised questions about the religious settlement in the United Kingdom, the role of Protestantism and religious non-conformity, and the relationship between organized religion and the state. The debate on all three subjects involved many outside the existing electoral or political community – they became national issues rather than remaining sectional ones.

The partial resolution of the first issue by the Reform Act in 1832 did not mark a complete break with the past; there were substantial continuities with previous electoral forms and practices. Gash, in an influential study, noted the similarities between politics before and after Reform, and commented that ‘the post-1832 period contained many old features that it inherited from the past. Between the two there is indeed a strong organic resemblance’ (Gash, 1953, p. x).

The workings of the un-reformed system have been re-examined and, from a detailed study of electoral politics before 1832, O’Gorman concludes that after Reform ‘the electoral forms duly changed... but the substance of electoral life, already participatory, partisan and popular, continued’ (O’Gorman, 1989, p. 393). He does not suggest that the Reform Act made no difference to electoral politics, it obviously did, but points out that political practices in the constituencies changed little and that many of the important features of electoral life after 1832 can be identified in the un-reformed system.

Continuities existed at several levels. The parliament of 1833 was, like its predecessor, composed mainly of members of the aristocracy and the landed gentry. Even with the changes in the electorate, many MPs continued to sit for seats that had returned them before 1832. The existence of small proprietor or nomination boroughs had been one of the most corrupt features of the un-reformed system. These seats often had very small electorates and were easily influenced or venally corrupt. Notorious examples such as Old Sarum and Gatton were abolished but patron seats can still be identified after 1832 – Hanham lists 52 boroughs in which individual patrons may have controlled the return of a total of 73 MP’s.

The Reform Act enlarged the electorate but most electors in 1832 had first voted during the un-reformed period. Salmon estimates that there