After 1832, the register defined the electorate in a constituency. The official list was produced at an annual revision when there was an opportunity to add or object to new electors. The process was supervised by a revising barrister but ‘the election agents of the parties soon learned to exploit the complexities of the Act. Despite the efforts of revising barristers, party machinations kept many bona fide electors off the register, and some dead men on it’ (Brock, 1973, p. 326).¹

The system was further reformed by the Registration Act of 1843, and in some boroughs the annual registration process became a surrogate election with intense partisan activity:

The open voting system helped an election agent to identify claims to vote emanating from potential opponents of his party. It was his duty to object to these. A trifling objection was always worthwhile. The claim might not be defended. If it was, no costs could be awarded against the objector until the Registration Act of 1843. Even then they were limited to a pound and were seldom awarded. (Brock, 1973, p. 326)²

In Lancaster we can follow this process from surviving records, and outline the activities of a local party organizer in his attempts to add individuals to the register and organize the constituency vote.

I

Before Reform, Lancaster, the county town of Lancashire, was a two-member borough with an extensive franchise – 2,490 electors voted at the election in 1818. However by 1832 the registered electorate was
reduced to 1,109, although by 1847 this had grown to 1,340. In 1851 the population was 16,168, mostly ‘engaged in the salmon fisheries, the coasting and foreign trade, in the making of cotton, cabinet goods, sailcloth, rope, coaches, ships etc’. Politically in Lancaster the ‘parties are so evenly divided that little personal power is centred on individuals’ (Dod, 1853, p. 174). In making this assessment Dod did not add the phrase that he used for the more corrupt constituencies – ‘influence wholly possessed by the plutocracy’ – but there was a local culture of corruption and political malpractice that contributed to the unseating of candidates after elections in 1847 and 1852. Those in 1857 and 1859 passed off without an inquiry, but the 1865 election was also declared void, and a Royal Commission established. It reported:

that corrupt practices very extensively prevailed at the election 1865, that 843 persons were guilty of bribery ... by receiving money or other valuable considerations for having given, or to induce them to give, their votes; that a further number of 139 were guilty of corrupt practices at the election, by corruptly giving or promising money or other valuable consideration to voters for purchase of their votes, or on account of their having voted or by corruptly advancing money for the purpose of bribery or treating, of which 139 – 89 were electors and 50 non-electors for the borough; that with rare exceptions, corrupt practices have for a long time extensively prevailed at contested elections for this borough. (Bean, 1890, pp. 286–7)

After this report, Lancaster was disfranchised by the Second Reform Act in 1867.

Thomas Greene was one of the two MP’s for most of period immediately after 1832. Entering parliament unopposed as a Tory in 1824, he was re-elected in 1830 and continued to represent Lancaster until the 1850’s. Immediately after Reform, in 1832 and 1835, the representation was shared with a Liberal, but by 1837 the Tories were able to win both seats. They did so again in 1841 with Greene, as in 1837, coming top of the poll, see Table 4.1.

The election results suggest that both ‘parties’ had a core of supporters in the electorate, both might be able to win at least one of the two seats, and so from 1837 to 1865 every general election in Lancaster was contested. Reform may have changed the composition of the electorate and the pattern of electoral politics but by using poll books and canvassing books we can go behind these aggregate figures and analyse the voting at the individual level. This identifies some of the processes that contributed