After 1832 electoral behaviour was influenced by three related factors – partial enfranchisement, the social relations within the electoral community and the public nature of open voting. In borough constituencies there was a link between the elector and the social environment that can be described in terms of social networks. Such networks were used to influence the behaviour of electors and, with the institutional structure created by the Reform Bill, contributed to the development and growth of local party organization.

Political partisanship was public knowledge under open voting. A change in political behaviour, such as voting for a candidate or party other than the one to whom support had been promised, could incur social costs. Partly as a result, electoral preferences tended to be stable over time with the electorate changing as voters left the electorate and new electors were registered. The extent of electoral turnover varied between constituencies and the links between ‘new’ electors and existing social networks were used to influence, and to maintain, the underlying constituency pattern of electoral behaviour. Parliamentary candidates, and local party organizations, could rely on a core of known support within the electorate and concentrated on establishing the political identity of new electors. The accuracy of political information was confirmed through canvassing, and by the knowledge of voting available from poll books and other sources. As a result, within the small and restricted local electoral community of most borough electorates, there could be both a consistent pattern of political campaigning and a relatively stable structure of electoral behaviour individually and collectively.

In 1867, before the passage of the Second Reform Bill, about one in five of the adult male population were enfranchised; 20 years later this had increased to approximately two out of every three. More importantly, ‘with the extension of the suffrage, class was becoming the most
important single factor in deciding political allegiance’ (Cornford, 1963, p. 37). By the end of the 1880s mass electoral behaviour had become increasingly class based, a major change from the earlier period between the First and Second Reform Bills.

The social and political changes that came after 1867 modified patterns of individual electoral behaviour, and the organizational activity of constituency parties. The Second Reform Bill doubled the number of electors and, five years later, the passing of the Ballot Act altered the conditions that had sustained the link between voting and the social context. The 1872 act introduced the secret ballot and ended the ‘full information’ character of elections, voting became an increasingly private and individual act, with consequences for party organizations, individual electors and political campaigning.\(^1\)

Within constituencies the relationship between electors, and between electors and non-electors, had already been altered by the extension of the franchise in 1867. The Ballot Act brought other changes, and the transformation of voting and political campaigning was completed by the further alterations in the franchise, and in the structure of constituencies, that followed the Third Reform Bill in 1884/85.\(^2\) These later changes were accompanied by attempts to control and eliminate electoral corruption, and the transformation of the social context of voting was completed by the emergence of a mature class society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.\(^3\)

By the end of the nineteenth century a majority of the electors in England lived in urban and suburban areas, so the typical social context of voting was no longer that of the medium-sized market town that had been the main element of electoral system between 1832 and 1867. In addition not only had the class system changed but so had the relationship between class and vote. Finally, as the franchise widened, the context of electoral politics became increasingly nationalized.\(^4\) General elections became general, with campaigns that concentrated on party leaders and party policy, as compared to the previous focus on mainly local concerns. So in a relatively short period after 1867, successive changes had a major effect on electoral behaviour, and, as a result, electoral politics after 1885 were qualitatively different to those found within the more restricted electorate of the period between 1832 and 1868.

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The passing of the Second Reform Act in 1867 extended the right to vote and ‘overturned the principle... that property was the sole indication of