An Economic Approach to Enfranchisement through the UK Reform Acts of the Nineteenth Century Leading up to Universal Suffrage

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ABSTRACT

This study uses theoretical economic research to test theories of political development and middle class construction through the reform acts of the early nineteenth century in the United Kingdom leading up to universal suffrage in 1928. My research looks at enfranchisement of specific groups of individuals along with the repercussions of their enfranchisement on political change and the economic well-being of all agents in the society. Overall findings show that the rich elites use enfranchisement as a way of lowering the threats of revolution from the non-elites by providing increased economic value to them. Strategic delegation methods allowed for the non-elites to increase their economic well-being in a period of high revolutionary threats, through increased rates of redistribution. This allowed for the high threats of revolution to be efficiently minimized by the elites, not creating large costs.

Approved by ____________________________________________, __________________________
Professor Chris Ellis Date
I. History and Background

To consider the impacts of the reform acts and their purposes in the United Kingdom, an understanding of the historical events leading up to the early nineteenth century is necessary. The threat of revolution from lower classes has had a steady influence on society and politics throughout history. The French Revolution of 1789 is considered one of the most impactful and influential historical events as it allowed other nations to witness an upheaval of government due to social unrest and lack of political stability. The social unrest of the lower class was rooted within their lack of political rights and economic well-being relative to the wealthy. “‘The revolution’ writes Georges Lefebvre, ‘is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world’”(Cobban). The lack of political rights and economic status prior to the French revolution gave the non-elites a reason to feel powerless, leading to the revolution. Thus, the French Revolution provides a template for other countries as to what to consider if they themselves want to avoid a similar revolution.

One method of holding off a revolution is to extend the right to vote to members of lower classes, allowing them to have a voice in the political system. Political representation favors lower classes economically as they vote on policies that increase tax rates and make them better off through redistribution of those taxes. Enfranchisement, the act of granting the right to vote, has been contingent upon specific criteria of individuals in the United Kingdom throughout history. The enfranchisement regulations before the reform acts of the 19th century were quite strict, causing the enfranchised electorate to be very minimal in size, restricting representation of the citizens of the United Kingdom. These regulations were divided between two constituencies, counties and boroughs. Enfranchisement between counties and boroughs was quite different, creating controversy for equal representation in the early 15th century. In counties, the property
qualifications for enfranchisement were standardized so that all male owners of property worth at least forty shillings were given the right to vote. However, this “forty shilling threshold” was never adjusted for inflation. As time progressed the franchise increased due to the real value of forty shillings of land diminishing. In boroughs, the qualifications for enfranchisement were not standardized. The qualifications in the boroughs were often unique to the specific borough, creating no sense of credibility and allowing for corruption to play a large role in pre-reform politics. The right to enfranchise settlements was up the current monarch’s discretion. This often created large bias and corruption in the electorate. The settlements felt as if the monarch was not considering the well-being of the settlements they chose to enfranchise or disenfranchise. For example, the Tudor monarchs enfranchised 70 boroughs yet 31 of those boroughs were disenfranchised later in history. In addition, smaller electorates were often under the control of wealthy landowners who expected their constituencies to vote as they demanded. Failing to do so created threats of losing representation in the upcoming election.

In an effort to put an end to corrupt political representation in the United Kingdom, reform of the political institution was often attempted. In 1649, Oliver Cromwell refused to adopt universal suffrage and continued highly restrictive property qualifications for enfranchisement in both counties and boroughs. However in 1674, Thomas Rainsborough urged the universal enfranchisement of citizens, as he wanted anyone who lived under a certain government to have input into that same government. Although early attempts at reform such as Rainsborough’s were being shut down, it was still a sign that there was social unrest creating a need to make change in the political and economic hierarchy. This need for change only strengthened after the French Revolution, as Whig leaders advocated parliamentary reform in 1792 with Sir Francis Burdett proposing universal suffrage, equally sized electoral districts, as well as secret ballots to reduce
corruption. However, Burdett’s proposal only received one other passing vote causing it to be rejected. In the early 19th century, social unrest continued to grow and nearly caused a revolt in 1819 through an event known as the “Peterloo Massacre”. The massacre resulted in the death of 11 people with several hundred injured. The reasoning behind the near revolt and massacre was rooted within economic and political issues. “The question of why the crowds came together is fundamentally a economic question: The Lancashire operatives were spurred to attend the great meeting by the pressure of overwhelming economic distress. The question of how the crowds assembled is one of political organization: it centers around the working-class radical reformers and their extensive network of agitation”(Read). The social and economic distress of the non-elites led to the protest as participants were seen arguing for equal representation. This protest ultimately led to the creation of the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act of 1819 that prohibited groups of 50 or more people from gathering in a political manner. The protest proved to parliament that once again change was needed to make the non-elites economically and politically better off, and more importantly, avoid a potential revolution.

II. Economic Models

In Acemoglu and Robinson’s “Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy” (2006) theoretical economic models introduce the framework and reasoning behind why the poor and middle class will desire enfranchisement along with why agents may or may not chose to revolt.

*The Two-Class Model*

In a simpler environment there is a world with just two classes, the rich (r) and the poor (p). We assume that in this scenario there are more poor individuals than rich, p > r. Each group of individuals receive income, \( y_i \), where \( i \) represents economic class \( r \) (rich) or \( p \) (poor), \( y_r > y_p \). Along their income, each agent pays an income tax, \( \tau y_i \), where the common tax rate is \( \tau \). Income
taxes are distortionary so that $C(\tau) \in (0,1)$ of every dollar in tax revenue is wasted, creating dead weight loss through taxation. $C(\tau)$ is also increasing and convex as the first and second derivatives are greater than zero, $C'(\tau) > 0$ and $C''(\tau) > 0$. Meaning as taxes increase, the dead weight loss increases at an increasing rate. After receiving income and paying their income taxes, each agent (i) receives a lump sum redistribution transfer ($T$). Therefore the government budget constraint is:

$$T = \frac{\tau(Ry_r + Py_p) - C(\tau)(Ry_r + Py_p)}{N}$$

$\tau(Ry_r + Py_p)$ represents the benefits of taxation on the rich and poor for the government and $C(\tau)(Ry_r + Py_p)$ corresponds with the cost the government faces and $N$ stands for the number of individuals in the society. We can simplify the equation above to $T = (\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y}$ where

$$\bar{y} = \frac{Ry_r + Py_p}{N}$$

and is the mean income of the society. From this, indirect utility functions of both the rich and poor can be derived. The value, or utility, with a common tax rate $\tau$ is:

$$V(y_r | \tau) = (1 - \tau)y_r + (\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y}$$

Where $(1 - \tau)y_r$ represents the value of rich’s income after taxes and $(\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y}$ is the value of their lump sum transfer from the government. Similarly for the poor, the utility function is

$$V(y_p | \tau) = (1 - \tau)y_p + (\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y}.$$  In order to find the most preferred tax rate of both the rich and poor, first order conditions must be taken of the utility functions.

First order conditions:  

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<td>Rich: $V'(y_r</td>
<td>\tau) = (1 - \tau)y_r + (\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y} = 0$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor: $V'(y_p</td>
<td>\tau) = (1 - \tau)y_p + (\tau - C(\tau))\bar{y} = 0$</td>
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Where: $\rho_r = \frac{y_r}{\bar{y}} > \frac{y_p}{\bar{y}} = \rho_p$
From these assumptions and preferred tax rates, we can conclude that since \( C(\tau) \) is increasing and convex, \( \tau_p^* > \tau_r^* \). Thus, the poor will prefer a higher tax rate than the rich, causing a common tax rate to create varying preferences and redistribution conflicts. The conclusion is that poor voters, if enfranchised, will prefer and vote on a much different tax rate than the rich. This creates a desire for the poor to have voting rights and political input to better their economic well-being by way of higher redistribution. If democracy were to be fully introduced, the median voter would choose the tax rate. In this case the tax rate would be \( \tau_p^* \) as we assume that there are more poor agents than rich in society. Thus, enforcing our conclusion that poor agents seek enfranchisement to become the median voter, in order to increase their economic value through higher rates of redistribution.

*Introduction of the Middle Class*

A more realistic society includes more than just the rich and poor. It will also include a third classification, the middle class. “A long tradition in social science, including Moore’s (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, views third classes such as the middle class…as the key actor in the processes that ultimately lead to democracy. Moore suggested that only societies with a sufficiently strong bourgeoisie would become democratic whereas societies in which landowners were strong enough that the emerging bourgeoisie had to enter into an alliance with them would turn into dictatorship” (Acemoglu & Robinson). Given the dynamic nature of the middle class and the relationship it has with enfranchisement, it must be included in our economic models.

*The Three-Class Model*

The three-class model contains three groups of agents, the rich (r), the middle class (m), and the poor (p). The relative size of these groups is important, so we can label the size of the rich as \( \delta_r \),
the size of the middle class as $\delta^m$, and the size of the poor as $\delta^p$. Normalizing the size of the entire economy’s population to 1, $\sum_i \delta^i = 1$, the assumption is that $\delta^p > \delta^m > \delta^r$. This assumption states that the poor are the most abundant in our society and the rich are the least populous, with the middle class being in between the two. To further our assumptions, we can illustrate the share of the economy’s total income for each group by using $\theta^i$ as the share of the economy’s total income for group $i$. We can then assume that $\frac{\theta^r}{\delta^r} > \frac{\theta^m}{\delta^m} > \frac{\theta^p}{\delta^p}$ inferring that the rich have a higher share of the economy’s overall income in relation to their size, making them relatively richer than the middle class, which is relatively richer than the poor. To find the preferred tax rates of each group $i$, we must look at two conditions:

$$\frac{\delta^i - \theta^i}{\delta^i} - C'(\tau^i) = 0 \text{ and } \tau^i > 0 \quad \text{Or}$$

$$\frac{\delta^i - \theta^i}{\delta^i} - C'(\tau^i) \leq 0 \text{ and } \tau^i = 0$$

By the definition of our assumptions, $y_r$ is greater than $\bar{y}$, thus the rich prefer no taxation and a tax rate $\tau^i = 0$. With regard to the preferred tax rate of the poor, we know that the average income, $\bar{y}$, is greater than the income of the poor, $y_p$. It must be true that the desired tax rate for the poor, $\tau^p$ is greater than zero. The middle class’ preferred tax rate depends on the middle class’ relationship in terms of income to the economy’s average income. Assuming that the rich drive the economy’s mean income up to a point in which the middle class’ income is lower than the society’s average income ($\bar{y} > y^m$), the middle class will also prefer a positive tax rate. Although both the middle class and poor desire a tax rate greater than zero, it is still true that the middle class is relatively richer than the poor ($\frac{\theta^m}{\delta^m} > \frac{\theta^p}{\delta^p}$). Therefore, the tax rate the poor desire is greater than the tax rate of the middle class, as the poor will be better off with more economic redistribution provided by a higher tax rate. This puts the middle class in a very important
political position, as they are influential in deciding policies. The middle class desires a tax rate in-between the rich and the poor, causing economic redistribution conflicts to society. If full democracy is reached, the median voter will set the tax rate in the economy by way of majority voting. Thus, in the situation of $\delta^p > \delta^m > \delta^r$, it is implied that the rich are mathematically not the majority or median voter as $\delta^r$ must be less than 1/2 in a economy that is normalized to equal 1. After determining that the rich are not the median voter, there are two possible situations. One, that the middle class is the median voter ($\delta^p < 1/2$) causing the middle class to set the desired tax rate $\tau^m$. Two, that the poor are the median voters ($\delta^p > 1/2$) setting a preferred tax rate, $\tau^p$, which is greater than both the desired tax rates of the middle class and the rich. Enfranchising the poor and middle classes leads to policies that benefit both groups, but more importantly, provides negative economic outcomes to the rich elites as their preferred policies would not be selected through a democratic majority vote, increasing redistribution to lower classes.

**Strategic Delegation**

The threat of a revolution results in lower classes desiring to receive economic benefits through political action. Strategic delegation refers to a government making critical decisions on whom to enfranchise and when to promise future distributions to lower classes in order to avoid a potential revolution. The government, using strategic delegation, can provide lower classes with economic benefit in order to minimize the threat of revolution. However, the threat of revolution fluctuates throughout time, making certain periods more likely to undergo revolution than others. In a period where the threat of revolution is high, distributions are made and future distributions are promised to the lower classes to improve their economic conditions. On the other hand, when threats of a revolution are low or become low, the government will not see the need to fulfill their promises and no future distributions will be made. For the lower classes, the only way
economic payoffs can be guaranteed is by moving towards a democratic political system. Through enfranchisement of the middle class, the government aims to allow the middle class to set taxes at the point where the lower classes are indifferent between a revolution and no revolution. This creates efficiency for the elites as the threat of revolution is dismissed and the tax rates are set as low as possible in order to do so. However, this economically benefits the lower classes as redistribution is guaranteed. In this case, payoffs to the lower classes would no longer be contingent upon a period of high threat, as redistribution payments would be consistently made. Granting political rights to a portion of the non-elite, allows for government to set the tax rates at the point where agents are indifferent between revolution and no revolution. This becomes the most efficient avenue of guaranteeing redistribution to lower classes and lowering the threat of revolution, economically benefiting all classes. The strategic decision making of distribution payments and who is enfranchised proves to be critical in preventing revolution.

*Emergence of a Partial Democracy*

When a certain portion of society becomes enfranchised, traditional dictatorships and monarchies are no longer politically applicable. A partial democracy occurs when certain democratic characteristics are applied to the political environment by giving the right to vote to only a small share of the overall population. The share of enfranchised is usually the middle class in order to gain allegiance with the rich and prevent revolution from the poor. A revolution has been a credible threat to government throughout history, stemming from the French Revolution, which many governments fear. The threat of a revolution arises from an alliance between the disenfranchised poor and the middle class to rival the rich. The rich look to fend off this revolutionary threat by enfranchising some, if not all, of the middle class to create their own
alliance between themselves and the middle class. Thus, the coalition between the rich and middle class will not allow for the middle class and poor to work together on a revolution against the elites. Since the income of the middle class is greater than that of the poor, the rich view it as easier to persuade them away from revolution rather than to persuade the poor. The policy preferences of the rich and middle class are more aligned. The poor cannot undertake a revolution if the middle class withdrawals from the process as they depend on each other to be successful. However, if a revolution does occur, we must look at the expected returns to each group of society. The returns from a revolution would be shared between the middle class and poor due to the dependent nature of their relationship. The returns from a revolution can be modeled by:

$$V^p(R, \mu) = V^m(R, \mu) = \frac{(1-\mu)\tilde{\gamma}}{\delta^p + \delta^m}$$

A fraction, $\mu$, of the economy’s income is destroyed and the remainder $(1-\mu)$ is distributed between the poor and middle classes $(\delta^p + \delta^m)$. Given the equation above and the intuition behind a revolution, the value to the rich is zero, $V^r(R, \mu) = 0$. Therefore, we can construct a revolution constraint based off of the values of the revolution to the middle and poor classes to make a decision theorem as to whether it is beneficial for the two agents to collude and revolt. The revolution constraint can be expressed as follows:

$$V^p(R, \mu) = V^m(R, \mu) = \frac{(1-\mu)\tilde{\gamma}}{\delta^p + \delta^m} > y^p \text{ and } > y^m$$

The revolution constraint shows that the middle and poor classes will only engage in a revolution if the returns of the revolution are greater than the incomes of both agents. It is extremely important to note that the returns must be greater than both the middle class and poor’s incomes as the revolt will only occur if both agents are economically better off going through with the process. Therefore we can simplify the revolution constraint:
\[
\mu < 1 - \left(\frac{\delta^p}{\delta^m} + 1\right) \theta^m
\]

When \(\theta^m\) falls, the income share of the middle class falls in relative terms to the overall income of the economy. This, in turn, increases the inequality between the middle class and the average income. It also increases the right hand side of the inequality, making it more likely that it is greater than \(\mu\), increasing the likelihood of a revolution. One way the rich can fend off revolution is to meet the value of a revolution through making promises in the sense of future redistribution. However, these selective delegation promises are often not realized and only used as a temporary measure against high threats of a revolution. If the threat of a revolution dissipates, so do the promises of future payoffs. The value or utility of allowing the rich to remain in power while promising future redistribution is described by, for \(i = r, m, p\), at a tax rate \(\tau^N\) representing no revolution

\[
V^i(N, \tau^N) = y^i + p(\tau^N(y - y^i) - C(\tau^N)y) 
\]

If the rich chose to embrace a partial democracy, through strategic delegation, only the middle class is enfranchised. The preferred tax rate of the middle class would be implemented, \(\tau^{PD} = \tau^m\). The value of a partial democracy with a tax rate \(\tau^m\) can be represented by:

\[
V^i(PD) = y^i + (\tau^m(y - y^i) - C(\tau^m)y) 
\]

The values depend on who is the median voter in a full democracy (\(\tau^D = \tau^m\) if \(\delta^p < 1/2\) or \(\tau^D = \tau^p\) if \(\delta^p > 1/2\)). The value of a democracy is as follows:

\[
V^i(D) = y^i + (\tau^D(y - y^i) - C(\tau^D)y) 
\]

Thus, the rich are indifferent between full and partial democratization where \(\tau^{PD} = \tau^m = \tau^D\) if \(\delta^p < 1/2\). However, the rich prefer partial democracy if \(\delta^p > 1/2\) as \(V^r(PD) > V^r(D)\) since \(\tau^p > \tau^m\). This conclusion shows that the rich will try to manipulate the political structure based on circumstances and who the median voter is in order to lower levels of tax redistribution. This
will ensure policies that make the rich economically better off. The poor will fail to capture the policies that economically benefit them most as it is in the best interests of the rich and middle class to prevent that from occurring. Therefore, for a revolution to be prevented, we need one or two conditions to be met:

\[ V^m (N, \tau^N) \geq V^m (R, \mu) \text{ OR } V^p (N, \tau^N) \geq V^p (R, \mu) \]

The revolution will not occur if the value to the middle class with no revolution is greater than the value to middle class while undergoing a revolution or if the value of not undertaking a revolution to the poor is greater than the value of a revolution to the poor. This condition is required as the poor and middle classes must both be economically better off under a revolution in order to go through with the process as they dependent upon each other. Represented by:

\[ V^m (R, \mu) = V^p (R, \mu) \text{ and } V^m (N, \tau^N) > V^p (N, \tau^N) \]

In the case where current government promises future distribution to meet the threat of a revolution, a revolution will be prevented if:

\[ V^m (N, \tau^N = \tau^m) \geq V^m (R, \mu) \]

\[ y^m + p (\tau^m (\bar{y} - y^m) - C (\tau^m) \bar{y}) \geq \frac{(1-\mu)\bar{y}}{\delta^p + \delta^m} \]

Partial democracy leads to the middle class setting a tax rate, \( \tau^m \) as \( V^m (PD) \geq V^m (D) \). Including the middle class into the system with partial democratization is the least costly way for the rich to prevent social unrest and revolution, incentivizing selective enfranchisement by the elites.

**Partial Democracy to Full Democracy**

The idea of intra-elite competition stems directly from the United Kingdom and the political battle of elites between the Conservatives (Tories) and the Liberals (Whigs) in the early 19th century. The two parties competed for overall power, doing so by ultimately extending the right to vote in areas in which they believed they would gain voting power for their respective party.
“Disraeli (Conservative) extended the franchise – something he had initially opposed – because he decided that the newly enfranchised would vote Conservative” (Acemoglu & Robinson). The decision to enfranchise specific groups of individuals can be illustrated through expected payoffs. Assume a partial democracy where the middle class is the median voter, stating that $\delta p < 1/2$. Given that we are in a partial democracy situation, the middle class who has current power is worried about losing this economic value to the rich, represented with probability $q$. Therefore if the current political system remains, we can realize a tax rate set by the middle class along with the probability of them remaining in power $(1- q)$. The expected payoff of this partial democracy to the middle class can represented by:

$$V^m(\text{PD}) = y^m + (1 - q) (\tau^m (\bar{y} - y^m) - C (\tau^m) \bar{y})$$

To think about a transition from partial democracy to a full democracy, the enfranchisement of the poor would be required, increasing redistribution. Since the poor are not the majority in this case, the middle class would still set the tax rate and ultimately remove the threat $(q)$ of losing its power to the rich. Full democracy would lock in the middle class’ ideal economic policies, as the rich are guaranteed to not be the majority voter, increasing redistribution to the lower classes. The following can represent the expected payoff to the middle class in a full democracy:

$$V^m(\text{D}) = y^m + (\tau^m (\bar{y} - y^m) - C (\tau^m) \bar{y})$$

The middle class transitions to full democracy in order to ensure that they remain economically better off in relative terms to the rich. The middle class uses the poor as a way to balance out the rich. “Although this intra-elite competition view is interesting, it does not receive much support from the historical evidence in the British case. The Conservatives lost the 1868 election immediately after having passed the franchise extension and the Liberal party lost the election of 1885 after having passed the franchise extension reform act in 1884” (Acemoglu & Robinson).
Thus, the idea of social tension and threat of revolution must have been the main concern behind the reformation in the United Kingdom, as the theory fails to succeed in terms of winning elections. If the move from partial democracy to full democracy was not in response to intra-elite competition, it must be the case that there was a high threat of revolution from the disenfranchised poor. Once again, a partial democracy starts where \( \bar{y} > y^m \), meaning that there will be consistent redistribution to the poor regardless if they are enfranchised or not, increasing their economic well-being. The threat of revolution stems from the poor, as the partial democracy favors the middle class inherently. Therefore if a revolution is successful in a partial democracy, the rich and middle class will receive nothing whereas the poor will reap the benefits of the revolt, described by the following:

\[
V^p (R, \mu) = \frac{(1-\mu)\bar{y}}{\delta^p} \\
V^m (R, \mu) = V^f (R, \mu) = 0
\]

Therefore the revolution constraint and decision is:

\[
V^p (R, \mu) > V^p (PD) \quad \text{equivalent to} \quad \mu < 1 - \theta^p - (\tau^m (\delta^p - \theta^p) - \delta^p C (\tau^m))
\]

A method to fend off revolt can be through promising future redistribution. The values, with promises of future redistribution in a partial democracy can be illustrated by:

\[
V^i (PD, \tau^{PD}) = y^i + p (\tau^{PD} (\bar{y} - y^i) - C (\tau^{PD}) \bar{y}) + (1 - p) (\tau^m (\bar{y} - y^i) - C (\tau^m) \bar{y})
\]

The middle class chose to reset the tax rate, \( \tau^m \). When the middle class favors more redistribution it is much easier for them to convince the poor to restrain from revolution, as redistribution economically aids the poor and makes them better off. However, in doing so, it is also easier to avoid full democracy since full democracy is no different than partial democracy in the sense that \( \tau^m \) is chosen given our assumption that \( \delta^p < 1/2 \). In contrast, if \( \delta^p > 1/2 \) the poor’s preferred tax rate \( \tau^p \) is chosen and condition for full democracy to prevent revolution is:
\[ V^p (R, \mu) \leq V^p (D) \]
\[ \mu \geq 1 - \theta^p - (\tau^p (\delta^p - \theta^p) - \delta^p C (\tau^p)) \]

Therefore, when the poor are relatively poorer in terms of their share of the overall economy’s income, full democracy is more likely. This creates increased economic redistribution rates and a large income inequality between the middle class and poor.

### III. The UK Reform Acts from 1832 – 1928

*Reform Act of 1832*

The Reform Act of 1832 was considered the first major parliamentary reform in the United Kingdom. The act was constructed and proposed by the Whig leader Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey. However, not all members of parliament were on board with the act; the House of Lords including the king, William IV, met the Reform Act of 1832 with heavy opposition, as parliamentary reform was not wanted. However, the bill was eventually passed due to the ever-growing social unrest and threat of a lower class revolution. “The Act was passed as the climax to a two-year period of high political tension and excitement both within parliament and outside. Many MPs (member of parliament) believed that, unless measures of parliamentary reform were passed no later than the spring of 1832, a violent revolution would sweep away all established institutions. Chaos and blood-shed, such as the French had experienced forty years early during the ‘Terror’ phase of their revolution, would befall Britain” (Evans). The historical events of the French Revolution proved to be influential in the political decisions backing the United Kingdom’s reformation of government, as they did not want to see similar revolutions on their own land. The Reform Act’s main purpose was to enfranchise individuals and increase the overall electorate as well as to redistribute seats, working towards equal representation and lowering the threat of revolution. The act increased the total electorate from about 500,000 to 813,000 which granted around one out of every seven males the right to vote from the total
population of 14 million. The redistribution of seats looked to grant more representation to those constituencies that had rapidly grew during the industrial revolution and take away seats from corrupt electorates that were run by wealthy landowners, known as “rotten boroughs”. The maps below illustrate the distribution of seats geographically before (left) and after (right) the Reform Act of 1832.

There were 65 new county seats and 65 new borough seats created through the Reform Act of 1832, further driving the goal of overall equal representation. Along with the redistribution of seats came new requirements for enfranchisement in both the counties and boroughs. In the county constituencies, the right to vote was extended to male owners of land worth £10 and those who had leases on land worth £10 for more than sixty years. Males who had leases on land worth £50 between twenty and sixty years were enfranchised as well as tenants who were paying
annual rents of £50. In borough constituencies, all male householders of property worth at least £10 were enfranchised, giving the boroughs a standardized enfranchisement requirement for the first time. These enfranchisement requirements apply to our economic models in the sense that they represent a partial democracy and utilize selective delegation. The large rates at which one must be paying to get the right to vote implied that only the wealthy middle class and rich would be entitled to enfranchisement, suggesting favorable economic redistribution levels for the elites. We can think of this as the rich forming a coalition with the upper middle class in order to ensure that the middle class does not join the poor to start a revolution and increase taxes. The economic returns to the rich and upper middle class are greater in this case than they would be if a revolt were to happen, benefiting the two agents. The threat of revolution was pressing and authentic, causing the rich elites to be forced into making reform. Although the reform itself did not prove to be ideal for the poor and the majority of the middle class, the sheer action of making change and extending minor enfranchisement led to minimizing the threat of revolt. The lowering threat of revolution was driven by minor economic redistribution to lower classes.

*Scottish and Irish Reform Acts of 1832*

Similar to the Reform Act of 1832 that applied to England and Wales, the governments of Scotland and Ireland aimed to make strides in reformation. During the boom of the industrial revolution, Scotland was growing at a rapid rate, leading to potential revolt and a changing culture. Before 1832, citizens in Scotland, like England and Wales, had a minor role in government and very few had the right to vote. This caused a pressing need for reformation. “It wasn’t a democratic system. In fact hardly anyone had a vote to decide who went to Parliament. Before 1832 only 5,000 Scots had a vote, although the population was over two million. But ideas about fairness and good government were changing. Aristocratic rule was no longer
acceptable to many people. Already there had been revolutions in America and France against
the old system” (Gray). The Scottish reform act of 1832 looked to aid equal representation as
well as redistribution of seats across boroughs. Many boroughs’ boundaries changed due to the
reform act solely for the purpose of elections, thus boundaries for other purposes were often
different. The Scottish members of parliaments increased from 45 to 53, minutely growing the
overall representation of the country. The requirements for enfranchisement in Scotland changed
as well, giving the right to vote to male householders of £10 of value in the burghs and male
property owners of £10 or tenants of £50 rental in the country. This reform and new
enfranchisement requirements increased the franchise from 5,000 to 65,000 in the population of
2,300,000 individuals.
In Ireland, similar changes were made in their 1832 reform act. The total number of seats
increased five percent from 100 to 105, and borough constituencies’ boundaries changed to help
move toward equal representation. The requirements for enfranchisement in Ireland were quite
similar in nature to Scotland, England, and Wales. Men who were freeholders of land worth £10,
leaseholders and copyholders of estates worth £10, leaseholders for at least 60 years and the
renters of the same or leaseholders for at least 14 years of £20 estates were all enfranchised.
Like the Reform Act of 1832 in England and Wales, the majority of the population was still left
disenfranchised. The use of strategic delegation gave the right to vote to a small majority of the
wealthier individuals of the society and allowed for consistent redistribution across agents. Thus,
enfranchising a specific portion of the wealthy middle class also hindered the threat of a
revolution. Although these enfranchisements did not allow for the median individual in society to
set the tax rate, they left the non-elites somewhat satisfied by redistributing seats and
guaranteeing economic redistributions. The upper middle class and rich were colluding to ensure
that policies were still economically favorable for the wealthy and that no revolt would take place.

Reform Act of 1867

The Reform Act of 1867 was known as the second great reform act in the United Kingdom, specifically for England and Wales. This act was very influential in the working class group as by 1868 male householders were granted the right to vote. “Extending the vote to adult male householders in 1867 produced working-class majorities in many urban constituencies thereafter” (Evans). Given that adult male householders were now enfranchised and even majorities in some constituencies, the electorate dramatically increased. Before hand, only one out of every seven males had the right to vote. The Reform Act of 1867 doubled that, increasing the electorate of England and Wales from around 1 million adult men to around 2 million. This large enfranchisement increased the working class’ political representation and right to vote significantly, as they now had more members of the electorate than ever before. The passage of the act was often looked at by conservative leaders as a way to gain votes and ensure a victory in the upcoming election, inferring intra-elite competition as seen in the economic models. As quoted earlier, quite the contrary came to fruition as the conservatives lost the 1868 general election, which in part could be due to political corruption. Although the middle class was getting the right to vote, bribery of wealthy landowners and other corruptive acts were limiting the power of the middle class’ vote. Anonymous secret ballots had not yet been introduced, creating large pressures on individuals to vote a certain way. As we see the extension of the franchise, without direct results within election outcomes, we must believe once again the rising social pressure and high threat of revolution were at the forefront of the decision-making.

According to our economic model’s theory, the rich elites aimed to form an alliance with the
working class as in previous years. However, now they were reaching deeper into the middle class, enfranchising a significant portion of the group, allowing for more favorable economic redistribution to the poor and middle classes. For the elites, increasing the value of redistribution through enfranchisement was far more worthwhile as opposed to facing a potential revolution and losing all returns as well as destroying a portion of the nation’s economy.

_Ballot Act 1872_

As time progressed in the United Kingdom, the existence of corruption within politics and elections was growing more and more apparent. The Ballot Act became the first movement towards ending corruption in governmental elections. Before the Ballot Act, many individuals who were enfranchised were forced to vote in a specific direction by the demands of a superior member of the electorate, decreasing their desired economic redistribution levels. The Ballot Act introduced the practice of a secret ballot, which required voting to be anonymous in order to hinder the corruption behind voting practices. Before the Ballot Act was introduced, radical John Bright often was concerned that tenants of wealthy landowners would be getting kicked out of their homes if they chose to vote against their landowners’ wishes. The husband of John Bright’s sister was the individual who introduced the Ballot Act to try and combat his growing concerns of corruption in politics. However, Lord Russell, a liberal who opposed the idea of voting in secrecy believed that elections should be a public affair. Russell saw the Ballot Act as a prelude to universal suffrage. The Ballot Act application has loose ties to our economic models, as the true enfranchised middle class was granted the opportunity to vote authentically without the influence of others, increasing the level of redistribution to lower classes. Beforehand the rich were still controlling and corrupting the non-elite vote. Redistribution was granted to all agents, yet the policies that were administered economically favored the elites. Although the Ballot Act
was implemented, corruption in politics was still occurring through the unlimited spending by candidates. This allowed for the rich candidates to continue having economic power over lower income candidates, reducing the potential value of economic redistribution to lower classes as rich candidates were still being elected and setting favorable policies.

*Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act 1883*

The Corrupt and Illegal Practice Prevention Act of 1883 built off of the Ballot Act in the sense of trying to end political corruption. In order to alleviate the corruption, the Corrupt and Illegal Practice Prevention Act of 1883 made it required for each candidate to publish the amount of spending on campaigns to the public. As well as publishing the spending amounts, the candidates now had limits on spending. Each candidate was allowed £710 for the first 2,000 voters in the candidate’s respective constituency and £40 for every additional 1,000 voters. This limit on spending opened the door for the middle class and potentially some of the poor agents to be more involved in the election process and possibly becoming candidates for their constituencies, lowering political corruption and increasing equal representation. The ending of political corruption was another step towards the lower classes gaining economic benefits through desired redistribution levels, moving away from corrupt policies of the rich and receiving higher rates of economic redistribution.

*Representation of the People Act 1884*

The Representation of the People Act of 1884 was known as the third reform act, and ultimately expanded the Reform Act of 1867 from borough to countryside. “The Representation of the People Act, 1884, extends a uniform household franchise and a uniform lodger franchise at elections to all counties and borough throughout the United Kingdom, and enacts that every man possessed of a household qualification or a lodger qualification shall… be entitled to be a
registered voter” (Glen). The standardization of requirements helped make the electorate qualifications much more direct and clear as all men paying annual rent of £10 or landowners of £10 were enfranchised. This increased the electorate dramatically, but was nowhere near reaching universal suffrage. The 5.5 million enfranchised men were only accounting for about 60% of the Men in the total population and still no women were granted the right to vote. Now that the majority of middle class men had the right to vote, if \( \delta^p < 1/2 \) the middle class would act as the median voter agent, increasing economic value to the lower classes. However, the median voter was still not winning the elections as the environment was still a partial democracy, but the preferred tax rates and policies of the middle class were theoretically chosen as full democracy is indifferent from partial democracy when \( \delta^p < 1/2 \). The government could utilize selective delegation, enfranchising a portion of the middle class and in turn create indifference between a partial and full democracy. This indifference would allow for the tax rate to be set by the median class, creating favorable distribution for the non-elites and making them economically better off.

*Redistribution of Seats Act 1885*

William Gladstone, a liberal leader, introduced the Redistribution of Seats Act of 1885 aiming to bring equal representation to parliament by creating equally populated constituencies with equal representation. The House of Commons had a Liberal majority and the Act passed easily, yet the House of Lords opposed and challenged the act, led by Lord Salisbury, a Conservative leader. Salisbury thought the bill would potentially weaken his own party’s constituencies and in turn give governmental reign to the Liberals. After Queen Victoria intervened, negotiations between the two parties began and eventually Salisbury agreed to pass the bill conditioned upon parliamentary seats being redistributed. The Act made it so boroughs with a population under 15,000 citizens would have to merge with a division of the county, causing 79 boroughs to be
disenfranchised. Boroughs with populations between 15,000 and 50,000 citizens would have their representation reduced from two Members of Parliament to one Member of Parliament. The 23 boroughs with more than 50,000 citizens remained undivided, maintaining two members of parliament constituencies. These redistribution movements allowed for more equal representation across the nation, not allowing smaller settlements to have unnecessary representation as well as large settlements having too little representation. Overall 160 seats were redistributed and Scotland’s representation increased by 12 seats. “The climax of this process of evolution arrived in 1885 when the principle of male suffrage was more or less established, the worst anomalies in the distribution of seats had been removed and electoral corruption had largely been curbed. Yet for all that, the scale of this ‘democratic’ transformation should not be exaggerated” (Self). Even with the removal of corruption and disproportional representation, the majority of the population was still disenfranchised, allowing for economic redistribution to lower classes to remain minimal. Equal representation led to a less corrupt electoral process, gaining the true interests of the constituents and minimizing the importance of wealth or societal status.

*Representation of the People Act 1918*

The Representation of the People Act of 1918 was the first act to enfranchise the entire adult male population as well as introduce women’s suffrage. The act essentially abolished all property qualifications for men, as beforehand important members of the male population, such as military men had no right to vote, raising threats of a potential socialist revolution. The enfranchisement of all adult males of the age 21 and over was only one aspect of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 as women were finally enfranchised. However, women were not enfranchised on the same threshold as men. The enfranchised group of women were
either over 30 years of age or married to a government member, property owner, or a university graduate voting in that specific university constituency. “Section 4 of the act granted the franchise to women, but at a higher age than men, 30 years. Oddly, later the same year parliament enacted the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which removed the disqualification from membership of the house of commons of person on the basis of their gender or marital status. So for some years after the 1918 act, women might be an MP and able to vote on national legislation but ineligible to cast a vote at a general election”(Blackburn). The most interesting aspect of this act in terms of our economic models is the fact that women had a higher age threshold required to gain enfranchisement as compared to men. This was due to the fact that if women of 21 years of age were enfranchised, they would alter the majority of the electorate and higher tax rates would be set, economically benefiting the lower classes, taking monetary value away from the elites. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 tripled the electorate from around 7.7 million enfranchised to about 21.4 million by the end of 1918, subsiding the threat of revolution and adding economic value to the poor and middle classes through increased rates of guaranteed redistribution.

*Representation of the People Act 1928*

The representation of the People Act of 1928 represents the final move to full enfranchisement, building off of the Representation of the People Act of 1918. The Representation of the People Act of 1928 standardized the age for enfranchisement across genders, granting women of age 21 and older the right to vote. Thus, women became the majority of electorate. Universal suffrage was reached by the year 1928 in the United Kingdom and, more importantly, policies were being placed into action with maximum economic benefits to the lower classes. The reform acts of the past had no true intentions of creating a full democracy, rather solely for the rich to lower the
threat of a revolution. This allowed the rich to remain economically elite and minimized the value of redistribution to the lower classes. The move to universal suffrage allowed for the lowers classes to be economically better off than they were previously. Thus, relating to our economic models, the median voter would now be setting their own, higher redistributive, economic policies through the process of majority voting. It is likely that the middle class would be the median agent in most circumstances, setting policy that makes them better off but also aids the poor as well, reducing the wage inequality in the society and increasing economic redistribution through increased tax rates.

IV. Conclusion

In analyzing the history of reformation in the United Kingdom, economic theory can be applied to the reasons behind the specific decisions of enfranchisement. Revolutions occurring before the United Kingdom’s parliamentary reform created a template for what nations should do in order to prevent a potential revolt from the non-elites. The French Revolution made threats of a revolution from lower classes credible, as the upheaval of the French government proved to be costly. Thus, social unrest created a need for changes to be made in the United Kingdom’s parliamentary system to prevent revolution. Decisions to enfranchise specific agents in the early reform acts were used to minimize the threat of revolution from the poor and the middle classes through guaranteeing economic redistribution. The rich used specific delegation in times of high revolutionary threat to enfranchise a portion of the middle class by obtaining an alliance with them. Enfranchisement of the middle class ensured that they did not create a coalition with the poor. More importantly, it ensured that the tax rate would not be set too high on the rich, creating large economic distribution to the lower classes. Revolutions could only be successful if both the middle and poor classes economically benefited from and participated in the process together.
Given that the rich had tools such as political power and a large share of the overall economy’s income, they used these assets to lure the middle class away from the poor. Selective delegation granted political rights to a specific portion of the middle class when the threat of a revolution was high. This in turn, allowed for the middle class to set tax rates at higher levels, which created increased economic values for the lower classes. The higher tax level created indifference between revolution and no revolution for the poor and middle classes, as guaranteed redistribution levels were as economically valuable as revolution. The early reform acts had no democratic intentions; the leaders of the time did not see the future of their nation turning to democracy. These reform acts were utilized as necessary economic adjustments to government, ensuring that chaos did not ensue. As time progressed and the electorate continued to grow, redistribution policies that favored the middle and poor classes were set, driving more economic value to the lower classes. By 1928, the United Kingdom reached a full democracy and universal suffrage. This allowed for the median agent in society to set economic policies through majority voting, ending the political and economic hierarchy, increasing the wealth of the non-elites. Overall, the United Kingdom ultimately succeeded in preventing a revolution as enfranchisement and the emergence of a middle class played a large role. Initially, the unrest of the poor and middle classes were creating a high threat of revolution. Yet, the government reacted with political change, as they were quite familiar with the history of revolutions in the past. The political change resulted in the use of selective delegation and enfranchisement of a small portion of the middle class, guaranteeing redistribution as well as redistribution of seats in parliament. The enfranchisement and redistribution of seats allowed for the middle class to gain additional economic value and this ultimately lowered the threats of a potential revolution. Through the use of economic methods, parliament was slowly changing the political environment as more groups
of people were given the right to vote, increasing economic redistribution for the non-elites. The increase in economic status of the non-elites ultimately led to a full democracy and universal suffrage in 1928. The movement to a full democracy economically benefited the middle and the poor classes, as policy was determined by majority voting, and the lower classes were now setting policies that favored higher redistribution payments. In summary, the reform acts utilized political and economic development to allow for the United Kingdom to proceed through a period of high threats of revolution. These threats never materialized as the increased economic well-being of non-elites reached a point of indifference.
Works Cited


