

**Richard D. Floyd.** *Religious Dissent and Political Modernization: Church, Chapel and Party in Nineteenth-Century England.* Studies in Modern History Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 264 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-52540-5.



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**Commissioned by** Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

In this solid examination of religion and politics in the fifteen heady years following the Great Reform Bill, Richard D. Floyd argues for the formation of the two-party system sooner than has been traditionally accepted and maintains that religion was the determining factor in this development. He arrives at this conclusion by focusing on the links between dissent and liberalism as well as Anglicanism and conservatism, which, he believes, had grown firmly attached long before the halcyon age of Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone. Floyd concludes: “this widening divide in politics occurred at both the constituency and the parliamentary levels, and there were liberals and conservatives in a period long before what is usually seen as the beginning of the two-party system” (p. 175).

The book is divided into two parts. The first one, approximately three-fourths of the book's length, investigates the crossroads of politics and religion at the local level using a traditional methodology. Here, Floyd examines in consider-

able detail the parliamentary elections from 1832 to 1847 in five regional towns--Durham, Nottingham, Ipswich, Bedford, and Exeter--to provide somewhat balanced geographical coverage of the country. Primarily relying on rich newspaper accounts of these elections, Floyd successfully transports the reader back to the hustings of the early Victorian political arena. In the second part of the book, Floyd employs a quantitative analysis of these elections to confirm with statistical certainty the theories posited in the geographical examination. It is a tale of two methodologies: one brimming with idiosyncratic personalities and often eccentric circumstances of local politics; the other, thankfully shorter, providing historiographical heft with the facts and figures that would have made headmaster Thomas Gradgrind proud.

Floyd opens with a chapter overview of politics at the time of the reform bill, quickly laying the groundwork for the nascent bond between dissenters and Whigs (or liberals, as he refers to them throughout the book). The second chapter

helpfully revisits the important issues and events that cluttered the political landscape from the late 1820s to the mid-1840s and that serve as the touchstones for the candidates in the following chapters: the reform bill, the slave trade, church rates, agricultural protectionism, and the Maynooth grant. Oddly missing from this chapter is a discussion of the burgeoning state primary education system under the direction of Dr. James Kay-Shuttleworth and the 1843 Factory Bill, which brought educational matters to the forefront; given education's centrality to religion and politics, the inclusion of both would have been useful.

Interestingly, in the regional analysis, each location assumes a personality of its own. Durham is the lively northeast town whose Anglican cathedral encouraged an active nonconformity and even led to the election of radical John Bright in 1843. Nottingham is the industrial center of the list, the largest of the five cities examined, and the liberal town whose split personality led to Tory and working-class cooperation, and ultimately to the dual election in 1847 of the Tory John Walter and the famed Irish Chartist Feargus O'Connor. East Anglia's Ipswich emerges as the busy market town where religious rivalries cultivated and served ample vitriol in local politics and where the fear of Rome often surfaced as a political football. The smallish agricultural town of Bedford shows its distrust of outsiders as it preferred local men of prominence for Parliament and where one of Floyd's arguments—that many Tories departed from Sir Robert Peel because of his Maynooth grant and not his embrace of free trade—played out on the political stage. Finally, the large southwestern city of Exeter with its trade links to the Continent ironically reveals how little the issue of free trade meant to most electors compared to religious issues, even to conservatives. Throughout this survey, however, the principal common factor was the religious antagonism between dissenters, who generally supported liber-

als, and Anglicans, who generally supported Tories.

Of interest to the reviewer was the notion from town to town that “a candidate's position on Maynooth could seriously disrupt his political career” (p. 132). In the three southern locations of Ipswich, Bedford, and Exeter, antagonism toward Maynooth, and, by extension, general concessions to Roman Catholics, remained a steady and popular stump issue, even for liberal candidates, like Bedford's Sir Harry Verney, who distanced himself from Rome after accusations that he favored Roman Catholicism too much. Because of the centrality of Maynooth to the elections of the mid-1840s, the book could have, perhaps, benefited from a geographical location in the northwest, Preston perhaps, where the ramifications of a third, failed Irish potato crop in 1847 dovetailed with the entrance of the Roman Catholic schools into the financial bonanza of the state educational system. The anti-Catholic fury reached fever pitch only three years later with the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy and Lord John Russell's subsequent insulting Ecclesiastical Titles Bill. That said, the Maynooth controversy and how it played out in local Tory politics is a well-developed and fascinating aspect of this work.

Floyd begins the second part of his book explaining the methodology behind his quantitative analysis of parliamentary voting behavior when Commons divisions centered on religion. These two hundred instances where church and chapel often sparred included votes on such issues as parochial boundaries, education and admittance to the universities, tithes and livings for clergy, political involvement of bishops, and government spending. The author also explains his decision to focus somewhat narrowly on the voting records of the thirty-five men who sat for these five boroughs from 1833 to 1847, which allows the researcher and reader to get to know their personalities more intimately and have a deeper understanding of their motivations. Appendix A, which

charts the 2,400 potential votes cast by these thirty-five politicians, reveals that “liberals strongly supported measures promoting political agendas favourable to dissenters, while conservatives supported the privileged position of the establishment” (p. 143). To this point, over the fifteen-year period, liberals consistently voted with religious dissent nearly 86 percent of the time, while conservatives supported the established church nearly 85 percent of the time. Of note, further analysis of each specific parliament also reveals that these percentages decreased when the votes concerned national education and the Maynooth grant and that absenteeism, which averaged 63 percent across all four parliaments in question, dropped substantially when these items were on the agenda. Floyd attributes this phenomenon to when “nonconformists and liberal MPs [members of Parliament] who championed [freedom and voluntarism] occasionally found themselves lining up with chauvinistic Anglicans and conservatives—to the exclusion of more moderate members” (p. 152). The author is right to recognize this deviation from his thesis and deftly argues how it does not alter the big portrait that he is painting of this era.

The author’s contingency table and chi-square analyses of poll books from the five towns and the exhaustive appendix B further reinforce his conclusions. Dissenters were wedded to liberal causes, and candidates as well as liberal MPs “clearly recognized their debt to nonconformist electors, and regularly acknowledged them while canvassing, from the hustings, and in other public speeches” (p. 174). That both groups pursued the cause of religious and civil liberty became axiomatic by the middle of the nineteenth century, as the pursuit of commercial liberty joined these causes and, with the split of the conservative party, ultimately led to the emergence of the Liberal party of Lord Palmerston and Gladstone.

This book reflects a tremendous amount of research and analysis, especially on the quantita-

tive side. But what capture the reader most are the numerous anecdotes that breathe life into this topic. For example, in strengthening his argument about dissent and liberal politicians, Floyd humorously mentions that the June 1841 meeting of the Nottinghamshire Auxiliary of the London Missionary Society had such a poor attendance on its second morning because so many members had instead gone to see the incumbent liberal MP, Sir John Cam Hobhouse, make his entry into town. He also mentions the Ipswich candidate Henry Tufnell who, while an Anglican himself, proclaimed his liberal bona fides in a public speech by taunting Tories and Anglicans and equating them with Catholics in his declaration: “to priestly domination, whether from Rome or Lambeth, I will never bow” (p. 76). With this book, Floyd has provided a portal into the minutiae of local parliamentary politics and bolstered our understanding of how dissent’s relationship with liberalism, and conversely its alienation from the established church, altered the political landscape of England.

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