

‘We care not a Fig, who is Lord Mayor of London, or Tory or Whig’: ¹ Popular Political Culture in the City of London, c.1725-46

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The Georgian City of London was a site of lively political activity, as Londoners from all walks of life engaged in formal and informal ways with political events and structures. This article provides a fresh perspective by examining City politics from the grass-roots level, from the streets and alleys of the City, revealing powerful internal City dialogues. The focus is on the period between the City Elections Act of 1725, and the repeal of its most unpopular provision, the Aldermanic veto, in 1746. This corresponds to an era of intense agitation both in the City, where political events were frequently the topic of newspaper reports and pamphlets, and nationwide, with mounting opposition to Prime Minister Robert Walpole and his corrupt ‘Whig Oligarchy’. The City, as Nicholas Rogers and Henry Horwitz argue, played a vital role in the national political opposition to Walpole’s deeply unpopular Excise Bill of 1733, and his 1739 treaty with Spain; these provoked widespread opposition as affronts to City merchants’ trading interests, making this a particularly turbulent period.² However, this study uncovers a groundswell of citizen political activism through an analysis of the dialogues of elections to the Common Council. The Corporation of London was governed by the Lord Mayor, the Court of Aldermen and the much larger Court of Common Council, the legislative body for civic matters. Common Council elections, not previously studied in detail by historians, reveal valuable correctives to the traditional party-political view of City politics.³ In fact, newspaper reports of Common Council elections show that these contests were not primarily fought along party political lines, but rather a rhetoric of opposition to corruption and the accountability of elected representatives emerged in the 1720s and 30s.⁴ These ideas were not unique to City politics, since they were important tropes of the Tory-Patriot opposition to Walpole’s Government; what is remarkable here is that they were divorced from this partisan context, and instead used within a civic sphere. Political impetus came from London citizens themselves, operating within the vibrant structures of City government.

The City of London, the ancient heart of the expanding metropolis, was home to the ‘most active and experienced electorate to be found anywhere in the country’.⁵ Under the City Corporation, an unusually high proportion of residents, by the standards of eighteenth-century Britain, were enfranchised. In the early eighteenth century, up to 80 per cent of adult male householders could elect Common Councilmen and Aldermen.⁶ These elections were also conducted in public, allowing the disenfranchised to participate to an extent, and newspaper reports involved a wider audience; it is in this participatory context that this article claims to examine popular political culture. Although, as Rogers describes, neighbouring Westminster had a ‘remarkably wide’ Parliamentary franchise,

and was prone to turbulent elections in the mid-eighteenth century, the sheer range of elections in which City voters could participate every year at ward, parish and City-wide levels made this an unrivalled arena for popular political activity.⁷

The eighteenth-century City of London was possessed of a uniquely participatory political system, because the structures of City government extended far down into its streets and alleys. The City was, and still is, divided into 26 wards. Each ward was represented by an Alderman, elected for life, and divided into precincts, represented by a number of annually elected Common Councilmen according to the size of the ward and precincts. Male freemen of the City, who owned property worth over £10 per annum and paid ward taxes, elected Councilmen and Aldermen.⁸ Those who met the other qualifications but were not freemen could elect other ward officers at the annual ward meetings or wardmotes. In total, there were 234 Common Councilmen at the start of our period, and 236 when a parish was added to the City in 1737.⁹

Freemen who also paid to assume the livery of their Company assembled as 'Common Hall' annually to nominate candidates from among the Aldermen for the position of Lord Mayor.¹⁰ Traditionally, the next most senior Alderman who had not yet held the office was elected. Liverymen voted for the four City Members of Parliament at general elections. This context explains the connections between City and national politics; but it is with the lesser-studied franchises of the ward electorate that this article is particularly concerned.

The 1720s and 30s was an era of challenge for City government. Crime, argues John Beattie, was feared 'as a serious social problem', to which the City was forced to adapt and respond.¹¹ The City increasingly fought to defend its traditional role, described by Daniel Defoe in the 1720s as 'centre of the money, as well as of the credit and trade of the kingdom'.¹² While Westminster and the suburbs expanded rapidly, the population of the City stagnated; increasingly tradesmen left the City for other parts of London.¹³ Thus it was critical for the City to respond to challenges to its governance, to maintain its place within the expanding metropolis. In the light of this, a variety of projects of civic improvement, from repairing pavements to the construction of a Mayoral Mansion House, were undertaken at this time. These concerns animated City politics from the neighbourhoods to the Court of Common Council. Tensions over City government and its efficacy drove the emerging dialogues of anti-corruption and the accountability of elected representatives. It was these ideas, rather than national partisan struggles, that animated City politics in this era.

In order to understand these City discourses, this article takes a new approach in looking to internal City factors for their causes. City government in this era was shaped by the 1725 City Elections Act, deeply unpopular among the City opposition to the Government, as it was perceived as an attempt

to restrain the independence of the City.¹⁴ It officially limited the ward franchise to freemen householders, and also provided for the controversial veto of the Court of Aldermen over Common Council. However, the Act actually reanimated City traditions by reinforcing them at grass-roots level. For example, it stressed that ward service was a necessary condition of the franchise. Although some newspaper commentaries criticised the Act, it brought the discussion of elections into the public sphere. By contrast, even at the height of the Rage of Party (1688-1715), when Common Council elections were highly contentious, they were not reported in newspapers.¹⁵ During that era and into the early 1720s, many Common Council and Aldermanic elections caused fierce internal disputes; illegal voters were challenged, and returning officers' practices were criticised.¹⁶ After the Act, debates in the newspapers arose concerning opinions of the campaigns and outcomes, but the franchise and process themselves were generally accepted. The Aldermanic veto was repealed in 1746, as the Government attempted to appease the City, but the City franchise and election procedures remained unchanged. In fact, the institutions of City politics remained vital and open to widespread participation at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ However, this later period is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the 1720s and 30s as a formative era for the development of public debates and scrutiny of City politics.

We start with an analysis of the individual wards, precincts and vestries of the City, which were distinct but interconnected political communities. This demonstrates that the structures of grass-roots politics led to conflicts in the Common Council elections of particular wards, and that concerns raised in the wards were related to City-wide tensions, such as the need for civic improvement, and fears of criminal activity. This structural analysis enables the subsequent illumination of contested Common Council elections from the perspective of the newspaper reports about them that proliferated in the 1720s and 1730s. The rhetoric of these contests reflects the ways in which the City Elections Act reanimated the traditions of service to ward and neighbourhood, but also reveals the emergence of dialogues about the accountability of representatives and anti-corruption. Political impetus came from London citizens; their discourses animated a lively and participatory popular political culture.

1: Ward Political Culture

The wards, vestries, precincts and parishes of the City of London were active political communities, and their study reveals grass-roots responses to the challenges facing the City in the 1720s and 30s. This was an era in which concerns over governance permeated all levels of City society. John Smart's *A Short Account of the several wards, precincts, parishes etc* (1741), was a revised version of a report

to a Common Council committee examining lighting and watchmen provision in the City in 1735.¹⁸ His quantification of all the houses in the wards and precincts of the City reflected a wider concern about security and the prevention of crime in the City; he estimated the contributions that each ward could make to provide a more centralised system to ensure that streets were well-lit, and patrolled by paid watchmen.¹⁹ His detailed calculations reveal general concerns with ensuring the efficiency of City government, as it responded to economic and criminal pressures. Here we focus on three particular City wards: Bassishaw, Bishopsgate and Langbourn, which provide a valuable cross-section of City political culture. These wards, for which many records for this period survive, all witnessed especially contentious Common Council Elections in the 1730s and provide examples of different causes of conflict. The common theme, however, is that these contests were not merely partisan, but driven by factors at the neighbourhood levels of City politics.

The 26 City wards were divided into precincts often according to the different parishes, or parts of parishes, within them. Smart named 109 parishes in the City in 1741.²⁰ Each parish assembly, called a vestry, was governed by the churchwardens and overseers of the poor, chosen annually from among the inhabitants. The primary responsibility of, and source of conflict in, the parish was the collection and distribution of funds for the poor. Some vestries of the City were 'Select', and some were 'Open'. All rate-paying inhabitants were permitted to attend the meetings of open vestries, whereas only those elected by the other vestrymen attended select vestries, which could often cause contention.²¹

Scholars who have examined the wards and neighbourhoods of the City, rather than merely the City as a whole, characterise ward political culture in partisan terms. Rogers delineates particular wards as 'Court' (Ministerial Whig) or 'Tory-Patriot' based on the political affiliations of their Common Councilmen.²² He argues that the Court party was best represented in the inner wards, including Bassishaw and Langbourn, which were dominated by financial services, whereas the middle and particularly outer City wards were more Tory in character.²³ Rogers takes his divisions of the wards, and his broad characterisations of their characters, from Gary Stuart de Krey's work for the earlier part of the century (Figure 1).²⁴ While different parts of the City clearly had different characters, this analysis is rather reductive. Crucially, Common Council contests were not openly discussed in the language of party; a more detailed examination of individual wards and neighbourhoods reveals a variety of factors that provoked political conflict.

(Figure 1 here: the City of London by ward (from de Krey, Fractured Society, p. 172), ©Gary Stuart de Krey, reproduced with kind permission of the author.)

One such factor was local office-holding. Scholars have recognised that this added a participatory element to the eighteenth-century political community.²⁵ Valerie Pearl estimates that one-tenth of London householders held office in any one year in the mid-seventeenth century; it is likely that this proportion remained roughly constant into the eighteenth century, although with variations between different wards and parishes.²⁶ The range of local offices was fairly large; representatives to serve as inquestmen in the City courts, constables, scavengers, collectors of the Lamp Duty, overseers of the poor, churchwardens and sidesmen were all required annually by ward or vestry. Since Common Councilmen were often some of the more prominent residents of their ward, they often held offices in their ward and vestry. Furthermore, City government was dependent on amateur office-holding at all levels; from the Lord Mayor down to the sidesmen. The participatory nature of office-holding was limited, as it was almost exclusively among male householders. However, since they composed the ward franchise, their engagement in office-holding undoubtedly shaped the political culture of individual wards and parishes. Questions over the ability of these officers to meet the changing needs of their communities shaped the vibrant political culture of the 1720s and 30s.

Bassishaw, Bishopsgate and Langbourn offer contrasting insights into how wards operated as political communities, the concerns that were raised and debated, and the divisions along which Common Council elections were fought. Bassishaw is arguably the most 'inner' City ward, as it contains the Guildhall, the administrative centre of the City.²⁷ Although the smallest ward, consisting of only one street and 142 houses in 1741, John Strype recorded in his *Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster* that Bassishaw was 'well inhabited by Merchants', and 'graced with good Buildings'.²⁸ It returned four Common Councilmen, two of whom represented the upper precinct, and two the lower.

By contrast, Bishopsgate was a far larger and more complex ward that included sections both inside and outside the City walls. Bishopsgate elected fourteen Councilmen in total, of whom four represented the section without the gate and ten the section within. However, the section within the gate contained only 426 houses, whereas that without had 1,612; Bishopsgate within was proportionately far better represented in Common Council.²⁹ Strype also described a social and economic divergence between the two sections; within there were 'divers great Inns', and 'handsome' courts and streets home to merchants.³⁰ Bishopsgate without was 'not so well built and inhabited', with fewer merchants and many dealers in second-hand goods.³¹ It is notable that the particularly contentious part of the ward was the section outside the gate, populated by inhabitants generally of lower social status, and not as well-represented.

Langbourn, another inner City ward, was more populous than Bishopsgate within or Bassishaw, with 530 houses.³² Electing ten Common Councilmen from twelve different precincts within nine different parishes, it had a convoluted electoral structure. As Strype described, Langbourn was dominated by the financial services of the City; it contained Exchange Alley, with 'divers Eminent Coffee Houses...chiefly frequented by Brokers, Stockjobbers, Frenchmen, Jews, as well as other Merchants and Gentlemen'.³³ While Rogers describes this ward as dominated by the Court party, the complex contests of the late 1730s suggest both that this dominance was challenged, and that factors other than party played a role here.³⁴ By examining these contests from the perspective of the ward, and the vestries and precincts that composed it, it emerges that a variety of concerns, largely unrelated to partisanship, drove ward politics.

An important starting point for understanding the political concerns of the City wards are the ward presentments. These were official documents returned by each ward to the Lord Mayor after the annual choice of ward officers. As well as containing the details of officers, they raise concerns and grievances, bringing them to the attention of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen. The ward presentments for Bishopsgate and Bassishaw reveal that, in the 1720s and 30s, a matter of particular concern was the poor condition of streets and alleys.³⁵ These presentments reflect the fear highlighted by Beattie that certain areas of the City were breeding grounds for vice and criminal activity; citizens and officers were concerned with improving the City, removing brothels, and ensuring that constables and watchmen, responsible for law enforcement in the local context, did not neglect their duties.³⁶

While the evidence from ward presentments shows some of the concerns that animated ward politics, it does not reveal why some wards were particularly contentious in the 1730s. To discover this, we need to move further down the City structures to the vestries, or parish assemblies, where matters of concern were debated and resolved. The select vestry at St Botolph without Bishopsgate (figure 2), caused intense conflict both before and after it was finally abolished in 1732. The parish records attest to an ongoing struggle from the early eighteenth century between the parish oligarchy of the vestry, and the excluded parishioners, who sought an open vestry. A document from 1721 relates parishioners' attempts to break the select vestry, following a conflict over the collection of the poor rate, and sets out the perceived abuses of the vestry.³⁷ These included the misuse of parish money for 'feasting', making offices 'as burthensome as they can' so that those called upon to serve them chose instead to pay heavy fines and left others less 'worthy' to serve, and ensuring that those who did not vote for the vestry's candidates for offices had to perform parish offices out of turn.³⁸

(Figure 2 here: Benjamin Cole, 'The North-East Prospect of the Parish Church of St Botolph without Bishopsgate' (1750), ©City of London)

This attempt to remove the select vestry was not successful, however, and in November 1732, a group of parishioners who refused to pay the rate set for church repairs claimed that they would pay only if 'the vestry will consent to try their customary right of holding select vestries.'³⁹ These parishioners were clearly influential and disruptive, as the Select Vestry was abolished, although a select group of vestrymen continued to dominate parish affairs. In the 1739 Bishopsgate Common Council election, which was heavily contested, and for which detailed sources survive, allegations that the vestry of St Botolph had been fixing the rates featured heavily.⁴⁰ Prominent and wealthy residents including Thomas Phillibrown, Sir Edward Bellamy, James Colebrooke and Sir Joseph Eyles, who all refused to pay the church rate in 1732, were named in connection with the opposition to the sitting Common Councilmen in 1739, who had all been members of the select vestry.⁴¹ This vestry created divisions which endured into the later 1730s, and made this part of the ward particularly contentious. The vestry perspective shows that perceived abuses of power at the lowest levels of City government could drive intense political conflict.

Evidence from precinct records shows other causes of electoral conflict. In Langbourn, precinct meeting minutes reveal a convoluted electoral system, which probably facilitated the high levels of contestation in this ward.⁴² Although the ward was composed of twelve different precincts, it elected only ten Common Councilmen.⁴³ In contrast, Bishopsgate ward contained six precincts, of which five elected two Councilmen apiece, and the larger St Botolph without four. In Langbourn, each precinct appeared to return as many Common Council candidates to the wardmote as it chose to that particular year, and when ten Common Councilmen had been chosen by the ward as a whole, they were redistributed to represent particular precincts. From St Dionis Backchurch, three candidates were returned to the ward in December 1737, compared with seven in 1738.⁴⁴ An appeal in December 1735 to return 'only Two Gentlemen for the North and South Precincts' in this parish was rejected.⁴⁵ The Councilmen elected in 1738 came from only four of the ward's nine different parishes.⁴⁶ This uneven and chaotic system meant that some parishes dominated others, undoubtedly causing further tensions. Furthermore, a close examination of the newspaper reports of Langbourn Common Council elections reveals that the 'lists' in which candidates were presented and elected were not rigid collectives, but could change. Between the elections of 1737 and 1738, three sitting Common Councilmen changed their allegiance to the collective that they had opposed in the previous year.⁴⁷ A precinct and ward perspective reveals structural factors that created a lively local electoral culture in Langbourn, as individuals from rival parishes tussled for prominence in the ward as a whole.

Drilling down even further, we may consider the individuals who sought to become Common Councilmen. The contested elections of this period suggest that these were sought-after positions, even though Councilmen were not paid, and were obliged to attend lengthy meetings. It is clear that serving as a Common Councilman could represent an important step for those who aspired to the upper civic circles. Ian Doolittle finds that 37 of the 77 Aldermen who served between 1738 and 1763 were formerly Common Councilmen.⁴⁸ The 26 Aldermen were the civic elite, often prominent merchants and tradesmen, some of whom were also members of Parliament.⁴⁹ In Bassishaw, Bishopsgate and Langbourn between c.1720 and 1740, nine former Common Councilmen became Aldermen.⁵⁰ William Baker, an extremely prominent and wealthy merchant, first ran as a Common Councilman in Bassishaw in 1735, but was not elected until the following year.⁵¹ In December 1740, he became Alderman for Bassishaw, later served as an MP and was knighted in 1760.⁵² Baker's perseverance in contesting for a Common Council place suggests that serving as a Councilman could ensure prominence among the ward electorate before standing as an Aldermanic candidate. This reflects the vitality and continuing importance of City government structures, even to the wealthiest citizens.

However, only a small minority of Common Councilmen became Aldermen; most did not rise further up the City hierarchy. Instead, some were prominent on the various Common Council committees. Service on these committees has traditionally been seen as a burdensome aspect of the role of Councilmen, but there were clearly benefits to membership, as some were members of many committees.⁵³ James Dancie, Deputy for Bishopsgate ward within, was on the Committee for the Markets, for the Watch, for Gresham College, for the City Lands, for the Mansion House, and was one of the Commissioners for Sewers; all the available committees but three.⁵⁴ This was an unusually high level of commitments, but of the fourteen Bishopsgate Common Councilmen in 1738, all except two were on a committee.⁵⁵ Although we cannot know how frequently, if at all, these individuals actually attended, evidence from committee minutes reveals that Dancie was an active member of the sub-committees that dealt with watchmen provision in 1735-7, and on the implementation committees following the passage of the Watch Act in 1737.⁵⁶ Involvement in Common Council committees therefore partly reflected contemporary attempts to protect against street crime, including robbery and burglary, through better lighting and more effective watchmen. However, there were probably also opportunities for the advancement of private business interests. In the late 1730s, questions were raised about the intermingling of personal advancement and public service, both in a City-wide and in ward contexts. The active involvement of these Bishopsgate Common Councilmen on committees undoubtedly played an important role in provoking the conflict in this ward in the late 1730s. The interactions of the grass-roots political concerns revealed by ward,

precinct and parish records with wider political turbulence in the late 1730s made this a particularly contentious era of City politics.

2: Reports of Common Council Elections and City political culture

Moving on from the causes of Common Council contests in particular wards, we now focus on the elections themselves, which provide valuable insights into City political culture. The choice of representatives from each ward for the Common Council was an annual opportunity for political engagement among citizens. In many cases, the sitting Common Councilmen were not contested, and most contests progressed only as far as a show of hands before one candidate was chosen.⁵⁷ However, half of the City wards experienced two or more elections that went to polls in this period; this was a startlingly lively time in ward politics. Not only were elections conducted physically in a public space, they were also discussed in newspapers, and so experienced by a range of readers. Hannah Barker suggests that up to one quarter of London residents were newspaper readers in the mid-eighteenth century; newspapers were available in coffee-houses, where they could be read aloud, and were often shared between less well-off readers.⁵⁸ Between approximately 1719 and 1745 (and particularly in the 1730s), newspaper reports on Common Council Elections were notably frequent and detailed, in stark contrast to the periods immediately before and after.

While some candidates advertised for voters in newspapers, using them as a campaigning space (figure 3), most reports of elections were broadly factual statements of electoral outcomes.⁵⁹ A comparison with Bassishaw's ward records shows that newspapers recorded all the contests attested to by the ward records between 1720 and 1745.⁶⁰ The extensive reporting of the outcomes and process of elections in newspapers is evidence of the role that the City Elections Act (1725) played in reanimating City politics, and drawing these discussions into the public sphere. The vitality of Common Council contests developed in the 1720s and 30s, and was confirmed when part of the Act was repealed in 1746, but the franchise and processes for ward elections remained unchanged.

Despite this evidence of civic electoral vitality, Rogers, the foremost scholar of London popular politics in this era, only discusses Common Council contests in national partisan terms.⁶¹ Strikingly, the language of party was very rarely used in Council election reports. Newspaper reports of Common Council elections sat alongside those of Parliamentary contests, which always referred to candidates representing the 'Country' or 'Ministerial' interest.⁶² In contrast, Common Council elections were discussed in terms of 'lists': often the 'old list' of the sitting Common Councilmen or alternatively the 'Common-Council-Mens-List', against the 'new list' who were contesting them. As

the earlier example from Langbourn demonstrated, these collectives were more ad-hoc and changeable than straightforward partisan groupings. Even in the late 1730s, when City-wide and partisan concerns did infiltrate the language of ward politics, citizens used the opportunity of wider contestation to continue to raise neighbourhood concerns in electoral contests, and party political figures exploited existing vibrant electoral traditions.

(Figure 3 here: a Common Council candidate's advertisement (London Daily Post, 16 Oct. 1738).)

Common Council elections were, throughout this period, dominated by a rhetoric of the duties of ward service. The City Elections Act, by stressing that ward service was a necessary condition of the franchise, reinvigorated this City political tradition. It was expected that a candidate, passing through the ward offices in a straightforward fashion, would not attempt to become a Councilman before he had served the more junior offices.⁶³ Fitness to serve the office of Common Councilman was often related to the length of time that an inhabitant had been resident in the ward. Appeals for voters in newspapers often emphasised that a candidate was a 'very ancient' inhabitant (figure 3). However, the use of newspaper reports to attack those who were seen as upstarts or as violating the traditional progression through offices reveals that ward politics were not uncontentious and consensual; instead, they were extremely animated.

At Aldersgate in 1733, a 'faint Attempt' at opposition was made by a group of three individuals described as the 'New Light Men' by newspapers.⁶⁴ It seems that they were so-called because they were new to the ward, and the sitting Deputy of the ward, John Smart, was then heavily involved in the committees for the provision of lighting and watchmen for the City.⁶⁵ This play on words undoubtedly resonated with citizens in the context of debates over City lighting proposals at this time; more effective street lights, it was believed, would make the City safer and help to detect and prevent crime. The *Grub Street Journal* commented that they were 'three inhabitants of so short a standing, that neither of them has yet been called upon to serve any office', and criticises their attempt to 'jostle out some deputy or common-council-man, and have a hand in the government of this great city, before he [they] well knew how to keep the peace, or to see the streets kept clean'.⁶⁶ Their lack of ward service is contrasted with the activities of Deputy Smart on Common Council committees. Service to the ward and maintaining the hierarchy of ward offices were important concerns; there were clearly fears that tradition was being challenged as these concerns were played out publicly in newspaper reports.

As Common Councilmen were primarily representatives of their ward, concerns related to their immediate neighbourhood were frequently mentioned in electoral contests. Particularly dominant were allegations that Councilmen were assessing for taxes incorrectly. In Cripplegate Without in

1719, it was claimed that the sitting Common Councilmen, if re-elected, would bring in a new poor rate, favourable to themselves.⁶⁷ In Farringdon Without in 1723, Mr Bott, a Common Councilman and baker, reportedly over-rated those who did not buy their bread from him.⁶⁸ Inhabitants of Vintry ward in 1725 presented a petition to the Court of Aldermen, claiming that they had not been assessed for the Orphans' Rate, as the ward officers responsible for assessments were deliberately preventing them from voting in Common Council elections.⁶⁹ That the powers over rating property held by Common Councilmen and other ward officers could be matters of contention is also reflected in St Botolph without Bishopsgate, where allegations about fixing the poor rate continued in the late 1730s against the sitting Councilmen.⁷⁰ This reflects the enduring ability of ward and precinct concerns to motivate political strife into the late 1730s.

In the late 1730s, Common Councilmen were also increasingly scrutinised by the newspapers for their roles on the City-wide political stage. A dominant concern was the Common Council's granting of building contracts for the City, a topic of fierce pamphlet debates.⁷¹ Civic improvement was recognised as an important way in which the City could assert its continuing power and relevance in the expanding metropolis, as the construction of the mayoral Mansion House reflects, but the process of civic improvement clashed with City traditions. Particularly debated was whether Common Council should grant building contracts to its own members; this right was both defended as a reward for the (unpaid) service of the Common Councilmen, and attacked as corrupt and as often leading to poorer quality and more costly building works. Such allegations also had a local context. At Bishopsgate, their opponents criticised the 'open Partiality and blundering Management' of the sitting Councilmen, which 'swell'd the Expence' of the gate at Bishopsgate; there were complaints about the poor construction of the gate, and the inconvenience caused by the delays in its construction in the early 1730s.⁷² As was noted above, many of the Bishopsgate Common Councilmen were involved in the City committees, and it was alleged that they used this influence to grant building contracts to their own members, and to their associates. Clearly, allegations of corruption in local building contracts resonated keenly with electors.

(Figure 4 here: Paul Fourdrinier, 'The Lord Mayor's Mansion House' (1751), ©City of London)

Most of the concerns over building contracts expressed in electoral contests, however, related to the City-wide context. The most scandalous contract was that for the masons' work for the construction of the new Mayoral Mansion House in 1738. The Common Council voted to award this contract to the three masons who proposed a cost of £17,200, rather than the two whose proposal cost only £16,975; the former were Common Councilmen.⁷³ The inability of the Common Council and the Court of Aldermen to agree over the masons' proposals provoked a crisis in the construction of the Mansion House, which halted for a year until compromise was reached.⁷⁴ In the contests at

Langbourn in 1738 and Bishopsgate in 1739, Councilmen were openly criticised for supporting the more expensive masons' proposal, under which the City would pay more money for the same work.⁷⁵ In Bishopsgate, the opponents of the sitting Common Councilmen claimed the sitting Councilmen had not served the City's interests properly by voting for this higher proposal, although they defended the 'Common Right' of Councilmen to serve the City through building contracts.⁷⁶ The Bishopsgate election was portrayed by contemporaries as a contest between the Tory Patriots (the sitting Common Councilmen) and the Ministerial Whigs (their opposition); thus it is striking that this anti-corruption rhetoric was directed not, as in the national political context, at the Ministry, but rather at the Tory Patriot sitting Councilmen. This reveals that these dialogues of anti-corruption and the accountability of elected representatives for their actions were subverted in the civic context, co-opted by London citizens for their own aims of preserving the City's distinctive and independent position within the nation.

The Bishopsgate Councilmen were also criticised for their roles in the 1739 Mayoral Election, a moment of crisis and conflict in the City. Most Common Councilmen were liverymen, who assembled annually as Common Hall to elect the Lord Mayor. Supporters of the sitting Councilmen saw the opposition to them as a result of their rejection of a 'Voter for the Convention' as Lord Mayor.⁷⁷ This refers to Common Hall's opposition to Sir George Champion as a Mayoral candidate, although the tradition of rotation meant that, as the most senior alderman who had not yet served this office, it should pass to him. He was rejected by Common Hall because he voted for the deeply unpopular Convention of Pardo in Parliament, a treaty with Spain brokered by the Whig Government but seen by many merchants as damaging to British trading interests in the Americas. It was alleged that Champion had been bribed to vote for the Convention, and the press presented this vote as a betrayal of the interests of London citizens, to whom he was 'accountable' for his actions in Parliament.⁷⁸ The sitting Common Councilmen, and also Rogers, alleged that the opposition at Bishopsgate was driven by a desire of the ministerial Whigs to capture this ward in revenge for the casting aside of Champion.⁷⁹ This explanation does not account for the ward- and vestry-level concerns also raised in this contest; instead, the opportunity of City-wide political strife was taken at Bishopsgate to debate a range of grievances.

It is, however, striking that the language of political parties did emerge in Common Council elections in the late 1730s. Explicit mentions of party before this were extremely rare; the 1734 Common Council elections was the only occasion on which the 'Country Interest' was mentioned, even though this phrase was always used at this time to describe the political affiliations of parliamentary candidates.⁸⁰ In the City context, partisanship was often discussed in terms of a fear of corrupting external influence. By the late 1730s, appeals were made in the style used by the national political

opposition to the Whig government, calling for the defence of the 'City Parliament' (Common Council) against feared Ministerial 'Management'.⁸¹ Thus even when connections were drawn with national political parties, the dominant rhetoric was concerned with preserving City independence and traditions; this was closely related to the interests of a groundswell of citizen political activism.

These fears of adverse Ministerial influence over Common Council elections reached their peak in the late 1730s. Each year between 1736 and 1738, the *London Evening Post* celebrated that,

those who have distinguish'd themselves by a true Zeal for the Liberties of their Country...carried their Elections by a great Majority in most of the Wards, in Opposition to those that have for many years vainly attempted to bring the Common-Council of the City of London, under the Influence of the Court, and be (like themselves) the Creatures of the Ministry.⁸²

In the 1739 Bishopsgate Election, the opposition to the sitting Common Councilmen was portrayed as a 'Ministerial Scheme', and the Eyles brothers, prominent Whig Aldermen, as behind the opposition.⁸³ Newspaper reports referred to the opposition as 'Sir Joseph Eyles' List', while the sitting Common Councilmen were the 'Deputy's List'.⁸⁴ Joseph Eyles, a wealthy resident of Bishopsgate Street, was elected as Alderman of Cheap ward in January 1739 under a storm of allegations of corruption.⁸⁵ A powerful reference to this alleged influence of Ministerial Whigs over the Bishopsgate election was a comparison made with John Milton's 'Comus'.⁸⁶ In this play, the Lady is tempted by the debauched 'Comus', and she exercises her freedom of mind against his representation of vice and the pleasures of the body. The City was compared to this 'Chaste Lady', whereas Eyles and the Whigs were Comus, trying to tempt and corrupt her. Although undoubtedly exaggerated for rhetorical effect, and not based on any evidence of the direct involvement of Eyles in the election process, these emotive expressions of feared Ministerial influence effectively appealed to a desire to uphold City independence.

In the Bishopsgate election, the rhetoric of national Tory-Patriot opposition to the Whig Government was also strikingly used to promote the defence of the City's interests. This included references to Walpole's deeply unpopular Excise Bill of 1733, the Government's corrupt and self-serving practices, and the Septennial Act of 1716, which marked the departure from triannual general elections established in 1694. Supporters of the sitting Common Councilmen in Bishopsgate asserted that 'the annual Election of the City-Parliament, or Common-Council, is, what Parliaments should be, and a genuine Fragment of the old English Constitution'; it was feared that the Court's influence would end in 'a Septennial Common-Council too'.⁸⁷ The *Daily Post* suggested that:

some Sparks of Freedom and Independence (only to be found in annual Parliaments) breaking out of late against Excises and Conventions, Offence is taken, and all Means are used to bring the Common-Council of the City into the Measures of a Court.⁸⁸

This article claimed that the opposition presented by the City to the Excise Bill and the Convention of Pardo provoked attempts by the Ministry to influence Common Council elections, and that the Ministry sought to stifle these frequent ward elections, by making the Common Council more like Parliament, with elections every seven years. This was clearly scare-mongering, but it is notable that references to the dangers of the Septennial Act were not merely used by the wider parliamentary political opposition, but also related to the civic context of Common Council elections. In the late 1730s, the opportunities offered by national political oppositional tropes were used in Bishopsgate in particular to frame arguments that asserted City electoral rights and preserved City political institutions.

Conclusion

The City's government structures represented a vibrant and independent outlet for the political expression of London citizens in the early Georgian era. The wards and precincts of the City were vital political communities, and the 1725 City Elections Act, far from restraining City politics, reanimated political culture by confirming its institutions. There is undoubtedly scope for a broader survey, examining all the wards of the City in detail and also drawing comparisons with Westminster and Southwark; this article merely hints at what is possible. This analysis of Common Council elections, formerly little studied, shows their frequent contestation in the 1720s and 30s cannot be attributed to partisanship. Instead, grass-roots citizen political activism shaped powerful civic dialogues opposing corruption in government, and making elected representatives accountable. In this period, the City government was under threat, both from within and without; the challenges posed by crime, the threats to the City's economic position and to its government structures prompted responses at all levels of City politics. This is not to deny the existence of national partisanship in City politics in this era; but rather to assert that citizens exploited the opportunities of national partisan conflicts for their own ends.

In 1746, the unpopular Aldermanic veto was repealed, but the ward franchise and electoral practices of the City Elections Act were preserved. The provision for the survival of animated ward elections shows that these were an established and active political mechanism. Although Susan Brown has revealed the vital role of the Corporation at the end of the eighteenth century, further work is needed to uncover the role of Common Council and other civic elections during the rest of the century.⁸⁹ Scholars such as Marie Peters, Kathleen Wilson and Lucy Sutherland all describe a popular Patriot sentiment in the second half of the eighteenth century, which played to the interests of the

City tradesmen, who felt excluded from a national political system that mostly benefitted the landed classes.⁹⁰ Although couched in partisan and national political terms, their work does suggest a potential continuity from the groundswell of citizen political activism revealed here in the 1720s and 30s.

The idea that City representatives were accountable to their electors for their actions, the expression of this accountability in the popular press and an anti-corruption rhetoric potentially foreshadow three key features of John Wilkes's 1760s radicalism. Further research is needed to establish this connection, but it is notable that the concept of accountability of elected representatives was taken up by Wilkes and his allies in the 1760s, albeit in the context of making MPs and Ministers, rather than civic representatives, more accountable; the press was a crucial tool for Wilkes and the rhetoric of a fundamentally corrupt government continued to play a dominant role in emerging radical political opposition.⁹¹ These internal City and citizen-centric dialogues, rather than solely national political struggles, made important contributions to a lively and participatory popular political culture in the eighteenth-century metropolis.

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¹ Anon., *A Compleat Collection of all the Letters, Papers, Songs etc. that have been published on the opposition of the Present Common Council Men of Bishopsgate Ward* (1739), 44.

² N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); H. Horwitz, 'Party in a Civic Context: London from the Exclusion Crisis to the Fall of Walpole', in G.S. Holmes and C. Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party 1680-1750: essays presented to Geoffrey Holmes* (London: Hambleton, 1987).

³ See Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, and G.S. De Krey, *A Fractured Society: The Politics of London in the first Age of Party 1688-1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) for some examination of Common Council Elections.

⁴ It is important to recognise that the newspapers used in this article all had particular political standpoints. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine this further, but for discussion of these issues, see, for example, H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855* (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

⁵ 'Short Summary: Proto-Democracy', 6, <<http://www.londonelectoralhistory.com/PDF%27s/LEH-Basics/LEH-BASICS1.10SHORT-SUMMARY-PROTO-DEMOCRACY.pdf>> [accessed 19 May 2016]. The London Electoral History database provides the details of 595 recorded wardmote contests between 1700 and 1852; there were undoubtedly more for which records do not survive.

⁶ De Krey, *A Fractured Society*, 40.

⁷ Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 168.

⁸ The term 'freeman' refers to those who, through birth, apprenticeship or purchasing freedom of the City, were permitted to practise a trade or sell goods within the City, and were also entitled to vote in City elections. See I. Doolittle, *City of London Politics from Shaftesbury to Wilkes: Another Viewpoint* (Haslemere, 2010), 7-8.

- ⁹ I. Doolittle, 'The Government of the City of London, 1694-1767' (Unpublished DPhil Thesis, Oxford University, 1979), 6.
- ¹⁰ Doolittle, *City of London Politics*, 7. 'Liverymen' were generally the wealthier tradesmen.
- ¹¹ J. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London 1660-1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18.
- ¹² D. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, eds. by P.N. Furbank, W.R. Owens and A.J. Coulson (London: Folio Society, 2006), 181.
- ¹³ E. McKellar, *The Birth of Modern London: the Development and Design of the City 1660-1720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 14; I. Doolittle, *City of London Politics*, 7.
- ¹⁴ I. Doolittle, 'Walpole's City Elections Act (1725)', *English Historical Review*, 384 (1982), 504.
- ¹⁵ De Krey, *Fractured Society*, 41.
- ¹⁶ N. Rogers, 'The City Elections Act (1725) Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, 396 (1985), 607.
- ¹⁷ S.E. Brown, 'Politics, Commerce and Social Policy in the City of London, 1782-1802' (Unpublished DPhil Thesis, Oxford University, 1993).
- ¹⁸ J. Smart, *A Short Account of the several wards, precincts, parishes etc* (1741).
- ¹⁹ See Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*, 194.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-51.
- ²¹ See J. Phipps, *The Vestry Laid Open* (1739), which is an attack on Select Vestries.
- ²² Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 145.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ²⁴ De Krey, *Fractured Society*, 172. See also G. S. De Krey, *London and the Restoration, 1659-1683* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ²⁵ M. Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England', in T. Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 155, who argues that the relatively high proportion of citizens involved in local office-holding meant that every citizen was engaged actively in the process of government; see also H.R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ²⁶ Quoted in Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic', 162.
- ²⁷ De Krey, *Fractured Society*, 172.
- ²⁸ Smart, *Short Account*, 9; J. Strype, *Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster* (1720), vol. I, Book III, 66.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, II, 107.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 108-9.
- ³² Smart, *Short Account*, 24.
- ³³ Strype, *Survey*, I, II, 163.
- ³⁴ Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 147.
- ³⁵ London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), COL/AD/04/030, COL/AD/04/032, COL/AD/04/033, COL/AD/04/034 (Ward Presentments for Bishopsgate and Bassishaw in 1732-3, 1736-7, 1738-9 and 1740-1). Curiously, Langbourn ward very rarely raised complaints in ward presentments.
- ³⁶ Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*, 1; LMA, COL/AD/05/002 (Summaries of Ward Presentments, 1680-1845), see Bassishaw 1726; LMA, COL/AD/04/030 (Ward Presentments for Bishopsgate, 1732-3) where there was a 'disorderly house' with 'night walkers'.
- ³⁷ LMA, P69/BOT4/B/004/MS04527A ('The case of the inhabitants of Bishopsgate parish, London, in relation to the select vestry there').
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ LMA, P69/BOT4/B/001/MS04526/003 (St Botolph without Bishopsgate Vestry Minutes, 1725-33 and 1740-54).
- ⁴⁰ *A Compleat Collection*, 21-30.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁴² The wardmote minutes for Langbourn in this period do not survive.
- ⁴³ Smart, *Short Account*, 24.
- ⁴⁴ LMA, P69/DIO/B/001/MS04216/003 (St Dionis Backchurch Vestry Minutes, 1712-59).
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 27 Jan. 1739.
- ⁴⁷ *Daily Gazetteer*, 24 Dec. 1737 describes a 'List of Ten' running against a 'List of Five'; in *Read's Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 27 Jan. 1739, the 'Ward's List', which corresponds with the 1737 'List of Five', also contains three sitting Councilmen who previously ran on the 'List of Ten'.

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- ⁴⁸ Doolittle, 'The Government of the City', 261.
- ⁴⁹ R. Sedgwick, ed., *The House of Commons, 1715-1754* (London: HMSO, 1970), vol. 1, 151 lists 31 London Aldermen who were MPs.
- ⁵⁰ A.P. Beaven, 'Chronological list of aldermen: 1701-1800', in *The Aldermen of the City of London Temp. Henry III - 1912* (London: Eden Fisher, 1908), vol. 2, 119-140.
- ⁵¹ *London Evening Post* (hereafter *LEP*), 21-23 Dec. 1736.
- ⁵² S. Matthews, 'Baker, William', in Sedgwick, ed., *The House of Commons*, vol. 2, 429.
- ⁵³ Doolittle, 'The Government of the City', 21.
- ⁵⁴ Anon., *A Guide to St Thomas's Day: Being an Address to the Electors of the Common-Council* (London, 1738), 23.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-26.
- ⁵⁶ Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*, 193.
- ⁵⁷ See, for example, the accounts of annual choices of Common Councilmen in LMA, CLC/W/GA/001/MS02506/001 (Bassishaw, Account of the Officers elected at the wardmotes, 1735-1821).
- ⁵⁸ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, 47.
- ⁵⁹ See, for example, *Daily Courant*, 22 Dec. 1729.
- ⁶⁰ LMA, CLC/W/GA/002 (Bassishaw wardmote inquest minute books, 1655-1842).
- ⁶¹ Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 63.
- ⁶² For example, *LEP*, 20-22 Dec. 1733.
- ⁶³ Doolittle, *City of London Politics*, 32. *London Daily Post*, 20 Dec. 1736 noted 'it being a general Rule in this City, that no Man is qualified for the Office of Common-Council-Man, who has not served or fined for all Ward Offices'.
- ⁶⁴ *LEP*, 21-23 Dec. 1733
- ⁶⁵ Beattie, *Policing and Punishment*, 194.
- ⁶⁶ *Grub Street Journal*, 27 Dec. 1733.
- ⁶⁷ *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 19 Dec. 1719.
- ⁶⁸ Anon., *The Art of Managing Popular Elections* (1724), 18.
- ⁶⁹ *Mist's Weekly Journal*, 25 Dec. 1725.
- ⁷⁰ *A Compleat Collection*, 27.
- ⁷¹ Anon., *City Corruption, And Mal-Administration Display'd* (1738), and the reply, Anon., *Scurrillity, and Defamation Corrected* (1739).
- ⁷² *A Compleat Collection*, 27; *City Corruption*, 10; LMA, COL/AD/04/030 (Bishopsgate ward presentment, 1733).
- ⁷³ *General Evening Post*, 6-8 June 1738.
- ⁷⁴ S. Jeffery, *The Mansion House* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1993), 50.
- ⁷⁵ For the Langbourn contest, see *Daily Post*, 28 Nov. 1738.
- ⁷⁶ *A Compleat Collection*, 7; *ibid.*, 19.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁷⁸ Anon., *The Reasons for and against the Seclusion of Sir G.C.* (1739), 48; see *Daily Post*, 22 Sept. 1739.
- ⁷⁹ *A Compleat Collection*, 5; Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 63.
- ⁸⁰ *LEP*, 19-21 Dec. 1734; *Daily Courant*, 23 Dec. 1734.
- ⁸¹ *A Compleat Collection*, 38.
- ⁸² *LEP*, 18-21 Dec. 1736, 20-22 Dec. 1737, 19-21 Dec. 1738.
- ⁸³ *A Compleat Collection*, 6.
- ⁸⁴ *LEP*, 20-22 Dec. 1739.
- ⁸⁵ See *LEP*, 2-4 Jan. 1739, which alleged that Eyles bribed voters; and *A Compleat Collection*, 31, where it was argued that Eyles encouraged the Lord Mayor to wrongly dismiss as illegal votes for his opponent, Richard Hoare, granting Eyles a slim majority in the election.
- ⁸⁶ *A Compleat Collection*, 38.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ *Daily Post*, 25 Dec. 1739.
- ⁸⁹ Brown, 'Politics, Commerce and Social Policy'.
- ⁹⁰ M. Peters, *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London Opinion during the Seven Years' War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); L. Sutherland, *Politics and Finance in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Hambleton Press, 1984), 52; K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1714-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ⁹¹ J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 16.

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