

Tackling the documents paper at AS

Using Statistical Sources: The 1841 Election

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A COLUMN OF FIGURES, A TABLE OR A GRAPH can make a question seem unnecessarily difficult and off-putting. In a history textbook we often ignore the statistical evidence and rely on the text. Like the illustrations a statistical table seems to be an irrelevance, put in by the author to fill a space, only worth a quick glance to pick out the significant point it might be illustrating. Statistical information can take many forms. Price and wage indices can tell the reader much about the standard of living during a period being studied, production figures reveal details about economic development and the health of the economy while electoral statistics can help us to test some of the assumptions made about the popularity of parties and the achievements of political leaders.

Examining boards have rarely used pictures, illustrations and statistical tables in the document and source-based questions they have set at Advanced Level. That does not mean that an analysis of such evidence is a wasteful exercise because under the new system of AS and A2 examinations the boards should be looking to set a wider variety of tasks.

The Sources

Here are four pieces of evidence about the 1841 general election and the decay of the Whig governments of the 1830s. They include a statistical analysis of the results of the 1841 general election, a contemporary comment on that election, one historian's perspective and a Whig politician's explanation of his government's failure. Study them carefully before looking at the questions that follow.

SOURCE A. A letter written by J.W. Croker to Sir Robert Peel 20 July 1841.

The elections are wonderful, and the curiosity is that all turns on the name of Sir Robert Peel. 'Tis the first time that I remember in our history that the people have chosen the Prime Minister for the Sovereign. Here every Conservative candidate professed himself in plain words to be Sir Robert Peel's man, and on that ground was elected.

SOURCE B. Adapted from *Aristocracy and People* by Norman Gash, published in 1979.

There was an urban as well as a rural conservatism, and it was here that Peel's leadership made its decisive contribution. [It was in large urban constituencies] that the shift of public opinion could most clearly be discerned. Peel's reputation had been built up more as a national than as a party leader. He had made no promises; he had entered into few commitments. There was no second Tamworth Manifesto.

SOURCE C. The 1841 election statistics.
The election result

| | England | Wales | Scotland | Ireland | Total |
|------------------|---------|-------|----------|---------|-------|
| Conservatives | 283 | 21 | 22 | 43 | 367 |
| Whigs and allies | 190 | 8 | 31 | 62 | 291 |
| Total | 471 | 29 | 53 | 105 | 658 |

Different types of seats in England won by each party

| | Borough and university seats | County seats | Large borough seats (more than 2,000 voters) | Medium borough seats (1,000 to 2,000 voters) | Small borough seats (fewer than 1,000 voters) |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--|--|---|
| Conservatives | 157 | 124 | 15 | 29 | 109 |
| Whigs and allies | 170 | 20 | 43 | 34 | 93 |

SOURCE D. Lord Campbell held a junior post during the last years of Lord Melbourne's Whig ministry. Here is part of his assessment of what went wrong.

I begin with the extravagant expectations which the masses fostered of the benefits to be derived from the Reform Bill. Deep disappointment was felt, much discontent was created. The people were taught to believe that very little had been done for them. A serious detriment to them [the Whigs] likewise arose from Sir Robert Peel's moderation, and his giving a new name to his party.

Analysing the statistics

The election statistics give one very obvious piece of information - the Conservatives had a majority of 76 seats over the Whigs and their allies. They can provide you with much more information, and with points that challenge the interpretation of the election in Source B. The Conservatives were the party of England. The Whigs had a clear majority of Welsh, Scottish and Irish seats (101 to 86 for the Conservatives). The Conservatives won 93 more seats than the Whigs in England. The figures can tell us what kind of seats the Conservatives were winning in England. Look at the English county seats. What has happened to the Whigs in these rural constituencies? Why was agricultural England voting, where there were contests, for the Conservatives? It might have something to do with the Whig election promise to modify the Corn Laws. The Conservatives were the party of protection and Peel remained very quiet

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