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Political and Institutional Development in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the political and institutional development of England from the Magna Carta to the Glorious Revolution. I argue that institutional change in this period is best understood through the lens of coalition formation. Political elites had heterogeneous preferences over first two, and then three, recurring axes of disagreement: constitutional prerogatives, foreign policy, and after the Reformation, religion. Institutional change occurred when shocks caused coalitions to form, fracture, and realign. I discuss three episodes. First, due to defeat in France, a baronial coalition was able to check the power of the king through the Magna Carta. Second, the Reformation introduced religion as a new axis of conflict, ultimately giving rise to organized political parties during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–1681. Third, the Glorious Revolution succeeded when James II's pro-Catholic policies shattered the Tory coalition that had sustained the late Stuart monarchy. Using data on 750 Exclusion Crisis MPs, I document the structure of these political alignments empirically, and discuss how the defection of Tory elites was decisive in 1688.

JEL Classification: N00, N13, C72, C78, D74, N43

1 | Introduction

Britain was the first country to industrialize and, although it was not the first country to democratize, its Parliament is rightly remembered as the parent of modern constitutional government. These twin achievements have, of course, been much celebrated and intensely scrutinized by skeptics. Nonetheless, in this article I will argue that important aspects of Britain's political development have been missed in the scholarship in economic history and political economy and that newly available data can be brought to bear on important remaining puzzles.

As Broadberry et al. (2015) establish, sustained economic growth in Britain began in the 17th century.[1] The origins of institutions capable of constraining the monarch such as Parliament go back to the Middle Ages. Similar developments took place elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless, as Henriques et al. (2026) argue, England by the 18th century was the only European country which combined high state capacity with strong constraints on the executive.

This paper builds on an argument that I have been developing jointly with Desiree Desierto and other coauthors that revisits many classic questions in England's economic and political history from the Magna Carta, through the Reformation, culminating in the Glorious Revolution.[2]

My argument is that historical political economy needs to be anchored in the study of individual elites. Pre-modern government was oligarchic, and elites had heterogeneous preferences over ideology, material interest, and religion. They had to form coalitions to affect policy. Institutional change often took the form of discrete events—the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution—but these political storms can only be understood by tracing the shifting alignments that preceded them.

This draws on joint work with Desiree Desierto. This paper benefited from comments from the faculty at the Arthur Lewis Lab at the University of Manchester. I acknowledge the use of Claude Code for help with data visualization, coding and copy-editing. I am responsible for all writing and empirical analysis.

Adam Smith described three preconditions for prosperity: "peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice" (Smith 1763). But achieving "peace" in a large-scale society was a difficult task. It required the support of a powerful enough ruling coalition. Disorder occurred when the policies of the king clashed with those of powerful elites, or when those elites were themselves divided over key issues of policy such that no stable coalition was viable.

In the Middle Ages, there were two issues over which elites and the Crown frequently clashed: first, what we would call foreign policy, and which usually involved obligations to defend the Crown's claims in France; second, the constitutional prerogative of the Crown. These prerogatives were not clearly defined because elites wanted a strong King when that king's preferences aligned with their own. But the power of the King became a problem when these preferences diverged from those of powerful elites in the realm. The Magna Carta was an agreement that bounded these royal powers. It did not itself end conflicts between the King and his lords but it set limits over what the King could do to his subjects. Nonetheless, its relevance appeared to be in decline by the 16th century, as the independent military power of the feudal lords waned.

The Reformation disrupted this trend and brought about renewed political crisis because it introduced a new issue over which elites and rulers disagreed: as well as different preferences over foreign policy and the power of the Crown, religious preferences now took center stage. Tudor and Stuart attempts to enforce religious conformity were to no avail and these pronged disagreements (made worse by the reestablishment of royal control over Ireland and the Union with Scotland) brought repeated political crises in the 17th century. The Civil War, the Exclusion Crisis, and the Glorious Revolution were all fought over these issues. In this paper, I draw on a dataset of 750 MPs present in the Restoration Parliament, collected from the *History of Parliament* website, to examine how elite coalitions formed and broke apart over these three issues.[3] The achievement of the Glorious Revolution and the post-1702 Settlement therefore was less to secure property rights, as North and Weingast (1989) contended, but rather the establishment of a solid coalition of elites that had relatively settled views on all three issues (the differences between the Whigs and most Tories were, in this respect, minor). This settlement provided for the relative domestic peace and stability that Smith saw as a precondition for prosperity.

2 | Institutional Accounts of British Institutional Development

Economic historians and political scientists have long had a canonical story for the emergence of a constitutional monarchy in England. This story centers on North and Weingast's (1989) account of the Glorious Revolution. North and Weingast (1989) argued that property rights were insecure under the Stuarts and that, as a result the crown, was unable to borrow substantial sums. The Glorious Revolution entailed a commitment to secure property rights which concomitantly transformed the state's ability to access financial resources.

The canonicity of 1688 for institutional change in England was reinforced as North and Weingast's argument became folded into the broader account of how institutions drive development made famous by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012).[4]

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argued that the Glorious Revolution created the world's first inclusive political institutions, accelerating political centralization and pluralism. In their account, the post-Revolutionary government adopted economic institutions that enforced property rights—including patents—and provided incentives for investment, trade, and innovation (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 102–103).

Of course, this account was criticized by economic historians since its inception. Clark (1996) contested it by providing evidence that the return on land remained stable through 17th century England. Returns on farmland and land prices were unaffected by the political turmoils of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution in contrast to rents in Zealand which did fluctuate in wartime. Scholars have pointed out that improvements in access to credit in some cases predated the Glorious Revolution (O'Brien 2001; Johnson and Koyama 2014) and in other cases took several decades to come into effect (Stasavage 2002; Sussman and Yafeh 2006).

While the Glorious Revolution has often been seen as textbook case of institutional change, more recently economists in this tradition have also challenged its importance for both economic growth and constitutional development, particularly Murrell (2017) and Hodgson (2017). The thrust of these criticisms has been to emphasize more gradual institutional change, with important fiscal developments taking place in the Civil War and Commonwealth period (O'Brien 2011) and important constitutional developments taking decades to resolve.

Similarly, scholars have criticized the characterization of the Spanish monarchy as unconstrained. The Spanish Hapsburgs ruled "composite monarchies" and, whereas they had considerable powers in Castile, their abilities to raise taxes or implement reforms were limited in Aragon (Grafe 2012).[5] Rather than being "absolute" or "unconstrained" from their inception, Henriques and Palma (2023) document a gradual decline in checks on the executive and overall institutional quality in Iberia. It was sometime in the mid-17th century that discernible differences in institutions can be found in Spain compared to England.

3 | Magna Carta and the Origins of Parliament

First, we need to lay out the medieval foundations for the subsequent development of constitutional government in England.[6] We need to appreciate several features of Western Europe's distinctly feudal political economy to fully understand the rise of Parliament in the 17th century.

The context for understanding the origins of parliaments is feudalism. The aspect of feudalism that matters for us is that it entailed military decentralization. Feudal rulers lacked a monopoly over legitimate violence and relied on their nobility to provide men in times of war (Desierto and Koyama 2025).

Furthermore, this meant that they could rebel against the king if he behaved tyrannically (see Desierto and Koyama 2026a).[7]

In most societies, rebellion against the ruler was treated as the ultimate crime. Yet during the High Middle Ages (c. 1000–1300 CE), feudal custom recognized a qualified right of rebellion: a lord could formally withdraw his loyalty through the diffidatio without being guilty of treason, because feudal vassalage was a bilateral, contractual bond. No English earl was executed for open rebellion between 1076 and 1306. As Desierto and Koyama (2026a) argue, this right of rebellion was the mechanism that undergirded the political bargains sustaining feudal order. The credible threat of withdrawal constrained royal abuses of power and made monarchical rule "self-limiting." Crucially, rebel barons could later be reconciled with the king and reintegrated into the ruling coalition, avoiding the destructive cycles of purges characteristic of more autocratic regimes. Medieval rebellions, such as the one that produced Magna Carta in 1215, thus aimed not to overthrow the king but to compel him to honor his obligations.

King John was an abusive king. Two issues were key: (i) John exploited England and English lords in order to recover his French possessions; (ii) his arbitrary taxes and treatment of his barons. These clearly map onto the two dimensions I discussed in the introduction: foreign policy and constitutional constraints.

Consider property rights over land. Nominally, after the Conquest, the king was the owner of all land in the country. Other landowners, including the great noble families held property as feudal tenure from him. By around 1100, these land holdings had become hereditary (J. C. Holt 1972). But the rights that lords possessed remained contingent. If a lord died without an adult male heir control of the land, including usage rights, and of the heir would pass to the king in the form of a wardship. Feudal rights, such as these, traditionally used by rulers to cement alliances within the ruling coalition, were exploited by John for short-term profit.

As J. Holt (1992, 196) observed, in some respects, John's actions resembled those of his predecessors: "he was doing nothing more than grant privileges, exercise justice, take reliefs for the succession to estates, arrange marriages; doing all those things which were attributes of feudal lordship". But from another perspective, the intensity and violence of his actions were seen as particularly egregious through his use of imprisonment, hostage taking, pledging of land, and "by financial pressures which subjected a man to burdens near or beyond his powers of repayment and threatened his estate and patrimony".

John was driven to do this in order to reconquer Normandy. He was successful in putting together an impressive and expensive coalition against the French King. Unfortunately, for him, this tremendous effort came to naught as his army was crushed at the Battle of Bouvines (1214), one of the few battles in history with a legitimate claim to having been "decisive". On his return to England, John faced a challenge from a coalition of dissatisfied barons.[8]

Many individual barons had reason to oppose King John, but no single baron had an incentive to rebel alone. The solution to this collective action problem was the formation of a coalition. Barons who were interconnected through family networks could coordinate their opposition, and as the coalition grew it became attractive for more marginal barons to join.

Together with Desiree Desierto and Jacob Hall, we model how external shocks can trigger the formation of rebel baronial coalitions. These rebels can propose institutional reforms—such as Magna Carta—that constrain the king's extractive capacity and establish equal rights among barons (Desierto et a. 2023). The king can accept or reject the proposal. The victorious party subsequently implements their preferred institutional arrangement. Agreements like Magna Carta emerge as equilibrium outcomes as optimal contracts between violence-capable parties. Such agreements are most likely when the king is highly extractive, when barons possess non-appropriable resources that can be easily withdrawn from the royal coalition, and when resource distribution among barons is egalitarian.

Central to these findings is a key result proposing that individual barons are more likely to join rebel coalitions when the coalition's total non-appropriable resources are substantial. Desierto et al. (2023) test this lemma empirically. They construct a comprehensive dataset encompassing all English barons in the early 13th century, including their family networks and baronial holdings. Since the relevant resources are those that barons can reclaim upon rebellion, the authors use defensibility as a proxy for non-appropriability, specifically counting castles held by rebel coalition members to measure the coalition's non-appropriable resources. This measure should positively predict individual baron participation in the rebel coalition.

The empirical results confirm our prediction: the number of castles held by rebels within a baron's family network positively correlates with that baron's decision to join the coalition against King John.

Magna Carta laid the foundations for the subsequent meetings of Parliament. Historians have disputed the precise dating of the first parliament but Baker (2017) makes a strong case for the assembly of 1225 as the first parliament "of some sort".

The Magna Carta was not unique. Other countries saw similar developments, notably in Spain and Hungary. Parliaments proliferated in 13th century Europe as documented by Van Zanden et al. (2012). Parliament grew in importance during the 14th century, particularly during the Hundred Years War (1337–1453).

When the monarchy required revenue—particularly during military campaigns—Parliament served as both a funding mechanism and a forum for voicing grievances against royal policies. However, this institutional check had significant limitations: kings could govern for extended periods without convening Parliament, leaving armed rebellion as the only recourse for addressing royal misconduct. Nonetheless, throughout the late medieval period, baronial revolt was the most immediate threat that a king could face. While the "noble bridle" was designed to constrain monarchical abuses, it was not originally conceived as a justification for deposing rulers or initiating civil wars. The late Middle Ages witnessed an increase in such conflicts. Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III were all deposed violently.

The English nobility underwent dramatic changes between the 13th and 15th centuries. The number of lords and barons contracted significantly, while a small cohort of "super magnates" accumulated unprecedented wealth and influence. This consolidation of noble power proved unsustainable when civil warfare erupted in the late 15th century, decimating large portions of the aristocracy.[9] These recurring conflicts created the conditions for the Tudor dynasty to establish a fundamentally different system of governance.

The new Tudor regime reshaped England's political structure. First, they reduced the power of the great nobility, particularly their capacity to maintain independent armies that could challenge royal authority. Second, the monarchy increasingly relied on the House of Commons as a source of both legitimacy and revenue, shifting away from dependence on aristocratic support. Third, government became more sedentary and bureaucratized, with administrative functions increasingly centralized at Westminster rather than following an itinerant court (see Hall 2024).

This Tudor Revolution coincided with—and indeed facilitated—a broader social transformation. As the traditional high nobility's influence waned, a new class of landowners known as the gentry gained prominence and political influence. This group, positioned between the great magnates and common farmers, became increasingly important in local governance and national politics.

The trajectory of these political developments remains unclear because they were soon overshadowed by the religious upheaval that engulfed Europe after 1500. The Protestant Reformation introduced an entirely new dimension to early modern political economy: systematic religious conflict. This religious discord would ultimately undermine the ability of both Tudor and Stuart monarchs to construct a centralized monarchy that the institutional reforms of the early Tudor period had seemed to promise.

4 | The Reformation

Following the Wars of the Roses, Henry VII successfully pursued a strategy of weakening the power of the aristocracy. He was aided in this by many factors. The traditional nobility had decimated themselves in battle. Few ancient families were intact. Changes in military technology, particularly developments in artillery and gunpowder weapons, meant that baronial castles had become irrelevances and it was increasingly difficult for feudal magnates to maintain their own private armies.

Greif and Rubin (2024) emphasize the role played by Parliament in legitimizing the change in religion. This was undoubtedly important. Together with Desiree Desierto and Marcus How, however, we demonstrate the importance of simple material incentives: the availability of monastic lands, initially distributed to royal favorites and then placed on the open market provided a clear reason to favor religious reformation (Desierto et al. 2024).

According to Elton (1953) this was the basis of a "Tudor Revolution" in government that took place in the 1530s under the guidance of Thomas Cromwell. Recent scholarship tends to downplay the revolutionary nature of these changes (Coby 2009). It is instead emphasized that the late medieval English state was already capable of administering the realm and intervening effectively in local affairs. Nonetheless, the 1530s did see major changes in the English state.

Dissolving the monasteries, for example, was the most revolutionary policy that had been pursued in England since the Norman Conquest. Cromwell's plan for former monastic lands appears to have been to strengthen the financial position of the Crown. However, fiscal problems meant that most of the land was sold with the peak of sales in 1542–1544 (Woodward 1966). As Desierto, Shera, and myself argue, however, this had the unintended consequence of creating a large vested interest in maintaining the Church of England and impeding any return to Rome.

Following Henry VIII's death and the short reign of Edward VI, Mary faced this problem squarely. She wanted to return to Rome but the monasteries had been dissolved: "all had become with equally good legal title the property of the Crown, and parts of almost every estate had, by a rapid process of fragmentation, devolved by equally strong title into the hands of innumerable lay owners, great and small" (Knowles 1959, 422). She could not retake these lands back for the Catholic church without violating existing property rights.

Parliamentary debate on religion was thus overshadowed by anxiety about the future of former ecclesiastical property (Loach 1986, 177).[10] Indeed, while Mary and her leading advisor and Archbishop of Canterbury Reginald Pole, sought and eventually obtained a Papal guarantee that former monastic lands were secure, these promises were seen as lacking credibility. The owners of monastic lands feared that their property rights depended on the whim of a foreign Pope (Pogson 1975).

Desierto, Shera, and myself provide econometric evidence that opposition to Mary's policy of recatholicization was stronger where there had previously been more monastic lands. Furthermore, when heresy trials were resumed against English Protestants, areas that had more monastic lands saw fewer executions conditional on proxies for underlying Protestant religious belief.

Religious policy was now an additional dimension over which the preferences of elites could differ. While domestic political conflict prior to the Reformation evolved along two major axes: constitutional and fiscal, following the Reformation, however, there would be at least three important axes of disagreement as religious conflict became central. In an environment where religious pluralism and freedom were not feasible (see Johnson and Koyama 2019; Koyama 2020), religious conflict was perceived in zero-sum terms.

5 | The Early Stuarts and the Civil War

The challenges posed by the emergence of religion as a new axis of possible disagreement were greatly exacerbated by the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England in 1603 as this created a composite monarchy that proved difficult to govern.[11]

The Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 had been intended as a compromise capable of drawing in most adherents of traditional Christianity (i.e., many or even most Catholics in the medium to long-run) as well as satisfying the demands of ardent Calvinist Reformers (see McGrath 1967). For several decades this appeared to be relatively successful, but by the early 17th century the dissatisfaction of the more Calvinist Protestants with the Church of England was all too apparent. The problem was all the more apparent once Scotland joined England and Ireland in a union of crowns as the population of Scotland had undergone a Calvinist reformation, under John Knox. A key tenet of what became known as Presbyterianism was the rejection of bishops and the ceremony of Anglicanism.

While James was a skillful politician who avoided foreign policy entanglements, the same could not be said of his son, Charles I (r. 1625–1649) who alienated Parliament soon after coming to power with failed interventions in the French Wars of Religion.

The crisis that engulfed Charles from the late 1630s onwards largely operated along the three post-Reformation axes enumerated above. There was a religious conflict over the content of the state religion: whether it should retain or strengthen traditional elements such as the episcopacy or move further along the road toward a full Reformation along Calvinist lines. There was a constitutional conflict as more absolutist interpretations of the royal prerogative clashed with those who saw in the Common Law sharp limitations on royal power. This conflict also involved disagreement over economic policy as James and Charles frequently clashed with Parliament over the rights to raise taxes or to intervene with trade and economic regulation. Foreign policy concerns remained active as Protestants wished England to ally itself with the Dutch Republic against the Catholic Hapsburgs.

Charles's inability to force his preferred religious settlement on Scotland forced him to recall Parliament. This Parliament sought to reset royal policy and to purge the advisors blamed for the mistakes and oppression of Charles's decade of personal rule.

The Long Parliament called in 1642 saw the emergence of distinct Parliamentary factions. These factions radicalized during the subsequent English Civil War. During the Civil War, the Parliament side fragmented into a Presbyterian faction and an Independent Faction. The former wanted a compulsory Calvinist Church along Scottish lines; the latter favored religious toleration among Protestants. The Civil War failed to resolve the outstanding constitutional issues. After 1653 Cromwell ruled as a de facto monarch and at his death there was no-one who could fill his role, certainly not his eldest son, Richard. The throne reverted almost by default to Charles II in 1660.

But crucial questions remained unresolved: the precise relationship between Crown and Parliament, the extent of religious toleration, and the direction of foreign policy. Despite Charles II's personal preference for religious peace, persecution of nonconformists resumed under the Clarendon Code (Johnson and Koyama 2019). The stage was set for the next crisis.

6 | The Exclusion Crisis and the Birth of Parties

6.1 | Court and Country Factions

By the early 1670s distinct factions had emerged in Parliament. The "Court" faction comprised MPs who were generally supportive of the King, though members could oppose specific royal policies. Its members were rewarded by offices and other rents from the monarch. By the mid-1670s, the leader of the Court faction was Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby. Danby led the Anglican grouping that was loyal to the Crown and to the religious establishment. The Court faction was opposed to religious toleration for either dissenting Protestants or for Catholics.

Those MPs who did not belong to the Court faction were often referred to as the "Country" MPs. These were the MPs on the outside who were not beneficiaries of patronage from the Crown and were generally opposed to some aspect of royal policy. Neither faction was a political party. Country MPs did not necessarily share common views on topics such as religious toleration, economic policy, or foreign policy.

6.2 | The Problem of Succession

The next constitutional crisis of the Stuart monarchy arose because Charles II did not produce a legitimate male heir. By the late 1660s, it seemed likely that no offspring would be forthcoming from his marriage to Catherine of Braganza. This left as Charles's heir his brother James, Duke of York. By the early 1670s knowledge of James's conversion to Catholicism had become public. This raised the possibility of a Catholic King of England for the first time since the reign of Mary I—a prospect that alarmed many.

Parliament's first response was to pass the Test Act of 1673, requiring officeholders to disavow belief in transubstantiation. James in response resigned his position as Lord Admiral. But the problem did not go away. James's second marriage to the Catholic Mary of Modena in 1673 raised the possibility of a Catholic male heir and cemented the perceived threat to England's religious settlement.

As Horwitz (1977, 1) noted, none "of these oft-remarked deficiencies of the Restoration arrangements might have seemed subsequently so momentous had it not been for the political inclinations and religious preferences of Charles II and of his brother James". In other words, it was specifically the Duke of York's adherence to Rome—and thus in the eyes of Protestants, to a foreign prince—that undermined the Restoration settlement.

6.3 | The Popish Plot

Tensions over foreign policy and the succession were already in the air before the revelations of Titus Oates in October and November of 1678. Oates had constructed an elaborate conspiracy theory about a Jesuit plot to assassinate Charles II and to

facilitate a Catholic takeover. While Oates was initially dismissed, his claims were seemingly confirmed when the justice of the peace investigating them, Sir Edmund Godfrey, died in mysterious circumstances, and when James's private secretary Edward Coleman was found with incriminating papers.[12]

The Popish plot reactivated anti-Catholic sentiments. It provided momentum for attempts to permanently exclude James from the line of succession. Crucially, it provided common ground for Anglicans and dissenters. Prior legislation aimed at Catholics such as the Test Acts had also harmed dissenting Protestants, preventing the formation of a coherent anti-Catholic coalition (Kishansky 1996). The Popish Plot changed this calculus. It also spoke to reawakened fears about the security of the former monastic lands. When he spoke to Parliament Titus Oates specifically warned that: "For our Souls, we are Heretics, they will burn us, and damn us. For our Estates, they will take our lands, and put Monks and Fryars upon them" (Grey 1769).

6.4 | Shaftesbury and the Formation of the Whig Party

To study how this constitutional crisis ultimately led to institutional change in the form of the Glorious Revolution we need to study the composition of the political elites who mattered in late 17th century England. To do this we study the positions and policy stances of MPs.[13]

The first development we need to study is the formation of early political parties in the 1670s out of what had previously been more fluid factions.[14]

Jones (1961) detailed how a disparate group of individuals who opposed the policies of Charles II and feared the ascension of James II came together to form a political party. These individuals included those who were opposed to the religious policies of the Crown—typically committed to some form of Presbyterianism. Others had been excluded from the rents associated with political office and from royal favor—these were termed the "county opposition". Others were associated with Charles's bastard son the Duke of Monmouth, seen as the most plausible alternative to James. Still others, who would become "radical whigs" wanted to limit the power of the crown and were committed to some form of republicanism.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, seized on the Popish Plot to first force from power his rival Danby. He then turned his attention to the issue of succession and specifically the policy of excluding James from the line of succession. This issue unified opponents of the regime into a party that gradually acquired the name "Whigs".

These parties were not simply elite groupings. While not directly comparable with modern parties, they were in many respects mass mobilization parties that extended their reach deep into society. For Harris (2014, 14): "it was not just the political elite at the center who became polarized along Whig-Tory lines; party rivalry can also be detected at the local level, in the shires and corporations, among the electorate, and even among the "crowd", at the level of street politics".

Dimitruk (2021) uses Parliamentary lists to find evidence for greater cohesion for the court majority over the course of the period between 1660–1690. Nonetheless, the majority of MPs were not explicitly aligned with either party and this remained the case throughout the 1680s.

The Whigs were united by their opposition to James as heir. But they did not specify who the heir should be. They also did not attempt to limit the powers of a future monarch (Western 1972). In other words, Whig policy was focused on what they saw as a conservative policy: preserving the lawful dynasty by sacrificing one member of it.

Examining what was being debated during the Exclusion Crisis, Scott (1991) finds that it was about "popery and arbitrary government"—the same pair of threats that had driven the crisis of 1640–1642 and would drive the crisis of 1687–1689. In Scott's reading, the Restoration crisis was the second of three structurally similar crises that punctuated the seventeenth century, each triggered by the perception that the Protestant religion and the institution of Parliament were under coordinated assault.[15]

The centrality of Exclusion to the emerging party divide is confirmed by the data. Figure 1 uses Shaftesbury's contemporary classification of MPs as "worthy" (supportive of Exclusion) or "base" (opposed) to predict later party identity. Among the 261 MPs Shaftesbury marked as "worthy," a substantial share were subsequently classified as Whigs, while very few became Tories. Conversely, among the 186 MPs he marked as "base," Tories predominated and Whigs were rare. Shaftesbury's list was not a measure of court versus country faction—it was an operative assessment of who could be counted on to support the Exclusion Bill. That this assessment so strongly predicts the emerging Whig–Tory division confirms that Exclusion was the defining issue around which partisan identities crystallized.

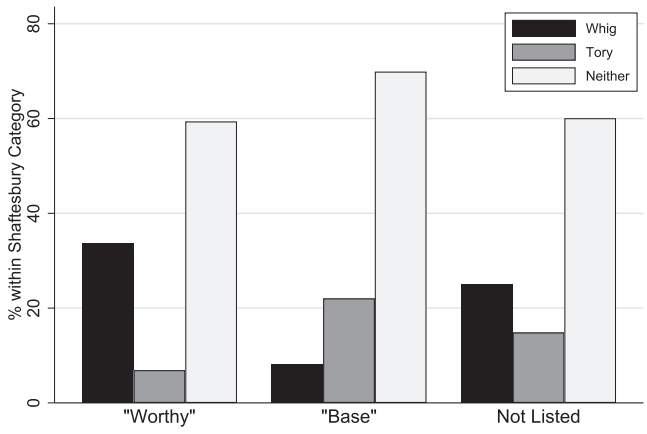

FIGURE 1 | Shaftesbury's classification of MPs as "worthy" (pro-exclusion) or "base" (anti-exclusion) predicts subsequent party identity. MPs shaftesbury expected to support Exclusion disproportionately became Whigs; those he expected to oppose it became Tories ($n = 750$). *Data Source: History of Parliament*, 1660–1690.

6.5 | The Structure of Political Alignments

How coherent was the political structure of the Exclusion Crisis? Were MPs' positions on religion, foreign policy, and constitutional questions independently determined, or did they cluster into recognizable ideological packages? To address these questions, I draw on the dataset of 750 Exclusion Crisis MPs handed coded across more than 20 political variables from the qualitative biographies on the *History of Parliament* website.[16]

Figure 2 presents a correlation matrix across key political variables. Several patterns stand out. The strongest correlations link party identity to constitutional positions: Whig affiliation correlates at $r = +0.48$ with support for abdication and vacancy, and at $r = +0.40$ with voting for the Exclusion Bill. Tory affiliation shows the mirror image ($r = -0.39$ and $r = -0.27$ respectively). Anti-Catholic activity correlates strongly with engagement in the Popish Plot ($r = +0.45$), confirming that these were part of a single mobilization. And anti-French foreign policy positions are linked to Popish Plot activism ($r = +0.34$), suggesting that hostility to France and concern about Catholic conspiracy were elements of a coherent worldview.

These correlations likely *understate* the true strength of political alignments, since roughly a quarter of MPs left too little trace in the sources to be coded on multiple variables. When analysis is restricted to the better-documented majority, the party-constitutional correlations strengthen to $r \approx \pm 0.50$.

To examine the dimensionality of this political space more formally, I apply factor analysis to the full set of political variables. A three-factor model identifies the following structure. The first factor captures *religious identity*: the Anglican/Dissenter divide, with high loadings on Anglican (-0.90), Puritan ($+0.66$), and Presbyterian ($+0.61$). The second factor captures what might be called the *opposition program*: anti-French foreign policy ($+0.71$, $+0.80$) fused with constitutional activism on habeas corpus ($+0.54$) and opposition to a standing army ($+0.46$). The third factor isolates the *Exclusion question* itself: the abdication and vacancy position ($+0.60$) and the Exclusion Bill vote ($+0.51$), intertwined with positions on toleration and the Test Acts.

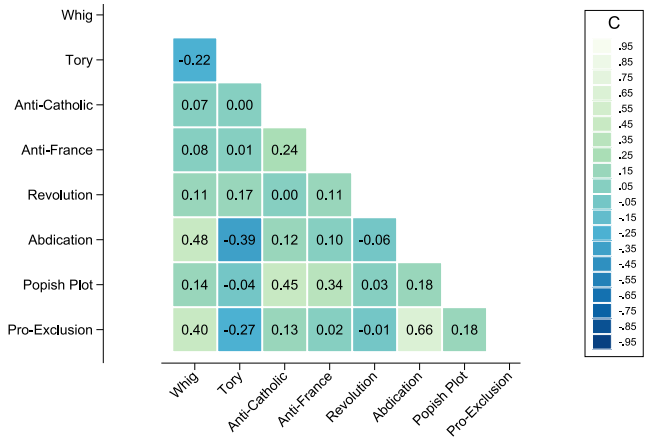

FIGURE 2 | Correlation matrix of key political variables for exclusion crisis MPs ($n = 750$). The strongest correlations link party identity to constitutional positions (whig/abdication, tory/abdication) and anti-catholic activity to popish Plot engagement. *Data Source: History of Parliament*, 1660–1690.

Figure 3 plots MPs in the space defined by the first two factors, with party affiliation indicated. Whigs and Tories separate visibly in this ideological space. The separation is driven primarily by the constitutional and opposition-programme dimensions rather than by religious identity alone. This is consistent with the historical interpretation that what distinguished the parties was not simply religious affiliation—most MPs on both sides were Anglicans—but rather their stance on the constitutional implications of a Catholic succession.

These patterns point to a structured political landscape during the Exclusion Crisis. Far from being a fluid or chaotic period, parliamentary politics in 1679–1681 were organized around identifiable axes: party identity, constitutional stance, and anti-Catholic mobilization formed a reinforcing cluster. The emergence of the Whig party represented not merely an organizational innovation but the crystallization of a coherent ideological package that linked anti-Catholicism, opposition to France, and constitutional activism into a single platform.

These divisions would be critical in the political crisis that would culminate in the Glorious Revolution.

7 | The Glorious Revolution

The Glorious Revolution is one of the most studied events in British political and economic history. But social scientists have focused on its consequences rather than its causes.

Insofar as the causes of the Glorious Revolution are discussed, it is in terms of the constitutional conflict between the king and Parliament (North and Weingast 1989; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). What is missing is the role of religion. As one historian notes: "The later Stuarts might well have succeeded in their bid for absolute power if it had not been associated with Catholicism." (Speck 1988, 166).

James II succeeded to the throne in February 1685 in a strong position. The Tories, who had rallied to defend the hereditary succession during the Exclusion Crisis, dominated Parliament. Monmouth's rebellion in the summer of 1685 was easily crushed. Yet within 3 years James had lost his throne.[17]

James's downfall stemmed from attempts to change his ruling coalition. Abandoning the Tories and the Anglican establishment that had supported his succession, he pursued religious toleration for Catholics. His Declaration of Indulgence (1687) suspended the penal laws against both Catholics and Protestant dissenters. While this policy appears enlightened to modern eyes, it was seen by contemporaries as a stalking horse for Catholic absolutism on the French model.

There was concern about the security of property rights under James II. But it was not a general concern that established property rights were at risk. As critics of the North-Weingast

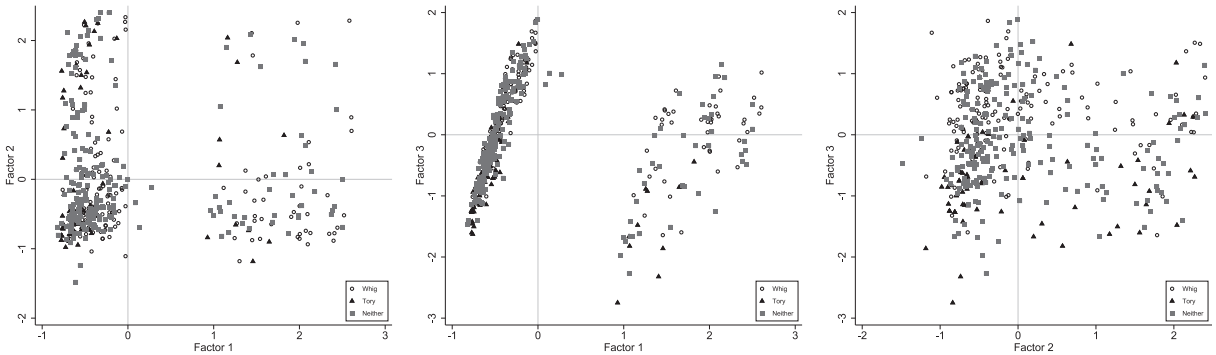

FIGURE 3 | Factor analysis of 20 ideological variables for politically active exclusion crisis MPs (activity score ≥ 3; $n = 449$). Three factors are extracted: Factor 1 captures religious and anti-Catholic activism, Factor 2 captures constitutional and opposition-programme positions, and Factor 3 captures foreign-policy orientation. Each panel plots MPs in the space defined by a pair of factors, with party affiliation indicated by marker shape (hollow circles = whig, filled triangles = tory, gray squares = neither). The left panel (factor 1 vs. factor 2) shows the clearest partisan separation: whigs cluster in the upper-right quadrant (high on both religious activism and constitutional opposition), while Tories occupy the lower-left. *Data Source: History of Parliament*, 1660–1690.

thesis have maintained, general rights over landownership had been secure in England since the 13th century (e.g., Clark 1996). Rather specific property rights were at issue. The issue of former monastic lands was reactivated during the Exclusion Crisis. As discussed in Desierto et al. (2024), James commissioned and closely supervised a book by Nathan Johnson to reassure landowners that former abbey lands were legally secure, but the very need for such a publication underscored how fragile confidence had become (Sowerby 2013, 39). Similarly, James's policy of ejecting the fellows of Magdalen College Oxford (and of permitting an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism to retain his salary) were perceived as violations of long-established property rights.[18]

These policies in combination with his expansion of the standing army from approximately 9000 men under Charles II to over 30,000 by November 1688 and the appointment of Catholics to military and civil offices in violation of the Test Acts undermined the Anglican Tory support that had sustained Charles II during the Exclusion Crisis. James instead sought to pack Parliament and local government with his supporters and to build a new coalition of elites that was based on radical dissenting Protestants as well as Catholics (Sowerby 2013).

The fracturing of James's coalition can be documented using our data on MPs who sat in both the Exclusion Crisis parliaments and the 1685 Parliament. Of the 750 Exclusion Crisis MPs, 228 also sat in James's 1685 Parliament. This reflects the widespread purging of many Whigs during the period of "Tory Reaction" that followed from the failure to exclude James from the line of succession. Table 1 summarizes their party composition and subsequent stance on the Glorious Revolution in 1688/89. The 1685 Parliament was heavily Tory-leaning: 66 Tories (29%) versus only 36 Whigs (16%), with 126 (55%) unaffiliated. Yet when the Revolution came, a substantial number of these Tories defected. Of 66 Tories who had sat in the 1685 Parliament, 22 (33%) actively supported the Glorious Revolution, while 18 (27%) actively opposed it; the remaining 26 (39%) left no recorded stance (Figure 4). Among Tories with a recorded position, a majority (55%) supported the Revolution—a remarkable defection rate for MPs who had defended James's right to succeed.[19] Among the Whigs, 15 of 36 (42%) actively supported the Revolution, while only 1 (3%) opposed it. The very MPs who had defended James's right to succeed turned against him once he attacked the Anglican establishment.

Panel B reveals a further pattern. Among MPs who had voted *for* Exclusion, 35% actively supported the Revolution and only 11% opposed it. Among those who had voted *against* Exclusion—that is, who had defended James's right to the throne—27% supported the Revolution and 25% opposed it, a much more even split. In both groups, a large share (47%–54%) left no recorded stance. This pattern is partly an artifact of selection: many Exclusion supporters were no longer MPs in 1685. But the willingness of former anti-Exclusion MPs to support the Revolution is consistent with the claim that the Revolution coalition was fundamentally different from the Exclusion coalition. It was not only the old Whig opponents of the succession who drove the Revolution; Tory loyalists who had previously backed James also played a crucial role (Sowerby 2013).

While support for James had been waning over the course of the winter of 1687/8, the timing of the Glorious Revolution was determined in part by chance. James had been married to Mary of Modena for 14 years without surviving issue so the birth of a male heir in June 1688 was a shock to the political situation. Where previously Protestants could hope that James's Catholic policies would die with him—since his heir was his Protestant daughter Mary—now they faced the prospect of a Catholic dynasty. This galvanized opposition, including among leading Tories.

Mary's husband, the Stadholder of the Dutch Republic, William of Orange had previously supported James, in part because he anticipated his wife's inheriting the throne. Now his calculations changed. Moreover, he urgently needed English support in his ongoing conflict with Louis XIV. In late June, seven leading peers invited William of Orange to invade England. William's declared aims were initially limited: to secure a free Parliament and to bring England into the European coalition against Louis XIV. He did not necessarily intend to depose James. William landed in November 1688 with a Dutch army. James's support evaporated as leading figures defected, including John Churchill

TABLE 1 | The 1685 parliament: party composition and revolution stance among MPs who also sat in Exclusion Crisis parliaments ($n = 228$). "Supported" means actively recorded as pro-revolution; "opposed" means actively recorded as against; "no recorded stance" means the sources contain no information on the MP's position.

	Supported revolution	Opposed revolution	No recorded stance	Total
Panel A: By party				
Whig	15 (42%)	1 (3%)	20 (56%)	36
Tory	22 (33%)	18 (27%)	26 (39%)	66
Neither	24 (19%)	25 (20%)	77 (61%)	126
Panel B: By exclusion vote				
For exclusion	19 (35%)	6 (11%)	29 (54%)	54
Against exclusion	16 (27%)	15 (25%)	28 (47%)	59
Not recorded	26 (23%)	23 (20%)	66 (57%)	115
Total	61 (27%)	44 (19%)	123 (54%)	228

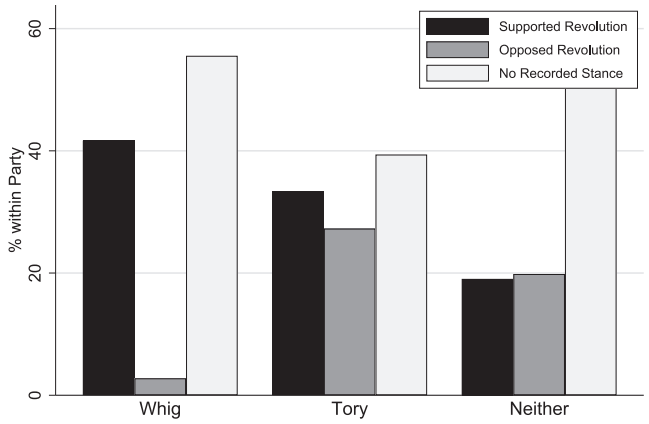

FIGURE 4 | Revolution stance by party among MPs who sat in both the exclusion crisis parliaments and the 1685 Parliament ($n = 228$). Among Tories with a recorded stance, 55% supported the glorious revolution (22 of 40 with recorded positions); 27% of all Tories actively opposed it. A majority of MPs in all groups left no recorded stance in the sources. *Data Source: History of Parliament*, 1660–1690.

and even James's daughter Anne. James fled to France on December 23, 1688.

To understand these dynamics more formally, I draw on the model developed in Desierto and Koyama (2026b). The model distinguishes between *political actors* (MPs, peers, military commanders) and *ordinary citizens* who can exert pressure only through collective action. A ruler maintains power by distributing rents to a coalition of political actors, but is vulnerable when "wide-reaching" groups—organizations that span both elites and ordinary citizens—can simultaneously coordinate elite defection *and* popular protest. During the 1680s, the strengthening of political parties created precisely such groups.

This framework explains both failure and success. Monmouth's rebellion in 1685 drew thousands of popular supporters but lacked elite coordination and was crushed at Sedgemoor. The Exclusion movement had mobilized both elites and popular opinion, but Charles II's financial independence allowed him to weather the storm. The Revolution of 1688 succeeded because the coalition against James bridged the elite–popular divide. The "Immortal Seven" who invited William of Orange spanned the political spectrum—Whigs, Tories, and moderates—and had connections to broader networks among the gentry and the Anglican clergy. James's policies had alienated groups, above all the Church, that spanned the full social hierarchy.

8 | Conclusions

This paper has sought to explain the rise of a constitutional and limited state in Britain by the 18th century. I have connected three key historical episodes: the Magna Carta and the rise of Parliament, the Reformation and solidification of Protestantism through to the Glorious Revolution.

First, religion was central in a way that is often neglected in the economic history literature. The Reformation created a new axis of political conflict that interacted with existing constitutional and fiscal tensions. The security of property rights over former monastic lands depended on the permanence of the religious settlement. The formation of the first political parties during the Exclusion Crisis was driven by fears of Catholic succession. And the Glorious Revolution itself was precipitated by James II's attempt to change religious policy. Leaving religion out of the story of British political development leads to serious misunderstandings.

Second, coalition dynamics were central to institutional change. Political actors are not unitary states or homogeneous classes but individuals who form coalitions to achieve their goals. Magna Carta emerged from a coalition of barons. The Whig party was a coalition united by opposition to Catholic succession. The Glorious Revolution succeeded because James II's policies drove Anglican Tories into alliance with their former Whig opponents. Understanding how these coalitions formed and reformed is essential to understanding institutional change.

Third, institutional change was more evolutionary than revolutionary. The critics of North and Weingast are correct that 1688 did not represent a sharp break with the past. Many of the institutions that characterized 18th-century Britain had deeper

roots. Parliament's fiscal powers traced back to the 13th century. A key development in the late 17th century was the formation of political parties, civil society organizations that linked elites and ordinary citizens. These parties played a critical role in the Glorious Revolution and subsequent political development. This does not mean that 1688 was unimportant. What the Revolutionary Settlement achieved was an alignment of incentives on the critical matter of religion. By permanently excluding Catholics from the succession, the Act of Settlement ensured that Anglicans would never again face the invidious choice between their loyalty to the monarchy and their loyalty to the Protestant Church. It also was critical in ensuring a period of domestic peace and stability in the decades that followed.

The British Isles had experienced sustained civil war and political unrest from the 1630s until the 1690s. As Plumb (1967, xviii) observed: "In the seventeenth century men killed, tortured and executed each other for political beliefs; they sacked towns and brutalized the countryside ... By comparison, the political structure of eighteenth century England possesses adamantine strength and profound inertia". The Glorious Revolution did not end political conflict—party strife intensified in the decades that followed—but it reduced the stakes.

Finally, this is not a story of English exceptionalism. Parliaments proliferated across medieval Europe. The English Reformation was part of a broader European upheaval. The political instability of the 17th century had parallels throughout the continent. What distinguished England was not unique institutions but a particular sequence of events—shaped by contingent choices of individual actors—that led to a particular outcome. That outcome, a constitutional monarchy with a powerful Parliament and secure property rights, would prove conducive to subsequent economic development. But it was not inevitable.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] I will switch between Britain and England as appropriate but my analysis largely draws on the English experience.

[2] These papers are Desierto et al. (2023, 2024); Desierto and Koyama (2026a, 2026b).

[3] The dataset of Exclusion Crisis MPs was constructed jointly with Desiree Desierto and will form the basis of a separate coauthored paper. Throughout this essay, "I" refers to arguments advanced in this sole-authored paper, while "we" refers to the broader collaborative research program with Desierto and other coauthors.

[4] This was in part due to this account playing a key role in the argument of North (1990) and by North's subsequent Nobel Prize (although the prize itself was largely for his earlier work in cliometrics).

[5] Bonfatti et al. (2025), in contrast, is skeptical that Iberians states were weak.

[6] This section draws heavily on Desierto et al. (2023).

[7] This project will eventually become a book entitled *Noble Bargain* (Desierto and Koyama 2028). Other aspects associated with feudalism such as manorialism are less important for our purposes.

[8] Desierto et al. (2023) formally model the formation of this coalition.

[9] Desierto and Koyama (2026a) hypothesize that changes in military technology that made most medieval castles vulnerable to rapid assaults may have been crucial in unraveling the feudal equilibrium.

[10] Loach (1986, 123) for example notes that "the history of another bill discussed at this time suggests that a great deal of concern was felt about the rights of property owners".

[11] See Elliott (1992). The critical point here is that composite monarchies that were made up of populations with different religions were especially difficult to govern. See also the discussion in Johnson and Koyama (2019).

[12] See Slater (2022).

[13] The only preceding studies we are aware of that have used the House of Parliament biographies systematically for the period 1660–1690 are Dimitruk (2018, 2023). Dimitruk (2021) introduces a complementary database of MP political affiliations compiled from contemporary parliamentary lists and shows that the majority coalition became increasingly cohesive from 1660 to 1690.

[14] We are aware that the use of the term parties has sometimes been contested as these were not modern organized parties. Scott, for instance, sees Whigs and Tories more as "polarities of belief" rather than organized parties in any modern sense (Scott 1991). But we think that on balance the term is appropriate. See discussion in Harris (2014).

[15] Scott's survey of 1450 pamphlets at Cambridge University Library found that 95% address popery and arbitrary government as their primary subjects. In the second Exclusion Parliament (1680–1681), the Commons spent only four and a half of its fifty-seven sitting days on Exclusion itself; the rest was consumed by the Popish Plot, the standing army, and the dispensing power.

[16] Variables cover three broad domains: religion (Anglican, Puritan, Presbyterian, Catholic links, anti-Catholic activity, dissenter links, toleration, Test and penal laws), foreign policy (anti-France, anti-standing army, anti-French alliance, military service abroad, Ireland), and constitutional issues (abdication/vacancy, Exclusion Bill, Popish Plot, dispensing power, habeas corpus, revolution involvement). Missing values are treated as no recorded position.

[17] This narrative is drawn from Western (1972); Miller (1978); Speck (1988); Harris (2006); Pincus (2009) and Sowerby (2013).

[18] College fellowships were regarded as a form of freehold. Indeed, Glassey (2013, 15) notes that "Magdalen College furnished the only real example of a direct threat from James to the property of his subjects".

[19] In the country, there was much broader Whig support for the Glorious Revolution than among the MPs in the 1685 Parliament. The large share of MPs with no recorded stance reflects the limitations of the biographical sources; it does not necessarily imply neutrality.

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