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Comment on a passage in "Why did the West extend the franchise? Democracy, inequality, and growth in historical perspective" by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson

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Abstract

I argue that [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000\)](#) misinterpret statements by Earl Grey that they claim support their thesis that the “Great” Reform Act of 1832 in the United Kingdom was a response to the threat of rebellion. I also point out some errors in their presentation of the evidence.

As support for their argument that the “Great” Reform Act passed by the parliament of the United Kingdom in 1832 was a response to the threat of rebellion, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000, p. 1182\)](#) write

When introducing the electoral reform to the British parliament in 1831, the prime minister Earl Grey said “There is no-one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage and the ballot, than am I . . . The Principal of my reform is to prevent the necessity of revolution. . . . I am reforming to preserve, not to overthrow” (quoted in [Evans 1983]).

I argue that the interpretation that Acemoglu and Robinson give to the phrase “to prevent the necessity of revolution” is incorrect. Some points in the passage are also incorrect: the parts of the statement in quotation marks before and after the first ellipsis were not made on the same occasion; the second part of the statement was made in 1830, not 1831; neither part of the statement was made when the Reform Bill was formally introduced (and [Evans 1983](#) does not make that claim); and several details of the wording are incorrect. I first discuss these errors, and then turn to the interpretation of the phrase “to prevent the necessity of revolution”.

- Earl Grey made the second part of the statement in the House of Lords on November 22, 1830, in his first speech as Prime Minister.¹ According to [Hansard](#) (House of Lords, 22 November 1830, vol 1, c613), his wording differed from the wording given by Acemoglu and Robinson. He said “The principle of my reform is, to prevent the necessity for revolution. . . . The principle on which I mean to act is neither more nor less than that of reforming to preserve, and not to overthrow.”²
- The first part of the statement does not appear in Hansard. Assuming Hansard is accurate, Earl Grey thus did not make this part of the statement in Parliament. Rather, this part of the statement is attributed to Earl Grey by an article in the *Poor Man's Guardian* of 19 November 1831. (See the last three pages of this file. The *Poor Man's Guardian* was a pro-reform newspaper published from 1831 to 1835.) The exact wording is “there is no one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and the ballot, than I am.” The article does not indicate where or when Earl Grey made this statement.³ Earl Grey made related statements in Parliament, but none with the wording in the *Poor Man's Guardian*. For example, in his first speech as Prime Minister, on November 22, 1830, he said “I do not support—I never have supported universal suffrage and annual Parliaments, nor any other of those very extensive changes which have been, I regret to say, too much promulgated in this country, and promulgated by gentlemen from whom better things might have been expected” ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 22 November 1830, vol 1, c606). And in a speech in the House of Lords on 24 March 1831 he said that “Never, at any period of his life, had he not stated his decided opinion against Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage, and latterly—because it was only latterly that the subject had been brought under the public notice—against the Vote by Ballot.” ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 24 March 1831, vol 3, c850. In this case, Hansard appears to be reporting the content of his speech, not the exact wording.)
- In particular, Earl Grey made neither part of the statement when formally introducing the Reform Bill. (In his first speech as Prime Minister, when he uttered the second part of the statement and expressed sentiments similar to those in the first

¹[Evans](#) (1983, p. 212) (also [Evans](#) 2001, p. 266) cites the two parts of the statement on the same page, separated by a few sentences. He gives a source for the second part, but not for the first part. Acemoglu and Robinson appear to have incorrectly interpreted the source as being for both parts. The source Evans cites for the second part gives the wrong year (1831 rather than 1830).

²The quotation in [Evans](#) (1983, p. 212) is correct, except that it omits the last comma.

³[Thompson](#) (1963, p. 811), like [Evans](#) (1983, p. 212), cites the statement without providing a source. He writes that Earl Grey made the statement “in the House in November 1831”. Parliament was prorogued in November 1831, so at least the date in Thompson's claim is incorrect. Searches in the online version of Hansard for various words in the statement generate no matches.

part of the statement, he stated his position in favor of electoral reform, but did not propose any specific measures.⁴) All three versions of the Reform Bill were introduced (in the House of Commons) by Lord John Russell.⁵

- Acemoglu and Robinson appear to interpret the statement “The principle of my reform is, to prevent the necessity for revolution” to mean that Earl Grey thought that the reform was necessary to prevent rebellion. I disagree: by “revolution” he meant not rebellion, but a wholesale change in the electoral system, including universal suffrage. He believed that the relatively minor⁶ changes in the Reform Bill would satisfy the population, making further (“revolutionary”) changes unnecessary. The context of his statement is the following passage.

my object would be to propose—if the happy medium can be found—such a reform as would in this respect satisfy the public expectation, without endangering—here was the limit, and the only limit—by sudden change and violent disturbance, the settled institutions of the country. Does my noble friend mean to say, that a reform which rests on that principle will be at once rejected by the country? If so, I tell him that those who would thus reject it expect revolution and not reform. My great object is, the desire of preventing that which, be it needed as it may, must always be the greatest of all possible political evils. The principle of my reform is, to prevent the necessity for revolution. And I must

⁴[Hansard](#), House of Lords, 22 November 1830, vol 1, c606.

⁵The first version was introduced on 1 March 1831 ([Hansard](#), House of Commons, 1 March 1831, cc1061–1151). This bill passed in the House of Commons by one vote (302 to 301) on 22 March 1831, but the government lost a vote on a detail of the bill at the committee stage and Earl Grey asked for parliament to be dissolved. The government won the subsequent election, and Lord John Russell introduced a new version of the bill on 24 June 1831. This version passed in the House of Commons by 136 votes (367 to 231) on 6 July 1831, but failed in the House of Lords on 7 October 1831 by 41 votes ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 7 October 1831, vol 8, cc188–344), precipitating riots. A third version of the bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Lord John Russell on 12 December 1831 ([Hansard](#), House of Commons, 12 December 1831, vol 9 cc156–206); this version passed in the House of Lords by 9 votes (184 to 175) on 14 April 1832, after the king agreed to create additional reform-minded peers, if necessary, to get the bill passed ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 13 April 1832, vol 12, cc327–459; the session started on April 13, but did not end until April 14 ([Butler 1914](#), pp. 359–360)). But on 7 May 1832 the government was defeated by a Tory amendment ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 7 May 1832, vol 12, cc676–733). Earl Grey asked the king to create enough peers to pass the bill, but the king refused; Wellington, a Tory, tried to create a government, but failed. Earl Grey then returned as Prime Minister, and the king agreed to create enough peers to pass the bill; it passed the Third reading in Lords, without any new peers being created, on 4 June 1832 by 84 votes (106 to 22) ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 4 June 1832, vol 13, cc349–79). On 5 June 1832 the House of Commons agreed to the amendments proposed by the House of Lords.

⁶Despite the common practice of using the word “great” in connection with the Act, the change in the franchise that the Act mandated was minor. For a discussion of the significance of the Act, see [Evans \(2000, Chapter 4\)](#).

say, I do not think it fair of my noble friend to look for a declaration less limited, or to wish for details. I trust the House will be satisfied with the principle and the limit I lay down, which seems to have been so much misunderstood by the noble Earl. When did he find that I limited the reform to giving Representatives to the large towns? The principle on which I mean to act is neither more nor less than that of reforming to preserve, and not to overthrow. ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 22 November 1830, vol 1, c613.)

Earlier in the same speech, Earl Grey expressed the view that electoral reform was necessary, but the “revolution” he mentions in this passage refers to a major change in the electoral system, not to popular rebellion. Here is his earlier statement:

I then [in an earlier Session] stated, and I now repeat my conviction that it is necessary that the Government (by whom alone the question can be satisfactorily taken up and settled) should take into immediate consideration the state of the representation, with a view to the correction of those defects which have been occasioned in it by the operation of time, and with a view to the re-establishment of that confidence upon the part of the people, which I am afraid Parliament does not at present enjoy to the full extent that is essential for the welfare and safety of the country and the preservation of the Government. ([Hansard](#), House of Lords, 22 November 1830, vol 1, c606.)

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MR. CARPENTER AND THE REFORM BILL!

To the Working Classes.

FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN,

Our worthy friend Carpenter has addressed you in support of the Whig Reform Bill, and as his address is evidently intended to counteract the effect of the arguments contained in the *Poor Man's Guardian* against "THE BILL," I cannot refrain from offering a few observations upon some of his statements.

Entertaining, as I do, great respect for Mr. Carpenter, I am compelled publicly to declare that his Address has failed to convince me that the Working Classes ought to countenance and support the ministerial Reform Bill; and though I am ready to admit that I believe Mr. Carpenter to be a good and a clever man, yet I should act unfaithfully towards him if I did not, with equal candour, unequivocally state that, in my estimation, his Address to the Working Classes is a very *inconsistent* and *extraordinary* performance. I cannot honestly compliment either the clearness of his reasoning or the solidity of his judgment. If, therefore, in what I have to offer on the subject, any expression should inadvertently escape me that, to our mutual friends, appears illiberal, I here disclaim any intention of giving the slightest offence to a gentleman who has evidenced his sincerity by anxiously endeavouring to render a service to the public, at the expense of pecuniary and personal suffering.

Mr. Carpenter commences his Address by stating "that he is aware he is about to express an opinion different to that entertained by some who had been *"misted,"* by the *rhapsodical declamation* of one or two persons who have considerable influence over you, and whose honest intentions he has no disposition either to impugn or to question."

Passing over this highly complimentary commencement, let us, my friends, examine the "*arguments*"—not the "*rhapsodical declamation*" of one "*who has been misted*"—but the *dispassionate* and *unprejudiced* ARGUMENTS of our friend Mr. Carpenter.

But first permit me to make a few general observations on the subject of "*the Bill*." It is important to ascertain how the just claims of the working classes have been treated in this affair. It is easy for Mr. Carpenter, and others, to assert that you are "*misted*" by the *Poor Man's Guardian*; but he should have told you *why* those connected with the *Guardian* should seek to mislead the working classes or be themselves misled,

on this important subject. Mr. Carpenter knows full well that I am, on principle, adverse to the possession of exclusive rights or privileges; and that, upon every occasion, I resolutely oppose measures which I deem of a deceptive or inefficient character. I repudiate altogether political expediency—that expediency which makes us “do evil that good may come;” with me, therefore, that only is expedient which is clearly founded on TRUTH and JUSTICE. I am, moreover, prejudiced in favour of the old fashioned maxim “that honesty is the BEST policy.” Guided by these principles, the Editor of the “Guardian” and myself were not easily blinded by the dust cast into the eyes of the people of England, by the hired agents of the despicable Whigs. From the very commencement of the struggle, we have, indeed, been most anxious to avoid being misled, and have done our utmost not only to prevent our poorer fellow-countrymen from being misled, but also to obtain for them a Reform Bill that would confer the right of Representation upon ALL classes. Mr. Carpenter’s recent Address to you renders it necessary, therefore, that I should briefly review the line of conduct I have pursued with respect to this Whig Reform Bill.

When the Whigs came into office, the useful classes, in conjunction with their fellow-countrymen, were almost unanimously demanding Reform. It is true, indeed, they desired not a *partial* and *exclusive* measure, but one of UNIVERSAL JUSTICE. Mr. Carpenter cannot surely have forgotten that at that period the middle and working classes were united in their demands for Reform, and a spirit was very generally evinced pregnant with great danger to the aristocracy, unless they consented to an immediate restoration of the people’s rights; and had the union continued, the rights of both classes would, I am confident, ere this have been fully recognized and admitted.

Under these circumstances, the conduct of some of the present advocates of the Bill, is the more inexcusable, because they urged the people to demand their rights, and impressed upon them not to be satisfied with any inefficient measure. Mr. Cobbett and Mr. Carpenter in particular did this. Mr. Cobbett indeed published a *Plan of Reform* with less than which he called upon the people *not* to be satisfied. What was that plan? Why that a new parliament should be chosen every year—that all men at the age of eighteen should have a vote, which vote should be given by ballot—and that there should be no pecuniary qualification for members. This plan gave very general satisfaction, and was hailed with joy by every working man in the kingdom. Did it go too far *even* for Mr. Carpenter? So far from this being the case, he arranged with Mr. Cobbett to publish it in a *cheap* form that the working classes might be prepared to demand that to which they were justly entitled. You will also bear in mind, fellow-countrymen, that it was not merely Mr. Cobbett and Mr. Carpenter who entertained these notions, but men of every rank and station held them, and the industrious millions to boot. Even the *Examiner* contended that if universal suffrage could not then be carried, the Bill should make provision for introducing half a million of voters at certain stated periods till EVERY MAN in the united kingdom was admitted to the elective franchise. Mr. Grote, the banker, in a pamphlet entitled *Essentials of Parliamentary Reform*, adopted this very suggestion from the *Examiner*, and honestly declared that no measure that did not recognize the right of all to be represented in Parliament, would be just or satisfactory to the country. When the Whig Reform Bill made its appearance, did it contain any of these essential principles? NOT ONE. What, then, was the conduct of these gentlemen? Why they deserted the cause of their poorer fellow-countrymen—lauded the measure to the skies—and, I boldly and honestly contend, “misled” the working classes generally into an approval of a Bill which blasted all their hopes of political emancipation. According to the Spanish proverb, “After having cried up their wine, they sell us vinegar.” But, say the advocates of

the Bill, you cannot surely imagine that the measure is to be “final.” Fellow-countrymen, I beseech ye be not “misled” by such jargon. We all know that what is established to-day may be set aside to-morrow; but there is every reason to believe that all the power possessed by our corrupt Government, aided by the volunteer CARPENTERS, will be exerted to prevent the working classes from obtaining their political rights. Bear in mind that all parties concerned in granting the Reform Bill design it to be final. Are not Grey and Althorp esteemed the most honest, if not the only politically honest, men in the Ministry? What says Grey, then, on this subject?—“If any persons suppose that this Reform will lead to ulterior measures, they are mistaken; for there is no one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and the ballot, than I am. My object is not to favour, but to put an end “to such hopes and projects.” In the face of such an explicit declaration from Grey, how can you, fellow-countrymen, be “misled” by the Cobbetts, the Carpenters, the Wakleys, into an approval of the measure? Why, *even of your own selves*, judge ye not what is right?” Besides, do not even these powerful writers admit that the measure will be final, by urging as an argument against our oppressors that a *larger* measure of Reform will be demanded by the people (meaning, of course, the “mob” and the “populace” as contradistinguished from the people) “unless the Bill pass;” thereby implying that THEY will not be instrumental in calling for an extension of the franchise if the Bill pass, but that they *will* countenance and support a larger measure of Reform if it be finally rejected? Delusion and cajolery have been resorted to by all parties to keep the working classes from expressing their sentiments and demanding their rights. When the nature of the Bill was first made known, the language held to them was—“You cannot expect all at once; the Bill is a first instalment.” For months this sophistical stuff, about the Bill being a first instalment of your rights, effectually paralyzed all our efforts; but we are no longer to be duped—our eyes are open. It is no instalment—it gives you *nothing*—ABSOLUTELY NOTHING; and yet you are quite as much entitled to be represented in Parliament as any £10, or £20, or £100 householder; and until you are, you will be despised, plundered, and oppressed. So far from “the Bill” being a first instalment of your rights, it is, my friends, to you a DENIAL OF JUSTICE. Let me make this plain, by an illustration which I have, on former occasions, used orally, because I have never found any of these “first instalment” gentry who could answer it.

Suppose a rich and unprincipled individual was indebted to 20 men a sovereign each, but that they had no legal means of enforcing payment. In this emergency they consult with each other as to the best method of obtaining their 20 sovereigns, and mutually agree to *dun* this rich and unprincipled individual till he has satisfied their demands. Worn out and distracted by their perpetual importunities he, at last, makes a proposition to them, not to pay them all—though he is quite capable of doing so—but to give them five sovereigns. Well, that you will say, perhaps, is the first instalment of five shillings in the pound—five shillings for *each* man. Not so, my friends; the unprincipled scoundrel (for I can call him nothing else) selects five out of the twenty, who least want the money—the strongest—the cleverest—the most influential—and pays them their demand IN FULL; saying in a wheedling and insidious manner—“Come, my good fellows, there is a sovereign each for *you*; now keep off these fifteen clamorous rascals, and, in future, we shall be better friends.” Now, fellow-countrymen, this is the way we have been treated by the Reform Bill. The rich unprincipled individual is the government—the middle class are the five who get their demand in full,—and the fifteen who get *nothing* are the working classes. But what must be your opinion of the character of those “middle men” who would be bribed to act a part so base and selfish as to desert the cause of those through whose instrumentality they have obtained—not payment yet, you will recollect, of

their demand—but the mere *promise* of payment? And now the working people are beginning to bestir themselves, and are coming boldly forward in all parts of the country to demand their rights, out steps Mr. Carpenter, who, instead of aiding his poorer fellow-countrymen to recover those rights to which they are justly entitled, is endeavouring, as far as he can, to paralyze their efforts by inducing them to become the unconscious dupes of those who are in pursuit of selfish and exclusive objects; saying in effect—“Don’t listen to what the *Poor Man’s Guardian* tells you, but pray attend the meetings of the “*exclusives*”—assist them, that is, don’t oppose them, in carrying a Bill that will be more palatable to the aristocratic reptiles;” and, I will add, “*equally efficient*” in excluding you, the millions, from all participation in the elective franchise. As Liverpool once said of the greedy pensioners—**REALLY, THIS IS TOO BAD.** I, therefore, warn my fellow-countrymen against being “*mised*” by Mr. Carpenter, or any one else, into even a negative approval (and silence, or “*neutrality*,” as Mr. Carpenter calls it, would be deemed by our oppressors an approval) of any measure that does not fully restore to them their rights. Bear in mind that we, the working classes, have set the “*exclusives*” a noble example—we have united on principle—the Declaration of the National Union of the Working Classes (notwithstanding the base calumnies of the corrupt daily press) is founded on justice—it is free from the slightest taint of exclusiveness; and the just principles it contains will serve to test the political honesty of the middle class. We hold out the olive branch of peace to them. We invite them to join us; and, having done every thing to ensure their aid and co-operation, if they still shun us, and disregard our claims, the scriptural declaration “that they who are not for us are against us;” may, with strict propriety, be applied to them. Every honest and sensible man among the middle and higher classes must be fully convinced that till the political “rights of the working classes are recognised and protected, there can be no security for the rights of their *pretended* superiors.” In fact, there can be no peace—no prosperity for our country till *Universal Representation* is obtained.

I will enter upon the topics discussed in Mr. Carpenter’s Address in my next, and will endeavour to shew that whether we consider the *character* of the late Reform Bill, or one “*equally efficient*”—the *effects* it is calculated to produce—or the probable *consequences* of its being defeated—the course we ought to take is to cause it, if we can, to be rejected with disdain, as being a gross and daring insult offered to at least seven-eighths of the male population of the kingdom, and those the most useful portion of the community.

Fellow-countrymen, get knowledge—abstain from intoxicating liquors—be united—be firm—persevere—and your tyrannical oppressors must ultimately concede your just claim to be represented in Parliament.

H. HETHERINGTON.

VICTIMS OF FREE DISCUSSION, AND OF THE ODISIOUS “SIX ACTS.”

A public meeting was held at the Crown Inn, Hyde Lane, near Manchester, on Wednesday, October 5, 1831, to consider the propriety of petitioning the House of Commons to repeal the odious “Six Acts,” and for the liberation of those who are suffering incarceration on account of their theological or political opinions, or for their public conduct; and also to devise the best means of relieving all who are suffering under the above-named Acts, or for the honest and fearless expression of their opinions.

The following Resolutions were adopted:—

“That it is the opinion of this meeting that any tax upon the public press cramps the sale and acquisition of cheap and useful knowledge, and was enacted to keep the labouring class in ignorance and delusion; and the continuation of it by government is more for this purpose, than for what it contributes to the revenue.”

“That the denominated Six Acts are odious and direful, they wantonly violate our liberty and security, and are a disgrace to any legislature that enforces them.”

“That this meeting disapproves of men being confined for advocating either the liberty of the press or the open and public avowal of theological and political opinions, and we feel it our duty to enter into a subscription of one penny per week each, until they are restored to their liberty.”

“That a petition founded on the above resolutions be prepared and forthwith sent to the House of Commons; and that Mr. Hume present it, and several other members be solicited to support it.”

NATIONAL UNION OF THE WORKING CLASSES.

Last Monday evening, pursuant to adjournment, a Meeting of the Members of the Union was held at the Rotunda.

Mr. Lovett having been called to the Chair, said it was unnecessary for him to call upon them to conduct the proceedings with order, seeing their meetings had ever been characterized by it. Their meetings were attended by men, ay, and women too, who dared to face the calumnies of a corrupt press, and belie them; those who had discovered the difference between error and truth, honesty and corruption, and knew that this Union was established for the simple support of the truth. (Hear.) He wished the press would no longer mix them up with great men; let it call them Rotundaites or Revolutionists, but let them no longer call them O’Connellites or Huntites (hear); and let not the Tories or Boroughmongers be mistaken, though they might differ in opinion on partial measures, they were ready to unite with the Whigs (however they might suspect their sincerity) or any others, against those enemies to the general good of mankind, who had declared themselves opposed to all Reform. (Cheers.)

Mr. Cleave, in the absence of the Secretary, read the Minutes of the last Meeting, which were confirmed.

Mr. Julian Hibbert proposed the first Resolution:—

“That the members of this Union pledge themselves, individually and collectively, to renew their efforts to procure for the people of this country, a cheap and really free press.”

He thought there was no difficulty in supporting such a motion. Though the newspapers were generally established for mercenary purposes—being, like Peter Pindar’s razors—made to sell, and had supported the aristocrats and neglected the people—yet there were some cases in which they had advocated their rights, and spoke the truth. In the *Morning Chronicle* of that day was a paragraph, which he would read:—

“Were the people to see any display of power by the present Ministers, they might indulge in some hopes of their ability to carry the measure of Reform. But they cannot shut their eyes to the circumstance, that Ministers are without power. The Tories are everywhere in the strong-holds of the country—they are everywhere the delegates of the Royal authority, and the Government may be said to be in their hands. The removal of Earl Howe and Sir Byam Martin are too trifling to be taken into account. The conclusion at which the people have arrived is, that Ministers have not the power to do that which would enable them to be of any use to the country;—that they have been retained till it suits the Oligarchy to throw off the mask. We do not believe the Ministers possess the means of carrying Reform, and it is of importance that the people should no longer remain under the delusion that they can carry it. He that is forewarned is fore-armed.”

Now, if this was correct, how much had some persons been deceived, though neither he nor some others had been. The Whigs had only been placed in power just when the Tories had carried their high pressure engines too fast (laughter); they were a faction both weak and wicked; they had done nothing, and could do nothing; and he supposed that in a short time the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel must come back again. (Hear, and laughter.) He saw no hope for the people, unless they united and exhibited their moral power. (Hear.) It was plain the Whigs were alarmed from their proceedings last Monday. (Hear.) He had called upon Mr. Hetherington that day, who told him that some boys, as they were going home from school, began to buz, and the soldiers were immediately ordered to fall in and march. (Laughter.) But to return: he hoped they would leave off ranking themselves under mens’ names, and be known only as radical re-