The language of elections

Luke Blaxill *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914* (Royal Historical Society, Boydell Press, 2020)
Review by **Iain Sharpe**

POLITICAL HISTORIANS STUDYING elections in the pre-1945 era before opinion polling have always faced a difficult challenge in gauging what voters were thinking and why they voted as they did. David Butler and his fellow authors of the 'Nuffield' studies of post-war elections could draw on detailed opinion polling to shed light on the outcome. But interpreting election results in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century elections can sometimes feel like little more than guesswork.

Those who have attempted studies of pre-1945 elections have found various ways of overcoming this problem. A. K. Russell and Neil Blewett, in their respective monographs on the 1906 and 1910 elections, scoured candidates' election addresses to produce detailed tables of which issues were mentioned most. The diaries and correspondence of leading politicians can also provide valuable insights. There is also press coverage. But until the last couple of decades this was a laborious process: researchers had to spend long hours combing through column inches of yellowed newsprint or microfilm to find reports of election speeches and political meetings and s o discover what candidates, journalists and voters were saying and writing. It could feel a bit random and unscientific, and above all time-consuming.

The experience has been transformed by the arrival of digitised newspaper archives, such as the *Times* Digital Archive and the British Library Newspapers collections. Now we can search for and identify the articles we are looking for using names of candidates, political parties, constituencies. It saves time and enables us to be more confident that we have not missed anything crucial. But, for whatever reason (perhaps a sense that British political history is a tired and passé field of study), digitised newspapers have not been exploited to their potential in the study of politics and elections.

So, Luke Blaxill, in this excellent monograph, is blazing a trail for the innovative use of newspaper archives to shed new light on pre-First World War electoral politics. He uses the technique of corpus linguistic analysis, which although common in social sciences has not really been adopted by historians. He has compiled three collections (or 'corpora') of election speeches between 1880 and 1914, one from East Anglia, another from other constituencies across the country, and a third of speeches by leading statesmen with a more national than constituency focus.

He has used these corpora to search for and identify how often particular issues, or words associated with them, were mentioned in hustings speeches. While such an approach cannot tell us what voters were thinking, it does tell us what candidates thought were the issues most likely to win votes. Such an approach enables a more methodical and quantitative analysis of these speeches than is possible by historians reading and interpreting the text. It provides researchers with a significant new angle in studying historic election campaigns.

Blaxill applies his approach to weigh in on debates and controversies surrounding elections in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era, by turns challenging or reinforcing current wisdom. So he points to Joseph Chamberlain's radical 'Unauthorised Programme' having had a greater impact on the 1885 election than recent historians have suggested; the continuing importance of home rule as an issue in 1892 as well as 1886; the South African war being the decisive reason for the Unionists' triumph in 1900 (a view that is once again becoming received wisdom after being challenged by historians); and the Unionists being in a stronger position before the First World War than recent literature has allowed for, with a positive and unified position on tariff reform. There are other issues whose importance he revises downwards, such as the distinctive identity of the Liberal Unionists after 1886, the impact of imperialism in the 1895 general election, and the importance of New Liberalism in Liberal electoral success in the Edwardian period.

He also looks at the importance of national personalities on election campaigns. In doing so he establishes Gladstone's continuing central importance to politics during the 1886–92 period, which some historians have seen as little more than a coda to his long career. In fact, Gladstone's name was mentioned almost as often in the latter election as in 1886 and references to him far exceeded those of any other politician; for example, in Blaxill's 'national' corpus there were 271 mentions of Gladstone but only 44 of the Conservative leader, Salisbury. But most surprising is Blaxill's finding that, in the two elections after his adoption of home rule, Gladstone was referred to far more often by opponents than by supporters (between twice and four times as often depending on which corpus is used). In fact, he shows that this is true generally of

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Luke Blaxill

STUDIES IN HISTORY
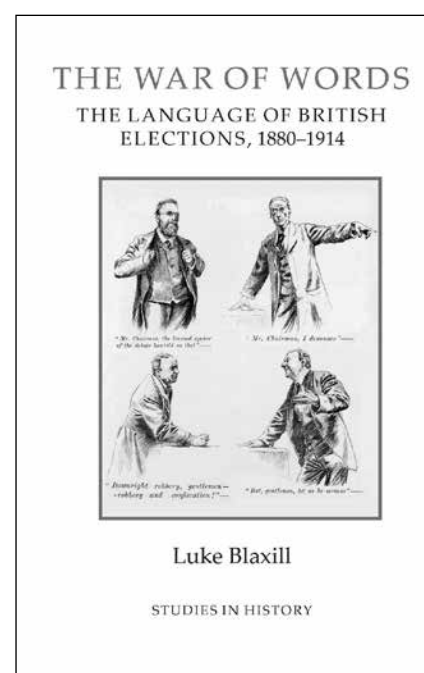
Asquith vs Lloyd George

On 7 December 1916, H.H. Asquith was replaced as Prime Minister by David Lloyd George. The change followed mounting disquiet over the conduct of the First World War, and Lloyd George's demands that a small committee, not including Asquith, should direct the war effort. Lloyd George forced the issue by resigning from the coalition government. Unionist ministers sided with Lloyd George and indicated their willingness to serve in a government led by him.

The Liberal Party remained divided until the end of the war and beyond. The party fought the next two general elections as two separate groups and the reunion that finally came, in 1923, was, in Asquith's words, 'a fiction if not a farce'.

Was the split between Asquith and Lloyd George caused by their contrasting personalities, or by substantive disagreements over management of the war? Or did their rivalry reflect deeper divisions between different Liberal traditions?

Join **David Laws** and **Damian Collins MP** to discuss the causes and consequences of the Asquith–Lloyd George rivalry. Both speakers contributed chapters to Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers: 55 Leaders, 55 Authors, 300 Years of History* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), David Laws on Asquith and Damian Collins on Lloyd George. Chair: **Wendy Chamberlain MP**.

7.00pm, Monday 1 February (following the Liberal Democrat History Group AGM at 6.30pm)
Online meeting, on Zoom: register via the History Group website at **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**

national party leaders, but most distinctively so in Gladstone's case.

It would be easy for a book such as this to consist of dry statistical analysis, and while there are certainly plenty of graphs and tables contained partly in lengthy appendices, it is written in a lively and engaging fashion that means it is far from a dull read. Inevitably corpus linguistic analysis can only provide part of the picture in studying elections and there will always be a place for the qualitative analysis of election leaflets, speeches and newspaper reports, along with party records, politicians' diaries and correspondence.

It still leaves us plenty to argue about. For example, while this reviewer is in happy agreement with Blaxill about imperialism, Liberal Unionism and New Liberalism, I think he overstates the case that the

Unionists were bound for victory in the election due to have taken place in 1915 had war not intervened. The Unionists may have had a unified and coherent message on tariff reform, but the evidence of post-First World War general elections suggests this was still not a winning electoral cause. In addition, there was at least a year of the parliament still to run and the potential for the course of events to affect the likely electoral outcome. Had the Liberal government achieved 'peace with honour' in the August 1914 crisis, delivered Irish home rule with compromise between Unionists and nationalists, and succeeded in abolishing the system of plural voting that had cost up to fifty seats in 1910, it would have been in a strong electoral position. Had it allowed Germany to occupy Belgium and France and

presided over civil war in Ireland, it would have faced certain defeat – and probably even more catastrophically than Blaxill suggests.

Whatever specific disagreements one may have with particular conclusions, Blaxill deserves much praise for pioneering a new approach to the study of electoral history – one that, from the evidence presented here, has provided considerable new evidence and insights. One hopes that corpus linguistics analysis will be taken up by others in this and other fields of historical study. By any standards this is an important and impressive book.

Dr Iain Sharpe is an administrator at London University and a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.