

THE WHIGS AND THE TORIES

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In the eighteenth century, the Whigs and the Tories represented the two primary political factions in Great Britain. The parties formed in the late seventeenth century in response to the ascension of Catholic James II and the subsequent Glorious Revolution that deposed him. The parties, as Jane Austen would know them, later formed again in 1784, when the Tories revived under William Pitt and the Whigs under Charles James Fox. It is difficult to classify Tories and Whigs using modern political parlance, especially as their positions often changed course over the centuries. **Whigs** were generally **reformers**, representing the aristocracy and advocating for stronger parliamentary powers. **Tories** were generally middle class **traditionalists** who believed in upholding the powers of the monarchy.

So what did they believe?

ON THE SUBJECT OF

MONARCHY

- The Whigs were **Constitutional Monarchs**, which means that they supported increasing the powers of Parliament and limiting the powers of the monarch.
- The **Tories** were **Royalists**, which means they believed in upholding the monarch as the supreme ruler of the land.
- Whigs largely supported the Hanover monarchy while Tories were affiliated with **Jacobitism** and largely supported the Stuart monarchy.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

TRADE

- The Whigs supported protectionist trade policies.
- The Tories supported free trade policies.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

RELIGION

- The Whigs were strongly associated with Scottish Presbyterianism.
- The Tories were strongly associated with Anglicanism and Catholicism.
- Originally, the Whigs opposed Catholic emancipation while the Tories supported it. By the nineteenth century, Whigs became proponents for Catholic emancipation.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

WOMEN

- **Tory feminism** is an academic term used to describe the works of women like Jane Austen and Mary Astell, who advocated for equality of women in marriage and education, but still defined women's roles within traditional domestic and religious frameworks.
- The **Bluestockings**, a society of women who promoted women's education, generally held **Whiggish sympathies**. They used the language of monarchial tyranny to critique the institution of marriage.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

SLAVERY

- The Slave Acts of 1807 and 1833 were both passed under Whig governments. That said, there were notable abolitionists on both sides of the political divide.
- William Wilberforce, who campaigned for the Slave Trade Act of 1807, was an independent.

THE WHIGS AND THE TORIES

COMMON QUESTIONS

Where do the terms "Whig" and "Tory" come from?

The term "Whig" seems to have come from the term "whiggamor," a Scottish epithet for a cattle driver. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the exact etymology has never been ascertained, although it may derive from Scots or Gaelic. This term was first used as a derogatory name for Scottish Presbyterians in the seventeenth century before being applied to politicians.

The word "Tory" comes from Ireland. Originally, the term described Irish outlaws who attacked English settlers; the term eventually came to encompass those who were Catholic or sympathized with Catholic issues. The term derives from the Irish word *tóraighe*, which means to pursue.

Who could vote in this period?

Before the Reform Act of 1832, only 14% of men in the UK could vote. There were two types of constituencies: counties and burroughs. Counties included only voters made up of landowners whose land was worth more than 40 shillings. Burroughs could range in size from populations in the hundreds to the thousands; qualifications to vote in a borough could vary widely, from paying a certain type of tax to being the head of a household. While women could not vote in this period, it was largely because it was rare for a woman to inherit a qualifying estate in her own right. The law did not specifically exclude women from voting until the Reform Act of 1832.

Was Jane Austen a Whig or Tory?

The Austen family themselves were by and large Tories, and most scholars seem to agree that Austen was most likely a Tory herself. According to her niece, Caroline:

"The general politics of the family were Tory—rather taken for granted I suppose than discussed, as even my Uncles seldom talked about it—and in vain do I try to recall any word or expression of my Aunt Jane's that had reference to public events—Some bias of course she must have had—but I can only guess to which quarter she inclined." (My Aunt Jane Austen, 9)

Why are there no longer Whigs?

In 1815, the Whig Party reorganized as the Liberal Party, and Whig eventually was used to denote the more conservative faction of the Liberal party. In 1886, in conflict over the issue of Irish Home Rule, the "Whiggish" faction of the Liberal Party broke away to form the Liberal Unionists, which eventually merged with the Conservative Party (which itself had derived from the old Tories).

Was there an American Whig party?

There was indeed an American Whig party between 1834 and 1856. The Whig party, led by Henry Clay, formed in opposition to Andrew Jackson. Famous American Whigs include William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor.

During the American Revolution, Loyalists were often called Tories, although there was no cohesive Tory party in the Colonies due to the lack of representation in Parliament.

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FAMOUS WHIGS

The Prince of Wales/the Prince Regent/George IV



While George III held a famous disdain towards the Whig party, his son was known for his close friendship with Charles James Fox. Although George seems to have favored the Whigs overall, it is notable that once he became regent, he maintained his father's Tory ministry instead of installing his own Whig ministers.

Horace Walpole

Walpole wrote one of the earliest Gothic novels, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), one of the “horrid” novels that would inspire *Northanger Abbey*. Son of the first British Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, who himself was a fervent Whig, Walpole served as a member of the House of Commons for thirteen years.



Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire

Once portrayed by Keira Knightley in the film *The Duchess* (2008), Cavendish is known as one of the first women to make her name in British politics. While she could never run for office herself, she was a public proponent of the Whig party and encouraged other women to turn out to rallies in favor of the Whigs.

FAMOUS TORIES

Anne, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland

Queen Anne was famous (or perhaps infamous) for favoring moderate Tories over the powerful Whig politicians that were in power during her reign. Her close friendship with Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (depicted in the 2018 film *The Favourite*), likely ended over political differences.



Robert Burns

It should be no surprise that illustrious Scottish patriot Robbie Burns supported Tories and the Jacobite cause. He even wrote a poem called “Awa’ Whigs, Awa’!” (1789) in which he called the Whigs “a pack o’ traitor louns.”

Samuel Johnson

Johnson is known for many things: his illustrious wit, his lauded *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), and his prolific writings, including *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) and *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81). According to his biographer James Boswell, Samuel Johnson once stated that “I have always said, the first Whig was the devil.”



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider your favorite Austen novel. What political stance, if any, do you think Austen takes allegorically through her work? You might consider the references to the slave trade in *Mansfield Park*, her opinions towards the navy in *Persuasion*, or her thoughts on female inheritance and property rights in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing an author and her work through a political lens? How might "politics" shape our vision of Austen and our interpretations of her work?
3. Tomalin writes about Austen's famous "silence" on political matters: "To appear whimsical and affected is a common form of self-defence. Silence is another. Jane Austen's silences are especially problematical because it is hard to know how much they are real silences, how much the effect of Cassandra's scissors" (Tomalin p. 137). Do you think that Austen was silent on politics? What evidence in the letters, biographies, or novels do you see for either her silence or her voice in political matters?
4. Read the following excerpt from Austen's letter to Martha Lloyd (2 September 1814, p. 285) and comment on what it tells us about Austen's worldview, political and religious beliefs, and her perception of justice.

"(Henry Austen's) veiw (sic) & the veiw of those he mixes with, of Politics, is not chearful--with regard to an American war I mean;--they consider it as certain & as what is to ruin us. The (?) Americans?) cannot be conquered & we shall only be teaching them skill in War which they may now want. We are to make them good Sailors & Soldiers & (?gain) nothing ourselves.--If we are to be ruined, it cannot be helped--but I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation inspite of much Evil improving in Religion, which I cannot beleive (sic) the Americans to possess."
5. Some scholars have read the small towns and communities of Austen's novels as a microcosm of the larger British Empire. Others, such as Marilyn Butler, believe that Austen's political focus was specifically invested in small local communities rather than national affairs. What do you think of the scale of Austen's novels and how do they relate to the political or social situation of her day?
6. There is significant debate about the degree to which Austen pushed the envelope in her critiques of society. Would you classify her as radical, feminist, or traditionalist? How do you see Austen pushing against the limits of her society? Compare her letters to your favorite Austen novel, or think of an event from Tomalin's biography.

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GLOSSARY OF POLITICAL TERMS

Absolute monarchy: a government in which the monarch wields supreme power over the jurisdiction of laws. Parliament or other legislative bodies are subject to the monarch's powers.

Catholic emancipation: for most of the eighteenth century, Catholics were barred from voting or holding public office. Catholic emancipation refers to the restoration of rights to Catholics within Great Britain.

Constitutional monarchy: a form of government wherein the supreme power is shared between the monarch and a legislative body such as a parliament. The monarch's powers may be limited or defined by a constitution.

Franchise: a franchise refers to the ability to vote according to the laws of the land. To enfranchise means to give someone the right to vote.

Jacobites: Jacobites wanted to restore the Stuart Dynasty to the British throne. Since Catholics were prohibited from inheriting the Crown after the Act of Settlement of 1701, a lack of suitable heirs in the Stuart lineage led the court to look abroad for suitable heirs. Jacobites believed that monarchs were ordained by God and thus the Hanover Dynasty, which was brought over from Germany, were illegitimate heads of state.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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