

POLITICS IN SCHOOLGIRL DEBATING CULTURES IN ENGLAND, 1886-1914*

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Abstract: Debating was an important part of schoolgirls' political education in late Victorian and Edwardian England that has been overlooked in the scholarship on female education and civics instruction. Debates offered middle and working-class schoolgirls an embodied and interactive education for citizenship. Considering both the content of discussions and the process of debating, this article argues that school debates provided a unique opportunity for girls to discuss political ideas and develop political skills. Debates became intertwined with girls' peer cultures, challenging contemporary and historiographical assumptions of girlhood apoliticism. Positioning girls as political subjects sheds new light on political change in modern Britain. Schoolgirl debates show how gendered political boundaries were shifting in this period. Within the unique space of the school debating chamber, girls were free to appropriate and subvert 'masculine' political subjects and ways of speaking. In mock parliaments, schoolgirls recreated the archetypal male political space of the House of Commons, demonstrating their familiarity with parliamentary politics. Schoolgirl debates therefore foreshadowed initiatives that promoted women's citizenship after partial suffrage was achieved in 1918, and they help to explain how the first women voters were assimilated easily into existing party and constitutional politics.

The partial enfranchisement of women by the Representation of the People Act in 1918 marked a key turning point in modern British politics. The long campaign for the parliamentary vote and its legacy for women's political activities both in and out of parliament have been well documented.¹ However, beyond women's party organizations, we know relatively little about women's political socialization in the preceding decades.² After partial suffrage was achieved, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), formerly the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, set itself the task of equipping women for the parliamentary franchise. Where earlier efforts have been acknowledged, these are assumed to date only from the establishment of the first Women Citizens Association in 1913.³ But these initiatives were not as innovative as historians have suggested. By looking at schoolgirls' political education before the First World War, this article will argue that the efforts of suffrage organizations to instruct women in constitutional politics had important precedents in the classroom.

Schoolgirls' political education in England at the turn of the twentieth century took different forms. Teachers and schoolmates could be powerful influences on girls' political development. Formal instruction sometimes included civics and constitutional history, whereas school visits to the houses of parliament and mock elections provided a rarer but more participatory education for citizenship. This article focuses on school debates, which gave pupils an especially interactive and rounded political education. In the debating chamber, schoolgirls gained knowledge of political ideas and parliamentary forms while developing valuable public speaking skills. Debating society membership offered an apprenticeship in the organizational practices and committee work central to women's public roles in the period.

Underpinning this analysis is the conviction that the histories of childhood and education have important implications for our understandings of political change. Michael Childs has highlighted the influence of age on the electoral fortunes of the early Labour party; we know that generational change impacted voting behaviour, but more work is needed to understand how children and young people developed political identities in relation to the adults around them.⁴ We need to take the experiences of schoolgirls seriously, as they reveal new ways of thinking about the gendering of political cultures, political agency, and the transmission of political ideas and structures across generations. For instance, historians have acknowledged that women voters were assimilated easily into the party political system after 1918 but have yet to fully explain why.⁵ Turning our attention to the school shows that this process of assimilation began much earlier. School debates, which from the 1880s encouraged adolescent girls' integration within existing party and constitutional structures, are one important reason why partial suffrage was not a revolutionary moment and why a women's party failed to win widespread support in Britain.

Historians have highlighted the significance of debating for political education in various late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century contexts. The emphasis placed on rhetorical prowess in training public schoolboys for political careers has been well documented.⁶ The literature on 'informal' working-class education also helpfully shows how debating societies offered opportunities for unenfranchised men to develop their political acumen.⁷ Debates were not, however, a male preserve. Sarah Wiggins has persuasively demonstrated how women's college debating societies provided a political education for female students at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London.⁸

By contrast, histories of girls' education have largely neglected debating and downplayed schoolgirls' political socialization before 1918.⁹ The tendency to conceptualize political education as a precursor to adult, male political activity means girls' schools have

not been an obvious place to look. Moreover, school magazines – the primary record of middle-class school debating cultures – have only recently started to receive the critical attention they deserve. The extensive historiography on civics education in late Victorian and Edwardian English elementary schools could also be enriched by considering how debating contributed to citizenship instruction.¹⁰

In her recent article on League of Nations Union junior branches, Susannah Wright points to the active and participatory political education the societies offered secondary school pupils – especially girls – in the interwar period.¹¹ In this article, I will suggest that debating played a similar role in earlier decades in both elementary and middle-class girls' secondary schools. The late 1880s saw a boom in middle-class girls' school debating societies, as recently established institutions began to endorse the practice. Taking the lead from women's higher education, girls' schools co-opted a traditionally male intellectual pursuit into their extra-curricular repertoire – a bold experiment, perhaps, for new institutions still establishing their reputation. By the later Edwardian years, educational magazines increasingly recommended debating for both boys and girls in the higher standards of elementary schools.

Girls' educational experiences in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were heavily circumscribed by class.¹² The elementary schools established after the 1870 Education Act had a far more limited curriculum and considerably lower leaving age than the fee-paying girls' high schools which developed from the mid-nineteenth century.¹³ As many middle-class girls were educated at home, girls who attended the secondary schools I analyse in this article likely already came from households that valued women's citizenship roles.¹⁴ This was also a period of educational transition that saw a huge expansion in secondary school provision after the 1902 Education Act, creating new, though limited, opportunities for working-class girls to access secondary education.¹⁵

Given this gulf in educational provision, it is surprising that both elementary and middle-class girls' schools embraced debating. Teachers' periodicals highlight political debates in the elementary school context, whereas school magazines illuminate debating practice in middle-class girls' schools. Catherine Sloan has skilfully shown that school magazines are rich sources for young people's participation in the social and cultural practices of nineteenth-century middle-class secondary school education.¹⁶ Magazines were written primarily for those associated with the school – current and former pupils – but could have a broader circulation, including to other schools across the country and even abroad. Of course, school magazines offer only a partial record; they document debating proceedings to varying levels of detail. The survival of debating society minute books for North London Collegiate School allows us to fill in some of the gaps in ways not possible for other institutions. Nevertheless, school magazines offer a rare opportunity to access schoolgirl voices, albeit mediated by teachers' editorial oversight and likely representing a small but enthusiastic section of the school population.

The following analysis draws primarily on the records of five girls' high schools in London: North London Collegiate School (which established a permanent debating society in 1887), two Girls' Public Day School Company schools at Notting Hill and Wimbledon (where debates began in 1888), Central Foundation Girls' School in Spital Square (where form debates were first recorded in 1903), and the City of London School for Girls (which had a debating society from 1904).¹⁷ These schools were chosen for their geographical spread across the capital and their diverse organization and history. While North London Collegiate opened in 1850 and Central Foundation dates from the seventeenth century, the other schools were established between 1873 and 1894, coinciding with the rapid expansion of middle-class girls' education in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Central Foundation and City of London were linked to boys' schools and, unlike the other institutions, the former's

cheaper fees attracted a lower-middle-class clientele. Schoolgirl debating was not, of course, limited to London. To draw comparisons with schoolgirl experiences in a different political context to the capital, I examine the debating society at Manchester High School for Girls, which first met in 1886.¹⁸ This institution pioneered girls' secondary school reform in the city. Elsewhere, references can be found to debates at girls' high schools in Carlisle, Dover, Liverpool, and Sheffield – a by no means exhaustive list.¹⁹ This suggests that the debating practices at the six schools in this study can tell us about a broader political culture at a specific type of institution: the middle-class girls' day secondary school.

The school magazines document over 430 debates across the six girls' schools before 1914. The long-running North London Collegiate School debating society accounted for 36 per cent of these. Wimbledon and Notting Hill High Schools followed, at 22 and 20 per cent respectively. Unlike the other institutions, most Central Foundation debates did not take place in an extra-curricular society, but in form lessons, as part of the school's well-developed civics curriculum. Despite its early enthusiasm, Manchester High School's society was short-lived; its debates make up less than 5 per cent of the total. Debating societies fluctuated and were highly dependent on the commitment of particular schoolgirls or teachers.

Debating was a privilege restricted to the most academically advanced, usually older, pupils. In the girls' schools, participation was limited to those in the fourth or fifth forms and above, typically girls aged fourteen or older. Teachers' magazines also suggest that only those in the higher elementary school standards, broadly pupils aged eleven to thirteen, could take part. Ideas about child development and adolescence were in flux in this period.²⁰ The rules which determined whether a child had reached the right age and educational level to contribute to political debates need to be seen in this intellectual context.

The first section of the article considers how the content of debates contributed to schoolgirls' political education. By empowering schoolgirls to discuss current affairs and parliamentary politics, debates provided a powerful platform for their political expression. The analysis then turns from content to process. The very act of debating was political; debates trained schoolgirls in constitutional procedure and developed their speechmaking and organizational skills. The final section focuses on school parliamentary debates, where pupils recreated the House of Commons in the classroom.

II

Schoolgirl debating societies addressed political issues from the outset. The earliest political debate at the schools I have selected took place at Manchester High School for Girls in July 1886, on Irish home rule.²¹ This was only the sixth debate held by the school's society, established earlier that year. Significantly, the motion – 'That the present difficulty in Ireland can only be satisfactorily settled by the introduction of Home Rule' – was debated just three months after Gladstone brought the First Home Rule Bill before parliament. The speeches of the sixth former proposer and opposer point to adolescent schoolgirls' familiarity with parliamentary proceedings. Home ruler Lucy Baker concluded her argument with 'an extract from a speech of Mr. Gladstone's on Home Rule'. Her opponent Mary Scott instead chose to invoke the anti-home rule MP John Bright. This suggests girls had access to and read newspaper reports of parliamentary debates. Indeed, this was part of a wider debating trend where schoolgirls cited political 'experts' to support their arguments. Examples from North London Collegiate School debates include schoolgirls quoting the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini on free education, Robert Peel on the House of Lords, and the United States Commissioner on Education, Dr Harris, on co-education.²² These schoolgirls were

therefore familiar with the ideological convictions of prominent political men and deployed parliamentary and governmental discourses for their own ends. Nevertheless, in doing so they perhaps unconsciously constructed a hierarchy where the authoritative male political voice carried more weight than their own rhetorical efforts.

Eugenio Biagini has convincingly argued that women campaigners constructed home rule as ‘a woman’s issue’, framed in humanitarian and moral terms, to engage publicly with the ‘male preserve[s]’ of constitutional politics and foreign affairs.²³ However, the Manchester High schoolgirls saw no need to treat home rule as a female concern. Although their speeches avoided party politics, rather than ‘feminizing’ the home rule debate, the schoolgirls addressed political history, the legislature, nationalist violence, and the influence of the Catholic Church.²⁴ Indeed, schoolgirl debating societies destabilize many of our assumptions about women’s politics in late-nineteenth-century Britain. Historians have often argued that women presented their political activities as ‘feminine’ – an extension of their religious, social, and moral duties.²⁵ But from the 1880s, schoolgirls debated a wide range of political questions within the supposedly ‘masculine’ domains of constitutional politics, fiscal policy, empire, and foreign policy.

What enabled adolescent schoolgirls to engage with these political subjects in ways unavailable to adult women? The freedom of youth and shift in attitudes that came with generational change no doubt contributed, but I would argue that the educational context was decisive. The school was at once a public and private space. Although separated from the outside world, girls’ actions were nevertheless on display and open to scrutiny from their teachers and peers.²⁶ In the school debating chamber, this tension was pushed to its limits. This was an imagined, adult-controlled space where teachers temporarily allowed free political expression. The geographer David Livingstone’s concept of ‘spaces of speech’ is helpful here, focusing attention on how ‘particular settings confine or facilitate oral

exchange'.²⁷ The school therefore disrupts the frameworks we still use to understand the gendering of politics in the period, which remain rooted in the 'separate spheres' paradigm. Sites that eluded simple categorization, like the school debating chamber, created unique opportunities for female political engagement.

Debates on foreign policy and empire highlight schoolgirls' awareness of the changing geopolitical context. The legality and practice of war was the most frequently debated political issue at the six girls' schools, coinciding with the rapid growth in peace and arbitration organizations in the later nineteenth century.²⁸ Schoolgirls grappled with the concept of just war throughout the period, but motions also responded to current events.²⁹ For example, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 inspired debates on disarmament and arbitration at North London Collegiate School.³⁰ Reflecting growing anxieties about military competition, by the early twentieth century, debates on conscription became increasingly prominent.³¹ Debates were also an important way that schoolgirls encountered the empire 'at home'.³² However, given the emphasis on imperialism in the historiography of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century civics education, schoolgirls debated imperial topics far less than we might expect.³³ When they did discuss imperial matters, schoolgirls focused on pragmatic issues of colonial governance, rather than emotional appeals to imperialist ideology. Their debates included motions on the Jameson Raid, whether the colonies were a 'source of strength to the Mother Country', and 'The effect of the Boer war on England' – notably not on South Africa.³⁴ Indeed, all the imperial debates conceptualized empire in terms of its impact on the colonizers not the colonized. Schoolgirls viewed the major imperial issues of the day through a metropolitan lens.

Schoolgirls seemed more interested in political issues closer to home. They eagerly embraced constitutional debates which questioned the foundations of the British political system, like monarchical versus republican government and House of Lords reform.³⁵ Fiscal

policy was also well within schoolgirls' grasp, with several debates on free trade versus tariff reform.³⁶ Frank Trentmann's study of Britain as a 'free trade nation' and David Thackeray's analysis of the popular base of the Edwardian tariff reform campaign show how the fiscal debate suffused national culture, appealing to unenfranchised women and children as well as male voters. Political parties, they argue, deliberately used the debate to mobilize female support.³⁷ Schoolgirl engagement with the issue should be understood in this context. However, challenging gendered assumptions about women's participation in the fiscal debate, schoolgirls approached the subject intellectually, rather than as consumers. Concentrated between late 1909 and early 1910, their debates reflected a key issue of the 1910 general elections. At a time when openly comparing Liberal and Conservative policy would have been inappropriate for schoolgirls, the fiscal question provided a suitable proxy for partisan debate – one example of how future women voters were assimilated into the party system before 1918.

Electoral reform was another hotly contested topic in schoolgirl debates. Women's suffrage was debated ten times across the London schools in the first decade of the twentieth century. These debates mainly took place between 1904 and 1909.³⁸ This maps onto the broader chronology of the suffrage movement. The majority of debates took place after a parliamentary majority for women's suffrage had been secured and when the extra-parliamentary campaign was gaining momentum. The prominence of women teachers in the suffrage movement meant these debates likely had sympathetic supporters among the staff.³⁹ However, motions supporting women's suffrage stopped after 1909. It is unclear whether teachers or schoolgirls took the initiative here, but the rise of suffragette violence likely made the subject too controversial for middle-class schoolgirls to discuss. By the following year, the tone of debates had changed. Fifth formers at the City of London School for Girls agreed in December 1910 'That the methods of the militant party of the Women's Suffrage

movement should be censured'.⁴⁰ Through these evolving debates on the franchise question, adolescent schoolgirls demonstrated their awareness of the changing political landscape, which in turn set the parameters for suitable political discussion.

Schoolgirl debates subverted gendered political conventions most profoundly by mirroring parliamentary proceedings. In the following examples, girls voiced opinions on the same subjects that echoed around the Commons chamber – the archetypal masculine political space. In 1901, Wimbledon High School debaters, reconstituted in a short-lived 'Political Society', discussed bills for 'the Better Housing of the Poor' and 'the Prevention of Drunkenness in Licensed Houses'. Both issues were debated at Westminster that year and were likely chosen for that reason.⁴¹ Similarly, North London Collegiate School debates on the 1888 Local Government Act and Eight Hours Bill coincided with similar discussions at Westminster.⁴² In 1907, eighteen-year-old Gladys Miall Smith, secretary of the school's debating society, praised the relevance of their latest debate on House of Lords reform. 'The subject was a very appropriate one', she wrote in the school magazine, 'for that very week the same question was being discussed in the House of Commons, and was foremost in the minds of all Englishmen'.⁴³ Discussions of contemporary parliamentary issues seemed to add gravitas to schoolgirl debates.

Girls did not simply rehearse debates that took place at Westminster but tackled major legislative issues themselves and even critiqued parliamentary decision-making. In December 1911, adolescent schoolgirls at Notting Hill High School agreed 'it is not desirable that the Insurance Bill shall become law'.⁴⁴ As a comparison with schoolboy debates highlights, overt criticism of government policy remained gendered. Confidence motions were rare in schoolgirl debates for much of the period, but featured regularly in the various debating societies at the City of London School from as early as 1880, for example.⁴⁵ However, by the end of the period, girls were able to make similarly scathing attacks on specific elements of

government policy. In December 1913, schoolgirls at Notting Hill High declared they had ‘no confidence in the Land Policy of the Government’.⁴⁶ Schoolgirls’ freedom of political and partisan expression therefore increased over time.

Nevertheless, girls were aware their participation in political debates was controversial. In their second ever debate, in March 1887, North London Collegiate schoolgirls considered whether ‘political debates be excluded from this society’.⁴⁷ The outcome of the vote was not recorded, but the appearance of debates on women’s suffrage and insurrections in the following months suggests the motion was defeated. When the question resurfaced twenty years later, supporters of political debates only won by a single vote.⁴⁸ Even in a setting where political subjects were addressed regularly, schoolgirls’ political engagement remained a contested issue.

Political debates prompted more concern in the elementary school context, reflecting fears about the particularly pernicious effect partisan teaching might have on younger, more impressionable working-class pupils. There were other important differences between debates in elementary and middle-class schools. Whereas girls’ school debates were seen primarily as an opportunity for civics instruction, for working-class pupils the perceived pedagogical benefit was twofold: debates improved academic performance in oral and written composition while preparing both boys and girls for their future roles as citizens. In elementary schools, debates typically took place during lessons guided by a teacher rather than in dedicated, pupil-run debating societies. Although middle-class girls’ school debates were a firm fixture by the late 1880s, elementary school debates did not take hold until a couple of decades later and were less widely adopted, especially for girls.⁴⁹

Debates were not part of the mandated elementary school curriculum but are one example of how some teachers kept their lessons relevant and engaging; ‘up-to-date’ teaching

was the latest pedagogical craze.⁵⁰ From 1909, teachers' magazines began to reference debates among older elementary school pupils, usually children aged eleven to thirteen. Several teachers contributed to *The Teachers' Aid* and *The Woman Teacher's World* to report the success of their school debates. As these articles show, it was not only middle-class girls who debated the Licensing Bill and women's suffrage or discussed the relative merits of monarchy and republic, free trade and tariff reform.⁵¹ However, other teachers were more cautious when selecting suitable motions for debate. According to one teacher writing in 1912, debates should be both 'of an interesting character' and 'within the grasp of the child-mind', whereas motions which invited 'partizan prejudice' were discouraged.⁵² The following year, *The Schoolmistress* printed a similar warning: 'It is not advisable to suggest that school children should discuss national political questions, moral or religious topics, or even "Votes for Women."' ⁵³ But the line between political and non-political content was not always clear. In an accompanying list of sanctioned debates, the author included a motion to abolish rates and taxes. Definitions of politics were fluid and the line for acceptable debates could be drawn in different places.

When children's 'debates' first appeared in magazines for elementary school teachers, they were designed as entertainment items. Between 1885 and 1896, *The Teachers' Aid* published twelve 'Debate[s] for Children's Entertainment' – scripts that ran to several pages, designed to be performed by schoolchildren. Most of the dialogues were politically themed. Topics included women's rights, imperial expansion, the payment of members of parliament, free education, local elections, labour disputes, and state interference.⁵⁴ The scripts contain a surprising level of political detail; performances would have exposed child 'debaters' to political ideas and discourse. In these political 'debates', the speakers were mainly boys. In mixed educational settings, it seems, political matters were often assumed to be relevant only to schoolboys. Although it is unclear how widely the dialogues were used by teachers, the

long-running nature of the series suggests the items were popular, or at least editors thought so. During this period, then, elementary school debates were transformed from a fixed narrative occasionally imposed on schoolchildren to a more regular, organic activity. The child performer became an active debater. At the same time, political debates became more suitable for girls. Influenced perhaps by growing interest in child development and movements for progressive education, children's political precocity was no longer seen as a source of humour but something of educational value to be nurtured.

The proportion of political and non-political debating topics varied between institutions. When teachers' magazines suggested political themes for debate in elementary schools, these were accompanied by a wide range of non-political subjects, such as transport, the seasons, literature, and urban versus rural life.⁵⁵ Across all the girls' schools, non-political debates were most common. Literature, character, fashion, and lifestyle proved particularly popular themes; even the existence of ghosts was debated on several occasions. Overall, just under a quarter of girls' school debates addressed political subjects – ranging from roughly one in three at Central Foundation Girls' School, to one in five at Wimbledon High. What is more striking, however, is the ease with which schoolgirl debaters moved between political and non-political topics. As one example, in 1886, the first year of debates at Manchester High, schoolgirls considered the influence of fiction on readers a fortnight before debating Irish home rule.⁵⁶ By moving seamlessly between political and non-political subjects, political discourse within the school debating chamber was normalized.

III

Politics was not confined to the content of schoolgirl debates. The act of debating was political. Debates developed schoolgirls' political skills in three main areas: speechmaking,

organization, and debating protocol. Emma Griffin helpfully uses the development of political skills, for example in mutual improvement societies, as an explanatory framework for the widespread participation of working-class men in the Chartist movement.⁵⁷ Similarly, the practical political education that debating societies offered middle-class schoolgirls helps to explain how women were equipped to take increasingly active roles in public politics from the last two decades of the nineteenth century. By giving girls transferable skills in political dialogue and association, debating societies anticipated the efforts of organizations such as NUSEC to equip women with the political skills needed for full citizenship after 1918.

Historians of the nineteenth century have largely treated speechmaking as a masculine political skill. Joseph Meisel characterizes debating societies as ‘schools for public speaking’ that catered mainly for men and Josephine Hoegaerts has explored how male politicians sought to enhance their status by cultivating a “‘proper” parliamentary voice’.⁵⁸ Certainly, for much of the nineteenth century, encouraging middle-class women, let alone schoolgirls, to speak in public was highly controversial. As Lawrence Goldman has shown, the earliest papers by women at the Social Science Association were read by men and the novelty of women speakers in the 1850s and 1860s drew large audiences.⁵⁹ Women public speakers stood out. In her memoirs, Lady Frances Balfour recalled listening ‘with awe’ to Lydia Becker, the first woman she had heard give a public speech.⁶⁰ In this context, schoolgirl debating emerges as an innovative attempt to redefine appropriate female behaviour. Although the path from school to political life was one rarely available to women in this period, schoolgirl debaters could develop skills in speechmaking and rebuttal that might be put into practice later in a public career.

Reports of schoolgirl debates prized speaking skills highly; comments critiquing the quality of delivery outnumbered those on speech content. At a 1906 fourth form debate at Central Foundation Girls’ School about women artificially improving their appearance, it was

the speaking skills not the arguments of one fourth form schoolgirl which denoted political potential. Form representative Clara Birnberg reported: ‘One honourable member spoke so well that we think she ought to be an M.P.’.⁶¹ Here, political skills rather than familiarity with politics were the necessary prerequisites for a parliamentary position.

Not all reports were so complimentary. Repeated appeals were made for new speakers and members were encouraged to speak more frequently and spontaneously. In the April 1901 issue of *The Wimbledon High School Magazine*, a lower fifth former bemoaned the ‘present low standard’ of debates and gave suggestions for increasing speakers’ confidence.⁶² Shyness was often seen as a barrier to successful debates. We should not, though, view this as a peculiarly schoolgirl issue. Sarah Wiggins identifies similar problems in women’s college debates.⁶³ In an 1889 article on how to set up ‘A Teachers’ Parliamentary Debating Society’, *The Teachers’ Aid* reported that even schoolmasters could be afraid to speak in public.⁶⁴ By repeatedly calling out reluctant speakers, schoolgirl debaters deliberately set themselves a high standard. In March 1895, the secretary of North London Collegiate School’s debating society urged members to participate more keenly in discussions, ‘or the Debating Society would lose its position and usefulness’.⁶⁵ Schoolgirls were aware of how much was riding on the success of their debates: the reputation of their society and, with it, their right to voice opinions, even on political subjects.

For the same reason, debating societies celebrated skilled and reasoned argument over sentiment. Edith Read, a founding member of North London Collegiate School’s debating society who continued her debating career at Girton College, recalled a debate in 1887 on socialism where her opening speech was criticized by headmistress Mrs Bryant for being too emotional.⁶⁶ This suggests that middle-class schoolgirls were already being trained in the supposedly masculine qualities of ‘emotional economy’ and control which Alison Light argued became part of middle-class femininity in the interwar period.⁶⁷ Does this mean that

schoolgirl debaters were encouraged to adopt a masculine demeanour to be taken seriously? I have already suggested that by debating ‘male’ political issues with ease, schoolgirls redefined assumptions about suitable political subjects for female discussion. The same was true for the debating process. By favouring restrained speech over emotionalism, schoolgirls showed there were a broader range of speaking styles available to young women at the turn of the twentieth century.

Debating society membership gave schoolgirls practical experience of the organizational methods involved in a wide range of public activity. Schoolgirls largely ran debating societies themselves. Society members elected individuals to committee positions; schoolgirls were appointed to various roles including president, secretary, and treasurer. Debating reports in school magazines and society minute books were often authored by pupils, usually the society’s elected secretary. Members drew up constitutions and rules, which were adapted over time and could be extensive; in February 1907, the reconstituted North London Collegiate School society passed no fewer than twenty-six new regulations.⁶⁸ Adolescent schoolgirls elected to positions of office in debating societies therefore gained first-hand experience of committee work – valuable training for the kinds of public positions open to women in the period, in local government, women’s political organizations, and charitable work.

Mistresses were involved in school debating societies to varying degrees. At Manchester High, North London Collegiate, Wimbledon High, and City of London Schools, women teachers were numbered among committee members. North London Collegiate School teachers played a particularly active supervisory role, advising on debating protocol and, from 1895, signing off each entry in the minute book.⁶⁹ Even at Notting Hill High School, where mistresses declined the offer of committee positions and ‘preferred to leave the matter in the hands of the girls’, the debating society ran with the permission of headmistress

Miss Jones.⁷⁰ Teacher supervision was more marked in elementary school debates. Mistresses were firmly in charge, deciding the subjects for discussion, enforcing the rules of debate, and calling on reticent pupils to speak.⁷¹ This was a far cry from the self-governing societies celebrated in middle-class schools. It is unclear whether age or class was the deciding factor, but political discussion among younger, working-class girls involved closer supervision.

However, teachers' motivations for participating in debates went beyond supervising schoolgirls. At the six high schools, teachers joined in debates themselves, giving speeches and voting alongside their pupils. At Wimbledon High School, old girls also participated actively in the debating society from the start.⁷² Adult women, too, then, enthusiastically embraced the freedom of the school debating chamber and were drawn back even after leaving school. Apart from the minority who went on to university, life after school offered few opportunities to continue debating. Keeping in touch with school societies no doubt had a social purpose but also provided ongoing access to a highly valued space for political debate. This is further evidence that the school setting, rather than age, was the key enabling factor for female political expression in these debates.

Schoolgirls' efforts to follow debating protocol closely – and to be seen doing so – aimed to demonstrate their political competence. Debates conformed to a set pattern and proposed changes to protocol provoked vigorous discussion among members. However, schoolgirls' debates were not always so formal. An important annual fixture in Notting Hill High School's calendar was the entertainment debate. Old girls were invited back for a debate with current schoolgirls followed by refreshments, dancing, and dramatic or musical performances. In 1899, the school magazine noted the society was 'becoming quite famous' for its tea.⁷³ The entertainment debate continued to thrive and epitomized how schoolgirls could fuse serious – sometimes political – discussions, with more light-hearted activities. In December 1913, for example, the annual entertainment included a debate on the

government's land policy, tea, and 'Scenes from Cranford'.⁷⁴ This combination might seem incongruous, but there is no sense from the school magazine reports that these activities were in any way contradictory for the teachers and girls taking part. Similarly, the founding rules of North London Collegiate School's debating society stated that 'Needlework may be done during the Debate'.⁷⁵ (Though this regulation had been removed by 1907.) Girls' school debates did not, then, take place in opposition to conventional feminine 'accomplishments'; to take part in one, adolescent schoolgirls did not necessarily need reject the other. Just as they might move easily between political and non-political subjects in the content of their discussions, so too could they shift from political to non-political activities within their debating society meetings. These tensions within schoolgirl debating practices give a nuanced picture of the gendering of middle-class girls' educational experience at the turn of the twentieth century.

IV

In parliamentary debates, which recreated the House of Commons within the school walls, pupils constructed their own versions of the most influential political institution in the country. These formed part of a longer history of 'local parliaments' in the nineteenth century. Historians have tended to interpret these male-exclusive institutions through their success in training men for public office.⁷⁶ Colin Matthew's analysis is more nuanced and shows how local parliaments enabled political education and expression among a wider group of men.⁷⁷ The conceptual framework Sarah Wiggins uses to unpack women's college parliamentary debates is particularly helpful. Wiggins looks at the significance of student parliaments both at the time of their sitting and as training for the future. Student debates, she argues, combined 'substance and merit for the present along with promise and potential for

the future'.⁷⁸ The former becomes even more important in the school context, where an exclusively future-oriented perspective would overlook the distinctiveness of adolescent political expression.

Schoolgirl parliaments were by far most frequent at North London Collegiate School, especially in the late 1880s and 1890s. The first mock parliament on 11 July 1888 drew a large audience, with a record attendance of sixty-two members.⁷⁹ Headmistress Mrs Bryant acted as Speaker and the schoolgirls, divided into Irish, ministry, and opposition benches, each assumed the role of a particular member of parliament. Parliamentary procedures – maiden speeches, bills, divisions, and voting – were mimicked closely. In doing so, schoolgirls intended to demonstrate their political skills and maturity. The reporter to *Our Magazine* noted proudly: 'All was carried out in due form.'⁸⁰

Schoolgirl parliaments provided a unique atmosphere for free political expression. Within 'the House', the school rules which discouraged unnecessary talking between pupils were relaxed, and debates enabled 'outburst[s] of enthusiasm', 'Much disturbance', and heckling.⁸¹ They combined serious parliamentary imitation with schoolgirl humour and satire. Sixth former Margaret Turner's account of the July 1895 parliamentary debate on funding a statue of Oliver Cromwell emphasized the lively nature of proceedings. Her report is rich with parenthetical descriptions of members' reactions: 'Hear, hear', 'Opposition cries', 'ministerial cheers', and 'Laughter'.⁸² Parliamentary debates not only gave older North Londoners the opportunity to mimic parliamentary proceedings but also to appropriate the conventions of political journalism in their parliamentary reporting.

Parliamentary debates at Central Foundation and City of London girls' schools focused instead on school matters. While girls used political language and imitated parliamentary procedure – joining parties and taking cabinet roles – their debates avoided

political subjects. In 1909, the fourth forms at Central Foundation Girls' School 'had a Parliament in the Art Room'. Bills included a proposal 'to tax mistresses two pence' whenever they issued a punishment.⁸³ The first parliamentary debate at City of London School for Girls, which did not take place until 1916, also discussed school policies. Members debated the Colonial Secretary's bill for school site expansion ('That this nation should emigrate to its Colony') and an appeal for the second badminton team to be allowed to play in matches as the 'Second Army'.⁸⁴ By mimicking parliament, adolescent schoolgirls added weight to their jovial protests against school discipline and suggested improvements to the school experience. The educative benefit of these debates was perceived to be in teaching parliamentary process rather than political content. Their primary purpose was an education in constitutional practice.

Given that parliamentary debates were never a permanent fixture in girls' high schools, it is significant that they were sometimes encouraged among younger, pre-adolescent pupils in elementary education. As with elementary school debating in general, mock parliaments in working-class schools became more interactive over time. In 1893, *The Teachers' Aid* ran a three-part series titled 'A School Parliament', in the genre of its 'entertainment debates'. In the dialogue, boys from the upper standards 'debated' the 'The All Play and No Work Bill'. Stage directions informed teachers how they might move desks to recreate the Commons chamber in the classroom. Boys should wear archaic parliamentary dress and be 'made up' with 'wigs and whiskers' for comic effect.⁸⁵ Here, working-class boys no older than fourteen embodied parliamentary satire through a typical childhood activity: dressing up. While they might have inadvertently learnt something about parliamentary protocol, the end goal was entertainment not education.

Several years later, the aim of these debates shifted, and pupils participated more actively. In 1901, two articles in *The Teachers' Aid* described 'Parliament in School';

schoolboys imitated a London County Council transport committee and debated pensions, juvenile employment, and women's suffrage in a mock House of Commons.⁸⁶ It was not until the following decade that girls were recorded doing something similar. In a regular feature on teaching current events, to coincide with the opening of parliament in February 1912, *The Woman Teacher's World* described how teachers might organize a 'Children's Parliament': the reality of Parliament should be brought home to the children by allowing them to copy the "Mother of Parliaments" as faithfully as possible. Two sides can be chosen to conduct the debate, and a Speaker, in whose hands all questions of order should be left, may be elected by the class or selected by the teacher. A good plan, though involving some trouble, is to move the desks, so that the two parties may face one another as in the House of Commons.⁸⁷

These practical instructions were a blueprint for teachers to spatially reconstruct Westminster's confrontational politics in the elementary school classroom. As in the high schools, following parliamentary process was valued highly. However, allusions to party politics were more strictly controlled. Schoolgirls were appointed as prime minister and leader of the opposition, but party labels were to be avoided. 'Rights' and 'Lefts' should be used instead, and the subjects selected for debate were non-political. In the earlier examples of schoolboy parliaments, too, despite the discussion of major political issues, no reference was made to party politics. In the elementary school, a clear distinction was therefore drawn between children engaging with constitutional process and party political debate.

North London Collegiate School's mock parliaments suggest that older, middle-class schoolgirls had more opportunities to bring party politics into their debates. Both teachers and schoolgirls associated themselves with party not through partisan labels but the politics – and personalities – of individual MPs. Sometimes this was done to visual effect. At the first parliamentary debate, the Irish MPs 'were known by their green bows and decorations'.⁸⁸

Here, schoolgirls participated in the popular political tradition of displaying party allegiance through the wearing of party colours.⁸⁹ Where debaters' names are recorded alongside their parliamentary pseudonyms, we can probe schoolgirls' party political convictions through the MPs they chose to represent. Teachers were more likely to align themselves with Gladstonian Liberal, Liberal Unionist, and Conservative MPs, whereas girls had more divergent views.⁹⁰ Unlike their teachers, several schoolgirls identified themselves with Irish nationalist, Liberal Radical, and Socialist politicians. It might have been unwise for mistresses to betray such radical political convictions; schoolgirls, instead, appeared more free to do so. Although adults and adolescents alike found their political voice within the school debating chamber, age still determined the scripts available to them.

These parliamentary performances complicate our understanding of girls' political agency. In their imagined parliaments, debaters took on the personas of specific male politicians. Their partisan activity was permitted only when they relinquished their age and gender disadvantage by assuming the role of enfranchised, elected men. This should not be seen, however, as undermining the girls' own political identities. Instead, parliamentary debates show girls' school debating culture at its most empowering. It was precisely in the performance of parliamentary figures underlying these debates where schoolgirls best demonstrated the extent of their parliamentary knowledge and their partisan allegiances.

Edith Read remembered the tensions caused by party politics at North London Collegiate School in the late 1880s. The school attempted to control schoolgirl debaters' party political enthusiasm, and members 'were not supposed to display [their] political prejudices apart from a properly conducted debate'.⁹¹ Party political expression at the school was sanctioned only in specific settings which enabled a level of adult control. In the recreated House of Commons chamber, schoolgirls were free to demonstrate party allegiance and participate in parliamentary rowdyism. Schoolgirls' parliamentary performance created a

platform where, for a time, different rules applied. Once the debate was finished, they were expected to return to obedient schoolgirl behaviour. For example, North Londoners were instructed by Mrs Bryant after one debate ‘to leave the House quietly and quickly’.⁹²

These attempts to spatially confine schoolgirls’ debates were, however, never fully successful. Schoolgirl debating at times spilled out from formal settings into less controllable spaces. In her study of mid-nineteenth-century French boarding schools, Rebecca Rogers shows how girls could circumvent the ‘spatial and disciplinary politics of boarding-school life’ in secluded areas of the school.⁹³ In a similar way, English schoolgirls in later decades sought out more private spaces for informal debates beyond teachers’ control. The cloak room is a good example. In 1907, members of the sixth form Sodalitas Debating Society at Central Foundation Girls’ School were keen to continue their discussions after the formal meeting closed: ‘enthusiastic members discussed the subjects, with ardour, in the cloak rooms’.⁹⁴ It was here, too, that debates on free trade and tariff reform took place during the first 1910 general election. The exclusively schoolgirl space was transformed for the purpose: ‘the Sixth cloak room became a debating chamber’. Schoolgirls incorporated the physical layout of the cloak room in their imagined parliament. The cloak room benches were transformed into a ‘Free Trade bench’ and ‘Tariff Reform bench’ and an umbrella stand became a precarious debating platform.⁹⁵ Following insights from children’s geographies, here young people used the physical, social, and imagined dimensions of the ‘intimate geographies’ available to them.⁹⁶ By appropriating the space of the sixth form cloak room for their own purpose, the oldest girls of the school could circumvent the stricter controls of formal debates and express their partisan opinions more freely beyond their teachers’ gaze. The girls’ commitment to the parliamentary debate format behind closed doors suggests they saw it as an acceptable framework, both legitimizing but easy to satirize, for broaching party political opinions with their peers. Schoolgirls therefore co-opted the ‘parliaments’ of their

debating societies into their own peer cultures and leisure spaces. By playing parliament, they showed the extent to which political debating could permeate the school experience.

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From the late 1880s, debating gave girls in English schools a unique platform for political discussion and training. Debates expanded girls' political knowledge and honed their political skills. Schoolgirls demonstrated their political competence and rhetorical skills in the debating chamber by following debating procedure closely and refining their public speaking. Leadership roles on debating society committees gave them practical experience of the organizational activities central to women's public work in the period.

School debates were radical precursors to the work suffrage organizations began decades later to prepare adult women for the franchise. Members of NUSEC and the Women Citizens Associations enjoyed a more active citizenship than schoolgirl debaters, campaigning to elect women to parliament and lobbying for social reforms. Nevertheless, schoolgirl debating culture provides crucial context to this postwar drive for women's citizenship. Just as schoolgirls, female teachers, and former pupils all embraced the unparalleled political opportunities of the school debating chamber, the appeal of the citizenship initiatives that followed was the same: the creation of a space that encouraged politically uninitiated women to discuss politics openly and develop political skills.

Schoolgirl debates are an important but overlooked example of how gendered political boundaries were shifting in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. They demonstrate how the histories of childhood and youth can enrich our understandings of political change and the need to analyse juvenile political activity on its own terms, not just as training for future citizenship. Both elementary and high school debaters grappled with the

major political issues of the day, from imperial and foreign policy, to constitutional and fiscal politics. Within the school debating chamber – at once a public and private space – girls were free to appropriate and subvert ‘masculine’ political subjects and ways of speaking with enthusiasm and ease. The mix of political and non-political topics normalized political debates at school. Girls were far more likely to debate political issues at middle-class schools before similar opportunities were open to their working-class peers. Elementary schoolgirls did participate in later political debates but, in mixed educational settings, it could be more easily argued that debating be restricted to schoolboys. However, there are limits to what school sources can tell us. Despite the wealth of evidence that debating was a widespread schoolgirl experience, it is much harder to trace the long-term trajectory of individual debaters. A handful of students continued their debating careers at university; further research might explore the impact school debating had on adult women’s lives beyond the educational context.

The debating chamber offered schoolgirls an embodied and interactive citizenship education. The mock parliament took this to the extreme. Schoolgirls’ recreations of the archetypal male political space of the House of Commons in the school disrupted gendered political boundaries most profoundly. Nevertheless, schoolgirls were mostly deferential to the parliamentary system – and the traditions of parliamentary satire – they mimicked. School parliaments were therefore one important route for women’s assimilation into existing constitutional and party political structures before 1918. Party politics remained off limits in elementary school parliaments. But in their mock Houses of Commons, middle-class secondary schoolgirls experimented with partisan expression. Beyond the supervision of their teachers, high school debaters found spaces in school to play parliament. This imagined parliamentary play epitomizes the versatility of middle-class schoolgirl debating cultures and points to schoolgirls’ remarkable familiarity with the Westminster world. By providing a

platform for public speaking, political discussion, and even parliamentary imitation, girls' school debating cultures enabled political expression far beyond what was possible for adult women – let alone schoolgirls – outside the school walls.

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⁹⁶ Chris Philo, "'The corner-stones of my world": editorial introduction to special issue on spaces of childhood', *Childhood*, 7 (2000), pp. 243-56.