

Dr Max Skjönsberg, FRHistS
Department of History
School of Histories, Languages and Cultures
University of Liverpool

Party and Faction in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought

When is party politics beneficial and when does it become so polarized and militant that it risks tearing societies asunder? This question has been central in Western politics for several years on both sides of the Atlantic. It became acute during the Trump presidency, especially during the 2020 Presidential election and its violent aftermath. This discussion emerged at the very beginning of party-based politics in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain. After the beginning of annual sessions of parliament in the wake of the Glorious Revolution in 1688-89, political parties became an entrenched part of political life. This quickly generated a debate about whether parties were an unavoidable part of modern parliamentary politics, and whether they were beneficial or pernicious. In this debate, parties were blamed for encouraging a form of herd mentality in politics. More fundamental was the concern that parties exacerbated division and turned neighbours into enemies. As Joseph Addison wrote in the *Spectator*, "I am sometimes afraid that I discover the seeds of civil war in these our divisions." Most astute political commentators, however, realized that parties were not going away. They were a price worth paying for parliamentary politics and ultimately a sacrifice for political freedom. A state without parties was a state without liberty, as Montesquieu put it in his history of the Roman republic. A government without parties is an absolute government, since rulers without opposition are autocrats. The most famous way to distinguish between beneficial and pernicious party politics was through the distinction between party and faction, made famous by Bolingbroke and Burke, who play seminal roles in my recently published book, *The Persistence of Party: Ideas of Harmonious Discord in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).