

# [George the 3rd's reign: public perceptions](https://assignbuster.com/george-the-3rds-reign-public-perceptions/)

## Discuss the public perception of George III in the first half of his reign.

The sixty year reign of George III from 1760 to 1820 is the second longest of any British monarch save Victoria, his granddaughter. It endured the as yet unrivalled Gordon Riots of 1780, in which 10, 000 troops were deployed and some £100, 000 of damage caused, the independence of America after years of expensive war and witnessed the French Revolution of 1789 and the horrors and war that followed. When George III died in 1820 he was well mourned: 30, 000 people attended the supposedly private funeral, despite the fact that the king had been out of the public eye since 1810; shops were shut and laudatory sermons penned (Colley 1984, 94). Yet the public perception of George in the first half of his reign is somewhat more ambiguous and controversial: Samuel Romilly wrote that ‘ from the beginning of his reign to the close of the American War, he was one of the most unpopular princes that ever sat on he throne’ (quoted in Colley 2005, 208).

Picard (2000, 288), on the other hand, notes that the accession of George III was greeted by the people with ‘ delirious enthusiasm’. On his coronation at the age of 22, George may indeed have seemed an attractive prospect, in particular because, unlike his two predecessors on the throne, he had been born and educated in England and spoke English as his first language. The stigma of being foreign did not apply to him and his attachment to Hanover, regularly preferred by George II, was not great, in fact he described it as that ‘ horrid electorate’ (Ditchfield 2002, 23). In his first speech before parliament, George emphasised this, ‘ born and educated in this country, I glory in the name of Britain’ (Shapiro 1972, 30). As for his character, Horace Walpole noted, the king seemed good-natured, walking about and talking to everybody as well as occupying the throne with dignity and grace and answering addresses well (Long 1962, 67). Even so, Colley has noted that while the new king may have been better received than the previous Georges, he received less public acclaim than William Pitt the Elder, whom he had rebuffed upon the death of George II (Colley 2005, 401 n. 28; Colley 1984, 94; Long 1962, 64-65).

Despite what might have been an optimistic beginning, the popularity of George seems to have waned, at least in certain quarters, during the 1760s. Early cartoons undermine him, showing him under the control of his mother and Lord Bute (Colley 2005, 209). A cartoon of 1770 vividly compares the reception of the king in 1760 and 1770 (Clarke 1972, 75). In contrast to the crowded street of celebrants in 1760, in 1770 the king’s procession proceeds alone through London as the driver comments ‘ we are no longer plagued with the acclamation of the people’. Clarke (1972, 74) comments that this visible discontent was caused by rising population and deteriorating living standards. Other prints from the late 1760s show George as a blind, pliable child, in 1773 and 1780 he was portrayed as a drain on Britannia, in 1779 and 1784 he was shown as an oriental tyrant and (Colley 1984, 102). Perhaps due to his friendship with members of the Catholic elite and his sponsorship of the sons of Catholic ‘ gentlemen of reputable character’ as well as his support for measured Catholic relief and suppression of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, he was even represented as a closet Catholic (Ditchfield 2002, 100-101, 106).

It was during the early 1760s that John Wilkes rose to public prominence and popularity, often at the expense of the king and Bute. Wilkes, an English MP, had begun to publish a paper, The North Briton, in opposition to the Scottish Bute’s paper The Briton, which supported peace with France, (Shapiro 1972, 37). Wilkes was, amongst other things, anti-Scottish and pro-English, a womaniser and a member of the Hell Fire club (Colley 2005, 106). As such, he stood in stark contrast to the king, and seems to have been a more popular figure with the public. In response to George’s speech proposing peace with France, he published number 45 of The North Briton, in which he notoriously criticised the king and his new minister Grenville, causing his arrest under a general warrant (Clarke 1972, 42). He then capitalised on the unpopular use of general warrants, presenting himself as a champion of liberty against tyranny, and they were later declared illegal (Shapiro 1972, 47).

George’s early unpopularity seems to have been due to his break with the Whigs and his promotion of his former tutor and relative political outsider Bute and their policy of peace with France (Clarke 1972, 38). He was suspected of trying to increase royal power and acting unconstitutionally, leading to accusations of tyranny, although it is only natural that Whigs and the excluded would respond in such a way after their years of prominence. His early proclamation of Britishness, while inclusive in spirit, rankled with sections of the majority English, as did his choice of the Scottish Bute, a Stuart, who was also reputedly the lover of the king’s mother and a Tory (Shapiro 1972, 32-33). His unpopularity may also have owed something to the king’s perceived dullness and ordinariness and a lack of ceremony and majesty to promote the royal image (Colley 2005, 202). For example, the royal couple were brought to their coronation in sedan chairs and Samuel Johnson commented that the crown was too often ‘ worn out of sight of the people’ (Colley 2005, 203).

In the 1770s and early 1780s, with Lord North as his minister, it was the loss of the American colonies and defeat by them that became a real public humiliation for George, as well as a political crisis (Cannon 2004). In 1775, John Wesley commented that most people ‘ heartily despise his majesty, and hate him with a perfect hatred’ (quoted in Colley 2005, 208). Even so, public opinion on the war was ‘ seriously fractured’ on both sides and Colley notes that the experience of this particular war, against a colony perceived as the mirror of Britain and without allies in Europe, ‘ seems actually to have resolved some of the uncertainties and divisions of the 1760s and early 1770s’, although North was forced to resign in 1782 (Colley 2005, 137, 143). Indeed, North absorbed much of the responsibility and images of George himself tend to become more positive, often portraying him as St George, John Bull or later as the guardian of the nation (Colley 1984, 102). This is especially the case following the king’s illness in 1788, which showed his vulnerability and aroused great pity (Colley 2005, 212).

A more conscious fostering of royalism and its link with nationalism in second half of George’s reign inevitably casts a shadow back over his public perception in the first half. For example, the first royal jubilee was held on 25 Oct 1809 and celebrated around the empire as well as in 650 locations around England (Colley 2005, 218). While George’s famed domesticity may have been unexciting in a young king, his morality and example perhaps influenced the shifting virtues of the late eighteenth century towards an idea of the family and sensitivity and away from indecency, especially popular amongst the developing middle classes (Porter 1990, 305-307). There was also an increasing sentimental female attachment to royalty (Colley 2005, 218-19). Through his long life he became a symbol of continuity and stability in Britain against the anarchy that had overtaken much of Europe (Colley 2005, 223-24). Public ceremony and pomp also was taken more seriously with some 27, 000 volunteers displaying in Hyde Park in 1803 (Colley 2005, 225).

Inevitably, the public perception of George III varied from person to person and it is imprudent to overgeneralise; there is evidence for both popularity and approval and their opposites and there is undoubtedly much that is partisan in popular publications (Colley 2005, 208, 228). However, the increasing popularity of George in the latter half of his reign does seem to highlight his more ambiguous public status in the first half, but should be taken in the context of increasing concern for fostering the royal image. Insofar as it is possible to gauge public perceptions, he was viewed in the first half of his reign with a mixture of optimism, suspicion, ridicule, love and hatred. He may have offended Wilkes, the Whigs and the old elite and seemed weak and under the control of his mother and Bute, but his loyalty to his country, delight in family, home and farm and sheer longevity eventually offered a unifying factor in a changing country and a changed world. Through the loss of America, and his very public illness and confinement, George, rather than becoming less popular, could be seen to embody a more national feeling, and indeed this changing image, rather than power, of royalty has been developed by monarchs ever since. Thus Colley (2005, 401 n. 28) observes that it was from the 1780s that there was a sustainable rise in his popularity and patriotic significance.

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