Elections and Voting Behaviour

The Political System of the United Kingdom

Current Events

Current Events

- ▶ Attack in Tunisia
- ▶ Lord Janner will be prosecuted after all →calls for director of CPS to resign
- ▶ Labour leadership campaign
- ▶ Prisons, NHS, Schools, Universities obliged to prevent "radicalisation"

Today:

- ▶ Elections
- ▶ Closely related to parties

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Elections: What Are They Good for?

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Elections: What Are They Good for?

- ▶ Provide parliamentary majority with legitimacy and maybe a "mandate"
- ▶ Opportunity for citizens to feel integrated
- ▶ Input from citizens, cues for public policy

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Elections: What Are They Good for?

▶ Provide parliamentary majority with legitimacy and maybe a "mandate"

▶ Opportunity for citizens to feel integrated

▶ Input from citizens, cues for public policy

▶ Incentive for politicians to avoid largely unpopular decisions

▶ A means to achieve non-violent constitutional and political change

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Recap: Electoral Systems

- ▶ Transform votes into seats
- ▶ Three elements:
    - ▶ District magnitude
    - ▶ Ballot structure
    - ▶ Electoral formula
- ▶ Various systems in use in the UK
- ▶ System for General Elections: Single Member Districts, First Past the Post (FPP, simple plurality)

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FPP

- ► Pros
    - ► Simple
    - ► Tends to produce two-party-systems (if there are no regional party systems) → single party government
    - ► Close relationship between MP and constituency – not longer true?!?

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- ▶ Cons
    - ▶ Bias
    - ▶ Regional variation/concentration in support can massively distort results
    - ▶ Room for manipulation
    - ▶ Majority in parliament $\neq$ plurality in electorate

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    - ▶ Regional variation/concentration in support can massively distort results
    - ▶ Room for manipulation
    - ▶ Majority in parliament ≠ plurality in electorate
- ▶ Electoral systems provide incentives for politicians and voters
- ▶ Party regionalisation and the boundaries commission

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Four Approaches to Voting Behaviour

1. Sociological approach (norms, social pressure)
   1.1 Micro-sociological: vote like your friends, family, colleagues, neighbours
   1.2 Macro-sociological: vote like your cleavage group
2. Social-psychological approach (attitudes): vote for party with which you identify ($+$ short term factors)
3. Rational choice approach (economics): vote for party that will maximise your utility from government

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Sociological Approaches

- ▶ Premise: people conform with normative expectations of in-group
- ▶ Micro: cross-pressures → abstention and wavering
- ▶ Macro:
  - ▶ West European societies shaped by durables social conflicts ("cleavages": centre vs. periphery; church vs. state; city vs. countryside; workers vs. capital owners)
  - ▶ Parties created to represent sides in these conflicts
  - ▶ People will vote for "their" party
- ▶ Problem: How to explain change?

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Social-psychological approach

- ▶ Behaviour driven by attitudes
- ▶ Durable sense of attachment (identification) to one party, often inherited from family $\rightarrow$ "tendency" to vote for that party
- ▶ Short term factors can reinforce or weaken this tendency:
    - ▶ Candidates
    - ▶ Issues
- ▶ Problems:
    - ▶ Which attitude how important under what conditions?
    - ▶ US society of 1950s comparable with European societies of 1960s/1990s?
    - ▶ Decline of party identification, new/multiple identities, . . . ?

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Rational choice approache

- ▶ "Voters are no fools" (V. O. Key)
- ▶ Citizens are rational
- ▶ Will vote for party whose program gives maximal utility from government
- ▶ Issues and competence matter, nothing else
- ▶ Problems: Self-defeating
  - ▶ Rational citizens will abstain because there vote is not decisive
  - ▶ Rational citizens will be "rationally ignorant" about politics
  - ▶ It's not rational to be rational in mass elections

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So what?

- ▶ (Modern) rational choice and (modern) social-psychological approaches fairly general and probably compatible
- ▶ Sociological approaches can be integrated into these
- ▶ Modern studies of voting behaviour highly eclectic
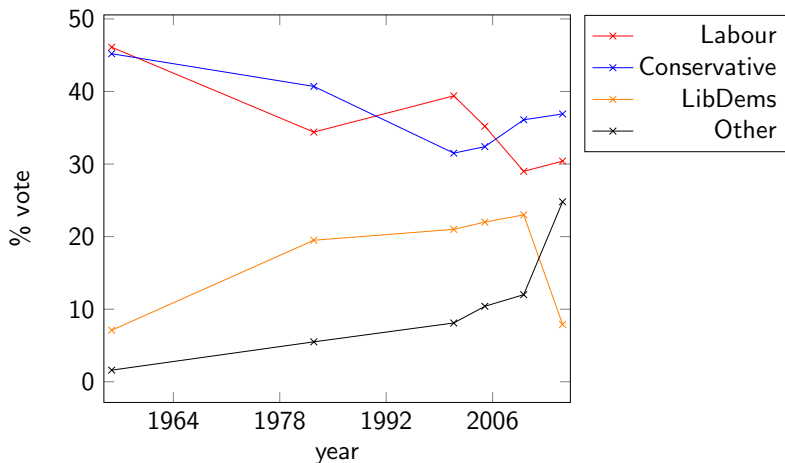- ▶ Combine elements/variables of all approaches

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General trends

- ▶ Party regionalisation
- ▶ Built-in bonuses for Scotland and Wales $\rightarrow$ built-in bias favouring Labour/LibDems, now SNP
- ▶ Nationalisation of parties and campaigns, professionalisation
- ▶ But:
    - ▶ Nationalists in Wales and Scotland
    - ▶ LibDems in the South (before 2015)
    - ▶ Modern, more targeted campaigns
    - ▶ Local parties can make difference in marginal seats
    - ▶ "Being local" advantage for candidates even if controlling for incumbency
- ▶ Short, cheap campaigns by American (or even German) standards

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Low and Declining Turnout

▶ Turnout 61.3% in 2005 General Election, up from 59.4% in 2001 (postwar low), 65.1% in 2010, now 66.1%

▶ Many people feel that their vote does not make a difference (true)

▶ Declining sense of civic duty to vote

▶ Declining interest in/support for parties and voting, but no general decline of political interest

▶ Low turnout a problem?
  ▶ Legitimacy
  ▶ Turnout correlates with class, age, education, gender $\rightarrow$ even more bias

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Electoral Decline of the Two-Party System

Source: Kavanagh et al. ch. 20, p. 404 + own calculations for 2005-2015

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Electoral Decline of the Two-Party System

- ▶ Electoral "Two-party system" during post-war years
- ▶ Decline of Labour, then of Cons (after 1992)
- ▶ Rise of LibDems, later translated into seats (better strategies)
- ▶ Rise of other parties (nationalists etc.)
- ▶ Effects of PR on subnational level(s)
- ▶ Relatively moderate shifts in terms of votes $\rightarrow$ change in government

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Patterns: Class

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Patterns: Class

- ▶ Many socio-demographic factors do not play, but class does (did?)
- ▶ Class: a hierarchical distinction (stratification) based on occupation and resources, but also on culture
- ▶ Historically, very relevant; today, still prominent in political discussions (+ "official" classes for statistical purposes)
- ▶ 1945-70: 80% of the middle-class vote for Conservatives, 60% of the working-class vote for Labour

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Patterns: Class

- ▶ Rise and then decline of (traditional) working class benefitted, then hurt Labour
- ▶ Traditional class alignments (not class itself?!?) increasingly less relevant
- ▶ Both parties cross-class, yet Labour still (much) more popular amongst working class people ("us and them")
- ▶ But Labour under pressure from BNP, UKIP

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Patterns: Issues

▶ When/how can issues become important?
▶ Two mechanisms:
  ▶ Valence: Is a party competent to handle the issue? Can they deliver? Is an issue "owned" by a party?
  ▶ Position: Which of two (or more) *policies* is favoured by a party?
▶ Condition for both mechanisms: Issue is salient for many voters (strong feelings)
▶ Condition for positional items:
  ▶ Public opinion split unevenly (say 70:30)
  ▶ Issue is salient for many voters

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Patterns: Issues II

- ▶ Market-liberal profile of Cons since 1980s
- ▶ Labour traditional in favour of nationalisation – unpopular even with many Labour rank-and-file members in the 1980s
- ▶ Labour traditionally pictured as incompetent re the economy (legacy of the 1970s)
- ▶ Cons lost their image as sound managers of the economy on Black Wednesday (September 16 1992)
- ▶ Lab/Brown created image of economically sound party ("the end of bust & boom")

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Patterns: Issues III

- ▶ Lab & Cons chiefly competing on salience issues at the moment
- ▶ Main salience issues
    - ▶ NHS
    - ▶ Economy (incl. house prices)
    - ▶ Unemployment
    - ▶ "Crime"
    - ▶ Race relations/Immigration
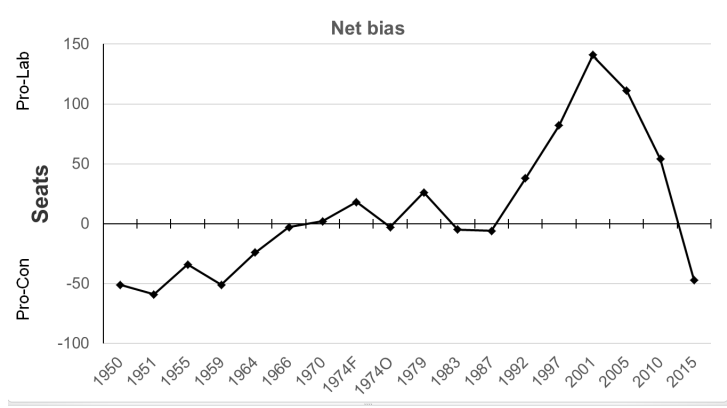- ▶ But (positional) controversy remains: taxation, deficit, cuts/"austerity"

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Other Short Term Factors

- ▶ Candidates, both for PM and (shadow) cabinet
- ▶ Party image (strength of leadership, unity etc.)
- ▶ Media coverage

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Why did Labour Lose?

- ▶ Long term: slow erosion of partisanship
- ▶ Mid term: positional too much on the left & not left enough, still burdened with legacy of Brown government
- ▶ Short term: candidate unpopular, message not very clear
- ▶ Bias: Labour no longer benefitting from electoral system

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Why did Labour Lose?

Net bias

Source: `http:`

`//blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/electoral-bias-in-the-uk-after-the-2015-general-election/`

Representation and the Westminster Model

- ▶ Citizenry largely passive
- ▶ Citizens provide politicians with a broad mandate, which can be renewed/withdrawn after five years
- ▶ Brits not content with limited democracy anymore
- ▶ Declining turnout/interest in parties; rise of the anti-party (UKIP) + the nationalists/outsiders (SNP, PC, Greens)

Why?

- ▶ Decline of class/cleavages
- ▶ Modernisation, post-industrialism, post-materialism
- ▶ Higher levels of education
- ▶ Real and apparent policy failure (shortcomings of traditional system, combined with 24/7 and more aggressive media)

New Forms of Participation

- ▶ "New" means (sit-ins, demonstrations etc.); "direct action"
- ▶ Local, regional, national interest groups
- ▶ Further fuelled by the internet and other new means of communication
- ▶ Protest perceived as legitimate and not un-British

Conclusion

- ▶ Voting still most important channel of participation
- ▶ Two party system and class voting – no more
- ▶ Ideological polarisation low at the moment; dominance of valence issues
- ▶ Changing political culture – the end of deference

Class questions

▶