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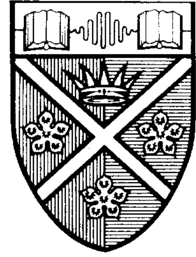

ELECTION STUDIES IN GREAT BRITAIN:

Imported Ideas in a Changing Political Landscape

by

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Introduction

One of the most important tests of the success of the survey based study of electoral behaviour is its ability to explain electoral change. Great Britain has provided as severe an examination on that score as any western democracy in the post-war period. In 1950, the country exhibited all of the characteristics of the classic two-party system. The electorate divided its support almost equally between the two main parties, Conservative and Labour, while third parties secured no more than 10% of the vote – and by 1951 as little as 3%. But by the 1980s, the picture – at the electoral level at least – looked more like a multi-party system with one dominant party. Over a quarter of the electorate voted for third parties, while the Conservatives were fifteen points ahead of Labour. How well has survey research enabled us to understand these developments?

In tackling this question we will pursue three main themes.The first and most important is a critical evaluation of the main substantive findings of the literature. We will identify the predominant intellectual concerns of researchers and the conclusions they have reached. But we will also consider two important questions about the manner in which the research has been conducted. We will examine the success of the various research designs which have been employed. And we will also consider the impact of the institutional setting in which the research has been conducted. Each of these themes will be pursued together as we trace the main chronological developments in the sub-field[1].

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[1] For similar reviews which also address these themes see Dunleavy, 1990; Miller, 1983; Norris, 1990; and Scarbrough, 1987.

However, one important point should be made clear at the outset. While the social survey has been the predominant methodological technique used in British electoral research, it has never had the field to itself. As we shall see, early studies often combined survey research with more traditional historical and institutional research. Research employing aggregate data has continued throughout the post-war period and has been of particular importance in the study of the country's changing electoral geography and in the operation of its electoral system (Steed, 1965; Curtice and Steed, 1982; Curtice and Steed, 1986; Johnston, 1985; Johnston et al, 1988; McAllister and Rose, 1984). Meanwhile, as elsewhere, the use of econometric techniques to study the political economy of government popularity between elections has become increasingly popular (see especially Goodhart and Bhansali, 1970; Sanders et al, 1987)[2]. This work however lies outside the scope of our remit[3].

Intellectual Themes

The survey based approach to electoral research was of course pioneered in the United States. Indeed concepts and techniques originally devised in the United States have heavily influenced the British electoral research

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2 These are of course reliant on surveys for information on the level of government popularity through time but otherwise take their information from non-survey sources.

3 We have also confined ourselves to studies of parliamentary elections and ignored studies of local or European electoral behaviour. On local electoral behaviour see in particular Miller (1988). Further, all the studies referred to in this paper do not cover Northern Ireland, where to date no specifically no specifically electoral study has been conducted though one is planned for the next general election due to be held by July 1992.

agenda throughout the post-war period. Electoral researchers in Britain have been far more likely to maintain intellectual contact with their American counterparts than most members of the political science community, and consequently have willingly imported American ideas into their research. But despite this responsiveness to American intellectual changes, and despite the extent of electoral change at home, we can identify two distinctive themes which, although not uniquely British, have consistently remained of at the forefront of British electoral research .

The first theme has been the relationship between social structure, particularly social class, and voting behaviour. The relationship between social class and vote has widely been regarded as stronger in Great Britain than in any other country (Alford, 1963) while it is widely argued that cleavages commonly found elsewhere such as religion, region or ethnicity are largely absent. In Pulzer's famous aphorism, 'Class is the basis of British politics; all else is embellishment and detail' (Pulzer, 1967). In this context an understanding of the mechanisms that link voters and parties to social classes has been a natural and important concern.

The second consistent theme has been the role of elections in liberal democracy. British electoral studies have been as concerned to answer normative questions about the nature of democracy as they have to develop a behavioural theory of voting. In a country with an elitist rather than a populist political tradition, critical questioning of the role of elections has come not unnaturally to students of politics. The twentieth century thrust upon the ordinary voter a weighty responsibility – determining the future political direction of the country – which had previously been solely the duty and prerogative of the qualified few. How well was the voter equipped to perform this important role? Did he

or she have the knowledge required to make an informed decision? Of particular importance, it was believed, were the 'floating voters' – those who were not tied to any particular party and whose decision whether or not to change their vote determined the aggregate outcome. It was felt essential that they should be able to stand above the political battle and make a reasoned and objective choice as to which party would be best for the future of the country.

Early Studies

These particularly British themes were evident in the very first studies which were conducted at the time of the 1950 and 1951 general elections. But so also were American intellectual ideas, and in particular the methodological approach of the Columbia school established by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (Lazarsfeld et al, 1944; Berelson et al, 1954). All of the earliest British studies were conducted in one or at most two parliamentary constituencies. The two most substantial studies – the Greenwich study of 1950 (Benney et al, 1956) – and the Bristol South East studies of 1951 and 1955 (Milne and Mackenzie, 1954; Milne and Mackenzie, 1958) – traced the attitudes of a panel of voters during the campaign, although other smaller studies (Birch and Campbell, 1950; Campbell et al, 1952; Martin, 1952) conducted at the same time were simply cross-sections. In addition, the studies did not confine their attention to the voters, but also concerned themselves with the social and political context in which voters made their decision. So, for example, they examined the way in which the election campaign had been fought locally and charted the social and political history of the constituency. Indeed in some cases the report of the survey findings constituted only a

small portion of the final book.

Columbia's influence was not simply methodological. There was a direct link in terms of personnel – one of the junior researchers on the 1948 Elmira study, Miss Gray, played a major role in writing up the 1950 Greenwich study. And even the British researchers' particular interest in social class and the operation of democracy followed closely the Columbia school's original concern with the role of the media as a source of information for the voter and its subsequent discovery of the importance of a socially-determined predisposition to vote.

But, although by no means methodologically unsophisticated, these early studies were pale reflections of their American cousins in their scope and size. For example, while the 1940 Erie County study included a seven-wave panel, all of the British studies had two or three-wave panels. Even so, the importance of these studies to the development of British electoral studies should not be underestimated. They were to form the basis of much writing on British electoral behaviour for the next twenty years. Most crucial were the apparent implications of their findings for the operation of democracy.

The studies found that the voter did not meet the theorists' expectations. They found that for 75% of voters, their electoral decision was rooted in their family background and social class together with the long-term images of the parties. Their mind was made up before the election campaign started and they were not influenced by the issues of the day. Further, in a foretaste of later party identification theory, these voters were found to be able to filter out campaign messages that were adverse to their own prior political standpoint.

But what of the remaining one-quarter of the electorate who were apparently willing to change their vote? Far from being the most knowledgeable of voters these floating voters appeared to be the least

interested and informed of all. Their voting decision appeared to depend on the relative strengths of the social pressures they were subject to rather than a reasoned individual choice.

Not only were voters not up to the task expected of them, but election campaigns were also largely of just symbolic and ritualistic value. Not only did they fail to inform the floating voter but they also had no effect on the net outcome of the election. The movements of those who did change their minds after the first wave of interviewing were largely self-cancelling. The net distribution of party strength on election day matched closely that in the first wave of interviewing.

But while these early studies raised doubts about the role of election campaigns, they appeared to confirm the importance of social class in British political life[4]. The most important question appeared to be not whether social class influenced voting behaviour but rather what did one mean by social class. Here, following the pattern elsewhere in British sociology, the studies largely departed from American pre-occupation with a composite measure of socio-economic status (but see Rose, 1968). A number of alternative measures were tried. A consensus emerged that the most important distinction was an occupational one, between manual (Labour-voting) and non-manual(Conservative-inclined) workers, whilst amongst non-manual workers, employers and managers were a particularly pro-Conservative group (Bonham, 1954). The two-class, two-party model of British politics emerged.

But other aspects of these studies followed the Columbia model quite closely. They found that most people had a (middle or working) subjective class identification which was associated with vote independently of objective class. And attention was also given to the

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4 Budge and Urwin (1966),however, demonstrated on the basis of a number of small surveys conducted in Glasgow around the time of the 1964 election that in Scotland religious identity and national feeling were important as well as class.

influence of social interaction and 'class environment'. Bealey et al (1965) found that the proportion of a class voting for a party varied from one location to another depending on whether an area was predominantly middle or predominantly working class. Benney et al found that those who thought their family and associates held the same view as themselves were more likely to be stable in their voting behaviour than those who were subject to cross-currents. Thus while these early studies downplayed the importance of the immediate *political* context in which the voting choice was made, they did point to the role of the *social* context.

But if social class dominated British politics and manual workers were the largest class, how was it that Labour lost elections? Indeed in 1959 Labour lost its third election in a row. The Conservative party was evidently better able to win over working class votes than Labour was able to secure middle class ones. It was the investigation of this paradox that gave rise to the first studies designed to address specifically trends in the British party system – in this case Labour's electoral decline – and the first academic surveys which did not conform to the Columbia model – by interviewing in more than one location moving away and/or interviewing outside an election period.

Each of these studies focussed on the origins of working-class Conservatism. Two, McKenzie and Silver (1968) and Nordlinger (1967) were particularly interested in the relative importance of traditional social deference (such as a preference for an old Etonian as Prime Minister) and instrumentalism (such as a belief in the proven ability of the incumbent Conservatives' ability to deliver material prosperity) in stimulating working-class Conservative support. They found that while deference did apparently account for some working class Conservatism, it was less common amongst younger voters and was thus apparently in

secular decline.

Goldthorpe et al (1968) wished to test the 'embourgeoisement' thesis – the claim that increasing material prosperity was being accompanied by the spread of middle-class values into the working class, thereby reducing its class solidarity and loosening its ties to the Labour party. In order to do so they chose to interview (a small sample of) young manual workers in three factories in Luton, a prosperous and growing centre of light-industry with a large number of geographically mobile people, i.e. precisely the kind of people amongst whom 'embourgeoisement' should be evident if it existed at all. In any event, they found little support for the thesis – indeed they found that their respondents did not seem to differ much from working class voters in general.

The Columbia tradition however was not yet quite dead. Television news coverage of election campaigns arrived late in Britain because, until 1958, the broadcasting organisations believed that such coverage would violate the law – although party political broadcasts giving each major party free air time were broadcast from 1950. The 1959 general election was therefore the first television election in Great Britain and it was marked by the first study of its influence upon voters, a study which was repeated in 1964 (Trenaman and McQuail, 1961; Blumler and McQuail, 1968).

Their main findings closely mirrored those of the original Columbia studies – television did not have any significant influence upon voters or upon the net outcome. However, in their second study they found that the greater coverage given to the Liberal party in television news during election campaigns increased knowledge of and support for the Liberals. Further, those who floated in this way came much closer to the theorists' model of the ideal voter that the first studies had searched

for in vain. They were more highly motivated and more knowledgeable than the average voter, and acquired yet more political information during the campaign. Here was clear notice that the debate about the rational voter was by no means over.

Butler and Stokes

Meanwhile, of course, in the United States the Columbia approach to the study of electoral behaviour had already given way to the Michigan approach inaugurated in 1952, with its use of nationwide samples and panels that spanned the period from one election to the next rather than just a single election campaign. Given the findings of the early studies, such a switch seemed to make sense in Great Britain as well. For the strength of the Michigan approach was that it was better able to investigate long-term influences on voting behaviour – not least because of its most famous concept, party identification.

As with the first Columbia style survey in 1950, the first Michigan style survey involved a direct interchange of personnel with the United States. Donald Stokes, one of the co-authors of *The American Voter*, directed the survey in collaboration with David Butler, the country's best known student of elections (although by no means necessarily from a behavioural perspective). Their surveys, started in 1963, were to be the beginning of what are now known as the British Election Studies. These have become the principal source of material for the survey based study of general elections in Great Britain and have been conducted at each election since 1964. A summary of the surveys which form the series is given in Table 1. Butler and Stokes' report of their own findings (Butler and Stokes, 1969, 1974) remains the single most influential book ever

published on British electoral behaviour and indeed had no serious competition at all until the 1980s.

Butler and Stokes' implementation of the Michigan approach had four main features:

1. The use of nationwide surveys. For the first time a representative sample of the national electorate was interviewed with a sample size of nearly 2,000 respondents (see Table 1).
2. The introduction of an inter-election panel. The Columbia surveys had indicated that if people changed their minds between one election and the next they usually did so before the election campaign started. Evidently therefore, electoral volatility was better studied by looking at the flow of the vote from one election to the next rather than during the campaign itself. Thus Butler and Stokes' design combined cross-section samples of the electorate interviewed immediately after the 1964, 1966 and 1970 elections with panels of respondents who had already been interviewed after one or more previous general elections.
3. The introduction of the concept of party identification to the study of British electoral behaviour. Although Butler and Stokes retitled the concept 'partisan self image', and accepted that in Britain identification was less likely to remain invariant if a voter were to change his or her vote than it was in the United States in most important respects their concept resembled its American cousin. Most crucially, partisan self-image represented an affective bond between the voter and his party and was the primary determinant of voting behaviour. Meanwhile they argued strongly against the view that issues were an important influence upon voting behaviour.
4. An emphasis on long-term rather than short-term sources of

electoral change. Although they found rather more switching between elections than might have been anticipated from their theoretical perspective – nearly one-third of their sample – they found that many of those voters who defected from a party switched back to it at the next election. And very few leapt directly from Conservative to Labour or vice-versa. Thus short-term switching did not affect the long-term strength of the parties; major changes in the party system could only come about by changes in the underlying distribution of partisanship.

How might this occur? An important feature of Butler and Stokes' model was their emphasis on the transmission of partisan self-image from parents to progeny during the latter's childhood. Children, they argued, received their earliest and most important political cues from their family environment. Further given the existence of homogeneous class communities and the class basis of politics, those cues would often be reinforced by the wider social world with which they gradually came into contact. Unless those progeny were subject to different political cues during early adulthood, as a consequence for example of social mobility, their partisanship was probably fixed for the remainder of their life.

This meant that long-term political change could only occur as a consequence of generational differences in the distribution of partisanship. If the distribution of partisanship amongst those who were currently entering the electorate (through attaining the age of majority or immigration) was different from those leaving the electorate (through death or emigration) then the overall partisan balance would change. Based on the evidence of an innovative but daring use of the data they collected from their respondents on both their own and their parents'

partisanship, Butler and Stokes attempted to chart the long-term changes in the distribution of partisanship throughout the twentieth century. From this they were able to argue that there was a long-term drift to Labour in the distribution of partisanship. Older voters leaving the electorate were more likely to have a Conservative partisanship than younger voters. This was not because people became more Conservative as they got older (though Labour partisans were more likely to die early). Rather it was because that when these voters entered the electorate – in some cases before 1914 – Labour was not a fully-fledged major party and in consequence these older voters were much less likely to have been socialised in childhood into a Labour vote.

There was however a second possible source of inter-generational change. As we have noted partisanship was most subject to change during early adulthood. In consequence new voters were particularly likely to be influenced by the political climate of the day. Butler and Stokes argued that if there was a major change in that climate then voters entering the electorate at that time may well drop the partisan cues learnt in childhood in favour of those received at their first voting experience. Butler and Stokes argued that 1945 was one such occasion when this happened with the election of the first majority Labour government. Thus a particularly large cohort of new voters (there had not been an election since 1935) exhibited unusually strong pro-Labour sympathies which further bolstered Labour's partisan strength.

In contrast some other features of the Michigan model, particularly those that helped to account for the behaviour of those voters who did not vote in line with their party identification, received rather less attention. British party leaders of course cannot win office independently of their party, so candidate evaluations are less easily separated from party ones. Still, Butler and Stokes argued that, although

less important than in the United States, the popularity or unpopularity of a party leader had a clear impact on party support, especially when a leader was particularly popular or unpopular. Equally, some attention was paid to the impact of the party's policies on particular issues (especially immigration) and of images of the parties.

Rather more space was given to the role of group memberships, especially social class, in voting behaviour and to perceptions of the relationship between social groups and politics. Butler and Stokes confirmed the view of the earlier studies that occupation was the best measure of social class though they were somewhat uncertain where precisely to draw the dividing line between the middle and the working class. They also echoed earlier findings on the importance of the local class environment (or milieu) in reinforcing or undermining partisanship. In addition, they found many of their respondents (especially those in the working class) saw politics as primarily about class, and a widespread recognition of Labour as a working class party and the Conservatives as a middle class one. But only a minority felt the classes were in conflict with each other, and so class politics did not pose a threat to the stability of the political system.

After Butler and Stokes – The New Consensus

Butler and Stokes' stewardship of the election studies ended with the 1970 election. The baton passed to Ivor Crewe, Bo Särlvik (who had previously directed the Swedish study), and James Alt (joined later by David Robertson) of the University of Essex who conducted three studies between 1974 and 1979. Financed by the Social Science Research Council (albeit not on a permanent basis) it was in this period that the

studies acquired their status in the British political science community as the 'official' – although by no means the only – election study[5]. Following the departure of some members of the Essex team abroad, the studies have been directed since 1983 by Anthony Heath (Oxford), Roger Jowell (Social and Community Planning Research, London), and John Curtice (Liverpool and subsequently Strathclyde). Both teams maintained the key pillars of Butler and Stokes' approach, i.e.post-election cross-section surveys and long-term inter-election panels, unsupplemented by any study of party behaviour, media output or party activists and candidates[6]. However, additional respondents were interviewed in Scotland in October 1974 and 1979 (Miller, 1981) and in Wales in 1979 (Balsom et al, 1983) in order to permit separate analysis of electoral behaviour in those component parts of the United Kingdom[7].

But if their successors maintained Butler and Stokes' methodology, their intellectual approach seemed due for a reevaluation. By 1974 the image of a stable electorate whose affections were evenly divided between and dominated by two great parties of state seemed badly astray (see also Crewe 1972 and 1976). The election campaigns of 1970 and

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5 Most notable have been large nationwide surveys conducted in 1979, 1983 and 1987 on polling day and the day before which were financed by BBC television and directed by Ivor Crewe (Crewe, 1981 and 1985b), a nationwide survey of 1,023 respondents conducted for Dunleavy and Husbands (1985), and an ESRC financed campaign panel conducted during the 1987 election (Miller et al, 1990). See also Fishbein et al (1976), Himmelweit et al (1981 and 1985) and Scarbrough (1984).

6 This will however not be true of the 1992 election. A content analysis of media output will be undertaken in conjunction with the survey responses of the main questionnaire. (See also Miller, 1990; Miller, 1991). Studies of all the main party activists (including Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists and Greens) are currently in progress as is a study of parliamentary candidates. Although directed independently of the election study, a number of questions included in these studies have previously appeared and/or will appear in the next election study questionnaire, permitting for the first time some study of representation in Great Britain.

7 There will also be additional Scottish respondents in 1992 as well as a Northern Irish study for the first time ever.

1974 saw some dramatic changes in party fortunes. Indeed, in 1970 the Conservatives' election victory seems to have been secured by a switch of votes in the very last days of the campaign. Parliamentary by-elections in the late 1960s and early 1970s registered some record-breaking swings. Meanwhile, the Liberal party secured nearly one-fifth of the vote in the general elections of both February and October 1974 and the Scottish National Party won 30% of the Scottish vote and 11 parliamentary seats in October 1974.

Gradually in the 1970s and 1980s a new and very different consensus emerged about the nature of the British electorate. The old forces of social class and partisan identification, the foundations upon which the stability of the electorate had rested, had lost their power. Not only did this produce greater volatility, but it could also account for the secular decline in Labour support which continued right through the 1980s and the rise in SDP/Liberal Alliance support.

Indeed, the first suggestion that an important change was occurring was made by Butler and Stokes themselves in the second edition of their book. They argued that there had been a decline in the strength of the class alignment. While the level of Labour partisanship was weaker in the working class in 1970 than it had been in 1963, it was stronger amongst the middle class. The classes also seemed to be less polarised in their subjective class identities. The 'class equals party' model of British politics was seriously questioned for the first time, unleashing a debate about dealignment that dominated the literature of the 1970s and 1980s.

But it was not easy for Butler and Stokes to account for this change in terms which were consistent with their model of inter-generational change. In part they were able to remain within the terms of their model by noting that the strength of the class alignment appeared to be weaker amongst the newest cohorts in the electorate than in the cohort that had

entered in 1945. New electors were evidently responding to a new political climate, as their model suggested they would. But in speculating about what had changed about the political climate, Butler and Stokes referred not to sudden changes registered at one election, which was what their model had previously relied upon, but to gradual social changes – the introduction of television, the increasing similarity in the social composition of the Conservative and Labour parliamentary parties and increasing affluence. Even more importantly, they acknowledged that these changes had influenced the whole electorate and not just new voters. Their explanation seemed to suggest that there could be significant changes in the social basis of electoral behaviour which could not simply be accounted for by a generational model of electoral change.

For later proponents of the class dealignment thesis this was not a problem (Franklin, 1985; Kelley et al, 1985; Rose, 1980). They argued that the relationship between class and vote had continued to decline after 1970. In particular attention was drawn to the declining proportion of the working class (i.e. manual workers) vote that was being won by the Labour party which fell from 69% in 1966 to 42% in 1983. But whereas in trying to account for this decline Butler and Stokes paid as much attention to changes in the political parties as to social changes, most later writers concentrated on the latter including growing affluence amongst the working class, the spread of owner occupied housing (and especially the sale of council houses by the Conservative government from 1979 onwards), increased social mobility and educational opportunity, and the decline of homogeneous class communities. In short it was argued that the traditional class-based cues of the Conservative and Labour parties were striking a less resonant chord because class had become a less important influence upon social life. This worked to the benefit of third parties and – as the party most

dependent upon a class based appeal – to Labour's particular disadvantage (see also Robertson, 1984).

If Butler and Stokes can claim some authorship of the class dealignment thesis, the claim that there had been a decline in the role of party identification – dubbed partisan dealignment (Crewe et al, 1977; Crewe, 1984; Crewe, 1985a; Rose and McAllister, 1986) was undoubtedly the work of later writers, most notably Ivor Crewe. He noted that since 1974 there had been a decline in both the number of party identifiers and, more especially, in the strength of party identifiers' identification. For example the percentage of very strong identifiers fell from 44% in 1964 to 19% in 1987. It was argued that this meant that voters were less likely to be loyal to one party, producing higher levels of electoral volatility and a greater willingness to vote for third parties. And in an important further critique of the Butler and Stokes model of inter-generational change, Crewe et al (1977) noted that the decline in partisanship in 1974 was not confined to new voters but actually was greatest amongst those who had entered the electorate in the 1930s – that is amongst voters who first came of age at the height of the depression and for whom the class-based appeal of the two main parties might have been expected to have had most resonance.

New Cleavages and Changing Motivations?

Alongside these theses of dealignment, some analysts have also suggested that new alignments have emerged and/or that new sources of electoral motivation have replaced party identification. Probably the most influential argument in favour of the emergence of a new alignment has been the claim that a public/private sector cleavage has opened up

(Dunleavy, 1979; Dunleavy 1980; Dunleavy and Husbands 1985). Based on the work of Castells in the area of urban politics, Dunleavy argued that the growth in the role of the state in the economy, together with an increasing divergence in party attitudes towards what that role should be, meant that increasingly voters were being influenced by their relationship to the state.

In contrast, Inglehart's post-materialist theory has received less attention than in other European countries and has relatively few adherents amongst students of British electoral behaviour (Inglehart, 1971; Inglehart, 1977). Of course the relatively weak performance of the British economy for most of the post-war period has meant that it is debatable whether Britain's post-war generation has experienced 'formative affluence' – as Inglehart himself has recognised. In any case, although there is evidence that a fraction of the salaried middle class is less likely to vote Conservative and more likely to vote Alliance or Labour than the rest of the middle class (Heath et al, 1985; Heath et al, 1991), it is by no means clear that this is anything new. It may have more to do with the differing educational or religious background of different sections of the middle class than with either formative affluence or sectoral location.

Stronger evidence of a new cleavage seems to lie elsewhere. There has been an increasing geographical polarisation of electoral support between the North of Britain (i.e. Scotland and the North of England) and the South (i.e. the rest of England) (Curtice and Steed, 1982; Curtice and Steed, 1986; Johnston et al 1988; Curtice and Steed, 1988). While the North has become relatively more pro-Labour, the South has become more pro-Conservative. Further, this divergence cannot easily be accounted for differences in the social structure of the two halves of Britain. This suggests that region itself has become an influence on

electoral behaviour (Curtice, 1988); indeed regional location has become the biggest divider of the working class politically, outstripping even housing tenure and trade union membership (Heath et al, 1991).

While the claims of class dealignment have initiated a search for new cleavages, partisan dealignment has promoted a quest for new motivations. Following similar arguments made in the American literature, some writers have argued that as party identification loses its impact voters have been enabled to vote on the basis of their attitudes (Fishbein et al, 1976; Himmelweit et al, 1981 and 1985; Franklin, 1985; Särlvik and Crewe, 1983). According to this view, the voter now fits more closely the stereotype of the reasonable rational person the early studies had been looking for. The debate is by no means straight forward as it raises complex issues about the direction of causation between party identification, issues and vote that have been extensively debated in the United States literature. And the argument is difficult to test in Great Britain because – thanks to Butler and Stokes intellectual concerns – relatively little issue data was collected before 1974. But it is interesting to note that both Himmelweit et al and Särlvik and Crewe discovered that the relationship between issue position and vote was less strong in the case of the Liberals/Alliance than in the case of the Conservatives and Labour – yet it is the Liberals/Alliance whose support has grown in recent years.

Perhaps more plausible is the argument that Butler and Stokes and earlier studies underestimated the role of issue voting in the 1950s and 1960s (see also Heath et al, 1991) and that issues have always played a role. Further, there is lively debate over what is meant by issues. Heath et al, for example, have argued that voters adhere to broad values (see Rokeach, 1973) which are relatively stable over time and that it is these rather than the immediate campaign issues of the day which are most

important in voting behaviour – a position that echoes the work of Milne and Mackenzie's emphasis on images rather than issues in the 1950 Greenwich study (see also Rose and McAllister, 1990). Meanwhile Scarbrough (1984) has suggested that a significant proportion of voters in fact have political ideologies that reflect the main ideological positions promulgated by the political parties.

The Breakdown of the New Consensus

These claims for new cleavages and motivations have always appeared problematic. But in recent years the post-Butler and Stokes consensus about class and partisan dealignment has also been challenged, most notably by the most recent election study team of Heath et al. Their work has provoked a fierce debate in particular about class dealignment (Heath et al, 1985; Crewe, 1986; Heath et al, 1987; Dunleavy, 1987; Heath et al, 1988; Marshall et al, 1988, Heath et al, 1991). They have argued that to demonstrate the existence of class dealignment it is not sufficient to show that Labour's working class and/or the Conservatives' middle class support has declined. One or both of the two class-based parties may have simply become less popular in all classes. Rather, they claim, it needs to be shown that Labour's support has become relatively more middle class and Conservative support relatively more working class. They suggest that when this is examined that although the class/vote relationship has not been stable over time (and did indeed decline between 1964 and 1970 as Butler and Stokes argued) there has not been a consistent secular decline in the relationship such as predicted by the class dealignment thesis. Rather the relationship has fluctuated up and down since 1970 – with the differences often not being statistically

significant.

Heath et al have also looked more directly at the evidence that class has declined in importance in people's minds. In tandem with Marshall et al, they find little evidence to support the claim. There does appear to have been decline over time in the relationship between objective class and subjective class but it is both small and is not corroborated by the evidence of the other indicators which are available.

Whereas Heath et al challenged the class dealignment thesis in their first book published in 1985, they only expressed doubts about the partisan dealignment thesis in their second book six years later. They do not disagree that the strength of party identification has declined according to the standard measures. What they question is the existence of some of the supposed consequences of that change. In particular, there seems little evidence to suggest that inter-election volatility is significantly greater now than in the 1960s. 34% of voters switched between 1966 and 1970 while 37% did so between 1983 and 1987. Further, voters who fail to vote in accordance with their party identification at one election seem to have been as likely to switch back at the next election to the party they identify with in the 1980s as they were in the 1960s (Heath et al, 1991).

But if voters have not changed so much as was thought how do we account for political change in Britain? Heath et al argue that analysts have mistaken changes in behaviour by voters for changes in their motivation without asking first whether or not the political stimulus they have received is identical. They suggest, for example, that variations in the strength of the class alignment may well reflect changes in the extent to which elections are fought by the parties on class-based issues (see also Evans et al, 1991). In short, instead of only searching for sociological or psychological explanations of change we should also look at political

explanations, a point also made by Rose and McAllister (1990)

Meanwhile, so far as the failure of partisan dealignment to produce greater electoral volatility is concerned, Heath et al point out that even if the relationship between vote switching and strength of party identification was the same as in the 1960s, the proportion of voters switching between elections would in any case have only increased by 6%. Further, they suggest that if party identification measures not only affective identity but also satisfaction with a party then a voter may still not switch his vote when his party identification declines because he is still even less satisfied with any of the alternatives.

Towards an Evaluation

So how well have academic electoral studies faced up to the test of explaining political change? Two important points are clear. Firstly, most of the survey-based academic literature has concentrated on long-term change rather than short-term change. Yet with one-third of the electorate switching at any pair of elections, and one-quarter changing their minds during the (short) election campaign, short-term change is clearly crucial to the outcome of the battle for power. Although, in 1987 the first ever British national campaign panel was conducted by Miller et al (Miller et al, 1990) much of their text concentrates on the specifics of the 1987 election and more general theoretical questions receive relatively little attention. Further, there was less net movement in party fortunes during the 1987 election campaign than at any time since 1966, leaving Miller et al with relatively little political change to account for. However, their work does demonstrate the need for further work on the role of the media. They argue that the predominantly pro-Conservative

press may be more influential in shifting votes than many writers have previously suggested – especially amongst the politically less interested half of the population – raising new doubts about an old question, viz. the rationality of the floating voter.

Some limited work has also been undertaken on retrospective voting and this largely confirms its apparent importance (see e.g. Alt, 1979, Miller et al, 1990) but much of it is based on questions that are liable to be 'party-laden' in the cues that they offer voters. For example, asked how well the government has handled unemployment, the voter who has voted for the government will be inclined to *ex post facto* rationalise his vote by saying it has handled it well. Still, the broad conclusion that economics matters has been supported by recent econometric work on government popularity (though which economic indicators matter varies from one time period to another), but much of that literature also suggests that non-economic events matter at least as much (see, for example, Clarke et al, 1986; Norpoth, 1987; Spencer et al, 1991). In a similar vein, the results of the 1987 election study suggest that retrospective evaluations of non-economic issues, such as the state of the health service, can play a role as well as economic evaluations (though for a different view see Rose and McAllister, 1990).

Less attention has been paid to an old Michigan concept, candidate evaluations, despite the prominence given to it in journalistic commentary on elections. Some recent literature has suggested that evaluations of party leaders have a perceptible but small influence on voting behaviour (Graetz and McAllister, 1987; Bean and Mughan, 1989). But there is considerable difficulty in disentangling the impact of vote preference on leadership evaluations from the impact of evaluations on vote. Further, when in the 1987 election study respondents were asked to judge both parties and leaders by the same criteria, the two

proved to be heavily intercorrelated (Rose and McAllister, 1990), suggesting that leadership may not easily be separable from party image (itself a topic that has also received relatively little critical scrutiny). No substantial work has been done on the role of affective reactions to leaders (Abelson et al, 1982).

The second important feature of the British literature is that it has concentrated on sociological and social psychological explanations of electoral change, and to a considerable extent ignored the political. The dominant concepts have been party identification and social class. This orientation has led to a concentration on theories that claim that electoral change has been caused by changes in the way that voters behave rather than in the way that parties appeal to them. This has been despite the fact that, for example, the Labour party suffered a serious split in 1981 which lead to the formation of the Social Democratic Party and moved significantly to the left. Yet in an attempt to simulate the effect of social and political change on electoral change between 1964 and 1987, Heath et al (1991) estimate that less than a third of the decline could be accounted for by social change while rather more could be accounted for by certain political changes, such as an increase in the number of constituencies fought by the Liberals and the greater ideological polarisation of Conservative and Labour. If correct, their conclusion suggests a greater need to integrate survey based voting studies with the analysis of what parties say and do (such as Budge and Farlie, 1983) than has hitherto tended to be the case since the adoption of the Michigan approach.

The early Columbia studies not only paid greater attention to the political context, but they also emphasised the importance of the voter's social context. Although Butler and Stokes did pay some attention to this theme, the Michigan design is not necessarily ideally suited to pursuing it. Yet much of the debate about British electoral politics

makes crucial assumptions about the importance of the voter's social context. Proponents of the class dealignment thesis for example argue that voters are now less likely to live in class homogeneous constituencies and that as television has become their main source of political information, so conversations with friends and neighbours have become less important. In contrast the increasing geographical polarisation of Conservative and Labour support has led some to suggest that the voter's local social environment has become more rather than less important (Miller, 1978).

The investigation of social context raises further considerable design issues. Under the Michigan model respondents can be asked their impression of the class milieu of their local environment or how often they talk to neighbours and friends and whether they discuss politics. In addition, in an innovation introduced in the 1980s studies, data from the census can also be linked to respondents replies to provide some objective information on the local environment. However these strategies rely on the perceptions of respondents – which are not an unbiased report of reality (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1977) and are confined to using the information collected from the census. In order to go beyond this we need to interview respondents' political discussants as well as the respondents themselves and to conduct sufficiently clustered samples to enable the survey to be used to generate data on localities as well as on individuals. However, a major stumbling block to this approach is that such clustering represents a serious threat to the representativeness of any sample.

Conclusion

The study of British electoral behaviour has recently been both a productive and lively field of enquiry – although unfortunately a number of its leading practitioners have been lured from the country by the brain drain. The election study series is the longest running academic survey series in Great Britain, compares favourably with election studies elsewhere in the range of information collected, and until recently at least, was virtually the only major academic survey based project in political science[8]. But the literature has been heavily dependent, both methodologically and conceptually, upon ideas imported from elsewhere, most notably the United States. And, as we have seen, the techniques and concepts which have predominated have had some important limitations. There is a need to integrate the strength of the Michigan approach – the production of a representative study of voters – with some of the strengths of the older Columbia one – the study of the political and social context in which those voters make their decisions. If the study of British electoral behaviour is to make as much progress in the next forty years as it has in the previous forty, this issue will have to be addressed.

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8 For current survey based work on political parties see footnote 6. In addition, a major study of political participation was conducted in the 1980s (Parry et al, 1991), while a new annual series of surveys, the British Social Attitudes surveys, was launched in 1983 which *inter alia* includes questions on politics, including a number of items which have also appeared in recent British Election Studies questionnaires.

Table 1. British Election Studies since 1963

Year	Study	
1963	Electorate: new respondents 2009	
1964	Electorate: new respondents 347; from 1963 sample 1422; total 1769	
	1963-64 panel 1481	
1966	Electorate: new respondents 566; from 1963 and 1964 samples 1308; total 1874	
	1963-64-66 panel	1163
	1963-66 panel	1283
	1964-66 panel	1360
1969	Electorate: new respondents 1114	
1970	Electorate: new respondents 1093; from 1969 electorate 750; total 1843	
	1969-70 panel 792	
	1963-64-66-70 panel	718 (not part of 1970 electorate sample)
	1963-64-70 panel	787 (ditto)
	1963-66-70 panel	781 (ditto)
	1963-70 panel	921 (ditto)
	1964-66-70 panel	831 (ditto)
	1964-70 panel	915 (ditto)
	1966-70 panel	1107 (ditto)
Feb. 1974	Electorate: new respondents 2462	
	1969-70-Feb. 74 panel 1096 (not part of Feb. 1974 electorate sample)	
Oct. 1974	Electorate: new respondents 535; from Feb. 1974 electorate 1830; total 2365	
	Feb. 1974-Oct. 1974 panel 1830	
1979	Electorate; new respondents 1018; from Feb. 1974 electorate 875; total 1893	
	Feb. 1974-Oct. 74-79 panel	756
	Feb. 1974-79 panel	866
	Oct. 1974-79 panel	765
1983	Electorate: new respondents 3955	
1986	1983-86 panel 1090	
1987	Electorate: new respondents 3826	
	1983-86-87 panel 877 (not part of 1987 electorate sample)	

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