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IS CLASS STILL THE BASIS OF BRITISH POLITICS?

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No. 2 *1983*

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IS CLASS STILL THE BASIS OF BRITISH POLITICS?

Potential for catastrophic change in the British party system

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Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics
No. 2

ISSN 0264-1496

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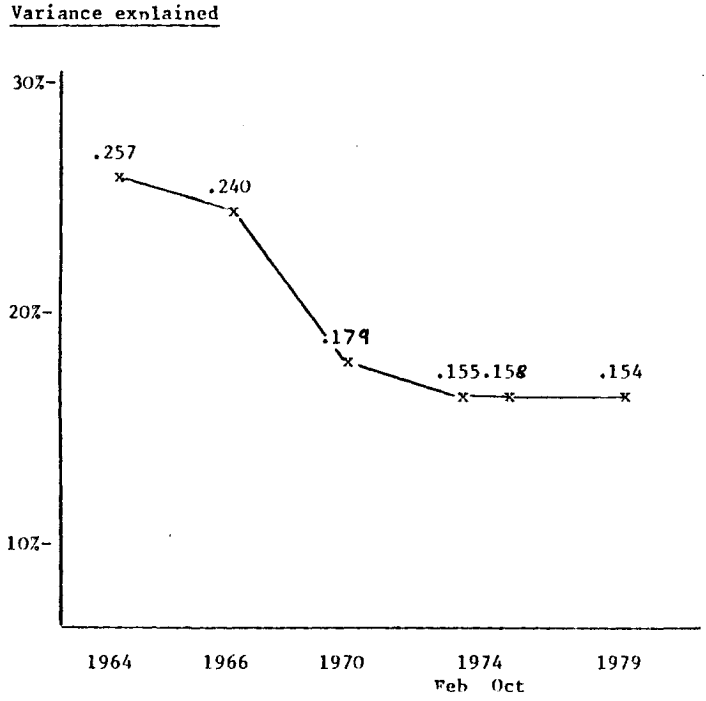
Introduction

During the decade between 1959 and 1970, social class, which had generally been accepted as being the basis of British politics, declined dramatically as a force structuring voting choice in General Elections. Depending on whether it is measured traditionally in terms of occupation, or more generally in terms of a wider set of social indicators, its ability to predict voting choice declined by something between a quarter and a half during this period.(1) Recent research has shown that, when necessary corrections are made, the bulk of the decline can be seen to have occurred between 1966 and 1970, with little change thereafter (Figure 1). This research, however, concerned itself with social class as indicated by a composite measure incorporating six variables already established as powerful predictors of partisanship, but the individual effects of these six variables were not investigated.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the decline of class voting in Britain in terms of changes in the

Figure 1 The decline of class voting, 1964-1979, with correction for the effects of changing class profiles, swing and minor party voting.[a]



a. Adapted from Franklin (1982), Figure 10.

importance of particular variables associated with the concept of social class in order to confront the question: is class still the basis of British politics? To this end we will begin by defining a causal model which depicts the linkages between the particular variables concerned. This model will permit us to isolate salient features of class voting for further investigation. In this manner we hope to be able to show that the variables most central to the concept of class voting are those whose importance in structuring voting choice has declined the most, so that what we have left is a structure ripe for extensive changes.

In recent years a new branch of mathematical theory has been used to study the way in which the accumulation of small causes can eventually lead to an effect quite out of proportion to those that had gone before. The field is known as catastrophe theory, and, in the vocabulary of this field, British electoral politics may well have approached the "cusp" at which catastrophic change occurs.(2)

The groundwork for this study has been laid by two previous articles. The one referred to above brought to light two contaminating influences that have to be taken into account in any investigation of changing effects of class factors over time. One of these results from demographic change in the class profile of the electorate (Franklin, 1982 pp. 203-5) and the other is the result of changing electoral fortunes of the political parties: what was called the "swing" effect (pp.

208-9).

The other article which lays the groundwork for the present study was concerned to map out the consequences of different research methods for the pattern of findings that could arise in British voting studies (Franklin and Mughan, 1978). It pointed out that although there could be no single best approach, conventional regression analysis offered a more balanced perspective than some alternatives, providing the implications of causal priorities between variables were carefully considered. That article began the process of investigating the effects of individual variables, but was hindered in its progress by the fact that the dataset (chosen for the sake of comparability with other studies) did not contain important variables relating to the childhood of each respondent. The present article thus takes up the story where both these earlier studies left off.

At the same time, our analysis permits us to shed some light on yet a third strand in recent voting studies: the observed paradox that although class has become a poorer predictor of voting choice at the individual level, it has at the same time increased its dominance in an ecological analysis of constitutency characteristics and constituency electoral results (Miller, 1978,1979). We think we can contribute to an understanding of this paradox because even while most class variables have declined as predictors of individual voting choice, some have actually seen their effects enhanced; and the

particular variables whose effects have increased are those which might well be related to processes of group opinion formation which are likely to be involved in an area effect.

The data

The data for this study come from six nationwide surveys of the British electorate (excluding Northern Ireland) conducted following every General Election from 1964 to 1979. (3) From each of these surveys, in addition to voting choice, six variables were chosen as being most representative of the different social influences connected with the concept of class voting. Three of these related to the childhood of each respondent: perception of parents' class, perception of parents' party and respondent's education. (4) The other three variables related to the present social circumstances of each respondent: occupation, union membership and type of housing. Each of these variables is in reality an indicator for the general direction of political influences that individuals can be expected to experience in relation to different features of their lives. During childhood they will have been influenced by the political atmosphere of their home, neighbourhood and school; while during adulthood they will have been affected by their neighbours at home and their colleagues at work. (5)

For use in an analysis whose purpose was to explain why some respondents should support one major party while other

respondents supported the other major party, each of the six independent variables had to be dichotomized in such a way as to group together characteristics associated with Labour Party voting, and distinguish these from characteristics associated with Conservative Party voting, while distinguishing both sets from a third with neutral or ambiguous impact (the resulting three-way classifaction becomes a dichotomy when the neutral category is treated as missing data). In studying any single election, the distinctions are easily made by trying out all the different possibilities until that particular combination is found which maximizes the ability of the resulting dichotomy to predict voting choice in the election concerned. Unfortunately, the dichotomy which best distinguishes Conservative from Labour supporters in one election may not be the same as that which best makes this distinction in another election. But when dealing with a causal model whose intervening variables must each in turn be treated as dependent, curious differences in effect will result from changing the definitions of these variables from election to election. Consequently it becomes important to keep the same definition of what constitutes any class characteristic whenever we observe it. For different reasons a standard coding scheme was also required in one of the studies which laid the groundwork for the present one (Franklin, 1982), and for the sake of convenience and comparability the same coding scheme has been adopted here.(6)

When we come to analyse the extent to which our six social

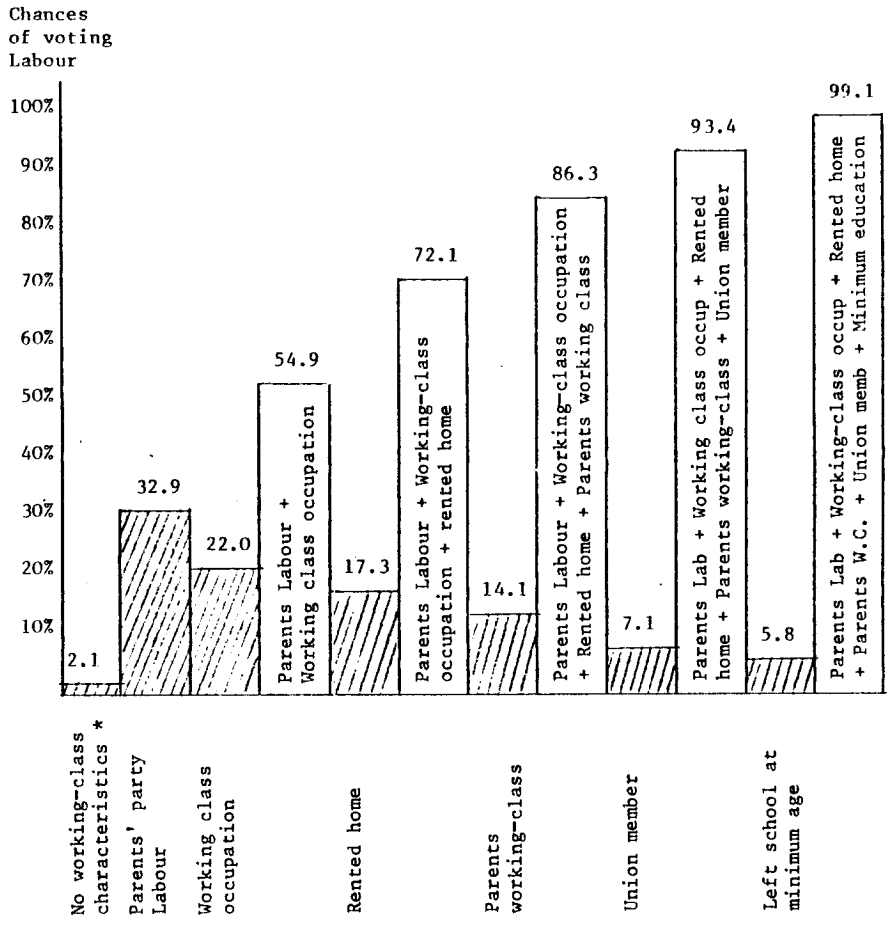
structural variables can explain voting choice, we have another decision to make: what is to constitute the universe under study? Specifically, are we interested in the behaviour of major party voters? Or of all voters? Or of the entire electorate including non-voters? In the past it has been conventional to concentrate upon major party voters when studying the effects of social class. Evidently, when we try to explain why voters choose to support one of the major parties, our explanation will appear much more complete if minor party and non-voters are excluded from consideration. But removal of such respondents will affect the inter-relationship of variables other than voting choice, thus causing spurious variations in the influence of intervening variables. After all, the fact that a respondent abstains from voting does not imply any lack of housing, occupation or other characteristic of interest to us in the present study. In order to simplify the presentation that follows, we focus on only two of the three possible universes: that comprising all respondents and that which is restricted to major party voters. The latter universe provides comparability with other studies and a "best case" focus where class forces should display themselves to best advantage. The former is more interesting in a causal analysis of class factors leading to major party voting since the failure of individuals to vote for either major party is taken into account. In both sets of analyses, the dependent variable, Voting Choice, always indexes a preference for Labour, the more class-based of the two major parties.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 illustrates the power of different variables to predict the voting choice of individuals based on a regression analysis of major party voters in our 1964 survey. Each shaded bar in the graph indicates the probability of an individual's voting Labour if they had one particular characteristic typical of such voters, but no other. The unshaded bars give the cumulative probabilities of voting Labour for individuals with successively more Labour characteristics. Thus the right-most bar represents the probability of voting Labour for an individual with all the social characteristics associated with such a vote. The variables could have been taken in any order, but were in fact taken in order of their importance in structuring voting choice. Thus the left-most variable is parents' party, the most powerful predictor of voting choice in Britain, while the first two variables together (parents' party and occupational class) are shown to be more powerful than all of the remaining four.(7)

Figure 2 makes it clear that, at least in 1964, social characteristics were powerful determinants of voting choice. The small proportion of major party voters with uniformly middle class or working class characteristics could hardly have been more strongly influenced. Only two percent of those with no working class characteristics voted Labour, while less than

Figure 2 Individual and cumulating effects on the probability of voting Labour of various Working-Class characteristics, from regression analysis of major party voters, 1964.



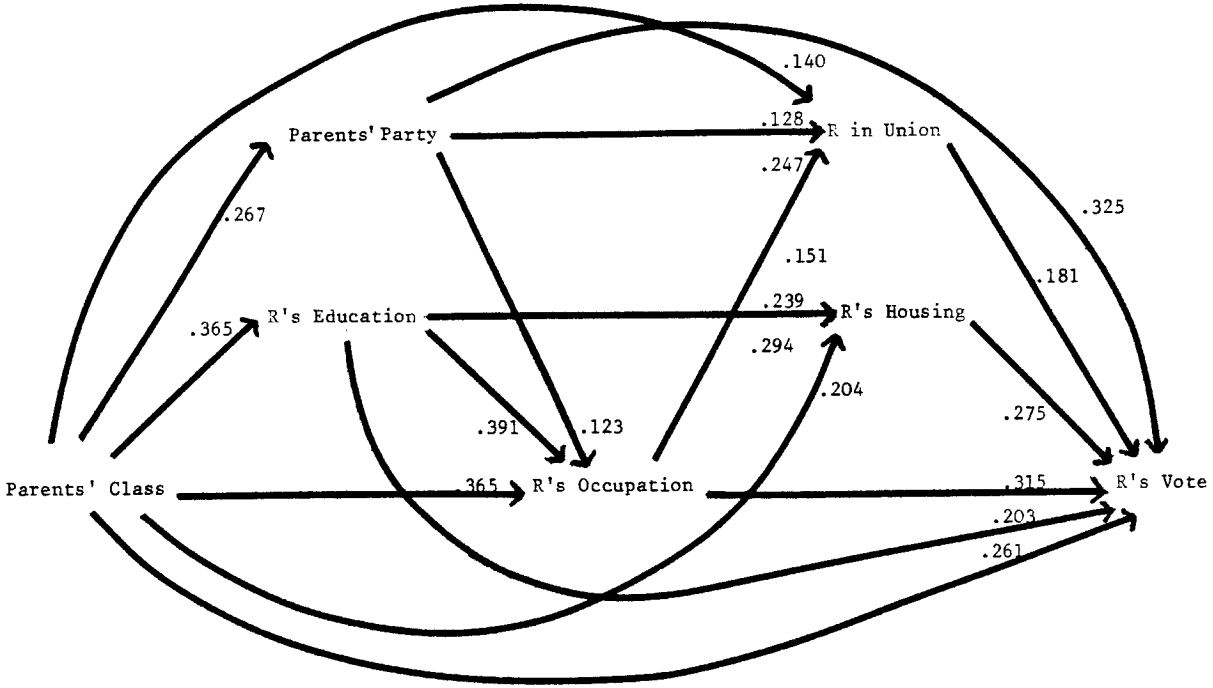
* This constant term is included within each of the other probabilities depicted.

one percent of those with no middle class characteristics voted Conservative.

The Model

The seven variables we are investigating (six representing social influences, together with voting choice) can be arranged in temporal sequence. Clearly, childhood characteristics have the opportunity to help determine adult characteristics, and both sets evidently affect voting choice (see Figure 2). However, the childhood and adult sets of variables can each be further unpacked in terms of their likely influence on one-another. Thus parents' class has the opportunity to affect parents' party preference and also the type of schooling their child was given; while respondent's occupation may well affect the type of home tenure they choose, and whether or not they belong to a union. These considerations lead us to spread our seven variables on a five-point temporal scale, with parents' party and respondent's education occupying joint second place between parents' class and respondents occupation; and with respondent's home tenure and union membership similarly tied for fourth place between occupation and voting choice. Figure 3 illustrates this model in a preliminary fashion, showing the more important zero-order intercorrelations (all of those with values greater than 0.10) between the variables in the wider of the two universes with which we are concerned, that for all voters in 1964.(8)

Figure 3 A preliminary model of class voting showing selected Pearsonian (zero-order) intercorrelations between variables for all respondents in 1964[a]



a. Missing data has been deleted in a pairwise manner, and the number of cases upon which each coefficient is based varies from 1208 to 1773

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Inspection of these coefficients yields some interesting speculations. It seems likely that the link between parents' party and respondent's occupation would be largely spurious: the outcome of the relatively strong links between each of these variables and parents' class. By contrast, a great many of the links between parents' class and other variables (all except the ones with parents' party and respondent's education) are likely to be the work (in large or small part) of intervening variables. But the major point to emerge from Figure 3 is the relatively small magnitude of all the coefficients shown there. Social structure in Britain is not particularly coherent, and the possession of one attribute typical of some class does not bring with it a very high probability for possession of any other particular attribute typical of that class. It is for this reason that the powerful structuring of voting choice evident in Figure 2 is diluted in its impact on the electorate as a whole: very few people have all the attributes associated with either the working or middle class (only eight percent in 1964; see Franklin, 1982, note 11).

In order to refine the model presented in Figure 3, it is necessary to eliminate the links that are wholly spurious (or wholly the work of intervening variables) and adjust the weight

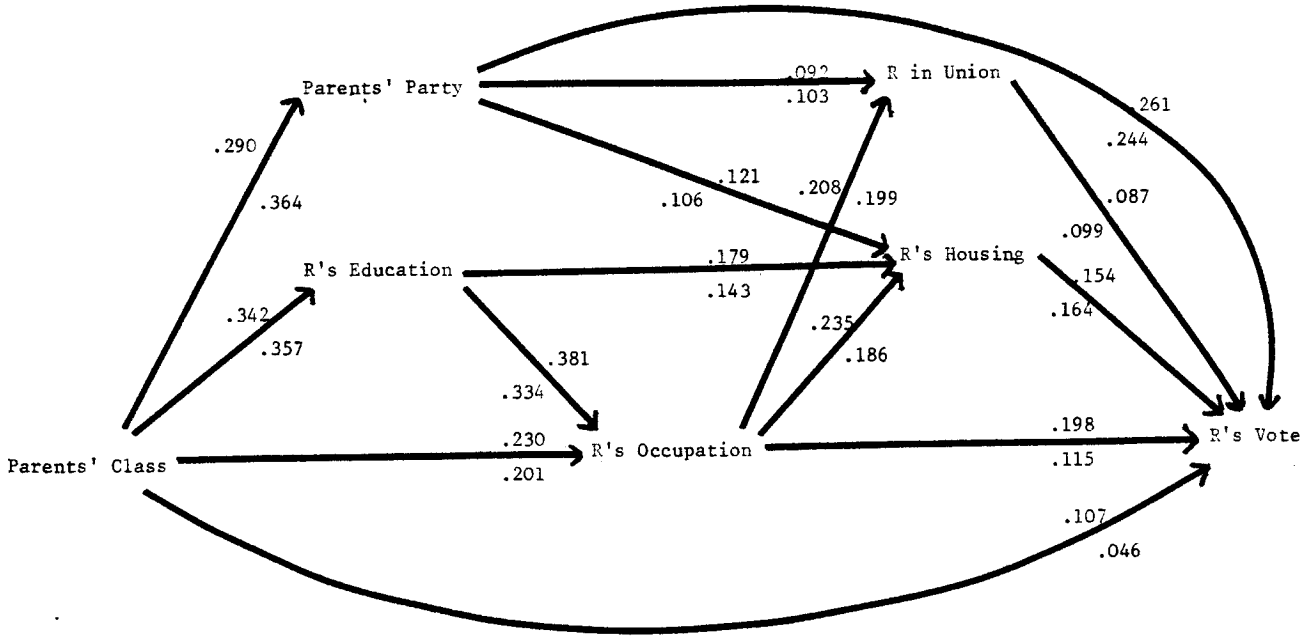
given to other links to reflect the fact that some of them will be partly spurious (or partly the work of intervening variables). To do this we perform a series of multiple regression analyses treating each variable other than parents' class in turn as dependent upon those variables prior in causal sequence. Thus voting choice is initially treated as dependent on all other variables, home tenure as dependent on all but voting choice and union membership, and so on. In each of these analyses the independent variables are eliminated from the equation in turn, to see how much explanatory power they add to the prediction when all other variables have explained as much as they can. If a variable eliminated in this fashion is found to have contributed less than half a percent to the explained variance it is removed from consideration, and the process repeated for the remaining variables.(9) A large number of potential links can be eliminated by this means, but there is a complicating factor that has to be borne in mind. This arises from the fact that we are not concerned only to create a model correct for a single election, but one in which changes in the importance of particular variables can be traced over a considerable time-span. Since the elimination of any link changes (albeit slightly) the linkages for all other variables, comparisons are only possible between models containing the same links. Thus a linkage found to be important in one election must be included in the model for another election with which comparisons are to be made, even though its importance at that time was slight.

In this fashion, models were established for each pair of successive elections between 1964 and 1979, as well as for certain pairs more widely separated in time. The models including the 1966 and 1970 elections turned out to be severely affected by swings in the electoral fortunes of the major parties and also by temporary demographic effects, as anticipated in previous research (Franklin, 1982). However, this same research tells us that demographic effects had worked themselves out by 1974, and we know that the parties were in rough electoral balance both in 1964 and 1974, so that these two elections are comparable in at least two respects.(10) Since the major changes in class voting took place during the intervening decade (see Figure 1), we can best guage the nature of the changes by concentrating on the two elections at which the contaminating influence of other factors will have been least in evidence. So it is upon the model of class voting for 1964 and 1974 that we now focus our attention.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4 differs from Figure 3 in showing fewer links between the variables, a number having been found to be either spurious or the work of intervening variables by means of the analysis described above. This time the coefficients illustrated are not correlations but ordinary (unstandardized) partial regression coefficients (b's) which, in the case of

Figure 4 A more refined model of class voting, showing effects (partial unstandardized regression coefficients) for all respondents in 1964 (upper coefficients) and 1974 (lower coefficients).[a]



a. Missing data has been deleted in a pairwise manner, and the number of cases upon which each coefficient is based varies from 1208 to 1773 in 1964 and from 2106 to 2453 in 1974.

variables measured as 0,1 dichotomies, can be interpreted as differences in proportions (see Franklin and Mughan, 1978, Table 3). Moreover, each link is now accompanied by a pair of coefficients: those above each line relate to all respondents in 1964 and those below each line relate to all respondents in 1974. So the coefficient of .261 linking parent's party to respondent's vote for 1964 can be interpreted as the proportion of respondents who would have been expected to vote differently in 1964 had their parents evinced a different party preference, while all other influences remained the same. (11) In speaking of any one respondent these proportions can be turned into probabilities simply by multiplying by 100 and viewing the results as chances out of a hundred. The effects into any node of the model can be summed, so that, for example, the chances of a working class occupation on the part of a respondent with minimum educational attainments and working class parents is 61.1 per cent greater in 1964 than are the chances of a working class occupation on the part of one who had neither of these characteristics.

The extent of class voting in 1964

Is this model one of class voting? We shall argue that in 1964 it could plausibly have been identified as such, but that by 1974 no such identification could any longer be made. We base our argument on the behaviour of two variables included in the model which must have a central part to play in any social

mechanism underlying class-based voting behaviour. Occupation is one of these variables, given primacy (either theoretical or analytical or both) in almost every study of the electoral impact of British social conditions.(12) The other is parents' class. This variable has not always been stressed in British voting studies, because questions as to childhood class environment have not always been included in British electoral surveys. However, it is clear that there are many individuals whose class self-image does not accord with their occupational status because of their view of their childhood roots in a working class environment.(13) More importantly, perhaps, it is clear from Figure 2 that our model cannot be a model of class voting unless we give primacy to parents' class. This is because parents' party preference, which we have already identified as the most powerful determinant of voting choice, need have no class connotations unless it is linked to parents' class in the manner depicted in the model. Without such links it could transmit any variety of partisanship from generation to generation, rather than reinforcing the transmission of class-based preferences in the context of a class-based political system. So while the model may not in fact be correct (and we cannot prove it to be correct) it is surely the model that underlies the concept of class-based voting behaviour in Britain. "Class is the basis of British politics," said Peter Pulzer (1967, p. 89). "All else is embellishment and detail." If that was true, as was generally supposed at least until the mid-1970s, then it can only have been true in the context of a model of class voting such as that in Figure 4.

For variables as important as parents' party and home ownership to be considered "embellishments" it is essential that they be considered consequential upon social class in one manifestation or another. Indeed, if these two particular variables are to be subsumed within a class-based view of electoral choice, we require two manifestations of social class in order to provide the necessary anchorages. The only possible candidates are occupation and parents' class. In what follows, we shall refer to these as "central" variables in our model of British class voting. Other variables will be termed "supportive".

The manner in which the central variables anchored the supportive variables within a class-based structure is readily seen if we start by re-assessing the unique contribution of parents' party preference within the structure depicted in Figure 4. What our model asserts is that, in 1964, 29 per cent of the effects of parents' party were in reality ascribable to the influence of parents' class. So of the direct effects of parents' party, .076 (= .290 X .261) must be re-assigned to the variable prior in causal sequence, as must a further seven percent travelling along even less direct paths (see Table 1). This small adjustment, because it must be taken from the effects of parents' party and also added to the effects of parents' class, counts twice in boosting the importance of parents' class relative to that of the other variable. Similar adjustments have the effect of ascribing to parents' class some 34 per cent of the effects that would otherwise have been attributed to education, and 23 per cent of the effects

otherwise ascribable to occupation (the paths from parents' class to education and occupation are shown in Figure 4 to carry weights of .342 and .230 for 1964). Table 1 accumulates the total effects attributable to each variable from direct and indirect influences and then, for variables subsequent to parents class, removes the effects that have been attributed back to variables earlier in causal sequence. The net effect column thus cumulates the additional influence ascribable to each variable after indirect effects have been attributed back as early as possible in causal sequence, and indicates that in 1964 central class variables accounted for .387 out of .806 (or 48 per cent) of total influences when these were re-assigned in a manner consistent with the causal structure of the model.(14)

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

But even this is not the end of the story. The total effects of occupation are reached in Table 1 after subtracting influences thought properly to belong to education. But where our objective is to evaluate the impact of central class variables we must bear in mind that most of the influences of education would not have been felt but for the presence of occupation to channel them forward to voting choice. So it can be argued that the net effects of occupation should not be reduced in the same manner as the net effects of other variables. A true assessment of the contribution of central

Table 1 Direct and indirect effects of Central Class and other variables calculated from Figure 4 for 1964

Row No	Effects of	Via	Gross Effect	Includes effect	at rows	Net effect
1	Parents' class	Direct	.107			.107
2		Parents' party	.076			.076
3		& Union	.002			.002
4		& Housing	.005			.005
		Education				
5		& Housing	.009			.009
6		& Occupation	.026			.026 +
7		& Union	.002			.002
8		& Housing	.005			.005
9		Occupation	.046			.046 +
10		& Union	.006			.006
11		& Housing	.008			.008
		(Total indirect)				(.184)
		(Total effects)	.291			.291
13	Parents' party	Direct	.261	.076	2	.185
14		Union	.008	.002	3	.006
15		Housing	.019	.005	4	.014
		(Total indirect)				(.020)
		(Total effects)	.288			.205
16	Education	Housing	.028	.009	5	.019
17		Occupation	.075	.026	6	.049*
18		& Union	.007	.002	7	.005*
19		& Housing	.014	.005	8	.009*
		(Total indirect)				(.082)
		(Total effects)	.124			.082
20	Occupation	Direct	.198	.121	6,7,17	.077
21		Union	.018	.013	7,10,18	.005
22		Housing	.036	.022	8,11,19	.014
		(Total indirect)				(.019)
		(Total effects)	.252			.096
23	Union	Direct	.087	.026	3,7,10, 14,18,21	.061
24	Housing	Direct	.154	.083	4,5,8,11, 15,16,19, 22	.071
All Variables						
	Total direct effects		.806			.501
	Total indirect effects					(.305)
						.806
Central Class variables						
	Total direct effects		.305			.184
	Total indirect effects					.203
						.387

* Effects routed via occupation total 0.063 to be added to the effects of Central Class variables in any complete assessment of the role played by central class variables (see text).

\+ Effects routed via occupation are properly regarded as direct effects of central class variables viewed as a whole (see text).

variables to the model in Figure 4 requires not only that they be credited with influences they exert indirectly, but also with influences that would not have been exerted by prior variables without their intervention. A suitable adjustment to Table 1 to take account of this consideration would add .063 to the effects of occupation, bringing the influence of central class variables up to almost 56 per cent of total influences.(15)

What we have done, therefore, is to construct a model in which class forces can be seen to contribute more than half of total influences, and in which, of this majority influence (.490 out of .860), .305 are direct influences: more than twice the .145 of indirect influences flowing via the network of supportive social characteristics. It may be a near thing, but clearly this can reasonably be regarded as a model of class voting. The same cannot be said when the accounting operation summarized above is repeated for the 1974 coefficients reported in Figure 4.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The decline of central class influences by 1974

Table 2 summarizes the accounting necessary to evaluate the

Table 2 Components of change in the effects of central class variables on voting choice, 1964 and 1974.

	Central Class Variables				
	Direct effects	Indirect effects	Total	Effects of other variables	Total
1964 totals	.184	.203	.387		
Adjustment for education *	.049	.014	.063		
Adjustment for parents' class +	.072	-.072	.000		
	.305	.145	.450	.356	.806
Central class %	67.8%	32.2%	100%		
Total %	37.8%	18.0%	55.8%	44.2%	100%
1974 totals	.100	.184	.284		
Adjustment for education *	.024	.011	.035		
Adjustment for parents' class +	.037	-.037	.000		
	.161	.158	.319	.349	.669
Central class %	50.5%	49.5%	100%		
Total %	24.1%	23.7%	47.8%	52.2%	100%

* These are effects that required the presence of a central class variable in order to become effective (see Table 1).

\+ These are effects that are properly regarded as direct effects when the two central class variables are considered together, being direct effects of occupation (see Table 1).

decline in the influence of central class variables by 1974. Clearly, central class influences had declined considerably during the decade. Not only had the total effects of parents' class and occupation declined by a third to make up only 42 per cent of the much reduced sum of total effects (.284 out of .669), but the increment to these total effects obtainable by claiming credit for the educational influences that pass via occupation had declined even more precipitously to a mere 3.5 per cent. So by 1974 this model in which class forces show themselves to best possible advantage could no longer attribute as much as half of the effects on voting choice to central class variables. Instead of dominating by a margin of .450 to .356, central class variables in 1974 were themselves dominated by a margin of .349 to .319.

Even more importantly, the table shows that indirect effects were hardly changed over the decade. Such influences as central class variables continued to exert in 1974 are shown in Table 2 to be shared almost equally between direct and indirect influences, instead of being very largely direct in nature. Moreover, the continued power of indirect influences arises largely from an increase in the influence of supportive variables (see below). Without this change, the decline in central class influences would have been even more precipitous. The real contrast between the two election years comes in the virtual halving of the direct effects of parents' class and occupation, from .305 in 1964 to .161 in 1974, while other influences remained largely unchanged (See Table 3).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

It is of course possible that the findings presented above arise at least in part from the fact that 1974 saw a dramatic increase in minor party voting, and it might have been the case that for major party voters the effects of central class variables declined less. It is, after all, among major party voters that we would expect to find class forces at their most powerful. But Table 4 shows that the decline in the importance of central class variables among major party voters was even more extensive than among all respondents (Table 3), with a change in effect of −.158 compared to −.144 for the universe comprising all respondents. At the same time, the table makes it clear that the difference between the two universes under examination lies primarily in the behaviour of supportive variables. In the universe comprising all respondents these change little in their effects between 1964 and 1974, so that the decline of the central variables indexed in Table 3 brings with it an overall decline in our ability to predict voting choice of an equivalent amount. In the universe comprising major party voters, by contrast, the decline in the structuring effects of central variables is largely offset by an increase in the structuring effects of supportive variables, leaving a net decline of only 0.044 (.114 − .158).

Table 3 Direct effects of central and supportive variables compared for all respondents, 1964 and 1974

Effects of	1964	1974	Change in effect 1964 to 1974	Change % of 1964
Parents' Class	.107	.046	-.061	-57.0%
R's Occupation	.198	.115	-.083	-41.9%
Central	.305	.161	-.144	-47.2%
Parents' Party	.261	.244	-.017	- 6.4%
R in Union	.087	.099	+.012	+13.8%
R's Housing	.154	.164	+.010	+ 6.5%
Supportive	.502	.507	+.005	+ 1.0%
Variance explained	**22.1%**	**17.4%**		

Table 4 Total effects of central and supportive variables compared for major party voters, 1964 and 1974

Effect of	1964	1974	Change in effect 1964 to 1974	Change % of 1964
Parents' Class	.169	.115	-.054	-32.0%
R's Occupation	.241	.137	-.104	-43.2%
Central	.410	.252	-.158	-38.5%
Parents' Party	.303	.275	-.028	- 9.2%
R in Union	.068	.138	+.070	+102.9%
R's Housing	.173	.245	+.072	+41.6%
Supportive	.544	.658	+.114	+21.0%
Variance explained	31.5%	29.9%		

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

In particular, two variables which show some gains in structuring voting choice in the universe comprising all respondents show quite dramatic gains in the more limited universe. Among major party voters, the effects of housing tenure increase by over forty per cent, while an equivalent absolute gain on the part of union membership results in a doubling of that variables' rather modest 1964 effect. These observations may serve to shed some light on a major paradox that has emerged in recent British voting studies.

The ecological paradox in British class voting

Almost as well-documented as the decline in the power of social class to structure partisanship at the individual level in Britain is the increase in the power of class to structure partisanship at the constituency level. In a seminal article, Miller (1978) has demonstrated the existence of a very powerful relationship between the percentage of employers and managers in a constituency and the percentage of votes cast for the Conservative party. In 1964 fully 69 per cent of the variance in Conservative voting figures could be explained by this variable alone, and by 1974 the percentage had increased to a staggering 77 per cent. (16)

By mathematical manipulation of separately derived survey and constituency estimates for the effects of social class, Miller shows that there are two effects on class voting. One of these is the individual-level effect which we have been investigating in this article, having to do with the power of a person's own characteristics to determine his or her partisanship. The other is an area effect which has to do with the power of constituency characteristics to determine the partisanship of the individuals who live there. The constituency-level findings point to an increase in the area effect on partisanship corresponding to the decline in the effect of individual characteristics. Miller suggests (p.283) that "the whole system of class polarization may be in a state of dynamically stable equilibrium with self-cancelling trends more likely than anything else." This is because one of the things that can stop the area effect from dominating completely, so that all working class individuals in a predominantly middle class constituency end up voting Conservative and vice versa, is the power of individual-level characteristics (p.281). Conversely, one of the things that can restrict the power of individual characteristics to structure partisanship would be a strong area effect making itself felt on members of the minority class in each constituency.

If this suggestion is correct, then all that may have happened is that one form of class voting in Britain has been replaced by another, and the party system is safe from more

radical changes. But is the suggestion correct? We would like to argue that the increase in the power of constituency class characteristics to structure constituency electoral outcomes is no more than an ironic concomitant of the decline of class structuring on an individual basis. As the supportive variables in our analysis have come to bear more weight in predicting voting choice, so the class composition of different constituencies will also have become a better predictor of constituency outcomes. This is because patterns of housing tenure, in particular, will have tended to cluster geographically, so that more middle class constituencies will have tended to see an increase in home ownership while more working class constituencies will have tended to see an increase in council house tenancies. This is an inevitable result of differential housing policies by local authorities over the past twenty years. Union membership will also have tended to cluster geographically, although in a less clear cut fashion because so many people commute to work across constituency boundaries.

So, other things being equal, we would expect the increasing importance of supportive variables to show up at the constituency level in terms of increasing correlations between class and constituency voting outcomes: precisely what Miller found.

How can we distinguish between Miller's suggested interpretation of his findings and our own? One way would be

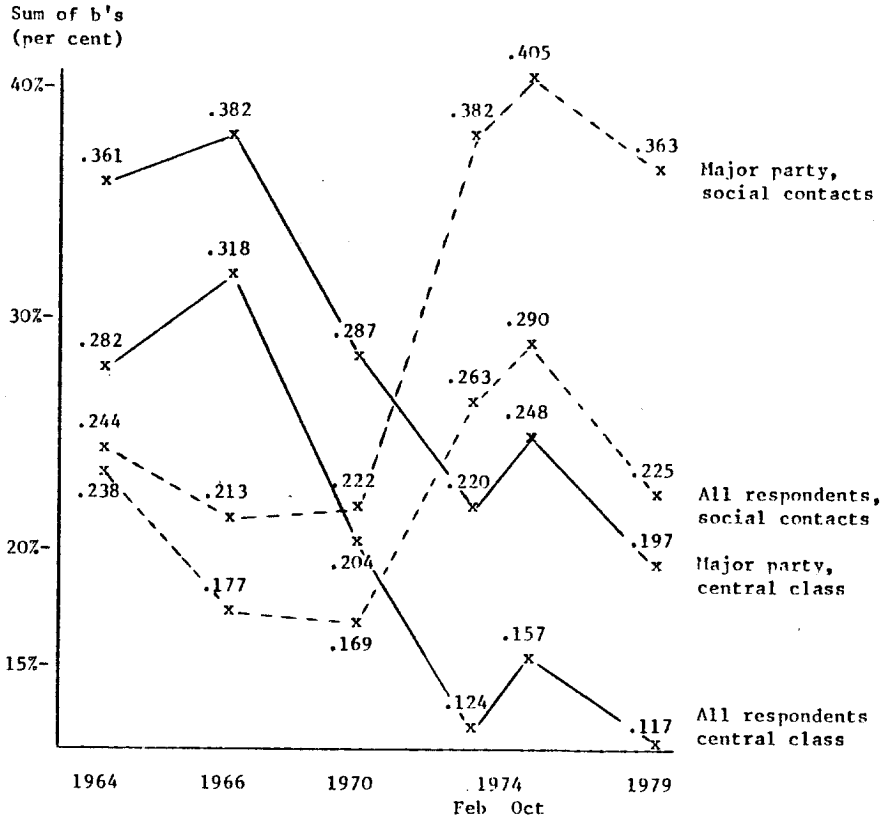
to link the constituency-level data to characteristics of individuals residing in different constituencies who are members of our samples. This is a complex undertaking best left for future research (Franklin, 1983). In the meantime, a good preliminary test to distinguish between the two hypotheses is to look at the timing of the various changes we and Miller have noted. Miller found variance explained at the constituency level varying between 68 and 70 per cent from 1964 to 1970, and between 77 and 78 per cent thereafter (1979, p.377). In other words the increase he noted occurred in a single step between 1970 and 1974. We already saw in Figure 1 that at the individual level, class voting declined also in a single step, but that step occurred not between 1970 and 1974 but during the previous inter-election period, between 1966 and 1970. On the face of it this would contradict Miller's suggestion, since the rise in the area effect did not coincide with a decline in the individual effect and we did not have a system in a state of dynamically stable equilibrium. However, Figure 1 is perhaps not the correct point of departure for the comparison. After all, this summarized the effects of all six of our independent variables, and in a highly corrected fashion at that. Perhaps it would be fairer to Miller's hypothesis if we were to look only at the behaviour of those variables most centrally connected with the concept of class voting. Figure 5 traces the changing effects of central class variables over the fifteen year period of our study (solid lines) for major party voters and all respondents, and shows conclusively that although there was a decline in the structuring effects of

these two variables between 1970 and 1974, the major decline for both universes had occurred by 1970.(17) At the same time, Figure 5 traces the progress of the two variables whose structuring properties increased over the period, housing and union membership (broken lines) here described as "social contact" variables. These variables, by contrast with the central class variables, do show an increase coinciding with the rise in the area effect reported by Miller, with small fluctuations before and after easily attributable to the effects of swing.(18)

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

So the decline in class voting at the individual level cannot simply be viewed as a logical implication of its increase at the constituency level, with class-based parties as secure in the new structure of partisanship as they were in the old. On the contrary, the rise in class-based partisanship at the constituency level is very likely due to nothing more than the links between local authority housing policies, the class complexion of constituencies with different housing policies, and the voting behaviour of these constituencies. Our evidence for this assertion is circumstantial but persuasive. It does not contradict any of Miller's findings, and runs counter only to his suggestion that self-cancelling trends were more likely than anything else. After all, the area effect was, according

Figure 5 Changes in the effect of social contact and central class variables in determining voting choice for all respondents and major party voters over all elections between 1964 and 1979.[a]



a. These coefficients derive from regression analyses in which education was included as a predictor of partisanship, and so are not comparable with coefficients in Tables 2 and 5.

to Miller, a matter of social contacts breeding consensus. If housing and union membership are increasing in importance this is likely to be for the same reason. So it probably does not much matter whether Miller's area effect is serving as a surrogate for these two variables or vice versa. In either case he would have been right in stressing (1978, p.283) that electoral politics was becoming "less and less about 'people like me' and more and more about 'people around here'". What does matter is our different prognosis for the future of the British party system. Miller believes that an increasing local component in voting behaviour could lead (1978, p.283) to "a declining fit to the constituency regressions." The implication is that this decline would be gradual. Our own feeling is that the decline could be quite dramatic, for reasons to which we now turn.

A Catastrophe in the making?

In the introduction to this article we suggested that British electoral behaviour might well have approached the "cusp" at which catastrophic change can occur. It is now possible for us to elaborate on this suggestion.

Catastrophe theory should be viewed, as suggested by its creator Rene Thom (1975), not so much as a theory and more as a method of analysis: a method particularly suited to handling sudden or discontinuous changes. An example of discontinuous

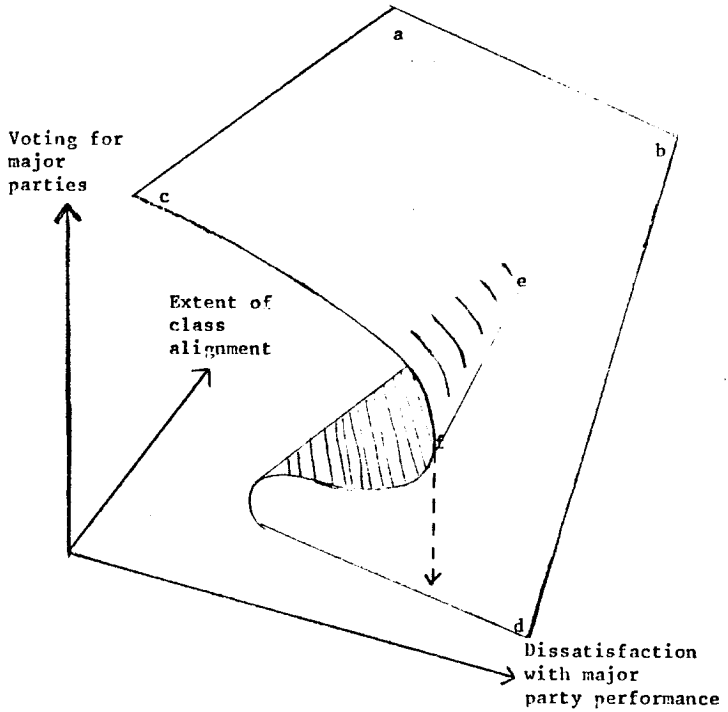
effects taken from the natural sciences arises in the familiar case of applying heat to ice at a constant rate. Over a wide span of temperatures, the ice warms up in direct proportion to the heat applied. Then, for no readily apparent reason, the continued application of heat ceases to warm the ice and instead turns some of it to water. Another example would come from the continuous movements of portions of the earth's crust which eventually generate so much stress that a final small movement brings about an earthquake. Discontinuities of this type are hard to handle from the perspective of Newtonian mechanics, where effects are always proportional to causes, and to analyse with the mathematical tool (called "calculus") that Newton provided. So Thom created a branch of mathematics designed to handle discontinuous effects. The mathematics are of little interest to us as social scientists, any more than is the calculus required to handle continuous changes. What is important is the perspective that comes along with the mathematics.

The perspective that comes from catastrophe theory permits us to look at British class voting in a new light, as a control factor determining the behaviour of a complex system. As long as class voting was high, people would support major parties largely regardless of how well they thought the parties were doing. Voting was for many people a matter of "my party right or wrong", because support for that party was traditional among people of their social class. In these conditions no third party could break in to the political system and achieve major

party status. However, as class voting declines, a point must be reached at which this governing principle would cease to be true, and a third party would have the potential for breaking in and replacing one of the pre-existing major parties, supported by a vote that was not any longer class-based.

Catastrophe theory provides us with a way of visualizing the effects of dissatisfaction with major party performance at different levels of class alignment. Figure 6 projects a hypothetical relationship between the variables concerned. What it shows is that at high levels of class alignment the basic relationship is roughly linear: more dissatisfaction leads to slightly less voting for major parties at a fairly constant rate. But as the extent of class alignment falls, the relationship becomes more and more curvilinear. At the extreme limit of zero class voting, the effect of increasing dissatisfaction with major party performance starts off being slight, but then accelerates to the point of a vertical drop shown by the broken arrow superimposed on Figure 6. The relationships illustrated are subtle, since they show two ways of avoiding catastrophic change. One is to keep the class alignment control variable at high levels. The other is to avoid increasing the level of dissatisfaction with major party performance beyond a certain point.

Figure 6 Projection of a three-dimensional plane linking votes for major parties to dissatisfaction with major party performance, under the control of extent of class alignment.



a. Strong class alignment, low dissatisfaction, high support for major parties.

b. Strong class alignment, high dissatisfaction, fairly high support for major parties.

c. Weak class alignment, low dissatisfaction, high support for major parties.

d. Weak class alignment, high dissatisfaction, low support for major parties.

e. Point of minimum catastrophic change.

f. Point of maximum catastrophic change.

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

In fact, in the contemporary British situation, there is a fourth variable that cannot readily be illustrated in a two-dimensional projection. This is the credibility of minor party alternatives, or the esteem in which they are held. Effectively, Figure 6 represents a slice out of this fourth dimension in which such parties have a given degree of credibility. Changes in this variable will affect the left-right position of the fold (or "cusp") in Figure 6. More minor party credibility will move the cusp to the left, so that catastrophic change would come about at lower levels of dissatisfaction with major party performance. Less credibility will move the cusp to the right so that quite extreme dissatisfaction would be required in order for the electorate to abandon the major parties in any numbers.

Figure 6 is, as we have said, a hypothetical illustration. We cannot now say precisely where the fold occurs, how deep it is, or even whether it exists at all.(19) After the collapse of major party support has occurred (if it does) we will have rather more information to go on. However, there are always reasons why catastrophic changes occur, and these reasons determine the location and extent of the cusp. In contemporary British politics there is reason to believe that class voting is now low enough to permit a catastrophic change in major

party voting, provided dissatisfaction with major party performance is great enough. The reason is implicit in the analysis presented earlier in this article. The decline in class voting shown in Figure 1 may not appear particularly great, but because of the way in which the decline was concentrated in variables central to the class nature of British voting behaviour, the apparent degree of class voting that remains today is largely spurious. The dependent variable in Figure 1 is an additive index in which the contribution of central class variables declined in the manner discussed in previous sections. By 1974 the index had not only fallen: it had also ceased to be an index of class voting in important respects. It is this sort of subtle change in the very meaning of a control variable with changes in its value that gives rise to the presence of a catastrophic cusp. (20)

Conclusions

Is class, then, still the basis of British politics? At the individual level the answer must be an unequivocal "no". The explanatory power of variables most central to the concept of social class (parents' class and respondent's occupation) had declined so extensively by 1974 that supportive variables which used to reinforce these central influences are now essentially propping up a structure which has lost its backbone. The variables which, at the individual level, have retained their importance are those relating to inherited partisanship and

social contacts. Inheritance can transmit any political allegiance from generation to generation, and social contacts can similarly support any type of party system. The contemporary political system happens for historical reasons to be class-based, but in elections since 1970 it has been supported only because it is there. Its essential fragility was demonstrated in Scotland by the rapid rise and then decline of Scottish Nationalist partisanship on the part of individuals whose class characteristics should have led them to vote Conservative or Labour. The recent surge in by-election voting for the SDP / Liberal alliance is another demonstration of the same fragility.

At the constituency level, research has shown social class to have been rising in importance as a determinant of constituency electoral outcomes, but this appears to be no more than an ironic concomitant of its decline at the individual level. Group processes of opinion formation and dissemination are the props which sustain what is left of the British class vote, but to the extent that class-based voting patterns are sustained in this manner, election results come increasingly to be determined by the particular mix of social characteristics found in each constituency. If ever a new alignment springs up, it too is likely to be supported by these same processes, and the high correlations found between class and electoral outcomes at the constituency level will vanish just as easily as the much lower correlations between class and voting choice at the individual level. When this happens then class voting

will have been replaced by something else.

At the time of writing (early 1983) there is still some speculation as to the possibility of an SDP/Liberal alliance taking over major party status from a Labour party apparently torn by internal dissention, though the probability appears less than it did a year ago. Our analysis cannot tell us whether such a change in the political alignment will occur. What we can say is that the opportunity for realignment is there, and has been there since 1970. The SDP/Liberal alliance may fail to push over the spineless structure which in 1979 still supported the old two-party system, and no other new force may prove capable of doing so. Nevertheless, so long as class voting does not reassert itself and no other change (such as proportional representation) gives an alternative source of stability to electoral choice, each new political force will have the <u>potential</u> for breaking through; and elections in Britain will never have the predictability they appeared to enjoy only ten short years ago. The least that can now be said is that we live in interesting times.

FOOTNOTES

(1) For a discussion of the different ways in which this decline can be measured and interpreted see Franklin and Mughan (1978, pp. 523-534).

(2) The word "catastrophe" should not be interpreted in its normal sense of being virtually synonymous with the word "disaster". Technically, a catastrophe occurs when a cause that previously had effects of one kind suddenly gives rise to effects of a very different kind or magnitude. These effects may be disasterous for some and beneficial for others, but it is not the disasterous nature or otherwise of the change that makes it catastrophic. See for example Woodcock and Davis (1978, p.81). Catastrophe theory has been the subject of some controversy in the decade since its invention, but there can be no doubt that it does provide a perspective from which to view sudden or discontinuous changes that is quite different from that provided by conventional analysis. This perspective can clarify processes in many fields that would otherwise have remained obscure.

(3) The first three of these surveys were conducted by David Butler and Donald Stokes and kindly made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Those fielded in 1974 and 1979 were conducted by Ivor Crewe, Bo Sarlvik, James Alt and David Robertson, and made available by the British SSRC Survey Archive at the University of Essex. These surveys were acquired by the Social Statistics Laboratory at the University of Strathclyde, and their analysis was much facilitated by preliminary work performed by the staff of the Laboratory, and particularly by Ann Mair for whose patient assistance I am much indebted.

(4) Because of the increasing proportion of children attending Comprehensive schools, years of education were dichotomized to distinguish those who left school at the minimum legal age from those who stayed on at school after that time. It was felt that this would provide an indicator of classroom environment that should remain relatively stable over the fifteen year period covered by our study.

(5) The impact of different socializing variables on adult political behaviour have been extensively analysed by Butler and Stokes (1974, Ch. 5). The variables chosen to indicate adult influences are the most important of those whose impact was evaluated by Franklin and Mughan (1978).

(6) Details of this coding scheme are given in a separate appendix available from the author on request.

(7) Regression analysis is not necessarily the best method of computing average coefficients from data that could be represented as a multi way contingency table. Because it assumes normally distributed interval variables, it can be subject to bias when making estimates from dichotomies (Goodman, 1975). However, other research has shown such bias to be negligible in a situation similar to the one that faces us here (Franklin and Mughan, 1980). We employ the method for lack of an alternative means of causal analysis suited to this number of variables.

(8) The coefficients are Pearsonian product-moment correlations. The model differs from the only other British voting model of similar (or greater) complexity constructed to date (Himmelweit et al, 1981) in a number of respects. Himmelweit and associates were concerned with individuals all of whom entered the electorate in 1959, and each of whom thus had the opportunity of voting in an identical number of General Elections. Past voting behaviour becomes a plausible component of such a model, replacing the role of parents Party in our own model and dominating the resulting picture at the expense of such variables as housing and union membership. Moreover, attitudinal variables are introduced as mediating between social characteristics and voting choice. However, the major difference between this model and our own is the inclusion of a variable, educational attainment, which we eliminated because, despite its large effect for the small number of individuals who did receive higher education, added very little to the overall variance explained.

(9) This is similar to the "backward elimination" procedure detailed in Draper and Smith (1966, pp. 167-68).

(10) They are non-comperable in the extent of minor party voting, but we will allow for this difficulty in the analysis that follows. All the models were subjected to a number of tests to determine their adequacy, as recommended by Asher (1976, 33-34). Since the information needed to replicate them for the models of interest is included in the paper, all that is necessary here is to report that the outcome of these tests was satisfactory.

(11) All the analyses reported in this paper were performed using pairwise deletion of missing data. The danger inherent in this method lies in the possibility that the case base for some coefficients could be very different from the case base for other coefficients. In order to guard against the possibility of being misled in this fashion, all the analyses were repeated with missing data being replaced by least-squares estimates of their true values. Happily the results of all these analyses corresponded closely to the results presented here, though the coefficients were generally of a somewhat lower magnitude, reflecting errors in estimation. The data manipulation involved in all these analyses was extensive

and could hardly have been attempted without instantanious access to intermediate findings as different coding schemes were tried and different regression models evaluated. The computer package used was SCSS, the SPSS Conversational Statistical System (Nie, Hull, Franklin, et al., 1980).

(12) See for example Butler and Stokes (1974, pp. 70-73), Rose (1974, pp. 143-132), Crewe, Sarlvik and Alt (1977, pp. 168-181). The major dissenting voice among researchers into British voting behaviour comes from Patrick Dunleavy (1979) who suggests that British voting behaviour is determined not by the social influences people experience in the home, school and workplace but by real economic interests which have in recent years come to be determined by consumption patterns (but see Harrop 1980). Because of his focus on interests rather than influences, Dunleavy's analysis falls outside the tradition within which the present argument is constructed.

(13) Separate analysis of the Butler and Stokes 1964 survey shows that two thirds (68.1 per cent) of the individuals whose class self-image conflicts with their occupational status have class origins consistent with this self-image.

(14) It must be emphasized that the attribution of influences to prior variables in this fashion results directly from the causal ordering of the model, which was determined on the basis of theoretical considerations. Once this ordering is established, indirect effects result from the rules of algebra, and do nothing to confirm the correct definition of the model.

(15) The same result would have been obtained in a stagewise regression analysis which took out the effects of central variables before investigating other influences.

(16) It may not be immediately clear how a variable measured at the constituency level can explain so much of the variance in votes cast when essentially the same variable measured at the individual level can explain little more than ten per cent of the variance in voting choice (eight per cent in 1974). The problem arises because, at the individual level, someone either votes for a particular party or they do not. They cannot cast a proportion of a vote to match the probability associated with their occupation. On the other hand, in analysing constituency election returns this problem does not arise. At the constituency level, the Labour vote does not have to be (and indeed never is) one hundred per cent. So readers should not be overly impressed by the high level of variance explained in the constituency analysis. What <u>is</u> important is the different direction of the trend.

(17) Because of difficulties referred to earlier in defining a single causal model correct for all the elections held during our time period, the analyses reported in Figure 5

consist of straightforward predictions of voting choice from all six of our independent variables, including respondent's education. The coefficients for education and parents' party are not reported but remain fairly constant over the period, except for a notable drop in 1970 and revival thereafter.

(18) See Franklin (1982) for a discussion of the way in which swing can be expected to affect the estimation of class influences.

(19) Indeed, catastrophe theory does not provide a means of measuring these parameters: merely of picturing them in relation to each other.

(20) See the social science examples in Woodcock and Davis (1978, Chapters 7 and 8), and in Insard and Zeeman (1975). In fact, both our control variables undergo subtle shifts in meaning with changes in their values. At low levels of voting for major parties, increasing satisfaction cannot mean the same thing as at high levels since the party cannot be evaluated as a potential governing party. From the point of view of a party attempting to achieve major party status, the illustration shows how much more support it needs in order to gain such status than is required to retain it thereafter.

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