

# Elections and voting

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“Elections rule the political process but not the government’s policy. They decide who rules; they do not rule themselves”

Ian Gilmour (1971: 136)

## Learning objectives

- To understand the purposes and importance of elections in Britain.
- To be aware of the variety of electoral systems in use in the UK.
- To have a grasp of how and why turnout has varied over time, from place to place and from individual to individual.
- To be aware of how and why support for different parties has varied over time, from place to place and from individual to individual.



**POLLING  
STATION**

It almost goes without saying that general elections are major events in the political life of the United Kingdom, giving rise to greatly increased political activity, discussion, interest and media coverage. For about a month before polling day, the campaign dominates news coverage in the mass media – almost to the point of saturation. Day by day the activities of the party leaders are reported, opinion polls charted, individual constituencies analysed, policies dissected and so on. In 2010, for the first time, the campaign featured live televised debates involving the leaders of the three major parties and these attracted large audiences. In 2015 audiences were somewhat smaller – partly because the novelty wore off – but, even so, the two live debates still had about 10 million viewers in total. On election night itself, the main television channels and radio stations provide special all-night programmes to report, analyse and discuss the results and, next day, the front pages of all newspapers worthy of the name are entirely devoted to election news. By the time a general election is over there must be very few people in the country unaware that something important has been going on.

Elections in Britain are not confined to choosing Members of Parliament (and hence a government), however. In addition, there are elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for devolved legislatures, local elections across the whole country for councils and mayors, and also (at least until 2014) elections to the European Parliament. Although none of these generates the intensity of coverage or the level of excitement and interest among

the electorate that general elections command – with European elections coming bottom of the list in this respect – they all attract considerable media coverage and involve many thousands of people in campaigning and standing for office. Millions of citizens make the effort to vote in them.

What, the naïve might ask, is all the fuss about? The answer is, of course, that elections are important. In the first place, they are central to democratic political systems. It is through elections that citizens participate directly in the political process and, by electing representatives, the people ultimately determine the personnel and policies of governments. Only a government which is elected by the people is a legitimate government and elections are the mechanisms by which governments are held accountable. At least once every five years general elections enable the people to pass judgement on the performance of the incumbent government and vote either to keep it in office or ‘throw the rascals out’. In short, it is the existence of free, competitive elections which distinguishes political systems that we normally call ‘democratic’ from others.

Second, despite the cautionary note sounded by Ian Gilmour (a former Conservative MP, Cabinet minister, thinker and author) in his comment quoted at the start of this chapter, elections are important because they make a difference to the policies pursued by governments and hence to the lives of most people. Exactly how and how much elections affect what governments do is a matter of some debate. Voters themselves disagree about how much difference it makes when one party rather than another wins an election, and it is certainly true that governments of any party are constrained by external events over which they have little control. It is obvious, also, that local and European Parliament elections make much less difference than general elections. Nonetheless, the results of general elections (and also elections to the devolved legislatures) certainly have significant effects. Indeed, elections are so central to politics that, as David Butler (1998: 454) observed, ‘History used to be marked off by the dates of kings. . . . Now it is marked by the dates of [general] elections.’

## Electoral systems

Elections, then, enable individual citizens to participate directly in politics by choosing representatives at various levels. Voters will have different preferences, of course, and so there has to be an agreed mechanism whereby individual choices are aggregated in order to arrive at a result. In other words, elections involve a particular **electoral system**.

Until fairly recently, almost all public elections in the UK were conducted under what is formally known as the single member, simple plurality system (SMSP). Each electoral district (constituency) has a single representative, and he or she wins by virtue of getting most votes (a simple **plurality**) in the area concerned. This is more commonly known – in an analogy with horse-racing – as the **first-past-the-post system** (FPTP). For a candidate to get past the winning post he or she needs to get more votes than any other candidate – even if it is

only one vote more – whether or not this represents a majority of those who voted. Indeed, in the 2015 General Election less than half of MPs elected obtained a majority of votes in their constituencies, and in Belfast South, the successful Democratic Unionist won less than a quarter of the votes cast.

For various reasons, however, assorted other electoral systems have been introduced in recent years. The reasons include trying to bolster popular support for devolution in Scotland and Wales, ensuring representation for the different communities in Northern Ireland, complying with European Union regulations and keeping the Liberal Democrats in a governing coalition with Labour in Scotland. The effect is that the former **hegemony** of FPTP has long gone and the UK has become a veritable laboratory for anyone interested in the operation and impact of different electoral systems. Those currently in use are listed in Table 8.1 and briefly explained in Box 8.1.

Table 8.1 Electoral systems in the UK

System	Body elected
Single member, simple plurality (first-past-the-post)	House of Commons; some English/Welsh local authorities
Multi-member, simple plurality	Some English/Welsh local authorities
Additional member system (aka mixed member proportional)	Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Assembly
Single transferable vote	Northern Ireland Assembly; all Scottish councils
Regional party (closed) lists	European Parliament
Supplementary vote	Mayors in England

There is an extensive literature on the properties and effects of different electoral systems and considerable debate among enthusiasts about the various alleged good and bad points of each (see, for example, Farrell 2011). Unusually, this debate reached the public realm in 2011 when there was a referendum on whether the method of electing the House of Commons should change from FPTP to the alternative vote (AV) method. In the event, the electorate gave AV a massive thumbs down, by 68 per cent to 32 per cent and, in the process, probably ensured that no further attempt will be made to move away from FPTP for many years to come.

This is not the place to examine the merits of different electoral systems. It is important to note, however, that there is no ‘ideal’ system. A preference for one sort or another ultimately

### BOX 8.1

## Electoral systems

Under the **additional member** (or **mixed member proportional**) system, voters have two votes. One is used to choose a constituency representative (on the basis of first-past-the-post in the UK case) while the other is cast for a party list (within regions in the cases of Scotland and Wales). The list votes are used to ‘top up’ those elected in constituencies so that the distribution of representatives across parties within the relevant area is broadly proportional to the share of list votes received. Generally, this means that no single party is able to win a majority of seats. In the Scottish Parliament election of 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) defied the odds by winning 69 of the 129 seats but things returned to normal in 2016 as the party’s representation fell to 63 seats.

The **single transferable vote** (STV) requires multi-member electoral districts. In Scotland, for example, all local council wards elect three or four councillors. Voters list their choices in order of preference (using as few or as many choices as they please). To be elected, a candidate needs to reach a specified quota of votes (the total number of valid votes divided by the number of seats at stake plus one, all plus one). If no candidate reaches the quota then the votes of the bottom candidate are re-allocated on the basis of second preferences. Similarly ‘surplus’ votes are re-allocated when a candidate exceeds the quota. The system produces proportional outcomes, which makes it difficult for a single party to win a majority of seats. Following the introduction of STV for Scottish local elections in 2007 ‘hung’ councils became the norm leading to minority administrations or coalitions.

A **regional party list system** was used for European Parliament elections in the UK (except in Northern

Ireland where STV was employed). The regions elected a number of members (ranging in England in 2014 from 3 in the North East to 10 in the South East). The parties put forward a list of candidates and voters opted for one list or another. The list was ‘closed’ in the sense that voters could not choose individuals within the lists, just the list as a whole. The party winning the most votes got the first seat and its vote total was then divided by two. The party which then had the most votes got the next seat and its vote was divided by two. This process continued with the divisor being increased by one every time a party won a seat until all the seats were allocated. The system produces broadly proportional results within regions.

The **supplementary vote system** allows voters to indicate a first and second choice among candidates. If no candidate has a majority (more than 50 per cent) of first preferences then all but the top two candidates drop out and their votes are transferred on the basis of second preferences (if these are for one of the top two). In the election for London mayor in 2016, for example, Sadiq Khan had 44.2 per cent of first preference votes, but when the second preferences of those who dropped out were transferred, he had 56.8 per cent and was elected.

The **alternative vote system**, which was the subject of a nationwide referendum in May 2011, is based on single member constituencies. Rather than plumping for one candidate, as in first-past-the-post, however, voters indicate an order of preference. A candidate obtaining more than 50 per cent of first preferences is elected. Otherwise, the last-placed candidate drops out, and his or her votes are re-allocated among the rest on the basis of second preferences. This continues until a candidate has more than 50 per cent of votes.

comes down to making value judgements about what we want a system to achieve. Is it important to ensure fair representation of parties or is it better to have a system that increases the likelihood of a single-party majority government, which can be clearly held accountable by the people? Is the link between individual MPs and constituencies something worth preserving? Should voters be able to discriminate among candidates of the same party or should parties determine the order in which their candidates should be elected? These and other questions raise issues about which people will disagree and hence they will have different views about which electoral system is 'best'.

## Electoral trends

In looking at election results in the UK, psephologists (specialists in electoral analysis) are usually interested in three features: the level of turnout (the percentage of the eligible electorate which turns out to vote), the level of support for the various parties and the resultant make-up of the body concerned in party terms. The first two of these have both temporal and spatial dimensions – that is, they vary over time and across different areas of the country. In this section patterns of change over the past 50 years or so are considered.

Percentage turnout figures for general elections between 1964 and 2015 are given in Table 8.2 and illustrated in Figure 8.1. From the 1964 election to 1997 turnout was always more than 70 per cent and fluctuated within a relatively narrow range. Although there was a tendency for more people to vote when a close contest was expected and fewer when the

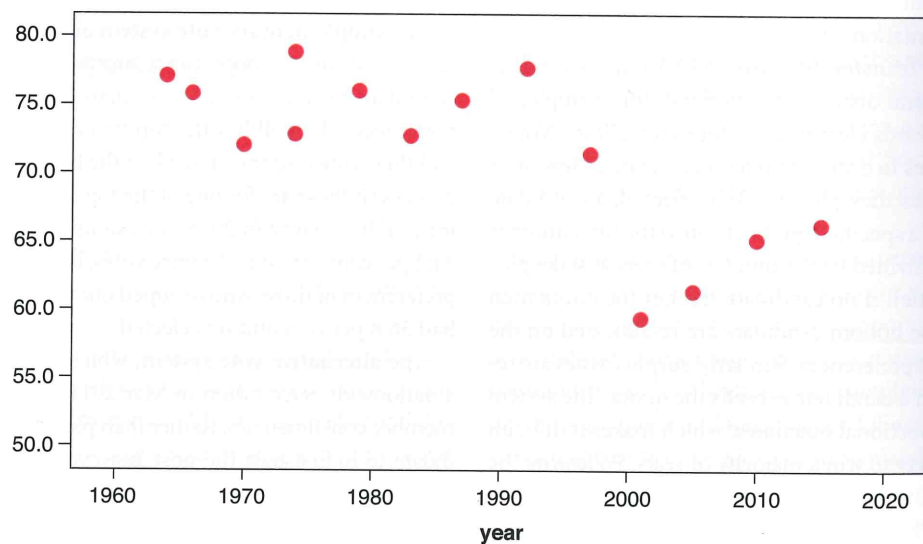


Figure 8.1 UK turnout in general elections, 1964-2015

Note: The graph is based on the data in Table 8.2.

result seemed a foregone conclusion, to a considerable extent these fluctuations appear to be almost random. In 2001, however, turnout dropped sharply to 59.4 per cent and recovered only slightly in 2005. Although easy Labour victories were expected in these elections, this is not enough to explain the very low level of participation. In 2010 a much closer contest was in prospect and turnout increased significantly. There was a further small increase in 2015 but the figure nonetheless, remained markedly lower than was normal before the turn of the century. Possible explanations for this change will be discussed below.

Summary statistics for party vote shares in the same elections are given in Table 8.3 and illustrated in Figure 8.2. Perhaps the most striking development over the period is the increased fragmentation of party support. In the 1960s the Conservatives and Labour utterly dominated elections, together winning almost 90 per cent of votes. Thereafter, the

Table 8.2 Turnout (%) in general elections, 1964-2015

Year	Turnout (%)	Year	Turnout (%)
1964	77.1	1987	75.3
1966	75.8	1992	77.7
1970	72.0	1997	71.4
1974 (Feb)	78.8	2001	59.4
1974 (Oct)	72.8	2005	61.4
1979	76.0	2010	65.1
1983	72.7	2015	66.2

Sources: The figures for 1964-2010 are from C. Rallings and M. Thrasher: *British Electoral Facts 1832-2012* (Biteback, 2012). Those for 2015 are from the House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (CBP-7186).

Table 8.3 Party shares of votes in UK general elections, 1964-2015

	1964 %	1966 %	1970 %	Feb. 1974 %	Oct. 1974 %	1979 %	1983 %
Conservative	43.4	41.9	46.4	37.9	35.8	43.9	42.4
Labour	44.1	48.0	43.1	37.2	39.3	36.9	27.6
Liberal (Democrat)	11.2	8.5	7.5	19.3	18.3	13.8	25.4
Others	1.3	1.6	3.0	5.6	6.6	5.4	4.6
	1987 %	1992 %	1997 %	2001 %	2005 %	2010 %	2015 %
Conservative	41.9	30.7	31.7	32.4	36.1	36.1	36.8
Labour	30.7	31.7	32.4	36.1	35.2	29.0	30.4
Liberal Democrat	22.6	17.8	16.8	18.3	22.0	23.0	7.9
Others	4.3	5.9	9.3	9.3	10.4	11.9	24.9

Note: The figures for the Liberal Democrats in 1983 and 1987 are for the 'Alliance' between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Sources: As for Table 8.2.

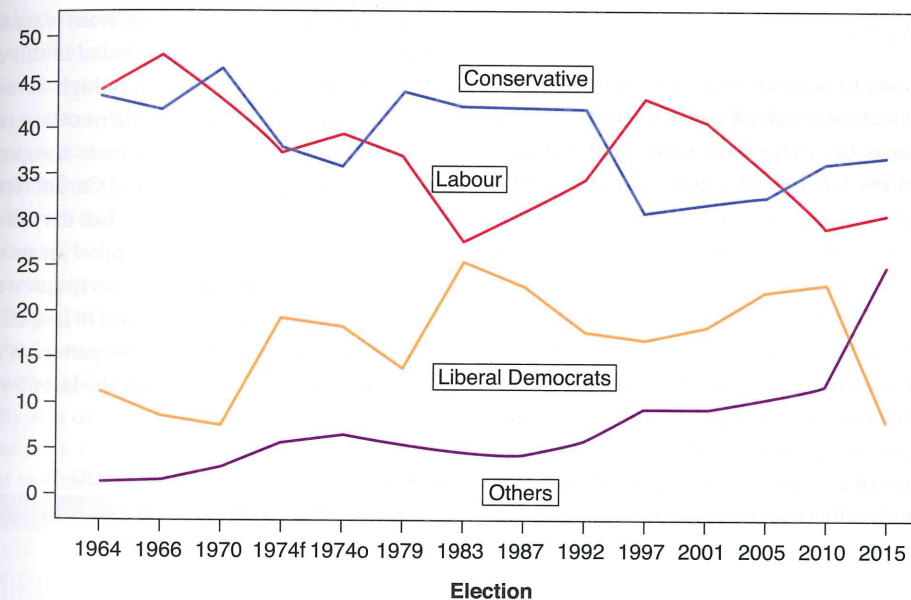


Figure 8.2 Party shares of vote in UK general elections, 1964-2015

Note: The graph is based on the data in Table 8.3.

political centre (initially the Liberal Party, which later formed the 'Alliance' with the Social Democratic Party and later still became the Liberal Democrats) figured more prominently while support for 'Others' (including the SNP in Scotland, Plaid Cymru in Wales, UKIP, and the Green Party) also became more significant. By 2010 the two major parties could muster only 65 per cent of votes between them and the figure remained at around two-thirds in 2015. Britain used to be the archetypal two-party system but in the early years of the twenty-first century such a description is clearly inadequate. This conclusion is reinforced if elections other than general

elections are considered. In the European Parliament elections of 2014, for example, of the 73 seats at stake in the UK 24 were taken by UKIP, three by the Greens, two by the SNP and one by Plaid Cymru. In the Scottish Parliament election of 2016, the SNP won 63 seats and the Greens 6. In these years also, in English local elections, UKIP won significant numbers of seats.

In general elections, however, the electoral system has ensured that the party fragmentation among voters has been reflected in the composition of the House of Commons to only a limited extent. Excluding Northern Ireland MPs, the

Conservatives and Labour together won over 98 per cent of seats in the 1960s and in 1970. From 1974 through to 1992 the figure hovered around 95 per cent but then fell to 91 per cent in 1997 and 90 per cent in 2001. In 2005, 2010 and 2015 the proportions were, respectively, 88, 89 and (again) 89 per cent. In 2010 the Conservatives did not have an overall majority (more seats than all the other parties combined) and consequently entered a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. A similar outcome was expected (but did not materialise) in 2015. There has been enough fragmentation in the House of Commons, therefore, to have important consequences for the conduct of government and politics. It remains to be seen, however, whether – both among voters and in the legislature – the trend towards greater fragmentation will continue in future.

## Turnout

### Aggregate variations

As well as varying over time, election turnout varies according to the type of election involved and also from place to place. Table 8.4 shows the percentage turnout at different types of election in the UK between 2010 and 2015 and it is apparent that they do not attract the same level of interest on the part of the electorate. Elections for Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales were instituted in 2012 but elicited hardly a ripple of interest on the part of the electorate and are not listed here. These apart, the lowest turnouts in this period (as always) were for local and European Parliament elections. Even the high-profile mayoral contest in London in 2012 attracted less than 40 per cent of electors to the polls. Turnout in elections to the devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was rather higher but the two general elections at the start and end of the period saw the highest turnouts, even though participation in these was poor by historical standards.

Clearly, then, the electorate does not view all elections as equally important. Political scientists have suggested that there is a distinction to be made between ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ elections. General elections are first-order. Most people think they are important and care about who wins; there is saturation media coverage in the run-up to polling day; and the parties mount intense national and local campaigns. To a greater or lesser extent, the other contests are second-order. In local elections, for example, not a great deal appears to be at stake – voters could be forgiven for thinking that it doesn’t really make an enormous difference which party controls their council – and there is little media coverage. Characteristically, turnout is lower in second-order elections.

To conceive of UK elections in terms of a first-order/second-order dichotomy is to oversimplify matters, however. Some elections are more second-order than others. The European Parliament, for example, is seen as remote by people in the UK, its routine activities are virtually unreported in the British media and it seems to make little difference whoever is elected. Unsurprisingly, turnout in the relevant elections was poor. On the last occasion that European elections were held on their own rather than in tandem with local elections (1999) UK turnout was a paltry 24 per cent. The Scottish Parliament, on the other hand, has extensive powers – so it matters who wins – and elections to it generate considerable interest within Scotland. This is reflected in the relatively high turnout (55.8 per cent in 2016). The Welsh Assembly has more restricted powers and turnouts are generally lower than in Scotland. The Northern Ireland Assembly is perhaps seen as an arena of conflict between the rival communities there and hence assumes considerable importance, resulting in relatively strong turnouts.

The extent of turnout variation from place to place is illustrated in Box 8.2. Scotland is excluded in this case because in 2015 turnout there was unusually high across all constituencies. Otherwise, the lowest turnouts were in inner city areas while the highest were mostly in upmarket suburbs (Twickenham, Richmond Park and Cardiff North). These are, of course, only the extreme cases, but they do reflect general patterns. Turnout tends to be higher in more prosperous, middle-class constituencies and also in more rural areas; it is consistently lower in large cities and in less affluent areas with higher levels of social housing. This pattern is very well established and has changed little over the last 50 years at least. In

**Table 8.4** Turnout in UK elections, 2010–5

	%
General Election 2010	65.1
Scottish Parliament 2011	50.6
Welsh Assembly 2011	50.6
Northern Ireland Assembly 2011	55.7
English/Welsh locals 2012	31.8
London mayor 2012	38.1
English locals 2013	31.0
English locals 2014	35.7
European Parliament 2014	34.2
General Election 2015	66.2

Sources: For general elections, as for Table 8.2. For local elections, the series of *Local Election Handbooks* produced by C. Rallings and M. Thrasher under the auspices of the Local Government Elections Centre, University of Plymouth. For the European Parliament election House of Commons Library Briefing Paper RP14-32. For devolved elections, the websites of the relevant legislature.

### BOX 8.2

## Highest and lowest constituency turnouts in the 2015 General Election (England and Wales)

Lowest	%	Highest	%
Stoke-on-Trent Central	51.5	Twickenham	77.4
Blackley and Broughton	51.9	Richmond Park	76.6
Manchester Central	52.9	Monmouth	76.4
Birmingham Ladywood	53.1	Cardiff North	76.2
Middlesbrough	53.1	Wirral West	75.9

addition, it is also evident in local and devolved elections. Overlaying these differences based on the social composition of constituencies, however, the marginality or safeness of a seat also usually matters. Electors are more inclined to go to the polls in places where the contest is likely to be close than in places that are rock-solid for one party or another. This is largely due to the fact that parties campaign harder in areas where the result may be in doubt than in those where they have no chance or expect to cruise to victory. In the 2010 election, for example, in constituencies (N = 169) where the winning party had a majority of 10 per cent or less in 2005 the mean turnout was 67.7 per cent, while in those where the relevant majority was over 30 per cent (N = 110) 2010 turnout was 61.1 per cent. Oddly, however, this well-established pattern was not very evident in the 2015 election, possibly because of changed tactical situations due to the emergence of UKIP.

### Variations in turning out

Looking at and analysing variations in aggregate turnout across time, space and types of election is certainly fascinating. In the end, however, the decision to vote or not is made by individuals. In order to discover who votes and who doesn’t and to begin to explain why, we need to turn to survey data.

There are three main approaches to explaining why some people vote while others don’t. The first concentrates on the social locations and circumstances of individual voters. It suggests that the resources that underpin political participation (knowledge, skills and time) are unevenly distributed across different social groups, as are levels of involvement in community networks. As a result, different sorts of people differ

in their propensity to vote. The second derives from rational choice theory and directs attention to the costs and benefits of voting, suggesting that turnout will be greater when there are more incentives to vote (for example, living in a marginal rather than a safe seat) and costs are kept at a minimum. A third approach focuses on the connections between parties and voters. It is concerned with how parties mobilise voters and the impact of voters’ identification with parties.

Differences in turnout across a variety of social groups are illustrated in Table 8.5, which has figures for the 2015 election. As has been the case for some time, there is no significant difference in the turnouts of men and women. On the other hand, married people and those who have been widowed were much more inclined to vote than the unmarried. This has been the case for a long time and it is only partly to do with age. Middle-class groups voted more heavily than the working class, the better off more than the worse off, owner-occupiers more than renters and those educated to A-level or above more than those less well qualified. The clear division in turnout between the relatively well-off, well-educated professional middle classes on the one hand and the less well-educated manual working class on the other is a relatively new phenomenon and certainly was not in evidence in the 1960s when national survey studies of voting began. Perhaps the most striking figures in the table, however, are those for age. Among the three youngest age groups turnout failed to reach 60 per cent but it was almost 80 per cent among those aged 65 and above. A simple, practical explanation for the heavy turnout of the oldest group would be that, since most are retired, they have more time to go to the polling station. At a more general level, however, it is widely suggested that as people get older they become more involved in the political process and acquire a greater sense of responsibility.

**Table 8.5** Turnout of social groups in 2015

Sex	%	Housing	%
Men	66	Owner-occupiers	74
Women	67	Private renters	60
		Social renters	43
Marital status		Highest education qualification	
Married/Widowed	76	None	62
Live with partner	54	Occupational qualification	63
Separated/divorced	66	GCSE (or equivalent)	63
Single/never married	51	A level (or equivalent)	76
		Professional qualification	68
		Degree	74
Occupation		Age	
Professional and managerial	71	18–24	57
Intermediate occupations	65	25–34	53
Routine occupations	62	35–44	59
		45–54	70
Income		55–64	72
Lowest third	61	65+	79
Middle third	68		
Top third	74		

Source: British Election Study (BES) 2015 face-to-face post-election survey. The original data have been weighted to reflect the actual turnout in the election.

The approach which focuses on the costs and benefits of voting suggests an arresting conclusion: it is irrational to vote. Voting involves some costs (it takes time, for example) but there is no obvious benefit. The chances of one person's vote making a difference to the constituency result – never mind the overall national outcome – and hence obtaining some benefit from electing the party that he or she prefers, are infinitesimal. The question, therefore, is not why some people don't vote but why anyone does!

The answer is that rather than voting for what we might term *instrumental* reasons, many of those who participate in elections have a *normative* motivation – that is, they vote because they see voting as part of a citizen's duty. In 2015 a large majority of British Election Study (BES) respondents agreed that it is every citizen's duty to vote (75 per cent). Unsurprisingly those who believe that voting is a duty are much more likely to turn out than those who do not. Perhaps more important, younger people have a much weaker sense of civic duty in respect of voting than those who are older. Among 18- to 24-year olds, 66 per cent believed that voting is a duty but the figure rises steadily with age to reach 84 per

cent among the over-65s. We have here an important source of age differences in turnout. Conceptions of duty also help to explain turnout differences between the married/widowed and others.

Turning to the connections between parties and voters, surveys in the UK have always found that the more strongly someone identifies with or supports a party, the more likely they are to vote. This is not difficult to understand; people who are strong party supporters are more likely to want to demonstrate their support by voting than those with a less strong commitment or none at all. Voting, for them, is *expressive*. In the 2015 election BES figures show a turnout of 87 per cent among strong party **identifiers**, 76 per cent for the fairly strong, 58 per cent for the not very strong identifiers and 42 per cent for those with no identification.

The turnout of strong identifiers has not changed a great deal since the 1960s – decline is concentrated in the other groups. The problem is that there are now many fewer strong identifiers than there used to be. In the 1960s over 40 per cent of voters had a very strong party identification and only about 10 per cent had no attachment. In 2015, according to the BES, the respective figures were 14 per cent and 20 per cent. So, the group with the highest turnout has now been overtaken in size by the one with the lowest. This change in levels of party identification is a major cause of the markedly lower turnout in the UK since the turn of the century.

After the 2001 election there was much hand-wringing among the 'chattering classes' over what was to be done about low turnout. Government responses have largely focused on the process of voting, such as allowing easier access to postal voting. This approach implicitly assumes that lowering the costs of voting will improve turnout. In practice, however, this makes little difference. It is much more difficult to do anything about the really important sources of poor turnout – a decline in the sense of civic duty among younger voters and weakening commitment to parties among the electorate as a whole.

## Party support

### Aggregate variations

Like turnout, levels of party support vary in different types of election and from place to place, as well as over time. We have already seen that support for 'others' in general elections increased from 1964 to 2015. Nonetheless, the major parties usually do even worse in 'second-order' elections. The best recent example is European Parliament elections. In these elections, in 2014, the Conservatives and Labour between them won just 49 per cent of the votes as compared with 67 per cent in the General Election held a year later. Within Scotland and Wales, support for the SNP and Plaid

Cymru has generally been noticeably stronger in the devolved elections than in UK general elections. For example Plaid garnered 11 per cent of the Welsh vote in the 2010 General Election but then rose to 19 per cent in Welsh Assembly elections a year later. In the 2015 general election the party went back down to 12 per cent but then up to 21 per cent in next devolved election. SNP support used to follow a similar pattern but it was decisively broken in 2015 by the sensational result achieved by the party in the general election.

The second-order theory suggests that smaller parties do better in these (and local) elections than in general elections because control of the UK government is not at stake. Voters are more willing to indulge themselves by deserting the major parties because it simply doesn't matter very much who wins. While this rings true for European and, perhaps, local elections, it is certainly far from the whole story as far as devolved elections are concerned.

The merest glance at constituency election results is enough to confirm the rather obvious point that party performances vary from place to place (and the same is true of wards in local elections). Elections would be rather boring if they didn't! The extent of variation across constituencies is truly enormous. In the 2015 General Election, for example, the Conservative vote share ranged from 4.7 per cent in Glasgow North East to 65.9 per cent in Hampshire North East, and Labour's from 4.5 per cent in Aberdeenshire West to 81.3 per cent in Liverpool Walton. Anyone with more than a passing interest in British politics will be aware that, on the whole, the Conservatives do better in more affluent, middle-class areas and in rural and suburban constituencies. Labour, on the other hand, does better in poorer and more working-class areas and in more urban areas. Support for the Liberal Democrats has been less predictable than that for the two larger parties, although they tend to do badly where Labour is strong and get more support in the same sorts of constituencies that usually favour the Conservatives.

Overlaying these broad patterns, however, there is a clear regional dimension to party support in the UK. Table 8.6 shows figures from the 2015 election for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the nine 'standard' regions of England. Northern Ireland is clearly *sui generis*, as the major parties are almost entirely absent from elections there, and the nationalist parties (included as 'other' in the table) make Scotland and Wales distinctive. Nonetheless, with the exception of London, the so-called 'North–South divide' remains in evidence. In England, Labour's strongest areas outside London are the three northernmost regions. In each of these it was the largest party in 2015 in terms of popular support. On the other hand, Labour trailed the Conservatives in the Midlands and lagged well behind in the south and east of England. Conservative support across regions is a mirror image of that for Labour but the Liberal Democrats did badly everywhere

and reached double figures only in the South West. Outside Scotland and London, UKIP achieved a respectable level of support in every region. A North–South division is even more apparent in terms of seats won. In northern England, despite making gains, the Conservatives won 44 seats compared with 110 for Labour. In the Eastern, South East and South West regions, by contrast, Labour managed just 12 wins to 181 for the Conservatives.

There is a considerable literature on the 'North–South divide' and a number of explanations for it have been suggested. For example, the proportion of broadly middle-class people has tended to increase in the South and in rural areas and, relatively speaking, to decrease in the North, Scotland and urban areas. It remains the case, however, that even within classes there are significant regional differences in party choice. A more fruitful approach is the argument that regional behaviour, even within classes, is a product of regional variations in economic well-being which are themselves a result of uneven regional economic development. Put crudely, Scotland and the North have simply not been as prosperous as the South especially since the decline of heavy industry. It is worth remembering, however, that even in the nineteenth century the Tories were weaker in Scotland, Wales and the North than they were in the South, so that an explanation focusing on recent economic trends is not entirely satisfactory. Core-periphery theory offers a broader perspective. This suggests that the 'core' – London and the South-east – dominates other areas (the 'periphery') culturally, economically and politically. Peripheral regions are poorer, suffer more in times of economic depression, have worse housing conditions and so on. As a result they tend to favour radical, non-establishment parties. This theory certainly does not fit the British case perfectly; for example, London itself

**Table 8.6** Party shares of votes in 2015 in regions (row %)

	Con	Lab	UKIP	Lib Dem	Other
Scotland	14.9	24.3	1.6	7.5	51.6
Wales	27.2	36.9	13.6	6.5	15.7
Northern Ireland	1.3	–	–	–	98.7
North East	25.3	46.9	16.7	6.5	4.5
North West	31.2	44.7	13.7	6.5	3.9
Yorkshire/Humber	32.6	39.1	16.0	7.1	5.1
East Midlands	43.5	31.6	15.8	5.6	3.6
West Midlands	41.8	32.9	15.7	5.5	4.1
Eastern	49.0	22.0	16.2	8.2	4.4
London	34.9	43.7	8.1	7.7	5.7
South East	50.8	18.3	14.7	9.4	7.7
South West	46.5	17.7	13.6	15.1	7.1

Source: House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (CBP-7186)

is 'the core of the core' but is not particularly fertile ground for the Conservatives. However, it does offer some clues to understanding the geographical pattern of voting.

### Explaining party choice: class and party identification

'A person thinks, politically, as he (sic) is socially. Social characteristics determine political preference.' That was the blunt conclusion of the first-ever survey study of voting behaviour in the USA which was published in 1944 (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968: 27). Much influenced by this, early British studies also focused on the connection between social location and party choice. Although a variety of interesting relationships were found to be significant (involving, for example, age, sex, religious denomination and housing tenure), the strongest social influence on party choice was found to be **occupational class**. Middle-class voters were heavily Conservative while about two-thirds of the working class voted Labour. Writing in 1967, Peter Pulzer could conclude, in a much-quoted sentence, that 'Class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail' (1967: 98). Social determinism was never the whole story, however. For example, this approach had difficulty in accounting for the (often large) minorities who did not conform to group voting norms (such as working-class Conservatives) and it offered no clue to as to which of the many social groups to which people belong would be decisive in determining party support.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a more refined explanatory theory of party choice was put forward by David Butler and Donald Stokes (1969, 1974). This 'Butler-Stokes model', summarised in Figure 8.3, involves party identification as well as class voting. Party identification refers to a sense of attachment to a party, a feeling of commitment to it, being a supporter of the party and not just someone who happens to vote for it from time to time. The starting point of the model is

the class and party of voters' parents, and this is underpinned by the theory of political socialisation, which suggests that families are particularly important in transmitting political attitudes and beliefs to succeeding generations. Most people in the 1950s and 1960s, were brought up to think of themselves as supporters of one party or another (with upwards of 40 per cent of the electorate describing themselves as very strong party supporters) and thus developed an enduring loyalty to a party which they would support, for the most part, through thick and thin. Although Butler and Stokes allowed for short-term factors to affect party choice – particular issues, party leaders, government performance, for example – they emphasised that class and party identification were the strongest influences on party choice and, since these didn't change much, electoral stability rather than volatility was to be expected.

Although it was widely accepted as a powerful explanation of party choice in the 1950s and 1960s, the relevance of the Butler-Stokes model began to be called into question almost as soon as the second edition of their book was published. The first development was a sharp decline in the level of class voting. Various measures of the overall level of class voting have been developed, the simplest of which is known as the 'Alford index'. Scores on this index can range from zero (the same proportions vote Conservative and Labour in each class) to 100 (all manual workers vote Labour and all non-manual workers Conservative). In 1964 and 1966 the scores were 42 and 43 respectively. In the 1970s the average score was 31.5, in the 1980s 25.0 and in the 1990s 23.5. In the four elections between 2001 and 2015 the average was 17. Whichever measure of class voting is used, a similar story of long-term decline is evident. From a situation in which there was a clear, if imperfect, **alignment** between class and party there has been a progressive **dealignment**.

Table 8.7 shows party choice by occupational class in the 2015 General Election together with patterns among other

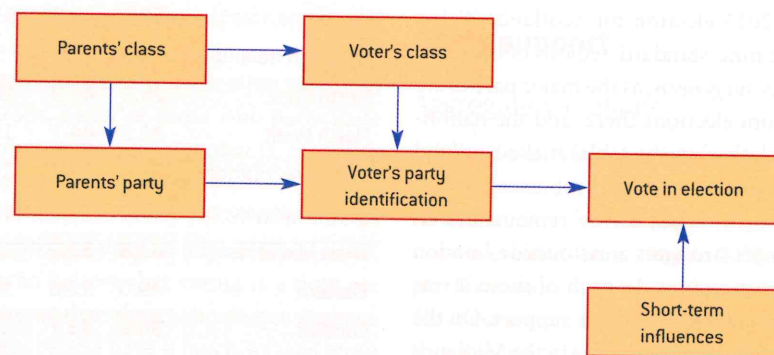


Figure 8.3 Butler-Stokes model of party choice

Source: *Political Change in Britain*, 2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan (Butler, D.E. and Stokes, D., 1974)

Table 8.7 Social characteristics and party choice in 2015 (row percentages)

	Conservative	Labour	UKIP	Liberal Democrat	Other
<b>Occupational class</b>					
Professional and managerial	39	33	9	9	9
Intermediate occupations	41	29	13	9	8
Routine occupations	31	32	21	4	12
<b>Housing tenure</b>					
Owner-occupier	42	27	12	9	9
Private renter	29	39	10	8	15
Social renter	18	47	19	3	13
<b>Age</b>					
18-24	27	43	11	4	16
25-44	28	42	8	8	13
45-64	41	26	16	9	8
65+	46	22	15	9	8
<b>Sex</b>					
Male	35	30	17	7	11
Female	40	32	9	9	9
<b>Religion</b>					
None	30	32	14	10	15
Anglican	56	19	16	7	2
Church of Scotland	24	26	0	4	46
Roman Catholic	33	39	11	5	13
Nonconformist	45	28	9	8	11
Non-Christian	23	63	2	5	7
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
White British	40	26	14	9	11
Asian	26	60	0	6	8
Black	11	83	0	2	4

Source: British Election Study (BES) 2015 face-to-face post-election survey. The original data have been weighted to reflect the result of the election.

social characteristics of interest (the 'embellishment and detail', in Pulzer's phrase). Class – which has become increasingly hard to define – made little difference to support for the Conservatives and Labour. Indeed, the latter was about equally (un)popular among each of the three categories identified here. On the other hand, UKIP was clearly more successful among routine workers than more middle-class groups. Housing tenure is more clearly related to party, with the Conservatives doing best among owner-occupiers and Labour (and UKIP) among social renters. Having given the Liberal Democrats strong support in 2010, younger people switched to their traditional preference for Labour in 2015. Conservative support steadily increases (and Labour's decreases), however, as we move through the age groups. It appears that women were clearly more Conservative than

men in 2015 but this is mainly down to the fact that men were much more likely to support UKIP. In terms of religious affiliation, Anglicans (overwhelmingly Church of England) were the most strongly Conservative group, followed by Nonconformists. Catholics, on the other hand, were more inclined to vote Labour. The high figure for 'other' among Church of Scotland adherents is explained by support for the SNP. Finally, the figures for ethnicity (although based on rather small numbers of survey respondents) show that the Conservatives were very weak among black voters and clearly worse than average among those of Asian origins. Labour was overwhelmingly preferred by the former and very strongly by the latter.

Looking at the voting choices of different groups of the electorate is certainly interesting and a good deal of effort has

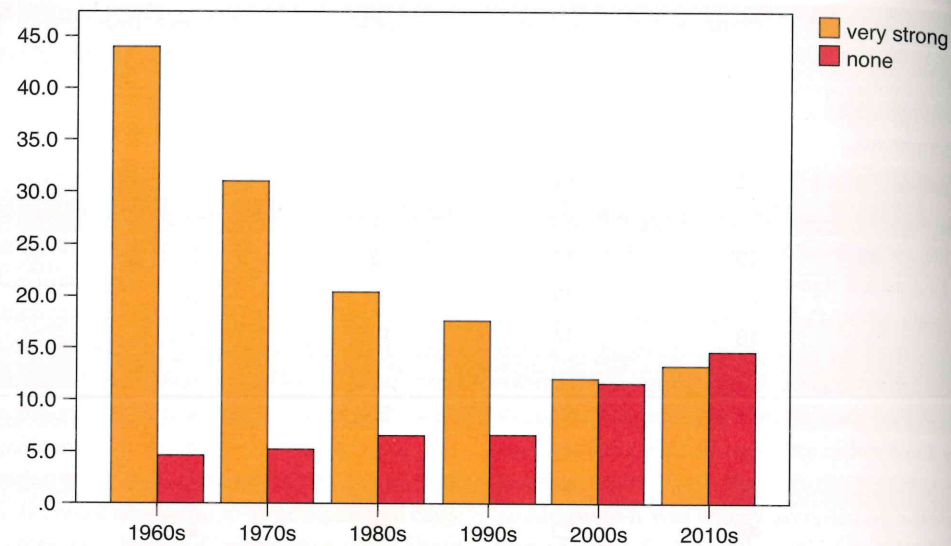


Figure 8.4 Strength of party identification, 1964–2015

Source: BES

gone into explaining why certain groups display distinctive patterns of party support. In fact, however, even combining the effects of all the categories shown in Table 8.7 does not take us very far in explaining party choice. The statistical procedures that enable us to come to such a conclusion are complicated but if, for example, we wanted to predict whether survey respondents voted Conservative or for another party in 2015 then, without knowing anything at all about them, we would be right in 62 per cent of cases if we simply assumed that none of them voted Conservative. If we knew their occupation, tenure, age, sex, religion and ethnicity then our prediction would improve to only 68 per cent of cases. Improvements in predicting votes for the other major parties are similarly modest.

The second development undermining the Butler-Stokes model of party choice has been a steady decline in the strength of party identification amongst the electorate. Figure 8.4 shows the mean percentages identifying 'very strongly' with a party and having no party identification in BES election surveys grouped by decade. It is immediately apparent that there has been a sharp and steady decline in the proportion of electors claiming to be strong party supporters. At the same time, the proportion with no party identification has increased – more than doubling over the period and overtaking the 'very strong' identifiers in the 2010s. Although the great majority of people claim to retain some sort of attachment to a party, the important point is that the attachment is much weaker than it used to be. Analysts have suggested that this trend is a consequence of interactions between social changes – including developments in the occupational and

industrial structure – and more obviously political changes – including the unimpressive performance of governments, television coverage of politics and changes in party rhetoric to try to appeal to a very broad spectrum of voters. Whatever the reasons for weakening party identification, it has important effects. Weaker party identifiers – of whom there are now more than ever – are less likely to vote than those with strong attachment and also much less likely to stick with their party through thick and thin.

### Explaining party choice: valence voting

Class and **partisan dealignment** together seriously undermined the explanation of party choice that had seemed to work very well until the 1970s. As a result, electoral analysts began to put more weight on voters' opinions, assessments and judgements when explaining party choice. There was no consensus, however, about which opinions were most important or, indeed, about what the new approach to voting should be called – the terms used included 'issue voting', 'policy voting', 'instrumental voting', 'pocket-book voting' and 'consumer voting'.

In their report on the 2001 General Election, however, the BES team developed and elaborated a more general explanation of party choice, which they christened a 'valence politics' model. This quickly won general acceptance in the electoral studies community (Clarke et al. 2004). The starting point for the theory is a distinction originally made by Butler and Stokes between what they called 'position' issues and 'valence' issues. Position issues are those on which people take different

positions (for or against electoral reform, for example, or for or against Britain's membership of the European Union). Valence issues are ones on which nearly everyone takes the same side. Not many favour increased crime, for example, or want the National Health Service to be abolished. Since the 1960s, the argument goes, politics has come increasingly to be about valence issues – the differences between the parties on position issues, or on ideology more generally, have become relatively small as they all crowd into the 'middle ground'. For voters deciding which party to support, then, the question is not which party has the ideological or policy positions that they favour but which is likely to be most competent at achieving the goals that are widely shared among all voters (such as reduced crime, a healthy economy, a well-run health service, and so on).

The next stage in the argument emphasises the importance of party leaders. Given that most voters neither think nor know all that much about politics, they tend to seek ways of simplifying political choices. Evaluating the competence of the various parties on various issues is a fairly complex activity. On the other hand, we are used to judging people and so many voters simplify their electoral choice by focusing on party leaders. Evaluating leaders is a short-cut to evaluating party competence and is made all the easier by the fact that the media bombard us with information about the leaders. Whereas most voters used to evaluate leaders largely on the basis of their pre-existing party preference, evaluations of leaders now strongly influence their choice of party.

The final element in the valence politics model of voting relates to party identification. Despite the clear decline in the strength of partisanship in Britain over the years, party identification stubbornly remains a statistically important influence on party choice in elections. Initially at least, this would appear to be something of a problem for the valence politics argument since, as traditionally conceived, party identification has little to do with judgements or evaluations. Rather, it reflects a sort of 'tribal' loyalty. Valence theorists suggest, however, that it should be understood as an underlying preference that is continually updated. As people's store of information, evaluations and reactions to events changes then so does their underlying party preference. In this interpretation party identification is dynamic rather than an unchanging loyalty.

Evidence of the importance of valence or performance considerations in recent elections is plentiful (see Clarke et al. 2004, 2009; Whiteley et al. 2013). As before, in 2015 BES respondents were asked to name what they thought was the most important issue facing the country and which party would be best at handling the issue that they had identified. Thirty per cent nominated immigration – which can be counted as a valence issue because almost everyone wants it to be controlled – and 22 per cent referred to the

economy and associated problems such as unemployment. Three other valence issues – crime, terrorism and the NHS – were mentioned by 15 per cent, so that together these five issues accounted for two thirds of all responses. Among those mentioning these issues, 35 per cent did not know which party would be best at handling them – or thought that no party could – but 36 per cent chose the Conservatives compared with only 15 per cent suggesting Labour and 9 per cent opting for UKIP. Hardly anyone thought that the Liberal Democrats would be best. It almost goes without saying that overwhelmingly people voted for the major party that they thought would best handle the issue that they had nominated as the most important. It can be inferred that the lead that the Conservatives had as the best party to deal with valence issues was a major factor in accounting for their victory in 2015.

The Conservatives also benefitted from the increased importance of party leaders in helping voters to make up their minds. During the inter-election period the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, never once led David Cameron as the best person to be Prime Minister in the regular YouGov polls. Things did not change much during the campaign. On the eve of poll Ipsos/MORI reported that Cameron was thought to be the most capable Prime Minister by 42 per cent of respondents compared with 27 per cent for Miliband. Unfortunately, the BES post-election survey used here did not include a 'best Prime Minister' question. However, respondents were asked to score how much they liked or disliked the party leaders on a scale of 0 ('strongly dislike') to 10 ('strongly like'). The results suggest that the British public certainly does not find its political leaders particularly likeable. Overall, David Cameron came out on top but even he, with a mean score of 5.0, was just on the 'dislike' side of the scale.

Table 8.8 shows how those who voted for the different parties rated the leaders and there is clearly a relationship between liking a leader and voting for his or her party. David Cameron and Nigel Farage appear to have been particularly well-liked by those who voted for their parties but it is worth noting also how strongly people appeared to dislike the leaders of parties that they did not support in the 2015 election.

Table 8.8 Vote in 2015 by ratings of party leaders

Mean score on 'likeability' index				
Vote	Cameron	Miliband	Farage	Clegg
Con	7.1	2.8	3.8	4.6
Lab	3.2	5.3	2.2	4.2
UKIP	4.3	2.7	7.1	3.2
LibDem	5.2	3.7	2.7	6.3

Source: British Election Study (BES) 2015 face-to-face post-election survey. The original data have been weighted to reflect the result of the election.

The evidence reviewed on issues and voter reactions to party leaders is certainly consistent with the valence or performance politics interpretation of party choice. The difficulty is that it is also consistent with the older theory based on party identification. People who identify with a party would be expected to think that it is the best to handle virtually any problem (because it is 'their' party) and that the party leader would be the best person to be Prime Minister (because he or she is 'their' leader). To take the discussion further, therefore, we need to incorporate party identification into the analysis and also, possibly, control for social factors. Doing so by means of cross-tabulations is almost impossible, however, since tables quickly become too large to handle and results unreliable. Table 8.9, therefore, is based on a statistical technique known as binary logistic regression which enables us to assess the impact of each of a number of variables on (in this instance) party choice while holding all the other variables in the analysis constant. This sounds frightening (and the statistics involved certainly are) but interpreting the results of such analyses is not too difficult.

**Table 8.9** Logistic regression analysis of party choice in 2015

	Conservative v. others	Labour v. others	UKIP v. others
<b>Party Identification (ref. = none)</b>			
Conservative	4.03	0.13	-
Labour	0.17	9.39	-
Lib Democrat	0.15	-	-
UKIP	0.17	-	26.5
Other	0.18	0.27	-
<b>Best party on issues (ref. = none/DK)</b>			
Conservative	3.00	0.41	-
Labour	0.26	3.45	-
Lib Democrat	0.08	-	-
UKIP	-	-	4.22
Other	0.29	0.28	-
<b>Attitude to Cameron (ref. = dislike)</b>			
Neutral	4.23	-	0.50
Like	9.68	0.36	0.16
<b>Attitude to Miliband (ref. = dislike)</b>			
Neutral	0.51	-	-
Like	0.31	5.51	0.24
<b>Attitude to Farage (ref. = dislike)</b>			
Neutral	-	-	9.96
Like	0.40	-	24.2
% correctly classified	90.1	90.4	92.7

Note: See accompanying text for guidance in interpreting this table. Only significant odds ratios ( $p < 0.05$ ) are shown.

Source: British Election Study (BES) 2015 face-to-face post-election survey. The original data have been weighted to reflect the result of the election.

Table 8.9 presents three analyses – one each for voting for the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP versus voting for any other party. This is necessary as in this statistical technique the variable to be analysed (party choice) can have only two values (Conservative/not Conservative, for instance). In the previous discussion of the impact of social characteristics on party choice, it was noted that taking all the variables together (and using logistic regression) made only a modest improvement in predicting whether someone voted one way or the other. Here, all the social variables have been retained in the analyses (occupation, tenure, age, sex, religion and ethnicity) but the scores for them are not shown. Rather, the focus is on the variables that have been added – party identification, best party on the most important issue and ratings of party leaders. For each variable included a reference category is specified ('dislike' in the case of party leaders, for example). The figures shown for each remaining category are odds ratios, which measure how more or less likely someone in the category was to vote for the party concerned than someone in the reference category. A ratio of less than 1 indicates that people in that

category were less likely to vote for the party, while a ratio greater than 1 means that they were more likely to do so – even taking account of all the social characteristics included as well as the other variables in the table. Thus, those who liked David Cameron were almost ten times more likely to vote Conservative than those who disliked him even after taking social characteristics into account as well as opinions about the other leaders, the best party on issues and party identification.

When the other factors are taken into account, party identification remains a powerful influence on voting. Conservative identifiers were four times more likely than those with no identifiers to vote Conservative while other party identifiers were much less likely to do so. Interestingly, as far as voting UKIP is concerned, identifying with another party had no significant effect either way but, as would be expected, UKIP identifiers were massively more likely than others to support the party at the polls. The same broad pattern holds when looking at assessments of the best party to handle important issues. These opinions remain a significant influence on party choice when all other factors are taken into consideration, although the coefficients are not particularly large. When it comes to attitudes to party leaders (the scores having been converted into three categories) it can be seen that, net of all other influences, as already noted, those who liked Cameron were almost ten times more likely than those disliking him to vote Conservative while those who liked Miliband were almost five times more likely to vote Labour and those liking Farage no less than 24 times more likely to vote UKIP than those who disliked these leaders. These coefficients indicate very substantial effects. Adding the five variables shown in Table 8.9 to the social factors already included has a very substantial impact on our ability to predict whether people in the survey voted for the party in question or not. In each case more than 90 per cent of respondents would be correctly assigned. There is strong evidence, then, that the performance or valence politics theory of party choice goes a long way in explaining voting in the 2015 election.

## Conclusion

It is not the case, of course, that everyone nowadays votes on the basis of evaluations of the relative competence of the

## Chapter summary

Elections are central to the political system of the UK, ultimately enabling citizens to hold to account their representatives at national, sub-national and local levels. Turnout in elections has tended to decline, and this is probably a result of a declining sense of citizen duty among the electorate and a weakening of party identification. In explaining patterns of party support, the social characteristics of voters are no longer as important as they once were. Instead, more emphasis is placed on how voters evaluate the performance of the governing party and their reactions to party leaders.

parties or of the party leaders. There remain, no doubt, plenty of people who are long-term supporters of a party and always vote for it no matter what. There are assuredly also some voters who have clearly worked out positions on central (or even not so central) policy issues or take a particular ideological position and make their decisions in elections on that basis. There may even be a few voters who still think of politics in class terms. There are also numerous other influences on voting that need to be taken into account – the mass media and campaigning, for example. Nonetheless, valence concerns have clearly increased in importance among the electorate and this has a number of consequences. For one thing, the fact that the fortunes of their parties are to a considerable extent riding on the shoulders of the party leaders makes for a tough life for them. These days, the penalty for electoral failure is swift demotion. Moreover, in choosing leaders, parties increasingly have to pay attention to the electoral appeal of likely candidates (rather than ideology, standing in the party or even the ability to govern, for example). Even so, electoral appeal can dissipate rapidly. Evaluations of leaders can be more volatile than more settled attitudes towards parties. For example, in June 2015, according to IpsosMori, 49 per cent of the public were satisfied with the performance of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and 42 per cent dissatisfied. Just a year later, in June 2016, 35 per cent were satisfied and 58 per cent dissatisfied. Under valence voting, then, the popularity of parties can fluctuate to a much greater extent and more quickly than was the case when party loyalties were more fixed. That certainly makes life more exciting (as well as more complicated) for election-watchers.

I noted at the outset that elections allow the people to participate in politics and, in that context, the relatively low turnouts in recent general elections remain disappointing. On the other hand, the main purpose of British general elections is to enable the people to hold governments to account – to pass judgement on the performance of the incumbents and vote either to keep them in office or replace them. When party choice was largely based on class and inherited partisanship, it is not clear that elections actually fulfilled this function very well. With the development of more widespread valence or performance voting, the claim that elections are key mechanisms of popular control can be more easily substantiated.



## Discussion points

- Should voting in general elections be made compulsory?
- Why are the outcomes of UK general elections unpredictable?
- Why have party leaders become more important influences on voters' decisions?

## Further reading

The themes covered in this chapter are explored in greater detail in Denver, Carman and Johns (2012) *Elections and Voters in Britain*, 3rd edn (Palgrave). Detailed studies of the 2015 elections include Cowley and Kavanagh (2016) *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave) and Geddes and Tonge (eds) (2015) *Britain Votes 2015* (Oxford University Press).

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## Useful websites

Useful websites include [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk) and [www.pollingreport.co.uk](http://www.pollingreport.co.uk)

## The General Election of 2017

On April 18th 2017, in an announcement headlined by *The Telegraph* next day as 'May's bolt from the blue', the Prime Minister indicated that she would be asking the House of Commons to agree to hold an election on June 8th. This decision took almost everyone by surprise – politicians, the media, party professionals and, not least, those involved in preparing this book for publication – including the author of the above chapter. Given the constraints of the production schedule it would have been impossible to rewrite the chapter. For one thing, the British Election Study data on which much of the analysis is based will not be available for some months after the manuscript needs to be completed. Accordingly, I provide here a brief discussion of the main themes of the chapter in the light of the results of the 2017 election.

### Turnout

Preliminary figures put the turnout of the electorate at 68.7% across the UK (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP 7979). This will be a slight underestimate since it does not include rejected ballots (as it properly should) but, even so, this was the fourth general election in succession that has seen an increase in turnout. On the other hand, it was still lower than at any election between 1950 and 1997. There remained, of course, significant variations in turnout levels across

different regions and – even more so – across constituencies. Box A8.1 shows the highest and lowest constituency turnouts (in Great Britain) in 2017.

As in 2015, the lowest turnouts were in inner city areas while the highest were in upmarket suburbs and towns. Also as before, these examples reflect more general patterns since, across the country, 2017 turnout was higher in more prosperous, middle-class constituencies and consistently lower in large cities and in less affluent areas with higher levels of social housing. In discussing 2015 turnout I noted that for the first time in many years the previous marginality (closeness of the contest) in constituencies was not related to turnout levels. The same was true in 2017 and the reason for this remains something of a mystery. What is clear is that fears that the sophisticated targeting of campaign efforts on key seats by parties might lead voters in others (the great majority) to become more apathetic have not been borne out.

Although BES data are not yet available both YouGov and IpsosMori have released figures from post-election polls showing turnout levels for different demographic groups. The results from the former are shown in Table A8.1. Men appear to have been slightly more likely to vote than women and, as is usual, owner-occupiers more than renters, the better-educated more than the less well-educated and middle-class groups more than the working class. During the election campaign and afterwards, there was much comment suggesting that Labour – and in particular the leader Jeremy Corbyn – had been successful in mobilising young people (especially students) to turn out and vote, at least in part because of a promise to abolish university tuition

### BOX A8.1

## Highest and lowest constituency turnouts in the 2017 General Election (Great Britain)

Lowest	%	Highest	%
Wolverhampton South East	51.9	Twickenham	79.5
Glasgow North East	53.1	Richmond Park	79.1
Leeds Central	53.4	Winchester	78.8
Glasgow East	54.7	Wirral West	78.5
West Bromwich West	54.7	Wirral South	78.4

fees. On these data, however, the turnout of the 18–24 age group in 2017 (58%) was not much different from what it had been in 2015 (57%). On the other hand, the turnout of those aged 25–29 looks to have increased sharply. It is worth noting, however, that IpsosMori estimated that the turnout of 18- to 24-year olds increased more than that of any other age group between the two elections. Both agree, however, that, as in previous elections, the propensity of people to turn out increased steadily with age.

**Table A8.1** Turnout of social groups in 2017

	%		%
<b>Sex</b>		<b>Housing</b>	
Men	70	Owner-occupiers	77
Women	67	Renters	56
		<b>Education level</b>	
		Low (GCSE and below)	60
		Medium	68
		High (Degree or above)	79
<b>Occupation</b>		<b>Age</b>	
Professional and managerial	79	18–24	58
Intermediate occupations	73	25–29	64
Routine occupations	59	30–39	61
		40–49	66
		50–59	71
		60–69	77
		70+	84

Source: YouGov.

### Party support

The shares of votes and seats won by the various parties in 2017 together with changes from 2015 are shown in Table A8.2. Perhaps the most striking change from 2015 is the abrupt reversal of the trend towards fragmentation of the party system. Whereas in 2015 the two leading parties together won 67.2% of the votes, in 2017 this leapt to 82.3%. Both increased their vote shares while all other parties in Britain declined. The Liberal Democrats fell back a little, the share won by the Greens dropped by more than half and UKIP plunged in popularity. Even in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) went from 50% in 2015 to 36.9% in the latest election. Whether this heralds a permanent return to two-party politics is an open question. There is no evidence that the main underlying reason for fragmentation – weakened identification with the Conservatives and Labour – has gone into reverse so it is possible that new issues and the

**Table A8.2** Share of votes and number of seats won (UK) and changes from 2015

	Share of votes (%)	Change 2015–17	Number of seats	Change 2015–17
Conservative	42.3	+5.5	317	-13
Labour	40.0	+9.5	262	+30
Liberal Democrat	7.4	-0.5	12	+4
UKIP	1.8	-10.8	0	-1
Green	1.6	-2.1	1	0
SNP/Plaid Cymru	3.5	-1.8	39	-20
Other (Northern Ireland)	2.5	+0.5	18	0
Others	0.8	-0.1	1	0

Note: The Speaker, who was not opposed by the Conservatives, Labour or Liberal Democrats, is treated as an ‘other’.

course of events over the next few years could lead to a revival in the fortunes of the minor parties.

Regional variations in party support (Table A8.3) show that, with the exception of London, there remains a broad North–South division in England. Labour’s strongest areas outside London remain the three northernmost regions. The Midlands had significant Conservative leads, but in three southern regions (Eastern, South East and South West), Labour failed to reach a third of votes cast. London was the only area in which the Conservatives actually declined and, electorally speaking (as well as possibly in other respects)

**Table A8.3** Party shares of votes in 2017 in regions (row %)

	Con	Lab	UKIP	Lib Dem	Other
Scotland	28.6	27.1	0.2	6.8	37.4
Wales	33.6	48.9	2.0	4.5	10.9
North East	34.4	55.4	3.9	4.6	1.8
North West	36.2	54.9	1.9	5.4	1.6
Yorkshire/Humber	40.5	49.0	2.6	5.0	3.0
East Midlands	50.7	40.5	2.4	4.3	2.1
West Midlands	49.0	42.5	1.8	4.4	2.3
Eastern	54.6	32.7	2.5	7.9	2.2
London	33.9	54.5	1.3	8.8	2.3
South East	53.8	28.6	2.3	10.5	4.8
South West	51.4	29.1	1.1	14.9	3.5

Source: House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (CBP-7979)

there is now a yawning gap between the capital and the rest of the country.

Wales returned to being something of a Labour stronghold but for the second time in a row the election result in Scotland was clearly exceptional – but this time for very different reasons. As noted above, support for the SNP fell sharply and the Conservatives out-performed Labour to take second place.

As far as the other parties are concerned there is little to be said. Liberal Democrat support in England is concentrated in London and the South while, after a very strong performance in 2015, the 2017 election reduced UKIP to insignificance across the country. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that UKIP outpolled the Greens in the north of England whereas the latter came out top in London and the south.

As with turnout, we can use the post-election poll by YouGov to look at party choice among different groups of voters, and this is done in Table A8.4. Men were slightly more inclined than women to back the Conservatives rather than Labour, but the difference between owner occupiers

**Table A8.4** Social characteristics and party choice in 2017 (row percentages)

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other
<b>Occupational class</b>				
Professional and managerial	46	38	10	7
Intermediate occupations	41	43	8	8
Routine occupations	44	42	6	9
<b>Housing tenure</b>				
Owner-occupier	53	31	8	7
Renter	32	51	6	11
<b>Age</b>				
18–24	21	63	9	7
25–29	23	63	7	6
30–39	29	55	8	8
40–49	39	44	8	9
50–59	47	37	7	10
60–69	58	27	7	7
70+	69	19	7	6
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	45	39	8	9
Female	43	43	7	7

Source: YouGov

and renters was more substantial. However, the really interesting figures are those for occupational class and age. Class had barely any effect on party choice. Indeed, among groups that would normally be considered working class, the Conservatives outpolled Labour. In broad terms this outcome is confirmed by IpsosMori which reports that in this election Labour had its best score among the middle class and the Conservatives their best score among the working class since the company began polling at general elections.

In contrast, there are sharp differences in the different age groups. Labour had large leads among younger voters while the Conservatives were well ahead among the over fifties and hugely predominant among the over seventies. It would appear that Labour’s campaign promise to end university tuition fees was something of a master stroke. The data on class and age suggest that if two-party politics is making a comeback it is not the old class-based system of the 1950s and 1960s. Arguably, class conflict has been replaced by generational conflict.

### Explaining the outcome

In the chapter above I suggested that the best way of explaining party choice – and hence election outcomes – in modern Britain is in terms of ‘valence politics’. This approach argues, first, that the most important issues in elections are ones on which most people agree about what the aim should be – a good health service and so on – but disagree about which party can best achieve it. Second, it suggests that evaluations of party leaders play a large role in determining voters’ attitudes on such matters and hence strongly influence their choice in elections.

On the face of it, this election was about a very divisive issue – the UK’s exit from the EU. The Prime Minister called the election, it was claimed, to strengthen her hand in the upcoming negotiations on this matter and the Conservative party was, indeed, the one that was preferred by the electorate on this issue. During the campaign, however, other – more traditional – issues came to the fore including the NHS and schools and on these Labour was in a much stronger position. IpsosMori data suggested that by the middle of the campaign healthcare was the issue that most concerned voters. Arguably, even Brexit was a valence issue since all parties accepted that it had to go ahead. The question was which one would achieve the best outcome for the country during the exit negotiations.

At the start of the campaign all polls agreed that Mrs May had very strong positive ratings among the electorate while Mr Corbyn languished deep in negative territory. Unsurprisingly, she had enormous leads over her rival as being the best person to be Prime Minister. This, no doubt, explains why the

Conservative campaign strategy focussed almost exclusively on her and her qualities and the alleged weaknesses of the Labour leader. As the campaign progressed, however, the shine came off Mrs May and Mr Corbyn improved his reputation. According to YouGov, she led the Labour leader as the preferred Prime Minister by 54% to 15% when the election was called. By the end of the campaign, however, the respective figures were 43% to 32%.

Even with this lead, proponents of the valence politics explanation would have expected a comfortable victory for

the Conservatives. They did get most votes and most seats of course, but clearly valence politics is not the whole story (although neither did the election justify a resurrection of the Butler-Stokes model based on class and party identification). Labour's spending plans – especially in relation to tuition fees – probably played a part and the split in the country over Brexit may have resonated more than anticipated. These questions and others will certainly feature in future research by academics as they try to understand what, by any standard, was an astonishing election.