

Chapter 25 Voting and identity

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Identity looms large in modern political theory and society. Individuals identify with particular groups based on their ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality or other markers. Translating these identities into political choices is not straightforward, however: people sharing the same identity may draw different political conclusions and they may hold several identities simultaneously, creating cross-cutting political positions. These complications notwithstanding, identity politics suggests a move away from assumptions of dispassionate rational political calculation based on interests (Kenny, 2004; Parekh, 2008).

What do identity politics imply for analyses of British elections and voting? Two quite different responses are possible. The first emphasises the emergence of a multicultural Britain in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in which the politics of identity plays a growing role in elections. Paradoxically, however, the second (and dominant) perspective in the empirical political science literature suggests quite the opposite trajectory, from an electoral politics dominated by identity to one dominated by rational action. This chapter traces that shift in academic understandings of British voting.

Identity voting: the aligned electorate

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the dominant academic paradigm on voting behaviour stressed the importance of electoral alignments, long-standing and stable links between voters and parties. Voting was seen as an expressive, not a deliberative, act. Most voters would support the same party in election after election, and hence parties could count on a 'normal vote', especially when abstention rates were low, as was the case until the 1990s. Parties mobilised as many core supporters as possible and fought for the support of the relatively small group of uncommitted 'floating' voters who might decide elections by changing their preferred party between contests. Explanations of alignment drew primarily on two different theoretical traditions: partisan identification and social cleavages.

Partisan identification

Partisan identification, pioneered in 1950s America (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), stresses individual voters' psychological attachments initially formed in childhood, as parents socialise their children into supporting a particular party. As children grow into adulthood, their inherited party identification strengthens over time, forming a

psychological heuristic through which they judge aspects of their political environment. Republican identifiers will be positively predisposed to Republican politicians, and Democrat identifiers to Democrat candidates. Voters may occasionally deviate from their party identification with Democrat identifiers occasionally supporting Republicans and *vice-versa*. But in the long term partisans return to voting for the party they identify with.

British voters in the 1960s reported strong attachments to particular parties (Butler and Stokes, 1969). In 1964, for instance, around 95% of respondents to the British Election Study (BES) identified with a named political party: 45% identified 'very strongly' with it, and a further 39% identified with it 'fairly strongly' (table 1). And they voted accordingly. The stronger their identification with a party the more likely they were to turn out at an election: 40% of the very small group of individuals who identified with no party abstained in 1964, compared to (for instance) just 7% of very strong Conservative identifiers. And the stronger an individual's identification with a party, the more likely he or she was to vote for it. Around 90% of 'very strong' Conservative or Labour identifiers voted for their respective party. But this dropped to two-thirds of those who were weak Conservatives, and 60% of those who were weak Labour supporters. A similar pattern held for those who identified with the Liberals, though overall loyalty rates for this party were lower than for the 'big two', not least as the Liberals fielded candidates in only 365 of the 630 constituencies at the 1964 election: some Liberal identifiers had no Liberal candidate to vote for in 1964.

Social cleavages

The identities enacted in voting were not simply psychological, however. Major social cleavages also produced long-standing patterns of party support. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) traced the salient mid-twentieth century European political cleavages to two waves of radical nineteenth century social change. The national revolution resulted in divisions between centre and periphery in the new states and (in Catholic Europe at least) between church and state. The industrial revolution produced divisions between agriculture and industry and between bourgeoisie and workers. Parties crystallised around each cleavage, representing one side or the other. Centre-periphery cleavages stimulated separatist and regionalist parties in peripheral areas; conflicts between Christian Democrat and secularist parties represented the church-state cleavage; peasant parties and/or parties representing the old landed aristocracy arose from the agriculture-industry divide (e.g. Cox, 1970); and the bourgeoisie-worker divide was colonised by parties of the right and left (particularly, in the latter case, socialist and social democratic parties). Which cleavage came to dominate in a particular national context, Lipset and Rokkan argued, depended on which was most active when the franchise extended to most adult males. Once established, the major parties on either side of the cleavage became institutionalised, allowing them to continue even if the initial tensions stimulating the cleavage had ameliorated.

In Great Britain, the class cleavage dominated the 20th century. The late-19th century extension of the franchise to most adult males created a large new group of voters, the urban working class, and by the start of the 20th century, a new party, Labour, emerged from the trade union movement explicitly to represent them. The Conservatives became the party of the middle classes and of business interests. While around two-thirds of BES respondents in the main middle class groups voted Conservative in 1964, only between a quarter and a fifth of voters in the manual

working class groups did so (table 2). Conversely, while over half of manual workers voted Labour, only about 16% of the middle classes did so. In a class-divided society, 'class (was) the basis of British party politics; all else (was) embellishment and detail' (Pulzer, 1967, 98).

The exceptions:

A fully aligned electorate, in which people always voted in line with their partisan and/or class identities, would produce stable election results. Electoral change would be relatively glacial, as older voters died and were replaced by the young. But this clearly does not fit the experience of fluctuating party support over time, or the regular turnover of governments. Even when electoral alignments are strong, some citizens are floating voters, with weak attachments to any party, and open to being swayed one way or the other in any given election. It is no accident that the 1950s and 1960s in the UK were marked both by strong partisan attachments and by broad ideological consensus between Labour and the Conservatives: with their bases secured by voter alignment, the parties appealed to the small number of Downsian median floating voters for the extra votes needed to win.

A significant minority of voters in 1964 chose parties other than the one they identified with, or (even more so) might be thought of as their 'natural' class party (tables 1 and 2); such minorities were central to British election results for much of the twentieth century. Had the class cleavage been absolute, an inbuilt manual working class majority in the electorate would have delivered Labour victory in most elections before the 1980s (in 1964, around 60% of the electorate were in manual working class households: table 2). The electoral dilemma for the Conservatives throughout the period was how a party drawing largely on middle class support could win power given an electorate dominated by the manual working class.

Clearly, the Conservatives solved their dilemma, becoming by far the most successful electoral force in twentieth century British politics (Seldon, 1994). Their ability to win support from a significant minority of working class voters reflected partly on support from forms of social identity other than class. In a few areas (such as west central Scotland and Liverpool) with large Irish Roman Catholic communities, the politics of Irish nationalism produced a unionist backlash from working class Protestants, which the Conservatives capitalised on. A more widespread factor was social deference among some working class voters, identifying the Conservative party elite as a natural ruling class, notably in rural areas (McKenzie and Silver, 1968; Jessop, 1974; Newby, 1979). But some working class Conservatives who were driven by pragmatic evaluations, voting Conservative based on their positive evaluations of the party's performance in government (McKenzie and Silver, 1968).

No less striking were middle class Labour voters. Social mobility played a part: 58% of the Labour-voting middle classes in the 1964 BES sample had fathers who were manual workers, compared to just 44% of all middle class respondents, and only 39% of those who voted Conservative. For some, then, Labour voting reflected an older identification, drawing from childhood socialisation. But cross-cutting identities were also involved. The growth of Britain's welfare state after 1945 meant many depended on the state for either or both of major services and employment (including, within the middle class, a growing number of public sector managers and professionals). This created the basis for a new set of politicised identities (Dunleavy 1979; Dunleavy and

Husbands, 1983). Those identifying (as either service consumers or employees) with the public sector were more likely to vote Labour than those who identified with the private sector.

These cross-cutting sectoral identities partly account for middle class Labour voting. At the October 1974 election, for instance, BES data reveal that while 14% of private sector professional and managerial workers voted Labour, this almost doubled to 26% among public-sector professionals. The corollary held too: 50% of private sector professional and managerial workers voted Tory, compared to just 30% in the public sector. Cross-cutting sectoral cleavages appeared as a result of variations in housing tenure; 59% of manual workers who rented their home from the public sector voted Labour in October 1974, but only 42% of those who were home owners (12% and 27% respectively voted Conservative).

Social identities influenced British voting in the 1960s and the early 1970s, therefore, but in complex ways. While some identities reinforced each other politically (middle class private sector workers, for instance), others pulled in opposite directions (as for working class home owners). But economic restructuring in the 1970s and 1980s saw the steep decline of traditional manual industrial jobs and the growth of the white collar service sector. In 1951 65% of the working population were in working class jobs: by 1991, just 38% were (Heath et al, 2001, 13). At the same time, more Britons aspired to middle class lifestyles and home ownership grew rapidly in all social classes – around two thirds of all households were owner occupiers in 1997. The implications were very different for Britain's largest two parties. For the Conservatives, embourgeoisement promised electoral ascendancy (a vision they exploited in the 1980s, through policies such as the right to buy council houses). For Labour, the decline of the traditional working class raised the spectre of permanent consignment to the electoral wilderness (Hobsbawm, 1981; Franklin, 1985; Crewe, 1988; Heath *et al.*, 2001). Labour's challenge at the end of the twentieth century was similar to that facing the Conservatives at the century's start: extending its appeal beyond the dwindling manual working class was central to New Labour, for instance.

Dealignment: away from identity voting?

But class and partisan alignments were not unchanging. From the mid 1970s, dealignment took hold (Crewe et al., 1977; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983; Franklin, 1985; Heath *et al.*, 1985; Crewe, 1986; Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Sanders, 1998). The weakening of class alignment is illustrated by decade-on-decade trends in the Alford index, which subtracts the percentage of non-manual workers who vote Labour from the percentage of manual workers who do so. Where the class cleavage is absolute, all manual workers will vote Labour, and no non-manual workers will do so, producing an index of 100. Where there are no class differences in voting, the index is 0. The UK's Alford index has dropped in every decade since the 1960s (figure 1). Whereas in 1964, 63% of voters voted for their 'natural' class party, by 2005, only 41% did so – the lowest share of any election between those dates.

Voters' psychological identification with political parties has dropped steeply too. Whereas in the 1960s around 45% of BES respondents identified very strongly with a political party, only 11% on average did so in the 2000s (figure 2). At the same time, the proportion identifying weakly or not at all with a party increased. Whereas in the

1960s, only around 6% of voters on average identified with no party and a further 10% were weak identifiers, by the 2000s these positions were shared by 14% and 35% respectively.

The origins of dealignment lie in the deep 1970s recession. Neither Labour nor Conservative governments could resolve the crisis (King, 1975). Public confidence in political parties fell. Between 1970 and 1974, partisanship decreased abruptly in all age cohorts, and did not subsequently recover (Abramson, 1992). Subsequently, the rebirth of the Liberal party, the creation of the SDP in 1981 and its Alliance with the Liberals for the 1983 and 1987 general elections provided an alternative focus for voters relatively alienated from the two main parties (Crewe and King, 1995; Rose and McAllister, 1986; Johnston and Pattie, 1988), although relatively few developed a long term strong commitment to that new axis in British politics.

But dealignment was a political earthquake waiting to happen. The faultlines were already apparent in the mid-1960s, although their full significance took longer to emerge. A striking generational shift in political attitudes had occurred among skilled manual workers (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968). Although most manual workers supported Labour, the reasons for that support varied. Older workers, who could remember the 1930s economic depression, voted Labour from class sentiment: the Tories were the bosses' party, Labour the workers'. Their children, who had grown up in post-war affluence (and who had not yet experienced the 1970s economic downturn), also supported Labour, but on instrumental, not solidaristic, grounds. Their support was premised on Labour's promised ability to improve living standards. As long as Labour delivered prosperity, they would back it. If it failed, their support was no longer guaranteed. Ten years later, skilled manual workers in the south east swung behind Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in the 1979 election, largely as a reaction to the 1974-79 Labour government's failures.

The valence revolution: from identity to evaluation

If voters are no longer moved by their social and political identities, how do they actually decide? One answer, already apparent in Goldthorpe *et al.*'s work, is provided by a focus on valence issues, those on which most voters – and most parties – agree. Most wish to see rising living standards; most want peace and security; and so on. Valence issues can influence electoral choice, especially where parties are perceived to differ substantially in their abilities to deliver what all see as desirable. No-one wants crime to rise, for instance. But if crime is seen as an important issue by the electorate, and if one party has the edge over its rivals in public perceptions of its ability to fight crime, that party stands to gain. Where electoral choice is dominated by valence issues, voters evaluate parties on the basis of their performance, not their ideology. . In recognition of this, New Labour emphasised pragmatism and delivery above ideological purity: to quote Tony Blair in Labour's 1997 election manifesto, 'what counts is what works' (Giddens, 1998; Gamble, 2005).

The valence approach radically reconceptualises party identification, seeing it not as long-term psychological attachment to a party, but as a running tally of government performance (Fiorina, 1981). Looking back over a government's record in office, voters steadily update their impressions of it. Perceived successes increase the government's stock, while perceived failures weaken it. The same logic extends to

other parties, depending on their ability to project themselves as fit for office. Far from representing a stable long-term outlook, party identification should move in keeping with the ups and downs of the political business cycle.

Empirical evidence backs this up. Many studies use the economy as a shorthand measure for government performance (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000). Most voters have neither time nor expertise to monitor all the different fields of government activity and hence will not update their running evaluations of government performance in the light of each twist and turn of public policy. However, all are affected by the state of the economy and most hold the government at least partly responsible for it; indeed more tend to blame governments for poor economic performance than credit them when things are going well (Alt, 1979; Brug *et al.*, 2007).

These feelings influence party support (MacKuen *et al.*, 1989, 1992; Erikson *et al.*, 1998, 2000). The worse voters feel the economy performed in the past, or the more pessimistic they are about its future prospects, the lower is partisan identification with the main party of government, and the higher identification with the opposition. Conversely, the more positive voters are about past economic performance, or the more optimistic they are about the future, the higher their identification with the government, and the lower that with the opposition.

Party support in Britain is influenced by such valence issues. As early as the late 1960s, analyses of monthly trends in government support found that it tracked changes in the economy (Goodhart and Bansali, 1970): as unemployment and/or inflation rose, the government's support dropped (and as they fell support increased). More recent analyses have examined voters' economic perceptions. The best known example is the 'Essex model', which analyses monthly trends in government popularity as a two-step process (Sanders *et al.*, 1987). First, economic conditions (unemployment rates, inflation rates, and so on) influence voters' expectations about the future. If the economy is doing well, voters become more optimistic about their own future financial prospects: when it is doing badly, they become more pessimistic. The second stage is to model monthly trends in government popularity. In the 'classic' Essex model, this is a function of just two factors: the government's popularity in the preceding month (sudden changes in government popularity are rare); and aggregate personal economic expectations (the more optimistic voters feel about how affluent they will be in the future, the more support the government gets).

The model was first used to claim that Mrs Thatcher's landslide re-election in 1983 was caused not by victory in the Falklands but by economic recovery after the deep recession of the early 1980s (Sanders *et al.*, 1987; though see e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 1990). A notable success for the model was its use to predict accurately the outcome of the 1992 election 18 months before the event. That contest was widely expected to be very close. But, as Sanders (1991) predicted, the government won re-election on a barely changed vote share (albeit with a substantially reduced Parliamentary majority) thanks to policies aimed at economic recovery introduced sufficiently in advance of the election.

Economic voting has become a new orthodoxy in British voting studies and in British party thinking alike. Ironically, however, in some respects the 1992 election

represented a high water mark for straightforward applications of the theory in the UK. Strikingly, the Conservatives, having won re-election in 1992 as Britain emerged from a recession, went on to their worst election defeat of modern times in 1997, even though the economy was relatively strong (and had been for several years). The Labour government elected in 1997 was re-elected twice in part on its economic record, having presided over one of the longest periods of continued economic growth in recent British history. And yet, throughout the period between 1997 and 2005 (and in sharp contradistinction to the years of Conservative government between 1979 and 1997), monthly trends in government popularity did not track personal economic expectations at all (Sanders, 2005). The core relationship which underpinned the Essex model in the 1980s and early 1990s broke down over the last decade.

But valence is not restricted simply to economic performance. For instance, the attribution of responsibility is important. Voters may feel the economy is strong, but judge that this is despite the government's policies, rather than because of them. Linked to this, a reputation for competence is a valuable political asset: a reputation for incompetence is a fast track to defeat. The Conservatives lost in 1997 despite an economic boom because the 1992 ERM crisis badly damaged public perceptions of their economic competence. Up until late 1992, the Conservatives invariably out-pollled Labour as the party most likely to handle the economy well. The party had recently taken Britain into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), arguing this was essential for the future economic well-being of the country. But in September 1992, market pressure forced the government to abandon ERM membership, a dramatic policy failure. The Conservatives lost their long-established lead on economic competence, and hence the 1997 election (Sanders 1999). Labour picked up this accolade and its ownership of the issue was strengthened first by Tony Blair's New Labour project and then, *a fortiori*, after 1997 by Gordon Brown's reputation as a competent Chancellor presiding over a prolonged economic boom (Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Sanders, 2006).

Similarly, perceptions of party leaders have come under renewed scrutiny (e.g. Bartle and Crewe, 2002; Clarke and Stewart, 1992, 1995; Clarke, Stewart and Whiteley, 1997, 1998; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Leadership is a valence issue in that few if any would wish to elect a Prime Minister with no leadership skills. Perceptions of leadership competence have independent effects on party choice, even after controlling for factors such as underlying party identification, and evaluations of the economy. Leaders matter, and can be an electoral asset for their party (as Blair was for Labour in 1997) or a liability (as, arguably, Gordon Brown rapidly became in early 2008). Other valence issues of importance in influencing party choice include voters' evaluations of competence in handling major public services such as the NHS and education, benefits such as pensions, and public problems such as crime and security (Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Johnston and Pattie, 2001).

How do identity and valence issues stack up as explanations of contemporary voting? We illustrate this in a multinomial logit model of voting at the 2005 General Election, controlling for a range of demographic, identity-based, ideological and valence measures (table 3). Data are drawn from the 2005 BES panel survey, which interviewed a national sample of voters around a month before the election took place, re-interviewing them immediately after the election. The independent variables in the model are all taken from the pre-election wave of interviews, and hence are not

contaminated by voters' knowledge of the election results, and are less likely than are measures derived from post-election surveys to be affected by their eventual vote choices. The demographic and identity measures are:

- Age, coded into 7 age bands: 18-24 year olds; 25-34 year olds; 35-44 year olds; 45-54 year olds; 55-59 year olds; 60-64 year olds; and those aged 65 or over. The higher the score, the older the individual;
- Class: professionals and managers coded 1; skilled non-manual workers 2; the self-employed 3; manual workers in supervisory roles 4; manual workers 5; and others 6;
- Highest educational qualification: those with no formal qualifications are coded 1; school-leaving qualifications are coded 2; post-school qualifications short of degree level are coded 3; and university-level qualifications are coded 4;
- Gender, coded 1 for women, 0 for men; and
- Party identification, coded 0 for those who identify with no party, 1 for Labour identifiers, 2 for Conservatives, 3 for Liberal Democrats and 4 for those who identify with some other party.

Political ideology is measured using responses to two scales;

- Tax-spend: an 11-point scale, ranging from those whose preference is to cut taxes, even if this means cutting public spending (coded 0) to those who want to raise public spending, even if this means raising taxes (coded 10); and
- Left-right: another 11 point scale, this time anchored at one end by those who self identify with the left of the political spectrum (coded 0) and at the other with those who identify with the right (coded 10).

Four valence issues are included, one reflecting economic evaluations and the others evaluations of the party leaders. They are:

- Personal economic expectations, ranging from those who expected, on the eve of the 2005 General Election, that their personal economic circumstances would get much worse over the next year (coded 1) to those who felt they would get much better (coded 5); and
- Three variables measuring feelings towards the three main party leaders in 2005: Tony Blair for Labour; Michael Howard for the Conservatives, and Charles Kennedy for the Liberal Democrats. Each is coded on an 11-point scale, where 0 indicates that the respondent strongly dislikes that particular leader and 10 indicates that they strongly like them.

The model contrasts voters for the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and other parties (primarily the Scottish and Welsh nationalists but also minor parties) against those who voted Labour. Identity, ideology and valence all affect vote choice. Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters in 2005 were rather older than Labour voters (as were voters for other parties), and less likely to be working class. Prior party identification was important: compared to those with no party identification, Labour identifiers were much less likely to vote for other parties than they were to vote Labour; Conservative identifiers were much more likely to vote Conservative (but less likely to vote 'other') than they were to vote Labour; and Liberal Democrat identifiers were more likely to

vote Lib Dem, and less likely to vote 'other' than to vote Labour. Left-right ideology differentiated between Labour and Conservative voters: the latter were more likely to favour tax cuts and place themselves on the right of the political spectrum than were Labour voters. Valence also mattered. Choice between the two most likely parties of government, Labour and Conservative, was influenced by personal economic expectations: the better off individuals expected to be in the future the less likely they were to vote for the Conservative opposition rather than for the incumbent Labour government. Party leader evaluations mattered too. The more negative voters felt about Tony Blair, other things being equal, the less likely they were to vote Labour rather than to vote for another party. The more positive people felt about Michael Howard, the more likely they were to vote Conservative rather than Labour, with positive feelings about Charles Kennedy raising the chances of voting Liberal Democrat rather than Labour.

Party identification was the single most important factor in accounting for vote choice, though the next most important were the valence measures (table 3, final column). Political identity still matters. However, if (as Fiorina and others suggest) party identification is a running tally of party performance evaluations, then it is a summary of valence, not a measure of long-term identity. To find out, we model pre-election party identifications as a function of the other variables employed in the analysis of 2005 vote choice.

The likelihood of identifying with a major party increased with age, the only demographic factor to have a general effect (table 4). There was a class dimension in identification with the Conservatives: the more working class a person, the less likely he or she was to identify with the Conservatives in 2005 compared to identifying with no party at all. But this does not suggest a return of class voting: no equivalent effect was found for Labour identification. That aside, the main factors underlying respondents' party identifications were ideological and valence-based. The relative ideological positions of voters for each party match the parties' own relative positions (Budge, 1999). The more left-wing an individual on each of the ideology scales, the more likely he or she was to identify with Labour. Conservative identifiers were relatively right-wing on the left-right self-placement scale (those identifying with the minor parties were relatively to the left on this scale), and Liberal Democrat identifiers were relatively to the left on the tax and spend scale. Turning to valence measures, the more confident respondents felt about their personal economic prospects in the future, the more likely they were to identify with Labour (though this had no bearing on identification with other parties). And positive feelings towards a party leader resulted in a greater probability of identifying with his party, and a lesser probability of identifying with his rivals' parties. The final column in the table shows that by far the major factors underlying party identification were political ideology and feelings towards the party leaders. Partisanship is influenced by valence issues.

Electoral participation

The rise of valence as an explanation of voting in Britain has coincided with the growth of concern over falling electoral turnout. Whereas in the 1950s, around 80% of British voters regularly took part in General Elections, only around 60% did so in the 2000s, raising anxieties over the representativeness of election results. To some extent, the shift from identity to valence politics outlined above is implicated in turnout

decline. As we have seen, turnout is highest among those with the strongest party identifications. Even in 2005, only 9% of very strong identifiers abstained, compared to 42% of those with no partisan identification, figures very similar to those quoted above for 1964. But, of course, far fewer voters were strong partisans, and far more were non-partisan at the later election than the earlier. As fewer voters over time identify strongly with political parties, and more identify with no party at all, electoral participation falls (Heath, 2007).

Political failure in the 1970s was one of the triggers of partisan dealignment. Similar concerns regarding growing public disenchantment with politics are now widespread (e.g. Mulgan, 1994; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007). So has the shift from identity to valence politics been inimical for electoral participation? The picture is somewhat more complex than this suggests, however: there is both good and bad news for those concerned by rising abstention.

First, the good news: it is too often forgotten that abstention was relatively low at most post-war British General Elections (figure 3). It was only in 2001 and 2005 that turnout fell below the normal post-war range. One of the best predictors of electoral turnout between the 1950s and late 1990s was the closeness of the election: the tighter the contest, the higher the turnout (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). Even the low turnout of 1997, much commented on at the time, was completely explicable when the size of Labour's pre-election lead over the Conservatives and the perceived ideological closeness of the two main parties at that election are taken into account. The decline of identity politics and the rise of valence predate by some decades the rapid rise in abstention since 1997.

Furthermore, the relationship between competitiveness and turnout (also observable at the level of individual constituencies: Denver and Hands, 1997; Johnston and Pattie, 2006) implies that the rational, evaluative mind-set at the heart of valence politics can actually encourage participation. Electors are more likely to vote when their participation is more likely to make a difference than when the result is a certainty. A Labour victory was almost guaranteed at each British General Election between 1997 and 2005, hardly conditions conducive to high turnouts. From this perspective, a return to more competitive elections should generate a rise in turnout – especially if the major parties are perceived as offering distinctive programmes. In any case, the evidence on growing political disenchantment is ambiguous. Politicians are distrusted and disliked but levels of public interest in politics have not changed dramatically for decades (Clarke *et al.*, 2004).

There is bad news too, however. Abstention is not randomly distributed across the electorate: non-voters are not only less likely to be strong partisans than voters, they are also more likely to be younger, poorer, and less well educated (Denver, 1995; Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Abstention becomes an ingrained habit too: the more elections individuals abstain from, the more likely they are to abstain again in future contests (Franklin, 2004). Rising abstention among younger voters at recent elections suggests fewer electors in future will have the voting habit, hardly an encouraging sign.

And yet

British electoral behaviour is now influenced much more by valence issues than by class and partisan identity, therefore. Valence matters: what counts is what works (or at least, what is perceived to work). However, this is not quite the last word. Recent research has questioned valence politics. Evans and Andersen (2006) argue voters view the economy through the lens of their party preferences, not *vice versa*. If I support the party in power, I am more likely to think the economy is performing well: if I don't approve of the governing party, however, I am more likely to think the economy is performing badly. Their analysis of BES panel data between 1992 and 1997 demonstrates that once prior support for the (incumbent) Conservatives is taken into account, economic evaluations played no role in explaining party choice.

If true, this reinstates the importance of political identity and suggests the effects of valence issues are overstated. However, trends in economic evaluations follow trends in the real economy in sensible ways, irrespective of party support (Lewis-Beck, 2006). While some voters do evaluate valence issues in the light of their party preferences, others do not – and it is these swing voters who have the potential to shape election results. Comparative research on economic voting in Europe suggests that economic conditions affect elections through their impacts on party preferences, and in particular on the likelihood of individuals voting for particular parties (Brug *et al.*, 2007). A worsening economy may make voters a little less likely to vote for one party and a little more likely to vote for another – but if that pushes enough voters from one camp to the other, it will affect the election result, even if most voters stay with their original preference. Valence still matters.

A further complication lies in the conceptualisation of identity. The discussion so far has examined class and partisanship. However, the impetus for the recent upsurge of interest in identity politics comes from the recognition that Britain is a multicultural society (Kenny, 2004; Parekh, 2008). What are the electoral implications?

Surveys from the 1970s to the 1990s routinely showed that between around 70% and 85% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) voters supported Labour (Saggar, 1998). Ironically, this fact, and the assumption that BME voters tend to be most concentrated in safe Labour seats, has limited academic (and political party) interest in their party choices. The accepted wisdom has been that the BME vote is unlikely to change and hence of little interest. Where the parties have, in the past, taken an interest, they have tended to assume BME voters are interested primarily in terms of racism and race relations (Saggar, 1998, 27).

However, these are serious misjudgements. First, much of the reason for Labour's success here reflects the socio-economic marginalisation of many in BME communities – Labour's traditional role as the party of the economic underdog assists it. But more importantly, treating the BME vote as a fixed bloc under-estimates the diversity of interests and ideals within the BME 'community'. A very clear indication of this came in the 2007 General Election, when Labour saw its vote fall dramatically in previous strongholds with relatively large proportions of Muslim voters, in most places largely as a consequence of the Liberal Democrats' campaign against the government's controversial stance on the Iraq War (Norris and Wlezien, 2005). Perhaps the most dramatic example was in Bethnal Green and Bow, however; in a seat with many voters of Bengali Muslim origin the incumbent Labour MP was defeated by the anti-Iraq war Respect party candidate, George Galloway.

Does BME voting mark a return of identity politics in the electoral arena? The jury remains out on the wider case of BME support for Labour. As noted above, some of the reasons for this support rest on social and economic factors, not identity. The recent defection of Muslim voters from Labour is more complex, however. It seems clear that individuals' Muslim identifications were important: the war in Iraq was all too readily presented as a war against Islam. However, there is also a valence perspective. Iraq represents one of the most controversial, and arguably least successful, post-war British foreign policy initiatives. What could be more 'valence' than to punish a government for such a (perceived) failure?

Identity and voting within the UK

Throughout this chapter we have discussed the British electorate as a whole. Over recent decades, however, the sense of British identity has declined, particularly among younger generations, and is being replaced by stronger identification with the constituent nations of the UK (Tilley and Heath, 2007). This has contributed to cleavages around national identity in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

One of those cleavage systems is longer-established than the others. Since the creation of Northern Ireland in 1922, voting at all elections there – including UK general elections as well as those of the devolved Assembly – has been based on the province's main identity divide, between parties which strongly advocate retention of the union of Northern Ireland with Great Britain – most importantly the Ulster Unionist and Democratic Unionist parties – and those (notably the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Féin) which advocate union of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. This cleavage is very strongly associated with Northern Ireland's major religious divide: Protestants overwhelmingly support the unionist parties whereas Roman Catholics similarly are associated with the nationalist and republican parties (Tonge, 2005).

The 1970s saw a resurgence of nationalist sentiment in Scotland and Wales. Both the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru have sought to mobilise support throughout their relevant country, but have had more success with some groups and in some areas than others. Reflecting the importance of language for Welsh nationalism, Plaid Cymru have found most support among Welsh-speaking voters in north-west Wales but has struggled in largely monoglot English-speaking South Wales, where Labour traditionally dominates (Balsom *et al.*, 1983; Wyn Jones *et al.*, 2002). However, following devolution, Plaid made some inroads into those South Wales Labour heartlands in Assembly elections, appealing increasingly to voters disaffected with New Labour (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006). At the 2007 Assembly election, Plaid came a strong second to Labour in such iconic Labour seats as Caerphilly, Rhondda, Cynon Valley and Neath.

Unlike Wales, Scotland enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy within the United Kingdom since Union in 1707. That notwithstanding, for much of the 19th and 20th centuries most Scots supported the Union and Scottish independence was the preserve of the political fringes (Colley, 1992; Bennie *et al.*, 1997). But from the late 1960s onwards, however, electoral support for the SNP grew significantly, following economic decline and the discovery of significant oil reserves in the North Sea. The

former helped weaken support for the Union while the latter provided the promise of an economically viable independent Scotland. By the 1974 elections, around a quarter of Scottish voters supported the SNP.

National identity is associated with party choice in Scotland and Wales – though it is complicated somewhat by the many-faceted nature of identity (Bennie *et al.*, 1997; Brown *et al.*, 1999; Paterson *et al.*, 2001). There is no simple binary divide in Scotland between those who consider themselves Scots and those who identify with Britain: most Scots feel both British and Scottish. While a quarter of respondents to the 2007 Scottish Election Study felt completely Scottish, over 60% felt both Scottish and British: 7% felt completely British (the remainder had some other national identity: table 5). Voting in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election (as in previous elections in Scotland) followed national identity. Whereas half of those who felt wholly Scottish voted SNP, only 7% of those who felt wholly British did so. The groups most likely to vote Labour, meanwhile, were those who felt both British and Scottish. And the more British (and hence less Scottish) voters felt, the more likely they were to vote Conservative.

As with BME voting, however, voting in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is not just about identity. Valence matters too. For instance, a substantial surge in support for the SNP at the 2007 Scottish Parliament election ended Labour's long dominance of Scottish politics. The SNP emerged (narrowly) as the largest party in Holyrood, with a third of the vote and 47 MSPs. However, this did not mark a sudden increase in the proportion of the electorate espousing a Scottish identity: the proportions in 2007 were very similar to responses ten years earlier, when the SNP won only 22% of the Scottish vote in the 1997 UK General Election. But a major contributor to the SNP surge was growing dissatisfaction with the record of the Labour-controlled Scottish Executive (Johns *et al.*, 2008). The new SNP-led Executive will, in its turn, undoubtedly be judged on its performance.

Conclusions

British voting studies have moved against the grain, leaving behind an interest in identity as other areas of politics embrace it. The cases of BME and nationalist voting notwithstanding, the new accepted wisdom in the field is that identity is now much less important than evaluations of government performance. Indeed, valence issues have always (or at least as far back as good survey evidence will stretch – to the early 1960s) been important in UK elections (Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Voters weigh up what they see before them and vote – or abstain – accordingly. Delivery and success are rewarded: failure is punished. To that extent, British elections still fulfil the role implied for them in standard democratic theory: they hold Britain's governments to account.

Table 1 Partisan identification, 1964 (source: 1964 British Election Study)

Party identification	% identifiers (Column percents)	Vote 1964 (row percents)				
		Abstained	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	Other
Very strong Conservative	19.3	7.4	90.2	1.5	0.9	0.0
Fairly strong Conservative	16.2	12.0	82.3	2.1	3.2	0.4
Not very strong Conservative	4.2	14.9	67.6	9.5	8.1	0.0
Very strong Labour	21.8	5.8	1.3	92.1	0.3	0.6
Fairly strong Labour	16.4	6.3	2.1	88.9	2.8	0.0
Not very strong Labour	4.8	34.1	1.2	59.8	4.9	0.0
Very strong Liberal	3.8	5.9	14.7	11.8	67.6	0.0
Fairly strong Liberal	5.9	8.7	19.4	17.5	54.4	1.0
Not very strong Liberal	2.1	20.0	20.0	11.4	48.6	0.0
Very strong other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Fairly strong other	0.1	0.0	50.0	50.0	0.0	0.0
Not very strong other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
No party identification	5.4	40.2	17.2	26.4	16.1	0.0

Table 2 Household class and voting, 1964 (source: 1964 British Election Study)

Social class	% in class (Column percents)	Vote 1964 (row percents)				
		Abstained	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	Other
Higher managerial (A)	5.8	5.2	68.0	15.5	10.3	1.0
Intermediate managerial (B)	8.7	5.4	64.2	16.9	12.8	0.7
Clerical and supervisory (C2)	23.7	9.9	51.2	22.8	15.3	0.7
Skilled manual (C2)	37.9	12.6	25.7	54.1	7.6	0.0
Semi & unskilled manual (DE)	24.0	14.6	21.4	58.4	5.4	0.2

Table 3 Modelling voting at the 2005 General Election: multinomial logit (Source (2005 British Election Study))

	Vote (versus voted Labour)			Chi-square ¹
	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Other	
Constant	0.54	0.80	2.10	
<i>Identity and demographics:</i>				
Respondent agegroup	0.22**	0.15**	0.15*	17.95
Respondent class	-0.22**	-0.11*	0.03	17.47
Respondent education	0.05	0.08	-0.02	1.17
Respondent gender	-0.26	-0.27	-0.79**	10.22
Respondent party identification (comparison = other party ID)				488.66
No party ID	0.19	-0.40	-2.33**	
Labour identifier	-1.94**	-2.02**	-3.22**	
Conservative identifier	2.03**	-0.53	-1.68**	
Lib Dem identifier	-0.38	0.82*	-1.75**	
<i>Political ideology</i>				
Tax and spend scale	-0.11*	0.04	-0.08	10.14
Left-right scale	0.21**	0.02	0.11	11.89
<i>Valence issues</i>				
Personal economic expectations	-0.55**	-0.15	-0.11	20.08
Feelings about Tony Blair	-0.42**	-0.37**	-0.42**	169.24
Feelings about Michael Howard	0.37**	0.01	0.03	58.15
Feelings about Charles Kennedy	0.03	0.23**	0.07	30.38
Model improvement		1902.48		
Model significance		0.00		
% correctly classified		74.6		
Nagelkerke R ²		0.74		
N		1757		

* significant at $p=0.05$; ** significant at $p=0.01$

1. This column gives the difference in $-2 \log$ likelihood between the final model and a model omitting the indicated variable.

Table 4 Modelling party identification at the 2005 General Election: multinomial logit (Source (2005 British Election Study))

	Party identification (versus no party ID)				Chi-square ¹
	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Other	
Constant	-3.12	-4.59	-5.29	-0.84	
<i>Identity and demographics:</i>					
Respondent agegroup	0.16**	0.11**	0.14**	0.08	20.38
Respondent class	0.07	-0.17**	0.03	-0.04	27.60
Respondent education	0.06	-0.01	0.10	0.03	1.81
Respondent gender	-0.13	-0.02	-0.10	-0.21	1.60
<i>Political ideology</i>					
Tax and spend scale	0.21**	0.01	0.17**	0.10	47.74
Left-right scale	-1.04*	0.53**	-0.08	-0.24**	212.48
<i>Valence issues</i>					
Personal economic expectations	0.21*	0.16	0.10	-0.11	11.44
Feelings about Tony Blair	0.42**	-0.15**	0.02	-0.01	477.55
Feelings about Michael Howard	-0.16**	0.54**	0.05	-0.1*	338.06
Feelings about Charles Kennedy	-0.04	-0.13**	0.51**	0.19**	231.81
Model improvement			1892.02		
Model significance			0.00		
% correctly classified			60.8		
Nagelkerke R ²			0.60		
N			2260		

* significant at p=0.05; ** significant at p=0.01

1. This column gives the difference in -2 log likelihood between the final model and a model omitting the indicated variable.

Table 5: National identity and the regional vote at the 2007 Scottish Parliament Election (data from 2007 Scottish Election Study)

	% national identity (column percents)	% regional vote (row percents)					
		Abstain	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP	Other
Scottish not British	25.1	19.6	1.6	12.1	4.0	50.8	11.8
More Scottish than British	30.0	22.0	5.9	18.0	8.4	29.3	16.4
Equally British and Scottish	25.9	17.5	15.3	25.7	12.7	15.1	13.8
More British than Scottish	5.4	25.0	25.0	23.8	8.8	5.0	12.5
British not Scottish	7.4	24.1	22.2	10.2	18.5	7.4	17.6
Other	6.4	27.4	16.8	10.5	9.5	14.7	21.1

Figure 1 Declining class voting, 1960s-2000s (data from British Election Studies 1964-2005)

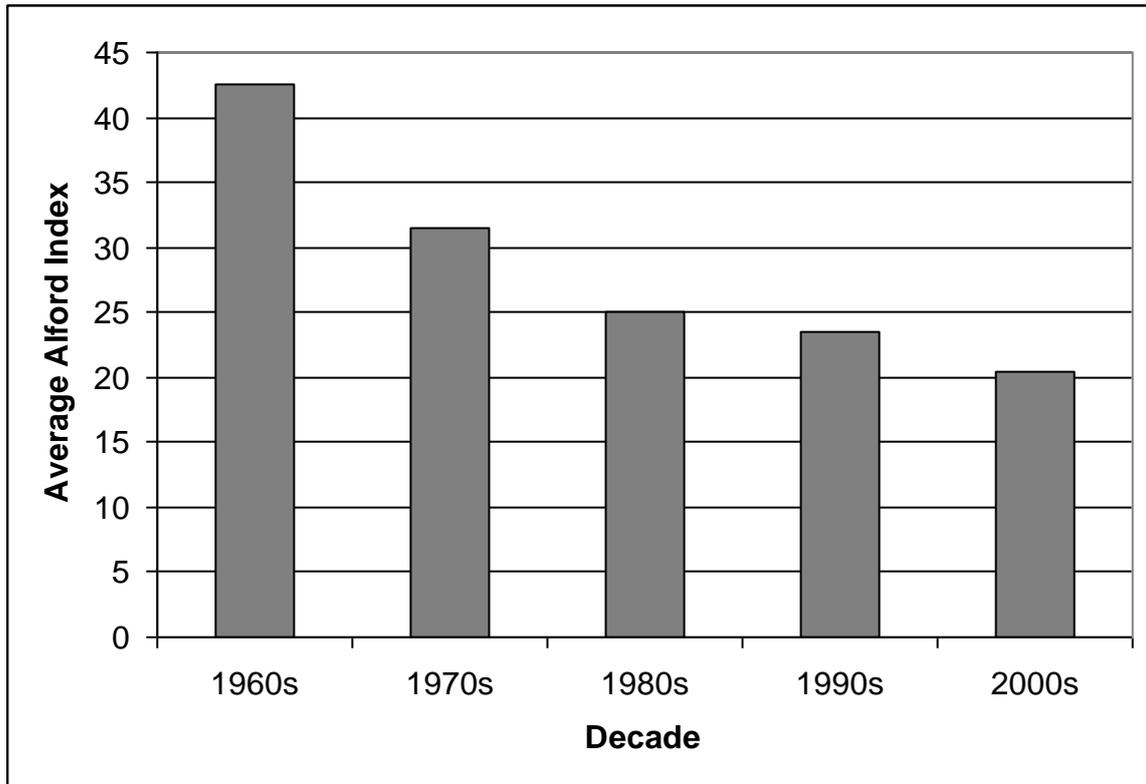


Figure 2 Weakening partisanship, 1960s-2000s (data from British Election Studies 1964-2005)

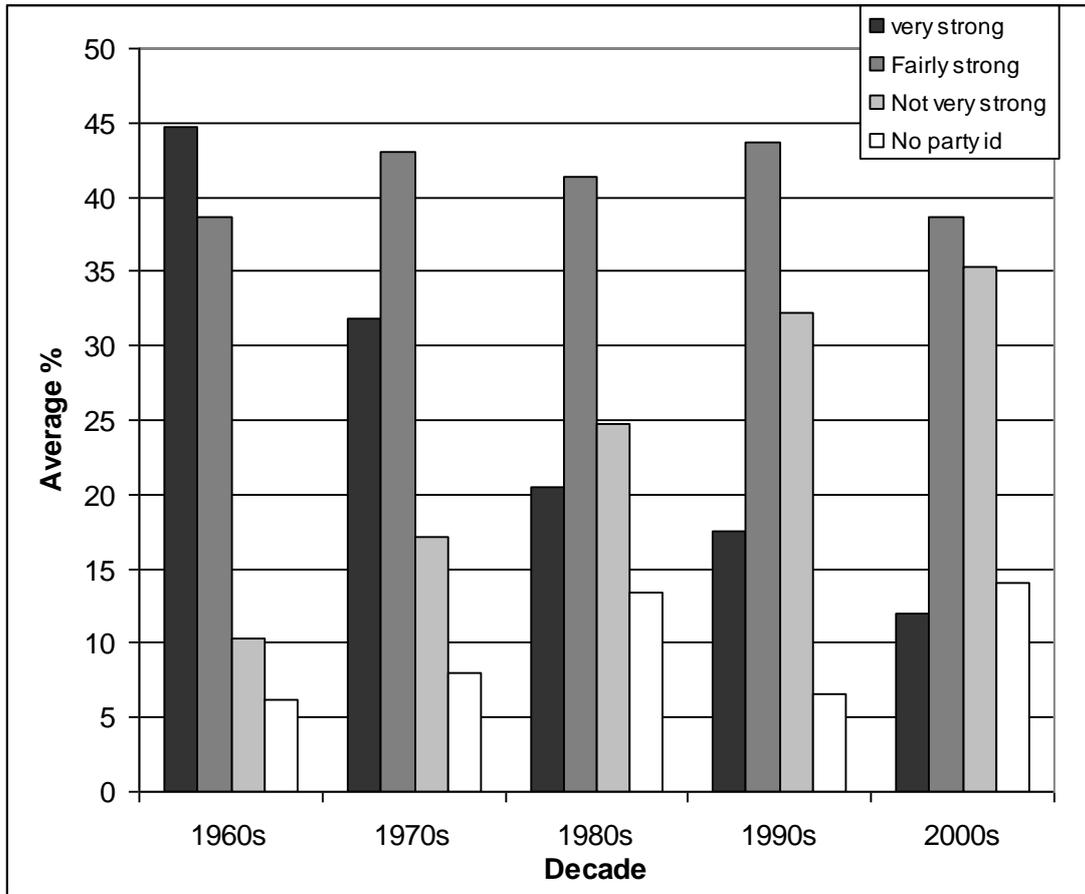
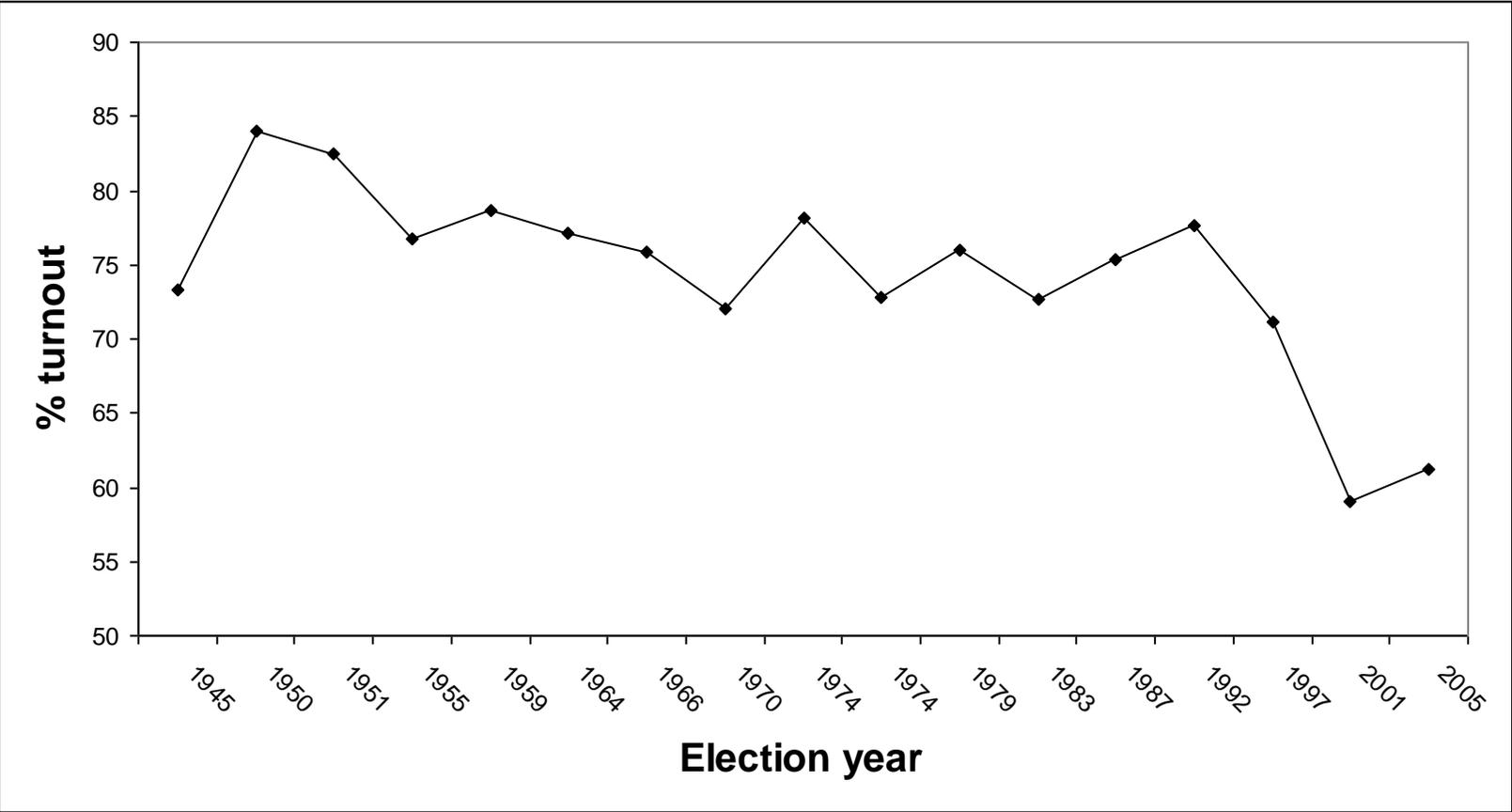


Figure 3: Turnout at British General Elections since 1945



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