Geography: the Key to Recent British Elections

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Elections are a geographer’s delight, providing them with large amounts of data which can be mapped and spatially analysed. This is especially the case with elections to legislative bodies – such as the UK’s House of Commons and the USA’s House of Representatives – which use single-member district systems characterised by a winner-takes-all method (often termed first-past-the-post or plurality) for translating votes cast for political parties into legislative representation. Not only are the data intrinsically geographical – they refer to spatially-defined places; territorially-delimited vote containers – but in addition the entire organisation and conduct of elections in such circumstances is an inherently geographical activity.

Geographers have not fully realised the potential of a spatial approach to electoral studies, however. The data are so easy to portray cartographically (increasingly so in recent decades given the developments in GIS technology) and to deploy as the basis for relatively superficial spatial-ecological analyses, that comparatively little attention has been paid to many of the important geographical aspects of electoral conduct by either the major political actors (political parties) or the voters. As a result – in Agnew’s (1990, 18) terms – geography is implicitly presented as epiphenomenal. It is portrayed as the arena within which electoral contests are fought and provides a valuable format for depicting the outcomes, but it is not seen as integral to most aspects of an election’s conduct and operation; more attention is paid to the outputs (the results) than to the inputs and throughputs (Taylor, 1978).

This essay counters that situation. It demonstrates that geography is much more than epiphenomenal in electoral studies through a case study of British general elections over the last 60 years, based on a large number of empirical studies (many of them summarised and extended with analyses of the 2005 general election in Johnston and Pattie, 2006.)

*The Framework*

**THE DISTRICTS**

British general elections are contested in constituencies, with each returning a single Member of Parliament. Between the beginning of franchise extension with the Great Reform Act of 1832 and its completion (universal adult franchise) in 1929, there were only three redistributions of Parliamentary seats (the UK term for redistricting) – in 1866, 1888 and 1918. Each of these was an ad hoc exercise, and there was no legal
provision for regular reviews – with the consequence that subsequent population change generated very large variations across the map of constituencies in the size of the registered electorate.

This situation changed in 1944 with the passage of the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, one element of a large programme of preparations for post-Second World War Britain. (For a full discussion of the work of the UK Boundary Commissions, see Rossiter et al., 1999.) This requires frequent and regular reviews of all constituencies by four independent Boundary Commissions (one each for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and set norms for the number of MPs to be returned from each country. It also established the criteria on which those regular reviews had to be undertaken: the goal was to produce constituencies with relatively equal electorates around four ‘national’ quotas (the number of registered electors for each seat). However, those constituencies – as far as possible – were to nest within the major local government units, any changes to their boundaries were to respect community ties, and minor changes that might disrupt such ties and patterns of representation were not to be undertaken just to achieve greater electoral equality. Redistributions were thus not – as some have described the US equivalent – simply a numerical exercise; the Commissioners were required to exercise their judgement on a range of criteria, to undertake a geographical task (one which was explicitly non-partisan with regard to their practices; they use no political data and partisan issues can not be raised with them during their procedures). The organic (representing communities) and the arithmetic (equalising electorates) are both components of the redistribution process (Johnston et al., 1997).

With some relatively minor changes, these procedures have remained in place since first implemented in 1948 (the current legislation is the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 and the Boundary Commissions Act 1992, as amended by the Scotland Act 1998). They involve the four independent Boundary Commissions determining the number of constituencies for each local government area (and, if major inequalities seem likely, whether adjacent areas should be combined to ameliorate the problem) and proposing a set of constituencies for each area on which representations are sought. If opposition is encountered, a Public Inquiry is held, chaired by an Assistant Commissioner, which hears evidence and makes recommendations to the Commission – either to sustain the original proposals or to vary them. If the Commission accepts the latter advice, its revised proposals must be published and further representations invited; a second Public Inquiry is very rare. When all of the proposals have been finalised they are submitted to the relevant Secretary of State, who can modify them (although this has never happened: see, however, the discussion of the 1969 Boundary Commission for England report in Rossiter et al., 1999) before submission to Parliament for either acceptance or rejection.

This is a largely non-partisan procedure, in which politicians have no direct impact on the outcome of a redistribution – and thereby cannot potentially gerrymander constituency boundaries in any way.¹ There is one indirect way in which political

¹ Parliament can, of course, reject a set of recommendations if the outcomes look unfavourable to the majority party – this happened in 1969. In 1982-1983, Labour party members unsuccessfully sought to delay a redistribution using the courts when they were in opposition, and in 1992 the Conservative government changed the Act so as to speed up the redistribution process, thinking this would favour it at the next election.
influence can be exercised, however. Political parties can submit representations to
the Commissions and present evidence at the Public Inquiries promoting constituency
arrangements for the relevant local area that would suit their electoral interests. The
Labour party realised this potential during the Fourth Periodical Review of all
constituencies – which reported in 1995 – and achieved changes in a number of areas
which probably led to them winning 12-20 more seats at the subsequent general
election than might otherwise have been the case (Rossiter et al., 1999). Since then,
all parties have been aware of the potential the Public Inquiries offer: if they can
convince Assistant Commissioners (using evidence which makes no reference to
political-electoral concerns) to support constituency schemes that favour them
electorally, they may be able to achieve a slight gerrymander-equivalent. But this
cartographical activity is at the margins only; a geographical game with, at best, only
minor consequences (save, potentially, at a very close election where a few seats can
make the difference between success and failure).

THE POLITICAL PARTIES

In the middle of the twentieth century, British politics were very straightforward. The
vast majority of the registered electorate voted (turnout at the 1950 and 1951 general
elections was 84.0 and 82.5 per cent respectively), and the great majority of them did
so for one of only two parties – Conservative and Labour; in 1950 and 1951 they
gained 89.6 and 96.8 per cent respectively of all votes cast. The Liberal party, which
had been in government only 30 years previously and had won a landslide victory less
than five decades earlier, was in apparent terminal decline: it only contested 475 and
109 of the constituencies at those two elections and won just 9 and 6 seats
respectively. Much of its support had switched to the Labour party, established by the
trades unions in the late nineteenth century to promote working class interests,
which increasingly flourished following the move to a universal franchise that incorporated
the non-property-owning working class into the electorate.

The two predominant parties very largely drew their support from separate class
bases: Labour was the party of the working class while the Conservatives drew their
support overwhelmingly from the white-collar middle classes. This meant that there
was also a well-defined geography to their support, and hence to the pattern of party
representation. Labour’s strengths were in industrial Britain; the Conservatives’ were
in the small towns and the countryside plus suburban areas. To a very considerable
extent, therefore, the geography was predictable – suggesting that it had little role in
the detail of the electoral operations. Once you knew where the different classes lived,
you could predict with considerable accuracy which party would win which
constituency – and also whether it would be won easily, or the contest would be close,
depending on the constituency’s class composition.

There were some variants on this general pattern, however. Whereas the
Conservatives could generally rely on a high turnout by their supporters, because of a
strong sense of civic duty within the middle classes, this was less the case for Labour.
Its support needed to be mobilised, by the party organisation and by its major allies –
the trades unions. It thus tended to be strongest in areas with the greatest union
density – in the coalfields and the heavy industrial areas especially – and in areas with
large concentrations of working class people, such as the council (social) estates
which housed 18 per cent of households in 1951 (when a further 53 per cent lived in
privately-rented dwellings), increasing to 32 per cent in 1981 after the major programmes of slum-clearance and rehousing in state-provided homes (when private tenancies had fallen to 13 per cent). Labour was less able to mobilise the working classes in areas where small companies operated – as in many rural areas, where there was also a tradition of working class deference to landowners linked to Conservative voting (Newby, 1977; see also Mackenzie and Silver, 1968). The result was that each party was even stronger than the class composition suggested it might be in the areas where it was generally strong (Johnston et al., 1988), so that as a result the country’s electoral geography was even more polarised than its class structure (as shown by Cox, 1969, in an early informative ecological analysis; see also Miller, 1977). The Liberal party has remained relatively strong in parts of rural Wales and Southwest England, for example, where it had traditionally mobilised working class voters against Conservative landowners (Cox, 1970), and in a few places – such as the Northwest of England and Clydeside, where there were large Roman Catholic populations with Irish ancestry – religion to some extent replaced class as a mobilising force, with relatively strong non-Catholic working class support for the Conservatives.

Of course, not all people voted the same way at all elections, otherwise there would be no point in holding them! Whereas a substantial majority of each party’s supporters remained loyal to it across a sequence of contests, providing its core voting strength, others were sufficiently uncommitted to one that they were prepared, in certain circumstances, to consider voting for the other. These, known as floating voters, were major determinants of each general election outcome; the degree to which they were prepared to vote for one party rather than the other was crucial to the result – and meant that whereas one party might win an election by a substantial majority (as Labour did in 1945 and 1966, and the Conservatives in 1955 and 1959) at others there might be a much closer result (e.g. the Conservative 1951 victory and Labour’s in 1964). Switching between parties was part of the general geography of electoral support, however. Electoral analysts used the concept of electoral swing to measure changes between elections, and showed that, although there were always some variations from the general trend, on average all constituencies swung by the same amount – by 3 percentage points away from the Conservatives towards Labour across all constituencies, for example, hence the term uniform swing which is widely deployed in media discussions and reporting of British elections. This means that which seats would change hands at a given election was as predictable as those which each of the parties was almost certain to hold, once the general switching of support between parties was known. (Other influences on the changing geography include voter turnover – a consequence of differences in electoral preferences between both in- and out-migrants and new generations of voters compared with those who died between elections.)

All Change – and Emergence of New Geographies

This stable electoral geography characterised the 1950s and 1960s, but from then on there was a series of major changes – associated with not only changing geographies but also changing geographical practices by the political parties. These first became apparent at the two general elections held in 1974, both won by Labour with small Parliamentary majorities.
The dominant feature of these changes was in the party system, with a decline in the Conservative-Labour two-party hegemony. From winning an average of 91.8 per cent of all votes cast at the seven previous elections, their joint share at the two 1974 contests was 75.1 in February and 75.0 in October respectively. The beneficiaries of this shift were a revived Liberal party, whose share of the vote increased from 7.5 per cent in 1970 to 19.3 per cent in February 1974, plus the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales). Furthermore, those parties all won seats at the 1974 elections: in February, the Liberals won 14, as against 6 in 1970, the Scottish National Party 7 (1 in 1970), and Plaid Cymru 2 (0 in 1970); eight months later, they won 13, 11 and 3 seats respectively. Many of those seats were lost in 1979, with the SNP contingent of MPs falling from 11 to only 2, but the Conservatives and Labour never regained their electoral hegemony. Their combined vote share was slightly higher in 1979 at 81 per cent, but at the six subsequent elections averaged only 72 per cent, falling to a nadir of 68 per cent in 2005.

This growth of ‘third parties’ had very clear geographical foundations. That of the SNP and PC reflected the growth of nationalist views in both Scotland and Wales, although in each country there was a geography to this support for greater autonomy, if not independence, from the UK government (Johns et al., 2009). Both the SNP and PC won most of their votes outside the working-class industrial heartlands of central Scotland and south Wales, where Labour continued to dominate. (Both parties made some inroads to Labour’s industrial fastnesses, notably at by-elections, but were generally unable to sustain these.) The Conservative party was the main loser – with its share of the votes cast in Scotland and Wales falling to only 17.5 and 19.6 per cent in 1997, when it won no seats in either country. Outside the industrial heartlands, the nationalist parties and the Liberals were the main contenders for votes, generating a new electoral geography in each country. The nationalist claims were partly countered in 1998 by the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly (the former has more powers than the latter), following a failed attempt in 1979.

The Liberal growth also had a clear geographical expression. The party rebuilt its base in many areas where it had traditionally been well supported – the areas where non-conformist Protestant religions were strong, such as parts of rural Wales, rural Devon and Cornwall in southwest England, and a few industrial areas in northern England. But within those areas, as well as in other cases, the emergence of a strong Liberal party reflected local developments. In a number of places, the party won a Parliamentary constituency by-election, largely as a protest vote against the incumbent government by people not prepared to switch their support from the Conservatives to Labour. Some of those seats were then lost again at the next general election, but others were retained and – often through the success of a popular MP – a strong party base was established. Many of those by-election successes were based on foundations established in the local governments, where Liberal campaigning had led to the party winning seats on the relevant local councils, providing a foundation for parliamentary campaigns based, in part, on evidence of Liberal participation in, and in some cases control of, local governments. The creation of such ‘islands’ of Liberal voting then acted as ‘heartlands’ from which activists spread the message, creating a diffusion of Liberal voting (Dorling et al, 1998). In most places, the Liberals gained their main support from among the middle classes, especially those with higher educational qualifications working in professional occupations, although there were exceptions – the Lancashire industrial town of Rochdale, for example (where the co-
operative movement was founded), returned a Liberal MP from 1972-1997 and again from 2005 on.

The Liberal revival was enhanced in the early 1980s when a number of Labour MPs left to form the Social Democratic Party (on which see Crewe and King, 1995). This formed an electoral alliance with the Liberals in 1981, with each agreeing not to contest a constituency against the other; the agreement saw a joint decision on which party should contest every seat at the 1983 and 1987 general elections. For a time the new Alliance led in opinion polls, but even though it eventually came third in the 1983 general election, with 25.4 per cent of the votes, it came close to establishing itself as the second most popular force in British politics – Labour came second then by only a narrow margin over the Alliance, with 27.6 per cent. This success was not replicated in the allocation of seats, however, with the Alliance getting only 23 compared to Labour’s 209. Most of the SDP MPs lost their seats, but in some of those constituencies a firm foundation for further electoral activity remained and was built on at later elections. A substantial factor in the Alliance’s failure to translate votes into seats in 1983 was the geography of their support, which was too evenly spread to deliver many MPs in a first-past-the-post electoral system: unlike Labour and the Conservatives, they did moderately well in most parts of the country – but at the same time, there were few seats where they did well enough to win. The same problem occurred in 1987 when the Alliance won 22 seats (out of 657) with 22.6 per cent of the votes. Soon after that the parties merged, eventually becoming known as the Liberal Democrats.

The creation of the SDP, the (relative) success of the Alliance in 1983 and 1987, and the growing strength of the Liberal Democrats thereafter (they won 20 seats in 1992, and 46, 52 and 62 respectively at the next three elections), was just one element of a major shift in British politics. The structure created in the 1930s that had lasted through the 1960s began to collapse, largely as a function of economic change. In particular, some of Labour’s foundations were eroded through the decline of coal mining and heavy industries – shipbuilding, iron and steel, textiles – which not only removed many of its loyal supporters but also, especially after the major strikes of the early- and mid-1980s in the iron and steel and mining industries, saw the decimation of the trades unions that had mobilised many of its voters and provided very substantial funding to the Labour party. At the same time, the sale of around 2 million council houses between 1979 and 1997 fragmented another of Labour’s main recruiting grounds.

The main direction of Britain’s changing employment structure from the 1960s on was a decline in blue-collar employment and a growth in the absolute and relative numbers in white-collar occupations. This shift meant that – as Franklin (1985) clearly demonstrated – the divide between the working and middle classes became increasingly fuzzy: many fewer people had working-class backgrounds and occupations, for example, were members of trades unions, and lived in council housing. For Labour to win parliamentary majorities, it had to expand its appeal (Crewe, 1986), and yet during the 1980s the opposite occurred as a new geography of party competition emerged. Through much of southern England, outside inner London and a few major cities, Labour’s organisational strength withered, its representation in local government declined, and its vote-winning capacity at general elections decayed: the two main contestants in many constituencies there were the
Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. In most of northern England, Scotland and Wales, on the other hand, the Liberal Democrats failed to establish strong local bases and the majority of constituency contests were between Labour and the Conservatives. In the 1990s, however, the Liberal Democrats began to replace the Conservatives as the main opposition to Labour in some northern areas, by winning seats on — and in some cases control of — local councils (in cities such as Liverpool and Sheffield); on such foundations, they occasionally won Parliamentary seats. In the early 21st century this meant that the Liberal Democrats were fighting on two separate fronts in different parts of the country — a fairly difficult proposition (Fieldhouse and Russell, 2004). At the 2005 general election, two of their main policy proposals — withdrawal of troops from Iraq and abolition of university fees — saw them win votes from Labour much more readily than they did from the Conservatives, especially in areas with large student and Muslim populations (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2005).

One further feature of these trends in the economic structure and the erosion of the bases of party (especially Labour) support was the decline in electoral participation. Turnout fell slightly from a high average of 83.3 per cent at the 1950-1951 elections, but remained consistent at around 75 per cent until 1992 — with the absolute level being slightly higher at contests expected to be close rather than when the result seemed a foregone conclusion (Pattie and Johnston, 2001). It then declined, first to 71.5 per cent in 1997 (though the fall to 1997 was entirely explicable by the widespread expectation of a substantial Labour majority at that election) and subsequently 59.4 per cent in 2001, recovering only marginally to 61.2 per cent at the slightly closer 2005 contest.

An increasing proportion of the British electorate was thus unwilling to participate in the electoral process. In some cases, this was because of disillusion with party politics; in others it was because people thought their votes were irrelevant. Many of the latter lived in safe constituencies, where one of the parties was almost certain to win; this was especially the case in Labour-held seats (Johnston and Pattie, 2001). A geography of turnout thus emerged. Furthermore, as discussed below, it was encouraged by the parties — or, perhaps more exactly, its emergence was not discouraged, despite various national programmes designed to increase political engagement. The parties (especially Labour and the Liberal Democrats) did little to encourage voter turnout in seats that they seemed either certain to win or destined to lose.

A series of processes combined from the 1970s on to create a very different electoral situation — and geography — from that of previous decades, therefore. The changes in the class structure stimulated dealignment: fewer voters were firmly committed to one of the two main parties (in most cases, on the basis of class and ideology) and could therefore be won over by another — or could be lost to abstention. The basis of the campaigning for support from this increasing population of floating voters was the economy. Governments were assessed according to their perceived performance while in power, at a number of scales. Egocentric voters were those who voted for the incumbent government to be returned if they felt personally better-off than they had done previously, especially if they credited the government with that increased prosperity, and if they were optimistic about their financial future; they voted against the government, however, if they felt worse-off — especially if they blamed the government for their situation — and pessimistic about the future. Sociotropic voters,
on the other hand, were those who voted for the government if they felt that either the national or their local economy was thriving, but against it if they felt it was performing badly (because of government policies) and were pessimistic about the future. Governments were thus increasingly judged on their economic records and opposition parties presented themselves as able to perform better – leading in the classic case to the 1997 election result; the Conservatives had lost their reputation for good economic governance in late 1992 and Labour increasingly looked a credible alternative, a situation enhanced after Tony Blair’s election as its leader in 1994, and his rebranding it as New Labour.

The growing importance of economic (or pocketbook) voting itself had a geography, since spatial variations in personal and local economic fortunes were expressed in differential willingness either to support the incumbent government or to vote for its removal. Thus in the early 1990s, for example, a major slump in the housing market meant that many people were suffering from negative equity – the mortgages that they had taken out to buy their homes were larger than the properties were now worth. The places with the largest numbers in this situation tended to be those where the incumbent Conservative government lost most support at the 1992 general election (Pattie et al, 1995). In addition, whereas some made their economic voting decisions based on their appreciation of trends in either or both of their personal financial situations and the national economy, others also took into account regional economic conditions (Johnston and Pattie, 1998; Pattie and Johnston, 2008) – even to the extent of putting local concerns ahead of their own (Johnston et al., 2000).

Enter the Local

All of these changes to the British political/electoral situation were not just reflected in its geography. Increasingly geography became central to their creation, in large part because the parties became geographical practitioners.

At the micro-scale, analysts have long argued that geography is an important influence on voting patterns, through what is generally known as the neighbourhood effect. The theory underpinning this argues that through contact with their local friends and neighbours, especially if it involves discussions about politics, people tend to adopt the local majority view: thus, for example, neighbourhoods that lean towards Labour because of their class composition tend to have even more Labour voters than expected, with the same for each of the other parties. Establishing the validity of this argument has not been straightforward, in part because of the absence of the needed data, but a variety of studies has shown that conversation with others of different views is important in changing people’s views about how they should vote and that the spatial polarisation predicted by the neighbourhood effect is present (e.g. Pattie and Johnston, 2000). The circulation of politically-relevant information through social networks within local communities is therefore important to decisions about how to vote, especially among those who interact with their neighbours (Johnston et al., 2005). These spatial variations in voting behaviour are much more profound than those frequently observed at the regional scale: indeed, many of the regional variations disappear once the smaller-scale variations are taken into account (Johnston et al., 2007), although Walks (2005), following Cox’s (1968) classic work, has shown growing intra-urban polarization between city centres and suburbs over the period 1950-2001, with the former becoming more pro-Labour in their voters’ preferences.
(probably indicative of relative economic decline there) whereas the Conservatives’ support has been increasingly concentrated in the suburban (especially outer suburban) zones. The inner cities also have socially and culturally (especially ethnically) more mixed populations, which Walks (2009) suggests stimulate voters to favour the more inclusionary policies of left-leaning parties, although such areas are also characterised by relatively low turnout rates (on which see Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008).

Over recent decades, the political parties have built upon these spatial foundations in their efforts to mobilise support where it mattered. They could no longer rely on the class divide ensuring that certain types of people would almost invariably support them – indeed they could not even rely on their loyal supporters turning out for them. Support had to be mobilised and re-mobilised. Nor could they rely on the national media alone doing this for them. From the late 1950s on, it was widely assumed that general elections were won and lost according to the parties’ (and especially their leaders’) performance in the national contest, as presented to the voters through the mass media – increasingly through TV. This generated the national uniform swing in support that occurred across constituencies between elections (Butler and Stokes, 1969): geography was unimportant. But as the willingness to vote reduced so more effort was needed to ensure that people turned out – especially those who were hopefully going to vote in a particular way in a place where that mattered.

The local component of British general elections for long involved the twin processes of campaigning and canvassing. Party activists went round their constituencies contacting voters in their homes, thereby compiling lists of their likely supporters. These could be used as the basis for reinforcing messages – delivering leaflets, for example – and then, on polling day itself, as a register that could be checked to ensure that likely supporters had indeed voted, with the recalcitrant ones visited before the polling booths closed to encourage them to go and cast their vote. Posters and leaflets advertising the party’s policies and its candidate accompanied this with election meetings held to reinforce the message – and perhaps win over a few converts. The goal was to identify and deliver.

Such campaigning costs money, even though much of it is undertaken by volunteer workers, perhaps directed by a paid local agent; leaflets and posters have to be paid for. Since the late nineteenth century the amount that candidates could spend on their constituency campaigns has been regulated, to try and create a ‘level playing field’ and prevent corruption; the allowed sums are small – in 2005, on average no more than some £11,000 per candidate in a constituency – although the limits only apply to the short official campaign period after the election has been called and the candidates declared, usually only 3-6 weeks. Before then, there is no regulation.

Until the 1980s, conventional wisdom had it that these local campaigns were very largely ineffective; they might engage party activists but they had little or no impact on the election outcome. Studies of the contests suggested something different, however. The reported amount spent by each candidate in each constituency is published, and analyses showed that in general the more that was spent – i.e. the more intensive the local campaign – the better the candidate’s performance (Johnston, 1987; Johnston and Pattie, 1995; Pattie, Johnston and Fieldhouse, 1995). One candidate’s spending could counter-balance an opponent’s, of course, but if one
considerably outspent the other, or one’s spending was more efficacious than the 
or one’s spending was more efficacious than the 

opponent’s, then the electoral benefits could be substantial – and perhaps significant 
in terms of winning or losing. Other studies – of activists and of party organisations – 
produced consistent findings and increasingly the weight of evidence provided strong 
and irrefutable evidence that local campaigning matters (Denver and Hands, 1997; 

Increasingly the political parties realised this, and acted accordingly. The Liberals had 
long been aware of the importance of local organisation, campaigning and canvassing. 
Their few electoral successes in the 1970s had reflected just that – not only in the 
short official campaign period but in the weeks and months beforehand as well – and 
they continued to focus their relatively meagre resources on a small number of 
constituencies where they believed they had a strong chance of victory (Cutts, 2006a, 
2006b). Much of the money deployed had to be raised locally, however; parties were 
much better able to obtain it where they had a strong base of members and a viable 
organisation, and could offer the possibility of either victory or, if they held the seat, 
defeat to stimulate people both to be active and to contribute funds.

Such strategies became increasingly important from the 1980s on as a result of 
dealignment and growing political apathy. The parties could no longer rely on their 
core voters turning out; they had to make sure they identified them and encouraged 
them to perform their civic duty. But they – especially Labour and the Liberal 
Democrats, who in general have had much greater difficulty raising funds, both 
locally and nationally, than the Conservatives (which changed for Labour when Blair 
was elected leader in 1994) – saw no point in being as active in every constituency. 
There were many areas in which they had virtually no hope of victory, weak local 
party organisations with few members and financial assets, and were unable to raise 
income to spend on campaigns (Johnston and Pattie, 2008a); intensive campaigns 
might raise the party’s vote share slightly, but would have no impact on the 
constituency outcome and would be unlikely to provide a foundation for further 
growth at later elections. There was little point in canvassing strongly there and 
spending much on leaflets and posters, let alone deploying central party resources – 
including the time and energies of leading members – in the search for extra votes. 
Those constituencies were, in effect, “written off” and there was little concern that this 
might mean a low turnout locally (and nationally as a consequence).

Similarly, there were other seats that the party was almost certain to win on the basis 
of past performance. An intensive campaign was not necessary there either, although 
because there was likely to be a substantial, relatively well-funded local organisation 
some campaigning would take place. Such constituencies were unlikely to be “written 
off” like the hopeless seats but they would not be the focus of a great deal of activity – 
although in general the Conservatives were more likely to be active and spend more in 
their safe seats than were Labour in theirs; the Liberals had very few.

This leaves the marginal constituencies, those won by a relatively small number of 
votes at the previous contest. The incumbent party would want to retain the seat, and 
run an intensive campaign – as would the second-placed party which wanted to 
displace the incumbent. (In a small number of constituencies, three or more parties 
might perceive a chance of victory and run an active campaign accordingly.) The 
number of such constituencies can vary between elections, depending on the outcome
of the previous contest and the number of seats that the major opposition party needs
to win from the others if it is to be the largest party in the House of Commons, if not
form a majority. These are where most money will be spent – not only on leaflets,
posters and videos/CDs but also on IT and other resources (Denver and Hands, 1997).
Such intensive campaigns are increasingly backed, if not directed, by the central party
organisations, not only by financial allocations and sending leading members to
campaign for the local candidate but also through other activities – such as canvassing
from central phone banks that are increasingly used to identify and maintain contact
with potential voters (Fisher et al., 2006; Fisher and Denver, 2008; Pattie and

Studies of all elections over the last sixty years, but especially those since 1979, have
shown the importance of the local campaign. Parties spend more and devote more
resources to the seats that can be won or lost – as rational actor theory suggests.
Furthermore, the more money spent on their local campaigns, the better their
candidates’ performances and the poorer their opponents’, so that the balance of
advantage depends on how much each spends and their success in translating
campaign effort/money into votes. Through the sequence of elections 1979-1992, all
of which were won by the Conservatives, studies showed that spending by Labour and
Liberal candidates was much more likely to have a substantial impact than was
Conservative spending, which led to suggestions that for some reason Conservative
campaigning was less efficacious.2

An alternative hypothesis was that the important difference was between the
incumbent party and its opposition. Parties in government and their candidates (most
of whom are incumbent MPs) get much more local publicity in the press and other
media than their challengers, and thus the marginal return on an extra pound spent
might be less than that for the challenger parties’ candidates who have to work
harder/spend more to get an equivalent amount of coverage. Testing this became
feasible after the 1997 election, which was won by Labour – as were the subsequent
elections in 2001 and 2005. Studies showed that in 1997 – as at the previous four
elections – Labour’s spending had a greater impact than did the Conservatives’, but in
2001 and 2005 when the situation was reversed, spending by Conservative
challengers reaped greater benefits than did that by Labour incumbents (Johnston and
Pattie, 2008b; Pattie and Johnston, 2009).

A further geographical element was introduced in the late 1980s and became of
increasing importance at successive elections – tactical voting (Johnston and Pattie,
1991b). Where there are three parties contesting a constituency, people who support
the third-placed candidate who has little or no chance of winning might be convinced
to vote instead for a better-placed candidate in order to keep out another candidate for
whom they have some antipathy. This might involve their voting for the second-
placed candidate, thereby helping her/him to displace the previous victor, or they
could throw their support behind the incumbent, to prevent the second-placed
candidate from winning. Such activity could reflect a formal pact between the two
parties involved, which suggests that they have enough in common that voters are
prepared to switch allegiance from their first- to their second-choice candidate in

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2 Liberal here refers to the major third party in British politics at each election: Liberals in 1979, the
order to increase the pressure on their third-choice. Or it may be that, without a formal pact – and none was ever entered into during this period – the voters in certain constituencies see the point of such tactical voting, undoubtedly encouraged (if not explicitly) by the candidates/parties concerned (without whose circulated information about the electoral situation many in the constituency might be unaware of the tactical voting possibilities).

Such a situation emerged before the 1992 and, especially, 1997 general elections, when both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were determined to remove the long-serving Conservative government; the parties shared enough other common ground for them not to discourage tactical voting, and electors were prepared to follow leads suggesting that even though, for example, they supported Labour a vote in their constituency for the Liberal Democrats was a much better way of seeking to oust an incumbent Conservative MP – and vice versa. The tactic worked: in 1997, for example, in many constituencies where Labour came third in 1992 its vote share fell – despite the overall national swing towards Labour – whereas that of the second-placed Liberal Democrats increased by more than the national trend, with the result that several Conservative incumbents were unseated. Similarly in seats where Labour came second in 1992 and the Liberal Democrats third, the Labour vote surged in 1997 as many Liberal supporters switched their allegiance in order to remove the incumbent Conservative (Johnston et al., 1997). Four years later, such tactical voting was repeated in many seats, even though Labour won by a massive majority in 1997 and was expected to do so again in 2001; the tactical goal this time was to ensure as few Conservative gains as possible – and once again it worked. By 2005, however, the incentive was less, the Liberal Democrats were fighting hard against Labour in many places and the tactical strategy began to unwind (Johnston et al, 2006).

One consequence of tactical voting is that the opposition parties glean even fewer ‘wasted’ votes in constituencies that they have no chance of winning than might otherwise be the case: they come an even poorer third next time. And this has impacts on a further aspect of the election result – the translation of votes into seats.

The Final Twist – Geography Delivers Landslides

The geography of votes cast is not the end of the matter in an electoral system like Britain’s, since they still have to be translated into seats in the House of Commons – an inherently geographical procedure. Although the number of votes that a party gets in a general election is a crucial influence on the number of seats that it is allocated, it is not the sole determinant; indeed, at two post-1945 elections the party with the largest share of the votes cast has not become the largest party in the House of Commons and thus its leader has not been invited to form a government.

It is a commonplace in discussions of first-part-the-post electoral systems to note that the outcome of many elections is disproportional; the percentage of the votes that a party gets is not commensurate to its percentage of the seats. In general, three elements characterise such disproportionality:

1. The largest party in terms of votes cast usually gets an even larger percentage of the seats allocated – what is frequently termed the ‘winner’s bonus’;
2. Parties which occupy third and lower places in the distribution of votes usually get a much smaller share of the seats – a ‘losers’ deficit’;
3. Second-placed parties in terms of votes cast generally get approximately the same share of the seats. The extent of any disproportionality thus largely reflects the size of the winner’s bonus and losers’ deficits.

The extent of the disproportionality is readily measured, and the figures for Britain (Figure 1) show that across the sequence of elections from 1950 to 2007 it increased substantially: disproportionality is measured here as the sum of the differences (irrespective of size) between each party’s percentage share of the votes cast and its percentage share of seats in the House of Commons – the larger the value, the greater the disproportionality. Much of that increase occurred in a single step after 1970, reflecting the growth in vote share going to minor parties (as discussed above), which was not matched by an increase in their shares of the seats. Thus, for example, the Liberal party averaged 19.5 per cent of the votes cast over the six elections from 1983 to 2005, inclusive, but only 5.2 per cent of the seats; it won too many votes in the ‘wrong places’, with most of them being wasted since they delivered no representational returns.

Recent research has shown that British election results are not only disproportional, they are also biased; the operation of the mechanisms generating disproportional results favours some parties more than others. In much of this research bias (sometimes known as partisan asymmetry) is measured as the difference between the two largest parties – Conservative and Labour – in the number of seats that they would win if they had the same vote share, such as half of the total number of votes won by the two parties. A notional election result is constructed from the actual result, with the larger of the two parties ‘losing’ the same share of the votes cast in each constituency and these being reallocated to the smaller of the two – so that each has the same number of votes nationally. If the system were unbiased, they should have the same number of seats and the difference between the two indicates the extent of the bias. (For a full discussion, see Johnston et al., 2001, 2006.)

The trend in this bias statistic over the period analysed here is shown in Figure 2, where a negative value indicates bias in favour of the Conservative party and a positive value a bias favouring Labour. Over the first two decades, the Conservatives were the beneficiaries of such bias; during the middle two decades there was little advantage to either party; and in the last two there has been a very substantial pro-Labour bias. This latter has been brought about by three linked components: Labour tends to be stronger than the Conservatives in the smaller constituencies and those with lower turnout, so that its seats:votes ratio is smaller than its opponent’s (in effect, the equivalent of the US concept of malapportionment); the large majorities that Labour used to win by in many – mainly mining and industrial – constituencies before the 1990s have largely disappeared as a result of industrial change, so that it amasses less surplus votes in the safe seats won by large majorities; and tactical voting has meant that Labour also gets fewer wasted votes in many of the seats that it loses, because these have been transferred to Liberal candidates (although further tactical unwind may well reverse this trend). The geography of the contest thus delivered substantial victories to Labour in 1997, 2001 and 2005, with much larger House of Commons majorities than the Conservatives would probably have obtained with the same vote share. Geography is not just a passive arena within which those biases have been produced, however; geography has been manipulated by the party – notably
through its spatially-targeted campaigning – in order to increase its yield of seats relative to votes, much of it, according to the most recent research, at the Liberals’ rather than the Conservatives’ expense (Borisyuk et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Geography is much more than a stage upon which election dramas are played. It is, rather, a resource deployed by the main actors – the political parties – to promote their interests relative to their opponents’. This use of geography involves not only the drawing of the map of constituencies within which the election is fought but also the mobilisation of voters in those different territorial containers through various campaigning strategies in order to maximise electoral returns. The constituency map is a central component in the process of translating votes into seats; the size of a party’s election victory – even whether it wins or not in closely-fought contests – depends on the interaction of the geography of votes cast with the geography of constituencies. Election winners in Great Britain are usually the better geographers.

Whereas this paper has used Great Britain as its case study of the role of geography in elections, its general themes have much wider import. In the USA, for example, political parties play a much larger role – indeed, the dominant role in many states – in the decennial cartographic exercise of redrawing the country’s Congressional Districts, allowing them to practice gerrymandering, but even where this is not possible – as with the quadrennial contest for votes in the Electoral College with which to elect the President – the geography of their campaigning and the outcome in terms of the distribution of popular votes can be crucial to the outcome (as in 2000: Johnston et al., 2005). And in Australia, which uses a different electoral system (the alternative vote) based on single-member constituencies, once again who wins how many votes where is crucial to the eventual outcome (Johnston and Forrest, 2009).

In other words, in the conduct and outcome of elections – geography matters.

References


Figure 1. Disproportionality in British election results, 1950-2005.
Figure 2. Bias in British election results, 1950-2005.