

Class Alignment

Danny Dorling, University of Sheffield, EPOP Conference Paper, September 2005.

Abstract

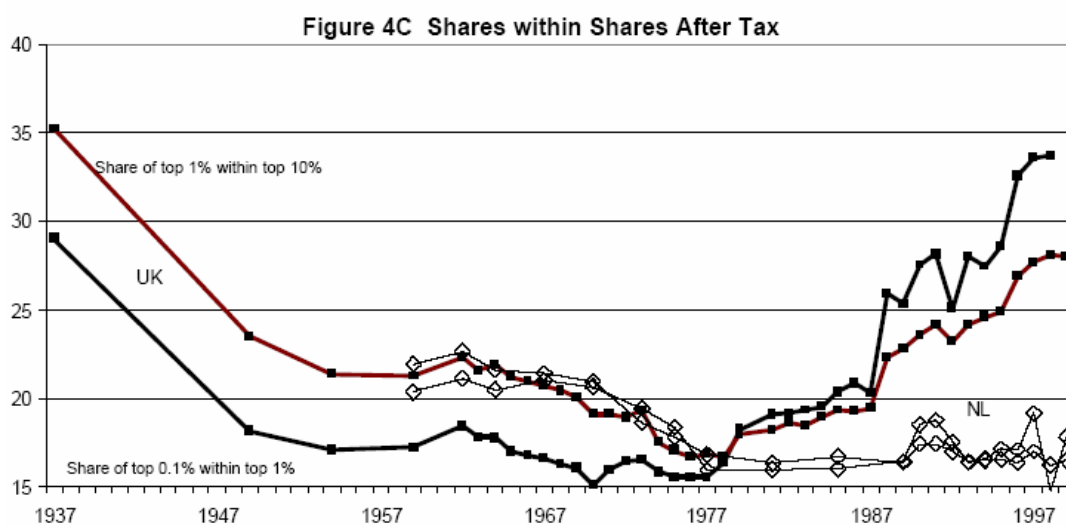
It is odd that patterns of voting in Britain have been described as becoming less class aligned over the last few decades, while so much more in society has polarised. From social mobility between the birth cohorts, to mortality inequalities by area and class to income and most importantly wealth inequalities, to educational opportunities – what matters in Britain is clearly becoming more unequal and has been for some time. So why have people not reflected that in their voting? The answer that this paper suggests is that they have and they have done so clearly steadily, slowly, reliably and consistently. We just failed to look clearly at those people and those votes, worried too much about surveys and perhaps classed people a little too much by what they said they did (occupation) and too little by where they found themselves to be and what they held there (wealth). The paper suggests that in Britain from the late 1950s onwards social class has become more closely aligned with voting, particularly as social polarisation has grown most rapidly – most clearly aligned in 2005.

Background

In Britain, in hindsight, social equity grew most clearly from just before the First World War to just after the Second. The absolute and relative gaps between rich and poor fell in all that mattered most, in the chances of their children dying as infants, in their wealth, in their opportunities for education, and in the importance that where they lived had on their lives. Analysing the results of a survey in the early 1950s, comparing it to one he had commissioned over half a century earlier, Seebohm Rowntree declared that poverty had all but been eliminated by social reform. It had not, but it is easy to forget just what had been achieved in those years.

The trend towards greater social equality came crashing to a halt in the late 1950s. The income shares of the richest within the richest analysed by others show that clearly (see Figure 1). Analysis of mortality trends over time reaches almost identical conclusions. Wealth too shows the same pattern. In all that is certain in life – death and taxes – class now matters more. The 1960s Labour governments presided over a period of slight increases in equality again, as did the late 1970s government, but their efforts when viewed over the course of the whole of the last century appear now to simply have been to have held back a revival in inequality bringing us - by the start of this century - to where we were at the height of the 1930s depression. In terms of absolute wealth, especially in comparison to most of the rest of the world, we are much richer. In terms of relative chances between social groups we are as unequal now as we were then. This is why the 1970 birth cohort fairs so much worse than that of the 1940s or that of the 1950s that have been followed up in terms of social inequality and lack of social mobility (and in the mortality of young men).

Figure 1: What proportion of income do the richest of the rich hold?



source: <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/users/atkinson/NLandUK12.pdf> (A.B. Atkinson and W. Salverda, 2003). See original source for authors' requests over use, etc.

Growing social inequalities in Britain were not inevitable. They did not occur to anything like the same extent in the Netherlands for instance as Figure 1 indicates for tax shares amongst the richest, and as studies of health as well as housing comparing these countries confirm. In Britain we collectively decided to become more unequal. That this has been the case is evident from studies in epidemiology (on health divides), in housing (as tenure polarised), in economics (growing wealth inequalities), sociology (unequal life chances), and in geography (which matters). The exception to this trend, the production of dozens of graphs looking like Figure 1, has been in politics and most clearly in the study of elections. Why, if so much that matters – from death to taxes – has become more unequal – has this not been reflected by an electoral polarisation? Instead we are told that a de-alignment occurred. The purpose of this very short paper is to make a suggestion that we should question that idea of de-alignment. Above all it is nonsensical given all that has happened to people in Britain over the last fifty years that politics should be unconnected to society.

De-alignment

Other than borrowing the graph in Figure 1, this paper references only one previous paper (Curtice 2002) as that paper itself references almost all of the most relevant electoral work in this area (and is extremely good). John Curtice's 2002 review covered the period up to and including the 1997 election. A major theme of Curtice's review of survey research and electoral change in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century concerned debates of class de-alignment and partisan de-alignment. Curtice sums up the start of the argument that something was changing thus:

"...the first suggestion that an important change was occurring was made by Butler and Stokes themselves in the second edition of their book [1974]. They argued that there had been a decline in the strength of the class alignment. While the level of Labour partisanship was weaker in the working class in 1970 than

it had been in 1963, it was stronger amongst the middle class. The classes also seemed to be less polarised in their subjective class identities. The 'class equals party' model of British politics was seriously questioned for the first time, unleashing a debate about dealignment that dominated the literature of the 1970s and 1980s, and continued in the 1990s."

And Curtice continues:

"But it was not easy for Butler and Stokes to account for this apparent decline in class voting in terms that were consistent with their model of inter-generational change. In part they were able to remain within the terms of their model by noting that the strength of the class alignment appeared to be weaker amongst the newest cohorts in the electorate than in the cohort that had entered in 1945. New electors were evidently responding to a new political climate, as their model suggested they would. But in speculating about what had changed about the political climate, Butler and Stokes referred not to sudden changes registered at one election, which was what their model had previously relied upon, but to gradual social changes - the introduction of television, the increasing similarity in the social composition of the Conservative and Labour parliamentary parties and increasing affluence. Even more importantly, they acknowledged that these changes had influenced the whole electorate and not just new voters."

The evidence that this de-alignment was taking place came from the electoral surveys. Surveys designed and often implemented by the same people who were analysing them. Curtice later in his paper laments that earlier electoral surveys did not contain the questions needed to question some of Butler and Stokes' ideas because the relevant questions were not in the surveys due to Butler and Stokes' theories. However, that is simply the tip of the iceberg of the problem of partiality in the study of so called de-alignment. The base of the iceberg concerns the idea of class that has been used in these studies which is termed GSB (General Social Bias) class here-on. This is social class largely based on occupation. The idea that someone's class can be well determined by their job title has a number of problems with it.

- 1) It assumes they have a job with a clear title. The very rich and very poor tend not to and women in the past were much less titled than now.
- 2) It assumes that all jobs with much the same title are equal, and that gaining a job is what matters most and what puts you on a par with others.
- 3) It assumes class (and hence class interest) is individualistic. Thus a teacher living with her none-earning husband with three young children is of the same class as a teacher living with her well salaried accountant husband.
- 4) It largely ignores wealth which is mainly inherited or has been built up from small inheritances – deposited in housing (very few people are "self made").
- 5) It assumes that where you live is unimportant. A teacher in the Gambia, at Eton, aged 60 in Dorset or aged 20 in West Belfast are the same.
- 6) It has at its heart a fantasy of meritocracy – that if you work hard enough – and socially fit in - you too can be with your betters. Thus when SEG (see endnotes) was introduced in the 1950s the highest groups were those considered to play tennis together. However, although everyone may have been a member of the Tennis club – some were clearly more equal than others.

The acronym GSB stands here for General Social Bias¹. From a Factory owner's son discovering poverty in Manchester a century and a half ago, to shipping magnet Charles Booth in the 1880s to Registrar General T.H. Stevenson a generation later to the OPCS tennis players of the 1950s, to the ONS sponsored "New" SEC hustled in with New Labour at the end of the last century – class classification systems betray their designers: their designer's beliefs, aspirations, and context. Note that class de-alignment often later came to be termed partisan de-alignment but the difference is the splitting of hairs if the argument being made here is at all correct.

In the 1970s it was noticed that GSB class and peoples' pasts became least predictive of vote as people aged. What people had and where they were was becoming more important than their job title. To continue to quote from Curtice's summary:

"Crewe et al (1977) noted that the decline in partisanship in 1974 was not confined to new voters but actually was greatest amongst those who had entered the electorate in the 1930s - that is amongst voters who first came of age at the height of the depression and for whom the class-based appeal of the two main parties might have been expected to have had most resonance."

In the 1980s it was noticed that people with generally lower pay and wealth (public sector employees) and who were also more likely to live in the north were more likely to vote Labour even of the same GSB class. New alignments were thus suggested:

"Alongside these theses of dealignment, some analysts have also suggested that new alignments have emerged and/or that new sources of electoral motivation have replaced party identification. Probably the most influential argument in favour of the emergence of a new alignment was the claim that a public/private sector cleavage had opened up (Dunleavy, 1979; Dunleavy 1980; Dunleavy and Husbands 1985)."

However, even in the 1990s GSB class was still being used and hence analysts said it was not easy to account for the growing spatial polarisation of class because GSB class did not account for the differences in structure in the two geographical halves of Britain (well it wouldn't would it when a teacher is the same where ever they live!):

"Until the 1990s at least, stronger evidence of a new cleavage seemed to lie elsewhere. Between 1955 and 1987 there was an increasing geographical polarisation of electoral support between the North of Britain (i.e. Scotland and the North of England) and the South (i.e. the rest of England) (Curtice and Steed, 1982; Curtice and Steed, 1986; Johnston et al 1988; Curtice and Steed, 1988). While the North became relatively more pro-Labour, the South became more pro-Conservative. Further, this divergence could not easily be accounted for by differences in the social structure of the two halves of Britain. This suggested that region itself had become an influence on electoral behaviour (Curtice, 1988); indeed by 1987 regional location had become the biggest divider of the working class politically, outstripping even housing tenure and trade union membership (Heath et al, 1991). However, even this divide has appeared to weaken somewhat more recently, not least it seems because of deliberate attempts by the Labour Party to increase its appeal in the South of England (Curtice and Park, 1999)."

Curtice gets towards the end of his review by stating how very complicated it all appears to be and leaving his readers wondering just what we now know:

[Heath and Friends]

...suggest that when this is examined we find that although the class/vote relationship has not been stable over time (and did indeed decline between 1964 and 1970 as Butler and Stokes argued) there has not been a consistent secular decline in the relationship such as predicted by the class dealignment thesis. Rather the relationship has fluctuated up and down since 1970 - with the differences often not being statistically significant.

Re-alignment

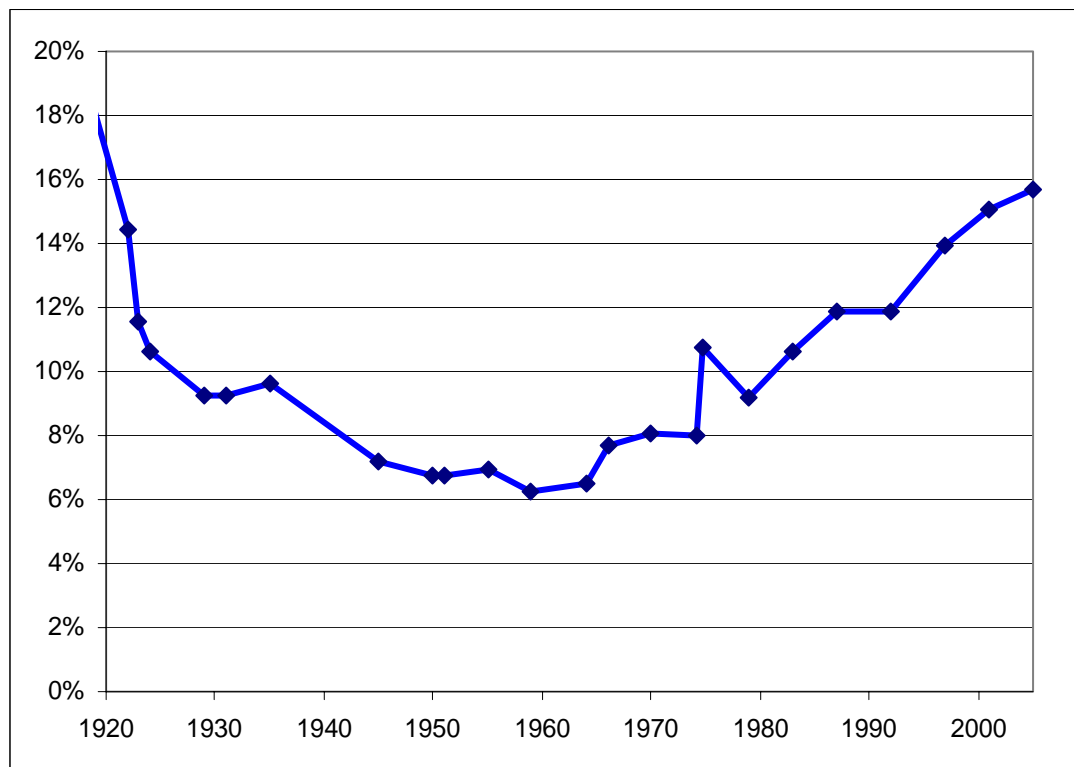
In hindsight, and given all the other social trends that are now becoming ever more evident, the class or partisan de-alignment debate can be viewed as a potential problem of definitions. Define class by job-title, or even worse partisanship by some form of recollected identity, and you are not going to be defining a group of people with that much of a common interest. All the country's teachers, secretaries, managers and metal workers do not have that much in common. Rising inequalities in wealth

and educational opportunity by area and greater social polarisation through migration have increasingly brought together people with common interests geographically – people with class interests geographically concentrated. If you want your children to inherit your wealth and have an advantage over other peoples’ children, to go to university and not see others go, if you want your house value to rise and not see new homes built in your area then you have more in common with your neighbours than you may have had in the past. Similarly, if you have no significant wealth, your children have almost no chance of a good education, the homes around yours are either not for sale or worth relatively little you are more likely to share these attributes with your neighbours than you were half a century ago. You have more of a similar interest and you are more likely to behave like each other as a result. Politically this increasingly implies not voting as a class (with a common set of interests in none of the main three parties).

Suppose this argument were true. That people with similar class interests were behaving politically in similar ways and that as class become more important this political behaviour became more distinct – what should we expect to see and how should we expect to be able to see it? Well, we could look at the electoral surveys over the last half century and try to tease these relationships out, imputing indicators of wider family wealth, educational advantage, and health status that were comparable over time – perhaps even using respondents’ addresses to estimate such things. However, that would be a great deal of work, may not even be possible, is possibly not ethical, and may well not be necessary. Alternatively we could simply define what we would expect to see if the argument above is correct and then see if we see it.

Compare Figure 2 to Figure 1.

Figure 2: How many Tory voters need to move to spread them evenly over Britain?



Source- analysis by author – dataset available at www.shef.ac.uk/sasi

Imagine for a moment that voters are like butter and the country is a piece of toast. You are an all powerful being, have a knife, and are about to spread Tory voters evenly across the nation (you look a little like Peter Snow leaning over some odd multicoloured map graphic on election night). Figure 2 shows what proportion of the electorate you would have to move for each general election held following the end of the Great War until that held earlier this yearⁱⁱ. By spring 2005 you, or rather the fictional omnipresent you with the very large butter knife, would have to spread almost 16% of Tory voters out of their homes and into the rapidly vacated homes of those otherwise aligned living elsewhere. That's a lot of Tories.

To be a bit more precise you would have to sweep some half a million Tories out of the South East of England, quarter of a million out of the South West, almost a third of a million out of the Eastern Region; depositing roughly half a million in aggregate into Yorkshire, Wales and the North East; two hundred thousand into the North West of England and over four hundred thousand into Scotland. Proportionally you would be moving the most ever needed since 1918 (and that was an odd election).

Why are the Tories now so clustered by geography if not by job label? Why has the increase in that clustering been so steady and smooth? It is not places that create a common interest (other than indirectly). There is nothing in the soil in the south or the rock in the north that now gives people a reason to behave in a particular way. Figures 1 and 2 look so similar because they are showing the same thing, just through different lenses. Who you are, and what you have – class – matters more today than it did a half century ago in Britain. Voting, as with all else that matters – especially that which matters most - has aligned more strongly to class as class has become ever more important; but to see that you have to first recognise class and class interest for what it really is, and not through the titles and ranks given to people's jobs.

Reference

Curtice, J., 2002, Survey Research and Electoral Change in Britain, CREST Working Paper Number 96

<http://www.crest.ox.ac.uk/papers/p96.pdf>.

ⁱ GSB could also stand, in no derogatory way, for a "Grammar School Boy" idea of class. By this definition GSB refers to the brief historical moment in the middle of the twentieth century when boys from poorer backgrounds, in theory, had a chance of bettering themselves by passing an exam at age eleven (if they were entered and were lucky enough to be good at exams at that age). Some girls were included too but the eleven plus was often made more difficult for them by raising the mark they need to pass! Grammar schools were defined as schools with an "academic curriculum" as opposed to schools for the majority that taught them how to work rather than think. Going to a grammar school would not make your parents wealthy, but it would give some boys a chance of gaining a job with a good title and a chance of avoiding the manual work of their fathers. Given that this chance was so important to these boys it is hardly surprising that this generation came to use classification systems based on job titles so enthusiastically - often called social-economic group (SEG) or Socioeconomic status (SES) or socio-economic position (SEC) or even new SEC (NSEC). The GSB classification is a male, hierarchal, meritocracy biased class system. It matters less and less.

ⁱⁱ The areas you are spreading these good folk over are the 84 European constituencies defined in 1999 but never used. These areas are used so that the results are not influenced by boundary changes. See www.shef.ac.uk/sasi/hguk for more details.