

Preface

This is a book about the political choices that British voters make. More precisely, it is about the decisions they make in successive general elections. In each election, voters have two choices – first, whether to cast a ballot, and second, which party to choose. Since the first British Election Study (BES) some four decades ago, the emphasis has been very much on the second of these decisions, party choice. The prior, turnout, decision has received very little attention. In the 1950s and 1960s, neglecting turnout seemed reasonable, or at least acceptable, since the vast majority of people regularly voted in general elections. That has now changed. In 2001, less than three in five in the eligible electorate went to the polls, thereby clearly signalling that the turnout decision has become an important aspect of electoral choice in contemporary Britain. Turnout and party choice both merit attention.

Viewed generally, the literature on electoral choice is dominated by two theoretical perspectives – what we call the sociological and individual rationality frameworks. These two frameworks subsume a wide variety of explanatory models. Historically, most studies of voting behaviour in Britain and elsewhere have adopted, and then strongly advocated, a single model within one of these two frameworks. Ensuing empirical analyses typically, and predictably, demonstrate the power of the preferred model. We contend that this research strategy imposes undesirable theoretical costs because the explanatory contributions and potential superiority of rival models are ignored. These costs may not be recoverable because national election studies are a very scarce commodity. Almost always there is only one study per research community per election cycle. When used to guide the construction of the survey instruments, the 'single model' approach means that the data needed to investigate the utility of a range of alternative models often are unavailable.

In *Political Choice in Britain*, we specify and test several rival explanatory models of electoral choice. As principal investigators of the 2001 BES, we explicitly designed the survey

instruments with this goal in mind. Since electoral participation had been largely ignored in previous studies, we constructed substantial batteries of new questions to generate the data needed to test alternative models of turnout. In the same spirit, extensive additions were made to the set of questions designed to operationalise various models of party choice. New batteries designed to locate elections within, and gauge their impact on, the broader political culture were also included. These surveys are described in Appendix A. The data and questionnaires are available from the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex and the 2001 BES website: www.essex.ac.uk/bes.

The analyses in the pages that follow do not rely exclusively on data gathered in the 2001 BES. Indeed, some of the most important findings are only possible because of the availability of the now lengthy set of BES surveys initiated in the early 1960s. These data are especially useful because they include multi-wave panels that facilitate analyses of the individual-level dynamics of partisanship and other important political orientations. Additional leverage for these analyses is provided by the 1992-2001 BEPS (British Election Study Panel Studies). Important also are data we gathered in a series of monthly surveys conducted by the British Gallup organization between January 1992 and December 2002. These data enable us to investigate the aggregate-level dynamics of party support over a decade that witnessed the sharp reversal of the fortunes of the erstwhile hegemonic Conservatives, and the emergence and rise to power of New Labour.

Analyses using varying combinations of these data sets challenge sociological models of party choice. In Britain, the long-dominant sociological model is motivated by one key observation and one key hypothesis. The former is that class is the dominant social cleavage, and the latter is that class positions drive party choice. Since the inception of British electoral research in the 1950s, many analysts have adopted this model, and Butler and Stokes made it the centrepiece of their classic study, *Political Change in Britain* (1969). Ironically, the title of their book suggests the fundamental weakness of class-based models, namely the inability to account for more than very slowly paced change. Since the class locations of the vast majority of voters do not change, other explanatory factors must be employed to account for the, sometimes sharp, variations in party

support across successive elections. Although this logic is eminently transparent, and empirical evidence documenting the weakening of the class x party choice nexus has been available since the 1970s, proponents of the class voting model have continued to insist that it constitutes the canonical account of political choice in Britain. Our analyses indicate that they are wrong to do so.

Sociological accounts of voting behaviour are dominated by models located in the individual rationality tradition. Particularly important are 'valence' models, early examples of which were developed by Donald Stokes (1963, 1992). These models do not place unreasonable requirements on the cognitive capacities of voters or impose exorbitant deliberation costs on them. Rather than being omniscient utility maximisers, voters are only required to recognize that they possess limited information about alternative political futures. They react to these limitations by focussing on competing parties managerial teams, paying particular attention to the competence of rival party leaders. They look for a 'safe pair of hands'. In making their judgments about which party and which leader can do the best job, they do not ignore performance. Rather, they store and update information about party and party leader performance, and in so doing develop – and sometimes change – partisan attachments. Nor is the case that the dominant model of party choice in Britain has moved from 'class' to 'choice' over time. Although the correlation between class and party support has weakened significantly since the 1960s, we contend that it was never as strong as many have presumed. Valence models provide a good account of past as well as present party choice.

What about turnout? Analyses of rival models in the sociological and individual rationality frameworks reveal that choice-based models perform relatively well. But, this is only possible if one circumvents a fundamental logical problem with classic rational-choice models of electoral participation. As is well known, these models suffer from the 'paradox of participation' – millions of people do vote even though their vanishingly small probability of decisively affecting the election outcome means that it is irrational to go to the polls. However, by collectivising the concept of political influence, it is possible to specify a simple cost-benefit model that explains a substantial

portion of the variance in individual-level turnout in 2001, as well as aggregate-level variations in turnout over time.

There is more to this story -- various individual and collective incentives also have significant effects on turnout. Especially important are system incentives, revolving around the notion of civic duty. There is a strong correlation between sense of civic duty and age in the 2001 BES data, with younger voters having substantially lower levels of civic duty than do older ones. Analyses suggest that this relationship has a substantial generational component. If so, it cannot be easily assumed that people in what we call the 'Thatcher' and 'Blair' generations will eventually become as participatory as the generations that preceded them.

Listening to one of the authors recount these various findings, a colleague in political philosophy politely inquired, 'what, then, is your psephological anthropology?' Translating this pointed, if arcanelly worded, question as a request for a 'bottom line' description of the typical British voter, our answer is a combination of famous aphorisms by V. O. Key (1968) and Amartya Sen (1977). British voters are neither 'fools', nor are they 'rational fools'. The dominance of the valence model of party choice testifies that Key was correct to argue that voters are sensible people whose political behaviour is guided by a rough and ready rationality. At the same time, voters respond to what we call 'general incentives', that is, they are motivated by collective considerations as well as egocentric concerns. As a result, the British electorate does not exhibit a pernicious individual rationality that prompts the collective irrationality of undermining a democratic polity by draining it of citizen participation.

In reaching this conclusion, we recognize that generational replacement is a motor of political change. The fact that many young people do not view voting as a serious civic duty thus becomes cause for concern. That said, there is no indication of a wholesale retreat from citizenship or deep-seated disaffection with the political system. Indeed, data gathered in the 2001 BES show that levels of involvement in political life, views of the self as a political actor and satisfaction with the performance of British democracy are quite similar, and in some cases, superior, to those

measured by national surveys conducted over the past four decades. It is essential to calibrate -- not celebrate -- this finding. Contemporary Britain is hardly a political arcadia, overflowing in a bounty of social capital, citizen participation and enthusiasm for the political system. But, insofar as we can tell, it never has been -- Britain's 'civic culture' is now and has always been considerably more minimalist and rougher than that.

Our story of political choice in Britain thus is one with elements of both change and continuity. Readily acknowledging that the economic and social contexts in which political choice occurs have changed greatly since national election studies began in the 1960s, we nevertheless contend that the present is like the past in important respects, but both are different than often supposed. In the pages that follow, we present the evidence that prompts this conclusion.

First, however, there is another order of business. A large number of individuals and organizations contributed to making this book a reality. We are very pleased to have this opportunity to acknowledge their assistance. First, we wish thank the Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC) for its generous funding of the 2001 BES. We also wish to thank the ESRC for funding the Dynamics of Democracy project as part of the Participation and Democracy programme. This enabled us to gather the 2000-2002 monthly survey data on the inter-election dynamics of party support in Britain. ESRC officers Gary Williams and Jennifer Edwards deserve special notes of thanks for their interest in and support of these projects. We also benefited from research grants awarded by the National Science Foundation. These grants enabled us to fund the 1992-1999 monthly Gallup surveys that tracked the evolution of party support during a crucial period. NSF Political Science officer Frank Scioli's support for our work on the Gallup project is very much appreciated. Our universities also offered significant assistance. Program support at the University of Texas at Dallas has been especially important -- bolstering the available funds for surveys, and enabling two of the authors, Clarke and Stewart, to travel to Britain to work on the project.

Members of the 2001 BES Advisory Board deserve special recognition. Board members included John Bartle, Alice Brown, Ivor Crewe, Russell Dalton, David Denver, Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin, Peter Kellner, Anthony King, Richard Johnston, Ron Johnston, Lawrence LeDuc, William Miller, Anthony Mughan, Pippa Norris Charles Pattie, Elinor Scarbrough, Patrick Seyd, and David Walker. In the design stage of the project, several members of the board met at the University of Sheffield and then at the University of Essex to offer us guidance concerning the content and structure of the survey instruments, and the aims of the project as a whole. Their willingness to spend valuable time sharing their insights and wisdom with us is much appreciated.

We also wish to thank the individuals and research organizations that did the field work for the several surveys that are the centrepiece of the 2001 BES. The pre- and post-election cross-sectional and panel surveys were conducted by Nick Moon and his staff at NOP. Simon Sarkar and Colleen Sullivan directed the Gallup staff that conducted the rolling cross-section telephone campaign survey and follow-up post-election survey. FDS did the post-election telephone survey in Northern Ireland. Thanks are also due to Joe Twyman who generously offered to help us with a mode experiment by placing a web version of the post-election survey on the Yougov site.

As the surveys prepared to go into the field, we were very fortunate to secure the services of Jonathan Burton. Jonathan's careful checking of the CAPI programs proved invaluable, and his efforts on behalf of the project are greatly appreciated. During the data collection phase of the project, we were privileged to have the assistance of three extremely able research officers -- Antony Billingham, Jane Carr and Rob Johns. Antony worked on the 'data cam' project, putting the daily updated results of the rolling-cross-sectional campaign survey on the BES website. Jane and Rob performed a host of crucial data collection tasks with skill and enthusiasm, including visiting the Lord Chancellor's Office in London and, in Rob's case, local sheriff's offices throughout Scotland, to gather vote validation data. We also thank Ben Sanders and Carole Welge. Ben assisted Rob in maximizing return rates on the mailback questionnaire, and Carole maintained project records.

In addition to the BES board members mentioned above, there are a number of other individuals who have helped us to develop our thinking about electoral choice and how to study it. In this regard, we especially wish to acknowledge Jim Alt, André Blais, Ian Budge, Ray Duch, Geoff Evans, Jim Granato, Anthony Heath, Allan Kornberg, Allan McCutcheon, William Mishler, Jon Pammett, Norman Schofield and Paul Sniderman. One organisation deserves special thanks too. That is the EPOP (Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties) section of the Political Studies Association. Participation in the EPOP annual conference has provided us with many valuable learning opportunities, and the conference is invariably an enjoyable experience. The hard work of David Denver, Justin Fisher and other EPOP organizing officers is much appreciated. Another person deserving special thanks is Bob Wybrow, for many years, director of British Gallup. At an early EPOP meeting at Worcester College, Oxford, Bob listened to our idea of using Gallup surveys to do a mini-election study every month. His enthusiasm and support did much to make the ensuing eleven-year project on the dynamics of party support in contemporary Britain a reality.

Last, but certainly not least, we wish to thank Gillian Sanders and Sue Whiteley. Their patience and support over the several years it has taken to complete the project are deeply appreciated.

Political Choice in Britain has been a genuine collaborative effort among the four authors. The project has been based at the University of Essex, and this has provided Clarke and Stewart with numerous opportunities to visit Wivenhoe Park. Indeed, Wivenhoe House has become their 'home away from home' and a rendezvous point for members of the project. The authors' evening debriefing sessions at the Wivenhoe House bar and occasional sojourns to local establishments such as the Rose and Crown and, slightly further afield, the Marlborough House in Dedham, have been sources of intellectual and social capital, and just plain fun. All are important for a project like this.

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