**CHAPTER TWO**

**VOTING BEHAVIOUR**

1. KEY CONCEPTS

Voting behaviour in Britain after the Second World War underwent a dramatic change in the 1970s and can be divided into two different phases: the period of alignment and the period of dealignment.

**The period of alignment**, between 1945 and 1970, was a period in which voting behaviour was in line (aligned) with expectations as to how people would vote. For example, most observers would expect working class voters to vote Labour and middle class voters to vote Conservative. Voting was also **habitual** (people often voted out of habit rather than thinking about who they voted for).

**The period of dealignment**, between 1970 and today, saw people no longer voting in line with these expectations. It became much harder for psephologists to predict how people would vote. Voting behaviour became much more complex and people would change which party they voted for from one election to the next. This is known as **voter volatility** and is in direct contrast with **habitual voting.**

**THE PERIOD OF ALIGNMENT: 1945-1970**

This post-war period was characterised by stability, habitual voting, predictable voting trends and the dominance of two main parties: the Conservatives and Labour. Ninety per-cent of voters either voted Conservative or Labour. The third party, the Liberals, won few seats: they had just six MPs between 1951 and 1964. This period of stability is known as the period of alignment. The factors which influenced voting behaviour throughout this period are known as **long term factors**, or **PRIMACY FACTORS.** They are listed below.

1. **Social Class**

This was the most important factor and led to class alignment. Working class voters predominantly voted Labour, whilst middle class voters predominantly voted Conservative. There were some notable exceptions. These exceptions are known as **deviant voters**. They included working class Conservative voters and middle class Labour voters. There are two reasons why there were working class Conservative voters:

1. **Deference**. This is a belief that others are more superior to you and are therefore ‘born to rule’. Some working class voters felt that the Conservatives had stronger ties to the aristocracy and were therefore better placed to lead the country.
2. **Aspiration**. Aspirational voters were those working class voters who ‘aspired’ to be middle class and, in order to demonstrate their middle class status, voted Conservative. They wore their voting habit like a badge saying ‘look at me, I’m middle class’. By the mid-nineteen fifties the British economy was beginning to recover from the post-war austerity and new consumer goods were becoming more widely available. Many working class people enjoyed the benefits of this economic upsurge and consumerism and were becoming more middle class in their lifestyles. This phenomena is known as ***emboureoisiement***.

But there were also middle class Labour voters. These were mostly professionals who worked in the public sector (doctors, nurses, teachers, etc) because he Labour Party was committed to supporting the public sector.

In this period the psephologist Pulzer noted: “class is the basis of British party politics, all else is embellishment and detail”.

1. **Gender**

Throughout this period more men voted Labour and more women voted Conservative. This was partly because men worked in more unionised occupations and there has been a strong historical link between the unions and the Labour Party. Those women who worked, on the other hand, were mostly in low-paid part-time jobs which were not unionised.

In the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher, the number of women voting Conservative surprisingly declined.

1. **Ethnicity**

Historically most members of ethnic minorities have voted Labour. There are two reasons for this.

1. In successive waves of immigration throughout this period most groups settled in urban areas (which are predominantly represented by Labour MPs). Labour MPs therefore became more experienced in understanding and dealing with the issues which faced immigrants and Labour became recognised as the party most sympathetic to immigrants. On the other hand, some Conservative MPs, notably Enoch Powell, were seen as openly hostile towards immigration.
2. The types of jobs available to immigrants were often low paid. Factory work or low-paid public sector work was most commonly taken up by ethnic minorities. It is precisely this kind of unionised work which the Labour Party represented.

A notable exception to this trend was Asian businessmen who often aspired to be middle class and saw the Conservative Party as the party most likely to support small businesses.

1. **Region**

There were two significant regional variations in the UK. These variations still largely hold true today.

1. **The urban/rural divide**

Those who lived in urban areas (towns and cities) were more likely to vote Labour. This was particularly true of the industrial conurbations, such as the West Midlands or Greater Manchester. Those who lived in rural areas (the countryside) were more likely to vote Conservative.

1. **The north/south divide**

Those who lived in the north of Britain, which is more industrial and more urban, were more likely to vote Labour. Those who lived in the south, which is more prosperous and rural, were more likely to vote Conservative. This is still very evident today, although in 2015 Labour lost much of its support in Scotland to the SNP.

1. **Age**

Older people were more likely to vote Conservative. This is because conservatism is more about resisting radical change in society and older people are less accepting of change. Conversely, younger people are more prepared to embrace radical change and are therefore more likely to vote Labour. Gender also plays a part in this as women, who were more likely to vote Conservative, generally live longer than men.

1. **Religion**

Religion played a part in voting behaviour in two ways.

1. Traditionally the Conservative Party has been associated with Anglicanism (the Church of England). One wit once described the Anglican Church as “the Tory party at prayer”. Catholics were more likely to vote Labour, whereas nonconformists (Methodists, Baptists, and Calvinists) were more likely to vote for the Liberal Party. Those areas dominated by non-conformist religions (Cornwall, Wales and Scotland) were historically more likely to return Liberal MPs.
2. In Northern Ireland religion has been (and continues to be) the key influence on voting behaviour. Catholics are represented by the Republican Party, Sinn Fein, and the more moderate Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP). Protestants are represented by the Unionists parties: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionists. Republicans seek a united Ireland and the integration of Northern Ireland with Eire (Southern Ireland) which gained independence (‘home rule’) from the UK in 1922. Unionists seek to maintain Northern Ireland as part of the UK. The mainland parties (the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats) are not represented in Northern Ireland, although there have been close historical links between the unionists and the Conservative Party.
3. A further factor influencing voting behaviour in the 1950s was identified by two psephologists, **Butler and Stokes,** in 1963. This was the described in **the Party Identification Model** and was based on voters’ **psychological attachment** to a given party. This was a characteristic of **partisan** (or party) **alignment**. What Butler and Stokes noted was that voters developed an almost tribal affiliation with a political party. They voted out of habit (**habitual voting**) and therefore voted for the same party election after election, regardless of any change in policies. Voting for the Conservative, or Labour, or Liberal Party was *part of their identity.* Psychologically they saw themselves as a Conservative, or a Socialist or a Liberal.

Many of these long term or primacy factors are still evident in elections today, although their influence on voting behaviour is not as strong as it was in the period of alignment.

**THE PERIOD OF DEALIGNMENT: 1970-THE PRESENT**

From the 1970s onwards a significant shift occurred in voting behaviour in Britain and it became much harder to predict people’s voting intentions. There was greater change and voter volatility, with people changing who they vote for from one election to the next. Although they are still evident, the long term factors diminished. New influences on voting emerged, based largely on people making conscious rational choices each time they voted.

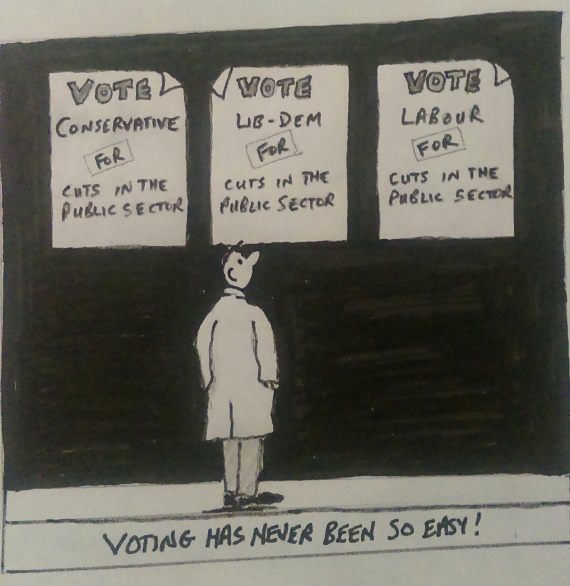
In the 1980s two new explanations for voting behaviour. The German psephologist, Hilde Himmleweit, proposed the **Rational Choice Model**. This assumes that voters act like *consumers* in choosing who to vote for: they look at the different policies of the parties and the issues that affect them most and make a ‘best fit’ choice according to their needs.

The second model was proposed by two psephologists, Dunleavey and Husbands, in 1985, and proposes that people vote according to their relationship to the public sector. This was the **Sectoral Cleavages Model**. It proposes that those who work in the public sector, use the public sector (eg public transport) and are dependent on the public sector (eg the NHS or state benefits) are more likely to vote Labour. Conversely those who work in the private sector, use the private sector (eg have their own transport), and are dependent on the private sector (eg have private healthcare insurance) are more likely to vote Conservative. While the subsequent shrinkage of the public sector makes this model less relevant today, the contemporary psephologist, Richard Curtis, noted it as a potential factor in the 2015 general election.

There are other factors which have been identified as influences on voting behaviour today. These may be subsumed under the ***rational choice model*** because voters are using these criteria to make a considered (or rational) choice as to who to vote for. They include:

**Issue voting**

This assumes that voters consider policies and the background issues (the ‘proximate climate’) in deciding who to vote for. Thus, in 2015, the issues which dominated the election were the deficit and the economy, austerity, the NHS, immigration, and the Britain’s future in the EU. Some issues are ***valance issues****,* were the parties *broadly agree* on their approach to the issue (health and the economy have broadly been valance issues in 2005, 2010 and 2015).



*Valance issue 2010 & 2015*

Key among the issues is **economic voting**. This involves voters deciding whether they wold be better off or worse off if a particular party was in government. This has been a crucial issue in the 2010 and 2015 elections.

**Party competence**

Voters also make a judgement on how parties have handled, or might handle, a given issue, such as the economy. Voters who consider how a party has handled a particular issue are said to be judging ***retrospective competence*** (retrospective = ‘looking back’). Voters who consider how a party might handle a particular issue if they win the election are said to be judging ***prospective competence*** (prospective = ‘looking forward’). In 2010 the Labour Party under Gordon Brown was not judged to have handled the economic crisis particularly well (*retrospective competence*). However, no party was judged to be sufficiently competent on the economy to command an overall majority in the House of Commons. In 2015 David Cameron’s Conservative Party was judged to be fit to deliver on the economy (*prospective competence)* and this was a key factor in their electoral victory.

**Leader image**

In today’s world of 24/7 news reports and media analysis the image of a party leader can be a factor in influencing voting behaviour, although the impact of a leader on the outcome of an election may not be as significant as the media would have us believe. It is just one factor or many. In 2010 Gordon Brown’s image was not favourable, partly because of his dourness, partly because of *Bigotgate* (see Chapter 1) and partly because a journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, had branded him as a bully. But none of these factors significantly influenced Labour’s standing in the opinion polls. Conversely, Nick Clegg was a popular leader of the Liberal Democrats, but they still lost seats at the election. In 2015 Ed Miliband received a bad press with suggestions that he was not prime ministerial material, yet the opinion polls suggested Labour was neck and neck with the Conservatives.

But that isn’t to say that the leader image has no effect. It can have some influence on voters’ choices. Back in 1997 John Major was portrayed as grey and boring, whereas Tony Blair appeared young and fresh. Blair won.

The importance of the image of a party leader first became significant in the UK in the 1960s. Harold Wilson, a Labour Prime Minister, tried to present himself as a ‘man of the people’ to the media. Although he was often filmed as a pipe-smoking beer drinker, he really preferred cigars and whisky. Wilson courted the media, being filmed with the cast of Coronation Street and Sean Connery (the first James Bond).In the 1970s Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative leader, who became Britain’s first (and only) female Prime Minister, underwent a radical image makeover, including power-dressing voice coaching: her voice became much deeper. This demonstrates that in our media-driven age image is important.

**Party image**

In 1997 the Conservative Party was perceived as the party of ‘sleaze’ because of a number of sexual and financial scandals (see Chapter 1). This negative image, compared to New Labour’s apparent honesty, contributed to its defeat. The subsequent media portrayal of the Conservative Party as ‘the Nasty Party’ (a legacy from the days of Margaret Thatcher when the party was first branded as uncaring for the poorest in society) was instrumental in the party’s defeats in 2001 and 2005. From 2006 David Cameron fought hard to distance the party from the Thatcher era and ‘detoxify’ the Conservative brand.

The party’s image may also depend on the party’s ideology (**ideological voting**)**.** This is where voters choose to vote for a party which supports their values. In 1994 Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party and set about changing the party’s ideology (from socialism to social democracy) in order to appeal to a wider voter base.

**The Campaign and the media**

The twists and turns of the campaign can have an influence on voting behaviour. Voters may change their mind as to who they intend to vote for during the campaign. This is known as **‘*churn’***. In 2010 25% of voters decided who to vote for in the last week of the campaign. The 2010 election also saw the first televised leaders debates (involving the three key party leaders) and this was repeated (with seven parties) in 2015.

Campaigns involve a variety a variety of activities, from posters and leaflets, to hustings and party political broadcasts on TV. A poster campaign of notable success was the Conservative poster of 1979, suggesting that ‘Labour isn’t working’. Britain’s economy was in a dire state, with rising unemployment and high inflation. The poster portrayed a dole queue (although this was staged by photographing Conservative supporters).

[](https://www.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/8/80/Labour_Isnt_Working.jpg&imgrefurl=https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_Isn't_Working&docid=0La850q0eo9daM&tbnid=Kyyz21vS9ps0vM:&w=380&h=190&ei=cXjEVbLTK-iu7AbB4pewDw&ved=0CAIQxiAwAGoVChMI8s_UttKWxwIVaBfbCh1B8QX2&iact=c&ictx=1)

However, much of the evidence suggests that **the media** tends mostly to reinforce rather than change voting intentions. Readers of Labour supporting newspapers, such as *The Mirror*, tend to vote Labour, while readers of Conservative supporting newspapers, such as *The Sun* and *The Telegraph*, tend to vote Conservative. As Miller suggests, this is because most readers want to have their opinions confirmed rather than challenged. Where the media can be influential is in *setting the political agenda* by focussing heavily on certain issues, such as EU membership or the NHS.

Increasingly in recent elections political parties have turned to utilising the new media in order to win voters. Online campaigns, blogs, *Facebook* campaigns and advertising on social media are used more widely. In 2015 the Conservative Party mounted a *Facebook* campaign targeted at young voters.

2. ADDITIONAL STUFF

**The Registrar General’s classification of social class**

Modern psephologists tend not to use such vague terms as ‘working class’ or ‘middle class’ when they examine how the different social classes have voted. They use the Registrar General’s classification, which uses occupation as the key determinant of social class. The classification is as follows:

* Class A: Professional
* Class B: Managerial & Technical
* Class C1: Skilled non-manual
* Class C2: Skilled manual
* Class D: Partly- skilled
* Class E: Unskilled

Traditionally the Conservatives draw their vote securely from A&B, whereas Labour drew its vote from E, D, and some C2s. With the decline of manufacturing in the 1980s Labour lost its most loyal and reliable support (its **core vote**) among the D & E classes. Thus, David Osler suggested that Labour’s lack of success in the 1980s was due largely to the collapse of the manufacturing working class and in the 1990s Blair’s Labour Party began to focus on attracting **‘middle England’** (the middle and lower middle class voters, mostly C2s and C1s, who were traditionally conservative in their views). In order to be electable, parties today chase this ‘centre ground’ for votes.

3. EXAMPLES OF ELECTIONS

**1983:**

This election illustrates:

* Party image  
  Ideological disjuncture  
  The proximate climate  
  Leader image
* This election was notable for the importance of **party image**. Under Michael Foot the Labour Party was seen to be at its most left-wing. Its manifesto proposed higher taxes to support public services, unilateral nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from the Europe Community, (which it saw as an overtly capitalist organisation), the nationalisation of industry, support for trade unions and the abolition of the House of Lords. These policies were not popular with the voters. The mismatch between manifesto policies and voter expectations is known as **ideological disjuncture**, and this is the election in which Labour clearly showed this phenomenon. Gerald Kaufman, a senior Labour MP, wittily described their 1983 manifesto “the longest suicide note in history”. Labour polled just 28% of the vote. Fresh from victory in the Falklands War (the **proximate climate**) Margaret Thatcher led the Conservatives to a second victory. The newly-formed Social Democratic Party (SDP), a centre ground party which had been founded in 1981 by moderate Labour MPs who were alarmed by Labour’s increasingly left-wing stance, had been predicted to win over 600 seats by some optimistic observers. They won just six!

The 1983 general election also provides an important example of **leader image**. Despite his strong intellect, Michael Foot, the Labour leader, was portrayed in the media as too old to become Prime Minister (he was 70 shortly after the election) and too shabby in his appearance. His leader image was poor, whereas Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative leader, appeared strong and decisive, particularly after the Falklands War.

* The mismatch between manifesto policies and voter expectations is known as **ideological disjuncture**

This is a useful definition.

**1992**

This election illustrates:

* Opinion polls  
  The media  
  The campaign

The 1992 general election is particularly significant for the failure of the **opinion polls** to accurately predict the outcome of the election, showing a 9% error in their calculations (opinion polls generally work to an acceptable margin of error of plus or minus 3%). Buoyed up by the polls, Labour were convinced they were going to win, and at a rally in Sheffield a fortnight before polling day, to the tune of ‘Things Can Only Get Better’ by D:Ream, the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, promised to end thirteen years of Conservative government. In the end, though, John Major’s Conservative Party won the largest post-war share of the vote (42%) and were returned to office, leaving Labour with just 34%. This was an example of the so-called **boomerang effect** (see Chapter 1).

**The media**, particularly *The Sun* newspaper, claimed some influence on this election. Throughout the campaign *The Sun* had been urging its readers to vote Labour, but on the eve of the campaign it switched to supporting the Conservatives, saying, on their front page, “If Neil Kinnock wins today will the last person in Britain switch the lights out” (an allusion to the imagined chaos that a Labour government might bring). *The Sun* went on to claim that because of this message their readership switched their vote from Labour to the Conservatives and, after the election result was announced, they proudly declared: “It Was *The Sun* Wot Won It!” This, of course, is untrue. Even if the entire *Sun* readership had switched party allegiance it still wouldn’t account for the size of the Conservative vote.

**The campaign** was important in this election, though. Labour recognised, after its 1983 and 1987 defeats, that voters do not like high taxation. They had become a party synonymous with higher taxes. In 1992 Kinnock promised that a Labour government would not increase income tax. But the Conservatives understood that voters were sceptical of this promise, and they played with this doubt by producing a **poster** which declared “Labour’s Tax Bombshell” (in other words Labour had a hidden agenda to raise income tax once they had been elected). This warning may have influenced some voters, whether it was true or not. Interestingly, in 1997 voters did accept Tony Blair’s promise that Labour would not raise income tax.

**1997**

This election illustrates:

* Party image  
  Leader image  
  The media  
  The economy

The 1997 general election is notable for the fact that it swept Tony Bair’s New Labour Party to power in a **landslide victory** ending 18 years of Conservative government. Out of 659 seats in the House of Commons Labour won 418, giving them a majority of 179 seats. The Conservatives trailed with 165 seats. In part this was due to **party image**: the Conservatives had been haunted by successive sexual and financial scandals and had been branded ‘the party of sleaze’. The Labour Party had also been successfully rebranded as *New* Labour, more social democrat and less socialist in its ideology, ending its commitment to the nationalisation of industry and to higher taxes, courting the business community. In part, too, Labour’s victory was also due to **leader image:** John Major was caricatured in **the media** as grey and boring, whereas Blair was young and fresh. Among the key **issues** was education, with Blair famously declaring that his three main priorities were ‘education, education, education.’ Another key issue was the **economy.** The Conservatives were perceived by many voters to have mismanaged the economy since ‘Black Wednesday’ in September 1992. In fact, the Conservatives handed Labour the strongest post-war UK economy, but this was not recognised by the voters. What the voters saw was what Blair called ‘Broken Britain’, with rising crime (including the murder of the toddler, Jamie Bulger) and high unemployment.

A **landslide victory** is when a party wins a large overall **majority** of seats in the House of Commons.

This is a useful definition.

**2001**

This election illustrates:

Turnout  
Swing  
Hapathy  
Apathy  
Ideological disjuncture  
Campaign  
The media

The general election of 2001 saw the lowest **turnout** of any post-war general election at just 59%. With a majority of 179 seats, Tony Blair’s New Labour government was unlikely to be overthrown. A huge **swing** (the change in voter support from one election to another) would have been required to bring about a change of government. Such a swing was highly unlikely. Factors which influenced voting behaviour in 2001 included ‘**hapathy**’, in which voters who are content, or happy, with the current government and, believing it is most likely to win again, do not feel their vote is needed to secure its re-election. **Apathy** was also a feature of the 2001 election: some voters were indifferent about voting, feeling that their vote would have little chance of overturning a government with such a secure majority or, perhaps, feeling that none of the mainstream parties represented them any longer (given that the three main parties were now ‘catch-all’, centre ground parties).

The 2001 election also illustrates **ideological disjuncture** on the part of the Conservative Party. William Hague, the Conservative leader, fought a Eurosceptic **campaign** to ‘Save the £’ (believing that Blair and Brown were about to adopt the Euro), and proposing that Britain needed to be tough on asylum seekers. His arguments did not convince the voters and Labour was re-elected.

For Blair, he most difficult moment of the **campaign** was when a Birmingham resident, Sharron Storer, about the NHS. This encounter was caught on camera by **the media**. Her husband, a cancer patient, was facing difficultly securing a hospital bed for his treatment.

**2005**

This election illustrates:

* Issue voting  
  Leader image

The 2005 campaign was largely about the **issues.** For the Conservatives the key issues were immigration, cleanliness in the NHS, and crime (although these were not seen as such a high priority by most voters). Their lacklustre campaign slogan, ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking?’ was open to ridicule and their leader, Michael Howard, was considered by some to be too old to become prime minister (he was 64) and his poor **leader image** left

Labour won on the lowest share of the vote of any government in British political history, just 35%, but still won 355 of the 646 seats. The **issue** which lost them many Muslim votes was the Iraq War, with some former Labour supporters voting for the Liberal Democrats (who had opposed the war) or the Respect Party (which won its first seat in parliament, the constituency of Bethnal Green & Bow, with George Galloway unseating the Labour MP Oona King). Blair’s **leader image,** once very positive, had been tainted by his decision to take Britain into the war. By some he was branded a war monger.

**2010**

This election illustrates:

* Issue voting  
  Valance issues  
  Competency  
  Leader image  
  The media  
  Turnout  
  *Continuing Long term factors*  
  The Boundary Commission

The 2010 election is notable for producing a **hung parliament** and a **coalition government.** It was dominated by the **issues** of Britain’s budget deficit, the NHS, immigration, and the future of public sector spending. All three main parties wanted to cut public spending (a **valance issue**), but the speed and depth of the proposed cuts varied between the parties. The Conservative Party wanted to cut the deficit faster and deeper than the other parties, prompting Labour’s criticism that they were looking to return to the harsh Thatcherite policies of the 1980s.

[](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/gallery/2010/mar/30/general-election-2010-labour#img-1)

Both the Conservative and Labour parties fought a negative campaign which focussed on the failures and characteristics of the respective leaders (see, for example, the posters below).

[](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/gallery/2010/mar/30/general-election-2010-labour#img-8)

No party won an overall majority and therefore none was judged sufficiently **competent** to be trusted with managing the economy on its own, but judgements about the **retrospective competence** of Gordon Brown’s Labour government saw them lose. Brown’s **leader image** was also poor. He was seen as stern, ill-tempered, judgemental of others, and a bully. **The media** dubbed his encounter with a life-long Labour supporter, Gillian Duffy, as **Bigotgate,** after he called her a bigot when she tackled him about his government’s record on immigration.

[](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/gallery/2010/mar/30/general-election-2010-labour#img-11)

On the other hand, Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, had a positive **leader image** after his performance in the TV debates. This became known as **‘Cleggmania’** in the press (although his popularity did not result in more seats for the Lib-Dems). The leaders **TV debates** were the first of their kind in the UK.

**Turnout** was still low at 65%, partly a result of **disillusionment** with Westminster politics after the 2009 expenses scandal. *The Daily Telegraph* had run an expose on MPs expenses claims in 2009. One MP was even claiming expenses for cleaning the moat around his house and for an ornamental duck shelter in his pond!

The independent **Boundary Commission** had introduced constituency boundary changes since 2005 resulting in four new seats (making the total number of seats 650). Studies suggest that the net effect of these changes was to lose nine seats for Labour.

The Boundary Commission

The Boundary Commission regularly reviews the size of constituencies because of population movement and makes recommendations to Parliament for boundary changes. Constituencies are based on population size. Most constituencies are roughly equal with between 70,000 and 80,000 voters. There are some significant discrepancies, however. Because of the smaller population density many Scottish constituencies have fewer voters, but cover a wider geographical area. The smallest UK constituency, in terms of the number of voters, is the Scottish constituency of [Na h-Eileanan an Iar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na_h-Eileanan_an_Iar_(UK_Parliament_constituency)), with 22,000 voters; the largest constituency is the Isle of Wight with over 110,000 voters.

Changes made by the Boundary Commission in constituency size may unavoidably favour one party or another.

 This is a useful definition.

***Were long term factors still at play in 2010?***

**Long term** or **primacy** factors were still evident in the 2010 election. There was a clear **north/south divide** (most of the north of Britain voting Labour; most of the south voting Conservative) and the **rural/urban** split was still very apparent. **Social class** voting was also evident: 40% of social classes A and B voted Conservative and approximately 40% of social classes E and D voted Labour. Labour also performed well in constituencies with a large **ethnic minority** vote.

**2015**

This election illustrates:

* Opinion polls  
  Exit Polls  
  Issue voting

Leader image  
The media  
Competency   
Turnout

The 2015 campaign was notable for the failure of the **opinion polls** to accurately predict the outcome: a Conservative majority. Most pollsters were expecting another hung parliament and all of the parties were preparing for such an eventuality. One theory suggests that there was a late swing towards the Conservatives, but a more plausible theory is that so-called ‘shy Tories’ were being dishonest in replies to poll surveys. Another explanation is the ‘Lazy Labour’ factor: Labour voters are less likely to vote on polling day than Conservative voters. However, the **exit polls** were remarkably accurate. The former Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, was initially sceptical of the exit polls, promising on the BBC Election Night programme to ‘eat my hat’ if they were true.

The **issues** of the 2015 general election were the UK budget deficit and austerity, the economy, immigration, Britain’s place in the European Union, and the future of the United Kingdom in the face of apparent growing support for independence in Scotland. The Conservative Party was judged **competent** to manage the deficit and the economy, although in Scotland the SNP’s anti-austerity message won them a landslide victory. It became evident that the United Kingdom was not entirely united on the issue of how to tackle the deficit and Scotland is developing a separate political narrative. But the SNP position on austerity resonated with a wider voter base, especially amongst the 18-24 age group. The most ‘Googled’ question in the 2015 election was ‘How can I vote SNP if I live in England?’

On the issue of Europe, the Conservatives were keen to demonstrate their Eurosceptic credentials in the face of potential UKIP gains. In the end UKIP lost one seat, leaving them with just one MP, but fears of their success had forced David Cameron to promise an in/out referendum on Europe by 2017.

This was an election in which **the media** played a significant role, organising TV debates between party leaders. One of these featured seven party leaders, illustrating the increasingly fragmented nature of politics in the UK. Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader, was perceived to perform particularly well in the TV debates, with her anti-austerity message. Indeed, the SNP was remarkably successful, gaining 56 of the 59 Scottish seats. Conversely, the Liberal Democrats gained just 8 seats, significant down on the 57 seats they had won in 2010. The expected success of UKIP did not materialise. They retained only one seat. The Conservative Party also mounted a high-profile **Facebook** campaign aimed at attracting young voters. Blogs and social media messaging became important as campaign tools for the parties.

In the media the Labour Leader, Ed Miliband, had a negative **leader image.** Questions were raised about whether he was sufficiently decisive and prime ministerial material. Labour’s policies on a Mansion Tax and a new tax on so called ‘non-doms’ (non-domiciles: UK citizens who live abroad who are often wealthy but avoid taxation) did not connect with the voters.

**Turnout** had improved at 67%, but remained low compared to the latter half of the twentieth century. Turnout in Scotland was higher than in the rest of the UK at 71%. The SNP have galvanised a fresh enthusiasm for politics in Scotland, particularly among younger voters. They would like to see the voting age dropped to 16, as it was for the Scottish independence referendum.

**Long Term Factors in 2015**

There are some early indications of the influence of long term, or primacy factors in 2015. The polling organisation IPSOS-MORI reports the following:

As might be expected, Labour had a clear lead over the Conservatives among 18-34 year old voters (Labour 43%; Conservatives 27%), in social classes D and E (Labour 41%; Conservatives 27%), and among BME (Black and Ethnic Minority voters), with Labour wining 65% of the BME vote and the Conservatives winning 23%. Inevitably the Conservatives fared better in the social classes A & B vote (45%, as opposed to Labour’s 26%)

Labour’s share of the vote for those aged 65 and over fell to just one in four. This group are traditionally more likely to support the Conservatives and are the highest turnout group.

The Liberal Democrat vote collapsed across all categories, but particularly amongst younger voters (just 5% of the vote - perhaps because of tuition fees).

For the third successive election women were marginally more likely to vote Labour than Conservative.

There was a significant increase in turnout amongst young people across the UK. In 2010 turnout amongst the 18-24 category was 44%, in 2015 it was 60%.

4. HARD STUFF

**Differential turnout**

Turnout for each election is measured in terms of the national turnout figure. For example, in 2010 turnout was 65% and in 2015 turnout was 67%. However, these average statistics hide the differences between individual constituencies, or **differential turnout**, which might vary enormously. For example, in the 2010 general election turnout in Manchester Central was just 44%, whereas in nearby Cheadle it was 73%. Across the West Midlands in 2010 the lowest turnout was in the Ladywood constituency (in central Birmingham) at 48% and the highest turnout was 72% in Solihull. **In 2015** the constituency with the lowest turnout again was **Manchester Central (47%)** and the constituency with the highest turnout was **Dunbarton East (82%)**. It is notable that generally poorer, working class constituencies have lower turnout, whereas more affluent, middle class constituencies have higher turnout.

**Differential turnout**: the difference between the average turnout in an election (67% in 2015) and the variable turnout in different constituencies. Average turnout masks differential turnout.

 This is a useful definition

5. FASCINATING STUFF

**Can the weather influence general elections?**

In the period of alignment it was more likely that Labour would gain more votes on a sunny day and the Conservatives would gain more votes on a rainy day. This was because Labour voters were generally poorer, reliant on public transport, more apathetic and less likely to walk to a polling station in the rain.

[https://owa.solihullsfc.ac.uk/owa/14.3.181.6/themes/resources/clear1x1.gif](https://owa.solihullsfc.ac.uk/owa/attachment.ashx?attach=1&id=RgAAAABjtNPkp0NqTrArHkr6ebkgBwCqCFtWCj8XQ7i7bxOLOtz7AAAABLLYAAC1YaGh3H1GRobbOh2vAYCuAAAN/qBxAAAJ&attid0=BAAAAAAA&attcnt=1)