The 1964 General Election: Explaining Voting Behaviour Then and Now

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The 1964 General Election: Explaining Voting Behaviour Then and Now

David Denver

Current electoral analysis exemplified by authors such as Clarke et al. in Political Choice in Britain (2004) explains voting behaviour in terms rather different from those derived from the pioneering work of Butler and Stokes’ Political Change in Britain, first published in 1969. While acknowledging that short-term and ephemeral factors may have some impact on party choice—perceptions of the party leaders and party images helped Labour slightly in 1964—they lent particular emphasis to the long-term ramifications of social class. From the 1970s, however, electoral analysts began to play down the explanatory power of ‘social determinism’. More contentiously, Clarke et al. suggest that the significance of social class may also have been overstated by Butler and Stokes. Conversely, valence politics—ironically a term introduced by Butler and Stokes and relating to voter perceptions as to the relative competence of the parties on issues upon which there is widespread agreement—has not only become a more significant tool but may also have greater explanatory power than previously acknowledged when applied to elections at least as far back as that of 1964. In comparing constituency data for 1964 with those for 2001, this article thus finds certain broad similarities. Notwithstanding differences in aggregate turnout, in the main parties’ share of the vote and a sharp decline in party identification, the kinds of constituency that had relatively low turnouts in 2001 also had low turnouts in 1964; and the social factors associated with variations in party support in 2001 were associated in much the same way in 1964.

Keywords: Voting Behaviour; Elections; Valence Politics

There are two main traditions of electoral analysis. The first is pitched at the individual level and involves the use of survey data to explore and attempt to explain electors’
behaviour. The second uses aggregate data to advance our understanding of election outcomes focusing, in particular, on variations across electoral units. In Britain, the analysis of constituency variations in the level of support for the various parties and in turnout has a long history and has been a staple element of the Nuffield Studies of general elections since 1945.

The 1964 election was significant in a number of ways. It resulted in the return of the first Labour government for 13 years; television coverage was more advanced and reached more voters than ever before; and the parties’ use of the medium was more sophisticated than previously. It is perhaps less widely known that the election also marked a major breakthrough in the study of elections and in the understanding of why people voted as they did. This change mainly affected survey studies of voting behaviour but, shortly after the election, more sophisticated aggregate analysis also became possible. This article discusses each of these developments in turn; it also considers how the two types of electoral analysis in the early twenty-first century—individual and aggregate—compare with the analyses undertaken 40 years ago.

Butler and Stokes and the British Election Study

Before the 1964 election all academic surveys of voting behaviour in Britain had been local surveys—conducted in and describing behaviour in a single constituency or town. David Butler and Donald Stokes set up the British Election Study (BES) in preparation for the 1964 election and conducted the first national survey of voters in the early summer of 1963. They followed up with another survey at the time of the election and then a third in 1966. Their conclusions were contained in Political Change in Britain, first published in 1969. This book—and the second edition, published in 1974, incorporating material from the 1970 election—was a landmark in British election studies. It defined the research agenda for a generation and became the essential starting point for all subsequent survey-based electoral analysis in Britain.

Although they eschewed any precise formulation of their explanation of party choice in the 1960s, the approach adopted by Butler and Stokes came to be known as the ‘Butler-Stokes model’. Three concepts lay at the heart of the model—socialisation; class voting; and party identification (or ‘partisan self-image’ as they called it). The emphasis was on the importance of long-term factors in determining party choice. At the individual level, voters largely inherited from their parents (especially their fathers) both a class location and a tradition of party support. As the individual came of age, then they developed a party identification and an awareness of the links between classes and parties. When an election came along, this generalised support was translated almost automatically into a vote for the relevant party. Because it was a product of long-term factors, voters were generally stable in their party choice, rarely switching between parties in successive elections. At the level of the electorate, the ‘twin pillars’ of class voting and party identification sustained a stable two-party system in which electoral change was slow and minimal. Elections were decided
by a combination of a small number of ‘switchers’ whose motives were usually hard to fathom and who did not care very much about the election outcome, and by differential turnout on the part of party supporters.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, the emphasis of *Political Change in Britain* was on stability rather than change. Butler and Stokes did allow for short-term influences upon voting (including contemporary political issues, the press, the party leaders and the economy) but concluded that these had only a marginal impact. In identifying four conditions for ‘issue voting’ they made the apparently obvious suggestion that voters choose parties on the basis of their opinions about, and the parties’ stances on, political issues. The four conditions were: the issue voter must be aware of the issue; must have a position on it; must be able to differentiate between the parties’ positions on that issue; and vote for the party closest to their own position. In fact, voters fell in large numbers at each of these hurdles, and issue voting was very much the exception among the electorate. Similarly, Butler and Stokes investigated the impact of party leaders on voting choice and found that views about leaders were ‘but one among the factors that determine transient shifts of party strength; it is easily outweighed by other issues and events of concern to the public.’

**Butler and Stokes and the 1964 Election**

How, then, would the Butler-Stokes model explain the outcome of the 1964 election? Since they were interested in more general questions they did not attempt to do this specifically, but it is relatively easy to construct an answer to this question. First, it would be emphasised that most electors voted for the party that they had always supported. Between 1959 and 1964 only 3.9 per cent switched between the major parties while a further 6 per cent switched to or from the Liberals. The net effect of these movements was actually in favour of the Conservatives. Second, differential turnout also slightly favoured the Conservatives. While 5.2 per cent of the electorate switched from non-voting in 1959 to voting Labour in 1964 this was offset by 4.9 per cent who moved in the opposite direction. On the other hand, while 4.4 per cent switched from non-voting to the Conservatives, only 3.3 per cent went from supporting the Conservatives in 1959 to non-voting in 1964. Third, however, Labour gained a decisive advantage from the physical replacement of the electorate. More Conservative than Labour supporters died between the two elections (3.5 per cent of the electorate compared with 2.4 per cent) and more first-time voters went to Labour (3.1 per cent of the electorate) than to the Conservatives (2.5 per cent). This accords with the general thesis of glacial electoral change across generations propounded by Butler and Stokes. They argued that working-class Conservatism was something of a hangover from the distant past, relating to the relatively late arrival of Labour on the electoral stage. As the links with the past became more tenuous, Labour was receiving more and more support among its ‘natural’ constituency, the working class.

The Butler and Stokes analysis suggests that two short-term factors played a part in explaining Labour’s victory in 1964. The first was evaluations of the party leaders.
Harold Wilson attracted many more positive comments from survey respondents than did Sir Alec Douglas-Home. While far less important than attitudes to the parties, attitudes to leaders did have a measurable effect. Second, under Wilson Labour had managed to acquire a favourable image—specifically the party outscored the Conservatives in being seen as ‘modern’, ‘youthful’ and ‘exciting’. This did not last very long once the party was in government, of course, but in the heady days of 1964, Butler and Stokes conclude, these images ‘carried a genuine, if small, advantage for Labour’.6

Explaining Voting Behaviour in 2001: ‘Valence’ Politics

Almost as soon as the second edition of Political Change in Britain was published, the central thesis of the book began to be called into question by events. The 1970s proved to be electorally volatile rather than stable; support for third (and fourth) parties—hardly considered by Butler and Stokes—soared; and the hegemony of the Conservatives from 1979 to 1992 debunked the suggestion that Labour would continue to benefit as Conservative supporters died out at a more rapid rate. The two key developments undermining the model were declines in class voting and in the strength of party identification recorded in successive BES surveys. This class and partisan dealignment is illustrated in Table 1. Despite periods of relative stability (1979–92), the trend in class voting is clearly downwards. Perhaps more strikingly, the mean strength of party identification declined at every successive election. Thus, the ‘twin pillars’ of the Butler-Stokes model were clearly eroded with the passage of time.

By the 2001 general election, responsibility for the BES had passed to a team comprising Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whiteley

Table 1 Trends in Class Voting and Strength of Party Identification 1964–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Class Voting</th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974O</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The index of class voting shown here is the ‘consistency index’ presented by Clark et al. and defined as (% non-manual Conservative – % manual Conservative) + (% manual Labour – % non-manual Labour). Alternative measures show the same trend. Strength of party identification is scored from 0 for non-identifiers to 3 for very strong identifiers.

Source: Clarke et al., Political Choice in Britain, 43, 180.
(henceforth CSSW), based at the University of Essex. Interestingly, like Butler and Stokes, this team has an Anglo-American flavour, Clarke and Stewart being based at the University of Texas, Sanders and Whiteley at the University of Essex. No doubt deliberately the title of their resulting book, *Political Choice in Britain*, has strong echoes of the pioneering study.7

The analyses offered and the explanations of voting behaviour put forward are very different from anything of which Butler and Stokes could have dreamt. In the first place, *Political Choice in Britain* is not a book for the statistically faint-hearted. Whereas *Political Change in Britain* never gets much beyond simple cross-tabulations and reports no tests of statistical significance, CSSW provide an astonishing display of statistical pyrotechnics. Throughout, models and hypotheses are rigorously specified and then tested using advanced statistical techniques of which binary logistic regression is perhaps the most familiar. This is fine for professional political scientists (or at least some of them) but there is no doubt that *Political Choice in Britain* is much less accessible to non-professionals than was its illustrious predecessor.

Secondly, CSSW devote considerable space to the analysis of turnout. This would hardly have occurred to Butler and Stokes. But recent declines in turnout have made this topic a significant one for analysts, and CSSW provide an exhaustive (if not greatly illuminating) account of turnout in 2001, as well as a lucid and convincing explanation of trends in turnout over the post-war period. The pattern is largely explained by the expected closeness of the election in question and the ideological distance between the parties but, in addition and in more recent years, the ‘post-Thatcher’ generation have a weaker sense of civic duty than their elders.

It is on CSSW’s explanation of party choice that interest centres here, however. First, they are dismissive of explanations that regard party choice as a product of social location, including class. They say that a social class model gives a very poor explanation for party choice in 2001 and that including other social characteristics makes little improvement. As far as ‘social determinism’ is concerned, ‘those wishing to understand electoral choice in present-day Britain must look elsewhere’.8 More controversially, it is suggested that social class was never a particularly strong influence on party choice and that, even in the 1960s, it was certainly not as centrally important as had been claimed by Butler and Stokes. Second, CSSW test the classic ‘issue voting’ model derived from Downs.9 While they ascribe greater value than did Butler and Stokes to this line of explanation it, too, has declined in explanatory power in recent elections. Indeed, in 2001 voters’ perceptions of their own and the parties’ issue positions was less effective in explaining party choice than a simple social class model.10

The ‘big idea’ put forward in *Political Choice in Britain* is that party choice is to be explained in terms of ‘valence politics’.11 Yet it was Butler and Stokes who first introduced the concept of valence to distinguish between issues on which the public take different sides (‘position’ issues) from those—such as crime, corruption or peace and prosperity—on which (almost) everyone is agreed about the end to be pursued (‘valence issues’).12 What is important about valence issues is how voters judge the
relative competence of the parties to achieve the desired ends or evaluate the performance of the government in doing so.

The notion of valence has been part of the vocabulary of electoral studies ever since and was further elaborated in a later article by Donald Stokes. The idea that voting choices are now more affected by evaluations than used to be the case is also not new. Sarlvik and Crewe, who directed the BES in the 1970s, were already heading in that direction, arguing that electors’ evaluations of party performance had become much more important in explaining why people voted as they did. In *Political Choice in Britain*, however, CSSW define a fully-fledged valence politics model of party choice. They argue not only that it provides the best explanation of how electors decide to vote now but also, contrary to what most analysts have thought, that it has always done so—at any rate since 1964. They say: ‘In our view, the most important factor underlying electoral choice is valence—people’s judgements of the overall competence of the rival political parties. These judgements, in turn, are arrived at through two principal and related shortcuts: leadership evaluations and party identification.’ They further claim that: ‘The model has always been as, or more, compelling statistically as either models in the sociological framework of the issue proximity model’.

The reference to leadership evaluations is a significant and controversial one. Following Butler and Stokes, a lengthy tradition of electoral analysis in Britain has generally downplayed the influence of party leaders on voting choices. For example, a recent piece by John Bartle and Ivor Crewe concludes that ‘leaders have not had much of an impact on election outcomes net of prior variables.’ CSSW argue to the contrary. They first explain why, especially nowadays, leaders may be expected to be an important influence on voting—the increased ‘presidentialisation’ of the role of the prime minister; the media focus on leaders; the fact that election campaigns are leader-centred; and the relative ease with which voters can form opinions about leaders. Not many would dissent. Second, they show that there is a high level of consistency between how people evaluate leaders and how they vote. Again this is no great surprise and it is entirely consistent with the Butler-Stokes model. Finally, however, they argue that leadership evaluations remain highly significant even after other variables, including party identification, have been taken into account. This, they claim, holds true for the 1966, 1992, 1997 and 2001 elections and also (using monthly Gallup data) for the period from 1992 to 2001. This clearly revisionist view of the influence of party leaders on voting choice is set out with great rigour (and vigour).

The second ‘short-cut’ that voters use in evaluating the parties is party identification. Despite all the criticism that has been heaped on the concept and its measurement, and notwithstanding the clear decline in the strength of partisanship in Britain, party identification stubbornly remains a statistically important influence on party choice in elections. Initially at least, this fact would appear to be something of a problem for CSSW since, as traditionally conceived, party identification has little to do with judgements or evaluations, reflecting, rather, a sort of ‘tribal’ loyalty.

In order to encapsulate party identification within their valence framework, CSSW reconceptualise the notion. Following Fiorina, they suggest that identification
is ‘a storehouse of accumulated party and party leader performance evaluations’.19
‘Valenced partisanship’ is continually updated as voters acquire new information, react
to events and continuously make judgements about the competence of parties,
governments and leaders. This interpretation is underpinned by the facts that there has
always been considerable individual instability in party identification and that changes
at both individual and aggregate levels can be explained by changes in other relevant
evaluations.

Given this general background, CSSW’s explanation of voting in the 2001 election
and of its outcome is not surprising. Party choice and Labour’s victory are to be
understood in terms of valence considerations—Labour triumphed because the party
was judged to be more competent than its rivals (especially on the economy), focused
on the right issues and had the most popular leader. Media commentators might have
ventured the same opinion without the need for election surveys and elaborate
statistical analyses, but CSSW provide an empirically based account that is all but
irrefutable.

No doubt part of the difference between the explanations of party choice is simply
due to the passage of time. Voters at the turn of the twenty-first century are simply
different from those studied by Butler and Stokes in the 1960s. Partly also, modern
statistical techniques are more powerful—and, with computers, relatively easy to
use—than were those available to Butler and Stokes. In particular, they facilitate
simultaneous analysis of a large number of independent variables, allowing researchers
to estimate in a much more precise and rigorous way the relative importance of
different variables in explaining voting behaviour. Perhaps the most striking aspect of
CSSW’s explanation of voting is that, although there is much theoretical and
conceptual underpinning and a plethora of advanced statistical techniques, it is more
in line with what non-academic people interested in elections tend to say about the
subject than with recent British Election Studies—perhaps even more so than Butler
and Stokes.

After the Labour landslide in the 1997 general election, Philip Gould, strategy and
polling adviser to Tony Blair and the Labour party, ridiculed (some) British
euphologists.20 Having noted the lessons that could be drawn from previous election
studies, he commented, with heavy irony: ‘Needless to say we based our strategy on
precisely the opposite precepts and just managed to scrape home.’21 The work of
CSSW should put an end to remarks of this kind. Although few may fully understand
the statistics and some may find the terminology unusual, the fact that party choice is
now best explained in valence terms will ring true with media commentators and with
those who are professionally involved in politics.

Aggregate Data Analysis

The second tradition of electoral analysis has a much longer pedigree than the use of
surveys and focuses on election results themselves. From 1945 onwards, the series of
Nuffield studies of British elections always included an analysis of the results with
special attention being paid to ‘swing’, a concept and measure developed by David Butler. The analysis of results in the 1964 election was written by Michael Steed and is mainly concerned with patterns in swing. There is a discussion of regional variations with accompanying tables showing the distribution of swing in relation to Liberal candidatures, change in the Liberal vote, change in turnout, local special factors and in rural seats. Steed also provides brief discussions of turnout, the Liberal vote, minor parties and the operation of the electoral system.

Given these interests, it is no surprise to note that Steed makes no real attempt to explain the election outcome, apart from a passing comment that Labour’s victory was not due to the relatively large number of Liberal interventions (164) or to the improved Liberal performance. Elsewhere in the book, however, Butler and King acknowledge that, in the absence of survey data, ‘attempts to explain the outcome must be based to a large extent on guesswork’. They say that the election results suggest that:

many voters were torn between their desire, on the one hand to bring to an end a period of Conservative government which had brought with it economic recession, scandal and a decline in Britain’s standing in the world and, on the other hand, their doubts about the Labour party’s past disunity, its financial competence, and its administrative capacity.

This conclusion conforms more closely to well-informed political commentary than to political science.

In the Nuffield study of the 2001 election, Michael Steed remains an author of the analysis of results section but now in conjunction with John Curtice. Perhaps the most striking difference between their report and the 1964 analysis is that swing has been more or less abandoned. The concept was designed for a two-party system but, by 2001, the party system in Britain was rather more complicated; thus Curtice and Steed analyse separately the changes in vote share obtained by each of the major parties. Secondly, the authors use census data to categorise constituencies into different types—an option that was not available in 1964. Thirdly, they dip their toes into slightly more advanced statistics, reporting a few correlation coefficients. Nonetheless, as in 1964, the bulk of the analysis consists of simply comparing arithmetic means; no serious attempt is made to introduce multivariate analysis.

Not unexpectedly, Curtice and Steed devote some attention to explaining the sharp fall in turnout in 2001. In this regard they present evidence to show that the election results were consistent with three popular explanations—a long-term decline in party identification; disillusion among core Labour voters due to the party’s move to the centre; and a combination of the facts that the outcome of the election was widely thought to be a foregone conclusion and that the parties were not perceived to be very different. Curtice and Steed also suggest that variations in party performance across constituencies were consistent with what would be expected if voters were responding to the distinctive appeals made by the parties. The ‘rebranding’ of Labour, for example, yielded electoral benefits but also incurred costs—most notably a marked decline...
in support in the party’s safest seats. As with the 1964 analysis, however, this section of the Nuffield study is not the place to look for an explanation of the overall election outcome. The closest the authors come to presenting such an analysis is in the chapter entitled ‘The Campaign Reassessed’ which is largely based on polling data. Labour, it is suggested, entered the campaign with a number of advantages—majority press support; large leads in the polls on having the best leader; on economic competence; and on the issues that mattered to voters. These advantages the party simply maintained until polling day. The Conservatives, meanwhile, were saddled with an unpopular leader and talked about the ‘wrong’ issues—most notably the euro. This, of course, is reminiscent of the explanation offered by CSSW without the statistical apparatus.

As mentioned above, census data for constituencies were not available in 1964. The results of the sample census of 1966 were the first to be published at constituency level, and the first sustained analysis linking census and electoral data was published by Ivor Crewe and Clive Payne in the Nuffield study of the 1970 general election. Such analyses are now a routine element of electoral research. Due to the rapid development of computers and appropriate statistical packages they are very much easier to carry out than they were even in the 1970s.

It is relatively easy, therefore, to provide a brief comparative analysis of constituency variations in turnout and party support across Great Britain in the 1964 and 2001 elections. The 2001 census is used for the election of that year. And, on the assumption that the social composition of constituencies changes only slowly in the short term, the 1966 census results can be used to analyse the 1964 election. Table 2 thus shows correlation coefficients measuring the association between constituency turnout and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1964</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Professional/Managerial</td>
<td>0.279</td>
<td>0.322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Manual workers</td>
<td>−0.158</td>
<td>−0.145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Owner occupiers</td>
<td>0.565</td>
<td>0.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Council tenants</td>
<td>−0.016*</td>
<td>−0.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Private renters</td>
<td>−0.685</td>
<td>−0.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% No car</td>
<td>−0.569</td>
<td>−0.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Agriculture</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>0.502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electors/persons per hectare</td>
<td>−0.731</td>
<td>−0.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Retired/pensionable age</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ethnic minority</td>
<td>−0.589</td>
<td>−0.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous marginality</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(618)</td>
<td>(641)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All coefficients are statistically significant except that marked *.
a variety of socio-economic variables that are broadly comparable in the two censuses concerned, plus previous marginality, in 1964 and 2001.

In the first place, it is striking that, despite a gap of almost 40 years between the two elections, the patterns of turnout were broadly similar in both. All of the associations are in the same direction—constituency characteristics that correlated positively with turnout in 1964 did so in 2001; those that had a negative correlation in 2001 were also negative in 1964. Over 40 years, therefore, the pattern of variation was relatively unchanged. Secondly, some of the coefficients are clearly greater in 2001. Perhaps most obviously this is true of the relationship between marginality and turnout, suggesting that the parties have become more sophisticated in targeting their campaign resources into more marginal seats and that the effect is to increase turnout. In addition, however, the coefficients for the percentages of professional and managerial, of owner occupiers, of council tenants, of people with no car, of those employed in agriculture and of older voters are also clearly stronger. The figures indicate therefore that there was a clearer and more consistent difference in turnout between different types of constituencies as measured by these variables in 2001 than there was in 1964. Only the coefficients for the percentage of private renters show a significant decline between the two elections. It would appear, then, that, as compared with 1964, the country was more clearly divided into high and low turnout constituencies in 2001 and that the two were very different in social terms.

Table 3 presents a similar analysis of the shares of votes obtained by the major parties in the two elections. As with turnout, one cannot but be struck by the impressive continuity in patterns of party support. Almost all of the relationships with social characteristics were in the same direction in the two elections and, in both, the pattern for the Liberals/Liberal Democrats is a sort of paler reflection of that for Conservative support, though it must be remembered that the Liberals contested only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Lib/Lib Dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Prof/Managerial</td>
<td>0.662</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>0.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Manual workers</td>
<td>-0.640</td>
<td>-0.305</td>
<td>-0.054*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Owner occupiers</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>0.504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Council tenants</td>
<td>-0.381</td>
<td>-0.712</td>
<td>0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Private renters</td>
<td>-0.050*</td>
<td>-0.002*</td>
<td>-0.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% No car</td>
<td>-0.445</td>
<td>-0.730</td>
<td>0.648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Agriculture</td>
<td>0.158</td>
<td>0.311</td>
<td>0.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electors/persons per hectare</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>-0.318</td>
<td>-0.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Retired/pensioners</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.320</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ethnic minority</td>
<td>0.058*</td>
<td>-0.204</td>
<td>0.029*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N) (618) (640) (618) (641) (363) (639)

Note: All coefficients are statistically significant except those marked with an asterisk.
just over half of the seats in 1964. There is, as may be expected, less polarisation between the major parties in 2001 in terms of the class composition of constituencies; but in terms of housing, car ownership, the percentage of older voters and the urban–rural dimension, party support correlated more strongly in 2001 than in 1964. In the 1964 election, however, the proportion of the population belonging to ethnic minorities was not significantly related to the level of support for the Conservatives and Labour; by 2001, when ethnic minority voters constituted a much larger segment of the electorate, the situation had changed—the larger the ethnic minority presence in a constituency, the smaller the share of the vote obtained by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and the larger the share obtained by Labour.

Finally, Table 4 shows the proportion of the variation in each party’s vote across constituencies, explained by these ten socio-economic variables. Conservative support is now clearly more predictable on this basis than used to be the case. This probably reflects the fact that the poor performance by the party in the last election meant that its relatively good performances were confined to the heartlands—broadly rural and more affluent areas. Labour support remains the most predictable but is slightly less determined by the social character of constituencies than it was in the 1960s. Although the party won both elections, the result in 2001 was a landslide, with Labour getting substantial support in areas where it is not traditionally very strong but also experiencing something of a decline in ‘core’ areas. In both elections the Liberal/Liberal Democrat vote was the least predictable on the basis of constituency characteristics. The overall performance of the third party was much stronger in 2001 than in 1964, but the relative performance in different constituencies was even more unpredictable than it had been in 1964.

Conclusions

We are left, then, with something of a paradox. There is no doubt that the election results in 1964 and 2001 were very different. In the 1964 election, turnout was 77.2 per cent and the two major parties obtained 87.7 per cent of the votes; in 2001, turnout was 59.1 per cent and the two parties had 74.7 per cent of the votes. There is also little doubt that in explaining party choice at the individual level, there has been a sharp decline in the strength of party identification, in class voting and in the impact of social location more generally. Nonetheless, constituency results show substantial
stability. The kinds of constituencies that had relatively low turnout in 1964 also had relatively low turnout in 2001. The social factors that were associated with variations in party support in 1964 were associated in broadly the same way in 2001. Reconciling these apparent disjunctions and difficulties in patterns of electoral behaviour remains a research task of some urgency for students of British elections.

Notes

[1] Various overlapping panels were also built into the three main election surveys.
[4] Ibid., 368.
[5] These data are taken from the ‘flow of the vote’—see Butler and Stokes, Political Change in Britain, 1969, 289.
[6] Ibid., 371
[8] Ibid., 123
[16] Ibid., 63.
[19] Clarke et al., Political Choice in Britain, 211.
[21] Ibid., 3.
[23] Ibid., 300.
[24] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 235–50.
[27] Ibid., 240–48.

References


