

The Influence of Social Factors on the Electoral Success of the Labour Party of the United Kingdom in the late XX century

The article is dedicated to analyzing the social factors, which influenced the electoral process and the election results of 1997 in the United Kingdom. The author highlighted the features of the socio-political system of the United Kingdom of the late twentieth century and determined the social changes, which affected the electoral behavior of voters on the eve of the 1997 elections.

Keywords: psephology, electoral behavior, party identification, class voting, frozen political system, the Labour Party, the party system of the United Kingdom.

Чорняк З.С. Вплив соціальних чинників на електоральний успіх Лейбористської партії Сполученого королівства наприкінці ХХ ст.

У статті проаналізовані соціальні чинники, що вплинули на характер виборчого процесу та результат виборів 1997 року у Сполученому королівстві. Окреслено особливості соціально-політичного устрою Сполученого королівства наприкінці ХХ ст.. Виокремлено соціальні зміни, що вплинули на електоральну поведінку виборців напередодні виборів 1997 року.

Ключові слова: псефологія, електоральна поведінка, партійна ідентифікація, класове голосування, заморожені політичні системи, Лейбористська партія, партійна система Сполученого королівства.

After World War II, the British political landscape was dominated by two political parties – the Conservative and Labour Party of the United Kingdom. At a more or less regular turnout of 70%, the total number of votes cast for the two parties was around 90%, which according to the United Kingdom electoral system meant about 98% of the seats in the parliament. Psephologists noted that the nature of party affiliation and identification did not change significantly until the 1970's. What varied was the number of voters present at the election. However, in the late 1970s, researchers noticed that the British electorate became less-predictable. Research pointed out that the Labour Party began attracting votes of an electorate, which was “unconventional” for it. These changes affected the electoral success of the Labour Party in the

late XX century. In this article we have tried to find out which factors influenced the change in voting behavior of the British voters.

In the second half of the XX century psephologists pointed out that the nature of electoral behavior of voters, depends largely on a wide range of factors - social class, age, gender, place of residence, religion, race and ethnicity, but stressed that social class had the greatest impact on electoral behavior. This led the Austrian scientist P. Pulzer to write in his book *Political Representation and Elections* (1967) that “class is the basis of British party policies: all else is embellishment and detail.” (Pulzer, 1967) Indeed, till the end of the 1970’s, the party system of the United Kingdom was a classic example of a S. Lipset’s and S. Rokkan’s (1967) *frozen party system*¹. The British society was ruled by deeply rooted socio-political divisions and political parties successfully used these divisions for their electoral purposes, which also helped maintain this steady polarization.

These patterns of political behavior, namely the relationship between social class and voting behavior were explained and expressed in the *identification model of voting behavior*, which arose from the studies conducted in the 1940’s and 1950’s at the University of Michigan, and was significantly developed by D. Butler and D. Stokes (1974).

The research and findings led the scientists to the following conclusions:

- About 90% of respondents identified themselves with a certain party and this picture has remained fairly stable during the elections, and sometimes throughout life. The growth of “bias” with age was also identified.
- There was a significant and stable correlation between the electoral behavior of the respondents with party identification.²
- The majority of respondents were willing to “self-identify” themselves with a particular class (working class, middle or upper class)³

When respondents were asked about their social status and class, this subjective data was compared with the objective data on their class, according to employment and income. By comparing the data side-by-side, the researchers did not find a perfect match. However a large percentage of data did indeed match, although there were some differences. After obtaining

¹ *Frozen party systems*, is a concept developed by S. Lipset and S. Rokkan, according to which the modern party systems do not undergo changes since their introduction in the 1920’s. After studying the party system of the 70s, these authors argue that it reflects the structure of sociopolitical divisions that existed half a century earlier.

² For example during the 1963 local elections 85% of the Conservative electorate, 95% of Labor voters and 88% of the Liberal electorate voted in accordance to their party identification.

³ Generally, the definition of social class and its determinants is a complex and broad issue. However, the researchers of the aforementioned period did not greatly resort to detail, typically characterizing classes according to employment areas (A, B, C1, C2, D, E). A - Higher professional, managerial and administrative; B - Intermediate professional, managerial and administrative; C1 - Supervisory, clerical and other non-manual; C - Skilled manual; D - Semi-skilled and unskilled manual; E - Residual including casual workers, dependents on the state).

empirical data, the researchers concluded that a strong correlation between class and voting behavior during the aforementioned period indeed existed.

Let's try to analyze how this behavior was explained, according to the identification model:

D. Butler and D. Stokes (1974) believed that the majority of voters of this time period had "very limited knowledge and understanding of key policy issues and the British economy" (Butler & Stokes, 1974) and that their understanding of party policy was based on a spectral division (right, left and centrist). The scientists noted that the voters conducted the analysis of various parties not based on their own values, but through a social filter. This led to the conclusion that "in the United Kingdom of the 70's, social groups were subjects who voted in the election and not individuals" (Butler & Stokes, 1974). For this reason, the "identification model" is often called the social voting model. Although, of course, D. Butler and D. Stokes did not exclude the impact of other more "informal" factors on the choices of, such as short-term issues and events, they viewed long-term social relationships as the main factor of influence.

The *party identification model* dominated in the scientific community, when it came to explaining voting behavior, for quite a long time. However, in the 1970's there started to develop a notion that despite the significant influence of social class on electoral behavior in the United Kingdom, (which exists even today), that electoral behavior cannot be viewed only through the prism of the party identification model. According to this new wave, the traditional social class range could not cover all modern variations and voter sub-groups anymore. The voter himself was also becoming more and more unpredictable. The scientists noticed a change in the way of how voters started to identify themselves. This led them to the idea that since 1970's, because of the growing heterogeneity in society, Britain entered the era of *class dealignment*⁴ and *partisan dealignment*⁵. According to this new wave of scientists, these phenomena occur when voters no longer massively support their "natural" class party. To support their claim they pointed at the significant social changes which happened in Britain, such as the increase of the "white collar" workers (that is, the middle class), and a decrease in employment in amongst the "blue collar" workers (that is, the working class). They also argued that absolute class voting⁶ and relative class voting⁷ started to significantly decline as well.

Class dealignment was first explored and measured, after researchers started observing a decline in absolute class voting. The first attempts to measure absolute class voting and relative

⁴ *Class dealignment* is a phenomenon, which occurs when voters no longer identify themselves with a certain class, for example, when the working class begins to identify themselves as middle class.

⁵ *Partisan dealignment* is a phenomenon, which occurs when voters do not vote according to their traditional class, that is, if, for example, when the working class massively votes for the Conservatives or Liberals.

⁶ *Absolute class voting* is the overall proportion of the electorate who vote for their "natural" class party.

⁷ *Relative class voting* is the relative strength of the parties in different classes.

class voting and other related phenomena, were measured by the so-called *Alford Index*⁸. In the late 80's, A. Heath, R. Curtice and J. Jowell in their study *How Britain Votes* (1985) highlighted the need for a more detailed formula for calculation, besides the Alford Index and proposed *The Odds Ratio*⁹. With this new formula the researchers could calculate the odds of people from "opposite" classes voting for the opponent-party.

Class dealignment was also studied I. Crewe (1984), who explained this issue, though the affiliation of voters with the "new" or the "old" working class. He divided the Labour electorate into two parts, according to a number of criteria and their inherent characteristics. Based on the 1980's elections, he made an assumption that it is more likely that voters living in the north and/or rented accommodation and/or were members of trade unions and/or working in the public sector (the old working class) would vote for Labour, and therefore less likely that voters who lived in the south, and/or owned property, and/or were not union members and worked in the private sector would have voted in support of the Labor Party. I. Crewe (1984) also proposed a similar model for the Conservative Party electorate, suggesting that voters who come from the middle class, with a secondary or incomplete higher education, employed in the public sector are more likely to support Labour in the elections. Based on these assumptions, the scientist later suggested that these voters (middle class) were the ones who most likely supported New Labour in 1997.

Class deviations were also explained by means of a *radical model of electoral behavior* by P. Dunleavy and C. Husbands (1985). This theory combines the traditional model of party identification with *issue voting*¹⁰. These researchers believe that "the main determinant influence on electoral behavior and the formation of class deviation is employment in various sectors" (Dunleavy & Husbands, 1985). They believe that regardless of affiliation and education, voters, who work in the public sector, will recognize the Labour Party as a the defender of their rights and needs. Accordingly, those working in the private sector - give priority to the Conservatives.

It is important to try to analyze the causes and effects of *class dealignment* and *partisan dealignment*. We tried to examine and illustrate in our study the different approaches and theories aimed at analyzing the above phenomena:

Class dealignment among the working class can be explained through a number of potential causes and factors, like: social changes in the structure of the class, especially the working class, the erasing of boundaries between the public and private sector, access to other areas of work, which made it possible to advance up the pyramid of class and so on. The influence of

⁸ *The absolute class voting index* is calculated by subtracting the percentage of middle class voters, who vote for Conservatives, from percentage of the working class, who vote Labour.

⁹ *The Odds Ratio* is calculated by taking the odds of a middle class person voting for the Labour Party, divided by the odds of a working class person voting for the Labour Party. The Conservative index is calculated the same way, but with "mirrored" variables.

¹⁰ *Issue voting* – is a type of voting behavior, when voters vote for a particular issue of policy, regardless of the party which presents it.

the above mentioned factors started to become more and more prominent in the late 50's and 60's. During the elections of 1951, 1955 and 1959, many working class voters did not consider themselves as working class anymore, so consequently did not support the Labor Party, which at that time looked like a traditional proletarian party. However, the Labour failures of the 60's were not simply influenced by class dealignment. A great role was played by the changes in *party loyalty* of Labour and Conservative voters. According to the polls, conducted by J. Goldthorpe and D. Lockwood (1969), who also paid special attention to the class dealignment issue, 80% of their respondents from different classes, actually voted in accordance with his class. However the Labour electorate was more tenuous and started to become less loyal to their party. In other words, specific political events or changes in party policy, made the Labour voters rapidly change their loyalty. Later on, these types of voters became known as *deviant* voters.

The 1979 elections marked a significant decrease in Labour support, when only 41% of the C2 voters and 49% of the DE voters (the largest groups of Labour support) voted for the Labor Party. In 1983, Labour lost voters again, but this time their electorate "ran away" to the Liberals. According to above mentioned data, we can speculate that J. Goldthorpe and D. Lockwood (1969) were right about the increase of deviant voters among the Labour electorate. This can be explained by the fact that M. Thatcher, despite the relatively strong meritocratic position, was able to raise the standard of living of many workers. This "traditionally" Labour electorate, benefited from M. Thatcher's politics and continued voting for the Conservatives, confirming that amongst the ranks of Labour voters there exists a significant proportion of deviant voters and voters with a shaky party loyalty. These voters preferred the Conservatives over Labour in the 1980's, because the Conservatives proposed a more attractive policy. On the other hand, there exist other groups of scientists who do not fully support J. Goldthorpe's and D. Lockwood's (1969) statement about the "embourgeoisment" of the working class in the 80' and 90's, because objective research also pointed to a rise in social inequality at this time.

In order to explain the partisan dealignment phenomenon, it would be appropriate to distinguish two groups of factors, which influenced the decline of party identification: long-term sociological factors and short-term political factors. We considered several most important ones, which in our view, would help better characterize this approach.

Social factors:

- Rising incomes of the working class;
- The decline of traditional proletarian communities;
- The development of the "new working class" and the growing importance of sectoral divisions among the working class;
- The deformation of traditional process of political socialization;

- Access to alternative sources of information and alternative views, which occurred because of a more active intersection of social groups, inter-class marriages and dating, etc., which significantly reduced the traditional party loyalty.

Political factors:

- Since 50-60's the role of media began to grow, giving individuals access to alternative sources of information. Viewing various analytical broadcasts shook the foundation of the party identification of voters, hence weakening the traditional party loyalties.
- At the end of 1960's and 1970's, voters in the United Kingdom started judging the parties based on their ability to reform the economy and ensure a sustainable and positive economic growth. In other words, party identification during the corresponding periods of history was influenced by so-called *valence issues*.
- The changes in party leadership, the changes in party ideology and policy and the way how parties handled the economy after each election played a great role in determining electoral behavior.

Besides the above mentioned factors, it is also worth noting that there were many other factors, which added to the changes in voting behavior. Voting behavior is a very complex issue, and cannot be simply explained by a few factors, so it is very important to consider other possible influences, like changes in *priority values* of voters for example. With the gradual growth of income in the country, voters began to pay more attention to *post-material values* such as ecology, quality of life, civil rights, nuclear disarmament etc. Many voters did not view any of the dominant parties as competent subjects, regarding the above mentioned issues, which led to the weakening of party identification, promoting instead a greater involvement in pressure groups.

The end of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom was a time of great social change. Since the 1970s, due to changes in the structure of employment, access to education and the improvement of quality of life, the share of the working-class amongst the British population dropped from 50% to 33%. The share of middle-class, on the other hand, greatly increased. The increase in education and the development of mass media formed a new social group of people, who started to analyze the parties and their policies. This group of people started voting for specific policies and issues, instead of voting for "a party". A growing share of these so-called "deviant" voters was effectively used by the Labour party in the end of the XX century. Labour aimed their new policies at these people, in order to attract them and to gain their votes. This was achieved by creating a universal centrist election program, which managed to cover the entire social spectrum of voters and engage the support of deviant voters.

To summarize, the following should be noted: the period of 1945-1970 in the United Kingdom can be described as a period of *electoral stability* and *strong party identification*, in terms of electoral behavior. This period can also be described as a period of *class voting*. Since the 1970's, Britain entered a new era, known as the period of *class dealignment*, which features

an increase in the share of voters who do not vote according to their “natural” social class. Since the late 1970s a relatively large minority of voters, began voting unexpectedly and unpredictably (so-called *deviant voters*). This attracted the attention of researchers towards more “informal” factors of influence on electoral behavior.

The relatively stable period of 1945-1970 was replaced by a period of *increasing electoral volatility*, which, in our opinion, continues to this day. The growth electoral volatility triggered a *decrease in party identification* and the shift of voters focus towards post-material values. In the late twentieth century the Labour Party successfully analyzed the social changes, which occurred in Britain and moved towards centrist policies. This way they managed to attract an electorate, from social strata which were was not typical for her. This move was risky, but electorally justified - the Labour Party won the elections of 1997 and lasted in power for three consecutive terms.

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