



Age, sex, qualifications and voting at recent English general elections: an alternative exploratory approach

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ABSTRACT

There has been a substantial switch in approaches to the study of British voting behaviour in recent decades, with much less attention being paid to individual voters' social positions. This paper argues that such approaches can mis-represent the contexts within which voters are socialised and mobilised and are also technically problematic because social positions and attitudes may well be collinear – in which case ‘true’ relationships are difficult to uncover. Further, regression models that include variables representing social positions almost invariably look at the main effects only and pay no attention to the interactions among those variables. Using a newly-developed multilevel modelling approach to the analysis of multi-way contingency tables, this paper explores the relationships between respondents' age, sex and qualifications and their voting at three recent general elections in England, using a large data set. It indicates that, contrary to recent work, respondents' social positions are linked – through their attitudes – to their partisan choices, and that exploration of the interactions among those variables identifies important differences in how they voted.

1. Introduction

There has been a substantial switch in approaches to the study of British voting behaviour over recent decades. The stress in early work was on social class, hence Pulzer's (1967) statement that ‘Class is the basis of British politics: all else is embellishment and detail’. Butler and Stokes' (1969, 1974) classic work was firmly set in that mould, while paying considerable attention to aspects of the ‘embellishment and detail’. By the 1980s, however, the emphasis on class was challenged by work on dealignment, which observed increased variation in the degree to which a class's members remained committed to ‘their’ party (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983; Evans and de Graaf, 2013). Nevertheless, the social class model (suitably modified to reflect changes in the country's class structure) continued to inform major studies of voting at British elections, notably the series of books produced by the team that conducted the British Election Studies between 1983 and 1992 (Heath et al., 1985, 2001: see also the critique in Crewe, 1986; Heath et al.'s, 1987, response; and Franklin, 1985; Evans, 2000). Increasingly, however, the focus shifted away from an attention on class and towards behavioural models that focused on voters' attitudes.

One such approach, drawing its inspiration from Downs (1957; Grofman, 2004), looked to issues (such as the desirability of state involvement in the economy) on which voters and parties took distinctive ideological positions; voters support the party closest to them in

ideological space. An alternative approach – advanced in Stokes's critique of Downsian models – became known as valence voting (Stokes, 1963: for their British application see Clarke et al., 2004, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2013); voters determine which party to support not on ideological grounds but rather on their perceptions of which party can best govern the country, based on both its record and its policy proposals. Thus, for example, all parties may have manifesto commitments to promote economic growth and keep unemployment, inflation and interest rates low; voters decide which is most likely to deliver on those promises – although in many cases using short-cut heuristics, such as the perceived quality of the party leaders, when making their decisions.

The valence model has not gone unchallenged, however. Evans and Chzhen (2016a), for example, focus on an endogeneity issue: those who think a government has performed well in office are more likely to be those who voted for it at the preceding election than those who did not. Whiteley et al. (2016, 236) responded that ‘The variables in the valence politics model ... do not explain everything about electoral choice, but they provide powerful theoretical and empirical insights into what is going on in the minds of the voters. Supplemented by selected variables from [Downsian] spatial theory, the result is a parsimonious composite model that goes a long way toward providing a satisfactory explanation of voting in Britain and elsewhere’ – a conclusion with which Evans and Chzhen (2016b, 246) continued to disagree, claiming that ‘party preference dictates party performance evaluation, not vice versa’ (their emphasis).

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In response to Evans and Chzhen, Whiteley et al. (2016, 236) claimed there is ‘no need to rummage around one more time in the dark recesses of the famed “funnel of causality” model of voting behaviour to seek explanations of British voting behaviour’. That model, initially developed by the ‘Michigan School’ of voting behaviour (Campbell et al., 1960; Bartels, 2016; provides an overview), presents the influences on voters' decisions as located within a funnel.¹ At its exit point is the vote decision. Furthest from it – at the funnel's mouth – are relatively fixed variables, such as a voter's age, sex, and social status. Moving into the funnel, those characteristics are causally linked to slightly more transient variables – such as the groups with which the individuals identify and their value orientations. These in turn are linked to their attitudes to the political parties and whether individuals identify with them; and then – approaching the funnel's point – they are linked to their evaluations of candidates and parties and their policies, which are also influenced by perceptions of the external environment (economic conditions, for example).

An approach to uncovering those various stages in the funnel of causation model – in particular, the links between voting behaviour and socio-demographic characteristics at the funnel's mouth, which are the possible precursors of valence – is illustrated here with reference to recent British work, developing both substantive and technical arguments. Substantively, along with Evans and Tilley (2017), we claim that elements of the sociological model have been unnecessarily underplayed in recent analyses. Technically, we argue that most analyses insufficiently explore the relationships between sociological factors and voting behaviour – specifically the interactions among those factors – and use a recently-developed method for exploratory data analysis to identify them.

This paper develops three main arguments, therefore. First, it contends that socio-demographic variables remain important influences on British voting behaviour, so it is insufficient for analyses to focus at the end of the causal pathway to partisan choice; those variables located at the funnel's mouth continue to influence voter choices through their relationship to individuals' general political attitudes (even ideology: Scarbrough, 1984) and their positions on contemporary political issues. Secondly, it suggests that standard modelling approaches – such as binomial and multinomial logistic regressions – are limited in their capacity to uncover all of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables in voting studies, especially those involving interactions among the socio-demographic influences on voter choice. Finally, recognising these first two points, it deploys an exploratory modelling procedure whose outputs have a very natural interpretation: it enables a clear identification of those socio-demographic groups who have a propensity both to hold particular attitudes on contemporary political issues and to vote in a particular way.

Most studies of voting patterns – not only in the UK – are basically exploratory in their approach. They select a number of variables – respondent characteristics derived from survey instruments, for example – believed to be related to voter choices, and assess whether that is the case using regression analyses. Although there are general expectations regarding the direction of the individual relationships, there are rarely specific hypotheses regarding their strength and intensity (both absolute and relative to other variables in the equation) – the theory on which the analyses are based does not specify the expected outcome in such detail. Hence the potential benefits of improved exploratory procedures, such as that advanced here.

2. Funnelling voting decisions: from age, sex and qualifications to party choice

Although the funnel of causation model implicitly underpins many discussions of British voting behaviour, it is rarely referred to explicitly and is often incorrectly implemented in analytical models and their empirical testing.

2.1. Fixtures at the mouth of the funnel

Three socio-demographic and -economic variables – or their equivalents – have been widely used in most studies of British voting: class, age, and sex. Traditionally, individuals' class status was identified according to their occupation (in the simplest formulation between those in white-collar and blue-collar jobs) although as that distinction became increasingly blurred and the balance between the public and private employment sectors changed alternative formulations were sought (Dunleavy, 1979). More recently, alongside – if not replacing – occupational status analysts have employed individuals' educational qualifications as an important indicator. In an economy increasingly dominated by the service sector, individuals' skills as reflected in their qualifications provide the entrée to the higher-paid, more prestigious jobs; lifestyle differences follow from these contrasts in income and status, and may be reflected in political attitudes and partisan preferences. (Empirically, since their qualifications can be directly obtained from most adult respondents to questionnaires, this is a preferred indicator of status to occupation – and also to incomes, given the British reluctance to provide information on them – as a large proportion of the adult population may not currently be in the workforce. Further, qualifications reflect a lifetime cumulative experience; with income and occupational status people may move either up or down the ladder at points in their careers. Finally, as the questions are relatively straightforward for respondents to answer and for researchers to code they are less likely to be affected by misclassification error and consequent attenuation of effects.)

Many empirical studies have identified variations in partisan preferences across different age groups (for example, Tilley, 2005; Tilley and Evans, 2014); in general, older people are more ‘conservative’ in their views than their younger counterparts, and this is reflected in the relative preferences for different political parties. The usual ‘explanation’ for such differences is that older people have a greater ‘stake in society’ through, for example, home-ownership and aspirations for their children, and are more likely to vote for a ‘conservative’ party that promotes those individual values – hence the British Conservative party's policies of promoting home ownership. Empirical studies have also identified differences between males and females in voting at British General Elections (Norris, 1996, 1999; Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Annesley and Gains, 2014).

There is considerable empirical evidence that different socio-demographic groups tend to favour one political party rather than others in the UK, therefore. The arguments regarding both class/partisan dealignment and the importance of valence issues have pushed these relationships into the background in many recent studies, however. In analyses of the 2010 British General Election, for example, Whiteley et al. (2013, 137) dismiss models of party choice using socio-demographic variables alone on the basis that they provide only a poor goodness-of-fit – although they successfully predicted 71.5 per cent of respondents' party choices in binomial logit models. Valence models, on the other hand, successfully predicted 87.7 per cent, and when the two models were combined (with others) that only increased to 88.8 per cent. They concluded that use of the socio-demographic variables (age, gender, ethnicity, social class) is ‘obsolescent’ – unnecessary to a parsimonious model that can successfully predict how most people vote, even though socio-demographic characteristics such as age, sex and qualifications may be important determinants of voters' attitudes. But without including such variables in choice models the understanding of

¹ See the large number of images of the funnel at https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=funnel+of+causality&biw=1333&bih=569&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEwj_x_r7cKAhWHXR0KHfkSBJoQsAQIHg – accessed 10 October 2017.

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