

UK Politics and Government – Voting and the Media

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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The main interest = the factors that are affecting the way that people vote

- Social and demographic factors = such as class, ethnicity, gender, age etc.
- Valence (image) issues and economic voting.
- Party leaders.
- The idea of voters' rationality (or irrationality) when casting their ballot.
- The campaign and party manifestos.
- Tactical voting.
- Turnout.
- The role of opinion polls.
- The media.

Sociological factors

Social class

Nowadays social class is primarily based on occupation (socioeconomic status = education, income, occupation), using 4 social grades: AB (higher, doctor, senior executive), C1 (teacher, office manager), C2 (plumber, hairdresser) and DE (labourer, call centre staff).

- Traditionally, AB group would vote Conservative while DE would vote for Labour.
- In the 1964 election, Labour won 64% of DE voters compared with 78% of AB voters for the Conservatives.
- Class dealignment, however, led to partisan dealignment.

Class dealignment = people are less likely to identify themselves with a particular class = decreasing the impact of class on voting behaviour.

Partisan dealignment = people are less likely to be consistently committed to a specific party, resulting in many more 'floating voters' and less tribal voters. The same regarding generational impact of parents on their children's voting behaviour.

- Class is a less powerful predictor of voting patterns nowadays, and more likely to act as a predictor of turnout.
- Gender is a significant predictor, but its influence is inconsistent.
- Age is becoming a relatively powerful explanatory factor.
- However, the influence of class may 'work' its way via other characteristics such as education, which used to be a potent component of socioeconomic status. Thus, it is still a significant predictor.

Age

- A more significant factor nowadays than it used to be.
- In 1983, 42% of 18-24-year-olds voted Conservative and 33% voted Labour.
- In 2017, 27% of 18-24-year-olds voted Conservative and 62% Labour.
- Conservative enjoys a substantial support from the over 60s: in 2019, 61% of the 65+ vote was for the Conservative.
- The 35-44 age group is more likely to support the Lib Dems.
- It is unclear if age will retain its influence on predicting voting behaviour in subsequent elections.

Region

- General increase in regional voting patterns.
- Labour has a strong support base in London and a plurality support in Wales and in the north of England.
- The Conservative party has strong a strong support base in the southeast of England, and relatively strong in the east of England as well.
- The SNP is dominant in Scotland.

Gender

- Seems to have little to no impact on predicting voting intentions.
- A relative clear gender divide seems to appear relevant within the young group (18-24) but still both men and women from this age group, vote more heavily for Labour compared with the Conservative.

Ethnicity

- A relatively strong predictor of voting patterns.
- Black and minority ethnic voters are more likely to vote for Labour.
- White voters are more likely to vote Conservative.

Non-sociological factors

Valence

- The general image of the party and its leader.
- Linked with levels of trust towards the party and its leader. Also with concepts such as alienation, apathy, etc.
- Referred to as '**government competency**' = a generalised feeling among voters that the party is either competent or far less competent. The degree of competence is heavily reliant on economic issues and foreign policy.
- Other affecting factors are the perception of party unity and the image of the leader including decisiveness.

Party leadership

- Unpopular leaders are more likely to drag the party down whereas popular and charismatic leaders often 'translate' their image into increase in voting support.
- Tony Blair versus Jeremy Corbyn.

Saliency

- ✚ *'Events, dear boy, events'*, Harold Macmillan.
- ✚ *'A week is a long time in politics'*, Harold Wilson.
- Identifying a salient issue at the heart of the political campaign.
- In 2019 = the issue of Brexit and whether voters preferred a second referendum.
- In 2010 = the issue of the deficit and public finance and whether there would be public sector cuts or tax rises to cut down the deficit.

Party manifestos and election campaign

Manifesto = a package of commitments spelled out by the party at the beginning of the campaign.

Mandate = the authority granted by the people at the elections, for the winning party, to go on and implement its manifesto. Links with legitimacy and political participation.

- Election campaigns typically last between 4 to 6 weeks, a time frame where it is argued that the manifesto has a strong influence on voting.
- The manifesto provides the platform for the mandate enjoyed by the winning party.
- During campaigns, parties will employ a variety of techniques to persuade voters to vote for a specific party, such as:
Party political broadcasts on TV, leaflets, advertising and social media, televised debates, meetings and rallies, calling and knocking on doors, daily press

briefings, constituency visits by key politicians, targeting key marginal seats, and negative campaigning against opponents.

Tactical voting

- When voters feel that their preference may be 'wasted' in their vote because their candidate has a narrow realistic chance of winning, they may resort to tactical voting by voting for their second choice.
- Thus, it is a vote against a candidate rather than for a candidate = for the party that may beat the candidate they most dislike.
- Supporters of the Green Party typically will tactically vote Labour to prevent Conservative candidates from winning.
- UKIP or Brexit party voters may vote Conservative to prevent Labour from winning.

Turnout and electoral outcomes

Turnout = the percentage of the electorate that casts a vote.

Disillusionment and apathy = characteristics that reduce the percentage of turnout, go hand in hand with lack of political efficacy, cynicism and mistrust.

- The percentage of turnout can affect the outcomes of the election because it is linked with different demographic factors that are acting as predictors of voting patterns.
- The young tend to be more disillusioned and apathetic towards politics and politicians.
- In 2015, a higher level of turnout seems to emerge from disillusioned Tories who 'came back home' after fearing that Labour and the SNP would form a 'coalition of chaos'.
- General elections turnout generally decreased.
- The lowest turnout was in 2001, 59.4%.
- Consequently, it is important to identify the factors that are affecting turnout itself:
 - Apathy, alienation, disillusion, abstention, mistrust, lack of efficacy.
 - Turnout dropped for younger voters, urban voters and working-class voters.
 - Turnout remains higher among older voters (the grey vote) and in rural and middle-class voters.
 - Turnout is lower in second-order elections such as local elections, by-elections and European elections.
 - Since 2001, turnout seems to be on the increase again.
 - Salient issues seem to be linked with increase in turnout.

Opinion polls

Conducted by research organisations using a sample of typical voters to establish voting intentions, assess leaders' image and popularity and the salience of specific issues.

The media appears to have increased influence alongside the decrease of influence of long-term factors and partisan dealignment.

Newspapers tend to back a specific party; however, there is a decline in readership alongside an increase in social media and TV. In social media, the main feature is active audience.

The relevant debates regarding polls

- Whether opinion polls during campaigns can affect how people actually vote; thus, not only intention.
- Whether the accuracy of the polls is reliable and can be trusted.
- Whether the polls can affect party policy.

The call for banning polls

- They may influence turnout if they demonstrate a clear outcome one way or another, so people refrain from voting thinking it doesn't make a difference.
- Can be inaccurate and therefore misleading the public; usually though having a 3%-4% margin of error.
- Some countries such as Canada and France ban the release of polls during campaign.

The call against banning the polls

- It erodes freedom of expression.
- The polls may still be available privately for various organisations.
- The polls reflect valuable indications on various attitudes, policy choices and other relevant parameters, thus a valuable barometer for public opinion. It is important as it needs to be reflected in manifestos and policy choices, representation.
- The internet would make it practically impossible to enforce the ban.

The role and impact of the media in elections

The press and the role of media bias

Most national newspapers in the UK support the Conservative Party and can have a **Conservative bias** = the Daily Mail, the Sun, the Daily Express, the Daily Telegraph and The Times. The Daily Mirror and the Guardian generally support the Labour Party.

The question is whether the newspapers can persuade voters to vote to a specific party, thereby affecting elections' outcomes.

TV and debates

Televisual image = refers to how the leader comes across to voters on television, how confident and decisive they are, and how they perform in comparison to other candidates during television debates.

The role of social media

Canvassing = a form of campaigning that involves direct contact with voters; includes political parties identifying supporters and targeting floating voters with one-to-one tactics of persuading them to vote for them.

It is difficult to assess the degree and nature of influence of various social media platforms because they are relatively new. However, the demographic of users of social media can provide insights into its likely influence: primarily age.