Introduction: Understanding Electoral Change

Pippa Norris and Geoffrey Evans

As Tony Blair passed cheering crowds to enter Downing Street on 2nd May 1997, accompanied by his wife and young children, many believed that Britain had experienced an election which inaugurated a new political era. Given the size of the Labour landslide in seats, and the sharp reversal in Conservative fortunes after eighteen years in power, the 1997 election produced a decisive break in the pattern of parliamentary politics which had dominated Britain under successive Conservative administrations since 1979. The central questions this book addresses is whether, in what respects, and by how much, the 1997 election differs from its predecessors. If we look critically at the evidence beyond the impression derived from the popular headlines, were there actually new patterns of party competition? New issue alignments? New social alignments? And, was the overall outcome the result of a 'critical' realignment representing a decisive watershed in the established pattern of party competition in Britain?

This issue is important, not just for explaining the outcome of this particular election, and the reasons for Labour's victory, but also for understanding the general dynamics of electoral change. The common view that May 1st was critical has been heavily coloured by Labour's return to power after so many years in the wilderness and by the massive landslide of seats. The popular assumption, reflecting democratic theory, is that such a decisive change must rest on the decision of the electorate to finally 'throw the rascals out' due to the government's record on sleaze, their management of the economy, and splits over Europe. Many also commonly believe that voters were responding positively to Labour's electoral strategy and ideological appeal. But so far few have looked beyond the outcome to examine the attitudes and values of the electorate and thereby test these assumptions on a systematic basis. To consider these issues this introduction lays out alternative interpretations of the outcome, describes the core conceptual framework, and outlines the plan of the book.

INTERPRETING THE 1997 ELECTION

The Critical Elections Thesis

As the scale of Labour's victory became apparent on election night, Anthony King captured the mood by describing the outcome as equivalent to an asteroid hitting the planet (Cathcart 1997). The headlines concurred, describing the results as a "Landslide" (the Daily Express and Daily
Telegraph), a "Massacre" (Daily Mail) or "Buried: The Worst Tory Defeat This Century" (Evening Standard). "Everything has changed" claimed the Independent. Commentators commonly argued that the 1997 election represents one of the great political landmarks of the century (Pimlott 1997). In the early hours of the morning after the election, in the heady atmosphere of the South Bank victory rally, Tony Blair made exuberant claims before party workers that a new (metaphorical) dawn had broken: "Today, on the eve of this new millennium, the British people have ushered in this new era of politics, and the great thing about it is that we have won support in this election from all walks of life, from all classes of people, from every single corner of our country. We are now today the People's Party." (Cathcart 1997).

From this perspective, therefore, the 1997 election represents a critical realignment in the established pattern of British party politics, as demonstrated by the succession of historic records toppled and overturned. The clearest evidence rests on Labour's landslide of seats (see Table 1). The Labour party, which had not won a general election since October 1974, was returned with almost two-thirds of the House of Commons, 419 MPs (including the Speaker), their highest number ever. The Blair government won a parliamentary majority of 179 seats, the largest for any administration since Baldwin's 1935 coalition and the biggest in Labour history. Labour gained 145 seats, its best sweep since 1945. In total 266 new MPs flooded into the corridors of Westminster including record numbers of women members. Labour not only strengthened its grip in Scotland and Wales, it also re-established itself across large stretches of Southern England.

After eighteen years in power, the Conservatives experienced an electoral rout. The Conservative party lost a quarter of its 1992 vote, a third of its Cabinet, and over half its seats (178). The Conservative share of the UK vote fell from 41.9% to 30.7%, their worst result since modern party politics began in 1832. As William Hague acknowledged, "The Conservative party was not merely defeated. It was humiliated" (Quoted in Cowley 1997: 37). Reduced to an English rural rump, the Conservatives were obliterated for the first time in Scotland, as well as winning no seats in Wales and most major cities outside of London including Sheffield, Bristol and Manchester. Reduced to 165 MPs, the Conservatives had their lowest tally since 1906 (see Figure 1). The overall Conservative-Labour swing of 10.3% across Britain was the largest since 1945. To regain a bare overall majority in the next election the Conservatives would need a swing more than twice the size of that achieved by Mrs. Thatcher in 1979. Labour were not the only ones to
benefit from the Conservative demise: the number of Liberal Democrats more than doubled to 46 MPs, representing their best parliamentary result since 1929 (for more details see Norris 1997c).

The Conservative party was not just defeated badly at the polls, it was left with a deeply damaged organizational machine. Eighteen months later the party was estimated to be saddled with debts to the tune of £11 million, forcing party managers to cut staff at Smith Square by a fifth and to close eight regional offices. One of the first priorities which William Hague implemented was a reorganisation of the party structure and an attempt to staunch the demoralised and shrinking membership, estimated to be reduced from 1,000,000 in 1987 down to 400,000 at the time of the 1997 election, before plummeting to 300,000 eighteen months later (see Chapter 3). Moreover the Conservative base in local government was also low; after the May 1996 local elections the party was left with only 4,400 councillors, well behind the Liberal Democrats (5,100) and Labour (11,000). In contrast, in May 1979, when Mrs Thatcher first won power, there were 12,143 Conservative local councillors up and down the land.

During the first years of the new Blair administration there is evidence that British party politics continued to realign on the centre-left, with closure of the gap between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Discussion of parliamentary co-operation, an informal pact, or even a Lib-Lab merger, was strengthened by appointment of five Liberal Democrats on the Cabinet sub-committee on the Constitution and by the selection of Lord Jenkins to chair the Electoral Reform Commission. Both parties worked closely together with the Joint Consultative Committee on much legislation especially a radical series of government initiatives on constitutional reform, one of the issues closest to the Liberal Democrat agenda. This included devolution for Scotland and Wales, the creation of a directly-elected mayor and Assembly for London, plans to reform the Lords and introduce a Freedom of Information Act, as well as a new constitutional settlement for Northern Ireland. The future party order will be shaped by electoral reform: the Additional Member system for the Scottish parliament and the Welsh Assembly, closed regional lists for the European elections, the Supplementary Vote for the Mayor and AMS for the Assembly in London, and, if implemented, by the introduction of the Alternative Vote for Westminster (http://www.officialdocuments.co.uk/document/cm40/4090/annex-a.htm).
Party conferences in 1998 debated how far these parties could, and should, work together. The Liberal Democrats expressed concern that, like a mouse in bed with an elephant, if they collaborated too closely with Blair the party could lose their identity and independence. Moves towards a referendum on electoral reform for Westminster, following the report of the Jenkins commission, raised similar fears about cross-party collaboration in the Labour party. But a joint statement by Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown in November 1998 reinforced party co-operation:

"We believe it is now appropriate to widen the work of the Joint Consultative Committee. This will be an important step in challenging the destructive tribalism that can afflict British politics even where parties find themselves in agreement. Of course we are two sovereign and independent parties working together where we agree and opposing each other where we do not. Our parties will continue to offer different choices to the British people in the ballot box whenever the appropriate opportunity arises. To do otherwise would weaken British politics and diminish the choices available to the voters.

We are confident this step forward can deepen co-operation and result in widening support for the kind of progressive change which we wish to see and to which we believe the British people are strongly committed.

Our aims are simply stated. To work together in building a modern Britain. To create a new, more constructive and rational culture for our national politics. To ensure the ascendancy of progressive politics in Britain, against a Conservative Party which seems determined to travel further and further to the Right. And to continue the reshaping of British politics for the next century." (Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown 11 November 1998)

The vision implied by the leaders seemed to be nothing less than a new party order at Westminster, persisting for more than one term of office, defined by legislative co-operation on the centre-left and the long-term marginalisation of the Conservatives on the right.

Other evidence comes from opinion polls during the early stages of the Labour government where the continued weakness of the Conservative party, and in contrast the lengthy Labour 'honeymoon', reinforces the popular notion of a decisive shift in party fortunes. Without any major upsets in the early stages, New Labour not only maintained but even increased their support. Polls for MORI reported that average approval for Tony Blair during his first year in office was 67 percent, well above the average rating during the same period
(54 percent) for occupants of No.10 since the war. In contrast, William Hague's ratings were among the lowest for any Tory party leader since opinion polls began, on a par with those for Michael Foot. From 1997–98 satisfaction with the government's performance also easily surpassed many of their predecessors at the equivalent stage of office (Atkinson and Mortimore 1998). On 1st May 1997 the Conservatives received 31.4 percent of the popular vote in Britain, their lowest level since 1832, but five months later Gallup polls reported that Tory support had dropped even further to 22 percent. By October 1998 Conservative popularity had edged up to 30 percent and they trailed far behind Labour. The length and size of the Blair honeymoon broke modern records. In contrast, a year after the 1945 Labour landslide the polls suggested that the Conservatives were almost neck-and-neck. After the Labour victory in 1966 the Tories were comfortably in the lead within a year. Similar patterns are evident in most election cycles. Of course polls can change rapidly. A sudden recession, or unexpected external events, can damage government popularity. But nevertheless faced with these figures, little wonder that many observers, even Mrs Thatcher, believed that there was no chance of Conservatives winning the next election, allowing Labour to consolidate its position in power for at least two terms. William Hague faces a mountain to climb before re-entering the portals of No. 10; he requires a swing of at least 8 percent to wipe out the Labour lead and a vast swing of 11.6 percent to achieve a bare parliamentary majority of one seat (Norris 1997:23).

Sceptical Challenges

Yet after the initial excitement about the new government faded a more sceptical and cautious view emerged to challenge the popular wisdom. A substantial victory for one party, even a landslide which lays the groundwork for more than one term in office, does not in itself constitute the basis for a new party order. There have been many previous false dawns when observers have proclaimed that an election represented a realigned party system, only to find the restoration of the status quo ante in subsequent contests. In the mid-1970s it became fashionable to claim that Britain was becoming a 'multi-party system' (Drucker 1989). The death of the Labour party was often forecast prematurely in previous studies asking *Can Labour Win?* (Harrop and Shaw 1989) or *Can the Tories Lose?* (Smyth 1991), or even whether Britain was 'Turning Japanese?' with the Conservatives permanently in power (Margetts and Smyth 1993). Journalists often make political headlines appear brighter, newer and more exciting than is actually the case. The Blair government hopes to
consolidate its grip on power over successive elections. But if we focus on the electorate rather than parliament, the results of the 1997 election are less dramatic. The more cautious interpretation suggests that 1997 showed considerable continuity with established patterns of party politics among voters. In this view, 1997 represented a secular evolution in party support, following an incremental series of steps in previous elections, but not a critical realignment.

As shown in Table 2, popular support for Labour and the Liberal Democrat was far from record-breaking. Granted, Labour increased their share of the UK vote by 8.9 percent while Conservative support fell by 11.2 percent. Nevertheless Labour's share of the UK vote (43.2%) was almost identical to when they lost in 1970 (43.1%), and far less than their peak in 1966 (48.0%) (see Figure 2). Overall, 13.5 million people voted Labour, fewer than voted Conservative in 1987 or 1992. Due to the more efficient distribution of their support, the Liberal Democrats gained seats despite their share of the vote subsiding from 17.9% to 16.8%, representing a steady erosion in their support for the third successive general election. Moreover during the campaign it was hard to discern signs of enthusiasm in the electorate: compared with 1992, 2.3 million fewer people cast ballot papers. Turnout fell to 71.5%, its lowest point since 1935. Many participants remarked that the campaign, as opposed to its aftermath, felt dull and predictable.

[Table 2 and Figure 2 about here]

The dramatic landslide of seats was largely the result of the strong bias against the Conservatives in the British electoral system in the last election. Even with an equal share of the 1997 vote, Labour would still have been 87 seats ahead of the Conservatives. Labour's 43.3% of the UK vote turned into 63.6% of parliamentary seats: a votes: seats ratio of 1.46. The size of the winner's bonus, and the penalty for the main party in second place, were larger than any since the war. This disproportionality was produced by several factors: the geographic distribution of party support; the winner's bonus awarded by the first-past-the-post system; the effects of tactical voting; and continuing disparities in the size of British constituency electorates (Norris 1997; Curtice and Steed 1997; Dunleavy and Margetts 1997).

The more sceptical view therefore emphasises considerable continuity in the electorate. For commentators such as Butler and Kavanagh, it is too early to say whether 1997 represents a realigning election in which Labour becomes the 'normal' party of government (Butler and Kavanagh 1997). The
Conservatives face a mountain to climb to return to government. Nevertheless, as with previous cycles of party popularity, we might expect the strong anti-Conservative sentiments to pass with time and for Labour's honeymoon to be eroded in the mid-term period (Rose 1997). In a dealigned electorate, sharp swings in support towards one party are possible but equally strong counter-surges in subsequent contests remain equally likely.

We therefore set out to examine the evidence for these alternative interpretations of the 1997 election and its consequences for the British party system. Other books have already described the campaigns in the 1997 election (Butler and Kavanagh 1997; Jones 1997; King 1997; Crewe, Gosschalk and Bartle 1998) and a companion study has analysed the role of the media in this process (Norris et al. 1999). Previous studies have analysed constituency results and the NOP/BBC exit poll (Norris and Gavin 1997; Curtice and Steed 1997). But in order to understand whether the 1997 election was as distinctive as many assume, representing a critical break with the past, we need to be able to compare voting behaviour in long-term historical perspective. This book draws on the rich legacy of more than three decades of data in the British election studies (BES), one of the longest time-series survey of voting behaviour in the world. This series of studies have been carried out after each general election since 1964 among a representative cross-sectional sample survey of the electorate in Great Britain (see the Appendix for technical details). This unique resource allows us to understand voting behaviour in Britain utilising the series of ten post-election cross-sectional surveys of the electorate from 1964-1997.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As a first step we need to clarify the core concepts and alternative interpretations of secular trends and critical elections which the book explores. We often refer fairly loosely to 'landslide' or 'watershed' election but here we need to nail down our common terms. The core focus is upon how far the 1997 election represents a critical discontinuity in the 'party order', understood to refer to the durable structure of party competition in government and the electorate. Party politics are in a state of constant flux, following the fortunes of the latest opinion poll or parliamentary division, but the party order represents the relatively enduring features of British politics which persist across successive elections. Party systems involve patterned, stable and predictable interactions in the competition for seats and votes.
The concept of critical elections has a long pedigree, particularly in American political science which has conventionally divided the party order into distinct eras. The theory of critical election originated with V.O. Key (1955) and the extensive literature generated by this work has considered the most appropriate conceptual framework, debated the historical periodization of party systems, and argued about alternative accounts of realignment, particularly in the United States (Campbell et al. 1966; Burnham 1970; Sundquist 1973; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1990). This book develops and expands the traditional framework to classify elections into the categories outlined schematically in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Analytical Typology of Elections**

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These categories differ in terms of the magnitude, durability and direction of change and its consequences for party government. Classifying recent elections, without the benefit of hindsight, is often highly problematic. As chapter 4 points out, in the early 1980s, with the country in deep recession and unemployment soaring, few would have predicted that Conservative government would continue uninterrupted for eighteen years. In the past there have been many false dawns of realignments as new parties like the SDP or Greens have temporarily surged at the polls only to fall back in subsequent contests. In the aftermath of the 1992 election many thought Conservatism was invincible (Margetts and Smyth 1993). As with any predictions, we can only provide cautious interpretations of the current political landscape which may, or may not, be borne out by subsequent events. Psephology is far more like a provisional medical diagnosis based on exploratory surgery than the laws of physics. We will only know the full extent of the change in electoral behaviour which occurred in 1997 after subsequent contests either consolidate...
or reverse the alterations. Nevertheless we can carefully assemble the available evidence to see whether 1997 seems to share some of the characteristics of critical elections in the past, in Britain and elsewhere. In the introduction we reserve an agnostic position, since each of these models provides plausible hypotheses which can be tested further in subsequent chapters. We give our overall interpretation and summarise the overall evidence in the book's conclusion.

**Maintaining Elections**

In the classification adopted by this book the essential difference is that maintaining elections reflect the status quo: there are no strong issues, events or major shifts in party policy to deflect voters from their habitual electoral preferences. Each party mobilises its 'normal base' of support. This concept requires splitting the actual vote cast for a party into two parts: a 'normal' or baseline vote to be expected from a group, based on their behaviour over successive elections in the past, and the current deviation from that norm, due to the immediate circumstances of the specific election. This relies upon the traditional 'Michigan' model, exemplified in Britain by Butler and Stokes (1974), whereby most voters are perceived to be psychologically glued for long periods of time, perhaps for their lifetime, to parties through stable party and social alignments. Maintaining elections are characterised by electoral flux, but not flow, as a few voters shift back and forth between parties leaving the balance of power largely unchanged. In maintaining elections the underlying party order persists largely unaltered so they rarely produce much parliamentary turnover, let alone changes of government. The psychological party bonds are reinforced and overlaid by institutional anchors, such as the electoral system. Many contests in earlier decades were commonly regarded as falling into this category, such as the 1955 and 1959 general elections, with class anchoring voters to parties via the process of socialization, although in an era of dealignment we would expect fewer elections to fit this type.

Clearly at parliamentary level, the sheer size of Labour's landslide, the extent of the Conservative defeat, and the rise to power of the new Blair government makes it implausible to claim that 1997 election represented a maintaining contest at Westminster. Nevertheless if the evidence points to considerable continuity in the underlying social and ideological basis of voting behaviour, for example in terms of voting patterns in Scotland, then the 1997 election may legitimately still be regarded as a maintaining election among the electorate in this region (see Chapter 12).
Dealigning Elections

In contrast, under conditions of dealignment the social psychological bonds linking parties and voters loosen. The party order may persist but it becomes destabilised, less predictable and more fluid. Two main sub-types of dealignment can be distinguished, based on the pace and durability of electoral change.

In **deviating elections** particular personalities, issues or events produce a temporary sharp reversal in the 'normal' share of the vote for major parties. Deviating contests are characterised by negative protests against the government, which cause dissatisfied voters to defect temporarily to minor parties, only to return home in subsequent contests. Second-order contests often fall into this category, such as local elections, by-elections and European elections. The model of change can be understood as one of 'impulse-decay' (Carmines and Stimson 1989), or 'trendless fluctuations', where a temporary shift in one election is not maintained in subsequent contests, leaving no permanent imprint on the party system.

During the early 1980s the strong surge of support for the Social Democratic-Liberal Alliance in by-elections, and their record levels of popularity in opinion polls, can be regarded as a short-term deviation in the usual pattern of centre party support (Crewe and King 1995; Norris 1990). The performance of the National Front in the early 1970s or the Green's record vote in the 1989 European elections, can similarly be seen as deviating elections, since in contrast to their European counterparts these parties failed to sustain this level of support over successive contests. Flash parties, which suddenly rocket upwards for one election but splutter and fold in subsequent contests, like support for Perot in 1992, have been evident since the mid-1970s in many countries (Ware 1996). The majoritarian electoral system at Westminster acts as a major barrier to such breakthroughs, with a relatively high electoral threshold for minor parties whose support is not spatially concentrated. For the new pattern of party politics to survive there has to be continuity in the issues that evoked the pattern, otherwise the change will prove highly transient. But if the primary factors leading to new parties persist, for example if rising concern about the environment fuels continuing support for the Greens among the younger generation, then the more likely it becomes that socialisation processes will reinforce the new pattern.

The 1997 election can be most plausibly regarded as a deviating election if the outcome is interpreted primarily as an expression of negative protest against the eighteen years of Conservative rule, prompted by the pervasive
problems of sexual and financial sleaze, internal leadership splits, and the sense of economic mismanagement which afflicted the Major administration after the 'Black Wednesday' ERM debacle. As one Conservative strategist, Daniel Finkelstein (1998), encapsulated the perceived reasons for Tory failure within Smith Square: "Rightly or wrongly, they (the public) saw us as arrogant, smug, sleazy, weak, incompetent and divided." In this sense, as a temporary protest vote, we might expect that dissatisfaction would weaken Conservative support without necessarily strengthening the positive attraction towards Labour on a long-term basis. Others like Tony King (1998:197) concluded that the Conservatives lost so heavily because of their economic mismanagement, broken promises and because voters no longer trusted them to maintain Britain's social fabric. King argued that disaffection with the government was probably more important than any overwhelming enthusiasm for the Labour party. If 1997 was 'time for a change' against the Conservative administration then eventually, given the regular swing of the pendulum, we might expect that subsequent elections will prove 'time for a change' against the Labour government. In the words of David Sanders (1997: 73):"The danger for new Labour is encapsulated in the phrase 'easy come, easy go'."

Secular Dealignment

While deviating elections represent a short-sharp, shock, a closely related type of contest involves secular dealignment, meaning a long-term, incremental and cumulative progressive weakening in party-voter bonds. We would expect more elections today to fall into this pattern if we accept that the process of class dealignment has gradually eroded the structural links anchoring voters to parties in successive elections since the early 1970s, as argued by Sarlvik and Crewe (1983), Franklin (1985) and Rose and McAllister (1990). Butler and Stokes (1974) suggest that in the early 1960s most voters were stable in their voting choices due to enduring party loyalties which framed attitudes towards party leaders, policy issues and party images. This stability was the product of a cohesive socialization process which reinforced party alignments within the family, work group and social milieu. Class provided the predominant anchoring mechanism in the electorate reflecting the main cleavage in British party politics, although other social divisions like religion, gender, housing tenure and center-periphery cleavages left a faint imprint on voting behaviour. Theories of dealignment suggest that from the late-1960s onwards the social psychological bonds of partisan and class identities gradually weakened so that short-term factors became more influential in voting choice.
If the 1997 election provides another step along the continuing path of partisan and social dealignment, then series of Labour gains over successive elections since 1983 can be understood as contingent phenomena. With a rootless electorate, large swings towards the Conservatives or Labour in any one election can be expected to be replaced, in due course, with equally large swings against them. At the individual level, if voters are politically semi-detached, we would expect to find evidence over successive elections leading up to 1997 of considerable electoral flux, progressive erosion of party loyalties and secular class dealignment. A dealigned electorate increases the importance of contingent factors during the long and short campaign, examined in a companion study (Norris et al. 1999), including evaluations of the governments record, the rival attractions of Blair, Major and Ashdown, news headlines about Conservative splits over Europe and sleaze, and campaign debates about issues like taxes and pensions. The defining feature of all dealigning elections is weakening social and psychological bonds between voters and parties, but with secular dealignment the erosion is steady and incremental over a series of contests, whereas with deviating elections the change is more sudden, dramatic and sharp.

**Secular Realignments**

Alternatively *secular realignments* are elections characterised by an evolutionary and cumulative strengthening in party support over a series of elections. For V.O. Key, the American party system maintained a stable equilibrium for long periods of time, over successive elections the pattern of voting by different regions, counties and social groups was largely predictable. But the party system could change due to *secular realignment* which produced a gradual shift in the electorate over successive elections, with the more or less continuous creation of new party-voter alignments and the decay of the old (Key 1959). This is a familiar model which gives primacy to broad socio-demographic developments, such as generational turnover in the electorate, migrational movements or socio-economic trends which gradually produce new generations exposed to different experiences to their parents. Much attention in voting studies has focused on understanding long-term secular trends in post-industrial societies, including the growth of new social cleavages and the process of generational value change which may glacially transform the electorate (Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 1985; Heath et al. 1991; Inglehart 1990, 1997). The secular realignment model produces an incremental, durable and persistent strengthening in the long-term contours of party support.
If 1997 falls into this category, then we would expect to find that Labour's victory rested on trends which gradually developed in an incremental process of recovery in successive elections since 1983. If the outcome can legitimately be regarded as the result of secular realignment then 1997 was 'one more heave' in Labour's efforts to develop a new coalitional base. Such an interpretation would rest on broadened Labour support among non-traditional constituencies for the party, such as among women or younger voters, due the process of value change in the British electorate. In this regard the outcome would reflect the positive appeal of new Labour's strategy and image, built up under successive leaders, rather than simply a negative rejection of the Major government or contingent support for Tony Blair's leadership.

**Critical Elections**

Lastly, critical elections are defined as those exceptional contests which produce abrupt, significant and durable realignments in the electorate with major consequences for the long-term party order. Critical elections have significant consequences, not just for a single administration, but also for the dominant policy agenda of successive governments. In this sense the pendulum of party competition ratchets decisively in a new direction. While every contest sees some electoral flux back and forth between parties, lasting transformations of the party order rarely occur. Critical elections are characterised by three interrelated features:

(i) realignments in the ideological basis of party competition.

(ii) realignments in the social basis of party support.

(iii) realignments in the partisan loyalties of voters.

Ideological realignment involves major changes in the programmatic basis of party competition, for example if new cross-cutting issues and events arise which deeply divide parties and the electorate, or if parties shift rapidly or 'leapfrog' over each other across the ideological spectrum, or if new parties become established in parliament. Social realignment concerns major shifts in the traditional coalitional basis of party support based on structural cleavages such as those of class, gender, race and region. If Labour's strategic appeals have broken party ties with the working class and trade unions, but also forged lasting and persistent links with new social groups, then this would count towards social realignment. Lastly, if these shifts consolidate, we would expect to see realignments in the partisan loyalties of voters. Significant change across not one but all three levels provides convincing evidence for a durable and deep-rooted alteration in the party
order which is likely to persist for more than one term of office.

V.O. Key identified critical elections as those "...in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed." (Key 1955:4). These exceptional contests represent sudden and large breaks in the established social and ideological basis of party competition, with enduring consequences for government and for the public policy agenda. Critical elections move the party system from equilibrium to a new level and then the new level stabilises and consolidates. The classic exemplar is the 1928–1932 New Deal coalition assembled by Roosevelt, returning Democrats in the White House for a quarter century and still evident in faded form today, forging a diverse alliance of conservative, southern Dixiecrats with northern blacks, rust-belt unionised blue-collar workers with mid-western small farmers, and urban Italian and Irish emigres with liberal Jews (Burnham 1970). The deep economic recession created new political divisions and cross-cutting issue cleavages which subsequently consolidated around fundamentally different visions of the role of government in society. Most elections display secular trends, these remain the norm, but in exceptional circumstances party systems occasionally and rarely experience more decisive and abrupt discontinuity.

Borrowing from the natural sciences, the model of change in critical elections is one of punctured equilibrium (Krasner 1993). The party order is maintained for successive elections, due to a process of dynamic equilibrium, before experiencing an external 'shock' which produces a critical break, then settling back into a new period of stasis. The pattern of change is less linear than stepped. Governing parties seek to maintain the status quo and institutional structures like electoral systems, which reinforce the existing party system, cannot easily be reformed.

Powerful illustrations of this model elsewhere includes regional polarisation among Canadian parties following the electoral annihilation of the Progressive Conservatives in 1993; the breakdown of the long-dominant Italian Christian Democrats in 1994 after the end of the Cold War; and the dramatic fragmentation of the two-party system in New Zealand following electoral reform. Other historical examples include the dominance of Gaullism in the Fifth French Republic after 1958, the revival of SDP fortunes in Germany after 1965, and the fragmentation of Danish parties in 1973. In Britain, the 1924 and 1945 contests are widely acknowledged to be watershed, where the party order changed, and changed decisively. These shifts in party fortunes may be the net result of an accumulation of incremental
steps, but at the same time certain contests can be regarded as decisive or 'critical' elections, which symbolise a definitive turning point in the established pattern of party politics. The period before, and after, these contests can be regarded, rightly, as distinct eras. The difference between critical and secular realignments relates to the magnitude of the initial step and to its causes. Catalysts for critical realignment include institutional, ideological and social change.

**Institutional** accounts, which were somewhat neglected in the early American literature, emphasise the importance of the electoral context for maintaining party systems. Changes to the established rules of the game, such as moving from a majoritarian to a mixed member electoral system, alter the choices confronting citizens and parties. The mobilization of new voters, notably the tripling in the size of the electorate following the enfranchisement of new working class and older women in 1918, exemplifies such changes (Wald 1983). More modest alterations during the last quarter-century includes the extension of the franchise to 18-20 year olds in 1968, the growth in the number of Liberal candidates, and the altered tactical situation in many constituencies (Heath et al. 1991; Evans et al. 1998). The introduction of AMS electoral systems for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are expected to have a major impact on the party order in these regions. New constitutional arrangements have dramatically realigned Northern Ireland parties, with the peace settlement cross-cutting the old Catholic-Protestant cleavage. In May 1997, although the formal rules did not change, the workings of the British electoral system altered with major consequences for the outcome. As mentioned earlier, the overwhelming Labour landslide of seats was largely the result of the strong bias against the Conservatives in the British electoral system. The size of the seats bonus for the party in first place, and the penalty for the main party in second place, were larger than any since the war. Chapter 7 discusses the reasons for this disproportionality and assesses its consequences.

**Ideological** change provides an alternative catalyst. Accounts of critical elections commonly stress the emergence of new, salient polarising issues which cross-cut traditional ideological divisions, breaking up and reassembling the familiar landscape of party competition. As V.O. Key noted, "Only events with widespread and powerful impact or issues touching deep emotions produce abrupt changes." (1959:198) Major international wars, widespread ethnic conflict, or deep recessions are believed to have the capacity to transform the normal basis of support for the major parties or to allow new parties to gain momentum. In the United States, heated conflict over...
racial equality and civil rights after 1948 deeply split liberal and conservative Democrats, contributing to Republican resurgence in the South after 1948 (Black and Black 1987). In Belgium linguistic cleavages fragmented the party system in the 1970s, in Germany changing value priorities and the rise of environmental concern fuelled the growth of the Greens in the early 1980s (Dalton 1994), while in France racialism and divisions over ethnic minorities encouraged support for le Pen's National Front (Kitschelt 1995).

As discussed in chapter 12, in recent decades nationalism and constitutional issues have transformed party competition in Scotland; a durable realignment in the early 1970s produced a four-party system in marked contrast to England. In the 1997 British election the closure of the traditional left-right gap was dramatic. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, Labour's shift to the centre of the ideological spectrum, flanked by the Conservatives to the right and the Liberal Democrats to the left, transformed the familiar post-war landscape of party politics at Westminster. The impact of traditional left-right issues for Labour support also declined (Chapter 10). This may have led to the rise of Europe as a polarising and cross-cutting issues on the political agenda, which split the old patterns of left and right in British party politics and clearly deeply divided the Conservative parliamentary party. We therefore need to explore the consequences of these ideological changes for the electorate.

Lastly social change may occasionally act as catalysts for critical elections, although by their nature demographic factors normally function to produce secular rather than critical realignments. Nevertheless in some circumstances we can identify certain elections where social groups switched partisan allegiances in a shift which subsequently consolidated and persisted in subsequent elections. Exemplars would include the emergence of the modern gender gap in the 1980 election in the United States, a major change in the basis of the Democratic coalition with significant consequences for subsequent races at every level of government, for patterns of party identification, and for the predominant policy agenda.

The literature remains divided about many central features of critical elections and realignment theory. In the United States disputes continue to revolve around the conceptual framework and the most appropriate historical periodization of the party system, particularly after 1932 (Shafer 1991). For Burnham (1970) and Sundquist (1983) the American party system changed at roughly thirty-year intervals, first in 1792, then around 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932. Yet Bartels (1998) argues that American elections since 1868 show a complex mix of large, medium and small effects rather than a few great peaks separated by broad plateaux reflecting political stasis. For Carmines and
Stimson (1989: 21-23) more detailed analysis of each 'critical' election reveals a multiple number of movements before and after, so that the very notion of 'critical' events becomes muddied. Since many central features of realignment theory remain unresolved, some scholars, in frustration, have argued that we should abandon the idea of critical elections altogether, or seriously limit the use of the concept (Shafer 1991). Yet others like Nardulli (1995) have suggested, as we do, that we need to modify, develop and refine the original concept of critical realignment, to provide a more accurate and nuanced account of electoral change.

Therefore in analysing the 1997 election in long-term perspective certain common themes will run through all chapters. In particular, can the election best be understood one which maintained familiar social and ideological patterns of voting in the electorate? Can it be seen as evidence of social and partisan dealignment in the British electorate, either a sharp deviating contest or another step along the road of secular dealignment? Can it be viewed as secular realignment, with an incremental strengthening of Labour support based on a series of steps which gradually accumulated over successive elections since 1983? Or can 1997 legitimately be regarded as a 'critical' realignment, as some claimed after the event? We started this book with an agnostic view about the most appropriate interpretation and, after working through the evidence provided by our collaborators, we draw together our conclusions in the final chapter. In considering these questions we are seeking to understand the specific reasons for Labour's victory in 1997, but more generally we are aiming to gain theoretical insights into the capacity of parties and the electorate to change.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

**New Patterns of Party Competition?**

To explore these issues this book falls into three sections. Part I focuses on changes in the party system. Scholars conventionally draw a distinction between three distinct levels of analysis: parties-in-the-electorate, parties-as-mass-organizations, and parties-in-government (Katz and Mair 1994). The relationship between these different levels may vary. On the one hand, these components may be only loosely connected: party competition may change at one level (for example, a weakening of party identification among the electorate) without necessarily influencing others (for example, the structure of party organisations or the strength of party discipline in parliament). Alternatively, these levels may be intimately connected: hence Labour's shift centre-left on economic issues
may have altered their party image, thereby drawing many more middle-class professionals into the party membership, and perhaps altering the party's traditional working-class base of voting support. In the long-term we would expect to find significant interaction between different components.

In chapter one Ian Budge explores the pattern of competition among parties-in-government based on content analysis of the party manifestos since 1945. Through systematically comparing official party programmes in the post-war period this chapter considers whether the changes in Labour's manifesto represent a gradual, incremental shift to the centre-left since 1983, or whether the 1997 manifesto can be seen as a radical break with the past. The study concludes that there is some evidence that 1997 was, indeed, distinctive to past patterns. In particular, the 1997 Labour party manifesto represented the most right-wing position they have adopted since the war. Most importantly, in shifting centre-right, Labour actually leapfrogged over the Liberal Democrats, only the second time which this has ever happened since 1945. Under Blair, flanked by the Conservatives on the right and the Liberal Democrats on the left, Labour became the party in the centre of party competition on the traditional economic issues which have always provided the basic left-right division in British politics, as well as on the 'social conservatism' issues. This produced new patterns of competition in party policies, yet the chapter concludes that, based on past patterns, this may not prove a durable change and Labour may drift back towards the left in due course.

Are shifts in official party policy found in the attitudes of MPs? Chapter 2 by Pippa Norris goes on to explore changes in the culture of parliamentary parties. In particular, given that the official policy in the Labour party shifted towards centre, do Labour politicians reflect this change? This chapter draws on the surveys of over 1000 politicians in the 1992 and 1997 general elections. The study demonstrates that the parliamentary Labour party did move towards the centre on many of the classic economic issues, such as on the debate over nationalisation v. privatisation, and also became more socially conservative. By the time of the 1997 election on the economic issues Labour was close to the median British voter while Conservative politicians were furthest apart. One reason for this is that Conservatives were less accurate than Labour in estimating the position of their voters. Politicians assumed that the public was more rightwing than was actually the case. The chapter concludes that the change in the Labour party may well persist and even be reinforced in subsequent elections, since younger politicians proved significantly more rightwing than the older generation.
Chapter 3 by Paul Webb and David Farrell explores whether party members have experienced a similar transformation. Conservative party membership plummeted during the last parliament from an estimated 780,000 in 1992 to under 350,000 in 1997, falling below Labour for the first time this century (Pinto-Duschinsky 1997). In contrast the same period has seen a remarkable revival of Labour's grassroots party membership, up from 280,000 in 1992 to 405,000 by the time of the 1997 election. These changes in membership have potential implications for party funds, local campaign strength, and the pool of candidates available to fight local, regional and general elections. But have they altered the composition of parties, such as the ideology of party members? And has there been a change in the political attitudes and values of party members, reflecting changes in official party policies? To examine these issues this chapter analyses data on party members from the British Election studies 1964–97. Webb and Farrell conclude that by 1997 Labour party members had moved away from the traditional left on issues such as public ownership and the redistribution of wealth to an unprecedented degree. Labour members also became the most pro-European party during this period. In short, there is a convincing body of evidence that the shifts in party competition produced by Labour's move towards the centre from 1992 to 1997 represent more than just packaging and presentation, and instead penetrated to the hearts and minds of the parliamentary and grassroots party.

Critical elections require more than just a shift among elites and some of the most important evidence for a durable change concerns party loyalties among the electorate. In Chapter 4 Ivor Crewe and Katarina Thomson consider the evidence for patterns of partisan dealignment (representing a loosening of partisan bonds between voters and all parties) or whether there is any indication of partisan realignment in Labour party support in the last election. Crewe and Thomson found that the 1997 election saw the most dramatic redistribution of party identification since 1964, with a strong shift towards Labour. Moreover this movement was based on positive attraction towards the new party, not merely a negative protest against the Conservative government. The chapter concludes that the 1997 election has some but not all of the characteristics of a realigning election, which offers the Labour government an exceptional opportunity to capture a new generation of semi-detached but favourably inclined young voters.

New Social Alignments?

The evidence for change in competition among parties-in-the-electorate is less well established. Parties may well alter in government and as
organizations, but whether the electorate perceives these changes, and whether this perception influences voting behaviour, remains to be established. Subsequent sections go on to consider whether shifts in parliamentary parties have trickled downwards to produce new social and issue alignments among the electorate. If parties change their strategic appeals do voters respond? How far has Labour's shift centre-left altered established patterns of voting behaviour in terms of class, ethnic minorities, major regions, and among women? Who participated in the election, and did turnout decline among particular groups in the electorate?

One common claim is that Labour has become a catch-all party in its appeal to different socio-economic groups. To examine this thesis Chapter 5 by Geoffrey Evans, Anthony Heath and Clive Payne summarises traditional structural theories of social cleavages and then traces the evidence for class dealignment in Britain since 1964. The chapter concludes that class voting in the 1997 election was the lowest it has ever been in the series of BES surveys. The pattern over time in the class-vote relationship is one of a stepped secular decline, with peaks and troughs around a falling level. The chapter considers how far this pattern can be explained by party competition around left-right issues, and whether Labour's movement towards the centre from 1992-97 weakened their appeal to the traditional working class.

Another major cleavage in British politics, although one where we have little systematic evidence in previous studies, concerns race. Chapter 6 by Anthony Heath and Shamit Saggar examines the composition of the ethnic minority community and the pattern of party support from 1974-1997. The chapter concludes that ethnic minority voters have backed Labour in overwhelming numbers, and this pattern is relatively insulated from short-term trends. In line with past trends, in the 1997 general election four out of five ethnic minority voters supported Labour. Yet the pattern was not wholly uniform, since within the ethnic minority community Asian Indians gave higher than average support to the Conservatives. Heath and Saggar conclude that irrespective of party strategy in Britain during the last quarter century there has been a stable pattern of voter–party alignments by race, rather than any evidence of dealignment or realignment. Although class alignments have weakened, Labour can still count on overwhelming support from ethnic minorities.

Chapter 7 by John Curtice and Alison Park summarises long-term trends in regional voting patterns. The 1997 election was marked by two major changes in the geography of party support. Labour's vote rose, and the Conservatives'
vote fell, rather more in the south than north. The evidence points to secular dealignment in the regional cleavage since the north–south divide peaked in 1987. Moreover in 1997 there was a higher incidence of 'tactical voting' in constituencies which the Conservatives were defending, as voters switched to whichever Labour or Liberal Democrat was best able to defeat the Conservative incumbent. Curtice and Park consider alternative interpretations of these patterns, arguing that the strategies adopted by the parties, and Labour's move to occupy the ideological center ground, is the primary explanation. Both of these factors had important consequences for the outcome in seats, producing an electoral system in 1997 strongly biased against the Conservative party.

In Chapter 8 Pippa Norris examines patterns in the gender gap in Britain since the war to see whether Labour's strategic appeals to women managed to close their traditional disadvantage among this group. The study found a gradual long-term convergence in the overall size of the gender gap in Britain, indicating gender dealignment. The chapter consider alternative explanations for this pattern based on secular trends in generational turnover, structural explanations and cultural accounts. The chapter concludes that generational differences proved critical: older women remain slightly more Conservative than older men but the pattern was reversed among the younger generation. As a result secular trends of generational replacement seem likely to produce a gradual long-term shift of women towards the Labour party in future decades.

A final area in which new social alignments may be occurring is considered by Bridget Taylor and Anthony Heath in Chapter 9, which explores the issues of turn-out and abstention. The 1997 election was characterized by the lowest level of turnout since 1935. Many commentators are concerned that certain sectors of the electorate are failing to participate, with implications for the legitimacy of parliament. Turnout was especially low in safe Labour seats, often in the inner-city, and many young people appeared to be particularly apathetic. This chapter looks at trends in turnout and registration to explain who is abstaining, why, and whether we have seen long-term changes in the social characteristics of non-voters. Taylor and Heath conclude that the closeness of the 'horse-race' is the major explanation for fluctuations in turnout over time, so that it was the widespread assumption of a comfortable Labour victory in 1997 which produced the fall in participation.

New Issue Alignments?

The first section of the book monitored how far the parliamentary
parties moved to the centre ground in competition over the social and economic agenda. Labour not only tried to move to the middle, they also attempted to redefine the terms of engagement. As Philip Gould (1998:6) expressed the strategy, "We wanted to remake the political map by establishing new dividing lines, new prisms through which politics was perceived. Not tax and spend, but save and invest; not private versus public, but partnership between the two." The question addressed by the last section of the book is how far voters were aware of changes in official party policy, and how far this influenced voting behaviour. In terms of issue alignments, were voters still mainly divided by the post-war economic and social policy cleavages such as taxes and spending, or did 'new' issue cleavages become more salient including those involving national identity such as Europe and devolution? How important were issues in accounting for Labour's victory? And, lastly, how do we assess the outcome?

In Chapter 10 David Sanders considers long-term trends in public opinion on the major left-right cleavages concerning the economy and welfare state, and the importance of political ideology for electoral behaviour. Did Labour's catch-all strategy reduce the relevance of ideology for voting choice? Sanders establishes that in 1997 ideology did have far less influence over the electoral decisions of Labour voters than in any previous election since the BESA series started in 1964, a development which can plausibly be attributed to Blair's move towards the centre ground of British politics. At the same time Sanders found that ideological considerations influenced Conservative voting support more in 1997, probably because their vote was condensed to its core.

What of controversial 'new' issues? During the last decade the Conservative party in parliament has become deeply divided over Britain's position in the European Union, in particular entry into the European Monetary Union. In a critical election we would expect to see the rise of more controversial issues on the public agenda, and this seems like one of the most plausible candidates. The end of the cold war meant that, unlike in 1983 and 1987, British defence policy was 'the dog which did not bark' in the election. Debate about Britain's role in Europe received extensive attention in the news media during the long and short campaign (Norris 1997). But did the heated debate about Europe within the parliamentary elite resonate with the public? Did the parliamentary division between Eurosceptics and Europhiles represent a new issue cleavage among the electorate? Chapter 11 by Geoffrey Evans and Roger Jowell considers long-term trends in public opinion towards Europe (where we have a consistent series of items in the BES), the
perceived position of the parties on this issue, and assesses the influence of attitudes towards Europe on voting behaviour in the 1997 election.

Constitutional issues may also represent a new issue cleavage between the Conservative government, who favoured maintaining the status quo in Scotland, and all the opposition parties who had shifted into the reform camp in different degrees. In Chapter 11 Paula Surridge, Alice Brown, David McCrone, and Lindsay Paterson consider long-term trends in attitudes towards constitutional reform in Scotland, analyse how far public opinion can be seen as similar to, or different from, the situation in the mid-seventies, and consider the impact of this issue on voting behaviour in 1997. The study concludes that far from representing a 'new' cleavage in Scottish politics, the pattern of public opinion and voting behaviour showed considerable continuity with the past. Although the Conservative MPs were wiped out of Scotland, this was due to the electoral system rather than critical changes in the electorate.

In Chapter 12 Mark Franklin and Christina Hughes outline a theory of the responsive public, develop an overview of the structure of attitudes in the British electorate, and analyse how the components of voting behaviour have changed in recent decades. The chapter concludes that the issue space of British politics has altered by expanding in terms of 'new' politics compared with the 'old' left-right cleavage.

Finally, the conclusion by Pippa Norris and Geoffrey Evans draws together the primary findings from these chapters to reflect on their implications for the main themes developed in the book. The conclusion analyses whether there are plausible grounds and a convincing body of evidence to believe that 1997 can be regarded as a critical election which symbolises a decisive watershed in British party politics or whether it is more legitimate to regard this contest as the result of secular realignment over a series of elections.
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<td>184</td>
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**Overall Maj** Con 21 Con 27 Lab 179

**Note:** (*) including the Speaker.

**Source:** Norris (1997c).
### Table 2. The Share of the UK Vote, 1992–97

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**Source:** Norris (1997c).