CHAPTER 4

CHANGES IN THE ELECTORATE

If we accept that Britain has shifted from the era of two-party dominance in 1945-70, to the era of the declining two-party system from 1970-1995, the central question is how we explain this development. This chapter focuses on voter-led explanations, the most common approach within the literature, which suggest that the decline in two-party politics can be attributed primarily to psychological changes in the character of the individual voting decision. This overview aims to review these theories and clarify the core concepts before critically considering the evidence for them in subsequent chapters.

The debate at the heart of this chapter is how far voters remain affective party loyalists, steadfast Conservative and Labour supporters out of long-standing and habitual attachments, and how far voters are now influenced more strongly by the policies and performance of parties. During the 1950s and early 1960s in the orthodox theory most voters were believed to be stable in their voting choice due to enduring party loyalties, which shaped their attitudes towards issues, leaders, and party images, and ultimately their electoral behaviour. In turn party identification was thought to be based on a cohesive socialisation process within the family, workgroup and social milieu. The predominant class cleavage in British society was seen as the primary divide in party politics. Theories of dealignment suggest that from the mid-sixties onwards the strength of party and class attachments weakened. As a result, it has been argued, electoral volatility increased and short-term factors became more important in determining individual voter choice: whether policy issues, party leadership, the government record, or events during the campaign. Let us consider the assumptions behind these theories.

Theories of Party Alignment

The American Voter

Social psychological accounts became widely accepted in electoral studies following research in the United States by Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, published in The American Voter (1960). This seminal work was based on surveys of the American electorate from 1948-56 carried out by the Survey Research Center at Michigan University, hence it became known at the ‘Michigan’ model. The study suggested that, contrary to assumptions about voters in theories of responsible party government, or more populist beliefs about direct democracy, most American citizens were largely uninvolved, uninterested and ill informed about political life. Campbell et al argued that the typical American voters lacked information about politics, opinions on major issues, and political sophistication. For ‘issue voting’ to occur Campbell et al set fairly strict hurdles, namely (i) people had
to be familiar with the issue, (ii) the issue had to arouse some feelings, and (iii) people had to perceive a party difference on the issue. The study reported most Americans lacked familiarity with government policy and programmes. For example, in 1956 about a third of all Americans could not offer an opinion, or did not know what the government was doing, regarding policies on education, medical care, racial equality, or overseas aid. Even where individuals had opinions about an issue, many could not distinguish where the parties stood on domestic and foreign affairs.

Nor did people organise their attitudes in a consistent manner, or think in structured, ideological terms. Although observers commonly refer to 'liberals' and 'conservatives' in the electorate, The American Voter argued that most voters lacked a coherent set of beliefs, or an ideology, to order their political attitudes. The study analysed the content of unstructured comments when asked what they liked or disliked about the parties and candidates. The study reported that in the mid-fifties about 12 percent of the electorate could be classified as 'ideologues' or 'near-ideologues' who could express fairly consistent responses across policy issues, and who were familiar with the abstract distinction between 'liberal' and 'conservative'. About 42 percent of the electorate viewed parties largely in terms of group benefits. One-quarter saw politics in terms of the 'goodness' or 'badness' of the times, such as associating the government with war or peace, recession or prosperity. The remaining fifth of the electorate failed to comment upon any issues in response to unstructured questions. The authors concluded that a large segment of the public lacked the ability, knowledge, and educational background to manipulate the abstract political concepts which give order and consistency to political debates.

Nevertheless even without knowledge of specific issues, or a general ideological orientation, faced with a range of complex electoral choices for candidates at Presidential, Congressional, Gubernatorial, state and local levels, American voters could choose, and did choose, on a fairly consistent and stable basis. The central discovery of The American Voter was that most citizens had a general political orientation, -- a cognitive and affective map, -- which guided their electoral choice. For Campbell et al partisan identification was the key to understanding the structure of voter's cognitive maps, and hence the stability of their voting choice. People structured their perceptions of complex issues, candidates and campaign events through the prism of party loyalties.

The concept of party identification has two main dimensions: direction (for which party) and strength. Based on the standard survey measure, party identification in America could be arrayed along a continuum extending from strong Republicans, weak Republicans, via Independents, to weak Democrats and strong Democrats voters. Partisan identification was seen as affective, relating to an individual's feelings of self-identity; stable, persisting across successive elections; durable, not readily disturbed by passing issues, events and personalities; and pervasive, most Americans had this sense of attachment with one party or another. Party loyalties were
seen to endure across different elections, even when people temporarily changed their voting choice, to provide the 'normal' base of support for the Republicans and Democrats. People could therefore temporarily defect, for example voting against their normal party to express dissatisfaction with the government or the choice of Presidential nominee, then return to their 'home' vote in subsequent elections. Party loyalties ('voting the ticket') provided voters with simplified decisions and information shortcuts when confronted with the diverse and complex array of Presidential, congressional, state and local candidates.

In turn, party identification was seen to be derived from a voter's social milieu, particularly their early family and group socialisation. In the United States during the 1950s groups such as the labour unions in Chicago, Jewish city-dwellers in New York, Irish-American Catholics in Boston, and Swedish Lutheran farmers in Minnesota, acted as reference points for political attitudes. These groups were seen to generate a sense of identity or group membership, (a 'we' feeling) so that they represented more than simple demographic aggregates. Where cohesive and formalised, (for example, organised labour) group standards acted as reference points in political life. Generational effects were also important: party loyalties were found to strengthen over a citizen's lifetime. New voters were least likely to have developed stable party attachments, and were therefore the most open to prevailing political moods. But the longer voters saw themselves as belonging to a party, the stronger their sense of loyalty. The argument was clear and powerful:

"Evidently no single datum can tell us more about the attitude and behaviour of the individual as presidential elector than his location on a dimension of psychological identification extending between the two great parties."

Yet if enduring and stable social structures led to partisan alignments which stabilised voting choice for most Americans, this could not explain dramatic changes in party fortunes, such as Roosevelt's Democratic landslide in 1932. Campbell et al therefore proposed a dynamic element to the theory, following the work of V.O.Key, classifying elections into three basic types: maintaining, deviating and realigning. In maintaining elections there are no strong issues or candidates to deflect the electorate from voting in accordance with its standing partisan allegiances. Each side mobilises its natural base of support. In deviating elections the basic division of party loyalties are not seriously disturbed, but particular personalities, issues, or events produce a temporary reversal for the majority party. In realigning elections, associated with a decisive national crisis such as the Civil War or the Great Depression, significant groups of voters change their partisan loyalties and political attitudes on a long-term basis.

Walter Dean Burnham, among others, has extended this further by considering the essential historical preconditions for 'realigning' or 'critical' elections, and whether the process of partisan change has been essentially cyclical, with major realignments
in the social basis of party support occurring at roughly thirty-year intervals in America.
The theory of partisan realignment has subsequently developed an extensive literature in
the United States, debating the essential causes and consequences of this process. Recent
years have also seen a body of work in cognitive psychology critically reexamining the
concept of party identification, and supporting or challenging fundamental notions
about the ill-informed nature of the American electorate.

Nevertheless throughout the sixties the 'Michigan' model represented the orthodox view. Democratic and Republican support was seen as rooted in long-standing and complex historical alignments based on successive waves of external and internal immigration, regional polarisation over the Civil War, racial divisions over civil rights, the urban-rural split, and to a lesser extent the cleavage between unionised workers and employers. Once established, party loyalties were thought to be maintained for decades, rooted in group socialisation processes. The theory suggested that at periodic intervals major realignments provided opportunities to reestablish the social basis of party politics, notably the New Deal coalition which Roosevelt created in 1932. But during periods of 'normal' politics, party identification anchored most groups as predictable Democratic or Republican voters for successive elections, perhaps throughout their lifetimes.

Political Change in Britain

This social psychological framework became widely influential in Britain following publication of Political Change in Britain (1969, 2nd ed. 1974) by David Butler and Donald Stokes, which shared many of the same concepts and theoretical assumptions developed by the Michigan school. The seminal study became widely accepted as the most authoritative account of British voting behaviour, decisively reshaping the established research agenda. Drawing on the British Election Study from 1963 to 1970, Butler and Stokes suggested that politics remained peripheral to most people's lives: the British electorate rarely participated politically and had minimal involvement in civic life. "Only one in two voted in local elections and only one in ten went to an election meeting. Only one in fifty took an active part in the campaign and the number engaged in party activities between campaigns was altogether negligible."

The typical British voters was seen as fairly uninformed about politics, falling far short of the expectations of citizenship in liberal theories of representative democracy. In the sixties parliament was concerned with complex and technical issues revolving around the effectiveness of the British nuclear deterrent, the repercussions of the Cuban missile crisis, the problems of African decolonisation, entry into the European Economic Community, and Britain's balance of payments difficulties. Most voters, Butler and Stokes argued, lacked sufficient knowledge to understand these problems. Issue voting can only occur in this theory if three conditions are met, namely if voters are concerned about the problem (saliency); if public opinion is divided (skewness); and if parties offer alternative policy solutions (differentiation).
Butler and Stokes believed that most issues failed to meet these requirements.

BES panel surveys were used to examine the same voters over successive elections. Butler and Stokes concluded that few people had consistent and stable opinion about well-known issues which divided the parties, such as Britain's entry into Europe, the nationalisation of industry, or the use of nuclear weapons. Many seemed to alter their opinions from one survey to the next, which suggested, Butler and Stokes argued, that they lacked stable and deep-rooted attitudes. In the mid-sixties, only the welfare state (social services, pensions, and housing), strikes, and immigration were issues of widespread public concern, which divided the public and the parties, and therefore met the strict conditions necessary for issue voting. The typical British voter was found to display fairly mixed-up attitudes, adopting leftwing and rightwing stances on different issues. For most people political attitudes were not organised on a consistent basis, let alone structured into a sophisticated, abstract 'conservative' or 'socialist' ideology.

Yet despite widespread ignorance about politics, and minimal interest, in general elections about three-quarters of the electorate cast their vote. When faced with the choice of parties at the ballot box, Butler and Stokes concluded that British voters sought cognitive short-cuts, or 'standing decisions', to guide them through elections. As in the United States, during periods of stable partisan alignment, voters in Britain were seen as being rooted for many years, even for their lifetime, to one or other of the major parties.

"It is clear that millions of British electors remain anchored to one of the parties for very long periods of time. Indeed many electors have had the same party loyalties from the dawn of their political consciousness and have reinforced these loyalties by participating in successive elections."

The concept of partisan 'self-image' (rather than identification) was used to describe how voters saw themselves as party supporters on an enduring basis. Social identities represent how we describe ourselves, perhaps as Geordies, Glaswegians or Londoners due to our local roots, as Church of England or Catholics, or by our occupation, or generation. In the same way people derived their political identity from their usual allegiance to the Labour or Conservative parties. For Butler and Stokes partisan self-image had three characteristics: it was pervasive, 90 per cent of the British electorate described themselves as generally Conservative, Labour or Liberal; durable, four-fifths of the electorate reported always voting for the same party; and strengthened with age, in 1970 only one quarter of younger voters (18-24) described themselves as strongly attached to a party compared with two-thirds of pensioner age. To this extent it fulfilled the Michigan model. Party attachments provided a frame of references which allowed voters to slot unfamiliar problems or new information into an established pattern. Instead of trying to understand technical foreign policy or economic issues, such as Rhodesia or the balance of payment crisis, voters used party identity as a prism to filter their political opinions. Most citizens expressed positive
feelings about parties, and these attachments helped to mobilise citizens into civic life. Nevertheless in contrast with the American evidence, where party loyalties remained stable whilst voting behaviour changed, Butler and Stokes reported that in Britain the two moved in tandem to a greater degree.

Social Alignments

If we can accept the assumption that party loyalties are critical, how are they acquired? Butler and Stokes emphasised two sources: when young, voters were influenced through the socialisation process by the party loyalties of their family. This was seen as particularly important among first-time voters, in the impressionable years, when political attitudes were relatively plastic, but this inheritance gradually weakened as other factors came into play during their lifetimes. The socialisation process within the family could also be expected to be particularly strong where both parents shared the same Labour or Conservative party loyalties. In the words of Butler and Stokes:

"A child is very likely indeed to share the parents’ party preference. Partisanship over the individual’s lifetime has some of the quality of a photographic reproduction that deteriorates with time: it is a fairly sharp copy of the parent’s original at the beginning of political awareness, but over the years it becomes somewhat blurred, although remaining easily recognisable."

In later years voters were more strongly influenced by groups within their social milieu including the neighbourhood, workplace and community. Political attitudes would be reinforced by discussions with friends, colleagues and family who shared party attachments. Religion provided the primary cleavage in British party politics prior to the first world war, dividing Liberal non-conformists from the Conservative Church of England supporters, with regional and class differences as secondary influences. From the mid-twenties onwards, after the major realignment when Labour displaced the Liberal party, class became the dominant cleavage of British party politics. For Butler and Stokes, modern party loyalties were founded on the rock of class identities: "The individual, identifying with a particular class, forms a positive bond to the party which looks after the interests of the class." Class was seen to provide the major reference group voters used to define themselves (class self-image), and the main parties (The party for ‘working people’ or ‘good for business’). Butler and Stokes noted there was evidence this relationship was weakening even during the late 1960s, nevertheless class cleavages continued to be more closely associated with party loyalties than other social divisions, such as region, housing tenure, religion, age or gender. In this model, social group identities could be expected to have a direct effect on voting choice, as well as an indirect effect via party attachment (see Figure 4.1). The Labour and Conservative parties were widely regarded as representing the major cleavage in post-war British society, based on divisions of social class, competing in balanced equilibrium.
This account of British voting behaviour was given powerful reinforcement by the widely influential study of European Party Systems and Voter Alignments (1967) by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan. This seminal work explained how party competition and voting choices stabilised around the dominant structural cleavages within European nation-states. For Lipset and Rokkan ‘cleavages’ may prove politically salient if they have three characteristics: if they divide nations based on social characteristics such as occupation, religion or language; if the groups involved in the division were conscious of their collective identity; and if the cleavage was expressed in organizational terms. Contemporary political alignments in Western Europe were seen to reflect the imprint of four major cleavages based on the historical divisions of center-periphery, church-state, urban-rural, and worker-employer.

The first divided the dominant culture in the center of the political arena (London, Paris, Rome) from subject cultures at the periphery (Glasgow, Marseilles, Sicily). This produced linguistic or national cultural minorities, and parties reflecting their interests such as the Basque separatists and Plaid Cymru. The second cleavage divided church from state, with Catholic churches closely related to Christian Democratic parties such as those in France, Spain, Belgium, Italy and Austria. The third cleavage divided those working in rural areas from the commercial and industrial classes in the cities, resulting in agrarian parties in Scandinavia and in parts of Central and Eastern Europe. The last cleavage - based on social class divisions between the landed aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie, and later between employers and their workers - proved the critical source of political conflict in twentieth century Britain. The class conflict became ingrained throughout European party politics. It divided the ‘insiders’ favouring the established Church, the monarchy, and the old social order of privilege from the radical challenge of the ‘outsiders’ who represented the nonconformist churches, peripheral regions, and the less privileged. With the expansion of the franchise, European parties needed extra-parliamentary organizations to mobilise the new voters. In order to develop grassroots membership, expand electoral support, raise resources, and stabilise their base, parties forged long-standing alliances with groups representing the major cleavages in society. Parties could gain temporary support without such a base, due the appeal of particular popular leaders, or a temporary surge of protest voting against the incumbents, but such support could melt as fast as spring snow.

For Lipset and Rokkan, party-group linkages, founded on the dominant cleavage in each society, permeated all aspects of electoral politics, stabilising and ‘freezing’ the party system in European countries in the 1920s. Some organizations were mobilised into politics, and once well-entrenched, it proved difficult for new
parties to challenge the status quo. The rules of the game - especially electoral laws - favoured the established parties. Mass parties insulated and captured their supporters, developing political sub-cultures which gave supporters a psychological sense of belonging. Hence this seemed to explain why electoral behaviour in the fifties and sixties, in Britain and elsewhere, proved so stable. Rose and Urwin’s study of nineteen Western nations from 1945-69 showed that, except in countries with a regime-change, “the electoral strength of most parties had changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation.”.

Lipset and Rokkan’s theory reflected a long tradition of the structural analysis of voting behaviour in Britain, linking class and party, which became the widely accepted orthodoxy in British textbooks. The earliest British studies of voting behaviour during the 1950s and 1960s, -- drawing on evidence from Gallup polls of the electorate, constituency surveys, and aggregate constituency data, -- emphasised class cleavages as the preeminent division in party choice. In an influential early study, Robert Alford compared working-class support for the left party in Britain, America, Australia and Canada, using Gallup data, and found that Britain had the highest and most stable level of class voting. Alternative social cleavages which divided voters in other countries, -- such as religion, region, generation, and gender -- while influencing British voters, had less significant impact on party choice. Moreover, as Guttman demonstrated, class politics in the electorate were reflected, to a lesser degree, in class divisions in the background of Labour and Conservative MPs. Many of the issues which divided the postwar British policy agenda -- the nationalisation of industry, the growth of the welfare state, and the management of the economy -- reflected classic divisions between capital and labour. Not surprisingly, as a result the public’s image of the major parties were also commonly in class terms. The remaining puzzles, spawning a series of studies, seemed to be how to explain the anomalies to this model, notably the phenomenon of cross-class voting and the working-class Tories, the 'floating' voter, and the non-voters.

Theories of Partisan Dealignment

The strength of Labour and Conservative loyalties seemed to provide a convincing explanation for the stability of two-party politics during the 1950s and early 1960s. But, just as the new orthodoxy became widely accepted, voting studies seemed to be overtaken by political events. If voters were so stable, how could theories of voting behaviour explain sudden bursts of support for the Liberals, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National parties in the 1974 general elections? If voters were so loyal, why did Wilson’s 1966-70 administration, then the 1970-74 Heath government, start to experience unprecedented electoral turbulence as indicated by monthly opinion polls, by-elections and local elections?

Moreover patterns in Britain seemed to reflect trends experienced elsewhere.
In Belgium the three major parties split into Flemish and Walloon divisions; in Norway the traditional parties fragmented over Europe; in Italy the Communists almost overtook the ruling Christian Democrats; in the 1973 Danish election the number of parties in the parliament doubled overnight from five to ten, and a new radical group emerged as the second largest party. Systematic studies of electoral volatility, by Morgens Pedersen and by Marie Maguire, compared support for European parties from 1948 and reported greatly increased electoral instability in the seventies.

The major challenge to the old orthodoxy was provided in the mid-seventies by theories of dealignment. Partisan and social dealignment should be treated as analytically distinct, since these phenomena may be independent, although in many accounts the two are closely linked. Theories of dealignment remain within the social psychological tradition, locating the explanation for the weakening two-party grip over the electorate in the changing character of the voting decision among individual electors. The concept of partisan dealignment is often used rather loosely, indeed sometimes as a synonym for the electoral volatility it seeks to explain. Here the concept of partisan dealignment will be understood to refer to the weakening of affective, habitual and stable party loyalties among the electorate. Without such ties, the electorate is potentially more fluid and dynamic, open to the appeal of new parties, leaders, or issues, and short-term influences on their vote, although this does not necessarily mean that electors will actually change their voting behaviour, or indeed that there will be any difference in aggregate levels of party support. The theory of partisan dealignment suggests people may continue to vote Labour or Conservative, in this sense the thesis is perfectly compatible with two-party politics, but it suggests that their reasons for so doing have changed. Without the ballast of traditional loyalists Labour and Conservative party support is more open to sudden shifts in the winds of electoral fortunes. Dealignment theory suggests that we need to distinguish between enduring partisanship and short-term voting choice; between a party’s long-term level of support and its actual vote at a specific election; and between the basis of the former and the influences upon the latter.

The Changing American Voter

Why should party loyalties have weakened? In the United States, the argument was most fully developed in The Changing American Voter by Norman Nie, Sidney Verba and John Petrocik. In the United States, Nie et al found that in the early-seventies party identification remained a long-term commitment, established early in life, and usually maintained after that. But, they argued, the blandness of party politics during the Eisenhower years misled Campbell et al into assuming that issues were consistently unimportant in structuring voting choice. In contrast, Nie et al suggested, in the sixties consensual issues faded from the policy agenda, replaced by deeply divisive conflict over race, Vietnam, crime, and drugs. These issues were particularly salient for the younger generation, protesting over the war, civil rights, and sexual politics. The Democratic party, a diverse amalgam of conservative Dixiecrats, civil rights blacks,
Italian, Irish and Jewish voters, organised labour in northern cities, and younger, liberal McGovernites, proved unable to accommodate these issues without fragmenting its New Deal coalitional base. In the early seventies the Republicans became deeply divided and demoralised by Watergate. These developments led to the erosion of traditional party commitments, and the swelling of the pool of independent voters. As Nie et al summarised their findings:

"(1) Fewer citizens have steady and strong psychological identification with a party. (2) Party affiliation is less a guide to electoral choice. (3) Parties are less frequently used as standards of evaluation. (4) Parties are less frequently objects of positive feelings on the part of citizens. (5) Partisanship is less likely to be transferred from generation to generation."

Decade of Dealignment

During the late sixties and early seventies, theorists suggested that many European countries experienced similar trends. As Ivor Crewe summarised the British evidence:

"Partisan dealignment in all its manifestations - a plummeting of party membership, a weakening of party identification, a wavering and prevarication among major party supporters, negative voting, and a growing instability and unevenness of electoral change - have all occurred, indeed, accelerated, over the past three decades."

The dealignment argument rests on three major premises: that citizens are no longer so strongly attached to political parties; as traditional affective loyalties have weakened, short-term influences have become more salient in voting choice; and as a result voters have become more willing to desert the major parties, producing the sporadic waves of temporary support for the Liberals, SDP, Nationalists and Greens.

Many dealignment commentators have suggested that party identities have become more fluid and less clear-cut, producing a major change in the social psychology of the individual voting decision. As long-term party loyalties have weakened and fragmented, this thesis suggests voters are more open to the effects of short-term factors including particular campaign events, the appeal of party leaders, the government's record in office, and the marketing of party images. Looser class identities and party loyalties should increase the willingness of voters to consider different parties, and hence the chances that minor parties can mobilise support, especially in second-order contests such as local, European, and by-elections.

Theories of Social Dealignment

In Britain the literature has emphasised that partisan dealignment has been accompanied by, and can be primarily attributed to, class dealignment. Butler and Stokes noted that the class-vote relationship was declining at the time they were writing, in the late sixties, with greater volatility of support notable particularly amongst the younger generation. Subsequent studies Ivor Crewe, Mark Franklin and others have argued that the link between social class and voting choice has diminished further
over the years. As Rose and McAllister summarised the situation by the mid-eighties:

"The electorate today is wide open to change; three quarters of voters are no longer anchored by a stable party loyalty determined by family and class. More voters float between parties - or are wobbling in their commitment to one party - than show a lifetime loyalty to a particular party."

The most comprehensive examination of the evidence, based on national election surveys in fourteen countries, by Franklin, Mackie and Valen, found that many advanced industrialised democracies experienced social dealignments during the seventies and early eighties. "Almost all of the countries we have studied show a decline during our period in the ability of social cleavages to structure individual voting choice".

Yet social and party dealignment, which are frequently assumed to go hand-in-hand, could involve separate processes. The developments which we have described can be envisaged to produce four possible results (see Figure 4.2). If traditional social and partisan alignments remain strong then we would expect the continuation of a stable two-party system in Britain. If partisan and social attachments to the Labour and Conservative parties progressively weaken, this could potentially lead to a multiparty system, within the constraints of the institutional context set by the electoral system. Lastly if either social or party alignments weaken, this may undermine the foundations of the established two-party system, without necessarily replacing it.

[FIGURE 4.2 ABOUT HERE]

There is little doubt that the social structure of Britain has been transformed in the postwar era due to demographic, economic and cultural trends common to most post-industrial societies - the rise of the service sector, the 'new' working class, the growth of the underclass, patterns of immigration, changes in the public/private employment divide, increased social and geographic mobility, the expansion of educational opportunities, the decline in the traditional family, technological innovation, the information age, and the growth and subsequent contraction of the welfare state. Yet there remains considerable debate about the effects of these structural changes on voting behaviour in Britain, as discussed in subsequent chapters. Theories fall into four distinct categories:

*orthodox structural theories which suggest that class is the basis of British party politics;
*the revision of traditional concepts and measures of social class;
*the restructuring of social identities; and lastly,
*the replacement of affective group loyalties by more rational 'issue' voting.
Revising Concepts of Social Class

Revisionists have suggested that traditional measures of social class, based on divisions between blue-collar and white-collar occupations, need to be modified to take account of the complexity of inequalities in modern society. Structural arguments suggest that social class was the critical political cleavage in post-war Britain since it determined so much else about social identity. Working class communities based on traditional industries such as steel, shipbuilding or coal-mining, where families worked and lived in close proximity, provided a common life-style and homogeneous culture. The traditional division between factory and office workers could be used to predict household income and wealth, levels of education, health and standards of housing, networks of friends and neighbours, even language and accent, and therefore cultural attitudes and values.

As discussed in later chapters, Heath, Jowell and Curtice have strongly advocated the most significant revision to the traditional occupational classification of the middle and working classes, based on the work of the sociologist, John Goldthorp. These authors argue that given the appropriate classification and measurement, the relationship between social class and party vote has not weakened. Heath et al acknowledge that there has been a shifts in the size of the working-class, which have slowly produced a shrinkage in the natural base of Labour’s support, but they argue that the relative strength of the linkage between class and party has not diminished.

In a variant of this theme, Dunleavy and Husbands argue that following the growth of the welfare state the division between public-sector and private-sector workers has become increasingly important in determining voting behaviour, along with alternative proxies for socioeconomic inequalities such as households in council housing or owner occupiers. Crewe has argued that the working class has become fragmented into the ‘old’ working class, the factory workers living in council housing estates in Scotland and the North, and the ‘new’ affluent working class in skilled and semi-skilled jobs in light industry, living in owner-occupied households in the Midlands and the South. What these accounts share in common is the notion that voters continue to acquire their political attitudes and party loyalties through the socialisation process within their social milieu, but the nature of class inequalities have become more complex in post-industrial societies.

The Restructuring of Social Identities

Yet others have argued that new social identities and structural cleavages have replaced old ones. Modernisation theory suggests that occupational class has become less relevant in post-industrial societies which are characterised by social fragmentation and differentiation, increasing geographic and social mobility, rising
levels of education, and the expansion of mass communications. In recent decades the Lancashire mill-towns, the Welsh valley pit-communities, and the Staffordshire potteries have been swept away. As a result modernisation theories suggest that Britain has experienced a fragmentation of simple social identities. In Robertson’s words: “The old classes have ceased to be cultural communities” as multiple influences have come to shape political socialisation. Post-industrial trends towards a more fragmented, polycultural, and pluralistic society, with diverse groups and social movements, may have eradicated older social and political identities.

What may have replaced class? Regional divisions were once thought likely to fade with the development of the modern national state. Yet since the mid-fifties, as mentioned earlier, Britain has experienced a growing North-South divide, generating an extensive literature. Regional identities have also fragmented party cleavages in Belgium and Italy, the Basque nationalists have used terrorist violence in Spain, and Quebec separatism has almost broken up Canada. Rose and Urwin noted regionalism as one of the most important influences on political behaviour during the twentieth century. Bogdanor and Field have argued that the traditional core-periphery cleavage, which existed in Britain at the turn of the century, has reopened due to the decline of class divisions. Far from fading, regional identities and nationalist sentiment may have strengthened over time.

Moreover, generational differences may have become more important. Post-materialist theory developed by Ronald Inglehart suggests that a new cleavage has developed among younger, well-educated voters, centred around issues of the quality of life and protection of the environment, bolstering support for new social movements and Green Parties. Post-materialist values have become more popular in the post-war era, Ronald Inglehart has argued, because the younger generation have grown up during a period of widespread affluence, without economic insecurities under the welfare state. In a comparison of value trends from 1970 to 1993, Abramson and Inglehart reported a clear trend towards post-materialism in seven out of eight European countries, with the proportion of post-materialists doubling in Britain, from 7 to 15 percent, reflecting trends throughout West European publics.

In a related development, gender may have become more politically salient. Post-war developments have seen the increased participation of women in the paid labour-force, the decline of the traditional family, and the growth of the women’s movement. These events have heightened the salience of gender politics, revolving around economic issues including demands for equal opportunities, affirmative action, and equal pay; social issues including reproductive rights, child-care, and care of the elderly; and criminal justice issues including protection against domestic violence, rape and child-abuse. The gender-gap where women are more liberal than men, which emerged in American elections in the early-eighties, has become evident in some other advanced democracies. In Britain there has been a long-standing ‘gender-generation gap’, which has attracted increasing attention as the major parties have tried to mobilise ‘the
women's vote'. Lastly, patterns of immigration have transformed British society, producing ethnic and religious diversity. From this perspective, the social identities of voters continue to structure party choice, but simple inequalities of occupational class have been replaced by more diverse and complex cleavages based on differences of region, generation, gender and race. For Rose and Mcallister, party choices continue to be affected by a 'lifetime learning' process of socialisation within the home, workplace and community. What has altered, they argue, is less dealignment than a restructuring the components contributing to the vote.

The Rise of Rational 'Issue' Voting

The last school of thought has argued that as old class and party loyalties waned, party policies and performance count for more. Theories of 'issue voting', which became common in the eighties, suggested voters had become more open to rational argument, more willing to switch parties, more influenced by the election campaign and assessments of prospective policy issues, or retrospective evaluations of the government's performance. In Britain, Hilde Himmelweit and her colleagues argued that voters act like rational consumers in the political marketplace. In the United States, Samuel Popkin has developed the thesis that voters use 'low-information' rationality, or gut reasoning, to assess candidates, parties and issues, drawing on information from past experiences and daily life, from the media and from political campaigns. Therefore, although there is considerable agreement (although not total consensus) that the old order of strong party attachments is passing, the form of the new order of voting behaviour is not yet apparent. Commentators have disputed the relative influence of different short-term components of voting choice.

One view has emphasised the rise of 'issue voting'. Mark Franklin emphasised how issue voting arose, he argued, to fill the vacuum left by the decline of class-structured voting:

"The British electorate has moved to a more sophisticated basis for voting choice. No longer constrained to the same extent by characteristics largely established during childhood, British voters are now more open to rational argument than they were in the past." Others like Jim Alt, David Sanders, and Helmut Norpoth, have focussed attention on prospective and retrospective evaluations of the government’s record on the economy, using econometric techniques to trace the relationship between economic indicators and party popularity.