Decade of dealignment

The Conservative victory of 1979 and electoral trends in the 1970s

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and

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With the assistance of

NEIL DAY and ROBERT MACDERMID
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When we set out to write this book, our intention was to prepare a short descriptive report on the findings of the national interview survey which we conducted immediately after the May 1979 general election. But we have come to write a longer book. We could not avoid seeking explanations for the Conservatives’ victory, and in doing so found ourselves looking back to the two elections of 1974 and occasionally beyond. Nor could we entirely resist the temptation to look at the 1979 result with the benefit of hindsight and in the light of recent upheavals in Britain’s party system.

Our book therefore contains three elements. It serves, firstly, as a reference source of what we trust is authoritative information – as far as national interview surveys allow – about the state of public opinion and electoral behaviour at the time of the 1979 election. Towards this end we have presented numerous tables, some of which are purposely fuller than is perhaps usual for a book of this kind. But we have aimed to write a book which, whilst being informative for the academic specialist, can also be used by senior undergraduates and the interested lay public. We therefore hope that the advanced researcher will bear with those passages in which we describe in deliberately simple terms the nature of certain techniques of statistical analysis.

The book also seeks to explain the Conservatives’ victory – or cast light on explanations offered by others – by reference to changes of opinion and voting patterns between 1974 and 1979. For this purpose our survey in 1979 returned to respondents first interviewed in one or other of our surveys at the elections of February and October 1974. Like the 1979 study, the 1974 studies were national surveys, carried out immediately after each of the two elections. We have made use of the resulting ‘panel’ data, as well as the February 1974 and October 1974 surveys in their own right.¹

¹ Because of the length of this book it was not possible to include the usual appendices on the questionnaire, sampling design, sampling error and other aspects of data collection and analysis. Technical documentation can be obtained from the SSRC Data Archive at the University of Essex. A list of the documents available is given on page xiv.
Preface

From time to time the book takes a deeper perspective and examines longer-term changes in the nature of British electoral behaviour. On these occasions we have gone back to the series of election studies carried out between 1963 and 1970 by David Butler and Donald Stokes. Their pioneering study, *Political Change in Britain*, laid a foundation for research on voting and public opinion of such originality and comprehensiveness that almost every path that we have followed in our own research has taken their book as a starting point.

Our book is about the general election in Great Britain. We have excluded Northern Ireland from our study because its party system and electoral politics differ so much from that in the mainland. We have also deliberately forsaken the special analyses of Scotland and Wales that these two countries’ increasingly distinctive pattern of voting and opinion in the 1970s merit. This is partly because a strictly representative sample of Great Britain, consisting of about 1,900 respondents, will include too few of them from Scotland and Wales for the purpose of detailed statistical analysis. (Indeed, the problems posed for analyses of the English regions are similar.) But it is also because, in response to this very problem, the Social Science Research Council funded parallel but independent research projects on the 1979 election in Scotland and Wales. The three election studies contained a large common core of identically worded questions to ensure comparability across the three nations of Great Britain, but from the outset it was agreed that results would be reported independently.

The national surveys of the two elections in 1974 were jointly conducted by the authors of this book. For the survey of the 1979 election we were joined by Dr David Robertson, formerly of the University of Essex and now a Fellow of St Hugh’s College, Oxford. We all took a full share in the responsibility for the planning and conduct of the 1979 survey. The questionnaire, on which so much ultimately depends in research of this kind, is the result of numerous discussions and meetings among the three of us about the contents and phrasing of almost every item.

David Robertson undertook extensive analysis on the social determinants of the vote, the results of which is being published separately. We therefore decided to devote only one chapter to this aspect of voting in Britain: in this chapter the reader will find a broad, summary description of the social basis of the parties’ support. The main themes of our enquiry, however, are the flow of the vote during the 1970s and its relation to positions taken by voters and parties on the issues that dominated the period from 1974 to 1979.

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3 The Scottish Election Study was directed by Jack Brand and William Miller of the University of Strathclyde; the Welsh Election Study by Peter Madgwick and Denis Balsom of the University of Aberystwyth. The SSRC also funded a special study of Scotland at the October 1974 election, under the day-to-day direction of William Miller.
Preface

The character of a study of this kind is so heavily determined at the design stage that it is next to impossible to distinguish one investigator’s contribution from another’s. Nevertheless, when it came to writing the book, the two authors decided that the most practical way to proceed was to divide the work. We agreed upon the plan for the book, discussed all chapters extensively, and are indebted to each other for the intellectual stimulation and insights gained from this collaboration; but each author is responsible for the chapters that bear his name. We are jointly responsible, however, for the concluding Part III.

We have received a great deal of assistance throughout the project from many individuals and institutions. Our greatest debt is to our research officers. Tony Fox was involved in the preliminary stages of the 1979 survey, having worked with us on all stages of the 1974 surveys. He was helped by Bill Aughterson. Neil Day was our senior research officer for most of the planning stage and throughout the fieldwork. He also supervised the checking and coding of the interview data. He was helped for a year by Alastair Gordon. His successor as senior research officer was Bob MacDermid, who carried out almost all the computing for the analyses reported in this book, and who prepared supplementary technical papers on the project (these are listed on page xiv). Towards the end of the project, Dorothy Chase provided invaluable help by checking and editing tables and technical documentation. Finally, we want to mention the important contribution made by our first research officer, Jim Alt (now at Washington University, St Louis) to the 1974 surveys. In the course of the project, when we were often tied down by teaching and other academic responsibilities, much depended on our research officers’ enthusiasm, resilience and technical skill. We thank them all.

The secretaries were always important members of our small project team. June Yates was the project’s secretary during the planning and fieldwork and assisted with the typing of the book. Nina Elston typed successive drafts of the manuscript for the book. We thank them both for their cheerful and efficient assistance.

A large-scale interview survey also requires extensive assistance on such laborious but essential tasks as coding, data processing, and the checking of interview schedules. We were fortunate to find many students and others who at one time or another were willing to lend a hand. We particularly wish to thank

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Preface

Drafts of our writing were read by a number of our colleagues. We are particularly indebted to Anthony King, who went far beyond what any author could reasonably expect in his detailed and helpful comments and suggestions. We also wish to express our gratitude to Jean Blondel, Ian Budge, Jill Hills, and Olof Peterson for commenting on parts of the typescript at its various stages of production, and to Hugh Barrington for his support and encouragement when we first embarked on the election studies.

The interview fieldwork for the 1979 election survey was carried out by Research Services Ltd. The February 1974 and October 1974 cross-sectional surveys were conducted by the British Market Research Bureau and Social and Community Planning Research, respectively. We appreciate the co-operation we received from all three organisations in response to the special needs of the 1974 and 1979 studies.

All of the election studies have been funded by grants from the Social Science Research Council, for which we wish to record our appreciation. We are also grateful to the University of Essex for providing office space and computing facilities, to the staff of the University’s Computing Centre for advice and practical assistance on many occasions, and to the Educational Technology Unit for the loan of equipment during the pilot stages of the project.

Finally, our list of acknowledgements would be incomplete without a special, personal note of thanks for the encouragement and understanding of our families: Ingegerd and Katarina Särvik, and Jill, Deborah, Benjamin and Daniel Crewe.

This book represents neither the first nor the last of our writing on the election surveys. The results of the 1974 surveys were reported in a dozen articles appearing in scholarly journals and edited volumes. This time we decided to produce a book before proceeding to publish articles on more specialised and technical topics.

The collection and analysis of data based on large-scale surveys is a time-consuming business, however, even with the aid of powerful computers. The fieldwork for the interviews, their detailed coding, and the checking and organisation of the data files took up the first twelve months after the 1979 election. What we now present is the result of analyses and writing in the following year and a half. There remains much to be done. We intend to return to the problems we have begun to penetrate here in further publications.

*Although the following unpublished papers, available from the authors, make some use of the 1979 election study data:

2. B. Särvik, I. M. Crewe and D. Robertson, ‘Why the Parties were Liked and Disliked in the 1979 Election: An Analysis of “Free Answer” Survey Data’.
We shall be helped in this task by many other scholars. The data from the 1974 surveys have been available since October 1976 through the SSRC Data Archive at the University of Essex. A large number of books, articles, papers and theses are partially or wholly based on the British Election Study data (a regularly updated list may be obtained from the SSRC Data Archive). The 1979 survey – as well as the Welsh and Scottish sister surveys – have been similarly available since June 1981. We anticipate an equally intensive use of these data by the research community at home and abroad. We hope that these surveys will be regarded, in conjunction with the earlier election studies conducted by David Butler and Donald Stokes, as a research resource for the study of British politics.
Note on documentation about the British Election Studies, 1974 – 1979

The following BES Technical Papers can be obtained from the SSRC Data Archive, University of Essex:

- A Comparison of Respondents’ Characteristics with Known Population Parameters
- A Description of Surveys Conducted by the British Election Study Project
- The 1979 British Election Study: The Survey, The Sample Design and The Fieldwork, with a Note on Sampling Error

The SSRC Data Archive can also provide a list of publications by members of the British Election Study, as well as a list of books, articles, papers and dissertations based wholly or partly on data collected by the British Election Studies from 1974 to 1979.

The machine-readable data files for the cross-sectional studies conducted in February 1974, October 1974, June 1975 (EEC Referendum) and May 1979, as well as for the 1970 - February 1974 and February 1974 - October 1974 - May 1979 panel studies, can be obtained from the SSRC Data Archive, University of Essex. Accompanying documentation (which can be obtained without the data) includes, for each study, a codebook with frequency distributions, a facsimile of the questionnaire, and a detailed description of the sample design, sampling errors, response rates and fieldwork procedures.
Note on the tables

The number of respondents in the 1979 election survey is 1,893. However, in many tables we have excluded from the per cent distributions small numbers of respondents for whom data were inadvertently missing. Therefore, the tables show a slight variation with regard to the total number of respondents as well as the numbers in the sub-categories.

Unless otherwise stated, the tables display complete per cent distributions. The total for complete per cent distributions is always given as 100 per cent; however, because of decimal rounding the sum of the percentages in a row or column can occasionally differ slightly from 100.