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Chapter 3 The Conservative Century? Geography and Conservative Electoral Success during the Twentieth Century

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“The Conservative party dominated British politics to such an extent during the 20th century that it is likely to become known as ‘the Conservative century’. Either standing alone or as the most powerful element in a coalition, the party held power for 70 of the 100 years since 1895. For much of the remaining 30 their opponents had only a fragile grip on office.” (Seldon and Ball 1995: 1)

Political parties are formed to fight and win elections, and on this criterion the Conservative party was by far the most successful in Great Britain during the twentieth century. Although two of its worst performances came at the century’s beginning and end -- it gained 43.6 per cent of the votes cast but only 23 per cent of the seats in 1906,¹ and 30.7 and 25.7 per cent respectively in 1997 -- between those dates its election machine delivered victories which were unmatched by its opponents,² in part no doubt because throughout the century it was best able to raise the money necessary to fight national and local campaigns (Pinto-Duschinsky 1981).

The Conservative party won the largest percentage of the votes cast at 17 of the 26 elections, won the largest percentage of the seats at 14 (which in one case was less than a majority), and was in office -- either alone or in coalition -- for 66 out of the 100 years (figure 3.1). This success rate was a significant improvement on its nineteenth-century performance: between 1832 and 1885 it won only two of the 13 elections outright, compared to eight of the 14 between 1886 and 1935 and eight of the 16 between 1945 and 2001: in a period of rapid social change, it has dominated British politics (Pattie and Johnston 1996) -- although it won the support of more than half the electorate on only three occasions. Why this success? Why did the Conservative party so dominate British government for most of that century?

Exaggeration and Bias in the Electoral System

Explorations of the Conservatives’ success have to take account of the geographies involved, as well as the contexts within which each general election was held. In the British electoral system, using single-member constituencies (with a small number of exceptions up to 1949), the candidate having the largest number of votes is elected, even if he/she obtains less than 50 per cent of those cast. Disproportionality in election results in the translation of votes into seats is the norm with such systems. This disproportionality has two components: *exaggeration*, whereby one or more parties (usually the largest) gets a larger share of the seats than of the votes cast (a ‘winner’s surplus’); and *bias*, whereby one of the two largest parties gets a larger proportion of the seats than the other, with the same percentage of the votes.

[fig 3.1]

Exaggeration was normal throughout the century, with each of the two largest parties getting a bigger percentage of the seats than of the votes cast at most of the contests. This can be shown by the seats:votes ratio (a party's percentage of the seats allocated divided by its percentage of the votes cast: a ratio above 1.0 indicates a larger percentage of seats than votes). For the Conservatives, this occurred at 20 of the 26 elections analysed (figure 3.2), all of those at which it was the largest party and an additional five when it came second in the contest for votes. Its largest seats:votes ratios occurred in three periods: in the 1920s and 1930s, when the opposition was divided between two parties, Labour and Liberal; in the 1930s after MacDonald's formation of a National Government in 1931 resulted in the Conservatives' best two performances in terms of seats won; and in the 1980s, when again the opposition was split between two parties, neither of which was particularly strong.

[fig 3.2]

The disproportionality associated with first-past-the-post electoral systems led to the Conservatives almost invariably winning a larger share of the seats than of the votes, but this was the case for its main opponents also at most of the elections. But did the system's disproportionality favour the Conservatives over the Liberals until the 1920s and over Labour thereafter? Answering this question involves looking at the degree of bias in a result: that is the difference in the number of seats obtained by the two parties if they had the same percentage of the votes cast. This is calculated by applying a uniform shift in votes across all constituencies to equalize the parties' vote totals. Thus, for example, if the Labour party won 45 per cent of the votes nationally and the Conservative party won 35 per cent, the Labour share would be reduced by 5 percentage points across all constituencies, and those votes re-allocated to the Conservatives, so that each had 40 per cent of the total (Johnston et al. 2001). With the same vote percentages, an unbiased system should have each party with the same number of seats. Any difference indicates the level of bias. Figure 3.3 shows that the bias in the system (i.e. a positive value for the bias figure) favoured the Conservatives at 14 of the elections, including 10 of those contested after 1940.

[fig 3.3]

The British method of translating votes into seats that generates both exaggeration and bias occurs because of the interaction of two geographies. The first is the geography of voting, of who votes what, where. This involves maps which, at their most detailed, show the home location of each elector and how he/she voted.³ More generally, however, these point maps are generalized into area maps, showing the pattern of support for each party (and of abstentions) by wards and other administrative divisions. Secondly, there is the geography of the constituencies, the areas which return the MPs to Parliament. This geography is overlaid on the geography of voting, with local government wards used as the building-blocks by Boundary Commissions for creating constituencies.

The particular set of constituencies interacts with the geography of voting to produce areas of strength and weakness for each party -- as well as the arenas within which the parties seek to mobilize support. How the constituencies are created is thus a crucial influence on the translation of votes into seats, affecting both the level of disproportionality in any election outcome and, potentially, any bias between parties in how they are affected. There are many different ways of producing a set of constituencies from a larger number of wards: Johnston and Rossiter (1982), for example, identified over 15,000 ways in which the 27 wards in Sheffield could have been amalgamated into six constituencies during the redistribution completed in 1983.

During their successful century, therefore, the Conservatives benefited from the distortions produced by the electoral system at a majority of the elections fought -- and at a preponderance of those fought after the Second World War: the biases within the system

favoured them rather than their opponents. Those biases are a consequence of the geographic framework within which elections are conducted. Understanding how they operated in the Conservatives' favour for much of the twentieth century is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

The Changing Electoral Context

The impact of these geographies changed considerably across the twentieth century, as the electoral context was altered. Three aspects of this context were particularly important. The first was the extension of the franchise, a process initiated with the Great Reform Act of 1832 and continued by the further Reform Acts of 1866 and 1885. Even after the latter, however, the majority of adults (including all adult females) were unable to vote at general elections; in 1910, for example, of an adult population of 26.1 million only 29.5 per cent were enfranchised. After the 1918 Representation of the People Act, when all adult males together with females aged over 30 could vote, the percentage increased to 79.9, and the Equal Franchise Act 1928 generated a further increase to 91.1 per cent. By 1939, 98.5 per cent of the country's adult population was on the electoral roll. Other aspects of the franchise have influenced turnout and voting patterns notably, though not only, at the elections held in wartime or just after hostilities ceased (only one of which -- 1945 -- is analysed here). In the mid-1980s, for example, the government legislated to allow those living abroad to vote at UK elections for 20 years after their departure (in the constituency where they last resided): against this, the legislation introducing the 'community charge' for funding local government (commonly known as the 'poll tax') led a substantial number to disqualify themselves by failing to register as electors in the hope that this would help them to evade the charge (on these, see Dorling et al. 1996; Pattie et al. 1996).⁴

These changes in the size of the enfranchised population had major implications for the political parties, because each extension up to 1918 increased the proportion of the electorate who were in what was generally termed the 'working class', much of whose support was mobilized by the Liberal and, increasingly, Labour parties. It should be noted, however, that the Conservatives were successful in winning working-class support in some places (McKenzie and Silver 1968; Nordlinger 1967). The class composition of the British electorate changed and, given that class was a dominating feature of electoral mobilization throughout most of the century, this should have disadvantaged the Conservative party. Elsewhere in western Europe, extension of the franchise led many conservative parties to support the introduction of proportional representation systems in order to sustain their electoral position: this was not the case with the British Conservatives, however, who remained committed to the 'first-past-the-post' system and, as we have seen, thrived electorally.

The franchise extension was in itself geographically constituted, in that the working-class residents who gained the right to vote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were predominantly urban. This had clear implications for the parties' electoral prospects, if they could mobilize the new voters in such places. This was of major importance to the Conservatives, since increasingly the urban areas became dominated by voters whose likely political affiliations would favour parties other than theirs; the class cleavage increasingly became an urban--rural cleavage, and as the urban areas grew in relative importance, so the Conservatives' 'natural' electoral heartlands apparently declined.

Whereas the first half of the century saw the enfranchisement and growth of the working-class electorate, the second half, and especially the last quarter, saw its decline as many traditional manufacturing industries were run down, a process that was countered by a growth in service industries -- most of them in different parts of the country from those where manufacturing had traditionally flourished. This change in the country's class composition

favoured the Conservatives, especially in the areas where service-sector growth was strongest. As a consequence, Crewe (1986) argued that for Labour to regain power in the late twentieth century it had to abandon its almost exclusive focus on economic and social policies aimed at working-class constituencies and instead target a much wider and more diverse audience embracing substantial sections of the middle class. Neil Kinnock started such a project in the 1980s; it was carried forward by John Smith (1992--4) and then successfully completed by Tony Blair after 1994. It had seemed for a while in the 1980s that a new middle-of-the-road alliance of Liberals and Social Democrats would break the two-party mould of British politics established in the 1920s when Labour replaced the Liberals as the radical party of the left (Crewe and King 1995). That project failed, however, and the late 1990s saw a very substantial Labour revival linked to policy changes which took it into the centre ground of British politics, previously occupied by the Liberal--SDP Alliance, and to the right of the current Liberal Democrat party (Budge 1999).

The second, very much related, component of the changing electoral context was the massive redistribution of population through the country. The urban component increased significantly through the nineteenth century, largely because of net migration from the countryside. The traditionally Conservative rural areas were depopulated, with many of the migrants joining the newly enfranchised urban working class. By the third decade of the twentieth century, the urban areas dominated. After the Second World War, however, this trend was partly reversed, although the country remained dominantly urban -- to what extent depending on how urban was defined. Throughout the century, capitalizing on developments in both public and private transport, the middle classes moved out from the inner cities to lower-density suburbs, where they were joined to some extent by working-class residents who were provided with out-of-town council homes. From the 1960s on, the centrifugal forces were increasingly propelling people beyond the suburbs into the smaller towns of the surrounding rural areas (Champion 1998). Through counter-urbanization, the traditionally pro-Conservative areas were being repopulated, largely by the middle classes who were most likely to support that party, whereas the anti-Conservative urban areas were suffering the sort of population denudation that the rural areas experienced earlier in the century.

The third aspect of the changing political context -- already alluded to -- was the changing organization to the left of the Conservatives on the political spectrum. For the first quarter of the century, their main opposition was provided by the Liberals, who won three elections between 1906 and 1918 -- although only just in 1910, after challenging the Conservative hegemony in the House of Lords and as difficulties arose over their proposals for Home Rule for Ireland, which won it parliamentary support from various Irish parties. But the slow advance of support for Labour, especially in the industrial areas where it mobilized most actively, and the split in the Liberal party following its coalition with the Conservatives during the latter part of the First World War, saw a major switch in partisan support on the left. By the 1929 election, the Liberals were down to 23 per cent of the votes cast -- which delivered them just 59 seats -- whereas Labour won 37 per cent of the votes and 288 seats. This new bipolar axis to British party politics was submerged by the events of the early 1930s, MacDonald's response to the economic crisis involving a coalition with the Conservatives and a split in his own party. But it re-emerged in 1945, and -- apart from a brief period in the early 1980s when the Alliance of Liberals and Social Democrats briefly led in the opinion polls and threatened to push Labour into third place at the 1983 general election (in terms of votes if not seats) -- it remained firmly in place for the second half of the century.

In terms of the country's class composition and the franchise, therefore, the century's early decades were pro-Conservative, as was also the case in the 1980s. But in the middle decades radical parties of the left were more favoured by the country's demographics. In the 1930s they failed to realize that potential, following the debacle of the MacDonald Labour government elected in 1929. From 1945 to 1979, however, they won six of the 11 elections -- although after the party lost three in a row in 1951, 1955 and 1959 some wondered whether

Labour would ever win again (Abrams, Rose and Hinden 1960). So why were the Conservatives the dominant force in UK politics, and by far the most successful electorally, for so much of the century? In part this reflected the electoral context: the replacement of the Liberals by Labour in the 1920s, the creation of the National Government by MacDonald in 1931, and the 'You've never had it so good' prosperity delivered by Macmillan's government in the late 1950s, when the Labour party was badly split, as it was again in the 1980s. Were the Conservatives aided further by the operation of the electoral system, thereby creating the large Conservative seats:votes ratios in the 1920s and 1930s (figure 3.2) and the pro-Conservative bias between 1935 and 1964 (figure 3.3)? And was that assistance serendipitous or planned for?

[Creating the Interacting Geographies: Constituency Delimitation

Some of the various trends outlined above favoured the Conservative party's campaigns for electoral support, whereas others operated somewhat to its disadvantage. But the extent of their impact depended on one of the key geographies introduced above -- that of the constituencies. Different sets of constituencies in an area can lead to significantly different election results -- even if the geography of party support in the building-blocks remains unchanged. The choice of when and how to change constituencies can be crucial to a party's chances in the translation of votes into seats.

The process of defining new constituencies -- what the British call redistribution and the Americans redistricting -- is open to abuse, as it is possible to so arrange the geography that one party is significantly advantaged. Two main abuses are widely recognized, notably, though not only, in the United States. The first is *malapportionment*, whereby constituencies of different size are created so that one party is strongest in areas with small constituencies (i.e. have a low average number of voters per constituency) whereas its opponent(s) are strongest in the areas with larger constituencies (on international patterns of malapportionment, see Samuels and Snyder 2001). A consequence of this difference is that it takes fewer votes to win a seat in the areas with smaller than with larger constituencies, so that the strong party in the former gets a greater return for its votes.

Malapportionment may be a deliberate strategy employed by those involved in constituency delimitation, or it may be that differences in constituency size determined for other reasons serendipitously favour one party over another. Furthermore, the distribution of voters across a set of constituencies is likely to change over time, as with the urbanization of the first half of twentieth-century Britain followed by counter-urbanization thereafter, and the patterns of population growth and decline may favour one party over another, in what might be termed *creeping malapportionment*. A party with major strengths in the rural areas would be advantaged by urbanization, therefore, as population decline there reduced the average constituency size, while increasing it in the urban areas that were attracting the immigrants. Creeping malapportionment can be halted by a redistribution, by redrawing the constituency map so as to remove the electoral inequalities induced by population movements.

The second major form of electoral abuse is *gerrymandering*, whereby -- even if constituencies are equal in size -- their boundaries are carefully delineated so as to create as many constituencies as possible that will be won by the party involved, or by the party supported by those in charge of the redistribution. Again, the strategic goal is to create an advantage for one party, giving it a better return on its votes won relative to its opponents. Gerrymanders come in two main forms. The stacked gerrymander involves the concentration of one party's voters into some constituencies, which it wins by very large majorities -- with many of its votes being surplus (i.e. do not bring returns in terms of seats won). The cracked gerrymander, on the other hand, involves so distributing a party's votes that it wins as many constituencies as possible, in most cases by fairly small margins. It therefore wastes relatively

few votes on seats that it loses, but opens itself to defeat in many of those that it wins if there is a swing of support away from it.

There is a major difference between these two strategies -- only one can be countered by explicit criteria. Malapportionment can be made illegal by requirements that all constituencies be the same size (or as equal as is practicable) -- as the United States Supreme Court required in a series of landmark decisions in the 1960s -- and creeping malapportionment can be reduced in its impact, though not totally removed, by regular redistributions, either at defined intervals or when the differences between constituencies exceed a pre-set threshold. Gerrymandering, on the other hand, cannot be eliminated from electoral systems which use the first-past-the-post method in single-member constituencies. Explicit gerrymandering by interested parties may be prohibited by preventing them from taking part in the redistribution process -- as with the use of independent Boundary Commissions in the United Kingdom since 1945 -- but, as Taylor and Gudgin (1975: 405--15) put it, 'all districting is gerrymandering'. The process of combining building-blocks into larger territorial units is, as they showed, almost certain to advantage one party over another and thereby produce the equivalent of a gerrymander -- an unintended gerrymander (Gudgin and Taylor 1979). In less pejorative terms (because gerrymandering implies corruption to some people, even though it was ruled entirely constitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 2001) the party benefiting from the gerrymander does so because its votes are more efficiently distributed than its opponents': fewer of them are either piled up as surplus votes in its safe seats or wasted in seats that it loses by relatively small margins.

Redistribution in the United Kingdom

So, has there been malapportionment and gerrymandering in the United Kingdom and, if so, have they contributed to the Conservative party's electoral success over the twentieth century? To answer that, it is necessary to appreciate the redistribution process, which was changed very significantly at mid-century.

Although the British electorate increased sevenfold during the nineteenth century, and population redistribution from rural to urban areas was extensive, there were only three redistributions of parliamentary constituencies then, each related to the major Reform Acts which extended the franchise. From the outset, there were massive variations in constituency size, with many boroughs (mainly small rural towns and villages -- the 'rotten boroughs') having electorates of less than 50. A major goal of each redistribution was to eliminate the smallest constituencies and achieve some level of equality. All of the major decisions were taken by Parliament, however, and so party considerations were uppermost in many minds. Furthermore, as seats were reallocated from the rural areas to the burgeoning industrial cities, so boundaries had to be drawn to encompass the new constituencies -- and in this there was a great deal of gerrymandering, notably by Lord Salisbury, leader of the Conservative party at the time of the 1885 redistribution, who had also been much involved in the preceding redistribution of 1866. Through detailed knowledge of the geography of voting, he was able to bargain with the Liberals for constituency boundaries which protected Conservative interests at a time when both franchise extension and population movements were running in a counter-direction (Salisbury 1884; Roberts 1999; Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999).

The first twentieth-century redistribution did not take place until 1919. In the interim, the Conservatives under Balfour had prepared for a redistribution in 1905, the main outcome of which would have been a reduction of seats in Ireland, from where the Home Rule parties traditionally supported the Liberals in the House of Commons, and an increase of about 20 for England, many of which could well have been won by the Conservatives -- especially as there was some gerrymandering of boundaries 'in order to secure a fairer grouping of areas in accordance with the general character of the population' (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999:

46--9). The government fell in 1906, however, and lost the subsequent election by a massive margin. The Conservatives had a large majority in the House of Commons after the 1900 election, but the party was badly split over the issue of tariff reform (figure 3.1b).

In the redistribution of 1917-19, a complicated matter involving several Acts, produced by a Liberal-led coalition, the detailed task of defining boundaries was delegated to commissions. Their prescribed goals embraced equality in electorates across constituencies, but there was also implicit gerrymandering, with the instructions including the requirements that: 'regard shall be had to ... size, to a proper representation of the urban and rural population, and to the distribution and pursuits of such population' (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999: 50).

Most of the new constituencies had populations of between 50,000 and 90,000, but variation within those limits was considerable. Within little more than a decade, creeping malapportionment was very substantial, and there was parliamentary pressure for a further redistribution in the mid-1930s, which the (Conservative) government declined to undertake.

The next, and by far the most significant, change came in 1944 as part of preparations for the post-war elections. A committee chaired by the Registrar General was established in 1942 to explore the many issues involved in modernizing the electoral system, with terms of reference including the redistribution process. Its report set out a series of principled recommendations, which included the need for regular reviews, for equality of electorates across constituencies, for use of the local government map as the template within which the geography of constituencies should be set, and for the appointment of independent commissions to undertake the reviews (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999). These were very largely accepted by a Speaker's Conference which reported in 1944, and were implemented in the, largely uncontroversial, House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1944. This was amended a number of times in successive decades. The anti-malapportionment clause was weakened early on, by a Labour administration. Inter-country malapportionment was introduced by the Conservatives in 1958 with guaranteed minimum numbers of seats for Scotland and Wales irrespective of population changes, alongside an amendment which reduced the need for reacting to 'mild' creeping malapportionment, in order to retain constituencies in which 'community ties' had been built. Some potential for gerrymandering was also incorporated in 1958 with the opportunity for political parties (and others) to contest the commissions' recommendations at public inquiries. However, the main features of the system remained in place for the remainder of the century, being consolidated in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986.

Identifying Electoral Bias

The Conservative century was therefore a game of two halves with regard to the procedures for defining parliamentary constituencies. How was the party affected by them, and how did it operate within them? To answer these questions, we apply methods that have previously been used to chart the nature of bias in the United Kingdom electoral system since the new procedures were put in place in 1944 (Johnston et al. 2001).

Effective, wasted and surplus votes

The goal for those involved in deliberately manipulating a constituency map for partisan gain, as described above, is to maximize the impact of their votes -- i.e. to get as many seats as possible for a given percentage of the votes -- and to minimize the impact of their opponents' votes. We can illustrate this by dividing all votes cast for a party into three types:

- 1 *Effective votes* -- those that help the party to win seats.
- 2 *Surplus votes* -- those that are surplus to requirements in the seats that it wins, and so do not help to deliver seats.
- 3 *Wasted votes* -- those won in constituencies where the party loses, and so play no part in delivering seats.

Thus in a constituency with 10,000 voters (none of whom abstain), where party A gets 6,800 votes and party B gets the remaining 3,200, all of B's votes are wasted. For A, 3,201 votes are needed for victory over B (i.e. are effective), and the remainder (3,599) are surplus. If the electoral system and the geography of votes are even-handed to both parties, then each should have a similar proportion of effective, wasted and surplus votes.

To test whether this was the case through the twentieth century, we have calculated the number of effective and surplus votes per seat won at each election for the Conservative party and its main opponent (Liberal before 1924, Labour thereafter) and the number of wasted votes per seat lost -- on the assumption that each party won the same proportion of the national vote total.⁵ We then expressed each figure for the Conservatives as a ratio of that for its main opponent. If the ratio of the two figures were 1.0, then there would be no malapportionment or gerrymandering-like bias effects: if it were greater or less than 1.0, one party would be advantaged over the other by the interaction of the two geographies. Figure 3.4a--c shows the trends for each of these ratios across the twentieth century.

[fig 3.4]

Parties are disadvantaged if they win too many surplus votes -- i.e. they have larger majorities in the seats that they win than their opponents do where they win, their seats:votes ratios are relatively small. In figure 3.4a a ratio of less than 1.0 indicates that the Conservative party is advantaged on this component (i.e. it had fewer surplus votes per seat won than Labour), which indeed was a characteristic for much of the century. Only in the period 1920--45 was it common for the Conservatives to win with larger majorities on average than their opponents -- no doubt a reflection of the inter-party contest on the left in the 1920s and, especially, the Labour party's problems in the early 1930s. With wasted votes, a ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that the Conservatives tend to waste more votes where they lost than their opponents did where they lost. Figure 3.4b shows that this was common after the mid-1920s: up until then, the Conservatives tended to waste more votes than their opponents; from then until the 1960s there was little difference between the two, but (with the exception of the first 1974 election) the next three decades were characterized by ratios below 1.0, indicating that Labour wasted on average more votes in the seats that it lost than the Conservatives did where they lost. The 1997 election saw a further shift, however, with the advantage switching to Labour -- an advantage that was extended in 2001 (Johnston et al. 2002).

The trend in effective votes (figure 3.4c) shows that the century's last four decades involved a substantial, and growing, anti-Conservative bias. Until the mid-1920s, the Conservatives had many fewer effective votes per seat won than the Liberals, suggesting that the Conservatives were strongest in the country's smaller constituencies, where fewer votes were needed for victory. In other words, because of the geography of their support, it took fewer votes to elect a Conservative MP than one of their opponents: these Conservative votes, of course, were concentrated in the depopulating rural areas. From the 1930s until the mid-1960s there was little difference between the two parties, but from then on the Conservative disadvantage was compounded: by the early 1990s they needed on average nearly 30 per cent more votes to win a seat than did Labour (i.e. ratios of *c.*1.3). The rural areas were being repopulated and the inner cities depopulated, to the Conservatives' detriment in electoral battles.

This interpretation is clarified by figure 3.5, which shows the trend in the ratio of average electorate in seats won by Conservatives to those won by its opponents: a ratio below 1.0 indicates that Conservative-held constituencies were smaller than Liberal-held seats (before 1920) or Labour-held seats (after 1920). At the century's first four elections, the Conservative strength in the declining rural heartlands gave it a significant advantage, which it had lost by the mid-1920s and which, from then until 1945 when many urban constituencies were small because of the consequences of the war, decentralization removed. For a short period in the 1950s the Conservatives regained the advantage, because the Boundary Commission for England operated -- under a Conservative government -- a policy of favouring the rural areas with slightly smaller constituencies than the urban, which it ended in the 1960s. The remainder of the century had the advantage very much with Labour, with the peak differences in 1970, 1979 and 1992 reflecting the impact of creeping malapportionment. Commission reviews after each of those elections reduced the size variation between constituencies, largely by reducing the number in (the mainly pro-Labour) urban areas and increasing the number in the rural districts.

[fig 3.5]

Bias and its components

Malapportionment and creeping malapportionment apparently characterized the British electoral system both before and after the reforms of 1944, therefore; but how important were they to Conservative success, both in absolute terms and relative to gerrymandering-like effects? To answer that, we assess bias with the simple metric introduced earlier -- the difference in the number of seats that the two parties would win if they had the same share of the votes cast -- which has the added advantage of being decomposable into malapportionment, gerrymandering (or efficiency) and other components. In these calculations, a positive bias indicates that the Conservatives would have won more seats than their main opponent with equal vote shares, with the reverse situation shown by a negative figure.

The overall trend in the volume and direction of bias, as already indicated (figure 3.3), shows that the Conservatives were the main beneficiaries of the electoral system's vagaries in translating votes into seats in two main periods: the first two decades, and the period from 1950 to 1970. In the intervening period, the system worked somewhat to the Conservatives' disadvantage, although the difference was never more than 40 seats. And then from the late 1960s onwards, the party's advantage (of up to 50 seats at its peak) was rapidly eroded, until 1997 when it suffered a disadvantage of 82 seats. In 2001 the figure was even greater at 141.

What part of this pattern relates to malapportionment? Figure 3.6a shows the volume of bias due to the malapportionment component, which measures the impact on the number of seats won (at equal vote shares) of variations in electorate size. In the first quarter of the century, the Conservatives benefited from this component because of their strength in the depopulating rural areas, but as the inner cities began to decline in population so the bias shifted to favour Labour. Since the implementation of the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1944, however, one of the main purposes of the Boundary Commissions' regular reviews has been to counter growing variations. Creeping malapportionment restarts after each review, with new constituencies used at the general elections of 1955, 1974 (February), 1983 and 1997. Each review reduced the pro-Labour malapportionment bias, which increased again at subsequent elections.

[fig 3.6]

As noted earlier, malapportionment may be at least partly built in to an electoral system, if the average size of constituencies varies between different areas and one party is stronger in the areas with smaller constituencies. The 1944 Act guaranteed Scotland and Wales a minimum number of constituencies, and the 1958 amendment ensured that this meant -- given the relative patterns of population change between those two countries, on the one hand, and England, on the other -- that constituencies in Scotland and Wales would be relatively smaller than those in England (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999). Labour has increasingly outvoted the Conservatives in those two countries since 1950, and this has produced a bias of up to 14 seats in its favour, out of the total shown in figure 3.6a. The Conservatives lost out to Labour both through the 'over-representation' of Scotland and Wales in the House of Commons and through the process of creeping malapportionment within each of the three countries.

The gerrymander component of electoral bias is a consequence of different patterns of surplus and wasted votes between the two main parties: the smaller the number of each that a party gets, the better its performance, because its vote distribution is more efficient. In the first half of the century, the Conservatives were generally disadvantaged by this -- especially in the 1920s -- but for much of the second half the situation was reversed (figure 3.6b). The work of the Boundary Commissions involved the production of unintentional gerrymanders, which Gudgin and Taylor (1979) showed tend to favour Labour in the large cities and the Conservatives elsewhere, with the latter being the net beneficiary, largely because its candidates won by smaller majorities than did its Labour opponents where they won. The 1997 election was a major deviation from this pattern, however -- a point to which we return below.

There is a third set of sources of electoral bias, what we have termed *reactive malapportionment* (Johnston et al. 2001). These result from the impact of other aspects of voting behaviour. Two of them in effect reduce the number of votes one of the main parties needs to win a seat -- and therefore operate in the same way as classical malapportionment. The first is the number of abstentions: the more of these there are in a constituency, the fewer votes are needed to win there, so that a party which is strong in areas with high abstention levels is advantaged (according to our bias measure) relative to one which is strongest where turnout is high. And if turnout falls unevenly -- as has been the case in recent decades -- then the party which is strongest where it falls most will reap even greater advantages. The second operates in exactly the same way; the larger the number of votes for a minor party, the smaller the number of votes needed for victory by one of the other parties, so that the one which is strongest where a minor party or parties perform best will reap an advantage -- unless a minor party wins, in which case this will disadvantage the stronger of the two main parties (the third reactive malapportionment component).

The geography of abstentions largely favoured the Conservatives in the first half of the century -- due to lower turnout rates in rural areas. But over the last five decades, the abstentions component produced an anti-Conservative bias (figure 3.7a): turnout was consistently lower in Labour- than in Conservative-held seats. Furthermore, as turnout nationally declined from 84.1 per cent in Great Britain in 1950 to 71.4 per cent in 1997, so Labour's advantage increased: exceeding 10 seats for the first time in 1964, and reaching 25 by 1997. Many Labour-held seats were very safe for the party: there was little incentive for individuals (especially those not very interested in politics) to go to the polling booth, and increasingly Labour did little to mobilize their support, spending much less on campaigning in its safe seats than the Conservatives did in theirs (Denver and Hands 1997; Johnston et al. 2001).

[fig 3.7]

The disadvantage that the Conservatives suffered from the abstentions component of reactive malapportionment was countered by the minor-party votes element, which operated in its favour virtually throughout the century (figure 3.7b). There was an early peak in the 1920s, when Labour was replacing the Liberals as the second party and the two parties split the anti-Conservative vote in many constituencies, making them relatively easy for the Tories to win. It then increased rapidly from the 1960s on, as the Liberal revival (plus, to a lesser extent, that of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru in the non-industrial areas of Scotland and Wales) reduced the average majority needed to win in many Conservative-held seats more so than it did in those held by Labour; the Liberals and their allies became the main opposition party in much of the Conservative-held south of England (Johnston, Pattie and Allsopp 1988). However, when those minor parties won seats (in the 1920s and the 1980s--1990s), most of them would otherwise have been won by the Conservatives, which was a bias advantage for Labour (the wins component in figure 3.7b). The net pro-Conservative bias from these two minor-party components combined was largest in the 1970s (figure 3.7b), when the minor parties won many votes (up to one-quarter of the total) but few seats (never more than 10 per cent); as the minor parties won more seats, so the net advantage to the Conservatives declined, to virtually zero by 1997.

Conclusions

“No other party [than the British Conservatives] in a Western democracy can rival its electoral and campaigning record.” (Davies 1995:196)

But to what extent can that record -- no longer sustainable after the comprehensive defeats of 1997 and 2001 -- be linked to the operation of the British electoral system? And did the Conservatives manipulate that system to their own ends, or were any benefits gained serendipitous?

In the first part of the twentieth century the system largely worked to the Conservatives' advantage. They were strongest in the areas with the smallest constituencies, had their support more effectively distributed throughout the country (with no major concentrations of surplus or wasted votes), and benefited when the Liberal and Labour parties split the opposition vote during the 1920s. There was no need for the Conservatives to do anything to the electoral system -- and they didn't, with the 1918 redistribution being implemented by a Liberal-led coalition. (Although the Conservatives did consider shifting a substantial number of seats from Ireland to England in 1905 to bolster their cause.) The system put in place by Lord Salisbury in the nineteenth century continued to serve them well, despite the extension of the franchise -- but whether this lack of concern to change the pattern of constituencies was intentional or occurred by default is difficult to tell.

During the 1930s, the Conservative government declined to introduce a redistribution which may have aided Labour, since the largest constituencies were by then in the urban areas. But when a number of important electoral issues needed resolution ready for the first election after the Second World War, the Conservative-led coalition acquiesced in the introduction of a regular series of independent redistributions, as the result of an independent inquiry chaired by the Registrar General. This was followed by a Speaker's Conference chaired by an erstwhile Conservative MP, which included a number of members who had been promoting redistribution in the 1930s, and then a Bill which encountered little opposition in the House of Commons. The party may have felt that it would be the main beneficiary of such regular reviews, because they would remove the creeping malapportionment which, with urban depopulation, was likely to benefit the Labour party over time. Indeed, it became part of the conventional wisdom during the 1950s--1980s that the Conservatives usually benefited by up to 20 seats from any redistribution, and it was this belief that led the party to bring forward the next redistribution in 1992 to ensure that new constituencies were available before the next general election (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999).

What the Conservatives didn't realize, however, was that this apparently inbuilt benefit from redistribution could be countered by detailed presentation of pro-Labour cases during the public consultation process -- which the Conservative government made much more important in its 1958 amendments. In the 'battle of the boundaries' during the Fourth Periodic Review (1991--5) Labour very successfully outflanked the Conservatives in several parts of the country, effectively achieving gerrymanders there by convincing the Commissioners of the validity of their alternative configurations for some constituencies. Furthermore, in the late 1980s Labour realized that once a set of constituencies had been established, careful targeting of voter mobilization can influence the outcome very substantially. There was little point in pressing for high levels of turnout in safe Labour seats, merely to garner more surplus votes; nor was there much point in pressing Labour supporters to go to the polls in safe Conservative seats, only to accumulate a few more wasted votes. Focused campaigning in marginal seats, perhaps assisted by anti-Conservative tactical voting in constituencies where Liberal Democrats had the best chances, was the basis of Labour's strategy in the 1990s (and 2001), whereas the Conservatives continued to activate their formidable electoral machine (aided by their greater financial resources) in places where more votes would not be effective. As a result, Labour was able to achieve a major change in the direction and volume of the gerrymander bias component in the 1990s, as well as gaining from the lower turnout (because many of the increased abstentions were in safe Labour seats).

In general, therefore, for much of the century the Conservatives took little interest in the details of the operation of the electoral system bequeathed them by Lord Salisbury. They were complacent, assuming that the major change of regular redistributions introduced in the 1940s would benefit them, and not being aware that carefully crafted strategies of operating both on and within those redistributions could work to their opponents' benefit. That complacency even included the guarantee of a minimum number of seats for Scotland and Wales, introduced in 1944 and in effect extended in 1958, which was then declared a 'political no-go area' in the 1980s (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie 1999). Wales was already a very strongly pro-Labour area by the 1950s, Labour winning over 50 per cent of the votes cast there at the majority of elections post-1945; Scotland did not become so until the 1970s. Granting and then sustaining over-representation for Scotland and Wales ceded an electoral advantage to Labour which became enhanced over subsequent decades.

So, the Conservative century was assisted by the operations of the electoral system, but without the party doing much to enhance that. Largely through complacency, it seems, the Conservatives assumed that they would benefit from the system's quirks -- and for much of the time they did. But when, in the last decade, their opponents pierced that bubble of complacency, the Conservatives in 1997 and 2001 suffered two of their worst election defeats ever. They realized, after Labour had proved the point beyond doubt, that geography matters in the conduct of British elections.

Notes

- 1 In 1906 the Conservative party won 16 seats in Ireland, which returned 101 MPs then. If just Great Britain is considered, then the party won 25 per cent of the seats.
- 2 In 1923 the Conservative party got 38.1 per cent of the votes cast but 42 per cent of the seats.
- 3 Such information is never available to the parties, although the major competitors develop databases from their canvassing which identify (to the extent that voters will tell them) where their supporters live. Official records provide no data on voting patterns below the level of the constituency for parliamentary elections and the ward for local government elections.
- 4 There was also a small number of electors who, until 1949, had two -- and in some cases three -- votes: as well as the constituency in which they resided they could also vote for a representative of the university from which they graduated and/or as a member of the business roll.
- 5 As in all of the calculations reported here, these figures relate only to the constituencies contested by both of the main parties at the relevant election, since it is very difficult -- especially for elections early in the century -- to estimate what the number of votes won by the various parties would have been if they had been contested. The number of uncontested seats declined during the first half of the century. There were over 150 uncontested seats at the 1900 election, but this fell to 32 in 1906 and just 9 in the first (January) 1910 contest. It was 93 at the second (December) 1910 election but then less than 50 at each of the four contests in the 1920s and the two in the 1930s. There were just two uncontested seats in 1945 and none from 1950--1951 on (save those being contested by the incumbent Speaker). It is our guess -- but no more -- that a majority of the uncontested seats in the early part of the century were both small and Conservative strongholds.

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