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# 7: Politics

Politics has been reserved for the final chapter because the maps here do not show something about how people live, but something about what people think about how they live, what they believe in and how they want things to change. For mapping purposes this chapter concentrates on a single aspect of politics — electoral geography. Although there are many surveys which, unlike the census, ask people for their opinions on society, and many studies have been conducted on how government operates in different areas, none of these sources contains sufficient information to be comparable with the detailed human geography shown so far. The one consistent clue to political opinions which is available across many small areas is how people choose to vote in elections.

Electoral geography uses terms which are not always clearly understood and so are defined here. *Electors* are people who have the right to vote. In Britain this includes almost all adults with a few exceptions (for instance peers and adults committed involuntarily to psychiatric hospitals). However, to be able to vote, an elector must be *registered* by having completed a form stating where he or she lives, and by having lived there for a short length of time. The group of electors who are registered are called the *electorate*. The process of election is often termed the *poll*, meaning "the counting of voters". However, that term can also be used to mean the number of votes a candidate receives. To avoid ambiguity the phrase *the vote* is used here to mean the sum of all votes won by all candidates standing. All those electors who did not vote in an election are said to have *abstained*. The words *margin* or *majority* are used to mean the number of votes by which an election was won. In the British first past the post system this is the difference between the votes for the first and second placed candidates. Candidates usually stand for the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrat party, the Scottish Nationalist Party or Plaid Cymru (the last two are combined from here on as *Nationalists*). Votes for all other parties are combined in the analyses which follow and are labelled *other parties*, except for votes for candidates standing for the Social Democrats, Alliance or Liberals which are combined with the Liberal Democrat vote and labelled as *Liberal parties* or *Liberal* from here on. Elections are either local or general. In local elections each candidate contests a ward to be elected to the local council. In general elections each successful candidate represents a parliamentary constituency (consisting of well over a dozen wards) and is elected to national government.

The primary purpose of elections is, of course, not to elicit political views but to create governments, either local or national. It is important to bear this in mind when viewing each map. Electors in Britain are often presented with a very limited choice of candidates to vote for, and so voting figures can reflect the political options which voters had when they voted, as much as their opinions. For instance, in many local elections only two candidates stand. Although it is interesting to look at the share of the vote gained by each party in each place (bearing in mind these constraints), under the electoral system in Britain only the party polling most votes in each ward or constituency wins. Thus the most important electoral map is that of which party won in each area and so the chapter begins by showing this distribution of party strength for the results of all local elections held in wards immediately preceding the 1991 census. The results of all general elections since 1955 are mapped at the parliamentary constituency level later.

People can vote only if they are registered as electors and so an attempt is next made to estimate how many adults are not registered in each ward. In many wards more than one adult in ten is not registered to vote. The importance of low rates of electoral registration in determining which party wins an election is returned to at the end of the chapter. For those adults who can vote, the pattern of their votes is then examined for each of the three main political parties at British local elections and for all other parties combined. An indication of how the political geography of Britain may be changing is shown by the change in votes for each party in local elections since the census. Similarly, the map and recent pattern of change is drawn for the electorate who choose to abstain at local elections. Each of these patterns is also shown at the district level, as it is for the election of district local authorities that these elections are held.

The local election data used in this atlas only cover the period 1987 to 1994. To be able to look at longer term changes, and at results which affect the national government of Britain, general elections have to be studied. The results of all general elections which took place from 1955 to 1992 have been collected at the level of the parliamentary constituencies in which they were held. The second half of this chapter maps these elections in a variety of ways using cartograms based on constituencies. The number and size (electorate) of constituencies changes over time and so the cartograms drawn here change shape slightly between each pair of elections. Constituencies are drawn as hexagons rather than as circles which were used in the district cartograms (see index maps). The patterns of which party won and which party came second in each seat at each election are drawn, as well as the changing geographical distribution of abstentions. The chapter ends by looking in detail at the most recent changes between the general elections of 1987 and 1992 and then at the pattern of marginal seats which those changes produced. The future electoral map of Britain is considered by speculating over how individual voters will react to the changes that have occurred in their lives over recent years and on how the geographical patterns which those changes followed translate onto the electoral map of Britain. How are political changes related to the shifts in where and how people choose to live, how they are housed, how they work, in their health and in changes to the social structure of this country as a whole?

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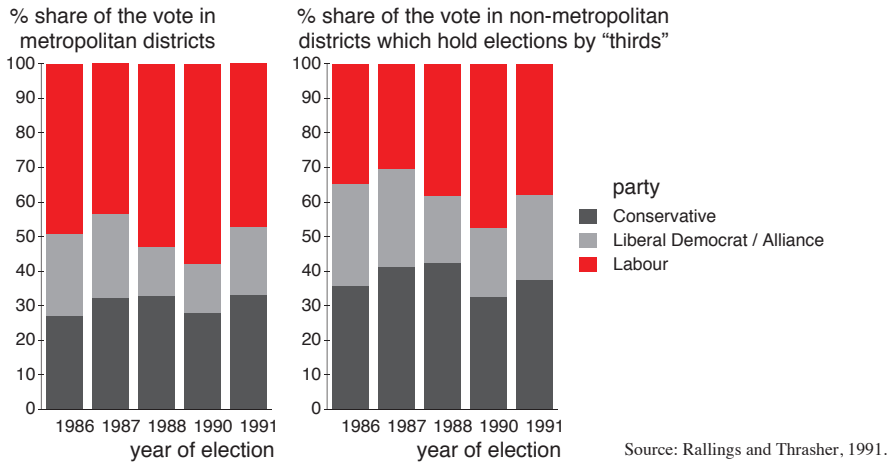
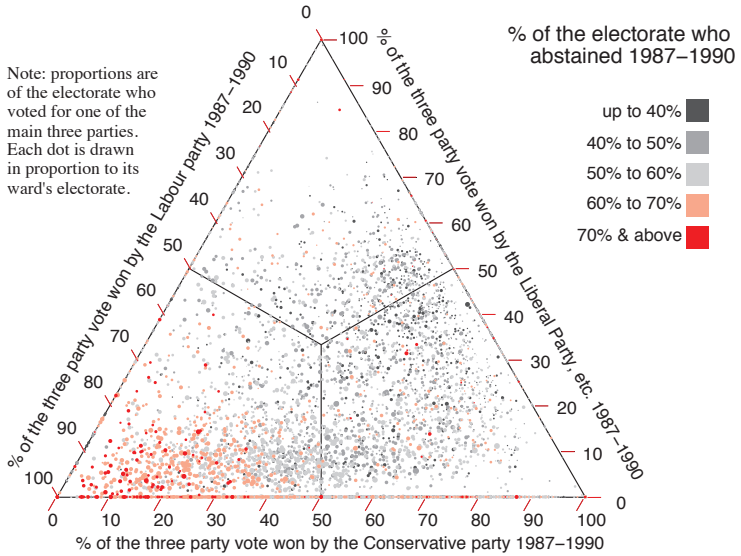
**7.1: Share of the Vote Won at Local Elections in England and Wales 1986–1991**




Source: Rallings and Thrasher, 1991.

**7.2: Distribution of the Three Party Vote in England and Wales by Ward**




## Winning Party

Local election results are not simple to map. This is because these elections are held at different times in different parts of the country and because more than one candidate can be elected from some wards. To alleviate these problems the votes in all local elections which took place in each ward between 1987 and 1990 have been combined here, as have the votes for all candidates standing for the same party in a ward. The result is to produce a single set of results, as if each and every ward had had just one local election with just one candidate standing for each party. This produces an election result simple enough to map, which also smoothes out minor changes.

Figure 7.1 shows the national share of the vote between the three main parties at the local elections held each year between 1986 and 1991 in both metropolitan districts which (apart from London boroughs) hold elections three years out of four, and in those non-metropolitan districts which also observe this pattern of voting. In 1989, local voting was for county councils and so has not been included. The graph shows that between each of the three years combined here, the Labour share of the three party vote increased and the Conservative and Liberal shares of the vote decreased. However, taken together, the average of these three years is representative of the general level of support each party had among the electorate during the second half of the last decade.

The ordinary map of which party had the most votes in each ward is dominated by the colours of the Conservative and other parties (which here include the Nationalists). In many wards in rural parts of England and Wales no Conservative candidate stands, but an "un-aligned" candidate is voted in who subsequently votes with Conservative members in the local council, thus the map can be misleading. Most misleading, however, is the use of an equal-area base to map election results. The cartogram demonstrates this, making visible the 42% of people who were living in wards in which the Labour party won most votes. In this data set results were not recorded for wards in the Scottish Islands, the Scilly Isles or in the City of London. These are areas which contain a tiny proportion of the electorate but one of which covers a significant land area.

How comfortably each ward is won by a particular party varies from place to place and Figure 7.2 shows how the distribution of votes within wards were shared between the three main parties. Each ward is shown as a dot in the *electoral triangle*. From the position of the ward the vote shares can be read off. The overall pattern of dots gives a picture of how much wards vary between each other in the performance of each party. There are distinct clusters of wards around the axis which separates seats won by either the Conservative or the Liberal parties, and around the Labour/Conservative axis. The figure also shows the average level of abstention in each ward at these elections. Abstentions can be seen to be at high levels in many of the safe Labour wards which occupy the bottom left-hand corner of the electoral triangle.

## Winner 1987–1990

party position in ward

party winning most votes in each ward

| | |
|---|---|
| Conservative party | 47 |
| Liberal Democrat, etc. | 5 |
| not recorded | 2 |
| other parties | 36 |
| Labour party | 10 |

% of the land area of Britain

Scale

= 1000 km²

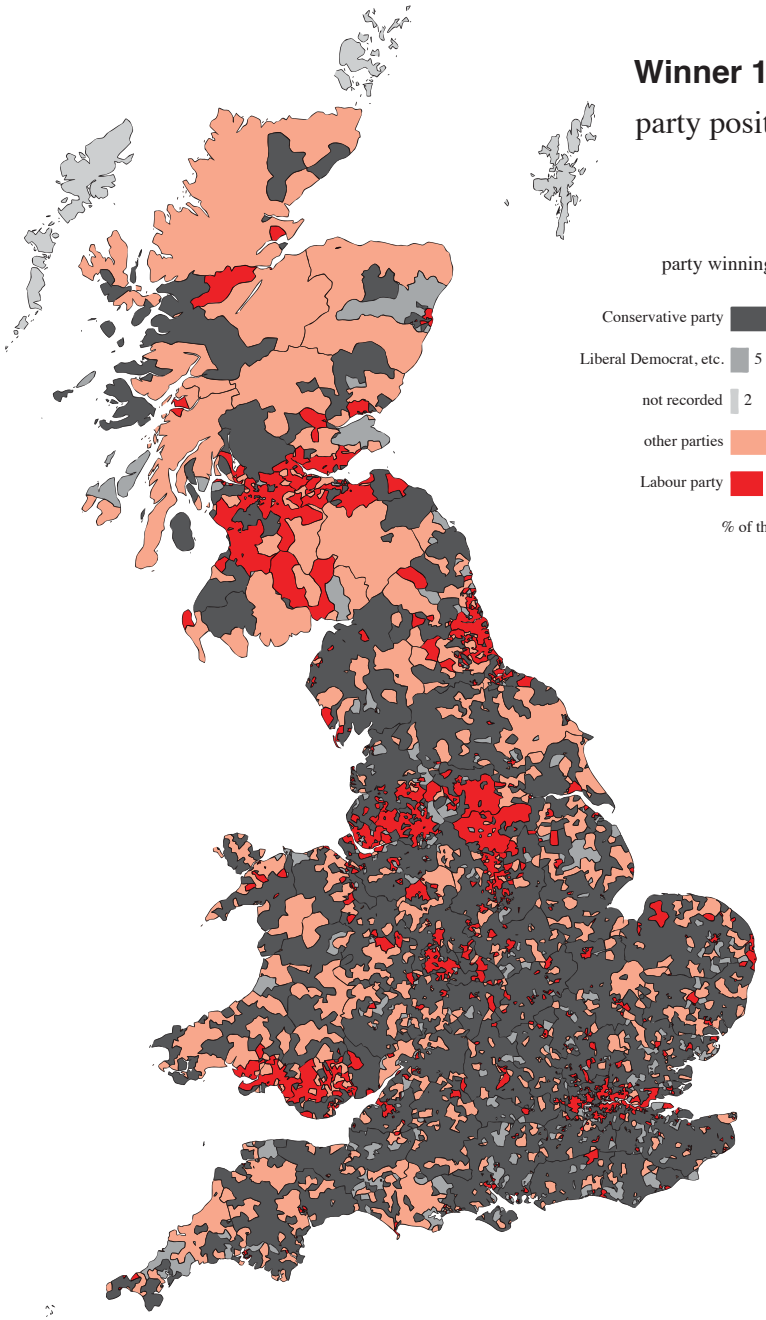
party winning most votes in each ward

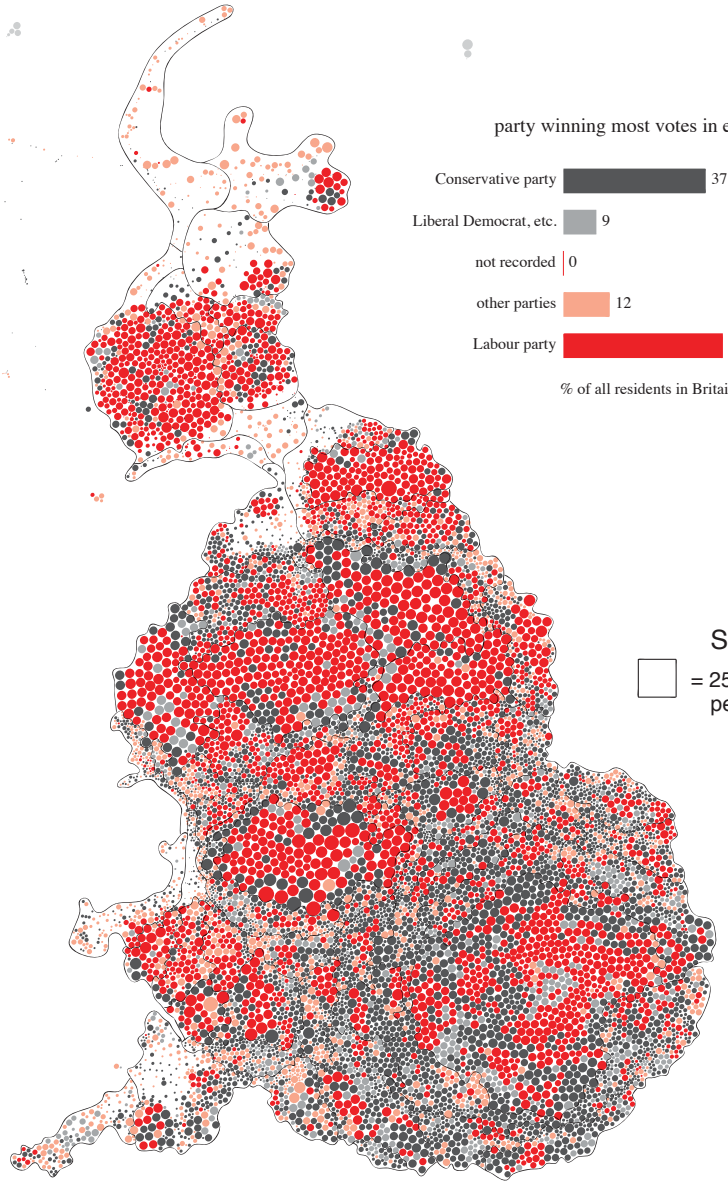
| | |
|---|---|
| Conservative party | 37 |
| Liberal Democrat, etc. | 9 |
| not recorded | 0 |
| other parties | 12 |
| Labour party | 42 |

% of all residents in Britain

Scale

= 250 000 people





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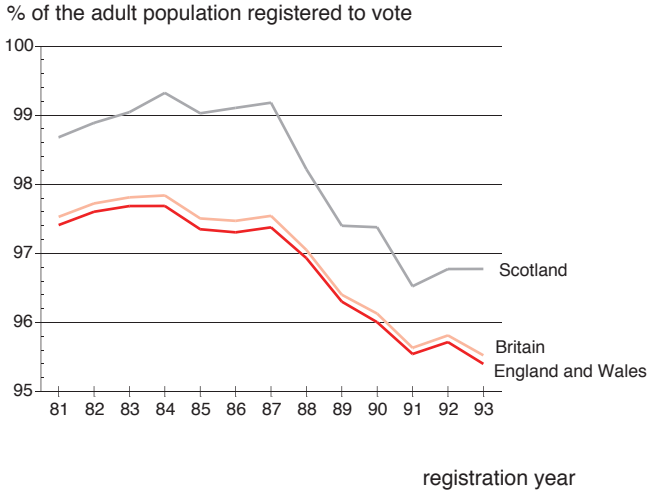
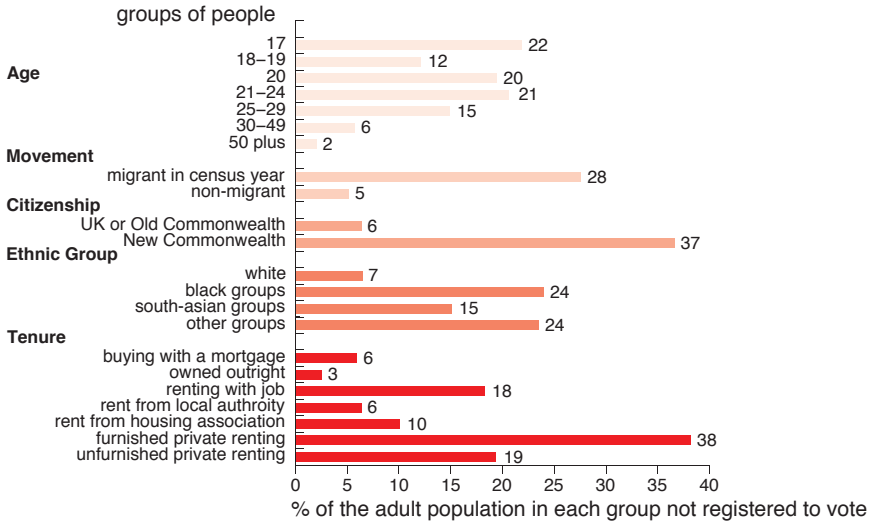
**7.3: Voter Registration by Country in Britain 1981–1993**




Source: OPCS, 1993, Electoral Statistics no. 20, Appendix B, London: HMSO

**7.4: Voter Registration in Britain by Characteristics of Voters 1991**




Source: Smith, 1993, Electoral Registration in 1991, London: HMSO.

## Electoral Registration

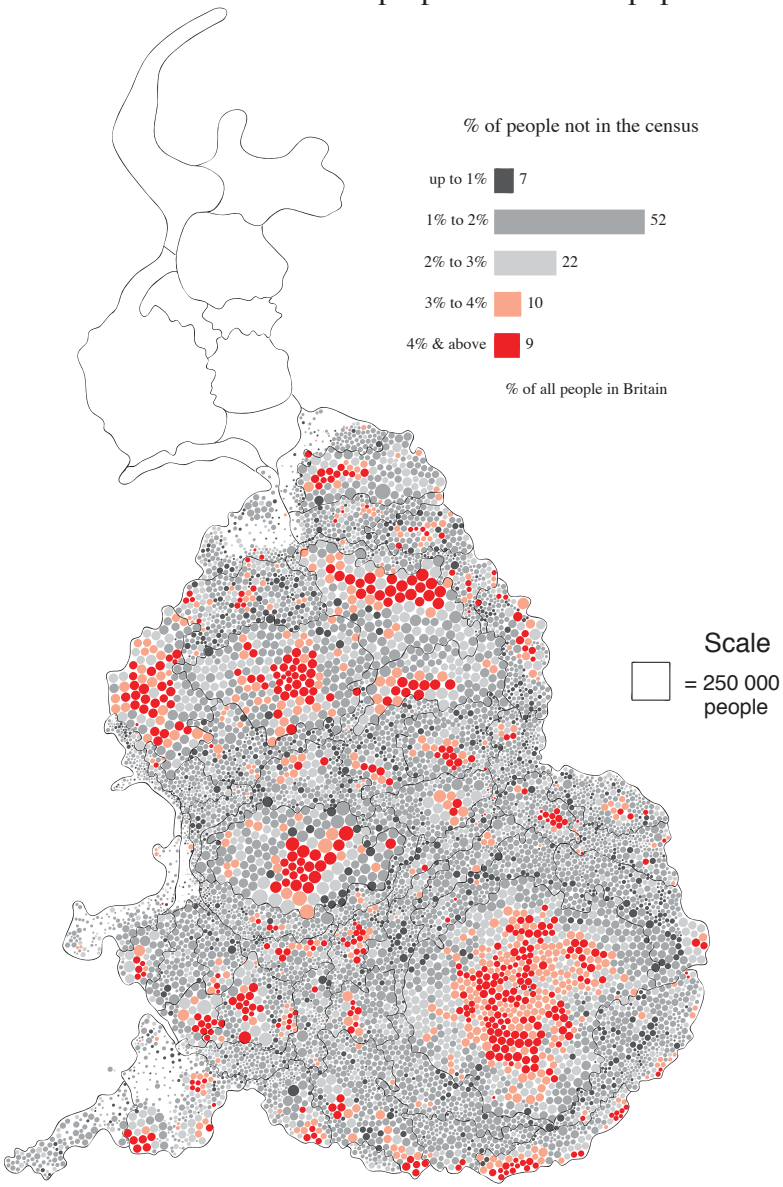
In 1991 almost two million adults eligible to be on the electoral register were not registered to vote in Britain (OPCS 1993). This has been the result of a steady rise in the proportion of all eligible adults not registered to vote since the early 1980s, a rise which may have been accelerated by the introduction of the poll tax (in 1989 in Scotland and in 1990 in England and Wales, see Figure 7.3). The unadjusted census results cannot be used to find where these non-registered adults live because the census itself failed to enumerate over a million adults in Britain (see Figure 1.10). However, recent research has been conducted to estimate where the people missing from the census lived (Simpson 1994). This research has assigned those people estimated to be missing from the census in each district (subdivided by age and sex) to the wards within each district. Using the preliminary results of this work, which does not cover Scotland, the first map opposite has been drawn. This map shows the net proportion of people living in each ward in 1991 who were not recorded as being residents of that ward by the census. *People* is used to mean everyone living in an area regardless of whether they were recorded as resident in the census. There is a clear geographical pattern as to who has been excluded from the census, although in no ward was under-enumeration estimated to exceed 10%.

The second map opposite compares the number of people living in each ward aged 20 or over with the average number of adults registered to vote in local elections in the 1991 to 1994 period. The age limit of 20 was chosen rather than 18 because the preliminary population estimates divide the population up by five year age bands. In simple terms, therefore, the electorate should always be higher than this subset of adults. However, it is possible for adults to be registered to vote in more than one place and for members of the armed forces not to be registered to vote where they are living. So the number of electors could be much higher or lower than the number of adults in any area, despite no people ineligible to vote being registered. Even given this situation, however, the pattern in the map cannot easily be explained. In central London, Liverpool, Leicester and in much of Wales and Bristol over 10% of the adult population are not registered to vote. Conversely, in central Birmingham, Manchester and Tyneside there are at least 10% more electors than these adults. This may be because the electoral register was more out of date in those latter areas and contained many people who had migrated since registration. These areas also contain many students aged 18 or 19 who were eligible to vote but who would be excluded from the count of adults aged over 19 which is used here (see page 33, Figure 7.19). Reconciling adults and voters is not a simple process.

It is possible to gain an impression of what kind of adults are likely not to be registered nationally from a random sample that was taken from the 1991 census forms of people who were eligible to register. This sample was checked against the electoral register (Smith 1993). A summary of the results of the study are shown in Figure 7.4.

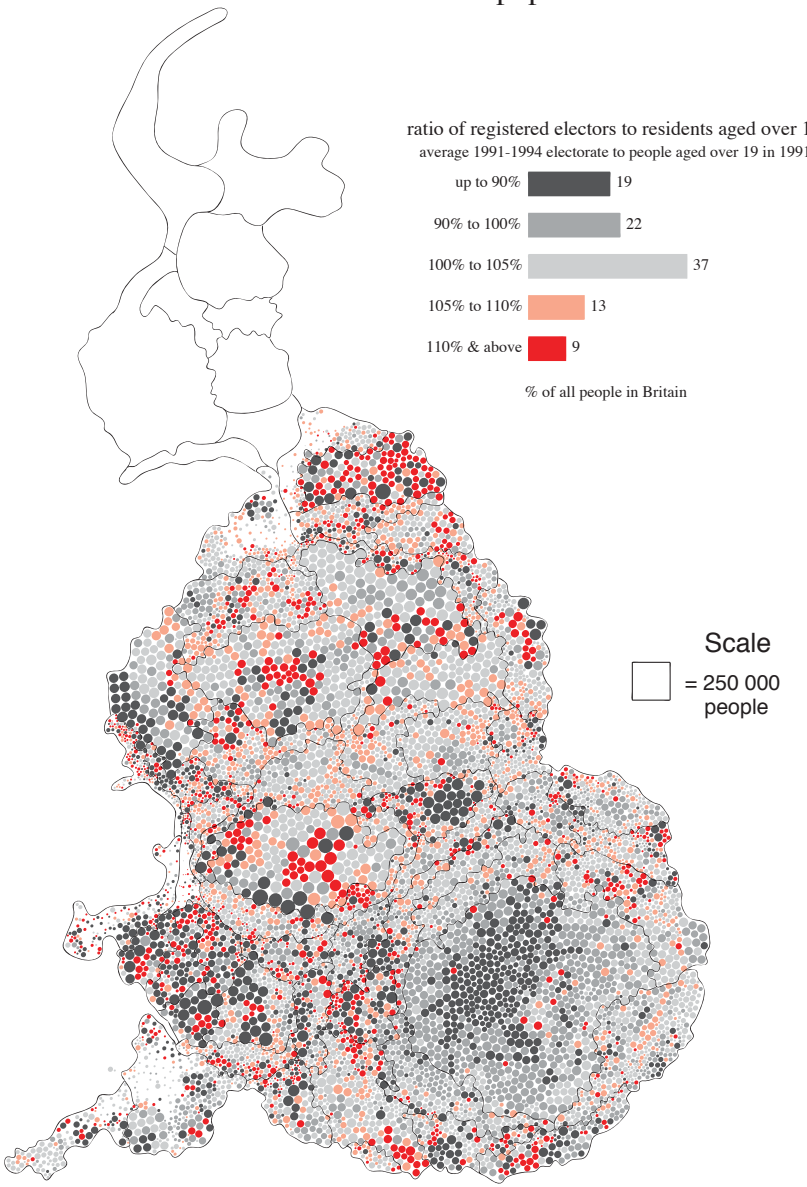
## Missing Million in 1991

proportion of ward populations




## Electors Registered 1991

ratio of ward populations



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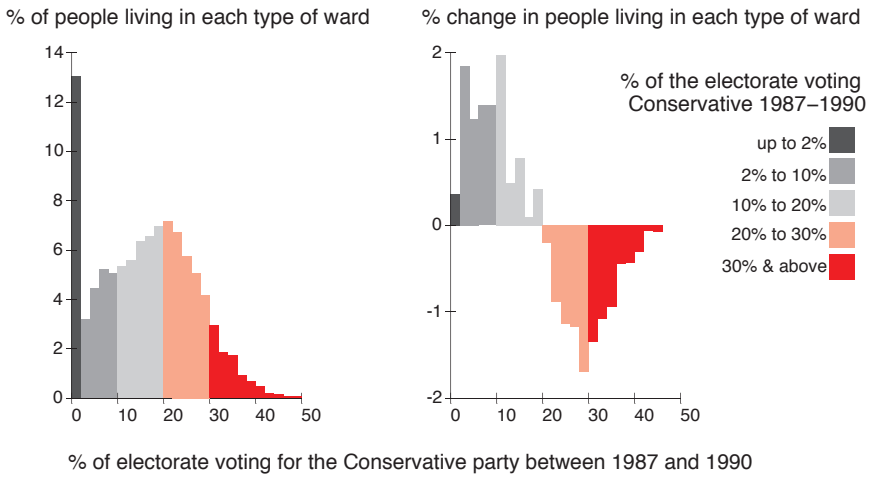
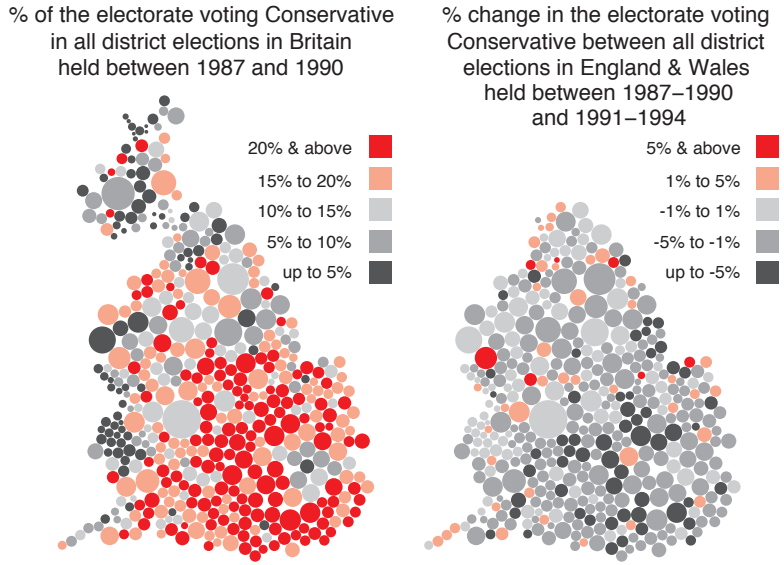
**7.5: Conservative Vote in England and Wales by Ward 1987–1990, 1987–1990 to 1991–1994**




**7.6: Conservative Vote by District 1987–1990 and Change in the Vote to 1991–1994**




## Conservative Vote

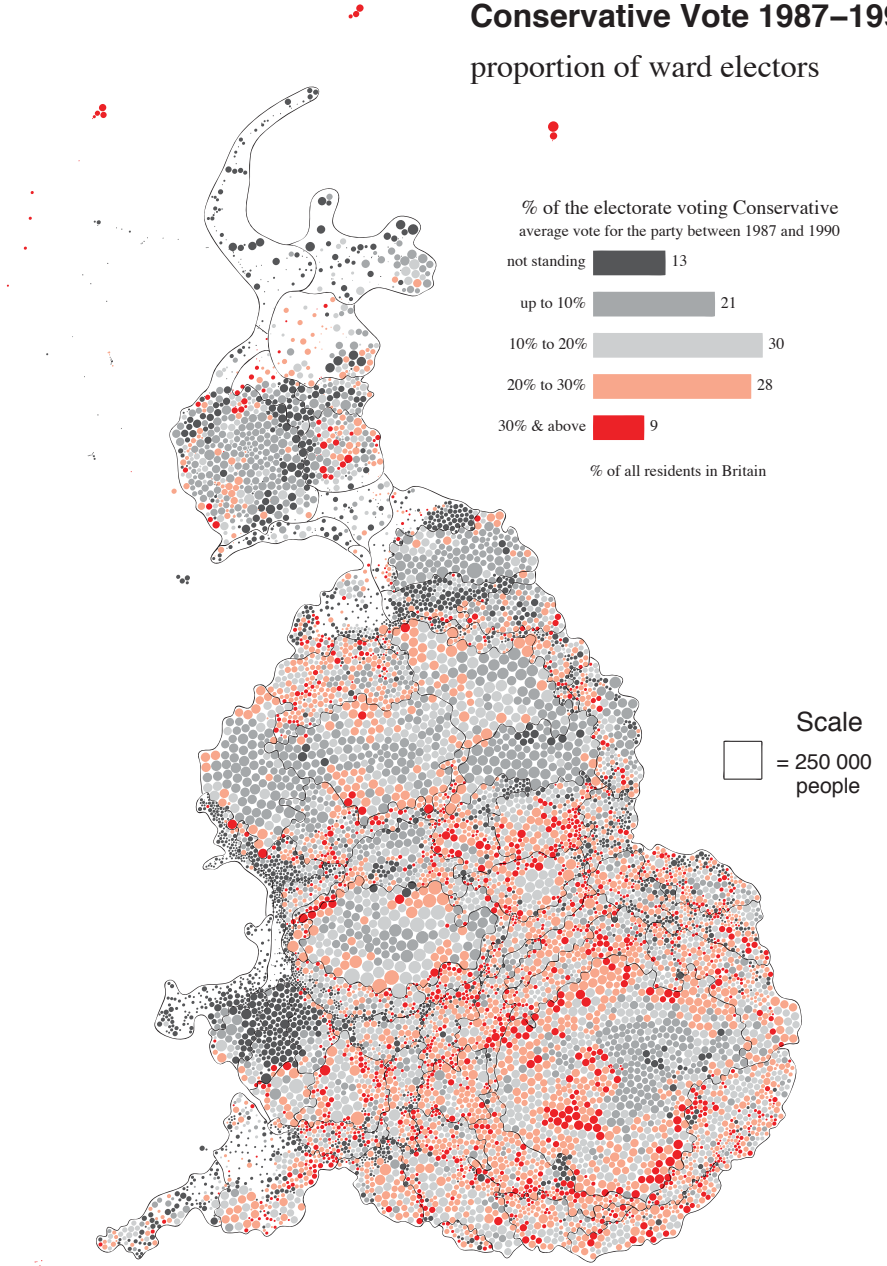
Of those adults who were eligible to vote, under 16% voted for a candidate standing for the Conservative party at local elections across all of Britain between 1987 and 1990. It is important to remember that only a minority of electors vote in local elections and that many Conservative party supporters vote for candidates who do not label themselves as Conservative at local elections. The first map opposite shows where those voters who did vote for a Conservative candidate lived. The areas in which no Conservative stood and where 13% of the population lived, such as much of Wales, contain most of the "unlabelled Conservatives". There is a distinct geography to the places where this party enjoys the support of more than a fifth of the electorate locally. This map contains a pattern similar to that of managers & professionals shown on page 191, and to the distribution of wealth shown on page 203, but discrepancies to the general trend for the more affluent to vote for the Conservative party can be found across the country.

The second map opposite shows the change in the proportion of the electorate voting for this party between the averaged result of the 1987 to 1990 set of elections and the average of the subsequent 1991 to 1994 set. The map excludes Scotland because recent local voting data were not available for that country at the time of writing. In England and Wales as a whole the Conservative share of the electorate fell from 16% to 14% in four years. The map shows some very clear patterns emerging from a variable which expresses the short-term change in the support gained from a minority of the population. The Conservatives can be seen to have suffered their highest losses in Outer London while increasing their vote most strongly in parts of the West Midlands, the Wirral and in several isolated clusters of wards grouped in particular districts. Figure 7.5 shows the changing distribution of the electorate voting for this party in graphical form, the first graph illustrating that the modal share of the electorate voting Conservative by ward was between 20% and 22% in the 1987–1990 period. The second graph in the figure shows how the proportion of the electorate living in wards grouped by (2% bands of) the Conservative vote changed in the four year period following the census. More people now live in wards in which the Conservatives win less than 20% of the electorate, and less people live in each category of ward in which they win a higher proportion than this due to the fall in their support over the period studied. The graph shows the effect of an aggregate decline in the Conservative vote in most wards in England and Wales.

The bunching of wards exhibiting similar changes into district groups on the far map opposite stresses the importance of local government and party organization in voting. For instance, electors may be more willing to vote where their vote has more chance of changing the composition of the council. Figure 7.6 shows the distribution and change in the Conservative poll aggregated to each district. A simpler pattern to that of the detailed ward level is revealed. This can be compared with other district level changes.

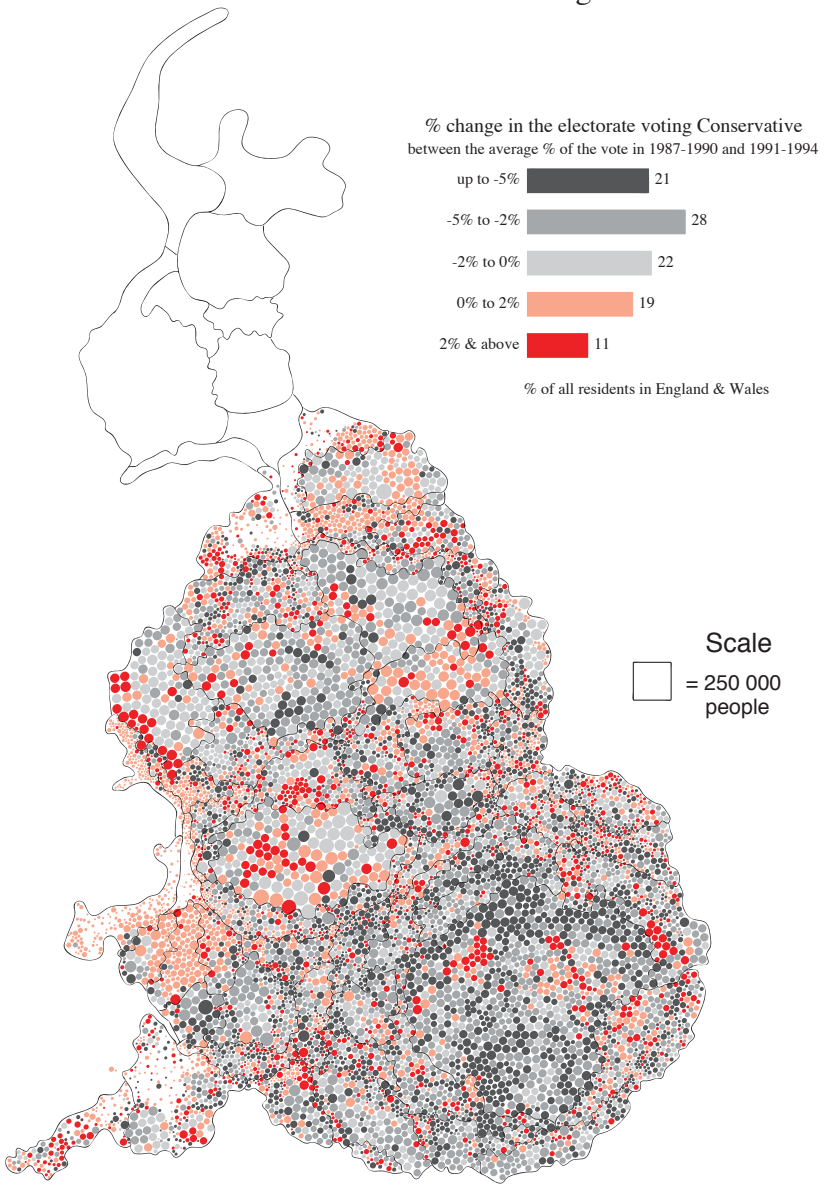
## Conservative Vote 1987–1990

proportion of ward electors




## Conservative Vote 1987–1990 to 1991–1994

change in ward electors



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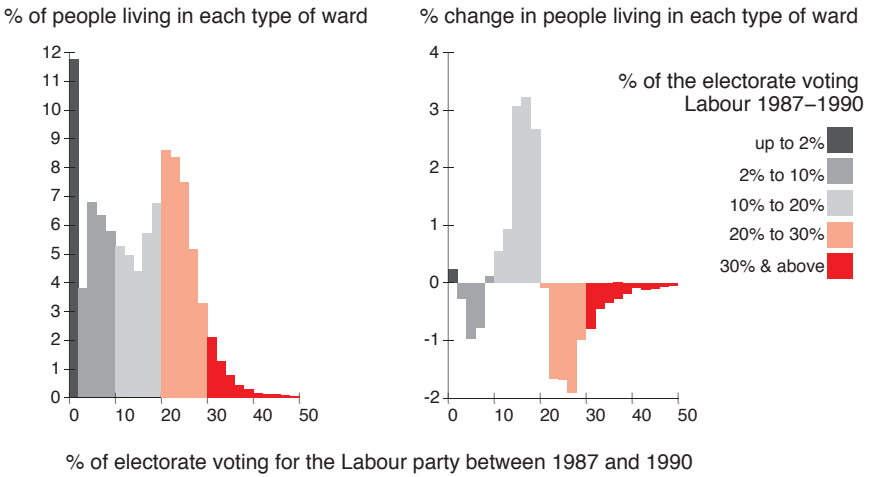
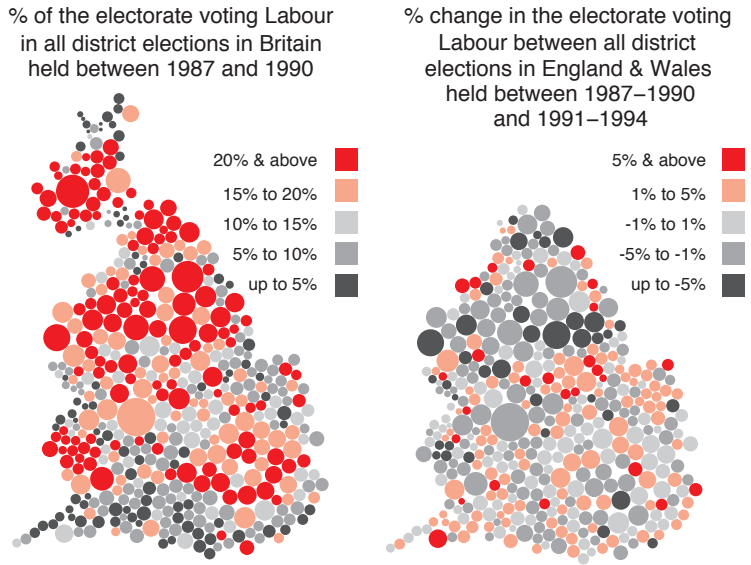
**7.7: Labour Vote in England and Wales by Ward 1987–1990, 1987–1990 to 1991–1994**




**7.8: Labour Vote by District 1987–1990 and Change in the Vote to 1991–1994**




## Labour Vote

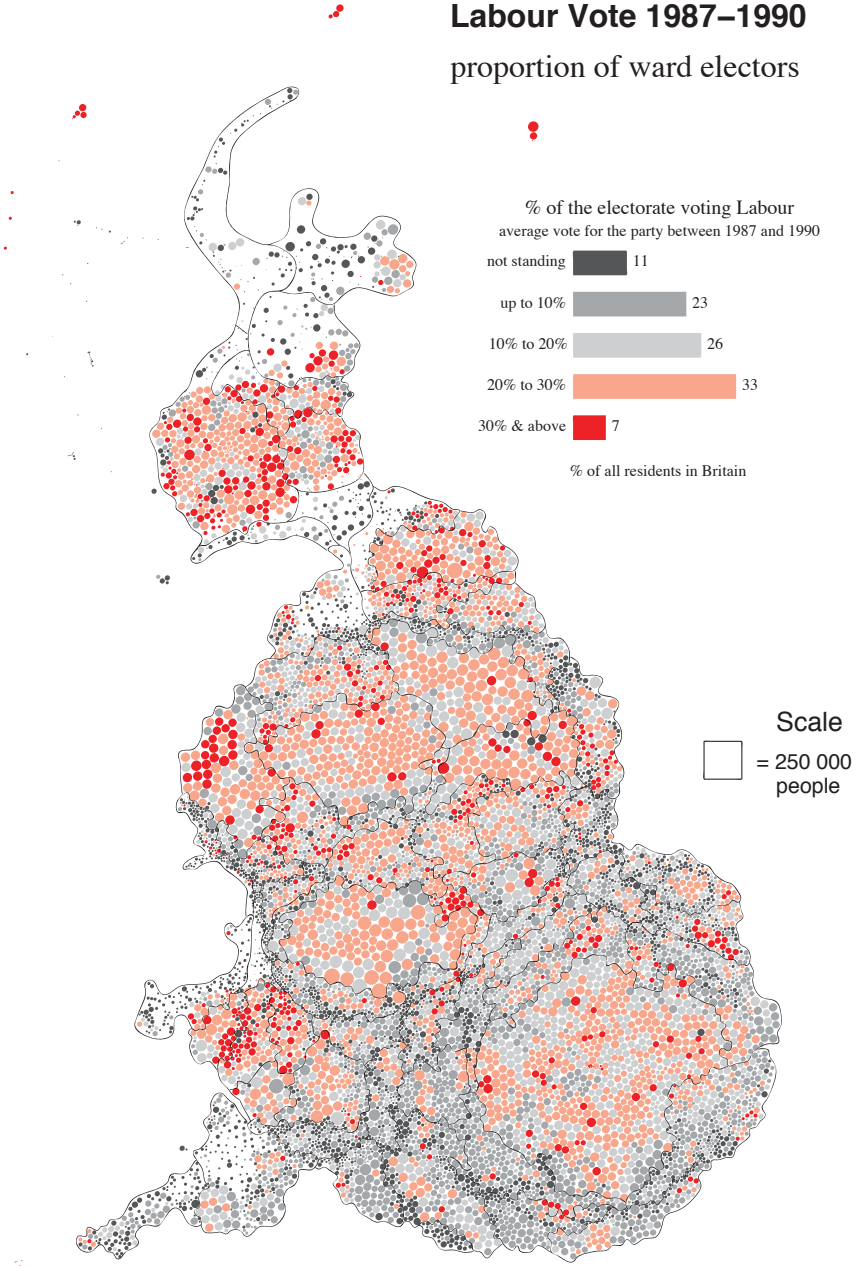
The same maps and graphs of share of the electorate have been produced on these pages for the Labour party as were produced for the Conservative party on the last two pages and as are produced for the other parties and for voters abstaining on the following pages. This is so that the position of each party can be judged on a consistent basis. In the 1987 to 1990 period 16% of all electors voted for Labour at local elections in Britain. This is only marginally higher than the Conservative vote and both of the main two parties were quite evenly matched at this time. Geographically, the areas where the Labour party wins most votes are very much the same as those where the Conservatives do most poorly, as is shown by the first map opposite. The geography of social groups which the Labour party vote most closely matches is that of workers who are semiskilled & labourers (page 187), although this connection is not as strong as that seen for the Conservatives with the managers & professionals social group. The Labour party vote was particularly high in parts of Strathclyde, Merseyside and South Wales, and the party did not put a candidate forward in many small rural wards at this time.

The geography of the change in the vote for Labour shown on the second map opposite is much less predictable. Between 1987 to 1990 and 1991 to 1994 the party won increasing support in the East Midlands and in many parts of the South East, as well as improving on an already strong position in large parts of the north. Their vote declined, however, in the centres of many northern conurbations, in the Welsh Valleys and in specific districts such as Lambeth. In England and Wales as a whole their share of the electorate fell from 15% to 14%. This was a slower fall than for the Conservatives so that, even excluding Scotland, more electors who voted in local elections were voting Labour by 1994. Most important for the Labour party was the fact that they were now picking up votes in areas where they needed votes to win power. Figure 7.7 shows how there used to be a bimodal distribution of votes for the Labour party, which traditionally won one group of wards in which they usually gained well over a fifth of the electorate, and then did poorly in another large group of wards in which they gained less than a tenth of the electorate, with relatively few marginal wards. In the four years following this period their declining vote in safe wards and rising vote in wards in which they used to have little chance of victory has meant that this bimodal pattern has disappeared, and the Labour party now seriously contests many more areas.

Figure 7.8 shows the simplified geography at the district scale. The Labour party now controls many more district councils, but increases in their vote have only been marginally responsible for this rise. The severe decline in the Conservative vote in these same districts (as shown in Figure 7.6) is the main reason why that party no longer controls so many local authorities. The severe decline in the Labour vote in many northern metropolitan districts is mainly attributable to rising abstentions (Figure 7.14).

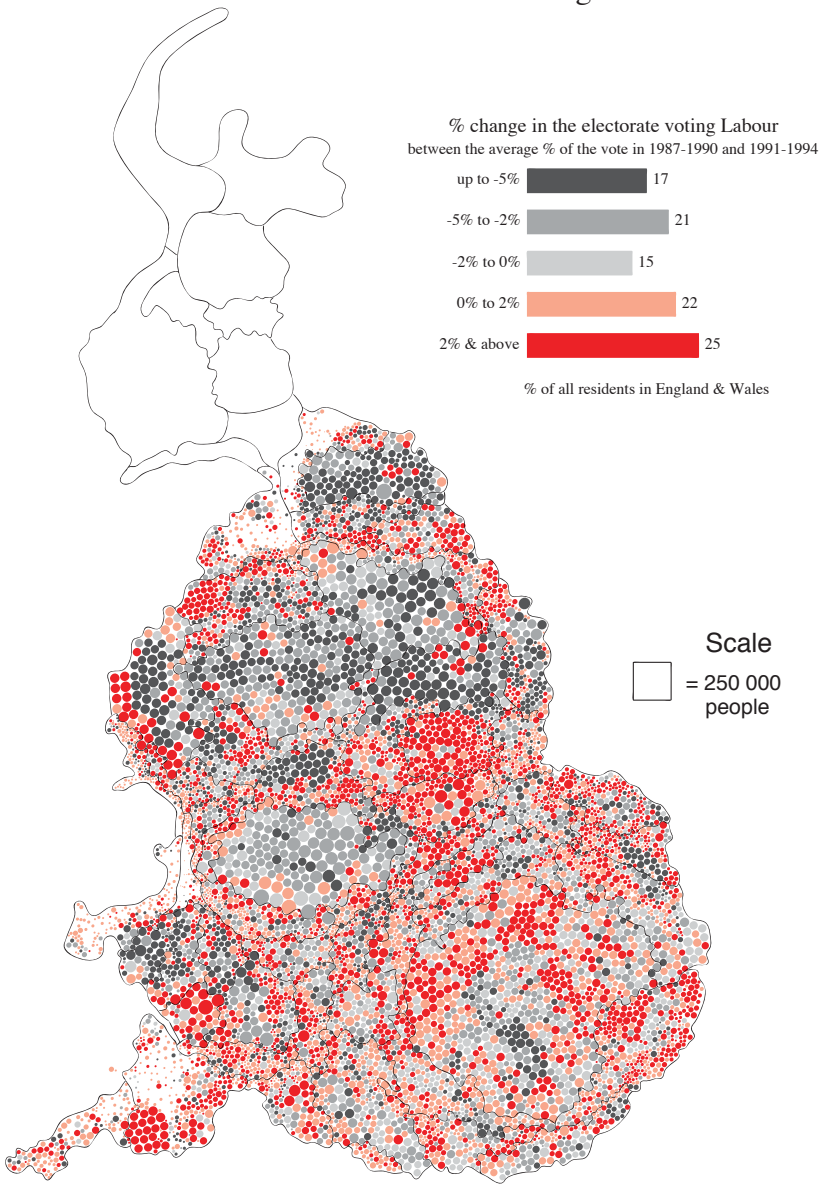
## Labour Vote 1987–1990

proportion of ward electors




## Labour Vote 1987–1990 to 1991–1994

change in ward electors



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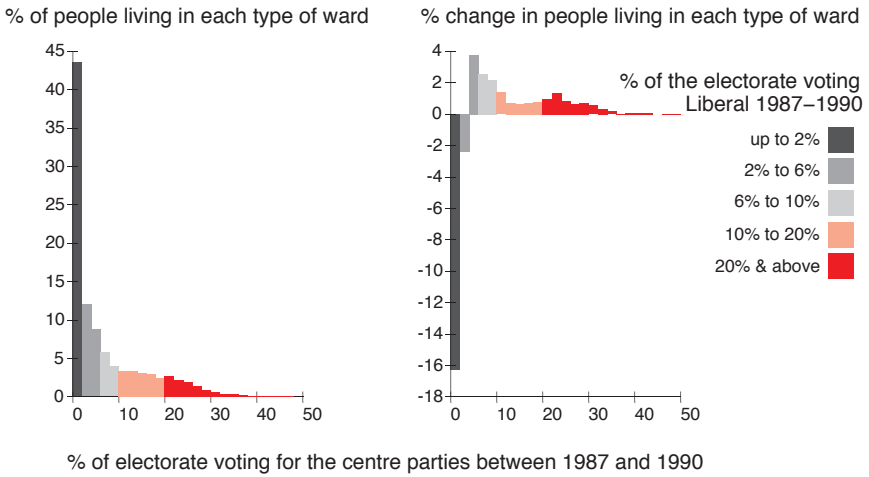
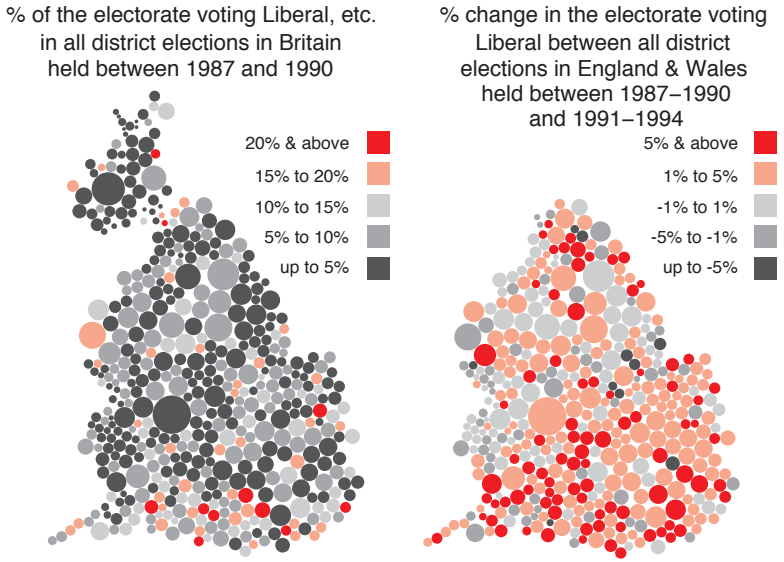
**7.9: Liberal Vote in England and Wales by Ward 1987–1990, 1987–1990 to 1991–1994**




**7.10: Liberal Vote by District 1987–1990 and Change in the Vote to 1991–1994**




## Liberal Vote

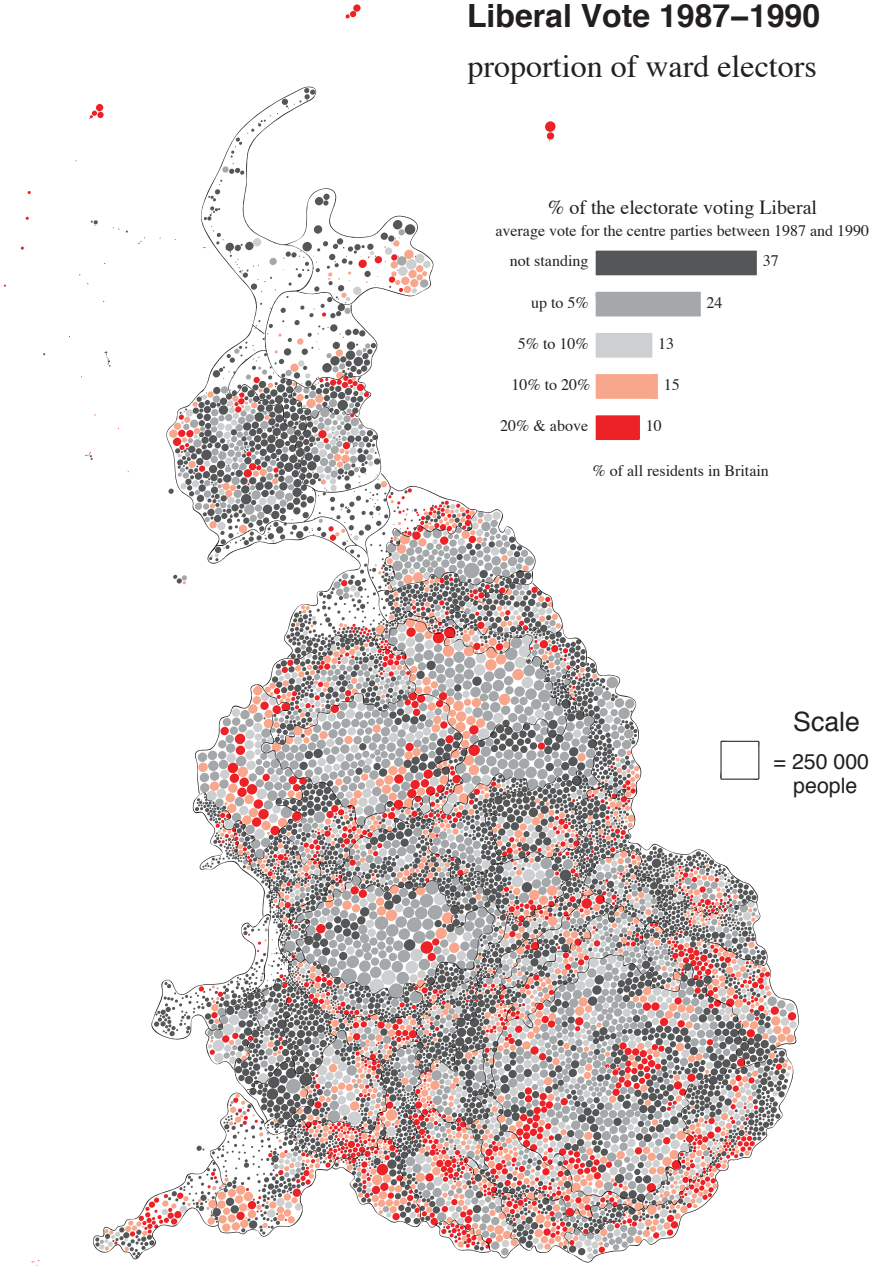
In the 1987–1990 period the Liberal vote was shared between the Liberal Democrat party and the alliance of Liberals and the SDP at various places and varying times. Between them they won support from, on average, 6% of the electorate in all local elections held in wards at this time. Support for the Liberal parties on the first map opposite shows the most chequered pattern drawn so far. In over a third of all British wards, by population, they did not put a candidate forward, while in a tenth of all wards (by population) they put a candidate forward who secured over a fifth of the vote. The clear clustering of these wards suggests that support was strongest where the Liberal parties had a chance of significantly affecting local council compositions. Although these parties are seen as having their strongest support in the south, there are clearly pockets of Liberal success right across the country. However, the first graph in Figure 7.9 illustrates the uphill struggle the Liberal Democrat party will have if it is to contest more seriously for power. Also note that a different shading scheme had to be used on the map because of the lower overall Liberal vote as compared to the two main political parties.

The change in the four years to 1991–1994 may give a clue as to how the Liberal Democrats could increase their hold on power. Nationally, the proportion of the electorate who voted for them in England and Wales rose from 7% to 9% over this period, but that rise was mainly concentrated around the areas where they already had power, as the second map opposite shows. There are a few anomalies where their vote increased in areas where they had very low support before, such as Lambeth, but these were exceptional. It is interesting to compare this map of rising support with some of the indicators of economic difficulty in the south, such as unsecured debt (page 129) or year of highest unemployment (Figure 3.31). The second graph in Figure 7.9 shows how the Liberal parties have seen both a rise in the proportion of the population living in wards which they can now win, and a huge decline in the number of seats in which they were not standing over the period.

In terms of political power, however, the Liberal parties still control only a small minority of local councils. Figure 7.10 shows those districts in which a high share of the electorate voted for them between 1987 and 1990, and how that pattern has changed since then. In the first period they won over a fifth of the vote in only ten districts: Richmond upon Thames, Sutton, Shepway, Medina, Alnwick, Yeovil, Winchester, Lewes, East Hampshire and Chelmsford. After the 1991–1994 set of local elections they had won over a fifth of the vote in another twenty districts adding Oadby & Wigston, Taunton Deane, Brentwood, Restormel, Wear Valley, Eastbourne, Torbay, Carrick, Bath, Kingston upon Thames, Mole Valley, New Forest, South Norfolk, Newbury, Waverley, North Wiltshire, Tandridge, Cheltenham, Rother and South Wight to their tally. By concentrating their vote geographically this (now united) party is gaining more power.

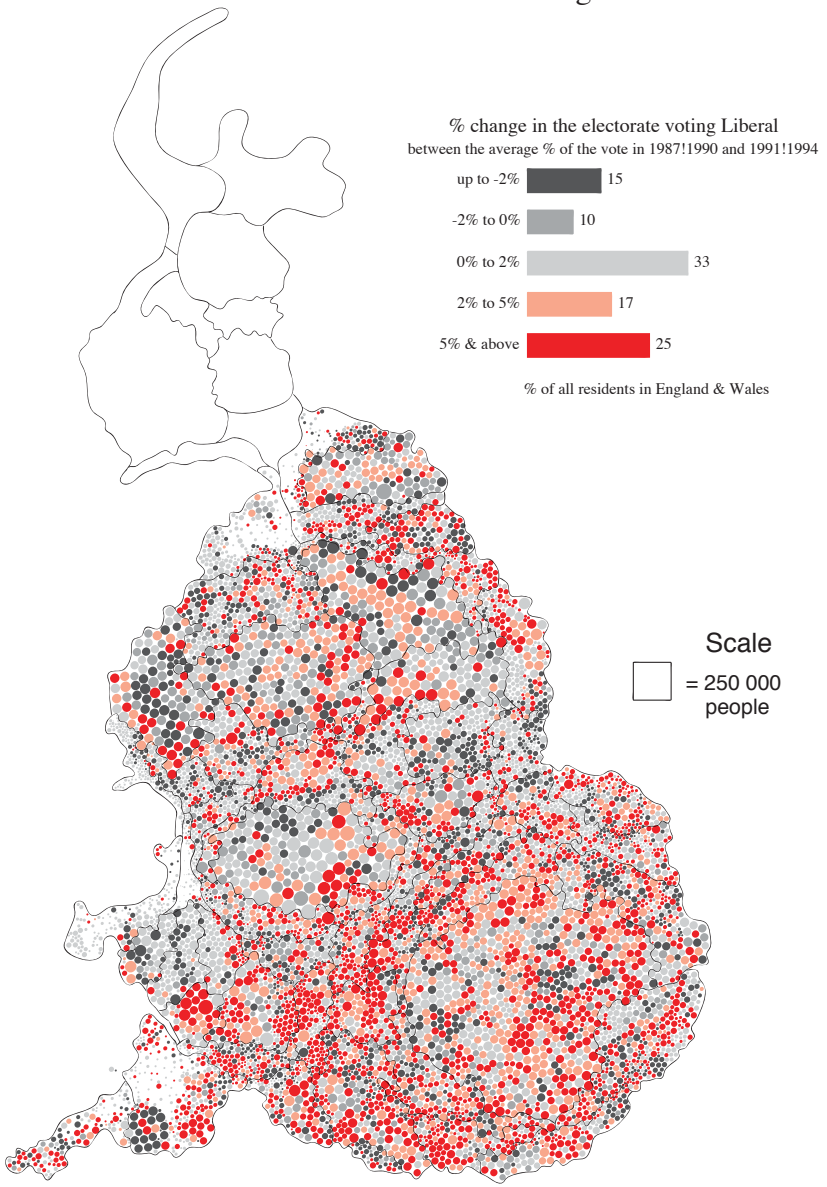
## Liberal Vote 1987–1990

proportion of ward electors




## Liberal Vote 1987–1990 to 1991–1994

change in ward electors



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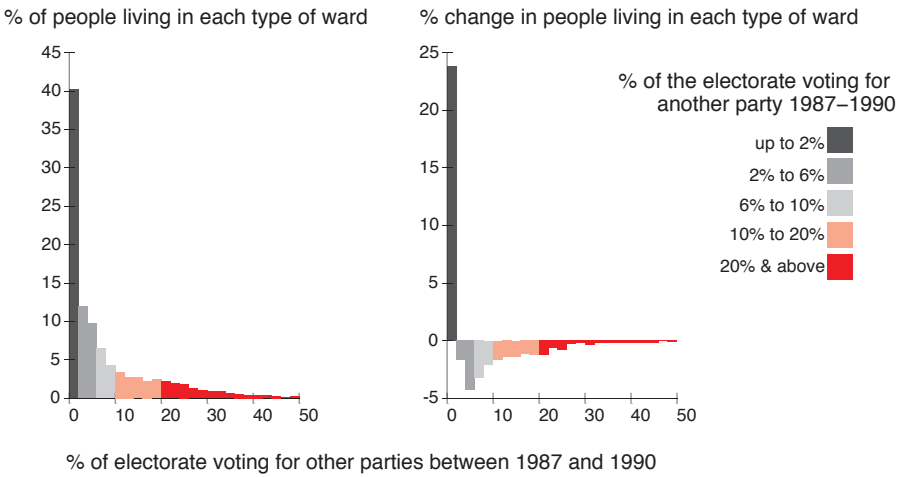
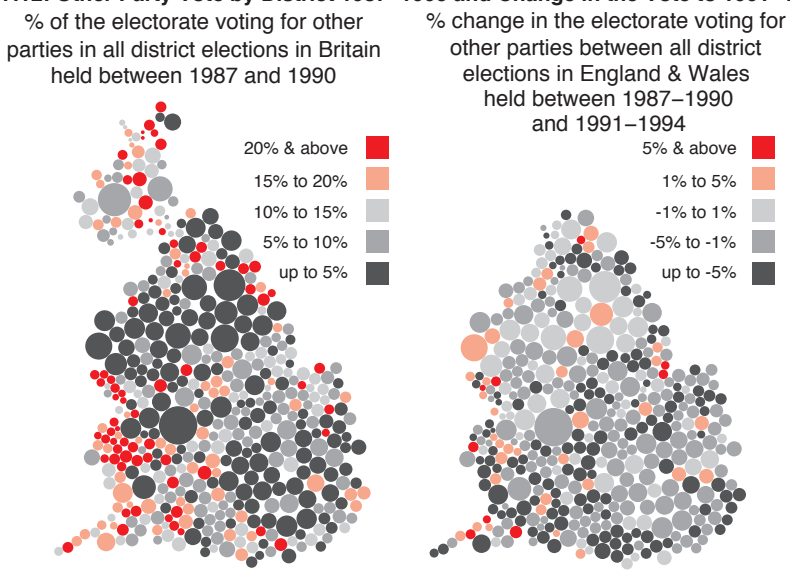
**7.11: Other Parties Vote in England and Wales by Ward 1987–1990, 1987–1990 to 1991–1994**




**7.12: Other Party Vote by District 1987–1990 and Change in the Vote to 1991–1994**




## Other Party Votes

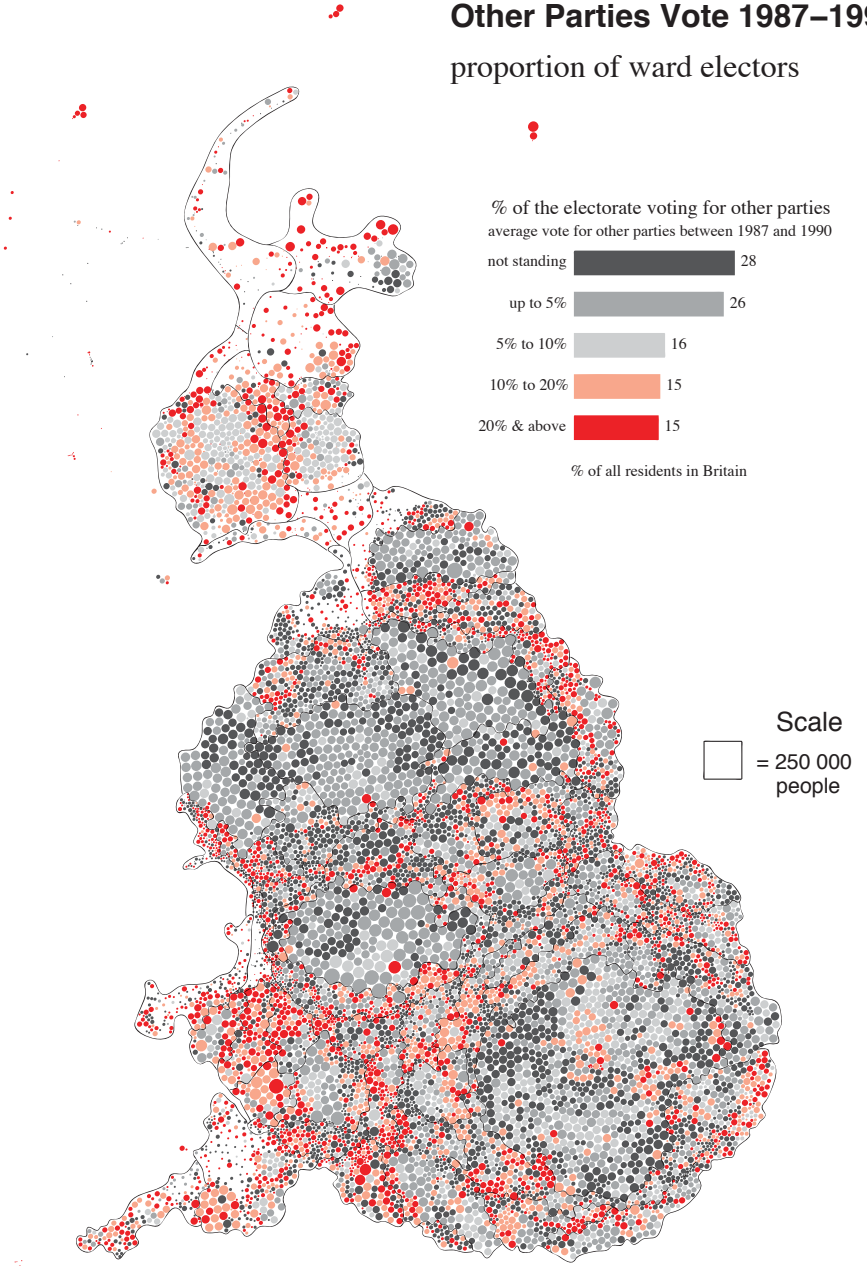
Many candidates stand for parties other than the main three at both local and general elections. At local elections these people have been, in aggregate, more successful than the Liberal parties, winning over an average 8% of the electorate in Britain between 1987 and 1990 and having a majority of the vote in wards containing 12% of the people (and three times as much of the land, see page 215). However, where more than one candidate from other parties stood, their votes have been combined, so it would be wrong to think that other parties had won this proportion of seats. The votes for these candidates can only be treated as a group to give a general indication of dissatisfaction with the main political parties, and even that can be misleading as many of the other parties' candidates in the Home Counties and North Yorkshire are standing in lieu of an official Conservative candidate. In Scotland other party candidates are likely to be members of the Scottish Nationalist party; in Wales, Plaid Cymru; and in many parts of England they are likely to be Green party members, British National party members, members of various residents associations or even members of the Monster Raving Loony party.

The first map drawn opposite shows where these various parties were most successful between 1987 and 1990. The same shading scheme is used as for the Liberal parties on the last page. This map should be compared with the map of the Conservative vote on page 219 to see where the candidates are most likely to be standing in lieu of that party. In areas like Cornwall it is obvious that candidates from other parties are contesting the Conservative party for seats, whereas in much of Northumberland "independent" candidates are standing instead of Conservatives. Support for alternative parties is lowest in the main metropolitan cities, where they are least likely to put forward candidates. The exception to this is the success of some of these parties in small areas of London.

Figure 7.11 shows that other parties gained more than 2% of the vote in a majority of wards between 1987 and 1990, but achieved this in only a third of all wards (by population) between 1991 and 1994. Nationally, their share of support from the English and Welsh electorate fell from 8% to 5% in four years. One reason for this dramatic change may be that many of the "independent" candidates were replaced by official Conservative candidates in the latter period. The far map opposite provides evidence for that shift in some of those areas where the other parties' vote declined by over 10% of the electorate. However, in many of the centres of metropolitan counties support for candidates from other parties has been growing, albeit from a very low base. Figure 7.12 shows how the latter changes have had an insignificant effect upon the aggregate district level vote for other parties, which has only risen dramatically in a few small rural districts. Now that Conservative party candidates are standing in most of England, only in Wales and Scotland are there many districts in which the aggregate vote for parties other than the main three is at all high.

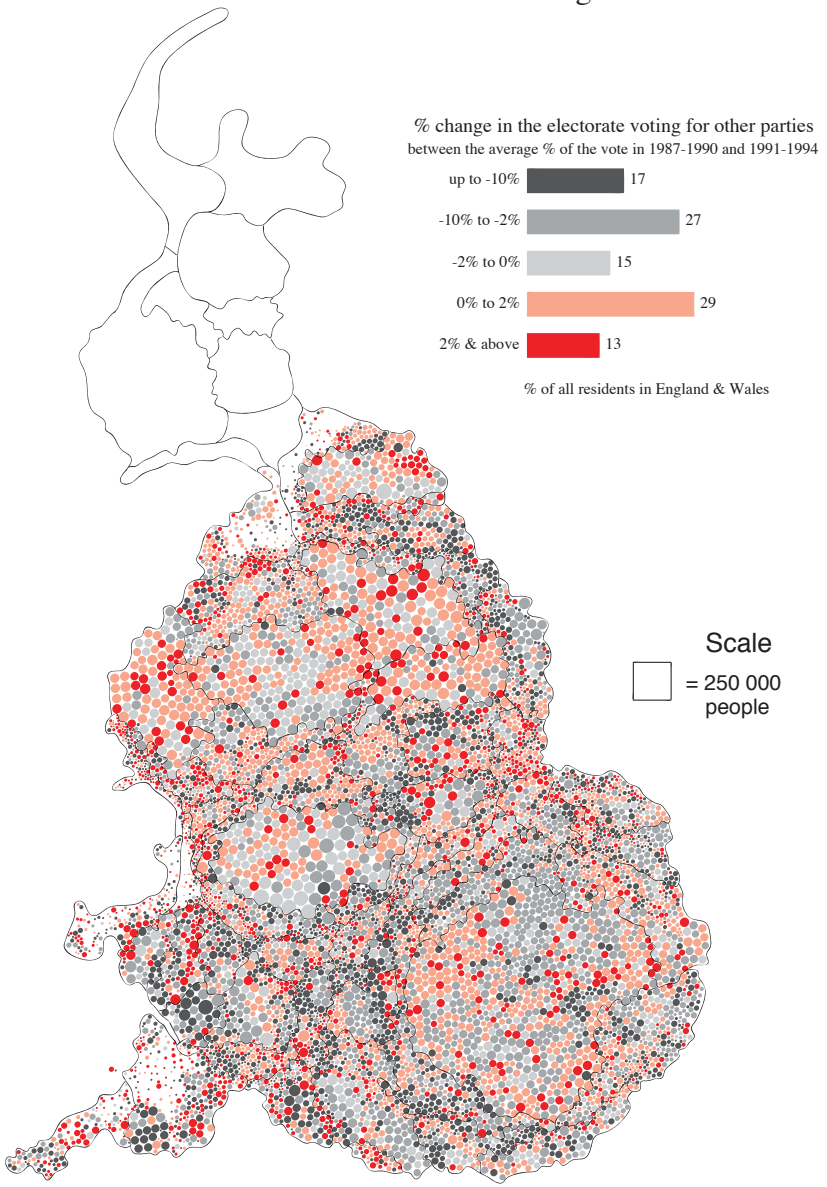
## Other Parties Vote 1987–1990

proportion of ward electors




## Other Parties Vote 1987–1990 to 1991–1994

change in ward electors



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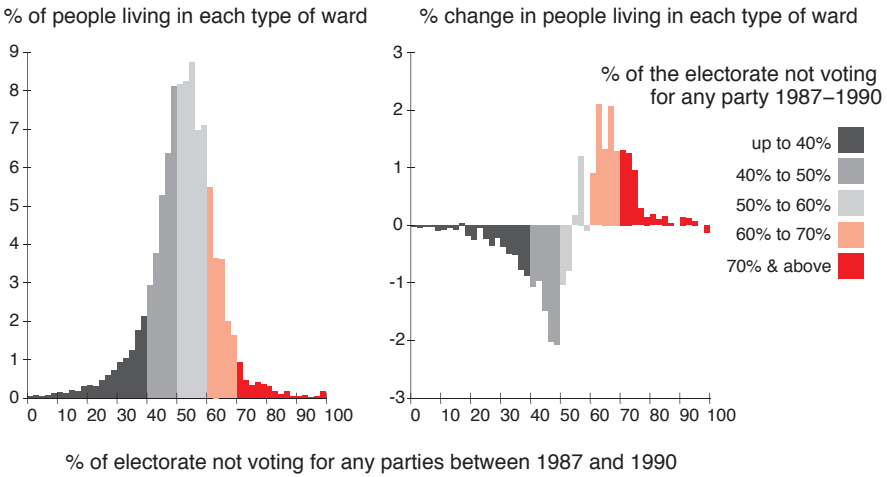
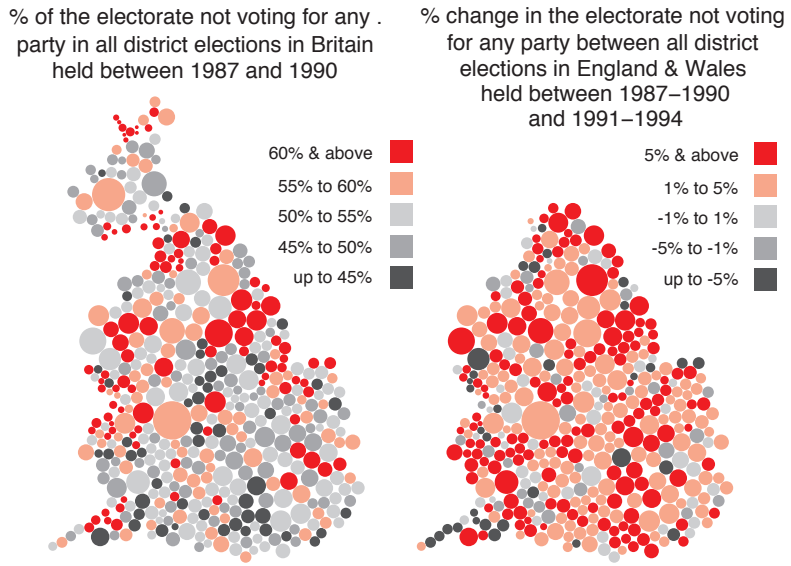
**7.13: Abstention in England and Wales by Ward 1987–1990, 1987–1990 to 1991–1994**




**7.14: Abstention by District 1987–1990 and Change in Abstention to 1991–1994**



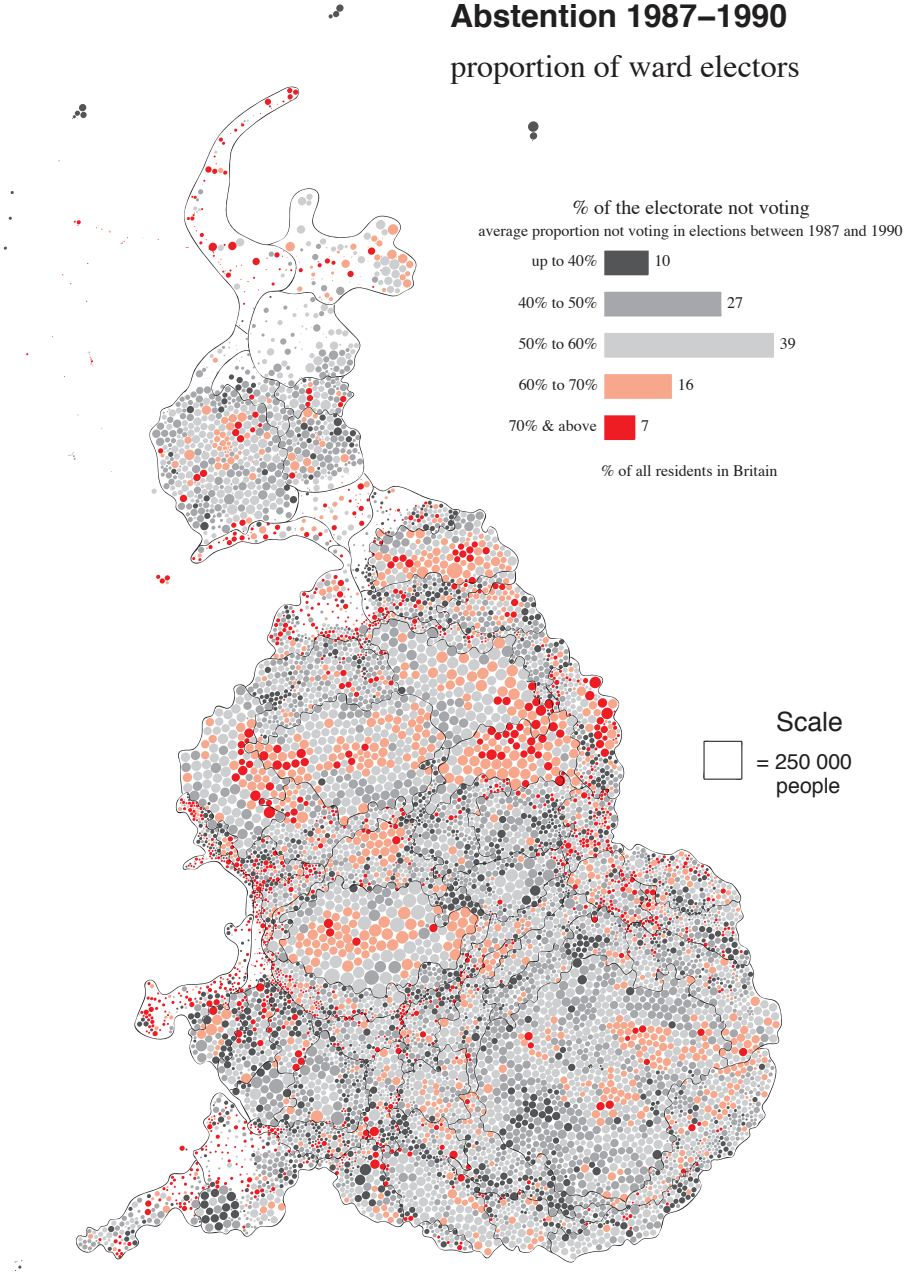

## Electorate Not Voting

The largest share of the electorate (categorized by political allegiance) does not vote for any of the political parties at local elections in Britain; it abstains. In Britain between 1987 and 1990, 54% of the electorate who were registered to vote did not usually vote. It is because of the size of this group that most of the figures presented in this chapter have been of shares of the electorate, rather than of shares of people who vote (which is the usual convention). The electorate not voting are too large a group to ignore. A majority of electors vote in local elections in only just over a third of all wards by population, while 7% of the population live in wards where over seven out of ten electors abstain at local elections. These statistics are shown in the key to the first map opposite which illustrates how rates of abstention vary across Britain by ward. The geographical distribution is very smooth, with few areas of high abstention rates abutting places where a high proportion of electors vote. In London, for instance, voting rates are highest in the south west and lowest in two clusters of wards in the east and centre of the capital. Between these places the rate changes very evenly. The social group distribution which most closely matches the pattern of abstention is that of workers-with-no-occupation shown on page 185. Voters who abstain may well also share some of the characteristics of adults who are not registered to vote; they certainly tend to live in the same places and so it is useful to compare the pattern of abstention with the maps and figures given on pages 216 and 217. The first graph in Figure 7.13 shows how even the distribution of abstention rates by population was in England and Wales between 1987 and 1990, with the modal rate of abstention being 55% of the electorate at that time.

The second graph in Figure 7.13 shows how the distribution of abstention rates has changed in England and Wales in the four years to 1991–1994. Abstention rates rose from 54% to 58%, and the graph indicates how (a proportion equivalent to) over four million more electors now live in areas where a majority of the electorate abstains than did in the previous period. Almost three quarters of all residents in England and Wales live in wards where abstentions rose, as the key to the second map opposite shows. This map contains a much less even pattern than the static rate of abstentions. For example, abstention rates tended to fall only in district clusters of wards where it is likely that parties campaigned strongly and that control of the council was marginal. Abstentions tended to rise most inside the largest cities, but also in areas where the rate of abstention had been very low in the previous period. In general, however, the pattern of inner city lack of interest in the political process is becoming clearer. This summary is supported by the maps shown in Figure 7.14, in which already high district aggregate abstention rates appear to have been rising most strongly. The figure also shows other features, such as high rates of abstention in very rural areas and low rates in the Welsh Valleys and much of southern England, with abstentions falling in the South West.

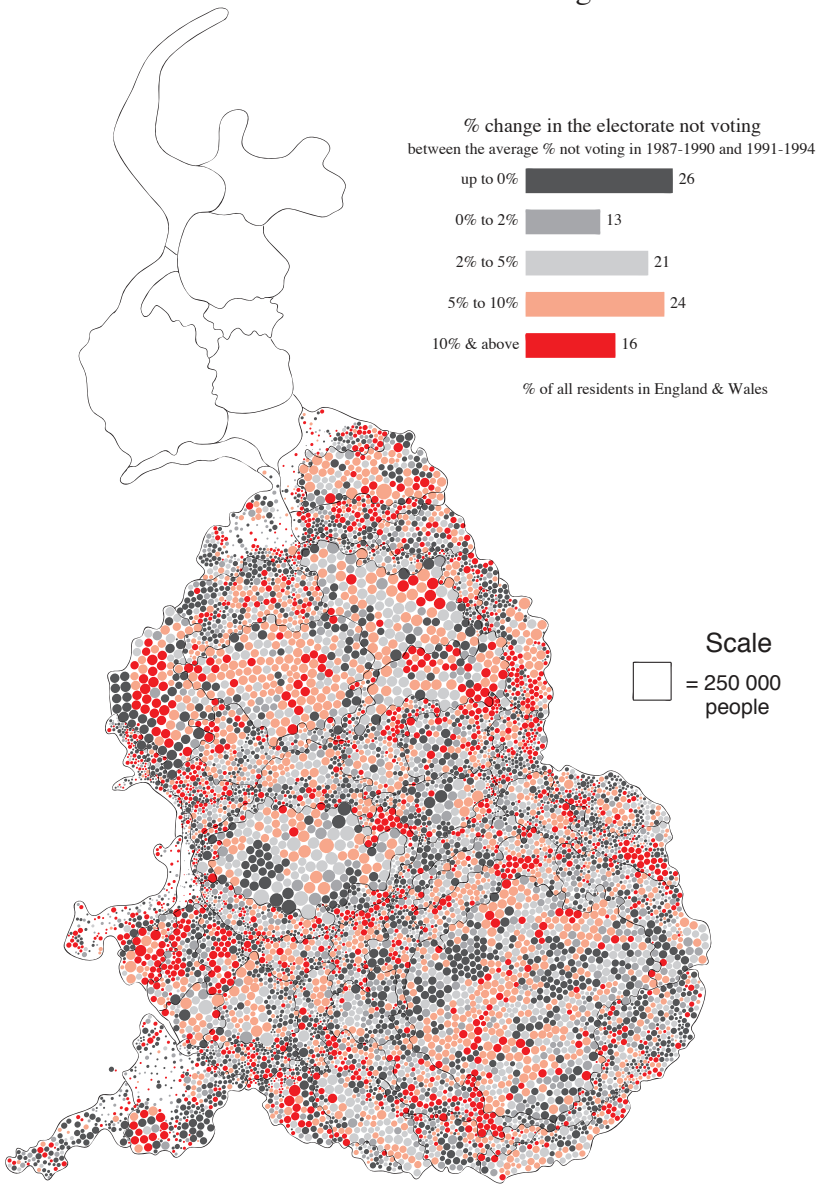
## Abstention 1987–1990

proportion of ward electors




## Abstention 1987–1990 to 1991–1994

change in ward electors



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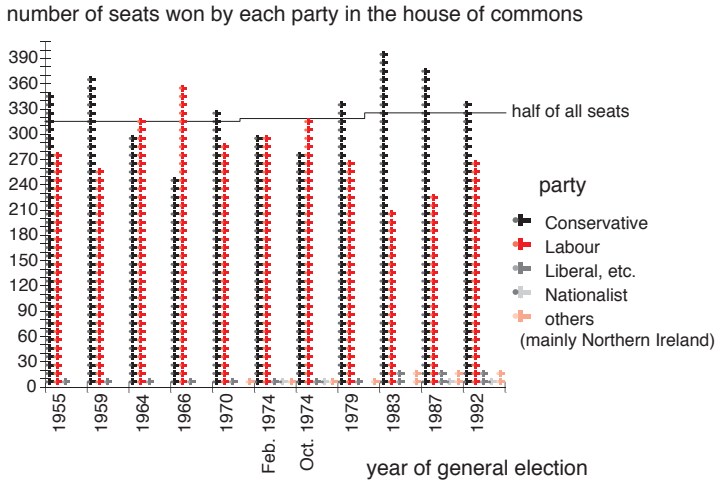
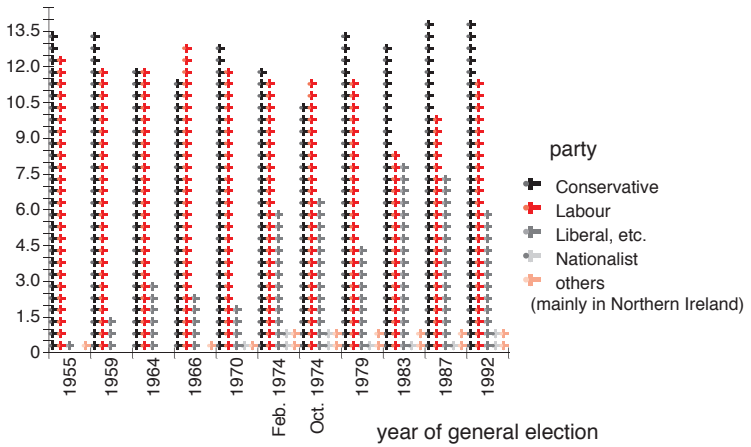
**7.15: Seats Won by Party at each British General Election 1955–1992**




**7.16: Votes Won by Party at each British General Election 1955–1992**




## Winning General Elections

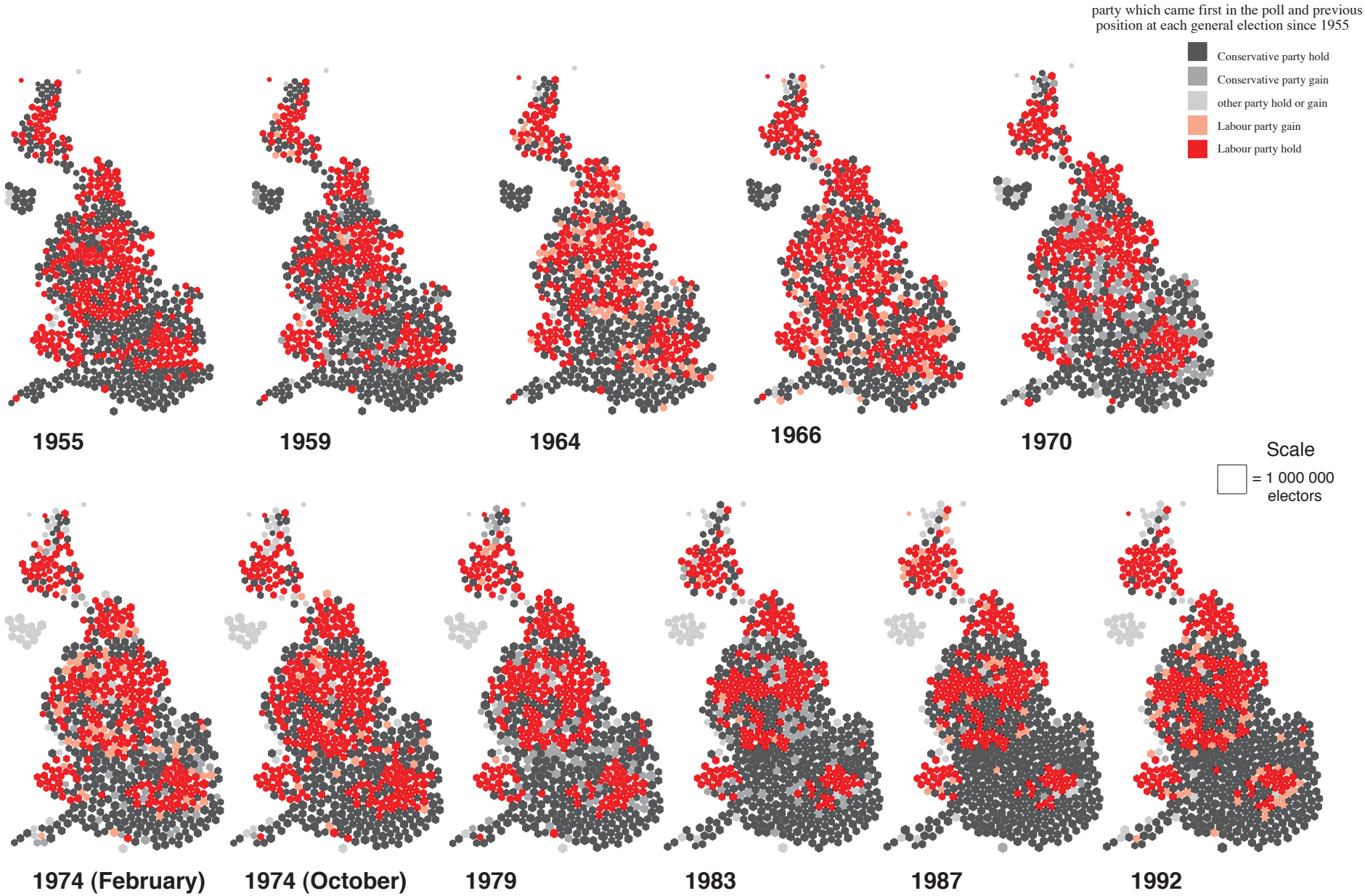
Local elections provide a great deal of geographical detail about the political preferences of the electorate, but they are not the best measure of these preferences because only a minority of electors vote for district councils. It is also very difficult to collate information about a long series of local elections because the boundaries of wards are altered so frequently and because this information was not systematically collected until relatively recently. To be able to study long term changes to the geography of voting in Britain, and to be able to include the preferences of a majority of electors, general elections need to be studied. These are held in parliamentary constituencies, of which in the United Kingdom there were 630 between 1955 and 1970, 635 between 1974 and 1979, 650 between 1983 and 1987, and 651 in 1992. The candidate of the party winning the most votes in each constituency becomes (or remains) a Member of Parliament, holding a seat in the House of Commons. Figure 7.15 shows how many members each party in Britain has returned at each general election since 1955, and thus which party won at each election, and by what margin. Before this date the electoral system was more complex (prior to the 1948 and 1954 redistributions of seats).

The maps opposite show where these constituencies were won at each election and also, for each election since 1955, whether the seat had changed hands since the previous election. To map this, the constituencies had to be linked over the two periods of redistribution (further details are given in Cornford *et al*. 1995). The shape of the cartograms changed over time as seats were destroyed and created and as the sizes of their electorates changed. Because the vast majority of seats are won by the main two parties, seats won by all other parties have been given a single shade on these maps. Together, the maps illustrate how the electoral system of the United Kingdom has evolved over four decades. Although the basic pattern has remained fairly constant, a distinct geography has emerged of those changes which have occurred. In general, the two main parties tend to win seats near to those which they already hold when they are being successful, and tend to lose seats on the edges of their "territories" when their national vote declines. In 1955 only eight seats were won by a party other than the Conservatives or the Labour party, and six of those were Liberal victories. By 1992 this total had risen to forty four, only twenty of which were held by the Liberal Democrats. Scottish and Welsh Nationalists between them won seven seats in their respective countries. The remaining seventeen seats are in Northern Ireland, where, since 1974, all seats have been held by various parties unique to that province.

Because of the nature of the first past the post electoral system the distribution of seats over-emphasizes the lead in votes of the two main parties as Figure 7.16 demonstrates. The Liberal parties fare particularly badly under this system because of the more even geographical distribution of their support.

## Winner 1955–1992

party position in constituency



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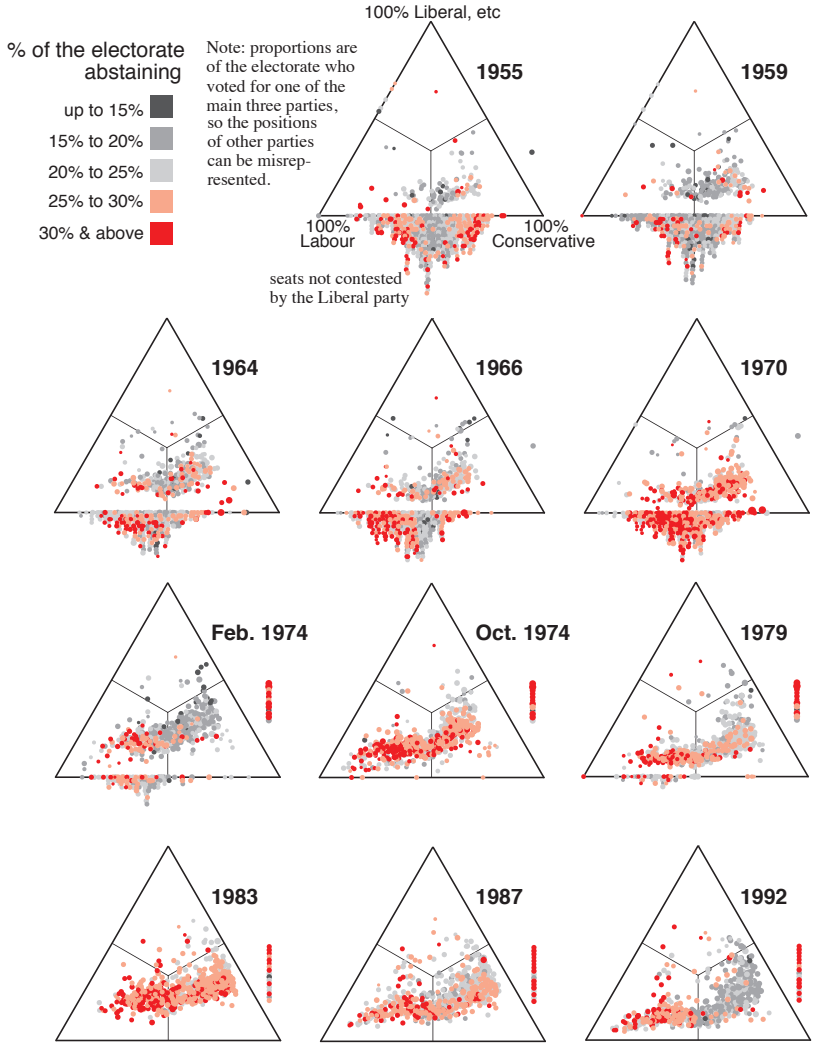
**7.17: Distribution of the Three Party Vote in General Elections 1955–1992**
showing share of the votes in each constituency in the United Kingdom

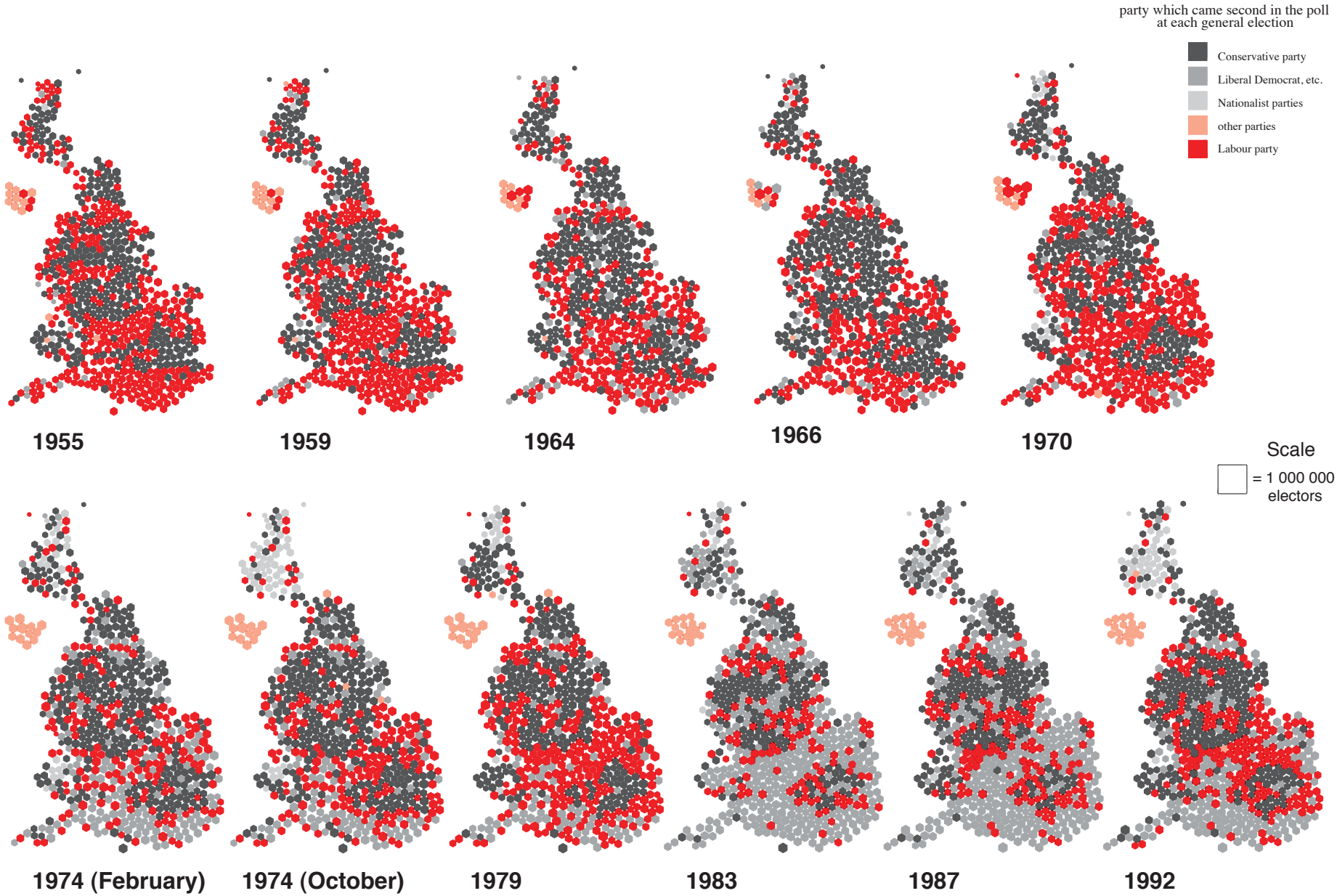



## Runner Up 1955–1992

To understand better how votes are converted into seats at general elections it is necessary to look at the distribution of votes within constituencies and, to appreciate how potentially volatile the electoral system is, it is useful to consider which party came second in each constituency at each election. The distribution of votes within constituencies can be shown using the electoral triangle in which each seat is drawn as a dot, placed in the triangle according to the share of the vote won by each of the three main parties. This method is explained further in the text accompanying Figure 7.2 which showed how the vote is distributed within wards at recent local elections. In Figure 7.17 an electoral triangle is drawn to show the distribution of votes within constituencies at each general election from 1955 to 1992. Here the triangles have been embellished further by drawing a histogram on their base to show the distribution of votes within constituencies which were not contested by the Liberal party. This is because the Liberal party did not put a candidate forward in many constituencies during the beginning of this period. Only in 1983 did the three main parties field a candidate in every constituency in mainland Britain. The seats drawn by the side of each triangle are those in which none of the three main parties stood, being mainly Northern Ireland constituencies. The changing pattern of constituencies within the triangle illustrates how the electorate has changed its allegiances over time, and how these changes have been transformed into the changing distribution of seats held in the House of Commons. The triangle is divided into three sectors and each sector contains seats in which one of the three main parties won the most votes (a Conservative candidate did not stand in five of the six constituencies won by the Liberals in 1955, so those dots appear on the Labour/Liberal axis of the triangle). The margin of victory by which each seat was won can be measured from the distance between the seat and the nearest of the three lines subdividing the triangle. Thus, by the general election of October 1974, the Labour party had many more "safe" seats than did the Conservative party. The Liberal parties saw their votes rise dramatically in the elections of February 1974 and 1983, but the dots did not rise far enough in the triangles for the change in votes to be transformed into many changes of seats. If the triangles are divided into six sections by adding three more lines (from the corners to the centre), those sections subdivide every first and second party permutation. The geographical distribution of parties coming second is shown in the maps on the opposite page and displays a much more dramatic picture of change than is presented by merely viewing the winner of each contest. In recent years the Liberal parties have come to contest a majority of seats in the south of England, while the Scottish Nationalists are the main contender (to Labour) north of the border, as they were after the second general election in 1974. Thus there have been substantial changes beneath the surface of British politics in recent years.

# Runner Up 1955–1992

party position in constituency



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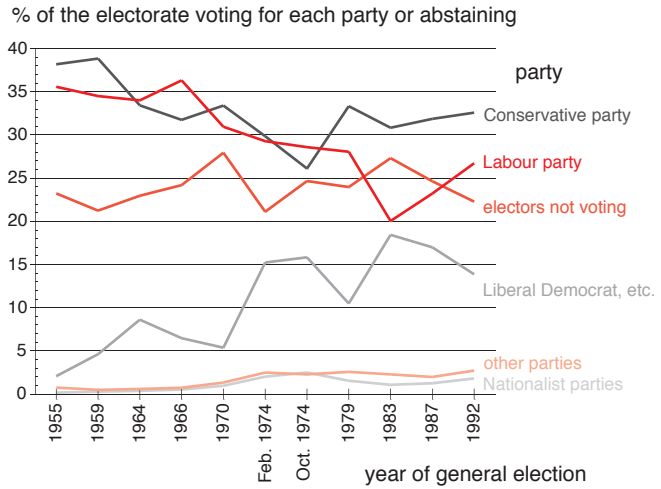
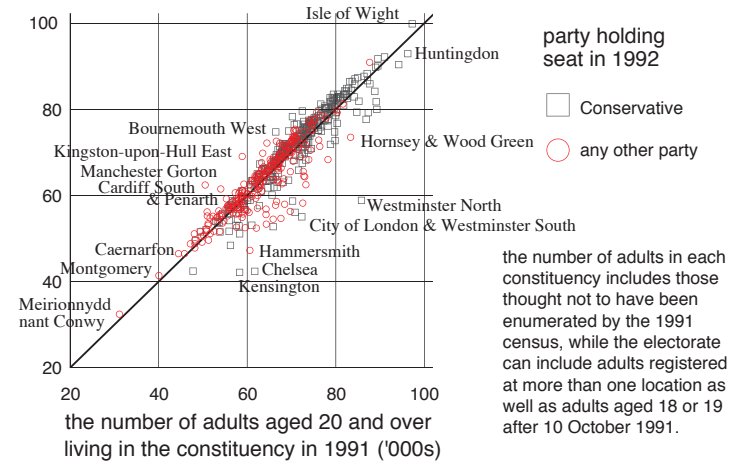
**7.18: Voting and Abstaining at each British General Election 1955–1992**




**7.19: Electors and Adults in Constituencies in England & Wales in 1991**



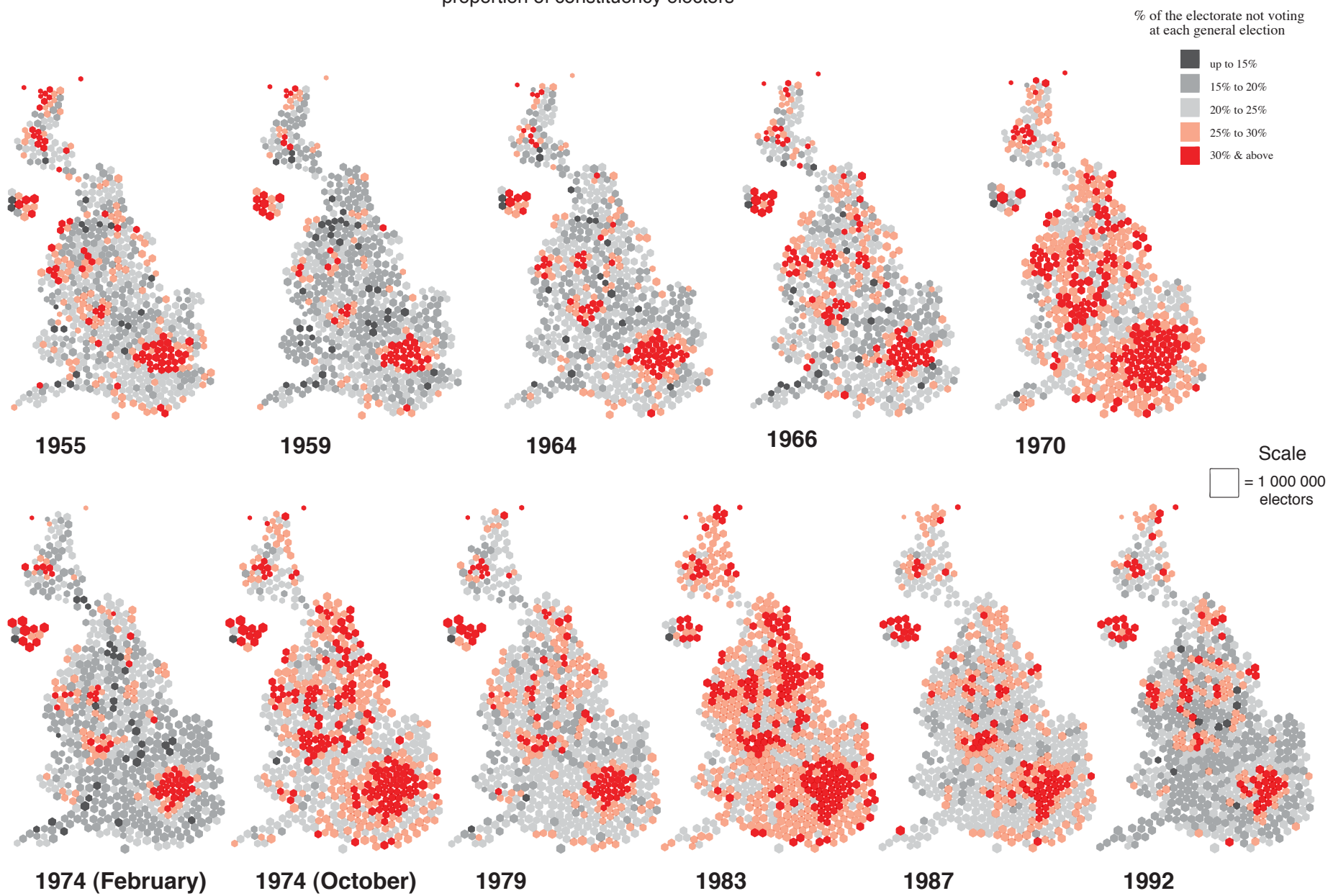

## Abstaining 1955–1992

Rates of abstention are much lower in general elections than in local elections. However, if only a small proportion of the electorate who usually do not vote did choose to vote, and voted differently from current voters, the electoral map of Britain would be radically redrawn (see page 236). Figure 7.18 shows what proportion of the electorate did not vote at each general election between 1955 and 1992 and how that proportion compared to the total share of the electorate voting for each party. Between 21% and 28% of the electorate do not vote at these general elections, with turnouts being highest in February 1974 and lowest in the general election of 1970, and low again in 1983. This pattern is reflected in the maps of abstention rates shown on the opposite page, which all use the same scale so that they can be compared. Turnout was high in 1992, and in eight seats more than six voters out of every seven went to the polls. In general, abstention rates tend to be low when the national contest is close (see Figure 7.15).

Geographically, the areas where abstention rates are high have remained much the same over these four decades. This geographical pattern is probably due to many of the same reasons which were raised in the discussion of abstention in local elections (page 226). However, some factors clearly operate more strongly at general elections where, for example, abstention rates are high along the south coast in constituencies which contain many elderly people who may find it difficult to get to the polls. Another strong correlate with abstention rates in a constituency is how marginal the seat is. This effect is illustrated by the shading of the dots in Figure 7.17. Constituencies where the Conservative and Labour shares of the vote are very similar tend to have higher turnouts (and in recent years have seen falls in the Liberal share of the vote attributable to tactical voting, see Upton 1994). More important than all these factors, however, is the underlying social geography of Britain which changes so slowly that almost exactly the same places have abstention rates of above 30% in 1992 as had those rates in 1955, despite the replacement of one generation of electors with another and the changing socioeconomic shape of the country. Again, it is probable that the same factors which are related to adults not registering to vote are linked to the high rates of abstention of those who are registered in each area. Figure 7.19 shows how the number of people on the electoral register compares with the number of adults aged over 19 living in each constituency (see page 216 for definitions). The constituencies labelled are those in which registration rates were lowest or highest, and in which the electorate was smallest or largest at the last general election. Seats with high rates of migration tend to have the largest undercounts of electors, and the voters who are registered in these seats tend to return Conservative members of parliament to the House of Commons. Conversely, seats in which there are more registered electors than usual residents aged over 19 often contain universities and return Labour members to the House of Commons.

## Abstention 1955–1992

proportion of constituency electors



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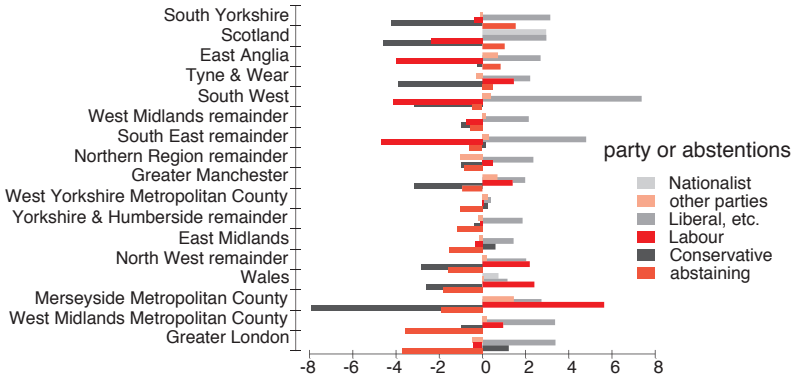
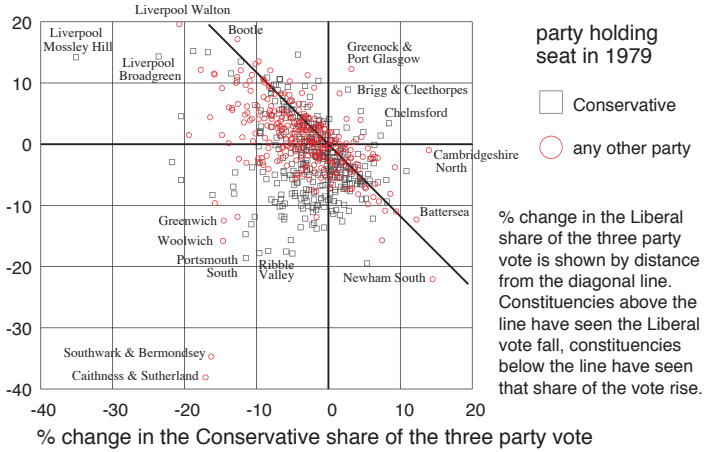
**7.20: Change in the Party Votes by Region and Metroplitan County 1979–1992**

standard regions of Britain with metropolitan counties shown separately




**7.21: Change in the Three Party Vote in the General Elections of 1979 and 1992**

% change in the Labour share of the three party vote for each constituency in Britain




## Voting 1979–1992

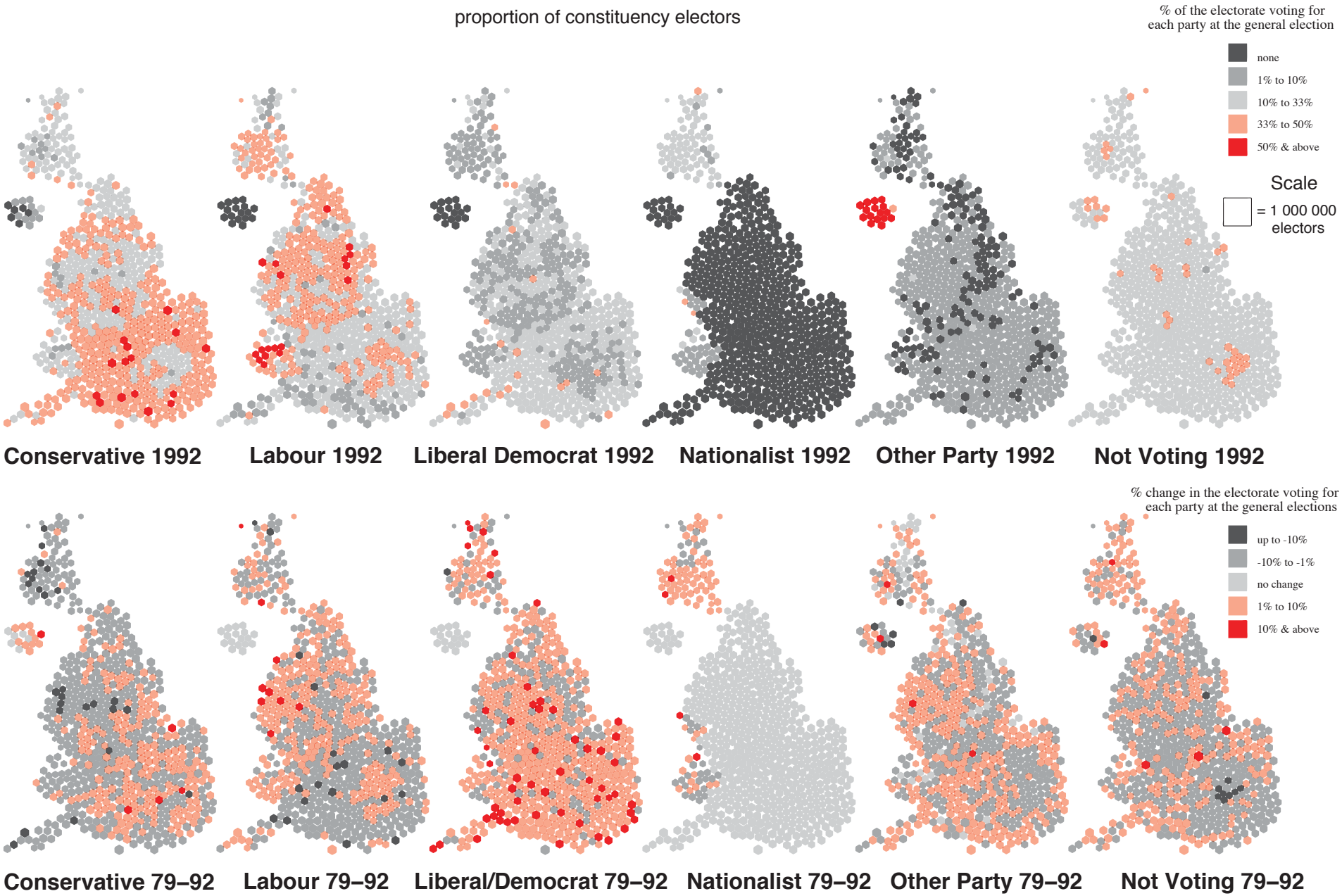
Many of the maps in other chapters in this atlas have compared changes between the two census dates of 1981 and 1991, and the latest period of voting is of particular interest, so here the share of the vote won by each party in each constituency at the 1992 general election is mapped, and the change to the vote from 1979 to 1992 is also drawn. This is the longest recent period for which votes can be compared using a consistent set of seats as the votes cast in the 1979 election have been redistributed to the constituencies which have been in place since 1983 to conduct research such as this (BBC/ITN 1983).

The top row of maps opposite shows what proportion of the electorate voted for each party or abstained in each constituency at the general election of 1992. The southern ring of Conservative loyalty with its associated northern pockets of support has been a familiar pattern in many of the maps in this atlas. The Conservative party won majority support (of over half the electorate) in only sixteen seats at the last general election, mainly in the Home Counties. The pattern of Labour party support is largely the mirror image of this, although that party won the support of a majority of electors in eighteen seats, with the safest being in South Wales. The geographical pattern of Liberal party support is similar to that of the Conservatives, but at a lower level, and in no seat did this party win a majority of the electorate. The Scottish and Welsh Nationalists are confined to their respective countries and receive most support in the north of each; while combined other party support is very high in Northern Ireland, but stands at below 10% in almost every seat on the mainland. The pattern of the electorate abstaining was shown on the last page. Here the most extreme group of constituencies is highlighted, with between a third and a half of its electors abstaining at the last general election.

The second set of maps shows how much of the pattern of voting described above can be attributed to changes which took place over the last decade. In general, the existing electoral division of the country was strengthened (Johnston *et al*. 1988), but there were exceptions to this trend. The Conservatives stood in Northern Ireland for the first time in two decades in 1992 and so automatically gained support there. Labour increased its support in a ring of southern coastal towns over the decade. The Liberal party saw the most dramatic changes, as illustrated opposite, and the Nationalists and other parties all gained greater support. Abstentions, which rose in general, fell dramatically in central London constituencies. Figure 7.20 shows a summary of these changes for votes aggregated by standard region, extracting metropolitan counties, and sorted by the change in the rate of abstention over the period, with Greater London seeing the strongest fall and South Yorkshire experiencing the fastest rise. Conservative support fell most in Merseyside, while Liberal support increased most in the South West. A more precise picture of the changes in the share of the vote held by each of the three main parties over this period is given in Figure 7.21 at the constituency level.

# Voting 1992, 1979–1992

proportion of constituency electors



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**7.22: The Fifty Most Marginal Constituencies in Britain after the 1992 General Election**

| Marginal Rank | Constituency Name | Margin (%) after 1992 | Conservative '92% | ('87%) | Labour '92% | ('87%) | Liberal '92% | ('87%) | Nationalist '92% | ('87%) | Other '92% | ('87%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Conservative seats which are Labour targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Vale of Glamorgan | 0.0 | 36.3 | (37.1) | 36.3 | (27.5) | 7.6 | (13.2) | 1.7 | (1.4) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 2 | Bristol North West | 0.1 | 34.9 | (37.0) | 34.8 | (27.4) | 11.7 | (14.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.0 | (0.0) |
| 3 | Hayes and Harlington | 0.1 | 35.8 | (36.7) | 35.7 | (26.4) | 8.2 | (11.4) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 4 | Ayr | 0.1 | 33.9 | (31.5) | 33.7 | (31.2) | 6.2 | (11.8) | 9.1 | (5.3) | 0.2 | (0.0) |
| 10 | Bolton North East | 0.3 | 36.9 | (34.9) | 36.6 | (33.6) | 8.5 | (10.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.0) |
| 13 | Norwich North | 0.4 | 35.4 | (36.3) | 35.0 | (23.9) | 10.6 | (19.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.8 | (0.0) |
| 14 | Corby | 0.5 | 36.9 | (35.3) | 36.4 | (32.5) | 8.5 | (11.8) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.1 | (0.0) |
| 17 | Slough | 0.7 | 34.9 | (35.6) | 34.2 | (30.1) | 5.5 | (10.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 3.7 | (0.0) |
| 20 | Tynemouth | 0.8 | 37.0 | (33.8) | 36.2 | (30.3) | 6.5 | (14.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.7 | (0.0) |
| 21 | Southampton Test | 0.8 | 33.6 | (34.8) | 32.8 | (25.4) | 10.1 | (16.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.9 | (0.0) |
| 25 | Edmonton | 0.9 | 35.0 | (37.2) | 34.1 | (26.1) | 6.2 | (9.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.0) |
| 26 | Amber Valley | 1.0 | 39.1 | (41.8) | 38.1 | (27.9) | 7.5 | (11.5) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 28 | Luton South | 1.1 | 35.5 | (34.8) | 34.4 | (27.6) | 8.2 | (12.8) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.0 | (0.0) |
| 30 | Bury South | 1.2 | 37.8 | (36.7) | 36.6 | (32.6) | 7.3 | (10.4) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.0) |
| 31 | Stirling | 1.2 | 32.9 | (30.4) | 31.7 | (28.8) | 5.7 | (11.8) | 11.3 | (8.5) | 0.7 | (0.0) |
| 32 | Dover | 1.2 | 36.8 | (36.7) | 35.6 | (27.3) | 9.0 | (15.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 2.1 | (0.0) |
| 33 | North West Leicestershire | 1.4 | 39.2 | (39.5) | 37.8 | (28.4) | 8.8 | (14.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.8) |
| 37 | Bolton West | 1.5 | 37.1 | (35.5) | 35.6 | (28.9) | 10.6 | (15.7) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.0) |
| 39 | City of Chester | 1.7 | 36.9 | (35.8) | 35.2 | (28.4) | 10.8 | (15.6) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.9 | (0.0) |
| 41 | Batley and Spen | 1.8 | 36.2 | (34.3) | 34.3 | (32.5) | 8.3 | (11.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.8 | (0.9) |
| 44 | Langbaurgh | 2.0 | 37.7 | (32.9) | 35.8 | (30.3) | 9.6 | (15.7) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 49 | Basildon | 2.2 | 35.7 | (31.9) | 33.6 | (28.0) | 10.3 | (13.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 50 | Coventry South West | 2.3 | 36.6 | (34.0) | 34.3 | (29.1) | 7.4 | (15.5) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.9 | (0.0) |
| *Conservative seats which are Liberal targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | Brecon and Radnor | 0.3 | 31.0 | (29.3) | 22.6 | (24.7) | 30.8 | (29.4) | 0.8 | (1.1) | 0.8 | (0.0) |
| 9 | Portsmouth South | 0.3 | 29.4 | (30.8) | 10.1 | (9.2) | 29.1 | (30.6) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.6 | (0.6) |
| 34 | Hazel Grove | 1.4 | 38.1 | (37.1) | 9.9 | (9.7) | 36.6 | (34.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.5) |
| 35 | Edinburgh West | 1.5 | 30.6 | (29.7) | 14.8 | (17.6) | 29.1 | (27.7) | 7.0 | (4.5) | 1.1 | (0.0) |
| 40 | Isle of Wight | 1.8 | 38.2 | (40.7) | 4.8 | (4.7) | 36.4 | (34.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.4 | (0.0) |
| 42 | Conwy | 1.9 | 26.6 | (29.8) | 20.3 | (17.1) | 24.7 | (24.0) | 5.8 | (6.0) | 1.4 | (0.0) |
| *Labour seats which are Conservative targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | Rossendale and Darwen | 0.2 | 36.3 | (37.4) | 36.4 | (30.7) | 9.4 | (12.1) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.9 | (0.0) |
| 6 | Warrington South | 0.2 | 35.6 | (32.5) | 35.8 | (27.8) | 10.3 | (17.2) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.4 | (0.0) |
| 8 | Birmingham Yardley | 0.3 | 26.9 | (31.5) | 27.2 | (27.1) | 23.6 | (15.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.4 | (0.0) |
| 12 | Ipswich | 0.4 | 34.8 | (34.2) | 35.2 | (32.9) | 9.2 | (9.7) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.1 | (0.3) |
| 15 | Halifax | 0.7 | 33.6 | (32.1) | 34.2 | (33.7) | 10.0 | (11.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.9 | (0.0) |
| 18 | Ilford South | 0.7 | 34.1 | (34.7) | 34.8 | (26.9) | 7.4 | (10.1) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.5 | (0.0) |
| 19 | Southampton Itchen | 0.8 | 33.1 | (33.6) | 33.8 | (24.4) | 10.0 | (17.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 22 | Cambridge | 0.8 | 28.2 | (31.2) | 29.0 | (22.1) | 14.5 | (23.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.4 | (0.9) |
| 23 | Dewsbury | 0.9 | 34.3 | (32.8) | 35.1 | (33.4) | 9.0 | (12.6) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.8 | (0.0) |
| 24 | Birmingham Northfield | 0.9 | 33.7 | (32.8) | 34.6 | (28.5) | 7.7 | (11.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 27 | Pembroke | 1.0 | 34.8 | (33.1) | 35.9 | (25.0) | 9.1 | (21.1) | 2.2 | (1.6) | 0.9 | (0.0) |
| 38 | Thurrock | 1.7 | 34.1 | (30.4) | 35.8 | (29.3) | 7.4 | (11.8) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.7 | (0.0) |
| 43 | Lewisham East | 1.9 | 32.0 | (33.3) | 33.9 | (25.3) | 8.5 | (15.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.3 | (0.0) |
| 45 | North Warwickshire | 2.0 | 36.6 | (36.0) | 38.6 | (32.0) | 8.6 | (11.9) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 47 | Cannock and Burntwood | 2.1 | 36.7 | (35.5) | 38.8 | (31.5) | 8.1 | (12.8) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 0.6 | (0.0) |
| *Liberal seats which are Conservative targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11 | Gordon | 0.3 | 27.3 | (23.5) | 8.3 | (8.5) | 27.7 | (36.4) | 10.5 | (5.3) | 0.0 | (0.0) |
| 29 | North Devon | 1.2 | 38.6 | (41.6) | 4.9 | (5.1) | 39.7 | (35.0) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.1 | (0.0) |
| 48 | Cheltenham | 2.1 | 35.9 | (39.6) | 5.1 | (5.9) | 38.0 | (33.4) | 0.0 | (0.0) | 1.2 | (0.0) |
| *Liberal seats which are Labour targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 16 | Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber | 0.7 | 16.6 | (16.3) | 18.4 | (18.0) | 19.1 | (26.1) | 18.1 | (10.5) | 1.1 | (0.0) |
| *Nationalist seats which are Labour targets* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 36 | Angus East | 1.5 | 28.6 | (29.5) | 9.5 | (8.1) | 6.2 | (5.9) | 30.1 | (32.0) | 0.7 | (0.0) |
| 46 | Ynys Mon | 2.1 | 27.9 | (27.1) | 19.0 | (13.8) | 3.5 | (5.4) | 29.9 | (35.3) | 0.3 | (0.0) |

## Marginal After 1992

The most recent general election results are always of great interest because they not only show which party has support where, but also give an indication of how firm is their grip on power, and thus of how likely it is for there to be a change of government in the near future. The 1992 general election produced the closest result, in terms of seats won for the main two parties for 18 years (see Figure 7.15). The Conservative party had a majority of seats in the House of Commons of only 21 after it won the election. This has subsequently been reduced even further in by-elections and by Conservative rebellions. In fourteen seats it won with margins of 1% of the electorate or less. These seats are shown in Figure 7.22, which lists all the most marginal constituencies in the country by this measure. The figure shows that after the 1992 general election the Conservative party held more marginal seats at this level than did all the other parties combined. Most importantly, only one seat — Inverness, Nairn & Lochaber — was a marginal being contested between the two main opposition parties (and this seat is unique in that all four parties are effectively contesting there, as the voting statistics in Figure 7.22 illustrate). Thus, the party of government is in a very weak position and faces two opposition parties which are not a great threat to each other in terms of electoral geography.

The first map opposite is shaded to show where marginal and safe seats are most often found using this definition of marginality. The size of the margin of victory of each party is also given as a figure within each constituency. The areas of traditional party loyalty, identified as having high support for particular parties on the last page, can be seen to contain the largest majorities. After 1992 it was generally suburban seats which were most marginal, a great many of which were in the midlands and the north of the country. The most marginal seats in absolute as well as relative terms were Vale of Glamorgan (won by 19 votes), Bristol North West (45 votes), Hayes and Harlington (53 votes) and Ayr (85 votes). All of these seats were won by the Conservative party, as Figure 7.22 shows. Thus, in theory, 103 voters, voting differently out of an electorate of 43 238 935 could have nearly halved the government majority, and a change in allegiance of a further (carefully selected) 1141 voters would have resulted in a hung parliament!

Well over nine million registered electors did not vote at the last election and almost another two million eligible adults were not registered to vote. The second map opposite gives an indication of how important these people could be in the future. Constituencies are shaded according to the ratio of adults not voting to the margin of victory in a seat. The key to the map shows that one elector in six in Britain lives in a seat where more than five times as many adults failed to vote than were needed by the runner-up to win that seat at the last general election. The figures within each constituency show the proportion of adults not voting. The scope for a great deal of electoral change obviously exists if, and when, enough people decide that they want to effect that change.

## Marginal 1992

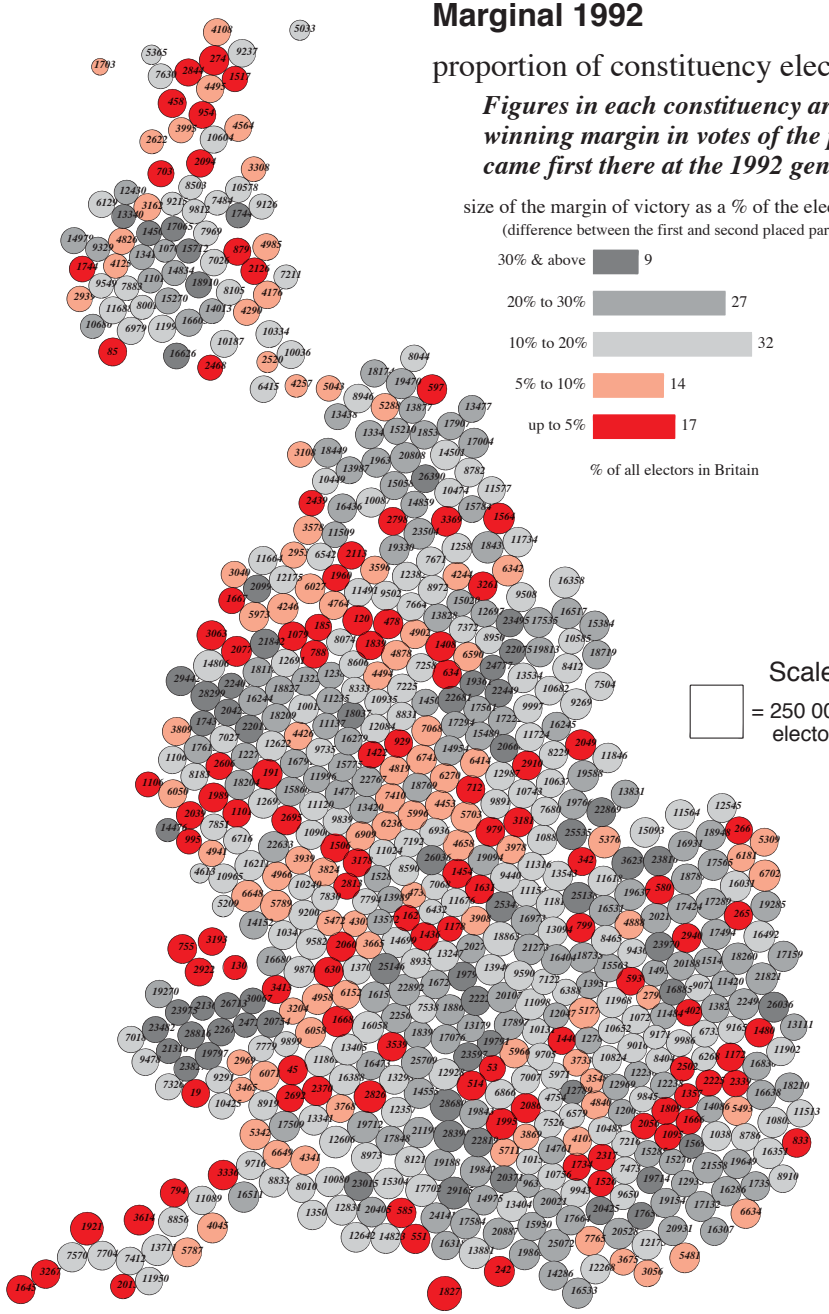
proportion of constituency electorate

***Figures in each constituency are of the winning margin in votes of the party which came first there at the 1992 general election***

size of the margin of victory as a % of the electorate
(difference between the first and second placed parties)

| | |
|---|---|
| 30% & above | 9 |
| 20% to 30% | 27 |
| 10% to 20% | 32 |
| 5% to 10% | 14 |
| up to 5% | 17 |

% of all electors in Britain




## Not Voting 1992

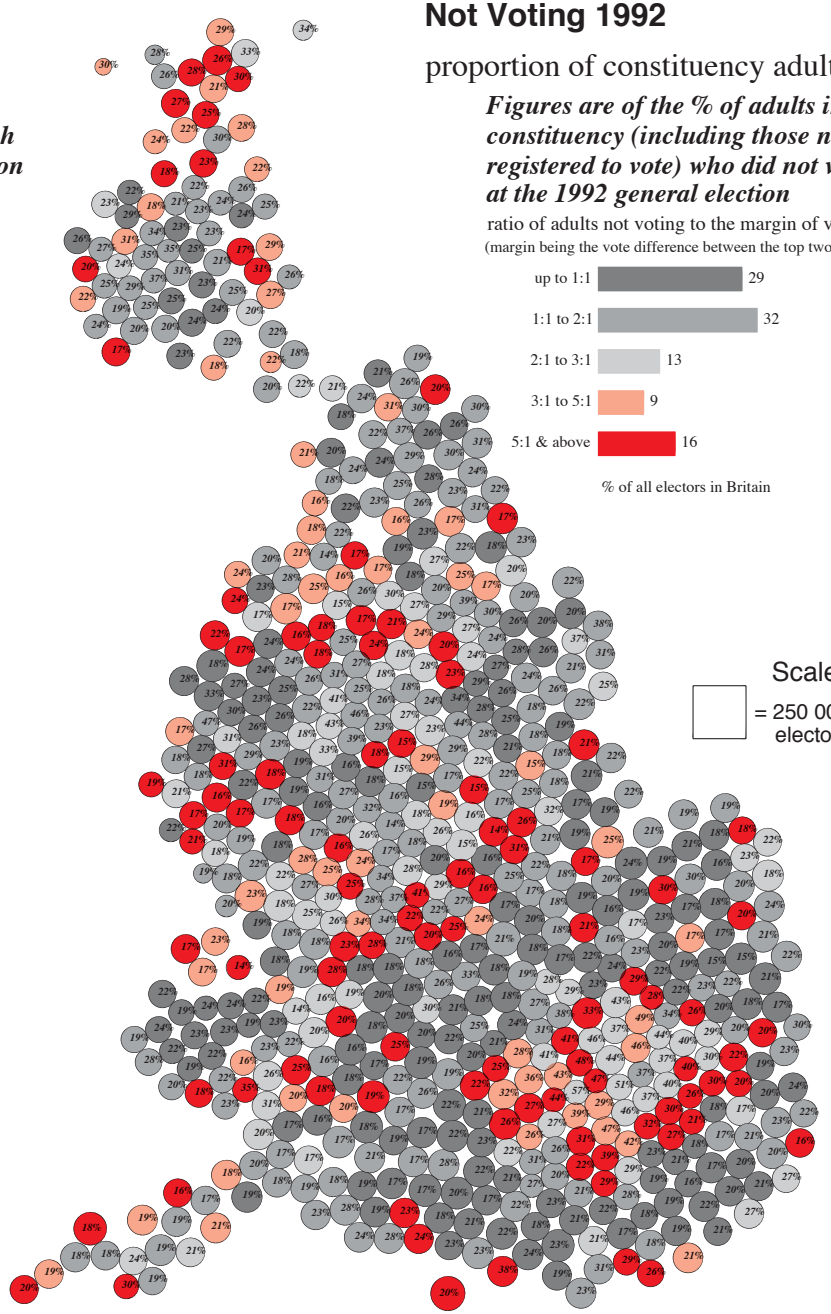
proportion of constituency adults

***Figures are of the % of adults in the constituency (including those not registered to vote) who did not vote at the 1992 general election***

ratio of adults not voting to the margin of victory
(margin being the vote difference between the top two parties)

| | |
|---|---|
| up to 1:1 | 29 |
| 1:1 to 2:1 | 32 |
| 2:1 to 3:1 | 13 |
| 3:1 to 5:1 | 9 |
| 5:1 & above | 16 |

% of all electors in Britain



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## Conclusion: Votes and Parties

### Local Elections

The geographically specific way in which politicians are elected in Britain is a demonstration of the importance given to local problems and solutions in this society. At any one time more than fifteen thousand individuals are in political office in Britain following European, Parliamentary, County or District elections. All of these people are elected to represent specific areas, and the majority of these people represent the residents of the ten thousand plus wards which have been mapped throughout this atlas. Thus there is a constitutional acknowledgement of the importance of local issues and governance. You may be constrained to send your children to a local school, but you also have the choice of which councillors to elect, some of whom will govern that school. However, as local politics has become more popular, with a gradual increase in turnout and electoral completion over time (Rallings and Thrasher 1991), the powers of local government have been reduced so that elected councillors have less control over spending and are being removed from positions of influence over local services such as schools, colleges and hospitals. The number of wards with very low turnouts is now growing (Figure 7.13) as, with the shrinking power of local authorities, local elections become more of a referendum and less a means of changing the management of services and amenities in particular localities.

Aspects of the social structure of Britain can be seen through the snapshots of local political opinion which were presented in this chapter. Locally, the Conservative party generally fared well only where the rich (page 203) and those in work (page 69) were most numerous. The Labour party shows much the opposite pattern, representing areas containing most of the ill (page 137) and those most reliant on local services in Britain (page 119). The pattern of Liberal (and other) party support is more complex. Third and Fourth party voters are most numerous in wards in districts where they can make a difference to the balance of the council. In many ways the first-past-the-post electoral system prevents subtle expressions of local opinion, reducing most debates to two-way contests, and thus simplifying more complex social interests. Voting change is even more difficult to account for, particularly over quite short periods of time. Already, though, the impact of issues such as rising negative equity (page 129) and the new pattern of unemployment (Figure 3.31) can be seen in changes such as the collapse of the Conservative vote in Outer London (page 219), and the rise of Labour in the East Midlands (page 221). The continued spread of the Liberals out from their strongholds in the periphery of Britain (Figure 7.10), and the increased support for alternative parties in the city centres (page 225), may both reflect some of the particular combinations of social change and realignment which took place in the early 1990s.

### Political Colours: Colour Print H

Although the voting system itself simplifies political opinion and preference, the way in which voting patterns are portrayed smoothes them even further. The cartogram of which party wins in each seat (page 215) hides large variations in the degree of success of different candidates standing in different places (Figure 7.2). With colour a more subtle picture of British electoral geography can be painted. Colour Print H groups wards into fifteen categories on the basis of which party won, which party came second and the difference between their two votes. Only the votes of the three main parties are used to colour this map. It is fortunate that each of these political parties have chosen primary colours to represent them. Thus all wards in which the Conservative candidate won most votes can be given a shade of blue, all wards where Labour did best can be given a shade of red, and all wards where the Liberals had the largest poll are coloured a shade of yellow. In wards which are considered not to be safe, a hint of the colour of the party coming second is added. Liberal seats where Labour came second are light-orange, whereas close Labour victories over the Conservatives are a shade of magenta. Here, safe wards are defined as wards in which the first placed party was forty (percentage) points ahead of the second placed party in terms of shares of the three party vote. Safe wards are given the clearest or darkest shade of each of the three primary colours. Conversely wards are classified as marginal, here, if the difference between the first placed two parties is less than ten points. Light pastel shades are used to show the six possible types of marginal into which each of these wards falls.

The key to Colour Print H shows what proportion of the population of Britain live in each ward by electoral type, as well as the relative positions of each shading category in "electoral space" (using the same scale as in Figure 7.2). The largest group of wards are classed as safe Labour victories, although it is important to realise that in places such as Scotland a Nationalist or other party candidate may well have won the ward. There, Labour may simply have polled much more than the candidates of the other main two parties (assuming they stood). The next largest group of wards by population live in areas comfortably won by the Labour party where the Conservative candidate came second. One person in six lives in an area like this, mostly in cities. Safe Conservative seats are the next largest group, encompassing 11% of the population. Rural and suburban areas contain most of these people, but there are also clear concentrations in areas such as south west London. In terms of wards which are marginal between these two parties, they both hold equal numbers containing, in total, a tenth of the population. Almost as many people live in wards where the Liberal party and the Conservative party are effectively contesting one another, but only 3% of the population are involved in

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serious contests between Labour and the Liberals. Geographically, the Liberal party has one of the most interesting distributions. Where the Liberal party does well in rural areas its wards are tinted green as the Conservative party tends to come second. Inside cities such as London and Liverpool its wards have an orange tint as Labour are the main alternative there. In terms of increasing their vote, three times as many people live in marginal Conservative wards which the Liberals have a good chance of winning as live in similar marginal Labour wards. Thus the local electoral geography of Britain reflects something of the nature of contests being held for national government, as well as the greater complexity that is revealed at this spatial resolution.

### General Elections

Increasingly it is general elections which matter. As powers are taken away from local government, and as the state plays a more active role in determining who gets what, the prospects of people in local areas become more and more dependent on decisions taken in Westminster. It is central government which now decides how much social housing to build, how many schools to support, how health care should be organized and which local industries are promoted. Central government now collects and spends more money less fairly than it has done at any time since the war (Social Justice Commission 1994).

Because national politics is so dominated by the two main parties it is possible to draw simple maps which simultaneously show both the static picture and voting change in constituencies (page 229). The rise of the third and fourth placed parties over recent elections has made this mapping more difficult (Figure 7.16), so that it is now necessary to show which party came second in every seat to demonstrate the variation in the types of political competition which now take place (page 231). Over the last forty years the electoral geography of Britain has changed dramatically. The Liberal party is now significant as well as Labour from the point of view of the government losing seats (Figures 7.17 and 7.22). However, electoral geography means that the only party which can hope to gain majority power other than the Conservatives is Labour, and its chances of achieving that at the next election are still only slight (Cornford *et al*. 1995).

It is worth comparing some district-level economic changes with the more recent changes to the political map of Britain (page 229). The Conservative gains in 1983 corresponded with widespread falls in unemployment outside London (page 97), as did their victories in 1987, which were concentrated in the south. In 1992, when Labour regained many of these seats, unemployment was rising in most districts. A similar pattern is found when the general election maps are compared with the house price changes preceding election years (page 127). House price rises in 1982–1983 and 1986–1987 correspond geographically with government victories, while price falls before the last election were deepest around suburban London, where Labour made most gains. The Liberal party has also gained from some of these changes which is shown most clearly by the recent rise in its local vote in those areas which have suffered most from the latest recession (Figure 7.10). Between the 1979 and 1992 general elections the Liberal vote grew most strongly in the South West and South East (excluding London), Labour saw its largest fall in these two regions and gained most in Merseyside, Wales and the North West as a whole, whereas the Conservatives saw their largest falls in Merseyside, Scotland and South Yorkshire, their vote only rising noticeably in London over the decade, where turnout too rose most strongly (Figure 7.20).

### Registration and Representation

Just as most of the press coverage of the 1991 census has concentrated on who was not included, so who is not included in elections is equally, if not more, important. These issues are inextricably linked, as the maps on page 217 show, because it is much the same people missing from social statistics who are excluded from the political process. But because the electoral register does not impute voters, almost twice as many adults are not eligible to vote as were not counted by government statisticians. These people are known to be more likely to be young, renting, not to be white (Figure 7.4) and to be living in particular parts of particular cities. Their absence from the political process will have a much more marked effect than if they were evenly distributed amongst the population. Most seriously, they have not been included in the current reorganisation of parliamentary constituencies, so future generations of people living in places like central London will have far fewer members of parliament than they are entitled to.

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