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Electoral geographies

An election is coming. Universal peace is declared, and the foxes have a sincere interest in prolonging the lives of the poultry.

(George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, 1866, chapter 5)

Voting, the widening franchise, and the growth of electoral geography

Elections and the way they are organised are fundamental to the make-up of all democratic societies; they also profoundly affect their social and political geography, in that they provide the means by which people are represented in government. Voting gives people a voice, but the way constituencies at all spatial scales – local, regional, national, and even supra national – are organised is critical in deciding how their voices will be heard and acted upon. As George Eliot noted in her novel *Felix Holt*, elections are the one real opportunity for the people to call to account the executive that normally rules their lives. There are, of course, many other factors which also influence elections, in particular who is eligible to vote, the voting system used, and the frequency with which elections are held, but also the size and shape of constituencies is critical, because quite small demographic shifts can impact radically on the distribution of political power.

It is, therefore, quite surprising how relatively recently electoral geography has established itself as a core element of political geography. Aside from a few isolated research monographs, it was only in the late 1970s that there was any systematic interest shown by geographers in the subject (Taylor and Johnston, 1979), but the upsurge of interest in the UK then sparked not just a great deal of interest in the spatial patterns produced by election results, but also theoretical research on the

significance of electoral studies for understanding the underlying dynamics of political geography (Johnston, 1979; Gudgin and Taylor, 1979).

Certainly the lack of attention paid to voting patterns by geographers was not the result of a general lack of interest in the subject. Elections have been pored over in detail by political scientists ever since representative government began to become the norm in the Western world at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. In the UK this interest dates back to the Reform Act of 1832, which made the first serious attempt to ensure that the franchise in Britain more fairly reflected the distribution of population (Thrasher and Rallings, 2000) (Box 7.1). Not that the first Reform Act itself provided for anything approaching a universal franchise. In common with most democratic societies, the UK has inched towards this goal over a period of nearly two centuries, grudgingly conceding the right to vote to more and more of its people, group by group. Gender and ownership of property were initially the key qualifications. In common with most other countries, the franchise in the UK included only men who owned property, though this was then extended to leaseholders and, subsequently, to most working men. By the end of the nineteenth century, voting was more or less a right for all men over the age of 21, but women were completely disenfranchised. Not until 1918 did women gain the vote and, even then, only those over 30. It was ten years later that voting rights were finally extended to all adults over the age of 21. Since then, the only important change in the franchise has been the reduction in the age limit to 18 in 1970.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most Western democracies have a universal franchise and this general extension of the right to vote has made elections very much more geographically relevant. They are now more truly tests of public opinion as a whole, rather than measures of particular sectional interests, even though participation rates are sometimes surprisingly modest, throwing into question the extent to which they are true tests of the overall public mood. In Western Europe, voting is compulsory only in Belgium, Italy, and Luxembourg, though it was compulsory in the Netherlands until 1971. Not surprisingly, these countries have amongst the highest levels of voter participation, consistently running at over 80 per cent of the electorate, but there are other countries, such as Iceland and Sweden, where voting is not compulsory and which have similar levels of participation. The missing voters in those countries where voting is compulsory are explained by

Box 7.1

The Reform Acts

The three Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884 all extended voting rights to previously disenfranchised citizens. Most controversial was the 1832 Act, which reapportioned representation in Parliament in a way that was fairer to the rapidly expanding industrial cities of the north, and did away with the so-called 'rotten' and 'pocket' boroughs. Old Sarum near Salisbury, for instance, only had seven voters, all controlled by the local squire, yet still sent two members to Parliament. The act not only reapportioned representation in Parliament, so that it more accurately represented the distribution of population, it also extended the franchise to those who were less powerful, socially and economically. The act extended the right to

vote to any man owning a household worth £10, thus adding 217,000 to an electorate of 435,000 and giving one man in five the right to vote.

The 1867 Act extended the right to vote still further down the class ladder, adding nearly a million voters, mostly working men, to the electorate and bringing the total number eligible to vote to two million in England and Wales. The 1884 Act, together with the 1885 Redistribution Act, further tripled the electorate and gave the vote to agricultural labourers, by which time voting had to all intents and purposes become a right to all adult men. Women had to wait until the twentieth century to gain similar rights.

spoiled ballot papers, as many as 20 per cent of the electorate choosing not to cast their vote for any of the candidates on offer. At the other end of the scale, the proportion of the electorate voting in national elections in some countries is often well below 70 per cent, the lowest vote in Europe being 45 per cent in Switzerland in 1991. Turnout is usually even lower in local elections with turnouts of below 30 per cent quite common, and in the elections to the European Parliament the figures have been similarly low.

From a geographical point of view, it also needs to be remembered that the voting system used can have a significant influence on the eventual outcome. That most commonly used is the straightforward one person one vote across a jigsaw of constituencies. Under this first-past-the-post system, those gaining the most votes are duly elected to serve the particular constituency in question. The limitation is that, if there are more than two candidates, then the persons elected will more than likely only have gained a minority of the votes cast and the wishes of the

majority of voters will have been ignored. It also means that no politician can ignore the minutiae of their local constituency affairs, even if they are fully engaged on the national or international stage, and none can take winning their constituency seat for granted.

The single transferable vote is one way of ensuring that voter wishes more nearly match who is eventually elected. Under this system voters rank the candidates and then a process of elimination occurs. At each iteration, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and the first-choice votes cast for them are redistributed to the voters' second choices. The process ends when one candidate has 50 per cent of the votes cast. It is undoubtedly a fairer system, although it too has its disadvantages, notably the fact that voters are encouraged to rank candidates, even though they may know very little about what some of them stand for. It is also a very laborious and slow process to count the votes, but those areas where the single transferable vote is used, such as Northern Ireland, it is a popular system and has succeeded in broadening the political range of candidates elected.

The potential conflict between national and local party loyalties has been tackled in a different way using a list system, whereby the number of candidates elected for a particular party is determined by the proportion of the votes cast for that party. In some instances, such as the Federal Republic of Germany, there are national lists covering the whole country, in others, such as the elections for the European Parliament, there are constituency lists. The problem with the list system is that there is not much direct affinity between the candidates and the voters, who often have little idea who it is who is representing them. The criticism is countered by the argument that there are invariably other, lower tiers of government using the first-past-the-post, or the single transferable vote systems and the candidates elected at these levels can adequately represent individual voters.

Whatever the limitations of elections as measures of public opinion, be it through low levels of participation, or the inherent unfairnesses of the voting systems used, they do provide unparalleled insights into the way societies are changing. People are increasingly moving much more frequently, both within and between countries, so that the socio-economic structure of voter groups may change quite dramatically from one election to the next. Demographic factors, such as birth and death rates and rates of household formation are also constantly changing, and

they too will affect what people want from society and the way they vote. More sinisterly, the manipulation of elections, through where exactly boundaries are drawn and which particular segments of the population are included, or not included, within constituencies can materially influence who is elected.

The spatial organisation of elections

Ensuring that elections are fairly and properly managed is one of the most important public duties in a democratic society. All countries with representative forms of government try to ensure that they have in place unambiguous rules for the conduct of elections, as well as the means to enforce them. The task is extremely difficult, because bias is all too easy to hide amid constant social change, but the price of failure is high. Once particular groups or sections of the electorate have been favoured, it is extremely hard to persuade them to relinquish their position and a monopoly of political power and systematic discrimination against those excluded is the result. If not addressed, this can become the source of deep-seated and destabilising social unrest, in extreme cases threatening the stability of the state.

The electoral goal in most countries is to devise and implement a system where every adult of voting age has a single vote of equal weight to all others, following the principle of one person one vote. In addition, constituency boundaries must be drawn in such a way that each includes roughly the same number of people and that, as far as possible, everyone has a similar social mix, a procedure known as districting. Of all countries, the USA has probably legislated most vigorously, though not necessarily most successfully, to achieve proportionality. The number of people eligible to vote per electoral district is regularly reviewed after each census to ensure that none is over or under represented. The US Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled unconstitutional even very small deviations which meant that there was not absolute equality of voters in each district. Most states subscribe in principle to proportionality, but are prepared to tolerate a greater degree of limited deviation in the interests of effective representation. This was the reason given for creating additional constituencies for the 1991 elections in Zambia. In order to ensure that areas with severe communications difficulties were not ignored, a rural bias was engineered and they were allocated a voting strength out of proportion to their population. The process was open and

accepted by all sides in the election, but it still meant that some votes were devalued. It goes without saying that the whole process of districting is dependent on the availability of accurate and up-to-date population statistics, something that even countries using the most sophisticated census techniques struggle to achieve (Westminster City Council, 2002). Indeed, in the USA reapportionment used to be undertaken after every Congressional election, but because of arguments about the accuracy of population statistics, it now occurs after the US decennial census.

In the UK the task of ensuring electoral fairness has been the responsibility of the Electoral Commission since 2002, under which there are separate Boundary Committees for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. These committees, previously known as the Local Government Commissions and answerable directly to central government, have extremely wide-ranging powers including a duty to conduct periodic reviews of all constituency boundaries to ensure that demographic changes and population movements do not result in bias and imbalance in the system (Rossiter *et al.*, 1999a). Details of the Electoral Commission's responsibilities are set out in Box 7.2.

Box 7.2

The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent body set up by the UK Parliament under the terms of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Its brief is to increase public confidence and participation in the democratic process within the UK, by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

On 1 April 2002, the Boundary Commission for England, which had formerly been known as the Local Government Commission for England, became a statutory committee of

the Electoral Commission. Its main duty is to keep local electoral boundaries under periodic review, to ensure that they reflect as far as possible the distribution of population. There are separate Boundary Commissions for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, the Boundary Commission is responsible to the Scottish Parliament; in Wales to the Welsh Assembly; and in Northern Ireland to the Northern Ireland Office, though this will change if local government is once again devolved to the province.

Malapportionment, or violation of the norm of equal representation according to population, is an ever-present danger, which those in charge of managing elections must constantly watch for and take steps to eliminate. In the USA, as far back as 1842, the Reapportionment Act required that Congressional Districts be contiguous and compact to prevent perverse and discriminatory boundaries being drawn, thereby excluding, for example, certain concentrations of unwanted economic or ethnic groups. The Act was strengthened further by a Supreme Court ruling in 1962, which held that Districts must have fair borders and encompass an appropriate population mix. A further ruling by the Supreme Court in 1985 deemed that any attempt to manipulate District borders to give advantage to one particular political party was unconstitutional. Despite such actions, however, the risk of malapportionment, intentional or unintentional, remains and the onus should always be on those responsible for managing elections to show that this form of bias is minimised.

There are many ways in which constituency boundaries can be intentionally manipulated for electoral advantage. Such acts are generally known as gerrymandering, after the Governor of the US State of Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry, who crafted a District that bore a strong resemblance to a salamander for the political advantage of his own party. The ruse was spotted by his opponents, who called it a gerrymander after the perpetrator, a term picked up and publicised by the press. Suddenly there was a graphic word to describe the widespread abuse of power through spatial fraud and gerrymandering rapidly became established in the English language across the world.

All gerrymandering ultimately has the goal of unfairly encompassing an undue proportion of voters from one political party and there are a host of ingenious ways of doing this. The most common and blatant is to draw boundaries in such a way that the opposition is concentrated into a small minority of constituencies, thus reducing, and even eliminating, their chance of ever gaining political power. Social policies and discrimination have been used in the past through ethnic and religious ghettos, a notorious example being the concentration of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland after the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the subsequent civil war.

A second commonly used stratagem is precisely the reverse strategy, whereby the voting power of the opposition is diluted across as many constituencies as possible, thus preventing them from ever achieving the

number of elected representatives that would reflect their true electoral strength. In the UK the Liberal Democratic Party and its predecessor the Liberal Party have both campaigned long and hard for some form of proportional representation through a candidate list system to overcome this acknowledged bias. Not surprisingly, the Labour and Conservative Parties, which have monopolised political power since the early part of the twentieth century, have paid little more than lip-service to the Liberal Democrat pleas for greater fairness. The only major concession has been the introduction of a candidate list system in the elections for the European Parliament in 2004.

Both the above techniques of gerrymandering are difficult to prove and hard to eliminate, unlike a third technique, sometimes referred to as the stacked method, whereby small areas that are physically separated are lumped together to form single constituencies favouring the party in power. Invariably, however, attempts to stack votes in this way are so obvious that they rarely succeed.

There have been many attempts to counteract gerrymandering by using computer algorithms to generate constituencies automatically, but success has been very limited. It is not just the shortcomings of the algorithms themselves that pose problems, but also the almost endless scope for challenge by any party that feels it has been disadvantaged. It is a salutary lesson to understand that unless people have confidence in such theoretically unbiased results, the outcome can be just as controversial as more malevolent attempts to draw maps of electoral boundaries.

Finally, reference must be made to the most widespread of all election malpractices, voter registration. Unless voters are registered, it is impossible to conduct fair elections and ensuring that people do register, or are not being prevented from registering, is extremely challenging. Even in the most advanced democratic societies, there is great variation in the proportion of people registered to vote across countries, and in less developed countries it is often even more difficult to ensure the all those eligible are included.

The Westminster City Council gerrymander

A notorious attempt to gerrymander was perpetrated by a group of senior Conservative Councillors, led by Dame Shirley Porter, on Westminster

City Council in central London during the 1980s. Their particular ploy was to use the newly introduced right for council tenants to purchase their houses or apartments to bring more people who were likely to vote Conservative into key marginal wards and thus make it more likely that the ruling party would retain power. The irony of the case was that initially the social policies of the Council had been much praised, especially its 1987 decision to sell 500 homes a year as part of a 'building stable communities' initiative. Only later, under persistent probing by the National Audit Office, did the more sinister political agenda become apparent. The case eventually went to court and Dame Shirley was personally convicted and fined £42 million in surcharges, interest, and costs. She appealed successfully against the conviction in 1999, but this was overturned again by the Law Lords in 2001 and the case was finally settled with a reduced payment of £12 million in 2004. The whole saga illustrates very clearly how insidious gerrymandering can be, and how difficult it is to prove and to bring those responsible to book.

Elections and social change

Elections are good barometers of social change, because they directly involve a greater proportion of the public than any other test of opinion. They expose underlying social cleavages and often can provide a clear indication of the ways in which states and regions, at all levels, are changing. Furthermore, the longer established and more mature the democratic process is, the better election data are for uncovering changes of political mood. It is argued that political parties normally go through a three-stage process of development: from cadre parties, largely reserved for wealthy male elites; to mass parties representing particular sectional interests, such as the working class, or the church, or small farmers; to the all-embracing stage, found widely in Western Europe and North America today, where they try to appeal to all sections of society, irrespective of sectional affiliation (Panbianco, 1988). Once political parties have reached this final stage and begun to achieve a universal appeal, election results become a very sensitive measure of shifts in the public mood.

In the USA, two major political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, have exercised a monopoly of power for most of the past two hundred years and shifts in the balance of power between them across the country are widely seen as reliable indicators of social and

political priorities. Archer and Taylor (1981) made a fascinating analysis of the four-yearly presidential elections over 150 years and identified from the electoral geography a number of key turning points, such as the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the economic depression in 1933, following which the underlying cleavages in American society experienced a quantum change as a result of the New Deal programme he inspired (Box 7.3).

Box 7.3

The New Deal

The New Deal is the name for a raft of government policies developed by President Roosevelt immediately after his election as the US President in 1933 to try to lift the USA out of the Depression. The strategy was basically to initiate a huge programme of public works across the country. A quarter of a million unemployed young men were offered jobs in forestry and flood prevention work, nearly twice as many as were at that time in the US regular army. The Tennessee Valley Authority was set up to revitalise the whole of the river basin of the Tennessee River, one of the rural areas worst affected by the Depression. Legislation was passed by the Congress to ease the burden of debt for farmers and homeowners, thus preventing millions of foreclosures. A huge sum at the time, \$500 billion, was granted by the Congress to help states, counties, and municipalities in their duty of care for those who need direct and immediate relief. Finally, the Congress passed legislation allowing those states that wished to the right to sell beer. This resulted in many new jobs being created and a useful new source of tax revenue for the Federal government.

The initiative proved both popular and effective and a second wave of legislation extended further the ability of the Federal government to undertake public works. The Farm Relief Bill enabled huge amounts of public money to be poured into agriculture; legislation was enacted to enable working conditions for industrial workers to be regulated; and the Railroad Bill introduced a degree of central planning into the national railway network.

The New Deal as a whole was viewed by many in the USA as creeping socialism and, for that reason, was treated with great suspicion, but its success in creating a genuine economic revival meant that such fears were never allowed to derail the programme. In any case, the US involvement in the Second World War after 1942 squashed any argument about the rights and wrongs of direct government participation in the productive economy, as manufacturing industry turned increasingly to producing war materials.

Shifts such as those identified by Archer and Taylor go beyond the local effects that are evident in some form in all electoral data. Local effects can arise from some kind of genuine regional solidarity, like that traditionally accorded to the Democratic Party in the American South in the south-eastern USA, but they can also be the result of cynical manipulation. Governments always run the risk of being accused of enhancing their electoral fortunes by disproportionately favouring those areas where their support is weak, most frequently by channelling public investment into swing constituencies. The process is known as pork-barrelling and the charge is most frequently levelled at the way Federal spending has been allocated across the USA, though in general it has been shown to be more effective in bolstering the popularity of individual politicians, rather than influencing wider political allegiances.

The electoral map of the UK

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the electoral map of the UK appears to be experiencing the kind of fundamental political shift described above. The Conservative and Labour Parties have dominated the national political landscape for more than half a century, with long periods of Conservative government being occasionally usurped by radical intrusions of Labour rule, notably between 1945 and 1951, and between 1966 and 1970. After 1979, a string of radical and reforming Conservative governments, led by Margaret Thatcher, seemed to be decisively breaking this mould. There was widespread speculation that the Labour Party was finished as a national mass party and that its support base had shrunk to the urban and industrial regions of northern Britain. There was talk of a nation dividing and the prospect of growing social tension between a poorer and politically disaffected north of the country chronically lagging behind a prosperous and modern politically right-wing south. Geographers made some significant contributions to the examination of this growing divide through the analysis and mapping of the changes (Johnston *et al.*, 1988a).

A decade later the electoral map had been transformed. The fortunes of the Conservative and Labour Parties had been almost completely reversed and a third party, the Liberal Democrats, which had been insignificant in electoral terms since the early part of the twentieth century, had made significant inroads into particularly the Conservative vote in Scotland and south-west England. In addition, the nationalist

parties in Scotland (Scottish Nationalists) and Wales (Plaid Cymru) had both gained significant numbers of seats in their respective regions and were beginning to resemble more closely the well-established regional parties in Northern Ireland.

In the 1997 General Election the Labour Party made sweeping gains – a net increase of 144 seats (53 per cent) – right across Great Britain, but particularly in the Midlands and south-east England, and in Scotland and Wales (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). The Conservative Party disappeared as a national electoral force in both Scotland and Wales to be replaced by a combination of Liberal Democrats and Scottish and Welsh nationalists. Even in Northern Ireland the traditionally strong links between the Conservative Party and majority Ulster Unionist Party were severely weakened. Aside from the change of government, therefore, the 1997 election seemed to indicate a real resurgence of the Liberal Democrats as a credible national political force with the prospect of it being able to strengthen its position further in the future from a broad base across the UK. The party gained seats in Scotland and Wales, extended its traditional base in south-west and north-west England, and significantly increased its number of seats in the south and east of England. In Scotland and Wales, the nationalist parties made less spectacular gains, but showed their potential for political influence; while in Northern Ireland multiparty politics became a reality in electoral terms with the fragmentation of the once omnipotent Ulster Unionist Party and the emergence of the nationalist Sinn Féin on the national electoral stage in the UK with a second seat in the Westminster Parliament.

The General Election in 2001 confirmed the apparently fundamental shift that had occurred in 1997 (Figure 7.3). The Labour and Conservative Parties altered their relative positions hardly at all. The Conservative Party did make some gains, but these were almost completely offset by losses elsewhere, mostly to the Liberal Democrats. The party did make a solitary gain in Scotland, winning back the geographically large but sparsely populated seat of Dumfries and Galloway from the Scottish Nationalists, but effectively it remained what it had become in 1997, an English right-of-centre party. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, further consolidated their spectacular gains in 1997. They added 6 seats to the 28 they had gained then, giving the party 52 seats overall, still only a third of the number held by the Conservative Party, but sufficient for the party to be able to play a significant role in the political opposition. The results for the nationalists were much less encouraging. The Scottish Nationalists lost one seat, while Plaid Cymru lost one and gained one.

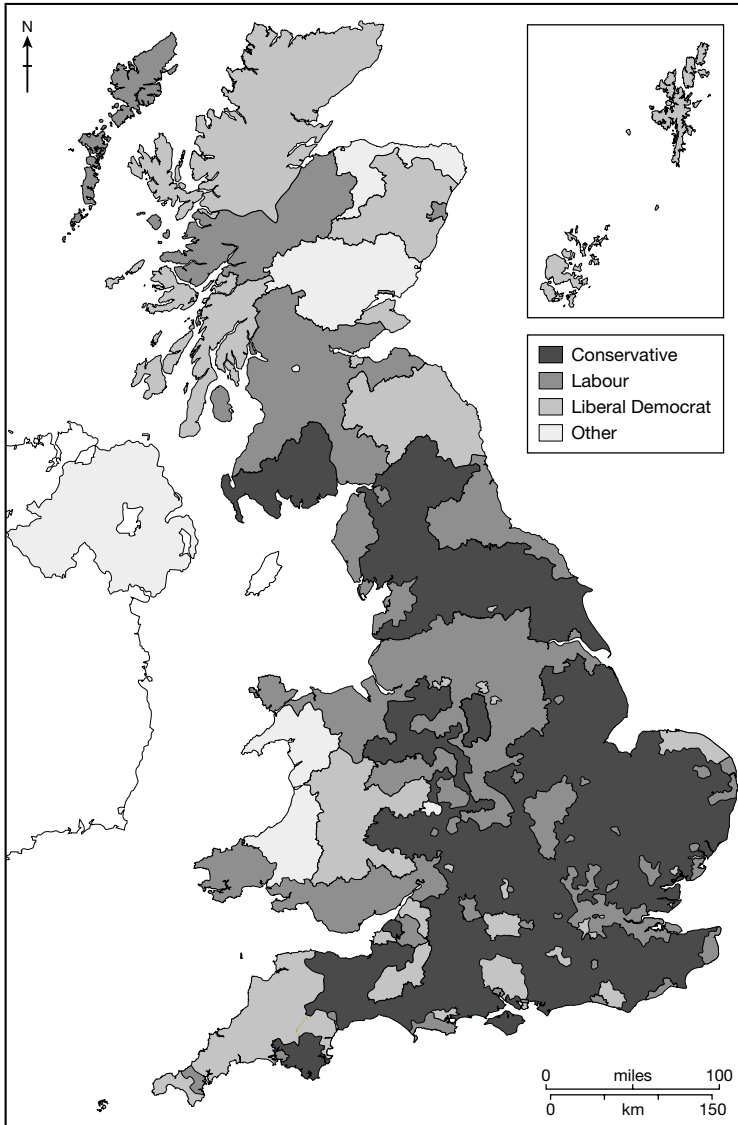


Figure 7.1 *Electoral map of the UK after the 1997 General Election*

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland the Ulster Unionist Party continued to cede ground, losing two seats to Sinn Féin and three to the Democratic Unionist Party, making the political situation in the province even more multiparty, but also isolating it to an even greater extent from the rest of the UK.

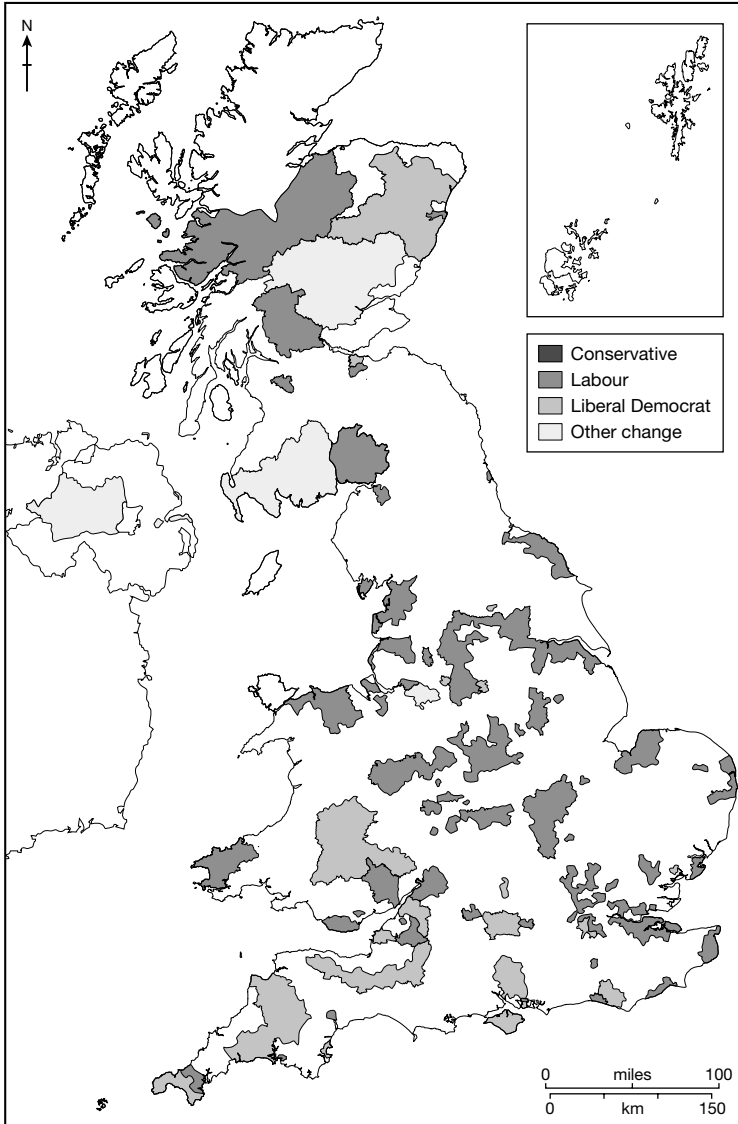


Figure 7.2 *Changes to the electoral map of the UK after the 1997 General Election*

Predicting trends in political allegiance is naturally an exercise full of danger, but the changes in the electoral geography of the UK at the turn of the twenty-first century seem to show some fundamental changes in the national electoral mood and these changes are clearly illustrated by

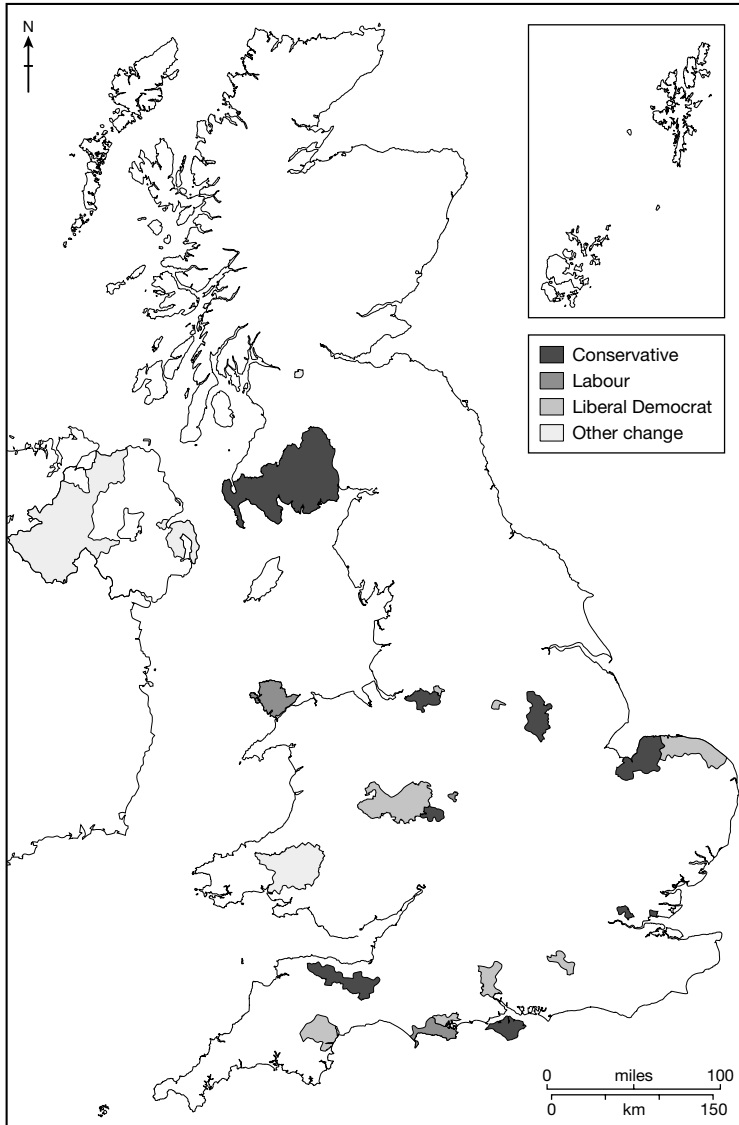


Figure 7.3 *Changes to the electoral map of the UK after the 2001 General Election*

the cartographic evidence. The Labour Party is now the only political party that can claim to be truly national on the basis of seats won, notwithstanding its complete absence from Northern Ireland, where it has so far chosen not to field candidates. The Conservative Party, which for

more than 200 years has taken its pre-eminent position as the national political party in the UK almost for granted, is now barely credible as such. It has shrunk away, not only from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but has also largely been replaced in south-west England. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, have extended their political foothold all over Great Britain, if not Northern Ireland, and would seem to have a very broad-based launch pad for further growth in their number of parliamentary seats in the future. The outlook for nationalist parties is much less clear. Neither the Scottish Nationalist Party nor Plaid Cymru have really established themselves securely, either on the national stage or in their respective regional assemblies, while in Northern Ireland the divisions between the various nationalist parties remain so deep that participation in any devolved regional government is at present not possible.

Key themes and further reading

At the heart of this chapter is the history of democratic elections and the progress made in widening the franchise in different parts of the world since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the main alternative voting systems that are used: a simple majority of votes cast, the single transferable vote, and the list system. The aim of fully democratic elections should be to ensure that each vote cast counts equally towards the election of representatives, but bias is difficult to eliminate. Malapportionment, when there is a variation in the number of electors between voting constituencies, is hard to eradicate and the reasons for this need to be clearly appreciated. Similarly, the processes behind the manipulation of constituency boundaries for political advantage, known as gerrymandering, should be understood. Finally, the reader should have some knowledge of the consequences of long-term shifts in voting patterns at the national level.

Two books were instrumental in propelling electoral geography to the centre of the political geography agenda: *Political, Electoral and Spatial Systems* by R. J. Johnston (1979) and *Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections* by G. Gudgin and P. J. Taylor (1979). They are still the best introductions to the subject written by geographers, although there is a huge amount of material written by political scientists. A comprehensive introduction to the facts and figures of British elections

is the book edited by Mike Thrasher and Colin Rallings, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1999*, the sixth edition of which was published in 2000. A fascinating study of the changing electoral geography of the UK is to be found in *A Nation Dividing? The Electoral Map of Great Britain 1979–1987* by R. J. Johnston *et al.* (1988b).