

6 Time and the Fragmenting Party System

The fragmentation of the UK party system was dramatically illustrated in the discussion of the 2019 European Parliament Elections in Chapter 4, but this process has been going on over a much longer period of time. In the first fully peacetime general election in 1950, Labour and the Conservatives received 89 per cent of the popular vote on a turnout of 84 per cent. In contrast, in the general election of 2019 these parties obtained 76 per cent of the vote on a turnout of 67 per cent.¹ So fewer eligible people are voting, and when they do so, they are less likely to support the two major parties. The share of the vote for the two main parties recovered to some extent in the 2017 and 2019 elections compared with 2015, as previous chapters have shown. But the growth in support for minor parties has substantially reduced their share of the vote compared with fifty years ago.

As we have seen, a major contributor to this development has been differences in age-related electoral turnout and support for the major parties, trends which have been growing over time. We have known for a long time that young people are less likely to turn out than the middle-aged and elderly in British elections.² Moreover, as discussed earlier, age was not only significantly related voting to Leave in the 2016 referendum on the country's EU membership but was also a strong predictor of voting Labour in the 2017 and 2019 general elections.³ Young people were very likely to vote Remain in the referendum and then to vote Labour. After the 2017 election, this surprisingly strong age effect was described as a 'Youthquake'.

This chapter investigates why the process of party fragmentation has occurred over a long period of time with a particular focus on the role of age. We will explain why electoral participation among different age groups is so varied, why this variation has grown over time and how this

¹ House of Commons (2020).

² Franklin (2004); Grasso (2016).

³ Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017), p. 155; Allen and Bartle (2018), p. 166.

has contributed to the fragmentation of the party system. We begin by focusing on turnout, and then subsequently look at voting for parties over a period of fifty-five years using British Election Study (BES) surveys as well as our own more recent national surveys. This exercise uses every BES survey from 1964 through 2017.⁴

At first sight, it appears easy to analyse if young people participated in greater numbers in recent elections compared with the past simply by looking at turnout and party support by different age groups over time. But it is a more complicated exercise than it first appears, since there are three different aspects to the relationship between age and voting behaviour that we need to examine. These are what are known as life-cycle, period and cohort effects, each of which makes a separate contribution to the relationship between age and voting.⁵

To consider each of these in turn, *life-cycle* effects are associated with individuals getting older and therefore having a variety of life experiences which can affect their attitudes, beliefs and rates of political participation. For example, 18-year-olds are unlikely to have full-time careers, or high incomes; few will own properties and have mortgages and they are less likely to be in a stable relationship with a partner or to have children than are older people. All these experiences are likely to influence the way they look at politics and the world more generally in comparison with the middle-aged or elderly, most of whom will have had a number of politically relevant experiences over the course of their lives.⁶

One way of explaining lower turnout among the young is to note that they have less of a 'stake in the system'. If they do not pay taxes, have full-time jobs, own property, are relatively healthy and do not have children, they are less likely to be concerned about politics because, while issues related to these characteristics are central to policy, they are peripheral to young people's concerns. Youth are less focused on issues such as taxes, employment, health and housing, in comparison with older groups because their experiences in the labour market and in society differ from their older counterparts. On the other hand, when young people get into the world of work, acquire a partner, a mortgage and have children, their circumstances change. The more they acquire a stake in the system the more they will pay attention to government, politics and voting.

⁴ The first BES survey was conducted in 1963, but the 1964 survey was the first to follow a general election, a procedure which has continued ever since. The data for the 2017 and 2019 elections come from surveys commissioned by the authors.

⁵ Yang and Land (2013).

⁶ Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995).

Period effects, in contrast, arise from the state of society and the political context at the time when an election takes place. Each election is to an extent unique and so the specific context in which it takes place can influence participation. For example, the 2015 election occurred at the end of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government during which the worst effects of the Great Recession had eased. This allowed the government to claim success in managing the economy, while at the same time blaming New Labour for ‘crashing the economy’ prior to the Great Recession. Circa 2015, the ideological distance between the parties was not especially large and the date of the election was known well in advance, such that the parties were well prepared for the campaign.⁷

Things were very different in the 2017 general election, which came as a surprise to everyone, had a longer than usual campaign and was dominated by the Brexit debate, as we discussed in Chapter 3.⁸ In addition, the ideological divisions between Theresa May’s Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party were much wider than two years earlier. Equally, the effect of the campaign was much larger in 2017 than it had been in 2015, with significant increases in public support for Labour occurring as polling day approached, something which had not happened in the previous election. Clearly, period effects were quite different in the two elections. A similar point can be made about the 2019 general election as the analysis in Chapter 5 makes clear.

The third aspect of the relationship between age and participation involves *cohort effects*, an idea originally introduced by the social scientist Karl Mannheim.⁹ Cohort effects are based on the idea that the values, attitudes and beliefs that determine people’s voting behaviour are formed in late adolescence and early adulthood. As this process happens it is influenced by the economic, social and political circumstances of the time. Once formed, the evidence suggests that, unlike life-cycle effects, cohort effects remain relatively stable over time as people grow older, even if their social and economic circumstances change.¹⁰ In this respect higher education is an important socializing agency. For example, consider an 18-year-old student who became politically aware in 2003 and joined in several protests against the UK’s participation in the war in Iraq. There is evidence suggesting that these experiences are likely to stay with this person for many years after graduation, working to shape their subsequent political attitudes and behaviour.

⁷ Cowley and Kavanagh (2016).

⁸ Allen and Bartle (2018).

⁹ Mannheim (1928).

¹⁰ Inglehart (1977); Alwin and Krosnick (1991).

At a collective level, these early-life socialization processes can produce ‘generational’ or *cohort effects* among voters. This means, for example, that individuals who ‘came of age’ politically during the Second World War and who faced physical dangers and wartime deprivation are likely to look at the world differently from those brought up in the relatively peaceful and affluent 1960s. Moreover, this will continue to be true for the wartime generation even when they live comfortably in the changed circumstances of later decades. The claim is that early experiences can mark a generation of people for life, and this is also true of their politics and voting behaviour.

One prominent researcher, Ronald Inglehart, developed these ideas in a series of publications about changing cultural values across the world.¹¹ In a series of widely cited studies, Inglehart argued that successive cohorts of people coming of age in affluent post-Second World War societies increasingly have ‘post-materialist’ values focusing on ‘self-realization’ and ‘personal development’. In contrast, older cohorts who reached maturity during periods of economic hardship and war were much more likely to have ‘materialist’ values that prioritize ‘economic successes’ and ‘personal security’. Inglehart’s central argument is that the evolution of political orientations is primarily driven by the successive replacement of cohorts with different socialization experiences rather than by age or period effects.

Taken together, the preceding discussion implies that if we wish to understand the relationship between age and political participation, we need to identify age, period and cohort effects using a longitudinal study. However, there is a serious problem in doing this because the following relationship holds between the three effects.

$$\text{Period} - \text{Age} = \text{Cohort}$$

If we know the age and period effects, then the cohort effects are fixed and cannot be independently estimated. To illustrate this, consider an 18-year-old student who was a first-time voter in the 2019 general election. We know her age and the period or election in which she participated, so she must be a member of the cohort who became politically aware at some point between the 2016 EU referendum and the 2019 election. This assumes that she had to be at least 15 years of age before she started to take an interest in politics just prior to the referendum. Clearly, she cannot be part of a cohort who came of age politically in the 1960s or 1970s, so age and periods perfectly predict her cohort

¹¹ Inglehart (2018).

membership. Technically this is referred to by statisticians as an ‘identification problem’. This means that it is impossible to estimate the three effects in a linear regression model of electoral turnout.¹²

Recent debates have divided the methodological community on the issue of overcoming this problem and estimating trends in turnout among age groups over time. All are agreed that it cannot be done with a survey conducted at a single point of time, but it is argued that the availability of longitudinal data collected over time may make this possible.¹³ We will begin the data analyses in this chapter by examining turnout before going on to look at support for the parties, utilizing these three age-related measures to examine how voting behaviour has changed over time. Each of these aspects plays an important role in explaining electoral participation and voting for the major parties, and they help to explain the observed fragmentation of the British party system.

Periods, Cohorts and Turnout in Britain 1964–2019

We begin our investigation of age-related influences on electoral participation by looking at the effects of periods and cohorts on turnout in surveys conducted between 1964 and 2019. This is the longest period over which national survey data on voting behaviour in Britain are available. We first examine trends in periods and cohorts without separating them out in order to provide an overall picture of what happened across this fifty-five-year time interval. Subsequently, we distinguish between the different age-related effects after introducing *hierarchical age-period-cohort* modelling. Altogether, there were sixteen different election studies conducted between 1964 and 2019, and so we start by examining them. The cohort and life-cycle effects are discussed more fully below.

The analysis of turnout utilizes self-reported voting by the survey respondents. This presents a potential problem, since there is abundant evidence indicating that individuals tend to exaggerate their electoral participation when they are questioned in surveys.¹⁴ However, we can examine the extent to which this is a problem by calculating an average figure for self-reported turnout in each of the sixteen surveys and then compare these figures with official turnout statistics from the actual elections. The relationship between the two appears in Figure 6.1, where each dot is an election, and the regression line summarizes the association

¹² This is an extreme example of what is referred to as a multicollinearity problem in multiple regression analysis. See Kennedy (2008).

¹³ See Yang and Land (2013).

¹⁴ Clausen (1968–1969); Traugott and Katosh (1979); Bernstein, Chadha and Montjoy (2001).

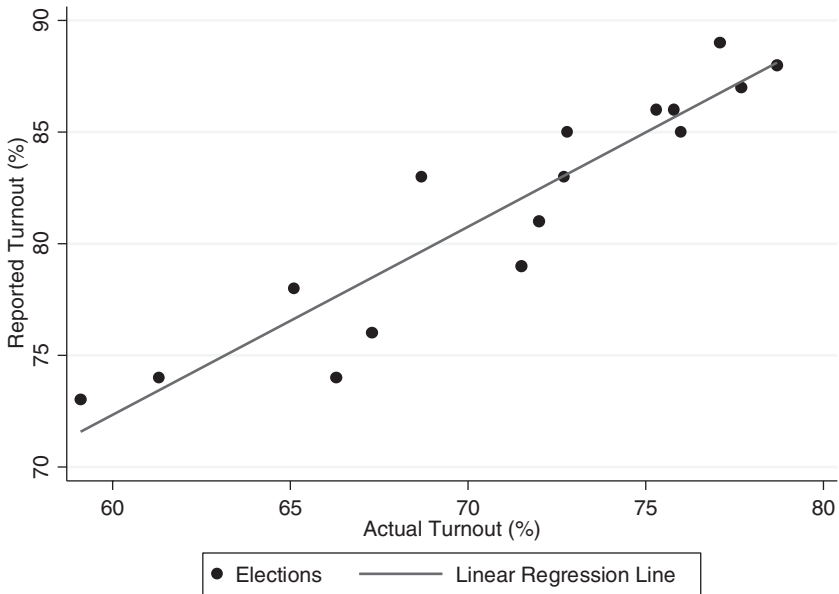


Figure 6.1 The Relationship between Reported Turnout in Election Surveys and Actual Turnout in General Elections, 1964–2019.

between the two measures over time. The correlation between them in these 16 elections is very strong ($r = +0.93$). Thus, self-reported turnout is an excellent guide to what actually happened in an election.

Having established that self-reported turnout is a suitable proxy measure of actual turnout, Figure 6.2 shows levels of electoral participation by age groups in all sixteen general elections. The figure confirms the point that younger age groups have always voted at lower rates than their older counterparts. It is also evident that the differences in turnout among age groups have grown significantly over time. These age-related differences reached an all-time high in the 2005 election, after remaining fairly stable between the 1964 and 1992 elections. The years when Tony Blair was prime minister were associated with the largest changes in age-related turnout over the entire period. Electoral participation in the Labour landslide victory in 1997 declined rather sharply among those below the age of 40 compared with 1992 and subsequently fell even more in the 2001 election. The latter was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the Conservatives had little chance of eliminating Labour's massive majority, and this clearly had an impact on participation by all age groups, except for the very old. If people think elections are a 'done deal' then they are less likely to participate.

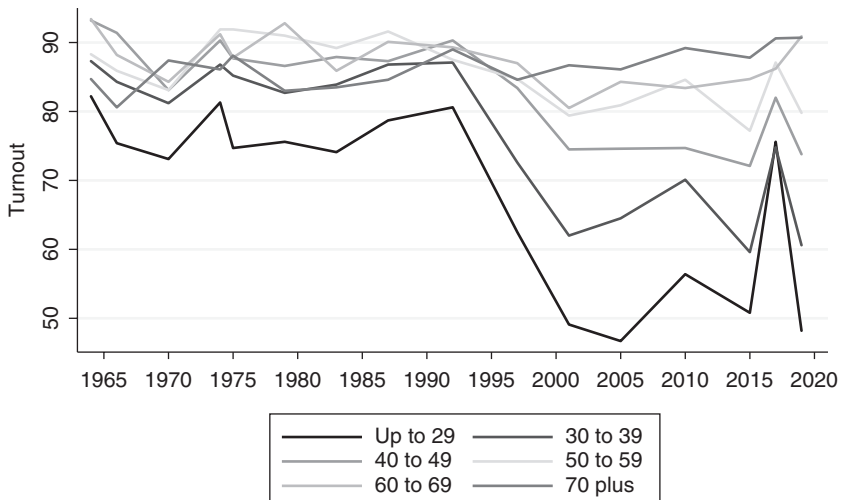


Figure 6.2 Turnout in General Elections by Age Groups (Periods), 1964–2019.

One of the most striking observations in Figure 6.2 is the rather dramatic rise in turnout during the 2017 general election among young voters, something which amply justifies the description ‘Youthquake’. This change had a lot to do with the referendum on EU membership which took place a year earlier and which mobilized many young people to vote.¹⁵ In addition, as we pointed out in Chapter 3, in 2017 Jeremy Corbyn ran a very successful barnstorming campaign in comparison with Theresa May, whose campaign was largely ineffective.¹⁶

Corbyn was a new face at the time and held a series of very successful open-air rallies attended by many young people, including at the Glastonbury festival. In addition, much of Labour’s campaign was conducted online and this was also very effective.¹⁷ However, Figure 6.2 also shows that this surge in turnout among the young did not continue through to the 2019 general election. Many young people failed to vote on this later occasion when their counterparts over the age of 60 turned out in even greater numbers. This helped to produce a very different result, helping to clear the way for the rise of Boris Johnson.¹⁸

¹⁵ Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017), ch. 7.

¹⁶ Cowley and Kavanagh (2016), pp. 1–20.

¹⁷ Cowley and Kavanagh (2016), p. 308.

¹⁸ Allen and Bartle (2021).

Figure 6.2 shows the relationship between elections and turnout when these occur at well-defined periods of time, but what about cohort effects? While period effects are relatively easy to identify the same cannot be said for cohorts. Becker was one of the earliest political scientists to examine cohort effects, and he defined them as ‘a grouping of a number of cohorts characterized by a specific historical setting and by common characteristics’.¹⁹ The important point about defining cohorts is to locate them in a political and historical context. If they are defined too broadly this will bundle together rather different political eras, and so we will not be able to distinguish between them. On the other hand, if they are defined too narrowly this will treat rather similar political contexts as if they were uniquely different from each other and give a misleading picture.

Researchers often have defined cohorts more or less arbitrarily as time intervals of five- or ten-years’ duration. This may be acceptable in some contexts, for example in medical research where it is difficult to pin down when a problem like obesity started to be a serious issue. In this case it makes sense to divide the time into equal periods.²⁰ But in electoral politics there are clear differences between political eras, and they are not all of the same duration. For example, there are good reasons to expect that individuals who reached political maturity during the years of consensus politics in the 1950s are likely to look at the political world differently from those who came of age in the divisive Thatcher era of the 1980s.

In our earlier book, *Political Choice in Britain*, we identified five different age cohorts in an analysis which looked only at age and cohort effects in the 2001 election.²¹ We assumed that individuals would reach political maturity by the age of 21 in that analysis, although it is now more common to assume that this happens by the age of 25.²² Our original classification of the different cohorts was:

- (1) ‘Post–Second World War’ cohort who achieved political maturity before 1950;
- (2) ‘Macmillan’ cohort who achieved it between 1951 and 1964;
- (3) ‘Wilson–Callaghan’ cohort who achieved it between 1964 and 1979;
- (4) ‘Thatcher’ cohort who achieved it between 1979 and 1992;
- (5) ‘Blair’ cohort who achieved it after 1992.

That analysis focused only on one election and so did not consider period effects, and therefore did not encounter the statistical

¹⁹ Becker (1990), p. 2.

²⁰ See, e.g., Reither et al. (2015).

²¹ Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley (2004), pp. 270–271.

²² Grasso (2016), p. 40.

identification problem discussed earlier. There may have been period effects, but they could not be identified using data from a single survey. The findings suggested that both the ‘Thatcher’ and ‘Blair’ generations were less civically minded than their earlier counterparts, and this was manifested by their lower participation.

More recently, Maria Grasso has suggested that different researchers working on age-related effects in politics have identified rather similar political cohorts in Britain, indicating that there is something of a consensus about them in practice.²³ Her focus was on studying age-related political participation across several European democracies and for this reason her definition of cohorts is rather broad. She identified five cohorts in her study: ‘Pre–Second World War’, ‘Post–Second World War’, ‘Baby-Boomers’, ‘80s generation’ and ‘90s generation’.

Since the present focus is solely on Britain, we can be somewhat more specific about the definition of cohorts, linking them to periods of post-war political history which are clearly different from each other. Accordingly, we use the original cohorts introduced in the 2001 analysis but add another four to bring it up to date. Specifically, we define members of a cohort as people between the ages of 15 and 25 living during a given political era, at which point they are assumed to have reached political maturity.²⁴ The nine cohorts are defined as follows:

- (1) ‘First World War’ cohort who achieved political maturity before 1919;
- (2) ‘Post–First World War’ cohort from 1919 to 1929;
- (3) ‘Great Depression’ cohort from 1930 to 1939;
- (4) ‘Second World War’ cohort from 1940 to 1949;
- (5) ‘Macmillan’ cohort from 1950 to 1963;
- (6) ‘Wilson/Callaghan’ cohort from 1964 to 1979;
- (7) ‘Thatcher’ cohort from 1980 to 1997;
- (8) ‘Blair’ cohort from 1998 to 2010;
- (9) ‘Austerity’ cohort from 2011.

These cohorts are not equal in duration, but rather reflect the circumstances of different periods of British political history. It is useful to sketch out some of the key differences. The First World War radically changed the country not merely because of the large number of deaths and wartime shortages, but also because the existing Conservative–Liberal

²³ Grasso (2016), pp. 42–43.

²⁴ To illustrate, a respondent interviewed in 1964 who was 25 years of age in 1918 and therefore a member of the First World War generation, would be 71 years of age at the time of the interview.

two-party system was shattered in the 1918 general election.²⁵ This meant that the wartime cohort faced a different political landscape from the post-war cohort. The latter came of age in a period of turbulent party politics and conflicts over public spending and industrial relations, the latter exemplified by the general strike of 1926. This era ended with the election of the first minority Labour government in 1929.

The Great Depression cohort went through the severe economic disruption in which the unemployment rate exceeded 15 per cent in 1932, at a time when welfare benefits were meagre.²⁶ This was followed by a period of recovery that was largely associated with rearmament and increased defence spending in the face of the growing threat from Nazi Germany. It was also a period when the National Government was formed by Labour leader Ramsey Macdonald. The Labour Party split and was subsequently heavily defeated in the 1931 general election.²⁷ This was a turbulent period in British politics.

The Second World War cohort experienced physical dangers, civilian and military losses, and major shortages as the country was placed on a wartime footing. Children were evacuated from cities and thousands of adults were drafted into the armed forces, many of whom did not see their families for years. However, victory in 1945 did not bring an end to austerity, since rationing continued up to the end of the decade and beyond. Elected in 1945, Clement Atlee's post-war Labour government started the huge task of reconstruction, while at the same time laying the foundations of the modern welfare state and creating the National Health Service.²⁸

Conservative governments, in power in the 1950s, were exemplified by that of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, who presided over a period of growing prosperity as post-war reconstruction and full employment finally brought an end to wartime deprivation. It was an era of broad consensus politics described at the time by the epithet 'Butskellism', i.e., a combination of 'One Nation' Conservatism associated with prominent Conservative R.A. Butler, and the centre-left politics of Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell.²⁹ Macmillan captured the mood of the era in a 1957 speech in which he claimed: 'Our people have never had it so good.'³⁰

²⁵ Butler and Butler (1994).

²⁶ See www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/research-datasets

²⁷ Marquand (1997).

²⁸ Harris (1982).

²⁹ Horne (1989).

³⁰ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8145390/Harold-Macmillans-never-had-it-so-good-speech-followed-the-1950s-boom.html

The Macmillan era came to an end when Labour leader Harold Wilson won a narrow victory in the 1964 general election. Wilson captured the desire for change in the country at that time with a speech in 1963 in which he talked about using the ‘white heat of technology’ to invigorate the British economy.³¹ He won a large majority in the subsequent 1966 election, but then lost power in 1970 following an economic crisis, the devaluation of the pound and a recession. Edward Heath’s Conservative Party won that election, but his administration was largely a political failure beset by industrial relations problems and the emergence of rising inflation. Labour subsequently returned to power in the February 1974 election and stayed in office until 1979 under James Callaghan who took over from Wilson as prime minister in 1976. By then the government’s majority was precarious and the loss of a vote of no confidence in the House of Commons precipitated the 1979 election, won by Margaret Thatcher.

The Thatcher government marked a new era in British politics, following a policy characterized by Andrew Gamble as ‘The Free Economy and the Strong State’.³² Initially it created a period of austerity with the aim of quelling rampant inflation and became involved in serious industrial conflicts exemplified by the miners’ strike of 1984. Austerity proved unpopular, but the victory in the Falklands War and a split in Labour in 1981 enabled the Conservatives to win a large majority in the 1983 election. Mrs Thatcher’s government then embarked on a policy of extensive privatization of state assets and deregulation of the City of London. In turn, these actions helped to produce a stock market rally and consumer boom in the economy. However, the seeds of divisions over Brexit were sown in the Conservative Party at this time by a growing conflict between the prime minister and the European Union over Britain’s budgetary contributions, reflected in her phrase: ‘I want my money back!’

In November 1990, Mrs Thatcher was ousted as prime minister, largely as a result of her determination to push through a highly unpopular poll tax to finance local government.³³ She was replaced by John Major, who won a surprise victory in the 1992 general election, but his term in office was very much an extension of the Thatcher era. The ‘Black Wednesday’ currency crisis in September 1992 blighted his administration from the start and intra-party divisions over the European Union grew stronger among Conservatives, symbolized by the political rebellion over the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. The Thatcher era finally

³¹ Pimlott (1992).

³² Gamble (1994).

³³ Moore (2020).

came to an end with Tony Blair and New Labour's landslide victory in the 1997 general election.

Tony Blair served as prime minister for ten years, during a period of growing prosperity and rapid increases in public expenditure on health, education and welfare described as the 'New Labour' era.³⁴ But Blair's popularity was blighted by his support for the Iraq War of 2003 and infighting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, who took over as prime minister in June 2007. Brown's premiership was undermined by the financial crash which started with a run on the Northern Rock bank in October 2007. The crash precipitated a deep recession that had major effects on the economy and the course of British politics.³⁵

As a result, Labour lost the 2010 general election and was replaced by David Cameron's Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government which chose to respond to the crisis with a long period of austerity. Voters who came of age in this period also experienced increasingly fractious politics associated with the debate about whether or not to continue membership of the European Union, which served to exacerbate age-based political divisions and had also been reflected in the rise of the new populist UK Independence Party. The latter drew most of its votes from older Britons. As discussed in Chapter 4, in the 2016 referendum on EU membership many young people voted to remain while their older counterparts largely supported Brexit, with these divides over age among the largest reported at the referendum.³⁶

Using the nine distinct political cohorts defined above, Figure 6.3 displays the relationship between electoral turnout and cohort membership over time. The figure differs from Figure 6.2 because older cohorts die out and younger ones take their place, so cohorts appear and disappear at different points in time. Turnout in the various cohorts remained similar up to the start of the Wilson/Callaghan era in the 1970s. At that point electoral participation among the youngest cohort started to decline and fell precipitously during the Thatcher era. To a lesser extent turnout also decreased among the under-40s making electoral participation among cohorts much more variable. Participation by the youngest cohort then increased during the austerity years, reflecting the rise in youth voting culminating in the 2017 election.

These are interesting findings which we explore more fully below, but it is important to remember that they do not separate age, period and

³⁴ Gould (1998).

³⁵ Tett (2009).

³⁶ Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017).

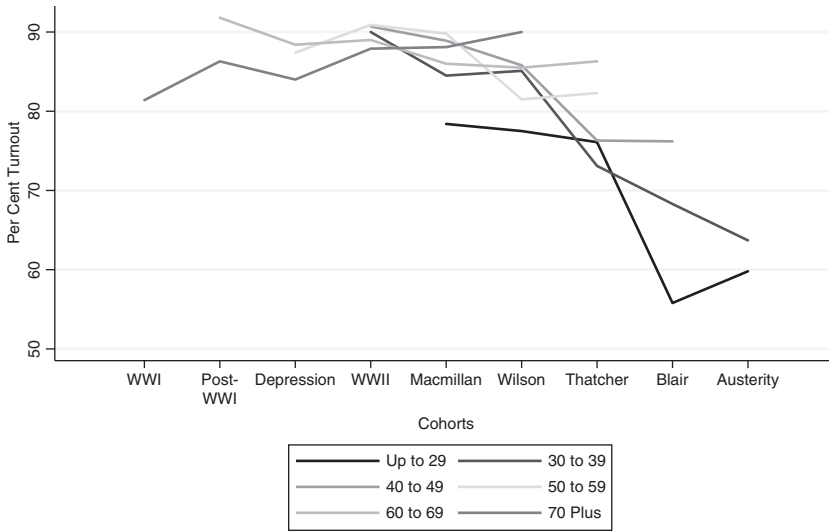


Figure 6.3 Turnout in General Elections by Age Cohorts, 1964–2019.

cohort effects, which are all mixed together. Table 6.1 shows the interaction in turnout between the sixteen general elections and nine cohorts over the 1964 and 2019 election surveys. If we read the table by rows, we can see that people in the ‘Blair cohort’ who first appeared in the 1992 election were less likely to vote in all subsequent elections in comparison with their predecessors. In Labour’s landslide, for example, only 60.7 per cent of the Blair cohort voted in comparison with 72.3 per cent of the Thatcher cohort. In the 2001 election, which had the lowest turnout of any election in the post–Second World War period, the equivalent figures were 48.4 per cent and 66.8 per cent.

This decline in electoral participation continued into the era when the Austerity cohort began. The members of that group who first appeared in 2001 were less likely to vote than members of the Blair cohort in every single subsequent election after 2001. For the Austerity cohort, the low point of participation was reached in the 2005 election when only 44.3 per cent of them cast a ballot. It is not an exaggeration to say that these two cohorts are increasingly abandoning electoral participation in a way not observed in the past. The only exception to this trend occurred in the 2017 general election when young people turned out in numbers equivalent to that of their older counterparts. But as mentioned earlier, the 2019 election showed that this was an exception.

If one reads Table 6.1 by columns this shows how particular cohorts behaved in different elections over time. For example, 84.3 per cent of

Table 6.1 *Turnout by Periods and Cohorts, 1964–2019*

Percentage within cohorts										
Period Effects (16)	First World War	Post-First World War	Depression	Second World War	Macmillan	Wilson/ Callaghan	Thatcher	Blair	Austerity	Total
1964	84.3	92.5	88.9	93.0	83.7	88.6				88.6
1966	77.5	90.3	85.8	89.5	84.8	71.0				85.6
1970	83.8	89.6	83.8	85.2	82.6	71.0				81.0
Feb1974	76.9	88.8	90.9	91.9	88.7	84.1	70.0			87.8
Oct1974	84.2	91.4	86.8	91.5	87.0	77.8	75.0			85.0
1979	70.6	81.4	90.3	91.6	88.4	81.2	70.1			84.8
1983		82.0	84.2	87.7	87.9	84.2	73.8			83.4
1987		68.6	86.1	90.4	91.3	86.0	80.4			86.1
1992		76.9	87.7	90.7	88.3	89.5	84.4	74.5		87.0
1997			75.5	88.8	88.0	83.6	72.3	60.7		78.8
2001			79.4	85.9	84.4	77.8	66.8	48.4	58.6	72.6
2005			77.1	86.0	86.3	82.1	72.1	53.2	44.3	74.0
2010				93.2	89.3	83.9	77.8	68.8	54.4	77.8
2015				65.4	89.5	86.1	75.4	66.0	51.8	73.6
2017					86.9	88.8	85.5	79.3	74.2	82.8
2019					88.2	90.9	83.2	70.0	53.3	75.9
Total	81.5	88.1	86.5	89.5	87.5	84.1	77.3	66.4	61.0	81.1

Source: BES and Essex-UTD Surveys.

the First World War cohort turned out in the 1964 general election but by 1979, the last survey to include enough of them for meaningful analysis, their turnout was down to 70.6 per cent. Turnout among the really elderly tends to be lower than among their younger counterparts, but electoral participation by the elderly in 1964 stands in stark contrast to the figure of 53.3 per cent for the Austerity cohort in the 2019 election. Again, the biggest contrast in the columns of Table 6.1 is between the average turnout of 89.5 per cent among the Second World War cohort in fourteen separate elections and 61.0 per cent among the Austerity cohort in six elections.

A third way of reading Table 6.1 is to look at it diagonally from left to right. Unlike the row figures which classify voting in each election by successive cohorts, or the column figures which look at each cohort in different elections, the diagonal identifies the interaction between cohorts and elections. For example, it shows that voting by the First World War cohort was still at 81.2 per cent during the Wilson/Callaghan era and fell to 73.8 per cent in the last (1979) election in which enough of them could be counted.³⁷ Generally, diagonal comparisons show that the pattern of declining turnout began in the Thatcher years and continued until the present era.

In this section we have focused on the relationship between periods and cohorts and electoral participation over time. But it is equally interesting to look at the relationship between these variables and party support. We examine this next.

Periods, Cohort and Party Support 1964–2019

Table 6.2 shows vote shares for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal/Liberal Democrat parties in each of the sixteen elections.³⁸ These figures are consistent with the story sketched earlier that Labour won the 1964 and 1966 elections, but narrowly lost the 1970 election. Labour then regained power in February 1974, but with only four seats more than the Conservatives. This subsequently led Harold Wilson to call the second election in October of that year. In that election, Labour increased its majority by eighteen seats, producing a lead over the Conservatives of forty-two seats, but with a narrow overall majority.

³⁷ Note that if the election studies were panels, with the same individuals being re-interviewed over time rather than independent cross-section surveys, then the diagonals would reveal the extent to which the same people changed their participation in different elections.

³⁸ These data differ slightly from official election turnout statistics in Figure 6.1 due to sampling error in the surveys, but these are all well within the margin of error.

Table 6.2 *Party Vote Shares by Periods, 1964–2019*

Percentage within period effects (16)		Conservatives	Labour	Liberals/LibDems	Others
Period Effects (16)	1964	42.3	46.6	10.7	0.4
	1966	39.4	51.7	8.3	0.7
	1970	45.3	45.2	7.2	2.3
	Feb 1974	38.0	40.6	19.1	2.3
	Oct 1974	36.0	42.5	18.0	3.5
	1979	47.0	37.6	13.8	1.6
	1983	44.9	29.4	13.0	12.7
	1987	43.8	31.2	23.5	1.4
	1992	41.9	35.0	15.9	7.2
	1997	26.4	49.1	16.5	8.0
	2001	25.3	48.2	18.0	8.5
	2005	28.7	39.6	21.3	10.4
	2010	35.7	32.1	21.9	10.3
	2015	39.9	32.3	7.5	20.3
	2017	39.2	41.8	9.6	9.4
	2019	49.3	26.4	13.5	10.7
Total		38.5	38.5	15.4	7.6

Source: BES and Essex–UTD Surveys.

Mrs Thatcher's victory in 1979 set the stage for nearly two decades of Conservative dominance. As the previous discussion indicated, this dominance continued through to 1997, the start of the 'New Labour' era. After winning in 2001 and again in 2005, Blair stepped down as Labour leader in 2007 and Gordon Brown took over only to be engulfed in the financial crisis and the subsequent Great Recession. This was followed by the coalition government of 2010–2015, at which point David Cameron's Conservative Party won a narrow majority. This subsequently disappeared in the 2017 election called by Theresa May in the middle of the Brexit negotiations. Finally, May's successor, Boris Johnson, won a decisive majority of eighty seats in 2019. Overall, the table illustrates the well-known story of the two major parties alternating in office, a pattern interrupted by the Coalition government interlude from 2010 to 2015.

Less familiar is Table 6.3 which shows the parties' support for nine different cohorts over time. It is striking how support for the Conservatives has declined markedly across the cohorts. Almost 60 per cent of the First World War cohort voted Conservatives and only about a third of them supported Labour. In contrast, nearly 55 per cent of the Austerity cohort voted Labour, with only just over a fifth of them supporting the

Table 6.3 *Party Vote Shares by Cohorts, 1964–2019 (Percentages within Cohorts)*

	Conservatives	Labour	Liberals /LibDems	Others
First World War cohort	59.6	32.8	7.6	0.0
Post–First World War cohort	47.8	40.1	10.0	2.1
Depression cohort	48.3	37.1	11.5	3.1
Second World War cohort	41.1	41.1	14.3	3.5
Macmillan cohort	39.5	39.0	15.2	6.3
Wilson/Callaghan cohort	41.0	33.1	16.8	8.7
Thatcher cohort	34.0	39.0	17.1	9.9
Blair cohort	30.6	42.6	16.1	10.7
Austerity cohort	21.3	54.4	12.3	12.0
Total	38.6	38.5	15.4	7.6

Source: BES and Essex–UTD Surveys

Conservatives. Liberal support in the First World War cohort was below 8 per cent and it reached a high point in the Thatcher cohort at 17 per cent, before falling to 12 per cent in the Austerity group. Interestingly, there were no respondents to be found in the First World War cohort who voted for minor parties, compared with 12 per cent who did this in the Austerity cohort.

This long-run perspective on generational change shows that the Conservatives had a consistent advantage over the other parties among the pre–Second World War cohort, but Labour caught up by the time of the Second World War and thereafter moved ahead of its main rival – this gap widening to a chasm by the time of the Austerity cohort. Having presented this overview of the relationship between voting and cohort membership since 1964, we next discuss how we can separate age, period and cohort effects on turnout and party support.

A Hierarchical Age-Period-Cohort Analysis of Turnout

As discussed above, the problem of trying to separate age, period and cohort effects is that, when we know the person’s age and the elections in which they voted, that automatically fixes their cohort membership. This ‘identification problem’ is analogous to trying to solve a single equation which contains two unknown variables. The problem has been known about for many years and some researchers have argued that it is impossible to separate the three effects.³⁹ However, other analysts contend that

³⁹ Glenn (1976), pp. 900–904; Goldstein (1979); Bell and Jones (2014, 2018).

the problem arises from a *linear* relationship between the variables and if the model can be recast in a non-linear form, then the difficulty can be circumvented.⁴⁰

A number of political scientists have attempted to identify separate age, period and cohort effects using various approaches.⁴¹ Clearly, cohort and period effects have very different implications for electoral behaviour. If cohort effects predominate then it means that change will be quite slow, since it relies on younger groups replacing older ones over a relatively long period of time. This is also true but to a lesser extent for life-cycle effects. On the other hand, if period effects dominate, then change is likely to be much faster but at the same time voting behaviour will be more volatile. Since any given election can be held in very different circumstances from the previous one, period effects can produce large short-term changes.

The Hierarchical Age-Period-Cohort (HAPC) approach divides the estimation procedure into two parts which are examined at different levels of analysis. One equation is estimated at the level of individual survey participants, and it delineates the relationship between age and turnout. This is known as a ‘fixed’ effects model, and it is used to examine life-cycle effects. The second or aggregate level of analysis examines cohorts and periods as the cases rather than individuals and is known as the ‘random’ part of the model. This looks at cohort and period effects by predicting changes in the intercept of the individual-level model. This intercept represents what is left over after accounting for various factors such as a respondent’s age, educational level, occupational status and gender. If the second level equation contains variables that significantly influence the intercept of the first-level equation, it means that contextual factors such as an individual’s cohort membership are influencing turnout.

This approach enables us to determine how age influences turnout over time while controlling for cohorts and periods. We also can identify if individuals who became politically aware at particular points in time, e.g., the Blair cohort were less likely to vote in the 2015 election than individuals who came of age in the 1980s during the Thatcher cohort. If true, this would mean that there are cohort effects that operate independently of age or life-cycle effects when they are included in the analysis.

⁴⁰ A linear relationship means that the association between two variables can be represented by a straight line in a graph, and the correlation coefficient provides a reliable measure of the strength of the association between them. If, however, the relationship is non-linear, the correlation coefficient is weaker and no longer accurate, and so the problem of multicollinearity, that is a very high correlation between variables, is reduced. This is often referred to as ‘breaking’ the linearity between variables. See e.g., Reither et al. (2015).

⁴¹ Tilley (2002); Dassonville (2013); Neundorf and Niemi (2014); Grasso (2016).

Yang and Land are leading advocates of the HAPC approach, and they explain why they think this works in the following terms: 'An HAPC framework does not incur the identification problem because the three effects are not assumed to be linear and additive at the same level of analysis.'⁴² In their view, this solves the identification problem.⁴³ However, their approach has been challenged, particularly by Bell and Jones in a series of papers based on simulating the results of HAPC modelling.⁴⁴ They create a model with known parameters and then try to estimate it using the HAPC procedure. They conclude: 'For us, the key critique of the HAPC model lies in its inability to accurately represent data generating processes (DGPs) in simulations.'⁴⁵ In other words, their statistical analyses are unable to accurately delineate the model they constructed to produce the data. In addition, they find that period effects tend to dominate the cohort effects, although the reason for this is unclear.

This suggests that it may be unwise to try and estimate all age, period and cohort effects at the same time. One solution to this problem is to focus just on estimating life-cycle effects at the individual level and cohort effects at the aggregate level and ignore period effects. It is important to know the extent to which individuals change their party support as they get older (life-cycle effects) as opposed to remaining loyal to the parties they supported when first becoming aware of politics in their teens and early adulthood (cohort effects). However, if period effects are important, then the life-cycle and cohort effects alone will produce inaccurate estimates which fail to take into account differences between elections.

We respond to the Bell and Jones critique not by ignoring the period effects but by changing their definition in the modelling. In a full HAPC analysis, the period effects would represent all sixteen elections between 1964 and 2019, but this is what gives rise to the identification problem. An alternative is to look only at a limited number of elections which are chosen on theoretical grounds as being important turning points in electoral politics. In the subsequent modelling we do not attempt to assess the impact of all elections or periods, but only those which meet a specific criterion which we expect to be important. This is done by focusing only on 'turnover' elections that produced a change in government and ignoring the others.

A 'turnover' election is defined as one in which an incumbent party or coalition government was removed from office by a challenger party.

⁴² Yang and Land (2013), p. 191.

⁴³ For how the HAPC model is technically written, see Appendix B.

⁴⁴ See Bell and Jones (2014, 2018).

⁴⁵ Bell and Jones (2014, 2018).

There were seven elections between 1964 and 2019 when this happened. Labour replaced the Conservatives in power after the 1964, February 1974 and in the 1997 elections, and the Conservatives replaced Labour after the 1970 and 1979 elections. In addition, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government replaced Labour after the 2010 election and the Conservatives replaced the coalition government in 2015.

When incorporating these period effects as controls in the statistical analysis, they are treated as significant political ‘shocks’ to the system, rather than as recurring events covering all elections from 1964 to 2019. This approach removes the identification problem referred to earlier, since the periods are no longer systematically linked to changes in the respondent’s age defined by their cohort membership and life-cycle experiences. Rather they are defined by political events which we have good reason to expect will influence voting because they have a major political consequence.

Turnout 1964–2019

We begin by examining turnout in the individual-level model. We use a logistic regression specification which is appropriate when the dependent variable is a dummy variable scoring one if people voted and zero if they did not.⁴⁶ We have met this model already in Chapters 3 and 5. The Austerity cohort is treated as the reference category with which to compare the others, and therefore is omitted from the model specification. This means we are evaluating how turnout has changed over time in the different cohorts in comparison with the most recent one.

Figure 6.4 depicts the impact of both the individual and aggregate variables on turnout over the 1964–2019 period. The individual-level or fixed effects appear in the bottom of the table in a lighter shade than the aggregate-level random effects which appear further up in the figure. The middle dot shows the size of the effect of the variable on the probability of voting.⁴⁷ The left-hand and right-hand bars linked by a horizontal line measure the uncertainty associated with the estimate, i.e., the confidence interval.⁴⁸ When the confidence interval crosses the vertical

⁴⁶ See Hox, Moerbeek and Van de Schoot (2018) for an explanation of the logistic model in the context of multilevel modelling.

⁴⁷ The logistic regression model is a non-linear model which means that the coefficients or effects vary along the range of observations. The figure captures the mean effect averaged over the range of outcomes on the probability of voting.

⁴⁸ The confidence intervals measure the uncertainty surrounding the estimates which arises from the fact that we are using sample data to measure what happened in the entire electorate. Inevitably, the use of samples means that estimates of turnout differ from the actual turnout and the confidence intervals are wider when that uncertainty is larger.

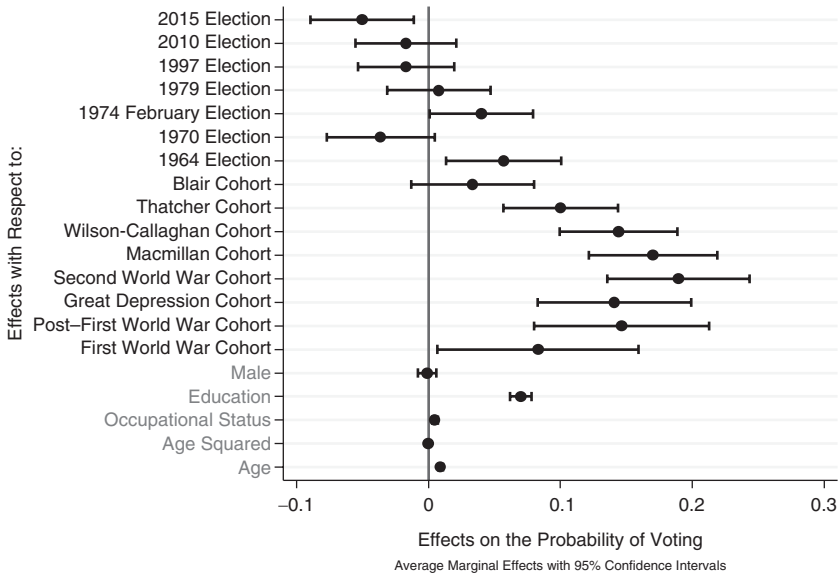


Figure 6.4 Hierarchical Age Cohort Model of Turnout with Period Controls, 1964–2019.

Note: Aggregate random effects are first followed by individual fixed effects.

line at zero, it means we do not have a statistically significant effect, since the true coefficient may be zero rather than positive or negative. This happened in the case of the Blair cohort, for example, which means we cannot be sure that this cohort differs from the Austerity cohort when it comes to voting.

Unlike the Blair cohort, all the other cohorts had significantly higher turnout than the Austerity cohort, since they all show statistically significant positive effects compared with this most recent cohort. In these cases, the uncertainty bars do not cross the zero line, so we infer that they voted in greater numbers than the Austerity and Blair cohorts. This suggests that there was a significant ‘break point’ in socialization processes that encourage young people to vote after the Labour government won the 1997 general election. Cohorts that became politically aware prior to that period consistently voted in greater numbers than cohorts emerging after that election.

The implication of this finding is that the Blair era was a key turning point for electoral participation over this lengthy sixty-year period. Those who became politically aware during and after the Blair years

were less likely to vote even when their occupational status, age, education and the controls for turnover elections are considered in the analysis. This is particularly true of the Second World War and Macmillan cohorts, who were much more likely to vote than their Austerity counterparts. Those years represented something of a golden age in electoral participation in Britain. This is illustrated by the fact mentioned earlier that the highest turnout in any post-war election was 84 per cent in 1950, at a time when the post-Second World War cohort was coming of age politically. That compares with a turnout of only 67 per cent in the 2019 election.

The age or life-cycle effects in the individual-level model reinforce this conclusion, since age is a strong predictor of turnout throughout the entire period,⁴⁹ with older people voting in greater numbers than the young. But as Figures 6.2 and 6.3 show, the gap between the old and the young has grown significantly wider over time, and the modelling confirms this point. However, the quadratic specification of the age variable in the analysis shows that the effect of age on turnout tends to decline as individuals get really old, which is not surprising given the physical infirmities that accompany ageing.⁵⁰

The election 'shocks' in the figure should be compared with the average turnout in those elections which did not lead to a change in government. In general, these period effects are weak, with two clear exceptions. The February 1974 election saw an upsurge in turnout following the troubled Conservative government of Edward Heath which had come to power in 1970. The second exception was the turnout in the 2015 election, when David Cameron's Conservative Party almost wiped out their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats. Participation in this election was below average. Apart from these exceptions, the long-term decline in turnout is clearly driven by cohort replacement and persistent age effects rather than by specific period shocks.

This finding carries a disturbing implication, namely that decline in electoral participation over time is unlikely to be easily reversed in the future.⁵¹ The growing gap between the young and the old apparent in Figure 6.2 is being 'baked in' to the system in the long run, as the

⁴⁹ The age effects appear to be small in the individual level model, but this is because they show the average impact of an extra year's age on turnout, which is much more limited than the cohort effects which last over many years.

⁵⁰ The coefficient of the age squared variable associated with the quadratic specification is statistically significant, although the sizes of the coefficients are very small in the figure.

⁵¹ There have been small increases in electoral participation since the 66 per cent turnout achieved in the 2015 election, but these are not politically significant except for young voters in 2017.

low participation age cohorts are subsequently joined by new cohorts as the future unfolds. Unless something unforeseen happens, these new cohorts are likely to continue voting in lesser numbers than their older counterparts, leading to a continuing decline in overall electoral participation.

Party Choice, 1964–2019

We turn next to support for the two major parties. The results of applying the HAPC analysis to the Labour share of the vote are presented in Figure 6.5. Starting with the fixed effects or individual-level part of the analysis, age, occupation and education are all statistically significant predictors of Labour voting. The confidence intervals around age are very narrow, indicating that we are estimating effects with little uncertainty. Unfortunately, this means that the effects are hard to see in the figure, but suffice it to say that they are very strong.⁵² As expected, the coefficients indicate that older working-class people have been more likely to support the party and the highly educated professionals have been less likely to do so. Of course, these relationships are very familiar to students of British party politics. In addition, and similar to the turnout model, the analysis does not indicate any significant gender effects on party support.

Figure 6.5 shows that cohort effects on Labour voting have been rather different from those on turnout in Figure 6.4. None of the cohorts were significantly different from the Austerity cohort, with the sole exception of the Second World War cohort, members of which were more likely to support Labour in successive elections. That said, the post-First World War and the Macmillan cohorts are both close to being statistically significant, implying that they contain more Labour supporters than the Austerity cohort. But these effects are rather weak evidence of a preference for Labour. Just as the Second World War cohort have been more likely to vote in elections, they are more likely to vote Labour, suggesting that wartime experiences provided a turning point in support for the party.

The turnover election effects for Labour also are rather sparse. Clearly, the 1964 election under leader Harold Wilson mobilized additional support for the party after thirteen years of Conservative rule. Equally, and not surprisingly, the 1997 election victory produced considerable additional support for Labour reflecting the fact that it was

⁵² The coefficient on the age variable is 0.08 and the t statistic is 10.5, indicating a highly statistically significant effect.

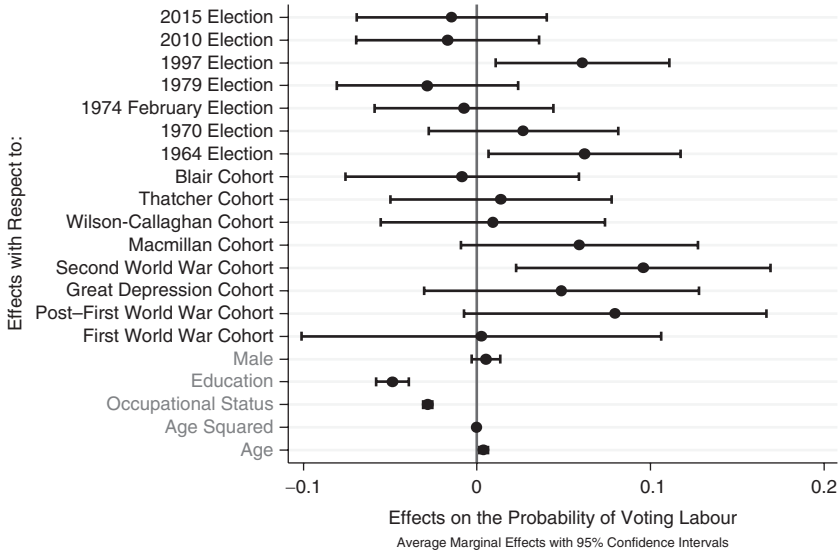


Figure 6.5 Hierarchical Age Cohort Model of Labour Voting with Period Controls, 1964–2019.

such a landslide win for the party. But in other respects, the impact of election-related shocks on Labour support has been rather modest.⁵³ The general conclusion from this analysis is that neither cohorts nor electoral shocks have had large effects on support for the party over this long period of time.

There has been a recurring argument which surfaces every time Labour loses an election ever since Mark Abrams and Richard Rose first raised it over a half-century ago.⁵⁴ It is the proposition that Labour can never win again because of a lost generation or cohort which was very supportive of the party in the past but is not being renewed. However, there is little statistical evidence to support this idea. Rather the analysis suggests that the party fights each election as it comes and, depending on the circumstances, it will do well if the context is favourable and badly if it is not. Examples of this are the 2017 general election discussed earlier, in which the party did very well, although it did not win.

⁵³ If Labour had won the 2017 election, it would have been counted as a realigning election and included in the modelling and would have shown additional support for the party.

⁵⁴ The first publication on this theme was over sixty years ago by Abrams and Rose (1969), and it has recurred every time the party loses an election.

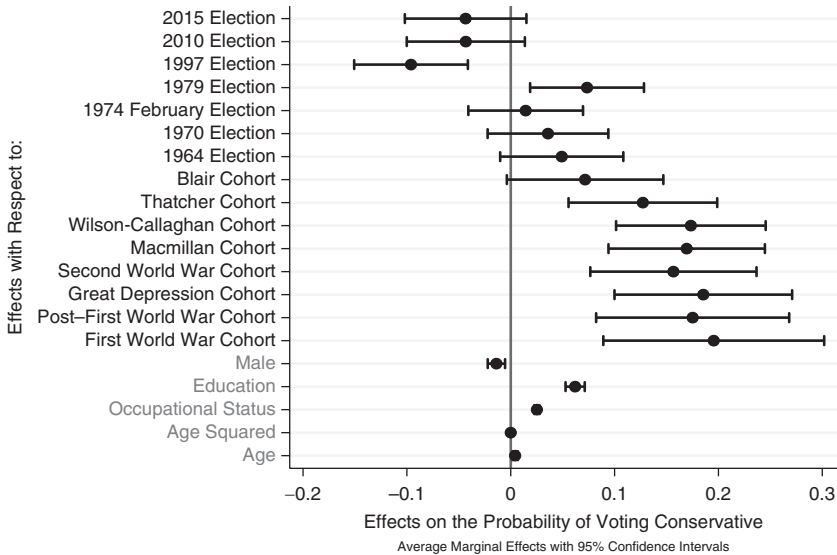


Figure 6.6 Hierarchical Age Cohort Model of Conservative Voting with Period Controls, 1964–2019.

Similarly, the 2019 election produced the worst result for Labour since its 1935 election defeat. These are very different outcomes in elections held only two years apart.

Results of the Conservative HAPC analysis displayed in Figure 6.6 are very different from those for the Labour model. Once again, in the individual-level model, age has a highly significant impact on party support, with older people more likely to vote Conservative than the young.⁵⁵ The occupational status and education effects are the opposite of Labour's, with highly educated individuals in professional occupations being more likely to vote Conservative than the rest of the electorate. Again, these effects have been known about for many years. Also, unlike Labour, gender has a significant effect, with women being more likely to vote Conservative than men.

The really striking feature of the Conservative vote model is the importance of the cohort effects. They show that all cohorts, with the sole exception of the Blair cohort, are more likely to vote for the party than the Austerity cohort. These strong cohort effects for Conservative support mirror what we observed in Figure 6.4 in relation to turnout.

⁵⁵ In this case there is no evidence to suggest that this effect declines as people get really old since the quadratic age effect is not significant.

In a reflection of the results depicted in that figure, there has been a significant decline in support for the Conservatives among young people who came of age politically during and after the Blair years. These most recent cohorts in British politics have abandoned the party in a way not seen before. The effect associated with the Blair cohort is strikingly different from the previous Thatcher cohort, whose members support the Conservatives to a much greater extent.

We will examine this further below, but a clue to the causes of this loss of support lies in the period effects. The first significant period effect occurred in the 1979 election, when Mrs Thatcher won a comfortable majority and achieved a significant boost in Conservative support. However, it is evident that the negative impact of the loss of support for the party in the 1997 election was considerably greater than the positive effect of winning the election in 1979.⁵⁶ Again, this suggests that the election which brought Tony Blair to power was a turning point in the Conservative Party's history. In effect, the party has never fully recovered from Labour's 1997 victory, since the socialization processes which renewed Conservative support in the years prior to that election were wiped out during and after the Blair era.

To summarize, cohort effects are strong for the Conservative Party and point in the direction of it losing support among younger voters. As regards period shocks, the Conservatives did well in 1979 and badly in 1997, and since then, specific elections have had no impact on Conservative support, despite winning in 2010 and again in 2015 and 2019. This shows that electoral success for the party is now dependent on the context of each election, much as it is for Labour. Labour lost the 2010 general election in the context of the aftermath of a serious financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession. But as analyses in Chapter 9 will show, although their effects are still playing out, the large-scale economic and social disruptions caused by Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have the potential to be more serious than those associated with the financial crisis of a decade ago. If so, as new voters join the electorate and old voters fade away, the Conservatives may find it increasingly difficult to win majorities in general elections. That said, the population in Britain is ageing and this could offset these trends to some extent, with the party retaining strong support among the elderly via life-cycle effects. Overall though, the results show that electoral politics is becoming more volatile and unpredictable over time.

⁵⁶ The coefficient for the 1979 election in the logistic regression model was 0.37 ($t = 2.6$) compared with a coefficient of -0.50 ($t = 3.4$) in the 1997 election.

Explaining the Dynamics of Turnout and Party Voting

Up to this point we have examined HAPC effects on turnout and party support for the two main parties and established that there are important differences between them with respect to the age-related voting. But we have not fully explained these differences except in rather general terms. In this section we probe the reasons for these differences in more depth. To do this, it is useful to draw on the three prominent theoretical explanations of electoral participation and party choice. These are the social class, valence and spatial models of voting behaviour, which we introduced in earlier chapters. We begin by briefly summarizing all three.

The Social Class Model

The social class explanation of electoral participation was discussed in the earlier chapters and is rooted in Butler and Stokes' seminal analysis of voting behaviour in Britain.⁵⁷ To repeat an earlier quote, their starting point, in the words of their contemporary, Peter Pulzer, was that 'class is the basis of British party politics: all else is embellishment and detail.'⁵⁸ At that time, working-class people by and large supported Labour at the ballot box, while the middle and upper classes opted for the Conservatives, although there were always exceptions to this.

The contribution of Butler and Stokes to this analysis was to introduce the concept of partisanship. This idea originated in studies of US elections conducted at the University of Michigan in the 1950s and Butler and Stokes imported it into the study of British politics. They defined partisanship in the following terms: 'most electors think of themselves as supporters of a given party in a lasting sense, developing what might be called a "partisan self-image".'⁵⁹ Partisanship is seen as an emotional attachment to a political party rooted in an individual's identity, much like football fans identify with their favourite club. Butler and Stokes' key argument was that such partisan attachments in Britain had their origins in social class. They wrote: '[t]here is, in fact, evidence that partisanship has followed class lines more strongly in Britain than anywhere else in the English-speaking world.'⁶⁰ How exactly does social class give rise to partisan attachments?

⁵⁷ Butler and Stokes (1969).

⁵⁸ Pulzer (1967), p. 98.

⁵⁹ See Butler and Stokes (1969), p. 39.

⁶⁰ Butler and Stokes (1969), p. 67.

In Butler and Stokes' analysis, the social class environment in which people are socialized in terms of the family and community creates and subsequently reinforces their partisan attachments. Blue-collar workers who are employed in large factories, live in council houses and are trade union members, are very likely to identify with and vote Labour. All these different characteristics reinforce their support for the party. On the other hand, highly educated, middle-class professionals, who own their homes and have well-paid jobs identify with and vote Conservative. Minor parties such as the Liberals were not accommodated in this theoretical scheme because, in the middle of the twentieth century they had a small and apparently declining vote share and so were considered irrelevant to the main story.

Butler and Stokes focused on partisanship and party support, so they had little to say about the links between social class and turnout, largely because participation in elections was high and thus taken for granted.⁶¹ However, the resources model of political participation developed by Verba and Nie⁶² shortly after Butler and Stokes were writing, fills this gap in the analysis. Verba and Nie explained their model in the following terms: 'According to this model, the social status of an individual – his job, education, and income – determines to a large extent how much he participates.'⁶³ Since the middle and upper class have higher social status than the working class, and therefore greater resources, they are more likely to vote in elections and, more generally, to participate in politics in various ways. Subsequent work by Verba and his colleagues defined resources as 'time, money and civic skills'.⁶⁴ This implied that Labour had more of a challenge to turn out its supporters than did the Conservatives.

A decade after Butler and Stokes published their study, it became increasingly apparent that party politics in Britain was 'de-aligning', i.e., the relationships between social class, partisanship and voting were weakening.⁶⁵ According to the framework they laid down for explaining partisanship these developments originated in long-run changes in British society, with class distinctions beginning to blur over time. In the 1960s, 'blue-collar' industrial workers were easily distinguishable from 'white-collar' professionals.⁶⁶ But if we look at contemporary Britain,

⁶¹ For example, turnout in the first fully peacetime election following the Second World War in 1950 was 84 per cent. See Butler and Butler (1994), p. 216.

⁶² Verba and Nie (1972).

⁶³ See Verba and Nie (1972), p. 13.

⁶⁴ Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), p. 271.

⁶⁵ Sarlvik and Crewe (1983).

⁶⁶ Goldthorpe (1968).

these distinctions are much less clear-cut, since massive changes have taken place in the composition of the labour force, not to mention in social values and attitudes of the population.

There has been a decline in skilled and semi-skilled industrial employment and a rise in service sector employment. The latter involves many white-collar occupations, but they are often insecure and lowly paid. Call centre workers are not traditional manual workers like miners, since they require social skills not physical strength, and the former are unlikely to be members of a trade union or to live in council accommodation. At the same time, they are low-paid and relatively insecure. As a result, they will look at the world differently from a miner. These developments imply that the relationship between occupational status, partisanship and voting behaviour will change over time.

To understand some of these trends, we can examine demographic data from the earliest and the most recent election surveys. In 1964, some 61 per cent of respondents in the BES survey were either skilled or unskilled manual workers, but by the time of the 2019 Essex-UTD survey this had fallen to 26 per cent.⁶⁷ In the intermediate occupational groups, lower non-manual workers made up 9 per cent of the workforce in the 1964 survey, but by 2019 this had risen to 29 per cent.⁶⁸ This is the insecure white-collar group we referred to above. At the other end of the scale, some 15 per cent of respondents in 1964 were in the management or professional categories, but by 2019 this had risen to 25 per cent.⁶⁹ Occupational status may predict partisanship, but the effects will weaken if the status of jobs changes over time and other factors like housing tenancy and union membership no longer reinforce it. Another important demographic change has been the rapid growth in higher education which itself serves to socialize participants into a new set of values and attitudes.⁷⁰

In the 1964 BES survey, only 43 per cent of respondents reported receiving an education beyond the minimum school leaving age, but by 2019 this figure had risen to 58 per cent, most of them going on to higher education. That said, if education is an important resource, then its expansion creates something of a paradox for explaining the long-run decline in turnout. If tertiary education has grown rapidly over this period and participation is driven by resources, this should produce a rise in turnout rather than a decline. However, this interpretation assumes

⁶⁷ These are respondents in the D and E categories in the Market Research Society social grade variable.

⁶⁸ These are respondents in the C1 category of the social grade variable.

⁶⁹ These are respondents in the A and B categories of the social grade variable.

⁷⁰ See, *inter alia*, Inglehart (1977, 1990).

that there is no distinction between absolute and relative educational status, a topic which has been discussed extensively in the literature on political education.⁷¹

Absolute status refers to an individual's location in the status hierarchy at any one point of time, for example, if their income is in the top 10 per cent of the income distribution. In contrast, relative status refers to their position in the social structure relative to everyone else. If large numbers of people become more highly educated, this will not necessarily increase the relative status of individuals possessing such qualifications. This is because many others are acquiring similar qualifications at the same time. It follows that their relative position in the social structure will not change very much and so more education will not necessarily increase their participation.

In fact, these changes will serve to decrease participation overall since those left behind by a general improvement in educational standards will experience a loss of status which serves to discourage their participation. Some of the 'Left Behind' have shifted to radical right parties like UKIP, so it does not always inhibit participation, but this can be a problem in general. Other demographic factors such as the increase in female participation in the workforce have also brought about significant changes, which collectively have served to weaken the traditional relationship between class, partisanship and voting.

Overall, the links between social class and partisanship have changed over time, but the class model is nonetheless part of the mix in explaining electoral choice in the long run, as we have observed in the HAPC analysis. We have investigated its effect already by including occupational status and education as predictors in the individual-level models. To develop this further, we include two additional variables in the analysis, treating them as contextual effects. These are the percentage of professionals and higher managers and the percentage of skilled and unskilled manual workers in the workforce. These are included as additional period effects in the analysis.⁷²

The Valence Model

As discussed in the Foreword and in Chapter 3, the valence model is based on the idea that the most important issues in politics involve policies over which there is widespread agreement about what should

⁷¹ Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996).

⁷² We cannot investigate the cohort effects of the social class variables since data are not available to identify the various class measures prior to the Second World War.

be done. Voters prefer prosperity to recession, secure streets to crime-ridden ones, protection from terrorism and external aggression, efficient and effective public services in areas such as healthcare, education and transport. As a result, elections typically are about which party will do the best job at delivering on these widely accepted, high priority policy objectives. A party which is thought to be effective at delivery will win votes and a party which is thought to be ineffective will lose them. To examine the impact of valence issues we use data on levels of unemployment and inflation found during the periods defined earlier. If election-related effects linked to these variables are significant it suggests that short-term economic performance is a key to understanding valence effects.

At the same time, if cohort effects remain significant in the modelling it means that economic performance and other factors relating to the performance of governments have a longer-term impact on electoral behaviour. To illustrate this point, it may be that declining electoral participation among the Blair and Austerity cohorts is explained by the economic insecurity they have experienced since the Great Recession and the slow recovery from that made worse by the Coalition Government's austerity policies after 2010.

Partisanship is also part of the valence model, but it has a rather different interpretation from the class model. In an analysis introduced by Morris Fiorina, an American political scientist, partisanship is a major heuristic or cue that voters use when making their electoral choices. However, according to his account, partisanship is both dynamic and performance-based rather than being solely the product of early-life socialization experiences.⁷³ It is a 'running tally' of public evaluations of the past performance of rival political parties which cumulates over time. Thus, a poor performance by an incumbent party in delivering on highly salient issues like the economy and public services will cumulatively weaken support for the party. As a result, fewer voters will feel an attachment to that party over time which undermines its support. In contrast, a strong performance by an incumbent party will have the opposite effect, with more voters identifying themselves as supporters of that party. This dynamic conception of partisanship replaces early socialization processes in the family and community, although they may still play a role in the initial formation of partisanship.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that this dynamic version of partisanship is more accurate than the static socialization story espoused by Butler and Stokes.⁷⁴ These differing interpretations have implications

⁷³ Fiorina (1981).

⁷⁴ Clarke and McCutcheon (2009).

for what we are likely to observe in statistical analyses. If partisanship is largely a matter of early-life socialization, then its effects are likely to be observed among cohorts. On the other hand, if it is dynamic, then life-cycle and period effects will be important. Partisanship is included in the extended modelling as a contextual variable to capture its dynamics over time.⁷⁵ This has been described as ‘macropartisanship’ in research on this topic in the United States, where it exhibits considerable change over time that is more consistent with a valence interpretation than a class interpretation of the effects.⁷⁶

The Spatial Model

The third major theoretical account of electoral choice – the one which Stokes criticized⁷⁷ – is the spatial model of party competition. It is based on the early work of the economist Harold Hotelling, subsequently popularized by Anthony Downs, and has generated an enormous body of research⁷⁸ involving extensive theoretical elaboration and testing.⁷⁹ As our previous discussion of the Brexit issue showed, the spatial model’s key assumption is that *position or spatial issues* are the dominant factors governing electoral choice. Unlike the valence model in which consensus policy goals are centre stage, the spatial model focuses on policy goals over which there is widespread *disagreement* among voters about what governments should do.

Britain’s decision to leave the European Union following the 2016 referendum is very much a spatial issue, with ‘Leavers’ outnumbering ‘Remainers’ by a small margin in the referendum. And as we discuss in Chapter 5, the division of opinion between the two groups has remained quite closely balanced since then. There are many other spatial issues which divide the parties and voters, such as the relationship between taxation and spending, the trade-offs between national security and civil liberties, and the conflict between economic growth and environmental concerns.

A key assumption in the spatial model is that the major divisive issues in electoral politics can be bundled together into an overall ‘left–right’ ideological scale. Parties on the left generally support public spending, even if this involves higher taxes, and parties of the right favour lower

⁷⁵ Macropartisanship is measured using a seven-point scale with 1=very strong Labour; 2=fairly strong Labour; 3=not very strong Labour; 4=no partisanship; 5=not very strong Conservative; 6=fairly strong Conservative; 7=very strong Conservative.

⁷⁶ Mackuen, Erikson and Stimson (1989). See also Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson (2002).

⁷⁷ Stokes (1963).

⁷⁸ Hotelling (1929); Downs (1957).

⁷⁹ Adams, Merrill and Grofman (2005).

taxes and less spending. Similarly, left-wing parties such as the Greens are more concerned about environmental protection than delivering cheap but non-renewable energy, the latter being more of a priority of parties of the right. The assumption is that voters will choose the bundle of issue positions which is closest to their own views on this overarching left–right ideological scale.

A weakness of the spatial theory is that it assumes that left–right preferences exist among the voters but does not explain where they come from. They are ‘exogenous’ or explained by forces that are outside of the theory. In fact, experimental evidence shows that this exogeneity assumption is wide of the mark because parties and the media can change people’s preferences by campaigning.⁸⁰ But the assumption simplifies the theory and allows analysts to focus on individuals’ attempts to ‘maximize utility’ by supporting a party closest to them in the left–right policy space.

For their part, parties are strategic actors who try to maximize electoral support in light of their knowledge of the distribution of voters across the commonly shared issue/ideological space. Parties do this by moving around on this left–right dimension in search of votes. Spatial models have been imaginatively elaborated in various ways, but they retain the core assumption that salient *position* issues drive the choices of utility-maximizing voters. The spatial model implies that the fragmentation of the British party system has occurred because of a lack of ideological distance between parties. If there are no ideological differences between the two parties of government, then there is no incentive to vote or support either of them.

One of the key predictions of the theory is the so-called ‘median voter theorem’ which asserts that in a two-party system where most voters are to be found close to the ‘centre ground’ of politics, both parties will try to occupy the position of the median voter on the left–right scale.⁸¹ The parties do this to maximize their vote, but paradoxically it means that if this happens then no significant ideological differences will exist between them. In this situation, voters will always get the set of policies favoured by the median voter, regardless of whether they participate in an election. And, in fact, they have no incentive to participate since policy outcomes will be invariant regardless of which party wins.

Again, we will use left–right ideology as a contextual variable in our statistical analysis.⁸² At the aggregate level, we include a measure of the

⁸⁰ Sanders, Clarke, Stewart and Whiteley (2008).

⁸¹ See Black (1958).

⁸² Note that some BES surveys contained indicators of left–right ideological scores, but these were not available in the early studies.

ideological distance between Labour and the Conservatives as a period effect using data from the Comparative Manifesto project.⁸³ This is a long-standing cross-national project which codes party manifestoes in each of the post-war elections into a left–right ideological scale using a technique known as content analysis. The data generated by the Manifesto Project provides the necessary contextual measure of ideological distance between the two major British parties over all general elections since 1964.⁸⁴

Extended Modelling Results

The results of the extended modelling of turnout appear in Figure 6.7. For technical reasons we use a single variable to identify period effects while retaining different variables for the cohort effects.⁸⁵ To examine the individual-level fixed effects first, all variables in Figure 6.7 are statistically significant predictors of turnout with the sole exception of gender. Thus, older people are more likely to vote, but again the quadratic specification of age shows that the effect declines as people get even older. Occupational status and education have strong positive impacts on turnout whereas unemployment has a strong negative effect. This replicates the findings in the earlier analyses.

Turning next to the aggregate-level variables, the class-related measures, namely the proportions of professionals and workers in the workforce both influence turnout. However, the latter effect is much weaker than the former. Thus, the growth of middle-class professional occupations stimulates turnout much more than the decline in working-class occupations reduces it. Clearly, the individual level effects of occupational status described above are reinforced by these aggregate contextual effects, although it is important to remember the effect of relative status on turnout discussed earlier. The implication is that changes in the occupational structure will not have a large impact on turnout.

The valence measures are interesting in the turnout model, since there is evidence to suggest that both period inflation and period unemployment stimulate turnout, so in the latter case the contextual effect offsets the individual-level effect. This is largely because voters who are personally unemployed are likely to be demobilized by the experience, whereas

⁸³ Budge, et al. (2001).

⁸⁴ We cannot code ideological differences for cohorts using these data, since they are not available prior to the Second World War.

⁸⁵ The expanded model creates problems of multicollinearity with dummy variables for the periods, so we impose the assumption that the period effects are linear. This is a more restrictive assumption than in the earlier modelling, but it makes estimation possible.

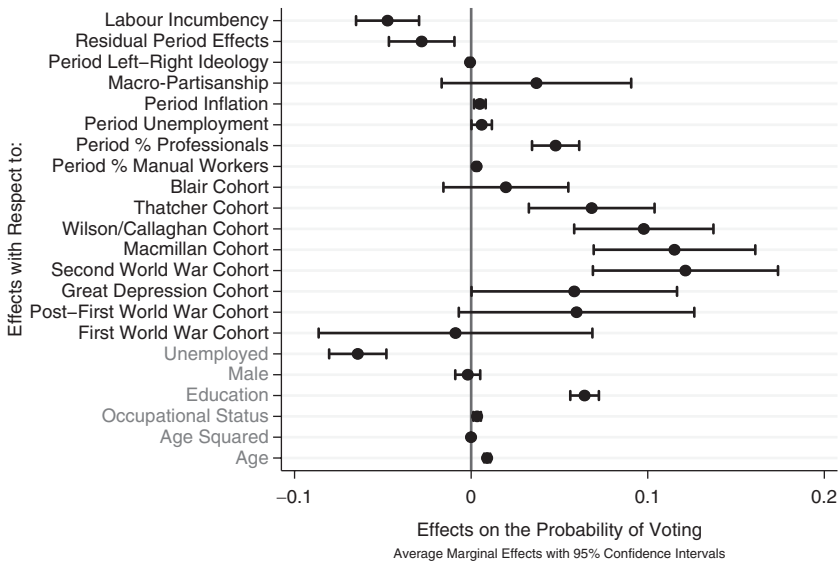


Figure 6.7 Hierarchical Age Cohort Extended Model of Turnout with Cohort and Period Controls, 1964–2019.

national rates of unemployment are a symptom of recession which mobilizes some people to vote against the government.

Once again there are striking cohort effects in the modelling as was evident in Figure 6.4. In this extended model, turnout among the Blair, First World War and post-First World War cohorts is no different from those of the Austerity cohort. But all the other cohorts record higher participation. The First World War-related effects are likely to be a product of age, with the very old being less likely to vote than their middle-aged counterparts. But the Blair cohort effect, which is the same as the Austerity cohort effect, is likely to be influenced by the growing insecurity in the labour market, which young people have experienced since the Great Recession.

Macropartisanship is not a significant predictor in the turnout model, and nor is the difference between the ideological positions of Labour and the Conservatives as measured using the Manifesto data. Of course, both are period effects, since pre-Second World War data are not available to identify cohort effects associated with these measures. But it seems likely that cohort effects might be important if they were available, in view of the decline in partisanship observed in Table 6.3.

Finally, residual period and cohort effects were included in the analysis to pick up anything missed by the modelling. In addition, a

dummy variable was included identifying if Labour was in office at the time of the election to determine if party incumbencies make a difference. The results show that there are additional period effects in the data, and a Labour incumbency effect, but there are no additional cohort effects. The period effect charts a long-term decline in turnout in successive elections, and the Labour incumbency effect denotes lower electoral participation when Labour was in power. The latter is exemplified by the turnout of 59 per cent in the 2001 election, the second election won by Tony Blair and the lowest turnout since the Second World War.

Figure 6.8 illustrates the impact of the different variables on voting for the governing party, a specification which allows us to examine valence effects on party support. To repeat an earlier point, the valence model emphasizes the performance of the governing party, with opposition parties gaining support from poor performance and losing it from good performance. This means that the incumbency status of a party is controlled in the modelling to avoid missing this distinction.

The results in Figure 6.8 indicate that in the individual-level model occupational status and unemployment are significant predictors of support for incumbent governments, but none of the other demographics are significant. This shows that, when indicators of the valence model are included, the relationship between individual demographics and support for the governing party are no longer important, with the exception of the workforce measures. The fact that age differences cease to be predictors in this extended model highlights the importance of including economic variables in the analysis. Put differently, the age effects we have observed are a lot to do with the impact of the economic circumstances and the experiences of young people.

With regard to the percentage of professionals and workers in the aggregate contextual model, the former boosts support for the incumbent party, while the latter is non-significant. This should be understood in the context of the Conservatives being in office for thirty-one of the fifty-five years between the 1964 and 2019 elections. The party has consistently been supported by middle-class professionals to a greater extent than Labour, although the gap is narrowing in recent elections. This means that class is still important in British politics, but the class divide favours the Conservatives in the long run. This is because the middle class are more likely to support them, than the working class are to support Labour.

The period inflation and period unemployment variables are both significant and negative in the analysis, which is consistent with the valence model, since economic problems reduce support for incumbent governments. In addition, the estimates show that unemployment has

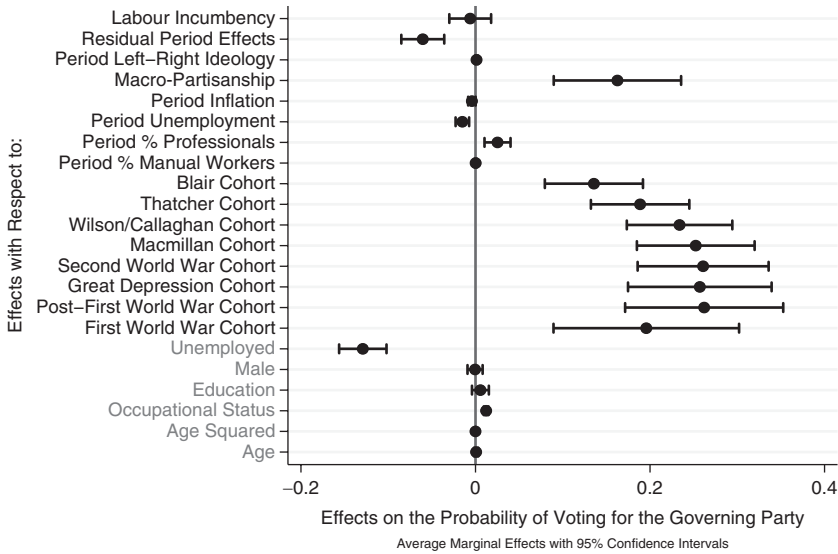


Figure 6.8 Hierarchical Age Cohort Extended Model of Voting for the Governing Party with Linear Period Controls, 1964–2019.

a bigger impact on incumbency support than does inflation.⁸⁶ British governments have more to fear from rising unemployment than they have from increased inflation. However, it should be noted that inflation was only a serious problem in the 1970s and has been at relatively low levels ever since, which reduces its salience. That has changed in the post-pandemic period, but overall in the past half century, rising unemployment is more of a problem for successive British governments than price rises.

Once again, the most striking feature of the government support model in Figure 6.8 is the very strong cohort effects. All cohorts, including the Blair cohort, were significantly more likely to support the government than the Austerity cohort. This finding is the same as earlier findings in Figure 6.6, which show how much the younger generation has deserted the Conservative Party in office since 2010. The party may have won three elections in a row after Labour left office in 2010, but it is vulnerable to generational replacement in the long run, as these large cohort effects demonstrate.

⁸⁶ The expanded model creates problems of multicollinearity with dummy variables for the periods, so we impose the assumption that the period effects are linear. This is a more restrictive assumption than in the earlier modelling, but it makes estimation possible.

Finally, macropartisanship clearly plays an important role in influencing support for the governing party. The finding implies that there is greater support for the governing party when macropartisanship moves in favour of the Conservatives. We observed in Table 6.3 that Conservative partisanship fell from 39.9 per cent in 1964 to 29.8 per cent in 2017. The decline for Labour is slightly greater, with 42.1 per cent identifying with the party in 1964 and only 28.4 per cent doing so in 2019.

Clearly, both parties have experienced a sizeable erosion of their partisan bases. The long-term implications of this depend on the extent to which partisanship is a largely static product of socialization in early adulthood or, alternatively, a dynamic ‘running tally’ of updated performance-related evaluations. Existing research suggests that in Britain the latter is more important than the former.⁸⁷ So the long-run effects of declining partisanship at any point in time are mitigated by the possibility that increases in parties’ partisan shares are ongoing possibilities. That said, the weakening of early-life political socialization creates problems for both major British parties.

Conclusion: The Dynamics of Turnout and Party Support

This chapter has investigated both the short-run and long-run influences of age, period and cohort effects on turnout and party support in Britain. It is clear that the class and valence models help to explain the relationship between these different aspects of age-related voting in Britain over the fifty-five-year period between 1964 and 2019. With regard to turnout, there have always been differences in rates of electoral participation between age groups, but these became far more pronounced after the Labour landslide of 1997 when Tony Blair’s New Labour became the dominant party. This resulted in lower rates of voting among members of the Blair cohort, and this has subsequently carried over to the Austerity cohort.

Another important finding is that over this long period of time the Labour and Conservative HAPC models are very different. In the case of Labour, changes in support are related to different periods or elections with little evidence of enduring cohort effects. In contrast, the Conservatives appear to have relied heavily on socialization processes which strongly influenced their support prior to the New Labour era. These have subsequently largely disappeared, such that ‘socialization politics’ have become very much weaker.

⁸⁷ Whiteley and Kölln (2019).

The fragmentation of the class system as measured by changes in the occupational structure has weakened the relationship between social status, partisanship and electoral behaviour. The decline of traditional working-class occupations and the rise of managers and professionals have weakened support for Labour more than for the Conservatives. Labour won a lot of support from middle-class voters during the Blair years and subsequently the party has done better than expected in a number of relatively middle-class constituencies, even in the most recent 2019 election.⁸⁸ At the same time, as Chapter 5 shows, the party lost a number of traditional working-class constituencies in the so-called 'Red Wall' of Labour strongholds in the North West in that election, illustrating the continuing fragmentation of the association between class and party affiliation.

Another finding is the lack of support for the spatial model of party competition. It is well established that divisive issues can play an important role in electoral politics, exemplified by the 2019 general election, which, as we have seen, was influenced by the issue of Brexit. However, that chapter revealed that the impact of Brexit on the vote was rather modest, with the possible exception of support for the Liberal Democrats. In the present context there were no significant contextual left-right ideological effects in the modelling, either in relation to turnout or support for the governing party. That said, macropartisanship is very influential in general elections, and this is clearly associated with ideology. But partisanship is much more strongly related to political identity and policy delivery than long-term support for left-wing or right-wing policies. The implication is that either the Manifesto data do not capture ideological differences very well, or more likely their influence on electoral behaviour has been exaggerated by the popularity of the spatial model.

It also bears emphasis that prosperity increases support for incumbents regardless of the party they represent, and recession reduces their support, in line with the valence model. This has important implications for future elections relating to the longer-term consequences of the protracted Brexit crisis, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. This topic is discussed in more detail in Chapters 9 and 10. The responses to these shocks will vary between the parties and will be influenced by ideological differences between them over the next decade. The valence model suggests that these events will make life difficult for incumbents until prosperity returns and the economy recovers. There

⁸⁸ For example, the party won Putney and also Canterbury, the latter being formerly a safe Conservative seat.

is an argument that the fragmentation of party support in Britain may make government less effective in the future, but the counterargument is that valence voting which focuses tightly on performance rather than ideology can actually improve accountability, a topic to be examined in Chapter 8.

This chapter has been a story of the fragmentation of party support and the strength of the relationship between partisan attachments and demographics such as age and social class over time. However, there is a second perspective on these political changes which relates to the geography of the vote – the spatial dimension in British politics. This is examined in the next chapter.