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Chapter 6: Conclusions

Beyond First- and Second-order

The distinction between first- and second-order elections have been a key means of understanding British elections since its incorporation into the literature in the 1980s. Although modified and aspects of the classification critiqued there have been no alternative models proposed which do not rely in some manner upon the distinctions established by Reif and Schmitt (1980).

Chapter 1 and II asked two interrelated questions; firstly are all second-order elections the same? And secondly are all elections of the same type homogenous? In exploring these questions these chapters – along with the remainder of the book established three key critiques of existing classifications of elections in Britain. Firstly that elections which do not affect national sovereignty (i.e. subnational elections) do not attract equal levels of salience from those who participate within them, and secondly, the elections of the same type are not homogenous in the salience they are afforded by political parties, the media or by voters themselves. Finally Chapter 2 argued that any future classification needs to view elections from a broad perspective and not solely rely on turnout.

The goal of this book is to offer a means of classifying the salience afforded to each election in Britain in its own right. As such one central argument the book set out to test and defend was the notion that elections – including elections of the same type - are heterogenous events; each election – rather than type of election – attracts varying levels of salience and as such they should be studied independently of one another.

Within this book I sought to develop a means of classifying elections which draws upon the processes of elections rather than simply the results of elections. Here, as Chapter 1 argued, whilst politicians may argue that every election they stand/campaign in is important (especially if it directly relates to their job) it is plausible that members of the public and the media are able distinguish between the salience afforded to different elections (with variations in turnout being one just measure of this). Such perceptions, as the empirical chapters demonstrate, are not confined to the electorate but demonstrated through the different approaches the media and political parties take to election campaigns. This is important in detaching the salience offered to elections – which this book measures – and the salience attached to the election results – which it doesn't.

In doing so I have acknowledged that these groups are not independent from one another; politicians can also write newspaper articles (reflecting their own interests/biases) and journalists and politicians can simultaneously be members of the electorate. Just as complex relationships exist between these groups, such interactions themselves exist within wider relationships; for example journalists seek to sell their stories to, and politicians represent, the public (as opposed the electorate).

Each chapter has drawn upon two case studies to offer evidence to suggest that large differences exist between elections, either elections of the same type or what have been previously homogenised and defined as second-order elections. These have highlighted the differences that exist predominantly between subnational elections and in doing so challenged aspects of the first- and second-order binary distinctions. These case studies have further highlighted the complex interactions that exist between different types of elections – for instance in the discussion in Chapter 5 which demonstrated the media’s prioritisation of the 2019 European elections over the local elections, despite the former taking place three weeks after the latter.

Such evidence has further placed each election within a wider context, relating to the decline of political parties or the end of class alignment and theses explaining the decline in voter turnout. Clearly elections are not insulated from such wider trends and further changes will impact upon the nature of elections. However any such changes offer further evidence for incorporating a range of actors into our understanding of the importance of elections particularly if these are to effectively classify elections over a long period of time.

This research has not and cannot completely dispel the first- and second-order thesis. As each chapter has shown there is – albeit at differing levels - on aggregate less salience afforded to sub-national elections than to national elections. This is most prominently borne out by the analysis of the printed media in Chapter 5, which demonstrated across different electoral cycles that the media’s reporting of general elections outweighed its reporting of subnational elections.

The importance of this is to demonstrate that whilst elections to the Westminster Parliament are currently deemed the most important or salient this is not an inevitability. As Chapter 3 demonstrated the turnout for the 2001 general election was markedly lower than other recent general elections. Such fluctuations are also displayed in other forms of elections, and it is not beyond the realms of possibility that turnout for a devolved or other sub national election may exceed that of a general election in the future. The turnout in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 – a subnational referendum - was higher than the corresponding turnout in the national 2016 referendum on EU membership (albeit with variations in the electorate).

Previous chapters have disaggregated the task of constructing a new mechanism to capture the salience afforded to each election by exploring the different actors roles in times of elections. Although important in understanding how these actors interact in different elections on their own such measures are unable to offer a holistic understanding of elections. Figure 6.1 draws together the measures of salience used in the previous three chapters – offering equal weighting to each group of actors – to offer a holistic understanding of elections in Britain.

Previous chapters have also demonstrated that each group within elections in theory has the propensity to offer higher levels of salience to every election. This is due in part to declining voter turnout and the competing pressures faced by the media and political parties. In this regard salience levels measuring less than half of the maximum achievable score does not represent in itself a problem or issue for democracy or democratic institutions in Britain. Rather what the seeks to do is to understanding the differences that exist between these scores – either between different election types or elections of the same type.

Figure 6.1 demonstrates the combined results of some elections over the last decade. It demonstrated the combined salience afforded to different elections between 2010 and 2017. The x axis is a combined measure, drawing upon the salience offered by the electorate (turnout), political parties (party spending) and the media (proportion of newspaper articles) using data outlined in the previous three chapters and expressed as a percentage. Each institution is afforded equal weighting and the individual totals are added together to make a combined salience score. Although the x axis could technically be extended beyond 300, as political parties could theoretically spend more money than they are permitted, this should be seen as the upper limit for the purposes of comparison. This had the benefit of affording equal weighting to all the actors within this study.

Figure 6.1 About here Salience of Selected elections 2010-17

As fig 6.1 demonstrates the most salient elections are the general elections of 2015 and 2017 (though the 2012 London Mayor election attracted higher levels of salience than the 2010 general election). Equally the lowest scoring elections; the 2012 PCC elections and the 2011 Welsh elections are elections which have previously been described as “second-order” elections. This is akin to the first- and second-order model, developed by Reif and Schmitt.

However the graph also demonstrates wide variations between what Reif and Schmitt and later political scientists have labelled as second-order elections. Noticeable in this regard is the 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner elections which attracted a salience measure of just 23.31 – less than a third of the next lowest score (the 2011 Welsh elections) and a score that was just over one fifth of the 2010 general election. Such differences are far greater than the differences between other subnational elections and general elections (which were identified as first-order). Equally the 2012 London Mayor election and 2016 Scottish Parliament elections were both perceived to be more salient than the 2010 general election questioning that the dichotomous binary distinctions of first- and second-order elections.

The graph also highlights an advantage of measuring each different election in isolation is that we can explore trends in elections or highlight anomalies. Chapter 5 highlighted in one of its case studies how the local elections of 2019 became assimilated – at least within the media discourse – with the issue of Brexit. Although it is too soon to obtain data on party spending in these elections, hence why they are omitted from fig 6.1, we can see that trends in different elections fluctuate. Here the 2017 general election attracted higher levels of salience than either the 2010 or 2015 general elections – largely as it was boosted by higher turnout. Comparing specific elections comparatively can also offer insights into wider trends in British politics. For example we can see that the devolved elections (Scotland and Wales) of 2016 were perceived as more important than the elections five years earlier. Although the reasons for this cannot be explored in detail here such understandings could help explore the interactions between these institutions or views of the electorates in Scotland and Wales and link to (the drivers of) wider policy issues, such as campaigns for independence.

Important here is that the graph – or indeed this study – cannot (be used to) make predictions about future elections. This is a key difference from the first- and second-order thesis, which has been used as a static means of classifying elections into binary categories. It may be the case that in the future general elections do not attract the highest levels of salience and indeed that PCC elections do not attract the lowest. Although the study is unable to make such predictions is it a useful tool for measuring any/such changes over time.

As Chapter 1 demonstrated the links between elections and legitimacy are important, especially when exploring intuitions that lack the history and traditions of the Westminster Parliament. Although figure 6.1 demonstrates increasing levels of salience a reversal of this trend could lead to further questions about the validity of such institutions. Here I do not want to wish to comment on the nature of such discourse but rather suggest that a more nuanced measure of such elections has wide implications within British politics.

Further Considerations

This book has provided a new framework for understanding and classifying elections in Britain, moving beyond traditional first- and second-order distinctions. Whilst it has established the methodological means to do so there are limitations to the data that can be displayed here. This concluding chapter, unfortunately, omits certain elections due to a lack of data being available. In particular there is a lack of data on candidate spending in by-elections principally due to these not being collected at a national level and only available in local councils for a period of two years. This means that although earlier chapters could highlight the different interactions that exist within turnouts or the media's reporting of by-elections the concluding chapter was unable to incorporate such elections into its analysis. Though such elections are still included in the data presented in appendix A. A longitudinal study, constructed over a number of years and parliamentary sittings, would be able to address this.

It must be noted that the interactions that exist between voters, political parties and the media, and outlined within this book are not simply confined to elections. One aspect of democratic engagement this study has not discussed is that of referendums. Since 1997 Britain has (or at least parts of the British electorate have) been asked to vote on referendums regarding the nature of devolution (in Scotland and Wales and for regional mayors in England), the electoral system used in Westminster elections and the UK's membership of the European Union. Some referendums have impacted the British political system, in many ways, more than some elections mentioned with this study. This impact has not been limited to the results of the referendums but concern the campaigns themselves. For example, matters of identity in the Scottish Independence Referendum and the 2016 EU referendum. Equally the effects of such campaigns have influenced political parties and voters in subsequent elections – for example the positioning of parties along “remain”/ “leave” lines following the 2016 referendum.

Intuitively we can suggest that some of these referendums were more important than others. Whilst all affected the sovereign institution of parliament such affects were not uniform. The 2014 Scottish Independence referendum had the potential to create a bigger impact than the 1997 devolution referendum as ceding sovereign territory would be a greater impact than sharing administrative functions/legislative power. Equally the campaigns for the 2016

referendum on the UK's membership for the European Union were more heated and visual than the corresponding campaigns to change the UK's First Past The Post electoral system in 2011.

Such intuitive logic and reasoning cannot, alone, offer a sound means of classifying referendums, but further exploration may be able to. Indeed the formulae offered within this study could be adapted (not least to acknowledge the different nature of referendum and election campaigns – the former do not officially involve political parties but often broad coalitions who advocate a certain policy) to offer a means of comparing referendums and elections. Such exploration would offer an important contribution to existing debates surrounding direct and representative democracy.

The first- and second-order distinctions are not unique to Britain, and to achieve similar status any further means of classification must demonstrate its ability to classify elections beyond the British political system. As many others have noted the UK's Westminster unitary model of governance is distinct from many other states. Whilst there have been increasing debates about how whether or not devolution has shifted British governance from a unitary to a federal system it is clear that within comparative and global politics the British system is largely unique.

If this model's applicability is tested outside of the British context it could further be useful in comparative politics, by exploring the perceptions and roles of different elections in diverse political systems. For example, applying this model to European countries such as Germany or Switzerland could highlight differences in the perceptions of local or regional governments in federal and unitary states. This would offer symmetry with the first- and second-order model which was conceived off following the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, and further developed following the 1984 EEC elections. By extending the model to all EU member states we could also develop greater understanding of the institution and contribute to debates surrounding perceptions of the EU's democratic deficit. This could also have wider understandings for the importance difference member states place upon European parliamentary elections. Alternatively it could be used in the context of the federal system of the USA, with its emphasis on local/state institutions/governance. Such an exploration would be important in establishing the links that exist between this model and diverse electoral systems.

However in order to apply the model in other context we must be wary of any differences that exist. For example, we can hypothesise that countries with compulsory voting would have higher rates of turnout than those demonstrated in the UK, thus suggesting higher levels of salience. Different electoral rules would have to be accounted for. Particularly problematic may be elections such as the European parliamentary elections which occur simultaneously in all member states are subject to different rules. Here EU law establishes "common provisions" such as the need for proportional representation but allows member states freedom over the exact electoral processes (European Parliament, 2019). Equally different regulations may exist, across electoral systems and countries, regarding political party campaign spending – and in some cases no limits may apply. This poses difficulties in using spending returns to gauge how salient political parties view different elections.

Conclusions

Despite a range of new elections following the devolution agenda of first New Labour in the late 1990s-early 2000s and latter the Conservative Party under David Cameron the primary understanding of British elections still rests upon distinctions made by Reif and Schmitt in 1980. This book has sought to question the appropriateness of this understanding and offer a new means of classifying elections in Britain.

In some respects it has underlined the original analysis by Reif and Schmitt – that there are one group of elections which typically attract higher levels of salience than other types of elections. That voters have less incentive to vote or engage in elections that do not affect parliamentary sovereignty (what Reif and Schmitt labelled as second-order elections, and what I term subnational elections).

Yet in other ways it has challenged this approach. It has demonstrated that the addition of new elections into a wider second-order category is akin to conceptual stretching and argued that Reif and Schmitt's categorisation of all other elections should be reconsidered. It has suggested that turnout is part of the elections results, rather than process, and therefore relying on this figure, alone, is insufficient to gauge the importance actors give to different elections.

By outlining these critiques the empirical case studies this book offers moves towards a new means of understanding the differences that exist between elections which draws upon the roles of voters, political parties and the media during elections. In doing so it highlights three key points; firstly that not all elections of the same type attract consistent levels of salience (and rather when measuring elections it is more accurate to speak of particular elections rather than different types of elections), secondly that subnational elections are heterogenous and should be conceptualised as such, thirdly the variations/differences that exist between subnational elections can often be greater than those which exist between national and subnational elections meaning that any binary distinction is problematic.

In some ways British elections are unique in terms of their scope and electoral systems. The classification designed within the book is done so with such peculiarities in mind. However as this chapter has acknowledged such variance is not the same as suggesting that it cannot be incorporated into wider comparative study; either by incorporating referendums or using it to classifying elections in other political systems.

References

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