

KENNETH D. WALD

Crosses on the Ballot

*Patterns of British Voter Alignment
Since 1885*



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PATTERNS OF BRITISH VOTER
ALIGNMENT SINCE 1885

Kenneth D. Wald

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To my parents—who may finally understand
what I've been doing with my time.

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Preface

This study began as yet another inquiry into the development of class politics in Great Britain. As the initial research unfolded, it became increasingly clear to me that the rise of class politics could not be understood without first paying attention to a development which made class politics possible—the decline of religion as a political factor. This discovery took me back yet another step, to attempt to understand how religion had become a major source of political division in Britain and to chart the various ways in which denominational conflict impinged on political attitudes and behavior. The title is meant to reflect my interest in the factors which promoted a political system built largely on religious conflicts, the subtitle to indicate a focus on how and why that system decayed.

In the course of research, I was struck by the confidence with which scholars had offered as facts what were really untested assertions about the structure of party coalitions in late Victorian-Edwardian Britain. Much of my time was spent simply trying to collect the kinds of information that might permit a test of these descriptions and hypotheses. The difficulty of finding suitable data brought to mind the complaint of Henry Thomas Buckle, the Victorian writer, that poor record-keeping forced students of past politics to “collect the facts, as well as conduct the generalization.”¹

¹ Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, cited in Lee Benson, *Toward the Scientific Study of History: Selected Essays* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972), p. 99.

Preface

In presenting the results of my quarrying, I tried to keep in mind the chastening sentence in a Wolverhampton newspaper story about the address of a municipal councillor: "Towards the end of his speech, Councillor Steward ceased to be interesting and became statistical."² Mindful of what that implies, I have tried to strike a balance in the narrative between the demands of presenting statistical tabulation and readability.

In researching and writing the book, I have picked up more debts than I can repay or even remember. At Washington University, where it all began, I received sage advice and counsel from Robert Salisbury, John Sprague, and Richard W. Davis. Thanks to the timely intervention of Merle Kling, I also received money and some elegant instruction in motivation. Later on, Memphis State University provided me with additional research funding, computer time, and, in the person of Deborah Brackstone, an invaluable interlibrary loan service—all of which enabled me to complete the dissertation which became the foundation for this book.

The major expansion of the study was supported by the National Science Foundation under grant SES 7805765 and by a research grant from Memphis State University. Though I doubt that these institutions have corporate opinions, least of all about the matters discussed in these pages, I nevertheless must hasten to absolve them of any responsibility for the opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in the publication.

Two British institutions provided hospitality and sustenance. At the London School of Economics, Dr. Tom Nositer was kind enough to supervise my initial work and comment frankly and repeatedly on the direction of the thesis. A few years later, Professor Richard Rose invited me to spend a year as a visiting fellow in the Centre for the Study of Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde.

² *Express and Star* (Wolverhampton), October 29, 1904, p. 4.

I am grateful to Professor Rose for that productive year and to Dr. William Miller for supplying data and encouragement.

For giving me access to restricted materials, I thank officials of the British Library of Political Science, British Museum, Gladstone Library, Bradford Central Library, and the research divisions of the Conservative, Liberal, and Labour parties. Such generosity was not restricted to institutions: Jeffrey Hill, George Jones, Anthony King, Stanley Pierson, and Hugh Stephens shared with me a variety of unpublished material. Some of the material contained herein first appeared in article form in *Political Studies* and the *British Journal of Political Science*; for allowing me to reprint that material, I want to thank the publishers, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press. I also appreciate the permission to ransack some material from other scholars who published under the aegis of Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. (Table 2.2); University of Toronto Press (Tables 2.2, 2.3); Macmillan, London and Basingstoke (Tables 2.3, 3.1); and St. Martin's Press, Inc. (Table 3.1).

The manuscript would have improved dramatically if I had taken more advice from Peter Clarke, Henry Pelling, Ivor Crewe, Donald Stokes, Hugh Stephens, and the countless thousands who had occasion to comment on the material in its various guises. Though scholarly etiquette requires that they be absolved of responsibility, especially for some of my wilder notions, I do think that guilt by association should still count for something.

On the personal front, I must thank my parents for their support and encouragement; I hope the dedication repays some of that. Robin Lea West assisted me as critic, (paid) research assistant, babysitter, keypuncher, typist, therapist, cheerleader, and wife—I'm immensely grateful for all that and even more thankful that psychologists seldom write books. My daughter Dara probably delayed the book by at least a year, but we both had fun in the interim. I hope the persons mentioned in this paragraph won't begrudge a

Preface

salute to my cats, who spent many hours on top of the manuscript, guarding it from all manner of dangers.

Persons interested in German-American understanding will doubtless be relieved to learn that I have forgiven the German pilot who made life difficult for me by so thoughtlessly bombing certain sheds at the British Newspaper Library during World War II. I will not forgive so easily if it happens again.

In order, the quotations on page 3 are from Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 346; David Watson Rannie, *The Origin of Party in England* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1882), p. 13; Patrick O'Donovan, "Catholicism and Class in England," *Twentieth Century* 173 (Spring 1965), 52; and letter to E. B. White, cited in *Selected Letters of James Thurber*, ed. Helen Thurber and Edward Weeks (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), p. 7.

Crosses on the Ballot

Take my vote and let it be
Consecrated Lord to thee.
Guide my hand that I may trace
Crosses in the proper place.
—*A Sheffield prayer (1910)*

Nothing in history is more striking than the way in which motives wholly or even partially religious invade the domain of other motives, however powerful they may be, and overcome them. —*David Watson Rannie (1882)*

Ideally religion is a lonely relationship between man and God—alone with the alone. Or else it is man acting in society in accord with what he conceives as his God's requirements.
—*Patrick O'Donovan (1965)*

Over here [in England] everybody turns Catholic when anything is the matter. —*James Thurber (1937)*

CHAPTER 1

The Context of the Study

... what sort of divisions can be found in British society which provide the basis for partisan opposition?¹ —*Leslie Lipson*

This study of the pattern of voter alignments in Britain since the late nineteenth century is directed to a pair of topics which have long commanded the attention of political sociologists. First, it explores the relationship between social structure and voting patterns in a mass electorate. The goal is both to specify the various social formations which achieved political relevance after 1885 and to identify the mechanisms which translated social divisions into lines of partisan cleavage. Beyond a static portrayal of mass political behavior, the study has a second aim—to enhance understanding of the dynamic properties of the British party system. It attempts to explain why certain social divisions, once of considerable electoral significance, became less important over time until they were superseded altogether by new patterns of sociopolitical conflict. Despite its concentration upon a single political system, the study thus addresses problems which Lipset and Rokkan regard as “fundamental questions for comparative research.”²

¹ Leslie Lipson, “The Two-Party System in British Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 47 (June 1953), 351.

² Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction,” in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, p. 6.

RATIONALE

Most of the material for the book has been drawn from an intensive study of electoral patterns between 1885 and 1910, dates which mark the first and last general elections held under the provisions of the Third Reform Act. Though not so neglected as it once was, this stretch of years remains something of a dark age in terms of electoral analysis.³ The British party configuration of this period has not been subject to the same careful scrutiny as the party system of the middle nineteenth century, which has been studied profitably through analysis of the rich store of data contained in pollbooks, the published records of individual votes at general elections.⁴ Nor has the party system between 1885 and 1910 received anything like the attention devoted to the era which followed it, a period for which the full resources of modern electoral analysis have been deployed.⁵ The relative neglect of the late Victorian-Edwardian party system is unfortunate because it was during this period that British mass politics first assumed a recognizably "modern" format.

During the period of the Third Reform Act, elections acquired their decisive modern function as the major mechanism linking the actions of the rulers with the wishes of the ruled.⁶ The fate of a Government, which had depended primarily on its ability to survive confidence votes in the House of Commons, came instead to depend upon the support it could command in the cities and counties at a general election. As the concept of the popular mandate

³ Note the assessments in G.S.R. Kitson Clark, *An Expanding Society: Britain, 1830-1920* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 55-56, and Alan J. Lee, "Conservatism, Traditionalism and the British Working Class, 1880-1918," in *Ideology and the Labour Movement*, ed. David E. Martin and David Rubinstein (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 86.

⁴ D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976); T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1975); J. R. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

⁵ William L. Miller, *Electoral Dynamics in Britain Since 1918*.

⁶ John P. Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 2nd ed. (London: Stevens and Sons, 1968), pp. 173-209.

gained legitimacy, elections were treated as referenda upon current issues, and the distribution of the vote was taken as a measure of public reaction to party policy. To a greater degree than ever before, the major issues of the day—Irish government, imperialism, free trade, the role of the Lords, the status of the Church—were debated with reference to electoral considerations. This development had its parallel outside Westminster as constituency life, formerly dominated by the peculiar features of the local community, responded more fully to national influences.⁷ These influences were channeled through political parties which increasingly functioned as agents of mass electoral mobilization. For leaders and followers alike, in other words, the votes counted.

The institutional structure for counting votes, the electoral system, also appeared in modern guise during the period.⁸ The scope and influence of electoral corruption and “influence” were lessened appreciably by the adoption of the secret ballot (1872) and the passage of corrupt practices legislation (1883). The old constituencies, based on a series of medieval communities which had long since ceased to correspond to social reality, were replaced by new election districts (1885) which more faithfully mirrored population distribution. The reforms embodied in the Franchise Act of 1884 led for the first time to a rough semblance of universal manhood suffrage. As recent research has emphasized, the combined effect of these changes still left a great many Britons outside the pale of the Constitution.⁹ Nevertheless, whatever the considerable defects and

⁷ On the situation before 1884, see H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*.

⁸ David Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918*; William B. Gwyn, *Democracy and the Cost of Politics in Britain*; H. J. Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain, 1832–1914*; Cornelius O’Leary, *The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections, 1868–1911*.

⁹ Neal Blewett, “The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885–1918,” *Past and Present*, no. 32 (1965), 27–56; Hugh Clegg, Alan Fox, and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions*, pp. 269–271; H.C.G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin, and J. A. Kay, “The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party,” pp. 723–750.

The Context of the Study

anomalies remaining in the electoral system, by 1885 "the word 'Reform' no longer naturally denoted 'Electoral Reform.'" ¹⁰ The electoral process, formerly an institution for reformers *to* attack, had now become an avenue *of* attack.

The period under discussion also witnessed the modernization of another important element in British politics, the party system. Political parties replaced factions built around notables as the accepted nuclei for organizing a Government within Parliament. ¹¹ This development inevitably affected the individual Member of Parliament, downgrading him from an independent center of authority and criticism to a much diminished role as defender of the party leadership. Divisions within Parliament accordingly followed party lines to a much greater extent than before. In another respect, the partisan environment of Westminster took on a marked resemblance to the contemporary pattern. Then, as now, two parties divided the bulk of the popular vote, but they frequently had to rely for their parliamentary majority upon tacit alliances with assorted minor parties. It was during this period, moreover, that the three major parties of modern British political history—Liberal, Labour, and Conservative—first achieved representation in the same Parliament. As questions of distributive justice began to force their way onto the political agenda, the partisans staked out positions that sound familiar to the observer of British politics in the post-1945 setting.

For all these reasons, then, the period of British politics bounded by 1885 and 1910 merits sustained study. It presents an opportunity to examine problems of major interest to students of voting behavior and to do so in a broader historical context than is customary. The study is further warranted by the inability of scholars to achieve anything approaching consensus on the salient features of political life during the period. Indeed, as scholarly interest in the

¹⁰ Butler, *Electoral System*, p. 1.

¹¹ D.E.D. Beales, *The Political Parties of Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Historical Association, 1971).

period has deepened, disagreement has intensified to a point where virtually every claim or generalization generates a counter-argument. This description is particularly apt for the two main topics addressed in the study, the contours of electoral cleavage and the source of long-term change in party fortunes.¹²

Contemporary observers seem to have treated political parties not as collections of voters sharing a considered attachment to basic political values nor as floating masses of individuals responding like Pavlovian dogs to the bribes offered by party leaders. Much like modern political scientists, they recognized that party coalitions were often based on shared social characteristics and fortified by the dead hand of tradition. As one MP wrote,

To many persons party symbols and party associations have taken the place of all party meaning [so] that to vote "blue" or to vote "yellow" has become the traditional practice in many families. . . . The answer of not a few to all solicitations is "my father always voted 'blue' (or 'yellow') and so did my grandfather, and so shall I."¹³

What groups were significant in binding voters to their parties? According to the conventional wisdom expressed in many modern accounts of the period, religious or denominational differences provided the basic line of political demarcation. The electoral arena is portrayed in these accounts as a context in which the protagonists fought out battles which had their origin in Reformation-era conflicts. The kinds of issues which provoked partisan conflict, it is argued, have a quaint tone when compared to the characteristically modern rhetoric of class conflict.

Other scholars reject this religious interpretation, however, and describe party competition under the Third Reform Act as a relatively straightforward clash of economic

¹² Full references for these arguments are presented in Chapters 2–3.

¹³ Cited in *Bradford Constitutional Yearbook* (Bradford: H. H. Tetley, 1904), p. 79.

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interests. The proponents of this alternative perspective regard the pre-1918 party system as a somewhat more primitive version of the class-stratified configuration that has characterized post-1945 Britain. Perhaps, to consider yet another logical possibility, these contrasting views can be reconciled. If class and religion overlapped to a considerable degree, it would make sense to treat them not as competitive sources of cleavage but as mutually reinforcing influences on voter behavior.¹⁴ We must also entertain the possibility that a variable which has not thus far figured prominently in British historical election analysis—such as region—exercised a considerable impact on voter alignments. The merits of these competing claims can be assessed in part through a systematic analysis of voting patterns—a major task of this study.

If the nature of electoral stability under the Third Reform Act has proved so difficult to gauge, the problem of change has generated even more disagreement. The rise of the Labour Party at the expense of the Liberals, a trend first suggested during the period, has been described by one reviewer as a subject likely to replace the rise of the gentry as the foremost problem in modern British political development. This transformation of the party system has been attributed to all manner of forces: changes in the basis of electoral cleavage, bad tactics by Liberal strategists, the increasing structural differentiation of industry, reapportionment of constituencies, the growth of secularism, the extension of the franchise in 1918, wartime disagreements among the Liberal leadership, etc. These factors are not all equally amenable to verification with the methods favored here; but because many of them are based upon unproven claims about voting behavior, the systematic anal-

¹⁴ Derek Urwin, "Towards the Nationalisation of British Politics? Party Politics, 1885–1940" (Paper presented to the conference on "Wahlerbewegung in der europäischen Geschichte," Historische Kommission zu Berlin, May 1978).

ysis of electoral data from the pre-1918 period may contribute significantly to clarifying the debate.

These empirical disputes among students of British political development tie into some broader theoretical issues that concern specialists in political sociology, voting behavior and political parties. By paying due regard to these issues, an intensive study of Britain may contribute to theoretical development in the field of political behavior. For example, the social analysis of voting has spawned many useful insights about the process by which social divisions impinge upon voting and considerable speculation about hierarchies of cleavage. The British data offer an opportunity to refine and test some of these insights for a period for which survey data are unavailable. The general phenomenon of change in party systems can also be advanced by examining trends in British voting. The electoral history of many nations seems to be marked by an alternating series of stable party configurations followed by an abrupt period of electoral discontinuity in which stable allegiances are disrupted and new party coalitions emerge. The periods of electoral stability, which have been described variously as "party systems" and "sociopolitical periods," tend to exhibit a characteristic political agenda, a high degree of persistence in mass voter alignments and a relatively fixed distribution of the vote.¹⁵ In explaining why such stable systems seem to give way to rapid decomposition and reformulation, researchers have speculated about the role of factors such as new political issues, demographic changes, alterations in the legal-institutional structure of elections, and generational displacement in dissolving a seemingly stable pattern of political conflict. The process of electoral change in Britain can thus be regarded as another potential inci-

¹⁵ Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *The American Party Systems*, ed. William Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 277-307; Everett C. Ladd, *American Political Parties* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

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dence of a recurring phenomenon and be treated as a "case" in the study of the transformation of party systems.

APPROACH

One problem with the existing literature, as we have just seen, is that scholars have given radically different answers to a number of basic questions. Such disagreement alone warrants further study of the period. Equally important, existing studies have failed to capitalize fully upon modern techniques of electoral analysis. To remedy that omission requires a new kind of study with methods suitable to the analysis of mass politics.

Without doing too much violence to their unique qualities, previous voter studies of the period can be placed into four categories: single election studies, works of electoral geography, intensive local profiles, and, a more recent development, historical survey research. Four of the eight general elections fought during the period have been the subject of monographs similar to the Nuffield College series on post-World War II British elections.¹⁶ These single election studies characteristically examine the record of the Government that called the election, its fortune in by-elections, the kinds of issues raised during the campaign, the tactics of interest groups and candidates, and the general pattern of the returns. In the typical works of electoral geography which were popular early in the twentieth century, the authors mapped the results of elections and commented upon the spatial distribution of party support and the relationship between party vote and parliamentary rep-

¹⁶ D. C. Savage, "General Election of 1886 in Great Britain and Ireland" (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1958); Mary E. Y. Enstam, "The 'Khaki' Election of 1900 in the United Kingdom" (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1968); A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973); M. Charlita Brady, "The British General Elections of 1910" (Ph.D. thesis, Fordham University, 1947); Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People*.