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Elections

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Political sociological research on elections has been primarily concerned with investigating the underlying social bases of party support. Three issues are of central concern. First, there are important questions about voters, both individual voters and members of key electoral groups (in particular, classes, genders, religious traditions, and a wide range of other social groups over whom parties compete for votes). Second, political sociologists have been interested in questions about the consequence of elections: how much and to what extent do elections, as opposed to other political factors, influence political and political outcomes? Finally, the institutional context in which elections are contested varies.

In democratic polities, elections matter. They decide who governs, providing a critical mechanism for translating citizen's preferences into public policies. Elections also provide clues about underlying political trends. Critical sources of information can be unearthed in the details of election surveys: How are social groups aligned? Where do the votes come from, that is, which major social groups supported which parties or candidates? How do differences in turnout and/or the changing size of important voting blocs influence outcomes and impact the possibilities for the future? Understanding the social profiles of political parties – and how they change over time – is important because once in power, parties and political leaders enact policies that will tend to reward their supporters. The study of these 'social' bases of elections has thus been one important part of the tradition of voting studies, and the one to which political sociologists have traditionally devoted the bulk of their attention.

The range of questions that political sociologists typically ask about elections are broad in scope. Three issues are of central concern. First, there are important questions about voters, both individual voters and members of key electoral groups (in particular, classes, genders, religious traditions, and a wide range of other social

groups over whom parties compete for votes). Second, political sociologists have been interested in questions about the consequence of elections: how much and to what extent do elections, as opposed to other political factors, influence policy and political outcomes? Finally, the institutional context in which elections are contested varies. For example, legislatures can be elected through proportion representation, single-member districts or 'mixed' systems. Electoral systems vary in terms of their party systems, both in terms of how many parties seriously contest for votes and seats.

In this essay, I discuss some of the most important of each of these questions, in order to provide an introduction to the study of elections from a political sociological perspective. To keep the discussion manageable, my focus is on research and findings for the established 'rich' democracies of Western Europe and North America, although many of the same points could be made about some of the newer democracies in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a brief discussion of why elections matter. I do this because much of the scholarly foci of political sociologists in recent years has largely centred on other topics; far fewer sociologists systematically study elections than a scholarly generation ago. That said, the field has been revived in recent years by the introduction of new methods, theories and insights, and the remainder of the essay provides a discussion of several of the most significant of these directions. In part two, I review what we have learned about the changing social bases of contemporary political life as read through democratic elections. Significant developments in the party systems of rich democratic countries have appeared. Among the most notable have been declining electoral support for socialist and traditional 'left' political alignments, the rise of what are sometimes called 'neoliberal' political formations, and changing issue contexts in which elections have been fought. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of some of the questions at the cutting edge of contemporary research, and how political sociologists are pursuing them.

Why Elections?

Elections are of interest to political sociologists for three main reasons: first, because it is clear after a generation of research on policy outcomes that who wins elections does in fact deeply influence policy outcomes; second, because political sociology's focus on the causal importance of political institutions finds important expression in the electoral context; and third, because election results provide one of the clearest (and well-measured) sets of signals about how important social groups are parented to political life.

Elections influence policy outcomes

Let's start with why elections matter for policy outcomes. The answer would seem, on the surface, to be fairly obvious: elections matter because they determine who governs. If the ultimate purpose of having democratic elections in the first place is to allow ordinary citizens a say in the policies made by their government, then there should be

some clear connection between election outcomes and policy. But the straightforward impact of elections has not always been so clear. Across the world, the election of either conservative or social democratic governments often disappoints their followers. Even dramatic changes in partisan control of government, such as the election of free-market conservative Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom or socialist François Mitterrand in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s respectively, may not produce nearly as much shift in policy as one might guess (see Pierson 1994).

But a generation of scholarship has explored the impact of partisan control over government, and the fruit of this work suggests quite clearly that it does (e.g., Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001). Perhaps the best overall indicator of the impact of election outcomes can be seen in the case of the welfare state. Where social democratic parties have long governed, welfare state benefits tend to be more universal, more generous and less subject to means-testing, and tend to be more egalitarian in their treatment of men and women (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990). In polities where religious parties, such as Christian democratic parties, have been dominant but in close competition with left parties, social spending has been relatively generous but historically skewed towards re-enforcing traditional family forms. By contrast, in countries with weaker social democratic traditions, mostly notably in countries like the United States, Japan, Canada and Australia, social spending is lower, more subject to means-testing and less likely to produce egalitarian outcomes.

Perhaps the critical test of the hypothesis that elections matter arises in the United States. There, a two-party system in which both parties compete closely in efforts to attract centrist voters would seem to provide the least room for election outcomes to matter. The old joke about the American two-party system is that it consists of 'Tweedledum' and 'Tweedledee', that is, that the parties are largely indistinguishable from one another. Yet even in the American context, research strongly suggests that it makes a substantial difference whether Democrats or Republicans govern. One line of recent work has examined the impact of partisan differences in control over government in an era of rising inequality. Income inequality has grown rapidly since the early 1970s, but that rising inequality has occurred primarily during periods in which a Republican president was in office (Bartels 2008; Kelly 2009). This is particularly the case with respect to tax policy, where key changes under Republican leadership led to rising inequality. On other important issues, such as incarceration rates (and drug policy in general), anti-discrimination law and enforcement, business regulation and some social issues (notably abortion policy at the state level), evidence has now accumulated suggesting that partisan control matters as well (see, e.g., Jacobs and Helms 1996; Brooks 2006; Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Research on the connection between elections and policy outcomes is now moving into a second generation of scholarship, where more fine-grained hypotheses are being proposed and tested. In particular, analysts are reconceptualizing the complex interplay between institutional and political factors (Kelly 2009), as well as re-thinking key outcomes such as how we think about welfare state outputs (Garfinkel, Rainwater and Smeeding 2010), the complexity of labour market policies (Rueda 2008), the role of 'corporatist' political arrangements (Kenworthy 2004), and paying more attention to how public opinion and elections are related to one another and ultimately policy outcomes (cf. Erikson, MacKeun and Stimson 2002; Brooks and Manza 2007).

Electoral institutions matter

If election *outcomes* seem to matter for important kinds of public policies, it is natural to ask, *how* do they matter? One answer concerns the institutions of democracy, or more specifically, how election results translate into the creation of a new government. There are several ways in which democratic elections can be formally contested (Powell 2000), and then there is also a variety of underlying informal and cultural contexts in which elections are typically held (Tilly 2007). These institutional factors shape the party systems (for example, by creating high or low barriers to entry) as well as the impact of elections on policy.

How did these different institutions arise? The spread of democracy, conventionally measured by the existence of regular and honest elections with turnover of parties in office, universal suffrage, the right of anyone to run or form a party and a free press to cover it, has been uneven over the course of the past 150 years (Markoff 1996; Dahl 1998). The institutions of democracy were robustly established at the turn of the twentieth century in more or less the form they are found today, in only a small handful of countries. Even in these countries, most of which were in the Anglo-American world, the franchise had not been fully extended nor had some of the most important institutions of contemporary elections (such as the mass media) developed in their modern form. In the 1930s, a wave of authoritarian reversals dramatically reduced the number of democratic countries in the world, and much of the period after the Second World War was marked by democratic stability in Western Europe and North America and authoritarian governments elsewhere. But the recent period beginning in the 1980s, and especially since 1989, represents a clear high-water mark of democratic governance. The vast majority of countries around the world are now plausibly able to make at least some claim to being 'democratic'.

Beyond the question of whether democratic elections are held at all is the critical institutional context within which members of national legislatures are chosen. The institutions of democracy were robustly established at the turn of the last century in some countries, but not all. As electoral systems were debated, a key question was whether the elections would take place in single-member districts (most common in the Anglo-American world) or through systems of proportional representation (where the percentage of votes won by each party would determine the number of seats it would win). Eventually, a variety of systems mixing features of majoritarian and proportional representation emerged as well, although some type of proportional representation remains the dominant system throughout the world.

The research literature in comparative political economy strongly suggests that proportional representation (PR) systems are more likely to produce strong welfare states and public policies encouraging more egalitarian income distributions than are majoritarian systems (Swank 2002; Perrson and Tabolini 2004). PR systems seem to promote universalism in part because legislators do not represent individual districts. They also typically ensure a broader presence of parties across the ideological spectrum (Lipjhart 1999). One estimate holds that the strict majoritarian institutions employed in American elections may account for as much as half of the differences in welfare spending in the United States versus Western Europe (Alesina and Glaeser 2004: ch. 4). To be sure, this conclusion has to be qualified in a couple of ways: in particular, the choice of electoral system is itself subject to other political factors (and

occasional revision). Still, the conclusion that electoral institutions matter is now clear, and that PR systems foster more egalitarian policy outcomes (cf. Norris 2004 for some thoughtful qualifications).

Another, less often studied (at least in relation to stable democracies) but clearly important question is whether democratic institutions are ‘clean’ or contain significant forms of ‘patronage’, subtle exclusions of some groups of citizens, or otherwise fail to foster trust and cooperation among citizens (cf. Amenta 1998; Tilly 2007). Patronage-based electoral systems – where rewards in the form of jobs or benefits are exchanged for votes through one mechanism or another – are common around the world. Whether because of patronage or other forms of corruption, electoral institutions that do not foster trust have proven inherently unstable, and encourage political actors to mobilize other ways to bring about social change. By contrast, social revolutions, or even significant revolutionary movements committed to the violent overthrow of the government, have not been found in any fully democratized country since the Second World War (Goodwin 2001).

Elections as indicators of group-based political trends

The final reason elections are important to political sociology is that election outcomes – or more specifically, election surveys – provide important clues about the political alignments and beliefs of key social groups (for recent assessments of the literature, see Evans 2010; Franklin 2010). Political divisions along class, religious, racial and ethnic, linguistic, national or gender lines have often led to enduring voting patterns. Elections are one place where such social divisions can be peacefully deployed, as well as measured and studied over time. The classical theory of group alignments held that once a group became embedded in the party system, it tended to endure and reproduce itself in the absence of some source of political change. The logic was that party leaders and candidates make similar group-based appeals and policy commitments at each election that are sufficient to ‘remind’ voters of their usual preferences, and a pattern set in that seemed to hold alignments in place pretty robustly in most democratic countries for several decades in the middle part of the twentieth century. Evidence of changing group alignments in many countries over the past three decades provides strong evidence that the historical patterns are indeed changing in response to broader social and political shifts. I explore some of those changes in the next section.

Social Forces and Elections

Are workers significantly more likely to support left parties, and affluent people to support conservative parties? Do highly religious voters align with conservative or religious parties, or do their ‘class’ interests trump their religious beliefs? What other types of group-based divisions are significant sources of political alignment? The most important of such group-based divisions came to be known as ‘social cleavages’, enduring forms of group differences in electoral preference grounded in a society’s social structure (Lipset 1981 [1960]). Any enduring and significant social cleavage, whether based on class, race/ethnicity, linguistic preference, region, gender or religion, will exhibit varying degrees of expression in political conflicts at four distinct levels:

(1) social structure; (2) group identity; (3) political organizations and party systems; and (4) public policy outcomes (cf. Bartolini and Mair 1990; Manza and Brooks 1999: ch. 2). Social structural divisions give rise to groups of people with shared interests or statuses. Societies – even those as similar as the rich democratic countries of Western Europe and North America – will vary in the types of divisions embedded in social structure. While class and gender may be universal, there is considerable variation in other social structural divisions. For example, in the case of religion in some countries a single denomination (the Catholic Church in Italy, Ireland or Belgium, the Anglican Church in Britain, the Lutheran Church in Sweden) has the allegiance of most citizens who claim a religious identity, while in others a competitive religious marketplace can be said to exist where two or more religious blocs compete for members (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands or the United States).

Although the primary focus of most research has been on how members of significant groups vote, the impact of social cleavages on elections broadens quite considerably when we think about how *likely* members of a particular group are to actually vote, as well as how large the group is. A good way to think about how social forces matter for elections is to think about them dynamically, and ask two questions: where do the votes come from, and how has that changed over time? (see Manza and Brooks 1999: ch. 7 for fuller elaboration). This can be broken down into three smaller questions: (1) Who votes? (2) How are important social groups aligned with parties? (3) How has the size of key groups (and their change over time) impacted parties and elections?

Who votes

In some rich democracies, turnout in national elections is very high (80 percent or more). When turnout is at those levels, turnout rates among groups tend not to vary much. But it has long been understood that in elections where turnout is far from universal (either in countries with low turnout for national elections, or in local or other low-stakes elections in high-turnout countries), resource-rich groups vote at higher rates than more disadvantaged groups. For example, in the United States, a country with low rates of voting (adjusted turnout rates in presidential elections have been between 55 and 60 percent in recent elections), there is typically a large turnout gap (25 percent or more) between the highest turnout group within a cleavage category (such as professionals versus unskilled workers in the case of the class cleavage, or Jews versus those with no religion in the case of the religion cleavage). In all of these cases, group differences in educational attainment are especially important, and mediate but do not explain all of the differences between the groups.

One of the most striking trends in recent years has been evidence of declining turnout in many of the established democracies (Franklin 2004). Although the source of this decline is debated, the fact that it is as widespread as it appears to be suggests that downward pressures on participation are both general and substantial. Analysts have focused on a number of different issues in accounting for turnout decline (cf. Lijphardt 1997). Turnout is highest in countries with mandatory turnout, although most have abolished those rules (most recently, in Italy and the Netherlands). Turnout is lower when national elections are held on a working day (as in the United States) versus on either a weekend or national holiday (Freeman 2004). One compelling thesis

that has been advanced more recently is the role of declining 'social capital' among groups, specifically those related to social networks that promote political participation, such as in close-knit neighbourhoods or communities (see, e.g., Abrams 2010). The decline of organized labour has also been an important factor in almost all countries (Western 1997); unions are especially effective in organizing their members to vote, even when representing workers with lower education levels that might otherwise reduce their participation. The upshot is that to the extent that turnout decline in the rich democracies continues, patterns of unequal turnout (as in the United States) are likely to grow.

Voting behaviour

The second leg of the triad concerns the actual voting behaviour of key social groups, historically the heart of the political sociology of elections. Three issues are important: (1) How and when do key social groups become politically aligned? (2) How large are these differences? (3) How have they changed over time?

It is somewhat difficult to provide a comprehensive summary of the origins of enduring social cleavages in electoral contexts, as there is considerable cross-national variation. What is clear is that the timing and sequencing of the development of political parties are a key part of the explanation for how and why electoral cleavages take the form that they do. When the right to vote and a multi-party system arose together, early socialist and labour parties were considerably strengthened by the struggle to extend the franchise to the working class, advantages that they would preserve for many decades and which would drive high levels of class-based voting cleavages (Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992). In other countries, national or religious cleavages were as strong or even stronger, leading to a different pattern of cleavage politics (cf. Lipjhart 1979; Nieuwbeerta, Brooks and Manza 2006).

The general question of the size of cleavage impacts is also difficult to generalize across the democratic world. It would hardly be surprising to note that cleavages are larger in places where they are embedded most successfully in the party system, and/or when they continue to be 'activated' in particular electoral campaigns. The class cleavage tends to remain strongest, for example, in countries where unions are strong and party systems are organized along class lines. These organizational features – rather than the level of inequality per se – have been consistently strong predictors of the level of class voting (e.g., Evans 1999). In fact, one of the great paradoxes of class voting is that it is often highest in countries with the lowest levels of inequality, such as in Northern Europe!

Finally, turning to the question of change over time in group alignments, a wide range of scholars have argued that traditional group-based political alignments have begun eroding in recent decades. Some have argued that in recent decades a kind of 'new politics' has emerged, one rooted in conflicts over lifestyles, identities, symbolic conflicts and national identity rather than traditional social identities and social structural factors (Inglehart 1997). The rise of green parties and the increased attention paid by the major parties to new political concerns provides one expression of its potency (Dalton 1996). Another would be the resurgence of right-wing parties in many countries, who may draw support across the spectrum, including among working-class voters for anti-immigrant appeals (Bornschieer 2010).

The empirical evidence in support of the theory that traditional voting blocs are dealigning is somewhat mixed. But as we approach the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is now clear that important changes have occurred. The most careful research finds some evidence of declining levels of class voting, although not in all countries and not to the same extent (Evans 1999; Houtman, Achterberg and Derks 2008). Social democratic parties across Europe and elsewhere must win votes from middle-class voters to stay competitive. Conversely, conservative parties are winning more votes from non-traditional sources such as working-class voters, sometimes in response to nationalist or anti-immigrant appeals, but also by building a more diverse base for anti-tax, anti-government policy ideas.

The lively and ongoing debate concerning the fate of the class cleavage in British politics provides a good example of the increasingly complex overall picture. The historic pattern of strong working-class support for the Labour Party and equally strong middle-class support for the Conservatives long appeared among the most robust in the democratic world. The influential and innovative research of Anthony Heath and his colleagues presented persuasive evidence that while there had been fluctuation in the degree of class voting, no overall net decline could be discerned, for the period from the early 1960s onwards through the early 1990s (e.g., Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1991). The most recent assessments of Heath and colleagues, however, extending their analysis through the elections of Tony Blair and New Labour, find greater evidence of the erosion of the overall level of class voting (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 2001). A number of other studies employing slightly different models or assumptions, including our own research as well as those studies including even more recent elections, have also found even more evidence of decline in class-based voting in Britain (Nieuwbeerta, Brooks and Manza 2006; Evans and Tilly 2011).

While it would be wise not to overstate the inevitability of these trends, it is nonetheless worth exploring some of the dynamics of declining class voting. Some theories point to changes in the social structure of the rich democracies. For example, rising levels of citizen affluence and increasingly upward inter-generational social mobility appear to be pushing the children of working-class families into more conservative political alignments. The break-up of stable working-class communities, rising economic instability and the decline of unions has surely contributed to changing working-class alignments (and pushed at least some working-class voters into supporting right-wing parties). Increasing average levels of education are thought to provide voters with the ability to reason about political decisions above and beyond simple class-based heuristics. And many middle-class voters have shifted their support to centre-left parties at least in part out of concern for non-materialist 'social' issue positions (the rise of the so-called 'second left'). While no one of these factors by itself is decisive, in varying combinations they have worked to reduce traditional class politics (for a recent review, see Houtman *et al.* 2008: ch. 1).

Parallel research and arguments about the religious cleavage have also been advanced. Virtually every country in Western Europe has a significant religious party, or parties with significant religious roots (Britain is an exception). These parties are generally located on the centre-right of the political spectrum, and usually known as Christian Democratic parties. In terms of the overall impact of religious identities on voting behaviour, as with class so too with religion: there is evidence of declining religious voting, at least as measured at the denominational level (see Manza and

Wright 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2004). The magnitude of changes in the alignment of religious groups and parties has varied, depending on the structure of the religious field. For example, analysts generally find that Catholic countries, religiously divided countries or countries without a state church have higher levels of religious division in voting behaviour than countries with a state-sanctioned church that claims the allegiance of most citizens. Declining church attendance and rising rates of secularism have reduced the impact of religion on voting behaviour, although this also opens up the possibility of new political divisions between those who are churched (in whatever denomination) versus those who are not.

Perhaps the most wide-ranging debates about religion and voting have taken place in the United States. Here, the rise of a 'new Christian Right' (NCR) has been widely publicized, and viewed by many analysts as exerting a significant force on the party system (particularly inside the Republican Party). However, some of this impact has been exaggerated. Religious party activists associated with NCR groups have become more prominent over the past 30 years, and some have exerted enough influence in local or state Republican Party organizations to pull the party to the right on social issues like abortion. But their impact on voting behaviour has not been huge. Many evangelical Christians support Democratic candidates, and much of the apparent shift of Southern evangelicals towards the Republican Party has been part of a larger *regional* realignment of American politics that proceeded independent of increased religious political activism (cf. Hout and Greeley 2006).

The most striking change in the social foundations of voting behaviour in recent years has involved the rise of a new gender cleavage. During the 1950s, prevailing wisdom held that women supported centre-right parties *slightly* more than men, and data in many countries seemed to bear this out. However, this 'traditional' gender gap has been called into question by empirical evidence of a leftward shift in women's voting patterns across advanced industrial nations, starting in the 1980s. Comparative researchers have now converged on a near consensus that there has in fact been a rise in the so-called 'modern' gender gap, in which women have grown more left-leaning than men in their attitudes and their vote choices (see Inglehart and Norris 2003).

A broad array of factors may have contributed to this significant shift in women's voting behaviour (see Manza and Brooks 1999: ch. 5; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Many analysts have looked to the transformation of women's roles in both family and society – including women's lower socio-economic status, rising rates of divorce and non-marriage and rising rates of labour-force participation by women – which have worked in combination to push women towards greater support (relative to men) for left-of-centre parties. Although most agree that the structural factors outlined above are significant, still other researchers ask *how* these changes in women's life situations are translated into new forms of political behaviour. Some studies have credited the women's movement with raising the feminist consciousness of women by making the structural changes in their lives more salient and by infusing these changes with an explicit political relevance. Still others have examined the development of feminist consciousness itself as the source of the modern gender gap, although studies have produced mixed findings. Finally, a number of recent studies have found evidence of a distinct *generational* gender gap, in which younger cohorts of women in particular are significantly more left-leaning than men.

Group size and 'total' cleavage impact

The final source of change in the social profile of party support arises from changes in the demography of electorates. Many of these changes are well known. Probably the most critical have been changes in the class structures of the rich democratic countries across the past hundred years. The share of the population employed in agriculture has plummeted, and parties drawing significant vote shares from farmers have suffered. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rapid rise in the proportion of manufacturing workers fuelled the growth of the social democratic electorate. Today, we see the declining share of unionized blue-collar workers in the electorates of the rich democracies and the rising share of secular voters across Europe (and to a lesser, but still significant, extent in the United States).

Looking at the big picture, it is clear that however we think about it, social divisions in the electorate remain important sources of voting behaviour and electoral change, even as the specific patterning of groups and votes have changed in significant ways since the 1970s. Some of the changes we are observing in the social bases of voting are linked; it is almost certain, for example, that the increase in the gender gap is associated with the decline of class voting; as economies shift the mix of jobs towards a higher proportion of service-sector jobs and labour-force participation of women increases, one 'traditional' pattern declines but a new one opens up. This does not necessarily mean that there will be a definitive swing towards the left or the right; the vote shares of centre-right and centre-left parties have fluctuated over the past three decades without showing marked change. But the changing composition of the parties – where the votes come from – is likely related to changes in party platforms and campaign strategies. It is hard to imagine, for example, the shift of social democratic parties towards the political centre without understanding the steady change in the underlying foundation of their electorates. The only thing we can be certain about is that these changes will continue for the foreseeable future, and are well worth paying attention to alongside our usual interest in who wins the election.

The Future of Election Studies in Political Sociology: The Return of Contextual Analysis

In this concluding section, I want to turn briefly to some comments about the place of political sociology, and sociological ideas, in the study of elections as a whole. While the classical political sociological traditions and questions outlined in this chapter continue to be vital topics of investigation, the most influential work in the field of election studies long ago migrated from political sociology to political science. Indeed, one highly stylized view of the history of the field of voting studies holds that while the paths charted by the early political sociology of voting behaviour – with their characteristic focus on social groups and networks – dominated the agenda, these approaches already began to give way in the late 1950s to purely individual-level approaches to understanding political behaviour. In particular, the appearance of Anthony Downs' *An Economic Approach to Politics* (1957) and Angus Campbell and colleagues' *The American Voter* (1960) would sweep the field of voting studies. Campbell and his 'Michigan School' colleagues' social psychological framework

moved the social context of political behaviour to the ‘back-end’ of the ‘funnel of causality’, suggesting that group influence on elections manifests itself largely in individual identification with group categories (‘I am a worker’). By the late 1970s, rational choice theory largely inaugurated by Downs was increasingly displacing Michigan-style voting studies, sharpening the turn towards individual-level assumptions and moving even further away from the contexts of individual voting behaviour.

In spite of their many other differences, both the social psychological approach of the Michigan School and RCT share the view that it is the preferences and partisan histories of individuals – not the social groups they are embedded in – that provide the key to unlocking the mysteries underlying vote choice. The rapid move to intellectual dominance of the field of political behaviour first by the Michigan School and later RCT had a transformative effect. In the 40 years following the publication of the two landmark texts, virtually all of the major or influential works on voting built upon the foundations of one or the other. At the same time, political sociologists abandoned the field of voting studies altogether (see Manza, Brooks and Sauder 2004).

Yet over the past decade, a renewal of interest in how the *social* context of politics matters has begun to reappear. A couple of major motivations for its re-emergence can be identified. First, the insights of individual-level models long dominant in political science have not been able to satisfactorily answer some important empirical puzzles. For example, why is turnout higher in some countries or regions than others? Or why are the class cleavages in voting often higher in countries with less inequality than those with more inequality? Both of these puzzles have remained impervious to individual-level analysis and theory. For example, Americans do not vote at dramatically lower rates than Europeans because they are less well educated, less informed or less interested in politics. Controlling for these individual-level factors will simply not explain the enormous cross-national differences. At the same time, within-country analyses have cast doubt on whether institutional differences alone are sufficient: for example, while in many parts of the United States voter registration requirements may reduce turnout, a number of states have moved towards same-day registration that has had at best a mixed impact on turnout (see Freeman 2004 for a review). In the case of class voting, without an analysis of the context provided by strong or weak unions and social democratic parties it is impossible to understand – purely from the standpoint of individual voters – why class voting does not increase as inequality increases.

Given such shortcomings, renewed interest in how the *social contexts* of politics matters has begun to reappear. Recent scholarship is returning to examine the neglected role of social groups, social networks and organizational contexts in shaping the patterning of political participation and voting behaviour (e.g., Leighley 2001; Zuckerman 2006; Mutz 2006). In particular, evidence is beginning to mount suggesting that interpersonal discussion networks are important influences on political behaviour (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mutz 2006). Baldassari and her colleagues (Baldassari and Berman 2007; Baldassari and Gelman 2008) develop models of opinion polarization that arise out of network processes. Weeden and Grusky (2005) propose to move the analysis of class politics to the level of occupation, where individuals interact most closely with one another and are most likely to develop group consciousness.

While this work is still in its infancy, it suggests enough promise to lead us to suspect that a rethinking of the relationship between political sociology and the orthodoxies of

political science in the field of voting studies is in the offing. Combined with changes in party systems in many democratic countries, this suggests the possibility of fruitful new investigations. Given this, research on elections and the social bases of voting and political participation is likely to remain an important topic in the field of political sociology.

Further Reading

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