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The Changing Geography of Voting Conservative in Great Britain: is it all to do with Inequality?

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The Changing Geography of Voting Conservative in Great Britain: is it all to do with Inequality?

In a series of publications, Dorling has argued that there is a strong correlation between levels of inequality in Great Britain and the spatial concentration of Conservative party support at general elections. His interpretation of this relationship is questioned; the interpretation is inconsistent with the data and fails to take account of Britain's changing party system and electoral geography.

Keywords: inequality, Conservative voting, electoral geography

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In the second edition of his book *Injustice*, Danny Dorling (2015, 195) includes an updated version of a figure also included in the first edition (Dorling, 2010, 175) and in an earlier paper (Dorling, 2006). It shows variations in the unevenness of the distribution of Conservative votes across Great Britain's constituencies, and is replicated here – updated to include the 2015 general election – as Figure 1. (Henig and Dorling, 2015, also includes the updated graph.)

The statistic shown on the vertical axis of that graph is the index of dissimilarity, widely used in studies of ethnic residential segregation and comparable to the Gini coefficient of inequality. It varies from 0.0 to 100.0, and is a measure of the degree to which the variable of interest – in this case Conservative votes – would have to be redistributed across the constituencies in order to match another distribution – in this case an equal share of Conservative votes in every constituency. The larger the index, the more concentrated the geography of Conservative support. (In the 2006 paper, the figure is headed – 'How many Tories need to move to spread them evenly over Britain?'.)

The trend shown in Figure 1 is U-shaped: Conservative votes were spatially more concentrated at the beginning and end of the period since the First World War than in the central years. This U-shaped pattern is also shown in two of Dorling's other graphs – of health inequalities and the share of all income received by the 'richest 1%', and he (Dorling, 2015, 193) uses all three to illustrate 'the changing extent of the social divide', which is the basic argument throughout the book. Basically inequality was high in the UK before the 1940s; the 1940s-1970s were decades of relative equality (for reasons why see the excellent treatment in Atkinson, 2015); and since then inequalities have increased, returning to the levels last experienced at the end of the First World War. When inequalities of income and wealth are relatively high, the rich are spatially more segregated and – so the implicit argument runs – because the wealthy are most likely to vote Conservative, Conservative votes are spatially more segregated too. Thus '…by the early 1970s, it became clear that Conservative sympathies were about to begin to be newly created, increasingly concentrating spatially again, and growing in number' (Dorling, 2015, 197). More people were becoming rich, were clustered spatially around the ultra-rich, and the Conservative party benefited from their votes – whereas elsewhere (we assume) either those becoming relatively (if not absolutely) poorer were either not as equally attracted to switch their support to the Conservatives or, if they had previously done so, deserted them for other parties, thereby contributing to the greater spatial concentration of Conservative votes – which tripled between 1959 and 2015.

Dorling gives a fuller account of why he believed the three U-shaped diagrams are causally related, and not just examples of spurious correlations, in his 2006 paper. He rejects arguments – widely held among UK psephologists – that there has been what they term class dealignment since the 1970s,

because the relationship between class (usually represented by occupational status) and voting has weakened. Instead, he claims that (Dorling, 2006, 17):

> Who you are and what you have – class – matters more today than it did half a century ago in Britain. Voting … has aligned more strongly to class as class has become more important; but to see that you have first to recognise class and class interest for what it really is, and not through the titles and ranks given to people's jobs.

Class to him should be represented by income and wealth: as inequality has increased in recent decades, so the spatial inequalities in these have increased, hence the greater geographical concentration of Conservative votes. Thus the rich vote to sustain those spatial inequalities (Dorling, 2006, 18):

> Many a vote is cast to try to preserve their geographical advantage – against the poor, against the north, against immigration, against redistribution: looking after 'their' place, their interests, as a class.

This leads to the conclusion (Dorling, 2006, 19) that:

> Social-political classes in Britain by end 2005 aligned geographically, less and less by job title. Job title mattered most to those generations first establishing their wealth, first to own their home, first to go to university, first to drive a car. Those who did not come from such families … could have the opportunities that were more widely spread across past generations.

But they are now concentrated in particular parts of the country only, where Conservative voting predominates.

Indeed, given the increase in inequality between 2010 and 2015, Henig and Dorling (2015, 20) go further:

> People in most of the UK are now living parallel lives. Their chances of meeting others who vote or do not vote like them have never been lower. In one half of England a majority of the population vote Conservative. In the rest of the UK a wider variety of parties are more popular and there are fewer Conservative voters to be found there than ever before. The UK is not four nations but two: The 'might-haves' and the 'have-nots'; both governed – for now – by a very small group of 'haves'.

This statement is factually incorrect on two grounds:

- With greater spatial concentration, the chances of meeting somebody who votes like you should increase not decrease?! But in any case, to make that statement they should use the indices of isolation and exposure (Massey and Denton, 1988) not dissimilarity and segregation. The index of isolation – the probability that two electors selected at random both voted Conservative – was 0.43 in 2010 and 0.45 in 2015:[1] hardly a major change. In 1997 and 2001, when the Conservatives won 30.7 and then 31.7 per cent of the votes, it was 0.36 and 0.39 respectively, so the argument that the chances of Conservative voters 'meeting others who vote like them have never been lower' than in 2015 doesn't bear scrutiny; indeed the opposite is the case.
- Although the Conservatives won 50 per cent or more of the votes cast in 2015 in 175 of the UK's 650 constituencies, they won votes from 50 per cent of the registered electorate in exactly ***none*** of them. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that about 15 per cent of those eligible to vote are not registered, which would reduce that claimed percentage even further. In the 330 seats that they won in 2015 their vote total was 8.4million, just one-third of the total electorate there – hardly a majority of the population voting Conservative in one half of the country.

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But is Dorling reading too much into that correlation between the geography of Conservative voting and that of wealth inequalities (with the latter only inferred: the geographies of income and wealth are not displayed). Is there an alternative interpretation of Figure 1?

Figure 2 suggests one. It shows the relationship – across all general elections from 1945 on – between the Conservative share of the votes cast and the Index of Dissimilarity shown on Figure 1. The relationship is reasonably strong (an r^2 value of 0.52), and the relationship is both near-linear and negative ($y = 30.9 – 0.5x$): the Index of Dissimilarity falls by half-a-point for every one point increase in the Conservative vote share. The more votes that the Conservatives got, the more widely spread they were geographically – and they got most votes when inequalities were at their lowest post-1945.

Dorling recognises the reason for this relationship between vote share and spatial concentration, noting that 'Political parties do not want their support either to be too geographically concentrated or too spread out' (Dorling, 2015, 194). In the UK's plurality system if the former occurs they may win some seats well, but not enough to form a majority; if the latter is the case, they may come only second in many places, and again not win sufficient seats to form a majority. Geography matters very much in the translation of votes into seats (Johnston, Pattie, Dorling and Rossiter, 2001). Britain's Conservative party has its heartlands – in the towns and rural areas, and in the suburban sections of the cities and metropolitan areas – but winning there is insufficient to deliver a majority of seats in the House of Commons. That requires them to be successful in the more marginal seats outside the heartlands, where a successful appeal to the swing voters can deliver sufficient seats to form a majority. To win an election, the Conservatives have to get a substantial share of the votes (no election since 1945 has been won with less than 35 per cent of the votes cast) and have them spread wide enough that they win a majority of the seats.

But Dorling is wrong to say that 'In the 1960s, when the Conservatives were unpopular, their core vote was spread out', hence their defeats at the decade's two general elections. In 1964 and 1966, two elections lost to Labour, the Conservatives won 43.4 and 41.9 per cent of the votes respectively; subsequently, only in 1970 and 1979 did they exceed the former figure (46.4 and 43.9 per cent) and they haven't exceeded 38 per cent since 1992. But the Index of Dissimilarity was 6.51 in 1964 and 7.68 in 1966: at every election since it has been higher than the latter figure.

What Dorling omits to take into account is the changing, fragmenting, nature of the British party system over the decades when inequalities have been increasing. From 1945 until 1970 there was a two-party system in place; Labour and the Conservatives together won over 85 per cent of all of the votes cast, and 90 per cent of the seats.[2] From 1974 on, that hegemony was increasingly challenged – by the Liberal party, the SDP and their successors, by the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties and, then, most recently, by UKIP and the Greens. These parties won increasingly large shares of the votes cast but – because their vote geographies were not, in many cases, very efficiently distributed across the constituencies they contested (with the exception of Plaid Cymru in 2010 and the SNP in 2015) – they won relatively few seats. Thus from 1974 on the Conservatives with fewer votes than at most previous elections were still able to win a large share of the seats – including their 2015 majority. (Labour, of course, benefited from the same geographies when it was relatively strong: it gained substantial majorities in the House of Commons in 1997 and 2001 with vote shares – 43.2 and 40.7 per cent respectively – substantially smaller than the party's all-time high of 48.8 per cent in the 1951 general election, which it lost!)

That multi-party system which developed in Great Britain from 1974 on had its own geography. In England and most of Wales, for example, three parties – Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat – dominated from 1992 until 2010 inclusive, but that didn't mean that all three were strong

contestants in every constituency. Instead, the country was split into three segments, each with its own two-party system (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). In some, the Conservatives and Labour were the main contestants, with the Liberal Democrats in a poor third place: in others, mainly in southern England outside London, Labour came a poor third behind Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates; and in a smaller third group, mainly in northern cities, the Conservatives occupied the poor third places. For the Conservatives, and also Labour, there was a segment of the country where they posed no challenge, yet if they won sufficient seats in the other two they could get close to a majority of the seats. For the Conservatives, this situation was exaggerated by their rapid decline of support in Scotland (where they won no seats in 1997) and Wales (where they also won no seats in either 1997 or 2001) – a fate also suffered by Labour in Scotland and the Liberal Democrats in both countries in 2015.

Thus the two largest post-1945 Dissimilarity Indices for the Conservatives came in 2010 and 2015, at the first of which elections they were the largest party in the Commons and at the second they won a majority there. These were also the years when inequality – as represented by Dorling (2015, 213) and others by the percentage share of total taxable income received by the richest 1 per cent of the population – was at its post-1945 highest. But were the two related?

The Conservative post-1992 decline in many English cities – where the Liberal Democrats became Labour's only challenger, at local government as well as general elections – may be an indicator of the relative absence of wealthy people there; wealth was increasingly concentrated in the country's southeast, and the Conservative votes were concentrated there. But not everywhere: several constituencies in London's leafy, affluent, southwest suburbs regularly returned Liberal Democrat MPs across several general elections preceding their party's collapse in 2015.

The correlation that Dorling adduces – he doesn't measure it – between growing inequalities within Great Britain from the 1970s on and an increasing spatial concentration of Conservative voters may not be entirely spurious: the Conservative vote clearly declined in much of the urban north (including Scotland) during that period. But the geography of British elections is more nuanced than that simple equation – there is a small class (one per cent of the total) within the population who are becoming increasingly wealthy, and because of that those who support the political party for the wealthy (which has never had the support of less than 30 per cent of the British electorate) became increasingly spatially concentrated. More is needed than that to understand Britain's changing electoral geography.

Notes

[1] The formula for the index of isolation in this context is $[(x_i/\Sigma_i) * (x_i/\Sigma x)]$, where: x_i is the number of votes for party x in constituency i; Σ_i is the total number of votes cast in constituency i; and Σx is the total number of votes for party x across all constituencies. The index varies from 0.0 to 1.0; the larger its value the greater the probability that two individuals selected at random in a constituency voted for party x.

[2] Their lowest joint vote share during that period was 87.5 per cent in 1964 and their lowest share of the House of Commons seats was 94.7 per cent in 1945.

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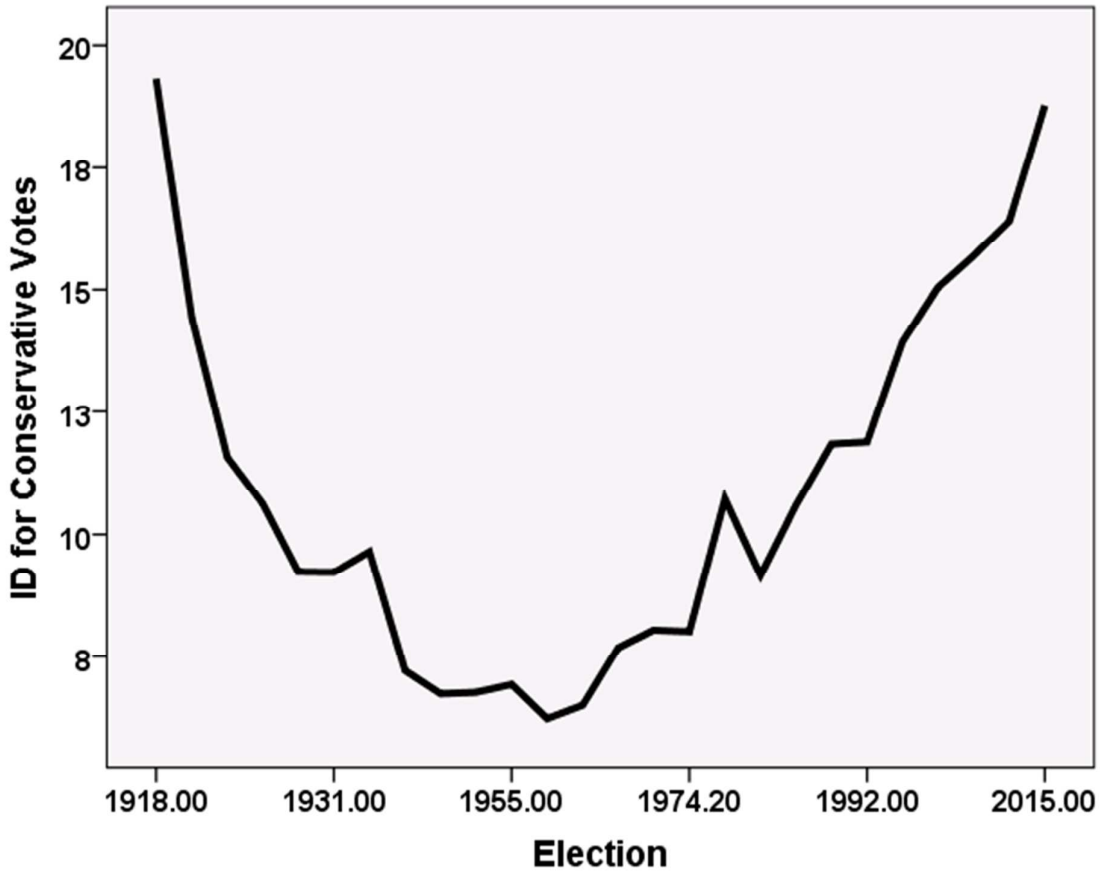

Figure 1. The index of dissimilarity for Conservative voting, 1918-2015.

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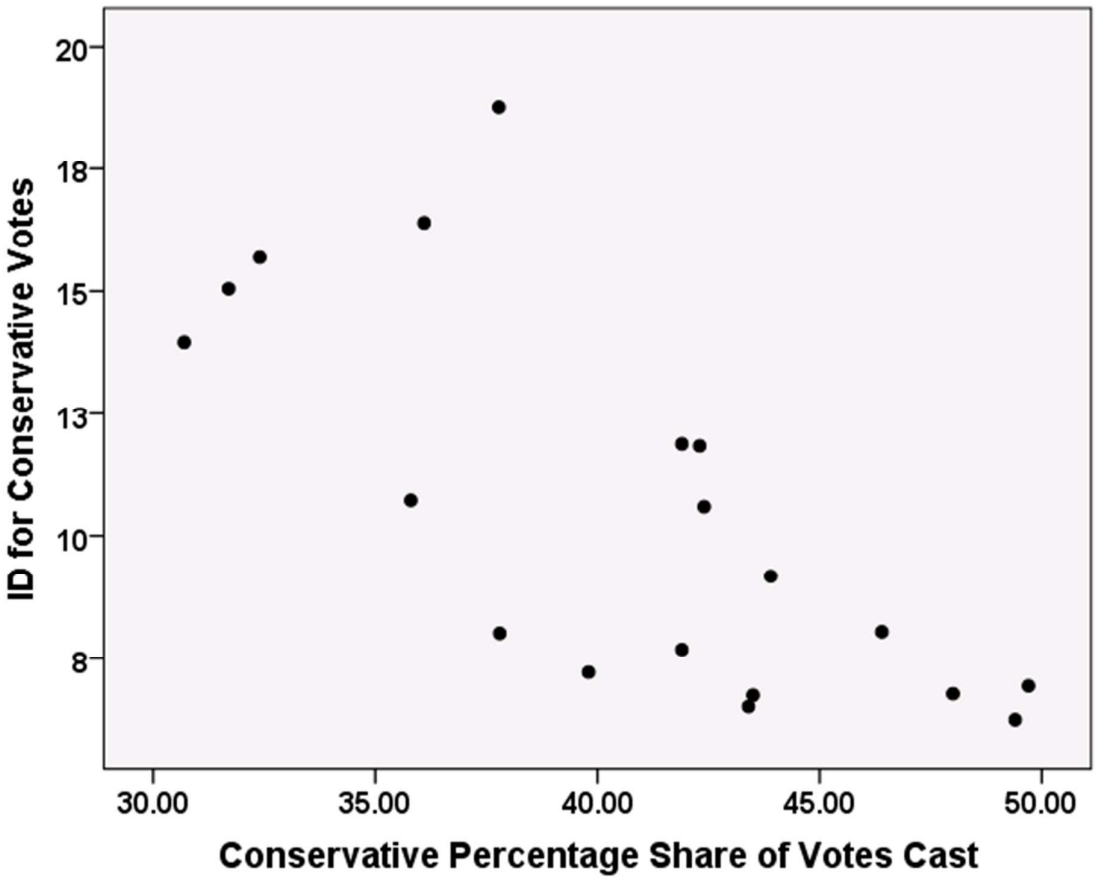

Figure 2. The relationship between Conservative vote share and the index of dissimilarity of Conservative voting at British general elections, 1945-2015.

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