

People have always voted not out of party loyalty but on the issues

Voting behaviour is the way in which people tend to vote. The people generally cast their vote based on different factors. They are influenced by their own social class, class leaders, area where they live, the local issues, their age and background, public opinion and media.

Voting analysis was started around 1945 and the initial results showed that their own social class was very important in deciding the candidate for which they voted.

People tended to vote according to their natural class in the sense that lower or labour class voted for Labour party while upper class showed preference for Conservatives. Though this is not a good classification but this explains the social class influences on voting behavior: upper class, middle class, upper working class, lower working class, temporarily or permanently unemployed

Right from the 40s to the 60s the majority of the people very strongly favoured one or other of the two main political parties i.e. – the Conservative party or the Labour Party. Although there are always exceptions, party loyalty was divided amongst social class with different classes showing preference for different parties. Working class voters were more inclined towards the Labour Party while the upper and middle class voters tended to vote for the Conservative Party.

But these clear divisions are on a downslide since then. A look at the table 1—data taken from British Election Survey -- shows that there has been a steady decline in percentage of strong conservative loyalists and strong labour loyalists. This phenomena of decline in the number of people voting according to their natural class was named as 'partisan de-alignment'. It is very clear now that people vote on issues and not based on their own class. (British Election Survey)

Table 1:

Very strong Conservative identifiers:

1964: 48%

1974: 32%

1983: 25%

1992: 21%

2001: 14%

Very strong Labour identifiers:

1964: 51%

1974: 41%

1983: 28%

1992: 24%

2001: 16%

Very strong Liberal identifiers:

1964: 32%

1974: 12%

1983: 21%

1992: 8%

2001: 7%

Source: British Election Survey

Partisan Dealignment – The term was coined to explain the fact that voters who were previously "strongly attached" to a political party were showing signs of voting based on issues. The loyalty between voter and his/her party is dipping implying that the electorate is becoming more volatile in its voting behavior and more likely to look at real issues and judge the contestants on merit before casting a vote. It also suggests that short-term political factors become more important in determining voting behavior. Events of public importance and government's handling of these events, government's policies all of these together plus the overall performance of the government and the Prime Minister are assuming increased importance in most models of voting behavior.

Class de-alignment or the partisan de-alignment are almost similar in terms of class loyalties getting weakened and people now ready to cross over to another party at election time depending on the issues which are closer to their welfare. As election expert David Sanders states "Electoral tribalism has declined and consumer voting has continued to grow" (Sanders, 1999)

Thanks to the media, which gave increasingly more information on politicians and parties, people had more access to information and this immensely helped in changing the public's voting habits. As per British election records Mor

e working class voters have voted for conservatives in the 80s and early 90s. In the 1987 General Election, it was seen that 42% of working class voters supported the Conservative Party while only 35% voted for Labour. This was an eye opener since such dealignment had never happened before and was totally opposite to the previous voting behaviour. This behaviour was attributed to the populist policies of then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Prime Minister Thatcher was one of the most popular leaders of Britain and she took many populist decisions which helped to increase her popularity amongst the working class voters. She introduced several proposals for educational reforms and adopted a comprehensive secondary education policy. Thatcher also saved the Open University from being abolished down. Thatcher in her role as Conservative spokesman on Housing and Land adopted the policy of allowing tenants to buy their council houses. This idea was first developed by her colleague James Allason and later taken up and provided shape by Thatcher. This policy proved immensely popular. (BBC News, 2001)

Thatcher's economic policies put great emphasis on free markets, and entrepreneurialism. Her government advocated privatization and tried to reduce government's intervention and allowed free market forces to come into play. In one of her first measures adopting privatization, she de-nationalised the National Freight Company and received positive response from its workers. This encouraged her to take more bolder steps in future. This also resulted in large number of traditional labour party voters voting for Thatcher as these policies helped them to raise their standard of living.

Another reason for the change in voter preferences could be the breakdown of traditional classes as the economy prospered during the economy boom and more and more people moved towards tertiary jobs from primary and secondary jobs. Due to these changed employment patterns, the number of manual workers also fell from nearly 50% of the population to 33%. Moreover the Feminist movement in 1960s saw the emergence of strong women who thought independently and had more say and were more empowered to make their own decisions.

In 1944, The Education Act changed the education system for secondary schools in England and Wales. This Act was named after the Conservative politician Rab Butler. According to this act, secondary education was made free for all pupils. This Act also helped in educating and mobilising women and the working class. It opened secondary school to girls and the working class. Thus more and more working class people and women were able to pursue higher education after secondary school. This newly educated working class showed awareness of their disadvantaged social position and worked hard to get rid of their harsh circumstances. This created a bitter class division between the working and middle class. (Dunford, 1990)

Thus we see that people in general have now started voting on issues rather than based purely on party loyalties. This transformation happened over the years and has been due to many factors such as The Butler Act (Education act of 1944), the feminist movement, Alignment and Dealignment of voters due to increased education levels, and increased media awareness.

References:

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