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Table ronde 2

"Comment concevoir et saisir les temporalités du vote ? Pour une approche longitudinale de la décision électorale"

Session 1

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A review of research findings from panel studies of British electoral behaviour

Work in progress: Comments welcome.

Introduction

This is a review of the use of panel studies (in which the same individuals are interviewed on more than one occasion) for research into electoral behaviour in Britain. The main aim is to consider what has been learnt from panel studies that could not have been gained from other kinds of survey design. Panel studies are not the preserve of British electoral research. Knight and Marsh (2002) described the pre-post panel as the 'preferred design' for election studies. Also inter-election panels have been major components of the US, British, Dutch and German series of election studies (Knight and Marsh, 2002). The focus on the British data helps to limit the scope of an otherwise enormous literature while still capturing the main developments in electoral research in established democracies that are due to panel data. Britain has examples of all the major panel study designs and many of the intellectual questions that have been addressed using panel studies in Britain mirror those that have been asked of politics in the US and elsewhere. There are also British specific political developments that British panel studies have helped us understand, and these are covered here.

The main aim of panel studies, in general, is to study change in attitudes and behaviour of individuals, something that isn't possible with a pair or even a series of cross-section surveys because they have separate individuals in each survey. Panels can be used to assess overall change over time if there is relatively little change in the population being studied, so that the effect of entry into and exit from the population between the two time points is negligible compared with the change in the group in the population at both time points. This scenario is especially likely to occur when the time between the two waves of a panel is relatively short, such as that for an election campaign, which in Britain is formally four weeks.

Electoral panel studies tend to be focused on understanding change in vote choice between elections, or change in vote intention over the course of an election campaign. They are also used to study change in social and political attitudes and behaviour related to elections. The defining requirement is that these attitudes and behaviour need to be measured on the same individual at different points of time.

Perhaps the main reasons for studying change at the individual level are to understand political developments, test theoretical ideas about the causal determinants of vote choice and to investigate the properties of survey-based measures of social attitudes. Although these aims are not entirely separate and distinct, I will discuss contributions to each of these aims in turn, after first outlining the nature of the panel studies for the study of electoral behaviour in Britain in the next section. The concluding discussion summarizes the key contributions but also mentions some of the main concerns with panel data.

What panel studies are there for studying electoral behaviour in Britain?

Table 1 summarizes the academic British panel studies that are relevant for electoral research. Political parties have commissioned private panel studies from time to time, but these are not listed. Internet and other polling companies, most notably YouGov, maintain a panel of respondents, but since the individual-level data are not in the public domain they are not listed.

Table 1 Panel surveys for electoral research in Britain

<i>Panel</i>	<i>Waves</i>	<i>Notes</i>
British Election Panel Study 1963-70	4 (63,64,66,70)	There were booster samples in 64 and 66.
British Election Panel Study 1969-1970	2	
British Election Panel Study 1970-Feb74	2	Initial sample included the 69-70 respondents
British Election Panel Study 1974-1979	3 (Feb74, Oct74, 79)	
British Election Panel Study 1983-1987	3 (83,86,87)	
British Election Panel Study 1987-1992	2	
British Election Panel Study 1992-1997	7 (92, 94, Spring 95, Autumn 95, Spring 96, Autumn 96, 97)	The between election waves were a mixture of telephone, postal and face-to-face interviews
British Election Study Campaign Panel 1997	4 (96, early April 97, late April, May 97)	Random sample on each day of the campaign

British Election Panel Study 1997-2001	8 (August 97, Sept-Nov 97, 98, 99, Summer 00, Autumn 00, May 01, post-election)	
Pre-Post panel for British Election Study 2001	2	Face-to-Face survey
Rolling cross-section campaign panel 2001	2	Telephone survey in both waves. Separate from the main BES. First wave interviews took place each day in the month before the election.
Pre-Post panel for British Election Study 2005	2	Face-to-Face survey
Rolling cross-section campaign panel 2005	2	Telephone survey in both waves. Separate from the main BES. First wave interviews took place each day in the month before the election.
British Household Panel Study	15 annually so far	http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/bhps/

Notes: Further details studies up to 1987 are in Appendix 1 of Heath et al (1989), further details of the 1979-1997 surveys are in Thomson (2001), the 2001 panels are described in Appendix A of Clarke et al (2004). Thomson et al (1999) provides details of the 1997 campaign study.

The British Household Panel Study (BHPS) is listed in Table 1 despite being a general social survey because it includes questions on voting behaviour and political values that mean that it has become useful to electoral researchers as discussed below, not least because of the large sample size and numerous annual waves. The Economic and Social Research Council have just recently commissioned a major new household panel study, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ukhls/>) to incorporate the BHPS. With a target sample size of 40,000 households and 100,000 individuals it will be the largest the largest study of its type in the world.

Apart from the BHPS, all the other panels listed in Table 1 are based on samples of individuals rather than households. Until 1997 the sampling frame was the electoral register, since then it has been the postcode address file, with individuals selected at random within randomly selected addresses. Each began with face-to-face interviewing, except the 2001 and 2005 campaign panels which used with telephone sampling and interviewing only.

The election study panels can be divided into four main types: inter-election panels with post-election interviews after each of two elections; inter-election panels with mid-term waves such as the 1992-7 and 1997-2001 BEPS; pre-post panels with an interview before the start of the election campaign and a post-election survey; and rolling cross-section campaign panels with daily random samples during the campaign and a post-election interview. There are some variations on this classification. For

instance, since there were two elections in 1974 the inter-election panel that continued to 1979 covers three elections, as does the 64-66-70 panel. Also, since non-respondents to waves in the middle of a multi-wave panel were revisited in later waves, it is possible to construct distinct panels with each pair of waves. While the 2001 and 2005 campaign panel studies were rolling cross-sections, with a fresh random sample of respondents interviewed by phone on each day of the month long election campaign, and then re-interviewed after the election, the 1997 campaign study was similar except that respondents for the telephone interviews in the campaign were drawn from the 1996 British Social Attitudes survey the year before the election, thus extending the panel to cover the so-called long campaign, and also interviewing respondents twice during the campaign increasing the number of waves to four. However, Johnston and Brady (2002) note concerns about conditioning with this design. Naturally the different designs are chosen for different purposes and the questionnaires are tailored accordingly. The campaign panels are for short-term change and to study campaign specific events, and the 1997 campaign panel was especially focused on change among users of different media.

What has been learnt from the British panel studies?

This section focuses on results from panel studies that rely on the panel nature of the study. Panels have been used to map change over time in ways that could equally, or better, be done by a series of cross-section surveys. The fact that panels, especially over the short-term, can give insight into change at the aggregate as well as the individual level is clearly an advantage over repeated cross-section surveys, but such usage does not illustrate their unique advantage.

Although waves of panel studies are not designed to be analysed as separate cross-section surveys, they sometimes include questions that lend themselves to cross-sectional analysis. For example, Gabel and Hix (2005) use just one wave of the BEPS 92-97 data because it had several questions on European integration together with other relevant variables of interest for modelling attitudes to Europe. While such usage is common and adds to the contribution made by election panel studies, since it does not exploit the panel element these kinds of study are not covered below.

Electoral panel studies can become useful for studying non-political phenomena, e.g. Tilley (2003) uses the BEPS (1987-1992) to model the role of family formation in the process of secularization in Britain. Again, without denying that such usage further indicates the value of the panel study data available, I have restricted this review to political phenomena. Conversely, although the British Household Panel Study is a general social survey and not primarily designed to study electoral change it has proved useful for studying political processes, and political research based on the BHPS is covered here.

Even within these parameters the review that follows is not exhaustive of the literature using panel data, but it is hopefully indicative. I hope to make future versions of this paper more comprehensive.

Panel data analyses of developments in British Politics

In their study of political change in the 1960s, Butler and Stokes (1974) emphasized the relative stability of party preference. Instead they show a substantial generational replacement effect moving average opinion in the electorate towards Labour between 1959 and 1970, but also note that this was offset by differential turnout and, to a lesser extent, by conversion in favour of the Conservatives. Among other things, Butler and Stokes (1974) used the panel data to show that changes in the party fortunes were linked to changes in the perceptions of their leaders.

Change in the party fortunes in the 1970s is studied in depth with frequent use of panel data by Sarlvik and Crewe (1983). One of the most important developments in that decade was the rise of the Conservative party under Margaret Thatcher, who became leader in 1975 and prime minister in 1979. As the Labour government became increasingly unpopular, Mrs Thatcher set out a distinctively more right-wing alternative approach to tackling the economic problems faced by the UK at the time. Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) used the 1974 to 1979 panel to show that those 1974 Labour voters who switched to the Conservatives in 1979 were, compared with those who stuck with Labour, more likely to be against nationalization and government and union agreements on salary inflation. Those who already differed from Labour on these issues but nonetheless voted for them in 1974 were particularly likely to desert, but there was a considerable number who changed their opinion on the issues in a more right-wing direction, and correspondingly developed a more favourable opinion of the Conservatives' competence on economic issues, and thus switched to vote Conservative.

While in government, Margaret Thatcher embarked on a substantial programme of privatisation of state-owned industries and sale of council houses. Part of the motivation for these policies was to change the structure of British society to become inherently Conservative through the expansion of share and home ownership. However, the 1983-87 panel suggests that Thatcher failed in this aim. The change in party support among those who bought their council house was little different to that for others, and the same is true for those that bought shares in privatized industries, whether becoming share owners for the first time or not (Heath and Garrett, 1991). Nor did new share owners or council house purchasers become more right wing in their political values. Instead they tended to have been already more right wing and sympathetic to the Conservative party than those who didn't buy shares or those local authority tenants who didn't purchase their council house.

The dramatic swing from the Conservatives to Labour between 1992 and 1997 was driven by two main political events, the currency crisis that accompanied the UK withdrawal from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in September 1992 and the modernization of the Labour party following Tony Blair's election to the leadership in 1994. While the damage to Conservative popularity from the ERM crisis is visible from regular opinion polls, Heath et al. (2001) were able to demonstrate with the panel data that by 1994, rather than becoming enamoured with the Labour party, those who voted Conservative in 1992 primarily became disillusioned. The BEPS data also show voters began to notice Labour's move to the right with the advent of New Labour after 1994, and that it was accompanied by Labour gains from the right of the ideological spectrum (Heath et al. 2001; pp.103 & 107-8). Moreover Johnston and Pattie (2006) use the panel data to show how voters increasingly saw little difference between Labour and the Conservatives and therefore

became less inclined to vote, and this is a major part of the explanation for the drop in turnout between the two elections.

In moving his party policy platform to the right, Tony Blair seems to have prompted Labour identifiers to change their values (Curtice and Fisher, 2003). This process of Labour supporters moving to the right is visible in both the 1992-97 BEPS and the 1997-2001 BEPS, while the British Social Attitudes series of annual surveys conducted since 1983 shows that the ideological conversion that seems to have been inspired by Blair is remarkable given that there was no such conversion under Thatcher.

Understanding and testing theories of electoral change

As well as helping us understand the significant developments in British politics and their implications for the fortunes of the parties in recent elections, British panel data has also been used to address some of the major debates in electoral behaviour that involve Britain as a particular example. These include topics such as volatility, second-order elections, election cycles, media effects, party campaigning, neighbourhood effects, issue voting and economic voting. This section will discuss each of these in turn.

Flow of the vote, volatility and fluidity

One of the implications of the partisan dealignment theory (Dalton, 1996) is that, as party attachments weaken and people increasingly decide how to vote on the basis of the issues of the day, there should have been increasing volatility voting choice. To measure volatility it is necessary to use panel data, since recall vote choice is unreliable. People tend to over report turning out to vote, forget having voted for the Liberals (as the third party of British politics), and they seem realign their previous vote with the current party preference (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983, Appendix A; Macdonald and Heath, 1997).

For the 1960s, Butler and Stokes (1974) pointed towards remarkably consistent inter-election volatility despite varying rates of much smaller net changes in party vote shares. Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) show that volatility in the 1970s was greater than that in the 1960s, but Heath et al. (1991) later argued that when the entire 1964-1987 period is taken into account there is little evidence for a systematic increase in volatility, even though it was clear that the proportion of people identifying with a political party had declined. Part of the reason for this is that measures that are supposed to be of stable party identification may in fact be partly measures of the strength of party preference as discussed below.

Regarding the structure of vote switching, making use of the multi-wave 1963-64-66-70 panel, Butler and Stokes (1974) argued that the pattern of change is inconsistent with the idea that the electorate is divided into floating voters and party stalwarts (or movers and stayers) since, while those who switched in one period were more likely than those who were consistent to switch in the next period, the difference was not substantial, and the probability of someone who was stable one period switching the next is not close to zero. They also noticed that there was relatively little direct switching between Labour and the Conservatives, but instead the Liberal party

seemed to serve as a ‘turn around station’ that voters would visit at a stage in a conversion from Labour to Conservative or in the other direction. Heath et al (1991) generalized this idea of differential rates of switching between different pairs of parties into that of fluidity between different voting options. They showed that fluidity is greatest between abstention and voting for any party, than between the Liberals/Alliance and either Conservative and Labour, and transition between the Conservatives and Labour is the least fluid. The regularity was so great that they found it ‘tempting to say that we have here a law of British electoral behaviour.’ While this pattern holds for the different social classes when considered separately, it is interesting to note that fluidity between Labour and the Conservatives was greater in the 1980s for the working class than the middle class. This supports the idea that the latter are more homogeneous than the former.

2nd order elections

In addition to the change between general elections, panel data with mid-term waves is useful for understanding how voting in European and local-elections relates to general elections. One argument is that voters still use these so-called second-order elections to voice their opinions about national politics (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), perhaps sending a signal to the parties (van der Eijk et al 1996). Using the 1992-97 panel, which included questions about the European and local elections in the 1994 wave, Heath et al (1999) show that there is some truth in the argument that voting in these elections reflected national concerns, but more so for European Parliament elections because they are regarded as less important than local elections.

Election cycles

Another topic that inter-election panels with mid-term waves have been useful for is the study of election cycles. Gelman and King (1993) develop an enlightened preferences theory that establishes an election cycle whereby voters become more focused on issues and more informed by general election campaigns. This idea has been tested using the 1992-1997 BEPS data by Andersen (2003) who shows that attitudes are more coherently structured around election time. Similarly, Andersen et al. (2005) use both the 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 BEPS to show that knowledge of party platforms is highest immediately following election campaigns and lower between elections. Similarly the explanatory power of ‘fundamental variables’ (i.e. socio-demographic and issue-related variables) as predictors of vote choice is greater around election time than in mid-cycle.

Media effects

One of the main reasons why political knowledge might improve during election campaigns is the greater media coverage of politics. However, Norris et al (1999 Chapter 7), using the 1997 British election study campaign panel, found that “patterns of media use and attention had little significant impact on changes in levels of political knowledge, efficacy and participation during the 1997 campaign.”

Newspapers in Britain, especially the strongly partisan tabloids, are often thought (not least by the political class) to have considerable influence on the fortunes of parties at elections. Most famously, *The Sun* newspaper ran a strongly pro-Conservative campaign and announced that it was the 'Sun wot won it' after the 1992 election. Curtice and Semetko (1994) used the 1987-1992 BEPS to look at the relationship between newspaper readership and change in party support. They found that those who consistently read a pro-Labour or pro-Conservative paper were more likely to be loyal to the party of their paper. These effects tended to cancel each other out with little net effect. Moreover there was little effect of newspaper readership on changes during the final four week campaign.

The Sun again claimed it won the election in 1997, but this time for Labour having switched allegiance. However, there was again little evidence for the paper's persuasive power since *The Sun* did not seem to convert its readers to the Labour cause (Norris et al. 1999, chapter 10). If the paper changed sides in order to stay in tune with public opinion and win more readers it also failed. The findings from both the BEPS 1992-1997 and the campaign panel reinforce those from the 1987-1992 BEPS that newspaper readership has a primarily reinforcing effect (Norris et al. 1999, chapter 10).

Party campaigning effects

Johnston and Pattie (2006) use both the 2001 and 2005 pre-post panels to study the effects of party mobilization effects during the course of the final four-week election campaign. Despite finding that people were slightly more likely to watch their own party's election broadcasts than others, there were, nonetheless, effects of having watched a party's election broadcast on vote choice, even after controlling for the strength of prior party support. Also, face-to-face and telephone canvassing and the amount parties spend in a constituency were all found to have had effects on change in party preference over the course of the campaign, reinforcing similar results in Clarke et al. (2004).

Neighbourhood effects

While it has been clear for sometime that similar kinds of people vote differently according to the kind of area they live in, it has typically been difficult to establish the micro-mechanism and to prove both that this is not simply a selection effect whereby people are more likely to move to areas where there are others that share their political values. However, using the 1992-97 BEPS, Johnston and Pattie (2006) show that discussing politics with more people lead to increasing tolerance over time. Similarly, the number and partisanship of discussants affects ideology on both the socialist-laisser-faire and libertarian-authoritarian dimensions. By showing that political discussion can produce a change over time in political attitudes, the panel data has helped avoid the selection bias problem and establish a causal connection.

Issue voting

There have been various studies of issue voting making use of panel data, some of which have already been mentioned in the section on political developments above. One particularly interesting contribution that has theoretical implications is Evans'

(1998) analysis of the role of European integration as an issue in the 1997 election. Over the 1992 to 1997 period the British electorate became increasingly Eurosceptic and this should have benefited the Conservatives, since they were the most anti-European integration party. Moreover, on average the Tories became closer to the average voter while other parties became more distant. However, Evans (1998) uses the 1992-97 BEPS to show that voters became sensitive to the divisions within the Conservative party on European integration that emerged. While pro-Europeans were anxious about the anti-Europeans in the Conservative party, so for their part were Eurosceptics nervous of Europhile wing of the Tory party. Thus the differences within the Conservative party undermined the advantage that should have been gained from their average position.

Economic voting

There is a popular conception that governments receive more support when the economy does well, and there is a substantial literature on economic voting in Britain which seems to show such effects using aggregate polling data over time. There is also some evidence from panel data, perhaps starting with Butler and Stokes (1974) observation that the decline in the Conservative vote from 1959-64 was linked to perceptions of the respondent's own and national economic circumstances in 1963. Overall, however, studies of economic voting using panel data have tended to show weaker effects, compared with that from time-series analysis. For example, Sanders and Brynin (1999) use BHPS data from 1991 to 1996 to model party support in a dynamic fashion, with party support in any given year being, among other things, a function of party support in the previous year, ideology in the previous year and change in ideological position over the past year. They argue that change in ideology is a much more important predictor of change in party support than economic evaluations, but that ideology itself changes as a function of changing economic experience. Evans (1999) using the BEPS 1992-97 shows that there is little or no evidence that economic perceptions, however measured, played a role in explaining the changes in party support between 1992 and 1997. Instead, political factors, such as competence and capacity for strong government, are more relevant. However, probably the most important development in the economic voting literature is the Evans and Andersen (2006) argument that economic evaluations are endogenous to party preference that is discussed in the following section.

Methodological lessons from panel data

Panel data has been particularly helpful in understanding the nature of survey measurement and its implications for the study of electoral behaviour. I discuss three main areas below, the measurement of party identification, stability of values, and endogeneity. To some extent there are both substantive and methodological lessons here, but the methodological aspects of the debates are perhaps more striking.

Measurement of party identification

The study of electoral behaviour has been strongly influenced by the Campbell et al. (1960) idea that voters form long-term stable party identification starting with a process of childhood socialization and strengthening over the life-course. Butler and Stokes (1974) argued that the theory was relevant for Britain since party identification

was unstable for only 17% of respondents to the 1963-64-66 panel. They further discussed how party identification strengthened and vote choice became more stable over the life-course, by demonstrating greater stability among older cohorts. In their book *Decade of Dealignment*, Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) show a weakening of partisan attachments in the 1970s, which Crewe and Thomson (1999) show continuing to 1997.

Even though levels of party identification may have declined, those with a party identification are supposed, if the socialization theory is correct, to be stable in that identification, but Johnston and Pattie (1997) show that responses to the survey question used to illicit party identity in the BHPS between 1991 and 1994 are remarkably volatile over time, calling into question either the theory of party identification, the measurement, or both. However, it could also be that the theory and the measurement of party identification both worked fine in the 1960s, but not in the 1990s.

To address this issue, Clarke et al (2004) apply mixed Markov latent class models, which account for measurement error, to various different panels and find that just over 30% of respondents in any of the panels, including that for the 1960s, could be considered party identification ‘movers’. They go on to model the change in party identification over time, and find that it is an accumulation of party and leader evaluations, i.e. dominated by valence issues. However, the fact that they get similar results using questions eliciting party support does call into question the extent to which we can measure party identification separately from party support.

The stability of values and attitudes

One of the major debates in the study of social attitudes is the extent to which voters have informed and stable values, attitudes or policy preferences. If opinions on a particular issue are unstable, then people could be said to have a ‘non-attitude’ even if they did respond to the question. For example, Butler and Stokes (1969) consider the case of attitudes towards nationalization of industries, and argue that the volatility is due to uncertainty on behalf of respondents, rather than a genuine change of heart. The relative instability of attitudes towards nationalization, compared with vote choice or party identification, is something that Heath and McDonald (1988) also find for the 1983-6-7 panel. By comparing the stability of different measures, panel data can be used to assess the degree to which there are ‘non-attitudes’ as opposed to simply measurement error.

Johnston and Pattie (2000) use BHPS data to show that individuals are quite volatile over time in their responses to the items in the Heath et al. (1993) socialist-laissez faire (or economic left-right) scale, concluding that either the items are inappropriate measures or that people do not have stable attitudes. However, using the same data, Sturgis (2002) argues that the instability over time that Johnston and Pattie (2000) identify in each item taken separately is effectively random measurement error. The purpose of producing a composite scale is to produce a more reliable measure, and Sturgis demonstrates the stability of the composite left-right scale is both reliable and relatively stable for individuals over time in a way that could not be done without panel data.

Endogeneity

When testing a causal hypothesis researchers must assume that the explanatory or independent variable is exogenous, in the sense that it does not itself depend on the outcome variable that the regression seeks to explain. If this condition does not hold, there is an endogeneity bias. Cees van der Eijk (2002) explains how the problem of endogeneity in survey research can arise for two very separate reasons. The first occurs when the hypothesized singular direction of a casual relationship is in reality mistaken, either because the direction of causation is the other way round or because there is a reciprocal causal connection. The second is a measurement problem, in which the survey measure of the supposedly independent variable in an analysis is contaminated by the true values of the dependent variable.

As already discussed above, responses to questions asking people to recall how they voted several years ago are influenced by current party preference. Macdonald and Heath (1997) point out that this means there are problems in trying to use vote recall in regressions of current vote choice, because they are artificially powerful predictors.

While it may be unsurprising that vote recall responses are not exogenous to party preference, the endogeneity problem is actually more pervasive. Using the 1983 to 1987 panel study Heath et al. (1991) show that perceptions of the performance of the national economy in 1987 were strongly conditioned by party support in 1983. Similarly, Evans and Andersen (2006) use the 1992-97 BEPS to show that perceptions of the economy are conditioned by prior party preference, even more so than party preference is influenced by prior perceptions of the economy. These findings mean that there are significant problems with trying to argue, as do Price and Sanders (1995) that subjective perceptions of the economy are important determinants of party preference.

Evans and Andersen (2004) show that there is also an endogeneity problem for issue voting, since people, regardless of where they position themselves on an issue dimension, are more likely to place the party they like the most close by. This means that issue proximity, when calculated using respondent self and party placements, is not an exogenous predictor of vote choice.

Concluding discussion

As I hope the above discussion illustrates, panel studies have been useful for understanding the major developments in British politics, the determinants of vote choice, and the quality of survey measurement and its implications. Perhaps most notably the 1992-1997 panel study was critical to following the party fortunes and the rise of New Labour and has show us that respondent evaluations of the economy and party issue positions are influenced by party preference.

While much academic electoral research focuses on in-depth study of post election cross-section surveys months after the election, voters and especially the media are most interested in understanding the outcome of the election before it even happens. If it generally true that campaigns are relatively uneventful and inter-election panels with mid-term waves capture the main developments, then such data can be especially valuable in engaging public debate with more rigorous academic analysis. For

example, the 1992-97 BEPS helped to provide timely and relevant political information, so that in a web article written during the general election campaign for the BBC, John Curtice was able to explain that the following.

“Labour is thought to have moved towards the centre, while voters themselves have moved to the left. Before 1994 Labour won most of its support from the Conservatives but since then it has come mostly from the Liberal Democrats. Tony Blair appeals to the middle class, but no more than he does to the working class. Voters have become more sceptical about Europe, but more voters think Labour are closest to their own views. The critical tone of the traditionally Tory press since 1992 has not helped the Conservatives, but it has not done them much harm either. Elections are supposed to be about the economy, but now it seems to be image that matters.” [A re-punctuated version of (Curtice 1997).]

By comparison with inter-election panel studies with mid-term waves, campaign panels seem to have yielded fewer substantial research findings. Curtice (2002) suggests that part of the reason why campaign panel studies have not revealed strong effects of political communications in the run up to elections is that there is very variance over time in the messages that parties send out during the campaign. Instead the politicians reinforce their previously presented arguments. If this is right then, and if major structural changes in the nature of party competition occur well into mid-term then inter-election panels with annual surveys are likely to be more revealing. To this extent the 1992-97 BEPS has been very important in understanding the evolution of New Labour. Of course inter-election panels can still suffer from lack of variance if there is relatively little change between two elections, as between 1997 and 2001. Even then, however, the 1997-01 BEPS has helped us understand how voters have come to appreciate just how solid the Labour move to the centre has been after they came to power.

This review has not so far discussed the two main concerns with panel studies: attrition and conditioning. Even if the response rate at each wave is a high proportion of that at the previous wave, the overall sample size responding to each wave can rapidly decline. This process is known as panel attrition and may lead to both selection bias and small N problems. Attempts to limit the attrition make panel studies expensive, especially if financial inducements are involved. Sample selection bias is an increasingly important problem for all survey research as response rates fall, and while it might seem as though panels suffer more than cross-sections, there is at least information about non-respondents in later waves from their responses in earlier waves making it possible to model the process of attrition. There are also statistical methods designed to deal with this specific problem (e.g. Fitzmaurice et al., 1995).

Conditioning is the name given to the process whereby respondents are influenced by having responded to previous waves of the panel. If the same questions are asked repeatedly respondents may get bored and give less attention to answering or they may remember how they responded previously and be tempted to give the same answer again to appear consistent. The panel process, as well as affecting survey responses can affect the individuals themselves. Having been asked about an issue in the past the survey may have prompted the respondent to think more about it and thus develop a more considered opinion. Moreover, surveys may actually inspire interest in politics leading to greater engagement and knowledge, and perhaps a change of

opinion on some issues. All these possibilities mean that it is particularly important to be cautious about research with panel data on the nature and effects of political knowledge and engagement. However, the research so far does not suggest the presence of strong conditioning effects.

Despite these problems, the analysis of panel study remains the best approach to testing causal hypotheses of individual change in social and political behaviour and attitudes available aside from field experiments, which are possible for only very few specific interventions. When resources for election studies are tight, the cost of a well maintained panel study might appear to make it an unaffordable luxury, but the benefits in terms of both understanding political developments and for social scientific research are substantial. Moreover, the findings of Evans and Andersen (2004, 2006) among others regarding the problem of endogeneity suggest that cross-sectional, or even repeated cross-section, data is inadequate for studying opinion-based determinants of the vote.

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