**How relevant is the Sociological Model?**

As Labour chooses its new leader, here is a fact that may hold the key to the party’s future. In this year’s general election, for the first time, middle-class Labour voters outnumbered working-class Labour voters. The days when Labour support was dominated by the party’s “natural” core vote are gone, probably for ever.

This is not because Labour support rose among middle-class (ABC1) – voters. In fact, it fell, six points, to 27%, compared with 2005. A YouGov survey of more than 90,000 electors conducted immediately after the election found that working-class (C2DE) support fell only slightly more, by eight points to 33%. The figures do not support the argument that Labour paid a special price this year for neglecting its core voters; rather they tell us something far bigger about long-term trends and what Labour needs to do to regain power.

Forty years ago, when Harold Wilson’s Labour party lost power, two-thirds of the electorate were working-class, and only one-third middle-class. And votes polarised along class lines: Labour won 56% of working-class votes but only 22% of middle-class votes. Overall, Labour secured ten million working-class votes but barely two million middle-class votes.

Since then, the size of the middle-class vote has grown – slowly at first, more quickly since the late 1980s – while the number of working-class voters has shrunk. By 1992, there were three middle class voters for every four working class voters-class. One reason for Labour’s fourth successive defeat was that it had lost support among the shrinking C2DEs, without gaining enough among the expanding ABC1s. Political scientists started asking whether Labour’s attachment to its contracting base condemned it to permanent opposition.

Such predictions looked pretty daft just five years later. Labour attracted slightly more ABC1 votes than the Tories, and won seats that had previously been beyond its dreams. Even so, working-class Labour voters still outnumbered middle-class voters by three-to-two (8 million: 5.5 million).

This year’s figures are, of course lower: Labour’s overall share of the vote was just 30%, and the turnout was only 65%. But the class figures remain telling: around 4.4 million ABC1 votes for Labour, compared with 4.2 million C2DE votes.

Over the long term, two different but related things have happened. Not only have working-class numbers shrunk – today they comprise just 43% of the electorate – but class has largely lost its significance as a determinant of votes. In 1970 the “class gap” was a vast 34 points (56% of C2DEs voted Labour, compared with 22% of ABC1s). By 1997 it had shrunk to 17 points. It is now just six points.

That does not mean Labour and Tory voters are alike. But the differences these days flow from values more than ideology or class. Labour voters tend to feel more strongly about fairness, public services and the need for collective action to tackle Britain’s problems. They tend to be more liberal on gender equality and gay rights. They are less hostile to Europe and, sometimes, to immigrants. Asked to pick the proudest year in Britain’s history, Labour voters’ most popular choice is 1948, the year the NHS was founded; among Conservatives it is 1940, the year when Britain stood alone against Hitler.

So Labour and Tory voters are different, but not in the way they used to be. Perhaps we should not be surprised: today, except for the very richest and the very poorest, workers by hand (C2DE) and brain (ABC1) tend to visit the same shopping centres, use the same hospitals, grapple with the same mortgage-lenders, get stuck in the same traffic jams, subscribe to the same Sky packages and fret over the same taxes, crimes and insecurities. They view politicians of all parties through the same jaundiced eyes.

Half a century ago the typical Labour voter belonged to an utterly different tribe from the typical Tory voter; now they occupy slightly different slots on the same continuum. Vast changes to the jobs we do and the lives we lead have swept old loyalties aside. In that sense, class is dead. Basing an election campaign on voters’ social class is almost as daft as basing it on hair colour or shoe size. Today’s determinants of political triumph are values, trust and competence. These are the battles that Labour’s new leader must win; and, given the outside chance that the Tory-Lib Dem coalition may collapse, s/he may not have much time in which to win them.

Labour performance 1970-2010

Election Labour vote (millions) Division of electorate by social class (%)

**ABC1 C2DE Total ABC1 C2DE**

1970 2.2 10.0 12.2 34 66

1974 Feb 1.9 9.7 11.6 35 65

1974 Oct 1.9 9.6 11.5 35 65

1979 2.8 8.7 11.5 36 64

1983 1.7 6.8 8.5 37 63

1987 2.2 7.8 10.0 38 62

1992 3.2 8.3 11.5 43 57

1997 5.5 8.0 13.5 49 51

2001 4.6 6.1 10.7 52 48

2005 4.8 4.8 9.5 55 45

2010 4.4 4.2 8*.6 57 43*

*Sources: derived from British General Election of... series, 1970-2001; YouGov 2*005, 2010