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Chapter 9

Qualitative Methods

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Qualitative methods is a generic term that refers to a range of techniques including observation, participant observation, intensive individual interviews and focus group interviews which seek to understand the experiences and practices of key informants and to locate them firmly in context. More often than not, researchers use two or more of these techniques in the field and research that draws on these techniques is usually referred to as ethnographic research or an ethnography (Lareau and Shultz 1996: 3). This chapter is divided into four parts. First, it looks at the role of qualitative methods in the social sciences in general and political science in particular. Second, it considers the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research. Third, it evaluates criticisms that are often levelled against qualitative research. Fourth, it discusses a recent example of qualitative research on electoral volatility at the 1997 general election by the author and her colleagues (White *et al.* 1999). Overall, it will be argued that the use of qualitative methods in political science has made an important contribution to our understanding of political phenomena and explanations of them. Some political scientists are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of qualitative methods to the discipline. They doubt the value of qualitative techniques and the need to be reflexive about issues of method in the discipline. Fortunately, there are others who recognise the advantages of qualitative research and are more reflective about issues of method. Empirical research in political science is moving in this direction.

The role of qualitative methods in political science

Qualitative methods have played a major, albeit understated, role in political science, from the study of individuals and groups inside the formal political arena to the political attitudes and behaviour of people (be they voters or members of elites) outside it. It is no coincidence, however, that it is a sociologist (albeit one that retains a long-held interest in political science) who is the author of this chapter since the origins of different qualitative techniques lie in sociology and anthropology. Participant observation was first used in anthropology to study other cultures (Powermaker 1966; Spradley 1980; Wax 1971). It involves the

researcher immersing himself or herself in the social setting in which they are interested, observing people in their usual milieu and participating in their activities. On this basis, the researcher writes extensive field notes. The participant observer depends upon relatively long-term relationships with informants, whose conversations are an integral part of field notes (Lofland and Lofland 1985: 12). They are the 'raw data' that are analysed, and the interpretation of the material forms the basis of a research report. More recently, participant observation has been used by sociologists including Roseneil's (1995) chronicle of the experience of women involved in the Greenham peace camp in the UK and Eliasoph's study (2000) of civic groups – recreation club members, volunteers and activists – and how they avoid talking politics in the USA.

However, it has been more common for sociologists (and, as we shall see, political scientists) to use intensive interviewing techniques rather than participant observation. In-depth interviewing is based on an interview guide, open-ended questions and informal probing to facilitate a discussion of issues in a semi-structured or unstructured manner. The interview guide is used as a checklist of topics to be covered, although the order in which they are discussed is not preordained (Bryman 1988: 66). Open-ended questions are used to allow the interviewee to talk at length on a topic. Finally, various forms of probing are used to ask the interviewee to elaborate on what they have said (Fielding 1993a: 140–1). Intensive interviews are, then, 'guided conversations' (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 9). Such lengthy interviews are usually conducted with only a small sample of informants. The transcriptions constitute the data that are analysed and interpreted. Interviewers also engage in observing the interviewee and the setting in which they are found and these observations facilitate the interpretation of the material. In contrast to the highly structured interview used in survey research, based on a tightly defined questionnaire and closed questions, intensive interviews are open and flexible, allowing the informants to elaborate on their values and attitudes and account for their actions (Mann 1985; Brenner *et al.* 1985). For example, McAdam's (1988) in-depth interviews with volunteers who went to Mississippi to register black voters in 1964 – the Freedom Summer project – captures the voices and experiences of the American civil rights movement.

Finally, academic researchers are increasingly undertaking focus group interviews, although the technique is still most closely associated with opinion poll organisations and the politicians who use them (Barbour and Kitzinger 1998). Note, for example, the frequent (and often disparaging) reference in newspapers to Tony Blair's use of focus group research findings to define new issues and devise new policies! The technique involves intensive discussion about a set of issues with a small group of

people (say 10–12 participants). The main advantage of focus group interviews over individual interviews is that participants interact in a discussion on a particular topic, agree with other interviewees in some respects and disagree in others and raise new issues and concerns. It is the interaction between all the participants in a quasi-naturalistic setting – that is, not too far removed from everyday group conversations – that is unique to the method (Maynard 1998). The discussions are usually either tape-recorded or extensive notes are taken which are then subject to different forms of analysis (like those associated with individual interviews). The transcripts or notes may also be subject to conversation analysis which involves a very detailed examination of what people say, how they say it, how they respond to other people's reactions and so forth. Focus group discussions have been used, for example, by Gamson (1992) in the USA to consider the process of opinion formation, how people deal with media information, and how they draw on their own experiences in life and also those of people they know in talking politics. He argues that people are able to conduct informed and reasoned discussions about political issues and have a political consciousness often dismissed by opinion pollsters.

From this brief description of qualitative methods, it should be clear that they are most appropriately employed where the *goal* of research is to explore people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. Intensive interviewing, for example, allows people to talk freely and offer their interpretation of events. It is their perspective that is paramount (Harvey 1990). Qualitative methods are also good at tapping into the thought processes or narratives that people construct. In-depth interviews allow people to tell their own story in language with which they are familiar. Where the discussion of issues flows naturally it is possible to understand the logic of an interviewee's argument and the associative thinking that led them to particular conclusions. Finally, qualitative methods draw particular attention to contextual issues, placing an interviewee's attitudes and behaviour in the context of their individual biography and the wider social setting. This is sometimes referred to as a holistic approach. Qualitative methods, therefore, are good at capturing meaning, process and context (Bryman 1988: 62; Rose 1982). Inevitably, research of this kind is very labour-intensive, especially when fieldwork is conducted over a long period of time, and it not surprising that researchers usually concentrate on a small group of people. It is the meaning of a particular practice – say, not voting at an election – that is important to qualitative researchers rather than the frequency of abstention that concerns quantitative researchers.

Qualitative methods have been employed across a number of sub-fields of political science since participants in the world of politics have been willing to talk about their involvement in groups, their role in formal

positions of power, their views about the political system and so on. Political scientists, for example, have frequently interviewed pressure group activists (Grant and Marsh 1977; Mills 1993). Members of political parties and party officials have interviewed extensively about developments in party organisation, strategy and so forth (Seyd 1987; Whiteley 1983). While previous work in the UK focused on the Labour Party, recent research on party membership has extended to the Conservatives as well (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley *et al.* 1994). The prize-winning book on the rise and fall of the Social Democratic Party by Crewe and King (1995) draws on many interviews with a wide variety of people. No doubt observations and so forth played a very important part of their analysis too since both authors were involved in the early days of the SDP and their involvement must have shaped their insights into the momentous events of the 1980s. Qualitative methods have been used extensively in the study of local politics in Britain (Gyford *et al.* 1984; Lowndes and Stoker 1992; Maloney *et al.* 2000). Until recently, qualitative methods were rarely used in research on central government because of limited access to the seemingly secretive world of high politics (the exception being Helco and Wildavsky 1981) although the move to more open government has facilitated greater willingness among government officials to be interviewed (Smith 1999).

There are, then, a number of research techniques which fall under the generic heading of qualitative research which have been widely used by sociologists and political scientists who have chosen one or more of them to elicit people's subjective experiences, opinions, beliefs and values and so forth. While academic researchers usually choose a research technique that is most appropriate for what they want to explore, the choice of methods is not merely a matter of technical superiority. As we shall now see, opting for one technique over another raises epistemological arguments about different ways of knowing the social world (Bryman 1998).

The epistemological underpinnings of qualitative methods

The use of methods is often associated with an epistemological position about the production of knowledge (May 1997; see also Chapter 1). Quantitative methods, for example, have been linked with a positivist stance that aligns itself with a particular view about the assumptions and mechanisms of the natural sciences (see Chapter 10). It is underpinned by a belief that only that which is grounded in the observable can count as valid knowledge (Halfpenny 1992; Halfpenny and McMylor 1994). A positivist notion of knowledge, therefore, is grounded in the objective and tangible and researchers working within this paradigm are preoccupied with

creating the conditions in which objective data can be collected. As Sanders notes in his chapter (Chapter 2), early twentieth-century positivists were concerned with the precise operationalisation and measurement of theoretical concepts (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993: 15; Lee 1993: 13). The preference is for survey research with a standardised approach to interviewing based on a predetermined questionnaire and closed questions where there is limited interaction between the interviewer and the respondent to avoid bias. The interviews can be replicated easily and are, therefore, reliable in reproducing similar facts. The statistical analysis of the coded replies produces observed regularities that form the basis of explanation, generalisation and prediction. The major concern of survey researchers is with the predictive ability of their statistical findings (Bryman 1988: 34). Overall, the highly structured interview associated with survey research is a form of communication under controlled circumstances somewhat analogous to an experimental situation found in the natural sciences (Fielding 1993b: 144).

Qualitative methods have been aligned with an interpretive epistemology that stresses the dynamic, constructed and evolving nature of social reality. In this view, there is no objective science that can establish universal truths or can exist independently of the beliefs, values and concepts created to understand the world. These concerns are unique to the social sciences and account for the different methods used in the natural and social sciences. Researchers committed to this paradigm attach primary importance to the perspective of conscious actors who attach subjective meaning to their actions and interpret their own situation and that of others (Benton 1977; Keat and Urry 1975: 205). Thus, intensive interviews are appropriate when seeking to understand people's motives and interpretations. Such guided conversations cannot be free of bias, although the influence of the researcher can be acknowledged. There is a strong emphasis on describing the context in which people live their lives, form opinions, act (or fail to act) and so on. Participant observers go to great lengths to watch people in their natural settings, especially since subjective meanings vary according to the context in which they are found. Consequently, the emphasis is on seeking to understand human experiences and practices rather than making predictions about behaviour (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993: 16). Explanation involves understanding and interpreting actions rather than drawing conclusions about relationships and regularities between statistical variables. Thus, the in-depth interview is about listening to people talking in order to gain some insight into their world-views and how they see things as they do (Fielding 1993b: 157).

It should be emphasised, however, that the distinction between the choice of methods and epistemological positions should not be overdrawn.

It would be ridiculous, for example, to dismiss all quantitative researchers as positivists (Marsh 1982, 1984)! To adopt such a position would imply that different methods are mutually exclusive and cannot be employed in conjunction with each other (see Chapter 11). The choice of methods is usually made on the basis of whether it is a suitable way of answering particular research questions (Bryman 1988: 108–9). Quantitative and qualitative methods involve collecting data in different ways and the crucial question is whether the choice of method is appropriate for the theoretical and empirical questions that the researcher seeks to address. As it is, social scientists increasingly use a mix of methods rather than one method in isolation (Brannen 1992; Cohen and Manion 1985). This is not to suggest that methodological eclecticism does not have technical or epistemological problems (Miles and Huberman 1984; Reichardt and Cook 1979). There are a number of technical issues raised by the mixing of methods such as how to deal with apparent inconsistencies between data sets, and whether or not one data source should take priority over another (Devine and Heath 1999: 199–205). There are also important epistemological issues at stake for, as Mason (1996: 28) has argued, researchers should ensure that the integration of methods is legitimate and based on 'similar, complementary or comparable assumptions about what can legitimately constitute knowledge or evidence'. Nevertheless, a combination of methods can lead to a more rounded and holistic perspective on the topic under investigation.

More recently, the epistemological underpinnings of the social sciences have been challenged by postmodernism that regards the quest for reliable knowledge of the social world as misguided (see, for example, Denzin 1997). As Williams and May (1996) note, postmodernist thinking has big implications for questions of epistemology and method (see Chapters 1 and 6). In relation to the former: 'postmodernism can be viewed as a critique of the values, goals and basis of analysis that, from the enlightenment onwards, have been assumed to be universally valid' (Williams and May 1996: 158). With reference to the latter: 'the alternative to the complacent foundationalism of modernism becomes the maxim ... that anything goes' (ibid.). More specifically, the postmodern critique of research practice has confronted empirical researchers with a dual crisis: a crisis in representation and a crisis in legitimation.

Crisis of representation

The first crisis is based on questioning the expert status of the researcher, given that: 'truth is contingent and nothing should be placed beyond the possibility of revision' (Williams and May 1996). It is not possible to capture lived experience directly because the researcher is merely an interpreter whose own account has no greater claim to 'truth' than anyone else's account. There can never be a final accurate representation of what was meant or said – only different textual representations of different experiences (Denzin 1997: 5). Representation and reality can no longer be said to correspond to each other, therefore, and what becomes significant is how researchers use textual devices in an attempt to create 'authentic' accounts (Stronach and MacLure 1997). Postmodernism demands that researchers think about the research process and not just the research outcomes in a more radical way than they have done to date.

Crisis of legitimation

The crisis in legitimation arises from a rethinking of concepts such as validity, reliability and generalisability. A claim to validity, based on rules concerning the production of knowledge and its relationship to 'reality', is the usual means by which an account is given legitimacy and by which 'good' research is distinguishable from 'bad' research. Denzin (1997: 6), however, argues that attempts to claim validity for a piece of research: 'cling to the conception of a "world out there" that is truthfully and accurately captured by the researcher's method'. Consequently, the postmodernists reject specific criteria for judging research and 'doubts all criteria and privileges none' (Denzin 1997: 8).

The postmodern critique, therefore, sees the researcher as intrinsically implicated in the production of knowledge (Williams and May 1996). Moreover, centrality is given to text and to questions of power and authority that are inscribed within them (a text can be anything from a literary text, an official document or an intensive interview transcript, through to a photograph, a movie or a building). This means that a pivotal concern of postmodern research is the deconstruction of texts and their embedded power relations. As Williams and May (1996: 169) note: 'how the social world is represented becomes more important than the search for an independent "reality" described by such texts'. The advantage of this approach is that the socially constructed, interpretive and dynamic nature of reality is genuinely appreciated. That the accounts produced by the researcher in the process of deconstruction are as much the focus of the postmodern gaze as the initial texts upon which they based their analysis may be seen as a disadvantage however. As I have argued elsewhere (Devine and Heath 1999), the postmodern researcher is consequently caught in a hall of mirrors with too much attention devoted to the preoccupations of the researcher rather than the research topic. See this tension, for example, in Charlesworth's (2000) study of the 'political dispossessed' working class of Rotherham, South Yorkshire in the UK.

To date, there are few examples of empirical research – especially in political science – which have been informed by postmodern influences. Those who have contributed to the debate on postmodernism have not really discussed the issue of method head-on other than in a highly abstract way. Therefore, it is not entirely clear what form postmodern research strategies might take. The emphasis on uncertainty and disappointment is not especially helpful. To be sure, research is often messy and rarely proceeds in the neat and tidy way that researchers wish for (Devine and Heath 1999). Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' research according to certain criteria and those criteria can vary from one methodology to another. This position implies that it is possible to cultivate knowledge of the social world and that research can make important substantive contributions to an understanding and explanation of the social world. This is not to say that the issues raised by the debates over the crisis in representation and legitimation should be ignored. On the contrary, the debate concerning the limits of validity and the competing claims of alternative accounts is welcome. Discussion on the degree to which any knowledge of the social world is highly dependent on the methodological devices employed by the researcher is also welcome. Still, the wholesale dismissal of conventional criteria for assessing social research can easily collapse into a rather hopeless relativism that gets nobody anywhere! (see Chapters 1, 9, 11).

Criticisms of qualitative research

While the sterile debate about quantitative verses qualitative research no longer preoccupies social scientists (Bryman 1988: 84–5), there are some who still dismiss qualitative research as impressionistic, piecemeal and even idiosyncratic (even if political correctness demands that such views are expressed in private conversations rather than publicly in print). Quantitative research is seen as representative and reliable. Systematic statistical analysis ensures that research findings and interpretations are robust. Overall, quantitative research is replicable and comparable and generalisations can be made with a high degree of certainty. Social surveys produce hard scientific data (Hellevik 1984; De Vaus 1991). In contrast, qualitative research is often dismissed as unrepresentative and atypical. Field relations raise problems about bias while the interpretation of the material can be highly subjective and not open to external validation. Finally, qualitative research is neither replicable nor comparable and, therefore, not the basis on which generalisations can be made. Qualitative research produces soft, unscientific, results. On the face of it, these criticisms of qualitative research seem damning. Closer reflection, however, suggests that these criticisms are misplaced. That is to say, what is a valid method depends on the aims and objectives of a research project. For example, if the goal of qualitative research is to explore the meaning of voters' attachment to a political party in depth, it is not concerned about the frequency of particular views and opinions. It would be nonsensical to employ methods more appropriate to capture the latter rather than the former. Moreover, as we shall see, qualitative researchers are as systematic and rigorous in their methods of empirical investigation as quantitative researchers.

Representativeness and reliability

The issues of representativeness and reliability revolve around the question of designing and generating a sample of 'people, places or activities suitable for study' (Lee 1993: 60). It is often assumed that qualitative researchers do not devote as much attention to generating a sample as quantitative researchers because they are not concerned with representativeness (see Miller 1995). This is far from the case, precisely because there is often no sampling frame from which to draw a random list of names to approach for interview. Snowball sampling is the usual way of generating a sample. Interviewees are asked to nominate potential informants and the request is made at each subsequent interview until the required number is reached. Snowballing a sample continues throughout the period in the field. However, there are problems in generating a sample from one network of people with particular characteristics because interviewees can nominate a set of interconnected people. Researchers have to be on their guard against producing a restricted sample and find ways of generating as wide a sample of interviewees as possible. It is not surprising that most qualitative research reports devote a considerable amount of time to the issues of how a sample was generated and the characteristics of the informants included in the final sample. In sum, the choice of sampling methods or the use of sampling frames is no less important in qualitative research than quantitative research. A failure to justify one's sampling strategies in any research only undermines the strength of the claims that can be made about the data (Devine and Heath 1999: 13–4).

Objectivity and bias

Qualitative research is often dismissed because of bias and the lack of objectivity in the collection of empirical material. The relationship between an interviewer and interviewee is not aloof, for example, since the interviewer participates in the conversation (Bulmer 1984: 209; Newell 1993: 97). The relationship cannot be distant if confidential personal

information is to be revealed or when sensitive topics are discussed (Lee 1993: 111). In such instances, a greater level of involvement is required so that the researcher inspires trust (Bulmer 1984: 111). Thus, qualitative researchers neither subscribe to the view that research can be objective, nor do they seek objectivity in field relations. That is not to say, however, that field relations are unproblematic and their impact on the collection of the information can be ignored. Playing an active role in facilitating conversations is not easy. Informants are often anxious to please and offer responses that they perceive to be desirable. They may seek to impress with shows of bravado and create the impression that they know more than they do. They may ask the interviewer to offer their own opinions on the topics under discussion (Finch 1984). All of these considerations demand that the interviewer is reflexive about the conduct of an interview or an episode while engaged in participant observation and that they think about the nature of interaction on what was said, how it was said and so forth. Thus, rather than attempt to control the effects of bias in field relations, qualitative researchers prefer to acknowledge it in the process of collecting empirical material and explicitly consider its effects on substantive findings (Devine and Heath 1999: 9–10; Hobbs and May 1993; Lee 1993).

Interpretation

Concern is frequently voiced about the interpretation of qualitative material. Is the interpretation placed on the material merely a personal reading? Of course, the analysis and interpretation of qualitative material proceeds in a different manner to quantitative research that is concerned about relationships between variables (Rose 1982; Silverman 1997). Transcripts can be analysed manually, being subjected to numerous readings until different themes emerge, or, with the aid of computer packages for qualitative research, coded and analysed on this basis. All empirical material, be it of a quantitative or qualitative kind, is subject to different interpretations and there is no definitive interpretation that tells the 'truth'. Nevertheless, the qualitative researcher has to demonstrate the plausibility of their interpretation like their quantitative counterpart. Various ways of enhancing the validity of interpretations exist. The interpretation of interview material can be discussed with a group of researchers to obtain a consensus on the interpretation. It is possible to ask the informant for their reaction to the interpretation of the interview transcript and this may lead to a reinterpretation. The plausibility of an ethnography can be enhanced by doing full justice to the context of the participant observation or intensive interviewing (Atkinson 1990: 129). Finally, the internal consistency of an account can be assessed to establish whether an analysis is coherent with the themes that have been identified. External validity can be considered by checking findings with other studies (Fielding 1993b: 166). In sum, the onus is on the qualitative researcher to make the interpretation of the data as explicit as possible in the development of an argument using systematically gathered data (Mason 1996; Silverman 1997).

Generalisability

Finally, qualitative research is often dismissed because it is not possible to generalise the findings from a study that confines itself to a small number of people or a particular setting. Qualitative researchers have to be tentative about making inferences from a small number of cases to the population at large, yet qualitatative researchers can design research that facilitates an understanding of other situations (Rose 1982: 38). The findings of one in-depth study can be corroborated with other research to establish similarities and differences. Such a comparison would be a limited test of confirmation (Marsh 1984: 91). As it is, it is rarely the case that a sample of interviewees is so unrepresentative or the interpretations so misleading that suggestion about the wider incidence of certain phenomena is wholly specious. Finally, qualitative research findings are often the basis on which subsequent quantitative research is conducted from which generalisations can be made. To date, however, there have been few genuine attempts in political science to bring quantitative and qualitative data together to address inconsistencies as well as consistencies (an issue which will be considered further in the conclusion). Qualitative research, therefore, can have wider significance beyond the time and place in which it was conducted (Ward-Schofield 1993: 205). Qualitative research methodology has its disadvantages like other methods and techniques. Its advantages, however, are clear where the goal of a piece of research is to explore people's experiences, practices, values and attitudes in depth and to establish their meaning for those concerned.

Illustration of qualitative research

Somewhat surprisingly, qualitative research has been largely absent in the field of electoral behaviour. It may be that voting is particularly amenable to quantitative research – along the lines of the British Election Surveys (BES) – and that this has inhibited the use of other methods and techniques. The over-reliance on the BES was the source of debate in the early 1990s (Devine 1992; Dunleavy 1990). It is certainly the case that other methodologies are now employed in the study of elections. That said, the

BES remains the dominant mode of enquiry even though, as one of the principal authors of the 1997 BES publications (Evans and Norris 1999; Norris *et al.* 1999) has readily acknowledged, the validity of the statistical data remains open to some doubt (Norris 1997). That is to say, the BES had been used to develop various models of voting behaviour but they are essentially socio-psychological models of individual behaviour derived from the analysis of aggregate patterns and trends of voting from the electorate as a whole (Norris 1997). Indeed, Sanders (1999: 201) has conceded that 'aggregate patterns can often hide a great deal more than they reveal about the electoral calculations that individual voters make'. Against this background, a qualitative study of why people changed their vote, or wavered but voted as before, was undertaken immediately after the 1997 general election (White *et al.* 1999). The sample of 45 interviewees (see Table 9.1) was drawn from the campaign panel of the BES and interviewed in depth six weeks after the election on how and why they voted as they did.

Why did these voters act differently in 1997 or consider doing so but remain loyal to their political party on polling day? There was a long-standing and deep-seated disillusionment with the Conservative Government. The catalogue of disgruntlement with the Conservative Party was long and familiar (Denver 1997; Norton 1998; Whiteley 1997). The informants focused particularly on the standing of the leaders and the

Table 9.1 *The political profile of the sample, 1992–97*

Alterations in 1997	
Conservative to Liberal Democrat	7
Conservative to Labour	9
Labour to Liberal Democrat	3
Liberal to Labour	5
Green Party to Labour	1
Voting to non voting	7
Non voting to voting	2
	34
Waverers in 1997	
1992 Conservative voters	7
1992 Liberal Democrat voters	3
1992 Labour voters	1
	11
Total interviewed	**45**

Source: Adapted from White *et al.* (1999: 10).

related imagery of the parties. John Major, for example, was widely regarded as a weak and ineffectual leader who could not hold his increasingly disunited party together. As a previous Conservative voter explained:

> Well, she [Margaret Thatcher] was strong. You know, she wasn't scared to get up and, you know, if they were slagging her off like, she slagged 'em back. I think they have to be a strong leader otherwise the party's no good because he needs to be, or she needs to be, whoever it may be, they have to control. They have to have a head to tell the other ones, or sort out the other ones. It's no use letting everyone do as they want 'cos, to get away with what they want, 'cos it just goes as you've seen the Conservatives this last time. All they did leading up to the election was fight with each other. That's all they did. Or fight with the other ones. They didn't actually in my eyes, didn't sort of get it together themselves. (Male, 30s –Wirral West)

Tony Blair, in contrast, was credited with transforming the Labour Party into a political party that could win an election. While many had been unsure of Kinnock, Blair was seen as genuine and likely to keep the promises he made. Most importantly, it was his perceived strength and decisiveness in leading his party in opposition and preparing it for government that impressed interviewees. His leadership appeared to attract younger voters, unencumbered by Labour's past, to switch directly from Conservative to Labour (see also Crewe and Thomson 1999). An evaluation of the leaders, therefore, was often intertwined with an evaluation of the political parties they led and each shared the positive and negative traits identified. Focusing on the leaders, therefore, appeared to be a shorthand way of discussing the state of the political parties especially amongst the least politically interested and informed interviewees. These findings appear to confirm Crewe and King's (1994) argument that the leaders have an indirect influence – via their own relationship to the party they lead – on the way in which people vote.

The image of the political parties was also very influential for the sample of voters. Two aspects of party imagery were important. First, they clearly associated the political parties with different classes although the association had changed in recent years. That is to say, long-standing Conservatives who had previously felt that the Conservative Party represented all classes in its safe management of the economy no longer felt that way. These voters expressed their unhappiness with the 'fat cats' – the senior managers of various private and recently privatised utilities – who were the main beneficiaries of privatisation. Many of the interviewees talked about how the 'rich had got richer and the poor had got poorer' under the

Conservatives and that the Tories 'only look after the rich'. While this view was often expressed by Liberal Democrat or Labour voters, it was increasingly a view shared, albeit reluctantly, by long-standing Conservative voters. The mass appeal of the Conservatives under Thatcher in the late 1970s and early 1980s had clearly disappeared. In contrast, Labour was seen as representing the mass of ordinary working people including the middle class and the working class. The party's focus on the issues of health and education tapped into concerns about welfare services on which most people depended. Their policies for shorter waiting lists and smaller class sizes were seen as reflecting the concerns of the mass, rather than the few. The Labour Party's appeal, therefore, was a broad-based and inclusive appeal that focused on concerns shared by the working class and the middle class. Thus, class voting may have been low in 1997 (Evans *et al.* 1999: 94), but class imagery was an important part of the electoral appeal to the parties on which the interviewees commented.

Second, the transformation of the Labour Party from Old to New Labour was influential on how the interviewees voted. Its transformation was especially important for those interviewees who had voted Liberal Democrat in 1992. The perceived loosening of the relationship between Labour and the unions opened the way for many of the interviewees to vote Labour (Kellner 1997: 120–1). After all, the threat of union domination and the implications for the economy – often used by the Conservative Party against Labour – were no longer a consideration. In 1992, some voters had misgivings about Labour even if they had wanted change, as a mobile voter who voted Liberal Democrat in 1992 and then switched to Labour in 1997 explained:

> I wanted it, the Government changed from Tory ... [I voted] just to get the Tories out but at the same time I didn't really want Labour in then because ... there were a lot of things, you know, it was still in my mind about all this militant stuff ... miners striking, Arthur Scargill shaking his fists, what's his name in Liverpool doing dodgy deals and getting loads of backhanders ... I didn't know much about them [Liberal Democrats] at all but maybe I liked Paddy Ashdown and thought he seemed a real man ... All I can remember is that I wanted things to change. (Female, 20s – Northampton North)

Moreover, the perceived convergence of the political parties was noted in favourable terms. Labour's move to the centre ground – its willingness to forgo old dogmatic policies like nationalisation and adopt new pragmatic policies such as jointly funded public and private ventures – impressed many of the interviewees (Budge 1999; Sanders 1999). As a voter who moved from Conservative to the Social Democrat Party to Labour explained:

> I was by now totally clear that the Conservative Party had to move ... If they had another spell in power you were really starting to get a one-party state ... But in developments in the year before ... The Labour people had obviously changed a lot of what they were trying to do. They'd modernised themselves, admitted they'd moved. They'd moved, in fact, very much into the SDP area. When you looked at the way they were doing [things] and what they were talking [about] and the people they'd got, it was almost as if the SDP had risen again. They were very similar. Also, the leader character seemed to be attractive and strong enough to say what he thought, and what he thought was reasonable and matched my own sort of thinking. (Male 60s – Northampton North)

In this instance, the move across the political spectrum had been gradual and painless and, indeed, the voter quoted here emphasised that the parties had moved to his way of thinking rather than vice versa. Labour's past image as being too closely associated with the unions, too left-wing and too internally divided, which had impeded victory in 1992 (Heath *et al.* 1994), had been left behind. As we shall see, however, the Labour Party's transformation left traditional Labour voters unhappy with the electoral choice before them in 1997.

Reference has already been made to the importance of issues to the interviewees, although it is important to stress that which issues were important, how important they were and how they were discussed were closely tied to past political allegiances. The issue of Europe, for example, was important to only a small group of Conservative interviewees who invariably remained loyal in 1997. The state of the economy and the issue of taxes were discussed in that some interviewees commented on how taxes had increased under the Conservatives thereby reneging on earlier promises. However, the dominant issues were education and health (Norris 1997). Conservative voters who shifted to the Liberal Democrats in 1997 mentioned these issues although they approved of the way that the Liberal Democrats acknowledged the need to increase income tax to improve services, while Labour remained vague about how it would finance improvements. Thus, one switcher explained:

> Mr Ashdown said he would put up taxes, which I would agree with, and I would willingly pay the extra coppers and what not that he said he was going to charge me, provided he said he was going to use them for ... education, health and things like that. (Male, 60s – Oxford West and Abingdon)

Somewhat ironically, a policy of explicitly stating taxes would be raised to pay for better services also prompted disillusioned Labour Party supporters to vote Liberal Democrat. The Liberal Democrats were

perceived as more radical than Labour, therefore, in stating explicitly that taxes would go up rather than accepting the Conservative agenda of not increasing them (Budge 1999; Holiday 1997). This was not a bone of contention for previous Conservative voters who switched to Labour however. As a young interviewee explained:

> Well, you want the best for your children. You want your children to grow up in a safer and like educational world and I just thought, like all them things in the news you know, the last government wasn't doing enough and now, I've got to, had to show an interest 'cos my children are going there [school]. So that's why I started voting Labour 'cos they said they're going to change it and they're going to change, like the crime, cut down teenage crime. (Male, 20s, Northampton North)

Issues, therefore, were important to the interviewees (Sarlvik and Crewe 1983) although which issues were important to them, how they were discussed and their salience relative to other considerations were heavily influenced by their past partisan alignment.

Finally, tactical considerations and evaluations about local and national outcomes influenced how the interviewees actually cast their vote because how they acted varied even if they shared similar assessments of the political parties (Curtice and Steed 1997: 310). There were former Conservative voters, for example, who were seriously attracted to Labour but local constituency factors intervened. As a voter explained:

> Tactically, I voted to get them out but I wanted Labour in. If I'd been in a seat where Labour had a chance of winning, I would have voted Labour so I wanted them in but because I'm down here in a country area with farming, hunting, shooting and fishing, [it was] an absolutely wasted vote if you voted Labour. There's 5,000 people voted Labour and 23,000 voted Conservative and 21,000 voted Lib Dem last time so we thought, 'right, vote Lib Dem and we'll topple them' which we did. It was a tactical vote, but if I'd had a chance of voting Labour I would have voted straight Labour. (Female, 40s – Devon West and Torridge)

Local factors also worked in the opposite direction, leading wavering Conservative voters to remain loyal, for example, rather than vote Liberal Democrat or Labour. Evaluations of the national outcome – namely, the likelihood of a Conservative defeat and Labour victory – also influenced how some interviewees voted (Miller *et al.* 1990). It compelled some voters, for example, to remain loyal to the Conservatives to keep their vote up rather than waste their vote on the Referendum Party. Disillusioned Labour supporters who voted Liberal Democrat did so in the context of a likely landslide victory for Labour. A former Labour voter who much preferred the Liberal Democrat policy on education explained that:

> When I'd seen the polls and they said, you know, Labour would definitely get in and whatever, then I thought, well, I'd vote for the one I feel is the best. Anyway, so I voted Liberal Democrat. I thought it would be nice to get some Liberals in as well. If they [the polls] had said 'oh, it's a bit dubious whether Conservative or Labour was going to win', I think I'd probably have gone Labour. (Female, 30s – Colne Valley)

In this context, previously loyal Labour supporters felt they had the space to vote differently or abstain in the event of a landslide. Tactical considerations, local constituency factors and evaluations of the national result, therefore, played an important role in shaping the interviewees' voting decisions.

Overall, the qualitative research highlighted the continuing influence of family and class on early voting behaviour. Most importantly, it shapes voters' images of the political parties, including support for one particular party and opposition to other political parties. The nature of early political socialisation in the family and local community also influences the extent to which party attachments are strong or weak. Indeed, early images of the political parties can be very enduring and are often the starting point from which voters evaluate leaders, parties, issues and so forth. It was found, for example, that most of the sample had long histories of voting for one political party prior to 1997. It should be stressed, however, that this stability was not necessarily indicative of a strong commitment to a political party; sometimes it was merely a product of routine or falling in with family and friends. Be that as it may, images of the political parties are not static but change as the issues and policies they stand for change and the perceived unity and strength of the party change. Against the background of eighteen years of power, long-standing Conservative voters, for example, were dismayed with a party leader who they had been ambivalent about in 1992. They were unhappy with the extent of disunity and squabbling over Europe within the party. They were unconvinced by the Conservative Party's claim to run a sound economy, uninterested in their agenda of keeping taxes down and increasingly convinced that the Conservatives represented the rich rather than the whole electorate.

In contrast, the Labour Party was no longer burdened by its poor imagery of the late 1970s and 1980s. The Conservatives' attempts to ignite fear and uncertainty about Labour's ability to handle the economy and to portray it as the party of big spenders fell on deaf ears, especially among younger voters with little or no memory of events nearly two decades earlier. Instead, voters were impressed by the Labour Party with its strong leader and united party and were convinced by its agenda of improving education and health services. The appeal to the whole of the electorate also convinced many of the interviewees to support them. This is not to

suggest that they easily moved across the political spectrum. Their political histories, past party alignment, early images of the parties and tactical considerations greatly influenced voters' decision-making processes. Thus, some previous Conservative voters would never vote Labour and chose to abstain, remain loyal or vote Liberal Democrat. Other Conservative voters, unfettered by a strong alignment to the Conservatives or negative images of the Labour Party in the past, could shift to Labour without too much difficulty. Labour's transformation was especially attractive to Liberal Democrat supporters who now viewed the party's agenda as less dogmatic and more pragmatic and, thus, more in tune with their views and opinions. This support, however, came at a price for Labour. Its transformation had not found favour among its traditional constituency of working-class supporters strongly committed to socialist ideals. These voters, like their Conservative counterparts at the other end of the political spectrum, either abstained, remained loyal to Labour or voted Liberal Democrat.

In sum, the qualitative research explained why individual interviewees voted while others did not, and why some changed their votes while others remained loyal, in a way that quantitative data cannot. The material suggests that the 1997 election was critical (Norris and Evans 1999) – in some way different from past elections – in that some long-standing Conservative voters were so disillusioned that they were prepared to place their vote elsewhere. It also suggests that it was not a critical election – that it shared similarities with the past – in the way that Labour faced the problem, once again, of winning middle-class voters and losing working-class voters. The analysis of the qualitative material was also suggestive in highlighting patterns and regularities between groups of voters within the sample in terms of how they responded to party appeals, which issues were important to them and so forth. Young Conservative voters, for example, appeared to find it easier to move directly to Labour, while some older Conservatives voters would never, in their wildest dreams, consider voting Labour! This suggests that the concept of political generations and cohort effects which Butler and Stokes (1974) spoke of many years ago should be reconsidered in the study of elections. These comments suggest ways in which further analysis of the BES could proceed. There could, for example, be more disaggregation of the data to look at different groups of voters, rather than just examining aggregate patterns and trends among the electorate as a whole.

Some might argue that the qualitative material presented here does not offer any revelations. Only those who remain hostile to qualitative research demand that it demonstrate its worth by some new extraordinary revelations. Arguably, listening to the way in which the voters of this study described how they came to vote revealed much about the causal processes

by which final decisions were made. This contribution is as great as any account of the predictive power of individual variables to the development of explanatory theories of voting behaviour and may, indeed, lead to a widening of the remit of election studies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been argued that qualitative research has made a significant contribution to political science. Be that as it may, there are some political scientists who are hostile towards qualitative research albeit in the privacy of conversation rather than the publicity of print. They remain sceptical of what they see as a costly approach to the collection of political data. They scoff at the small sample sizes of qualitative work that they reject as atypical and worthless. They dismiss qualitative findings as insubstantial and not worthy of note, since they are rarely new or unfamiliar. They think it is the stuff of sociologists and not proper political 'scientists'! Fortunately, there are other political scientists who are more enlightened about qualitative research. The inclusion of this chapter in a political science textbook for students is testimony to this fact. There are signs that the advantages of qualitative research are being recognised as more research of this kind is being undertaken in the discipline. Moreover, there are encouraging indications that more research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods is being undertaken. The ESRC-funded Democracy and Participation programme is a case in point. These developments are to be welcomed. For political science as a whole, they herald an era in which epistemological questions about how we know the political world and the process of producing knowledge about that world are not taken for granted. Arguably, the discipline will be all the better for it.

Further reading

There are numerous books that discuss different methods and techniques in the social sciences.

- One of the most useful texts is Gilbert's (1993) edited collection that considers quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
- Recently published books focusing on qualitative research that have enjoyed favourable reviews include Silverman (1997), Mason (1996) and Devine and Heath (1999).
- Good qualitative research straddling sociology and politics include Roseneil's (1995) study of political action at Greenham in the UK and Eliasoph's (2000) study of civic groups and avoiding politics in the USA.