The growth of New Social Movements is evidence of a post-industrial society in which traditional class struggle and political issues are no longer as important.

Rationale

The aim of my investigation is to see whether the society we now live in is the fragmented post-industrial society that is described by post-modern thinkers and whether the growth of New Social Movements is actually evidence of this fragmentation.

I have chosen to study this area because of the low interest shown towards party politics at the 2001 General Election which had a turnout of just 59%.

My first objective is to look into whether there has been a so-called death of class in voting behaviour. Traditionally, the working class were seen to vote Labour and the middle class conservative; this is often referred to as voting on class basis.

Secondly, I am going to examine reasons for why there is disillusionment with the ability of the state to distribute welfare as I saw on some government statistics that the approx 74% of the wealth in the UK is owned by the richest 25% of the population. This means that the welfare is distributed unevenly with the wealthier being at an advantage, so therefore 75% of the population of Britain has less than adequate welfare.

Finally, my third objective is to investigate the disillusionment of ideas offered by political parties because they seem to make promises and often not carry them out. I am also interested in this aim because when political parties offer lower taxes no matter who comes into power the taxes always seem to rise every April.

Context

Post-modern sociologists generally see the society that we now live in as a fragmented post-modern society. Post-modernity as a whole entails a declining faith in party political organisation because of the disillusionment of the ideas offered. A research questionnaire carried out by Michael Llangberg (2001) on a small scale at a university in America showed that out of every 10 people he questioned 4 of them felt that political parties offered ideas that were worded to sound a lot better than they actually were. This finding links to my third objective of my rationale as I am investigating into this area.

My three objectives stated in my rationale are interrelated social developments, which are used by some as evidence of a post-industrial society, one where traditional class struggle and political issues no longer exist. For Hallsworth (1994) the term New Social Movement "is one developed to refer to the wide and diverse spectrum of new, non-institutional political movements which emerged in Western Liberal Democratic societies during the 1960's and the 1970's.

Some sociologists see New Social Movements (NSMs) as reflecting a move away from class-based politics, which mainly focused around economic issues. NSMs encompass gay rights, animal rights, environmental issues and more; they are seen to draw support from individuals across class divisions. Paul Bagguley argues that a key difference between traditional (old) social movements and NSMs is that NSMs are less interested in economic issues but more in a post-modernist sense of focusing on lifestyle and/or identity politics. This helps to link to the so-called death of class based voting discussed in my rationale because it shows how people are more interested in NSMs (a move away from class-based voting) which in turn is shown by the 59% turnout of the 2001 General Election.

For those attracted to postmodernist ideas, 'NSMs are important as they indicate the existence of a new type of society and a new type of politics where class divisions are no longer a central political issue around which debates may focus' stated sociologist Ulrich Beck in his book Risk Society. This more evidence for my first objective in my rationale.

Butler and Stokes' (20th century) study into voting behaviour maintained that there was a strong relationship between occupational class and voting behaviour. When it was a two-party system, Butler and Stokes argued that about 4/5 of the middle-class electorate voted

Conservative and 2/3 of the working classes voted for Labour. If you refer to my first objective in my rationale, you will see that these results reflect it. They also argued that this partisanship was learnt through a process called political socialisation at an early age.

Then, in the 1980's a political scientist, Ivor Crewe presented a number of studies of voting behaviour in Britain and argued that the partisan relationship between class and voting behaviour was breaking down. Crewe concluded that although still significant, class has declined considerably in importance and that voters had to be seen as acting rationally when voting rather than simply voting on class basis and political socialisation. Whereas other sociologists argue that, the apparent decline in class-based voting simply reflects changes in the class structure and a more complex political system. In my rationale, my first objective can be looked into thoroughly using this material.

Heath et al, argue (from their study) that class-based support for the major parties has remained at a significant level since the 1960's, although there has been a slight decline in the relationship between class and voting.

As there is many studies into my first objective from my rationale that all have the result of yes or no to a decline in class-based voting behaviour I will have to ensure I conclude this for myself from my research.

Refer to my second objective in my rationale and you will see that when New Right thinkers Marsland and Murray argue that the welfare state has created a dependency culture and that the correct role for the state is simply to protect the freedom of the market to enable it to function effectively. In this way, the state would not act in a biased way protecting the interests of one class, but would enable all to have the opportunity to maximise their potential. According to Marsland and Murray, reducing the state to the minimum institutional framework necessary for this task would empower all citizens equally and thus the distribution of the welfare state would be equal.

Methodology

I have chosen to use a questionnaire for my investigation so that my research will be representative of a wider group. For my research to be of sociological value, I need to address the issue of the relationship between my situation research and the wider society. In order to do this I feel that using a quantative method of surveys and a technique of stratified sampling will work best.

Practical and ethical issues also have their influence on research. Possible practical problems that may arise include time, money and access. Time should not be a problem for my questionnaire as it is on a relatively small scale and it is low cost so therefore money is not a problem either. Some social groups may not be willing to participate in my questionnaire because they may feel it is a biased questionnaire or for other reasons.

The research participants that will partake in my questionnaire are informed at the top of the sheet that it is confidential and that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to because participants have a right for the research to be confidential and private. My questionnaire is not covert research; therefore, I do not need to discuss this area.

My sample will be a small-scale representation of the sampling frame ensuring that my research can be related back to the survey population.

The advantages of using a questionnaire include the possibility to obtain a large number of respondents in a short amount of time and the advantage of the respondent having time to consider the questions. This will help ensure that my answers are more accurate.

My main concern is the possibility of a low response rate as I have decided to allow respondents to take the questionnaires away ensuring more confidentiality. Another concern is that the questions can not be explained to the respondent if they do no understand what the question is asking; to limit this, I am going to try and make my questions simple, easily readable and explain my questions in brackets after that particular question.

As questions can be either open or closed I have decided to use a range of both. I will include a majority of closed questions to give me comparative data while also including a few open questions so that the respondent feels they can explain their opinion on the issue. This will give me more of an insight to feelings about my topic.

An example of my questionnaire is show in appendix A.

Looking at appendix A.1, you can see the population of the UK in age and gender, from this I have worked out how many people I will need to survey to get address the issue of the relationship between my situation research and the wider society. I am not going to be using any of my population aged 0-14years as I feel that they are not capable of understanding my questionnaire or for most of them reading it. Therefore, my final survey population total will be 39 males and 42 females with a grand total of 81. My table on appendix A.1 shows you the ages and number of people to be surveyed for each age.

Evidence

As you can see (refer to appendix B answers to question 1) only 29.62% of the population I surveyed felt that they were represented by a certain political party. All of these people felt they were represented by one of the three main political parties and these same people felt they were strongly part of the social class they ticked. In addition, approx 90% of these people said they are more than likely going to vote at a General Election. This shows that even though there has been a decline in class-based voting, there has not been a so-called death of class in voting behaviour patterns. This finding from my research agrees with the study by Ivor Crewe (discussed in context) but on the other hand conflicts with the conclusions made by Heath et al (also discussed in context).

The results from my questionnaire answers 3a showed a large number of respondents to be supportive of single issue politics whereas the answers to 3b showed that a considerable percentage of those respondents did not know who to go to deal with their single issue. Answers to questions 4 and 5 showed some strong support towards New Social Movements although the number was small, as discussed earlier many respondents did not know where to go with their single issue.

The previous two findings from my research agree with Paul Bagguley's research, which was discussed in my context. The low percentage of people voting on class-basis and the higher percentage of people supporting New Social Movements agree with some sociologists when it is said that NSMs, which are mainly focused around economic issue such as gay rights, are also reflecting a move away from class-based politics.

Therefore, I have considered my first objective discussed in my rationale and according to my small-scale study there has not been a death of class-based politics, just a decline.

My second objective in my rationale should be answered by question 7b on my questionnaire. One answer by a 24year old female stated, "The welfare of Britain is unfairly distributed by the government among the top social classes, it is unfair but I feel there is nothing I can do to change this as the government seem to show fair distribution but it is not that way at all." I feel this sums up the majority of the other answers I received in this particular question which shows that there is a disillusionment with the state to distribute welfare.

The majority of scoring for the Sectors discussed in 7.a focused around the 6-8 areas, which shows there is a general feeling that the sectors discussed although worryingly there are a range of scores with some people obviously being very unhappy with the sector and the way it has served them. If you refer back to my context to the study discussed by Marsland and Murray my findings contradict this as it is stated that the correct role of the welfare state is to simply protect the freedom of the market to enable it to function properly. Obviously, some people are displeased with the welfare state as they scored sectors quite low indeed.

Looking back at my third objective in my rationale, I cannot comment on findings as I have realised my questionnaire did not cater for any answers for evidence to this point.

Evaluation and Conclusions

From my evidence, I conclude that in the Huntingdon area where my research was carried out that there has been a decline in class-based voting but not a complete death of it. In order to link this to wider society I would have to carry out further research as discussed near the end of this section.

Secondly, I deduce that there is disillusionment with the state to distribute welfare discussed in my evidence section. Although, I do not feel that I gained enough information to make further conclusions on this particular objective of my investigation.

To further my research I need to include some questions in my questionnaire that can answer and reflect my third objective discussed in my rationale. From the information I gathered, I could not make a fair conclusion or judgement on this objective.

In order to gain a more accurate idea of the fragmentation of our society in this so-called post-industrial society where class-basis voting behaviour and political issues are no longer as important, it would be sensible to do some further research. Possible ways of furthering my research include recreating a questionnaire that would be suitable to a larger population and then to survey them to get an idea of the wider picture in societies other than Huntingdon area.

I would like to continue research into the so-called death of class-based voting behaviour because my questionnaire was not accurate enough to say whether there has been or not. This is also a very popular topic but no one seems to have come through with a definite answer as many sociologists' findings from research and studies is contradictory of each other. I could do this by holding interviews of certain people, analysing questionnaires and government statistics on electorate turn out at elections and the so-called social class definitions to try to understand what is happening in this post-industrial society as far as class-based voting behaviour is concerned.

Overall I think my investigation was only valid for my first objective discussed in my rationale because I became to focused on this particular area and did not realise that my questionnaire did not really cater enough for my second and third objectives. Other than that I feel my response from my survey population was excellent as everyone I gave a questionnaire to returned it promptly for me to analyse and evaluate for my research. The respondents were all understanding and answered all questions necessary as I made it clear that it was completely confidential and that ethical issues and been evaluated.

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