

***Voter apathy in British elections:
Causes and Remedies***

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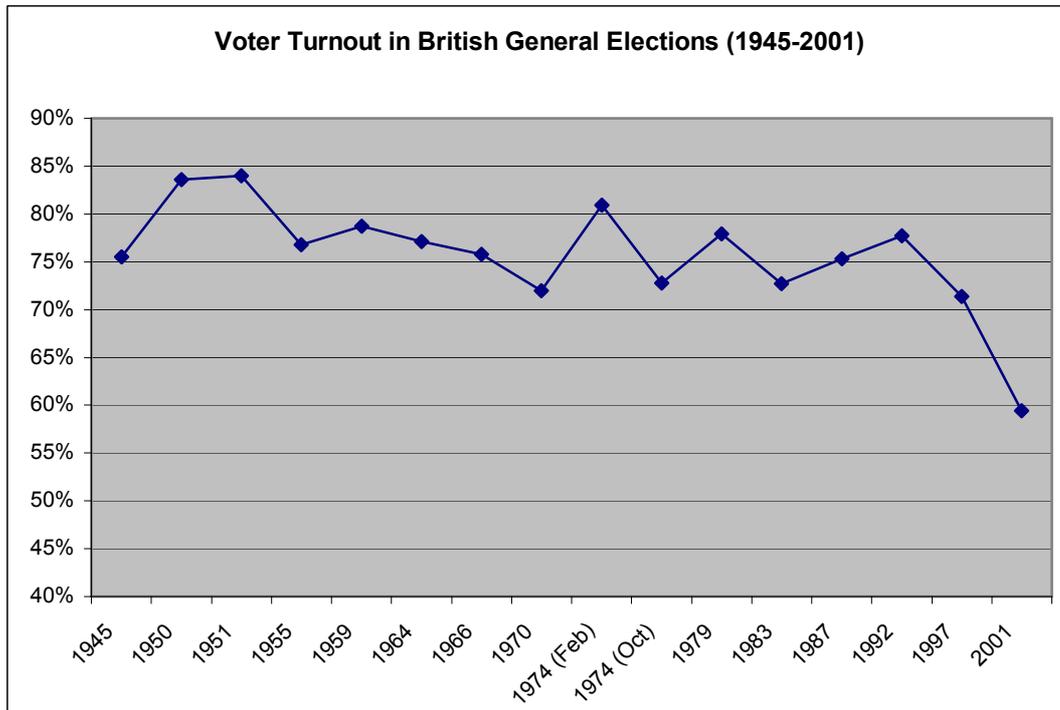
Abstract

The turnout for the 2001 General election in Britain was the lowest ever after full adult suffrage. This essay presents the theoretical explanations of voter apathy and then reviews the literature on the causes behind the increasing voter abstention in General elections in Britain. Finally, the measures which have been proposed in order to increase voter participation are presented and critically assessed.

Setting the scene

According to Dalton (1988) "citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful" (p. 35). Limited political involvement is a sign of weakness because it is only through dialogue and participation that societal goals are defined and achieved in a democracy. Voting, though it requires little initiative and cooperation

with others, is the most visible and widespread form of citizen involvement (Dalton, 1988).



Source: Bartle J. (2002) Table 7.10, p. 197

Crewe et al (1992) distinguish between voter apathy and voter alienation as the basis of low political motivation. Apathy denotes a lack of feeling of personal responsibility, a passivity and indifference for political affairs. Subsequently, it denotes the absence of a feeling of personal obligation to participate. Voter alienation, on the other hand, denotes an active rejection of the political system and thus, political participation is negative towards the political world. The authors found that the alienated abstainer and the committed non-voter are a rare exception not only in the British electorate as a whole but among regular non-voters as well.

There are three schools of thought explaining voter turnout (Pattie and Johnston 1998, Bartle 2002): a) theories of rational choice, b) sociological theories and c) theories of political efficacy. Theories of rational choice argue that voters weigh up the costs and benefits of their actions. Thus, they will turn up to vote when they consider that the benefits of such an action outweigh the costs. It could be argued that every individual voter's benefits from voting are infinitesimal compared to the cost, which may not be great but it is not trivial: time, energy and the chance to indulge in other activities. Crewe et al (1992) argue that this way of thinking is flawed, as, in their view, voting is a very 'easy' form of political participation, requiring minimal effort and initiative and not demanding the voter's engagement in conflictual or co-operational behaviours with

other people. At the same time, this 'easy' act has a high value attached to it.

Sociological theories argue that socio-economic characteristics affect political behaviour, identification with a party's values and people's propensity to vote. Turnout is higher among: i) those with higher income, ii) those of higher education, iii) white-collar workers, iv) whites, v) men, vi) middle-aged and older voters, vii) those with closer community ties, viii) those married and ix) members of organisations. Social factors may influence turnout by limiting the access of voters to political information and may affect their party identification.

Political efficacy theories argue that people alienated from the political process are less likely to vote. Alienated voters feel that their vote will not make any difference, that politics has little influence in their lives and that the main parties do not address their concerns.

Discussion of the findings: Causes

***1966-1974**

A study of the elections from 1966 until October 1974 (Crewe et al., 1992) traced four factors associated with irregular turnout: a) being young, b) having recently moved home, c) the type of housing tenure and d) marital status (single or divorced). The authors noted that these factors intercorrelated but each of them had an independent and depressive effect on turnout regularity. In their view, isolation from personal and national networks resulted in a lack of political information or pressure to vote and thus in lower turnout (Crewe et al., 1992). They also pointed out that motivational factors exerted more impact on voter turnout than sociological ones.

Weak or absent party identification emerged as another important source of irregular voting (Crewe et al., 1992). According to their findings "both age and strength of identification are independently related to turnout levels" (p. 28), but their relative impact differed. Partisanship strength seemed to exert a greater influence in every age group while age was an important factor only in the dichotomy between under and over 45-year-olds.

Crewe et al (1992) also emphasised that voter turnout in General elections had steadily declined in Britain since the early 1950s. They partly explained this phenomenon by pointing out the erosion of partisanship and commitment of the British electorate which took place at the same time. People who identified very strongly with a political party fell from 41 per cent in 1964 to 23 per cent in October 1974. The reason for this lack of political commitment appeared to be disillusionment with both parties because of their disappointing performances in government.

A study by Denver and Hands (1992) concluded that, in the 1970s "marginality increased in importance as a factor explaining variation in constituency turnouts" (p. 44); a sharp contrast to the period from 1955 to 1970 when party expenditure showed a much stronger correlation with turnout than marginality. The authors explained this change as an indication of voter dealignment. From 1955 to 1970 voters identified strongly with their parties and thus responded to the stimulus (as indicated by constituency party expenditure) provided by the local party campaign. As party identification decreased, voters responded less to that stimulus and more to their assessment of the marginality of the seat. This, for Denver and Hands (1992), was an indication of an increase in voter sophistication.

Overall, the two major influences on turnout in the UK were age and party identification. Other factors such as social status, educational level and gender exerted a fairly weak influence, while strong political competition and ideological cleavages between parties tended to increase turnout (Dalton, 1988).

***1987**

Swaddle and Heath (1992), after studying the 1987 General election, reported that a substantial majority of non-voters presented 'circumstantial' explanations for not voting. Thus, they concluded that "non-voting is for most people a temporary thing, related to rises in the cost of voting, such as sickness, holidays or a change of address, which are also usually of a temporary in nature" (p.36). Moreover, Swaddle and Heath's (1992) findings support Crewe et al's (1992) conclusion that age seemed to be the most important variable influencing turnout. Contrary to Crewe et al (1992) though, Swaddle and Heath (1992) found that both class and income had significant influence on turnout, with those of higher income participating more. Explaining these differences in findings between the two studies, Swaddle and Heath (1992) pointed out that the behaviour of the electorate may have changed between 1974 and 1987 and that their study design was different to that of Crewe et al's (1992). They also emphasised that "turnout appears to be quite high in almost all social groups and that a substantial majority of registered electors will turn out to vote if the costs of voting are not too high" (p. 40).

***1992**

Contrasting previous findings, Pattie and Johnston's (1998) study of the 1992 General election found that the marginality of the contested seat was not a significant factor which influenced voter turnout. Party identification, age, housing tenure, interest in the campaign, the impact of the local campaign and the perception of ideological difference between the parties were found to be the influential factors.

Commenting on their findings, the authors argued that "only a few factors have a substantial impact upon individual turnout decisions...turnout [is]

driven largely by political commitment, but also to some extent by the mobilising efforts of the parties and by socioeconomic conditions" (Pattie and Johnston 1998, p. 278). They also pointed out that their findings rejected the sociological interpretation of turnout, as social status was found to have very little impact on individual turnout. Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, constituency marginality was not found to influence turnout. When these two were linked it was because marginal seats contained more committed electors than average and/or more electors who cared about the outcome than average.

Moreover, Pattie and Johnston (1998) pointed out that the decline in partisanship, the convergence of parties in the middle ground of the political spectrum and the focusing of the parties in national campaigns and not on constituency campaigning also decreased people's incentives to vote.

Overall, Pattie and Johnston (1998) argued that their findings supported the rational choice theory: those interested in the election or felt closer to a party would consider its 'cost' bearable and would vote. Their findings also provided some support to political efficacy theory as those with a greater commitment and interest in politics were more likely to vote. Finally, local party campaigning also had an influence on turnout.

***1997**

Heath and Taylor (1999), studying the reasons behind the low turnout in the 1997 election, found evidence (though not conclusive) of "increased working-class and trade union apathy, particularly among previous Labour voters" (p. 173-174). They interpreted these findings not as voter disillusionment but as lack of enthusiasm with Labour. Moreover, they argued that this finding did not wholly explain the decline of turnout and its likely effect was tiny.

Another significant finding was the fact that the decline in political trust did not explain the fall in turnout. The decline in political trust seemed to have been associated (in 1997 at least) with people's disappointment with the Conservative government. Thus, Heath and Taylor (1999) argued that the alleged "crisis of democracy" in retrospect appeared to have been a crisis of trust towards the Conservative party.

They also argued that the most convincing explanation for the differences in turnout in Britain, from 1945 to 1997 was provided by the perceived closeness of the election and by the perceived ideological differences between the parties. In their view, the fact that opinion polls, mid-term elections and political commentators predicted an easy victory for Labour encouraged Labour voters not to vote, especially in safe Labour seats. Moreover, New Labour's move to the centre of the political spectrum and a subsequent such move by the Conservatives would decrease ideological differences between the parties, thus resulting in continuing low turnout. This situation would be further aggravated if Labour continued to enjoy

substantial leads over the Conservatives in the next election (Heath and Taylor, 1999).

Pattie and Johnston (2001) reached similar conclusions. They argued that throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s the average turnout was remarkably steady at around 74-75 per cent and claimed that "the 1997 election is not the latest step in an inexorable downward spiral" (p. 291). Their analysis showed that closely contested elections generated high turnouts and, thus, the low turnout in 1997 was not surprising. Another factor which, in their view, influenced the turnout was the fact that voters perceived the Conservatives and Labour as being ideologically close.

***2001**

Curtice and Steed (2002), commenting on the turnout of the 2001 election, argued that it was "the lowest turnout officially recorded at any election since 1918" (p. 304). Taking under consideration that the 1918 turnout was affected by World War I the authors concluded that "voluntary abstention was at a higher level in 2001 than at any previous general election since the advent of mass franchise" (p. 304). The low turnout was characterised by the Electoral Commission as "the single most important aspect of the 2001 general election" (Electoral Commission 2001, p. vii). Curtice and Steed (2002) argued that this was due to declining party identification, the perception of a sure Labour victory and traditional Labour voters' dissatisfaction with the party's ideological movement towards the centre of the political spectrum. They also pointed out that the mechanisms of the first-past-the-post electoral system, which is applied in the UK, allowed the Labour party to lose votes without losing seats. This resulted in the electoral system producing the most biased electoral outcome ever. In their words: "That may be good news for New Labour but whether it is good for the health of Britain's democracy is a far more debatable point" (p. 333).

A study by Denver (2002) emphasised that people's disillusion with the government contributed to the low turnout. Turnout was higher in more densely populated areas and constituencies with more owner occupiers, more professional and managerial workers and farmers while it was lower in areas with households without a car, with more ethnic minority voters, with more council tenants and more manual workers.

The sociological explanation for the low turnout in 2001 was dismissed by Whiteley et al (2001) who argued that sociological variables (social class, education, ethnicity and gender) had not changed enough in the four-year period from the 1997 election to 2001. Their study showed that turnout in 2001 was influenced by four major factors: a) the electorate's evaluation of party leaders, b) the electorate's perception of the country's economic performance, c) the electorate's discontent with the delivery of public services and d) the electorate's interest in the campaign.

They also found that the relationship between constituency marginality and turnout was a strong one. The strongest effect on turnout was

exerted by voters' interest in the campaign, their positive feelings for party leaders, their party identification and the government's policy performance. The same study did not support the argument that the perception of the election being a foregone conclusion demobilised voters. This view is opposed by Geddes and Tonge (2002) who emphasised that "Labour's apathetic landslide was a consequence of an...acceptance of the party as the only viable electoral choice" (p. 257) and argued that the reason behind the low turnout was the fact the electorate perceived a Labour victory as inevitable.

The view that the low turnout in 2001 was the result of the decline in partisanship, of the ideological convergence of the two major parties and of the fact that the result was a foregone conclusion is also supported by Bartle (2002). He also pointed out that, if the decline in turnout was a sign of the electorate's alienation from the political process, then, neither an ideological divergence nor a closely contested election would necessarily be a remedy.

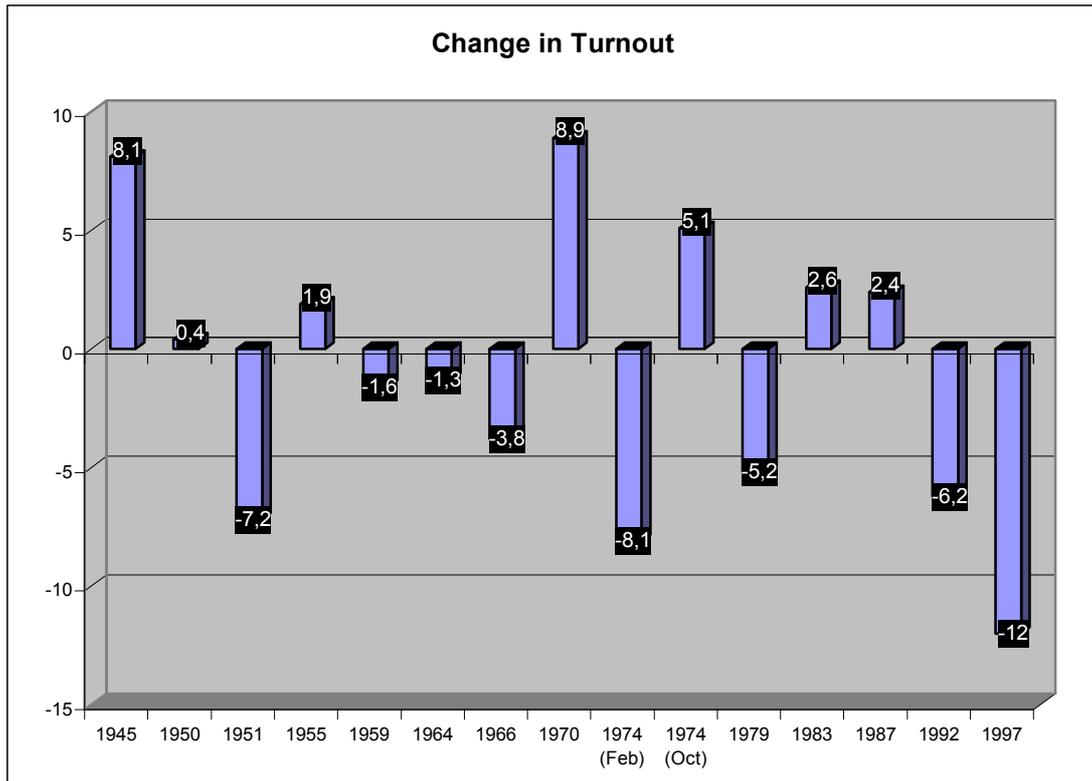
Nevertheless, Bartle (2002) argued that voter alienation could not be easily traced as the questions posed in surveys were often ambiguous. Moreover, he noted that, as the case of Northern Ireland (where turnout was much higher than the rest of Britain) clearly showed, turnout per se is not a sign of a healthy democracy.

The 2001 election emphasised four important points:

- a) partisanship was in continuous decline
- b) party leaders' popularity was also in decline
- c) the electorate expressed significant discontent with policy
- d) people's interest in elections had declined significantly.

Whiteley et al (2001) argued that the emergence of these four points during the 2001 election may have been due to the length of the campaign or due to its micromanagement by professionals which made it boring and predictable.

On the other hand, Worcester and Mortimore (2001) pointed out that the sharp decline in turnout was the outcome of short-term factors as public interest in politics had remained stable over the last three decades and that people were no less interested in the 2001 election than in politics generally. According to their surveys, alienated voters were "far too few to explain a 41% non-vote in a general election" (p. 114) and they found no signs of permanent alienation. Nevertheless, they found evidence of a decline in political identification and of a decrease in involvement with party politics. Politicians and parties have allowed the whole political process to fall into disrepute. In their view "it is not, simply, apathy" (p. 122). Thus, they concluded that "the public are increasingly turning to single-issue pressure groups, NGOs or other channels for their political expression rather than political parties" (p. 118).



Source: Bartle J. (2002) Table 7.10, p. 197

Discussion of the findings: Remedies

Proportional representation

The Electoral Commission (2001) pointed out that the first thing to be done in order for the issue to be tackled would be to identify its causes, both at a national level and among particular segments of the electorate.

Proportional representation is believed to stimulate turnout, as any party can achieve (or increase) its representation in the legislature proportionally to its share of the vote (Dalton, 1988). As Franklin (1999) put it: "proportionality enhances the predictable consequences of a voter's choice" (p. 211). Geddes and Tonge (2002) argued that, if the British electoral system became more proportionate, then voting would become more meaningful and this could have a serious impact on turnout. Still, they pointed out that "the temptation for the Labour government will be to do nothing and await a third landslide, even more apathetic than the 2001 version" (p. 262).

Worcester and Mortimore (2001) disagreed by arguing that, according to their surveys, the electoral system was not brought up by the public as a reason for not voting. They pointed out that the vast majority of the

electorate were more interested in the outcome of an election rather than its process. Thus, they argued that voters "are never likely to get very worked up about proportional representation or any other fundamentally technical part of the process" (p. 180). Moreover, they dismissed the argument that proportional representation was very popular among the public. In their view this was a prime example of survey outcome being influenced by the way the question was asked. Similar questions emphasising popular aspects of the current electoral system would "just as easily achieve a majority in favour of its retention" (p. 181).

Moreover, such an initiative may be misplaced as a change in institutional arrangements may not have a major effect. As Pattie and Johnston (2001) recommended, the way to increase turnout was to increase policy differences between parties and party competition.

Compulsory voting

Another proposal for the tackling of low turnout is to make voting compulsory. In countries where this is applied, the average turnout is 89 per cent (Franklin, 1999). The Electoral Commission (2001) pointed out that the introduction of compulsory voting would not tackle the lack of engagement in politics from the part of the electorate, which is an underlying cause for low turnout. Nevertheless, the Commission argued that the question should be raised and that compulsory voting should be further examined as one of the options available in an effort to raise voter participation.

Franklin (1999) admitted that such a change would surely increase turnout but argued that low turnout was not the actual 'disease' but rather a 'symptom' of the character of the electoral process. An attempt to cure it would not necessarily lead to the cure of the actual disease that causes it. He argued that low turnout reflected a lack of choices for the electorate and a breakdown of the connection between the voters' electoral choice and a change in policy. Geddes and Tonge (2002) did not recommend the introduction of compulsory voting (yet) as they considered it to be too illiberal a measure. They pointed out though that other countries where voting is compulsory (such as Australia) were not less liberal. Moreover, compelling citizens to vote when they did not care to (for whatever reasons) may actually be more harmful as it would trivialise both the electoral process and the outcome (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001).

Franklin (1999) emphasised that "a more suitable way to achieve the same end would surely be to make elections more consequential and to make those consequences more apparent, thereby making it worthwhile for candidates to propose policies designed to appeal to previously non-voting groups. Higher turnout *in and of itself* would probably not achieve this" (p. 216).

Special emphasis should be placed on the role of politicians in persuading the public of the importance of voting. By focusing their campaigns on

marginal seats, the parties virtually excluded a significant part of the electorate from the political debate and from political activism. Thus, the political parties, by re-engaging with the electorate and by widening the political debate could be crucial in re-connecting the people to the electoral process (Electoral Commission, 2001).

Moreover, the argument surrounding the issue of compulsory voting diverts attention from other proposals which may address the genuine shortcomings of the electoral process and not its appearance. The introduction of compulsory voting would compromise the turnout's usefulness as an indicator for the health of democracy (Franklin, 1999).

New ways of voting

New methods of voting (such as postal and electronic voting) would only result in a slight increase in turnout as their recent application has shown. Moreover, a post-election survey commissioned by the Hansard Society, found that people who accessed the internet in the UK, unlike their counterparts in the US, were not more likely to vote. This finding is explained by the large number of younger non-voters with internet access (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001). The same study concluded that there is a trend among younger voters to use the internet as a route to politics and thus "e-politics is here to stay" (cited in Worcester and Mortimore 2001, p. 178). Worcester and Mortimore (2001) though, still remain sceptical.

There is little evidence that postal voting had any significant impact in the increase of turnout (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001). The impact of other efforts such as polls opening a week early, travelling polling stations, polling stations in supermarkets and electronic voting seemed inconclusive. Other proposals have included voting by telephone or by mobile phone, and via the internet (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001). The Electoral Commission (2001) doubts whether the introduction of new methods of voting would result in a major increase in turnout if the electorate perceived the election as irrelevant to them.

Elections and the Media

Norris et al (1999) found evidence that media coverage of the 1997 General election campaign and especially negative news coverage did not affect voter turnout. The authors concluded that "patterns of media use and attention had little significant impact, positive or negative, on changes in levels of political knowledge, efficacy and participation during the 1997 election" (p. 113). This finding is very important as the news media are the ones to be blamed for public cynicism with political parties and low turnout. As the authors pointed out "we should probably stop shooting the messenger and look elsewhere for the causes of these civic ills" (p. 113).

Similarly, a study of the effects of the British press on turnout during the 1992 and 1997 elections concluded that "other things being equal, the British press has a direct, measurable and statistically significant association with voting turnout...[which] is not large" (Brynin and Newton 2003, p. 73). This effect appeared to be larger when election results are close.

Finally, proposals for a ban on the reporting of opinion polls by the media, in order for them not to distort the national debate and make the election more interesting, are not expected to restore the levels of turnout (Geddes and Tonge, 2002).

Conclusion

As the literature review showed, the findings regarding the causes of declining turnout have been mixed and inconsistent. Most authors seem to support the rational choice theory of voting and, to a lesser extent, the political efficacy theory. The low turnout in recent General elections does not seem to be a result of voter alienation, but rather the outcome of voter apathy due to Labour's significant leads in polls and people's disillusionment with both major parties. Moreover, the ideological convergence of the Conservatives and Labour and the electoral system have also contributed in voter apathy.

The situation may improve by making the electoral system more proportionate. That way, votes would carry more weight and the Liberal Democrats and smaller parties may become more significant in the political spectrum. Such a measure may result in politics and election campaigns becoming more interesting, policies becoming more elaborate and party ideologies becoming clearer.

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